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ASHLEY

Your Honor, thank you for letting me address this court. The first thing I want to say is that I couldn't wait to start high school. I liked the defendant. I really liked him. And I thought he liked me back. But now I know he never saw me as a person. I was nothing more than an opportunity for him. So now I can't wait until I'm done with high school.

—Ashley E. Lawrence, victim impact statement

NOW

BELLFORD, OHIO

The mirror is my enemy.

So is the closet.

There's literally nothing to wear. Clothes litter my room. Several pairs of jeans are balled up on my bed because they hug

my butt too tightly. T-shirts lie in piles on the floor because they're too clingy. Shorts and skirts? No. They reveal too much leg. I throw them over my shoulder. Dr. Joyce, my therapist, claims it's normal to have trouble getting dressed after what happened.

I always tell her I don't care what's *normal after what happened*; I just want *normal*—without qualifiers. I want to open my closet, pull on any old outfit, and not obsess about people thinking I'm *asking for it*.

“Ashley?”

I glance up and find Mom in my doorway, looking me over. I'm wearing a robe even though it's about ninety degrees outside.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” I lie and dive back into my closet, mopping sweat from the back of my neck. We'd agreed that I'd go to school on my own today. It's time.

“Ashley, look at me.”

I pull my head out of my closet and meet her eyes.

“Honey, I know you're upset. We all are, but I promise you, it's going to be okay.”

At those words, I clench my jaw and shoot up a hand. Then I just turn away because honestly, I don't know which part pisses me off more...the colossal understatement implied by a wimpy word like *upset* or the addition of the pronoun *we*, suggesting everybody else in this family knows exactly how I feel when they don't have the slightest clue.

She sighs but nods and then steps over to the closet, rehang-ing the discarded clothes I dumped on my bed. “We haven't

looked west yet. California is truly beautiful. You know I've never been there?"

I roll my eyes. We haven't looked anywhere. All we've done is *talk* about it, so I say the same thing I always say when this comes up. "Mom, I don't want to move away."

"But it could be a fresh new start for all of us, Ashley. No one would even have to know you were—"

"Mom." I cut her off, forcefully this time. "I really have to get dressed."

Her blue eyes, the eyes both of my brothers inherited, fill with the look that's become way too common over the last two years. It's disappointment. Is it directed at me or what happened to me? I don't know anymore, and I don't think it even matters. All I know is it's so acute, I can't bear to see it and have to look away. Once again, I return my attention to the closet to find something to wear.

"Okay. Have a great first day. Call if...if you need me." She turns and heads downstairs.

I don't answer because great days are yet another myth I've discovered in a long series of them, starting with the concept of justice. I roll my eyes. *California*. Like it would be no problem to just shut down Dad's auto repair shop and move a family of five across the country where there are no grandparents, no aunts, no uncles or cousins.

As the front door closes and the engine starts in the driveway, my phone buzzes. It hardly ever does that anymore. I glance at the display, annoyed when some stupid tiny seed of hope blooms because there's a text message from Derek.

Derek: Good luck today.

Rage ignites inside me like a match held to dry leaves. Cursing, I kick over my hamper, swipe every last book and paper off my desk, and come perilously close to hurling my cell phone at the wall. *Good luck.* Could he be this clueless?

As this is my brother, yes. He could be and often is this clueless...and worse.

Ashley: Yeah. Sure. Luck. That'll help.

The phone buzzes again.

Derek: I'm sorry. I swear I am.

Sorry? I almost laugh. Derek doesn't do apologies.

"Derek, tell Ashley you're sorry," Mom would order him after he'd made me cry for some thing or another.

And he'd say, "Sorry, Ash." Mom would walk away or turn her back, and he'd stick out his tongue or roll his eyes and smile that Derek smile, and I'd *know*. I'd know he wasn't really sorry. He was only saying it to make Mom happy. Apologies happen when you own up to having been wrong, and Derek has never been wrong in his life.

I stare at the words I'd have given anything to hear my brother say two years ago, but they're too little, too late, and knowing Derek as I do, false.

I toss the phone to my bed and go back to pawing through every drawer in my dresser and every hanger in my closet for something to wear and finally spy something. It's this old maxi dress Mom bought for me years ago. The tags are still on it. I grab it and hold it up. It probably doesn't fit. I think I was twelve or thirteen when she bought it.

There's a little pang in my chest. *Twelve or thirteen.*

Before everything changed.

I swallow hard, trying to hold on to the pain because if it gets loose—

Deep breath. Hold it in. Okay. Dress. Right.

I hold the dress up to my body, considering it. Yeah, it might work. I slip it on, smooth it out. It's actually a bit big. And ugly. Shades of dull beige and brown in a paisley print that hangs all the way to my ankles. I grab a sweater to hide my shoulders revealed by this outfit and smooth down a cowlick in my hair, which has finally reached shoulder length again.

