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Sheena Holt

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Our Kind

by

Sheena Holt

Joseph Skibell
Adviser

English & Creative Writing

Joseph Skibell
Adviser

Tiphonie Yanique
Committee Member

Dr. William Gilders
Committee Member

Dr. Sheila Cavanagh
Committee Member

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Sheena Holt

Joseph Skibell

Adviser

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Abstract

Our Kind

By Sheena Holt

Centered around a group of teenage girls at a Northern California Catholic high school, this thesis explores the ways that race, gender, sexuality, religion, and class affect individuals' relationships with each other, and institutions of education and faith. The girls' personal lives and hardships lead them to consider starting a feminism club at their school, despite the tensions that this club will cause within the group and the school at large. "Our Kind" is written to be the first act of a three-act novel, and thus focuses primarily on presenting the relationships the girls have with their school, classmates, families, and each other. The thesis is designed to set up the later two acts of the novel to effectively explore the consequences of breaking the status quo at an incredibly traditional institution.

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Chapter 1

“Joan! Got a minute?”

Joan turned around, trying to find the body connected to the voice yelling her name from behind her. She knew who it was, of course, and she knew this confrontation was coming, though she had hoped she could make it through the day avoiding it. And she almost did — made it until the final bell, when she had to leave the science building from honors physics, and Shira was coming out of chem. If she had been thinking about it, she would have taken the long way, out of the east wing of the building, all the way around, and then to the parking lot, instead of cutting straight through the west wing. But she was not thinking about it at that moment, she was thinking about the coffee she was about to have. And so when Shira picked out her bright red head bobbing down the hall, she could only blame herself.

Shira was Joan’s mock trial partner. Shira was the pre-trial attorney on the prosecution; Joan on the defense. Shira was better at it. Joan was smart, but she hated to argue. She liked to think of law as a philosophical exercise, and occasionally, a source of moral outrage. And as a point of principle, she liked defense. Saw it as the humanizing force against tough on crime politics. But unless she was perfectly prepared, she was going to suck when it came time to actually make her arguments. Her brain would freeze, and she’d lose all critical thinking skills.

They had lost a match to Pinecrest the night before, in no small part thanks Joan’s poor preparations and stumbling responses to the judge’s questions. Joan knew that Shira was pissed at her. Hell, the rest of the team probably was too, but Shira was the only one that would actually say it.

Shira smiled, her lips pressed together in a way that told Joan she was holding back venom. Joan checked her watch, trying to steady herself (2:32). Sometimes focusing on the hands calmed her down, if only for a second.

“We really need to study up some more before we go up against Pali, right?” Shira nodded at her own words, like she had to tell Joan what to think. Like Joan wouldn’t recognize the leading question of a cross-examination. They both knew it was Joan, on the defense team, who would be going up against them. “I really think it would serve the whole team well if we went over the cases before next time.”

“Yeah. Good idea,” Joan said, looking for an escape route. Shira was blocking the door out of the building, so Joan would either have to find a way directly past her, or turn around.

“If one of us performs poorly, they could lose this for the whole team, you know. I’d hate for that to be on one of our shoulders.”

Instead of having to make up her mind about the best course of action, Joan’s stomach picked what to do. A flock of angry butterflies started fluttering inside of her, reminding her that Shira was right about her being a useless idiot, and also that she had to get the hell out of there.

“I’ll look over my notes again tonight,” Joan said. “I really gotta go.” She ran to the bathroom as calmly as possible, and pushed that embarrassment right back into the plumbing system. She put two fingers down her throat, but her body didn’t need much help. It came in waves, and with each round, she lost some of the tension she was feeling a few seconds before, and focused herself onto the discomfort, the physicality of her body.

It was loud. She hadn’t bothered to check that she was alone before she began, just assumed that the silence in the room was proof of its emptiness.

But it wasn't empty.

"Are you okay?" a girl asked from the stall to Joan's right.

Shit. This is bad, this is bad bad bad.

"I'm fine," she said, with as much strength as she could muster. "Bad enchiladas, I guess."

She heard the stall door open. She turned her head to see feet moving out and in front of her, separated only by the stall door.

She tried to see the face of the girl checking on her through the crack in the bathroom stall, to say something reassuring to the girl at least, but her fingers were covered in her vomit, as was her chin, and she didn't think anyone, let alone a stranger, should see her like that.

Also, Joan wasn't okay.

It wasn't because she thought she was fat. She had asked herself this too many times, if she secretly wanted to lose weight, if she hated the body she had. But no. She threw up because she felt like everything anyone had ever said to her, or thought about her behind her back, anything she had ever thought about herself behind her own back, was sitting in her stomach, and this was the only way to feel a moment of relief. To focus on what her body could do, instead of what her mind was telling her, for one precious minute. She imagined that it was the same relief that came for people who cut themselves, but less visible.

So there she was on the nasty bathroom floor, spewing out brown bile that was 90% coffee, knowing fully well that this random girl standing outside her stall was going to run out of the bathroom straight to the counselor's office. The same counselor's office that told Jenna Andrews that she had depression when she started crying while watching a video about rape in

her religion class, and wouldn't let her come back to school until she got a note from a psychologist. For this, she wouldn't be surprised if they forced her into some sort of eating disorder rehab. She knew something was wrong with her, but she knew that sure as hell wasn't the answer to her problems.

But then, the girl didn't run to tell.

~

If Anna had come into the bathroom after the girl and heard the sound of vomiting, she would have booked it straight out of there. She would have used the commons bathroom instead of the science building's, before going up to the library like nothing was out of the ordinary. But the girl started puking, loudly, and in the stall immediately to Anna's left, right as Anna was mid-stream. Morally, she knew she couldn't just ignore that, as much as she might want to.

When the girl said she was just sick from bad enchiladas, Anna believed her. That is, until she opened the stall door a crack, and Anna saw the puke all over her middle and pointer fingers.

Anna didn't scare easily at medical stuff. Blood never freaked her out or anything; she always prided herself on being the best caretaker in her family when anyone was sick. So puke, she could handle. But if this was some sort of anorexic thing (why is this such a thing for white girls?), she knew she was out of her element.

"Do you want me to call someone for you?"

"No! I mean, please don't. I'm fine, really." The girl looked at her with fear in her eyes. Desperate, real fear.

Anna didn't want to tell on her. That felt wrong, and also, not exactly the type of attention she wanted to draw to herself. But people with these problems don't usually want help — she was pretty sure of that — so wasn't it her duty to help her, even if she didn't want it?

“I have Tums in my backpack,” she said, finally. “Or if you give me your water bottle, I can fill it up.”

The girl pushed herself off the floor with the clean hand. It seemed to take her so much effort to get up, Anna thought about pulling her. Once she finally got herself to standing, she had little control of her body, and she swung the door all the way open so that it hit Anna in the arm. It hurt, but she knew she should have seen it coming.

“Shit, I'm sorry,” the girl said.

Anna laughed, though she wasn't sure why. “Tums or water?” she asked. These, Anna felt, were the only two resources she could offer the girl. “Or both, of course. Just whatever works best for you.” She felt like an idiot, repeating this like a catchphrase, but she didn't know what else to say.

She felt the girl studying her for a moment, probably trying to figure out if Anna was going to tell on her or not. Little would she know that Anna had no idea what she was about to do.

She looked a little bit older than Anna — thin and tall and ghost-white, with bright red hair (lined with bits of bile) tucked behind her ears. She was pretty, but in the way of high fashion models and women with tuberculosis in period dramas. Anna wondered if the girl always looked like this, or if it was just the way she caught her.

The girl reached for the water bottle in the sleeve of her backpack and handed it to Anna.

“Thanks,” Anna said. She studied the stickers on it, and pointed to the pink “I Stand with Planned Parenthood” one. “I like this a lot,” she said. Maybe, if she could find some common ground with the girl, she’d have a better sense of what she should do. The girl would open up to her, and Anna would know whether or not she needed help.

The girl smiled back, a gentle, thin smile that gave nothing away. “I got it at the women’s march,” she said.

“I wanted to go,” Anna said, which was true. Her wanting to go had actually been a major point of contention in her life for a few weeks, one of the few real conflicts she had ever had with her parents. She knew that this information could be a tool, an olive branch for the girl to tell her more about herself. But she had no idea how to tell the girl without it sounding forced. “Something came up though.”

The girl nodded. Anna took her silence as a cue to head to the water fountain.

If she wanted to, she could just keep walking to the end of the hall, then turn left out the door, and walk right into the counselor’s office. She could tell them that there was a girl making herself throw up in the bathroom, and that would be that.

But she still had to bring back the water bottle. And she really didn’t want to stir something up for herself for absolutely nothing. The girl would connect the dots on what Anna did; maybe the counselor would even make her write a statement. She didn’t know how that sort of thing worked.

She filled up the bottle at the water fountain, and walked straight back to the bathroom.

By the time Anna got back, the girl was clean, sink water dripping down her chin. Anna handed her the water bottle. She started to chug. Anna watched her silently, shifting her balance back and forth between her feet.

“Thanks for this,” the girl said, once she finished the bottle.

“It’s really nothing. I don’t get picked up until 5 anyway, so I’ve got time.”

“Where you planning to do anything in the meantime though?”

“Not really, I kind of just do work on campus. But I’m ahead right now, so it’s really no problem.”

“I can’t even imagine being ahead,” the girl chuckled. Her voice was hoarse when she laughed.

So much for being relatable. “Well, I run during the fall and spring, so I’m kind of just used to getting my work done early.”

The girl nodded. “If you’re not doing anything now, I was planning on driving over to HoBags, if you wanna come.”

“HoBags?”

“House of Bagels,” the girl said slowly.

Anna figured this was some place off campus that she was supposed to know about, and so she reminded herself to do all she could to seem in the know. “Oh right. Yeah, I just really need to be back here when my parents come.”

The girl checked her watch. She had clearly washed her hands and used them to clean herself, yet she had somehow managed to keep the tan leather band looking totally dry. “It’s only 2:45. I’ll get you back by 4:15 at the latest.”

Anna thought about it for a moment. She knew she should stay and get work done, wait for her mom to come, and avoid getting even further tangled up with this strange, troubled girl. But she felt a bit of responsibility to her. At the very least, to make sure she ate something. And Anna was curious.

“All right,” Anna smiled. She followed the girl out the bathroom door, and after a moment, realized she didn’t even know the girl’s name. “I’m Anna, by the way.”

“Joan,” she said.

~

It was about a two-minute drive from St. Cecilia’s to HoBags, down one of the main streets in Mountain View. There wasn’t much to do in town, so Joan was surprised when Anna didn’t know what it was. It always seemed to Joan your options for a cafe in anywhere near the high school were HoBags or Starbucks. Maybe Anna was just a Starbucks girl. Joan hated going there.

On the rare occasions that she did go to Starbucks, she always saw the worst type of people from school. They travelled in packs, blonde and loud and rude to whoever was working there. The type of people born in the Valley, who wanted to stay in the Valley. The type of people who would vote Republican their whole life, supposedly just because of abortion and taxes. The type of people who wanted to raise their Bible-quote-in-their-instagram-bio daughters and football-college-walk-on sons in the exact same cul-de-sac where they’d grown up.

“It’s not like a regular suburb here,” Joan said, as she turned out of the parking lot.

“What do you mean?”

Joan sighed. “If you grow up in rural Kansas and are the type of person who wants to get away from that, go to the big city, you’d probably try to go as far away as possible. New York or LA, maybe. But if you grow up in Mountain View, you have three options.”

Joan paused, waiting for Anna to ask her what the options were. She always had a flair for the dramatic. After a few seconds, Anna caught on. “What?”

Joan chuckled, like she hadn’t been waiting to share her musings. “Stay there like the cookie-cutter you are, go far far away, or drive an hour north, and pitch your tent in San Francisco.”

Anna nodded. “It’s weird. There’s so much money here, but it still feels like San Francisco might as well be a state away.”

“It’s the Catholics,” Joan said. She saw Anna flinch out the corner of her eye.

“So, until I can move an hour north at the least, I come to a dingy little bagel shop in the heart of my hellhole.” Joan smiled. “Welcome.” She pulled into the parking spot in front.

Joan turned off the Billy Joel that Anna had put on when she’d handed her the CD binder. She loved that old Volvo station wagon, but that didn’t mean it had an aux cord.

Anna shrugged once she got out of the car. “Can’t believe I’ve never noticed this place before. It’s so close.”

Joan opened the door into HoBags for her. “Where do you usually go, if not here?”

“Uhh, home, I guess. Sometimes my family drives to Rancho and we run together on the weekends.”

“I mean by yourself,” Joan said. “You should have a place to go by yourself. Other than the library.” Anna hadn’t mentioned anything about spending time in the library, but Joan thought it was safe to assume.

“Hey Joan!” Mark said from behind the glass. Joan went to HoBags three times a week, so they knew her well there. “Blueberry and a coffee?”

“As always,” she said. “What’ll it be?” Joan asked, looking over to Anna.

Anna shook her head like she was just remembering where she was. “Oh no, I’m good. My parents can see my bank statements.”

Why Anna’s parents would care about a few dollars spent at a bagel shop was beyond Joan’s understanding, but she didn’t miss a beat. “C’mon, my treat.”

“Fine,” she said, rolling her eyes, and flashing a smile of perfect teeth. Joan’s teeth were already yellowing, from coffee and bile. “Do you know if the boba is any good?”

“It’s decent.”

Then to Mark, she said, “I’ll get a Thai tea with pearls.”

“You got it,” he said, then to Joan, “Just make it \$5. Tea’s on the house.”

“Thanks, Mark.” Joan handed him five \$1 bills. She always had tons of ones from tips at Jackie’s, the diner she bussed at on Saturday and Sunday mornings.

Once Joan put her money away, she led Anna to her favorite table in the corner. Anna put her phone face up in front of her, and kept glancing down at it every few seconds. Not for long enough to be reading something, just to be checking.

“So, when you’re here,” Anna began, “what do you do?”

“A lot of things,” Joan said. “I get school work done, read, listen to music, sometimes I meet people here.”

“Meet people? Like on dates?”

Joan laughed. “No, no, I just mean friends. You know, if we don’t have a ton of time and want to just catch up quickly or something. I don’t really date.”

She smiled. “Me neither. I’m not allowed.”

“It’s not that for me.” Mark brought over their order. “Thanks,” she said, looking up at him and smiling. “There just aren’t a ton of people around here who are my type.”

She nodded. “Yeah, the guys at Cecilia’s are kinda jerks. I can’t wait to get out.”

Joan shook her head. “Not exactly that either.”

“You *do* like the guys here?” Anna asked, confused.

“I’m gay,” Joan said, a little louder than she wanted to.

“Oh,” she said, sipping her boba. “This is really good, by the way.”

“Not many people are out at St. Cecilia’s.”

“My friend Derek is gay. Only me and our other friend Ruth know, though.” She paused, her eyes growing wide. “And you now, I guess. But you probably don’t know him, so I guess it’s okay.”

Joan nodded, to let her know she was in the clear. “That’s usually how it goes here. It doesn’t matter too much for me — I’m a girl, so people don’t really pick up on it, and if it comes up I tell them. Sometimes they get awkward about it, but no one really gives me any shit. For guys it’s harder. Maybe not harder, but different.”

“You should probably eat some of your bagel,” Anna said. “If you aren’t still feeling sick.”

Joan was still feeling a bit lightheaded from earlier, so she knew that Anna was right. Sometimes she’d get really ahead of herself with the coffee, and basically drink her weight before she had any food in her stomach. That’s usually when she’d get the most restless, but there were usually other reasons for that, too.

Still, she didn’t like being told to eat. Being looked at like she was sick, from some girl who had no right to look at her that way. Who probably had no idea what problems a person could deal with that would make them feel as awful as Joan did all the time. Who probably had no idea what it was like to be so disappointing that your body literally can’t handle it.

“I’m fine, thanks,” she said sharply. She pushed the bagel to the side in protest.

“Okay.” Anna took another sip of her boba.

They sat in silence for a minute, Joan refusing to speak, and Anna seeming not to know what to say.

“It’s cool that you went to the women’s march,” Anna said. It was clumsy, but Joan appreciated the effort.

“Yeah, it was really powerful. Of course, we just went to the San Jose one, so it wasn’t huge or anything, but still something. And after a few years, at Cecilia’s, it’s always nice to be around people who actually care about women.”

“Maybe I’ll go next year.”

“If you do, you should come with me and my friends. We’re really into it.”

“That would be awesome.” Anna sighed. “I don’t know many people who support that sort of thing, actually.”

“Really? That fucking sucks.”

Anna tensed up at the swear. Joan took a second to really look at her again. She was just so damn small, she *looked* like words could physically push her over. Clearly sheltered, but she seemed to have a good heart. With the type of parents who shelter you in the Valley though, that could easily turn into a fearful heart by the end of a childhood. The type of fear that makes you anxious about feminism and gay people. Joan hoped that wouldn’t happen to her — it was always a shame to see. Not that she could really talk about anxiety.

“My family is just really religious. And we’re Filipino, so it’s mostly cool. Really tied to tradition, and family, and food — really good food. But that means that certain things are kinda off limits, you know?”

“Your friends are like that too, though?”

Anna shrugged. “They just don’t seem to care.

“Damn.”

Anna tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “How were your parents, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“About what, the women’s march?”

“No, about your....?”

“Oh, I never told them,” Joan said. “At least not directly. I don’t think I’ll ever really ‘come out,’ like I don’t think it will really be a thing. We just never talk about that stuff.”

“What do you talk about then?”

“That’s kind of a funny question, isn’t it?” Joan said, laughing. Anna was strange in the way she said things, told you things. It was all so earnest, Joan just didn’t know where it came from. She had some hunger for depth that seemed like it was unfulfilled.

“I guess it is. I’m always interested in that though, the things that people focus on with the people they care about. I don’t talk about things like sexuality with my parents either, but that’s because they’re sort of conservative in that regard. We talk about fluff — trips and school and sports and gossip,” she said. “I like them a lot though, that’s just not the relationship we really have.”

“I don’t talk about anything with my parents,” Joan said. “Sometimes I’ll talk about the deep stuff with my dad I guess, when I get him at a good moment, but honestly, we don’t see each other enough to talk. They’re always working, and when they’re not, I stay away.”

“That’s kinda sad, Joan. Not to be rude or anything.” Anna looked down at her phone for longer this time and pressed the home button. Her mouth slid down into a look of panic. “It’s 4:55. Can you get me back now? Sorry. I mean, thank you.”

Joan looked down at her watch. It had been so long since she’d gone more than five minutes without looking at the thing, she was shocked to see how much time had passed. “Shit, let’s go!”

They raced out of the HoBags and into Joan’s car. They didn’t have enough time to pick a song to play, but Joan sped back to campus fast enough and through the maze of parking lots for that not to matter. She dropped Anna in front of the library where she said she usually got picked up. To Anna’s very obvious relief, her parents weren’t there yet.

“See you around!” Anna yelled behind her, walking to the front of the building. Joan waved and drove off, queuing up some more Billy Joel as she drove. She was halfway through *The Stranger* when she noticed that Anna’s lunchbox sat lying on the floor of the passenger’s seat — Joan didn’t know people even used lunchboxes anymore, but if someone did, it would definitely have been Anna. She smiled. They’d have to deal with that in the morning.

Chapter 2

Anna knew her mom would be suspicious if she were already waiting outside the library when she pulled up in her Highlander (*All the convenience of a mini-van, without the lame!*). So she went into the commons on the bottom floor of the building where everyone who didn’t want to study hung around, and sat scrolling through her phone, trying not to look out of place. Even if she was fully a student at St. Cecilia’s, she could never shake the feeling that she wasn’t supposed to be there. And that afternoon, with her heart in her throat from guilt and action and maybe even — dare she think — excitement, she was having an even harder than average time acting normal.

She went onto Instagram and scrolled through pictures of fake-tanned blondes at NCL banquets, and boys in baseball caps standing in the beds of their trucks for some reason. It was the only social media she was allowed to have, as long as her parents could follow her from the account they’d created for the sole purpose of following her. Instagram was a concession, because Anna really wanted a Snapchat. Her mother had researched it and decided there was no way in hell a daughter of hers was going to be allowed to partake in what seemed to be text

messaging for nudes. She didn't raise a pornographer, she had said. With a smile, of course — it was a conversation, not a lecture — but Anna knew she meant it.

