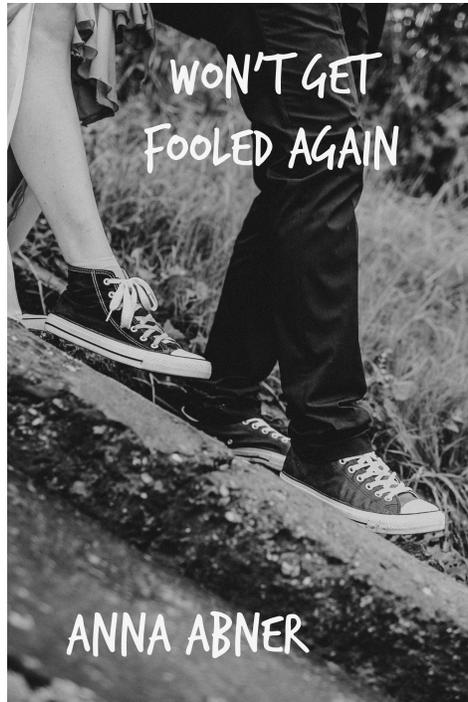


Won't Get Fooled Again

By Anna Abner

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SATURDAY

The bedroom at the top of the stairs was exactly as Carrie remembered it. Four years hadn't improved the unicorn print comforter on the queen-sized bed or livened the gray-blue carpet. Nana hadn't changed the heavy drapes over the windows or the James Dean poster, either. Carrie took it all in, getting a strange feeling of déjà vu. Nana hadn't changed a thing since the day Carrie had left to live with her mom.

"You can unpack, you know," Nana said, hovering in the doorway.

"I will." But she probably wouldn't. "As soon as my mom calls, I'm going back to Indianapolis," she said confidently, making a show of setting her backpack and rolling suitcase on the bed.

"I registered you for school."

"But I'll only be here a few days," she repeated her cover story. "Mom's vacation with her friends in Chicago is almost over. She'll be home any day." Carrie couldn't admit yet that Mom had left ten days earlier without a word and had been missing ever since.

"Either way," Nana said, pulling a box from the bedside table. "I got you a cell phone. I didn't think you had one, and I thought a sixteen-year-old girl would want one. Am I right?"

"Thank you," she said, taking the box. But she was immediately suspicious.

Carrie watched her grandmother carefully, thinking, *she knew*. Somehow, she'd figured out what was really happening with Mom. Or maybe she'd known all along.

"I really appreciate it," Carrie said, "but you didn't have to register me. I'm only staying a couple days."

If she knew more than she let on, Nana didn't give anything away. "It's no problem," she said. "I still have copies of all your records. It was a simple thing to register you." After a moment, she added, "I didn't want you to fall behind. In case you're going to be here longer than a couple days."

"Well, thanks," Carrie said. "That was very thoughtful."

Nana smiled kindly. "You start Monday morning."

And with the detonation of that bomb still going off in her wake, Nana closed the bedroom door behind her.

Tossing the phone box on the bed, Carrie rushed to the window that faced west and parted the heavy drapes, a waft of dust blowing over her head. But she could still see, if she looked hard, Trey Martin's bedroom window in the house next door. Their windows didn't match up. His was ten feet to her left, but if she squinted she could see a sliver of his life.

Four years ago, they'd left messages for each other on their window sills. A coffee cup right side up meant *come over*. The same cup upside down meant *leave me alone*.

There was no cup on his sill, but she could see him in the reflection of his closet mirror. No lights were on, and he was a gray shape crouched on his desk chair, his knees drawn to his chest. If he saw her, too, he made no move to get her attention. She waved limply, just in case, but there was no reaction, and she couldn't see his face.

Plugging in her new cell and quickly memorizing the phone number, Carrie hurried out, not even worrying about her flyaway hair or the chocolate milk stain on her jeans from when her car had hit a pothole on the four-hour drive from Indianapolis.

Her feet thumped down the stairs. "Nana, I'm going to Trey's!" She was out the door before she caught a response.

Walking up the two wooden steps to Trey's front door felt like old times. Back when they were kids she must have made this walk a million and one times, and her heart was fluttering like a nervous bunny's as she rang the bell.

"Come in," called out a woman's familiar voice.

"Hello, Mrs. Martin," Carrie said when she found Trey's mom sitting quietly in the living room. There was no TV or music on, just her sunken into the overstuffed sofa, knitting quietly. An afghan lay folded upon a footstool. Another on the sofa. A third and

fourth were paired up on the armchair. In fact, there was so much knitted material, the living room looked like it belonged in a dollhouse.

“Carrie,” Mrs. Martin greeted as if showing emotion was a foreign concept for her. She was almost as bad as Carrie’s mom was on downers. Almost. “I heard you were back in town.”

“For a couple days,” she agreed. “Is Trey here?”

“He’s at basketball camp,” she said, frowning. “I’m supposed to pick him up at Dover Park at seven.”

Carrie thought of the shadow in his room. Who had she seen if not Trey?

“Do you mind if I pick him up?” Carrie asked, checking the time on her new phone. It was five after seven.

Mrs. Martin frowned. “Sure. If you want to.”

“Yeah. I definitely do.” When Carrie had gone to live with her mother at the beginning of eighth grade she and Trey could have kept in touch, but thirteen-year-olds don’t make the best pen pals.

She had been too distracted caring for Mom. She was ashamed she had let thirty-six months pass without a single phone call, text, or Christmas card. But clean slate to Mom meant *clean slate*.

Now, Carrie was back for a few days, and she and Trey could pick up where they left off—weekly sleepovers, building mud forts in the yard, and mixing gummy bears into coffee-flavored ice cream.

Okay, so maybe their tastes had changed. Whatever. They’d figure it out. They always had.

“Let me write my phone number down for you,” Carrie said, scribbling it onto a pad on the kitchen counter before sliding the paper across the coffee table. “In case you or Trey needs to get ahold of me.”

Dover Park was a large sports complex across town. Off to the right, sitting under a tree by a mega-sized playground was Trey Marcus. Head down, he didn’t notice Carrie. She honked the horn.

His head jerked up, and then he looked over his shoulder as if she must be communicating with someone else. She waved, smiled, and he finally stood up. His body unfolded to heights she didn’t recognize. Not only had he grown at least a foot since she had seen him last, but he had filled out.

Her mouth dried up. He wasn’t a scrawny eighth grader anymore. At sixteen, he was a grown man.

He had to bend horizontal to see through the open window.

“Hi,” she said, a touch too loudly.

He scowled. “Carrie?”

“It’s me,” she said, grinning like an idiot. “Can you believe it? It’s been so long.”

But Trey’s frown didn’t even twitch.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, and not in a nice way.

She stared into his dark eyes, familiar and yet different, her smile slipping by inches. He was Trey, but he wasn’t.

“I told your mom I’d pick you up,” she said, her voice falling flat.

Finally, he climbed into the car, buckled up, and hugged his oversized duffel. “You’re late.”

For a moment she was too stunned at the growl in his voice—that had changed too—and maneuvering through traffic to reply.

It wasn't exactly the reunion she had expected. "I just arrived today." She stumbled over the words. "I was talking to your mom. She said I could surprise you."

He looked her up and down. "You're different."

She wasn't sure if that was a compliment. Of course she was different. She'd left Bridgeville a skinny thirteen-year-old in ponytails and boys' jeans and come back with boobs and flat-ironed blonde hair. They had both grown over the past three years.

"So are you," she exclaimed. "You must be six feet tall."

She caught sight of his shoes. Black and white Converse sneakers. The kind his older brother Sy always wore. She noticed the homage to his brother, but she was too uncomfortable to mention it.

"You must be tired," she guessed because she felt stupid sitting there in silence. As kids, there hadn't been awkward silences between them.

By the time she stopped in front of his house, Carrie felt foolish. For thinking they were still friends. For thinking nothing had changed in three years. For thinking she knew anything about Trey Martin at all.

With his hand on the door's handle, he asked, "How long are you staying?"

"A few days," she said.

With a shake of his head, Trey got out of the car. "Good-bye, Carrie."

"It's not good-bye," she murmured. It was their goofy back-and-forth. Their thing. When one said, *Good-bye*, the other always replied, *It's not good-bye, it's see you later*. A silly

line from a movie they'd once thought was cool. Three years ago, he would have waited to hear her say it.

Trey reached for his front door and before he could escape completely, she blurted out, "I'm sorry about Sy!"

Of course he'd heard her, but he acted like he didn't.

Still stupidly sitting in the car, she watched him through the windshield. No one said hello or anything to him when he entered his house. His head down, he went upstairs.

So much for old friends.

At her grandma's house, Nana was still in the kitchen, wiping countertops after dinner. It was a stark contrast to all the days Carrie had come home from school in Indianapolis to find the trailer empty. Or more recently, hearing her mother snoring in the middle of the day.

"There you are." Nana smiled warmly. "Did you find Trey?"

"Yeah." He just hadn't been very happy to be found.

"I expected you two to be squirreled away somewhere catching up," Nana said.

Carrie sank into a chair at the little kitchen table. Without asking, Nana poured a glass of cold milk and set it in front of her.

"He hardly said two words to me."

"Sy's death hit him hard," she said sadly. "He hasn't been the same kid since."

"I wish you would've told me when it happened," she said, taking a sip of milk.

"I tried," Nana said. "But you didn't have a phone, and you moved without telling me. I couldn't find you in time."

All true, but it meant Carrie hadn't heard about the nineteen-year-old kid dying in a drunk driving accident until months after it happened.

Trey had needed support. And she hadn't been there.

"Just give Trey some time," Nana said. "He'll come around. I've never seen two kids closer than you were."

"I guess." The milk and the soothing sound of her grandma's voice lulled her.

"I'll take you shopping for school clothes tomorrow," she offered.

"I don't need any," Carrie assured. "I just want to relax and go to bed early."

"If you're sure." A hint of worry entered her voice. Nana wasn't used to having her around anymore. And she must sense something was very wrong with Mom or Carrie wouldn't be there at all. Carrie hadn't admitted that Mom had been missing for ten days or that Carrie suspected she was using again. It would devastate Nana, and Carrie hated hurting her.

She'd left Bridgeville three years earlier with such hope for the future. But Mom hadn't been able to make her fresh start stick.

"Oh," Carrie said suddenly. "There is something. I had a garden in Indianapolis. I was thinking I could grow one here, too. If it's okay. If I stay that long."

Nana looked surprised, but pleased. "Of course. I'd love to have fresh vegetables."

"Okay. Good." Relief. She hadn't realized how much her garden in Indianapolis had meant to her peace of mind. "I'll get started in the morning. You can keep it going when I leave. It's easy. I'll teach you."

After her chat with Nana, Carrie shut herself in her room and went straight to her window. Light shone through Trey's window. The shadowy figure from earlier was gone.

Angry, Carrie snatched the coffee mug—right side up—off her sill and then snapped the drapes closed, wafting more dust. She dumped the mug on her desk and jammed a pencil into it. She'd been so naive to think her friend would remember her. Obviously their friendship hadn't meant as much to him as it had to her. And it hurt, deep inside.