Above the shelf on my wall, there's a mirror Mom bought so I could get ready for the new school year. I'd smashed the old mirror in another fit of rage not long after I'd hacked off my long hair. Yeah, this outfit *does* work. It hides pretty much everything.

I grab my phone and try to visualize the day ahead. Tara, my best friend, will meet me at school. She always has my back. The rest of the school is a different story.

Derek's words rattle around inside my head like some kind of curse. *Good luck, Ash Tray. You'll need it.*

Deep breaths. Breathe in, hold for one...two...three...four,

breathe out. In, hold, out. In, hold, out. I hate doing these breathing exercises because I feel like a total loser. I mean, who has to concentrate on breathing?

Traumatized people like me, that's who.

Two years. It's been two years. I'm fine. I'm absolutely fine. I roll my eyes because that's another thing I must do. Tell myself complete and total lies. It's supposed to help me believe them, turning them into what my therapist claims are *self-fulfilling prophesies*. I get it. The power of positive thinking and all that crap. But the truth is, I'm still waiting to feel fulfilled, yet I keep doing the same stupid breathing exercise, and I keep repeating the same stupid lies until finally my heart stops trying to beat out of my chest.

This is it—the first day of school. Junior year. I can do this. I can. I *will* do this.

I do something else...something my therapist never told me about. I visualize. I imagine building a dam...a little beaver dam of logs and twigs and dried mud to keep all of the triggers and memories and rage and...pain from leaking out into my life. I spend some time shoring up my dam, and with one last deep breath, I head downstairs, pretending the dread that's still climbing up my rib cage is anticipation for the first day of my junior year.

I see two coffee cups in the sink and dishes from my parents' breakfast. It's normal and typical, and it gives me something to hang on to while I wrestle all that dread back behind the dam.

I glance at the clock to make sure I have time and discover it's after 8:00 a.m.

No, that can't be right. I woke up extra early.

My shoulders sag while I stare at the clock blinking on the microwave over the stove and then pull the phone from my pocket. It shows the same time. How? How is this possible? They're wrong. They're both wrong. They have to be. I run to the family room, but the cable box is blinking the same time.

I've not only missed the bus, but I've missed the start of first period.

I shoulder my bag and start walking.

I thought I was past this. I thought the days when I'd lost huge chunks of time doing nothing except breathing were behind me.

.....

School is terminally irritating.

I missed first period entirely, and by the time the old bat in the front office gives me my pass, I've missed half of second, too.

"Ashley. Hey," Tara whispers when I finally take my seat in lit class, her face split in a huge smile. "What took you so long?" And then she looks at my outfit. "What *are* you wearing?"

I shake my head. "Don't even."

She puts up both hands in apology—or maybe surrender—and turns back to her notebook. Mrs. Kaplan is reading us the class rules and information about homework, exams, and class participation. I know this drill so I zone out. I take a look around the class, see who's here, who's not, and spot Sebastian Valenti over by the window at the same second he jerks his eyes away from me.

They're really amazing eyes. *Hazel*. I used to think hazel was a color but found out it actually means eyes that change colors. Sebastian's eyes look green sometimes, and other times, they look brown, and I've even seen them look practically yellow. Sebastian's a good guy. The best. He saved me when my stupid brother didn't. Wouldn't. He keeps asking how I'm doing, and I keep saying *fine*. And that's about as deep as our conversations ever get, so I just don't bother anymore. I haven't talked to him all summer. But he's still a really good guy.

"May I have your attention please?"

The PA system cracks into life, and Mrs. Kaplan takes a seat at her desk while the principal welcomes us back to the new school year and tells us about some after-school clubs. And then, right after an announcement about several new teachers, Principal McCloskey ruins what's left of my life.

"We'd like to welcome our new calculus teacher, Mr. Davidson, to Bellford High. In addition to teaching calculus, Mr. Davidson has agreed to help us reform a new and improved football team. Tryouts for this year's Bengals team will be held after school."

A cheer goes up around the classroom.

I sit in my seat, frozen. *I'm fine. I'm absolutely fine.* I lie to myself, but my brain knows better, and I can feel that old pressure spinning inside my chest.

A hand squeezes mine, and I jolt like I've been struck by lightning. I look up into the concerned eyes of Tara. That's when I discover everybody in the entire class has swiveled around to see how I'm taking this news. Most people look concerned, like Tara.

But others are triumphant, like Andre, sitting at the front of the classroom, and Bruce over by the windows next to Sebastian. I can't stand it, can't deal with it. Suddenly, I'm on my feet, running for the door. "Ashley! Ashley, come back here!" Mrs. Kaplan shouts after me.

