ONE

A thick, pink-polished fingernail strikes the edge of my desk—two succinct taps—and I look up from my poetic masterpiece, right into Mrs. Hickenlooper’s eyes. They bulge like her three hefty chins are trying to choke the life out of her.

“Am I boring you, Mr. Blackwell?”

I return to scratching the letter S into the top left corner of my notebook. “I assume that’s rhetorical.”
Muffled laughter from the class. Mrs. Hickenlooper’s bulbous eyes narrow—no easy feat.

"Out." She juts her talon in the direction of the door, as if I’m too stupid to locate it myself.

I feel another sarcastic remark bubbling up, but I swallow it back as I casually finish the last of my scratching.

There.

Now F-U-C-K T-H-I-S will be visible in the top margin of at least the next thirty sheets of notebook paper. I know it isn’t particularly clever or imaginative, but I smile all the same. Then I calmly collect my belongings and stroll out of AP macroeconomics, unsure how, exactly, being forced to leave all this is a punishment. She expects me to report to the guidance counselor’s office like she has the last three times, but of course I won’t.

I drift down the mostly empty hallways until . . . I don’t know, whatever. Truthfully, I kind of hope the asshole hall monitor will find me and dole out some sort of actual punishment.

“‘S up, Tyler?” one of my old teammates says as I pass the gym. Before, I would have taken my frustrations out on the weights. Now it just seems so stupid. I nod a greeting to Ted and continue walking.

Time’s not the same as it used to be, and suddenly the hallways are filled with people I used to be able to stand. I never even heard the bell. I have AP chem now, but it doesn’t really matter if I show up. Mr. Waters wouldn’t dare fail me. Even crusty Mrs. Hickenlooper will probably still give me an A. I wish she wouldn’t. I wish they would all stop tiptoeing around me just because my mom offed herself over the summer.

A firm hand grips my shoulder, forcing a jolt of adrenaline through me.
“Jeez, man. Relax.”

Marcus.

His girlfriend clings to his arm like if she let go, he’d instantly find another chick to hook up with. In all fairness, he probably would. Marcus isn’t picky. Well, that’s not entirely true. Marcus, much to the chagrin of his mother and the entire African American female population of our school, only likes white girls. Preferably blondes, although this one—number twelve, I think?—is a rare brunette. Probably because she has huge tits. I make the mistake of looking at her face. She stares back at me with that infuriatingly caring look. If people knew how that face really made me feel, they’d be more careful. One of these days the wrong person is going to look at me like that, and I will seriously lose my shit.

“Baby,” Marcus says to poor unsuspecting number twelve, “I’ll meet you after gym by my locker, ’kay?”

After a disgustingly public tongue bath, Twelve finally leaves.

“Yo, Tyler, where you headed?” Marcus yells down the hall after me.

“AP chem,” I say, not stopping.

“I got English,” he says, catching up.

Marcus was my best friend, but now . . . I don’t know. It’s just kind of awkward. I mean, I guess we mostly only ever talked football. But football just doesn’t seem all that important in the grand scheme of things. Not to me. Not anymore.

“Well, I’ll see you in gym,” Marcus says, slowing until he’s fallen behind me.

. . .
When I reach the lab, I hesitate by the door. Do I really need to be here? The first week of school is always pointless, but the first week of your senior year when you could feasibly fail everything and still get into a state school seems even more pointless. I’ve always done well in school. Not because I needed to prove something or impress my parents or whatever. I just like it. I actually like learning.

The guys give me shit about my grades, but I don’t care. Especially when Coach contacted Stanford about a football scholarship. The scout came toward the end of the season last year when I was totally on my game, and they flew my mom and me out to visit the campus, where they offered me a National Letter of Intent. I signed without batting an eye. A Pac-12 school with an Ivy League–level education for practically free? Um, hell yeah. It’s not that I’m all that great a player, but I’m fast as hell. Plus with my 2340 SATs and 4.3 GPA, let’s just say the admissions department was happy to offer me a football scholarship. And a scholarship is the only way I’d ever get any kind of college education, let alone one at freaking Stanford.

The second bell rings. Class is about to start. Mr. Waters makes eye contact with me out in the hallway. Damn. Too late to turn and run.

... 

Running is the only thing that brings me any release these days. Thank god for gym. I’m in a groove, way ahead of the others. That is, until Marcus catches up with me, practically killing himself in the process.

“Man, you’re on fire,” he gasps, like he’s not used to the mile-high altitude, when he’s lived in Denver his whole life.

