“IT’S MY BEST IDEA YET.” Coop’s got a huge grin on his face as he wrestles his ice skate onto his left foot. “It came to me last night while I was launching a mud missile.”

“Oh, God, here we go again.” Matt rolls his eyes as he pulls the blue plastic skate guards off his blades. “It’s like a recurring nightmare.”

“No, listen,” Coop insists. “This is the one. I’m telling you. It’s going to make us all obscenely rich.”

“Seeing a live naked girl last summer was ‘the one.’” I dig around in my backpack, searching for a pair of wool socks. “Playing in the Battle of the Bands was ‘the one.’” Instead of socks, I find one of Buttons’s fossilized hairballs, which I quickly huck under the bench. “Every one is ‘the one.’ Except that they never are.”

“How can you live with yourself, being so wrong all the time, dawg?” Coop says. “All of my plans have
turned out for the best. Think about it for a second. When we saw a live naked girl, Matt got a girlfriend. When we played in the Battle of the Bands, I got a girlfriend. If you play your cards right, Sean-o, this could be the thing that finally gets you a girlfriend.”

The muscles in my jaw twitch. “I’ve had a girlfriend.”

“You know what I mean,” Coop says. “One who doesn’t look like a hobbit and who sticks around for more than a week.”

I flip him off. “Remind me again why we’re friends.”

Coop claps me hard on the shoulder and beams. “Because I’m always thinking about how to make your life sweeter.”

I finally find the wadded-up socks at the bottom of my bag. I give them a quick sniff and recoil at the damp, woolly urinal-cake stench of them.

Matt laughs at me. “Why do you always do that? You think this time they’re gonna smell like cinnamon?”

“I don’t know,” I say, my ears getting hot. “I smell things. It’s how I experience my world. Maybe I was a dog in a past life.”

As soon as the words spill from my mouth, I realize I’ve just set myself up. I brace myself for the barrage of butt-sniffing jokes from Coop but nothing comes. Which is totally uncharacteristic. And can only mean that he must be über-focused on his new plan. Used to be that him being so excited about his ideas would get me going too, but I don’t know. As we’ve gotten
older—and everyone but me has benefitted from his insane schemes—I’ve found it harder and harder to take him seriously.

Of course, if I thought there was even the tiniest chance that this plan of Coop’s, whatever it might be, could actually make us rich, I would be on it like a parrot on a peanut. Because, as much as I hate to admit it, he’s right about my girlfriend situation. I am a lost cause. After Tianna broke up with me at the end of last summer, I’ve been on a starvation diet where girls are concerned. I could use any advantage I can get—and if that extra boost came from being a millionaire, I’d take it, despite what my mom says about the kinds of girls who like you for the size of your bank account instead of the size of your heart.

But it’s stupid to get hopeful, because all we ever get out of Coop’s schemes are headaches and heartbreaks. And that’s when things actually go well.

So life will just continue on as it has, with everyone else paired off.

Coop and Helen.

Matt and Val.

And me and my urinal-cake wool socks.

On the plus side, at least I don’t have to spend the night with only our pack of foster animals for company. Love them as I do, they’re a little boring in the conversation department.

“A movie,” Coop announces, like me and Matt have
been begging him to spill the beans. “That’s the sitch this semest. We’re going to make a cheap-ass horror film like *Psychopathic Anxiety.* Or *The Jersey Devil Assignment.* They shot those things for a few thousand bills and then sold them for megabucks. There’s no reason we can’t do exactly the same thing.”

“I can think of a few thousand reasons right off the bat,” I say, my feet feeling claustrophobic in my old stiff hockey skates. “I mean, seriously. If there were awards for your dumb ideas, this one would win Best . . . Most . . . Dumbest.”

“Ouch,” Coop says flatly. “That stings, Sean. Too bad you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. Because it’s a genius idea. Case in point. Your favorite movie of all time. A little film called *El Mariachi.* Made for seven grand. Turned over two mil. And that was just in theaters. That’s not even counting the five trillion copies of the DVD you bought.”

I blow a lip fart. “Whatever. Even if we knew the first thing about making a movie—which we don’t—where the hell are we going to find seven grand? Or any grand, for that matter? We might as well conjure up a million dollars and be done with it.”

“It’s not like I’m springing this on you uninformed,” Coop says. “I researched filmmaking on the Internet for almost an hour last night.”

“A whole hour?” Matt says, sounding fake-impressed.
“Why didn’t you say so? This plan is obviously fool-proof.”

“Look.” Coop starts pacing around, a little wobbly on his skates. “There are a ton of ways we can raise the cash. We get a bit here. A bit there. Family. Friends. Local businessmen. It’ll be simp. You’ll see.”

The DJ turns on the music in the rink. It’s a Justin Bieber ballad that’s been everywhere lately. It’s actually not a bad song. The lyrics are sort of catchy, really.

Coop turns on me, his eyes narrow. “You’re tuggin’ me, right? You don’t actually know the words to this crap, do you?”

I clamp my mouth shut, suddenly aware that I’ve been singing along. “Uh . . . no. I just . . . no.”

“Sean-o likes the Biebs!” Coop cracks up. “Now I totally understand why your sister’s convinced you’re gay.”

I glare at him. “First of all, munch my left one, okay? And B, Cathy isn’t convinced I’m gay. She wants me to be gay. Because she thinks it’d be cool. There’s a big difference.”

“Okay, sure, fine. Whatever you say.” Coop sighs and runs his hand through his hair, doing nothing to fix the hat head he’s been rocking all day. “Anyway, as I was saying. We can raise the money for the movie. I mean, Christ, B&M Deli sponsors Little League baseball teams all the time. And what do they get for that? Their
name spanked across the back of a uniform? A cheap-ass plastic trophy every few years? Big whoop. If our movie rakes in even one-quarter of the coin that that puddle of spooge *Psychopathic Anxiety* made, they’d never have to sell another pastrami on rye with a flaccid pickle spear ever again.”

