

Despite his party pooping, Eric took his shoes off. We all left our shoes at the base of the sign that proclaimed No Trespassing and offered the number of the city ordinance we were breaking. We stepped in our socks across the railroad ties, toward the center of the bridge—Eric and me, with Tiffany and Brian behind us.

Through my cotton socks, gradually I began to feel the cold, hard ties. The air seemed colder, too, as we walked farther from the riverbank.

I heard Tiffany trip, then laugh. Brian probably thought tonight was The Night, and maybe it was. He'd been bugging me for months in the back of calculus class about how to take his relationship with Tiffany to The Next Level. I had told him I wasn't that close with Tiffany anymore. I wasn't that close with anyone. He said it didn't matter. He seemed to think I was an expert on sex in general.

What did I expect? Good news traveled fast.

And I was pretty much getting what I asked for from Eric. I looked the part. As the only teenager in Shelby County, Alabama, with blue hair, I was everybody's go-to girl for bad behavior. Tonight I wore a low-cut T-shirt that said Peer Pressure in the hope of luring Eric into another

sexcapade. As if he needed any luring. He was pretty much

As we reached the middle of the bridge, he steered me by the neck to the metal wall of the trestle. I didn't mind being held around the back of the neck, but I minded being steered. The rich, dirty scents of rust and tar made me dizzy. I was about to shake him off when he slid his hand down to my butt and parked me against the wall.

I sipped beer and gripped the rusty wall with my other hand, looking down at the reflection of the white moon in the black river so far below us. Trees clung to the sides of the gorge, their tiny spring leaves glinting white with moonlight. People had said the view from the bridge was 12 beautiful, but no one seemed to have actually seen it. Now I had seen it.

Now I had seen everything. Brian Johnson, salutatorian, math team captain, had Tiffany Hart, valedictorian, yearbook editor, sandwiched against the bridge wall in front of him. At least he'd taken the precaution of putting his beer down. He wore all the wrong clothes, a sure sign his parents didn't let him watch TV. She wore the right clothes, clean version, no skin in sight. His hands moved up her sides toward a risqué area and I almost laughed. Every few seconds, he glanced over at Eric and me as if he needed instructions.

Oblivious to Brian's groping, Tiffany shook her blonde windblown curls off her face and asked, "Why didn't those















excitement spread through my body, and I tilted my head down to expose more of my neck for his mouth.

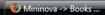
I'd grabbed him like a life preserver to float me through3 my last three months of high school. He wasn't much, but he was the only thing that kept me moving, besides anticipating my spring break trip to Miami one week from tonight. I would live as high as I could that week, which would tide me over until I graduated in June and moved to Birmingham for college. It was only twenty minutes up the

tracks. Blackness. I considered setting down my beer and putting my ear to the railroad tie to listen for vibrations. like in an old Western. "Suddenly, I am full of fear."

Eric put both arms around me and massaged my boobs, too hard. "You're just stoned," he whispered so Brian and Tiffany couldn't hear. Even in their inebriated state, they would have been truly horrified at a mention of marijuana.





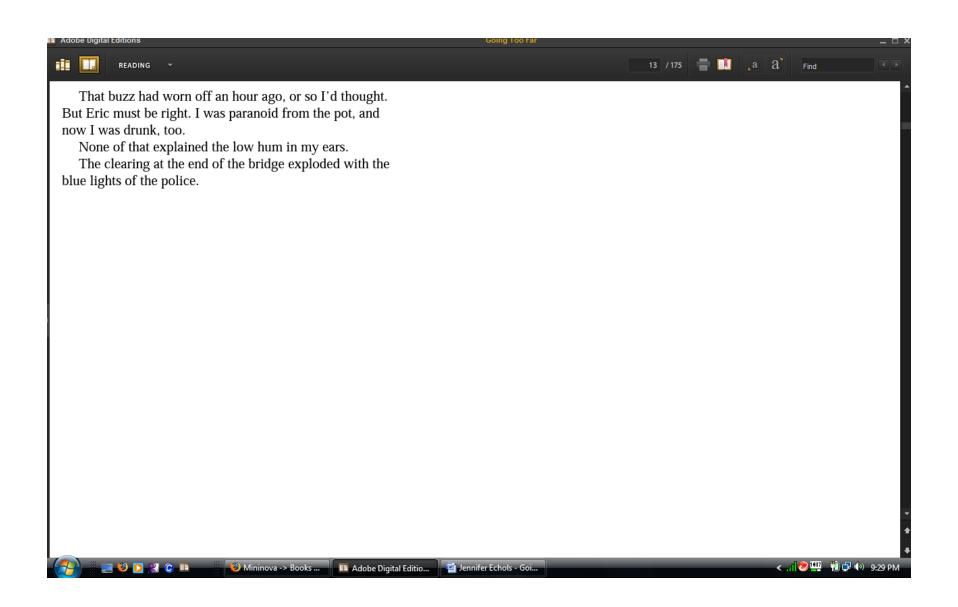


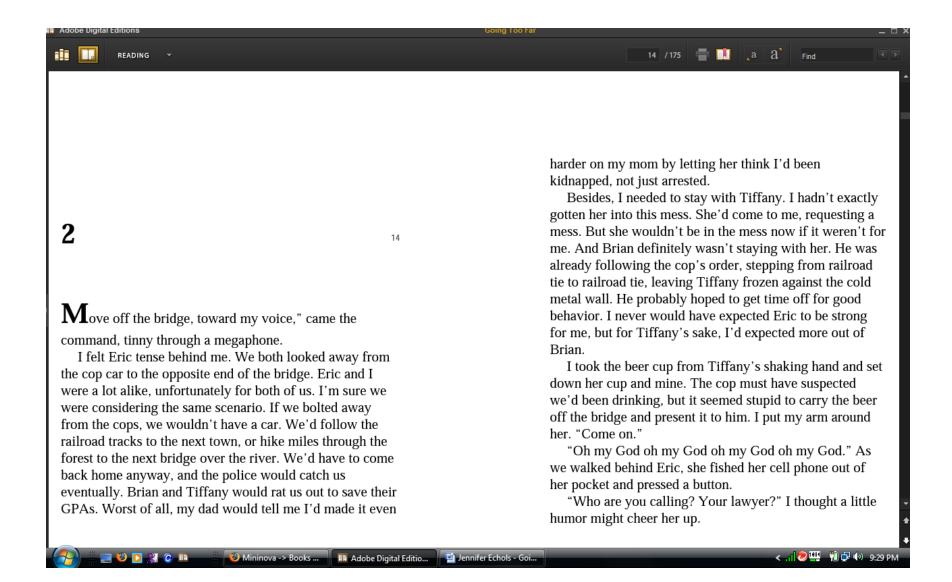












She pressed another button to hang up the phone, like 15 someone used to following orders. "Oh my God," she shrieked at me, "he knows who I am!"

This was kind of weird, but not impossible. It was a small town. We probably went to school with the cop's daughter. "He would have found out who you were when he looked at your driver's license, anyway," I said. "What does it matter?"

"He's going to tell my parents!"

It almost made sense. I was about to point out to her that she'd just called her parents herself, when Brian reached the end of the bridge.

The muscular cop with a military haircut stepped out of the shadows, into the moonlight and swirling blue light from his car. The sneaky shit must have driven all the way down here from the main road with his headlights off.

He said something quietly. Brian cowered before authority. He bent his head, gave the cop one wrist to handcuff to the railing at the end of the bridge, and spread his legs. Then he let the cop pat his hands over him,

search if the cop had snapped his fingers.

Now Eric reached the end of the bridge. The cop didn't look quite so enormous next to Eric, who was six foot three. But Eric was skinny, and the cop was built like Matt Damon.

Eric let the cop handcuff him to the railing and search him, too. Unlike Brian, Eric gave the cop shit the whole time, almost like they knew each other. Which was likely, considering what Eric had been up to lately. Anyway, everybody in town knew Eric because his daddy was a hotshot lawyer.

I helped Tiffany sit down on a railroad tie at the end of the bridge so we could put our shoes on. The cop had his back turned, and I couldn't hear what he was saying. But I could hear Eric lying. "I'm not high. You think anybody in town would sell to me? Lord knows I've tried." Then, "It was my girlfriend's idea to come up here in the first place."

"Thanks, asshole," I called, giving him the thumbs-up. "Chivalry isn't dead."

"It was your idea," Tiffany reminded Eric. She squinted at me. "Wasn't it?"

"Don't say anything else to each other." The cop still spoke as he had through the megaphone, calm and cool with a threat underneath. He curled one finger at Tiffany. "Your turn."



voice.



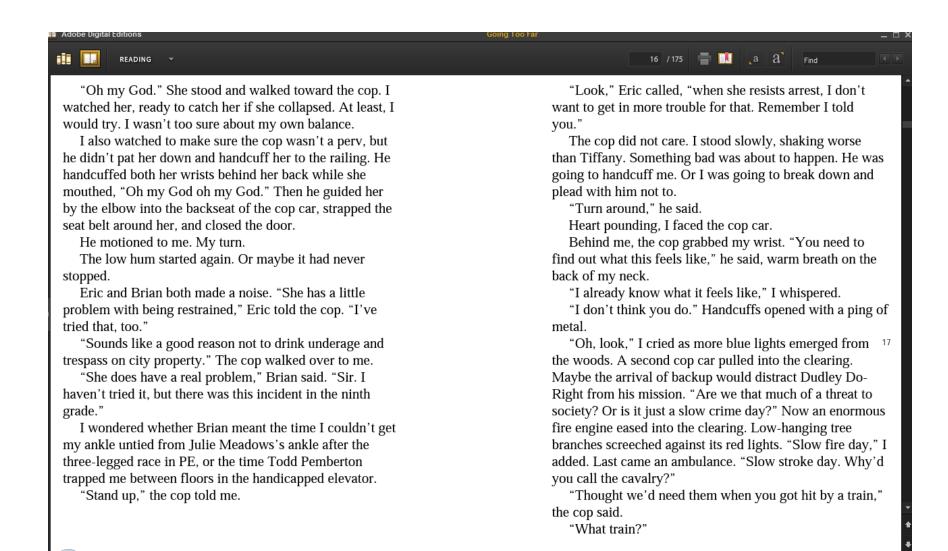












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A few more seconds and the locomotive passed us. The engineer chose this moment to lay on the head-splitting horn. Eric and Brian, chained close to the tracks, each put one free hand up to one ear.

floated downward, disappearing into the darkness.

I stumbled a few paces before I realized the cop was dragging me backward by the elbow toward his car, cussing.

We passed a knot of emergency response personnel chatting together, disappointed there was nothing for them to do. "There's McPherson," called Quincy, the paramedic I happened to know. "I could see even when you were thirteen years old that you were nothing but trouble."

"Of all the freaking nerve!" I screamed back at him, but the cop shoved me into the car and closed the door.

I tried the handle. Locked.

Do not panic. I made myself breathe slowly. At least the cop had forgotten about handcuffing me. And I couldn't panic in front of Tiffany. Stretching the shoulder belt to the limit, she lay sideways and sobbed into the vinyl seat.

I pulled her head into my lap and wiped her wet hair out of her eyes. "Have you put the yearbook to bed yet? You

could add something to the list of accomplishments under my senior picture. 'Managed to get the valedictorian arrested."

17 /175 📳 🚺 a a Find

She sniffed. "It's not funny, Meg. They might take valedictorian away from me. They might take away our scholarships to UAB."

I seriously doubted the University of Alabama at Birmingham was watching the police blotter for incoming freshmen. "They can't even keep my name straight," I told her. "I've been getting registration forms addressed to Mr. Mac McRearson. I almost wish I was going to live in the dorm so they'd give me a boy for a roommate." But I planned to work my way through college to pay for an apartment. I didn't want to live in a dorm with visitation hours and curfews and monitors. I'd had enough of the Big Brother treatment from my parents at home. And my arrest wouldn't help that situation for the next few months.

Tiffany laughed a little, sniffed again. "I'm going to need a new boy, too, after this."

That was the truth. Now that Tiffany and Brian had been arrested together, a date at the putt-putt golf course wouldn't hold the same romance. While tank cars and flatbed cars and boxcars decorated with graffiti continued to rumble by, the cop got down in Brian's face and shouted at him. Then he got up in Eric's face and shouted at him. Through the rolled-up windows of the police car and over the roar of the train, I couldn't hear what he was saying.















But judging from the look on Brian's and even Eric's face, it was pretty intense. One of the spectator firemen took a step in their direction as if to coax the cop to back off.

A second cop put a hand on the fireman's shoulder and held him in place. The second cop was older than our cop. Not nearing retirement age, but way too old to be wearing a patrolman's uniform without getting a promotion to detective.

The endless train behind them made me dizzy. I looked down at Tiffany, who had resumed mouthing, "Oh my God."

"We're getting off easy, Tiff. Too easy, come to think of it. Why are the boys the ones who get yelled at, like they're the only ones who matter? We should be offended."

"Then go tell the police officer how offended you are," Tiffany snapped. "Let him handcuff you to the bridge."

I tried the handle once more, jokingly. "Door's locked." But I began to shake again in the warm car.

"I shouldn't have said that." Tiffany sat up awkwardly and leaned her head on my shoulder. "You have a thing about being locked up. I'm glad I'm handcuffed and not you."

Me too, I didn't say. I had thought of Tiffany as a walking, talking version of Microsoft Excel, but she had more soul than I'd given her credit for.

We both jumped, probably delayed a few seconds by our hampered reflexes, as our cop opened his door. The racket of the train followed him inside. The last of the train cars had cleared the bridge. I watched its flashing taillights disappear around a bend in the tracks.

The cop shoved his muscular frame into the driver's seat and slammed the door shut. Then he said a few words into his CB, reached for a clipboard, and began filling out forms. He never glanced at us through the metal grid that separated him from us dangerous criminals. A bead of sweat trickled down the back of his thick cop-neck.