I nod, trying not to let the interruption slow my pace.

“You coming to practice today?”
I haven’t been to practice since early summer. Since I found my mom in a tub of her own blood. A few weeks before school started, I told Coach, Marcus, and a few others who were in Coach’s office, that I wouldn’t be back this year because I had to work, that I wouldn’t have the time. Coach told me to “take as long as you need,” like he thought I didn’t really mean it. But I did. And I wish Marcus would stop hounding me about it.

“Gotta work.” I push myself harder, setting my quads on fire. It feels good.

I make it a few laps without thinking about anything, but then I’m about to lap the rest of the class, so I slow my pace, keep my distance. Marcus slows down until he’s running next to me again.

“So what, are you, like, quitting?” he asks. I can barely understand him, he’s breathing so hard.

“What can I say? My dad’s a prick. I gotta work.”

“What about your scholarship?”

“I guess I’m not going to college.”

Marcus stumbles, but recovers and catches up to me again.

“Look, that was my mom’s plan, and she didn’t have the guts to see it through, so why the hell should I?”

He ignores my tone and presses on. “Well, what are you going to do?”

“No fucking clue.” I don’t wait for a reply. I push myself again, weaving through the others, focused, until all I can hear are my feet hitting the asphalt, my steady breathing, and the beat of my heart pounding in my head.

...
“Um... Uh... You want ham and cheese?” the chubby, middle-aged woman asks her tween daughter, who couldn’t look more horrified about being in public with her totally uncool mom. She grunts what I think is meant to be a “Yes” and goes back to texting.

“Six-inch or foot-long?” I ask.

Roger glances over at me from the register. I have somehow managed to not meet his high standards of sandwich artistry yet again.

“Let’s do a foot-long. Then we can share it,” the mom says. The girl snorts her annoyance.

“What kind of bread would you—”

“Wheat,” the girl says, the duh implicit.

I pull out one of the older pieces of wheat, one that’s dry and extra-crunchy.

“Can you cut it now?” the girl says. “I don’t want her fatty mayo near my half.”

I do as told. The daughter goes back to texting, not even looking up as she orders me to add toppings, like she has eyes on the top of her head. Every time her mother asks for a topping she doesn’t approve of, the daughter sighs heavily.

Roger grabs the sandwiches from my hands the second I finish stuffing them into the bag and rings them up. He’s aggressively polite to everyone, including me, even though I’m pretty sure he hates my guts. It makes me want to punch him, just to see how he’d react if confronted with any unpleasantness.

It’s not like I’m dying to spend all my free time working at Subway, but it was the first job I found after my dad informed me that if I wanted to continue driving my crappy car or, you know, eating, I would have to
figure shit out for myself. I don’t think he cares that technically he’s responsible for me until my eighteenth birthday, which is exactly 217 days away.

The second I turn eighteen, I plan to get the fuck outta Dodge. I will leave this godforsaken place behind and never look back. Screw graduation. Everyone knows the ceremony is really only for the parents. And that would require parents who A) are alive, or B) give a shit.

This year was supposed to be about maintaining my GPA and keeping the Stanford people happy so I didn’t lose the scholarship, and then I could be on my way to a better life. I was going to take my mom far away from my prick father, show her that she didn’t have to live the way she did. I don’t know exactly what I had planned to do—get an MBA and work my way up the corporate ladder at some Fortune 500 company? Maybe. But whatever. She selfishly took that away from me. I’d been doing it all for her anyway. So now what?

“Ty? You want to take your break? I can hold down the fort,” Roger says. It takes every ounce of restraint for me not to choke him for calling me Ty. Only my girlfriend calls me that, and the only reason I don’t choke her is ‘cause she’s a girl.

I must look sad or something. I try to hold that shit in for when I’m alone—it makes people uncomfortable.

...

Shit. Brett’s black 3 Series Beemer’s parked at the Conoco. But my tank’s on E, so I don’t have a choice—I won’t make it home if I don’t stop.

I park at the pump farthest from Brett. It doesn’t keep him from spotting me.
Brett’s the new running back. He should be grateful I’m no longer playing, but for some reason he hates me. I suspect it has something to do with Sheila.

Brett shakes his blond hair out of his eyes and greets me with a raised middle finger. Then he bends to say something to the passenger or passengers—his windows are so tinted, you can never tell who’s inside—before throwing his head back and making a face like he’s having an orgasm. Apparently this is him laughing. What is it about BMWs? Do they make you an asshole or are you already an asshole and that’s why you have a BMW?