Matt shakes his head, tugging his pant leg down over his skate boot. “Please, count me out on this one, okay? I just want to have a normal, boring school semester for once.”

Coop sighs. “I don’t get you guys sometimes. This is the kind of thing that can separate us from the miserable masses. Don’t you dawgs want to be in charge of your own destinies?”

“Tell me,” I say, carefully untying the dog-chewed laces on my skates and pulling the tongue up and out to try and give my feet a little more breathing space. “What’s Helen think of this ‘genius plan’? She on board?”

Coop glances toward the rink, where the Zamboni is finishing up resurfacing the ice. “I haven’t told her yet. *Because,*” he adds before Matt or I can interrupt, “I wanted to tell you guys first. But I’m sure she’ll be all over it. She loves the movies. Why wouldn’t she want to help make one?”

“And what about Val?” I ask Matt. “Think she’ll go for it?”

Matt holds up his hands in surrender. “Like I said,
I just want to have a nice, normal semester. I’m sure Val does too.”

I flash a grin at Coop. “See?”

“Fine.” Coop smashes his knit cap on his head. “But don’t you two come squalling to me when I pull up to the car wash you’re slaving at in my bitch-red Gullwing, blowing my schnoz with fifty-dollar bills and wiping my ass with hundreds.”

“Why would you be wiping your butt at a car wash?” I ask.

Coop shakes his head. “I was being metaphorical.”

Just then, I look up from adjusting my skates to see Val and Helen entering the arena.

“Okay,” Coop says when he sees the girls. “Let’s keep our movie plan on the q.t. for now. Until we have a few more details hammered out.”

“Yeah, well.” Matt shrugs. “Seeing as we’re not doing it, I don’t see what there is to keep quiet about.”

“I’m just saying.” Coop keeps his voice low. “If the girls learn about it before we know exactly what kind of film we’re going to make, they might have . . . opinions. And we don’t want to have to make some gay-ass lovey-dovey chick flick. No offense, Sean.”

“Just because I like Mamma Mia! doesn’t mean I like all chick flicks. And it certainly doesn’t make me ga—”

“Hey, whatever.” Coop shoots me with a finger pistol and winks. “We accept you for who you are, dude.”
I look skyward as the girls approach.
“What’s up?” Helen says, her white figure skates tied together and slung over her shoulder.

“Nothing much,” Coop leaps in. “Just discussing how lame it is that we have to go back to school on Monday.”

Helen’s looking pretty cute in her powder-blue mittens and matching pom-pom hat. It used to be that she would only wear bulky clothes in various shades of gray. But ever since the Battle of the Bands, Helen’s been trotting out the pastels in a big way. I just can’t believe she and Coop are going out. After all he did so he wouldn’t have to be her partner in Health class. Beefing her out of the library. Stealing her combination so Prudence could ransack her locker. Filling out an application to try and get her to change schools. I don’t get it. But that’s Coop for you. Always landing on his feet.

“Yeah. Vacations always go so fast,” Valerie says.

“Hi, you.” She leans over and gives Matt a kiss. Lucky jerk. I’ve had a crush on Val—with her long red hair, full lips, and sexy French accent—ever since she moved here in seventh grade. I would have been totally pissed at Matt for dating her if I hadn’t been going out with Tianna at the time.

As it is now, I’m just insanely envious.

“Have you guys been here long?” Helen asks, sliding her arm around Coop’s waist.

“Not really. Maybe fifteen.” On skates, Coop is sev-
eral inches taller than Helen. He leans down, and the two of them start making out.

There’s a twinge of something inside me as I watch them go at each other. Jealousy, for sure, but also . . . oh, gross. I quickly shift on the bench to try and stanch the rapid swelling in my pants. Jeez Louise. That is not cool. I really wish my body was a bit more selective sometimes.

I turn my head before anyone notices the flush in my cheeks. Pretend I’m looking to see if the gates to the ice are opened yet.

The rink guards have just finished putting out the orange traffic cones to cordon off the center oval for people who want to practice their figure-skating moves.

A deep breath and I manage to regain control over my careening hormones. I yank hard on my skate laces, and just like that, they snap in unison, causing both my clenched fists to punch me right in the mouth.

Coope sputters with laughter. “Dude, no need to beat yourself up. Things’ll turn around for you eventually.”

Perfect. This just gets better and better.

“Are you okay, Sean?” Helen says.

“Yeah. Sure. Fine.” I feel my throbbing lip with my tongue. There’s no taste of blood, so that’s one good thing. But the way this night is headed, I’m sure it’ll swell up to the size of a bratwurst.

I do some quick repair work, knotting up the broken
laces, then stand and do a few deep knee bends to lim-
ber up.

“You guys want to go get something to eat first?” Valerie lifts her chin toward the warm glow of the Wigwam’s doors.

Matt, Coop, and Helen say they’re up for some food, but I beg off using the pork chops I had for dinner as an excuse. But really, I’d rather chew my own arm off right now than sit through half an hour of my friends making googly eyes at their girlfriends while they feed each other French fries. Besides, the smooth ice beckons.

Nobody puts up any arguments. No “Come on, Sean.” Or “Hang with us. You don’t have to eat anything.” Just a thumbs-up from Coop and a “Catch you later” from the others, before the four of them turn and head off without me. At least no one’s there to see me lip-synch the last few lines of the Justin Bieber song.
THE CIRCULATION HAS been completely cut off from my feet, but who cares? It feels right to be gliding over the ice at top speed. The electronic fizzing tweet of the music buzzing and pounding over the arena sound system is like my own personal soundtrack.

The cold air feels good on my face. That frosty bite on the cheeks and nose. A chilly sting in the lungs. I’ve got my arms pumping and my legs working overtime as the acid builds up in my calves and thighs. I can usually get three or four good fast laps in before the rink crowds up and it’s all dodging and weaving around bodies.