She really could have used a friend right then.

Carrie double-checked that her bedroom door was closed and then grabbed her phone to dial the detective in Indianapolis handling her mother's missing persons case.

The cop was busy, and the conversation was brief.

"Anything?"

"No. I'll call you if something happens."

Carrie gave him her new phone number and then flopped spread eagle onto the unicorn print comforter. Even knowing Trey was in his room on the other side of the property line and that her grandma was watching TV downstairs, Carrie had never felt so alone.

SUNDAY

Nana had a decent sized yard covered in dead, weed-choked grass. It was way bigger than Mom's yard at the trailer park in Indianapolis. Feeling pleasantly buzzy Sunday morning, Carrie sorted the tools she'd found in the garage. Two shovels, a wad of black trash bags, a wheel barrow, and a lawn rake.

Nana squinted through the sliding glass doors. "You need help? We could rent something."

"No, thanks. I've got it." Digging was part of the stress therapy.

“Okay. But please clean up after yourself.”

“I promise,” she said. “And you’ll love it. Fresh flowers. Fresh veggies. Whatever you want, I’ll grow it.”

With a murmur of concern, Nana disappeared inside.

First job, dig up the tightly rooted sod and viney weeds behind the back patio. By hand.

Carrie hacked away at them, still shocked at the reception she’d gotten from Trey the day before. Yes, it had been three years, but had their friendship really suffered so much? Seeing Trey again was something she’d been looking forward to the most about Bridgeville. Him and Nana were the best parts of the quiet, country town.

Around noon, Nana appeared with icy cold lemonade and a turkey sandwich.

Sometime later, a car pulled up next door in front of Trey’s house, its radio pounding through the closed windows. Jogging across his front lawn, he hopped in the waiting car, and they took off.

Carrie wiped sweat from her brow with a sleeve, sipped lemonade, and got back to work.

At dusk, Nana came outside to check on her progress—limited—and let her know dinner was ready.

The same loud car parked in front of Trey’s house, and they both turned to watch the lanky teen go inside.

“Have you talked to Trey yet? You used to be two peas in a pod.”

“I tried last night.” Carrie grimaced at the perplexing responses she’d gotten from him. “But he’s different.”

“He could use a friend, poor thing.”

“Okay.” She got it. Guilt trip succeeded. “I’ll try again at school tomorrow.”

MONDAY

School was school. New teachers, new courses, new faces, new books. But it was basically the same as Carrie’s old school, except Bridgeville High didn’t have lockers so she had to lug forty pounds of books and personal stuff around in a backpack.

She didn’t see Trey first period or second period or even third period. She was beginning to wonder if he even went to this school, but the senior lunch bell rang and there he was at the end of the hall surrounded by three girls, each of them trying to outdo the others in shortness of skirts and length of blonde hair. Hot girls. Cool girls. Girls not like Carrie at all.

But Trey was her friend and she had every confidence he would want to talk to her. No matter how different he was.

She waved and shouted, “Trey!”

He must not have heard her because he veered toward the cafeteria. One of his circling females, though, heard and zeroed in on her. She yanked Carrie’s waving hand down.

“Excuse me,” Carrie said, hoping the wrist grab was some sort of accident.

“No.” The blonde folded her tan arms over a C cup chest and glowered at Carrie with eyes so blue they looked fake.

“What?” Carrie tried to go around her, but the cheerleader sidestepped and blocked her again.

“Are you new or just forgettable?” the blonde asked as another sour-faced girl from Trey’s group joined her.

Being polite was getting more difficult. “I’m Carrie.”

The first girl said to the second girl, “This dork was trying to talk to Trey.”

“She must be special needs.”

It finally dawned on her that these were mean girls and to continue talking to them would only bring about more ridicule. Carrie faked left, and then dodged right. But damn if they weren’t quicker.

“Hold up, Special Needs,” the first girl said. “Leave Trey alone.”

“We’re friends.” Wrong thing to say. They both looked her up and down as if she might actually have special needs.

“Do you see Trey?” the second one asked, finding him over her shoulder.

Carrie stood on tiptoe to see him through the cafeteria doors, oblivious to her distress.

The girl continued, “He’s not your friend. He never was your friend. And he’ll never be your friend.”

That morning Carrie had been relatively confident of her first day look. She’d twisted her hair into pigtail buns, one under each ear. She’d worn her standard uniform—skinny jeans and retro concert tee. Today’s was Metallica. She didn’t look ridiculous. No, she wasn’t wearing a mini skirt and stilettos like the first girl, but she looked above average. Though as the second girl made a big deal of inspecting her, she felt like a simple-minded child.

“Leave Trey alone,” the first girl warned. “He doesn’t need Papparazzi all over him right now. Got it? He needs his privacy. Now, scoot.” She pointed in the opposite direction.

Carrie couldn’t help herself. She didn’t like being bullied in the hallway on her first day. “Are you okay with the fact that I can see your bush under your skirt? Haven’t you country kids heard of a wax strip yet?”

During the moment of stunned silence that followed, Carrie ducked away and straight into the cafeteria. They didn’t follow. They bee-lined it over to Trey and his harem, now holding court in a cluster of tables in the corner. Carrie caught his eye for half a second before a group of kids passed, and she turned away first.

She bought a hot dog and a soda and ate alone outside under a tree.

The rest of her day was slightly better than the first half. Trey didn’t have any of her classes, but neither did the two mean girls, so it evened out. At the end of sixth period, she stuffed all her books and homework into her backpack and drove home.

She should have done homework right away. That’s what good, responsible children did, but she grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and headed outside to work on her garden project instead.

And the digging helped.

“Hey.”

She hadn’t heard him walk up, but Trey stood at their shared backyard picket fence.

“Oh.” Her heart rate skyrocketed. For a moment, she hoped he was there to talk. Like in the old days. But then she got a good look at his face, and her hope deflated. “Hey.”

“I had to listen to Amber cry through our whole lunch period because of you.”

Her mind hurried to catch up. “Who?”

“Whatever you said to Amber really hurt her feelings.”

Must be blonde number one. “Is she your girlfriend?” It was the only scenario that made sense.

“No, but she’s a friend.”

Carrie wasn’t going to apologize for standing up to a bully.

“I had to listen to Amber cry at lunch about how mean you were.”

Carrie snorted in disbelief.

Scowling, he continued, “I don’t like it when my friends cry. So, just leave them alone. Don’t talk to them. Don’t talk to me either.”

That stung. She leaned on the shovel, staring for a long moment. *Don’t talk to him?* “We used to be friends,” she said quietly, and then felt stupid. “Never mind. Fine. I won’t talk to you or your friends. Oops,” she said, being snarky, “You’re talking to me right now. Breaking your own rule.”

“Nice mud manicure,” he said, daring her to say something back.

But she didn’t. She still cared about him. Even after three years of silence, all she could think about was talking to him again.

She lifted her chin a fraction. “You used to love digging in the mud. Our mud fort’s still in the corner over there. Remember?”

His expression shifted, losing a lot of the malice, and he stood on tiptoe to see over the picket fence. “Really?”

“Yep.”

His face closed down. “Just stay away from Amber. For your own good,” he said and then stomped into his house.

“Good night to you, too,” she shouted at his closed door.

“Who are you yelling at?”

Carrie whirled. Her grandma was on the porch looking concerned.

“Sorry, I was saying something to Trey.”

“Well, you don’t have to shout,” she said. “You can go over there anytime. You know that.”

Maybe she used to be able to. Probably not anymore.

TUESDAY

On Tuesday, Carrie made a new friend. Or, rather, she re-connected with an old friend from middle school. Andrea Green had been cursed in the hair department—frizzy red curls—but blessed with personality. She found Carrie right before lunch and invited her to join with her.

“I usually sit with the band geeks,” Andrea said, “of which I am the captain, but I would rather catch up with you. Do you play an instrument?”

“No. Sorry. My grandma tried to get me to learn piano, but ‘Mary had a Little Lamb’ was as far as I ever got.”

“Too bad. It would be cool if you joined the band with me.”

That was never going to happen. Carrie had no musical talent whatsoever. Unless listening to classic rock was a talent.

Carrie glanced over her shoulder at Trey’s table. He was surrounded by his harem and was looking more and more like an evil conqueror as he sat on top of his lunch table,

gazing seriously at the chattering hot girl to his left. He didn't notice Carrie, and she looked away.

"Oh, no," Andrea said knowingly. "You've only been here two days and you already have Trey-itis."

Carrie laughed. "What?"

"Every girl has had it at one time or another. I mean, look at him."

Carrie did, and he was even hotter the second time.

Andrea continued, "But he only dates cheerleader types. Besides, no offense Carrie, but he is so far above you on the ladder of coolness, you can't even see him through the clouds." She play-acted squinting up at the soaring ceiling. "From here he's just a fuzzy dot."

"We used to be friends." Heavy emphasis on the *used to be*.

Andrea nodded knowingly. "Things were different in grade school. Now, he has his sphere and girls like us have ours."

"Oh yeah?" Carrie asked, turning her back on Trey. He still hadn't glanced in her direction. "What's my sphere?"

Andrea scrutinized her from her pink-checkered Vans slip-ons to her Nirvana concert tee to her long hair. "I would say you fall into the 'as cool and pretty as a non-cheerleader can be' sphere. Which thankfully includes me and all my friends."

"Okay." Carrie had no idea what she was talking about, but it felt good to laugh.

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After school, Carrie couldn't procrastinate on her homework any further, but sat at the kitchen table and worked on her weekly assignments. She didn't even have time to improve on the garden before dinner.

After a piping hot vegetable lasagna, Nana handed Carrie a sealed plastic container of still warm brownies. "I made too much," she said. *Yeah, right.* Nana was awful at subterfuge. "Will you walk them next door for the Martins?"

"Sure," Carrie said with a smile. She still held out hope, despite what Andrea had said about cool kids and cliques that Trey and she could renew their friendship.

The Martins' garage door was up, and Trey was bent over a shiny black Ford pickup, staring into the interior.

"Hey," Carrie called.

He jumped like she'd scared him. "Oh. Carrie."

"Nana made some brownies." She lifted the plastic tub a little higher.

Ignoring her, Trey grabbed a tall brown bottle that looked a lot like alcohol and took a swig. Not only were they underage but she had a real sensitivity to drinkers because of her mom. Though heroin was her narcotic of choice, alcohol had played a large part in Mom's downfall.

"Are you drinking?" Carrie blurted out.

He looked at the bottle in his hand. "No. Are you crazy? It's root beer, Carrie. *God.*" He slammed the bottle into a trashcan. Glass burst. "After the way Sy died you think I would be stupid enough to drink?"

Without waiting for an answer, he stormed into the house, leaving her standing there holding the brownies. Only because she'd told Nana she would did she follow him into the kitchen. His mom sat in an armchair knitting the same afghan. Trey was nowhere in sight.

“Hi, Mrs. Martin,” Carrie greeted shyly, feeling strange coming into her house uninvited. “It’s me, Carrie from next door.”

She didn’t look up for a second, but finished what she was doing first. “Hi, honey. How are you?”