The back door on the driver’s side flies open and Sheila sprints toward me at full speed.

I really don’t have the energy.

I rub my hand across the back of my neck and wait for the attack.

“Ty, baby!” She launches herself into my arms, and I turn my head just before her lips assault mine; they land at my ear instead. I pretend to be distracted by something on the pump screen as I slide her off of me.

She traces her finger over the letters of my stupid Subway hat. “Did you just get off?”

I nod.

“Wanna do it again?” she says suggestively.

I manage a small smile.

“That’s better.” She nuzzles into me, gently scratching the back of my neck with her acrylic nails. It doesn’t feel as good as it used to. “You smell yummy,” she says. “I haven’t had bread in forever.”
“Perks of the job,” I say, probably a little too sarcastically. I used to love the smell of freshly baked bread. At this point, let’s just say it’s lost its appeal.

“Sheila!” Cara, one of the other cheerleaders, calls.

“Hang on, bitch.” Sheila flips her brown hair all dramatically. “Say the word and I’m yours.”

The gas pump clicks, so I turn to finish my business. “Sorry. It’s just… It’s been a long day.”

“Your loss.” She grabs my ass and snakes under my arm, shoving her tongue in my mouth while I attempt to tear off the receipt. Then she bounces back to her friends. “See you tomorrow, baby!” she sings as she climbs back into the Beemer. There’s a symphony of giggling from inside. I wonder just how many girls are actually in there.

Brett grins at me like he’s beaten me at something as they drive past. I hate that guy.

It takes my car three tries before finally starting, and then it dies again. It doesn’t want to go home either. I halfheartedly pound the steering wheel and try again. It finally starts.

A giant pickup honks angrily as it passes me on the way home. I’m going ten under the speed limit. I’m in no hurry. If I get there after 10:30, there’s a good chance my dad’ll be locked away in his room. Hopefully passed out. He’s always been an asshole, but it’s gotten exponentially worse since Mom. It’s the nights he’s in that in-between state that I have to worry about—where he’s not sober enough to be depressed, and not drunk enough to be numb. I just never know what I’ll get. He’s like Schrödinger’s cat. Except instead of both dead and alive, he’s both passed-out drunk and not drunk enough until I open the front door and find out for myself.
I sit in the car staring up at the window above the garage. The light is on in the guest room. As if we need a guest room. Mom was an only child, and Dad's alienated everyone who'd ever want to visit. It's also the room Mom used as her office. There's a crappy rolltop desk that she squeezed between the bed and the window. She had to push the bed out of the way to get a chair back there when she used it. I'm surprised my dad hasn't hawked the thing yet. He got rid of its contents along with everything else as soon as he could. People think it's because he couldn't handle the reminders, but I'm convinced he just wanted extra cash for booze.

There's no movement in the window—maybe he passed out and forgot to turn the light off.

I strangle the steering wheel and let out a silent scream. Then I go in.

Captain comes running to the door the second he hears my feet hit the porch. At least someone's happy to see me.

"Hey, buddy." I lean down and let Captain lick my chin while I give him some pats. If you didn't know him, you might think he was threatening me, baring his teeth and all, but his tail's wagging so fast, he almost throws himself off balance. His teeth are just too big for his mouth, so he looks like he's aggressive when he's excited. I like to think he's smiling.

"Who's a good boy? Who's a good boy?"

Captain tilts his head like he's trying to understand me. He's an Australian shepherd mix but looks mostly Aussie, only with a long, thick tail. He's brown and white, and he has one black leg and a black patch over his brown eye, which offsets his light blue one. Hence the name: "Captain Jack Sparrow." Even though Jack Sparrow didn't have an eye
patch or a peg leg. Mom named him. He was the only pirate she could think of. And she loved Johnny Depp.

"Should I give you two some privacy?" Dad thinks he’s hilarious when he’s in that in-between, not-quite-drunk condition. I do not. "At least I know you won’t go knocking the dog up. Just do something about his hair all over the goddamn floor first, that’s all I ask. Or are you testing me to see if I’ll make good on my word?" Dad loves to threaten to get rid of Captain. It’s all talk. He’s too lazy to actually follow through.

I slowly get up and start past him toward the closet, leaving my backpack on the living room floor.

"Where the fuck are you going?" He grabs my arm. My muscles flex involuntarily. I know he’ll take this as a challenge and immediately wish I could take it back.

He shoves me as hard as he can. I reach out to catch myself but I’m not positioned right and I fall into the closet. My head hits the doorframe on the way down. These are the nights I resent my mother most.