I do a sloppy crossover as I round my first lap. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve tripped over my own feet attempting to cross one over the other. But even though I’m going full tilt now, I don’t really care if I take a spill.
When we were kids, Coop, Matt, and me would fall on purpose. Seriously. It was sweet. Especially on a newly cleaned ice surface. We’d take off as soon as the gates opened and then we’d drop like we’d been shot, sliding and spinning until we slammed hard into the boards. We could only get away with it twice a night—once at the start of the session and again at the midpoint just after the Zamboni resurfaced—because that’s when the ice was slickest and there were the fewest people skating.

I’m tempted to hit the ground right now—even though it’s probably too crowded at this point to avoid a collision. Still, a part of me is craving that loss of control. Those few moments when you’re slipping this way and that. Trying to right yourself. Bracing for the impact of the boards. The heavy thud against the body.

Then, as I head into another turn, crossing the blue line, I see an opening. A nice stretch of clear ice heading straight over the far right face-off circle. And before I can talk myself out of it, I dig out a few extra strides to get my speed up and take the plunge.

I’m not on the ice half a second—my jeans absorbing the wet like a ShamWow—when I realize that I didn’t exactly think this through. Sure, there was a clear path to the boards when I went down, but the fact that everyone is moving in a circular motion around the rink didn’t get factored in to my snap decision. Neither did the fact that I’m not quite as small as I was five or six years ago.
I clip the first person—a little boy in a white Michelin Man coat—causing him to do several wobbly Bambi-esque pirouettes before he grabs a hold of someone’s arm.

The red-jacketed rink guard is my next victim. I only catch one of her legs, but she isn’t expecting it, and so she goes ass over teakettle, her right skate barely missing my face.

If I hadn’t taken those extra strides before I dove to the ice, that might have been the end of it. As it is, I’m still moving pretty fast heading toward the boards. Lucky for me, the word seems to be out, because people are leaping to the side, clearing a path.

Not so much the pretzel-thin girl who’s clinging to the wall as though this is the first time she’s ever strapped on skates. She’s much too focused on not falling to notice the guy who’s hurtling wildly toward her.

She looks sort of familiar, but I can’t really place her. I try to shift my position in an attempt to avoid her, but the beauty and the curse of freshly cleaned ice is just how slick and smooth it is.

And so I take her out like a bowling pin as I plow into the boards.

There’s a loud *thunk*, followed by a high-pitched scream, which, if I’m being totally honest, I think came from me.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” the girl says as she lands on top of me. “I told them I didn’t know how to skate.”
She’s all bony elbows and knees, and smells a lot like Swiss cheese.

“It was my fault,” I say, scrambling to get out from under her.

It shouldn’t take this long to extricate ourselves from each other, but we’re slipping around on the ice like a couple of hot-oil wrestlers.

Two rink guards skate over to help us up and out of the gates. Thankfully, everyone is treating this like an accident and not something I stupidly did on purpose.

We get to the benches, and a quick inspection reveals we’re both okay. Just a little bruised up. Nothing major.

“Evelyn,” the girl says to me when the rink guards finally take off. “Evelyn Moss.”

“Sean,” I reply, since we seem to be introducing ourselves. “Hance.”

“I know.” Evelyn smiles shyly, her eyes cast down to her doe-brown rental skates. “You were in my computer class last semester.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right. Computer class.” I nod like it’s all coming back to me. She must have been one of the ninth-graders we tended to ignore.

“You don’t remember me. It’s okay.” She glances over at me. “The only reason I remember you is because I used to eavesdrop on you and your friend Matt. You guys were pretty funny.”
“Thanks,” I say, trying to wiggle some life back into my strangled toes. I should probably take off my skates, but if I do that, I’ll never get them back on. And I’d still like to take a few more laps before I call it a night.

“Are you taking any computer classes next semester?” she asks, picking at the fuzz BBs on her avocado-colored sweater.

“Web Design. Maybe. I don’t know if I’ll get in; I handed in my forms late.”

“Me too,” she says. “Web Design, I mean, not the late part. I always get my schedule in way before the deadline. Hey, maybe we’ll get lucky and be in it together.”

“Yeah. That’d be cool.”

Okay, let me get this out of the way right off the bat. I am not attracted to Evelyn Moss. At all.

Sure, she has reddish hair, but it’s stringy and dull. Not long and lush like Valerie’s. And she’s got a raccoon mask of freckles, which isn’t a good look for a girl with the sort of pinched-thin nose that she has. Also, her voice is all nasal and shrill. Like a crow with a cold.

And then there’s that cheese smell. It’s weird. It’s not like it’s so awful as much as just really there. Like maybe she works in a deli or something and is exclusively in charge of slicing the Swiss. Don’t get me wrong, I actually like Swiss cheese. Just not wafting off a girl’s body.

“Are you here with anybody?” Evelyn asks.
“Just some friends. Matt and Coop,” I specify, reminding myself that she was in our computer class. “You?”

“My Girl Scout troop. We took a vote for our winter break outing. Needless to say, this was not my choice.” She snort-laughs like an excited piglet.

“Girls Scouts? Really? Do people still do that?”

“Sure. I’m a Senior Scout. I’m also a Counselor-in-Training. It’s cool.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.”

“Shut up.” Evelyn giggles as she punches me in the shoulder. Hard. “Is too. We go on all sorts of cool trips. Plus it’ll look great when I apply to college. It shows I’m committed.”

“Like, to a mental institution?”

“Oh, funny, funny. No. But once I finish the Counselor-in-Training program, I can get a job at a summer camp.”

“I sure hope you can swim better than you skate.”

“Okay, Mr. Graceful.” She whales me in the arm again. Jesus. “Or maybe you fell and knocked me over on purpose so you could start talking to me?”

