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## Heaven on Their Minds

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HEAVEN ON THEIR MINDS

By

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Bachelor of Arts — English and History  
Loyola University Chicago  
2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts – Creative Writing

Department of English  
College of Liberal Arts  
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## ABSTRACT

### **Heaven on Their Minds**

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*Heaven on Their Minds* is a novel written from the first-person perspective of teenage protagonist Melody O'Malley. The plot details Melody's attempt, along with two close friends, to undermine their conservative Christian theater camp's summer production of *Godspell* via the edgier songs and theology of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Though ostensibly a satire of the Evangelical Christian community, Melody's insecurities are the true heart of the novel--her fraught relationship with her best friends, her concerns about her post-high school future, and her ill-advised crush on the most prominent RFC (Robot for Christ) in the camp, a crush that has terrible consequences for nearly everyone in the production. The narrative also delves into various social issues: adolescents exploring their sexualities in a hostile environment, the problems that arise from having blind faith in just about anything, changing family dynamics as children grow older, and the fervent obsessions that are (mostly) peculiar to young adults. The book would almost certainly be classified in the Young Adult genre, but its goal is to appeal to audiences of all ages--to convey the universal teenage experience of not belonging in a humorous, yet honest way.

## DEDICATION

For Meg, Molly, and Leta, who allowed me to exaggerate them into characters.

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## Chapter 1

I'm sitting in a dark cavern, nine red sticks the only light: EXIT. Cool, damp air seeps under the double doors and packs my nostrils with the scent of wet earth. I've got one arm around Angie, who's shaking, trying not to cry. The skin of my arm sticks to the flesh of her coatrack shoulders and stretches with each heave. I can hear the scratch of Jane's fingernails in the crusty glue of Angie's mohawk--the closest she can get to rubbing her head.

Some kid in the row ahead of us turns around. I can't see him turn, but his words move hot and smelly in our direction. "What's wrong with her?"

"Demon possession," says Jane. The worst part is he probably believes her.

There's a storm outside, one of those flash-bang summer rumbles that comes without warning and lasts just long enough to screw everything up: to drench you when you forget your umbrella, to quench the flames of your barbecue, or, in our case, to cut the power on the first day of camp. Angie doesn't like storms. Some weird fear she developed when she was so little she can't remember--so little we hadn't met yet.

In the void, a soprano's voice flies up and hovers, warbles like a dove: *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine...*

As usual, Tina has chosen a key too high for most--but it's *her* key, and her key is obviously the best key, a divinely-inspired key, a key the choirs of angels themselves would select. Assuming Evangelicals were into angels--they're more of a Catholic thing. And of course, everyone joins her regardless, the older kids building a scale of harmonies in notes their mortal voices can reach, the younger kids screeching along with open-hearted enthusiasm. *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine...*



Our three heads bump together, the curves of our ears nestling. “Do we have to sing about it?” whispers Jane. “Couldn’t someone just find the freaking breaker?” *This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine...*

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I reply. “Jesus is my electrician.”

Angie says, “I’m going to be sick.”

“From the storm, or from the singing?”

“Both.”

*Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!*

Three more rounds of this. Hide it under a bushel (no!), don’t let Satan blow it out, all that. After a while I start mouthing the lyrics--they’re so catchy, and no one can see me anyway. I think Jane’s right--this song is *long*, and still nothing has changed. Just curtain black and a cheerful chorus. If they’d sent someone to fix it, it surely would have happened by now.

Angie pushes on her stomach, air hissing through her teeth as it deflates. She swallows. “It’d probably hurt my chances of getting a good part if I suggested that God’s not listening, right?”

“You’re Catholic,” I say. “You’ll never get a good part anyway.”

“Excellent point.”

I get this pinching sensation at the base of my spine that courses down the backs of my legs. Mom says it’s sciatic nerve stuff, runs in the family, but I’m pretty sure it’s my body’s way of scolding me. If Angie does scream that God doesn’t exist and gets kicked out, it’ll be my fault. She’s done similar things in the past--cutting teachers off in the middle of lectures to correct them, shouting out answers during exams. Once this terrible local band was ruining Weezer’s “Sweater Song,” so Angie leapt up on the stage, stole the guy’s mic, and finished it for him. He

used the mosh pit as an excuse to throttle her for the rest of the night. It's not like she can't help herself--she does it purely for fun, for no reason other than that she can, and she doesn't care about the consequences. That's why she needs Jane and me. For balance. Some weird, three-way scale.

Forget snuggling. I clamp my arm around her to prevent any impulsive outbursts. "It'll be over soon."

Precisely as they run out of verses, two orange candle flames bob out onto the altar—or I guess the stage, for our purposes—and two orange faces flicker behind the flames, lips mouthing the final *let it shine!*

"That was beautiful, everyone." Tabitha Jensen is shining with delight, as though she absorbed the song's positivity and is using its power to animate her body. I like that idea—at least the singing would have powered *something* that way. And she's not wrong. I can criticize Joyful Noise all day, but if there's one thing that its members can do well, it's sing.

Steve, her husband, doesn't look quite so happy. He's smiling, but his lips are tight, maybe trying to seal in a torrent of curses. Not a good sign in a director whose work has barely started. Reflections of the candle pool in the sweat on his bald head, drip neon orange down his nose.

He doesn't curse. "We're still working on the lights, but we found these candles in storage. When God closes a door, he opens a window."

Tabitha laughs. She's got this ridiculous babbling-brook giggle, like Snow-freaking-White come to life. And it's completely genuine, too. "I can't believe you just said that."

“Corny, I’ll admit. But I’m so grateful God found us some light. It’s been a long day of auditions, and I bet you’re all ready to hear the cast of the Joyful Noise Players’ Summer 2006 production of *Godspell*—am I right?”

What we’re lacking in light we make up for with noise—boys screaming yeah, girls whooping and wooing, babies squealing, and everywhere applause, feet stomping the carpeted floor—a zealous roar loud enough to drown out the storm, but only until Steve plays the melodramatic orchestra conductor and waves his hand above his candle. Almost a hundred throats sucking the noise back in until all that’s left is a hush to match the darkness, broken only by a few whispers. Our eyes are aglow with those two flames, the whole crowd awaiting its fate.

They start by listing the chorus members, dozens of eight, nine, and ten-year-olds clapping arrhythmically when their names are called. I don’t get why they even have the littlest kids audition. It’s not like they’re going to crush some baby’s dreams of stardom. Babies go in the chorus, where they can stand around and look cute and mess up without it really affecting anything.

Then they move on to the “dance team,” which is pretty much still the chorus, but for older kids who can handle choreography more dynamic than the sway-and-smile. I expect to find myself here. I got a callback this time, but I’m not stupid. I’m an okay singer, a tolerable dancer if I practice until my limbs fall off, and a pathetic actress. I like musicals a lot, and I’m happy to do pivot turns in the background.

I do *not* expect to find Jane here. I don’t think Jane does, either. When she hears her name—“Jane Fisher”—her chair creaks skeptically backward. I thought for sure she’d graduated into the lead roles category after her appearance as Lady Teakettle in Joyful Noise’s knock-off production of *Beauty and the Beast* last spring. The Joyful Noise Players is a nonprofit, so they

can't afford the rights to Disney songs. They write their own versions of the songs instead—awful, practically parodies. And they always find a way to stick God in there. I was a dancing lacy napkin in the “Bon Appétit” number, flapping my skirts while Monsieur Candelabra crooned: *Have a seat, here's some meat, and some yummy bread to eat. Say some grace, and have a taste. Dinner's served—Bon Appétit!*

Pretty sure Walt is rolling in his grave over that one. At least it's *Godspell* this time—a real musical. If Jane and I have to do box-steps and grapevines for the next four weeks, it'll be to good music.

“We have a few soloists this time around,” Steve says, flipping to the next page on his clipboard. That explains it: they'll give Jane a solo. I hope Angie gets one, too. They may not like her so-punk-it-hurts wardrobe choices, but they can't deny she has a killer voice. She sang Christina Aguilera at the school talent show when she was only in the fourth grade, nailed every single note. There's a video somewhere, but Angie doesn't like to be reminded that she ever listened to “Genie in a Bottle.”

“First up: Melody O'Malley.”

Why? They're announcing other names, but Jane's whispering, “congrats baby-Melly-girl,” and Angie is smooching her purple lipstick all over my cheek. Something has gone horribly wrong. My mother is going to be thrilled.

“And now, the moment you've all been waiting for: our disciples.”

It's the usual RFCs—Royces and Lindens. Amanda (Royce), Lillian (Linden), Grace (Royce), Patrick (Linden), Reese (Royce), Zachary (Linden), Evan (Royce)...

“Singing ‘By My Side,’ we're going to have Ángela Martinez.”

This whole time Angie's been shivering, but the sound of her proper name snaps her straight. Jane's bouncing up and down *holy shit holy shit*, and I'm just humming a hideously high note in her ear.

"Stop it," says Angie. I tell her I love her.

Only two names left. Christina Linden, obviously. I can't think of a single play for the past two years where Tina *hasn't* had a lead role. Except the time she skipped *Willy Wonka* to do some missionary work in Chicago. But she was only downtown, where there's just a lot of businesspeople and tourists and skyscrapers. Harrowing stuff.

"And our Jesus will be played by George Linden."

Makes sense. Tina's older brother turns 18 on July 7th--my half birthday--so he'll be too old to do any more shows after this one. Plus, he's really good. Better than most of the guys, who are always weaker than the girls, I don't know why. Even Angie's clapping for him. He's perfect for Jesus, actually. Totally perfect. I can imagine his halo of blond hair under the stage lights--not sandy yellow like mine, but fairy tale spun-gold blond. From his looks alone, anyone would buy him as the son of God.

Tabitha moves her candle toward her husband, takes the handwritten cast list from him. "We'll have these up on the website tonight. And we'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning to start rehearsals. Congratulations to each and every one of you."

"Seriously," Steve cuts in, "there's so much talent in this room that it was really hard for us to decide."

"It really was." Tabitha bows her head, wisps of bangs falling from behind her ears and twirling in the glimmer. "A quick prayer before we go: Lord Jesus, thank you so much for these kids, who love you and are thrilled to perform *Godspell* for your glory. It is an honor to be able

to tell the story of how you sacrificed yourself to save us all. May you protect and guide the entire cast, especially those who are showcasing their talents for the first time. May they remember that their talents are gifts from you, and in gratitude, may they use them to spread your love to all the ends of the Earth.”

Out of the dark swells a raucous Amen.

\*\*\*

Glossy porcelain doll eyes—that’s how you know they’re drunk. Angie told me Ryan told her that, and I think he’s right. When we go see bands at the VFW, the kids with murky water bottles have eyes like that. So do the paunchy old men who’ve been swinging clubs all afternoon at the range, empty cans clustered at the edge of the Astroturf and Dad bringing them another one from the cooler.

On TV, Jesus has porcelain doll eyes, but they’re squinty ones, each looking a different direction while he tries to manage his rowdy disciples. We’re watching *Jesus Christ Superstar* again, the 1973 feature film starring Ted Neeley—who’s *still* playing Jesus on stage, even though he’s old and paunchy enough to fit in at the driving range. I hear he can’t sing the high parts anymore. We lugged the TV from Angie’s room to the basement bathroom so she could bleach her hair while we watch.

Jane has plastic gloves on and a paintbrush in hand. Angie’s leaning her head back over the side of the tub, and her voice comes out strained from the angle as she sings along: *what’s the buzz, tell me what’s-a-happenin’, what’s the buzz, tell me what’s-a-happenin’...*

“Disco Jesus is happening,” I say.

“Damn right he is.” She tugs her chin toward her chest to look at me. “Disco Jesus is far superior to hippie Jesus.”

It's true—at least in my opinion. I like *Godspell*, but the music in *Jesus Christ Superstar* is way better. When people think Andrew Lloyd Webber, they think the tacky 1980's-- synthesizers and electric drums, puffy sleeves, puffy hair, puffy everything—but before that he was a disco king. *Jesus Christ Superstar* has these scratchy, looping guitar riffs, and dancey drumbeats, and it's all accented with these swooping, billowing string parts. It's a freaking masterpiece.

Plus, the storytelling is more dramatic. In *Godspell*, Jesus is just goofing off with his disciples, dressed like a clown, singing about parables, and then he randomly dies and you're supposed to care. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he's all up in his falsetto—*see how I DIIIIIEEEEEE*—and it's like, oh man, he's really dying. So good.

“I wish we could do *Jesus Christ Superstar* at Joyful Noise,” I say.

Jane stretches some plastic wrap from the box. “That would be awesome, but it’ll never happen. Maybe if they cut King Herod and Pontius Pilate out of the story entirely?”

That's the advantage of *Godspell*: you can tell the whole story of Jesus without anyone killing him. One brief song on a chain-link fence and then it's all resurrection and smiles.

Angie snorts—or maybe the bleach is burning her head. “God, can you imagine that casting? ‘And in the role of the Roman soldiers who whip Jesus to a bloody pulp, we have...’”

“Stop moving. I don’t want to get bleach on you.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be an artist? Aren’t artists supposed to be precise? You couldn’t get bleach on me if you tried.”

“Want to bet?”

I spin around to face them, twisting the bathmat up in the process. “If they did do it, though, who would you want to play?”

“That’s the other problem with it,” says Jane. “Girls can play Mary Magdalene or Mary Magdalene.”

“I don’t know,” says Angie. “You could probably gender flip a lot of the disciple parts.”

“Stop moving.”

I say, “I want to play Judas.”

Judas is easily the best role in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. He’s not evil, first off. He cares about Jesus, probably more than some of the other disciples. He’s just worried that the Romans are going to crush their whole movement if they aren’t careful, which is understandable. Sure, he doesn’t think that Jesus is God, but why would he? If Angie decided she were God, I’d—I was going to say I’d get her some help, but honestly, I’m surprised she hasn’t proclaimed herself God already, just to piss people off.

Judas has the best songs in the musical. His opening number, “Heaven on Their Minds,” is amazing. The melody is desperate and fearful and angry and loving all at once, like a human being.

“Bitch, you’re too cute to play Judas.” Angie splashes me, so I grab a towel off the rack and snap it at her ankle.

Jane does not appreciate the spectacle. “I’m trying to watch the movie. Stop, please.”

“What if we did perform it, though?” Angie’s head emerges, the top half mummified with plastic wrap.

I hand her the towel for later. “Are you suggesting that the three of us put on a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* alone? In the garage, like when we were little?” We had quite the



repertoire: a bold reimagining of *101 Dalmatians* that substituted assorted Beanie Babies for dogs, an original one-act in which a popular breakfast cereal turned out to be deadly (yes, it was called *Cereal Killer*), and our annual Christmas production, an unlikely sequel to *The Nutcracker*.

She smushes the makeshift turban to make squelching noises. “The RFC’s hate *Jesus Christ Superstar*, right? And what’s more fun than pissing off RFC’s?”

RFC’s—Robots for Christ. Our term for the so-Jesusy-it’s-gross kids at Joyful Noise.

“I still don’t get it. As in, we put on a competing production, or...?”

“I’m just thinking we sing it here and there at rehearsals. Corrupt the young’uns by telling them all about this *other* cool Jesus musical. Burn CDs. ‘I even have the soundtrack right here—you can borrow it.’ All insidious.” She laughs like a maniacal cartoon villain.

“I could be into that,” says Jane. “Sort of like performance art.”

“The Disco Jesus Project?” I suggest.

“Oh my God, yes.” Angie hugs me, plastic wrap sticking to the side of my face, the force of her arms reorganizing my internal organs. “Let’s challenge those fucking hippies to a dance-off. They don’t stand a chance.”

And just like that, we’re in another club. I don’t think Angie and Jane and I have ever *not* been in a club. First we had a pretty solid witches’ coven, holding seances with Jane’s brother’s Ouija board and making “potions” with whatever wildflowers we could find in the woods behind my house. After that we were photographers, then pastry chefs. For a while we had a band, but it broke up due to artistic differences--Angie wanted to take it in a Riot Grrrl direction à la Bikini Kill, while Jane wanted a more experimental Björk vibe. I was happy with either as long as I could sing backup and play tambourine. Most recently we started a book club, as Angie and I

were dissatisfied with the timid English curriculum at Our Lady of Sorrows. Jane goes to public school, lucky lady. I always worry we're going to grow out of this stuff, but it never happens. We are hobby-prone, pastime-obsessed, devotees of the extracurricular activity.

Good ol' Neeley's still singing on the TV. *Why should you want to know? Why are you obsessed with fighting times and fates you can't defy? If you knew the path we're riding, you'd understand it less than I.*

\*\*\*

Dad taught me how to drive the picker when I was only ten, when Mom was on a Caribbean cruise with her best friends from college. She'd never have allowed it otherwise. He didn't even set me on his lap—just handed me the keys and laughed while I made wobbly curlicues around the three grassy acres of Francis O'Malley's Driving Range & Lounge.

I'm sorting the balls into green plastic baskets when Dad finally gets out of the bathroom.

"How long have you been here?" He grabs a new roll of toilet paper from a cardboard box behind the counter.

"Not long. Jane dropped me off."

"How's Jane? Still seeing that communist?"

"That's Angie. And he's not a communist, he's an anarchist. But yes."

I swear he shudders—anything remotely liberal gives him the heebie-jeebies. Better change the subject before I get an earful of American Values. "Dad, I got a solo."

He scoops up a bunch of rental clubs beneath one arm. "How about that. Congrats." I dodge the rounded heads as he kisses me quick on the forehead. "What show is it again?"

*"Godspell."*

He drops the clubs on the counter, grabs a brush, a cloth, cleaning fluid. “I don’t know that one too well.”

“Really?” I ask. “More your era than mine. And we’ve watched it before.”

“Are you sure you’re not thinking of *Hair*?”

“Are you kidding? I wish I could forget that.” I was eleven years old, and the nudity and drugs had evidently slipped my parents’ minds when they made that particular selection for movie night.

So Dad’s basically Davy Crockett--or he wants to be, anyway. He has deer heads mounted above the bar, like Bambi-murdering is his big pastime, even though Mom won’t let him keep guns in the house. On summer mornings, before the range opens, he rents a motor boat and goes fishing on the small lakes nearby. When I was too young to resist, he used to take me with him, drag me behind the boat on a hot pink inner tube.

But here’s his big secret: he loves Broadway musicals. Well, movie musicals would be more accurate. The man’s reputation is too important to him to risk being spotted at a theater, so trips to the big stages in downtown Chicago were a rare treat. But Mom likes them, too, so somewhere along the line, movie musicals became our primary family activity--so much so that they’re kind of integral to our interactions at this point. Anytime we want to express that we’re less than fond of another person, we squeal a ditzy “I caaan’t stand’em,” just like Lina Lamont in *Singin’ in the Rain*. Whenever Mom tries to convince Dad to scrap his junky car for a new one, he starts singing about his “Greased Lightnin’,” complete with Travolta dance moves. *The King and I* is a taboo subject in our household, as my first major fight with Mom was about whether or not it’s racist (it is). At any rate, this stuff is so normal for us that they’re both supportive of my

interest in the performing arts, even if I never land a lead role. Dad can make an exception for attending my shows--he has to cheer on his baby girl.

He scrubs the clubs hard, like he wants to file the grooves away. "Your mother's going to be pretty excited."

"Do you know when she'll be home?" Mondays are Mom's late night at the hospital. Her shift is supposed to be over at midnight, but a lot of times there are emergencies, or she covers for somebody else, so it's usually later than that. If she thinks of it, she texts Dad. If she doesn't think of it, I text Angie, who texts her mom--they're both nurses on the same floor.

"Everything's normal, as far as I know. You shouldn't stay up, though. You can tell her over breakfast."

"Yeah." I'll stay up anyway, of course. Reading, or talking with Angie and Jane. Or imagining the many ways in which I could screw up a solo. It'll probably be too high--my voice loses confidence above a high C. I suspect that's one reason I don't get leads--I always play it safe at auditions. Simple numbers. Sometimes funny. No showstoppers.

This time I auditioned with "Somewhere That's Green" from *Little Shop of Horrors*. I even managed to mimic Audrey's silly accent as she dreams of her 1950's-style life with Seymour. *Between our frozen dinner and our bedtime, nine-fifteen, we snuggle watchin' Lucy on our big, enormous twelve-inch screen!* I thought it went okay, but I honestly wasn't expecting a solo. Although George Linden was in the room watching, and he said I did a great job, and he would know--but I figured he was just being nice.

A sort of honking shoves its way through the swinging doors that lead to the bar.

"Can you grab Mr. Malinowski another Bud?" Dad asks. "Promise I'll kick him out at 9 so we can go."

I take a deep breath and push into the lounge. Mr. Malinowski is slouching in his barstool, tapping his third empty can on the rail. Flecks of spit catch in his mustache as he slurs, “Aren’t you too young to serve, sweetie?”

Technically no—the law says that sixteen-year-olds can serve alcohol if they work at a licensed establishment and have received the proper training. I don’t really work here, but it doesn’t matter—the police chief is one of Dad’s best customers.

“Yep,” I say. I plunge my hand into the cooler.

\*\*\*

Do elementary schools still have those book fairs? The kind they set up in the library or the gym or wherever? They used to give us catalogs weeks before, pages splashed with the bright covers of my favorite series--and I had a lot of favorites, everything from girl detectives to historical diaries to friendly extraterrestrials just trying to fit in on Earth. It was smart marketing. I’m sure those book covers and their descriptions were strategically arranged to make kids like me--spoiled brats, that is--bug our parents nonstop until the credit card or the checkbook came out and they ordered a stack for us in advance. The books would be waiting for us when we got to the fair, tied up in plastic grocery bags with our names sharpied on the side.

Whoever thought up the elementary school book fair must be an evil genius. But then, who’s going to argue that making kids read is a bad thing? Three cheers for capitalism, I guess?

The point is, the first time I went to one of those book fairs, I didn’t get a catalog to whet my appetite. That’s because I was a baby at the time, in kindergarten, and some idiot decided that kindergarteners weren’t supposed to know how to read. “Idiot” might be kind of harsh I guess. Back in the seventies, the eighties, people probably didn’t think kindergarten would have all that much impact on someone’s future success. But by the time I was born, things had changed. My

parents started a college savings account for me when I was still in the womb, and when I was three my mom started teaching me how to read, even though she was already back working at the hospital. She squeezed my lessons between her shifts, using whatever materials she had at hand, which is why I was well-versed in obscure diseases by the time I hit four. I once told a sneezing cashier that she might have human metapneumovirus. Creepiest kid ever.

So my literacy rendered my kindergarten teachers pretty much useless, but rather than have me skip a grade, they decided to have me do extra work instead. While all the other kids got to do arts and crafts or play house, I got to sit in the corner and take reading quizzes. It was basically the worst. You're smart? Great. Time to punish you.

The only good thing that came of it is that my teacher got my parents' permission to let me attend the book fair with the second-through-sixth-graders. Not the only good thing, I guess-- Angie came of it, too. She was the only other kid in my class who could read, who sat in the opposite corner taking her own quizzes. Who knows why we didn't bond over our shared misery before that? Maybe we wanted to feel special, and a duplicate would've ruined it. Even though part of me hated being separated from everyone else, I also felt like I was better than them, if I'm being honest.

The day of the book fair, the teacher's aide escorted Angie and me to the multipurpose room, where rows of rolling shelves now covered the light from the low windows. St. Joe's was a tiny K-8 school, only about 20 kids per grade, and pretty poor. Our worksheets were always printed on recycled stationery donated by the big pharma companies out by the highway where so many parents worked, and we had no classes besides the basics: no art, drama, or choir. No stage to have them on anyway, not even a gymnasium. PE was held out in the church parking lot, only when the weather was warm enough. The multipurpose room normally served as the

teacher's lounge, but it wasn't officially a teacher's lounge, so they cleared their coffee-stained mugs and outdated magazines without complaint to make way for the temporary library. There probably was complaining, actually, but not in front of us.

When we got inside, Angie immediately pulled me behind a cardboard cutout of Clifford the Big Red Dog. "Have you heard of *Terror Town*?"

I tugged at the bottom of my green plaid jumper; I didn't want to admit to my rival that she knew something I didn't. "It's a book."

"Duh it's a book. My neighbor Ellen let me borrow hers. She's *twelve*."

When you're six, twelve-year-olds are basically gods. I nodded. "Is it scary?"

"Scarier than anything."

Scarier than anything sounded great. I mean, I could already explain in grisly detail exactly what would happen to a human dying of Ebola, so the kids books about haunted ham sandwiches and mummies in museums weren't really doing it for me.

Angie glanced at a spinning rack of books in the corner. "The new one is over there." Maybe she was dumber than I thought. The yellow sign atop the rack clearly stated FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL AND UP. I put on the voice that my dad used whenever he had to cut someone off at the bar: sympathetic, careful, and very sorry. "I think those books are only for the older kids."

She grinned then, candy-swirl eyes and a gaping black hole where her two front teeth should have been. "I've got a plan." She poked at my clenched fist. "How much you got?"

Mom was already at the hospital by the time the school bus came, so when I reminded him about the book fair, Dad gave me a five dollar bill. Dad probably hadn't read a book since he left school, so he wasn't exactly up on the cost of literature in those days. With five dollars, the

most I'd be able to get is one paperback, and definitely not the newest in any series. Still, it was the most money I'd ever carried on my own, so I was freaking out when I handed it over to Angie.

"I've got ten," she said. "That should get us two of them."

"But they won't let us buy them."

"They won't know we bought them."

Angie then explained the plan, all the while pretending to browse the other books. I followed her, flipping through pages that might as well have been blank. It was tough not to follow Angie, even then. It's like she was born with an unending stockpile of blueprints in her brain, so all she has to do is spit the schemes out one by one. I'm pretty sure she'd follow me if I came up with some crazy intrigue, but I'm more the accomplice type.

My first act as her accomplice would be this: she'd create a distraction while I grabbed the books and slipped the money onto the table near the cash box.

I was skeptical. "I know it's not stealing, but it seems kinda..."

"Kind of what?" She challenged. "We're paying them."

"But--"

"I know you want to read those books."

The thing is, I really, really did.

I was convinced that the plan would never work, but as usual, I was wrong. Angie darted behind the cardboard cutout of Amelia Bedelia and knocked it over, falling beneath it and letting out a wail you'd have to hear to believe. I'm talking banshee-level wail, a wail of the glass-shattering variety.



She stretched her pink index finger below Miss Bedelia's starched white apron and accused a pudgy fifth grade boy waiting in line to pick up his order. "He pushed me!"

As predicted, all the adults abandoned their posts and rushed to her side. She emerged from under the oversized character, her face smeared with tears and snot, rugburn hot and red on her elbows and knees. Her performance was so convincing that I almost forgot my role. While the grown-ups tried to calm her and scolded the unlucky boy, I literally tiptoed over to the middle school rack--I guess I'd read one too many of those girl detective books. I snatched two copies of *Terror Town*, ran to the table, and slid the crumpled bills beneath one corner of the gray metal box. I even went so far as to grab a plastic bag, so the teachers wouldn't be able to see what books we were getting away with.

We reconvened at the end of the day, when we were lining up to catch our respective buses. I held the bag open and let her pick which one she wanted.

"We'll switch when we're done," she said.

And that was that. Angie had declared that we were a we, partners in crime who hoodwinked the adults at every turn, friends who shared the spoils of victory, all that stuff. I had no reason to object to the friendship, and even if I'd wanted to, I'm terrible at objecting to most things. But I didn't want to object. I wanted to be friends with this girl, this seemingly fearless girl who took the things she wanted, who knew what I wanted and made me take it, too. I really, really did.

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The community hall of the Forever Risen megachurch is a study in shades of beige. The walls are the color of manila folders. The chairs—hundreds of them, stacked up on the far side of the room—are cushioned in a soft, plasticky material reminiscent of old people shoes. The

linoleum floor is of a beige so pale that it's barely recognizable as beige at all; it takes a few minutes to realize it's not just a dirty white. The ceiling isn't beige, but it's no less bland. It's composed of craggy tiles mixed with panels of fluorescent lights, the type of ceiling they never have at places you actually want to be. This is where we rehearse.

The Linden family files in at 9 a.m. exactly, all seven of them—George, Tina, Patrick, Lillian, Zachary, Phillip, and Ruth—literally in order of height, like they're the freaking Von Trapps. In profile, George resembles one of those ancient Greek or Roman busts--forehead, nose, and jaw all distinct and strong, no feature hiding behind the others. I guess I mean he's handsome. Tina's unbraiding her hair—wavy blonde tresses that reach her waist. The first day I met her, I told her I liked her hair. More specifically, I said, “I wish I had your hair.” She replied, “thou shalt not covet.”

Angie pops her chewing gum. “Are there more of them now?”

“Not since the last time I checked.” I grin. “There's going to be a quiz on their names later, you know.”

“Well I'm screwed, then.”

I pat her head. “Fear not. The little ones don't count.”

They may as well be the Von Trapps. The whole family is beautiful and talented. On top of that, their father is the Finance Director at Forever Risen, which is the reason we have a free place to rehearse at all. They're Evangelical. They're homeschooled. They're everything an RFC is supposed to be.

Someone jumps on my back, and a plume of red curls sweeps over my shoulder. Miraculously, I don't fall.

“A solo,” says my attacker. “You're really moving up in the world.”

I manage to shake her off, then I spin around and curtsy. “Thank you, Miss Grace. And congrats to you, too.”

Grace Royce surveys the line of Lindens, who are snaking their way to their rightful place in the center of the room. “At least George and Tina won’t be playing romantic leads this time.”

“Right? I thought God was against incest, but what do I know?”

To be fair, they’ve never actually played a romantic pair. But close—Jasmine and Jafar in *Aladdin*, for instance. As if it weren’t ridiculous enough that both our Jasmine and our Jafar were white. Not that the directors had much of a choice. Half-Mexican Angie is about as diverse as it gets here.

Angie stands up and slinks her arms around both our waists. “I’d pay to see them go in for Joyful Noise’s patented dip-facing-away-from-the-audience-fake-kiss.” Lips touching before marriage--a grave offense for the RFCs.

“You too, lady.” Grace pecks Angie on the cheek. “Keep this up and I’m going to have to consider you my competition.”

“You’re leaving, anyway. You’re too old for this business, and I’m the young, beautiful ingenue here to replace you.” Angie flourishes an invisible skirt over her wide-legged jeans, which she has inscribed with song lyrics in permanent markers. “I’m the role model Joyful Noise needs.”

Grace laughs. “Listen, kids—you can wear all black and be an actress, too.”

“I was going to say ‘you can be the spawn of Satan and be an actress, too,’ but your version works.”

In an alternate universe, we wouldn't be friends with the Royces. They're basically the Lindens' evil twin—seven kids, Evangelical, homeschooled, beautiful and talented. Red hair instead of blonde, but whatever. But despite their parents' best intentions, they're awesome. Look at them, spread out all around the room—Grace is with us, Reese is nowhere to be found (maybe in the bathroom but probably late), Amanda's snapping the bra straps of her younger sister Marie, Evan's creeping on Angie from across the room (he's got it bad for her), Jenna's twirling around to make her skirt poof out, and little Samantha's sitting in a gaggle of other screaming babies—perfectly normal siblings who love each other but mostly can't stand each other. I've spent years studying the dynamics of people with siblings, so I should know.

Tabitha opens the door with her hip--her arms are piled high with stacks of paper, presumably sheet music. Steve squeezes in past her, gets a running start, and slides in his socks to the center of the room, like Tom Cruise in that one movie. Steve doesn't make it look so smooth.

"Hey hey, everybody! You know what day it is?"

The little kids gasp, thrilled, not yet old enough to understand the obvious.

"It's the first day of *Godspell* rehearsals!"

Roaring applause. I manage an obligatory woo.

"As you all know, we're on a tight schedule, so I think we'd better get started. And where better to begin than the beginning?"

Tabitha bends down and hands stapled packets to the cross-legged cast members closest to her. "This is the music for 'Prepare Ye.'" You're all in this number, so everyone needs a copy."

"And where's our John the Baptist?" asks Steve. "Where's Reese?"

"Here," says Reese, who swings open the door, right on cue.

Angie puts her lips close to Grace's ear. "Your brother likes to make an entrance."

"No, he just likes his new smoking habit too much. I told him he's going to ruin his voice, but he won't listen."

He's going to need his voice for this song. "Prepare Ye (The Way of the Lord)" is the big opening number of *Godspell*. (Apart from "Tower of Babel," which we're presumably cutting because it's so complex.) It usually starts with whoever's playing John the Baptist alone on stage. Then, with no accompaniment, he has to hit this high, clear, hopeful note. I can't imagine it with a smoker's growl. After that he gathers up the rest of the disciples, and that's where everyone else comes in.

Reese walks forward, and Steve tosses an arm around his shoulder. "How do you feel about heights?" That sounds ambitious.

Tabitha gestures toward the piano. "Everyone else over here. We're going to learn the harmonies."

"Lunch is at noon," says Steve. "I hope you all brought something. And I want to meet with our soloists at 1 p.m., sharp."

"Wait." Tina Linden raises herself up with perfect posture, her head held high and noble, unbreakable. I'd say she looks like a saint, but RFCs think saints are blasphemous. "Before we set out on this journey, I think we ought to offer our hearts up in song to the Lord, don't you?"

Not again.

Tabitha nods. "Of course. Will you lead us, Tina?"

Tina opens her palms to the sky, like she wants God to give her a low-five. She closes her eyes. *I love you Lord and I lift my voice to worship you, oh my soul rejoice...*

It wasn't a song I knew before I joined Joyful Noise, but now I know it too well. We sing it before every show, before most dress rehearsals, before many regular rehearsals, and whenever someone's feeling particularly righteous that day. I find myself singing it in the shower, humming it between class periods. It's very pretty, and I hate it.

Slowly the crowd blends their voices with hers, a wave building low and quiet from the depths, until it surges, crashes against the drab walls of the community hall, drenching them.

*Take joy my king, in what you hear. May it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear.*

Two hours of learning a song I already know, but at least I have the alto part. Technically I'm a soprano, but the alto harmonies are always more interesting. When you mix them with the main parts, it all sounds normal, but when you listen to an alto part on its own it sounds ominous, or spastic, or demented.

After that it's an hour of dancing, and by "dancing" I mean stepping front to back and clapping. Specifically: upper right clap, upper left clap, lower right clap, lower left clap, spin to the right and clap, spin to the left and clap. Over and over and over. It'd be nice if we could have some real choreography, but that would mean the eight and nine year olds would have to go, and they're just so darn cute. Jesus loves the little children.

At lunch, Jane is eating a plain cheese sandwich again, and we're bugging her about it again.

"There's a whole wide world of condiments out there," I say. "Even just mustards—yellow mustard, dijon mustard, honey mustard, spicy brown mustard—"

"You could put ranch on it," says Angie.

I am appalled. "Who puts ranch on a sandwich?"

"I do."

I'm about to explain why that's the worst idea ever, but then I notice that Angie and Jane's eyes are elsewhere. My lower back prickles. There's someone behind me.

I turn and find myself amidst gently twirling gold tendrils. Tina scoops her hair behind her neck. To her left, as always, is her younger sister Lillian, who's basically a smaller, bonier copy of Tina. Her hair's a little thinner, too, and limp. Behind the two Lindens is a flock of followers, shifting from one foot to the other, peeking over each other's shoulders, hoping to get a glimpse of our faces when their shimmering idol deigns to speak to us.

She glances at Jane's sandwich, then flicks her eyes to the ceiling. "Is that *cheese*?"

"Yep," replies Jane, still chewing.

Tina clasps her hands together, bows her head, prepares for confession. "Last month, I was diagnosed with lactose intolerance."

Shocked gasps and sighs escape the bellies of the enamored audience.

"My case is especially bad. If I ingest even the slightest amount of dairy—cheese, milk, ice cream—I'll be ill for days."

One of the babies, obviously contemplating for the first time how horrific the concept of "forever" can be, pipes up: "no more ice cream?"

Tina kneels and takes the child in her arms. "No more ice cream." The crowd coos in sympathy, like a devoted sitcom audience.

Jane swallows. "I'm sorry, Tina. That's awful."

"Thank you for your concern. I'm sure you understand why I'm asking you not to bring cheese for lunch in the future."

Stupidity this pronounced makes me uncomfortable. I stare at the grime in the cracks of the floor so I don't have to deal with it.

Angie, on the other hand, can't resist dealing with it. "That's not even how lactose intolerance works," she says.

"I just talked to the doctor about it. And lactose intolerance is more common than you think. Do you have any idea how many people you might be putting in danger by eating that sandwich?"

Centuries ago, the crowd would've been ready to stone us, baskets of rocks at their sandaled feet. Unlike Angie and Jane, I've never been one for a fight. "Okay," I say. "She'll be more careful from now on."

Because the three of us are so below her notice that what one of us says may as well have been said by the others, she is satisfied with this response. She floats away, the girls in procession behind her.

"Why do you always give her what she wants?" asks Angie.

"I don't. But she already thinks humans and dinosaurs coexisted. Why would she understand the science of modern medicine?"

Jane takes another huge bite. "I stop eating cheese sandwiches for no woman—not even her holiness."

"I never said you should. All I did was make her go away."

When I finish eating, I find Steve Jensen in the hallway, downing a coffee. It's 12:53. I'm chronically early. It's a sickness. He doesn't seem to mind, though. "Great, Melody! Can I call you Mel?"

"Most people do."

"Fantastic." He flips through his clipboard, examines some scribbles. "Okay. For your solo, you're going to be doing the reprise of 'Learn Your Lessons Well.'"



Crap. Worst song in the whole play. It sounds like a country song written exclusively for preschoolers. It's so annoying that they cut it out of the film—also from 1973, coincidentally.

“Cool,” I say.

“We'll start rehearsing your scene later this week, or maybe early next week. I'm not totally sure, but I think it's going to be just you and George on stage. I was thinking you could lasso him or something.”

Me and George Linden. Painted backdrop behind us—probably some cityscape, or a park, or a junkyard, I don't care—audience pulsing in the black before us, breathing. I'm breathing as I sing to him, too, remembering to breathe between the notes. Just breathe. And he's breathing back at me, warm gusts sending dust particles spinning in the white spotlight. We're looking each other in the eye, though we're cheating out as always, our faces flush to our observers. He's not that much taller than me, but he seems so much taller than me, practically looming, and his hair is shining, glowing, and I'm singing to him, breathing.

“Lasso,” I say. “Cool.”

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I was worried about this. It's been coming on for years—weirdly ever since I had a small role as his mother during a production of *The Music Man*. George Linden is a certified RFC, but my body has rebelled against my mind. I'm in full-on crush mode, and it has to stop. I smash my face into my pillow and pull my blanket over my head.

He's not really an RFC, though. Or he's not like the others, anyway. He doesn't talk about his personal relationship with the Lord every two seconds. In fact, I've had whole conversations with him that have nothing to do with Jesus. One time we talked about old-fashioned eyewear, like those tiny telescope-glasses people hold up to their faces in period pieces whenever they're

at a show. Afterwards I found a costume monocle online, and I was going to get it for him, but then I thought it might be awkward. Another time we talked about what sheep would be like if people never sheared them--what if they got too heavy to walk? He's pretty quiet. He reads real books. He's smart. He smiles in this way where one of his eyes is way crinklier than the other.

Shit shit shit.

Screw this. It's late. I can address this issue tomorrow. Can't do anything about it right now. Sort of.

I flip over. My hand reaches beneath the waistband of my pajama pants, beneath my underwear, and so easily finds that sweet spot. I slip one finger inside, two, and I look anywhere but over my head at the thin, gold crucifix my mother gave me at First Communion, the one she inherited from her great aunt, fastened to the wall. A dying man gazing down at me, who never closes his eyes, even when I come.

## Chapter 2

I'm wading through the corpses of human fetuses, thousands of them piled up to my shins. Tiny pink thumbs curled to tiny pink mouths, bulbous, amphibian. Plastic, of course—the world's most gruesome ball pit.

"Sorry about this," says Grace. "Everyone's out back."

Mrs. Royce is a total wretch—a pro-life nutcase who pickets outside clinics and pelts frightened women with her effed-up baby dolls. Right now she's locked in the upstairs bathroom, moaning about something while Mr. Royce tries to calm her. Aside from praying and snacking, calming his wife is practically all I ever see Mr. Royce do--scooping her against his broad, fatty chest, muffling her grumbling at best, her shrieking at worst. I learned to stop asking a while ago.

Angie picks up one of the fetuses and bites it, piercing its skull with her teeth. She giggles. "I'm going to give it to Ryan."

In the backyard, the bonfire's already roasting, flames tickling the stars that shine above Sparrow Lake. Evan's playing an acoustic guitar, accompanied by the dead leaves cracking to nothing below the burning logs. As usual, he stops when he sees Angie. It's like his feelings for her are so strong that they override his human circuitry, forcing him to shut down.

"Gimme," she says. He hands her the guitar with reverence.

In the shallows, the three youngest sisters are dunking each other underwater. When one springs back up, the others pick the leeches off her shoulders and neck. Amanda emerges from between cattails wearing a string bikini, the fabric printed to look like denim. Her hair is dripping.

"Did you guys bring suits? It's a great night for a dip."

"Aren't you cold?" asks Jane.

“Come on—it’s warmer by the fire.”

Jane and I share a stump. Amanda hands us a package of hot dogs and two sticks.

“Sorry—no buns.”

When Jane removes a soggy log of meat from the plastic, her fingers turn it blue. I poke at it with my stick. “Non-toxic paint, I hope.”

“You remember Sand Art?” she asks. “That fad when we were little?”

“Sure. It was messy.”

“I’m dyeing these placemats for my mom’s birthday, and I’m trying to make them look like Sand Art. Maybe even have a sandy texture.” She shrugs. “It’s complicated.”

