

EPILOGUE: YOU ROCK

LOLA WEST

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OLIVIA

It was one of those days when I was ready to kill my little sisters. They bickered all through their cereal, and then when we headed to the car Lucy booked it, jumping in the front seat and snapping her seatbelt closed like we were rushing to escape a tidal wave or a forest fire. We weren't. It was a gorgeous spring morning. The air was crisp and smelled clean and the last thing I wanted in the world was to be in the middle of my little sisters' utterly pointless arguments. Let's be honest, that time in life when puberty starts to sink its claws into your flesh, not that fun to be around.

Slow and calculating, Jess hung back, moseying to the car like she didn't have a care in the world. Then she stood about three feet away from the passenger side door and said, "Luce, wasn't that your book report on the counter in the kitchen?"

"Fuck," Lucy said under her breath. "Not again."

“Jesus, Luce,” I rolled my eyes. Already in the driver seat, I placed my mom sized tumbler of coffee in the cup holder, before continuing. “You’re ten. Watch your damn mouth.”

Lucy turned to me and pleaded with her whole body. “Will you go in and get it for me?”

I shook my head. “Not a chance kid. No way I’m getting in the middle.”

She unsnapped the buckle on her seat belt and threw open the door. As she walked past Jess, she snarled, “You’re the worst.”

“Not my fault, you can’t remember your stuff.” Jess chided.

Lucy flipped around so she was walking backwards towards the house. “Why should I? I’ve always got you to remind me.”

Jess took the comment as a compliment. It wasn’t, but it didn’t matter. As she settled into the front passenger seat she was smiling, high on triumphing over her sister.

I shook my head. “You could have just picked up the book report.” I noted hoping to point out that making Luce feel forgetful and stealing the front seat status wasn’t the nicest move.

Jess shrugged. “I could have. But she didn’t save a seat for me at the lunch table yesterday and I’m mad.”

Being a twin didn’t look easy. They were both precocious and mouthy. But, they didn’t have the same interests Lucy was outgoing, Jess was not. Sometimes they had periods of time where they were dead set on defining their space as

individuals. Sometimes that meant they weren't that nice to each other. It felt like a twin thing but it also felt like a middle school girl thing. They actually adored each other, mostly.

I took a deep breath. "Did you talk to her about it?"

Jess shook her head.

"Well maybe you should."

She shrugged.

The door to the house slammed and Lucy sulked her way to the backseat. When she was in the car and I heard the click of her seatbelt, I turned the key in the ignition and shifted the car into reverse. She was a dump of a car, a bumbling baby blue old ford taurus wagon from the 90's. But she ran and managed to make it to Boston and back so I was thankful for her.

The silence in the car was palpable. I ignored it, turned on the radio and rolled down my window letting the spring air rush against my face. Like the flutter of an insect's wing, an image of Fred batted through my mind. It was a particular moment when we were twirling in the freezing fountain, a look he gave me that said I want you. It was a hungry sexy look, a hot eyes look. But it was more than that. It was a deep look, a devouring look, a look that said he wanted me specifically, not just sex with me. He wanted to know me and love me and be possessed by me. It was an undeniable look and remembering it helped me breathe.

It was almost three months since our night together and he was still dancing through my mind each day. Knowing he

was out there made all the grueling moments better. But in the daylight I mostly tried not to think of him. He was deliciously distracting and bittersweet. I still ached for him. Still felt him hard and heavy between my legs. I still pined to hear the rumble of his laughter and to feel the graze of his fingertips on my skin. It was like he branded me. I couldn't even really look at other men. There was still only him. My longing for him didn't feel normal. It was only one night and still I felt more connection with him than anyone in my life.

I told myself that I had achieved my goal, that I wanted a night to remember and that I got one. With Fred, I had all the fireworks I could have possibly imagined. It was a perfect night. A fleeting love story for me to carry through all of my days. Our time together was hung in the air like a melancholy scene in one of our own old movies. It felt glamorous and shadowed and valuable, just like I wanted it too. But I hadn't expected to truly miss him. I didn't know that when I had something to say or nonsense to vent about, I would want to tell him. I didn't know that I'd feel so crushingly sad that I never told him about my sisters or my mom or my mundane job. I didn't realize that the memories of him would burn in my chest like acid. I longed to know his true name, thinking of him as Fred felt hollow like it was all a lie.

In the beginning I tried to push my thoughts of him away. I tried to center myself in the good things in my life focusing on art, joking with my sisters. I tried running, long afternoon runs during the hours when I wasn't at work and my mom had the girls. I even put a rubber band on my wrist and snapped it any time I thought of him. But no matter how I tried to cull them, memories of him would just pop

up. The curve of his smile, the intensity of his focus. Sometimes at night, when everything and everyone was quiet. I'd let myself get lost in them. I'd stay awake reliving every moment, pushing my mind to not lose a single second of the night we spent together.

Breaking through the silence Lucy snarked, "Jesus, what happened to you in Boston?"

Not one hundred percent sure what she was picking up on, I glanced in the rearview mirror so I could see her face. But before I saw her, I saw myself. Until this exact moment when Lucy called me out I hadn't realized what thinking of Fred might look like on the outside because I was too busy trying to manage how it felt on the inside. I looked tired and sort of lost. I'd let the purple in my hair fade away to nothing and there were dark circles under my eyes. I also looked thinner and generally unkempt. Still, I pretended not to notice and caught Lucy's gaze in the mirror. "What are you talking about?"

Lucy shook her head, seeming disappointed and then looked out the window rather than push me further. Jess who was sometimes less and sometimes more stubborn, took over Lucy's inquisition, saying, "You're weird. You're just different. Sometimes it's like you're not here."

"I'm here." I argued weakly.

From the backseat Luce said, "Sure, you're in the seat and driving the car but if you ask me, you left your personality in Boston."

I laughed. What else was I going to do? Then I said, "You're little shits, you know that right."

Smirking at me in the mirror, Luce said, "We're ten. Watch damn your mouth, Liv."

AFTER I DROPPED off the girls I went straight to work. The best thing about my job was that we didn't have a dress code. I got to wear whatever I wanted as long as I donned a red apron, which was embroidered across my bust with the name of the shop, Wilcox Discount Art Supply. Honestly, I was pretty sure that discount was a misnomer, or at the very least a concept from an outdated vision for the store, but the owner Artie Wilcox, inherited the shop from his parents so he had every right to go his own way. I would if my art supply shop owning parents named me Artie.

Artie was in his fifties, with a bushy gray beard. He never married and had a salty effeminate air about him. Sometimes I wondered if he was gay. He wasn't openly so, but it seemed like a possibility. And if he was, it was sad because in the town where we lived, in the generation he was part of gayness was not even vaguely acceptable. So, if Artie was a gay man he would never live that life. Either way, the life he lived was small. He had a little house on a little street. He came to the shop everyday, did all the jobs of managing, sales, stock boy, and cashier and always carried a off-white porcelain coffee mug with a scratched up image of Garfield on it and 'Art' scrawled in permanent marker across the top.

Other than Artie, there were only three employees at Wilcox Discount Art Supply. Jesse stocked the shelves, smoked cigarettes out the back door and basically, never said anything

other than a grumbled hello or goodbye. Cora, who was in her forties, worked the floor with me most of the time. She was a little too friendly, always telling you more of her business than you wanted to know. Cora loved kitting, bragged often that she only worked at Wilcox for the discount on her yarn. And finally my favorite fellow supply slinger, Clarence, a tall thin middle aged black man who knew bucketloads about jazz music and used a camera to pull the soul of someone to the surface.

Clarence and I only worked together on Tuesdays. But it was a Tuesday and I was looking forward to his company. He was the only person I'd told anything about Fred. And to be honest, I wasn't even really that forthcoming with him.

When I got to the shop, he was sitting on the stool behind the register, leaning over the counter, looking at something on his phone.

Without looking up at me, he said. "You know those memes that say things like 'if you see anything other than a dog, you're a pervert' or whatever. You know the ones that are obviously sexual."

