

Janette Rallison



BLUE EYES

and Other Teenage Hazards

BLUE EYES AND OTHER TEENAGE HAZARDS

PULLMAN HIGH GIRLS

JANETTE RALLISON

Blue Eyes
And Other Teenage Hazards
By Janette Rallison
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Fame, Glory, and Other Things on my To Do List

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My best friend Anjie rolled out of my life on a sharply clear September morning. I lived in Pullman, Washington, where most of the time the sky looked like it was being smothered by clouds; but on the day Anjie moved, there was nothing but sun. I hate it when the weather lies like that.

I'd gotten up at six in the morning to see Anjie off. Neither of us was sleepy. We stood by her family's minivan while her dad loaded suitcases into the back. The moving van would come later in the day to take everything else.

"Call me as soon as you get to Virginia," I said.

"I will." Anjie put a pillow and a book into the backseat of the minivan. "And you call me too. Call me tomorrow."

"Nothing will have happened by tomorrow to talk about."

"But I still want to hear from you."

Anjie and I had been inseparable since second grade when she moved onto my street, five houses away. We'd shared everything: bikes, clothes, even a crush on super hot Chad Warren. And now, a week before our sophomore year got underway, she was moving. We were finally no longer on the lowest rung of social life at high school. Life was supposed to be fun now. But with Anjie leaving, I felt like I'd been set adrift. In a sea of uncaring teenagers. Many of whom would happily puncture my boat. And laugh as I sunk into the depths of high school life.

Anjie's mother came outside carrying a box filled with houseplants. She put it into the backseat of their van. "Come on, Anjie," she said. "It's time

to go.” Then, because she felt sorry for me, she added, “You’ll have to come up and visit us sometime, Cassidy.”

I tried to smile. “Sure.” It would probably never happen. Fairfax, Virginia, was on the other side of the nation.

She hugged me and got in the back seat next to her little sister and brother.

I watched until the minivan turned the corner and drove out of sight. With it went our late-night phone conversations, homework sessions where we didn’t do homework, and summers sitting by the public pool unsuccessfully trying to get tans. With it went a thousand other things I couldn’t name but felt anyway. As I trudged home, I glanced up at the sun hanging there alone and abandoned in the sky and decided the weather hadn’t lied after all.

It wasn’t that I didn’t have other friends. I did. I sat with Faith and Caitlin at lunch. We didn’t actually ever do anything together, but they were nice to me. Okay, maybe they were actually more like acquaintances, but that was only because I’d never needed anyone else before. Anjie was like me: a straight-A student, an avid reader, and someone who kept the rules instead of looking for ways to bend them. I could talk to her about my goals or values without her looking at me like the Goody-Two-Shoes Fairy was about to carry me away.

The only other sophomore girl on the street was Samantha Taylor—or Queen Samantha, as Anjie and I had taken to calling her. This was because Samantha was bound to be homecoming queen someday, and she generally treated us like peasants. We’d all been best friends in elementary school, but in junior high things had changed. Samantha was blond, beautiful, and on the cheerleading squad. Now she mostly ignored me at school, but if we were ever thrown together in class, she rolled her eyes when I answered questions. Sometimes she also shook her head.

School started and I went through the first few days mechanically. I didn’t say much at the lunch table. As I ate, I noticed how everyone talked about things without ever really saying anything important... or even interesting. It was all about who was dating who, or fighting with who, or where people were going, or what shows they’d watched. Not one single idea. Nothing about our school assignments except how hard or stupid they were.

If Anjie had been around, we would've talked about today's lecture on whether hunter-gather societies were really better for the environment (Um, obviously not. Otherwise everybody would be out hunting and gathering.) or whether the entire English department had some sort of crush on Hamlet (Probably).

I couldn't imagine three more years of school going through every day without having anyone to talk to—well, to *really* talk to.

My parents knew I was feeling down about Anjie's move, and they tried to be sympathetic. Dad told me this was an opportunity to branch out and expand myself. Meet new people. Stretch. Dad's the optimist of the family.

Mom told me I'd better get used to it because sometimes in life you're alone and you have to learn to cope. She's the cynic. I could tell Mom felt sorry for me, though. She took me shopping and bought me designer clothes. The expensive kind. She'd never done that before.

As we got to the cash register, she said, "Lesson number one in solitude. If you have to be lonely, do it in high fashion."

While she was waiting for the clerk to finish with her credit card, I traced the label on her wallet. "Is that why you have a designer wallet? Your money is lonely?"

"I don't have enough money to get lonely. The wallet's for me."

"You're lonely?"

"Not as long as I'm with you, my little peach." Mom had an unending list of cute names she used to embarrass me with. "I'm stocking up in preparation for the time when you go off to college. I can't believe it's only three years away. Three *short* years." She said this last part as if college was death.

Mom had never wanted me to grow up. When I was little, after each of my birthdays she would look at me solemnly and say, "Absolutely no more growing up." I had sensed, even back then, what I had been too young to remember—the grief she felt over a pregnancy where she'd lost not only the baby but the chance of ever getting pregnant again. I was an only child, and always would be.

When Mom and I got home from shopping, Dad was on the couch answering emails on his laptop. "Will MasterCard call tomorrow to thank me for our support?"

Mom dropped one of the shopping bags on the couch. "Consider it our way of stimulating the economy." She turned to me. "Show your father

what we bought.”

Dad put on a good show of being impressed. He said, “Ooh,” and “Ahh,” and “Very nice.” But in actuality, he had no fashion sense whatsoever. He would have said the same thing if I had held up things from the clearance rack at Goodwill.

“I’m sure you’ll look great in them,” he said. I was *his* little peach too.

He winked at my mom. “But as it turns out, you didn’t need to take Cassidy shopping at all.”

Mom sat down on the couch and kicked off her shoes. “Oh?”

“I have such good news for her, she’ll forget all about clothes.”

“You’re doubling my allowance?” I guessed.

“Wrong.”

“You’re buying me a Jeep for my birthday?”

“Wrong, wrong. Really wrong.” Before I could guess at anything else that was expensive, he said, “While I was mowing the lawn, the Lopez’s realtor came by and took down the for sale sign in front of their house. It sold.”

That didn’t feel like good news. I had faintly hoped that the house would never sell and Anjie’s family would hate Virginia so much they would decide to move back. I sat down with a thud on the couch and didn’t say anything.

“It sold to the Benson family,” Dad went on. “They’re moving here from California in about a week and they have a daughter your age.”

I frowned at him. Anjie wasn’t a pair of shoes that I could just replace when I needed new ones. What were the chances that the new girl would be someone I liked, someone who liked me? It was just as likely she would become fast friends with Samantha and the two of them would spend the remaining years of high school doing eye-rolling relays at my expense. I didn’t even crack a smile. “I’d rather have a jeep.”

“The family also has a teenage son,” he said. “A senior.”

My mother made a disapproving sound as she gathered up my purchases. “Don’t give Cassidy ideas.”

I didn’t comment on that. I already had ideas. I just had them about Chad Warren.

Mom handed me the shopping bags. “When they move in, you’ll have to go over and introduce yourself to the girl your age. You could volunteer to show her around.”

I told myself that I wouldn't get excited about her. I wouldn't expect her to be like Anjie. But once a seed of hope is planted, you don't need to water it. It grows by itself. By the time I went to bed, I was already wondering what 'about a week' meant. Six days? Nine? Maybe five. Hopefully five.



THE ONLY GOOD thing about having Anjie gone was that I didn't have to worry about her getting jealous if I flirted with Chad—not that I had ever flirted with Chad before. Last year it had seemed too presumptuous. He was one of the most popular guys in the sophomore class, and I'd been a freshman who still looked like I belonged in junior high—five foot four, string-bean thin, no clue what to do with my dirty-blond hair, and a smile decorated by braces.

A year later, I'd grown three inches, filled out, discovered Clairol highlights weren't that difficult to apply, and finished my monthly excursion to the orthodontist. The next logical step was flirting. So this year, I would attempt it. I called my scheme "Operation Chad." First goal: get him to notice me.

Chad was gorgeous. He had wavy blond hair, blue eyes, and a smile that could melt ice. But the thing I liked about him was that he looked clean-cut—like someone who would be polite to your grandparents. He got good grades, which meant he was smart, and a smart guy had to want an intelligent girlfriend. I was clearly qualified for the position. We would be able to talk about anything and everything. Life. The cosmos. What to name our first child.

With this in mind, I set "Operation Chad" in motion. This consisted of doodling his initials next to mine in my Spanish notebook, planning to go to all the football games—he played wide receiver—and arranging my schedule so I passed him in the hallway three times a day. It was a slow start, admittedly, but I wasn't sure he even knew my name. I couldn't just go up and talk to him. With all the hall time we spent together, I somehow hoped he might notice me, wonder who I was, and say something to me. Okay, it was a really, *really* slow start.

Upon evaluation of the first week of school, I decided I needed something to help me stand out. On Monday I wore a form-fitting red skirt

and a pair of three-inch red high heels. I'd always preferred sandals to high heels, and it took me half an hour of trundling around my bedroom before I felt like I could walk in them without wobbling.

Armed with my fashion-model heels and a skirt that looked perfect on me—even if it was so form-fitting that I could only take small steps—I set out to capture Chad's attention. Sometimes he studied in the library before first period. I strolled in, trying to ooze sophistication.

Luck was with me. Chad sat at a table doing homework with his best friend, Mike. I walked by and purposely dropped my English book next to Chad. I had visions of him reaching gallantly for it. Our eyes would meet as he handed it to me. Maybe he'd even smile and say something.

But he just sat there, his head bent over his book. He didn't even look up from his trig problems. Awkwardly—my skirt wasn't meant for bending—I reached down and picked up the book myself. It was then I noticed a table full of junior girls close by. They were glaring at me. They knew what I was up to. In fact, they'd probably tried the same thing themselves. No wonder Chad didn't move. He was probably showered with objects daily.

I'd planned on sitting down at a nearby table and studying, but suddenly it seemed like a bad idea. I didn't want to look like I had no friends to hang out with. I scanned the library for a group I could sit with.

The only person I really knew was Samantha. She sat at a table with the rest of the cheerleading squad, talking and smiling. Being anywhere in Chad's vicinity apparently makes the neurons in my brain misfire because it suddenly seemed like a good idea to go over and tell Samantha that a new girl was moving in on our street. For those few moments, I completely forgot that I was on the peasant list.

When I walked over to her, Samantha put on an expression of perturbed patience.

And then I remembered, but it was too late to turn around.

"Hi," I said.

The other cheerleaders stopped talking and stared at me, waiting to find out why I'd disturbed them.

"Did you hear about the new family that's moving in on our street? They've got a girl our age." I'd been watching the house for signs of the new family, checking it impatiently ever since my dad had told me the news.

“Yeah,” Samantha said without emotion. “My mom told me. Mr. Benson drove up last night and the rest of the family is coming this afternoon. They’ve got, like, six kids. The one our age is named Elise.”

I should’ve known Samantha’s mother, Mrs. Taylor, would already have twice as much information about the family as my parents did. Mrs. Taylor was what some people would have called “involved in the community” and less-kind people would have called a busybody. In elementary school, she’d always been room mother; in junior high, she’d been on the PTO board; and last year the Taylors not only donated the materials for the freshman homecoming float, but Mrs. Taylor had basically designed the thing and helped build it.

“Elise,” I said the name out loud, trying to conjure up an image of the girl it belonged to. “What else do you know about her?”

Samantha hesitated. Her lips pursed together slightly. Whatever she knew about Elise, she didn’t like. “Nothing really.”

The fact that Samantha wouldn’t tell me probably meant it was something that wouldn’t have bothered most people. Elise didn’t have a fatal disease or a third leg. She just didn’t meet Samantha’s qualifications as a worthwhile person. She wasn’t homecoming court material.

I didn’t think about what I said next. It just came out of my mouth in a moment of spontaneous goodwill. “We should stop by the Benson’s house after school and welcome Elise to the neighborhood. I could make some cookies for her family.”

Samantha shrugged and glanced at her friends. “Sorry. I have cheerleading practice after school.”

“That’s okay. We can wait until cheerleading practice is over. After all, it will take me a while to bake cookies.”

“Ummm,” Samantha said, clearly searching for an excuse to skip out on being friendly.

I pressed her anyway. If both of us went it would look more like a neighborly thing and less like a Cassidy-is-desperate-for-a-new-friend sort of thing. “Come over to my house at four o’clock and we’ll walk over together.”

“Fine,” Samantha said, then didn’t say anything else. None of the cheerleaders did, either. They were waiting for me to leave.

“Okay. See you later.” I spun on my heel. Literally. I had forgotten I was wearing shoes with heels so high they prevented all natural movement, and

when I turned, I lost my balance.

The tight skirt didn't help matters. I took a lunging step to steady myself. Or rather, I tried to steady myself. The skirt didn't allow for lunges, so I ended up taking a stumbling step that did nothing but quicken my descent to the floor. My books went flying in all directions. I heard a ripping sound that was either my skirt or the tendons in my leg. At that point, it was all a blur.

To Samantha's credit, she helped me up. She was laughing as she said, "Are you all right?" but at least she helped me.

"I'm fine." And I was. Unless you counted my pride, the slit in my skirt that was now considerably longer than it had been, or the stinging in my palms from where I'd hit the floor.

The other cheerleaders gathered my books for me. My biology book had slid over to Chad and Mike's table. Chad picked it up and handed it to a perky blonde cheerleader named Chelsea.

It was my book though, and Chad had picked it up. I could even say with confidence that he'd noticed me, since he was eyeing me. Which, if I was being really technical, was Operation Chad's first success.

After school, I made chocolate chip cookies for the Bensons. I'd told Samantha to meet me at my house at four o'clock, but at four fifteen she still hadn't come. Cheerleading practice must have run long or Samantha had found some more important thing to do—like anything.

I didn't really want to go over to the Benson's by myself, but I wanted to meet Elise, and what else was I going to do with two dozen cookies? I waited until four thirty, then headed over.

My father always said that when you make a wish and send it out into the universe, the universe conspires to make it happen. I'd never believed him. I'd wished for a horse from the time I was three, and so far the universe had done very little in the way of helping out in that regard. But as I walked to Elise's house, I not only sent a wish out, I struck a bargain.

I wanted Elise to have a good sense of humor. And be smart. And be nice. And not be a drama queen. That wasn't a big order, was it? But if that was asking too much then I'd settle for smart and nice. In return, I would be kind to any and all new students for the rest of my life.

After I rang the bell, a thirteen-ish boy with unruly black hair opened the door. He looked at me unconcerned. "Yeah?"

"Hi," I said. "I'm one of your neighbors. Is Elise home?"

"Yeah." He held the door open, and I walked into what used to be Anjie's living room. It looked all wrong without the Lopez's black couches and marble coffee table. The tan walls seemed scuffed and forlorn. Stacks of boxes and miscellaneous furniture cluttered the floor.

The boy eyed my plate of cookies. "Hey, are those for me?"

“For your family. You can have one if your mom says—”

At this, he grabbed a cookie, tilted back his head, and yelled, “Elise! There’s someone here to see you!”

It was so loud she must have heard it, but there was no reply.

The boy grabbed another cookie off the plate. With his mouth full he told me, “My parents aren’t home right now, but they’d let me have two.” Then he ran upstairs. I stood alone and waited.

A giant German shepherd trotted into the room. He stopped when he saw me.

I’ve always liked dogs. At least little ones. Little dogs are better because if a Yorkshire terrier suddenly mistakes you for a fleeing criminal, he’s probably not going to do a lot of damage. German shepherds are different. And mutatedly large German shepherds are enough to make anybody’s plate of cookies tremble.

“Hello there, doggy,” I said. “I hope you’re a nice dog.”

He surveyed me intently.

At this point certain questions ran through my mind: *Where is everyone in this family?* and *Why hasn’t Elise shown up?*

I took a step toward the door. “Nice doggy. Why don’t you find a cat to chase?”

His eyes never left my face. He didn’t growl, but he didn’t wag his tail, either. He moved toward me, sniffing.

I took another step backward. The dog took several more forward. His gaze fixed on the plate and he licked his lips. I held the cookies up over my head. I could tell he was calculating whether he could reach them if he jumped.

“Stay, doggy. Sit, doggy.”

He heaved himself up and put his paws on my shoulders. I had to take a step back to keep from being knocked over. I was nearly pressed up against the wall.

“Down, doggy! Down!”

He didn’t move. Instead, he barked at the plate.

I was just about to let him have the plate and flee from the house when I heard a teenage girl say, “Goliath! Down!”

The dog dropped to all fours and wagged his tail.

“Bad dog! No eating the guests!” She looked at me, nonchalantly. “Sorry about that.”

Elise was tall with long, dark hair and blue eyes. She looked athletic, tan, and pretty—not the sort of person Samantha would avoid. Elise wore shorts, a tank top, and flip-flops even though the weather had turned cool. Apparently, she was in autumn denial.

A few of the cookies had nearly slid off the plate. I pushed them back into the center. “That’s all right. He didn’t get any.” I held the plate out to her. “I’m Cassidy Woodruff. I live down the street.”

“Thanks.” She didn’t take the cookies from me. “I’m thrilled to be here.” It was clear she wasn’t.

I shifted my weight, awkwardly. “Pullman is a nice place.”

She looked at me like I had to be joking. “Does Pullman even have a mall?”

“Not really.”

“A Seven-Eleven?”

“No.”

“A Burger King?”

“We have a McDonald’s.”

Elise plopped down on a couch. “Great. At least I won’t be without my Happy Meals.”

I suddenly understood why Samantha hadn’t been eager to meet Elise. Somehow, Samantha had known what Elise was like. Rude. Condescending. Not at all what I had ordered from the universe. I smiled in an attempt to be gracious.

The dog went and lay at Elise’s feet. I still stood there holding the cookies and wondered if I was supposed to sit down.

Elise said, “Where do you guys do your clothes shopping, anyway?”

“Moscow, Idaho, is only eight miles away. Mostly we go there.”

“You go to another state to shop?” Elise tossed her head back on the couch. “For this, I had to give up my friends, eighty-degree weather, beaches, mega malls, pool parties, and Hollywood?”

How could I compete with Hollywood? “Well, at least we don’t have any earthquakes.”

Elise ignored this helpful evaluation. “My parents thought the small-town atmosphere would be good for the family.” She picked up a pile of dish towels that lay on the couch and moved them to an end table. “They thought it would be a good place to move their stupid office-supply store. A brilliant financial decision, since offices are so plentiful here.”

Pullman was a university town—home of Washington State University and Schweitzer Labs. The population was almost thirty thousand, but most of those people were students. It wasn't a big place, but it had always been big enough for me. I looked around the room for someplace German-shepherd proof to set the plate. "Where do you want the cookies?"

"I'll put them in the kitchen." Elise finally took the plate. "Sit anywhere. I'll be back in a minute."

I took a box off a small loveseat and sat down. Goliath got up, trotted over, and stared at me. All the old dog sayings came to mind. Never run from them. Never provoke them. Dogs can smell fear.

"Nice Goliath. I don't have the cookies anymore. Go see Elise. She's in the kitchen."

He sat sniffing, then jumped up on the loveseat. For a moment I was nose to muzzle with him; then he lay down on my lap.

"Down, Goliath, down!"

The dog didn't move. I thought of pushing him off but was afraid he'd consider that provoking.

He rolled over on his back, stretching.

I strained to see the kitchen. "Elise," I called weakly. "Elise!" No one came.

I patted Goliath a few times on the stomach. "Nice doggy. Get off."

He didn't move. I decided to take a chance and I pushed him off. He rolled from my lap onto the floor, shook himself, and jumped back onto the loveseat. He plunked down in my lap again.

Elise returned from the kitchen carrying a couple of glasses and a bottle of Sprite. "Goliath, get down!"

He still didn't move. Elise put the glasses and soda on top of a stack of boxes that was in front of the couch, grabbed Goliath by the collar, and pulled him off me. "Sorry about that," she said, but she looked more amused than apologetic.

"It's all right."

Goliath put his face on the cushions and looked up at me with forlorn brown eyes.

Elise sat down on the couch across from me. She seemed to have forgotten about the soda and glasses full of ice she'd brought in. "So, what do you do for fun around here?"

"I belong to the chess club and I play tennis."

She looked completely unimpressed by this so I added, “With all my homework, I don’t have time for much else.”

“Chess and homework,” she said flatly. “What does everybody else do for fun?”

Goliath whined. I patted his head. “The regular stuff. Play sports, go shopping, and see movies.” Goliath flung himself onto my lap once more. With some effort, I managed to push him off. He slid onto the floor, a heap of tan and black fur. He barked at me indignantly.

“Why does your dog want to be on my lap?”

“No reason.” Elise smirked, holding back a laugh. “Except that you’re in his chair.”

I got up. “Your dog has a chair and you let me sit in it?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, but by that time she was laughing.

I brushed dog fur off my jeans with quick motions. “Thanks. I came innocently bearing cookies and you let your dog sit on me.”

She tilted her chin down. “You didn’t come innocently. My dad told your mom that I needed to be around good influences and so here you are—the good influence welcome wagon. The I’m-too-busy-doing-my-homework-to-have-fun poster girl.”

Ah. Her dad had talked to Mrs. Taylor, so she thought I was Samantha.

“Nobody told me anything about you,” I said pointedly, although suddenly I wished they had. “And my mom has never met your father. I just came by to be friendly.”

Elise studied me for a moment, discerning whether I was telling the truth. “Fine.” She picked up one of the glasses and poured soda into it. “If you’re not trying to reform me, you can stay.”

As if I wanted to stay.

She handed me a drink and gestured toward the recliner. “You can sit there. Goliath doesn’t fit on it.”

I wanted to tell her that I had to be going, but decided to give her another chance. I moved a suitcase, sat down, and took a sip of soda.

Elise rifled through a box sitting at her feet. “When I asked you what you did for fun, what I really meant was where do you party?”

“I don’t drink,” I said. “It’s illegal.”

She pulled out a can of beer that had been buried underneath clothes and wiped off the top. “Yeah, so is speeding, but everybody does that.” She

laughed, then stopped when she saw my expression. “What? You don’t speed?”

There wasn’t much of a point to speeding in small towns. It wasn’t worth risking a ticket just to shave two minutes off your time. Besides, I only had my driver’s permit. “Speeding ruins your insurance rate.”

Elise sighed, opened her can, and poured it over the ice in her cup. She swirled it around and took a drink, then poured the now chilled beer back into the can.

I watched her not knowing what to say. I knew some sophomores drank, but it was four-thirty in the afternoon on a Monday. Wasn’t drinking like that a sign of alcoholism?

Off in the distance, I heard wailing. The noise got louder and louder until two young girls shrieked into the room. One held a doll up in the air while the other chased her around the boxes.

Elise put her can on the floor, stood up, and grabbed both of them by their collars. “Stop it!”

The girls barely seemed to notice that Elise had a hold of them. The older of the two, who couldn’t have been more than six, kept reaching for the doll. “It’s mine!”

“It isn’t your Skipper,” the other said. “It’s mine!”

Elise took the doll. The girls tried to grab it, but she pushed them away. “Be quiet. Skipper is trying to say something.”

Both girls grew silent, suspicious. Elise held the doll up to her ear. “Skipper says she’s tired of you two pulling her apart and she wants to be my doll.”

“She did not!” they cried together.

“She did too. She also says you’re both ugly little trolls.”

“She did not!”

“She did too. Now go watch TV, and if I hear any more arguing, the TV and I will have a talk too.”

The girls took a few sullen steps away. In unison, they turned back and stuck out their tongues. Then they ran out of the room.

Elise tossed the doll onto the floor, sat down, and went back to drinking her beer. She wasn’t casual about it. Each sip was angry, determined, like she was making a point. “How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“None. I’m an only child.”

“That must be great.”

“Sometimes it is. Sometimes it isn’t.”

A car pulled into the driveway. Elise swore and looked for someplace to hide her beer. She reached for the box, but when the car door slammed she ditched the can behind a chair cushion instead. She finished the whole production just before the door opened and her older brother walked in. He looked a lot like Elise. His black hair was wavy and a few stray curls lay against his forehead, like he’d just walked in from the beach. His blue eyes made a striking contrast to his dark hair, and he had a face that would make the girls at PHS take a second look. And probably a third looks too.

“Oh,” Elise said, “it’s only you.” She took the can out again.

Without noticing either of us, he opened one of the boxes on the floor and sifted through the papers in it. “Mom and Dad decided to stay late at the store. I’m just picking up the invoice sheets, then I’m going back.”

“That’s all right,” Elise said drearily. “I don’t have anything to do with my life anymore except babysit.”

As he straightened, he looked over at Elise and saw the can in her hand. His eyes narrowed into icy blue slits. In two strides, he’d reached her and grabbed the beer from her hand. “If you want to get drunk on your own time, that’s one thing. But don’t you ever do it when you’re watching the kids.” His voice got louder. “Do you even know where they are?”

I would’ve withered up and died if someone talked to me like that. Elise took it in stride.

“Abby is asleep—at least she was until you just yelled. Bailey and Olivia are watching TV. Dan is putting away his junk, and I’m entertaining a guest.”

Elise’s brother glanced at me for the first time. He didn’t seem impressed. “What, you’ve only been here twenty-four hours, and you’ve already found drinking buddies?”

My mouth fell open. I knew I looked stupid, but I couldn’t help it.

“Cassidy lives down the street. She brought over cookies to welcome us to the neighborhood. Unless you give me my beer back, I’ll give yours to the dog.”

He crumpled the top of the can in a way that made its return unlikely and stalked out of the room without another glance at either of us.

Elise flipped him off, then leaned back into her chair with her arms folded. “That was my brother Josh.”

“Oh.” I felt I ought to say something else, so I added, “I guess you two don’t get along.”

“Sometimes we do. Sometimes we don’t.”

An awkward silence came between us.

I shifted in my chair. “Well, I’d better go. But if you want help finding your classes tomorrow, I can give you a tour in the morning.”

“That’s okay. It’s such a small school. How hard can it be to find things?”

To Elise’s credit, she got up and showed me to the door. She even thanked me for the cookies and told me goodbye. I half expected she wouldn’t.

I trudged back down the street shaking my head. I’d hoped for someone who was funny, smart, nice, and not a drama queen. Out of those things, I’d gotten, um, nothing.

I went inside my house and sat down at the kitchen table. Mom was on the other side surrounded by charcoal sketches. She was a freelance artist and frequently worked all day on her projects. This meant dinner would be something Dad picked up on the way home from work. I was excused from kitchen duties tonight, but I still sat there, staring off at the cabinets and replaying the scene with Elise in my mind.

“What’s the new girl like?” Mom asked.

“Sort of psychotic.”

Mom glanced up from her paper pad. “Why is that?”

“I think it’s because she comes from a family of psychotics.”

“And what did this psychotic family do?”

“Yelled at each other.”

Mom went back to her pad, making quick, dark strokes on the paper. “If that’s your criterion, then we’re occasionally psychotic too.”

“Yeah, but at least we don’t flip each other off.”

“And we can be mighty proud of that.” Mom laughed, and suddenly it did seem funny—the thought of my parents and I giving each other the finger. Despite what my mom said, we hardly ever fought, let alone yelled at each other. My life was quiet, predictable, sane. That’s the way I liked it.

So who cared if Elise was rude? Eventually, I’d find another best friend. And I still had Faith and Caitlin to eat with and talk to. I probably wouldn’t see much of Elise at all.

As I stood at the bus stop the next morning, rereading parts of *Macbeth* for honors English, an ancient white Nissan pulled up. Elise leaned out of the passenger side. “Hey, Cassidy, do you want a ride?”

After yesterday’s reception, I couldn’t believe she offered. I stood there with the book open in my hand and stammered out, “Sure,” because I couldn’t think of an excuse to turn her down. I climbed into the back seat and noticed Josh was driving. He didn’t say anything to me, but Elise turned around so we could see each other. She was smiling like she was happy to see me.

I put on my seatbelt. “It’s nice that your parents let you have the car for school. That’s still a matter of debate at my house.”

“It’s Josh’s car,” she said, “and he never lets anyone forget it. I’m surprised he doesn’t ask for cab fare.”

Without glancing at her, Josh said, “That could be arranged.”

Elise ignored him. “My parents would never let me take one of their cars to school. I don’t know what I’ll do next year when Josh graduates.”

“Ride the bus,” Josh said.

“No way,” she said. “I’ll have to date someone who owns a car.”

Josh came to a stop sign, looked both ways, and almost stopped all of the way before he went through the intersection. “You could always get a summer job and save up for a car like I did.”

Elise snorted. “I doubt there are many high-paying jobs for teenagers in Pullman. So hey, that means you’ll have to get some measly minimum-wage job next summer—just another one of those small-town benefits Mom

and Dad were so eager to have us experience. Maybe McDonald's is hiring. You'd look spiffy in their uniform."

He shook his head. "We'll probably be too busy helping Mom and Dad with their store to get jobs."

"You mean *you'll* be busy with the store. I'll be stuck at home babysitting." Elise wrinkled her nose. "And with what they'll pay me, I won't even be able to afford a bike." She let out a martyred sigh. "It's settled. I'll have to find some hot guy with a car."

Josh smiled. "I'd better warn all the upperclassmen with wheels."

"Just remember..." She sent him a sharp look. "I know where there's video of you running around in nothing but Batman tighty underwear. You don't want to see that make its way around the internet, do you?"

"I was six at the time," Josh said.

She waved her hand in his direction as if to erase this point. "My camera works. It wouldn't be hard to capture some of your less-than-flattering behavior. I'd start listing things right now, but I don't want to gross out Cassidy."

Josh made a scoffing sound. "Like what—you mean all the times I don't act like a girl?"

Elise leaned closer to me and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial tone. "He lets the dog lick his face. That's like frenching with a canine."

Josh shot Elise a look, taking his eyes from the road for the first time. "No, it's not. Sheesh, Elise, what have you been doing on your dates?"

She smiled at him smugly. "Are you going to warn the upperclassman about that too? I'll have a boyfriend with wheels in no time."

"And a few communicable diseases," he added.

"Cad," she said and laughed—a sound that was light and airy and told me that this sort of teasing was normal between them. It was as if all the yelling—all the flipping off of yesterday—hadn't happened. Elise seemed so nice, so normal that I almost expected her to say, "Oh, by the way, I have an evil, psychotic twin sister. You may have met her."

Another thing hit me about Elise. Although she had nearly called me boring for preferring homework to partying, the girl had a vocabulary: cad, canine, capture some of your less-than-flattering behavior. Elise was smarter than she let on.

"What's your class schedule?" I asked her.

She pulled out a paper from her backpack and handed it to me. It was so crumpled, I wondered if she'd wadded it up at some point. I could imagine her doing that—crumpling it up and throwing it across the room. Maybe I would have done the same thing if my parents had uprooted me. It made me want to help her, to make all of this easier for her.

“We’ve got lunch and Honors English together,” I said.

She looked down at the Macbeth book in my lap. “Is Honors English doing Shakespeare all year?”

“That and Greek literature. Oh, and we’re also going to read some Chaucer in the original text.”

Elise took the schedule from me, pulled a pen from her backpack, and crossed out Honors English.

“Hey, it’s a fun class,” I said. “We’re going to put on *The Tempest* in a couple months. Everyone will have a part.”

Elise added more pen marks across Honors English. “Which means the teacher will make us memorize large chunks of sixteenth-century dialogue. Forsooth and forthwith—I just don’t think so.”

Josh said, “The lady doth protest too much.”

More hand fluttering on Elise’s part. “Beware the ides of March—and any teacher who makes you write essays on that phrase.”

“It’s all much ado about nothing,” he said.

The two of them could even banter in Shakespeare quotes. Impressive. I slipped Macbeth into my backpack. “I think you’ll be able to handle Honors English.”

Elise gazed at her marred schedule. “I wonder if they offer dance during that hour. What are the easy classes?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said.

My comment made Josh laugh, although I wasn’t sure why. I hoped I hadn’t come off sounding arrogant.

After Josh parked the car, he walked beside Elise and me to the school. Yesterday I hadn’t noticed how tall he was and how broad his shoulders were. It made me feel suddenly self-conscious. I wasn’t sure if it was rude to walk beside him and only pay attention to Elise or whether it would be presumptuous to start a conversation with him when he’d only given me a ride because his sister had asked him to.

Anjie’s brother had been in seventh grade. I had no idea about the social mores of friends’ hot older brothers. Before we went our separate ways, I

inserted an awkward “Thanks for the ride” into the conversation.

He shrugged. “No problem.”

I helped Elise find where her locker and classes were. Despite Elise’s prediction that it would be easy to find everything in a small high school, it wouldn’t have been the case. Pullman High had apparently been designed by a frustrated artist looking for a creative medium.

First of all, the school was orange and yellow—two colors I’d grown to hate by the time I was halfway through my freshman year. Second, there was hardly a regular geometric shape anywhere. All the classrooms were sort of trapezoidish. It was as though the builder had dropped walls anywhere he fancied. The hallways were so confusing that the administration had painted giant arrows on the walls to show which direction certain classes were. The cafeteria was an open, sunken room off the main lobby. The library was two stories in the middle of the building. The architect had also dropped two mini buildings a short distance from the main one. I’m not sure what purpose those buildingettes were supposed to serve off by themselves, but we had to tromp outside to get to our math classes—a fact everyone appreciated from October to April, when it was freezing.