“Sounds like it.” I’m so artistically impaired I can hardly color in the lines, whereas Jane’s a natural at all of it--painting, drawing, sculpture, whatever. She’s got a bedroom wall covered in blue ribbons from school art contests, 4H shows at the county fair. Lately her art has taken a more political bent--I suspect that has something to do with Angie’s influence. But instead of chaining herself to a condemned building (which Angie has never actually done, but has threatened to do more than once), Jane throws all that energy into her art. Engraving dog tags with anti-war slogans. Soaking her forgeries of famous paintings in tubs of saltwater to highlight the impact of Global Warming. That sort of thing.

Grace sneaks up behind us and snatches the hot dogs away. “Where’s Reese?”

From the dark mouth of the toolshed, a mangled chair comes flying, its left front leg barely hanging on, spinning like a propeller. It lands squarely in the center of the bonfire, and with a growl the flames shoot higher still.

Reese exits the shed, wipes his dusty hands on his pants. “Nothing like the smell of burning wood.” He shields his eyes and peers across the slithering hot tongues. “Evan—stop drooling over Angie and give me a hand.”

This accusation causes the younger boy to contract, pulling up his hood and down his sleeves so most of his body is inside his green sweatshirt, like a plush turtle. He shuffles over to his brother, eyes on his feet. We wait until he’s out of earshot to laugh.

“Leave him alone,” says Angie. “It’s not his fault. As we all know, I’m physically irresistible.”

Amanda leaps into Angie’s lap, knocking the guitar to the dirt. “Ain’t that the truth.” One arched eyebrow later they’re making out, Angie’s hands tangled up in Amanda’s wet hair and Amanda’s hands up Angie’s shirt.

“You don’t need to put on a show,” says Grace. “The boys are gone.”

“It’s not a show.” Angie wraps her arms around Amanda’s waist. “I’d take this gorgeous gal’s sweet ass over Evan’s any day.”

Amanda kisses her neck. “How’s Ryan?”

“Fuck if I know. I haven’t seen him in three weeks. He said he was going to come up this weekend, but now there’s some big protest at the Mayor’s office.” She bangs her head against the back of the lawn chair. “I can’t stand it—I’m *so* horny.”

Amanda bites Angie’s ear. “I can take care of that.”

“I wish you could. We’ve been talking about going poly, but his head’s not there yet.” She sighs into Amanda’s shoulder. “I can’t wait until I can be there with him. He says we’re going to have our own room and everything.”

Ryan's eighteen, and he lives in Chicago in this anarchist commune called Paradise, where they eat vegan food and plot their revolution against The Man or something. I've only met him a few times; his punk band used to play regularly at the VFW, but now they're on hiatus because their drummer went to college. Angie showed me some pictures of Paradise online: no furniture, and a murky green-brown floor that appeared to have been recently flooded. I'm not Ryan's biggest fan, mostly because I think Angie can do better, and also because I'm sick of hearing about how great his dick is.

Grace pulls her curls up into a ponytail. "It seems tough now, but you'll be legal and free before you know it."

"What about you?" Jane shifts and bumps me further off the stump. "What are you going to do now that you're almost eighteen?"

"I'm not sure," says Grace. "I'd like to keep acting. Maybe in the city? My mother, on the other hand, would like me to marry George Linden and start popping out some babies."

Everyone laughs except me. I wonder if people ever really object at other people's weddings.

"She just wants to live vicariously through me. She'd have ten more of us if she could."

"Ten more of you?" Jane grins. "Disgusting."

Reese and Evan return, each hauling two cases of cheap beer. Amanda extracts her legs from Angie's. "There's not that many of us."

"I like to make sure my friends are taken care of," says Reese.

"You just want to get wasted," she retorts.

"So do you." He tosses me a can.

“No thanks. I’m not much of a rebel.” I hand my can to Angie, who taps on the top before she opens it. Jane passes, too—I hope it’s not to make me feel better.

The evening simmers on: fireflies trembling in cupped palms, sticky drops of beer, power chords, sing-alongs, and a humming bonfire that we constantly resuscitate with the many charms of the Royces’ backyard—gnarled branches, flimsy lake reeds, pinecones. We are young and un beholden to nature. We don’t care for things as they are. We burn it all down.

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I have this theory that all dads contain an extra twist in their DNA, an as-yet-unidentified gene that causes them to fixate on classic cars. They know the gas mileage is terrible, they know that the rusty insides require constant upkeep, they know that the cost is impractical, and yet, they’re helpless to the allure of wide hoods and stick shifts and cherry red tailfins.

My dad’s no different. He’s an avid tinkerer, which is why he insists on keeping his janky 1988 Buick Century Sedan. Sure, he’d prefer something flashier, but at least the Buick constantly falls apart, which means that he gets to continue working under the hood, shifting and tweaking and, if all else fails, replacing parts. Swearing at them, too—I think it’s cathartic. I first learned curse words from Dad, who slings them at every wire that dares to defy his placement. I somehow knew not to repeat those words, though. Even now, when I try them out, they feel lumpy on my tongue.

To get his fix, Dad always used to take me up to cruise nights in Merton, this tiny, legit 19th century town right before you hit Wisconsin. It has a general store and everything. Because the place was so small, the cruise nights weren’t really limited to cars. There was a band, a bouncy castle for the kids, a few volunteers grilling up cheeseburgers and handing out beers and pop from a cooler. The local oldies station would broadcast live out of the gazebo next to the post

office. It was more like a block party, but instead of just a block, it was the whole of Main Street. Not that this particular Main Street was much bigger than a block.

We don't go so much anymore. I'm too old for Dad to force me to come along, and he's so tired when he gets back from the range that all he ever wants to do is slump in his armchair and watch whatever golf tournament he recorded that day. Doesn't have to be a big thing like The Masters or the U.S. Open--he'll watch it all, whether it's celebrities playing for charity or old dudes way past their prime. We get up to cruise nights maybe once a summer now, usually so Jane and I can celebrate our friendediversary.

"What's your favorite dangerous animal?"

That's what she opened with the night we met. It was one of those searing July evenings where the sharp light of sunset beamed like a laser. Dad was making me get my face painted while he chatted with the owner of a teal '57 Chevy, even though I was ten years old and totally over this whole face paint thing, especially because I was pretty sure it was going to melt off in the heat anyway.

I looked closer at her poster board, where Jane had displayed samples of the ferocious creatures she was willing to draw on people's cheeks or foreheads, all for the low price of one dollar. There were all the obvious ones: lions and tigers, snakes and alligators, a toothy, wide-mouthed shark. But there were also some choices I couldn't figure out: a beaver, a raccoon, a goose.

"How is a beaver dangerous?" I asked. "Don't they just build stuff?"

"They're way scary. Sharp teeth. I read in the newspaper that some lady in Canada got bit by one, and it cut right through her artery."



“Gross.” I squeezed my eyes tight, trying to delete the image that now looped in my mind: a middle-aged woman bleeding to death next to a peaceful mountain stream, a maniacal beaver on its haunches nearby, the fur around its mouth matted and red, its thick tail slapping gleefully against the forest floor.

Jane must have noticed something was wrong. She handed me a Sprite in a green glass bottle with a straw sticking out the top. “I only took one sip.”

“Thanks.” I allowed the drink to bubble happy in my mouth before I swallowed. “I’m kind of squeamish.” I examined her poster again. “And the raccoon?”

“They’re the worst of all. Got all kinds of diseases.” She set down her paintbrush. “You want to hear a story?”

I glanced back at the line of babies that was beginning to form behind me. “Okay.”

She got super excited then, unbraiding and rebraiding her hair while she spoke. “This one time, my mom got attacked by a rabid raccoon. It just ran at her and jumped, and she kept trying to wrestle it off, but it was really strong, and then it bit her arm. She was screaming and screaming and screaming, and my dad came outside, and he had to beat it with a stick until it died.”

I sipped my pop, tried not to think too hard about it. She did not pause for long.

“So when you get rabies, you have to get a shot really soon, or else you’ll die in three days. But it was the weekend, and all the hospitals were far away, and nobody wanted to help because something with insurance. She got one at the last minute, but it was close.”

“That’s awful,” I said.

“Yeah. But it was also awesome.”

“I guess.” I looked at the kids behind me again. There were some little boys who might want to get the killers of the animal kingdom painted, but most of them were little girls, complete with plastic tiaras and pink everything. “Why are you only painting dangerous animals?” I asked.

“I like dangerous animals.”

“I get that, but what about flowers or peace signs or smiley faces?” I was a pretty big Lisa Frank fan at the time.

“Animals are more fun to draw.”

I could see where maybe this girl would prefer a challenge. She was a good artist even then. The snake’s forked tongue darted quick out of its mouth in an almost audible hiss. It would have been easy to make the tiger’s stripes straight, but hers were realistically uneven.

I still felt like she was missing the point. “Wouldn’t you make more money if you painted all that other stuff, too?”

She took back the Sprite and sucked on the straw while she considered. “Okay,” she said. “But I’m going to stick to animals. You can handle everything else.” She hopped up and dragged a folding chair over from a nearby table where some old ladies were selling raffle tickets.

“I don’t know how to draw, though.”

“Anyone can draw a flower.”

Turns out she was right. My artwork was nowhere near as skilled as Jane’s, but I did pull off several flowers--multiple kinds of flowers, in fact--as well as rainbows, stars, and hearts pierced with arrows. I even managed an alien, the classic “little green man” with giant black eyes. Dad was so absorbed by the hot-rods that he didn’t notice I was gone. At the end of the night, Jane grabbed the wad of cash she’d been collecting in her brother’s baseball cap and split it with me right down the middle.

I used the money to get my ears pierced the next week at the mall. But the best thing I got out of the deal was, obviously, Jane. We exchanged phone numbers, and whenever our parents were willing to drive us, we spent the rest of that sticky summer tying knots in a cat's cradle string, in our dirty shoelaces, in our hair, tying knots in a friendship that we pretended had always been there.

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Tabitha Jensen's fingers frolic over the piano keys. She sways on the bench, clearly taking pleasure in the jaunty, honky-tonk tune she plays—though her smile is too meek and her clothes are too modest for the Wild West saloon where the song belongs.

The choreography isn't ready yet, so Grace pumps one hip up and down while she sings:  
*Turn back, O man. Forswear thy foolish ways. Old now is earth, and none may count her days.*  
*Da-da-da-da-da...*

"Turn Back, O Man" is one of my favorite songs in *Godspell*. It's sexy, which is refreshing since the rest of the songs are so earnest. It's strange, though. The melody's seductive, but the lyrics are just the opposite—stop sinning, or else.

"Good job," says Steve. "That was great. So for this scene, I was thinking we could change the tempo a bit, make it more like a lounge song. You know, a 'Girl from Ipanema' type of thing." He raises his hand, as if to paint the set before us. "Grace is in the spotlight with one of those old-fashioned microphones. The other disciples are sitting around, drinking out of martini glasses, looking snooty. Maybe some of the chorus could play wait staff."

Tabitha frowns. "Honey, I don't know if martini glasses are appropriate."

Grace tosses her sheet music on top of the piano. "That's too bad—I really like the tempo as is."

“So do I.” Tina Linden works her way up to the front, careful not to step on the fingers and toes of the seated cast. She has a piece of fabric balled in one fist.

Angie’s been sucking on her necklace, but now she lets it drop, the skull and crossbones charm thudding against her chest. She sticks her head between mine and Jane’s. “What is that bitch doing?”

“Who the eff knows?” replies Jane. “God probably told her it was the right tempo in a dream.”

Tina unfurls the fabric—a red felt scarf, much too warm for the summer weather. “I thought this number could be a great one for audience interaction.” She drapes the scarf around Grace’s neck. “This would be a feather boa instead of a scarf. Grace could walk up and down the aisles, literally telling the audience to ‘forswear thy foolish ways.’ She could wrap the boa around their necks and stuff.”

Grace shrugs the boa off and catches it with her left hand. “What if people don’t want to be touched?”

Tina tugs the scarf back and rests it over Grace’s shoulders again, this time like a beauty pageant sash. “Audiences love to be a part of the show. Why do you think *Cats* was on Broadway for so long? Because the cats were climbing all over people.” I am honestly surprised that the RFC’s don’t find anything objectionable about *Cats*. Aren’t those body suits a little too tight for the Lord’s tastes?

She drags a chair in front of the piano and sits in it. “At the end of the song, she could come on stage, where all the other disciples are, and sit on George’s lap, like this.” Tina grabs Grace’s hips and pulls her down.

Jane leans back, happy for the scandal of it. “What is happening right now?”

“God, look at Grace’s face,” I say. It’s not quite a cringe, but her eyebrows are contorted, like she’s worried Tina’s going to open her legs at any moment, letting her crash to the ground.

“Yeah, she looks like a Picasso.”

“I wish we could rescue her.”

But Tina isn’t finished with her vision. “She can tickle him with the boa. Yank him in and try to kiss him. You know—because she’s obviously the Mary Magdalene character.”

The musical theater geek in me gets all riled up because that is so untrue. In *Godspell*, the only “characters,” per se, are Jesus and John the Baptist. The rest of the disciples go by the actors’ real names--probably to make room for more women in the cast, and also probably because Thaddeus was a stupid name even in the 1970’s.

Tabitha comes around and separates the girls. “While that’s very creative, Tina, and I appreciate your passion, I’m not sure—“

“It’s a great idea,” says Steve, who takes the scarf and wraps it around his own neck. “Fantastic.”

Tabitha pinches his elbow. “You’ve got to remember, Steve, these are kids. You’re not in New York anymore.”

“Lighten up, Tabby.” He lowers his voice, but we can all still hear. “It’s not like she’s some jezebel. I promise to keep her fully clothed.”

It’s so awkward I’ve got shivers. I wonder how many of the babies are going to go home today and ask their parents what “jezebel” means.

“It’s decided, then.” He bunches up the scarf and gives it back to Tina. “Tell your mother we’ll be needing a red feather boa.”

Mrs. Linden sews all the costumes for the plays. She's a thin, pale, quiet woman. During tech week she's constantly behind her Singer machine, folded in her chair like a worn scrap of linen.

Angie jumps up and stretches her arms above her head, black bangles clattering to her elbows. "Don't worry about it. I've already got a boa."

"Wonderful," says Steve. He wraps his arm around Tabitha's waist—he can almost circle it entirely. "Now you just have to plan the choreography. You can practice on me."

"How many shades of pink do you think her face is now?" I ask Jane. I wish I could rescue Tabitha, too.

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The bottoms of George Linden's bare feet are calloused. They stick out from the ends of his overalls, white around the edges. I'm serious—overalls. White cotton tee beneath the denim straps, soft flannel button-down over the whole ensemble. He's eating an apple, too. Give him some white paint and a fence, and he'd be Tom Sawyer.

He's reading a book—I can't see what it is from here. Two of his fingers are marking different pages from the one he's reading. His fingers are slightly too long for his palms. I wonder if he plays piano.

Those hands, those feet—they're made for crucifixion. I can't wait to see his body spread on a chain-link fence, naked to the waist. He'll sing *oh God, I'm dying* as his chest caves and his toes twitch.

Of course, it would be better if his demise were followed by the energetic dance number at the end of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. As a post-suicide Judas, rope still around my neck, I'd

dangle from the catwalk above him. *Every time I look at you I don't understand, why you let the things you did get so out of hand....* There'd be fringe and glitter and choirs of angels.

I have to throw my trash from lunch away. How convenient. I cross the room and toss the crumpled tinfoil in the bin next to him. I glance at his hands. *Othello*. But his ring finger is covering the *t. O, hello*. Maybe that's what I should open with. A nervous giggle tickles in my throat, but I manage to get it under control before I speak.

"I read that in school last year." Yes. Didn't even quiver.

He closes the book. "Yeah? I'm reading it for the second time in a row, actually. Paying more attention to the glossary this time."

While it's true that I did read it in school, I actually remember it more from when I tried and failed to watch the movie adaptation with my parents. For some reason, I can never get them into plays. They can't seem to enjoy the plot without the interruption of improbable musical numbers. We sat down to watch it one night, but twenty minutes in, Dad was folding laundry and Mom was on the computer booking tickets to a conference. They offered to give it another shot the next evening, but soon they fell asleep leaning against each other. It was cute and annoying at the same time. I ended up watching it in full both nights by myself, so I know the play pretty well.

Better not mention the movie, though. I don't want to sound stupid. "I like Iago. He's so evil for no reason."

"No reason?" he says. "What about 'the green-eyed monster'?"

Is there anything hotter than guys who know Shakespeare? "Sure, Iago's jealous. But jealousy doesn't normally inspire a person to hatch an elaborate plot that ends in the victim murdering his own wife."

“I suppose that’s true.” He always speaks slowly, as though a five-pound weight were attached to each of his words and he had to set them down very carefully. “What Iago did to him was wrong, but Othello gave into jealousy, too. In James it says, ‘You desire but do not have, so you kill.’ It was so easy for Othello to kill Desdemona. Does he deserve our sympathy?”

Crap—scripture. Not my comfort zone. The only Bible passage I know about jealousy is the one that’s forced upon all of us at every wedding ever, read in an unpracticed drone by some elderly relative, a dull rite of passage the happy couple must suffer through before they can say their I-do’s: love does not envy. “Othello made mistakes, I guess, but I still feel kind of bad for him.”

“Love the sinner and not the sin.”

“Right. That.” I feel around the folds of my brain for a different subject, but I’m hypnotized by the swirling, golden cowlick at the back of his head. “So I guess your sister wants to be a director, too.”

I’m an idiot. Why am I even allowed to speak? Hello, gorgeous. Let me insult your sister. Luckily, George smiles. “That was something else. I’ve never seen Tina like that.”

“Maybe she’s having a weird day,” I offer. My gut is pretzeling. “Well, I’ll let you get back to The Bard.”

Before he can say “see ya,” I’m back with Jane, my arm looped through her elbow. Her cool skin melts against mine, hot and red.

“Spreading the good news of Andrew Lloyd Webber to our hippie-clown Lord and Savior?” she asks.

“No,” I reply. “We were talking about Shakespeare.”



“His literacy levels are that high? I thought homeschooled kids were only allowed to read C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, and The Bible.”

I lean my head against her shoulder, where it notches perfectly. “I’m tired,” I say. Crushes really take it out of me.

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In 1977, Yvonne Elliman had a massive hit with her version of The Bee Gees’ “If I Can’t Have You,” released on the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack. But before she was a disco diva, she played Mary Magdalene opposite Ted Neeley in the film of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Her version of the musical’s ballad “I Don’t Know How to Love Him” also charted, but nowhere near as high. This particular song is the topic of discussion at today’s Disco Jesus Project meeting.

“Figures that the one woman in the whole musical gets the worst song.” Angie’s perched on the counter next to her mom’s laptop, whose screen shows Yvonne Elliman’s round, sweaty face belting the song, strands of her long, black hair sticking to her cheeks. Angie won’t talk about what happened to the TV in her room. My guess is that her mom tried to ban her from seeing Ryan again, and the fragile box bore the brunt of her frustration. Her brothers are using the TV in the living room, playing some video game where they carve people up with machetes.

“What about ‘King Herod’s Song’?” I say. “It’s way more annoying.”

“Incorrect.” Jane pours the sugary contents of a Pixie Stick into her mouth before she continues. “It’s equally annoying. But at least it offers the opportunity for a cute tap number.”

Angie crosses her arms. “The point is, the song sucks.” She does an exaggerated impression of Elliman’s voice, singing each syllable like she’s turning on a vacuum cleaner in a different key.

“It’s super sexist, too,” says Jane. “Just because she’s a prostitute, she has to love Jesus in a sexual way.”

The song is pretty pathetic—a woman tortured by her obsession with one man. I like the bridge though. *Should I bring him down? Should I scream and shout? Should I speak of love? Let my feelings out?* All the while the melody builds, inflates with tension, and when she bursts—*I never thought I’d come to this!*—it strikes me as painfully honest.

Max pokes his head into the kitchen. “Will you turn that shit down?”

“¡Vete al carajo y déjame en paz!” She must have said something like “eff off,” but worse, because he bolts out of there like there’s an avalanche tumbling from the tops of the cabinets.

I pop the tab of a Mountain Dew. “Speaking of Mary Magdalene—“

“Oh my God, I know.” Angie’s practically giggling with glee. “That was fucking hilarious.”

“It didn’t seem so funny for Grace.”

“No, but she’s tough. God—Tina tugging her into her lap like that? And Grace is supposed to be the whore in this scenario?”

Jane opens her mouth to interject, her tongue splotched with green and blue, but Angie corrects herself first.

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m all about sleeping with who you want, when you want. But I still think it’s great that Tina called Grace a whore when she was basically forcing herself on the woman.”

“Fair enough,” says Jane. Then she smiles. “It’s probably the most action Tina’s ever got in her whole life.”

I examine the spiky green spiral on the can and roll the popping, carbonated liquid on my tongue, searching for different flavors, all to avoid the pitying stare that I know Jane is sending my way next. I hate when she and Angie do this. It's not like Jane's much more experienced than me anyway. She had that *one* boyfriend that *one* time.

I'm glad that Angie keeps the conversation moving. She props her legs up on my shoulders while I grab a twisty straw from the drawer beneath her. "What do you think her game is?" she asks.

"The usual. Treat people like crap in the name of God."

"I don't want to talk about Tina anymore. She's not worth our attention." Jane points to the screen, where Mary is kneeling over Jesus' sleeping body. *He scares me so. I want him so. I love him so.* (Oh, Mary. I can relate.) "What are we going to do about that?" she asks.

Angie closes the top of the computer, and the strings are abruptly halted. "Hopefully skip past it when we watch in the future."

"I think you're missing its potential," Jane argues. "The Disco Jesus Project has yet to strike, and this song is universally annoying."

"But that would require us to sing it a lot."

"Not necessarily." Unsurprisingly, Jane has drawn a diagram, which she holds up before us. "I propose we give people CDs that are labeled as something else, but really it's just 'I Don't Know How to Love Him' on repeat."

I take it upon myself to point out the flaw in her plan: "What reason would we have to give everyone CDs?"

"Because we're nice? Maybe we tell them it's something we recorded ourselves."

Angie smirks. “It’d be great if we could swap them out with the practice CDs they give us.”

I stop blowing bubbles with my straw. “No. That would just make Tabitha look bad. She’s Jesusy, but she’s no RFC.”

Jane nods. “You’re right. No need to punish the innocent.”

“I think we should table the CDs,” says Angie. “At least for now. For one thing, this song’s the audio equivalent of nuclear waste. I’m literally concerned that listening to it will give me cancer. For another thing, I think we should start smaller. Win their trust while the disco worms in slowly.”

Jane folds up her drawings. “What did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know.” She slides off the counter. “That’s your assignment for next time: think subtle. And now I’m going to have to kick you ladies out. I have an internet date with Ryan, and I have to change into my lacy bra.”

“How’s he going to see your lacy bra over IM?” I ask.

“Dude—the future is now. Video chat. We have the technology.”

“Right,” I say. Obviously.

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Beads of holy water cling to my forehead and chest. It’s a humid Sunday, and they won’t dry, even when I exit the stuffy church. I’m bummed that it was the priest who can’t sing on key. Mom taps my head with her rolled-up bulletin.

“We’ve got to order you new skirts for next year.”

“My skirts from last year should still fit.”

“You’re a senior now. Brown plaid changes to blue plaid. Remember?”

I honestly didn't remember until she said. Sometimes it's like Mom's the high schooler. She's constantly bugging me about whether I'm going to the football games (even though the answer is always no), nagging me to join Yearbook or Poetry Club or the Quiz Bowl Team-- anything to get me more involved. All nostalgic about her alma mater, I guess.

She leans down to whisper to me, cheeky smile, like we're the best of gal-pals. "When I was your age, we used to wear colorful bras under the white uniform shirts so all the boys could see."

Dad coughs. "Marianne, don't give her any ideas."

I say, "You've told me that before."

She kisses the top of my head. "How are rehearsals going?"

"Fine." I try to walk along the parking lines like a tightrope.

She is undeterred. "I'm so glad you and Angie found Joyful Noise."

*Found* isn't the correct word. We didn't have much of a choice. Our Lady of Sorrows' student theater program wasn't strong to begin with--they only ever rotated between a few plays, tired performances of *Our Town*, *The Odd Couple*, *The Crucible*. They never put on musicals, as that would have required our dismal school orchestra to actually practice their instruments. And the program never recovered after Mr. Adams took a match to the red auditorium curtains at the end of our freshman year. The official story is that he was smoking inside, but Angie and I know better. Well, we have theories, anyway.

We still wanted to do theater, and Joyful Noise was our only viable option. There's technically community theater, but I'm not sure they've put on an actual production since the nineties. And besides, Jane could join us at Joyful Noise. It was Jane who found their advertisement in the first place, a spread of happy, singing faces on the back page of a newspaper

she was about to slice apart for a decoupage project. Tryouts for *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, coming soon. The prospect of getting on stage again, the three of us together, was enough to make us put up with all the ridiculous RFC stuff.

I say, "Yep." I know Mom loves me, but I'm not having it today. My mind's still with Jesus—but not the one from Mass. "For all the silent petitions we hold in our hearts," said the lector, and in the quiet I prayed, "please make it stop," and also, "please give him to me." *Lord hear our prayer.*

"Now that you've got a solo, maybe you want to change your major from library science to music."

I waver from the white painted stripe, and my foot lands on the blacktop. "I don't have a major. I'm not in college."

She starts fussing in her purse for the car keys. "You told me you wanted to major in library science."

"Yeah—like, two months ago."

"Melody, I don't want to tell you what to do,"—except that's exactly what she wants to do—"but it's about time to get focused. Those first applications are going to be due in October."

"I'm fully aware of that."

"Are you?" She clicks the unlock button about sixteen times in a row. "You haven't cracked those guides I bought you. They're still on the dining room table."

That's because I recently came across some more interesting reading material. I was in the basement trying to dredge up inspiration for the Disco Jesus Project; there's a whole mess of junk down there--random craft supplies, heaps of mildewed magazines that we keep for no apparent reason, ugly paintings that my parents had on the walls when they first moved in

together. In a cardboard box that was caving in beneath the weight of the plastic Christmas tree, I found Mom's diaries from high school. Mottled composition notebooks, each neatly labeled with a span of dates. I read one cover to cover, then decided I'd better save the rest for later. I put the box back, even scooped up dust and sprinkled it over the top so she wouldn't find out.

That's how I know that she only joined Yearbook because a certain Derek Peterson joined Yearbook--which is fascinating, since she and Dad are supposed to be high school sweethearts. Maybe now would be a good time to question her about this no-longer-young-man. She's so nosy about my life--why can't I be nosy about hers?

The clock strikes noon, which is probably a good thing. Our car is parked directly below the bell tower, and when I open my mouth, all that bellows forth is a cheerful clanging.

I climb into the backseat. Dad buckles his seatbelt and leans over the armrest to look at me. "Maybe you could be a nurse like your dear old mom."

"Francis." She turns the ignition. The roar of the motor vibrates in my stomach, my jaw.

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It's like I committed some horrible crime that I'll never be able to erase from my record. The evidence is all over the house. Porcelain statue of Mary in the front hallway, a writhing snake beneath her feet--that one's quite the relic, brought on the boat from Ireland by my great-great-grandparents. Dried palm leaves folded into crosses and tucked behind the frame of the painting near the dining room table. Tiny glass bottles of holy water displayed next to the plates in the china cabinet.

Then there are the many pictures tying me directly to it, the ones Mom will never take down, the ones she'll want to give me someday for my own home and I won't hang them up and then she'll get all weird about it. Baby Mel in a poofy white dress, resting in her smiling parents'

arms after having her original sin forgiven. Slightly older Mel in a slightly poofier white dress after her First Communion, her gloved hands folded before her as though she were praying, which she's obviously not because she's smiling at the camera. Awkward, gangly junior high Mel stepping away from the altar after her confirmation in the Catholic faith, her mouth full of braces and bearing a new middle name: Clotilde, patron saint of adopted children, exiles, and widows. (I only picked it because I thought the name was pretty.) At least they don't make you wear poofy white dresses for Confirmation.

What Mom doesn't get is that thirteen straight years of Catholic schooling is a surefire way to make your kid hate Catholicism. Sure, once I got older it was all the women-hating and gay-bashing that I had a problem with, but it started long before that. A girl can only learn about the seven sacraments so many times before she wants to scream. Maybe it's not so bad if you only have to deal with Sunday School, but religion class five days a week for practically your whole life? It's too much.

Not to mention Mass two days a week on top of that. They call it the "Mystery of Faith," but Christ's life as manifested in the Eucharist becomes way less mysterious when you're an altar girl. It's tough to take Father Willis seriously when not an hour earlier you were in the sacristy with him, watching him scratch his butt while deciding which vestments to wear.

It's not like Angie and I are particularly rebellious about this; I can hardly think of a single person in our class who *wants* to go to Church at this point. Sure, not every student at Our Lady of Sorrows tries to found an Atheism Club--one of the few schemes Angie didn't get away with--but still, most of us are sick of it.

All that Catholic stuff, though--confession, Latin hymns, no meat on Lenten Fridays, sex-ed that told us condoms didn't work--it's nothing compared to the RFCs. Seriously--Catholics



seem normal by comparison. The trouble with faith in God is that you can't see God, right? With the RFCs, they can see God. Not sight, exactly. It's like God is a fundamental part of the way their bodies function, a sixth sense that only Evangelicals have developed--sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, Jesus. They talk about God as if God is obvious.

It sounds kind of nice, putting it that way, but it's actually scary. They're delusional. Since God is a fact to them, other facts don't matter, even if there are piles of evidence to back those facts up. At least the Pope declared that evolution is true. Last Halloween, Evan Royce told me--for real, no joke--that witches used to mate with their succubi and produce half-human, half-animal babies. Angie tried to explain chromosomes to the poor kid, but he wouldn't listen, even though he'd been crushing on her for years. It's not like falling in love is supposed to make you abandon everything you've ever believed in, but still, you'd think love plus actual facts would do the trick.

What Mom doesn't get is that they're dangerous.

"So they pray a lot," she says the next morning, snapping an apple between her teeth while I polish off my peanut butter toast. "That's a good thing. When do you ever pray? Only when I drag you to church, I'll bet."

But that's the thing--I do pray, all the time. I'm an atheist, or at least that's what I tell Angie and Jane, and it's what I want my brain to believe. But the praying is like some weird OCD thing. I can't stop it. *Please let me get through this audition*, I pray to no one in particular. *Please don't let them hate me. Please let me disappear.*

"It's not the praying that bugs me. They're mean to people. They think anyone who disagrees with them is evil, and they treat them like crap."

Mom slides one arm into a cardigan. "Do they treat you like crap?"

I push a clump of peanut butter off the roof of my mouth. “Not really. But other people, yeah.”

She swings her bag over her shoulder, kisses me on the head. “Sometimes you just have to get along with people you don’t like.” And then, winking at me on her way out the door: “That’s what Jesus would do.”

In *Jesus Christ Superstar* there’s this scene in the Temple of Jerusalem, which has basically been turned into a sketchy outdoor Wal-Mart--people are selling everything from food to guns to sex. Jesus shoves his way in like some scrawny, drunk Godzilla and starts tearing the place apart, turning over tables, smashing goods with the butt of a rifle. *My temple should be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves*. People are literally screaming. He ends it all with an angry, ragged falsetto threat: *Get out! Get out!*

In *Godspell*, there is no Temple scene.

She meant it as a joke, but really, is that what Jesus would do? I guess it depends on what kind of Jesus you’re talking about.

### Chapter 3

I'm removing a thick, black snake from my arm. It's hard work—Johnny Cash enjoys cuddling (or squeezing me to death), and the one long muscle that is his body clenches in protest. Inch by inch, I lay him on the granite countertop.

"What are you doing with him?" asks Jane.

"Is The Loser home?" The Loser is Jane's older brother Glen. He doesn't go to college, he doesn't go to work—he rarely goes anywhere at all. His favorite activities include watching TV, smoking weed, and letting Johnny Cash out of his cage for a nice slither around the house.

"I don't think so, but he always locks the door of his room, whether he's here or not."

I dig my fingernails under its belly and force the last bit of serpent off my wrist. "He's cold-blooded. If we leave him on the counter, he should stop moving around. That way we won't step on him." Johnny begins to wrap himself around the faucet. "Should kick in any moment now."

"Let's hope Honors Bio taught you true." Jane pinches her fingers—canary yellow this time—around my wrist, digging between the tendons, and drags me back into the living room. Angie's there, stacking books over the hole in the floor for safety.

Jane lives in a crumbling Victorian mansion in Merton. Her parents run the local flea market, so her house is basically where bizarre things go to die. In the basement there are six vintage pinball machines—all broken. The back wall of the garage is coated in license plates from every state—and, for some reason, two from Yemen. What was once a grand, gilded fireplace mantel is now lined with mannequin heads, chunks of their synthetic hair missing.

Jane's studio occupies a large pantry space off the kitchen. A gift from her parents for her eighth birthday, she spends most of her free time there—canvases stacked below the shelves,

murky buckets full of wet sponges, a scuffed filing cabinet with pens and pencils and markers and crayons jumbled inside each drawer. In this town—if you could call it a town—the studio is probably the best gift someone could have. Not much to do here. We usually resort to watching movies or stealing all the ketchup packets from the Dairy Queen. Who buys hotdogs there, anyway?

Jane rolls up the zebra hide that covers the floor between the couches. Angie pops in the DVD. “Let’s try this one more time.”

“Again?” I’d rather do anything else—even ketchup packets, add to the heaping mound on the counter. “I’d kind of like to take a nap before Grace’s thing tonight.”

We’ve been invited to the Royces’ for board game night, which is something we keep saying we’re going to do, but this is the first time we’ve actually done it. We’re really good at organizing things.

“Don’t worry,” Angie replies, pointing the remote at the TV. “You’ll get your nap--just as soon as we have this down perfect.”

*Christ you know I love you! Did you see? I waved! I believe in you and God, so tell me that I’m saved.*

We’re teaching ourselves the choreography to “Simon Zealotes.” The Zealots were these people who wanted Jesus to rebel against the Romans—none of this turn-the-other-cheek stuff—and in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, they have a big gospel number. The best part about it is the dance—it’s wild and ecstatic and rollicking, bodies twisting all over the place.

It’s also extremely difficult. We started last night at 5 p.m., and with only a short break for a frozen pizza dinner, we practiced until 2:30 a.m. We were a complete mess, but we had a breakthrough when Jane realized that you have to move your arms and your legs separately—not

one's natural inclination. Legs together and arms straight up with jazz hands, tuck your arms in and stick your right foot out, legs together and arms to the side with jazz hands, tuck your arms in and stick your left foot out, and so on—but double time. The pirouettes come later.

*Jesus I am with you—touch me touch me Jesus! Jesus I am on your side—kiss me kiss me Jesus!*

I still think it's a stupid idea. Even if we do convince Steve to use the choreography in another number—and that's unlikely, given the sheer amount of babies with clumsy feet—it's not like anybody's going to *know* they're dancing to *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

"It's the principle of the thing," said Angie, a string of cheese drooping between the slice of pizza and her teeth. "*We* will know that their pure, crunchy-granola Jesus musical is being corrupted by a Jesus musical with synthesizers and an infectious backbeat."

"I don't think *Jesus Christ Superstar* ever uses synthesizers."

"You know what I mean."

This morning we run through it seven more times, and when we finish I'm soaked—gross boob sweat and everything.

"How exactly are we going to go about this?" I ask.

Angie's freshly-dyed hair is dripping turquoise down her face. She looks like a relief map I made for school when I was eight or nine--her forehead a putty-pressed desert, her perspiration the painted rivers cutting through it. "Tina Linden isn't the only one who gets to play director."

"So we just walk up to Steve and say: 'Looking for some choreography? Good thing we meticulously planned this entire dance for no reason.'"

When Jane falls back on the couch, the ratty cushion nearly sinks to the floor. "It seems kind of like plagiarism, too. We're taking credit for this dance we didn't invent."

“What is wrong with you guys?” Angie unrolls a chain of paper towels and dabs herself. “Nobody’s making money off the show. And it’s not like anyone’s going to see it except our families and friends. Who’s going to notice?”

“Fine. Let’s say we go ahead with it.” I grab the paper towels from her. “What song are we going to suggest he use it for? ‘Day by Day,’ ‘Light of the World’—those are too slow.”

“I can think of one.” Angie crawls onto the window seat and stands, her body framed by worn velvet curtains. She inhales and tenses her arms, which slowly rise above her head as she sings, an instant finale: *Bless the Lord! My sooooooooooooooooooul!*

How does a wail so loud come out of a broomstick like that? The note is thrilling---almost frightening, as though it’s defying some natural law to pierce the air so effortlessly. I’m concerned for the structural integrity of the old windows.

Angie leaps down, takes a bow. “I need some water.”

We follow her to the kitchen counter, where I rescue Johnny’s tail from the potential mutilation of the garbage disposal. She gulps down a glass. “Remember to wear comfortable clothes tomorrow.”

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When you have seven kids, you need more of everything. The Royces’ house isn’t that big, but they have two couches, two coat racks, and the largest fridge I’ve ever seen. I didn’t know they made 72-packs of toilet paper, but the Royces have one leaning against the wall outside the downstairs bathroom, a hole ripped into the plastic and several rolls missing already.

“Monopoly, maybe?”

Jane and Grace and Amanda and I are sitting at one end of the long, rectangular dining room table, which is surrounded by two mismatched sets of four chairs each. All the plastic

fetuses have been stuffed into two duffel bags stacked at one end of the room, so our feet have someplace to go.

“What else is there?” asks Jane.

“Not much.” Grace walks to the hallway and begins rummaging through a closet. Something jangles and then crunches when it hits the floor. “Operation. Pictionary.”

“Let’s play Pictionary.”

“Says the girl who can draw.” Amanda stretches her arms high above her head, the tips of her fingers dangerously close to the spinning blades of the ceiling fan.

If I weren’t such an idiot, I could have brought more games from home. We have Scrabble and Taboo, and Dad bought us Jenga last Christmas. “I should have brought some from home.”

Grace pokes her head around the corner, red curls gone wine-colored in the low light. “What’s the matter? Our games not good enough for you?”

“No, I just meant--”

“She’s kidding, Mel.” Jane nods at Grace, who smiles in confirmation. I know it’s only a joke, but it annoys me. Why can’t people ever mean what they say?

“I vote for Monopoly,” says Amanda. “It’ll keep the boys away. They don’t have the patience for it.”

Who does have the patience for it? I never know whether it’s better to buy or pass--makes me nervous, because I feel like I’m just screwing up the whole time. On the other hand, it’s better than Operation, which has to be the most jarring thing on the planet. I guess it’d be okay if I had a steady hand, but I wasn’t born to do anything involving fine motor skills. It took me a

year and a half to learn to tie my shoes. My favorite game is Trivial Pursuit because all you have to do is know random stuff.

Jane nudges Amanda with one knee of her chalk-stained overalls. “We certainly wouldn’t want any boys here, would we?”

“Boys are gross,” she confirms. I can think of one who’s not gross, but before I can lose myself in admiration, Amanda snaps her fingers. “Jenna! Get out of here.”

The second-youngest Royce is sprawled out on the floor in the corner reading a book. Her head and shoulders are tucked beneath the legs of a dusty high chair, which probably hasn’t been used in almost a decade. At Amanda’s command, she scoots out and hops away through the kitchen.

“Has she been there the whole time?” I ask. “I’m not the most observant person, but you’d think I’d notice another human presence.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” Amanda replies. “She’s very sneaky. It’s a family trait.”

“I’m just going to bring all three.” Grace returns carrying a stack of sagging cardboard boxes. She takes the lid off Monopoly and peers inside. “Shoot. This is the stuff for Yahtzee.”

Turns out the Monopoly board is in the Pictionary box. We’re about twenty minutes into the game--I thought I was doing okay after I bought Baltic Avenue, Vermont Avenue, and St. James Place, but then a Chance card put me in jail--when the front door creaks open and an odor we know all too well wafts through the stagnant summer air. It’s the thick, grainy scent of the pig barn at the county fair mixed with the juicy, organic stink of a bag of spinach that’s been left open too long mixed with the ugly reek of a gas station bathroom.

“I brought Ryan!” shouts Angie.



“No kidding,” Jane mutters while the newcomers remove their shoes. Matching black boots is my guess.

The couple enters the room, hands linked tight in solidarity against whatever Ryan decides is corrupt today. He’s shaved his head since I last saw him, and he’s removed the gauges in his ears so that his baggy lobes sink halfway to his shoulders. I stare through the holes at the objects they frame--a swatch of wallpaper, a light switch, and when he turns his head, Angie’s nose.

“Sorry we’re late.” Angie skips around to the other side of the table and sits next to Amanda. “We went to a museum,” she says, as if it were the most grown-up thing anyone could ever possibly do.

Ryan sits next to me--of course. I try to breathe as little as possible. His voice has the cadence of a broken coffee maker. “There was a Cuban art exhibit at the MCA. Castro and shit.”

“Neat,” says Grace. Poor thing--she probably doesn’t even know where Cuba is. Can’t imagine that godless communist nations are high on the religious homeschooling priority list. “Do you guys want to join us for Monopoly? We have the top hat, the thimble, and the shoe left.”

Ryan pulls a cigarette from his jacket pocket. “Capitalism? Fuck that shit.” He speaks directly to Angie, like the rest of us aren’t there. “I’m going outside to smoke.”

“Kiss first?”

He leans across the table and Angie meets him halfway, and then he basically assaults her face with his mouth. I’ve never been kissed, but when and if it happens, I hope it doesn’t look anything like that. He’s like a big dog slobbering on her chin.

Before Angie can extract her lips from Ryan's jaw, Amanda's running upstairs, leaving only a quiet "I'm sleepy" in her wake. Maybe I can take her properties. When Ryan finally shuts the patio door behind him, Jane cracks up. She can't help herself.

"He's sensitive, I know." Angie grabs the thimble, sets it on Go. "But I mean, he really does take this stuff seriously. He and all the other guys in Paradise have dedicated their lives to this shit."