“Nana made brownies.” She set them across the table from her. “Ma’am, I’m really sorry about Sy.”

“Oh.” Her eyes glazed over and her smile wobbled. “Thank you. Trey is upstairs, I think, if you want to see him.” She ducked her head and worked the yarn. Carrie might as well have melted through the floorboards.

“I’ll just go on home. Good night.”

“Mmm,” Mrs. Martin replied, not looking up.

As she walked home, she wondered how she and Trey could be so out of sync. Talking to him used to be as easy as breathing. But then Carrie left, and Sy died. Everything was different. And not in a good way, but in an awful, soul-crushing way.

Screw it. Dark, or not, Carrie needed to burn off all this uneasiness in the yard. She changed into old clothes, turned on the back light, and hacked at the lawn until she was covered in sweat.

The porch next door creaked, and she realized with a start that someone had been lurking in the shadows, probably watching her. At the very least, listening to her grunting with exertion.

Was it the mysterious figure again? Impossible to tell in the dark.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a lanky teen approach the shared picket fence and watch her wrestle with the lawn for a few minutes.

“What are you doing?” Trey asked.

“Putting in a vegetable garden.” Carrie wiped her forehead with the sleeve of her tee. “I have to take out the dead grass first.”

The fence that separated her grandma’s yard from his yard was four feet tall, but Trey hopped it with little to no effort, and landed gracefully on her side.

“You’re doing it all wrong.” He plucked the shovel out of her hands. “You have to get under the sod or it’s a waste of time.” He wedged the edge of her shovel into the ground and tore up a small section of tightly rooted grass.

Carrie stood there for a second, not sure what to do. “You’re breaking your own rule again,” she said because she couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Shut up, Carrie.” But it was said with no edge to it.

With nothing else to do, she grabbed a second shovel and got to work beside Trey.

“What classes do you have?” she asked. “I didn’t see you in any of mine.”

“I have electives in the morning, and then core classes in the afternoon. You probably have the opposite track.” He kicked at his shovel and ripped up a wide swath of sod.

“That’s right.” She had all of her senior level classes—English, math, and biology—in the morning. Drawing, psychology, and civics after lunch.

“What electives do you have?” she asked. She was making progress, but more slowly than he was.

“Basketball practice, cooking, and sculpture.”

“Cooking?” Carrie could hardly believe it. The Trey she knew had never cooked a dish in his life.

“Yeah.” He peered at her. “Do you have Mr. Shaw for English?”

At her nod, he added, “Me, too. He loves group projects. Get ready for the next one to start on Monday.”

“Oh, okay.” She dug into the earth and was rewarded with a satisfying crunch.

“Do you have Kevin Chang in that class?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. She hadn’t learned a lot of names yet.

“Purple mohawk? Likes to slouch in his seat until he’s almost horizontal?”

“Oh.” That was a perfect description of the boy sitting in front of her.

“Trust me, do not feel sorry for him and join his group. He will coast the whole year with a D minus. He’s already been held back twice. I don’t know why he even comes to school anymore.”

They worked for a moment in companionable silence, their shovels biting through dirt and gravel.

“I don’t know if you have trouble in math,” Trey said, pausing to lean on his shovel, “but if you even think you will, sign up for tutoring now. Those spots fill up right away and the tutors really help. Plus, Mrs. Killiam will give you extra credit for going. Do you have her?”

“Um, yeah.”

“Bedtime, Carrie,” Nana said, opening the patio slider. She spotted Trey and grinned. “Hello, Trey. How are you, sweetheart?”

“I’m doing well, ma’am. Thank you for the brownies. I better go.” He handed Carrie his shovel and then catapulted over the fence. “Good night, Carrie,” he said without turning around.

“It’s not good-bye,” she murmured in response before putting the tools under the patio and following Nana inside.

WEDNESDAY

On Wednesday in English class, Mr. Shaw showed a slide about the upcoming group project. They were to pair off and prepare to perform an original one-act play in two weeks’ time. Kevin Chang turned to raise his eyebrows at Carrie in silent inquiry. Smiling, she shook her head and then searched out Andrea. Mr. Shaw seated them alphabetically, so she was two rows away, but she gave Carrie a thumb’s up.

Pleased, Carrie flopped back against her plastic seat and began sketching story ideas in her notebook.

In math class, when her teacher reminded them about tutoring sign-ups, Carrie printed her name on the sheet of paper taped to the door.

By lunch, she was feeling pretty good. Things were falling into place. And she had Trey Martin to thank for the tips.

At lunch, a bag of plain potato chips in her hand, she sat across from Andrea and turned to find Trey lording it up over his adoring subjects in the corner. She waved and could have sworn they made eye contact, but he turned to talk to Amber without showing any recognition.

“Carrie,” Andrea chided, pulling her attention back into the present. “You’ve got it bad, girl.”

“It’s not like that,” she said sadly with no idea how to explain what it was like. They were former best friends, but now one of them wouldn’t acknowledge the other in public? Sad. Rather than get into it, Carrie opened her bag of chips and quietly munched on one.

“It’s okay,” Andrea assured, giving her shoulder a playful punch. “He’s hot. I get it.”

Carrie ducked her head and smiled. Yeah, he was hot, but he was so much more than that. Past the sexy exterior she still saw the goofy kid with the overbite who made elaborate mud pies and loved horror movies. She missed *that* Trey.

“Do you have your eye on anyone for the homecoming dance?” Andrea asked, twisting in her seat to survey the visible boys to choose from. “I didn’t go last year, but I’m definitely going this year. I don’t care who I have to go with.”

“Hmm.” Carrie hadn’t even thought about homecoming. “No, I don’t know that many people. What about you?”

“Mike’s cute,” Andrea said, drawing Carrie’s attention to a table of good-looking boys. Probably football players, by their size. “And Sean. And Daryl. I wouldn’t go with Clark, though, if he asked me.”

Carrie leaned forward to get a good look at Clark. “Why not?”

“He dated my friend at the beginning of the year,” Andrea explained. “I just think he’s a douche. I mean, you can like him if you want, but not me.”

Carrie laughed abruptly. “I don’t like anyone.” As if beyond her control, her eyes wandered toward Trey’s table.

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Carrie ceased shoveling old sod from her grandma’s garden to check her phone. 4:15 and no further news on her mom. The detective said he’d call her if anything changed, but

would he? Was she just an annoying kid to him? She considered giving him a quick call, just to check when a tall, dark shape appeared on the other side of the fence.

“Hey,” Trey greeted, vaulting over the rickety wood.

“Hi,” she said, pocketing her phone.

Taking up the second shovel, he made quick work of the weeds and sod in the corner between the concrete and the fence.

Into the silence, he said, “I tried to wave to you today. You were staring at me, but then you acted like you didn’t see.”

She frowned because she honestly hadn’t seen it. But teasing him was more fun than arguing. “Oh, wow.” Carrie really amped up the sarcasm. “Trey Marcus moved his hand in my direction. I’m the luckiest girl in town.”

He looked like he wasn’t sure if she was teasing him or not. “What are you talking about?”

“I never imagined you would be popular,” she admitted. *Or so tall. Or so nice to look at.*

“Why can’t I be popular?”

“Because popular people are shallow,” she said. Obviously. “And fake. And cruel.”

“Thanks.” Oh, so he did get sarcasm. “People like me because I’m good at sports,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “And my parents are MIA so it seems like I can do whatever I want.”

“Another thing I don’t get,” she said, “is why you’re nice to me at night, but you’re such a dick during the day.”

He stopped shoveling, but didn't look up right away. She feared she'd hurt his feelings with the dick remark, but it wasn't that that had irritated him. When he dragged his gaze up to her face, his dark eyes were furious.

"I'm not nice," he snarled. "I'm not sweet or good, either." He slammed an open palm against his chest, making a hollow noise. "I don't feel things like *nice* anymore. Everything that was nice about me is gone. You were right the first time when you said I must be cruel to be popular." He let his shovel clatter to the ground. "What would you know about it, anyway?"

This wasn't the Trey she knew. He was torn up, inside and out, and overwhelmed with grief. One thing she was sure of, though, Trey was no villain. He was in pain, not cruel.

"That's not true," she countered. "You're a good person, Trey."

Snorting in disbelief, he backed away.

Before he jumped the fence and disappeared, Carrie blurted out, "I'm sorry about Sy, but you can't let it ruin you. I can't let my mom's screw ups ruin me, either."

"I'm already ruined." He turned on her, tense and withdrawn. "Did they tell you what happened? Or did you get the edited version?"

Carrie stuttered, not sure what he meant. Nana had tracked her down months after Sy's death and told her he'd been killed in a drunk driving accident. What hadn't Nana told her?

Trey didn't wait for her reply. "He was drinking and drove his friend Bucky home, but he hit a tree on Old Potter's Road. He wasn't wearing a seat belt. He went halfway through the windshield and then fell back on the seat." Trey pointed to his garage in the distance.

"My parents had the truck restored. New interior. But I know where to look if you want to

see blood stains. Because my brother bled to death in that thing before the ambulance even got there.” His voice was sharp in the cold night air. “Well, do you want to see it?”

She sensed he was only trying to scare her, maybe even chase her away for good. But Carrie didn’t scare that easily. She’d been through too much with her mom and Mom’s roundtable of loser boyfriends.

“Yeah,” she said. “Sure.”

Recovering quickly, he marched for the front of his house, and she jogged to catch up. With brisk movements, he opened the garage door, turned on the overhead light, and yanked open the driver’s door.

Carrie peered inside the fresh-smelling cab. Outwardly nothing was wrong, but she got the shivers nonetheless. Sy had suffered and died inside the vehicle. How could his parents have kept it? How could they stand to look at it?

Trey reached around her and pulled up a corner of the floor mat, revealing an orange-brown stain on the metal beneath.

Sy’s blood.

Sadness overwhelmed her, and she held her breath against a sob of pain.

Trey’s voice was quiet. “I’m empty inside, Carrie. HOLLOWED OUT. I don’t feel anything anymore.”

With that awful proclamation hanging between them, Carrie broke and turned into Trey’s chest. She hid her face in his shirt and cried, not caring that he was angry with her, not caring that he’d changed. In that moment, they were both in pain and thirteen again. After a beat, his arms slid around her shoulders.

“I’m so sorry,” she cried. “Trey, I wish I could change it.”

His mouth lowered to her shoulder. "I wish I'd been there to stop him," he admitted. "Maybe..." The unspoken words lingered in the air.

THURSDAY

Carrie's alarm went off, and she rolled over Thursday morning to check her phone for any missed messages from the detective in Indianapolis. Nothing important popped up, and her gaze wandered to the window facing the Martins' house. Last night, Trey had proved he was still the boy she remembered. But he was hidden beneath layers of grief. If only she could break through and remind him how much fun they used to have together.

Bleary eyed and exhausted, she stumbled into the hall bathroom and showered for school.

Downstairs, Nana was at the sink rinsing dishes.

"Good morning," Carrie said, searching the pantry for a granola bar or something.

"I made you breakfast." Nana pulled a piece of plastic wrap from a warm plate of scrambled egg whites and dry toast.

