

A young woman with long dark hair, wearing a purple hoodie and dark pants, is walking away from the camera on a bridge. The scene is set at sunset, with a bright sun low on the horizon creating a strong lens flare. In the sky, a small airplane is flying. The bridge has a wooden railing on the right side. In the background, a road with a few cars and a line of trees is visible under a cloudy sky.

THE
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CHAPTER ONE

Trouble in the air is very rare. It is hitting the ground that causes it.

—Amelia Earhart

I was sneaking a twenty-dollar bill from Mom's purse when I saw the empty space where the picture should have been. It was of my parents on their wedding day, and they were laughing under a dogwood tree. Mom's hair was pulled back in a neat bun, a style she couldn't wear now, with her hair so short. Dad was clean-shaven in the picture, which always looked weird to me. His rented tux was a size too small; it showed in the arms and shoulders. They were twenty-two years old. I used to try to guess what they were laughing about. Whenever I asked, Mom said she couldn't remember.

Mom's ChapStick, an overdue library book, a dusty box of Kleenex—everything else was there. I pocketed the twenty and inched toward the nightstand, scanning the floor to see if

the picture had fallen off when Mom hit her alarm clock that morning. But the picture was gone.

Downstairs in the kitchen, Teddy and Katy were peeling oranges for breakfast. Teddy kept jabbing his thumb into the flesh of the orange, making juice drip down his arm and onto the floor. Jackson, our terrier, licked the tiles.

Katy pushed Teddy toward the paper-towel rack. "Mom," she said. "Mom, he's getting it everywhere."

Teddy shoved her back. "She's pushing me."

"Mom, he's not going to clean it up."

Standing at the sink, Mom held its sides as if she was at a podium. Her mouth was caught between a smile and nothing. She looked over the backyard, where the Kmart swing set was rusting and a few scraggly trees almost blocked our neighbor's property. Usually she looked tired, even if the morning had barely begun. But for a moment, her face was clear and her eyes were focused.

Jackson barked. Teddy reached out to push Katy again, but her longer arms stopped him.

Mom blinked and wiped her hands on her jeans. "Both of you," she said, tossing a sponge at Teddy. "No horsing around." Teddy neighed, and Mom laughed a little.

I tried not to eye Mom as I made toast. Jackson nudged my leg, so I tore him a corner of bread. "Where'd your wedding picture go?" I asked.

"Okay, that's enough," Mom told Teddy, who had cleaned up the orange drips and was now scrubbing the rest of the

counter. She pried the sponge from his hand and attacked the dishes from last night's lasagna. A tiny *V* appeared in the middle of her forehead. Over the sink, her hands worked furiously. I wondered if she would crack a plate. "Alex, did you say something?"

"The picture on your nightstand. When you and Dad got married."

Katy giggled into her cereal. "The puffy dress."

"Isn't it there? Dammit." Mom snatched her hand away from the hot water and turned the cold-faucet handle. "George must have moved it."

Katy looked up from her breakfast and caught my eye briefly, while Teddy continued to suck on orange slices. "Who's George?" Katy asked.

"David. Dad," Mom corrected herself, but she spoke carefully, as if she was afraid of making the same mistake again. She turned to me. "And exactly why were you in my room, Alexandra?"

"I was looking for my striped shirt," I said, not blinking. "I thought it got mixed up in your laundry." Katy was suddenly fascinated by her breakfast. She knew my shirt was on our bedroom floor, after I had tried it on and flung it off in disgust, but she also knew better than to say so. Now that Katy was in middle school, we had an understanding: she kept my secrets so I would do the same when she got some worth keeping.

Mom stared at me for a moment before shutting off the water. I'd expected more of a fight. Sneaking cash from her

purse wasn't a regular thing for me, but I knew she had noticed some missing before and suspected me. Katy hoarded her money, so I couldn't ask her, and Teddy couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"Driver's ed today?" When I told her yes, she asked, "Have you practiced at all? Dad hasn't taken you in a week."