That night, Jane sleeps over. We're curled up in my bed, staring at the glow-in-the-dark constellations on my ceiling that I invented when I was too young to know what constellations were.

Jane rolls her face onto my pillow. "She has to know we all hate him, right?"

"Hate's kind of strong."

"I forgot. You don't hate anybody."

It's just that I think hate is really unspecific. Ryan's super cocky and irritating, but I could put up with that and the ridiculous politics and even the stench, at least for Angie's sake, if I got the impression that he didn't hate me. But I'm sure he hates me--despises me for not dressing like everyone else he knows, loathes me for being polite. It might even be that he thinks I'm a drain on Angie's time, like she could come down to the city more if she didn't have friends to deal with. I don't hate Ryan, but I am sort of bewildered and unhappy with him, I guess, since I never did anything wrong.

"He's definitely annoying," I say. "And he needs to take a shower."

"There you go." She fake-punches my shoulder. "Let out that rage!"

"I think that's all I can manage for tonight."

She shifts back to her side of the bed. “You won’t tell Angie I said we all hate him, right?”

“Relax. I’m no Benedict Arnold.”

“What?”

“I’m not a traitor,” I say, adjusting the blanket below my chin. “I won’t tell.”

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Lillian Linden is not Aretha Franklin. She’s not Sharon Jones, or Mavis Staples, or Adele. That’s not the real problem—if she were any of these women, or if she were even half as talented as these women, she wouldn’t be wasting her time in Joyful Noise. The real problem is that she’s not her older sister, who could at least muster up enough charisma to make the audience think: now there’s a girl who can sing.

Tina knows it, too. She’s staring intently at her script—but not turning any pages—while Lillian struggles through the song.

*Oh bless the Lord, my soul! His praise to thee proclaimed, and all that is within me join to bless his holy name.*

“Bless the Lord” is a soul number. But Lillian doesn’t have the power or the wisdom required to belt the notes the way they deserve to be belted. Her voice is thin, tripping over the triplets at the end of the measures instead of gliding through them smoothly. On top of all that, she’s trying to dance. She keeps bumping into chorus members. At one point, she knocks down a nine-year-old. Jane’s in the back row, cringing.

*He pardons all thy sins, prolongs thy feeble breath, he heals thine infirmities, and ransoms thee from death.*

Angie bites my shoulder, leaving marks that fade from red to pink to white. She bites me there so often it's a wonder the marks don't stay permanently. "More proof God is dead," she says. "No one's prolonging her feeble breath."

"Don't be mean. She's trying so hard." I watch her stumble through a basic grapevine. "Maybe she could play it up as comedy. As in, 'isn't it funny how she keeps screwing up?' Like a clown."

"That would require her to possess a sense of humor."

*He clothes thee with his love, upholds thee with his truth, and like an eagle he renews the vigor of thy youth.*

"She went flat four times."

"I get it, Angie. You're a better singer than her." There are round, shiny boxing gloves in Angie's eyes, so I bite her back to let her know I'm not really mad.

I'm not really mad, but I am really something--tired, maybe? Grossed out? There was a point in time when Angie was capable of saying nice things about other people. It's not like she was ever sweet, exactly, but she wasn't so sour, either. Jane, too. Forget sympathy--sometimes it seems like they can't even *pity* people anymore. At least the RFCs feel bad that everyone else is going to hell.

For most of the song, the tempo is even, but at the end it all revs up to this fast-paced gospel frenzy. The chorus claps in time: *Bless the Lord! Bless the Lord! Bless the Lord! Bless the Lord!*

This is it—she has to hit the high note, the same one Angie so easily landed the other day. I brace myself.

*Bless the Lord!*

Lillian looks like she has to pee.

*My soooo—*

It's kind of like that sound when the needle scratches on Dad's record player, and kind of like that wobbly instrument they use in old movies about aliens. Either way, it's not what it's supposed to be. To her credit, Lillian finishes the number—drops to one knee and flings her scrawny arms to the dingy ceiling, a sad substitute for the heavens. Then the sobs explode from her, rocking her with the kind of energy she could have used during the song.

Tabitha's out from behind the piano so fast that she kicks over the bench. Her hands are on Lillian's violet, splotchy cheeks. "It's okay. I know you can sing it—I heard you during auditions." She smooths her hair. "We're going to practice one on one until you feel comfortable with it. Alright?"

Lillian snuffles her agreement. She hobbles out of the room on Tabitha's arm.

I get the impression Steve likes to pretend that unpleasant things never happen--every fight becomes a simple misunderstanding, every failure becomes a mere setback. He tucks his clipboard beneath one arm, half-shrugs. "That's lunch, guys."

It's our moment to strike. While the other kids unzip their backpacks and tear into their brown paper bags, Angie, Jane, and I approach Steve. I'm mentally reviewing the footwork, fairly certain that I'm going to stomp on my own toes at least once.

He holds his travel mug halfway between his neck and lips and stares at us over the rim—the choice between inhaling caffeine and doing his job must be agonizing. He takes a quick sip and sets it down on the floor. "What's up?"

We've decided to let Jane take the lead on this one, as she's actually in the number. She's all decked out for exercise—track shorts low on her hips and a sweat band over her perpetual

pigtail braids. “We were thinking that the choreography for ‘Bless the Lord’ needs some more pep.”

With his back against the wall, Steve sinks to meet his liquid savior. “Tabitha’s in charge of music and choreography, so you’re going to have to talk to her.”

“We already came up with something,” she insists. “I know it’ll be tough for the little kids, but they can rise to the challenge. Just let us show you.”

He crosses his legs and holds the warm mug to his chest. “Fire away.”

From the first move, everything is wrong. I think it’s because we don’t have any music. We’re spinning in an uneven circle, our planetary bodies falling out of orbit. We’re flailing into nothing, gyrating slightly out of sync. The slaps of our feet sound disgusting—graceful dancers should make no sound at all. I don’t stomp on my own toes. I stomp on Angie’s.

In the meantime, Steve’s mug rests at his mouth, and I can’t tell if he’s trying not to laugh or if he’s just sucking down the bitter stuff to its dregs. Whatever the case, he finally takes a break. “I know those moves. It’s from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, right? The ‘Simon Zealotes’ number?”

I’m surprised he was able to recognize our mangled rendition. Jane balks. “Well we *based* it on that, yeah.”

“I was in a production of that once. L.A. The movie choreography’s so perfect we just borrowed it, too.” Steve’s head is so sweaty it looks like he was the one dancing. “This is why I was gunning for you guys when we were casting. You really know your stuff. Unfortunately, I don’t think this one’s going to fly. It’s a cool idea, combining the two musicals, but there’s no way I can get the tykes to pull it off.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “Thanks.”

For once, my surrender goes unquestioned. We march back into the community hall and collapse into one beige corner. If possible, it seems more beige today.

I fish an apple out of my bag. “He’s right about the babies. *We* could hardly do it.”

Angie’s whole body grimaces, from the folds in her stomach to the curl of her toes. “The worst part is that he’s onto us now. The Disco Jesus Project needs to be stealthier.”

“I thought the dance was supposed to be the subtle option.” My apple tastes like soap, but I swallow it anyway. “We should have known he’d recognize it.”

From what I’ve heard, Steve and Tabitha both used to have pretty successful professional careers in musical theater. They toured with companies and everything. Supposedly there was a lot of buzz about Tabitha. Makes sense. She’s a slight, beautiful soprano—perfect ingenue material. She could easily play Eponine in *Les Miserables*, Eliza in *My Fair Lady*, Guinevere in *Camelot*, Laurey in *Oklahoma!*--any of those. All you’d have to do is switch the costumes. But then she met Steve during a production of *Carousel*, and the rest is history. Sometimes they still do shows in the city. Tabitha gives voice lessons in their living room on weeknights.

Jane whips out yet another sandwich. “I doubt he’s ‘onto us.’ A secret plan to undermine one Jesus musical with another Jesus musical? It’s so ridiculous only someone like you could have thought of it.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Angie starts biting her nails and ripping them off. “The DJP’s not over yet. I’ve got some ideas.”

If she starts listing those ideas, I don’t notice. A barefoot boy in overalls is coming our way. I’ve tried to break the hold he has over me. I’ve made lists of his least attractive qualities, but they all end up too short--the only things I ever add are his Jesus obsession and his obnoxious siblings. Sometimes, when you repeat a word over and over again, it starts to sound like nothing,

nonsense. I've laid in bed and chanted his name--*George Linden, George Linden, George Linden*--so that he'll become nothing, too. But it only conjures his image before me, builds him up into a bigger fantasy. Basically, I'm hopeless.

He steps across my lap and squats next to Jane. "Listen," he says, so calmly I'm inclined to detect a nonexistent drawl. "I know you're trying to eat, and I don't want to keep you."

She mumbles an acknowledgement with her mouth full. She's so embarrassing.

"I don't know if you've heard of what they call 'lactose intolerance'—"

"We all know what lactose intolerance is, and we all know Tina has it." Angie pulls a tube of liquid eyeliner from her pocket and begins to reapply without a mirror. "The cheese will be gone faster if you let her finish eating."

The tone of his voice dips, apologetic. "The thing is, it's not just Tina anymore. Lillian's been having a lot of stomach problems lately. I think that might've been what went wrong with her song earlier." Nausea would have explained her twisted expression. "You know how it is—some of these conditions spring up later in life."

He scratches his nose. I want to scratch his nose.

"Mom's got appointments booked for all of us at the doctor next week. We're praying for the best, but in case it's the worst, it'd be swell if you could avoid cheese for a while."

He said *swell*. That's adorable. I hope he says *golly*, too. *Shucks*. Who doesn't want a man who says *shucks*?

"Just at rehearsal, of course." He grins and that one eye scrunches up, and now I won't be able to sleep tonight. "You can do what you'd like at home."

Jane's manners seem to have disappeared. When she speaks, her jaw drops dramatically, revealing chunks of masticated bread and Kraft American Singles. "Will. Do."



With a polite nod, George stands and backs away. He didn't even glance at me.

"Fucking RFC's." Angie has her fists in her hair, pulling it up in tufts, shaping it into a colorful lion's mane.

"I don't think that had anything to do with Jesus," I say to my chocolate chip cookie.

"Please. It's their religious homeschooling that makes them such idiots. Catholic school sucks, but at least they educate us."

That may be the most forgiving way Angie has ever described Our Lady of Sorrows.

Jane swallows the last bite of her sandwich. "What do they expect me to do? I can't make anything else."

It's a slight exaggeration, but there's some truth to her statement. For all her artistic talents, Jane doesn't know how to boil water. She decorates a mean cake, but if she tries to *bake* that cake, it probably won't come out of the oven in one piece.

"Tell them you have a disease where you can only digest cheese," says Angie. "They won't know the difference."

Lillian may not have recovered--after lunch, Steve decides to move on to another number. Of course, the switch may simply be a result of the pace needed to put on a show this quickly. During the school year, Joyful Noise shows rehearse for three months, and they perform for two weeks. During the summer, they rehearse for three weeks, and then the show--one, single show--is performed at the end of the fourth week. That way everyone has two months left for vacation, back-to-school shopping, all that. Kind of funny how Joyful Noise operates on an academic schedule when so many of its participants don't even attend real school.

"I want you all in your places for 'Day By Day,'" he shouts.

I'm in this one. I hike up my yoga pants and head over to stage right. I know it's stage right because there's an X of neon green tape over the beige floor, and someone has scrawled STAGE RIGHT on it, probably for the benefit of the babies.

Onto the neon green X marked CENTER STAGE steps Tina Linden. George soon joins her, kneels down and gazes up at the waving layers of his sister's hair. I spot Angie in the audience, her smile smug and satisfied--she's latched onto incestuous romantic tension again, I imagine. I wish she'd stop that.

It's not really a romantic song, but it is a love song from a devoted disciple to her savior.

*Day by day, day by day, oh dear Lord, three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.*

That's it. Those are the only lyrics. But the chorus comes in eventually with backup vocals and clapping hands, and it picks up speed. It's hippie gold--I can't help but picture a bunch of long-haired women in crocheted tops and bell bottoms twirling around and singing on the side of some sunny, Californian hill.

Tina fits the part. Not only because of her hair. When she sings, all the pride melts from her face. I don't understand how she does it, but her cheeks puff, and her chin softens. Her blue eyes widen, reflect some ocean far away from here. She dances around her brother, body fluttering like a scarf. If I didn't know her, I'd be convinced she sleeps on a bed of moonbeams and eats nothing but daisies.

And George—George is mesmerized. The hot aura of her adoration bouncing off his body is nothing compared to the adoration bursting from within him, molten love oozing like some gorgeous disease out of every orifice—eyes and ears and nose and throat. He looks like he might die there, happy.

I want to die. If he won't adore me, there's no point.

"Good job," Steve calls after the first run-through. "Front row over here, I want to see you more animated. You may be physically in front, but all I can see right now is the back row. Back row—fantastic. But Mel, you've got to remember to turn this time."

"Got it." I hate today.

I keep my eyes on my feet for the rest of practice. If anyone asks I'll say I have a stomachache. Maybe I have lactose intolerance, too.

The second 5 p.m. hits, Jane has her keys out of her pocket. She's jangling them in time to "Simon Zealotes" when Steve pulls Angie aside. Literally—he tugs her by one spaghetti strap.

"I keep forgetting to ask," he says. "You play guitar, right?"

She pulls the strap back up to her collarbone. "Yeah."

"Do you have an acoustic?"

"Yeah." She hasn't pulled that acoustic guitar out of the basement for years. She has a cheap Fender Strat that she prefers to play, not because a Fender is worth anything but because it's electric. One of her major life goals is to own a Gibson SG.

"Awesome. One of the reasons I wanted you to sing 'By My Side' is that I want you to play it, too. We'll have a live band for the rest of the numbers, but I thought it'd be cool if you covered this one. You in?" He preps for a fist bump.

When we were in first grade, Mrs. Martinez and my mom took us to Toys 'R' Us so we could each pick out a Puppy Surprise. Those things were all the rage back then, but they're kind of creepy. It's a plush dog with a velcro stomach, and inside there are plush puppies—but you don't know how many you're going to get. Hence the surprise. When we got home, we immediately gutted them. Mine had four puppies. Angie's had *thirteen*. I still maintain that it

must have been a manufacturing error. She yanked them out one by one, and with each puppy that emerged her face grew pinker and her eyes grew bigger until she resembled my dollhouse tea-table: a rosy cloth with white saucer eyes.

Her face doesn't look that way now, but I'm reminded of it all the same.

"Yeah," she says.

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Angie doesn't go anywhere without that acoustic now, like she's pregnant with it. It's a banged up, yellowish Seagull, something her dad purchased at a garage sale. The guitar pops comic book bright against her gothic attire. She carries it with her to rehearsal every day, slung over her shoulder in a soft black case. She picks at its strings constantly, even when Steve's talking. He doesn't seem to mind, maybe because it's for the show. When people are practicing, she pretends to pick at its strings, miming the fingering. At lunch, she passes the guitar back and forth with Evan, and they trade songs. Sometimes Amanda sits with them, and they teach her a few chords.

For all her railing against homeschooling, nobody taught Angie how to play guitar. Her parents had it displayed at the side of the fireplace, nothing but a piece of tasteful suburban decor. She grabbed it one day and started strumming, just as a joke. I was there. Even though she was goofing off, I could tell there was something thrumming inside her with each pluck, buzzing down her fingers. That guitar was playing her.

She mastered it eventually, though, with the help of the internet. Online videos demystified the tuning process. She downloaded and printed thousands of tabs, the papers flung across every flat surface in her room, including that largest of flat surfaces, the floor. Dirty footprints on Green Day's "Welcome to Paradise," folded corners on Weezer's "El Scorcho," and

Sleater-Kinney's "I'm Not Waiting" split straight down the middle. Jane and I bought her a few binders for her 13th birthday, but they ended up somewhere in the dusty junk landscape below her bed.

She's no prodigy, but she's good. Plays without a pick, too. Her fingernails do the trick—she keeps them longer on her right hand. Her black nail polish is always chipped.

"By My Side" is my favorite number in *Godspell*—a quiet folk song, no accompaniment besides the acoustic guitar. Vocal harmonies blow softly into the melody, and the winds build until a luscious round whirls in the air. I love listening to Angie play it, but so far I've only heard her sing along once: yesterday, while Tabitha took an hour to teach the babies how to box step. She was practicing in a closet around the corner from the community hall, seated in a folding chair, her arm stretched over the body of the guitar, wider than her hips. I cracked the door and peeked my head in to watch her fingers weave the solemn melody from the metal strings. Then the lyrics issued from her vivid blue lips:

*Where are you going? Where are you going? Can you take me with you?*

Only later did I see the figure in the shadows, hidden in a forest of mops, nodding along with the tempo. The light from the hallway caught a single rivulet of sweat on his bald head. "Good," he said when she was finished. "No notes."

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They're still sitting on the dining room table. Why wouldn't they be? Who eats at the dining room table? Dinner usually consists of me scooping out a portion of whatever Mom made a huge batch of on Sunday and microwaving it on a paper plate. Sometimes I go to the range and eat with Dad, pick something from the limited selection of food he serves at the bar: hot dog, frozen pizza, cheesy nachos. Meanwhile, our dining room table has become a collection area for

misfit items. Some people have a junk drawer, we have a junk table. We usually clean it off for Christmas, and then the build-up starts again with the new year.

I pick the first book off the top of the pile: *The Savvy Girl's Guide to College--Get Smart About the Rest of Your Life!* The exclamation point has a cartoon flower instead of a dot at the bottom, in case the title didn't make it clear enough that there are no boys allowed. It looks just like the stuff they gave us in school about getting our periods. The receipt is still stuck beneath the front cover, an unused bookmark. What else is there? A magazine--*U.S. News & World Report* rankings. The stuff you'd expect--The Idiot's Guide, How-To's, ACT and SAT test-prep manuals.

I don't have the energy for Math right now. *Savvy Girl's Guide* it is.

The Table of Contents appears to have been written by the same people who compose children's birthday cards. Awesome Admissions Essays! Radical Recommendations! Excellent Extracurriculars! This is not what I need. I can string a sentence together, and I'm sure some of my teachers will vouch for my good-kid-ness. Why isn't there anything about majors? I know you don't necessarily need to pick one before you apply, but nobody wants to be undecided--it either means you're too scatterbrained or that you don't care. Maybe back in the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci could get away with being an artist and a scientist and an inventor, but today his school guidance counselor would label him "unfocused" and demand that he take ADHD meds and settle on a clear-cut career path. He'd probably end up in business school for lack of a better idea, paint nothing but the walls of his suburban home.

What options do I have? Anything with numbers is out. Math is basically a foreign language to me. Foreign languages? I took two semesters of Latin, which was okay. Completely impractical, but okay. I was in Latin Club for a few months, but it got to be too much on top of

all the Joyful Noise stuff. Theater? Maybe if I worked really hard I could make a living off being in the chorus. That would never actually work, though. Real stage actors have to do more than box steps--the dancing would be my downfall.

“Oh, good.” Dad’s got a stack of magazines under his arm, *Driving Range Monthly*, which is somehow an actual publication that has enough subscribers to sustain itself. “If you move your books, there’ll be room for these.”

I take one from him, flip through the poorly-formatted articles and black-and-white advertisements. “Do you ever read these? Or do you just order them to be a good business owner?”

“Are you reading those? Or do you just want to make your mother happy?”

“You caught me.” It’s not so much making Mom happy as it is getting her off my back, but that’s a distinction Dad doesn’t need to know about. “I don’t think they’re much help.”

Dad pulls out the chair next to mine and plops himself down. He removes his cap and runs his hand through the straggly remains of his hair, which Mom and I can never convince him to shave off. “Looks like we’ve got trouble, right here in--”

“Right here in River City, I know.” Weird that he goes with *The Music Man*--I was watching the video of the Joyful Noise production last night, the one where I played George’s mom. Specifically the part where we hug. The Wells Fargo wagon was a’comin’. It was an exciting moment. “I’m not in the mood to sing, okay?”

“Are you in the mood to talk? About whatever it is?”

Oh no--the dreaded Dad advice. He has good intentions, but his pearls of wisdom tend to be either generic platitudes or accidental insults, like the time I was getting a C in my computers

class and he told me that it was okay, girls didn't have to be good at computers anyway. This coming from a man who still has an AOL email address.

He's not going to move until I say something. Might as well let it out. I slap the stack of books, my hand right on top of the floral punctuation. "This is all stuff about how to apply to college, which I'm pretty sure I can manage on my own. I need to know what to do once I get there."

"Ah, the age-old question of what to do with your life."

"That's the one."

He smiles. He'll probably turn it into a terrible joke, like I can just marry a rich guy and then do whatever I want. "I can only think of one answer to that."

"Which is?"

"Do what you love." Generic platitude, then. I honestly don't know which is worse.

On his way out, he ruffles my hair, like we're on a freaking sitcom. And all I can think is that I must be really screwed up, because I'm not sure that I love anything.

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When Dad's in a particularly good mood, he lets us sit on the roof of the driving range. I like to read up there, my legs baking on the hot shingles. When we were younger, Angie and Jane made a game of dropping golf balls down the drain pipe, competing to see whose ball would roll further upon ejection. Now we usually just sit and talk there. It's surprisingly quiet on the roof, even though it's not very high. You can hardly make out the sounds of cars in the parking lot and the garbled swearing of lousy shots.

Angie's with Ryan tonight--the Paradise members are going dumpster diving to collect food for the homeless--so it's just me and Jane. We're on our backs, our heads propped up with



our hands, gazing at the view: a dry, grassy fairway, and on the horizon, lines of identical houses, big and boxy, each with a deck and a grill.

“I want a cheeseburger,” I say.

Jane flips onto her side. “I’m considering giving up meat.”

“You, too?” Angie went vegetarian way back when. “I’m going to be the only carnivore left.”

“It’s not a cruelty to animals thing. It’s just that I don’t eat meat too often, anyway.”

I put my hand on my belly, feel my laughter bubble there. “Do you think you’ll give up cheese?”

“Don’t even start.” She sits up and unzips her bag. “That reminds me—I’ve been working on a secret project.” She removes a spiral notebook and turns it sideways before handing it to me. “They’re in no particular order.”

Inside there are pencil drawings sketched across the blue, college-ruled lines. A girl with a straight nose and long hair dangling down her back is in a field, surrounded by those dairy cows with black and white spots. She’s holding a cross with a sharpened end, and she’s staking one of the cows in the neck. There’s a caption at the bottom: God hates lactose.

“It’s not that witty right now,” she says, “but I’m planning on looking through The Bible. There’s got to be some verse banning milk in Deuteronomy or one of those Old Testament books. Old Testament God didn’t want people to eat anything.”

On the next page there’s a boy sitting at a cafe table, holding hands with a girl across a checkered tablecloth, candle flickering behind their wrists. At a nearby table, there are two men kissing. The guy on the date is watching them with sparkly eyes, a cartoonish heart popping out of his chest. She’s drawn him a bit older than he really is, but it’s still clearly supposed to be

Patrick Linden. We're all sure the third-oldest Linden gay, but it's not like he could come out—Jesus wouldn't approve. Above the cafe is a swirling banner that reads ROBOTS FOR CHRIST.

"Below that one I'm going to have the verse that bans homosexuality. I'd like to make it a weekly webcomic."

"These are effing great," I say, because they are. They're simple, but it's easy to tell exactly who they're meant to portray. The jokes could use some work, but she nailed the art.

"I have to do something during rehearsals, as I'm hardly in the rest of the goddamn show."

"You have always known how to use your time wisely."

I flip to the next page. The representation of Tina Linden is back, this time with a boy whose face is nearly identical to hers. Their arms are wrapped around each other and their lips are locked. A jagged, zig-zag halo engulfs them, the kind you find around words like BAM! and ZAP! in old comics. Beneath them she's scribbled "unevenly yoked?" That's crossed out, and above it she's written "Brothers and sisters in Christ."

I slap the notebook shut and barely prevent myself from flinging it to the well-trimmed grass below. "I don't think that last one's funny."

"Yeah." She takes the notebook from me, regards her own handiwork. "I can't get the caption right."

"It's not that." I hug my knees to my chest. "Incest is really gross. And it's not even true—George and Tina don't make out with each other. Isn't that libel or something?"

"Tina doesn't stab cows to death, either. And it's not like I'm going to put their names in it." She rubs my shoulder, massaging deep into the bone. "You're too nice. You know that? Sometimes people deserve to be mocked."

“The RFC’s are jerks, but that’s no reason—“

“You have to stand up to jerks,” she says, the fiery orange sun setting behind her head.

“In whatever way you know how. You have to grow a spine.”

I lay limp on my side. Jane tickles my back, but it doesn’t work. No reaction at all. “Can’t stop evolution. One day you’ll be a vertebrate like the rest of us.”

## Chapter 4

I'm waiting at the end of a gauntlet. Babies line the hallway--little kids pressed against the walls, hugging, high-fiving, praying together, utterly delighted to see each other again after the agony of one whole night apart. Their lightbulb eyes flash to the entrance for each new arrival, eager to greet their friends. Only a few moments ago, I passed through this gauntlet without incident. Somehow I don't think Angie will have the same luck.

She's standing at the far end of the hallway, just past the glass doors. Today her hair is blood red, curled up and over her brow into an Elvis Presley-style pompadour. Her eyes are ringed in black, an anarchy symbol drawn atop her left cheekbone. A plain ring loops through her septum. A large safety pin is stuck through one ear. A black tank top cuts low across her chest. Chains of various weights and colors dangle from her neck, dive into her cleavage. A brown plaid skirt hangs on her hips--unlike me, she obviously remembered that we're switching to blue plaid next year. But the uniform skirt is almost unrecognizable now--she's sheared a few inches off the bottom, attached some patches with loose, uneven stitches. Ratty Chuck Taylors lace up her calves. On her back, she carries her guitar.

I gaze down at my own attire: gray t-shirt, ankle-length skirt. One of these days I need to borrow a sense of style.

The worst part is that the babies are too young to know any better. They think they're helping Angie when they hurl their squeaky judgments. I'm sure they're just parroting whatever their parents say, and their parents are just parroting whatever effed-up interpretation of the Bible their churches are preaching, but that doesn't make it any less creepy.

A boy with his two front teeth missing is the first to share God's love: "People who wear all black are going to hell."

Two girls in matching yellow dresses, holding hands: “You can still be saved.”

“Repent,” says another. It’s an easy word, two syllables, so it catches, the children picking up the chant, waving their arms in the air, clapping and cheering. “Repent! Repent! Repent!”

Angie walks down the center of the hall exactly, heel to toe, blank eyes on the blank ceiling. The muscles around her jaw are clenched tight, and her chin juts forward. I’ve seen her put on this face a lot--when she got ejected from the Sadie Hawkins dance for her homemade backless dress, when the bass player for Ryan’s band called her a groupie slut, when her mom screamed at her for twenty full minutes after finding the bag of weed she’d hidden in the umbrella stand next to the front door--and though it’s supposed to be defiant, I get the sense that she’s also deeply uncomfortable. If it were Jane, she’d just laugh--that’s how she handles trouble. She was literally rolling on the ground when her school suspended her for a week after ditching a single day of classes. The only time I can think of that I got into real trouble was when I hit a streetlamp with Dad’s Buick on Day 3 of my driver’s permit. I immediately started bawling.

I’m waiting at the end of the gauntlet, holding out my hands. She reaches for me at the final stretch and our fingers braid together.

“I thought this was supposed to be day camp.” Angie bites her lip, smearing some of the lipstick onto her teeth. “Whatever happened to ‘Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall,’ or ‘On Top of Old Smokey’?”

Her head drops suddenly--tiny Samantha Royce is tugging at her dirty shoelaces, beaming. “Piercings are evil!” She sounds like she just spotted a puppy.

“Sammy, stop it.” Graces marches up to us, grabs her youngest sister’s wrist. “Who taught you to say that?”

The girl grinds her toe into the carpet.

“Jesus tells us that only people who have never sinned have the right to judge others. And last time I checked, you’re not perfect. Wasn’t it you who stole Mom’s bag of chocolate chips last week and hid it under your pillow?” Grace kneels and hugs her sister. “I bet Angie will forgive you if you apologize.”

Samantha nods. “Sorry you’re evil.” She picks her nose, then flits back to the other babies.

Angie’s cracking up. “That has to be the greatest apology I’ve ever received.”

“That’s one down,” I say, taking in the swarm of children. “Fifty or sixty others to go.”

Angie definitely gets it worse than the rest of us. The RFCs despise Catholics, so I occasionally have to deal with some of that, but usually it’s not even directed at me. They simply forget that there’s a Catholic in the room--former Catholic, whatever--so they have no qualms about spewing hate as freely as they spew prayers. Their criticisms are pretty typical: decadent Catholics worship the golden calf, what with our painted statues and our rosary beads. One time an RFC actually referred to me as a “cannibal,” which was hilarious. I guess they’re too squeamish for transubstantiation.

But for the most part, Jane and I disguise ourselves fairly well. Angie’s clothes make her an easy target. My mother would say she’s asking for it--Angie’s mother would say she’s asking for it--which is stupid, because they would never apply that logic to their patients at the hospital. They’d never tell a mugging victim that he shouldn’t have been out late at night. But their daughters? That’s entirely different.

The thing that drives me nuts about the babies is that they don’t do this in front of adults. Somewhere in the muck of their underdeveloped peanut brains they must realize that “saving”

Angie is wrong, because the second Tabitha calls us into the community hall, the cruel glee vanishes from their faces, and aren't they just darling?

"It's me today," says Angie, as we cross the border into beige territory. "'By My Side.'" I pinch her arm for luck, then go sit next to Jane, who's too absorbed in her sketchbook to say hello.

Steve jumps in front of the group, a small boom box in hand. I nudge Jane, who glances up and swiftly covers her ears. "Shit," she says. "It's too early for 90's Jock Jams."

I start pumping my arms in the air, the only attendee at an invisible aerobics class. "Come on, Jane. It's *never* too early for 90's Jock Jams. Let's get pumped!"

My false zeal is made real in Steve--or probably he's just a better actor than me. He's not that big of a guy, but his gestures are so huge you'd think he's playing to a stadium rather than to a group of Christian kids in a church basement. "Are you guys ready for the Lock-In? Say it with me now: ONE. MORE. WEEK."

Lately Steve's been using the First Annual Joyful Noise Summer Session Lock-In as a way to rally the crowd at the beginning and end of rehearsals. One Saturday night. One community hall. Almost 100 kids. It was originally supposed to happen last summer, but the Lock-In caused a major rift in the RFC camp, as many parents were concerned about the evils of their children sleeping fully clothed in the same room as children of the opposite sex. The event was finalized only after a series of heated negotiations that resulted in the enlistment of twenty chaperones and the installation of a large, folding room divider in the center of the hall.

Jane smashes her head into her sketchbook. "I can't believe we have to spend a whole night with these people."

"We don't technically *have* to."

“No way, O’Malley. I already forged my mom’s signature on the permission slip, so you’d better be coming with me. I’m not doing this alone.”

“Calm down.” I squeeze her shoulder. “When have I ever abandoned my friends?”

It’s not like we have a real choice. Anything less than enthusiasm for the Lock-In is regarded with suspicion, as though your faith in Christ himself may also be waning. So of course we’re going--attendance isn’t mandatory, except that it totally is.

Besides, Mom already signed my permission slip, too. And besides-besides, I can think of one RFC I wouldn’t mind spending the night with--not that anyone can ever know that.

Angie sits cross-legged in the center of the hall--if someone pulled out the new room divider, it would split her right in half. She begins tuning her guitar. “Where’s my back-up?”

Grace skips forward and drums her fingers on the top of Angie’s head. Tina emerges from the crowd, hands clasped behind her back, and stiffly takes her position beside the other girls.

Steve hushes the audience, still teeming with new-day energy. “Whenever you’re ready, ladies.”

Angie plucks the intro. I look at the kids across from me--kneeling, laying down, heads propped up with hands propped up with elbows. They don’t know what they’re in for. I don’t think many people have heard Angie sing, and I can’t wait to see their expectations explode. Her talent is the perfect revenge.

*Where are you going? Where are you going? Can you take me with you? For my hand is cold and needs warmth. Where are you going?*

It’s not quite as dramatic as I’d hoped. I wanted people to fall over or cry out—maybe fold their hands in prayer and ask God’s forgiveness for being jerks. Still, I detect signs of surprise. There are definitely some big eyes and dropped jaws.



Grace swoops in with her harmony and carries my mind back to the song.

*Far beyond where the horizon lies, where the horizon lies, and the land sinks into mellow blueness. Oh please, take me with you.*

Something strange is going on with Tina. It's hard to tell, but I think she's shaking. Not shivering like she's cold, but barely quivering, her chest puffed out, like her insides are boiling and she's trying to keep the steam from bursting out of her mouth. It's the same thing Angie's body does when there's a storm coming on, before the real shakes start. Her lids are lowered, staring at Grace's feet, and her face is flushing red. Is she going to puke? Maybe I'm making it up—she comes in right where she should, and her voice is clear and sweet as ever.

*Let me skip the road with you. I can dare myself, I can dare myself. I'll put a pebble in my shoe, and watch me walk. I can walk! I can walk!*

My stomach goes missing on that last note like I'm falling. Their voices blend beautifully together, different branches of the same tree.

The thing with Tina--I am totally not making it up. I grab Jane's arm, stop her pencil. "Notice anything odd?"

She puts the pencil on the floor and surveys the situation. At first her face scrunches in confusion, but then she sees what I see and smiles. "I think Christ's chosen has lost her cool," she whispers.

Grace has caught on, too. She keeps flicking her gaze to Tina, then away again, her expression somewhere between freaked out and concerned. And Tina, she's raised her head despite the shaking and she's just drilling her eyes into Grace's temple. It's hard to imagine hating someone that much, to the point that you're physically repulsed by them. Her voice sharpens, insistent, as though she wants to threaten.

*Then I'll take your hand, finally glad that you are here, by my side.*

Their voices split into three again, each taking its own path through the cosmos. Angie's remains steady, terrestrial. Grace's orbits in space, looping through celestial bodies. Tina's wings all the way up to heaven. Her chest is heaving when the song ends, exhausted by the summit.

Tabitha is on her feet. "That was spectacular."

Her clapping rouses everyone from the haze; cheers and whistles begin to slip through their teeth.

"Fantastic." Steve enters the circle, ruffles Angie's head. I'm shocked she doesn't hit him. "I love it when you guys make my job so easy. Can we hear it one more time?"

Tina's already halfway to the door. She tosses out the word, "bathroom."

"Alright then. Five minute break, everyone."

Jane and I crawl over to Angie. "Good job, kiddo," Jane says. "But you missed the show."

She's still playing the song, but at double speed, like it's all her fingers know how to do and she's desperate for some variety. "What do you mean?"

"Tina was acting crazy," I explain. "Shaking. I thought she was going to lose it and murder Grace." I tug on Grace's skirt. "You okay?"

"Yeah. That was weird though, right?" She crosses her arms tight to her chest.

"Better watch out." I poke at her waist, try to make her laugh. "Tina Linden's coming for you."

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"I've got a hundred and fifty bucks in here," says Jane, rattling a slightly bumpy ceramic mug on her bookshelf, one of her earlier efforts at the kiln. Now the stuff she makes is good

enough to sell at craft fairs--probably how she got the money in the first place. "How much've you got?"

On the weekends, when the range is busier, Dad sometimes pays me to man the counter while he deals with the bar and everything else. I answer phones, exchange plastic buckets of balls for cash or credit. Ten bucks an hour--there's probably some serious nepotism in that wage. Lately I've been focused on the play, though, so my savings aren't great. "I don't know. Maybe sixty? Why?"

Jane smiles, revealing a cute yet crooked set of teeth--her parents never sprang for braces. "Bail money."

"Good God, Fisher. What have you done?"

"Not me. Angie. Yesterday she literally asked me if she could have some wire for a bomb--had instructions printed out from some stupid anarcho-punk website and everything."

My insides plummet. "You didn't give it to her, did you?" I have a vision of Jane and Angie sharing a prison cell, transforming it into an unlikely domestic paradise--Angie tearing apart their orange jumpsuits to make them more fashionable, Jane decorating the cinderblock walls with flowers she folded out of toilet paper.

"I'm not an idiot." She moves a stack of forms and manila envelopes off her bed so she can sit down. "I told her I ran out. Which is true. Paint's more my thing right now--haven't made jewelry in forever."

"I guess we're lucky Ryan's an idiot. He couldn't build a bomb if his life depended on it."

"Angie's not an idiot, though."

“Right. So at some point she’s going to realize that this is a terrible idea.” I notice that Jane’s unshaven legs are curled to her chin. She might be more worried than I am. “You don’t honestly think she’d do it.”

“She still hasn’t realized that Ryan is a terrible idea. If he asked her to...”

“No way. Angie’s all talk.” Last time I checked, anyway. She never actually runs away from home (a common threat, even when we were little), she’s not actually descended from a rare tribe of Mexican gypsies (her grandparents just moved around a lot), and her dick isn’t actually bigger than the dicks of every dude she hates (her dick is, in fact, purely metaphorical). She’s occasionally rash, but I don’t think she’d do something this stupid. “Ryan’s all talk, too. Don’t worry about it.”

“Maybe you’re right. You’re right about Ryan, anyway.” Wow--I’m glad she has such faith in my opinions. It’s not like I’ve known Angie for far longer than she has or anything. She rolls to one side and plugs a brown cord into the wall, lighting up the many-tiered chandelier that hangs from the angled ridge of her ceiling. She crafted it from dolls’ heads, each with a colored Christmas light shoved into its open mouth. “What are we going to do about that guy?”

“I don’t think there’s anything we can do. He has her in his unwashed clutches.”

“Wish we could sabotage their relationship instead of the play.”

“Speaking of which.” I pick up a yellow legal pad--so rigid and official looking you’d think the whimsy of Jane’s room would simply expel it--and the nearest writing utensil, a green magic marker. “We should get to work.”

The whole reason I came over was to drum up ideas for the Disco Jesus Project, since Angie was so dissatisfied with our last attempt. Our fearless leader is once again down in the city with her boyfriend, probably reclining on a bare mattress on the dirty floor of Paradise, letting

him suck hickies all over her neck. So far Jane and I have split a tub of mint chocolate chip ice cream, raided her attic for old clothes, and complained about Ryan, but that's it.

"I'm not in the mood," Jane says. "I don't have enough energy to hate the RFCs right now."

"It's too bad none of us can play the piano." I jot down *piano*, and the thick letters bleed onto the line below. "If we could just start playing one of the songs at lunch or something--"

Jane plops her head down onto her pillow. "It's not like it's ever going to work."

"Well, we could always recruit someone who plays the piano. Doesn't Grace?"

"The whole thing, I mean. The Disco Jesus Project. It's ridiculous."

Since when is the stuff we do *not* ridiculous? Holding a fancy dinner party for nobody but ourselves on a Tuesday night, blowing up hundreds of balloon animals and dumping them all over the Loser's bedroom, creating elaborate secret handshakes that take over a minute to complete. That's why we're friends--we're not afraid to be ridiculous together. "It's silly, I guess. But Angie's so into it."

"Then Angie can come up with a plan." She sits back up, swings her legs over the edge of the bed. "Come here a minute."

"Why?" I toss the notepad and marker onto the shag carpet and shuffle over. Jane grabs my face, one hand on each cheek, and pulls me toward her until our foreheads touch. As I zoom in, her eyes collapse into one big cyclops eye, a blurry gray pool before me. "You don't always have to do what other people want," she says, her minty breath warm on my chin. "Do what makes *you* happy, not what makes other people happy."

I shake out of her grasp. "Yeah, if so-and-so jumped off a bridge. I get it." Making my friends happy does make me happy, but whatever.

“I’m serious.”

“I get it.”

Jane scoops a few vials of glitter from beneath her pillow, starts arranging them in rainbow order on the windowsill. I’m just yanking at the carpet with my toes. “What do you want to do now?” she asks.

“I don’t know. Whatever.”

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The disease is spreading. Almost a dozen kids have contracted what is apparently a severe case of lactose intolerance. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches abound. Amazing that it would affect so many people at the same time. A side effect of Christianity, perhaps? Or maybe God’s punishment for allowing heretics in their midst.

Tabitha pulls Jane aside, apologizes, explains that there’s a lot of pressure coming from parents to make Forever Risen a dairy-free zone.

“She knows it’s stupid, but I guess they can’t really do anything. Supposedly one of the moms was talking about suing. Mr. Linden didn’t like the sound of that. And besides, his kids are the ones who started it in the first place.” Jane chomps down a banana that Tabitha brought for her, along with a bag of grapes and a granola bar. “It’s cool though, because she asked me to make tie-dye shirts for the whole cast to wear during the finale—to make it up to me.”

“Will you make me a tank top instead?” Angie’s practically allergic to t-shirts. She can’t stand the tug of fabric at her neck. Makes her feel claustrophobic.

“I’ll happily make you a tank top, but you know they won’t let me make it solid black.”

“Tie-dye can be black.”

“Hippie-goth chic?”

Something about the bizarre genre combination sparks in Angie's mind, and soon she's onto her favorite subject, more beloved even than the Disco Jesus Project: "So the last time I was downtown, Ryan took me to see this band called Havoc."

It's not like the conversation we'd been having was important or anything. "Uh-huh."

"It was in this third floor apartment in Humboldt Park. Wood stairs all the way up, and there wasn't even a balcony in the back, just a door that leads to nowhere. If you opened it up and stepped outside, you'd fall all the way down to the yard below and break your neck. Couple people almost did. They tried blocking it with a chair, like that was really going to stop people."

"Wow," says Jane. "Sounds like quite the fire trap."

"Totally. It was awesome."

I just don't get it. Angie's more dedicated to that jerk than most people are to their jobs. Any chance she gets she's on the train, making the long, lakeside commute down to the city. And what does she get out of it? Besides sex? A gutted, electricityless space to sleep in with a bunch of smelly dudes who are stupid enough to think that anarchy is realistic. I guess Ryan buys her stuff--he takes bike messenger gigs sometimes for a little cash. That might be a draw. And more stuff in general happens in the city than in the suburbs--concerts, parties, whatever. Maybe she sees it as an adventure, but I didn't think adventures were supposed to be so predictable.

