

• • •

Doors stand open down the long length of hall. Bright bulbs of conversation drift between them, sparked by bursts of laughter. Girls slip from one room to the next carrying armloads of whisper-weight dresses, lovely and soft.

They cluster in Jenny's; her roommate is away. They comb, unasking, through her closet. Toss the contents of their own on her bed. Try this. That color is so good on you. I have shoes for that; what size do you wear?

The air feels electric as they make each other beautiful.

• • •

Haley

Haley wakes to pain. Actually, to clapping. “Happy” is this month’s ringtone. It pulls her from a fitful nap. Glowing red knives pierce the space between her ears when she moves her eyeballs.

Sunlight peeks around the edges of the shades in the dark dorm room. The windows are closed, and it’s hot. Why does Jenny always shut the windows?

From her iPhone, happiness rings.

She gropes at the top of the desk, locates the solid rectangle, squints at the screen. It’s her mother. Again. She answers the call with her thumb.

“Hey.”

“So I just got off with the people at the health center, and we’re all agreed that this would be easier if you’d sign the release papers. They won’t talk to me and they can’t talk to your doctors at home until you do.”

Haley doesn't answer. Her thoughts take shape in molasses. She hears her mother, she understands, but her tongue feels thick. She wades thigh-deep through something dark and sticky in search of words.

"Haley, are you there?"

"Yeah. What time is it?" she manages. She doesn't feel like opening her eyes again to check the phone and see for herself.

"Two o'clock. Were you sleeping?"

"Trying to." She doesn't attempt to hide the annoyance in her voice.

"I'm sorry. I don't know when is the right time to call. But this is important."

"I told you I would do it, okay? It'll happen."

"Haley." The patient tone. Which is not patient at all, but just short of anger. What a relief, if she'd just yell. "This is serious. Your treatment team at school can't—"

"Treatment team." Haley repeats the words like she's tasting them. Trying to decide if she likes or even recognizes the flavor.

"The doctors who are monitoring you," her mother says.

Haley mulls this over. Considers this disconnect between the image her mother must have of a state-of-the-art medical facility and the shabby reality of the MacCallum College health center. She'd managed to drag herself over there this morning: Coach's orders. Sat in an excruciatingly bright room and answered questions from a friendly nurse who took her temperature and wrapped a blood pressure cuff around her arm. Talked to a bald doc who confirmed—surprise, surprise—that she'd suffered a concussion when she and the middle from Jefferson College both went up for that header at Saturday's game.

Stars. A glorious explosion of fireworks as her brain banged against the side of her skull. She actually remembers the impact, unlike her two previous concussions, when she'd blacked out and had to be told afterward what had happened.

On the grass, a familiar helmet of pain encasing her head, she heard whistles, calls for a knee-down. *No no no. Still three weeks left of the regular season. No no no . . .*

Funny how that was her first thought. Not paralysis or permanent impairment, but play time. How long she'd sit the bench.

"You know, Mom, I sort of decided sleep was more important than hauling my ass back across campus so you can know what my blood pressure is."

"What sort of an answer is that? This isn't about me or what I do or I don't know! It's about the health center having access to your medical records back home and the doctors being allowed to speak to one another. I can't give them the go-ahead! You're eighteen and considered an adult, and *you* have to sign the release of records forms."

Her mother's voice, an irritant on a good day, is an instrument of pure torture at this moment. Haley suspects that if she doesn't end the call soon, her head will literally explode.

"Mom. It's my third concussion. We know the drill." No reading, no computers, no television. No soccer. Especially no soccer.

"Now, you see, that's the problem. Your third concussion—says who? The emergency room doc at that Podunk hospital where your coach dragged you? Haley, these people are trained to stitch up drunks on a Saturday night. Did anyone give you an impact test?"

Oh god oh god make it end. Haley considers turning off the phone. For days. Although that would most likely prompt an actual visit from her mother.

“She said . . . No. No, they didn’t do an impact test. They didn’t need to. She said I was pretty typical. And the guy at health services just asked a few questions, then told me to go to bed.” Haley hears her mother sigh impatiently. This is not the answer she wants.

“Without an impact test, how can they possibly monitor your progress?”

Not a real question. Rhetorical. And not at all what her mother’s really thinking. *How can they know when you’ll be ready to play again?* Haley fills in for her.

From the slough of molasses in which her thoughts move, another emerges: *Don’t tell her what Coach said.*

Coach, who had ordered Haley into her car after they returned to campus and the rest of the team unloaded from the bus. Coach, who drove her straight to the local hospital and sat with her until the young woman doc on duty checked her out. Who returned her to the dorm, where Saturday night was in full swing. When they pulled up to the curb outside Haley’s building, they could hear the pulse of music through the closed windows of the car. A steady stream of laughing students poured in and out the front doors. Every light in every room was on.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” Coach remarked. “They would have let you stay overnight at the hospital.”

“I’ll be fine,” Haley replied. “You get used to dorm noise.”

“Well, sleep is your most important medicine right now. Rest, water, and lots of sleep.”

Haley began to nod, then thought better of it. Her head felt like it rested atop a pike. She was about to get out, but Coach kept speaking.

“You know, since I was sitting with you when the nurse did the intake, I couldn’t help but overhear you tell them that this is your third concussion.”

Haley stilled. *Here it comes.*

Coach sighed. “I wish I’d known. Not only today, when I played you so aggressively, but last year, when I was recruiting at Hastings.” She didn’t sound mad as much as she sounded . . . sorry.

Haley didn’t speak. The soccer-powerhouse Hastings School, where she’d repeated junior year and ultimately graduated, seemed like a lifetime ago.

“You’ve made a great contribution this season, Haley, especially considering that you’re only a freshman,” Coach said. “But for now you need to focus on your health, so you’ll be contributing from the bench.”

The bench. Followed by the door. As in, *Don’t let it hit you on the way out, girl.*

“The health center is closed on Sundays, but I’m going to see if the doc will come in to check on you. I’ll let you know.”

She was dismissed. That much was clear. Haley swung the door open to the night air, the sounds of the party under way. She turned to face Coach.

“Thanks for helping me out this afternoon. I really appreciate it. I . . . I’m sorry I’ve let you down.”

Coach didn’t look at her. She glanced in her rearview mirror. Flipped the directional, signaling left. She was done.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Coach said. “Try to get some sleep.”

Some part of Haley—the angry part, the *why-me?*-head-throbbing part—wants to tell her mother right now that no impact test on the planet can help her. She’s cooked. Stick a fork in the girl—she’s done. Benched for the rest of this season, and next year? Probably won’t even make the roster.

Some part of her resents carrying this alone. Some part of her wants her mother to feel bad, too. Another part feels sick that she screwed up. What was she thinking, talking about a third concussion in front of Coach?

Before she can say another word to her mother, the door to the room swings open. It’s Jenny. Weighed down, as usual, by a massively overstuffed backpack. She glances at Haley lying in bed with the phone to her ear and flashes her an apologetic look. As if she’s interrupting. She always acts like she’s interrupting. Like it isn’t her room, too.

“I need to go,” Haley says into the phone. “I promise, I will deal with the forms today.” She ends the call before her mother can speak again. She turns off the ringer, closes her eyes, and lays the phone on her chest. It takes too much energy to reach up and replace it on the desk.

She hears the hushed sounds of Jenny moving around.

“She’s like a mouse,” her teammate Madison had once commented. “I mean, you turn around and she’s *there*. Like, when did she slip in? It’s almost creepy.” Madison, who does everything at full speed and full volume. “She even looks like a mouse. Kind of little and brown-haired.”

“You just don’t get the charms of ‘petite.’ She’s actually really pretty,” Haley countered. It was a kick-your-own-dog reaction: she gets annoyed with her roommate, but no one else can. She understands Madison’s impatience with Jenny.

Jenny is überstudious and soft-spoken, while Madison is . . . not. Which, in Haley's case, is a good thing. She loves being Madison's teammate; appreciates being Jenny's roommate. Randomly paired in a sprawling freshman dorm, their paths rarely cross. Haley is either at practice or hanging with her teammates or cramming in the library. Jenny, premed, practically lives in the lab. They navigate their separate lives efficiently and politely.

