Summary

With the basement to themselves, Jackie and Hyde can't seem to stay away from each other. Buried feelings rise to the surface. Jackie makes the first move, but Hyde blocks it. Rather than kissing, they end up in a chess match of escalating risks and consequences.

Notes

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A month into summer, and Hyde itched for fall. Another night shift at the Fotohut meant another day of sitting in the Formans' basement. Watching intelligence-crushing game shows. With Jackie.

They were on the couch together, him wedged into the right-most corner. He'd moved to that spot last week, after his chair both bruised and numbed-out his butt. The cushion was too hard to sit on for long, but she didn't seem to mind his proximity. In fact, unless his monotony-dulled brain was hallucinating, she'd crept closer to him each day.

Only two inches of space existed between them now. Her perfume smelled like a spring hike in the woods, and when he inhaled deeply, he tasted the aroma of apricots. Had to be her shampoo. Sitting on the couch was an error in judgment, but he stayed put. Breathing her in bothered him but not the way he'd expected.

The basement was the coldest room in the house. It kept out the heat, but with Jackie so close, sweat had formed on his upper lip. His beard probably hid it. He hadn't shaved since the school year ended, but she wasn't looking at him anyway. She'd fixed her gaze on the TV—not that he resented it. The less she recognized her effect on him, the better.

"Evelyn Peabody," Johnny Olsen said through the TV speaker, "come on down! You're the next contestant on The Price is Right!"

The camera searched the audience. An elderly woman waved her wrinkled arms in the air, and she hurried to contestants' row. The camera cut to Bob Barker, who was standing on the main set. On a
color TV, the studio was a garish sight. On the basement's black-and-white ... it was still garish.

"Another old lady," Jackie said. "She can't even reach the wheel!"

Hyde's knuckles began to hurt. They were pressed against his cheek, but the show's celebration of consumerism pressed in on his skull. "I can't watch The Price Is Right again. I just can't."

"This summer totally sucks. There's nothing to do!" The material of Jackie's blouse crinkled, as if she'd altered her position on the couch. He flicked his eyes in her direction. Even from behind his shades, the flush in her cheeks stood out. She was staring at him, and she ran her tongue over her lips.

The lust he'd been fending off for weeks cascaded into his bloodstream. Spending this much time alone with her hadn't been his plan, but he reflexively licked his own lips. The salt from his sweat coated his tongue. Her head-fogging aroma clung to his senses, and he turned toward her.

She'd broken up with Kelso in a letter. She was a free agent, and they had no witnesses. Kelso and Donna were in California. Forman was upstairs in his room, moping about "lost second chances," and Fez had gone to the public pool. Hyde would've been better off joining him. The pool was full of chicks he had no history with.

Jackie's bare foot nudged his leg. Her eyebrows rose. An invitation? Their last kiss had shoved him into a ravine, and she'd left him there with no way out. The sides were too slippery, too steep to climb. He'd begun to starve while she went to feed Kelso.

Hyde was still starving, not just for her body. For everything that made her her.

She leaned toward him on the couch, eyes partly closed, but he didn't meet her halfway. He stood up. "Don't you have friends you can hang out with?" he said and went to the TV. "An air-conditioned mall beggin' for your dough?"

"Donna's in California," she said. "My other friends are all busy, vacationing with their rich families or at cheer camp."

He changed the TV channel. Hollywood Squares came on. No better than The Price is Right, and he changed the channel again. The local news flickered onto the screen, some story about fishmongers in Kenosha. Good enough, and he plunked down on his chair. The bruises on his butt protested, but the pressure in his chest silenced them.

Jackie said nothing at the channel switch. She showed no reaction to his change in seats either, and he rubbed his jaw. His coarse beard scratched at his fingers. It would likely redden his skin, but his insides were already scoured raw.

"Steven," she said after a minute, and his breath squeezed through his lungs. It came out as strained laughter, and she glared at him. "What's so funny?"

"Why're you here, man?" he said between laughs. She lived in an air-conditioned mansion. Her parlor had a big color TV with cable. If anything, he should be over there. "It's just me and a crappy television."

"That's a whole lot more than what Michael left me with."

His laughter disintegrated. "So you're moping like Forman, but instead of holing up in your room, you're doin' it down here."
"No, I'm not."

"Come on, Jackie. You're hiding."

"I'm not," she said, but it had to be bullshit. He'd believed her once, a mistake he couldn't afford to repeat.

"Your friends on the cheer squad are probably gossiping a shitload about you," he said, sounding colder than he intended, "so you're avoiding 'em. You're lonely, and I'm all you've got..." That was why she'd leaned in to kiss him, to stay warm until Kelso came home. "If you're that hard-up for distraction, try Forman. You could be each other's rebounds 'til your exes get back."

She bent down and put on her shoes. "I'm over Michael, okay?" Her fingers fumbled with the left shoe buckle. "You of all people should—I'm not who you—damn." She shut up and managed to fasten both buckles. "Life isn't simple," she said and pushed herself off the couch. "I wanted it to be, but it's as complex as you are."

He cupped his mouth, pushing his palm into his lips. She'd either insulted him or given him compliment. Whichever it was, he'd tripped a wire, set her off.

"Being here let me think," she said. "My relationship with Michael was a dud. That's what my dad calls it. No matter how pretty it looked on the outside, the inside was rotting."

She was doing it again, exposing her depth, and his throat grew dry. If she could just remain superficial, he'd get out of that ravine, scrabble up its sheer sides to freedom. But every time she revealed her insight, he slid back to the bottom.

"Jealousy, selfishness, fantasy," she said, counting off on her fingers, "that's what Michael and I were made of. I'm not stupid, Steven. I know he's not pining for me in California. I know that our last few months together were a warning sign."

She strode to the basement door and grasped the knob. "We became friends." Her gaze was fixed on him, and her free hand splayed over her heart. "You and me. We never talked about it, but it happened. At least, I thought it had..." Her voice became higher, shakier. "Just like I thought we didn't have to talk to understand each other. We just innately understood."

"Jackie—" He swallowed. His throat was so damn dry, and he didn't want to cough. "We don't... Innately. Maybe she'd sensed his need to kiss her. Her being unattached had opened him up to possibilities, but they were punishing ones, lacerating his brain as much as his guts.

"It's fine," she said. "You're obviously sick of my company, but don't worry..." She turned the door knob. "You can have the basement to yourself the rest of the summer."

She pushed open the door, but he said hoarsely, "Wanna go bowling?"

Her body froze. "Excuse me?"

"Bowling. Where ya hurl a heavy ball toward a bunch of pins."

"I know what bowling is." She made the barest of movements, and the door squeaked under her grip. "I'm not going to the grimy bowing alley by myself."

"Yeah, I'm sayin' I'll go, too."

"You'll go..." She released the door and faced him. He'd been talking to the back of her head, but the
flush of her cheeks blazed redder. "You want to go bowling with me?"

He left his chair and walked to her. "We survived a date at Inspiration Point. Think we can handle bowling." He grinned. Her lips rose in response, and moisture finally reached his throat. "So...?"

"Sure," she said, and he opened the basement door wider for her.

Jackie had kissed six boys in her life. The first, David Sutton, had soft lips and a sweaty neck. He'd asked her to the sixth-grade spring dance. The kiss was little more than a peck, but her face tingled for hours.

The second boy was Joey McIntosh, pale-skinned, freckled, and the best actor at Performing Arts Sleepaway. Her parents had sent her to the summer camp after seventh grade. One week in, and Joey became her first boyfriend. He had a habit of cupping her shoulders while they kissed, as if she were a roller coaster, and he had to hold on. They experimented with technique, going beyond pecks to open-mouth kisses.

But on their three-week anniversary, his tongue pushed past her teeth. The slimy thing was coated in Sugar Daddy, and she gagged. Her palms slammed into his chest, shoving him off the giant rock by the lake, and he landed in the water. It was a wet break-up, but she didn't cry over him.

In Eighth grade, she dated Matthew Delveaux. He was the tallest boy in school and played on the basketball team. He kissed so well that her toes scrunched in her socks. Classmates sometimes gawked as they walked down the halls together, hand-in-hand. He had over a foot on her in height, but she loved it.

At her house, she often sat on his lap while they made out. The sensation of his lips on hers shot into her stomach and throbbed even lower. His erections, the first she'd ever felt, pressed into her under-thigh.

They broke up before the summer. His dad was a research scientist, and he'd left his job at a Kenosha pharmaceuticals company for academic research in Madison. That meant Matthew and his family was moving. As a going-away present, Jackie let him get to second base. Unlike his skilled kissing, however, he had no idea what to do with her breasts. They hadn't developed much yet anyway, but they were tender for days because Matthew's inept, pinching fingers.

Ninth grade was spent secretly lusting after Michael. Transitioning to high school had taken most of her focus—getting into the most popular clique, being in the cheer squad, coping with double the homework requirements—so she didn't pursue him. A week before sophomore year, though, they met at The Hub. He asked her out in the cashier line. It was the happiest moment of her life … until they kissed.

His lips were so wet and cold on their first date she reevaluated her crush on him. He'd smeared spit on her cheeks and chin, and her attraction withered. But one look at his perfect face, with its chiseled cheekbones, thick eyelashes, and shiny hair, and she had to give him another chance.

She lectured him on kissing technique, using all she'd learned from Matthew. Michael progressed slowly, but he eventually kissed the way she liked.

The fifth boy, Fez, had kissed her without permission. The roll of his tongue in her mouth was a startling and exciting experience, but he'd forced it on her. It was also fit a pattern of behavior. He'd constantly pushed himself at her, not physically but romantically. But she got to choose who she dated, not him. No matter how badly he wanted her.
The sixth boy had her permission and needed no instruction. Her first true kiss with Steven was also her last, but it was like three kisses in one. He'd welcomed her tongue toward the end, letting her deepen the contact. She cupped his cheek before pulling away, kept her lips pressed to his, waiting for her toes to scrunch … for her stomach to heat up … for her body to throb with the need for more.

Yet she was numb. Physically and emotionally. Or she'd simply exhausted herself by chasing him so long. How could she possibly hope to keep someone like Steven? He'd say, "Sayonara," the instant he was done with her. No sentimentality. No interest in reading Cosmo to work on their relationship.

He wasn't the type to fall in love, especially not with her.

"Come on, baby!" Steven's voice reached her through the noise of the bowling alley. She lifted her head from the scoring table as his bowling ball soared down the oiled lane. It smashed into the pins, scattering all ten of them. A strike.

He returned to her with a satisfied smile. They were six frames into the game. He'd scored seventy-three points so far, not counting his latest strike. She, on the other hand, had a score of twenty-six. Pathetic, but ruining her manicure wasn't worth it. She didn't grasp the ball tightly or throw it all that hard, and she was so distracted that aiming wasn't even a concern.

Steven had ignored her signals for days. She'd sat closer to him in Eric's basement. Gotten a pedicure and showed off her creamy, delicate toes. Worn a perfume that smelled like the most romantic of summer nights. The aroma blended amber, lilac, and jasmine, but he hadn't noticed. He was so oblivious to her she might as well be invisible.

He took her place at the scoring table, and she went to the ball return. She'd chosen a pink, seven-pound ball that glided down the lane more than rolled. But it knocked down three pins on her next throw.

"Not bad," Steven said from the table. "You could pick up the spare."

Her spine stiffened. She hadn't been completely honest with him today. She'd said she was over Michael, but she was over being with Michael. He'd shattered her heart enough. Shattered her illusions.

But Steven's growth was no fantasy. He'd gotten a few inches taller the last few months. His biceps were bigger, and some of his smaller T-shirts strained against him, showing off the muscles of his chest. Not intentionally, of course. He wasn't vain, but he resembled a man now.

Especially with his beard. It was full but not bushy. Michael's patchy attempts at facial hair had turned her on, but Steven … whenever she looked at him lately, her mind and body pulsed with want. The feelings she'd expected from their first kiss had finally emerged. She hungered to touch him, to be touched by him, and forget Michael ever existed.

Was that picking up the spare?

The ball return spat out her ball. She hefted it up and approached the lane slowly. Steven had no problem with meaningless, sexual flings, so why couldn't she be one of them? A few weeks of making out, maybe doing more.

Serious relationships caused only pain. Her parents' marriage was decaying, and Michael had abandoned her. Even if he hadn't, she needed more than he could give. More than who he could ever possibly be.

"Would you throw the ball already?" Steven said.
"I'm trying to figure out how to pick up the spare!" she shouted back.

"Aim for the right side, where most of the pins are."

"If I do that, the ball will go into the gutter!"

He clutched the scoring table with both hands. "I'll freakin' show ya how to do it, all right?"

She hugged the bowling ball to her chest and nodded.

He reached her in moments and gestured to the lane. "See those arrows? Use them as aiming guides. Alls you gotta do is position your feet like this..." He demonstrated by backing up and running to the lane and mimed throwing the ball. His movements were graceful, not clunky, and they set a craving deep in her stomach.

She clamped her mouth shut. She was going to say something stupid, something she'd regret. He'd laugh at her, spot the leggy blonde three lanes over, and Jackie would have to catch the bus home.

"Still not getting it?" he said.

"Not really."

He inhaled and cleared his throat. "Put the ball down."

"Why?"

"This'll be easier without you holding it."

She did as he said, and he eased himself behind her. Her muscles tensed at the heat from his body. This much of him had never been so close to this much of her, not even during their kiss. Her eyes closed as his fingertips brushed down her right arm. He grasped her wrist gently, and his other hand slid over her left hip.

"This okay?" he said.

The woody aroma of Old Spice drifted into her nostrils. She was inhaling his scent, and her legs were dissolving, and this was totally, utterly not okay. Her reaction had to be purely physical, but her heart beat faster the more she thought about him. He was brave and smart. Funny and compassionate. He'd protected and comforted her. Mostly laughed with her nowadays rather then at her.

And he was waiting for her permission.

"Go ahead," she said, and he positioned her feet on the lane. He drew back her right arm, told her to focus the arrows, and swung her right arm in a mock throw. He did this two more times, and when he let her go, her skin was buzzing.

"Think you've got it?" he said but didn't stick around for her answer. He sat at the scoring table. His boots tapped on the floor, and he twirled the pencil in his fingers. Any other boy would've been turned on, such was the effect of touching her. Steven, however, just wanted to get to his next turn.

She grabbed her pink bowling ball. He'd always seemed immune to her beauty, but surely he appreciated her personality. Otherwise, he wouldn't have invited her bowling.

A chill skated across her skin. He did like her—as a person, not an object of desire. He'd never asked anything of her, unlike Michael and Fez, except to leave him alone. And a few minutes ago to take
her turn.

She threw the ball as he'd taught her. It glided between the arrows, began to roll halfway down the lane, and crashed into the remaining pins. Six of them fell, but the seventh wobbled on its base.

"Come on," Steven said behind her. "Come on, come on..." His voice was growing louder, and when the pin finally tipped over, his cheer warmed her neck.

"Oh, my God—I did it!" She'd picked up the spare, and she turned toward him. He was standing inches away. His arms spread open for a double low-five, but she thrust herself at him instead. She wrapped him in an embrace, anticipating a complaint or him prying her off. But he said nothing and closed his arms around her.

She shut her eyes. His heartbeat was ticking against her cheek, and her body quivered with a strange kind of music. The impossible had happened: for the first time ever, Steven Hyde was hugging her back.
CHAPTER TWO
LIGHTING THE FUSE

The second month of summer sped by in comparison to the first. After bowling together, Hyde and Jackie made a pact: no more watching *The Price Is Right*. If they did watch TV, it was *Julia Child & Company* or *Donahue* or any show that wouldn't kill their brain cells.

Usually, though, they spent their days outside the basement, playing Putt-Putt and pool. Going to the movies and the bowling alley. Sometimes Forman and Fez joined them, but mostly Hyde and Jackie were alone … and he didn't hate it.

One night, they went to an Aerosmith concert in Milwaukee. Her dad had gotten tickets as a thank-you from a client. Only two, and Forman added that to his *List of Sadness*.

"Aerosmith were kind of Donna's and my band," Forman said when Jackie presented the tickets in the basement. He, Hyde, and Fez had been playing *Monopoly*, and she offered the spare to whoever could be the least obnoxious for five minutes.

Hyde won that contest easily, but during the drive to Milwaukee, Jackie said, "I always planned on bringing you. I just didn't want to tip off Fez and Eric."

Tip them off to what? He and Jackie were hanging out. That was it. Never mind that she regularly occupied his mind while he jerked off. Or that he hadn't cruised for chicks since the summer started. With Forman obsessing about Donna—and Fez obsessing about his virginity—Jackie had become the least obnoxious person to be around.

Even when she got into a talking jag, he actually enjoyed it. Her monologues about fashion often deepened into discussions about philosophy and human behavior. The longer she was away from Kelso, the more Hyde saw of her brain. Maybe her fundamental self, too.

She rarely yawned when watching *Donahue* repeats with him, and scattered among judgmental comments like, "That lady's too fat for such a big print. Her floral shirt makes her look like an ugly couch," were insights that smashed his initial concept of her

"He feels shame because he thinks he's responsible for his mom's addiction," she said one afternoon. That day's *Donahue* was about the children of alcoholics. He would've changed the channel, but she'd stopped him. "It doesn't matter when people tell him he isn't," she said. "The belief is part of him, like he'd been indoctrinated by a cult."

"Or maybe he thinks he should've been able to stop her," Hyde said.

"It's both." She swept her hair from her shoulder, exposing the smooth, olive skin of her neck. The
summer sun had darkened her complexion significantly, but he remained sunscreen-pale. "I promised my mom I'd get my grades back up, now that Michael's no longer a distraction. But will it keep her from drinking a bottle of wine every night?"

The rhetorical question dangled in the air between them. He tried to ignore it, but it shone so brightly that he could think of nothing else. "Your mom's a drunk?"

"No. She's not a drunk. She's an alcoholic."

"So an upper-class drunk."

Jackie's temple twitched. She was clenching her jaw and her fists. Everyone in town knew his parents were drunks, but her family hid within a high-society illusion. Her admission to him had to be tough. She'd probably never said the truth out loud before.

Memories of sharp fingernails, of hard-as-brick palms, surfaced in his skin. "What's she like?" he said.

"Sleepy … loose-lipped." She turned toward him on the couch, but her gaze sank to the cushions. "I've learned more about my dad's sexual habits than I ever wanted. … Sometimes she asks me for advice."

"Oh, man..." He swallowed the laughter rising in his throat. Amusement had nothing to do with it. He was uncomfortable, and he scratched the nape of his neck. "Edna used to screw my 'uncles' with the bedroom door open. Sometimes in the living room. Walked in on her … a lot."

She shuddered and stuck out her tongue. She was clearly skeeved out, but her gaze met his. "Once someone becomes a parent, she should stop having sex until her children move out."

"That's one reason I'm never havin' kids. I ain't giving up sex for eighteen years."

"Oh, God. Okay, revised rule: parents should not let their children know they're still having sex."

"Reasonable compromise," he said, and a smile rose to her lips. He couldn't help but grin back, a bad habit he'd formed whenever she smiled. But she'd given him other reasons to grin, too, like when she'd allowed him to teach her how to play chess.

"This game has too many rules," she'd said during their first match. She cupped her forehead and groaned. "I need forty aspirin."

She stayed with it though, and after ten games, she'd begun to challenge him on the board. If they could have another month to play, she might actually beat him. But once school started, their time alone together would end. It was a thought Hyde couldn't get out of his head.

Nine days were left in summer. Nine days before Jackie would be reabsorbed into the cheer squad, her life of gushing over Donny Osmond and Peter Frampton, and, quite possibly, Kelso.

"Steven, what's wrong?"

His focus shifted to Jackie. He'd been staring at the basement TV, but he had no idea what today's Donahue was about, and his fingers ached. One of the circular candles from the spool table was clutched in his left hand.

"Wrong?" he said, chuckling. "What's wrong is what that dude is wearing." He pointed at the TV and hoped one of Donahue's guests was a man.
"Yeah, his suit is two sizes too big," she said, and her leg pressed against his, transferring warmth. They were sitting on the couch together, part of their routine when no one else was around. "You can tell by where the seams of the sleeves hit his arms. They should be at his shoulders, but since when do you care about—or notice—what people wear?"

"I don't." He tossed the candle to his right hand. "I'm gettin' edgy, like I gotta commit a felony before cramming myself back into Point Place High."

"Oh, I know exactly what you mean!" Her hand landed on his thigh, closer to his knee than to his crotch. "I wish the mall would have one last half-off sale. Throwing elbows and hair-pulling are expected. It's such a rush!"

"Throwing elbows?"

She shrugged. "Sale rules are in effect."

"Huh." He suppressed the urge to lick his lips. Her hand still rested on his leg, and his blood sped toward it, as if magnetized. She'd been touching him a lot these past few weeks. Nothing that lasted too long. Nothing that indicated more than general affection, but his body responded with all the lust and intense affection he felt for her. Holding himself back was exhausting.

Hiding his hard-ons was easier. He'd gotten into the habit of tucking his dick into the waistband of his underwear. But he wanted her beyond sex. He woke up every morning craving her presence, and chaining his impulses had become progressively tougher. An attitude of indifference was his goal, but being with her made every part of him throb.

"I've got it!" she said and rubbed his thigh.

His jeans felt uncomfortably tighter at the movement. He swallowed and said, "Got what?"

"What we should do. We want some adrenaline, right? So why don't we—"

"Fuck?" He smirked, and she slapped his leg.

"No, you pig! Go to Funland."

The basement door slammed shut after her last word, and he leapt off the couch. Fez and Forman had entered, and Fez said, "Funland? I'm in."


Neither of them seemed to notice that Hyde and Jackie had been sitting together. But as precaution, Hyde made a show of returning the candle to the spool table. "Tomorrow," he said and gestured to everyone, including Jackie. "Get your asses here by nine. We'll take Forman's car. I'll drive."

"You?" Forman sighed and looked down at his hands. "I guess you're right. My reflexes are dulled. I just … I miss Donna so much."

"We get it!" Hyde, Jackie, and Fez shouted together.

"I miss her," Fez said, imitating Forman. "'I love her.' 'I want her to come home.' Write another song already."

"Believe me, I tried." Forman brushed his shaggy bangs off his forehead. He sat on the armrest of the
"But nothing rhymes with California."

"Why don't you call her?" Jackie said. "I'm sure her dad has her phone number."

"Yes." Fez went to the bookshelf under the wooden stairs. He grabbed Forman's *Scooby-Doo* lunch box from it and and presented it like a model on *The Price Is Right*. "Inside this magical box is the money you need to make that phone call. Do it, Eric. Do it and set us free!"

Forman rushed to Fez's side and snatched the lunch box from him. "Money? What money. There's no money inside here." He put the box back on the shelf. "And, anyway, there's too much to say over the phone. We haven't seen each other in almost two months. It's the longest we've ever been apart."

"If you don't count the year you were broken up," Hyde said and moved to the basement door. "Well, I'm outta here."

Jackie got to her feet. "Me, too."

He didn't wait for her. He climbed the stone staircase and strolled to the driveway. Once he got into the Camino, however, he let the engine idle.

Jackie's reflection appeared in his rearview mirror moments later. He gestured to her through the driver-side window, leaned to the passenger-side door and opened it for her.

She slid into the seat beside him. "Where are we going?"

"Do you care?"

"Not really, as long as it's not here."

That was his girl. He pressed on the gas and drove onto the street, but as the trees flew by, he reminded himself that she'd never actually be his.

The vivid colors of Funland collided with the shrieks of children. Combined with the air's salted caramel scent, Jackie's senses were overloaded. The popcorn cart by the entrance must've had some kind of fan, blowing its aroma through the park. She focused on a pine-green bench and gathered her thoughts. Would she be going on rides by herself? Playing carnival games to win herself prizes? That was what happened whenever she'd come here with Michael.

"Ooh, the ring toss has a giant stuffed dog as a prize!" Fez said. "I must win that for Kelso." He headed down Fun Street but pivoted to the right and darted into Sweet Auntie's Candy. The pastel-blue store would occupy him for at least a half-hour. It always did.

Eric clapped his hands together once. "Okay, you two, what do we hit first? Jungle Land? The Royal Kingdom? Or do we play some rigged carnival games?"

"How's about the Death Coaster?" Steven said.

"D-death Coaster?" Eric's face grew pale. "Couldn't we start with something milder, like the Dolphin Go-Round?"

"That's for babies," Jackie said. "You won't even fit."

"I dunno," Steven said. "He fit himself into a cardboard box this big." He mimed the dimensions of a three-by-three foot box. "He's like a scrawny contortionist."
Eric waved his hand dismissively. "Let's not exaggerate. The box had give, but if you want to go on rides, let's pick one that won't make me vomit."

She scowled and crossed her arms over her chest. Eric was supposed to have partnered up with Fez. She and Steven had planned to ride the most thrilling coasters today. "Or," she said, "you could try to win Donna a prize."

"Win Donna a prize?" Eric turned toward Fun Street. "Which—which one?"

"Something big." She gestured at the plush lions of the Frog Launcher booth. "Something that'll take you multiple tries to win. It'll be symbolic. Once she sees that giant lion, she'll understand how hard you'll work to earn her back."

Steven glanced at his watch. "Yup. Nothing shows a woman how committed you are to a relationship like a cheap stuffed animal."

"You know what? You're right." Eric dug into his jeans pocket and pulled out a few quarters. "I'm gonna launch the hell out of those slimy, rubber frogs."

He raced down Fun Street and disappeared into a crowd of kids, but Steven kept looking at his watch. Maybe the sensory overload of Funland getting to him, too.

Jackie sat on the edge of a raised flower bed and shut her eyes. A deep breath clogged her nose with salty-sweet aroma, but Steven saturated her brain.

She'd never been one to settle. When she wanted something—or someone—she found a way to get it. But she couldn't force him to have feelings for her. She'd tried that once, and in the end they'd both felt nothing for each other.

That wasn't quite the truth. She'd been numb, experiencing the kind deadness that accompanied terror. She'd learned that from Donahue. Kissing Steven had frightened her beyond physical and emotional sensation. Falling for him, truly falling, meant being unsure at every step. Could he commit to one girl? Did he want to?

She'd been over these questions before, but her heart wasn't strong enough to be broken by him. He understood her on a level she barely understood herself. Being with him was like exploring another land, one he'd abandon her to if she asked for more than friendship.

A familiar warmth slid over her shoulder. "Jackie," Steven said, and she looked at him with wet, blurry eyes, "what's goin' on?"

"The smell," she said and coughed for effect. "It's too much."

"So let's go. The popcorn cart ain't gonna follow us." His hand slipped from her shoulder to her palm, and his fingers closed loosely around it. He was holding her hand. Steven Hyde was holding her hand willingly, and she blotted her eyes with her wrist. "Death Coaster?" he said.

"As long as you promise not to scream in my ear. It's still ringing from the last time I'd..." gone on a twisty, stomach-plummeting roller coaster with Michael. But she didn't say that out loud Steven's expression became blank whenever she mentioned Michael, as if he were retreating inside himself. Michael's absence this summer probably upset him, just like Donna's absence was upsetting her.

He nodded to where Eric had disappeared. "Forman's the screamer.. And the puker."

"Good," she said, and he tugged her in the direction of the Death Coaster. She risked curling her
fingers around his palm, but he didn't let go. He tightened his grip, and their hands fit together snugly.

Perfectly.

The Formans' phone rang. Four phones, to be exact, and Hyde picked up the call in the basement. Jackie glanced at him on the couch. Her big, brown eyes communicated an emotion he had trouble identifying. Curiosity or maybe disappointment, but he definitely experienced the latter himself as Forman's voice came through the earpiece: "Hyde? We're an hour away."

"Cool," Hyde said. "Your folks'll be back from Jaws II in half that."

"Damn. Don't let them into the kitchen, okay? They can't catch Kelso pulling into the driveway."

"Fez is already on it. He left a melted chocolate bar on their sheets. They'll have no idea if it's shit or candy. Either way, it'll keep 'em busy."

Forman laughed. "That's great. I knew I could count on you."

They hung up after a quick good-bye, and Hyde blew out a breath. His summer with Jackie was packed with dynamite. A spark was traveling inexorably to blow it up, ignited a few days ago by a missed phone call from Donna. But he and Fez had bought Forman a ticket to California. Forman's stash of dough in his Scooby-Doo thermos was just enough to cover it.

"How long?" Jackie said.

"An hour."

She pulled on her skirt. It covered her knees, but she tugged on it as if that would lengthen it to her ankles. "Eric should've just called her back."

"He was determined to see her. Didn't want him driving to Cali. He'd probably get lost somewhere in Iowa."

"Yeah. It was nice of you to get him that ticket..." she looked at him with the same, wide-eyed expression as before, "but I'm not ready for Michael to come home."

Neither was he, but he couldn't do anything about it. She'd be pissed at Kelso for a week. A month, tops. Then she'd forgive him, and the Jackie that Hyde respected—hell, that he admired—would be gone.

"What are we going to do?" She frowned, and the couch seemed to shrink by half its size. He had to jump up, to get as far away from her as possible. He needed to cradle her face in his hands and kiss that frown off it.

"About what?" he said instead.

"Us hanging out. Eric's been so upset over Donna that he hasn't noticed. And Fez doesn't notice anything unless it's covered in chocolate. But Eric's happy now, and he'll see what we're doing. Then he'll Donna, who'll tell Fez—who'll tell Michael."

He stretched his arm over the back of the couch, but he was careful not to touch her. At worst, she was afraid Kelso would get the wrong idea, that he'd think she and Hyde were fooling around. At best, she was worried about her reputation. But Hyde's rep was the one at stake. Forman would burn
him to cinders if he realized what Hyde had been doing all summer.

"There's nothin' to tell, man. We played chess and went bowling."

"Steven."

"What?"

She laid her hand on top of his, the one resting on the back of the couch. "Do I really mean nothing to you?"

Her touch set off tiny explosions in his skin. He withdrew his hand and scratched his beard with it. "We're cool."

"That's it?" She squinted at him. "'We're cool'?"

"What else do you want?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something like, 'Jackie, you've become one of my best friends this summer. We're still going to hang out, no matter what anyone says."

He pushed himself up to the couch's armrest and sat on it. Jackie Burkhart wasn't one of his best friends. She was the girl who'd hacked up his thoughts and screwed his sanity. "We can still hang out."

"Reassuring."

"Listen..." He chewed on the inside of his cheek and considered his next words carefully. "Jackie, the second we're in school again, you'll go back to the cheer squad. Your breakup with Kelso's gotta be old news by now. This summer'll fade, and you'll move on."

"And what'll you do?"

"Same as always."

"Then I guess we're back to where we were a month ago." She left the couch for the wooden staircase but paused at the first step. "Even if you can't say it—or, honestly, have no reason to say it—I will: you mean something to me."

She vanished up the stairs, and he scrubbed a hand over his face. She meant more to him than he'd ever admit aloud. Telling her the truth would get him nowhere. He'd made the same choice after their first kiss, and what he'd experienced this summer wasn't enough to change his mind. Maybe another guy could chisel Kelso out of her heart, but Hyde didn't have the tools.
Chapter Three
MATCHING HIS MOVES

Jackie gripped the knob of the basement door. The cold of the metal shocked her palm, and she withdrew her hand. She couldn't have been away that long, but the retaining walls surrounding the stairs seemed equally cold. She shivered and rubbed her arms. The weatherman had reported sixty-seven degrees this morning. Sixty-seven. Perfect weather for her shoulder-bearing dress, but the Formans' house was draining her of warmth.

She pushed open the door, expecting to see Donna, Eric, and Michael. They'd returned from California two days ago, but Steven occupied the basement alone. He sat in his chair, one hand resting on thigh, the other grasping the couch armrest. He was watching TV. Match Game '78 by the sound of it, but she closed the door with an audible click, and his gaze shot from the TV to her.

His sunglasses were hooked on the collar of his shirt. His eyes narrowed, but Gene Rayburn spoke before he could: "I just flew back from Cincinnati, and, boy, are my arms blank."

Definitely Match Game '78, and she pointed at the TV. "You've really let yourself go."

"What're you doing here?" he said, but his tone wasn't angry. It was soft. Confused.

"We had a chess match scheduled."

He stood up without a word and passed her on the way to his room. He came out with the chess board and pouch of chess pieces. She forced her expression to remain neutral, but a hundred candles lit up her insides. He liked being with her. Genuinely enjoyed it. Even if the extent of his feelings were platonic, at least he felt something.

She shut off the TV, and they set up the game as Led Zeppelin played on the stereo. As always, the board went on the couch's side table. Steven pulled his chair close to it, and she took her place on the couch.

He opened by sliding his king's pawn two spaces toward the middle. The move was one he'd made many times. If she didn't counter it properly, he'd gain control of the board.

He had to be testing her memory, to see if she'd retained his lessons. Matching his move, shifting her own king's pawn two spaces forward, could put them on even ground. She'd used that opening before. He'd shown her how to defend against his attacks, but she wasn't interested in a defensive game today.

She brought forward her c-pawn instead, the pawn in front of her queen's bishop. He said nothing, but a smile glided over his lips. It was gone in a blink, but she'd spotted it. His approval, his pleasure,
had revealed itself.

Ten minutes into the game, and she gave up less ground and pieces than she'd anticipated. Steven's eventual victory, however, had become self-evident. She wasn't that well-versed in the Sicilian Defense, but she'd learned enough to avoid total decimation.

"So," he said while taking one of her bishops, "you seen much of Kelso?"

His voice jarred her more than the loss of her bishop. Up until now, they hadn't been talking, just playing.

"I haven't seen anyone but Donna," she said and studied the board. The kingside was under his control, but she still had a chance on the queenside. "According to her, Fez has been dragging him all over town … but I don't wanna see him anyways."

She'd barely looked at Michael when he returned from California. His van had pulled into the Formans' driveway, and she stood by the porch. Her attention centered on Donna and her miraculous tan. Miraculous because usually Donna stayed pale or burned during summer. Her mom must've given her a new kind of California sunscreen.

Steven gestured to the board. "Get your rook onto the c-file. That'll help you advance."

She thanked him and did as he instructed. He was trying to help her win, to teach her how, and her stomach fluttered.

His knight was in a good position to take one of her queen-protecting pawns. She braced herself for the loss, but he pushed one his few remaining pawns forward.

"Why did you do that?" she said.

"The obvious move ain't always the smartest." He leaned back in his chair, laced his fingers together, and stretched his arms above his head. "You don't gotta jump into a relationship just 'cause you've been out of one a few months."

The fluttering in her stomach sharpened into clawing. "Yeah. I watched that episode of Donahue, too."

"No, man. What I mean is, you shouldn't define yourself by a guy." He leaned forward again, but his focus wasn't on the chess board. It was on her. "When you and Kelso broke up the second time—the third time? Whatever. You tried to define yourself by me."

"I did not!"

"You followed me like a freakin' baby duck who'd imprinted itself on me."

Blood heated her neck and cheeks, and she turned away from him. She stared at the alcove under the wooden stairs, and the scent of her own perfume choked her. Too much jasmine. "I have no plans of being with anyone right now."

"Plans don't always work out. Forman and Donna are slobbering all over each other. The cheer squad's gonna squawk about your single status, and the pressure'll get to you."

"So?" Her face blazed even hotter with blood. She whipped her head back toward him, hoping some of her fire flickered in her eyes. "So what, Steven?"
He captured her other bishop with his pawn. "Don't wanna see you get hurt, all right?"

Her breath stalled. His concern was like a salve. It soothed her stomach and tingled on her cooling skin. She was important to him. He'd finally admitted it, albeit in his own way.

"I took your second bishop," he said at her grin. "You shouldn't be happy."

"How could another boy hurt me? By cheating?" Her smile faded. Her importance to him was worthless if he had such little regard for her intelligence. "You think I'm dumb enough to get involved with another faithless jerk?"

"You went back to Kelso."

"Because I thought he'd changed."

"Kelso doesn't change. He is who he is."

She took one of his knights with her rook. "I know that now."

"Right. You 'know'." His eyebrow quirked up, as if he didn't believe her. Or had secret information.

"You've spent time with him," she said. It wasn't a question. He was acting too suspicious, and Michael was a braggart. Steven definitely had information about … "California. What did he do there? Who did he do?"

He scratched his beard and looked at the board. "Enough beach trash to fill a garbage truck."

She gasped. The sound vibrated in her ears and set off an avalanche. Boulders crashed onto her heart. Their jagged sides poked between her ribs, and she pressed both hands into her chest.

"See?" he said. "You're still hung up on him."

"I am not! It's just hard to hear about him being with other girls."

"Because you're still hung up on him."

She slapped the couch's armrest. "What do you care anyway?"

"You can do better." He closed his eyes and rubbed the nape of his neck. "You've got to."

He wasn't trying to goad or burn her. He seemed worried, but his demeanor changed before she could react. He patted the sides of his legs in a rhythm and refocused on the chess match.

Her concentration, though, remained on him. He rarely expressed himself openly. He was mostly subtext, but she'd taken Honors English. She could analyze his actions to find the truth.

He didn't want her with Michael, and he hadn't been with any girls all summer—unless he'd sneaked them into the Fotohut. But she doubted he had, which meant he'd kept himself dateless. Celibate, just to spend time with her.

His hand hovered above the chess board. He was about to take his turn, but she grasped his hand, and his eyes widened. He looked up at her, as if silently asking a question. She answered by changing her grip on his hand to a more comfortable one.

He didn't withdraw. His thumb swept the underside of her wrist, creating both warmth and a chill, and goosebumps sprouted on her arm.
"Steven," she said, but the basement door crashed open. Fez burst inside, singing an inaccurate version of "The Star-Spangled Banner". She flung Steven's hand away and adjusted the top of her dress.

"You two look sweaty and guilty," Fez said, approaching the couch. "Have you been eating my candy?"

"What candy?" she said.

"I didn't say candy..." his eyes shifted to the right, "and I certainly don't have any candy hidden in the garage." He waited a moment before speaking again. "I will be in the garage."

He fled from the basement. The door closed behind him, and she glared at Steven. "What do you think you were doing?"

"Me?" He gestured to her. "You're the one who groped my hand."

"Please. Who asked you to caress my wrist?"

"Caress? I don't caress."

She tapped the underside of her wrist. "Right there, Steven. Your thumb. My skin."

"Whatever. You're nuts."

"Not nuts enough to go back to Michael."

"Believe that when I see it."

His gaze lowered to the chess board, and he moved his queen forward, menacingly, toward her king. His dismissal of their intimacy invaded her stomach, scraping it clean of tissue, and acid spilled into the rest of her body.

"I'm not the one obsessed with Michael," she said. "You are."

He squinted at her. "Huh?"

She brushed her hair from her bare shoulders and spoke with a forced haughtiness "You don't want me dating him because it means he'll be too distracted by me and my great beauty to hang out with you."

"Sure." His chest bounced with soundless laughter. "That's gotta be it."

"I don't hear you offering an alternative explanation."

"Told you: don't wanna see you get hurt."

Her hands curled into fists. "Prove it."

"Why should I?"

"If you have to ask that..." She squeezed her lips together until they hurt. Her muscles tensed until she could no longer control them, and she flipped over the chess board. "You are so aggravating!"

He stayed silent as the chess pieces *plinked* onto the cement floor. He was staring at her ... or maybe past her.
"You're a broken railway signal, Steven. All the lights are blinking at once, and I don't know what it means or where to go!" She got off the couch. She should've left the basement, but her heels dug into the floor. "At least you're right about one thing. I can do better."

Hyde crawled on the basement floor, scavenging for chess pieces. Jackie's outburst had surprised him. So had her showing up for their chess match, what she'd said about Kelso, holding his hand—but she was a busted railroad signal, too. The second he let her in, the way his guts were begging him to, she'd lead him onto the tracks and pulverize him with a train. He wasn't going through that crap.

"You're talking like this ..." he gestured between himself and Jackie from the floor, "is more than it is."

She tapped her foot by her fallen rook. "Isn't it?"

He scooped up the rook and two nearby pawns. The pieces he'd gathered so far were cradled in the hem of his T-shirt. He twisted the cloth to secure the makeshift pouch, and it exposed part of his stomach.

She was watching him. He pretended to ignore her, but a vision pierced his skull of her touching him. Of her palms pressing into his stomach and her lips smothering the doubt in his mind.

"So what I feel here," she jabbed her fingers into her chest, "is just made up."

The pain in her voice speared him, and a lump grew thick in his throat. If she'd never dated Kelso, if she hadn't reconciled with him so many damn times ... "Depends on what it is you feel," he said.

"Friendship, loyalty, connection—on a level deeper than I ever expected. Why do you think I came back? Why I keep coming back to you?"

He dragged in a breath through his nose. She had to be fucking with his head, but the sadness in her eyes deepened the ache in his throat. He stood up, chess pieces wrapped in his shirt and crammed into his jeans pockets. "It's not made up."

She dashed to him and looped her arms around his neck. Her cheek skimmed his beard, and he tightened his grip on his shirt to keep the chess pieces from dropping. "Jackie—"

"Shut up and hug me back."

He slung his free arm around her waist. Every curve of her body fit against him as if he'd been made for her, and his shoulders stiffened. That was romantic bullshit, but his eyes closed as her perfume swirled around his brain: citrus, jasmine, and another flower he had no name for. How many damn perfumes did she own?

Blood thundered in his ears. Ten seconds must have passed, but she wasn't letting go. Neither was he. His muscles relaxed with the extended contact, like they did during a circle, and he sighed through his nose. As certifiably nuts as she made him, he'd never achieved this kind of serenity with anyone else. Not without drug-induced help.

"For someone who doesn't do hugs," she said and nestled her head in the crook of his neck, "you're good at this."

Allowing their embrace to continue was a bad idea. She'd repositioned herself more intimately against him, but his arm tightened around her back. He nuzzled his nose into her hair, breathed in its
apricot aroma, and his dick grew hard. Not just from lust but from all his shackled emotions. The center of his chest was throbbing with pressure, but he couldn't have what his insides screamed for.

Steps thudded on the wooden staircase, and Kelso's voice followed: "A Catholic school? That's rough."

Jackie's head jerked from Hyde's neck. Her arms slipped off him, and he tripped on his own feet getting to his chair. His hand let go of his shirt and grasped the couch's armrest. He'd kept himself from falling, but chess pieces spilled onto the floor.

Jackie gestured frantically to his chair. He got his ass into the seat, slid his shades onto his face, and adjusted his erection through his jeans pocket, effectively hiding it. She crossed her legs on the couch, like she had her own lust to hide, but evidence was everywhere.

He shook the thought from his skull. Evidence of what? They hadn't done crap but hugged.

Kelso, Forman, and Donna's voices blended together. Whatever they were talking about, Hyde's haze of adrenaline muffled it. He was sweating, and his shoulders hurt. His head pounded, but Kelso leapt over the back of the couch, landed next to Jackie, and Hyde's concentration sharpened.

Kelso's foot collided with a chess piece, sending it flying toward the TV. A string of spit latched onto the lollipop he pulled from his mouth. His legs spread wide enough to touch Jackie's, and his left arm got into her personal space.

"What were you guys doing?" Forman said from the deep-freeze. It sounded like an accusation, and Donna nodded beside him, reinforcing Hyde's sense of incrimination.

He didn't like it. He and Jackie owed no explanations. If they played chess together, hugged each other—or someday fucked—it was their damn business, no one else's.

"Well?" Donna said. "You and Jackie look weird."

"You look weird," Jackie said. "Your makeup palette, as limited as it is, suits fair skin, not the tan you acquired in California."

Hyde laced his fingers over his knee. His forearms strained with the effort, but this interrogation had to end. "Careful, Donna. Piss her off, and she'll chuck chess pieces at you."

Donna laughed. "What?"

"You can't see it 'cause of the beard, but I got a bruise forming on my jaw."

"That's right!" Jackie thrust her fist into the air. She must've caught onto his cover story. "I came here for you, Donna, but I found Steven practicing chess strategies. I made a perfectly innocent remark about him playing with himself, and he—"

"Gave her wardrobe advice," he said. "Her dress makes her shoulders look like a linebacker's."

She gritted her teeth but spoke through them. "That's when I hurled a bishop at him … and the rook."

"And the pawns, the knights, the queen and king. I should have her arrested for assault, man."

"You wouldn't dare! My dad would sue you for false charges!"

Kelso raised his hands, as if to placate her and Hyde. "All right, all right. Obviously, nothing's
changed between the two of you." He put his hands down and angled his head toward her. "You and me, though … look, Jackie, we've been avoiding each other. I think it's time we hash this thing out."

Hyde chewed the inside of his cheek. The moment he'd been dreading had come, but Jackie smiled at Kelso like he had the mental faculties of a fungus. "It's okay," she said. "I'm good."

"I can see you're devastated over losing me," Kelso said. He brought the lollipop to his lips, and his tongue dragged it into his mouth. Had to be an attempt at seduction, but he needed to get better moves.

Hyde imagined ramming the lollipop down Kelso's throat. He followed that up in his mind by shoving pawns into Kelso's eye sockets, but in reality he did nothing but cross his arms over his chest.

Jackie mirrored Hyde, crossing her arms over her chest, too."You know what, Michael?" she said, but her eyes flicked to Hyde. He arched up an eyebrow. Her smile deepened, and she looked at Kelso again. "I'm fine. Really."

Kelso removed the lollipop from his mouth. "You sound brave, but inside you're a scrambled mess. Just remember this: I'll always be there for you in case you have any physical needs, all right?" His left arm snaked around Jackie's shoulders, and he clutched her upper arm. "We don't have to be in a relationship to fool around."

His fingertips were close to her breast, and her jaw visually tightened. She didn't want Kelso touching her. That much was clear

Kelso's fingers played with her dress, the ruffled trim of its low neckline. Her spine straightened, but her eyes dulled. She resembled a dead deer, and Hyde slammed his fist into Kelso's right arm.

Kelso cried out in pain and withdrew his arm from Jackie's shoulders. Life returned to her eyes, but Kelso glared at Hyde. "Damn! What was that for?"

"I just missed you, man," Hyde said, smirking, but he felt anything but happy. Jackie must've been so used to Kelso overrunning her space that spacing out was her defense.

"Oh." Kelso's glare became an appreciative grin, and he stuck the lollipop into his mouth. Jackie though, pinched the skin by his elbow. "Ow—Jackie! What was that for?"

"I didn't miss you," she said and stood up. "You deserted me and broke my heart, but I've had a whole summer to get over you. A lot can happen in eight weeks, Michael. A lot can change." She walked to the basement door and grasped the knob. "Donna? Come by my house later and tell me about the horrible school your dad's making you go to."

She left, slamming the door behind her. Hyde fought every impulse to follow. She'd given Kelso a strong message today. She didn't go back to him. She'd come to Hyde. If he went after her now, they could find a secluded place to make-out, like behind the oak tree in the Formans' backyard.

His mouth grew dry as Forman moaned about Donna's school situation. Hyde's problem was less immediate but more toxic. If Jackie rejected him … or felt nothing in their second kiss … or claimed to share his feelings but returned to Kelso down the line—
"Fuck!" he whispered, and three sets of eyes trained on him. He was obsessing. Over Jackie. "What?" he said. "Donna's gonna be in a hot Catholic school uniform all day, and I won't get to see it."

Kelso nodded in understanding. Forman tilted his head, as if deciding whether to be sympathetic or pissed. Donna, however, said, "Oh, you'll see it. I'm not changing clothes before I get home. But if you make any Catholic school jokes, I'll—"

"Spank me with a ruler?" Hyde said, and Kelso high-fived him. Mission accomplished. He'd successfully accounted for his outburst, but his bigger issue still needed solving: what to do about Jackie.
Donna's complaints filled Jackie's room. Ten minutes and counting, and she'd begun to repeat her grievances, but Jackie didn't mind. Her house had become a lonely place without a boyfriend. So much had changed over the summer: her parents' relationship, her thought process, her views about herself and how society functioned—or dysfunctioned. It was unsettling. It was partly Donahue and Steven's fault, but having Donna in her room, chatting away, grounded her in the present.

"Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow," Donna said from Jackie's bed. She'd dragged Jackie's empty Michael box onto her lap, and her thumbnail dug into it "My dad had to choose a Catholic school with the cheeriest name."

"Probably to make a point." Jackie exchanged a flower pillow for the shoebox. If Donna needed to fiddle with something, it shouldn't be what used to contain Jackie's past.

"Because me going to California plunged my dad into perpetual sorrow?"

"No. To warn you that if you ever pull a stunt like that again, he'll make sure you're miserable the rest of your life."

Donna squeezed the pillow's petals. "Huh."

She said nothing more, and Jackie enjoyed the silence. Donna's deep, somewhat gravelly voice could be grating, especially without breaks. But not hearing it in school anymore would suck. Jackie no longer had someone to confide in between classes.

Not that she was confiding in Donna now. She sat on the bed and glimpsed her waste basket. Its white wicker was stuffed with cheap knickknacks, toys Michael had bought her over the course of their relationship. What happened in the basement today had compelled her to toss them.

"I had to leave," Donna said, starting up again. "My dad wouldn't have let me do it, not right away. He would've made me wait a week, to set up the stay with my mom."

Jackie cupped Donna's knee. "Oh, I totally understand. It's like when your manicure's gotten all chipped and ragged, and you're going to a party that night. So, of course, you have to get your nails done. And your regular manicurist says, 'Sorry. I'm all booked up this afternoon,' and you say, 'Here's ten dollars. I'm your next appointment.'"

"Um..."

"Going by someone's else's schedule doesn't always work," Jackie said. "You know what's best for you, and if it conflicts with someone else's expectations, then sometimes you have to say, 'Screw it,'
and choose yourself. No matter the consequences."

Donna flinched, as if Jackie had whipped a wet towel at her. "Jackie, what the hell happened to you over the summer?"

"Nothing." Jackie laid her hand on her chest, just beneath her collarbone. Steven's heartbeat still ticked against her skin. It was a memory, but colors exploded inside her mind at the sensation, and her own heart beat faster. He'd held her today, not just hugged her. Held her and nuzzled her hair.

"Bull," Donna said. "You don't usually listen to me this long without interjecting something about yourself."

"I talked about getting a manicure."

"That was a sympathetic analogy, not a conversation-hijacking."

"Whatever." Jackie snatched the pillow from Donna's lap and replaced it with the shoebox. "There. That's what happened. Open it."

Donna pulled off the top of the box. "It's empty."

"Exactly."

"Very funny."

"No, I mean it. That's my Michael box." Jackie pointed at the waste basket. "I threw out everything that loser ever gave me."

Donna got off the bed, pulled the waste basket closer, and sat again. "These are things you can order from the back of comic books."

"Yeah. For our one-year anniversary, he gave me that rubber chicken." Jackie grabbed the shoebox from Donna and crammed it into the trash. "I'm lucky he didn't give me chlamydia."

Donna's nose wrinkled. "Ew, but I guess Kelso's really history for you. … Too bad he doesn't think so."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard him in the basement. He thinks you're so heartbroken over him that you'll take him back on any terms."

Jackie's cheeks grew hot, even as chills rippled through the rest of her body. "Well, I'm not available."

"You've been dating?" Donna patted Jackie's bedspread. "Oh, please, tell me you've been dating."

"Michael is not the be-all and end-all of my existence, Donna. No man is." Jackie pulled her hair from her heated neck, but her fingers tingled with frost. The contrast in temperatures was dizzying. The last time she'd felt like this was after she'd caught Michael cheating on her. He'd begged her to take him back, promised love and devotion, and he was so good at lying he believed his own sincerity.

But she knew the truth behind all his deceptions. She wouldn't define herself by his lies anymore or by her own lies about him.
"I am my own woman," she said. "If and when and who I decide to date is up to me. Not Michael. Not anyone."

Donna nodded approvingly. "I'm impressed. You've really grown."

"Yeah. I've been watching a lot of Donahue."

"Did he ever have an interior design special?" Donna gestured to Jackie's pink walls. "You could use a little growing in that area, too."

"Shut up, you goon!" Jackie hurled the flower pillow at her head. Donna deflected it and laughed, and Jackie laughed, too. Even without going to the same school, their friendship would survive. And, maybe, so would Jackie's friendship with Steven.

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Hyde tried to relax in his chair. His leg was propped up on the mushroom footstool. The TV was tuned to Jeopardy. It should've been an easy morning, the last Friday of summer, but his throat was dry. His bottle of root beer was almost empty, and he kept checking his watch.

Jackie was one minute late.

Every Friday the last two months, she'd shown up at eleven a.m. Every Friday, he acted indifferently to her arrival, but it set off firecrackers in his stomach. Hell, any time he saw her face, an incomprehensible sense of joy shot through his blood.

No girl had ever affected him this much, especially one he wasn't screwing. But below Jackie's surface was someone who questioned deeply, who loved even deeper, and whom people constantly misjudged.

She seemed to prefer it that way, being misjudged. She hid the truth of herself to protect herself, just like he did. This summer, though, she'd trusted him with it. And in return, he'd given her a few chess lessons and a whole lot of aggravation.

He cleared his throat and focused on the TV, but Jeopardy couldn't hold his attention, even with World History as one of the categories. He checked his watch again. She was three minutes late.

Kelso had probably gotten to her a few hours ago. Driven her to the lake for a picnic crawling with ants and a sloppy make-out. She'd always be his girl, despite her rejection of him yesterday. Despite her assurances to Hyde that Kelso no longer interested her.

Eleven minutes into Jeopardy, and Hyde's arms twitched at a familiar click. The basement door opened, and Jackie entered. "I'm sorry!" she said, not two steps inside. "My parents tried to rope me into their latest argument—"

"Nothing to apologize for, man." He stood up and went toward her, swallowing his own apology for thoughts she didn't know about. "It's cool."

"No, it's not." She met him halfway. Her cheeks were flushed, and she hit her knee against the couch's armrest. "I'm sick of it! My mom accused my dad of having an affair with his secretary, and my dad accused my mom of sleeping with our gardener."

"Crap."

"What's worse is they each asked me to confirm their suspicions. 'You've seen him with Linda,' my
mom said. 'How she wears those tight skirts around him,' and my dad said, 'What about the way your mother looks at Jorge in his white tank top?" She banged her knee harder against the couch. "I hate it, Steven!"

"I know. It sucks." Her family sitch was fucked up, same as his had been. "They're imploding, and you can't do anything to stop it. Been there."

She gripped the sides of his vest and tugged on them. "You can't tell anyone. Promise me you won't."

"What's to tell?" He clapsed her shoulders, hoping to calm her down. She'd mess up her knee if she kept hitting the couch with it.

"Thank you." She let go of his vest and balled her fists at her sides. "Here's what's probably gonna happen. My dad'll buy my mom something shiny, like a diamond bracelet. She'll forget she accused him of anything, and he'll act like he never accused her either. If I bring up the fight, they'll tell me I'm misremembering. It's the way it goes."

He sucked in a breath. As much as he distrusted most everything and everyone, she was desperate to trust. She sought out declarations of friendship and loyalty, of freakin' love, to learn if people were safe for her. That didn't make her Kelso's girl. It meant she was terrified, and Hyde had been a dick about it.

His hands stayed on her shoulders, and he kissed the top of her head. It was an apology. It was a promise. He'd had the Formans to get him through his parents' bullshit. Jackie had no one. She disguised her problems to keep up appearances, but she didn't have to do that with him. He'd be her safe place.

"What the hell?"

Hyde's spine stiffened at Donna's shout, and Jackie's palms smashed into his chest. He stumbled backward but didn't fall. The muscles on her—man, how did such a tiny chick pack so much power?

"I'm blind!" Forman yelled. He and Donna were standing by the basement door, with their eyes bulging and mouths agape. They resembled a pair of suffocating fish. Donna's outfit, though, was far more flattering: a crisp white blouse, plaid skirt that ended above the knee. She'd obviously gotten fitted for her Catholic school uniform today.

"Oh, you are not blind," Jackie said and leaned her butt against the couch's armrest. "What are you two shouting for? Calm the hell down."

"Calm the hell down?" Donna moved deeper into the basement. "Jackie, you and Hyde were … well, I'm not really sure what you were doing, but it was—"

"Horrible!" Forman marched past her to the couch, giving both Jackie and Hyde an accusatory glare. "Lips, hair … yours, his!"

Hyde mimicked Forman's frantic gestures. "Oh, no, physical contact!" He plunked down on his chair, but Forman's dying fish face reemerged. "I kissed the top of her head. So what?"

"He was comforting me," Jackie said. "So what?"

"So what?" Donna said. "So what?"

Jackie grunted and slapped the top of her thigh. "Why do you keep repeating what we're saying?"
"Because this is impossible!" Forman thrust his index fingers at Hyde and Jackie. "You two hate each other!"

"Hmm..." Jackie stood up straight and looked at Hyde. She was tapping her bottom lip. He imagined surrounding it with both of his and pulling it into his mouth, but she said, "Steven, do we hate each other?"

"Nope."

"So where would Eric get an idea like that?"

"No idea." He scratched his left palm against his right wrist and kept his gaze on Jackie. She wasn't acting ashamed or like they had to be secretive. She was playing this situation cool and aboveboard, same as him. Their synergy was more of a turn on than he'd expected, but he willed his blood not to rush south. "Wanna hit up the Oshkosh County Fair?" he said. "Saw a commercial for it."

"Sure," she said and offered him her hand. He grabbed it, and she helped him off his chair. "Watch out, Eric—more physical contact!"

Hyde laughed and followed her to the basement door, but Donna and Forman were muttering at each other. "Kelso is gonna freak out," Donna said.

"Kelso!" Forman said in a hushed whisper.

Hyde opened the door for Jackie, but she pushed his arm aside. The door clicked shut, and she said, "Let him freak out! How many girls did he mess around with in California, Donna? Did you care about me freaking out when he did it?"

"But you're not..." Forman put up his hands, as if physically letting go of his statement.

"I'm not what, Eric?" Jackie said and stepped toward him.

"If you and Hyde are..." Forman stuck out his tongue in disgust, "together in a bedular way, then you're gonna break up the band, Yoko!"

"Yeah, got news for ya, Forman." Hyde eased his arm around Jackie's shoulders in a sideways hug. "She ain't Yoko. She's part of the band."

Jackie covered her mouth. "Oh, my God."

Hyde guided her back to the door. He opened it again, and this time she walked out.

"Hyde, come on," Donna shouted after him, "are you and Jackie dating?"

"Have you become Stevackie Hydehart?" Forman shouted a second later.

Hyde flipped them off before leaving the basement. It was the only response their friends deserved.
GOING ON THE ATTACK

Jackie darted into the Formans' kitchen just in time. Mrs. Forman had gathered ingredients—eggs, flour, cinnamon—for whatever Saturday treat she planned on baking, but Jackie needed those plans to change.

"Mrs. Forman!" Jackie's purse banged against her hip as she dashed to Mrs. Forman's side. The uncracked egg in Mrs. Forman's hand was dangerously close to her mixing bowl. "You have to help me!" Jackie said and wrapped her fingers around Mrs. Forman's wrist.

"What on Earth—?" Mrs. Forman's gaped as Jackie gently, but firmly, dragged Mrs. Forman's hand away from the bowl. "Jackie, what is going on?"

Jackie touched the pendant at her collar bone. Steven had won it for her yesterday at the Oshkosh County Fair. Nine games of Balloon and Dart on the midway, and the silver shooting star dangled from his finger on a chain.

"Thought you might like this," he'd said. He could've have gotten himself a Matchbox car or a KISS record, but he'd chosen a prize for her.

"Why?" she said. "Why did you...?"

He scratched the nape of his neck, as he so often did when uncomfortable. She knew him well enough to understand his body language. Her question and the shrieks of excited children had closed him off. His shoulders hiked to his ears. He wasn't going to answer; she was sure of it, but once his shoulders relaxed, he gave her a look that indicated surrender.

"When you were a kid," he said, "stargazing … pickin' out constellations. You get it."

Her eyes burned, and she shut them to hide her tears. He'd listened to her. Truly listened when she spoke. Weeks ago, she'd told him about stargazing with her dad About how she still loved to gaze at the night sky.

"Honey," Mrs. Forman said now, "are you all right?"

"Fine." Jackie swallowed the ache in her throat. "I have to bake something for Steven. He's been really nice to me lately, and I want to thank him." But she didn't know his favorite cookie … or if it even was a cookie. Maybe he preferred brownies. Or ice cream. "He's at work now, and I want to get this done before he gets back."

Mrs. Forman let go of the egg, and it rocked on the counter. "I knew it."
"Knew what?"

"You two have finally started dating."

"No, we haven't."

"Are you sure?" Mrs. Forman tilted her head and sang her next words: "Because I kind of think you aaaaare."

Jackie's stomach thrummed. She'd eaten pancakes for breakfast, but it might as well have been a beehive. "Steven and I don't like each other that way, Mrs. Forman."

"If you call spending every free moment together, holding hands, and sitting cozily on the couch 'not liking each other,' then I don't know what kids are up to these days."

"We don't hold hands." Jackie snatched the jar of cinnamon from the counter. She unscrewed the lid and sniffed the cinnamon. "When have we—" Spicy-sweet scent choked her nostrils. She coughed away from the jar, but she had a question that needed answering. "When did we ever hold hands?"

Mrs. Forman took the jar from her and put the lid back on it. "I might have gone into the basement the other day to do the laundry, and I might've waited at the top of the stairs when I saw you and Steven. You were playing chess, but you'd stopped to hold hands above the board..."

"We don't—" Jackie pressed her fist to her lips and bit into her knuckle. "That's wasn't..."

"It's okay, sweetie. If you and Steven want to keep your dating private, I won't say anything to anyone." Mrs. Forman patted the counter, as if signaling that subject was closed. "All right, then! You want to bake him something? How about peanut butter chocolate chip cookies? They're his favorite."

"Yes! That's exactly what I want to make for him." Jackie's heart fluttered. Peanut butter chocolate chip cookies. She should've realized he loved those flavors. Ever since Reese's Pieces came out, he'd chosen them over M&Ms. "Do you have the ingredients? Do we have to go to the store?"

"No, no. I have everything we need, and I have something for you. Stay here." Mrs. Forman hurried into the living room and returned with a magazine. "You will sit on that stool," she gestured to the bar in front of the sink, "and read this." She passed the latest issue of *Glamour* to Jackie. "And I will bake the cookies."

Jackie curled the magazine in her hands. She hadn't read that issue yet, but she'd wanted to do the baking. "Mrs. Forman, if you make the cookies, how are they from me?"

"It's just like when you used to buy those shirts for Michael. You didn't make them, did you?"

Jackie's shoulders stiffened. "Do you have spy cameras set up in this house?" she said. Nothing else could explain Mrs. Forman's secret knowledge. "I saw that on an episode of *Charlie's Angels*, but I don't think they're legal without informing your guests."

Mrs. Forman laughed a loud, bone-vibrating laugh. "I don't need cameras, sweetie. I just pay attention. Now," she pointed at the bar again, "this will go a lot faster if you let me do the baking. Also, there's a much better chance the cookies will be edible."

"Okay, fine." Jackie opened her purse and removed a five-dollar bill. "But I'll pay you for your services."
"Oh, you don't..." Mrs. Forman gazed at the five-dollar bill. "Well, the ingredients do cost money." She plucked the bill from Jackie's fingers and stuffed it into her pants pocket.

Fifteen minutes later, the smell of chocolate and peanut butter saturated the kitchen. Jackie tried to focus on Glamour's article about fall makeup trends, but the scent of Steven's cookies distracted her. She couldn't wait to see his face when she gave him her gift. It would solidify their friendship. He'd understand she was as much of a giver as a taker. If Michael and Eric got pissy about her presence at school, Steven would shut them down.

She giggled and turned the page of the magazine without looking. Donna had accepted Jackie's place in the group, but she'd never defended it. Neither had Michael when they were dating, but Steven ... for all he didn't say, he'd already told her what she longed to believe, that he respected her.

Water splashed onto the bar and the magazine. Mrs. Forman was washing baking utensils at the sink, but her hands had jerked up with the mixing bowl. Her stare seemed fixed on the space behind Jackie, and Jackie twisted around on the bar stool.

"Oh, no..."

Michael had plastered his face against the sliding glass door. His mouth was open wide, resembling a leech's, and he puffed out his cheeks.

"Should I let him in?" Mrs. Forman said. "He's getting spittle on my house."

"No, I'll do it." Jackie got off the stool. She'd been the one to lock the patio door to begin with. She'd wanted a little extra security, in case Steven left work early. Of course, he could enter the house two other ways, but she hadn't thought that far ahead.

She knocked on the glass where Michael had positioned his gaping mouth. He moved away, and she opened the door for him. "Michael."

He wiped his lips on his sleeve and, in the process, swept a bouquet of pink roses through the air. She backed up before it hit her in the nose. "These are for you," he said and presented the bouquet to her properly.

She eyed the roses. "Why?"

"An apology. I was insensitive the other day. I know you like being romanced, not just having your physical needs met. So..." he shook the bouquet for emphasis, "I'll romance you as long as you don't expect me to be magnanimous."

"You mean monogamous," she said and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Right. That one. So will you accept these? They're your faaaaavoriiiiite." He'd sung the last sentence, and Mrs. Forman tsked.

Jackie dug her nails into his arms. Michael had become even more cocky over the summer. He must've thought she couldn't do better than him. Or that she hadn't found love elsewhere in his absence, but his charity was an insult.

"I don't want your stupid roses," she said.

"What? You mean I stole these from the flower shop for nothing?"

"Who do you think I am, Michael?" She grabbed the bouquet and smacked his head with it. He cried
out in pain—or maybe shock—but she hit him again. "Did you ever know me?" She hit him a third time, and pink petals fluttered to the floor. "Obviously not because you think I'd accept a selfish cheater back into my heart."

She tossed the bouquet to the ground and stomped on it. "We're over!" she shouted, but her voice cracked, and her eyelashes grew wet. "You mean nothing to me, so just leave me alone!"

She shoved him aside and raced to the driveway. Her tears were infuriating. They were a betrayal. She shouldn't be crying, not about Michael, but the treason continued as she fled to the Pinciottis' backyard. Steven's cookies were safe with Mrs. Forman. Jackie would come back for them after she regained control of her brain.

Hyde settled into his chair and propped his feet on the spool table. The basement was peaceful without Forman and Kelso. The Hub's Space Invaders competition had drawn them away, which made Donna and Fez better company. No Forman for Donna to swap spit with, and no Kelso for Fez to whine to about his virginity.

But Jackie was missing. He had no clue where she was or what she was doing, and his insides became cramped at her absence, as if his skeleton were shrinking. This was their last Saturday afternoon before school. Would've been cool to hang out with her before the cheer squad reabsorbed her into its ranks.

He inhaled deeply and held the breath a moment before exhaling. Earlier, he'd changed out of his pot-scented clothes and bandaged a pair of paper cuts. Photo-sorting wasn't normally hazardous, but his circle with Leo had messed up his coordination. His high was gone now, though, and The Jeffersons repeat on TV failed to distract him from the truth.

Spending all day with Jackie yesterday should've been enough. Giving her that shooting star necklace had been an impulse, driven by feelings he no longer controlled. But her joy squirmed beneath his skin: the unexpectedly shy smile, her warm hand cupping his neck, and the soft kiss on his cheek. He craved more of it, to be the cause of her happiness.

"Steven?" Mrs. Forman said loudly, like she'd been calling his name for days. She was standing at the top of the wooden staircase, and she gestured to herself. "I need to talk to you a moment."

"Sure, Mrs. Forman."

He stood up and rolled his shoulders, but the tension in them remained as Fez said, "Ooh, you're in trouble!"

Donna chuckled. "I bet she's gonna ground you. Maybe even send you to Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow."

"No, no. Steven isn't in trouble," Mrs. Forman said as Hyde climbed the stairs. "I just have to talk to him about Jackie."

"Jackie?" Donna and Fez both said.

Hyde's head started to pound. Their nonsensical burns had just been goofs, but now he was in actual trouble. "She said jacket," he yelled down at them. "My jacket's ripped..." he looked at Mrs. Forman, "right?"

The confusion on her face dissolved. "Right! I distinctly said jacket." She pointed at Donna and Fez. "You two better get your hearing checked tomorrow. I'll make an appointment for you at the hospital
"Our hearing's fine, Mrs. Forman," Donna said. "But go have your private conversation about Hyde's 'jacket'."

"Get bent," Hyde said and scooted past Mrs. Forman to the kitchen. She followed, and he sat at the bar. The more distance between himself and the basement door, the better. "What's this about Jackie?" he whispered.

"Well..." Mrs. Forman whispered back and joined him at the bar. "If you're serious about her, then you shouldn't wait."

"What're you talkin' about?"

"I know you kids are trying to keep it a secret, maybe even from yourselves. But Michael's not over her, and he's gone on the attack."

Gone on the attack? Hyde's head pounded harder, and he scraped his nails through his beard. The skin on his face burned, but he didn't quit scratching.

"He brought Jackie roses today," Mrs. Forman went on, "and she ran out of here in tears."

"She was crying?" His hands dropped to his lap and curled into fists. Kelso had made Jackie cry ... again. Which meant he still had the power to affect her. "Thanks, Mrs. Forman. You did the right thing, telling me."

"I thought so. Now you do the right thing."

"Trust me. I will." He hopped off the bar stool. No way was Kelso getting what he wanted. "But I'm gonna need your permission to make it happen."

"My permission?" She placed her hand over her heart. "Whatever for?"

Donna and Fez surrounded Hyde when he returned to the basement. He couldn't move more than two feet from the stairs. His jaw clenched at the lack of personal space, but he needed their help. So he backed up and sat on the third step.

"What's really going on?" Donna said, standing in front of him. "If you and Jackie are dating, tell us now."

"Yes," Fez said. "Donna and Eric informed me of your kiss yesterday."

Hyde's neck stiffened. He and Jackie hadn't kissed. He'd kissed the top of her head. "We're not dating, all right?"

Donna slapped the staircase's support beam. "'No, it's not all right! If you and Jackie are more than friends, we're all screwed."

"How?" His palms slid over his forehead, and his fingers tunneled into his hair. A pair of aspirin would've been good about now. "How the hell would me and Jackie dating screw anyone else but me?"

She glared at him as if the answer were obvious. "Because of Kelso!"

"Still not gettin' it."
"Ai, let me try." Fez waved at Donna to move. She did, and Fez took her place in front of Hyde. "Kelso will be furious if you date Jackie. He will do anything to get her back, and then we'll have to choose between you and him. And I don't want to choose."

"Hyde," Donna said, "she ran into my room this morning, crying about him. He wants her back but only, like, so she won't be with anyone else."

"I love Kelso," Fez said, "but he is being unfair. He says Jackie should be his girlfriend as long as he doesn't have to be her boyfriend. Is that even possible?"

Hyde clutched his knees as his pulse stomped on his eardrums. "All that is crap, okay? Jackie can date whoever she wants."

Donna's eyebrows rose. "Including you?"

"Yup, but I'm not interested in her." Not romantically, not anymore. Kelso's hold on her was too strong, and Hyde wouldn't be used again, not so she could get revenge.

He also wouldn't abandon her.

"In fact," he said and drummed his fingers on his knees, "I'm thinkin' we should get Jackie a new boyfriend. Tonight."

"Tonight? Boyfriend?" Donna was playing with the ends of her hair, but her fist closed around them. "Oh, God..." Blood rose to her cheeks, and her voice lowered. "Last year, when my mom left, you held me. For, like, a really long time."

"He held you?" Fez opened his arms wide. "I can hold you. Come here, baby—"

She shoved him aside. "Hyde, I'm so sorry. You really are friends with her."

Hyde nodded once, but her apology could've been for doubting him or because he and Jackie had become friends.

Didn't matter. If she helped him, his friendship with Jackie might actually last longer than the summer.

"So here's what's gonna happen..." He pushed himself off the stairs, and both Donna and Fez finally gave him space. "We've gotta find Jackie a good guy to date. Someone like Forman but not—"

"Into Star Wars?" Donna said.

"Bony?" Fez said.

"All of the above." Hyde took a notepad and pen from the shelves beneath the stairs. He brought them to his chair and sat down. "The three of us have gotta be sneaky and observant. Fez, remember when you and Forman threw me that party?"

Fez hopped over the back of the couch and landed hard. "Ow. How does Kelso do it?"

"Fez, man, focus. That get-Hyde-a-chick party—"

"Of course I remember. You yelled at me."

"Yeah, well, we gotta do the same for Jackie."
"Yell at her?" Fez said, and Donna frogged him. "Ai! Why did you punch me?"

"Because you're being dense," she said and sat next to him, "but Jackie'll never go for it. She'll be insulted. 'Jackie Burkhart doesn't need help finding a man!'"

Hyde chewed on the end of the pen. Donna had a point. Jackie's pride was as big as it was vulnerable. "Her getting a date ain't the problem. Getting a good one is. Look at her track record."

"Kelso," Fez said. "Kelso again. That guy you punched. Then you. Then Kelso a third time..."

"Right." Hyde scribbled on the notepad, to make sure the pen was working. "We've gotta do this. 'Cause you know Kelso's not gonna stop. Not until she gives in."

"It's really sweet you care about her so much..." Donna said, "and a little scary." She tapped her cheek, as if deep in thought. "A party won't work. We have to make it something that'll stroke her ego, like a TV show..." Her eyes widened. "I've got it! We'll do The Dating Game! We just have to find some eligible, Jackie-worthy bachelors."

Fez thrust his arm into the air. "I volunteer!"

"Fez," Donna said, "how is Kelso gonna accept you dating Jackie anymore than he'd accept Hyde dating her?"