“Um, no. I definitely did not mean to knock you over. I’m actually a pretty good skater.”

“Good.” And before I know what’s going on, Evelyn grabs my hand, stands, and yanks me up. “Then you can teach me how to skate better. To make up for knocking me over.”
God, she’s strong and pushy.

I glance around and don’t see my so-called friends anywhere. So, fine. I’ll be the nice guy and show Swiss-cheesey how to balance on her skates. What could it hurt?
Oh, man, her palm is super clammy. Ick.

I didn’t notice at first because I was so shocked by her bossiness. And her superhuman strength. But now that we’re skating around the rink, hand in hand, it’s like I’m holding a warm soggy dinner roll.

“How’s this?” Evelyn says, shuffling clumsily along on her skates. “Pretty good, huh?”

I nod. “Yeah, you’re doing great.”

She’s gripping my hand tight, cutting off all the feeling in my fingers. I’d really like to let go of her, but she’s using me for balance, and if I pull away right now, she’ll do a face-plant onto the ice for sure.

Evelyn looks over at me and smiles. “You’re a good teacher, Sean.” She stumbles and nearly falls. I have to use all my strength to keep her on her feet.

“Eyes ahead,” I instruct. “We’ve got to get you so you can do this on your own.” Like, now.
“I don’t know,” Evelyn says, staring forward again. “I kind of like skating like this.”

It’s strange, but she’s much more attractive from the side. Not like a “Yeah, I’ve got to tap that” kind of attractive. But certainly an improvement over how she appears face-to-face. I guess that’s what people mean by having a “best side.” Evelyn’s is definitely her left one by a good margin.

I wonder if I should mention this to her. So when she gets her picture taken, she can always pretend she’s looking off at something over to her right.

As I debate this with myself, the lights are suddenly dimmed and some slow, sappy love song starts playing over the loudspeakers. A disco ball is lowered from the center of the ceiling and casts little squares of light all over the place.

“Couples skate,” a guy announces in a deep Darth Vader-ish voice. “Couples only.”

“Hey, we can stay on,” Evelyn caws, crushing my hand. “Because there’s two of us.”

“Yeah.” I look around at all the other couples joining us on the ice and feel like someone just dumped a fistful of itching powder down my boxers. People are going to think I actually asked her to skate. “Great.”

I sigh quietly. But then I think, So what? So what if people think I asked Evelyn to skate with me? It’s not like she’s so hideous. And it’s certainly not like I have any other prospects. Besides, Evelyn seems to really be
enjoying herself. Let her have her fun. Maybe I’ll bank some karma points with the girlfriend gods.

See, he’s a nice guy. Let’s send him someone really special.

“I love this song!” Evelyn sways in time to the beat as the female singer bellows on about how people wait their whole lives for a moment like this.

“Careful now,” I shout over the music. “Focus on your balance. Don’t get too carried away.”

“I’m already carried away.” She looks over at me as the song swells, her eyes wide and wet like a love-starved puppy.

Oh, crap. I think I might have boarded a runaway train here. Not good.

I flip through the possible excuses in my head. Food. Bathroom. Leg cramp. They all sound so made-up. And nowhere near good enough to make her release the death grip she’s got on my hand.

Still, it’s not fair to lead her on.

I’m about to throw myself to the ice under the guise that I’ve lost an edge on my skate blade when Coop and Helen glide up next to us, the flickering fairy lights of the disco ball dancing across their faces. Helen gives me a big smile. Coop shoots me a way-to-go wink and thumbs-up combo.

I glance over at Evelyn again. The muted lights make the left side of her face that much more appealing. Cute, even.
Could I overlook all that other stuff—the voice, the whiff of cheese, the sweaty palms—for a girl with a moderately pleasant profile?

Yeah, I think I probably could. I mean, I’m not looking for someone to marry. I just want a girlfriend. Someone to go to the movies with. And watch TV with. And to hang out along with my friends.

Besides, everyone says you should play the field before you settle down. This would just be like that. Who knows? Maybe we’d really get along.

And then, out of the blue, I get a pang of uncertainty. Like, what if I read the signs wrong? What if I imagined that look of longing in her eyes? What if I make a move and she smacks me down? Rejected by a sort-of-homely ninth-grader. That would not look good on the dating résumé.

Suddenly, just as the cornball song reaches a crescendo, Evelyn’s skate blade catches a rut and she trips.

I grasp her hand tightly and pull her up before she hits the ice.

“Oh, my God.” Evelyn gazes into my eyes, her arms somehow having wound up around my neck. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” I ask, wondering if she popped her shoulder or something.

We’re standing in the middle of the rink, all the other couples streaming past us like a river around a rock.

“The lyrics to the song.” Evelyn says breathlessly.
“She was singing about how she wants someone to catch her when she falls. And then you caught me just as I was falling! It’s a sign, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t really listen—”

Evelyn leaps up and smashes her mouth against mine. Her tongue pries open my lips and she’s exploring the inside of my mouth like a spelunker searching for cave treasure. There’s a moment when I think she’s actually playing tetherball with my uvula.

Part of me wants to detach Evelyn from my face, but another part—a lower part—is enjoying the kiss too much, however ferocious it might be. My eyes dart around like crazy as I try to guide the two of us out of traffic and toward the boards.

When I finally get us to safety, she pulls away with a loud wet smack, biting my lower lip like a wild animal.

Evelyn’s out of breath. She’s staring at me with this strange hungry look in her eyes. Like if she could, she would actually eat my entire head.

She grabs me in a powerful hug, pressing her cheek to my chest and squeezing the air from my lungs. “I guess this means we’re going out now, huh?”


And that’s when I see Val and Matt, smiling and waving from the other side of the glass.