They are perfect living companions.

Nevertheless, Madison's observation stuck, and before long the whole team referred to her as Jenny-Mouse. Not to her face, luckily. Haley lived in dread that Jenny would overhear one of them.

"Hey," Haley says from the bed, eyes still closed.

"I'm sorry; you didn't have to hang up," Jenny says.

"Actually, you did me a solid."

"Your mom?"

"Yup."

Jenny doesn't reply. Six weeks of overheard conversations is all Jenny needs to completely get Haley's mom thing. She doesn't comment. But she doesn't judge, either.

"How are you?" Jenny asks. "I heard you got hurt at yesterday's game."

"Bashed heads with a Jeffersonian," Haley says. "Concussion."

"Ouch."

"Serious ouch. Third-time serious ouch." Haley hears a creak. Jenny sits on the opposite bed. "Which is why I've been so out of it," she continues. "You've probably been wondering why I've been lying here in the dark."

“No, your friend Madison told me. Listen, I’m really sorry about last night.” The bed creaks again. And again. Little jouncy squeaks.

Haley scrolls back to last night: Coach dropping her off. The screaming lights, warm bodies packed in the halls as she pushed her way up to her room and closed the door to the rager that persisted until dawn. She remembers turning the dead bolt, crawling into bed.

“What happened?”

Jenny doesn’t answer. Jenny doesn’t answer for so long that Haley actually turns to face her. The cell phone slides off her chest and hits the floor. When she reaches down to pick it up, she glances at her roommate.

Jenny has drawn her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms tightly around them. She rocks slightly, forward and back. Her gaze is fixed ahead, at nothing in particular, and her eyes brim with tears.

“Jenny?”

“I got in . . . really late,” she says. “And I turned on the overhead light. Anyway, I think I woke you up. You kind of . . . yelled. *What the hell, turn that thing off.* I’m sorry; I didn’t know you’d been hurt, or that you were even in here.”

Haley tries to place this. It’s disorienting to hear someone describe something you did that you absolutely cannot recall. At least, not the same way. She tries to remember details from Saturday night besides crawling into bed. The furor of the partying going on right outside her door.

A few bits come back. The door did open. A giant maw of white light and thrumming, sound made tangible, unleashed

at her. She remembers thinking: *Jenny*. Being surprised it was Jenny. Because Jenny never stayed out late.

She doesn't remember yelling. She doesn't remember saying anything.

"I'm really sorry," Haley says. "I don't remember that at all, but I was pretty out of it. Light and noise are killer right now. I probably just . . . reacted."

Jenny continues to rock. "It's okay. You felt terrible and I woke you up. I was pretty out of it, too. I drank some stuff at a party and it really hit me."

Haley sits up. Her eyeballs threaten to pop from her skull, but this warrants her attention. Jenny-Mouse at a party?

"Seriously? You partied? *My* roommate? Jenny, I'm so proud of you!" Haley manages what she hopes is an enthusiastic smile but suspects is more like a grimace.

"Yeah, well, don't be." Jenny presses her face into her knees, blotting her eyes against her jeans.

"Hey," Haley says. "It's okay, I'm not mad. God knows I've come crashing in here late plenty of times."

Jenny doesn't answer. But she does unlock her knees, rise from the bed. She moves to her desk, begins fussing with some papers.

Haley tries again. "So where was this party?"

"Conundrum," Jenny says.

Haley's eyes widen. Conundrum is one of the houses on campus. Some are "interest" houses and named appropriately: Green House for the environmental activists, Light House for students into religion. Others are just named after famous alums, and you could apply as a block and get to live with a pack of your friends.

Conundrum is supposedly an interest house for people from different clubs. An institutional effort to combat the social silo effect of people hanging out only with their teammates or fellow choir members or rock wall buddies. Officially, it's meant to be an eclectic blend of students who wouldn't normally hang out together.

Unofficially, it's people who like to rage. Whenever, for whatever.

"Wow. Go hard, girl."

It's the wrong thing to say. Jenny whirls around.

"Yeah, well, you know what? It *sucked*. The party sucked! I don't know why I went. This guy I hardly know invited me. And it was a big, huge, stupid mistake." Jenny moves to the closet. She yanks out her towel and grabs her toiletries bag. She really does remind Haley of a frightened mouse.

"Jenny. What's wrong?"

The girl shakes her head hard, her long brown hair obscuring her face. "Nothing. I really don't want to talk about Saturday night. I'm going to take a shower." Jenny bolts from the room. The door slams.

What the hell? Fine. Be psycho. Next time I won't ask.

A fresh wave of pain crashes behind Haley's eyes. She needs to lie down again. But first: water. Haley steps over to the mini-fridge where she's stashed bottles of Poland Spring.

Jenny's backpack rests against the fridge door. Haley grabs the top loop to pull it out of the way . . . and it won't budge. She pulls again, and fresh daggers shoot up her neck into the bottom of her skull.

What is in there? Haley can't help herself: she unzips the

bag. It's stuffed with science and math textbooks, the type made with the ultrathin, photograph-rich paper that results in boulder-heavy books. Haley unzips and push-drags the thing out of the way, then retrieves a water. She takes a long, deep swig from the bottle before returning to her bed.

As she settles her head gently on the pillows and closes her eyes, she's struck by how many times she's seen Jenny heft that pack over her shoulders. She's almost never without it; it's like a fifty-pound growth she scurries beneath, from dorm to library to lab.

That girl is way stronger than she looks.

• • •

The walls of Conundrum throb, a testament to the power of stereo speakers. The windows rattle slightly, but no one hears that over the music. Doors slam, water streams in the showers. Deep male laughter erupts in short bursts.

The dusky air outside the house is deceptively still. It is the silence before the starting gun. The final breath before the plunge. Looming night trembles with possibility.

• • •

RICHARD

Her hair, like milkweed spilling across Richard's chest, smells of wood smoke. A few strands cling to his lips.

Downstairs something clatters in the kitchen. The shower, on the other side of the wall behind their heads, thrums with the uneven staccato of water hitting a plastic tub. The scents of bacon and coffee seep into the room.

"You're like a dog," Carrie always teases him. "I've never met anyone more sensitive to smell."

"Rrrruff," he'd replied the first time she compared him to a dog. He'd buried his face in her neck and taken a good long draw, as if to prove her point. Goat milk soap. The laundry detergent she liked from the natural foods co-op rising from the sheets as he pressed her back into the bed. They were in bed the first time she'd said it.

They were usually in bed.

“Dude,” Jordan had said with an exaggerated wink to Richard shortly after their first public appearance as a couple. Jordan had spotted them in the dining hall, seated across the table from each other, silently concentrating on the chocolate chip pancakes stacked on their plates. Carrie didn’t usually come to the dining hall. She preferred cooking for herself in the big communal kitchen at Out House, the building where she and all the other students into hiking and camping lived. But that morning there were no eggs in the fridge and she wanted pancakes, so they made the long walk across campus for brunch.

It was a Sunday. Richard remembers this because even though he wasn’t particularly hungover that morning, he was dreading the long afternoon ahead: a boatload of number theory to get through and a paper due by noon Monday that he hadn’t started. He was thinking he’d need to get back to his room to collect his stuff before heading to the library. He was also thinking, *More coffee*, and he was about to ask Carrie if she wanted a refill when she reached across for his free hand. Didn’t break stride on those pancakes, didn’t look up from her plate, but laced her fingers through his and held them there while she ate.

That’s pretty much how and when Richard—and everyone, including Jordan, who saw them that morning—knew: they were a thing.

Richard wants to pull the hair off his mouth, but he’s afraid Carrie will wake, and he’s not ready for that yet. The room is bright—she refuses to draw blinds at night, claiming she likes to rise with the sun—but he’s the one always woken up at dawn while she’s impervious to the light. Once up, though, she springs to action. She doesn’t exactly bolt from bed,

but extricates herself from the tangled sheets and heads for the shower before his eyes fully focus.