"Damn." Fez put down his arm. "I don't volunteer."

Hyde wrote a list of requirements on the notepad. He copied it onto the notepad's second page, and he passed both copies to Donna and Fez. "This is what Jackie needs. Pay attention, use what you know about who you're talkin' to, and make a good choice."

Donna laughed. "Hyde, you sound so serious."

"This is serious." He had no time to conceal the truth. Being so open was like slicing his skin and exposing his veins, but this Dating Game shit needed to get done. "Fez, you're going to The Hub. There's a ton of dudes there today for that Space Invaders contest. Don't let Forman or Kelso see you."

Fez gave him a thumbs-up. "Can I borrow your Milwaukee Brewers baseball cap? I should be in disguise."

"Go for it," Hyde said, and Fez rushed into Hyde's room. "Get my aspirin while your at it, would ya?"

"Ten-four!" Fez shouted back.

Hyde gestured at Donna with the pen. "You'll hit—"

"The mall," she said. "You put smart and philosophical on her list, and the mall has some nerdy stores. I'm sure I can find someone there."

"Yeah. Okay." Hyde cleared his throat. It had grown dry. Just thinking about Jackie had that affect on him, but this scheme might actually work. He'd go to Mt. Humphrey Park, to the public chess tables. They were mostly used by old men, but maybe he'd find someone Jackie-appropriate there. Someone better than Kelso and, hopefully, better than himself.
CHAPTER SIX
PLAYING THE GAME

Two sheets were suspended from the ceiling, dividing the basement into two halves. Hyde and Donna had used a pair of ladders to do the job, one from Red's garage and the other from Bob's. Red's initial reaction to the redecoration was protest, but once he learned ladders were involved, he elected himself supervisor.

His spatial sense was a bonus. He directed where to put the couch for the "bachelors" to sit, brought stools from the garage for Jackie and the "audience". Having one less responsibility gave Hyde room to think. His mind was overheated. The dryness in his throat had expanded into his mouth and over his skin. Air pushed in his direction by people walking raised the hair on his arms. The feeling sucked, but his whole body had become sensitive.

He never got nervous, but his stomach jumped at every little noise—the creak of the wooden stairs, Fez's nasal breaths, the scratching of Donna's pen. Like him, his friends were writing questions for Jackie to ask. They crowded the spool table with their bodies, with their crumpled index cards, and Hyde needed some space.

"How many did you come up with?" Donna said as he stood up.

"Three." It would have to be enough, and he left the table to pace. The "bachelors" would show up in five minutes. Jackie in ten. He hadn't seen her all day, and their laughter from yesterday rolled over his memory like a toxic cloud. Giving himself to her wasn't an option, not when she didn't truly want him.

He pushed through the sheet barrier to where Jackie's potential boyfriends would sit. Mrs. Forman had set up the side table with a plate of snickerdoodles and cans of Coke. She was arranging pillows on the couch, ones from the living room. She'd done more than she'd had to, and he cleared his throat. Not consciously, but it had become habit, and the sound rattled against his ears.

"Oh, Steven!" Mrs. Forman presented her work to him. "How do you like it?"

"It's great, Mrs. Forman. Thanks." He scratched his neck, but his throat remained dry. He considered snatching a pop from the side table, but he wouldn't be talking much tonight. The "bachelors" would, and if they got thirsty, those pops were for them.

Mrs. Forman's brows furrowed. "You sound terrible!" She placed the back of her hand on his forehead. "Are you coming down with something?"

He shrugged. His hoarse voice was a tell, especially for someone as shrewd as Mrs. Forman. He couldn't have her encouraging him to back out of this scheme. Jackie had to start dating. Otherwise,
Kelso would fuck up her future.

"Well, you just take it easy tonight," Mrs. Forman said and glanced at her watch. "Oh, I better get to the kitchen. Jackie'll be here any minute."

She rushed through the sheets. He followed half a minute later and found he was alone. Donna, Fez, and Red must've gone upstairs. Fez and Red were supposed to meet the "bachelors" at the front door, two from Point Place High and one from Ft. Anderson High.

Hyde had recruited the Ft. Anderson kid himself, a guy named Mark. Apparently, Mark went to Mt. Humphrey Park regularly for chess matches. Hyde had watched him play a game against a man old enough to be his grandpa. Mark lost, but he'd lost without an ego and shook the old man's hand.

Mark seemed a decent enough kid, so Hyde challenged him to a match afterward. Mark agreed and had no trouble talking while strategizing.

"She can be a talker," Hyde told him two-thirds into the game. Mark was open to the idea of The Dating Game setup, but he wanted to know about Jackie first. "But she's smart as hell, and if you engage her in the right topic, you won't be bored."

"I can deal with a talker," Mark said and pushed his bangs from his eyes. His hair was long, blond, and reached his shoulders. He had the Leif Garret, Peter Frampton, Andy Gibb look that Jackie dug. Physical chemistry wouldn't be a problem, long as Mark wasn't an asshole. "I'm more of a thinker," he said and checked Hyde's king, "so I like someone who can generate conversation."

Hyde captured Mark's rook, and Mark cursed. Hyde's king was no longer in check.

"She also knows when to quit talking," Hyde said as Mark studied the board. "Gets the value of silence. She's open to learnin' new things, and she'll probably teach you a few—"

"Hey, I'm almost sold." Mark moved his bishop into the d-file. He was threatening Hyde's queen. Would probably capture it. Hyde's only way of protecting it was to make his king more vulnerable. "How's she at kissing?"

"Uh..." Hyde raked his knuckles against his beard.

Mark tapped the underside of the concrete chess table. A sharp wind ruffled nearby trees, and he sighed with the leaves. "That bad, huh?"

"Didn't say that."

"So she's that good?"

"What makes you think I know?"

Mark's forehead creased. "Thought she was your ex. You talk like she is."

Hyde laughed quietly. This guy was perceptive. "Yeah, she's a good kisser, but she's not my ex."

"Hmm." Mark took Hyde's queen. "So you're still with her? This is some kind of kink-thing?"

"Hell no. We tried dating. Didn't take."

"I see. Why not?"

Hyde was going to lose this match. He'd left too many openings. Made too many bad moves. Future
He'd challenged Hyde frustratingly well the last few minutes; and in three more moves, he checkmated Hyde's king.

He also agreed to be one of the "bachelors".

Footfalls vibrated the basement's ceiling. Mark or one of the other candidates must have arrived, and Hyde read over the questions written for them. Most were Jackie-specific in their own ways. But if he disliked the answers they elicited from Jackie's potential boyfriends, he'd kick their asses out.

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Jackie hurried into the Formans' kitchen, much like she had this morning. The sunset shone through the patio door, adding orange to an already questionable color palette. But she had no time to give Mrs. Forman her décor expertise. Donna had begged her to come over, to help her get data for a paper she'd forgotten to write. Donna was doing a senior masterworks project for school, something on the psychology of dating.

"Jackie, Donna told me you'd be here," Mrs. Forman said. "Something about an essay?"

Jackie clutched the edge of the bar. She'd been promised Michael wasn't part of this project, that he'd be at The Hub all night, busy with some video game contest. "Yes, but that's last-minute Donna for you. Do you have the cookies?"

Mrs. Forman opened the cabinet above the sink. She pulled out a plastic-wrapped plate of cookies, gave it to Jackie, and removed a ginger ale from the fridge. "He's not feeling very well," she said and passed her the soda, too. "I don't think he has a fever, but he's obviously got a sore throat, and he's pale."

"Steven's always pale," Jackie said. "He's fair-skinned … blue-eyed … strawberry-blond …"

"Strawberry-blond?" Mrs. Forman ushered her toward the basement stairs. "Donna's waiting for you."

"Strawberry-blond, " Jackie repeated. "His blond hair has a coppery tint to it, but it'll probably darken as he gets older…" Steven's face filled her mind. She'd studied it secretly for years. His scruffy, manly looks appealed to her as much as his soft, compassionate soul.

"He might just be perfect," she said as she followed Mrs. Forman down the stairs. "I mean…"

She clapped a hand over her mouth. Saying more would reveal too much. Her feelings for Steven were complex. With Michael she'd become a dead end, but Steven opened her up to possibilities she'd never thought of.

Mrs. Forman laughed uncomfortably. "No one's perfect, and everyone could use a hearty dose of forgiveness for their imperfections. Try not to forget that."

She left Jackie at the bottom of the staircase and scurried into the basement. Jackie held the plate of cookies against her stomach but paused at the second-to-last step. The basement had been transformed. Sheets split it into two spaces. The spool table and TV had been pushed toward the
front wall. A stool stood near the sheets, and the couch was missing.

"Is that her?" a male voice said from behind the sheets. She didn't recognize it.

"Yes," Mr. Forman's voice said. He had to be behind the sheets, too. "Now shut it."

A masculine giggle drew Jackie's attention. Fez, Donna, and Steven were by the washer and dryer, and Steven elbowed Fez in the ribs. Fez stopped giggling and rubbed his side. Donna had clearly enlisted more than Jackie to help her, but rearranging the basement seemed excessive.

"What's going on?" Jackie said from the staircase.

"It's for my senior masterworks project," Donna said. "The Psychology of Dating, remember? What better way to get data than to recreate *The Dating Game*?"

Jackie climbed down the last steps hesitantly. "Am I ... a contestant?"

"Yes!" Fez darted to her side. He had on a brown suit, and his hair was poofy, like he'd used hairspray. "And I am your charming, handsome host for the evening." He offered her his arm. She ignored it, and he went to the stool by himself. "Please, have a seat."

"In a minute." Jackie brought Steven's cookies to the washer and dryer. Steven backed away, but she grasped his sleeve. "Stay put. I don't care if you're sick. Donna..." A row of folding chairs had been placed between the laundry area and the sheet divider. Mrs. Forman was already sitting in a chair, and Jackie pointed to the one beside her. "A little privacy, please?"

"Sure." Donna shoved a notepad under her arm and went to the chairs.

Jackie maintained her grip on Steven's sleeve, even though he'd stopped trying to escape. "What's your role in all of this?" she said. "And why are the Formans here?"

"Red's making sure the 'bachelors' don't mess up the basement," he said. "Mrs. Forman agreed to let Donna use the basement only if she could watch. Guess she's bored."

"Huh." That explained the Formans, but ... "What about you? It's Saturday night. Shouldn't you be out 'cruising for girls'?"

He pushed his palm into the edge of the washer, like the question bothered him. Before the summer, searching for commitment-free sex was the usual for him. She'd witnessed it, watched as he and his girl-of-the-week sneaked into his room. Both would emerge an hour later, flushed, sweaty, and smiling. With the summer basically over, that routine would probably resume.

"Did your car break down?" she said when he didn't answer.

"I'm here to make sure nothin' goes wrong."

"Wrong? What could go wrong?"

"Me, Fez, and Donna picked the guys for this experiment. But if any of 'em act up, I'm Red's backup."

She waved to the sheets. "Then shouldn't you be on that side?"

"Hey!" Donna shouted from the row of chairs. "Cut the chatter already. We don't have all night. I really want to get this over with—I mean started."
Jackie scowled and stuck out her tongue. Donna could be so pushy. Jackie had an important deed to do, and she handed Steven the plastic-wrapped plate of cookies. "These are for you. They're peanut butter chocolate chip."

"You baked these for me?" His soft, surprised tone made him sound like a little boy, and her legs lost substance. She leaned against the dryer for support as he unwrapped the plate. He bit into a cookie, and his features froze, as if unsure of what he was tasting. But his eyes half closed behind his sunglasses, and he began chewing in earnest.

He glanced down at the plate after he finished the cookie. "Jackie, why did you...?" His shoulders slumped, but the cookies were supposed to make him happy, not miserable.

"I didn't bake them." She clutched her shooting star pendant over her blouse. "Mrs. Forman did, but I asked her to, as a thank-you for yesterday … for the whole summer." She willed her legs to solidify, and she stood up straight. "For being you."

She grasped his hand and leaned in to kiss his cheek, but his fingers tightened over her palm, and she changed course. Her lips grazed the corner of his mouth. His lips responded, and the sensation of it tingled in her skin.

He was kissing her back. No more than a peck, but it also wasn't less. If only he'd move his face an inch to his left, she could learn his true feelings for her. Without their current company, she'd take the initiative herself, but she broke off contact.

"Try not to eat all the cookies at once," she said and walked to the sheet divider, where Fez stood. He passed her a stack of index cards. She sat on the stool and read the first one. It was a Dating Game question, written in Donna's handwriting.

"Hello, and welcome to Getting Jackie a Date!" Fez said, like he was actually a game show host. "Bachelors, can you hear me?"

"Yeah!" a deep, male voice said through the sheets.

"No problem," another male voice said, less deep but more relaxed.

"Loud and clear," a third male voice said. It had a playful lilt, and whoever owned that voice would probably be trouble.

So would Fez if he called this experiment Getting Jackie a Date again.

She tugged on the hem of his suit jacket before he could speak. "I've never had trouble finding a date," she whispered, though it wasn't quite true. She wasn't above crying fake tears to get to Prom.

"This is Donna's project, so either call it The Dating Game or The Fruits of Donna's Procrastination, or I'll kick you in your fruits."

Fez swallowed, and his tone rose two octaves. "Okay, let's begin! Jackie, there are three men on the other side of that curtain—"

"It's a pair of sheets," she said, "and Mr. Forman's there, too. So, technically, there are four men."

Laughter and a snort tickled Jackie's ears. She peered back at the row of chairs, and Mrs. Forman covered her mouth. Steven, however, didn't hide his smirk.

"On the other side of that curtain," Fez repeated, "who will vie for your affection. Please choose a bachelor and ask him a question."
She waved the index cards at him. "I know how this game works. I watch it all the time." She read the first question to herself a second time. Donna had done a good job. It was definitely relevant, and Jackie read it aloud: "Bachelor Number One, it's our one-year anniversary. What do you get me as an anniversary gift?"

"Well, that depends on you," the boy with the relaxed voice said. "If you're into, let's say, sports—"

"No," she said.

"Okay, then..." He cleared his throat. "If you like reading—"

"Diamonds!" she shouted, and Fez glared at her. "What? I'm just trying to speed this along."

"Unfortunately, at this stage of my life, I can't afford something that expensive," the first bachelor said. "But I'd get you something that shows you how much I care."

That was a cop-out answer, but she clasped the shooting star pendant. Steven couldn't afford diamonds either, but he'd given her a silver necklace. Spent three dollars to play nine games of Balloon and Dart, built up enough wins to get her one of the more expensive prizes.

She released the pendant. Steven wasn't a contestant, and this game wasn't real. She wouldn't actually go on a date with any of the so-called bachelors. This experiment was for Donna's research, and she addressed Bachelor Number Two with the second question: "If you were a candy, what kind of candy would you be?"

"Easy," the boy with the lilting voice said. "I'd be a lollipop, so sweet you couldn't help but lick me all over."

Jackie's upper lip curled in disgust, but Fez said, "Good answer! I need to write that down."

"Okay, Bachelor Number Three..." She crossed her legs on the stool. The next question was a bit embarrassing, but it was also written in Steven's handwriting. He'd scratched out his original wording for some of it, replacing it with the silly, TV-safe version. "You want to make whoopee, but I'm tired and not in the mood. What do you do?"

"I'd give you a massage," the third bachelor said in his deep voice, "and hope it would relax you enough to get you going."

"Watch it," Mr. Forman said.

"Sometimes a lady needs a little coaxing is all," the third bachelor said, followed by a slapping sound. One of the other bachelors must've high-fived him, or maybe Mr. Forman had hit him. "I give great massages, too. Strong thumbs."

Her posture drooped. He hadn't been hit, but Bachelor Number Three's answer disqualified him. One relationship of being coaxed into sex—being annoyed into it—was enough.

"Bachelor Number Two," she said, "is it important for you to be better looking than your date?"

The question was Donna's, but Jackie held her breath as the second bachelor ummed. He was thinking, which meant he wanted to answer "correctly," not honestly, or that he was hiding something. "No," he said eventually. "In fact, it's the opposite. Definitely the opposite."

"So you're an ugg?"
"Jackie!" Donna shouted behind her. "None of these guys are gonna wanna date you with that attitude."

Jackie glanced at the row of chairs. Steven was sitting beside Donna but showed no reaction. He was too busy eating the cookies Jackie had given him.

"If I'm gonna date someone," Jackie said, "I have to be attracted to him."

Donna gripped her pen, hard enough to whiten her knuckles. "Looks aren't everything."

"You're sayin' that 'cause you picked an uggo," Steven said, and Donna slammed her fist into his shoulder. The plate of cookies shifted on his lap. Cookies slid to the edge of the plate, but he caught them in time.

"Eric is not ugly," Donna said.

"Not talkin' about Forman." He nodded toward the sheets and held up two fingers. He had to mean Bachelor Number Two, Donna choice for her experiment.

"Oh." Her grip on the pen loosened. "Shut up, Hyde. Jackie, ask the next question."

Jackie flipped through the index cards. Bachelor Number Two was disqualified, too, if Steven thought he was ugly. Physical appearance wasn't everything, but it could make up for a lot. It had drawn her back to Michael repeatedly, despite his unfaithfulness and selfishness. But he knew how gorgeous he was, and that had made him lazy. He put no effort into bettering himself as a person.

Unlike Steven.

Her thumb scratched against index cards. She was in Donahue mode again, but Steven worked on himself, struggled with himself. She'd seen it the last month, the last few days.

"Bachelor Number One," she said and ignored the pre-written questions, "let's say we've been dating a while. If you fell in love with me, how would you tell me?"

"I'd take you on a really nice date," the first bachelor said. "Dinner at your favorite restaurant, maybe somewhere we could dance. I'd hold you real close then whisper my feelings into your ear."

"Pussy!" the third bachelor shouted.

"All right, that's it," Mr. Forman said. "You've just made your last lewd remark. Let's go."

"Ow! Ow—ow—ow..."

Jackie got off the stool. Donna stood up, too, and dashed through the sheets. Jackie caught a glimpse of Mr. Forman with the ears of Jake Bradley squeezed between his fingers. Jake was the Vikings' quarterback, broad-shouldered and tall, and desired by of most of the cheer squad.

"Mr. Forman," Donna said, "Jackie's got to make the decision."

"You weren't back here, Donna," Mr. Forman said. "You didn't see—"

"Ai!" Fez ran into the sheets but became tangled in them. "That's my bachelor! I chose him! He's on the football team. The football team, damn it! And he was nice to me."

The basement door creaked open, but Jackie couldn't see it. The sheets—and Fez—were blocking her view, but the second bachelor said, "Less competition? Awesome! This'll make it easier for us."
"I'm not high-fiving you, bro," the first bachelor said.

"Fort Anderson kids," the second bachelor said with contempt. "Am I right, cherry pie?"

"Don't call me that," Donna said, and her hands popped through the sheets. They freed Fez, and the rest of her emerged into Jackie's half of the basement. "Okay, okay … we can salvage this."

Fez straightened his crooked tie and smoothed his rumpled suit jacket. "But all that's left is your short nerd and Hyde's aesthetically pleasing Snapping Turtle. My guy is gone."

"Damn right he is!" Mr. Forman shouted from the other side of the sheets.

Jackie cupped her forehead. It was beginning to hurt. "You guys, I think I'm done. Donna, just use what you've got or watch an episode of the actual Dating Game—"

"Just one more question, Jackie." Donna patted the stool. "Please? Then you can make your choice."

Jackie groaned. "Fine, but you owe me."

"And Hyde owes me," Donna muttered as she went back to her chair.

Steven? Jackie sneaked a look at him. The plate of cookies was on his lap, rewrapped in plastic, but nothing about his demeanor suggested what he might owe Donna. Once this nonsense was done, Jackie would ask him a few questions in his room. For now, though, she chose a final question from the index cards.

"Bachelor Number Two," she said and read from one of Steven's cards, "if we got into an argument, how would you handle it?"

"Easy," the second bachelor said. "I'd guilt you into apologizing to me."

"That's … interesting." She pushed the index cards at Fez. She no longer needed them, and he slipped the cards into his suit jacket pocket. "Bachelor Number One, same question."

The first bachelor began to speak, but a loud thump cut him off. The sheets billowed, and Mr. Forman said, "You! Do that again, shorty, and I'll kick your ass with something much harder than a pillow."

"Did you hear that?" the second bachelor said. "He's threatening me!"

"Because you're cheating," the first bachelor said. "You hit me with a pillow before I could answer her question."

"Aw, did the widdle piwwow hurt your pwecious face?" The second bachelor pretended to cry. "'You're cheating. Wah, wah, wah!' What a wuss."

"Jackie," the first bachelor shouted over the second, "I'd talk it out with you. Losing a single chess match isn't big a deal—unless, of course, it's the World Chess Championship—but not learning from that loss is the problem. Why repeat the same mistake?"

Jackie pressed her hand to her heart. Bachelor Number One was actually appealing. "So you play chess?" she said.

"Every weekend," he said.

"Are you really single?"
"Wouldn't be here if I weren't."

She sneaked another look at Steven. He was leaning back in his chair, but he seemed anything but relaxed. His fingers were laced behind his head, and biceps flexed in his short sleeves. Making him jealous had worked on him before. This experiment could be exactly what she needed to get him to act.

"Fez, Donna, I've made my choice," she said.

"Thank God," Donna said. "Let's hear it."

"Wait!" the second bachelor said. "She asked this guy two more questions. I should get the same amount."

Fez stuck his head through the sheets. "The lady has chosen."

"But—"

"She's chosen!" Fez shouted and returned to Jackie. "Who is your choice?"

"Bachelor Number One."

Fez clapped once. "Terrific. Let's bring out the loser—I mean Bachelor Number Two—first.."

"No way," the second bachelor said. "I'm outta—"

A redheaded boy stumbled through the sheets, like he'd been shoved. He was about Jackie's height, and she recognized him from school but didn't know his name.

"Jackie," Fez said, "this is Mitch Miller. He has a B average and, from his smell, a terrible taste in cologne."

"You're talking?" Mitch sniffed near Fez. "You stink like you bathed in opossum musk."

Fez stepped into Mitch's personal space and towered over him by nearly half a foot. "Oh, yes? Well, for your information, I have no idea what opossum musk smells like."

"You!" Mitch said and jerked his thumb at him. "This guy."

Jackie put up her hand. "Enough!" She gestured to the sheets. "You may leave."

"Gladly."

He pushed the two sheets apart, but she didn't watch him leave. Her focus was on Steven. He was leaning close to Donna and whispered something in her ear.

She shrugged. "I found him charming."

Mitch Miller, charming? From the little Jackie had experienced of him tonight, that word definitely did not fit. "Fez," she said, "bring out Bachelor Number One."

"Yes," Fez said. "Bachelor Number One, please come out."

A boy, about as tall as Michael, stepped through the sheets. His shoulder-length hair reminded her of Andy Gibb's, and his face had full lips that rivaled Mick Jagger's. Her room was full of posters with singers who resembled him.
He smiled politely and gave her a shy wave, and she begged her body not to respond. But her breathing grew shallow as Fez introduced him: "This is Mark Cailliet from Ft. Anderson—"

"Of Cailliet Clothiers?" she said.

"One and the same." Mark unbuttoned the left cuff of his dress shirt. "My parents run the company with my uncles." He rebuttoned the cuff. He was obviously uncomfortable, but most people did in the presence of her great beauty.

She hooked her thumbs into the belt loops of her jeans and jutted out her hip. "What do you mean you can't afford something as expensive as diamonds? Your parents are rich!"

"They're rich. I'm not. I like to earn my own way."

His response should've been a turn-off, but her skin prickled. "Donna," she said, "can I actually go out with him?"

Donna jumped out of the chair and raced to her side. "That would be great! I mean, as long as you reported how the date went for my paper."

"Paper?" Mark said.

Jackie slapped Donna's arm. "You didn't tell him what this Dating Game thing was for?"

Donna rubbed her arm as Steven hurried toward them. He crammed a five-dollar bill into Mark's pocket and said, "You two kids have fun tonight."

"What?" Jackie tried to pull Steven under the wooden stairs, to ask him why he'd given Mark money. But he wriggled free of her grip and planted his hands on her and Mark's backs. "Steven—!"

"Time's-a-wasting," he said. "Night ain't getting any younger. Go, go!" He pushed them to the other side of the sheets, where Mr. Forman was waiting.

"Can we put this crap back where it belongs already?" Mr. Forman gestured at the basement couch. Fez's usual seat, the lawn chair, was positioned behind it. He must've been sitting in it like a sentry.

"In a minute," Steven said and left Jackie and Mark for the basement door. He flung it open, and Eric staggered forward, as if he'd been holding onto the door knob. Michael followed, tripping on Eric's heels, and they both crashed to the basement floor, by Steven's feet.

"For God's sake—" Mr. Forman stared up at the ceiling and inhaled deeply. "Eric, get up!"

"I would, Dad, but Kelso's crushing my spine!"

Steven stepped back, all the way to the couch. Michael rolled off Eric, and they both stood up. Their gazes darted around the basement, but Eric was the first to speak. "Why is a pair of sheets dangling from the ceiling? And what's the couch doing here?"

"Who's this guy?" Michael pointed at Mark, who was laughing quietly. Michael and Eric's bumbling entrance would've amused Jackie, too, if she weren't so confused.

Fez appeared from the other side of the sheets. "That," he said, "is Jackie's date."

"Jackie's date?" Michael's full attention shifted to Jackie, and a chill hardened over her skin. "No, you're not supposed to be dating."
"This guy your brother?" Mark said to her.

"My ex."

"Him?" Mark hiked his thumb at Steven. "I thought that guy was your ex."

"Hyde?" Eric laughed and patted Mark's shoulder. "No, no, no, no. They hate each other … or used to." His hand fell from Mark's shoulder. "Actually, I have no idea how they feel about each other anymore."

Mark pivoted on his foot toward Jackie. "Jackie, if we're gonna have a chance of making this work —"

"Make what work?" Michael said, and Jackie gripped the back of the lawn chair. Its lattice structure dug into her palms and would likely leave a mark.

"We've got to start off with honesty," Mark said, looking squarely at her. "Your ex—or friend—or whoever he is to you—asked me to take part in this … game, I guess you'd call it, to find you a date."

"For Donna's paper," Jackie said and looked at Steven, "right?"

Steven brushed his fingers through his beard. "Well … no."

"Is that what this is for?" Eric said. "You set up a mock Dating Game?" He batted the sheets dividing the basement, and they swung away from each other, revealing Donna and Mrs. Forman.

"Donna? Mom?"

Mrs. Forman waved at him as if she were on TV. "Hi, honey!" Then, to Jackie, she said. "I'm so glad you chose that one. He seems like a nice boy."

"So my girlfriend and parents are involved … and Hyde and Fez … to find Jackie a date." Eric cupped his chin and nodded. "Jackie could use all the help she can get. The only guy she's been able to snag so far is this cheating moron"

He indicated Michael, and heat throbbed at the base of Jackie's skull. It burned through her body, transforming the ice on her skin into steam. Crimson exploded behind her eyes, and she charged forward, screaming, "You asshole!"

Her rage had multiple targets: Eric for his insults, Michael for being hypocritically possessive, and Steven for participating in this humiliating scheme. Her friends had plotted together and recruited Eric's parents to—what? To show her how pathetic they believed she was?

"Who's responsible?" she shouted, and her fists lashed out, pummeling any flesh they could reach. "Who's the leader of this conspiracy?"

Her stomach lurched as someone yanked her backward. "Me, all right?" Steven said by her cheek, and her vision cleared as he turned her around in his arms. "It was me."
CHAPTER SEVEN

TRYING ON NEW CLOTHES

Jackie smashed her palms into Hyde's chest, and he fell backward onto the tattered couch. "You?" she said. "You set all this up?" Her flushed cheeks and the pain in her eyes were more bruising than any punch. "Why?"

The basement was too crowded for this conversation. Forman, his mom, and Donna stood by the sheets dividing the room. Fez sat on the armrest of the couch, and Kelso was circling Mark, as if assessing his competition.

Even Red didn't get the concept of privacy. He'd retaken his spot on the lawn chair and seemed as eager to hear Hyde's answer as Jackie.

"To keep you away from him," Hyde said and nodded at Kelso.

Kelso shrieked behind Mark. Mark winced, but he didn't elbow Kelso in the face like Hyde would have. He scooted beside Red. Not an unwise move. Kelso was unlikely to tackle him with Red so close.

"Away from Michael?" Jackie's voice quivered, and Hyde's stomach clenched. He hadn't intended to hurt her, but he'd done it anyway. "This whole Dating Game plot was your idea just to keep me away from Michael?"

Hyde pushed himself off the couch. Having this discussion here, under these circumstances, was going to damage whatever he and Jackie might have left. "Jackie, man, you know how you are..."

"No, I don't know."

"Hyde," Donna said. His name was a warning, but what was he supposed to do? Jackie had him by the stones. He'd fucked up, and he owed her an explanation.

"You're too forgiving," he said, focusing only on Jackie. No one else in the basement mattered right now. "You can't stay pissed enough to save yourself."

The skin of her forehead reddened, matching the color of her cheeks. "And Mark's your solution to that?"

"May I offer some perspective?" Mark said, raising his hand, but he didn't wait for a response. "I've been told you two dated, and I'm guessing you—" he pointed at Jackie, "went back to him." His finger shifted to Kelso. "And from what I've seen, he's a bit of a dick—"

Red snorted in obvious agreement, and Mrs. Forman said, "It's true. He is."
"Mom!" Forman said. "Don't talk about my friends that way."

"But, sweetie, Michael has cheated on Jackie over and over. Sure, she can be pushy, but that doesn't mean she deserves to have her heart broken."

"Or be humiliated in public," Donna said and grasped one of the sheet dividers. "But I guess it's too late for that."

Mark left Red's side and approached Jackie. "Jackie," he said low but not low enough, "from what Hyde's told me, you're an intelligent, compassionate girl. Don't let yourself be a pawn. If your two exes are battling it out, get off the board."

"Only one of them is my ex." Jackie's fists twisted in her jeans pockets. Donna was right. Doing all this in public—discussing Jackie's psychology, her relationship with Kelso—in front of friends and a stranger had to be like being ground into fragments. But Hyde was the one who'd crammed her into the meat grinder, and he was the one who had to get her out.

"Okay, enough." He swept his gaze over everyone. "Game's over. Night's over. Anybody who doesn't belong here, get the hell out."

"It's my basement!" Forman said.

"No, it's my basement," Red said.

"And it's my life." Jackie stepped close to Hyde. She jabbed her finger at his face and scratched his chin in the process. "You had no right to do this. If I want to date Michael, I will—"

Kelso pumped both fists into the air. "All right!"

She turned toward him. "Shut up. I don't want to date you. If I want to date anyone," she indicated Mark, "that's my choice, not yours."

"Peter Frampton? You'd pick Peter Frampton over me?" Kelso darted to Forman's shelf of records. He yanked out *Frampton Comes Alive* and waved it in the air. "I'm way hotter than Frampton."

"Kelso—" Forman rushed to him and snatched the record from his hands.

"Michael, you have no say in who I date." Jackie's voice rose in volume but remained steady. "You have no rights over me. You have no hold over me." She looked at Hyde again. The pain in her eyes had become disappointment, and it breached his chest. "Tonight wasn't to keep me away from Michael. It was to keep me away from you."

He couldn't deny it, despite the slight shake of his head, and she stepped back from him. "Well, Steven, mission accomplished. At least now I know how you feel." She reached behind her neck and removed the necklace he'd given her. "Little advice, though: with the next girl, just tell her."

The shooting star pendant glinted in her palm, but she tilted her hand, and the necklace fell to the floor. His gaze clung to it as every part of her disappeared from view. Her footsteps clacked on the concrete, and the basement door squeaked open. It thudded shut, deepening the breach in his chest.

Loving her had created fresh fissures in both their damn hearts. Because he did love her. In spite of his efforts to remain indifferent, he'd fallen for a girl he'd just kicked into the dirt.

Jackie yanked Donna into the *Sharp, Snappy, Sleek Boutique!* and propelled herself to the rack with
the sluttiest clothes. Slut was a word she'd tried to stop using. Watching that episode of Donahue about feminism had opened her mind, made her aware of her own internalized misogyny. She could even teach Donna a few lessons about it. But slutty and other disempowering words infested her thoughts, thanks to Steven.

He'd demeaned her last night. Recruited friends and strangers to help him do it, but they weren't aware of his true motives. That was the only reason she could look Donna in the eye and bring her to the mall. Donna hadn't meant to hurt her.

"This isn't your usual store," Donna said over the boutique's bass-heavy disco. From a neighboring rack, she pulled a mini-skirt that was little bigger than a headband. "You'd be expelled from school for wearing this."

Jackie gritted her teeth. She was going for a smile but ended up snarling. "Want me to buy it for you?"

"Thanks but no, thanks." Donna put the skirt back. "I can't wear anything that's in here, and I don't just mean Sharp, Snappy, Sleek. The whole mall is banned from my wardrobe now that I'm going to Catholic school. I can't believe this is my last day before hell."

Jackie understood. Sending Donna to Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow was the same was exiling her.

"At least you can come home to the basement." Jackie gathered a few sheer blouses from the first rack and moved onto the next. "Eric'll welcome you home with bony arms."

"Yeah, but it's not the same. I'm gonna miss hanging out with him between classes, passing notes during classes, eating lunch together. And not just with him. I'm gonna miss you and the guys, too. … This year is gonna totally suck."

"Worse than last year?" Jackie held a leather mini-skirt against her body. The hem reached halfway to her knees, and another customer in the store—a woman in her twenties—nodded her approval.

"No," Donna said, and she stopped talking as Jackie added more clothes to her try-on pile.

Five minutes in, Donna offered to carry Jackie's selections. She never did that. Guilt about last night had to be driving her. Or maybe she was feeling generous. Either way, Jackie let Donna act as her assistant.

A little while later, Jackie had a see-through blouse in her hands. Not sheer. Transparent. It was too much, and she returned it to the rack. She had plenty of clothes to try on anyway, and the time had come to learn if they should be worn or burned.

"How many items?" an attendant said at the front of the dressing room line. The woman was gray-haired, wrinkled, and seemed entirely out of place, especially with the disco music vibrating the walls. Her name tag identified her as Irene, and she wore glasses with a neck strap. But maybe she was like those "sexy librarians" in dirty magazines. The outside displayed an old, frowsy woman while underneath existed a wild nymphomaniac who went braless.

Donna counted the clothes Jackie had picked out. "Sixteen."

"Only ten items allowed at a time," Irene said with little affect. A table covered in lingerie and shredded, punk-inspired shirts sat before her. She was busy sorting through the unbought clothes, or perhaps Wild Irene was choosing items to buy for herself.

Jackie peered past her to the main dressing area. It had a pink carpet and black leather walls. More
significantly, a few stools were scattered outside the privacy booths. "Could my friend sit with the rest of my—"

Irene waved her into the dressing area. "Next!"

Jackie and Donna left the growing line of customers, and Jackie chose a booth. With the privacy curtain drawn shut, she tried on a lacy, off-the-shoulder top and a pair of leather pants. The pants skimmed her butt perfectly, but the blouse stretched across her chest like a frown.

Still, the mixture of hard and soft was appealing. It fit how she'd decided to present herself at school this year. She might be the prettiest girl in Wisconsin, sensitive and loving, but she was also no one to mess with.

"Donna," she said through the curtain, "prepare yourself." She stepped into the main dressing area and modeled her new outfit.

"Wow. Those pants..." Donna gaped at her from a stool. She was hugging Jackie's remaining clothes on her lap and crinkling them.

"I know!" Jackie disappeared behind the curtain again. The next two outfits bordered her taste level, but the fourth blasted through it. The polyester dress was cinched at her waist so tightly she resembled a 1940s hooker, especially with the deep neckline. One wrong move, and her breasts would slip out.

She modeled the dress for Donna anyway.

"That's … no, that's terrible," Donna said.

"Really? But it's what your good friend Steven seems to think I should be wearing." Jackie bent at the waist, giving Donna a good view of her breasts. Another of the boutique's customers gestured for her to stand up straight, but Jackie ignored her. "He tried to peddle me off last night, Donna, like he was my pimp."

Donna squeezed her temples between her thumb and forefinger. "Jackie, that's not what—he wasn't —"

"Only he didn't quite get how it's supposed to work," Jackie said over her. "The john's supposed to pay him. He's not supposed to pay the john."

"I'm sorry about last night," Donna said. She released her temples, but she still seemed pained. "I never meant to make you feel like—well, like you have to go all slutty."

Jackie straightened up and placed her hands on her hips. "There's no such thing as slutty, Donna. Women should be able to show off their bodies without being labeled or judged."

Donna's brows furrowed. "Okay, when did you become a feminist?"

"Over the summer." Jackie went back into the privacy booth. The last three months had brought a lot of change to her life, both positive and negative. But just as her new sense of self was solidifying, Steven had laid it to waste.

She shimmied out of the prostitute dress and put on an A-line chambray dress. It had to be the classiest, most romantic piece of clothing in the boutique with a hem that reached her ankles. The bodice was embroidered with a stylized floral pattern, and the majority of the dress's fabric was the color of a winter sky.
The color of Steven's eyes.

She stepped from behind the curtain and twirled in the dress. The pleated skirt flared out, and she felt free, like herself. Communicating through her clothes wasn't necessary. Honoring whom she believed herself to be, whom she hoped to be, was the right road. Whoever didn't recognize her would be left behind.

"Jackie," Donna said, brow still creased like she had a headache, "I really am sorry—and that's a very nice dress."

Jackie smoothed her hands down the skirt. Its material was soft against her palms. She'd definitely buy this one. "I appreciate the apology," she said, "but your heart was in the right place. You don't want mine to be broken again."

Donna's expression finally relaxed. "Exactly! Kelso's dicked you around enough."

He had, but... "I really am over him now. He doesn't have the power to break my heart anymore."

"But Hyde does," Donna said.

The statement slammed into Jackie's stomach. Air shot from her lungs, and she combed her fingers through her hair. It was an old habit meant to soothe, to get her breathing. But she imagined Steven's hands in her hair, his fingertips grazing her neck, his lips inching dangerously close to her mouth.

"Jackie?"

"He should've just come up with another haiku and been done with it," Jackie said and thrust herself into the privacy booth.

"What happened between you two?" Donna shouted over the disco music, and the question reached Jackie through the curtain. "What actually happened."

"Nothing!" Jackie shouted back. She removed the chambray dress. The last item left in the booth was a satin negligee. She slipped it over her head and studied herself in the mirror. *Negligee* was from the French word that meant neglected. An omen?

The negligee she'd selected emphasized her curves and breasts. She adored how sexy it made her look, but who would see her wearing it? Sharing her body with someone required her to share her heart. She'd tried once to do the former without the latter and hit on a man old enough to have dated her mom.

One who had dated her mom.

Nausea rolled through her at the memory. Back then, she'd floated into the sky, higher and higher with no tether. Michael's cheating had cut her safety lines. Steven became her anchor, but her heart had been too fractured to process her feelings for him. She'd let him go and gravity lost its hold on her.

Gravity was loosing its hold now. Dizzying, detaching anxiety assaulted her body, and she pushed her back against the privacy-booth mirror. Her parents' marriage was dissolving. Michael had destroyed her future with him. Steven … if he could see how labored her breathing was, how she'd begun to shake, he'd pull her into his arms and stop fear from yanking her into space. Even if he had no desire to date her, he'd try to make her feel better, to feel safe.

"Jackie," Donna said from outside the curtain, "are you okay in there?"
"Fine! Just admiring myself..." Jackie cringed at the strain in her voice. She collected the clothes she wouldn't buy and stepped out of the booth. "See?" she said breathlessly, and she modeled the negligee in front of Donna and whoever else decided to stare. "I'm not just beautiful. I'm hot."

"Um … sure." Donna took the clothes Jackie passed to her and exchanged them for the ones Jackie hadn't yet tried on. "Did you and Hyde have sex?"

"Donna!" Jackie's mouth went dry. She licked her lips, but the moisture evaporated. "Nothing romantic happened. Nothing."

"You just seem, like, super guilty right now. All flushed and flustered."

"That's because Steven and I … we've always had this connection, you know?"

"No?" Donna's brown boots tapped on the pink carpet. "You insulted his upbringing on a regular basis. He protected me … a lot." And maybe the latter was what he'd tried to do yesterday: not pawn her off but send her to what he thought was safety. "Am I overreacting, Donna?"

"A hundred percent." Donna jutted her chin toward the privacy booth. "Now would you put on something less … revealing?"

"Prude." Jackie returned to the booth and changed into a fitted Ramones T-shirt and pair of jeans shredded at the knees. The outfit was one Steven would probably appreciate—on another girl.

She bit into her knuckle. The mirror was smudged where her back had leaned into it, and the foggy smears distorted her body. That was how Steven must've seen her, misshapen. Her beauty had never inspired lust in him, and she'd overestimated the value of their conversations. So why had he spent the summer with her when, obviously, she had nothing he wanted?

Teeth marks branded her finger, just as Steven's pity branded her heart. Because that was the only conclusion that made sense: he felt sorry for her. His *Dating Game* plot stank of a misguided sense of charity. It was an insult, along with every kind thing he'd ever done for her.

"'Poor pathetic Jackie,'" she muttered. Her fingers dug into the Ramones T-shirt and tugged it off her body. "I am not poor." She kicked off the shredded jeans. "And I won't be disrespected."

She exited the booth in her own clothes, a knit top and pink corduroy pants. "I don't love him," she said, dumping the boutique's shirts and jeans onto Donna's lap. "I feel sorry for him."

"Okay?" Donna stood up with the heap of clothes. Jackie grabbed what she planned on purchasing, and Donna draped the rest over her arm. "Who are we talking about?" Donna said, but Jackie strode from the dressing area to the cashier line. "Jackie, who are you talking about?" Donna repeated. Her arms were free of clothes. She must've given them to Irene.

"He's going to end up alone," Jackie said. "In his own way, he's as bad as Michael. He'll have plenty of sex but no one to anchor him. No one to share his life with." She exhaled a long breath, and her shoulders sagged. "But, I guess, that's what he wants, so he'll be happy."

The customer directly in front of her glanced back. An eavesdropper. Jackie made a nasty face at her, and the woman turned around.

"You're being too hard on him," Donna said. "It sounds weird to say, but Hyde genuinely cares
about you. I think, maybe, he was afraid you'd mistake it for something more and go back to your creepy, stalking ways."

"I never stalked him," Jackie said, and the customer ahead of her gave her another glance. The woman had a mountain of leather bustiers in her arms, and Jackie pointed at it. "Lady, if you look at me like that again, I'll choke you with one of those—"

"Jackie," Donna clasped Jackie's shoulder, "don't take your anger out on her. Your voice is carrying."

"Whatever." Jackie held tightly the clothes she intended to buy. "I didn't stalk him."

"You didn't take no for an answer, either."

"Please. I didn't make him ask me out on Veteran's Day. I didn't force him to kiss me."

Donna slapped Jackie's arm. "You shut your lying mouth. He kissed you on that date?"

Jackie didn't answer. The eavesdropping customer had reached the cashier, and Jackie waited until the woman was thoroughly distracted. "We kissed each other. It was mutual."

"And?" Donna said.

"It went nowhere. Clearly."

Donna blinked a few times, as if processing this new information. "Okay, look, he'll probably kill me for saying this, but he doesn't want you to end up in a bad relationship again. With Kelso or anyone."

Goosebumps rose on Jackie's arms and shoulders. She peered up at the ceiling, at the strip of paper attached to the closest air conditioner, but it wasn't flapping. The cold was all hers, internally generated.

"Then I should thank him," she said, putting artificial warmth into her voice.

"I don't think he expects a thank-you," Donna said, "but you could go easy on him."

"Oh, I'll definitely be thanking Steven. He saved me from another bad relationship."

Donna's eyebrows rose, but Jackie didn't clarify. Fortunately, the cashier said, "Next in line!" saving Jackie the effort of redirecting the conversation.

"Did you find everything you need?" the cashier said, and Jackie slammed her clothes onto the counter. The cashier was a gum-chewing, stick of a woman. She could've gone bone-to-bone with Eric in a scarecrow contest, and she pointed at Jackie's negligee. "Oh, I love that nightie. I bought two, one in black like yours and one in red."

Jackie didn't speak. Her thoughts were too cruel. They were spilling onto strangers they didn't belong to, and staying silent was the wisest choice. Steven believed she couldn't stay angry at people who betrayed her, but she'd prove him wrong. She wouldn't forgive him for his scheming, for his warped view of her, or for his most brutal of crimes: acting like he might possibly love her.
Flirting with Imprisonment

Chapter Notes

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CHAPTER EIGHT
FLIRTING WITH IMPRISONMENT

Hyde sentenced himself to spend the last day of summer break in his room. Some hours, the stone-brick walls pressed in on him. Others, they hurtled away, making his room stretch into the cosmos. Pot wasn't the culprit. He hadn't touched the stuff today. Misery, pervasive and absolute, was causing the illusions.

He remained on his cot, back against his dresser, and moved only to piss or flip over his record. The Rolling Stones' latest album, Some Girls, had played through at least seven times. When the last song, "Shattered," ended, he turned the record to side A, and "Miss You" started.

With the album on, he didn't have to think. Most of the lyrics put words to his conflicting emotions. He'd contracted a sickness, one he'd foolishly believed he was immune to: heartache. It had eradicated his appetite and most of his courage. He should've been man enough to face Jackie and his choices, but he was laying low instead.

His solitary confinement remained intact past four p.m. No one had tried to break him out. He always slept in on Sundays while the Formans went to church, so that explained the first few hours. His friends were probably outside, enjoying their last scraps of freedom before school. The Formans must've thought he was with them and had accidentally left on his radio.

He rubbed his eyes. The walls were contracting again, and knocks rattled his door. His instinct was to tell the person to scram, but a one-in-seven chance existed that the knocker was Jackie. Those odds couldn't be ignored.

He shut off his stereo and stretched his stiff back. His legs felt bloodless and tingly. He'd been sitting too long, and he stomped his boots on the floor. The door continued to rattle, but a ghost might as well have been outside his room. No voice accompanied the knocks.

"Hold on!" Hyde croaked out. His mouth had been shut for hours. It both sounded and smelled like it, too, and he wiped a pack of gum from the dresser. He shoved a piece into his mouth, but the door bounced against the hinges, like someone had kicked it.

He grasped the door knob and positioned himself strategically. If Jackie charged in like a stampeding bull, he'd have some chance of protecting his stones. His legs tensed, ready to jump out of the way, and he opened the door.

Forman's fist punched at open air. "Hyde, what the hell?" His face was flushed. Sweat beaded his forehead, and he dropped his arm. "Next time you want to hide, don't play your stereo so loud."

"Wasn't hiding."
"I almost kicked my way in here." Forman entered the room and pushed the door shut with his elbow. "Do you have any idea what I've been through the last three hours?"

"No, but I'm sure you're gonna tell me."

"I had to drive Kelso to the DMV. Yeah, he lost his driver's license in California and wouldn't drive himself. It might just be the first time he's intentionally obeyed the law."

Hyde paced from the dusty armchair to the Formans' old trunk and back again. "So?"

"Fez went with us to be 'part of the fun,'" Forman said and dropped onto Hyde's cot. "But while Fez went to a DMV rep to complain about the comatose line, Kelso unloaded his own grievances onto me."

Hyde chewed his gum harder to stimulate his saliva glands. His mouth and throat were dry, and talking was harder than it should've been. "And now you're gonna dump 'em onto me."

"Because they belong to you! Kelso's throwing a hissy fit over what happened last night."

"So?"

Forman gripped the sides of his hair. "Would you stop saying that?"

Hyde chuckled. Watching Forman get flustered was entertaining. "You keep doin' that, you'll go bald like Red."

Forman jerked his hands from his head and spoke more softly. "You need to stay out of Jackie's life, okay? Let her and Kelso work out their relationship for themselves."

"Their relationship's done, man. Nothing for them to work through."

Forman laughed as if Hyde were being naïve. "Kelso's never going to be done with Jackie. It doesn't matter how many girls he sleeps with. He'll always want the option of being with her."

"That's his damn problem."

"You didn't see him today, how upset he is that Jackie might be dating other people. And he blames you for giving her the idea."

"Forman, do you even hear yourself?" Hyde's heartbeat pummeled his eardrums, and he sat on the armchair, hoping his adrenaline would fade. "You're talkin' like Jackie doesn't have a choice in this."

"Of course she does, and you've seen what she chooses: Kelso. She's determined to be with the guy, no matter how much she denies it. No matter badly he treats her. So you might as well back off."

Hyde shoved his gum into his cheek as his breaths staggered in his chest.

"I know you care about her," Forman said, "but you can't save her from what she doesn't want to be saved from."

He was echoing Hyde's own doubts, ones that had led to last night. Hyde should've argued harder against himself—today, yesterday, the whole freakin' summer. He shouldn't have tried to set Jackie up with a boyfriend she hadn't asked for, but his mistakes didn't wipe out his survival instincts. Better for him that they stay platonic. Better for Jackie, too.

"So Kelso throws a tantrum," he said, "and you don't give a shit he's a total hypocrite. He can screw
whoever he wants, but Jackie's gotta go into some kind of suspended animation. Date no one, fuck no one, fall for no one until Kelso decides to be with her. *If* he does."

Forman tugged on his hair again. "Why aren't you getting this? Whatever happens between Jackie and Kelso is between *Jackie and Kelso*, not between Jackie, Kelso, and *you*. That's all I'm saying. Stay out of it, or we're all gonna lose."

"No can do."

"Hyde—"

"Kelso's gonna have to live with me and her being friends," Hyde said, not that he and Jackie were friends anymore. Not after last night, but his point was still valid. "If that means I set her up with a good guy, that's the way it goes—"

"From what I witnessed yesterday," Forman said, "she didn't want you to."

"Nope. Yesterday was a bad move, but it doesn't change facts: Kelso's gotta accept that her friends are gonna help her find someone who ain't him. Same as when she set Donna up with Casey, and you had to deal with it."

"That analogy doesn't work." Forman squinted like he had a headache and kneaded his right shoulder. "Jackie and I aren't friends, so her setting Donna up on a date breaks no codes. But you and Kelso have been friends since first grade. You can't tell me you're choosing Jackie over him … unless this 'just friends' riff of yours is a scam."

Hyde scooted forward on the armchair and dug his boots into the cement floor. "Not choosin' anyone over anyone," but that was a lie. He'd picked the Jackie he didn't trust over the one he'd fallen for. "You've been telling me this whole time to back off, but why don't you back the hell off?"

"Because even without your sunglasses on, you don't see the bigger picture."

"If something's goin' on between me and Jackie, it's between me and Jackie."

"So there *is* something," Forman said, and Hyde shrugged. "What's *this*," Forman copied the shrug, "supposed to mean?"

Hyde spat his gum into his hand and wadded it into its wrapper. Forman wasn't getting any more out of him.

"You and Jackie." Forman let out a shuddering breath, as if pairing the names would initiate a dark ritual. "*You* and Jackie … *you* and *Jackie*? I just don't get it. I don't want to."

"Not asking you to." Hyde scratched his cheek, and the roughness of his beard scraped his fingertips. His life was the same, abrasive and sprouting from his own skin but, ultimately, going nowhere.

"So that's it?" Forman said. "You're gonna let Jackie ruin our last year together before college? Donna's already going to another school—"

"Keep your panties on, Forman. Jackie can't ruin anything. She..." was a helluva girl, with a wider perspective about the world than his. Simply by being herself, she'd made him aware of the constraints he'd put on his life. Limitations he couldn't seem to get beyond.

"She's what?" Forman said, "Made of hellfire?"
"No—"

"The devil incarnate?"

"None of your damn business," Hyde said. Forman wouldn't help him with Jackie; his loyalty was to the friendships he'd grown up with, and any threat to them scared him shitless.

"So we're agreed," Forman said. "She's none of our business, and you'll stay away from her."

Hyde stuck his hand into his jeans pocket. The shooting star pendant was inside, and he ran his thumb over its smooth surface. "Forman, we'll be friends 'til death, but fuck off on this."

Forman opened his mouth but made no sound. He got off the cot and slouched from the room.

Hyde should've followed and found Jackie. Explained his choices so she could make her own based on the facts, but he sank onto the cot and back into his cowardice.

For the first day of school, Jackie went with the chambray dress. It flaunted her body without being tawdry, and its winter sky color complimented her summer-tanned skin. She strutted through the school halls with an air of pride, carrying her designer backpack over one shoulder. But she made sure not to flounce before the first bell. Appearing overly confident or too happy would reveal her bluff.

Her new locker assignment was on the second floor, but decorating the gray, bland metal would have to wait. Boys were looking her way. She focused on unlocking her locker and did it on the first try, but one of the boys broke from the pack. He was at tall, rangy—and approaching her.

"Keith?" she said. "Keith Byrne?"

"That's me," he said with a smirk. "Can't believe how much hotter you got over the summer."

She touched a fingers to her lips, and her stomach fluttered uncomfortably. He must've grown half a foot taller since June, and his voice had deepened considerably. She didn't comment on his changes, though. She looked at him expectantly, waiting for a follow-up.

"I'm not sure of it's this," he mimed an a hour-glass shape with hands, "or the fact you finally dropped that moron, Kelso."

Another boy joined him from the pack, Andrew Schmidt. "I'd say it's both," he said and rested his arm on Keith's shoulder. Andrew was the J.V. field hockey team's goalie. At least, he had been last year. This year, he'd probably make varsity. He was taller, too, and more muscular. "Jackie..." his eyes raked her body, "you really are looking foxy."

"I know." She offered him a smile, and it seemed to signal the rest of the pack to come over. Five boys, including Keith and Andrew, surrounded her by the lockers. Each had gone from baby-faced sophomores to man-voiced juniors who wouldn't be asked for I.D. at Charlie's Bar.

They were also all flirting with her.

This morning's conversation with the cheer squad had to be responsible. She'd met up with her teammates in the school parking lot, and they asked where she'd been hiding all summer. It was the question she'd been dreading, but she had a lie prepared.

"Oh, I shadowed my dad at his job," she said. "He took me all over the Midwest on his business
trips. I barely had time to get my nails done, but..." She presented her newly French-manicured nails.

Everyone expressed their approval but Valerie, the cheer captain. Her too-tweezed left eyebrow arched up, and she said, "So are you and Michael Kelso are officially over? I saw him hitting on Nancy Gorski at The Hub on Saturday."

"Over doesn't begin to describe it," Jackie said. "But, yes, I broke up with him—two months ago? Something like that."

Julie, the assistant cheer captain, frowned. "Aw, why?" The sympathy was obviously fake, an attempt to coax Jackie into a damning confession. But a breeze swept through the parking lot and tousled Julie's hair. She shrieked, grasped her head, and raced into the school.

The rest of the cheer squad followed, but Jackie stayed by her car. She watched other cars pull in, and her heart pounded as a black El Camino drove into the lot. Rock music blasted from it, but it shut off before the driver—Steven—chose a parking space. Maybe he'd seen her and hoped to talk.

Confronting him had been her plan, but she fled into the school.

Regaining her outer composure hadn't been hard, but inside she was a quivering wreck. He didn't want her. He didn't respect her, but her chest ached at the loss of him. Donna wasn't even here to give comfort. All she had were a horny boys fawning over her.

"Yeah," she said to one of them now. "Of course," she said to another. She giggled at a third, but it was an act to keep from crying. It was a perfect imitation of her mom at business dinners. Create an illusion of interest, and connections would be made.

Every second that went by, the boys stepped closer. They breached her personal space, fenced her in. Her back was pushed against her locker, and if the school bell didn't ring soon, she'd start kicking 'nads.

"Have you seen Animal House yet?" Keith said, and his finger hooked a lock of her hair. "Because I was wondering if you'd—"

"Hey! Get away from her!"

Jackie's breath hitched. She stood on her toes and glimpsed Michael charging toward the pack. He reached it, clamped his hand on Keith's shoulder, and forced him around.

"What the hell, man?" Keith said.

Michael pointed at Jackie. "That's my girl you're hitting on!"

"She's not your girl," Keith repeated. Andrew repeated it, too, and the rest of the boys made similar statements.

Michael's grip tightened on Keith's shoulder, and he yanked him from the pack. "Let's go!" Michael said. "I'll take all of you!" but the school bell rang.

"Goddamn cheerleader gossip," Keith muttered. He pried Michael's hand off himself and disappeared into a classroom with the other boys.

Jackie grabbed her backpack. She had a history class to get to, but Michael stuck to her side as she rushed down the hallway. "You look real pretty in that dress," he said.
"I'm pretty in any dress," she said.

"Jackie—" He got in front of her, and she stepped on his feet. "Ow—Jackie!" He began walking backward but stayed in her way. "What I'm saying is I love you ... and we should try again. I won't cheat this time or run. I promise. Just please, please say you'll be my girlfriend."

She shoved him aside, even as a thrill arced through her. He was begging, but he'd groveled before. Made promises before. "Words come so easily to you," she said. "Too bad you can't buy trust with them."

Her classroom was close. Students poured into it from the left and right, and she joined them as Michael shouted, "Can I buy it with something else? I've got five bucks!"

She kept her gaze forward. She wouldn't take him back, no matter how many times he declared faithfulness. Or how badly she wished his words were more than a collection of sounds.
Rumors spread quickly through Point Place High. During Jackie's morning classes, she'd learned about Maggie Nervetti's swimsuit incident, Ed Vollan's rash, and the divorce of Amy Bradford's parents. But The Dating Game debacle wasn't being whispered about. Jake Bradley and Mitch Miller had nothing to share except their own embarrassment, so they were staying quiet. They'd both been ejected from the game before its true purpose came out.

Steven wouldn't talk about it in public: her utter humiliation at his hands. She could count on his pity to keep his mouth shut, but Michael, Fez, and Eric were keeping Saturday night private, too. Each of them likely had their own reasons, and their silence gave her one less pressure to worry about.

She headed down to the cafeteria without bowing her head. Her first lunch as a junior, and her popularity remained intact. Her spot at the cheer squad's table was all but contractually guaranteed. No matter how many times she'd chosen to sit with Michael, her teammates always welcomed her back.

And with Donna at another school, she had nowhere else to sit.

The cafeteria was in the basement, but the main staircase ended on the first floor. Like everyone else, she had to cross the senior locker area to reach the basement stairs. Having lockers on the first floor was a senior-year perk. So was leaving school during lunch period.

Steven had to be outside by now. She'd gone downstairs late to avoid him, but she peeked out from the stairwell to be sure. Half the football team was cramming backpacks into lockers. Stragglers, but they weren't the only ones. Steven hadn't left yet either, and she cursed. The scruffy-haired jerk and Fez stood by what had to be Fez's locker. Fez was taping photographs to the inner part of the metal door.

"Would you hurry it up, man?" Steven said. "Wanna beat the riff-raff to The Hub."

"But we are the riff-raff," Fez said and positioned a photo next to the others.

Steven blew out a breath, and Jackie inhaled a shaky one. Michael would've abandoned Fez for The Hub. He probably had with Eric, but Steven leaned against a neighboring locker and drummed his fingers on it.

She needed to get to the cafeteria, but she didn't dare cross the locker area yet. It was too empty, despite the broad-backed football players lumbering around. She couldn't risk Steven seeing her.

Not that he'd notice how her dress matched the winter sky of his irises.
She clenched her fists, and her nails bit into her palms. He deserved none of her attention or scrutiny, but she hid herself deeper in the stairwell and spied on him with one eye. He shifted his gaze from one football player to another like a sentry. That had to be why he waited while Fez decorated his locker. He was protecting his friend, just like she'd let him protect her.

Yet he didn't pity Fez. He valued him, and a bubble of force expanded in her chest. She pressed her fist to her mouth to stop from screaming. He couldn't possibly feel more than pity for her. His *Dating Game* scheme had proven that.

"'Scuse me," Ron Turner said as he passed her by. He was part of the Vikings' defensive line, and his wide back cast a shadow over her. A spark broke through the darkness in her mind. He was exactly what she needed, and she used him as a shield as he went into the locker area.

He moved quickly for his size. She kept up with him until he turned sharply to the right, toward Fez's locker, and for one deadly second she became visible. She darted behind him again, but he spun on his foot and changed directions. His locker was on the opposite wall to Fez's, and his altered course had exposed her.

"Jackie?" The softness of Steven's voice tore through her. He stood up straight from the lockers, and she ordered her legs to move. But the terrazzo floor had captured her feet, trapping her with Steven and her uninvited emotions.

Fez opened his locker door wide. "You like it, Jackie? I put pictures of all of us inside."

She glanced at the photos. One was of Donna in her Catholic school uniform. Another was of Jackie in a bikini, a photo he must've stolen from Michael. But Steven drew her focus without saying a word.

Her gaze swept over his body, same as Andrew Schmidt's had done to her this morning. Steven's jeans were belted low on his hips, a rarity. Usually he wore his belt higher, but he'd lost weight over the summer. Maybe as much as fifteen pounds because he'd drunk less alcohol.

Because of her.

He'd quit sneaking beers into the basement on June 27. It was the second day of the second week she'd spent with him. She'd written the event in her diary. With Donna in California, Jackie's diary had gotten much more attention.

But after June 27, his weekend drinking continued as far as she could tell. On Mondays, he'd emerge from his room late in the morning. Usually disheveled. Sometimes reeking of alcohol—wine or schnapps or whatever else he'd gotten his hands on. Definitely a drink stronger than beer. She hadn't said anything about it, and the Formans never caught him. He'd disappear into the bathroom and reappear a half-hour later, resembling someone who'd spent the weekend at the library.

His routine changed, however, once he learned about her homelife. Confessing her mom's alcoholism seemed to make him stop drinking altogether. She wasn't brave enough to ask why. She still wasn't, but he wouldn't admit the truth to her anyway. That required respect, a currency she was incapable of earning from him.

"I've gotta go," she said, and her throat grew thick. The basement stairs were only a few feet away, but they might as well have been miles. The floor wouldn't release her.

Steven hooked his thumbs into his belt loops. "Or we could talk about Saturday night."

"There's nothing to—" Her voice hitched. He'd inadvertently pulled his jeans lower on his hips. His
John Lee Hooker T-shirt showed off the slimness of his waist, and warmth flushed into her stomach and lower. It throbbed with her heartbeat, with fantasies she rarely let herself imagine.

She shut her eyes. Her damn body had betrayed her. It was the one trapping her, not the floor. Football players and other students walked around her to the cafeteria, and the flow of air pricked her skin. Steven—she physically hurt because of how much she wanted him.

The way he was dressed. His foxy swagger. The rugged beard he'd grown. She couldn't be the only one who'd noticed. Girls were going to hurl themselves at him. And he'd probably sleep with every one, promising them nothing.

"You're a liar," she said, opening her eyes. "You don't see me, Steven. You see what you believe I am, but you don't see me. And you lie … because you think I'm fragile. But I see who you really are, and I hate it!"

Her legs finally moved but with too much force. She stumbled into his personal space, and he caught her, one hand on her elbow, the other on her waist. His touch set off tiny explosions on her skin, and she peered up at his lips. Her body was pleading for relief. For one slow, long kiss to set her blood free, but it would poison her heart.

He didn't. He let her go down to the cafeteria without any hope she could be wrong.

Getting to The Hub was usually an easy walk, but Hyde winced at every breeze that shook the trees. The leaves kept whispering the same, one-word reprimand at him: "Mistrust." Jackie had once called him a broken railway light, giving her conflicting signals, but his inability to trust her had cut the wires.

"I have not seen Jackie that angry in a long time," Fez said as they turned onto Birch Street. "Not since she caught Kelso cheating on her. I thought The Dating Game would be fun, but you really screwed the poop on this one."

"It's pooch, Fez."

"I'm not hearing a difference."

Fez was still learning American idioms, but Hyde had no mind to explain this one. He needed to sort out what had happened in the locker area. Jackie's rage at him was tangible, but it also gave him a strange vibe, like he wasn't the only liar between them.

Fez kicked an empty soda can in the middle of the sidewalk. It flew out into the street, and a car ran
over it with a metallic crunch. "Ooh, that went far!"

"Good job, man."

"That didn't sound sincere." Fez's voice trembled. "Are you lying to me, too?"

Hyde exhaled through his nose, and the tree leaves imitated the sound. "No."

"I believe you, but I don't think Jackie will believe anything you say ever again."

Fez was probably right, but Hyde finally homed in on the vibe she'd given off: lust. The huskiness of her voice. Her focus on his mouth. The gooseflesh on her arms. The physical signs were obvious now that he'd identified them, but that road led to a dead end. She was an expert at convincing herself of feelings that didn't actually exist.

She'd thought she wanted him a year ago, had even sold him on it, but their kiss taught them both otherwise. And it had left him disoriented, with feelings he'd tried to convince himself didn't actually exist.

"Hyde, did you hear me?" Fez said and waved toward The Hub. It was less than a block away. "Don't let me get hot dogs. They remind me of Rhonda, and my heart—and throat—still hurts from our breakup."

"No hot dogs. Got it," Hyde said, but his lips were tingling. The sensation of Jackie's warm mouth pressing on them was a memory he despised. It rose in his mind at night when he jerked off, taunted him with desires he couldn't fulfill. Reminded him of how hard he'd fallen for her.

He'd had a chance with her this summer. Maybe dozens of them, and he'd let them all slip by. Saturday night he'd done worse. Tried to find her a good guy. But to her, he was just pawning her off like an old watch.

She had every right to think that. He kept weighing her present motives against what she'd done in the past. It was fucked up, but it was also for survival. The people he loved usually didn't love him back. They pretended to. Then they used him, beat him to hell, and left him for dead.

No one would ever do that to him again. Not Jackie. Not anyone. His brain was shooting off warning flares, and he couldn't ignore them. Even if it meant losing the girl he loved.

Jackie rushed to the cheer squad's table with her food tray. Valerie, Julie, and the rest of the cheerleaders were nearly done eating, but they never ate much anyway. They spent most of lunch period talking. Leslie Cannon was in the middle of recounting a melodramatic story about herself—something about a Trans Am, a college student, and her breasts—but Valerie silenced her with a look, the way only their cheer captain could.

"What took you so long?" Valerie said, turning her gaze onto Jackie.

Jackie gripped her tray with one hand and fluffed her hair with the other. "I've been ambushed by boys all day! It's been tough getting anywhere on time."

Valerie nodded her approval, and Julie slid closer to her, making room for Jackie to sit.

Jackie took her place next to Julie and twirled gluey Fettuccine Alfredo onto her fork. Not exactly appetizing, but her encounter with Steven had left her starving.
"Can I finish my story or what?" Leslie said. A rolled-up *Tiger Beat* magazine was in her hand, and she hit her opposite palm with it.

"He sucked on your nipples. You blew him, and he gave you the keys to his car," Julie said, as if she'd heard the story repeatedly. "Now, can we talk about what's been going on with the guys here?"

Leslie shrugged, but everyone else at the table murmured with enthusiasm, and Julie said a name that made Jackie cough: "Steven Hyde."

Jackie banged on her chest, and her bite of Fettuccine went into her stomach. "What about him?" she said roughly.

Julie touched Jackie's arm. "You should've been here earlier. Susan Amborn came by and dropped a juicy piece of gossip. Apparently, she saw quite a thing by the senior lockers."

"Did she?" Jackie clutched her knee below the table. She'd just won Idiot of the Year, eating like her reputation hadn't been tarnished. Susan must've been behind a row of lockers, listening for insider football info. She was the sports columnist for the *Point Place High Chronicle*, but instead of a Vikings scoop, she'd scored a cheer squad intrigue. One that could gain her social status and wreck Jackie's.

"Mm-hmm," Julie said. "She said Steven scared Ron Turner—the Ron Turner—with just a shake of his head. Ron was going after that weird foreign kid, Fex—"

"Fez," Jackie said.

"Yeah, him. Anyway, with one shake of his head, Steven made Turner back off. I caught a glimpse of Steven in the halls earlier, and he's barely recognizable. A few inches taller, way more muscular—those arms are deadly—and that beard!" Julie fanned herself, causing her blond hair to bounce. "I'm definitely getting in on that."

Valerie gave her an encouraging smile, and Leslie said, "What kind of car does he drive?"

"A '67 El Camino," Julie said. "I overheard him talking about it with Michael Kelso last year. They worked on the engine together. I bet he looks hot driving it, too." She fanned herself again. "Steven is so manly!"

Jackie squeezed the material of her dress. Julie wasn't supposed to say Steven's name with such familiarity or hunger. "But he's a low-class burnout," Jackie said. "I bet he has lice. Or crabs."

"Who cares? Last year, Kat Peterson let slip he gave good head." Julie groaned and slid her hands over the lunch table. "It's been so long since I've gotten good head. I bet his beard tickles—"

"Was Michael good at oral?" Valerie said but didn't wait for Jackie's answer. "He must've been. Otherwise, you wouldn't have kept dating him after all his cheating. But you broke up at the start of summer, right?"

Jackie let go of her dress before she ripped it apart. "Yes."

"That's, like, three months. A really long time." Valerie bit her bottom lip and curled a finger around a lock of her hair. "Would you mind terribly if I went out with him? We have English together, and he asked me out."

Jackie's stomach clenched, threatening to expel the little she'd eaten. Michael had claimed her as his
girlfriend this morning, had professed his love and faithfulness, only to ask out Valerie a little while later? His choice of dates was suspect, but Jackie recalled the lessons Steven had taught her last year. She had to be aloof, ambiguous.

"That's cool."

"You're the best, Jackie," Valerie said and patted Jackie's hand. Apparently, ambiguity was lost on her. "It's no wonder girls throw themselves at him. He's a total fox, and you shouldn't blame yourself for his cheating." She patted Jackie's hand a second time. "He's surrounded by a lot of temptation, but by dating a woman of both strength and undeniable beauty, it'll be like he has a set of blinkers on."

Jackie stabbed her fork into a fettuccine noodle. Valerie had referenced the apparatus used to narrow a horse's field of vision and keep its focus straight ahead. She'd also triple-burned Jackie, but Jackie had to swallow her anger, or else Valerie would feed on it and become even stronger.

"Michael's nothing like a horse," Jackie said and ate the noodle off her fork. "But if you think you can break him, good luck to you."

Leslie pointed at Jackie with her rolled-up *Tiger Beat*. "What about your love life? Any flings during those business trips across the Midwest?"

_Nope_. No flings. Jackie had gradually fallen in love with another boy, one whose every kindness toward her had been an act of charity. One who'd warned her about this very moment with the cheer squad. Lying came naturally to her, but she didn't want to lie about this. Or to go out with a jock like Andrew Schmidt to generate reputation-boosting rumors. But she hadn't expected Valerie and Julie to go after her boys.

"Don't you bitches judge me for this," Jackie said, "but I'm seeing someone from Ft. Anderson."

Valerie slapped the lunch table, and several food trays jumped at the impact. "A Snapping Turtle?"

"They're our mortal enemies, Jackie," Julie said. "Our enemies!"

"Go, Vikings, Go!" Valerie shouted and thrust her fist into the air.

"Go, Vikings, Go!" the whole cheer squad repeated, and the cafeteria burst into the same cheer.

Jackie cupped her forehead. She hadn't meant to start a pep rally. "He's not a jock," she said when the cheer died down. "Okay? He's a brain. He's in the chess club, for God's sake."

"The chess club?" Leslie screwed up her face. "What's he look like?"

Jackie gestured for her magazine. Leslie passed it over, and Jackie unrolled it. Leif Garrett was on the cover, with his shoulder-length hair and thick, tempting lips. She tapped his image, and everyone at the table stared at her like she was nuts.

"Nuh-uh," Leslie said.

Julie snatched the magazine. "Ft. Blanderson does not have students who look like this."

"It does," Jackie said, "and I'm dating him."

"We need proof." Valerie circled her finger around the cafeteria. "Bring him here. Have him meet you after school. Introduce us."
"I'm not gonna march him into enemy territory and have you tear him to shreds."

"Then bring us a picture of yourself with him," Valerie said. Her haughty tone suggested Jackie had no choice in the matter, and Jackie scrunched her toes in her shoes.

"Several," Julie said, "and one has to be of you two kissing. Not just a peck but full-on Frenching. I want to see tongue."

_Tongue?_ Jackie sucked in her cheeks, and when she released them, her lips smacked apart. "Fine, if it'll shut you up."

"It will," Valerie said. "What's his name?"

"Mark Cailliet."

Leslie reached across the table and grasped Jackie's wrist. "Of Cailliet Clothiers?" Jackie nodded, and Leslie said, "Now it's starting to make sense."

"Thank God," Jackie said, and she gave thanks again when the cheer squad moved onto a new topic: the upperclassmen trip. Every October, the juniors and seniors went on a five-day team-building trip together. It was a waste of time, especially for someone like Jackie. She'd been a cheerleader since junior high. She knew all about teamwork.

"I heard it's going to be in Quartz Falls State Park," Valerie said.

Leslie leaned her head back and moaned. "Nooo! That means camping! And hiking."

"And bugs and mud," Julie said.

"And lots of make-out opportunities," Valerie said, and the other seniors in the cheer squad agreed. "Last year, I..."

Her voice faded as Jackie withdrew into her mind. Being a cheerleader wasn't just about talent and skill but popularity. Dating a boy as gorgeous as Michael had earned her a lot of cachet, despite the fact he'd cheated on her. But her prestige was dulling. She had to shine it up and fast, and that meant calling Mark.

Who'd seen her at her worst and hadn't given her his number.