After I’d shown Elise around, I took her to the library to see if Faith or Caitlin were there. They weren’t, but Chad and Mike were. After we walked by them, Elise said, “Who is that gorgeous blond guy?”

“Chad Warren. He’s one of the junior jock gods, but he also takes trig and chemistry, so he can’t be all good looks and muscle.”

I could have told her more. I knew Chad was the starting wide receiver for varsity football, was the third leading scorer on the basketball team last year, and also ran the 100-meter dash in track. He was student body rep for his class, had two older brothers, drove a dark-blue Toyota, and took weeklong skiing trips with his family every winter. I also knew his address.

When you come down to it, there’s a fine line between adoration and stalking.

Elise cast another look at Chad over her shoulder. “Moving to Pullman just got a little better.”

“Well, if you ever find a good way to get his attention, let me know. I’ve been trying for years.”

Elise managed to drag her gaze away from Chad and back to me. “What, is he stuck up or something?”

“No, he’s just, you know...” I shrugged. “He’s Chad Warren.”

We walked slowly around the library, so we could look at him without being conspicuous. “Have you ever talked to him?” Elise asked.

I kept my gaze straight ahead. “It’s not that easy. He’s an upperclassman.”

“So is my brother. You didn’t think talking to him was hard, did you?”

“Um...” Now that I thought about it, I realized that during the car ride to school, Josh and I had both talked to Elise but hadn’t said anything to each other.

“You’re a wimp,” Elise said. “But since you’re my friend, I’ll give you the first shot at Chad. You have until the end of the day to talk to him before he becomes fair game.”

“What?” I blinked at her. “How am I supposed to talk to him today?”

Elise nodded toward his table. “He’s sitting right there. Go up and say something to him.”

I made little incredulous grunts. “You can’t force these things.” We had circled all the way around the library but kept going, just like those Jane Austen characters who took turns around the room. That had never made sense to me until now.

“Come on,” Elise said. “You’ve liked the guy for years but have never spoken to him? What are you waiting for, the angel Gabriel to announce you?”

I looked over at Elise with her flowing black hair and blue eyes, all confidence and tan. She couldn’t understand. The problem with living in the same small town all your life is that people don’t just see you, they see who you used to be. They remember every backward, stupid, humiliating thing you ever did. They remember that you used to be short and scrawny with bad hair and no fashion sense. You can’t erase it. It drifts behind you like a kite tail.

I had to wait for the right casual moment to talk to Chad—the moment when it didn’t look like I was hitting on him. That way if he wasn’t interested, I’d still have a shred of pride left.

Faith and Caitlin walked into the library, saving me from explaining this to Elise. “There are some of my friends. You should meet them. They’re really nice.” I steered her in their direction.

After I made introductions, Faith said, “How do you like Pullman so far?”

“Well, you have some cute guys here.”

“True,” Caitlin said, “but we’re always looking for new talent. We hear you have an older brother. What’s he like?”

Elise glanced over at me, and I was suddenly embarrassed that I’d told Faith and Caitlin about the new family moving into Anjie’s house. It made me seem gossipy. I wasn’t. I’d just been eager for them to move in.

“I’m not a good judge of my own brother,” Elise finally said. “What has Cassidy told you?”

“Just that he’s a senior,” Caitlin said.

Then everyone looked at me. “Josh is pretty cute,” I said. On a scale of one to ten, I gave him an eight—nine if you counted the fact that he could quote Shakespeare. Chad was a twelve.

Elise smiled at my appraisal. Caitlin raised her eyebrows suggestively. “We’ll have to meet him sometime.” Caitlin was the type who rotated through crushes as though dating were a relay event.

Elise compared schedules with Faith and Caitlin and was relieved she had some classes with them. They spent the rest of the time telling her about the teachers she was in for and various homework horror stories. I was just glad the topic of Chad had been pushed from Elise’s mind.

Elise saying that I should talk to him today? Crazy talk.

Before we split up to go to first period, Elise said, “If you want a ride home, meet me at my locker after school. And remember,” she added, “you have until the end of the day to speak to Chad.”

I met up with Elise on the stairs at lunchtime. “How have your classes been?” I asked.

She drifted down the steps slowly, a lunch bag in her hand. “I’ve got to get out of my honors classes. You have way too many overachievers at this school.”

I shrugged. “Most of our parents are either professors at WSU or engineers at Schweitzer Labs.”

She grunted like this was a bad thing.

I didn’t ask more about her classes because I spotted Samantha walking down the stairs in front of us. “There’s the other girl on our street,” I told Elise. “Let me introduce you.”

We caught up to her so quickly I almost didn’t have time to worry about how Samantha would react to Elise. Perhaps it was selfish, but a part of me worried that Samantha would like Elise too much. After all, why shouldn’t she? Elise was pretty and, right now, charming. The type of person who could blend in with cheerleaders.

“Samantha, hi!” I said. “This is the new girl on our street, Elise.”

Samantha forced an unconvincing smile. “Hi.”

I hadn’t been Samantha’s BFF since elementary school, but I still knew her well enough to interpret that look. She wanted nothing to do with Elise. I didn’t know why but could only assume it had to do with whatever Mrs. Taylor had found out about her.

“Samantha was planning on delivering those cookies with me,” I said, “but she couldn’t because...”

“Cheerleading practice ran over,” Samantha said.

“Oh, that’s right. Cheerleading practice. I guess that’s hard to get out of. Anyway, you should get to know each other. Why don’t you come and eat with us today, Samantha?”

Samantha’s smile grew even more forced. “I can’t. I have to sit with my friends. They’re waiting for me.”

“They can live without you for one day.”

“Sorry. I really can’t. See ya.” She practically sprinted the rest of the way to the lunchroom.

Elise watched her go. “Are you the leper or am I?”

“That’s Samantha’s friendly way of making you feel like a valued member of PHS.”

Elise shook her head. “Cheerleaders. Some things are the same no matter where you go.”

I showed Elise where my table was. Faith was already there. I joined Caitlin in the hot-lunch line.

I was beginning to think my father was right about the universe conspiring with you to make your wishes happen. And not just because it turned out that Elise was smart, funny, and nice—the jury was still out on whether or not she was a drama queen—but because Chad Warren stood in line right in front of me.

I watched the back of his head: the way the florescent cafeteria lights brought out the highlights in his hair, the way his flannel shirt and broad shoulders made him look like a lumberjack.

According to Elise, if I talked to him right now, he’d be off-limits for her. The universe was nudging me. I didn’t say anything though. I’d already looked like an idiot yesterday morning in the library, and if I said the wrong thing now, I could doom myself to be forever Chadless.

I had to think of something good to say. Something intelligent and sophisticated, preferably.

“What’s for lunch today, anyway?” Caitlin asked me. “I can’t see the sign.”

“I can’t see it either.” And then I saw my opportunity. I touched Chad’s shoulder and, sounding as sophisticated as I could, asked, “Do you know what they’re serving?”

His gaze drifted to mine, casually taking me in. “Tacos or stew. They’re both all right.”

I smiled at him. “You’ve tried the school stew? You’re a brave man.”

“Yeah.” He grinned back at me. “It’s one of the requirements for being on the football team.”

“They make you eat the school stew to be on the football team? That’s rough.”

He laughed and I felt tingly all over. The line moved, and he turned around again. Caitlin gave me a knowing look. She was dying to tease me about talking to *him*, but she couldn’t say anything with *him* standing right there, so she just smirked a lot. When we got to the food, I asked for the stew.

Chad turned to me. “You decided to try it, huh?”

“I’m a brave woman.”

He smiled at me again, and I tingled all the way back to the table.

When I sat down, Faith leaned toward me. “Did my eyes deceive me, or did I see you talk to our hero, Chad Warren?”

“We spoke.” I sent Elise a triumphant look.

Elise bit into a carrot stick. “See, I told you it wasn’t hard.”

Caitlin put her hand over her heart and fluttered her eyelashes. “They exchanged pleasantries about the school stew. It was *so* romantic.”

I opened my milk carton. “This is why I never tell you guys anything. You make the biggest deal over the smallest thing.”

“Am I hearing right?” Caitlin asked. “Talking to Chad Warren is a small thing?”

I took a bite of the stew. “Hey, this really isn’t that bad.”

“Right,” Faith said. “We’ve all had the school stew before, and we know why you really like it.”

At fifth period, I waited for Elise outside of our English room. I figured by this point in the day she’d probably forgotten where the rest of her classes were. The room was on the second floor near the balcony that overlooked the landing. When it was nearly time for class to start and she still hadn’t come, I went to the balcony to see if I could spot her. She was at the bottom of the stairs. “Elise!” I called.

She looked up and saw me, but just then Mrs. Harris walked to the classroom door. “The bell is about to ring, Miss. Woodruff.” She had a deep, strict voice that sounded like it belonged in a Dickens novel—like she was some character who was perpetually scolding orphans. She tapped her wristwatch. “A tardy means an extra paper to write.”

“I’m just showing Elise where the classroom is.” I motioned down the stairs. “Elise Benson. She’s new.” I turned back to Elise and waved to her to hurry.

She didn’t hurry, and she eyed Mrs. Harris wearily.

The bell rang, but Mrs. Harris waited with me for Elise to finish plodding up the stairs.

When she reached the top, I said, “Our room is that one over there. Did you get lost?”

Elise kept her gaze fixed on Mrs. Harris. “I...um, I think I’m switching out of Honors English...”

“Oh come on,” I said. “You can handle it. You were quoting Macbeth this morning.”

“Miss Benson,” Mrs. Harris said in her you-are-a-bothersome-orphan voice, “In the future, class starts directly on the hour. See to it that you are sitting in your chair at that time.” She made a sweeping motion toward the door. “Ladies, after you.”

I walked in. Elise hesitated. “I think I’m supposed to be in regular English.”

Mrs. Harris didn’t budge. “There are seats in the front. We look forward to hearing your opinions.”

Elise sighed, slogged inside, and dropped into one of the chairs in the front. I sat in the second row. I would’ve gone to sit by her, but Mrs. Harris doesn’t let us move around. She takes roll by the seating chart.

During the class discussion on whether or not Macbeth was a heroic character, Elise never voluntarily answered a question. But every time Mrs. Harris called on her, she gave good answers—and that was without reading Macbeth recently. I knew she would be fine in Honors English, and I was glad to have a friend in the class. We could study for tests together.

When the bell rang, Elise left right away. I didn’t think about that too much. She was closer to the door, and I figured she wanted to make sure she wasn’t late for her next class.

I didn’t think about it at all until after school when I went to her locker to catch a ride home with her.

She was just shutting her locker and hefting her backpack onto her shoulders. The two of us headed toward the front door. “So how did the first day go?” I asked.

She adjusted her backpack. It looked like it held every school book she owned. "I've had better."

"They don't expect you to get caught up on everything you've missed by tonight, do they?"

"Let's just say I'll be busy for a while." She walked fast-paced, looking straight ahead. "Which doesn't matter, since I'll have nothing else to do anyway."

Oh. She was back to mourning California. We walked silently for a couple of minutes, swept away by the tide of students moving to the door. I didn't know how to cheer her up—or if that was even possible. I figured it wasn't a list of activities that she missed anyway. It was her friends and probably a boyfriend. It was memories and that comfortable feeling you have when you're home. It was fitting in.

We reached the school's front door and went outside and down the front stairs. "If you give it some time," I said, "you'll like it here."

She rolled her eyes.

"In the winter, there are a lot of great places to ski. Have you ever been skiing?"

"Waterskiing."

"Well, it's the same thing except it's downhill."

"And it's in the frozen wilderness instead of a warm, sunny beach."

Josh was waiting for us in his car. Elise climbed into the front seat, and I got into the back. "I'm just saying we're never bored."

Elise leaned against her seat like she had a headache. "Of course, you're not bored. You're too busy cultivating a sense of wonder to ever be bored, aren't you, Cassidy?"

Suddenly it hit me. Elise's evil, psychotic twin sister was back, and I was trapped in the car with her. "What are you talking about?" I asked.

She let out a disgusted huff. "Like you don't know."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." *Except I suspect you may be unbalanced and never make sense for long anyway.*

I looked at Josh to see what his reaction to all of this was, but I couldn't tell from his back. He'd started the car and was guiding it through the parking lot with one of his arms calmly draped across the steering wheel. He was probably used to these outbursts.

Elise shot me a look over her shoulder. "Those were the words Mrs. Harris said while talking about Macbeth. She said we should cultivate a

sense of wonder about the artistry of the language.”

I vaguely remembered this, but I couldn’t see why Elise was upset about it. Shakespearean English was artistic. Poetic. Something you couldn’t gulp down but had to take in slow, savoring sips.

“I told you I wanted to drop Honors English,” she said. “I was going to skip that class and get my homework done. But no, you dragged me into English in front of the teacher.” Elise looked up at the car’s ceiling. “I bet I could’ve gone for months before they caught me. And then I could have said I misunderstood my schedule and thought I had a study period. So not only did I not get my math and biology done, I have to write a paper comparing and contrasting Shakespearean heroes.”

Josh didn’t say a word about this, just looked straight ahead as he pulled out onto the road.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But you can’t skip class for months—you have to take four years of English to graduate. What if they made you take summer school to make it up?”

She grunted. “I’d like to see them try.”

I blinked at her. “If you don’t do what they want, they don’t hand you a diploma.”

Another grunt. “Who cares about graduating?” She shoved her backpack off the seat and onto the floor. “Forget this. I’m not doing my homework. I’m going to go find someplace to party.”

“At three o’clock on a Tuesday? Good luck with that.”

“Anything is better than contrasting Shakespearean heroes.”

“Actually,” I said, still trying to make her see reason. “I can think of a lot of things that are worse. Like washing dishes for a living because you didn’t graduate from high school.”

She stared out the window, her chin raised stubbornly. “I didn’t expect you to understand.”

“You’re right. I don’t understand.” *I don’t understand how I let myself get trapped in this car with you, and I especially don’t understand why I introduced you to my friends when I had an inkling you were insane all along.*

We rode quietly in the car for a while. I studied the back of Josh’s neck. It bothered me he hadn’t said anything, that he hadn’t taken a stand one way or the other. I couldn’t determine whose side he was on. Judging from the

fact that he had quoted Shakespeare this morning, I guessed he wasn't the type that skipped classes, but his silence seemed to indicate otherwise.

Elise turned around again, "Seriously—is getting shiny new As on your report card all you want from life? You'll jump through whatever hoops your teachers and your parents wave in front of you just so you can get a little bit of praise?"

"Those A's on my report card are going to get me into a good college. Hopefully with a scholarship."

"So you can do the whole thing over for your professors. Has it ever occurred to you that no one in real life cares about the similarities and differences in Shakespeare's heroes? No one cares about most of the stuff they force us to learn and regurgitate. It's just a waste of time."

"Learning isn't a waste." *Jump in any time to support me, Josh.* "Mrs. Harris isn't trying to teach us about the differences between Hamlet and Macbeth, she's trying to teach us how to think."

Josh never said a word; he just kept driving. He may have even slowed down to prolong the agony of the conversation.

"Some of us already know how to think," Elise said. And with that, she turned forward and ignored me. Graveyard silence filled the car. At last, we reached my house. I nearly leaped out onto the sidewalk.

"Bye, Elise." *Thanks for nothing, Josh.*

I shook as I walked inside. Elise hadn't just attacked Mr. Harris's homework assignment, she'd attacked me—who I was. I cared about those shiny little As on my report card. According to Elise, that meant I didn't know how to think.

Mom was in the living room with her sketch pad. "You're home early."

I dropped my backpack on the floor and sank onto the couch. "I got a ride home with Elise. You know, the psychotic new girl on our street."

"Did she flip you off on the way home?"

"No, she told me I was jumping through hoops to get the praise of my teachers and parents."

Mom made sweeping lines on her paper. "Like that's a bad thing."

"I don't jump through hoops," I said crossly. "I do a thorough job because I care about my education."

Mom looked up from her paper. "I was just joking."

I didn't answer and Mom went back to her drawing. "Maybe you shouldn't hang around with Elise. I don't think she's the type of friend you

want.”

“You’re telling me.”

Mom paused, then glanced up at me again. “I talked to Rachel Taylor today, and she told me some things about Elise. It seems she got expelled in California. She and some of her friends vandalized their school. The police were involved.”

“Oh.” That must be what Samantha knew. She was keeping her distance because she thought Elise was one of those kids who would constantly be in trouble. Maybe she was right.

I went up to my room to do homework. I always did homework right after school. That way the information was still fresh in my mind and I could do a better job. Besides, I liked having it out of the way so I had time to do whatever I wanted in the evening.

Only with Anjie gone, I didn’t have much to do in the evening.

As I did my homework today, I kept thinking about the things Elise said. She was wrong, I told myself. Clearly wrong. Expelled wrong. So why did her accusations keep running through my mind?

I didn’t care about my grades too much. It was normal, wasn’t it, to do homework right after school?

Maybe it wasn’t. Maybe I’d never have another best friend because I didn’t socialize enough. First I’d start talking to myself, then to the cat, and before long I’d be communicating with people through the great beyond.

When I got to my English homework, I flipped through *The Works of Shakespeare* to decide which characters to compare and contrast to Macbeth. Last year we studied Othello, Hamlet, Romeo, and Julius Caesar. They’d all died hideous deaths, which meant either Shakespeare or Mrs. Harris liked to see men in misery and ruin.

I chose Othello because he’d be easy to compare to Macbeth. They were both power-hungry leaders with trust issues.

Since it was an easy comparison, I was clearly not jumping through any hoops. I could have chosen Romeo, who would have been more difficult. Romeo’s downfall had been love and rashness and a complete inability to communicate with Juliet about important issues such as faking one’s own death.

When you thought about it, a lot of Shakespeare’s characters had communication problems. I flipped through some more pages, wondering if

that was a dramatic device or if it was an underlying theme of Shakespeare's work. Maybe it said something about his personality.

Now *that* would be an interesting paper—a psychoanalysis of Shakespeare using his plays and sonnets to decipher his personality. I didn't have time for that sort of research before this assignment was due, but I could do it someday. Maybe in college.

I was estimating how long it would take to read the complete *Works of Shakespeare* and simultaneously wondering if the fact that I was thinking about reading more Shakespeare meant I was hopelessly boring, when Mom called, "Cassidy, someone is here to see you."

I knew it was Elise. Who else would've shown up at my house instead of calling my phone? I wondered if she'd come to apologize or just to ask me where the easiest place to buy liquor was.

I slowly left my room. I didn't want to see her.

When I reached the staircase, I saw Mom talking with someone downstairs. Two steps later I saw that it wasn't Elise. It was Josh.

He was looking at some of Mom's paintings on the wall but turned when he heard me coming down the stairs. "Hi, Cassidy."

"Hi, Josh."

"Well," Mom said, "I think I'll go start dinner now." It was an obvious exit and made me feel even more awkward. I tried not to blush.

Josh gazed at me hesitantly. "Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure." I walked into our living room and sat on the couch.

He sat on the loveseat beside me. He leaned forward, keeping his voice low. "Look, I'm sorry about the way Elise acted on the way home."

"It wasn't your fault. Why should you apologize?"

He hesitated. I could tell he was debating what to say. "You wouldn't know it now, but Elise was a straight-A student from kindergarten through junior high. She's got an IQ that would let her run for Mensa president. But last year she got in with a bad crowd—a loser boyfriend and a bunch of dimwit fashionistas who were always skipping school to get wasted. It's one of the reasons my parents moved here. A fresh start and all that."

His blue eyes fixed on mine earnestly. "She needs good friends, and I can tell you'd be that for her."

It wasn't a question, and yet it was. He was waiting for my answer.

"I don't think she wants to be my friend," I said.

“She doesn’t know what she wants right now...well, except to bother my parents. She’s pretty clear about that goal.” He tapped his hand absentmindedly against his armrest. “I’m the one who had to move during his senior year, but the way she carries on you’d think it was the other way around.”

I felt a tug of sympathy for him then. It would be hard to start at a new school your senior year, especially if one of the reasons you moved was that your younger sister had been expelled from your last high school. Most guys would be angry at their sister for that, but Josh was here in my living room trying to convince me to be Elise’s friend.

Sitting across from him, I noticed for the first time what a pretty shade of blue his eyes were. Bright blue. Almost like Chad’s.

“She’s actually fun,” Josh said, “when she’s not drunk or angry.”

“What percentage of the time is that?”

He chuckled. “Do you want an estimate or empirical data?”

Empirical. I didn’t know what the word meant, so I couldn’t answer. Which bothered me. Vocabulary was one of the things they tested on the SATs. I definitely needed to read more Shakespeare.

“Look,” Josh said, “would you give Elise another chance? Just let her know you’re still willing to be her friend?”

I hesitated. I didn’t want more car trips like the one this afternoon. And our first meeting where Elise had let her gigantic dog sit on me—yeah, I could do without that sort of thing too. The rational response would be to tell Josh that I wished Elise the best, but we were too different to be friends.

I didn’t say those words though. Maybe it was thoughts of Anjie struggling to fit in at her new school. Maybe I saw a little bit of myself in Elise. Or maybe I just didn’t want to see a good IQ go to waste. I let out a deep breath and said, “Okay.”

Josh smiled. “Great. Can I pick you up tomorrow for school?”

“Sure.”

“Can I pick you up at the bus stop so Elise doesn’t know I’ve talked with you?”

“What if she doesn’t want you to pick me up tomorrow?”

“She will.” He got up and sent me another smile. “Thanks, Cassidy. See you later.”

“See you.” I walked him to the door.

Within seconds my mother poked around the corner. “Who was that guy?”

“Josh. He’s Elise’s brother.”

“Is he psychotic too?”

“I don’t think so.”

Mom peered out the blinds and watched Josh walking down the sidewalk toward his house. “He looks old. How old is he?”

“He’s a senior.”

Mom raised an eyebrow. “Mmm-hmm.”

“It’s not what you think. He just came over to talk to me about Elise. He wants me to give her a second chance.”

“Does he know you’re only a sophomore?”

“I don’t think it matters to him.”

Mom turned back to me. “Well, it matters to me. I don’t think it’s a good idea to date a guy who’s eighteen.”

“Then you shouldn’t date him.” I headed up the stairs. “I fully support that decision.”

“Very funny.” Mom went back to looking out the blinds.

This was not the end of the discussion, though. While I helped make dinner, she kept making little dating comments like, “Standards are more important than looks when you choose a boyfriend,” and “You know, it would be better if you dated boys your own age; then you’d be on the same experience level.”

Most of the boys my age had passed my “experience level” sometime around the seventh grade. I didn’t tell Mom that. It would have only made her panic.

At dinner, Mom told Dad about Josh’s visit. “A boy came to see Cassidy today.”

“It wasn’t a real boy,” I said.

“He wasn’t a real boy?” Dad asked.

“No, I mean he didn’t actually come to see me.”

Mom poked at things on her plate. “He certainly didn’t come to see me.”

“It was only Elise’s brother. He came to talk to me about Elise.”

“He’s a senior,” Mom told Dad, “and very handsome.” The way she said it, *handsome* sounded like some terrible character flaw.

Dad cut into his lasagna and grunted disapprovingly. "Perhaps we need to get to know him better."

"No, you don't," I said. "I don't want you saying anything to him. You'll embarrass me."

Mom stopped eating. "We won't embarrass you. We know how to make casual conversation with your friends."

"You'll embarrass me."

"Ohhh," Dad said. He sounded like Sherlock Holmes discovering something.

I put down my fork. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You must really like this boy if you're so concerned about us talking to him."

"I can't believe this," I said. "He was here for five minutes, and you're acting like I'm going to run off with him. When I do start dating, I'm never bringing any guys here." I picked up my fork and stabbed my lasagna. I didn't take my eyes off my plate, but I could tell my parents were exchanging exasperated looks.

Dad changed the subject and talked about work. Mom made remarks every once in a while. I finished dinner in silence.

Before I went to sleep, Mom came in to talk to me. She sat down on the side of my bed like she'd done when I was a little girl and she told me bedtime stories. "I'm sorry about dinner. I guess I'm not quite ready for you to grow up."

"Look on the bright side. I might never get asked out."

"Yes, you will. You're beautiful, intelligent, and talented." She stroked my hair and sighed. "Soon you'll be busy trying to keep the herds of boys away."

"No, I won't. That's your job."

"And I'll do it with great diligence."

"Mom, he really did come to talk about Elise." I don't know why I told her that again. Perhaps it was because I didn't want her to be disappointed when Josh never showed up again. Maybe it was because I wanted her to convince me otherwise. But she didn't. She just kissed me and said goodnight.

I was nervous the next day at the bus stop. I almost hoped Josh and Elise wouldn't come. What would I say to Elise? "Hi there. Ready for another day of Honors English?" Or perhaps, "How's your sense of wonder this morning?" The only thing I could do was hope she said something to me first.

I'd begun to think I would end up riding the bus after all when Josh pulled up.

Elise opened her window. "Hey, do you want a ride?"

"Sure." I climbed into the back seat.

No one said anything for a minute. The quiet panicked me. I could picture the whole long, silent ride to school.

I was developing a healthy aversion to Nissans when Elise finally spoke. "I'm sorry I laid into you yesterday. It's just...I'm the type of person who wants to experience life instead of listening to teachers tell me about it. *Carpe diem*. Seize the day."

"Right," Josh said. "The way you live life, what you mostly experience is detentions and hangovers. Why don't you try seizing something else for a while?"

Elise rolled her eyes. "That was today's motivational quote, brought to you by HolierThanThou.com."

Elise and Josh were obviously not having one of their better days together.

I looked out the windows longingly.

Elise turned back toward me and went on, “Anyway, I’m sorry about yesterday. I want to be your friend, but I have to warn you that I’m not some straight-laced scholar like the rest of your friends. I don’t want to sit around and discuss quantum physics or Machiavelli. Life is too short for that crap.”

I didn’t know what to say. All I could think about was what a waste it was. Elise had a Mensa IQ and she was shrugging off school and learning like it meant nothing. Like that kind of intelligence wasn’t a gift. I knew I was smart, but those shiny new As on my report cards had come through hard work. They’d come through long nights of studying when watching TV would’ve been easier.

“You’re selling yourself short,” I said. “You need to think about your future.”

“I am,” Elise replied glibly. “I plan to be partying in the future too.”

Josh shifted his gaze to her, disapproving. “You’ll be living it up with all the other alcoholics at the homeless shelter.”

Elise waved a dismissive hand in his direction. “And you’ll be boxed up in a cubicle, crunching little numbers for a living. Which is worse?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said. “While I’m in Hawaii for two weeks of paid vacation, you’ll be in detox.”

Elise sat back in her seat with a frustrated thud. “I’ll get a degree and job *eventually*. Which is all the more reason to have fun now. School and work—it’s all drudgery. It’s being a cog in a machine that makes money for someone else.”

“I don’t like every class,” I said, “but you have to take the good with the bad.” I leaned toward her, trying to connect to a part of her that I knew was there somewhere. “Haven’t you ever learned something that made you feel like your mind had physically expanded—that you became more—just because you understood something new?”

For a moment, I saw a flicker of recognition in her eyes, then it was gone—pushed away. “If school makes you happy, great. Spit out as many assignments as your teacher asks for. But getting good grades never won me friends, increased my popularity, or gave me something to do on Saturday nights. So I’d appreciate it if everyone would let me live my own life instead of trying to make me live theirs.”

Josh shook his head, resigned, and turned on the radio. He flipped through the stations without saying anything else. Elise took out her cell

phone and read through text messages. I went back to looking out the window and wondered how many times Josh planned on picking me up in the morning.

I mentally compiled a list of excuses to get out of this new ritual: I was sick, running late, had to go to school early for tutoring. Better yet—I had to log more time driving for my learner’s permit, so I needed to drive to school with my mom every morning. Mom would probably agree to it. All I had to do was tell her I had a massive crush on Josh and then ask her how long a girl should know a guy before it was all right to French kiss. She’d be falling over herself to get me out of his car.

“I can’t believe it,” Elise said, scowling at her phone. “Bella hooked up with Carter.”

Josh pulled onto the street that led to the high school. “Is that Isabell or Isn’tabell? I could never keep track of the Bellas.”

“Bella Rogers,” Elise said. “The slut.”

As though interpreting for me, Josh said, “Carter was Elise’s boyfriend. Bella Rogers—Isn’tabell to me—was one of Elise’s loyal friends that she was distraught about leaving behind.”

Elise kept staring at her phone’s screen. “I’ve been gone for what—twenty minutes?”

“Maybe it’s just gossip,” I said.

Elise flashed her phone at me. The picture on the screen showed a girl in a bikini top lip-locked with a bronzed, shirtless guy.

“Oh,” I said. “I guess not.”

Elise turned back in her seat and began texting with much more force than the process required. She muttered as she did this, and despite all the flack she’d given school, she had a thesaurus full of synonyms for the word slut.



I DIDN’T SEE Elise when I went to lunch. I figured she had either skipped out on school altogether because of the Carter-Bella thing or found other people to eat with—people who weren’t straight-laced scholars. I didn’t know whether to feel sorry for her or offended.

I wasn't sure how much Carter had meant to her. She hadn't seemed too attached to her boyfriend when she'd ogled Chad yesterday. But then, to see your friend kissing your boyfriend—and kissing him out in public where people could snap photos and send them to you—ouch. Low blow. Hallmark should make sympathy cards for those sorts of occasions.

I hadn't expected to see Elise in English, either, but she was already sitting at her table, speed-reading *Macbeth*, when I came in.

I walked over. "How's it going?"

She didn't look up. "I'm mired in Shakespeare. That pretty much says it all."

"We missed you at lunch. Are you hungry?" It was completely juvenile, but I was fishing to see whether she'd skipped out or found someone more worthy to sit with.

She flipped over a page. "Josh took me out. I had three McDonald's hot fudge sundaes."

"Sounds better than cafeteria food."

"Yeah." She flipped another page, still skimming.

"Your brother is really nice." I had already upgraded him from a nine to a nine and a half. And then, because I didn't want her to think I had a thing for him, I added, "It makes me wish I had a brother."

"There are days when I would gladly rent him out." She glanced up at me for the first time. "But I guess not today."

Samantha Taylor's mom was not only involved in her daughter's school activities, but also in all sorts of community boards, activities, and fundraisers. I figured she planned on running for something someday—mayor or senator or Mother of the Year—and wanted a resume that would put every other candidate to shame. This wouldn't have mattered to me, except that our mothers were friends, so I often got dragged into projects right alongside my mother.

Last month, we went over to the Taylor's house with a bunch of other women to tie quilts for a homeless shelter in Seattle. I'd pointed out to my mother that the homeless people would be just as happy with a quilt we bought at a department store, but she made me go anyway. For my mother, these projects were as much about socializing with the neighbors as they were about getting anything done.

This might not have been so bad if Samantha and I were still friends, but we weren't. Mrs. Taylor either didn't know or didn't want to accept this fact. She was always directing me to where Samantha and her friends were, as though they would be glad to see me. It was awkward.

On Wednesday after dinner, Mrs. Taylor, my mom, and a dozen other women were going over to a caterer's to use their kitchen to make and freeze fifteen-hundred cookies for the homecoming dance. This way the school could keep the price of the dance down. Baking probably would have been fun, but I wasn't doing that. My mother volunteered me to babysit the kids of the women who were baking. Mrs. Taylor set up crafts for the kids at her house so they could have fun too. I wanted to point out

that it was for this exact reason that God had given children two parents—so that dads could watch children while their wives were out doing things—but it wouldn't have done any good. Mom hadn't let me buy a quilt so I could skip out on making one from scratch. I knew she wouldn't let me go AWOL on babysitting. I was just glad that Mrs. Taylor had invited Mrs. Benson to help make cookies because Mrs. Benson had volunteered Elise to babysit too. Otherwise, I would've been stuck all night with Samantha and her evil cheerleading twin, Chelsea.

Elise and I walked over to the Taylor's together, slowly strolling down the street. Autumn had reached the trees, and orange leaves scattered around our feet. When I was little, I loved seeing the trees like this, dressed up in fancy colors. I still liked them, but I couldn't forget that this spurt of sunset colors meant that winter was coming. Months of cold weather, gray skies, and trees that looked like skeletal hands reaching out from the ground.

Elise had been upbeat all day—a fake kind of upbeat that meant she was refusing to let herself think about Carter and whichever of the Bellas had stolen her boyfriend. But now, Elise wasn't even trying to sound happy. “I can't believe my mother said I would do this. Like I don't do enough free babysitting as it is. I swear, there must be some sign on my shirt that says ‘This girl is a professional nose-wiper.’”

“Tell me about it,” I said. “We're babysitting so our moms can make cookies for the homecoming dance, and I bet I don't even get asked to go.”

Elise sized me up after this statement. “You may have a point. We have to work on your guy skills.”

I wasn't sure whether to be pleased or insulted by that suggestion. After all, I'd already been trying to improve my guy skills. Or at least I'd been trying to improve myself, which should have automatically improved my attractiveness.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She let her gaze run over me in a mournful sort of way—the way someone looks at a stained shirt that might be beyond saving. “You're too serious. You don't send out a ‘fun’ vibe.”