I dart across the hall into the girls' bathroom and lock myself into a stall. *I'm fine I'm fine I'm fine I'm fine.*

I repeat the words over and over so fast, they morph into percussion that syncs to the pounding of my heart. It's bad enough seeing everybody stare at me. Everybody blames me for canceling football.

Derek blames me.

My brother blames me for what happened two years ago. I can never forget that...or forgive it.

It doesn't matter how many lies I tell myself or how deep I bury those memories, how strong the dam is. Those memories—the pain they cause—they keep finding ways to break out, and I'm just not strong enough to hold them back.

I don't think I ever will be.

TWO YEARS AGO

BELLFORD, OHIO

It's raining, but I don't care. I love the way the air smells when it rains. Earthy. Clean and fresh and—so *alive*. I'm totally psyched to start high school and don't care if there's a hurricane. Armed with my bright pink umbrella, I'm ready to head to the bus stop,

but Mom says Derek could have the car if he drives *both* of us to school. I squeal and clap. I love riding shotgun with Derek... when he lets me, that is.

Derek's been treating me like crap for ages. We're only a year and a half apart, so we shared a stroller, took baths together, went to gymnastics and soccer together. We were on different teams though. That always bugged me. I wanted to play on *his* team. We're a unit, a combo special, a *team*. Justin, our brother, is a lot older. He has his own separate life. But Derek and I are best friends. Nobody knows it but me, but Derek wants to make video games when we grow up. He has a ton of cool ideas, too.

At least, he used to. He never talks about that kind of stuff with me anymore. Now he's all about football and girls and driving and avoids me as much as he can. I *annoy* him. I don't see how that's even possible. I try to do all the things he always liked doing with me like movie nights and epic game battles. Now he just rolls his eyes and says I should get a life.

But this is my first day of high school. So that means we can hang out again. I'm older and not so annoying. Derek doesn't argue with Mom about driving me to school, so I kind of assume that means he's finally outgrown his problems with me. Mom said he would...eventually. I also kind of assume that driving us to school also means driving us home. He has other ideas.

"Take the bus home. I'm hanging with my friends later."

"Oh," I say, smile fading. "Yeah. Sure."

My first day of high school is awesome in every possible way. I have lunch with Donna Jennings, a girl I know from middle

school, who got her hair cut in this really cool undershaved style *and* got a boyfriend over the summer. She showed everybody the gold heart necklace he'd given her, and my heart sighed. It had stopped raining by the afternoon, so I take my time heading to the parking lot to ride home with Derek, but the space where he'd parked Mom's car is empty.

Darn. I was supposed to take the bus home. I totally forgot.

"You look lost." A boy with messy hair and blue eyes says. He is seriously cute and standing with three other boys against a blue car.

"Must be a freshman," another says.

"No, just looking for my brother."

"Who is he?"

"Um. Derek Lawrence."

They exchange glances and laugh. "Oh, you're *Ash Tray*. Sorry, you just missed him."

"Cut it out," the cute one says. "I'm Vic. Victor Patton." He smiles at me. Dimples. Wow.

"Hey, that's what Derek calls her." The boy laughs.

Oh my God. Derek told them that? My face bursts into flames, and I turn away.

"Leave her alone." Vic straightens up and walks toward me. He's tall, taller than Derek. "Derek left. He might be back. Why don't you call him?"

Yeah. Good idea. I pull out my phone and hit his name. It rings, but he never picks up. Next, I try texting him. Meanwhile, the boys pile into the blue car and take off, splashing water all over me.

I brush muddy splotches from my clothes, choking back tears and call Mom's cell phone, but it goes straight to voicemail. I try calling Dad too. Same thing.

What am I supposed to do? I head back to the main entrance, sink down one one of the steps, and drop my chin into my hands. I sit there, quietly crying, until the steel doors burst open and a bunch of laughing girls jog past me. Quickly, I fluff my waist-long hair in front of my face to hide the tears. All but one wear warm-up suits bearing the word *Fusion* in bright red letters down one leg. There are five of them.

One crouches down to get a look at me. "Hey. You okay?"

I nod vigorously. "Yeah. Fine."

"You're crying. Can I help?" She takes a step closer, and I scrub at my face with the back of my hand, like that has even a remote chance at erasing my complete embarrassment.

"Not unless you have a magic potion that works on stupid brothers," I blurt. Oh my God! I slap a hand over my mouth. I need to die. Right now. Where's a lightning bolt when you need one?

"Oh, a stupid brother. I have one of those." She smiles. She's so pretty. Long, dark, and lean, she looks like one of the models in my *Teen Vogue* magazines.

I'm suddenly interested in hearing her story. "Older or younger?"

"Younger. Takes annoying to whole new levels, like it's some kind of vow he took. Do you know he actually put my retainer in the toilet? My mother nearly burst a blood vessel after that." She giggles. "Oh! I'm Candace Ladd."