I looked for Eric and Brian and saw them in the backseat of the old cop's car, which was parked on the far side of Eric's Beamer. The dejected fire truck and ambulance eased out of the clearing and up the road without flashing their lights.

"What are you so mad about?" I asked the cop. "Is it true that a couple of teenagers got killed here a long time ago?"

"It's true," he said without looking up. "And y'all came close to adding four more to the body count tonight."

"Not four," I said. "If I'd gotten caught on the tracks, I would have been the only one killed. My boyfriend wouldn't cross the street to save my life."

"Some boyfriend." The cop drew broad strokes through parts of the form that did not apply to us, perhaps *previous* convictions or gainful employment or significant other.





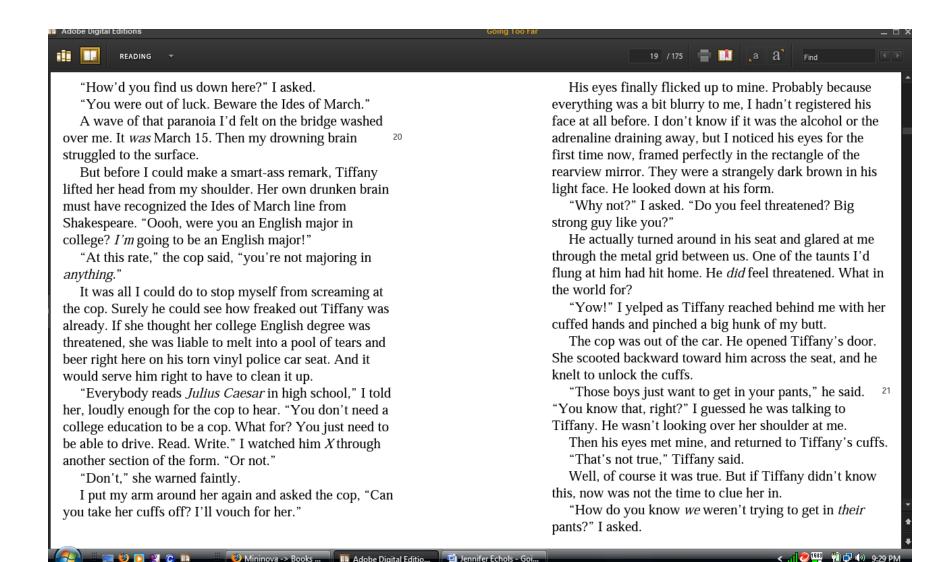












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get it like Eric and Brian.

Maybe not. His glance traveled briefly down to my Peer Pressure T-shirt. Or the absence of said T-shirt over my cleave. Theoretically this could have worked to my advantage. But I was unwilling or unable to Work It under the intensity of those deep brown eyes. Despite myself, I looked around to make sure the old cop's car was still a few yards away and he had not abandoned me to this cop and the forest and an unrequested sexcapade.

The cop put his fists on his hips and cocked his head to one side. There probably was a line drawing of him like this in the dictionary, illustrating the word skepticism. "I might not have been to college," he said, "but I have been to the police academy."

He pronounced police academy carefully, like it was a foreign word. I thought he was poking fun at himself. I almost laughed. I wasn't quite confident enough to laugh.

He went on, "What do you think we do at the police academy, surf the Internet?"



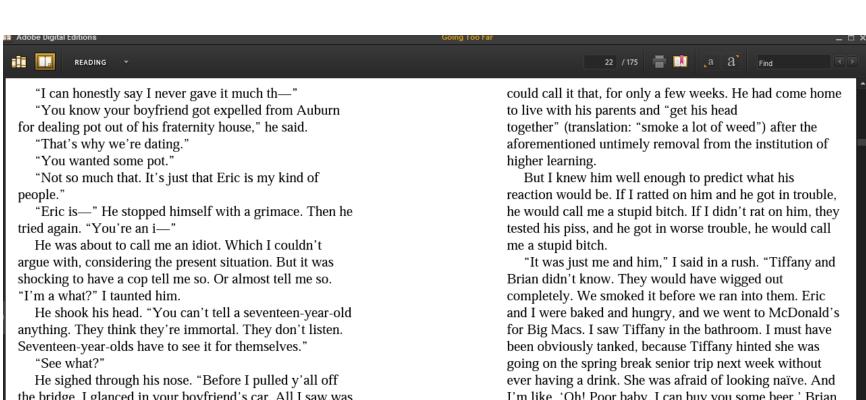












the bridge, I glanced in your boyfriend's car. All I saw was two gallon jugs of beer. I don't have anything like possession on you. Come clean with me now, and maybe we won't do a drug screen on your boyfriend. You know if we do, we're charging him with driving under the influence of narcotics."

They certainly were. I backed against the cold car for 23 strength and looked over at Eric's shoulders hunched into the other police car. Actually, I'd been dating him, if you

I'm like, 'Oh! Poor baby. I can buy you some beer.' Brian doesn't drink, either, but he went along with it. Probably for reasons you mentioned previously."

"Mmph," said the cop.

"It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. She never would have done it if she'd had time to think about it. And I never would have done it if I hadn't been stoned. Ditto walking onto the bridge. Completely unpremeditated."















I tried to gauge the cop's reaction. I couldn't see a thing. His dark eyes could have been laughing at me, or considering how I would look when I got out of prison just in time to join the AARP.

"Interesting," he said. "You've broken a lot of laws tonight."

Definitely laughing at me. I lashed out. "Let's list them, shall we? What fun. Trespassing. Possession of marijuana. Underage purchase of alcohol. What else? Public intoxication, loitering, unlawful assembly. Corruption of a minor. Wait, can you corrupt a minor when you yourself are also a minor?" 24

"You tell me. You're wearing the *Peer Pressure* Tshirt."

So he had noticed. "Yeah, I saw you taking in my Peer Pressure T-shirt," I said, just to test how much he'd noticed.

He'd noticed, all right. His white face and neck flushed pink against his dark blue uniform.

I was horrified, truly. I'd gathered over the years from the way men on TV talked about Taylor Swift and Miley Cyrus that forty-year-old men were really into teenage girls. I wouldn't have thought a blue-haired teenage girl would make the cut, but clearly there was no accounting for taste.

And here was this cop, out working hard at 11:30 at night, innocently providing for his wife and fourteen kids at home, scrimping and saving money for that new aluminum shed he'd had his eye on for storing the riding lawn mower. And I'd gone and flaunted my boobs in his face. It really wasn't his fault for looking.

23 /175 📳 🚺 a a Find

He sighed through his nose again. His blush slowly retreated, and he was back in charge. "Are you even sorry?"

Yes, I was sorry for distracting him from the little missus for two seconds. Better not bring that up. "I'm sorry you arrested Tiffany. And maybe I'm sorry you arrested Brian." I was mad at Brian for abandoning Tiffany, but he *had* saved me from being handcuffed. Without the ulterior motive of getting himself out of more trouble, unlike Eric. "Do you want me to be sorry for getting stoned?"

"Are you sorry you almost got killed?"

"We didn't."

"You did!" Now he was furious, shouting down at me, finally giving me the Brian/Eric treatment. "Are you so drunk you didn't see that train?" He looked like he was going to lay into me again. I cringed, waiting for it.

But he thought better of it. His mouth snapped shut, and he took a step back.

Turning toward the bridge, he stared into the blackness. With my eyes adjusted to the pool of light from the cop cars, I couldn't even see past the No Trespassing sign. But





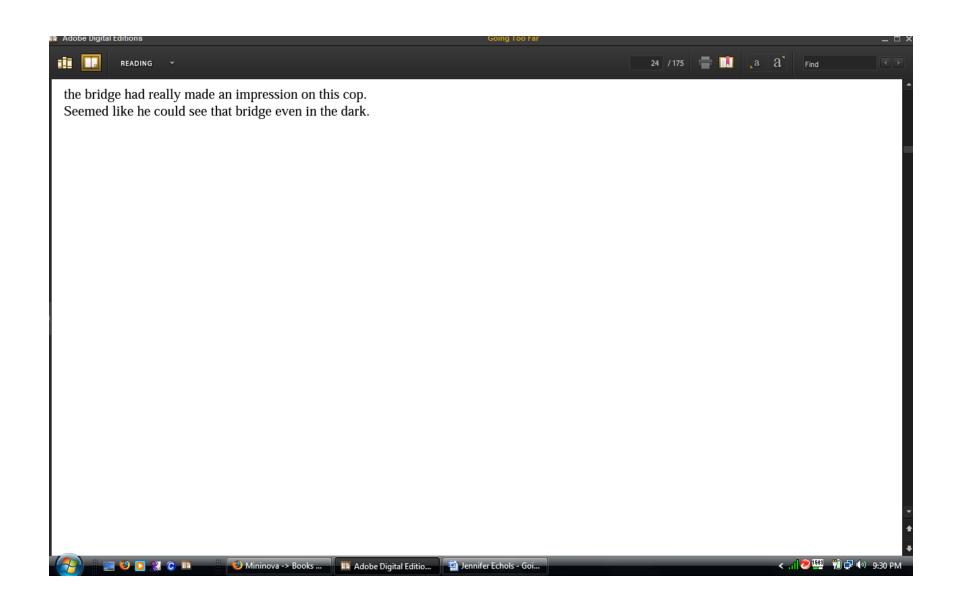


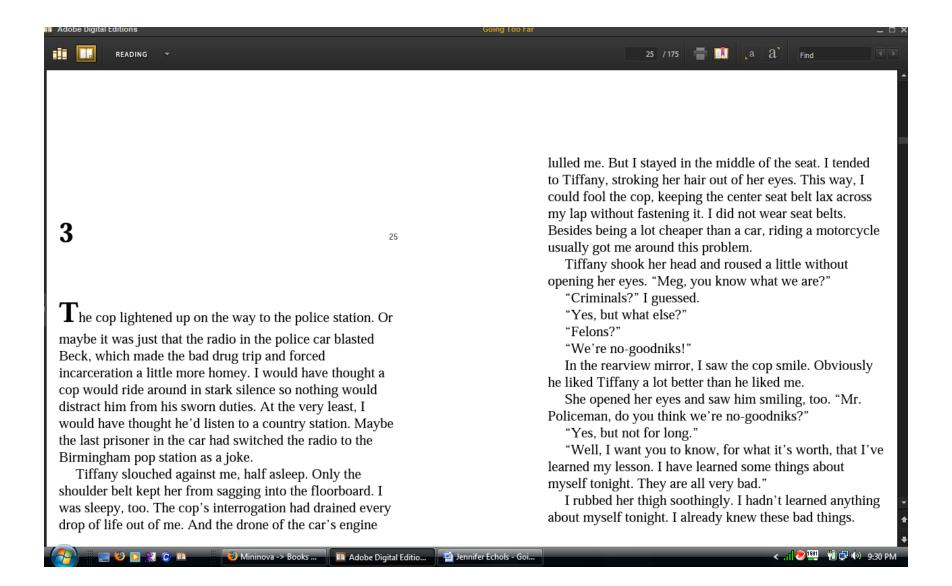












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"Oh, no," she said.

"It was your first drink," I said through my teeth.

"I don't want to lie to the policeman." She sat up straighter. "Mr. Policeman, I went to England with my grandma last summer, and I had a can of shandy, which is beer mixed with lemonade. I bought it out of a Coke machine. My grandma said it was okay. Clearly it was wrong of her."

"Did you catch a buzz?" I asked.

"I don't know. I ate a lot of fish and chips with it."

The policeman laughed. Dimples showed in both his cheeks when he laughed.

I decided to try my hand at him. "Do you watch Cops on TV?"

"I love Cops," he said. "It's like my life, but with the boring parts taken out."

"Do you watch Reno 911?"

"Yes. That's probably even more true-to-life than *Cops*. At least around this town." He parked and cut the engine in front of the jail/courthouse/city hall, beside Tiffany's mom's minivan. "Sit tight just a minute, ladies." He slid out from under the steering wheel, closed the door, and spoke to the old cop through the rolled-down window of the other police car, with Brian and Eric in the backseat.

Eric said something to me through the glass. It did not look good. Then he struggled with his arms cuffed behind him. Finally his head and shoulders disappeared, and his cuffed hands rose above the windowsill. He shot me a bird.

I pointed out the spectacle to Tiffany. "I'm glad I'm not going to the prom. He might refuse to go with me now."

Tiffany rubbed her temple. "Invite him. We'll all double-date. Can you imagine where they would take us out to dinner?"

"McDonald's," I said with conviction as our cop opened the door.

The old cop was already hauling Brian and Eric out of his car. The message Eric had been trying to send me rang through the parking lot and echoed against the building. "You told him about the pot. He faked you out, you stupid bitch!"

"Well! That is not a very nice thing to say." I was actually kind of concerned about being faked out, and disappointed in myself. I had to keep up my rep around the Big House.

Our cop didn't even look at me. I was just another snitch to him. "Don't say anything else to each other," he intoned to the space between us.

"Pot?" Tiffany echoed behind me.

"Not you," our cop assured her. "I know you're not that much of a no-goodnik." He laughed and Tiffany giggled















"I will," I said, knowing I wouldn't. I did not call people. Her parents took her home.

Brian's father arrived soon after. He was grim and quiet, like Brian. There was probably a lot of Silent Treatment going on in that household, and it probably worked. He took Brian home.

Then Eric's father blustered in. He acted like it was the policeman's fault for making the arrest, the city's fault for making the bridge off-limits, my fault for seducing his child. At least, I assumed he meant me when he said "that

something to the old cop that I couldn't quite catch. He 28 leaned against the cement-block wall and folded his arms.