"Um-hmmm."

"What does it mean that I never ever see the dog? Or the woman reading. Like it's all sucking and fucking to me. Where's the goddamn dog?"

I laughed. Then I said, "Beats me, I never see the dog either."

"Good to know, I'm in bad company." He finally looked up, smiling. "Ah, continuing to look like hell warmed over, I see."

I rolled my eyes. “Gimme an effing break, Clar. I’m the de facto mother figure to two middle-school-aged hooligans.”

“More like savants. And also that is no excuse for coming to work in clothes that could clearly double as sleepwear.”

“They’re yoga pants.” I argued.

He glared at me incredulously before sighing, “If you ask me, they have heartbreak city written all over them.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. But I’ll live.”

Appearing out of nowhere like an apparition, Artie popped up from behind a display. “Is that why you’ve lost your shimmer, Liv? Someone break your heart?”

I hadn’t really meant to tell anyone other than Clarence about Fred, but not much I could do about it now. I crossed the room and bent down to store my purse behind the counter before answering, “Kind of.”

“When you went on your trip, right? The weekend in Boston.” Again, I was surprised that like my sisters, Artie was able to pinpoint the change in me to the exact moment of its occurrence. I hadn’t realized that my melancholy was so obvious.

I didn’t chat. I just nodded.

Artie didn’t let it go. In fact, his face perked up in a way that felt utterly unfamiliar and he took a step closer towards Clarence and I as if he couldn’t control his need to know more. “Was it a whirlwind affair or did you know him before you went.”

“Just a date,” I said.

“One fantastic night?” He smiled, his cheeks bunching and glowing with an overall sense of merriment.

I nodded.

“Have you spoken since?” He asked.

I shook my head no.

Artie’s eyes widened and he appeared startled when he said. “Oh heavens, why not?”

“They trusted serendipity.” Clarence deadpanned.

“Ucghch,” Artie groaned. “You young people are so lively and so incredibly irrational.”

I laughed. “Art, it’s not like I could run off to Boston to be with him. I have to be here.”

He shook his head, “No, but you could have stayed in touch. Enjoyed each other in some way. We don’t get an endless supply of love in our lives, Liv.”

He said the words simply. But I heard them like they were echoing through a desolate canyon.

THE DAY AT WORK DRAGGED. And dragged. And dragged. But eventually it was over. My mom got the girls up from school, but she asked me to stop at the market and grab a few essentials on my way home. By the time I got back to the house, she’d be on her way out back to the hospital to pick up another night shift after sleeping most of the day.

I strolled through the isles of the Giant Food Store grabbing the items on my mother's list. Mostly it was things for the girls' lunches, bread, turkey, gogurts, fruit roll ups, chips, generic boxes of cereal. Even though my body felt slow and achy, tired from my work day, I didn't rush. I walked aimlessly through the store, not quite ready to be finished. It was weird, but supermarket shopping felt like stress relief. It was brainless. Moving through the layout of the store, the aisles filled with necessary things, I could just get lost in a zone of ease. I was being responsible, helping my family, without really having to do anything hard. No one was asking for my help. It was peaceful and almost felt meditative.

So I strolled up and down, past the canned goods and the crackers, past the pasta and the cleaning supplies. I just walked and browsed, thinking of Fred the whole time. Remembering how he held my hand and the cart as we traipsed through Target. Remembering how it felt to stand next to him and know he was watching me, wanting me. In the process, I grabbed a few things I needed, disposable razors, deodorant, shampoo, coffee, a big bag of Tootsie Pops. Eventually, I had to move on. So I checked my mom's list one more time and noticed that I'd forgotten eggs. I savored my last few minutes, slowly moving down the dairy aisle. My eyes rolled past the cheese, the butter, the milk, the yogurt and then I got stuck on a red and white can of Reddi wip.

There was nothing particularly notable about that particular can of Reddi wip. It looked like all the others in the row. But I just stood there staring at it. People pushed their carts by me, circled around me like I was a broke down vehicle in the road. And in some ways I was. I was at a crossroads,

struggling to decide which direction to go. I could continue on my path and head right for the eggs or I could change direction, cross the aisle, grab the Reddi wip and post an image of it to Fred and Ginger's instagram. I already knew the caption: Fantasies not yet realized. #fredandginger #lustandfound #hereslookingatyoukid

ERIC

I pulled open the door to our apartment building and crossed through the lobby, leaving the crisp spring air behind me. Lately, I'd stopped using the elevator. Every night when I got home from the studio I climbed the stairs. All eleven flights. Something about the monotony and the exertion blocked out the ugliness that lurked all around me. It was twenty minutes when I didn't feel anything but the huff and puff of the oxygen in and out of my lungs.

Garrett was dead. He was dead, just gone. I could still hear the sound of the pulley lowering him into the ground. He'd been gone for almost two months and everything felt changed. We were all different. Bruno withdrew. Horse basically disappeared, dropped out of school, went home to his foster parents and became unreachable. But I kept reaching, knowing someday he would need us. Meredith, Kelly, James, Marcus, Josh and I, we just weathered the darkness like piles holding up a pier. The water all around us was rough and brutal and still we stood.

The last time I saw Garrett he popped his head into my room and tried to convince me to go out and party with them, but I was so buried in my longing for Ginger that I just wanted to hole up with my computer and work, so I pushed him away, acted cold and detached. I wasn't even sure I smiled. Now, I wished I'd gone. I wished I had just a few more hours of his company. I was angry too. Angry, he was broken. Angry he was an addict. Angry, I didn't help him. Just angry in every way.

And when I wasn't angry, I was guilty. Guilty, I could still get my work done. Guilty, when I laughed at a sitcom. Guilty because sometimes when I was reminded of Ginger, I'd smile to myself. Guilty because I missed her almost as much as I missed him. Guilty, I kept breathing, that I had a future he didn't have.

So, like always. I worked. I put my head down, blocked out everything else and worked. I was in the studio day and night. I took on every project I was offered and even helped on some that weren't mine. If I wasn't in class or sleeping I was working. I ate breakfast, lunch and dinner in the studio. But the work was different now. Since Ginger, I wasn't broken about it anymore. I worked for me, not to prove anything to anyone, but because I loved my work. I worked because the work felt like passion. The work felt like thriving and playing in the way that Ginger inspired. So I worked because it reminded me to feel joy. And then at the very end of the day, I would drag myself back to our apartment and flop down on the couch and have a beer or a snack or take in a movie with whoever was around. Sometimes that meant everyone, but it mostly meant James and Mer.

James and Mer seemed to numb their grief with Netflix, like an inordinate amount of binge watching. They watched almost anything. Currently, they were thoroughly engrossed in season two of *Private Practice* - that show about a female obstetrician who left *Grey's Anatomy* to run a medical practice with her friends in Santa Monica. It was mostly a soap opera and really not my thing. But if I wanted to sit with them at night, watching a couple episodes of whatever they were binging was a package deal. Suffice to say that I knew more about Addison Montgomery than I should.

That was the plan for tonight. Climb two hundred and thirty one stairs. Enter the apartment. Hang my coat by the door. Grab a beer from the fridge. Pop the top. Carry it to the couch. Hang with Addison, James and Mer, and of course whoever else decided to show up. But the plan changed. For the first time in two months, when I opened the door I was greeted by something other than hallow glances and the sound of the television drowning away.

Instead, Mer came bounding towards me, skidding on the shiny wood floor in her hot pink socks. She was grinning as she spewed all kinds of happy energy at me. "Holy Jesus Fuck and half! I have been waiting fucking hours for you to come home."

I laughed. I had no idea why she was so excited but just the presence of her excitement felt like a dream from another time, and it was infectious. Behind her James looked happy too. He was standing taller and the corners of his eyes were lifted. He almost looked like the laid back version of himself that was omnipresent before Garrett died.

Taking a certain delight in delaying whatever it was Mer wanted. I kind of of ignored her. Smirking, I focused on

taking off my jacket and turning to hang it on the hook by the door.