“Good morning . . . I guess?” he’d said the first time he stayed the whole night and witnessed this routine. She was sifting through her closet, quick-clicking the hangers as she parsed her clothes. She had her back to him, and he was treated to a view of her naked butt. “Whatever happened to pillow talk?”

Carrie pulled out a kimono and slid her slim arms through the sleeves. It had a red, yellow, and black dragon festooned across the back. She turned, smiled at him. Grabbed a mesh bag from the top of her dresser.

“I told Gail I’d meet her for breakfast downtown,” Carrie said. She was at the door, hand on knob, when she reconsidered. She returned to the bed. Bent to plant a barely-there kiss on the side of his face. “Plus I’m not really the pillow-talk type,” she said. “See you later?”

Before he could answer, she was gone. He listened to her footsteps, heard the bathroom door open and close, and only when he could make out the unmistakable sounds of water gushing through faucet did he get up, retrieve his clothes from the floor, and leave.

Here’s what Richard’s never told her: sometimes, after they’ve spent the night together, he doesn’t shower. He carries her with him throughout the day, lifting the back of his hand to his face and breathing in her lingering scent. The shampoo she uses. Her skin. He can’t get enough of it. As opposed to her, jumping in the shower as soon as she’s awake, staying in there too long, and, according to her housemates, using up all the hot water and making them late.

She's right. He must be part dog.

The racket from downstairs increases as voices are added to the mix, and Carrie stirs. Instinctively he tightens his arm around her. Her head, which has been tucked warmly between his chin and shoulder, lifts. The veil of blond hair lifts as well, detaches from his lips.

"Hey," he says.

Carrie squints, wrinkles her nose. Shifts slightly away from him and buries her face in the pillow. "Who the hell is banging the drums?" she moans. She moves as if to rise, but he holds her.

"Just because your housemates are frying tempeh sausage instead of sleeping in doesn't mean you have to get up," he says.

He feels her relax slightly. She widens her eyes. They're burnished brown, flecked with gold.

"It's not tempeh," she mumbles. "It's tofu."

"Same thing," he replies. He waits for her to argue with him, but she closes her eyes.

"How much did we drink last night?" she says instead.

Richard blinks: no pain. He runs his tongue over his teeth: no cotton mouth. His eyes sting a little, but that's probably from the smoke. A bunch of them had been sitting around a campfire they'd made in one of those metal dishes. A very Out-House-y way to pass a Saturday night. As opposed to the usual weekend "activities" in his house.

"Not much," he says. "But I can't speak for you."

She rolls over, stares at the ceiling. "My skull feels like eggshells."

"Want me to get you a glass of water?"

“Oh god. Would you?”

He pulls his arm out from underneath her and flips back the comforter. The cold air in the bedroom hits him like a slap; the students in Out House thrive on keeping the thermostat at igloo levels. It's only October, but nights and mornings are cold. He searches quickly for his boxers. He's already gotten an earful from the Hippie Witch, who shares the floor with Carrie, about seeing him slip into the bathroom without them.

“Nobody needs to see your naked ass first thing in the morning,” she cawed, like some crow, the morning he'd just needed to take a piss and mistakenly thought the coast was clear. He doesn't get why Carrie lives with these people. It's not like the house is that great.

“Hippie Witch caught me,” he'd reported the morning it happened. Carrie had gotten up and the dragon kimono was on.

“You know I hate when you call her that,” she'd said. “She has a name: Mona.” She'd brushed past him with the mesh bag, exiting.

“Exactly. Mona the Hippie Witch,” he'd directed at her retreating back, but she didn't laugh. She also didn't seek out his company for the next thirty-six hours; not even a text. Then, around eleven o'clock at night, while Richard was studying alone in his bedroom, Carrie knocked. He opened the door. She stepped in and her mouth was on his and she was unbuckling his belt before the latch fully clicked shut.

He figured she'd gotten over the Hippie Witch comment. But he'd learned his lesson.

Words, which Richard batted carelessly among his friends, were powerful things to Carrie. With the guys, he slipped easily into some shorthand that didn't mean much beyond what

was just said in the moment, possibly less, since their word choices were reflexive, unconsidered. For Carrie, words were volatile, intentional, Molotov cocktails of meaning.

Deep down, Richard knows she's got a point. He should respect accuracy in language. But choosing words carefully was one thing; navigating minefields of political correctness was another, far more exhausting, thing.

Sometimes he wonders why he's with her. Then Jordan reminds him.

"Older women have . . . knowledge," Jordan had commented the Sunday of the chocolate chip pancakes. He'd tracked Richard down after brunch, discovered him in the library, and dropped his laden backpack on the long table where Richard had just started on his problem sets. Jordan sat. Waited.

"They do," Richard agreed. That was it. He wasn't sure he was ready to talk about Carrie. He wasn't sure he knew what to say.

"So, this is a thing now?" Jordan continued. "You, the lowly sophomore, and Eco Carrie? Who just happens to be a senior?"

Richard laughed. "People call her that? Seriously?"

"Uh . . . everyone calls her that. Maybe not to her face. I mean, she pretty much is, right? Lives in the nuts and berries house, protests fracking, wears hemp . . . or does she eat it? Can you eat hemp?"

"No, but you can smoke it."

"Oh. Does she?"

"She wears flannel, eats local, and would never smoke," Richard said, immediately sorry he'd taken the bait. He wasn't superstitious, but for some reason he hadn't wanted to jinx

their relationship, or whatever it was. Hadn't wanted to expose it to the brutality of his friends' conversations. The whole thing felt as fragile and random as a bubble to him: one wrong move and it'd pop.

She was the one you always noticed who never noticed back. The type who couldn't quite disguise her curves inside oversize clothes—overalls and plaid shirts, soft dresses brushing the tops of scuffed Carhartts—this girl-woman-goddess with untamed hair, half held in place with a fist-size clip.

He still couldn't get over that she'd chosen *him*. Neither could Jordan.

“Way above your pay grade, don't you think?” Jordan had teased.

Richard forgave the dig. Jealousy was the highest compliment. He'd rewarded Jordan with a wink and no comment. *Let him imagine.*

The bathroom, where he goes to fill a glass of water for Carrie, is shrouded in mist. Hot air from the shower mingles with frosty air from the wide-open window, creating a mini meteorological event. Moisture drips from the ceiling, like it's raining indoors. *How is this environmental?*

He slips out before the someone who has created their own personal rain forest emerges from behind the plastic curtain. *Gotta be the Witch*. Hypocrite of the highest order. Her dad, a VP for some oil company, pays her tuition so she can stick it to him by growing her red-blond hair into white-girl dreadlocks and organizing protests against the college's portfolio of investments in climate change–related industries.

Hell, what's *not* a climate change–related industry? If the Hippie Witch had her way, exhaling would be outlawed.

Carrie has shifted to a half-sitting position, a pillow rolled behind her neck, cradling her head. While he was in the rain forest, she had retrieved the dragon robe. She lies atop the covers now, arms folded across her chest, robe wound tight across her body. He holds the glass out to her and slides beneath the comforter.

“Thanks,” she says. She drains the glass, hands it back to him.

“More?” he asks.

She closes her eyes and presses her head back into the pillows. “I’ll get the next one myself.” It’s an effort for her to remain inert like this. She is seriously hungover. “Wow,” she says. “Why did we drink so much?”

“I had no idea *you* were drinking so much,” he replies. He’d pregamed with Jordan and the guys at their place, Taylor House, before arriving late to the bonfire at Out House. The guys had given him a hard time about leaving for Carrie’s.

Earlier in the semester they’d been cited for damage at Taylor. Their parents were all sent fairly hefty bills covering a broken window, a smashed couch, and a hole-punched wall. In addition to the fine, they were also banned from hosting parties. So Jordan and Co. had come up with the brilliant solution of getting the house next door, Conundrum, to host for them. With them. Whatever. Taylor supplied the booze, Conundrum the location.

Richard had wanted no part of this plan. For one thing, his parents couldn’t afford the fines. *He* couldn’t afford the fines. His mother was in tears when the bill from the college arrived; his father furious.

“How bad is it?” he’d asked his kid sister, Ellen, over the

phone. A junior in high school, Ellen got to witness the parental reaction firsthand.