Something about how they’re beaming at me, and the
swirl of the song coming to an end, and how I don’t want
to wind up being the guy at college who dated only one
girl in high school, clears the fog from my head.

Well, that, and the uprising going on downstairs.

“Yeah,” I say. “I guess so.”

Evelyn laughs and hugs me harder, if that’s even
possible. “Ohmygod, my very first boyfriend! I can’t even
believe it!” She leans back, her dead-serious stare boring
into me. “Don’t ever break up with me, okay?” Her eyes
start to fill up at just the thought of it. “I mean it. I don’t
think . . . I don’t think I could take it. Promise me, okay?”

“Oh . . . okay,” I croak. “Sure.”

“Thank you.” Evelyn buries her face in my coat and
sniffles. “I believe you.”

I pat her back awkwardly.

I should be happy here, right? I mean, I’m finally
dating someone again. Someone fairly cute. Sort of.
From the side. So why do I feel a nauseous sourness in
my stomach? Like I just ate three Big Macs with way too
much special sauce?

Like I maybe just made one of the biggest mistakes of
my life?
I’VE GOT BROCK LESNAR down on the mat—ready to take my rightful place as the Ultimate Fighting Champion—when I hear the family-room door open and footsteps coming up behind me.

“Off the TV, scrotum. I’m watching a movie.” It’s Cathy, Queen of Darkness.

“Clearly you’re not,” I say, waving my Xbox controller.

“I will be once you turn off your idiot games.” She gestures at the cold pack I’ve got wrapped around my neck. “What’s up with the ice? Get a little too vigorous with the wanking?”

“Ha, ha. You should be a clown, Cath. You’ve already got the white face makeup.”

“Is that right?” Cathy snatches the ice pack from my neck and dangles it in the air. “Who’s laughing now, little boy?”
“Give it back, jerk!” I pause my game and leap off the couch.

Her dark-shadowed eyes go wide when she sees my neck. “Holy crap, Sean. Where’d you get all those welts? Were you attacked by bats or something?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Some of your vampire buds ambushed me last night.” I lunge for the cold pack, but she swings it behind her.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say those were some major hickeys.” Cathy laughs. “Tell me who gave them to you, and I’ll give you back your ice.”

“Eat it,” I say, glaring at her. It looks like she’s got a new brow piercing, which makes two over each eye now. Mom’s going to flip.

Cathy shrugs. “Fine. But secrets just lead to speculation.” She taps the silver stud in her lip. “Let me guess: Johnny Weir showed up at the rink and the two of you spent the entire evening doing some serious neck sucking.”

“Johnny Weir would never skate at the Salisbury Park Ice Rink,” I say, making a grab for her arm that she easily dodges. “He trains at the Ice Vault Arena in Wayne, New Jersey.”

Cathy’s jaw drops.

“Well, well, well,” she says. “Someone knows quite a lot about a certain flamboyant figure skater.”

“Just give me the freakin’ ice pack, will ya? I have to get rid of these things before school on Monday.”
“It’s a simple barter system, baby brother.” Cathy dangles the cold pack in the air. “Goods for information. Now come on. Tell your big sister who’s been gnawing on your neck.”

Cathy was born nine minutes before me, which she loves to rub in any chance she gets.

“Don’t you have a cemetery to haunt or something?” I say.

“Listen, Sean.” Cathy gives me her I’m-so-compassionate look. “I could be your biggest champion if you let me.” She reaches out and grabs my shoulder. “All you have to do is be honest. I’d be totally supportive, I swear. Now tell me, do I know him?”

“I’m not gay.” I step back from her. “What about that don’t you understand?”

She cocks her head. “Please. It’s so obvious. I mean, besides your stalker-like knowledge of Johnny Weir’s whereabouts, there’s also the little matter of your iTunes library. Lady Gaga? Justin Bieber? The Sweeney Todd soundtrack? The signs are everywhere, sweetie. You dress up in women’s clothing. You’re a mama’s boy. You play homoerotic video games. Should I go on?”

“One time! I dressed up in girls’ clothes one time! And it was to see a naked girl, which you seem to have conveniently forgotten.”

“So you claim. But what about this?” Cathy gestures at the television, where Brock Lesnar and Heath Herring
are lying frozen on the mat in a bare-torsoed grasp. “Tell me there’s nothing gay about two barely clothed men embracing each other on the floor.”

I point at the screen. “That’s a rear naked choke.”

Cathy raises her eyebrows. “I rest my case.”

“They’re beating the pus out of each other.”

She shrugs. “If you say so. But it looks like man-love to me. And it’s totally cool. Some of the most influential people in the world have been gay. Leonardo da Vinci. Alexander the Great. Oscar Wilde. Isaac Newton. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not ashamed.” A vein in my left temple pulses. “If I was gay, I’d admit it.”

“Really? I’m not so sure. Or maybe you just don’t realize what’s so clear to the rest of us.”

“You know what? Keep the stupid ice pack.” I grab the remote control, shut off the television, and storm out of the family room.

The second I’m through the door, I am engulfed by our panting, whining dogs. I make my way through the living room, trying to pretend that I can’t hear Cathy hot on my heels.

Ingrid, our African gray parrot, squawks from her cage in the corner of the room. “I’m hung like a horse!”

“You’re a girl, Ingrid,” I snap. “You’re not even hung like a bird.”

“Take the pecker!” She jabs her beak at the air.
Two years ago, Ingrid was found in the home of some dead old guy who must have had nothing better to do with his time than teach her how to curse at people. Strangely enough, we haven’t been able to adopt her out.

“You like it birdie style!” she caws, grabbing the side of her cage with her claws and doing little thrusting motions with her body.

“You see?” Cathy laughs. “Even Ingrid knows.”

I ignore both of them and go to the kitchen. Yank open the freezer door and look inside to see if we have anything I can use as a substitute cold pack. Peas. A box of Fudgsicles. A whole salmon.