Whenever my dad asked if I wanted to go for a drive, I said I was busy or tired or made some sarcastic comment that would keep him from wanting to spend time with me in an enclosed space. But the real problem was that controlling a huge, whirring hunk of metal terrified me. My heart raced and I couldn't breathe and I forgot everything I was supposed to do. Cars hadn't always scared me. It wasn't like I cringed whenever anyone drove above the speed limit. I'd never been in an accident—not a real one, anyway. But something happened when I was forced to get behind the wheel. There were too many parts, all hidden under the hood; any piece could come off or spark. The brakes, the gas, the wheel, the mirrors—how could I be expected to pay attention to so many things at once? It went too fast. Anything could happen. So I avoided being behind the wheel as much as possible.

"Who cares if I don't practice? I'm going to be, like, the worst one anyway."

"That's *because* you don't practice," Mom said. "It takes time. And it would be a big help for me if you could drive your sister to gymnastics—"

"Oh, yes, please let me cart around my little sister. That's

exactly how I want to spend my afternoons.” At the table, Katy insisted that she didn’t want to ride with me, either.

It wasn’t the first time Mom had tried to convince me to drive. She and Dad had even offered to pay for a cell phone if I got my license—in case I broke down while I was on the road. By now I was the only person I knew who didn’t have a cell, so that had almost gotten me, but then I’d remembered the feeling of being behind the wheel and claimed I didn’t want one.

I devoured my toast at the counter and brushed crumbs into the sink. “See you later,” I said, grabbing my backpack.

“Hey, where are you going?” Mom said.

“School,” I said. “They make you go every day.”

“You’ve got ten minutes before the bus. And you haven’t made your lunch yet.”

I lingered by the door. “I’ll buy it. And I was going to walk.”

Mom’s eyebrows knit together. “You’ll never make it in time if you walk.”

“Sure I will,” I said.

“Only if you cut through the woods,” Katy muttered, probably deciding that if she had to ride the bus, then so did I.

“Oh, no,” my mother said as she arranged slices of bread for sandwiches. “You want to walk, that’s fine, but you have to stay on the street, where people can see you.”

I gave her a look like I didn’t know how she functioned in the world. “What’s going to happen? I’ll get attacked by a squirrel?”

Teddy snorted a laugh. “Maybe Alex’ll get rabies and she’ll

get all crazy and foamy.” Sticking out his lower lip, he made slurping noises.

Mom ignored Teddy, even as Katy threw her napkin at him and told him to stop. “Remember that man a few years ago?” Mom said. “The one who tried to grab that boy?”

“Yeah, I’m desperate to get raped and murdered,” I said, slinging my backpack over my shoulder. “Can I go now? I’m going to be late.”

Mom cut three sandwiches so aggressively that I thought she’d cut off her own finger. “I am so sick of this attitude of yours. Ever since you became friends with that Theresa Harbin, you do things like threaten people in chemistry class.”

I laughed. “That was one time! And we didn’t threaten people; we threatened stupid John Lacey’s letterman jacket. He deserved it.”

Mom shoved sandwiches into paper bags. “You think you’re entitled to everything.”

“Oh, my Lord, you are so melodramatic,” I said. “Just because I want to walk somewhere, you make a huge deal out of it. Shouldn’t I be getting fresh air?”

“It’s the way you say it, as if we’re all dirt to you.”

“Yeah, right, I’m such a horrible brat. Tell me about all the things I can’t do right, please.”

“You *could* do anything if you tried at all. But you don’t care about anyone but yourself.”

“No, you just can’t understand how anyone could not want to do everything your way!”

We were almost shouting now. At the table, Teddy and Katy exchanged looks.

"And I don't appreciate you going through my things when I'm not around," Mom said. "How would you like it if I did that to you?"

"I wasn't going through your stuff. I already told you." The twenty-dollar bill burned inside my pocket. "Why would I even want to go through your stuff? There's, like, nothing there."