The hesitance in her voice as she carefully chose her words with him was more upsetting than his dad's anger. "They keep saying, 'What's gotten into him? This is so out of character,'" Ellen said. A pause. "I mean, you never drank when you lived at home, Richard."

"That's because I was always in training for cross country," he said. "Not anymore." When he'd arrived at MacCallum, he quickly learned his high school times weren't good enough for the team.

"Still." That was all she said. All she needed to say.

Jordan had been pissed when Richard said he was heading to Carrie's instead of the party at Conundrum.

"Seriously? You're blowing off the best party of the fall to sit around singing 'Kum Ba Yah' with a bunch of eco freaks?"

Richard laughed. "I plan to spend very little time with the inhabitants. Except for one."

By the time he arrived at Out House, the campfire was already dying down. Couples were peeling off and small groups were moving on to the next party at another location. Carrie, seated in an Adirondack chair at the edge of the fire ring, jumped up when she saw him. In front of everyone there she planted an enthusiastic kiss on Richard's mouth.

She was always more aggressively affectionate after a few drinks.

"I kind of got the sense that you'd been drinking more than usual," Richard says. "Then, when we came to bed, it was obvious."

“I don’t remember walking up the stairs,” she says. A small line forms between her eyes as she attempts to recall the night before. “No, wait. I do.”

He leans in. He kisses behind her ear, breathing in softly. His favorite place to kiss her. “I hope you remember more than just walking up the stairs.” His lips migrate to her shoulder.

She sits up straighter. “What?” she says. “What should I remember?”

He slides closer. “Woman, you pretty much raped me last night. I’ve never seen you so . . . energetic.”

His words have a Taser-like effect. Despite the pain that he knows blooms behind her eyes, she sits bolt upright with surprising speed.

“Don’t say that. Don’t say ‘rape’ like it’s some sort of recreation. Jesus, Richard.”

He exhales audibly. *Great, here we go again.*

“I’m sorry,” he says instantly. “That was wrong. You know I didn’t mean anything by it, Carrie.”

“Actually, I have no idea what you meant by it. What did you mean?”

He scootches up to a sitting position. “You were just really into it last night. Not that you aren’t always into it. But last night you were really . . . assertive. And it was good, okay? I liked it.” He says the last part softly. “You liked it, too.”

She swings her legs over the side of the bed and stands.

“Don’t presume to tell me what I like, Richard. Or maybe I should start calling you Dick? I wouldn’t *mean* anything by it.” She begins her march to the door.

“Carrie. C’mon, don’t be like this.”

She grabs the mesh bag.

He slips from the bed and stands, barring her passage at the door.

“Move,” she says.

He folds his arms across his chest. “Not until we talk.”

She tries to push past him, reaching for the knob, but he blocks her.

“Richard, *move*.”

He doesn’t budge.

Shocked surprise spreads across her face. Carrie is not used to being thwarted.

“You are not going to stomp off in a huff,” he says calmly. “We are going to talk like civilized people. Can you be civilized?”

“Are you threatening me?” Incredulity in her voice.

“See, that’s what I don’t get. You see talking as a threat. That’s not good, Carrie. It suggests you have problems with basic communication.”

“I’m not talking about talking. I’m talking about you, standing there, not letting me out of my own room!” Her voice rises. The shower sounds from next door have stopped. If she starts yelling, the Hippy Witch might decide to involve herself.

Richard leans back against the door. “What I said about last night? That was stupid. I’m sorry. I was being . . . what do you call it? . . . glib.”

She doesn’t respond.

“This is the part where you say, ‘I accept your apology,’” he continues.

“I don’t know if I can be with such an insensitive dumbass,” she says instead.

“Sure you can,” he says. “Because you know I don’t mean anything by it. You’re just so damn indoctrinated by the PC police that you have to hate on anything that isn’t überenviro-feminist. It’s killing your sense of humor, Carrie. Do you even have one left? Seriously, what makes you *laugh*?”

Carrie’s eyes narrow. “A lot of things make me laugh. Here’s what doesn’t: hate speech. Words that promote violence against women. It doesn’t take a genius to understand that.”

He nods. “Even a dumbass like me gets that.” He thinks he detects a flicker of light in her eyes when he refers to himself as a dumbass.

“You know what?” she says. “When you apologize for the stupid things you say? It’s not because you *get* what you’ve said or you’re even sorry for saying it. You’re just sorry I’m annoyed.”

“Well, of course I’m sorry you’re annoyed! What’s wrong with that? Would you rather I enjoyed annoying you? Wow, pissing off Carrie is great! That’s one hell of a good time!”

“I *so* wish you weren’t such a Neanderthal.”

“Yeah, until you *want* a Neanderthal,” he mutters.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” Richard steps away from the door. He’s tired. He glances around the room for his clothes. He’ll leave while she’s showering. She never invites him to stay for breakfast.

He expects her to move to the unblocked door. But Carrie has more to say.

“Richard, do you not get what I do on Tuesday nights?”

He sighs. Of course. Her shift. Her all-important, saving-the-world-one-hysterical-girl-at-a-time shift, answering the

phone at the college's just-created helpline. Which is supposed to be a rape crisis line, but has turned out to be where freshmen females call when their underage roommates barf uncontrollably after drinking too many vodka shots. They call the helpline instead of campus security. Or an ambulance.

At least, that's how Carrie described her first two weeks answering the line. She almost seemed disappointed that nobody was sexually assaulted on her watch.

His jeans are draped over the back of her desk chair. He pulls them on.

"I asked you a question," Carrie says.

"I apologized," Richard says evenly.

She stares at him. "Wow."

He pulls his T-shirt over his head. "And yes, I'm perfectly aware of how you spend your Tuesday nights. Trust me: I've heard it." He glances around the room for his sneakers. They were tossed near the dresser. As he yanks on his socks and shoves his feet into the sneakers, Carrie moves to the door. Hand on knob, she turns.

"So, this is the part," she says carefully, "where I say 'See you later.'"

He looks up at her. It's a far cry from accepting his apology, but probably as good as he'll get.

Then Carrie surprises him.

"But instead I think I'm going to say 'See you never.' 'Cos I'm done trying to explain basic shit to you."

"You're blowing this way out of proportion."

She laughs. A short half laugh. "Am I? Richard, we're always fighting."

“Always? See, that’s an exaggeration. Right there.”

“Fine. Usually. We’re usually fighting. Whatever. I’m tired of being mad. And it’s not like this was ever going anywhere.”

Richard stops midlace. He straightens up and stares at her. “So that’s it? We’re breaking up? Just like that, over a stupid comment I apologized for?”

Carrie flashes him one of her vintage are-you-kidding-me? expressions. She turns the knob. “Breaking up? That assumes we were ever together.”

Richard has no words for this. If she had slapped him across the face, he wouldn’t be more surprised.

The door is open now, and he can see into the hallway. Mona walks briskly past, toward her bedroom. He wonders if she’s been listening. As she leaves the room, Carrie glances over her shoulder at him one last time.

Then the door closes with a soft click.

• • •

“Are you sure we can come?”

“Yes! He said to bring friends.”

“How do you know him, Jenny?”

“He’s in my economics class.”

“Brandon, right?”

“Brandon Exley.”

“Oh. Jenny. Wow.”

It’s not her dress. She doesn’t own anything like this. Black, with thick shoulder straps studded with rhinestones and sequins, a scoop neck. An airy fabric falls straight down in crumpled folds, floats around her body. Ends mid-thigh.

“Do you think I’ll be cold?”

“You look amazing!”

“Shoot, girl. I may have to let you keep it. Looks way better on you than on me.”

• • •

Haley

Haley's seen these women before. Just not in her room.

The black woman with the super-short-pretty-much-shaved hair and the blonde. The pretty white-blonde she passes on Tuesday and Thursday mornings on her way to the gym. It's a scheduling thing. You get into patterns, pass the same people who are retracing their patterns. Dining hall, class, library, dining hall. They tread invisible paths into the sidewalks, only to shake it all out and start afresh each semester when the schedules change.

