



ANGIE'S BACK
AND READY
TO ROCK

SPECIAL GIRL
DON'T HIDE YOUR FACE

YOU'RE A BEAUTIFUL MESS.

CONSTELLATIONS
ENTERTAIN US...

YOU'RE A
BEAUTIFUL MESS

I REGRET THE THINGS
I COULDN'T SAY
EVERY SINGLE DAY.

FIND MY
WAY HOME...

I WANNA HEAR
YOU SCREAM!

I'VE BEEN
RUNNING...

HEY!

FAT ANGIE HOME- COMING

#

e.E. Charlton-Trujillo

NEVER QUIT!

DON'T
GIVE UP...

I SEE YOU AT THE
EDGE OF THE PARTY.
YOU'RE A REBEL IN A
WRINKLED T-SHIRT.

YOU WON'T BE
THE MARTYR OF
THIS STORY.

WHY COMING WITH ME? REVOLUTION OR ENVY?

NOT GONNA CONCEDE TO A WOMAN'S PLACE.

BE THIS
PROVOCATION...

DON'T
WAIT!



**FAT
ANGIE**

Homecoming

FAT ANGIE

Homecoming

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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Carrie, because of you, Angie and I are both finally home.

There was a girl. Her name was Angie. Her life was finally perfect.

Well, sort of.

Chapter 1

This was not the beginning, again. Rather, it was an end. A fantastic end to an unbelievable, truly fabulous four weeks, three days, seven hours, and approximately four minutes since Angie's return from her road trip across Ohio. A trip marked by ups, by downs. By shifts in perspective. Since taking the stage with indie girl band Cat Scratch in the Queen City of Cincinnati and pouring her sister's ashes into the Ohio River, the once angry-depressed-devouring-candy-to-solve-her-problems Angie was more in control of what went into her body and her heart.

She was a girl on fire!

A fire that could be witnessed in the way she dressed, and especially how she expressed herself in and out of therapy. It was this version of Angie, riding passenger side

in Jake's classic Datsun 280Z while blasting Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream," who was ready for something more. Because the moratorium on Angie's heartbreak regarding her first love, KC Romance (who had relocated to the greater Dallas metropolitan area, then ghosted her), had finally and thankfully expired. Which meant Angie was ready to make today, Thursday, mere weeks before homecoming, the day she officially asked Jamboree Memphis Jordan out.

Swoon!

Because Angie had never asked anyone out and was prone to nervous rambling, she had typed and glue-sticked what to say onto several three-by-five index cards. She wanted to leave nothing to chance because the last few weeks had been a life largely spectacular. Angie and Jamboree talking and laughing between classes, during lunch and late into the night. Their arms casually-not-so-casually brushing together during Random Movie Nights on the roof of the RV. The two of them lounging on crushed velvet sofas at The Backstory with Zeke and sometimes Darius. With Gary Klein now living several states away with his father, life was better for Angie. At least, when she wasn't home.

Home continued to be hard.

Angie's couldn't-get-it-together mother, a self-described unflappable corporate attorney, had found herself in a state of being, well, flapped. Her not-so-gradual descent

into a semi-shut-in existence had followed her termination from work. Connie had spiraled into a life of rarely laundered pajama bottoms, disheveled hair, more drinking, and T-shirts that had belonged to her daughter Natalie. It was the lowest Angie had ever seen her mother. A low that Angie felt was partly her—

“You didn’t hear anything I just said.” Jake popped the top to a Pepsi.

“No, I heard,” she said, attempting to cover her absolute not hearing anything he had said.

“Uh-huh,” Jake said. “What are you studying for?”

“Um . . . They’re just to keep me from rambling,” Angie said. “Rambling is not sexy when you ask someone out.”

“You still haven’t asked Jamboree out?” Jake said. “Wang said something about hand-holding and milkshakes. He was unusually vague.”

“Yeah, there were hands and kissing-not-kissing, staring, sort-of touching with frenetic energy. That’s a thing, right?”

“I think it might be for you.” Jake steered into the student parking lot. “Can I?” He motioned for the cards.

Reluctantly, she handed them over as he parked beside a lifted pickup blasting country music.

“Are you really going to quote a commercial?” he asked.

“Wang thought it would be funny.”

“You’re taking dating advice from Wang?”

“I panicked,” Angie said. “You were with your dad.”

“Not by choice.” Jake continued to read.

The searing reality of Jake's parents' now-more-public separation continued to weigh heavy on his once light shoulders. Spending the weekend with his dad in his one-bedroom, one-bath apartment in the city was not what Jake had wanted. But Jake was a good boy, from a once-good home, who tried to make peace the best he could because that's what Jake did. Even if it hurt him. Deeply.

"Sorry," Angie said. "About how it is with your dad right now."

"It just is, right?" Jake said, still reading the cards. "Until it's something else."

Jake flipped to another card.

"I know what I want to say to her." Angie leaned against her headrest. "I just . . . I don't want to mess it up. The friendship part has been so . . . good, you know? And the other part is there. Like *really* there. I've just never asked anyone out. This is uncharted territory. It's a—maiden voyage. 'Love is a battlefield,' you know?"

"That's from a song isn't it?" Jake asked.

Angie grinned.

"Look, I get the cards, but I think you're overthinking this. Jamboree likes you. She always has, and if you hadn't put on the brakes after you kissed her, you'd already be a thing. A good thing."

Angie picked at a loose thread on her backpack. "Were you ever this nervous? Asking someone out?"

Jake nodded. "Sure."

“Liar.”

“I get nervous,” he said. “About a lot of things. Like—”

Before Jake could finish, Angie’s eyes tracked Jamboree’s car cruising past them, *BEAT THE OWLS* scrawled in white shoe polish across the back window of the not-so-trendy Honda Accord.

The wind whispered along the edge of Jamboree’s skirt as she stepped out of the car. Her boho dress burst with color from beneath her oversize tweed coat, lapel dotted with miniature band pins. The sin of her was her smile, the way she said *serendipitous*, and of course, her mind filled with curiosity for all things retro and new. Angie’s heart was undone, unfettered—floating well beyond her Pat Benatar *Get Nervous* super-soft baseball-style T-shirt.

When Jamboree’s grin transcended the space between her and Angie right then, a rush crushed the soft parts of Angie.

Her cheeks flushed.

Her heart beat irregularly.

Her lips parted ever so slightly.

“You got this,” Jake said, fishing a copy of *Every Day* from beneath his seat.

Angie reached for the cards, but Jake pulled them away.

“You don’t need these,” he said, jamming them into his glove box. “Just be you.”

“You get that historically that hasn’t worked out for me?” Angie said.

“Rewrite the narrative. Isn’t that what your therapist says?”

“Kind of.” Angie reached for the door handle. “More therapeutically.”

A rotating wall of chatter and music circled Angie as she got out of the car.

“Hey, I get home around eight,” Jake said, punching his arms through his letterman. “Stop by and tell me how it went.”

Angie heaved her backpack on as Jake cut through the throngs of cars and teens. She took a deep breath, pressing PLAY on the Sony Walkman strategically clipped to the hip of her charcoal denim jeans. The melodic piano of the excessively retro REO Speedwagon song “Can’t Fight This Feeling” vibrated through the orange foam headphones hanging around her neck.

The mood was set.

Angie began the longest yet physically shortest walk of her life. An estimated twenty-two steps, plump with rainbow, gay-girl-gay tension. She shifted her backpack straps along her shoulders. She smiled shyly. A dimple formed in her right cheek.

No longer the pariah, the freak of weighty gossip proportions, Angie was ready for this moment of walking toward Jamboree. She was Fat Angie and proud of it! A young woman who didn’t shrink in shame at her size but celebrated it.

Most of the time, anyway.

It was this version of Angie, strutting in bedazzled combat boots, who continued, nervous-but-excited, toward Jamboree.

Jamboree grinned at Angie.

Angie grinned at Jamboree.

They were, by all accounts, in the midst of a sappy, cutesy, geeky grinfest for two.

This was it. This was *the* moment. This was . . .

"Hey," Angie said to Jamboree.

"Hey . . ." Jamboree said back.

Angie's mind went blank. Absolutely, unspeakably, yet realistically blank. Where was Katy Perry? Where was Angie's badassery? She had rehearsed her speech forty-two times in front of her bedroom mirror. A speech that she'd not only typed but spell-checked. Though it was still unclear why she had done the latter. In this free fall of what to say, Angie scrambled for her cool, her calm—making the fastest of prayers to the goddess of Amazons to return some crumb of her index-card speech to her consciousness.

"I stopped by The Backstory and got you this," said Jamboree. "Since it's their last day for the next few months."

"A Rock You Like a Hurricane Italian Cream Soda with a downbeat of espresso?" Angie said.

"Is there really any other kind of Italian cream soda?" Jamboree asked.

"No." Angie grinned. "There isn't."

Their fingers touched as Angie took the cup. Dozens of imagined butterflies burst from their invisible cocoons inside Angie. She gulped, fixating on Jamboree's soft, very kissable lips. The lips she had spontaneously kissed in an I-might-get-institutionalized-by-my-mom-and-never-see-you-again moment nearly four weeks earlier. The lips she had almost kissed over the weekend during Random Movie Night, had Zeke and Darius not been there. Had she had the courage to make the first move for a second time.

Had Angie simply said—

"I like your shirt," Jamboree said.

"Yeah? Wang got it for me. I think he had a coupon. Or something."

Why had Angie mentioned the coupon? It had no relevance to the conversation. This was why she needed the index cards.

"Hey, Ang." A girl from her bio class raised her fist. "Revolution!"

Angie did not follow the trajectory of the salutation and awkwardly responded, "Most def-i-nitely."

"What was that?" Jamboree asked.

"I don't know," Angie said. "I borrowed her notes once."

"You said you wanted to talk," Jamboree said. "When you texted from Jake's phone."

"Yeah," Angie said. "I did—I do . . . want to talk. Um . . ."

Angie cleared her throat.