Mer laughed at me. “You can delay my delight all you want, mother fucker. But I promise what I have to tell you is so much more fun for you than it is for me...” She paused and then dropping the word like a heavy hammer she said, “Fred.”

My hands stilled. Fred. She called me Fred. Mer called me Fred. Whatever she was about to tell me was about Ginger. Energy ripped thought me. A spool of desperate need unraveled inside my gut, and I flipped around and grabbed Mer’s arms right beneath her shoulders as I cried out, “Tell me.”

Even I heard the chaos in my own reaction. The mere thought of Ginger had me unhinged. Sometimes I couldn’t believe that we’d only had hours together because I didn’t think I would ever be the same. She had changed me. No matter how ugly or crazy or irrational, I missed her in a way that felt as sick and sad as losing Garrett.

Trapped in my grip, Mer cackled. “She misses you too, dude. She’s thinking about you too. If you let me go, I’ll show you”

I shook my head, freeing my mind from the chaos that gripped me and released Mer, grumbling “Sorry.”

Mer didn’t seem to care. She reached into her back pocket and pulled out her phone. She clicked at the screen for a few moments before she handed it to me. And then there it was, a digital message in a bottle. An image posted to our instagram feed. A goofy picture of a can of Reddi Wip with a caption that acknowledged all the dirty we meant to get into and maybe someday still world.

She sent me a lifeline, albeit a subtle one. She wasn't saying here's my name. She wasn't saying come find me, Fred. But in her way, she was saying all is not lost. We are still connected, and I want us to be. It was enough. Someday Ginger would know Eric not Fred but until then we would have this. It was modern day equivalent of anonymous love letters.

This tiny little string, this odd digital connection would help us outwit the unrelenting question of serendipity. I knew for sure. Ginger had just made sure that we would find our way back together and when we did, I was going to love her in every way possible.

**SNEAK PEEK : FALLING FOR THE
OPPOSITION**

Coming March 2021

DREW

The first time I saw her, she was dancing. No, not just dancing—something else. She was fucking flying, communing with the music like it was in her blood cells, rushing, pushing, flowing through her veins. I was at Bonnaroo—well, sort of. I wasn't sleeping in the dirt, sweaty and camping like she probably was. I was staying in an air-conditioned tour bus and living like a rock star. I was there because it's what you do when you're in college. You drive eleven hours with your rich friends. You leave the pressure of being a senator's son at home. You remind everyone not to take your picture if you're holding a joint, and then you get high and drunk and you listen to the music and make memories that last a lifetime.

When I saw her, it was the final day of the festival, really late in the afternoon, maybe even evening. The sun was dipping low, spilling out all hot and yellow over the horizon. I was in some VIP viewing area, drinking a beer out of a plastic cup, surrounded by guys in khaki shorts with straight-haired blonds swaying in front of them or pressed against their

laps. I was drunk. Not ugly, sloppy drunk, but my guard was down. She was maybe 60 feet away—to my left and in front of me—not in VIP. It was stupid hot out. Sticky hot. It didn't stop her though. She was full-on dancing.

She was the opposite of the girls I knew. The girls I knew were linear. They were straight up and down—thin and pretty. They were like porcelain dolls. Small, delicate, dainty girls who wanted to be charming accessories. Girls who made you feel like they didn't sweat, let alone shit. Girls who played tennis and golf and talked about other girls, and clothes, and manicures, and diamonds. Girls who had coming-out parties and wore headbands. Girls who looked like my parents and wanted my parents' life.

She was not linear. She was round, soft, plush—so fleshy. I saw her from behind first. She was wearing jean shorts that were a little too tight so her flesh puckered at the waist, just tight enough that I could see the full cut of her ass as she rocked her hips. Her top was this light-weight sexy hippy girl top. The kind of top that ties behind your neck, and her shoulders were bare, tan, kissed with pink from being in the sun all day. Her dark hair was tied up in a bun, minus some sweaty strands that had escaped and were plastered to her neck. There was a small tattoo or a birthmark behind her ear. I couldn't tell from where I was standing. Her arms stretched above her head, her shoulders rolling to the rhythm of the music. Languid fucking movements. Jesus. When she circled in place so that she was facing me, I finally saw her face. It was as though the music owned her—possessed her features and overwhelmed her. Her eyes were closed and she was biting her lower lip. She also wasn't wearing a bra and she had real tits, big enough that going braless bordered on obscene. A

sliver of her round belly was visible at the hem of her shirt.

Watching her made my chest ache, it made my mouth wet, it made my dick hard. I didn't even know who was playing anymore. I wanted to be closer to her. I wanted to be on her. To kneel in the dirt in front of her, cup her ass in my hands, and rest my cheek on her belly. Don't get me wrong, I wanted to do all kinds of things to her and with her, but I had this overwhelming feeling that pressing my face against her hot sweaty body would make me feel calm. I never feel calm. And all of this... watching her, wanting her, it was completely inappropriate because I was standing with my arm around my date for the weekend, Candice Huffington.

When the song ended, I shifted my weight and quickly adjusted myself, hoping no one would notice that I had a raging hard-on. My movements jostled Candice, and she looked up at me, smiling, completely unaware. I attempted to smile back but it didn't quite happen. I was disgusting. I mean, sure, Candice was not my girlfriend. Not even close. She was a girl I met at my parents' country club. She was nice, like all the other blonds in the VIP section. She giggled at my jokes, was concerned I was drinking too much, and wore a strand of white pearls to Bonnaroo. What was up with that? My parents liked her. I liked her. I invited her, with my friends, but I hardly knew her. I'd fucked her though. Just once.

Fuck.

I was disgusting—an animal with no control.

I glanced back to the dancing girl. She had a bag on her shoulder and she was talking to a girl standing next to her.

She told her something and then she moved to leave. I leaned over to get closer to Candice's ear, "I gotta go," I grumbled. Smooth, as usual. Candice looked at me quizzically—her pale eyebrows pinched. I leaned in again, "To the bathroom." She started to gather her things like she was going to come with me. I shook my head. "I'll be right back." She smiled. She always smiled. I was a dick.

I strolled towards the back of the VIP section in the direction of the bathrooms. I could still see the girl making her way through the crowd. She moved quickly and strategically with no fear, owning her trajectory through the hoard as if the seas parted for her. I knew I was going to follow her; that was my intention. The only question was if she would head towards her camp, the restrooms, or the food venues. Obviously, the restrooms would have allowed me to utterly avoid suspicion, but honestly, I didn't care that much either way. When she headed for the food and drink, I barely glanced behind me to see if anyone was watching. Once I got close to her, ten to fifteen feet behind her, I let her set the pace and watched her hips sway as she walked.

It had rained the night before and there was mud everywhere. She didn't swerve to avoid the puddles. She just tromped right through, letting little speckles of dirt stick to her shins and calves. I was glad she wasn't prissy. She didn't look prissy. I followed her lead, my steps sinking each time they hit the muddy ground. She kept her bag close to her hip, holding it with her hand, and I couldn't help but think that it mattered—that whatever was in that bag, money or whatever—she needed it. I didn't know that feeling. Money came easily to me. I was born with it, and I would most likely die with it. Everything I had was replaceable.

She got in line at a stand that sold Philly cheesesteaks and I felt a tinge of joy that she wasn't a vegan or a vegetarian. It's not that there is anything wrong with people who fight for animal's rights or choose vegetables as their mainstay because they think it's healthy. But I didn't want her to be that. I wanted her to be untethered, wild, and vast, just like her dancing. I didn't want her to be clean or fearful. I wanted her to be greasy and rich. I wanted her to be dangerous. I wanted her to skydive. I wanted her to be the girl who sits on the railing of the balcony on the hundredth floor, the girl who jumps with you—not before or after you. I wanted her to be gluttonous.