Anna knew if she really wanted an app, she could probably just download it and they would never know. They pretty much stopped checking her phone when she started high school, citing a sudden and very selective belief in the value of their daughter's privacy. But Anna knew if she went behind their back to do something, it would probably just stress her out. Anna actually *liked* her parents, strict as they were. They were kind people. The three of them had movie nights that were fun, even as a teenager. Ruining that didn't seem worth it, not for an app.

Never mind that she had spent the afternoon off school grounds with some girl who, from what Anna could see, was a hot fucking mess. Who she definitely should have reported to the school for bulimia, who clearly had no interest in even eating the bagel that she paid for.

And even worse — Anna enjoyed it. She *liked* talking to Joan — liked the way she thought. It felt sort of dangerous to be with Joan, dangerous in the best way. Which was not how Anna was supposed to feel about her.

Joan was a loose cannon. If Anna's parents met her, she knew that they'd forbid Anna from hanging out with her ever again. She seemed like she could probably teach Anna all about sex and IPAs and whatever *Rocky Horror* was, if she really wanted to. Her parents' worst nightmare.

She went to Nikki Park's account to see if she was following a Joan. If anyone Anna knew was following her it would be Nikki; she was in Joan's year, and had by far the largest social media presence of any of Anna's teammates. She found two Joans: one with the account name "MsJoanieBakes" and a picture of a very old woman, and "JoanEllieHollis" accompanied

by a photo of *her* Joan mid-laugh, her bright red hair seeming to shine through the phone. Anna requested to follow her.

Mom: I'm outside!

Anna turned off her phone, and stared into space for another thirty seconds or so. She needed to make it seem like she had been upstairs, deep in reading her history textbook, when her mom's text had awoken her from her concentration. When her mental timer went off, she got up and walked out the door, a big smile plastered on her face.

"Hi, Mom!" she said through the open driver's window. Her mom smiled back. Anna got into the passenger's seat. "How was your day?"

Mrs. Ramos put her right hand casually on top of her daughter's for a moment, while she looked ahead to make sure it was safe to pull forward. Once she started driving her attention came back to Anna, though she never took her eyes off the road.

"Oh, the usual." She sighed. "We have kind of a big copyright infringement case right now that isn't going great, so dealing with that." Anna's mom was a paralegal at a start-up Anna often forgot the name of, which specialized in software Anna couldn't begin to understand. Anna did understand, however, that her mom put in twelve-hour days, and still somehow always managed to pick her up from school. That was what mattered to Anna.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"What can you do?" She shrugged. "How was *your* day though?"

Anna's heart began to pound so loud she couldn't hear herself think. She tried to come up with something, anything that wasn't Joan- or bagels- or the girls' bathroom-related. She racked her brain for a summary of the rest of the day, but drew a blank.

“How’d that science test go?”

Of course. She had totally forgotten her Chem test.

“Pretty sure I aced it.” In remembering her test, more of the rest of the day came back to her too. “English was also pretty cool today. We read ‘Her Kind’ by Anne Sexton, and I think it might be my favorite poem now.”

“Nice job on the science test!” Mrs. Ramos said. “And I still have no idea how you get anything out of writing *designed* to be cryptic, but I’m proud of you. As always.”

Anna’s mom hated poetry. Didn’t understand the point of it. She never discouraged Anna from reading it herself though, as she so often did in place of the fiction that most people read for fun, if they read for fun at all. Mrs. Ramos saw Anna’s love of poetry, of Ocean Vuong and Ntozake Shange and Walt Whitman, as a sign of her daughter’s much more humanistic intelligence than her own, which she never forgot to compliment.

Anna wasn’t sure her mom would be too proud if she read “Her Kind” herself, but she knew she never would. It told of witches driven to their deaths, women misunderstood, and brave in danger and death. Anna wanted to be a brave woman, to wave at the passerby, her body naked. To go to the gallows with a smile.

But she knew that if she had lived in Salem, no one would ever have accused her. Still, she liked the idea of it.

“You remember Mrs. Williams, that woman I work with? You met her at our Christmas party last year?”

“Uh...” Anna wasn’t sure. She remembered her parent’s coworkers by their first names, because that’s the way they would talk about them. To know them herself was to play a matching game: Tim became Mr. Chung; Linda (or was it Margret?) became Mrs. Williams.

“No? I thought your memory was better. Well anyway, she was telling me about her daughter today. A little older than you, but gosh, what a nightmare. Always out with the boyfriend, late at night, doing who knows what. Drinking, *drugs* maybe!”

Anna felt her chest tighten. She had no idea how her mother could be onto her so quickly, but it seemed like she was. Anna was done for.

“I just kept thinking when she was telling me all this: I am so lucky that God gave me such a wonderful daughter.” She turned her face slightly, so she could look at Anna with her eyes still on the road. “Just wanted to tell you how thankful I am for you, honey.”

Anna forced a smile. “I’m thankful for you too, Mom.”

Mrs. Ramos turned on the radio, ignoring the long metal rosary swinging back and forth from the rear-view mirror, and getting directly in her way. The radio was set to the Sirius ‘90s alternative station, which was basically the only thing she ever listened to. Anna always thought it was out of character, that such a responsible, grounded person as her mother could hold such high regard for Kurt Cobain, but she knew her mom was filled with a lot of little surprises like that.

For the next ten minutes of the drive, mother and daughter sat silently listening to the grunge guitar of Sound Garden and Mazzy Star. It wasn’t a charged silence — Anna knew this — but she couldn’t seem to shake the feeling that her mom was just about to find out what she’d done, that she’d be a disappointment for hanging around like a lowlife. That her mom would

have to take back what she said about how great of a daughter Anna was, and replace her feelings of pride with those of betrayal.

Her mom had explicitly told Anna that she was to stay on campus between when she got out of class and when she was picked up. “Only bad kids hang around on the street, or at fast-food restaurants. It’s dangerous to go off like that, too,” she had said. The family was talking through the Anna pick-up schedule at dinner one night, before the start of her freshman year. “If you really want to mix it up, go say a prayer in the chapel.” Anna was pretty sure her mom was joking, but she couldn’t be sure.

“Or the prayer garden. St. Cecilia’s has a really pretty one,” her dad added in.

As her mom hummed “Fade into You,” Anna knew that she suspected nothing, but she couldn’t seem to get the thought out of her mind.

Her mom backed the car into the driveway of their little bungalow. It was pretty small, but with the way real estate was going in the area, it was worth three times what her parents had paid for it fifteen years earlier. She got out of the car, backpack half-slung over her shoulder.

“Where’s your lunch box?” Mrs. Ramos asked.

Anna gulped in air. *This is it. This is how she gets me. I am never leaving this house again.* “Oh God, must have left it in the library.”

Anna looked over at her mom, trying to read her face for recognition. Mrs. Ramos rolled her eyes. Normally this was bad, but it usually indicated an offense far worse than Anna’s present worst-case scenario. Anna’s chest was still tight.

“Make sure you get that tomorrow.” She opened the door for her daughter. “And watch your language!”

Anna nodded. She let herself exhale.

~

Joan held her breath as she walked in the front door of her house, after having seen her mom's car in the driveway. The possibility of having to talk to her mother had begun to feel like waiting for the grade for a test she knew she failed. Or for Joan, got a B on.

“Mom?” she yelled. No reply. Phew.

The house was built in a classic ranch style, like most of the slightly-older-but-still-really-nice places in the area. They lived down in Morgan Hill, quite a ways south of St. Cecilia's. A little further out, a little further away from civilization, but Joan was glad to be away from the suburban sprawl covering the central parts of the Valley. They had a massive mansion-style staircase right in the middle of the house, leading up to Joan's parents' room on the left and Micky's on the right. Joan found it obnoxious. When she was in middle school Joan threw such a fit about sharing a room with Mickey that she got their parents to renovate the basement into a bedroom for her. She didn't mind the tightness of it, she just wanted to be further from her family. She felt that they had created a certain amount of distance from her on their own — her parents from always working, her sister from being a bitch — and since she had been dealt that hand, she did not intend to fight it. She was given a seven and a five of hearts; she would not hold out hope for aces.

They converted an old shed into the backyard into an office space for Joan's parents to share — Joan figured that was where her mom was. Both of them worked high up for Delta Airlines; no one could tell you what it was they were doing, but Joan just figured that in itself

told you how incredibly important it was. Or incredibly unimportant, if you were sixteen and suspicious of capitalism.

Joan stopped in the kitchen to grab some more coffee (they always kept a full pot, as long as at least one person was home) and headed down to her room. Shira may have been the worst, but she was right about something: Joan needed to get down there and study the crap out of her case law. She looked at her watch as she walked down the stairs (5:47). Entering her house always felt like a moment of truth for Joan — holding her breath to see who she'd have to answer to that day — but entering her basement felt like release. She had painted the walls a dark red, and hung fairy lights all over the place like it was something out of 2014 Tumblr. The walls were covered in postcards, Polaroids, and a few posters; her record player sat at the top of her bookshelf. It was the first thing you saw when you came in the room. It was entirely the room of a Gen Z indie kid, but it was entirely Joan, from the Hobo Johnson record to the imitation-Monet printed comforter. Everything was personal, suited exactly to her interests, yet everything was exactly what you would expect.

Before working on *People v. Westin*, she checked her planner for the day. She didn't have much homework — some problems for calc, a reading for APUSH, an English paper on *Paradise Lost* due at the end of the week. On a normal night, Joan would consider this super far ahead, and do absolutely nothing, leaving herself barely enough time to do a problem or two for calc in the car before class, and skim the history text during lunch. But in addition to having a fire lit under her ass about mock trial, she had work that weekend, and a kickback at Izzie's on Friday. Even Joan knew she had very little time.

She looked down at her phone to see three unread messages (5:51).

Izzie: How was your day?

Izzie: Wanna talk?

Izzie: Helllllllloooooooooo

Sure, she had work to do, but Joan could take twenty minutes first to talk to Izzie. Joan rang her on FaceTime. She picked up on the first ring. She could see Izzie sprawled out on her bed, probably waiting for her call.

“I was driving,” Joan said with a laugh. “I was gonna call you.”

“Excuses, excuses.” She grinned.

Joan waved her comment away. “So what happened for you today? Sorry I didn’t see you, I had a shit ton of mock trial stuff. Shira’s up my ass about it.”

“Don’t even listen to her! You’re way better than she is.”

“Eh, she was right, though. I sucked yesterday.”

“You kinda did.” Izzie laughed. “I kid, I kid!”

“But what’s up with you?”

“Hanson’s back at it with the racism today,” she said. “He told Neil he smelled like curry. Totally unprompted. He leaned over his shoulder to check his bunsen burner, and then said it loud enough for everyone to hear.”

“Anyone say anything this time?”

“Nah, I mean we were all kinda in shock. And everyone’s desperate to pass, so we’re not gonna get on his bad side.”

“Someone’s gotta say something,” Joan said. “This school is just dripping with bigoted assholes.”

“Yeah, and there’s even more bigoted assholes in admin. What do you think it’s gonna do?”

“True,” Joan shrugged. While she thought some of the teachers at St. Cecilia’s were good people, from what Joan could see, no one on admin was. Or if they were, they lost it somewhere along the way.

“I know what we should do. Wanna wear shorts to school tomorrow and see who lasts the longest without a dress code?”

“That sounds like a wonderful statement on inequality at the school.”

“Hey! It is, in a way.”

Joan knew Izzie was serious about the shorts. She got a dress coded violation like every other day, mostly just on principle. She thought of how to change the subject into something new, that would never get her into trouble.

Joan grinned into the screen, putting on childlike excitement. Or just exaggerating what she actually felt. “I made a new friend today.”

“Put it on the calendar!” Izzie laughed. “Who?”

“Her name’s Anna, I think she’s a sophomore... really sweet girl, but I don’t think she really has anyone.”

Izzie rolled her eyes. “What, are you gonna take her under your wing?”

“Don’t give me that.”

“What?”

“You say it like it’s a bad thing, looking out for someone.”

“It’s not a bad thing, it’s just a bit *Emma*.”

“Emma Anderson? The field hockey girl?”

“God, no. The Jane Austen novel? Cher from *Clueless*?”

“I’m a fucking idiot. I only got it at the *Clueless* reference.” The girls both started cracking up, both of their phones shaking in their hands. When they finally got back their composure, Joan started again. “I’m not trying to make her over, I just wanna be friends with this girl, and show her the possibilities of life. Is that so bad?”

Izzie raised her eyebrows. “What possibilities are we talking about?”

“You know. The shit we do, nothing bad. Invite her to Allie’s kickback this weekend, maybe a Denny’s run. Throw in some modern music; this girl seems like she hasn’t heard anything after 1980. Who do you think I am?”

“A rich lesbian with undiagnosed BPD?” Izzie had just started taking AP Psych as her elective, and suddenly each of her friends had a personality disorder.

“And you’re a slutty Latina kleptomaniac,” Joan said. “We’ve all got our shit.”

Joan heard Izzie’s mom yell something in the background that she couldn’t make out. She was always yelling.

“Gotta go, bye.” Izzie whispered. Izzie’s cheeks turned from their usual light brown to a dark, furious, crimson. Before Joan could respond, she ended the call.

~

Before going to the kitchen, Izzie needed to take a moment. Reflect, maybe.

Slutty Latina Kleptomaniac. Yep.

Joan said it like a joke. And it was almost fair, too, given that it was in response to Izzie’s admittedly less mean joke about Joan’s problems. Yet hearing it out loud, she realized they all

saw it as an issue unique to her. Not just Joan. If she was comfortable enough to say it so casually like that, their friends must be saying it and thinking it, too. Shoplifting wasn't just something funny that they all did, sticking it to CVS and Sephora and Target or whatever. It was a problem that was uniquely hers. Or at least, that was how they saw it. Never mind that she only did it with them, and it was only her idea *maybe* once or twice.

She wasn't just a thief, she was a brown one. And she wasn't just brown, she was a brown slut. There was a difference; a causal qualifier. And even if Joan said it without thinking, all of those things — her race, her promiscuity, and her poor behavior — were all one in the same. The jab felt cold. And jarring. Like a reminder that they all saw her as the one destined to be criminal, and themselves as quirky and alternative and maybe just kids.

Everyone *thought* that Izzie was a bad girl. Joan definitely did. Sometimes even Izzie thought so.

Some days, Izzie was sure it was all a race thing. She was never fully convinced that that didn't play into it, at least a little bit. Maybe people didn't decide that she was bad news *only* because she was part-Dominican, but it certainly didn't help her case. Made it easier for them to believe. And when someone said it directly — especially someone Izzie loved, and usually respected, like Joan — it became harder to make an argument to the contrary.

Izzie knew that if she were being honest, she wasn't doing much *not* to be seen as that girl. She had piercings all up the sides of her ears, ones that were constantly getting her detention whenever she forgot to make her micro-banged hair cover them, as she walked by the assistant dean. She was always talking about sex. Not explicitly about her own experiences, at least, it wasn't about her in a concrete way, but enough that everyone assumed she was promiscuous

without having any proof of it. There was a rumor that by the start of high school, her rice purity score was a 12. A list of a hundred acts of indecency, a point taken off for each thing you've done. And everyone thought that Izzie had gotten through items #1 through #88. That she had started with "holding hands romantically," and ended with a threesome. No one knew where Izzie would have gotten the chance to lower her score so much — no one knew of her partners, or a time she'd been arrested — they just assumed it all *had* to have happened.

But in real life, Izzie took her piercings out before she got home from school, so her mother wouldn't see. She was sixteen, and had only been kissed once. And even that was on summer break between seventh and eighth grade, when she went to stay with her dad in Oregon. She caught the eye of a metal-mouthed boy who always hung out at the neighborhood pool, who awkwardly put his wet mouth on her dry one the night before she flew back home.

And she was damn smart, too. One of the few kids who wasn't fully white, Chinese, or Indian in all the honors classes. They'd always turn to her like she spoke for all of Latin America whenever immigration or communism or agriculture or anything vaguely brown came up in social studies. Spanish teachers tried to get conversational with her real quick, as if her mother had taught her any Spanish.

There on scholarship. Not just financial aid. *Scholarship*. No one cared about that of course, and she tried not to bring it up, even though she really wanted to, sometimes. She wanted to bring up how fucking awesome she was at mock trial too, but she didn't do that, either.

"Izzie! Don't make me come get you in there."

Izzie started taking out her earrings as quickly as she could, not worrying about organizing them or putting the backs on right, just leaving them in a jumbled mess on her desk. If

she had time she'd put them with her tiny supply of weed, but no matter. Her mom didn't really snoop around her room, so there wasn't much reason to worry about her finding them. She tossed her phone onto her pillow and swung open the door. It was already half-open, per her mother's rule. She walked down the short, yet still poorly lit hallway into the kitchen/dining area of the apartment. Her mom was sitting under the giant heirloom crucifix on the wall at their old IKEA dining table, still in her scrubs. She had her reading glasses on and stared intently at her laptop. When she saw Izzie, she pulled out the chair closest to her and motioned for her daughter to sit down.

"I'm tired from work, so I'm gonna keep this short. I got an email today that you've gotten nine detentions this semester for dress code violations. You care to explain that?"

Her voice wasn't that angry. She probably didn't have the energy for anger. And it didn't seem to say anything about what the violations were, so Izzie really didn't need to worry. It probably wouldn't matter even if her mom did find out about the piercings, but she liked to avoid stressful conversations whenever possible. Or at least to minimize them.

When it came to breaking rules being ballsy at school, Izzie didn't care at all. But she hated doing that with her mom. She never wanted to fight with her. Sometimes pissing her off was just collateral damage for being herself.

"It's super sexist. They're all just because you can see I have boobs in whatever shirt I wear. If mine were smaller," Izzie said, "they wouldn't care." That was kind of true, but only two of the detentions were for this reason. And she *had* been wearing a push-up bra.

Her mom rolled her eyes behind her wire frames. "Yeah. You get them from me, sorry. But you know what I tell you about this, right?"

holiness of their time was always unclear), which was basically ten minutes in which anyone in the class could put out ethical issues in their life to the class and get advice. Aside from mandated reporting stuff — kids saying they wanted to kill themselves, and why in God’s name would you do that in the middle of class — everything was on the table.

One day, they were supposed to give presentations on Christian attitudes towards different forms of birth control for most of their class time (spoiler alert: they don’t like any of the ones that work). She didn’t actually want to get a bad grade in the class — Mr. Ferguson gave her a hard time, but she knew she could still get an A. She couldn’t, however, give an earnest reporting of Catholic teaching on IUDs in good faith. No way. And if she fully threw the presentation, she knew her grade wouldn’t come back from it.

So Izzie knew she’d need a good topic to get out of actually giving the presentation. She and Joan had started making it a game over the course of the year to push further and further past the ten minutes into class time, and make Ferguson more and more uncomfortable.

“Watch this,” she whispered to Joan. Her hand shot up.

“And what do you have for us today, Izzie?” Mr. Ferguson was shaking his head, but he was smiling. She was like a car wreck to him — she knew he wanted to look away, but he just couldn’t seem to.

“So strictly hypothetically speaking...”

“Oh God,” Ferguson said. “I mean gosh. Just go ahead, Izzie.”

“Hypothetically, what would you suggest if *someone* has a boyfriend who both has a latex allergy and is vegan?” Some boys across the room started laughing. Joan struggled to keep her face straight.

Ferguson sighed. “Izzie, are you alluding to condoms?”

“I am indeed.”

“Well,” he said, throwing up his hands, “consider it God’s sign.”

“To have unprotected sex?”

“Jesus Christ, Izzie! *Not to at all!* Do I teach you guys nothing? Don’t answer that.”

Izzie was the type of person who could always find a whole host of things she could say to make a religion teacher uncomfortable. She was headstrong, and she was *funny*. Yet her mother still made her go to Church every Sunday. The woman *cried* at her confirmation.

Her parents’ divorce didn’t mean much to Izzie — she was barely in kindergarten, and it was fairly amicable — but it crushed her mother. Not only from the loss of her husband, but from the sin. She was a good woman, a loyal woman. Progressive, yes, but proudly Catholic. Izzie knew that for her mother, a lot depended on Izzie keeping the faith. In turning out okay, despite.