"Is everything okay?" Jamboree asked. "Something happen with your mom again?"

"Yeah," Angie said. "I mean, no. It's not about my mom. Though it's an increasingly strange nightmare at home that would be best described as a—"

Angie had digressed.

"But that's . . ." Angie corrected. "It's not what I want to talk about . . . with you. What I want to talk about—it's a . . . a good thing."

"I like good things." Jamboree's smile wrapped around Angie's heart in layers.

"Yeah, me too. Liking of the good things." Angie took a deep breath. "I wanted to ask you . . ." The speech was returning. "First I wanted to say I really like . . ."

Angie was ready.

Angie was ready for everything.

Angie was ready for everything except what happened next.

The roar of a souped-up Honda Ruckus scooter engine ripped through the student parking lot. The headlights beamed in Angie's direction. As much as headlights could beam in the daylight on a cloudy day. Angie lost all sense of time, space, and even the fact that Jamboree was standing beside her because KC Romance, Angie's first girlfriend, had just unexpectedly cruised back into her life on two of the sexiest wheels possible.

KC killed the engine and lowered the kickstand. Her

punk-style cowboy boots crushed the pavement as she squeezed the hand grips. With a thrust of her hips, KC tamed the Ruckus into a freestanding park. The action, both powerful and slightly masculine, ignited an unexpected turn-on in Angie, who had all but written KC off. Written her off because KC had broken Angie's sugar-cookie heart.

Seeing KC again on the mysterious, matte-black Ruckus, all the excitement of the sweating Rock You Like a Hurricane Italian Cream Soda and asking Jamboree out slipped from Angie's consciousness. Because right then, the mystery of KC Romance had returned to Dryfalls, Ohio, and Angie was surprisingly curious.

KC slid her helmet off, her silky hair spinning in Angie-imagined slow motion. Puffs of blue and red streaked KC's hair, cascading to that unspeakable-yet-often-spoken-of purple heart tattoo along the nape of her smooth neck. She unzipped her vintage leather jacket; a flash of a new belly-button ring taunted Angie. Even from fifteen feet away, Angie could imagine the smell of KC's signature cherry ChapStick.

Angie's lips parted. The thinnest parcel of breath escaped, much the way it had when she'd seen KC for the first time in gym class a year earlier. What was this feeling? This feeling of longing when Angie had undeniably been:

- A. Hurt by KC.
- B. Done with KC.

- C. Involved in something, though not yet defined, with Jamboree.
- D. All of the above.

Angie looked at Jamboree, who had clearly seen Angie's no-poker-face reaction. This was when Angie decided she was in a conundrum.

Conundrum (n): A problem or question of intricate difficulty. Often presented in various fictional narratives to allow character growth.

Angie did not like conundrums, even when presented to her in the newest iteration of her more confident self.

"You two should probably"—Jamboree began to back up—"talk."

"What?" Angie said. "No, wait."

"I know what she means to you," Jamboree said.

"*Meant.*" Angie reached for Jamboree's hand but hesitated.

"That wasn't a 'meant' look. It's okay. Really. It's . . . it's KC."

But it wasn't okay, as evidenced by Jamboree's forced smile. Angie cradled the Rock You Like a Hurricane Italian Cream Soda against her chest, not sure what to do. This was not part of the index cards.

"Um . . ." Angie managed.

Jamboree paused. "I forgot. Zeke said to find them before class."

"Hey," Angie called out. "See you at lunch, right? Just like, um, usual."

"Of course," Jamboree said.

"Is that 'of course' spelled N-O?"

Jamboree smiled halfheartedly. "It's spelled Y-E-S, actually."

Jamboree half waved, disappearing into the school. Angie turned as KC strutted confidently toward her.

"Hey," KC said.

Angie's thumbs jammed beneath her backpack's shoulder straps. "Hey."

"New look," said KC. "Retro with a slit of indie in the jeans."

Angie looked down at the ripped knees of her jeans, not sure how to follow up.

"Definitely, cool tee," KC said.

"Thanks."

AWKWARD!

"Benatar is beast," KC continued. "Sincerely, edge times pi. First time I heard her was in one of Esther's prized throw-back flicks, *The Legend of Billie Jean*. You know it, right? 'Fair is fair.'" KC's fists pumped into the air.

"No, I, uh—I don't," Angie said.

"Oh, it's a must-marathon on VHS. Definite double feature with *Over the Edge*. No, wait, wait. Even better. *Foxes*.

Yes, *Foxes* with Jodie Foster. Oh my goddess, why can't she be our age right now?"

Angie thought this was rhetorical, but the lag time seemed to suggest maybe it wasn't.

"Because she's an adult?" Angie said.

"The perils of aging," KC said. "You and I will be forever young, though. I've decided I'm never getting old."

Why was KC acting as if they'd just seen each other at The Backstory last night? Things had happened. Lots of things had happened.

"I thought . . ." Angie began. "You were going to stay in Dallas. Life repaired by a Disneyland excursion or something."

"That buy-my-affection trip was a bust. Plus, I was over Dally. I mean, it's fine for a city in Texas. There's a sizeable underground VHS collector scene, queer-friendly in spots, but I was one hundred and ninety-nine percent over my dad on my ass twenty-four/seven. Dress like this. Act like that. Go to a megachurch so you can be megastraight. Highlight moment of his overt misogyny was when he said, 'KC, smile. You're prettier when you smile.' I was like, really? How did you ever impregnate my mom?"

Angie chuckled.

"Anyway," KC said. "I was literally suffocating in that suburban minimansion complete with heated pool and phony facade of a marriage to Mitzi, his man-wife. The woman literally has balls on the back of her truck."

"What?" Angie laughed.

"No joke," KC said. "Red rubber testicles hanging from the tow hitch. She's this ex-mechanic-turned-book-club-housewife who sells loads of cutesy shit on Etsy that she finds at estate sales. Her kids hate her as much as I do, but no alliances were ever to be made because they hate my dad and anything connected to him. Which is understandable. He's a tool. Massive."

Quiet.

More quiet that wasn't really quiet because people were talking all around them.

"So . . . I missed you," KC said, an unexpected vulnerability lingering. "A lot, actually. Probably more than I've ever missed anyone, you know?"

This was the part in the reunion with the witty, funny, intelligent, sexy first-but-now-very-ex-girlfriend where Angie was supposed to say, "I missed you too," because she had at first. She had missed KC to the point of longing that felt like a sickness. Angie hadn't simply filled that hole with Jamboree. Had she?

Before Angie could launch into contemplating the depths of her mixed feelings, which were many, the bell ceremoniously rang. Angie had literally been saved by the bell. The irony was not lost on her, and she would make note of it in her therapeutic journal for later reflection.

"I, um . . . need to go," Angie said.

"I'll walk with," KC said.

"If it's okay, I'd rather you didn't."

KC nodded. "Gotcha. Too much, too fast . . . too me. So, I'll see you later."

"Seems likely."

KC held steady for a beat longer before she left.

"Can't Fight This Feeling" faded out as Angie pressed STOP on her Walkman. Leaning against Jamboree's car, Angie wondered not just about KC's surprise return, but why she had let Jamboree simply walk away.

Chapter 2

It started with a few looks between classes later that morning. Nothing particularly noteworthy, or so Angie thought. But by the time she stood in line at the cafeteria, something was unquestionably amiss. Dozens of eyes launched from their phone screens, locking onto her. Staring wasn't an aberration in Angie's high-school experience, but *how* people were staring was. Their expressions teemed with a kind of awe and . . . excitement?

Skater Girl Rosie threw a nod to Angie as she walked past. Angie craned her neck toward her just as Zeke jogged up, camcorder in blinking-red record mode.

"Ooo, I like the hair color," Angie said. "It's very . . ."

"Pelt-the-Patriarchy Purple with hints of Anti-fascist Azul."

"I'm guessing that's not the name officially listed on the box," Angie said, picking up a food tray.

"No, but it should be," Zeke said, tugging at their ostomy bag through their shirt.

"You okay there?" Angie asked Zeke.

"Pinche adhesive. My skin is all pissed. Anyway. Girl, I sent you, like, six texts yesterday."

"My mom still has my phone," Angie said as the line finally picked up.

Zeke adjusted the weights stabilizing their DIY Steadicam. "Wasn't your dad gonna negotiate an early release?"

"It didn't exactly work out that way." Angie perused a pan of sickly rehydrated broccoli that looked like it had been dipped in the murky waters of the Hocking River. "They're still fighting about everything and nothing. He calls. She hangs up. She calls. He hangs up."

"And adults say *we're* immature."

"Right," Angie said. "Oh, and last night. You would have loved it. Absolutely camera-worthy. Wang and me and John/Rick were sitting at the dinner table right after my mom hung up on my dad. John/Rick asked her to pass the chicken tikka masala, and she threw it against the wall behind him."

"No shit!" Zeke said.

"No, um, shit. Then she threw the rice. Even the naan."

"That's hard core," Zeke said, camera back in record mode.

"I know," Angie said. "I really like naan. Anyway, she broke up with him. Right then and there. Wang started clapping. She started yelling. And John/Rick started spouting some self-help/couple counseling whatever-whatever. I'm just sitting there thinking after every idiotic thing John/Rick has said or done in the last year, it just took 'Pass the chicken tikka masala'? Strange."

Angie signaled the cafeteria server for fish sticks.

"It's never about the chicken tikka masala," Zeke said. "Adult relationships are a fervent spawn of lies and bored ideations."

"Huh," Angie said. "Yeah. Maybe. Anyway, sorry I didn't get your messages or meet up for songwriting yesterday. We were on an unofficial lockdown post-dinner drama. Wait. Did you get back with Raquel?"

"Yeah, no," Zeke said. "That would take divine intervention from the goddess."

"Or you apologizing for being weird. About the whole bag thing."

Zeke sighed. They did not like to be called out. It just wasn't something they knew how to handle, as evidenced by them saying—

"So, no one has said anything to you today?" Zeke continued to film.