I lingered back a bit, glancing about to make it look like I was undecided about what to eat. I was really wondering if I should get in line behind her. I didn't feel all that hungry, but the smell of the sizzling meat wasn't unappealing. Normally, with any other girl, I would have engaged sooner, but with this girl, I kept wondering how you feel about the guy that hits on you when you're in line for a cheesesteak? Do you think that guy is a turd? What if his breath smells of beer and other sundries? Are you repulsed by him?

Frozen by anxiety, I let myself watch her again. From where I was standing, I could see that the markings behind her ear were a tattoo. Small and unobtrusive, a constellation of asterisks. She looked around, scanning the crowd as if she was searching for someone. Who? An icy tightness constricted my chest. I considered that she might be waiting for a guy. Her boyfriend? Sheer jealousy propelled me forward. I crossed from where I was standing to get in line behind her. From this close, I could smell her. Three days baking in the hot sun wasn't good for anyone, but her odor wasn't rank. She was musky, earthy like the

woods, a simple, soft human scent that made me want her more.

There were three people ahead of us, but for me, they weren't people. They were increments of time. Each person represented maybe a few minutes, which meant, best-case scenario, I had nine minutes to make an impact. Nine minutes to get her to notice me. Nine minutes to strike up a conversation so valuable that she would want me. Or at the very least, nine minutes to earn myself a tenth minute. She continued scanning the crowd. She looked over her shoulder... in my direction. It was my opening. No gimmicks, just conversation. Deep breath.

I looked right at her, the words about to drip from my tongue, and then I saw recognition in her eyes. She pressed up on her tip-toes, waving her hand in the air, bouncing. Oh, God—tits. I didn't want to embarrass myself by having her first exchange with me be my eyes molesting her, so I looked at my feet.

“Joe! Joe!” she hollered, still waving frantically. A very tall gangly guy with a neatly trimmed beard and mirrored aviator sunglasses brushed past me. He was good looking in a grungy, fashion-y way. Not great looking, but man enough. His arms wrapped around her and he lifted her from the ground. She wrapped her thighs around his waist, squeezing her whole body against him.

“God, I missed you,” she cooed, and I tasted vomit at the back of my throat. She was supposed to be mine, but apparently, I didn't have nine minutes. I didn't have any minutes. She already belonged to some dude with shaggy chestnut hair and leather bracelets. I lingered for a moment, gnawing the inside of my cheek. He released her, returning her to the

ground but continuing to hold her hand. Once they turned their attention to what they were going to order and share, I fucked off.

I strolled through the crowd in the direction of the campgrounds. There were people everywhere and it was an eclectic group. Lots of regulars—everything from preppy frat boy types like me to hippie types like her, but there were also crazy motherfuckers. People covered in neon paint. People in full-feathered Native American headdresses. People on stilts. People in tutus and sailor costumes. I hated them all. I wanted to snarl, to growl. I wanted to be rabid. My brow furrowed and I clenched my fists. I needed to break something. Fuck someone up... get fucked up... get fucked... something. What I really wanted was to punch my fist into his neatly trimmed jaw and watch the impact in slow motion like you do in the movies. I wanted to see his whole face crumple as if it was going to permanently lose its shape. I wanted to see the blood on his lips, the shock and awe in his eyes. I wanted him to be afraid of me. I wanted him to piss himself when people said my name. But that shit was way the fuck out of proportion, considering I'd never even spoken to her.

So, I tried to breathe. I leaned my back against a tree and then let myself slide down until my ass hit the ground. I rested my elbows on my knees and held my head in my hands. The ache that claws at your face right before you cry crept into my cheeks. I closed my eyes and pressed my palms against them. I swallowed and sucked the emotion down. There was no way I would go all weak over some hippy chick that I'd never even spoken to—no way. I thought about going back to VIP. Candice was probably wandering around looking for me. I could go back to her.

She'd let me fuck her again. I knew she would, but I didn't want to. Fucking Candice was cold. She spread her legs and welcomed me and she made enough noise to seem like she wanted me, but her eyes were empty. Fucking Candice was a lie. A dirty lie. Candice wanted to be the girl dating the senator's son. Going back to Candice wasn't an option. So, I just sat there until it was really dark out.

After a while, a group of geeky looking assholes congregated around one of those one-piece benches and a picnic table that was off to my left. I could see them because they had a lantern, but I was pretty sure they couldn't see me. There were five of them, but one stood out as their leader. He was a boney dude with hard, thin features. He looked crooked—gnarly, like a kid who wore a trench coat to high school. A kid no one liked. Or maybe a kid whose life's mission was to hack into the CIA. He didn't look like a good kid, but not bad either—just unwanted. The others were also variations on this theme. They looked like dudes that loved girls who played video games.

They were smoking cigarettes. I didn't smoke, but it seemed like something to do, so I got to my feet. These kinds of guys weren't usually down with the likes of me. I was too clean-cut for their tastes. I reminded them of the footballer who gave it to their girlfriends in high school. I reminded them of the money their parents didn't have. I was that bullshit jock, that asshole frat boy who had it easy, who didn't know what it meant to survive on the outside. They didn't know shit. For most of us, there was no inside, no in-crowd. We were always alone. Always unsure and unsupported—following all the rules because we didn't have a choice. But it didn't matter. Not to punks like this, and honestly, I deserved their hate. I had done it all—pissed in their water

bottles, thrown them in dumpsters, taken their little sisters' virginity, all to be cool.

Still, I approached them—cocky, smirking. I wanted to feel the rush of control. I wanted to eat their discomfort. Their conversation halted as I hoisted myself onto the table and rested my feet on the bench. They smelled homeless, but after three days in the mud, the dancing girl was the only one who didn't.

“What's up, dudes?” I tossed the words at them. My voice was steady and deep, overly confident.

A small guy with acne and spikey hair at the end of the table rolled his eyes, and the leader who was sitting with his hands on the table by my hip shook his head, raised his eyebrows in sarcasm, and said, “Not much, man. Can we help you?” It wasn't a warm and fuzzy welcome, but I didn't want it to be.

“Oh, ya know,” I jostled his shoulder and felt him tense up, “I was just sitting over there enjoying the fanfare when, suddenly, I had an undeniable craving for a smoke, and well, wouldn't you know? Here you are... smoking.” I smiled a tight-lipped smile.

He glanced at his friends. I noticed his hair was greasy and felt the rumble of something secret. Something they knew and I didn't, but I didn't care that much. He looked back at me, crossed his arms over his chest, and smiled the smile of a trickster—curled lips, all teeth. “Sure, dude. Twenty bucks.” He said it casually. No fear. I had no power over him.

“Twenty bucks?”

“Yeah, man. Cigarettes are precious cargo in this joint. And honestly, I’d rather give them to hot chicks than to you.” He pulled the pack out of his pocket and tapped it against his palm. He had a long angular nose that was crooked like the rest of him. “So, if you really want one, you’re gonna have to pay for it.”

“Fuck you, man. That’s sexist.” The geek chuckled, and for a split second, we were friends. I sighed and shook my head as I pulled my wallet out and handed the guy a twenty. “Plenty more where that came from, right?” Smirk, our friendship ended.

He scowled at me and tugged a cigarette from the pack. I took it. “You want a light?” he asked. Instead of answering, I bent towards him, cupping my hands to protect the lighter from the wind, which had picked up a touch since the sun went down. It took a couple of tries for the lighter to catch. It didn’t bother me. I liked the zippering sound of the flint wheel. Eventually, the flame glowed hot and I sucked in air, igniting the cherry tip of the cigarette.

I knew immediately. My very first drag was like acid. It burned my throat and smelled like gasoline. But I couldn’t be the loser twice in one day. So, I stood up, took a second drag, exhaled, and said, “Thanks for, nothin’, dude.”