“I mean, Mom and Dad probably won’t understand,” I hear Cathy say from the doorway. “Being as uptight as they are. But they’d have to accept it eventually. With some counseling, they’d learn to love you again. And think about how much more interesting you’d be.”

“Blah, blah, blah.” I stare into the freezer, not wanting to give her the satisfaction of my full attention, even if it means I have to shout for her to hear me. “You can talk and talk all you want. It doesn’t matter. There is nothing you can say that is ever going to convince me to change how I feel about guys, okay? I know who I like and who I don’t. And frankly, what Mom and Dad think about my sexual tendencies doesn’t even enter the picture.”

Someone clears their throat behind me and I can tell immediately that it’s not Cathy.
I whip around to see my parents standing there, shopping bags dangling from their hands, their eyes wide. I scan the kitchen for my sister, but she’s nowhere to be found.

I shut the freezer door and clap my hand on my hickey-peppered neck. “Hi, guys.”

Mom’s eyes start to tear up. She glances at Dad, then back to me. “Is there . . . ? Is there something you’d like to tell us, hon?”

I blink, confused. Then it finally hits me. “Oh! No. No, there’s nothing. Cathy was just . . . She was trying to . . . Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

Mom takes a deep breath, sniffing. “It’s okay, sweetie.” She uses her placating, everything’s-fine-here voice. The one she uses whenever Dixie—our lactose-intolerant beagle—accidentally soft-serves on the living-room carpet. She plops her bags on the kitchen table, then looks at Dad. “Believe it or not, your father and I have actually discussed this. We had a . . . a hunch that you might be . . . you know . . . and we are . . .” She swallows the jagged little pill. “We are okay with it. Aren’t we, honey?” She looks over at Dad again.

“Yes,” Dad says, sounding like his shorts just shrunk three sizes. “As long as you’re absolutely sure. And you don’t want to, you know, maybe talk to Father Hurley about it first.”

“What? No! I don’t—”
“I’m sure there’s no need for that,” Mom says, coming to my rescue. “If he knows, he knows. It’s not going to make a difference.”

“Okay, this is ridiculous,” I say. “What you heard me say was . . . I was talking to Cathy and . . . Look, the point is, I like girls, okay? End of story. I’ve had a girlfriend. Tianna, remember? You met her.”

“You mean”—Mom scrunches up her face—“the girl who sort of looked like a boy?”

“What? She did not!”

Dad grimaces. “She kind of did, Sean. Like that actor. What’s his name? The one who played the hobbit.”

I smack my forehead. “Holy crap, are you serious?”

“Sean,” Mom scolds. “Language. Please. My goodness. And here I was under the impression that the gays were more refined.”

“You know what? Forget it. I’m just going to pretend we never had this discussion.” I storm out of the kitchen, the excited dogs swarming around me.

Mom calls after me, “We love you, Sean! All we want is for you to be happy. Whatever that means for you!”

As if this moment weren’t awful enough, just then my cell phone vibrates against my thigh. I don’t have to look at it to know who’s texting me. Evelyn’s been cell-stalking me from the moment I left the ice rink last night. Thirty-six texts and counting. I never should have given her my real number.

I reach into my pocket and blindly dismiss the text
because I’m “at my grandmother’s today” and we don’t get any cell-phone service in the mountains.

Speaking of mountains, I wouldn’t mind escaping to them right now. Or to the 7-Eleven at the very least. I wade my way through the dog pack and head toward the front door. Just as I go for the doorknob, someone knocks.

The dogs erupt into a chorus of barks and I freeze, convinced that it’s Evelyn trying to catch me in a lie. I duck below the peephole, picturing her standing on the other side of the door, her weepy eye pressed against the circle of glass, looking for a teeny, tiny Sean.

Evelyn knocks again. “Hello?”

My heart hammers in my chest as the dogs leap against the door, some of them howling now. There’s nothing they love more than visitors—though shouldn’t their animal senses alert them to the danger that awaits on the other side?

A third thump, this one so heavy that it reverberates through my body, which is trying to melt into the wood of the door. “Open up, jackass. I know you’re in there. I just saw you walk by the window.”

Jackass? That doesn’t sound like Evelyn. The dogs are now dancing in circles. Sure, they get excited for visitors—any visitors—but there’s only one person who makes them dance like this.

I let out a relieved breath and pull open our creaky front door, boxing out the snuffling dogs, to see Nessa—Cathy’s best friend and partner in Gothworld—standing
on the stoop, her squid-ink-black hair hanging in her
ghost-white face.

“Jeez, took you long enough,” Nessa says. “What the
hell were you doing, tweeting about your doll collection
again?”

“They’re not dolls. They’re action figures. And I
don’t tweet about them,” I say, and step aside to let her
in. “She’s upstairs.”

“Cool.” Nessa enters and brushes past me. I get a
whiff of her heavy makeup as she goes by. The smell
brings back memories of spirit gum and Halloween
costumes.

“Oh, hey.” She turns back and smiles. “I never got to
tell you. You guys were totally savage at the Battle of the
Bands. I didn’t expect you to be that good.”

“Thanks,” I say, completely caught off-guard by the
compliment.

“Okay, well. See ya.” Nessa flashes another smile,
then makes her way into the living room. The dogs attach
themselves to her like iron filings to a magnet, wagging
their tails, squeaking and whimpering, leaping this way
and that. You’d think they were starved for affection the
way they crawl all over her.

A brief flash of me crawling all over Nessa blindsides
me, and I shake my head like a golden retriever, trying to
dislodge the unsettling image.
Roast beef, popovers, potatoes au gratin, creamed spinach, creamed corn, and vanilla shakes.

This is the fattening feast that has been laid out in front of us tonight. Which, if we were a normal family, who ate normal food all the time, might seem completely...normal, if a bit excessive. But since Mom is a total health freak who swallows fistfuls of vitamins and runs five miles a day, every day, rain or shine, it's more than a little weird to see this kind of food on our table. weirder still, this is the third time in five days that Mom's prepared some kind of ginormous spread.