I bristled. “Just because a person is serious, doesn't mean they aren't fun.” And really, I wasn't even sure I *was* serious. Anjie had never accused me of being serious.

“You know what we ought to do,” Elise said, ignoring my assertion. “We ought to go up on campus and pretend to be college students. It would

be so easy to pick up cute guys there.”

“My parents definitely wouldn’t like that.”

“Why are you so concerned about what your parents think? You’re an only child. Take advantage of it. Your chances of being disowned are slim.”

“Yes, but my chances of being grounded are high.”

Elise sighed. “You admit you live under an oppressive dictatorship and yet you do nothing to resist. Exercise some civil disobedience. Haven’t you ever read Thoreau?”

“Yeah, and I don’t remember a chapter on picking up college guys.”

She kicked at some leaves and they fluttered limply off the sidewalk. “Well, it’s not like we have to give the guys our real names.”

I sent her a look of disbelief.

“Oh, come on. Carter is probably making out with my ex-best friend even as we speak. I need to have something fun to look forward to this weekend.”

It was getting dark enough that the streetlights came on, glowing dully in the evening sky. “How about we do something nice and normal, like... bowling?”

“Bowling?” she repeated with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

“Bowling would be good for you. You throw things and knock around all those pins.”

Elise considered this. “How about a compromise? We’ll play tennis. At least you don’t have to wear stupid shoes to play tennis. You know how to play, right?”

I nodded. “Tennis would be fun.”

“And if we play on campus, maybe we can find some cute guys to play doubles with. I’ll be Trixie. You can be Bambi.”

I gave her another incredulous look. I was getting quite good at facial expressions. “We’re not giving guys fake bimbo names.”

“Okay. I’ll be Claudette and you can be Rowena.”

We’d almost reached the Taylor’s house, a brick two-story with a big bay window in the front. I slowed a bit more. “Why don’t you join the chess club? We meet a couple of times a week after school and everybody there is really nice. And it’s mostly guys.”

“Are any of them cute?”

“Yeah.” Most were cute in the way puppies were cute, but I didn’t elaborate on that. I wanted Elise to meet nice people. Smart people. People

who didn't vandalize schools in their spare time. "Come on, Elise. I bet you've been playing chess since you were eight years old."

"I was six," she said. "Josh taught me."

"You can try to hide the fact that you're smart, but you're really one of us. You're not going to be happy with some brainless, hot guy."

"I might be," she said. "I'm willing to give it a try."

"How smart were Carter and Bella?" I asked.

Her lips twitched, then pursed into an unhappy grimace.

"I rest my case," I said.

She didn't comment, just looked out at the houses sullenly.

"You don't have to play dumb to have friends here," I said. "Embrace your inner genius."

She let out a sigh. "Okay, I'll try the chess club a couple of times. But only until I find something better to do."

Chelsea's old Ford was already parked in front of Samantha's house, looking cheap in comparison to the Taylor's BMW. We rang the doorbell and Mrs. Taylor answered. She was securing the back of a gold loop earring in one of her ears. It was just like Mrs. Taylor to dress up to go someplace where she would have to wear a hair net.

"Hello, Cassidy," she chimed, finishing with her earring. "And you must be Elise. Come in, come in." She stepped aside to make room for us. "So far we've got eight kids, but more are coming. Let me take you downstairs." She headed in that direction, still speaking. "I've set up a couple of different centers for the kids so they won't get bored. There are some ceramic pumpkins for the older kids to decorate, and the younger kids can make ghosts out of marshmallows and lollipops. They're just the cutest things. Oh, and I also have some sugar cookies for them to decorate to look like jack-o-lanterns."

We followed her down the stairs to the large game room.

"Sam!" Mrs. Taylor called. "Your friends are here!"

That sort of comment always made me wonder if Mrs. Taylor had actually talked to Samantha in the last three years.

Chelsea and Samantha were setting up supplies at several different card tables, laying out paper plates, plastic knives, and tubs of orange frosting. A group of children hovered nearby, eyeing the food. Chelsea and Samantha barely looked up when we walked in.

Mrs. Taylor towed us over to them anyway. "Chelsea, have you met Elise yet? She moved in a couple of days ago."

"Hi," Chelsea said, then went back to pouring candy corns into a bowl.

Mrs. Taylor smiled at Elise. "We're so glad you could help us out tonight, and it'll be fun for the girls to get to know you better. Your mother tells me you surf."

"I used to," Elise said. "The only place to surf around here is the internet."

"Surfing sounds like so much fun," Mrs. Taylor said. "Don't you think that sounds fun, Sam?"

"Yeah," Samantha said in a voice that didn't show any enthusiasm.

Mrs. Taylor surveyed the room. "Well, I think you have everything you need. We shouldn't be gone for more than a few hours. Call if you have any problems." She glided up the stairs and disappeared.

Elise and I set up folding chairs around the tables. By the time we finished, five more kids came. Most were in the four-to-six-year-old range, although there was one boy who couldn't have been more than two. He wouldn't let go of his sister's hand and followed her wherever she went.

Samantha briskly divided the kids into two groups and sent the younger ones over to Elise and me. She and Chelsea didn't really talk to us after that.

The crafts went bad quickly. The children managed to get frosting everywhere. They didn't like the licorice pieces we'd set out to use as mouths, and they made vampire teeth out of the candy corns. I took the bowl away when a freckle-faced boy tried to shove some up his nose.

None of the kids wanted to make ghosts, although the same boy entertained the other kids by shoving a succession of marshmallows into his mouth until I took that bag away too. I was afraid he'd either spit out a huge marshmallow blob or choke on them.

All of that took about half an hour. Then the kids were bored.

"Story time!" Elise told them and made them sit down in a semicircle at the far end of the room. She rifled through the diaper bags until she came up with a few picture books. She handed me the first one.

I put on my cheeriest face. "Do you want to hear the story of *Danny and the Dinosaur*?"

"No," the marshmallow kid said. "I already know how it ends. He learns how to play baseball."

I ignored the kid and peered down at the other faces. “How many of you like dinosaurs?”

The marshmallow boy wiggled his feet so they hit the boy sitting next to him. “Dinosaurs can’t really play baseball. They’d eat people.”

I was beginning to remember all of the reasons I hated babysitting.

Elise stepped in front of the kids. “Do you know the reason you’ve never seen me before?”

Half the kids looked at her blankly. The other half shook their heads, not grasping the nature of rhetorical questions.

“I’m Santa’s helper from the North Pole,” she said. “I’m here to check and see whether you’re being naughty or nice.”

Five pairs of eyes grew wide. Marshmallow boy’s eyes grew narrow. “Santa doesn’t send people to check up on you.”

Elise nodded in agreement. “Usually he doesn’t, but you’re a borderline case. Santa can’t decide whether to give you presents or coal. He told me you didn’t share the toys he gave you last year and you also sass your mother.”

The boy gulped and sat very still. He didn’t say a word for the rest of storytime. The other kids, however, wouldn’t stay quiet. All through my reading of *Danny and the Dinosaur*, they kept interrupting me to ask Elise questions about the North Pole.

“Where does Santa keep the reindeer?” one girl asked.

“We used to keep them outside, but they kept flying away and getting lost, so now they’re inside.”

“Inside the house?”

“Sure. It’s a big house. They’re like pets, only they leave hoof prints on the ceiling sometimes. It bothers Mrs. Claus when they do that.”

When it was Elise’s turn to read, she picked a book of classic fairy tales but changed the stories. She was in the middle of telling how Cinderella told off her wicked stepsisters, took one of their dresses, and went to the ball on her own, when a girl raised her hand. “My little brother did a doo-doo.”

Elise regarded her patiently. “Santa’s special helpers don’t change diapers. But do you see that girl over there?” Elise pointed to Samantha at the craft table. “She’s common, ordinary rabble, and she’d be happy to take care of any doo-doo you’ve done. Boys and girls, repeat after me: Samantha does the doo-doo.”

The children chorused, “Samantha does the doo-doo,” while the girl led her brother over to the craft table. I did my best not to smirk at Samantha’s facial expression.

Elise opened the book of fairy tales again. Now then, back to Cinderella. What have we learned from this story?”

The children stared up at her with blank faces.

“We’ve learned you can’t trust fairy godmothers to get you to the ball. If you want to go someplace in life, you have to get there yourself.”

After Elise finished discussing this principle with the children, she went on to tell them the story of how Snow White left the seven dwarves and got a degree in advertising. The kids began yelling out questions about other storybook characters. What happened to Shrek? To Mulan? To Rapunzel?

“Rapunzel went to beauty school,” I said. “So she could finally give herself a decent haircut.”

The children laughed, but they weren’t the only ones. I heard deep male laughter and looked up to see Josh carrying a little girl. Another of Elise’s sisters trotted along beside him, half skipping as she came over to us. Josh plunked the littlest girl into our semicircle of children. “Abby and Olivia were convinced you were having more fun here,” he said. “I had to bring them.”

“How thoughtful,” Elise said. “You know how much I love entertaining kids.”

“You’re a natural,” I told her.

“I’ve had a lot of practice.” To the seated children, she said, “Do you know who this guy is?”

“Josh!” her little sisters chimed together.

“That’s right!” Elise said with excitement. “It’s Josh, Santa’s bouncer. He does security at the North Pole.” She gestured to him. “He’ll show you some of his tricks. You guys can try to tackle him, and he’ll show you what he does to the rowdy elves.”

The kids jumped up and swarmed him with glee.

“Thanks,” Josh told Elise, but he got down on the floor and wrestled with the kids, laughing. I guess he’d had lots of practice too.

Abby and Olivia weren’t interested in wrestling with Josh, so Elise got out cookies for them to decorate. I sat down on the floor with Josh and the kids and did crowd control—keeping too many kids from crawling on him at a time. When Josh had had enough of that, he told them we would play

rock-a-bye-baby with them. This consisted of him taking a blanket from the couch and holding on to one end, while Elise held onto the other like it was a hammock. I put a child inside, and they rocked him back and forth while we all sang the song.

The kids loved it. As I sang along, I watched Elise and Josh, entranced. Usually, I'm fine with being an only child. Sometimes I'm even glad that there's no one else around to bother me. But right then I felt the loss. This is what having brothers and sisters would have been like—this fun, this noise. I envied Elise the inside jokes she shared with Josh. I envied the way her little sisters looked up at her with admiration. I would never have any of that.

The older children abandoned their crafts and came over asking for rock-a-bye-baby rides, so Samantha and Chelsea got another blanket and formed a second line. We swung the kids until the first mother came by to pick up her children; then Samantha told the kids if they helped us clean up, they could have some cookies to take home. While Elise and I folded up the chairs, Samantha sidled up to Josh with a gleaming smile. "I don't think we've officially met. I'm Samantha Taylor."

"I'm Josh Benson." He nodded over to a table where Olivia and Abby had gone to dip their cookies into the bowl of frosting. "Those are my sisters. Unless they're misbehaving, and then they're Elise's sisters."

Samantha let out a tinkling laugh. "You just moved in, right?"

"A couple of days ago."

"If you need any help getting around or if you have questions, feel free to ask me. I'm available." The way she said it made it clear she was available for more than questions.

I didn't hear more of their conversation because Elise came up behind me. She whispered, "Great. The cheerleader is hitting on my brother. I will totally gag if she starts showing up at my house."

"Make sure she sits in Goliath's chair," I said.

"It will be her seat of honor."

We took our chairs over to the far side of the room and stacked them against the wall. "I bet she starts being nice to me now," Elise said. "Girls always do once they like Josh."

"Tell Samantha he likes dingy, helpless girls who snort when they laugh."

Elise raised an eyebrow at me. “You have an evil streak, Cassidy. I like it.”

I snuck a glance at Josh. He was smiling at something Samantha had said. “Do you think he’ll like her?”

“No. Josh thinks he’s too mature for anyone my age.”

“Oh.” That pronouncement shouldn’t have stung but did anyway. Josh thought I was immature. “How lovely for us.”

A little while later my mother stopped by to give me a ride home. She asked if Elise needed a ride home too, but Josh had brought his car so Elise declined the offer. Mom spent a few moments exchanging pleasantries with Elise, asking her how she liked her classes and that sort of thing. Mom was all smiles, but I could tell she was watching Elise closely, evaluating her, probably waiting for her to do something psychotic.

Elise didn’t, of course.

On the ride home I told my mom, “Elise’s really funny and she’s nice too. All of the stuff before—I think that was just her having a hard time moving to a new place.”

“Why was her brother there?” Mom asked. “I don’t think Rachel will be happy when she finds out you had guys over while you all were babysitting.”

“It was just one guy, and he was only there because Elise’s little sisters wanted to come. I thought it was nice of him to stay and play games with the kids.”

“Hmm,” Mom said, unconvinced.

Really, my mother was way too suspicious. What sort of illicit thing did she think was happening with fourteen little kids running around the room?

The next morning at breakfast, my mother mentioned to my father that she had met Elise’s parents. Mr. Benson had dropped his wife off at the caterer’s, gone to their store to do some work, and picked her up again when the women finished making cookies.

“The Bensons are that boy’s parents...Josh, right?”

“They’re Elise’s parents,” I said.

Dad grunted unhappily about this. “We should get to know them better.”

“No, you shouldn’t.”

“We’re friendly people,” Dad said. “We like to meet our neighbors.” He turned to my mom. “So what did you think of them?”

“They weren’t what I was expecting—you know, after all the things I’ve heard about Elise.” She shook some salt onto her eggs. “They were friendly, intelligent, caring, well-mannered...If they’d been stunningly good-looking, they could’ve been us.”

Dad considered this for a moment. “Well, I guess teenagers rebel even in the best of families.”

Then in unison, their gazes both fixed on me.

I nearly choked on my scrambled eggs. “What?” I asked.

“Don’t ever do that to us,” Mom said.

Dad nodded.

“You don’t need to worry.” I sipped my orange juice. “I don’t plan on vandalizing my school.”

Mom picked up her toast but didn’t take a bite. “The drinking is what I worry about. Girls get taken advantage of when they’re drunk. If anyone even offers you alcohol, just walk away. Don’t even discuss it.”

“I will,” I assured them firmly. But it didn’t matter what I said. I suppose the years of parenting had predisposed them to lecturing, and they couldn’t help themselves. For the rest of breakfast, I got the full discourse on the traps and pitfalls of teenage life.

On Friday, Elise stayed after school and went to chess club with me. Throughout the day, she'd insisted that the fact that chess club was held on Friday was a clear sign none of the people in it had social lives; but despite all that, she had fun. She'd printed out tiny pictures of Carter and Bella and taped them to her opponent's king and queen. "It's to give me the incentive to win," she said.

She won one game and lost another, but the one she lost was to Bob Matthews, and he almost always won. I'd never beaten him.

Afterward, while my mom drove us home, I said, "See, didn't you have fun?"

Elise leaned back into her seat. "It has obviously been so long since you had fun that you've forgotten what it's like."

"We can play tennis tomorrow," I told her and quickly added, "at the high school courts." Just in case she was still harboring thoughts of being Bambi and Trixie on campus.

Elise sighed, but in the end, she agreed.

We weren't the only ones at the high school Saturday morning. A couple of tennis courts were taken and a few students were using the track. Elise checked around for cute guys, but finding no one she deemed interesting, she concentrated on the game. I wasn't much of a challenge for her. She had neglected to tell me she was skilled at the sport. She was one of those people who could place the ball anywhere. I spent my time sprinting around the court and considered myself lucky if I hit the ball back over the net. After she humiliated me in the first set, I insisted that we didn't keep score

and that she return all my balls whether they were in or not. It made the game fairer.

For the next half an hour, I ran back and forth across the court while Elise coolly returned balls. Finally, she said, "Let's take a break and get a drink."

"What do you need water for?" I panted. "You haven't even broken a sweat."

With a wicked grin, Elise nodded toward the school. That's when I saw the guys. Chad and Mike were about to use the track. They were warming up by the drinking fountain.

"I'm suddenly thirsty," I said. "And my water bottle is empty."

"Mine too," Elise said, and we headed toward the drinking fountains.

We were halfway there before I realized I was not only thirsty but also hot, sweaty, and bedraggled. I pushed loose strands of hair back into my ponytail and hoped I looked sporty.

Chad and Mike lay on the ground, each with one leg bent and one leg straight, stretching out. I had no idea how to start a conversation with them. I racked my brain for something to say, but the only thing that came to mind was *Hi, remember me? We talked about the school stew once.* I got a drink from the fountain and hoped for inspiration.

Elise stopped in front of them, blatantly considering them. "That's good," she said, "but if you want to make the cheerleading squad you have to do the splits all the way."

Chad glanced at her and smiled. "I'll remember that if I ever go out for cheerleading."

Elise swung her racket lazily back and forth. "They don't work you hard enough at football practice, so you come here in your spare time?"

Mike shrugged. "You can't take a break if you want to be the best."

"What a wonderful motto," Elise said. "And it sounds like the beginning of a cheer. Are you sure you don't want to go out for cheerleading?"

"I think I'll stick with football," Chad said. "I like knocking men down."

"So do the cheerleaders, from what I hear."

Chad and Mike both laughed.

I still couldn't think of anything to say. Why was this so easy for Elise?

Chad switched legs and stretched again. He was tan and muscular, and I couldn't keep my eyes off him.

Elise spun her racket slowly between her hands. “You know, I don’t know why they don’t have cheerleaders for tennis. It’s the more difficult sport.”

“Yeah, right.” Chad tilted his chin down in mock challenge. “I’d like to see the tennis team do squats or bench press two-fifty.”

“They could do it,” Mike said, “collectively.”

Elise paused to take a quick drink of water. “If tennis is so easy, you think you could beat us?”

“Sure,” Chad said, “right after you take us on in football.”

“We could do it,” she said airily. “Where’s the football? Let’s play.”

I’d gone back to take another drink of water and nearly coughed some up my nose. What was Elise thinking? I couldn’t throw a football, and even if *she* could, I couldn’t catch one. Flirting was hard enough without turning it into a contact sport.

Mike straightened his legs, done with his stretches. “We didn’t bring a football with us.”

“In that case,” Elise said. “You lose. I’m pretty sure that’s how the rules go.” She was still spinning her racket but looking at Mike now instead of Chad. “Are you up for a game of tennis? Cassidy could lend you her racket.”

I prayed he would say yes. It would leave Chad and me on the sidelines watching them. “I’d be your cheerleader,” I put in. “What was your motto again? Something about being the best?”

Chad let his blue eyes rest on me. “You can’t take a break if you want to be the best.”

I liked the sensation of having him gaze at me, of holding his attention even for a few seconds. “Right. The best. That should be easy to rhyme with something.” I looked upward considering. “The rest. The blessed. The dressed. The stressed...watercress.”

“Infest,” Elise added. “Oppressed. Digest.”

“Abreast—” I broke off because Chad and Mike both started laughing.

“I want to hear that cheer,” Chad said. “Go ahead and tell me that one.”

I felt myself color. “I meant abreast as one word. As in, ‘I want to stay abreast of the news.’”

Mike laughed harder. “If that’s the sort of news you have, so do I.”

Chad stood up, grinning at me. “You’re bright red.”

There was a downside, I realized, to having a big vocabulary. Some words were best left unsaid around teenage boys. Maybe I should lay off the Shakespeare for a while.

The guys, still laughing, told us goodbye and went to run laps. Elise and I walked back to the tennis courts. She shook her head at me the entire way.

All through the next set, I thought of words I could have chosen instead of abreast. Confessed. Messed. Depressed. Yep, I should have gone with depressed. That one worked well.



MONDAY, while Elise and I walked to our lockers, Chad sauntered by. When he saw me, he smirked and asked, “Rhyme any good words lately?”

“I’ve given up poetry,” I said.

“Don’t do that,” he said, walking past me and down the hallway. “You were coming up with some good stuff.”

I watched him for a moment, then turned to Elise. “Was that flirting or just general mockery?”

“Flirting,” Elise said, but I didn’t think she meant it.

For the next few days, Chad smiled at me every time we passed in the hallway, but never spoke to me again. Unless you count the time he walked by murmuring, “Pressed. Caressed. Undressed...Hey, you’re bright red again.”

It was amazing how many suggestive words rhymed with best.

Still, this sort of attention was better than being ignored altogether. Homecoming was in two-and-a-half weeks. In my more delusional moments, I pictured Chad asking me and worried that someone else would ask me first. In reality, I worried no one would ask me at all. Half the people at school already had dates.

Elise ate lunch at my table every day even though we were the National Honor Society crowd. I knew, although she never came out and said it, that she was trying on the persona. She was testing us out to see if she could be happy in high school as one of the smart girls. She even raised her hand willingly in English and answered questions.

On Thursday after school, while I put books in my backpack, Josh walked up to my locker. I usually didn’t see him until Elise and I climbed

into his car, so I was surprised by his appearance.

“Is Elise around?” he asked.

“No. She’s probably still at her locker.”

“Good. I wanted to talk to you alone.”

“Oh?” My gaze went to him. He was leaning up against my locker in all his senior-guy studliness. Seriously, the guy had biceps.

“I wanted to talk to you about Elise.”

“Oh.” This shouldn’t have disappointed me, but still did.

“How has she been acting at school? I mean, she’s not skipping class and drinking, is she?”

“I don’t think so. Why?”

He scanned the hallways watching for her. “She’s been good at home, too. I can’t figure it out. She hasn’t challenged my parents’ authority in days.”

“Maybe she’s turning over a new leaf.”

“Or working on a new con. She’s quite an actress when she wants to be.” His gaze flickered to me. “You’d tell me if you knew she was up to something, wouldn’t you?”

“Sure.”

“She’s never kept her partying a secret before, but maybe her tactics are changing.” He looked past me and on down the hallway. “Elise is coming. Pretend we’re talking about something else.”

“What?”

But he didn’t answer me. He just leaped into a conversation about one of his teachers—I wasn’t sure which one. I nodded and tried to keep from doing something stupid—like giggling.

If Elise thought it was strange that Josh was at my locker, she didn’t show it. “There you are,” she said.

He straightened, unruffled. “Are you ready to go?”

As we walked out of the building, I wondered which of the two was really the better actor.



ON FRIDAY I TURNED SIXTEEN. My friends came over and we ate pizza, sang karaoke, and made silly videos—mockumentaries of our lives as rock

stars.

All day Elise had kept saying, “You’ll probably get a car for your birthday. When parents only have one kid, they always buy expensive presents.”

But Mom and Dad gave me pearl earrings and some clothes. My cake, however, was in the shape of a car. Mom handed me a knife and said, “You can destroy this one. But if you so much as put a scratch on mine, you’ll be walking until you’re eighteen.”

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “I won’t touch your cake.”

Then all my friends chimed in and asked when I was going to take my driver’s test.

“I’m not sure. I’ll get to it sometime this week.”

Actually, I was going on Monday, but I didn’t want to tell them in case I didn’t pass the test. I couldn’t imagine having to tell everyone I’d failed.

Caitlin said, “You have to take us out for a victory ride as soon as you get your license.” Then Elise sang, “She’ll have fun-fun-fun ‘til her Daddy takes the T-Bird away,” only she changed “T-Bird” to “Accord.”

I laughed along with everybody else, but in my mind, I could already see myself behind the wheel. Independent. In control. A license was the first step to adulthood.

On Monday, I went down to the DMV for my driving test, completely confident. Over the months I’d practiced for hours. I could parallel park perfectly. I could three-point turn without a hitch. I was completeness itself at all of my stops.

At the Division of Motor Vehicles, I was assigned Mr. Jensen as my tester. He was about fifty years old and looked devoid of any emotion except a general distaste for teenagers. I smiled at him. He didn’t smile back. We got into the car and I pulled into the street.

His sour mood made me feel nervous. Without thinking I said, “So, how does one end up with a dangerous job like this?” A little faster, I added, “Not that I’m implying I’m a dangerous driver. I’m actually very safe.”

He grunted and said something that sounded like, “I’ll be the judge of that.”

“I just meant you don’t have to worry that your life is in my hands because I’m always careful.”

He looked at me suspiciously. “Concentrate on the road. Turn here.”

I turned and headed toward the college campus. I also bit my lip so nothing else stupid would fling out of my mouth.

He made the whole driving experience hard because he had a habit of mumbling his instructions. I kept having to ask, “What?” and he’d look dour and repeat himself slowly. I hoped he couldn’t mark me off just because he didn’t like me.

We drove around campus awhile, then he said, “Er by va melllox.”

At least that was what it sounded like. I ran it through my mind again and again. I tried to make sense of the words so I didn’t have to ask him to repeat himself. It was no good.

“What?”

“Turn...by...the...mailbox.”

At this point, we were practically past the mailbox, and I had to pull a sharp turn. The wheels squealed. Mr. Jensen looked dour again and wrote something on his notepad.

My palms started to sweat.

“Pull n front oda bookstore,” he told me, “and parlel park between dose cars.”

I pulled my car alongside the first car—a green Volkswagen. I was a bit nearer to it than I wanted to be. I checked the car’s camera, and still unsure, craned my neck to see over Mr. Jensen, trying to decide if I was too close. I had horrible visions of sideswiping the car and having to fill out a police report and drive back to the DMV with green paint on my mom’s Accord.

“How many tries do I get at this?” I asked.

“One.”

“What if I promise I’ll never parallel park once I get my license?”

“Ja still hatta pass it.”

I sighed and tried not to look at the college students who walked by. I put the car in reverse and backed up slowly. The whole time, my gaze was riveted to the side of the Volkswagen. I was so afraid that I’d scrape into it that I wasn’t paying attention to the back of my car, which ran up onto the sidewalk and into a bike rack.

A couple of the bikes jarred loose and crashed to the ground. Some of the college students stopped and clapped. I was so humiliated I put my head down. Unfortunately, the steering wheel was in front of my head, and I accidentally hit the horn. Mr. Jensen and everyone else in the vicinity

jumped. Any of the students who hadn't previously been staring now watched me with complete attention.

Mr. Jensen grabbed hold of the dashboard. "What are you *doing*?"

"I was just...I was just..."

"GET OFF THE SIDEWALK!"

I pulled the car forward and back onto the street.

He waved his notepad in the direction of the sidewalk. "Now go pick up those bikes!"

I got out of the car. A crowd was gathered, loitering around to watch me. A few of the college students clapped again as I set up the bikes. When I got back into the car, I knew my face was bright red.

"All right, now finish your parking job."

"Can't I go crawl into a hole somewhere?"

Another dour look. "I always make applicants finish the test, no matter how patetiglybag de mezzled." He wrote down more on his notepad, mumbling more things.

I parked perfectly this time, but Mr. Jensen didn't even pay attention. He was still busy writing. The college students all noticed, however. They gave me a standing ovation.

Back at the DMV, Mom was waiting in the parking lot. It may have been my imagination, but it seemed to me that Mr. Jensen jumped out of the car a little quicker than he needed to. I got out slowly.

"How did it go, honey?" Mom looked over my shoulder to Mr. Jensen. "Why is he looking at the back bumper like that?"

I cleared my throat. "Well, there was this bike rack—"

Without waiting for me to finish my explanation, she hurried over to examine the back of our car. I followed. In my embarrassment over the whole parking episode, I hadn't even looked at the car for damage. Now the thought horrified me. I scanned the bumper for dents but didn't find any. I was unspeakably relieved.

Mr. Jensen handed me my test results. "You can try again in a week. Work on your parallel parking. Ge cem dofaks."

"Uh...yeah." I didn't want to get behind the wheel again.

On the way home Mom tried to console me.

"Everyone makes mistakes occasionally. Next week you'll pass with flying colors."

“Strangers stopped to watch me, Mom. They clapped while I picked up bikes.”

“Neither you, nor they will remember this day twenty years from now.”

“I will.”

“We’ll practice every day this week...in your father’s car.”

I folded my arms. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”



I HAD PLANNED on taking the secret of my driving-test failure to the grave, but somehow I couldn’t resist telling Elise the next day. On the way to school, I gave her the complete, gory details. She laughed so hard she cried.

“What are you going to do for an encore? Run someone down?”

“Only if it’s Mr. Jensen. It was all his fault. He made me so nervous.”

Josh shot his sister a look. “Don’t be smug, Elise. You’ll probably cause a major pileup during your test. It’ll take days to pry through the mangled wreckage.”

“No, I won’t,” she said. “I’ll have had plenty of practice because my dear older brother will let me use his car to practice as often as I want.”

“Dream on.”

Elise turned to face me. “You know, that isn’t a bad idea.”

“What isn’t?” I asked.

“Get an upperclassman to help you practice. It could be romantic.”

“Elise, I think dating will be stressful enough without worrying about wrecking some guy’s car. I’d probably be so tense I’d drive over a cliff and kill us both.”

Elise sighed. “What a way to die.”

All that day Elise bugged me about having some cute guy help me practice my driving. While we waited in the lunch line, she surveyed the cafeteria for possible tutors. “Brandon Evans drives a truck,” she said. “They’re very versatile.”

“I hardly know Brandon Evans. Really, Elise, what do you expect me to do? Waltz up to a guy, bat my eyes, and say, ‘Hi. Can I have your car keys?’”

She kept scanning the area. “There are less than two weeks left until the homecoming dance, and you don’t have a date.” She looked over at Chad’s

table. “Hey, there’s Mr. Dark-blue Toyota. You know him.”

“Not well enough to ask him to risk his life.”

“He’s a teenage boy. They live for thrills. We just have to find some way to approach him casually.”

“Elise, the last time I talked to him—”

“Cassidy,” she said firmly. “You can’t wait around and hope he’ll fall into your lap. You’ve got to go snatch him. If you don’t, someone else will.”

We got our lunch and went to our table. I looked over at Chad once more. “Fine. If you can think of some casual way to approach him, I’ll talk to him.”

I had meant I would talk to him in a general way—not in a can-I-drive-your-car way. Apparently, I didn’t make that clear to Elise.

After school, she met me at my locker. “I thought of a way.”

“A way to do what?” I put the last of my books into my backpack and shut my locker door.

She motioned for me to follow her. “Remember, you said that if I thought of a way, you’d do it.” She walked up the hall, away from the exit. “The only problem is...if it doesn’t work out, we may end up walking home. I’m not sure how long Josh will wait for us.”

I glanced back at the exit. “It’s two miles home.”

“Exercise is good for you.” She stopped a little way from Mike’s locker. “First we’ll talk to Mike because Chad always comes here. You see, it’s very casual.” She walked over to Mike, and I reluctantly trailed after her. I suddenly felt the need to gulp repeatedly. I wondered if my hair was sticking up anywhere.

Elise sidled up next to Mike. “Hey there, having any luck as a card shark?”

He laughed at what must be a private joke between them. I wondered when they’d talked together and why Elise hadn’t told me about it.

He took his jacket out of the locker. “No, WSU still hasn’t made that into a major.”

She leaned up against the adjoining locker. “If I played you and won, would you do me a favor?”

He smiled at her. “That depends on the favor.”

I tried to catch Elise’s eye. I tried to tell her, using psychic vibes, not to mention anything about borrowing a car.

My psychic powers are woefully undeveloped.

By this time Chad had sauntered up. “You better find out how well she plays poker before you promise any favors. You’re not all that hard to beat, Card Sharky.”

Mike shut his locker door. “Don’t make me hurt you.”

Chad scoffed. “Like you could.”

“The favor isn’t for me,” Elise said, cutting into their ribbing. “It’s for Cassidy.” They all turned and looked at me. Ever so slightly, I shook my head at Elise.

“You see,” Elise went on, “Cassidy takes her driver’s test next week. She’s got it all down except for parallel parking. She hasn’t been able to practice it because her parents are both Carparkaphobic.”

“Carpa what?” Mike asked.

I shook my head a bit more vigorously, but probably only managed to look like I had a nervous tick.

“Carparkaphobic,” Elise said, as though it were a real diagnosis. “That’s the fear of being trapped between cars. They got that way after they were in a terrible car accident in bumper-to-bumper traffic. It was a horrible tragedy. They’ve never quite gotten over it, have they, Cassidy?”

I gulped. “Uh, no.”

“Anyway,” Elise shifted her backpack on her shoulder, “we’re looking for drivers to help out on the get-Cassidy-her-license project.” She gave Chad her sly grin. “Care to volunteer?”

Chad raised an eyebrow at me. “So you’d like to go park with me?”

I knew I was turning bright red again. “Parallel park.”

He leaned closer. “The other kind is more fun.”

“But I don’t think it helps on your driver’s test.”

“I don’t know—a pretty girl like you—it might be a skill that comes in handy with your tester.”

Visions of Mr. Jensen came into my mind. “Oh yuck. The guy who tested me was about fifty years old.”

Chad cocked his head. “I thought you hadn’t taken the test yet.”

“Well...I took it. I just didn’t pass. He told me to work on my parking.” Another gulp. “My parallel parking.”

Chad laughed and I felt myself blush again. Elise rolled her eyes.

“Right now we’ve got football practice,” Chad said, “but I’d be happy to park with you sometime, Cassidy.” He gave me a wink. “See you around.” Both he and Mike sauntered off.

Elise waited until they were out of earshot, then let out a frustrated sigh. “Cassidy, why are you so uptight?”