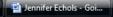
I yawned and stretched and shifted in my metal folding chair. I was watching an Andy Griffith rerun on the dispatcher's tiny TV. The dispatcher, whose name was Lois, had three grown children, eight grandchildren, two cats, two dogs, an iguana, lots of gold jewelry, and much bigger cleavage than mine. She lived at 2043 Sunny Level















"Do you want to call your parents again?" the old cop asked me. His name was Officer Leroy. He had never married and did not have any children of his own, not even an iguana. "When I talked to your dad, he sounded like he was already awake."

Yes, my dad was already awake. My parents owned a diner called Eggstra! Eggstra! Underneath the name, the sign said Our specialty is breakfast, as if this were not painfully obvious already. It was open twenty-four hours a day, which is the only reason I could see that anyone would ever eat there.

"They're not coming," I said without looking up from the TV. I chuckled. This Barney Fife was a real laugh riot. I was still drunk.

"I'll try calling them." Officer Leroy picked up the phone on the dispatcher's desk.

"Please don't bother. This is the last straw," I repeated what my dad had said to me on the phone. "They've washed their hands of me."

In December when I skipped school with Davy Gillespie and Billy Smith and came home plastered, my dad had warned me this would happen. He'd told me that was my last time worrying my mother sick, and next time I would be dead to them. I hadn't exactly kept my nose

clean since then. I'd done plenty with Eric. But I hadn't gotten caught, until now.

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Officer Leroy put the phone down. Even though I still studied the exploits of Officer Barney Fife, I could feel Officer Leroy studying me. "I'm acquainted with your dad," he said finally. I got this a lot. Translation: Your daddy is a hard-ass bastard.

I snorted. "You played ball with him in school, right?" "Seems you're his comeuppance." He slapped my cop on the shoulder and called a goodbye to Lois, who was 29 speaking into her headset and typing at her computer. She waved back vaguely. Officer Leroy pushed open the door. Part of the cold night elbowed its way in as the door closed slowly behind him.

"Well, come on," my cop said to me. He shoved off the wall with one boot.

As I stood up to follow the cop, Lois called, "After." It seemed like she was talking to the cop. Yeah, I would have liked this tour of the jail after. After I was sober. After it was daylight. After I was sure I wouldn't have to spend the night here. But she heard something on her headphones, and her eyes glazed over. She spoke into her headset again and turned away.

The cop nodded a greeting to a guard watching his own TV, raked back a barred door, and led me down a cementblock hallway lined with jail cells. There were lots of sleepy catcalls, which I could handle. But one gentleman



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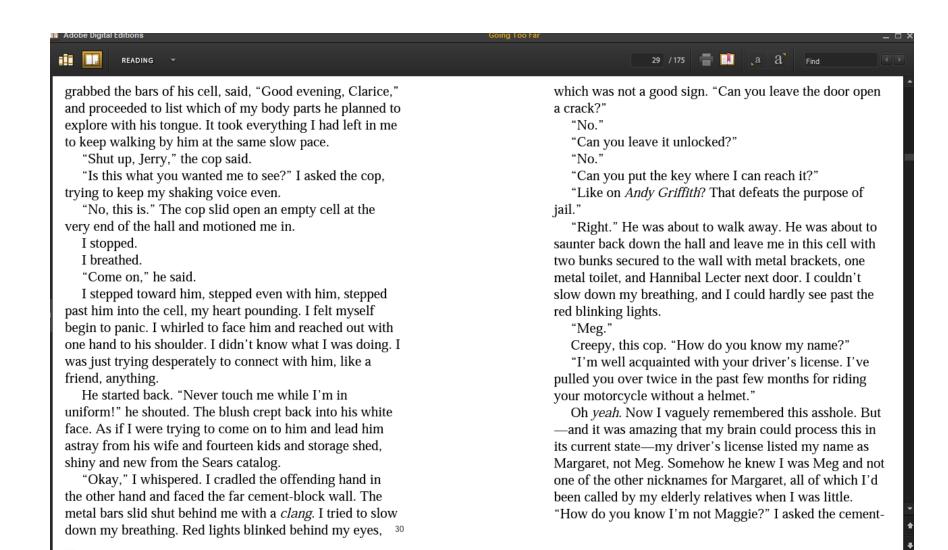










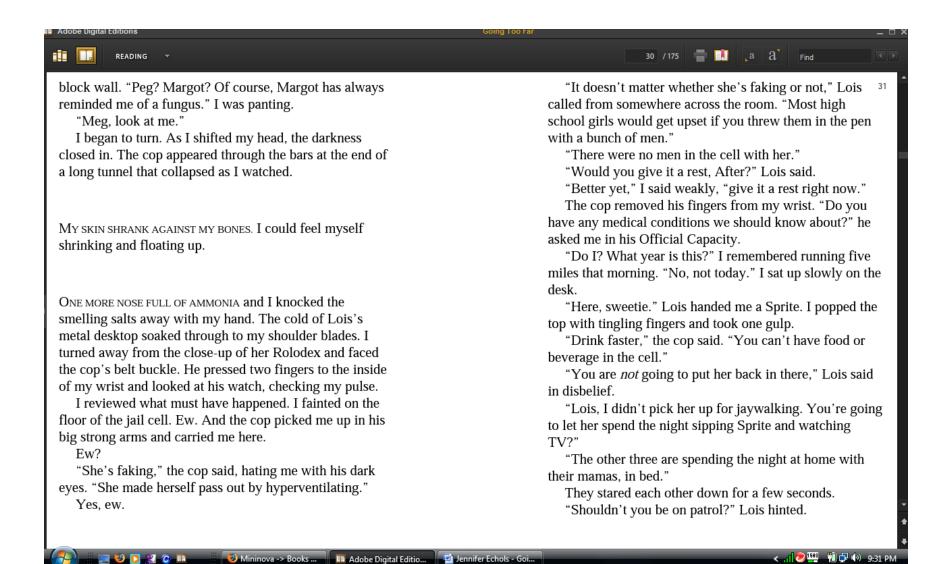


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open the door. This time an even larger piece of the cold night stepped inside as the door closed very slowly. He was gone.

"Thank you," I sighed.

"Mmmm-hmmm." Lois helped me down from the desk and back to my metal folding chair. She sat down, too, and spoke softly into her headset.

When she stopped talking and looked at me again, I asked, "What's his problem?"

"He's a good cop," she said. "A little too good, maybe."

"What's so good about him? He harassed me." I set down my Sprite and put my head in my hands. "If this town ain't big enough for the two of us, I'll be gone to Birmingham soon. All I want is to graduate in June. And go to Miami next week."

She murmured into the headset. Then she asked, "Miami? What for? Spring break?"

"Yeah," I said dreamily.

"With your folks?"

"No, thank God. Tiffany and Brian and I are going with a bunch of seniors from school. It's chaperoned, but loosely. Everybody wants to go on this trip. Each year, the football coach gets the cheerleading sponsor drunk on the 32 first night, and nobody hears from them again until the end of the week. It's a tradition."

Lois slumped a little in her chair. "I hate to be the one to break this to you, sweetie."

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"Break what to me?" As if spending the night in the police station was too good to be true.

"I hope you don't think the officer who arrested you is through with you. I overheard him on the phone with the Powers That Be a little while ago. He's got your number."

"He's got my number?" Did she mean my phone number? He was planning to call me, despite his wife and fourteen children and the storage shed? He must be going through a midlife crisis.

"He's hitting you where it hurts," Lois said. "He wants to make sure you kids don't get out of these charges with your parents paying a fine. He wants you to pay. But he wants you rehabilitated, not sent to juvy. So he came up with a plan."

"I hate plans."

"One of you will spend a week riding with the fire truck, one with the ambulance, and one with the police patrol. All the people you dragged out to the railroad bridge in the middle of the night."

"What about the fourth one of us?" I asked, knowing the answer already.

She rolled her eyes. "I think everyone assumes that lawyer will get his druggie son off, like he always does." Of course.

















"And by the end of the week," she said, "you'll have to turn in a proposal to the Powers That Be for a project to discourage other kids from doing what you did."

God, how Goody Two-shoes. But I was sure I could bullshit my way through this stupid proposal in my sleep. "It doesn't sound too bad. The riding around part actually sounds like fun. Maybe they'll let me drive." It probably would sound like fun if I didn't feel right now like I'd been run over by that train.

"They want you to do it during the night shift," she said.

"I can handle that."

She shook her head sadly. "They want you to do it during your spring break, so you can spend a week on night shift without missing school."

It took a second to sink in. Then I screamed, "What? That cop is the Devil!"

"No, he just understands how teenagers think."

I wasn't sure this was true. The cop thought I had plans to spend my spring break getting drunk and showing off my tits. Yes, there was that. But there was more. I felt tears well up in my eyes as I pictured the vast blue Atlantic. My parents used to talk about taking me to Florida someday when they'd saved up money. That talk stopped a few years ago. Now I'd spent my entire life five hours from the beach without ever seeing the ocean.

My first thought was for myself, of course. But my next thought was for my mom. While someone else supposedly chaperoned me in Miami, my parents were planning to take their first vacation in four years, to Graceland. They could still go while I served my time on night shift. Anyone else's parents would go. But I knew my mom. She would stay home now. Hell, she'd ride with me in the cop car if they let her. She would cancel her vacation because of me, and I would suffer the Punishment Worse Than Jail: guilt. It was enough to drive a girl to drink. Again.

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"I know it seems like the end of the world to you," Lois said, patting my knee. "That's exactly what he was counting on. But an adult can see that you are very, very, very lucky, and you should be grateful. Isn't this better than going to court?"

I considered this question. Bad things could happen at court. Probably I wouldn't get locked up, but there was an outside chance. I shivered and pulled my jacket closer around me.

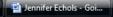
If I got to ride in the ambulance, it might be better than going to court. I did not like ambulances, and I liked being closed into them even less. But Quincy, my paramedic friend, would ride with me. He understood my problem and could help me out. He'd been an ass to me at the bridge, but I figured he'd been putting on a Disapproving Adult act in front of the other Disapproving Adults.







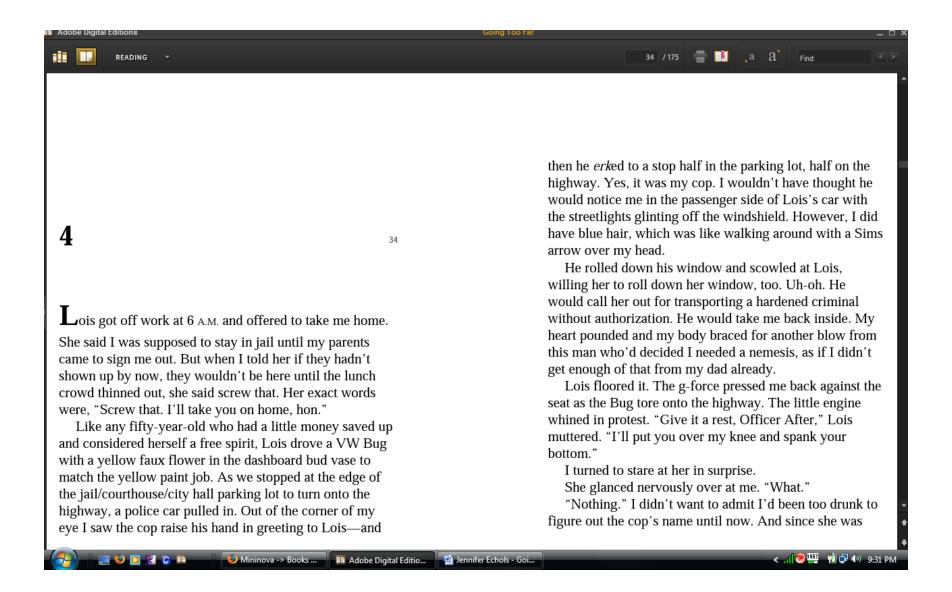












and fourteen kids and Lois's iguana, et cetera. Though I seriously doubted that Lois—or anyone else—ever inflicted corporal punishment on Officer After. The whole way home she checked her mirrors, expecting blue lights to burst on behind us. But he had let us go.

She pulled into the diner parking lot. Gravel popped beneath the tires. Wiping his hands on a rag, my dad glowered out at me from behind the counter. Then he turned back to the grill.

"I don't want to see any more of you," Lois told me, "at least until next weekend. Keep your nose clean." She tapped the tip of her nose twice. Some of her heavy makeup had rubbed off overnight. Red veins showed through.

Yes ma'am, I will, would have been the polite thing to say. But I did not make promises. "Thanks for everything."

Instead of the diner, I headed for the trailer. It had come with the diner. My parents had decided we would live in it temporarily to save money until the diner got established as the town's premier eatery and they could afford to build their dream home. We lived here still.

The whole thing shook when I slammed the metal door behind me. The floor creaked as I walked to the bathroom. After my fainting spell in the jail, my body wanted to go for a jog and prove to me that it was not sick, it was not wasting away, it was okay. But my head throbbed. I needed more time to recover from the beer. And I was scheduled to work all morning. Something in my dad's glower had told me I'd better not use jail time as an excuse to skip out of work. I could jog later. I showered with the curtain open, mopped up the water on the floor with a towel. Then I slipped on a low-cut shirt that seemed inappropriate for work, yet 50 percent less inflammatory than my Peer Pressure T-shirt under the circumstances, and went to face the music.

34 /175 📳 🚺 a a Find

I made my entrance through the front door so I could bus dishes and greet my dad with my arms already full. My mom sat in a booth with a couple of regulars, probably complaining to them about what I'd done now. She looked like the before on one of those TV makeover shows. Bad perm. Forty pounds overweight. Enormous T-shirt with a 36 picture of a kitten, paws on its head, and a thought balloon: "Is it the weekend yet?" Which made absolutely no sense because both my parents worked through the weekend. We all did.