"You can't deflect forever," Angie said.

"I'm not . . . deflecting about the O-bag and Raquel's freak-out."

"She didn't actually freak out," Angie said. "You kind of—"

"Angie," Zeke said. "You didn't talk to Jamboree? Darius?"

Choosing not to comment about her Jamboree blunder before school, Angie simply shook her head.

"Woman, I've got something good to tell you," Zeke said. "Really unbelievably good. My mother would call it a milagro. My father would make fun of her for calling it that. Which, my pinche dad. I can't even."

Angie grinned while paying the cashier. "What is it?"

"Okay, but at first it may seem like it's not good, but it's good, so you can't get mad."

In her brief knowing of Zeke, when they said *you can't get [fill in the blank]*, it often meant fill-in-the-blank was the inevitable outcome.

"You get that's holding me hostage?" Angie said. "Saying I can't get mad. My therapist would say it's denying me my mad."

"Yeah, okay, but you still can't get mad."

Angie waited.

And waited.

And when the waiting seemed like it might extend well past lunch, Zeke said, "I posted a video of you on YouTube."

This was a moment of unbridled terror, as evidenced by Angie's expression.

"Wait—what video?" Angie asked.

“Girl, you *can’t* get mad.”

“What video, Zeke?”

In the pause that followed, Angie knew that Zeke was withholding information for dramatic, on-camera effect. Angie was reaching for the lens when Zeke blurted out, “The one with you singing with Cat Scratch in Cincinnati.”

“What?” Angie’s loudness put the table closest to her at pause. Angie’s head whipped left—right. The looks in the hallways . . . between classes . . . before school. There in the cafeteria . . . They had seen her—singing?

“It’s not a bad thing,” Zeke said. “People like it *a lot*.”

The world of Angie Tilt-A-Whirl spun. All while holding a plate of greasy fish sticks and congealed cheesy tots sprinkled with freeze-dried parsley.

“It’s viral,” Zeke said. “Angie, it’s—”

Wang crashed into Angie from behind, chewing a mouthful of cheeseburger. He shoved his phone in her face. “Dude, why didn’t you tell me?”

Angie’s eyes widened.

Her mouth dropped open.

By all accounts, she was in a state of disbelief.

She had to write the number of views as an algebraic equation in her mind.

Angie + Video of Song = 833,242 views!

She looked up from Wang’s phone, Zeke’s camera still filming her.

“Right?” Zeke said.

"That can't be real," Angie said.

"It's for real, yo." Wang threw his arm over his sister's shoulders. "Your shit's viral, and not even for doing anything dumb for once."

She shoved him. He continued to laugh as he stumbled back.

Zeke circled Angie with their camera, pelting Angie with a litany of questions. "How do you feel? What do you feel? When are you dropping your next video? What do you want to say to your fans, chica?"

"Fans?" Angie chuckled.

"The numbers don't lie, Ang," Zeke said. "What did I tell you? I said you have a story and people wanna know. You got fans, girl."

The number of views continued to orbit the gravity-dense atmosphere of her confused mind. Angie had been a joke in online videos—in GIFs. A joke until recently at her high school.

Wang gathered a handful of cheesy tots from Angie's tray as she tilted his phone toward her, scrolling through the comments. The obvious *Fat Bitch with a mic* and *Shamu out of the tank* were there, but many of them were like *Badass!* and *U ROCK! Love this song! Go, Fat Angie!*

"You called me Fat Angie?" she said to Zeke.

"You said was it was your superhero name. I wrote it with nothing but reclaimed-word respect. I can change it if you want."

"No . . . it's . . . I just . . . never thought eight hundred thousand people would know it. Not hate me for it."

"It's the opposite of hate," Zeke said. "It's like a big, beautiful body celebration. Tyler Oakley retweeted the video, and it blew up," Zeke said. "Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram. It's everywhere."

Angie's pseudo-fame euphoria crashed with the word *everywhere*. The video could not be everywhere because that meant—

"My mom doesn't know I did this," Angie said to Zeke. "She doesn't know I went to Cincinnati."

"She knows you dumped your sister's ashes in the Ohio River," Zeke said, matter-of-fact.

"It's a very *big* river, Zeke!" Angie said. "She's going to kill me. Not like in a family television series where kids get in trouble and say 'My mom's going to kill me.' I mean, like, she may physically harm me. The naan, remember? She hasn't said a word to me since Gary Klein got suspended. Not a word. This might elicit . . . all of them. The bad ones anyway."

"She wouldn't hurt-you-hurt-you, right?" Zeke said. "Ang? Would she? Has she?"

Wang shot off a text, leaving Angie to continue to hide the volatile reality of their home life.

"I'm just—she's on the edge of whatever the edge looks like," Angie said. "She's been sitting in her room almost all day and . . ."

"Being a pain in my ass," Wang said, finishing his text. "And Angie's right. Our mom sees this, she's gonna shit like fifty-five angry bricks."

Wang's questionable descriptor was remarkably accurate.

"Why didn't you ask me, Zeke?" Angie said.

"It just—sort of happened." Zeke rested the camera rig against their shoulder. "Like, I showed it to my friend Finster who dropped it to her friend in California, who sings for the Raging Rachels, and she loved it. And she was like, 'you have to post this,' and I tried to text you, and then it just kind of went from there."

It was a good thing, a bad thing, and a potentially very ugly thing if Connie saw the video. Angie was not sure how to proceed.

"Dude." Wang nudged her.

"Not a dude, and I'm thinking," she said.

"Look, I don't want to," Zeke said. "But if you want, I'll pull the vid."

"No. I don't know. I mean, maybe?"

"It's not a maybe," Wang said. "It's a for-sure pull. It's one thing if it was me. I could give three steamy, long shits what happens."

"That's disgusting," Angie said.

"But you." He shook his head. "You gotta just not set her off."

Angie looked at Wang's phone. The video froze on

her and her primal-scream face. Seeing herself standing onstage, confident, fearless, not the Dryfalls Angie the world had come to know, it was a wow moment of the strangest variety. Maybe her mom wouldn't find out. Maybe if she did, she wouldn't go nuclear on Angie. On that stage, Angie wasn't meek or weak, and those were the two things Connie disliked the most about Angie. Well, behind her weight and mental health problems. And her love of her father's favorite music and—Angie had to stop listing because she was starting to panic.

"Just promise me you won't post *anything* else without asking," Angie said.

"I promise," Zeke said. "Gender-nonconforming honor."

Angie half chuckled.

"You guys wanna hug it out or something?" Wang asked. "Because—"

Wang's attention tipped toward the glass double doors as KC strutted inside. Zeke's and Angie's gazes soon followed Wang's as KC effortlessly maneuvered through the crowd of kids gathered near the salad bar.

"The plot thickens," Zeke said, camera back in record mode.

"Hey," KC said to Angie, before, "What up, Wang? Thanks for not passing on my text to Angie that I was coming back."

Angie's look to Wang was laced in not-so-subtle daggers. He shrugged. "Must've forgot."

Clearly, he had not.

"That new ink is rabid, yo," Wang said, eyes on KC's wrist.

KC pulled up her shirtsleeve, revealing a witch's hat propped against a steampunk broom with the words

Witches Don't Play

"I wanted something a little smoky, little buttery, you know." She lowered her sleeve. "One body. One life. Make it count, right?"

"Aren't you, like, sixteen?" Zeke asked.

"I was three hundred when I handed him the cash," KC said. "The place was legit. Health department gold star. Just a little after-hours stop. Friend of my mom's."

The exchange of looks between KC and Zeke was more adversarial than Angie might have expected. A moment that she would surely note in her therapeutic journal for later reflection.

"Check this." Wang regrettably rolled up his T-shirt sleeve to show off what seemed the result of a painfully drunken night for both him and the tattoo apprentice.

KC cocked her head to the side ever so slightly. "It's . . ."

But before she could finish, Wang said, "Bruce Lee. *Game of Death*."

It was truly, without question, a death of some kind, but *Game of Death* would have been a stretch of epic proportions.

"Yeah, I'm not seeing that," KC said. "More Middle Earth

Frodo with some . . . is that spaghetti in the background?"

He dropped his sleeve. "It's not literal Bruce Lee. Not entirely. Besides, I need some touch-up."

"You need a cover-up," KC said. "Listen, bad tattoos happen to even moderately good people. Come by Esther's shop. She's hella good with cover-ups. It's like her tattooist superpower. Sincerely. This weekend a woman came in. She got inked in Vegas because all things bizarro tattoo-wise happen there after twelve hours in a windowless casino downing three-dollar drinks while playing the slots. So, this woman is crying on my mom's shoulder. Full of ink remorse because she had two sunny-side-up eggs tattooed in a fit of irony."

"What was the irony?" Angie asked.

KC shrugged. "Irony is irrelevant. Relevant is that a few hours on my mom's table, her cover-up was ultra-even. Exquisite. Look."

KC slid her phone from her back pocket. A couple of taps and a few swipes and there were the before and after tattoo photos. Angie leaned in, the bareness of her arm touching KC's and igniting a twinge of unwanted attraction—of a familiar ache.

"You'd never know someone cracked eggs on her skin, right?" KC grinned at Angie before turning to Wang. "Besides, Esther will give you the friends-and-family discount, which is probably free because she loves Angie like a second child."

"Wang!" Cody Riley shouted from across the cafeteria.

Wang waved that he'd be right there before Angie pulled him to the side. "Why didn't you tell me she was coming back?"

"Yo, slow your roll," Wang said. "I didn't tell you your ex was coming back so you wouldn't punk out on asking Jamboree out. You did it, right?"

"Wang!" Cody called out, again.

"Look, I gotta go," Wang said to Angie. "I can't give you a ride after school, so hit Jake up."

"Wang . . . you promised not to hang out with Criminal Cody. He's the actual definition of trouble."

"Even famous you're weird," Wang said, backing up. "Relax. I'm an expert at avoiding trouble."