But she was Jackie Burkhart. If anyone could persuade a boy to forget her outburst on Saturday, it was her. And Point Place couldn't possibly have that many Cailliets. Even if it did, her dad had enough business contacts to connect with his parents.

She dug her fork into her now-cold Fettuccine Alfredo. Honoring her true self, leaving people behind who didn't respect her—how quickly she'd abandoned those lofty goals. At the first blush of social pressure, she'd proven Steven right.
CHAPTER TEN

FOLLOWING THROUGH

Hyde should've been in his car, driving off to freedom. The final school bell had rung. The first week of his senior year was over, but he bolted to the third floor bathroom and locked himself in a stall. The minutes plodded by on his watch, slower than during any of his classes, but he had to wait. Otherwise, his path to the school parking lot might not be safe.

On Monday, girls stared at him in the halls, pointing and giggling. Tuesday, a few of them offered a shy, "Hi," before scurrying off. By Wednesday, the first chick asked to feel his beard. She was a junior, almost as tall as him, with legs he wouldn't mind wrapping around his hips. So he said sure.

More girls asked to do the same on Thursday, and he indulged them. But today, most didn't bother asking. They felt up his face in classrooms, the stairwells, wherever they could corner him. It seemed like a conspiracy. Like Jackie getting vengeance for last Saturday and his other supposed felonies. Siccing the female population of Point Place High on his beard would be a decent payback.

But that kind of retaliation wasn't her style.

She hadn't spoken to him since Monday, since she'd accused him of being a liar. She'd gone to Donna's a few evenings but never the Formans'. Even if she were to drop by the basement, words wouldn't fix shit. Her friendship with him was done. Irreparable.

He pressed the heels of his hands against his forehead. For twenty damn minutes he'd tolerated fart stench and listened to urinals flush. He had to get out of the bathroom.

He left the stall and opened the bathroom door a crack. The hallway outside was clear, so he darted to the stairwell. His backpack bounced against his back, and his boots squeaked as he rushed down the steps. The senior locker area was empty, but he peeked into the lobby. A few students roamed around, but none fit the type who'd been interested in him lately.

Crossing the lobby caused no problems. He pushed through the double doors to the parking lot, but his breath sped from his nose, and his heart slammed against his ribs. Racing down two flights of stairs, people molesting his beard, Jackie avoiding him—his body and mind needed a break.

The Camino had no cars parked on either side of it. That would let him make a quick getaway, and he pulled his keys from his jacket.

"Hey, there, foxy," a feminine voice said behind him. Fingers tapped his shoulder when he didn't turn around, and the muscles in his neck tensed. He prepared to rip a groping hand from his face, but no beard-fondling followed.
He glanced back at a short chick with a nice rack. Her blond hair was curled similarly to Jackie's, and she smiled at him.

He acknowledged her with a nod but returned his attention to the Camino. He needed to unlock the driver-side door and get the hell out of here.

"Steven," she said, and shivers pricked his spine. Jackie must've been gossiping about him. No other way for this girl to know who he was. He didn't socialize in school except with his friends. He'd never been part of any extracurricular group. "I hope you won't find this too forward, but—"

"Beard's retired," he said.

"Really? That's too bad because I heard you give great head."

His fist tightened on the Camino's door handle. She wanted more than he'd expected, and he turned toward her. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Kat Peterson." She cupped her left cheek and drummed her fingers below her eye. If that was her most seductive move, it needed work. "She told me in confidence, but she's at the U of C now, and I can't imagine she'd mind if I talked to you about it."

"Uh-huh." He released the door handle and clutched his belt buckle. Jackie still could've sent this chick to screw with him, but Kat was the gossip in this sitch. "So you wanna slum it, too?"

Her arm dropped to her side, and she inched closer to him. Her knee-length skirt rippled with the wind blowing through the parking lot. "You're living with a nice, middle-class family. I'd hardly call that slumming it."

A chill set into his skin, raising the hairs on the nape of his neck. Apparently, Kat had paid more attention to his life than she'd let on, gathered intel, and shared it with this girl. "Who the hell are you?"

"Oh, come on, Steven." She cocked out her hip and gazed at him as if the answer were obvious. "You've known me a long time."

"Think I'd remember you."

"God, you really don't recognize me, do you?" she said, sounding turned on. "Julia Falk, but I go by Julie. I'm assistant captain of the cheer squad."

The name sparked a synapse. Jackie had mentioned her over the summer, and Julie's face wasn't wholly unfamiliar. Maybe Jackie had brought her to the Formans' once or twice.

Julie slid her hand over his shoulder. Her thumb stroked his beard, but he didn't flinch. Her touch promised more, and she used her grip on him to pull herself closer. "I'll blow your brains out," she whispered in his ear, "if you go down on me."

"When?" His body was already responding to her, but she could still be playing him. He dragged his palm along her hip and down to her thigh. If this was a trap, his move would freeze her up.

"Soon as you drive me home," she said, and her teeth nipped his earlobe. "My parents won't be home for hours."

His ear tingled where she'd bit it. She was freakin' serious about this. "What about cheer practice?" he said.
"Not today."

"Cool."

He gestured to the other side of the Camino. She followed him there, and he opened the passenger-side door. She scooted inside, grabbed her knees, and leaned her head back against the seat. She had to be desperate. No other explanation for her interest in him.

"Football team's not doin' it for ya, huh?" he said once he was in the driver's seat.

She crossed her legs. "Let's just say their skills on the field don't always translate to other places."

"Got it."

"Just as long as you get me there. You'll be happy you did."

He chuckled and revved the Camino's engine. Not much made him happy these days, but at least he could have some fun.

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Jackie met Mark on neutral ground: the chess tables in Mt. Humphrey Park. She'd found his phone number on Monday night. Called him on Tuesday and convinced him she wasn't normally a screaming lunatic. He seemed to believe her, offering sympathy for the Dating Game disaster, and he agreed to a date for Friday.

He smiled when she showed up. His hair was still as long as it had been last week, reaching his shoulders, and a breeze fluffed it out appealingly. The cheer squad would recognize him in the pictures—or mistake him for Leif Garret himself—if he allowed any to be taken.

"You're actually here," he said and patted the concrete chess table he'd chosen.

She sat across from him. "Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Gorgeous girls don't usually ask me out unless they want something."

She clutched her purse on her lap. Her camera was inside.

"But what could you possibly want from me?" he said and pulled a velvet pouch from his backpack. "You're smart enough to do your own homework, and we don't even go to the same school."

"Mark..." she said, and he removed chess pieces from the pouch, "I do want something from you."

He'd begun to set up the chess board and didn't stop. "What?"

"You're a really handsome guy, right?"

"If you say so." His concentration remained on the chess board. Maybe he had low self-esteem or didn't care about his looks, but she'd meant what she said. He'd never be without at date at her school.

She rummaged in her purse. "And you're too nice for me to lie to. I'm in trouble, and I need your help."

He finally met her gaze. "What kind of trouble?"

"A deep and painful kind." A gust of wind swept through the park, and she shuddered with the trees.
"Yes, I'm rich and beautiful and popular—"

"You're not making a great case here, Jackie."

"I fell in love with a boy who cheated on me," she said, and her voice strained with the confession. "I fell in love with another who doesn't see me. My best friend is at a different school this year, and I'm stuck with a bunch of shallow bitches who'll cast me out unless I..."

She showed him the camera. "I have to prove to them I have a boyfriend so they'll get off my back. If I don't, they'll kick me off the cheer squad."

"Oh, boy." Mark tapped the top of one his pawns. "Your situation kind of makes me feel lucky I'm mostly ignored."

"Ignored?" She glanced at the table next to them. An old white man was playing a chess match against a younger black man. "But you're more than handsome. You're pretty. You could be on the cover of Tiger Beat!"

Mark rubbed his cheek and laughed. "At my school, I'm considered a nerd. Most of my friends don't go to Ft. Anderson. I met them elsewhere. The girls I've dated, too ... not from my school."

"How long have you known your classmates?" she said. Their chessboard was completely set up, and she moved her e-pawn forward.

He matched her move, pushing his own e-pawn up a space. "Since first grade."

"So they formed their opinions early." She brought her queen's knight to f3. "And they're too small-minded to change those opinions as people change. As you've grown and changed."

"You going for the Spanish opening?" Mark said, placing his king-side knight on c6. She slid her queen's bishop to b5, and he nodded. "So you are—and you're right. My classmates are stuck in 1966."

He threatened her bishop with his a-pawn. It was exactly the move she'd hoped for, giving her the best chance of trapping his queen's knight.

"I understand how that is," she said. "People judge me, too, for how I used to be. Not for who I am now."

"Not all of them do, I think."

She withdrew her queen's bishop to a4, saving it from capture. "You didn't know me before."

"I'm not talking about me," he said and moved his b-pawn forward.

"Be careful, young lady," the black man said from the next table beside hers. "He's setting you up."

His opponent, the older white man, laughed once. "Noah's Ark."

"Jackie," Mark said, "meet Mr. Davis and Mr. Levine ... who are about to destroy my defense."

She greeted Mr. Davis and Mr. Levine. The chess game was no longer important to her, but she listened as Mr. Davis explained the Noah's Ark Trap, where Mark would make her queen-side bishop useless. He and Mr. Levine gave her a few strategy tips, which she followed and thanked them for.
They let her and Mark play on their own afterward. Two-thirds into the match, though, Mark looked at the board and sighed. He seemed unhappy, but he had the obvious advantage.

"What is it?" she said.

"I'm about to destroy my defense."

She studied the board. "Even if you made a bad move, I'm not good enough at chess to beat you."

"I don't mean this game. Jackie..." A blast of cold air whipped Mark's hair into his eyes. The wind rattled the chess pieces and elicited a hoot from Mr. Davis and a curse from Mr. Levine. "Jackie," Mark said again when the wind calmed down, "I barely know you, but after what I've seen today—and after what Hyde told me—I wish you were actually here for me."

Her shoulders grew heavy. He deserved a girl like herself, but her heart already had too many tenants, freeloaders she was trying to evict. "Steven talked to you about me?"

"He had to, to get me to take part in that *Dating Game* thing. He was right about you: you're smart, insightful, and compassionate—"

She grasped the sides of the chess table and leaned over it. "He said those things? Steven Hyde said those things about me?"

"Some directly. Some indirectly, but that was the gist." He gestured for her to sit back. She did, but a few of the chess pieces had been pushed from their rightful squares. He returned them to where they belonged. "As pissed as you are by what he did, I think he respects the hell out of you. I genuinely believe he was trying to do something good."

Blood heated her neck. Steven could've lied to Mark, to convince him she was worthy enough to date. But he'd also chosen Mark as a potential boyfriend for her, an attractive, intelligent, and—so far—kind boy who came from money. If Steven didn't respect her, he wouldn't have picked someone like Mark.

"Maybe he was," she said and fiddled with her purse strap. Her heart was beating hard, and gravity abandoned her brain. Her consciousness floated into the sky, making her dizzy. Being friends with Steven was like playing chess, only she didn't understand his strategy or ultimate goal. No one had written a rule book about him, and he wouldn't explain himself.

"Jackie, are you okay?" Mark said. "You're all flushed."

She cupped her forehead and closed her eyes. "Fine. I'm fine. Just ... I can't date anyone. Not now. I'm—"

"Letting me down easily. I get it."

"No. I mean, I would totally date you. I would, but I can be impulsive..." her hand glided over her heart, "where this is concerned. I can't afford to make another mistake. I have to be more careful," or she'd end up like her parents, in an imploding marriage. "I've been hurt, Mark. A lot, and I don't want to hurt you the same way."

He shrugged a shoulder, as if her explanation were enough. "So if I take those pictures with you, can I get a copy?"

"Why?"
"If I pass you off as my girlfriend at school, maybe it'll help my rep."

"Of course it will, but you won't say anything piggish about me, will you? Like I'm your whore or something."

"That's not me." He dragged a hand through his hair, pushing it from his face. "I'll say we started dating during the summer, and by October or November you and I will have broken up mutually—because the rivalry between our two schools is too much."

A thrill pinwheeled in her chest as her dizziness abated. "That's a great idea!" She bounced in her concrete chair but resisted the urge to clap. "People will think our relationship is like Maria and Tony's from West Side Story."

"Or Romeo and Juliet but without the death."

"So we'll both get something out of this."

He winked at her. "Here's hoping."

"Yeah..." she gestured to his eye, "don't do that in the pictures."

Julie's rug cushioned Hyde's knees, and his hands skimmed her bare stomach. She was lying on her bed, naked and fully informed of his one-week-only policy. If she liked what he did, she'd get seven days of it, tops. Fooling around wouldn't put them in a relationship.

She said she understood, but Led Zeppelin III played on her stereo. She'd evidently watched him their first week of school, noticing what he wore and assuming what music he liked because of it. Her attention to detail was unsettling. It made him feel more like prey than a casual fuck, but no reason a chick wouldn't pursue an orgasm same as a guy. Especially if she hadn't had one in a while.

He brought her legs over his shoulders and pulled her as close to his mouth as possible. She gasped at the first contact of his tongue, giggled as he found his rhythm, and said, "Your beard really does tickle!"

Laughter seeped from him quietly, pushing his stomach against her bed, but his amusement was sour. Had Jackie said those words to him, he would've kissed her inner thigh before continuing. But with Julie, he focused more intensely on getting her off. He hadn't been with a girl in months, saving himself for someone he couldn't have. That needed to end. He had to get back to his life, the one he'd lived before his summer of Jackie.

"Oh, God..." Julie's giggling stopped, and he grasped her hips tightly. She was squirming too much.

He pulled in a breath through his nose. His throat was becoming sore, and his fingers dug into Julie's skin. She yelped in pain, and his grip loosened. He hadn't meant to hurt her, but that seemed to be his latest bad habit: hurting people unintentionally.

"Sorry," he muttered.

He slowed down to give her a break. Her body relaxed, and a soft, sighing moan left her lips. Normally that kind of sound would get him off, but Julie's voice barely revved his blood. Whatever excitement she'd caused in the parking lot had worn off.

Jackie was in his skull. Her legs, her voice, her taste—he craved them. His touch didn't belong to her, but being with someone else felt like cheating.
"Don't stop," Julie said. "Please—"

He'd withdrawn from her thighs without realizing. He returned and gave her more than before, and her legs squeezed his head like a C-clamp. She groaned in that euphoric way girls did when they were close to the edge, but he slowed his movements again.

His jaw was tensing up, and not for the obvious reasons. The possibility remained that Jackie had fallen for him. Their encounter on Monday more than hinted at it. If she were truly over Kelso, then being with Julie was a big fucking mistake.

Nausea rolled through his stomach. Making someone come who wasn't Jackie … he couldn't do it, and he removed himself from Julie and her bed.

"What are you doing?" she said. "I'm done done yet."

His face smelled like her. Another disadvantage of having a beard, and he yanked a bunch of tissues from the box on her nightstand. "Sorry," he said and wiped his mouth and beard dry. "This just ain't gonna work."

She propped herself on her elbows, giving him a nice view of her breasts. They were a good-looking pair, but he had no desire to touch them again."You can't be serious."

"Wish I weren't."

"Did someone tell you I don't reciprocate? Because that's a lie."

He dumped the tissues into her waste basket. Leaving her in this state was an asshole move. Her skin was flushed and sweaty, and her eyes begged him to finish. But he couldn't do that for her or for any chick, not until he knew how Jackie felt about him.

Julie got off the bed. She marched up to him naked, and her gaze revealed such contempt that his dick shriveled a little. "Don't think you're getting away with this!" she said. "When I'm through, you'll have to go out of state to get a girl to touch you!"

"Do what you gotta do." He turned his back on her and opened her bedroom door, but she tugged on his belt loop.

"Please," she said quietly. "I'll blow you first. Even though you're being a huge jerk right now, you're worth the wait. And I have waited. You have no idea how long..." She tugged on his belt loop again. "Just—I really want you to stay."

He heaved a breath. His lungs and heart felt crowded, like someone had poured mud into his chest cavity. Julie's attitude had done a one-eighty. She was sacrificing her pride for a damn orgasm, but he wanted another girl. If he didn't leave now, he wouldn't deserve her.

"Gotta go," he said.

"I'm gonna tell everyone what you did!" Julie shouted as he went into the hallway. "Or what you didn't do!"

That was fine by him. By telling Jackie and the cheer squad he hadn't finished, she'd undo some of the damage he'd caused by starting.
Chapter Notes

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**CHAPTER ELEVEN**

**PUSHING BACK**

Jackie parked her car in front of the Fotohut's drive-through window. She could've gone to a different place to get her film developed, but this one was the closest. Her date with Mark had left her exhausted, for several reasons, and she wanted to get this part over with.

No one met her at the window. The sun had set. The dirty old hippie was probably sleeping, and she honked her car horn. Nothing. Two more honks, though, brought Leo's dazed, smiling face to the window.

"Hyde's not here, man," he said after pushing the sliding glass aside. "Come by tomorrow."

She knew perfectly well that Steven didn't work the Friday-night shift. Otherwise, she would've driven farther, to the Fotohut in Kenosha.

"I'm not here for him." She reached through her open car window and passed Leo her roll of film. "How much to develop this?"

He told her, and she gave him the money. "It's too bad he's not here," he said, pulling out a form to fill in her information. "He's all mopey, man. Been a real drag, but seeing you would cheer him right up."

"I doubt that—and don't put down my name."

His pen paused on the customer information form. "I don't even know your name."

She scoffed. Of course he didn't. "Put down Jolie Fille."

"Okay." He began to write but stopped after the J. "How do you spell that?"

"Never mind. Just put John Brown."

He did as she said, and she pressed on the gas. Her car tore down the street, away from the Fotohut, but her heart seemed to fly out the window. Her pulse was beating so fast she couldn't feel it. Mark had exceeded her expectations in their pictures today, probably not just for her. The intimacy they'd acted out would definitely help his reputation at Ft. Anderson. It would also convince the cheer squad that she and Mark were a couple.

Mr. Davis, Mark's chess buddy, was kind enough to snap the photos. Some of the staged shots had him clearing his throat uncomfortably. If Steven got his hands on those pictures … but he wouldn't. They were listed under an alias, and she'd be sure to pick them up when he wasn't at work.
A new stack of photo packets arrived from the Fotohut's photo-processing lab. Hyde had hoped for a lazy Saturday afternoon. Some TV-watching on the thirteen-incher, a nap against the drive-through counter, but he had over two-dozen packets to get through.

He sat at the Fotohut's sorting counter, where he'd left his shades. The name Cindy Hickson was scrawled on the first packet, with the letter C next to it in parentheses. He and Leo still filed photo packets according to customer breast size, from big to small. That meant Hyde had to spread the packets on the counter and arrange them like a jigsaw puzzle. The easiest part of this process was putting the male customers' packets aside.

His eyes scanned the names, but the smell under his nose distracted him. Julie. Even after a shower, a night's sleep, another shower, and several face washings, her scent remained embedded in his beard. Or in his memory. Either way, if the smell didn't dissipate soon, he'd have to shave.

Scott Flannery, Raymond Abramo, Larry Collins,—Hyde put their packets in the male customer pile. He'd alphabetize them once the pile was complete. Willie Herbert, Marvin Goldman, John Brown, but he looked at that last one closer. Something had been written beneath John's name in small letters: Loud Girl (TY).

Hyde pushed his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and he slipped his thumb beneath the packet's top flap. Loud Girl … that was Leo's name for Jackie. John Brown. J.B. Jackie's initials. (TY) stood for Too Young to put down a breast size without feeling like a pervert.

Had to be her.

He pulled out the photos. They were of Jackie and Mark playing chess in Mt. Humphrey Park. One showed them pecking each other's lips over a concrete chess table. Another had Mark carrying her piggy-back style. In another, they were laughing in the grass of Pleasant Lawn.

The first dozen shots were similar: hand-holding, a kiss on the cheek, a dandelion behind Jackie's ear. But as Hyde got to the second dozen, blood burned in his chest like acid. Mark lay over Jackie's body in the grass, their legs intertwined. One of her hands had tunneled into his hair, and the other gripped the material of his shirt.

But the focus of the photos shifted to their faces. Their lips only brushed against each other at first. Then their mouths opened, wider and wider, until their tongues were visibly in contact. Melding together. Consuming the other.

It was a make-out session, and Hyde's stomach cramped. His lungs had trouble pushing out air, and he shoved the photos back into their packet. She'd gotten doubles of them. Freakin' doubles.

He raked his fingers through his hair, and sweat smeared his palm. She couldn't have become serious about this guy so fast. They'd met a week ago. Or maybe she was trying to goad Hyde into some kind of response. She'd done it before with that asshole Chip.

The pictures had to be a scam. She didn't have to bring her film to this Fotohut. Hyde's Fotohut, but she'd also used an alias.

The fact was he didn't have the facts.

His shift wouldn't end for a few more hours, and she knew it. She'd stay away until he was gone, but he dropped her packet into the pocket of his denim jacket. These were pictures he planned to deliver personally.
Jackie's first Saturday cheer practice was not going well. She done her toe-touches expertly, jumping high enough to impress Valerie. She'd successfully balanced at the top of the cheer pyramid beside Julie and Leslie, but before Jackie could perform her stunts, Julie lost her balance. All three flyers tumbled, but the back spotters caught them. No twisted ankles or bleeding skulls were on the field—yet.

That fall had been Julie's third major mistake today. The Vikings' rowdy practice might have set her off. The football team had a game against Ft. Anderson next Friday, and preparing for a battle against the Snapping Turtles tended to stoke the team's aggression.

"We're taking a five-minute break," Valerie said, and most of the cheer squad scattered to the bleachers.

Jackie started to follow, but Valerie kept Julie on the sidelines of the field. If an interrogation was going to happen, Jackie couldn't miss it. Gossip was power in her social circle, and she needed as much of it as she could get after last week.

She stayed within listening distance and began a stretching routine. It was the perfect cover, and Valerie didn't shoo her off the field.

In fact, Valerie didn't seem to notice Jackie at all. Her attention was entirely on Julie. "Your rhythm's completely off," she said. "Is it Homecoming that's got your panties twisted? Because you'll have your chance to be queen next year when I'm gone."

Julie glanced back at the Vikings. "No."

"The trip to Quartz Falls, then. Just have your parents buy you one of those pre-assembled tents. They can afford it."

"No! It has nothing to do with that." Julie's eyes flicked to Jackie, and Jackie cursed. She'd been spotted. "Jackie!" Julie charged toward her, grabbed her by the arm, and dragged her to Valerie. "She was right," she said and nodded at Jackie. "Steven Hyde is a low-class, good-for-nothing dickhead."

Jackie crossed her arms over her chest and took a wider stance on the field. "What are you talking about? What did he do?"

"It's what he didn't do." Julie kicked the grass. "Fucking jerk. I should've listened to you."

"Well?" Valerie said. "Our squad's only as strong as it's weakest member, and right now that's you. So out with it."

Julie pulled Jackie and Valerie into a private huddle. "All I can say," she whispered, "is that he's a good tit-sucker, an amazing clit-sucker, and a total cocksucker."

"And?" Valerie whispered.

"I can't. It's mortifying."

Valerie huffed out a breath, but Jackie had trouble breathing at all. Steven and Julie … they'd been together. But he hadn't met Julie's expectations, whatever they were. Did she want something more than physical from him, like a promise of love and fidelity? Or maybe she'd hoped he'd agree to her every sexual whim, go down on her whenever she asked, the self-entitled bitch.

"Jackie, don't you give me trouble, too." Valerie snapped her fingers in front of Jackie's face, and Jackie flinched. "I haven't even gone out with your ex yet."
"What?" Jackie said. The huddle had broken, and the rest of the cheer squad was returning from the bleachers.

Valerie's brow furrowed. "Weren't you listening? I said if Michael Kelso disappoints me tonight, I won't bring it to the field tomorrow. And Julie needs to do the same thing now."

"If you'd been in my position last night, you'd understand," Julie said, "but whatever. I'll get over it."

"Get over what?" Jackie itched to say, but she stayed quiet. Steven's was free to date—or suck—whoever he liked. But for the rest of cheer practice she imagined punching his stupid face.

Hyde rang the doorbell of the Burkhart Mansion. He had no guarantee Jackie would be home on a Saturday night, especially after what he'd seen in her pictures. But with Kelso out with the cheer squad captain and Donna out with Forman, it was a decent bet.

Martina, the Burkharts' housekeeper, opened the front door swiftly. "Yes?"

"Is Jackie around?" he said. "Name's Hyde."

"One moment. I have to see if she's taking visitors."

She closed the door, and he peered back at the gravel driveway. Stone pedestals lined it at even intervals, giving off an eerie, ghostly glow. In all the time he'd spent with Jackie over the summer, he'd only dropped her off here. He'd never gone inside the house. She hadn't invited him to.

He used to think she was afraid of exposing her parents to him. Being friends with Edna and Bud Hyde's burnout son wouldn't get her another credit card. But after she confided some of her parents' secrets, he got the truth, that she'd been protecting him from them.

So many damn assumptions on his end. Guessing games that led him to dangerous territory rather than from it.

He rubbed the nape of his neck and made sure his shades were on his face. The Burkharts' property was strangely quiet. No cricket chirps. No buzzing moths. The place seemed gutted of life. If Jackie had found some joy with someone, he wouldn't take it from her. He just needed to find out what was going on.

The front door opened again after several minutes. "Mr. Hyde," Martina said. "Miss Burkhart will see you."

He followed her into the house, and the strum of an acoustic guitar haunted the foyer. It was some morose song he vaguely recognized, but the volume lowered once Martina led him to the parlor. Candles lit the room, not lamps. Their flames flickered in glass candle holders, casting shades of red, pink, and purple onto the walls. They lit Jackie's face the same way, but the rest of her resembled shadow.

"Martina," she said, "please don't disturb us."

"Yes, Miss Burkhart."

Martina disappeared into the hallway, and he removed his shades. The parlor was too dimly lit for sunglasses. Without them on, the furniture and Jackie's body gained substance. She was standing by the piano and wore a long-sleeved black shirt. Its hem reached just above her knees, and black sweatpants covered her legs.
He gestured to the candles spread throughout the parlor. "Your parents approve of you performing ritual sacrifice?"

"They're not home to approve or disapprove."

He glanced at the Burkharts' hi-fi. A few candles lit the transparent phonograph cover, and he identified the song playing: "Diary" by Bread. It was on the album Baby I'm-a Want You. He shouldn't have known it, but the record was part of Forman's collection. The music and lyrics fit the melancholy of the room, of Jackie's oversized clothes. Whatever bleak spirit she was trying to conjure, she'd succeeded.

"Where are they?" he said quietly.

Her hand rested on top of the piano. Her fingernail tapped against a glass candleholder, and the flame revealed a streak of ink on her skin. "Why did you come here?"

Her packet of photos weighed down his jacket pocket. It had for hours, and he placed it on the piano. "So … you and Mark."

She snatched the packet and opened it. "That dirty old hippie told me my film had gotten lost!" She flipped through the photos but stopped after a few. "You had no right to look at these."

Her body dissolved into shadow again, and a floor lamp clicked on. The room became significantly brighter and stung his eyes, but he didn't put on his shades.

"How did you even know they were mine?" she said.

"Check the front of the packet."

She did, and her mouth grew slack. "Your boss is an idiot. I told him to put down an alias purposely."

"No, he's a stoner. Wouldn't be doin' his job if he didn't give himself a way of identifying you."

"Whatever." She resumed studying the photos. "I can't believe you saw these. Isn't that against Fotohut policy? I could report you."

"To my stoner boss."

"Damn."

She turned her back on him, and he spotted a hole in her shirt sleeve. It was near her elbow. Wearing drab, oversized clothes wasn't her style. Candles were, but the ones in the parlor gave off no romantic vibes. Maybe his joke about ritual sacrifice had some accuracy, after all.

A clear jar was on the coffee table, but blood didn't fill it. Folded-up pieces of paper were crammed inside. A pen and notebook lay on the couch, and the truth began to solidify. She was hurting. A lot. And she was trying to find her way out of it.

A ache scraped his throat. He couldn't swallow it down, and his skin grew cold beneath his clothes. Wherever he found a blank space about her, he scrawled in his own info. Most of it was completely wrong, but he kept on doing it. Had done it since they first met.

A hiss issued from Jackie's general direction, but it came from the hi-fi speakers. Side A of Baby I'm-a Want You had ended. She hurried to the hi-fi, shut it off, and tossed the photo packet onto the
phonograph cover. "So, you and Julie."

He scratched his fingers through his beard. "Figured she'd tell you."

"She didn't. Not the whole thing. Do you respect me enough to tell me the truth?"

The ache in his throat became sharper and snagged his voice. "I kicked her out of the car two-thirds to her destination."

Her eyes narrowed like she didn't understand. Like she needed more.

"Went down on her and quit before she could come." He cupped his mouth and dug his fingers into his cheek. What he'd done to Julie wasn't his proudest moment. Confessing it to Jackie twisted his guts, but watching her stagger to the couch spilled adrenaline into his blood. He surged toward her, but she dropped onto the cushions and put up a hand. The gesture had enough power to nail his feet to the floor.

"It's cruel," she said. "Teasing her like that, giving her only so much then leaving."

His arms fell to his sides, dead weight. "You're right," he said, and his fingers twitched at the hoarseness of his voice. "It was a nasty—bad-nasty. Didn't intend to leave her like that, but..."

"But what? Why did you?"

His gaze lowered to the coffee table and locked onto a candle. Its orange flame shifted directions randomly. "People change their minds, man. Even in the middle of giving head. Or screwing. Or kissing. People freakin' change their minds."

Her fingernail rubbed against the pages of her notebook. "Did she taste disgusting or something?"

A smile fought gravity and lifted his lips. Jackie had never been shy talking about sex. "Nope. Two-thirds in, she just wasn't doing it for me."

"I see."

"Yeah ... you probably don't." Some life returned to his arms, and he hooked his thumbs into his jeans pockets. "Probably don't want to, either."

"Because you think I'm fragile."

He forced up his gaze and looked at her face. She'd used that word on Monday, fragile. But telling her it was the wrong word wouldn't prove shit to her. He had to show her what he thought, by trusting her with what he hadn't shared with anyone. .

"I get off when I'm getting a chick off," he said. His voice was still strained, but he kept talking. "The way she sounds, how she moves, it's totally hot. But Julie ... I didn't feel anything."

Jackie pushed her knuckle to her lips. "You couldn't just finish?"

"Could you? Givin' Kelso a blowjob—"

"I never did that!"

"Okay, then him going down on you, and you losing the mood halfway through."

She stiffened on the couch. "He never did that."
"Shit." He went to an armchair, and she didn't object when he sat down, probably because the coffee table stood between him them. "Sex," he said. "You ever want to quit in the middle of it?"

She grasped her pen, clicked it, and the inky tip came out. "Why do you think I'm weak?"

"Where are you getting this crap from?"

"The Dating Game. Everything you've ever done for me."

"Not weak, man. Vulnerable." He dragged in a breath through his nose, and the smell of wax shot into his nostrils. He coughed again but spoke through it. "Did you wanna go to jail?"

"No—"

"How's about being nailed by some asshole who called you a bitch? You want that, either?"

She pressed her fingers to her cheeks and pulled down the skin. Her lower eyelids stretched, transforming her face into a ghoulish version of itself.

"I see you, all right?" He laced his fingers over his stomach. "Not all of you ... but maybe enough. You're the one who doesn't. That's why you make the choices you make."

"I understand myself perfectly," she said and let go of her face. Her skin was red where she'd pushed into it. "And my choices."

"Like settling for Kelso 'cause you're afraid of being alone? Chasing after me for the same damn reason?"

Her mouth clenched shut. She grabbed her notebook, wrote in it, and passed it to him. "YOU PITY ME!" stained the page in giant, smeared letters.

"That's why you went out with me on Veterans Day," she said. "Why you spent the summer with me. Why you're here now."

"Pity?" He laughed, hard enough that his stomach bounced against her notebook, and the ache in his throat weakened. "That ain't any part of the equation."

"The equation that I'm incapable of making my own choices? That I'm so stupid I need you to set me up with a boy who's better than you and Michael?"

He got out of the armchair and chucked her notebook onto it. "I didn't force you to go out with him. And by the looks of those pictures, your date went just fine. But from what you did to this place," he pointed at her, "and what you've put on yourself..."

He curled his fingers into into a fist. Talking was useless. She'd already made up her mind about him.

"Finish your sentence," she said.

"Why the hell should I? You're gonna call it pity mo matter what I say or do, so what's the point?"

"Because!" She jumped off the couch and maneuvered around the coffee table. "Because, Steven!" She grabbed hold of his jacket pocket. She was tugging on it, and her eyes grew wet, same as her voice "If you actually care about me, then you'll deal with my confusion. You'll stay, even if it hurts, until we figure this out."

"Figure what out?"
Her grip moved to the front of his jacket. She pulled him closer and pressed the top of her head against his chest. "I only went out with Mark to get those pictures," she said. "The cheer squad … Valerie threatened to kick me out unless I proved I had a boyfriend."

His shoulders tensed, and pain spread into his neck. "Holy hell..."

"Mark has popularity problems, too, so we made a business arrangement. I get one set of the photos, and he gets the other."

"So you Frenched him because—"

She pushed her head harder against his chest. "They demanded I show tongue, Steven. Tongue, and I caved. Just like you said I would."

"Jackie..." His hand drifted to her hair. His fingers began to stroke it, but he stopped and splayed his hand on her back. "That's..."

"Pathetic, I know. I'm pathetic!" Her arms glided around his waist but didn't quite hug him. "And that's how your Dating Game made me feel. If that's what you really think of me—"

"I don't."

Her head rose from his chest, and she rested her cheek against him properly. "You don't understand how important your opinion is to me," she said, holding him closer, "how much I respect it. And now you have something to use against me."

"Wouldn't do that." But he understood her fear, all too well. He slid his cheek alongside her temple and breathed in the apricot scent of her hair. "I might be a dick, but I'm a dick in a way that's entirely my own."

She laughed, and her knuckles pressed into his back, as if she were clinging to him. His instinct was hug her tighter, but his arms held onto her loosely. He had no right to that kind of comfort, not from her.

Kelso still laid claim to her, even though Kelso himself was chasing tail non-stop. The guy was a the definition of hypocrite, but Hyde had been acting just as entitled.

Like he'd told Jackie tonight, people changed their minds. And over a year ago she'd changed hers about wanting him. That didn't make her selfish. It didn't make her delusional, either. She was human, just like him. Resenting her for that, for leaving him with feelings she didn't reciprocate … "I fucked up," he said. "But if you wanna try this friends thing again, I'm good for it."

"Friends." She sniffled and withdrew from him. She blotted her eyes with her wrist, but fresh tears rose in them. "I'm sorry. I just..." Her hand landed on his chest, as if to push him back. "Us being friends doesn't work for me anymore."
Wishing for Impossible

CHAPTER TWELVE
WISHING FOR IMPOSSIBLE

Jackie had blown out the last candle in the parlor. She'd brought her jar of folded-up resentments to her bedroom. And she'd sent Steven away, not just from her house but her life.

He didn't argue. Didn't betray any pain. Didn't proclaim love because he had none to proclaim.

"Idiot," she whispered and slid her finger down the jar. The darkness of her room, of night, hid the jar's contents, but their words were inscribed on her ribs. They composed a list of grievances that kept her heart trapped.

She'd planned to burn them, the pieces of paper they were written on. But complaints about her parents' absences had transformed into longing for Steven. These became regrets about Michael, and her mind iced-over when his name oozed from her pen. She was supposed to be over him, but falling out of love was an on-going process.

"Goddamn moron," she said, but the insult thickened her throat. Calling herself names wasn't cleansing, and putting her feelings on paper hadn't produced any solutions. It only tangled her problems into an indecipherable snarl of despair.

The jar would remain on her dresser as a monument and a reminder. She had to remember her weakness. No fire could consume the truth, that expecting a return on her investment from the people she loved was futile.

A thud outside her room made her shoulders jump. Her mom's laughter followed, and a male voice responded in a lilting tone. Another one-night stand. Another secret Jackie and Martina had to keep.

She sank to the carpet and lay on her back. Her hands swept over the carpet's thick pile as her eyes gazed into nothing. Her mom sounded drunk. That had to be why Dad stayed away so often. Or, maybe, Mom drank herself stupid because of Dad's longer, more frequent business trips.

Whatever the answer was, it wouldn't change anything. Jackie had no influence over anyone who mattered to her. No influence at all.

Hyde sat hunched on his cot, twirling the pendant he'd won at Funland. He wasn't built for making wishes. The shooting star spinning above his knee couldn't grant any either, but he found himself wishing anyway.

Light glinted off the silver pendant. It was as bright as the joy on Jackie's face when he'd given the pendant to her. He shut one eye and rubbed the heel of his hand against the other. She was chasing
that joy, same as him, but he'd found it in her. Of all the damn places, he'd found it in her. The truth pounded through him like hangover, all nausea and headaches.

His shades were on his dresser. He considered cementing them to his skull, but a slam rattled his door. Someone had entered the basement, and he stashed the pendant in his sock drawer. Monday afternoons weren't meant for sulking. He'd done plenty of that on Sunday. Mondays were meant for homework, and he carried his backpack out of his room.

Fez was by the lawn chair, setting up one of the Formans' TV tray tables. He must've gotten it from behind the shower curtain, and he put a textbook on it. At least Hyde wouldn't be doing homework alone.

"Hey, man—"


Hyde chuckled and went to Forman's stereo. He scanned the record shelves below it, searching for an album that wouldn't wreck Fez's concentration. But between Wings' Band on the Run and Venus and Mars, he found Led Zeppelin III. It was in the wrong place. It fucked up his thoughts, but he didn't touch it. Enough reminders of Julie pulsed in his memory: her smell, her taste, the pleading look in her eyes. Listening to that record would only send him back to her house.

So far, she hadn't pulled the trigger on her threat, telling people what he'd done to her. Girls still treated him like a cuddly dog, fondling his beard without asking. They'd stop once they heard about his lack of follow-through—if Julie ever reported her dissatisfaction. But maybe she was holding back out of some desperate hope he'd rectify it.

He might but not today. He put Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon on the stereo, dragged his chair close to the spool table, and started on his physics homework.

"Hyde," Fez said twenty minutes later, "do you think I have a chance to be homecoming king?"

"Always a chance, man." Hyde returned to the stereo and flipped over the record. "Always a chance for anything."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Nope."

Fez's shoulders slumped. "Ai."

Hyde settled back into his chair as Pink Floyd's "Money" moved beyond its cashier sound effects. The song used to conjure Jackie in his mind, but after their summer of Donahue and confessions, it made him think of her dad. It even had his name in it, Jack.

He shut his physics textbook. That crap was done, his physics homework and thinking about Jackie. Whatever was going on at her house, whether or not her parents had come home, wasn't his business. He had thirty pages of Shakespeare's King Lear to read.

Getting his head into the language took his full concentration, with its thees and thous. Just as he began to do it, though, Forman shoved open the basement door, sweaty and out of breath. He clutched the door knob, and Donna pushed past him. Her Catholic school uniform was rumpled, but after-school nookie couldn't be the culprit.

"Twenty miles," Forman said and trudged from the door. "Twenty miles to and from Our Lady of
Perpetual Sorrow."

Donna dashed to the laundry area. She grabbed a plastic cup from the sink, filled it with water, and brought it to him. "Eric, drink this."

"Thanks." He accepted the cup and drank it down.

"Take this, too." She grabbed a towel from the laundry basket and draped it over his sweaty neck. "Some deodorant would be useful—"

"Okay, Donna, I smell. Do you know why? Because I biked twenty miles! I need my car back."

She patted his arm. "You really do." She sat on the couch with her backpack on her lap. "But you picking me up from school everyday makes you sexier."

"And smellier. Don't forget about that," Fez said. "Maybe they should call your school Our Lady of Perpetual Stink." He laughed at his own joke, but it was a good burn. And accurate.

Hyde waved his hand over his nose as Forman walked by. "Yeah, man. Go change your shirt."

"Fine." Forman dropped his backpack on the floor and vanished up the wooden stairs. He reappeared after a few minutes in a fresh shirt. "Happy now?"

Donna rubbed the couch cushion beside her, an invitation. "Very."

He sat down, and she pecked him on the mouth. A sickening sight, but Hyde's lips buzzed at the fantasy it created in his skull—of Jackie kissing him the same way after school, of sitting with her and doing homework, or not doing homework, and generally being happy.

Happiness … fresh nausea frothed in his stomach at the idea. Fantasies like that were just that, fantasies, and he raked his fingers through his hair. It had grown too long even for him. His curls were packing together in thick clumps. Combing them out would take close to an hour, time he didn't feel like wasting. A haircut would solve the problem, but he'd have to care enough to get that done.

He pushed his chair back from the spool table. Reading would distract him. Taking Shakespeare as his English elective had been a smart move. Nothing boring about these plays, even with their dense language. He propped his feet on the mushroom footstool and found his place in King Lear, but the basement door swung open. Kelso raced inside, shouting, "Have you seen this?"

Hyde didn't look up from King Lear. "If you've gotten VD again, I'm not checkin' it out."

"Neither am I," Forman said. "Would you start using condoms already? One of these days, you're gonna catch something that'll kill you."

"Or you'll get some poor idiot pregnant," Donna said.

"This is way worse than VD!" Kelso's footsteps thumped across the floor, and King Lear flew from Hyde's fingers. Photos of Jackie and Mark took the play's place. They were dented in parts, as if they'd been handled roughly. "Have you seen them, Hyde? Have you?"

Hyde shoved the photos back at Kelso. He'd studied them plenty on Saturday. "What're you complaining about? Aren't you goin' out with Valerie 'Pom-Poms' Clayton?"

"Yeah, who wouldn't let me past first base on our first date. She's gonna make me 'earn' sex. Just like that chick Annette in California." Kelso flipped through the photos, adding more dents to them. "I
don't have time for that. Jackie and I got to third base on our first date."

"That is such a lie!" Donna said.

Hyde suppressed a smirk. She didn't know the half of it. Kelso had never gone down on Jackie. Maybe that explained why he nailed so many different girls: he sucked at sex. The smarter chicks, the more experienced ones, and those with good self esteem probably refused to screw him again. But those who didn't know any better, the ones with little or no experience—or bad experiences—they invited him back for more, just like Jackie had.

Freakin' Jackie. She had no clue what sex could be like, what it could feel like, with a guy invested in her enjoyment of it.

His fingers tingled with pressure. He stood up and rammed his fist into Kelso's upper arm, unleashing the force of all he couldn't say, all he couldn't do, into Kelso's muscle and bone.

Kelso staggered backward, and his face contorted with pain. The photos of Jackie and Mark spilled onto the floor, but Hyde picked them up. "How the hell did you get these anyway?"

"Valerie," Kelso said. He tried to swipe the photos, but Hyde slipped them inside his physics textbook. Kelso made a grab for the book, and Hyde punched his shoulder again. "Ow! Quit frogging me, Hyde. It really hurts!"

Fez held up a photo. It wasn't one from Kelso's group of dented ones, but it showed Jackie and Mark Frenching in the grass. "Mark's pretty," Fez said. "I hope Jackie invites me on their next date."

"Why would she do that?" Donna said.

Forman leapt off the couch and flailed his arms in stop! motion. "Okay, enough! This basement has been Jackie-free for seven days, ever since she and Hyde broke off their unholy alliance. Talking about her is almost as bad as her being here."

"Eric!" Donna tugged on the hem of his shirt, and he looked at her. "You're acting like an ass. I was gone all summer, and now that I've changed schools, I barely see her."

"She stopped by your house a few times last week."

"It's not the same as her hanging out with us. I miss her."

"Well, Donna, you wouldn't have to miss her," Kelso said, but he was glaring at Hyde, "if someone hadn't interfered with me and her."

Hyde clutched his belt buckle and tilted his head. Kelso took the warning and backed off, but he didn't quit talking. "That should be my tongue in her mouth in those pictures, but no. You had to get in the way."

"If by 'getting in the way,'" Hyde said, "you mean I hung out with her after you bolted to California and cheated on her—"

"I had to! Otherwise I'd be engaged to her and planning wedding stuff. God!"

Hyde blew out a breath and sat in his chair. This conversation was a dead end, just like his relationship with Jackie. It was his own damn fault, expecting her to take all the risk and accepting none himself.
"If you actually care about me," she'd said on Saturday night, "then you'll deal with my confusion. You'll stay, even if it hurts, until we figure this out."

She never defined the this, even after he'd asked, but she'd also said, "Us being friends doesn't work for me anymore." Us.

"Hyde, are you all right?" The question came from Donna, and he blinked. He was stooped in his chair, elbows on his knees, hands clasped together.

"Yeah. Fine." He remained hunched and scratched the side of his face. His beard irritated his fingertips, but Jackie's words scraped his guts. If she'd meant he had to stick around until they figured out their relationship, then he'd wait—despite that she'd rejected his friendship, despite that his patience might lead to nothing—because care didn't begin to describe how he felt about her.

She'd engulfed him like some kind of electromagnetic field. Her mere presence charged him up. Her voice accelerated his synapses, and her touch increased the energy of every electron he had. If he ever got to kiss her again, light would probably arc across his body like the freakin' aurora borealis.

So he'd wait. Fooling around with other chicks only created guilt anyway. Dust covered the nudie magazines under his cot. Jackie had planted her flag in his brain, in his chest, and it was flapping in the wind. But he wouldn't yank it out. That was up to her.

"Kelso," he said and pushed himself up from his chair, "you're staying outta Jackie's way."

Kelso retreated to the couch, squashing himself beside Donna, and his brow wrinkled. "What's that even mean?"

"No!" Forman pointed his pencil at Hyde. "I will not have my history homework disrupted by that she-demon. I will not have my life disrupted by her."

"Dramatic much, Forman?" Hyde retrieved his copy of King Lear. Kelso had flung it onto the deep-freeze. "Alls I'm saying is if anyone messes with Jackie, they're messin' with me."

Donna put a hand over her heart while Forman leaned back his head and groaned. But Fez erased something in one of his notebooks. He was obviously too involved in his homework for the conversation to register.

Kelso, though, sprang to his feet and said, "You don't get to make the rules! She was my girlfriend, not yours. We were in love, and you have no idea what that's like. 'Cause you've never been in love."

Forman's face hardened, and he gestured at Kelso. "He has a point, Hyde. You've never had someone you'd fly to California for, even if it'd get your car confiscated by your parents."

"Or someone you'd run away to California from," Kelso said, "because you love her so much she could force you to marry her."

Hyde struck King Lear against his hip. "What're you gonna do when she marries someone else, man? Pull a Benjamin Braddock and try to stop the wedding?"

"Don't be stupid. I'm way better looking than Dustin Hoffman, and Jackie's younger than me."

"Whatever. You've been warned."

Hyde eased into his chair as Fez hummed Simon & Garfunkel's "Mrs. Robinson". Kelso muttered
something else about *The Graduate*, but Hyde had thirty pages to read in *King Lear* and a hefty amount of uncertainty to tolerate. But that was the most consistent theme of his life: uncertainty. Falling in love with Jackie fit right in.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CROWNING A KING

All of Point Place High had packed into Viking Stadium. Jackie dashed to the sidelines with the rest of the cheer squad, and her heart thundered with the crowd as she and her teammates began their opening routine. Their voices chanted in unison. Their pikes and toe-touches were high and in sync, and they performed their flying stunts with precision, smiling the whole time. The homecoming pep rally was a time to show off, and Jackie gave all she had. Just because her own spirit was bleeding didn't mean she'd wound the school's.

Coach Ferguson took his place at the center of the field, behind a microphone stand. He grabbed the mic, which was wired to the stadium's PA system, and announced each member of the football team by name. Charlie Peterson, Ron Turner, Jake Bradley—they all jogged out to the crowd's adoring cheers. Jackie did her part, waving her green-and-white pom-poms, but her gaze swept over the bleachers.

She used to search for her friends during rallies and games, but Donna went to a different school now. Fez treated her nicely only when he wanted something. Eric hissed at her in the school halls and made devil horns above his head. And Steven said no more than, "What's up?" before walking away. Granted, he'd done it each day this week, and she never responded. But saying the truth would put him in a position intolerable to both of them.

"Hello, Point Place High!" Principal Pridewell said into the microphone. Coach Ferguson had relinquished it and stood back with the football team. "I've got two envelopes here with the names of this year's homecoming queen and king."

The crowd roared white noise, and the shrieks of the cheer squad stung Jackie's eardrums.

"Being crowned homecoming royalty isn't just a privilege. It's a responsibility," Principal Pridewell said, and his speech rambled on so long the football team started to chant, "En-vel-opes! En-vel-opes!"

Valerie gestured for the cheer squad to join in. It did, including Jackie, and the rest of the stadium caught on. The chant of, "En-vel-opes! En-vel-opes!" grew so loud it must have created a shockwave. Principal Pridewell stumbled back from the microphone stand, but he raised the envelopes in the air.

The crowd shouted and whistled its approval, and he opened the first envelope. "This year's homecoming queen is..." he said into the microphone, "Valerie Clayton!"

Valerie screamed, dropped her pom-poms, and cartwheeled to Principal Pridewell. No surprise in that outcome. Her campaign for homecoming queen had begun the day after last year's homecoming.
"And this year's homecoming king is..." Principal Pridewell tore open the second envelope, "Michael Kelso?"

Viking Stadium vibrated with cheers and laughter, but Jackie's fingers lost all feeling. Her pom-poms fell to the field, and the football team huddled around Jake Bradley like he needed protection.

Michael barreled down the bleachers with his arms raised in victory. His shirt rose off his stomach, exposing his belly button, and he joined Valerie at the center of the field. Jackie looked at the cheer squad, but neither Julie, nor Leslie, nor any of the other cheerleaders acted confused or shocked.

Michael as homecoming king made no sense. He didn't have the required popularity, athleticism, or GPA, and beauty alone wasn't enough to earn him that title. Valerie must have rigged the election. She'd been dating him since Saturday, and every day at lunch she bragged about him. Jackie had endured a whole school week of gut-twisting boasts with a smile.

Arm-in-arm, Valerie and Michael did the Homecoming Strut around the stadium. Principal Pridewell went into the second half of his speech, and Jackie snatched her pom-poms from the ground.

"I have Michael on a leash so tight," Valerie had said during yesterday's lunch period, "he won't even breathe in another girl's direction."

If she truly believed that, she was a fool, but Jackie hadn't said so aloud. Instead, she talked about Mark: "His parents pressured him not to show at our homecoming. They're loyal Snapping Turtles, and he couldn't break their hearts."

Leslie had patted Jackie's hand in sympathy. Valerie acted sympathetic, too, influencing the cheer squad's lunch conversation. It turned to famous star-crossed lovers, and Jackie's reputation was safe for another week. More importantly, a fuse had been lit. The resulting spark would cause the inevitable explosion of her "relationship" with Mark, and she'd be free of the lie.

On the football field sidelines, Julie led the cheer squad in a celebratory routine. Valerie and Michael were closer to them now, and Jackie performed the motions with as much enthusiasm as she could fake.

"Hey, Jackie," Michael said on his way past her. "You break up with Mark yet—"

"Michael!" Valerie yanked him forward, and it was a good thing she did. If she hadn't, Jackie would've smashed her right pom-pom into his jaw. His question was beyond insulting. Either he'd asked from a sense of ownership over her, or he despised her so much that he wanted her to be alone. Steven's signals might've been jumbled, but Michael's were a sewer full of crap.

"What was that about?" Leslie said next to her. "I didn't hear."

Jackie thrust her arms into a high V. "Michael's just excited to be the king of something other than the idiots for once."

Leslie nodded as if Jackie's explanation were solid, and everyone on the cheer squad moved their arms into a broken T. They transitioned into a right bow-and-arrow, a broken T again, and to a left bow-and-arrow. The routine was easy, and the afternoon air was crisp. It should've kept Jackie cool, but sweat erupted on her skin.

Michael's fixation on her wasn't weakening. He'd cheated on her when they were together, chased her when they weren't, and she had no power to make him let her go.
Chatter and sloppy joe sauce engulfed the Formans' kitchen table. Hyde tried to eat his Manwich carefully, but ground beef dribbled from the bun. He usually ate lunch at Fatso Burger on Saturdays, thanks to his shift at the Fotohut, but Leo had switched him to the late shift today. Leo couldn't work it himself because of the Grateful Dead concert in Madison tonight.

The change in routine was welcome, though. The Formans' back-and-forth with Donna kept Hyde from focusing on much else.

"Quartz Falls sounds like it'll be really fun," Donna said. "I can't believe I won't get to go. Last year's upperclassmen trip totally sucked because we were broken up."

Forman swallowed a big bite of Manwich. "You know what really sucks—"

"Eric," Red said across from him, "stop saying the word suck."

"Sorry. You know what really stinks?"

Hyde waved his hand in front of his nose. "You, after biking twenty miles to pick Donna up from her school."

"Still?" Mrs. Forman was sitting beside Forman, and she tapped his plate. "I bought you extra deodorant and left it in the basement bathroom."

"Getting my car back would be better," Forman said. "It's been over two weeks, not that my dad has any sympathy—"

"That's right. I don't." Red bit into his Manwich. Some of the sauce onto splattered onto his chin, and he wiped it off with a napkin.

Donna gestured at Forman. "You were saying?"

"Quartz Falls. Right. We'll be sleeping in tents, and I was hoping, you know..." Forman grinned at her, and she slapped his arm. "No, I didn't mean—well, okay, I mean that, too. But I wanted to show off my skills as a Cub Scout. These hands can set up a tent in under ten minutes."

Red's eyebrows rose. "You can pitch a tent? I don't buy it."

"Of course he can, Red," Mrs. Forman said. "I've seen him pitch a tent dozens of times—"

Laughter burst from Hyde's mouth, along with part of his Manwich. The Formans stared at him like they had no idea what was so funny. Donna covered her eyes and shook her head, and Forman's cheeks flushed.

"Set up a tent," Forman said. "She's seen me set up a tent."

His correction had no effect. Hyde couldn't stop laughing, and he excused himself from the table.

Twenty minutes later, he was in the backyard with Donna and the Formans. Forman knelt in the grass, sweaty but not smelly. A hammer lay beside him, and he checked the poles and stakes of his canvas tent. They didn't budge.

"See, Dad?" Forman got to his feet and brushed dirt and grass from his jeans. "Told you I could it."

Red circled the tent. He pushed on its taught walls, slid his palm over the secured guy-line, and tried to wiggle the support poles. "Who would've thought?" he said. "You managed not to foul it up."
"I knew he wouldn't." Mrs. Forman grasped Forman's shoulders and leaned her forehead against his. "My little snicklefritz earned the most achievement beads of his Cub Scout troop."

"Thank you, Mommy—Mom." Forman withdrew from her. "Mother."

"You can shoot a rifle," Red said, "set up a tent. … Maybe you'll survive out in the world after all." He pulled the Vista Cruiser's keys from his jeans pocket. "And maybe you're responsible enough to have your car back."

Forman's eyes widened. "Wait, really?"

Red clutched the keys in his fist. "This is provisional. If your grades slip—or if you lie to your mother and me again—the car's mine. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Forman said, and Red passed him the keys.

A gust of wind blew through the backyard. Donna touched the tent canvas as it rippled, but the poles stayed put. "If I were going with you guys," she said, "I'd take my dad's tent. The ones the school rented for us last year had holes in them and no rain flies."

Red scoffed. "Did Bob's National Guard training even teach him how to set up a pup tent?"

"Yeah." Her eyebrows rose with the corners of her mouth. "But he can afford to rent a truck camper when he wants to 'rough it,' so he does."

"Can he rent me one for next week?" Forman said.

"He could, but he won't." She moved in for a kiss. Forman puckered his lips, and Hyde averted his gaze. He'd watched them suck face plenty in the basement. He didn't need to watch it outside, too.

"Donna, man," he said when they finished, "could I borrow your tent?"

"Sure," she said. "I've got no use for it next weekend."

She leaned against the Formans' maple tree. Its leaves were turning red, and as Hyde crouched to pick up a fallen one, the backyard's front gate squeaked open. He couldn't tell who'd come by. The Formans' legs blocked his eyeline.

He stood up, expecting to see Bob or Kelso, and his breath stalled in his throat.

Jackie lingered by the fence, hair wreathed in sunlight, but her shoulders were stooped. Her fingers tugged at the hem of her sweater, and she kept a decent amount of distance between herself and everyone else. Hyde's own body responded with a slight jerk, but he stayed put. Like him, she was a master of concealing her pain. Where he went blank, she put on a show of pride. Today, though, she lacked any pretense. Her internal wounds stained his chest, partly because he'd caused a good portion of the damage.

"Well, hello, Jackie!" Mrs. Forman said. "How nice to see—"

Forman interrupted her with a theatrical groan. "Why? This day was going so well. I pitched a tent. I got back the Vista Cruiser, but no. God can't just let me have a win."

"Eric, we talked about this." Donna grabbed his hand, yanked him toward the maple, and whispered something in his ear.

"You're right," he said afterward. "It's not God. It's the devil who sent Jackie here. Her sulfurous
footsteps are leaving holes in my backyard!"

"My backyard," Red said. "Do you want to lose your car permanently?"

Forman swallowed, and his hand plunged into his jeans pocket. He had to be squeezing the Cruiser's keys. "No, sir."

"Then quit insulting the Burkhart girl. She may be loud, but she can also fix a U-joint. Do you even know what a U-joint is?"

"No, sir."

"Right. So shut it."

"Thank you, Mr. Forman," Jackie said, and her eyes flicked to Hyde. He was twirling the leaf between his fingers, but he stopped as a message to her—that she mattered to him. She probably wouldn't get it. It was too subtle a sign.

All week in school, he'd made sure to ask how she was. She never answered, but that was less important than him asking. She needed to know, despite rejecting his friendship, that he hadn't gone anywhere. But declaring his feelings openly wouldn't happen, especially not in the Formans' backyard. Whatever happened between them had to be private.

His fist closed over the leaf as her gaze left him. She looked at Donna, jutted her chin toward the Pinciottis' backyard, and went to the driveway.

Donna followed, and Forman shouted, "But it's Saturday! It's prime Eric-and-Donna time!"

Red heaved out a breath, but Mrs. Forman intercepted. She laced her fingers around his arm, pulled him past the tent, and said to Forman, "Honey, don't use your squeaky voice. You're a senior in high school now. Have some decorum."

"Decorum?" Red said to her with a laugh, and they stepped onto the driveway.

She leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked. "Eric left his vocabulary book lying around. I wanted to try out a new word..."

Their voices faded as they reached the house. They entered through the patio door, and once it slid shut, Forman kicked a stone in the grass.

"What crawled up your ass?" Hyde said.

"Goddamn Jackie." Forman began dismantling the tent. "First she monopolizes Kelso's time and treats Fez like her personal butler. She won't leave you alone, and then she sets Donna up with Casey Kelso." He wriggled one of the tent stakes and pried it out of the dirt. "Donna and I got back together less than a month ago. I bet you Jackie's trying to convince her to break it off."

"What, your dick?"

"That, too."

Hyde opened his fist. The leaf inside was crumpled and ripped in places. It hadn't started out that way. His touch had wrecked it.

"She won't be happy until she's taken everything from me," Forman said, and his statement vibrated in Hyde's skull.
"Forman, relax. Just 'cause Jackie's way hotter than you doesn't mean Donna's gonna fuck her."

"Okay—" Forman was crouched in the grass. He yanked out another tent stake, but the move threw him off balance. His legs slipped out from under him, and he fell onto his ass. "Since when do you think Jackie's hot?"

Hyde ran his knuckles along his jawline. His beard chafed the skin of his fingers, but the physical pain couldn't ward off his memory. A minute before he and Jackie had kissed on the hood of her car. That was when he'd realized the change. His whole body had begun to pulse, simply by sitting next to her.

"Jackie's a chick," he said as Forman removed a third tent stake. "By default, she's hotter than you."

"Oh."

"Big Rhonda's hotter than you."

"Um..."

"So's droopy-eyed Karen—"

"Got it," Forman said. "Thanks."

He reached for another tent stake, but Hyde blocked it with his boot. "And the next time you see Jackie," Hyde said, "don't act like she's freakin' Laurie. Kelso's obsessed with getting tail. His time would've been 'monopolized,' whether he'd dated Jackie or any other girl. Fez was trying to get into Jackie's pants. That's the only reason he kissed her butt—"

Forman moved toward a different tent stake, but Hyde got there first and stepped on it. "Forman, listen to me, man. Only reason Donna didn't break up with you sooner is 'cause of me and Jackie."

"What?" Forman peered up at him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You piss Donna off, and she comes to us. We back you up, give her some perspective, and she forgives you. Yeah, Jackiebacked you up, too." Hyde took his boot off the tent stake, but Forman didn't go for it. His fingers were busy tearing blades of grass. "I know," Hyde said, "'cause Donna used to tell me about it. Jackie's not out to get you, all right?"

Forman stared at the grass on his palm. "But Casey..."

"Donna was miserable without her ma, without you, and Jackie tried to make her feel better. End of story."

Hyde headed for the driveway. He'd said too much and not enough, and his lunch turned to stone in his stomach. Jackie had come by, and he'd done nothing but quit twirling a leaf.
Making a Better Plan

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
MAKING A BETTER PLAN

Jackie moved from the edge of Donna's bed to the desk chair. Donna was slapping her comforter in a syncopated rhythm, as if she were eager for gossip. The vibration had wrecked Jackie's focus, allowing Steven back inside her mind. He'd let Eric insult her in the Formans' backyard, but she shouldn't have expected differently. Steven's loyalty was to his friends, and she wasn't one of them.

"Was my question so bad?" Donna said. "Or do I, like, smell or something?"

Jackie gestured to Donna's hands. "You won't stop hitting your bed, you big goon. It's really obnoxious."

Donna's fingers curled into fists. "Sorry." She gripped the material of her jeans and glanced back at her nightstand. "So...?"

"His name is Mark—"

"Right! Mark!"

"And it's a ruse." Jackie gathered her hair at the nape of her neck. "Maintaining my level of popularity has certain requirements..." She tugged on her unfastened ponytail until her scalp stung. Even though Donna didn't go to Point Place High anymore, her boyfriend still did. "And don't you dare tell Eric, or I'll tell everyone at school you went away to have a baby."

Donna raised her hands defensively. "No need for threats. Your secret's safe with me. It's too bad about Mark, though." She looked at her nightstand again. "He seemed nice."

"He is. I wish I'd felt something when I made out with him, but—"

"He's not Kelso?"

Jackie's scalp throbbed, and she let go of her hair. From the strain, her forehead probably matched her flushing cheeks, "No," she said. "He's so much better than Michael. He's just not for me—and why do you keep staring at your nightstand?"

"I do?" Donna's own cheeks flushed, and she got off the bed. "Okay, I have to show you this." She pulled something from her nightstand drawer and placed a velvet ring box on Jackie's palm.

Jackie's skin tingled where the velvet box sat. "Eric proposed?" She pressed her free hand against her raucous, pounding heart. "Oh, God, you're getting married? To Eric?"

Donna's eyebrows drew together. "No. It's something I planned to give Eric tomorrow night, but
after his attitude toward you, I'm not sure I want to."

"You're proposing to him?"

"Jackie, just open the box."

Jackie did, and her eyes widened. Set into a gold band was a chunk of black onyx, emerald-cut and bigger than a piece of Chiclet gum. It was the gaudiest ring she'd ever seen, and she plucked it from the box. "You can't give him this."

"Why not?"

"It's hideous!"

"It is not!" Donna snatched the ring and brought it to the window. Daylight gleamed on the onyx's surface. "This ring is beautiful. Eric and I have come so far, and I wanted to get him something to celebrate that."

"If you say so, but if you give Eric that thing, you'll be forcing him to lie to you."

"Because...?"

"He won't want to hurt you."

Donna strode back to the desk and grabbed the ring box. She put the ring inside it and snapped it shut. Her jaw clamped shut just as tightly. Her temple twitched, but she sank onto her bed and said, "You think so?"

"Yeah." Jackie wiggled her fingers. "Have looked at his hands? How do you think that clunker would sit on his bony finger?"

"Oh, man..." Donna tapped the ring box. "He'd probably strain a tendon wearing this."

"So return it and buy me something pretty."

"That's not gonna happen."

Jackie leaned back in the desk chair and tapped her foot on the floor. Her influence on Donna used to be strong, but Donna had spent too much time away from her. "Fine. Give him the ring, and when you get into one of your usual misunderstandings with him, don't come crying to me."

"I meant I'm not buying you anything." Donna held up the ring box. "I'm definitely returning this. But I thought since my dad wears man-rings, and Hyde wears a ring, Eric might..."

"No," Jackie whispered. "No, no, no." She got off the chair and joined Donna on the bed. "Your dad's got meaty hands, and Steven's got big, masculine ones. They're built for man-rings."

"So what am I gonna do? Eric defied his parents for me and flew all the way to California. He spent the last two weeks biking twenty miles a day just to pick me up from school. I need to show him how much I love and appreciate him."

Jackie dropped her gaze to a rumpled part of Donna's comforter. Michael's most romantic gesture was kissing her instead of another girl. She'd granted him permission to kiss someone else. It was supposed to be her penance for kissing the manager of the Cheese Palace. It was meant to put her and Michael back on equal footing, and he'd chosen to kiss her instead.
Her desperation to keep him had corroded her logic. He'd cheated on her countless times, yet she'd believed she owed him a free pass to kiss another girl.

"Eric's a good boyfriend," she said and lifted her gaze. "And I know exactly what you should do: drive up to Quartz Falls on Friday after school."

"I can't take my dad's car for the weekend," Donna said, but a smile surfaced on her lips. "And isn't it, like, a six-hour drive?"

"Borrow my car. I'll photocopy the list of what the school told us to bring on the trip. You just need to get the driving directions."

Donna's chest rose and fell with quick breaths. "I can do that. The bookstore at the mall has all kinds of maps." She inhaled a slower, deeper breath. "Am I really gonna do this?"

Jackie patted Donna's wrist. "Yes, Donna. You are."

"What about my dad?"

"Lie. Tell him I'm not going on the trip and that you're spending the weekend with me."

"And when he calls up your parents—"

"They'll have no idea I went anywhere," Jackie said. "My parents have been so busy lately they don't even know about the Quartz Falls trip. And they'll be out of town starting Monday. They won't get back until Sunday night."

Donna pressed her lips together. She didn't appear convinced, but Jackie's parents had decided to go on a relationship-building vacation together. It should've offered her some hope, but her mom owed her dad a dozen confessions. Any one of them would trigger divorce proceedings.

"Trust me," Jackie said. "They're not that observant." A chill shuddered through her. She'd inherited the same lack of perceptiveness. Otherwise, she never would've dated Michael or forgiven him ... or gone back to him. "Donna, listen. If you really want something, you have to go for it." She picked up the ring box and tossed it near Donna's leg. "It's not just gonna fall into your lap—unless it's Fez you want."

"Eric flew over two-thousand miles for me," Donna said. "I can drive six—no, twelve—hours for him. And maybe he'll drive home with me. If Hyde and Fez cover for him, the teachers won't notice his absence from the bus, but..."

She bit into her thumb nail, but Jackie urged her to continue. "If my dad finds out I ran off again," Donna said, "he'll ground me for the rest of the school year."

"He won't find out. I'm sure the campgrounds have phones somewhere. If I have to bribe someone to let us use them, I will. A few calls home, and your dad'll be convinced."

Donna laughed. "I can't believe how generous you're being. It's like a brand new you."

Heat stung Jackie's cheeks again, and she hopped off the bed. "Really, Donna?" She grabbed a framed picture of Mr. Bonkers from the desk and held it in front of her. "Who's the one who got you to forgive Eric for killing your cat?" She put the picture back on the desk. "Who helped you start a relationship with him in the first place? Who took your side after you two broke up?"

"Okay, Jackie, I get it."
"Do you?" Jackie gestured to herself. "Do you see me? I mean really see me?"

"'Brand new you' was a dumb thing to say. I'm sorry." Donna stood up and stepped toward her. "I guess Eric's not the only one who doesn't give you enough credit sometimes." She rubbed Jackie's arm. "Why don't you come to the basement?"

Jackie pushed her tongue against her teeth and said nothing.

"I'll make sure Eric behaves."

"I can't." The basement was full of people Jackie had no desire to see.

"Look," Donna said, "I know what it's like to see an ex. Eric and I were broken up for a year, and I never stopped loving him. I just didn't know how to be with him. I didn't think I could be with him —"

"Donna—"

Donna kept on talking, and Jackie bit the inside of her cheek. She angled her head to the right, and Donna's Led Zeppelin poster captured her attention. Steven loved that band. He'd played its records while he taught her chess, and she'd begun to like the music, too. Especially the band's romantic songs, but lately she changed the radio station whenever the band's music came on.

A tap on her shoulder jarred her from her thoughts. "Are you even listening?" Donna said.

"Not really."

"Jackie, this important. I'm trying to help you." Donna grasped both of Jackie's hands. "Avoiding Kelso is just gonna let you idealize him again. Your feelings for him are obviously really strong—"

Jackie freed her hands and slapped Donna's arm. "I don't have feelings for Michael."

Donna clutched her arm protectively, but it was covered by a long sleeve. Jackie's strike couldn't have hurt, unlike Donna's total lack of understanding. Jackie had no illusions left about Michael. No one's happiness was important to him but his own.

"You got rid of the presents Kelso gave you," Donna said, "but that doesn't mean you got rid of how you feel. I convinced myself I was over Eric, and I so wasn't."

"I'm not you," Jackie said, "and Eric's not Michael. Eric never cheated on you. When you dated Casey, Eric tried to let you go. Michael's..." Her legs were shaking, and she dropped onto the desk chair. "He's with Valerie officially. Probably not faithfully, and he's acting like me dating someone else is a crime. Not that I actually am, but he doesn't know that."

She stared at her hands. They were shaking, too, and her voice started to waver. "He's being a possessive jerk about Mark, a boy who means nothing to him. But what if I dated Fez? What would Michael do then, threaten Fez until he broke up with me?"

"You like Fez?"

"No! I just—" Shivers erupted beneath Jackie's skin, but she was done cowering. She forced herself to stand. "Michael doesn't own me. No one does." She charged into the hallway. "Despite what you think, I am over him."

Donna sped after her. "Where are you going?"
"To the basement," Jackie said. To show Donna who she really was.
Jackie pushed open the basement's back door but let Donna go ahead of her. Jackie needed to assess the situation before she stepped inside. Coming here was like playing chess. Her strategy depended on what pieces were on the board and where they were positioned, information she'd get only through observation.

Fez's voice reached her first: "—to earn some money. I brought my résumé to a few places, but the DMV is the only one that called me. I have an interview there on Monday."

"All right," Eric said. "Good luck, man."

Cartoonish sound effects punctuated their mundane conversation, followed by Michael's chuckles. *Scooby-Doo* or *The Flintstones* had to be playing on the TV, and Jackie kept a grip on the basement door. Only a few weeks had passed since she'd come here, but it felt like a year.

"Forman, chair." The order came from Steven, and it lured her from the door. Eric was on his feet. He darted from the couch to the laundry area and brought back a folding chair. Steven nodded to the space between his own chair and the couch.

"What's going on?" Donna said.

Eric opened the chair. "Just making a place for one of our friends." He looked at Jackie as he patted the chair's metal seat. "You're always welcome here, Jackie. Always welcome."

He sounded like a blithering numbskull, and his change in attitude was suspect. She glanced at Steven for an explanation. His fingers were laced over his stomach. His sunglasses hid his eyes, but he tilted his head toward the folding chair.

"Fez," she said, "why don't you take that chair?" It was much closer to Michael than the lawn chair, Fez's usual spot. Michael had squashed himself into the couch's corner. If she sat between him and Steven, it would be like putting her king in check, an illegal move in chess.

"It's okay, baby," Michael said and rubbed the top of his thighs. "You've always got a seat right here."

"Thank you, Kelso." Fez moved toward the couch. "This is a true sign of friendship—"

Michael thrust out his hand and kept Fez from sitting on him. "I meant Jackie."

"I see." Fez backed up and sat on the lawn chair again.
Jackie stayed by him, but her skin heated up as Michael stared at her. "I knew you'd couldn't resist me once I became homecoming king," he said, and she forced her fingers not to close into fists. "I thought it was impossible, but I'm even hotter now."

"I'm not here for you," she said and strode to the folding chair. She picked it up and slammed it next to Fez. "I'm here for Donna and Fez."

"For me?" Fez laid his hands over his heart. "Does this mean I have seat on your lap?"

"No." She sat hard on the chair. It could've used a cushion, but at least she'd claimed a place for herself in the basement.

Michael, though, vacated the couch as Donna and Eric took up space on it and snuggled. The sight was revolting. A make-out couldn't be far behind, and Jackie concentrated on the TV. *The Flintstones* was on. She'd guessed right, but Michael walked up to her and blocked her view.

"I have got a fantastic idea," he said, standing too close. His crotch was inches from her eyes. "You used to be the girlfriend I cheated on, right? But how about you try being the other woman? How hot would that be? No obligations, and you'd totally be sticking it to Valerie while I stuck it to you. It's win-win!"

"Kelso!" Donna said, but Jackie smashed her feet into Michael's shins. He yelped and doubled over. His head grazed her knee, and she jumped out of the folding chair.

"I have a boyfriend!" she said.