When my mom saw me, she opened her mouth. Her eyes darted to my dad behind the counter. She closed her mouth and watched me with a tortured expression as I















the grill. This was new territory. He might have washed his hands of me, but he'd never suggested I couldn't come home. Until now.

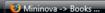
Normally the implied threat would have scared me silent. But Officer After had shocked the life out of me quite a few times over the course of the night, and I'd had enough. I banged the knife down on the cutting board beside the sausage. "Oh, you're kicking me out of the 'house'?" I made finger quotes. "And you're 'firing' me?" My parents made me work, but they didn't pay me. I

My dad growled at me, "You are going to spend your spring break pulling night shift with that cop After, like the DA said on the phone. And then you're going to work morning shift here. If you have the energy to get yourself arrested in the eight hours you have left in the day..." Expertly he slid his spatula under the eggs and flipped them to cook on the other side without breaking the yolks. "Vaya con Dios."

I watched the eggs sizzling on the grill, the yolks slowly growing darker. "What do you mean, I'm pulling





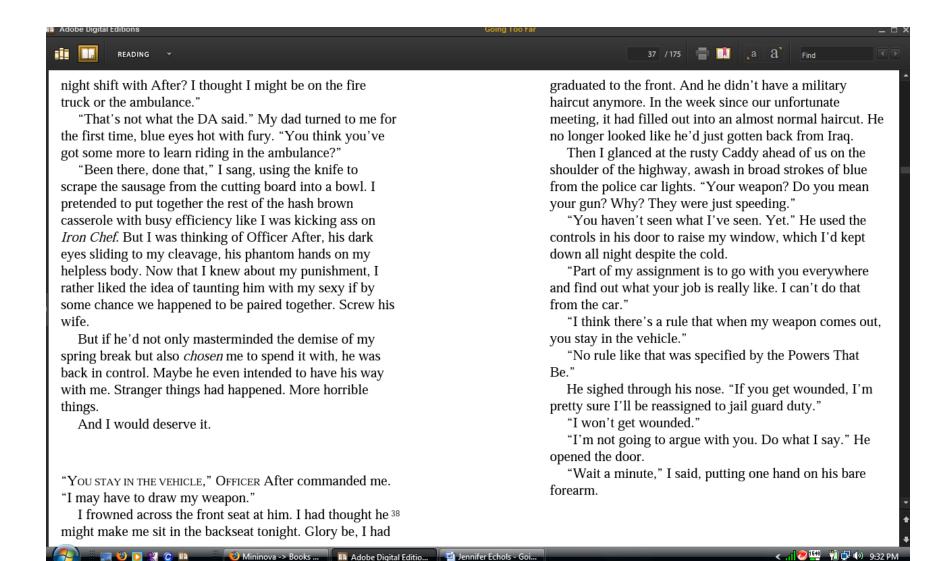












I didn't believe he'd get shot. I didn't believe anyone would get shot. Not considering how we'd spent tonight's patrol. After all his tough talk when he arrested me about how he wanted me to see something, this is what I had seen: I had seen a city cop herding cows out of the mayor's strawberry fields and back into the pasture next door. And I was paying this cop's salary with my tax dollars. Or I would be, if I were paying taxes, if I worked a paying job instead of slaving without pay at the diner. I owed, like, a dollar every year in taxes on my tips.

We had harassed a lot of innocent people. We chased skateboarders away from the sidewalks in the roundabout 39 in the center of town. We chased kids parked in pickup trucks away from the back of the movie theater. Lois was right when she said Officer After knew how teenagers thought. Sneaky shit.

We had worked a fender bender at the Birmingham Junction, the intersection of the highway through town and the interstate to Birmingham. The Birmingham Junction was famous for wrecks, but this one wasn't even interesting—just a shattered taillight and a couple of

infuriatingly polite Japanese businessmen from the car

We had driven down to the bridge with the headlights off three or four times to make sure kids weren't drinking there. Ides of March, my ass. It wasn't bad luck Officer After had caught us at the bridge. He caught us because he haunted that bridge, just as if he were the ghost of someone who'd died there himself.

We had eaten dinner, or whatever you called the 1 A.M. meal, at Eggstra! I could tell Officer After did this every night. Purcell served him coffee and cooked for him without asking for his order, just like he did for me. Weird that this had been going on in my backyard and I didn't even know, because I usually got off work around ten. While Officer After and I ate, the diner got slammed with the crowd heading home from the demolition derby. Of course Purcell wanted me to take orders and serve drinks while he cooked, and of course I refused. It was bad enough that my parents didn't pay me for working there. I sure as hell wasn't going to work there for free when it wasn't even my shift.

Purcell actually had the nerve to start cussing at me. I guess he wasn't worried about his job security. Our town offered plenty of jobs for an illiterate, and most of them probably paid better.

He cussed at me, that is, until Officer After half stood. That's all it took. Purcell suddenly became engrossed in





I'm stuck in here?"











flipping the chopped steak on the grill. Officer After went back to eating like nothing had happened, without looking at me.

Without talking to me, either. We'd spent most of the night in silence. And when we parked by the highway, cut the lights, and waited for speeders, it was like a game of 40 sleep-chicken. Who would snore first?

It was torture. I had gotten off work at Eggstra! Eggstra! that afternoon, gone for my jog, and then tried my best to sleep, but come on. I never slept at 3 P.M. And I was too keyed up about tonight. Now Officer After was making me pay. Wasn't it enough to miss spring break of my senior year in high school so I could ride around this town with a cop all night? He didn't have to bore me to death, too.

No chance of that now.

"You'll still be able to get out the door," he said. "I've set it so only the back doors are locked and suspects can't get out. And no one will be able to open your door from the outside. Suspects can't get in."

"Get in?" I echoed as he hauled himself out of the seat with lots of clicks and clanks from the equipment attached to his belt and closed the heavy door behind him with an official-sounding thunk. But he was bluffing, trying to scare me. The blue lights took swipes at the back of his uniform as he walked casually to the rusty Caddy and

stopped just behind the driver's door. He bent to talk to the driver through the window.

39 / 175 📳 🚺 [a a] Find

And then he slowly reached back with one hand and unsnapped his gun holster.

Frantically I felt for my cell phone in my pocket. I did not call people, but I pressed the button to call Tiffany at the hospital. We weren't close like we were as kids. We were back to being the tentative friends we'd been since eighth grade. Or maybe a little less, now that I'd caused her to miss her spring break and lose her boyfriend. But at school on Friday, I'd traded cell phone numbers with her when she asked. She'd told me the paramedics watched TV or slept at the hospital most of the night. But they'd warned her that when they did get a call, all hell would break loose. She'd wanted someone she could call to save her in case the speeding ambulance turned over. This was a similar emergency.

"Hello?" she said sleepily.

"Wake up," I hissed. "It's Meg. I need you to be on 911 alert. If I scream, bring the paramedics to the highway between the Shop Till You Drop convenience store and the1 Golden Cherry Motel. The cop has his hand on his gun."

"He has his hand on his gun?" She was awake now.

"I thought it was just a traffic stop. He has his hand on his gun. I'm sure there's some way for me to alert Lois the dispatcher from inside the police car, but there's not a red





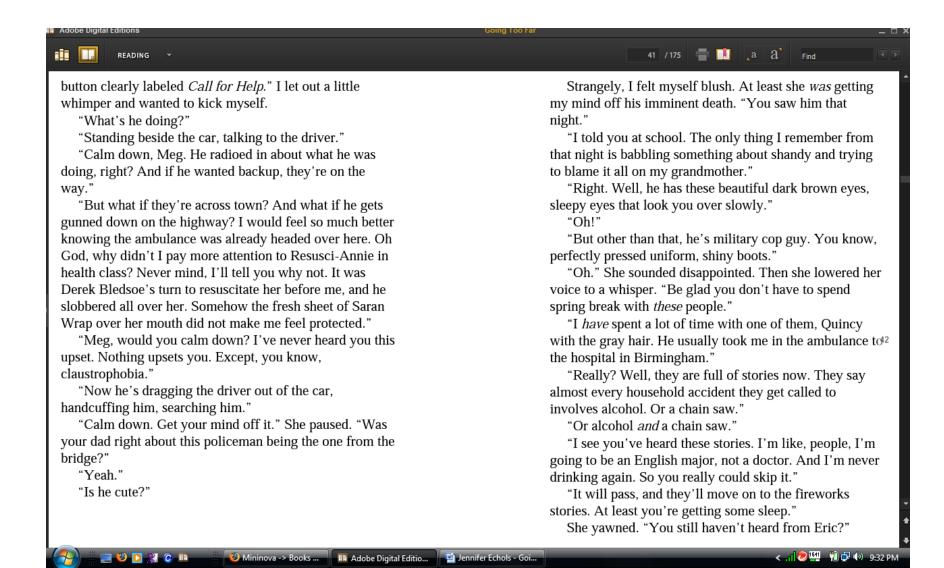


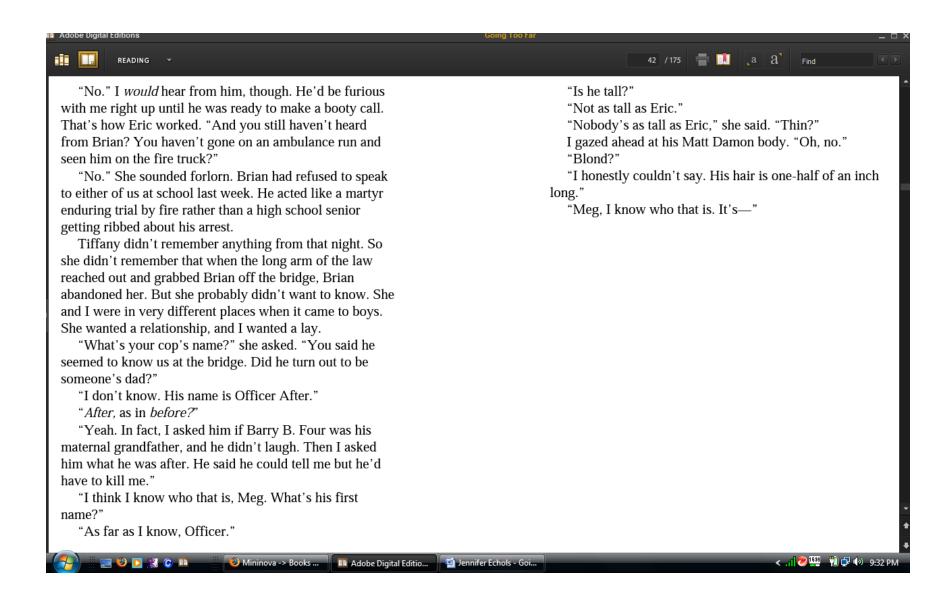


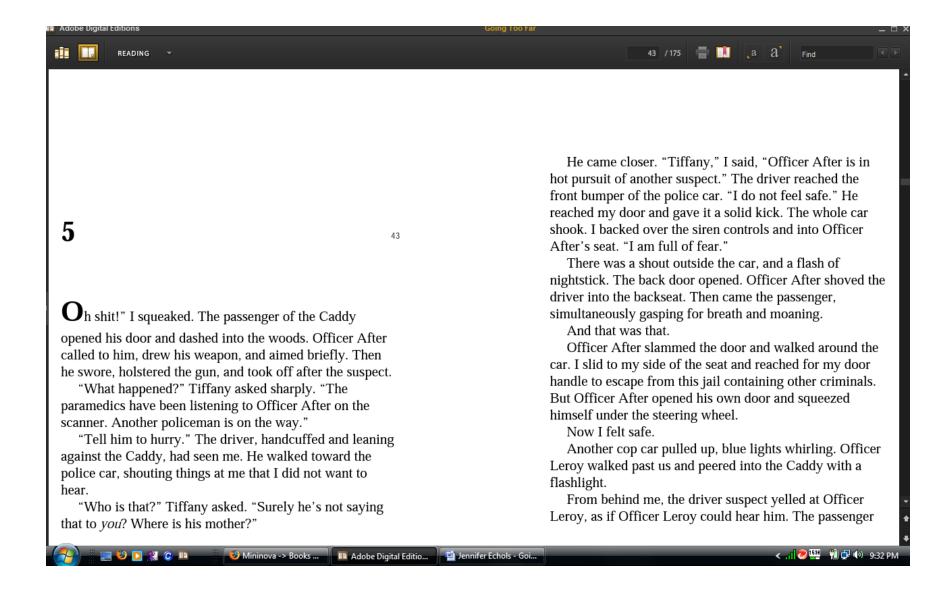












suspect continued to moan. Officer After shouted a few words into his CB at Lois. Then he turned up the Birmingham rock station on the back speakers. This drowned out the suspects with a rap about smoking pot. It did not seem to be an effective way to kick off the suspects' rehabilitation, much less mine.

Officer After was oblivious. Years as a cop must have taught him to tune things out. He reached for his clipboard44 and began filling out forms. A vein throbbed in his neck, but he was hardly winded.

"So, nice chatting with you, Tiff," I chirped into the phone.

"No problem," Tiffany said weakly. "Good night."

I clicked the phone off and stuffed it into my pocket, then reached down to the floorboard for my notebook. I had told Officer After I needed to take notes for my bullshit Goody Two-shoes proposal for the Powers That Be. Really I just wanted something to do while he crossed out forms on his clipboard in that annoying Official Manner he had.

I had already written Ides of March, police academy, get in your pants, and something I want you to see. Now I added vehicle, draw weapon, wounded, and suspect. Still scribbling, I asked Officer After offhandedly, "What was so dangerous about that? Herding cows was more dangerous."

"Don't laugh," he said. "Herding cows really can be dangerous. You don't want it to be exciting. You're lucky there wasn't a bull." He drew an X through a section of the form. "Chickens are also difficult." His dimples showed again when he laughed, just like he'd laughed for Tiffany that first night. He still wasn't laughing for me. He was laughing at his own joke. Aw, Hulk Hogan made a funny.