Haley and the blonde have become smiling strangers. That's how she refers, in her mind, to people she doesn't know but sees every day. It would be unfriendly not to smile, but weird to actually speak. Haley assumes the blonde lives in one of the interest houses near the athletic center and she's heading to a class on the days she passes Haley on her way to the gym.

Now she sits on Haley's bed. The woman with the short hair sits on the other bed. With Jenny. With her arm around Jenny's shoulders. As Jenny cries.

"Oh. Hey," is Haley's startled response. She's not supposed to be here. She's supposed to be on her way to history, but got hung up at the dining hall. Then forgot her notebook. And her phone. Haley keeps forgetting things. It's her first day back at classes, almost a week after the concussion, and while the pain has been mostly replaced by pressure, the fuzzy-headedness persists.

The blonde, who recognizes her instantly, is equally surprised. "Hey," she says back.

Awkward silence follows.

"Is everything okay?" Haley asks, which is ridiculous because it's clearly not.

The two visitors look at Jenny, who blows her nose into a tissue.

"It's my roommate," Jenny tells them. They look Haley up and down.

"Do you need to get in here?" the short-haired woman asks.

"Just have to grab my notebook," Haley says. She walks between them to her desk and picks up the notebook and phone. The only sound is Jenny sniffing. As she turns to leave, Haley exchanges glances with the blonde. Her wide, copper-colored eyes communicate nothing. Her mouth forms a thin half smile. She nods good-bye, dismissing Haley from her own room.

What the hell? Haley thinks as she power walks to the class she's already late for. They haven't been speaking, her and Jenny. Not beyond the automatic "Hey how's it going." Frankly, Haley's pissed. She'd apologized for supposedly yelling the

other night; wasn't that enough? And you'd think, given how awful she's felt this week, lying in their room with her head throbbing, Jenny would've been maybe a little thoughtful? Offered to bring her a sandwich, or at least *ask* how she was doing, especially after Haley's parents showed up? You know things are not going well when the 'rents show up and it's not Parents Weekend.

Instead, Jenny-Mouse was more furtive than ever, bordering on unfriendly. Avoiding eye contact. Huddling on her bed with her back to Haley, whispering into her phone. And that's if she thought Haley was asleep. If Haley was awake and Jenny's phone went off, she'd tell whomever on the other end, "I can't talk now. I'll call you later."

As if I give a damn about her little dramas. Haley pushes open the doors to the lecture hall. It's a big survey class, American history from the colonial period to the Civil War, and she slips unnoticed into an empty seat in the back.

She's had her fill of drama lately. This morning at breakfast, for example. When she broke the news to Madison that she was off the team.

Madison stared at her across the dining hall table. "That so. Utterly. Sucks."

The crowded room was a riot of light and noise. Haley felt far from great, but the docs told her she could give the big dining scene a try.

Madison was the first one she'd told.

"There's still two weeks left of the regular season," Madison persisted. "Can't you get back for postseason?"

"It's not about the postseason, or any season," Haley said.

“It’s about *ever*. Coach won’t play me. She’s afraid if I bang my head again and permanently damage my brain, we’ll sue the college. I’m a liability.”

Madison waved one hand dismissively. “Sign a waiver or something.”

“Not an option.”

“Why?”

“Because Coach said no! Trust me: it came up. If she doesn’t *want* to put me out on the field, she doesn’t have to. Play time isn’t a right. It’s a privilege.”

Not Haley’s words. Repeated words. From yesterday’s meeting. With her mom and dad. Coach. The college medical director, who reviewed the results of Haley’s impact test (they finally did one) and pronounced her soccer career officially over.

The look on her mother’s face was priceless. Her mouth popped open in this little O as the doctor explained the risks she faced if she concussed again. Haley’s first thought was: *That’s what they mean, in novels, when they describe someone’s jaw dropping in surprise.* And she was surprised by her own detached observation. As if this weren’t happening to her. As if the defining activity of her life hadn’t just come to an abrupt end.

She was surprised that she felt nothing beyond mild curiosity, while her mother appeared tearful and her father grim.

Actually, that’s not true. She felt awful about Coach.

It hurt, the way she shook their hands, businesslike, and hurried off to some other appointment when they were done. Hurt, the way she responded when her mother brought up signing something. A waiver.

“You may be willing to put your daughter at risk, but I’m under no obligation to do so,” she’d said. Steel in her voice. “Participation on my team is not a right. It’s a privilege. And Haley revoked that privilege when I recruited her and she neglected to tell me she’d had multiple head injuries.”

There was a long silence following that. Broken by Haley’s mom.

“Your kicking her off the team would appear to support our decision to withhold that information. The fact is if she’d *volunteered* her *private* medical records, you wouldn’t have recruited her. And if she hadn’t bumped heads with someone last weekend, she’d still be your starting striker.”

“And still be at risk for permanent brain injury,” Coach shot back. “May I ask, what’s the goal here? No pun intended.”

Haley’s father rose. “The goal,” he said quietly, “is good health and an education.” He extended his hand toward Coach, who stood as well. “Thank you. *We* wish you and the team every success.” He looked pointedly at Haley’s mother. “Let’s go.”

That was when Coach spoke directly to Haley.

“By the way, you haven’t been ‘kicked off.’ You are benched due to injury and expected to attend every game. Your teammates will want you there, and I want you there, right on through to the end of the season.”

Haley could feel her own grateful smile. “Thanks.”

Then Coach hurried off without another word. Her mother had no choice but to do the same.

Madison seemed exasperated after Haley repeated this story. “Haley—duh!” she had exclaimed. “Listen to the woman. Benched is not kicked off! Give yourself time.”

Haley wondered what part of this Madison wasn’t getting.

Madison leaned close, her eyes inches from Haley's. "You *will* be back on that field," she insisted. "Cocaptain."

That's when Haley's sturdy walls of detachment came tumbling down.

"Cocaptain" had been their private thing since preseason.

MacCallum had a strict no-hazing policy for all sports teams, but that didn't prevent the "bonding" that involved new members drinking to excess and behaving ridiculously. A week after arriving for practice, the soccer captains held a team-only party at an off-campus apartment. Mini red cups, each with a shot and a half capacity, were handed out upon arrival.

"Hang on to your cups," they were commanded.

The game was charades, and you were timed. Frosh on one team, upperclassmen on the other. If your team didn't get the clue within two minutes, you all drank a cup. A senior made up the clues. So naturally, the frosh got stuff like "*Cymbeline*" (which turned out to be a play by Shakespeare) while upperclassmen got "*Friends*."

An hour into it, the frosh were wrecked.

"This isn't going to end well," Madison wheezed into her ear at some point. "We need help."

Just then, it was Haley's turn. She somehow got to her feet and staggered across the circle to where one of the older girls handed her a slip of paper. She stared at the scribbled writing: "Backstreet Boys."

"Can I sing?" Haley asked.

The older girl scoffed. "It's *charades*."

"C'mon. We're dyin' here," Haley pleaded.

"Oh, let her," another girl said. "They were still in diapers when that group was popular."

Haley turned to her. The whole room swayed when she shifted her focus. Damn. “If we get it, you have to do what I say.” Whatever was in those red cups had made her bold.

The other girl smiled. She wasn’t worried. “We’ll see.”

Haley dropped the paper, and someone with a stopwatch began counting down: “Three, two . . .” Just as she reached “one,” Haley’s eyes fixed on the snack table. Someone had brought a sheet cake in the shape of a playing field, with shaved coconut dyed green for grass. There were two plastic toy goals at each end.

She knew what to do.

Tripping over a couple of girls, Haley grabbed a goal off the cake, pulled Madison to her feet, and dragged her to the middle of the circle. Frosting and coconut clung to the edge, but that didn’t stop her: she shoved the thing over Madison’s head like a hat. Before her friend could react, Haley got down on one knee, as if she were proposing.

“You are,” Haley crooned, “my fire. My one. Desire. Believe. When I say.” She turned to the other frosh. Rolled her hand, eyes wide. *What next?*

“I want it that way!” they all sang.

Haley jumped up, her head bobbing in encouragement.

“Backstreet Boys!” someone yelled.