That was a canard. Wang was an expert in attracting trouble. From the opposite sex, from the same sex, from police officers, teachers, his mother, his father, and his court-appointed therapist, who had been sleeping with their mother until recently. Trouble was synonymous with Wang, only Angie understood less and less exactly why.

Wang threw Criminal Cody a snap-shake. Angie's stomach tightened because he was next-tier trouble. Unlike Wang, there was nothing poser criminal about him.

"Should I've lied?" KC asked Angie. "About the ink?"

"You could've modulated the emasculating," Zeke said, a defensiveness in their voice.

"Esther raised me to never lie about a bad tattoo. The

only person who's happy after bad ink is the jerk who pocketed the cash."

Zeke turned off their camera. "Weren't you supposed to be, like, in Texas?"

KC gave Zeke an up-and-down before saying, "I was in Dallas, and now I'm here. It's like a rabbit in a magic hat."

Uncomfortable.

Super uncomfortable quasi-confrontation between Zeke and KC.

"I feel like I just crashed into the middle of a joke with no punch line," KC said.

"Yeah, it's not a joke," Zeke said. "Ang doesn't hear from you . . ."

"Zeke—"

"Then you just show up, rabbit and magic, cracking on people's ink." Zeke stepped toward KC.

"Zeke," Angie said.

"What?" Zeke asked.

"Not yours," Angie said. "Okay?"

Zeke nodded, then leaned into KC, whispering, "Don't mess with her head."

Zeke stepped back, heading out the glass doors plastered with homecoming posters.

"So . . . who is that, and why does she hate me to the nth?" KC asked Angie.

"*They* or *them*. Pronoun-wise. It's new-ish—to me, not to them. And hate . . . maybe more protective instead."

“Because they’re your girlfriend?”

“We write music together,” Angie said. “Watch a lot of foreign films.”

“Didn’t know writing music was your thing,” KC said.

“The world of your not knowing about what matters to me . . . is pretty vast right now. Like what it felt like when you left. When you stopped texting. When you just . . . moved on.”

“I didn’t *just* anything. And I definitely didn’t move to anything except Dallas. I told you. I missed you. Like, by the seconds.”

Angie nodded. “And the avocado-green-haired girl? With all the piercings that you posted pictures with? Which seconds of the missing was she in?”

KC paused, and it was in this pause that Angie felt a prickly, hot anger sprint along the corridors of nerve endings and flush her face.

Angie did not like anger.

Angie did not like knowing that while anger could be healthy, she rarely felt it that way.

Angie did not know how to navigate the complexities of this specific anger.

“Look, I had to make friends—try to fit,” KC said. “I still missed you. I just didn’t know . . . how to miss. But I’m here now. I wanna know about writing music and foreign films. Like, are you more the Clash or Beyoncé? French New Wave or Bergman?”

KC reached for Angie's hand. A confusing flutter expanded in Angie's stomach. She was mad. She didn't want KC holding her hand, but somehow it felt familiar and oddly alluring. Angie stepped back.

"But you didn't want to know then—when I needed you to know," Angie said. "And now you do? Don't you get that it's not— Don't you get how much you hurt me?"

"Let's just—have a do-over. You plus me and a sugary substance at The Backstory. A roll of quarters and *Galaga* in the arcade."

"What's wrong with you? Things have happened, KC. You weren't here."

"I made a mistake and I'm trying—"

"Yeah." Angie backed away from KC. "You did make a mistake."

"Angie . . . C'mon. It doesn't have to be fatal."

"You ghosted me," Angie said. "I can't. This. You."

Angie paused at the glass doors facing the courtyard. Jamboree sat, legs crossed, on top of their unofficially reserved table. Darius's head was characteristically buried in a textbook. Zeke filmed Jamboree now twirling her drumsticks, telling what was likely a funny story. Jamboree had the best stories. Maybe ever.

Pops of orange and red leaves rained around the trio. The whole scene could have easily been a snapshot from a trendy clothing ad in a number of magazines. All of them there smiling, laughing—that was Angie's new life minus

KC. A life where she had finally belonged. But for the first time since returning from the road trip, she questioned whether she truly belonged in that commercial-smiling-laughter version of her life. That version had a shelf life, with Darius determined to enlist in the air force after graduation, Zeke applying for film school in California, and Jamboree deciding whether to do another semester abroad. Where would Angie fit then? When the table was empty?

Angie looked over her shoulder at KC with her back to her. It hadn't all been bad with KC. It hadn't been all good either. There were many downs. Maybe more than ups, but KC was—she was KC. All that emulated the rugged rebellion of a feminist badass. Even if KC's slang was largely a creation influenced by her *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series fandom, it was KC speak, and it still made Angie feel . . . something she would have never expected. Confused.

Given the girth of Angie's perplexed and cluttered heart, she did what any empowered young woman with budding Internet fame would do. She retreated into the girls' restroom and waited for lunch to be over.

Chapter 3

Lockers opened and slammed shut while Angie stuffed her backpack, testing the limits of its threadbare edges. Her mind continued to spiral, as it had most of the afternoon, with both the excitement and the fear of being viral for something she wasn't ashamed of.

"Hey," KC said, her back collapsing against the locker next to Angie's.

Angie shook her head.

"I get it," said KC. "You're mad. You're right to be mad. Okay?"

"I don't need you to tell me that," Angie said. "That I get to be mad. It's just that. Me being me and not trying to fit whatever works for you."

"Wow." KC rolled onto her shoulder. "Is that what you were doing?"

Angie sighed. Articulating her feelings was not a strength in her relationship with KC because KC had been fragile-ish. For all her talk of ultra-even and feminist fury, she was just as wounded as Angie. Sometimes maybe even more so.

Angie noticed a series of scratches—fresh cuts—peeking from KC's shirt collar. KC quickly shifted her stance to hide them.

"When did you do that?" Angie said.

"Life is a maze with a lot of turns," KC said.

"Did you do that after lunch?"

"No," KC said defiantly. Maybe defensively. Angie was not entirely certain. "There is nothing to worry about. I'm working on it. New therapist. New plan."

Which was what KC had said many a time in many different ways when she had fallen off what she called the cutter's wagon. Not a phrasing Angie had ever been entirely comfortable with, but she acknowledged it was KC's way of minimizing it.

"Listen," KC said. "I saw your video. It's so extra-ultra. I never thought I'd hear 'transcranial magnetic stimulation' in a song, and it totally works because, you know, inherently that shit freaks me out. Happened to a friend of mine in Cali. But this song! Ang, I can't wait for girls to start burning the teen magazines coaching them on frivolous lip gloss techniques and fall fashion fixes in effigy. That would be essential."

"I guess," Angie said, flatly.

"You guess," KC said. "Okay. I know you don't want to talk to me. Fair. Kind of. But there's this competition. I found out about it when I was still in Dallas." KC slid her cell from her jacket pocket. "Look. Rock Riot. It's been going on for a few years. See? They're looking for all-female bands. Everything happens online. Which, bonus, you have a massive fan base. All you have to do is video a couple of original songs, make a promo vid, et cetera. You gotta enter."

Angie closed her locker. "I don't have a band. And even if I did," she said, glancing at KC's phone, "the deadline is in, like, three weeks."

Angie zipped up her backpack, shouldering it.

"You could do this," KC said.

"I don't want to talk to you."

Angie turned, but KC followed, cutting in front of her.

"What can I do? What?" KC asked. "I'm sorry that I— didn't handle leaving better or whatever. I'm sorry for it."

"You can't say sorry if you don't even know what it's for."

"Remember us?" KC said. "You. Me. *BTVS* marathon. Vanilla Coke in the bed of my mom's truck. Fourth of July. Eyes on each other. Like a queer country song if *ever* one was written. You could write it! I, of course, would be the heartbroken, boot-wearing damsel not in distress. I'd have a dog. A hound dog. We could name him Elvis."

"What are you talking about?" Angie said.

"Our country song."

Angie sighed. "We don't—KC, we're not a we."

KC reached for Angie's hand. "I love you. You're my best friend."

And that was when it happened. That moment in movies where the smart-sexy-troubled-ex-girlfriend professes her love only to have the current heart's interest come around the corner and see it all unfold. Jamboree's stride slowed down before backing up.

"I have to go," Angie said.

Angie jogged around the corner, the bottom of her backpack slapping against her lower back. It was a truly painful feeling.

"Jamboree!" she called out. "Jam."

Jamboree paused just outside the building.

"Hey," Angie said.

"Hey," Jamboree said, arms crossed over her stomach.

"I, um," Angie said, drawing a blank.

"Wang texted me to give you a ride," Jamboree said. "I was . . . coming to tell you I have auditions for Jazz Band and if you could wait until after. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You didn't, um . . . interrupt. Anything." Angie's heart and head flooded with half-written sentences scribbling toward completion.

Quiet.

More quiet.

"Zeke told me about KC and lunch," said Jamboree. "Are you okay?"

Angie considered the question for an unmeasured amount of time as she was prone to do when put on the spot.

"I'm sorry," Jamboree said. "I probably shouldn't have asked."

"No, of course you should ask," Angie said. "You can ask anything. We're friends."

Jamboree's head lowered ever so slightly. A clear indication that she was under the assumption that there was more between them than friendship. And there *was* more between them. A lot more, though not yet defined. And while REO Speedwagon's chorus to "Can't Fight This Feeling" began playing in Angie's mind, something kept Angie from saying what she really wanted—felt. *Carpe diem* Angie was not.

"I'm not saying anything right." Angie looked down at her boots. "It's been a really weird day. Viral video, an A on an English test I was absolutely sure I failed, and Wang continuing to be . . . And my mom. That's, like . . . I don't know."

"Is she talking to you yet?" Jamboree asked.

"She sighed in my direction yesterday, which is better than seething, I guess," Angie said. "It's still mostly Netflix bingeing in her bedroom and micromanaging this ridiculous film about my sister. Which I can't even put together that it's happening."

"Zeke said they're filming here in a couple of weeks?" Jamboree said.