“I’m not uptight. I’m nervous.” I looked in the direction the guys had gone. “Do you think Chad thinks I’m uptight?”

“I think he thinks you’re an idiot.” She turned and headed down the hall, quick-paced. “Why did you keep emphasizing it was just parallel parking you were interested in? Haven’t you ever heard of flirting?”

I walked alongside Elise, matching her stride. “Yeah, but what if I’d said, ‘Sure, I’d love to go park with you,’ and he took me seriously?”

“Oh. That would be tragic.”

“I don’t want him to think I’m easy.”

“Cassidy, you’ve liked this guy for two years. That’s...,” She reached into her backpack, took out her calculator, and pushed some of the buttons. “Let’s see...730 days, 17,520 hours, 1,051,200 minutes. Trust me, you could use a little more ease in your life.”

“Like what? You think I should be loose?”

“Not loose—looser, a little bit loose, as in *loosen up*.”

“I want him to respect me,” I said.

“Well, keep doing what you’re doing. He’ll respect you. He won’t ever ask you out, but he’ll respect you.”

When we got to the parking lot, Josh was sitting in his car waiting for us. I was especially glad he hadn’t left us, since I wasn’t in the mood for a two-mile walk during which all Elise had to say was how stupid I was.

He started up the car as soon as he saw us. “Where have you been?”

“Out wasting time,” Elise said.

I opened the door to the backseat and climbed in. “We were talking to someone.”

“We were winning his undying respect,” Elise said.

“Elise thinks I need to be looser.”

Josh shook his head. “Whatever. Just try to be here on time tomorrow, all right?”

He drove for a few minutes in silence, then seemed to match the morning’s conversation with the present one. “You weren’t out asking guys to help you drive, were you?”

Elise sat back in her seat firmly. “As a matter of fact, we were.”

Josh winced. “Please tell me it wasn’t any of my friends.”

“We weren’t being geeky about it.” Elise shot me a look. “At least *I* wasn’t.”

I glared at her. “You’re the one who came up with the story about my parents having Carparkaphobia, not me.”

Josh threw his head back and groaned. “Please tell me it wasn’t anyone who knows you’re my sister.”

“Well, I didn’t start out the conversation by saying, ‘Hi, I’m Josh Benson’s sister.’ Although I may try that approach tomorrow.”

“All right,” he said. “You win. I’ll take you driving. Just promise me you’ll stop soliciting upperclassmen.” He looked over his shoulder at me. “And that goes for you too. If you really need to, I’ll practice parallel parking with you, but we do it in your car. Mine can’t handle many bike racks.”

I was too insulted by his whole attitude to be flattered by his offer. He might as well have told me he thought I was incompetent. “No thanks,” I said. “I think my parents are over their bout of Carparkaphobia.”

Elise shook her head and laughed, and once she’d laughed it did seem funny. That was the thing about Elise. You couldn’t take yourself too seriously when you were around her. She could make anything feel comical, harmless—even making a fool out of yourself in front of the guy you’ve liked for two years.

At that moment I was glad she was my friend. I thought she was happy and that things would go on the way they were. But by the end of the week, everything had changed.

The next morning, I noticed right away that Elise was in a bad mood. When I climbed into the car, Elise barely did more than grunt a greeting at me. Josh had been texting someone while he waited for me to get in, and once he put his phone down, Elise picked it up.

She looked at the screen and scowled. "I can't believe you're texting the cheerleader."

Josh pulled out onto the street. "Samantha texted me first. I'm being polite. That's something you could practice once in a while."

She tossed his phone back on the seat. "If you marry her, your chances of having genetically boof-brained kids go way up."

"I'll keep it in mind," he said.

Elise turned and glared out the window.

My gaze went back and forth between them. I figured they were in some sort of fight, but then Josh glanced over at her and sighed. "It won't be that bad."

"Easy for you to say. You're graduating in eight months." She turned in her seat to face me. "Guess what my parents told us last night. Just guess."

I felt a pinch of dread in my stomach. "You're not moving again, are you?"

"No," she said. "That would actually be better." She leaned toward me to emphasize her point. "My mom is pregnant. With number seven. We're barely making ends meet as it is, and they're having another kid." She sat back in her seat with a determined thud. "Well, I'm not babysitting it. They can find somebody else to be their slave labor."

It stung that Elise had said moving would be better than having another sibling. I obviously relied on her friendship more than she relied on mine. I said the only thing I could think of to make her feel better. “I can come over to help you babysit if you want.”

She barely seemed to hear me. “You’re so lucky to be an only child.”

“It has its disadvantages.”

“Like what?”

I motioned to Josh. “For starters, I don’t have an older brother to drive me to school.”

She let out a huff. “Or watch your every movement.”

“No,” I told her. “My parents do that for me.”

“I bet you get lots of presents at Christmas.”

“But I don’t have anyone to share them with.”

She shook her head. “Whatever. Brothers and sisters don’t share presents. We do share rooms, though, and clothes and the small allotment of money our parents have left every month for allowances.”

Josh added, “It’s impossible to get a turn in the bathroom now that Elise is beautifying herself every morning.”

I hadn’t expected to feel emotional about the subject, but I did. Josh and Elise had each other and didn’t even appreciate that fact. “I’d share everything,” I said, “if it meant having a sister. When my best friend moved away a few months ago...” I didn’t say more because I couldn’t explain how alone I’d felt when I lost Anjie—how I’d realized for the first time that friends always moved on eventually. Family was the only constant—the anchor in your life that everything else flowed around. And I would always be short on family.

Elise was still listing her woes. “You’ve probably never even ridden in a minivan, have you?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Right. I rode in your car. It’s an Accord. The closest my family will ever get to an Accord is ‘discord,’ which is what we have every time we get into the minivan.”

I countered with, “I don’t get away with anything. If someone tracks in mud, my parents know who did it. As a child, I was never able to steal cookies from the cookie jar.”

“As a child,” Elise said, “there were never any cookies left when I got to the cookie jar.”

I held up a hand. "I don't have anyone in my family who's been a teenager in the last two decades to give me advice."

"I have too many." Elise looked pointedly at Josh.

I sighed. "After my parents are gone, I'll be all alone in the world."

"But you'll get a big inheritance."

Josh broke into our contest. "How come your parents stopped after one child?"

Usually, when people asked this question I said, "My parents got perfection with me. Why try for more?" It was Mom's line. She didn't like to talk about her infertility. I could tell that Josh actually wanted to know, though. "They wanted more children," I said, "but they had some problems with that. Then, when I was about five, Mom had a tubal pregnancy. When the doctor went in to take it out he found evidence of cancerous growth. She had to have a hysterectomy."

Josh frowned. "That's too bad."

"Yeah," Elise said, then added, "I'd be willing to sell them a few Bensons."

"My parents are all right about it now," I went on, ignoring Elise, "but they expect me to make up for it later by providing them with lots of grandchildren. It's another one of those disadvantages I've been telling you about."

We swapped a few more hardship stories. I told them about all the times I'd had to play Monopoly by myself and the time I tried to blame a broken window on my invisible friend. Elise told me about constantly having her makeup stolen because her little sisters wanted to play beauty parlor and the time she had to walk home three miles from swimming lessons because her parents forgot to pick her up.

We continued the conversation once we got to school. As we climbed up the steps, Elise said, "I've been a model child for the last two weeks. I haven't cut any classes. I've done all my homework. Not a drop of beer has passed over my lips. It doesn't matter to my parents. They haven't even noticed."

Josh had, but I wasn't sure I should point that out. I didn't want to tell her he'd asked me about her. So I said, "Your parents are busy getting their store off the ground. That doesn't mean they don't love you."

Elise didn't reply to that.

We split up to go to our lockers. When I got to mine, one of the guys in the chess club was standing nearby. Bob was a tall, thin senior, who slouched when he walked and had curly unkempt hair. I hadn't ever said much to him outside of chess club.

"Hi," I said and started in on my combination. "Are you looking for someone?"

He tapped his hand against his leg nervously. "Actually, I came to talk to you."

"Oh." I waited for him to say more, but he only stared at me. I wondered if the chess club was setting up a tournament or something. "What did you want to talk about?"

More nervous tapping. He looked like he was playing the drums on his jeans. "I was wondering if you were going to the homecoming dance. You've probably been asked already, haven't you?"

"No."

He paused. "No, you're not going? Or no, you haven't been asked?"

"Both."

He shifted his weight uncomfortably. "Both because you haven't been asked yet, or both because you have something else planned for that night and can't go?"

"I haven't been asked."

"Oh."

He didn't say anything more, and I wondered if we were finished with our conversation. For all I knew, he was finding out for someone else or taking a general survey. I finally said, "Any particular reason you wanted to know?"

"Oh—I didn't ask you, did I? Would you like to go with me?"

I smiled in what I hoped was a normal manner. "All right."

"All right. I'll see you then."

"When?"

He got a panicked look on his face. "Next Friday, the night of homecoming."

"No, I mean what time will you pick me up?"

"Oh. Six o'clock."

"All right."

He smiled sheepishly and walked down the hallway.

I'd been asked out on my first date. I was going out with Bob. Bob and I. We were going to the dance. It was sort of an anticlimactic feeling. Not that Bob wasn't a nice guy. He was. He just wasn't Chad.

At lunchtime, while Elise and I walked to the cafeteria, I told her about it. "Bob from chess club asked me to the homecoming dance."

"What did you say?"

"I said yes. What else could I say?"

"You could have said no."

"He's a nice guy."

She snorted. "He's a geek. And he wears weird glasses. Hasn't anyone ever told him about contacts?"

I looked through my lunch sack to see what my mom had packed for me. No chocolate. I could have used some today. "At least he's smart. He'll probably be a great conversationalist."

"Well, you better hope he can dance. It isn't called the homecoming discussion group." She shook her head. "It almost makes me glad no one has asked me. Almost." She gazed around at the crowd of students with evident dissatisfaction. "You know, the guys here all suffer from an incredible lack of good taste. No one has even asked for my phone number." She sighed. "I knew I shouldn't have joined the chess club. What if only the Bobs of the world ask me out?"

I tilted my chin down. "Go ahead and say it: 'What if I end up like you, Cassidy?'"

"Naw," Elise said, teasing. "It could never get *that* bad."

I smacked her arm. "Thanks. Thanks a lot."

"You know what I mean," she said.

"Yeah, I do. That's why I just smacked you."

She laughed.

I rolled my eyes at her but ended up laughing too. Laughter was as good as chocolate at making things seem all right.



MOM AND DAD were thrilled that Bob had asked me to the dance. Evidently, he was the type of young man they wholeheartedly approved of. For the next week, they gave me all sorts of helpful dating tips.

“Ask him lots of questions about himself. Men love to talk about themselves.”

“Make sure he opens the door for you. You need to let him know you expect him to be a gentleman.”

“Don’t choose an expensive item from the menu—and whatever you choose, eat it all and let him know you enjoyed it.”

“And remember, be yourself. Act natural.”

By the time Friday came around, I was glad I wasn’t going out with someone I wanted to impress. I’d have been a nervous wreck trying to remember all of their instructions.

Mom and I had gone to Nordstrom’s the day before to find the right dress for the dance. “I won’t spring for something new every time you have a date,” Mom told me, “but the first time is special. You’ll want it to be memorable.”

As I put hot rollers in my hair that night, both my parents hung around my room and sighed a lot.

“She’s growing up,” Dad said.

“Her first date,” Mom agreed. She put her hand over her heart. “Our little peach is going out with a boy.”

Before I realized what he was doing, Dad lifted his phone and took a picture of me. “Cassidy prepares for her first date.”

I made shooing motions with my hands. “I have hot rollers in my hair!”

“You look beautiful, even in rollers.” Mom shook her head sadly. “It’s only *three* short years until you leave for college.”

I put on my eye shadow, watching Dad’s phone to make sure he didn’t try to get any more candid photos. “You’re not going to do anything to embarrass me when Bob gets here, are you? You’re not going to sit him down in the living room and ask him how he plans on supporting a family?”

Dad fiddled with his phone. “Not unless you’re running so late we run out of conversation topics.”

I hurried with the rest of my makeup.

Bob rang the bell at six-fifteen. Not only was I ready, I was wondering if I’d been stood up on my first date.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said as I let him in. “I had to wait for my pants to get out of the dryer.” He smoothed a wrinkle from his pants. “They’re still a little wet; but I figured if I didn’t come soon, you might leave without me.” He laughed at this and I politely joined in.

I noticed a large gash underneath his chin. He saw me looking at it. “I cut myself shaving,” he explained.

“Ouch.” I went to the coat closet.

Bob took a few steps into the room. “You can say that again. Be glad you don’t have to shave your face because it’s a real pain. Of course, you have to shave your underarms, and I guess that’s just as bad.”

“Uh, yeah.” I put on my coat.

“Although, really you don’t *have* to shave your underarms. It isn’t something noticeable like a face. For example, in that dress, I can’t tell whether you shaved your underarms or not.” I must have looked mortified because he quickly added, “Not that I’m asking if you did because that’s none of my business, and I’d never ask you something so personal.”

My parents came into the room at this point. Dad flashed a picture of us before I could stop him. Then Dad shook Bob’s hand. “Nice to meet you. How are things going at school?”

“Pretty good.”

“Well, I hope you kids have a good time at the dance.”

“I’m sure we will,” I said.

Mom gazed at me and sighed. “Doesn’t Cassidy look nice tonight?”

“She certainly does,” Bob answered. “And I’m sure she has wonderful shaving hygiene too.”

My parents stared at him with frozen smiles.

“Come on, Bob,” I said. “We’d better go or we’ll be late for the dance.”

As we walked towards his car, Bob said, “I only said that about the hygiene because I thought your parents might have overheard me talk about your underarms before. Judging from their expressions, I’d say they had no idea what I was talking about.”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Do you think they think I’m weird now?”

“No.” Probably yes.

He followed me around to my side of the car, something I found disconcerting until I realized he was opening the car door for me. I’d been out on this date for only five minutes and already I’d forgotten one of my parents’ dating idioms.

When Bob slid into the driver’s seat, I decided to ask him about himself. Men love to talk about themselves. I remembered hearing once during chess

club that he'd done so well on the PSAT he already had colleges trying to recruit him.

"So, have you decided where to go to college?"

He pulled out of my driveway, checking for traffic. "Not yet. WSU will give me a full ride, but I still have to check out their entomology department."

"What's entomology?"

"The study of bugs."

I laughed, then realized he was serious. "They have a whole department to study bugs?"

"Of course. There's so much to study. For example, did you know that ants live in a highly complex society and communicate with one another through chemical secretions?" He kept taking his eyes off the road to look at me. "About ten thousand different species exist, but you can group them into six categories: army ants, harvester ants, fungus growers, dairy ants—the dairy ants keep aphids like we keep cows, and milk them."

"You can milk an aphid?"

"Sure, and they're not even the most interesting variety of ant. The slave makers raid other ants' nests, kidnap the pupae, and make them work as slaves in their colonies."

I tilted my head at him. "You're kidding me, right?"

"Not at all. Honey ants use certain members of the colony as living storage tanks. Those ants become so engorged with honey that they're immobile. The ants lay motionless until another member of the colony taps them with their antennae. Then they regurgitate."

"That's...really...interesting."

"Ants are fascinating." Bob went on. "I've studied them since I was twelve and got my first ant farm. Did you know an ant can carry from ten to fifty times its weight? That would be like you carrying..." He looked me over. "How much do you weigh?"

"The right amount for my height."

"Oh, sorry. That's one of those questions you're not supposed to ask women, isn't it? Well, let's say that you weigh one hundred and fifty pounds—"

"A hundred and fifty? You think I weigh one hundred and fifty pounds?"

"Too much?"

I blinked at him. "I weigh one hundred and fifteen."

"I wasn't implying that you're overweight. Actually, I think you're skinny. One hundred and fifty is just a nice round number. Anyway, it would be the equivalent of you carrying an elephant or a car or something. Ants are amazingly strong."

I crossed my arms. "You think I'm skinny?"

Bob looked at me in disbelief. "What? I thought all women wanted to be skinny. I have an older sister whose main goal in life is to keep her thighs from touching when she stands. I bet there are inches between your thighs." He cleared his throat. "Not that I've ever looked at your thighs before."

I crossed my legs too. "You were telling me about entomology, Bob."

"Oh, yeah. Insects are amazing. Most people don't know anything about them. I bet there are thousands of bug facts you don't know."

We parked and went into the Super China Buffet. Bob and I looked out of place in our dressy clothes. Everyone stared when we walked in, but Bob was oblivious. He apparently planned to tell me all of the thousands of bug facts about which I had somehow remained ignorant until now.

I tried to block him out as we went through the food line. I couldn't find the food appetizing while the guy next to me was using words like *larvae*, *pupae*, and *maggot*. I nodded and smiled and tried not to think about what all the unknown objects in the Chicken Chow Mein looked like.

When we got to the cashier's station, the woman behind the register gave us a scathing glare. I tuned Bob in long enough to hear him say, "And since flies digest food outside of their bodies, do you know a fly can throw up hundreds of times each time it lands? Think about that next time you see a fly walk around on something."

The woman said icily, "That will be twenty-two dollars and sixty-five cents. And let me tell you, we maintain the highest standard of cleanliness here, and we'd appreciate it if you didn't tell our customers otherwise."

For the first time, I looked at the people in the line behind us. They were all staring at us.

Bob took his wallet from his pants pocket. "Sorry. I was only explaining the life cycle of the fly. When I said that one fly can lay a thousand eggs, I wasn't suggesting any were in your restaurant." He glanced around. "Although, of course, it's always a possibility."

I tried to shrink until I became invisible.

He paid and we went and sat down at one of the few empty tables. All around us people in jeans and sweats were eating. I tried to look inconspicuous.

Bob continued to entertain me with bug trivia, and I ate as quickly as possible in hopes it would speed up the evening. Occasionally I smiled and told him how good my meal was, just so I could tell my parents I had.

Right in the middle of a treatise on the scorpion, which can survive temperatures from below freezing to well above one hundred and twenty degrees Fahrenheit, I asked Bob to pass me the soy sauce. I had put off finishing my fried rice because he'd given me a complex about my weight. All through the meal, I'd wondered if someone could really mistake me for weighing one hundred and fifty pounds. At the same time, I remembered my father telling me to eat everything when a date took me out to dinner. I pondered whether it would be better to appear as a glutton or an ingrate on my first date. I finally decided that Bob wasn't paying attention to me anyway and opted to eat it. I liked fried rice.

Bob reached across the table with the soy sauce. It slipped from his hand as it passed over my plate. The bottle hit the dish with a crash, and both objects flipped into my lap. The lid hadn't been screwed on tightly, and soy sauce spurted out, mingling with the rice now in my lap.

"I'm so sorry!" Bob stood up, then sat down. "Here, let me help you." He dipped his napkin into his water glass. Unfortunately, he did this a little too forcefully, and half of the water splashed out onto the table.

I stood up to avoid it trickling off onto me.

"That's all right. I've got it." I wiped off what I could with my napkin, but it was a hopeless cause.

"I'm so sorry," Bob said again.

"It's okay. I'll just go home and change into something else." As we left, I thought: At least it can't get worse. Turned out, I was overly optimistic.

My parents were understandably surprised to see us again so soon. Dad took one look at me and asked, "Food fight at the restaurant?"

"A minor accident. I need to change."

"That's fine," Dad said. "Bob and I will sit down in the living room and talk about the future."

I ran up the stairs, calling over my shoulder, "I'll be right back!"

Mom followed me into my room. While I flipped through my closet, she asked, "Well, besides that, how's it going?"

"Are you aware there are thousands of fascinating bug facts you don't know about? I, of course, know them all now." I glanced at the clock on my nightstand. "And the evening is still young."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." She searched for something positive to say. "You still look lovely."

"But now I smell like soy sauce." I flipped through my dresses until I found one that was nice enough to wear and slipped it off the hanger.

"The dance will be better," Mom said as she left the room. "You'll see your friends there."

I would have liked to see Elise. Somehow I knew she would've found a way to save the evening. She would've joked about it and made everything seem funny. She might even have found a way to get Bob to talk about something besides bugs. But Elise wasn't going to be at the dance. She hadn't been asked.

Elise had been sullen about this fact for days. At school, she kept pointing out guys to me and saying, "See that guy? He's a jerk. He didn't

ask me to the dance, and I've been nice to him since I moved in. That guy over there—major jerk. He's taking the girl who sits behind me in algebra, and she's a total ditz."

"There's always the Tolo," I told her. "You can ask whoever you want to that." It was the girl-ask-guy dance in March.

Elise hadn't been cheered by thoughts of the Tolo. March isn't much of a consolation in October.

When Bob and I got to the dance, I looked for Faith and Caitlin but didn't see them. Chad was standing on the edge of the dance floor with Alyssa Litton, a junior girl who always looked like she was part of a fashion show. He was telling her something, leaning close with his head bent towards her ear. She smiled. Somehow I didn't think he was rhyming words for her.

Josh was out on the dance floor with a senior named Paige. She was one of those bouncy, friendly girls who were always involved in the cute little skits during pep rallies. I wondered if Josh thought she was mature. I wondered if she'd ever hit a bike rack.

"Do you want to dance?" Bob asked.

"All right."

We danced for a while. Although to be accurate, the term *dancing* only generally described what we were doing. Bob's dancing looked like he was lurching back and forth—sort of the step you do as you're coming out of an elevator that's about to shut on you.

I never looked around to see if anyone was staring at us. I didn't want to know.

After a while, we went and stood in the picture line. Josh and Paige were in front of us.

When Josh saw us, he smiled. "Hey, how's it going?" He turned to Paige. "You know Bob, don't you? And this is Cassidy Woodruff. She's one of my sister's little friends." He shook his head at his mistake and laughed. "I mean my little sister's friends. Sorry, Cassidy. I wasn't saying that you were short."

Short, no. But what about immature? "Right," I said. "What would Freud say?"

Josh shrugged. "I don't think Freud would say you're short either. What are you, five-eight?"

"Five-seven."

Bob lowered his voice. "Don't ask her about her weight. She's touchy about it."

Paige peered at me with wide eyes. "You're not trying to lose weight, are you? Because you don't need to."

"I told her the same thing," Bob said. "And she got all defensive."

"I'm not trying to lose weight," I said.

"You can ruin your body by dieting too much," Paige went on. "We learned about anorexia in health."

"I'm not anorexic," I insisted.

"Well, no one ever admits it," Paige turned to Josh. "It's all men's fault, you know. You expect us to be shaped like Barbie dolls."

Josh held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I've never said any such thing." He turned to me. "You're great the way you are, Cassidy. I wouldn't change anything about you."

I blushed. And glowed. And didn't know what to say.

Josh didn't wait for me to comment. He turned to Bob. "Hey, how's your computer program going?" To Paige and me, Josh added, "Bob's a programming wizard. He made his computer sound like Spock from *Star Trek*. When it shuts down it says, 'Live long and prosper.'"

"It also does McCoy," Bob said. "When you search for a file it says, 'Darn it, Jim. I'm a computer, not a magician.'"

I laughed. Momentarily I forgot I was talking to Bob and asked, "How did you do that?"

He spent the rest of the time in line explaining sound cards, hertz, and RAM to me.

After the picture, Bob asked if I wanted to go to the refreshment table. "No thanks," I said. "I'm planning on binging and purging later."

He looked at me oddly. I'm not sure he realized I was joking.

I found Caitlin and Faith, and we spent a few minutes talking to them, then went to the dance floor again. After a few songs, I grew hot. I hoped the soy sauce smell wasn't permeating through my clothes. When the next slow song started, I asked, "Do you want to go outside to cool off?"

Bob nodded and we left. We went out back, down by the bleachers. A few other couples were wandering around. Silhouettes in the evening. I wondered if Chad was out here with Alyssa. I sighed and sat down. Bob sat next to me.

"Are you having a good time?" he asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry about your dress.”

“It’s okay.”

“And I’m sorry about the hygiene comment in front of your parents. When I get nervous, I babble.”

It was the first thing he’d said on the whole date I could relate to. “I do the same thing.”

“You do? I’d think a pretty girl like you would never get nervous.”

“Thanks, but I babble more than I’d like to admit. Either that or I can’t think of anything to say.”

“You can get away with that, though. You don’t need to say anything to get a guy’s attention.”

Bob had been leaning down with his elbows on his knees. At this point, he attempted to sit up and put his arm around me. At least that’s what I assume he was doing. Instead, his elbow caught me on the nose. A flash of pain shot through me, and I fell backward into the seat behind me.

“Sorry!” Bob jumped up and hovered over me.

I put my hand to my nose. It was bleeding.

Bob took hold of my other hand and pulled me to my feet. “Are you okay?”

I tilted my head back to try and stop my nosebleed, but it just got worse. Blood ran between my fingers and down my arm.

“Aw be awight in a minute.” I headed towards the school and Bob followed beside me, apologizing all the way. “I’m so sorry, Cassidy. I can’t believe I did that. Do you think it’s broken? I can take you to the ER if you want.”

“No, no, Aw be okay.” I was lying. I wasn’t okay. I was dripping blood across the pavement. If someone didn’t clean it off before school started on Monday, it would look like the scene of some grisly crime.

By the time we made it to the bathroom, my dress was bloody and a crowd of people had gathered around me. Caitlin gave me a wad of toilet paper to hold against my nose. Faith soaked some paper towels and wiped at my dress. One of the chaperones got ice from the kitchen, and I held it up against my nose.

When it finally stopped bleeding, I told Bob, “Maywe you’d betta tage me hamb.”

Bob nodded and we left.

We ran into Chad and Alyssa at the front door. He saw me and did a double take. "Are you all right?"

"Ya. Ah wiw be."

"What happened?"

Bob cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I hit her with my elbow."

Chad shook his head. "Trying to beat her into submission, Caveman?"

"It was dust a wittle accident," I said.

Chad kept shaking his head. "I don't know if you should hang around this guy. Your boyfriend is a brute." He chuckled, though I wasn't sure what he thought was funny—the idea of Bob being a brute, the idea of Bob being my boyfriend, or just my disfigured face.

I strode out the door without looking back.

Chad called after us, "Next time, try over the head with a club. It isn't as messy."

There was only one good thing about coming home from a date wounded. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Bob wouldn't attempt to kiss me. On the porch, I said, "Aa tink Aw'd betta go id now." He nodded, offered one more apology, and let me go inside.

I went straight to the bathroom to survey the damage. My nose was still red, but it wasn't misshapen. So at least it wasn't broken.

Mom came in and saw my dress. "What did you spill this time?"

"Blood."

She gasped, and I told her the story.

She listened to it, mouth open. "When I said your first date would be memorable, I didn't think it would be this memorable."

"I'm never going out on a date again."

Mom gave me a hug and two ibuprofen tablets. I went up to bed and fell asleep, even though it was only nine-thirty.

I was awakened from my sleep, and a dream in which I was being chased by six-foot-tall boxing ants, by a gentle tapping sound. I sat up in bed and looked at the clock. It was eleven forty-seven p.m. The tap came again. Something had hit my bedroom window. I pushed back the curtain and saw Josh on our front lawn. He motioned for me to come down.

I threw on a sweatshirt, some exercise pants, and my shoes. Then I tiptoed down the stairs and out of the house as quietly as I could.

Josh was still wearing his suit. He looked out of place, standing there on my lawn all dressed up.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Do you know where Elise is?”

I shook my head.

“She told my parents she was with you—a story I found hard to believe, considering I’d just seen you at the dance, and she didn’t appear to be anywhere around.” He sighed. “She’s not answering her phone, so I’m supposed to be here getting her. I’ve got to find her before my parents freak out and call the police. Any ideas where to look?”

I shrugged. I was still half asleep.

“Who are her other friends?” he pressed. “Where do they live?”

I folded my arms to keep warm. “Faith and Caitlin were both at the dance...she wouldn’t be with them. She could have gone to Mischa’s. She lives on High Street. Or maybe Rebecca’s. She’s on Garfield. They both live on College Hill.”

“What are their addresses?”

“I don’t know. They both live in white houses.”

“Could you be more specific?” Josh’s voice had an edge to it. “I can’t knock on the door of every white house on the street.”

“What are you so upset about?” I asked. “So Elise said my name and she meant someone else’s. She’ll call for a ride eventually, won’t she?”

He shook his head. “It wasn’t a mistake. She’s out getting wasted somewhere, and the sooner I find her, the less upset my parents will be. Can you come up with addresses or not?”

“I’ll come with you.”

I thought about telling my parents I was leaving. I really did. I pictured my mother’s face as I woke her up to tell her I was going to drive around alone with Josh in the middle of the night. Then I decided it was better not to disturb her.

I climbed into the passenger side of Josh’s car. He sat down at the wheel but hesitated as he put the key in the ignition. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. It’s Elise I’m mad at, not you.”

“It’s okay. I understand.”

I finished putting on my seatbelt and Josh pulled away from my house. His lips were drawn in a tight line. “Elise didn’t even bother coming up with a good cover. I guess she wanted you to be the first to know she’s gone back to lying and partying.”

He was right, I realized. If one of Elise's parents had come to get her from my house, they would have woken up my parents, and it would have been a huge deal. Had Elise even considered that my parents might not want me to be friends with her after that?

Maybe that's why she'd done it. Maybe she thought I was too boring and was looking for an excuse to ditch me.

"Where should I try first?" Josh asked. "Which of her friends is more likely to have a fake ID or parents with a liquor cabinet?"

Good question. Where would Elise go to find someone with alcohol? I'd barely posed the question to myself when I thought of the answer. Kaylee McGee, resident sophomore drunkard. Her boyfriend had broken up with her a couple of weeks ago, and she'd decided to boycott the dance by throwing her own party. It was something she did without much provocation anyway. Her parents were frequently out of town, and her college-age brother could get the liquor for her. This made her a celebrity among the sophomores, and her parties were widely advertised. Even some of the more alcoholic juniors and seniors went to them.

"Kaylee McGee is having a party tonight," I said, "but I don't know where she lives. She's probably the only McGee in the white pages." I reached for my phone, then remembered that I hadn't brought it. I hadn't known when I left my bedroom that I was going anywhere. "You can look it up on your phone," I said.

Josh pulled over to the side of the street. While he pulled his phone from his pocket, he looked over at me. After studying me for a moment, he slipped off his suit coat and gave it to me. "Here, you must be freezing. Your nose is all red."

I didn't want to explain why my nose was red, so I put on the coat without saying anything. Josh found the address, and we drove to Kaylee's street. It was easy to spot her house. The lights were on and cars lined both sides of the street.

Josh double-parked in front of Kaylee's house and left his keys in the ignition. "If anyone needs to get by, move the car for them." He opened his door, then turned back and added, "Carefully."

I rolled my eyes at him, but he was already heading toward the house and probably didn't see my facial commentary. I sat in the car, waiting, and wondered what Elise would do when she saw me. Would she be mad I'd

helped Josh track her down? I was glad I had Josh's coat. It was comforting to be wrapped up in something that smelled like his aftershave.

A few minutes later, Josh came out of the house. Elise followed after him. She wobbled into the back seat of the car, reeking of beer. "Well," she mumbled, "if it isn't the three Musketeers come to save me from myself. At least I think there are three of you. If you stopped waving up and down I could count."

She laughed, but I didn't. This time she was laughing at me.

Without saying anything, Josh put the car in drive and drove down the street.

I twisted in my seat to face her. "Why did you tell your parents you were with me?"

She lay down across the seat. "Because Josh has told them about you. They think you're a good influence." She pushed some hair away from her face. "Although obviously not a good enough influence tonight. I think I'm going to throw up." She waved a hand in Josh's direction. "Can't you drive without making the car sway around?"

Josh unrolled the back windows, letting in a blast of cold air. "Don't you dare throw up inside my car."

Elise moaned. Then, moving faster than I'd thought her capable of, she jolted upright and leaned out the window. Her body shuddered and her hair whipped around in the wind. I wondered if vomit was sliding down the outside of Josh's car.

Elise pulled herself back inside. Even in the dark, her skin looked blotchy. She wiped at her mouth with the back of her sleeve, making faces at the taste in her mouth.

"So," I said, "this is how you have fun?"

"It beats sitting at home babysitting while I wait for the Bobs of the world to ask me out—which reminds me, how was your date?"

"Fine."

"Just fine?"

"Yes. Fine."

"Think you have a future together? Maybe settle down and raise some little Bobbets?"

Josh let out a disapproving grunt. "Elise, stop being a jerk."

"Oh, so now you tell me how to talk to my friends. I shouldn't be surprised. You know how to do everything better than me, don't you?"

Josh gripped the steering wheel hard. "Shut up, Elise."

She flipped him off. He turned the radio on, and they ignored each other and me for the rest of the ride. I didn't say anything either. Even with the heater blasting, it felt cold in the car.

Finally, Josh pulled up in front of my house. "See you guys later," I said and got out of the car.

I hurried toward my house, only stopping at the porch when Josh called, "Cassidy, wait up."

He'd gotten out of the car and was striding toward me. Everything about him was tense: his walk, his expression, the set of his jaw. I had the sudden desire to give him a hug and tell him he was a good brother, even if Elise didn't appreciate it at the moment.

I didn't. It seemed too forward. But the words rolled around in my mouth.

