I can still feel a trace of his warm lips against mine as he slips away from me and fumbles for the door to his father’s van. I stay lying under the scratchy wool blanket on the backseat, wishing he’d stay. When he slides the door open, the ceiling light blinks on and exposes our faces to each other. His hair is rumpled. His brown eyes avoid mine.

“Thanks, Ellie. See you inside?”

I nod.

He slides the door shut and leaves me in the dark.

Thanks, Ellie.

I sit up and reach under my shirt to reclasp my bra as his shadow makes its way across the lawn and back to the house. He doesn’t turn around.
I find my own way to the door handle and slide the heavy door open again. When the light comes on, I see the crumpled-up wool blanket on the backseat. It’s covered with dog hair, and so is my shirt. I try to brush off the hairs, but they cling to the cotton. I climb out and adjust my clothes in the light, then slide the door shut. I lean against the cool metal and breathe in the clean night air.

Up at the house, indoor lights make the rooms look like they’re glowing. Party noises echo across the lawn. Through the large picture window in the living room, I see him standing with a group of guys. Someone hands him a beer. They throw their heads back, laughing. He joins them. Someone grabs his hand and smells it. He pulls his hand back, but the others try to grab and smell it, too.

I squeeze my legs together.

He pushes his friends away and walks to the window. His face is suddenly serious, looking out at the dark, not seeing me.

I slide my body along the side of the van and hide behind it just in case.

“Ellie?” Corinne’s footsteps hurry down the driveway. “Ellie?” she calls again.

“Over here,” I say quietly.
“There you are! I was worried when you didn’t come in with—Ellie? Are you OK?”

“I don’t feel so well,” I say, making my way to a nearby tree.

She follows. “Do you need to get sick?”

“I think so—” I am already bending over, retching.

Corinne instinctively pulls my hair back.

I retch and retch, but nothing comes out.

When I finally stop, Corinne helps me fix my hair and we find her car.

“You are the only person I know who can throw up without throwing anything up,” she says as she starts the engine.

“Jeez. How many drinks did you have, anyway?”

I shrug.

None.

“I keep telling you you’ve got to pace yourself.”

“I know,” I say quietly.

We drive a minute in silence.

“So . . .” She taps her fingers on the steering wheel. “How was it?”

I feel his hand in mine, leading me outside. See his brown eyes staring back at me, then closing as he leans in to kiss me.
“OK.”

“Just OK? But Josh is so cute! I nearly died of jealousy when I saw you disappearing with him. Come on, give me some juice.”

I feel his warm, wet whisper in my ear.

Ellie. Oh, Ellie.

“It was nice at first.”

I lick my lips, remembering how his mouth felt pressed against mine. How his hands rubbed my back.

Your skin is so soft.

My stomach melted at his touch.

“So what happened?”

Let me touch you.

I feel his fingers reaching under my panties and pressing inside me.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Come on! Far? Farther? Or farthest?” She’s smiling as she concentrates on the road.

Thanks, Ellie.

I cross my legs.

“That’s between me and him,” I say.

“You never tell me anything! It’s not fair.”

I look out the window and watch the dark trees on the side of the road. My reflection in the glass stares back at me.
“Are you going to see him again?”

I turn away from my reflection and concentrate on the yellow lines disappearing into the blackness in front of us.

“No,” I say. “It was just a one-time thing.”
“So, was she totally into it?” Kyle asks.

“What do you think?” Josh smirks at us as if his new status has elevated him from virgin geek to ultrastud.

My best friend has officially become an asshole.

“What do you think?” Josh smirks at us as if his new status has elevated him from virgin geek to ultrastud.

My best friend has officially become an asshole.

“Dude, way to hook up on the first try!” Dave high-fives Josh, then gives me a sympathetic look, like “Too bad you’re still a loser, buddy.”

My second best friend has officially joined my best friend in the Asshole Club.

My hands close into fists. If they weren’t talking about Ellie, maybe I wouldn’t mind so much. Maybe that makes me an asshole, too.
“Easy come, easy go,” Josh says.