"Well, you shouldn't!" He was rubbing his shins, and she smacked the back of his skull. He cried out in pain, but he'd earned it. His suggestion was more than disrespectful. It was demeaning. Donna, Eric, Fez—*Steven*—they'd all heard it, and her flushed skin tightened around her bones.

"You're a selfish pig, Michael. Mark has given me more than you ever have."

"Oh, yeah?" He straightened up. Blood had rushed into his face, reddening his cheeks and forehead. "Like what?"

"Like head."

He shrieked and thrust his finger at her. "That is a lie! Tell everyone that's a lie, Jackie!"

"Okay, the truth is..." she looked at Fez, Donna, Eric, and Steven in turn, "Michael. Never. Gave. Me. Head."

Michael shrieked again, and Eric groaned in disgust. Donna was silent, but Steven laughed the kind of laughter that made his voice hoarse and bounced his stomach.

"What is head?" Fez said.

"For guys, it's a blow job," Steven said between laughs, "but for ladies it means sucking on their love bud—"

Eric clasped his hand together as if in prayer. "No more. Please. I beg of you."

But Jackie stepped closer to Michael. "Did you ever go down on Laurie or Pam Macy?" She poked his lips. "What about Valerie? Have you gone down on her yet?"

"Jackie, quit it!" He grasped her fingers and shoved them from his face. "Why would I ever put my
"Oh, God—" Eric said. He snatched a throw pillow from the couch. "Donna, if you love me, you'll kill me. Suffocate me right now."

Jackie reached for Michael's lips again, this time to twist them, but he evaded her grasp. "You tried to get me to do that to you all the time!" she shouted. "You begged and begged and begged me to."

"That's different! It makes a guy feel good when a girl does that to him. It's also sanitary 'cause a man's anatomy is built for cleanliness." He peered back at Steven, maybe for approval, but Steven sneered at him. "They should've taught you that in health class last year, Jackie," Michael went on. "Licking a girl's pee-hole only makes her sick. I didn't want to give you a bladder infection."

She opened her mouth, intending to ask him if he were serious, but a giggle came out instead. Other giggles followed until she was full-on laughing. Her throat became sore, and tears welded her eyelashes together. She couldn't see as air flowed over her knuckles, but they began to hurt, and her laughter sounded strange.

Pressure hit her stomach. Not painful, but it dragged her backward. She dug her heels into the floor, and her feet lost all traction. They were no longer touching anything, and a new, harder pressure pushed into her stomach.

A door slam broke through her own voice. Her feet landed on the ground as the pressure left her stomach, and warm hands cupped her cheeks. Gentle thumbs glided across her wet lashes.

Her vision finally cleared. Steven was standing in front of her in his room. His hands were the ones cradling her face, and he said, "Have any clue what you were just doing?"

Her fists were white-knuckled balls. "I was laughing."

"For a second." He let go of her face and offered her a wad of tissues. "You started wailing on Kelso. Probably gave him a black eye."

"I did? I don't—" She leaned back against his door without taking the tissues. "Everything went dark."

"That's what happens when a person goes beyond pissed. Been there. Needed someone to haul my ass out of that sitch, so..."

He'd done the same for her.

She pressed her fist to her lips, and the memory of her screams shot through her like a comet, icy and hard to hold onto. She'd been out of control. Steven had picked her up and brought her into his room.

"Michael's crazy!" she said and accepted the tissues Steven had offered again. "I should've run when he blamed me for his infidelity! But what did I do? I accepted his point of view about my kiss with Todd. I—"

Steven turned on his stereo. A frenetic guitar riff blasted from his speakers, accompanied by a drum beat loud enough to vibrate Jackie's ribcage.

"Now you can yell all ya want!" he shouted over the music. "The Ramones'll keep anyone out there from hearing it."

"Am I yelling?" she said.
"Little bit."

"Well, sorry!" She blotted her cheeks with the tissues and wiped her nose. "I'm just sick of him! Acting like I'm so desperate that I'd be his mistress." The tissues crumpled in her grip. They started to break apart, and white dust flew into the air. "I don't want to be tied to him the rest of my life, Steven, or anyone like him. But no one seems to care how I feel!"

Steven was sitting on his dresser. His boot-covered feet rested on his cot, tangled in his knit blanket. "Jackie," he said after a deep breath and pulled off his sunglasses, "why the hell do you think I hauled you in here?"

"To protect Michael."

He hooked his sunglasses on his shirt collar and pushed his palms into his eyes. "Right."

She swallowed when he removed his hands from his face. His hair was too long. His curls were losing their shape, clinging to one another and becoming wavy chunks, and his beard needed a trim. But her body still responded to him. The adrenaline in her blood, generated to fight Michael, had found a new focus.

"What you did for Julie," she said, "what you didn't finish … finish it with me."

He grasped the edge of the dresser. "Crap. You're havin' a psychotic break."

"I am not!" She made sure the door was locked and moved away from it. Her heart pumped wildly, warning her to leave, pleading with her stay, and she pressed her shins against the frame of his cot. "You look like an overgrown Bergamasco, but—"

"An overgrown what?"

"Bergamasco. It's a sheepdog. Anyway, I know how soft your lips are..." She glanced down at his pillow as blood rushed into her neck. "And Julie wasn't shy about how skilled your tongue is, so I thought maybe..."

She looked at him again, but he didn't move from the dresser. He wasn't outwardly reacting at all, but she'd tossed aside her pride. Asking for this favor wasn't just about her body. It had taken humility and trust. She'd been utterly degraded by Michael, and she needed to feel the opposite. To be respected. Valued. Cherished. Surely he understood that.

Unless he was waiting to hear what he'd get in return.

Her mouth dried out. She had nothing to offer but gratitude, but he'd gone to jail for her. Going down on her couldn't possibly be worse.

Hyde trapped his tongue behind his teeth. His mouth had grown moist, and he was getting hard. The record he'd put on would work as well for pleasure as it did rage. The Ramones' *Rocket to Russia* was loud enough to distract the scary kids outside. They'd have no chance of hearing whatever noises he and Jackie unleashed.

His body urged him to go for it, but her request was too early. It was a killer. Before it came out of her mouth, he'd planned on admitting the truth, that he more than cared about her. Ironic, considering *Rocket to Russia* had reached the song "I Don't Care".

She stood in front of him and cupped his knees. He stayed on the dresser but clasped his hands over
his lap. Spotting his erection would give her an unfair advantage, but her touch strengthened it, and
the throb reached his brain.

"Remember when we went to the mall," she said, "and I bought you those?" She indicated the boots
on his feet. "You told me then if you didn't know me and you'd never talked to me, you'd think I was hot."

Her fingers drummed on his knees. The sensation vibrated into his blood, and he licked his lips.

"But you do know me, Steven, a lot better than you used to. You've talked to me a lot more, too,

enough to consider us friends … which means maybe you think I'm hot now."

She smiled, and he cursed his life. Her makeup was smudged from tears, but she had him by the
balls. No girl had been hotter. Or more exasperating.

"Maybe," she said, "you even think I'm hot enough to go down on me."

"You don't want me to do that," he said. "You're just pissed at Kelso." It was the only explanation
that made sense, and he slid off the dresser to the cot. The mattress sank a little under his weight, but
Jackie's hands were off him.

"Yes, I'm mad at him, but that's not why I..." She sat beside him and leaned her head on his shoulder.

Despite his instinct to shrug her off, he didn't. If this were a show of trust on her part, not an attempt
to seduce him, he'd only screw things between them more. "Why me?" he said. "Why now? Why
thata"

"I don't know what it feels like." She sounded defeated. It was consistent. It matched her demeanor
in the backyard earlier. "I've kissed six boys in my life but had sex with only one, and I want—need
to know it can be better."

"And you're choosing me to prove that to you?"

"I don't expect you to be my boyfriend afterward. I just need you to give me a beautiful memory, a
hope I can hold onto."

His temples hurt from clenching his jaw. She hadn't answered his question. "You felt nothing when I
kissed you here," he said and pointed to her lips. "What makes you think you'll enjoy me kissing you
somewhere else?"

"I felt something. … I was just numb to it."

"What's the difference?" he said, but no details followed. He leaned his aching temple against the top
of her head. Her hair was soft against his skin and smelled like its usual apricot. "Come on, man.
You don't want me to go down on ya. You want the next guy you're gaga over to do that."

She sat up straight, and his shoulder grew cold without her presence. "So you're saying no."

"I'm sayin' that even if we're not friends—even if we're not anything—I'm yours, all right? And I
can't go down on you since you're not mine. Too much of a mind-fuck."

"So if I agree to be friends with you, you'd be okay with doing that to me?"

He got off the cot and kept his back to her. She didn't get it. Didn't get him. "I'm not going down on
you, Jackie."
"But you can do it to Julie? To Kat Peterson? To, I don't know, any girl who isn't me?"

"Any girl who's not trying to use me for more than sex, yeah."

"What are you talking about?"

He propped his foot on the Formans' old ottoman. "Kelso," he said. "What the fuck else?" He plucked his shades from his collar and brought them toward his face, but hiding his eyes wouldn't do crap. The strain in his voice was obvious. The tension in his muscles had to be, too. His hard-on was gone, replaced by a rigidity that infected his whole body.

He tossed the shades onto the armchair and turned around. Jackie was standing, and she stepped into his personal space. "Michael has nothing to do with this," she said. "I already told you that."

"Like he had nothing to do with you buyin' me these boots?" He gestured to his feet, and her gaze flicked toward them. "Or us ending up on the hood of your car? How about you coming by the basement every day this summer?"

"Steven—"

"Every damn thing you've tried to get from me has to do with him. Either to make you feel better from his bullshit or to pay him back for it."

"That's not true!"

Unshed tears rimmed her eyes, but he crossed his arms over his chest. He couldn't shift into reverse. His road was clear, whether she cried or not.

"If Kelso wasn't part of your deal—of every deal you've ever made with me—you'd be on my cot, legs spread open, and squirming with how good you felt. 'Cause I'd enjoy that." He jutted his chin at his dresser. "Top-left drawer. Open it."

She stared at him, unmoving.

"Go ahead," he said. "I'm declassifying the Jackie files, so open it."

She did as he said, and her chest rose and fell with fast, shallow breaths. She swiped the shooting star pendant from his drawer. It dangled in her grip, and her posture worsened until she resembled a dying flower. "Why?"

"I was cool with waiting for you. With hurting for a while. Even with letting you go." His arms uncrossed and dropped to his sides. "I'm not cool with you using me as a weapon to make Kelso wait. To make him hurt. To make him let you go. Getting it now?"

"I..." She bolted to the door but grappled with the knob. The door was locked, thanks to her. "Are you a cheater?" she said and unlocked the door. "My mom's been cheating on my dad, and who knows? He could be having affairs, too. Would you be faithful to a girlfriend? Not those girls you sleep with for a week. An actual girlfriend."

His neck muscles grew tenser, making his head pound. "My dad cheated on my ma and split on us. What do you think?"

"Michael and Valerie made out in front of me this Friday, and I cheered during it." She clutched the door knob but stayed put. "It was the homecoming pep rally. I had to do my job, but I almost shouted, 'Get off my boyfriend!' and shoved my pom-poms down their throats."
"See, that's exactly the kind of crap I'm trying to avoid."

She held the shooting star pendant out to him. "You're right. I might always have some kind of feelings for him. It's horrible, and if I can barely handle it, how can I expect you to?" She shook the pendant. "Take it."

"I don't—"

"You have to take it! Because I won't be able to leave it here. I'm having enough trouble leaving you. Because no matter how I feel about Michael, you're the only person I want to be with."

The stiffness in his neck infected his back. "Would ya call it what it fuckin' is already?" He surged forward, ignoring the physical pain it caused, and snatched the pendant from her. "I'm your Goddamn safety line."

She fell silent but remained in his room. She didn't speak again until dozens of conflicting thoughts careened through his skull. "Maybe I did use you," she said over Tommy Ramone's drums. "To go to the prom. To feel better after Michael cheated on me. And the first time we went bowling together, I used our friendship to soothe my broken heart and looked at you … selfishly."

Hyde squeezed the pendant's chain until the links dug into his skin. She'd admitted what he'd thought was true since their first kiss. He hadn't been imagining it. "And today?"

"Yes, even today! And now I've hurt you the way I've been hurting..." She blotted her eyes with her wrist. They'd grown wet, and her voice was shaking. "I didn't mean to. I didn't realize I'd done it until a minute ago. And you deserve so much better than that, but it's not the whole story."

Tears ran into her mouth. She swallowed them, but her gaze stayed on him. "It's not," she said, "but if that's all you're willing to believe, if my history with Michael stains the way you see me, then what can I do? You'll keep using him as an excuse to push me away. I'm ruined for you."

She finally opened the door. A hiss accompanied her leaving, as if all the air in his room was escaping with her, and he kicked the door shut.

The hiss continued, but it was coming from his stereo speakers. Side A of *Rocket to Russia* had finished, and he flipped the record over. The drums of "Teenage Lobotomy" thumped against his walls while Joey Ramone shouted about what Hyde needed to get. Because loving Jackie had wrecked his brain.
The senior locker area was clearing out fast. The last school bell had rung. Monday was done, but Hyde's locker conspired against him. He'd screwed up the combination on the lock twice. His fingers were in a rush, but he had to slow them down if he wanted to get out of here.

The lock opened on his fourth try. He took his suede jacket from his locker, put it on, but his corduroy pants jostled at his waist. Someone was tugging on one of his belt loops, and he turned around.

A blur of flesh passed his eyes. A pair of lips skimmed his cheek, and the blur turned into Valerie Clayton's face. "Gotcha," she said, yanking off his shades.

He swiped his shades back and dropped them into his jacket pocket. His backpack was on the floor, but he kept his eyes on her as he picked up. "Not in the mood," he said after standing up straight. "So how's about you rah-rah on over to someone who is?"

"Adorable." She backed up a step, but her palms captured his cheeks, and her lips pushed into his mouth.

She was kissing him, but he grasped her shoulders and shoved her backward. "What the hell, man?"

She laughed and ran a finger from his chest to his belt buckle. The chick had a long reach. Her legs were long, too, and flexible from what he'd seen in Viking Stadium. "Julie finally told me the whole, sad story of what happened between the two of you," she said.

"So?" He removed her hand from his belt, but her other hand shot to his ass. She thrust her hips at him. His backpack fell off his shoulder and hit her hand, but that didn't deter her. She started to grind herself into his crotch. "Crap—"

He glanced around the locker area. They were alone and out of view of the lobby, but he needed to stop her. This was Kelso's latest chick, and Hyde was in love with Kelso's first, but Saturday afternoon had messed him up.

First he'd thought Jackie was desperate for Kelso. Then for any guy who wasn't Kelso. But his theory about her had shifted back to Kelso. He wasn't the only one with theories, though. Jackie had offered a doozy before fleeing his room on Saturday, that he was using Kelso as an excuse not to be with her.

Whether or not she was right, Kelso skittered like a rat between them, shitting everywhere. Hyde was splattered in feces, but Jackie still shone like a star in his skull and chest. He'd let her leave him
with the opposite belief in her mind. Let her spend all of Sunday and today believing it, too. It was a mistake he aimed to rectify. Had to rectify.

"Julie's aiming higher than her position," Valerie said and nuzzled Hyde's beard with her nose. "She's just a junior, but she's trying to rally the cheer squad to oust me, all because I got homecoming queen."

Cheerleader politics, a subject he had no interest in. He grabbed hold of her arms, but his biceps only tensed. He didn't shove her away again.

"Your beard is scratchy." Her breath warmed his ear, and he rechecked their position. With the arrangement of the lockers, no one from the lobby could possibly see them, but they were exposed to anyone entering through the staircases. "But a little pain can be fun," she said. "If you do for me what you wouldn't do for Julie, you won't regret it."

A sickening heat coiled in his stomach. Valerie was freakin' dry-humping him against his locker. She'd given him a hard-on, and his thoughts were blurring. He had to end this, but the desire to lose himself to it was strengthening. "So you and Kelso are over, huh?"

"Michael's brought this on himself, and he wouldn't dare break up with me." She lowered her lips to his neck, and his eyes squeezed shut as she kissed him. "He won't shut up about Jackie," she said and nipped his earlobe with her teeth. "Every other conversation we have is about her, about how you're the reason she didn't take him back, so..."

His grip on her arms weakened, enough that she could unzip the fly of his pants. Her fingers slipped inside, past the placket of his underwear, and grasped his erection. His breath staggered in his chest.

"I'm going to teach him a lesson," she whispered into his lips. She smelled like watermelon Jolly Rancher, not his favorite. But her hand squeezed him just the right way, and he swallowed a groan. "Jackie acts like you aren't worth the dandruff in her hair, but if you do what I'm asking so nicely of you..."

She kissed him on the mouth. Her wet tongue teased his own, urging him to kiss her back. But when his lips and tongue remained slack, she pulled away.

"Michael will understand what kind of threat you really are," she said. "He'll start focusing on me, and Julie will understand who's at the top of the pyramid."

"And I get to shoot my load into your palm?" He wrapped his fingers around her wrist and yanked her off him. He was already in emotional debt to Jackie. Following through with Valerie, making himself part of her ploy, would put him further in debt. "Thanks for the offer," he said and zipped up his fly, "but no."

He grabbed his backpack and headed for the lobby. His balls ached with the demand for release, but the pain would eventually subside. Or he'd have to drive the Camino to a secluded spot and rub one out.

"You're in love with someone!" Valerie shouted after him. "That's why you're walking away. Why you didn't finish with Julie."

He waved at Mrs. Dooley, the school receptionist, as he passed her desk. He had to act casual so Valerie wouldn't be tipped off. She was a keen one. Targeting people's vulnerability must've
propelled her up the social ladder. He needed to get out of here before she homed in on his, before she said the name—

"Jackie! It's always Jackie!"

Valerie's accusation dragged him back to her. A few straggling students had gone to their lockers, but he had to deal with Valerie in private. He took her hand and led her downstairs to the cafeteria. It was empty except for the lunch lady. The metallic bangs of pots and the rush of water signaled her presence. She had to be in the kitchen, cleaning up.

"It is Jackie, isn't it?" Valerie said, pinching the skin of her throat. She leaned her hip against a lunch table, and her body language confirmed his suspicions: Julie and Kelso weren't her only marks.

"What if it is?" he said.

Her face flushed. "It always is. My dad ran for city council, too. Did you know that? But Jackie's dad … and last year, she got voted Best Cheerleader in the state-wide competition. She was a Goddamn sophomore!"

"So you went after Kelso to burn her."

"What if I did?" She wound a lock of her hair around her finger. "Jackie's dating that Ft. Blanderson boy, but she's so not over Michael. She took him back too many times." Her hair slipped from her grasp, and she smiled mischievously. "Too bad she can't have him anymore—and too bad for you she'll always want him."

The nape of his neck heated up. "You're gonna try to blackmail me."

She stepped closer to him and touched the tip of his nose. "How perceptive."

"Let's hear it."

"I'll tell Jackie how you feel about her. She's the biggest gossip in the school, and everyone'll know in about..." she glanced at her watch, "five minutes after she does. She'll badmouth you to anyone who'll listen, and you won't be able to walk these halls without being heckled. Your senior year is going to be hell."

He arched up an eyebrow. "Unless?"

"Unless you accept my offer. Come on..." She cupped his still-throbbing balls over his pants. "You'll enjoy it. I promise."

He pried her hand off him. "Tell her."

An aggravated scream followed him as he left the cafeteria, but she had nothing on him. His senior year was already hell, and he wouldn't cow to her or anyone.

Hyde strolled into Donna's living room, pretending to be relaxed, but tension held his body hostage. His head pounded, and his dick and stones were tender. He'd had to finish what Valerie didn't, to relieve the pressure. Screwing cheerleaders was supposed to be a life goal for a dirtbag like him, but so far they'd only screwed him up.

"Tent's there," Donna said and pointed to the couch. She must've heard him come in. Her gaze was
plastered to a map spread across the card table. A pen was in her hand, and she seemed to be having trouble marking a route.

He looked at the canvas backpack by the couch. If its unworn state was any indication, the tent inside had to be pristine. "Thanks for the loan," he said.

"No problem. You can pay me back by helping me plan my route to Quartz Falls."

"Sure … but why're you gonna drive to Quartz Falls?"

She glanced at him as he approached the table. "I wanted to do something romantic for Eric, considering he flew to California for me. I had one idea Jackie shot down, and she suggested this one." She waved her hand over the map. "She's even letting me use her as an alibi and lending me her car so I can get there on Friday."

"Long drive." He pulled out a chair and sat. His eyes scanned the map, and his finger traced US 41 to Fond du Lac, but his mind circled around Donna's last statement. "Using her as an alibi?"

"Oh, her parents are out of town this week. I'm going to tell my dad I'm staying with her over the weekend. She's going on the trip, but my dad won't know that. Neither will her parents supposedly." Her thumbnail scratched the edge of the map. "It's kind of sad. You'd think they'd pay more attention to her, but maybe they're going through something. My parents basically ignored me while they tried to work out their marriage."

He said nothing but gestured for the pen. She gave it to him, and he began marking the map. He had the route to Quartz Falls figured out. It wouldn't be a joyride. Donna had to pay attention, especially since she'd be driving in the dark by the end of it.

"Damn," she said when he marked the switch from I-39 to US-51.

"Not done." He dragged the pen along the highway then moved it west onto a county road. The pounding in his skull was abating, but plotting this route reminded him too much of Jackie—of his connection to her. It had taken him across back roads and through unexpected scenery. But their relationship, if one could call it that, was leaking gas and about to fall apart.

Going down on Julie. Letting Valerie jerk him off. Jackie's continual reactions to Kelso and what they might lead her to do. These were all barricades, but the misery they caused fit Hyde like a pair of broken-in boots. He could walk in it comfortably for months without stopping.

"Okay, Hyde—okay." Donna grasped his wrist after he marked a series of left and right turns. "There's no way I'm doing this," she said. "Not alone. I just don't have the driving experience." She indicated the eyeball ring on his pinky. "Do you think Eric would appreciate something like that?"

He adjusted his shades on his face and chuckled. "You got him a ring?"

"A beautiful, sophisticated man-ring. It's onyx and gold."

"Oh, you gotta give him that." He was still laughing, and she slapped his arm. "Come on, man. A fat ring on his skinny finger? He'll probably strain a muscle wearing it."

She slumped into the chair next to him. "Jackie convinced me of the same thing. So what do I do?"

"First, you forget this shit." He shoved the map off the table. "Second, you still come to Quartz Falls. Just sneak onto the senior bus. Teachers won't notice. Hell, half the time while taking attendance they call your name."
"Really?" Her expression brightened, but it didn't last. "Only … you leave on Wednesday. What am I supposed to do about my actual school? Or my dad, for that matter?"

He wiggled the fingers of his left hand in front of her eyes. She watched them as his other hand sneaked around her shoulders and poked her right cheek. "Misdirection, man. There's gotta be a couple of girls at your school who listen to your show on WFPP or Jerry Thunder's."

"Yeah..."

"Bribe 'em to cover for you. Say you'll bring them to the radio station."

"What if doesn't work? Those nuns are pretty sharp. I sit in the back of every classroom, but Sister Mary Agnes caught me chewing gum last week. My knuckles still hurt from her ruler-spanking."

"That's what backup plans are for," he said and checked his watch. "Told Fez I'd pick him up from the DMV. A travel agency's next to it. That's where we bought Forman his plane ticket to Cali."

"So...?"

"So you're comin' with me."

Northern Pike Travel had a decent amount of agents, all sitting behind desks and talking to clients or making phone calls. The chatter in the place was loud. The lights were bright, and Donna seemed uncomfortable. She buttoned her wool coat closed as Hyde led her to a rack of brochures.

"I should've changed out of my Catholic school uniform," she whispered. "I swear a couple of those pervs are leering at me." She nodded to two older men at their desks. One was on the phone. The other was dealing with a middle-aged couple, but both men flicked their eyes in Donna's direction.

Hyde positioned Donna between himself and the brochure rack, blocking her from view. He hooked his shades on his shirt collar, clutched his belt buckle, and watched both men. When they tried to catch another glimpse of her, he raised his eyebrows, daring them to keep staring. One man flinched before returning his attention to his clients. The other smiled sheepishly and shrugged, as if to say, "What can I do? She's a teenage girl in a short skirt. You get it."

Hyde put on his shades again and moved toward him. The man thrust up his hands defensively as Hyde got closer, and the phone receiver dropped to his desk.

"My friend's here for a brochure," Hyde said when he reached him. The desk name plate said Carl, and Carl scrambled for the phone as his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. "If you look at her again, that brochure's goin' up your ass."

"Y-yes, sir," Carl said into the phone receiver, but he was staring at Hyde. "Sorry for the disturbance. Won't happen again."

Hyde would make sure it didn't. He returned to the brochure rack, to Donna, but kept his attention on the travel agents.

"What do you think?" Donna fanned out several brochures at him. "I mean, my dad loves golfing, but he also likes magic shows and eating out—"

"Donna, man, rephrase."
"Sorry. Dining out. I don't want to give him too many options. He'll know I'm up to something."

"So don't." He plucked the Wisconsin Dells brochure from her hands. "This place has got enough to keep your dad and Joanne busy." He altered his voice, imitating Bob's thick Wisconsin accent. "There's nothin' like a five-day weekend."

She nudged his shoulder and grinned. "Isn't that the place where your dad knocked up your mom with you?"

"Yup. Maybe you'll get a new baby brother or sister out of this scheme."

"Oh, God." She swiped the Wisconsin Dells brochure from him and put the others back. "Let's get out of here."

They walked past the travel agents' desks to the front door. A woman peered up at them from her logbook, but she was the only one. The other agents ignored them, including the two men who'd ogled Donna. That was best for everybody. Hyde could've easily gotten into a brawl. His muscles begged him for one, but unleashing his frustration on strangers would be counter-productive.

Donna studied the brochure as they left the travel agency. Cars filled Northern Pike Travel's small parking lot, but he'd parked the Camino at the DMV. Its far more expansive lot could fit over a hundred cars, easy, and its gable-roofed building was close. Normally it would be a two-minute walk, but they'd get to it in five at Donna's slow pace.

"It's all so complicated," she said. "So much could go horribly wrong, but Eric's worth it." She folded the brochure and slid it into her coat pocket. "Plus, it's sort of thrilling. Going to my school is like being in prison. Can't get away with anything. If I get away with this..."

"You'll be the queen of badassery," he said. "And if you get caught, maybe you'll get expelled from Nun High and get to come back to our illustriously squeaky halls. So, basically, it's win-win."

"Right."

She sped up the pace, but he stopped her a fair distance from the DMV entrance. Fez was supposed to meet Hyde outside. Avoiding the DMV's inflow and outflow of grumbling visitors was an added bonus.

"Thanks for—" Donna said, but a motorcycle engine revved up in the parking lot. She shouted over it. "Thanks for dealing with those freaks in the travel agency! I hate having to wear this uniform."

He patted her shoulder. She had enough freaks to deal with in the basement. "Speaking of," he said, "you think Jackie's still got it bad for Kelso?"

"I'm honestly not sure. I hope not, but you saw how she was on Saturday. And the fact she's not dating anyone—shit. I mean ... shit."

"Her and Mark are a fake-out. I know." His gaze shifted from her to the DMV. Cars, trees, and mowed grass surrounded the building. A bit of nature to balance out the motor oil, but the conflicting scents pierced his nostrils.

"You do?" she said.

"She told me."

She inhaled a breath. It was probably to calm herself down, but she coughed. "God, this parking lot
stinks!” She coughed some more, drawing his full attention. She pinched her nose and jerked her head, as if trying to expel the scent from her brain. "Anyway, wow. So she told you on Saturday?"

"Earlier."

"Huh."

"Gonna need more than that, Donna." His desperation scraped his spine, and he rolled his neck to keep the muscles from seizing up. If she'd picked up on it, though, she didn't let on. She stuck her hands in her coat pockets.

"Jackie likes having a boyfriend," she said, "but she's really picky. Or she's just too attached to Kelso to give someone else a chance."

Those were options one and two, but a third option existed: Jackie wanted to move onto Hyde. She'd said as much on Saturday, but she'd cried to him for sanctuary too many times. If he opened his door again and let her in, really let her in, only for her to leave once Kelso … Hyde swallowed as pain threaded itself into his throat. He couldn't do it. Jackie should be happy, with Kelso, with anyone, or alone, but Hyde wouldn't carve up his arteries to make it happen.

"Kelso's her country, man," he said. "Soon as his latest bout of fucking around is done, she'll go back to him."

Donna tilted her head, like she wasn't convinced. "He already offered to be faithful again, and she didn't go for it."

"'Cause he had no follow-through." He rubbed the side of his face, irritating the skin under his beard. "She's a great girl, you know? Big brain. Big freakin' heart. But she loves so damn hard it gets in the way of her smarts. All Kelso's gotta do is spend a month beating off instead of hunting tail, and she'll be ready for another episode of Will Kelso Cheat On Me?"

"I thought so, too, but I've underestimated her before. And she's been different since I came home from California. She used to get lost in these fantasies all the time, but she's been less dreamy and more introspective. She blames Donahue, but..." Her eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. "You."

"Me, what?"

She jabbed a finger at his face. "It's you! And her … and holy crap, you're in love with each other."

"Would you knock it off?" He pushed her jabbing finger away. "We are not."

"Then why are you asking about her and Kelso?"

"Concerned citizen."

"'She's a great girl,'" she said, doing a piss-poor impression of his voice. "'Big brain, big heart...'"

"Yup. I said those things."

Her eyebrows rose, but Fez shoved open the DMV door. He was muttering to himself and clenched his fists at his sides. Either he'd gotten the job at below minimum wage, or he hadn't gotten the job at all.

"Fez isn't gonna save you from this," Donna said and tugged on Hyde's jacket sleeve. "If Jackie goes
back to Kelso, it'll be because she feels like she has nowhere else to go. That's what happened with me and Casey—"

Hyde yanked his sleeve from her. "Enough. Whatever evidence you think you've got, you're reading it wrong."

But he scratched the nape of his neck raw as Fez approached them, and he barely listened as Fez explained why the DMV wouldn't hire him. Something to do with puns and a fondness for pie.

"I'm sorry, Fez," Donna said. "Hyde and I can chip in to get you a condolences pie."

"I would like that," Fez said. "Being able to eat pie after such a rejection shows resilience. Not a special skill my ass!"

Kenosha's Pie House was in the opposite direction of Point Place. It was also a straight drive from the DMV, at the juncture between 52nd Street and 52nd Avenue. No turns, so Hyde didn't argue about the detour.

He brought Donna and Fez to the Camino and told them to wait. It was sandwiched between a Toyota Corolla and an AMC Pacer. Paying for half a pie was one thing. But paying for a pair of broken side mirrors? Not in his budget.

Donna gave him guidance as he backed out of the parking space. She and Fez squeezed onto the Camino's bench seat afterward, and Fez continued to gripe about his interview. Hyde, though, concentrated on the road as he drove onto 52nd Street.

They arrived at the Pie House less than ten minutes later. Inside, Fez fogged up the display case with his breath and smeared it with his sweaty hands. He asked the baker details about the coconut custard pie and the chocolate cream pie, but Donna pulled Hyde to a corner table, as far from the display case—and Fez—as possible.

"I'd much rather see Jackie with you," she whispered.

He flicked the table's napkin dispenser. "You're still on this?"

"When Eric and I first thought something was brewing between you two, it scared us. But Kelso's been such a jackass. He brought this on himself."

"There's no this, all right?" He shoved the napkin dispenser aside. It skidded to the table edge but didn't fall off. "Me and her … it's crazy."

"Whatever you say, Hyde." She returned the napkin dispenser to its proper place. "But I could write an essay with the thesis: Jackie and Hyde are in love, and I'd have plenty of assertions to back it up."

"You write that essay, and I'll have enough evidence to commit you to the looney bin."

She smirked as if his threat were empty, and maybe it was. She'd given him a new read on his own evidence. He wasn't Jackie's sanctuary from Kelso. Kelso had become her refuge from Hyde.
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SPINNING OUT

Jackie, like the rest of her classmates in study hall, was actually doing homework. Pencils scribbling on paper had replaced chitchat and laughter, but tomorrow was the trip to Quartz Falls State Park. With early-morning wake-up calls, three-hour hikes, and days full of lessons in wilderness skills, no academic work would get done.

Her stomach growled as she graphed her last linear equation. She hadn't eaten much at all since Saturday. Usually her appetite grew stronger when she felt hopeless, but it was thinned out, weakened by Steven, Michael, and her parents.

She drew a plot point on her graph paper, but something jostled the table she shared with Valerie and Leslie. Jackie's pencil jumped, creating a garbage line across her graph. She grunted and peered up from her homework. Valerie had leapt from her seat. Her muscular legs must've knocked the table.

"Mrs. Fletcher," she said to the study hall supervisor, "may Jackie and I leave a little early? We have important cheer business to discuss before the trip tomorrow."

"Of course, Valerie," Mrs. Fletcher said from her desk. She pulled two hall passes from a drawer and wrote on them. Valerie could get almost anything from her. In fact, most people could. As far as study hall supervisors went, Mrs. Fletcher was the most lenient.

Valerie retrieved the hall passes and tapped Jackie's arm. "Pack up."

"Why?" Jackie said. Fifteen minutes were left in study hall, and she'd planned to start on her history homework next. "What's this 'cheer business' about anyway?"

"I'll tell you outside. Pack up." Valerie's orders weren't meant to be taken as suggestions, and Jackie did as instructed. Beside her, Leslie put away her own homework, but Valerie said, "Not you." She clasped Leslie's shoulder. "You stay here."

Leslie grabbed her backpack. "But—"

"Not. You."

"All right..." Leslie returned her homework to the table and kept her head down.

Jackie hefted her backpack onto her shoulders, but it was light in comparison to the grief she carried. She followed Valerie into the hallway and to the make-out alcove, of all places.

The alcove was actually a circular window, like a giant porthole on a ship. It looked into the lobby downstairs, allowing students to spy on one another other. It was also big enough that two students
could comfortably sit together or even lie down, as long as one student was on top of the other.

Jackie had made out with Michael here many times. She'd also glimpsed, from the lobby, Steven kissing random girls in the window. Valerie's choice of the alcove as a talking spot was dubious, and Jackie braced herself. She had to remain steady in voice, steady on her feet.

Valerie sat on the curved sill with her backpack between her legs. "I learned some terrible information yesterday," she said, "and as your cheer captain, I feel it's my duty to tell you."

"What?" Jackie placed a hand on her rumbling stomach. "Did we lose our bid to compete at the regional this year?"

"No, no. Nothing that horrendous, at least for the team. We'll be in Milwaukee this December." Valerie paused for effect, as she often did. "This is just about you."

"Me?"

"Unfortunately, you've attracted the wrong kind of person to yourself. Steven Hyde is in love with you."

Jackie's skin prickled and became hot at the same time, and she gripped the material of shirt. "How, exactly, did you learn this?"

"He all but said so."

"To you?"

"Yes." Valerie slid her hands over her knees and lowered her voice. "I confronted him about Julie, about what he did to the poor thing. She's still pining after his tongue. Can you believe that? Pathetic. But he couldn't hide how he feels about you. I mean, Jackie..."

She laughed, and her perfectly curled hair bounced against her cheeks. "You should've seen us. I really let him have it. Cheerleaders stand up for their own, but the only cheerleader he wants is you."

Jackie's backpack slipped from her shoulders to the floor. Valerie's lies weren't hard to discern, but she sounded genuine. That meant the only liar was Steven.

On Saturday, he'd accused Jackie of using him to get back at—and get over—Michael. His anger was obvious, not mixed into a haiku or sarcastic insult. His openness with her had matched his pain. Because he felt something for her. Since their first kiss, he'd felt something and lied about it.

Her stomach was empty, but it pressed down on her other organs. Breathing had become harder, too. Maybe her diaphragm was squeezing her stomach instead of making room for her lungs.

"He loves me," she whispered.

Valerie reached forward and patted Jackie's hip. "Feel free to scream with horror."

Jackie did scream, but not in any way Valerie could hear. She screamed inside herself at herself. After pursuing Steven for months, declaring her love for him, and their kiss, she went back to Michael. Not immediately, but Steven's perspective about her made total sense.

"He loves me," she said again, this time with more power. Her lungs expanded in her chest with a deep breath, and she shouted, "He loves me!"

"And you love Michael," Valerie said. "It's so very Shakespearean."
Jackie jerked back her head. Valerie might as well have smacked her in the face. "I'm dating Mark —"

"It's okay, Jackie..." Valerie grasped Jackie's hand with both of her cold ones. "I know you've been putting on a show with that Ft. Blanderson boy. And now you've got that shabby, burnout loser lusting after you."

"He is not a loser!" She yanked her hand free from Valerie's. "Yeah, he needs a haircut and a shave, but he's not shabby, either. You've never really looked at him. If you had, you would've seen how smart and poetic and compassionate and noble he is. Remember our game against Green Bay Prep last year?"

"Mm-hmm." Valerie turned from Jackie to the window. A few students roamed the lobby below, but Valerie's fingers combed through her curls. Only her own reflection seemed to be of interest to her.

Jackie's thoughts trembled with her pulse. Valerie was close to ending this conversation, but Jackie said, "Steven sacrificed a lot so I could cheer at that game. He didn't even like me yet, not really, but he protected me—"

Valerie whipped her face toward her. "By doing what?"

"Risking his future. Do you truly think Michael would do the same for you?"

"I'm making his future," Valerie said, "and you better be more careful with yours."

She stood up and cast a shadow over Jackie. Valerie's extra half-foot of height could be intimidating, but her social power was far more threatening. "You've been giving me the run-around since school started," she went on. "First with Ft. Blanderson. Now with Steven Hyde, but the truth is you're in love with Michael..." She frowned, but it had the subtext of a grin. It was an expression that took years to master. "And I have him."

She grabbed her backpack, and as she strutted to the stairwell, Jackie sank onto the curved window sill. The hallway was spinning.

"Don't faint," Jackie whispered. She'd never passed out in her life, except for the time Michael tossed her onto that trampoline. Her eyes squeezed shut at the memory, at her dizziness, but her thoughts spiraled around her brain. Steven thought she loved Michael. Donna and Valerie did, too. They weren't wrong, but loving someone and being in love with someone weren't the same.

The only thrills Michael gave her now were the horror-movie kind. They created an urge in her to stab his stupid, beautiful face, but that wasn't good. She needed to feel nothing for him. Otherwise, Steven would feel nothing for her anymore but contempt.

Michael emerged from Mr. Ortega's Spanish class with a crowd of students. One of his backpack straps dangled freely, and Jackie grabbed it and dragged him to the wall.

"Hello, Michael," she said.

"Jackie." He brushed a hand through his hair, as if her move had messed it up. "How'd you know where to find me?"

The third-floor hallway was emptying out. In a minute or two, no other students would be left. Everyone was heading to the cafeteria or outside for lunch, but she needed more privacy than that.
"You stole a copy of my schedule," he said. "You're stalking me!"

"No. Valerie has your schedule memorized, and she likes to recite it." She switched her grip from his backpack to his shirt. She twisted her hand in it, exposing his belly, but he wouldn't escape her. "You're going to wait with me. Then you're going to go where I tell you."

He chuckled nervously. "Okay..."

Mr. Hill, the ninth grade English teacher, followed the last of his students from his classroom. He had a long stride, and he reached the stairwell in moments. His classroom was just across the hall—perfect—and Jackie yanked Michael to it.

"Jackie—" Michael said as she shoved him inside the room. She locked the door behind them. The lights were off, but sunlight streamed in through the windows.

"I've thought about your offer," she said, "about being your mistress. Since I have a boyfriend, you'd technically be my mistress, too." She herded him to Mr. Hill's desk. The farther they were from the door, the better. "I'm giving you the chance to wow me. If you succeed, we can talk terms."

"Are you serious?" He dropped his backpack, and his hands landed on her hips. His touch stiffened her spine, but her body didn't tingle. "Baby..."

He lifted her onto Mr. Hill's desk, and his lips went to her neck. He always started with the neck. She held onto his back for support as her racing heart broke the sound barrier. The resulting shockwaves made her shake, but he continued his usual routine, sucking the skin near her jawline and fondling her breasts over her shirt.

"Not wowing me, Michael."

"Sorry."

He cupped her cheeks and focused his attention on her mouth. His tongue parted her lips, and as she let him in deeper, her hands wandered to his head. His hair was soft, and the kiss was powerful, but her blood throbbed no lower than her chest.

She moved her face to the side, and his lips skimmed wetly across her cheek. "Mmm ... no," she said and strengthened her hold onto his head, both for better control of him and to steady herself. The desk beneath her was bobbing, as if the classroom floor had become the ocean. She really should've eaten something this morning, but her appetite was gone. "Unzip my pants."

"All right!" His fingers went to the fly of her jeans. He popped open the button and tugged down the zipper. He started to take off his own pants, but she pulled his hair. "Ow!"

"No, Michael. Your pants stay on. Only mine go off."

"But what fun is that for me?"

She pulled his hair again.

"God—fine! So bossy." He shoved her jeans to her ankles. His fingers glided past the hem of her panties and between her thighs. The sensation was familiar, and his technique wasn't half-bad, but she stopped him a few seconds in. "Now what?" he said.

"This has to be worth it." She drew his head closer and pushed it gently toward her lap. He'd done the same to her when they dated, begging her to spit-shine his love gun. Nothing romantic or loving
had been part of it, which is why she'd refused. But today could change all that. "Do you understand?"

"Can't we just do it?"

"No! It's this or nothing. Make your pick."

He groaned like she'd told him to do her homework, but he dragged her panties over her thighs. His hands grasped her knees. He knelt on the classroom floor, and she shut her eyes as his face went between her legs.

Her body jerked at the first contact of his tongue. He'd found the right spot, like he'd done this before, but every flick of his tongue burned. Her legs quivered, and tears rose in her eyes. She whimpered as a scorching ache spread into her stomach. Her feelings for Michael still existed, but only as hollowed-out shells. Their contents had rotted away.

"You're a lie!" she blurted as a faint orgasm quaked through her. The fire torturing her nerves consumed any real pleasure, and she crushed his jaws with her thighs. "Everything I thought you were, it isn't true!"

He yowled in pain and fell backward to the floor. "This is why I never give head!" he shouted. "I have never had a good experience giving head!"

Tears slipped down her cheeks. The ache in her stomach had become nausea, and she pulled up her panties and jeans with shaky arms. Steven would never forgive her for this experiment, but the results were definitive. "I'm not in love with you, Michael."

"Putting on a brave face … but don't worry. I won't tell Valerie about us." He reached toward her from the floor. "A little help?"

Valerie. Laurie. Pam Macy, and all the girls Jackie had no names for. They could provide Michael with one fleeting joy after another, but none lasted. Not even his memories with Jackie had left a permanent mark, except to create a sense of ownership.

She hopped off the desk, drew back her foot, and kicked him in the balls. "Help yourself!"

Bands of sunlight and heat flowed over her as she strode to the classroom door. She had to get out of here, but the dying throb between her legs sapped her strength. Her pace was slowing, and Michael sobbed behind her. Yet how many days and nights had he made her cry? She'd held onto him so long, desperately hoping their experiences would change him. That he'd grow into the man she envisioned.

Instead of dissipating, those delusions had stayed with her. For months … for years. Transforming into possessiveness, even as she fell in love with Steven.

But Steven was already whom she needed him to be. Wanted him to be, but their first kiss had led them to a seemingly endless stalemate.

She opened the classroom door but clutched the knob. Her thoughts were dizzying, or maybe it was the lack of food. The hallway outside spun like a carousel at top speed. She tried calling for Michael, but her hand slipped from the door as everything went dark.

Timmy burst into The Hub through the front door, and Hyde swallowed down a bite of burger. "Coach Ferguson's finally divorcing Joyce," Hyde said, getting in his guess first.
He was sitting at the corner booth with Forman and Fez, but the appearance of Timmy Wilson always triggered a game. Timmy was Point Place High’s loudest—and most obnoxious—gossip. Whoever guessed closest to Timmy's latest rumor won a quarter from each player.

"Jake Bradley," Forman said. "Off the football team."

Hyde scowled. "No way. Fez?"

Fez began to speak, but Timmy shouted by the door, "Jackie Burkhart passed out! Jackie Burkhart passed out!"

A group of cheerleaders at another table gasped. Students by the jukebox whispered to each other, and Hyde charged from the booth to Timmy.

"Jackie—" Hyde said

"Passed out!" Timmy finished, and Hyde grabbed him by the shirt collar. "What?"

"Where is she?" Hyde shook him but not too hard. For such a loudmouth, Timmy was a little guy. "Kenosha Memorial?"

"J-just the nurse's office."

Hyde let him go but left The Hub without waiting for Forman and Fez. The pavement vibrated through his body as he raced back to school. People on the sidewalk became obstacles to avoid, and yellow-leafed trees blurred together. Jackie had to be all right. He hadn't seen her all morning, but she had to be all right.

He reached the lobby within three minutes. It was more crowded than usual at lunch time, full of girls from the cheer squad. They'd gathered near the reception desk, and he headed toward them. Their presence all but confirmed Timmy's rumor.

Sweat plastered Hyde's shirt sleeves to his arms, and his suede jacket weighed him down like iron armor, but he didn't slow his pace. Mrs. Dooley shouted something as he passed her desk, but he ignored her and entered the administrative hallway. The nurse's office was around the corner, and on the bench outside it were Kelso and Valerie, making out.

"Hey!" Hyde said and yanked on Kelso's T-shirt collar.

Kelso coughed and peered up from Valerie. "Hey! yourself, Hyde!" he croaked out. "Don't choke a guy who's Frenching someone!".

The door to the nurse's office was closed, and Hyde jutted his chin toward it. "Jackie's in there?"

"Yeah..." Kelso rubbed his throat. "I found her on the third floor. She woke up all disoriented, and I helped her get down here."

"Poor thing," Valerie said, and her obvious insincerity stiffened Hyde's shoulders. "I'm so worried about her."

"Sure you are," Hyde said.

He grasped the door knob to the nurse's office, and Kelso said, "You're not allowed in there. Nurse kicked me out."

Hyde turned the knob and stepped inside. No one was keeping him out. He glanced around for
Jackie, but a curtain separated the front part of the office from the back.

Nurse Davenport was sitting at her desk, flipping through a student roster. "Unless you require medical attention," she said, "you'll have to leave."

"Think I got a fever," he said and shut the door behind him.

"Oh." She left the roster on the desk and brought him a thermometer. "Put this under your tongue. You can sit over there." She gestured to a row of three chairs, near the curtain. "And, please, sit quietly. There's a student recovering from a bit of a dizzy spell.

He gave her a thumbs-up and stuck the thermometer under his tongue. He sat in the chair closest to the curtain, and Nurse Davenport busied herself at her desk, back facing him. Exactly what he needed. Unless she had superhuman hearing or an invisible mirror only she could see, she wouldn't catch him.

He pulled the curtain aside an inch and glimpsed Jackie on the office cot. She was sitting up, eating a sandwich, and drinking something from a plastic cup. She seemed fine, but he had to be sure. He pulled the curtain back further, and the pallor of her skin smashed into his chest. Her cheeks were bloodless, like a vampire had sucked out all her blood, and the thermometer fell from his mouth.

"Steven?" She put her food on the tray table beside her. "What are you—"

"For God's sake!" Nurse Davenport rushed to the curtain, but Jackie stopped her from closing it. "Jackie," Nurse Davenport said, "you need to eat and rest."

"I also need to talk to Steven."

Nurse Davenport picked up the thermometer and pointed at Hyde with it. "Is he your friend?"

Jackie looked at him, as if expecting him to answer for her. "Whatever she needs from me," he said, "she's got it."

Jackie grabbed her sandwich again. "Yes. He's my friend."

Nurse Davenport glanced at the thermometer then at him. Her dark eyebrows furrowed, and she touched the wispy ends of her hair. "I hope you're a good one because that's what she needs."

"Steven's one of the best friends I've ever had," Jackie said. It was a title he hadn't earned, and he scratched his fingers through his beard. "So please don't freak him out about what happened."

"You're not here because you feel sick," Nurse Davenport said to him. He shook his head, and she dropped the thermometer into her pocket. "That's just as well."

But he did feel sick. Jackie had passed out, and he hadn't been around to help her. "So what's the deal?" he said.

Jackie sipped her drink, orange juice from the looks of it, before answering. "I skipped breakfast this morning, and I fainted."

"People don't normally faint from skipping breakfast," he said. Not unless they had an underlying condition.

"No," Nurse Davenport said, "but they can from skipping dinner the night before, too, and from being under an inordinate amount of stress—"
"Hey, that's private!" Jackie slammed her cup onto the tray. "What happened to nurse-student confidentiality?"

Nurse Davenport cupped Jackie's shoulder and kept her voice even. "Jackie, someone you trust has to know." She turned toward Hyde. "She has no immediate signs of concussion, but some symptoms can present themselves hours or even days after a head trauma."

"I don't have head trauma," Jackie said and pointed at her forehead. "Do you see any bruising? Do you? I'm a cheerleader, Nurse Davenport. I'm trained how to fall."

"At any rate," Nurse Davenport continued, still speaking to Hyde, "someone has to drive her home and stay with her in case the symptoms of concussion present themselves. Both her parents are out of town for the week, and her housekeeper, apparently, is the designated guardian..."

The disapproval in her tone was hard to miss, and Jackie stared at the wall. She had almost half a sandwich left to eat, but she'd stopped touching it.

He forced himself to stay quiet, to breathe through his nose. Showing his anger wouldn't help the situation. It would only make Jackie shut down further.

"Unfortunately," Nurse Davenport said, "Ms. Pérez is only at the Burkharts' residence during mornings and evenings—is that right, Jackie?"

Jackie nodded, still facing the wall.

"And the emergency contact listed is her aunt Elizabeth, who lives in Michigan—"

"I'll help her out," he said, partly to get Nurse Davenport to quit shoving tent stakes into Jackie's pride. "What should I look out for?"

Nurse Davenport hurried to her desk, grabbed a sheet of paper from it, and gave it to him. "That lists the symptoms. If she displays any of them, you'll have to bring her to the hospital."

He read the paper as she returned to the desk. She began to write on a yellow Excused Absence slip, what students called an E.A.S., but he focused on the concussion symptoms. They included trouble concentrating, a sensitivity to noise and light, and personality or mood shifts. That last one would be tough to for him to judge. Not eating, being "under an inordinate amount of stress," parents stranding her for a week—Jackie's mood should be crappy.

"Hand this to Mrs. Dooley," Nurse Davenport said and passed him the E.A.S. "This excuses you from classes the rest of the day."

"Cool." He only had art, study hall, and gym left, and Coach Ferguson probably wouldn't let him participate anyway. His only pair of sneakers was dead. "Jackie," he said and put the E.A.S. into his jeans pocket, "what's your locker combo?"

"What?" Jackie finally moved her gaze from the wall. "Why do you need that?"

"To get your stuff." And to check if her memory was intact. Another concussion symptom was memory problems. "You're not goin' upstairs." He folded up the symptoms sheet and shoved it in the same pocket as the E.A.S. "You're staying here and finishing that sandwich."

"Steven, you don't have to do this. I can drive myself—"

Nurse Davenport put up a hand. "Absolutely not. Jackie, I will make this bigger than it is if you don't
"Fine." Jackie swiped the sandwich off the tray and bit into it. "Tmfy-tff, mapf, mrffy," she said while chewing.

Hyde laughed quietly. "Yeah, not gonna be able to open your locker from that."

"Fine!" Jackie shouted after swallowing her bite. "Twenty-two, eight, thirty. And the locker is number—"

"217," he said, already on his way out of the nurse's office. He'd seen her at her locker more than once.

Kelso and Valerie were no longer in the waiting area. They'd put on their show of giving a shit and cleared out. Forman and Fez were sitting on the bench in their place, but they both stood as soon as Hyde shut the office door.

"How is she?" Forman said.

Fez grasped Hyde's upper arms. "Tell me she's okay. She's okay, isn't she? Tell me she's okay!"

"She'll be fine." Hyde would make sure of it. "Forman, you're drivin' my car home today." He pushed Fez off him, plucked his car keys from his jeans pocket, and tossed them at Forman. "Give Fez the Cruiser's keys. I gotta drive Jackie home in her car."

"Why can't I take the El Camino?" Fez said.

"'Cause the last time I let you drive it, you dented the fender and wrecked one of the tail lights. Forman can handle a manual transmission."

Hyde left the the administrative hallway with Forman and Fez following. The lobby was free of cheerleaders. Valerie must've given them permission to disperse, and—fuck him, he'd messed up. Since this summer, he'd messed up. Jackie had no real friends on the cheer squad. She probably thought she had no real friends in the basement, either, except for Donna. But Forman had finally come around. Fez got distracted easily, but he still gave a crap. Either one of them would've driven her home.

But Hyde needed to do it. Distrusting Jackie had become a bad habit. But instead of breaking it, he'd proven how much he sucked at the whole being-in-love thing. Just like his parents. Just like her parents. Maybe he didn't deserve better anymore, but she sure as hell did.
Unfolding the Truth

Chapter Notes

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
UNFOLDING THE TRUTH

Hyde carried a tray of deviled eggs up the stairs to Jackie's bedroom. The meal took him an hour to make, almost twice as long than it should have. The Burkharts' pantry was as big as the Formans' dining room. He'd spent twenty minutes searching for the right ingredients, but the effort would be worth it if it brought Jackie even a scrap of joy.

Her bedroom door wasn't quite closed. The sound of her small black-and-white TV came through, but she could've fallen asleep while he was gone. "Jackie," he said through the door crack.

"I'm awake," she said. "I don't have a headache, and I haven't thrown up." She was answering his questions before he could ask them. He entered her room with the tray, but she didn't look at him. She was sitting on the bed in her pink flannel pajamas, gaze focused on the TV. A soap opera played on the thirteen-incher, and she pointed at it. "I'm not dizzy either, though Sue being back from the dead is ridiculous."

He chuckled, mostly from relief. She was alert. Her speech wasn't slurred. She demonstrated none of the concussion symptoms he had to watch out for, and he brought the deviled eggs closer to the bed. "Would've finished 'em sooner," he said, "but the white vinegar was hidden better than my stash."

She turned toward the tray of food. Her eyes widened, and she covered her mouth.

He backed away. "Crap, you gonna puke?"

"No!" She removed her hand from her mouth, revealing a smile. The sky outside had become gray, pushing murk through the windows, but the room brightened with her face. "You remembered."

"Might have." He set her up with the tray. Poured her a fresh glass of orange juice from the carton on her nightstand. Truth was most of what she'd said this summer had lodged in his skull.

"If someone ever cooked me those deviled eggs," she'd told him after an episode of Julia Child & Company, "I'd lose my mind."

"You did," she said now and bit into one of the egg-halves. A drop of yellow mustard fell onto her chin. She wiped it off, licked her finger, and her smile returned. It was the most freakin' adorable sight ever to grace his eyes, but the delight on her face gathered clouds in his chest. She hadn't seemed this happy in a long time, except maybe when he won her that pendant. He recognized the deepening sadness in what she'd call her soul. It was the same reflecting back at him every damn morning in the mirror.

Her meal became crumbs in no time. She had to be fueled by starvation, not just of the body. Of the
heart. She ate every last egg, drank down a full glass of orange juice, and her delight didn't fade. "Oh, my God—you're a chef!"

"Why haven't you been eating?" he said.

She glanced across the room at her dresser. A jar sat on it, the same jar from the night he'd delivered her photos, and her posture wilted with a breath. Her hands fell into her lap, and his neck heated up. Asking that question was the same as performing the Heimlich, making her vomit any joy he'd managed to give her.

"I'm losing my parents," she said, staring at her hands. "I lost the first love of my life … and I sacrificed the chance to be with the boy I love now."

She shut off the TV. Her legs swung over the side of the bed, but she stayed seated. Her breathing became deliberate, like she was trying to avoid hyperventilating or puking. He dragged the mop bucket to her. He'd swiped it from the kitchen after getting her upstairs, but she waved it away.

"I understand why you don't believe me," she said, "how I feel about you." She looked up at him, and the thinness of her face struck him. She really hadn't eaten for days. "And even though I'm beautiful, talented, and a genius, the choices I've made have canceled that out for you. But you deserve someone who's as smart as me and as beautiful—" she inhaled a breath, and her words quickened, "though you won't find that because, come on, no one's more beautiful than I am—"

"Jackie—"

"But she won't have my history, our history. You'll be able to trust her in a way you'll never trust me." Her lips pinched together, like she was going to frown, but a laugh burst from her mouth. "My food-deprived brain led me to making the biggest mistake of my life. And now…"

The sadness in her eyes turned to anguish, as if a tornado had ripped apart her past, present, and future. He wanted to cradle her face and kiss that anguish away. His own choices had piled into a mountain of mistakes. They were threatening to avalanche and take him—and anyone who stood by him—out, but he remained still. She needed him to listen, so he'd listen.

She jutted her chin at her bedroom door. "Go stand over there."

"Why?"

"Because once you hear what I'm gonna say, you'll want to leave."

He went to the door and leaned against it, but he wouldn't leave. Not unless she told him to. Even if what she said next tore up his insides, he'd stick to his word and watch over her. She wasn't going to die of a concussion because his heart quit beating.

"I have no doubts about my feelings for you," she began, and he ground his teeth together. All she needed to hear from him, all he needed to say, churned in his guts, but this was her time to speak. "But my..." She slid her hands over her legs and grasped her knees. "But Michael—I wasn't sure what was left. I didn't plan to go as far as I did, but..."

Her toes scraped her carpet. "I pulled him into a classroom and had him go down on me. It hurt. The whole thing hurt, from the inside-out. Even when I … finished, it was awful. I felt sick."

Her confession ramped up his adrenaline. His body was ready to bolt, but instinct wouldn't rule him. "Then you fainted," he said.
"Then I told him I'm not in love with him," she said. "And I kicked him in the 'nads for being a selfish asshole. Because that's what he is. I started to realize it before the summer, but I didn't want to face it. And the last few months, I've been so angry at him for not being who I want. Furious at myself for accepting a lie as my first love."

She touched her throat, but her voice remained steady. "My parents keep lying to each other and to themselves. I learned from the best, but when Michael was..." she gestured to her body, "I couldn't deny how I felt any longer. All my rage and grief burned through me, and I tried to leave the classroom...

"That's when I passed out." Her gaze didn't falter, and out of respect he didn't lower his. "He will never touch me again, Steven. He can't break my heart anymore. Only you can, and I'm not saying that to guilt you into forgiving me. I'm just stating facts."

A smile tugged at his lips, but he suppressed it. She was stronger than him, stronger than most.

"I must disgust you," she said and lifted her legs onto the bed. "I disgust myself." She hugged her knees to her chest. "I could have just kissed him, but I wanted no doubts. Sometimes a kiss isn't enough."

Her shoulders hunched, and her chin lowered to her knees. She was shrinking into herself, and he moved away from the bedroom door. He'd sworn weeks ago to be her safe place, but his insecurity had put her in danger. He'd felt less safe himself every time she showed any reaction to Kelso. But worrying about her screwing with him had confused her straight to Kelso's mouth.

"Should've been man enough to tell you the truth earlier," he said. "All of it." His fingers went to his temple, but his shades were in the Camino's glove box. Nothing to hide behind. He retreated to her dresser, by the jar of folded-up paper. Jackie had given him an escape route from the room, from their relationship. He had to give her the same. "Valerie accosted me by my locker yesterday."

She turned toward him on the bed. "Okay..."

"Chick's got some kind of vendetta against you, man. She's dating Kelso just to get back at you."

"I really don't care." Her shoulders stayed hunched, and her fingers played with the cuff of her pajama bottoms. "She can believe it hurts me, and she can have him if that's how she wants to waste her time."

His throat clogged when he tried to speak. He cleared it and rubbed his knuckles over his beard. "She also forced herself on me."

"What?" She jumped off the bed and dashed to him. She kept her arms at her sides but visually checked him over like he'd been in a knife fight. "What exactly did she do?"

"Dry-humped me against the lockers," he said. "Could've stopped her. But she undid my fly, grabbed my dick, and I let her give me a handy." His stomach burned with the memory. "Almost came ... wanted to ... so I'm not innocent here."

"All this happened in public?" She put up a hand, as if to dismiss her own question. "You didn't ... finish?"

"Finished myself later, but I let her go too far. Plus, I went down on Julie while being in love with you, and I let you walk outta my room on Saturday. I—"

His throat clogged again, but this time he couldn't clear it fully. "I let you believe I think you're
smeared in crap," he said raggedly, "when I'm the one who's covered in it. So I've got you beat." He
gripped the edge of her dresser and pushed his back into it. "I fucked up way more than you, man.
That stuff with Kelso today wouldn't have happened if I'd just told you the damn truth."

"Uh-uh, Steven. We're both guilty." She reached beside him and grabbed the jar. "I wrote all my
grievances about the people I love, including you. I could've told you those things instead, but I
didn't think you'd listen. I didn't give you a chance to." Her eyebrows rose, wrinkling her forehead.
"People don't tend to hear me, not really, or consider what I feel to be important. But you..."

She unscrewed the jar but left on the cap. "You hear me better than I hear myself sometimes. You
warned me to be careful about Michael, about the cheer squad. To protect myself." She tipped the
jar, and its folded pieces of paper spilled onto the floor. "Pick one. Read them all if you want to
know my soul and judge it."

"You don't gotta do this. Your thoughts are allowed to be private."

"You'll always believe I might go back to Michael because I went back to him before—and I went
back to him today. I won't ever go back to him again, but you'll never stop waiting for it to happen."

He gripped the dresser's edge harder. It bit into his palms, but the physical pain was no match for the
emotional. If he had a soul, it was disintegrating. His dad had messed around on his mom and left.
His mom had messed around with everyone and left. Being deserted seemed inevitable, but Jackie
wasn't either of his parents. And he wasn't hers.

"I fooled around with two of your teammates," he said. "You've got every right to think I'll cheat
whenever I'm pissed at you. I won't, but how the hell are you supposed to believe it?"

The pieces of paper crackled as she stepped on them. She replaced the jar on the dresser and slid her
hand over one of his. "So what do we do?"

His palms throbbed with the pressure he'd put on them. So did his whole body, but he opened his
arms to her. "Not trustin' each other drove us into a ditch. How's about giving the opposite a spin?"

She cupped her cheek and stared at him. "What exactly are you saying?"

"You figured out what you had to about Kelso, and you let him go."

"You believe me?"

His arms grew tired from holding their position, but he forced them to stay up. "Believe, trust, love,
want. My king's in check, Jackie, all right? You've won."

"It's a draw." She hugged his waist and nestled her head against his chest. Exhaustion hit him as he
closed his arms around her, but he put no weight on her body. She'd been through enough. "I love
you so much," she said. "I'm sorry, Steven. For making you feel used. For all of it."

"So am I ... for every Goddamn second I made you think you're less than you are." He buried his
face in her hair. Her apricot scent filled his nose, and gratitude saturated his blood. "And before you
ask, you're worth a helluva lot more than you've gotten. From your parents. From Kelso. From me—
and you've already given me more than I ever thought I'd get."

His guts seemed to be pushing against his stomach. Turning what was inside him into words was
slightly less impossible than transmuting lead into gold, but he had to keep going. "You deserve to be
freakin' happy, man, and if I get to be part of that—."
"Steven, you do. You are, and I'm … well, I'm starting to be." She tightened her arms around him. "Every second I'm with you now, I'm getting closer."

"Thanks for lettin' me try to do better."

She sighed, and he kissed her temple. He planned on kissing her a lot more, wherever she invited him to, but not today. Today was about recovery and recuperation, not sweat and friction.

Tomorrow, though, they were off to Quartz Falls. That meant four nights with a roomy tent to themselves, but they'd have to be sneaky. Otherwise, a bounty would be put on their relationship, ending it before it truly began.
Jackie chose a middle seat in Michael's Volkswagen Microbus. She slid her suitcase, makeup case, and rolled-up sleeping bag beneath it. Leslie Cannon promised to share her two-person tent with her, so buying a luxury tent for herself hadn't been necessary. But the next few days in Quartz Falls were going to be tricky, especially if her first thirty seconds in the Microbus was any indication.

Donna, Fez, and even Eric had greeted her warmly. They showed concern for how she was feeling, and Donna offered to help with Jackie's luggage. Then Michael's sister, Kim, asked if Jackie was sick.

"Of course she's sick," Michael said just a moment ago. "She thinks she's over me."

"Mikey," Kim said. She was sitting in the front, across from Michael. Jackie saw only the back of her head, but Kim's tone was one of exasperation. She'd graduated college last year and often acted like Michael's second mom. She must have come along to drive the Microbus home to the Kelsos'. He couldn't keep it parked in the school lot for five days. It would get vandalized.

"Give it a rest," she continued. "Haven't you put Jackie through enough?"

"Too damn much," Steven said from the back seat, and Jackie's stomach curled in on itself. He wasn't supposed to defend her. He was supposed to act aloof, like he had the last fifty seconds. She'd barely looked at him when she got into the Microbus, but she'd caught a glimpse. He'd shaved off his beard, like he said he would.

In her bedroom yesterday, she'd asked him to kiss her again. Not just on her temple but on the lips. "Can't kiss you with this," was his answer, and he indicated his beard.

"But I love how scruffy you are," she'd said. His hair was still too long. His curls were thick, spiraled clumps, but they added to his appeal. She brushed them from his face and ran her thumb over his lips. "Beards are so manly, Steven. You don't look like a boy anymore."

"I'll grow you another one, okay? Gotta shave this one off."

He didn't explain further, but she could guess. Memories of Julie and Valerie were in his beard, just like Valerie's grassy perfume infested the Microbus. Michael must have fooled around with her yesterday, after bringing Jackie to the school nurse.

But at least he'd picked up Jackie on time this morning. She had no one to drive her Lincoln home from school, and taking the bus with her luggage would've been a hassle.

"Jackie fainted at school," Fez said at a red light. He moved up the aisle and sat behind Kim. "But
we'll be watching over her this week, to make sure she doesn't have a concussion."

Jackie bit the inside of her cheek. She despised being spoken about as if she were an invalid, but Fez was obviously trying to flirt.

Kim turned in her seat and faced him. "That's really sweet of you, Fez. That's sweet of all of you." She lifted her chin, and her gaze landed on Jackie. Kim was nearly as tall as Michael. She resembled him, too. Same cheekbones, same eyes and lips. They could've been identical twins if not for their different genders and Kim's body type. She was built like Donna but more hippy.

"Jackie, take it easy this week," she said. "Don't let anyone push you past what feels safe for you to do."

"I'll be eighteen in a month," Fez said before Jackie could respond. "I'm also a virgin."

"No!" Kelso stuck out his arm toward Kim. His fingers splayed, like he was trying to hide her from Fez's view, and the Microbus swerved.

"Pay attention, you moron!" Steven shouted. He was out of his seat and charging up the aisle.

Michael gripped the steering wheel with both hands. "I am paying attention! To Fez trying to get my sister to deflower him."

Steven sat in the seat across from Jackie, but he seemed ready to jump at any moment and take control of the Microbus. "Just drive, man."

"I think you should do it, Kim," Eric said from the seat behind Steven. Donna was sitting beside him, her eyes closed and head leaning on his shoulder. "It'll do us all a world of good."

"Okay, can we stop talking about who I might or might not have sex with?" Kim said. "It's too damn early in the morning. I've had one cup of coffee. The sun isn't even completely up yet."

"You know what is up?" Fez said, and the Microbus swerved again.

"Do not finish that sentence!" Kelso shouted.

Steven got to his feet and grabbed Fez by his shirt collar. He dragged Fez to the rear-most seat, and Jackie's chest ached. She wanted to sit with Steven, to lean her head on his shoulder and take a ten-minute nap. But she couldn't, not with Michael present. He'd report to Valerie, and that was the problem.

Valerie had accused Steven on Monday of being in love with Jackie.

"And that's trouble," he'd told Jackie yesterday, "If she sees us enjoying ourselves together on the camping trip, she might try to hurt you. That chick's an aggressive psycho, man. She forced herself on me in plain freakin' sight at school. In the woods too much can go wrong."

"Which means Michael can't know we're we're together," she said.

"Bingo. Look..." His fingertips had skimmed her waist then. They eased up and down her back, and she thought of her bed. It was only a few steps away, but if he wouldn't kiss her with his beard, he wouldn't do more. "I'm gonna stick by someone the whole time we're up in Quartz Falls. Wanna avoid having to defend myself if she tries anything."

He meant shoving Valerie off if she assaulted him again. Getting rough with girls wasn't his way,
even to protect himself. Jackie had experienced that herself. Over a year ago, she'd forced him to hold her hand, tackled him with unwanted hugs, and generally invaded his personal space. But the most forceful he'd gotten was to yank back his hand or pry her fingers off him and walk away.

"Hey, Hyde," Eric said now, "Donna and I are gonna need Donna's tent. Hers is a double, and I want plenty of room to be with my lady."

With both hands Steven patted the top of the seat in front of him, the one between himself and Jackie, in a syncopated rhythm. The sound was loud enough to rouse Donna from Eric's shoulder, and Steven said, "Since I'm the one who gave Donna the idea how to sneak onto the camping trip, I'm gonna use her tent. Consider it your way of thankin' me."

Jackie turned around in her seat. He'd provided the perfect opening to look at him, to talk to him. "Excuse me?" she said. "I'm the one who told Donna to join the camping trip in the first place. Therefore," she covered her heart and smiled, "I get all the credit. And if Leslie and I weren't going to share a tent that practically set itself up, I'd take Donna's tent."

"Leslie Cannon has a self-erecting tent?" Eric said, and everyone but Michael stared at him. "What?"

Steven shook his head and laughed. "Man, you've got to work on your word choice when you talk about tents."

A giggle tickled Jackie's throat, but she had to keep up appearances. "And you've got to work on giving credit where credit is due, Steven."

"Right," he said. "Your plan was for Donna to drive up to Quartz Falls by herself. Six hours of interstate hopping. And when your car broke down on her, then what? Super thinking."

"The Lincoln is a top-of-the-line luxury car! Unlike your beat-up El Camino—"

"Hey, the Camino's cherry, man. She's got it all under the hood—"

"As much as I enjoy your bickering," Eric said over them, "I'm taking Donna's tent. Mine might be in pristine condition, but it'll be too tight a fit with me and Donna together."

"Burn!" Michael shouted from the driver's seat, and Eric glared at the back of his head. "You basically called your girlfriend Gigantor."

"He did not!" Donna said.

"Yeah," Eric said. "If anyone's Gigantor, Kelso, it's your sister—"

The Microbus stopped abruptly, pushing Jackie into the seat in front of her. Michael raced down the aisle, but Kim chased him. "Michael, it's fine. It's fine!

She grabbed at his arm, but Michael pulled free. He stood before Eric, face revealing the kind of pain and anger Jackie had witnessed in him only once. "Get out of my van," he said, and when Eric stayed seated, Kelso flung open the Microbus's side doors. "Get out!"

"Kelso, I'm sorry—" Eric said.

Donna slapped his arm. "Don't apologize to him. Apologize to her!"

"Oh, right. Kim, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I just don't like Kelso calling my girlfriend names."

"So you take your anger out on his beautiful sister?" Fez said. "Shame on you, Eric."
"Yeah, man," Steven said. "Not cool."

Jackie peered through the side doors. The Microbus was parked on Birch Lane, three blocks from school. She could leave and walk the rest of the distance, but the truth clung to her like a bad smell. Before the summer, she would've defended Eric and called Kim fat. But after weeks of believing Steven saw a warped version of her—after years of experiencing people judging her based on misperceptions—she couldn't judge Kim for her weight. Kim had always been kind to her, and that did make her beautiful.

"Oh, God," she whispered as the trees outside became hazy. She cupped her forehead and shut her eyes. Maybe she did have a concussion after all. Her thoughts seemed to belong to someone else, but she said, "Eric, everyone is Gigantor next to you."

"She's not wrong," Steven said. He slung his backpack over his shoulders and grabbed a rolled-up sleeping bag from under his seat. His duffel bag was on the seat across from him. It was lumpy and worn but practical. He put its strap over his right shoulder and headed for the open doors. "Forman, clean up your mess. I'm outta here."

"So am I." Jackie gathered her suitcase, makeup case, and rolled-up sleeping bag. They weren't easy to carry, but she managed and followed Steven outside to Birch Lane. He didn't glance back at her or the Microbus as the fight among Michael, Eric, and Donna continued.

"What if we have a daughter who's overweight?" Donna shouted. "Are you going to be an asshole about it?"

Jackie sped up her pace, but her sleeping bag slipped from her grasp. She knelt to pick it up, and her makeup case fell to the sidewalk. Her clumsiness was embarrassing, especially for the best cheerleader in the state, but no one from school was nearby but Steven.

She reached for the makeup case, but Steven snatched it up first. A silver chain was woven between his fingers. He opened the makeup case and dropped the chain inside before passing the case to her. He slid her sleeping bag straps over her left arm a moment later. The sleeping bag felt more stable in her grip like that. She had little experience carrying her own luggage, especially so much at once. Usually Fez, Michael, or the housekeeper carried it for her, but Steven had just taught her how to take care of it herself.

Her thanks remained in her throat as he continued along the sidewalk, leaving her like their interaction had never happened.

She rushed in front of him and kept walking as joy surged in her chest. They'd be apart the next six hours, riding different buses to Quartz Falls, but he'd still be with her. He'd put the shooting star pendant in her makeup case, an affirmation of his love.