"Then Ryan got us into this dive bar around the corner from Paradise. They didn't check my ID because the bartender's sleeping with Mick, who moved in a few months ago."

I swallow a bit of carrot. "Let me guess. It was awesome."

I realize immediately that I should have kept my mouth shut. Angie's fists curl tight--I imagine her nails digging white into her palms. "I get that you don't like him, okay? But you're supposed to be my friend. What has Ryan ever done to you?"

Nothing. The problem is he's never done anything. He almost never speaks to me. Jane and I are Angie's *best friends*, and he refuses to acknowledge our existence. Last time I checked, that was one of those "red flags" they tell you about in teen magazines. Abusive relationships. Not that he's physically hurting her, but as far as I can tell, he's fine with isolating her. He wants her all for himself.

"Nothing," I say. "Sorry. I woke up on the wrong side of the bed or something."

Jane's sketching, pretending like she's not listening. I'm afraid she's going to be mad, but when Angie digs into her bag for more food, she looks up from her picture and winks at me.

When Steve walks up behind Angie, I'm relieved--he'll distract her, and by the time she gets back she'll have forgotten the whole thing. But it turns out I'm the one he's looking to distract.

"I know we've been putting off rehearsing your scene, Mel. Do you mind squeezing it in now? I figured you and George could eat later while we run 'All Good Gifts.'"

When you're nervous about performing, people tell you to say your lines much slower than you think you need to—you'll probably be speaking at a normal speed. That's what I do now with my body. I press my palm against the floor and fold my legs, every move deliberate. I heave myself up, contracting each muscle, hoping to conceal my eagerness to rise. "Yeah," I say, stretching out that diphthong. "Sure."

Steve leads me through a maze of halls to a Sunday School classroom. Must be for preschoolers. The walls are plastered with about twenty xeroxed copies of the same picture: a coloring book depiction of the Rapture. Blotches of paint and markers spill over the outlines—purple people hovering in the air above a grassy hill, Jesus awaiting them on a brown cloud, a



glitter cat sticker over his head. George is already there, pulling the miniature desks to one corner. To my dismay, he's wearing a pair of sneakers.

I smooth my skirt, tuck my hair behind my ears. "Where do you want me?"

"Here." Steve grabs my shoulders and shoves me to the center of a bullseye rug. He plops a cowboy hat on my head, many sizes too big, which sinks over my ears. I'm pretty sure God hates me.

"George, all you need to do is watch, smile. She's not one of your disciples, but she's singing about your teachings. Your message is spreading—that makes you happy." Steve looks me up and down. "Do you know the Electric Slide?"

"I thought I was going to lasso him."

Steve scratches his head.

"The first day you said you wanted me to lasso him." I toss my thumb hitchhiker-style back at George.

"Do you know how to throw a lasso?"

I've seen a ton of Westerns. Can it really be that hard? "No."

"I think the Electric Slide would be better. Line dancing, country and western—you get the idea." He plugs the same boom box from this morning into the wall--with a different CD, I hope. "Let's see what you've got."

*I can see a swath of sinners settin' yonder and they're actin' like a pack of fools.*

"I'm going to stop you there." He pauses the music and nods in George's direction. "That guy's your savior. You want to try looking at him?"

Not particularly. Not while I'm dressed like a half-baked Annie Oakley and singing this stupid song. "Sorry."

George steps forward. “It’s my fault. I wasn’t even in her line of vision.” He waves his hand at me. “Howdy.”

I might remember how to smile. “Yee-haw, pardner.”

We run through the whole thing, the dance ingrained in my memory from many a wedding reception. I grapevine, I step to the back, I shimmy down, I shimmy up. I decide not to turn, for the sake of facing the audience.

Steve is dissatisfied. “There’s not enough going on. George, maybe you could...slap your knee or something? She looks all country, and you just look sad.”

I find myself talking, but I don’t know what I’m saying. “Maybe he dances with me, a little ways behind me, like I’m teaching him how to do it. And then at the end, I spin like this.”

It’s a basic three-quarter turn, nothing complicated, but when I’m finished, I’m right against him, his flannel fuzzing the skin of my arm. My leg raises—it’s like I’m a freaking marionette, who knows what pulling my strings. George places his hand beneath my thigh. Suddenly I’m seeing a future-past, first times and remember whens, a king-size bed, a green disposable razor on the edge of the sink, two sets of handwriting on a block of post-it notes near the fridge. He scoops me up, and I hardly exist, what’s left of me airy and fluttering in his arms. For the first time in my life, I know what it is to feel graceful.

“Then he carries me off the stage,” I say, somehow. Up close, I can see the divots and caverns of his lips. He smells like fresh straw, like we really are out on a horse ranch--or maybe that’s just my hat.

“Cute!” Steve gives us a one-man standing ovation. “I love it. Very dynamic. I knew I cast you for a reason, Mel.”

I think he winks at me, which is weird, but my biggest concern is that George is lowering me back to earth.

Steve turns the pages on his clipboard. “Now that we have that figured out—“

“Can we try it one more time?” I ask.

“I’ve got to say.” George pauses, like he normally does, and I’ve never wanted to hear the end of a sentence more in my life. “I could stand to work on my Electric Slide.”

Three more times. We practice three more times. Three more times George picks me up, and even if we never practice again, we’re still performing a show in a few weeks, and he has to pick me up then, in front of the whole audience. Today is the best day—the absolute best.

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“You’re the ticket, Mel. You’re our secret weapon.”

This can’t be good. This is the *you’ll look great in a tube top* look, the *it’s not really shoplifting* look, the *Canada isn’t THAT far* look. Difficult to resist, it always proceeds one of Angie’s terrible ideas. There are swirls in her eyes like a cartoon hypnotist, a smug smile on her face.

“You’re the only one of us who’s out on stage alone with George Linden,” she continues. “It’s the perfect opportunity for the Disco Jesus Project to strike.”

There’s this train station near Angie’s house, abandoned since before we were born. Who knows when, somebody made swings out of the old rail ties, tossed ropes over the rafters. We’re flying in the dark, opposing pendulums, creaking. I drag my feet in the dust. “No.”

“Just hear me out.” She leaps off the edge of her swing and lands about four feet ahead, barely missing the ruins of a bench. “I’m not talking during a show. Dress rehearsal.”

The windows of the ticket booth are smashed to nothing, empty holes with evenly-spaced rotting columns. She climbs onto the counter--Angie can make a stage out of anything. "You get up there with him, and before the music can start, you bust out 'King Herod's Song.' *So you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ.*" She knocks her knees together, wiggles her jazz hands.

"King Herod's Song" is like an old vaudeville number, upbeat piano and kazoos. The Romans have sent Jesus to Herod, the Jewish puppet ruler, hoping that he'll deal with the charismatic preacher and they won't have to get their hands dirty. Scornful of Jesus—and probably threatened by the devotion of his followers—Herod spends the song mocking Jesus, daring him to perform miracles. *Prove to me that you're no fool—walk across my swimming pool.* It's a cruel song, and on top of that, it's obnoxious.

"I am *not* doing that."

"You've got to learn to relax." Angie jumps to the ground. "It's only dress rehearsal. People always play pranks during dress rehearsal."

What she means is that *she* always plays pranks during dress rehearsal. She was cast as a servant in *Beauty and the Beast*, and during the dinner scene, she put a live chick on the tray and revealed it to the speechless princess with a flourish of the silver cloche. During *Oliver!*, she pick-pocketed the director. Twice.

"It's not just about dress rehearsal." I collapse back into the swing, let my feet dangle. "I'm not doing that to him. George isn't like the others."

"He's exactly like the others. Quieter, maybe, but he's a Linden. That in and of itself is enough to deserve it."

I want to ask, is his name enough? What crime has he committed? Tina's a nightmare, sure. But George hasn't done anything except learn his lines and read books and treat me with

kindness and respect. Not just me--I've never seen him be rude to a single person. He's a pretty unassuming guy. And what have the rest of the Lindens done? Lillian's guilty only of wanting to be like her older sister and not being as great of a soprano as her older sister. Which makes sense--she's only thirteen. Everyone's awkward when they're thirteen.

While we're on the subject (we being nobody but me), what have the RFCs done that's so bad? The RFC kids, I mean, in general. The Great Lactose Intolerance Epidemic is silly, but it's not hurting anyone. And yes, their knowledge of science (or lack thereof) is laughable, but it's not their fault. Their parents haven't exposed them to anything else. Sometimes they say hateful stuff--but so does Angie, so does Jane. It's just a different kind of hateful. Maybe I'm in a particularly forgiving mood today or something, but it seems stupid to hate someone for having beliefs.

I turn myself, twisting the ropes of my swing. "You're wrong. He's nice." I let go. I spin and spin.

Angie flies through the debris and heads directly toward me, like a bat emerging from the stalactite jaws of a cave. She grabs the ropes and stops me. "Oh my God. You *like* him."

Good thing it's dark in here--my face is probably raspberry-colored. "No I don't. I just—"

"You never have crushes on anybody. And now a fucking RFC?"

The sounds of a car pulverizing gravel, a slamming door.

"I have crushes on people," I say. "But it's not—"

Jane crawls over the rubble that's left of the west wall. "Sorry I'm late."

“You should be sorry.” I can’t tell if Angie’s more amused or bewildered. She’s practically sputtering. “Miss O’Malley has announced that she’s smitten with a certain George Linden.”

“No effing way.” Jane jogs over, kicking stones out of the way. “An RFC? Pretty sure that’s treason.”

“What won you over first?” asks Angie. Here comes the snark. “Was it the way he lusts over his sister? Or the way he stays strong and silent when she’s being a first-class bitch?”

How do hermits get to be hermits? We learn about them all the time in religion class--saints were big on removing themselves from society. Do they know where they’re going before they leave? Do they plan ahead, learn how to scavenge for food? If someone comes looking for them, how do they tell that person to back off without breaking their vow of silence? I want to go live on a craggy rock somewhere, plastered with bird crap, waves crashing against its base. I want to curl up in a hole and do nothing but watch the sun pass over me, one steady trajectory every day.

Jane crouches in front of me. Here comes the pity. “I think it’s sweet that you like him, but you’re better off with almost anyone else. I don’t even know if he’s allowed to kiss you, let alone bang you.”

“Because that’s all that matters.” People can rarely tell when I’m mad--I never learned how to shout, to cry in front of people, to throw things. “I’m going home.”

“You don’t want a ride?” asks Jane. “It’s dark out.”

“The weather’s fine.” It’s true. It feels like there’s some giant out there, millions of times bigger than the Earth, breathing on us.

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It was nerve-wracking, introducing Angie and Jane for the first time. Angie kept saying “you’re enough for me,” which is sort of sweet, except that we were only in middle school, so it was untrue, and also because I could tell she meant “why am I not enough for you?” It’s not like Jane was monopolizing my time--we obviously didn’t see each other at school. Her parents were usually off on some wacky trip, and my parents didn’t usually want to drive that far just so I could hang out with a friend. We saw each other maybe two weekends a month, and the rest of the time we kept in touch via instant messenger. RtsyFrtsy62 to MelodyDoReMi, whenever we could get on our respective family computers. Jane still maintains we owe our entire relationship to dial-up internet.

So it made perfect sense to me why we all needed to be friends. Aside from the fact that I legitimately thought they’d like each other, it would also make life more convenient for me--especially because I knew Mr. Martinez had to commute past Jane to get to his real-estate firm in Milwaukee. Ride problem solved.

I don’t know why I picked Slitherin’ Sam’s. It was this giant Chuck E. Cheese rip-off--took up half of a strip mall near a highway entrance ramp. It had all the same sort of stuff as its more popular inspiration, but everything was a little bit janky. Kids made a habit of stealing plastic balls from the ball pit, so it had become less of a pit and more of a room with some balls on the floor. Good space for dodgeball, though. The arcade games were often broken, the pizza usually wasn’t cooked all the way through, and they once had to shut the place down for three months because some of the prizes they’d ordered in bulk from China were made with hazardous materials.

They had the animatronic creatures, too, but they were “jungle” themed. There was a tiger on guitar, a lion on bass, and an elephant playing the drums with its trunk. I’m pretty sure

lions and elephants don't actually live in the jungle, but accuracy wasn't this place's main concern. The whole band was led by Slitherin' Sam himself, a bright green snake that coiled its body up a microphone stand and opened its fanged jaws around the mic head to sing. The weird part is that they didn't look like cartoon characters--they were super realistic, almost like they'd been taxidermied. Taxidermied wild animals that buzzed when they moved, singing rock versions of nursery songs, 70's disco hits, and the occasional patriotic ballad.

At eleven, we were getting a bit too old for places like this, but Slitherin' Sam's was the only thing remotely like an arcade in my town, so a slightly older crowd tended to gather there on Friday and Saturday nights, when they could get more aggressive with the games and down whole pizzas without their parents finding out.

I guess that's what I was thinking when I invited Angie and Jane to meet there. Jane lived far enough away that she'd never been, and I figured she'd appreciate the irony of the animal band, though we were too young to know what irony actually was. Angie could release all her competitive energy on the games instead of on Jane. And who doesn't love pizza? It seemed like neutral ground.

I was, of course, mistaken. Angie refused to play any games with me--"I don't want poor Jane to feel left out." Poor Jane, my butt. She challenged Jane to every game in the place--air hockey, skee-ball--and seeing as Angie had played them all before, she had a distinct advantage. But Jane pulled out a tactic that Angie hadn't anticipated: she refused to care about losing. Angie had enough tickets that she could wrap them multiple times around her neck like a scarf, and Jane's response was simply to nod her head in the direction of the prize counter and say, "I haven't been into teddy bears for a while."



Angie barred her teeth, which at the time were caged with braces. “I was going for the water gun.”

Barely a shrug from Jane. “I mean, it’s no Super Soaker or anything.”

Meanwhile, I’d been trailing behind them the whole time. My stomach was growling--I hadn’t realized dinner would be put off for several hours by a battle of egos. I issued a quiet “you guys, I’m hungry” after every game, but none of my protests worked until almost 9 p.m., when I finally upped the rhetoric to a crankier, “you guys, I’m seriously going to faint or something if we don’t eat.” We sauntered over to the cafe area, the foes on either side of me.

The pimply kid behind the counter took one look at us and said, “we stop serving food at nine.”

My insides gnawed at themselves in despair while Slitherin’ Sam and his Jungle Band played “Cheeseburger in Paradise” on the nearby stage. Jane moved forward and calmly folded her hands on the counter. “The clock behind you says it’s 8:50 p.m.”

“Kid, I don’t--”

“The clock behind you says it’s 8:50 p.m.”

“It’s fine, you guys.” I tugged on the sleeve of Jane’s polka dot shirt. “We can just--”

Angie smacked her hand next to the cash register. “My friend here is diabetic, okay? If she doesn’t get food right now, she’ll go into shock.” Angie wrapped her arm around my shoulders and pulled me close to her. I just stared and my shoelaces and hoped he didn’t notice my blushing--or if he did notice, I hoped he’d take it as a sign of illness. “You don’t want her to collapse, do you?”

The miserable teen audibly sighed--he probably just wanted to be home playing video games instead of dealing with hungry and entitled brats. "I think there are still some breadsticks I can heat up."

"We didn't come here for breadsticks," insisted Angie. "We came here for pizza."

"And you'd better give it to us for free," said Jane, leaning in to inspect his nametag, "or else we'll tell your manager how Mark was too lazy to take care of a diabetic customer."

I managed an embarrassed smile. "Pepperoni, please?"

Caught between his understandable desire to ignore us and his need for a paycheck, the money won out. Without a word Mark slammed open the doors to the kitchen and pulled a pie out of the freezer.

Apparently bullying a defenseless teenage boy was all it took to bring the two enemies together. They ended up hardly touching their pizza because they couldn't stop yapping and giggling with each other. They even called their parents and asked if they could sleep over at my place that night so the bonding could continue. Before we left, Angie helped Jane smuggle a few balls from the ever-dwindling pit, which Jane later smashed with a hammer and turned into bracelets for us. Peas in a pod, I guess, just like that.

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I don't remember exactly when Angie stopped ringing the doorbell—probably when we were around nine or ten. She knows perfectly well that the key for the back door is hidden beneath a stone turtle in my mother's long-untended garden. My parents are no more surprised to find her in the kitchen than they are to find chips in the cabinet or milk in the fridge.

Jane must have driven her from the train station—that explains how she made it to my bedroom before me. She’s turned on the radio. The oldies station is blasting “Do Wah Diddy.” She’s laying on my bed. She holds out a plastic bag of peanuts and gumdrops. “Want some?”

I walk to the bathroom, start running the tub. I have my pants halfway off by the time she gets there.

“Sometimes I forget I’m a jerk.” She sits on the toilet seat while I undress. On the silvery wallpaper behind her, a dark pink halo surrounds her shadow’s head. “Like, a Grade-A jackass.”

I squeeze in some bubbles.

“I get so angry all the time, and you and Jane are basically the only people I don’t hate.” She crunches some peanuts. “Seriously—you’re the only reason I don’t go around punching people in the face non-stop.”

“Don’t get those in the water.”

She tosses the bag onto the counter, where it lands right between the mouthwash and a jar of cotton balls. “Why didn’t you tell me you had a crush on him?”

“Probably because I knew how you’d react.” I lower myself, let the warm water flush over my tired skin, my head.

She waits until I come up for air. “We’re best friends. I want you to be able to tell me anything.”

Angie still wears her half of the “Best Friends” necklaces we bought at the mall when we were eight. The chain is too short now, so the blue pendant rests in the space between her collarbones. Mine’s at the bottom of a basket somewhere--I never got the hang of jewelry. “If you want me to tell you everything, then you have to take what I say seriously. You can’t judge it before I’ve said it.”

“I honestly didn’t realize you liked him,” she says. “I should have noticed.” She splashes the bubbles with her toe. “But you’re right, especially because you put up with my crushes on every idiot alive.”

I’m not sure she fully understands the accuracy of her statement. During our freshman year she dated Zachary Sharp, a super-senior and successful weed dealer—until he got pulled over by the cops for drunk driving. Then she wouldn’t stop crushing on Mikayla Saunders, a twenty-something waitress at the local diner who was married to a man and showed no interest in women whatsoever. Sophomore year her heart belonged to Alex Bidart, our French teacher, who “resigned” over Christmas break after the cops started investigating him for ties to a child pornography ring. And now there’s Ryan the dropout, Ryan who refuses to acknowledge the existence of her friends, Ryan who literally wants to bomb the Haymarket Square statue. I’m not mean enough to say all that, though--only mean enough to think it.

“George isn’t so bad.” She grabs a bottle of shampoo and starts lathering my hair.

I squint my eyes, suds in my lashes. “No, he’s not. He’s actually really nice to me.”

“You should go for it.”

“Maybe.” I dunk my head back under. “I think we’d be ‘unevenly yoked,’ you know?”

“You could try converting him to half-hearted Catholicism.”

“He’s too old. That kind of self-loathing needs to sink in during childhood.”

I guess this means I’m going to forgive her again. Jane once called me out on it when she was pissed at Angie. “She’s an attention-whore,” she’d said, “and you just let her walk all over you.” Like she had any right to talk about it--their spat was over so quickly that I can’t remember what it was about. Jane probably can’t, either. We forgive Angie because we want to, because we believe she deserves it. Sometimes her mouth gets in the way of her head, but mostly that mouth

is the reason we love her. We hear the other things that come out of it--worries and desires and creations that are better than anything we could ever come up with on our own.

The cloudy water swirls over the mounds of my stomach. My body has its own peculiar weather. "I have a headache. Can I finish my bath?"

She kisses the top of my head, her lipstick leaving bloody trails at the roots of my hair. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"If you wait until I'm finished, I can give you a ride."

"You were right earlier—it's a good night for a walk." She grabs her snack. "Love you."

"Love you, too." I stay in the bath for another half hour after she leaves, until my soggy fingertips are a geologic wonder.

## Chapter 5

I'm dying to get out of the car. Mom refuses to have the air conditioning fixed. I get that she's a busy woman, but she could make Dad do it--though that might mean weeks of tinkering. Still, she never had any problem taking advantage of Derek Peterson's mechanical expertise--I just got to a diary entry where her high school hero rescued her when she had a flat tire. She spent two and a half pages describing his butt. I didn't know my mom was such a creep.

The windows are rolled down, and I'm soaking through the back of my shirt. I knew flannel pajama pants were a bad idea. Screw black leather interiors.

"You excited?" She takes one hand off the steering wheel and pets my head.

"I guess." Does it matter? I'm basically obligated.

It took me forever to pack for the Lock-In--literally multiple hours--because I've only ever slept over at my friends' houses before. At Angie's or Jane's, all I need to bring is a toothbrush--I can borrow whatever else. But there are a lot of things to consider when you're sleeping over with a whole crowd. I mean, are we showering in the morning? I know there's one shower at Forever Risen, in the area with the offices. If that's happening, I need to bring shampoo. But almost a hundred kids showering one by one seems ridiculous. So probably no showers, right? And what about makeup? If it were just girls, I wouldn't care, but it's not just girls, obviously. But if I'm the only girl wearing makeup, that's also weird.

I think it's supposed to be pretty casual. The email invitation simply said WEAR PAJAMAS! In a tacky, curling font. Like that's any help. I thought about calling Angie, asking her what she was bringing, but I figured I'd only get berated for caring. So I ended up packing for every possible scenario. My backpack is bulging, its zipper barely closed, and I'm sure I look

like I'm way too into myself, one of those girls who's totally incapable of roughing it--not that a church basement is roughing it, exactly.

Mom pulls up to the doors, right where it says EMERGENCY PARKING ONLY, and clicks on her blinkers. "Okay. Well, if you need me to come get you in the middle of the night, you have my number."

The first sleepover I ever had at Angie's, she put on this old, 1940's version of *The Phantom of the Opera*--just a movie, not the musical--where the phantom gets acid splashed in his face. When Christine unmask him, half his face is raw, chewed-up meat. This was in Angie's old house, where they had a phone attached to the kitchen wall with one of those looped cords. At 10 p.m. I stretched the thing all the way into the bathroom and called my mom, sobbing, begging to come home. She'll never let it go.

"See you tomorrow."

"Love you, baby girl." She waves.

"Love."

Inside: screaming. Delighted screaming, that is—Christmas morning screaming, Disney World screaming. The babies are zooming around every corner of the community hall, arms outstretched like clumsy birds. Though the new dividing wall is still folded up on the far end of the room, the gender separation is occurring naturally, boys unrolling their sleeping bags on the right side (forest greens and blues and reds with plaid interiors), girls unrolling theirs on the left side (pinks and purples, flowers, dolphins, unicorns). I lay mine next to Angie's: bright yellow, covered in smiley faces. She's had it since before I met her. Jane shows up soon after with a dull, brown sack she inherited from The Loser.

Angie poses like Wonder Woman, fists to her hips. “I object strongly to the division of this room, which operates under the assumption of a fixed gender binary.”

“I’d keep it down if I were you.” I nudge my shoulder towards the wall. “We’re under surveillance.”

The chaperones stand at regular intervals, also separated by gender, backs against the wall like they’re at an awkward junior high dance. I spot a few recent Joyful Noise graduates among the supervisors, and Tabitha and Steve are there, too, standing exactly across from each other on opposite sides of the room. But for the most part it’s parents—all RFCs. Laurel Royce is nearest to us, shoulders slumped, hair matted. When she catches me looking, she glares at me like I’m a giant, twitching cockroach—I must be squashed as soon as possible, along with Jane and Angie, for “corrupting” her precious children.

While I’m contemplating all the horrific methods by which Laurel Royce would like to exterminate me, Amanda Royce crawls to us commando-style and pulls Angie to the blanketed ground. “They act like separating boys and girls is going to stop all the hot action,” she says, tickling Angie’s rarely-exposed thighs, made visible now thanks to her black and red striped pajama shorts. “Tonight you’re mine, baby.”

Angie cups Amanda’s face in her hands. “I wish.”

Feedback wails through the speakers I never realized existed--they’re as beige as everything else. Blended right in. Jonah Linden adjusts the microphone, his rotund belly wobbling the stand. His wife droops behind him, meekness personified. Tina and Lillian sit directly at their father’s feet, gazing up at his face, expectant and patient.

He’s just an office drudge, with none of the charisma of a preacher. There’s not a PowerPoint presentation behind him, but there might as well be. “Good evening, boys and girls.



My name is Jonah Linden, and I'm the Finance Director of Forever Risen. Welcome to the First Annual Joyful Noise Players Summer Lock-In." He pauses, possibly for applause, possibly to swallow. If he wanted applause, he doesn't get it. "I want to thank the Joyful Noise Parent Committee for putting all this together." Haphazard clapping from the kids who are old enough to know better. "Okay. I'm going to let my wife start us off with a prayer."

He doesn't lower the mic for her, so Beckah Linden's voice seems to emanate from below the ground. "Dear Lord Jesus, we give thanks for..." something about joy, or maybe a family? "And we ask for your protection...." Further mumbling, then "...safe, modest, and fun night together. Amen."

Sounds like a blast.

Her husband steps in front of her. "And now I'm supposed to tell you that pizza is here."

The prospect of the delicious treat inspires the fervor that his speech so blatantly fails to inspire. With an electric roar the crowd surges to the tables where the stacked, greasy boxes wait.

I make my way to the front, pushing past the other fanatics. A disembodied hand flings paper plates into the air, and I catch one on its descent. A voice in my ear: "do you want pepperoni or sausage?" But I can't answer, as I am attempting to grapple with the nightmare before me.

No cheese. None of the pizzas have cheese. Just lumps of meat festering in a raw, red circle, wilted chunks of green pepper floating through the mess.

Someone puts a square slice of each on my plate. I trudge back to my sleeping bag and sit with the plate on my lap, staring helplessly at the supposed food. This is the kind of disaster you can only survive with the help of others. Jane and Angie soon join me, and together we mourn.

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Dismembered bodies are piled on the conference room table—frayed clippings from various fashion magazines. Torsos on one side, legs on the other. No heads. In the backgrounds, you can make out snippets of picturesque locales—white and blue harbors, fans of green ferns, the red rocks of some Western mountain. I don't understand why you'd want to wear a maxi skirt while hiking up a mountain, but I suppose fashion photography doesn't have to make sense as long as it makes you buy things.

"The objective," she explains, "is to put together outfits that are worthy of a woman of Christ."

The Modesty Talks were Laurel Royce's idea, her contribution to the Lock-In planning. I don't know why she thinks we want to listen to some haggard old lady talk about sex. Seven kids though—I guess she's an expert on the subject. Grace once told me that for her fifth birthday, her mother had filled a kiddie pool with jelly beans and vanilla ice cream. She and Reese swam in the sticky mixture, gulping up mouthfuls, while their parents documented the happy occasion on a disposable camera. I wonder what shriveled that silly, joyful woman into the miserable creature she is today.

Every female member of the *Godspell* cast who's twelve or older is crowded around the table, mixing and matching their own paper dolls.

"This top is cute," says one girl, "but..."

Lillian Linden moves behind her. "Here." She hands a slip of paper over the girl's shoulder. "You can put this green t-shirt underneath it for better coverage."

Vomit vomit vomit. I glance at Angie, who tugs her top lower, gives her cleavage some air. Jane has produced a pen from nothing—a frequent trick of hers—and is scribbling all over the cut-outs, adding on squid-like, tentacled heads and giant clown feet.

For whatever reason, Lillian keeps talking. She addresses the whole table with what has to be a memorized speech: “Being modest doesn’t necessarily mean being unfashionable. Layering is a good choice when shirts or dresses are too revealing. Or perhaps God has given you or someone in your family the talent of sewing. A few alterations can turn an immodest piece into a modest one. You can always make it work.”

I’d like to see her make thigh-high fishnets work. Or fringe short-shorts. Or the purple and black, beribboned corset Ryan bought for Angie at some store downtown.

The Frankenstein game continues uninterrupted for a few more minutes, during which Jane creates a whole family of monsters held together by scotch tape. Angie and I are admiring her work when Mrs. Royce clears her throat. Her voice is ragged, like she’s been crying.

“Can anyone tell me why modesty is so important?”

Here it comes. I squeeze Angie’s hand like she’s a little kid at the dentist. We’ll get through this. Grace and Amanda are hunched over in their chairs, eyes in their laps. It’s understandable--I wouldn’t want to hear my mom talk about this stuff either. Not that my mom would talk about it in this particular way.

“God created men and women very differently, created them for specific purposes. Women were made to be the helpmeets of men—to support men in their endeavors, to keep their homes up and running, to bear their children and further God’s chosen race.”

Lillian has one hand in the air, wiggling up and down in her seat. Before Mrs. Royce can call on her, she jumps in anyway: “*Some* women think marriage and kids are unimportant. But when you think about it, it’s actually the most important job a person could have. Women are made to bear life, which is so cool, because God’s the only other being who can do that.”

Not counting every other animal on earth. What's with her? This is possibly the most I've ever heard Lillian Linden speak. Like, ever. Being insufferable is usually Tina's job, but she's sitting quietly next to Grace, her chair swiveled so that their knees touch.

Even Mrs. Royce is thrown off. "That's right." She contorts her face into what must be a smile. "Thank you for that...comment. Now, who knows the story of Adam and Eve?"

Seriously? Does she think we're five?

"Eve gave in to the Devil, and she tempted Adam into a life of sin. And it's all too easy for us women to behave like our common ancestor."

This is the worst part. I feel like I'm stuck in some kind of gross syrup.

"Men are easily tempted, so it's our job to be more diligent than Eve. We dress modestly so that men do not sin. And it's a way to protect ourselves, too, so that we don't become the victims of their sin."

Angie vibrates next to me. I can hear her mouthing off inside my head: "Yep. Because every man is a rapist waiting to happen. They can only be stopped if they never see boobs outside the bonds of holy matrimony."

But it's Jane who actually speaks. I thought she was too busy with her drawings to notice what was happening. "Seems like we're letting men off the hook too easily. Can't they just learn to control themselves?"

If Mrs. Royce was smiling, she's definitely not now. "I think—"

"I'm not finished." Jane puts down her pen. "If a man hurts a woman—if any person hurts another person—isn't it the attacker's fault? When a drunk driver kills someone, we don't blame it on the car."

Dozens of eyes blink dumbly before us. Angie starts to clap, but Jane grabs her arm and stops her.

Shouldn't have poked the bear--Mrs. Royce is practically snarling. "We're not talking about criminal justice. We're talking about God's law."

Sometimes it's easy to forget that the RFC's really believe this stuff. In the dusty light I can see the hair rising on Mrs. Royce's arms. The fuse that lights holy wars aflame burns hot at the back of her skull.

Seizing her opportunity, Lillian Linden steps in to cool things off. "Obviously, God holds everyone accountable for their actions and judges them, too. But we don't want to make it easier for our brothers to sin, and that's why modesty is important. For *Christian* women, anyway."

"Well said." The compliment slips through gritted yellow teeth. "Let's take a bathroom break before we continue."

Lillian links arms with some of the younger girls, leads them out of the room. Mrs. Royce moves to one corner and kneels down, her arms folded across her stomach. Praying for deliverance from the infidels, probably.

Angie smushes Jane's face into her chest. "That was epic, and I love you."

Jane manages a muffled "thanks," then yanks her head free. "I just thought Joyful Noise would benefit from some rational debate for once. I'm sick of their bullshit."

I massage her back. "I hope Mrs. Royce doesn't try to get you in trouble. She seems like the type who'd murder somebody." She's rocking back and forth now, muttering something.

"What are they going to do? Call my parents? Good luck getting ahold of them—they're out in the wilds of Maine looting some abandoned cabins."

“Of course they are.” A thought comes to me and I almost giggle. “God, if it’s this bad for us, what do you think the boys’ Modesty Talk is like?”

“Haven’t you figured it out yet? We’re the only ones who have to worry about modesty.” Angie pulls a fun-size candy bar from inside her shirt. She unwraps it carefully, the partially-melted chocolate sticking to the wrapper. “They’re probably having some matchmaking party where they rate our looks--and our piety, but mostly our looks--and select wives for themselves.”

I can totally see it--heated arguments over who gets whom, guys who feel like they missed out asking if anyone will trade, binders full of us girls being passed around a table. I can see George stopping on my photo, moving his fingers across the plastic slip.

“Well,” says Jane, “we’re probably last pick.”

Angie smiles, chocolate between her teeth. “I certainly hope so.”

When the circle reconvenes, Mrs. Royce appears to have calmed herself--but her voice is gruffer than ever. She proceeds to regale us with the harrowing tale of the one time she dated that most devious and insidious of creatures: a non-religious man. Not even non-religious, actually--he just didn’t go to church that often. A Catholic, naturally. The tragic tale is as I expected. He wanted her to love him more than God, he wanted her to give him her body, let him ravish it. He never really loved her, for true love comes only through God.

I wonder what sex is like for the RFCs. I wonder what it’s like in general, of course, but it has to be extra weird for them. They build it up so much, make it such a significant taboo. And then you get married, and that ferocious evil is suddenly supposed to be a good thing? Maybe it’s a quick process, a nightly obligation: brush teeth, wash face, penetrate wife. Or maybe after years of suppressing their urges they go completely nuts—whips and handcuffs and all that stuff.

Finally we've reached the moral of the story: "There's no reason to look for a man outside of church." Her face goes all smug--she thinks she's come up with something clever. "It's like looking for ketchup in the dishwasher."

Jane leans over to me. "That's definitely going in one of my cartoons."

Mrs. Royce reaches into a paper bag and removes a stack of what appear to be index cards. "Now that you've learned more about modesty, it's time to make your own commitments to God."

She passes the cards around the circle, along with a bundle of pens. The cards are pure white, embossed with gold writing in all capital letters:

WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT TRUE LOVE WAITS, I, \_\_\_\_\_,  
PROMISE MY FIDELITY TO MY LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. THE BODY HE  
CREATED FOR ME WILL REMAIN UNTOUCHED UNTIL THE HAPPY DAY I WED ONE  
OF MY BROTHERS IN CHRIST.

There's a space for a signature at the bottom.

Then she holds up a bag of tea candles. "Once you sign your card, I'll give you one of these. It's a chastity candle. You can have your future husband light it on your wedding night so he knows you waited for him."

Vomit. I scrawl my name on the card.

"What the hell are you doing?" asks Angie.

"She just wants us to sign it. It's not like I have to mean it."

Jane signs her card, too. "If it gets us out of here faster."

Of course, Angie has to go and lose it. She raises her hand.

"Yes, Angie?" All the sweetness of rotting fruit.

“What if I don’t sign it?”

One of the twelve-year-olds is confused. “Don’t you want a candle?”

“No, I do not want a cheap-ass, drugstore candle.”

Brimstone bulges in Laurel Royce’s cheeks. “Is there a problem?”

“I’m not a virgin.” Those four words suck the room into zero gravity. Jane and I are the only ones who haven’t spun upside down—though Grace and Amanda may only be tilted sideways.

Again, only the newly-verbose Lillian Linden can find words—and they’re quite the words. “God can restore your spiritual virginity if you ask His forgiveness.”

“Why would I want forgiveness?” I’ve watched Angie practice this devil’s grin, waiting for the right moment to unleash it. “Sex is fucking awesome.”

The confused girl starts crying. Literally *crying*. Mrs. Royce is poised for quiet destruction. “That kind of language isn’t tolerated at Joyful Noise.” She stands, beckons like an executioner. “Come with me. We’ll ask someone to call your parents.”

“I have a phone.”

“I will call them. I want them to know the severity of the situation.” She gestures at Lillian. “Finish collecting the cards.”

“Yep,” Lillian replies. She already has her arms around the crying girl. Mrs. Royce takes Angie lightly by the wrist, like she’s a used tissue, and escorts her from the room.

As soon as we can get away--Lillian decided to lead prayer first--Jane and I sneak upstairs. “We have to find her,” Jane says, “or things are going to get messy.”

But before we can begin our search, Angie ambushes us. “That bitch took my phone!” She’s basically seizing, undiluted anger racking her bones. “She didn’t just tell my mom that I



was being disruptive—she told her that I’d *confessed* to sleeping around. She told her that she should make sure I get tested for diseases.” She spits a gob of adrenaline onto the carpet. “Fuck. Mom probably will make me get tested, too.”

She collapses onto us, and we lug her to the nearby banister. “A test isn’t the worst thing,” I say, before I remember that I shouldn’t be allowed to talk, as my mouth is capable of forming only the most idiotic statements.

“You know that’s not what I’m worried about.” She slams her face into my collarbone. “She’s never going to let me see Ryan again.”

Jane and I burrow into her, twist our limbs together until we’re wrought into some elaborate new being. “Is she coming now?” Jane asks.

“No,” Angie breathes, uneven inhales and exhales, like she’s just learned how. “She’s working late tonight, and Dad’s visiting Mexico. Mrs. Royce said I could stay until Mom’s done with her shift.”

Jane puts on a goofy Southern accent. “My word, how *gracious* of her.”

I don’t have anything to add--accents aren’t my thing--so instead I start singing.

*Try not to get worried, try not to turn on to problems that upset you. Don’t you know everything’s alright, yes, everything’s fine.*

“Everything’s Alright” is Angie’s favorite song in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In the musical, Mary Magdalene sings it to Jesus, and Judas keeps interrupting her, reminding Jesus about all the troubles they face. The way I see it, it’s two different kinds of care. Judas wants to warn Jesus, wants him to be as prepared as he can be. Mary just wants him to get some rest. I think that’s the kind of care Angie needs now.

The calming melody curls snug around us. Jane joins in, our lungs pumping in time, while we watch far-off headlights glisten through the windows.

*If we try, we'll get by, so forget all about us tonight.*

\*\*\*

Tonight's feature film is *Shrek*. The green, cantankerous ogre is a bold choice. I was expecting Bible cartoons--assuming Angie's plan failed. She was plotting to switch DVDs at the last minute, trick whichever adult into playing *Jesus Christ Superstar* instead. It'd only work for a few minutes, but it was better than anything we'd come up with so far. When she opened up the movie's case, however, she found only an empty black circle. Turns out she'd left the disc at Jane's place during our overnight choreography session.

"We need to coordinate better," she said to Jane and not so much to me.

"It's your movie," Jane fired back. "It's not my problem if you forgot to bring it."

"You're supposed to care about the Disco Jesus Project as much as I do."

"I never said I didn't."

Sure, she never said she didn't--to Angie's face. The last thing I wanted was for them to fight, though, so I made the first comment that popped into my head: "You should always keep movies in the case. They'll scratch if you don't."

Classic Mel--unrelated and potentially insulting. But it worked. Angie went to the bathroom to calm down instead of taking her frustration out on me, and Jane only reminded me that I have to work on this conversation stuff.

Someone lowers the lights, and a projection screen hums down one wall. Jane taps my shoulder. "You should probably go up there."

I follow the line of her finger: there's an empty spot next to George Linden, who is just barely on the boys' side of the room. He has unzipped his sleeping bag and made a nest of its downy insides. "What's the matter?" I ask. "You don't like me anymore?"

Angie has caught on. "You're blocking our view."

"Shut up."

Jane presses on my head, shoving it toward the floor. "I can't see a thing. Would you move already?"

Angie starts channeling her inner annoying-sibling-on-a-road-trip, attacking my stomach with the tip of her index finger. "Move. Move. Move. Move. Move. Move. Move—"

"Fine." I stand up too fast and wobble woozy forward, my heart ping-ponging around my chest. George isn't looking at me. He's looking at the screen. Makes sense. There's a movie there. Should I ask to set my sleeping bag here? Maybe he's saving it for somebody. It might be weird to ask, though. It's not like he owns the—

"Sit down!" somebody hollers.

His gaze is on me now. In the dark, the blue of his eyes becomes thundercloud gray, a strange kind of energy pulsing behind it.

"Can I sit here?"

He waves his open palm. "Be my guest."

I can't be expected to listen to a movie when the heat of his body is so loud next to mine. There's a talking donkey on the screen, but all I hear is the steely buzz of power tool on metal, sending sparks dazzling over our heads. I try to match my breathing to the lazy rise and fall of his chest.

After about twenty minutes, he shifts. His left toes fall on top of my right toes. I deeply regret wearing socks.

Even through the wool, though, it's there—a cushioned frenzy, a cozy madness, a thoroughly comfortable discomfort. I want my arm beneath his sweatshirt, soft fleece on one side and his flesh on the other. I want the fuzz on his chin to meet the curves of my hips. I want his fingers to untie the bow of my pajama pants, flutter at my naked waist.

I'm losing it. There's a gingerbread man on the screen and I'm out of my freaking mind. My breath catches when I press my toes a millimeter closer. I stop breathing altogether when he presses his back.

I might be dying. I look away from our kissing toes, my body racked with an ecstatic attack. I roll onto my side, thrust my hips at nothing, hold them against nothing, squeezing my thighs together, all the while maintaining that tiny point of contact between our bodies, hoping my lust will surge into him, stop his heart.

Other details flow into my shocked consciousness. Someone sneezes. Shadows patrol the walls. Grace is on her side, too--our eyes meet in the dark, locked in the recognition that neither one of us is at ease. There is a lump at her back, another person snuggled close. Grace flips onto her stomach and the clear, pale face of Tina Linden rises like the moon above her shoulders.

In some hazy way I am surprised by this. I care, vaguely. But a slight downward stroke of George's toes stuns me. I roll back toward him, magnetized, a thrumming deep between my ribs. His feet explore mine over my sock, tender pushing on my tendons. We inch closer together, and our shoulders fuse. I move my left foot closer to my right and hook my big toe beneath the top of my sock, ready to expose my bare sole to him, when the lights flicker on. It is only then I notice the credits gliding by.

“I’m going to grab another slice of pizza,” he whispers, and then he is gone, and I am still alive, and in pain. *But the pizza’s cold now* is what I would have said, because I’m just that boring.