Dave laughs and elbows Josh. “Cum. Get it?”

They both crack up. Some other guys start to laugh, too.

The locker room is steamy from the showers and smells like a battle is going on between sweat, smelly feet, and wet soap. The soap is losing. I feel like I’m trapped in a lame locker room scene in some made-for-TV movie where all the guys are a bunch of stereotypical pricks.

“Told ya she was a sure thing,” Ben says as he sprays a cloud of deodorant under his arms.

“Yup, all you have to do is get her alone.” Kyle grins and closes his eyes, as if he’s remembering.

“Now we just have to find someone for Special Cay, here,” Dave says, like he’s so experienced. “Maybe you could hook up with her at the next party. She’s obviously not picky if she’d do it with these losers.”

They all laugh, even though the joke is about them. And Ellie. God, I can’t believe it. Ellie was with Ben? And Kyle? And Josh? I imagine how good it would feel to beat the crap out of all of them, but I’m obviously outnumbered. Some of them probably have more muscle in one arm than I have in my entire body.

“No, thanks,” I kind of mumble. I start shoving my stuff in my bag.
Dave shrugs and throws his backpack over his shoulder. “See you girls later.”

“Hey, wait up. Can you drop me off?” Josh grabs his bag. He struts after Dave in his new I’m-not-a-virgin-anymore walk.

The rest of the guys follow, leaving me alone in their stench.

I’ve had a crush on Ellie since first grade, when she gave me her red toy Porsche. The doors opened, and you could move the seats back and forth. I still have it on the top shelf of my bookcase behind the set of Narnia books my dad sent me for my sixth birthday. In the card, he promised we’d have a long visit some summer and he’d read the whole series to me. Four years later, I gave up waiting and read them myself.

I shake my head and pick up my bag. I should have known I had about as much of a chance with Ellie as I had of my dad actually fulfilling one of his promises. Why would she pick the pasty, scrawny guy who trips at the sight of her when she could have . . . anyone else?
“I thought he was different,” Ellie says quietly.

I have to lie down on my bed for this phone conversation. Judging from how it’s going so far, it’ll be hard not to suffocate myself with my pillow. Not to be insensitive, but this is like the fourth time this has happened, and it’s getting old. I should have known it would turn out like this. It always does. Ellie acts like hooking up is no big deal, then a few days later calls me in tears.

“How would you know if he was different?” I ask. “You hooked up with him as soon as he smiled at you.”

“That’s not what happened!”

“Then how did it happen?”
I want to tell her that from my point of view, it seems like all a guy has to do is give her a compliment and she’ll disappear with him to some back room.

But she’s really crying now.

“El, I’m sorry. I’m just trying to help you. You keep getting hurt.”

“He was so sweet to me at the party. He held my hand and acted like we were a couple! I thought maybe he really wanted more than just sex.”

“Then why didn’t you stop him when things started going too far?”

“Because I didn’t realize until after he left me!”

“Ellie! You could have asked first. That’s how it works!”

“How would you know?”

Right. She has me there. I’m not exactly the authority on sex. Not that she’s been any help in that department. I mean if I had sex, I’m sure I’d tell Ellie every detail. And to be honest? I had expected the same from her, which was a huge disappointment. But I’ve heard enough through my sister’s bedroom wall when my parents aren’t home to know that sex can involve talking. Ava’s number-one rule: “If you’re gonna be with a guy, you need to make sure right off the bat that you are the one calling the shots. You say what you want and what you don’t want. Period.” She’s been with her boyfriend for
two years. She must know what she’s talking about because that guy adores her. And like I said, judging from the noises they make, they are both having a good time.

But Ellie’s not the type of person to ever put herself first. It’s just not who she is.

I listen to her quiet crying and try to think of something to say that could possibly help. Poor Ellie has this romantic idea in her head that is just so fairy-tale, despite what keeps happening. It makes me want to cry.

“That bastard. I’m sorry, El. Has he called you?”

“No. He won’t.”

“Guys are jerks. You can’t trust any of them.”

“I thought he would be different,” Ellie tells me again. “But then he just left me there. He went back inside and —”

“And what?”
She’s crying again.