It wasn't until Josh reached me that I remembered I still had his coat. "Oh," I said, slipping it off my shoulders. "I forgot I was wearing this. Sorry."

I handed it to him. He didn't turn to leave. "I didn't come for the coat." His words were soft. The tenseness that had been there moments before had drained away. "I just wanted to say thanks for helping me. I'm sorry I got you up and dragged you around town."

"It's okay." I glanced at the car to see if Elise was watching us. She was lying down with her feet propped up on the window. "That's what friends are for."

I had meant I was Elise's friend, but Josh reached out and squeezed my hand. "I'm glad you're my friend." He smiled, then turned and strode back to his car.

I put my hand on the doorknob, watching him for another moment.

Josh considered me his friend. The phrase glowed inside me. It made me think of standing next to him in the photo line when he'd said, "You're great the way you are, Cassidy. I wouldn't change anything about you." Funny how that was the highlight of my first date.

I went inside my house and saw the kitchen light was on. I stood in the entryway and considered my options. Was it possible to sneak upstairs unnoticed? Maybe it was only a stray parent who'd wandered into the kitchen for something to eat. Maybe, if I crept up the stairs quietly, my parents would remain blissfully and unangrily ignorant. Then again, maybe

they were waiting for me. Maybe they knew I'd left, and trying to cover it up would only bring down parental wrath.

As I debated, my mother called, "Cassidy?"

"Yes."

"Would you come here, please?"

She knew. I swallowed hard and went to face her.

Mom sat at the table, flipping through one of her art magazines.

"Mrs. Benson called five minutes ago. She said Josh had driven here to pick up Elise and hadn't come back." Mom shut her magazine forcefully. "It would've been nice if I'd known what she was talking about. As it was, all I could tell her was that I hadn't seen Elise or Josh, and I didn't know where you were either."

"Sorry, Mom."

"I'm not finished." She glanced at the kitchen clock. "In fact, I don't think I'll be finished for quite some time."

I shifted my weight. "I only left so I could help Josh track down Elise."

"Did you find her?"

"Yes."

"Is she all right?"

"She's drunk."

"I suppose her parents will deal with her behavior. I'll deal with yours." Mom's voice raised several decibels. "Since when did you start thinking it was acceptable to leave in the middle of the night without telling your parents?"

"I knew if I told you, you wouldn't let me go."

Another decibel. "If you knew our opinion, you *certainly* shouldn't have gone!"

I let out a resigned sigh and wished she could understand my position. "Elise is my friend. I wanted to help find her."

"That's her family's responsibility. Not yours."

"But I know where her friends live. Josh didn't."

"Then you should've given her parents a list of names. You didn't have to go off alone with him in the middle of the night without telling us."

I sat at the table, too tired to argue about it anymore. "I'm sorry, okay? I don't know what else you want me to say."

She looked at me, paused, and her voice became gentler. "I won't ground you this time. It's hard to be mad at you when I know you were

trying to help someone. At least I hope that's why you went. I hope you didn't go for an outing with Josh."

I glanced down at my sweatshirt and exercise pants. "If I'd been trying to impress Josh, I wouldn't have gone at all. Look at me. My hair is uncombed, my nose is swollen, and I have no makeup on." Suddenly it hit me how terrible I must look. I'd sat across from Josh for half an hour looking like I'd been the one who'd hung my head out a window. "How am I going to face him again when he's seen me like this?"

"You'll find a way somehow."

I put my chin in my hand. "I guess it doesn't matter. I've given up on dating anyway."

Mom smiled. "I remember you telling me that."

Neither Mom nor I made a move to get up. I sat and stared at the table. Mom sat and stared at me. Finally, I said, "Elise said she didn't want to sit at home and wait around for the Bobs of the world to ask her out. Are dates like tonight all I have to look forward to?"

Mom shook her head. "You'll be asked out by a lot of different types of boys. Some you'll like a lot, some you'll like a little, and some you won't like at all. But you know what? Most of the time you won't know which guy fits in which categories until after you date him for a while."

"I'm pretty sure I know which category Bob fits."

Mom laughed. "You may be surprised, Cassidy. Give the guys in high school a few years. The guys at Elise's parties will have partied themselves out. Bob, on the other hand, will make something of himself. He's a bright—if not coordinated—young man."

I pushed my chair away from the table. "I'm glad parents don't arrange marriages anymore."

"You wait and see," Mom insisted. "Eventually his social skills will catch up with his academic skills. Then you'll be dazzled."

"He'll still have hair that sticks up."

"He'll probably be a doctor or an attorney. He'll be able to afford a decent haircut."

"He wants to study bugs."

Mom sighed nostalgically. "You might not believe it, but your father wasn't always a supreme specimen of male perfection."

"He still isn't, Mom."

“He is too.” Mom stood up, and we wandered toward the stairs together. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. If a boy is worth having, he’ll realize what a wonderful girl you are. If not, then he doesn’t deserve you.”

It was such a mom answer. Unfortunately, high school was already brimming with guys who didn’t deserve me.

Mom kissed my cheek. “I love you, dear. It’s been a long night for both of us. Let’s get some sleep.” With a smile still on her face, she said, “And Cassidy, if you ever leave during the night again, you’ll be grounded for the rest of your life.”

I didn't hear anything from Elise on Saturday or Sunday. When I climbed into Josh's car Monday morning, Elise held up one hand. "Don't even say it. I've had enough lectures at home. When Mom ran out of breath, Dad picked up where she left off. They propelled each other along for hours."

"Sounds like you had a fun weekend."

"I had a massive hangover, had my phone confiscated, got grounded for a month, and had to clean every window in our house. And on Saturday morning, my older brother made as much noise as possible to purposely drum more pain into my already-pounding head."

"Mom told me to vacuum," Josh said. "It doesn't have a quiet setting."

"You took two hours to do a twenty-minute job."

"I'm very thorough."

"And what about you?" Elise turned to me again. "How did *your* date go?" I must have looked at her oddly because she said, "What?"

"I already told you." I could tell she didn't know what I was talking about. "In the car. On the way home from Kaylee's."

"Well, I don't remember much of that part of the evening. What did you tell me?"

"It went fine."

"Were you more detailed when I asked you the first time?"

Josh said, "If you'd been sober, you would've remembered." We'd come to a stop sign, but Josh didn't drive forward even though no other cars were around. He fixed his gaze on Elise instead. "If you keep drinking like

that, someone is going to take advantage of you. There are guys out there who will do bad things to you.”

Elise looked up at the car ceiling. “I already heard it from Mom and Dad all weekend. Next time I won’t drink so much. Okay?”

Josh drove forward again, but he shook his head, unconvinced.

I changed the subject, and Elise and I talked about our Antigone assignment until we got to school. As luck would have it, Josh pulled into a parking spot right next to Bob. He saw me and waited so he could walk with me. Elise and Josh hung back a little, but I knew they were close enough to hear our conversation.

Bob looked me over. “How’s your nose? It doesn’t look broken.”

“It’s fine.”

“Did the blood come out of your dress?”

“Yes.”

“How about the soy sauce?”

“It came out too.”

“I’m sorry about all that.”

“It’s fine, Bob, really.”

We walked in silence until we came to the school steps. “Well,” Bob said. “I’ve got to get some things done before my first class, but I’ll see you around.” He hurried away after that.

When he was out of earshot, Josh and Elise caught up with me. “What was that all about?” Elise asked. “Soy sauce stains? Your nose doesn’t seem broken? What did you two do?”

“He...sort of...accidentally hit me in the nose at the dance.”

“With a soy sauce bottle?”

“Um, no. That was at dinner. He knocked the soy sauce into my lap. I had to go home and change.”

Elise quirked an eyebrow up. “And you told me your date was fine?”

“Fine in a general manner of speaking.”

“Meaning what? There were no casualties?”

I shifted my backpack uncomfortably. “Well, it could’ve been worse.” Actually, it was worse, but I didn’t feel the need to tell her about my indoctrination into the insect world.

I noticed Josh out of the corner of my eye. He was laughing. He tried to hold it in but didn’t do a very good job so he was disguising it as a coughing attack.

At another time I would have joined in with him, but now I thought he was just adding fuel to Elise's opinions. I sent him a cold look. "And I don't suppose you've ever had an accident while on a date?"

"Not one that could be considered assault and battery." Josh's coughing attack got worse. People turned and looked at us.

Elise shook her head. "That's the most pathetic thing I've ever heard."

"Okay. So it wasn't the best night of my life. But at least I remember all the details."

"Yeah," she said, "but why would you want to?"

She had a point. I couldn't think of a rebuttal.



IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for stories of Elise's exploits at the party to spread around school. She hadn't just been drinking. She and Cole Rider, a junior on the football team, had been kissing on the couch in front of everybody.

She didn't seem to care very much that Cole didn't pay attention to her after the party. All sorts of other people took notice of her now. She was an instant "in" with Kaylee and her gang. They followed her around the hallways like an entourage. Over the next few weeks, she ate at their table as often as she ate at mine.

My table always seemed too quiet when she wasn't there. It was odd how quickly I'd come to depend on Elise for energy. She had a way of making any situation feel like it could veer off into something fun. It made me wonder if there was something to her *carpe-diem* attitude to life.

I saw myself as smart and competent—someone on the right track to making the right choices. But maybe I was like one of those boring characters in coming-of-age movies. Repressed. Stuffy. Someone who hadn't learned how to live yet.

I didn't start going to parties, and I didn't shamelessly flirt with the upperclassman. But I did find myself Elise-izing things, making snarky comments, looking for things to laugh at.

Elise didn't talk about guys when Josh was around, but sometimes I went over to her house to study, and then guys were her favorite subject.

"What do you think of David Hunsaker?" she asked. "He flirts with me all the time."

“I don’t really know much about him. He’s a junior.”

“But you think he’s cute, don’t you?”

“Sure.”

“He wants to do something with me this weekend, but so does Avery Thompson. I can’t decide what I should do.”

I tried not to sound too envious of her dilemma. “I thought you were still grounded.”

“I’ve found ways around my parents’ unreasonable restrictions. I pretend to go to bed and sneak out my bedroom window. That’s the beauty of having a ground-floor bedroom: I get to have a good time, and my parents get to have a good night’s sleep.”

It was ironic that she didn’t ever get caught doing this, since the one time I’d snuck out, Elise’s mother had called and squealed on me.

I never had much to say about guys to Elise. I was still manless. Bob talked to me in chess club, but he didn’t ask me out again. Maybe he didn’t want to repeat the ordeal any more than I did.

Chad saw various girls, none of whom I liked as they all had the serious shortcoming of not being me. Josh was still seeing Paige. I didn’t like her either. Somehow over the last few weeks, Josh had improved on my guy scale to ten—perhaps even a ten and a half.

One morning I was in the library looking through the biography section for a social studies report, and Samantha strolled up to me. She casually pulled a book from a shelf near me. “Where’s Elise this morning?”

I flipped through the table of contents in a biography about Joan of Arc. “I don’t know.”

Samantha replaced one book and took off another. “Oh. That’s right. You’re only friends with Elise when Josh is around.”

My head jerked up. “I am not.”

She sent me a knowing look. “Oh come on. You practically hang off of him.”

“I do not.” I felt myself turning red. I couldn’t believe she was saying this stuff to me. “We’re just friends.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure you’re disappointed about that.” She turned her back to me and stalked off.

I was so steamed I couldn’t concentrate on anything else for the next two periods. I was busy thinking of what I should’ve said, starting with, “Why do you care?” and ending with places she could put her pompoms.

I hoped that sometime Josh would come up and talk to me in the hallway while Samantha was around, but he never did.



I TOOK my driver's test again and passed. Mr. Jensen marked me off with the same sour expression he'd worn when I'd ridden with him the first time. His one personal comment during the whole thing was, "Try to keep off the sidewalk."

I did.

Despite my success, I never asked my parents if I could take the car to school. I liked the time I spent with Elise and Josh.

One day Elise wasn't in English class. She didn't show up at my locker after school either. I figured she'd probably left school early, and I ambled out to the parking lot.

Josh was waiting in his car. When I walked up, he glanced behind me. "Where's Elise?"

"I don't know. She wasn't in English."

He grunted. "She's skipping classes again."

"It might not be that. She might have gone home sick." I didn't get in the car. Usually, I sat in the backseat, but it seemed odd to sit there if Elise wasn't coming. It would make Josh seem like he was my chauffeur or something. I gazed across the parking lot, searching for her.

Josh shook his head. "Elise is supposed to tell me if I'm not taking her home. That way I don't wait around for her, and I consent to let her ride with me the next day." He put his keys in the ignition. "Well, let's go."

As I opened the car door, I heard Elise calling. I turned and saw her and Chad strolling toward us. They were holding hands.

She gave us her wicked grin. "I won't need a ride home. Chad and I are getting something to eat."

They walked past Josh's car down the parking lot. I didn't let my gaze follow them. I got in the front seat of Josh's car and stared at the dashboard. As long as I didn't have to look at anything else, I could make it home without doing something to embarrass myself, like crying.

I hoped Josh wouldn't say anything to me, that he would just turn on the radio and ignore me. I kept looking at the dashboard, but all I saw was Chad

and Elise—and Elise’s wicked grin.

Josh started up the car and navigated through the parking lot. He turned on the radio and flipped through the stations.

“You have a lousy selection of music in Pullman. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

There was a small pause. “So, how was sophomore life today?”

“Fine.”

He didn’t say anything for a minute, but I could tell he was glancing over at me.

“You’re quiet today. Is something wrong?”

“No.”

“Was it something Elise did?”

And then my worst fear came true. I cried. A lot. I rummaged through my backpack for a tissue. Why, I asked myself, hadn’t I worn my waterproof mascara today?

The car stopped. I looked up and saw we were at a neighborhood park. “Why are we here?”

“I thought you might want to talk about it.”

What I wanted was to go home and wash mascara off my cheeks. I attempted to do it with the tissue.

“It’s something stupid,” I said.

“Of course it is. If it involves Elise, stupidity is a given.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I’ve lived with Elise for a long time, I’ll understand.” He leaned against his door so he could face me. “Besides, I can’t take you home looking like that. Your dad already doesn’t like me.”

“My dad doesn’t like you?” I kept wiping the mascara off my cheeks. “What are you talking about?”

“Whenever he sees me out walking our dog, he looks at me funny. Like he’s gritting his teeth.”

“He does not.”

“I can’t say I blame him. With Elise as a sister, people naturally question my morals. Besides,” he made a sweeping motion over himself, “with looks like mine, what girl could resist me? Fathers naturally want to lock up their daughters.”

I knew he was trying to make me smile, but I didn't. I checked the car's mirror to make sure the mascara smudges were gone. They were, along with all other traces of makeup. I looked terrible.

"What did she do?" Josh asked. "And was any of it illegal?"

I leaned back in the seat. "I guess if I don't tell you, Elise will." I didn't say anything else for a minute. I tried to think how best to word it without making me sound like a total loser.

"You know that guy Elise was with?"

"Chad something-er-other, right?"

"Chad Warren. And the thing is, I've liked him since I was in eighth grade. Elise knew that."

"You like Chad Warren?" Josh said this like it was a disease.

"I knew you wouldn't understand."

"I understand. I'm just surprised. I can't picture you with Chad Warren."

"Well you don't have to try hard," I said stiffly. "Because it isn't going to happen."

"No. I meant I thought you had better taste."

I put the wadded-up tissue in my backpack. "What's wrong with Chad?"

"The guy is full of himself. He's a jerk."

I zipped my backpack shut. "You don't know anything about him."

"Guys hear other guys talk. I've been in the weight room with him before. Trust me, he's a jerk."

I folded my arms.

"You wouldn't think so highly of him if you ever heard him carrying on in the locker room."

"Why? What did he say?"

Josh opened his mouth, then shut it again. "I can't say that sort of thing to you. But look, if you like Chad so much, you don't have to worry. Elise goes through guys quickly. Three months tops, and he'll be back on the scamming scene."

But that wasn't the problem. "Elise knew I liked him. I'm supposed to be her friend. Hundreds of guys go to PHS. Why did she pick him?"

"Because she's Elise."

"All I've ever done is be nice to her, and she did *this* to me."

Josh watched me in a half-amazed, half-questioning way. He really didn't understand.

“Look,” I said. “I appreciate you always giving me rides, but I don’t think I’ll need them anymore.”

“Because of Chad?”

“Because of Chad and Elise.”

He turned on the car and pulled into the street. “If that’s the way you want it.”

I knew he was mad at me, or at least disappointed, but what did he expect me to do? Hang around Elise so I could hear the details of her relationship with Chad? Tag along so I could be a third wheel? I pictured Elise telling Chad about my crush on him. They’d both laugh about it. That was the worst thought of all.

We came to my house and I got out of the car.

“See you around, Cassidy.”

“Yeah, see ya.”

I went straight to my room and cried again.

I tried to look normal when it was time to help with dinner. I went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face, then reapplied makeup. It was hard to do because my eyes were puffy. They were also bloodshot, and no amount of eye shadow made them look otherwise. I knew my appearance wouldn’t slip by my parents. I knew it, and yet I still tried to hide the evidence of my crying stint. While I set the table, I gazed down a lot.

First Mom glanced at the floor to see what I was looking at. Then she stared at me.

“Is there something wrong?”

“No.”

“Then how come you won’t look at me?”

I looked at her.

“What happened to your eyes?”

“Nothing. I’ve become a drug user, that’s all.”

Her face grew worried. “You’ve been crying, haven’t you? What’s wrong, honey?”

I told her the whole story. I knew I sounded pathetic, getting so upset about a guy who’d never been interested in me. I didn’t want to be pathetic or feel the way I felt, but I didn’t know how to stop.

Mom gave me a hug, a this-too-shall-pass pep talk, and the car keys. She said I could drive to school for the next couple of weeks.

By the time dinner ended, I was finally feeling better and in control of my emotions again. I sat down with my homework and managed to concentrate on it instead of endlessly reliving those moments in the parking lot. I'd be fine without Elise. Things would just return to the way they were before she moved in. I could handle having one less friend. I'd done it before, hadn't I?

At eight o'clock the doorbell rang. A few moments later my father called, "Cassidy, you've got company."

I both wanted and didn't want it to be Elise. I trudged downstairs. Josh was standing by the door, his hands thrust into his jacket pockets. My father stood next to him. And Josh was right—Dad did look a bit like he was gritting his teeth. But when I got there, Dad walked off toward the kitchen, leaving Josh and me alone.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

Hadn't we already? What was there left to say? And why hadn't he just called my phone? I knew he had my number. He'd programmed it into his phone when he'd first started giving me rides. "Sure." I showed him into the living room.

Josh sat on the loveseat, and I sat on the corner of the couch closest to him.

He fixed me with his gaze. "I don't think you should let some idiot guy ruin your friendship with Elise."

I kept my voice light. "Well, I wasn't taking a vote, but your opinion is duly noted."

"Elise says she didn't do it on purpose. She says she didn't try to hurt your feelings."

"You talked to her about it?" Until that moment it hadn't occurred to me that Josh would tell Elise about the car ride home, and I dreaded the thought of him being my advocate. He didn't understand Chad, he didn't understand my feelings, and he certainly didn't understand the ins and outs of girls' friendships.

"I chewed her out," Josh said. "Now she won't speak to me because it's obvious I'd rather have you for a sister."

"You didn't tell her I cried, did you?"

He didn't say anything.

I tilted my head back and groaned. "How could you? What if she tells Chad?" I put my hand over my eyes. "I want to die."

“She won’t tell Chad. She’s not trying to upset you.”

“Right.”

“Look, just talk to Elise. She doesn’t want to lose your friendship.”

“Obviously.”

“No guy is worth ending a friendship for.”

He definitely didn’t understand teenage girls.

“If she doesn’t have you,” he went on, “then all she’ll have is Kaylee and that bunch. Those were the type of girls who got her expelled in California. Don’t you care about her at all? You’re the one who was always telling Elise she should go to college.”

I understood now why Josh had come over instead of calling. It would have been easy to say no to him over the phone. It was harder with him sitting here, looking at me so intently, so earnestly.

Josh leaned in closer. “Come on, Cassidy, you’re not the type to hold a grudge. I want you to keep riding with Elise and me to school.”

It was a terribly inappropriate time to think about what a deep shade of blue Josh’s eyes were, but suddenly I found myself doing just that. Blue eyes and dark hair was such a striking combination. It was easy to let my gaze linger on him.

“Just talk to her,” he said softly. “Please.”

If I didn’t talk to Elise, it wouldn’t just be her friendship I’d lose. I’d lose Josh’s too. No more joking around with Elise and him in the car, no more talks, no more deep blue eyes.

He leaned in even closer. “Please.”

I sighed. “All right. For you, I’ll talk to her.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up for school on Monday.” He smiled, a little triumphantly. Maybe he did understand teenage girls after all.

After Josh left, I went to my room and thought about what I should say to Elise. Whenever I started a paper for school, I jotted down a list of everything I wanted to say and bullet-pointed the most important details so I didn’t forget anything. This was at least as important as a school paper, and I needed to make sure I phrased things right. I picked up a pen, then put it down. Bullet point lists for phone conversations was something Elise would’ve made fun of me for. I would do this her way, from the top of my head. From inside my heart.

I waited for the image of Chad and Elise in the parking lot to flash through my mind again, with its accompanying sting. It didn’t come. All I

could see was Josh leaning toward me, his gaze locked on mine. He'd said he wanted me to keep riding with Elise and him. Had he only said it because he thought I was a good influence on Elise or had he meant he would miss me too?

I made myself stop thinking about Josh and picked up my phone. My mom always said that a real friend wants what is best for you. I'd only been looking at that equation from my side. If Elise wanted Chad and he wanted her, a real friend would be happy for her. I needed to be that real friend now.

She picked up after a couple of rings. "Hey, Cassidy." Her voice sounded guarded, wary.

I kept mine light. "Josh told me he chewed you out over Chad."

"Chewed out is putting it lightly."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have made a big deal about it. It wasn't like I owned Chad or something. I'm embarrassed Josh even told you I was upset."

"I'm really sorry," she said quickly. "I actually put off Chad for a while because I didn't want you to be mad about it. But the thing is, it wouldn't have worked out between you and Chad. He's not your type; he's my type. He likes to party. You like to study."

I knew Chad went to parties sometimes. A lot of the football players did, but I had always thought it was only that—him hanging out with the football team. He got good grades, so he must study *some* of the time. I didn't point this out to Elise. She didn't give me time.

"Chad has a lot of hot friends," she said. "I bet I could set you up with one."

"You don't have to." I didn't want a consolation prize tossed in my direction.

"We could double somewhere."

"That would be too..." *painful and mortifying*, "awkward."

"Come to a few parties with me. I don't want to see you stuck with every Bob that comes along."

"I promised my parents I wouldn't go to those kinds of parties. Do you know how many lectures they've given me on date rape drugs? I already have a phobia of drinking anything someone else gives me. And did you know sauces and dips can be spiked too?"

"One party. You can bring your own guacamole."

"I can't."

“Okay. No parties. Just a social gathering. Come with me to one social gathering where a few friends and acquaintances will visit with one another. I could set you up in a second.”

“You don’t have to find another guy for me. Really. I’m fine.”

“Okay,” she said, but she didn’t sound like she believed me.

I was fine though. Or at least I would be soon. And if Josh was right about Chad being back on the scamming scene in three months, well, I wouldn’t have to feel bad dating my friend’s ex.

I worried that Monday would be tense and uncomfortable, but Elise and Josh were both joking around in the car like normal.

As soon as I got in, Elise fluttered her hand in Josh's direction. "It's only fair you tell Cassidy about your date on Saturday. You got a big enough laugh over the Bob affair."

Josh grimaced. "I'm no longer dating Paige."

"He broke her leg," Elise said.

"It was her ankle, and it was just sprained."

Elise turned in her seat to see me better. "It all started when Mom and Dad forgot they were supposed to take Olivia to a birthday party and they went shopping in Lewiston. Olivia was in tears because she thought she was going to miss it. I, of course, volunteered to drive her to the skating rink, but Josh insisted he do it even though he had a date lined up with Paige."

Josh's gaze shifted to Elise. "You don't have your license yet."

"A technicality. I'm a wonderful driver."

"You're going to get the story wrong," Josh said. "Let me tell it." He addressed me through the rearview mirror. "I picked up Paige—"

"With Olivia in the car," Elise added.

"And explained to Paige I was dropping off Olivia at a party. When we got to the birthday person's house, they'd already left for the rink. So we drove all the way over to Moscow, where we thought they'd be, but they weren't there either. By this time Olivia was crying, and I couldn't take her home, and I couldn't leave her there, so I suggested to Paige we postpone dinner and go skating."

“With his kid sister,” Elise emphasized.

“It wasn’t as though Olivia was right there, skating between us...at least not most of the time.”

“And Paige was dressed for roller skating.” Elise put in.

“What else could I do?” Josh protested. “Olivia was brokenhearted. Besides, the whole fiasco was partially Paige’s fault. She should have told me she didn’t know how to skate. I thought it was something all girls know how to do.”

I gestured outside to the road we were driving up. “Josh, Pullman is built on hills. Wearing anything with wheels is a death trap.”

“Well, anyway, there was this little collision...”

“Which involved how many people?” Elise prompted.

“Six,” Josh said. “And Paige ripped her pants, twisted her ankle, and cursed my name all the way home.”

“Didn’t you forget one part of the story?” Elise asked.

“And Olivia was so upset by the whole thing that she threw up.”

“On?” Elise prodded cheerfully.

“On Paige.”

I didn’t try to stifle my laugh. “Excuse me while I cough for a while.”

Elise nodded. “It makes a soy sauce spill seem pretty tame, doesn’t it?”

Josh let out a sigh. “I’ve gained new compassion for Bob. In fact, I feel a kinship with him now.”

Elise sat back in her seat. “Perhaps you two could have your own reality show: *Dates that Maim*.”

Josh ignored his sister. “The whole problem,” he said, “was that Paige comes from a small family. She hasn’t dealt with younger brothers or sisters. The next girl I date has to be from a big family. Four kids at least.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier,” I said, “to find someone who knows how to skate?”

Josh ignored me, too. “Who do we know that has a big family? How many brothers and sisters does Annie Hillard have?”

Annie was one of the popular girls in the junior class. “Two,” I said, “but they’re older.”

“No good. How about that girl who always texts me—Ginnie Anderson?”

Ginnie Anderson was student body president. *She texted him?* “She has a brother who’s a sophomore.”

“That won’t work.”

I shifted in my seat to see him better. “Why don’t you just date who you like?”

He never took his eyes off the road. “I could like a lot of different people. I have to be logical about it to find someone compatible.”

“What about that magic moment?” I asked. “What about chemistry?”

“Yeah, right. What I need is someone who understands why Cheerios are ground into the seats of my car.”

“People from small families can be understanding too,” I insisted. “If someone likes you, she’ll overlook Cheerio crumbs.”

“But she might be emotionally scarred after meeting my family. A girl with a lot of brothers and sisters would understand why we can’t have any privacy at my house and why I can’t afford to take her anywhere else most of the time.”

I put my hand to my ear. “What did you say? I can’t understand you. I’m sibling impaired.”

“Logic, pure and simple,” Josh emphasized.

I turned to Elise. “Are all men like this?”

“Thankfully, no. Some are romantic.”

“None of us are romantic,” Josh said. “Some of us pretend to be for your benefit. It’s all logic.”



SCHOOL WENT on like it had before, with the exception that Elise stopped eating at my table. She ate with Chad. The first lunch period she did this, Caitlin and Faith hated her on my behalf until I assured them repeatedly that it was all right.

A week later, a junior named Tim asked me out. He played JV football and seemed nice. It wasn’t until I was actually on the date with him that I realized we had absolutely nothing in common. All he talked about was sports. I thought if I had to hear one more touchdown story, I’d slap him.

I tried to change the subject a couple of times. On the way home in the car, I asked if he were a Republican or a Democrat. He didn’t know. He wasn’t even sure what his parents were. They’d had a bumper sticker for somebody during the last election, but he couldn’t recall the name.

“Did it have an elephant or a donkey on the sticker?” I asked.

He looked at me blankly, “No.”

“Those are the signs for the parties,” I said.

He craned his head back and forth to look out both windows. “What parties? I didn’t see any signs.”

“No. I meant the elephant and the donkey are symbols for the political parties.”

“Oh yeah, we learned about that in American history. Has something to do with the stock market, right?”

“No, you’re thinking of the bull and the bear.”

He smiled at me patronizingly. “Now you’re confused. The Bulls and the Bears are sports teams. Hey, did you catch the last Bears game? The defense made an awesome tackle. It was second down four yards to go...”

I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but at that moment I missed Bob.

When I got home, Mom asked me how my date went.

“This is why women become nuns,” I said.

“The next guy to come along will be better,” Mom assured.

The next guy to ask me out was a sophomore named Doug. Sadly, he wasn’t better—just different. He kept texting during dinner and the movie. I had the suspicion he was posting date updates. He tried to kiss me on my doorstep, but I let myself inside before he could succeed. I’d never been kissed before—not a real kiss—and I didn’t want my first time to be with a guy who’d announce the event to the world fifteen seconds after it happened.

Occasionally I saw Elise in the hallway with Chad, but I went out of my way to avoid her at those times. I was afraid that if I talked to them, Chad would give me a “knowing look,” which would mean he knew I had a crush on him. I didn’t want to face that head-on. It was easier from a distance. When he smirked about my affections, I didn’t want to be there to see it.

A lot of the time, Elise didn’t ride home with us. Josh insisted on taking me home anyway, but I felt bad making him do it. Occasionally I’d ask how his logical dating theory was going. He’d shrug and tell me about the latest catastrophe. With every bad date, his list of requirements for a girlfriend grew. Not only did she have to come from a large family, she also had to be able to carry on a conversation without using the word *like* twenty times a minute. She had to have a sense of humor about little brothers who run through the house shooting Nerf missiles, and she couldn’t be frightened by

large German shepherds who had tendencies to pounce on visitors. All in all, he wasn't having much more luck on the dating front than I was.

The thought did cross my mind that he ought to ask me out. After all, I'd already met his family and his dog. Josh and I talked so easily. And by now he had moved up on my scale to a twelve.

But he never asked me out. The closest he ever got to the subject was once when out of the blue he asked, "Do you know that next year when I'm in college you'll only be a junior?"

"I had realized that, yes."

"I'll live out of state, and you'll be in high school for two more years." He shook his head. "Two more long years."

"Is there some point to all this?"

"No, just thinking." He shook his head again. "Next September I'll be on my own and you'll be what, sixteen?"

"You were a sophomore once too, you know."

"I know," he said, "but it seems so long ago."

Once Josh brought Bob home with him. Bob was helping him with some computer programming. After I got in the car, it took me a moment to notice what was different about Bob. Then I had it.

"You got rid of your glasses."

Bob nodded. "I've gone with contacts."

"They look great." It wasn't an idle compliment. Bob had light brown eyes with a touch of gold to them. I'd never really noticed them behind his thick glasses.

"Thanks," Bob said. "After our homework, Josh and I are going shopping. He's making me into a new man."

"Sounds fun."

Josh glanced over at me. "We could use a woman's viewpoint. Do you want to come?"

I eyed Josh suspiciously. "No, I have a report for Spanish to work on, but thanks anyway."

The next day on the way to school, I grilled Josh about his request. "Are you trying to set Bob and me up? Is that what yesterday was about?"

"Don't be vain," Josh said. "Bob isn't changing for you. He just wants a new look."

Elise glanced back and forth between us. "What are you guys talking about?"

"If you were ever around, you'd know," Josh said. "And besides, Cassidy," he went on, "you ought to see him before you make any judgments. He looks good."

"You *are* trying to get us together, aren't you?" I turned to Elise. "Save me."

"Don't worry," Josh interjected. "Your nose is safe. He won't ask you out again. He thinks he ruined his chances with you after the first date. But wait until you see him."

Elise laughed. "And when do we get to see the unveiling of Bob the hottie?"

"We're working on my program today too, so you can see him after school when he rides home with us."

"Can't," Elise said. "I have plans."

I grabbed her arm. "Please ride home with us today. Don't leave me alone with Josh and Bob."

She took a deep breath, looked at the car roof, then back at me benevolently. "All right. But only because I love you, Cassidy."

After school as we walked across the parking lot, Elise sang the words to "Someday My Prince Will Come."

I appreciated that.

Suddenly Elise stopped. "Wow."

I peered over at the car and saw Bob next to Josh. "Wow," I agreed. He did look great. He barely looked like Bob anymore.

When we got to them, Elise said, "I guess clothes do make the man. You look awesome."

The clothes did look good. They relaxed him somehow, turning him from a Dilbert-waiting-to-happen into a normal teenager, but what really made the difference was the haircut. It no longer looked unruly and bush-like. It was sleek, with just a little bit of wave to it.

"Thanks." Bob smiled nervously, then tapped the sides of his pants. Josh shot him a sharp look. Bob immediately dropped his hand.

"How's your computer program going?" I asked.

"Pretty good," Bob answered. "We had a problem when our transpose matrix function wouldn't compile so we..."

Josh gave him another look.

"It's going fine now, though," Bob said.

We climbed into the car and talked about school. Bob did impersonations of the teachers. He was good at it.