I had been drinking and smoking weed all day—that plus whatever those assholes doped me with was a lethal combo. I started to get dizzy a few minutes after I walked away. It seemed like everything around me started to speed up while I slowed down. I walked into people. Colors raced by me, blurring my vision. I was hot, really hot. I pulled my polo shirt over my head and when the air hit my chest, I freaked out. I thought I was naked. I felt the air on my balls. But,

when I looked down, I was still wearing my shorts. People near me were talking and laughing and their voices were shrill. I tried to cover my ears, but I could still hear them. The anger from earlier started to percolate under my skin, and I clawed at my own chest. I had to get away from these people, but they were everywhere. I thought of the tree from earlier. I thought of Candice. I thought of the girl. I wanted the girl. I remembered stumbling along looking for her—and then there was nothing for a while.

Well, not nothing. Shards of something, but nothing decipherable. So many sounds, but more than anything, flashes of moments—frozen images in time. Bodies, sweaty and swaying to the music. Someone dancing with a glow stick. A paper plate on the ground. Blood all over my hands. Water spilling over my face and shoulders. The moon. Vomiting. The moon again.

Finally, clarity started to descend. I was on the ground. My neck and shoulders were cricked funny and I had a skull-bending headache. I heard laughing. Something tickled my abdomen. The acrid smell of vomit filled my nostrils. And there was throbbing. My hands were throbbing. More laughter. And voices.

“On his face?”

“Totally, man.”

“What should I write?”

“Ass”

“No, Dickhead.”

Something fluttered against my forehead—the same tickle I had felt on my abs. It was calming, like when my mom

tickled my back when I was a kid. More laughter and clicking. Clicking? No, a shuttering. My brain rattled. I knew the shuttering sound but couldn't place it. It was a bad sound. The shuttering was a camera phone. Whoever they were, they were taking pictures. I tried to open my eyes—but it felt like they were glued shut.

There was a new voice. She was angry, "What's wrong with you?"

"Just harmless fun," one of the voices sneered.

"This is what you call fun? Degrading another human being?"

"Whatever." I could sense eyes rolling. I would have done the same if I ran into the goody-two-shoes who was currently acting as my savior.

"I have an idea, why don't you take your fun elsewhere before I call the cops!" Her tone was unwavering; there was nothing empty about her threat.

"We would be long gone before they got here," a different voice chided.

"Okay, no problem. Let's test your theory." And then I heard dialing.

"Bitch!" someone spat, but they were moving away, feet shuffling.

I pushed myself to stir. A girl I'd once dated—Molly? Meghan, maybe? I couldn't remember. Pretty though, a strawberry blond—curtains matched the drapes, if you know what I mean. Anyway, she had made me go to a yoga class with her, and the teacher's instruction came to mind,

“Slowly, very slowly, bring life back into the tips of your fingers and the end of your toes. Circle your wrists—your elbows, awaken your knees, your calves—and when you’re ready, roll onto your right side into a fetal position. This is a safe space—a position that nurtured you for nine months. Finally, with great care, come to a seated position.” Her voice had been so calm. One of the most calming sounds I ever heard, but when I broke up with that girl, I never went to yoga again.

My body felt heavy, unruly, but I managed to sit up, and when I opened my eyes, the dancing girl was squatted in front of me. It was almost dawn, so the light was funny and my vision was blurry. I shook my head, thinking maybe I was imagining her—placing her face over the actual woman who had come to my rescue. But when I opened my eyes again, it was still her face, her pouty fat lips, her big dark eyes full of concern. Embarrassment caught in my throat, and I couldn’t speak.

“You okay?” she asked, her voice soft, even calmer than the yoga instructor. I nodded. “You want water?” I nodded again. She opened her bag and pulled out a water bottle. It was her water bottle, not a disposable one. She handed it to me. I wrapped my fingers around it. I was slow and uncoordinated. My body felt swollen, like it was made of bread dough. I sucked hungrily at the bottle’s plastic nipple, and when I returned it to her, it was almost empty. She didn’t seem phased. She just took it from me and put it back in her bag. “I’m gonna find you help. Don’t move.” She started to stand.

My embarrassment quickly obliterated, replaced by panic. It didn’t matter that Bonnaroo had a “No Questions Asked”

policy, a senator's son doesn't show up at the medical tent. Period. Before she was standing, I managed a hoarse, "No." She squatted again and looked at me quizzically.

"No?" Her voice had a very physical presence—a righteousness—like a solider.

"No," I said again, this time stronger.

"You can't get in trouble," she argued more gently, touching my leg. Her touch exploded on my skin, rippling aftershocks up my thigh and into my chest.

"I'm fine." I shifted and attempted to stand, but I was weak and she had to help me to my feet.

"You're not fine. You don't look fine. That hand looks bad." She nodded in the direction of my left hand. It was black and blue in a couple of places, pretty swollen, and there was crusty brown blood on all my knuckles. I had punched something. Hard.

"It's fine." She was not convinced. "Thank you," I mumbled. She looked at me, searching my face, trying to understand my behavior. There was nothing else to say. How could I have her now? Who would want the guy that stood in front of her? She was still looking right at me. Still searching my face, her hands still on me from when she helped me up. I shifted my weight backwards and she dropped her hands. I cleared my throat, tried to smile, and said, "Really, thanks." She nodded. *Goodbye, dancing girl.* I turned and started walking slowly in the direction of my tour bus. I could hear that she hadn't moved, but I didn't look back.

"Wait," she called out. I stood still, but I didn't turn around. She jogged over and stopped so that she was once again

standing in front of me, facing me. There was something in her eyes that I was unfamiliar with—something decent. She opened her bag again, took out a green bandana, and poured the last gulps of water from her water bottle onto it. She then braced her left hand against my temple and used her right hand to rub the wet bandana against my forehead. She was trying to wipe away the vandalism—trying to make it so what happened to me wouldn't be so visible. I wanted to cry. At first, she wiped gently. Worry filled her face, scrunching her features. She pressed deeper—rubbing hard.

“It's permanent marker,” she sighed. I looked away, swallowed, and looked back.

“You reap what you sow, right?” I meant it as a joke but it came out wrong. It wasn't snide, it was sorrowful.

She searched my face again, and then to my surprise, she hugged me. I was tense at first but when she didn't let go, I relaxed into her. I was so exhausted but not because some assholes doped me or because I had the word “dickhead” scrawled across my forehead or even because she had a boyfriend. I was exhausted because I spent so much time trying to get it right, trying to be the son my father wanted. Her head rested against my bare chest and just like I thought—me against her and her against me—it was like a salve. It was like the bronchia in my lungs were truly functioning for the first time—like I'd never taken a real breath before. Everything in my body relaxed. I pushed my nose into her hair and pulled her tighter to me. My heart was pounding against her ear. It was too much—too raw, too real. I bit my lip hard.

When we separated, she reached up and ran the back of her hand across my jawline. It was personal. Intimate. She was kind. I mattered, and she didn't even know me. "Maybe, you're right," she said softly like we were kissing. "Maybe you reap what you sow or maybe the world is just full of assholes." When she dropped her hand, I knew for sure. I could never have this girl and not because she had a boyfriend. This girl was bigger than me. She was better than me. I didn't deserve this girl.

I stepped back. If I couldn't have her, I had to get away from her. "I gotta go." The words came out hard, cruel even. I tried to soften it, "I... um... I'm sure my buddies are wondering where I am."

"I could help you back to your site?" she offered.

"No, I got it. I'm good."

She offered me the bandana, "To cover your head?"

"It's okay. It's fine." I deserved to be branded even if she didn't want me to be.

She pushed the bandana into my hand. "Just take it."

I did. I stuffed it into my pocket. I wasn't going to argue with her. I stepped to the side, preparing to walk away, but then it occurred to me that I would never see her again and I didn't even know her name. I had to touch her one more time. I wanted to kiss her, but I couldn't, so I grabbed her waist, pulled her to me, pressing my lips against her neck. The tone between us shifted quickly. A tiny shudder escaped her lips. I didn't expect it, and I reacted before I could think, shifting my lips, taking her earlobe between my teeth and pressing my thigh between her legs. The second shudder

was deeper—more of a growl. I growled back. My own sound shook me. There was heat coming off her and I wanted so much to absorb it, to run my hand up her thigh and slip my fingers deep into her wetness, to make her shudder over and over again until there was nothing left. But, I couldn't. I wasn't going to take this girl and poison her with my shit. I wanted to know that I had left this girl intact. I wanted to know that she was out there—that something good, something whole and normal existed.