"Answer me." Dad kicks the back of my leg. It’s not meant to hurt so much as humiliate. And that he has done.

"I’m getting the vacuum for all the goddamn dog hair," I mumble as I pull myself up and remove the vacuum from the closet.

He smacks the spot on my head where it hit the doorframe. "Wanna say that again?"

I shake my head. My face is on fire and I’m torqued inside from how much I just want to go off on him. At six feet, 210, I have a few inches and about fifty pounds on him. I could do serious damage. And he knows it. Sometimes I wonder if that’s what he really wants.
He snorts at me and turns back out of the room. I think we’re done, but then just before he reaches the stairs, he kicks Captain in the ribs hard enough for him to let out a high-pitched yelp. I lunge at Dad without thinking. Knowing how I’d react before I did, he easily steps out of the way, and then, using my own momentum, shoves me so that I almost land on Captain.

When I look back at him, he stares me down with a smug smile. He knows I won’t try anything else. Asshole.

When I finally hear his bedroom door shut, I feed Captain, vacuum the floors, and lock myself away in my cellar.

Okay, my room’s not a cellar. It’s a converted basement. With scratchy industrial carpet the color of old oatmeal, and shitty, scratched-up wood paneling halfway up the walls with white drywall above it covered in small holes because I use it as a corkboard. The focal point of the room is a mattress sitting only on the box spring, which I hate, being as tall as I am. And there’s a do-it-yourself-quality bathroom next to the wall of bars hung with clothes that would normally be hidden behind the doors of an actual closet.

It’s not great but it’s mine. Mom let me put a lock on the door when I turned sixteen, like it’s my own private apartment or something. Dad hates that. He thinks I’m hiding stuff. Which I am. Only not stuff he would be interested in.

I pull some loose paneling from the far corner and feel along the floor until my hand makes contact with a metal box. I carefully pull the box out and take it to my bed.

Captain jumps up and circles about five times before finally settling in next to me.
I take off the key I always wear on a chain around my neck and unlock the box, like I do every night. Then I pull out the plastic divider holding my secret emergency fund and set it aside.

Six photos stare back at me.

Mom on her wedding day—I cut Dad out of that one.

One of her when she was my age; she was so beautiful: long, shiny dark brown hair and light brown eyes that are full of life. She looks happy. I look a lot like her.

The two of us in Halloween costumes: She’s a black cat and I’m a ninja. I think I was ten.

One I remember taking when she finally went back to school. She was getting in her car and I raced out after her with the camera and said, “First day of school! My baby’s all grown up.” And she laughed. She’s mid-laugh in the photo.

The two of us hiking my favorite running path up in the foothills near Red Rocks. Captain was all muddy and jumping on her. Again she’s laughing.

And the last one: just the two of us at an awkward angle, slightly out of focus because she’s holding the camera out in front of us. We’re lounging on the couch after school let out last June. Dad wasn’t home and we were watching a Die Hard marathon and eating popcorn. She made a big deal about taking that picture of the two of us because it would probably be the last time we’d ever be like that. I was getting too old, she said, and soon I would think it was lame to hang out with my mom. I’m practically rolling my eyes in the picture, but Mom’s smiling away.

That’s part of what makes it hurt so much. I just never saw it coming.
I set the photos aside and reach for the one last thing Mom ever left me. And no, it’s not a note. She couldn’t even be bothered to leave an explanation. Oh, no—can’t give Tyler closure. Can’t leave him a note telling him I’m sorry. Nope. The only thing left of hers is the razor blade that ended her life. Nothing flashy, nothing special. Just a little silver rectangular straight-razor replacement blade.

I don’t know why I grabbed it. I’m not even sure if it really is the blade or just one of the others in its pack of ten or whatever. The protective plastic container was on the edge of the tub, which, in the chaos of pulling her out and trying to stop the bleeding while dialing 911, I stepped on, scattering all the others in the mess of blood on the floor. It still had her blood on it. I wish now that I hadn’t cleaned it off. I know that sounds morbid, but it’s all I have of her.

I run my finger along the blade lightly enough so it doesn’t cut me. It’s still sharp. Probably its only use was to tear through the flesh of her wrists.

Exsanguination.

That’s the term the EMT used. It sounds so much better than: “She slit her damn wrists and bled out.”

**TWO**

I’m intercepted by the school guidance counselor before I even make it to first period. I follow her bouncing yellow ponytail to her little office area, past all the pitying looks from the office staff.