Two motor coach buses were parked outside Point Place High. Students packed their gear into compartments at the bottom, and Hyde did the same, but his backpack stayed with him. He'd brought entertainment and snacks for himself. Six hours stuck on a bus with no TV and no place to smoke his stash would be a highway through Hell.

He peered up the street, but too many cars blocked his view. Parents were dropping off their kids. If his friends were smart, they'd abandon Kelso's van and walk their asses to the school. But fighting had the side effect of eradicating one's sense of time.

A smile lifted his lips. He should start a fight during the drive to Quartz Falls. It would make the time
go faster, but getting suspended wasn't worth it.

He shifted his focus to the other end of the street. Jackie had to be by the juniors’ bus. Over three dozen students crowded it, wearing colorful jackets. Mt. Humphrey Sports had put out a new line of garish fall outerwear, and the junior class must have collectively decided that was its uniform.

Freakin’ trends. Spotting Jackie would be tough among those walking rainbows.

His skin froze beneath his wool jacket. He shouldn't have known Mt. Humphrey Sports had put out a new line of outwear. Hell, he shouldn't know Mt. Humphrey Sports existed, but Jackie had told him about it over a month ago. She'd shown him the catalog, and he'd actually paid attention while she pointed out clothes on its pages.

Damn, was he in deep, and he scrubbed a hand over his face. His cheeks were smooth, cold, and a little sensitive, and his body jerked at the sensations. He'd grown accustomed to having a beard, but bad memories were attached to it. Bad decisions, and his relationship with Jackie needed to begin with better ones.

He kept searching for her among the juniors, but two hard taps to his shoulder stole his focus. Forman was standing beside him, red-faced.

"Would you talk some sense into her?" Forman said and hiked his thumb at Donna. She was a few feet away, clutching her sleeping bag to her chest. "She's refusing to go on the trip."

"Crap." Hyde gripped the straps of his backpack. Revealing that he and Jackie played negotiator between Forman and Donna had been a mistake. "If she doesn't wanna go, man, she doesn't wanna go."

"Come on, Hyde. I'll set up Donna's tent for you, okay?"

Hyde quirked up an eyebrow. He'd need more than that.

"And I'll pack it up at the end of the trip," Forman said, but he could give even more. Hyde didn't budge, and after five seconds Forman added, "And you can have the donnakitty cookies Mom baked me."

Hyde slapped Forman's shoulder and grinned. "Nice doin' business with ya."

Straggling seniors moved toward the bus, and Hyde maneuvered among them carefully, avoiding their gear as he approached Donna. She had to take her opportunities while she could. Hide in plain sight so teachers wouldn't think twice about her presence.

"Donna," he said, and she acknowledged him with a flick of her eyes. "You need a break from Forman? Sneak onto the junior bus instead. It'll give you a chance to cool off," and Jackie some decent company. "Six hours apart should just about do it."

She said nothing, but her face was more flushed than Forman's, and her temples twitched.

"Look, I'm not into senior-year sentimentality, but you don't wanna miss out on this trip. You and Forman are probably gonna get hitched someday and have kids. You'll wanna share this shit with them."

"Right?" Forman said by Hyde's ear and squeezed in next to him. "If we're going to get married and have those kids, then we better talk things out. And what better place to talk than trapped on a bus full of teenagers?"
Donna shook her head but laughed. "Fine." She shoved her gear at Forman. "Put this on the bus."

"Yes, m'lady."

Forman rushed toward the bus, and Donna caught up with him. They packed her gear into the luggage compartment together, and a few minutes later everyone boarded the bus.

Mrs. Fletcher began to do roll call once students were seated. Hyde hadn't seen Kelso get on the bus, but Kelso acknowledged Mrs. Fletcher when she called his name. He had to be sitting near the front with Valerie.

Mrs. Fletcher eventually got to the Ps. After calling Janet Parker, Darren Peterson, and Vincent Picket, she said, "Pinciotti, Donna?"

Donna reached across the aisle and slapped Hyde's arm. She mouthed, "No way!" at him before shouting, "Here!"

A few students stared at her. She, Forman, Hyde, and Fez had chosen seats toward the rear of the bus. Not too close to the bathroom, though. Otherwise, they'd be smelling shit the whole ride.

Mrs. Fletcher finished roll call without disruption, and Coach Ferguson didn't check over the student roster himself. He gestured to the bus driver, who revved the engine. The bus lurched forward, and Coach Ferguson lost his balance. He grabbed onto a seat back and remained standing, but a few students laughed anyway.

"All right, you wise guys, listen up!" Coach Ferguson shouted. He went into a spiel on bus safety, but at the end he started a chant of, "Go, Vikings, go!"

Hyde shared a look with Forman and Donna, but Fez joined the chant, as did the jocks and cheerleaders. It fractured into hoots and whistles, and Coach Ferguson said, "You feel that? It's called school spirit, and I expect each and every one of you to hold onto that feeling the next five days. You'll be representing Point Place High, the Vikings, and me."

The cheerleaders and jocks applauded along with Fez, and Coach Ferguson gestured for the bus to quiet down.

"Holding onto that spirit will be especially important," he said, "because we'll be sharing the park with about fifty Fort Anderson kids."

Questions flew through the bus like a flock of confused pigeons, but deep-voiced boos broke through them. Some people restarted the "Go, Vikings, go!" chant, and Coach Ferguson blew on the whistle around his neck.

"I know, I know," he said. "They've been there since Monday. They're leaving on Friday. Ft. Anderson's Coach Saunders phoned me this weekend. She did me that courtesy out of respect, so you need to give Ft. Anderson the same kind of respect and be on your best behavior."

Groans rose from the jocks, and Donna whispered, "Do you think Coach Ferguson and the Ft. Anderson coach are having an affair?"

"Could be," Forman said. "No secret his wife's cheating on him—"

Coach Ferguson blasted on his whistle again, and the bus grew silent. "They're just freshmen, so don't treat them like they're Varsity Snapping Turtles."
"The opposing coaches are definitely sleeping together," Donna said, and Hyde nodded. No better explanation for Ferguson's intel.

Students griped about the news as the bus drove onto the interstate. Autumn trees sped by the windows. Hyde watched them for a while, but Jackie plunged into his skull. Acting cold around her sucked, even though they'd both agreed on it. That was why he'd chucked the shooting star pendant into her makeup case. His feelings for her hadn't changed over night, and he'd needed to tell her that.

A theatrical gesture probably would've gone over better. Him on one knee, declaring his undying love while returning the pendant. But their situation was too dicey.

He also didn't do theatrical gestures.

She'd have to accept that about him. She'd have to accept a whole lot she wouldn't like, but he owed her the respect of being honest. She'd never have to question what he felt for her again, even if it wasn't always good. He'd let her know, one way or the other.

"Hey," Donna said and pointed toward the front of the bus, "you think Kelso's pissed enough to stay away from us the whole trip?"

"I don't know," Forman said. "I haven't seen him that angry since Jackie told him she kissed the tiny cheese guy."

Fez rose from the seat, probably trying to get a better look at Kelso and Valerie. "He's an abomination to most women," he said, "but he loves his sister..." He sat back down. "So do I."

"You've had, like, three conversations with her in three years," Donna said.

"Three of the best conversations of my life."A dreamy smile glided over Fez's lips. "I will win this woman. I just need to come up with with the perfect pun..."

"Yeah, puns worked out for you real well at the DMV," Hyde said, but he wasn't interested in this conversation or Kelso. The only cool part about the morning was Jackie defending Kim. He hadn't expected it, but deep in his guts—since that night she'd offered to meet his ma—he'd sensed who she was at her core. No other answer for why he'd fallen for her.

And she'd clearly sensed a better guy than he'd shown her. They'd both taken missteps since the get-go, but they had to play this trip carefully. Roaming in plain sight was dangerous. For now, the truth they'd revealed to each other was safe between them and them alone.
CHAPTER TWENTY
PUNCHING BRUISES

Jackie enjoyed gossip, but after exchanging two hours of it, she was done. She'd played musical chairs with the cheer squad and other popular girls, switching bus seats whenever someone shared a rumor. The first twenty minutes, however, had been about her. Girls sat next to her in turn, asking about her fainting spell. How come Michael was the one who'd found her? Were they sleeping together behind Valerie's back? Who took her home?

Before the summer, she would've thrived on the attention. But she gave boring answers, eliciting dull stares, and the interest in her withered.

Currently, Susan Amborn was finishing a story she'd heard about Ms McGee, the calculus teacher, flirting with senior boys. Susan kept her voice to a whisper since Ms. McGee was on the bus with them. The story began to veer into other teacher happenings, and Patty Frumkin disrupted her with an, "Oh, my God!"

It was a signal that Patty had a reputation-ruiner to spill, but unlike Susan, Jackie didn't move from her seat. She stayed in her spot by the window, gazing at copper-leafed trees and thinking of Steven.

Only a half-hour remained until lunch. The junior and senior buses would pull off the highway to a fast-food place. Then she and Steven could exchange glances or share a touch as they crossed paths.

Making out with him, though, that would be a dream: leaning against one of those trees outside, their hands and lips warming each other in the autumn air, but her thoughts splintered. Her thigh was burning, as if someone had slapped it, and Julie said beside her, "Jackie, did you hear me?"

"If I'd heard you, I would have answered," Jackie said and rubbed the top of her stinging leg. Julie had dropped onto her bus seat, maybe over a minute ago, but Jackie's mind had been elsewhere.
"What is it?"

"Why didn't you tell anyone that Ft. Blanderson was going to be at the park with us?"

"Because I didn't know?"

"Come on. Surely your boyfriend told you."

Jackie huffed out a breath. Julie obviously hadn't heard Ms. McGee's announcement properly. "He had nothing to tell me since he won't be there. Mark's a senior, not a freshman."

"Older boys..." Julie leaned her head on the seat. Her blond hair curled over her cheeks, and she said nothing else. She was probably fantasizing.
Jackie tried to return to her own fantasy, but Paula Becker gasped in the seat ahead of them. The sound captured the focus of other cheer squad members. Julie sat up straight, but she turned her back to the bus aisle. "I don't have much time," Julie whispered, "but I have to talk to you about this before I die."

Jackie groaned. "No more gossip." She bent down toward her makeup case. It was under the seat in front of her, and she'd stuck a Cosmo Magazine inside it. Other magazines were in her suitcase, but that was in the bus's luggage compartment. She should have brought a backpack like Steven. She'd grossly overestimated the entertainment value of discussing rumors.

"This isn't gossip. In fact..." Julie inched closer to Jackie, "I need you to keep this to yourself. If anyone can, it's you."

She glanced over her shoulder, and Jackie followed her gaze. The cheer squad seemed wholly wrapped up in whatever Paula had to say.

"Maybe it's because you're dating someone from a rival school," Julie went on, "but you've been ... different lately. I don't think Valerie's noticed yet, but you might want to turn up the attitude." She snatched a compact from Jackie's makeup case. Julie's makeup was usually impeccably applied, never too much mascara or blush, but her cheeks appeared pinker than usual. "Anyway, in return for that warning, I'm sure you'll keep what I have to say private."

She opened the compact and checked her reflection. Her fingers brushed through her hair, pulling her curls over her cheeks. Whatever Julie was hiding, it was big. Not pimple-big but personal-big, and Jackie clutched the shooting star pendant through her shirt. She'd put on Steven's gift to her shortly after boarding the bus, but Julie would assume she was covering her heart in anticipation.

Julie snapped the compact shut and returned it to Jackie's makeup case. "I'm in love," she whispered, softer than before, and Jackie strained to hear her, "with Steven Hyde."

"What?" Jackie said. Her own voice rang in her ears, and she spoke more quietly. "You are not."

"I am." Julie cupped her denim-clad knees and lowered her head. "I've had a crush on him since middle school. He acts like this aloof asshole—and he kinda is if I'm being totally honest—but he also protected me when I first got to Old Maine."

Jackie squeezed the pendant tighter. Julie could've been a spy, ordered by Valerie to gather intel. To tell a bullshit story about Steven and observe Jackie's reaction. Her pulse pounded against her knuckles as she held the pendant, but Julie hadn't told her enough yet. She needed to hear more, and she said, "Go on."

"I wear contacts, have since eighth grade," Julie said, "but I used to wear glasses. I was a total four-eyes, and Neil Rooney knocked them—" her hand sliced through the air, "BAM! Straight off my face. He threatened to break them, too. I don't know when that psycho became Destroy. Maybe he killed his twin in the womb." She dug her nails into her knees. "But Steven got to my glasses first and made sure Neil never bothered me in middle school again."

She heaved out a breath as the bus drove over something bumpy. Either the highway needed some repair, or a dead squirrel was now flat as a sheet.

"I've thought about him a lot since then." The corner of Julie's mouth rose in a half-smile. "Steven's the opposite of almost everyone else in my life. It gets tiring being mean for the sake of reputation, but Steven..." Her half-shrug matched her smile. "He helps out the bony nerdy guy, the weird
foreign guy, and Poor Little Miss Popular whose parents are never around—"

Jackie’s hand began to shake. She let go of the pendant, but Julie couldn’t be talking about her. No one but Steven and Donna knew about her parents’ absences.

"His beard gave me the perfect cover," Julie said. "He became foxier over the summer. Valerie couldn't deny it, and going after him hurt my popularity only a little."

"But it did hurt your cheer performance," Jackie said. "You called him a low-class, good-for-nothing dickhead."

Julie's gaze hardened. "Because he ran off after working me up! I haven't been … satisfied by a boy in forever, but I hoped fooling around with him would lead to more. He has a one-week-only policy. Did he mention that to you?"

Jackie shook her head, in both a no and false disdain. Julie's feelings appeared sincere, but Jackie wouldn't risk falling for a scheme. Any true information she gave up could be used against her.

"It sounds awful," Julie continued, "but it's really not. He's upfront about everything, and I'm very good at giving head. If he'd just let me show him, I bet he'd extend that one week into a relationship."

She giggled conspiratorially. Jackie tried to giggle with her, but it came out as a grunted growl. No one on the bus seemed to care about their conversation. Their attention was elsewhere, but Jackie felt watched anyway, like Valerie could see through Julie's eyes and hear through her ears.

Julie touched Jackie's wrist. "I'm going to try again. I came on too strongly the first time." She ran her palm up Jackie's arm. "You must have some insight about how I can cozy up to him. You two have hung out the last few years because of Michael, right?"

Jackie withdrew her arm from Julie and grabbed the Cosmo from her makeup case. She searched it for a flirtation quiz, anything that might get her out of advising Julie directly, but none of the articles fit the situation.

"I've got it!" Julie said, clapping once. "Oh, this is good. He learned Kat Peterson's sob story, and she got what she needed from him. I'll tell him mine, and we'll be making love under the stars before this trip is over."

Julie's throat closed up. Julie was not allowed to make love to Steven. She wasn't allowed to give him head or get cozy with him. Jackie grasped the chain of her necklace, intending to pull out the pendant and tell Julie the truth: Steven was her boyfriend. He'd laughed about it with her yesterday on her bed. Propped himself up on her pillows and held her while she she sat against his chest.

"Can't believe this shit is happening," he'd said, but his grin was perceptible in his voice. "We haven't even taken a test drive yet."

"Test drive? I'm not a car, Steven."

"Look, this is gonna sound bad any way I say it, but I didn't expect the girl I fell for to be someone I hadn't fucked yet."

His arms were crisscrossed her stomach. She slid her palms over them, over his muscles and warmth. "You're right. It does sound bad."

His sigh heated her cheek and disturbed a few strands of her hair. "Every chick I called a girlfriend
was either someone I'd nailed or was trying to nail. You and me, closest we got to a make-out was that kiss on your car."

"Who's fault is that?" She caressed his knuckles with her thumbs. "We could be making out right now instead of just sitting here."

"That all this feels like to you?"

She shut her eyes at the pain in his voice. She'd hurt him. Unintentionally, but he was opening up to her, trusting her with what he probably hadn't told anyone.

"No," she said and hugged his arms against her body. "This feels like something that'll rip me apart if I lose it."

"Jackie..." he hooked his chin over her shoulder, "you're my girl." His beard scratched against her cheek, but he pressed a kiss into her jaw and held her tighter. "My girlfriend, man. The word meant nothin' to me before you."

Her pulse had quickened then and roared in her ears, like twenty-thousand football fans cheering for their team. Being with her must have been on his mind a long time. Otherwise, he wouldn't have given her a title so fast. "If I'm your girlfriend," she said, "then you're my boyfriend."

He chuckled by her ear. "Guess I am."

"And I didn't even have to blackmail you into saying it."

His chin left her shoulder as his chest bounced against her back. He was full-on laughing. "I'm sure you'll figure out somethin' else to blackmail me for."

She'd laughed with him, but she wasn't laughing now. Julie had begun to construct a tragic story to lure Steven. She backtracked and changed details, recited them again.

Jackie released the necklace. Her relationship with Steven was too new, too vulnerable to be out in the open. Their relationship might not survive the assault if Julie's feelings for him were genuine—if she, Valerie, and Michael all went on the attack.

But Jackie wasn't defenseless. She smacked Julie's leg with her rolled-up Cosmo, and Julie stopped talking. Jackie made a show of checking the seats around them. The cheer squad, like the rest of the juniors appeared restless. Hunger was setting in, and no one questioned that Julie and Jackie had shared a seat for longer than ten minutes.

"Your story sounds great," Jackie said, "and Steven might even be swayed by it, enough to let you give him one of your fall-in-love-with-me blow jobs."

Julie placed her hands over her heart. "You think so?"

"But you've got a bigger obstacle than catching his interest." Jackie lowered her voice to a whisper. "Valerie cornered Steven on Monday and practically had sex with him against his locker."

Julie's pink cheeks flushed more intensely. "They stripped naked in public?"

Jackie gestured dismissively with the rolled-up Cosmo. "Valerie's too smart for that. Their clothes were on, but when that wasn't enough for her... " She mimed unzipping a fly and used the Cosmo to simulate giving a hand job. "Very sneaky, that one."
"Where—where did you hear this from?"

"I can't divulge my source, but it's reliable."

Julie's fists shook as she inhaled a few quick breaths. "That bitch! She chose him on purpose. To hurt me!"

"I know, I know." Jackie rubbed Julie's arm with forced empathy. "But you've got the means to blackmail her. She won't be pleased if her boyfriend, the homecoming king to her queen, finds out she's cheating on him. Especially not with Steven." She laughed once. "Trust me."

"That's right!" Julie pressed her fist to her mouth and nodded. "I've got her."

Jackie lowered her head, covering her smirk with her hair. If Julie and Valerie stayed true to their natures, Jackie wouldn't have to do much but stand back as they tore each other apart.

The Waupaca Fatso Burger had four-times the seating capacity of the one in Point Place. That was largely due to the outdoor seating area, which wrapped around the building. Despite the cold weather, many seniors and juniors chose to sit outside. Hyde and his friends, though, opted for a table inside the restaurant. Forman wanted to hash things out with Kelso, who agreed only if they ate indoors.

"I don't like being called tiny," Forman said after apologizing, "or scrawny or dainty—"

Hyde laughed along with Fez and Donna. Most of his focus had been on the cheer squad's table since he sat down, but the word *dainty* had gotten to him.

"And burning your sister for her weight is both hypocritical and insensitive," Forman said over their laughter. "Again, I'm sorry."

Donna hiccuped a chuckle. "He really is sorry, Kelso. He's apologized, like, ten times. He doesn't do that unless he means it."

"Fine," Kelso said. "Just be nice to my sister."

Forman went into a sales pitch about his honor, but Hyde's attention returned to the cheer squad. His friends were distracted, and his shades were on his face. Only someone with ESP would realize his intention: doing a visual check of Jackie. Nurse Davenport said concussion symptoms could show up days after head trauma. Jackie had fainted about twenty-four hours ago. He needed to be sure she wasn't exhibiting any warning signs.

Jackie's back was to him, but she was clearly eating. She seemed steady on her chair, too, and deep in conversation. He couldn't tell if she had a headache, but if her mood was good enough to put up with her teammates, she had to be okay.

Hyde bit into his burger as Forman and Kelso shook hands, reaffirming their friendship. Forman had done wrong by Kelso's sister, but Kelso continually did wrong by all of them, most of all Jackie. Hyde couldn't forgive him for that, the wounds he'd caused her. Kelso demonstrated no awareness or remorse. Wailing on him never changed anything, but every second Jackie was happy without him might have some kind of effect.

An unfamiliar sensation spread through Hyde's body at the idea, opening him up and shutting him down in succession. Jackie's joy causing Kelso pain. It was justice, but it was also screwed up. He lived in a twisted dreamworld, one where he was king and only his desires mattered. People who
deprived him the smallest speck of pleasure earned the guillotine—

Fez nudged Hyde's shoulder and pointed ahead of them, between where Forman and Kelso sat. "Do you think Julie will give me a chance?"

Valerie and Julie had left the cheer squad's table. They were advancing on Hyde and his friends. Hyde kept eating like their presence meant nothing to him, but Fez said, "Hello, Julie. Your hair looks lovely today. Is that Wildflower perfume I smell, Julie? Because it's driving me wild."

Julie waved at him to move over. He was sitting on the banquette next to Hyde, and he gave Julie enough room to squeeze between them. Hyde's stomach clenched, but he continued to eat. Whatever devious shit these cheerleaders had hidden in their pom-poms, they wouldn't splatter it on him.

Kelso pushed back his chair and welcomed Valerie onto his lap. "Hey, baby," he said, and they began to make out.

"Oh, God," Donna said. "This is California all over again."

Julie stole a French fry off Hyde's tray and jabbed it at his face. "You shaved? I'm disappointed," she said with a frown, but he swallowed his gut reaction. Being an ass to her wouldn't make the situation better. "But at least there's an upside." She popped the fry into her mouth and smoothed her hand over his cheek. "I get to see more of you."

"Damn it, Hyde—you already stole my potential girlfriend!" Fez said, but Hyde's skin prickled at Julie's touch. She was acting too familiarly with him, and he turned his face from her.

"Steven, you don't have to be shy with me," Julie said. "I forgive you."

He shut his eyes. He'd messed with her, and now she was messing with him in front of his friends.

"What exactly is going on here?" Forman said.

"I can tell you," Valerie said, and Hyde opened his eyes. She'd quit kissing Kelso to play Julie's sick game of darts, and Hyde was the bull's eye.

He swallowed some Coke. Chess was his game, not darts. Protecting the king often meant sacrificing other pieces. Valerie and Julie could have one of his rooks, but he'd still have the advantage. "Got to third with Julie," he said. "Left before I finished the job."

Donna blinked, and Forman tilted his head as if he were puzzled. Kelso laughed with a mouth full of hamburger, but Fez said to Julie, "I would finish."

"That's all right," Julie said. "But, Steven, since we're sharing, why don't we share it all?"

She wasn't looking at Hyde but at Valerie, and Valerie hopped off Kelso's lap. "Michael," Valerie said and grasped Kelso's wrist, "we're going to the bathroom."

"But I wanna hear the rest of this."

"Bathroom break. Now."

"So bossy!" Kelso shouted, but as Valerie dragged him toward the restrooms, he gave the table a thumbs-up. He probably thought toilet-stall sex was imminent, but he and Valerie hadn't gotten past second base according to him. She was following a deliberate timeline for their physical relationship, and it had to do with Jackie. She'd admitted as much to Hyde in the school cafeteria. Valerie was
after his girl, but she wouldn't get her.

"So, Julie..." he said, and his arm slid over the top of the banquette and behind her back. He wasn't touching her, but the move had created an intimate space between them. "You know what Valerie did."

She nodded, and Forman said, "What did Valerie do?"

Hyde moved a little closer to Julie. His friends could listen in, but he wouldn't let them participate. This was a two-person match. "Gives you some leverage."

"It does," she said.

"Cool." He smiled insincerely, and she smiled back, but it wasn't rah-rah cheerleader. Her smile appeared genuine.

"Hyde," Donna said, "remember our little discussion at the DMV—"

He signaled for her to be quiet. If Donna spouted what she believed about him and Jackie, she'd be handing Julie a relationship-killing machine gun.

Donna glanced at the cheerleaders' table and stood up with her tray. "You're being a jackass, Hyde, and I'm eating the rest of my food outside."

She headed for Fatso Burger's side door, and Forman joined her. Fez, though, remained seated on the banquette, despite that he'd inhaled his lunch like a whale sucked in plankton. He tapped Julie on the shoulder, and she gave Hyde an annoyed look. Hyde offered a sympathetically irritated one in return. She had to think he was on her side.

"What?" she said to Fez.

"Why are you wasting time with that non-finishing sonuvabitch? I would do so many things to you, and I'd finish every single one."

"Nice, Fez," Hyde muttered. If Julie weren't between them, he'd frog Fez's arms until they were living bruises. Fez wouldn't be able beat himself off for a month. "Go check on Jackie, would ya?"

"Ai, Jackie. Yes."

Fez grabbed his tray and left the table. He tossed his trash into a nearby garbage can, and Jackie looked up at him when he reached her. But Julie cupped Hyde's chin and pulled his gaze back to her. "You care about Jackie?" she said.

"Had to get Fez to give us some privacy," he said. It was exactly the opposite of he'd planned to do this trip, but he was up against unpredictable players. His strategy had to be fluid "Kid sort of worships her, so..."

Julie released his chin. "I understand. Cheerleaders are often worshiped. It's the price we pay for being so incredibly talented."

She swiped his pop, and as she drank from his straw, a shiver crept up his spine. Most people reacted to his emotional distance in kind, but not her. Had to be a trait taught at cheer camp: persevere no matter the odds of winning.

"Some 'price,'" he said. "Can't tell me you don't love it."
She put down his pop and licked her top lip. "Of course, but it also makes it hard to distinguish who adore us for the glamor and who adore us for us."

Another shiver pushed through him. This set-up was giving him déjà vu. He withdrew his arm from the top of the banquette, opening the space between him and Julie, and he scratched the back of his head. His fingers got caught between clumps of curls, but he'd teased out the problem in front of him: Julie reminded him of Jackie, during her lovesick octopus phase last year.

"I made the public private a few minutes ago," he said quietly, even as the chatter in Fatso Burger grew louder. Everyone in the place was competing to be heard over one another, but if they all lowered their voices, they wouldn't have to shout. "Surprised you didn't freak out."

She fluffed her hair like Jackie sometimes did. "I'm surprised your friends hadn't already heard about it. Anyone who matters in our school has. I told Valerie, and you can guess what happened next."

He could, and he removed his shades. She needed to see his eyes, that he meant what he was about to say. "I'm really sorry for hurting you, man. I started somethin' I shouldn't have."

"I'm disappointed, not hurt, but I should be used to it. A lot of people have disappointed me in my life..." She lowered her head, and her blond curls covered most of her face. "My parents. My sister. My best friend from grade school. I'm like Cinderella. I do, and I do, and I do, and all I get in return is ashes. I've never found my lost glass slipper, Steven, and I—"

"Holy hell." He began to laugh and put his shades on again. "You're gonna have to do better than that."

Her head popped back up. "What?"

"Your story. You're trying to get me to feel bad for you, but you're so full of shit I'm chokin' on the stink."

"I..." Her cheeks flushed. "You really don't remember me."

He squinted as he searched through his skull. She'd made a similar claim a few weeks ago in the school parking lot.

She circled her eyes with her thumbs and forefingers. "Glasses. Old Maine."

He flinched as a dagger of ice pierced his forehead. "Julia Falk..." Julie Ghoulie, the nerd girl he used to protect in middle school. "No fuckin' way." He looked her up and down and compared the sight to the scared ten-year-old girl in his memory. "Puberty does good work, huh?"

"It certainly does." She gestured at him. "Look at you."

"Secondary burn. Not bad."

"Listen, Steven, I'm just going to come out with it." She shoved his tray forward and rested her forearm on the table. "Admitting this could mean social suicide, but I really like you. You're hot. You're sweet when you're not being a total you're completely different than what I live with everyday, and I need different."

"Different how?" His interest was purely strategic. If she was playing him, she'd have to come up with a convincing answer quickly.

"Standing out can cause problems," she said. "When I was that shy, pale four-eyes, the attention I got
was mostly negative. But as assistant cheer captain, I have to deal with backbiting bitches who're all fighting for the same prize: power through popularity."

Her fingertips tapped on the table, and she inhaled deeply. "You and your friends hang out without constantly having to fight for a spot. But I've experienced how you fight to help others. Even if all you're doing is giving them a boost ... you're a kind person."

He cupped his hand over his mouth. His freshly-shaven skin was still a little sensitive, but Julie's sincerity clobbered him in the gut. Kind wasn't a word he'd ever associate with himself. He was an asshole who sometimes did right by people.

But Julie and Jackie's social scene was toxic, and Jackie's repeated escapes to the Formans' basement no longer mystified him. The cheer squad would high-kick her to a bloody pile if she showed any bit of vulnerability. She'd found a space for herself where she could just be, and Julie wanted to do the same.

"Do you have a thing for Valerie?" she said. He'd been quiet too long, but he shook his head no. "Why do you have a one-week-only policy with girls?"

He forced himself not to look at the cheer squad's table. "Relationships ain't me, man."

"So far ... but that could change." She hooked a finger around one of his curls and separated it from the rest of his hair. "Kind and hot don't usually go together in guys."

He grasped her hand and pulled it from his head. She had to quit touching him, but her fingers wrapped around his palm. He'd been through this before, with Jackie. Wriggling free would only make Julie more determined to hold on. He had to convince her to let him go.

"I'm not freakin' kind," he said. "You should know that, considering what happened between us."

"You're right. Kind is the wrong words. Caring is more precise."

Her grip on his hand grew tighter, and she moved her face closer to his. Her lips were puckering. She was going in for a damn kiss, and he scooted backward on the banquette.

She stumbled but caught herself on the table. The shock on her face matched his frenzied pulse rate, and he shifted his gaze to Jackie. She had to be doing okay, or else Fez would've run to Hyde in a panic. But Fez still sat next to her, and the cheer squad seemed to be laughing with him, not at him. He must've come up with some killer puns.

"What am I doing wrong?" Julie said. "You should be making out with me, not cowering against the wall."

Her grip on Hyde's hand weakened, enough that he shook her loose. "Cut the crap, and you'll get yourself a good guy, all right?" He wiped his sweaty palm on his jeans and controlled his breathing. "It's just not gonna be me."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he said, "You've got it in you to be honest, man. Maybe try to find someone outside your social group. Outside our school."

"Like Jackie did."

"Have no idea about that."

"Oh, she's dating a Leif Garret look-a-like from Ft. Blanderson." She pressed her lips together,
squeezing the color out of them. "Lucky bitch. He's a fox."

"If Jackie can do it, so can you."

"How?" she said.

A faint throb set into his temples, but it exploded into a skull-busting headache as Coach Ferguson blew on his whistle. He was standing in the middle of the restaurant, and he shouted, "This is your ten-minute warning! Finish your food. Go to the bathroom if you have to. Just be ready for another three hours on the road!"

Hyde indicated for Julie to get off the banquette and let him out. He needed to piss. He needed some aspirin. Julie did as he instructed but remained in front of him. "How?" she repeated.

He cleared his throat before speaking. "What do you do besides cheerleading?"

She bounced on her heels. "My dad and I go fishing all the time. I can gut a fish, too." Her eyes flicked toward the cheer squad table. "It's not something I'd ever tell Valerie or the rest of my teammates. They'd start claiming I smell like fish, and then the football team would connect that to … well, you know. I'd be mortified off the cheer squad."

"Plenty of guys like to fish. Start with that." He tried to skirt around her, but she was nimble on her feet. "Freakin' cheerleader..." he muttered, but he needed to take gym class more seriously. Smoke less pot. Work on his reflexes.

She stuck out her chin defiantly. "I'm more than a cheerleader."

"Now you're getting it."

Her forehead wrinkled, but after a second her face brightened, and she shouted. "I'm more than a cheerleader!"

He nodded, in both approval and exasperation. "Great. I gotta take a leak, so..." He waved at her to get out of his way.

She clasped his shoulder instead and pecked him on the cheek. "Thank you, Steven," she said and finally left, giving him an open path to the restroom and, maybe, the rest of his damn life.

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Jackie grasped the edge of her table and stayed seated. Following Steven to the restrooms would tip off her savvier teammates, but her bones were melting into soup. He and Julie had talked for ten minutes. The glimpses Jackie had stolen of them were more than bad. They were incriminating. He'd kept his arm around her practically the whole time, held her hand, acted cozy with her.

And he'd let Julie kiss him. On the cheek, but it was still a kiss.

Steven was playing someone, but Jackie couldn't be sure whom, and she despised herself for it. Yesterday, he claimed he trusted her. This morning, he gave her the shooting star pendant. Not long ago, he sent Fez over to check on her. Or to distract her while he fell for Julie's tragic life story. If so, he'd dump Jackie the first moment they had alone.

"Jackie, you said you were feeling fine," Fez said beside her. "You're all pale and sweaty."

"I am fine. I just have to go to the bathroom."

"You want one of us to go with you?" Leslie said. "In case you faint again?"
Jackie stood from the table. "I'm perfectly capable of going to the bathroom by myself."

"That is a first," Fez said. "You always bring a girlfriend with you."

"To talk, but I actually have to go."

She hurried to the restrooms without further explanation, not caring what rumors started because of it. She needed one moment with Steven, a shared blink, but two broad-backed men got in front of her. They weren't from school, and they lumbered toward the men's restroom like a pair of trucks running on fumes.

Squeezing between them wasn't an option. They'd squash her flat. Passing them wouldn't work either. A tide of boys was flowing to and ebbing from the men's restroom.

She veered to the right, toward the restaurant's side exit. It gave her a better vantage point, but as she waited, Coach Ferguson blew on his whistle.

"Three minutes!" he shouted, shifting her priorities. Taking the opportunity to pee was more urgent than seeing Steven. They hadn't entered their relationship blindly. They were both aware of their injured trust, but she hadn't expected her bruises to be punched so early, before she and Steven had even kissed.
Sinking Into the Ground

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
SINKING INTO THE GROUND

The junior and senior buses drove on the interstate, continuing the journey to Quartz Falls State Park. Susan Amborn had yanked Jackie onto her seat, promising a piece of class-A gossip. They were across from Patty Frumkin and Julie, whose face Jackie had glimpsed. It was full of a bliss that didn't belong to her. That was Jackie's bliss.

"This is an exclusive," Susan whispered in Jackie's ear, but Jackie tried to get a better look at Julie. Only Julie's fingertips, knees, and feet were visible with Patty blocking her from view.

Susan tugged Jackie's jacket sleeve, drawing her attention. "I don't have to tell you first, you know," Susan said. "I could spread it all over the bus, but I'm trying to be kind and give you the opportunity to dictate how this goes."

"How what goes?" Jackie's tone would not win her any congeniality awards, but her life had taken a frustrating detour. She should've been basking in new-relationship euphoria. Instead, she and Steven had chosen to spend their first full day as a couple apart.

"What I witnessed in the Fatso Burger bathroom." Susan tapped her temple. "As an investigative journalist, I'm always on the job."

Jackie inhaled deeply and suppressed her ego-slicing remarks. Susan worked on the school paper, writing the sports column. She was the first girl in Point Place High history to get that gig, and it gave her insider access to both the cheer squad and Vikings. But investigative journalist described neither her position on the paper nor her personality. Gossip monger fit her better.

"Technically, I should be talking to Valerie," Susan said and brushed her auburn hair from her shoulder. "She's got seniority on all levels, but this matter supersedes social standing."

She loved a good build-up. It obviously fueled a sense of self-importance, but Jackie's patience was a droplet of water. One more extraneous second, and it would vaporize. "Oh, my God," Jackie said to hurry Susan along, "this sounds big!"

"It's bigger than you can possibly imagine. Valerie took your ex by the balls—literally. But the question is: who's really leading whom on a wild goose chase?"

Susan fell silent, as if to let Jackie soak in the mystery, but Jackie glanced back at Julie. Her feet were resting on top of Jackie's makeup case. Jackie had wanted to grab it when she reboarded the bus, but Susan had grabbed her first.

"I don't know who's leading whom," Jackie said absently. She and Steven had chased each other in
the dark, stumbling into thornbushes and rocky hillsides. But now that they were together, and the sun was up, they found themselves surrounded by hornet nests. "It's a problem we have to solve," she mumbled, and Susan began gossiping in earnest.

"She had him in his mouth from what I could hear," Susan said. "But she stopped halfway and whispered, 'I saw the way you looked at Jackie from the table. If you ever look at her that way again...' Michael screamed after that. She had to be squeezing his balls. I mean, what else could make a man scream like that, right?"

"Right."

Jackie slid the zipper of her jacket up and down. Valerie's insecurity was Michael's problem for now, but it could soon become Jackie's. From what Steven had told her yesterday, Valerie was beyond jealous. She was resentful, believing Jackie had stolen what belonged to her: athletic achievements, a father on the city council. She kept Jackie on the cheer squad as a means of control. Had gone after Michael to hurt her. Assaulted Steven to get more control over Michael and, ultimately, wound Jackie as badly as possible.

Only Jackie's mask served as any protection, that Steven disgusted her. But the moment Valerie learned she and Steven were in love, that protection would disappear.

Susan jabbed Jackie's side. Jackie's focus had drifted back to Julie, and Susan said, "You need to pay attention. I put myself at great risk to get this intel, positioning myself so my feet wouldn't be seen underneath their stall door. There's more you've got to hear."

"I'm listening."

Susan paused a moment. "You better be. The stall lock clicked open, and I rushed to the sink. Valerie came out, and if there hadn't been a line for the stalls, she would've spotted me. But Michael relocked the door as an old lady tried to get in. She shambled into the next available stall, and I went back to my listening spot."

"He started talking to himself..." Susan paused a moment. "Did he used to do that around you?"

Several memories rose in Jackie's mind. "Only when he was mad."

"So it makes sense. He was super mad, muttering about being teased and how he'd do it with whomever he wanted, especially if his own girlfriend wouldn't put out. I think he's going to cheat on her." Susan laughed. "Can you believe it, the homecoming king cheating on the homecoming queen?"

"Michael's as slippery as a bar of soap," Jackie said, but he'd already cheated on Valerie. With Jackie. "Try to hold onto him, to hold him down on anything, and he'll fly out of your grip and slide over the next girl."

"Loose grip for a loose guy..." Susan's backpack was under the seat in front of them. She pulled a notepad and pen from it. "'Want to Keep a Loose Guy, Keep a Loose Grip,'" she said aloud as she wrote in her notepad. "That'll make a great headline for my first advice column—didn't I tell you?"

She twirled the pen in her hand. "The editor of the school paper promoted me. Now I've got two columns a week. It's a lot of responsibility, but..."

She rambled on about the paper as an ever-changing patchwork of yellows, oranges, and reds streaked behind her head. A forest of trees hugged the highway, visible from the bus window. That pane of glass gave Jackie a peek into the outside world, a reminder that life existed outside this bus.
Outside her social circle.

She and Steven hadn't shared their first kiss as a couple yet, but love was so much more than the physical expression of it. It was building a life together based on trust, fidelity, and joy. Her parents' relationship had started on that foundation, but their choices had rotted it away. She and Steven needed to better than them. She had to have faith in him.

"So what do you want me to do?" Susan said.

"With what?"

"Wow..." Susan circled her pen in the air around Jackie's face. "Your fall really did do a number on your head, huh? Your attention's all over the place."

She wrote something down on her notepad, ripped out the page, and handed it to Jackie. "Valerie's boyfriend, Michael Kelso, is going to cheat on her," the note said. "She's withholding sex from him, and he's going to retaliate."

"This story," Susan said. "Do I bury it or spread it? Valerie'll have no idea who initiated the rumor, and she needs to learn that she's as vulnerable as anyone to the power structure she set up. But I can't keep your name out of it. Jackie Burkhart and Michael Kelso are practically synonymous at this school, which is clearly why Valerie's torturing him."

Jackie's chest hurt, as if stalactites had grown from her ribs and pierced her heart. People would talk about her, Michael, and the inevitably of them having sex again. The effect that might have on Steven was a huge liability, but people would talk more about Valerie's inadequacies as a girlfriend. Made public, Michael's impending infidelity would shift power in Jackie's social circle. The consequences could destroy Valerie inside and out, a fate she was working hard to create for Jackie.

"Bury it," Jackie said and crushed the note.

Forman stayed true to his word. He began putting up Hyde's tent while Hyde snacked on Forman's cinnamon cookies. Their school's campground was set apart from the most publicly used places of the 3000-acre state park. With around a hundred students, that was best for everyone. Trees scattered throughout the site offered some protection from the elements but not the cold—or from the crappy situation Hyde and Jackie had snared themselves in.

The cheer squad was building a small tent city at the opposite end the campground. It couldn't be any farther from the area Hyde and his friends had claimed. A regiment of trees stood between him and Jackie, as would over fifty tents. Spending quality time with her this trip would be a battle, one he was more than willing to fight.

He'd caught sight of her earlier as she got off the junior bus. He couldn't read much from her body language except that she seemed tired. But they'd all gotten up at the ass-crack of dawn and been on the road almost seven hours. Fatigue was a consequence of the the trip, not a sign she'd developed a concussion.

"Oh, shit," Forman said and passed a tent stake to Hyde. "Ms. McGee's doing the rounds over here. Act like you're the one erecting the tent."

Hyde pushed a breath through his nose. Forman still needed to work on his word choice, but his fear of Ms. McGee was entertaining. From how Forman described her, she was hardass like Red, but she was also twenty-five-years-old and could be considered hot for a teacher. Blond, in shape, nice rack. Maybe part of Forman's fear came from attraction, but she did nothing for Hyde.
No chick had since he'd fallen for Jackie.

He gave Forman the tin of cookies and crouched in the dirt. He'd play along, if only to keep from actually setting up the tent himself.

"Hello, boys," Ms. McGee said as she approached them. A canvas tote bag was slung over her arm. "That's a mighty large tent you're erecting."

"Ms. McGee—" Forman's voice cracked, and Hyde stifled a laugh. "I'm just giving Hyde a few pointers. My tent's set up. See?" He waved to his tent. It was next to where Donna was putting up hers, one provided by the park.

Ms. McGee's eyebrows rose. "Really? I wouldn't have taken you for a nature boy."

"Well, you know..." Forman patted Hyde's shoulder, "being in the Cub Scouts taught me a lot about wilderness survival and community."

"That's fantastic, actually." She rummaged in the tote bag and pulled out two tags and a permanent marker. "Come find me after you're done helping your friends. I may have an opportunity for you."

She handed Forman the marker and tags. "Write your names on these and tie them to your tents. We don't want students getting confused as to whose tent is whose."

She moved on to Kelso, and Hyde tried to stand. Forman, though, pressed on Hyde's shoulder. "Stay down, you bonehead," Forman whispered. "She's not done with our section yet. Just put in that tent stake yourself."

Hyde plunged the stake through the tent's corner flap and into the ground. "This wasn't the deal, Forman. You and Donna are gonna fool around tonight thanks to me."

"In a teeny, tiny tent."

"Teeny, tiny is all the room you'll need, man." Hyde stood up and swiped the tin of cookies from Forman. Ms. McGee was hard to spot now. The trees blocked her from Hyde's eyeline, meaning he and Forman had to be blocked from her eyeline, too.

"Finish up, would ya?" he said, indicating unassembled parts of his tent. "With all the 'fun' activities we're gonna do, you're bound to say something to screw up your and Donna's good time." He plucked a cookie from the tin and bit into it. "You want me to help you out when that happens, then stick to the damn deal."

Forman grabbed a tent stake from the ground. "What crawled up your cranky butt?"

Hyde ate his cookie with slow, deliberate chews. Not being with Jackie had wrecked his cool. They'd climbed a rocky mountainside consisting of a mistrust and bad choices and managed to reach the top alive. But predators stalked them from hidden places, waiting for him and Jackie to expose their newborn relationship. He needed to get close enough to talk to her, to touch her, and make sure they were safe.

The sun had sunk below the horizon, but enough light remained to distinguish trees from air. Two instructors from the park had led the senior and junior classes to a wooded area, not too far from the campground. Coach Ferguson and Ms. McGee were present, too, but Mrs. Fletcher and Mr. Wilcox were MIA.

Lucky them.
Team-building exercises were hell, especially when they were supervised. Hyde couldn't mess with anyone. He'd have to play this straight, whatever it was, but with so many students clustered together—and with the darkness as a cover—he'd finally have a chance to find Jackie.

The senior and junior classes were split up, with about fifteen feet between them. All Hyde needed was for this exercise to start, and he'd use the distraction to cross the distance.

Students were chattering. Girls complained about the cold, and the guys griped about being here at all. But Coach Ferguson blew on his whistle, and the wooded area became silent.

"Hi, everyone! Welcome to your first lesson," one of the park instructors said, and Hyde resented him already. He sounded like he'd never had a bad night's sleep in his life. "The next few days will be full of challenges and adventure, and you'll need to rely on one another to get through them. That means ignoring your school's social strata and treating each other as equals, which you all are."

More than a few laughs burst from both classes, and the second instructor said, "Interesting. That's not the response we experienced from Ft. Anderson."

Boos replaced the laughter, and Coach Ferguson blasted on his whistle until they died down.

"You're juniors and seniors," the second instructor continued. "You should have solidarity between you. Ft. Anderson's group has been showing terrific cooperation so far." Her words were goading, and her tone shifted to match them. "Don't tell me you've let levels of popularity weaken you as a whole."

Confusion swept through the seniors, including Hyde. Classmates asked one another what was going on, like any of them had the answer. Others turned their heads, as if scanning the woods for spying devices. If the same phenomenon was happening to the juniors, Hyde couldn't tell, but these park instructors apparently had intel about Point Place High's student body.

The teachers. They were more observant than Hyde gave them credit for. They'd witnessed popularity empires rise and fall for years, and now they were trying to do something to change it.

"All right," the first instructor said, "we're going to pair seniors up with juniors, and you'll be led into the darkness two-by-two." He pointed to a denser part of the woods. "Whether you get lost or not is entirely up to how well you work together—"

"Excuse me," Donna said not too far from Hyde, "but that's, like, fifty pairs of kids. Are we gonna be doing this all night?"

"Not if you work well together," the first instructor said. "The more you cooperate, the faster this'll go."

"I am so relieved we already ate," Fez said beside Hyde. Their dinner had consisted of campfire hot dogs and potatoes. Not bad, but Hyde hoped the menu would vary from day-to-day.

He shoved his hands into his coat pockets. The night wasn't windy, but the air felt like ice. Jackie had to be cold, too, but she'd be sharing a top-of-the-line tent with Leslie Cannon. It would insulate her from the ground, and her sleeping bag would trap enough body heat to warm her up.

"Ft. Anderson finished this exercise in less than a half-hour," the second instructor said. "They're half as many students as you, but I bet you could beat their time if you band together. Should we get started?"

"Yeah!" students from both classes shouted. "Go, Vikings, go! Go, Vikings, go!"
The instructors pulled a senior and junior from the group and paired them up. They were little more than silhouettes, construction-paper cut-outs against the trees, and they disappeared into the darkness of the woods.

Jackie sucked in a breath as a hand grabbed at her coat sleeve. The park instructors just had to volunteer her first for this stupid, futile exercise. Worse, they'd paired her up with a someone who was evidently afraid of the dark. "Would you get off me?" she said when her partner's grip tightened. "The guy said we're going two-by-two, not arm-in-arm."

"Jackie?"

Her muscles tensed as Eric's voice entered her ears, but she wasn't entirely unhappy to hear it. At least the instructors had given her someone she could deal with.

"Don't spread it around," he said and let go of her sleeve, "but I'm glad it's you."

"You should be." Nothing existed in this park she couldn't handle, but they were losing time. She grasped his wrist and yanked him deeper into the woods.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Winning." She used to be a Girl Scout. It was a fact she hid from everyone, but she could pitch tents, tie life-saving knots, and start campfires. Her "Ew, wilderness!" act was just that, an act, to fit in with the cheer squad. "How'd you end up getting picked first from your class?" she said. "You don't like standing out."

"I don't like being crowded by people, either. Or getting lost in the dark. When I was a Cub Scout, we had lanterns during night-time hikes."

She tugged him to the left, where the trees seemed to be less dense. "Shush!"

"I also don't like being shushed," he said.

She waved his wrist toward a lit patch of woods. "Don't you see that? It's light! That's the way out."

"It's too easy."

"No, it isn't. I've learned from experience that people make things way more complicated than they have to be. Let's go."

She increased her pace and maintained her grip on Eric's wrist, but he didn't fight her. He matched her speed as they ducked under thick branches and avoided tree stumps. Her foot sank into something soft, but she kept going. Whatever had just ruined her shoe would have to be dealt with later.

"Wait, Jackie. Wait!" Eric's fingers wrapped around her forearm, and he jerked her back.

"What—?" She tried to press forward, but he was stronger than he appeared. "Eric, there's no such thing as trolls or giants. No one's out to get us, okay?"

"Maybe no one but something. Check it out." He guided her a step forward and extended her arm straight ahead of her. Her gloved fingers hit a bramble. Its ends had to be sharp, and she backed up. "You don't want your face scratched, do you?" he said. "I think my cheek is bleeding."

She stiffened. Her mom had signed a permission slip, not a a Release of Liability form. "Whose
genius idea was it to put a thicket in the middle of a dark forest?"

"It could be prickly pear, but it's more likely some kind of bush..."

"Enough with the botany lesson. How do we get around it?"

"This way."

He took the lead, and she followed, covering her cheeks with her free hand. If any part of her got scraped, this park and her school were getting sued, but the light brightened. The trees thinned out, and they arrived at a clearing.

Mrs. Fletcher and Mr. Wilcox stood in front of them, holding lanterns. "That was fast," Mr. Wilcox said, and Mrs. Fletcher raised a walkie-talkie to her mouth.

"I can't believe we did it," Eric whispered to Jackie.

"I can." She rubbed the top of his arm as warmth spread into her chest. For all the animosity they'd shared, she and Eric had a lot more in common than she thought possible. "Just don't spread it around."

The first victims had been in the woods for a minute, and Hyde used those sixty seconds to push through dozens of seniors. Bumping into people and tripping over their feet had taken up most of his time, but the path to the junior class was clear. A sprint across the gap would bring him fifteen feet closer to Jackie.

He eyeballed his target, a group of shorter students. It had to be made up of mostly girls, but a staticky crackle broke through the air, followed by Mrs. Fletcher's voice: "They're here. Repeat: they are here. Over."

Ms. McGee's silhouette raised its arm to its face. "So quickly?" Ms. McGee had to speaking into a walkie-talkie. "Over."

"Yes. Over," Mrs. Fletcher's voice said.

"Ten-four."

The second instructor laughed. "I did not expect that. Well, then, who volunteers to go next?"

"We all do!" Timmy Wilson shouted. "It's a trick! Go, Vikings, go!"

"Go, Vikings, Go!" the senior and junior classes shouted together. "Go, Vikings, go!"

Hyde remained silent, but he joined his class as it surged forward and merged with the juniors. They moved together like they did during a fire drill, not panicked but orderly. Darkness enveloped him when he entered the woods, and as the students ahead of him veered to the left and right, shouts of shock and pain reached him.

"Thicket!" someone yelled. "Sharp turn to the left! To the left!"

The line of students followed the instruction, but a girl directly in front of Hyde was too far to the right. He shoved her to the left, and a thorn scraped the top of his wrist. Another scar to join the rest.

The woods opened up into a clearing. It was lit by lanterns dangling from Mrs. Fletcher and Mr. Wilcox's hands, but Hyde couldn't see much else. Students leaving the trees were spreading out to
make room for those who hadn't yet. He followed the girl he'd saved from a nasty scratch, but she
spun toward him, and he cursed inside his skull. Of course it had to be her.

"You," Valerie said and cupped her cheek protectively, but he didn't react. Not even a shrug. Had he
known her identity in the woods, he might not have saved her face. She was a predator, out to wreck
whatever—whomever—she perceived as a threat.

Walking away was his best defense, and he strolled past her as his wrist stung. His cut was the least
of his concerns, though. Jackie was in this crowd, and he searched for her unsuccessfully until the
park instructors emerged from the woods, applauding.

"You finished this exercise in less than five minutes!" the first instructor said. "Who's the MVP,
here? Who led Point Place High to victory?"

"I did!" Timmy Wilson said from somewhere.

"No! I did. With Eric."

Hyde's fists clenched. That was Jackie, and he maneuvered through the crowd as she continued to
talk.

"We were the first pair to get through the woods, so we're the MVPs."

Forman and Jackie … the cosmos had a strange sense of humor, and Hyde chuckled as he pushed
through student after student. His girl and his best bud should've killed each other in the woods, but
they'd changed enough to work together. Or Jackie had seized control, and Forman acquiesced.

Either way, Jackie's brain seemed to be functioning normally. She'd had to think to do this exercise,
and her current attitude suggested no sign of concussion.

A chant started up in the clearing: "Jackie and Eric! Jackie and Eric!" It was a sentence Hyde never
thought he'd hear, but he moved faster. If he didn't get to Jackie now, he'd have to wait until
tomorrow, but Coach Ferguson blew on his whistle, and the chant died out..

"It's time to get back to the campground, people!" Ferguson said. "We have an early-morning hike.
Miles of walking ahead of us, so you better get some quality sleep!"

The senior and junior class groaned, and Hyde gave up his search. He and Jackie had lost tonight,
but he aimed on taking advantage of tomorrow.

Jackie and Eric were school heroes. For the moment, at least.

Their victory in the woods had conjured a spirit of gratitude among their peers. Girls let Jackie be
first in-line to use the park restroom, and when she found the toilet stalls occupied by Daddy Long
Legs, girls used their shoes to run them off. She had hot water during her shower, a sink where she
could brush her teeth, and energy left to spare.

She pulled her woolen hood over her wet hair and began the quarter-mile walk back to the
campground. Her coat protected her well from the chilly night. She'd switched to it from her jacket at
sunset, but her face was cold. She used her flashlight to supplement the park's bare-minimum
lighting, clutched her canvas bag of toiletries close, but she would've preferred Steven's arms.

He should've been waiting for her outside the restrooms. He would have had they been able to talk,
but their choices were separating them. They'd exalted fear over love from the start, worshiping it
like some kind of god.

She considered searching for his tent, but finding it amid seventy others would take more time than she had. She'd just have to dream that he was holding her tonight.

The cheer squad was set up in the northwest corner of the campground. She shone her flashlight on different tent tags until she found her name and Leslie's. Leslie's tent was huge and insulated, but if Jackie got any sleep with the raccoons and skunks scurrying around, it would be a miracle.

Once inside, she changed into her silk pajamas, braided her wet hair, and put on a pompom hat. A beauty queen she wouldn't be in the morning, but she'd still be prettier than most.

She was already snuggled in her sleeping bag when Leslie arrived. "This has been some day, huh?" Leslie said. Her hair was wet, too, and fell onto her shoulders in ropey strands.

"Mm-hmm," Jackie said as her eyes drifted closed.

Leslie's movements jostled the tent a little. She must've been preparing for sleep herself, but instead of doing so silently, she gossiped. Sharon Wheeler got wounded by the thicket. Band-Aids now covered her forehead. Neil Rooney hadn't broken anyone's stuff for days, and it could mean bad news for the Vikings. Coach Ferguson was seen sneaking off the campground—

The tent shook more wildly, and Leslie screamed. Jackie sprang up, heart pumping hard as Leslie shouted, "A bear! A bear's outside the tent!"

"It's just one of the jocks being an idiot," Jackie said, but she grabbed her flashlight. If a bear were outside their tent, hopefully she could blind it.

The tent's front flaps opened, and Valerie's face appeared in the beam of Jackie's flashlight. The sight was as scary as any bear, but Valerie ducked inside the tent, and the chill of night came with her.

"Jackie," she said, shielding her eyes, "get out."

Jackie turned off the flashlight. "Excuse me?"

"Get out!"

Valerie unzipped Jackie's sleeping bag, and her long fingers wrapped around Jackie's ankles. Jackie held onto the flashlight and tried to find traction with her free hand, but she glided over the tent floor. Valerie was dragging her outside.

"What the hell?" Jackie shouted as Valerie cast her into the cold. The tent flaps zippered closed. Jackie went for the outer puller, but the zipper wouldn't open. Valerie must've had a grip on the inner puller, waiting for her to slink off.

Jackie crouched in front of the tent, shivering. One strong bash of her flashlight, and Valerie would let go, but Jackie stood up. She couldn't risk breaking Valerie's fingers. That would be the same as committing social suicide.

Leslie's head popped out of the tent. "Jackie," she said. "I'm sorry. I can't let you back in. This is serious. I'm sure one of the other girls'll let you share their tent."

"Leslie!" Jackie said, but Leslie disappeared inside the tent and zippered it shut.

_Bitches._ Jackie's social circle was full of them, but if she showed any weakness, she was finished.
The teachers' tents were at the center of the campground. They could fix her current situation, but that would put her in a worse one tomorrow. Not that she wanted to sleep outside. Her pajamas, wool socks, and pom-pom hat weren't enough to keep her warm. The temperature was supposed to hit the low thirties tonight.

Her only way back into Leslie's tent was to force her way inside and beat Valerie's brains in with the flashlight. Turning the cheer captain into a drooling vegetable might cement Jackie's place on the cheer squad, but it would also land her in prison.

Shivers wracked her body. Fear had put her in this position, but she was sick of acting on fear. She had a warm place to sleep tonight, but only if she claimed it.

Trees were scattered everywhere. Bumping into one could knock out her teeth or give her an actual concussion, but she dug her feet into the dirt and sprinted across the campground. Most everyone was in a tent by now. Only a few stragglers were left, but Steven wasn't among them. She shone her flashlight on tent tags as she sped by, but none of the names written on them were his.

She reached the southeast corner of the campground. The last cluster of tents was set up here. They had to belong to her friends; otherwise, she'd freeze to death. Her neck, shoulder, and back muscles were a tense knot. Her feet were so numb that every step felt like sinking into the ground, but her flashlight lit up Fez's name on a tent tag. Michael's was next, followed by Donna's, Eric's, and finally Steven's.

Being found in a tent with a boy by the teachers would mean suspension, but Jackie's fingers, toes, and nose were about to fall off. Icicles had to be forming on her eyelashes, but she grasped the front of Steven's tent, ripped open the flap, and thrust herself inside.
Conspiring to Survive

Chapter Notes

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO
CONSPIRING TO SURVIVE

Hyde's muscles tensed for a brawl, and his fingers curled around his flashlight. He'd kept it by his sleeping bag for a scenario just like this one: some fool breaking into his tent. Kelso, Julie, Valerie, they all had motives to screw with him, but the shadowy invader fell to its knees. It shuffled forward, teeth chattering, and said, "St-Steven?"

He clicked on the flashlight though he recognized the voice. The beam revealed Jackie's shivering face, and his pulse kicked into overdrive, as if it would warm her up.

"Shit. C'mere, man. C'mere," he said, gesturing to his sleeping bag. She wore a winter hat but no coat, and she scrambled to his side. Whatever had propelled her across the campground must've been bad, and he shut off the flashlight as she burrowed into the sleeping bag.

Her body was ice through her pajamas. It sent a chill into his skin, and her fingers had to be frozen stiff. She was fumbling with the sleeping bag zipper, but he reached over her and zipped it up himself.

His arm remained over her and grasped her freezing hands. "Turn toward me," he whispered, and she did. Her new position let him rub her hands between his and blow hot air on them. "What the hell happened?"

"V-valerie k-kicked me out of Leslie's t-tent," she said through chattering teeth. He tugged her hat more securely on her head, and the coldness of her cheeks stoked an inferno in his stomach. Charging the cheer squad's tent city, evicting every last one of her teammates—it might snuff the blaze inside him, but she needed his love right now, not his fury.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. She shivered in his embrace but continued to speak. "I-I don't know why she did it. Maybe s-she finally dropped the pretense and is trying to k-kill me outright."

"I doubt it," he whispered, "but it was a dick move, whatever her motivation. And a bad one. It revealed a crack in her force field. She has weaknesses, just like everyone else. We just gotta find them and neutralize her."

"Mm-hmm."

Her agreement was a whimper, and he rubbed her back. Nothing felt better than having her in his arms, despite how cold she was. Separating from her again would be like stabbing himself in the throat, but he'd do whatever was necessary to keep her safe.
Jackie's eyes snapped open to a clamor of metal-on-metal. She took in the canvas walls surrounding her, the warm body fidgeting beside her, and last night seeped back into her consciousness: Quartz Falls, the freezing cold, Valerie … Steven. He'd held her, rubbing her back until she fell asleep.

"Fuck, my brain's finally exploded," he said. "What the hell is that racket?"

The sleeping bag they shared barely fit both of them. She had an inch to maneuver, but she rolled onto her other side and looked at him. He was on his back, palms pushed into eyes. His thick, curly hair spread beneath his head like a pallet of straw, in need of a detangling brush. Or a rake.

She slid her hand over his chest. "It's the teachers, banging pots," she said. "Martina's done that a few times to my mom. Only thing that wakes her up after two bottles of White Zin."

"Jackie?" He grasped her hand. His heart beat faster under her palm, and he turned his face toward her. "That shit Valerie did actually happened."

"Do we have to talk about it?" She squirmed closer to him, and he held her but not too tightly. Each clank outside the tent stung her eardrums. A headache was setting in, but this moment could be her last with Steven on the trip.

Her eyes closed, and his chin touched the top of her head. His fingers heated her shoulder and the small of her back. The teachers' alarm call continued, but his soft breathing broke through it, and his love broke through her nerves. They really were together. He was her boyfriend, and he respected her need not to discuss the cheer squad.

"'Bout time," he said when the clanging finally stopped, but he didn't move. The feeling of him against her body, warmth to warmth, was euphoric. With him, she wouldn't have to fantasize. With him, she'd experience the joy she'd always longed for.

She hooked her leg over one of his inside the sleeping bag. Maybe they could hide in his tent and skip the morning hike. Explore each other instead of nature, but a blast of chilly air swept over her. She held onto Steven tighter, but an unwelcome voice hit her ears: "Hyde, you'll never guess—"

She fought to sit up as Eric's shriek filled the tent. She wriggled out of the sleeping bag, and he whispered, "Jackie?"

"No!" she shouted and grabbed her flashlight. She rushed past him and crawled through the tent's opening. Donna's tent was close. She dove into it, praying no one had seen her.

Donna was almost fully dressed. She was sitting on her sleeping bag, tying her boots, but she looked up with wide eyes. "Jackie?"

Jackie exhaled, puffing out her cheeks. "That's the third time someone's said my name in surprise this morning."

"You're still in your pajamas..." Donna said, "and your hair—"

"What about it?" Jackie had left her hat in Steven's tent, and she felt her braid. It was still damp, and a few strands had pulled free while she slept. "I couldn't exactly bring my hot curlers. Where was I supposed to plug them in, a tree?"

"Did you run over here as soon as you woke up?"

"No."
Donna pulled a toothbrush and toothpaste from a small travel bag. "Do you have a headache? Are you nauseous, dizzy?"

"Oh, God. Enough with the concussion questions." Jackie tasted the inside of her mouth. She needed her own toiletries and all her stuff back in her possession. "I'll explain everything on the way."

"On the way to where?"

"Where I was supposed to be sleeping last night."

Jackie emerged from the tent into the dawn, and Donna joined her a few seconds later. She was carrying a wool coat, and she draped it over Jackie's shoulders. "Wear this until we get back to your tent."

"Thanks." Jackie slipped her arms into the coat. Having it on was like being embraced. As alone and lonely as she'd been the past few weeks, she had a place she belonged. It wasn't with the cheer squad but with her friends, with Donna and Steven, Fez, and even Eric.

Across the campground, students were in varying states of wakefulness. Some yawned outside their tents. Others ate snacks they'd brought with them. Many trudged toward the bathrooms.

Teachers held student rosters and were doing head counts. Park staff was busy preparing breakfast by the communal eating area, a safe distance from the tents. Scrambled eggs and sausage sizzled on cooking fires, and Jackie's stomach grumbled.

"Valerie kicked me out of Leslie's tent," she whispered, but Timmy Wilson was nearby. All she needed was his gossipy mouth blabbing her private business. He'd already shouted her fainting spell to the whole student body.

"Why?" Donna said.

"I have no idea, but she physically dragged me out of the tent."

Donna turned her head left then right. "Where is that bitch? I'm gonna kick her ass!"

"You can't."

"Wanna bet?" Donna gripped her toothbrush hard enough to make her knuckles white, and she sped up her pace.

"Donna, please? This isn't your problem."

"You're my best friend! Of course it is."

"I'm your..." Jackie stopped as Donna charged ahead. The air was nippy, but she had on Donna's huge coat. Donna had called Jackie her best friend for the first time ever, and Donna wanted to hurt Valerie on Jackie behalf. All of that turned the October dawn into midday July. "Wait, Donna!"

Donna slowed down, and Jackie dashed to her. "Though I'm thrilled you'd maim Valerie for being a bitch to me," Jackie said and touched Donna's arm, "I think something's wrong. She showed weakness by doing what she did, and using that could hurt her more than your gargantuan fists ever would."

"All right." Donna's posture relaxed, and she matched Jackie's less urgent stride. "Where did you end up sleeping?"
"In a safe place."

"Hyde?"

Jackie's breath froze in her chest. She flicked her eyes from side to side. Looked behind her then in front. No one was in their path. Only trees. "How did you know?"

Donna laughed. "I figured out you two had the hots for each other a while ago. In fact, that's what convinced me coming on this trip would work. Because if you and Hyde could fall in love, then anything's possible."

Blood flushed Jackie's cheeks. If Donna had realized the truth, then other people might have, too.

Jackie removed Donna's coat. The cheer squad's campsite was only a few yards away now. As much as she'd like Donna to stay by her side, Donna no longer went to Point Place High. She couldn't back Jackie up in the school halls, and Valerie would use that fact against her.

"How's your memory?" Donna said, putting on her coat.

"Donna..."

"I'm sorry, but I've got to ask you these things. How well did you sleep?"

Jackie crossed her arms over her chest, for warmth more than anything else. The repeated questions sliced at her pride, reminding her of what she'd done with Michael. Done to herself. But Steven was worried about her health and had taken responsibility for it. Donna was just helping him stay informed, and Jackie couldn't fault her for that.

"I slept fine once I was no longer a frozen steak," she said. "I remember every piece of gossip I heard on the bus yesterday, like how Vicki gave Andrew Schmidt a blowjob behind the gym. Sharon's mom lost her secretary job for being too matronly. Pam Macy is supposedly sleeping with the vice principle so she can finally graduate—"

Donna wrinkled her nose. "You can stop there. I get that Pam is, like, twenty and repeated junior year and now her senior year, but ... God." She shuddered. "I wish I'd never heard that. Now I'll have to make an anonymous call to Principle Pridewell so he'll look into the situation."

Jackie gazed at Leslie's tent. Donna was such a fighter, not just for herself but other people. Jackie used to believe the same of herself, but she'd been fighting to preserve her popularity, not her self-respect.

"The noise that woke us up didn't bother me more than it did Steven," she said. "I'm not irritable. I'm pissed off and frustrated, and the only stars I saw were in the sky. I'm fine, Donna, okay? At least physically."

"Okay..." Donna said, "but until this trip is done, expect to be asked these questions. We care about you, enough to be obnoxious about it."

"I know." Jackie leaned her head on Donna's shoulder. "And we're going to call your dad's hotel room after the hike. You need to check in."

"Right! Thanks."

Jackie stood up straight as Leslie exited her tent. She waved frantically at Jackie, and Jackie darted toward her. Donna followed, maybe acting as a bodyguard in case of an ambush, but most of the
cheer squad was heading to the breakfast line.

"I am so, so sorry about last night," Leslie said when Jackie reached her. Leslie pulled Jackie to the tent but stared at Donna. "Excuse us."

"Jackie—" Donna said.

"See you later," Jackie said and went into the tent with Leslie.

Forman stuck by the opening of Hyde's tent, as if the area inside were full of tar. "You had sex with Jackie? Here? In—in—in Donna's tent?"

Hyde had gotten dressed except for his boots while Forman sputtered. He needed to take a leak, but Forman seemed on the verge of mental collapse. "Whatever me and Jackie do is our business, all right?"

"But you're together … bedularly."

"We're together."

"Bedularly," Forman repeated.

Hyde dropped his toothbrush and toothpaste into his left boot. His fingers brushed out a few knots in his hair, but the longer curls insisted on sticking together. "She's my girlfriend, Forman, and you can't say shit to anyone about it. We've gotta keep it secret."

"Your girlfriend? For how long?"

"On the hike, man. On the damn hike."

Hyde carried his boots out of the tent. His bladder situation had gone critical, and he hightailed it to the woods. He relieved himself away from other male students, who were doing the same as him. The teachers hadn't given explicit instructions not to piss in the woods, but it sucked for the girls. Guys had an anatomical advantage: unzip, whip it out, and go in nature's urinal. Chicks had to walk a quarter mile to reach a toilet suitable for them.

Forman caught up with him on the breakfast line, and in the growing sunlight, a cut became visible on his face. It was a sliver of a scratch, probably from that thicket in the tree maze, but Mrs. Forman must've packed him a First Aid kit. At home, Forman would've worn a Band-Aid on his cheek, no matter how tiny the injury. Out here, though, maybe he thought exposing his boo-boo for all to see would make him appear more manly.

The cut on Hyde's wrist was less than a gash but more than a scrape. Blood had dripped down his hand, and he'd washed it off in the bathroom last night. Applied direct pressure to the wound until it stopped bleeding. The routine was familiar, thanks to his ma and some of the "uncles" she'd bring home. He hadn't packed Band-Aids on this trip, and he didn't have someone to pack Band-Aids for him either, but he hid the bright red scab under the black sleeve of his thermal shirt.

It still burned a little, especially when his wrist bent. Putting on his boots after pissing had been less than fun. His toothbrush and toothpaste had been moved to his jeans pockets, where they pushed against his hips. Also uncomfortable, but discomfort he could handle.

"You're gonna ask her to be your girlfriend on the hike today?" Forman whispered beside him.
"No," Hyde said and stood stiffly. Forman's interest in his romantic life was more than irritating. It was inconvenient. "You want more info, you'll get it on the hike."

They reached one of the cooking fires, and a park staff member piled eggs and sausage onto paper plates. "Plastic utensils, cups, and pitchers of water are on the picnic tables," she said, nodding to the communal eating area.

Hyde and Forman brought their plates to a table full of jocks and chess club members. The groups weren't talking to each other, but they weren't fighting either. Their team-building exercise yesterday might've done some good, after all, fostering an echelon-spanning camaraderie. But it could fall apart at any second. One wrong word, one wrong look, and Hyde would have to yank Forman to safety.

"So what's your deal?" Hyde said and cut into a sausage. "Why'd you break into my tent?"

Forman shoveled a forkful of scrambled eggs into his mouth, but he swallowed before speaking. "Ms. McGee was impressed by my tent-pitching—shut up, Hyde!" he said when Hyde laughed. "I've got rank now. She made me her special helper—"

Hyde laughed again and put his fist to his mouth.

"Since I have most of the skills we're going to learn out here," Forman went on, "she promoted me to assistant wilderness skills guide. The park instructors are gonna give me a pin so everyone knows."

"Oh, man. You are so getting your ass kicked."

"Not with the power of fire in my grasp!" Forman opened his fingers like he'd conjured an imaginary fireball. "Who do you think burned down Old Maine?"

"What?"

Forman sipped at his water. "It wasn't me. I wouldn't have been that careless. Anyway, I'll get community service credit for this trip, too. One less thing to worry about on the ol' high school transcript."

"Did the Cub Scouts award achievement beads for getting beaten up?" Hyde said, "cause you're gonna earn a whole bunch the next few days," but he was only joking around. Forman's help would be a welcome relief to most people, and if anyone made an aggressive play Forman couldn't handle, Hyde would handle it for him.

Leslie had drawn Jackie into a two-person huddle. Leslie's tent was zippered shut, but Jackie did a surreptitious inventory of her stuff. Her sleeping bag didn't smell like Valerie's grassy perfume. Valerie might've gone back to her own tent last night to sleep. Jackie's suitcase and makeup case were at the back of the tent, but without a thorough inspection, she couldn't tell if they'd been tampered with.

"You're the only one I can tell," Leslie whispered, holding both of Jackie's hands. "If this had happened to anyone but Valerie, I would've spread it across school, but you understand."

Jackie did—partly. Harboring Valerie's secrets a secret was an act of self-preservation, but why Leslie believed she could trust Jackie with them was mystifying.

"You've changed," Leslie said, and Jackie tried to relax her face. Her confusion had to remain hidden. "You care about people," Leslie continued, "like their status doesn't matter. Like you have a soul."
"I've always cared about people," Jackie said, but her throat closed up. First Julie, now Leslie. They'd been watching her, tracking her growth. But becoming like Valerie, using people's trust and vulnerability to get power, that was a path Jackie couldn't travel. "Most of life, if we're lucky, happens after high school."

Leslie squeezed Jackie's hands. "But life is happening right now! Valerie caught Michael cheating on her! She couldn't tell who the whore was, but she did see the back of her blond head, bobbing up and down on Michael's gearshift. It was in the middle of woods somewhere, and Valerie ran straight to me."

Jackie wrenched one of her hands free and covered her mouth. Susan Amborn's report had been accurate. "How did Valerie even find them?" Jackie said between her fingers. "Why was she in the woods anyway?"