“Yes!” Haley screamed. Fist pump. She pointed to the upperclassmen. “Drink on the chorus!” The frosh cheered; the others moaned.

“But we. Are two worlds apart,” she continued, amazed at how well she sang after a few shots. All the frosh joined in for the rest of the song, yelling “Drink!” to the upperclassmen after each increasingly hysterical repeat of “I want it that way.”

Even Madison, who kept the goal on her head for the rest of the party, belted it.

Both sides surrendered after that, retreating to the snacks. As Haley used a napkin to help Madison wipe traces of buttercream from her ears, one of the seniors approached them.

“Well done,” she said, grinning.

“Thanks,” she and Madison said in unison.

“You know,” the senior said, ducking her head and drawing them close, as if she didn’t want to be overheard, “you two have been playing great. Everyone thinks you’ll be the only freshmen to start.”

Haley could feel Madison dig one finger excitedly into her back.

“Cool,” Haley said, hoping she wasn’t slurring the word. The room felt like a slow carousel ride.

“And if I had to guess,” the girl continued, “I’m looking at two future captains. Right here.”

As she walked away, Madison stage-whispered, “Oh. My. God!” into Haley’s ear. “Cocaptains!”

It became their thing after that. They knew it was smug and completely inappropriate, because who knew what would happen over the course of four years, four seasons?

Like this. A career-ending injury. It takes a while to absorb what that means. Which is why she can forgive Madison for not getting it straight off.

But it was still fresh enough that the word threatened to bring on the tears she’d avoided until this morning’s breakfast. She hustled straight out of the dining hall following that, and would have made it to class on time if she hadn’t forgotten the notebook.

The history lecture hall is wonderfully dim and this prof is big into PowerPoint, so the potential for dozing off is great. Haley does her best to concentrate, but the low lights and the images only further lull her cloudy thoughts. Her head jerks up at the herdlike sound of shuffling feet moving toward the door. Class over.

Once outside, Haley blinks in the sun. A slight ache in her neck foretells pain to come. She has one more class, then she's done for the day. She pulls out her water bottle and unscrews the cap. She's about to take a long swig when she hears her name.

"Haley, right?" The blonde from earlier stands at the foot of the wide staircase. She takes a few steps up toward Haley. "I'm Carrie," she says. "Sorry about before. Back at your room. You must have thought we were totally rude."

"A little," Haley admits.

"Do you have a minute?"

Haley gestures around them with her hand. The sea of migrating students. "I've got class."

"Which way? I'll walk with you."

Haley hesitates. "I'm sorry, this is totally weird. What's up?"

Carrie looks around. The entrance to the lecture hall is crowded with students. She steps closer to Haley. "I'd like to speak to you privately. About Jenny. She asked me to talk to you."

Haley's eyes narrow. "Jenny can't tell me whatever it is herself?"

Carrie purses her lips.

That's when Haley sees him. Over Carrie's shoulder, at the foot of the stairs: Cute Guy, from math tutoring. Her class

doesn't have an assigned teaching assistant, so if you have questions you can go to the math lounge where some upperclassman genius is usually on duty. She went once for help with a tough problem and spotted Cute Guy across the room. This sandy-haired sophomore who seemed to know everyone taking multivariable calculus. Cute Guy wasn't asking questions; he was answering them.

Haley had started going to the lounge on a regular basis after that. It turned out to be a great study spot, whether you were doing math or not.

But now Cute Guy is staring at them. Actually, not "them." He seems rooted to a spot on the sidewalk, aiming his X-ray vision at Carrie. Like he's waiting for her. Willing her to turn.

"It's complicated," Carrie says, turning to see what Haley is looking at. A flicker of impatience crosses her face. "Let's just walk, okay?" Carrie says abruptly. "I can explain everything."

• • •

They don't hear him over the percussive, insistent thump. He steps into the room, turns down the volume.

"A little help?"

They follow him down the stairs, their feet thunderous on old wood. Outside to the small paved area behind the house. A station wagon is parked near the door, its back end low. He raises the hatch to reveal cases of beer. A brand-new plastic green garbage can. Cartons filled with bottles of clear liquid.

"Let the games begin, gentlemen," Exley says.

• • •

RICHARD

He's been following her.

This doesn't make him proud. But Richard can't help it. He wants to see who she's with. Where she goes. The tilt of her head as she speaks to people he doesn't know.

He wants to see if she exhibits signs of the ache that's been twisting his gut. So he trails, at a distance, while she saunters to class. Lingers over chai at the library café. Marches purposefully downtown with her string bag to the food co-op, where she'll load up on organic produce, farro, local cheese. He used to remark, amazed, at the prices she was willing to pay for these items.

Her face is smooth as she moves through her days. She looks more beautiful and self-contained than ever.

When he can't stand the silence anymore (she responds to none of his texts or phone messages), he decides to make sure she sees him. He will force a response, something, a glance

even, that acknowledges his existence on the same campus, the same planet.

Normally, he'd be nowhere near the history building at this time of day. Neither would she, so it strikes him as odd. Her whole morning has been out of joint. She and Gail had breakfast at the dining hall (which they almost never did), then set off across campus to one of the freshman dorms. He didn't have class, so he waited on a bench, a comfortable viewing distance from the entrance.

I've become a stalker. This is bad. He's got it bad.

"Have a little pride, man," Jordan said when he confessed that he'd been following Carrie. They were drinking beers in the Taylor common room. Jordan had been unsympathetic. "It shouldn't be that much work," he said. "Constantly watching every word you say? Putting up with her ridiculous friends? There are more fish in the sea, and they are way easier to hook."

Richard regretted telling him. Not that Jordan was wrong. It *had* been too much work. But Jordan didn't get that he felt bad anyway. It was like some little piece of him had been surgically removed, and he was looking around for it. In a dark tunnel without a flashlight. Making an idiot of himself in the process.

Richard knew it wasn't good.

"See, you made the wrong choice," Jordan continued. "Not just about Eco Carrie. That was the big wrong choice. About the weekend in general. Shouldn't have blown off our party."

Richard smiled. "Seriously? If you had a choice between sleeping with a gorgeous woman or raging with the guys? Give me a break."

Jordan tilted back his head and drained his beer. "I didn't have to choose."

Richard looked at him skeptically. Jordan was usually a lot of talk when it came to women. Whether there was any action connected to that talk was debatable. More than a few guys at the house had a running bet that he was *all* talk.

“Seriously?” Richard repeated.

“Freshman.” Jordan winked. He reminded Richard of a raccoon, with his cunning point of a face. Those cute animals that cock their little heads then tip your trash.

“Hmm,” Richard responded. Which Jordan interpreted as encouragement.

“Exley invited her. And she brought others. So you would not have been lonely, my friend.”

“Hitting on freshmen is sort of like shooting fish in a barrel, don’t you think?” Richard said. “I mean, as long as we’re sticking to your fish metaphor.”

Jordan laughed. “And that’s a problem . . . why? If the whole point is catching a fish?”

Richard shook his head. “Whatever. Just not my style. At least one of us had a good weekend.”

Jordan popped another beer.

“So are you going to see her again?” Richard asked.

“Who?”

“The freshman.”

Jordan snorted. “See, this is what I’m talking about. This is why you are moping around with your tail between your legs. News flash: no one’s trying to get married. Except maybe you.”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“Hell no,” Jordan replied, laughing. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. She was great. But this is college. It’s a freakin’ buffet!

When else in our lives are we going to be surrounded by so many females our age? Besides, it's not like we exchanged numbers or anything."

"Or could find your phone the next day," Richard added.

"True. God, we were wrecked. Exley mixed an entire trash can of Skippy."

"Skippy?"

"Beer, ice, vodka, and Country Time lemonade," Jordan ticked off. "Has to be Country Time. Something about the sugar."

Richard wrinkled his nose. "Since when did our man Exley become such a bartender?"

"Dr. Exley," Jordan corrected. "He's got a PhD. *People Hafta Drink*."