“What did he do?”

“Nothing,” she says, all quiet.

I don’t know why she gets into these messes. She’s supposed to be the innocent one. But look at us. I’m Miss Horny Forever Virgin and Ellie’s, well, not.

“Hey,” I say. “Want to meet somewhere? We could go to the mall or something.”

“The park?”
“I’ll meet you there in twenty minutes,” I tell her. “At the swings. And Ellie? Cheer up. It’s his loss. I mean it.”

I hang up and grab a wrinkled sweatshirt from the end of my bed. I put on my baseball hat and pull it down low. When I check myself in the mirror, I notice the strip of black-and-white photos Ellie and I took in a photo booth at the beginning of the summer. I’m sticking out my tongue and crossing my eyes. Ellie’s laughing because she can’t manage to cross her own eyes without putting her finger in front of her nose. We laughed so hard that day. School had just gotten out, and we’d gone to the beach to celebrate our freedom. We hung out at the arcade and ate French fries and bought cheap matching earrings from a vendor on the boardwalk.

I step closer and look again at our happy faces. I’d give anything for us to feel like that again.
“Hand me that wrench, bud.”

My dad’s huge callused hand reaches out from under the hood of his van. The lines in his palm are black with grease.

“I wonder if the rings are burned out. Didn’t I just change the oil two weeks ago?”

I shrug, then remember he can’t see me.

“Why don’t you make yourself useful and pull out the backseat for me. I told Mikey I’d pick up the speakers for the show tonight.”

I roll my eyes and head for the back of the van. My dad playing at the local Legion Club with a bunch of his old high-school buddies doesn’t actually count as a “show” in my book, but whatever.
I open the back of the van and reach for the locks to unhitch the backseat. When I tip the seat back to pull it out, Rosie’s rumpled blanket slides across my arms.

I swear I smell Ellie’s perfume on it.

I cringe at the memory and try to shake it out of my head. I toss the blanket over my shoulder and finish pulling the seat out. As I carry the seat to the back wall of the garage, the blanket slips to the floor. I trip on it and drop the seat.

“Nice play, Shakespeare,” my dad says, poking his head out from under the hood of the van.

My dad the comedian. I lean the seat against the wall, then pick up the blanket. The memory flashes in front of me again. I throw the blanket back in the van and slam the door, but it’s too late. I’ve seen her. The way she looked at me as I left her, as if she wanted something. I don’t know what. Or maybe I do. But I was so embarrassed by the whole thing, I just wanted to get the hell out of there.

All the guys said how great it would be. How into it Ellie was. No strings, just a good time. They never mentioned how she’d look after. Maybe they didn’t notice.

My dad slams the hood of the van. “Come on, I need a beer.”

I follow his hulky body through the garage and into the kitchen. Rosie, our mangy-looking mutt that my dad says is a
black Lab, drags her fat body up off the garage floor and follows us.

If my mom was home, no way would Dad be slinging one back yet. Not before five o’clock. That’s Mom’s rule. But she’s at work, as usual. And when there’s no Mom, there’re no rules.

My dad reaches into the fridge and pulls out two cans, handing one to me.

“To Saturdays,” he says, touching his can to mine.

The beer is cold in my hand. I crack it open and take a long swig as my dad tilts his own head back and lets the beer empty down his throat. His Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he swallows.

When the phone rings, my dad answers in his friendly manner. “Yeah?” He turns his back to me and looks out the window.

“Mikey! How’s it goin’? You ready for the gig tonight? Katie did forgive you for getting home so late last time, right?” He pauses and takes another swig while he listens to Mike—that’s his best friend, and Dave’s dad. They’ve known each other since grade school, just like me and Dave. Our moms, too.

This is the usual routine. Our dads call each other the morning of “the show” and reminisce about last week’s
performance. Then they talk about their “playlist” like they are a real band and like the list actually changes from week to week. Then they complain about our moms and how they give them such a hard time about staying out too late and drinking too much.

“Well, you’ll just have to put your foot down!” my dad says.