"Yeah. Plus we have to do this stupid family interview when they're here. I hate the interviews so much. There's nothing real about them except how uncomfortable they are. But I just . . . with my mom. I keep thinking maybe she'll hate me less if I go along with it."

"She doesn't hate you," Jamboree said.

"I did pour the remains of her firstborn in the Ohio River. Which really sounds twisted when I say it out loud."

Angie looked away, recalling Connie's coldness to her since she'd returned from her unsanctioned road trip, urn empty. The days and weeks that followed procured a hole in Connie unlike anything Angie had seen, leaving Angie to feel responsible for Connie's descent from high-functioning alcoholic to her "leave" from the law firm and pouring a glass of wine before ten most mornings. Regardless of the many ways Connie had wounded Angie, Angie had never meant to hurt her mother.

"Hey." Jamboree's fingers brushed against Angie's wrist.

"Sorry," said Angie.

"You don't have to apologize," Jamboree said. "You don't have to be anything but whatever you are. Just you."

"How do you do that?" Angie asked.

"What?"

"Be so . . . kind?" Angie said.

Jamboree laughed. "I guess it's my superpower."

The wind sprayed Jamboree's hair across her face. A face faintly dotted in freckles and two small blemishes along the edge of her chin. Blemishes she could have covered with concealer but hadn't. Her smile was slightly crooked. Her eyes were wild and calm, and it was in that duality that the noise about Angie's family and the movie and all the other things dropped out to . . .

"What?" Jamboree said.

"Um," Angie said. "You know, we're not just friends. I wanted to say that before—earlier. Not that we're not friends. Because we're definitely, absolutely—you know."

The anxiety from the rambling—the nonsensical tripping over her feelings was utterly confidence crushing. She simply had to say—

"Yeah?" Jamboree offered.

"Maybe . . . I could come by later," Angie said. "I've got this dinner thing tonight with my dad and his newish-not-newish wife. I mean, it's really just a stop on the way to a conference in Cleveland, but he's made it out to Wang that it's about us, so I kind of have to go. And that was, like, the longest sentence ever."

"It was a perfectly fine sentence," Jamboree said.

"So . . . I could come by after?" Angie said. "If that's okay."

Jamboree grinned. "Sure."

One Grin + One Sure = Tingles

"Swell," Angie said. "Exponentially."

"So, maybe around eight or so?" Jamboree said.

"I'll text you from Wang's phone when we're done," Angie said.

"Good luck," Jamboree said. "With your dad and his . . . what do you call her?"

Angie smiled. "His newish-not-newish wife, Sharon."

"Good luck with her, too," Jamboree said, heading toward the band hall.

Angie would ask Jamboree out while they did homework, perhaps with Prince or Bowie spinning on vinyl in the RV. She would move past her confusion with KC and forward in her new life with Jamboree, however uncertain it might be. All she had to do was get through dinner.

Angie's palms pressed against the top of her mother's dining room chair while she stared hopelessly at a series of headshots stretched across the table. Twenty full-color photos had been assembled in two precisely aligned rows of ten. Angie was dumbfounded by the character names matched to the actors. It was—

"Your dad called," Connie said, her voice startling Angie. "He said they'll be late. Surprise."

Connie stood across from Angie, a glass of chardonnay in hand, as she reviewed the headshots. Nervously, Angie's index finger rubbed a jagged nick along the back of the expensive, hand-carved-to-Connie-perfection chair. Unsure of her exit strategy, unsure what her next best move was

because even with a table between them, being alone with Connie felt too close.

"He wants you to meet him there," Connie said, not looking up from the table.

"Um, okay."

The imperfection in her mother's dining room chair slit Angie's finger. A line of blood exhaled along her thumb. Angie looked up from her hand at her mother, trying to understand some part of Connie, wearing a moth-chewed HORNETS' NEST TRACK T-shirt with designer jeans.

"What?" her mother said, sipping from her glass.

"So, these are the cast options?" Angie said.

Connie shuffled some of the headshots, studying their new pairing quietly. "The director and a small film crew are coming to film some kind of cinema verité B-roll during homecoming. That's how Joan explained it to me."

"I thought you weren't talking to anybody," Angie said.

"Why would you think that?"

Angie thought that mostly because Connie had rarely left the house the last few weeks, letting messages stack up on the landline answering machine, one of the few relics Connie clung to in what was becoming a largely digitally updated home.

"Anyway. They've asked me my opinion on a few of these people. It's more of a courtesy, but they want to get it right."

"Those actresses don't look anything like me," Angie said.

"They don't have to."

"But isn't that the point?" Angie asked. "The point of getting it right?"

Connie shuffled another series of headshots, seeming pleased with her new pairing. Angie, however, was not.

"These guys." Angie pointed to two headshots in the far top corner of the table. "Wang's Vietnamese. Not Korean or Filipino."

"They're people of color."

"They're the wrong color," Angie said. "You can't just swap out whatever version of ethnic you think is better."

"They screen-tested very well," Connie said.

"But it's a lie."

"It's a reframing of the narrative. I don't expect you to understand. You understand so little."

Angie clenched her jaw.

"This is really how you're going to do this," Angie said. "You're just going to rewrite us—cast people to play us to fit whatever idea you wish we could be."

"This is not about me. It's about honoring— It's an interpretation of your sister's life."

"Whose interpretation?" Angie said. "This is nothing like her life. That actress—right there. She doesn't even look like her."

"It's a headshot, Angie. Why do you have to make everything—"

"Wang's Vietnamese. I'm not a size eight. Dad doesn't have a scar above his eye like a cheap Harry Potter. Coach Laden is bustier and more . . . not that. And Imelda Sanchez, who played on the team, she's Afro-Latina, not white with curly hair."

"Stop." Connie's hand went up. "Just stop it."

"Mom, it's—"

"Can you just stop?"

Angie shook her head. "I don't want to fight with you. I just . . . This is so—wrong. Can't you see it?"

Angie and Connie shared a look that easily could have been timed at eight seconds. The length of time necessary for a rider to stay saddled on a bull in a rodeo. It seemed equally long and hard for Angie and her mother to look at each other. It was in this moment that Angie saw something shift in Connie's expression. The chiseled coldness loosened in the smallest of increments. Her eyes seemed to soften. Her heart was—

"Change your shirt before dinner," Connie said. "That one has a stain."

Closed. Her heart had closed as quickly as it nearly opened. A thorny ball of anxiety swirled in Angie's diaphragm.

"What happens when you try to just talk to your mother?" her therapist had recently asked Angie.

"You can't talk to someone who thinks you're invisible."

"Maybe . . . her grief makes it hard to reach out."

Angie had considered the notion, and then said, "So, what about before? Before, when Nat was still home. She didn't see me then. She looked through me, around me . . . to see Nat, Wang, the landscaper. Anyone who wasn't me."

Angie stood at the table alone. The sound of her mother's footsteps clapped along the stairs, her bedroom door soon closing. Tom Petty and the faint smell of a joint would likely follow.

Angie picked up one of two headshots marked:

ANGIE, AGE 16

The actress was television fat, which was way different from real fat. There was only the hint of a possible second chin, and in no world of acting did she appear sixteen.

Angie put the headshot back on the table, precisely in alignment with all the others, and walked toward the stairs thinking one thing: something had to change, but it wasn't going to be her shirt.

Chapter 4

Angie had waited for approximately twenty-three minutes, per the crooked clock behind the register of Jamie's "Truly Authentic" Chinese Dynasty. She had waited because Wang and her couldn't-be-accountable father and his newish-not-newish wife were, of course, late. She shifted on an unpadded bench while two white waitresses gawked from a pair of stools. It was a set of looks that normally would've made Angie cradle her stomach with her arms as if to somehow conceal the girth of her. But tonight she was not going to give them the satisfaction of reducing her body to something to be ashamed of. She was fat and beautiful, and they would just have to get used to it.

There had been a time, not that long ago, when Angie

would've salivated at an all-you-can-eat buffet. Tonight was not that night. As tempting as it was to eat her problems away, most notably those with her mother, she knew it would fix nothing.

The bell over the door jangled. Sharon walked in toting a large, sparkly gift bag though there was no reason for said bag. As far as Angie knew.

Angie readied herself for the uncomfortable hellos, *how are you, I-don't-know-what-else-to-say* as her dad stumbled in, attempting to wrangle a bouquet of balloons. Mylar balloons to be exact, with the phrase YOU'RE SO SPECIAL printed on each of them.

Angie cringed. The word *special* was specifically cringe-worthy for her.

"Hey, honey." He proudly presented the balloons to her. "There are M&M's in the base."

Angie stood there literally speechless. Not that she didn't have something to say, it was just that—

"What?" he said.

"You drive a Prius and you bought me Mylar balloons?" she said.

"I don't understand," he said.

"They're nonbiodegradable. Baby sperm whales get them stuck in the lining of their stomachs and die. They cause power outages if they get tangled in electrical lines."

"But you love balloons," he said.

"No," Angie said, handing them back to him. "Nat did."

It was at this infraction that the invisible space between them widened. One of the balloons went rogue, bouncing into her father's clearly fake-and-bake face as he batted it away.

"Oh . . . um," he scrambled for something to say, but only came up with an expression of embarrassment. "Nonbiodegradable, huh?"

Angie sighed. She simply wanted this portion of the evening to be over. She wanted to lounge in the back of Jamboree's RV, listening to Blondie, Bowie, Prince, INXS—anything but—

"Latex too?" her father asked.

Angie sighed. "Six months to four years. The length of time it takes to degrade."

"Wow. I didn't . . ." He turned to Sharon. "Did you know that?"

"Yeah, I did," she said. "That's why we didn't have them at the kids' parties."

"Huh," he said.

"Booth or table?" the waitress asked, eyes leaving a sizable trail of judgment Angie's way.

"Booth, please." Angie's dad turned to her. "Unless you want a—"

"It's fine," she said.

It was, of course, not.