43 /175 📳 🚺 a a Find

The passenger suspect kept moaning, and the driver suspect yelled more loudly at Officer Leroy. Without turning around, Officer After said, "Shut up, Zeke. Hang in there, Demetrius," and turned up the radio again—All-American Rejects, "Dirty Little Secret." He went back to his forms. I studied him as he wrote.

I wondered if I was developing Stockholm Syndrome, identifying with my captor like Elizabeth Smart. Or if I was having some preprogrammed biological cavewoman reaction to a caveman saving me from a saber-toothed tiger. Because at the bridge when he threatened me, I'd only noticed Officer After's dark uniform, white face, dark eyes. And his dimples. Now that he'd rescued me, so to speak, I noticed a lot more.

I noticed how smooth his face was, except for a scruff of five o'clock shadow (in this case, a bit after 5 A.M.) and some worry lines between his eyebrows. I noticed how sensitive and soft his mouth looked as he bit his lip gently, considering a section of the form. I noticed how long his blond eyelashes were, fringing his dark eyes. His lashes















fourteen—he seemed more responsible than that), with the oldest about to finish high school and get pregnant herself.

They lived in a triple-wide trailer and were very happy. His wife stayed up some nights, listening to the police scanner just to feel close to him. There was a lot of warm fruit cobbler. She cooked with butter, and this was one of the things that made him horny for her after all these years.

She went easy on the fruit cobbler herself so she could keep her girlish figure. She was one of the women around this town who looked like a hick but very, very pretty and carefully kept up if you could see past the big hair. Like Lois, twenty years ago. Oh, yeah, she turned Officer After on.

Unlike me. I glanced down at my shirt. No cleavage tonight. Though I'd fantasized about it a little, in the end the whole seducing-a-married-man thing had made even skull-and-crossbones T-shirt to get across how I felt about "I don't think you were worried about the danger to

because you were embarrassed to be seen with me in front

through the metal grate at the suspects. Demetrius was still

Zeke. He looked at me. "I don't know what you mean. Why would I be embarrassed to be seen with you?"

He asked so earnestly that I felt like I had to explain the obvious. "My hair, and the way I dress."

"You dress like you're Japanese," he said.

"The clueless Japanese who work at the car factory and wear those weird plastic sandals? Thanks."

"No, the cute Japanese girls you see at the mall in Birmingham."

He looked down at his forms, pen poised. But he didn't write anything. That blush crept up from his neck and across his cheeks. He had just realized he'd called me cute.

"I mean, the Japanese girls," he said, still looking down. "You know how you dress. With your T-shirt and your jacket and your jeans and your shoes and your weird socks and your hairpins and your blue hair."















He was digging himself a deeper hole. Now he had told me he'd noticed every detail of what I looked like. Maybe that was part of his police training, so he could provide an accurate description of me when I escaped. Although blue hair probably would be sufficient to get me picked up.

Or maybe he was attracted to me.

I watched as he drew an X on the form and brusquely flipped to another page. I honestly didn't know what to think anymore. Usually I was very good at reading people. I didn't get emotionally involved. When you were an outsider looking in, it was easy to see clearly. This guy I couldn't read.

"You dress like a manga character," he said.

Well, that explained everything. "Your kids read manga?" He probably had a daughter into manga, and I reminded him of his daughter. He had blushed because he thought I'd gotten the wrong idea. And he was right.

Now he looked up at me and held his hands out flat, pen between two fingers. "What kids?"

I noticed his left hand was bare. "They don't let you wear your wedding ring on the job?"

He turned his big hand over and looked at it. "What wedding ring? I'm not married."

Zeke told me I could come to his prison for a conjugal 47 visit any time I wanted. He would tie me down. My heart sped up like he really was tying me down with his words.

Bitch encircled one of my wrists, cock held the other, and spread was snaking around my left ankle.

46 / 175 📳 🚺 a a Find

I dumped my notebook out of my lap and tried the door handle. Locked. "Shit." I pounded the window. "Let me out. God damn it!"

I heard the lock slide open. Then I tried the handle again, bailed out onto the grassy shoulder, and jogged toward the Caddy, away from the heh heh of Zeke.

Beyond the pool of headlights and the sweep of blue lights, the night was black. The highway was empty. Officer Leroy bent over in the Caddy, peering under the seats. I guess it was because he knew my dad (even if he didn't like my dad), but I thought he would protect me from the suspects. And Officer After. Funny how a nearstranger's weighty ass provided me comfort.

But I couldn't really feel comfortable while a low hum vibrated through me. I looked around nervously until I realized it was Officer Leroy's car engine on idle.

Officer After lit a cigarette behind his door, out of the wind. Then he tossed the pack into the car, closed the door, and walked toward me. He settled next to me, half sitting on the bumper of the Caddy.

I scooted a little farther away from him. "You promised me you wouldn't lock me in the car."

He exhaled smoke. "I didn't lock you in before. I locked it when I got back in. I forgot. Habit."















this won't be the time they get caught. But they're high themselves, and they have poor judgment. They don't understand they could greatly reduce their chances of getting caught by driving the speed limit. And by choosing a vehicle other than a stolen 1987 Cadillac Eldorado." He tapped ash onto the asphalt and took another drag. Exhaling, he said, "It's cold out here. Come back to the car. We'll leave as soon as Leroy finishes his search."

way he moved and spoke with such confidence.

He flicked away the cigarette butt (littering wasn't a crime suddenly?) and nodded toward the car. I hauled open my heavy door emblazoned with the city seal and the police department motto, To Protect and Serve, and sat down on the vinyl. The radio blasted Mariah Carey's "Touch My Body."

Shouting over the music, Zeke gave me a few details 49 about how he was going to rape me.





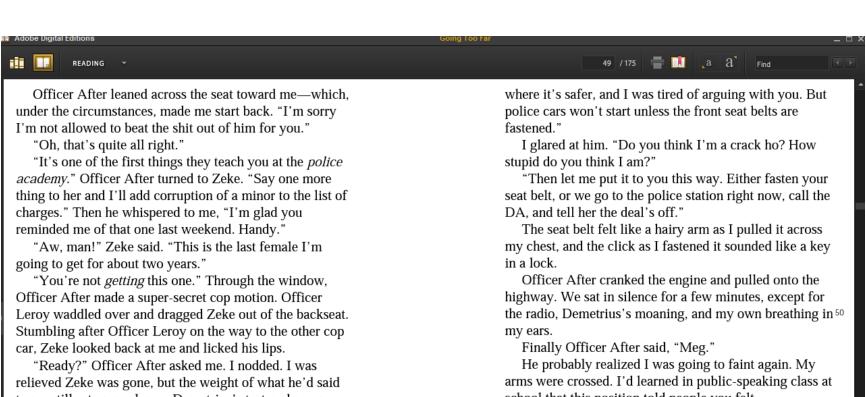












to me still sat on my lungs. Demetrius's tortured moans from the backseat were a constant reminder. "Put your seat belt on," Officer After said impatiently.

"I don't want to have this conversation with you every time I start the vehicle."

I waited, hoping he would start the car anyway. He didn't. "I can't." I said.

"You can. I didn't say anything the night I arrested you, when you pretended to wear it. You were in the backseat

school that this position told people you felt uncomfortable. As if I could have hidden this. It also pushed my breasts up so I looked like I had a more ample bosom. In addition, my chest heaved with heavy breathing. My skull-and-crossbones T-shirt looked like a pirate flag waving in the breeze. No wonder Officer After had noticed.















However, as I was having some trouble staying conscious, I concentrated on my own needs. I hit the button to roll down the window and hung my head out like a dog. Between moans, Demetrius complained about the wind and the cold. But unlike Zeke, he didn't mention my privates, so he was easier to ignore.

Watching the sickeningly familiar highway and trees and buildings spin by, I wondered whether Graceland was everything my mom had dreamed or if she was actually more impressed by the chandelier in the lobby of Memphis's Comfort Inn.

I wondered whether the football coach, the cheerleading sponsor, and my classmates had reached Miami in the bus yet. I wondered if they would get drunk first thing, or if they would run down to the beach first, like I would have done. I wondered how the sand felt between their toes, and whether the water was soft and warm.

I sat up when we pulled in at the emergency entrance of the hospital. "What are we doing here?" The hospital was one of my least favorite places to visit.

Tiffany met me in the entrance with a violent hug that nearly knocked me down. "It was so exciting to listen on 51 the scanner to what was going on! I wish we could trade

"Be careful what you wish for," I said as Officer After came back alone. "Tiffany, this is Officer After, who arrested you. Officer After, this is Tiffany Hart, who doesn't remember you."

They shook hands more cordially than they should have. Officer After didn't have a problem with her touching him while he was in uniform.

"I am so sorry," Tiffany giggled and gushed. "You know how it is when you're drunk."

"No, he doesn't," I said. "He's been sober since birth."

"Me too!" Tiffany said. "Until last Saturday." She tilted her head annoyingly. Officer After showed his dimples.

"But I do remember him," she said. "You know who this is, don't you, Meg?"

Officer After's dimples faded.

places!"

"Mr. Harrison, my yearbook faculty sponsor, also taught AP English last year. John was the only John in that class." She touched Officer After lightly on the hand. He didn't flinch. She prattled on, "But his full name had such





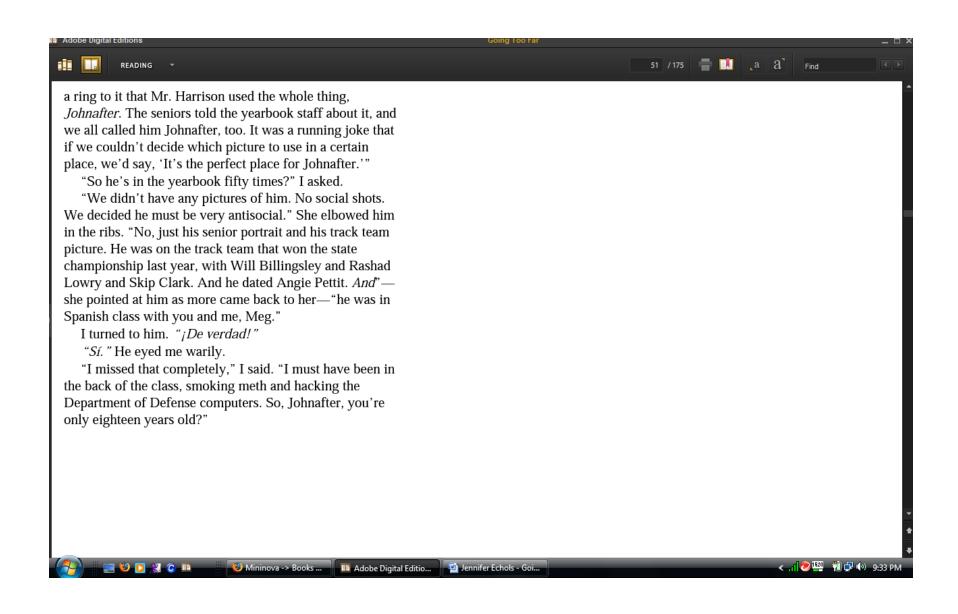


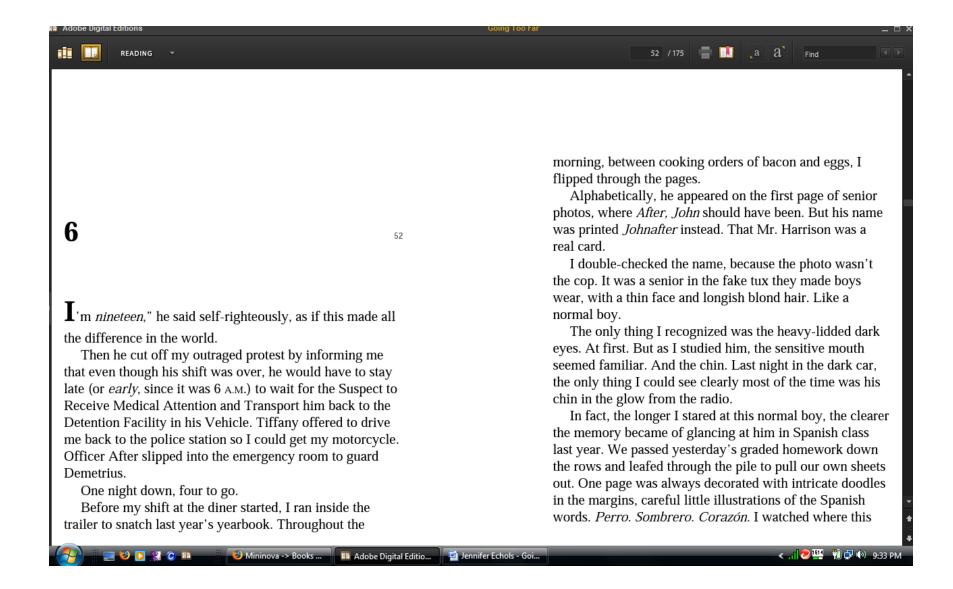












everywhere. Not knowing any better, they bought the cheap houses being built here. They stayed here until they figured out it was no fun and moved closer to Birmingham. So for all practical purposes, our town was still in the middle of nowhere, but now we had a Target.

If you were college material, right after graduating from our high school you escaped to UAB. Then you found a professional job and settled in Birmingham, never to

I peered across the bag of chopped onions at the yearbook on the counter. I stared at his photo, with my hands over my mouth. And I realized that something was happening to me. For the first time in my life, I had a crush. On a cop. Who was never leaving this town.

Beware the Ides of March.















As always, I stretched my muscles in front of the decorative park gate tiled with red, blue, and yellow handprints from my elementary school. Tiffany's handprint was there, and Brian's, and even Eric's. Mine was toward the bottom-left corner. I still remembered how thrilled I was to see my handprint and name on the wall for the first time, back when I was young and dorky(er). I thought I was famous. Along with everybody else in the third and fourth grades. Now I regretted that a little piece of me would be cemented to this place forever.