“Fuck...” I pulled back, ran my hand through my hair, then started backing away, still facing her. “I’m sorry... God, I’m so sorry.” I was shaking. She just stood there. She didn’t smile or try to play it off like it was alright. She didn’t say anything. She just watched me. She looked sad, her face still. I turned and kept walking. I walked straight across the site. I passed through the campgrounds and didn’t stop to take a breath until I was standing beneath the Ferris wheel; it was turned off so it felt creepy like a ghost town or a post-apocalyptic world. It wasn’t really light out yet and everything, everywhere was still. I pulled the green bandana from my pocket, held it to my nose and wished it to smell like her, but it didn’t.

When I got back to the tour bus, there was a sock duct-taped to the door and my buddy, Pete, was sitting on the ground. I’d known Pete most of my life. His dad was a corporate lobbyist for big oil, so we were both prep school brats together in DC. We didn’t mean to go to the same college, but it ended up that way, and then it was like a done deal—same frat, same friends, lifers. People often thought we were brothers, even though we really didn’t look alike. Pete was blond with brown eyes and brown facial hair. I had dark hair and green eyes, but we were built similarly, tall, athletic

—nothing that says obsessive bodybuilder, but nothing that says couch potato either. Pete was just my family and people could tell. He was the guy I'd call if I needed help getting rid of a body.

“Jesus, Drew! What the fuck, man? Where have you been?” He was never one to pull punches, and I respected him for it.

I didn't have an answer. I didn't want to talk about what happened, so I rubbed my face with my hand for a second and then asked, “Where's Candice?”

Pete nodded towards his Land Rover. “Sleeping with Kate.” Katie Sullivan was our third. We grew up with her too. She was a year younger than us and an athlete who could whip both our asses in all things, particularly tennis. I swear, if she could have pledged our frat, she would have, just to remind us who was boss. She was good—oddly stiff and very controlled, but good. “She's pissed, dude.”

“Candice?”

“No, man. That one is like all worried and shit. Katie's pissed. She's more familiar with your...” He paused, searching for the right words. “Shall we say, extracurricular behaviors.” Our whole life, Pete made a constant joke out of the PR spin machine that was my life. “She had to take care of Candice all night. It was not cool, dude.” He paused, smirked, and pointed towards my face, “Although, I think that shit on your forehead might help your case a little...” He snickered.

“What's with the sock?”

“Conner.”

Conner was the other friend we'd come to Bonnaroo with. He was also in our fraternity. Pete and I had met him as pledges. We trusted him because when we were pledging, he was always the brother who stepped in when he felt shit was going too far. He was a funny guy, the kind of guy everyone liked—the ladies included. The whole ride down from DC, Conner kept making "If the tour bus is a-rockin', don't come a-knockin'" jokes, and apparently, he wasn't kidding. I sat down next to Pete and leaned against the bus. He looked at me with a serious expression. "You look like shit, dude. You okay?"

I nodded and then we were quiet. Pete always seemed to know when to be still and when to push. The bus door inched opened and a petite olive-skinned girl with black hair emerged. She was moving very slowly, stealthily, sneaking out. Pete and I watched her. She looked disheveled, there was a red lipstick stain around her mouth and her mascara had smeared and run. I realized that we needed to say something or else we were going to startle her.

"Hey," I said quietly. The girl jumped, dropping the bus door so that it slammed. So much for not surprising her. She looked at Pete and me for a split second, then ran off in the direction of the other campgrounds. A groggy Conner appeared in her place, hollering after her, "What? No breakfast?"

We laughed.

And then it was time to go. Time to pack up the Land Rover and leave the dancing girl behind.

LUA

Joe, my best friend, is basically a stubborn asshat. As usual, I was standing at his bedroom door waiting for him to be “decent,” which, for any normal human being means dressed—like clothed—like not naked. For Joe, “decent” means fashionable, which he pronounces fah-shun-ah-ble; I think the pronunciation is similar to saying tar-jay instead of target, in other words, trying to make something seem like more than it really is... but that’s Joe. He’s obsessed with living a life that’s explosive, and when that’s your bag, that’s your bag. We’ve all got to dance to the beat that suits us, but Joe’s version is wow. Just wow. To be clear, explosive is not my calling. I like my life soft, rich, and kind, like folk songs, or blurry and wish-filled like a full moon right before it snows. Conversely, I also appreciate practical and useful, so fah-shun-ah-ble is not me, mostly because it takes a lot more time than “decent.”

Historically, I would have chosen to just stand there and sigh, waiting for Joe, but I’ve been impatient lately. And, for

Christ's sake, I was wearing a hand-me-down bathing suit and a ratty old beach towel. This was not an instance that required showboating. The plan was to go to the lake. The lake on OUR property. My dad and Joe's parents were founding members of an intentional community—a commune called Community Thrives. We call it the “thrive,” and Joe and I have literally lived on the property our entire lives. So, I could pretty much guarantee that Joe wasn't going to run into the love of his life or a modeling scout on the way to the lake. In fact, it was a million times more likely that he'd run into someone who changed his diapers, and honestly, pretty much any outfit is a step-up from poop in your pants.

“JOE!” I hollered, lifting my hands to bang my fists against his door, but instead, I almost fell into him as he threw it open.

Immediately, his hands and chin dramatically rose towards the heavens and he deeply growled, “Patience, Padawan.” His vibe came off more Gandalf from *Lord of the Rings* than Jedi knight, but whatever. He was wearing a black t-shirt and a hot pink banana hammock. Not kidding. I rolled my eyes and smiled because he's an asshat, but he's my asshat and I love him. Once he'd cleared his bedroom, aka, his dressing room, he pushed past me, heading for the kitchen. I turned to follow him, noticing that the butt of his itchy-bitsy swim-suit said, *Bootylicious* in stenciled font. There is no question—he ironed those letters on himself.

In Joe's house, the kitchen is actually a great room, very open concept, which is pretty normal for the thrive because we build our own houses, so less walls means less work. Basically, the room is a huge rectangle divided by a

counter/breakfast bar type thing that has three wooden stools to go with it. I've eaten more snacks and breakfasts there than I could possibly count. The walls of the room are mud—adobe-like, and Susan, Joe's mom, has painted murals on them—big winding green vines. To the right side of the counter, there are all the things one finds in any kitchen, and to the left, there is a living room/art room/office, featuring an easel, craft table, desk, and a set of mismatched couches and chairs—which are all covered with Afghans and Navajo blankets. In the corner on the far-right side of the room, there is a fireplace and around the hearth are painted handprints of all kids born on the thrive—starting with Joe and I on the bottom left corner. It's homey and comfortable and might just be the place that I have laughed the most in my life.

Like the diva that he is, Joe headed straight to the kitchen, pulled out his air guitar, and belted out a blues-y song of his own making to his mom who was sitting at the kitchen counter reviewing papers, “Good morning, mama. Dododododo,” he whipped his dark hair around and squinted at her. “I don't know if you noticed, dododododo.” Full body toss, followed by squealing, “I oversle-ept.” The guitar disappeared and he was creeping toward her with sultry eyes and whispered singing that crescendoed to all-out madness, “Oh, tell me, mama... Tell me! Tell me you packed our lunch. Dododododo. Because Lua seems oh soooooo tigh-iiiiii-t-ly wound.”

Joe's song barely earned a glance up from whatever Susan was working on. Pencil in hand and eyes still on the page, she said, “Joe-Joe, give Lua a break. Going off to college is stressful, kiddo.”

Joe and I had completed our AAs, and starting in September, I had a full ride to Hamilton to finish my BA. I was a little freaked out. Okay—a lot freaked out. And Joe was not helping.