Mrs. Ortiz sits across from me, her head tilted caringly to one side, her eyes practically welling up. My stomach churns. I think my sausage and eggs might make a reappearance all over her desk. The thought forces the side of my mouth to pull up.
“How are you, Tyler?”

“Full of vexation come I,” I mumble.

A look of confusion briefly overtakes her look of pity.

“A Midsummer Night’s Dream? It’s really good. You should totally read it. It’s by some British guy.”

She smiles, tolerating me. And then presses on. “Are you seeking help?”

As if you’re in any position to help, lady. I shrug.

“Tyler, honey”—her pity-face is back—“it’s okay to ask for help. I can recommend—”

“I already have a shrink.”

She tilts her head the other way. She doesn’t believe me.

“David Adelstein,” I say.

She pulls her eyebrows together like she’s deep in thought, like all shrinks, therapists, and fucking high school guidance counselors know each other and she’s trying to place him.

“I would give you his number, but . . .” You’d have to torture it out of me.

She straightens in her chair. She’s obviously annoyed but trying to keep her concerned-for-a-student-whose-mom-killed-herself face.

“I understand Mrs. Hickenlooper asked you to leave class yesterday.”

I nod.

“Would you like to elaborate?”

“Can’t say that I would.”
Her jaw clenches ever so slightly. “Well, with your, um, situation, we’re willing to be a little more lenient than usual, but please try not to push your luck.”

“Understood,” I say, like sir, yes sir.

“Tyler, why don’t you tell me a little about what happened with . . . you know. Maybe it’ll help me understand how to better help you.” She has the stupid caring look in her eyes again.

“My mom killed herself. I don’t know what more you want to know.”

“Where were you when she . . . ?”

Jesus. She can’t even say the words, “Football. Summer training.”

“How did you find out?”

“My dad.” This is a lie. But I’ll never tell her that I came home from training to grab my knee brace and some Advil but I was out of Advil and went up to Mom’s bathroom to grab some when I found her floating lifeless and naked in a tub of pink water, blood still trickling from one wrist to the giant puddle of red on the floor. Nor will I tell her that I scooped my mom out of the tub and tried to revive her. That she was still warm. That the bath water was still steaming. That if I had come home five minutes, or three, or who knows how many minutes earlier, I might have stopped her, saved her. Only one other person knows all this: Dr. Adelstein. Only a handful of other people even know that I found her: the EMTs, the cops, the social worker, and Dad. I can’t take the way people treat me now, and if everyone knew I found her, they’d treat me . . . Well, I’d probably just have to kill myself.

Mrs. Ortiz has been talking while I’ve been zoning out, but I’m done pretending to listen.
“Good talk,” I say, standing. “This was definitely not a waste of time.” I’m already halfway out the door when she calls after me to stop in tomorrow to “touch base.”

Yeah. I’ll be sure to do that.

... 

Coach is walking toward me, and it’s too late to pretend I don’t see him. Not that I’m avoiding him. Okay, maybe I’m avoiding him a little.

“Blackwell.” He slaps his hand on my shoulder.

“Coach.”

“We sure missed you this summer. McPhearson’s not half the running back you are. You been keeping up on your running?”

“Yes, sir,” I say as enthusiastically as I can muster.

“Good, good. You just let me know when you’re ready, okay? Is there anything I can...?” He trails off awkwardly.

“Nope. I’m good. Thanks.”

“All right then.” He pats my shoulder again and steps aside so I can get to class. I don’t have to look back to know he’s watching me. I can feel it.

... 

“There you are!” Sheila calls down the hall just before lunch, pretending to be upset because I did or didn’t do... something. There’s no escaping her. So I walk toward the herd of short skirts staring into their phones.

“You didn’t text me back, mister.” She pouts. She actually pouts. She’s developed this affinity for drama lately. I can’t stand it.

“I was in class.” I lean down and kiss her neck, and all is forgiven.
“I mean last night.” She scratches the back of my neck with one hand and rests the other on my chest. All I can focus on is her ridiculous puke-green nail polish. It looks like fungus. “Hello?” She taps a putrid nail against my pec.

“My dad,” I say as way of explanation.

“I’m so sorry, baby.” She places her palm against my cheek and it almost makes me feel better for a fraction of a fraction of a second. Until I see her glance at the girls next to us to check if they’re watching, to make sure they see just how tragic her boyfriend is and how wonderful she is to take care of him.

I wave her off, hoping she’ll drop it before I say something I shouldn’t.

She does.