"Okay, what the hell's going on?" Cathy stares at the food on the table. "Are you guys getting a divorce, or what?" She plops herself down in her chair and ushers
several of the curled-up dogs out from under the table with her stocking feet.

“Don’t be rude,” Dad says, tucking his napkin into the collar of his sweater with one hand and scooping a pile of potatoes onto his plate with the other.

“I’m not being rude,” Cathy says. “I’m just concerned about my pants size. I’ve gained, like, ten pounds in the last week.”

Mom shrugs. “So I’ve relaxed my dietary restrictions a bit. Big deal. If you ever turned off your computer and exercised a little, maybe you wouldn’t be gaining so much.”

“Is that so?” Cathy says, staring at Mom’s rounding belly. “Then what’s your excuse?”

Dad points a serving spoon at her. “That’s enough out of you, young lady.”

“What?” Cathy shrugs. “It’s not like I’m saying anything we all haven’t noticed. Right, Sean?”

“I don’t . . . know.” I avert my eyes, not wanting to get involved.

“Oh, come on. You know. Mom’s packed on a few lately. And she’s cooking like she expects Paula Deen to show up and join us for dinner. If Mom’s depressed or something, are we just supposed to ignore it?”

“I’m not depressed,” Mom says, her eyes getting moist.

“Just eat your food, Cathy,” Dad says.
“I’m a vegetarian,” she announces, staring at her empty plate.

“Oh, really?” Mom asks, snuffling back her tears. “Since when?”

“Since right now. I just decided.”

“Not me.” My mouth is watering as I serve myself some roast beef. “I love me some meat.”

Cathy smirks. “So I’ve heard.”

I glare at her. “I didn’t think vampires could be vegetarians.”

“And I didn’t think little mama’s boys could think for themselves.”

“That’ll be quite enough,” Dad says.

“Ignore your sister, Sean.” Mom pats my hand. “She’s probably just having her period.”

Cathy narrows her eyes. “Just because I don’t want to have a heart attack at eighteen doesn’t mean I’m PMSing.”

“Look, if you don’t want to eat, don’t eat,” Mom snaps as she serves herself a puddle of creamed corn. “I’ll bring the leftovers down to the shelter, where I’m sure the starving homeless children would appreciate a nice home-cooked meal.”

“Fine.” Cathy crosses her arms tightly across her chest. “Can I be excused then?”

“No, you cannot.” Dad lowers his gaze at her. “You’re a vegetarian now, okay, fine. Potatoes, spinach, corn. Last
I heard, those were all vegetables. And just a little factoid for you: there is no substantial proof that being a vegetarian prolongs a person’s life span.”

My shoulders start to shake as I try to hold back my laughter.

Cathy stares lasers at me, then angrily slings a spoonful of creamed spinach onto her plate with a wet *splat*.

We eat in uncomfortable silence until Mom makes a loud slurping sound with her straw as she attempts to get the last of her vanilla shake from the bottom of her glass.

“Heaven,” she says, slapping her cup down on the table. “Shakes should be illegal. Or at least there should be a hefty fine. They’re just too good. I can’t believe I’ve denied myself for so many years.” She forces a smile. “So, what’s the latest and greatest? Who wants to share? Sean?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. School starts tomorrow. Not looking forward to that.”

Mom looks at me sideways. “Anything . . . *else*?”

“Oh, no. Not that I can think of. Why?”

Mom’s eyes slide to the side. “No reason. I just thought, you know . . . maybe there were some *other* things you might want to talk about. You know. *Other* things.”

Oh, Christ. Here we go again with the gay thing. There’s no way I’m taking this bait. “Sorry. No *other* things to discuss.” I lift my utensils and resume slicing up my food.
“Okay.” Dad gestures toward Cathy. “How about you, Cath? What’s the news?”

“I just announced I’m a vegetarian. That’s not interesting enough for you?”

“All right, you two want to be stingy?” Mom shakes her head. “That’s fine. Don’t share your lives with us. We’re only your parents. The people who gave you life. Why should we know anything about anything that’s going on with you?”

Mom looks at Dad across the table.

Their eyes meet, and he gives her a little nod and a small smile. Some sort of silent answer to a psychic question she’s just asked him.

“Well, then,” Mom says, “your father and I will start the ball rolling with some news of our own.”

I put my silverware down, eyeing my roast beef suspiciously. Suddenly the food seems like a trap or a bribe.

“Something very exciting has happened,” Mom continues. “Something that’s going to have an enormous impact on all of our lives. For the rest of our lives.”
YOU’RE WHAT?” CATHY SAYS, blinking furiously.

“But . . . how?” My voice sounds a thousand miles away.

I realize that Mom has just told us she’s going to have a baby but my brain seems unable to fully process it. Like a computer with too little RAM and too many open programs.

And so I sit here at the table, my hands tucked under my legs, my feet resting on the warm furry body of our chocolate Lab, Bronson, and the spinning beach ball of death rotating uselessly in my mind.

“I don’t get it,” Cathy says. “I thought you were fixed.”

“I had a tubal ligation, yes,” Mom explains. “But sometimes—it’s rare—but apparently, according to Dr. Halpern, your tubes can grow back together. What can I
say? All that running and vitamins and healthy eating for so many years. I guess I’m a strong healer.” She shrugs. “That’s why we only just figured it out. Your father put it together after I started having my cheesy-creamy food cravings. So, anyway, it looks like I’m around five months.” She grabs her rounding belly. “And here I was thinking I was just giving your father a bit more of me to love.”

“So, wait.” Cathy screws up her face. “Are you telling us that you guys . . . still do it?”