"Oh, man." Carrie gladly took the plate and pressed a quick kiss to Nana's cheek before devouring the food. She wasn't used to people making her breakfast.

"I thought you might be hungry after working so hard last night," Nana remarked, nodding out the kitchen window at something in the yard beyond.

"Yeah, I worked some on the garden," Carrie admitted. Though after Trey had showed her Sy's truck, she'd lost interest in gardening and come inside to read her assigned novel and write some lines for her group project.

“Some?” Nana chuckled. “It’s finished.” She turned from the window. “I’m impressed with how hard you’re working. This garden is important to you, isn’t it?”

Finished? Setting her fork on her plate, Carrie checked out the back door. The yard was completely cleared of old sod and clumps of weeds, and it was ready to be tilled and fertilized. Carrie couldn’t believe her eyes.

“It wasn’t me,” she admitted.

“Trey,” Nana guessed.

“He got upset with me last night. He must have come back after I went to bed.”

Nana glanced her way. “What was he upset about?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Carrie said with a sigh, returning to her breakfast but finding she wasn’t hungry anymore. “I asked him why he ignored me at school, and he went off about how he’s not nice, how he doesn’t have emotions.” She was too embarrassed to admit to seeing the blood stains.

Nana nodded. “You have to understand, he lost his brother *and* his best friend. He’s so full of pain, he doesn’t know what to do.”

Carrie ducked her head. “I know Sy and him were close.”

“He lost his brother,” Nana clarified, “and he lost you.”

She snapped her chin up. “What?”

“He was a wreck after you left,” Nana said. “He was so sad, he would come over here just to drink hot cocoa and be near your memory. Now, you’re back. He might be trying to process those feelings all over again.”

“He still came over here?” Big, tough Trey had missed her? She’d missed him terribly, but she hadn’t expected him, for some reason, to have similar feelings.

Nana nodded, sipping her tea.

Slumping her shoulders, Carrie said, "I don't know what to say to him anymore."

"You'll think of something."

#

After school, Carrie dropped her backpack in the foyer and went straight outside to take stock of the back yard and start planning where different crops and flowers would go. Root veggies right off the patio, then a row of bulbs would be nice. She'd always wanted to plant a berry bush or two. Definitely beans. And daisies were fun and easy.

As she organized her thoughts, she sensed someone watching her.

Hesitating between ignoring him or not, she finally decided to try to reach him. After all, he must have spent hours working in the garden the night before.

"Hey," she called, shielding her eyes from the sun in order to spot Trey lurking on his back porch. "Thanks for the help."

He didn't say anything, but he stepped onto the top step and watched her.

"Look," she continued, "I'm just going to go ahead and say this while you're still speaking to me." She took a deep breath. "I know who you are. You're the kid who was too scared to watch *The Shining* in one sitting. We had to watch it in sections. In sixth grade, your John Cena impression made me laugh so hard I peed my pants. And after Nana went to bed, we used to crawl into the same sleeping bag at our sleepovers so we wouldn't feel alone. I've spent more time with you than I have my own mother. I know exactly who you are, and you're a good person. You're hurting right now, but that doesn't change who you are in your heart."

He stared at her for so long, she got itchy and nervous. What if he couldn't hear her? What if he had ear buds in, or something? Or worse, what if he heard her perfectly, and he was embarrassing her on purpose?

"Well, I've got work to do," she told him and turned away.

But ruining her big exit, her phone chirped. Police department number. Indianapolis.

"Oh, damn it," she hissed as she answered.

The news didn't make sense even as the detective explained it in clear, clipped phrases.

"Carla DuPont was picked up today in a raid in downtown Indianapolis. She's had an overdose. She's in Mercy Hospital."

Carrie said something nonsensical like, *Is she dying?*

"That's a question for the doctors, miss."

She hung up without saying anything else and dropped the shovel still in her left hand, then promptly stepped on it. The handle bonked her hard on the shoulder, and her phone somersaulted into the dirt.

She upgraded her swear words. "Shit," she hissed, avoiding the shovel and bending for her phone. But another hand reached it first.

How had he gotten over the fence so fast?

"What's wrong?" Trey wiped dirt specks off the screen and set it in her palm, steadying her with his free hand. Though it was strange to feel Trey's big hand on her back, it was a kindness she hadn't realized she needed. But she did need it. Images flashed through her mind. Mom in a hospital bed. Mom unconscious. Mom dying.

“Nothing,” she said rather than confess the truth, that Mom wasn’t getting better. She wasn’t on a vacation with friends. She’d been missing for almost two weeks. “I have to go.” She could make Indianapolis by nine, if there wasn’t traffic.

“Go where?” He wasn’t letting her off the hook. Of course he wasn’t. She was beginning to think he enjoyed giving her a hard time.

“Indianapolis. My mom needs me.”

“I call bullshit,” he said. “Something’s wrong. What happened?”

She glanced at the house as she passed it, worried Nana could hear her through the walls and glass. “My mom’s in the hospital,” she said. “I have to go see her.”

Trey kept step with her all the way to the driveway. “Was she driving drunk?” he asked.

“No.” She fumbled the keys. Luckily, her wallet was in her back pocket. She wouldn’t need to go in the house and face Nana. She didn’t want to lie to her, but she didn’t know how to tell her the truth.

“Did she overdose?” Trey asked and as he did, he removed the keys from her numb fingers.

“What are you doing?” she squealed. “Stop it. This is serious.”

“You can’t drive like this,” he said, easily avoiding her swinging fists.

“I have to go!”

“I know,” he said, ducking around her and opening the door. “I’ll drive.”

She couldn’t think for a second. “To Indianapolis?” she confirmed, shocked.

“Wherever you need to go.” He squeezed into the tiny car and adjusted the seat position to full back.

“But—” He was right. She wasn’t in any frame of mind to drive for hours on freeways.

“Get in,” he called, starting the car and adjusting the mirrors. “And give me your phone.”

She handed her phone to him through the open door.

“Mrs. DuPont,” he murmured as he typed a text, “this is Trey. Carrie’s spending the night at my house tonight. I’ll take her to school in the morning.”

“Good thinking.” She got in, buckled her seat belt, and just stared at him for the length of time it took him to drive out of their neighborhood. Trey glanced at her, once, but he didn’t say a word, and too anxious to have a one-sided conversation about stuff she didn’t want to talk about, she turned on the radio and spun the volume up.

Trey spun it right back down again. “What’s going on with your mom?”

Carrie sighed deeply. To her side window, she said, “She was good for the first couple years we were in Indianapolis. Then I could see her slipping. She was drinking, but only on the weekends. Then she’d come home late from work smelling like pot. She held it together pretty well until the last month or so. She was back on heroin. I could tell. But I didn’t know what to do, and she wouldn’t talk to me. I had to come back here because she went missing. Well,” she blinked away foggy tears, “they found her.”

“Alive?”

“Yeah.” So far.

He didn’t ask any other questions for a while. In the tiny car, he was too big, too quiet, too annoying.

He fiddled with the radio, trying to find a station and pushing all the wrong buttons.

Sitting forward, she said, "Stop, please."

"Do you have Bluetooth?" he asked, pulling out his phone and setting it on the center console.

"This is a 1985 Dodge hatchback," she reminded him. "I can't even play CDs."

He looked aghast. "So, how do you listen to music?"

"The old-fashioned way." She opened the glove box and pulled out a homemade cassette tape. "Do you know anything about hard rock?"

"Like Bruce Springsteen?"

"Not exactly. Here." She pushed the tape into the stereo. "The first song is 'Won't Get Fooled Again' by the Who. The second is 'Enter Sandman,' the greatest song ever recorded."

"The best *hard rock* song ever recorded, maybe," he grumbled.

Teasing, she said, "Just shut up and listen."

From time to time, she caught him tapping his finger on the steering wheel, which was enough of approval for her. She left the cassette in, slid low in her seat, and propped her feet on the dash. If they were lucky, the music would last all the way into the city.

#

Parking at Mercy Hospital was in a garage across the street. Trey slid her car into a spot on the third level, and Carrie hurried down a ramp, down flights of stairs, her sneakers flapping on the concrete steps, and zipped across the street, past a coffee hut, and toward the hospital's main entrance. After checking in, she took the elevator alone to the third floor and then was stopped dead at the doors to ICU.

"I'm here to see my mom," she said. "I got a call from Detective Green."

"Name?"

“Carrie DuPont,” she blurted out, and then realized the woman probably meant her mom’s name. “Carla DuPont. Sorry.”

“She’s having some procedures done right now,” the lady said kindly, but firmly. “Have a seat in the waiting room and someone will find you when she’s ready for visitors.”

Carrie backtracked to the nearest waiting room, but couldn’t sit down. Her heart was racing. What if Mom was messed up? More messed up than normal? What was she going to do?

“Carrie?”

She spun, expecting a nurse or doctor, but it was Trey, looking so abnormally tall and healthy in such a depressing place. He handed her a cup of steaming coffee.

“Thanks.” She took it, smelled it, and then enjoyed the warm cardboard cup in both hands.

“Did you see her?” He didn’t rush her to sit down or calm down, but it helped anyway. She felt better, not being alone. She’d been facing crap like this with her mom for years by herself. Having Trey beside her lent her strength. It was slightly dizzying.

“No. Not yet.” She sat and hunched over the coffee. “But now I can go home to Indianapolis.” If Mom was safe and sound, they would return to their trailer as soon as she was released. It would be hard to break the news of her leaving to Nana, but probably not as hard to say good-bye to Trey. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He would probably be relieved to see her go.

“What are you talking about?” Trey asked. “She’s in the hospital.”

“She’s been in the hospital before,” Carrie confessed. There had been a MRSA infection six months ago that required an overnight stay in a different hospital. About a

year ago, she had her tonsils removed after a bad case of tonsillitis. And there were other stays, other health issues, but she'd always come home after a night or two and life had gone on. Carrie had no inkling this would be any different. Her mom was weak for heroin, but tough in every other way.

Trey opened his mouth to say something more, but the big double doors to ICU swung open and they both turned to watch a dark-skinned man in green scrubs stroll toward them.

"Miss DuPont?" he greeted. "I'm Dr. Patel. How are you?" His larger hand swallowed hers in a firm shake. "Carla is your mother?"

"Yes."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

The doctor frowned. "Is your father or someone else here to be with you?" Dr. Patel asked.

Trey stepped up beside her, his arm brushing hers briefly.

Carrie said, wishing he'd get to the point already, "It's just me and my mom. What happened?"

"When your mother was admitted to the emergency room, she was not breathing on her own. After a toxicity screen, we detected dangerous levels of opioids in her blood."

"She overdosed?" Carrie clarified. She'd been through this before, too. Her mother overdosing is what had sent Carrie to Nana's house as a little kid, the first time she'd met Trey and Sy.

"Yes," the doctor said. "To put it bluntly."

“When can she come home?” she asked.

Dr. Patel’s brow furrowed in a way that worried Carrie. “Your mother is in serious condition. She suffered several small strokes both before and after she was brought in by ambulance.”