“You ought to be in drama,” I told him.

“Don’t have time. Now here’s my impersonation of Mr. Jones as Yoda the Jedi chemistry teacher.” Bob’s voice turned high like Yoda’s. “Mmm... So...chemists you want to be? Learn the way of the nuclear force, do you?”

Elise was still laughing when they dropped me off at my house.

The next day on the way to school I congratulated Josh. “How did you do it? You turned Bob into a normal person. Into a better-than-normal person. He was funny yesterday. Where did that come from?”

“Bob is a funny guy. He just gets nervous around girls.”

I looked out the window, still shaking my head in wonder. “He didn’t mention a bug once all the way home.”

“I told him they were off limits—along with computers, the Unified theory, or anything else that would require a Ph.D. to understand.”

“Amazing,” Elise said.

“After we work on our program today,” Josh went on, “we’re going to the mall in Moscow to see if we can attract college women. Eat your heart out, Cassidy.”

I shifted my backpack on the seat. “It never would have worked out between Bob and me anyway,” I said with a theatrical sigh. “Next September when he goes off to college, to live on his own out of state, I’ll still only be sixteen. I’ll have two more long years of high school.”

Josh glanced at me through the mirror. I could only see his eyes, but I could tell by the way they crinkled that he was smiling. He didn’t say anything, though. Elise looked questioningly from Josh to me, but she didn’t say anything either.

Really, things between Josh and I would’ve probably gone on like that forever if I hadn’t changed everything with a slip of the tongue.

The night my tongue slipped up, Elise had come to my house so she could copy some of my biology notes. She didn't have them because she'd skipped out on class a couple of times, but our teacher let us have one handwritten page of notes with us during our tests.

While she wrote out the names and functions of cell parts, she kept gazing around my bedroom. "Your furniture all matches," she said. "You were one of those girls who got a canopy bed when you were little, weren't you? I bet your parents bought you everything you wanted."

I was sitting on my bed with my laptop, finishing off my English assignment. "There's a flip side to having matching furniture. If you think you have no privacy with your brothers and sisters, you should try living with just your parents. They want to know what I'm doing every second of the day."

"They care."

"They've poured all their parenting efforts into one person. Me. If I get a B on my homework instead of an A, they want to know why. If I bite my nails, they notice. When I come home from school and they ask, 'What did you do today?' they really want to know. They want a synopsis of my life every single day. Sometimes it's smothering."

"But at least they know who you are."

I kept tapping out my English assignment. "They worry about me all the time. Their guilt trips are horrendous. If I let them down, they don't have anyone else. If I said to them, 'I'm not going to college. I want to be a traveling street performer,' they'd die."

“My parents would pack my bags.”

“They constantly embarrass me,” I went on. “Every time Josh has come over, my parents have hovered around and then grilled me about it as soon as he left.”

Elise cocked her head. “Josh has come over? Why?”

Oh. *Why* was right. Why didn’t I know when to keep my mouth shut? I couldn’t tell Elise he’d come over to talk about her—that he’d asked me to be her friend.

“Um...” I felt myself blush. “He came over...a long time ago...because I left things in your car. My sweater...and my phone.”

Elise contemplated this. “Why didn’t he give them to you the next day?”

“I don’t know.”

“And why are you blushing?” She raised her eyebrows in question. “Is something going on between you and Josh?”

I was trapped. I took the only way out I could think of. “Um, sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“Well, okay, yes.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“We want to keep it a secret.”

“Why?”

I felt like a living object lesson about the perils of lying. I’d dug a hole for myself, and it was getting deeper. But I couldn’t get out of it now. I had to keep digging.

“Because of my parents. It’s like I told you. They’re overwhelming when it comes to guys. They’d be all over my case if they thought I was... getting too serious.”

“How serious are you?”

The shovel kept hitting the dirt. “Not very, but my parents would start an inquisition if they knew I’d been out with him more than a few times. We’ve had to be, you know, discreet.”

Elise blinked, incredulous. “You could’ve at least told me.”

“I wanted to, but we decided it would be safer if no one knew. Besides, I think he’s touchy about dating a sophomore.” That part at least was true.

Elise grunted. “Josh thinks I’d tell someone, doesn’t he?”

“He never said that. But he did seem adamant about not telling you. In fact, I bet if you confronted him right now, he’d deny it.” I drummed my

hands against my desk. “You won’t confront him, will you?”

“Not if you don’t want me to.”

“Good. He’d be mad at me if he knew I told you.”

Elise shook her head. “And to think of all the grief I’ve gone through over Chad. I thought you still liked him. Every time I was with him and saw you, I felt bad. You could’ve at least let me know you were okay about it.”

“I did,” I reminded her. “I talked to you right after you started dating him.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think you meant any of those things. I thought you were just being nice.” She laughed a little. “I should’ve known something was going on. Those looks you two exchange on the way to school, and Josh not dating anyone—then he expects me to believe it’s the dog’s fault.”

“Remember, you don’t know anything about this.”

She put her hand up. “I know how to keep a secret.”



THE NEXT MORNING as we walked across the parking lot to school, Elise asked if I was ready for the biology test.

“Yeah,” I said. “But I still have to finish my algebra homework.”

“Josh could help you.” She shot him a sly look. “He’s good with story problems.” The way she said “story problems” made them sound like something vaguely suggestive.

I glared at Elise. “I’m sure I’ll be able to figure it out.”

Elise smiled knowingly. “I think Cassidy needs your help, Josh. Tell him you need him, Cassidy.”

“I can do them on my own,” I insisted, my voice higher than it should be.

Josh gave me a peculiar look.

I opened my backpack and sifted through it, pretending to search for something so I didn’t have to look at him.

When Josh branched off from us, I gave Elise a death glare. “You’re great at keeping secrets. I’m sure he didn’t suspect a thing.”

I knew then that I would have to tell him what I’d done—and soon.

I worried all day that Josh would ask Elise what her innuendo meant and that she would tell him what I’d said. Then not only would he think I

was some delusional stalker, but Elise would find out I was a liar.

This could end badly in so many ways.

Elise didn't ride home with us that afternoon, which meant I had the perfect opportunity to explain things to Josh. I couldn't force myself to bring it up, though, until he'd pulled up to my house. There just aren't a lot of good ways to tell a guy about your fake relationship. What if he was angry?

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I asked.

"Sure. What about?"

I didn't answer, just bit my lip.

Josh looked at me more closely, then turned off the car and sighed.

"What's Elise done now?"

"Nothing. It's what I've done."

He waited for me to continue.

I shifted uncomfortably. "Well, it happened like this." I took a deep breath and launched in. "I was having this talk with Elise about parents and what a pain they can be, and I accidentally told her about the times you came over to my house, and then of course she wanted to know *why* you came over, and I couldn't think of anything..." I glanced at Josh to see how he was taking this.

His expression was blank.

"I mean, it was one of those situations where your mind doesn't work. So I told her you came over because you...you know...liked me."

He pressed his lips together, like he was trying to stop himself from smiling.

"I told her we wanted to keep it a secret, so I don't think she'll say anything to anybody, but I had to tell you before she mentioned it to you."

He abandoned his attempts and grinned.

I guess I should've been glad he wasn't angry, but all his mirth was beginning to grate on me. It was as if the very idea that he could like me was laughable to him.

I fiddled with my backpack strap. "I'll understand if you'd like to break off this mad, impulsive affair we've shared."

He kept grinning but stayed quiet.

"Aren't you going to say something?"

"Yes. How did I get into a conversation about your parents being a pain?"

“Oh, that. Well...uh...” I hadn’t prepared this part of my speech and didn’t know what to say. “My parents still think of me as a thirteen-year-old, so when you came over...” I stopped. I had talked myself into a corner. When you came over—what? When you came over my parents jumped to the conclusion that you were smitten with me, even though I’m an unsophisticated sophomore who you’re not interested in?

But I didn’t have to say anything else. He knew what had happened. He nodded. “Now I know why your dad grits his teeth when he sees me.”

“I’m sorry. Really. I’ll do whatever you want to about it, but if it’s all the same to you, can we maybe not end this right away? I don’t want to tell Elise we broke up when I just told her yesterday we were going out. I don’t want it to seem like a fling.”

“Of course not. No flings for us.” He smirked at me. “Darling.”

“Thanks,” I said, and got out of the car.



FOR THE REST of the week, I don’t know who had more fun tormenting me: Elise, who kept up her hardly-veiled comments, or Josh, who would every once in a while send me smoldering looks that always made me blush.

The guy did smoldering well. Stupid deep blue eyes.

On Friday instead of meeting at the school like the chess club usually did, we were all going to go to Bob’s house to work on the annual fundraiser. This year we were hand painting ceramic chess pieces in blue and gray, the PHS school colors. The student body had ordered more than we expected, so Bob had called in some favors to get more people to help us paint. Josh was on that list because Bob had helped him with his computer program.

I’d planned on riding home with Josh and Elise and then driving over to Bob’s house. But while I walked to the parking lot, Bob caught up with me. “I can give you a ride if you want one.”

“All right,” I said. “Just let me tell Josh.”

We headed to Josh’s car. He was sitting inside working on homework, but he looked up and opened the window when Bob and I walked up.

“I’m taking Cassidy with me,” Bob said.

“You don’t have to,” Josh said. “She always rides with me. I don’t mind taking her.”

“Neither do I.” Bob took out his cell phone and texted for a few seconds. “But since you have the room, I’m telling Jenny and Cameron you can take them.”

Josh smiled stiffly at him. “Okay. I’ll wait for them.”

I followed Bob to his car. He opened the door for me. Josh had never opened a door for me. I wondered if he was watching, but I didn’t look.

Bob and I made small talk on the way to his house. He asked what I’d been doing. I asked if he’d decided on a college yet.

“I’m considering Stanford,” he said. “It’s a top school, it’s got good weather, and it’s not too far away. The only drawback is that the tuition is astronomical.”

Maybe it was a loaded question, but I couldn’t help myself. “How’s their entomology department?”

“Pretty good.” That was his entire assessment.

I smiled. He had obviously taken Josh’s list of taboos seriously.

When we got to his house, I helped Bob set up the paints and boxes of chess pieces. While he filled glasses of water, something on the counter caught my attention. It was a wooden tray covered by glass. Inside, pinned and labeled, were rows of butterflies. They were all different colors and sizes.

Bob saw me looking at them. “That’s part of my collection. I worked on it last night.”

“They’re pretty. Did you catch them all?”

“Most of them.”

“I’ve never looked at a butterfly close up. They’re so intricate.” Some of their wings shimmered like they’d been cut out of silk.

He came and stood behind me, then pointed at one. “That’s the monarch. They can migrate as much as two thousand miles. Each winter they fly to warmer climates in orange and black swarms. I’ve seen pictures of them covering the trees in Mexico. It’s fantastic. Someday I’ll go see it myself.” He moved the box to reveal another tray underneath. This one held a bright turquoise butterfly. I’d never seen anything like it and wouldn’t have believed it was real if I hadn’t been staring at it. “This is a *Narathura micale amphis* or the common oak blue.”

“If it’s common, how come I’ve never seen one before?”

“They live in Australia. One of my dad’s friends works at the entomology department at Washington State University and got it for me. Spectacular, huh?”

“It’s gorgeous.” I wished I could touch it. “It makes me sad that it’s dead.”

“Don’t worry. Entomologists only capture butterflies that are about to die of old age. Then they give them lethal injections. It’s all quite humane.”

“Really?”

He laughed. “No.”

I blushed. “Well, how would I know how you do it? After that whole business of slave-making ants, I’ll believe anything.” Then I laughed myself because giving butterflies lethal injections did seem silly. “You mean you can’t tell how old a butterfly is by counting its rings?”

I looked back at the trays. People at school had been seeing Bob differently ever since his makeover. The girls at chess club flirted shamelessly with him. Even Faith and Caitlin had commented on his new hotness. But it wasn’t until that moment that I saw Bob differently. I saw him in Mexico surrounded by thousands of monarch butterflies, like petals in an orange and black field of flowers. I saw him in the outback of Australia, pushing his way through the overgrowth, searching for rarities. It all seemed exotic.

Bob leaned against the counter next to me. “If I promised not to hit you, would you like to hang out again sometime?”

“Sure,” I said, hoping I wasn’t blushing again.

He smiled. “Good.”

The doorbell rang and chess club members began coming in. Josh showed up last with Cameron and Jenny. Josh seemed tense and irritable all through our painting session. I told myself it was because he was jealous Bob had taken me in his car; jealous that Bob was sitting beside me talking to me while we painted. But I knew the chances were equally great that it was because Josh had been stuck taking Cameron and Jenny here and was now sandwiched between them. Cameron felt compelled to crack a stupid joke every other minute, and Jenny always laughed at them.

When we were all done, Josh offered to drive me home.

“If it’s out of your way,” Bob said, “I can give Cassidy a ride.”

Josh sent him an insincere smile. “It’s not out of my way.”

I had barely sat down in Josh's car before he turned to me. "What was that all about between you and Bob?"

"Nothing. He just asked if I'd like to hang out sometime."

Josh tapped his hands against the steering wheel. "So, you're going to go out with Bob again?"

"He promised not to hit me this time."

"And you believe him?"

"I don't think you have room to talk after you sprained Paige's ankle."

Josh turned on the car and pulled into the street. "It wasn't me. It was the three people we ran into."

"Bob and I will even be able to go skating because I know how."

More tapping. "I thought you said none of the girls in Pullman skated."

"I said it was hard to do. I happen to be one of those who didn't mind going thirty miles an hour straight down a hill. I'm a thrill seeker at heart."

"Which is why you're willing to go out with Bob again."

"Bob doesn't have any stupid logical theories about dating."

Josh took his eyes off the road long enough to give me a meaningful stare. "My theories aren't stupid."

"So how are they working?"

"Lousy. I can't go out with anyone else while Elise thinks I'm dating you."

"I never told her we were exclusive."

"Elise knows I date one girl at a time."

"I said you could end it anytime you wanted," I reminded him. "Do you want me to dump you for Bob?"

"No," Josh said stiffly. "I don't want to be dumped for Bob."

"Then dump me for whoever you think is the logical choice."

Josh shrugged off the comment. "I haven't found a logical choice."

"They're stupid theories," I said again. "Call me a romantic, but romance is supposed to have something to do with it."

Josh looked straight ahead. "If you want dating to work, it has to be logical. Take you, for example. Logically, I could never really ask you out."

I blinked, stung. "Why not?"

"It would jeopardize your friendship with Elise. Think about it. What would happen if we had a fight? Elise would have to choose sides."

"And naturally you assume she'd choose yours?"

Josh didn't answer my question. I'm not sure he was even listening. "You couldn't come to our house anymore because you wouldn't want to see me. You wouldn't ride with us in the morning for the same reason. Every time Elise mentioned me, you'd say something snide. It would be bad all around."

"Why? Are you a total jerk when you break up with a girl?"

"Not me. Everybody. That's how dating works. Somebody always gets hurt. The whole "Let's be friends" business is a myth. You always end up avoiding your ex-girlfriends. I don't want to end up avoiding you."

"Thanks, Josh." I tried unsuccessfully to keep my voice light. "I've never been so flattered by someone telling me he doesn't want to date me. I'll remember not to ask you to the Tolo dance."

"That's not what I meant, Cassidy. You can ask me if you want."

"But you'd tell me no."

"No, I wouldn't."

"You'd say yes, but then you'd avoid me for the rest of your life?"

He exhaled deeply. "You don't understand. I guess I shouldn't expect you to. You're only a sophomore."

"Oh, now I'm immature." I folded my arms and stared out the window.

"You see, we haven't even dated and we're fighting. It would never work. I rest my case."

"Well, you don't have to worry," I retorted. "I hadn't planned on asking you to the Tolo."

"Oh? Who were you going to ask?"

"I don't know. It's months away. I have to find a guy I'm going to want to avoid after we break up."

"You'll probably ask Bob."

"I could stand to avoid Bob."

Josh shifted his hands on the steering wheel. "You know, I'm the one who took Bob clothes shopping. I told him to get contacts. I made him get a decent haircut. I even coached him on what to say to girls. Bob isn't Bob. Bob is me."

"Why do you care whether or not I go with Bob? You don't want to go with me."

"I didn't say I didn't want to go with you. I said I shouldn't."

"Oh yes, you shouldn't, but you wouldn't say no if I asked. You're so patronizing, Josh. Do you think I need pity dates?"

“This has nothing to do with pity. This is logic.” He pulled up in front of my house and put the car in park. “I’m leaving for college next year. And even if we did go to the same college, you wouldn’t be there for two years. You’ll be here doing high school stuff. Football games, prom—you’ll probably have a different date for every night of the week.” He shook his head. “I don’t want to have to worry about a long-distance romance.”

I took hold of the door handle. “You’ve already thought out the next two years of my life. That isn’t logic. That’s insanity.”

“You probably won’t even call me while I’m away,” he went on. “I don’t think I should go to the Tolo with you, after all.”

“I never asked you to.” I got out of the car and slammed the door shut.

I found Mom in the kitchen cleaning out the fridge. Our table was covered with condiments, milk jugs, and all the vegetables mom stoically brought out at dinner but that Dad and I mostly ignored.

I plunked down on one of the kitchen chairs. “I’m giving up on men. I’m sorry, but you’ll never have grandchildren.”

She dunked her rag in a bucket of water. “What happened?”

“Apparently, I’m so bad at relationships, I now have guys breaking up with me who I’ve never even dated.”

She peered around the fridge door at me. “What?”

“Josh just gave me a list of reasons why he’d never go out with me.”

Mom’s eyebrows dipped together. “Were you flirting with him? Did he feel pursued?”

“No. We were talking about logic. It was out of the blue.”

Mom peeled off her rubber gloves and stood up. “Honey, I think there’s something wrong with that family. Why don’t you stop hanging around them? I’ll let you take my car to school.”

I thought about the offer. I really did. “I don’t know. I still want to talk to Elise. It’s just...I can’t figure out Josh. I can’t figure out guys at all.” I threw up my hands. “And to think I *wanted* to start dating.”

The phone rang. Mom checked the caller ID. “It’s Josh.”

I took the phone anyway. “Hello?”

“Hello, Cassidy. Look, I’m sorry about our fight. I didn’t mean to upset you. I’ll go with you to the Tolo.”

I waited for a moment. “Who is this?”

“Very funny. You know it’s Josh.”

“Josh who?”

“I don’t even know what day the Tolo is, but I’ll pick you up at seven o’clock.”

“It’s supposed to be a girl-ask-guy thing,” I said. “*I’ll pick you up at seven o’clock.*”

“Good. I’ll see you then.”

“Josh, I’m warning you. I’m going to buy something new to wear for this, so don’t change your mind and decide it doesn’t fit into your logical life plan. Once I go shopping, you’re committed.”

“Fine,” he replied. “Tell me what color you’re wearing, and I’ll get something to match.”

“Fine. I’ll see you at seven o’clock.”

I hung up the phone and noticed Mom staring. “Did Josh just ask you out?”

“Well, not really. He said he’d go to the Tolo with me.”

“Did you ask him out?”

“No. But we’re going now.”

She shook her head. “You know, until this moment I thought I could counsel you about teenage boys. But evidently, a lot has changed since I went to high school.”

I wondered if Josh would treat me differently now that we had an actual date in the works. He did. He didn't open any doors for me or send me knowing looks. He didn't even mention our social plans. However, he did act more distant and talked to me less. When I spoke to him, he seemed preoccupied. I figured he regretted the whole Tolo thing and didn't want to encourage me further by acting interested or, for that matter, polite.

It was an unfair attitude, considering he was the one who'd insisted we go to the dance in the first place. At first, I tried to joke around with him. I thought it would put him at ease. It didn't. After a few days of being given this cool treatment, I ignored him in the car and talked to Elise.

That Thursday after Josh dropped us off in the morning, Elise kept glancing at me while we walked to our lockers. "Are you and Josh fighting?" she asked.

I sighed and swung my backpack from my shoulders. This was as good a time as any to end the facade.

"You could tell, huh?"

"What did he do?"

I smiled and she looked at me questioningly. I said, "He told me once that if we ever fought you'd be forced to choose sides. He assumed you'd choose his side."

Elise snorted. "I live with him. I know how impossible he can be. What did he do?"

I pulled my Spanish notebook from my backpack. "I think he regrets going out with me. It's like he's embarrassed to date someone so young. He

doesn't introduce me to his friends. He won't tell people about us. It makes me feel like a second-class citizen."

"Men can be such pigs."

"Then we had a fight about the Tolo. We decided we'd go, but I think he wants to get out of it. He acts so tense. He must want to break up."

"Pigs, pigs, pigs."

"I guess I'd better talk to him—you know, tell him if he wants to call everything off, it's okay."

Elise put her hand on my arm. "Will you be all right?"

"Sure. There are more fish in the sea—of course, I never did like fish, but I won't be too lonely. I have my friends, my schoolwork...and Bob said he'd like to hang out sometime."

"I can set you up with someone," Elise said.

I shook my head. "I need time by myself."

"That's the last thing you need. Look, there's a party tomorrow night at Henry Fletcher's house. The whole football team will be there. You'd have lots of fun."

"I can't."

"If you went with me, you'd feel differently. Give guys a chance to see you in an environment where you don't have a book in front of your face. I'll introduce you to some upperclassmen super-studs."

"No, thanks." She didn't look convinced, so I added more forcefully, "I don't need any more Carparkaphobia stories."



I'D PLANNED on waiting until after school to talk to Josh, but I saw him at his locker while en route to algebra. I walked over to him. "You can get on with your logical dating plans now. I told Elise we're breaking up."

He threw one of his books into his locker. "Great. Anything else happen while I've been away?"

"I thought you wanted it this way."

His gaze flashed to mine. "How come I have no say in what you tell Elise about us?"

"What did you want to say?"

He ignored my question. “Did you tell her you were dumping me for Bob?”

“No. I said you didn’t want to date someone so young.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Why? Did you get younger than you were when I decided to date you in the first place?”

“No. You had a change of heart.”

He pulled his physics book from his locker and gripped it tightly. “And Elise believes that?”

“She called you a pig.”

He glared at me again. “Great.”

“She’s not really mad at you.”

“Yeah, just wait until I tell her my side of the story.”

I shifted my books nervously. “What’s your side of the story?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t made it up yet. You can hear about it the way I hear about these things—after the fact and as a surprise. Maybe I found out you two-timed me.”

I tilted my chin down in disbelief. “You’re not going to tell her that.”

He gave me a smile that looked very much like Elise’s wicked one. “You’ll have to wait and see, won’t you?”



IT TURNED out to be a good thing I broke up with Josh when I did. That afternoon as Elise and I wandered across the parking lot, Bob caught up to us. After a couple of minutes of small talk, he asked, “Are you doing anything tonight, Cassidy?”

I shook my head.

“My parents had planned on going to a dinner theater up on campus tonight, but my Aunt Nancy called this morning. She’s driving up from Colorado and wants to stop here on her way to Seattle. They gave me the tickets because I was never crazy about Aunt Nancy anyway. I don’t mind missing her.”

I smiled politely and waited for him to make sense.

He watched my expression for another moment. “Do you think you could go?”

“To Seattle?” Elise asked.

“To the dinner theater,” he said.

“Sure,” I answered. “What time is it?”

He glanced at his watch. “Three o’clock.” Then he blushed. “You meant what time is the dinner theater, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“Six. I’ll pick you up at a quarter ‘til. Sorry it’s such short notice, but you don’t need to do anything to yourself. You always look nice.”

We’d reached Josh’s car by this time. Bob headed toward his own. “See you later.”

Elise huffed in exasperation.

“Bob is nice,” I said.

“This is all Josh’s fault,” she answered.

When we got into the car, Elise glared at her brother.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said pointedly. “Everything is fine with me. I’m having a normal, happy day. How about you?”

“I’ve had better,” he said.

I watched the scenery go by the window and pretended I didn’t know what they were talking about.



MY DATE with Bob went smoothly. We talked about school on the way to the show and then talked about the play on the way home. It was a stupid play about a pair of dysfunctional sisters who were trying to find themselves, but it made for good conversation on the ride back. Bob and I both agreed that as punishment for being annoying, the characters should be forced to relive high school. That way, they wouldn’t have to worry about finding themselves because there were always so many people in high school who told you exactly who you were.

When we got to my house, Bob walked me to my doorstep. “Sorry the play was such a bomb. I hope you had a good time anyway.”

“I did. Thanks for taking me.”

“We’ll have to do something again sometime.”

“Sure.”

We looked at each other for a moment, and I wondered if he wanted to kiss me. Then I wondered if I should let him. What exactly did a goodnight kiss mean? That you were boyfriend and girlfriend? I didn't want that. Not yet. Maybe never. How did people know enough about each other after two dates to make that sort of decision?

A voice in the back of my head said, "If this was Josh, you'd kiss him."

I hated the fact that I was letting Josh, who clearly didn't want to kiss me, intrude on my date with Bob. But there it was. The truth never cares whether it's a convenient time to present itself. I liked Josh. A lot. Which meant it wasn't right to kiss Bob.

I took hold of the doorknob before any more time passed. "Well, good night."

Bob nodded. "Good night."

I slipped inside. As I got ready for bed, I tried not to think of Josh anymore. I didn't succeed.



ON SATURDAY AFTERNOON, my parents drove an hour and a half to Spokane for an art show. Mom had a few of her paintings featured in the show, but I knew from experience that going to this sort of event meant spending hours walking around staring at obscure paintings, then spending the rest of the evening listening to my parents discuss them. I opted for a night at home with a microwave dinner instead.

At ten o'clock, Elise called to ask for a ride home from Henry's party. Chad had driven her there, but Elise said he wasn't in a condition to drive anymore. I hesitated before answering her. My parents would be back anytime. I knew they expected me to be home. "Can't you call your house?" I asked.

"No. Then my parents would know I've been drinking."

"Won't they know when they see you?" After all, I could tell just by her voice.

"I'm only one of eight people living in the house. Mom is throwing up. Dad is busy keeping the little people happy. They don't pay close attention to me. But if you can't come pick me up, I'll have to risk it and make Chad

take me. Of course, we might crash and die—might even plow into a few innocent bystanders...”

“All right. I’m on my way.”

I thought of texting my parents to tell them where I was going, but I wrote a note and left it on the table instead. A text they would read right away. With any luck, I’d be home to throw away the note before they had a chance to see it.

I drove to Henry’s quickly, jogged up his front walk, and knocked on the door. When no one answered, I rang the bell. A guy I recognized from the football team opened the door.

“Hi!” He turned his head and yelled back into the house, “It’s more chicks!”

A general hurrah went up from the living room.

“I’m here to pick up Elise,” I said.

The guy turned his head again. “Nope, it’s just one chick!” He returned his attention to me. “Don’t just stand there, come in.”

I took two steps into the entryway. “Is Elise Benson here?”

“Sure. I saw her around somewhere.”

“Could you find her for me please?”

“I’ll see.” He threw his head back and yelled, “HEY ELISE!”

No one answered. No one even looked up. “Can’t find her,” the guy said. “Check the kitchen.”

“Thanks.” I navigated my way across the living room, trying not to step on people sprawled around on the floor. It was dark and hard to tell which blobs were bodies and which were coats. I noticed people cluttering the hallway and sitting on the stairs too. I wondered if I’d have to search the whole house for Elise.

As I wandered through the dining room, a guy came up and offered me a beer.

“No thanks,” I said. “I’m just here to pick someone up.”

He stepped closer to me. “Wow, you don’t waste any time, do you?”

“I mean, I’m here to pick up my friend, Elise, and take her home.”

“Wouldn’t you rather take *me* home?”

“Excuse me,” I said, pushing past him. “I need to find Elise.”

A few minutes later, I did. She was sitting on Chad’s lap on one of many chairs set up in the kitchen. She saw me, called, “Cassidy!” and stood and hugged me. “You know, I really love you, Cassidy.”

“That’s nice. Let’s go home.”

“Hey everybody,” she chimed, “this is Cassidy Woodruff. My idiot brother broke up with her Thursday, so she’s suffering from a broken heart. Be nice to her.”

A collective “Ahh” went through the room.

I put my hand over my face. “Can we go now?”

“I have to finish my beer. Sit down. Enjoy life. Carpe diem. If you don’t seize the moment, the moment will never seize you.”

Seize? That sounded like what happened when you had a heart attack. I sat on a chair and glared at her. She didn’t notice. She was back on Chad’s lap. He had his arm around her waist.

“So Cassidy,” he said, “how’s your poetry going?”

“Fine.”

“You want something to drink?”

“No, thanks.”

Elise held out her glass to me. “It won’t bite you, you know. This beer is perfectly tame.”

“Elise, I thought you called for a ride home.”

“I did. But you might as well have a good time while you’re here. Think how jealous Josh will be.” She turned and motioned to someone. “Hey, Brandon, come here. I want you to meet my friend.”

A tall guy with light brown hair and a football-player strut came over. He grinned. I tried not to look as uncomfortable as I felt.

“Cassidy, this is Brandon, super stud extraordinaire. Brandon, this is Cassidy, or—as she’s sometimes known—Cassi-Diem.”

Brandon sat beside me. He spoke louder than he needed to. “So, you’re on the rebound, huh?”

“Sort of. I mean...actually, I’m here to take Elise home.”

He took a sip of his beer. “Why don’t you tell me about it.”

“Well, I plan on putting her in the car and driving to her house.”

I glanced at Elise. She was messing up Chad’s hair and laughing about something. I knew she didn’t want to leave. She’d set this whole thing up so I’d meet guys.

I sent her psychic kill vibes.

“No,” Brandon said, “I mean tell me about yourself.” He put his arm across the back of my chair. “I’m very compassionate—emphasis on the *passionate*. Tell me how you need someone to comfort you.”

“Thanks for the concern. I’ll be fine.”

He took another sip of beer and gazed at me. “You have beautiful eyes. Kind of greenish, brownish—”

“Hazel,” I said.

The speakers, which had been blaring ever since I came inside, switched to a song Brandon knew and liked. He sang along. Almost on key.

I tried to catch Elise’s attention by staring at her, but she was completely occupied with Chad’s blond hair. I wondered how long she would take to finish her beer.

Three minutes. I would give her three minutes and then we were going.

While trying to ignore the second verse of Brandon’s song, I gave the room a good overview. The kitchen connected with the family room, so I could see a lot of people. A guy was stumbling out a version of Dance, Dance Revolution, while a few people cheered him on—probably waiting to see if he’d fall over. Everybody had drinks in their hands. Some people were talking and laughing. Some people looked bored. Some people appeared to be on the final lap of the race to unconsciousness. One guy lay under the coffee table—just lay there—staring up at the underside of the table.

I thought of all the people I’d passed on the way to the kitchen and how a lot of them wore dull expressions. One group sat in front of a laptop in the living room and watched YouTube videos. Did they have to come to someone else’s house to do that? What was the point?

Even those who seemed happy were being stupid. Brandon would’ve never sat down beside me, told me I had beautiful eyes, and broken out into song if he hadn’t been plastered.

I don’t know what I had expected to find at one of these parties. It’s not like I’d expected everyone to be playing charades, but I’d figured something entertaining must happen. Until that moment, I hadn’t realized the alcohol *was* the entertainment. Apparently, the idea was to slosh your brain until it had fun by itself—and then, lo and behold, staring at the underside of a table became a thing of joy.

The song ended and Brandon finished his serenade. “I ought to start my own band,” he said. “It would be great. I could play the guitar, get paid lots of money, and women would throw themselves at me.” He gestured in my direction. “Have you ever thought about being a groupie?”

“Not really.” I glanced at the clock on the wall. Elise’s three minutes were up. I motioned for her to come over.

She got up and pulled Chad along after her. Instead of looking at me, she leaned close to Brandon, and stage whispered, “How’s it going?”

“I don’t know,” Brandon said. “Your friend isn’t very talkative.”

I stood up. “That’s because Elise and I have to leave now.”

Elise ignored me. “Cassidy is kind of repressed. She needs to learn to enjoy life.”

I sent her more psychic kill vibes.

“You know what happens to repressed people,” she added as though she were a doctor delivering a diagnosis. “One day they snap and do something completely insane like becoming accountants and engineers. You don’t want that to be your fate. You need somebody to sweep you off your feet.” To Brandon she said, “Be the broom. Be the...” she hiccupped, “you know, that plastic thing you sweep junk into.”

“The dustpan?” I provided.

She fluttered a hand in Brandon’s direction. “Yeah. That. Be that.”

“Elise,” I started, but I didn’t finish. While my back was to Brandon, he picked me up, literally sweeping me off my feet. He twirled me around—something intoxicated people really shouldn’t do. He stumbled once, and I suddenly had visions of cracking my head open and being rushed to the emergency room. Thankfully, after one twirl he set me down again, still keeping his arm around my waist. I wasn’t sure whether he was trying to be romantic or just using me to steady himself.

“Wow,” he said looking at his feet. “The tile on the floor is moving. Have you ever noticed that?”

I turned to find Elise. She and Chad had headed out of the kitchen, holding hands.

I stepped away from Brandon, disconnecting his hand from my waist. “Elise, where are you going?”