Clearly, Dave’s mom hasn’t quite forgiven his dad yet. I have to laugh at my dad’s advice. Like he ever stands up to my mom. Actually, they pretty much just ignore each other.

I take another long drink of my beer while my dad does his usual ramble with Mike. He laughs about something Mike says, then swigs. When he finishes his beer, he tosses the can in the sink and opens the fridge for another. I finish my own and drop it in the sink so it hits his.

“Where you going?” he asks me, cupping the mouthpiece on the phone with his hand.

I shrug and head for the door.

“Be good!” he calls after me. I turn around to fire a comeback, but he waves me away and goes back to talking with Mike.

It’s warm and sunny outside. The leaves are starting to change color. It smells like fall, and for some reason it reminds me of the day I learned to ride my bike. My dad was sleeping
one off, and my mom was determined to teach me on her own—Dad’s punishment for getting wasted again.

I was happy to have her to myself, even though he was the one who had promised to teach me.

“You can do it, Joshy, if you just try,” she kept saying. She hung on to the back of the seat and wouldn’t let me fall. It must have been three hours, maybe longer, till I finally went forward without her. I wobbled all the way to the end of the driveway, then slowly turned back toward her outstretched arms. Her face was all sweaty, and her hair was falling out of her ponytail. She had a huge grin on her face. I swear that’s the last time I saw her look genuinely happy.

Now I’m lucky to see her at all. She practically lives at the nursing home, changing old people’s diapers and putting their teeth in. Like that is preferable to being at her real home with us. If she’s not at work, she’s doing some volunteer project with Dave’s mom. She used to make my dad and me go with her to the local soup kitchen every Sunday afternoon, but eventually she got tired of us complaining. Plus I think she was embarrassed to bring my dad, who was usually hungover.

I walk to the end of the driveway and look back at the house. The blue vinyl siding is faded and cracked, and the white gutters are overflowing with muck. A few years ago, my
mom would have flipped over that. Now nothing around here seems to matter to her. Including us.

I head down the street toward Dave’s house. Judging from my dad’s side of the phone conversation, Dave’ll be wanting to get as far away from his parents as possible. When they fight, it’s not pretty. But at least they still acknowledge each other’s existence.

I take a left onto Dave’s street and look down toward the end, where his house is. Figures. He’s already walking toward me.
The metal chains above me creak as I swing.

*Back and forth.*

*Back and forth.*

I pump my legs like I did in first grade. My stomach does a familiar hop each time I swing backward.

When I see Corinne coming toward me, I stop pumping. When she reaches me, she stands so close I almost kick her with my feet. She doesn’t say anything, just nods hello. She gets on the swing next to me and swings sideways so we almost collide. We used to call it bumper cars when we were little. Only then we used to smash into each other. This time she seems careful not to touch me.
“I’m sorry it didn’t work out with Josh.” She sees me notice the pity in her eyes and turns away. She starts to swing the right way. She smiles at the breeze and then at me.

I start to pump again, until we are in perfect rhythm. Higher and higher. Our feet point toward the sky.

“Remember how we used to think we could swing right up over the bar?” Corinne asks. “I always thought I could do it if I just pumped hard enough.”

We both laugh a little, remembering. We stop pumping at the same time, letting ourselves glide back and forth together. The wind blows my hair forward, then back. Forward, then back.

Corinne used to jump off the swings when we were kids. Just let go of the chains and take flight without a trace of fear. I’d watch her jump, wishing I could be that brave. But I’d always hang on, waiting to slow down first, always mindful of my mother’s warning: You’ll break a leg if you’re not careful! But now I don’t care.


When I land hard on my feet, the sting goes all the way up to my teeth.

Corinne lands heavily beside me and falls to the ground. I fall down next to her. We laugh out loud and roll around,
pretending to be injured. It feels so good. My stomach muscles ache from not being used to laughing.

But then Corinne stops. And I think, Don’t stop now. Don’t stop. Keep laughing. I don’t want this to end.

But she’s looking behind me, into the distance. She stops smiling. And I know by the look on her face. I know before I turn around. He’s here.