Izzie didn’t talk about it much, but out of all of their friends, she was raised the most religious. Maybe that’s how it always is. For Izzie’s friends, God was always just out of sight — never brought up directly to tell them that they were going to hell for their sinful ways, but referenced enough in conjunction with other things — family, love, fortune — for them to know that their infractions were disappointing Him. Allie’s family was Catholic in the sort of expected, 4th generation, Irish-American way; Joan’s parents didn’t care about God at all. Religion didn’t really matter for them. They could talk shit about religion when it was convenient, but Izzie knew that her friends had no skin in the game. If they renounced the faith, their parents might be a little disappointed, but they’d get over it in like a day. Say that their children should make their own choices.

Things were different for Izzie. God wasn't a decoration hanging on the wall; He was the one thing her mother truly wanted to instill in her. Izzie had to choose: be little miss perfect Bible camp, or totally reject it. She didn't have the privilege of towing the company line.

The rest of their friends were more or less what you'd expect alternative kids of middling popularity at a Catholic high school to be. They talked a big game about how much they hated the Church, with its backwards values and evangelism and molestation of little boys, but at the end of the day, they all made the sign of the cross when an ambulance drove past. They were able to be casual about their beliefs, and what they didn't believe, and what they didn't understand.

She would never admit this to her friends, but she still prayed every night before she went to sleep. She'd never tell them that she prayed her plastic children's rosary when she felt so incredibly sad and angry that she couldn't bear it anymore, or that she kept it hidden with her weed and her earrings when she was at home. And she would never, ever admit that now and then, it helped a bit.

But maybe even if she did tell her friends about her faith, it wouldn't matter. They would never see her that way, right?

No, Joan said it best. Kleptomaniac. Slutty Latina. You couldn't get more stereotypical, more micro-aggressive than that. The bad friend, the edgy friend. She liked to be seen that way by outsiders; wasn't really sure why, but she did. It felt almost like reclamation, like telling everyone who looked down on her *I am exactly who you think I am and I am proud of it*. But when Joan said these things about her, right after befriending some literal child who'd probably find Izzie scary — this, she held against Joan. Deep down, she knew she didn't really have a right to, but it didn't keep her from hurting.

She hadn't even met Anna yet, knew basically nothing about her, but Izzie knew she was going to hate her. She felt a little bad about this, but brushed it aside. If Joan wanted to replace her — wanted to lighten things up with someone unbroken — Izzie wasn't going to sit by quietly.

When the water came to a boil, she added the last of a box of spaghetti, and gave it a stir.

In a few minutes, she drained it, and brought a bowl of the stuff to her mother, with Parmesan and butter on top.

Carmen smiled up at her daughter. "Thanks, love."

Izzie nodded, and went to take her bowl back to her room.

"No, no, no," Carmen said. "Just because I'm busy doesn't mean we don't say Grace together."

Izzie retraced the five steps she had already made toward her bedroom. She sat back down beside her mother, and held her hand. Izzie dropped her eyes to her lap. Her mom didn't say anything for a moment, and so Izzie looked up, wondering why she hadn't begun the prayer. Carmen was studying her daughter's face, her eyes a little moist. Izzie couldn't tell if she was crying out of love or fear, if she knew something she wasn't supposed to, or if she was just being a mom. Finally, she sighed, and looked down into her own lap. They made the sign of the cross, mumbling the words as Catholics always do.

"Bless us O Lord, for these thy gifts..."

Chapter 3

When Joan got to the car the next morning, to-go coffee mug sloshing around in her hand, Mickey was already sitting in the passenger's seat, already looking pissed. Somehow, her bleach-blonde ponytail looked even tighter against her head than it usually did.

"You're late," she said. Joan threw her backpack in the backseat from the front and turned on the engine.

"You can't be late if it's your car." She knew, however, that she was: it was 6:34, and they had agreed to be ready to go by 6:30. Most people wouldn't care about four minutes — especially not at sunrise — but Mickey wasn't most people.

"You know it's *our* car! It's not my fault I don't have a license yet." Mickey tried to fiddle with the radio, probably looking for a pop station, but Joan swatted her hand away.

"My car, my music." She popped in a Regrettes CD she always kept at the front of the binder. Mickey rolled her eyes. Joan backed out of the driveway.

Mickey and Joan would probably get along fine, if they had even one thing in common. Only one. Mickey was the type of girl popularity came easy to. Pretty, and a varsity soccer player as a freshman. Joan swam on the freshman team, then decided it wasn't for her. She wouldn't admit it, but swimming wasn't for her because she sucked at it. Mickey got their parents' blonde hair and tan complexion; Joan got the bright red hair and pale skin of her grandmothers.

But if you were to ask Joan, she'd tell you that the main difference between Mickey and herself, was that Mickey never really thought about anything. This is not to say that Mickey was dumb, but she never seemed to have questions. "That's the way it's always been" was a sufficient answer to a question for her. She saw being called "chill" as a compliment, when all Joan would

hear is compliant. It was for these reasons that Joan never understood her, and Mickey never really knew Joan.

“Can you turn this shit down? Jake’s calling.” Joan turned down the music, but not before glaring at Mickey. “Lacy Loo” was her favorite song on the album.

“Hey babe,” Mickey started. Joan didn’t want to listen to her sister swoon, but aside from genuinely thinking hard about the road as she drove, she didn’t have many options for entertainment.

“—Oh yeah, I’m still in the car. My sister was *late* again, so it’s still gonna be a while.” She shot Joan a death glare. “Yeah, I know I said I’d meet you, I’m really sorry. Make it up to you this afternoon?”

Joan had no idea what “this afternoon” entailed, and she really didn’t want to know. It was bad enough that her baby sister was dating before her; God forbid she’d started having sex. Or the stuff leading up to it even — Joan wasn’t really sure what the order of events was supposed to be. Again, as long as it concerned her sister, she didn’t want to know.

Once they finally got to school, Mickey had Joan drop her off at the very front entrance, like always. Mickey wanted a clean, unadulterated entrance into the school, one untouched by her nerdy older sister or any associations thereof. Joan didn’t mind it either, because it meant extra time by herself.

Still, she didn’t love the reminder of how uncool she was. Try as she might have not to care, she was never fully numb to it. She could never, ever admit that, though.

“See ya,” Mickey said with a half-wave. She didn’t even turn to look back.

Joan drove back to the junior parking lot. It was an additional ten minutes or so of driving, given that she had to get through the line of parents dropping off their freshmen and sophomores, wrapping around the block, and then back to the line of juniors trying to park their cars, but the girls left home early enough that it was still another half hour until the bell rang when Joan pulled into her spot next to Izzie's old Camaro. It was a much nicer car than she could really afford to drive — a random gift from her dad, who showed up just long enough to convince himself he was in the clear, then left again. Her mom didn't want to let her keep the car, but without another model to offer Izzie, she figured she'd only be hurting her daughter to save her own pride. Joan thought Carmen was pretty great for that.

For selfish reasons, Joan was really glad Izzie got to keep it. Weekend drives to the beach in that thing were unmatched.

When Joan pulled in, Izzie and Allie were leaning on the hood of the Camaro, looking deep in conversation. They pulled out of it when they noticed her, both of them starting to yell stuff she couldn't hear over her CD player. Finally, she rolled down the windows and turned down the stereo. She looked at the time on the dashboard (7:26). Once she was fully parked, they swarmed her driver's side window.

"Important question for you." Allie giggled, tucking a golden curl behind her ear. Allie was a swimmer, and the chlorine did something to her hair that made it perfectly curled and beach-ready everyday, the sun tanning her to perfection. It didn't look fake or anything, she just always looked healthy and pretty and athletic. Out of place, maybe. At least in Northern California, and certainly amongst their deeply un-athletic friends.

"The Veronicas or The Marias? We've been debating this for the last 15 minutes."

This was an easy question. “Obviously, The Veronicas. I listened to “Future Me Hates Me” for like a week straight last year.”

“See?” Allie laughed. Izzie shook her head and began defending the Marias again, and Joan got out of the car. From there, the three of them went back from Joan’s Volvo to the front of the Camaro, this time with Joan and Izzie sitting on the hood and Allie standing toward them on one of the dirt-covered parking lot dividers. Ideally, these were supposed to be a few feet of grass, but California was always in a drought so Joan had never seen them any way but in their current decrepit state.

“I see Mickey’s already gone,” Izzie said.

“We’re all better off that way.”

“What’s up with that boyfriend of hers? Jacob, or something?” Allie asked.

“I don’t know what there’s to tell. I mean, they’re gross, but I don’t know if there’s anything particularly interesting going on in that department.” She couldn’t bring herself to tell them about what Mickey might be up to in the afternoon. She knew they’d have plenty of theories if given the prompt.

“He’s kinda cute.” Allie shrugged. “I wonder what they talk about, though. Like what a deep conversation for them looks like.”

““What do you think, like, space is like?”” Izzie said, in her best valley girl voice.

Allie deepened her voice. “I bet there’s a ton of aliens. That would be fucking awesome. Fucking an alien, I mean.””

“Well, she talks to him the whole drive to school, and that’s basically what it sounds like,” Joan laughed.

Izzie waved at someone, and Joan looked over to see Jamie and Luke walking across the lot toward them.

Jamie and Luke were just about the only guys they tolerated. Luke was acceptable because he was gay, and had only ever really been friends with girls anyway. He befriended them prior to coming out, but they all knew as soon as they met him.

Even after being friends with Jamie for a while, Joan wasn't really sure why they kept him around. He was certainly nicer than other straight guys she knew — that wasn't the issue — but she could never shake the feeling that he didn't add anything. That they only wanted him as a friend for the sake of having a straight-guy-friend.

Joan looked at her watch (7:43).

“Well look who the cat dragged in,” Allie said, once they were close enough to hear.

Luke shook his head. “The cat dragged in’ — who are you, my grandma?”

Izzie punched Luke's arm. “Good morning to you to.”

“Where have you guys been?” Joan asked. They were usually hanging with Izzie and Allie before she even pulled into the lot.

“I had to go work on a ceramics project, and Luke had...” Jamie pointed to Luke for him to fill in the blank.

“I was talking to Ms. Violet about her casting for *Grease*; I literally talked about it the whole walk over here. Do you *ever* listen?”

“I listen!” If Jamie *did* listen, he was very bad at it. He didn't know Allie was on swim until year three of their friendship, when she had to miss his birthday party for a meet. This was after literal years of missing hangouts and study sessions and just about everything for swim.

“Fine,” Luke said. “Then who’s she trying to cast as Danny?”

Jamie scratched his head. “Uh... you?”

Luke shook his head. “No, but she should be.” He turned to Joan. “Have you thought at all about auditioning? I know you used to sing, and we’re in dire need of a good Frenchie. You’ve already got the hair.”

She couldn’t tell if this was a dig or not, but she didn’t care. She liked her red — it might just have been her favorite thing about herself. “Just have them buy a nice wig or something,” she shrugged. “And I can’t — we might go to state this year for mock trial.”

Izzie nodded. “Joan’s too busy playing my pretrial lawyer to play a beauty school dropout.”

“What’s the case this year?” Allie asked.

“A murder, which they almost never do,” Joan said. “Normally it’s something lame, like age discrimination or stalking.”

“I had a stalker once,” Jamie said.

Luke put his hand on Jamie’s shoulder. “Your mom tracked your location. It’s not the same thing.”

They all laughed at this, unsure whether Luke was joking or not. Jamie was laughing along though, so he probably was. Probably.

The first bell rang (7:55). Allie looked to Joan — they both had Calc AB with Mr. Salvador first period across campus. “Ready to go?” she asked. Joan nodded.

“I’ve got physics, so I should probably start that way too,” Izzie said.

“We’re both in English,” Luke said, motioning to Jamie. “So we’ll see you later.”

“Bye,” Jamie said. The girls waved back to him.

Once they were out of earshot, Allie turned to Joan. “I love that boy.”

“Jamie? Really? Love?”

Allie nodded.

This wasn't news to Joan; Allie wasn't exactly shy about her crushes. But it was the first time she had addressed her feelings directly to Joan, and certainly the first time she'd said it with such drama. “Love” is a big word, even if only used in hyperbole. And Joan knew it didn't matter much what she thought, but she just couldn't understand why Jamie. He was about as generic as you could get for a man, and that really said something.

“Have you done anything about it?” Joan asked. She believed that the smartest thing to do when someone came to you with their crazy was to avoid doing the talking as much as possible. She was usually right about this. Problem was, it meant everyone came to Joan with their respective crazy. Luke, with his theatre drama when Jamie wasn't around, or wasn't helpful; Izzie, with just about everything, and now this.

Which was ironic, because as far as Joan was concerned, she herself had too much crazy for any one person to handle.

Allie shook her head. “I mean, we text a bit, but I don't know how to keep the conversation going. He's definitely clueless about it.”

They were approaching the math building, but Joan didn't want to lose this line of discussion. Frankly, she was entertained by it.

“Let's talk about it after school today, okay? Brainstorm or something. I've got practice, but if you're still around after that?”

Allie nodded. “So do I, so sure. Thanks Joan. I’d like that.”

Really, this was probably more fun for Joan than Allie, but she didn’t want to lose the credit. “No problem.”

~

Allie wasn’t as dumb as people thought she was. She was ditzy — even she knew that — but she was great at math. She kind of liked that she and Joan had class together for it, because she loved watching Joan struggle to hide her embarrassment when, just about every time, her test came back a C, and Allie’s came back an A.

She was also the type of good at math where she didn’t really need to pay attention. She’d look through the textbook while going through a few practice problems, *maybe* consult the internet if something was really stumping her, but the lecture just wasn’t really necessary for her. So while everyone else was desperately taking notes on derivatives, Allie was reading the news on her iPad. Maybe not the most interesting thing for a sixteen-year-old girl to be doing, but pretty much every interesting app was blocked on the devices that the school gave out at the start of the year.

She read about the US’s unraveling relationship with Iran. She read about the abuses of the Rohingya in Myanmar. She read about taxes, and healthcare, and Israel-Palestine. And she read so, so much about guns.

While Mr. Salvador lectured away about God knows what, Allie started to form opinions on these things, things she had never known much about at all. Before Calc AB, Allie didn’t really have opinions on much. She knew her parents were Republicans, and she knew that her

friends were definitely planning to be Democrats. Maybe even further than Democrats, though Allie wasn't entirely sure what that entailed. Social studies had never been her subject.

In that particular math class, with Joan fighting tears trying to understand the work on the board in the seat to her right, Allie was reading about yet another mass shooting in a high school. Some place in suburban Oregon, some white boy without friends and too many guns in his dad's tool shed. 4 dead, 12 injured.

Whenever Allie read those headlines, she always thought about who she knew that could do something like that. She knew it was kind of fucked up, to suspect people of murder before anyone's been hurt, but she couldn't help it. It felt like self-preservation, like something that would inevitably come into use at some point.

She was pretty sure that if it was someone in Calc AB, it was gonna be Elliot Keller. Kid wore a suit to school on free dress days. He'd been in her religion class freshman year, and went on this long rant one time about "God's wrath" coming for us. Kind of freaked out the teacher, too.

She wondered how he'd do it. If he'd just be missing at the start of the class, then come in, dressed all in black, right in the middle, or if he'd sit for the lecture first. Wait until everyone was really focusing to pull a gun out of his bag. Saint Cecilia's didn't have metal detectors, so it wouldn't be that difficult. She wondered who he'd hit first, and if he'd say anything, and if he'd want to kill her. Allie didn't talk to him much, but when she did, she was nice to him. Picked up some books he'd dropped in the hallway once.

When the bell rang for second period, Allie gasped. She had been so deep in her head, thinking so hard about Elliot Keller's hypothetical murder spree, that her immediate thought at the sound of the bell was not the end of class, but the end of her life.

Allie felt a hand on her shoulder. Joan was staring at her, brows knitted.

"Dude, you okay?"

Allie nodded. "Just zoned out. All good."

She passed Elliot leaving the classroom. "I like your hoodie," she said. It was the same too-tight gray one he wore every day.

"Thank you, Allie. That's very kind." He smiled a little too big.

"All right, then." She shuffled off to French, avoiding his eye the best she could.

Chapter 4

Anna had no idea where to find Joan at lunch. She *needed* to find her though. To get her lunchbox back.

She thought of DMing Joan on Instagram, initially, but decided against it. Thought that might seem weird, or desperate, or like she *only* wanted to get the lunchbox and then never talk again. Anna didn't want Joan to think any of these things.

So she spent the first ten minutes of lunch walking around every part of campus where students might be eating, trying her very best not to stick out as she walked, alone, scanning the faces and feeling the eyes of everyone around her taking her in. Anna always felt like everyone was watching her, waiting for her to slip up, to do something weird or off. Especially at school, and especially when she didn't know what she was doing.

She started by walking through all the big cement tables outside the cafeteria. She thought there was a good chance that was where Joan would be. That was where most people of middling popularity sat, especially when they had a friend group. She wasn't sure that Joan did, but Joan seemed confident enough that Anna was pretty sure she hadn't totally fallen through the cracks socially. Anna looked hard at the tables of kids in the arts and in debate — that felt like where Joan might find her tribe — but nothing. She shuffled past the girls' cross country team — the table where she usually sat — trying to avoid their eyes. They probably wouldn't notice she was gone; she usually said so little at lunch. Either way, she didn't want them to notice her actively by herself.

She poked her head into the cafeteria for a moment, not expecting to find anything. Only the really weird or the really popular kids sat in the cafeteria. The football team and the girls' field hockey team taking up giant banquet tables of space, the certified pariahs wedged awkwardly in the corner where no one would talk to them. Just as she suspected, Joan was nowhere to be found.

She wasn't really sure where to go from there. Joan could be in a teacher's room, in which case there was no use even trying to find her. She could be in the library, but having to look through there would be extra embarrassing, what with everyone just sitting quietly and doing their work. The only place she could really think left to look would be the commons. She wasn't really sure if people went there during lunch — you couldn't eat there until after school for some reason — but she gave it a shot.

As soon as Anna walked in the door, she could see that Joan wasn't there. Only about ten kids were even in the room, so it was pretty obvious. It was time to give up. She'd have to make

up some excuse about how it wasn't in the lost and found, and how the mean librarian must have thrown it out for some reason. Maybe she'd buy a new one with own money to keep her mom from asking more questions. It wasn't that she was trying to micromanage Anna, not always. Anna was a good enough kid that she was pretty sure it seldom crossed her mother's mind that she might not be. She was just curious enough to usually find out when something was off.

Anna realized she needed to pee, so might as well go while she was already in the building. She walked across the commons to the girls bathroom —nicest in the school, thanks to the donation of the big rich Catholic family that the Carlson Student Commons and Library was named for. As she passed, she looked through the glass window connected to the wall separating the main commons room from the activity center. Bingo.

Joan was laughing at the big conference table in the center, wearing a bright pink turtle neck that along with her red hair, made her pretty hard to miss. Anna could see the back of a girl sitting across from Joan. Her hair was in two black pigtails that either meant she was way cooler than Anna was, or really strange. Or maybe both.

The activity room was really a tiny a board room. It had a table in the center, with plastic roller chairs much nicer than any of the ones in the classrooms, a coffee machine intended for the teachers, a microwave, a sink, and cabinets which may or may not have held accessible food. A pretty nice spot for lunch on a high school campus.

Of course, students weren't supposed to be in the activity room without a teacher. This made Anna a little bit queasy as she stepped through the threshold, but she did so anyway. She had forgotten her need to pee at this point. She was determined to get back her lunchbox. And maybe meet this oddly-styled friend of Joan's.

The girl with the pigtails swung around as soon as Anna opened the door. She had a septum piercing. Definitely cooler than Anna.

“Can we help you?” Her tone was genuine, if not a bit on guard. Anna didn’t know what to say. She looked to Joan, who looked just as stunned as she felt.

“Anna? Hi, whatcha doing here?”

“Hey, sorry,” she began. “It’s just that, I think, I left my lunch box in your car maybe? I’m always losing stuff.”