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

I knew she wouldn’t be back in a minute. It was all in her diabolic plan. She was leaving me with Brandon, and an assortment of other wasted idiots, to fend for myself.

“So,” Brandon said, trailing after me, “Do you want me to sweep you off your feet again?”

I held up a hand to ward him off. “No, my feet are fine on the ground.”

“We can go out back and watch the stars.”

“It’s ten below outside.”

“My car has a heater and a sunroof.”

“I’ll take a rain check, Mr. Dust Pan. I’ve really got to go.”

I made a trip once around the downstairs searching for Elise, then went upstairs to look for her there. As I walked by one of the bedrooms, I heard Chad’s voice from behind the door.

“C’mon, Elise. You’ll like it. I promise.”

All sorts of compromising situations came to mind. I put my hand on the doorknob but didn’t turn it. I didn’t want to embarrass Elise. Then again, I didn’t want to leave her in the room with Chad, either. It was wrong. In her state of mind, she’d be easy to take advantage of.

My hand didn’t move.

What if she *wanted* to be taken advantage of? It was her choice, not mine. She constantly told me to let her live her own life. What if she hated me for walking in on her now?

But it didn’t matter. I knew I would hate myself even more if I walked away from the door.

I knocked to give them a moment’s warning and turned the knob. The door was locked.

“Who’s there?” Chad called.

“Elise, it’s time to go home.”

“You’re supposed to be off having fun,” she told me. “Go Carpe your diem.”

Chad laughed. “Don’t worry about Elise. I’ll take her home.”

I rattled the doorknob again. “No. Open the door.”

I heard them talk quietly. Chad came to the door and opened it a crack. He hadn’t meant to open it more than that, but I pushed my way inside. Elise was leaning up against the bed. I started towards her, then stopped abruptly. A couple of oddly rolled cigarettes sat in an ashtray on the dresser.

I stared at them. “Is that marijuana?”

“No,” Chad said.

Elise held up her hands to stop my words. “I wasn’t going to smoke any.”

I turned to Chad. “You were giving her drugs?”

“It’s just a few joints,” he said, as though it were all a joke. “If you want the hard stuff, you gotta go downstairs to the den.” He turned to Elise, with

a stupid grin, “Hey, babe, want to stop by the den later?”

What was in the den? I thought of every statistic and news story my parents had made me read about the dangers of mixing alcohol with other drugs. Cocaine and alcohol could stop your heart. “Don’t,” I told Emma. “This is dangerous and illegal.”

“Calm down.” Chad put himself between me and the dresser. “It’s no big deal. A little pot takes the edge off your stomachache so you don’t throw up.”

He was an expert on this? How often did he do drugs? “And then you can drink yourself into a coma instead?”

He picked up a joint and took a drag. “See? No coma. Just fun.” He tilted his head back and blew out a puff of smoke. “You wanna try some?”

I folded my arms and stared at him. I felt nothing but contempt for him at that moment. “I’m sure Elise told you that I’ve had a crush on you since the eighth grade. But now that I know what you’re like, I think you’re a complete jerk.”

He took another drag. “You had a crush on me?”

Elise shook her head. “I never told him, Cassidy.”

Chad smiled and blew out more smoke. “Since the eighth grade, huh?”

I stepped away from the smoke. The last thing I needed was to come home smelling like pot. “Didn’t you hear anything else I said? I think you’re a jerk.”

He took a step closer to me, still smiling. “Your eyes sparkle when you’re angry. Did you know that?”

Elise stepped over to us, hands on her hips, her eyes tight with anger. “I can’t believe this. Are you hitting on my friend while I’m standing right here?”

“I’m just teasing her,” Chad said. “Chill the hormones.”

I took hold of Elise’s arm. “We’re going home now.”

Elise didn’t answer. We heard a noise downstairs, like something crashing. Chad held up his hand. “Shh.”

We all listened in silence. The music had stopped. We heard raised voices, but not what they said. Footsteps muffled everything.

“I’ll see what’s happening.” Chad put his joint in an ashtray and strode to the door. “I’ll be right back.”

As soon as he was gone, I snuffed out his joint, smashing it hard. “This isn’t living life to the fullest, Elise. It’s living life to the stupidest.”

Elise's hands were still on her hips. "I can't believe my boyfriend flirted with you. He *was* flirting with you, wasn't he?"

"He was mocking me."

"Oh." She paused for a moment. "Should that make me more angry, or less? I can't think straight. I've had too much to drink." She put her hand on her throat. "I really hope I don't throw up."

"Where's your coat?"

"Downstairs. But we have to wait until Chad gets back. I want to say goodbye to him and yell at him for flirting with you."

I glanced out the window and saw movement down on the street. I went over for a better look. That's when I saw people fleeing from the house. Someone dropped from a nearby window. He seemed distinctly familiar.

"Hey, Elise, is that Chad running across the lawn?"

She looked, then grabbed my hand. "Oh, no! The party's busted!"

Before Elise's words could register, she pulled me from the room. I wasn't sure where we were going or what we were doing, but her panic was contagious, and I ran after her.

The police met us on the stairs.

Elise and I weren't the only ones who'd managed to be apprehended by the armed forces of Pullman. A dozen or so kids hadn't been quick enough, or coherent enough, to escape. The guy under the table had to be carried outside. The rest of us were escorted.

A big van with two benches on the sides and padded walls waited with the door open. I could smell the inside of it from fifteen feet away. It was like an outhouse on wheels. Two police officers were helping kids climb in.

I went and found the officer in charge. He was a middle-aged man with short-cropped dark hair and a gruff expression. "Excuse me," I said, "but I wasn't a part of this party. I was only here to pick up a friend. She had too much to drink, and I was giving her a ride home."

"Well, honey, you're a few minutes too late. Now we'll give you both a ride—down to the station."

"But I didn't drink anything," I protested. "Isn't there some kind of test you can do to prove I'm not drunk?"

"Down at the station."

I looked around the street at the flash of blue and red lights that pulsed shadows onto the sidewalk. "My parents are expecting me to come home. Can't you have me walk a straight line? It's not illegal to pick someone up, is it? You're not going to arrest me for that, are you?"

“No. We’re not going to arrest you.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

“We arrest adults. We detain juveniles.”

“But—”

He held up a hand to stop my words. “Look, when we find drugs at a party, we take everyone in. Everyone.”

“Drugs?” I’d touched the ashtray when I’d snuffed out Chad’s joint. Could they get my fingerprints off it? I probably had some sort of residue on my fingers. Did the police test for that sort of thing? I felt sick. Then I remembered Elise had been in the room too. She was my witness. If they questioned me about it, she could turn in Chad and clear my name.

Elise was angry enough at him that she would probably volunteer the information anyway. From the moment we ran into the police, she’d done nothing but issue a stream of curses on his name, his family, and several of his body parts. It didn’t make a good case for her sobriety, but at least I knew her loyalties.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll go down to the station to clear my name.” I thought about the paddy wagon and its outhouse smell. “Can I drive my own car?”

“No,” the officer drawled. “You’ll ride in my car in the backseat cage, and as an extra bonus, you can wear our famous designer police bracelets.” He held up a pair of handcuffs, jiggling them so they rattled. “They’re the latest fashion rage. All the kids are wearing them—at least, all the kids at this party.”

I took a step backward. “You’re going to handcuff me like a criminal?”

“No. The criminals get handcuffed on their feet too. But if you’d like to put up a fight, we’ll oblige you.”

I got into his car quietly. Well, nearly quietly. As he shut the car door, I called out, “I’m pretty sure this is a violation of my civil rights.”

The officer didn’t answer. I was sandwiched between two completely drunk girls. One kept burping; the other passed out and leaned her head on my shoulder.

I thought of my note back home on the kitchen table. Were my parents home yet? If they weren’t, they would be soon. I pictured my mother reading it, checking her watch, then reading it again. I could even see her lips tighten as she did it.

I was in trouble. Massive trouble. Enormous, immense, colossal trouble. Any synonym for *huge*—that’s how much trouble I was in.

I rehearsed the events of the evening in my mind and tried to pick out my mistake. What should I have done differently? I couldn’t have let Chad take Elise home. I couldn’t have left Elise alone in the bedroom. I couldn’t have dragged Elise out by her hair, either. Maybe my mistake had been walking into the house at all. Maybe I should have stood on the front porch and rang the doorbell until Elise came outside. I wondered if the police would’ve detained me for standing on the porch and ringing the bell incessantly.

When we got to the station, we were escorted into a lobby-type area. Elise staggered over so she stood next to me. All I could manage to say was, “My parents are going to kill me.”

“You worry too much,” she said lightly. “Think of this as an adventure—something to tell your grandchildren about.”

“An adventure is when you do something fun. This is a nightmare, and I don’t want to tell my grandchildren about it. Even more, I don’t want to tell my parents about it.”

“Then don’t.”

“Right. What will I say to them? I’m here at the police station visiting? I dropped by to make sure the justice system was moving along smoothly?”

A police officer waved for Elise to come to the counter. The officer was a heavyset woman, with short dark hair that haloed her face, glasses, and a look on her face that said she’d already had a long day. I went to the counter too. Before Elise could say anything, I started in on my explanation. “This is all a big mistake. I’m not supposed to be here.”

The officer peered at me over the rims of her glasses. “I hope you remember that, young lady. This *is* a big mistake, and none of you should be here. You should be home doing school work like responsible teenagers.”

“No, I mean I wasn’t actually *at* this party. I mean, I was there, but only to drive my friend home.”

“Uh-huh,” the woman said with an implied sigh. “Your name, please?”

Elise lifted her chin defiantly. “We won’t tell you our names, Coppo Swine.”

Without thinking I said, “Elise!”

She hit me. “Thanks a lot, Natasha. Is there any other information you’d like to supply the enemy with?”

The officer typed her name into her computer. “What’s your last name, Elise?”

“Just Elise. I’m like one of those famous singers who don’t have last names. Although my good friends call me Buttercup.” Elise gave me an aloof look. “You’re obviously not one of my good friends.”

The officer was patient. “Elise, you’re not making this any easier.”

“Good,” she said. “I don’t want this to be easy. I want this to be as hard as I can make it.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “And don’t you dare tell them anything else about me, Natasha, or I’ll never speak to you again.”

The officer tapped her fingers on the counter. “If you want to add hindering an investigation to your charges, fine. Spend some time here. Spend days here. I don’t care. Your parents will look for you sooner or later.”

“No they won’t,” Elise slurred out. “They don’t care about me. They’ve got five replacement children at home. They won’t notice I’m gone—at least not until they need a babysitter. When they both need to go to their stupid store, then they’ll wonder what happened to Elise.” She folded her arms. “Who knows, a jail cell might be the closest I ever get to having my own room. I don’t want to see my parents. Why shouldn’t I spend time here?”

“All right.” The woman turned and yelled to an officer standing nearby, “Hey, Wozniak, can you come and take Buttercup here to the detox room? She wants to take advantage of our deluxe accommodations.”

The man came and led Elise away. She sang “Jailhouse Rock” while she tromped off. I could hear it all the way down the hall. Some of the less-sober people in the room joined in.

“So, Natasha,” the police officer said, “do you want to help your friend and give us some information about her? We need to call her parents.”

Elise had said she’d never speak to me again if I told the police anything about her. I wasn’t sure how serious she was about that threat. “Can I make a phone call first, please?”

“Going to talk to your lawyer?” The woman looked exasperated but let me use my cell phone. I dialed Josh’s number, hoping he hadn’t turned off his phone and gone to bed.

He answered. “Cassidy?”

I kept my voice quiet. "I'm down at the police station and I need your help."

"You're where?" he asked, sounding like he was still waking up.

"At the police station. I'm with Elise."

"You're with Elise?"

"We were busted at a party."

"You were *busted!*" The incredulity in his voice rose with each statement, and it made me feel even worse that he kept repeating everything I said.

"I wasn't drinking. I was just there to pick Elise up, and now she won't tell the police anything except that her name is Buttercup, and they put her in detox, and she says she'll never speak to me again if I give them any information about her. She says she doesn't want to see your parents, but I can't just leave her here."

He let out a low breath. "What do you want me to do?"

He didn't say it sarcastically. I knew he was trying to find out what I wanted from him. But what I wanted was for him to somehow magically make this all better. I wanted him to deal with Elise and take care of everything so I would no longer be responsible.

With the phone still pressed to my face, I realized that it wasn't possible to fix something like that with a simple phone call. It wasn't possible because I wasn't responsible for Elise in the first place. Only Elise was responsible for her situation, and right now she was obviously singing prison ditties in detox. It didn't matter what Josh or I did. Things wouldn't get better for Elise until Elise made them better.

I was silent for so long that Josh said, "Cassidy?"

"You know, maybe we should let Elise handle this on her own."

"What?"

"Maybe what she needs is for someone not to come rescue her this time."

"Cassidy, she's at the police station."

"I know, Josh. I know because I'm here with her. I went running to rescue her from her latest mistake, and now I'll probably get a lovely mug shot to commemorate the occasion."

Josh let out a tired sigh. "You only want to leave her there because you're mad."

“No, I’m only trying to figure out what’s best for her because I care.” I ignored the impatient look the police officer gave me and went on. “I just spent the evening trying to help Elise. I’ve been hit on, mocked, detained, and sandwiched between two drunks in the back of a police car. My parents will go ballistic over this. They’ll never let me out of the house again, and none of it matters to Elise.”

I thought he’d protest further, but he didn’t. The line was silent. Finally, he said, “I have to tell my parents where she is. They’ll worry when she doesn’t show up here soon. But I’ll think about what you said.”

He hung up without saying goodbye.

I put my phone away and turned back to the police officer. “I let Elise’s family know where she is.”

The woman smiled at me patronizingly. “I’m glad to hear that. Now, why don’t you give us some information about yourself, Natasha.”

After I told the police every minute detail about myself, I was able to call my dad. I explained what had happened. He didn't say much. It was a bad sign.

When my Mom came to the station to pick me up, she barely looked at me. She talked to the officers, signed forms, and didn't defend herself when they lectured her about a parent's moral and legal responsibility to make sure their children obeyed the laws.

They pointedly let me know I was getting off easy because I hadn't been involved in the underage consumption of alcohol. All the other teenage criminals got a court date.

This didn't alleviate Mom's anger, however. She walked briskly to the doors. "Come-on-Cassidy-we're-going-home."

It was a very bad sign.

She strode to her car fast-paced. "I don't believe this. You are permanently grounded. You're not leaving the house again without our permission. Do you understand?" She got in the car and slammed the door.

I got in the other side.

She turned on the car, wrenched it into reverse, and pulled out of the parking lot. "Of all the things we ever expected from you, I never thought I'd be picking you up from the police station."

I didn't answer. It hadn't been on my list of expectations either.

"How could you let yourself get mixed up in this?" she went on. "Do you know what this will do to your reputation? Do you?"

I listened quietly while she told me how my respectable image was shattered and how hard it would be for me to live a life of dignity in high school from here on.

I was really glad when we reached home.

The lecture didn't end, however, it just moved into the living room. "Your days of hanging around Elise are over," Mom said. "Do you understand? No more Elise."

While I put my coat away, Mom stomped up the stairs and slammed her bedroom door shut.

Dad came out of the kitchen. He stood there quietly for a minute, his hands in the pockets of his robe. "Have you learned anything tonight?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"I can't solve Elise's problems for her. But having learned that, I think I should still be allowed to be her friend—"

Dad held up a hand to silence this line of conversation. "What else have you learned?"

"Chad Warren's a jerk."

"Who's Chad Warren?"

"The guy who ran out of the house and didn't tell us the police were coming."

Dad didn't appear pleased by this answer. "Is there anything else you've learned?"

"Real police stations aren't at all like the ones on TV."

"Cassidy..."

I held up my hands in frustration. "I don't know what answer you want, Dad."

"What have you learned about drinking parties?"

"Oh that. Don't worry; I thought it was a stupid party even before it got busted. The whole time I was there, all I wanted to do was leave."

"Good," Dad said with relief. "Now, do you think in the future you can manage to stay on the right side of the law?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Go to bed."

I trudged up the stairs. When I went by my parents' room I heard Mom crying inside. I stood there, frozen, unsure of what to do. Then I knocked softly on the door. Mom didn't answer, but I walked in anyway. She lay on

the bed, one hand covering her eyes. I thought she heard me come in, but I wasn't sure. She didn't look at me or say anything.

I sat down on the bed beside her. "I'm sorry about everything."

She didn't move. I watched her, not knowing what else to say. I felt guilty and was suddenly angry she was making me feel guilty.

"Mom, I didn't do anything bad. Why can't you trust me when I tell you that?"

She sat up, wiped at her tears, and hugged me. She held me tight like she did when I was a little girl. Her voice was shaky. "I know it's not your fault, honey. I shouldn't put this on you. I just don't want to lose you."

"You won't lose me."

"You're my baby, my daughter. You're the only one I've got."

"I know."

She pulled away from me to look at my face. "You know?"

"Well, I'd noticed there wasn't anyone else around the house."

She laughed and took a deep breath. "I don't expect you to understand this—to understand what it's like to be a mother." She touched my hair lightly, pushing a strand away from my face. Her eyes lingered on mine. "The first time I held you in my arms...I'd just been through labor. I was exhausted, but it was all I could do to keep myself from leaping off the hospital bed so I could hold you while they tested you to make sure everything was all right. I would've walked through fire for you." Her smile wavered. "In fact, I think I did walk through fire for you tonight."

"Yeah, sorry the police officers said all that stuff to you."

"I haven't acted like it, but I know you're a good kid." She kissed the top of my head. "This is what infertility does to a person. One thing went wrong, and suddenly I saw my entire parenting career as ineffectual. I saw..." She stared past me into the darkness. For a few moments, I sat and felt the silence around us. Then she said, "I used to want other children so badly. Every time we tried and failed, I held onto you tighter. I guess I've never been able to let go." She put her hand over her face, lay back down on the bed, and cried again.

I didn't know what to do. I'd never seen her like this before. "It's okay," I said. "You won't lose me." She seemed so fragile, so out of control.

Dad came and sat down on the bed beside us. I hadn't noticed him come in and didn't know how much of our conversation he'd heard. He took Mom in his arms, and she cried onto his shoulder. "It's all right," he told

me. “She’s not crying about you. She’s crying for the children we couldn’t have.”

I didn’t understand. “What children?”

“Go to bed,” Dad said. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

Mom lifted her head. “No, it’s all right. She needs to stay and talk with us, or she’ll think I’m having a nervous breakdown.” She wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand. “About once a year something sets me off, and I cry hysterically whether I need to or not. It’s another side effect of infertility.”

“I didn’t know it upset you so much.”

Mom took a tissue from her nightstand. “There was no point in telling you. You can’t do anything to change it.”

“You’re a wonderful daughter,” Dad said, “and you make us happy.”

Mom tried to smile but didn’t quite manage. “You have to understand this about me—after all these years, my arms still ache every time I see a baby. I don’t look at pregnant women. I go out of my way to avoid the baby section in department stores. The pain doesn’t end. It just resurfaces at each different stage of life.”

I didn’t know what to say. I got choked up myself. I thought of all the times I’d complained to my parents about being an only child and how it must have hurt them. Why hadn’t I ever seen it before?

Mom gave me a hug. “I didn’t mean to make you sad, honey. You don’t have to feel bad. We’re the luckiest parents alive because we have you.”

I took several shaky breaths in an attempt to regain composure. “Why didn’t you adopt?”

“We thought about it,” Dad said.

“We still think about it sometimes,” Mom added. “But, it’s just...” Her voice trailed off, and she crinkled the tissue in her hand, looking down at it instead of me. “We tried for so many years to get pregnant after we had you. For five years, we went to doctors. When the pregnancy test finally came back positive, we were so happy. We picked out names. We painted and wallpapered the den into a nursery. You went up to complete strangers and told them you were going to be a big sister.”

Mom stumbled over her words now. “When I found out I had to have the hysterectomy, I couldn’t go on anymore. It was as if heaven itself had pronounced we shouldn’t have any more children. I couldn’t face the prospect of trying for another child, of getting my hopes up again. I

couldn't even walk past the den without mourning the one I'd lost. I just locked the door, and we didn't use the room for six months." She paused. "I don't suppose you remember that, do you?"

"I remember you being in the hospital, but that's all."

"You were little." She smiled sadly. "Do you know what you wanted to call the new baby? Thumper if it was a boy and Flower if it was a girl."

"You watched a lot of Bambi," Dad said.

I don't know what made me say it, but the words, "I think you should adopt," came out of my mouth.

Mom said, "Do you?"

"Yes."

"We're too old."

"No, you're not. Elise's mom is having a baby and she's older than you."

"Elise's mom is a normal person."

"So are you."

"Elise's mom doesn't have the social-services judge decide whether she's fit to parent or not."

"You're great parents. I'll vouch for you."

Mom gave me another hug. "We'll think about it. But now it's nearly —" she glanced over at the clock, "morning, and we all need to get some sleep. It's been a long night."

"All right." I gave them both a kiss. Before I left their room, I turned back to them. "If you decide to adopt, I'll tell strangers I'm going to be a big sister."

I could tell Mom smiled even in the dark. "I do trust you, Cassidy. I'll try not to hold onto you so tightly."



BY THE TIME I pulled myself out of bed the next day, it was afternoon. After I'd showered and eaten, I texted Elise to see how she was. She didn't answer. I figured her parents had confiscated her phone, so I texted Josh and asked the same question.

He texted back: *I'm about to walk the dog. Meet me outside.*

Yesterday I wouldn't have told my parents what I was doing. I would've made up some other excuse to leave the house. Today I put on my coat and grabbed a pair of gloves. "I'm going to go talk to Josh."

Mom glanced up from her laptop. I knew she wanted to question me about how long I'd be gone and what I'd be doing. She probably also wanted to throw in some instructions about dressing warmly, but she just said, "Okay."

I smiled and left.

Josh hadn't said where to meet him, so I started down the sidewalk toward his house. A thin layer of snow covered the ground, sparkling in the sunshine and making everything seem clean and picturesque, renewed.

I was almost to Josh's house when I ran into Samantha. I didn't usually see her outside, but she was walking in my direction wearing a parka that framed her face so perfectly that she looked like a model for a ski magazine.

I wondered if Josh always walked his dog at this time and if Samantha had coincided her stroll to run into him.

When she got close, she smiled in that evil cheerleader sort of way. I could tell she already knew about Elise and me getting hauled down to the police station last night. I met her gaze without flinching anyway. "Hi, Samantha."

She stopped instead of walking past me. "Hi, Cassidy. How's your weekend going?"

"Oh, average." I made a mental note to call all my friends when I got home. I wanted them to hear the story from me before they heard it on the sour grapevine. "How about you?"

"Well, I'm keeping out of trouble."

"Great." That about summed up everything I had to say to Samantha.

I caught sight of Josh. Goliath was straining on his leash, pulling him toward us. "Heel," Josh said, but it didn't do any good.

Apparently, Samantha and I looked interesting or perhaps smelled tasty.

"Hi," Josh said when he reached us.

"Hi," Samantha and I said at the same time. We glanced at one another, then back at Josh. He nodded at Samantha but motioned for me to follow him. "Come on, Cassidy, let's go talk."

I refrained from smiling triumphantly at Samantha and went with him.

When we were out of earshot, I asked, "How's Elise?"

“Trying to shake her hangover.”

“Your parents picked her up?”

“Yeah. She’s grounded for a month. My parents also decided they need more quality time with her so they’ve promoted my younger brother to head babysitter and she’s going to pick up some shifts at the store.”

“That’s quality time?”

“It will be for a while.” He shrugged. “They’re making it a priority to spend time with her. That’s the important thing.”

He tilted his head, studying me. “Did you get in a lot of trouble?”

“A lot would be an accurate description.”

“How long are you grounded for?”

“At first it was for forever, but then my parents reduced the charges to a stern lecture.”

Josh pulled Goliath away from a piece of trash in the street. “When I talked to Elise this morning, I told her you’d be in it deep with your parents. Do you know what she said? She said it was my fault. Mine. If I hadn’t broken your heart, she wouldn’t have had to play matchmaker at the party. She won’t accept the least bit of responsibility for her part in it.” Goliath tried to investigate some shrubbery near a house, and Josh pulled him back onto the sidewalk. No wonder Josh had nice biceps. He didn’t need to lift weights. He wrestled a mammoth dog every day.

“I’ve thought about what you said last night,” Josh continued. “We do always come to Elise’s rescue. I’ve done it for years. So have my parents. Our whole family life spins around her. Now she’s got you into it too. But what are we supposed to do—just sit back and let her screw up her life?”

I put my hands in my coat pockets. “I don’t know. I guess we take each situation as it comes.

He nodded, then sighed. “Well, I for one am sorry you got into trouble last night.”

“It’s not your fault.” I smiled. “Well, except that you broke my heart.”

His blue eyes fixed on mine. “What did you tell Elise to make her think you were so upset about our breakup?”

“Nothing. Maybe she thinks you’re so wonderful anyone would be heartbroken.”

“She called me Mega Pork. You must have said something.”

“I told you what I said to her: You didn’t want to date a sophomore. It’s true after all—you told me that yourself.”

“Yeah, but that was...but I...” He gave Goliath another correcting tug. “That makes me a pig?”

“A mega pork, evidently.”

“We’re still going to the Tolo,” he said. “Don’t think you’ll get out of it just because you’re heartbroken.” His eyes narrowed. “And what did Elise mean by matchmaking, anyway? What matchmaking went on last night at that party?”

“None. Unless you count the time she told a guy if I didn’t have someone sweep me off my feet, I’d end up being an accountant or engineer.”

“And you accuse *me* of being unromantic about dating.”

“Maybe I should come up with some logical plans.”

Josh gave me a smile that could not only melt ice but turn the water into steam besides. I wondered if he did it on purpose. Did he know what his smile was capable of? Then I wondered why I had ever thought he was less than a fifteen.

All day Monday, I fielded comments from friends and acquaintances about doing time and my brush with the criminal element. I repeated the story so many times I was sick of hearing about it. My friends, however, thought it was intensely amusing and took every opportunity to tease me. The ribbings got old, but at least everyone believed that I'd been a sober innocent bystander. That's why everyone thought it was so funny.

I didn't see Elise much. She'd apologized in the car on the way to school, but I couldn't help wondering if Josh made her do it. She didn't seem sincere. Right after her apology, she leaned around her seat to see me better. "But I bet you met some interesting people, didn't you?"

"Oh, tons. Most of them wore blue uniforms."

"What about Brandon?"

"What about him?"

"Did you like him?" Elise looked pointedly at Josh as she asked this.

"Elise, I don't know anything about Brandon except that he drinks light beer and sings baritone."

"Oh," she drew out the word. "Did he serenade you? How romantic. Tell me all about it."

"Yes," Josh said sweetly. "Tell us all about it."

"There's nothing to tell." To change the subject, I asked, "So what's going on with Chad? Have you talked to him since he fled the crime scene?"

Elise's voice turned caustic. "Yes, I talked to the King of Slime. I called him up and told him I never wanted to see his lousy, repulsive, cowardly

face again. I still can't believe he ran off without warning us that we were about to be incarcerated. I mean, how much trouble would it have been to yell, 'Police'? But no. He left us there like sitting, underage ducks. And all that after he—" She seemed to remember Josh was sitting close by. "Well, you know."

"I don't know," Josh said. "What else did he do?"

"All right, if you insist on knowing, he hit on Cassidy. Right in front of me. The creep."

Until that moment I thought she was talking about the drugs. "He did worse things than flirt."

"Oh yeah," Elise said, "and he was doing drugs too. What a loser. I should've listened to you, Josh. You knew all along that he was a jerk."

Josh let out a grunt. "Remember those words next time I tell you something. *I should've listened to you, Josh.* I think you should say that several times a day."

"Well, maybe I would've listened to you this time, but Cassidy gave Chad a ringing endorsement—how was I to know?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "How did this become my fault? When did my judgment enter into your romantic affairs?"

"I know, I know," Elise said. "You couldn't have realized what a trash heap he was. I forgive you for misleading me."

I sent her a raised-eyebrow look. "I'll try to pick out a better boyfriend for you next time."

"Get someone tall, dark, and handsome—but throw in a dash of Bob for upstandingness." She tilted her head considering her own words. "Actually, Bob is tall and dark already. He's also kinda cute in a geeky, smart-guy sort of way. Sort of a pre-Bill Gates..."

"But with bugs instead of computers," I agreed.

"He's better looking than Bill Gates." Elise's gaze shot to mine. "Not that I would ever try to snag him if you were dating him first."

"We're just friends." I couldn't tell her, with Josh sitting right there that her brother was the one I wanted to date. I didn't need her feeling even sorrier for me that my supposed romance with him had failed. I glanced at the rearview mirror. Josh's eyes were framed in it, surveying me.

"It's a moot point anyway," Elise said with a dramatic sigh. "I'm grounded for a month. It's my unjust reward for trying to improve your love life."

“Feel free to strangle her,” Josh said. “I won’t stop you.”

But I just shook my head and said, “Elise...Elise...Elise...”

I passed Brandon once in the hallway at school. He saw me and did a double take. I could tell he was trying to place me, but he didn’t say anything. I smiled and walked on. I hoped it drove him crazy.

I ran into Chad too. He looked away awkwardly. I wondered how much of our conversation from the party he remembered. I wondered if he would spend the rest of the school year pretending he didn’t see me when I walked by. I was glad he felt uncomfortable. He deserved to.

During PE Samantha and I were on the same wiffleball team. She usually ignored me during any stint together, but the first time we were in the outfield she came and stood next to me.

“I hear you asked Josh to the Tolo. You certainly believe in making advance reservations, don’t you?”

“It wasn’t like that.” I didn’t say anymore because I couldn’t describe what it actually was like between Josh and me. I still wasn’t sure myself.

“Getting a little desperate?”

I tried, I really did, to remember that Samantha and I had once been friends—that somewhere under her perfectly-styled hair and tanning-bed tan was a person I had liked. It didn’t do any good though. I couldn’t keep the contempt out of my voice. “Samantha, why do you constantly harp on me about Josh? What is your problem?”

“You’re my problem,” she said. “You and Elise.”

I huffed in disbelief. “What did we ever do to you?”

“You turned Josh against me.”

“Samantha, I think you’ve fallen off your cheerleading pyramid one too many times.”

She threw a look of contempt right back at me. “Don’t act so innocent. I know you said bad things about me.”

“No, I didn’t.” As soon as I said it, I realized I had. Elise and I had talked about Samantha in the car sometimes. We had a running joke about the cheerleading gene that enabled some girls to do leg kicks in tacky miniskirts without feeling any embarrassment. My guilt must have shown on my face.

“Sure, you didn’t,” Samantha said.

“I’ve never tried to make him dislike you.” At least not much. Granted I didn’t want him to like her. I’d hoped he wouldn’t. But I hadn’t gone out of

my way to sabotage her.

“You know,” she said, her gaze icy and cool on mine, “It’s not only my fault that we aren’t friends anymore.” Then she walked away.

I watched her saunter across the outfield with an uncomfortable feeling growing in my stomach. Guilt. All the things I’d said about her to Josh had seemed justified at the time, harmless. But now they seemed petty. As though my subconscious had been waiting for the opportunity to ambush me, I began to remember other things, little incidents in junior high. The way Anjie and I had resented the time Samantha spent with her other friends. How sometimes we’d given her the cold shoulder because of it.

I told myself that things wouldn’t have turned out any different, even if Anjie and I had always been model friends. But that was the thing about second-guessing things you’ve done in the past. There’s no way to know for sure.

After school, Elise didn’t show up at my locker. She wasn’t at hers, either. I finally went out to the parking lot, watching for her as I walked. I hoped she hadn’t made up with the King of Slime.

I ran into Josh and two of his friends on the way out. “Hi, Cassidy,” he said. “How’s it going?”

“All right.”

“Troy, Jared, this is a friend of mine, Cassidy Woodruff.”

I said hello to them, and they helloed back. Then they talked about basketball to Josh. They wanted him to join PHS’s team this season.

“Ask for later work hours,” Troy told Josh. “It’s your parents’ store. What are they going to do, fire you?”

“You have all summer to make money,” Jared added. “It’s your senior year. You gotta play some ball.”

“Okay,” Josh said with a reluctant smile. “I’ll try out.”

There was cheering and knuckle-bumping at this pronouncement. I shouldn’t have been happy. This meant when basketball season started, I wouldn’t be riding home with Josh anymore. But somehow I was happy for him anyway. Josh deserved to have fun.

When we got to the bottom of the stairs, Troy and Jared went their own way. Josh and I headed across the parking lot. He pulled his keys from his pocket. “Now you can’t tell Elise I was embarrassed to introduce you to my friends. I just did.” He smiled triumphantly at me. “I’ll pin the blame for our breakup on you yet.”

“I never said you were embarrassed to let your friends know my name. I said you were embarrassed to let them know we dated. Our breakup is still your fault.”

“If you want, I’ll tell them we dated.” Josh glanced over his shoulder as if looking for more friends. “Is there something in particular you’d like me to say we did together? How about all those expensive restaurants I took you to because I’m such a nice guy?”

“I’m glad I’ve provided so much amusement in your life.”

He gave me one of his warm smiles. “I brought you flowers too because I’m soooo romantic.”