The waitress escorted them to one of three U-shaped, tall-back booths. Angie worked to wedge herself into the

snug-fitting booth. While she attempted to push the table away from her, the waitress blurted out, "It's bolted down, sweetie."

"We can move to another table," Angie's dad said, tugging at his ear.

That was when Angie noticed that he had pierced his left ear with a diamond stud. From a suit and tie to flip-flops, dark-washed jeans, and a diamond earring, her father was truly a screaming example of midlife crisis.

"No, I'm fine," Angie said, surrendering to the pressure against her stomach.

She was not fine. She was annoyed. With the tightness of the table. With the electro-pop music accompanied by operatic vocals. With the fact that Wang, who wanted nothing more than to spend time with their dad, was late. With the Mylar balloons now floating in the center of the table.

In short, she was annoyed with the entire scene.

"Buffet or menus?" the waitress asked.

"Buffet. Right, Angie?" said her dad.

"If she wants that," said Sharon.

"Of course she does," he said dismissively.

"Sure," she agreed, just to have them stop talking about her like she wasn't there.

Finishing their drink orders, the three of them scooted out of the booth and perused the remarkably long line of buffet options. Pan after greasy and often sugarcoated pan of foods, including chow mein, fried rice, steamed rice, egg

rolls, crispy noodles, beef broccoli, sesame chicken, orange chicken, shrimp with snow peas, crab rangoon, egg foo yong, seafood delight, and to Angie's confusion, even pizza, meatball pasta, mashed potatoes, fried chicken, orange Jell-O, and tiny squares of vanilla cake with hints of ice along the frosted edges.

Angie wanted none of it.

Not a single bite.

She simply wasn't hungry, and she should have been famished.

"Angie?" Sharon said. "Everything okay?"

Angie sighed and plopped an obligatory small serving of fried rice and lemon chicken on her plate.

"You want more than that," her dad said, his plate heaped with a mountain of General Tso's chicken.

He pierced the vat of lo mein with a pair of food-encrusted tongs. The noodles dangled helplessly as he craned them over Angie's plate, plopping them on top of her rice and chicken.

Just breathe, she thought. Even if he can't see you.

"What's wrong?" he said. "You love lo mein. I mean, you do, don't you?"

One, she was a food separatist. She didn't like her food touching much less slopped together like in a trough. Two, had he really just decided what she wanted to eat?

"I didn't want it," she said.

"Oh," he said, clearly befuddled by her response.

"Jesse," said Sharon. "She can figure it out."

He proceeded down the line. Sharon mouthed to Angie, "He's trying" before following him.

Angie considered the egg drop soup as Marcus Murphy dumped a fresh container of egg rolls onto the buffet line.

"Hey, Ang," said Marcus.

"Hey, Marcus," she said, a bit surprised they were talking.

Surprised because . . .

Marcus Murphy hadn't said much to her since freshman year. While they had classes together in junior high, they'd parted ways after she flunked ninth. They weren't particularly unfriendly to each other. They just had little in common aside from an affection for '80s and '90s music, B-horror movies, and the steak fingers served on Wednesdays in the cafeteria. Which, to be honest, should have bonded them for life, but it had not.

"Dinner with your folks?" He nodded toward the booth.

"My dad and his newish-not-newish wife."

"My parents got divorced too," he said. "My mom remarried twice. I don't think I ever told you that."

"No," Angie said. "I guess that would be kind of weird."

"Yeah, mostly," he said. "She's in SAA now. Sex Addicts Anonymous."

"Which . . . isn't all that anonymous because you just told me?" Angie said.

He shrugged, wiping spilled food from the counter. "She tells everyone. We were at The Slice picking up a pizza, and she told Sydney Oliver. Whole school knows now."

"I'm sorry."

"I saw your video."

"Yeah," she said. "Weird, huh?"

"It was really cool," he said. "Like, really."

"Thanks."

He nodded. "Want some moo goo gai pan? We got some in the back."

"No, I'm okay."

"Okay," he said.

She started to walk away, but stopped. "Hey, Marcus."

"Yeah?"

"Sorry about your mom," she said.

"It could be worse."

Angie waited for the worse, only he couldn't think of anything.

"At least she's not a serial killer," Angie offered.

Marcus grinned. "At least."

He swiped food debris into a bucket before disappearing behind a set of double doors.

Angie's father was pouring soy sauce onto his meal when she squeezed back into the booth.

"Did you see that they have those puffy fried donuts?" her dad asked her.

She twirled her fork around the mound of lo mein, not looking at him. "Yeah."

He sucked soda through a straw, peering over the sauce caddy at Angie's plate. "You didn't get any. They're your favorite."

"Not really. Not . . . anymore."

Sharon, eating in small precise bites, smiled at Angie, who had begun to count. Eleven times. Sharon had chewed one bite eleven times. Surely, that level of mastication was exhausting to one's jaw.

"We could get something else after we leave if you want," Angie's dad said.

"Dad, just stop it." Angie's fork dramatically clanged against the plate though she had not meant it to. "Stop fixating on what's on my plate or what my favorite whatever is."

Confused, her father said, "What is that about?"

"This dinner. Tonight? You don't return calls or show up when you say you will, and all of a sudden you're here? Do you get this is the first time I've seen you since Nat's funeral? You said you'd come to the dedication ceremony, but you didn't. Not that I can entirely fault you because it was an epically disgusting fiasco, but I kind of do."

"You know we were still settling in . . . and," her dad said, "Sharon had knee surgery."

"Leave me out of this," Sharon said quietly.

A surprise volley of looks bounced between Sharon and Angie's father.

"Angie, I know your mom is hard," her dad continued. "Very hard. But . . . running away—"

"I didn't run away."

"That's not what she says," her dad said.

"And she's a reliable narrator, why? Do you get that—what she—"

What Connie really was. Not just the version that he knew. The version she and Wang lived with. The mother who had hit her, had privately fat-shamed and actively threatened to send her to a modified conversion therapy facility. The woman who had done all of that, and sold her sister's story to the highest buyer only to arrange twenty headshots of actors who were in no way even remotely similar to the real people of Nat's life. Still, there was Angie, not saying what was true out of some . . . she didn't even really know.

Angie stared through the bouquet of floating Mylar balloons at her dad. A man who was reliving his teen years one vintage concert T-shirt at a time. What was he really going to do to help her?

He laced his fingers, elbows propped along the sides of his plate.

"Why did you pour your sister's ashes in the river, honey?" he asked.

"Is that really a question?" Angie said.

"I think so," he said. "Don't you think it should be?"

"Why didn't you tell Wang and me that the ashes even existed? Do you know how many times he went to the cemetery? Like, he thought she was there—the parts of her that came back, anyway."

It was that image that put a full stop to Sharon eating.

"I think we're confusing the issue," Angie's father said.

Angie leaned back against the booth, arms crossed.

"Angie, you know you're my special girl and—"

"For the love of the goddess, don't say that. Don't call me special. Please."

"Um . . . okay," he said, caught off guard.

They sat in a palpable tension for an unmeasured time before the waitress came by. "Everything good?"

"We're fine," Sharon said.

"Can we have some water when you have a moment?" said Angie's father.

"Of course," the waitress said, seeming to sense the unease before leaving.

Leaving them in silence.

More loud and deafening silence with Angie screaming from inside. Screaming—

"What's going on?" her father offered weakly. "You're sullen. You're argumentative. Is the therapy not helping? She came highly recommended for kids who have experienced trauma and . . ."

His attention fell to Angie's wrists. To the scars. To the "Free Fallin'" moment in the gymnasium bathroom when

she had given up. Normally, Angie would've hidden her wrists beneath the table. "Normally" didn't work for Angie anymore.

"Attempted suicide?" Angie said. "Is that what you're trying to say?"

He shook his head and went back to his meal. Went back into his shell like the human turtle he had become prior to leaving Angie's mom. Went back to pretending nothing had happened to Angie or Nat or Wang or even himself. This was his way of hiding—his way of coping.

"Food," Angie had said to her therapist. "My dad was always hiding it. In his bedroom closet. His desk at work. The garage. I mean, we all knew. Everybody but Mom. I mean, maybe she knew."

Angie wrung her hands, feeling a wave of nausea rise. Then pass.

"When I was, um, maybe four or five, I had this really bad dream. And, um, I woke him up, but he didn't want to talk about it. He just walked me into the closet and gave me a prewrapped brownie. He said, 'It's all better now.' But it wasn't, and I didn't get that it wasn't. I mean, it was a brownie. Who doesn't want a brownie in the middle of the night?"

The therapist nodded.

"When things got harder, between him and my mom after Nat went overseas, he took me and Wang to Big Dave's Diner. Bought us these huge banana splits with extra everything. Whipped topping. Nuts. Cherries. But he didn't order anything

for himself, which was weird because he loved those banana splits. Wang just sat there. He wouldn't eat his. He knew. He knew what was coming."

"What did you do?" the therapist asked.

"I ate mine . . . and Wang's."

"How did you feel after what your dad said?"

Angie shrugged. *"Hungry."*

"I was going to wait for your brother," said Angie's father, reaching into the gift bag. "I've got something I think you'll be excited to have."

He held out a brand-new, on-trend cell phone with accompanying shatterproof case.

"We're paying for the service, so your mom has no reason to take it from you."

"So Mom doesn't know about it?" Angie asked.

He picked up his fork. "She doesn't need to."

Angie stared at the contraband cell phone. A phone she was expected to keep from her mother because her father didn't have the courage to meet Connie somewhere in the middle of their fighting.

"Wang," her dad called out.

Wang jogged up, popping his earbuds around his neck, stopping just short of the table. "Is that an earring, Dad?"

"Yeah," his dad said, self-consciously tugging at it. "Cool, huh?"

"No," said Wang.

"You have one."

"I'm seventeen," Wang said. "I have an active sex life and a deep collection of quality playlists. You're, like, almost fifty, yo. It just looks silly." Wang motioned for Angie to move over. "What did I miss?"