Richard laughed in spite of himself. As he drained the rest of his beer, he thought about what Carrie would make of this conversation. He could picture her disgusted expression. Which was why, in the weeks they'd been together, he'd never introduced her to any of his housemates. That had been easy: except for the one time she'd surprised him in his room, they'd always gone to Out House. And he'd said nothing to the guys about her. Until Jordan spotted them the morning of the pancakes.

Richard had been the last man chosen for Taylor. His freshman year roommate and running buddy, Joe, wanted Richard to live with him at the party house, Conundrum, but Richard decided to pass. It was looking like he'd end up living in a basement single in one of the old dorms (his room draw number sucked) when Jordan, whom he also knew from their frosh hall, said they needed one more guy to fill out the

application for a house block. Richard jumped at it. He was pumped when they got it. He'd be part of a pack of twenty guys, most of whom he knew, living in his own (closet-size) bedroom in a three-story house.

Then Richard met Jordan's friend Brandon Exley.

Richard was no stranger to partying, but nothing prepared him for Exley. A boarding school veteran, word was the guy basically stopped living with his parents at age fourteen. It wasn't simply that he drank a lot, and drank harder stuff than anyone—he did. It wasn't that he did drugs, and not just pot—he did. It was the grim purposefulness to Exley's partying that set him apart. The closed look in his eyes as he stood in the dim corner of a room, draining one red cup after another, watching. Laughing without smiling. You didn't see him talk to girls, but when he was ready, he'd move from his place on the wall to the dance floor in the center of the room and begin grinding with whomever he'd decided to target that evening. At some point, you'd see them leave together, his arm around her waist as they stumbled upstairs.

Exley disliked Richard instantly, stiffening like a restrained animal that senses a threat the moment they met. Richard didn't really get it, but the more he got to know Exley, the more it made sense. It was like the guy needed someone to provoke, to target, and fixated on Richard. Exley was always pushing Richard to drink more than he wanted, goading him if he slowed down. Mocking him for tutoring math instead of joining the rest of the guys for beer pong or pool shots at the house. When they got cited for damage and banned from hosting parties, Richard was actually relieved.

As Richard stands just behind a tree near the entrance to

the history building, watching Carrie, who seems to be waiting for someone, a wave of urgency breaks over him. He can fix this. He *needs* to fix this. He takes a deep breath, relaxes his shoulders, and observes. It occurs to him that this is how he attacks tough math problems: avoid panic, take one step at a time. There is always a solution. It always, ultimately, reveals itself.

Richard steps out from behind the cover of the tree and plants himself behind her. At the same moment, the doors to the building yield, letting loose a stream of bodies. They break around Carrie as she remains in place, her gaze fixed on a point at the top of the stairs. She doesn't turn. He takes one step closer.

She speaks to someone. A girl who has just come out.

Richard knows her. Recognizes her, anyway. She comes to tutoring, although he's never worked with her. Soccer Girl (the sweatshirt she always wears gave that away), who sometimes doesn't ask for help at all but simply studies in the math lounge.

He notices Soccer Girl's hesitancy as she answers Carrie. She wrinkles her forehead, looks beyond Carrie as if she's impatient to move on. That's when Soccer Girl sees him, and their eyes lock. Surprise unfolds across her face.

Carrie turns to see what's so interesting over her shoulder. When she picks out Richard, she flashes him a furious look, then whips her head back toward the girl. More words are exchanged between the two of them, then the matter is settled and they begin walking together. They pass him on the sidewalk, Carrie's eyes fixed ahead at something, anything except him.

It's not turning out the way he intended.

• • •

Music seeps from someone's room, not clear which. The volume is turned up, and several doors down someone else sings along. A few more join in from another room, then the whole thing goes hall-viral.

Girls who never thought they could carry a tune are belting it. Girls who never thought they could dance are shaking it, down the hall, in dresses and jeans and gym shorts and sweatpants. They hold hairbrushes like microphones, they whip out their cell phones and blind themselves with repeated flashes from their cameras.

From the bathroom, one girl emerges, shower-fresh, wrapped in a towel. She stands in the center of the hall and, diva-like, sings.

They laugh so hard they gasp for breath, falling against each other for support.

• • •

Haley

Haley's not a hugger.

Never has been. Not even when Haley was little and girlhood was defined by sleepovers and whispered secrets, giggles and body-rocking laughter over practically nothing. And hugs.

Spontaneous, random hugs. On the playground. At the swim club. Before school, after school. In the hallways as they changed classes. On the couch in someone's den, the big TV room, group-hug pileup with a bowl of popcorn knocked over in the crush. Body language that declared, emphatically: *We Are Friends. Best Friends. Forever.* And when they got older? Instagram-Snapchat-Facebook-posted documentation of girl-love, those hugs. The imprimatur of success: *Me and my besties. #HavingSoMuchFun*

It wasn't instinctive for Haley. She could feel herself tighten awkwardly when friends threw their arms around her. Her

return hugs were swift; she always let go first. It wasn't that she wasn't physical—just the opposite. Haley was the first to rush the goal and hurl herself at their keeper when they won a game; the first to slap your hand in encouragement after a tough point; the first urging everyone together in a midfield huddle, heads bumping, arms laced over hunched shoulders.

That felt genuine to her. The rest . . . not. So when she opens the door to their room and finds Jenny waiting, as Carrie promised, she is startled by her own response.

Haley drops her pack and walks straight to where Jenny sits on her bed, open laptop resting on her knees, a box of tissues at the ready. She ignores all that, even the stray used tissues. She ignores the polite, respectful distance that has made them such good roommates and slides herself onto the thin wedge of bedside next to Jenny, the computer tilting dangerously. She feels her own eyes fill as she throws her arms around the girl's shoulders and, wordlessly, squeezes tight.

Oh, Jen. I'm so, so sorry, she doesn't say out loud.

Her roommate shakes with silent sobs. Haley just holds on. She doesn't know how long.

When they finally move apart, Haley stays on the bed. Jenny's face is creased and red-streaked. Her eyelids look raw.

"I feel terrible. I had absolutely no idea," Haley says quietly.

"How could you? I didn't tell you. I could barely admit it to myself."

"That's what Carrie said. But she said you've been really brave."

Jenny angles her head away. "I don't know. If I'm so brave, how come I didn't fight him off? How come I let this happen

to me?” Fresh tears begin to form in her eyes. “I don’t feel brave. I feel stupid.”

Haley covers Jenny’s hand with her own and squeezes. “It takes bravery to speak up. It takes super bravery to report . . .” Haley stops short of saying the word. For some reason, she feels like that would upset Jenny even more. She doesn’t know why. It’s just a gut feeling. She’s relying on her gut for all of this. Plus, Carrie’s advice.

The older girl got right to it. Once she whisked Haley away from the history building, she revealed that she was a volunteer for the sexual assault response team at the college.

“Your roommate, Jenny, was raped last weekend,” Carrie said. “My friend Gail and I are both volunteers. We’ve been helping Jenny get the support she needs. After you walked in on us this morning, she told us you didn’t know. She asked me to tell you.”

That scene in the room. The tears, the air smog-thick with tension. Haley finally got it. “Oh my god! What happened? Is she okay?”

Carrie shook her head. “I can’t discuss any of the details with you. Privacy, you know? Physically she’s fine. But mentally, not so good. She’s shaken. Classic trauma, really. Just like they described in our training sessions.”

Classic trauma. Haley had no idea what that meant.

“She’ll need lots of support,” Carrie said.

“Of course. What about her family? Do they know?”

“Yes. They’re flying in tonight. From Ohio,” Carrie added.

Haley felt a prick, the slightest twinge, of annoyance. *Uh, she’s my roommate. I know where she’s from.*

“She’s going to need to process. A lot,” Carrie continued. “Be prepared to listen. Sometimes at inconvenient times, if you know what I mean.”

“No. What do you mean?”

“Late at night. In the dark, in bed, when there’s nothing to distract her from the thoughts. When she keeps replaying the attack, over and over, in her mind.” Carrie’s voice was steely, the words delivered like short, swift blows. “Or maybe unexpectedly, middle of the day, while you’re doing homework together in your room? Suddenly she’ll start to cry. Maybe she won’t speak at all, but just need someone to be with her. Don’t ask questions. Just be present.”