I thought of my conversation with Samantha. “Speaking of dating, who did you tell about us going to the Tolo?”

He shrugged. “A few people. Elise, some of my friends—you know, the ones I was too embarrassed to tell about us before.”

“Samantha?”

“Yeah, I told her too.”

“Why did you tell her?”

“She called me, and we were talking—”

“Samantha called you?” And she had the nerve to imply that *I* was throwing myself at him.

Josh jangled his keys. “Yeah, she calls every once in a while. Anyway, I got the feeling she was going to ask me to the dance, so I told her I was going with you. Why? What did Samantha say to you about it?”

“That I turned you against her.”

He cocked his head. “Why would she say that?”

I fidgeted with my coat buttons. “I made it clear I didn’t like her...”

“That has nothing to do with it. I’m not interested in Samantha.”

“Wrong number of brothers and sisters?”

“No. She always picks apart everybody and everything. After a while, you get tired of hearing about the shortcomings of humanity. So rest at ease. You had nothing to do with it—not in that regard, anyway.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure what he meant by that. “Well, that’s a good thing, because I did a lousy job picking out Elise’s last boyfriend.”

We’d reached Josh’s car and Elise wasn’t there. “Where is my sister, anyway?” Josh and I both scanned the parking lot. We saw her off in the distance, walking through rows of cars towards us. As she came closer, I

could see the anger on her face. Her jaw was clenched and her cheeks were flushed.

Before we could say anything she said, “Did you hear?”

“Hear what?” I asked.

Elise didn’t answer. She just issued a stream of swearwords connected to Chad’s name.

Apparently, they hadn’t gotten back together.

Josh opened his car door and slid inside. “Calm down and tell us what happened.”

Elise threw her backpack into the car. “He told everyone that the only reason he went out with me was because I’m easy. He says he and a few of his friends know from personal experience.”

I got into my seat. “Elise, you didn’t, you haven’t...”

She glared at me. “No, I haven’t! I can’t believe this. Not even *you* believe in me.” She got into the car and slammed the door.

Josh and I exchanged looks. He started the car. I leaned toward Elise. “If you say you didn’t, I believe you.”

“Oh, good. That’s one person out of the whole high school. Everyone else thinks I’m a slut. They’re all whispering about me.” She turned to Josh. “Beat Chad up.”

He guided the car through the parking lot. “Sure, Elise.”

“I’m serious. Don’t you care about defending my honor?”

“Why should I,” he asked, “when you never have?”

She blinked at him in surprise. “Josh!”

His voice was calm but intense. “If you’d been the least bit concerned with your honor, you would’ve lived like you had some, and then nobody would believe Chad when he tells lies about you.”

She folded her arms stubbornly and stared out her window. “You don’t care about me.”

“My picking a fight with Chad won’t rebuild your reputation.”

“It would teach him a lesson.”

“I’m more concerned with teaching you a lesson.”

“Me?” She gasped and her gaze swung back to him. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Yes, you did. And until you realize it, you’ll make the same mistakes and keep dragging everyone else through them too.”

She pursed her lips. “I don’t drag everyone else through my mistakes.”

He took his eyes off the road for long enough to send her a piercing look. “You do whatever you want, whenever you want. If you want to break a few laws, you do. If you want to disappear so the entire family has to go out searching for you, you do. If you want to get wasted with losers like Chad, you do. You never think about how it might turn out. You don’t care what everyone else goes through—how it makes the rest of us feel or look.”

She frowned at him, arms still folded. “That’s what you really care about, isn’t it? How this makes you look. Well, what about me? I’m the one who has to walk through the halls while everyone stares at me. What about me?”

Josh’s voice went quiet. “You know, Elise, I think your main problem in life is that you ask that question too often.”

She turned sharply away from him and glared out the window again. For the rest of the car ride, we were all silent.



AFTER I WAS DONE with my homework, I went online to write Anjie. I noticed she’d posted a message to Samantha: *Happy Birthday*. She’d included pictures from Samantha’s party in fifth grade. The three of us were standing together, all smiles, arms draped over one another’s shoulders.

How had I forgotten it was Samantha’s birthday today? As a child, I’d looked forward to this date every year almost as much as my own birthday. It had always meant a fun outing with Samantha and Anjie. Instead, I’d argued with her today.

I stared at those pictures for a full half an hour.

Then I wrote her a long message telling her I was sorry that things were the way they were between us. I didn’t know if it would change anything, but I had to write it anyway.



I HOPED Josh and Elise would be back on good terms by morning. They weren’t. They both sat tense and silent in the car. “Don’t worry,” I told Elise. “It will blow over. These things always do.”

“Right. Everyone thinks I’m a slut, and now the only guys who’ll ever ask me out are ones with social diseases.” She turned to Josh. “You wouldn’t date a girl who had that type of reputation, but you’ll stand by and let Chad Warren give me one.”

Josh switched through radio stations, punching the buttons with more force than the task needed. “This isn’t my fault, Elise. I didn’t date the guy. I didn’t take you to parties and make you act like a complete fool.”

“Chad is spreading lies about me,” she said, “and you don’t care.”

“I do care,” Josh said. “That’s why I told you not to date the guy in the first place.”

Neither one said anything after that.

Elise was right about the rumors not blowing over. In fact, if they'd been a weather front, I'd say they settled in and showered on her. By ten o'clock I'd heard three different, very creative accounts of Elise's supposed encounters. I denied each story, whereupon the teller of the story would look at me smugly and murmur, "Oh Cassidy, you're so naïve."

At lunchtime, Elise ate at my table. The first thing she said to my friends was, "Just to dispel any stories you've heard, I want you to know I share more in common with the Virgin Mary than our two-syllable names."

"And what would that be?" Caitlin asked. "Your Jewish ancestry?"

Elise opened her lunch sack stiffly. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah," Faith said, "But Mary had an angel to vouch for her."

Caitlin opened her milk carton and slid in a straw. "You're not thinking of claiming an immaculate conception are you?"

"Forget it," Elise said. "Forget the whole comparison." She bit into her sandwich and chewed angrily.

I kicked Caitlin under the table.

She spoke to Elise again, this time with more kindness. "Don't worry about it. I don't think most people hold it against you. I mean, who could resist Chad Warren?"

"I could," Elise said. "Despite what everyone thinks, I'm not about to be somebody's one-night stand. I have *some* self-respect." She put down her sandwich and pushed herself away from the table. "This is amazing. No one believes me."

Elise stood up and stalked off toward the exit. I went after her. She was out of the cafeteria by the time I'd caught up to her. "Don't leave," I told her. "Faith and Caitlin didn't mean to give you a bad time."

"Yes, they did. They did it with glee."

"Give them a chance. They'll forget about it tomorrow."

"No, they won't. Your friends have hated me ever since I dated Chad." She kept walking, heading toward the front door. I wondered if she planned on walking all the way home without her coat. I had half an hour until my next class started. I kept pace beside her.

"They don't hate you."

"The worst part about it," Elise went on, "is my friends aren't any better. Do you know what Kaylee's reaction to all this is? She thinks it's funny. Every time she sees me in the hallway she yells, 'How was he?'" My other friends keep asking me for details about who else I was with, like my life is some sort of sordid soap opera. I'm never coming back to school. I hereby drop out."

"You can't do that, Elise. That's letting Chad win."

She flung open the front door and a gush of cold air hit us. She strode outside anyway. "I suppose you feel vindicated now. Josh and his high horse are both riding around on cloud nine. He keeps saying, 'These are the consequences you get when you make bad choices.' Well, it's not my fault Chad turned out to be such a creep."

"Which is why you can't run away and let his side of the story stand." Dirty bits of snow sat on the steps, tracked up from the parking lot. I avoided them as much as I could. "I'll help you set people straight. After all, it could've been me this happened to. I wanted to date Chad too."

Elise stopped then; stopped and stared wearily off at the parking lot. "No one would've believed it about you," she finally said. "Because you're not the kind of girl who got kicked out of her last high school for vandalism, and who made out with Cole Rider in front of everybody, and who got wasted at parties. But me, well, I've set a great precedence for myself." She let out a long sigh and folded her arms for warmth. "I hate it when Josh is right."

I gestured to the school. "You don't really want to drop out. Let's go back inside."

She glanced at the building but didn't move. "If I stay, then anytime a guy asks me out I'll wonder if he's expecting something from me."

“You’ll just have to make sure they know where you stand.”

“That will make for some interesting first date small talk: Would you please pass the butter, and by the way, I’m not going to sleep with you.” She put her hand over her eyes. “And to think I ever made fun of your date with Bob.”

I started to laugh, but she didn’t so I stopped quickly. I cleared my throat and pretended I had been doing that all along. “You’ll get through this.”

She still didn’t move, didn’t head back toward the school.

I was beginning to shiver. “You’ve told me all along that I needed more carpe in my diem. And I think you’re right.”

Elise raised her eyebrows in disbelief.

“But seizing the moment isn’t about partying. It’s about recognizing the good things in your life and appreciating them. It’s about making your friends laugh when you can and crying with them when you can’t. If you need me to cry with you, I will. But don’t drop out of school. I need you around to help me laugh.”

She looked out across the parking lot, then back at the school doors. “You still need lots of loosening up.”

I took a step toward the school. “Right. And besides, I need you in the car so I have an excuse to see Josh. He wouldn’t take me to school if you dropped out.”

She grunted. “Yes, he would. He takes you home when I’m not around.”

A took another step toward the school, then another. “But it would be awkward.”

Elise reluctantly followed me back to the stairs. “So are you saying you want to get back together with my brother?”

“Maybe. A little bit. Okay, yes. But don’t say anything to him about it.”

“Hmm.” Elise was silent for the rest of the way up the stairs, but she wore a thoughtful expression.

That expression worried me. We’d come to the school door. I opened it and stepped inside, letting the warmth engulf me. “Really, Elise. Don’t say anything to Josh.”

“I won’t,” she said, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t help things along.”

“The last time you tried to help along my love life, I wound up at the police station.”

“Details, details.”

We walked back to the cafeteria. I don't know why I looked at the other side of the room. Perhaps it was my built-in, Josh-is-near radar working. At any rate, I saw him. He, Troy, and Jared strode across the cafeteria. They stopped in front of Chad's table. I grabbed Elise's arm. "Look!"

We headed to our table, watching as Josh talked to Chad. We couldn't hear what was said, but it was easy to see from their facial expressions that neither was happy. Chad turned deeper and deeper shades of red. Josh leaned in towards him. The general level of noise in the cafeteria dropped as people noticed what was going on.

Finally, Josh and his friends marched away. When they were a safe distance removed, Chad, in a loud voice, called them members of the horse family.

Josh turned and called back, "You're lucky you didn't touch my sister, Warren, or it wouldn't just be your football that gets kicked downfield."

The crowd hooted. Chad called a few more obscenities from his safe distance.

Josh shook his head and kept walking. He never saw Elise and me watching. He never looked at anyone in the crowd.

"Wow," Caitlin said.

Faith followed Josh with her eyes. "I second that."

Elise smiled broadly and picked up her sandwich. "I have the best brother ever."

I kept my gaze on Josh's retreating back and on his broad shoulders and his wavy black hair. "Yes, you do."

Elise nibbled at her sandwich happily. "He almost makes up for the rest of the Benson crew."

I'd been over to her house enough times to know her brothers and sisters. "Actually, the rest of the Benson crew is pretty great too."

"Naw," Elise said. "They're hopeless. But maybe the new baby will have some redeeming qualities. It could be another little Elise or Josh."

I ate my lunch, every once in a while glancing over to where Josh had been.

Elise sent me a sly smile. "I'll think of a way to help you. Something really subtle."

I shook my head at her. Elise could be many things, but subtle wasn't one of them.



ELISE DIDN'T COME to my locker after school. She wasn't at hers either. I walked slowly out to the parking lot, wondering if she planned on not showing up so Josh and I would be alone.

He was sitting in his car reading a physics assignment. He looked up when I got close. "Where's Elise?"

"I don't know." Plotting someplace probably. I turned and scanned the parking lot. Maybe she was waiting somewhere until she was sure I sat down in the car next to Josh.

Josh sighed. "She didn't ditch school, did she?"

"I doubt it." I got into the front seat. No sense in letting Elise's plotting go to waste. "She's been in a good mood since lunch when you threatened to kick Chad downfield."

Josh flipped his physics book shut. "I couldn't help myself. The guy seriously ticks me off."

"He deserved it," I agreed. "And Elise thinks you're the greatest brother alive now."

"That's a step up. I've been mega pork ever since I broke your heart."

We saw Elise then, hurrying across the parking lot to the car. When she reached us, she was out of breath but smiling. "Hey, thanks for defending my honor at lunch, you big brute."

"You're welcome," Josh said. "But that's not a habit I want to form, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." She opened the back door and tossed her backpack onto the seat.

"Where have you been?" Josh asked.

"I was talking to Bob." She sat down with a bounce and scooted her backpack over. "He says I can rejoin chess club. He even said he'd show me some of his grandmaster moves."

Josh started the car. I turned in my seat to talk to Elise. "Bob offered to show you his moves?"

"It wasn't like that," Elise said. "And besides, you said he was fair game."

"Uh-huh. Watch out for Bob's putting-his-arm-around-you move. That one nearly broke my nose."

Elise's expression clouded. She clicked on her seatbelt with slow deliberateness. "Wait, you don't think Bob is being nice to me because he thinks I'm easy, do you?"

I shook my head. "He's not that type. We went out on two dates and he never even tried to kiss me."

Elise relaxed. Josh raised an eyebrow at me.

"And Bob is a gentleman," I added. "He always held open doors for me."

"Ah," she said, "That's so sweet."

"Ah," Josh said, tapping his thumb against the steering wheel. "I'm stuck in the car with Bob's fan club."

Elise smacked his shoulder. "I thought you liked Bob."

"I do," Josh said. "He'd be good for you. You should date him." Josh glanced at me, probably to see if I was upset by the idea of Elise taking a second guy from me.

"You should," I told Elise.

Josh smiled. I saw it even though he'd turned and was keeping his eyes on the road. I just wasn't sure what it meant.



THE NEXT DAY on the way to and from school, Elise borrowed Josh's phone so she could text Bob about bug facts. She was trying to find one he didn't already know. "Get this," she told us, tapping out her message. "So many termites live in the Sonoran Desert that when it's quiet, you can hear them munching on stuff."

"Now aren't you glad you moved to Pullman," I said, "instead of wherever the Sonoran Desert is?"

"Arizona," Josh said.

Maybe I am a geek at heart. I found it incredibly attractive that Josh was smart enough to know where the Sonoran Desert was.

Bob texted Elise back. She read his message and squealed. "Gross. There's a kind of wasp that paralyzes spiders, then lays their eggs inside the spiders so that when the babies hatch they have something to eat."

Josh shook his head. "You're undoing all of my work with Bob, Elise. Now he's going to think girls like hearing this sort of stuff."

“Elise,” I said firmly, “for the sake of womankind you have to put a stop to this right now.” I held out my hand to her. “Give me the phone.”

She didn’t. And she did the same thing every day that week. She also came late to the car after school, which I never complained about because it gave me time to sit and talk to Josh. Somehow my regular spot in the car moved from the backseat to the front seat next to Josh.

He didn’t complain about Elise staying a little late after school to talk to Bob. I wasn’t sure whether that was because Josh liked talking to me, or whether he was just glad Elise was interested in a guy who wasn’t likely to be arrested in the near future.

Elise told me she liked Bob because he was the polar opposite of Chad, but I knew there was more to it than that. She was reverting back to her original persona. A smart girl. A fun girl, but a smart girl too.

The next Monday after school, Elise came to the parking lot almost on time and asked Josh to drive her to Bob’s house before we went home. “I’m asking him to the Tolo, so I need to put stuff in his room before he gets home.” She held up a bag full of plastic ants. “I’m going to spell it out on his carpet. Perfect, huh?”

Josh started the car and drove through the parking lot. “Does anyone know you’re coming?”

“His sister left the door unlocked for me.” Elise leaned forward to see the clock. “I asked one of Bob’s friends to delay him at school, but I probably only have fifteen minutes max.” She jiggled her bag. “I hope I have enough ants.” More jiggling. “That’s a sentence I never thought I’d say.”

We pulled up to Bob’s house. A snowman with an Einstein hairdo sat in the middle of the lawn. Classic Bob.

Elise opened her door. “You two wait here. I don’t need your help.” She sent us one of her wicked smiles. “Find something fun to do while I’m gone.”

So subtle.

After she went inside, Josh turned in his seat to survey me. It suddenly felt different than the other times we’d been alone in the car. He wasn’t busy driving. We weren’t scanning the parking lot waiting for Elise to show up. I didn’t know what to say. The only sound in the car was the low hum of the heater.

Josh was still studying me. “You’re not mad at Elise for going after Bob, are you?”

“No. He’s just a friend.”

“Oh.” Josh nodded, considering this. “Is there anyone you like more than a friend?”

My gaze went to Josh’s. Why was he asking? Was he just making small talk or did he have a personal interest in the subject?

He was looking at me intently, his blue eyes locked on mine.

I shrugged. “There might be.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Maybe. You know a lot of people.”

Josh put his arm on the back of his seat, his fingers nearly brushed against my shoulder. “What’s he like, this guy?”

Normally I wouldn’t have admitted to anything, but I was tired of all my moments with Josh being ordinary, safe. This was one I was going to seize. “He’s the usual sort of guy that girls get crushes on. Smart. Funny. Really responsible.”

“That’s the usual sort? Why don’t I have girls swarming me?”

“He’s also tall, dark, and handsome,” I added, “Plus he’s got these gorgeous eyes—all deep blue and mystical.” I looked away from him then. I couldn’t keep looking at the eyes I’d just described.

Josh leaned a little closer to me. “A rich guy with a sports car?”

“Not really.”

“A gentleman?”

“Mostly, although I don’t think he’s ever opened a door for me.”

Josh nodded, his gaze still intense. “Would I approve of you with this guy?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Would you?” I let my gaze slide to his then, just long enough to see him smile. I wasn’t going to say more. I wasn’t about to admit to everything when he hadn’t admitted to anything yet.

“I think I might approve of this guy.” Josh kept smiling. His voice was soft now, as lulling as the heater. “You said Bob didn’t kiss you. Have you ever been kissed?”

“Sure, if you count the time in the fourth grade when Jonny Miller cornered me in the coat closet.”

“No, I’m talking about a *real* kiss.” Josh moved even closer to me. “You’ll always remember your first real kiss.”

I thought about asking him if he remembered his first real kiss, but on second thought, I didn't want to hear about any of his past kisses. "You're probably right," I said.

"If I was to kiss you now, I'd go down in your personal hall of fame. The opportunity is irresistible."

"Is it?" I wasn't sure if he was joking about that or not.

He leaned across to my seat and kissed me, and it was a *real kiss*. His lips were soft on mine, questioning, gentle. He knew I didn't know how to do this but didn't seem to mind teaching me. His hand slid around the back of my neck, holding me closer to him. Just those two touches, his lips and his hand, were setting off all sorts of sparks in me. I was happy, and yet at the same time, I had a nagging suspicion that maybe he was kissing me because he wanted to be the first, and it was all a joke to him.

I pulled away. "Aren't you supposed to ask me out before you do that?"

"Okay," he said, still close to me. "Do you want dinner?"

"Right now?"

Josh looked upward considering. "We'd probably never hear the end of it if we left Elise here. How about this Friday?"

"Okay. It's a date."

Josh leaned towards me again. He obviously had no qualms about waiting until after our date to give me my second real kiss. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back.

I don't know how long we were like that. Longer than my mother would have liked. All of a sudden I heard a rapping on the window, then the back door opened and Elise climbed in.

"I can't believe you two are making out in broad daylight. I'm shocked." She didn't sound shocked though. She sounded happy.

Josh shot me a glance. I suppose to see how mortified I was. I just shrugged and smiled. After all, Elise had known about us before there even had really been an us.

He put the car in gear and pulled out onto the street. "So did you have enough ants?"

"No. I ran out, so the invitation says, 'Will you go to Tolo, Elise' but he should get the basic idea." She shoved the empty bag into her coat pocket. "And now that you two are back together, we can double."

Josh grunted and looked over at me. "I don't know. Are you up for a double date with Elise and Bob?"

“Sure,” I said. “It will be one of those carpe diem things.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Josh said.

But he was only saying that because he didn’t understand. It would be fun, all of us together. I leaned toward him. “If they start talking about spider venom, we’ll ditch them.”

“Or if Elise gets too annoying,” Josh added.

“Hello,” Elise said. “I can hear you.”

“Good,” Josh said. “Consider yourself warned.”

He dropped off Elise at their house first, then drove me home. He opened my car door for me, pointedly drawing attention to this fact. “I am officially a gentleman,” he said.

Instead of letting him get back into the car, I took his hand and led him into my house. Mom said hello to Josh in a surprised sort of way, but she left us alone. We sat in the kitchen eating and talking, and even though none of this was planned, it all seemed natural. Comfortable. Not logical, maybe, but really good anyway.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janette Rallison (who is also sometimes CJ Hill when the mood strikes her) writes books because writing is much more fun than cleaning bathrooms. Her avoidance of housework has led her to write dozens of novels, which have sold over 1,000,000 copies and have been on the IRA Young Adults' Choices lists, Popular Picks, and many state reading lists. She would name them all but knows your eyes would gloss over if she did, so you will just have to trust her that she has lots of books and they are all awesome!

Most of her books are romantic comedies because hey, there is enough angst in real life, but there's a drastic shortage of both humor and romance. She lives in Arizona with her husband, five kids, and enough cats to classify her as eccentric.

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CHAPTER 1 OF ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE, WAR, AND HIGH SCHOOL

The problem with getting bad news is you hardly ever get to go home and cry, or sulk, or rip things up, like you'd like to. Usually you have to be someplace that requires you to smile and make pleasant conversation. That's exactly what happened after I got my SAT scores.

I should have waited until after work to open up the envelope, but I'm not one of those patient types of people — you know, the kind who never even sneak a peek at their presents before Christmas. I had to know my score the moment I took the letter from the mailbox. I ripped open the envelope and scanned to the score results. I got a 470 on the language section and a 340 on the math. My score was 810 out of a possible 1600. I may have bombed the math portion of the test, but even I could figure out my score wasn't high enough to be admitted to a good university.

I leaned against the mailbox and reread the letter more carefully, hoping there had been some mistake. Perhaps a typo. Perhaps the SAT people sent somebody else's results in my envelope. But it was my name, Samantha Taylor, on the letter.

I shoved the envelope into my purse and walked over to my car. I had ten minutes to get to my job, and apparently a really long time to decide what to do with my life besides going to college.

While I drove I told myself everything would work out all right. I was only a junior in high school and could take the SATs again next year. Next year I'd do better. Much better.

Only I'm a terrible liar, and even while I told myself all of this, I kept hearing a little voice in the back of my head that said, Like what? You're suddenly going to get smart in the next year? You're going to give up your social life and study every free minute?

I parked my car and walked into The Bookie, Pullman's only bookstore, then trudged upstairs to the general fiction section.

Logan Hansen was standing behind the book cart, but he looked up at me when I came over. "You're late."

"So fire me." I went to the closet where Mr. Donaldson kept our vests and slipped mine on.

Logan handed me a stack of books. “I wouldn’t fire you if I could. It’s nice having you around because next to you I look like a really hardworking employee.”

I smiled back at him. “Next to me you also look ignorant and poorly dressed, but I try not to hold it against you.” Without waiting for his reply, I went to put my books away. Usually I didn’t mind sparring back and forth with Logan. Most of the time I was the one who started it. But today I just wanted to avoid him. I felt too emotional, and the last thing I needed was to break down and make a fool of myself in front of him.

Logan and I had been at odds with each other since the eighth grade, when I broke up with him. It wasn’t that we were ever a serious couple. “Going out” consisted mostly of passing notes, hanging out in the halls, talking on the phone, that sort of thing.

We “went out” for a few of months, and then the big realization hit me. Logan was not *the one*. I’m not sure why it took me months to figure this out back in the eighth grade. If I were to make a list of my favorite guys now, Logan would be way down in the triple digits.

My problem with guys is this: I always start out thinking that if a guy is cute, he’ll be perfect in every other way. Then after a couple of months of getting to know him, I realize he isn’t anywhere close to what I want in a boyfriend. I don’t remember what turned me off about Logan. He exhibits so many irritating behaviors now, it’s hard to recall which one it was that bothered me back then. And besides, I’ve gone out with a lot of guys. Their fatal flaws have all run together in my mind.

My last boyfriend swore too much. The first time my seven-year-old brother repeated one of his commentaries at the dinner table, I knew the guy had to go. The boyfriend before that talked endlessly about the people on the football team. I mean, really. What girl wants to hear about the team’s ongoing battle with athlete’s foot?

I don’t know why it’s so hard for me to find just one ideal guy. I’ve probably read a hundred romances, and every single one of them has my ideal man in it. So they must be out there somewhere: all those tall, handsome, brooding men who exude high doses of testosterone yet, at the same time, can take a woman in their arms and murmur poetry into her ear.

None of the guys I meet are capable of murmuring anything that doesn’t involve food.

Logan walked by me and said, “We’ve got another book cart to unload in the back room, so get a move on,” then disappeared into the maze of bookshelves.

Logan, for example, could never have qualified as a romantic hero. True, he wasn’t bad-looking. He had thick brown hair and a smooth olive complexion that always made him look tanned, but not one of the romantic heroes I’ve ever read about has dirt underneath his fingernails. Logan loves to work on cars. He looks like he dips his hands in oil before he comes to work.

Besides, he took it very hard when I broke up with him in junior high. He told all of his friends I was a jerk and a snob, and ever since then it’s been his personal mission to prove how worthless I am. A romantic hero would never do that. If a romantic hero was ever hurt by a girl, he’d never stoop to sully her name. He’d just brood about it and be all the more attractive.

While I was shelving the next batch of books, Logan came up and leaned against the end shelf.

“So,” he said slowly, “how are you today?”

I barely looked over at him. “Fine. What do you want?”

He put his hand to his chest, pretending to be hurt. “I’m just making polite conversation. Don’t you do that anymore?”

“If you’re asking me to take your shift on Friday night, I’m not interested.”

“Oh? You must have a hot date. Who’s the lucky guy?” He said the word “lucky” really sarcastically, so I glared at him. “Brad Willis.”

“Brad Willis, huh? A guy with both the build and the intelligence of a semi truck. A perfect match for you.”

I shoved my copies of Dr. Spock onto the shelf with a *thunk*. “Yeah, well, I’d tell you who your perfect match is, but I don’t know anyone with the personality of a broken-down bicycle.”

I walked back to the cart, and Logan followed me. “Are you and Brad serious?”

“We’ve been going out for a month and a half.”

“So you’re about through with him then?”

I forced a smile on my lips. “No, but I’m through with you. Go away.”

“I didn’t mean to be rude,” he said with a perfectly straight face. “I was just asking because I know someone who wants to go out with you.”

I didn't suppose Logan had taken up match-making, but my curiosity got the better of me. "Oh? Who?"

Logan hesitated for a moment, as though he wasn't sure he should come right out and tell me, then said, "Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but you aren't into guys who are big in the brains department, right?"

"I went out with you, didn't I?" I meant it as an insult. I was agreeing with him and using him as an example of the stupidity of my boyfriends.

"Yeah," he said, "but *for the most part* the guys you date aren't heavy on the I part of IQ, right?"

There's nothing more frustrating than insulting someone who doesn't get it. "Just tell me who it is, okay?"

"Doug Campton."

Doug was one of those guys who must have been starved for attention as a child and was thus making up for it now by being a class clown. If something stupid happened at Pullman High, chances were Doug was involved. His last escapade involved his stealing the school-mascot outfit — a greyhound that actually looked more like a giant, happy rat. He put on the outfit, along with a bikini top and a hula skirt, and then ran through the gym during a home basketball game, carrying a sign that not only insulted the entire female population of PHS but also questioned our shaving habits.

Totally juvenile.

I gathered a few books in one arm. "Tell Doug, I'm flattered but I'd rather just be friends."

Logan, who hasn't ever taken an interest in my love life other than to make fun of whom I'm dating, looked disappointed. "Oh, come on. Why don't you give him a chance?"

"Why?"

Logan shrugged and held out one hand in a pleading fashion. "I like the guy, and for some reason he likes you. I just want you both to be happy."

"No, really. Why?"

Logan was silent for a moment, as though debating what to say next. "All right," he finally said. "I'll tell you. Doug has this cousin who lives in Moscow. Veronica." Logan said her name as though savoring the word. "Her family came to watch him play the last baseball game, and I met her. She was really nice, and well, Doug says he can set me up with her if I set him up with you."

“Why don’t you just call Veronica yourself?” Moscow, Idaho, is only eight miles away from Pullman, and even though Pullman is in Washington, the cities are so close together and both so small, we’ve always used the same phone book.

“I don’t know her last name, and Doug won’t tell me. It’s blackmail, and I need your help.” Logan leaned closer to me and turned on his most charming smile — the one where his mouth quirked up at the corner and made him look like he was about to commit some act of irresistible mischief. “Come on, Samantha, you go out with everybody. What difference would it make if you go out with Doug? Just one date with him, that’s all I’m asking.”

Logan had never asked me for a favor before. I enjoyed the moment and smiled over at him graciously. “You know, I was in a bad mood when I came in, and I have to thank you for doing your part to bring me out of it. Really, it’s so gratifying to know I have the power to make you happy or miserable. I feel much better now.”

“I’ll take your next weekend shift for you.”

“Not a chance.” I ran a finger over the books in the cart, checking a last time for any that might be in my section.

“The next two.”

“Nope.”

He let out a huff of frustration. “All right, you tell me what it would take. What do you want from me?”

It was ironic he should offer to help me now, when I needed help so badly. If Logan could have somehow made my SAT scores go up, I would have jumped at the chance. But he couldn’t do that. No one could. I suppose I could have asked him to help me study for the entire next year, but he wouldn’t have agreed to that.

I sighed dejectedly. “Sorry, what I want, you can’t get me.”

Logan blinked at me, his eyebrows raised in a question. He probably thought I was talking about some sort of criminal activity. In a mildly shocked voice he said, “And what exactly would that be?”

“Better grades.”

“Oh. Well, you’re right there.” He paused for a moment and then added, “Since when did you start caring about your grades?”

I pulled another book off the cart. “Since I started thinking about college.”

“Ahh, I guess that cheerleading scholarship didn’t come through, huh?”

“No, and I suppose you’re still waiting for your application to comedian school.”

Logan picked up a stack of books from the cart. “Naw, I’m going to Western Washington University.”

WWU. That was one of the schools I’d been considering. You’d think that knowing Logan was going there would have made WWU seem less desirable, but it had the opposite effect. I absolutely couldn’t be rejected by a place that Logan could be so casual about getting into.

“Are you sure you have the grades to get in?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I think so. And besides, they take other factors into consideration when they review your application. I’ve been in student body council for years.” He smiled over at me nonchalantly. “I’ve got leadership qualities.”

“And so many other qualities too — many of which I have to endure on a daily basis. Do they take those into consideration too?”

Logan laughed then, which was something else I found annoying. One moment he’d be so spiteful I’d want to slap him, and the next moment he’d smile over at me like we were the best of friends.

“If you go out with Doug, I promise never to annoy you again.”

“That’s a promise you can’t keep.” I walked over to the general fiction section with my stack of books, and this time Logan didn’t follow me. I knew he hadn’t given up on this whole Doug thing, though. He’d probably be bugging me for days, until I was so frustrated with it all I’d have to drive to Moscow and go on a door-to-door search for Veronica myself.

Still, I wasn’t mad at Logan. In fact, for the first time in the shift I was in a good mood because he’d given me an idea. As soon as Logan mentioned leadership qualities, I mulled it over. Why couldn’t I do something that would show my leadership qualities too? I had them, after all. As head cheerleader, I was constantly organizing things. All I had to do was show colleges that I was a leader. And the election for next year’s school officers was less than a month away.

When I got home from work, I kept the envelope with my SAT scores in my purse and didn’t mention to my parents that they’d come. I wasn’t exactly sure what their reaction to a score of 810 would be, but I had a vague fear it might be grounding me until I reached that same age.

The lecturing would go on all night.

Dad: Young lady, you obviously need to spend more time on your studies. Don't come out of your room until you can calculate the square root of pi in your head.

Me: But —

Mom: And no more dating until you're a straight-A student.

Dad: That's right. We've never liked the guys you hang around with, and this gives us the perfect excuse to banish them from your life. From here on out, we decree that any guys who are cute, cool, or listen to music with lyrics we can't understand won't be allowed to cross our threshold.

Me: But —

Mom: And while we're angry I'd like to point out that your room is a mess, you haven't practiced the piano in weeks, and you're two inches shorter than I've always wanted you to be.

Me: But —

Dad: And stop calling us names. You're grounded.

OKAY, maybe my parents wouldn't be that extreme. Well, at least my dad wouldn't be. Mom tended to get worked up easily. She expected me to do everything flawlessly. Apparently, the SAT was one area where I was far from flawless.

I'd have to tell my parents eventually, but I could put it off as long as possible.

TO READ the rest of the book, [click here](#)

Thanks