I push myself up, joints cracking. I drag my sleeping bag over to Grace, who has moved hers closer to the door. “Are you okay?” My voice is scratchy.

She leans her head on me. “Tina said, and I quote, ‘you and I ought to be closer friends.’”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And then she just plopped herself down behind me. There was nothing I could do.”

I unzip my bag entirely and lay it out in a square so we can both sit on top of it. “That’s effing weird. I’d watch out for her if I were you. Who knows what her warped sense of righteousness will make her do.”

She crashes down onto my makeshift picnic blanket, yawns. “Maybe we should give her the benefit of the doubt. She could be trying to change.”

I watch Tina across the room, her hair spouting fountain-like from the ponytail high atop her head. She’s cheerleader perky. It makes me tired just looking at her. “Maybe.”

“What about her brother?” Grace is on her stomach, her legs kicking, her head held aloft by her hands. I am transported back to grade school—I get the horrible notion that she has something like Truth or Dare in mind. “Angie told me about your little crush. Actually, she told Amanda and Amanda told me, but it doesn’t matter. Was he feeling you up over there? Do I need to alert a chaperone, young lady?”

I always go with Truth in these situations. It’s so easy to tell the truth without saying what actually happened. “No. He just bumped into me a bit.”

She nods. “I imagine you’ll have to make the first move when it comes to George. He’s kind of oblivious, don’t you think?”

I don’t get the chance to answer. Tina comes over with a plate of chocolate chip cookies and lowers herself in front of Grace—I have to step back so she doesn’t sit on my feet. “They’re mom’s family recipe,” she says.

She says it to Grace, that is. It is abundantly clear that the cookies are not for me. Grace picks one up cautiously, takes a bite. I hope they’re not poisoned.

Tina turns to me. “Can you move?”

I guess I’ll get my sleeping bag later.

\*\*\*

One in the morning. Harsh whispers in the hallway, a line of fluorescent light beaming from the crack in the door, its straight path broken by the bumps of sleeping girls. I am pressed against the divider, my head resting in my elbow. I jab Jane with my foot, but she’s already awake. “Do you think it has something to do with Angie?”

We watched her leave hours ago, saw her mother’s hand on the back of her neck, saw her shoved into the backseat of the car—no words, all the anger physical, tight.

Jane stretches her arms behind her back. “We’d better find out.”

We don’t have to make excuses to the chaperones, as it seems they’ve abandoned their posts. I assume they’re all part of the hallway ruckus—it would account for the range of voices, an audible carousel of panic. I don’t know what I’m expecting. Some secret Evangelical society, black hoods and candelabras, plotting to obliterate the unbeliever? Angie looking for revenge, fists swinging, pummeling anyone she can reach as the adults close in? In fact, the scene we spy

through that slight partition seems more like a trial: Amanda Royce stands before the chaperones, her mother's fingers in a bruise-worthy clamp on her arm.

I'd say that Jonah Linden looks silly in his baby blue pajamas if his expression weren't so mean, like a dog on the brink of attack. "What were you thinking?" he asks. It's more of a demand than a question.

With her free hand, Amanda pulls a paperback from her pocket. "It's Reese's. He left it in my bag, and I know he can't fall asleep without reading."

Another interrogator speaks: "And you thought it would be a good idea to go into the boys' room without permission?"

"He's my brother." Amanda tries and fails to wrench herself away. "I was going to find my brother. That's all."

Mr. Linden pushes through the crowd belly-first. Earlier, when he was kicking this whole nightmare off, he seemed bumbling and harmless. Now I'm not so sure about the harmless part. "Why should we believe you? Your own sister is the one who caught you. Isn't that right, Grace?"

The crowd parts and Grace moves to the front, her curls flattened a little on the side where she'd been resting her head. Tina Linden is right behind her. I'm not surprised--she probably put Grace up to it. Although I don't get how she could have known that Amanda was sneaking around.

Grace rocks onto her toes and back down. "Caught is a strong word. I only saw her near the door to the boys' side."

"Which is against the rules," Tina helpfully reminds her--though she doesn't sound happy to have to remind her. Sad, even. Sympathetic.

“Precisely,” says Mr. Linden. He turns back to Amanda, folds his arms. “How did you expect Reese to read? It’s past lights-out.”

“Maybe he brought a flashlight?” Amanda’s face and neck are slick. She struggles like a fish caught on a wire. “All I know is he wanted me to give him this book, and I forgot to do it earlier.” She twists her neck to glare at her mother. “I was a little busy with your Modesty Talk.”

Mr. Linden says, “give me the book,” but it doesn’t matter—he rips it from Amanda anyway. He glances at the cover. I can’t make out the title, but it’s definitely not The Bible, and I’m pretty sure Jonah Linden considers The Bible to be the only book worth reading. He flips through the pages, and a small packet falls onto the floor. “What’s this?”

I have no idea what it is. I look down at Jane, whose head is between my knees. “I think they’re cigarette papers,” she says. “I guess Reese likes to roll his own.”

Amanda’s gone as white as the chastity candles. “I didn’t know those were in there.”

It’s obvious she’s telling the truth—Reese would be that careless. But when has the truth ever mattered to RFCs?

Mr. Linden tosses the papers in the trash, hands the book back to Amanda. “I think it’s best if you spend the rest of the night out here. My wife will keep an eye on you.” He focuses his attention on Laurel Royce, who’s still playing the human shackle. “You can let her go now.”

Mrs. Royce is pallid, too, with red splotches at her temples and the corners of her nose. She clutches at her stomach, doubled over, pained at the dishonor her daughter has brought on her. So freaking melodramatic.

As if she heard my thought, the woman springs up, backhands Amanda across the face with a loud thwack.

“Fuck,” Jane says. I drop down next to her, wrap my arm around her back.



Amanda's face isn't white anymore. It's rugburn red, already sticky with tears and snot.

Someone tugs on the cuff of my pajama pants. It's one of the babies. "What's happening?" she asks.

"Nothing." I say. "Go back to bed."

\*\*\*

Three in the morning. The witching hour, according to the spellbooks we got from the library for our childhood coven. No spells to cast--I just have to pee. I've been holding it since the attack, the incident which clearly made this not only the first Joyful Noise Lock-In, but the last. I sort of fell asleep for a while—more of a trance than a sleep. Purple jaws with broken teeth kept biting me awake.

There are three utilitarian gray stalls. Jesus wants nothing to do with bodily functions, apparently--no need to praise him here. The farthest stall door is closed, and there are sounds coming from inside—a sort of sniffing interspersed with strained grunts. The cheeseless pizza must not have sat well with somebody. Unless--

"Amanda?" When I knock, the door hinges open.

Not Amanda, but her mother. Laurel Royce squats over the toilet, hand pressed against the wall for balance. Her face is as much of a mess as her daughter's was only a few hours ago. Her thighs are bulbous, forked with varicose veins. The seat is splattered with thick, gooey blood.

"Hand me some toilet paper." The words spurt from her throat in short bursts, like she needs to catch her breath every few syllables.

I bunch up a handful from the next stall and pass it to her. She moves aside to clean herself, so I peer into the bowl, where I find a natural disaster. Clotted chunks glistening on the porcelain, strings of matter stretching across the bloody water.

I'm tempted to just slam the door and run away. They never covered adult women bleeding out in bathroom stalls during my short-lived stint in the Girl Scouts. There's a tampon somewhere in my overstuffed bag, but a tampon's not going to help with this. This is no period. "Let me call 911," I say.

For a second I'm afraid she's having a stroke or something, but it's just a vehement no. "My phone." She points to the pants crumpled in the corner of the stall. "I have to call my husband."

I fish around in the pockets. "I think you need a doctor."

"I need a change of clothes." Certain, like she's done this before.

I give her the phone. Somehow she remembers to thank me. Then, "I need to talk to my husband."

I back away from the wounded woman, escape into the hallway. The path to the darkened Community Hall is wide and empty--I can practically see a dotted line leading me to the warmth of my sleeping bag. Nobody would ever have to know this happened. But it could take a long time for Mr. Royce to get here--Sparrow Lake is pretty far. And he'll still have to get out of bed, get dressed, all that.

She didn't ask me to guard the bathroom door, but it seems like the right thing to do. I sit down next to the fire extinguisher and I wait.

While I wait, I try not to think about the pulpy mess in the toilet, but it's the sort of thing that's hard to forget, especially when the blood vessels inside my closed eyelids are the same

color red. I try to compromise with myself, think about things that are merely similar to the pulpy mess in the toilet. Soaked sponges discarded by the surgeons on *ER*. Mom watches it all the time, even though it's basically her life. The posters that the anti-abortion protesters hold up on the sidewalk outside our school. It makes no sense, because it's a Catholic school, so we're theoretically on their side.

Occasionally I hear noises from inside the bathroom. At one point the tap turns on, but I never hear any flushing.

I wait, and Mrs. Royce bleeds. Everyone else sleeps. Only one girl comes to use the bathroom, one of the babies. She's wearing an old-fashioned white nightgown with ruffles, which makes her look like a porcelain doll. I tell her that it's broken, that she has to try the bathroom upstairs. She's too little to question why I'd be in charge. She thinks I'm a grown-up. It's sort of funny.

I wait, and Mrs. Royce bleeds. I can't tell how long it's been. Maybe an hour. I examine my hands, both sides. I feel like I ought to be bleeding, too. I want someone to hit me. I want someone to bash my head against a wall, break my nose, split my lips. I want someone to choke me, deprive me of oxygen until I forget everything I thought I knew.

No--I shouldn't have those thoughts. Those are not the right thoughts.

I am distracted by the appearance of Mr. Royce, who drags himself toward me, slightly hunched, one hairy arm shielding his eyes, like a troll who's escaped from beneath his bridge and is bewildered by the electric light. He has a tote bag draped over the other arm. It can't be heavy, but it seems to be weighing him down, and his thick beard seems to be weighing his head down, and he seems tired, more tired than me, tired of life and everything. He doesn't look at me, just walks into the women's room without a word. After he's been in there a while, the toilet flushes.

I want to call my mom. I want her to take me home and tuck me into bed, to kiss me goodnight and tell me that everything will be fine.

## Chapter 6

I'm flinging snapdragons at my feet, paper packets of gunpowder popping bright in my wake. Reese has all the heavy-duty stuff piled beneath a tree, starspangled boxes ready to explode once the sun sets over Sparrow Lake.

The big news is that the Lindens accepted the invitation to the barbecue. Nobody expected that, not after Amanda's failed late-night excursion undermined her family's privileged position. There was some talk of disciplinary action, both for Amanda and for Angie. Many RFC parents felt that such blatant revolt shouldn't be rewarded with prominent roles—roles that their well-behaved, God-fearing children could play. But Tabitha and Steve came to the rescue: they simply couldn't recast at such a late date.

Since then, Amanda and Angie have been spending lots of time together, the dream team of unrepentant girls. Jane stitched two red fabric A's for them to pin onto their shirts, but they refused. Angie said it was because Amanda didn't want to piss people off, but the fact is, they don't need the A's—they're pissing people off just by associating with one another.

The Lindens are all huddled on one corner of the yard, reclining on lawn chairs they brought from home. George is putting sunscreen on Tina's translucent back, dragging his hands across the folded wings of her shoulder blades.

"We didn't put out any cheese because they were coming." Laurel Royce is at my side, drowning in a floral, 1950's-style housecoat. "But I have Wisconsin cheddar in the basement fridge if you want some on your burger."

"Thanks," I say. She backs away, flip-flops clapping her calloused heels.

She talks to me now, a sentence or two every time I see her. But I don't get the impression that she wants to talk to me. It's more like I'm holding some precious heirloom of hers over the edge of a cliff, and she's trying to get me to climb back down, to appease me.

Jane is using the party as an excuse to complete her tie-dye costume project. All the attendees have brought a shirt in their size, and she's kneeling over a baby pool of purple dye, rubber bands looped up her left arm, clothespins clipped to her lower lip.

"You want me to hang some of those up for you?"

I'm pretty sure she says go for it, so I remove two of the pins, leaving bloodless white impressions behind. "Careful with these." I move to the clothesline. "Lips are prone to bruising."

She twists another shirt right at its heart. "What would you know about it?"

I wouldn't, except there was this one time I suctioned the rim of an iced tea bottle to my mouth for too long while I was reading. I ended up with a purple stain from the bottom of my nose to the center of my chin. It's probably not the best story to tell right now.

"Can I help?" Tabitha Jensen's wearing a simple blue bathing suit with a sarong at her hips. She's carrying a glass of lemonade.

Jane scoots over. "Sure." She hands Tabitha some rubber bands. "Where's Steve?"

"I don't know." She readjusts: straightens her back, molds a smile. "I mean, he left already. Sometimes he just needs to get away."

She removes her sandals and steps into the baby pool.

"Violet feet the next big thing?" I ask.

She doesn't say anything. She simply soaks, bundles bobbing all around her.

Reese drags the canoes out from behind the toolshed, slides them over layers of dead pine needles to the muddy edge of the water. Across the way, Evan extends a hopeful paddle to

Angie—but Amanda’s already jumped in the nearest boat, two womens’ lifejackets strewn across one of the seats. That poor boy can’t win.

Grace is lifting up Tina Linden’s hair while she puts on her own lifejacket. Tina links arms with Grace, and they stroll to the second canoe. I crouch down by Jane. “If there’s a drowning today, I called it.”

A finger pokes the back of my neck, hard.

“Can I help you?”

His chest is broader than I thought it would be. It’s usually hidden beneath layers of shirts, the bags of a sweatshirt, the stiff shape of a jean jacket. No hair—just a touch, actually, gold filaments at his breastbone. There’s a thin scar on his gut—appendix? And he has an outie. An *outie*. God, I want to smooch it.

He speaks, and I am reminded that George Linden also has a glorious face. I don’t think he shaved today. “I was wondering whether you might like to join me out on the water.”

“Okay.” As if there would have been another acceptable answer. Jane pinches my butt as I rise to meet him, but I don’t take the bait.

As we cross the lawn, I try to step exactly where he steps. I’ve never seen his legs before, either. They’re toned, but not too buff, like someone who spends his days walking from town to town--Johnny Appleseed. He pops into the shed and returns with a hot pink life vest. I turn around and hold out my arms, wait for his fingers below my breasts, strapping me close. He drapes it over the crook of my elbow, the buckle of the white belt dangling in the dirt.

We approach the canoe. “Front or back?” he asks.

I have never been in a canoe. Except there was this one time—I was at sleepaway camp, and they made us tip over in a canoe for practice. I freaked out, gagging, convinced I was trapped beneath a craft so light I could lift it on my own.

“Front,” I say. Crap. I should have said back—I could stare at him that way.

“Guess I’m steering, then.” Crap revoked. It would have been a total disaster if I had to steer. “Let me know if there’s anywhere you want to go.”

How about every secluded spot on this lake? Grace and I once spent a day meandering its entire perimeter, so I know there are plenty of places to be alone: the veiled willow grove, the abandoned ranger post, the footbridge over the lily pads.

I see his image in the murky green swirls left by my paddle, a brownish mountain crowned with the rising sun. The water’s warm, and not too deep. It’d be easy to slip in, take a swim. No wind today—the boat wouldn’t float off. I could untie the knot of my halter. The water’s opaque—he wouldn’t see a thing. But he could feel what he wanted. He could wade over to me, and it could all happen below the surface. My stomach skipping-stone smooth against his chest, his hands exploring while our legs kick, kick, kick together, get tangled in the seaweed straining for us.

“You’re kind of quiet today.”

“Oh,” I cleverly respond. “Just tired.”

“Spending the whole day outside will do that to you.”

I try to keep my strokes even. “What are you going to do now? It’s your last play, right?”

“Afraid so.” Water washing over wood, then, “I’d like to be a youth pastor. Seems to me that grown-ups forget how to be excited about God.”



“Oh.” A pastor? He’s too far out there—there’s no way I’ll be able to pull him back in.  
“That’s cool.”

“What are your plans?” he asks. “You’ve got what? Another year?”

“Yeah.” My plans are to marry you. Seriously? I’m pathetic. “I’m going to go to college.  
Don’t know where yet.”

“I’ve heard good things about Wheaton.”

Of course he has—it’s the most Christian college ever. I heard it only allowed dancing a  
few years ago. “I was thinking more like University of Chicago.” Was I? I’ll never get in.

“You’re ambitious,” he says. “That’s admirable.”

I bob up and down for a moment in his misplaced compliment. I wish it were true. “I  
wish someone knew me well enough to give me a compliment that’s true.”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing. Thanks.” The smell of charcoal wafts across the current. “I’m hungry.”

With a few circular strokes, he spins the canoe back toward the shore. “Your wish is my  
command.”

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There’s this scene in *Jesus Christ Superstar* where all these sick people and blind people  
and dying people come squirming out from dark caverns between rocks. *See my eyes, I can  
hardly see. See me stand, I can hardly walk. I believe you can make me whole. See my tongue, I  
can hardly talk.* Jesus is walking there alone, and they twist toward him, reach out their filthy  
hands and beg to be healed. *See my skin, I’m a mass of blood. See my legs, I can hardly stand. I  
believe you can make me well. See my purse, I’m a poor, poor man.* There are so many of them,  
and only one of him. Soon he is overwhelmed, subsumed by their writhing bodies. *Will you*

*touch, will you mend me Christ? Won't you touch, will you heal me Christ? Will you kiss, you can cure me Christ? Won't you kiss, won't you pay me Christ?*

I've always thought that part was really scary. Whenever Angie and Jane and I watch it at night, I find some excuse to leave the room—glass of water, bathroom break. They've probably noticed, but they're nice enough not to say anything.

Lately I've been having this dream where I'm Jesus—that is, I'm in Jesus' position, but I'm still me—and I'm naked. All these anonymous hands come for me, slide across my skin, scrape me with their nails and smother me. Thumbs in my mouth, fingers between my legs. The thing is, I like it. I never want them to stop. By the light of day, it freaks me out. By the light of day, I want them to be George's hands, multiplied a million times—but I'm not sure that's true.

I have a method now, during rehearsals, to maximize the amount of time George spends touching me. A mathematical formula, actually--I'm pretty proud of it, considering math's not my thing. Basically I estimate the time we'll be practicing the scene, then I divide the amount of minutes by two, and then halve the result: the number I end up with is the number of times I can allow myself to screw up without it seeming totally weird. When I screw up, of course, we have to do it again.

Steve doesn't usually allot much time for our scene—it's only a brief reprise, after all. But if we're supposed to be rehearsing for ten minutes, I can mess up two times. (I think it's generally safer to round down.) I've mastered the art of tipping my head so that my ten-gallon falls off right into George's path, tripping him up. One time he even wiped out and I toppled down with him, landed with my head on his chest. It was the best. I've also started in the wrong key, danced in the wrong direction, sung the wrong lyrics. I can be creative when I want to be.

If Steve notices my newfound clumsiness, if he's worried about how I'll perform, he doesn't show it. To be honest, *Godspell* hasn't been his main concern these days. Shortening lunch, letting us out early—he's definitely distracted. The rumor is that he got cast in another show downtown, but who knows? Tabitha's been taking over more and more, altering the schedule so she can supervise both the chorus and the leads while Steve takes thirty-minute phone calls. I don't think she's noticed my carefully-executed flaws, either, but with dozens of kids to watch, I imagine she doesn't have a lot of energy to spare.

As for George, he just lifts me up and carries me, no matter how many tries it takes. I want to be a growth on his side, a benign tumor.

Today we're not rehearsing the scene, which is why I'm kind of surprised when George slides his back down the wall and sits next to me. "I messed up the sheep thing again," he says.

A laugh rumbles low in my gut--I'm thinking about how weird "the sheep thing" has to sound out of context--but I suppress it. What he means is the scene where Jesus sorts the disciples into sheep and goats. Sheep go to heaven because they fed him and clothed him, goats go to hell because they didn't. "Him" being Jesus, but also everyone, because Jesus is in all of us or whatever. I don't know what Jesus had against goats--seems to me they just go about their business like any other animal. It's not really fair that they get slandered in a famous parable, even if the author is the messiah. Is that where the word "scapegoat" comes from?

"It's a lot of lines that all sound the same," he continues. "I get them mixed up."

"Aren't you the one who wants to be a pastor?" I ask. "It's basically just the Bible, word for word."

George doesn't smile--he looks kind of shocked, to be honest. Crap. People never get it when I'm being sarcastic. I lean into him a little, barely graze his sleeve. "Sorry. I didn't mean anything. I was kidding around."

"That's alright." There's the smile--although I wish I could see his teeth. He bumps back into me, a bit harder. "You should help me run lines sometime."

Oh my God yes forever yes anytime literally whenever. "Sure," I say. "You could come over to my house."

What? No he can't. I think the last time I had a boy over was my tenth birthday party, back when it was still normal to invite half the class. I've never invited a boy over alone before. Would Mom and Dad care? Maybe if I told them he's gay...

"Probably not," he replies. "My parents like to keep me and Tina close to home. Lots of siblings to watch, you know?"

All I know is that I never truly understood devastation until this moment. It's like that thing where you stand up too fast and your head goes all spinny, except I haven't moved. I never want to move again. There is no longer a point to movement. Not walking or eating or breathing--nothing.

"But you could come over to my place," he says.

"I could?" Mr. and Mrs. Linden allow Catholics inside?

"Why not? Tina has Grace over all the time."

I feel like he's missing the obvious George-boy-Mel-girl thing--his parents can't be a fan of that--but if he thinks he can pull it off, who am I to object? "Sounds cool," I say.

The blurry people around us are rearranging themselves. Rehearsal must be starting again. George stands and dusts off his pants, even though there's nothing to be dusted. "I think

Steve wanted to go over some stuff with me. But I'll talk to my family and let you know when would be a good day."

"Great. You know where to find me."

Today we're not rehearsing the scene, but for once that's a-okay with me.

What's not a-okay with me is that I still have to hear the freaking song. I may have the reprise of "Learn Your Lessons Well," but Amanda's got the real deal, the big number, complete with paddock of sawhorses, which also serve as the horses themselves. *Godspell*'s more enjoyable when you embrace the nonsensical.

Tinny harmonica blares from the speakers of the CD player. As irritating as the song is, Amanda's perfect for it. Not that she's irritating, but she's sort of scrappy—she looks like she'd fit in on a cattle ranch. A strong, prairie woman type. Plus, she puts on this cute southern drawl while she sings.

*I can see a swath of sinners settin' yonder, and they're actin' like a pack of fools. Gazin' into space they let their minds all wander 'stead of studyin' the good Lord's rules.*

Angie's knees are wrapped to her chest, pale discs peeking out of ripped jeans. I notice something scratched on the back of her wrist—a rose, I think, but it's all scabby. When Amanda drags her wooden steed forward, I see a bandage taped around the same spot.

I scoot up to Angie, push right in the center of the needled blossom. "You guys have a blood pact now or something?"

"You'll get it infected." She jerks her hand away, cradles it like an injured animal.

"There's no need to be jealous, Mel. You still hold best friend status. She's just going through a rough time."

"So you're cutting?"

“Don’t be stupid,” she says, and she gives me that look that never fails to make me feel stupid—a curling of the lip that conveys disgust. “It’s scarification. We looked up how to do it online.”

“Sorry,” I say. Sorry I’m not hip enough to be dangerous.

*Better pay attention, learn your comprehension. There’s gonna be a quiz at your ascension.*

After a pivot turn, Amanda tips her hat and winks at Angie. “Are you guys dating?” I ask.

“I’m dating *Ryan*.” The tone of her frustration becomes less immediate, more exhausted—I suspect it’s no longer directed at me. “I keep trying to get him to come around to the idea. We see each other so little anyway—wouldn’t it make sense if we could both sleep with other people, too? And you’d think a girl would be less threatening.”

On stage, Amanda and her backup are mounting the sawhorses. Looks uncomfortable.

“He’s just an old-fashioned, one-woman kind of guy?” I ask.

“He just loves me too much. Doesn’t realize there’s enough love to go around.”

*Not to mention any threat of hell, but if you’re smart, you’ll learn your lessons well.*

Breaking with the choreography, Lillian Linden climbs off her horse. She’s draped in a red wrap dress, her Sunday best. “Excuse me,” she says, speaking lines that aren’t hers.

Tabitha stops the music. “Is there something you’re having trouble with, Lillian?”

“I think somebody ought to point out that Amanda Royce singing about learning God’s rules when she’s incapable of following them.”

The sounds in the room go as blank and beige as the walls. Even the babies are quiet—though a few of them are rising, along with some of the older girls. They silently step behind

Lillian, all dressed in red as well. They look like that Soviet propaganda poster from my history textbook.

Since Tina began her new obsession with Grace, I had noticed a shift in her adoring cult. As they were consistently ignored by their leader, one by one they trickled to Lillian—the next best thing. Though I hadn’t realized Lillian had the charm to capture so many, or that their devotion to Tina was so weak. Seems kind of problematic for people who are supposed to believe in an unseeable God.

I’m assuming Tabitha’s too shocked to speak rather than agreeing. Lillian uses the pause to continue, reciting a Biblical condemnation: “In Corinthians it says: ‘Do not be deceived—bad company ruins good morals.’ And in Thessalonians it says to ‘keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.’” She sneers. “Why should she be in a *Christian* theater group if she can’t behave like a Christian?”

This is extreme, even for a Linden. Tina always played the game subtly, like she was trying to help her victims. She never waged full-out war. Maybe she’s in on it, though—when I glance to where she and Grace are seated, Tina’s got one hand on her shoulder, holding her back. Angie’s breathing heavy, so I run my fingers around the spikes in her blue hair. George is in a corner, reading a book.

Tabitha finally cuts in—too late, in my opinion. “Is this what you all think?”

After a glance at Lillian, unmoving and spiteful, for reassurance, they nod—a grove of unthinking dashboard bobbleheads.

“What about Jesus’ message of forgiveness? What about his command to love your neighbor?” Tabitha strides to Amanda, who’s lost all her sass--she’s kneeling on the floor, beads of eyeliner clustering near her nose. Tabitha kneels down with her. “Perhaps Amanda has made

some choices that you disagree with, but it's not your place to judge. I'm absolutely not removing her from the show. If you're concerned about the situation, you can pray for her."

"Fine," says Lillian. "Let's pray."

She starts the song in a much lower key than Tina does, and she's slightly flat, so some of the harmonies contributed by the insurgents are in an eerie minor key. They have no accompaniment, but it sounds like there ought to be an organ, pedals pushed by some toothless, rotting old man.

*I love you Lord, and I lift my voice to worship you, O my soul rejoice.*

Tabitha leans over Amanda, shields her from the blows of the choir.

*Take joy my king in what you hear. May it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear.*

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We invented "The Dirty Unicorn" in eighth grade: a concoction of all the fountain sodas behind Dad's bar, minus the diet ones. Today the drink fizzes acidic down my throat, makes me sick to my stomach. "You want me to spy?"

"Why do you have to take everything so seriously?" asks Angie, spinning on her stool. "Spying makes it sound all sinister. I only mean that we rarely get to see the RFCs in their natural habitat. Do it in the name of scientific discovery."

I could point out that science is one of my worst subjects, not that it would do me any good. Mentioning my invitation to George's house was clearly a mistake. "We're at the Royces' place all the time. They're technically RFCs."

"You know it's not the same."



Jane's standing behind the bar, digging maraschino cherries from the bottom of a jar. "What about Lillian's outburst the other day? You can't deny that this would be a good opportunity to check up on her, see if she's plotting anything."

Angie perks up at that. "Could give us ideas for the Disco Jesus Project, too."

I slurp the dregs of my glass. "So you *do* want me to spy."

Angie slides off her stool--I think she might actually be mad. "If it weren't for *George*--" she says his name in a syrupy sweet fake voice--"you'd want to spy just as much as us."

"I generally don't do mean things to nice people." I push my glass to the end of the counter. "Can't you just tease me about my crush like a normal friend?"

"That can be arranged."

"Whatever." I lean across the bar and grab an ice cube, pop it in my mouth. "I'm not discussing this anymore. Let's change the subject."

With Angie and Jane, we've been friends for so long that sometimes we can hang out for hours without saying a word to each other. We might crowd onto one of our beds and read or do homework together. It happens in public, too. On more than one occasion, Jane and I have gone to Starbucks for hot chocolate and we've simply sat across from one another, making wacky faces. It's not that we're mad at each other, or bored with each other, or that we've run out of things to say. We're just super comfortable with each other, so comfortable that words aren't always necessary. We never have that forced talking thing I feel with some people, where it seems like silence would be embarrassing, or a horrible social faux pas.

Of course, this silence isn't one of those comfortable silences. The air conditioning in the clubhouse feels way colder than it needs to be. My stomach gurgles. I wish I had some Tums.

Finally, Jane boosts herself up so she can sit on the counter. “I’ve got some news.” She pulls a piece of paper from her purse, slides it over near Angie and me.

I unfold it. It’s a letter, the modern logo of The New School printed at the top. The first line says *congratulations!*

“I honestly didn’t think I’d get in,” Jane confesses. “That’s why I didn’t tell you guys. I didn’t want to jinx it.” She gazes at the letter with big-eyed awe, double checking to make sure it really says she’s been accepted.

“You applied early?” I ask.

“Ages ago.”

“Where is it again?” I ask.

“New York,” says Angie, who folds the letter back up and hands it to Jane.

I went to New York City once, in winter. It was a black-and-white movie world, a grainy, grayscale atmosphere, all except for the stoplights and the tired paint on the taxi cabs. Black garbage bags heaped in front of buildings, shadow people wrapped head to toe against the cold, steam emitting from the folds of their scarves, the subway grates. The Met was cool, though, and Central Park.

“With my credits, I can graduate after fall semester,” Jane says. “That gives me more time to move out there, find an apartment.”

The remains of the ice cube slide down my throat. “You don’t want to walk?”

“Graduation ceremonies suck. Why should I drop a hundred bucks on some ugly robe and waste two hours of my life when I could get out of here that much sooner?”

Angie's mouth is clenched in this tight, flight stewardess smile that she struggles to maintain while speaking. "I thought you were going to stay in Chicago. I told you about Ryan's friend who runs that gallery, and--"

"I think what Angie means," I interrupt, "is congratulations."

"What are you, my mom or something?"

It's a dreary Saturday, more moist than rainy, and the range is dead. The only sound besides our voices is Dad repairing who knows what in the cellar. He's always fixing one thing or another. Angie blinks in time with the blows of his hammer. "I've got to go. Told Amanda I'd hang out." She brushes aside the wisps of hair that have escaped Jane's braid, kisses her temple. "Congrats." The bell dings as she exits.

Jane refills her cup with water. "Shit. She's pissed."

"She'll get over it."

"I just wanted to actually go away for college, you know?"

Not really. It hasn't even occurred to me that location should factor into my college search. I could go anywhere.

Jane reaches her arms across the bar. I extend mine to meet hers, and we embrace in an arched almost-hug. "You'll have to come visit me," she says.

I imagine myself crammed into her dorm room, sleeping on a comforter on the floor, next to the thin metal bunk bed she shares with her roommate. I can see beneath the bed: single socks, scraps of paper, a used coffee cup, a condom wrapper. I imagine sitting in on her class, a painting workshop, pretending to understand the vague forms slathered thick onto canvases. Her friends smoke cigarettes, wear blue eye shadow, drink booze out of dixie cups. They discuss their

respective artistic visions, clear and vehement. They think it's hysterical that I go to "real school," with core classes and quads and sports teams. They think it's cute.

"Yeah," I say. "New York is cool."

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I keep reading online about these parents who are totally freaking out that their daughters are going to become sluts now, all because of some stupid vaccine. Not my mom. She greets me at the breakfast table one morning with "you need to get this shot right now," then lectures me for twenty minutes about HPV, how it can cause cancer, how contagious it is, how you don't even have to go all the way to get it, just touching and messing around is enough. Not that she spared me with euphemisms. I heard a lot about different kinds of genital contact that day. Just the sort of conversation a girl wants to have with her mother over a bowl of Cheerios.

She picked me up from rehearsal today to take me to the doctor's, but we've hit every single red light on the way.

"We're going to be late," she mutters over the smooth jazz oozing from the radio. Mom has the worst taste in music. I guess when you work at places that play that crap everywhere--in the lobbies and the elevators, on the phone when you get put on hold--you must get used to it.

"Couldn't you just smuggle the medicine out of the hospital and give it to me at home?" I ask. "It's not like you don't know how to give somebody a shot."

"That would be illegal," she says, her arm tense, resisting the urge to honk. "And probably impossible. They bar code all that stuff to keep track of it now."

"But it'd be fun to pull off an epic heist."

She doesn't respond, just sighs as we pull up to an intersection where the lights are out. The other cars are treating it like a four-way stop, and we're all the way at the back of the line.

She takes her arms off the wheel, stretches them above her head.” “I heard Jane got into college. The New School, right?”

“How did you know that?” I reach into the front pocket of my backpack, feel around for my phone. “You didn’t go through my texts again, did you?”

“When are you going to let that go? I didn’t *mean* to look at your texts. I was just trying to find the Martinez’s home number, and I clicked the wrong thing.”

Sure she did. Parents are never trying to barge into their kids’ personal lives. “Whatever you say. But you didn’t answer my question. How do you know about Jane?”

I did tell Dad about it--he came up to make sure the bar was clean before Jane left, so we shared the happy news--but there’s no way he’d remember something like that, something not directly related to me and my life, long enough to pass it on to Mom. Not when he’s got golf on the brain, and he always has golf on the brain.

She takes her foot off the brake, lets the car lurch forward a few feet, then stops it again. “She told me about it herself. At the hospital.”

I don’t get it. “What are you talking about? Is Jane sick?” If she’s got strep or something and has been infecting us all without telling, I’ll probably kill her. Or more likely Angie will.

“Of course not.” Mom gives me this look like maybe she failed to raise me properly. “It was Wednesday.”

“Okay?” Now I’m worried that I really am stupid. “What’s so special about Wednesdays?”

“That’s the night she volunteers.” We finally crawl to the light itself, pause at the thick white line. “In the psych ward. Teaches the patients to make art, drawing and all that. It’s really good for them.” We zoom through the intersection to the other side. “She didn’t tell you?”

No, she did not. What is *that* about? Was she afraid that I'd try to help or something? My artistic abilities are pretty dismal--I'd probably traumatize the patients more. Does Angie know? Mrs. Martinez is a nurse there, too.

Maybe I'm being paranoid, or selfish. Jane's allowed to have things she doesn't share with us. We usually tell each other everything, but I guess we're not required to tell each other everything. She could be doing it purely out of the goodness of her heart. There's this scene in *Godspell* where Jesus huddles up his disciples and whispers something to them. Meanwhile, Judas lies about it to the audience, cracking jokes about what Jesus is saying. But Jesus catches him in the act, and then he lets everyone else in on his teaching: "God will reward a good deed done in secret." And then the disciples, in unison, put their index fingers over their lips and hush the audience. "Shhh! It's a secret!"

I shake my head in the negative.

"You should ask her if you can come with next week," says Mom, a little calmer now that traffic is moving. "It's no wonder she got accepted to school so early. Colleges love all those extracurriculars. It wouldn't hurt you to volunteer, too."

Of course. In my mother's eyes, nobody does anything out of the goodness of their hearts. It's all about freaking college. "I suck at art."

"Well, there are plenty of other things you could do. Libraries, nursing homes, food pantries. Take your pick."

"Are you saying I have to?" She glares at me. My seatbelt is way too tight all of a sudden. I hold it away from my chest. "Jane didn't get into college because she volunteers. She got into college because she's super talented."

"You're talented."

“At what, exactly?”

I love that she has to think about it for a minute. “You get good grades.” Yeah, me and millions of other students across the nation. “You do theater.”

“I can’t even get a lead role.” Not that I’d actually want one. I’d be mortified, screw it all up.

“Fine, be a Debbie Downer if you want.” We turn into the hospital complex. The last three red letters of the sign directing people to the ER have burned out, so it just says EMERGE.

“If you’re as mediocre as you seem to believe, then you really should be volunteering somewhere. Set yourself apart.”

What the eff does she know about it? I have it in her own hand that college was a piece of cake. She didn’t write about meetings with counselors in her journal. She didn’t tour campuses or pore through guides or *volunteer*. She participated in a lot of after-school activities, but only because they were fun--and because they kept her closer to Derek Peterson. She graduated high school and went to the nearest college to her home, simply because it was nearby. The same college her parents attended. She didn’t have to worry about loans and scholarships. Tuition was cheap enough back then that she could get by on part-time work. Apparently my dad found her a secretary job at his uncle’s meat-packing company. It’s the first time she mentions Dad in her diary at all.

“Do we have to talk about this right now?” I duck out of the car and slam the door. “I have to get a shot, remember? That’s painful enough for one day.”

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There are traces of them all over my house. All the takeout menus on the fridge are hung with magnets that Jane made me for Christmas one year. They look like eyeballs, but she

replaced the pupils with random objects--a miniature dice, a fake pearl, a sliver of fingernail (hers, I hope). That pink stain on the back of the white couch? I was having a rough time--my first-ever C on a report card *and* my first-ever period on the same day--so Angie biked over in the middle of this crazy rainstorm (no thunder) to give me a hug, and to bring me some tampons that weren't the crappy cardboard kind that mothers inevitably seem to use despite the many advances in comfortable applicator technology. She'd recently dyed her hair, though, and the couch proved the perfect canvas for the back of her head. Mom was pissed at first, swore she'd make me work off the cost of a replacement couch, but in the end she just threw a decorative blanket over the top and forgot about it.

Jane and Angie sleep over often enough that we constantly have the couch pulled out in front of the basement TV. Nobody in my family likes strawberry ice cream, but we always keep a tub in the freezer because it's Jane's favorite. My dad can actually tell the difference between street punk and hardcore music thanks to Angie's car stereo preferences. Our family photo albums have just as many pictures of Angie and Jane in them as they do of me.

Mrs. Martinez is a little more concerned with interior design than my mom, and I'm not an artsy-craftsy person, anyway, so I hardly ever find traces of me in Angie's home. But it doesn't matter--I'm still the first person Mrs. Martinez calls when Angie locks herself in the bathroom. It's a fairly common occurrence.

I knock four times, twice in each of the door's middle panels, as if one might work better than the other. "It's just me," I say. "Let me in?" I hear a quiet click, and I turn the handle.

Bare feet on a ragged blue bath mat, surrounded by tufts of blue hair sliced in uneven clumps. It's all over the counter, too, and clogging the drain of the sink. A pair of kitchen shears



rests behind the chrome faucet. Angie drags a safety razor across her scalp, no shaving cream or anything. Little spots of blood swell where she nicked herself behind the ears.

“Can you get the back?” Her voice sounds as though it’s trapped at the bottom of a well, doesn’t have the will to climb out.

I barely remember Angie’s original hair color. It was the end of sixth grade when she first dyed it. We were working on our science fair projects, which made up a quarter of our grade that year. Mine was about the effects of different kinds of water on plant growth. I can’t recall the results—only that I ended up with tons of rocks covered in moss. Mom put them in her garden afterwards, where the moss promptly withered to a dry brown. Angie did her project on the effectiveness of various cleaning agents against bacteria—glass cleaner, hand soap (regular and antibiotic), hand sanitizer, and, of course, bleach. I don’t know if working with the bleach is what gave her the idea to do it, or if she’d been considering it for a while. Either way, it wasn’t *that* bleach we used. We weren’t quite that stupid.

I walked with her to the drugstore to get the necessary supplies, and we locked ourselves in the bathroom. I helped her paint on the bleach and put in the dye, too—which is maybe why it came out so uneven. It was supposed to be a bright magenta, but her hair ranged from cotton candy pink to a twilight purple. Mrs. Martinez was furious, mostly because the school didn’t allow unnatural hair colors. The day of the fair, Angie simultaneously won a trophy and received a detention.

In that memory, her hair before the dye was brown with honey highlights. All I can see now are miniature spikes peeking up from the follicles. They look sort of gray, to be honest.

I take the razor from her. “Why?”

The lower rims of her eyes go wobbly. “Ryan broke up with me.”

## Chapter 7

I'm peeling my face from the top step of the risers, my skin slick with other people's sweat, my cheek imprinted with the pattern of treads that were supposed to prevent any falls. Good thing my family's not big on lawsuits. When I raise my head, I am blinded by the hot beams of stage lights.

Tabitha bangs her hand hard on the piano keys, causing a clamor that halts the scene and adds to my rapidly-developing headache. "You okay?" she asks.

I grip the railing that kept me from plummeting to a broken bone and pull myself to my feet. "Fine."

It is tech week, and everything is wrong. Everything is wrong because it is tech week. Not that dress rehearsals aren't always a mess--that's kind of the point, to let everything go wrong before the curtain rises for real. People flub their lines, trip over costumes, reverse their blocking. Earlier today I missed a cue entirely. George asked me for help with his hair--it seems they've decided that Jesus should have a style akin to strategic bedhead--and I wasn't going to pass on that opportunity. Even a missed cue is within normal bounds, though. This tech week is especially bad, like the entire cast shouted "Macbeth!" and wished each other a hearty good luck at the same time.

The whole Angie-Ryan debacle was the first thing. It doesn't relate directly to tech week, I suppose, but it knocked our little world off its axis. Jane and I tugged a few more details out of her--a text message, the long distance, a lack of commitment to the anarchist cause. We tried everything we could to defuse the situation--defuse being an uncomfortably literal term, as Angie's first response after the head-shaving was to dig up those bomb-making instructions from the chaos of her bedroom and plot to blow Paradise to bits. After we threatened to call the police

about a million times, we finally convinced her to channel her desire for revenge at another enemy. Jane and I had been lazy about the Disco Jesus Project before, but now we redoubled our efforts, spewing whatever ideas we could come up with at a perpetually dissatisfied Angie, who sat on Jane's bed, her arms crossed and her face twisted like she was sucking on a sour candy.