“Hey.” This time, my smile is bigger. “Ashley. Ashley Lawrence.”

“You must be a freshman.”

I wince, face burning all over again. “Does it show?”

She laughs, revealing perfectly straight, bright white teeth that somehow remained impervious to her little brother ruining her retainer. “Nah. I’ve just never seen you before, and I know pretty much everybody. I’m a junior.” She studies me, her head angled to one side. “Lawrence, huh?” And then her dark eyes open wide. “Oh my God. Is that stupid brother you mentioned *Derek* Lawrence?”

“You know him?”

She nods. “Yeah, we’re in the same homeroom. Oh, wow. Brittany is gonna *hate* hearing he’s a jerk. She’s really into him.” Candace points to the field on the other side of the small parking lot. The pretty blond with the great smile is doing ballet pliés.

I stare and swallow hard. Brittany is everything I’m not. Beautiful. Skinny. She even looks like Derek with perfect blond hair and blue eyes. They could be Ken and Barbie. I have dark hair and dark eyes. “Maybe he’ll be nicer to her.”

“Come on.” Candace Ladd grabs my hand, tugging me off the step where I’d been sitting, crying. “You know what’s great for getting over the stupid stuff brothers do?”

I have no idea, but I follow her anyway, making my way across the lot to the field that’s empty except for these girls.

“Dancing.”

I plant my feet in the grass at that. I *love* dancing. I’d taken dance classes for years when I was little. But I stopped about two

years ago and now have a roll of fat bulging from the top of my jeans. I'd stick out like one of those old *Sesame Street* games—one of these things is so not like the others.

“Everybody, this is Ashley Lawrence. She's Derek's sister.”

The really pretty blond snaps her head up at that. Her smooth hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and her blue eyes are so blue, I wonder if she wears contacts. “I'm Brittany,” she says with a smile. “And this is Tara, Marlena, and Deanne.”

“Hi,” I manage to squeak out while the girls each smile and greet me.

Oh God, they're all so beautiful. Next to them, I feel like a freak.

I *am* a freak.

“Ashley's gonna dance with us today. She's got some brother crap to work out of her system,” Candace explains to her friends, and instantly, Tara's face breaks into an expression of total understanding.

“Oh, honey. I got two of them. Is Derek what caused all this?” She waves a hand with pink-striped fingernails at my new back-to-school outfit, currently splattered in mud thanks to the boys in the blue car.

“Um, indirectly,” I admit.

“Jerk.”

“What an asshole!”

One by one, they all give their opinion of Derek while adjusting hairstyles, retying shoes, and stretching leg muscles. I'm entranced.

“You a freshman?” Marlena asks, and my face heats up again.

I nod, expecting her to make a disgusted face, but she just says, “I’m a sophomore. Candace and Brittany are juniors. And Tara’s a freshman, like you.”

I perk up at this news. Finally, somebody my own age.

Brittany pulls a small wireless speaker from her backpack, turns it on, and sets it on a bench at the edge of the athletic field. “It’s nice having the field to ourselves for once.”

“Hey, let’s teach her the routine,” Deanne suggests. “Then she can try out for Ms. Pasmore.”

Wait, what? Try out?

Holy crap, I can’t. But the rest of the girls agree. Candace crosses her arms and studies me. “Can you do basic moves like pirouettes and leaps?”

I shake my head. “I haven’t done those in a long time.”

“But you know how?” Candace prods. I can only shrug. “Oh, come on. Just try.” She urges me with a smile.

“Come on, Ashley. It would be great if we both make it on to the team,” Tara adds.

Tara’s words shoot straight into my heart and sort of plant roots. Suddenly, I want this. I want to dance and be on the team and have friends who understand all of my Derek problems.

“It’s okay, Ashley. You can do this,” Tara says, and that spot inside my heart warms up again.

I swallow hard, rub my damp palms down my legs, and get into fourth position...or is it fifth? I perform a slow, shaky pirouette. The girls applaud, and my face feels hot.

“That’s seriously not bad for someone who hasn’t danced in

a couple of years.” Candace lifts her palm for a high five that I happily give her.

Derek would freak out if I do this.

So I should totally do it.

“That’s really great, Ashley. Okay, now strut!” She calls out, and the girls line up with me, everybody moving left, pumping their arms. I follow along, astounded by my efforts. “Other way. That’s good, Ashley! Now make it bigger.”

We strut back and march in place, and then Brittany takes over, leading us in a series of big, bold movements—kicks, leaps, shoulder shimmies, and pirouettes. They were right. This is fun. We dance for over an hour. The girls teach me their entire routine, and I do it all and have no time to be mad about Derek.

When we finally stop, Brittany angles her head, studying me.