Joan hit her hand to her head. “Yes, I totally forgot! It’s in my passenger seat, I’ll get it for you now.” As she said it, she looked down at the still-steaming cup of coffee in front of her, no doubt from the teachers’ coffee maker. This girl was *bold*. “Actually, do you wanna just hang out while I drink this, and then we can get it after? Unless you have somewhere you wanna —“

“That would be great,” Anna cut in. It didn’t even occur to her to use this time to go pee. She could feel her lips contorted up in a big smile, and tried to neutralize her face slowly enough that they wouldn’t see her thinking about it. She made her way into the room, struggling to decide where to sit. *Do I sit next to Joan? But then, I’m looking at this other girl. Or, I sit next to the other girl and it’s easy to talk to Joan, but that’s weird, cause I’m sitting next to the girl who doesn’t know me at all.* She finally settled on the chair one away from Joan on her right, not too close and not too far, and more importantly, almost as far away from a confused-looking pig-tail girl as she could.

“Uh, hi,” the pig-tail girl finally said.

“Oh shit. Anna, this is my best friend in the whole world, Izzie. Izzie, this is my very new and very lovely friend Anna.” Joan was gesturing dramatically with her hands, playing up the part of the gregarious hostess. It suited her.

Anna half-raised her hand into a wave, smiling with her mouth closed. “Hi,” she said.

“Hey, how’s it going,” the girl said in one breath, clearly not asking a question, and quickly turning her face back to Joan.

They sat in silence for a moment, Joan sipping her stolen coffee, Izzie eating a bowl of instant ramen she must have made in the microwave, and Anna, gingerly taking bites of a soggy-looking sandwich pulled from the brown paper bag her mom had packed. To her own shock, she was the one who finally broke the silence.

“So, why are you guys in here? Do you have a club meeting or something after this?”

Izzie and Joan side-eyed each other, clearly trying to suppress smiles and laughs of an inside joke. Anna felt small, and left-out. Which, she remembered, she most certainly was. It would almost be weirder if she wasn’t.

“Something like that,” Izzie said.

Joan turned to Anna, apparently deciding to let her in on the joke. “Izzie and I figured out not too long ago that this room is basically free game every lunch period. Except for every other Tuesday, when the Spanish club meets in here, but still. And isn’t it so much nicer than standing out on the quad?”

“I mean yeah, but aren’t you afraid you’ll like, get in trouble for it?”

Joan waved her away with her hand. “Nah, they’ve got bigger issues on their hands than us.”

“So where do you normally sit at lunch, Anna?” Izzie asked. It was unclear whether or not she was actually interested, but Anna answered anyway.

“Uh, generally on the quad, with the other cross country people.”

“And you like it there?”

“It’s fine I guess.” She breathed in for a moment. She was thinking of saying something she knew she might regret. “I’m just not really close with them, is all. Most of them, I should say.”

“Is there a reason for that?” Izzie kept going. Joan shot her a look. “I don’t mean to pry or anything, I’m just curious. Getting to know you.” Anna detected a hint of irony in her voice, but it wasn’t enough for her to want to shut down completely. Normally she’d be out of the room by then. But something told her even if this strange and cool girl was mocking her a bit, she just needed to tough it out.

“They’re really, really, nice people,” Anna began.

“And you’re not?” Izzie asked.

Anna laughed. A hard laugh, one she forced out to convince herself that they were all joking. She really hoped she was right about this. “No, it’s not that, at least I hope.”

Izzie looked like she was about to speak again, but Joan cut in first. “What is it, then?”

Anna glued her eyes to the wall as she spoke, trying to steady herself. She noticed the clock up there, ticking away. It was 11:50, leaving 20 minutes in their 40 minute lunch period.

“They just don’t really care about the same things, I guess.”

“Such as...?”

“Like when Trump got elected. I was really sad about it, and I tried to bring it up with some of them when we were stretching before practice, cause we were in season then. I guess that was freshman year, so maybe we all knew less about things. But when I said I was upset that he won, and it was weird Mr. Peters didn’t say anything about it at all in our global citizenship class, Sophia Perkins just told me that she didn’t like talking about politics and school shouldn’t be political anyway and everyone agreed with her. And it’s always like that,” she sighed, finally taking her first breath in a while. “It’s not bad, though.”

Anna couldn’t believe how much she had just gone off, but looking to the two other girls, she realized that they had loved it. Joan was smiling and nodding, something like approval, though of what, Anna wasn’t sure. Even Izzie looked a little taken aback. “This school is soaked to the brim with dumb blondes,” she said. “My regards to Mickey, by the way.”

Mickey? They couldn’t possibly be talking about Mickey. Not that Mickey, at least.

Joan rolled her eyes. “She’s not that bad.”

“She’s exactly what Allie’s describing.”

“Anna,” Joan said. “How could you forget that when we already *have* an Allie?”

“It’s the top A-name in my mind!”

“Which Mickey is this?” Anna cut in.

“Mickey Hollis,” Joan said. “My little sister. Ya know her?”

Anna nodded. *THAT Mickey*. She knew Joan’s last name — she saw her Instagram. How could she not have thought about this?

“What did our favorite future prom queen do to you?” Izzie asked.

“Can we go get my lunch box?” Anna asked, turning to face Joan. She may have been in a vulnerable mood, but there *was* a line.

Joan nodded. She seemed to pick up what Anna was putting down. “I’ll be back to get my stuff,” she said to Izzie.

“It was nice to meet you,” Anna said to her.

“See ya.”

They walked down the hall in silence, but once they were solidly out of the student center and into the light of day, Joan turned to Anna. “So what did she do?” Joan asked. “I won’t tell anyone or do anything if you don’t want me to.”

“It’s really nothing,” Anna said. She wanted to tell her, but she knew she really shouldn’t. Very bad idea.

“I don’t believe you.”

They were walking by the prayer garden, a little grass island in the middle of the teachers’ parking lot with a few benches around the edges. Anna went to sit down on one of them. Joan, following her cue, sat down by her side.

Anna took another deep breath, like she did before she told Joan and Izzie about the cross country girls. She knew she was gonna tell Joan, knew it as soon as she found out that Micky was Joan’s little sister. “You know her boyfriend? Jake?”

Joan nodded.

“Well, he’s in my grade, and we were really good friends freshman year. He’s a runner too, and we had a lot of classes together. Anyway, he kinda liked me — I don’t think it was that serious or anything, but he did like me. He asked me to homecoming this year, actually. Then

your sister...” she trailed off. She didn’t know how to say the next part, and didn’t really want to. Sometimes saying it out loud made it feel like she was willing it into existence.

“What did she do, Anna?”

She breathed in again. “It was kind of insane actually. I’m afraid it’s gonna sound like I’m making it up, but I swear I’m not.”

“I’ll believe you. Just tell me.” Joan glanced down at her watch, though Anna couldn’t see exactly what it read. Anna knew time was dwindling, but she didn’t really care.

“She started spreading this rumor that my family had a massage parlor and I would ‘help with the ending,’ whatever that means. Apparently, it’s a sex thing or something, I don’t know. None of it’s true, and I think everyone knew it, but Jake sort of ghosted me after that. Like even as a friend.”

The first bell rang, signifying they had five minutes to get to class before being counted as late, but neither of them moved. Anna had stopped speaking. She looked over to Joan for a reaction. Sadness, kindness, even anger at Anna for shit-talking her sister. The silence went on for what felt like minutes, but in reality was only a few seconds.

“I’m gonna kill her,” Joan said. She started walking to her car again, suddenly done with the heart-to-heart. Her hands were fisted at her sides, and her head straight forward, refusing to look at Anna’s tears-eyed face. Anna was struggling to keep up behind her, starting to feel her chest heat up.

“No, no, no. Please don’t tell her it could make this so much worse.” This was exactly why she shouldn’t have brought it up.

“She won’t know it came from you. That’s the beauty of a rumor. Anyone could have told

me.” She paused for a moment, doing calculations in her head. “Let’s run so I can get you your box. Where’s your next class?”

They both started jogging, through the sea of kids walking in the opposite direction of them. “300 building.” That was across campus, so Anna knew she probably wouldn’t make it on time. That didn’t concern her though.

“Shit I can get it to you later, it’s my fault for keeping you.”

“It’s fine, it’s Warzecki’s class. He’s not gonna do anything.” Warzecki was the type of guy who was such a mess in his own life and as a teacher that he knew he couldn’t expect perfection out of his students, at least not in how they presented themselves. He was a statistical genius though, and he expected the same academically. Anna was his favorite. But even if she wasn’t, in that moment, it wouldn’t have mattered. Nothing mattered but what she had just told Joan.

Joan unlocked the car mid-sprint. “It’s in the backseat!” she yelled, right as the bell rang. Anna grabbed her box, and was off in a sprint across campus just as quick. She wasn’t going to be thinking much about stats, though.

~

Izzie and Joan had AP US History with Ms. Rainier after lunch, in the second floor of the 600 building, which was right next to the parking lot. When the first bell rang, Izzie grabbed Joan’s backpack along with her own, and headed over. She knew Joan was going to end up late, with her walking out to have some private heart-to-heart with the new kid at the end of lunch. But Izzie was a good friend. Even when Joan had her head in her ass.

Joan walked into class at two minutes past the bell. A dramatic entrance. Her face was bright red. Like she'd been running. Or was horribly embarrassed. One was a lot more likely than the other.

"Look who decided to join us," Ms. Rainier smirked as Joan walked in.

"Sorry. Foot traffic." Joan was a minute or two late to Ms. Rainier's class about 50% of the time, and she always claimed traffic in the halls as her excuse. It only ever seemed to affect her, though. Izzie had no idea how that was always happening, what with Joan looking at her watch like every five seconds.

Still, Joan was a good enough student that it only ever seemed to amuse Ms. Rainier.

"I haven't sent in attendance yet, so take your seat."

Joan walked to her seat next to Izzie, at the front left of the class. They might have seemed like they were back-of-the-class people, but the truth was that they were actually pretty nerdy. Especially when they had an okay teacher like Ms. Rainier, who you could always tell was on the right side of the stuff they covered in class, even when she had to remain apolitical or whatever they told teachers they had to do to hide their own morals.

Ms. Rainier sometimes got pissed at Joan and Izzie for whispering to themselves, but most of the time she ignored it. Whatever they were talking about was usually on topic anyway, and they'd sometimes stay after class to tell her what it was that they were thinking after all the other kids had left.

Izzie had put Joan's backpack in her chair. She raised her eyebrows when Joan looked over, grinning to herself and shaking her head. She wanted Joan to see her irritation as rightfully directed at her, not at the new girl who, as she expected, was unnervingly timid and entirely

ruined Izzie's lunch period. She wanted Joan to know she was a bit annoyed, but not the full extent. Sometimes it's hard to find the right middle ground with that.

"Thanks for grabbing it," Joan whispered.

"Debrief after class."

"Obviously."

Ms. Rainier eyed them gently, in a way that wasn't necessarily a warning, but maybe a pre-warning. She turned back to the class just as quickly. "All right people!" she said with a clap. "Today we're starting our unit on the Gilded Age! You all were supposed to read chapters 19 and 20 in your textbooks for class today, so you should already know what this is, but who here can refresh my memory?"

Joan raised her hand. Always the first to have something to say. Izzie preferred to wait a bit, only chime in when she had something really good, but not Joan. Ms. Rainier nodded to her.

"It was the period during the late nineteenth century where the US economy was growing a lot and because of this, so was European immigration. At the same time though, there were a few people who were getting insanely rich, while everyone else was just getting by, so it really wasn't exactly 'gilded' for most people."

AJ Kelly scoffed from behind them. Normally you can't really hear a person scoff, especially when you can't see them, but AJ wanted them to hear. He was the one rich white baseball player guy smart enough to take APUSH, and he made sure everyone else remembered it. He was an asshole. Izzie could tell that that fact was not lost on Ms. Rainier, but she hid it pretty well for the most part.

"Mr. Kelly? Something wrong?"

“I just didn’t agree with Joan’s description, is all.”

“And what would you change about it?”

Izzie turned back to look at AJ. He was smiling. He had been waiting for Ms. Rainier to ask. Asshole.

“She’s right about the economy and population growing, and even that there was an undeniable increase in individual wealth. But she’s wrong that this was bad for the majority of people. More industry meant more jobs, and better transportation and products that made life easier. It trickled down.”

“So you’re saying that income inequality isn’t inherently bad?” Ms. Rainier asked.

“Yeah. It just looks ugly, but it isn’t bad, necessarily.”

“What about workers rights?” Izzie asked. *This* was a good time to cut in. “What about the tenement conditions of immigrants? What about the sketchy-ass project I live in, versus your mansion in Los Altos Hills?” Izzie did not live in a project, but that was neither here nor there. She was making a point.

There was a thick tension in the classroom at the mention of AJ’s wealth. Ms. Rainier looked like she might snap at Izzie for the comment, then thought better of it. AJ chuckled.

“Look I’m not saying it was perfect, I’m just saying it was better than having nothing, or being a Jew in Russia dealing with pogroms, or being in Ireland and having nothing to eat but rotten potatoes. Sometimes better is good enough.”

He smiled at Izzie. “I’m sure you’d rather be in your apartment here, than in some cartel-state, right?” Classist *and* racist. Awesome.

Izzie looked over to Joan, then up to Ms. Rainier. Both of them looked intentionally distracted, liked they wanted so badly to be busy. To not take it on themselves to stick up for her.

“I’d actually much rather be in Santo Domingo, dickwad.” Ms. Rainier was still obnoxiously quiet.

“Then leave.”

“Alright, alright,” Ms. Rainier finally said. “If we stay on this we’ll be on definitions the whole class, and I really do have more material than that. Now when we look at the Gilded Age, one of the best places to start is the Transcontinental Railroad. Can anyone tell me why?”

At the end of class, Izzie and Joan stayed in their seats until everyone else left, since it was the end of the day and didn’t matter if they stuck around for a while. AJ was first, booking it to practice and away from everyone he so clearly had nothing in common with, followed by a sea of khakis and New Balances and wire-framed glasses and the one girl who wore cat-ears to school every day. Ms. Rainier waved to everyone as they left, and then pulled up a chair by the girls. She shook her head at Izzie, but she was smiling so it was clear she wasn’t actually upset. Her face showed something close to pride, and that was the best thing Izzie could really hope to get from an adult. Even when what she really needed was someone to fully take her side for once.

Izzie couldn’t decide if she was satisfied with Ms. Rainier’s seeming secret approval, or if she was pissed off that it wasn’t open.

“Every class, at least one of you manages to get in a fight,” Ms. Rainier said. “I genuinely don’t know how you do it. It’s almost admirable.”

“Why ‘almost?’” Izzie said. “Any day I set an entitled prick like that straight, is a good day for me.”

Ms. Rainier was trying to stifle her laughter, but to no avail. It was always clear she felt bad about siding with them, but the truth is she didn't do it enough. There were certain things that really were just a choice between bigotry and not bigotry, and Izzie didn't understand this respectable pressure to be impartial. Ms. Rainier was probably the best at fighting it, at least in the faculty. But it still affected her. It was strange to Izzie that Ms. Rainier would subject herself to that place, with its crosses and AJs and Mickeys, when she obviously didn't want any part of that. But some people just seemed to have an easier time towing the company line. Izzie knew that she never could. Even when she became an adult, she knew she would never stay quiet on what she believed in.

The laughter was starting to piss Izzie off. Joan was joining in too, a forced, throaty chuckle. It seemed like Joan didn't even know why she was supposed to be laughing, just that Ms. Rainier was, and anything that Ms. Rainier did, Joan wanted to do, too.

Izzie knew she was being laughed at, her naivety something deserving to be openly mocked and belittled. It was funny to them that she was argumentative enough to kindle someone else's blatant racism. She'd never understand that.

“Okay, so I've got a question,” Joan started, once the laughter died down. “Actually, it's more of a two-part thing. First off, Ms. Rainier — how'd you end up working here? I was just thinking about it, because I feel like you're really ahead of this place, and so I'm not sure I get it. Sorry if that sounds rude.” Joan was as red as when she walked in the door. She seemed pathetic.

Izzie had to try as hard as she possibly could not to make a face. Izzie hated how much Joan idolized the woman. It was weird. And it was starting to feel like it came at Izzie's expense. Like she wasn't standing up for Izzie when she really should.

"It's not rude," she said. She was squinting her eyes toward the popcorn ceiling, like she was looking for the words somewhere in the room to answer what they were all wondering. Probably including her, too. Her left hand was twirling the beads of her necklace — which was chunky and bright, probably something she'd gotten on a trip to some place Izzie had never heard of — and her right hand was holding the back of her chair. God, she probably thought she was so cool. She was probably in her early thirties, Izzie thought, but in that moment she looked so damn old.

"I went to Catholic school my whole life," she said. "All the way through college, Go Hoyas," she chuckled, pointing to the little Georgetown flag on her desk. "But anyway, that meant a few things for me. For one, it made it easier for me to get a job at a Catholic school, which generally has better pay and security than a job at a public school. That's the practical side of it. That, and that I didn't have the money for a PhD."

As far as Izzie was concerned, that had to be the whole story. Teaching was the easiest option, at least for someone with an anthropology degree, of all the useless things you could possibly get a degree in. Izzie was pretty sure it was racist too, although she had no idea why she thought this. Something to do with observing indigenous communities like they were gorillas.

"Then, there's the sentimental side of it. That I feel like I understand how suffocating this type of place can be, and how cynical it can make smart kids like you two, and how maybe I could offer an alternative to that. I don't know how reasonable that is, but it helps me sleep at

night.” She was smiling, like she knew what she was saying was a load of crap. If she really wanted to help the youth or whatever, St. Cecilia’s sure as hell was not the place to do it.

Then again, her class was the only one Izzie sort of enjoyed, the only one where she felt she at least *could* speak. But that was beside the point.

The point was that Izzie was begging for scraps. The point was that being able to fucking *speak* was the best she could hope for in just *one* class. The point was that she was so fucking smart, yet even the nice teachers still laughed at her. The point was that just because her mother believed she needed to repent for her own life, and that love and living and being alone with a child was such a sin, Izzie had to deal with rich sociopathic douchebags like AJ. The point was that every fucking person at this so-called Jesus school ate his douchebag bullshit right up, even though Jesus hated rich sociopathic douchebags like AJ, told them all the time how they’re going to hell. The point was that even the people who could see that someone was a rich sociopathic douchebag were able to just shrug and treat that person like anyone else. And the point was that Izzie couldn’t, and they acted like she was a bitch for it.

“But you said it was a two-part thing, Joan?”

“Oh, yeah.” Joan nodded. She was practically beaming. Apparently, Ms. Rainier’s little speech had won over Joan. She spoke slowly, clearly trying to be careful with her words. “How do you deal with the people here? All the ignorance?”

Ms. Rainier sighed, leaning deeper into her chair. “You know this sounds like the fake teacher answer, but it’s really not as bad as it seems. Most of the people — even the really traditional ones— just wanna be good people, and encourage others to do the same. They just have a different way of showing it.”

Izzie wanted to fight this point. Her stomach strained, *begging* her to argue. But she knew what she said wouldn't mean anything to them. Not to Ms. Rainier, not to Joan. At least not in her current headspace. She stayed silent.

"And the others?" Joan asked.

She laughed a little. "The others I just don't let waste my time." She looked at the clock. 3:15. "As much as I'm loving this chat, don't you girls have mock trial now?"

"Damn, yeah," Izzie said, stuffing her backpack as quickly as possible. Joan waited for her by the door.

"Thanks Ms. Rainier!" Joan yelled, speed-walking down the hall.

"She's so cool," Joan said, once they were out of earshot.

Izzie shrugged. "I still don't know why she's here. She could have done anything, gone anywhere. And she's still just here teaching in this lame-ass town, at this lame-ass school. She's gotta be all talk."

"She just explained it to us. The pay, cost of grad school, being there for kids like us, yaddah yaddah."

"I don't know if I buy it." The two went quiet for a minute, until it came to Izzie. The absolute perfect plan. She grabbed Joan's arm. "I have an idea for how to put it to test."

Joan looked skeptical, maybe even scared. She was always pretty hesitant about Izzie's ideas. Without Izzie pushing her, Joan could sort of be all talk, no action. She felt her angerturning towards Joan, but kept it down.

"What? Compare her salary to the average cost of a PhD program?" It sounded like that was what Joan was hoping for.

Izzie shook her head. “I mean if she’s really here to help us.” They were in the 200 building by now, where mock trial was, so she was almost whispering. “I’ll tell you more later.”

“Izzie, you’re shitting me.”

She grinned. “Nah, gotta run. And I gotta think about the plan, too.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Lord and savior!”