"What if we snuck into the booth and put the soundtrack on during rehearsal?" Jane suggested. "We could even put the movie on, right? Because you can probably control the projector from there."

"How do you propose we get the keys away from Mr. Linden?" asked Angie.

My turn didn't go much better. "One of us could offer to lead prayer, and we could start singing the 'Hosanna' number. It's catchy, so people might join in on the chorus. And when we get to that one line? *Hey JC, JC, will you die for me?* They'll freak out."

"You think they're going to let Catholics lead prayer?" asked Angie.

"Well, maybe we could get one of the Royces to--"

"You guys suck at this, as usual." Angie was on her feet and halfway out of the room already. Jane's baby-head chandelier cast lumpy pink shadows over her disgusted face. "I'll come up with something on my own."

That was pretty much the last time she spoke to us. Mostly she's been living in her headphones, a black band over a pale orb dappled with the stumps of hair. I don't know what it is about intentionally bald women that makes them look like they're contemplating hideous acts of murder, but suffice it to say, Angie isn't exactly approachable right now. Even Amanda won't go near her. She's taken to shadowing Tabitha in order to avoid Lillian's creepy cult.

That's the other thing. It's definitely a *cult* with Lillian. When Tina was in charge, she had an audience. Enamored by her very existence, they trailed behind her quietly--watching and

listening, nothing more. If she'd asked them to do something, they would've done it, but she never asked. Tina merely performed, thriving on the adoration of the crowd.

Adoration isn't enough for Lillian. She has disciples, and she demands that her followers demonstrate their loyalty in actions. At first it was just Amanda they had a problem with, constantly cornering her, trying to have discussions about "purity"--though their own minds couldn't have been that pure, since Jane literally overheard one eleven-year-old refer to Amanda as a "slut." Jane wanted to tell on her--"can't have Lillian teaching them dirty words, now can we?"--but I convinced her to let it slide. Nobody would believe us over Lillian, and besides, if Joyful Noise were to step up its policing of dirty words, Angie would probably be next in line for punishment.

After they'd hounded Amanda into retreat, they moved onto other members of the Royce family. With Reese it was anti-smoking literature. They showered him with doctor's office pamphlets and pages printed from the internet. When he asked them what the hell they were doing, they insisted that they were merely concerned with his health. With Grace, they decided to help her "learn her lines" by reciting the lyrics of "Turn Back, O Man" at her. Not *singing* the song, but reciting the lyrics--a whole flock of girls chanting *forswear thy foolish ways, forswear thy foolish ways* in a soulless monotone. It was like a freaking horror movie. But at least with Grace, Tina's hovering had an unexpected benefit--neither Lillian nor her followers will do anything when Tina's around.

Angie thinks the whole thing is a calculated effort to cleanse the Royces from Joyful Noise's ranks entirely, but I think she's being paranoid. It's not like they have anything they could use against the little Royces. If anything, Lillian will try to convert them to her cause, young and malleable as they are. I honestly think it's more likely they'll expand their list of

enemies to us heathens. But Angie and I are longstanding beneficiaries of a Catholic education, so we're pretty used to cultish behavior--candlelit Easter Vigils, the Stations of the Cross. We can take it if we must.

I blink sweat from my eyes and glance at the clock on the side of the stage. There are still hours of rehearsal to go. There's got to be a saying for the opposite of "time flies," right?

"I know it's tough," says Tabitha, "but I need you guys to raise your arms higher, make them stronger. This is a big moment in the song, so I need more energy."

A sigh of agreement issues from the wilted rows of the chorus. I ignore the pain in my skull and fling my drooping neck to its fullest height.

The air conditioning broke today. I guess God is going all Job on us. It was a chilly seventy degrees when we walked into Forever Risen this morning, but midway through Steve's frenzied, poorly-rehearsed "Welcome to Tech Week" pep talk, that steady, comforting hum whirled manic, then hushed into a terrible nothing. The sealed windows didn't protect us for long. The heat shambled in through the cracks in the doors, weighed heavy on the roof, and slowly baked us. We're not in the basement anymore, either. We ditched the cool, beige cave of the community hall for the vast expanse of the auditorium, so we could practice on the real stage. And as science class so frequently reminds us, heat rises. It rises from the aisles, flattens the wrinkles in the velvet curtains, burns the metal steps of the raised platforms where the chorus dances. It's freaking sweltering up here.

Mr. Linden's been on the phone all day, ramming his fat, ruddy head through the double doors of the auditorium every so often to give us updates--like we actually care to hear any update besides "we fixed the problem." At least we don't have to sing about it. Probably not enough songs about God being the winter snow that soothes his scorching children.

The only person who seems happy is George, who stands center-stage in his costume: bell-bottom jeans and a striped shirt whose sleeves are slightly too short, leaving his wrists exposed. They were going for hippie, but the ensemble turned out weirdly nautical. He's belting "All For the Best," probably the second-most irritating song in *Godspell*, next to mine. And it's especially awful right now--a perky duet that insists upon looking on the bright side when life gets you down.

*Don't forget that when you get to heaven you'll be blessed. Yes! It's all for the best.*

The rest of us have to bounce in the background, oompah-ing upbeat harmonies as the song gets faster and faster.

George doesn't just look happy--he looks downright cheerful, the Saturday morning cartoon smile of someone who is convinced that God is real, convinced that a heaven full of puffy pink clouds and harp-bearing angels awaits. In my sweaty delirium, I am simultaneously impressed by his dedication to acting and overwhelmed by a desire to strangle him. I guess a half-day lack of modern conveniences is all it takes to sway my fickle heart.

That's not true at all. I still want to touch him, even though it means I'd be even hotter. I could rehearse our scene a hundred times, put up with the music and the ugly hat and everything, if it meant feeling our mingled sweat dripping down my spine.

"Cut." Tabitha's cheeks are scrunched close to her eyes, like she's on the verge of sobs. I didn't think we were *that* bad. "That was okay. Five-minute water break."

I run to my bag, where I dig for a bottle of ibuprofen. Grace is nearby--her dimples sink deeper as she sucks on her water bottle, five, six, seven times, never coming up for air. I'm hesitant to interrupt her chugging, but I haven't talked to her in forever--Tina Linden's all over her like a rash.

“How’s Amanda doing?” I ask, popping one of the small orange pills.

She replies only after every drop is extracted from the plastic. “Not great. Last I saw she was hiding under Tabitha’s piano bench.”

“I noticed. Is she that bad at home?”

“She won’t talk to any of us. Mom or Dad, either.”

Grace was there, so I don’t need to point out that there’s another obvious reason why Amanda might not want to talk to their mother. If she doesn’t want to acknowledge that sudden act of violence, that’s her decision. I’m not sure whether Grace or Amanda knows why their mother lashed out, and I’m not sure whether losing a baby is a good reason to hit your kid, as traumatic as it must be. I file those memories away again, in a cardboard, duct-taped box labeled “other people’s secrets.”

“Can’t you get Tina to do something about Lillian?” I ask. “If she actually wants to be your friend--”

“I get that you don’t like Tina, okay?” The wet strands of hair plastered to her face begin to pop up and curl again as she cools down. “I’m sure she’d call Lillian off if she could, but younger siblings don’t like listening to their older siblings. Every time I try to give Amanda advice, she accuses me of ‘micro-managing’ her life.”

“I still think she could--”

“Why don’t you get George to do something?” She pulls a few quarters from her pocket. There’s a vending machine down the hallway stocked with water--assuming that’s not broken, too. “You’re always saying what a great guy he is. Why doesn’t he do anything to stop Lillian?”

Because he has tons of lines to memorize? Because he thinks it’s girl stuff, maybe? Family loyalty? It doesn’t matter--Grace doesn’t wait for my response. When I get back to the

auditorium, I search for George. He's seated in the front row, chomping on a green apple. Juice dribbles down his chin.

Tabitha is behind the piano again. Even from across the room, I can see the smears of child-sized handprints in the glare on the instrument's surface, leftovers from the babies who crowded around to learn their songs. She calls out, "'Save the People!'"

Crap. I was hoping I could sit this one out. I feel a tug on the back of my soaked t-shirt. "I can't make it," says Jane, who really does look like she might collapse, all red and wobbly. The panting has to be for dramatic effect, though. "You'll have to pull me."

"Hold on tight." I trudge up to the top of the bleachers, my cargo in tow.

"Have you noticed that Steve is MIA again?" she asks.

"Maybe he has heatstroke."

"At least that would be a good excuse. But it seems like he was gone half of last week, too."

Maybe not half the week, but Jane has a point. Tabitha has taken to carrying around Steve's clipboard, squinting her eyes to decipher his blocking notes.

"He might have some family stuff going on. Or something with work." I prop myself up against the railing. "We don't know for sure that he's slacking."

Jane frowns. "Slacking off or something worse." She shields her eyes against the light and peers into the auditorium. "You seen Angie today?"

"This morning. Why?"

Despite the heat, she leans in close to me, lowers her voice. "Last Thursday I was on my way to the bathroom, and I saw Angie come out of a classroom, shortly followed by Steve."



“They were probably rehearsing,” I offer. “When George and I rehearse our song, Steve usually brings us to another classroom, away from everyone else.”

“Where were Tina and Grace, then? They’re in that number, too. And why didn’t Angie have her guitar?”

I shrug. “Tina and Grace could have left before you got there.” She cannot honestly believe what I think she believes. “What do you think happened?”

Jane tilts her head at the babies who are clattering up the steps into their places, looks wary--she doesn’t want to say it aloud. “Angie’s super vulnerable right now. With Ryan and everything.”

I don’t know whether it’s the temperature or her implication, but I get dizzy. I sit down to stop myself from falling again. “Jane, this is real life, not a *Law & Order* re-run. You can’t just--”

“Are you suggesting”--she glances at the kids filling in the row beside her, and her voice turns murderous-- “that *stuff like that* doesn’t happen in real life?”

“Of course not. But I mean...” I mean in other people’s real lives--not ours. And there’s no way Angie would go for that. She wouldn’t give someone else that kind of power. “Steve’s an idiot, sure. But a creep?”

“You’re telling me you haven’t noticed anything weird about him? You don’t get that vibe at all?”

The silhouettes of broomsticks stand straight as bars and trap me in a memory--Angie’s calloused fingers plucking a solemn tune, Steve’s chapped lips silently forming the lyrics. My stomach squeezes, and I wish I were capable of lying to my friends. “A while ago I peeked in a broom closet because Angie was practicing in there and I wanted to listen. After a minute I realized that Steve was in there with her.”

“Un-fucking-believable.” So much for censoring herself around the young’uns. “You seriously didn’t think to mention this until now?”

“Why would I?” It’s not like she brought the subject up any sooner.

“Because you’re supposed to care about your friends.” Great, now I’m a freaking traitor. Jane’s looking at me all repulsed, like there’s something awful where my face should be. “He could be hurting Angie.”

“She would have told us.”

“You’re not stupid enough to believe that.”

Maybe not, but I want to believe it. I blink a tear out of my right eye, and when the swirling wetness clears I notice a pale sphere bobbing in front of the drab gray wall next to the sound booth. “You’re wrong.” I point into the audience. “Angie’s here. Back row.”

The emergency exit swings open and Steve slips inside, tucking his phone into his pocket. Instead of heading to the stage, he sits down next to Angie, chair groaning.

Jane glares at me. “We have to do something.”

“Fine. We’ll talk to her.”

I start formulating speeches in my mind, but they all sound like dialogue from one of those awful reality TV shows that exploits fragile people--drug addicts and bulimics or whatever. Like we’re at a staged intervention, all stuffed together on a drab couch. Angie, you can tell us anything. Angie, we’re here for you no matter what. Not that any of it’s untrue--but does the truth have to be so generic?

I’m interrupted by Tabitha, who’s about as close as she’s ever been to yelling. “If you don’t get into your places faster than that, we’ll be here all day.”

George leaps onto the stage and lands right on his mark--dead center, as usual. "Save the People" is Jesus' first big number in *Godspell*, and one of the few that requires the entire chorus, besides the finale. It starts out as a charming folk song, the booms into a full-fledged Broadway bonanza. Hence the risers, and the chorus of people stomping our feet and flinging our arms into the electric heavens.

*When wilt thou save the people? Oh God of mercy, when? The people, Lord, the people.  
Not thrones and crowns, but men!*

George appears stronger somehow, as if that one little apple bulked up his muscles and his spirits alike. Everything is terrible, yet he defies it all. Part of me thinks he really could save everyone. He said he wants to be a pastor--that requires a certain amount of tact and persuasion, right? He'll certainly have to intervene in people's lives and mediate conflicts--divorces and stuff. Assuming he doesn't consider divorce to be a sin. Maybe Grace's idea wasn't so bad, about George talking to Lillian. He might appreciate the practice.

We rehearse the number about a million times--I lose count somewhere after four--and then I skip down the stairs toward him. Before I realize what I'm doing, I link my arm through his elbow.

His shining gaze drops to meet mine. "Howdy, pardner. Care to square dance?"

"No." Yes, obviously, but for one thing I don't know how, and for another thing I have to stay focused on the objective at hand. He swings me around anyway, and it takes me almost a whole minute to recover from the giggling. I am such a mess. "Hey, George."

"Hey, Mel."

That might be the first time I've heard him say my name. "Hey." Focus! "Hey, I was wondering if you've noticed Lillian."

“Noticed her?” He grins. “She’s my sister, so I suppose I notice her, most days.”

“Right, but I mean--I guess I mean that whole thing about Amanda Royce the other week, and how she’s been talking a lot to the rest of the Royces, too. And it seems like maybe she’s convinced a bunch of other kids to talk to them also.”

Wow. I have mastered the art of the awkward ramble. To his credit, George makes an effort to understand whatever just spewed out of my mouth. “I think Lillian is just trying to help them.”

“I’m sure she is. The thing is.” What is the thing again? “The thing is, sometimes people don’t want advice. They’re less likely to listen if they feel like the advice is being forced on them.”

“Hm.” How cute is that? Who actually says *hm* when they’re thinking? He bites his lip, too--the upper lip--and then continues: “That might be.”

“Yeah.” He doesn’t say anything else, just stands there blinking at me--his lashes have to be yards longer than mine. Finally, I raise his arm and twirl myself around beneath it. “So will you bring it up with her?”

He nods slow and heavy. “I’ll try to remember.”

I thank him, but my words are drowned out by the buzz of disorganized chatter. To my delight, George moves his glorious face closer to my ear. “Shouldn’t we have moved on to the next scene by now?” And unless I’m hallucinating, he squeezes my hand before strutting into the wings.

It’s possible that I’m hallucinating. It’s a thousand degrees in here, after all, and I’ve always been the daydreamer type anyway. When I was a toddler I was so spacey that Mom took me to three different medical specialists and a therapist. Nothing wrong, though--I just have a

more vivid internal life than most people. But that squeeze--my imagination isn't that good. My fingers twitch, a delayed response.

I get so caught up in this mental debate that it takes me a while to catch up with George's observation. Rehearsal has indeed come to a halt. Groups of kids are scattered throughout the auditorium--reclining on the sloping floor of the aisles, resting their feet on the backs of chairs, leaning against the walls. It's too early for lunch. Over by the piano, Tabitha is slumped over the keys, her face in her hands. Something about her posture freaks me out--she looks broken, like someone snapped her neck and she can no longer support the weight of her own head.

I scan the seats for Steve, but he's nowhere. Oh God. Is Angie gone, too? No--she's folded up in a far corner, her white skull set upon her knees. For the second time today, Jane tugs at me from behind.

"I didn't think it should wait," she says, "so I talked to Tabitha without you."

Something is not right. "About what?"

She gapes at me--clearly that was the wrong answer. "That's not funny. You shouldn't joke about stuff like that."

"Stuff like?" Her eyes widen at me, amazed by my apparent idiocy, and then it hits me, ricochets around my brain. "Wait. You told Tabitha about Angie and Steve?"

"Don't act so surprised. You agreed we should talk to her."

"I meant Angie."

"Oh." Jane crosses her arms, uncrosses them, shifts them to her hips, fists balled tight. "But Angie's stubborn. She probably wouldn't admit it on her own. And Tabitha deserves to know what her husband is doing."

“You have no proof!” Everything seems too bright, painful bright, and my feet are sinking into the wood planks of the stage, weighty and tingling, like I haven’t moved them for days. Angie’s supposed to be the impulsive one, not Jane. Jane is logical. She has to understand how much she’s screwed this up.

“Don’t defend him.”

Apparently she does not understand. “I’m not defending him, but--”

“It’ll all come out now, whatever happened.”

Can’t argue with her there.

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I have this theory that churches are pretty much made for scandal. They may be founded on God, but they’re built and run by men, and men excel at effing things up. Televangelists prey on the dementia of the elderly. “Pray the gay away” pastors cheat on their wives with the nearest willing--or unwilling--male volunteer. Catholic priests get a little too friendly with the altar servers. We expect these men of God to have some super-human ability to resist temptation, but really they’re just like everybody else. Only worse.

Considering how many clergymen have ended up in the news lately for all the wrong reasons, you’d think congregations would do more to protect themselves. But I suppose cameras in the confessional booths wouldn’t go over so well.

There are no cameras at Forever Risen, either, except for one at the back of the auditorium so they can film special services or weddings or whatever. They film Joyful Noise’s productions with it, too. They get transferred onto DVDs that our moms buy for \$9.99 a pop.

So there’s no way they could’ve caught Steve fooling around with Angie--which he wasn’t, anyway. That became clear to Jane and me when Jane asked, all serious, “what did Steve

do to you?” And Angie let out this screeching laugh, which went on for so long I thought she’d suffocate. It sounded painful. It was the first noise she’d let us hear in days. “You’ve got to be joking,” she said, after finally catching her breath. “You think I’d bang *that*?”

She doesn’t think it’s so funny now that Tabitha’s asking the same question of Steve. We’re out in the parking lot, in the back of the building by the dumpsters. When Tabitha told us to meet her here after rehearsal, her eyes forked with red, that’s when Angie’s humor about the situation evaporated. “What the hell did you do?” she asked us.

Summer blacktop is perfect for fighting, sucking in the sun’s rays, stripping them of their shine and exhaling them in an oven breath. Harsh gravel for scratching open, sticky tar for holding grudges.

“Seriously? You think I’m a fucking pedophile now?” Steve lifts the bottom of his gray t-shirt, blots the sweat from his face.

Tabitha pushes her hair back, curls her fingers as if to grab the locks and pull, but instead she lets her arms drop to her sides. “When did I use the word pedophile? When did I use it? All I’m saying is that this isn’t the first time--”

“That was different, and you know it. I’ve apologized for that a thousand times, but I’m not going to apologize for this, Tabby.” There’s an ache beneath the anger in his voice, like his emotions have pulled a muscle. “I was just talking to her.”

That’s what Angie had told us, too.

“We were worried about you!” Jane was all indignant, tugging on her braids. “Ryan was obviously a big blow, and you wouldn’t tell us anything about how you were feeling, how you were coping.”

“What would you guys know about it?” Angie replied. “Your longest relationship was what? Two weeks? And Mel’s a freaking virgin.”

She didn’t have to rub it in.

Jane was nowhere near finished--she was clearly not expecting Angie’s ingratitude. “We saw you alone with Steve multiple times. He’s never alone with anyone else. It didn’t seem right.”

“We just talked. Nothing else.” Angie rolled her eyes up and to the left, like she was too embarrassed to look at us. Stupid friends with their stupid concerns. “He asked me why I shaved my head, so I told him about the breakup.”

“I’m sure the bald has-been dispenses invaluable life advice.” Jane was a paragon of sarcasm. My tongue could never be that quick. “Tell us, what wisdom did he impart?”

Apparently it was nothing more than the usual old-guy-trying-to-relate spiel. I was like you, I was a cool kid. I smoked and drank, I played in a rock band. I had lots of women, I broke some hearts, I had my heart broken. Those damn hearts--they always patch themselves up, no matter how bad the damage seems. You’ll get through it, you’ll find someone else. I did.

He was a little too leery, maybe, too desperate for Angie’s approval, but no harm done.

“And you thought you’d have that talk with her alone, with the door closed?” Tabitha has a point. It’s almost certainly a bad idea for a middle aged man to shut himself in a room with a teenage girl. No cameras at Forever Risen, after all. Broken fractals on Tabitha’s forehead, broken fractals in the pavement.

“It’s about trust,” says Steve, the back of his shirt dampening, darkening. “She needed someone to talk to, and I didn’t see you doing anything about it.”

“That’s because I was too busy doing *your* job.”



Way at the edge of the building, the last cars are leaving the parking lot. A few of the parents have been gaping at the spat through their glared-over windshields, but they're too afraid to get near. The three of us are standing in the dirt on the side of the lot, where straggly weeds are struggling to prolong their existence. Though Tabitha asked us to be here, it's become pretty clear that she's more interested in interrogating her husband than she is in hearing what we have to say. So far we've done nothing but give them space.

Angie steps forward cautiously, her boots tracking dust onto the blacktop. "He's telling the truth, I swear. He didn't hurt me. I just needed to talk."

I guess our marginal distance from them must have been enough. Tabitha stares at Angie with wonder, as though she'd just appeared from a puff of glittering smoke. Then she narrows her eyes, appraises Angie like a rival. Then she relaxes, yanks a handkerchief from her back pocket. She ties it around Angie's pale head to block the sun. "You don't know what you need."

She turns back to her husband, who's pressing his face into his hands, massaging his temples with his thumbs. "We're supposed to be a team," she says calmly. She won't even yell about this. "I can't read your mind. You're the director of this show, so you need to direct it. I'll help you, but you have to do the job you signed up for. No more phone calls."

"Those phone calls are for you." Steve could give her some yelling lessons. "You're the one who wants to stick me with an office job."

Now there's a surprise. I guess the whole auditioning for shows downtown thing was a rumor after all. Steve seems more exhausted than angry now, his shoulders hunched, sick of every single thing in his life--just sick of it. He probably thought he'd be on a stage. A real one, not a church one. He probably thought he'd be the star of a show, or at least that he'd have a big enough part for his headshot to be in the playbill. He probably thought he'd only have to pray

when he mentioned God in the blurb below his headshot, thanking his Lord and Savior for all his success. At any rate, he probably didn't think he'd be fighting with his wife about potential child abuse next to a dumpster. I almost feel sorry for him.

"I don't care," says Tabitha. "The show will be over after next week. Then you can look for other work. No more phone calls, and no more putting yourself in compromising positions with young girls--at least not without talking to me first."

A slew of okays slides from his mouth, but they're curt and dismissive. I get the impression that he wants the conversation to end more than he agrees. But it's enough for Tabitha--or maybe she realizes it's the best she'll get for now.

"We won't tell anyone about this," I say. "Our lips are sealed."

Tabitha nods at me. Their sad little station wagon is parked over by the skeletal tower that holds up the power lines. They walk to their car and climb in, Steve in the driver's seat.

"Why did you say that?" asks Angie. I didn't even notice that she'd moved back towards me. "Our lips are sealed," she mimics.

What did I do wrong now? "Can't you imagine what the RFCs would do if they heard about this?" I ask. "They'd tear them apart--both of them--and then we'd have no show whatsoever."

Jane takes her turn. "I can't believe you're more concerned about the production than about people's safety."

"But he didn't do anything." I grab Angie's arm as evidence. "You literally just said he didn't hurt you."

Jane grabs Angie's other arm, pulls her closer to the weeds. "Victims don't always--"

“I’m not a victim. Survivor. Any of that.” Angie shakes herself free from us. “He honestly didn’t touch me.”

“Fine,” says Jane. “Okay.”

“I know you’re passionate about this issue”--Angie’s addressing Jane now, holding her hand--“but you can’t go accusing people out of nowhere. Start a club about it at college or something. And *both* of you”--she says both, but I’m the only one she’s looking at now--“need to mind your own business.”

I thought my best friends were my business. The sun has never felt hotter. I wish it would set already, but there are hours of daylight left.

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It’s a simple set for a simple number: two black stools set center stage, soft white light dusting the dings in their painted legs. Reese stands stage right, two other soloists flanking behind him. By this point he has transformed from John the Baptist into Judas--a *Godspell* tradition. Jesus has already told him to go, to do what he needs to do. The music from the pit is unnervingly peaceful, acoustic guitars and whisked cymbals. The soothing melody jars against the frenzy of tech week, jars against the notion that something good is coming to an end. George sits on one of the stools. The rest of the disciples line up behind the other, and one by one they allow him to wipe away their clown make-up with a wet rag. One by one, they embrace him, say their farewells.

*On the willows there, we hung up our lives, for our captors there required of us songs, and our tormentors mirth.*

This is my biggest problem with *Godspell*: it treats Jesus’ sacrifice as nothing, as an unfortunate inevitability, as something everyone was okay with, something that had to happen

for the greater good. Nobody has choices. When Jesus reveals to Judas that he will betray him, there's no uproar, or even the slightest hint of angst. It's just do what you have to do, and then Judas sings "On the Willows," which is lyrically sad, but sounds more like a lullaby. Sleep well, disciples. Everything will be better in the morning.

*Godspell* diminishes Jesus' sacrifice. The show is so bloated with buffoonery that his death barely makes it into the second act. Judas hands him over, he gets strapped to a fence, and that's that. He is risen and all is well.

In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, there's a whole song where Jesus prays alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. He's upset, anxious.

*I only want to say, if there is a way, take this cup away from me, for I don't want to drink its poison, let it hurt me. Things have changed. I'm not as sure as when I started.*

If I were about to die at the behest of an invisible God, I'd be frightened, too. But he chooses to die anyway, despite his fear. And Judas? He hangs himself. Which makes sense: if I knew I'd sentenced my best friend to imprisonment and probable death, I might have some serious qualms about that. The characters in *Jesus Christ Superstar* are real people with doubts. Valid, totally understandable doubts. The characters in *Godspell* are clowns at best. At worst, they're puppets.

I fought again with Mom last night. Fought is maybe a strong word--there was no door-slamming, no fragile-object-throwing. We're not a dramatic family. We were quiet--Dad didn't have to turn up the TV to drown us out or anything. But there was definitely tension, a wire coiled tight between us, ready to spring.

She'd finally seen Angie's head when Jane dropped me off. "It's always something with her," she said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Piercings, her ridiculous hair--or lack of it. It’ll probably be tattoos as soon as she gets out of the house.”

My mom is really disappointing for someone who lived through the sixties and seventies. I’ve scoured her diary and there’s nothing even remotely rebellious--no pot, no protests. I guess Derek Peterson was her drug of choice.

She tucked my hair behind my ears--she can’t help it, even though she knows it’ll tangle and fall back in front of my face within seconds. “I’m glad you’re not like that,” she says.

“Yep. It’s great that I don’t have a personality.”

“Melody. Don’t put words in my mouth.”

I was just making her statement truer, giving it some oomph. “She’s going through some boy stuff.”

When I was thirteen, Mom gave me the standard birds and bees talk. Actually, it was probably better than standard. She went into horrific medical detail, and she even gave me a box of condoms. Of course, she also gave me the necessary Catholic-parent caveat: sex is only for marriage. But if I was going to sin, I’d better not get preggies on top of it. I only ever opened one of the condoms, just to see what it felt like--like a fish covered in vaseline, mostly. The rest of the box got buried in the bottom of my sock drawer and stayed there. I wonder if she’s more disappointed or relieved that I let them all expire unwrapped.

She put a bag of popcorn in the microwave. “Hair grows back.”

“Then why does it matter that she shaved it?”

The kernels began to burst. “Because it grows back slow. Sometimes it grows back different than it was before.” She hugged me. “No boy is worth that trouble. Don’t ever cut your hair.”

Bold choices are for other people. “I won’t.”

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Whenever I’m behind the curtain, I feel as though I’ve been swallowed up by a giant, like I’m traipsing around at the hard bottom of her belly. In the wings, there’s a moist, dark hush. Cords hang from the rafters and are taped to the floor, conduits for life. Trip this wire, release that flap. Flip this switch, cut that power. Pull this rope and her mouth opens wide, the bright gaping maw of the stage itself.

At the end of our number, George deposits me backstage. I’m whirling beneath the hot kaleidoscope lights, the weight of me hurtling into his chest, inertia, cowboy boots dangling heavy on my feet, and then, stillness, light blotted away, silence. My vision fuzzes--black blobs twist before me like a fever dream. Cool air wicks my skin as I’m swallowed.

Steve’s voice echoes down the curtain-lined corridor. “One more time, y’all.” George grabs my hand and pulls me back into the light. I guess it’s an appropriate gesture for somebody who’s supposed to be Jesus.

Steve has renewed his vigor for the production, so we’ve rehearsed the “Learn Your Lessons Well” reprise six times already, even though it’s only thirty seconds long at most--probably the least crucial element of the entire play. I can’t complain about more time with George, of course, but the tune is so maddening that I stopped my calculated screw-ups four rounds ago, for the sake of everyone’s sanity.

I have no idea what Steve wants us to do differently. I can only grapevine with so much precision. My oversized smile is starting to hurt. George appears to be stumped, too. He puffs his shoulders in a little shrug before we return to our marks.

I decide to give it all I've got, even if it is only dress rehearsal. I'm channeling Dolly Parton. I'm channeling the covers of those Louis L'Amour novels that Jane's parents stacked in the corner of their downstairs bathroom. I'm channeling the cowgirl doll from *Toy Story* whose name I forget. I ball up my fists and swing my arms like I emerged from my mother's womb mid-do-see-do.

*I can see a swath of sinners settin' yonder, and they're actin' like a pack of fools.*

I'm adding an extra bounce each time I scrape the heels of my boots against the scuffed wood planks. I'm adding a twang to my voice that would be comedic to some, offensive to others.

*You'd better pay attention, learn your comprehension. There's gonna be a quiz at your ascension.*

I leap into George's arms with an even greater enthusiasm than normal--a sort of goofy, cartoonish hop. I think I caught him off-guard--he wobbles before he begins to spin. I press my hat to my head with one hand, keep the other snug around his neck.

*Not to mention any threat of hell--but if you're smart, you'll learn your lessons well!*

Darkness devours us. George sets me down gently. From the auditorium: "Great job, guys. Way to push it. Let's move on to 'All Good Gifts' in five."

Darkness isn't black. It's made of many hues, and as my eyesight adjusts, they separate. I can see them all--stormcloud grays and midnight blues, pond-bottom browns and toad-back greens, dirty whites, even the faded orange-yellow of a rotten pumpkin. I can sense George

behind me, waiting for me to lead the way, so I take a blind step forward. Soon my eyes can discern movement again--the soft sway of cords, dust trembling in the breath of a vent.

Two shapes move together behind a grid--the chain link fence for Jesus' mimed crucifixion. Shoulders bump into the flexible metal, making bubbles that lash back into place. They're seated on something or other, glowworm legs jutting from beneath swathes of lost fabric. The shapes form a lumpy, shifting pyramid, new additions built and demolished in moments, quietly.

Something wavers in my head, and the last layer of gauzy shadow is lifted.

Tina and Grace are leaning towards one another, gravitational, their lips pressed together, moving, murmuring into each other's tongues. It's an effortless motion, the way someone might double over while laughing or balance a heavy bag of groceries on her hip. Tina's thumb glides across Grace's cheek, Grace's hand slides to Tina's waist. No choreography here--they're completely off-script, a tender improvisation.

George's hand is on my wrist again, but this time he tugs me into the dim hallway, letting the heavy door slam behind us. There are wrinkles all over his face, like a shirt he was in too much of a hurry to iron. I think this might be what he looks like worried, which is bizarre. He usually exists in a cosmically un-bothered calm.

"You saw what I saw?" He's got both hands on my shoulders, shaking me a little, more like he's trying to make me see what he saw, snap me out of a temporary amnesia.

"I think so. It was dark."

"We have to tell someone."



My eyes are messed up again--I see dots when I squint, grids of them squiggling at angles. I force myself to breathe. "Are you sure you don't want to talk to Tina first? I mean, she's your sister. Maybe she--"

"You know the rules." Yes, I know the rules. There's a strict no-dating policy at Joyful Noise, and an even stricter no-kissing policy, because kissing is an evil act magically made blessed by the bonds of holy matrimony, or something. On the rare occasion that two RFCs do publicly show an interest, they're provided with actual chaperones.

"Listen," he starts carefully. "You may be close with her, but you're no Angie Martinez." For some reason it baffles me that he even knows Angie's name. He's never talked to me about my friends before. "You respect the rules, Mel. I know you do. That's why you and I can't..."

What. "What?" No effing way. There is no effing way that the grand romance in my head is also in his head. That is literally impossible. It never happens.

He takes my hand, softly this time, and clasps his warm fingers between mine.

I'm dead.

He leans forward, moves his lips near my hairline, and I get this tingle all over my skull. It runs along the bridge of my nose, down the center of my open mouth. "It's not about getting them in trouble," he's saying. "It's about helping them live in God's light."

Helping is a tricky word. So is God. I force myself to step back, shake my head. "It just seems like a family matter," I manage. "It's not anybody else's business."

"You're right," he says, still holding my hand, shifting his thumb over the waves of my knuckles. He smiles, astonished. "You're right. You're so smart."

My speeding pulse slows a little, in relief, I suppose, among other things.

“This should definitely stay in the family,” he says, “at least for now. So we’ll only tell my mom.”

I think it’s the “we” that gets me.

## Chapter 8

I'm sitting in what has to be the world's most uncomfortable armchair--straight back, severe arm rests, not much cushion to speak of, all stretched over with somber green upholstery. It must be an heirloom or something, as it doesn't fit in with the rest of the decor. For the most part, the room looks like the set of a catalogue photo shoot. Nothing trendy--stuff so safe it could never possibly go out of style, hopelessly suburban. Breezy curtains with a barely discernable floral pattern, a suede sectional that could be either green or gray, depending on the light. The lampshades and the walls are plain white. There would be models in this photo shoot--thin, middle-aged women gathered around the coffee table, laughing, drinking glasses of white wine. The only thing that gives it away is the cross on the wall above the couch--metal vines twisted tastefully into the instrument of Jesus' death.

This is not how I thought my first visit to the Lindens' house would go. It was supposed to be me and George. Sure, we'd probably have to endure some mild interrogation from his mother, naturally suspicious of any female outsider. We might have to suffer some righteous abuse from Lillian. Whichever room in the house we decided to settle in, we'd certainly have to keep the door open wide. We would never have been totally alone. But we could have cozied up near each other, handed his highlighted script back and forth. We could have shared a snack, fingers dipping into the same bowl, tossing crackers into each other's mouths. Eventually our recitation could have evolved into real conversation, finally getting to know each other in relative privacy--more privacy than we have at rehearsals, anyway.

I did not anticipate that my first visit to their home would be to attend a Joyful Noise Parents' Committee emergency meeting. The fact that the committee thought the Lindens' place would somehow be more neutral makes me worry that they're crazier than I originally thought.

It's a good thing there's so much seating. RFCs I hardly recognize are strewn throughout the room, occupying chairs dragged in from the kitchen, sharing footstools, perched on the edge of the sofa's arms. Steve and Tabitha are there, too, squeezed into a loveseat. None of the kids are there, but I saw Tina when I came in. She, George, and Lillian were at the top of the stairs, presumably so they could listen in. She was leaning against her brother, draped in a blanket, like she'd just survived some harrowing brush with death. Girl kidnapped by deranged serial killer. Girl trapped in the rubble of a freak avalanche. Girl subjected to lesbian kiss.

George, for his part, had his arm around Tina, his fingers reaching far enough to touch Lillian's shoulder. He didn't even glance at me, though the girls did. While I paused at the foot of the stairs to kick off my shoes, they studied my body like they were going to be quizzed on it later. The resemblance between all the Linden siblings is obvious, but I'd never realized just how much George looks like his sisters. Exact same nose--charmingly upturned like Judy Garland's. Exact same posture--tall but precarious, as though they'd collapse in on themselves if a puppeteer cut the string.

The Royces are noticeably absent. Beckah Linden comes in from the kitchen, nearly tripping over her floor-length patchwork skirt. She hands me a cup of tea. There's a quote from Psalms on the mug, in this stupid font that's supposed to look handwritten: *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

Her husband is on the couch fiddling with his tie, which won't lay flat across his stomach. "Miss O'Malley," he says, still fiddling, "why don't you tell the committee what you saw the other day."

It wasn't supposed to be such a freaking big deal--a quick word with Mrs. Linden about her daughter, nothing more. She'd been easy enough to find--she spent every tech week stuck

behind her Singer, making last-minute adjustments to people's costumes. When George and I approached her, she was pushing bunched-up folds of purple glitter tulle through the machine--a tutu that Grace wears during the Good Samaritan scene. The fabric looked totally ridiculous against the yellow-white of her sewing machine, the beige-as-ever walls of the community hall.

Even with George right there beside me, I could hardly squeak out what he wanted me to tell her. Her expression unchanging, she took her foot off the pedal and asked me to repeat myself, like she didn't hear me the first time. Maybe I really was too quiet, I don't know. After the second time, though, she sat very still. Inanimate object still, her lips so thin they practically disappeared. I was kind of worried she'd stopped breathing altogether when she asked George to confirm what I'd said. He just nodded, his face solemn. I half expected him to raise his right hand in a scout's pledge of honesty, but he kept his hands in his pockets.

Suddenly, his mother lunged at me, knocking several spools of thread and a pair of scissors to the floor. She gripped my upper arm like I was the only thing keeping her from plunging to her death. "It's dark backstage," she said. I'd never heard her speak so loudly. "Are you *sure* you saw it?"

It took me a second to register how desperate she was, that she was pleading with me to take it back. The thought of a queer daughter was that horrifying to her. I could swear I heard her heartbeat falter when George finally spoke up: "I saw it, too."

Now I wish I could take it back, but not for Beckah Linden's sake. I almost didn't come-- I could've said I didn't have a ride, or that I was sick or something, but I didn't want to risk a call to my parents. When I interrupted my mom's precious *Wheel of Fortune* viewing time to ask her to drive me over, she stared at me like I'd completely lost it.

"Are Angie and Jane going?"

“No.”

I honestly thought she was going to check my forehead for fever. “Don’t you hate the Lindens?”

I take a sip of the tea. Crap. Scalding. Not going to be able to taste anything for days. “I already told Mrs. Linden”—and I’m sure she told everyone else, so I don’t even understand the point of this meeting--“but I saw Tina and Grace kissing backstage.”

No gasps or tsk-tsk-tsks, so they must already know. A few people bow their heads. “You’re referring to our oldest daughter, Christina, and Grace Royce?”

I’m surprised there’s no stenographer typing my testimony, no gavel in Mr. Linden’s chubby hand. “There’s no other Grace that I know of in the cast, so, yes.”

“Now this is very important, Miss O’Malley.” Want to make me swear on a Bible? Part of me wants to ask him to call me Mel, but I think that would just make me feel gross. I don’t want to be on friendlier terms with the man than I have to. “You claim the girls were kissing. Would you say that Christina was kissing Grace, or that Grace was kissing Christina?”

The worst part is that it’s not a joke. He is pitifully earnest. “I didn’t see the beginning, but they both looked pretty into it to me.” There we go--that got a gasp.

Some tall guy in the corner with grayish skin and a combover asks if I can clarify to the committee “in what manner” the girls were kissing. Sorry, creep: I’m not an expert witness in lip-locking, and I’m not going to help you with the porno you’re so clearly directing in your head. I’m still reeling from that one when Tabitha cuts in.

“Forgive me, but I’m not sure why Steve and I are here--or why any of us are here.” She starts playing with her silver cross necklace, twisting the pendant. “Teenagers are bound to fool

around from time to time. This seems like an issue for the Lindens and the Royces to deal with more than anyone else.”

I could kiss the woman, but that would probably send one of these RFCs to the hospital--not to mention give Mr. Creep a giant boner. I send a half-smile Tabitha’s way, but she doesn’t return it.

“I’m surprised to hear you say that, Mrs. Jensen.” I guess we’re all on a formal basis with Mr. Linden today. “When we entrusted you with our children’s care, we made our policies regarding sexual intimacy perfectly clear.” He lowers his voice during the phrase *sexual intimacy*, as though they’re dirty words in and of themselves. “It is crucial that our children follow God’s laws.”

Some spray-tanned lady in a frumpy dress shouts, “you were supposed to keep them safe!”

Who knew that a kiss was the end of the effing world? “Mr. Linden,” I start, “with all due respect, I really think this is getting blown out of proportion.”

“And I think you’ve told us all we need to know, Miss O’Malley.” He’s back to his tie now. “You’re free to go.”

I didn’t realize I wasn’t free to go the whole time. Someone’s on a power trip. The chair creaks beneath me as I stand. I can feel the RFCs’ eyes stick on me like leeches, sucking up my discomfort. I shrug a small goodbye at Steve and Tabitha. Steve waves, but Tabitha only shifts farther to the edge of the loveseat, crosses her arms.

It’s one of those subdivisions where people leave their front doors open. Not too far from Angie’s house, actually. I consider walking over--it’d only take about twenty minutes if I cut across people’s yards, and the ditch should be dry this time of year--but then I scrap the idea. I’d

rather as few people know about this whole dumb thing as possible. She and Jane might find out anyway, but I can burn that bridge when I get there, or whatever the saying is.

I step out into the driveway, start batting at the mosquitoes. I dig through my purse for my phone so I can call Mom. So much crap in here--empty gum wrappers, receipts, multiple tubes of lip balm. *Godspell* lyrics, of course.

Soft clapping on the pavement behind me. George has on yet another flannel shirt. I imagine him at the local thrift store, plastic basket over one arm, yanking shirt after shirt off the wire hangers. That can't be right, though--his mom probably shops for the whole family. His hair's getting long, brushes the bottoms of his ears. With the bare feet, he looks like some all-American runaway. Tom Sawyer again.

I wish I smoked. It'd be so cool if I pulled out a cigarette right now, everything inside my head concentrated into its simmering orange tip, and I'd be empty, except for the smoke--above it all. I've got everything but in my bag. The only time I puffed on a cigarette--at one of Ryan's band's shows--I ended up sneezing for the next day and a half. "What?" I say. Very smooth.