Carrie’s stomach clenched tighter and tighter with each word, twisting so hard she feared she might throw up all over Dr. Patel’s nice blue scrubs. “Strokes?”

“These strokes have caused trauma to her brain,” the doctor continued. “We’re running tests, and we’ll know more soon.”

The whole floor swayed. Or maybe that was Carrie. Hard to tell. She closed her eyes, trying to regain her equilibrium.

Like a security blanket, a warm, firm hand slid around her ribs. Trey’s familiar scent enfolded her.

“Can Carrie see her mom?” Trey asked.

“Of course,” Dr. Patel said, leading the way through the double doors into ICU.

Carrie started following him before realizing Trey was hanging back, whether to be polite or not, she wasn’t sure, but she needed someone familiar to go through those doors with her. Whether he was still angry at her didn’t matter at the moment. She took his hand, grasping his long fingers between her own, and pulled him through the doors.

When Dr. Patel pulled a curtain aside, revealing Carrie’s mom lying in a hospital bed, Carrie’s eyes widened. She’d seen her mother in many different conditions—drunk, high, furious, goofy, passed out—but she’d never seen her like this. Her mother was scrubbed clean and lying motionless on a white-sheeted bed, spider webs of tubes and leads floating off her and connected to half a dozen different machines and IV bags.

“Oh, my God,” Carrie groaned. “Is she going to die?”

“She’s weak,” the doctor said. “She has a lot of healing to do before we can make a guess about her chances.”

“I want to stay,” Carrie said. “I want to help her.”

The doctor said, “That’s not possible.”

“She’s my mom.”

“I’m afraid there’s nothing you can do here, for now. You can stay for a while, but then you need to return with another parent or guardian during regular visiting hours.”

“Carrie,” Trey said quietly, pulling her away from the doctor and closer to his own body at the same time. For a moment, she felt like one of his weak-kneed, blonde harem girls and it irritated her. “We can stay until midnight. Then I’m getting you to school.”

At the sound of his voice, Mom opened her eyes and pulled at her oxygen mask.

“Mom?” Squinting at every detail, Carrie approached the bed. Bruises on both wrists and under her left eye. Was it her imagination or was her lower lip swollen?

Her mother’s reflexes were slow. She blinked twice into Carrie’s face before seeming to recognize her. “Carrie?” she whispered. “What have you done? Where am I?”

“You’re in a hospital,” Carrie explained kindly. “The police found you.”

As if speaking the word could conjure them, a broad man in a suit and wearing a shiny badge approached the privacy curtain.

Mom didn’t see him yet, though. Her eyes were pinned on Carrie. “Get me out of here,” she hissed, a real fear in her voice Carrie had rarely heard. “I want to go home.”

“Not yet,” Carrie said, patting Mom’s forearm, but Mom yanked her arm out of reach.

“What have you done?” she repeated.

“Good evening,” the officer greeted. “I’m Detective Green. You must be Carrie. I have a few questions for you. When you’re ready.”

“Can I talk to her first?” Carrie asked. She wasn’t ready to leave. She’d just gotten her mom back.

“I’ll wait outside the door.” The detective nodded and ducked out.

“Mom?” Carrie asked, leaning over the edge of the bed. “What happened?”

“Get me out of here,” Mom cried, wiggling under the white sheets. “I want to go home.”

“Who hit you?” Carrie asked, her throat suddenly clenched. “How did you get those bruises?” And then her mother’s arm relaxed and the angry red puncture marks in the crook winked up at Carrie.

“How could you do this?” Carrie breathed, closing her eyes as a wave of dizziness hit her.

“Get me out of here!” Mom reached for her, bony fingers digging into her. “You bitch, what have you done?”

Carrie backed away and kept backing away until she bumped into something solid and warm, and then she pushed away from Trey and rushed out of the room. The detective was there, waiting.

“What’s wrong with her?” Carrie demanded as the detective flipped through pages in a notebook. It was like her mother didn’t even recognize her.

“That’s a question for the doctor,” he said.

Except the doctor had vanished. “But you know what’s wrong, don’t you?”

Sighing, Detective Green said in a hushed voice, "She's had several strokes. She's lucky to be talking and moving around. It'll take a little time to fully recover. Maybe years."

"How long does she have to stay in the hospital?" If she could get Mom home right away, maybe life could return to some semblance of normal. Her eyes found Trey hovering at her left side, there but quiet and respectful. Supportive, but invisible.

"I want to talk to you about that. You see," he said, "your mother was found in a very suspicious circumstance. Being in possession of illegal drugs is the least of the charges at this point. She was picked up in a home where a young woman was being held against her will."

"Wait," Carrie's stomach dropped a solid foot. "What?"

"Police had been searching for a missing woman, followed some leads, and found her alive in a home where your mother was also staying, along with at least two ex-cons."

"So, my mom was a victim, too?" Carrie clarified. That must be where the bruises had come from. Maybe they'd even drugged her while she was there. That's why she'd been gone so long.

"No," the detective said quite firmly. "Your mother was not being held against her will."

Carrie laughed. Couldn't help it. "That's ridiculous."

The detective's expression never changed. "As soon as she's cleared for travel, she'll be transported to the county jail, and from there she'll likely be charged with abduction. Among other things."

“No. You’re wrong.” Carrie glanced at the curtain concealing her mother. “She wouldn’t do anything like that.” But even as she said it, Carrie knew that when using her mother was capable of anything.

“I have some questions,” the detective said, unfazed by Carrie’s outburst. “When was the last day you saw your mother, before tonight?”

Carrie did her best to answer questions he already knew the answer to or questions he’d already asked. What was her mom’s weekly routine? Where did she work? Did she have a boyfriend? With each answer, a sinking feeling only deepened. This was really happening. Her mother was using again, and worse than that, she’d abandoned Carrie to kidnap an innocent woman in order to buy more heroin.

“Carrie, we should go.”

She looked up. Trey was standing over her, a hand between her shoulder blades.

“What?”

The detective was gone. She hadn’t even seen him leave. Had he said good-bye? Had she?

“We have school in the morning,” he reminded her. “Your grandma’s going to be worried if you don’t show up.”

Nana. Right. She had to hold it together for Nana because until she found a way to explain the insanity of tonight to her grandma, she couldn’t say anything at all.

He urged her away from her mother’s bed, but a sense of panic forced Carrie back through the curtain. “I love you, Mom,” she whispered fiercely as she snatched a quick hug. Carrie left to her mother’s pathetic, whining cries.

The car ride back home was a lot quieter than the first trip.

Somewhere between Indianapolis and Bridgeville, Carrie's shock turned violently to anger. "Why?" The word broke from her chest and throat. "Why?" She slammed her hand against the dash. "How could she do this? How could she start using again?" She hit the dash harder, then with both hands, and then with both fists. The pain in her knuckles was a relief. She slugged the dashboard of her stupid little car until her hands screamed in pain, sharp spikes of it driving up her forearms. "Why? I'm right here. Why?"

She screamed, obliterating any further words and punching the dash so hard a nerve vibrated like a bell up her arm all the way to her ears.

She threw herself back against the seat and twisted away from Trey.

It worked. He didn't try to comfort her any further, but drove her into Bridgeville and into her grandma's driveway.

"Will I see you at school?" Trey asked, but Carrie took the keys from him, gathered her things, and got out of the car.

#

The house was dark and quiet when Carrie shut herself inside at six am Thursday morning. Nana would be asleep, and Carrie was glad because she couldn't have faced her grandma right then.

Tiptoeing up the stairs, she went into her bedroom and kicked off her shoes. She'd left the drapes open, and she stood at the window to close them. It was a habit for her gaze to flick to the left toward Trey's windowsill.

An empty coffee cup sat on his sill, right side up.

Carrie stared at the reminder of their childhood games, and her fingers gripped the heavy drapes tight.

It hadn't been there the day before. He must have hurried upstairs and set it there after she stormed off. She'd gone slowly upstairs, but there hadn't been much time. Trey must have run.

Carrie released the drapes and changed her shirt, reapplied deodorant, brushed her hair, and packed her backpack for school. She stepped carefully downstairs and outside. Leaving her backpack on the hood of her still warm car, she headed for Trey's house. No need to knock. He was sitting on his porch steps.

She sat beside him, pulled up her knees, and rested her chin on her arms. "Thanks for driving me to Indianapolis," she said into the bitter, early morning air.

"Of course," he grunted. "I just wish... Never mind."

"What?" She turned to see him, but his face was a shadow. "Tell me."

"Nothing."

"There are no secrets anymore," she said. "You know all mine. My mom is using again. She's going back to prison, maybe for the rest of her life. I'm on my own again. What could you have to say that could be worse than all that?"

"I needed you," he said tightly. "When my brother died, I needed you, and you weren't here."

Goosebumps rose on her arms. God, the pain in his voice...

"You were my best friend. Where were you?" he demanded. "I was all alone."

"You had your parents."

"They're useless," he snarled. "You think they were silent before? When Sy died, they might as well have been sculptures. I was all alone, Carrie." He blinked shiny eyes.

"I'm sorry," was all she could say. "I would have come back if I'd known."

“Not true,” he returned. “First chance you get, you’ll run off to Indianapolis. You already said you’re leaving.”

She didn’t have a good answer. “I’m here now,” she said quietly.

“Too late,” he barked. “It’s too late. I needed you. My brother died. And you weren’t here.” He stood, looming over her as his fists curled. “You promised me you’d come back, but you never did. Not even for Sy’s funeral.”

“I couldn’t.” She popped to her feet and stepped onto the top shelf so they were nearly eye-to-eye. “I didn’t know about Sy until it was too late. But I thought of you. I never stopped thinking of you, not for a single day I was gone.” She tilted her head toward his house.

“After Sy died, I tried to find you,” Trey said with difficulty, as if not really wanting to talk about it. “But your grandma said you didn’t have a phone or an email. She said you must have moved a couple times because her letters came back return to sender. That’s when I knew you weren’t my best friend because if you *were* my best friend you would’ve been here. You would’ve tried to reach me—before Sy died, after he died, *anytime at all.*”

Carrie leaned in closer, flushed with anger. She gripped his hand, and like an instinct, he squeezed back. “I had to give my mom her big second chance. Don’t you understand? She needed me. She’d worked so hard to get clean, to find a job, to be a mom again. I had to let her *try.*”

“But you can’t save her,” he shouted, whipping his hand from hers. “You’ll never be able to save her. And you can’t save me, either.”

A little white coupe pulled over to the curb in front of Trey's house and the window rolled down to reveal Amber's grinning face and long blonde hair. "Hey, Trey," she greeted in a cutesy sing-song voice. "You ready?"

He stared unblinking at Carrie for a long moment. Finally, he grumbled, "Yeah," and swung his backpack over one shoulder.

Carrie watched him walk away.

"Hey, Special Needs," Amber called out. "Hurry up. You don't want to miss the short bus."

Carrie opened her mouth to retaliate when Trey's booming voice froze her. "What did you say to her?"

The cheerleader stuttered. "Uh, what? Nothing."

"Don't talk to her like that," he snapped.

"What? Why?" Amber whined.

"Just don't."