Chapter 5

In mock trial, Joan was an attorney, and Izzie a witness, which meant they were divided into different spaces — sometimes even different rooms. After practice, Izzie had to drive home right away to help her mom cook dinner, and do whatever chores people needed done when they didn’t have a woman come clean their house once a week. So Joan knew she wasn’t going to get to talk to Izzie until really late that night, and if it really was something big, the following morning even, so Izzie could explain it to her in person. Joan hated being in the dark about something, maybe more than anything else in the world. The very thought of that could make her throw up. She was afraid that it might.

Joan’s anxiety about whatever Izzie was planning wasn’t as bad as it usually was, because she knew this was just *mischief* she didn’t know about, not a confrontation or wrongdoing of some sort. This wasn’t some revenge fantasy; Joan was sure of that. But she still felt like shit sitting through mock trial that day, consulting case law related to fourth amendment violations, and even worse when she got back to her car and remembered what she had heard about her little sister that morning. She checked her watch (5:03).

Mickey put up enough of a fit about driving with Joan that most days their dad picked her up after soccer, so luckily she didn't have to deal with her sister just then. She didn't know what she'd have done, what she'd have said. Deep down, she knew she couldn't confront Mickey just yet. She was too angry, she'd expose that she had a connection to the victim of Mickey's bitchiness, and that would just fuck over Anna. Or maybe, on second thought, she'd just write it off as the pointless rage of her riot grrl-wannabe, feminist sister. Coin flip.

But the longer she waited, the more Joan felt like the problem was deeper, like maybe she was part of it. If her own little sister could be a racist little shit, what did that say about their family? What did that say about Joan? And as long as she waited to do anything, wasn't that just a way of approving Mickey's fucked up behavior for longer?

It wasn't like Joan had no idea that Mickey was kind of backwards. One of her favorite insults was to call someone retarded. Joan had heard her say it plenty of times, and she'd tell her to stop it. But never with any more urgency than any other fair-game insult that Mickey would say, like that someone was stupid or weird or needed to get their roots done.

Maybe that was the issue. Maybe it wasn't just that Mickey was awful, that other people were awful, but that Joan couldn't stop them. Maybe, her lack of heroism was the real tragedy. Maybe thinking that was even worse.

Joan was sitting in the parking lot and reflecting on this, when the sound of a tap on her passenger seat window zapped her to attention. It was Allie waving in, her hair still dripping out of her bun and down her shirt from swim practice. Joan rolled down the window.

"You still got a sec to talk?" she asked.

In everything that had happened throughout the day, Joan had totally forgotten she said she'd talk to Allie about Jamie.

“Oh yeah, of course! Get in.” Joan reached over and awkwardly opened the door from the inside.

“Ho Bags?” she asked, once she was in the car.

Joan turned on the engine. “Where else?”

~

When they got to Ho Bags, the girls bolted to the corner table and dropped their bags before anyone else could take it. It was basically empty, aside from an obvious freshman in a school hoodie working on algebra outside, but they worked out of habit. If you went right before or after school, it could get pretty busy in there.

“Hey Mark,” Joan said, at the register. “The usual for me, and...”

“Egg and cheese on an everything bagel,” Allie said.

Mark nodded. “You got it.”

After they got their food and Joan's coffee, they headed back to the corner.

“So...” Joan said. Allie knew Joan was waiting for her to jump in, but she had hoped that Joan would steer the conversation. Something about leading a conversation about her interest in a boy made her feel even worse about the whole thing, like if she didn't start the conversation she could pretend this was entirely for Joan, who she was just humoring.

Allie looked over at Joan like she had forgotten why they'd come to HoBags in the first place. “Yes?”

Joan took a sip of her coffee and made a face. She always complained that the coffee there was burnt, but she always got it anyway. Allie didn't get why, but she didn't ask. "You and Jamie? You wanna elaborate on that?"

Allie exhaled, making her peace with the fact that she was going to have to initiate the conversation with Joan, that there was no way to pretend this was anything but her idea. She finished chewing the bite already in her mouth, a finger up to indicate her intended pause.

Allie had been thinking about what she'd tell Joan during the entirety of swim practice. Every lap was another thing she wanted to say about Jamie, every flip turn was an image of how wonderful it would be if they actually got together. She really wanted to tell Joan about it, all of it. But she didn't want to seem crazy. At least, no more than she feared she already did.

"Yeah okay, so I've liked him for a while. I think it started in study hall, like freshman year, because we were two of the only freshmen who had it — he needed it cause he's a bit slower with homework and my schedule just got messed up — but the other kids were just kinda, well, mean to me. Like I could tell they were making fun of me the way they'd talk, and like giggle after I said anything. You know what I mean?"

Allie's finger went up again, and she took another bite. She had to pace this out. "And Jamie's kinda cool, and he's cute, and they all knew him from the remedial classes or whatever, so they definitely would've hung out with him. He could be friends with anyone if he wanted to; he's not like me, in that way. But once he realized they were being mean to me, he started asking me to sit at our own table in the library, cause he said it was hard to focus with them, which was probably true anyway. We've studied together before — you know I'm really focused and quiet

when I get going. But anyway, he was so sweet to me. This was before we all became friends too, so he had no reason to, not really.”

Allie knew she was rambling, but she didn’t know how to stop it. Luckily, Joan was not shy about cutting in. “It sounded like things had changed though? Like maybe your feelings have gotten stronger or something?”

Allie nodded. “You wanna know what happened?”

“That’s why I’m here, right?”

She took another bite, not really knowing how to proceed from there. The story was going to get messier, and Allie wasn’t always the best at handling that sort of thing. Joan was already done with her bagel and halfway through her coffee, so she had ample reason to pause and catch up.

“You remember that party at TJ’s last month?”

Joan laughed. “How could I forget it? Black-and-white dress code, *very* strictly ‘invite only,’ except half our year was invited? That the one?”

Allie nodded. She could feel herself blushing. Allie and Jamie were the only ones in their group that made the cut — Allie because of swim team, and Jamie because he actually was cool. Luke, Izzie, and Joan had a sleepover at Joan’s house instead, and “jokingly” bitched about not being cool enough for Allie and Luke the following week.

“Well, I drank way more than I ever had that night. You know me. I’m not the type of person to feel comfortable at that type of thing, and some of the seniors on the team brought some vodka to the pregame — anyway, I was off my ass, and none of my teammates could care less. I don’t know if they thought it was funny, or just didn’t care, but I was a wreck.”

“How didn’t we hear about this?”

“I was humiliated! And it would have been worse — I started taking off my shirt apparently — but Jamie stepped in and totally took care of me. He cleaned the puke out of my hair — gross, I know — and got me water and food and drove me home, and if anyone recorded it or was saying shit he must have threatened them or something because no one’s bothered me about it since then.” She took a breath.

“I mean, that’s great,” Joan started, “but that’s just what he *should* do. Like as a friend. Or, actually, just as a decent human being.”

Allie scrunched up her face. If Joan met Jesus Christ himself she’d just scoff at “a man being praised for the bare minimum.”

“That’s nice and all, but I don’t know how realistic that is. *Girls* —who are literally supposed to be my teammates, my friends — couldn’t be bothered to do half of what he did. I don’t even wanna think about what a worse guy might’ve done.”

Joan raised her eyebrows. “You think you were partying with rapists?”

“I mean, probably. So a guy who isn’t just a wash in that department — well that’s not just a good friend, that’s the *best* friend. Or maybe more.” Allie shrugged.

Joan opened her mouth a bit too long before speaking, like she knew her words were treading a line. Allie could feel that Joan was being delicate with her, like she was something that needed to be handled. She hated that. “I don’t want it to come off like I don’t think you should pursue Jamie. He *is* a great guy. I’m not questioning it.”

“It sort of sounds like you are.” Allie chuckled a bit to lighten the mood, but it felt forced.

“I’m really not. I’m just questioning if not assaulting you *makes* him a great person, and beyond that, if that’s a reason to love someone, is all.”

Allie could feel herself turning red, could feel the anger rising in her stomach. She should have known it would be like this, that Joan was the last person she should talk to about boy problems. She didn’t even *like boys*. Allie should have just talked to Izzie or Luke. Of course, Luke would have just run right to Jamie, but it was better than this.

But she had gone to Joan for a reason. Izzie and Luke were fun, and they’d agree with what you said, but they gave shit advice. Izzie just desperately wanted *something* interesting to happen in their friend group, and Luke’s base of knowledge came from the fucked up world of theater kids, where fucking half the ensemble at the cast party was perfectly normal. According to him.

Joan was inexperienced, but she sort of got people in a way none of the others did. She noticed things, and she was honest about them. That also meant that when Joan gave you a response you didn’t want, you usually had to just accept it.

Joan kept talking. She looked nervous now. “But I mean you said you already liked him anyway, so it’s not like you just started liking him *because* of this. It’s okay if it helps.”

Allie relaxed a bit. She was still here, so she might as well not shut down completely. “So what do you think I should do?”

“He’s coming to your kickback this weekend?”

Allie nodded.

“I guess just wait until then and try to take the chance to talk to him one-on-one, or at least have side convos with just you two. If he’s interested, you should be able to figure that out pretty quick.”

“And then what?”

Joan grinned. “Then whatever happens, happens.”

Maybe she had been overreacting earlier. *Maybe*. Joan could be bitchy, but she was still a good friend. Just protective.

“Also, that reminds me,” Joan said. “Is it cool if I bring someone?”

“Ooh, who? New boo?” Allie scoffed at herself. She could be so damn awkward sometimes, and she had no idea how to stop it. “I hate that I said that. But really, who? And of course you can. As long as it’s not your sister or something.” As soon as she said it, she realized she had no idea if this was an okay thing to say. They always made fun of Mickey, but Allie had no idea where the line was.

Joan smiled a little, her lips still pressed together. “This girl who kinda took care of *me* the other day, weirdly enough.”

“Took care of you? God, at what?”

“Nothing like that. I just had a bad headache, and she gave me some Excederin. But I think you’ll like her.”

Allie took the last bite of her sandwich. It had gone cold, but it was still pretty good. “She in our year?”

Joan shook her head. “The year below, so you probably wouldn’t know her.”

“Name?”

“Anna...” she paused for a moment, her face flushing red. “Well, I actually don’t think I know her last name. But she’s Asian, sort of skinny and short... I’ll point her out to you next time I see her.”

Joan looked at her watch. “It’s 6:24. Don’t you have to get back for dinner?”

“Shit, yeah. Can you drive me back to my car?” Allie was supposed to be home in Emerald Hills by seven o’clock for dinner. It was at least a 30-minute drive. She had been missing them a lot more lately, and she promised her mom she’d make it that night.

Joan nodded, a thin, closed smile on her face that Allie couldn’t quite read. Joan was always a little bit difficult for Allie to read. She had this way of saying a lot of things that seemed like they really meant something, but was maybe only 60% of what she wanted to say. She held things back. Allie wasn’t really one to pry, so she just walked quietly out of the shop and into Joan’s passenger seat.

On the short drive back, they talked logistics for Friday night — who was sleeping over, which of Allie’s older brothers was buying them alcohol (Chris could probably be bribed to use his fake ID for them if they gave him an extra \$10; Nate might do it for free, but if he was in a bad mood, he might lecture them about underage drinking since he was 21, and no longer drinking illegally. They decided to pay up and ask Chris.). Joan dropped Allie off right at the door of her beige Camry and turned to leave the lot before Allie could wave back.

~

Joan didn’t know where she was going yet — she just knew she couldn’t go home. It was 6:31. If she got back there within the next hour, she simply didn’t trust herself not to throw up

again. She didn't usually do it enough for it to be an issue — not really — but two days in a row? Even she knew that was bad.

She could turn right back around and go to HoBags if she wanted to, but that felt sort of lame. Like admitting she had nowhere else to turn to. She knew Mark wouldn't judge her, but the thought of it made her temples sweat a little. She could go into the school library if she wanted to, but that closed in half an hour, and the thought of seeing more people from class didn't feel right either. She needed to be herself, truly herself in the real world, and she knew that achieving that was damn near impossible next to kids from her religion class.

But then, she remembered that she had left her tennis shoes and a pair of shorts from the last time she went on a run in the back of her car, so she decided to switch into them and head over to Rancho for a hike. Normally she'd be worried about bumping into the cross-country team, barely breaking sweats as they ran six-minute miles on eight-mile loops, but it was much later than they ever went out. And as she had recently learned from Anna, it was off-season anyway. And she knew that exercise would do her some real good.

She pulled her car over as she was passing the baseball fields, and climbed into the backseat. She wasn't too worried about anyone seeing her change this late in the day, and even if they did, who cared? She had no strong feelings about her body, and she found it hard to believe that anyone else did.

Something people didn't normally realize about Joan was that she really liked being outside. It was one of those things that wasn't particularly obvious, or maybe even believable, based off the way she carried herself, or maybe more accurately, people who carried themselves the way she did. Girls with lots of opinions and a soft spot for emotionally-charged music

couldn't possibly want to go camping, right? Or maybe it was that she never got organized sports, or maybe it was simply that her skin never tanned. Or maybe people didn't actually think this about her, and she just acted like they did.

But either way, she had always liked the outdoors. Some of her best memories of being a kid were when her family went on camping trips in Tahoe or Big Sur, swimming in the freezing lake or tiny waterfalls, that were absolutely gorgeous if you knew where to find them. Her dad knew all the best places for nature in California, places where you were always the only ones there, and you couldn't believe you didn't have to pay to get in. Mickey and Joan got along a lot better then, before either of them was old enough to really know what they didn't like about the other. Other than when one of them bossed the other around.

By the time Joan got to middle school, Mickey started playing on a pretty intense club team for soccer, so most weekends were spent at her games, when their parents stopped working for five minutes. A lot of the time, when Joan's parents didn't make her come to the games, she walked up the path behind their property, and just sort of roam the hiking trails for a few hours. She didn't know how far out they stretched — didn't even know their names — but at that age it felt like there was no end, that all of California was covered by the tiny dirt paths reaching out from their house.

Joan was not religious. Her family was Catholic, in a very technical, cultural sense, but faith had never struck Joan as something that she should have. Even after eleven years of Catholic school, God was just something to be studied, something impersonal. But alone on a trail, Joan came as close as she could to understanding what drew people to religion. Not in the euphoric way Pentecostals shout, but in the way the stations of the cross tell Catholics exactly

what to do, pray, and reflect upon. She found clarity in nature, an ease and an obviousness that allowed her to exist in peace with her mind and body.

Once she started driving, the impulse to stay within walking distance of her house got a lot weaker, and she got a lot busier. She had less time to just roam around, and when she had that time, she didn't want to use it that way. But being out there still appealed to her, particularly on days like this one, when she needed to clear her head from the suffocating weight of people who actually knew her.

Rancho was almost always packed, but it was starting to get too late for most people to head for a hike, especially in January. The parking lot was close to empty, just as she had hoped. She decided to do the Hammond-Snyder loop. It was a hilly path, but only about 2 miles total, and so she'd be able to finish it before the sun set. She was used to a bit of darkness on the trail anyway; much of the hiking trails around Rancho were almost entirely covered in eucalyptus trees, which made it pretty hard to see beyond the shade, no matter the time of day.

She grabbed her keys, phone, and earbuds, and headed out for the trailhead. She put on one of her softer playlists — “Gentle Smiles” — something with a lot of Jack Johnson, Lumineers, and a few Florence + the Machine ballads. Joan always valued having the perfect music mix for whatever she was feeling in the moment. It had to match. And that didn't only mean the lyrics had to match her feelings; that would be too simple. It wasn't enough to play a sad song when she was sad. She needed music that made her dig into *what* she was feeling and that left space for thought. So she would have much rather listened to music that made her think the best of people, à la “Banana Pancakes,” when she felt she couldn't trust anyone at all.

She just didn't know how Mickey and her could grow up in the exact same circumstances and turn into such wildly different people. Not only that — how they could come out with such different *morals*. It was one thing to prefer soccer over school; it was another to be a fucking racist. Or to use racism to put another girl down.

Joan wondered what her parents would say if they knew what Mickey had done. Her immediate assumption was that they'd be mortified, and while she still genuinely believed this was true, she wasn't sure if their reaction would be much more than the one they'd have if she broke curfew or snuck a few beers. They'd say some shit about raising her better than this, but Joan wasn't sure that they ever actually went out of their way to make sure they were raising her to be a good person at all.

And then there was what Izzie had said. Surely it couldn't be anything too bad, her plan, but Joan couldn't handle adding another thing to worry about to her life. Ms. Rainier was one of the few teachers at their school who actually seemed to have the Joan's and Izzie's backs, and she really didn't want to put a strain on that.

This is where her head was as she walked up that trail. She wasn't watching the ground or the winding terrain before her; she wasn't listening for animal sounds to her sides (though with her music playing, it would have been pretty hard to do that even if she wanted to). So maybe it shouldn't have come as too much of a surprise that in her disassociation she managed to make her way around the entire loop and back to her car without breaking out of her thoughts even once, or realizing that the sky had gone entirely black before she reached her car.

Joan pulled out of the Rancho lot at 7:46. She spent the whole drive back dreading having to talk to Mickey. She had no idea how she was going to contain her rage. Luckily, they were

never very pleasant with each other to begin with. Maybe her anger could look like its usual resentment for as long as it needed to.

She pulled into the driveway at 8:24. She held her breath as she walked in the front door, listening for the clatter of forks and knives from her family eating, or the laugh track of Mickey watching tv in the living room. To her relief, the house was silent, meaning Mickey was probably locked in her room, and her parents were probably working. She hadn't seen them in at least thirty-six hours, but that was okay. Better than okay, even.

She knew she should go confront Mickey. If she had any spine at all, she'd be at her door as soon as she got home, banging and yelling and demanding that her sister open up. Asking her who the fuck she thought she was, throwing her phone out the window then running to her car to run it over. She'd call her a racist, call her scum of the earth. Because that's what she was.

But maybe, Joan was scum of the earth, too. Because she didn't yell at Mickey, didn't even acknowledge that she was home. She just walked as softly as she could to the kitchen. There was a note on the counter that a plate was waiting for her in the fridge. She heated up the chicken and rice, and stood staring at the giant photo of an elephant foot on the back wall of the dining room as she waited. When the microwave went off, she quickly went to the basement before anyone could possibly come out to see her, pulling her sleeves over her hands to avoid burning herself on the plate.

She still hadn't done nearly enough to prep for trial. She had planned to the night before, but she couldn't concentrate. She pulled out her notes on the case law. Her argument was that inclusion of the defendant's notably violent Twitter presence was a violation of the first amendment, and couldn't be included in the their murder trial. Joan didn't really agree with her

position, which made it far harder to argue for. Still, she had always been more sympathetic to defense than prosecution. The fear of sending an innocent person to jail — even in a fake trial — had always struck her as so much worse than letting a guilty one go free. So she knew she had to work harder. She had to give this fake defendant a fair shot. And give herself a fair shot to come back from Tuesday's embarrassment. To be worth something.

She was pretty deep into her work when she was startled out of her trance by the vibration of her phone in her pocket. It was an Instagram DM from an @ARamos. She pulled up the profile. It was Anna. She didn't check her Instagram much, so she hadn't even noticed that Anna had requested to follow her. She accepted, followed back, and opened the DM.

Anna: Hi, r u busy?

She was, but now that she was out of her math flow, the last thing she wanted was to go back into it.

Joan: Not really, what's up?

Anna: I just feel kinda weird ab what I told u

Joan: Ab Mickey?

Anna: Ya I mean she's your sister, I don't wanna make it weird for u

Joan: Honestly I'm glad you told me, I'd rather know who she is as a person ya know

Anna: Good pls don't tell her...If she knows I'm talking about it she's gonna make it worse

Joan felt her stomach heating up. She didn't love how suspicious Anna seemed to be, but she understood it. She tried not to read into it. It wasn't like Joan was some childhood friend of hers; they had literally only met two days before. Anna really had no reason to trust her with something like that. And besides, Anna didn't seem like the type of person who was exactly

going around telling everyone her secrets. Which when Joan began to think about it, made their sudden closeness they were sharing all the more puzzling.

Joan: ofc not

Are you doing anything tomorrow night

Anna: lol no

Joan: My friend is having a few ppl over, you should come! You can def sleepover too

Anna: I'll have to ask my parents...sounds awesome!

At that, Joan put her phone away, assuming Anna would text her with a confirmation after she had talked to her parents.