“You working tonight?”

I shake my head.

“You wanna meet up at my house after practice? My mom’s got a dinner meeting, and you know my dad’s clueless.”

“Sure.” I could use a good distraction. As long as she doesn’t expect me to talk about everything and get all emotional and shit. She keeps trying, and I get that that’s what a girlfriend does, but it’s not going to happen.

“Great. I’ll wait for you since your practice usually goes longer than ours.”

I open my mouth to remind her that I’m not going to practice, but decide I don’t feel like a pep talk, so I kiss her instead. No matter how many times I tell her, she won’t let it drop. I wish I knew if it was because she cares about me or because she’s worried about the social ramifications of not dating a football player her senior year.
“Shee, come on. We’re going to lose our table if we don’t go.” This from the other brunette girl who used to date Marcus—Nine, I think. She playfully tugs at Sheila’s dark hair until she pulls away from me. “Hey, Tyler.” Nine says, “where’s Marcus?”

“Do I look like his keeper?”

Nine giggles. And then she and Sheila turn toward the cafeteria.

Sheila whips around when she sees I’m not following. “Aren’t you coming?”

“Not hungry.” I say.

... 

I actually am hungry; I just need to not be around Sheila and her friends. I don’t bother going back to class after downing my Chipotle—I decide my time will be better spent reading at Starbucks. Plus I don’t want another run-in with Marcus about practice, especially because I know Sheila told him I wasn’t working tonight.

The parking lot has pretty much cleared by the time I return to school. I head toward the chanting-in-unison coming from the upper gym—our gym has two levels, the smaller upper gym for stuff like volleyball and cheerleading, and the larger main gym on the lower level for the real sports. I make myself comfortable on the ground, leaning my back against the wall to wait for Sheila. A few stragglers walk by; I keep my head down so none of them has the urge to strike up a conversation. I’m pretty safe—it’s mostly drama and band geeks. None of them would ever bother talking to me.

“Hey, Tyler. You weren’t in chem today,” a tinny male voice says.

Apparently I was wrong.
I look up to see a skinny guy with glasses—Jeff maybe?—walking toward me with some Asian goth chick. She drops her pencil and it rolls across the floor coming to a rest when it hits my leg. I hold the pencil out for the girl, who grabs it without bothering to say thank you.

The skinny guy stares, still waiting for me to say something about skipping class, but when he realizes his goth friend has kept walking, he runs to catch up with her. I hear him whisper something about being rude and doesn’t she know my mom just died and crap.

“That doesn’t give him carte blanche on assholedom,” she says. He shushes her and glances back at me to see if I heard. I laugh to myself.

The gym door hits my foot, so I pull myself up. Sheila practically runs into me as the cheer herd stampedes out of the gym.

“Ty? What are you doing here? I was just coming to find you.”

“Mission accomplished.”

“Is everything okay?” She rests her hands on my shoulders and looks at me with intense concern.

“Everything’s fine. Let’s go.” I take her bag from her and turn toward the exit before she can play up the “I’m with tragedy boy” thing even more.

As we navigate our way to the parking lot, I can feel how much she wants to ask me about practice, but she knows it’ll just cause a fight. And that wouldn’t look good for her.

“Where’s your car?” I ask.

“Let’s just take yours. You can stop by and pick me up in the morning.”

“Fine.”

Sheila cranks the stereo and flips through the stations to find a song she likes. Landing on some irritating pop song, she leans out the window
and sings at the top of her lungs at passing drivers. I almost laugh. When we first started hanging out in tenth grade, I had some stupid argument with Coach and she couldn’t stand that I was in a bad mood, so she blasted the pop station and scream-sang at the other drivers, getting a variety of reactions, all of which made me laugh. God, we’re completely different people now. Sometimes I feel like we don’t even like each other anymore. But I guess it’s safe. It’s comfortable. For both of us. Plus, sex.

Her dad’s home, but as she said, he’s totally clueless. He’s parked in front of his computer and barely grunts an acknowledgment as we pass him on the way to her bedroom.

Before I know it, we’re rolling around on her flowery comforter, my hands threaded in her silky hair, her hands brushing up my chest, pulling off my shirt, throwing it over my head to the floor. Then she rolls me over so she’s on top and pulls her cheer uniform over her head. I’m still not used to how thin she’s gotten. When we first hooked up, there was more to her. She was a little softer in all the right places and I liked it. I know it’s a cheerleader thing to be skinnier than the next girl, but it really doesn’t do it for me. I swear my tits are bigger than hers; I don’t even know why she bothers wearing a bra anymore. Except she’s not for long. The thing pops off and she’s holding my hands against her perfectly bronzed chest—no tan lines, of course. She groans and grinds her pelvis against me and she goes to kiss me. I’m trying to get into it, but then I begin thinking about how I shouldn’t have to try—I never used to. She kisses my neck and sucks at my earlobes. This gets me into it a little more. She moans and rubs against me. And moans. And rubs.