I braced myself on the wall with one hand, put my leg behind me, and pulled on my ankle to stretch my quadriceps. My head throbbed and my blood tingled from too much caffeine.

The trees in the park held tight to the tiniest bright green leaves. The sky was so blue it looked fake, and the yellow daffodils looked plastic, like in a cemetery. This

told me I was really sleepy and/or I really needed to get 55

And jogging toward me came the ghost of Johnafter.

I think I actually did a double take. His shirt was off, showing the sort of six-pack abs I saw all the time on TV but rarely in person. His white skin glowed against the bright greens and yellows of the park. Probably from living in the dark on night shift. His blond hair looked white, too, and from this distance, his dark eyes were holes in his face.

He didn't look like a forty-year-old cop to me anymore. I didn't see how I had ever made this mistake, either. And he didn't look like the boy from the yearbook. He looked like what he was, a nineteen-year-old with a fantastic body. Get this—I resisted the urge to hide behind the tile wall. I felt shy in front of him. Like I admired him from afar, but I knew I didn't have a chance with him. Suddenly I wished my hair was not blue.

He jogged to a stop in front of me and panted a few times to get his breath back. Finally he said, "Hey," as if I was some girl from school instead of his prisoner.

"Hey," I said.

He looked at the wall. "Are you on here?"

I put my leg down and kicked my handprint on the wall to show him. I picked up my other ankle behind me.

He bent down to look at my handprint. "Mmph," he said. "Near Eric."



cop.













"I went through a Goth phase when I was nine." He looked pointedly at me. "I grew out of it."

Did he mean my blue hair was immature? Ass. I said, "And you grew into your cop phase."

He turned without a word, walked into the parking lot &6 few paces away, and opened the door of a pickup truck. Great, I'd pissed him off. Riding around with him tonight would be fun fun fun.

To cover his naked muscles, he pulled on an Audioslave T-shirt I remembered him wearing in Spanish class last year. Only it fit him more tightly now. He lit a cigarette, slammed the truck door, and sauntered back to

I gestured to the cigarette. "What do you think you're doing? Flaunting your youth and good health in front of the cripples?"

His brown eyes widened at me, and he glanced toward an old lady moving at glacier pace on her walker. "It's the one thing I do wrong." He took a drag and sighed through

he exhaled smoke. "It keeps me awake. I'm tired. I'm always tired. The human body is not designed to work

"Have you tried coffee? Mountain Dew? Red Bull?"

"That would keep me up too long. I want to sleep when I get home. I already tried and failed for eight hours. After my days off, my first day back is always the hardest. I came here to run and tire myself out." The picture of health took another drag from his cigarette. "Did you just get up?"

"No, I just got off work."

"Work!" He ran one hand back through his hair with a puzzled expression, as if he couldn't quite believe it was gone. "Where?"

"Eggstra! Eggstra!"

"For how long?"

"Since your shift was over."

"God. Why?"

"My parents are at Graceland. I was supposed to go to Miami on the senior trip." If he'd been in uniform, I probably would have added some sharp pricklies to this, such as, "I can't go to the beach thanks to you, bastard." Strange how I could say this to an enormous cop, but not to a cute blond boy in an Audioslave T-shirt. "They thought it was safe to leave town when I was leaving, too. Now that I'm staying, they need something else to keep 57















"It means..." He pulled at the hair on the back of his head. "Girls always think they need to lose weight, and you don't need to lose weight."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I stood up straight and covered my tummy with my hands. "You're saying I'm too skinny."

He took a long, thoughtful drag and exhaled as he spoke. "No. You're not."

Was he saying I was fat in all the right places? I put my hands on my hips, pushed my shoulders forward a little for enhancement of cleavage in my V-neck T-shirt, and leaned to the left to stretch my side. I guess I probably looked pretty good, if you were into blue hair and extreme fatigue.

But he was a frightened horse about to bolt. He wore that expression he tended to wear when I got too close to him, the oh-my-God-she's-trying-to-seduce-me-and-Idon't-like-it look.

I gave up and relaxed my shoulders. "You're talking about Angie Pettit. She doesn't count. She's a midget. She's so cute and petite you want to pinch her head off."

57 /175 📳 🚺 a a Find

Johnafter took one last short drag from the cigarette, threw it down, and squashed it into the dirt with the heel of his running shoe. He imagined the cigarette butt was my head.

"I take it you're still dating her," I said.

"No. She broke up with me last fall."

Ah, the cigarette was Angie's head. "Why'd she break up with you?"

Now he put both hands in what was left of his hair and slowly stroked backward. Either this was a show of discomfort he controlled carefully when he was in 58 uniform, or he wanted me to notice his huge triceps. Believe me, I noticed.

"Because I'm a cop," he said, "and I live in this town, and she didn't want to get stuck here. She wanted to go to UAB."

This surprised me. Angie did not seem like college material. She seemed like cosmetology school material. Not that this was an insult. I knew from experience it was very difficult to get hair to take blue color and hold it for any length of time.

Oh, why not. I leaned to the right and asked him, "Are you dating anyone now?"





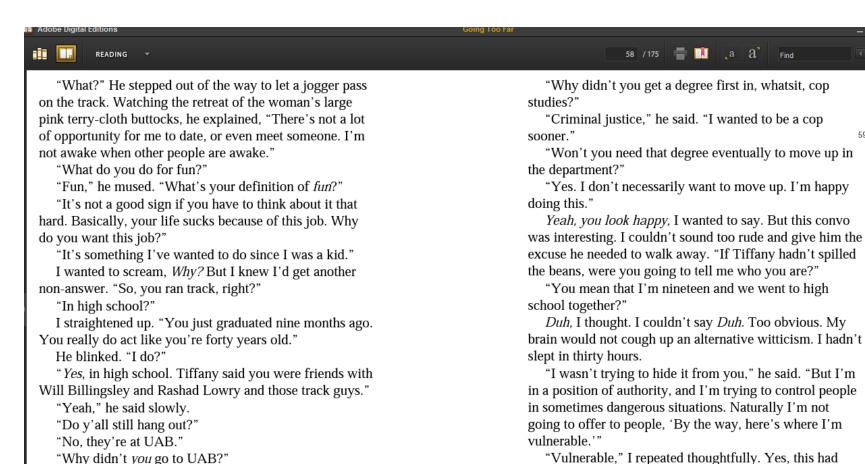












"Vulnerable," I repeated thoughtfully. Yes, this had been a very interesting convo. I'd discovered all sorts of buttons I could push to make him feel vulnerable and keep him off my ass for the rest of the week.





uncomfortable and he needed a way out.



"I told you," he said. "I wanted to be a cop." He looked

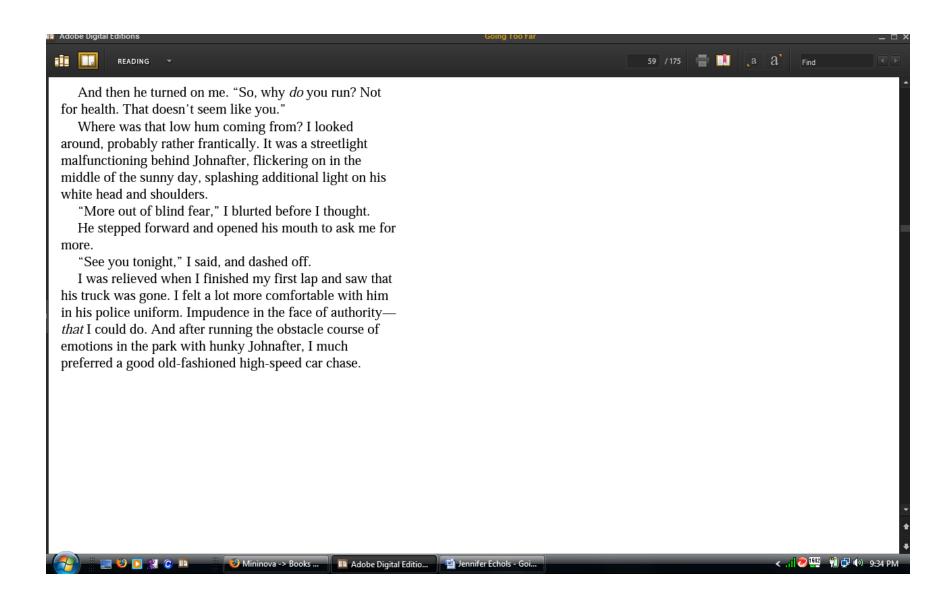
around the park like this conversation was making him

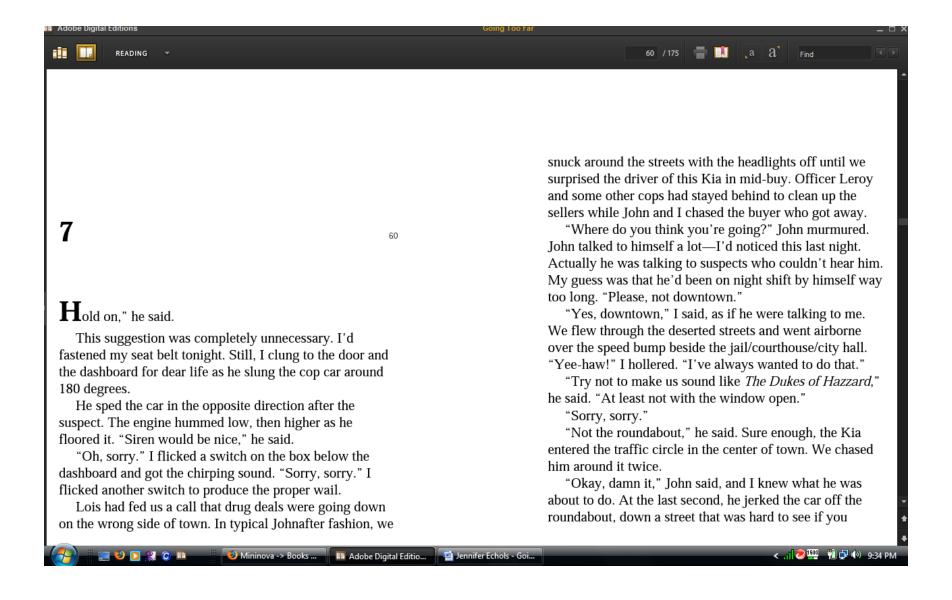












"John!" I gasped at the same instant he stomped the brakes. We skidded to a stop in front of the blinking signals. The Kia kept going, squeaking past the locomotive with inches to spare.

John and I watched the progression of train cars. We'd lost him.

Sighing through his nose, John reached to the CB to call Lois. There it was again. I'd thought I smelled cologne

streetlights softened his strong jaw and those sensitive lips. And his whole body was bathed in red as the warning lights from the railroad crossing blinked on, off, on, off, on.

Off, for good. The train was gone.

He looked ahead, into the empty street. "Where would you go?" he asked the suspect. Then he turned back to me. "Help me search for the Kia in parking lots as we pass. Sometimes they're that stupid."















It had crossed his.

And he was wearing cologne.

"How did I end up with you?" I asked.

He turned to me, wide-eyed. "What?" The car lunged over a rock, and he put his eyes back on the road.

"Why am I riding in your police car instead of the ambulance or the fire truck? Did y'all draw straws, and blue-haired girl. Of course, Eric is. Of course, Eric is charged with multiple felonies."

"I'm not sure I'd call that an attraction," he said. "From the way you talk about him, he's not much of a boyfriend. He's more of a john."

I counted to ten silently. I had enough self-control to keep from punching the police. By eight, I could hear the jealousy in his voice.

He was jealous.



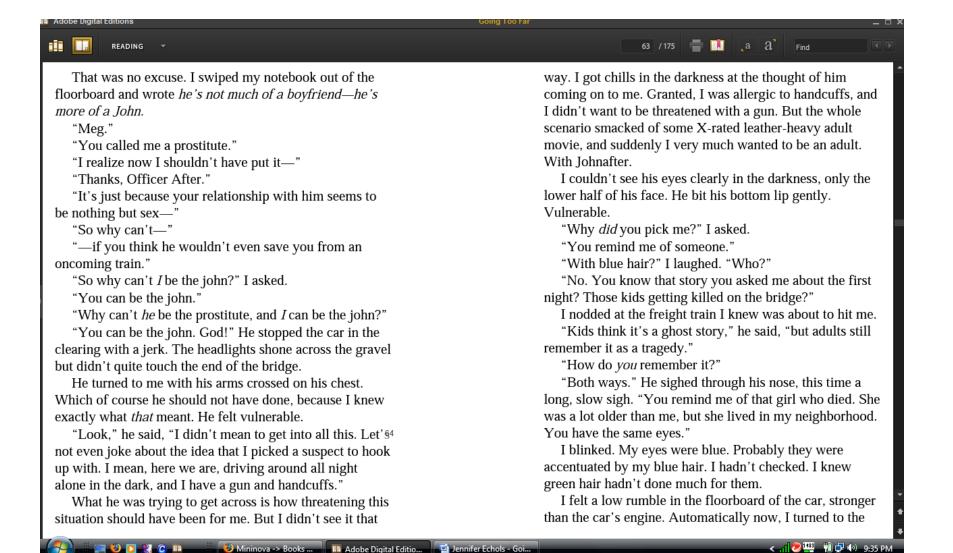












team caught me by the arm in two seconds. "Meg, come on. We're supposed to be looking for that Kia. We don't have time for this."

I pulled my arm away. "We don't have time for me to be completely creeped out that I'm riding around with you because I remind you of a dead girl. But we have time to drive down a dirt road and make sure the bridge is still here." I whirled around and gestured into the dark where I

trees, but it was only March. They hadn't woken up yet. 66

"If I could—" he started, then realized how loud his voice sounded. He cleared his throat and said quietly, "If I could save just one person, just you, all this would be worth it."