The way Mom looked at me, her head tilted and lips pressed together, she must have been trying to remember a time when I didn't act like I hated her. When she thought I was trustworthy. For that, she'd have to go back a while. I was about to tell her that we'd had this argument a million times, but suddenly her eyes were clouded with something else. The planes of her face relaxed, and she gazed beyond me, to the kitchen table and beyond even that, into nothingness.

"Never mind," I said, and strode out the front door before she could ask me to walk my brother home from school.

I was still annoyed as I made my way across the lawn and down the street, toward the woods. Storms had prematurely yanked all the leaves off trees, and now the ground was slick with color. Car horns blared—senior boys greeting one another. I wished they'd knock heads together. Maybe that way someone's skull would crack open and we would get to see if any of them actually had a brain. For a moment, I considered skipping school altogether to hide out in the woods. I hadn't done my math

homework—big shock—and probably wouldn't have time to finish during homeroom. Stoners and couples escaped to the graffitied boulder out here during free periods, but it seemed like their activities involved at least two people. On my own, I'd probably just end up hungry and feral.

Then I heard something else — hissing, like someone using a can of hair spray. I held my breath. Someone was probably behind the boulder. But I was still too pissed to realize it was too early for stoners or couples.

A branch snapped under my clunky boot as I strode around the rock. "Hey," someone said.

I hadn't expected anyone to notice me, and my mind was still clouded by my mom and obnoxious senior guys. "What?" I snapped.

A crown of a close-cropped head popped up on the other side of the boulder. Jim Wiley stepped into view. I still wasn't used to seeing him with his hair cut so short. Last year he wore it long, kind of shaggy. But the shortness worked; it made his cheekbones seem more carved and his lips softer. I'd spent the last few weeks admiring his cheekbones and lips during gym, the one class we shared. He'd already been one of the best-looking guys in school, and now he looked like some kind of Greek statue. He was tall like me and had startlingly light-blue eyes. Staring into them was like getting an electric shock, and I felt the hairs on my arm stand up.

In his hand was a can of spray paint. He stared at me for a second. "Sorry."

“No, it’s okay,” I said, a little too eagerly. “I didn’t expect anyone to be here.” I wasn’t sure if he knew who I was. Most likely he recognized my general shape as someone he probably went to school with, or even more generally as someone who wasn’t going to bother him. But of course I knew who he was. Everyone at Oak Ridge did. Last year he became a school legend when he drove his parents’ car into the side of their house. After that, he disappeared for the rest of school year. Then in September he showed up, a junior again and kind of an icon.

He tried to hide the spray can behind his back, although I wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t like this was the principal’s car or anything. The boulder was already covered with decades of couples’ initials and swears.

“What time is it?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” Another problem with not having a cell phone. “The bell’s probably going to ring soon.”

“Thanks, ah—”

I wasn’t sure if he was searching his memory for a name, but I put it out there anyway. “Alex.”

“Alex?” he said. “You’re a junior, right?”

“Yeah. We have gym together.”

He nodded and leaned against the boulder, shoulder jabbing the middle of someone’s spray-painted heart. The handwriting was sloppy, so it might have been LK LOVES SP. Some declaration of love. As far as I knew, Jim wasn’t dating anybody. Before he drove into his house, he always had a girlfriend.

Now either girls didn't know what to make of him or he wasn't interested.

It was too quiet. "What's with the spray paint?" I asked. "Did you write your initials?"

"Oh." He glanced at the can like he was surprised to find it in his hand. "I was just messing around."

I looked behind him to see if any of the graffiti matched the color on his can. One part did. I'd expected something quick and catchy like *FUCK YOU* or *OAK RIDGE SUCKS*, but it wasn't even a word. It didn't really look like anything—a bunch of sharp edges, curves, all in phosphorescent orange—but it felt deliberate.

"What does it say?"