“You know, you should cut some of that. It’s way too long for you.” She waves a hand over my hair.

My hair reaches my waist. “I, um, don’t look good with short hair. I mean, no offense,” I quickly say to Tara, whose jaw-length bob looks totally awesome.

“No, not that short,” Brittany says. “Maybe about here.” She indicates the middle of my back with her hand. “Take some of it off. I think it’ll have more volume.”

“Yeah,” Candace agrees. “When you do those snap turns, you won’t whip us in the face.”

Deanne hands me some forms. “Here. After you try out, you’ll need to order these.”

I stare down the sheet of papers, see the various items, each bearing the team name, *Fusion*.

“What do you say, Ashley? Are you in?” Candace grins, those bright white teeth gleaming at me.

I scan the group of them, all of them perfect and pretty and good at dancing. “Aren’t you worried I’ll make you look bad? I don’t...look like you all.”

“Oh, honey,” Tara says, putting an arm around me. “All you need is some practice to build up your confidence.” She looks around the group for verification.

“Hell, yeah. In freshman year, I had braces on my teeth, a terrible haircut, and I was six inches shorter than I am now. I could barely talk to anyone,” Brittany admits. “But you have something I didn’t have in freshman year.”

I did? “What’s that?”

“Boobs.” The other girls crack up as my face burst into flames. “The boys won’t see anything else. Trust me.”

Brittany and Candace hop into a car and are gone after a honk and a wave. Deanne and Marlana stand with me until a minivan pulls up, and then it’s just me and Tara. We start walking toward the school’s main exit.

“So how are you getting home?” I ask her, and she shrugs.

“Walk. I live pretty much next door.” She points down the road.

“Handy.”

“Well, see you tomorrow. It was nice meeting you.”

“You too,” I call back.

I start walking toward town, where my dad’s garage is, wishing

I had a bottle of water with me. My legs are like noodles after all that dancing, and a two-mile walk does not appeal to me. Like a wish granted, a horn honks, and a shiny black Chevy slows down beside me.

“Hey, Derek’s sister! Need a ride?”

Oh. Em. Gee.

It’s *him*.

The boy with the cute smile and the dimples, and my voice gets stuck in my throat, so I only nod.

“What’s your name? Your real name, I mean,” he asks through the open passenger side window, smiling and making my wobbly legs even weaker. He isn’t going to call me Ash Tray? *Swoon*.

“Um. Ashley.” My voice is all squeaky.

“I’m Vic.”

“Yeah, I remember.” Vic. What a cool name. The coolest name in the world. I want to name babies Vic.

He laughs. “Good. So where are you heading?”

“Oh, um. To my dad’s garage. Over on Blaine.”

“Right, right. I know where it is. Hop in,” he invites with a jerk of his head. “I’ll give you a lift.”

It never occurs to me to say no. He has such a great smile. His hair is somewhere between blond and brown and so messy I itch to touch it and smooth it. He’s really tall but lean. And his eyes are so blue, they look like pools you never want to get out of. But it’s that smile, the one with the dimple at the corner that makes me forget my name.

“So, Ashley. You’re what? A freshman?”

Is there a sign hanging over my head or something? Wincing, I nod. "It must show."

"Just a little." He looks over and winks. "I'm a senior."

A senior is driving me home. Ohmygodohmygodohmygod.

"Did you join a club or something?"

I nod, and suddenly remember I am probably in urgent need of a shower or a can of deodorant or a wet wipe, and I try to shrivel up against the passenger door and hope he doesn't get close enough to sniff me. "Yeah. The dance team."

"Fusion? That's awesome! The dance team performs at all the Bengals games. I'll probably see you at practice. Our coach had a meeting today, otherwise we'd have been on the field." He slows down for a traffic light.

Can he hear my heart pounding?

"How do you like Bellford High?"

"I like the girls on the dance team. And I like my science teacher."

"Who did you get?"

"Mr. Wilder."

"Oh, yeah, he's great. I had him. He likes to give pop quizzes every week, so be ready."

"Oh. Yeah. I will."

"Nothing terrible. Just read ahead and you'll be fine."

Read ahead. I can do totally do that.

Vic puts on his turn signal and waits for a left turn. "So your brother's kind of a jerk to you, huh?"

My heart sinks, and I slide a little lower in my seat.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll say something to him tomorrow.”

Suddenly, I’m grinning like a maniac. There’s probably a circle of cartoon birds and butterflies flying around the heart that just floated out of my body. Vic laughs and shakes his head as he pulls to the curb.

“We’re here. It was nice to meet you, Ashley Lawrence.” Vic hands me my bag as I pretty much fall out of the car on legs I can no longer feel. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Tomorrow.”

He honks and waves as he pulls away.