"Oh, Michael told Valerie he was going to pee. But he was taking too long, and, 'No one makes Valerie Clayton wait.'"

Leslie and Jackie sighed together, as if their patience with Valerie had run out at the same time. But Michael must have wanted to get caught. Back when he'd cheated on Jackie, he'd tried to conceal it, and he'd done a good job of it, too. Steven was the one who'd stoked her suspicions.

"Valerie considers all blondes suspects," Leslie said, brushing her fingers through her hair. "Including you?"

"Please. She knows I'd never let Michael touch me unless he got a better set of a wheels. I mean a V.W. Microbus? Come on!"

Jackie swallowed a laugh. Leslie liked what she liked, and she also wasn't the type to cross Valerie. But a lot of blondes were on this trip, from all levels of high school social strata. Valerie had a serious reputation problem to deal with.

Leslie cupped Jackie's knee. "You have to help me, okay? Valerie thinks Julie's out to get her and is her number-one suspect. She won't ask you for advice—like I told her to—but you have extensive experience with Michael. Does he have a specific blonde-type? Has he bragged to your friends in that weird clique you hang out with?"

Jackie squinted. "Weird clique?"

"You know, the El Camino, the El Dorado, Uh-bluh—"

"Oh, my God, you mean—" Jackie burst out in laughter. Only Leslie would name people by the cars they drove. "If he has, they haven't said anything to me about it."

"You'll have to go deep cover, then," Leslie said. "Valerie said Michael's best friend, El Camino—" she shook her head and put up her hand, "Steven Hyde. I'm sorry. She said he's in love with you. I'm not supposed to disclose that to anyone unless you … never mind. Anyway, you could use his feelings for you to find out who Michael's banging."

Jackie clutched the shooting star pendant through her pajama top. This could be the break she and Steven needed, but … "Why don't I just ask the El Dorado—I mean, Donna?"

"Because Michael's more likely to blab to Steven. Guys are as gossipy as we are, just to other guys. Listen," Leslie lowered her voice and glanced at each of the tent's walls, "if you do this, I'll totally support you in ousting Julie as assistant cheer captain. That'll set you up to becoming captain next
year and homecoming queen. You'll take Valerie's position as the most popular girl in school your senior year."

"And what about my reputation in the meantime?" Jackie said, even as her mind buzzed with the possibilities. "I have a boyfriend. If I pretend to lust after Steven, people will call me a cheating slut. Valerie thinks Steven's worse than chronic diarrhea, and she'll think less of me than she already does. This can only hurt me."

"Jackie, Jackie, Jackie..."

Leslie smiled like she had esoteric knowledge, and Jackie's breaths grew short. Leslie was more than just one of Valerie's thralls. She was a confidant, perhaps the confidant, to the female social leader of the school.

"You're not dating a boy from Ft. Blanderson," Leslie said. "Valerie saw through that ruse from the start, though the pictures of you and that male model were a nice touch—"

"Mark is not a model! He plays chess and is the Cailliet heir."

"Hmph." Leslie crawled to Jackie's suitcase and opened it. She pawed around inside and pulled out the sexiest outfit Jackie had packed: her long-sleeved Yves Saint Laurent blouse and butt-hugger jeans. "Valerie's father called up Mark's father, and Mr. Cailliet shared that Mark has no girlfriend, much to his chagrin."

Jackie snatched her clothes from Leslie. "Mark's keeping our relationship from his family because I'm a Viking, and they're rabid Snapping Turtle supporters, all right? It's horrible, but it's what he feels he has to do."

"Whatever you say." Leslie gestured to the blouse and jeans. "Wear that. Cozy up to Steven on the hike. Find out the info I need and take the temporary rep hit, or I'll be forced to spread something very unpleasant about you."

Jackie's fingers tightened around the blouse. Leslie was car-obsessed and used people because of it, but she'd never shown such ruthlessness before.

"Power is shifting," Leslie said. "Can't you feel it? A social earthquake is coming. Are you going to plummet through the cracks, run for cover, or stand on stable ground?"

"You mean stand with you."

"You could be my partner in this, Jackie. You just have to thicken up your skin." Leslie pinched Jackie's arm, and Jackie scooted back from her. "Steven's a fox, even without his beard. He drives a cool car, gives good head—when he finishes, that is—and he's smart even while wasted. You could do way worse."

Jackie's jaw clenched as pressure built up in her chest. "You've been with him?"

Leslie fiddled with the ribbon at her sweater collar. "Once or twice. I never told Valerie. I never told anyone. It was a few weeks after I crashed Uh-bluh's Corvette..." She giggled. "Man, was that a thrill. Too bad he ended up with that Vista Cruiser afterward." Her fingers left the sweater ribbon and pulled her hair into a high pony-tail. "Steven didn't let me near his car, but that was all right. Kat's word was enough to get me interested."

"Do you want him now? Jackie said. She yanked off her pajama top and put on her blouse. Her stomach was gurgling. She needed to eat, but this conversation was more important.
"Would I fuck him again?" Leslie secured her ponytail with a tortoiseshell barrette. "Sure. But seeing how he's in love with you, and what he didn't do with Julie, I doubt he'd fuck me."

Jackie tugged on her jeans, and one of her nails broke in the process. "Damn it!" she shouted. "Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn!"

Leslie pressed her palms to her ears. "Stop shouting! I had to hear enough of that from Valerie."

A scream caught in Jackie's throat. Her fingers turned into claws, tensing to rip the tent walls apart, to tear off Leslie's skin. But she snatched a nail file from her makeup case and fixed her ragged nail. Steven's sexual history was not his sexual present. She had to remember that.

"So are you gonna find out who Michael's other woman is or not?" Leslie said.

"I'm putting my own interests first." Jackie exchanged the nail file for her toothbrush and toothpaste. She stuck her feet into her hiking boots, tied the laces, and grabbed her down jacket. "That should tell you enough."

She unzipped the tent's front flap and went outside, hoping to eat whatever scraps were left for breakfast. But teachers were carrying garbage bags around the picnic tables, and students tossed in their paper plates and plastic utensils. Breakfast was over. Students would be lining up for the hike soon, ignorant of how the school's social royalty had turned cannibalistic.
Scabbing Over

Chapter Notes

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE
SCABBING OVER

The senior and junior classes were split into four mixed and mostly even groups. Each had its own trail guide and a teacher to babysit it, but the first and last ones would be policed the most. Coach Ferguson and Ms. McGee were the chaperones. Not optimum for Hyde's plans. He needed freedom of movement.

The middle groups, however, had the more lax Mrs. Fletcher and Mr. Wilcox. They'd probably let students wander in and out, and Hyde slipped into Mr. Wilcox's troop.

His friends must've had the same idea because they joined him. His attention, though, was on the group ahead of him, monitored by Mrs. Fletcher. Cheerleaders filled it, wearing their rainbow-colored jackets. Jackie had to be there, and his agenda included getting cozy with her. The nature trail began a mile from the campsite. That would make this morning's hike a four-miler altogether, plenty of distance to steal a moment or three with his chick.

But the starting times were staggered. Hyde's group moved forward only once Mrs. Fletcher's disappeared in the distance. Jackie was five minutes away, and he adjusted his backpack straps as memories of her saturated his body. She'd shivered in his arms last night, enough to scare him.

"Do you smell that?" Fez inhaled noisily beside him. "It is the smell of Christmas."

"It's the smell of my mom's dusting spray," Forman said and shined up his Quartz Falls badge. It was the size of a quarter and pinned to the lapel of his coat. It designated him as a wilderness guide assistant, a fact he hadn't shut up about since getting the badge.

Donna gestured to the surrounding pine trees. "It's the smell of nature, but do you hear that? The falls must be close."

"Actually," Forman said, "we'll be able to hear both the Quarts Falls and the Rainbow Cascades during the entire hike." He tapped his badge. "The amount of force they put out is incredible, and yet electric companies couldn't harness it, thanks to the unpredictable daily highs and lows of the Trumpeter River, into which both falls flow—"

Hyde frogged Forman's shoulder, and Forman ended his speech with a yelp.

"Looks like Hyde just harnessed the power of his fist," Donna said and laughed. "Eric, I get that you're into this whole Cub Scout thing, but could you maybe take it down a notch?"

"Okay..." Forman grasped his shoulder protectively. "Then I won't mention how Hyde's boots are going to give him a ton of blisters today." He grinned smugly. "That's right, buddy. Your feet are
"I'll be fine," Hyde said. "Worn these boots for over a year. They're broken in. If I get a few blisters, I'll swipe Band-Aids from you. Your mom packed you a first aid kit. Don't try to deny it."

"Yeah." Forman's gaze roamed Hyde's body, as if checking for parasites, and it landed on Hyde's right hand. Hyde's coat and shirt sleeves had risen up his arm, probably when he'd frogged Forman. He tugged them back down, but Forman said, "How'd you get that scab?"

Hyde rolled his tensing shoulders. This was not where he'd wanted the conversation to go, but Forman was already rummaging in his backpack.

"Now let's see that wrist mister," Forman said after pulling out a Band-Aid and a spray bottle of Unguentine. He sounded just like his mom, whom Hyde would've obeyed. But Hyde shoved his hand into his coat pocket. Kids from school crowded them on all sides. Having Forman play nursemaid to him would screw his rep.

"You wanna be Florence Nightingale, go bother people with scrapes on their faces. Some are pretty nasty."

"That thicket did claim a few casualties yesterday," Donna said. "Patty Frumkin got hit on the cheek hard. She was bleeding like a cat had slapped her. Guess she'll be at the rear of the cheer squad this semester."

Forman held up the disinfectant spray. "Hyde?"

"Nothin' doin—"

"He said give him your wrist!" Fez shouted.

Their group was approaching the Trumpeter River. Its water was murky and flowed northward. Hyde considered bolting, diving into the river and seeing where it carried him. But his shitty background and shittier future prospects wouldn't be washed away, no matter how strong the current. He might've lived with Forman's family, but he still wasn't family. More like a charity case.

Forman had parents who loved him. Despite what Red said on Hyde's eighteenth birthday, they'd never let Forman drown. They'd pack him first aid kits and bail him out of jail while Hyde bled and got sent to state prison. Red had kicked Hyde out of the house once. It could happen again, and the possibility bothered him worse than it used to.

If Jackie's folks didn't get their crap together, if their relationship broke down completely, she'd lose what familial security she had left. She'd depend on Hyde to give her what her parents couldn't, and he had no way to provide it. He was running in hole-riddled sneakers with no soles.
"This isn't gonna work," Hyde said as Forman sprayed disinfectant onto Hyde's cut. Fez had yanked Hyde's hand free of his coat pocket and was acting as a nurse's aid.

"Yeah, the scab's formed," Donna said. "He needed that stuff yesterday. Just put the Band-Aid on him."

Forman slid the spray bottle into his jeans pocket and used a tissue to blot the area around Hyde's cut. "I'm a wilderness skills assistant, Donna, and I'm going to assist."

He applied the Band-Aid to the top of Hyde's wrist, and Hyde let him.

"But this afternoon, my experience will be on display," Forman said. "Ms. McGee told me there'll be a lesson on knots, and no one's better at tying knots than this guy." He jabbed his thumb at his chest. "I can't wait to get the respect this school's owed me for years."

"Oh?" Donna bent down and snatched a pebble from the river bank. They'd reached the Trumpeter, and their trail guide stopped them to share its history. "What about when you were Point Place's Most Eligible Viking?" Donna said. "You were respected by the girls, at least."

"That was for my body and charm, not my talent." Forman produced a sizable spool of rope from his backpack, and Hyde glared at him. "What? If someone falls into the river, I can knot this baby to tree and myself and save him." He stood straighter and stuck out his chin. "I'll be a hero."

Donna squeezed her temples between her thumb and forefinger and shut her eyes. "You've been hanging out with Kelso too much in my absence."

"Not really, but speaking of Kelso—" He returned the rope to his backpack, "Ms. McGee asked me a couple of strange questions about him this morning, like if Kelso was actually nineteen, if his parents were the hands-off type..."

"Weird." She chucked the pebble into the river as their group moved again. "Wonder if his new position as homecoming king has anything to do with it."

Fez kicked the dirt. "Who cares? That sonuvabitch isn't spending enough time with me on this trip. He promised he would."

Hyde offered no sympathy, but he could relate. Headache-inducing noise had accompanied the most quality time he'd gotten with Jackie so far. But without her to talk to, the sediment of his thoughts was piling up.

The roar of Quartz Falls rumbled in his chest. Foam was floating in the river, and water rushed over mossy rocks farther north. A wooden overlook allowed people to get closer. Mrs. Fletcher's group was taking advantage of it, gawking at the frothing pool below.

Hyde pushed to the front of his own group. Catching up to Jackie had become possible, but the trail guide slowed Hyde's group down. "In just a few minutes, you'll feel the power of the falls!" the trail guide shouted. "In the mid 1800s, people mined the river for precious metals. The main operation occurred between Quartz Falls and the Rainbow Cascades, but..."

The cataracts pouring over the rocks turned blood-red in Hyde's mind. Too much bullshit stood between him and Jackie, not just her social situation but his deficiencies as a human being. Valerie had turned him into an Afterschool Special, trespassing his body, forcing him to feel sensations he hadn't invited her to create.

He should have stopped her. Could have, but his need for escape had made him compliant. Culpable.
It wasn't a new story.

His jaw clenched, and his heart pounded in his throat, but his name tugged his focus from the falls. Jackie was dashing toward him, a rainbow streak in that jacket of hers. He held out his hand, and she grabbed it and kept on running.

His muscles loosened up, and he raced with her through his group until they found a private spot among the trees. The closest students were at the river, skipping stones, and Mr. Wilcox had gone toward the front, presumably to listen to the trail guide.

"Steven," Jackie said breathlessly, "we're in trouble."

"Been thinkin' that myself—"

"Leslie and Valerie both have it out for me," she went on. "Or Leslie is out to get Valerie's position, which is more likely. I'm not much of a social threat, regardless of Valerie personal vendetta against me. But Leslie ordered me to 'cozy up' to you so you'll tell me who Michael's cheating on Valerie with."

His grip tightened on her hand. Her cheeks were pink, but the rest of her appeared pale in the shade. "Did you eat breakfast?" he said.

"Nothing was left. I needed to hear what Leslie—" She quit talking when his fingers sprang off her palm, and he thrust his backpack off his shoulders. "What are you doing?"

He plucked out his baggie of cookies and dropped it into her hands. "Eat."

"I'm too scared to eat."

"If I had my stash, I'd get you high enough to fix your appetite. But alls I got is please."

She stared at him with an emotion he couldn't read, but she opened the baggie and popped a cookie into her mouth. That was a better sight than the falls. She'd fainted once because of not eating. It wouldn't happen again.

"I just want this to be over," she said.

Strands of hair had rebelled against her braid. They dangled loosely over her nose, and he tucked the strands behind her ear. "So let's end it."

"I can't." She started on another cookie, and he caressed the side of her face. He had to get in as much physical contact as he could, to carry it with him. "I still have two years left at this school," she said, "and I won't be a social pariah. I have to play to win. You understand that, don't you?" She rubbed his hand as he cupped her cheek, and the contact stung a little. "Why are you wearing a Band-Aid?"

"Thicket got me yesterday. Saved Valerie from disfigurement."

She swallowed her bite of cookie loudly. "You did? Does she know?"

"Won't make a difference. But how the hell did she find out Kelso and you...?"

She glanced around their wooded area. Ms. McGee's group was approaching but slowly. "Not me," she said. "A blonde. Valerie caught them last night."

His eyebrows rose. "Now that could give you an advantage. Learning who it is'll be a cinch. Just
gotta use the right bait, and Kelso'll spill the beans." He indicated the cookies. "One more."

She grunted but did as he said. "This has become bigger than us. We're in a demented chess match, but if I do have to decide between the cheer squad and you, I choose you."

"Don't." He shoved the cookies into his backpack as Ms. McGee's group got closer. He and Jackie had to blend in with his group, and he led her back to it. "You've lost enough," he said, standing close to her. "You're just gonna lose more, bein' with me."

"How can you say that?" Her voice cut through the thundering falls. "I've already gotten so much from you, and we haven't even kissed as a couple yet."

"The crap that's kept us apart, maybe it's the cosmos's way of keeping you safe, man. I'm heir to a drinking problem, not a national clothing chain. Half this summer, you were hanging out with a hangover, not me."

She clutched the lapel of his coat and forced him to face her. If anyone was watching them, he couldn't tell. The anguish in her eyes occupied his senses.

He waited for her to speak what was inside her. She remained silent, letting the falls answer him with static.

"What is it?" he said.

She shook her head slightly. "Doesn't matter."

"If you're feeling it, it matters."

Her chest rose with a sharp breath, and her fingers curled over the nape of his neck. "You've been with a lot of girls."

"Yeah...?"

"Leslie."

"Shit..." The memory was buried in his mental junkyard, rusted over with booze. "Forgot about that."

Her mouth quirked into a half-smile. "Guess the experience was more memorable for her."

"Don't tell me she's got a thing for me."

"Not even your car. Who else do I need to know about?"

"That's up to you, man." He stroked her ear with the back of his fingers. It was an intimate move, making promises he desperately wanted to keep. "Past's only important if we've got a present."

Her thumbs played with his curls. "Oh, we've got that and a future. You don't have to accept your inheritance. My grandfather was deep in debt when he died, and my mom refused to be the executor of his will. She wasn't going to pay for his mistakes, at least not the financial ones."

She looked at the falls. "Come with me," she said and took his hand again.

"You sure?"

She pulled him to the walkway that stretched over the river. It ended in a hexagonal railing, and she
created space for both of them, edging students aside. Despite her orders to move, no one appeared to notice that she and Hyde were together. Students were too distracted by the falls or their own chatter.

He grasped the top of the railing. She copied the move but positioned herself so the roaring water would mask their words. Smart. Anyone trying to eavesdrop would have to stick their heads between them.

"Who I've screwed is gonna be another barricade," he said. "Being rich is your scene, not mine. Can't say I'm ambitious, either."

"Please. Having money and being successful in business are no guarantees of happiness. The Formans' house would be a disaster area without the chores you do. You cooked me those deviled eggs after hunting for the ingredients." She moved closer to the railing and leaned against it. "You've been dragged into my social mess. You're trying to help me get out of it..." She laughed. "And you say you're not ambitious."

"That's not what I'm gettin' at—"

"You work hard when it's worth it to you," she continued. "That's all I want. For being with me to be worth it to you. Because I'll work just as hard to be with you."

A lump of pain wedged in his throat. Being with her was worth more than he could quantify. He coughed to unknot his vocal chords. His sexual history wasn't a subject he talked about with anyone, but she needed him to do it. Especially after what he'd admitted to her on Tuesday.

"Biker chick named Esther," he began but someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he clamped his mouth shut.

"Quit hogging the overlook," Jimmy Headgear said behind him. His nasal voice was unmistakable.

Hyde laced his fingers with Jackie's. He wouldn't lose her, not on this trip. Not to Kelso or Valerie—and not to his own skull. The decision was carved in his chest now, and he be brought her to the thick of his group.

"She was a friend of my uncle's," he said, and Jackie hugged herself to his arm, maybe to hear him better over the falls. "She was the first. Older than me. Don't ask by how much."

"How old were you?" she said.

"Probably too young..." He angled his head up. Pine trees reached into the sky, and the sun shone through them, boiling away his hesitation. "Definitely too damn young. She initiated without asking. I gave in."

His organs seemed to shrivel with his confession. He'd never spoken his experience out loud. Never planned to. His childhood had been rough and lawless, and Esther had taken advantage of it.

"She gave me the illusion of control, and it fucked with my head. Couldn't square all the things I was feeling." The acrid memory rose through him like smoke. "A body just reacts, man. Even if the skull is screamin' for the opposite."

Jackie tightened her grip on his arm. "That's awful, Steven. That's—I'm sorry."

"It's why I waited a few years before I did it again," he said and visually checked the area for spies. If anyone had heard what was for Jackie's ears alone, he'd have to leave town. But people in his
group kept their distance, as if he and Jackie were surrounded by an invisible force field.

That explanation wasn't realistic, but he wouldn't take the opportunity for granted. He and Jackie had a decent amount of space to themselves. His insides already felt clearer, cleaner, sharing some of his past. And she hadn't left his side. Not yet.

"Was your next time better?" she said, pressing her cheek into his coat sleeve.

"Loads. It was with this chick passing through Point Place. Punk rock and paranoid. My kind of girl —back then. Almost left with her to New York, but the giant rats changed my mind."

"Giant rats?"

"The Formans painted a swell image of New York. Tried to convince me not to go. They … huh." A shudder passed through him, and Jackie's embrace shifted to his waist. He held her closely in response, not caring who saw.

"Baby, are you okay?" she said. His group was on the move again, but her embrace didn't falter as they walked past the falls. "You're shivering."

"It's colder by the river," he said, but the river hadn't caused him to shake. Even if the Formans did consider him family, his faults would always cost him more. Forman and Laurie could screw up and be welcomed home. Hyde's tactical errors had irreversible consequences.

Jackie tugged on his coat pocket. "Did you ever have any droughts? Breaks where you weren't with anyone?"

"Sure. Unlike Kelso, I don't constantly gotta have my dick in a chick—" He rubbed the nape of his neck. He hadn't meant that as a burn on her, but she didn't appear to be insulted. "Had plenty of action, though. Slept with girls from others school. Women I met elsewhere … including a mail lady."

"Steven, my God!" She slapped his hip. "Why?"

His stomach contracted. "She knew how to do stuff and gave me free stamps—"

"I don't need to hear any more."

Her arms fell from his waist, and nausea rolled through him. He was who he was. He'd done what he'd done, and if that killed her idea of him, then they wouldn't have lasted anyway.

He yanked his shades from his coat pocket. He hadn't worn them all morning, but the sun had risen high enough in the sky. Was bright enough. He moved his shades toward his eyes, but Jackie grabbed his wrist.

"What I mean is you're not on trial." Her grasp was dangerously close to the Band-Aid, to his scab. She must have realized it because she released him. "When Leslie told me about you two, I got jealous, okay? I don't like that so many of my teammates have been with you." She unzipped her jacket a little, opening the collar. "But there's also that paranoid punk rocker. A kinky mail lady—and whoever else. I forgot that you had a non-Jackie life."

He held onto his shades, scratching the frame with his fingernail. "Sex was just sex, man. It felt good. Sometimes it felt bad. That's it. That's what life freakin' was…" He dropped his shades into his coat pocket. "We're getting out of this."
"So we're over." She zipped her jacket back up to her neck. "Because you think I can't handle your history? Or because I can't compete with it?"

"Hell no. We're getting out of the cheerleaders' soap opera. 'Cause we have to."

"You want me to leave the squad."

He swallowed a groan. Their conversation was exposing them on all levels, to the school, to their own weaknesses. "Didn't say that, but you need to be there on your own terms. Just like we've gotta be together on our own terms, not cowering at anyone's feet. Got it?"

Her face flushed. She wasn't crying, but his truths weren't pretty. Whether or not she accepted them remained in question, but he slid his arms around her. It was as private an embrace as he could manage in their current company. "I love you," he whispered by her ear. "Got that?"

"Mm-hmm," she said, but the tears in her voice were unmistakable. He withdrew from her, and she wiped her eyes with her jacket sleeve before bolting.

He physically staggered back at her reaction. She hadn't shared what was in her head. Just run off, but he'd finally drawn people's attention. A few passersby gawked at him, like his skin had become transparent. Or maybe it had disintegrated, unable to conceal the pain sparking in whatever was left of him.
**Balancing on a Pebble**

Chapter Notes

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**CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR**

**BALANCING ON A PEBBLE**

Jackie fled Steven's hiking group on the rocky path. The trail sloped downward as it got closer to the Rainbow Cascades, and traveling it required a careful eye and good balance. Chunks of broken stones threatened to twist ankles, but the cheer squad was scattered through Mrs. Fletcher's group. Jackie's teammates were walking in gossip clusters, and she needed speed. If any of them caught her sneaking by, they'd prevent her passage to the front.

Valerie and Michael were to the left, arm-in-arm. Leslie and Patty Frumkin were to the right, chatting with Jake Bradley and others on the football team. Other students clumped together in the center, and Jackie broke through them. Her elbow landed in someone's gut, but she didn't apologize. Her voice would give her away.

Neil Rooney plodded ahead of her, but his lumbering pace belied his swiftness. On the football field, he tackled enemy players with ease, but his focus tended to be narrow. He was trying to shove his best friend, Paul Makowski, toward the Trumpeter River. His heels dug into the dirt as Paul pushed back, and Jackie skirted by on his right. He showed no reaction to her presence, not even a glance. That lack of peripheral awareness often got the Vikings into trouble, especially against the Snapping Turtles, but it had served her well today.

Only one last knot of students remained in the way. She was close to the front now, but the trail underfoot had gotten pebbly. Moving too quickly would be like running on marbles.

She surged forward. Her right foot slipped, but she regained her balance and dodged the flailing arm of a gossiping teammate. Jackie's left foot kicked a large pebble into the calf of the trail guide, but he seemed not to notice, and she sprinted past him and Mrs. Fletcher.

Her pulse pounded through her body as she kept running. Three yards of bumpy path lay before her, but she had to get to first hiking group.

She searched the ground and landed her steps in pebble-free areas. The falls' ceaseless rumble competed against her heartbeat. Her chest burned with the instinct to survive, but the first hiking group was in sight. A few feet more, and she'd be safe.

The students closest to her were gazing at the sky, as if birdwatching. Jackie widened her stride, but a pebble skidded beneath her boot. She crashed into the bird watchers, two boys. Her center of gravity had shifted too far over her feet, but hands grabbed her as she fell and yanked her upright.

"You okay?" one of the boys said, and she flinched. Buddy Morgan. He should've been in the group she'd left behind.
"Yeah," she said, and he released her arm. "I … needed a change of scenery."

"I get that."

"Does he ever." The boy to her left chuckled and let go of her waist. "Go up further," he said, moving to Buddy's side. "Enjoy the park without all the noise."

"Thanks," she said and went deeper into the group, but the noise was inside her head.

A few minutes ago, Steven had shown her an incredible amount of trust. Reassured her. Tried to empower her, and said, "I love you." It was the first time he'd spoken those words to her. He'd already admitted to falling in love, but saying, "I love you," was new level of intimacy.

His courage frothed in her stomach. He couldn't care less who saw them together or about the consequences that might follow. He just wanted to be with her, but shame had propelled her from him.

She was trembling at Valerie and Leslie's social power, cowed into subterfuge. Her parents had taught her better, to stand tall through any crisis, head held high. To put herself first. But they no longer considered her concerns and had, instead, become them.

"We'll be at the Rainbow Cascades in about fifteen minutes," the trail guide said from the front. "You can already hear them. They're the halfway mark on the trail, so—"

"Fifteen minutes!" Coach Ferguson shouted. "Lunch in fifteen!"

A raven cawed in the sky afterward. Students laughed, but Jackie's stomach continued churning. She should've stayed with Steven, told him she loved him. He'd waited during her confusion about Michael. He was still waiting, and she prayed he'd forgive her for leaving again—

"Jackie!" an unwelcome voice said, and Jackie's shoulders jumped. Julie walked up beside her, cheeks flushed. She wasn't supposed to be here. Jackie had escaped to this group for sanctuary. "I saw you running," Julie said, "but you were too quick. I'm so glad I found you!"

Jackie pulled her braid over her shoulder and tugged on it. "Oh, hell. Did anyone see you?"

"I don't think so. I slipped away when Jake tossed Patty over her shoulder. She squealed, and everyone was gawking at her."

"But that's so exciting!" Jackie said with fake sincerity. "Jake and Patty are totally an item now, right? Why aren't you with the squad to celebrate?"

"Honestly?" Julie gestured to the river. "I'd rather be fishing than spend another second with those catty bitches."

"You fish?" The hobby didn't match Julie's personality. She screamed whenever the wind tousled her hair. No way would she put on a bucket hat and touch worms.

"My dad and I go on fishing trips all the time. According to one of the trail guides, the Trumpeter's got walleye and panfish. If I had my rod, I could catch my own lunch. Of course, I'd also need my fillet knife, scaler, and..."

She went on about gutting and dressing a fish, and Jackie stifled a laugh. This group of students had been designated the Nerd Squad by the jocks, and Julie fit right into it. She'd been hiding parts of herself from the cheer squad, just like Jackie, but Julie hadn't questioned Jackie's presence here. She...
was acting suspiciously casual.

"Why did you follow me?" Jackie said. It couldn't be to ramble on about fish.

Julie clutched the straps of her backpack. "Valerie interrogated me about Michael Kelso, as if I'd ever be attracted to that idiot ... no offense. The only thing interesting about him is that by dating Valerie, he might actually wreck her reputation. Again, no offense."

Jackie's spine stiffened. The earthy scent of the river entered her nostrils, but she said nothing.

"He's a whore," Julie continued. "He's stupid. He's clumsy. He kind of resembles a horse when he laughs—"

"I got it." Jackie shut her eyes, and the *rat-a-tat-tat* of a woodpecker echoed through the trees. Its sharp beak might as well have been pecking at her skull. By insulting Michael, Julie had insulted Jackie's judgment. Naïveté, inexperience, and the illusion that she could control the uncontrollable. These made up her defense, but they were also conspiring to take her down.

Julie edged toward the river. "What I don't get, though, is why Valerie's dating him. Or fixed the homecoming election so he'd be king."

Jackie had the answer, but trusting Julie would be as stupid as trusting any of her teammates. Leslie turned out to be a power-hungry schemer, and other girls on the squad might have grudges they were hiding.

"Who knows why Valerie does anything she does?" Jackie said, and Julie grasped her arm. They were descending a rockier part of the trail, and Julie's balance was off. "Let go!" Jackie shouted. "You're gonna make both of us fall!"

"Sorry—these little stones are—I don't want to trip and break my neck."

"Then pay attention and don't walk on the little stones." It was Wilderness Wisdom 101, taught to Jackie when she was a Daisy in the Girl Scouts. "You're trained for this. Use your skills."

"Okay, okay." Julie freed Jackie's arm and wobbled. "I—jeez—all right." She continued to totter but became steadier the farther they traveled. "Think I've got the hang of it ... wish I could say the same about Valerie. I mean, she accused me of wanting to suck Michael's balls. Me! After everything I've done for that whore."

Jackie kept her gaze on the ground. "If you're so bothered by Valerie's treatment of you, why not use your leverage? She obviously thinks Michael's cheating, or going to cheat, on her. Remind her that she cheated on Michael first, and she'll leave you alone."

"I can't do that. Steven probably hated every second she touched him."

"Excuse me?" Jackie's focus shot to Julie, but her boot skidded on a few pebbles, and she looked down again.

"Valerie's so not his type. I don't think he invited her to jerk him off." Julie lowered her voice, and Jackie strained to hear it over the roar of the Rainbow Cascades. "She's bragged about her ... uninvited advances before. She likes how the guy struggles then gives in because she's all over his dick, 'so what's not to enjoy?"

She'd imitated Valerie perfectly, and Jackie's next blink coated her lashes with tears. Her body tingled with adrenaline, but she couldn't break. Valerie deserved to have her skin burned off for what
she'd done to Steven. He'd been hurt by so many people, and he gave his trust to few. It was a priceless jewel, as vulnerable as an exposed heart.

Jackie's attention remained on the rock-strewn ground. A tear fell onto a chipped stone, and she blotted her eyes with her jacket sleeve. She had to protect him. Valerie and the cheer squad were spiders, and their venom wouldn't liquefy any more of his innards.

"What did you and Steven talk about," Jackie said, "you know, at the Fatso Burger?"

"Oh, God, so much! He apologized to me for our disastrous afternoon together, and he gave me some great advice." Julie heaved out a breath. "He cares about people, Jackie. Like, a lot. Even if they've done him wrong. Dating's clearly out of the picture for us, but I'd be happy to be his friend."

She pointed at the ground. It was less pebbly now, but larger stones still posed a danger. "He's the kind of guy who'd pick you up if you fall … so you see why I can't blackmail Valerie? It could affect him, too."

Jackie's throat felt jagged, like she'd swallowed the broken rocks underfoot. Steven must've told Julie they would never happen as a couple—gently. He'd shown her respect, and she was returning it. "Wh-what advice did he give you?" Jackie said, pinching the skin of her neck.

"I'd like to keep that private," Julie said, "but it made me look at myself. I love being a cheerleader, but I hate being on the cheer squad … and so do you. That's why you're here, right? And not back there with them."

"Um..." Jackie glanced at the river. Jumping into it and ending up in Lake Superior seemed like a reasonable idea.

"Anyway," Julie said, "I'm seriously considering quitting."

The admission pushed down on Jackie's shoulders, and she straightened her posture in response. Whatever Steven told Julie, it had obviously been powerful, but it wasn't an, "I love you. " Julie didn't have Steven's pendant against her heart. Or his trust.

"Do you hate the squad or being under Valerie's thumb?" Jackie said.

"Both. We're the ones who let Valerie push us around. If we could, like, start a cheer union to collectively bargain … but I can't fight her alone. It'd be like one soldier facing a whole army." Julie counted off on her fingers. "Our teammates, populars across all the grades, the Vikings. Quitting would be suicidal..."

Her eyes became glassy, but her lips continued to move, like she was continuing the conversation inside her brain. "And it's just one more year," she said eventually. "Then Valerie will be gone. I'll be captain, and I can change how the squad operates."

"If Valerie doesn't screw you over first."

"She won't if I act like I'm super loyal and do some dirty work for her. Her cockiness makes her careless, and that I can use. She'll believe I'm scared of her instead of furious."

Jackie pressed her hand against her chest, against the shooting star pendant beneath her clothes. "You can do everything right and still lose."

"Nuh-uh."
"Play chess some time. Then talk to me."

"You are such a nerd," Julie said but patted Jackie's back. "I like it."

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Picnic blankets were spread on a rocky overlook by the Rainbow Cascades. The overlook stretched along the river and had room for a hundred people, but the fit was tight. Hyde and his friends sat next to Jimmy Headgear and his group, but their backs were to one another, creating a semblance of privacy. The rush of the falls didn't hurt, either. It acted like a white-noise generator, concealing conversations. It meant Hyde had to sit uncomfortably close to his friends, but it was preferable to shouting. What he needed to say wasn't for the school to hear.

During the first half of the hike, he'd told Forman and Donna what he could. Explained his situation with Jackie and his apparent flirtation with Julie. Forman and Donna said they would help, and Forman even claimed he owed Hyde and Jackie a few, which was damn cool.

Right now, though, no one was talking. Teachers and trail guides had passed out sandwiches and bags of potato chips, but students were expected to bring water themselves. That was why thermos had been on the list of trip supplies. Students filled theirs up before the hike began, but Jackie had nothing with her. She should've brought a backpack, not a makeup case, to Quartz Falls. She should've cut off her conversation with Leslie this morning, too, and prepared for the hike.

Hyde pulled a plastic cup from his backpack, one of a few he'd swiped at breakfast. Jackie needed a refresher on basic survival. Or, more likely, she was so afraid for her emotional and social well-being that necessities like water had been forgotten.

"Fez, man," he said and held up his thermos, "bring this to Jackie, would ya?" He held up the plastic cup next. "And this."

Fez scowled, but he also wrapped his sandwich in the plastic it came in. "I will do this thing because Jackie is my friend," he said and stuffed the sandwich into his coat pocket, "but when will you start being a friend to Fez?"

Hyde glanced at the falls. Fez had a right to be annoyed. Hyde was treating him like a butler, but the potential price Fez would exact from him … "What do you want?"

"Quality time. I'm getting nothing from Kelso, nothing from girls. I need something!"

"Looks like someone's gonna have to put out," Forman sang, and Donna laughed.

"I'm not gonna cuddle with you, Fez," Hyde said. "But we can hang out, okay? Just bring her the water."

Fez grabbed the thermos and cup. "Oh, I'll bring it. Then you and I are singing campfire songs."

He left their blanket and headed in Jackie's direction. She was far enough downriver that Hyde couldn't see her, but he knew she was there. He'd watched the cheer squad set up its picnic area and made sure his friends saw it, too.

"You think having a name that ends in IE is a requirement to be a cheerleader?" Forman said.

Donna chuckled incredulously. "What?"

"Wow. That's … a weird coincidence. I'm surprised they didn't force Patty Frumkin to change the spelling of her name to P.A.T.T.I.E."

Forman bit into his sandwich but appeared to swallow without chewing. "Hey, if you changed your name to Donnie, you could join the cheer squad."

"I'll get right on it," Donna said and popped a potato chip into her mouth.

"What we gotta get on is who Kelso's nailin'," Hyde said. Forman and Donna's banter was nice for them, but Hyde had no time to joke around. "The chick's blond, but that's a third of the girls here."

"You and Jackie should ignore the cheer drama and be together," Donna said.

Forman pointed at her, as if he agreed. "So Kelso's cheating on Valerie? That's what he does."

"Wish I could freakin' ignore it." Hyde rubbed the nape of his neck. It was hot despite the chill in the air. "We need the dirt on Kelso so we can get leverage. Valerie's a psycho, man. She did somethin' pretty nasty to me, and if she goes nuclear with Jackie..."

He stared at the sandwich in his hands. It was mostly uneaten. He'd probably save it for the second half of the hike.

"Is that what you and Julie were talking about at Fatso Burger?" Forman said.

"Hyde, what did she do?" Donna's voice was soft, and she rubbed Hyde's arm. She'd asked him the same question, more than once, when they were younger. Back then, it was about his ma. About the bruises Edna had pounded into body and brain.

His stomach tensed, but he said, "Grabbed my dick without asking—and before you make this a fuckin' episode of Donahue, I stopped her. Eventually."

"Eventually?" Forman said. "Valerie cheated on Kelso with you?"

"That wasn't cheating." Donna rewrapped her sandwich and dropped it into her backpack. "It was assault. The key words here are without asking."

Forman cleared his throat. "But Kelso won't care about that. Maybe he found out, and that's why he's —whoa, Donna!"

She'd pushed herself to her feet, but Forman captured the leg cuff of her jeans. "Let go of me!" she shouted. "I'm sick of that bitch messing with my friends!"

Hyde stood up and cupped her shoulders. "So am I, but we gotta play this smart. Boxing ain't the sport here. It's chess."

"Fine." Donna sat down again. Hyde did the same, but Donna clearly wasn't happy. She'd grasped the corner of their picnic blanket and was twisting it.

"And no. Kelso doesn't know," he said to Forman. "He'd be all over me if he did."

"Kelso!" The name was a gasp, and Forman pressed his fist to his chin. "He's gonna be furious when he finds out about you and Jackie."

Donna wrenched the blanket hard enough to jostle her backpack. "Kelso has nothing to say about it."
"Okay," Forman said, still looking at Hyde, "but what happens to the basement when your relationship is out in the open?"

"Your choice." Hyde extended his legs into Fez's empty spot on the blanket, but his friendship with Kelso was done. "If someone had treated Donna how Kelso treated Jackie, would you wanna hang out with him? Hell, Kelso hasn't been all that swell to Donna."

"And you were?" Forman's voice cracked, and he drank some of his water. "I mean, if we're throwing stones, let's throw them."

Hyde picked at the Band-Aid on his wrist. He hadn't meant to yank Donna into the middle of this conflict, but they'd had some private conversations Forman wasn't involved in. "Donna," he said and flicked her eyes in her direction.

She nodded and plucked her sandwich from her backpack, a signal that she'd let him do the explaining.

"I was a selfish asshole, and Donna's gotten more than apology outta me. Took me months to earn back her trust and longer for me to earn back mine, all right? Where do you think I got my one-week only policy from, huh? Why I told girls from the get-go what I want from 'em and what I don't?"

Donna nodded again, but Forman tugged on the drawstrings of his hood, like he wasn't convinced.

Hyde ripped the Band-Aid off his wrist. "Look, what I did to Donna's with me every damn day. I read through the pile of feminist books she gave me, and—"

"She made you read her books?" Forman said, and Donna nudged his shoulder. "What? You never made me read them."

"The point is, man," Hyde said, "I'd never treat Donna, or any girl, how I used to."

Donna patted his knee. "It's called respect. You give it. Kelso doesn't."

"I can't kick Kelso out of the basement," Forman said. "He's been one of our best friends since first grade."

Hyde had wadded up the used Band-Aid. He was rolling it between his thumb and forefinger, but Forman had a bad habit of idolizing their childhoods. "If Kelso's your definition of friend, maybe Red's kicked your ass too many times."

Forman fell silent, but Donna had finished her sandwich and said, "So we discover who Kelso's fooling around with. Then what?"

"We gotta spread it," Hyde said. "Distract Valerie so she can't tell which way is up. 'Cause if we don't, if she learns me and Jackie are together, she'll go after us hard." He scratched at the scab on his wrist as his blood turned to fire. "Alls we need is for her to shove her mouth over my dick and have Jackie witness it. A two-for-one special."

"Come on," Forman said. "She wouldn't do that. What's the point?"

"To wreck Jackie from the inside-out. This isn't some minor league grudge, man. It goes back years, outside of school. Valerie's sick in the skull, and she's fixated on my chick."

"Valerie's gonna have to learn about you and Jackie sooner or later," Donna said. "Be a united front. Show her no one can touch you." She gestured to the falls. "Or drown her. I'm good for either
"I say go with the first," Forman said. "You and Jackie … love each other, right?" He shuddered, as if describing his parents having sex. "Hold onto that, and you'll be fine." His arm glided over Donna's shoulders. "Take me and Donna for example. No one could wreck us except us. I didn't trust her, and that's what ultimately broke us up."

Donna gazed at him with wide eyes. "Wow. Thank you for admitting that ... but I also started drifting away before we broke up. Because I felt trapped."

"Because I was so insecure that I didn't trust you. You have a right to your independence. Being in a relationship shouldn't cancel that out."

"God, I love you."

She cradled Forman's face, and bile rose in Hyde's throat as they began to make out. He turned toward the falls, but the constant pounding of water on rocks fused with his thoughts. He and Jackie could've been together, returning the nausea Forman and Donna had given him. But they were choosing to stay apart, using Valerie and the cheer squad as an excuse to do it.

Lunch had been an uncomfortable hour. Leslie sneaked conspiratorial glances at Jackie as Valerie and Michael kissed. Their display was a total act, but at every smack of Michael's lips, Jackie remembered his mouth between her legs and cringed. It was an experience she wished she could erase while keeping the wisdom it had given her.

At least Steven had sent Fez over with water for her. She wasn't taking care of herself properly, and his love put a bright, painful spotlight on it. Socially, though, she'd begun to make progress. Julie had shared her water earlier, before Fez showed up, but drinking more would force Jackie to pee in the woods. Other girls already had, returning with horror stories of rabid chipmunks and pervy boys trying to steal a look.

So Fez drank Steven's water instead while sighing morosely at Michael. Michael gestured in Fez's direction. It could've been a wave hello, but Fez must have interpreted it differently—as a get-out-of-here—because he left.

Jackie should have gone with him. Finished eating with Steven and their friends. Last year, she would have, but with Leslie and Valerie watching her, she chose to stay put. When lunch was over, however, she blended into the crowd of students. She joined Coach Ferguson's group again without interference, but Julie didn't come with her.

Julie was probably ingratiating herself to Valerie, to stabilize her position in their social circle. But Jackie needed more time to herself, as much as she could get with two-dozen schoolmates surrounding her.

No one engaged with her, though. Kids were more interested in what met them on the trail, like the deer that scampered from the river to the trees or the faint, mournful call of the loon.

The trail guide eventually led everyone across the Trumpeter, over a wooden footbridge. Quartz Falls had become visible. The hike continued southwest along the river, but Jackie was sweating. The path sloped upward, and she unzipped her jacket halfway.

Had Steven been beside her, she would've challenged him to a race over the rocky trail. Her speed, agility, and balance gave her an edge. Her prize for winning: him carrying her to the campground as they made-out, but her daydream burst in a rush of water.
Her group was close to Quartz Falls now, and kids were elbowing one another and laughing. She stepped on her tiptoes to see over their heads, but far-off voices traveled through the air. Lots of them. Another group had to be on the same hike, heading toward hers.

"The falls are haunted!" a girl near Jackie shouted.

"By teenagers?" another girl shouted. "Ft. Anderson might be full of goons, but they're not ghosts."

"Ft. Anderson?" the first girl said, and Jackie pushed to the front of the group. Spray from the falls landed on her cheek. The force of the water buffeted her, but she held her position as twenty or so kids approached from the south. Their uniforms marked them as Ft. Anderson students, and they were led by a trail guide and a woman with a whistle around her neck.

"Coach Saunders!" Coach Ferguson said when the two groups met by the falls. "Fancy running into you here."

"Coach Ferguson," Coach Saunders said.

A smile rose on Coach Ferguson's lips. It could've been one of rivalry or satisfaction, but he gave instructions to the trail guide. The guide was to walkie-talkie the other Point Place High groups and tell them to delay.

The two coaches walked off together. While their tones were argumentative, their words were far less so. This meeting had been planned. The rumors about them were true, but Ft. Anderson's students puzzled Jackie more. Some were too tall, too mature in appearance to be freshmen.

One even resembled Mark from the back with his blond, shoulder-length hair. He was talking to a boy significantly shorter than him, definitely a freshman. But when the taller boy turned, Jackie's breath caught. He had Mark's face. Was Mark, and his expression shifted from shock to joy.

"Jackie?" he said but was already dashing toward her. His steps sent pebbles flying into the river, and his arms closed around her waist before she could react. He swept her into the air, spun her, and his kiss drop-kicked her heart into the falls.

Author's Note: Thanks to fellow T7S author 107derwent for pointing out that the names of the main cheerleaders of this story end in I.E. Credit for Eric's observation about it goes to her.
Raising the Grade

Chapter Notes

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE
RAISING THE GRADE

Jackie's lips tingled numbly when Mark lowered her to the ground. His kiss had been intense but superficial. No use of tongue, but anyone watching would think she and Mark were long-separated lovers. She pressed a hand to her queasy stomach. More and more variables were being added to her life. Soon, it would become an equation she couldn't solve.

Mark's grasp settled onto her hips. He leaned his forehead close to hers, creating a false sense of intimacy, but they were far from alone. Fifty potential spectators from both their schools surrounded them.

"Coach Saunders warned us about Point Place High coming here," Mark said above the roar of Quartz Falls. "I was hoping you'd be part of the group."

The queasiness rose to her throat, but she remained in his touch. "We heard—we were told—that only freshmen would be on your trip."

"It's the freshmen's community-building trip, where the youngsters get to bond. Senior peer leaders go with them to foster that bonding."

"Of course you're a peer leader. " She zipped her jacket up to her chin. She'd grown cold, and the sensation of fifty gazes hunched her shoulders. Witness reports were likely to travel from student-to-student, to the cheer squad and Steven.

"There are a lot of perks," Mark said, laughing. "Like teaching the freshman health class and being on this trip. Looks good on the high school transcript, too."

"Speaking of looking good..." She gripped his hands and stepped back from him, freeing her hips. The sick feeling left her body, and her posture straightened. "You're looking great."

He shrugged. Compliments about his physical appearance obviously held no value to him. But his blond hair shone in the sun, and his skin was smooth, not chapped by the frigid air. She hadn't seen him since their photo shoot in Mt. Humphrey Park. She'd mailed him copies of the pictures, and he'd sent her a polite thank-you note, but that was the totality of their communication.

She nodded past him at his schoolmates. "How did everything go?"

"Pretty well." He edged closer to her and whispered by her ear, "Do you want to really sell it? We've got the perfect opportunity."

"Actually..." Her eyes squeezed shut. She'd dragged him into her social situation, and his wasn't any less important. If he needed her to play his girlfriend today, she couldn't refuse. Even if it hurt her..."
relationship with Steven. "It is the perfect opportunity," she said, eyes still closed, "but first I have—"

Mark stumbled into her, and she staggered backward. Her foot caught on a chunk of stone, destroying her balance, she slammed into the ground.

"So this is the girl you've been hiding from us," a deep, booming voice said. It belonged to a skyscraper of a boy, who must have shoved Mark into her. She tried to scream at him, but her lungs took in no air. She mentally gave herself the command to stand but couldn't move. Her brain had lost control of her muscles and organs.

Mark helped her up and rubbed her back until her lungs functioned."Are you okay?"

"She's fine," the skyscraper boy said. He was at least six-foot-three with thick wrists and a thicker neck.

Mark turned to him. "You knocked her down, you dickhead!"

"Technically, you knocked her down."

"How the hell did you become a peer leader?" she said. The lunk was too big to be a freshman. He had to be a senior. "Rich parents? Or is it the school's desperate effort to make you a decent human being?"

"Quiet, sugar lump." He leered at her, and her fists balled at her sides. The fury inside her matched the force of Quartz Falls, but she'd been weakened by a lack of self-respect. It had begun to erode as she dated Michael again. She'd diminished herself so her intelligence wouldn't threaten him. And she hadn't stopped, as if it would protect her from whatever horrors lurked in her future.

"Her name is Jackie," Mark said and slid his arm around her shoulders, "and you owe her an apology."

"Nah. Didn't touch her."

Mark's expression hardened, and his head shook like he'd become a bomb without a detonation mechanism. "Joe, if you don't apologize, I'll—"

"You've always been all talk, Cailliet." Joe stared down at Jackie. "I thought she was an illusion you'd conjured—like that one there, created by light and water." He gestured to the falls. A rainbow arced over them, a romantic sight to be shared with the one she loved. Not with a bully and the boy she'd used to protect her reputation.

A shadow crossed her face. Joe was reaching for her. "Let me get a feel," he said. "Gotta be fully convinced she isn't a hologram."

His fingers splayed near her chest, but she grabbed his hand with both of hers. He chuckled like her defense was nothing, and a growl ripped from her throat as she yanked herself toward him. His arm skimmed her ribs, but years of cheerleader training put her focus on the right spot, and she smashed a high-kick into his crotch.

He grunted, and his giant body fell to the ground, displacing the river gravel.

"Oh, I'm real," she said as he curled into a ball. "And if you ever approach me again, you'll share a prison cell with the last boy who got smart with me."

"Her dad's one of the best attorneys in Wisconsin," Mark said. "So I wouldn't ignore that 'talk' if I
were you."

"And you're not going to harass Mark, either." She inhaled a shuddering breath. "Unless you want to be expelled from school. My dad's good friends with the Super Superintendent of Public Instruction. Do you understand?"

Joe groaned, but that wasn't a precise enough answer. His hands were cupping his privates, and she tapped his fingers with her boot. It was a promise to bash them into his nut sack, and she repeated her question.

"Y-yeah," he whimpered.

"Excellent. Mark, shall we? Somewhere more secluded."

Mark scooped her into his arms, and she giggled as he carried her to a wooded area lining the trail. Joe's groans faded in the distance, buried by the rumble of the falls, but she hadn't felt this powerful in months.

"You were so cool!" Mark said once he set her down. "And scary."

"Sometimes talk is all you need." Her dad had taught her that, and she leaned against a pine tree. Her legs were shaking with adrenaline. "Or a strong kick to the 'nads. You just have to commit." She played with the end of her braid. "Of course, having the means to follow through on your threats helps, too."

"Right."

"You're a Cailliet. You have the means."

His eyebrows rose. "It's just not who I am."

"Then prepare to be trampled on your whole life." Shivers battered her spine. She'd been trampled on since the spring, and the realization tightened her pulse. "Jerks like Joe are everywhere. Banks, supermarkets, our own homes. Many can be avoided, but those who can't … don't teach them you can be disrespected. Use your strategic mind. Outsmart them if you don't want to threaten them."

"Jackie," he clasped her shoulder, "you're a great girl; you know that?"

"Yes."

A grin lifted his lips. "I'm glad you know." He propped his foot on a tree stump but kept his gaze on her. "Man, I wish we we weren't in fake relationship."

"About that—" She unzipped her jacket a little and pulled the shooting star pendant from her blouse. "Steven gave this to me."

He touched the pendant with his finger. "So you two worked it out."

"Mostly." She returned the pendant to the safety of her blouse. "We're in love, and we've committed to each other, but we're not exactly together yet."

"Oh?"

"It's a long, complicated story, but…" She glanced through the trees. Coach Ferguson and Coach Saunders were making out nearby, in a stand of pines that towered above the rest. But they couldn't stay in this place forever, and neither could Jackie and Mark. "We have to break up," she said. "You
and me."

He scratched his cheek. "We've got plenty of witnesses, and the falls are a terrific backdrop for a breakup—"

She clutched his wrist and stopped his scratching. "Don't do that. You'll get flakes. Also, don't look so sad. I have someone in mind who might make a fantastic girlfriend for you. An actual girlfriend. Someone who'll appreciate you for how wonderful you are."

"Color me intrigued." He moved his foot off the tree stump. "If she's got your approval, she must be something else."

"She is. Trust me. But first I have to ask you a question, to make absolutely sure you'll be compatible." She ran her gloved thumb over his cheek. He'd dug red lines into it, but they'd fade. "And please be one-hundred percent honest in your answer, or it'll be no good for you or her."

"Shoot," he said, but an icy wind blew through the woods, and he angled his head down. She covered her ears with her hands. Her wool hat was in Steven's tent. She'd have to retrieve it by dusk, but her own brilliance heated her mind. Identifying one variable in an equation often led to the discovery of the rest

Pine needles fell around her and Mark as the wind gusted harder. Students hooted and screamed on the trail, but she gripped Mark's arm and drew herself close to him. Their "breakup" would be gloriously tragic, but with what she had planned, they'd be able to remain friends.

"So that question," she said by his ear. "Are you any good at giving head?"

Jackie sped into Mrs. Fletcher's group of students, hot tears welling in her eyes. The kids from Ft. Anderson had stepped aside, allowing Coach Ferguson's group to go forward on the trail. Now Mrs. Fletcher's group was letting Ft. Anderson pass but not peacefully. The Vikings and the cheer squad booed, but the clamor led Jackie to her teammates.

Leslie was the first to spot her. Jackie must have appeared a fright because Leslie quit booing, mouth agape. She tapped Valerie, who was chanting, "Go, Vikings, go!" but Valerie shut up when her gaze landed on Jackie.

"Jackie? What's wrong?" Julie said. She was on Valerie's other side, and Jackie continued to cry, fueled by thoughts of the last few months.

Valerie grabbed hold of Jackie's arms. "Sweetie, what happened?" It was an order to report.

"M-Mark!" Jackie sputtered. "Here! He's here, and we—he—we—"

"What? Come on!" Valerie dragged Jackie through the crowd of students until they were at the rear of Mrs. Fletcher's group. Ft. Anderson was nearly beyond them, but Valerie sprinted alongside its freshmen and seniors with Jackie in tow. "Him?" Valerie said, pointing at Mark's back and pulling Jackie forward.

River gravel crunched beneath their boots. Valerie pushed Jackie into Mark's sight, and Mark questioned Jackie with his eyes.

"Don't make me do this!" Jackie shouted, tasting salt. Tears had dropped onto her tongue.

"Are you Mark Cailliet?" Valerie said and jostled Jackie by the arm. "Do you recognize her?"
Kids closed in around Mark and verbally confirmed his identity, some derisively. The commotion should've drawn Coach Saunders's attention, but she seemed determined to get her students away from Point Place High.

"My ex-girlfriend," Mark said. He shoved through the kids blocking him and grasped Valerie's arm, matching her grip on Jackie. "But that doesn't mean I don't still love her, so if you'd please...?"

Valerie released Jackie, and Mark did the same to Valerie.

"What broke you up all of a sudden?" Valerie said.

"None of your damn business." Mark slipped between her and Jackie and cupped Jackie's face. His thumb wiped one of her tears. "I'm sorry. You understand, right? It just—we can't."

"I know," Jackie said, sounding as morose as she could. "I'm sorry, too."

He kissed her forehead before his schoolmates absorbed him into their ranks.

"I don't believe this." Valerie tried to snatch Jackie's wrist, but Jackie strode in front of her. "His parents have no idea who you are!" Valerie shouted.

"They're why we broke up!"

Jackie rushed ahead and suppressed a smile. That scene with Mark had been inspired, rivaling the poignancy of their "breakup". It stomped Valerie's assumptions to dust, but Jackie had more work to do.

She reunited with the cheer squad and thrust herself at Patty. "We're over!" she said, sobbing into Patty's shoulder. "Mark and I had to end it!"

"Oh, no!" Patty stroked Jackie's hair, and their teammates surrounded them as if Jackie were a fallen nestling.

"How?" Leslie said. "I mean, why?"

"Sc-school rivalry!" Jackie held onto Patty tighter. "His parents won't allow him to date a Viking!"

"That's terrible," Julie said. Her arm curled around Jackie's waist, joining Jackie and Patty's embrace.

"And he's such a fox, too," Valerie said behind them, and Patty and Julie withdrew from Jackie. "I just met him, and it's such a shame he dumped her." Valerie's voice was a shard of glass, hinting at a desire to slit Jackie's throat. "We need to give Jackie our support, girls." She snaked her arm around Jackie's waist, but unlike Julie's, her touch was jagged. All fingernails

Jackie wriggled free. Valerie's attempts to control her had grown tiresome, and she walked next to Susan Amborn. Susan had slipped into the cheer squad's circle, likely searching for gossip, but she made for a good shield. Using a teammate instead would lead Valerie to assume collusion.

Their group finally left Quartz Falls behind, and girls took turns as Jackie's cheer-panion. Some offered empathy and encouragement. Others dived into the drama of their own heartbreaks, appearing to forget Jackie was there.

"The most pathetic thing you can do is fuck an ex," Valerie said. The advice was supposedly for Carla Bruno, who'd just related her tale of regret, but Valerie's eyes were on Jackie.

"First loves aren't always the best loves," Jackie said. "In fact, they can be the worst, chosen out of a
lack of experience."

"That's so true." Leslie twisted the hem of her jacket. "Like, the first guy I ever dated didn't have a car. Just a bike … and it wasn't a Schwinn!"

Most of the cheer squad expressed sympathy, but Valerie's jaw tensed. She had little influence on the current conversation, a situation that had to rankle her.

Later, after a mile-and-a-half of talking and a bathroom stop, they came to the campground. "You'll have an hour to rest," Coach Ferguson told her group. "Then we'll learn how to tie knots!"

His sarcasm was met by an equally sarcastic cheer from students. Some groaned at the news, but Jackie sat on a log bench near the center of the grounds. The rope lesson was worrisome, but she'd deal with it in an hour. For now, she undid her braid, finger-combed her hair, and observed her schoolmates.

Jocks practiced drills with a football. Trees scattered throughout the camp served as decent obstacles, and Neil Rooney tackled a few. Chatter flitted amid the jocks' shouts, but none of it was terribly interesting. A few people complained about the TV they were missing or discussed their Halloween plans.

Jackie caressed the chain of Steven's pendant. She was alone, despite that every group had returned from the trail. Most students kept by their tents or were inside them, probably napping. Steven had to be napping, too.

Or their relationship was finished. He'd pledged his love on the hike, and she'd fled, killing that love.

Her eyes prickled with fresh tears, but a presence darkened her peripheral vision. She turned toward the shadow, blinking her eyes dry. Hope whispered that Steven had found her, but Timmy Wilson was crouched on the log bench like a mischievous gnome.

"Is it true?" he said.

"Is what true?"

"That you and Mark Cailliet broke up?"

She squinted at him. "How do you even know his name? I never talk to you."

"Everyone else is talking. So did you?"

"Yes, it's true. Mark and I—"

Timmy stood to his full height on the bench and shouted, "Jackie broke up with her Snapping Turtle! Jackie broke up with her Snapping—"

He yelped as a giant, pale hand seized the front of his jacket. The hand belonged to Donna, and she yanked him off the bench.

"You're strong," he said with a dazed grin.

Donna gave him a little shove. "Would you get out of here?"

"Donna's still bulked-up from J.V. wrestling!" he shouted and raced to another part of the grounds. "Donna's still bulked-up from J.V. wrestling!"
"He is such a tool," Donna said, sitting on the bench.

Jackie fought not collapse on her. She hadn't seen Donna since this morning, but she couldn't succumb to emotional exhaustion. "But you heard what he said, right?"

"Yeah. I also heard it from Pam Macy and Mitch Miller. Gossip sure gets around fast in this school. Did you and Mark plan to meet?"

Jackie recounted the story, leaving out none of the feigned pathos, and Donna said, "Does this mean you've decided to quit hiding?"

"That's not what I'm … whatever." Jackie massaged her temples. "I'm tired. Don't make me argue."

"It's not an argument, but I've got something for you. Well, Hyde does." Donna pulled Jackie's wool hat from her coat pocket. "He's worried about you."

She passed the hat to Jackie. Its pink pom-pom was intact, and it smelled like wool, not urine. Animals must've stayed out of Steven's tent this morning. "I have a slight headache," Jackie said, "but it's not concussion-grade. It's Valerie-grade."

"He didn't send me to ask the concussion quiz, but now that you mention it—"

Jackie answered her questions before she asked them.

"Great," Donna said, but he wants to know how you're feeling emotionally."

"He said that?"

"Not in so many words, but it's Hyde."

Jackie dug her boot heels into the grass. Steven was doing what he thought she wanted, giving her space. "I'm fine as I can be, considering the circumstances. But I'm working on changing those circumstances. My 'breakup' with Mark is part of it."

Donna looked at her silently, as if waiting for her to continue.

"Tell Steven not to worry," Jackie said, "and that I love him, too. The too is very important, so don't forget it."

"I won't, but I think you should tell him yourself."

Jackie rose from the bench. "I will … soon. Don't you have a phone call to make?"

"My dad!" Donna leapt up and glanced around the campground. "If he's realized I lied—"

"He hasn't. Martina has specific instructions in case your dad calls my house."

She led Donna to Mr. Wilcox, who was on a log bench farther away. He had an acoustic guitar in his hands and was strumming the chords to "Wild Thing". A few students sat by him on the grass, listening, but he stopped when Jackie and Donna arrived.

"Mr. Wilcox, Donna has to call her dad," Jackie said.

Mr. Wilcox pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "What's wrong?"

"Um..." Donna said, and Jackie gritted her teeth. Donna should've been better at lying. She'd
watched Jackie do it hundreds of times.

Jackie rubbed Donna's arm in a show of compassion. "Her dad has separation anxiety. Ever since his wife left him, he has trouble with … separation."

"I understand." Mr. Wilcox stood up with his guitar. "We'll have to go to the park guides' office. It's a bit of a walk."

"We can handle a walk," Donna said.

"Yup! Cheerleading's built up my stamina." Jackie flexed her quads inside her jeans. "And Donna's part lumberjack, so her legs are like two oxen."

Donna smacked Jackie's hip as they followed Mr. Wilcox. "I could lash you to the top of a tree and leave you there, but I'm too grateful to be mad. Thank you for this."

"I've got burns saved up from the summer, so you're covered until New Year's."

"No, for—" Donna's pressed together at Jackie's giggling. "You are such an imp."

Jackie and Donna returned to the campground in time for the rope lesson. It would start in a few minutes, but the call to Donna's dad had gone well. He was convinced Donna was at Jackie's house after a grueling day at school. He and Joanne were apparently enjoying themselves at the Wisconsin Dells, but that didn't allay Donna's fears about Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow.

Jackie had tried to reassure her on their way from the park guides' office: "If the girls you bribed do their job, you're good. If they don't, you'll be back at Point Place High with me! I mean, what's your dad gonna do, homeschool you?"

Donna burst into laughter, which was a relief. Jackie's own problems required her full concentration, and she separated from Donna at the campground. She had to stick by her teammates to avoid suspicion. With the "breakup," her absence would inspire ugly theories about her whereabouts.

The most dangerous would be about her and Michael. Valerie was questioning only blondes, but the cheer squad might ransack her suitcase for a blond wig. Claim she'd hidden the evidence and declare her a traitor to both Valerie and cheerleaders everywhere.

But Valerie was the one who was missing. In fact, Jackie hadn't seen her since the hike. The squad seemed to think she was with Michael or interrogating more girls.

"As long as she's not doing it to us," Ellen Champenny muttered. She was another blond teammate, lithe and flexible. "Keith and I might be in love, and I don't need Valerie messing that up."

She meant Keith Byrne. Their relationship had blossomed on the bus ride to the park. "But we do need her leadership," she went on, "so I'll suck it up. Go, Vikings, go."

"Go, Vikings, go!" the cheer squad repeated, including Jackie. Her devotion to school spirit hadn't vanished, but the squad's soul was dying. It had entered into an unspoken murder-suicide pact the moment Valerie became captain.

The knotting lesson began once everyone was supplied with rope. Instructors stood on raised wooden platforms as they demonstrated how to make the bowline. It was a knot with a non-slip loop, capable of supporting a lot of weight. Jackie had learned how to tie it in the Girl Scouts, but showing
off her skills would draw unwanted attention.

Valerie was absent, but Leslie expected intel on Michael. Jackie hadn't gotten any, so she had none to deliver. But if she revealed her wilderness experience, Leslie could accuse her of "withholding" and all that implied. It might set off a chain reaction, one of loyalty to Valerie and Michael, turning Jackie into the school pariah.

She stretched the rope between her hands. It was about a yard long, but choking Leslie with it wouldn't change much. When one lion fell, five more stalked prey in its place. Concealing herself in the heard was the best Jackie could do, and she stuffed the rope into her jacket pocket.

Half her teammates struggled with the knot. The other half was staring blankly into space, but Eric came by. He'd helped distribute rope earlier, and his silver Quartz Falls badge gleamed in the sun. "Looks like you ladies are having some trouble," he said, "but don't worry. Eric Forman is here to assist."

"You know how you could really assist?" Ellen said from a tree stump. "Getting this lame exercise to end."

Jackie's other teammates agreed, including Julie, who'd coiled her length of rope around her wrist.

Eric raised his bowline in front of him. "This knot could save your life one day. You can use it for climbing, if a friend falls out of a boat, to string up a hammock." He unknotted the bowline. "And it's easy to undo so you can use the rope for other tasks."

Ellen gestured at him dismissively, and Carla snapped her bubble gum.

Leslie, though, squeezed Eric's shoulder. "Uh-Bluh, without a Corvette, you're just a knot-tying nerd. So why don't you go over there," she pointed at Jimmy Headgear and his friends, "to your own kind?"

Jackie yanked her rope from her jacket pocket. "Eric," she said. Her voice was level, but his name heralded Armageddon. Leslie stepped back from him, as if sensing it, and no one else on the squad spoke. Carla even quit snapping her gum, and Jackie looped the rope on her palm.

In moments, she'd tied a bowline, and Eric held it up for her teammates to see. "This is how you do it," he said, and his gaze shifted to Jackie. "Um … how did you do it? You weren't watching the instructors."

"Yeah, Jackie." Carla spat out her gum. "What gives?"

"I was in the Girl Scouts," Jackie said.

Leslie thrust up her chin and laughed. "You were?"

The two-word question was full of condescension, but Jackie tied the straight end of her rope to a tree. "Two half-hitches. If this rope were bigger, I could loop it around myself and—"

"Rescue a friend who'd gotten stuck in a mud pit," Eric said. "You were in the Girl Scouts!"

"S-so was I!" Patty Frumkin said. She rose from the ground and tied a bowline. She untied it just as swiftly then made a trucker's hitch, creating a pulley with her rope.

Julie moved in front of Eric and tied a bowline, too. "It's useful on boats. Lots of knots are." She undid the bowline, took Eric's rope, and tied their ropes together. "Double fisherman's knot."
One by one, most of Jackie's teammates demonstrated their skill with knots. Only Leslie, Carla, and Ellen stood by, knot-less, but they seemed perplexed rather than angry.

"Ladies, you're in good hands," Eric said, "and have good hands." He chuckled at his own joke, and a few of the girls laughed with him. "They're doing the trucker's hitch now," he said, indicating the instructors, "but I think you can handle it. Help each other."

He left them for Buddy Morgan's clique of friends, but the cheer squad approached the rest of the lesson like a team.

Afterward, students lay blankets in front of their tents and hung out together. Park staff and teachers were preparing dinner, and Mr. Wilcox led everyone in camp songs. Or, rather, he was trying to.

The cheer squad told ghost stories instead. The sun had sunk low on the horizon, but night wouldn't fall for at least an hour. Still, Carla shone a flashlight under her chin as she spoke. Her story was about bats, and she jerked her head wildly at the climax. Her thick hair created a black cloud in front of her face, but it elicited giggles rather than screams.

She gave the flashlight to Julie, who recited from memory Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven". Leslie, however, captured Jackie's gaze and nodded to their tent. Jackie grumbled but followed.

"So?" Leslie said inside the tent.

"Steven said he's on it."

"Impressive! You must have worked him. I wasn't sure you could do it. … Want to talk about the breakup?"

"You believe Mark was my boyfriend?"

Leslie sat cross-legged on her sleeping bag and tapped a rhythm on her thighs. "Of course! Your breakup was seen by two-dozen kids from school."

"What about Valerie's 'proof' that Mark never heard of me?"

"Valerie's slipping. She used to be so good at reading people and getting dirt." Leslie leaned back on her elbows. "I don't want to say this, but other people have said it: that's how she became cheer captain. She blackmailed Linda Miller. Rita should've become captain, but—"

"Linda kicked her off the squad for disrespecting her," Jackie said and knelt by her own sleeping bag. That had happened during Jackie's freshman year. She'd never seen Rita Fogle be flippant to her teammates. "It was a lie."

"Valerie's best skill is manipulation, not choreography."

"You're not so bad at manipulation yourself."

Leslie touched her cheek to her shoulder and grinned. "Thanks! Valerie's passed off Julie's routines as her own forever. I'm gonna do the same with you when I become captain."

"What makes you think I'll choreograph for you?"

"Don't act naïve. If you play your part, you're going to be captain next year. If you don't, it'll be Julie, and you'll be off the squad."

Jackie gripped her knees. She was crouched like a beggar. Had acted like one for too long. "Leslie, I
"You'll always be second to me! Don't forget your place!" The shout came from outside the tent, and Leslie unzipped the flaps and rushed through them. Jackie crawled after her and found Valerie and Julie surrounded by the cheer squad. "Now gather that firewood," Valerie said to Julie, "pile it by the cooking area, and—for God's sake—don't let anyone see more than your hair. Stay low!"

Valerie normally had over a half-foot of height on Julie, but Julie appeared significantly shorter tonight. She was slouching, and the ghost-story flashlight was clutched in her white-knuckled fingers.

"Stand tall!" Jackie charged into the circle. "We're a team," she said to Valerie. "And you're our captain. You're supposed to be leading through example!"

Valerie's pink cheeks grew red. "You..." her fists clenched at her side, "are absolutely right, Jackie." She unclenched her fists and wiped her palms on her jeans. "I didn't mean to yell. I'm just—I'm all PMS-y!"

"I need some air," Julie said.

She pushed past Carla, who said, "But there's plenty of air out here!"

Julie kept on walking, and Jackie hurried to her side. "Valerie's a bitch," Julie whispered once they were far from their teammates. "She's gonna kick me off the squad. I just know it."

"You're too valuable to her. She's got no routines without you."

Julie clicked the flashlight on and off. "Maybe if the rest of the squad knew that, it would matter. Ms. McGee caught Valerie dry-humping Michael in his tent and assigned her hard labor. Valerie tried to make me do it for her. I refused."

Jackie bit down a laugh. "She's amazing."

"No, you are." Julie lifted a low-dangling tree branch, and she and Jackie passed beneath it. "You risked your own status by defending me."

"Not really. Valerie's too smart to attack me today. I've got the squad's sympathy."

Julie's voice darkened: "Her revenge will come later."

"C'est la vie." They'd come to the campground's exit. Julie started to turn around, but Jackie stopped her. "You and I are going on a field trip."

"We are?"

"It's time for you to forget about Valerie and have some fun." Jackie peered across the grounds, hoping to glimpse Steven. But with tents and trees and bad decisions between them, she had no such luck. "We can't control anyone but ourselves. And, like you said, we've let Valerie control us."

She led Julie from the grounds. A few students were returning from the bathrooms, but Jackie brought her there and beyond to an unlit path.

Julie clutched Jackie's arm. "Where are you taking me?"

"Ft. Anderson's camp is a mile from here—"
"Ft. Anderson! Was your breakup with Mark an act? Are you bringing the Snapping Turtles our strategy book?" Julie patted Jackie's jacket like a cop. "Where is it?"

Jackie swatted Julie's hands off her. "Would you calm down? If anyone's sharing the Vikings' strategies with the Turtles, it's Coach Ferguson. He and the Ft. Anderson's coach are having a fling."

"Then why are we going to the enemy's camp?"

"If anyone's the enemy, it's members of our own squad. Our junior year has sucked so far, hasn't it?"

"Yeah..."

"Disappointments. Disillusionment. It's gotten a big, fat D the first month. Let's raise that grade!" Jackie waved to the path. "You told me you need different than our social clique. I'm bringing you to different."

Julie shone her flashlight at Jackie's neck. "You better not be setting me up."

Jackie pressed her knuckle to her lips. Julie required a gesture of trust, but Julie was an opportunist. Trusting her could ruin Jackie's next two years. "The sports rivalry between our school and Ft. Anderson didn't break me up and Mark."

"You're still together?" Julie grasped Jackie's arm again. "You truly are Romeo and Juliet!"

"Hamlet. 'The play's the thing...'"

"That sounds intriguing."

"It's not gossip fodder. This is life." The pain Jackie had been carrying seeped out, making her shiver. Worrying about her parents, her future, had made her forget herself. "Valeries exist all over the world," she said. "Some can be helped. Others can't, but we can't quarantine ourselves because they're sick. We've got to become antibodies."