"I'm sorry you had to come all the way here." He steps into the lawn, begins plucking dewy blades of grass with his toes. "I didn't think it would be quite like this."

"You should've thought."

The moon's not out, and the orange streetlights make it hard to see the stars. The streetlights are supposed to look old-fashioned--the bulbs even flicker, to seem more like candles. George turns away from me, meanders towards the mailbox. He mutters something I can't hear.

I almost want to ditch the conversation--the fact that he didn't speak to my face irritates me--but I'm stuck without a car anyway. I follow him down the driveway. "What was that?"



“My mother likes you,” he says.

News to me--though I’m not sure why he thinks I care.

“And my dad, even though it probably didn’t sound like it in there.” He leans against the mailbox post, flicks the red plastic flag up and down. “He takes the Joyful Noise stuff real seriously.”

I somehow don’t think it’s the administrative aspects of the situation that are bothering Mr. Linden. “Okay.”

“They appreciate what you did. Helping Tina.” Helping is a tricky word. He takes a step closer to me, and I get the weird urge to move backward. “They’ve agreed to let us court.”

“Excuse me?”

He takes my hand, kisses me on the wrist, and holds it close to his warm, thumping chest. “Provided we can find appropriate chaperones, of course. Normally Tina would have been a good choice, but after this...accident, people might question her judgment.”

What is this? A Jane Austen novel? You’re Tom Sawyer, not Mister-effing-Darcy. I find I’m shaking, this wacky mixture of angry and scared. I don’t want to talk about this right now.

But before I can tell him so, two parallel orbs of light wind through the humid night, expose us where we balance on the curb.

Found the Royces. Or I guess they found us. All nine of them piled into the type of white, roly-poly van so frequently described in police reports. I can’t believe the committee wants to talk to them now--it’s past 9 p.m. The panel slides open, and the little ones hop out first. Samantha in Tweety Bird footie pajamas, Jenna in a ruffly pink nightgown--tousled hair, rubbing their eyes, like they’ve been pulled from their beds due to some terrible crisis. Marie and Evan next--she stumbles on the big step down from the van, and Evan scoops Samantha up as he heads

toward the house. Reese gets out and actually does light a cigarette, but Mr. Royce stops locking the car to yell, “put that damned thing out.” Amanda and Grace emerge together, heads ducked, Amanda’s arm coiled around Grace’s shoulder, like they’re celebrities dodging hordes of merciless paparazzi. When they move past me, Amanda’s arm grazes mine. I can’t tell whether it’s an intentional bump, but it’s enough to shock George into dropping my hand.

Laurel Royce comes around the front of the van. She’s wearing that housecoat again, frayed at the hem and collar. George tips his head. “Evening.”

She spits at my feet, right at the rubber soles of my Converse.

“I’ve got to go,” I say. Across a field, I can see the flat neon roof of a gas station, an ugly beacon, and I jet there like my needle’s on empty.

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I spit the sour orange juice into the trash can below the bar, search the carton for an expiration date. It must have gone bad. But you probably can’t tell with vodka mixed in, if vodka tastes anything like I imagine--some sort of bitter, acidic vegetable, liquefied.

“Dad,” I shout. “When’s the last time you went grocery shopping?” Only fractions of his response make it to the bar from the office. “I bet the health department would have some strong opinions about this juice.”

I shove open the padded double doors with my shoulder. Dad’s leaning over his desktop computer, one of those “futuristic” Macs from the turn of the millennium, with gem-tone monitors that look like halves of plastic Easter eggs.

“Dad, you said you just had to grab something. We’re going to be late.” Jane texted last night and said she couldn’t bring me to rehearsal--probably car trouble, it was a flat tire the last

time she couldn't make it--so Dad volunteered to drive me. The range doesn't open until noon anyway. Sometimes he opens early for the regulars.

"There's an email from Joyful Noise," he says. They've started sending those to parents now, too? Steve and Tabitha got all our email addresses at the beginning of the summer--passed around Steve's infamous clipboard, the lined pad of paper much less full at that point--and sometimes they send us little encouragements, Bible quotes, that stuff. A message pinged on my phone early this morning, woke me up before my alarm. Like most of their emails, I didn't bother opening it--just rolled over and tried to doze off again.

"Maybe rehearsal is canceled." He rolls the mouse around the screen, shoves his glasses higher on his nose. "I could use some help today. I'm expecting a shipment of new balls--way high-tech."

What could possibly make a golf ball high-tech? Whatever. Waste of time. "Let's get out of here."

"That's weird. There's going to be some kind of announcement. They want parents to stick around for a bit when they drop their kids off." His back cracks when he stands. "Any idea what's going on?"

"Nope." Nope! That is impossible. Calm down, be still your beating heart, Melly. There is no way that they're going to bother every single parent about this--if only because the Lindens won't want Tina's name dragged into it. But still. "I'm sure it's okay if you can't stay. You probably need to sign for that package, right? Don't want to miss it."

"I've got a few minutes to spare." Of course he does.

On the ride over, I twist the air conditioning up as high as it will go. Then it's too cold, all prickly on my skin. I slide the vents in every direction but mine.

“You okay, Mel?” Dad gives me a good-natured thump on the back.

“Fine.” I turn the air conditioning off altogether. “Maybe windows instead.”

There are no windows in the community hall. They’ve brought us back down here for their Very Important Announcement. I guess the auditorium’s too theatrical for serious business. I mean, the auditorium is where they hold all their services, but church services are pretty theatrical, when you think about it. Catholic masses, definitely--candles and goldspun robes, chanted Latin, incense swinging from an ornate chain. But Evangelicals are theatrical, too, in a different way. I attended a service at Forever Risen once--a friend of Grace’s had converted, was getting baptized. They wanted the baptism to be hip for the teens, so they literally brought in a carnival dunk tank, let the friends and family pelt the trigger with red and yellow rubber balls until the girl splashed into salvation. They ran out of communion wafers, so someone volunteered their box of animal crackers--the frosted kind. Transubstantiation isn’t their thing, obviously. Hard to believe you’re eating the actual body of Christ when it’s shaped like a rhinoceros.

The point is, the community hall is beige, which is the opposite of theatrical. When we rehearse, the chairs are stacked against one wall, but today they’re set out in rows to accommodate the parents, who gave up sitting cross-legged on linoleum floors long ago. According to the bucket-hat-sporting geezers who frequent the range, the knees go first, then the back. Dad and I sit on the edge of a makeshift aisle.

The entire Joyful Noise Parent Committee is lined up along the front wall--minus Laurel Royce, that is. I twist my head around and scan the rows for curly red hair, but none of the Royce kids are there, either. This can’t be good.

One time we went on family vacation to Colorado, and my parents made the unwise decision to take me skiing. To Midwesterners, every large hill looks like a mountain, and either way, hill or mountain, they all seem too steep to believe. The Rockies look a lot steeper when you're on top of them--hard, white sheets lined with shadowy pines, sunrays glaring off the merciless slope. Not only did I fall all the way down the icy mountain, but I also didn't adjust well to the altitude. I got sort of dizzy and tired, like my mind was floating above the rest of my body and my limbs didn't know what to do with themselves. That's basically how I feel right now. I dig my fingers into the hard plastic rim on the bottom of my seat to ground myself.

I spy Angie in the back row with her mom and her two brothers. Max and Marco are karate chopping each other in the neck. And Jane's there, too, on the other side of Angie. Guess she got the car working after all? I try to signal them, but I must be a ghost, because all I can see in their eyes is the blank wall behind me.

The screech of the microphone brings my attention back to Mr. Linden, who can't seem to get the stand at the right height to meet his mouth. He shifts the stand up and down, making such tiny changes that they shouldn't even matter. Finally, he removes the microphone and unwinds the cord.

"First off, I want to thank the parents for taking time out of your busy schedules to join us here today." I swear he could win a monotone contest. "It has recently come to our attention that certain *Godspell* cast members have been engaging in ungodly activities, specifically of a"--he pauses, like he's debating whether or not saying it will send him to hell--"*sexual* nature."

Multiple parents cover their kids' ears. I'm not even kidding.

"As you know, the Joyful Noise Players take God's laws very seriously. It's of the utmost importance to us to keep our children pure and on the path of righteousness."

I'm a pro at holding my breath--unlike skiing, my swim lessons as a kid really paid off. I hold my breath when I'm taking tests, when I'm applying makeup, when Mom's lecturing me, when I'm watching George. It takes everything I've got *not* to hold my breath on stage. I'm putting those skills to good use now, resting my hands on my puffed-out stomach. I hope I don't puke.

"In light of their transgressions, the committee has made the difficult decision to remove the Royce Family from Joyful Noise. They will no longer be involved with our productions in any capacity."

An invisible fist knocks the wind out of me--maybe God's fist--and my head crashes between my knees. Dad's hand is on my back, but I can't look at him, can't look anywhere. I want to go blind.

Mr. Linden's droning on about questions, and I think Dad is freaked out--he doesn't handle strong emotions well. Whenever I got upset as a kid and Mom wasn't home, he'd just take me to the range and force me to improve my swing. "Mel, sweetie," he's whispering over and over, "are you crying?" I hear his keys jangle as he goes into his pocket. "Here, I have some old tissue."

He may try to drag me out of here if I can't get it together. I raise my head slowly, press hard into my closed eyes so that when I do open them, my vision blurs back into place. The first thing that comes into focus is Lillian Linden's smiling face. She's two rows ahead of me, but only a few seats away, staring right at me in some kind of kooky admiration, the way a mad scientist might regard her demented creation. It's terrifying.

I haven't been paying attention. Is Mr. Linden talking about *me*? No--everyone would be staring if he were, not just Lillian. But what if he does? *We discovered all this thanks to the sharp eyes of Miss Melody O'Malley, a true servant of the Lord. A round of applause for Mel!*

Luckily, before that can happen, Tabitha's voice flies up. Not like a sparrow or a dove--something with talons. "This is absurd. Can you please explain why you need to remove the entire family? From what you've told me, only one of them was involved in anything remotely sexual--if you could call it that."

Mr. Linden's monotone crumbles into grump. "This incident was only the most recent in a long line of problems the Royce family has caused for Joyful Noise. Some of the children made trouble at the Lock-In, and there were payment issues as well."

I didn't know that. Grace and Amanda never mentioned it, probably embarrassed. But they shouldn't be. The participation fee for Joyful Noise isn't huge--way more reasonable than people I know at school who play sports--but with seven kids, it can't be easy.

Tabitha's bird dives, claws outstretched. "So you're kicking them out because they can't pay you?"

"The committee is under no obligation to explain these issues to you in detail, Mrs. Jensen." I bet that jerk's never had a woman speak back to him in his whole life.

"And what about your daughter, Jonah?" Oh crap. I peek up over the ridges of my fingers, which have migrated back across my face during the exchange. "Wasn't she also involved in the recent incident?"

His head's gone full tomato. "We don't punish victims here!"

“Is that so?” Tabitha stands so quickly that she kicks over her folding chair. She slings her bag across her chest. “I’m uncomfortable with your system of justice. I’m afraid I can’t work for someone who twists God’s word to serve his own purposes.”

Joan of Arc. Joan of mother-effing Arc. I should commission Jane to sculpt a ceramic statue of Tabitha, clouds at her feet, gold-painted halo behind her brave head.

“Tabby.” Steve grabs at her elbow like a lost toddler. “The show. Who’s going to take care of the kids?”

“You can, for all I care.”

People inch their chairs away from her as she leaves, make room for her powerful aura.

Mr. Linden clears his throat. “I’m sorry that turned so ugly. I can assure you the committee did not make this decision lightly. We prayed all night over it.”

I should have realized that--many of the committee members are wearing the same outfits they wore the night before. And there’s this sort of stale reek coming from their direction--but I might be making that up.

One of them--frumpy dress lady--bellows, “it was God’s decision, not ours.”

“That’s exactly it, Rhonda. Thank you. And God’s decision is final. If you have any further questions, you can send them to the committee email account.” He rams his fat fingers together--here is the church, here is the steeple. “Let’s have a quick prayer before we send the parents on their way.” He gestures at Steve, whose head is lolling like a lobotomy patient. “After that, it’s just rehearsal as usual.”

As usual? He just gutted half the freaking cast. I do my best to ignore his stupid, fake prayer, and as soon as he’s finished, I rush up to him, tap on the back of his checkered suitcoat. I’ve never been much of an attack animal. “Mr. Linden? You’ve got to listen to me.”



He puckers his lips like I'm sour. I don't care what George says--I'm pretty sure this guy despises me.

"You can't do this. I made the whole thing up." I don't have much experience begging. I hope this is how you do it. "It's my fault."

His laugh sounds more like a cough, and then he practically vomits his words, as though they'd been stewing rotten in his stomach before I got there. "Proverbs tells us that 'lying lips are an abomination to the Lord.'"

He sounds less monotone now. Maybe he only speaks that way in public to trick people into believing he's not a total narcissistic psycho. He pushes on my shoulder until I buckle into the nearest chair. "This must be hard for you. I know you were close with the Royces. But whatever made you tell us--it was the right thing to do. That was Jesus speaking to you, my dear." I'm sure George will be glad to hear that his father thinks he's been channeling the son of God so well.

The man is so condescending that I'm kind of expecting a pat on the head, but instead he bolts over to a group of male committee members by the door. They've left the women to fold the chairs and put them away. I leap up so I don't get in their way, and my blood rushes fast and hot.

Where's Dad? I spot him folding his own chair, setting it flat on the floor. I weave through the dissipating crowd in his direction.

"You don't have to do that," I say.

"I know," he replies. "It's just--"

When something goes wrong with the Buick, he tosses up the hood, steps back, and surveys the whole situation from afar, like he's putting together a giant, oily, metal jigsaw puzzle, searching for the missing piece. That's how Dad looks at me now--like I'm a piece out of place.

"Do you want to go home?" He asks. "I can take you home, if you want."

It's sort of cute. I wish that would help. "It's okay." It's not, but whatever. "I'll stay."

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Back in the third grade, Our Lady of Sorrows brought in some local firefighters for a schoolwide assembly about fire safety--checking closed doors with the back of your hand, crawling beneath the smoke, all the stuff kids will most likely forget if actually confronted with a burning home. I guess the firefighters must have been unimpressed with the school's own safety measures, because a few days after that, the faded red hand-pull alarms from the 60's or whenever were replaced with these shiny, automatic buzzers, complete with flashing lights. But something went wrong with the installation. Every day for a week, multiple times a day, the new alarms would wail and screech, forcing us to abandon our studies and move outside in single-file lines, our palms covering our battered ears. Everyone would just mill around in the parking lot, teachers and kids alike, waiting for someone to fix it so we could go back in and salvage whatever class time was left. Most of the time, Angie would ditch--walk down the street to the Tastee-Freez and buy a small, chocolate-dipped cone. I was always too afraid to go with her, but once she brought me a sundae that my teacher made me toss on my way back into religion class.

"Rehearsal as usual" reminds me of those hours spent outside thanks to the enthusiastic fire alarms, except that we're stuck inside, and that Forever Risen's nowhere near an ice cream shop. Although Angie's still gone, and so is Jane--maybe they drove to get ice cream? Or just to get the hell out of here, since Steve's helpless without Tabitha and nothing important is

happening anyway? I prefer those possibilities to the one gnawing at my stomach lining--that they blame me for the Royce excommunication. I don't know who would have told them between last night and this morning--Amanda would be my best guess, since she and Angie are so tight--but Grace might have, too. If she's angry at me, I get it. I'm angry at me.

To make things worse, it seems that Lillian Linden is decidedly *not* angry at me, as she just cornered me by the water fountain, hugged me from behind, and squeezed me so hard that the sharp bird bones of her wrists dug beneath my ribs and water came spewing out of my mouth.

"George told me *everything*," she gushes, blinking so fast that the energy could probably power a small machine.

What everything? That I'm a huge pushover? That I'm the worst friend in the history of friends? I stare at her, wipe the water off my chin with the back of my hand.

To my horror, she loops her arm through mine, bumps my right hip with her left, like we're bestest friends, like she didn't totally hate me a week ago. "Come on," she says. "You can't be so quiet if we're going to be sisters."

Oh God. It's worse than best friends.

"Mom says I'm too young to be a chaperone, which is so annoying, because shouldn't it be someone who knows you? Even if they're younger? But I'm sure we'll find somebody. Mom was thinking about giving Evelyn Saunders a call."

The name sounds familiar, but I can't conjure up a connected image until Lillian teases, "maybe she and Michael will take you dancing." The dancing makes my brain pick up the pace.

Evelyn Saunders--until recently Evelyn Wilshire--was basically the Tina Linden of Joyful Noise about four years ago. Unlike Tina, she was a better dancer than she was a singer. Graceful,

fairy-like--the directors always worked in complicated choreography for her, inserted whole dance numbers into scenes where they hadn't been before. Luckily for Evelyn, the George Linden of four years ago wasn't her brother. She married Michael Saunders in a peony-suffocated ceremony last spring, much to the delight of the RFCs.

What the eff. She thinks I'm going to *marry* George? I guess that's what courting means to these people, now that I think about it. Where it invariably leads. But I'm not even finished with high school. Not that high school means anything to Lillian. Do homeschoolers even have grades? If it weren't so freaking terrible, this would all be pretty funny. I'm somehow engaged to be married without having been proposed to.

I accidentally smile at the thought, which is a mistake--Lillian thinks I'm pleased to join the family. This is exactly how I ended up engaged without my knowledge. My communication skills are nonexistent.

Lillian begins to pull me down the hall. "George also mentioned that you think I'm being too hard on people. How forcing them into a closer relationship with God will never work."

Crap. Maybe this whole sisters, buddy-buddy thing was just a trick to lull me into complacency. Are her followers hiding somewhere nearby, ready to pounce? At least if she denounces me publicly, that probably solves the courting problem.

"You might be right," she says, her eyes as big as a begging dog's. "To be honest with you, Tina was my hero. Wanted to be just like her. But heroes don't always make good decisions." She smiles again, painted-angel sweet. "Everybody likes you, Mel. You can help me do better."

It has to be a trick. The things coming out of her mouth couldn't be more untrue. Some people like me well enough, I guess, but I'm in no position to win a popularity contest. And she could never be like Tina, no matter how hard she tried. She's too desperate.

"How is Tina?" I ask. She didn't show up today--Mr. Linden probably kept her at home to protect her or something.

Wrong question. "She's fine," Lillian blurts. And then, "she's sorry."

Not as sorry as me, I hope.

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The Snake in Black winds around my upper arm, either hugging or threatening my bicep. I'm going to go with hugging. I have so many questions for you, Johnny. Isn't a person allowed to screw up? I'm not denying that I did a crappy thing, but still. Is a person only allowed to screw up if they're an interesting person? Over the years, Angie and Jane have done so many crappy things that I can't even remember them all, but I can remember that I never hid from them like a freaking baby. Shouldn't a lifetime of friendship count for something? He hisses, and his flat head squirms toward my neck.

"You guys can't keep ignoring me. Your parents aren't home, so nobody's going to kick me out." As if the Fishers would kick me out if they were here. They'd probably just show off whatever items they'd acquired on their most recent scavenging trip--a collection of dead flower paperweights from some estate sale on the East Coast, or rotted-out pieces of old totem poles salvaged from the Pacific Northwest--until the other girls got tired of pouting and finally came downstairs.

Floorboards groan above my head. I ought to take a broom to the ceiling like they do in the movies, but this place is so rickety I'm afraid I'll punch a hole through it.

I took the bus all the way to Jane's--waited for forty minutes outside the hardware store and spent a dollar more than I had to because I didn't have exact change, only to be dropped a half-mile down the road from her home. They don't have sidewalks up here, either, so I had to trudge through the gravel on the shoulder, damp from overnight rain, while cars sped past dangerously close to me.

This is *after* I'd walked over and checked at Angie's. The second she opened the door, Mrs. Martinez started answering my questions before I could ask them. "They left a half hour ago." She put her hands on her hips and examined my face. She scowled. "Angie said you were sick. You don't look sick to me."

"No, Mrs. Martinez, I'm not--"

"I knew it. I knew she was up to something." She spun on one heel and headed to the kitchen, but she kept talking, so I stepped into the front hall to hear better. "I tried coming into her room earlier to ask what they wanted for dinner--I knocked, mind you--and the ungrateful little mocosa screamed her head off. Get out! Get out! Like I'm the Devil herself."

By this point she was rustling around in something. One of the boys, Max or Marco, made whining noises. "You've already had enough," she snapped--I thought she meant me for a second. When she reappeared in the hall, she was carrying a paper lunch sack rolled at the top. "Cookies," she said. "For you. Juan's mama's recipe."

"Thanks." I took the bag. She was staring at me, but also past me, wistful, like I'd triggered a painful memory.

"You're a good one, Mel." If she only knew. "When you find Angie, tell her I want her home before ten."

"Will do," I said, though my gut cramped, like I was telling a lie.

So I finally got to Jane's and they wouldn't answer the freaking doorbell. I pressed it a million times in a row, so fast that the ringing got off rhythm--dingdong dingdingdong dingdongdong dingdingdingdong dingdong-- in the hopes of driving them nuts enough to answer it. If not them, The Loser, though I knew he probably had his music blasting. When that didn't work, I hopped into one of the basement window wells--no air conditioning at Jane's, so all the windows stay open during the summer--and pushed in the screen. It didn't clatter--landed on a pile of dirty laundry. I'd be a lucky thief, but I wanted them to hear me. I've been shouting their names ever since, banging on pots and pans. Found Johnny Cash next to a box of mac 'n' cheese.

I'm not sure what I'm looking for. Forgiveness would be nice, but I suppose acknowledgement of any kind would be okay, just so I know for certain I haven't disappeared. It's a little creepy, making all this noise and nobody notices. Maybe I got hit by a car on my way over and I haven't realized I'm a ghost yet, going about my unfinished business. I stand on a chair--that doesn't seem very ghost-like--and get my face as close to the cobwebby ceiling as possible. Then I project, just like they tell us to do on stage.

"I didn't mean for this to happen." Totally true. I love Grace. I remember the first time I went over to her place to hang out, I was a bit nervous, because of Jesus and everything. But it was great. It was the middle of winter, so we went ice skating on the lake--or rather, she went skating, and I went stumbling. The skates I'd borrowed were a size too big, loose at the ankles, and I'm not graceful to begin with. She didn't mention Jesus at all--and what's more, she didn't freak out when I took his name in vain, when my foot plunged through a soft spot in the ice near the dock. She sped over, pulled me up by the armpits. Once we were inside, she wouldn't even let me take off my own shoes and socks. She drew a lukewarm bath for me--I guess with all

those siblings she'd learned early on that lukewarm is better than hot for fighting off frostbite--and while my foot was soaking, she made me a cup of cocoa.

Grace is one of those people you want to hate because she's perfect--beautiful, lively, funny, accomplished--but she's also so genuinely kind that all your jealousy gets pummeled into affection. And loyalty--I thought I was loyal, anyway. I betrayed my friend--real, actual betrayal--and I didn't even realize I was doing it. Maybe I'm just that stupid.

"I'd undo it if I could." Also true. If I could do it again, I'd convince myself to hate George. Well, not hate. I suck at hating people. It never seems worth it to get that furious. But I'd try harder not to lose my mind over him. I've talked myself out of crushes before. It helps if they're way older, or if I don't see them that often, or if they're in love with Angie or Jane (they're just more noticeable than me, I think), but I could have pulled it off with enough determination. There's this line in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, in "Heaven on Their Minds," where Judas sings: *if you strip away the myth from the man, you will see where we all soon will be*. That's what I should have done--consider him a not-so-bad RFC that I hardly knew rather than someone to die for.

"I'm sorry. How many times do I have to say it? I've got all night."

The clunk of footsteps coming downstairs, and then they round the corner. Angie's hair is already growing back in--a soft, purple-gray scalp, like the cloudy surface of a planet. Jane looks like she's slaughtered something, red up to her elbows, splatters all over her cheeks.

"You broke into my house," Jane says.

I almost laugh. Does she know how ridiculous that sounds? As if any one of us could break into the others' house. There's no private property for us. "You wouldn't let me in. You wouldn't talk to me."



“We have no interest in what you have to say.” Jane walks to my chair and raises her arms. She slips her fingers beneath Johnny and loosens his embrace.

“I have an interest,” says Angie. “A mild one.” As relieved as I am that Ryan’s out of the picture, I can’t help but think that Angie belongs down in the city, squatting with other punk kids, protesting whatever cause has caught her attention recently. When she’s angry, her voice gets extra clear, and sharp--but beautiful sharp, like a diamond. Not to mention that she looks gorgeous with her head held high--no makeup needed with the flush of conviction on her face. It’s pretty intimidating, though, when her conviction is directed at me. My shirt is damp, and I don’t think it’s because I’m too close to the ceiling light. “Why did you do it?” she asks.

Words are tough sometimes. I should have prepared a response before I came over, bullet points on index cards, like my half-a-semester on the debate team. “I don’t know. I didn’t mean to, and I’m sorry.”

“You did it because of a boy.” She pronounces *boy* the same way she’d pronounce *child molester* or *republican*.

“Sort of.” But it’s more complicated than that. I mean, yes--if George hadn’t convinced me, if it weren’t for his barely-kiss, I wouldn’t have gone with him to tell his mom. Honestly, it still doesn’t seem like it really happened. I remember it happening, but the whole thing’s gooey, like I was watching somebody else do it from a distance. And anyway, if I hadn’t told Mrs. Linden, I would have told somebody--most likely Angie and Jane. I wish I had. I can imagine their reactions. Angie would have lit up like a pinball machine at Slitherin’ Sam’s, shock and delight and curiosity rolling around her brain at top speed, *no effing way* the only words she can manage as she bounces in her seat. Jane would’ve played it a little cooler. *First you and George,*

*now Grace and Tina. She might giggle. All that pent-up sexual frustration must finally be getting to the RFCs.*

The muscles at the back of my throat clench. Crap. No crying. “Even if I hadn’t gone with him, George would have said something alone.” Would he have? I’ve rarely seen him intervene in anything. He always seems uncomfortable saying things that make other people unhappy. But he would have had to tell his mother eventually. “They were already doomed.”

“No fucking excuses. You outed Grace and now she’s screwed.”

“They’re all screwed,” adds Jane, picking at her red crusted fingernails. “The whole family.”

“Yeah, and I’m sorry about that.” It hurts when I breathe in. “I didn’t mean to. I didn’t know she was a lesbian. Or bi, I guess. I don’t know.”

“This is exactly why people stay in the closet. So many idiots out there.”

Great--now Angie’s pissed, and she’s on a soapbox. I can never get a word in when she pulls the soapbox out. It’s not like I disagree with her. I know better than to out people--when I’m thinking straight, at least. She can’t really believe I did this because I’m a secret bigot or something. If I were a homophobe, why would I ever be friends with *her*?

Angie’s eyes narrow, and she goes in for the kill. “I get that you’re all innocent, Mel. That’s your thing. But innocence isn’t a good excuse for cruelty.”

It’s sort of funny. It feels like Angie is looming above me, passing down judgment from on high, but I’m the one who’s still standing on a chair. I squat, then lower one leg at a time to the ground.

“You’re a coward,” says Jane. “Pathetic.”

It's probably not worth it to assure them that they cannot possibly make me feel worse than I already feel. I give Angie her mother's message, and I assure Jane that I'll replace the screen on my way out.

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Does it count as "suicidal thoughts" if I'm just considering all the ways I *could* kill myself, should the need arise? The train station's got it all. Suicide Station--ride the rails of your own demise. It's a playground of hazards, every parent's nightmare. People got those swings up and over the rafters somehow, and there are still tons of cords and wires laying around. I don't know how to make a noose offhand, but I could look it up on my phone. Bleeding might be quicker. There's plenty of shattered glass, and if I rooted through the junk on the floor, I could probably come up with some tetanus-laced rusty nails. If the cut doesn't get me, the disease will. Except that it won't, because I'm pretty sure I got a booster before I started high school. It's too bad I can't tie myself to the tracks, wait for the crush of a train like the helpless victim in a silent movie. Who'd save me? Jesus? George?

No trains here, not anymore. The only whistle's in my head, a constant, looping shrillness, hours and hours of it. My bones ache, my muscles are tight--feels like I've been stuffed in a coffin for days. Haven't cried yet. That might explain the tension.

I keep running down the list of who else I could have told. Steve and Tabitha, but they were dealing with enough already. Would've been way too awkward with Dad, and Mom probably just would have come up with some statistic about the incidence of homosexuality in American teenagers, or how psychiatrists no longer consider it a disorder or something. Or worse--she might have made some crack like, "that's nice, but I'm glad it wasn't you." Nurse or not, she's still Catholic, and I'm still her only hope for future grandkids.

I could have not told anyone, but honestly, I might have popped trying to keep that one in. And anyway, George saw it, too. Could I have convinced him not to tell? Maybe, if I'd been quicker on the draw. If I'd had the courage to plant a wet one right on his lips, instead of getting giddy over his weird hover-kiss thing. That might have distracted him. Or it might have made him run to mommy even sooner. If I broke the rules, he'd realize I was unsavable, rather than a heathen with a heart of gold.

I don't really want to kill myself. Part of me does, but there's this other part of me that can't. I've got this movie theater tucked into my heart--one of those ornate old palaces with balconies and red carpets, screen right up against the throbbing ventricle wall--and it shows only the most cheerful musical numbers on repeat. Judy Garland points one stockinged leg at a seductive angle and exhorts me to *come on, get happy!* Dick Van Dyke draws chalk-white smilies in the air with his fingertip and demands that I *put on a happy face!* That precocious redhead whose fictional name has erased her real one elbows me affectionately and assures me that *the sun'll come out tomorrow!* Betch'ur bottom dollar, Annie. I'm infested with optimism, and it's freaking annoying.

I sit on the carcass of a radiator wrenched from a nearby wall, try to make myself cry. You trampled all over your own principles. You picked a boy over a friend. You enabled homophobia. You destroyed an entire family. Your friends hate you. You deserve to be lonely and miserable.

But it's weird to cry if I'm getting exactly what I deserve. I'm not good at crying anyway--Annie and all that. When I do cry, it comes unexpectedly, a freak deluge when I'm cleaning my room or doing homework or changing a clotted tampon.

In *Godspell*, they never address what happens to Judas. He just disappears. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, he hangs. Then he comes back to sing “Superstar,” the grand finale, and he doesn’t seem repentant at all. *Every time I look at you I don’t understand why you let the things you did get so out of hand.* Maybe Judas is incapable of understanding because of his deadness--since he’s not alive, he can’t see everything that results from Jesus’ death. But that can’t be right, because later he questions why Jesus didn’t simply come to Earth during the modern era (the seventies, in this case), in order to use television and radio to spread his message. So wherever he does end up, in heaven or hell--with all the white-fringed gogo ladies, the movie seems to imply heaven--he must have the power to see across time. But that doesn’t make sense either. If he can see the future, then he should know how successful Jesus’ sacrifice was. And he *does* know. *Did you mean to die like that? Was that a mistake? Or did you know your message would be a record-breaker?*

It could be that Judas is just trying to sort out his own involvement in this thing. He must feel guilty for killing his friend--otherwise he wouldn’t have strung himself up. But if Jesus’ death was necessary for the salvation of humankind, then Judas should feel proud. He played an instrumental role in God’s plan, his betrayal almost equally as important as Jesus’ crucifixion. Almost, because Jesus probably could have found someone else to do the betraying if Judas had changed his mind last minute, or if he’d kissed the wrong guy by mistake, or if he’d had an untimely accident with a donkey cart.

I can understand why Judas would have been confused by all this. Despair and contentment don’t mix well together, and the frothy concoction must have caused chaos in his body.

Not that this has anything to do with me. Grace isn't Jesus and I'm not Judas. Her fall wouldn't have been a fall under most other circumstances, and it wasn't a sacrifice for some divine cause. I didn't help anyone--the opposite, really--and my actions weren't necessary. I made a selfish choice based solely on my own immediate (ridiculous) desires. I'm just a shitty person sitting in an abandoned train station. Nowhere to go but home, which is all I deserve, and more than I deserve.

## Chapter 9

I'm giving the world's most uncomfortable lap dance, squatting above his thighs, my black-and-red craft store feather boa limp around his neck. My skirt rides up, and his calloused fingers graze the fuzz on my knees that I missed while shaving. I always miss that spot. He's too scared to touch my skin, and I'm grateful for his fear. My smile is nowhere near as bawdy as it should be. It's more like the grin that's forced on you by the pricking and prying of dentists' tools.

*C'mere Jesus, I got somethin' to show ya!*

When I was a kid I used to love cherry slushies, the kind they sell at movies and at gas stations, the kind that tastes like cough medicine and turns your tongue an alarming red. For my eleventh birthday--and partially because he has his own sweet tooth--Dad bought a slushie machine for the bar. The metal box buzzed in a chilly vibration while the drink churned in its vat. I had three in a row, and that night I puked the stuff up all over my bed, foul puddles of it sloshing around me, white sheets ruined. Haven't had one since.

George Linden is my new cherry slushie. Not quite gag reflex-inducing, but whatever shine of his that dazzled me has rusted over. The same strong and straight brow that used to suggest intelligence now indicates a lack of thinking, his slow speech uttered in neanderthal grunts. The weird part is it's less about what *he* did. It's as though my own self-disgust altered my molecules, forced some hormonal shift that drenched my besotted heart and left me with only repulsion. I prefer to keep my distance from him now--from most people, but especially him--so I refuse to sit on him, my hips hovering just above his lap.

*Forswear thy foolish ways.*

From his front-and-center seat, Steve suggests, “maybe we ought to change the choreography here.”

No kidding. I nod--“maybe.”

It’s kind of funny how Steve decided I was going to be the slutty disciple--me, Melody O’Malley, the perpetually untouched. It was the first change he read off his clipboard this morning. The swift removal of the Royce clan may have cleansed the Joyful Noise ranks of vile sinners, but it also required recasting half the show. Somehow I got bumped up to Grace’s role, singing “Turn Back, O Man.” Jane’s taking over my solo--I can’t imagine she’s happy to be an understudy, especially for *me*. Patrick, the possibly-gay Linden (maybe it runs in the family?) is stepping into Reese’s role. He’s a bit immature to adequately convey both the dreamy adoration of John the Baptist and the angry gravity of Judas, but he’ll have to do. All this reshuffling, and only two days left to rehearse. It’s absurd, obviously, but after he announced the new parts, Steve made sure to remind us that “with God’s help, all things are possible.” Ever since Tabitha’s departure he’s become a lot more Jesusy, as though an absence of marital comfort has driven him to seek spiritual comfort. He strikes me as the type of guy who doesn’t know how to be alone.

Steve hops on stage, stands next to us. “You could just try bouncing up and down, with your hips, you know?” He wiggles stiffly, one hand behind his head and the other on his waist. “Like Gr--like she used to do when rehearsals started.”

That was a close one.

The oldest Lindens still have their parts, of course. George continues to be our Lord and Savior. Lillian’s been working on the high note of “Bless the Lord.” It’s progressed from a harsh croaking to a thin wail, sort of like the sound of the wind whipping past your ears when you’re driving on the highway with the windows rolled down. Her plan technically succeeded. The



Royces are now so completely reviled among the RFCs that even to say their names is implicitly forbidden, which creates some awkward religious maneuvering when it comes to Grace: “let’s all bow our heads and say...and pray,” or “God is infinite in his...mercy.” But despite her success, Lillian has encountered some unexpected consequences--namely, Tina’s back in the limelight. With Grace no longer there to fawn over, she’s become a living parable, the prodigal daughter, a real-world example of God’s forgiveness. “I was tempted down a dark path,” she explains to all the little ones who so quickly abandoned Lillian and returned to crowd at Tina’s superior feet. “But I was saved by my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, who cared enough about me to guide me back home. God’s love is truly awesome.” They applaud, sing cheesy worship songs.

George turns his head above my shoulder. “What am I supposed to do while she’s dancing over there?”

“Just watch her” is Steve’s best answer. “She’s putting on a show, so look interested, I guess.”

Look interested, I guess. Sounds like really compelling theater.

By “brothers in Christ,” Tina means literally George, and by “sisters in Christ,” she must mean me. First thing this morning, Steve had us rehearsing the opening number, “Prepare Ye.” Turns out our new John the Baptist has a bad case of vertigo, which kind of ruins Steve’s big idea of having him swing across the stage on a rope, Batman-style. The poor kid kept trying to climb to the platform, only to get stuck halfway up the ladder because he was shaking so much. Steve trudged up there again and again to stand behind him and help him back down. I was watching this pitiful cycle with interest--when was Steve going to realize that he’d just have to change the blocking?--when Tina sat demurely in the seat beside mine, tapped my knee, as if I hadn’t already noticed she was there. A small group straggled behind her in the aisle.

“I just wanted to say,” she whispered, “that I can’t thank you enough.” Then she issued this whopper of an apology: “Before this, I honestly thought you were an unbeliever. But God has humbled me.”

At first I had this half-formed impulse to deck her. Not that I know how to throw a punch. My reflexes aren’t really fast enough, either. The point is, I *wanted* to hit her, for her hypocrisy and her smugness, for making me a hypocrite, too. I wanted to hit her, until I noticed the panic flashing in her eyes, like someone was being held hostage back there. I realized that she doesn’t know what else to do.

I dismount George like a horse. He puts a sympathetic hand on my shoulder, the way a coach might to a Little League player who, by some clumsy work with the bat, has just lost his team the Big Game. “It’s okay. We’ll keep rehearsing.”

“You don’t get to decide what’s okay.”

I obviously didn’t deck him, but with the shock on his face, I may as well have. I wish he’d fall over.

Steve’s bobbing-apple head bounces between us. I suspect he’s got his eye on me. Doesn’t want me diminishing his cast any further with my colorful accusations. Don’t worry, Steve. I’m not looking to start a witch hunt. My convictions are apparently not all that strong either way. “Why don’t we move on to ‘By My Side,’” he says.

Shit. I have to sing Grace’s part in that one, too. Angie’s already dragging a stool center-stage. Steve signals whatever parent volunteer is in the booth today, and the lights fade to a frosty blue, the backdrop’s anonymous city skyline now overcast and wintry. This cue seems odd to me. “By My Side” may be slow, but it’s not hopeless. Tina smiles at me as she rubs Angie’s stubbly head. “For luck,” she says. Angie just tunes her strings.

If Angie and I were still friends, I'd ask her why she doesn't attack Tina for that humiliating and oblivious invasion of her personal space. She could cuss her out, at least. She could do it in Spanish--I'm sure the RFCs don't think Spanish is worth learning, unless they're going to be missionaries or something. If Angie and I were still friends, I'd bury her with the conspiracy theories I prefer to reality. I'd baselessly speculate that Tina planned this whole thing out from the beginning, that she went undercover queer to ruin the Royces once and for all. Angie would laugh with scorn, and then she'd scold me, remind me of the courage it takes to come out in a bigoted community. Because she's a way better person than I am.

"Mel, I want you to kneel in front of Angie--but cheat out. Tina, you stand behind her. George, you climb the tree stage right and watch from the lowest branch. You know, you're up above them because you're the Lord. It's different from what we had before, but I think it makes a nice tableau."

If there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that looking Angie in the eye would be a bad idea right now. How dare I? How pathetic would I be to beg forgiveness? Forgiveness which I have no business receiving. *It's not me you should be apologizing to*, she'd say. I'll look at her if Steve tells me to--then I can argue that I had no choice. In the meantime, I'll stare at my own funhouse reflection in the polished curve of her guitar.

*Where are you going? Where are you going? Can you take me with you? For my hand is cold and needs warmth. Where are you going?*

When I come in with Grace's harmony, it sounds totally awkward, like I've stolen some intricate scientific instrument that I have no freaking clue how to use. The cops catch up to me before long--Steve cuts us off. "Mel, have you warmed up today?"

That awful? "I was *just* singing 'Turn Back, O Man.'"

“Right. Maybe try...” Ha. What would Tabitha say? “Singing from your diaphragm.”

Nice try. He must miss her.

We give the song another go. I try to be peppier this time, but pep hasn’t been my strength these days. Last night I was so off that Dad tried to sneak me some coffee after dinner. You know it’s bad when your parents think your caffeine levels are too low.

Despite my best efforts--best efforts under the circumstances, anyway--nothing improves. Tina and Angie might be very different people, but their singing voices are forged from the same metal, flexible and graceful, a silver necklace chain, whereas my voice is more like an anvil where they forge the metal--on key, but blunt. Not a lot of variety.

“Let’s try that again,” says Steve in a tone that suggests even being trapped in a corporate cubicle would be better than this.

Again! Let’s do it again, because we can. Why are the things you *can* redo always the things that won’t make a difference?

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“I’m so excited for you.” Mom lets her fork clatter onto her plate of microwaved fettuccine alfredo. The cheese hasn’t melted all the way, and unappetizing clumps of it rest in the stiff nest of noodles.

“Excited is the last thing you should be.”

Mom’s been working crazy shifts the past few days so she can make it to opening night. This is the first she’s heard of my *Godspell* casting upgrade. She certainly sees it as an upgrade, anyway.

“When did this whole pessimistic teenager thing start? I thought we were going to escape that phase.”

“Sorry to let you down.” I chew with my mouth open to emphasize the point.

I should have expected this response. I’m terrible at explaining myself, and Mom only ever half-listens. Which is weird, because she cares--cares so much that it’s more irritating than anything else. I wish we could just settle into a comfortable future of talking past each other. One of us would feel obligated to call the other once a month to catch up. She’d send a card on my birthday, and I’d send her one on Mother’s Day. I’d come home for Christmas, and that would be that.

“But you haven’t let me down at all.” Her hands form a square before her face, and she peers at me through her makeshift lens, the parody of a visionary film director. “My baby’s going to be a star. You’ve got a lead part. What’s not to be excited about?”

“The means to the freaking end.” I shove my plate to the center of the counter, drop my napkin on top of the noodles. I try to muster some of Tabitha’s fierceness, but I think I missed out on the fierce gene. “It’s stupid that they kicked out Grace’s entire family, just because she kissed a girl. It’s not okay.”