"All what would be worth it? Carting me around for a week? Or being a cop in the first place?"















He turned back to me. "It's not that simple," he said again, through his teeth.

This was really a problem for him. I took in the whole picture of him, dark eyes, scowl, crossed arms.

Then I thought about what I must look like in the headlights' beam. I had crossed my arms at some point without knowing it. I looked the same as John, but with the blue eyes of a dead girl.

We stood there by the bridge, at this impasse, for what seemed like a long time.

Finally I took a deep breath and uncrossed my arms with effort, letting them hang by my sides. I felt naked. "The Kia knows you're looking for him and you're probably working all night. He plans to hide out somewhere until morning, then blend into the rush hour traffic headed to Birmingham. In the meantime, he knows you're the only one chasing him. He figures he's not that

important. So he'll pick a hiding place that has two ways

John uncrossed his arms. "For instance?"

"The quarry. The airport. Behind the rental storage

On the bumpy drive back to the main road, I tried to gauge whether we were on speaking terms again, or whether we were going to spend the rest of the night plus 67 three more in this uncomfortable silence. I tried it out. "Why are you bothering? He dumped the shit out the window fifteen minutes ago."

"Even if I caught him with something, it wouldn't stick. Usually doesn't. Or he'd be out in six months. I just like to scare them."

Right before he pulled onto the main road, he turned up the radio, probably so he wouldn't have to talk to me again. He still bit his lip gently. But by the time we reached the dirt road through the woods that eventually would snake behind the storage buildings, he'd recovered. With a glance at me, he said, "You know an awful lot about hiding from cops."

"I don't make daily drug buys, if that's what you're thinking. I go parking."

He grinned, showing his dimples.

"Don't act like you're above it," I laughed. "Next weekend, I'd better not find you in all my parking places."





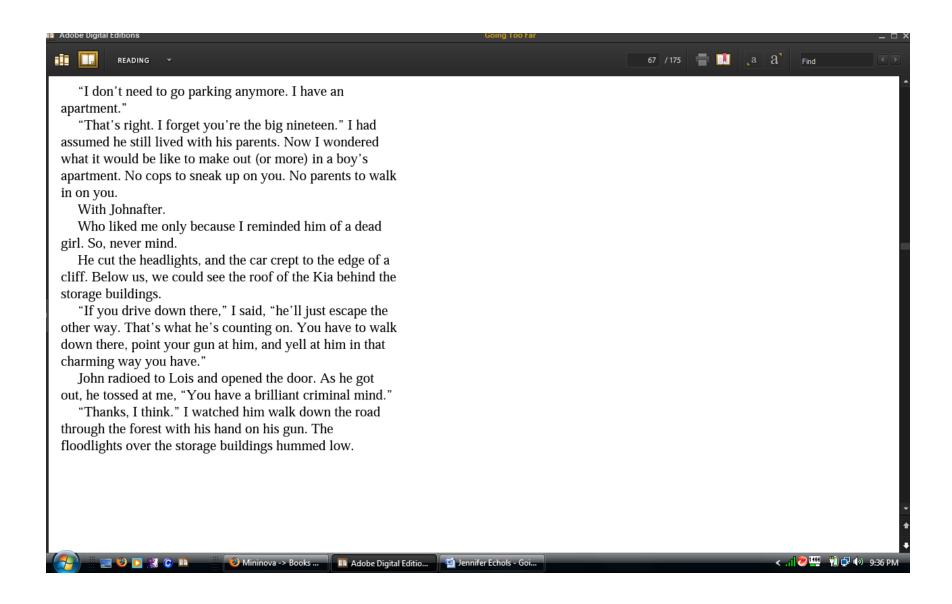


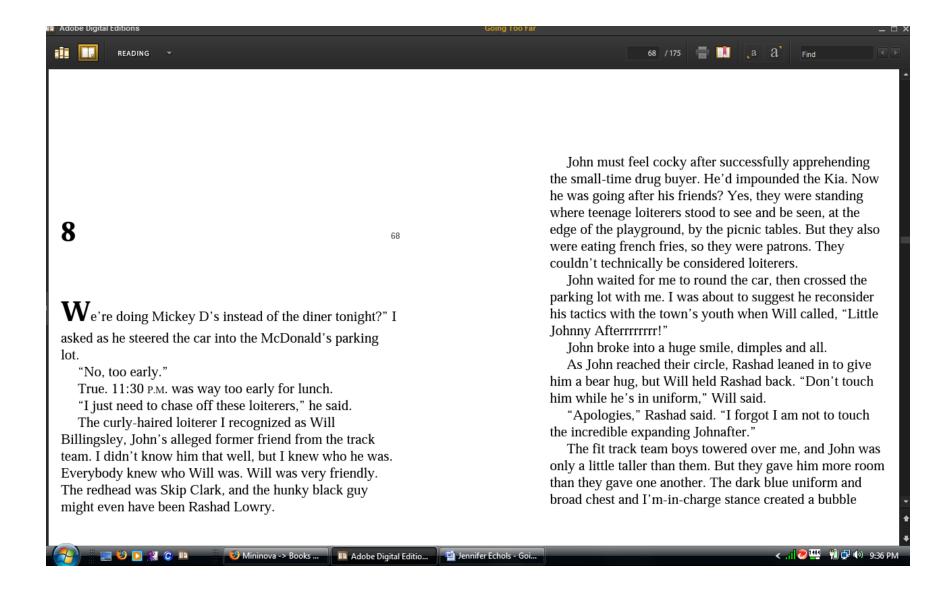












"That's right." "Why are you riding around with John? I'll bet you're

one of those suspects from the bridge." John called across the circle, "No, she's undercover."

"Oh, like Sydney on *Alias*," Will said. Of the possible comparisons, that was pretty flattering. He tugged a lock of my hair to see if it was a wig.

Disapproval flashed across John's face. I wondered whether no one was supposed to touch me while he was in uniform, either.

don't deserve a spring break," Rashad told John. "Even the fuzz needs love."

"Looks like he's already got some," Skip said.

Everybody looked at Skip blankly.

Did he mean me?

"Anyway," John said, "I don't think I'd be welcome, if Eric's going."

"He's not going," Skip said. "His parents grounded him because of the bridge incident. Can you imagine? Grounded."

Indeed I couldn't imagine. John and Eric were the same age. John was a policeman, and Eric was grounded.

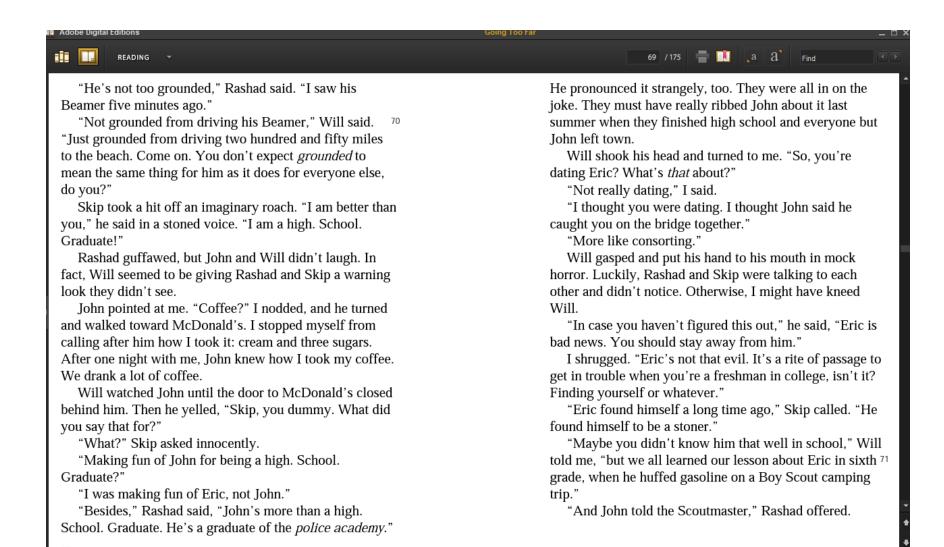










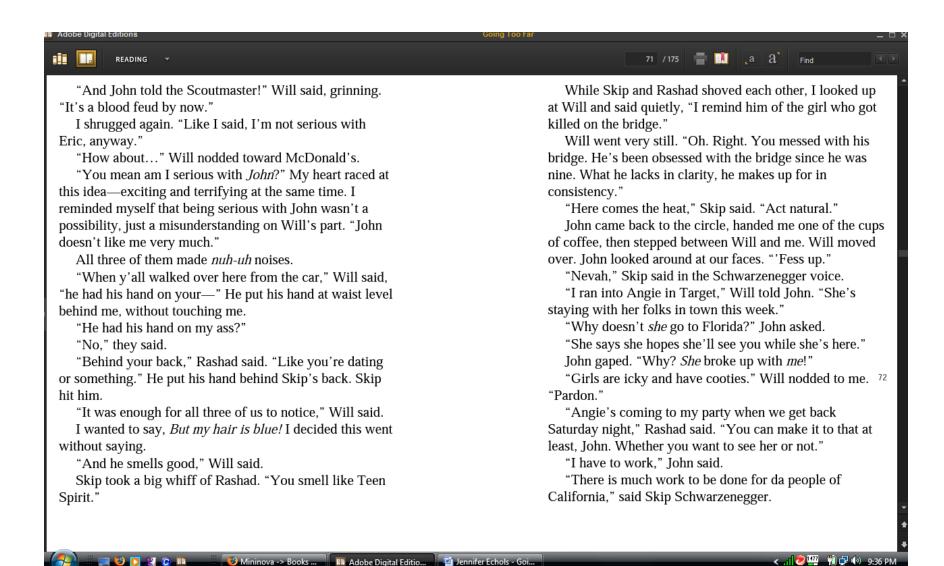


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"I'll be there," I said at the same time John said, "No. She's seventeen." While Rashad gave me the apartment building and number, John edged closer behind me. "Rashad, she's seventeen."

I looked around at John. "I'll be eighteen in May."

"The party is in March." The small radio on his shoulder suddenly buzzed with static and Lois's voice. He spoke a few words into it, then put his hand on the back of my neck. "Official police business."

WE SPED ACROSS TOWN, SIREN SHRIEKING. But by the time we got to the crime scene, the burglary was over. Neighbors said the victims were out of town for spring break. Officer Leroy was standing guard.

There wasn't much for John to do. Just a little Official Police Business such as securing the scene and smoking a cigarette and waiting an hour for the detective to show up.





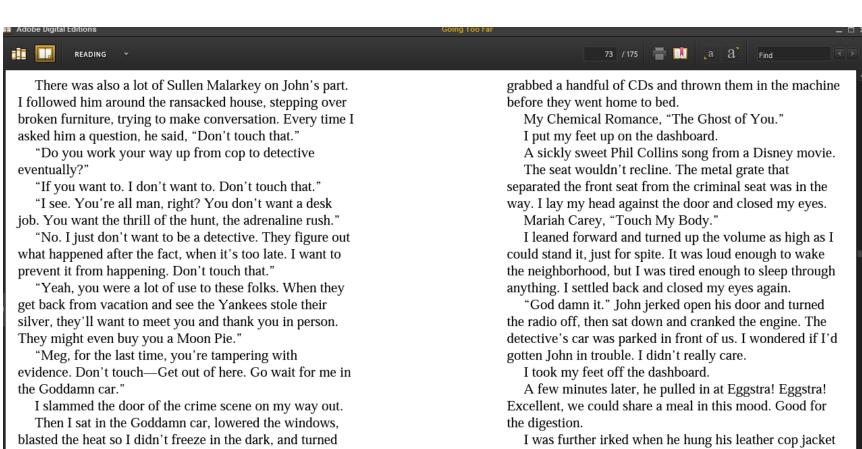












up the radio. "Dirty Little Secret" again. I'd figured out last night, after the sixth playing of "Dirty Little Secret," that no one bothered to man the radio station in the wee hours. They stacked twenty tunes in endless rotation. These songs were an odd mix, too, like someone had

on the coatrack by the door, like he owned the place. I suppose that's what we had the coatrack there for. I'd just never seen anyone use it. Then he headed for the windmill table, like last night.















could hurt me. Here was the worst thing about them: I could tell that if Johnafter loved you, his dark eyes would be beautiful and friendly and warm. So every time he cut me down with a look that was cold and unfriendly and ugly, it was a double insult, a reminder of what I could never have. I found myself avoiding his dark eyes when I could.

"I think it's the hair," I said.

He straightened in his seat and stretched his arms over his head. "So? I'm one of the tallest people on the force."

I almost laughed at the idea of our small-town police as a Force. "I don't think you should be hired as a cop until you've reached your full adult height. It seems barbaric. I've never heard of a nineteen-year-old cop."

"You have to be twenty-one most places, but there are a few where you can be nineteen. Montgomery Police. Florida Highway Patrol."















"Right, the police academy. Please tell me you at least went out and got good and soused on your nineteenth birthday."

"No. I came in to work. It was my first day on the job. Night, I should say." He shifted to his authoritarian voice, calm on the surface with a threat underneath. "Most adults do not take any available opportunity to drink themselves

this crush I had on him would ever be anything but. Still, it bothered me that he considered me whore-like.

"The thing is," I said, "I really didn't want to with him. I wanted to in general."

This explanation probably did not reduce my whorelike profile.

"Anyway," I blathered on stupidly, "now I'm sort of sorry I did it, because he's nuts."

John nodded. "Domestic."