Angie rubbed her eye while sliding her plate toward him. "Dad wants to know why I put Nat in the Ohio River."

"Huh," Wang said, dumping chili-garlic sauce by the spoonful over the food. "Why didn't you tell us she was in the urn, Dad?"

"We did that part too," Angie said quietly.

"What did he say?" Wang asked.

"Okay, enough," their couldn't-be-accountable father said. "And that's too much chili sauce, Wang."

"I don't need you to tell me how to eat," Wang said.

Angie leaned in, whispering, "You'll likely die or wish you had."

Wang now clanged the fork against the plate. Apparently, it was a night of clanging forks.

"Seriously, Dad," Wang said. "Why didn't you tell us?"

Their father looked to Sharon, who could do little more than hold his hand beneath the table, an action that didn't sit well with Wang.

"Your mother," their dad began. "She needed it to be . . . it was easier to let her have it. She said she'd tell you when she was ready."

Wang looked to Angie. Angie, who seemed to lack the latitude that Wang was giving their dad.

"Look," said their dad. "This meal isn't about the urn, though I see how it was . . . hurtful."

He in no way understood how hurtful lying about the location of their sister's remains had been. That much Angie could surmise from the tone of his voice, which was a kind of tell. It was an inflection reserved for avoiding conflict.

"I have something for both of you." He reached into the sparkly gift bag.

He handed each of them a narrow gray envelope. Wang swigged a gulp of Angie's soda while Angie ripped open the side of her envelope. She shook the contents onto the table.

Two concert tickets and a hundred-dollar bill. Angie looked blankly at her brother.

"It's concert tickets. I thought it was something you could do together. Get out of the house. Take a couple of friends. There's four in total."

Angie slid the tickets and money back into the envelope. This was not the thing she wanted from her couldn't-be-accountable father. She knew this feeling. Like when he bought her a computer and cell phone and candy after she was released from the Yellow Ridge treatment facility post-attempted suicide. This wasn't a gift. It was a payoff.

"So, that's what this is about?" Wang said. "Tonight? Yo, I thought you were here to help with what's going on with Mom. She's like Bell and Jar."

"It's *The Bell Jar*, actually," Angie corrected.

"I know what it is," Wang snapped.

"I am," their dad said. "We're here. We plan to talk to her. If she'll talk."

Wang glared at Sharon. She was the enemy as far as he was concerned. The enemy who had no place—

"But why is *she* here?" Wang asked.

This was not a line even Angie felt safe to cross with her father.

"Because she's my wife," their father said.

"Right," Wang said. "And because you can't spend a second alone with us."

"That's not true," his father said.

"Yeah, then tell me," Wang said. "Tell me the last time you spent any time with Angie and me? Are you even going to this concert?"

"Like I said . . . look. Sharon and I, we . . . Wang, I get you've struggled here with your mom. And Sharon and I have talked it over, and we'd like you to come live with us. On a trial basis. Assuming there wouldn't be any . . . assuming you could adjust. Which I know you can."

Wang's eyes ping-ponged between them, and then to Angie. Angie, who was now staring at a scuff on the tabletop.

"What about Angie?" Wang said.

A new kind of quiet divided them. It was a distinct quiet that Angie had heard when she had asked to go with her dad when he first moved out. An ask that was returned with the label of *special*. It was a no then. It was a no now.

Angie shook her head. "It's not a package deal, Wang."

"We could," said her father, "talk about that as an option. Definitely a visit at Christmas break. It's really up to your mother."

"Screw Mom. I want to talk about it now," Wang said.

"He doesn't want me," Angie said. "That's what the phone was about, right, Dad? Consolation prize. For being the least favorite of the three, or the most messed up."

The waitress came by, setting down water glasses.

"Get you something, hon?" she asked Wang.

He shook his head, staring at his dad. The dad he had wanted more than anything to want him—to take him away from Dryfalls.

The waitress was barely out of earshot when Angie said to Wang, "It's okay. You can go with them."

"Bullshit," Wang said, turning to his dad. "What's wrong with you? Earring, new motorcycle, a wardrobe of wannabe cool. Do you even got a clue what Angie has been through? What *I* been through, Dad? Do you even read the fucking texts I send you or is it just newish Sharon that does?"

"Watch it," their dad said.

Wang shook his head and leaned against the booth.

This was not the Wang Angie knew from their post-missing-sister-in-the-Iraq-War time. It wasn't even the Wang she knew when Nat had still lived with them. Wang was standing up to their dad—for her? It was an aberration that would be marked in mere moments by frogs falling from the sky.

"I believed you," Wang said, holding up the envelope. "I believed you when you said you'd help us. You don't give a shit."

"It's more complicated than that, son," their dad said. "We have a family, and we are trying . . ."

"A family?" Wang said.

"Jesse," said Sharon.

"No, they need to listen," their dad said, turning to Wang. "Your sister has specific needs—"

"Wow," Wang said. "You really gonna do her like that? You have no idea what Angie needs. Yeah, she's weird. She's hella weird, but don't think her problems make her, like, defective, because she isn't, Dad. Being hurt isn't being broken."

"That isn't what I meant," said their dad. "I don't mean she's broken or special in that particular way."

"What particular way is it then?" asked Wang. "You know, don't even. You lied to me about why you were coming tonight. You lied about why you stayed so long. Why you split. You know what? This is bullshit. This whole thing is bullshit."

Wang slid out of the booth.

"If you could just sit down and hear what I have to say," said their father.

"Nah, I'm good," Wang said. "See, it actually is a package deal, Dad. Me and Angie. You don't get to pick whichever one you think is easier or looks best in your holiday

card with your *new* family." Wang turned to Angie. "You coming?"

The answer was absolutely, unquestionably yes. Angie scooted out from the grips of the ill-fitting table as Wang blew out the door.

"Angie," her dad said.

"Don't promise him anything anymore," Angie said. "Don't tell him you'll visit or that you'll call. Just don't."

"You think you can understand, but you can't, honey," he said.

"Maybe not. But I know that you're full of shit if you think an all-you-can-eat buffet and tickets to a concert that don't even include you showing up, *again*, is going to make anything better for us."

Angie was halfway to the door when she walked back to the booth.

"Also, taking the family dog?" Angie said. "Really messed up, Dad."

"Your mother hates Lester."

"But *we* didn't. He meant everything to Wang."

It was true.

Wang loved Lester.

Lester loved Wang.

These were indisputable facts.

Angie reached across the table and grabbed the phone. Practically speaking, she still needed one. She opened the door, the bell jangling as she left. She was well on her way

to Wang's Jeep, engine running, Tupac bass beating, when the clicking of heels tapped behind her.

"Angie," Sharon called out.

Angie stopped. "Sharon, don't—"

"I'm not going to defend him," she said. "I can't defend or explain how he has avoided being there for you and your brother."

It was in that moment that Sharon had fully captured Angie's attention. In a way that wasn't muddled in quasi-resentment for being the one her dad loved more than her and Wang.

"I'm just sorry," Sharon said. "It's harder for some reason with you and Wang without your sister for him. Again, I'm not excusing it."

"She was kind of the Gorilla Glue."

Sharon half smiled. It was layered in compassion and uncertainty. "It's funny, because I always thought of you as the glue."

It was a thought Angie had never considered.

Not one single time.

"You know," Sharon said. "I would have screamed if someone had put food on my plate when I was your age. I really *struggled* with my weight."

"The thing is, I'm not struggling with my weight. Everyone else is."

The loudness of Wang revving the engine swelled as he shouted, "Angie!"

"I gotta go," Angie said.

She climbed into Wang's Jeep. The wheels squealed out of the parking lot. Sharon still stood where Angie had left her. Angie's father came out of the restaurant, watching them pull away.

There was no specific soundtrack in Angie's mind. Just the sound of the distance growing between her and her father.

Chapter 5

Angie watched from the magazine aisle as Wang flirted with Lori Ochoa, a high-school senior working the Dryfalls IGA register. It wasn't that Wang had been dishonest about wanting to grab cheeseburgers and marshmallow shakes from Dee's Diner with Angie. They were both starving post-hellish dinner fail with their couldn't-be-accountable dad. It wasn't as though Wang had been dishonest about running into the grocery for a charging cable for his phone. Where fiction and fact had collided was when he'd omitted that Lori was working. Lori, the girl he'd privately pined for all summer and into the fall because she had been dating his buddy Winter. But with their recent breakup and Winter out, Wang saw an in. All of which seemed like poor decision-making on his part, but Wang specialized in the art of poor decision-making.

A Moderate List of Wang's Bad Decisions

1. Putting Monistat in Angie's toothpaste only to have his mother borrow it.
2. Eating an excessively large portion of wasabi to spite John/Rick and getting unbelievably sick to his stomach.
3. Insulting a girl holding a full can of Coke and consequently having it thrown at his head.
4. Gluing the individual pages of the school library's Twilight series together while in detention.
5. TP'ing his ex-girlfriend's house without disabling the security camera.
6. Cheating on his last three girlfriends.
7. Ordering twenty-nine pizzas with Connie's credit card and having them delivered to the principal's house.
8. Eating five live leeches on a dare and getting a bacterial infection.

Bored with her options of *Field and Stream*, *Bowhunter*, *J-14*, and a host of fitness, cooking, and home decorating magazines, Angie wandered the store. From one processed food aisle to the next, her stomach howled. She hadn't eaten since lunch, which felt like last week right then. She grabbed a can of Sour Cream and Onion Pringles and stopped.

"You can eat whatever you want," her therapist had said. "Just choose it. Know why you're choosing it."

"That's hard," Angie had said. "I'm hungry. I just want to eat."

"And you get to eat," said her therapist. "I'm not telling you not to eat. I just want to encourage you to be conscious of what you eat. Is it what you want, or is it a reaction to something else? If you want ice cream, have some ice cream."

It was then that Angie reshelved the canister because ice cream was exactly what she wanted. Though she was sure that wasn't the intended takeaway from her session.