Haley stopped walking. She faced Carrie. “You seem to know an awful lot about this.”

The older girl held Haley’s gaze for a long moment before answering.

“I’m not a survivor, if that’s what you’re wondering,” she said. “Although, in a sense, we all are. Survivors of the rape culture.” She was speaking loudly. They had stopped beneath a cluster of trees, a quiet intersection of sidewalks, but students walking yards away on a parallel path shot them curious looks. Even Carrie noticed. They continued walking.

“I know you’ve been dealing with your own issues lately,” Carrie said, her tone a bit more hushed. “Jenny told us you were hurt playing soccer. But she needs you right now. I don’t get the impression she has a lot of friends.”

“She works a lot. She’s got two labs *plus* multivariable. It’s killer.”

“It would absolutely suck if she withdrew over this.” Carrie

grimaced. “Victims do that. The trauma, plus the academic pressure, is just too much. We can’t let that happen. We have to let her know that she is not alone. Especially as the complaint process moves forward to a hearing and her stress increases.”

“Hearing?”

“She’s going to file a formal complaint with the college against her rapist,” Carrie declared. “She’s not letting him get away with this.”

“Wow.”

“She’s so brave,” Carrie continued. “This has been really hard for her, but she’s doing the right thing. Not only for herself, but for all of us. Listen.” Carrie pulled out her cell phone. “Give me your number. We should talk for real, not like this. I can get you up to speed on what to expect and how you can support Jenny.” She looked at Haley, finger poised over her phone.

They come back to her now as she sits with Jenny, Carrie’s startling eyes. Metallic brown. Coppery. She pushes the stray thought away. The invading, distracting, nonrelevant thought. *Focus on Jenny*. A Herculean task, given the post-concussion landscape of her bruised, barely-able-to-concentrate brain. She glances at her watch. It’s not quite time to reload the Tylenol, but the ache behind her eyes has been steadily increasing all morning. She rises from the bed and heads toward the mini-fridge.

“Want a water?” Haley asks. Jenny shakes her head. Haley pulls out a bottle for herself, then sits on her own bed. She fishes through her backpack for the gelcaps. “When are your folks getting here?”

Jenny takes a deep breath. “Tonight. After dinner.” She looks like she might start crying again.

“But that’s good, right?” Haley says gently.

“I guess.” Jenny begins playing with the tissue she holds. Twisting it tightly around her fingers. “Telling them was . . . really hard. Awful, actually.” She looks at Haley with brimming eyes. “I’ve seen my mother cry before—tearjerker movies, sad stories. But never heard her sob. Until the other night, when I called them.” Jenny’s eyes drop to her lap. She’s pretty much twisted the tissue into a tourniquet at this point, and her fingertips are bright red. “I think half the reason I waited to report it was because I dreaded that call. And tonight? It’ll be the first time I’ve seen them. Since . . .”

“Yeah,” Haley says. *This* she gets: that “first time” meeting with your parents. When they tell you they love you, but you no longer *feel* like the girl they thought you were or want you to be. The soccer star and perfect student, happy and “killing it” at college. Now past tense, and the new you reflected in their voices, in their eyes. Their disappointment and pain like gasoline poured on your personal pyre.

If it was hard for her, what must this be like for Jenny?

“Then there’s my father,” Jenny continues. “He’s beyond angry. He called the dean’s office and wanted to know why they hadn’t expelled him already, ‘what are you doing to protect my daughter,’ blah, blah, blah. They told him they’ve got a process and they have to stick to the procedures they have in place and . . . well. He can get pretty worked up.”

“It’s his daughter. Of course he’s worked up,” Haley says.

“Yeah.” Jenny sounds unconvinced.

Haley pops four Tylenol into her mouth at once and washes them down with a single gulp. She stretches out on her

own bed and closes her eyes. “Expel him,” Haley repeats. “He’s another student.” This realization blossoms in her head. She’d assumed otherwise. She had no reason to assume anything, of course, except . . . she had. She’d assumed darkness. A burly stranger, some man reeking of alcohol and unwashed clothing. Surprising Jenny as she walked back to her dorm alone late Saturday night. After she drank too much at a Conundrum House party. One of those houses on the fringes of campus, where it was thickly wooded and quiet.

Jenny doesn’t reply. Which is when Haley remembers she’s not supposed to ask questions.

“I’m sorry,” she says immediately. “You don’t have to talk about it.”

“You don’t have to apologize. It’s fine.”

“No, seriously, I’m sorry. I mean, I’m here if you do want to talk about it. But I’m also here if you . . . don’t.”

“Thanks.”

They’re quiet for a while. Haley attempts to relax the muscles in her neck, will the little soldiers of advancing pain to retreat. The room is hot. God, Jenny *always* closes the windows. Haley can’t handle getting up again, straining to lift the heavy-paned thing.

“What did you think of her?” she hears Jenny ask.

Haley frowns. “Her?”

“Carrie.”

“Oh.” Haley considers. There’s a lot one could say. “Intense. Beautiful. In a Viking sort of way, but without the horned helmet.” Jenny makes a sound that could be a soft laugh. “What do you think of her?”

“Same. Especially the beautiful part. It surprised me, actually, when I finally met her. I didn’t picture her like that. We’d been talking on the phone on and off for a couple of days, and she had this . . . voice. I want to say strong, but that’s not really the word.”

“Emphatic?” Haley supplies. “Convincing?” *Bossy*, she doesn’t add.

“Yes, exactly. But then, when I finally met her and Gail? I didn’t expect her to be so pretty. Weird, right?”

“I don’t know. Do we match our voices? What if you talked to someone behind a screen, then they had to describe what you look like based on your voice. Would they get it right?”

“Good question.” Jenny is quiet again.

“How did you picture her?” Haley continues. It’s an effort, to keep talking. The warm room, the headache. She wants to sleep. But Carrie said Jenny needed to talk.

“Zits.”

Haley startles. “Zits?”

“Her voice felt like a bad complexion to me,” Jenny explains.

Haley can’t help it: she laughs out loud. Who knew Jenny-Mouse had a sense of humor? “She’s got the most amazing eyes, doesn’t she? I kept wondering what color they were.”

“Amber,” Jenny says without hesitation. “It’s from lipochrome. A yellow-colored pigment. I noticed, too.”

“Pardon my French, but how the *hell* do you know that?”

“I’m a biology major,” Jenny says, as if that explains it.

“You’re a biology genius, more like.”

“Yeah. Real genius,” Jenny says quietly. The tears return to her voice.

“I thought only snakes had yellow eyes,” Haley says quickly. “Yellowish,” Jenny replies, sniffing. “But also some cats. Owls. A certain penguin, found in New Zealand.”

“Cool,” Haley says. “And good to know. I was feeling the reptilian in Carrie, but maybe she’s more feline.”

It’s the wrong thing to say.

“There’s nothing reptilian about her,” Jenny says sharply. “She’s kind. And smart. She’s been helping me *so* much. Do you know, she actually went with me to the health clinic so I could get an STD test? I really don’t know what I’d have done without her. I’ve been so . . . alone. So totally alone in this. She and Gail have helped so much.”

“I know,” Haley says quickly. “She’s nice. I wasn’t hating on her. I just don’t know her.” She hears the quick whoosh sounds of tissues pulled from the box.

“Nothing is what it looks like. Or sounds like,” Jenny says, almost viciously. “Think a rapist is some tats-covered dude with a knife? Try a friendly guy with a great smile.”

“I’m sorry, Jenny,” Haley says. “I wasn’t judging. Not you, not Carrie, no one.” But Jenny doesn’t seem to hear.

“Here’s one thing I’ve learned: the real snakes in the world? Don’t look anything like you’d expect them to.”

Published by
Algonquin Young Readers
an imprint of Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill
Post Office Box 2225
Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27515-2225

a division of
Workman Publishing
225 Varick Street
New York, New York 10014

© 2016 by Maria Padian.
All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.
Published simultaneously in Canada by Thomas Allen & Son Limited.
Design by Liz Casal.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION CONTROL NUMBER:
2016020315

ISBN 978-1-61620-624-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
First Edition