He clicked the cap back on the aerosol can. "My initials. It was supposed to be this tag thing. But I can't really do anything good yet."

In the woods, with so many of the leaves fallen already and the ground bright with reds and yellows, his graffiti fit. The other names and colors faded into the rock. "It's like a phoenix," I said. Once the words were in the air, I wished I could grab them and stick them back under my tongue. Who said stuff like that, especially to Jim Wiley?

"A phoenix?"

"It's this mythical creature—"

"Yeah, I know what it is," he said.

I felt myself blushing. "The orange. It reminded me of fire."

Jim nodded. "That's actually what I was thinking about. The shape, I mean, not just the color, you know?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's got this movement to it. There are edges, but they still have a kind of flow."

"Right. Like watching a flame."

"But with more control."

"Yeah, that's totally it."

I'd barely heard Jim talk before, and now we were having this conversation about color and movement. Did he talk this way with everyone? I could have been the only person Jim Wiley talked to about this. My heart was beating fast. "You did a good job." In the distance, I heard a shrill buzzing. "First bell."

"Right. Thanks." He picked up his backpack from the side of the boulder and slid the can of spray paint inside. "I probably would have missed homeroom if you hadn't told me."

"Oh, tragedy," I said, and he smiled.

I thought he would walk ahead of me, but he kept pace, even though his strides were longer than mine. We didn't talk until we passed through the front doors of the school. Then Jim said, "Later, Alex," and headed down another hallway.

I tried not to notice kids looking at us. Tried to pretend this was a totally normal thing, Jim and I coming to school together. He was a legend, and I was barely anyone. I rushed to my locker, wondering if people were already inventing some kind of scandal about us.

CHAPTER TWO

Women must pay for everything. They do get more glory than men for comparable feats. But, also, women get more notoriety when they crash.

—Amelia Earhart

When I told my mother I was the worst student in driver's ed, I wasn't lying. I'd driven over more cones than anyone else in our class, or anyone in any class before ours, as our instructor, Mr. Kane, liked to remind me. Two weeks earlier, I'd blown out a tire while driving over a curb. Instead of letting us have a free period, Mr. Kane had made us spend the last half hour of class learning how to change a flat. I hadn't been allowed behind the wheel since.

"It's your turn today," Theresa told me as we climbed into the backseat of the '97 Volvo station wagon that served as our student-driver mobile. Someone's parents had donated it a decade ago, probably after their children refused to be seen in it. The dents I'd put into the fender weren't the first. Even

though Mr. Kane vacuumed the vinyl interior, there were still crumbs between the seats. After an hour, we'd smell like old skin and damp, stale bread.

"He's not going to let me drive," I said. It wasn't fair, anyway. Most high schools cut driver's ed ages ago, but our principal insisted that proper instruction could make for safer teen drivers. It obviously wasn't doing anything for me. I slid into the middle seat, Theresa on my left and Caroline Lavale, in her First Presbyterian Ministry T-shirt, on my right. In the driver's seat, Edward Baker was texting wildly.

"Mr. Kane has to let you," Theresa said. "It would be like not giving you a test in math. You'd think, *Hey, great*, but then he wouldn't pass you and you'd fail out of school and be stuck at home for the rest of your life. Do you really want that?"

"You want to see me drive through the fence."

Theresa ignored me. "So you broke a tire. So what? You helped us learn a valuable lesson about car safety." She leaned across me. "Isn't that right, Caroline? Did you know how to change a tire before Mr. Kane showed us?"

"Not exactly," she said.

"There you go."

Mr. Kane eased himself into the passenger seat and slammed the door shut. He was six foot four, so his head scraped the ceiling of the car. He scribbled on a clipboard, probably giving Edward points for not having destroyed any part of the car yet. "All right," Mr. Kane said. "Start 'er up. Seat belts, everybody."