Despite everything that’s going on, I’m really not aroused. I mean, yeah, I’m hard, but that’s just a physiological side effect of dry humping.
“It’s okay, baby. Don’t think about anything. I’ll make you feel better,” she breathes in my ear. I respond by grabbing her ass and grinding into her harder. She groans and kisses me again. This time it’s a light brush against my lips. Against my chin, my neck, my chest.

Her hand plunges under my waistband and she grabs me. “You want me to kiss it?” she says in this goddamn baby voice I’ve told her I can’t stand. I practically go flaccid right then, but her stroking continues and my dick has a mind of its own.

She raises her eyebrows, waiting for an answer.

“If you want.”

She sits up, glaring. “You really don’t care if I suck you off or not?”

I shrug.

She shoves me as she rolls off and goes to retrieve our clothes from the floor. “I’m not going to do it if you don’t want it. You think I’m, like, dying to put your dick in my mouth?”

“Hey, don’t get all pissy. You offered.”

My shirt hits me in the face. I pull it on as I head out the door.

THREE

Dad trashed the kitchen before he passed out last night, and now I’m stuck cleaning all the shit off the burner before I can make myself a decent breakfast. At least he turned off the stove.

I would normally keep the noise down—no use poking the sleeping bear and all that—but his car’s not in the driveway. Which means I have to take him to the bus before school. I need to wake him up in the least confrontational manner, hence all the excessive pot-banging.
Dad finally stumbles out of his room looking like he hasn’t combed his hair, and I’m pretty sure he slept in the clothes he wore yesterday and didn’t bother changing. I ignore the barrage of inventive names he mumbles at me as he snatches the bacon and egg sandwich I made for him out of my hands and heads to my car. He’s still pretty drunk from the night before. This will be a fun drive.

With all the booze wafting from his pores, it smells like I soaked my seats in a bottle of whisky. He’s unusually quiet. This makes me more anxious than if he were ranting at me the whole way. Silence means he’s thinking, and nothing good ever comes from that.

I think we’ll make it all the way to the park-and-ride without speaking, but about five blocks before my turn, he’s finally managed to put his thoughts together.

“You know? She never wanted a kid.” He’s watching me, waiting for a reaction. I can feel it. “Everything was kind of perfect before you came along and fucked it up.”

He’s said these things before. I refuse to play into it.

“You hear me? She’d still be here if it weren’t for you. I’m sure of it.”

I tighten my fingers around the steering wheel imagining it’s his neck.

“She was going to be a big-shot lawyer. But then she had to worry about taking care of an ugly little bastard.”

I consider informing him that they were, in fact, married, thus, I was not technically a bastard, but that’d just give him ammunition.

“You think you’re so fucking smart, don’t you? You got everything figured out.” He laughs bitterly. “You don’t know shit. You never know when an ugly little bastard might pop out and ruin your life.”
“Well, at least I’ve provided you with a valid excuse for becoming a raging, psychotic drunk,” I mutter.

My cheekbone feels like it’s exploded and my ear starts to ring. I swerve and practically hit a blue minivan that lays on its horn. I didn’t even see his hand move.

“You trying to kill me too, you little prick?” he asks.

I focus on the throbbing in my temple and block out his vitriol. When I reach the park-and-ride, I slam on the brakes so hard, his head almost hits the dash. Unfortunately, his reflexes aren’t as slow as I had hoped—his hands stop his head from making contact.

“You better watch yourself,” he says. Then he gets out and staggers to the bench, leaving the door open. His boss has the patience of a saint. Or maybe Dad’s got something on him. Or just maybe when your face is buried beneath a welding helmet no one gives a shit.

I shove my foot down on the accelerator. The sudden forward movement slams the passenger door shut. I’m shaking, I’m so pissed. Punching the dashboard helps a little.

...  

I reach school late and have to park way in the back of the lot. About halfway to the entrance, I reach for my phone in my pocket out of habit. It’s not there. It’s probably in the car, but I’m almost all the way to the door. Screw it.