FRIDAY

After school Friday instead of doing anything popular like go to a party, she rented an earth tiller from the local hardware store and started breaking up the earth behind Nana's patio. It was difficult, sweaty work, even with the machine. Which was a relief because Carrie needed the outlet. The things Trey had said about Sy's death had messed with her mind. She'd wandered through school like a zombie, not really taking anything in, but hanging around just to get attendance credit. She hadn't even looked at Trey at lunch, couldn't handle so much as eye contact after everything he'd said.

“Carrie?”

She startled, for a moment afraid it was Trey come to yell at her again. But it was Nana at the back door.

“Can you take a break?” Nana asked. “I need to talk to you.”

“Yeah.” Wiping sweat from her eyes, she set the tiller aside and kicked earth off her boots before following her grandmother inside.

“Here. Sit.” Nana served her a mug of hot green tea and then sat across from her. “I know everything.”

Carrie’s stomach dropped. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not so old I don’t know about Google alerts,” she said with a sad smile. “Your mother’s in trouble again.”

To buy herself time, Carrie sipped her tea. Why had she ever thought she could fool her grandmother?

Nana continued, “I really hoped this time would be different.”

“It was,” Carrie assured. “For a long time, she was clean and we were happy.”

“Did she hurt you?” Nana asked pointedly. “Be honest.”

“No.” But at Nana’s knowing look, she amended, “It was nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“She left you alone?” Nana guessed. “She forgot to feed you? Forgot to pay bills?”

Carrie didn’t respond, couldn’t snitch on her mom.

“You should have told me long before this,” she said. “I could have helped you.”

Carrie had been too embarrassed and too afraid something bad would happen to her mom to admit anything.

“You were trying to protect her,” Nana guessed. “I get it. But from now on, my only and most important job is to take care of you.”

Carrie sniffed, then tried to hide the tears behind her mug. “You know Mom’s in the hospital?”

“I know she’s in a lot of trouble,” Nana said. “But there’s nothing you can do now to help her, so you’re going to let yourself off the hook. Lord knows I tried to save my daughter at least a dozen times before I had to let go or lose myself, too.” She hardly ever talked about Carrie’s mom, but she supposed their experiences weren’t that different. “Bail money. Clothes for court. Money for rent. Money for just about everything. I’m not complaining,” she added. “But it didn’t help, not really. She didn’t straighten out until she was ready. And it didn’t have anything to do with me.” Nana leaned across the table. “Do you understand, Carrie? I have a feeling you’ve been the adult to your mom for a while, and I’m telling you, from here on out, you’re going back to being a kid and I’ll do the heavy lifting. Deal?”

Carrie hadn’t realized how much responsibility and fear she’d been holding on her shoulders because as soon as she agreed with Nana, it all fell away, leaving her a thousand pounds lighter. The thought of being a teenager again was too good to deny. She’d love to worry about nothing but clothes and homework projects. That would be bliss.

“But Mom,” Carrie said, remembering her lying in a hospital bed.

Nana reached for her hands and clasped them. “I’ve been talking to Detective Green and Dr. Patel. I know what’s already happened and what’s going to happen next. But you’re not to worry about all that. Your mother’s alive, and she’s going back to prison. That’s all you need to know.”

“Ok.” She exhaled. “I love you, Nana.”

“I love you, too. You are the only bright spot in all her mess, my precious Caroline.”

SATURDAY

Carrie knew about Georgie’s party Friday night because it seemed like everyone knew about Georgie’s party Friday night. Even Andrea brought it up. But it was the kind of party Carrie wasn’t invited to. Not because Georgie didn’t know her. She did. They were in the same English class together. But Carrie wasn’t going because she wasn’t cool enough to be invited.

So, when her phone buzzed with a text at 2:13 in the morning on Saturday, waking her from a really decent dream about a celebrity scavenger hunt, she was irritated. She was even more irritated because the message didn’t make sense. She sat up, rubbed her eyes, and tried again.

Don’t let me drive.

Carrie didn’t recognize the number, and figured it was an error, but just in case, she called the number back. Maybe the person was in trouble.

One ring, and before she could say hello, she heard, “Carrie?”

No way.

“Trey?” Why was Trey Martin calling her at two in the morning? They hadn’t exactly ended things on a friendly note the last time they had talked. She didn’t even know he had her number. He must have gotten it off the paper she’d left for his mom. “Are you okay?”

“I need—” There were other, female voices, a grating hyena laugh, and the line went dead. Carrie tried calling back, but it went straight to voicemail. He had turned his cell off. Or one of his adoring fans had turned it off for him.

Carrie sat in her dark bedroom, wiggling her toes under the sheets, wondering how she should respond. He sounded like he needed help, but maybe it was all a joke. A prank. A big misunderstanding.

Except, as his friend, Carrie couldn't take that chance. So, grumbling, she got up and dressed in mismatched clothes and flip-flops. She didn't wake up Nana. She would only overreact. Quietly, Carrie snuck out and started her car.

She drove straight to Georgie's house.

But Trey wasn't there. Some kid Carrie sort of remembered from school was, though.

“Hey.” She tapped the guy on the shoulder and tried to seem cool in her yoga pants and Pearl Jam concert tee. “Have you seen Trey?”

“Hi! Are you Trey's cousin? I heard you were Trey's cousin.”

Great. The only person she recognized was altered. “No,” she said, not doing a great job of hiding her frustration. “We are not cousins. Have you seen him tonight?”

“Yeah, of course. He's so freaking funny!” He burst into ecstatic giggles.

Maybe they were talking about two different Treys. The one she knew didn't even smile. “Trey Martin?”

“He went with Amber to Riley's house.”

“Where's that?”

Luckily, he had Riley's contact info in his phone, and Carrie memorized the street address. But as she hurried away from the sound of club music and riotous voices, she began to have second thoughts about this rescue mission. She pulled out her cell and looked at Trey's text again.

Don't let me drive.

Despite the ominous message, he sounded fine. He had gone to a second party with a girl, the girl Carrie hated, after he had sent the original message. He'd probably sent it by mistake. He would probably be pissed off and humiliated if Carrie chased him down while he was out having fun with his friends.

Yeah. She should get home.

She started the car and just sat there.

She couldn't leave him alone, possibly hurt, sad, or scared. No matter what. She'd failed him when Sy died. She couldn't do it again.

Cursing his name, she typed Riley's address into her phone's GPS. It wasn't that far from where she already was. Carrie pulled onto Main Street, turned right, drove two neighborhoods up, and then found the house at the end of Pinder Road.

This party was much louder and more crowded than the first. Carrie crossed the living room and dining room without seeing Trey or anyone else she knew. She checked the bedrooms, embarrassing herself and two couples looking for privacy, and then the bathroom. No Trey.

She was on her way out, figuring she had missed him and he had gone home on his own, when she found him wedged between a floor lamp and a curio cabinet with Amber

plastered all over him. She was going to town on his neck like he was made of candy. And he wasn't exactly struggling.

Carrie turned to go. Whatever his text meant, he looked like he was doing quite well. She threw him one last curious glance and that's when she noticed he was leaning heavily against the wall. As if he wouldn't be able to stand without it. And though Amber was wiggling and clutching at his back, his arms were at his sides.

"Trey?" Carrie had to shout over the noise. "Hey, are you okay?"

He roused at her voice and stumbled a step, his body going boneless for a second.

She leapt to steady him before he face planted, and she smelled bitter alcohol. Which didn't make any sense because Trey never drank.

"What are you doing here, Special Needs?" Amber demanded.

With Trey leaning a lot of his weight on Carrie's shoulder and her anxiety through the roof worrying about him, she did not have the patience to deal with the mean girl, too. Besides, Carrie was angry.

"You let him drink?" she shouted. "Are you stupid? His—"

That's as far as Carrie got before Amber punched a pink little fist into her eye socket.

Carrie spun with the impact, and pain exploded. She blinked, but her eye was watering so badly she couldn't see much.

Trey clutched Carrie to him, and she wasn't sure if it was to shield her or keep himself standing. "Carrie lives by my house," he declared in a slushy voice that hardly sounded like his. "Carrie will take me to my house by her house." He leaned toward the door, and she was forced to move or be flattened.

She couldn't see Amber's reaction, but she must have taken the hint because she didn't follow them outside. Carrie unlocked the car and Trey collapsed into the passenger seat, his head flopping onto the headrest.

He didn't say a word the whole ride home, and as she pulled onto the curb in front of her grandmother's house, she realized it was because he'd fallen asleep.

"Trey?" she gently shook his shoulder.

He startled awake like he'd heard a gunshot. "What?"

"We're here."

Carrie had a running commentary in her head of all the things she would yell at him about. The drinking, of course, being number one. But there was some good stuff about Amber and Sy and partying in general, too.

Until Trey opened the car door, fell onto his hands and knees on the sidewalk, and threw up.

"I can't go home like this," he said. "Let me stay with you."

Well, Carrie's grandmother wouldn't be thrilled to learn she'd snuck out of the house or brought home a drunk friend. Which meant they were being very, very quiet on the way upstairs.

Moving as stealthily as possible, she helped Trey into her room where he stumbled into the guest bedroom and fell onto her bed. Within moments, he was asleep.

Carrie stood there watching him sleep, tousled and smelling like a garbage can, and all she could think about were the dozens—probably hundreds—of sleepovers they'd had in this house when they were young. Of course, they had camped out on the living room floor in sleeping bags not her bed, but it all felt very similar.

With his cell phone, she texted his mom. "I'm staying at Carrie's house. Be home tomorrow."

Gently, she pulled off his sneakers and socks, and then she removed his chunky metal watch and his mega sized class ring. All of which, she placed on her bedside table.

She could have slept downstairs on the couch. She probably should have. Trey was so out of it he wouldn't have known the difference. But the bed was big enough for two. So, she changed into pajamas in the bathroom. In case he got cold, she spread an extra blanket over Trey and then climbed in between the sheets. The moment she lay down it was as if he could sense her. His hand leapt out, his fingers wedging themselves between hers. Holding her hand, he settled down and went back to sleep.

#

Surprising Carrie, Trey woke first the next morning. Groaning, he sat up and scowled, looking very confused. It was no wonder. He probably couldn't remember much.

"Morning," she greeted, staying where she was in the warm bed. "How do you feel?"

"Carrie? What the hell?" He scanned the room. "Why am I in your bedroom?"

"You don't remember last night?"

"I was at a party." He clutched his stomach and stifled a gagging sound. "Uh, I feel like crap." Collapsing onto his back, he covered his face with both hands.

She wanted to yell at him so badly. He'd made really dumb choices last night, but she controlled herself. He was too sick to fully grasp the situation and the last thing she wanted him to do was throw up again.

He curled on his side, the muscles in his back stretching the thin cotton of his T-shirt. "Just please tell me you didn't do anything embarrassing in front of my friends."

That was it. Carrie didn't mind driving him home and letting him sleep in her bed. But to be insulted afterwards? No.

"Friends?" she exploded. "The friends who let you drink when they know what it means to you?" Forget nice. He wanted to shoot jabs at her for being uncool? Fine. "What the hell do you think you're doing drinking, Trey?"