“Ashley? Who was that?” Dad asks. He just stepped out of one of the garage bay doors.

“Hmm?”

“Ashley!”

I turn and see Mom in the entrance to Dad’s garage. “Mom! Can we get my hair cut? Please? I’m gonna try out for the dance team, and my hair is too long, and it’s in the way, and I met a senior named Vic, and I need to buy these if I make the team.” I finally pause for air, and Mom takes the Fusion gear order form I have clutched in my hand.

“A haircut. And a uniform. Well, okay. But a senior? No. I don’t know about that.”

“I’m with you on that,” Dad says, grabbing Mom in a hug and tickling her until she squeals.

But I do.

I’m halfway in love.

2

DEREK

NOW

LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK

My sister hates me.

Ashley's hated me for a couple of years now, and it's okay. I *wanted* her to hate me, and I did whatever I could to make that happen. Of course, that was before I knew what *hate* really meant. Now that I get it, I can't change it, can't undo all the shit I did, can't fix what went wrong. So I *suffer*.

See, *hate* is a meaningless word. Everybody tosses the word around like it's confetti, diluting it, rendering it about as effective as a Band-Aid over a gushing wound to describe how they feel about every little thing that annoys them. They hate this song, that food, that person, or this movie. They hate homework, hate their teachers, hate their parents. They hate this team and that game. They *hate* every damn thing, but nobody has even the

smallest clue what *hate* really means unless they're the object of it.

The *focus* of it.

Hating somebody is more than you stop caring about them, and it's more than not wanting to see that person ever again. It's this need—an urge you can barely control—to make that person suffer. True hate goes all the way down to your bone marrow. Sometimes, it's glacier cold and infinitely patient; other times, it's surface-of-the-sun hot and bullet fast.

Ashley hates me in that glacier-cold, slow-moving kind of way. It leaves me permanently frostbitten and has this really annoying habit of shadowing me around even when she's not around.

Like right now—I can't get away from these damn flyers. One was slipped under my dorm room door, another was stuck on the exit door of my building, the third was stuffed into my hand when I ordered some breakfast, and now dozens of them are folded into little tent cards and placed on top of every single table in the dining hall.

I've been on campus at Rocky Hill University—several states and hundreds of miles away from my sister—for a few weeks, relieved to be away, to be anonymous, to be on my own. Mom and Dad wanted to come with me, set up my dorm room, and have the big sloppy farewell like they did when Justin left for college four years before, but I wanted no part of that. I just wanted to be gone. Free. When Dad got the last of my crap into the car and asked if I'd said my goodbyes to everybody, I'd said yes.

But I hadn't.

I tried to say goodbye to Ashley. She held up a hand and said, “Just go.”

It had cut deeply, but I knew I deserved it, so I climbed into passenger seat. Mom came to the front door and waved as Dad pulled the car out of the driveway. Ashley stood behind her, freezing me with that same cold, dead stare she’d been using on me since the trial. I adjusted my seat and settled back, happy to be rid of her for the next four years.

And what happens?

Everywhere I look...I see reminders of her.

The flyers announce You Can Stop Campus Sexual Assault! The white text on the blue paper announces they’re gonna Take Back the Night.

Great.

There’s a huge rally being planned for the week of homecoming—it’s called *Rock Stock* here. Because we’re the *Rockets*.

Of course, it would be homecoming week, because, like I said, I must suffer.

Homecoming week is when Ashley was...when she was assaulted. Like I could forget.

There will be guest speakers and live music and a candlelight vigil for all the survivors of sexual assault. I flip it over to read my favorite part: *Are you a guy against rape? Join GAR today!*

GAR. I wonder if people say it with a rolling R, like a pirate. *Garrrrrrrr.*

Oh, and my coach informed us the entire football team would don special uniforms for that game to show our support.

Awesome. I was already planning on being hurt, injured, or maybe both that day.

I crumple up the collection of flyers into a single giant ball and shove my breakfast aside, my stomach churning up acid.

“Hey, Derek.”

I glance up into the smiling face of Brittany Meyers, my girlfriend. We actually met in high school but didn’t hook up until we both arrived here. “Hey, Britt.” I sit up a little straighter and shove thoughts of my sister the hell out of my brain. Brittany’s hot in that girl-next-door way. Her long blond hair’s tied up in a loose knot with strands hanging loose. She’s wearing a tank top, shorts, and flip-flops, and her toenails are painted an electric green. My mouth goes suddenly sandpaper dry. Happens every time I see her.

Quickly, I take a sip of orange juice. A big one.

“What’s this?” She indicates my balled-up collection of flyers, and I shrug. Understanding dawns a second later. “Oh. The rally.”

“Yeah. That.” I rub the side of my face and scratch at the scar near my temple.

“You’re gonna go, right?”