Mom laughs. “Uh, yes, Cathy. As difficult as that is for you to believe, your father and I have a very vigorous, active, and healthy sex life.”

“Eww,” I blurt. And just like that, my brain has been smacked back into functioning again, offering up a seriously disturbing image of my pasty parents rolling around in the nude.

“That’s totally gross.” Cathy shudders.

I rub at my eyes, trying to lock this image away in the never-to-be-thought-of-again file of my mind—right alongside Ms. Luntz on the nude beach and the foot-long snot rope Coop stretched from his nose in third grade.

Unfortunately, my brain doesn’t want to cooperate and so I need to change the subject.

“Do you know if it’s a boy or a girl?” I say, the idea of a sweet little pink-or-blue-bundled baby thankfully trumping the freak show of my parents’ sweaty bedroom antics.
“Not yet,” Mom says. “But I’m scheduled for an ultrasound in a few weeks. We should know after that what color we’re going to have to paint the bedroom. Although we’re thinking of leaving it as a surprise and maybe just painting the room green or yellow.”

And with that, a terrible realization hits me.

We only have three bedrooms in our house. Mom and Dad’s. Cathy’s. And mine.

“The baby’s going to sleep in your room, right?” I say.

“Well.” Dad steeplesthis fingers and takes a deep breath. “That’s the other thing we need to discuss with you.”

“We’re moving?” A panicky flutter dances in my chest.

Mom flashes a quick tight-lipped smile. “No. We’re not moving.”

“Funds . . . are going to be a little tight for a while,” Dad says. “Especially since we want your mother to be able to stay home with the baby for the first few months.”

My head swivels from Dad to Mom to Dad to Mom. “So it is going to sleep with you?”

“I’m afraid that won’t work out,” Mom explains. “I’m going to be up and down all night with feedings. It’d be too disruptive with your father having to get up so early for work.”

“Well, it’s not sleeping in my room,” Cathy declares. “I’ll tell you that right now.”
“That’s not fair,” I say. “I’ve already got the smallest bedroom.”

“Too bad.” Cathy shrugs. “I’m the oldest. And I called it.”

“The baby’s not going to be sleeping with either one of you,” Mom says.

An incredible wave of relief washes over me.

“That’s right.” Dad picks up his knife and fork and begins sawing off a piece of his popover. “We’ve discussed the situation extensively, and the only reasonable solution we could come up with”—he pops the gravy-drenched dough into his mouth and starts chewing—“is that the two of you will have to share Cathy’s bedroom.”

Cathy whips her head in Dad’s direction. “I don’t think so.”

“Think again, young lady,” Mom says, with just a hint of satisfaction in her voice. “We’re going to make Sean’s room into the nursery, and that only leaves one place left.”

“Forget it,” I say. “I’ll sleep in the family room.”

“No, you will not.” Dad takes a sip of his shake. “There is only a limited amount of common space in this house. We’re not going to have your games and computer paraphernalia strewn everywhere. I’m sorry, but we’re all going to have to make some sacrifices.”

“Fine, then.” My shoulders slump in defeat. “I’ll share my room with the baby.”
“Aw, sweetheart.” Mom gives me a sympathetic look. “That’s just not going to work. You wouldn’t get any sleep.”

“I don’t care. I’d rather not sleep than share a room with her.”

“This is not up for debate,” Dad says. “The decision’s been made. We knew you two weren’t going to be happy about it, but that’s life. I shared a bedroom with three of my brothers growing up. You should consider yourself lucky.”

“Lucky?” Cathy huffs. “Right. I’m so sure. Why can’t we just get rid of all the stupid pets? Then we’d have more money and we could move to a bigger house.”

My stomach drops, but I don’t say anything. Cathy’ll just rail into me. Instead, I give Bronson a little consoling cuddle with my feet.

“We’re not getting rid of the animals, Cathy.” Mom stares at her in disbelief. “Honestly. The amount of money we would save casting out our little furry friends here”—Mom scoops up one of the kittens and works his paws like he’s a marionette—“wouldn’t even come close to offsetting the cost of a new home.”

“Whatever.” Cathy turns away so she doesn’t have to look at the adorable kitty puppet.

“What about building an extension?” I say. “To add another room. That’d be cheaper than buying a brand-new house.”

“We already looked into it.” Dad pulls the napkin
from his collar. “It’s still too much. It would cost twenty to thirty thousand dollars. And that’s if a contractor could stay on budget. I’m sorry, but this is our only option.”

“And who knows?” Mom adds. “You might even enjoy it after a while. I mean, you shared my womb, right? Now you’ll share a room.” She laughs like this is the funniest joke ever. “Who knows, maybe this is the thing that brings you two closer together.”

“What about Uncle Doug?” I say, the tightness in my chest getting even tighter. “He’s rich. Maybe he can lend us the money to build an extension.”

“Your uncle Doug is not rich,” Mom says. “He’s got some money, yes, but he’s got his . . . habits, and he needs all the money he makes to live on. I don’t understand why you kids are trying to turn this into something bad. This is very exciting news. Sure, we’re all going to have to pitch in a little, but this is a miracle from God we’re talking about here. Dr. Halpern said I’m the first patient he’s ever had get pregnant after having her tubes tied. We should be celebrating. This baby obviously wants to be born into our family. There’s going to be another Hance in this world.” Mom grabs her empty shake glass and hoists it in the air. “Let’s have a toast. To the baby.”

Dad is the first to pick up his glass. I raise mine because you can’t not toast to a baby. And Cathy is the last one to lift her untouched shake, hefting it like it weighs a thousand pounds.
My sister and I glare at each other across the table. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her look so angry before. And believe me, I’ve seen her *royally* pissed. I’m not sure if it’s directed at me or if it’s just an overall loathing of the world in general.

But I do know one thing.

Whatever it takes, even if I have to sell part of my liver, I will *not* be sharing a room with my sister.