Julie dug her fingers into Jackie's sleeve. "How?"

Jackie pulled her wool hat from her jacket pocket and put on her head. "By going for victory regardless of previous losses. The Vikings don't give up after a defeat. They train harder for the next game and change strategies if they have to."

"Is that what's written in our biology textbook? If so, I missed it."

"I understand why you think I'd betray you. I have little doubt you'll use whatever I say or do to endear yourself to Valerie."

Julie released Jackie's arm and winced as if struck.

"But I'm willing to risk betrayal if it means we'll both be happy. I am setting you up—" Jackie said, and Julie's mouth went slack. "but not how you think. There's a very sweet, ridiculously smart, and beautiful boy who needs someone strong like you. And you need someone sensitive like he is."

"Mark?"

"He and I are friends. That's all we ever were, but I've talked you up to him, and he's—"

Julie tugged Jackie forward. "What are you waiting for? We won't have that sun for much longer!" She broke into a run, and Jackie sped up her pace. They had fifteen minutes of sun left, tops. The
moon would be a sliver, but Julie had a flashlight. Coupled with Jackie's impeccable sense of direction, they'd find their way back. "He is such a fox!" Julie said. "I can't believe you were faking with him!"

"I'll explain it if you two work out."

"Don't worry. I'll show him I'm more than a cheerleader. Loads more, and I won't be pushy either. That'll give us a chance. If I like him, of course." She glanced at Jackie. "Thank you for this. For defending me to Valerie … and trusting me."

Jackie flushed with warmth as her feet pounded the dirt path. Julie was remembering herself pre-Valerie, before the cheer squad's corrosion, and Jackie had begun to remember herself, too.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX
STANDING ON A LEDGE

The smell of grilled chicken hung in the air, but the sky was cloudless. A good night for stargazing. That was the plan after dinner, and Hyde hoped Jackie would join him for that. He just had to find her first.

She wasn't sitting with the cheer squad. She must have taken her food to her tent, but he fought his instinct to check. She was resolidifying emotionally and needed time. Her message through Donna—and Forman's observations at the knot lesson—told him that much and more. She hadn't rejected him by running off today. She'd outgrown a constricting social perspective and shed it.

The development was encouraging. It would've brightened Hyde's mood, but he was at a crowded picnic table that, unfortunately, included Kelso.

Tonight's seating arrangements had to be on account of Valerie's new companion: the garbage bag slouched by her leg. She was sweeping cheerleaders' crumbs into it with a napkin.

"What's with your girlfriend?" Hyde said, and Kelso laughed with a mouthful of baked potato.

"Wow, sympathetic," Donna said. "Valerie got saddled with some kind of punishment, which you must've had something to do with. And you're over here, eating like the chicken king of Ashland County."

Fez gestured at her to be quiet. He and Kelso had been discussing a raccoon he'd spotted in the woods. It was the most attention he'd gotten from Kelso in a week, but their friendship had to wait a little longer. Getting answers was Hyde's priority, and Kelso was close to giving them up.

Hyde nudged Forman, and Forman said to Kelso, "What'd you do?"

Kelso laughed again. "Man, Ms. McGee—" He turned to the other half of the table. "People, you might wanna clear out. Fez just laid an egg." He pinched his nose. "And it is a stinker!"

"I did not!" Fez said, but the damage had been done. Students left the table with their plates, and Kelso snatched Fez's remaining potato. "Hey! I was going to eat that!"

"It has a higher purpose, buddy." Kelso stood and crumbled the potato on the vacated picnic benches. "Now no one else will sit with us, which is good 'cause I've gotta tell you guys something big!"

Hyde put his own uneaten half of baked potato on Fez's plate. Fez had no clue that Hyde and Jackie were dating. He wasn't good at keeping secrets, and his love for Kelso made him a liability, but he deserved freakin' respect.
"Ms. McGee busted me and Valerie for frottage," Kelso said.

"What is *frottage*?" Fez said.

"I thought it was a kind of cheese." Kelso mimed sprinkling cheese bits onto his chicken skewer. "But Ms. McGee taught me it's French for dry-humping. It's against school rules: *thou shalt not frot while on school trips*. So Valerie's assigned grunt work, and I'm totally doin' Ms. McGee!"

Forman choked on his water. "My math teacher? Kelso, how could you?"

"Yes, it is a shock." Fez stabbed a chunk of potato with his fork. "But maybe Kelso is doing it for you, Eric, to help with your grades."

"Oh, God." Forman's face paled, but he seized the lapel of Kelso's jacket across the table. "Does she know we're friends? Don't tell her we're friends. Oh, God."


Forman's grip on Kelso tightened. "If my sister taught you anything, for the love of God, use it!"

"You know who God loves?" Kelso pried Forman's fingers off him and pointed a chicken skewer at himself. "Carol swallowed the knockwurst our first night in the park."

"C-Carol?" Forman sputtered. "You're on a first-name basis with her?"

Hyde cast him a sideways glance. "Kelso's slipping Ms. McGee the sausage. What he calls her ain't that relevant."

"How's this for an interesting fact?" Kelso said. "You'd think calculus teachers would be stiff as a ruler, but Ms. McGee's super flexible. She practically folds in half!"

Donna shoved her paper plate aside. "Thank you, Kelso, for ruining seventeen years of my appetite."

"Donna, come on," Forman said.

She rose to her feet. "No. I've had enough."

Forman didn't follow as she disappeared through the trees, but Hyde removed his shades and chased after her. He caught up near the center of the campground and steered her toward the cheer squad's tent city.

"Kelso seriously makes me sick," she said. "How can Ms. McGee be the blonde? She's a calculus teacher, for Christ's sake. Avoiding idiots like him should be algebraic. If X equals a moron, then Y equals: *don't fuck the moron!*"

"Idiots like him could be her kink," he said, "but her being the other woman don't exactly fix my sitch with Jackie."

She heaved out a breath. "I guess it doesn't. So what are you gonna do?"

"Find out where the hell Jackie is."

They arrived at the cheerleaders' tents, but none were occupied. That meant Jackie had eaten elsewhere. He and Donna tried their own tents next, but Jackie wasn't there either.
"Okay, this is a little worrisome," Donna said. "What if a bear snatched her? Jackie's the perfect pint-size meal."

"I'd put my money on Jackie in that scrap," but a bear attack wasn't the most likely scenario. She had human predators to watch out for on this trip, and ambient light from the setting sun was all but gone.

He and Donna grabbed their flashlights, separated, and did a systematic search of the campground. But he came up empty and met Donna back at their tents. She reported the same result: no Jackie.

"Shit," he said, protecting his eyes. Students had initiated a game of flashlight tag. Light beamed from tree-to-tree, person-to-person, accompanied by screams and laughter. "I'll try Julie. She's gotta know somethin'."

"I'll check the bathrooms," Donna said. "See you here in fifteen."

They left each other again, but looking for Julie among tag-players was impossible. Kids raced past him in the darkness. One attempted to rope him into the game, and others yelled at him for shining his own flashlight and confusing the players.

Sweat soaked him by the time he returned to his tent. He changed from his wool coat to his denim jacket, despite that the temperature had dropped ten degrees since the afternoon. Adrenaline was roasting him, stoked by fear, and he scrambled out of the tent.

He and Jackie had held hands on the hike. If people blabbed, if Valerie heard, she might've taken his girl. Or ordered Destroy and Give Back to do her dirty work for her—

"She's not in the bathroom," Donna said, and his shoulders jumped. She'd blended into the night. "We should go to Coach Ferguson."

"Not yet, man. Not yet." Ratting Jackie out to Coach Ferguson would cause trouble with the school or her social circle. "Recruit Forman and Fez for the search. Have them scout the pissing woods and the kissing woods. If you spot Julie, tell her Jackie's missing. That'll get her involved."

Donna shone her flashlight at him and gripped his hand. "Ten minutes. Then I'm going to Coach Ferguson, no matter what you say."

"Yeah."

He wove among trees and students to the campground exit. He sped to the bathrooms, inspected them himself, but each was vacant. If Valerie and her jock-minions had gotten hold of Jackie, they would've brought her somewhere hidden. Away from the teachers and anyone who could stop them.

Three paths led from the bathrooms: one to the campground, one to the Trumpeter River, and one whose sign was faded to illegibility. He started along the mystery path, but a shrub shook nearby, halting his steps. A bushy tail darted from the glow of his flashlight. Only a squirrel, but he investigated the shrub further.

Its leaves were waxy and cold against his palm. No human bodies had been stashed in it, though. He appeared to be alone, save for the squirrel. Still, maybe Jackie's concussion had presented itself. She'd become disoriented, wandered from the campground, and passed out.

His stomach hollowed out at his theories. Unconscious. Kidnapped. Lost. Each was a possibility, but Quartz Falls rumbled in the distance, as if shushing his thoughts, and he stared at the sky.

Starlight bore down on him, drilling through his skull. His lack of sense had grown to Kelso-level
immensity. Telling Coach Ferguson was the only way to go, but the shrub glowed beneath him. Someone was aiming a flashlight at it, and the beam moved to his face, blinding him.

"Steven?"

Stars went nova in his eyes, but he barreled toward the voice—his damn joy—and wrapped his arms around Jackie's body. She was solid and warm and smelled like campfire smoke.

"What are you doing out here?" she said, and he loosened his embrace. She'd scared him shitless, but she stroked his cheek as if she knew. "I'm okay, Steven. I'm okay. I just introduced Julie to my 'ex'."

"Your ex?" His vision had mostly cleared, but the flashlight was on both of them now, held by someone close. Had to be Julie, and he lowered his forehead to Jackie's as understanding flooded his brain. "Mark."

"Ft. Anderson's camp is a mile-and-a-quarter from ours."

He shut his eyes to restrain the emotion trying to push out. She should have told him, told Donna, but at least she hadn't gone alone. "Dinner?" he said hoarsely.

"We ate there." Her thumb brushed over his left eyebrow. "Aren't you freezing? Why aren't you wearing your coat?"

The cold had finally seized him, but the shivers invading his muscles were weak. "Denim jacket lodged a complaint. Ft. Anderson feed you good grub?"

"Hamburgers."

"Huh." The ledge of his control was crumbling, but he opened his eyes and took in Jackie's face. Her cheeks and lips were pink in the gleam of Julie's flashlight. Her wool hat covered her hair, and no one had ever been more Goddamned beautiful. "Jackie, I wanna kiss you."

She cupped the nape of his neck and stood on her toes. "Mark kissed me earlier at the falls. He scooped me up and put on a show for our schools. But that's all it was: a show. He didn't even use tongue, and..."

Her words accelerated from explanations to frantic apologies, but her performance with Mark was old news. He'd heard it from a dozen gossipy kids. It was also a piece of unfinished business he was glad she'd finished. "You got nothin' to be sorry for," he said.

"I do. I ran."

"Same as me." He laid one of her hands on his chest. "Only thing keepin' us apart is us. We don't have to kiss 'til you're ready, man. Just stick around—"

Her breath heated his lips before her mouth made contact. She was taking the lead, reassuring him with tenderness. He held her tightly as relief gave way to peace, and when he opened his mouth wider, she pushed into it deep.

He grunted in surprise and pulled away, but her rhythm snapped inside his memory. He moved back in, getting high on the slide of her tongue, the pulse of their growing intimacy.

A loud clap sobered him up. "We are gonna be in so much trouble if our butts aren't in camp," Julie said, and he withdrew from Jackie's lips. Jackie glared at him, a mixture of shock and concern, and he felt the same. Julie had witnessed their first, albeit short, make-out.
"You cool?" he said to her.

"If you mean will I tell everyone you and Jackie just Frenched? The answer's no," Julie shone her flashlight at Jackie. "She's why you wouldn't kiss me at Fatso Burger."

"More or less." He grasped Jackie's hand, and the three of them began the walk to camp.

"He's your explanation," Julie said to Jackie, "why you and Mark were never actually an item."

Jackie leaned her head on his shoulder. "More or less."

"One-week policy?" Julie said.

He wrote an X with the beam of his flashlight on the ground. "Null and void."

"He's my boyfriend," Jackie said, and she swung their arms playfully. Their freedom wouldn't last, but hearing her voice, holding a part of her—it was freakin' euphoria.

Julie's flashlight joined his in lighting their path. They reached the campground in five minutes, but she stopped him and Jackie several feet from the entrance.

"Wait," she said. "So Valerie cheated on Michael by assaulting you." Her flashlight pointed at his jacket. "And Michael used to go out with Jackie, who's your now girlfriend. But you and I had our weird thing that Valerie knows about …"

Jackie hugged his waist, but it seemed protective rather than affectionate. "Valerie's not interested in Steven. She's interested in me."

"What?" Julie said.

"Not like that. To hurt me however she can. Dating Michael is part of it, but that's not working out like she planned. She caught him cheating with a blonde."

"Oh, whoa—" Julie tapped the butt of her flashlight against her chin. "That answers her insane interrogations, but it sure as hell wasn't me. I never understood why you kept dating Michael. You're too smart for someone like him."

Jackie squeezed Hyde tighter, and he rubbed her back. Her history with Kelso was just that: history. It no longer threatened him, and he tried to communicate that through his touch.

"Fear drives people to do stupid things," she said. "But Steven is everything to me, Julie. If Valerie learns we're together, she'll do whatever she can to destroy us." One of her arms dropped from his waist, but she pressed a kiss into his neck. "If she goes after my Steven again, I'll rip out her toenails."

"Save some for me, but I won't say thing," Julie said. "And I think we should try Mark's idea. Practice tomorrow and go for it on Saturday."

"Oh, it'll happen," Jackie said and offered Hyde no clues as to Mark's idea.

Julie entered the campground, but he signaled for Jackie to stay put. "You trust her?" he said.

"Yes. Even if I didn't, I saw her and Mark make out. They're gonna try dating. They have a lot in common, like fishing and some show called Battlestar Galactica and—"

"I hear ya." He shut off his flashlight and stowed it in his jeans pocket. Oil lanterns on the
campground provided some light, and he caressed the side of Jackie's face. "Good for her," he said sincerely. Julie wasn't a bad person. Just trapped like Jackie and attempting a jailbreak. "Also good for us since it gives us some insurance on her silence. Dating your 'ex' from Ft. Anderson won't help her rep."

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She tugged on the lapel of his jacket. "Steven ... I love you."

"She tugged on the lapel of his jacket. "Steven ... I love you."

His heart quaked in his chest. From her, those words had power over him. It was a vulnerability he'd sworn never to develop, but with Jackie it might possibly become a strength.

Hyde and Jackie rushed across the campground, hand-in-hand, to find a teacher. Any teacher. Oil lanterns kept them from stepping on anyone. Kids were either sitting or lying on sleeping bags outside as flashlights shone at them. The teachers were doing their nightly head count, and Hyde and Jackie moved toward the nearest one.

"My goodness!" Mrs. Fletcher said when her beam landed on him and Jackie. "So wonderful you're here, but I better run to Coach Ferguson. He's liable to call in the National Guard..."

She scurried past them, and Jackie whispered, "Why is she so freaked out?"

"He tugged on his earlobe as he considered how to answer. Jackie's pride had been battered for months, but the truth was what had: "Donna reported you as missing."

"And you went looking for me."

"We all did."

"Well, I better let Donna gaze upon me before she starts firing flares," she said.

With the aid of his flashlight, they reached his tent without any tree-related mishaps. Forman, Donna, and Fez were nearby, and the three of them yanked Jackie into a hug.

"Don't ever scare me like that again!" Donna shouted.

"Yes!" Fez said. "Donna said you were eaten by a bear."

"Gff—" Jackie's voice was muffled by the group embrace.

"Where were you, young lady?" "Forman said.

Jackie shoved the three of them off her and explained what Hyde already knew until Coach Ferguson blasted on his whistle.

"Get comfortable, people!" Ferguson shouted from the center of the grounds. "Get as warm and cozy as you can because Mrs. Fletcher is leading us on a cosmic adventure!"
Hyde and Jackie ducked into his tent, where they could be mess around without interference, but she dragged his sleeping bag outside.

He switched his jacket with his wool coat and followed. She was sweeping pebbles from his tent, clearing the ground. "I can do that myself," he said. "If you gotta go to the squad, go to the squad. It's cool."

"No, it's not," she said. "The people who weren't supposed to leave you, they left. And I've become one of them, someone who isn't supposed to leave."

"Jackie, don't beat yourself to hell, okay? Don't compare yourself to my folks."

"My hiding, the running—it has to feel awful. But I promise I won't abandon you." She gestured between them. "Even if we argue or need space sometimes, our connection won't break. We'll still be with each other."

He scrubbed his hand over his face. She was talking about trust. Most of his had been killed by his parents, but Jackie had the survivors, and they were multiplying. "Fuck."

"Did I say something bad?"

"No. Just … fuck."

She spread his sleeping bag on the pebble-less ground. "Is that a proposition?"

"No, man. I…" He was liable to spout sonnets to her if he couldn't close himself up. "Let's stargaze, all right? I'm done hiding," and judging by her actions, so was she. "Valerie can't do shit to us."

"How can you be sure?"

"'Cause you're here with me, and I … damn it." His body tensed, and he inhaled a few breaths through his nose. Less than fifteen minutes ago, he'd thought she was gone. Not just missing. Gone. "I love you," he said without cringing, "and I can say it without wanting to stab myself in the throat."

She patted her heart. "Oh, Steven, that is so romantic!"

"That's me. Mr. Romance."

He lay back on the sleeping bag, and she settled into the crook of his arm. Her head rested on his chest, a welcome weight. The pom-pom of her hat tickled his chin, but he had no complaints. The sky above was crowded with stars, forming shapes he had trouble discerning. But him and Jackie, this could be home.

"Ms. McGee?" Jackie whispered for the fourth time. Steven probably assumed a concussion, but the idea of Michael diddling the calculus teacher was tough to process. "I can't believe he's one of her 'special students'."

"He's proud of it." Steven stuck his hand into her jacket pocket and drew her closer. They were snuggled together on his sleeping bag, stars glittering above like untouchable diamonds. But his hands wandered only to caress and hold, not to grope. "He'd longed to be loved this way, and she nuzzled his neck. The scent of pine had saturated his skin. She'd likely always associate that smell with him from now on, but he said, "Your hat freakin' tickles, y'know."

He was chuckling, but she yanked off her hat. It wasn't necessary anymore. " Couldn't Ms. McGee
get in trouble for what she's doing—**who** she's doing?"

"Kelso's nineteen. It's legal but against school policy, so you can do the math."

"Later." She kissed the underside of his jaw and lay back again, refusing to let the cheer squad ruin this night. Tonight was perfect.

Mrs. Fletcher continued her astronomy lesson, shouting from the center of the campground. She described the constellation Pegasus and the mythology behind it, but she was hard to hear. Fortunately, Jackie knew enough star lore to teach a class on it herself.

She clutched Steven's wrist. Earlier, he'd had trouble recognizing the constellations, and she traced Pegasus with his index finger. "See it?" she said.

"I see somethin'. Doesn't look like a horse with a wings."

"It's upside-down. Those are the legs." She moved his finger to the stars Algenib and Scheat and said their names. "Use your imagination a little."

"You know what they're called?"

She released his wrist and sat up off him. "My dad and I used to stargaze. If he hadn't studied law, he would've been an astrophysicist. At least that's the story he told me."

"That's..." He stroked the side of her leg as she knelt beside him. "You sound sad, man."

"I miss him," she said, and the admission prickled her skin. She often crushed these kinds of thoughts, but the empathy in Steven's voice, his touch, had released them. "Mom, too. I don't understand why she—they changed. I'm afraid of what I'll be coming home to."

His hand skimmed her hip. "Whatever it is, you won't be stranded. I'm not gonna repeat that screw-up."

"Steven..." She leaned over him. Her hair fell onto his forehead, and her palm landed next to his shoulder for balance. "You pushed me away once, but after that you never really left me."

He cradled her cheek when she started to withdraw from him. "Where you goin'?" he said.

"I'm blocking your view of the sky."

His fingers slipped into her hair. "Who needs the stars? I got the sun."

The Earth wobbled beneath her legs as she grew dizzy. Her frenzied pulse had too little oxygen. Such a romantic sentiment should not have come out of Steven Hyde. It wasn't part of his anatomy, and her fingertips found his mouth in the shadow of his face.

"You're happy," she said, unable to hide her astonishment. "I make you happy."

He dragged his thumb along the edge of her ear. "Any point in denying it?"

She bent toward him, and her lips replaced her fingers on his mouth. His response was as good as a confirmation.

Blood throbbed hotly in her chest as their hips met in the darkness. His hands roamed her back, but his kisses were reaching beyond her mouth and neck. They cascaded into her grief, diluting it with tenderness and desire.
His hips remained flat on the sleeping bag, but her effect on him was obvious. She used every bit of self-restraint not to grind into him. They were in public, and though her body and heart ached for more, rushing would deprive them of true intimacy.

She wanted to learn what he liked, to teach him the same about her. To build lasting memories, but their rhythm synchronized naturally. He was the beach, and she became the tide, flowing over him. He cupped her butt, pulling her closer, tighter, and her awareness receded into pure sensation.

A moan slipped out of her, and control glinted in her mind like a grain of sand. With Michael, she'd been impatient. To sustain her joy with Steven, they had to slow down, and she forced herself off his body.

"I can't," she whispered, out of breath.

He sat up, breath equally short. "Shit—I'm sorry."

"No." She grabbed for his hand and got his wrist instead. "I mean I could. I really, really could, but Donna and Eric are right there. Fez can't be that far, either." It was partly an excuse, but explaining her full reason for stopping would take an hour. "We're too exposed."

"If you wanna move the party inside, I'm game."

"That's not it. I..." She rubbed her thumb over his wrist, and her skin came away wet. "Oh!" His Band-Aid was gone, and he was likely bleeding. She'd seen him pick his scabs in the basement. It was a disgusting habit, and now his blood was on her. "Get into your tent."

"Not the type to follow orders, but this one I like."

The shadow of his sleeping bag disappeared with him into his tent, and she went in after them. "Flashlight," she said. "Switch on your flashlight."

His tent brightened with light seconds later. She squinted as her eyes adjusted, and she brought her thumb into the beam.

"You're bleeding?" he said.

"You are." She crawled to him and aimed the flashlight at his right wrist. His skin was smeared with blood. "Where's your—ah." She spotted his duffel bag at the back of the tent. "You brought Band-Aids with you, right?"

"No."

"But you had one on earlier."

"Forman's."

"Steven! They were on the list."

"So was a thermos."

"Don't turn this around. You need to take better care of yourself."

"So do you."

"I said don't turn this around." She unzipped his duffel bag. Surely, Mrs. Forman had been her maternal, meddlesome self and packed him a First Aid kit. "A little help, please?"
He lit the bag's contents, and she rummaged through his clothes. Nothing out of the ordinary about his undershirts and socks, but she removed his gray sweater. A heavy object was wrapped in the wool, and she wrested it free.

"Holy hell," he said, shining the flashlight on a first aid kit.

A note was taped to it in Mrs. Forman's handwriting: "*Just in case. Love, Mrs. Forman.*"

"You didn't think she packed one for you," Jackie said at his bewildered expression. He grasped the back of his overgrown curls and shook his head. He resembled a little boy, and she busied herself with the first aid kit. Making a big deal out of this moment might shut him down, but he underestimated his importance to people. "Does your thermos have any water left?"

"It's full. Like having somethin' to drink at night."

"Bring it to me and hold the flashlight over your wrist."

He did as she said, and she poured water onto a gauze pad. His cut was oozing blood, and the skin around it was stained red. "Broke open when we were kissing," he said.

She cleaned the wound, patted it dry, then sprayed disinfectant on it. "We both need to take better care of ourselves," she said and applied a Band-Aid to his cut. He'd gotten the wound from protecting Valerie, but Valerie had hurt him more profoundly than that.

The flashlight beam moved beneath her chin. Steven was looking at her, studying her face. She soaked fresh gauze with water and wiped her thumb of blood. "I was a Girl Scout," she said, answering what had to be his unasked question. "I can do anything out here, including first aid."

"Forman mentioned that." He tugged his coat sleeve over the Band-Aid. "What are you and Julie planning?"

"A well-choreographed take-down, but first you have to confront Valerie."

He tugged his coat sleeve harder. "Not happening."

"Steven, she—"

"Beat the meat, and I let her. What's to say?"

She closed her eyes, but his pain flared inside her. "Michael groped me during our sleepovers. I'd be half-asleep, and he ... he'd touch my breasts and in between my legs. And as horrible as it was, it felt good, too, and I gave in." She opened her eyes but saw only darkness. Steven had clicked off the flashlight. "I hated myself for letting him do that," she said, "but then I'd go numb and sleep."

Steven's hair brushed against her temple, and the material of her jacket crinkled. He was holding her, but she hadn't confessed her shame to get consolation.

"You didn't ask for it," she said, hugging him back. "A body just reacts."

He answered with silence, and she hooked her chin on his shoulder. "The illusion of control. *The illusion,* remember? You said that, but it works two ways."

"I'm listenin'."

"The worst Valerie's done to me so far is what she's done to you. Her other plans fizzled." She knotted her hands at the base of his spine. "I bought into the idea that she has control over me. She
doesn't, but my belief was enough to make it true."

He stroked her hair "Grasshopper speaks wisdom."

"You taught me a lot of it." She pulled from his embrace reluctantly. "Walk me to Leslie's tent?"

"You gonna tell her about Kelso and Ms. McGee?"

"Yes. Then it'll be her problem."

The tent lit up. He'd turned on the flashlight. "I'll walk you," he said, "but Valerie means crap to me except for how she treats you."

"According to Julie, Valerie's forced herself on other boys. She'll do it again, just like Esther probably has."

The tent darkened, and he darted outside. She hurried after him, but he was waiting for her. "I pissed you off," she said as a gust of wind blasted the air. She put on her gloves, but her hair whipped at her cheeks. She'd forgotten her stupid hat in his tent.

"Not pissed." His fingertips grazed her gloved palm, and she clutched his hand. "But when a guy's hit in the stones, takes him a couple of minutes to recover."

A painful, intangible lump lodged in her throat, and she went with him quietly to the cheer squad's tents. Most were lit from the inside, including Leslie's. But Jackie had used Steven's past as a weapon to urge him forward, an unforgivable offense.

He dropped his flashlight into his coat pocket, and its beam faded into the sky. "Whatever you're thinkin', quit thinkin' it." He squeezed her waist gently. "You weren't trying to hurt me."

Her stomach fluttered at his trust. It flowed deeper than she ever dreamed it would, and she pecked his lips. "I'm with you, no matter what you choose to do."

"I got it..." he pushed up her jacket sleeve and kissed the underside of her wrist, "and you got me, Grasshopper."

She stared at him, startled and awed by his warmth, but she'd always suspected he was full of love. He just needed the right people to draw it out, and as she entered the chill of Leslie's tent, his warmth stayed with her.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CROSSING THE BRIDGE

The teachers' agenda was transparent. Half the students would do ropes courses this morning while the other half learned wilderness skills. Then, after lunch, they'd switch. The heart of today's activities, however, was the student pairings. Kids from different social circles had been partnered up, and Jackie prayed Steven had a partner he could tolerate.

Unlike him, she was in the wilderness skills group. Her partner, Timmy, was behaving as obnoxiously as she'd expected. Loud and frantic. But his unpleasantness probably had to do with their first lesson: how to find one's bearings without a compass.

Park instructors had brought her group to a glade. Twigs and small stones littered the ground, but students cleared patches of debris. They drove a stick into the dirt and placed a rock at the stick's shadow. The rock signified the western point, but they had to wait for the shadow to move. Then they could mark the eastern point, but Timmy wouldn't stand still. He'd taken three stones from the ground and was attempting to juggle.

He dropped the stones more often than not—onto Jackie's foot, onto their stick, which she had to readjust. Timmy created chaos wherever he went, but she was used to chaos. Last night she'd reported to Leslie about Michael and Ms. McGee, and once Leslie's shock subsided, she filled their tent with cackles.

"This is the best news you could've brought me!" Leslie eventually said. She held both of Jackie's hands, as if pledging to honor her in sickness and in health. "Michael's of age. Valerie could go to Principal Pridewell, but she'd have to prove her claim. Of course McGee and Michael would both deny it. And to retaliate, Valerie's parents would have to sue the Department of Public Instruction, which they'd never do."

"But Valerie's a total Daddy's girl," Jackie said. "He'd do anything for her."

Leslie snorted. "That doesn't go both ways. Her parents are swingers. Their parties are wild, but I guess your folks are too traditional for that sort of thing." She slipped inside her sleeping bag but continued to talk. "Her parents aren't big on being parents, if you know what I mean. Sure, they pay for whatever she asks for. But she basically has no curfew, no rules. No attention. It's quite sad, really."

In the glade, another stone fell onto Jackie's foot. She raised her arm, intending to smack the rocks from Timmy's hands, but the memory of Leslie cooled her temper. Valerie's upbringing didn't excuse her behavior, but it explained some of it, and Leslie's lack of empathy was startling.

Timmy gave up on juggling anyway. Ten minutes had passed since they'd pushed their stick into the
ground. The shadow had shifted but not far enough, and he tried to pry gossip out of Jackie: "Did you tell Mark any of the Vikings' strategies?" "Why is Valerie dating your other ex-boyfriend?" "What's Donna doing here? I thought she pregnant and got sent to a convent."

"Why do you involve yourself in other people's business?" Jackie said, copying his tone. She'd grown tired of standing around, too, but she at least she was being quiet about it. "Get a life already."

"I have a life," he said.

"Is it boring?"

He hesitated. "Yeah"

She turned her back on him. His psychology was low on the list of her concerns, but Valerie's haunted her thoughts. She also missed her friends. Fez had been paired with Paul Makowski at the opposite end of the glade, and Donna was at the ropes course.

Eric, though, had his wilderness assistant duties. He roamed the glade freely, and Jackie hoped he'd stay a while when he reached her area. They could discuss Princess Leia's hair or how late-sixties fashion influenced Star Trek. That was how desperate she was, but he only nodded at her and Timmy's work before checking on other students.

Finally, once the stick's shadow had moved sufficiently, park instructors directed students to mark its new position. Without being told, Jackie drew a line in the dirt between the two rocks. She stepped behind the line, with the first rock to her left and the second to her right, and pointed straight ahead. "That's north."

Timmy stared at her, but the instructors' directions confirmed what she'd done was correct. "You're a smarty pants," he said. "Jackie Burkhart is a smarty pants!"

Her neck muscles stiffened. "Don't you ever shut up?" she said. "I'm so sick of hearing your voice!" Usually she'd punctuate her annoyance with a pinch to his arm, but she refused to use physical violence. Valerie had shoved Steven against his locker and forced herself on him. Jackie wouldn't be that person on any level.

The next exercise of the day, the park instructors announced, was fire-building. Students had to gather plant material from the encompassing woods. Jackie grabbed dry grass and leaves for tinder as Timmy concentrated on branches for kindling.

"I'm not an asshole, you know," he said beside her. His arms were full of twigs. "You treat me like I'm one, but I'm not."

They left the woods and returned to their tract of land. "I'll watch what we've collected," she said. "You get the fuel wood."

"Bossy pants," he muttered as wind blew through the glade. It kicked up dust that scratched her throat, and she coughed until her ribs hurt. She couldn't seem to stop, but someone was tapping her shoulder.

"Timmy," she croaked out, "get fuel!"

"He is. Drink this."

That was Eric, and he passed her a cup of water. She drank it gratefully, but the wind blew harder.
"Keep your head down," he said and shielded her body with his.

"What are you doing?"

"Being your friend. Scary as it sounds, that's what we've become, I think."

When the wind at last weakened, he refilled her cup with his thermos. The water soothed her throat but not her mind. Not even the Trumpeter River could do that. "How'd you happen to have this?" she said, indicating the thermos.

"A frizzy-haired bird hinted you might be sensitive to dust and dirt particles."

Steven. She hadn't gotten to talk to him this morning. Or, more accurately, they'd chosen not to talk to each other. His caution mirrored hers, but he was still looking out for her.

"Thank you," she said.

"Thank you. Eric tucked his thermos in one of his coat pockets. "You stood up for me yesterday. You were Han Solo to my Luke in … forget it." His foot pushed her and Timmy's twigs into an orderly mess. The wind had scattered them. "After this trip, if you want Kelso out of the basement … he won't be there."

He dashed to a pair of arguing students, giving her no time to respond. Timmy trudged through the dirt a minute later, carrying branches as thick as relay batons. "Now what?" he said, but the park instructors hadn't revealed yet what kind of fire they were building.

"Now we help each other," she said and took the branches from him. His chaos wasn't malicious. It was impulsive, and he didn't gossip so much as act like the town crier. "You say your life is boring? Well, I'm going to offer you some true excitement—"

The instructors interrupted, explaining that students would learn how to construct a teepee fire. Jackie dumped the fuel wood to the ground. She'd made enough of these fires she could do it high on Steven's stash. "This is your lesson," she said to Timmy. "I'll supervise."

"Meaning I have to do all the work? Typical." His gripes continued, but he followed the instructors' directions, putting tinder at the center of their patch of dirt.

She licked her finger and stuck it in the air. The breeze was blowing from the west, and as Timmy built a teepee of twigs over the tinder, she gestured to its left side. "Create an open spot there. That way, the breeze will feed the fire."

"So exciting," he said.

"Oh, quit complaining. You're learning valuable skills today, including patience." But she understood his frustration. She wasn't the patient type either, although she was trying to learn. "How would you like to instigate a cheer-off? The outcome could affect the school for years to come."

His eyebrows rose into his shaggy hair. "What do I have to do?"

"Not much." She touched the chain around her neck. Steven's pendant was nestled against her chest. "Just be yourself."

Hyde hadn't spoken for an hour.

He stayed mute while learning how to spot and lift people properly. Said nothing during the first two
low-ropes courses. Silence was focusing him on the assigned tasks instead of his partner: Valerie Clayton.

The teachers were continuing their social experiment, matching students from varying social strata or those who had obvious physical disparities. Donna's partner was Mitch Miller, and their six-inch height difference presented plenty of challenges.

Hyde had witnessed their struggles up close. Donna insisted on sticking by him, but her concern was unnecessary. He could protect himself and wouldn't screw with Valerie's safety on the courses. That wasn't how he operated, despite that his nerve endings writhed at her touch.

Being paired with her, though, was a damn big coincidence. He'd suspected Jackie for a moment, that she'd suggested this partnership to a teacher. The chances of him confronting Valerie were higher if he couldn't avoid her.

But Jackie wouldn't choke him with this situation. Ms. McGee had likely done it to punish Valerie for being Kelso's girlfriend. Hyde's rep among the teachers was crap. His tattoo as Edna Hyde's good-for-nothing son had never faded. Using him to rankle Valerie was misguided but inspired.

Now, however, he and Valerie had to cross a "bridge" whose wooden boards had rotted to dust. Only two foot cables remained, proceeding from a pair of trees. They ran side-by-side, but the distance between gradually widened. Their end point was a second set of trees several feet apart.

He and Valerie stood on opposite cables, their hands clasped over the gap. They had to coordinate their steps, or they'd fall.

"Go faster," she said, but his even pace persisted. The cables were a half-yard above the ground, tops. Not a dangerous drop at their current position, but her nails dug into his skin. "What is your problem? We could be finished already!"

They were halfway across. Prolonging their time together wasn't ideal for him either, but confrontation had many forms. Resistance was his preferred mode. Hers appeared to be pain. His ma had used similar tactics, but Valerie wouldn't break more than his silence: "Can't control everything, man."

"You have no idea." Her nails bit his flesh harder. If he squeezed back, he could snap her fingers. He was physically stronger than her. Mentally, too, but he wouldn't pulverize a peanut with a sledgehammer.

"Makin' me bleed won't give me speed," he said.

"Jackie's available. I'm sure you've heard." She loosened her grip, and his skin throbbed as they took three coordinated steps sideways. "But you're not in the running. As we speak, she's probably chasing my boyfriend—"

"Who's fucking some blonde who isn't you."

Her fingers sprang off his hands, but he tightened his grasp on hers to compensate. The gap between them had grown considerably. Losing their balance might have nasty consequences.

"Good recovery!" a park instructor said behind Valerie. "You're near your goal. You can do it!"

He jetted to a different ropes course, but Hyde and Valerie wobbled on the cables. The air was cold, and their lungs puffed out white, smoky breaths. Exertion and his denim jacket shielded him from the chill, but Valerie's lower lip trembled.
"Do you hate me?" she whispered, and his eyes narrowed behind his shades. She'd switched strategies, but they managed another step. "Or are you..." Her thumb swept up his index finger with deliberate slowness. "Oh, yeah. You're hot for me."

He clutched her hands tighter and forced her to step sideways with him, but she kept stroking his finger.

"That's why you protected me from the thicket," she said, and her caresses twisted his guts. "You recognize our potential. Jackie's dying to steal my position in this school, and if she sees us as a couple, she'll die to be your girlfriend."

"I pushed you from the thicket 'cause it was the right thing to do," he said, but he'd spoken without a conscious intention. "Didn't know it was you."

She initiated their next two steps down the cables. "Imagine me naked, Steven. Imagine my lips wrapped—"

"Don't want you." His hands were sweaty from holding hers so long, and they felt huge, like two hot-air balloons. "You went after me 'cause I couldn't fight you."

"You don't have to want me. It's not your heart I'm not interested in. As for fighting me..." She rubbed his index finger faster. "Your cock and I are gonna have a lot of fun."

His gaze fixed on her face, but her features had roughened up. Instead of a smooth complexion were pockmarked cheeks. Her long, sharp nose had become short and rounded. And as continued to talk, her silky voice deepened, as if her vocal chords were drowned in gin.

His mind shouted for her to get off him, but the trees swished with the wind. He wasn't on top of his messy childhood bed. His hips weren't clamped in an unyielding grip, being urged to move awkwardly. Valerie, not Esther, held onto him, and he could fight her.

"Someone fucked you up," he said. "Beat you. Overpowered you."

She laughed, but her thumb quit fondling him. "You've watched too many horror movies."

"And you lived one." He repositioned his fingers around her wrists. They both had long arms, a long reach. They wouldn't have to grasp at each other to finish this exercise, and he hurried them along the foot cables. "But you've cast me, your teammates, and whoever else in a sequel you're directing."

"You're an idiot," she said. They were two steps from their goal, but he wasn't done talking. "You're an idiot!" she repeated when he slowed them to a stop.

"You're pursing the kind of control you'll never catch—" he said, and they tottered on the foot cables as she tried to pull free from him. "Can't escape what's inside you, man. You've made lousy choices so far, but you can change that." He leaned back, stabilizing them. "Or keep goin' how you're goin' and see where it takes you."

"You're an idiot!" she screamed.

Her pathetic comebacks betrayed her vulnerability, but she jumped to the leafy ground, killing his balance. He released her wrists and turned his body as he fell. He landed on his knees and elbows, safe but bruised.

"The girl you'll never catch..." she said and leapt over the cable dividing them, "her life's about to be hell, thanks to you." Dry leaves crunched under her feet, but he stood up before she got close. "Her
mom's a slut. A swinger, and half the school will hear it by the end of the night."

He dragged his fingers through his hair. His curls were thick and ropy, like Esther's influence. She'd wound herself around him the last six years, a presence he'd barely perceived until Valerie embodied it.

"Spread your dirt," he said, "and I'll tell Timmy mine."

"You have nothing."

"Wanna play chicken? Let's play chicken."

"Easy for you to say. It's not your life you're playing with. It's Jackie's."

She was trying to pin her decisions, her obsession with Jackie, on him. He clutched his belt buckle and waited, hoping she'd realize that on her own, but no such epiphany escaped her lips.

"You put her in that position," he said. "You interpret her victories as your defeats. Another choice, and here's mine: for each pain you cause her, I'll cause you two. But if you're nice, I'll be nice." He quirked up an eyebrow. "Your decision."

"Is there a problem?" Donna rested her arm on his shoulder. He hadn't heard her approach. With the amount of fallen leaves, he should have, but his fully attention had been on Valerie.

"Yes, is there a problem?" Mitch said, rushing to Donna's side.

"Mitch? I told you to wait by the Porthole." She meant the tire dangling between two trees. Hyde and Valerie had done that exercise with four other students.

"We're partners," Mitch said. "Nobody left behind! Especially your sweet, round behind."

"Which you've ogled plenty," Donna said. "Hyde?"

Hyde jutted his chin at Valerie. "Was suggesting she care about people who ain't her—or she might crash into an unscalable ditch."

"That's good advice." Donna hugged him from behind. "I care about you, Hyde." Her tone was forced and somewhat mocking, but he believed the sentiment.

He tousled her hair. "Care about you, man."

Mitch flung his arms around her waist but ended up embracing Hyde, too. "So do I!"

"You're all so stupid!" Valerie strode past them, shoving Mitch aside on her way. Donna and Hyde stumbled a bit with him, but they were chuckling.

Mitch, though, glared at Valerie as she walked away. "That girl might be the hottest psycho on Earth," he muttered, "but she's a bitch. She blackmailed my cousin Linda a few years ago." He glanced at Donna. "You used to work on the school paper. Think it would publish an article exposing her and the inner workings of the cheer squad?"

"Aren't you the editor?"

"That's right. I am!" he said with fake surprise. He'd set Donna up for that line, but Hyde flattened out his sneer. Mitch's idea had potential. "What say you help me with it?"
"I don't go to this school anymore."

"And yet here you are." He winked at her. "You're good friends with Jackie Burkhart, right?"

"Yes..."

"Terrific! Learn the dirt from her. Give it to me, and we'll uncover the cheer squad for what it is."

She flicked her eyes at Hyde. "On one condition: you won't trash Jackie."

"Or Julie," Hyde said. "They're off-limits."

"No can do. I have to maintain journalistic integrity," Mitch said, even as Hyde's shadow fell across him. "But Jackie and Julie will both be treated fairly. They're not my target."

Donna sighed. "Fine. I'll be one of your sources if Jackie agrees."

"Fantastic." He opened his arms wide. "Shall we hug on it?"

"You touched my ass enough during the last ropes course."

"It's never enough, but onto the tire!"

He marched through the leaves toward the Porthole, but she darted after him, saying "No more 'accidental' hand slippage! Otherwise, I'll..."

Her voice faded in the distance, but Hyde was glad she'd rejected his bull. Mitch often masked his obnoxiousness with double-talk and other sorts of trickery. His was an ass worth kicking, but his usefulness had bought him a reprieve.

Hyde considered dodging the rest of the ropes courses. He had two to go, and his mind was spent, but Valerie couldn't intimidate him. She needed to learn that, but she didn't show at the so-called Alligator Crossing.

"She's feeling under the weather," a park instructor told him, but her absence had Hyde scratching his neck raw. De-escalation had been his aim, but he might've provoked her to go nuclear.

Jackie picked at the remnants of her macaroni and cheese. The cheer squad had reunited at the communal eating area, everyone except for Valerie. She'd been at the ropes courses this morning, but so had a third of their teammates. They'd managed to shower and get back to the campground for lunch. But Valerie hadn't returned, and Jackie and Julie exchanged glances. Their plan was contingent on Valerie's presence.

"Val's progressed from PMS to her period," Carla said, eliciting giggles from Patty and other teammates.

"Or maybe she's chasing Ft. Blanderson's bus like a dog," Ellen said. "She hasn't put its blondes under the hot lights yet."

Most of the cheer squad laughed, but Julie slapped the picnic table and shouted, "Enough! She's our captain, and she's earned our respect. What would you do without her leadership?" She thrust her arms into the air. "Do a bunch of high and low Vs on the field; that's what! You want to choreograph our routines, Ellen?" Ellen shook her head, and Julie stared at Carla. "So you're going to be our choreographer?"
Carla shook her head, too. "I'm sorry."

"That's better. You don't badmouth any member of our team," Julie said. "Behind their backs or to their faces. That's part of being a team! Valerie's clearly having trouble in her love life, and we have to support her."

Jackie massaged her temples. Julie was playing the situation perfectly, and even if Valerie missed lunch completely, the plan could still work. Dinner would provide another opportunity, but the hours between allowed for other developments—

"Does Michael have the balls to cheat on her?" Leslie said. She was glaring at Jackie, challenging her. If Jackie answered yes, she'd be claiming equality, that Valerie had no superior love powers to tame Michael.

But saying no could be worse. Leslie or Valerie herself would reveal Michael's cheating, spinning a story that cast them as heroes and Jackie as a fool.

"Well?" Leslie pressed. "You dated him, like, forever. You must have some—"

Her mouth froze mid-sentence. All eyes across from Jackie, including Leslie's, had grown wide, and a weight landed on Jackie's shoulder. "Jackie," Steven said behind her, "we've gotta talk."

Fireflies swarmed her stomach. She and Steven weren't hiding their relationship anymore, but they also hadn't decided to announce it. "Sure..." she said cautiously, "but first: you're one of Michael's oldest friends. Would he cheat on Valerie?"

"Yup."

With a single word, he'd dumped chum in shark-infested waters. Speculation broke out among Jackie's teammates, and he grabbed her hand amid the gossip-frenzy. They bolted from the eating area to his tent, but she stopped him from opening the flaps.

"I have to stay outside," she said. "What is it?"

"Valerie knows your ma's been cheatin' on your dad."

Heat overwhelmed her body. The sun had to be swelling, boiling the Earth. ""How?" she said. "But—no. How?"

"We were partners for the freakin' ropes courses. We got into it, and she called your ma a swinger. Threatened to publicize it 'cause I pushed her too hard."

"A swinger?" The term absorbed the heat, cooling her down. "A swinger." She dabbed her sweaty forehead with her jacket sleeve, but Steven's sunglasses were off, and he gazed at her with such devastation her chest ached. "Steven, we're fine. It's fine." She cradled his cheeks. "Her parents are swingers. They throw these crazy parties. Leslie told me, and I guess my mom has attended gone to a few of them."

His arms slid around her back. "So if she talks shit about your ma, she implicates her own folks."

"Right. And who else would her parents have invited to these parties?"

"Their social circle. The folks of your social circle ... stalemate."

"Checkmate." She flicked his earlobes gently with her thumbs. "We've already won. She just hasn't
realized it yet."

He chuckled but seemed nervous. His fingers were scratching the material of her jacket. "How fucked up is this, man: during one of the ropes courses, I saw Esther in her. Then I saw myself."

"I understand the first part, but you're nothing like her."

"She's what I could've become."

"But you didn't."

His arms dropped to his sides. "'Cause of Forman and his folks. 'Cause hurting you and Donna opened my skull." He walked a few steps toward Eric's tent. He was starting to pace, but she moved in front of him.

"Baby, you're hurting yourself now," she said. "Valerie's tried to break me for years. You had nothing to do with that. Breaking you in the process would be an extra perk … since you held her accountable for what she did to you." She patted his heart. "That is what you did, right?"

"And then some," he said. "Still gave her an out, though. A road map to fix her crap."

Electricity arced across her nerves. As often as Steven purported to hate people, his empathy for others extended even to his enemies. It was such a turn-on, and she tilted her head suggestively.

A smile ghosted on his face. He edged closer to her, cupped her jaw, and their mouths met. The kiss began chastely, but it grew more intimate with each press of their lips. He communicated so much without speaking—his strong, protective hands on her back, the teasing and loving sweep of his tongue—and she gripped his waist as he satisfied her craving for his affection.

Distant voices scraped at her consciousness. They belonged to potential witnesses, but she remained absorbed in Steven, making out with him by Eric's tent. Then a single voice sounded an alarm: "Valerie is a fraud! She can't choreograph cheer routines! Valerie is a fraud! She can't choreograph cheer routines!"

Steven looked questioningly at her, but Timmy's shouts meant Valerie was at the campground.

Jackie grasped his hand as a dozen kids shouted, "Cheer-off! Cheer-off!" The chant spread from student to student until the air was vibrating.

"This is it," she said. "Steven, it's the endgame."

"You're diggin' those chess metaphors, huh?" he said, but they raced to the center of the grounds. The cheer squad was there, surrounded by concentric circles of students.

Jackie released Steven's hand. She had to get to her teammates, but a path opened for her. The chants continued as she passed by acquaintances and classmates. They weren't violent, just loud, and she reached the squad safely.

"This is ridiculous!" Valerie said. "We're a team. We don't cheer against each other!"

"Cheer-off!" students shouted defiantly. Valerie might as well have been yelling at the trees, but Coach Ferguson shoved past the crowd. He climbed onto a log bench and blew on his whistle, but the chant strengthened.

"Clayton," he said, glancing down at Valerie, "what's this all about?"
Mitch stepped forward. "We have no proof that Valerie choreographs her own routines!"

"She's our captain!" Patty said. "That's proof enough."

"Is it?" Susan Amborn joined Mitch near the cheer squad. "We've watched Jake Bradley lead the Vikings to victory repeatedly as quarterback, but we've never seen Valerie choreograph a routine."

"You've seen us cheer at games! Valerie's our captain. Do the math!" Carla said over the continuing chant.

Mr. Wilcox, Ms. McGee, and Mrs. Fletcher emerged from the inner-most ring of students. They joined Coach Ferguson on the log bench, and the chant abated. The sight of all four teachers must have subdued the crowd.

"We hear you!" Ms. McGee said. "You're dissatisfied with how the cheer squad's being run. That's unsurprising—"

"Bitch," Valerie whispered.

"That's unsurprising," Ms. McGee repeated, as if she'd heard Valerie's insult, "considering the social culture at our school."

Coach Ferguson touched Ms. McGee's arm. "But our cheer squad won both the regional and state championships last year. That was under Clayton's leadership. We could have a repeat this year. Maybe win nationals."

He was right, but Julie had choreographed the squad's routine at state. Valerie choreographed herself for the Individual, but Jackie had beaten her and the rest of the competition by a huge margin.

"So how do we resolve this?" Mr. Wilcox said.

"Cheer-off!" students chanted again, but Mrs. Fletcher gestured for them to be quiet, and they obeyed. She was the most beloved teacher in the school, mostly because of her leniency, but she'd apparently earned the students' respect, too.

"Instead of a cheer-off," she said, "why don't we have a cheer exhibition? Tomorrow is going to be a busy day. We'll be putting what we've learned to the test, but we'll reach a beautiful summit by sunset. Closing out our trip with a show of school spirit would be lovely!"

"I agree!" Julie said and climbed onto a neighboring log bench. "Anyone in the cheer squad can participate, but we'll do individual routines—a minute long."

Valerie pushed her hair from her neck. "No one's going to be part of this."

"Why not? It'll be fun," Jackie said, and to emphasize her point, she leapt into the air and performed a double nine. It was one of the toughest jumps in cheerleading, and her hamstrings weren't warmed up, but the crowd applauded and whooped as her arms and legs formed nines before she landed on the ground.

"I'll do it, too!" Leslie said.

Julie peered down at Valerie. "That's three."

"I have nothing to prove," Valerie said.

"That's right, lady," Mitch shouted, "because you've got nothing!"
Valerie hopped onto Julie's log bench and jumped off in a well-executed pike. "Tomorrow," she said after a smattering of applause, "you'll be chanting, 'Go, Valerie, go!'"

"You can do it, baby!" Michael yelled from somewhere in the crowd.

She blew a kiss to the unseen Michael. "Love you, baby!"

"All right, that's settled," Coach Ferguson said. "Separate into your groups!"

The concentric circles splintered and reformed as two amorphous blobs on opposite sides of the campground. Julie found Jackie in their group, clutched Jackie's jacket sleeve, and they gaped at each other with the same silent, awed laughter.

Hyde's body ached all over. The morning's rope exercises and the afternoon's survival skills had done him in. Learning how to build a lean-to with thick branches, dead and alive, had taxed his already sore muscles. But at least he'd been partnered with Jimmy Headgear and Sharon Wheeler. Valerie clung to the pretext of feeling ill, and she'd spent the three hours sitting in a lawn chair, reading a Cosmo and sipping water.

Hyde hid his pain at dinner, but Fez cried out when slicing his ham patty, and he complained about the picnic bench. "It is too hard," he said, "and my ass is so tender."

"That just means some of your muscles are being underutilized," Forman said.

"Of course I have muscles that are underutilized. They're my sex muscles."

Donna raised her plastic fork. "Fez, if you want to have that conversation, have it with Kelso." She pointed her fork at the cheer squad's table, where Kelso and Valerie were canoodling together. He'd replaced Valerie's trash-bag companion. "By the way, I conquered those courses," Donna said and flexed her biceps.

"Because you're having sex!" Fez said. "But I did make a new friend today. Give Back is nice without that sonuvabitch Destroy at his side."

"You were paired with Paul Makowski?" Donna's forehead wrinkled. "No wonder you're sore. He must've flung you around like Raggedy Andy during the ropes courses."

"Yes. I can no longer feel my spine … but I feel the rest of my body. My eyelids hurt."

Forman spoke while chewing. "Tomorrow'll be worse. High ropes in the morning."

"What're you griping for?" Hyde said. "You skipped the low ropes today."

"Today, but I have to participate tomorrow, and I'm terrible at climbing. That first tree is going to kill me."

"Well, Eric," Fez said, "I guess you underutilize your arms and legs during sex. A-burn!" He flexed and unflexed his biceps and winced. "Ai, burn! Why does everything hurt?"

Hyde could relate. Muscles twinged in places he thought no muscle existed, and once dinner was finished, he eased himself off the picnic bench. Students were free to hang out this evening, play board games, or do homework. Jackie would be practicing her cheer routine for tomorrow. She'd invited Hyde to watch, but he needed rest.

Inside his tent, he dressed for the night. Sleep snatched him within minutes, but Jackie infiltrated his
dreams, and he awoke with hard-on. "Crap."

"That's no way to greet me," Jackie whispered by his ear, and he wiped grit from his eyes. The dream had infiltrated his imagination, but she said, "Steven, are you awake?" and he rolled onto his side.

Someone was lying next to him, a shadow in the darkness. He groped behind his head for his flashlight, switched it on, and the shadow transformed into Jackie. She wasn't in his mind. She'd come to his tent and was in her pajamas.

"Hey," he said.

She twirled one of his curls around her finger. "Hi."

Her clothes from the day were in a pile by his duffel bag. Clearly, she planned on sleeping with him tonight, and he unzipped his sleeping bag with some effort. "You okay?"

"Mm-hmm." She inched closer to him and kissed his jaw. "I missed you … and Leslie wouldn't let me sleep. She pestered me for cheer choreography, but she won't manipulate me. I'm not going to stay in the squad as an indentured servant."

"Sounds good to me." Hell, it sounded great. "It's cold, man. Get in here."

She crawled beside him in the sleeping bag, but he grunted as he zipped it closed. His muscles were too stiff for all this activity.

"Are you really that tired?" she said after he shut off the flashlight. "You're not even holding me."

"Body can barely move," he said. "It's pudding."

"My poor Puddin' Pop." Her arm glided over his chest, and her leg swept over his crotch, hitting his erection.

He readjusted the position of her leg. "You wanna call me a cutesy name, fine. Just not that one."

"But you're so puddin'-y and popping." She giggled as her knee rubbed his erection. "Were you dreaming about me?"

"Yeah, and would you quit it?"

She withdrew her leg from him. "Oh! Steven, I'm sorry. I didn't mean … okay, I did mean to, but I thought … I wasn't thinking. I should've asked."

"Jackie, not that. The name." He slid his palm along her arm, the one draped over his chest. "But maybe we should figure out how this is gonna go between us."

"It's simple. Unless it's obvious we're both in the mood or having a spontaneously romantic moment —when we're both fully awake—we ask."

His fingertips stroked her elbow. "Rules work for me, with one addition: you wanna stop, we stop."

"Same goes for you," she said. "So no fooling around tonight?"

The best he could do was let her squeeze one out for him, but that wouldn't be fair to either of them. Today had been rough on his skull, full of torments old and new. "Too exhausted, but I'm glad you're here."
"So am I..." she snuggled against him but avoided his crotch, "Firefly." He inhaled a breath, intending to object, but she spoke first. "Your pet name for me is a bug, too, Steven. A bug! But I adore it because of what it means to fireflies are full of light like the stars … and you."

"You're gonna send me to the loony bin," he muttered. Fireflies were beetles whose asses lit up. But as awful as his latest nickname was, the more she called him that, the less he'd probably hate it. A plight he was willing to accept.
Chapter Notes

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT
LEAPING THE CHASM

Pots clanked together outside Steven's tent. The teachers' version of a wake-up call was relentless, and Jackie scrambled from Steven's sleeping bag. Leaving so quickly was an unhappy but necessary task. Without her, the morale of her teammates could be at risk, and she pulled on her boots.

"What's the rush?" Steven said, voice raspy from sleep. He sat up and cleared his throat. "We got a couple of minutes..."

She slid her coat on over her pajamas. "Are your muscles still sore?"

He stretched his arms above his head, and his knuckles grazed the top of the tent. "Not much, but it doesn't answer my question."

"I guess you were more emotionally exhausted last night than physically," she said and gathered her clothes from yesterday. "But speed is your friend. Don't be a slowpoke on the high ropes course, or you'll overtax your muscles."

"Emotions? What're those?" He was rubbing his eyes, and his chest rose heavily with his breath. The sunrise had tinged everything in his tent orange, including his frustration.

She knee-walked toward him. "It's not like I want to go. But when Valerie learns Ms. McGee is Michael's mistress, it'll create fresh drama. Half the squad's going to participate in the cheer-off, and —"

"You mean half of half," he said. "Lower classmen ain't here to participate."

"I can't change that."

"Lower classmen are gonna suffer for whatever happens on this trip."

She held her clothes with one arm and finger-combed curls off his forehead. He was talking on autopilot, not quite awake. "Julie and I are fighting to save the squad's spirit, not to mutilate it," she said. "Anyway, I'll see you later, okay?"

"Yup. I'll be front and center at the 'showcase'."

She dug her fingers into yesterday's shirt. His thinking could be aggravatingly limited, but in this case it was understandable. She was leaving him again. "Prepare to be surprised, Firefly."

Outside, light from the rising was dazzlingly bright. It shone on Jackie through the trees as she
crossed the campground, but the teachers continued their pot-bashing. The metallic clanks were akin to torture, and her teammates emerged from their tents like furious badgers.

Ellen covered her ears with her hands. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

"We're awake already!" Carla shouted. She shuffled from her tent with her toiletries, presumably to the bathrooms, and kept shouting at the noise.

Patty, though, covered her cheek, the one scratched by the thicket. Her Band-Aids probably had to be replaced, and she scurried after Carla silently.

Jackie waited a moment for Julie, Valerie, or Leslie to show. None of them did. Either they were slow to wake, or they'd gotten a head start to the bathrooms, and Jackie headed for Leslie's tent. Her toiletries were inside, along with a fresh set of clothes, but Leslie crawled from the flaps.

"Jackie?" Leslie stood up straight and blocked Jackie's path. "Where were you last night?"

"Funny. I don't remember you asking me that Thursday morning. You know, after Valerie dragged me from your tent our first night here."

Leslie blew out a breath. "I assumed you slept in El Dorado's tent. She walked you back here, didn't she?"

"Her name is Donna." Jackie copied Leslie's breath-blowing, exaggerating it. Leslie hadn't earned the right to be exasperated, unlike Jackie. "So, have you told Valerie about Michael's—"

"Shh! The timing's not right." Leslie's basket of toiletries dangled from her arm, and she rearranged the items in it. "I'll tell her close to the cheer exhibition. It'll really psych her out."

"A sound plan."

"I thought so." Leslie left with a gamboling step, clearing the way to her tent. The subject of Jackie's whereabouts had been dropped—at least for now—but Leslie had to be careful. Valerie might accuse her of sabotage if she stuck with her scheme.

Ten minutes later Jackie was in the bathroom, rushing through her morning routine. Minimal makeup. Hair swept into a ponytail. Today would be a demanding day, and girls complained beside her at the sinks. They were cranky and exhausted from being in the woods, and the impending ropes courses had created anxiety among them.

Their grievances followed Jackie to the breakfast line, but Jackie bounced on her heels. Their school could change because of the cheer-off. No more ruling social class. Students would be valued for who they were, as equals.

Laughter tickled her throat. Her thoughts were idealistic and barely recognizable as her own, but they made her proud.

At the cheer squad's table, Julie patted an empty spot next to her. It was an invitation, and Jackie accepted. Both were moves Valerie should have questioned, but her garbage duty was over. Michael's embargo from the table had been lifted, and her attention was on him. He teased her with a piece of bacon, brushing it against her lips, and her shoulders hiked to her ears. His affection seemed to disgust her, but she ate the bacon and giggled.

It was an obvious performance, but it ended once she slapped away his bacon-wielding hand. "Girls..." she said and wiped grease from her mouth. "Girls!"
All conversation stopped. Patty's pancake-laden fork froze inches from her lips. Valerie's gaze was on her, and Julie pressed her knee into Jackie's beneath the table.

"I expect the best from you tonight," Valerie said, and her gaze shifted to Leslie, Julie, and Jackie in turn. "Every one of you is part of this exhibition, whether cheering or not. But those of you who are cheering, I hope you've choreographed a sensational routine for yourselves."

Jackie chewed on a piece of bacon, tuning out Valerie's blather. Jackie's routine was a modified version of what won her Best Individual Cheerleader at state last year. Valerie must have assumed she'd do that, but her insight was outdated. Predicting the nature of Jackie's alterations would take more awareness than Valerie had.

A loud "Yeah!" punched the air, and Jackie's arm twitched. Syrup splashed onto the table from her fork, but her teammates had collectively responded to Valerie, and Jackie tuned back in.

"I'm counting on my girls to make me look good," Valerie said. "The team's counting on you. Go, Vikings, go!"

"Go, Vikings, go!" everyone repeated. Michael, too, but Valerie had given the cheer-off competitors a veiled message: "Do a half-ass job on your routine and confirm my superiority."

Normal conversation resumed after the chant. Patty ate her bite of pancake, and Jackie chatted with Ellen, but Michael said, "Jackie—hey, Jackie."

Jackie continued her discussion with Ellen. Ellen's boyfriend, Keith, had apparently sneaked a radio on the trip.

"Jackie!" Michael shouted and seized Jackie's plate of food.

Julie pushed her own plate between herself and Jackie. She had a whole pancake left and cut it in half. "Go for it."

"Thank you," Jackie said and sliced a square of pancake. She needed fuel for the high ropes course, but Julie's friendship was an act of rebellion. On Valerie's cheer squad, teammates were supposed to be rivals, despite Valerie's exhortations for the opposite.

"Jackie, it's rude to ignore someone who's talking to you," Valerie said.

"It's ruder to steal someone else's breakfast," Jackie said. "And immature."

Valerie smacked Michael's arm. "Return her food."

"Fine." Michael shoved Jackie's plate at her. "I just wanted to wish you luck tonight, Jackie. God!"

"Isn't that sweet of him?" Valerie said. "He's trying to be friends. That means he's truly over you."

"That's cool," Jackie said and popped a bacon crumb into her mouth.

Michael jabbed his syrup-coated fork in her direction. "I hope you and Mark can be friends someday."

"We're already friends."

"That's great 'cause it sucks to be dumped." Sympathy was absent from his tone. He chuckled instead, a soft but smug sound. "Think about it: I dumped you in June. Mark dumped you on Thursday..." He slammed the table. "That's rough!"
Jackie's grip tightened on her knife. He was rewriting their history. "Let me set the record straight," she said, addressing her teammates. "I proposed to Michael before the summer, and rather than tell me yes or no, he drove to California. Technically, we were still in a committed relationship, but he cheated on me again, and I broke up with him in a letter."

Valerie snorted, like Jackie were lying, but Jackie said, "Do you remember how that letter began, Michael?"

"'Dear cowardly, won't-marry-me loser, run-away-to-California jackass.' It was a good burn—" He winced. "Damn! I mean, there wasn't any letter 'cause I dumped you!"

Valerie clutched his hand with both of hers. "That's in the past. Michael's the perfect boyfriend now."

A strange hiss scraped Jackie's ears. Most of the cheer squad was suppressing its laughter, but Ellen smirked at Michael. "Well, Valerie certainly talks about you all the time. Like, all the time. You're all she talks about to a lot of girls."

He cupped the back of Valerie's head, clearly oblivious to Ellen's true meaning. "Aw, baby..."

Valerie's eyes stayed open as he kissed her, and she bit his bottom lip. He withdrew, but her teeth retained their hold on him.

"Ow," he mumbled. "Alerie, Alerie ... ow!"

She released his lip only when Susan Amborn walked by their table. Susan had her pen and notepad, and she greeted the cheer squad brightly, but Valerie said, "What do you want?"

"An interview," Susan said. "How do you feel that half the school demanded a cheer-off?"

Valerie smiled a gleaming cheerleader smile. "Exhibition. People can't get enough of me."

"I can't get enough of you," Michael said and kissed her neck.

"Stop! You'll stain my jacket!" She slapped Michael off her, whose lip was bleeding from their previous kiss.

Susan scribbled something on her notepad. Then she asked everyone at the table their thoughts on the cheer-off, but Leslie and Valerie spoke over most of the squad. Michael, meanwhile, tried to feed Valerie the last bits of food on her plate.

His efforts to sell himself to her were glaring. Maybe his fling with Ms. McGee had collapsed, making Valerie his sole sexual outlet in the park. Or Jackie's presence was the cause, but his motives were irrelevant. His choices hadn't changed since Jackie's relationship with him, and they probably wouldn't change for the rest of his life.

Students had been split into three groups after breakfast. They were divided by skill level, determined by their performance on the low ropes courses. Hyde had landed in the intermediate group with half the students. They were brought to a high ropes course that, according to park instructors, would be challenging and exhilarating.

Most of the morning, however, would be spent sitting. On benches. The grass. Rocky outcrops. The course consisted of five interconnected obstacles. For safety's sake, instructors allowed the next student to go only when the previous student was two obstacles ahead.
That meant Hyde had a long wait. The order was alphabetical by surname but backward, and he claimed a rocky outcrop. It had some height and offered a good view of the ropes course. Fez, Forman, and Kelso were with him, too, watching kids traverse the course. But the three Stooges should've been in the beginner group.

Fez still complained of body soreness, and unlike yesterday, no one would carry him through the obstacles. But Hyde felt surprisingly refreshed. His stiffness must have come from tension, like Jackie suggested, not physical effort.

"Would you look at that guy" Kelso said an hour in, pointing up at Mitch Miller. He was struggling on the course's third obstacle. "I could take those vines two-by-two."

"I don't envy your life," Forman said, "but I'll take your blind optimism."

Tiny sprouts between outcrop's cracks had grown brown. They were dying from the cold weather, and Hyde's fingertips skimmed a withered leaf. Kelso's optimism was pure stupidity. He had as much coordination sober as Hyde did plastered.

Ms. McGee was the reason he'd made the intermediate group, so Kelso's story went. Fortunately for him, she wasn't supervising the kids here. Mr. Wilcox and Mrs. Fletcher had that pleasure. The eventual entertainment of Kelso flopping on the obstacles would be hilarious.

"You had an easy out, Forman," Hyde said and gestured to the badge pinned on Forman's jacket. "Wilderness Ass gets his choice of the ropes courses."

"As usual, your wit is charming." Forman shined the badge with his sleeve. "I could've joined Donna in the advanced group, but I know my limits. Being taken away on a stretcher … no, thanks." He glanced at the first obstacle. Climbing a tree was the way to access it. Brackets had been screwed into the trunk, creating a ladder. "But people already think I'm not her athletic equal," he said. "Choosing the beginner courses would've been—"

"Smart?" Hyde said.

"I wish I were at the beginner courses." Fez rolled his shoulders. "Ai … if only I had a girlfriend to massage my aching muscles."

"I'll do it, buddy—" Kelso said, "if it involves tossing rocks at you."

Hyde slugged Kelso's arm, causing Kelso to jerk sideways. He'd lost his balance and kicked out a foot to regain it, sending dirt and leaves to the ground. "How's that for a massage?" Hyde said.

"I need this arm!" Kelso shouted. "How else am I gonna chuck rocks at Fez?"

Hyde raised his fist to frog him again, but Forman laid his hand on it. "Kelso," Forman said, "how's your brother Casey doing?"

"Casey?" Kelso's brow furrowed. "I have no idea where he is—oh! But I found a stash of bottle rockets in his closet. We should shoot them at the cows on Dutcher's Dairy Farm."

Fez rubbed his chin, as if deep in thought. "Dairy cows spray milk when they're frightened. We would have to wear raincoats and bring glasses full of Nesquik."

"Better pay more attention in biology, pal," Forman said and turned to Kelso. "What're you planning to do about your girlfriends once we're home?"
Kelso plucked a dying sprout from the outcrop. "Carol isn't my girlfriend. She's my lady-friend. And Valerie can't dump me 'cause we're both homecoming court royalty. So I'm living the high life." He sniffed the sprout then threw it over his shoulder. "But how about Jackie, huh? Poor kid's suffering without me."

"You mean she's happy?" Fez said.

"She was dumped by a turtle..." Kelso grinned. "How happy can she be?"

Hyde's biceps tensed. The pressure traveled to his knuckles, but punches had no effect on Kelso's mind. Words had no real influence, either. Only long-term consequences caused any change, but Kelso hadn't experienced any lately. His sex life wasn't suffering from his choices. He got to hang out with Hyde, Forman, and Fez instead of sitting alone. Hyde could rectify at least one of those situations, but Forman piped up first: "So Jackie can't be happy unless she's with you."


Forman's face flushed. His anger on Jackie's behalf was a welcome shift, and although Hyde had plenty to say, he let Forman talk.

"Meaning, you won't let her be happy unless it's with you."

"No ... I just hate the idea of her being happy without me."

"Why?" Forman said.

"Yes," Fez said. "Why?"

Hyde cracked his knuckles but otherwise remained silent.

"I was her first, right? That means I've gotta be her best."

"But it doesn't work the other way around," Forman said.

"Exactly!" Kelso said as a raven cawed overhead. The sound was a guttural croak, and Fez edged closer to Hyde, but Kelso was grinning again. "Wow, I missed talking to you guys. The sex I've been having is great and all, but you really get me."

Forman's feet tapped a rhythm on the outcrop. "I'm sensing a pattern here. You cheat on Jackie. She dumps you. You feel humiliated and try to avenge yourself through Laurie. You flee to California, but Jackie doesn't take you back afterward. You feel humiliated and—"

"Actually, she ran back to ol' faithful on Tuesday." Kelso pulled on the lapel of his jacket. "Yanked me to an empty classroom, and I totally ate her pussy."

"What?" Forman and Fez said together. They were staring at him, but Hyde had to shut Kelso up. He jumped into a crouch, preparing to tackle him, but a park instructor shouted Kelso's name. Debbie Lawson had reached the third obstacle on the ropes course, and Kelso was next in line.

Forman and Fez went mute as Kelso scooted down the outcrop on his ass. He jogged to the starter tree and put on a climbing harness. A park instructor showed him how to connect the safety line, but neither Forman nor Fez spoke. Kelso's confession must've melted their brains, or they were waiting for Hyde's reaction.

Hyde, though, watched as Kelso stepped onto the tree's first bracket. His ascent began well, but his
foot slipped off the fifth bracket, and he lost contact with the tree. His body swung through the air like a overwound pendulum, narrowly missing the trunk. But he would've plummeted to the ground if not for the safety line.

"Guess he fainted," Hyde said, but Kelso flailed on the line moments later and grabbed a tree bracket. "Asshole's got twenty lives and a big fuckin' mouth."

"Big enough to make Jackie faint from oral sex!" Fez said. "It should explain everything, but it explains nothing."

Forman's focus moved to Hyde. "You already knew."

Hyde nodded, and Fez's lips pressed together in a bloodless frown. "Kelso told you first?"

"Jackie," Hyde said.

"I see." Fez dug his palms into the rocky outcrop when another raven cawed. "You nursed her back to health that day, and she confessed why she fainted."

Hyde's throat thickened. Jackie's private business was an out-of-bounds subject, but Kelso had kicked it onto the playing field. "Lack of food made her faint," Hyde said roughly. "Alls I'll say about the rest is Kelso's version of events ain't accurate."

"It never is," Forman said.

Fez glared at Kelso, who was tottering on the rope course's first obstacle. "Kelso has three women while I have none!"

"Kelso doesn't have Jackie," Hyde said, but he wasn't the only one. Forman had also said it, and Hyde suppressed a smile. Forman was finally protective of Hyde's girl.

"But she cheated on her boyfriend with Kelso..." Fez said, and his eyes widened. "That is why she and Mark are over! Mystery solved."

Hyde pinched the bridge of his nose. His skull was pounding, but giving Fez the full truth couldn't happen until they were in Point Place. "Trust me on this, man. Jackie has no interest in Kelso."

Fez's shoulders jumped as a third raven cawed. "The crows ... it's a warning! All week, my friends have ignored me. Ordered me around. Excluded me from their secrets." He tugged on the hem of Forman's jacket. "Are you throwing me out of the group? Tell me! I need to know."

Forman patted Fez's back. "I understand that this is a confusing time for you. But if you're patient, everything will become clear."

"That is the same advice you gave me about Rhonda!"

Fez raced awkwardly down the outcrop. His muscle tenderness was apparent, and he seemed to be crying, but he'd misplaced his fear. His spot in the basement was secure.

"Guess Fez has a few secrets of his own," Forman said.

Hyde scratched the nape of his neck. Fez's secrets weren't all that secret anymore, and neither were Jackie's.