She had only been working on mock trial for an hour or so, but she just couldn't do any more. She hated herself for it, but she just could never seem to get herself to work on one thing for an extended period of time.

She had to get the *Paradise Lost* essay done anyway, so she decided to switch to Milton. It was hardly more interesting that *Packington v. North Carolina*, but at least it was a change.

She woke up at 4AM with her head in the book, her laptop with 863 new words she didn't remember writing, and her phone on 4% with a confirmation from Anna sent at 11:32 pm.

Joan tried to keep her peace with Mickey in the car, mostly by being exhausted and not talking to her like she usually did. She tried to keep her eyes on the road, on the rising sun over the highway, anywhere, but on her sister. Mickey was the only thing on her mind, though.

"Somehow you're even more frigid than usual," Mickey said after twenty minutes or so of driving. Joan had thought that she was acting normal, but apparently not. "Your girlfriend break up with you or something?"

“Sure, Mickey.” Mickey could never seem to fathom that Joan could be attracted to girls and still have a close platonic friendship with Izzie, but she couldn’t risk addressing this now and getting pissed.

Mickey shrugged, and went back to her phone.

When she pulled up to the school, she dropped Mickey off at the front, without a word, and circled the car around to the junior lot, where Izzie was sitting on her car, smirking at her as she drove in.

As soon as she parked her car (7:31), she started to lay into Izzie. “What the hell are you planning?” she asked, half-laughing, half-yelling. She didn’t know which half-expressed what she was actually feeling.

“Ah, so my play at mystery worked I see,” Izzie said. “Noted.”

“No, but seriously?”

Izzie was grinning, still sitting on her hood, while Joan waited. “A feminism club,” she said. She said it plainly, simply, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “It would be intersectional, of course.”

Joan was so taken aback by her suggestion, that she didn’t even have an immediate emotional reaction to it. She was almost numb, or maybe just dumbfounded. She was so prepared for robbery, for naked performance art, for a storming of the Bastille. She couldn’t decide if this was better or, as ridiculous as it seemed, much, much worse.

Perhaps it seems strange to have any sort of reaction other than relief, enthusiasm, or indifference to such a seemingly unimposing idea. Shock is almost overly dramatic. Obviously, a little school club was a lot more benign than something illegal, but in a lot of ways, it was more

mysterious. Potentially bigger. Especially if they wanted some form of legitimacy, and especially if they wanted to do it at St. Cecilia's, of all places.

And it was overtly political, which Joan never really expected from Izzie. Sure, they had the same politics, and Izzie talked a big game, but her ideas were always more mischievous than revolutionary. She might steal a bra, but Joan had never known her to burn one.

The politics of this, Joan realized, would be seen as more harmful than their occasional petty crime. By who, she wasn't yet entirely sure. The school, definitely, but probably other people, too.

“So you want Ms. Rainier to help with this somehow? Like let us use her room in secret?”

Izzie laughed. “I want her to moderate it. We need a moderator to get approved as a club, and she could even help us advocate to the administration for stuff. Like free tampons in the bathrooms or a fairer dress code.”

Now it was Joan's turn to laugh. “You know they'll never approve that, right? They wouldn't even let Molly Anderson bring a girl from another school as her prom date, and that wasn't even ‘political.’”

“I think you're underestimating the power of public opinion.”

“Which at a Catholic high school won't be favorable!” Joan was trying to soften her voice, to remain calm, but even she could hear the desperate catch at the end of her words. “And you don't even like Ms. Rainier, anyway. Don't make that face; it's obvious. You really wanna spend all that time talking equality with her when you clearly hate the woman?”

“I don’t *hate* her. I just don’t think she’s as progressive as she says she is. And besides, she’s definitely more so than anyone else here.”

“Which is exactly why this will never get approved!”

Allie walked from her car across the cement-and-dirt divider, her eyes wide like she was debating whether or not she wanted to be where her feet were taking her. Realizing how she must sound, Joan thought this was understandable. She was obviously heated.

“Whatcha guys talking about?” Allie asked, her voice upbeat, but a little shaky.

“Izzie wants us to start a feminism club. Here.”

“You’d join, right Allie?” Izzie asked.

Allie looked up to the sky, like she was pondering the question for a moment, and asking God what he thought. “Only if I can be on the board,” she said.

“Deal.” Izzie beamed.

“I’m sorry, did I miss the announcement where this school decided that they suddenly don’t hate women and minority groups?” Joan asked.

“Oh yeah, you were out sick that day,” Allie giggled.

Izzie grabbed Joan’s shoulders. “Look. I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but I really think there’s a way to do this. Get a petition going to allow it on campus, ask Ms. Rainer to confirm she’s willing to do it, get a solid board, make a PowerPoint to show the activities people what we want to do, and advertise the shit out of it. It’s controversial enough that people are actually gonna care about this, so they’re gonna come. Even guys are gonna do it so girls think they care about women. We can totally use that.

“We’ve all dealt with a ton of crap. People say racist shit to me all the time; even our fucking curriculum does. You know I’m right — the way they teach civil rights here is criminal. We’ve got no sex ed, except for literal religion class. It’s a disaster.

“I just genuinely think this is one of the only ways to actually make a difference around here. Tell me I’m wrong.”

Joan knew that Izzie was completely right. The school had a ton of issues; they all talked about it constantly. And with what Allie had told her about the party, and what Anna had told her about Mickey, she thought the school might need them more than ever.

And if she was being honest with herself, the idea of having some sort of social justice penance for avoiding her sister’s bigotry was appealing.

Joan sighed. “I guess this will look good on college apps.”

Izzie grinned. “That’s a fucked way to think about it, but I’m glad you’re in!”

“We can get Jamie and Luke to be on the board too, and the hopefully boys will join,” Allie said. “We’d need like one or two other people too though, so it’s not just entirely our friend group.”

“Get your sister to join,” Izzie laughed. “I’m sure we’d be the most popular club in the school then.”

“The football team can have pad drives,” Allie said.

“Field hockey will have off on bisexuality awareness week.”

“Campus ministry could volunteer at Planned Parenthood.”

“Get her boyfriend to give a talk on healthy masculinity!”

“Have her host a party that’s really just The Vagina Monologues!”

“What even is The Vagina Monologues? I’ve heard of that but no one’s ever explained it.”

“No idea!”

Izzie and Allie were bent over with hands on the ribs to dull the pain, tears in their eyes and crossed legs to keep from pissing their pants type of laughing. They were laughing so hard they didn’t notice that Joan was dead silent the whole time.

When they finally calmed themselves enough to open their eyes, Joan forced a smile.

“I don’t think Mickey should be allowed to pretend she cares about anything like that. Not that she would want to, anyway.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m kidding,” Izzie said. “No way in hell am I voluntarily gonna hang out with her.”

“I could maybe ask some of the girls on the swim team?”

Joan and Izzie raised their eyebrows. “You sure about that?” Izzie asked. “From what you’ve said they’re not exactly beacons of hope for women’s empowerment.”

“They’re not all that bad. And women’s sports is kinda a safe entry into feminism. Like they were lecturing us a ton last year about how the parents were finding it distracting at meets that our swimsuits are too tight up our asses. Literally making us feel bad for the suits *they* bought.”

“Allie’s got a point. I’ve heard a similar thing about the volleyball shorts, and the cross country girls all got detention for running in sports bras when it was 102 out.”

Izzie shrugged. “All right, ask away, I guess.”

Joan was starting to get swept up in the excitement of creating something, of doing something with significance. She always felt she was the type of person to take a stand. Principled. But it was all so vague at this point. She needed clarity before she threw her weight behind anything. Or really, before she got her hopes up.

“Say we get enough people to start this thing,” Joan said. “Fuck, even say we get Rainier to agree to moderate it. What then?”

“I thought we came to an agreement on this. If we get enough people to support it, the admin is gonna have to bend.”

“*We’re* gonna have to bend a hell of a lot just to get them to listen to us.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Allie said. Izzie and Joan were both on the verge of yelling, but Allie was still smiling somehow. “We can talk about it tonight! The guys might have ideas, too. And your friend, Joan — Anna, was it? Do you think she’d be into this?”

“Actually, yeah. I think she’d love it.” Joan looked to see how Izzie would respond to the mention of bringing in Anna, but her face was unchanging, unresponsive.

“Great. So we’ll talk it out with everyone tonight, and hopefully have a game-plan for Monday. Then we can go to Rainier?”

“Actually, I was hoping to do that today.”

“You can’t be serious,” Joan said.

“Why? You want time to talk me out of it?”

“I just feel like, at the very least, going to her without clear plans for the club is stupid. Like what do you even wanna do? And again, how the hell are we gonna get this approved?”

Izzie shook her head. “The bell’s about to ring, and I gotta cross campus.” She paused for a long time. “All right, we’ll brainstorm tonight. Just because I think we should have some action points. But first thing Monday I’m going to her, either with you guys or without.”

“Deal.”

“Deal.”

“See you guys at lunch? Or tonight?” Allie asked.

“Probably tonight, but I’ll text you?” Joan said. Izzie nodded in agreement.

Allie waved, and walked off to the English building.

Chapter 6

When Allie got out of practice that afternoon at 4:30, she did not go straight home like her parents expected her to. It wasn’t a rule for her to come home right away, not exactly, but more of a norm. An assumption. Unless she had somewhere else concrete to be, in which case, she was to text them.

But Allie didn’t have somewhere concrete to be. Her friends were all meeting at her place later. She didn’t want to spend money, and she didn’t want to do work, but she wanted to kill time.

The week before, on one of the two days Allie actually made it to their nightly-in-theory family dinner, Allie had told her parents that a few of her friends were coming over to watch movies and play Catan that Friday, and could they please stay upstairs as much as possible? They didn’t give her their usual lecture about how *telling* her parents what she was doing as opposed to *asking* if she could was inappropriate. Instead, they smiled at each other, and then at her, and her

mom said ‘Sure, honey’ like she was a little girl. Which upset Allie for a reason she couldn’t nail down.

Allie knew her parents were worried about her. She wasn’t exactly milking it, but when she told them about that Friday, she knew it wasn’t going to be a problem. She wasn’t stressed about having Chris buy them beers like she’d normally be. She wasn’t worried they’d get upset when they saw that *two* of the friends she was having over were boys, and one of them was pretty clearly straight. She’d had Luke over before, but this was the first time that Jamie would be there. Allie’s parents were usually the type to be kinda weird about that sort of thing, especially her mom. But they were treading lightly with her.

They didn’t know what happened. Of this she was pretty sure. There was no way they could have known that the team went to a party, instead of just staying at Ellie Lambert’s house like they were supposed to. Unless one of the other girls’ parents had said something, but then again, Allie’s parents weren’t really *friends* with the other parents on the team. Not that they were weird or standoffish — they weren’t like their daughter — they just preferred to find their friends other ways. Which frankly, was pretty good for Allie.

So, they couldn’t have known. But when Allie slinked herself out of her room the Sunday afternoon after the black-and-white party, she knew they saw that something was wrong. She wondered how much they knew. If they had heard her, the entire night and morning, alternating between brief stints of sleep and drunkenly puking into the trash bag Jamie had left next to her. If they had heard him sneaking out the back door, saw him walk around the hot tub and over the fence. If they watched the security camera footage that morning, and considered whether it was break-in, or a just boy who knew their daughter.

When they saw her from the kitchen table, looking up at her uncharacteristically pale face, focusing hard on walking gracefully down the spiral stair case, they fell totally silent. They didn't ask where her car was, or how and when she'd gotten home. Her mother looked at her with such sadness in her eyes she could suddenly see herself as her mom saw her, a picture of mistakes, or maybe something broken.

She didn't know how they could tell it was anything more than stupid teenage drunkenness. That would make them angry, she was sure, not concerned. Not gentle. Maybe it was because they underestimated her. Or maybe, they estimated her just right. Knew she was the butt of jokes, the worst victim of hazing, the strange one. Maybe they thought that this behavior couldn't possibly be voluntary. Which would make them half-right. Allie hated that.

It really hadn't been that bad. It had almost been very bad — transfer schools bad, twice-a-week-therapy bad — but it wasn't. Jamie had ensured that. But maybe there was something about that close call that made her carry her shame as if the worst had happened. She felt silly for this. Soft.

She knew they were, if anything, being kinder to her than usual. She had never had a bad relationship with them. Probably about average. She loved her dad unconditionally, her mother with a few conditions. They bickered. Often. Complained of the other's tone. Constantly. Allie accused her mother of preferring her sons, while she accused Allie of preferring her father. This came up infrequently, because both of them knew that they were both right. This was a difficult thing to talk about openly while living peacefully in the same home.

But even the tension with her mother had mellowed. She started using the same voice she used to speak to Allie's brothers to speak to Allie. Allie's dad made a point of taking her out to

breakfast at the Palo Alto Creamery on Sunday mornings, when Catholic school rules meant she never had practice or a meet. They suggested board games and movies and family outings to do on the weekends. Things should have been better than they'd ever been before.

And yet, Allie felt herself growing frustrated with them. Or maybe, she decided, just more aware. Aware of the manipulative ways her mom had spoken to her, just a month before. Aware of how her parents constantly complained about people getting handouts, but let their adult son live at home, free of charge. Aware of how they claimed to be Christians, but scoffed at the homeless, and used charity only as a way to avoid taxes. Aware of how her mother was expected to take care of home and children, even though both her parents worked. And the more aware Allie became, the less time she wanted to spend with them.

So before she went home on Friday, she went to BlueBar. A Palo Alto classic, right in between school in Mountain View and her place in Emerald Hills. Going to BlueBar, as a concept, made Allie feel free. Like a real adult. She was going far away from the teenage angst and crappy coffee of HoBags, into the shadow of Stanford and overpriced coffee and people who were exactly where they wanted to be.

BlueBar was kind of the It coffee shop in the Valley, and every Friday at five they had an open mic night that brought just about every amateur musician from San Carlos to Santa Clara. If she could find a place to sit, it was a good spot to spend a few hours fading into a crowd.

If she was being honest with herself, though, the last thing Allie wanted to do was fade into this particular crowd. She felt like a fake. Allie was not the artsy type. Never would have found a place like the open mic on her own. No, she was only there because she heard Jamie

mention it to Luke. Not even as somewhere he regularly went, but as somewhere he would like to go. That possibility, shameful as it was, was all the motivation Allie needed.

Maybe this would be the Friday that he finally got around to it. She would see him first but pretend she didn't, so then he would come up to ask if he could sit at her table, and she'd look surprised but say, "Of course!" And then, maybe, he could come over to her house before everyone else got there. And maybe she could introduce him to her parents formally, and when she excused herself to go to the bathroom, her dad would ask him what his intentions were. And he'd have to ask himself that question. And so after he'd had a few drinks in him, he'd get up the courage to tell her that he liked her. And they'd kiss and go on dates and lose their virginities to each other and go to colleges in the same city and move in together and get a dog and get married and buy a house and have babies and die holding each other in their sleep on the very same night and people would write feel-good articles about them and suburban moms would share the articles in their Facebook groups.

She got to downtown Palo Alto around 5 (traffic lighter than she'd ever seen it on a Friday somehow, even with staying on El Camino Real), and it took her a good 20 minutes to find parking, and she ended up having to pay and still walk five blocks. So when she finally walked into the subway-tiled cement-floored industrial-steel-applianced room that was BlueBar, the only thing left was standing room. Which foiled her entire plan.

But she was already there, so she decided to get a stale \$8 apple fritter from the front counter (she hadn't wanted to spend money, but anything under \$10 doesn't really count, right? And she'd heard that you're supposed to eat a lot before you drink anyway). She forgot to ask for it heated up, and when the handle-bar-mustached barista handed it to her, she couldn't bring

herself to ask him to take it back and toast it. So she took her cold apple fritter to the back wall, put her too-heavy backpack at her feet, and listened to the end of a dreadlocked white woman's acoustic version of Lauryn Hill's "Nothing Even Matters."

A middle-aged guy in a hoodie came on and told jokes about his Indian coworker at Google. He didn't fake an accent, which was a plus, but it was riding the line of racist. Allie watched everyone at the tables look down to avoid making eye-contact with anyone. Still no sign of Jamie. Then two guys who seemed a few years older than Allie covered a Beatles song, one on bass, the other on guitar and vocals. She thought this was pretty good. By the end of the song, she had finished her fritter.

She looked at her phone: a *Traffic?* text from her mom. About twenty texts in the group chat with her friends too, but she couldn't be bothered with that then. They had her address and knew when they were supposed to come.

Her parents had calmed down lately, this was true, but it probably also wasn't the best day to try her luck any more than she already had. The next act was another hoodied comedy act (why do tech guys always think they're funny?), with still no Jamie in sight. She knew it was crazy, but she felt a little hurt, as if she'd been stood up.

She didn't text her mom back, because if she actually had been driving, she wasn't supposed to be on her phone. She'd just mention it when she got home.

Once she got to her car, she did, however, text Chris *you got stuff?* To which he very quickly sent back a thumbs up and directions on where to find the alcohol (wrapped in a blanket inside an IKEA bag in her closet) since he would be at his girlfriend's that night. Great. So everything was in place. Not exactly what she wanted, but how she needed things to be.

~

Anna was fucking stressed. More stressed than she'd ever been in her life. Probably not entirely true, but she couldn't remember anything worse.

She had told her parents that she was sleeping over at Riya's house. *Remember? Riya from cross-country?* They vaguely remembered Riya from cross-country, but still wanted to call Riya's mom. By some miracle, Anna managed to thwart this.

"Please don't. We're just starting to get closer, and I really don't want to be embarrassed."

"Your mother caring isn't embarrassing. If her family is any good, she probably has to do the same thing."

"Trust me, no one else's mom is calling before they go to a sleepover in high school."

"I'm sure that's not true."

"Please. I'll call when I get there and after dinner. I swear."

Anna had never, to her mom's knowledge, lied before. So when she very occasionally begged for something like this, Mrs. Ramos folded more quickly than you might expect. She settled for a call when she arrived at Riya's house, a call after dinner, and a call in the morning before she left (allegedly, to be dropped off by Riya's mother for a morning cross country off-season training session at school). If all went according to plan, it wouldn't matter that Riya's house was in fact a city away in San Carlos. To her mother's untrained Mountain View eye, it was all the same on Find my Friends.

Anna had picked Riya as the fake friend in part because of the location of her home, but also because of her race. Riya was Indian, which was good, because she knew her mother would

trust another Asian girl to come from a good, principled home, certainly more than a white girl like Allie. But at the same time, Riya was not Filipina, and thus did not come with the ever-present risk of having a parent who was somehow vaguely connected to her own. It was an incredibly deliberate choice, so much so that Anna was somewhat taken aback by her own behavior. Scheming, it seemed, came easy to her.

Anna knew that, logically, there was really no reason for any of this to be an issue. But as she sat in Joan's car parked outside Allie's house, in an uphill parallel-parking spot that she was pretty sure defied the laws of gravity and car mechanics, she felt her stomach roll up her torso the same way she knew the car wanted to.

"You okay? You're breathing kinda funny."

"Me?"

Joan laughed. "Who else?"

"I gotta call my mom really quick before we go in," she said. "Actually, if you don't mind leaving me to lock the car you can go in first."

"Sure, if you'd prefer that."

"Thanks."

Joan reached behind her through the empty space between them and struggled to pull out a jam-packed purple duffle bag. She turned off the car, and handed Anna the key.

"See you in there."

Anna was pretty sure Joan's smile meant she knew what was up, at least in some capacity, but wasn't going to say anything. Anna appreciated that.

She pressed the “call” button on her phone. In the single ring before her mom picked up, Anna looked out her passenger window, which was facing out towards the Bay. From up in Emerald Hills, you could see just about everything. The lights over in Oakland, or maybe that was Alameda? The water looking like a giant pit ready to swallow everything surrounding it. It was around 7:30, which in January meant it was already night, which also meant it was beautiful.

“Hello? Anna, hello?”

“Hey, Mom! I’m here.”

“That’s pretty late to just be getting there. What took you so long?”

Anna thought fast. The closer to the truth it was, the better the lie. She and Joan had just been hanging out at Salt and Straw for a few hours, so that’s where she and Riya went.

“Well, we stayed at school to study for a few hours, then Riya’s mom took us to Salt and Straw for ice cream.”