Hell no. I shake my head. “No way. I’m the last person who should be there.”

She slides into the chair opposite mine and covers my hand with hers, and my whole body heats up. “Derek, you’re the *best* person to be at that rally. You get it. A lot of guys claim they get it and have no clue. But you do.”

I look into her big blue eyes for a minute and finally decide she

believes her own bullshit. And then I decide she's right. I *do* have a clue. In fact, I have the whole mystery solved. And because I do, there's no way in hell I'm going anywhere near that rally because I don't need the entire university knowing I'm Derek Lawrence, the guy whose sister is the *Belford High School Rape Victim*.

That's what the media called her.

Ashley was barely fourteen when it happened. A minor. So her identity was protected. But she took her story public, posting a detailed account to her blog. And she included my role in it. Now everybody from feminist bloggers to Ellen DeGeneres knows our names.

So, yeah. I don't want my whole school saying, "Oh! You're *that* Derek Lawrence."

Yep. The Derek Lawrence that played a stupid game that got his sister raped and then told a court of law to go easy on her rapist. The same Derek Lawrence who drove away and left her standing alone in an empty parking lot, putting the whole fucking ordeal into motion.

Self-hatred runs another ice-cold finger across my bare skin, and I shiver, reminding myself I deserve this...deserve every second of it.

Ashley was a surprise baby, born just a year and a half after me and close to six years after Justin. Mom was *so* happy to finally get a girl, I think she went a little bit nuts. She got a kick out of raising us like we were twins with the whole matching outfits thing. Maybe it was cute when we were toddlers. But the fake twin thing was epically annoying when I hit middle school.

Ashley was spoiled rotten, got away with absolutely any damn thing she wanted, and grew up to be a real pain. By the time I hit sixth grade, I'd had enough.

SIXTH GRADE

BELLFORD, OHIO

Martin's got this ancient issue of *Playboy*. We're not really friends. He's just a kid at school. But this old magazine is awesome, so when he invites me to his house, I can't wait to go because he claims there's a whole box of them in his basement.

It's an issue from way back in the eighties, and the pictures show women of every type you can imagine. Blondes, brunettes, red heads—each more beautiful and sexier than the last. Blue eyes, brown eyes, green eyes, hazel eyes, and they all have these big, beautiful, and bare breasts. I can't stop staring. I don't want to stop staring.

It's the first time I see a girl as, well—a *girl*, and not a sister or a mother.

I like it. A lot.

But next thing I know, Ashley's coming with me to Martin's house to play with his little sister, which not only means no *Playboy*, it means *two* sisters bugging us every minute of the day. We whine to his mother, who does nothing, which, in my experience, is what all mothers do when little sisters annoy big brothers. So we start teasing the girls and make it into a contest to see who we can make them cry first.

I win.

I call my sister *Ash Tray* instead of Ashley.

Martin high-fives me.

I just want to do some guy things. Why do I have to spend every single moment of every single day with my sister?

I ask Dad that question when I get home one day.

“Because she’s your sister,” he says, as if that explains everything.

Yeah, duh. That’s the entire problem!

I ask Mom next.

“Derek, there are three of you and two of us. When Dad’s working in the garage all day, I have to take Justin to soccer practice, baseball practice, basketball practice, and take you to Martin’s house, not to mention go grocery shopping and run all my other errands. And then I have to meet Dad at the garage so I can do the bookkeeping. What’s the big deal if Ashley stays with you at Martin’s house and gives me one tiny little break?”

Whoa, I’m not the one who decided to have three kids. Jeez.

So I back off. I may be dumb, but I’m not dumb enough to keep pushing Mom when she’s pissed off.

I ask Justin as he’s heading out why I have to spend all of my time with Ashley and he gets off free and clear.

“D, come on, she’s a kid. She looks up to you.”

“I can’t take it anymore, J. You don’t know what it’s like. She’s a friggin’ barnacle on my ass. Can I come with you? Please?”

“You don’t even know where I’m going.”

“I don’t care. Anywhere. As long as Ashley’s not there.”

Justin pushes his glasses up on his nose and snorts. “Yeah. I have no idea how annoying siblings are. None at all.”

I punch his arm. Justin’s in tenth grade—way cool—but I’m pretty strong for a sixth-grader. “I’m not annoying.”

“Yeah, you *are*.” He rubs his arm. “It’s just a phase. Soon, Ashley will be hanging out with girls, getting her nails done, and whatever. You can hang on until then, right?”

“No, man. I really can’t.” My voice cracks.

Justin rolls his eyes. “Jeez, Derek, it’s not difficult. Sit down and talk to her. Tell her you need some space. Give her a little, too. If she bugs you, offer to play a game with her and put a clock on it. After that time, you’re outta there.”