“She broke the rules.” I love how morals and justice no longer apply when it comes to one’s own offspring. If I murdered someone, Mom would probably try to convince me--black phone pressed to her ear at the prison visiting window--that the victim had it coming.

“Tina broke the rules, too, and somehow she’s still in the show.”

Mom smirks her *silly kid* smirk. It’s not exclusive to me--Dad gets it a lot, too. Especially on nights like these, when he comes home late after tinkering with equipment for hours and hours, a job he could do more effectively in the morning when he’s fresh. “Fine,” she says. “It’s not fair. Bigotry shouldn’t be in the rules. But sometimes you just have to accept your blessings, however they come. Think of how this will boost your college applications.”

“Is college all you ever think about?”

I thought the mouth-open chewing would set her off, but at least I got there eventually. She’s too frustrated to notice that her elbows are on the table--normally an unforgivable breach of etiquette. “Yes. I think about it because *you* refuse to care about your own future.”

“I’m sixteen years old. Did you care about your future when you were sixteen? Or were you too preoccupied with dreamy Derek Peterson?”

Well she certainly wasn’t expecting that. She shrinks back in her chair, like maybe she’s afraid of me. “Derek Peterson?”

“You should have hidden your diaries better.” I wasn’t planning on revealing my secret--her secret--at this point, but I’m thrilled now that I have. “Or at least found a better lock. All it takes is a bobby pin.”

It’s like I just downed a shot of espresso, my body all jittery and hot. Screw moody silence--I want to go on a freaking tirade, let it all out. But where to begin? “You cared way more about Derek Peterson than you cared about your studies. A C- in chemistry? I’m surprised they even let you into nursing school.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I--”

No way. Not while I’m on a roll. “Whatever happened to Derek, anyway? I could probably find out for you--most people are only a quick internet search away. Or maybe you’ve already searched for him? If the diary’s any indication, you were pretty obsessed. Way more obsessed than you were with Dad. Why do you even bother telling people you were high school sweethearts? Just because it’s a good story?”

“Stop it, Mel. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong with me.” My lungs are burning, like I’ve been running for miles. I think I’ve forgotten to breathe. “It’s bullshit that I have Grace’s role. And don’t talk to me about college again.”

A cheerful tune peals around us--it takes both of us a moment to recognize it as the doorbell. “Dammit,” Mom says. “Your father must have locked himself out again.” She shoves herself from her chair, and by the time I blink she’s out of there.

Of course. This is the only win I’ve had all week, and my triumphant exit is ruined by the effing doorbell. I decide to bolt to my bedroom--I’m done talking to everyone for the evening, including Dad--but when I leap across the hallway to get to the staircase, I hear a voice that is distinctly *not* my father’s say my name. A line from *Godspell* floats through my head as I back up, from the part where Jesus is teaching his disciples to turn the other cheek: *Slowly I turn, step by step, inch by inch...*

And there he is: Jesus is taking off his shoes, setting them next to the oversized vase filled with decorative sticks that adults always put in their homes to prove that they make enough money to own useless things. Mom’s holding out her hand, offering to take his jean jacket. As he balances on one leg, his gaze isn’t on me, but rather on the family portrait we sat for in Our Lady of Sorrows’ church narthex when I was in the fifth grade. I’ve begged Mom to take it down for years--the photo was taken at the height of my awkward stage, my mouth barred with neon-banded braces and my temples splotted with early acne.

“George,” I say. I can’t really think of anything else to say just yet.

Mom says, “I’ve heard so much about you.” Not from me, she hasn’t. But I don’t know--she might have eavesdropped on the Disco Jesus Project or something.

“My parents are waiting outside,” says George, answering a question that nobody asked. He wobbles during his struggle with the second shoe, attempting to shove it off with his right toes instead of untying the laces. As soon as he manages it, he looks at me--he still hasn’t handed Mom his coat. “Is your father home?”

“No,” Mom cuts in. “He’s still at work.” Normally I’d expect a polite *is there anything we can help you with?* out of her, but the unexpected visitor seems to have rattled her a bit. At least we have that in common.

George is slow to respond--apparently he can’t fathom the idea of a family not eating dinner together. “Well,” he starts, “it’s more traditional to ask the father.”

Oh God. Mom glares at me--I’ve done something wrong, made some kind of mess, but she can’t quite figure out what it is. “That’s not how we do things in this household,” she says. “Whatever you wanted to ask Mr. O’Malley, you can ask me.”

“I’d rather wait, ma’am. This is very--”

“Nope.” I stride forward, try to regain the momentum I’d had only a few minutes earlier, without much luck. I grab his wrist, but that feels too intimate, so I drop it. I cast a meaningful glance at Mom over my shoulder--*go away!*--but she either doesn’t get the message or refuses to get it.

I turn back to George, stare right into his eyes, which are wide and unseeing, like a doll’s. “You never asked me,” I say.

A beat or two later, he laughs, a sputtering chuckle, like he just got the joke. “You’re right. How could I have missed that?” He goes for my hand, but I twitch it away.

“You’re not listening.” Is he not listening, or am I not saying? I’m not great at saying anything--or I guess I’m great at saying the wrong things. Let’s try not to botch this one, too. “I



don't want to court you, George. It wouldn't work. With college and stuff." Hope that doesn't get an *I told you so* out of Mom later.

Another long pause while he processes, then: "If you want to study"--why did I think he'd absorb that information?--"we could always wait until--"

"I'm sorry, but I don't want to get some token degree that I'll never use because I'm following you around, being a good little pastor's wife. I'm not that person."

Shit. That came out meaner than I wanted it to. I've disappointed enough people in my life to know what it looks like--chin pulled to the floor, a tugging at their throat, one big breath to deal with the loss of their expectations. But George's features drop even lower, his shoulders sagging like they're laden with heavy cargo, his knees unable to stay still beneath the legs of his overalls. He leans against the cool glass of the front door like he's broken. Devastated. Dejected. His expression is pure Eeyore (there is something vaguely donkey-ish about his face, now that I think about it). I say "I'm sorry" again, but it doesn't make a difference.

Mom's usual manners finally kick back in, probably out of pure confusion. "Can I get you something? Glass of water? Or--"

"No thank you, ma'am." He steadies himself, slips his toes inside his shoes, stomping down the backs with his heels. "You're not who I thought you were, Mel."

"Yeah, I know. I just said that." Not the most graceful response, but I can't bring myself to care. Too many mood swings for one day. On his way out the door, George nods his typical nod--I might as well have been inquiring after his health, or complementing his singing voice.

This should make for an interesting production. Is it weird to wish that he'd do something Angie-level dramatic? He'd look terrible with a shaved head, but there are plenty of other expressions of grief. He could declare his undying love for someone else he barely knows, or

announce that God has called him to minister to poor natives on some tiny, nameless island in the middle of the Pacific. Better yet, he could quit the show, or demand my removal from it--it's me or her, that sort of thing.

At any rate, I don't have the desire to do anything Angie-level dramatic. Which is weird. A week ago I would have had that desire. I still wouldn't have done anything, of course, but I would have thought about it. Thought about it a lot, probably.

Mom pushes aside the curtain, watches as the Lindens' car backs out of the driveway, narrowly missing our mailbox. "What the hell was that?"

"Nothing you need to know about."

I'm halfway up the stairs when she shouts my name--my whole name, "Melody O'Malley!," like it's a swear word. Her voice is hoarse, and there's an uncomfortable wavering on the "o" that makes me stop. But when I crouch and peer at her through the bars of the railing, she only stares at me like she's been tricked, like she asked for her daughter and ended up with some stranger. It kind of freaks me out. Without the recognition in her expression, she looks less like my mom, too.

"I'm going to bed," I say. "Love you." But even the affection can't shake her out of it. She's disgusted, she'd be happier to get rid of me--so I bound up the stairs, two at a time, and oblige.

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In the dream, everything is normal. Not normal as in how-it-always-is--one person's normal is another person's bizarre--but normal as in average, plain, steady. The kind of normal that many would find boring. In the dream, I'm on a date with George--but it must not really be George, because there are no chaperones in sight. We're seated across from each other in a booth

at some generic chain restaurant--Olive Garden, I think, because he insists that I take the last breadstick. And I do. I pick it up, extra oily from sitting so long at the bottom of the basket, and chomp down half of it. "Too salty," I say, and hand him the remains.

Dream-George is a little dressed up, khakis and a soft, pumpkin-colored v-neck sweater. I know it's soft because he spills something red on his sleeve, and I dip my napkin into my glass of ice water to clean it before it stains. He has on real shoes for once, too--nice, leather ones, like he works in an office. The only other thing indicating that this is a date and not just a friendly dinner is the playful knocking of our knees beneath the table. We split a small bowl of lemon sherbet for dessert. I look at my watch--apparently my unconscious self wears watches--and say, "I have to go. My parents want me home by nine." They must not really be my parents, either--I haven't had a set curfew for years.

Dream-George kisses the top of my hand, like I'm a fairy-tale princess. I can feel myself blushing as I say goodnight. The evening is cool when I step into the parking lot, and the gray-white fluorescent lights make it seem as though moonbeams are as bright as the sun. I take out my phone to text Angie and Jane, to gush over how well the date went, to tell them every minute detail--how cute it was that he couldn't pronounce the Italian words correctly, how embarrassed he was when he tried to pay the bill but didn't have enough money for tip, how he apologized a dozen times as I flattened a few creased dollars that had been floating around in my purse and placed them near the salt and pepper shakers. I want them to tease me, in a good way. *Sounds like quite the knight in shining armor. When's the wedding?* I want them to be jealous, slightly. *You're so lucky to have such a sweet guy.* But as soon as I begin typing, the battery dies. "Shoot," I say to no one. "Now I need a new charger."

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Opening morning of opening night, the sky is a pinky red with particles dusted through it, like I knocked over my blush compact and spilled it across the clouds. I alternate my gaze between the bedroom window and the mirror while I cake on sticky stage makeup. It takes three tries to get the eyeliner right, black blots in the folds of my lids. My face and the sky morph simultaneously, but in opposite ways: my face hardens into a matte, basketball-orange mask, while the sky rolls and tumbles and shifts and melts. It glows the way Christmas lights do beneath snow.

Opening morning of opening night--opening afternoon, really. The show's at 2 p.m., an indisputably family-friendly hour. After all, it's not just relatives who come to these things. We get Sunday School groups pleased by the religious content, Girl Scout troops looking to add a drama patch to the accomplishments on their vests. Joyful Noise has a reputation: quality productions that include nothing a parent could possibly complain about.

"Melly!" Dad's call slides up the bannister and around the corner into my room. "We've got to go."

That time already? I know that standing up is not impossible. Getting out of bed seemed impossible, but after hitting the snooze button twice, I successfully kicked off the covers. Brushing my teeth seemed impossible, too, but somehow I managed to squeeze a boogery glob of minty paste out of the folded-over tube onto the bristles. I could stand up and walk downstairs, but I'd have to get out of my fancy ergonomic desk chair, which is *specifically designed* to be pleasant to sit in, not to mention good for the spine.

It's obviously not the desk chair. It's dread--full on, bile-inducing, headachey dread. This show is going to be shitty, but more immediately, talking to Mom is going to be shitty. I grip the railing while I descend the stairs. It's like heading into a haunted house, but instead of ghouls and

shrieks and chainsaws, it's just my mom reminding me that I'm the most ungrateful child on the planet, that she didn't raise me this way, that I basically deserve to be disowned and banished to some distant relative's until I learn how not to be a terrible person. Or worse--she stares at me, hardly moving, silently guilt-tripping me, and she'll never disown me or send me away because she knows it would be a relief. A haunted house with no exit--except college, I guess. It'd be a clever way of tricking me into doing what she wants.

But when I get to the kitchen, Mom's not there. Only Dad, struggling to get his nails beneath the plastic wrapping on a box of granola bars.

"I'll get it," I say. Dad lets me take the box from him way too easy--he's not the type to give up on stuff, even if it'd be better to give up on it, or to let someone else do it. I think my heavy makeup spooked him for a second. Thought some clownish intruder had come to lend a hand.

The granola bars aren't unusual. It's not like I have stage fright, but a giant breakfast doesn't sit well with me on show days. Always feels like undigested clumps are plugging up my intestines, refusing to move, weighing me down while I dance. Better a granola bar now and a more substantial meal between performances, after I've survived a few bouts of lights and applause. But it is weird that Mom's not giving me the granola bar. She never cooks elaborate breakfasts, but the fact that she's not here to at least oversee my nourishment seems particularly unforgiving.

I remove two bars, one chocolate-chip and one apple-cinnamon. I sacrifice the chocolate-chip for Dad. "Where's Mom?"

"In the car already." He seems intent on chewing his breakfast into the smallest bits possible, his gaze running down his nose, wary eyes reflected in the peeled-back foil.

Uncomfortable with Mom, or with me? Maybe both. Teenage girls, family strife--must be overwhelming for the poor guy. With his mouth full: "We're running late."

I glance at the stove clock. "Yeah--two minutes."

"We shouldn't keep your mother waiting."

When we enter the garage, Mom is climbing into the backseat of the Buick. What's with the sudden desire to let me ride shotgun? Oh God--what if Dad really didn't know about the diary, Derek Peterson? Maybe they got into a fight. That'd be the freaking cherry on top of this week: I ruin a family's life, alienate everyone I love, break a heart or two, and cause my parents' divorce. I can just see it, years down the road, reclining on the fainting couch in some pompous therapist's office, all dark wood bookshelves and rich fabrics. *It's never the child's fault*, he insists in an infuriatingly calm tone. And no matter how much I protest, I can't convince him that it really, really is.

I lower myself into the front seat with caution, afraid that it's rigged--not with a bomb, obviously, but with something? Whoopee cushion? Or that it's a trick, like she wants me to insist that she sit in front and now she's going to take this as further evidence of my bad attitude. But all is quiet. After a few tries, Dad starts the engine, and we glide down the driveway. No one's saying anything, which is creeping me out, so I reach to turn on the radio--when something bloody blossoms in the rearview mirror.

It's a bouquet of roses, the cheap kind you see in grocery store check-out lines on Valentine's Day, with a netting of miniature white blossoms stretching between the deep red swirls. "We know you're supposed to get them after the show," Mom says, poking my shoulder with their stems, "but with everything that's been going on lately, we thought you might want them now."

“You’re going to do great,” Dad says while he maneuvers the wheel.

I take the bouquet, plastic crinkling beneath my fingers. I hate roses--they’re so cheesy. Around the time Angie and Jane and I first became Angie and Jane and I, we were talking about weddings--one of those bridal shows was on TV, I think--and we all decided against roses at our future nuptials. Jane wanted sunflowers because of Van Gogh, and Angie wanted bleeding hearts, because they have to be the most badass flower that nature has ever produced. (Pretty sure Angie’s against marriage now, though, so I guess that plan’s out the window.) I chose irises, because they’re my mom’s favorite. They were the only flower that bloomed in her short-lived garden before everything died.

Now would clearly be a bad time to bring up my floral preferences--I still can’t tell whether Mom’s being sincere, or whether she’s trying to lull me before she strikes. “Thanks,” I say. “They’ll need water, though.”

“I brought a cup,” she replies. “I can fill it when we get there. Won’t be too hot to leave them in the car.” She rakes my hair, which for once in my theater career I don’t have to style in any particular way--no bobby pins, no hairspray. One time, for Joyful Noise’s production of *A Little Princess*, I needed Victorian-era banana curls. Mom helped me clip foam rollers into my hair the night before each performance, and I had to sleep like that. Thankfully, hippies are supposed to sport a long, tangled mess. I’ve been growing it out all summer, and it reaches to my elbows.

I don’t tell her to stop, but after a minute she tugs her hand away like a child who’s been caught picking her nose. “I’m glad you read my diary.”

A delicate film shatters between my ribs. “I’m sorry I--”

“Don’t apologize.” Her hands fold in her lap, and she examines her cuticles. “I was going to give it to you someday. That’s why I saved it. Your wedding, maybe.”

Dad twists his head toward the backseat, a grin on his face. “Or on your deathbed. That’d probably be less embarrassing, huh?” I nearly elbow him for joking around, but Mom snorts.

“Probably so. But anyway.” She slips one hand beneath the headrest and gently pinches the back of my neck, like a lion gumming at her cub. “I think it’s better that you read it now. I’m not the best at giving advice, but you’re bright enough to get some life lessons out of it.”

Not a divorce, then. But at the moment, ruining a nice surprise seems just as awful. How many other times have I thwarted her attempts to be good to me? I can think of a few obvious ones, right off the top of my head, but I’m sure there are plenty of others that I’ve forgotten, or didn’t care enough to recognize. I can vaguely feel a warm wetness on my cheek, but the thick layers of my orange exo-skeleton stifle most of the sensation. Mom tells me I’m going to ruin my makeup, but she’s wrong. This stuff is made to withstand the melting beams of spotlights, salty flows of sweat, the choreographed embraces of fellow actors. It’s indestructible.

“Derek Peterson.” Dad laughs his name. “Whatever happened to that guy?”

“No clue,” Mom replies. “You’re the only person from high school I bothered to keep in touch with.”

“Glad I made the cut.”

If the wetness on my face ever did materialize into actual tears, the tears stop immediately when we pull into the church parking lot. The car stops, too, but not in a spot--dead in the middle of the center aisle, where it idles behind a line of other idling cars, all brought to a sluggish crawl by the sight that is no less hideous considering that we first glimpse it through a line of other people’s windshields.



A red explosion--posters plastered over all the windows of Forever Risen's lobby. Now I know what Jane and Angie were up to when I burglarized Jane's house. The cartoons that I originally saw in Jane's spiral notebook have grown from a joke into something huge and angry and menacing. On detective shows, they always use blood spatter patterns on the walls to determine where people and objects were standing at the grisly crime scenes. That's what Jane's posters remind me of. It seems like she placed large stencils of the drawings against the boards, dumped buckets of red paint on top, and then peeled the stencils away, so that the figures themselves are defined in stark white against a savage, scabby backdrop. If it didn't freak me out so much, I'd admire the technique.

The posters are stacked floor to ceiling, not a crack between them. If I squint and blur my vision, it resembles a slice of skin pulled away from the body of an enormous creature, revealing the pulpy mass of muscle and veins beneath. Aside from the cartoons I've already seen--the pained face of the dying cow is in the lower right corner, Tina and George's incestuous lip-lock left of center--there's a new one, which stretches across two posters and spans the main doors. It depicts the Royce children in a sloping row, in order of age, holding hands. Conveniently in order of height, too. That might be artistic license--I can't remember whether Evan is taller than Amanda or vice-versa. Either way, it's like the illustration from some especially macabre fairy tale, back when fairy tales were supposed to frighten children instead of entertaining them. Below the long line of siblings, it reads, in all-capital block letters, LOVE THY NEIGHBOR.

Dad finally snags a space. I'm hoping they somehow didn't notice--distracted by family drama, maybe? Or if they noticed, I'm hoping it's one of those things where parents refuse to see what's in front of them, like how they ignore sex scenes on TV when I'm in the room.

Dad climbs out and opens the door for me. “Didn’t you say *Godspell* was supposed to be funny?”

Crap. “Yeah--not sure what all this is about. Could be ironic, I guess?”

Mom’s staring at the doors in much the same way she stared at the cinema marquis the first time she dropped me off at an R-rated movie--like this building she’s seen a hundred times has become untrustworthy overnight. “You sure you’re going to be okay?”

“As long as I don’t fall off the stage or something.”

Good--jokes appear to put them at ease. “Okay,” says Dad, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “We’re going to Marty’s.” It’s this fast food joint where they always kill time before my shows. When they hug me after curtain call, their breath smells like grilled onions and dill pickles and grease. “Break a leg, Melly.”

“I’ll do my best. Love you guys.”

Inside the lobby, it’s a total mess. Taking advantage of the lack of supervision, a group of babies are racing the length of the building, vroom-vrooming the engines in their throats, slamming the weakest competitors into walls and ignoring the injured wails that follow. Most of the older kids are either running through their hastily-learned lines, highlighted sheaves of paper scattered on the tile floor, or else they’re tripping through their new choreography, uneven rows box-stepping in different directions--casualties of the great reshuffling. A few people are digging into the snacks that were meant to be eaten between performances--orange cheese puff fingers licked clean, oily potato chip fingers wiped on the back pockets of jeans. One baby, so small I’m surprised he’s even old enough to be in the cast, has already shoved half a chocolate bar into his mouth, thick brown smears all over his lips and cheeks. Last year my Sacraments class textbook

had a picture of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* on the cover. The whole scene reminds me of the hell section of that painting--buggy eyes and open mouths and hectic flailing.

Jane and Angie are nowhere I can see. Maybe they've slipped away already, graffiti bandits in the night, ditching the show in protest. Jonah Linden's tantrum, however, indicates otherwise. He's barreling my direction, huffing like a bull, and I'm the world's worst matador, untrained and capeless.

"Where are your friends?" More red things: his jowly head and flopping tongue. "Don't lie. Lillian saw them finishing up their disgusting prank."

I guess rejecting his son hasn't exactly endeared the man to me. I try to back away, and I nearly trip over some kid who's curled up on the doormat to take a nap. "I get that you're upset."

"Upset is an understatement."

At the far end of the lobby, Beckah Linden is scratching at the edges of one of the posters, trying to remove it. It seems that Jane skipped tape altogether and went straight for glue. I remember that during her freshman year art class, she spent weeks concocting a special formula to hold together the disparate pieces of a sculpture that her teacher warned her was impossible to construct. Mrs. Linden squeaks an "ouch!" and starts sucking on her thumb. I almost pity her. It's going to take a while.

Steve slides into the room from a side door--looks like he's been running. As soon as he gets to Mr. Linden, his hands drop to his knees, and he has to catch his breath before he reports: "they're not in any of the offices."

Luckily for me, Mr. Linden turns his rage on Steve instead. "Lillian saw them go that way. Are you calling my daughter a liar?"

"Of course not, but--"

“They’ve got to be somewhere, and when you find them, I want them off the premises entirely. I wanted those girls gone after their wicked behavior at the Lock-In, but we gave them another chance--at your insistence.”

Steve raises his palms in a defensive gesture. “At my *wife’s* insistence.” I didn’t think that guy could get any more pathetic, but clearly I was wrong.

“What does it matter? Those little heathens vandalized my property.” He wipes his hands over his face before correcting himself. “The *Lord’s* property. Kicking them out is merciful. I should be pressing charges.”

“I’m sorry, but we can’t kick them out.” Steve places his hands on the man’s broad chest, doing his best to calm the flustered patriarch. “We don’t have understudies to fill their parts. If they go, the show goes, too. Do you want to explain that to all the families who bought tickets? Because I don’t.”

Linden heaves and sputters, but a comeback never materializes. Steve sighs, the pouch of his stomach expanding. “Forbid them from all future shows if you want, but this one--”

“I’m well aware. The show must go on.” Flecks of Linden’s spit dot Steve’s face. His tone is acrid, like he had a hearty dose of arsenic for breakfast. He swoops one arm past the surrounding carnival. “Get this under control.”

A cracking in the distance. Mrs. Linden has managed to strip the first of the posters from its window. The crusty white band that remains serves as a frame for the clouds that have congealed, their burning red doused into a weary gray.

I squeeze past an aspiring circus troupe of babies turning sloppy cartwheels in their matching tie-dye shirts and pick the poster up from the lobby floor. Kids have already trampled on it, shoe prints instructing an awkward dance step on the back.

“That needs to be tossed.” Mrs. Linden is insistent--she sounds a little scared.

No time to argue. I roll the artwork up and tuck it beneath my arm. “I’ll take care of it.”

And I mean that literally--I will *take care* of it. I’m not even totally sure why I swiped it. Well, one reason is so I can give it to Jane before they shred the rest. But normally I wouldn’t have had the reflexes to grab it so fast. Maybe it’s the bright red paint, along with the bright red tint of the day, war-like. It drums a revolution in my gut.

Here’s the thing: I think we gave up on the Disco Jesus Project too early. (I’m addressing the Angie and Jane inside my head now.) It was probably my fault, naysaying it, too afraid to make a scene. But what’s the point of theater if you don’t make a scene? Eff fear. I’m reviving the plan. It’s going to be even better now that I’m singing “Turn Back O Man” instead--more stage time to work with. I’ll wait until George is seated center stage, all lights on him, while I hijack the show. The surprised pianist will struggle to keep up with me, and will soon give up altogether while I sing King Herod’s song. *You’re a joke, you’re not the Lord. You are nothing but a fraud!* I’ll even softshoe it. I can fake a good time step.

On second thought, why let the show go on longer than it has to? Little Peter Linden too afraid to climb his platform? I’ll do it--scramble up there before he can stop me. I know how to use the harness--I was a clumsy, comic-relief Neverland fairy in last fall’s production of *Peter Pan*. I’ll secure it around my waist and launch myself into the spotlight’s white beam, hands pointed above my head like an Olympic diver. But the audience will never hear the hyper tambourines of “Prepare Ye.” In their place, I’ll give them my best imitation of the goofy, octave-spanning voices of Caiaphas and the other Pharisees as they decide Jesus’ grim fate: *Fools, you have no perception! The stakes we are gambling are frighteningly high. We must crush him*

*completely! So like John before him, this Jesus must die.* If Angie and Jane hear, maybe they can rush out and join me for the refrain: *Must die! Must die! This Jesus must die!*

The pre-plan plan: I'm going to find the real Jane and Angie. I'm going to give Jane back her poster, and I'm going to reveal the details of my scheme.

I'm not doing it to win them back. I don't care if they never forgive me. If Jane doesn't want her painting, that's fine. I'll put it up in my room, even frame it, right where that gaudy crucifix hangs. I'm doing this to ruin the RFCs. My mistakes raised them up, gave them life, and now I will destroy my creation--very much on purpose.

I make my way through the lobby, dodging the cast members who Steve is futilely attempting to herd into the backstage area. Though the doors don't open for another half hour, many audience members have arrived early. They mostly seem amused by the general confusion. Some of them are snapping pictures of Jane's masterpieces with their phones, even as Mrs. Linden scratches so relentlessly at the adhesive. A few people offer to help her, but she waves them off, shakes her head in a frantic *no*, as if working on it alone ensures that it will remain her problem and that no one else will see it.

I turn into the nearest hallway, where I find an obstacle course made of limbs. People are crawling on the floor and huddling in corners, fighting over the few outlets where they're plugging in curling irons and straighteners. Some are only now applying their makeup, wearing their fathers' old button-down shirts backwards as smocks. The air is clouded with puffs of translucent powder, and the chemical tang of hairspray burns my nostrils. They should have been ready forever ago, but there was no Tabitha to remind them.

At the very end of the hall, my toe catches on someone's thigh--"watch it!"--and I lurch forward, landing hard on my knees and right elbow. When I lift my head, I'm staring straight into

a dark classroom--though not dark enough to conceal the movement inside, a silhouette perched on one of the child-sized desks, leaning back while another figure approaches. Leaning back in fear? Delight, as a laugh whips through her spine? Bold words glow on the chalkboard at the front of the room: GOD IS LOVE. But the “love” has been partially erased.

I stand, slightly dizzy, and head to the door, hoping to find Angie and Jane--but that would be too easy. Instead, I find Grace Royce pressing a bouquet into Tina Linden’s hands. I guess the lobby must have been enough of a madhouse for Grace to get all the way down here unnoticed--our very own fugitive. Or maybe Tina helped her sneak in some other way. I only peek around the corner, stay behind Grace’s back and the wide cluster of flowers that blooms between the girls. It’s no store-bought arrangement--the thick pink cups of the tulips and the off-white daisies, all with their stems lopped off at different lengths, are clearly home-grown.

Tina raises one hand to Grace’s cheek. “You’re here.” Grace moves in for a kiss--but when her shoulder drops, I enter Tina’s line of sight. She shrieks, drops the bouquet. A few petals pop off and curl beneath the desk.

Tina’s gaping at me like I’m the Ghost of Christmas Past, and Present, and Future, and I just won’t quit haunting her, materializing at all the most inconvenient times, even though she learned her lesson ages ago. Given the circumstances, Grace is remarkably composed--although her expression does indicate some contempt, as if I’m a many-legged insect who had the nerve to scuttle across her path. She shields Tina with her body--doesn’t want her to be traumatized. It’s sweet. “Just because you got me kicked out of the cast doesn’t mean you can prevent me from seeing the show.” She flips a papery white rectangle in my face. “I’m a paying ticket-holder.

Now that I think about it, her hostility may have something to do with the grin pressing into the balls of my cheeks, forcing my mouth wider than even the grins required during the most

cheerful chorus numbers. I can see how this might be misinterpreted. But I can't help it. I'm giddy. "Break a leg," I say. "Tina, I mean. Break a leg."

Maybe I can dedicate my actions to Tina and Grace somehow. Shout their names before I take the plunge? I glance over my shoulder, work myself into the current of children moving swiftly to the basement. Though she doesn't say anything, Grace does not appear to be reassured. Can't blame her.

I press myself flat against the wall and take the stairs two at a time, accidentally whacking people with my rolled-up poster, until I find myself in the community hall, which doubles as our green room. Still beige, though, not green. Actually, some of the parent volunteers have set up a table with snacks, and the plastic tablecloth gives the walls a red cast. Kids swarm across the floor, plopping bags against the walls and pulling games and books from within. An old TV has been rolled into one corner so we can keep track of the show's progress, catch our cues. My eyes search from one corner to the other. I spot Angie's guitar leaning against the stacked chairs, but no Angie.

I run to my right, hurdle over a mop-turned-limbo stick that another group of kids is dancing under, and then I slam into someone, skull cracking against skull. If I keep this stuff up, I'll earn my first concussion. I focus through my dizziness and discover today's tattle-tale extraordinaire--Lillian Linden herself. She winces--probably from the pain, but it almost seems like she expects me to throttle her. I don't wait for her to recover. "Have you seen Angie and Jane?"

She shivers for a second before she realizes it was only a question. Her next reaction is to go full-on sanctimonious, her nose up so high it's like she's giving testimony to God himself. "Yes--I saw them vandalizing the building. I didn't know they'd become actual criminals."



No time for sarcastic retorts--she and everyone like her will get what's coming to them later. "Was that the last time you saw them?"

George plods up behind her, shoeless, frowning. Protecting his baby sister? When his run as Jesus is over, he could easily play a bumbling, small-town sheriff in some Western. "What do you want?"

Lillian links arms with her brother, but I hardly notice. The bump on her head is growing redder and redder. "She wants to know if we've seen her delinquent friends."

George is in a pickle. The problem is, I like him when he's in a pickle. Something about the way his features rearrange themselves when he's perplexed--wonky eyebrows, wrinkles in his nose that raise it a half-inch, a portion of his lower lip that disappears inside his mouth--really gets to me. It's like he's trying to think harder than anyone else has ever thought, and it's totally adorable. For a moment I forget my revenge, our disastrous near-engagement, my big mistake. I see only what I saw before--this simple, cute, good-natured boy. And while his pupils play a desperate game of tug-o-war between me and Lillian, I ache over what I have to do to his show. It's more painful than whatever beating I've taken from today's collisions.

"I think," he says. I guess that's a good sign. "I think I saw them heading towards the bathroom."

I want to hug him, but that would be a very stupid decision. "Thanks."

I turn around and force my way through the stampede of incoming children. Behind me I hear a distinct *oof*--I suspect poor George just took an elbow to the ribs. Wonder what Bible verse he'll use to justify helping me?

I hesitate for a moment before the bathroom, trace the white triangle hips of the stick figure with my gaze. It's the same bathroom where I found Laurel Royce the night of the Lock-

In, and as I sped toward it, I slipped back to that night, sickened and scared by the memory of red sludge floating in the toilet water. When I finally shove open the door with my shoulder, the sugary spice-rack scent of potpourri chokes me, and the fan hums louder than my own breath, challenging me to match its pace. I spot two sets of feet beneath a single stall door--the same stall where a bleeding woman insisted that all she needed was a change of clothes. I blink the thought away, remember to hope that they haven't locked themselves in.

A light push of my index finger reveals that I'm in luck. Angie is on her knees in front of the toilet, her bare arms thrust around the edge of the bowl, skin pressed against the dried urine splatters and moldy bathroom grime. Jane is squatting next to her, balancing with one hand on the toilet paper roll. Her other hand is petting Angie's scalp in long, steady strokes. The door bumps into Jane's knee as it creaks open, and she looks at me as if I'm the most inappropriate thing that could ever possibly enter a bathroom, like I was born Barbie doll smooth, no bodily functions, and my presence is merely taking up the space of more deserving people. "You really have some problems with privacy, don't you?"

I suppose barging into their stall wasn't the most polite thing I could have done, but I did it out of pure habit. We've spent our whole lives barging in on each other--I forgot I wasn't allowed to do it anymore. "What's the matter with her?" I gesture at Angie. "Sick?"

I didn't know it was possible to be knocked off one's feet by a sound, but the crisp thwack of the thunderclap is so loud that I fall backward, the corner of the paper towel dispenser jabbing right between my shoulder blades. The boom pommels my hyperactive, vengeful heart nearly unconscious, and pain flashes white instead of lightning. Of course--I'm such an idiot. Dad taught me the rhyme when I was just a kid, cruising the lakes with him on that stupid fishing

boat. I learned to recite it with a scratchy orange life vest tucked tight around my tiny neck: *Red sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky at morning, sailors take warning.* It's a freaking storm.

Angie quivers fast like the motor on that boat. She dry-heaves into the toilet.

Here's the thing: Angie's not afraid of storms "for some reason." For Some Reason is a dead giveaway--when somebody says that, they're really saying the exact opposite. They know what the reason is, but they don't want to tell you. Angie told me and Jane why she was afraid of storms only once. It was a story about being left alone.

Marco wasn't even born at the time, and Max was just a baby. But Angie wasn't much more than that, young enough that every new thing her parents bought her still had the prefix "big girl" attached to it--big girl bed, big girl cup, big girl undies. It wasn't one of those slow-moving systems, where you can hear the rumbling from miles away. It was the kind of storm where the thunder bangs loud enough to rattle the window glass, where the lightning strikes bright enough to mimic daylight. It was the first storm Angie could consciously remember, and it frightened her. She abandoned whatever she'd been playing with, climbed onto the loveseat, and buried her head between the worn cushions to muffle the noise. The cushions might have muffled her cries, too--maybe that's why her parents didn't go to her. Instead they both tended to their screaming newborn. In the hush between strikes, Angie could hear their footsteps pacing the hallway upstairs, cooing her brother's name. She was a big girl, so they left her to comfort herself.

The bathroom lights flicker, a timid response to whatever shining electrical wonder is happening outside. I drop Jane's poster, and it swoops beneath the sink, where it soaks up the discarded water from various handwashings. I throw myself at Angie, clasp my arms around her waist, try to blanket her. I sing:

*Try not to get worried, try not to turn on to problems that upset--*

Angie rears up and bashes me against the stall, which bends slightly with the sudden weight. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Seriously.” With a gentle touch, Jane moves Angie back into place. “Singing isn’t magically going to make it better.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, reaching for and rubbing the bruise that’s surely forming on my back. “We have never *not* sung songs to make things better. Music is basically our cure for everything.”

They can’t deny it. What about the time we blew out the speakers in Jane’s car blasting “Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better” after she lost that art prize to some pretentious dude from the next school district over? Or when we piled onto the roof of the driving range and bellowed “Defying Gravity” out across the fairway the day after our principal had the nerve to tell Angie that she had no future--all for a stupid dress code violation? Angie was the only one who could belt the high note.

“You can hate me if you want,” I say. “But you can’t go back and erase everything we’ve ever done together just because I was there.”

“We can do whatever we want,” Angie shouts into the stale water.

“Then so can I.” I shift closer to Angie, and she literally flinches. “I’m not going to touch you.” I start again.

*Try not to get worried, try not to turn on to problems that upset you. Don’t you know everything’s alright, yes, everything’s fine.*

Another crash clatters around us, ricochets off the tiles, rocks us together so that Jane ends up wedged between us, so tight I can feel the pulse in her chest. When we readjust, Jane joins me--though she's still suspicious, glaring at me like I might be poisonous.

*And we want you to sleep well tonight. Let the world turn without you tonight. Close your eyes, close your eyes and relax, think of nothing tonight.*

While I sing, I get this feeling that we might not recover. I mean, Angie will be fine. Once the rain lets up, she'll be good to go. But *we* might not recover. Even now, three friends in a bathroom stall is not what we are. I'm choosing to help Angie get through this because I love her, and they're choosing to let me, but their choice is different. They're choosing to let me help in the same way they might accept a tampon or a wad of toilet paper from a stranger in the next stall over. The same way Mrs. Royce accepted my help when she needed a change of clothes, because I happened to show up.

I'm not still not touching the other girls, but I'm very warm. I wonder if it's more than the storm, if Angie has a fever. She's rocking back and forth a bit.

The stall door swings open again, smashes into us. I turn to see Steve in shadow form, swathed in the black wardrobe of a stagehand, the microphone on his headset curving stiff before his lips. Tabitha was supposed to handle stage managing duties, but now he has no choice.

"There you are," he says, not particularly relieved. "Angie, Mel, you've got to get up there."

I stand and push him out of the stall, back him into the counter. Some frustrated noise comes out of me--I honestly think it's a snarl? But it doesn't seem to threaten the man as much as I'd like. He babbles on, completely oblivious. "It's clear she's having a rough time, but you guys are disciples. We can't do 'Prepare Ye' without you."

That's when the wails start up, somewhere above us, outside the building, spiraling loud, then soft, loud, then soft. I don't think I've ever heard tornado sirens for real--I only recognize them from the monthly, Tuesday-morning tests.

I point at the ceiling. "Tornado," I say. But my statement has no effect, like I'd spoken in a foreign language. Does he not know that tornadoes are dangerous? That everyone needs to come down to the basement? It's pretty basic stuff.

"I'm sorry," he says, "but you've got to suck it up and get on the stage."

The whole scenario is so ridiculous that I almost laugh in his face. The only thing stopping me is my sore back and sore arm--sore everything, really. I speak as slowly and calmly as I can, as if to a child on the verge of a tantrum. "Steve, we don't have to do anything. You do. You have to cancel the show."

Steve's losing it now, I can see it. This possibility--this necessity--hasn't ever occurred to him. Whatever faith had been sustaining him is collapsing in the fury of the storm. It's no wonder--he's lost so many other things. If he loses the show, he may as well lose his shiny, bald head, let it roll off his shoulders and settle in the drain. "But this is the only show."

"Right, but we can't--"

"Everyone is here."

"I know." I tentatively pat his back. How are you supposed to comfort adults? Especially when you don't want to? "We've all worked really hard. But even if we did come upstairs, it wouldn't work. Nobody knows their lines. There wasn't enough time. And the storm, too. People could get hurt. It's all gone wrong."

He's so blank his eyes might as well be covered in two black X's, like a dead cartoon. "I'm sorry," I say, and I almost mean it.

“You’re sorry,” he says, like it’s the worst thing I could have told him--worse than *I hate you* or *fuck you* or any threat. His skin goes all queasy, sweaty. I’m about to suggest he duck into the other stall when he swipes at me like a bug and exits the bathroom.

I peek back in at Angie and Jane. Jane’s still humming the song, but she stops whenever Angie spits yellowish globs into the toilet, asks her how she’s doing. I wonder why humans always ask each other how they’re doing when the answer is obviously not well.

I’m standing right in front of them, but it seems like I’m watching them from a great distance--like they’re on the stage of one of the big theaters downtown and I’m all the way in the last row of the second balcony. Like I can’t afford to get any closer. I decide it’s best to leave them, too, consciously keeping my footsteps quiet, though the weather would probably cover them anyway.

Back in the hallway, the kids who attend real schools are crouched along the walls, hands over their heads, just as they should be. I guess homeschoolers don’t have tornado drills. Some of the babies are crying, screaming red, and the few parent volunteers who stayed downstairs are subsumed by them. One woman in an ugly, oversized sweatshirt has six bodies squeezed to her chest at a time.

I tug one of them away from her--she doesn’t even notice. I wrap the little bundle in my arms--a girl, with three teeth missing from the mouth she can’t bring herself to close. She smashes her face into my shoulder and wipes snot all over my sleeve, but I don’t care. She’s frightened, unabashedly scared, and even though I feel bad for her, it’s kind of amazing. I can’t remember the last time I got to be unabashedly anything.

Echoing above our heads, Jonah Linden's deceptively unbothered voice makes a simple announcement: "Due to inclement weather, we're experiencing some technical difficulties. Unfortunately, we're going to have to cancel today's show."

Thank God for that--although a friendly "drive safe" wouldn't have hurt. Wonder how Steve convinced him? If he passed the blame onto me, I'm surprised Mr. Linden hasn't come to yell at me yet. Blah blah ungodly blah blah sabotage, whatever. Even if Steve did blame me, it doesn't matter. I doubt there are any more shows in my future.

It's funny--I thought more people would have been thanking God. That's generally Joyful Noise's thing. But there's no singing, no praying--not that I can see. The girl twists against me, caterwauls, too young to believe that God will fix everything, too young to know that bad tempests are survivable, determined to out-squall the storm until it backs down.



## CURRICULUM VITAE

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### Degrees

Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL  
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### Awards and Honors

Winter Student Writer Scholarship, *SCBWI*, 2015  
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### Teaching Experience

<b>Graduate Assistant</b>	<b>Aug. 2013 – May 2016</b>
University of Nevada, Las Vegas	Las Vegas, NV
Courses Taught: English Composition I, English Composition II, Introduction to Creative Writing	
Instructed students in the basics of English Composition based on lesson plans of my own design. Graded papers, created syllabi, and met with students individually to ensure their progress.	

<b>Writing Center Consultant</b>	<b>Aug. 2013 – Dec. 2013</b>
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**Publications**

“Radioactive Teeth,” *Paper Darts*, 2015

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