Still groaning, he sort of fell off the bed and crawled like a whipped dog toward the bathroom. But she wasn't done with him, yet.

"Sy died drinking. Are you trying to die, too? Because if you are then leave me out of it. I don't want to watch you self-destruct."

He ceased crawling and just knelt there, his head bowed. It took her a second in her fog of righteous anger to realize that he was crying.

Oh, God. She didn't want to make him cry. "Trey? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled." She crouched down and laid a sympathetic hand upon his shoulder.

"I drove his truck yesterday." His voice stuttered, thick and choked. "I had a drink at the party to feel better, but it only made it worse. So I kept drinking until I didn't feel anything."

"You should have called me sooner." She rubbed her palm across his bunched shoulders while he cried. "I would have helped you."

"I miss him so much." And then he couldn't talk for the sobs shaking him.

"Of course you do." She didn't know what to say to make it better. She sucked at grief counseling. "Have you ever heard the saying, 'You can't change what happened. You can only change the way you react to what happened?'"

“That sounds like something people say at AA meetings,” he said, and then blanched.

“Oh. Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

He hadn’t meant to bring up her mom’s drug addiction even peripherally. He was a nice guy.

“It’s okay.” Her mom’s screwed up life was hardly secret and as Carrie’s former best friend he knew more than most people.

He sighed shakily. “Do you ever wish you could change things? With your mom?”

Oh, Lord. What a can of worms. She spoke as honestly and openly as she ever had to anyone. “I had to let my mom go,” she said. “I know that sounds awful.” She shook her head until her face was temporarily obscured by her hair. “But I had to let her go or destroy myself because no matter what I do—and I’ve done it all, yelled, cried, ran away, stuck it out—she can’t kick her habit. I love her. I know she loves me, but she loves heroin, too. And maybe she always will.”

“I wish I could have been there and stopped Sy,” he admitted.

Someone knocked on the bedroom door. “Carrie? Who’s in there with you?” Without waiting for a response, Nana whipped open the door. But the sight of Trey froze her in her tracks.

Before Nana could embarrass him, Carrie motioned for her grandma to go and tried to communicate with her eyes that he needed privacy and a couple more minutes to compose himself. Pursing her lips, Nana reluctantly closed the door.

“What happened last night?” A little calmer, he pulled away and rubbed his face.

“You texted me to come help you. So, I did.”

He made fleeting eye contact, but it was enough to spot the mark on her cheek.

“What is that?” He poked at it, and she winced.

“When I found you, you were with Amber. She didn’t want to let you leave. She, uh, punched me.”

“Amber punched you?” He didn’t look like he believed it.

“Anyway, you were in no condition to go home so I brought you here. I let your parents know you were here. But not that you were drinking.”

“Thanks for driving me home.” He stood and turned away. “I need a shower, if that’s okay.”

“Yeah, you smell like garbage and puke.”

He made a face, not amused.

She added, “Use anything you need in there.”

Nodding, he closed himself into the bathroom and the lock clicked.

Before she had even finished descending the stairs, Nana was perched on the bottom step waiting for her. “Want to tell me what’s going on?” Even though it sounded like a question, it was more of a command. “I smelled alcohol. Were you drinking?”

“No,” Carrie assured, moving around her and toward the smell of turkey bacon. “But Trey was. Last night. That’s why I had to pick him up and bring him here. It was pretty bad.”

“I have so many problems with this I don’t know where to start,” she grumbled. “I don’t like that he spent the night in your room, young lady. If he stays here, he sleeps on the couch. Is that clear?” She sent Carrie a stern look of disappointment.

“Yes, Nana.”

She added, “I smelled alcohol on him. You, of all people, know better.”

Trey stepped gingerly down the stairs, and he must have heard their conversation.

“Ma’am, nothing happened, I promise. I wasn’t myself last night.” He glanced at Carrie.

“Carrie helped me find a safe place to sleep. That’s all.”

“I made breakfast,” Nana said, some of her anger ebbing. “Come eat before you leave.”

All Trey had been wearing the night before was a T-shirt over jeans and expensive sneakers. He’d put it all back on, which kind of negated the purpose of taking a shower. Carrie could still smell booze and vomit. Plus, there was nothing to hide the brown hickies climbing the column of his throat.

Nana served them each a plate of turkey bacon and oatmeal.

Carrie wasn’t very hungry. And Trey must have still been ill because he took a bite of bacon, but then set his fork down.

“What was all this about?” Nana asked, joining them at the small kitchen table.

“Trey?”

“I messed up, ma’am.” He bowed his head.

“Sy?” she guessed.

“Yes, ma’am,” he mumbled. And Carrie was surprised he had admitted that much.

“Well.” Nana fiddled with her mug. “You know you’re welcome anytime, Trey. You’re family around here. But next time bunk on the couch. You hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you for the breakfast, but I better get home.” Pushing away from the table, he walked for the front door. Without glancing back, he said, “Good-bye, Carrie.” And he was gone.

“It’s not good-bye,” she murmured under her breath.

“You know better than most,” Nana said, sneaking the untouched bacon off Trey’s plate, “you can’t save someone with an addiction.”

Yes, she did. “I think it was a one-time slip-up. He said he’d been depressed about his brother yesterday.”

“I can understand that,” Nans said wistfully. “Trey was always such a good kid. He seems a lot happier since you came back.”

This was Trey in a good mood? Carrie hardly believed he could be worse than this, but she had to take Nana’s word for it.

MONDAY

Carrie grabbed a banana for breakfast on her way out the door to school. She didn’t see or hear Nana downstairs, and she discovered why when she opened the front door and found her grandma chatting in the porch swing with Trey Martin.

“Oh,” Carrie said, startled. “Trey. Hi.” It was still a little awkward. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“I brought you this.” He handed her a gallon-sized baggie of cosmetics.

“What is it?” She accepted the gift, frowning at concealers, powders, and blemish sticks.

“I took an elbow to the face last year and had a black eye for prom,” he admitted. “My date insisted I wear this stuff for the pictures. It worked really well.”

“I have my own make-up,” she assured. In fact, she’d already tried to cover the bruises with foundation and powder.

Trey scrutinized her damaged eye, seeming unimpressed with her efforts.

“Fine,” Carrie said, tucking the baggie into her backpack. “Thank you,” she added when Nana sent her a look. “I appreciate the help. See you at school.”

He smiled as he bounded down the porch steps. “See you later.”

Shaking her head, Carrie kissed Nana good-bye and headed off. From the school parking lot, she called her mother’s landlord in Indianapolis and told him an abbreviated version of her mother’s arrest. He agreed to box up their stuff and keep it for a couple weeks until she could make the drive again.

Feeling good about how everything was working out, she grabbed her backpack and strolled into school.

The good feelings didn’t last long because Amber stumbled into her in the hall after first period.

“Oops, sorry Special Needs,” she sneered.

Carrie, though, was not having any of it. After being punched in the eye, her days of being bullied were over.

“Amber,” she warned, shoving her against the wall and pinning her there. “You’re not my bully, and I’m not your victim. Do you understand? And we’re not doing this anymore.”

The girl wrestled Carrie off and stood, glaring.

Before Amber could retaliate, Carrie added, “You hurt Trey at that party. A real friend wouldn’t have let him drink.”

“It’s none of your business,” she spat.

"It is," Carrie said, "because he's my friend. But if you don't cut it with the name calling, you and I are going to solve this another way." She waited for Amber to say something, but the girl just stood there staring.

For a brief moment, Carrie feared Amber might throw another punch.

"Tell Trey I'm sorry," she blurted out instead.

Carrie replied sharply, "Tell him yourself."

"I would, but he won't talk to me." With that, she flounced off down the hall.

#

Footsteps over the fence snagged Carrie's attention from the row of lima beans she was planting.

"Hey," Trey greeted.

"Hi." Straightening, she stretched her back. "What's up?"

He hopped the fence and went to investigate her pail of seeds.

"I saw Amber earlier," she said. "So, you two aren't speaking?"

"She told me," he said in a teasing voice, "that you bullied her in the hallway. I told her I thought your reaction was pretty tame, considering."

"I'm shocked," Carrie admitted. "I thought she was your best friend."

"Not anymore." He pointed at the side of his throat, still red and bruised. "It was basically sexual assault. I was barely conscious."

"And she let you drink," Carrie reminded him.

"And she punched your eye," he added. "So, she's not my friend anymore. I let her know to find a new lunch table from now on."

"Good." She was pleased he'd stood up for her and himself. "I never liked her."

Picking up a pouch of seeds, he asked, "Are you really going to plant daisies?"

"Yeah." She joined him on the patio. "They're pretty and easy to grow."

"I thought it was a vegetable garden."

"It's lots of things," she said, smiling. "It's eclectic."

"And messy and fun," he said. "Like you."

Her eyes widening, she looked up into his face. "Is that a compliment?"

He chuckled. "Definitely. Look, I can't stay. I have basketball practice. I just wanted to see what you were up to."

"Ok," she said as he crossed back into his yard. "Good-bye."

"It's not good-bye, Carrie," he called from his back porch. "It's, *See you later.*"

THURSDAY

At lunch, Carrie dumped her overloaded backpack on the table next to Andrea's plate of spaghetti and meatballs. "The homework here is ridiculous."

"I've always thought so."

As soon as she sat on the cold, metal bench Andrea's old nemesis Clark plopped down across from her. Though he said hello to her friend, he kept making nervous eye contact with Carrie.

"Did you do the math homework for fifth period?" he asked. "I didn't have time. Can I copy yours?"

Andrea dug a messy folder from her bag and while she thumbed through at least a semester's worth of handouts and homework assignments, the guy reached his hand across the table in Carrie's direction.

“Hi, I’m Clark. You’re Carrie, right? I remember you from when we were kids.”

She didn’t remember Clark, but he was cute in a Ryan Gosling kind of way, and he was nice to her in public, which was refreshing. She glanced over her shoulder, her gaze zeroing in on Trey. He was lording it over his harem on the other side of the cafeteria. Even minus Amber, he was still surrounded by cheerleader types.

Despite everything they’d been through during their off hours, he still wouldn’t acknowledge her.

“Yeah,” she said, turning her full attention on Clark. “Hi. How’ve you been?”

“Good.” He took her hand and squeezed, not letting go. His other hand appeared from under the table, and he made a big deal of studying her palm and then her fingers.

“Rough hands,” he observed. Carrie’s face overheated. That wasn’t very cool or feminine, was it? “Mechanic?”

“Gardener,” she admitted, snatching her hand back. “What do you do for fun?”

Seemingly not bothered by her scaly appendages, he grinned. “Party, hang out, whatever.”

Sounded vague. Andrea tried to get his attention by waving her homework in front of his face. Clark accepted it, folded it into eighths, and jammed it into his back pocket.

Carrie had a feeling her friend would never see that particular assignment again.

“So, you like Guns ‘N Roses,” he said, glancing at her tee. “That’s so retro. What’s your favorite song?”

“I love it all,” she admitted, leaning forward. “But ‘Paradise City’ is badass. And ‘November Rain’ is probably the best rock ballad ever produced. Have you heard it?”