All my morning classes are as pointless as ever. I seriously consider not coming anymore. I almost have all the credits I need for a diploma. The only reason I didn’t graduate last year was because I was short a gym credit and an elective credit. So this year I was going to pad my GPA and play football so I’d be sure to impress Stanford. But that
scholarship's probably off the table now that I'm not playing, so why the hell am I here?

... 

"Where were you?" Sheila shoves me from behind just outside the cafeteria at lunch.

I turn, taking a deep breath. "What?"

"Where were you this morning?" Her eyes and nose are red. She’s been crying. And it’s because of something I did. But I have no clue what.

"Good thing I called Shee before school," Cara, the one friend of Sheila’s I can actually stand, chimes in.

"Shit." I remember now and I feel like an asshole. "Sheila, I’m sorry. My dad left his car at work so he could get trashed last night, and I had to take him to the bus this morning."

Sheila used to live down the street from me and has been witness to several blowups on the front lawn with my very drunk dad and my very hysterical mom and me. So her look of pity doesn’t bother me as much as the others. At least she has a frame of reference.

She hurries over and wraps her sun-kissed arms around my neck. I pick her up and kiss the side of her head. "Sorry I forgot," I whisper.

I can feel her forgive me with her whole body before she says, "No. I’m sorry. If I had known . . . It sucks that you always have to deal with his crap. I’m here if you need to talk."

And then she looks up at me with bated breath, like I’ll just start pouring my heart out right here in the fucking hall. In front of all these fucking people so she can make sure they all know how great she is for being there for me.
Roger’s assisting one of the regulars—a man with a disgusting beard that always has something stuck in it. It physically sickens me to watch Roger’s level of ass-kissery today, so I head to the back room to chop some more damn onions.

Somehow I must have zoned out, because I’m stunned back to life when Roger snaps his fingers in front of my nose.

“I know you’re going through a really tough time right now, Ty, but I need you to focus, m’kay?” He’s leaning so close that I have no choice but to breathe in his rancid garlic breath. “Julie’s out there working the rush alone. D’ya think you can rally it up and give her a hand?”

I nod, because if I say anything, it’ll involve too many swear words, and then I head out to help Julie with the “rush.” There are two people chatting in line behind the old man that Julie’s currently helping.

I put my brilliant sandwich-making skills to use, and Julie, who might be more uptight than Roger, if that’s even possible, rings them up. When she’s finished, she sighs passive-aggressively in my direction. I’m left to stare at the bearded man eating at one of the tables, while Julie takes her break and Roger makes a personal call. Too bad our storefront faces east; from out back we have an almost unobstructed view of the mountains, and even from this side I can tell there’s a pretty spectacular sunset going on.

I’m checking the time on my phone when Julie comes back out.

“You can’t be on your phone in front of customers,” she says in this infuriatingly condescending voice.

“Don’t get your panties in a wad. I was just checking the fucking time.”
Her eyes widen and her face turns tomato red, swear to god. She spins around and storms into the back.

Once the bearded man clears out, Roger comes around the corner, his face plagued with concern.

“Tyler, I’m gonna need you to follow me to the back and apologize to Julie, then I’m gonna send Julie home, and you’ll close up alone tonight. Okay?”

Jesus.

When Julie comes into view, her face is splotchy, her eyes are red, and she’s sniffling.

“You can’t be serious,” I mutter, but not quietly enough.

“Now that’s enough of that,” Roger says in his manager voice.

“You see?” Julie says through a sob.

“Please apologize, Tyler,” Roger says.

“For what exactly?”

“Tyler . . .”

“No, really. I have no clue what I’ve done tonight that warrants an apology. I was checking the time on my phone when Julie had a fit for no reason.”

“Tyler . . .”

“This is ridiculous. There is no earthly reason she should be crying over something like this.”

“She says you directed offensive language at her.”

“Offensive language? Seriously?”
Julie sniffs and wipes her eyes all dramatically and I can’t do it anymore. I snap.

“You want offensive? How about this, Roger? A fucking monkey could do this job, and you treat it like we’re curing cancer or something. And you should seriously consider seeing someone about removing that stick up your ass.”

“That’s it. You—”

“And you.” I turn to Julie. “You seriously need to get laid and soon, otherwise you better be sure to get the number of his ass-stick-removal guy.”

“Tyler!” Roger looks like his head might explode.

“Don’t worry. I’m fucking out!” I slam the back door open and make my break for freedom. I was right. The mountains look fucking amazing.

... 

It doesn’t hit me until the middle of the night that I actually needed that goddamn job.