Theresa ignored him. She grasped the driver's headrest and hoisted herself forward, her chin practically on Edward's shoulder. "Hey, Mr. Kane. Alex gets to drive today, right?"

Mr. Kane was telling Edward to put away the phone already and pay attention. Today was three-point-turn day. "Now you're at a dead end. Visualize the street," he said once Edward's path was blocked by a line of orange cones. "What are you going to do?" Edward didn't hesitate, possibly inspired by Mr. Kane's voice. When he wasn't teaching driver's ed, Mr. Kane was also the theater teacher, coaching drama queens through the chorus of "Sunrise, Sunset" with his powerful tenor. Apparently he'd played various understudies on Broadway a decade ago but had to give it up because of his mother's heart disease. She was still dying, and he was directing *Oliver!* this spring.

"Very good, Edward," he said as Edward checked his rear-view mirror and eased the car into reverse. Smiling into his clipboard, Mr. Kane was probably complimenting himself on using theater techniques in driver's ed.

"Yeah, you're a regular car god," Theresa muttered at the back of Edward's head. "When is Alex going to drive?"

Mr. Kane sighed. "After Edward's done, it's Alex's turn."

"I don't have to. Edward needs more practice," I said.

"Edward's a champion," Theresa said. "You can be one, too."

"I can drive if Alex doesn't want to," Caroline said, her quiet smile directed at me. A small part of me wanted to throw my arms around her and claim her as my new best friend. But

mostly I wanted to tie her up and repeatedly run her over with the Volvo. As if I needed her pity.

“It’s okay—I’ll do it.”

Edward parked the car neatly by the curb so we could switch places. (Of course it was easy for him to drive; he had two older siblings.) In the front seat, I felt like Alice in Wonderland, shrinking to nothingness. Could I even press the pedals from here? Even after adjusting the seat and mirrors, I didn’t feel like I fit. Which pedal was which again? I remembered smashing into the curb, the sudden bang and hiss of the front right tire exploding. In classrooms, students had leaned toward rows of windows. Dozens of eyes watched as we got out of the car to assess the damage. How could that have happened? I thought driving would be easy, natural. Even the idiot senior boys could drive.

When I tried to focus on the dashboard, my vision blurred and I couldn’t remember how to count. The veins in my throat throbbed. Maybe if I had an anxiety attack, I would be excused.

“We’ll start out with something simple,” Mr. Kane promised. “You don’t even have to visualize anything. This is only a parking lot. All you have to do is pull away from the curb and make a left turn up there.”

I could feel everyone’s fingernails dig into the vinyl.

My hands groped for the key, already in the ignition, and I yanked it the wrong way a few times before starting the car.

“What are you doing?” Edward laughed, hyena-like. In the rearview mirror, I could see three fillings in his unnaturally

large mouth. His cell phone was pinned to his ear as he told his freshman girlfriend what a spaz I was.

“Shut the fuck up, Baker,” Theresa snapped.

Mr. Kane whirled around in his seat, straining against the seat belt. “Hey, settle down back there. And shut the phone off, Edward.” I hoped he would add “or else everyone’s out of the car,” but he didn’t. Instead he looked at me, his forehead suddenly huge and gleaming. “Ease your foot onto the gas and gently turn away from the curb.”

I’d only seen one of Oak Ridge High School’s plays, last year’s *Annie Get Your Gun*. It was painful to watch—screaching sopranos and boys with no rhythm doing the box step. Buffalo Bill Cody kept forgetting his lines. Meanwhile, Mr. Kane smiled as he directed the orchestra, hand waving gracefully over the violins. Maybe he was a better actor than director. Right now his teeth were welded together.

“Come on, Alex. Just like riding a bike,” Theresa said.

Yeah, I thought. *I’ve done that before*. I placed my foot on the gas, applied the smallest amount of pressure, and in a second, we were gliding over the asphalt. My hands rested at four and eight. Orange cones passed like troubled thoughts in a clear mind.