“Sure.” But he shrugged, and she thought he might be bluffing just to impress her.

“It’s great.”

“Yeah.” She backed off, folding her hands in her lap.

“Hey, so, there’s a party tomorrow at Pete Carr’s house. Did you hear about it?”

“No.” She wasn’t cool enough to hear about parties.

“I did,” Andrea blurted out. “Sounds fun.”

“Yeah.” He glanced briefly at her before turning back to Carrie. “Are you going?”

“I wasn’t exactly invited.”

“I’m inviting you,” he said. “Give me your number. I’ll text you the address. Will you meet me there?”

“Uh.” The last party she’d been to, Trey had been a mess and she hadn’t had any fun at all. Maybe it would be cool to go to a party and dance, talk, and hang out. “Yeah. Okay.” She put her number into his phone as the bell rang.

“See you tomorrow night.” He yanked her into a hard hug, and then bounded off. She glanced to see if Trey had noticed, but he and his harem were gone.

FRIDAY

It felt like a lifetime ago Carrie had gone out on a Friday night. As she stood in front of her closet mirror gazing at her Black Sabbath tee and skinny jeans, she wondered if it was worth it. But this is what normal sixteen-year-old girls did, and after Nana’s talk the other day about being a kid, Carrie desperately wanted to feel normal again.

It’s why she’d taken down the James Dean poster and replaced it with a vintage Ozzy Osbourne one. And why she’d stashed the unicorn-print comforter in the closet and

replaced it with a turquoise blanket from the guest room. To feel like this was her home again.

Outside, beyond the back patio, tiny green sprouts pushed up through the earth. Her garden was beginning to bloom.

This was her home, and she was staying for good.

Twenty minutes later, Carrie walked through Pete Carr's front door and froze for a split second. Trey was there. Despite all the drama of the last party, he was standing in the kitchen beside some guy Carrie didn't know, acting all serious like they were discussing the origins of the universe. She didn't even think he saw her. Which was perfect.

She wasn't sure when it had happened, but Trey meant more to her than a friend—a lot more—and the sting of his rejection was nearly unbearable.

Clark grabbed two bottles of beer from the fridge and offered one to her. He didn't know her apparently. Carrie didn't drink.

She felt something in the room shift, perhaps a conversation cut short. And she knew who was behind her before she even looked. Trey was staring, horrified, at her. As if he could affect the atmosphere with his mood. Or maybe she had Trey on her mind way too much.

"No, thanks," she said loudly to Clark. "I don't drink. Do they have sodas or something?"

Clark got flustered and put one of the beers back, fished around the fridge, and reappeared with a can of orange-flavored drink. She took it, but didn't look at Trey to see if he approved. It didn't matter. She didn't care what he thought. He could ignore her in public? Well, she could play that game, too.

Carrie grinned at Clark like he had done the impossible, and when he led her into the living room, she slipped her hand into his.

The parties she had gone to in Indianapolis had been different. There, she'd been friends with the people throwing the party. She'd felt comfortable and at ease. Not so tonight. She didn't know anyone except Clark. And Trey, but he didn't count.

A crowd gathered around the kitchen table where some boys were playing a drinking game. A clutch of girls was in the hallway laughing loudly. And several boys were yelling over the Xbox. Plus, the music was so loud she couldn't talk normally to Clark, but instead had to shout in his ear to be heard.

He seemed to be having fun, though. He cracked open a second beer and took her into the living room with the gamers where he immediately stole a controller and started playing and yelling and shoving his friends. Carrie perched on the edge of the sofa and watched, but after twenty minutes, she was bored and just wanted to go home and sleep. Parties weren't her thing, after all.

She got Clark's attention and tapped her watch, signaling she was leaving. She didn't expect him to argue, but he tossed his controller at the boy beside him and followed her outside onto the wet lawn.

"What's wrong?" he asked, pulling on her. "Are you mad?"

"No. Just tired. I'll see you at school, okay?"

"Wait. Where's your car? At least let me drive you home." He stole the keys from her hand and patted the hood of her yellow beater like he owned it.

She opened her mouth to tell him to back off, but was interrupted by the front door banging open.

“Carrie!” She knew his voice. She didn’t have to look behind her to know he was barreling straight for them. “You’re going home with him? He’s been drinking!” Trey veered into her eye line, his expression terrified.

Had Trey been watching her all night? Waiting for her to screw up?

“I’m driving myself home.” She held out her hand. “Clark, give me back my keys.”

Trey gripped her hard by the shoulders and peered into her eyes. “Did you drink anything?”

She tried to wrestle free, but he wouldn’t let go. “You know me better than that,” she growled. “Back off, Trey.”

“Hey.” Clark reached for Trey in an aggressive way. A bad idea. She could see in Trey’s eyes he was on shaky ground. “Mind your own business.”

Trey released her only to turn on Clark, grab him roughly by the shirt, and smash him against her car. “You were going to drive her home after you’ve been drinking?” He slammed him again. “You could kill her!”

“What the hell!” Clark fought back, finally freeing himself and staggering away. “This is between me and her. She came here with me.”

Trey took a menacing step in Clark’s direction, and the other guy flinched.

“Well, she’s going home with me.” Trey’s tone of voice left no doubt who the alpha in the yard was.

Clark made a dismissive grunt, as if to say she wasn’t worth the trouble, and double-timed it back into the house.

“What are you doing?” Carrie demanded of Trey, giving him a little shove. “Are you nuts?”

“That guy’s a dick. I can’t believe you came here with him.”

She looked Trey up and down from his brother’s Converse high tops to his black shirt, and he was perfectly cool and normal and everything the other boys tried to be. But his eyes gave him away. He was aching inside. Was she the only person who noticed?

“Why do you care?”

“Because you’re my friend.” He frowned. “What kind of question is that?”

Friend. It was the furthest he had come so far. Maybe it was the adrenalin from the confrontation or the sugary drink she’d downed, but she couldn’t breathe right all of a sudden. And all she could think about was Trey’s mouth. She closed the distance between them, rose up on tiptoe, and kissed him.

For a split second, he kissed her back, and then she heard a feminine voice, loud and clear. “Poor Trey,” she mocked. “Special Needs won’t let go of him!”

He jerked away and glanced over her head to see who was watching.

“That hurt,” she hissed.

“What?”

Had she said it aloud? Good. “Clark’s not the dick in this situation,” she snapped.

“You are, Trey. You’re the dick.”

She tried to sidestep him, but he wouldn’t let her. “What are you talking about? I’m looking out for you.”

“Well, stop, because every time you do, it only hurts worse.”

“Carrie. I don’t understand.”

“I love you, you idiot,” she shouted. “I love you. And you’re embarrassed to be seen talking to me.” She finally stunned him enough that she could climb into her car and start

the engine. As she pulled away, she looked back in the rearview mirror. Because the real idiot was her.

MONDAY

School felt like a minefield. Carrie knew Trey was there, somewhere, but she had to avoid him or risk her heart being blown to bits. Just the thought of him hurt. She shouldn't have yelled at him. Or thrown her feelings in his face.

He hadn't hopped the fence last night. She hadn't seen him at all that morning as she left for school. They probably should have a conversation at some point, but she was going to vote for never.

Before she knew it, it was lunchtime and she had no way to avoid him. So, she kept her eyes down, gripped her plate, and sat at Andrea's table with her back to Trey and his harem. Like it was any other day. Like she hadn't shouted, *I love you*, at him.

She saw Clark, but he didn't come by to say hello. In fact, he avoided her pathetic attempt at a friendly wave, and turned so he couldn't see her. Perfect.

"Trey Martin is staring at you," Andrea whispered. "Did I miss something?"

"Remember the party at Pete's house? Well, I went. Clark will not be calling."

"No loss there, trust me," Andrea said. "But what does that have to do with the hottest boy in school?"

"Trey was there and he acted like a jealous boyfriend, though he has no right. Then I called him a dick," Carrie said, poking at her mashed potatoes, "and then I told him I loved him."

"Holy God in heaven," Andrea hissed. "Please tell me you're joking."

"I am not." Unfortunately. She couldn't force herself to eat, so she pushed the plate away and buried her head in her hands. "I'm a total spaz," she grumbled. "I wish I had a time machine so I could start this school year over again. I would wear short skirts and laugh loudly and never, ever think about Trey Martin."

"No, you wouldn't."

She moaned. "No. I wouldn't."

"Crap."

Carrie heard scrambling like Andrea was rearranging their plates.

Andrea hissed, "He's coming over here. I don't know what to do. I've never been this close to—*Hi, Trey*. You don't know me. I'm Andrea. Hi."

"Hey." His deep, familiar voice was right beside her. He stepped over the bench and sat, putting her between the vee of his long legs.

Patting her hair down, she raised her head from the table and made eye contact. Today, he didn't seem achy. He seemed nervous. But the harem master was never nervous.

"Carrie."

And that's all he said.

"*Trey*," she countered, raising her eyebrows in silent question.

He tapped the table, folded his arms, and then cleared his throat. "Will you go to the homecoming dance with me?"

Andrea, who had clearly been eavesdropping, choked on her diet soda.

"So I can wear a bag over my head and you can pretend I'm someone else?" Carrie countered. "No, thanks."

“I’m free,” Andrea blurted out, and then into the ensuing awkward silence added, “Heh. Just kidding.”

Trey leaned in. “Carrie—”

“I can’t do this,” she said, leaping to her feet. “Not here. We’ll talk after school. Just not here.” She ran. Like a coward and a total nerd, she ran from the cafeteria and from Trey.

“Carrie!” Trey was right behind her. She made it as far as the doorway. Beside her, his adoring fans were loitering, probably waiting for him to lead them to class.

Taking her hand and smiling reassuringly, he gently but firmly tugged her toward his lunch table. He stepped onto the seat and then the table top, pulling her up alongside him.

The entire cafeteria hushed, and she had no doubt everyone was watching.

Trey wrapped her in his arms and kissed her.

She struggled, nothing clicking in her brain. “Trey, but—”

“Shut up and kiss me,” he said, cupping her face. “You’re ruining my big romantic moment.”

She laughed, and then he kissed her again. With everyone watching. Even his harem.

“Carrie,” Trey said. “The thing you said last night. I didn’t realize you felt that way.”

She couldn’t speak. Her only response was a creeping blush.

“Because I’ve felt the same way,” he continued, “for a long time. When you moved away,” he said, “it sort of wrecked my whole life.”

She looked up into his eyes and saw how hard it was for him to admit his feelings.

“I didn’t know that.”

She clasped his hand, the one folded next to his chest, and he didn't pull away. Or look over his shoulder for witnesses. He held her hand, and she could feel his pulse through his clothes.

"When you came back, all those feelings came back, too. And I was scared," he said, his words coming faster now as if her hand in his was lending him courage, "that you didn't feel anything. That I was just your stupid neighbor buddy. I had to keep my distance to protect myself. But I couldn't even do that. Why do you think I jump your fence every afternoon to dig up sod and spread fertilizer? Why do you think I texted you when I needed help?"

"I don't know," she admitted.

"Because I'm in love with you. Now, will you go to the stupid homecoming dance with me, or not?"

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