“In Palo Alto?”

“Yes, it’s on the way.”

A pause on the line. Anna held her breath.

“Well, it sounds like you’re having fun. Remember to call me once you eat. If you even eat anything after ice cream.” She laughed at her own half-joke.

“Will do. Love you, mom.”

“Love you, honey.”

Anna finally let out the stale air in her chest. She pulled out her backpack, bulging with her school supplies and her pajamas and clothes for the following day. She very deliberately left

her lunchbox in the backseat. Satisfied, she clicked Joan's key twice, glued a friendly smile to her face, and headed inside.

~

Izzie didn't usually like showing up to things alone. No one does really, she was pretty sure, but she was also pretty sure it was especially bad for her. For people like Joan, who were always anxious, it was just more of the same. Another uncomfortable situation in a lifetime of uncomfortable situations. But for Izzie, confident, spunky Izzie, it felt like an obvious moment of weakness.

She showed up at 8, not wanting to be the first person there. Sitting and making small talk in Allie's living room with her perfect parents, or her deadbeat older brothers, seemed worse than going to church. There were no parking spots near Allie's house when she got there — at least none that Izzie felt confident parking that old Camaro in, tight as they were and on a steep-ass hill, no less — so she kept driving past the house and finally got an easy spot two blocks up. She knew walking back in the morning was going to be a bitch, but that was tomorrow's problem. She locked her school stuff into the trunk, and pulled out her old camo backpack from middle school, the one reserved for maybe seeing her dad again if he ever wanted her to, and sleepovers. There were a couple of brownies in the front pocket, but she wasn't sure if she'd take some tonight. She only would if Luke had brought his stash, and other people were taking stuff. Or if Joan was annoying her too much. Or Joan's new friend. She did, however, intend to consume a shit-ton of whatever bullshit liquor was provided for her. That was nonnegotiable.

Truth was, Izzie was fucking scared. She really wanted the club to happen. The idea had started because Ms. Rainier was pissing her off — that was true — but the more she thought

about it, the more convinced she became that this was maybe the most important thing she'd ever do. Hopefully not, but you never know.

Izzie hated the way the world saw her at St. Cecilia's. First, she was Brown. Not even *that* Brown — everyone just knew she was Latina, and even if it was only half of her, and even if her mother was pretty light for a Dominican, they seemed to see her skin as several shades darker than it was in reality. It wasn't that she *minded* being seen as her race; she just didn't really feel like people got it right when they perceived her.

Then, there was gender. The school was co-ed, sure, but it fucking sucked to be a girl there. Really, really sucked. The dress code was sexist, alright, but more than anything it was the double-standards. The girls who got in just as much trouble for having their nudes leaked as the boys who leaked them. The way that Izzie was seen as a slut because she told some dirty jokes, but Rick Wilcox could fuck the whole volleyball team and he was just charming. Izzie knew she had maybe wanted people to think that once, but she hated how they had run with it.

And then, by Izzie's evaluation, the worst one. She was poor. At least by Mountain View standards. She knew she wasn't *really* poor. Her mom was a PA, for God's sake. But when an institution gives you money to attend — especially one like St. Cecilia's — you *feel* poor. Because they want you to — they want to remind you how spoiled and ungrateful you are for their generosity every fucking day.

And if Izzie really thought about it, she knew all of these things conglomerated to be used against her. People were more likely to see her as poor or slutty because she was brown. This was harder to articulate — especially because it seemed so nebulous — but she knew it was true.

And so, the club mattered. She just had no idea *how* it was going to matter, much less what it was going to do. It was a little embarrassing, to be so earnest and so clueless. She didn't know how to hide it.

She practiced strutting as she walked. Head held high, shoulders back. This was how Izzie liked to enter any space, and how she wanted people to see her, if they happened to pass her alone, late at night, in a place she didn't live. There was no reason to be afraid of Emerald Hills; it was the bougie part of an already bougie town. But scary things can happen anywhere. Best to look tough either way.

When she got to Allie's, she paused a moment outside before ringing the doorbell. Izzie was always blown away by Allie's house, no matter how many times she went. It wasn't the biggest house on the block. It wasn't even the style Izzie would want, if she ever got to choose from all the fancy houses you could buy. Izzie liked the classics — Victorians in San Francisco, old brickhouses and colonials she saw in DC on her school trip in 8th grade. Allie's house was modern. Glass walls, sharp lines, a dark wood office space that jutted out over the driveway. It was almost ugly. But to Izzie, it just looked like a giant sign that said WE HAVE MONEY. She wanted it.

She rang the doorbell and looked up into the security camera in the corner of the doorframe as she waited. She wondered if anyone ever checked that footage.

Allie opened the door, a hostess's grin plastered on her face. She went in for a side-hug, even though they had seen each other at school that morning. How strange relationships become outside their normal context.

“Hey! Throw your stuff wherever, we’ve just been playing Cards Against Humanity in the living room for a bit. Also, my mom got snacks! They’re all in the kitchen, sodas are in the fridge, take whatever.”

“Thanks.” Izzie took her Docs off, and left them in the giant heap of shoes at the door.

“Your parents here? Or your brothers?”

“Mt parents are, but they’re staying upstairs. They might come down once or twice in the next hour or two, but they’re usually out by 10 anyway. Chris is gone tonight, Nate’s here I think, but he never really leaves his room. The smell is literally toxic.”

“Gross! But sweet about your parents.”

“Let me know if you need anything.” Allie turned as if she was leaving Izzie, but the two girls continued down the one long hallway through the center of the house into the living room. They walked in a silence that for a reason Izzie couldn’t quite pin down, felt awkward.

Allie’s living room was big. Like the exterior of the house, it was modern in a way that would have been cutting edge a few years earlier. Giant windows looking out over the yard and hot tub on one side, a flat screen T.V. stupidly placed parallel to it on the opposite side, so if you watched it in the middle of the day the reflection of the glass would reflect onto the screen. The whole space was open concept, wrapping around a giant kitchen.

Luke and Joan were sprawled out on the sectional. Anna was sitting in a giant black leather armchair next to it, her tiny, perfectly postured body looking like it was about to be swallowed by the thing.

“Izzie!” Luke yelled.

“Hey, bitch,” Joan said.

Anna waved silently.

“Hey, guys,” Izzie said. “What happened to Jamie?”

“Late, as always. But I shouldn’t be complaining about that to you right now,” Luke said.

Izzie threw up her hands. “Traffic. Sue me.”

Joan pushed herself up and into the right corner of the sectional. “Come, sit.”

Izzie threw down her bag and plopped down next to her. Izzie couldn’t decide if she was annoyed at Joan or not, but until she made up her mind, she wanted to remain nice and normal to her friend. At least to the best of her abilities. She couldn’t even really put into words where her irritation was coming from. It was that comment she made on the phone the other day; it was how she seemed totally unwilling to stand up for Izzie; it was that new girl she had the audacity to bring to events specifically for their close friends. It was how Joan always thought she was doing the right thing, but was always just a little off the mark. It was just a creeping thing, seeping up through her stomach, and she knew that the more she focused on it, the worse it would become and the harder to get over.

It had happened before. Izzie and Joan hadn’t even been friends that long, not really, and Izzie had had friends before her. Friends that started to piss Izzie off. In little ways at first. Not giving back a pencil, telling Izzie to do something — usually something she was amenable to, but a command, nonetheless, a brag about their summer houses that they never even realized was a brag. Izzie would notice these small slights, and say nothing about them. Saying something felt ridiculous. But then they would happen again, or they would get worse, and they would keep getting worse until Izzie had had enough. And then she would leave, and neither party would

know why. Except that Izzie would know she felt hot white rage, for a reason she couldn't quite say.

Izzie didn't want that to happen with Joan. But it was hard to predict her own heart.

"Are we just gonna keep sitting around, or do you guys wanna do something?" Allie asked.

"Should we start drink—"

"Keep your voice down!" Allie whispered at a suddenly red Luke.

"Sorry!"

"And also no, it's only like 8:20, we can't really do that until my parents go to sleep.

Also, Luke? Any word from Jamie?"

"Let me check..." Luke pulled his phone out from his pocket. "This dumbass. He says he needs a ride. From fucking Belmont, I guess he went to Planet Granite or something? I don't understand why one of his greasy-ass climbing bros can't drive him. I sure as hell am not going to."

"I can get him!" Allie said, a little too quickly. "Belmont isn't that far from here."

"We're in *your* house though. Won't your parents care?" Izzie asked.

"No, it's fine. They probably won't even notice. And if they do, just tell them I went to get someone real quick. And don't break anything while I'm gone." Before anyone could respond, she was running, quietly and on the balls of her feet, down the hall and up the stairs to her room. In a few seconds, she was back downstairs, closing the door gently behind her.

“Well that was desperate,” Izzie said. No one laughed. She wasn’t sure what was going on with herself, but she felt on edge in a way that scared her, and she knew was about to be bad for her friends.

~

Allie was already sweating as she pulled out the driveway. She put on Vampire Weekend’s *Modern Vampires of the City* to try and calm her nerves — Ezra Koenig always had a way of doing that — but to no avail.

She wondered if Jamie would find it strange that she went to pick him up, not Luke or even Izzie. It *was* kind of weird that she left her own house to pick him up with people already there. She didn’t even know if Luke had texted him to let him know. Maybe he’d forget what her car looked like. Maybe he’d be waiting inside the gym, and she’d have to awkwardly come tell him, in front of his future-frat-boy friends, that she was the one who came to pick him up. Maybe he’d be embarrassed, and she’d be able to see it. Or maybe — worst of all — he’d get bored of waiting and already be gone.

She stopped extra long at a stop sign and pulled up his name in her text messages. Their last conversation had ended in his *ya*. She had been so proud of herself for not coming up with another question to try and keep the dry conversation alive.

Hey coming to get you :)

As soon as she sent it, she regretted it. It sounded creepy. But no use now.

She pulled onto El Camino Real. She thought of what she’d say when he got in the car. “Hey, Jamie,” felt too forced, but “Hey” felt too casual. “Hi” seemed like it left nowhere for the

conversation to move. Maybe she'd just let him say something first and then respond in kind. But could she even trust herself to come up with something good enough for that?

There were no parking spaces open near the building, so she pulled into the red zone right out front. This was a mistake. Allie hated doing things that could potentially get her in trouble, and this hatred, this fear, was amplified ten times over by being on the road. She tried to get her breathing under control, and while she waited realized she hadn't texted him.

Here

She would have used an exclamation point, but her priority was getting the car in motion as soon as possible.

The front door of Planet Granite opened. She could really see who it was in the dark, but she prayed it was finally Jamie. She waved, suddenly not caring if this resulted in an awkward interaction with a stranger.

To her relief, the figure waved back, came into the street light, mop of curly hair suddenly shining.

"Hey, Allie, thanks for coming for me!" He swung open the car door, and himself inside with one fluid motion.

"Oh, totally. Don't mind at all." She jerked the car into motion before he had a chance to get his seat belt on.

"It's at your house though, right?"

"Yeah, but it's close, and I know the area. It's really no big deal."

"Well anyway, thanks. I don't know if you know Eric and Andrew, but I bumped into them after they had XC practice — off-season, I guess — and they were going climbing, so I

tagged along. I wanted to top-rope for a bit after we finished bouldering though, so they left without me. Didn't really think about the ride back though..."

Allie didn't know what Jamie was talking about, but she liked how it sounded.

Athleticism that was meant to exist outside organized sport, the type of things that translate more to adventure and being in nature than mass-appeal.

"Is this Arcade Fire?"

"What?" It took her a second to realize he was talking about the music, which had slipped from *Modern Vampires of the City* to *Father of the Bride*. "Oh, no. Vampire Weekend. I like them a lot."

"Didn't they do a song about, like, diagramming sentences or something?"

"Oxford Comma." She smiled. She was glad that the conversation was in her wheelhouse. "You can queue it, if you want." She passed him her phone.

"You got a text from Joan... she just said 'Hurry.'"

"Fuck." They were just a few blocks away, but Allie stepped on the gas.

"I bet it's nothing. They're probably just bored."

"Let's hope." The song changed, and suddenly it was out with the borderline-country harmonies of "Married in a Goldrush" and into the Cape Cod bounciness of Vampire Weekend's first album. Allie didn't listen to the album as much — she didn't relate to it — but she liked it nonetheless. It described a world that paralleled hers in some ways. The wealth, the whiteness, the opulence. But it was different. More refined. Less concerned with appearing down-to-Earth. She wondered if she would fit in better. Jamie would fit in just fine, like he did in their own world. Jamie could fit in anywhere.

She was singing how little she cared about grammatical convention; Jamie was laughing. She hoped he found it charming. This was far bolder than she usually is. But then again, she'd never gotten this much quality time with just Jamie before. She had to take advantage of it.

“So, I see you know your shit then. Alright, alright. You're pretty into music?”

“Yeah, I guess I am. Izzie, Joan and I share a lot of our stuff. But yeah, a lot of it's mine.”

She pulled the car into the driveway. “This is us.”

“Thanks again for the ride.” They sat for a moment, neither saying anything, neither looking at the other, until finally he opened his door.

When Allie opened the door, her mom was already in the front hallway, looking pissed. She was in plaid pajama pants and her old Cal sweatshirt. Allie couldn't believe her mom would come downstairs looking like that, in front of Allie's friends, who might tell their parents what a trashy mess the McCarthys were. She knew the woman meant business.

Allie's mom glanced over to Jamie, her mouth forced into a taunt smile. She looked back to Allie and pulled her mouth into a straight line. “You wanna explain why all your friends are just sitting around in my house, and you've disappeared to God knows where?”

“I was picking up Jamie.”

“Jamie, honey, why don't you run along to everyone else? They're down the hall, in the T.V. Room.”

When he was out of earshot, her mom continued in a whisper. “So now you're sneaking around, bringing a *boy* here? You said ‘Jamie’ like I'm supposed to know who Jamie is, like you haven't clearly omitted that detail.”

“You knew Luke was here.”

“Allie, that’s clearly not the same thing.” She closed her eyes, took a breath. “It’s fine. But he does *not* get to stay the night.”

“I know. He’s staying over at Luke’s.”

“Then why were you the one to get him? Obviously he’s their friend, too.”

“I didn’t mind.”

“That’s not the point. We let you have friends over, because we want you to have a safe, respectable place to have fun, okay? And you know we’ve been very lenient lately after — you know, it doesn’t matter. I’m going back upstairs. But please, Allie, don’t pull anything. I’m just — please don’t.”

“I don’t know what you mean, but I won’t.”

She put her hand on Allie’s shoulder, and studied her face. “Okay. I love you, sweetie.”

“Love you too.” Allie and her mom had only recently begun saying they loved each other with any regularity. It still felt forced, but Allie was afraid that if she didn’t do it, it would just never be true.

Allie tried to look relaxed, tried to force the tension out of her jaw, but she could feel her mother seeing through her. As little as they understood each other, they could always read each other.

Allie’s mom went back upstairs without a word, and Allie went back to her friends, trying to lose the look of panic she could feel searing through her skin.

~

It was 9, and there was no sign that anyone had any interest in eating a full meal, so Anna decided it was a reasonable time to call her mom. Jamie had just gotten there, and the mother-

daughter battle of passive aggression that accompanied his arrival created enough excitement that Anna didn't feel she'd be missed, or even noticed, if she snuck out to make her promised call.

She went outside to limit the background noise. The line rang once.

"Having fun?"

"Yeah! It's great!"

"What did you guys have for dinner?"

She thought about what she would have at Riya's. "Oh, just some curry." Was that racist?

She was pretty sure it was.

The front door banged open. "Anna, come on, we're gonna open the stuff Chris got!"

Anna threw up her fingers to her lips, but it was too late. "Sorry," Joan mouthed.

"Who was that? Did I hear something about a 'Chris'? I hope I didn't."

"Sorry, that was just Riya." Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Yeah, but who's Chris?"

"Oh, that's just...her sister. Christina. She got us some movies to watch."

"Why not just watch Netflix?"

"They're hard to get."

"Pirated?"

If that was the worst offense, she was winning. The longer she went without giving in, the worse this could get. Meaning, the closer to the truth.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, Mom. We just really wanted to watch *Sicario*, but you have to pay for it."

Silence on the line. “We’ll talk about this tomorrow.”

“Mom —”

“I love you, but I am *not* happy about this. This is not like you. Do *not* watch that movie, you hear me?”

“Yes, Mom.” After ending the call, Anna looked up to see that Joan was still standing in the doorway, eyes wide.

“Shit.”

“It’s fine. I played it down. She’ll get over it.”

Joan nodded. “I take it when you told her where you’d be, you left something out?”

“I don’t lie. Normally.” Anna wasn’t sure how true that was, at least not anymore, but she still said it.

“Hell, I don’t care. I just don’t want to be, like, *that person*, you know?”

“What do you mean?”

Joan looked behind herself into the house, and shut the door slowly. She walked over to where Anna was standing in the driveway.

“It’s just that I’m older, okay? And my friends are maybe a little edgier. That’s not to say you’re sheltered, or something, I just. I just don’t want to be like a ‘bad influence’ or something. Like I’m not a bad kid, I don’t want to be that to you. I don’t know if I’m making any sense.”

“You’re making sense.” Anna didn’t really know what else to say, how to expand on that. Truthfully, she knew that Joan was a bad influence. Or at the very least, she knew her parents would see it that way. Joan made Anna want freedom, want to question authority. That was supposed to be bad.

And there was something about Joan's character, some magnetism that she had, that made Anna want to draw closer to her. Maybe more than anyone else. She wanted to be wherever Joan was.

She knew that technically speaking, Joan and her angsty friends were a bad influence. But being with Joan felt really, really good. There was something about talking to her, about sharing her opinions and hearing Joan's, always louder and bolder but still resonating, that clicked in a way Anna had never quite experienced.

"So you think I'm a bad influence?"

Anna smiled. "I think you're the *best* influence. Also, I'm not just like a good little puppy that can't make any choices. I'm here because I *want* to be here. No one made me bend the truth to my parents, I did that on my own."

"Okay, if you're sure." Joan started walking into the house, then turned back to face Anna, as if remembering something. "Also, you'll fit right in once we really start talking. Literally everyone in this friend group has some form of mommy issues. Even golden boy Jamie over there's got divorced parents. It's the glue that keeps us together."

"Fantastic."

~

They walked back into the living room to see that *Lemonnade Mouth* was already on the screen (9:51). Joan was unsure if this was a serious or an ironic choice, but it didn't really matter — they were watching it. Allie stared directly at Joan and Anna when they walked in, presumably on guard against her mother coming down again. If it happened, Allie would certainly not be able to alert the others in enough time to hide the drinks, but Joan knew this

precautionary lookout was only to make Allie feel a bit less anxious anyway. Jamie was posted in the corner on drink duty, mixing Diet Coke and too-warm Svedka into coffee mugs. They didn't want to risk using clear water glasses, and red solo cups were far too suspicious.

Luke made a face when he took a sip of it. "This can't be what mixed drinks are meant to taste like. It's awful! Did you puke in this?"

"Maybe it would be better if I was given better ingredients. I don't know much, but I know that vodka isn't supposed to be paired with coke."

"It's just what my brother gave me! If you guys are so particular, you bring stuff next time. Or take a lesson from Izzie and just do a bunch of shots."

"She's having fun," Luke said. Allie shot him a look that screamed murder. Izzie laughed, but it sounded scary for a reason Joan couldn't quite place.

Jamie walked over with the two glasses to where Anna and Joan had squished themselves into the couch.

"I won't be offended if you guys don't drink them, but here you go."

Joan took her glass, and she looked over to see Anna turning red as her hand tightened around hers.

"Thank you, Jamie," she said.

"You're welcome...Annie?"

"Anna."

"You're welcome, Anna," he said with a grin.

"Jamie, I swear to God, do not flirt with this young, young, baby girl."

“Jesus, Izzie,” Joan said. She wasn’t sure if Izzie had said it to mock Anna, to put Allie on guard, or both. But either way, it was a bitch move. Something that Joan felt was becoming more in character for Izzie as of late.

“I wasn’t flirting with her. I just literally didn’t know her name.” He made eye contact with Anna. “Did you *feel* flirted with?”

“Me? No, uh, not at all.”

“I rest my case.”

Joan looked over to Allie on the opposite side of the couch. She was still staring out into the hallway.