Fifty feet below, students wandered the grass like colorful beetles. The rope course's first two
obstacles had been easy, but the third was kicking Hyde's ass. He was halfway across it, a dozen U-shaped rope "vines". They created a bridge between two trees, but instead of being spaced apart evenly, the vines were at a variety of distances. The gap between the vine he stood on now and the next one required a jump he wasn't sure his legs had in them.

His safety line was clipped to a belay cable above him. If he leapt and missed the vine, he'd drop through the air like a yo-yo but without enough energy to haul himself back up.

His pride could take the hit, but his rep needed to remain intact. It had protected him and Jackie on Thursday's hike. That was his going theory, at least. Kids should've whispered about his and Jackie's hand-holding, but fear kept them quiet. The jocks' and cheerleaders' social power wasn't a monopoly. Being an anarchic asshole carried decent cachet, too.

But he had to get moving, or people would catch his hesitation. The vines were suspended from waist-height cables, and his arms pushed off them as he jumped. His right foot landed on the next vine, but his left foot didn't, and he wrenched his body forward using the cables. His center of gravity shifted. His left leg swung toward the vine, and after another pull on the cables, his left foot perched beside his right one.

He shook out his arms. Resting them on the cables hurt like hell, even through his denim jacket.

"Great jump, Steven!" someone shouted from below. "Keep going!"

He glanced down. Jackie was on the grass, near the ropes course, and she waved both hands at him. Her presence here was confusing, but it restored his fading strength.

He leapt forward, but his arms and legs were trembling by the final vine. Sweat soaked his clothes, and blood roared in his ears like Quartz Falls. He was full of adrenaline, but his heart pumped with more than his body's fight-or-flight response. His girl was cheering for him, and he hopped onto the wooden platform, completing the third obstacle.

Jackie applauded, but he fumbled with the carabiner attached to the fourth obstacle's safety line. "Take your time!" she shouted.

He sucked in a few breaths, and his fingers quit being clumsy. He connected the carabiner to his harness, removed the third obstacle's safety line, but nine wooden beams stood between him and the final obstacle. They created three Zs, which would force him to change directions. He'd have to use the cables they dangled from to support his balance.

The advanced course had to be a circus act, full of trapezes and flaming hoops, if this was only the intermediate course. But he raised his shaky arms to the cables above, and his equally shaky legs stepped onto the first beam.

"Kick the ropes high!" Jackie shouted. "Kick the ropes low! They can't beat you. Go, Steven, go!"

His fuel tank was nearly empty, but her cheering sustained him during the last two obstacles. She used different chants throughout, performed cheerleading jumps, and met him at the bottom of the course.

"I knew you could do it!" she said and embraced him before he could detach the safety line from his harness. A park instructor did it for him, and she asked Jackie to let him remove the harness. "Oh! Sorry." Jackie stepped back. "I'm just so proud of my Steven."

Hyde curled his arm around her shoulders once the harness was off. He tried not to put his weight on her as they walked, but physically he felt like he was ten-years-old—and riddled with his ma's
knuckle marks.

"Your cheering saved my ass," he said, and his lips grazed the top of Jackie's head. He'd meant to kiss her, but his body had gone dull.

"I'm a highly-trained spirit booster, Steven. I do what I can, but you're the one who had to climb, leap, and balance."

They sat on a bench together, and she snuggled into the crook of his arm. Her fingers combed his hair from his damp forehead, but she frowned. "I must really love you. I don't even mind your sweat."

He chuckled, too giddy and exhausted to think of an equivalent retort. Or ask why she wasn't at the advanced ropes course. He just wanted to chill with his chick, but Forman darted toward them. He was as sweaty as Hyde but pale, and his expression resembled a frightened rabbit's.

"H-h-how bad was it?" Forman said.

"No worse than boxing a few rounds with George Foreman," Hyde said and chuckled again. "Hey … Foreman vs. Forman."

Forman rocked on his heels. "You're kidding, right? It's not that bad. I mean, Kelso made it. Mitch made it." He peered at the ropes course then snapped his fingers in front of Hyde's face. "Am I gonna die up there or not?"

"He's tired," Jackie, rubbing Hyde's chest. "Don't you hear him? He's laughing at dumb jokes."

"What are you doing here, Jackie?" Forman sounded annoyed, but he gestured across the grass, where Kelso and Fez fenced each other with twigs. "What are you doing here? Aren't you two supposed to lie low?"

"I was fourth to finish the advanced rope course," she said. "Instead of forcing me to watch everyone else do it, Coach Ferguson let me come here."

Forman pointed to the course's second obstacle. "Hackel's struggling. If he has to be rescued, I can sacrifice my turn. The day has only so many hours." He clasped his hands together under his chin. "Jackie, do you know any spirit-deflating cheers?"

"Tons." She waved her fists in the air and chanted, "Hey, hey! You better pray! Because you'll be on those ropes all day!" She clapped twice. "A.L.L. day!"

"I meant for Hackel, but … thanks. That's great."

He slouched and disappeared behind a rocky outcrop, but Forman was nimbler than Hyde. That would help him with the course.

"I told you you'd see more of me today," Jackie said and poked the tip of Hyde's nose.

"You sure you're cool with people seein' us?"

"You're my boyfriend." She sat straighter on the bench and caressed the side of his neck. "Who's in serious need of a haircut, but I'm proud to be seen with you. Anyone who has a problem with that can go fuck themselves."

He grinned at her crude language. He wasn't used to hearing it from her. "That's not ropes-course
"You like how I talk. You always have."

"Uh..."

"Fine. It grew on you."

"I'll concede that," he said. "Begrudgingly."

Her palm glided over his sideburn, and her fingers rested on his ear. "I'm serious, though. If people 'report' on us to Valerie, I don't care. I won't live and die by what she thinks."

A spark ignited his blood, or maybe it was her growing self-respect, but he leaned his face closer to hers. She accepted his kiss with warm lips, and they made out like they were alone in the three-thousand acre park. Their hands slid along each other's spines, down to their butts, up to their hair. The wind started to gust, and his arms were obviously bruised, but his sense of freedom blunted the pain. Jackie had chosen herself. She was choosing to be happy and that included being with him in public.

His lips skimmed her ear. Feelings rose within him as words, and he began to whisper some, but an unexpected force wedged him and Jackie apart.

"Quit kissing my girlfriend!" Kelso shouted. His hand was on Hyde's chest, but Hyde bashed the underside of Kelso's forearm, causing him to cry out and withdraw. Like Hyde, he had to be bruised from the ropes course.

"I am not your girlfriend!" Jackie said and stood from the bench. Hyde stood with her, despite his weak legs, and she hugged his waist. "Steven is my boyfriend, Michael. We—"

"He's dead!" Kelso dived for Hyde, but Hyde split from Jackie, and Kelso crashed onto the bench. He pushed himself up but whimpered, and he clutched his left wrist. "The Turtle dumped you so you could be with Hyde?"

A crowd of students was gathering, but Jackie said, "We fell in love, and we're together." She slipped her arm around Hyde's back and hooked one of his belt loops with her finger. "That's all you need to know."

"But you were with me on Tuesday!" Kelso said.

"I kicked you in the balls on Tuesday!"

Laughter rippled through the crowd until Mrs. Fletcher and Mr. Wilcox worked on dispersing the students.

"Nuh-uh," Kelso said and stepped in front of Hyde. He was inches away and smelled like grass and bacon grease. "You can't have her!"

Hyde's eardrums stung, but he kept his own voice low. "Your girlfriend—actual girlfriend—gave me a handy on Monday. Have fun with that."

"No, she didn't," Kelso said. He was still clutching his wrist, and the color drained from him.

"She did," Jackie said. "You thought you cheated on her first, but she beat you to it."

Hyde reached behind her back cupped her hip. "Clever choice of words."
"Don't be gross." She tugged on his belt loop. "And thank you. It was probably my subconscious."

"S-subconscious?" Kelso said. "Y-you … and Hyde, but—but no. Val..." His eyelids fluttered, and he dropped to the grass.

Hyde nudged Kelso's leg with his boot, but Kelso showed no reaction. "Crap. He passed out."

"Mrs. Fletcher!" Jackie shouted, and Mrs. Fletcher emerged from the few students gawking at the scene.

"Oh, my—!" Mrs. Fletcher crouched in the grass. She checked Kelso's pulse, and he groaned faintly. She was holding his left wrist.

"Might wanna be careful," Hyde said. "Wrist could be broken."

Mrs. Fletcher called for Mr. Wilcox. The crowd of students was reforming, but it let Mr. Wilcox through and, eventually, the park paramedics.

Kelso regained consciousness, but paramedics insisted on putting him on a stretcher. Mr. Wilcox went with them as they carried Kelso from the field. Fez followed, and students dispersed without prompting, but Hyde stomach twinged.

"He'll be fine," Jackie said and squeezed his hand. "And it's okay to still care about the jerk."

Her ability to read him was unnerving, but care didn't mean loyalty. "Doesn't matter," he said, stroking her jaw. "I'm stickin' with you."

"Steven, I—"

"What happened to Kelso?" Forman shouted from the ropes course. He was at the start of the final obstacle. He'd crossed the first four during Kelso's outburst, faint, and subsequent removal.

"Short-circuited!" Hyde shouted to him.

"From what?"

"Us!" Jackie shouted

"Got it!" Forman flashed them an okay sign and hopped onto the first vine.

Jackie gripped Hyde's jacket sleeve. "How are we gonna stop Michael? He won't let this go. It's like he's obsessed with me."

"Sour the milk, man." He tapped her temple. "He's not gonna want a chick who talks about the subconscious."

"Or who knows what the Noah's Ark Trap is."

A thrill jolted his chest. "Who taught you that?"

"Next time we play chess, I'm going to make your queen-side bishop worthless." She cradled his cheeks. "I'm turning you on, aren't I?"

"You're hot as fuck right now." He kissed her, and students hooted at them. He'd barely parted her lips with his tongue, but he wasn't in the mood for an audience.
She sighed when he cut their kiss short. "Wanna cheer on Eric?" she said.

"Sure," he said, and they strolled, hand-in-hand, to the ropes course.
Jackie began to skip on the hike to Granny Hill. The dirt trail remained smooth, even after half a mile. She was surrounded by friends, and Steven held her hand publicly without creating gossip. They were among a hundred of their schoolmates, essentially penned in, but she felt uncaged.

Steven increased his speed to stay by her side. She tried not to outpace him, but his grip loosened on her hand.

"What is it?" she said and walked normally. Golden maples reflected in his sunglasses, but his expression was blank. "Steven?"

He let go of her and removed his wool coat. The temperature had dropped from lunch. They were two hours from sunset, and he'd freeze if he kept the coat off. But he passed it to her and pushed his shirt sleeve to his elbow. His left arm was a patchwork of black and purple. His right had to be the same.

"Oh..." She cradled his cheek. He'd relied heavily on the cables during the high ropes course. In the four hours since, visible evidence of his efforts had surfaced. She must've hurt him with her skipping, putting pressure on his bruises.

He rolled down his sleeve. "Pain's a little too familiar."

"Your mom?" she said and helped him on with his coat. She expected resistance, but he gave her none.

"Sometimes. Or my 'uncles'. Never Bud..." He peered at the sky. "Which is maybe why I kinda idealized him while fuckin' hating him. It's screwed up, y'know?"

Her throat tightened. This trip had been a nightmare for him, cracking open the terrors of his childhood. The confrontation with Valerie yesterday, his battered body, and Jackie's repeated abandonments. But he continued to love, to be vulnerable, to trust.

"Thank you for not giving up," she said.

"You just needed time, man."

"Not on me. On you."

He slid his arm around her waist. "You make it a helluva lot easier," he said as he drew her close, and she buried her face in his coat. "Bruises'll be gone in a week," he whispered. "I'll be fine, all right? And so will you."
"I was happy a minute ago," she cried against his chest. "But you lived in a horrible home ... and I don't want to go back to mine."

"Can't change your folks. Only what you do."

She glanced at him with wet eyes. "Can I move in with you?"

"Move in? Hell, Mrs. Forman would adopt you. Laurie's room's vacant. Red, though..."

"I'm the only one of Eric's friends he likes besides you," she said and parted from him. She blotted her eyes with her sleeve, but her nose was a problem. "Damn—don't look at me."

She dashed for the woods lining the trail. Fallen leaves littered the ground. They'd have to do, but a napkin waved in front of her. She grabbed it, blew her nose, and spotted Donna beside her.

"You're like a napkin angel!" Jackie said. She would so treat Donna to a makeover, as a thank-you for her support.

"Eric's backpack is full of them," Donna said, presenting a package of the napkins. "Part of his wilderness assistant duties, and they've come in handy. Fez has used a bunch already."

Jackie was still sniffling, but she and Donna rejoined their friends. Steven met her gaze, but his focus shifted to Fez, who was slouching between him and Eric.

Donna offered her a second napkin. "You and Hyde have a fight?"

"No, he's wonderful," Jackie said low and wiped her nose. Other students were immersed in their own discussions, but they had two hours ahead of them. Dinner and the cheer-off. Then another two hours of hiking. They might run out of conversation material and decide to eavesdrop on Jackie's. "Home's mostly the cause of this." She indicated her face. "If they divorce, I won't even get twice the amount of presents on birthdays and holidays. My mom spends her money on herself and booze."

"That sucks—not the presents part. The rest of it." Donna embraced her a sideways hug. "And you can crash at my house whenever."

Jackie's eyes stung as she fought her tears. After lunch, she and Donna had talked in private about Michael. Specifically, why he broke his wrist and Jackie's sexual encounter with him on Tuesday. Once Jackie had mentioned her parents, Donna totally seemed to understand. No self-righteous speeches followed.

"I was super confused when my mom left," Donna had said in her tent. "I hopped on the Casey Kelso train and went off the rails. In front of everyone. You at least did it in private, except for the fainting part."

Jackie had swatted Donna's knee then, but now she was returning Donna's embrace. "I can teach you and Joanne basic makeup skills if I sleepover. I saw that green eyeshadow in your drawer. You have blue eyes. Brown and coral will bring it out." She sniffled. "Green competes, and has Joanne ever heard of tweezers? Eyebrows are not supposed to shake hands."

"Okay, okay," Donna said and stuffed a napkin into Jackie's fingers. "But please don't be excessively judgmental during your 'lessons'."

"It'll be hard, but for you, I'll try."

"That's all I ask."
Jackie dried her face with the napkin. She was done crying but not because of her makeup. She'd worn none for the hike. If her eyes were puffy, she could blame it on the frigid weather. If her parents completely abandoned her, she had safe places to stay.

"Fez is upset about Michael, huh?" she said.

"That and how you and Hyde kept your relationship secret," Donna said. "Oh, and how he has no job or girlfriend. Basically, he's having an existential crisis."

"He also has us." Jackie marched toward Fez and replaced Eric at his side. "Fezzy?" she said and rubbed his arm. "Steven and I were protecting ourselves. You would've had to lie to Michael, and you saw what happened when he found out—"

Fez jerked away from her. "Oh, I saw it. I saw him lying on that stretcher, sobbing for his friendships more than his wrist."

"He broke 'em both," Steven said on his other side.

"You could have had any girl," Fez said. "Why Jackie?"

"Uh-uh. You're not gonna be Kelso's mouthpiece." Steven walked behind him to Jackie, and she grasped his hand. "Speak for yourself, man."

Fez opened his mouth then shut it. He raised a pointed finger then lowered it, and Jackie tugged the shooting star pendant from her coat collar. "Steven won this for me," she said, "and my heart."

"Never felt this way for anyone," he said to Fez. "You can figure out the rest by comparing what I've done to what Kelso has."

Jackie tucked the pendant inside her coat. In the sunlight, the shooting star would've gleamed like an actual star. But for the first time on this trip, the sky wasn't clear. Clouds scudded by as if blown by an industrial fan, but the sun radiated through her body.

Steven had admitted his emotions to their friends. He wasn't embarrassed by loving her, and she cupped the nape of his neck. But as Steven bent his head to kiss her, Eric deepened his voice and said, "'The way I feel about you, I've never felt about anyone.'"

Steven kissed her anyway. It was quick but a distinct message that their friends' mockery didn't phase him.

"That's your orphan soul coming alive!" Donna said, pitching her voice higher. Evidently, Steven's indifference was lost on her.

"Is that supposed to be us?" Jackie said.

Eric and Donna held onto each other, laughing, but Fez covered his eyes.

"Kelso is a bad friend!" he cried. "He throws rocks at me. Poured lighter fluid on my ass to set me on fire, but Hyde stopped him." He hiccuped. "Hyde has worried for Jackie's health since she fainted, but Kelso thinks only of himself."

Steven clasped Fez's shoulder. "Truth'll set you free."

Fez's nose was runny. Eric gave him napkins, and Jackie said, "Michael has crushed a lot of hearts and paid very little for it, but we can change that. Seeing me happy—especially with Steven—will be..."
a start."

And no less than Michael deserved. Once he realized Jackie had his friends' loyalty, he might finally respect her. Or, at least, leave her alone.

She considered skipping again, but a pebble bounced off her denim-clad shin. The trail was growing rocky and ascending sharply, and students' steps kicked tiny stones through the air. They plinked in the dirt as they landed. Ricocheted off trees and her legs, and students in front of her began to shout. They had to be experiencing the same barrage, but a cloud of dust rose from the ground. Someone was sprinting in the wrong direction, shoving people aside.

Jackie covered her mouth to protect her throat. The dust cloud was drifting closer, and Donna said, "What the hell is going on?"

"A dare?" Eric said, but Mitch appeared in front of them. He was speckled in dirt and the obvious cause of the ruckus.

"Hey, buddy," he said to Fez and yanked a notepad from his backpack. "You ever notice that we rarely talk?"

Fez crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Because you say you can't understand me. You are like the evil Spock in that Star Trek episode. But since Spock is not real, you're like the evil Eric."

"Hey!" Eric said. "First, I'm twice his height. Second, I've got this lady." He motioned at Donna. "Third—"

"You have a small penis. Point taken," Mitch said. "Recount your fling with Leslie Canon, and we'll talk." He slid a pen from behind his ear. "But right now, Fez has the goods I'm interested in."

Fez uncrossed his arms. "Bullying me has been your manner of flirting, eh? I'm flattered, but I like girls."

"Too bad they don't like you." Mitch brought his pen over his notepad. "Let's discuss the facts. You were with Kelso at the park infirmary. Did Valerie Clayton visit him while you were there? Because he's not on this hike, and she is."

Jackie looked at Steven, who raised his eyebrows. It was the equivalent of a shrug but on his face. She'd have to lay down a rule about that. Any form of, "I don't know," was unacceptable when he could offer more. Mitch was digging for dirt on the cheer squad. Steven had warned her Mitch would write an exposé, but she hadn't agreed to be a source yet. The cheer-off could serve the same purpose.

"You don't have to say anything," she said to Fez.

"But I want to. Valerie was there," Fez said, and Mitch wrote on his notepad. "She was yelling at Kelso, but Ms. McGee told us both to take a hike. This hike..." Fez tapped his chin. "McGee went to the hospital with him. He could have a concussion—"

"'Biss Bagee blah bloh blleh'?" Mitch said. "Come on, Mushmouth. Give me something I can use!"

Donna smacked the back of his head. "Cut it out! You understand him fine."

"Don't hit me. Hit him!" Mitch stabbed his pen at Fez. "He's the one withholding vital info! I can't use vague details. Specifics make the story!"
A new dust cloud formed. The wind gusted it toward Jackie, and she coughed. Someone else was pushing through the crowd. Students ahead moved apart, and Susan emerged from the gap.

"Specifics?" she said, glowering at Mitch. "You won't snag them by being an asshole to your source."

Susan's presence kindled Jackie's curiosity, but the irritation in her throat was stronger. Coughing was all she could do, but Steven signaled Donna, who removed a thermos from her backpack. A cup of water was in Jackie's hands seconds later.

"You can see Fez is upset." Susan said. She was carrying a pen and notepad like Mitch. "Have some compassion.

"I need compassion," Fez said glumly.

Susan and Mitch were both flanking Fez, and she patted Fez's arm. "I'm here to listen … and to record whatever's on the record."

"This is journalism!" Mitch said. "Not Coddling 101."

"Do you want the story or not?" She waved her pen, indicating for Mitch to go.

"Yes," Fez said. "Relinquish your spot next to me."

Mitch remained by Fez's side. "But—"

"I said leave us!" Fez shouted and grabbed Susan's hand. He pulled her forward, and they disappeared into the crowd of students.

Mitch blew out a breath and turned to Jackie. "Anything you'd like to share with the paper? You've been with the cheer squad all week, but you're—"

"Walking with my friends." Jackie passed Donna her empty cup. The water had soothed her throat, but her voice was a little hoarse. "You can interview me after the cheer-off."

"Yeah! That bitch is toast!" he shouted and rushed ahead.

"That guy," Eric said. "Any idea which bitch he's referring to?"

"Obviously Valerie," Jackie said. "Susan's not a bitch. She's nosy."

Donna's steps grew heavy but not slow. They scattered pebbles across the path, and she seemed to be visually searching the crowd of students.

Eric laid a hand on her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"I never realized what a misogynistic, xenophobic jerk Mitch is," she said. "Hearing how he talks about women—and to Fez—I'm not sure I can work with him on that article." She gestured at Eric and Jackie. "And you two shouldn't copy his language. Yes, Valerie is a terrible person, but using the word bitch relegates that awfulness to her gender."

"And there's no male equivalent," Steven said. "Bastard's close, but it ain't the same." He tilted his head. "Course, playing speech police is dangerous territory—"

Eric smirked. "We could use Mitch as an equivalent. It rhymes with bitch."
Jackie tightened her fingers over Steven's palm. As important as the discourse on gendered language and free speech was to society, she had a more immediate concern. "Do you think Fez will snitch on us?"

"So what if he does?" Steven said.

"Susan might report Michael's version of events."

"You and Hyde set Fez straight on that," Eric said. "I wouldn't worry."

Eric could be right, but she chewed the inside of her cheek. Michael had enough truth to concoct a hideous, lie-riddled but believable story.

"Crap—" Steven wobbled beside her. His left boot was skidding, but he kicked a rock behind himself and stabilized his gate. The pebbles had become chunks of stone, and she let go of his hand.

"Look down," she said. "You could sprain your ankle if you don't pay attention."

"Yes, dear," he said but followed her advice.

The trail continued to steepen. She focused on her own steps, but the pace of the school group as a whole slowed. The trail guide closest to her section shouted warnings and instructions. Steven and Donna muttered curses, and Jackie and Eric pointed out clear ground for them to walk on.

The rockiness eventually smoothed out, however, along with the slope. Gazes rose. Patches of deep blue sky peeked through the clouds, and Jackie hooked her thumbs in her coat pockets. She'd survived the perils of nature, but she was still at risk socially.

"Don't worry, man," Steven said. Her face must have revealed her thoughts, and he linked arms with her. "Whatever shit happens after tonight, we'll deal with it."

She kissed his shoulder. He was a kinder and more romantic boyfriend than she'd anticipated, but they'd had to fight their way to this place with each other.

"—and they actually look good together. Like they fit," Eric whispered to Donna, but he likely hadn't meant for his words to be heard.

"Of course we do," Jackie said, and Eric and Donna flinched, as if they'd been caught sharing state secrets. "I mean, he's ruggedly handsome, and I'm a beauty without compare."

"As ever, your humility astounds," Eric said, "but I'm actually happy for you guys—and I can finally burn Hyde on the fun relationship squabbles he's gonna have."

Jackie narrowed her eyes. "Steven and I don't squabble."

"You and 'Steven' have been together only a few days." Eric clutched the straps of his backpack and nodded. "Trust me, you'll squabble."

Donna tugged on his coat. "You're not exactly painting an encouraging picture of relationships."

"Listen, I've endured hundreds of gibes from this one," he indicated Hyde, "about us."

"Don't forget he also helped us stay an us."

"Damn." He bowed head to Jackie and Steven. "May God bless you both."
Jackie cupped her mouth and giggled. Eric was being ridiculous, but he'd accepted her as Steven's girlfriend. As importantly, he'd accepted her as a friend. That meant no matter what Michael schemed next, she'd have Eric as an ally.

Discussion shifted to lighter subjects as the hike progressed. Coniferous trees outstripped deciduous trees, transforming the landscape from gold to green. Both were the color of wealth and equally enjoyable. None of Jackie's schoolmates disrupted her conversations either, allowing for a peaceful forty-five minutes.

The current of gossip from the front had to be weak. Fez must not have confessed any damning details about her and Steven, but he hadn't returned. Maybe he and Susan were bonding. Or Susan had allowed him to shadow her as she interviewed other people. But after a winding segment of the trail, students rearranged themselves like someone was shoving them.

Jackie expected Fez and his beige coat to appear, but Julie stumbled between two boys. Her houndstooth coat and backpack were partially twisted on her body, and she gripped Jackie's sleeve.

"Jackie—I have to talk to you," she said breathlessly. "Privately. Please."

Steven squeezed Jackie's hand before releasing it. Julie kept hold of Jackie's sleeve, and they darted to the tree-strewn edge of the trail. That was as much privacy as they could achieve among dozens of kids, but no renowned gossips were nearby. Nor was anyone from the cheer squad or the Vikings.

Julie straightened out her coat and whispered, "Valerie demanded I teach her my solo routine."

"What a surprise."

"I was trying to nap after lunch, and she burst into my tent. I told her that any cheer captain worth the title could design a killer routine, but she grabbed my ankle through the sleeping bag—" Julie clenched Jackie's wrist hard. "Like this and said you and I are conspiring. If I participate in the cheer-off tonight, she'll cut us both from the squad."

Jackie glared at her. "And you're just telling me this?"

"I gave in—"

"What?" Jackie's shout echoed in the woods. She lowered her voice, but her mind would quit yelling. "Tell me you didn't."

Julie wound a loose thread of her coat around her finger. "Listen, okay? She heard that Michael busted his wrist in a jealous fit over you. " She tugged on the threat until it snapped off. The tip of her finger was bright pink, but she pulled the thread tighter around it. "She shared a fish story about your mom, said she'll combine it with your own 'cheating scandal' to paint you as a whore."

Julie's fingertip was purpling. Jackie grasped Julie's palm and removed the thread. "Do not amputate a part of your body because of this," Jackie said. "I can counter any move Valerie makes."

"You haven't heard the worst of it, though." Julie wiggled her finger as blood restored its proper color. "She broke down crying—and I don't think she was faking. She was half-incoherent, but she ranted how everyone loves you, and she punched her chest, like, a hundred times, and repeated, 'Empty, empty, empty!' Then she said, 'He was right,' and went on about some horror movie."

Julie swallowed and glanced behind them, but Steven, Donna, and Eric had closed ranks. Perhaps they'd designated themselves as guards, preventing anyone from eavesdropping.
"She was shaking," Julie said. "Panicking."

Jackie stomped a clod of dirt with her heel. "It's own damn fault! She has to earn her spot on the squad like everyone else." A spruce branch dangled low, and she smacked it, causing needles to sprinkle the ground. "I can't believe you choreographed her routine!"

"I hate her, but I couldn't leave her like that."

Jackie's neck muscles tensed, and her cheeks grew hot. If Valerie had been putting on an act, it sounded spectacular. "I am so freakin' pissed at your heart right now."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"But you helped her out of love this time, not fear," Jackie said with a sigh. "Not love for her personally. General love. There's a difference."

Julie chuckled. "You and Steven really are perfect for each other. You speak the same language."

Jackie couldn't disagree with that. She and Steven had taught each other how to communicate properly. Were still teaching each other.

"But you're totally wrong," Julie continued. "My choreography for Valerie is shit. Purposely shit, and she couldn't tell. I swear, Jackie, she recognizes a well-executed stunt, but she has no finesse. No sense of flow."

She laid the back of her hand against her forehead and pretended to swoon. "She claims she's gone blank because of Michael's betrayals. That she couldn't possibly come up with more than a toe-touch—but doing thirty of those in a row would be better than what I gave her."

Jackie clasped Julie's shoulders and stopped her, despite that it forced students to hike around them. "You are a beautiful, devious woman," she said. "It's like gazing at my own reflection."

Julie hooked her arm over Jackie's and started them forward again. "Valerie would've let me hang. I couldn't do that to her. She was freaking out, but I'm not going to reward her for being an asshole."

Jackie's chest felt light, like a boulder had been shoved off it. "Does this mean you're going to compete?"

"No," Julie said. "It means by the end of the night, Valerie will have at least three people to murder: you, Michael, and me."

Hyde thought he'd been in pain last night, but he'd had no clue. Tonight was agony. Coach Ferguson, Mrs. Fletcher, and Mr. Wilcox were sadists in uncool clothes, forcing kids to hike Granny Hill after the tortures of the rope courses.

Its summit overlooked a forest of fire, ignited by the setting sun. No trees were burning, but the combo of autumn leaves and orange light created a trippy optical effect. The Trumpeter had become a river of flame, too. Hyde had hobbled to the peak's western point to see it, but the sight wasn't quite worth the effort.

*Granny* was an apt name for this hill. It mutated anyone who hiked it into shuffling grandmas and grandpas.

Across the relatively flat summit, students were spread out with plenty of personal space. Smoke rose
from snuffed-out cooking fires, but pit large enough for a bonfire had been built.

"Us gettin' together saved a hundred lives, man," Hyde said to Jackie. She was sitting between his legs with her back against his chest. His hands rested on her thighs, and their closeness was a painkiller—except for sudden movements. They'd finished their dinner of franks and rice, and their friends were giving them alone-time.

"How so?" she said.

"Kelso plus bonfire equals inferno."

"He does like to set things on fire. He wouldn't have waited for people to run out of the way."

"Probably would've dragged Fez, blanket and all, to the pit."

"Ruin the potential between Fez and Susan. I mean, look at them." She gestured to their friends. Fez and Susan sat on the same blanket as Forman and Donna, but each pair was huddled together, having private conversations. They might as well have been sitting separately.

"We should've done from the get-go," Hyde said. "Been public." He kissed Jackie's cold cheek, but she turned her face as if she wanted a more intimate kiss.

He obliged her. The warmth of her mouth, of her fundamental self, settled into his bones, and he smiled as they parted. His bruises were throbbing, a consequence of moving, but his mind soared over Granny Hill. No one was watching them or reacting like their relationship was unnatural. The latter disappointed him somewhat, but it was a fair exchange for peace.

"Steven—" Jackie squeezed his knee urgently. "Did you and Valerie discuss a horror movie?"

"Kind of. Why?"

"Julie told me Valerie had a breakdown earlier, that Valerie said, 'He's right,' and mentioned a horror movie. I'm guessing the he is you."

"Huh." He slid his chin onto her shoulder and focused on their blanket. The frayed edge of it was twitching in the wind. "Remember how I said I saw myself in her? It's about that."

She stroked the top of his leg, a signal she understood. Her touch was comforting, but a shadow darkened their blanket. Valerie was towering above them, and he understood what had prompted Jackie's question. Jackie must have spotted Valerie's approach.

So much for peace.

"Aren't you two cozy?" Valerie said. "And just days after Steven's cock was in my hand."

"Michael's mouth was between my legs a day after that," Jackie said. "But I didn't have to force it there."

Hyde hid his grin behind Jackie's head. She'd reclaimed herself unapologetically, but she stiffened against his chest. He glided his palm across her stomach, to reassure her that mentioning Kelso and that moment hadn't hurt them.

"So you date Ft. Blanderson and cheat on him with my boyfriend," Valerie said. "Then you cheat on him with that one." She meant Hyde, and her gaze fixed on him. "You don't care that your girlfriend's a conniving slut?"
"I'm dating Jackie, not you."

Jackie clutched his hand. "Burn!"

Valerie pushed her hair from her shoulder. Superficially, she resembled the classical image of an angel, but the hell inside her revealed the demon. The sunset magnified the effect, and Hyde's biceps flexed. If he chucked her over the summit, most of their schoolmates would applaud. It would also make him a monster, the same kind who'd put that hell inside her.

"The only one who's going to be burned tonight is you," she said to Jackie. "Your friends aren't your friends. They laugh and conspire behind your back, and no wonder." She nodded at Hyde. "You're dating trash like him. What excellent judgment you have."

He shifted, intending to stand, but Jackie clutched his hand harder. She as asking him to stay put, so he did.

"It's sad how limited your view is," she said to Valerie. "You have no idea what's really going on because you're stuck inside a play you wrote." She pulled Hyde's arms around her waist, but he needed no prodding to hug her. "With your drive, you could do amazing things. Instead you choose to waste your life by constantly comparing it to mine."

Valerie's face flushed. Her temples pulsed, and Hyde's muscles tensed again. He was prepared to yank Jackie to safety, but Forman, Donna, and Fez had left their blanket. They strode toward Valerie, and Donna said loudly, "What's up?"

Valerie peered at Donna, clearly assessing her. "You lost the baby? Is that why you're on this trip instead of the convent?"

Forman thrust his finger at Valerie. "Listen, lady—"

Donna drew him back. "I have a radio half the town listens to," she said and invaded Valerie's space, "including most of Point Place High. You wanna mess with me and my friends? Try me." She shoved her wool coat at Forman. "I can't be suspended from this school for beating your ass. I don't go here anymore." She slammed her right fist into her left palm. "Fucking try me!"

Hyde surged to his feet and wedged himself between Valerie and Donna. Every fiber of his body complained, along with his desire for vengeance. But letting Donna act on impulse would set them all on crumbling path, one they couldn't return from.

"This road's a dead end, man," he said to Valerie. "Change directions or pulverize yourself on the bricks."

Valerie stared at him but for a second. Her boots clomped on the ground as she walked off, and Fez said, "We showed her!"

"Sure did, little buddy," Hyde said and low-fived him. Even though Fez hadn't contributed much, his presence demonstrated solidarity.

"Wait, do you hear that?" Jackie stood on the blanket, but her expression froze.

Hyde heard only a distant murmur, but it grew louder. Students nearby began to pump their fists in the air and chanted, "Cheer-off! Cheer-off!"

"It's like ancient Rome," Forman said. "People are calling for the lions."
"I better get ready," Jackie said. "I have to warm-up."

Forman, Donna, and Fez each wished her good luck, but Hyde brought her hand to his chest and pecked her lips. "You've already kicked her ass."

Her gloved fingers brushed through his hair. She seemed hesitant to leave, but she released him and looked at their friends. "Maybe," she said, "but we haven't won yet."
The light of the setting sun was fading, but oil lanterns supplemented it. They were strategically placed on mounds of hard-packed dirt and held by volunteers. Students had rearranged themselves on the summit of Granny Hill. They were positioned around a raised stretch of rock, where the cheer-off would take place. It was flat enough to be safe for the competitors, but each would be spotted by non-competing teammates. Jackie and Julie had insisted on it.

Currently, the cheer squad was gathered by the outcrop, and Coach Ferguson stood atop it, holding his Packers cap upside-down. "The order of cheerleaders will be chosen at random," he said and plucked a piece of paper from his cap. "Leslie Canon is first!"

Applause, whistles, and hoots burst from the audience. Students from band, who'd improvised percussion instruments for the cheer-off, banged wooden spoons on pots, and Jackie clapped herself. Her anticipation had converted to energy, needing release.

"Patty Frumkin is second!" Coach Ferguson said after pulling the next piece of paper. Patty grasped Carla, but Patty's face was hard to read.

Coach Ferguson rummaged in his cap and chose another name. "Jackie Burkhart is third, meaning Valerie Clayton will be last."

Mrs. Fletcher repeated the order of competitors: "Leslie, Patty, Jackie, Valerie!" She was acting as emcee to Coach Ferguson's referee, but someone from the audience shouted, "What about Julie?"

The questioner sounded like Susan, and it instigated a chant of, "Julie! Julie!" in the audience.

Mrs. Fletcher gestured at Coach Ferguson, and he helped her climb the outcrop. "Julie sprained her ankle on the ropes course yesterday!" she shouted. "She had to bow out!"

"Bullshit!" Buddy Morgan said above dozens of boos. He had a spot in the first row of the audience. Dale Hackel sat beside him, the friend he'd hiked the Trumpeter River trail with. "She smoked that ropes course yesterday."

A new chant of, "Bullshit! Bullshit!" emerged from the crowd. Fletcher blushed, but Coach Ferguson blew on his whistle.

"If Julie doesn't want to compete," he said, "she doesn't have to compete."

"I'm not competing!" Julie said from the base of the outcrop.

The audience expressed a mixture of disappointment and frustration, but Valerie coiled her arm
around Julie's shoulders. "Don't be shy, Julie! Do it for school spirit."

The chant of, "Julie! Julie!" began again, but it could've easily been, "Conspiracy! Conspiracy!" Valerie must have realized that possibility, and this was her preventative measure.

"You can cheer last," she said, "so you'll have time to come up with a routine."

Julie's brow wrinkled. "If you're sure..."

"I insist."

"All right," Julie said, and the crowd cheered louder.

Coach Ferguson descended the outcrop. He assisted Mrs. Fletcher as she climbed down, and Valerie ordered the spotters to their places. Leslie, meanwhile, spoke to the students in band, and Julie tugged Jackie aside.

"What the hell was that?" Julie whispered.

"Valerie's playing you."

"But why? What does she think she'll accomplish?"

"Suppression of suspicion," Jackie whispered, same as what Leslie was after. She'd had every opportunity to aggravate Valerie further. To tell her about Michael and Ms. McGee, but she'd gain nothing by revealing their affair now. Michael's possessiveness of Jackie dwarfed it in importance. "People already believe the worst of her," Jackie went on. "They're simply waiting for confirmation —"

The band students played a four-beat measure, recreating the rhythm from Queen's "We Will Rock You". Half of them clanked their pots twice. The other half followed with a clap, and the audience joined in.

Leslie tossed her coat to the ground and ascended the outcrop. She was wearing a stomach-baring blouse and butt-hugger jeans, and her strategy became clear. She was going for sex appeal, despite how the cold made her shiver.

The spotters glanced at one another behind her back. Their disdain was visible from the sidelines, but boys in the crowd hollered and whistled. Coach Ferguson, however, was quiet. He'd be timing the routines with a stopwatch, and he signaled Leslie with a blast of his own whistle.

She started with three consecutive toe-touch jumps. Her height was decent, but the rest of her routine was padded with suggestive cheer motions. She jutted out her left hip during a right high V. Jutted out her right hip at a left diagonal. It was bad form. Her posture should have remained rigid, but she continued with her hip-wiggling.

Boys were chanting her name by the end of her performance. She curtsied, thanking them with a glimpse of her cleavage. .

"No substance," Julie whispered to Jackie from the sidelines.

"No class," Jackie whispered back. "This is a cheer competition, not strip tease."

Mrs. Fletcher darted to the base of the outcrop, applauding. "Thank you, Leslie! Next, we have Patty Frumkin!"
The band students changed rhythms at Patty's request. It was still a four-beat measure but had a faster tempo, an emphasis on the first beat, and no rests.

Patty stood in the ready position on the outcrop, hands on her hips, legs shoulder-width apart. Unlike Leslie, she was wearing a sweatshirt, and Coach Ferguson's whistle signaled her.

She began impressively with pike-out, a pike that shifted into a toe-touch. She followed that with a double nine. Strutted across the outcrop with series of punch-ups—alternatingly thrusting each arm in the air—and performed a spread eagle jump, essentially a combination of a high V with a tuck.

The audience clapped enthusiastically when she finished. Her jumps had been high and precise, but cheering seemed to be an afterthought.

On the sidelines, Julie leaned close to Jackie. "She should be a flyer, not a base."

Jackie agreed. Patty's broad shoulders had disqualified her for a flyer in Valerie's eyes, but Patty's talents were being wasted at the bottom.

"Would you hold this for me?" Jackie said to Julie and removed her coat. Underneath was a body-clinging but warm sweater. She removed her gloves, too, and stuffed them in her coat pockets.

Julie took Jackie's coat and draped it over her arms. "Break Valerie's ego."

Jackie grinned. She'd try. Her muscles were warmed up. Her blood was revved up, and she raced to the band students. "Four-beat rhythm," she said. "Same tempo as Patty's but emphasize every other beat."

Jimmy Headgear—Jimmy Schultz—saluted her with his wooden spoon. He and his bandmates gave her the frantic heartbeat she'd asked for, and Mrs. Fletcher announced Jackie's name to applause.

The sound was thrilling, but Steven's cheers fluttered her stomach. He was rooting for her, not the acclaim her successes might bring him. It was an entirely new boyfriend experience.

She climbed to the outcrop's right-most edge. Both Leslie and Patty had started at the center, and Coach Ferguson cast her a confused look.

"I'm ready," she said.

"You sure?" Coach Ferguson said. Either he didn't remember her solo routine from state last year, or he had no confidence in her to pull it off on this rock. But she nodded, and he clicked his stopwatch.

Jackie opened with an aerial cartwheel. She landed near the outcrop's left-most edge but in complete control of her balance. The crowd's explosive response muffled the percussive beat, but pausing wasn't an option. She performed a right hurdler, a high toe-touch, and finished the combo with a tuck jump.

She was at at the center of the outcrop now. Her arms shot to a left bow-and-arrow position—"Hit 'em high!"—to a broken T—"Hit 'em low!"—to a right bow-and arrow—"Go, team, go!"

She sashayed a few steps to the right. "V is for victory!" she shouted, executing a low-V-to-high-V sequence. "V is for Vikings!" she shouted, repeating the sequence but ended in the touchdown pose.

For her finale, she leapt into the air with another right hurdler, performed a pike-out, and jumped off the outcrop with a back handspring. The rock scraped her palms. A fingernail cracked, but she landed on her feet.
The audience roared with applause. She winced at the volume and covered her ears, but Steven and their friends rose, clapping and whistling. They were giving her a standing ovation, and her face grew hotter than it already was.

Julie wrapped Jackie's coat around Jackie's shoulders. "You were incredible!" she said, leading Jackie from the outcrop. "Absolutely incredible!"

"I could've gotten more height in the pike-out," Jackie said. She was trembling from adrenaline, but she managed to put her coat on properly.

"A little, but your transitions were flawless."

They returned to sidelines, where Patty and Leslie were seated on a blanket. Leslie's focus was clearly on Valerie, who was walking toward the outcrop—but Patty reached for Jackie's hand.

Jackie let her grab it, and Patty said, "I loved your routine! You really know how to put on a show."

"Gymnastics," Leslie muttered. "It was a gymnastics routine."

Julie chuckled incredulously. "Jealous much? Jackie's opener was fireworks, and to get transitions like hers takes a lot of practice. Hell, I'm jealous."

"So am I." Patty smiled up at Jackie. "In a good way. I … I almost forgot why I became a cheerleader, but today made me remember."

"Thank you!" Jackie said, for their praise and for praising her openly. Teammates weren't supposed to compliment one another, not without Valerie's consent. But their self-confidence had expanded, their sense of individuality increased. A team was only as strong as its weakest member, but Valerie had used their vulnerabilities to weaken them all.

Mrs. Fletcher and a five-beat measure announced Valerie's arrival on the outcrop. Coach Ferguson blew on his whistle, and Valerie tossed her hair in a dance two measures long. She jumped a double nine and a pike at the wrong beat. Clapped and chanted, "Go, Vikings, go!" at weird intervals, and people in the audience laughed.

Valerie carried on, though, with front and side hurdlers. But her height was lousy, and she rushed through an awkward sequence of cheer motions.

People laughed harder at Valerie's finale. It was a cacophony of ill-combined jumps. She'd followed a toe-touch with a double hook—a jump where both legs were bent at the knee and curved in the same direction—and a tuck. The order should have been reversed, and her fists shook. The audience's reaction must have clued her in.

"Julie sabotaged me!" she screamed. "It was her choreography!"

Mitch popped up from the audience. He was three rows deep and said, "See? I told you that—"

"Valerie doesn't choreograph her own routines!" Timmy shouted from somewhere. "Valerie doesn't choreograph her—"

"Hearsay!" Susan said beside Mitch. "Let's gather real evidence before we convict. We haven't seen Julie's routine. If its rhythm and flow match the squad's, then we'll know."

People voiced their agreement, but Julie clung to Jackie's arm. "What should I do?"
"Cheer," Jackie said. "Cheer for yourself and the school."

"Okay," Julie heaved a few breaths and released her. "Okay. I can do this."

She went to the outcrop, but Valerie hadn't descended from it. Coach Ferguson offered to help Valerie climb down, but she smacked away his hand.

"Everyone's sabotaging me!" she said "My squad, my boyfriend—and Jackie Burkhart is the whore behind it! She—"

"That's enough, Clayton!" Coach Ferguson said. "Let's go—"

"It's not enough!" Mitch said, stepping forward. "She blackmailed my cousin. You remember Linda? She was cheer captain two years ago, and—"

Coach Ferguson pointed at him. "Miller, shut it!" He turned to Julie next, who'd stopped a few feet shy of the outcrop. "How long have you been choreographing the squad?" he said.

"She hasn't!" Valerie shouted, but he waved at her dismissively.

"I'd rather discuss this in private if we could," Julie said, and Jackie hurried to her side. She was obviously scared, but she wasn't alone. Jackie would stand by her, even if it meant expulsion from the squad.

"There's little privacy to be had here," Coach Ferguson said, indicating the audience of almost a hundred students. "But the cheer-off—cheer exhibition—whatever you want to call it—is done." He blasted on his whistle, and students began folding their blankets.

"Jackie is a whore!" Valerie chanted from the outcrop. She raised her arms in a high V. "Jackie is whore!"

Someone in the crowd responded by shouting, "Make Julie captain!

"Make Julie captain!" someone else shouted, and the chant gained traction.

"Nothing is changing until the school does an official investigation!" Coach Ferguson said, and the chant died to Jackie's surprise.

Julie slouched and cupped her forehead. "Thank God," she whispered. Another surprise, and Jackie suppressed a giggle. She and Julie had read each other totally wrong over the years. Julie used to behave like an attention-seeking glory hound, but Jackie had behaved the same way.

"Jackie is a whore!" Valerie continued to scream. "Jackie is—"

Coach Ferguson scrambled onto the outcrop. "Get off this rock, or I'll haul you off it."

She fell silent but looked to Mrs. Fletcher below. Mrs. Fletcher had always been one of Valerie's biggest supporters, but she said, "Please cooperate. You've struck a teacher, slandered a classmate … you're facing suspension."

"She's not just facing it," Coach Ferguson said. "She's earned it. Clayton, off!"

Valerie caught Jackie's gaze before descending the outcrop. The accusation in her eyes staggered Jackie's breath, but Jackie stood tall. Julie was with her, and her other friends had pushed to the front of the crowd. Steven and Donna were, no doubt, controlling themselves. Otherwise, they would've acted like Jackie's personal body guards.
The students were dispersing however. Most of the cheer squad had retreated, but Leslie remained on the sidelines. She was cramming her blanket into her backpack, but Valerie grabbed her wrist.

Leslie wrenched free. "I'm busy."

"Not anymore!" Valerie tried a second snatch at Leslie's wrist, but Coach Ferguson separated them. He and Mrs. Fletcher ushered Valerie to a distant part of the summit, probably for a lengthy lecture.

"We won!" Julie said and embraced Jackie in a sideways hug. "Valerie's going to learn what it's like to be at the bottom!"

"Yeah," Jackie said but felt no sense of justice. The crowd's mob mentality was terrifying. Valerie had become the symbol of social inequality. If left to their impulses, students might have stoned her to death.

That wasn't what Jackie had been fighting for. Valerie was a fallen tyrant, who treated people as serfs or worse. She needed to be held accountable for her actions, but social equality shouldn't require her head on a stake.

The bonfire had been lit. Fuelwood crackled and snapped, and students took turns roasting marshmallows. They were smiling and joking—celebrating. Their time in the woods was almost finished, but Jackie had little celebration in her. A thousand-mile forest awaited her in Point Place.

She was with Steven, hoping to decompress, but kids from every social strata spoke to her. Some gave congratulations on her cheer performance. Others expressed satisfaction at Valerie's humiliation, and a few asked if the cheer squad would eschew its superiority complex.

The disruptions were understandable but frustrating. Her responses grew increasingly less enthusiastic, and Steven clearly noticed. He curled his arm around her waist, whispered, "Real estate's too congested," and led her to a sparsely-populated area by the bonfire.

Their friends followed with their sticks and marshmallows. She was happy for their company but roasted a marshmallow halfheartedly. The end of this trip meant facing a possible ordeal with her parents. They'd gone to Cancún, Mexico to fix their relationship. But they could be filing for divorce, making love, or cheating on each other, and Jackie wouldn't find out until she was home.

"You okay?" Steven said. "Your twig's gone flaccid."

She raised her stick. The flames charred her marshmallow black, and she offered it to him. "Not a big marshmallow eater."

"You're lying, but we don't gotta talk about it."

"Thanks," she said and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I will … eventually. Just stay with me."

He did, along with their friends, as the fire brightened the night to day. Its heat warmed the autumn air, and she unbuttoned her coat. It was constricting, and she had to seize what freedom as she could.

"Do you think tonight will actually change anything at this school?" Eric said. He and Donna had entwined arms, and their sticks were crossed in the flames.

"If Valerie isn't demoted, students will riot," Donna said. "Jackie, if you were cheer captain, how would you run the squad?"
Jackie dropped her stick on the ground. "I won't be captain. I'm better at choreographing solo routines than team ones. But I'd guarantee everyone had a voice, even those I don't want to hear." She glanced to the left then to the right, but Valerie was nowhere in sight. "Maybe I'd learn something."

Steven patted her hip and grinned. He seemed proud of her, and that sloughed some of the day from her skin.

"Ai—" Fez's marshmallow melted off his stick and into the fire. "That is the fifth one! I've run out of 'mallows."

"Take mine." Jackie tossed him her pack of marshmallows. She wasn't in the mood for sweets—or for an interview, but Susan approached their group. Instead of holding a pen and a pad of paper, though, a marshmallow-skewered stick was in her hand.

"Some night, huh?" she said, but her focus was on Fez. "Having trouble?"

"Yes," he said. "The fire keeps eating my 'mallows."

"I can teach you how to roast them properly..." She gripped his wrist, positioned his stick in the flames, and pulled it out when the surface of his marshmallow blackened.

Fez nibbled on the marshmallow, and his eyebrows rose. "That is the most delicious 'mallow I have ever tasted!"

"The trick is removing it from the fire before it softens."

"I see." He ate the rest of the marshmallow and successfully roasted his next one himself. "This activity has gone from harsh to mellow. You are a good teacher."

She giggled. "And you're good with puns."

"At last, a woman who appreciates my humor."

"I appreciate a lot about you, hot stuff."

She extended her hand to him. He grasped it, and they dashed from the fire together.

"One thing's changed in this school," Steven said. "Fez might get lucky."

"Well, he is an over-sharer," Eric said. "I bet you he told Susan he's a virgin during his interview."

Donna pointed her stick at Fez and Susan's shrinking backs. "Guess he finally told the right person."

Jackie laughed. Fez and Susan was a pair she never would've imagined, but Susan had integrity and experience, and Fez could be a devoted boyfriend. They might make a good couple.

"Feelin' a little better?" Steven said.

A perfectly scorched marshmallow sat on the tip of his stick. She stole a bite, and her eyes shut as the bitterness of the char dissolved into hot sugar. Her lie to him earlier was pathetic. She adored marshmallows, and she wasn't exactly fine, and he'd known both without asking. "A little," she said.

He embraced her, arms cloaking her in a warmth deeper than the bonfire's. "Feel however you feel, Grasshopper. Whatever it is, I'm gonna ride it out with you."
She blinked back tears and held him tightly. "I'm terrified," she said against his shoulder. Her parents might leave each other. Leave her, but their weaknesses wouldn't become hers. She had Steven and their friends. More importantly, she had herself again. "But as scared as I am..." she said, "I also feel strong."
Moving On

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE
MOVING ON

Jackie's shelves had been cleared of books, records, and the trinkets that used to decorate them. In their place were enough candles to see by and still be romantic with the shades drawn. A thick blanket covered her bed instead of its usual comforter, and she lay back on a pillow from the guest room. Her room had been stripped to its essentials, but her memories remained—and she was creating a final one to leave it with.

Her breath caught as Steven's hands slid over her bare legs. Her body was flush from kissing him, from being touched by him, but her mind fought to stay present. A month had passed since the trip to Quartz Falls. So much had happened during that time, most of which had led to this moment.

"Ready?" he said at the edge of her bed. He was kneeling, shirtless, but he made no moves until she said yes.

His lips pressed into her thigh, and her heartbeat pulsed through every nerve. For weeks, she'd craved a deeper physical intimacy, but he'd insisted on going slowly. Whatever they did sexually had to be about them, not a distraction from her grief. Otherwise it could "screw their relationship".

Her boyfriend, Mr. What-Are-Feelings, had expressed that concern the day her dad pleaded guilty to federal bribery. Both her parents were gone. Her mom never returned from Mexico. Instead, she'd phoned, offering excuses that amounted to, "I can't be your mother anymore. You're on your own."

Candle flames quivered behind Steven's head. They seemed synced to her thoughts, and her stomach muscles tightened when his kisses edged closer to her center. Her breathing hadn't relaxed. Her focus was fleeing the room, and she clenched the blanket.

He'd urged her to be pissed after her dad's arrest, to be sad. Promised to comfort her and keep her safe, and he had. Most of her personal belongings now resided in Donna's bedroom, a deal he'd brokered. Only a few items were left in Jackie's house. They consisted of clothes and extra toiletries, but they'd be leaving today, like her.

"You with me?" Steven's warmth retreated from her legs, but his palms skimmed her stomach, bringing her back.

"I'm trying to be."

"We don't have to do this."

"You don't want to?"

He heaved out a breath, but his eyes were full of compassion. "Not gonna enjoy myself if you're
aren't. If you need to talk, man, we'll talk. You need space, you got it."

She slapped the bed. What she needed was her brain to cooperate. "Do what we planned, okay? I'm naked. We have an empty house—"

He rose from the floor and sat on the bed. "None of this is your fault," he said. "Your dad fucked up. Your mom's a fuck-up, and you couldn't do shit to stop it."

"I don't know how to do this," she said and gripped his hand hard. Her emotions had been erratic since her mom's call. Sometimes volatile. Sometimes virtually non-existent. "For sixteen years, I believed my life would go one way, but everything's changed."

"Includin' you." He gestured to the candles on her shelves. "You no longer settle for less than what you're worth."

She sat up against the headboard. She'd always expected the best and intended to say so, but the sight of him disrupted her speech. The boy she loved was on her bed, aching to give whatever she needed. Michael would've been a selfish tornado, unable to hold back at her nudity.

"I did settle. Steven, I..."

The candles. He was referencing the night she'd written her grievances, not the first time she'd had sex. But with Michael, she'd sped into making love, hoping it would bring them closer. It hadn't. He'd avoided her for days afterward. Bought her a stuffed unicorn as an apology, which she'd accepted, along with his cheating. His lying. His hypocrisy.

"I won't abandon myself," she said and cradled Steven's cheeks. They were smooth, except for his sideburns. "My parents won't dictate my destiny."

He looked at her without speaking. Caressed her side but shared none of his thoughts. It was unsettling.

"What?" she said.

"I admire the hell outta you..." He drummed his fingertips on her waist, clearly uncomfortable. "I'm also damn lucky. Had no idea this was possible."

"Us?"

"Yeah, and all that's come with it."

She smiled weakly. "You mean fighting off a crazy—former—cheer captain? Or fixing my parlor with Donna after I destroyed half of it? Or being shot at by Michael?"

He rolled his left shoulder, as if reliving the last incident. The bruise had healed weeks ago, but she kissed the spot Michael's BB had struck.

"Short-term crap," he said and placed the flat of her hand on his chest. His heart beat under her palm, steady and strong. "You gave me this, man. It's what'll stick."

Blood heated her face. His sentiment was startling, and she grabbed for the button of his fly. Their conversation had calmed her down and turned her on, but he stopped her from unzipping his jeans.

"Steven, let me give you something else."

"Head's in a different place, Grasshopper. No pun intended."
"You're afraid I'll be bad at it."

"Nope. Just gotta teach you how I like it, same as you taught me how you..." He traced the air around her breasts with his fingers. "In a giving mood is all. Not a receiving one."

She cupped the nape of his neck and drew him in for a kiss. It turned into a second, a third—and more—until their kisses had no beginning or end. His back muscles flexed beneath her hands. His woodsy scent saturated her senses, and his touches thrilled her body, creating a profound longing for him.

"I'm a little scared," she whispered. "It burned the first time..."

"'Cause you had an amateur tinkering down there." He pecked the corner of her mouth. "This is gonna feel a lot different."

Her pulse throbbed in her ears, but she lay back again and clasped her hands over her stomach. She'd been curious about oral sex since dating Michael, but the act itself was secondary to being close with Steven.

He returned to the end of her bed and knelt on the floor. Candles cast a mural of light and shadow behind him, and he rubbed the length of her legs. "You don't like somethin', tell me. I'll switch it up."

Gooseflesh spread on her skin. She inhaled sharply when he opened her thighs and pressed a kiss between them. The contact was superficial, but it had her reaching for him.

He grasped her hips and encompassed her fingers in his grip. His face eased forward, disappearing from view. Only the top of his hair was visible, but she grew increasingly aware of his presence.

She clutched his hands as the pleasure inside her built. He was unlike any boy she'd ever known. Unselfish and determined to see her happy, and he pecked at her. She nodded for him to continue, but he released her hips, brought her legs tighter around his head, and she let out her first groan.

Her eyes squeezed shut. A bout of shyness had seized her, but he stroked her stomach, coaxing out another groan. It was soft, but she ached to lose herself to the moment.

She pushed against him. His name escaped her throat, and his own breath became vocal, disintegrating her thoughts. Light blossomed behind her eyelids. A blissful pressure detonated within her body, and she shook with her love for him.

He rested his head on her right leg. "How was that?"

"Incredible." She wiped sweat from her forehead. "What about you? I can——"

"Already done."

She covered her mouth and giggled. He'd finished in his pants, which was a bit gross, but it meant her joy truly was his. "Come here," she said.

He climbed onto the bed, and she hugged him. Their skin was equally damp. His fingers combed her hair lazily, but her hold on him was tight.

"It felt totally different," she said. "It felt like you."

He nuzzled her ear before kissing it. "That's..." His arms strengthened around her back, embracing her like she might slip through his grasp. "Life doesn't pull its punches. You gotta have a break
sometime."

"So do you." She pulled from him, enough to see his face. "I'll be your knight when you can't do it
yourself, okay? That's part of what being a couple is about."

"Yeah." His chest sank from hers as he sighed, and his eyebrows rose. "You yanked me into a new
cosmos."

She understood his meaning. These were her last minutes in this house. She had no idea if she'd
come back or if her mom would, either. But for all the mistakes her parents made, their selfishness,
Steven proved people didn't have to behave that way. That she could be loved how she needed to be
loved.

"You did the same for me," she said and pecked his lips. "Let's wash up and get the hell out of here."

Hyde carried Jackie's backpack into the Formans' basement. The backpack was a swirl of pinks and
purples, but he didn't give a shit. It contained what Jackie needed to function, and that was what
mattered.

Forman, however, pointed to the backpack from Hyde's chair. "Is that Jackie's one-month
anniversary present to you?"

Jackie stepped forward, as if to shield Hyde from incoming burns, but Julie said, "Don't be an ass.
That's Jackie's bag."

She was seated on the couch. Mark Cailliet sat beside her, arm around her shoulders. The basement
had changed the last month. Three folding chairs were stashed in the alcove under the stairs, in case
the new regulars dropped by at once. The couch had been shoved a foot backward to accommodate
the chairs. Otherwise, everyone would be crowded around the TV.

"Or," Forman said and raised his finger, "she bought him a matching backpack. Next on the list:
matching outfits."

"Come on," Mark said. "He's acting chivalrous. Carrying your girlfriend's bag is a privilege."

"Pourin' it on thick, Cailliet." Hyde put the backpack on the lawn chair, Fez's regular spot. "Where's
the rest of the rabble?" On Sunday afternoons, the basement was usually full, and he jutted his chin
at Mark and Julie. "You two make-out, and Forman was the only one willing to watch?"

"No," Julie said. "We know the basement rules."

"And follow them to the letter," Mark said with a wink.

Forman stood from Hyde's chair and gestured at Hyde and Jackie. "Not that those two ever follow
them."

"The basement is blessed to have our love," Jackie said and embraced Hyde from behind. "It
transforms this drab place into a Roller-Disco paradise, minus the roller skates."

Mark laughed. "Strange metaphor."

"No, it's not," Jackie and Julie said together, and Hyde flinched. Hearing Jackie and Julie talk could
be jarring. Their similarities were obvious, but their tastes weren't completely the same. Or else they
would've redecorated the basement in Captain & Tennille posters and rainbow stickers.
"It's like having two Jackies," Forman said.

Hyde grasped Jackie's hand and her backpack. "Total trade-up."

They went to his seat. She settled onto his lap, and the backpack lay at his feet. They'd have to bring it to his room before their friends became nosy, but they could hang out for a while.

"I don't even mind it," Forman said, sitting beside Mark. He propped his foot on the spool table and picked lint off his khakis. "That's what scares me."

"It's called growth, Eric," Jackie said. "You've learned to distinguish good company from people who chain themselves to pipes and shoot friends with BB guns."

She leaned her head back on Hyde's shoulder, and he laced his fingers over her stomach. She'd been lenient on Kelso after the Quartz Falls trip, offering him the chance to stay in the basement—if he'd respect her relationship with Hyde.

He promised. But in the span of a week, he killed whatever goodwill was left. The passive-aggressive digs came first. Then the gifts to Jackie, but shooting Hyde with a BB gun got him banned from the basement.

He returned anyway and handcuffed himself to the shower's curtain rod. Quite a trick, considering his left wrist was in a cast and sling. But he wouldn't unlock the cuffs until the ban was lifted.

Forman called in Red, who brought a hacksaw with him. "I can either saw through your arm," Red said, "or you can remove those handcuffs."

Kelso scrambled for the key, but it fell into the shower drain. Red had to saw the cuffs in half, vowed Kelso's arms were next, and Kelso fled the basement.

Red changed the lock to the basement door afterward. Kelso would never relinquish his key, but Red's amputation threat appeared to do the trick. Kelso hadn't come back.

The basement door was rattling, though, and Hyde's muscles tensed. It was an automatic reaction. Happened every time since Kelso's banning, but Jackie had locked the door. Her precaution since Kelso's banning.

"You don't think—?" she said.

The door swung open, and Donna entered. Fez and Susan Amborn were behind her, which gave Hyde an idea where they'd been.

"You've got to oil that lock," Donna said. "It sticks."

She set her backpack on the couch armrest and yanked out a pile of newspapers. Jackie sprang off Hyde's lap. He assumed she'd relock the door, but she snatched a paper from the top of Donna's pile. "Is this it? You did it?"

"Hot off the presses," Susan said, and Fez opened a folding chair for her. "Principal Pridewell finally approved the story."

"School Spirit Exorcism: How Point Place High Was Possessed by Popularity," Jackie read aloud. She shut off the TV and continued to read but to herself.

Donna passed copies of the paper to everyone else but Susan, who read alongside Fez. The article
was thorough, describing how Valerie seized control of the cheer squad and, later, helped solidify the school's social hierarchy with Jake Bradley. Blackmail, intimidation, and manipulation were among their weapons, as well as gossip-mongering and fostering a herd mentality.

Excerpts of interviews with dozens of people were included, but Jake Bradley's stood out. He felt betrayed. Valerie had rigged the homecoming court election to make Kelso king. But their freshman year, she and Jake planned to "own the school" by their senior year. He described their schemes, probably not realizing he'd implicated himself.

The other interviewees were Linda Miller, the cheer captain before Valerie. Rita Fogle, who would've been captain last year had Valerie not blackmailed Linda. Members of the Vikings and the cheer squad, former and current. Students whose lives had been affected by Valerie and Jake's machinations, directly and indirectly.

The article made sure to present differing perspectives, but its point of view was clearly one of warning: learn from our history and don't repeat it.

"Jackie, look!" Julie said. She bounced on the couch a little and turned her copy of the paper around. "It's our interviews!"

"Captivating Cooperators: Meet the Cheer Squad's New Co-Captains," the headline said, but Hyde didn't have to read that article. He knew the story inside-out.

The school's investigation of Valerie had uncovered a tapestry of social corruption, more extensive than either Jackie or Julie suspected. Valerie and Jake were expelled from Point Place High as a result. Several Vikings were suspended, and Coach Ferguson offered Julie the position of cheer captain.

Julie refused to accept it, however, unless Jackie could be her co-captain. Not her assistant captain but her equal. Ferguson agreed, as did Jackie, and Patty Frumkin was made assistant captain.

"All this is great," Mark said and hit the top of his paper, "except for one thing."

Julie touched his knee. "What's that, babe?"

"Jake Bradley's at my fucking school, playing for the Snapping Turtles."

"Nothin' like putting football championships over principles," Hyde said, and Jackie moved to his side. He curled his arm around her legs, relieved to have her near him again. "Donna, man, you should dump a stack of these babies on Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow's doorstep."

"I printed an extra batch for that," Donna said, perched on the couch armrest. "But Valerie has no chance to fashion herself into a god there. The nuns won't allow it."

Forman tossed his paper onto the table and rubbed her back. "I'm really proud of you."

"Thank you. I'm proud of me, too. Of all of us."

Hyde said nothing, but Donna's bravery was impressive. Her expulsion from Nun High could've had a shitload of consequences, but Bob actually listened her. She explained that she'd been through enough with losing her mom and Forman. Her humiliation with Casey. Watching her folks date other people—and being used as a weapon to hurt the other.

"It's my last year in high school," she'd said to him in the Formans' driveway, but she wasn't alone. Hyde, Jackie, Forman, and Fez stood behind her. "Then I'm going to college, and I won't see them,"
"I supported you during the divorce when I needed your support. Why can't you understand how I feel? Why do you want to take everything away from me?"

That last question had Bob crying. He hugged her and promised to be a better dad.

"God must have a sense of irony," Forman said now. "You're expelled from OLOPS and reaccepted into Point Place High. Valerie's expelled from our school, and her parents send her to OLOPS. What is that?"

"Justice," Hyde said.

"An exhausting month." Susan sat up straight in her chair and counted off on her fingers. "First week: Mitch quits the paper in protest. Principal Pridewell wouldn't let him publish his Anti-Valerie manifesto, and the paper's without an editor.

"Second week: Donna comes back, thank God, and is made editor. No one protests. Valerie's expelled, but Jake Bradley isn't. Donna sends us out to interview key figures in the Vikings-slash-Cheer-Squad story, but Donna—"

"Had to question Coach Ferguson and the principal," Donna said. "The school's hypocrisy was blatant. Jake was as guilty as Valerie, but Coach 'put football championships over principles'. I was stuck until Jackie and Mark stepped in."

Jackie folded her paper with a snap. "It's a good thing we were here during your rant. I'm not above using blackmail for a just cause."

Hyde glanced at her. This part of the situation was news to him, but his focus had been on her dad's arrest and deterring Kelso at school.

"I'd hardly call what we did blackmail," Mark said. "We informed Coach Ferguson that we'd witnessed his liaison with Coach Saunders in Quartz Falls. That's it. He understood the possible consequences."

"Like casting suspicion on his loyalty and integrity," Donna said. "Simply hinting at the Vikings' strategy to a rival school's coach could get him fired—" She smirked at Mark. "And, yes, that's blackmail. Though nice try at rationalizing."

Julie patted the top of Mark's leg. "I've taught him well."

"Third week," Susan continued, as if no one had interrupted her, "Fezzy asks me out." She turned toward Fez in her chair, and they smiled at each other. "Of course I say yes, but it means I have to juggle schoolwork, my responsibilities for the paper, and a love life..."

Jackie squeezed Hyde's shoulder. "Susan's tales of exhaustion are exhausting me," she whispered. "Can we unpack my things?"

He stood and picked up her backpack. His fingers wove between hers, and he led her to his room. The basement was crowded, not only with bodies but thoughts. Everyone clamored to speak, and excited voices broke past his door.

He muffled them with the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night*. He and Jackie had reorganized his records the other day, grouping ones they both liked in their own section. That way, his stereo would be ready for her visits.

"Here ya go." He opened his bottom dresser drawer. It used to house his socks, but he'd emptied it
"Sometimes I can't believe how domestic you are," she said. "You even dusted."

He scratched the nape of his neck. "I'm enough of a badass that I can afford to be domestic."

"Sure." She placed a pair of her pajamas inside the drawer. "You shouldn't know how to cook or clean. You were practically raised by wolves."

"Wolves would've been better." He sat on his cot as she unpacked. A daytime outfit went into the drawer. Toiletries were next, followed by a hairbrush and makeup. She wouldn't spend a ton of nights with him, but his room was another safe place to sleep. "That's why I'm freakin' domestic," he said. "Having no damn boundaries growin' up ain't freedom. Two of my cousins ended in prison 'cause of it. One of 'em's dead..."

She shoved the drawer closed. "Go on." She clutched his hand with both of hers and held it to her stomach. "You've barely talked about yourself in weeks."

"Those days are long-gone for me, man. You're the one goin' through it. How I feel—not relevant."

"Untrue." She jostled his hand. "I want to hear it. It'll make me feel less alone, less scared. Because you're okay. You survived your parents abandoning you."

He cleared his throat. Shuttering his emotions hadn't protected her. It deprived her of hope, and he kicked off his boots. He had to perform a balancing act: sharing a similar experience without stealing attention from hers.

"A house has gotta have a frame to build on," he said. "You know how Donna kind of acted out whenever her folks ignored her for a fad? Or after her ma left?"

"Kind of?" Jackie sat on the cot and played with his fingers. "She smoked cigarettes. Skipped school and drank in the middle of the day—" Her eyes widened. "She became like you before the Formans took you in."

"Yeah, and Bob figured sending her to Catholic school would fix the problem. But realizing the problem was him, he asked Red for dad lessons. Donna has no clue about the last part."

She hit her leg with their combined hands. "Oh, my God, that's hilarious … and a relief. I do not need to see a naked Bob and Joanne romping around the living room."

"No one needs to see that." He swung his right foot under his cot, and his heel butted against a shopping bag he'd stashed. Giving it to Jackie would shift their conversation, but he had to stay in this one. It would lead where she was asking him to go. "Valerie's house has no frame," he said. "Maybe the nuns'll build her one before she—"

His voice caught. Freakin' embarrassing. This whole topic was, but he hit his chest to untangle his vocal chords. "Esther. Valerie's two-thirds Esther, and I can do fuck-all about it."

"Steven..." She stroked his cheek. "What she did in our school, to Linda Miller and others, is on the record. She can't hide from her choices anymore."

He blew out a breath. Her assertion was comforting, and carrying Valerie in his skull was useless. He had to accept what he couldn't do and move the hell on.

"So how does this apply to you?" Jackie said. "I understand the Valerie part, but house frames?
Unless this is your weird way of saying your dream is to be an architect."

"Goes to my first night at the Formans'." He patted the blanket beneath them. "Slept in Forman's room on this cot. Stared at the dark ceiling for an hour or two, considerin' the trajectory of my life. Knew I was lucky to be here, to survive. But being happy? Out of my reach."

A lock of Jackie's hair fell into her eyes. She didn't sweep it aside, as if moving would shut him down. He brushed it out of her eyes for her.

"Had no idea what bein' happy felt like," he said. "I do now."

"Me! I'm that happiness."

He laughed "Would ya let me finish? Thanks to the Formans, I got a house. Thanks to them and you, my landscape's changed. No longer see life as a dead end. Studying for my second go at the SATs —"

"What?" She slapped his knee lightly. "You should have told me!"

"You have more important stuff to deal with."

"There's nothing more important than our future! Because your future is mine, too. We—" She released his knee and scooted back on the cot. His discomfort must have surfaced on his face. "We'll talk about that later. But I'm glad you believe your future is one worth working for."

"Shocked the crap out of myself, but I do." And if his and Jackie's futures intersected, even better. It was a possibility, one he'd fight to make happen. But their intention to be together was all either of them could guarantee.

He dragged the shopping bag from under the cot. It was stiff and slightly bigger than a toaster. Tissue paper covered the top, and Jackie gaped at it.

"You bought me a present?" she said.

"For Mrs. Forman. Asking your opinion—"

"Shut up! It's for me." She snatched the bag and chucked the tissue paper at him. "A stuffed animal?" She pulled a plush lion from the bag. Its mane was curly, and its fur was the color of his hair.

"Your unicorn's tainted—and in the dump—so I got you a replacement."

She caressed its mane. "He looks like you."

"For nights your mind goes haywire," he said. "Or you can sneak over here. Your call."

Her fingers dug into the lion, but she thrust her arms around Hyde's neck. She kissed his cheeks, his mouth, his chin. "You are the best stuffed-animal-giving boyfriend ever!" she said and withdrew from him. "But as sweet as the lion is, you're still my firefly."

"Sickens me, but I don't mind the name anymore."

"Does that mean I can call you that in public?"

He pushed himself off the cot. Wedged between the Formans' suitcases was their chessboard. He and Jackie hadn't played in months, and he grabbed the board and its pouch of chess pieces. "You beat
me in a match today, and I'll consider it.”

With Jackie's help, the chessboard was set up a few minutes later. It lay between them on the Formans' old ottoman, and she used the French Defense against him. He had a few strategies to counter it, but he grinned as she anticipated his moves. In chess, she'd grown into a challenging opponent. In life, he had no better partner.

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