Beside me, Mr. Kane’s breathing steadied. “Very good, Alex,” he said. “Can you picture a road? This is how easy it’ll be.”

Easy. We were moving and not dying. It was just like riding a bike.

Except with more numbers and dials. Suddenly I was

imagining people on bikes getting hit by people in cars. Accidents like that happened all the time—screeching tires, mangled arms, heads cracking against pavement. Cars didn't even have to be going very fast to kill someone; we learned that in the written classes.

"Be careful," Edward grumbled. "I think we hit five miles an hour."

My arms felt heavy and rubbery, like they were filling with water. The windows were all up, all manual. I wanted to ask everyone to roll theirs down, but the words shriveled in my throat. Somehow it had gotten overcast since I started driving. Clouds pressed against the windshield.

Mr. Kane was making swift checkmarks on his clipboard. "Now you're going to turn the corner there. Watch out for the corner. The left."

"Alex, the left," Theresa said.

I yanked the wheel toward the left. My arms were so heavy, I couldn't correct myself. Then my knees were locked and I couldn't take my foot off the gas.

"Wrong side of the road," Mr. Kane said. He reached for the steering wheel, but it was too late. We careened through the cones, over the curb, and, barely missing the goalpost, onto the trimmed lawn of the football field. Everyone in back clasped one another and braced their feet against the front seats. The word "left" was stuck in my brain, so I tried turning again, but by the screams, I could tell that wasn't the right answer. Mr. Kane kept shouting for me to stop. Finally the word registered

and my foot smashed the brake. For a moment, everything was quiet. We were still alive.

In the rearview mirror, I could see Edward shake his head and chuckle to himself. "Jesus, Alex, you fucking suck."

"Out of the car." Mr. Kane's voice was choked, as if he'd swallowed a beetle.

I grasped the door, swung myself out of the Volvo, and walked stiffly on the grass. Let Mr. Kane yell at me; I was just happy to be standing on my own two feet again. Everyone else followed, standing as far away from me as possible, except for Theresa. Mr. Kane turned from us, hands at his hips, clipboard wagging at his side. His breathing was deep but sharp. When he faced us again, his cheeks were flushed and his nostrils flared.

"Alexandra," he said through his teeth, stressing the last syllable and turning my name into a kind of wince, "were you visualizing a street?"

I glanced at Theresa for help, but she was studying her shoes. "Yes," I lied.

He had to choose his words carefully. "Visualize that street again for me, won't you, Alexandra? You have run over everyone on that street, Alexandra. They are all dead."

Edward snickered in his fist, while Caroline looked vaguely ill. I imagined it was them I'd run over. Suddenly being the neighborhood assassin didn't seem so bad.

Mr. Kane took another deep breath, and when he spoke again, his voice was clearer, hitting the deeper register of his tenor. "I'm not sure you should be in this class," he told me.

“I think we should call your parents and set up a conference. Maybe we can find an alternative.”

Because of my dad’s schedule at the post office, it was hard for him to make conferences. Most likely, it would only be my mom. I could see it, the two of them discussing how unfathomable it was that I couldn’t drive. Shamefaced, Mom would assure him that she could parallel park anywhere. My lack of skill must have been from my father’s side of the family. They’d laugh. She would thank Mr. Kane for bringing this to her attention and refuse to let me on the road at all, in order to save the lives of pedestrians across town. Afterward she would drive me home, asking why I couldn’t do this one simple thing. It would be heinous if my mother came to school. I hoped that if she were at home right now, staring out the window, she would be too distracted to hear the phone ring.

Of course, by the next morning, everyone had heard that I’d plowed onto the football field. It was a small school—ninety-three juniors, ninety-four now with Jim Wiley—so I wasn’t surprised they all knew. The lawn was choppy near one of the end zones, two straight patches torn from where I had hit the brakes so sharply. Football practice had been limited to one half of the field, so the players’ cleats wouldn’t do any additional damage. The football coach and two groundskeepers were out there, hands on their hips and shaking their heads at the bare dirt.