“Okay! Anyone wanna order food?” Joan asked.

“Let’s hit Denny’s later,” Luke said. “Allie, you have like chips and shit here, right?”

“Yeah, you guys want popcorn?” Everyone nodded. Allie got up, and Joan followed her to the kitchen.

“You doing okay?” Joan whispered.

Allie nodded, but her eyes looked moist. Joan checked her watch. It was 10:11.

“Jesus.” Joan pulled her into a hug. “How was the drive over?”

“Good, I think.” She pulled out a bag of popcorn kernels, and put it into the microwave.

“I mean, I don’t know. I have no idea what he thinks of me.”

“It’s really hard. And Izzie needs to shut the fuck up right now, I don’t know what that was. Jamie obviously wouldn’t flirt with Anna. She had no reason to even bring that up.”

“Well, she doesn’t know I like him.” The kernels started popping.

Joan raised her eyebrows. “Dude, I love you, but you are probably the least subtle person I know. Like I doubt he can tell, ‘cause he’s a guy and probably doesn’t notice things, but I can assure you that Izzie knows. Frankly, Anna probably fucking does, too.”

“Jesus.” Allie banged her head down on the counter, just hard enough that when she stood up straight there was a little red impression on her forehead.

“You should take the popcorn out.”

“Right. Thanks.”

While Allie pulled out the bag, Joan opened a few of the cupboards, trying to find a bowl, but to no avail.

“It’s fine. I got it.”

Joan wanted to be of use, to say something helpful, or at the very least, to help Allie with her hosting. But she couldn’t think of anything that didn’t seem to just get in the way. She couldn’t shake the feeling that she was pissing everyone off. She just didn’t know why, or what had changed. Or maybe, she had just become more aware of some annoying facet of her personality that had in fact always been there.

“I’m sorry, Allie.”

“For what?”

Joan shrugged. “I just am.”

Allie smiled. “Well, don’t be. We’re gonna have a good time.”

“I know.”

“Then stop apologizing!”

“Okay, okay!”

They brought the popcorn back into the living room, where Luke was doing a poorly synced, lip sync performance of Naomi Scott's "She's So Gone," as it played on the tv.

"Fuck, popcorn!" Jamie just about ripped the bowl out of Allie's hands.

"You're a literal pig," Luke said, before going right back into the music. Jamie shoved the biggest handful he could into his mouth in defiance.

"Hey, Allie? Do you have water glasses somewhere?" Anna asked.

"Yep! In the far top left cabinet when you go in the kitchen. And we've got one of those built-in water filters on the fridge, if you want. The tap water is kinda crap."

"It comes from Hetch-Hetchy! It's the cleanest!" Izzie said.

"Either way, thanks."

"Wait, my mom is on my ass right now, so please be quiet, okay?"

Anna nodded, as if demonstrating just how quiet she could be, and walked out on the balls of her feet.

"Okay, what do we think of her?" Joan whispered, once Anna was decidedly in the kitchen. "Quickly."

"She's sweet!" Allie said.

Jamie shrugged. "Cool, I guess."

"A little too quiet, but maybe she'll warm up," Luke said. Izzie nodded.

"I'll take it!" That was really the best review Joan could hope for. These were critical people, she knew, as much as they would love to claim otherwise.

Anna came back in. Joan prayed she hadn't heard what they all said — it sounded worse than it was — but she couldn't know for sure. It was 10:15, and time was passing too slowly.

“I have an idea!” Izzie exclaimed, clapping her hands as she said it. Joan felt herself physically tense. “Why don’t we go out to the hot tub?”

“There’s a hot tub?” Anna asked.

“Oh yeah! Joan didn’t tell you?”

“We never go out there,” Joan said. “I didn’t think it was relevant.”

“You can just use one of Allie’s suits, right Allie? She’s got plenty! Or, you can just go in your bra, or something.”

“I don’t know that I feel like it,” Jamie said. “Plus, I’d have to go in my boxers.”

“I’m sure we’d all be fine with that,” Izzie said, laughing.

“Izzie, how drunk are you?” Luke asked.

“Drunk enough.”

“Jesus. Have you eaten anything?”

“Popcorn! Lots of popcorn.”

“You had like 2 pieces. And even if you had eaten more, that’s not...”

“If you throw up in here, or even worse the hot tub, I swear my parents will disown me.”

“I never throw up! Except when I do.” She started walking out the room. “I’m going in the hot tub!”

“It’s not even on!” Allie started chasing after her.

“Don’t care!”

“At least stop yelling!”

“I didn’t even see her drink that much,” Jamie said.

Joan shrugged. “You think she’s playing it up?”

Luke laughed. “Knowing Izzie? Definitely. But also, the hot tub sounds kinda nice.” He went to his bag in the corner, a *New Yorker* tote that was weirdly stuffed for someone who wasn’t spending the night. He pulled out a pair of light blue trunks. “And you guys are stupid if you didn’t come prepared. Except for Anna. It’s not your fault you were poorly informed.”

“Hey!” Joan knew it was kinda on her, but she wasn’t loving the attacks.

Luke went to the bathroom, presumably to change (10:24).

It hadn’t been this bad the other times they had come over to Allie’s house. They’d drink — usually beer, or seltzers, or maybe a bottle of wine — and they’d act a little bit drunker than they knew they probably were, until they started to believe that the alcohol was truly the reason they were laughing. Joan and Allie never really had more than two beers; Luke and Izzie would maybe have three. Jamie had never been there, which may have been part of it. Maybe having a straight guy there — even if it was just Jamie — had given Izzie the faint impression that this was actually a party, actually an event demanding her full intoxication.

But then again, Jamie’s presence wasn’t the only change. And Izzie wasn’t the only one acting weird. Joan wasn’t sure what was up with everyone, but she knew that there was something different about tonight. Some uneasiness she knew was a shift.

Maybe it was Anna’s presence throwing off their balance, but then again, Anna had hardly said a word. Or, maybe something was truly developing between Jamie and Allie. She hadn’t really thought that was in the cards, but maybe she’d misjudged them.

Or, the worst and seemingly most likely possibility: it was just Izzie. Drunker than Joan had ever seen her, and with a growing hostility that Joan could have sworn had been building up for the past few days. Maybe even longer than that.

Maybe Izzie wasn't just reacting to the changes around her; it was coming from within her.

They were supposed to talk about the club tonight. Joan thought that Izzie would show some interest in that, but she seemed to have totally forgotten it. Which made the whole idea feel like some stunt Izzie pulled to be dramatic without even giving a shit if it happened or not.

"Joan? Do you want to go in the hot tub?" Anna was standing over her, holding a bright pink racing suit that Allie had probably given her. No one else was in the room. She wasn't sure how she had missed that.

"Everyone's going?"

Anna nodded.

"Then, sure. What the hell." She looked over at the suit again. "Do you think...?"

"She said she's got more like this, but they're all kind of a lot for just sitting in the hot tub." She blushed. "I just don't really know your friends well enough to go in my underwear, you know?"

"No, that totally makes sense. I think I'm going to but that's just because I happen to have on like the most conservative underwear you could possibly wear."

Anna smiled. "Okay. Well, should I go out while you change, or...?"

Joan shrugged.

"I mean, you can go ahead if you want to, but I'll just be a second." She turned around to lift her tee-shirt over her head. She didn't know why she had turned away — she was about to go sit in close quarters with Anna in her same sports bra anyway. Still, there was something about Anna that made Joan a little extra on edge about changing in front of her. She didn't know if it

was how timid Anna was, or not knowing if Anna was weirded out by Joan being gay. Or maybe, it was the way that they had first met. How small, and vulnerable, and aware of her body in all its nastiness Joan had been. It made her want to tell Anna to go. But she didn't.

When she was done taking off her clothes, Joan placed them on top of her duffle in the corner, carefully bending at the knees and lowering herself down so her ass stayed straight. She knew this probably looked stupid, but the last thing she wanted was to stick out her asscrack.

She turned back to Anna. "Alright. Thanks for waiting."

"Should we get towels?"

"We can worry about that later."

The two ran across the house on the balls of their feet, neither of them sure why they had such a sudden sense of urgency. When they opened the sliding glass door to the backyard, they were hit with a sudden wave of chilling air — Northern California nights are sneaky like that — and the two of them turned their run into a sprint, across the patio, up the three steps, and into the hot tub.

"Fuck, it's cold!"

"What took you guys so long?" Allie asked.

"They were probably kissing," Izzie giggled. "Anna, did you know that Joan's a lesbo?"

"Izzie, what's your fucking problem?" Jamie cut in.

Joan hadn't decided if she was offended, indifferent, or amused yet, but she was satisfied to see someone — and Jamie, of all people — standing up for her. Normally, this would be embarrassing. But when Izzie was so clearly in the wrong, so clearly not herself, Joan was happy that she didn't have to be the one to point it out.

“I’m just playing!”

“Yeah, well your playing kinda fucking sucks for everyone else here.”

“Luke likes it.”

“I really don’t.”

“Guys,” Allie piped in. “I know this might not be the right time, but weren’t we supposed to talk about the club idea tonight?”

“I guess we all forgot.” Joan hadn’t forgotten about the club. But it was Izzie’s idea, so she had expected her to be the one to start the conversation. She was really starting to think it was a whole lot of bullshit. “You got an idea, Allie?”

“Well, I think now might be a good time to explain our idea to the guys and Anna.”

“You think Izzie is really up to saying her piece right now?”

“Why the fuck wouldn’t I be?”

“What type of club?” Jamie asked.

“I think we should explain the background first,” Joan said. The whole idea still felt too absurd to present with no explanation.

“I’m not even sure I know the background,” Allie said.

“Basically, Joan’s obsessed with Ms. Rainier, so we stay after class sometimes to hear her meditations on redlining or whatever the fuck. And the other day, she was talking about how she teaches at Cecilia’s to help the youth in the bullshit Catholic system, and I thought to myself, ‘Why don’t we have her put her money where her mouth is?’ And Joan doesn’t really like my idea, but that’s okay.”

“I’m not obsessed with her. She’s just really smart.” Joan looked down at her wrist, which was on the edge of the tub to keep the leather band of her watch out of the water. It probably would have been easier to take the watch off, but Joan knew she needed it to steady herself (10:43).

“Whatever you say.”

“Sorry, but what are you all trying to say with this?” Anna cut in. Her voice was quiet, but somehow, it sobered them.

“It means Izzie wants to start a feminism club at the school. And ask Ms. Rainier to moderate. And for some reason, Allie and I agreed.”

“And we want you guys to be on the board with us,” Allie said.

“What would we do?” Anna asked.

“Well, we already talked about the dress code, and sexist dress codes in sports,” Joan started. “And I think we need to push for sex ed. It’s weird we don’t have it.”

“And talks about consent.”

“And getting a diversity advisor to help write curriculums,” Izzie said. “And to tell teachers how to handle sexist racist classist pigs in their fucking social studies classes.”

“Why didn’t you say that earlier?” Joan asked. “That’s a really good idea.” She was beginning to wonder if Izzie was really as drunk as she seemed to be.

“What, you surprised?”

“Me and Luke are guys though. I’m not sure this has much to do with us.”

“Yeah, I don’t exactly want to be the token gay guy in the club for girls. It’s cliché.”

“We want it to be intersectional. 4th wave. That’s why we need you guys to be there. To show that we’re inclusive.” Joan had no idea where Allie had learned the waves of feminism with any fluency — they’d never really talked about it like that before — but how seriously she had started taking it was giving Joan some hope.

“Seems performance-y to me,” Luke said.

“You mean performative?”

“Whatever!”

“I like this idea,” Anna said, “But I’m not sure how cool my parents will be with it. Too political for them.”

“Do you really need to tell them?” Allie asked. “My parents are Republicans, but what they don’t know won’t be a fight.”

“Can I think about it?”

“Of course,” Joan said. She looked over to see that Anna’s face had developed a red hue. She couldn’t tell if it was from the heat of the tub or from something inside of her.

“There’s no way you guys are getting this past admin,” Luke said. “They’re gonna act like it’s anti-men. Or worse, anti-the-Church.”

“Which is exactly why we need you guys! Show them that this is something for everyone, that we all want a more progressive school.”

“What would we have to do?” Jamie asked. “Like to start it, to promote it, to run it?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure,” Joan admitted. “Allie? Izzie? You had a bunch of ideas this morning.”

“Oh, so you weren’t listening to what I said. I see,” Izzie said.

“That’s not fair.”

“The first thing is talking to Ms. Rainier,” Allie cut in.

“Wait, you haven’t even talked to her yet?” Luke asked.

“Joan wanted to wait. Didn’t trust me not to scare her off.”

“I thought we needed a better plan.”

“Then we make a petition, right? To show interest in it?” Jamie said.

“That sounds good. We could email it around, or post it on our stories. Could be like a change.org thing,” Allie said.

“Fine, but then what?” Luke seemed the most skeptical.

“Get a meeting with Mr. Jones in activities,” Anna suggested.

“No, go to Ms. Rainier first,” Izzie said.

“Should we have a presentation ready?” Jamie asked.

“Eh, definitely for Mr. Jones, maybe for Ms. Rainier, if we have time,” Joan said.

“We’ll need to figure out a mission statement. And a budget. And goals for the year,”

Allie said.

“I said all that this morning.”

“Congrats, Izzie.”

“Oh gosh, and how it fits with the Church,” Anna said. Her voice was shaky.

“I’m still not sure about this.”

“Please, Luke. We really need you.”

“I don’t even have time for this. Once *Grease* is done, I’m directing the student-run show.”

“We’d talk about LGBTQ stuff, too. And it’s way more likely we get this passed than a GSA, or something like that,” Allie offered.

“As if I’d join a GSA. But what ‘stuff?’”

Joan knew she was going to need to be the one to convince him on this. “Bringing any date you want to school dances, for one. And when we start working on a sex ed curriculum, getting non-straight stuff in there, too.”

“No way would they let us write a sex curriculum.”

“Probably not, but maybe we could consult?” Allie asked.

“Maybe a club isn’t big enough,” Izzie said. “Maybe we need something bigger.”

“This was your idea,” Joan said, working her hardest to keep her voice steady.

“Yeah, but now that you’re all running with it I’m starting to think it’s too soft.” Izzie shrugged, smiling like it was all a silly little bit she was doing.

“You always do this. You get all riled up about something, and the second it stops getting you attention you freak out.” They all went silent for a beat. Joan couldn’t make eye contact with Izzie, and so she focused on her watch. 11:06.

“Fuck you, Joan.”

Joan felt something break within her. Maybe it was the need to keep the peace, to be the one to accommodate. She had been trying to hold herself back, but she just couldn’t do it anymore.

“No — fuck you, Izzie. I don’t know what goddamn power trip you’ve been on the past few days, but snap out of it. God, you’re being such a bitch.”

Allie moved to the center of the hot tub, her arms out on either side in case she needed to hold either Joan or Izzie back. “Hey, I think we’re all saying some stuff we don’t mean.”

Izzie shook her head. “That’s *what* we’ve been doing. That’s what was happening when you guys were talking shit about me behind my back, then pretending to be my friends. That’s what I’ve been doing while I was pretending to be okay with it, even when you all would rather get some new girl to hang out with who hasn’t said one fucking word all night than actually talk to me.”

“Izzie, we haven’t said anything about you,” Jamie said. “Also, Anna has said at least twelve words.”

“Not now,” Luke whispered.

“Actually,” Izzie began again, looking Joan right in the eyes, “You’re the only one of us who hasn’t been lying. You told me exactly how you see me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Joan said. And she really didn’t.

“Slutty, Latina, kleptomaniac.” Izzie spoke slowly letting them sit with every word.

“Remember that?”

“Joan, is that true? Did you really call her that?” Allie asked.

“Why are you asking her? Am I really that unreliable?”

“Izzie, you know I didn’t mean...”

“No, I think that’s exactly what you meant, Joan. I think that’s how all of you see me, that I’m just your sketchy brown friend who you gets you into trouble. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“It has nothing to do with you being brown!” Joan yelled. She knew she was about to dig herself a hole, and yet, she couldn’t stop it. “You just need so much attention! All the fucking

time! You do this shit to yourself, and yeah. Maybe I don't want to get in trouble. Maybe I'd like to do well in school, and not get detentions.

“And the worst part is, you're a really cool person. And normally, you're a great friend. You're smart, and you have great ideas. I was really excited about this club, once I started really thinking about it. I think we could do a lot of good. Anna's got shit this could help fix; so does Allie, even if she doesn't realize she's a victim. But you're such a fucking narcissist, that doesn't matter to you.”

“I'm not a victim, Joan. And you don't mean...” Allie tried.

“No, Joan's right. I *am* the problem, I guess. I'm just gonna make things easier for all of you.” Izzie pushed herself out of the tub, splashing Allie and Luke in the face as she did, and started walking back into the house. “I'm going home,” she said, without turning around.

“How are you getting there?” Allie asked.

“Don't worry about it.”

“I'll drive you,” Luke said, his voice free of its usual edge. He followed Izzie inside, and then Jamie followed him, and Allie went after Jamie.

Joan stayed in the hot tub, staring blankly ahead. She was aware of Anna next to her, could feel Anna's anxiety about what she should do, but she couldn't respond. She knew she'd regret her inaction later, that this could very well be the end of her friendship with Izzie. And worst of all, she was pretty sure it was her fault. She was a hypocrite. She knew she'd hate herself soon, but she was in too much shock to come up with any clear feelings yet.

11:08, 11:09, 11:10, 11:11 (Joan could not be bothered to wish for anything), 11:12. She watched each minute come and go, focusing her breathing in time with the seconds-hand.

She heard faint yelling from inside, though by some miracle, the light in the upstairs window never went on. She couldn't see the front door, but she knew, knew in the way one knows her own mind, that Izzie had left alone, and was going to drive herself home. Maybe not drunk, but with an illegal amount of alcohol in her system, at least for someone under 21. She couldn't decide whether or not she cared.

The glass door opened, and Luke stuck his head out.

"She's gone, but I think she'll be okay," he said. "About the club, I think we should..."

"Don't worry about it. We can talk it all out on Monday."

"Okay. Me and Jamie are heading out then." He shifted his eyes slightly, to where Joan had forgotten that Anna was. "It was nice to meet you."

"You too."

Luke shut the door.

"Joan? Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll be fine." She was still making a conscious effort not to look over at Anna, instead keeping her eye on the watch face. She couldn't look at Anna, certainly not after all that she had heard Joan say. She had gotten Anna to confide in her, then proved herself to be just as bad as Mickey. She was pretty sure Anna must hate her now. She didn't blame her.

But then, Anna moved herself in front of Joan, their faces just a few inches apart. She couldn't help but look up.

"You sure you're okay?"

"No," she said. Their eyes locked.

"I'm sorry."

And then, in a motion that Joan could have sworn she didn't initiate, but felt herself pulling into, their lips touched. And for a second, it was wonderful. It was the release that they had been building towards, without even realizing it. Something clicked. Yes, this was why she wanted Anna there so badly. Yes, this was why Anna cared enough to lie to her mother about where she was. Yes, this was why she felt strange changing in front of her. Yes, the way the porch light dimly illuminated her black hair was beautiful.

Then in the next second, a panic set in. They both pulled back, almost at the exact same time. No, this was not what Joan should be doing. No, this was far too hard to handle.

Anna stared at Joan for a second, awkwardly stepped out of the hot tub, splashing her a little in the process. She ran inside, as fast as Izzie had done before. Neither of them had said a word.

11:16, 11:17, 11:18, 11:43. Joan stayed alone in the hot tub, staring blankly ahead.

It only took ten minutes to ruin everything. Or maybe, fifty-six hours, depending on what the catalyzing event really was. Maybe she had blew her life up when she told Izzie to go fuck herself, or maybe she did so when she told her off on the phone, casual as she would have been telling her what the history homework was. Maybe it all started when Anna checked on her in that bathroom stall, and she felt herself being cared for, really, truly cared for, for the first time in a long time.

She hadn't thought about any of it while it was happening. Not the important stuff, at least.⁵ For once in her life, she had just acted. And now, she was boiling in a hot tub, good as dead to everyone she cared about.

She stepped out of the tub, and walked to the bushes in the corner of the yard. She put her fingers down her throat.

When she was done, she laughed. This time, all she wanted was for someone to come check on her, to catch her in the act and be horrified. But this time, no one did.