Angie perused the seven freezer doors housing local favorite Jeni's Brown Butter Almond Brittle, Sweet Corn and Black Raspberry, and Darkest Chocolate. She stepped two freezer doors to her right, and the suction of the door exhaled as she opened it. The dense, cool air splashed against her face, sending a shiver across her shoulders. Her fingers tapped the tops of three ice cream pints before landing on Graeter's Buckeye Blitz. She closed the fogged glass door to see . . . Lucas Waite?

By some randomness of the universe, there in the ice cream section of the IGA, Angie stood with a quart of Graeter's and the winner of *Undiscovered*. Dryfalls' most famous breakout musician. Named by *Rolling Stone* as the "front man to watch," Rancid Reign's Lucas Waite was legend. The small-town singer had filled stadiums, teen magazines' trifold posters, and the hearts of women worldwide. At one point, he had his own brand of deodorant. He was a mystery, a phantom—an enigma of the highest gossip

proportions. Because Rancid Reign had collapsed under scandal—under the pressure, many had said, and Lucas’s star seemed to have burned out with them.

He had been in Dryfalls for months but rarely left his father’s abandoned factory. But there he was in the IGA on the longest Thursday maybe ever. Wearing dusty, paint-speckled work boots, rockabilly rolled jeans, and a flannel shirt with a tear at the elbow. His clothes would have been irrelevant had they not said everything about him. He was a man in fray, or so Angie had decided.

Lucas Waite was waiting for—

“You good?” he said, glancing up from texting.

“Uh, um. Yeah.”

He reached for the edge of the door, leaning toward the freezer. “It’s a quandary, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry?” Angie said.

“Ice cream. I never know which one to pick when I come here. I grew up on UDF, Häagen-Dazs, and Velvet. Then there was that hard-core Phish Food phase. I put it in my root-beer floats, Sunday sundaes after church or a Rocket Club meeting.”

“Some people remember moments by the song that was playing,” Angie said. “But I usually remember it by ice cream.”

“Exactly.” He looked directly at her. “Like if you get . . .”

He walked two freezers to the left, swaying between both while dipping down to see what was inside. “Take

this. Okay, here is an unassuming choice. Blue Bunny Mint Chocolate Chip. To me, this says breakup, not romance."

"Absolutely," Angie said.

"In my opinion," Lucas added, "ice cream is one of the most important personal dessert decisions you can make."

"I couldn't agree more," Angie said.

He chuckled, holding out his hand. "I'm Lucas."

"Uh, yeah, I know. Everyone knows."

"Right. You didn't ask for my autograph or a selfie, so I just thought . . ."

"I'm not really a selfie person."

"Me neither, but my manager said I need to be," he said.

"Sometimes I like to pretend no one knows me."

"Maybe in Belgium?" Angie offered.

"No, I'm pretty big in Belgium. Now, parts of Africa and Norway? Definitely more invisible. And there's Antarctica."

"I hear they have a raging metal scene," Angie said.

He laughed.

"I don't know that to be true," Angie said. "It was just something weird to say."

"What did you pick?" he said. "If it's okay to ask."

She held up the now-sweating pint of ice cream.

"Good choice," he said. "Does it ever seem a little sweet to you, though?"

Angie considered the question. "Maybe. It's a lot of peanut butter. A lot of chocolate. Which I guess is a lot of sweet."

"I like peanut butter on pancakes. On toast. Apples. I don't know if I like it with chocolate, though. After the whole Reese's Pieces fake-chocolate scandal, I think my trust in the combo was broken."

"Right? I went through the *same* thing when I realized there was no actual chocolate in Reese's. Obviously, I've recovered . . . as evidenced by my choice."

"Well, there's hope for me, then," he said.

Quiet.

Awkward now-what quiet.

Lucas turned on his boot heels, facing the freezer doors. "I think . . . I'm gonna get . . . Yes." He reached for the top shelf. "Ben & Jerry's Dublin Mudslide, or as I like to call it, the Jilted Lover."

"What?" Angie laughed. "Why?"

Lucas closed the cooler door. "Because it was what I was eating when my girlfriend said she had cheated on me . . . with my best friend. I ate it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for something like a week."

It was no secret that Lucas's last girlfriend had broken up with him in a very public, online way. Broadcasting what she deemed the shortcomings of the relationship, she had found herself in a new relationship in New York City. SoHo, so the rumor went.

"If you ever get your heart broken, look no further than this," he said.

The all-brother band Hanson's '90s chart-topping hit "MMMBop" echoed from the canned intercom above them.

"Have you ever realized that you can't hear 'MMMBop' and not be happy?" Lucas said.

Angie laughed. "I guess I hadn't thought about it. It is happy-making. Unless maybe . . . you were Clockwork Oranged with your eyes pried open and made to watch videos of war and slaughterhouse procedures for twenty-four consecutive hours while the song played on repeat."

Lucas looked flatly at her.

"Or maybe it just makes you feel happy." Angie turned the toes of her boots inward.

"I keep thinking you look familiar," he said.

"You probably knew my sister," Angie said. "Everyone does."

He thought about it for a moment. An unusually long moment. "Nope."

"Statue in the park?" Angie said.

"I guess I didn't notice."

"It's kind of impossible," Angie continued, "not to notice. She's sort of the fulcrum of the town. Except for you."

"I guess I should look at it, then," he said. "The statue."

Quiet.

More bizarre quiet.

"Anyway," she said. "I should . . . go look for my brother, who has likely been fully rejected by a girl way beyond his cool grade."

"Well," Lucas said, holding out his hand. "It was good to talk with an ice cream aficionado. A rarity."

Angie shook Lucas's hand. It wasn't a magical hand that sparked and glowed upon contact. Even if he had shaken the hands of hordes of famous people, of fans, of the Dalai Lama. Yup, Lucas Waite had met the Dalai Lama. It was just a hand with a scar above the left knuckle.

Lucas walked in one direction. Angie the other. As she turned the corner, she paused. She paused because an idea flashed in her mind.

"Lucas," she called out a little too loud.

"Yup."

"My brother and I are going to get some burgers from Dee's. You wanna . . . come with us?"

No sooner was the invite out there like a fish flopping onshore, gasping for air, did Angie race through ways to walk it back, so Lucas wouldn't have to say no. So he wouldn't have to embarrass her for thinking he'd want to grab a burger with a couple of—

"Sure," he said.

Angie's response was on a three-second delay. Somewhere floating on the International Space Station. Possibly.

"Um, okay," she finally said.

And then . . . in an Angie-imagined music video of what happened next, she and Lucas would round the freezer section, the rules of gravity largely suspended as organic squash, avocados, and romaine lettuce took flight behind

them. Angie's hair would lift off her husky shoulders and spray back from some unseen wind source. Their confident stride would be met with gobsmacked shoppers while swirling cans of soda, unsealed barrels of Utz Cheese Balls, open magazines, somersaulting protein bars—entire rotisserie chickens would all be free-floating in the air. The roof of the store would rip from its frame. Even the walls would soar up, as Angie and Lucas stepped onto a concert stage and—

“Dude,” Wang said, snapping Angie back to reality, where Lucas was at the register, paying for his ice cream. “Are you seriously not getting Phish Food?”

Angie and Wang watched from the counter at Dee's Diner as Lucas faced a minimob of moms and teenagers and twenty-something college girls in the parking lot.

“Wild,” Wang said, gnawing on his soda straw.

“I can't even imagine,” Angie said, sipping her shake.

“Well, you kinda can.”

Angie chuckled. “Not like that. Not like I was literally the sun.”

Wang's eyes cut past Angie to a girl sitting in a booth by the jukebox. His grin unfurled. Angie was midturn when he kicked her shin.

“Really?” She rubbed her leg. “Guess your heartbreaking rejection from Lori quickly mended.”

“We're going out tomorrow.”

"No way," Angie said.

"Is this the face of a liar?" he asked.

The question was clearly rhetorical because Wang had an innate ability to lie in nearly any circumstance.

"Okay," he said. "The face of a liar lying right now?"

"Don't you think it's kind of bad form? Hooking up with your best friend's ex?"

"Winter's a tool," Wang said. "He's all dick jokes and hypermasculine insecurity. What? My shit's evolved, yo."

"Evolved, huh? So, that's why you're hiding your love for ABBA and all things culinary curious from your hypermasculine friends."

"Just say what you really mean, Ang."

"I did," she said.

He spun back and forth on the stool. "Nah, you think I can't be cool with Lori."

"You were just making flirt-eyes with a girl two booths from the restroom," Angie said. "So, yeah, I question your level of, um, coolness with her."

"You ask Jamboree out?" Wang asked.

Angie looked away.

"See, this is why I didn't tell you about KC," Wang said. "She literally decimates you—stomps you into the ground—then zooms in on two wheels with a fresh tat, and you bail on Jamboree. Who's, like, smoking and decent."

"I didn't *bail* on anything," Angie said. "I'm going over to her place tonight."

“Uh-huh.”

Two greasy paper bags were set in front of Angie, who reached for her wallet.

“I am,” Angie said to Wang. “I’m going over there, and I’m . . . going to ask her out.”

He annoyingly slurped his empty Vanilla Coke. “Uh-huh.”

“Hey,” Lucas said. “Sorry about that.”

“Wang, give me a ten,” Angie said.

“I got this,” Lucas said.

“Cool.” Wang swept up the bags and headed for the door.

“He was raised by wolves,” Angie defended. “Human wolves, but wolves all the same.”

“It’s fine, really.” Lucas took his change.

As they were walking out, Courtney Jones and her flock of female followers were coming in. With Stacy Ann Sloan no longer leading the pack of the I Hate Angie clique, Courtney had gladly picked up the reins.

“Mr. Waite,” Courtney said, fawning. “Can I get a selfie?”

“Sure,” he said.

Courtney raised her phone. She did a quick teeth check, only to realize Angie was in the shot. “Moo . . . move, Fat Angie.”

Angie stepped to the side, but photobombed the pic at the last minute.

“Loser,” Courtney said to her.