“Oh, please,” Theresa said. “It’s just grass.”

The rest of the student body didn't seem to think so. Somehow our football team had managed an undefeated season so far—a first for the Oak Ridge Mountaineers. People other than the players' parents were attending games. Even my school spirit extended so far as to wear a maroon T-shirt on pep rally days (though it was really only so I wouldn't stand out). People were talking about going to the state finals. According to the rumors, state was out of reach now that I had destroyed the field. Which was totally ridiculous—the field was barely damaged—but they claimed it was a mental thing. Without a perfect end zone, they wouldn't be able to score. Because obviously that had been their problem all the years the team sucked.

"Hey, Alex," a sophomore boy called to me while I was getting books from my locker, "can I get a ride after school?" Before I could think of a clever response, he turned back to his friends, all hooting with amusement.

"Yeah, laugh your brains out," I said. I shoved a calc book into my locker so hard, the metal clanged.

From across the hall, Theresa heard the noise. "I hate math, too," she said, "but at the end of the year, they make you pay for the books you mess up." When only half my mouth rose into a smile, she shook her head at the sophomores. "Screw them, seriously. They'll be smoking pot in their parents' basements when they're forty."

"Forty needs to hurry along," I said.

A group of boys in letterman jackets strolled down the hall,

and my stomach knotted. From kindergarten through junior year, I had tried so hard to be inconspicuous, to fly under the radar, and so far it had worked: I certainly wasn't going to be prom queen, but I had my friends and managed to avoid crippling social trauma. Now everyone seemed to know both my name and that I couldn't manage a simple task everyone else had mastered.

One of the senior football players, Nick Gillan, his neck as thick as his skull, smirked at me. "Better start gardening."

"Christ, it'll grow back," Theresa said.

"It won't by Friday." Nick leaned toward me, so that I saw the scars from where he'd scratched his acne. "Better get to work, Alex. It's not going to grow back on its own."

I could smell the smoke on his breath under spearmint gum, stale and sugary. Behind him, the other football players chuckled. I swung my locker door shut. "Yeah, like your bald spot? That hair's never coming back."

Nick briefly touched the back of his head, where hair was already starting to thin. His mouth bent into a frown. "Fuck you, Winchester."

My eyes narrowed. "Asshole."

Mr. Hunter, the vice principal, appeared nearby. "Problem here?"

"Not with me," Nick said. Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his jacket, he sauntered away, the other football players behind him.

Mr. Hunter frowned at me. "Watch your language, Miss

Winchester.” Then he walked down the hall, limbs swinging in a poor imitation of the strut in old cowboy movies.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said.

Theresa shrugged. “He probably has money on the game.”

I hadn’t known how bad things would be if the football team’s winning streak was threatened. For years, they’d suffered humiliating defeats, ranked as the worst team in their league. And suddenly, after winning a few games, I was the one responsible for jeopardizing their chances of going to state. All day everyone kept harping on it, either as a joke or taking it seriously. People claimed I had hurt the team’s focus, or that the cheerleaders had better watch out when I was behind the wheel, or that I was a plant from our rival schools, out to kill the quarterback. When I was calm, I could say their behavior was immature and irrational, and they’d be lucky if they passed geometry or managed not to knock up their girlfriends. But by the time I followed Theresa into the cafeteria and heard my name at various tables, the calm had burned out of me.

Even when kids didn’t call out or approach me, I could feel eyes turn whenever I entered a room. At one table, girls from the soccer team pretended they’d been looking elsewhere when I turned to them. Last year when I was on JV, we’d all been friends. I quit when I finally got sick of my mom lecturing me after games about what I could have done better. Now I wished I’d stayed on the team just so they might stick up for me. I would have made varsity this year. In sophomore English,

we read *The Scarlet Letter*, and although I hadn't liked it at the time, now I felt like Hester Prynne was my kind of girl.