“Boooooo,” Joe retaliated, heading for the refrigerator door. “Boo! Boo! Boo! I don’t think she should get to act all Grumpy McGrump Pants just because she chose to run away to one of the country’s bastions of higher learning, binge drinking, and one night stands.” He pulled the door open and leaned fully into the fridge, bending at the waist, so from where I was standing, leaning against the door-frame, he was all legs and a full moon of pink bootyliciousness rising. “Gotta make choices you can live with. Right, mom? Isn’t that what you taught us?” He didn’t pause for an answer. “What do we want for munchies, Lua-cake? Are we thinking light and luscious—like apples and honey, bebe? Ou... deh-cay-dent? Maybe a little wine and cheese?”

“Cheese.” Given the option, I’m always going to go cheese.

He finally stood and turned to me. His hands—arms really—were full, goodies tucked tightly against his chest, using his elbows and armpits as pins.

“Just cheese? Please. Where is the charm, mon cheri? The x-peer-ee-ance.” Maybe he just likes to make English words sound French. He smiled, all goofy and toothy, “If all I’m doing today is basking in the sun at the lake, then you better believe I’m preparing a foodgasm.”

It took him twenty minutes to pack lunch, and by the time we started the hike out to the lake, the sun was set to broil. I didn’t mind so much. There is something about a hot

summer day that makes me feel connected to everything. It's like my sweat reminds me that I'm just another animal—one of many that sun could fry up quick—and the thrive is so beautiful in the summer. Everything seems to be alive. So green and humid and buzzing.

It's not a terribly long walk, but to get to the lake, we had to go from Joe's house past the central meeting house and the farming fields and then up an uncultivated hill and through the trees. Basically, we had to traverse the entire 350-acre property from one end to the other. We walked in silence. At first, there were ambient sounds—the hellos from other thrivers in their gardens or through their windows, the tractor engine, kids playing, and then as we got closer to the lake, the only sound was the scratching of the tall grass along our thighs and the bottom of the picnic basket.

As you can imagine, Joe doesn't do silence that often, but in this instance, he did it for me and I knew it. He gave me quiet. He gifts me silence whenever he thinks I need to breathe deep and think. He'd been giving me a lot of quiet lately. He thought I needed to come to terms with leaving the thrive and going to college.

It made sense that Joe thought college was freaking me out. When you grow up like we did, the mainstream doesn't exactly make sense to you. It's not what it sounds like. I'm not a freakish loser or incapable of meshing with society. I wasn't raised by wolves, and we didn't grow up in a cult or anything. The thrive is an experiment—a community of people with like-minded ideas. In this case, equality, justice, freedom, care, and community support. Our parents and the other thrivers decided to live their ideals by separating

themselves from the grid and everything that comes with it. We grow our own food; we have a community school; we help our neighbors when they can't make ends meet. It's like a huge open-minded family who lives together and spends their free time fighting for equality in the larger world.

I'm proud that I was raised this way. I'm proud of who I am because of it. I mean, I was at my first LGBTQ Pride parade before I could walk. I've protested sexism, racism, ableism, classism... when it comes to human equality, I am there. I have carried a picket sign on the Washington Mall more times than I can count, and I most definitely have an FBI file. Growing up on the thrive is special. It makes you self-sufficient. I can fix a transmission. I can build a shelter. I can grow plants for eating and for healing. I can recite poetry and play the guitar. In the mainstream, I'm a renaissance woman. On the thrive, I'm normal.

But the thrive also makes you a total weirdo once you're old enough to join the mainstream, which for both Joe and I was when we started classes at the local community college. We were the first of our tribe—so to speak—to get old enough to need to go to school outside the commune. Can you say culture shock? I mean, neither Joe nor I saw a television until we were in our late teens, and even then, it wasn't like we had one in our houses. When we began our collegiate journey, our entire community of one hundred and fifty-three people had seven computers and one building with Wi-Fi. Sure, we knew all the best campfire songs, had a well-rounded knowledge of feminist theory, and could raise our own livestock, but we'd never heard of a text message.

The learning curve was fierce. We made mistakes. We thought people our age would understand our perspectives,

our openness, our sense of community, and our belief in equality for everyone. We had weird clothes. We hummed and whistled. We thought that the average college freshman would want to talk about Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. There was some bullying—particularly once people realized we were from the thrive. And then there was also a lot of condescension from so many, including our professors. We would try to explain that computer access was complicated or that we didn't have personal emails or phone numbers and people just looked at us like we were crazy. Eventually, we convinced our parents that any child of the thrive that chose the college route needed a smartphone, a laptop, and access to Wi-Fi. Joe and I also host this whole "intro to college" party every semester to try to prepare the others, but it's still a struggle.

So, yeah, Joe thought I was freaked out about going to college because I'd have to start over and be the weirdo again—which was true, and when I got around to thinking about that, I felt totally freaked out. For sure. But honestly, since Bonnaroo, I wasn't thinking about that. Instead, I was fixated on the guy. I hadn't really told Joe about him, which was weird because I told Joe everything. Well, I did tell him that there was a guy who was out of it from drugs or something and I tried to help him, but I kind of left out the whole moody seduction, soaked panties thing. It wasn't that I wanted to keep it a secret—although, on some level, I was completely mortified. Honestly, it was just that my obsession with the guy from Bonnaroo was effed-up and I wasn't ready to admit that out loud to anyone.

I knew it though. I knew that I was obsessed with some nameless guy. A nameless guy with incredible shoulders,

huge grabby man hands, and really good hair, but nameless all the same. From the minute I saw those jerks tormenting him, it was like I had lost my mind. First of all, I know the statistics. I am well versed in the reality that young men, particularly in groups, are not to be trifled with—and this is even more so when you're a woman, alone. And yet, I couldn't stop myself. It was like I was possessed by the ferocity of Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth*: "Screw your courage to the sticking place!" I think I would have killed them—those jerks who were tormenting him, clawed their eyes out with my fists and teeth.

Literally, I couldn't remember another time in my life where I went all super mama lion on anyone. I was a pacifist for Christ's sake. I had a vegetable garden and read the works of Mahatma Gandhi. I bought hook line and sinker into the slogan, "make love not war," but in that one moment, I was willing to do anything to stop them. I didn't even consider what they could have done to me. I just jumped. Walked right into the fire with him—and strangely, I was proud of what I did. I felt the rightness of it deep in my intestines. Admittedly, I didn't bite off any earlobes or pull out any fingernails. I squelched the situation peacefully, but I knew that if my "negotiation tactics" failed, I would have devolved into something violent, and for some illogical reason, I couldn't bring myself to begin to feel any shame about that.

Furthermore, and I hate it when people refer to themselves in the third person, but honestly, Lua Steinbeck does not make out with strangers that she found passed out in the dirt. Next to his vomit, I might add. Gross. And yet, when I closed my eyes, I could still feel his hands on me. With no rhyme or reason, my mind drifts to my moments with him

—the expanse of emotion that flashed in his eyes when he blamed himself, the heat of his chest against my face, his aching gaze as my hand touched his jaw, the flutter of his lips against my neck, the explosion of desire as his mouth found my ear, and *oh, God...* those few seconds when he crushed my body against him and rolled my hips so that everything hard and soft about us caught fire. This memory just flared up and repeated on me like I was a skipping CD—trapped in some cosmic game of infinite repeat. Honestly, it didn't matter where I was or what I was doing. I was constantly plagued by the feeling of him. It was a visceral need. I ached for him, a stranger who had “dickhead” scrawled on his forehead when I met him and never actually kissed me—like lips to lips. EFFED-up.

The worst part about my endless distraction was that I knew nothing. Literal dickhead guy could be anywhere... anyone. The likelihood of us crossing paths again was slim, a million to one, more, a needle in a haystack, a galaxy in the universe, a singular atom in the wide Sargasso Sea, and yet, I thought I'd see him again, which is ridiculous—as absurd as Joe's swimsuit. Inane. Ridiculous and downright juvenile. And somehow, I still felt all romantic-y, which made me want to vomit. Destiny was not something I bought into and soul mates, please. I had things to do—college to prepare for. I couldn't constantly be drifting off into the land of unrequited orgasms and aching sexy sorrowful eyes.