Okay. Maybe that’ll work. “So where are you going, anyway?”

“Chess club.” He grins at my look of horror and walks out.

When the door shuts behind him, I sigh heavily. Well, at least he gave me actual advice. Mom and Dad don’t even see the problem.

I try what he suggested. I tell Ashley I’m not—repeat *not*—taking the bus home from school anymore. I’m taking my bike like all the other guys do.

She waits for me at the bicycle stand—actually expects to ride on the back of my bike all the way home. I’m so mad, I leave her there. Why can’t she tell when she isn’t wanted? Why does she have to make this so hard?

“Derek, wait!” she calls, running after me as fast as her chubby legs will allow her.

I don’t wait. I pedal faster.

It's worth the week without my PlayStation when she makes it home way later than I do, her long hair knotted in one huge tangle and tear streaks down her face.

"Derek, she's in fourth grade! She is way too young to come home alone. You're older. You should have known better." Mom is so mad, her face is purple.

Yeah, yeah.

When she hits sixth grade, I finally get a reprieve.

Ashley makes some new friends. She's invited to sleepovers and to birthday parties and to mall trips. Those are the best days of my eighth-grade life. But, like most things, they don't last long.

If I go to the family room to watch a monster movie, Ashley comes too—and we end up watching some Disney princess shit. If I go out on my bike to race with some guys, she grabs hers too, and we end up circling the block like we still have training wheels on because I'm not allowed to just ride off without her. I tried once and my parents took my bike for a week.

At the end of eighth grade, everybody in school is all jazzed up over summer vacation and starting high school in the fall. Me? I dread it. For me, summer isn't a vacation. No, it's like that twenty-four-hour news station Dad always listens to in the car, the one that plays the same tragedies on an endless loop. Summer was All Ashley, All the Time. *You give Ashley twenty-two minutes, she'll give you a headache.*

But the high school part that comes after summer? Yeah, I'm totally into that for one huge reason.

Ashley won't be there.

For two whole grades, I'll be the only Lawrence in the school.

I have to get through summer first. I'm itchy and desperate and can feel the walls closing in on me. It gets to the point that just hearing Ashley's name makes me coil up into a tight knot.

Until Dad gives me a football. He comes home with it one night after work. Says I have so much energy, he figures I need an outlet for it. Every day, after work, he tosses the ball around with me and Justin. Ashley whines that she wants to play, too. But Dad's firm on this: no girls.

Yes! I pump my fist in the air.

When I finish eighth grade, Justin graduates high school. He'll be leaving for college soon, where he'll get to live on his own, go where he wants, do what he wants—essentially live the life I want. But when Dad brings home that ball, Justin blows off everything to play.

"Here, let me show you," Dad says one night during our guys-only play time.. "You spread your fingers like this, over the laces and the seam. You see? And you grip it with your fingertips, not your palm."

I do what he says, and he jogs backward to one end of the backyard. I draw back my arm and throw, releasing the ball in an awesome spiral. It propels itself right into Dad's hands and is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I'm instantly hooked.

This is the day Dad saves me from going totally insane.

NOW

LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK

“Derek, you’re a guy,” Britt says, pulling me out of my trip down memory lane.

“Thanks for noticing.”

She smacks my arm. “Do you know how rare it is for guys to get where we’re coming from about sexual assault?”

I lift both eyebrows because I’m pretty sure my sister would say I don’t get a thing, but before either of us can say anything, Britt’s phone buzzes.

She frowns at the text message.

“It’s Tara.” Her eyes snap to mine, wide with worry. “Derek. They’re bringing back football.”

I snatch the phone and read Tara’s message.

Tara: New coach, new football program, and she ran out of the class. What do I do?

I stare at Britt. I don’t need to ask who *she* is. Oh, God. I can’t do anything. I’m several states and about six hundred miles away.
Shit.

“Derek.” Brittany grabs my hand. “Sebastian?”

Yeah. I nod. Yeah, Sebastian. I take out my phone and text my former teammate.

Derek: Heard about new coach. Make sure there’s no hunt. Please. I’m begging you, protect her.

Sebastian: Already am.

Do more! I want to shout, vibrating with the need to rush home and do something. But I'm not welcome there anymore.

I shove away from the table, spilling my juice. "I gotta go," I mumble and bolt, storming through the glass doors like the football player I am. I look feral. Lethal. I always look this way whenever I think about what happened to Ashley.

I wanna tear Victor Patton into tiny little Vic bits, but I can't. The DA warned me—and Dad and Justin—that such a course of action would result in prison terms for us if we tried.

It sure would feel good, though.

I hate Vic, my former friend and teammate. I hate him with that surface-of-the-sun hot kind of hate, and I wish, more than anything, that I could call my sister and tell her I get it now.

I understand *hate*.

And I'm sorry.