Theresa and I sat in the corner, joining our friends Maddie and Josh. I'd been friends with Maddie since elementary school, when we were both into horses, and Josh since middle school, when we both were into hating math class. They'd been talking about some band coming to Richmond, but stopped once Theresa and I sat down. I was sure they'd say something about my driving, but instead Josh asked, "You know Jim Wiley?"

All three of them looked at me. "Yeah," I said. "Everybody knows Jim. He drove into his house, remember?"

"No, I mean," Josh said, "like, are you friends?"

I balanced an apple in my palm before taking a bite. "Not really. I mean, I saw him on the way to school yesterday."

"What'd you do?" Theresa asked, grinning. "Hook up in the woods?"

"Yeah, it was really romantic," I said. "Bugs and wet leaves. I'm super outdoorsy." My mind flashed to Jim's perfect mouth and how I bet he would be an amazing kisser. "If Jim Wiley wanted to hook up in the woods, that's what I'd be doing right now."

"Like Tarzan and Jane," Maddie said. She took out a pen and started drawing purple flowers on her hands. "Except fewer gorillas, more squirrels."

I looked at Josh. "Did Jim say we were friends?"

Josh explained that he had been in Spanish class when people started talking about me, the car, and the football field. And then Jim said, "Like you guys are any better." I thought that was surprising enough, but Josh went on to describe Nick Gillan arguing with Jim about me, Nick saying I was some dumb bitch and they were going to lose the game because of me. "So Jim goes, 'Whatever. You sucked to begin with.' Nick's face got all red and he tried to jump out of his desk, which didn't really work because he's too big. Jim was, like, staring him down. I totally thought Nick was going to flip desks over or something, but then Señor Oria came in, so everyone had to shut up and sit down."

Maddie nodded. "Jim Wiley totally stood up for you."

I chewed a bite of apple and tried not to smile. "Yeah, well, he demolished part of his house. He probably thinks messing up the football field is so minor compared to that."

A few tables away, Jim Wiley was sitting with his senior friends but didn't seem to be saying much. He hadn't been in school long enough after driving into his parents' house to deal with any of the rumors. Some people had claimed he drank a whole bottle of Jack Daniel's. Others said he hated his family, and another group insisted that he snorted coke with the lacrosse team in the boys' bathroom. Whatever he'd done, it was cooler than freaking out behind the wheel.

I swallowed a bite of sandwich, but it was hard in my throat. I barely knew Jim; the first time he'd said more than "hey" to

me had been that morning in the woods. Except now he was sticking up for me when most of the student body thought I was an idiot. I hoped the rumors about him weren't true. I hoped he was mostly an okay person. That suddenly seemed important.

Just after last bell, Mr. Kane caught me in the hall. I thought he was going to tell me about more imaginary people I'd killed, but he'd calmed down a little since driver's ed. "Alex," he said, exhaling heavily. It was as if he'd been practicing how to say my name without swearing.

"Mr. Kane," I said.

"I just spoke with your mother about your situation. Your parents and I are going to have a conference and discuss our options. I really don't want to fail you, so be prepared—it's probably going to have to be a lot of extra work."

I could already imagine the lecture—how I wasn't applying myself, how I was totally capable, and I had to get over it already. "What did my mom say?" I asked.

"She's concerned, obviously," he said. He paused, frowning at his clipboard, and then met my gaze. His voice was softer. "She said she'd been feeling a little out of sorts, so please let her know that I can work around her schedule if she's under the weather."

"Right," I said, remembering how my mother had glazed over at breakfast. It was nothing, I told myself. Not like when

she'd been sick—or that's what we called it—years earlier.
"She's fine. You can meet whenever."

"Excellent. Until then, you can observe."

I tried to smile. Observing driver's ed—such a thrill. Public humiliation aside, I wondered if it would be better to fail the class.

"We'll make a driver out of you yet," Mr. Kane said.

"Can't wait," I said.

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