And so, instead of sharing, I was silently walking with Joe who seemed to be getting huffy. He started making sounds—sighs and grunts of aggravation. In just a few more steps, we'd be able to see the lake and he wanted me to talk to him. This was part of our friendship. Joe gives me just

enough space to think and then he forces me to talk. When we broke through the tree line, Joe dropped the picnic basket and started running.

He pulled his shirt off as he went, and once he'd discarded it, he turned so he was facing me, and running backwards, hollered, "Last one in has to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth." He'd cheated. There was no chance that I'd catch him before he hit the water, but that was the point. I quickly dropped the towel and tore off after him.

The water was dark—cool and green, exactly how a lake is meant to be. We'd been acting like goofy kids, splashing and ducking each other for at least fifteen minutes before Joe swam towards the shore and situated himself so that he was sitting Indian-style in about a foot of water. I stayed out where it was waist-deep, not wanting to spill my guts just yet. He beckoned to me, "Come on in, Lua."

"Not quite ready yet," I whined.

"Fine. Be a petulant child. The longer you stay out there, the more time I have to truly appreciate your rack."

He was teasing me. Forcing me to swim in and silence him.

"I mean, that is a shitty swimsuit and still your tits are perfect."

I was on the move. "Cut it out, Joe." As it got shallower, I moved faster, planning to dive at him.

"Honestly, you are so gorgeous—all round and deliciously fleshy—it's just too bad your snatch is—"

He didn't get to finish because I clobbered him with my full body weight and pinned my hand across his mouth.

“My snatch is what, Joe? Huh? What nasty thing were you planning to say about my snatch?”

He gurgled from behind my hand and I could feel him smiling against my palm.

“If I remove my hand, will you tell me what you were going to say?”

He nodded his head up and down, but I didn’t let go right away. He was lying back, propped up on his forearms so that his head didn’t submerge, and I was straddling his waist.

“In this position, I could easily drown you,” I threatened.

He nodded his head a little more vigorously and the dark wet strands of his hair flopped about, shaking drops of water onto my face. I closed my eyes for a split second and Joe took the opportunity to try to drown us both. He flattened out his arms and we went crashing into the water. There was some tossing and turning, and then we were all laughter and giggles.

When the silliness subsided, we got out of the water and laid out on one of the gray rocks that was situated at the water’s edge. This was normal. Joe and I, eyes closed, side by side on the rocks, baking in the sun.

I reached for his hand, wove my fingers through his, and said, “I’m gonna miss you.”

“You’ll be fine.” He turned his head to face me and I did the same. “You’re not even that worried about it.”

I felt my face fall. How did he know?

“Come on, Lua, I’ve been your best friend since before you could talk.” His voice was soft and sweet. He wasn’t angry. “I know what your fear looks like—this isn’t fear.”

I felt my face puckering because I was going to cry. And then I was crying, not like sobbing, but all drippy. I sniffled, sat up, wrapped my arms around my shins, and rested my head on my knees. Joe rose next to me and put his hand on my back.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“Don’t be. You’re allowed secrets, Lua. We’re all allowed secrets.”

“It’s not really a secret.”

He was looking out at the lake. He found a pebble with his left hand and threw it—starting a ripple of ridges in the water. “Tell me if you want to... or don’t. It’s up to you.” He threw another pebble.

I was absolutely going to tell him but didn’t speak right away. I was trying to find my words, but he was impatient.

“Oh my God, are you not going to tell me?” he said, utter shock in his voice.

I know he tried but he couldn’t help himself and it totally lifted my guilt.

“No worries. I’m gonna tell you,” I laughed.

And I did. I told him all about Bonnaroo and literal dick-head guy. I told him how embarrassed I was that I was still thinking about it—still daydreaming that I might see him again.

Joe was pretty positive about the whole thing, offering, “Listen, if nothing else, you’re hot for someone who is not Lucas.” Lucas was my ex. He also grew up on the thrive. When I was little, I thought I would marry him someday. Lucas and Lua. I used to make Joe officiate at our fake weddings. Lucas and I started dating when we were sixteen. We were together for almost two years but as soon as he mainstreamed and went to the community college, he dropped me like a hot potato. I was pretty devastated, and since then, I haven’t dated much. Even though our break-up was two years ago, Joe still hasn’t said a word to Lucas, like not one, and they were close. It’s messed up.

“I’m over Lucas. I keep trying to tell you that.”

“I hear ya. But he’s an ass, and honestly, I haven’t heard you get excited about anyone since then, except Mr. Nameless Dickhead from Bonnaroo. So, I love him already.”

“It’s Literal Dickhead, Joe. Get it right.” He smiled at me but didn’t laugh. It’s tough to get Joe to laugh. I was trying to accept Joe’s positive viewpoint but I couldn’t quite seem to get there. “I guess you’re right, but I mean, come on, I don’t even know his name.”

“Perhaps you do,” he teased. “Perhaps his name really is Literal Dickhead.”

I sucker-punched him in the upper arm. “Ouch.” He stood. “What are you hitting me for, I’m not the one who left you all worked up and unrequited.”

“Jerk.” I stood too, brushing my hands across my bottom and legs so that the little grains of pebble that had adhered to my skin fell away, leaving little pink impressions in their wake.

“Foodgasm, now?” Joe queried as he pulled me into a hug. I nodded against his chest.

An hour and a half later, I was once again waiting around for Joe. We had eaten everything Joe packed. Mozzarella, tomatoes, and basil with olive oil and crusty bread, home-cured meats, olives, nuts, dried apricots, a generous slice of leftover veggie lasagna, and two huge brownies. Exhausted and stuffed, we decided to head back to my house to nap but Joe didn’t quite make it. As soon as we reached the edge of the hill that leads down towards the thrive’s farming fields, Joe dramatically collapsed in the tall grass, complaining that he wasn’t going to make it. To be honest, he did look like he was in actual physical pain. He was lying on his back, knees pulled into his chest, groaning. Drama queen.

“Why did you let me stuff myself, Lua? Why?”

“Please, you are uncontrollable. Don’t blame me.” I plopped down next to him and watched the grass blow in the wind. After a few more groans, he rolled onto his side, facing me and started to twist a strand of my hair around his finger; it was something he’d done since we were kids and I found it endearing.

Without warning, he bounced back to our old conversation, “Maybe, we can look on the Bonnaroo website at the photos from the festival and find his name in a caption.” It was a thought. It was more pro-active than I had been. I’d pretty much been on a media diet since Bonnaroo—wanting to soak up the thrive before I left for Hamilton.

“Maybe,” I replied.

He popped up so fast, he startled me. All goofy and gangly, his feet bouncing, he grabbed my hand and took off running, leaving the picnic basket behind us.

I was heavy behind him, not quite prepared for our movement, and then suddenly, he stopped, and I kinda tripped forward, still caught in his inertia.

“What the hell, Joe?” I said, backing away from him. He didn’t respond. Instead, he quizzically stared ahead in the direction of my house. I turned to see what he was looking at and there was a van parked in my driveway, and not like a regular van; it was a news van, complete with a station logo and a satellite dish.

Joe started to speak, “I wonder...” but as soon as he started speaking, he stopped because he noticed another van crunching its way down the gravel road that wound through the thrive. Their presence made me uncomfortable.

“What do you think—”

He answered before I finished my sentence, “Don’t know.”

We were both kind of flabbergasted. We weren’t scared exactly, but news vans on the thrive didn’t make sense. News vans at my house didn’t make sense. It might be nothing bad, but it was something, and it pulled us away from our afternoon at the lake. Unable to deny our curiosity any longer, we started walking towards the house, but we moved slowly, tentatively, savoring the walk because it felt like change was at its end. I couldn’t help myself. I just wanted to hold on to all the feelings that came before the news vans for a little while longer.

“Joe?”

“Yep.”

“What were you going to say about my snatch?”

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