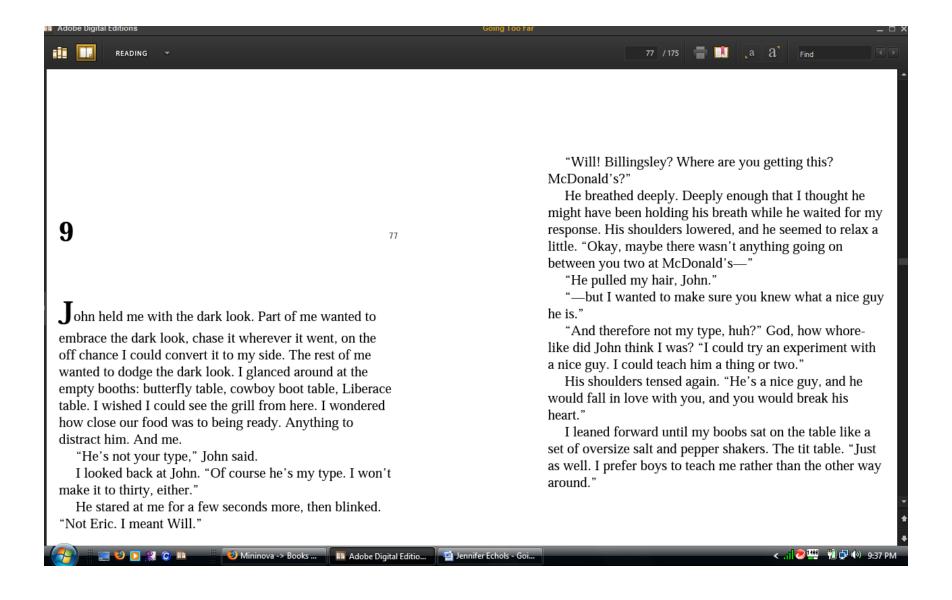












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certain time. But I didn't plan to hang out with a certain

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charismatic."

hadn't realized how far forward we'd both been leaning.

"Tiffany is cute," John called from the other side of the booth, which seemed like yelling across the Grand Canyon in comparison with how we'd talked before. "She's nice. Not sexy, if that's what you're insinuating."

I wanted to inform Officer After that I was not insinuating a damn thing about Tiffany. I was fishing for information about myself alone.

He half smiled at me, showing one dimple. "What have you got?"

"The Meg Special."

"Eggs?"

"Sort of a Tex-Mex omelet. The Meg Special is different every day." I took a bite, chewed, and desperately needed to spit it out. I swallowed it and washed it down with coffee, which didn't really help.





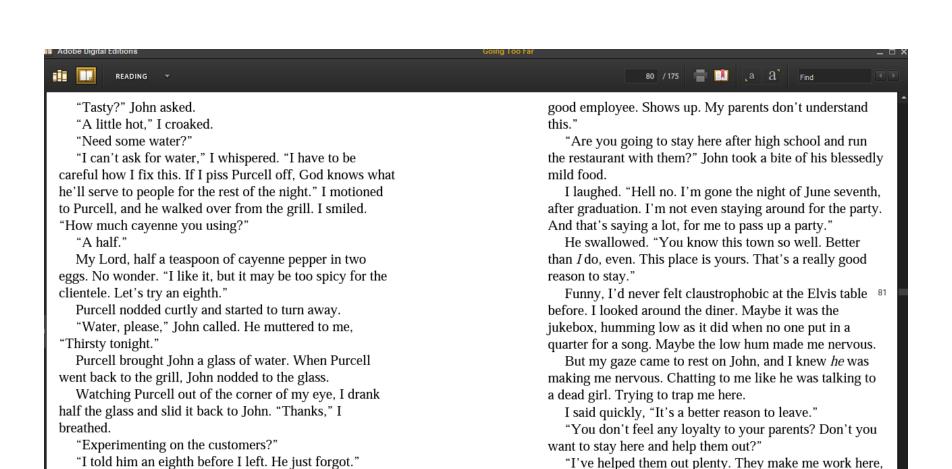












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and they don't pay me. It's basically slave labor. Kind of

He went back to eating like my snark didn't concern

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him. But he looked hurt. Those worry lines appeared

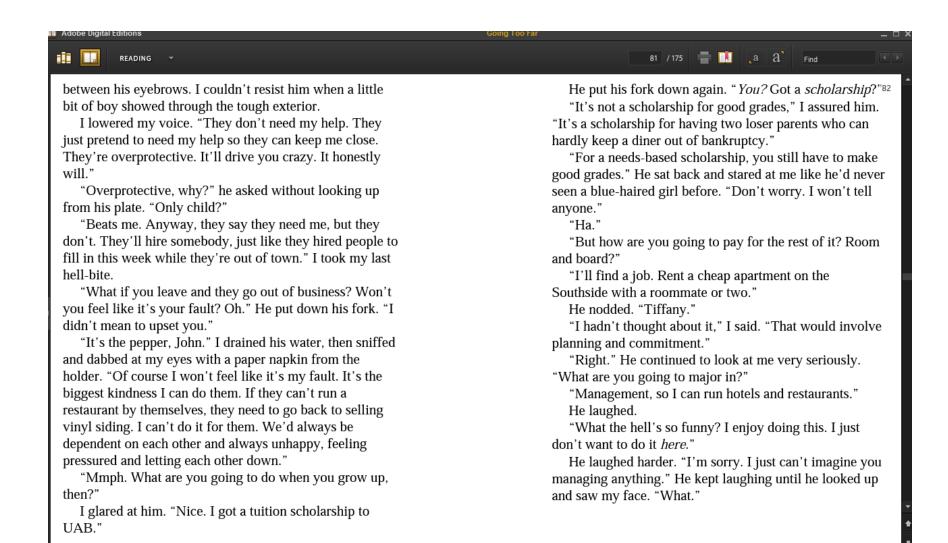
like following you around."

"Why don't you write it down?"

"He can't read." I took a huge bite of egg to get rid of it

more quickly, then a swig of coffee and another long drink

of John's water. "I try to work with him because he's a



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He gaped at me in disbelief. I felt myself cringe under that dark, hard gaze. "Meg, you were drunk, stoned, letting Eric Wexler feel you up, and five minutes from getting hit by a train."

I rolled my eyes. "I suppose I should point out to you yet again that I did not get hit by a train. I made a mistake. If I turn in my proposal to the Powers That Be, everything will work out fine. I think you're scared to live life, and you're putting that on me."

guard or a rent-a-cop while the rest of us are slaving away, waiting tables for rent."

"I have a job to do here," he muttered.

"What job? Your weird compulsion to protect and serve? You could do that anywhere. Why does it have to be here?"

"This is my home."

"I thought you lived by yourself in an apartment. Is your family in town?"















He shook his head. "They got divorced when I was nine. My mom stayed in town for a few years after that, but finally she couldn't stand it anymore, and she split. She lives in Virginia. My dad wanted me to finish school where I started, so he stayed with me until I graduated. Then he split. He lives in Colorado."

"This diner is the closest thing you have to a home," I mused. "You're like a bachelor homesteader on the prairie84 who eats all his meals in town."

"If I were a bachelor homesteader on the prairie, I'd know my way around a cast-iron skillet and some fatback." He was looking down at his plate, but his dimples showed as he smiled at himself.

"Your friends are gone, your family's gone, and you're not living in the house where you grew up. What makes this town your home? What do you have left here? Just the bridge?"

His dimples faded.

"Let's just say, hypothetically, that you went to UAB," I suggested. "Would you major in criminal justice?"

"No. What a waste."

This surprised me, considering how into this cop life he was. Then I thought I'd hit on it. Aim higher. "Pre-law?"

"No. Getting people on that end doesn't help. You major in criminal justice or law to learn to send them to jail as cost-effectively as possible and keep them from killing each other while they're there. But they spend their time in jail learning how to commit bigger and better crimes. Why bother?"

"What would you major in, then?"

"I'm not going to college, so it doesn't matter."

"Hypothetically, hello."

Between bites he said, "Art."

My jaw dropped. "Art!"

"That's what everybody says to me. And that's another reason not to go to college. You can't make a living if you major in art."

"Some people do, if they try hard enough. It was just the farthest thing from my mind for you." For a few moments, I watched him eat. Officer After in the dark blue uniform—I couldn't see him as an art major. He would think art was for sissies. But Johnafter jogging in the park? Maybe. Johnafter from Spanish class? Definitely.

I said, "You could at least work as a cop and do art on the side, and feel more fulfilled because you'd studied what you wanted to study. If you don't, you'll always be bitter toward your wife and your children who read manga. You'll always wish you'd gotten out and lived life when you had the chance." I lowered my head, trying to catch





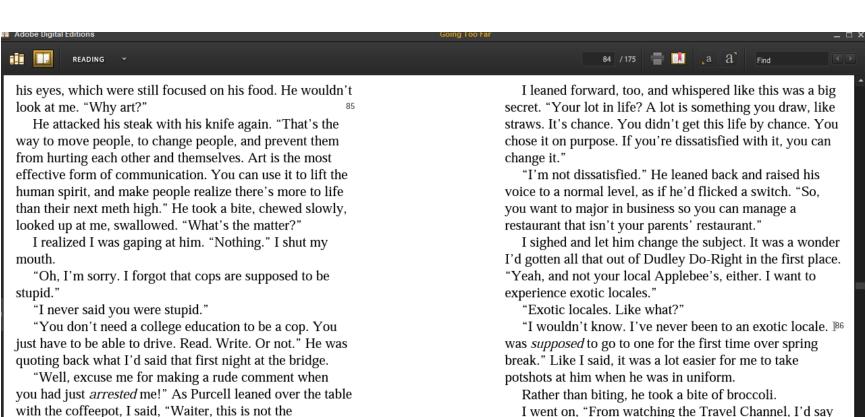












policeman I ordered. I wanted one with a lot less sauce." Purcell filled both mugs and turned away. "Your folks don't pay me enough for this."

John watched Purcell retreat to the grill. Then he leaned across the table toward me. He said quietly, "I'm not going to college. All you're doing is making me dissatisfied with my lot in life."

I went on, "From watching the Travel Channel, I'd say the place in the world I'd most want a job is Key West, Florida. It looks so cool. A tropical paradise. The southernmost point in the United States, south of Miami even. And they seceded from the union. In 1982, they declared themselves a separate country from America. Did you know that?"

"Yes."



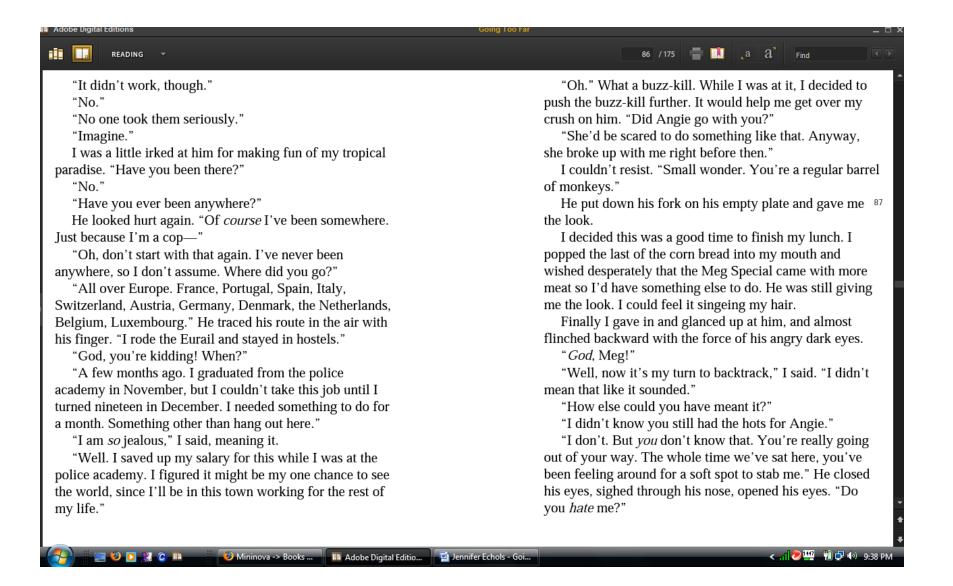


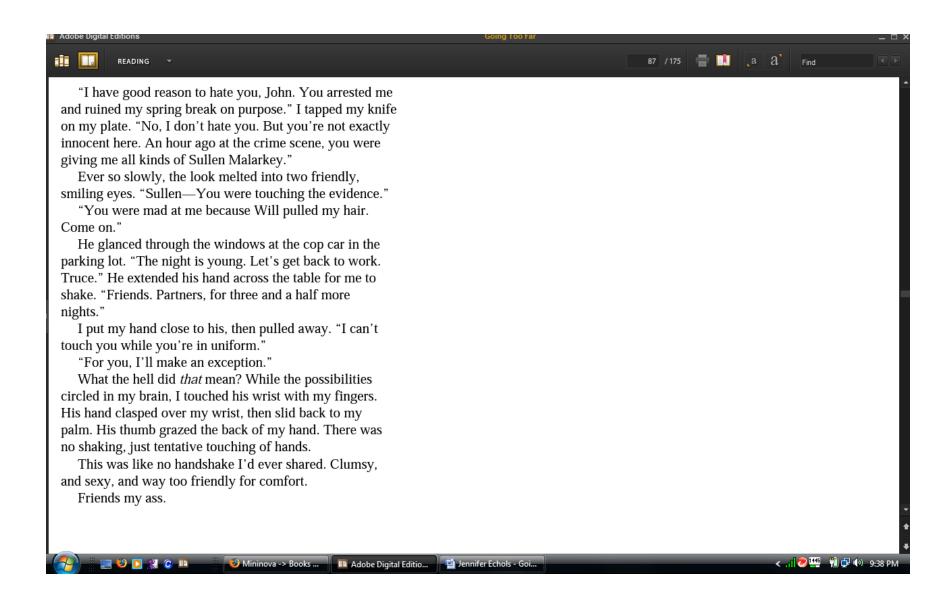


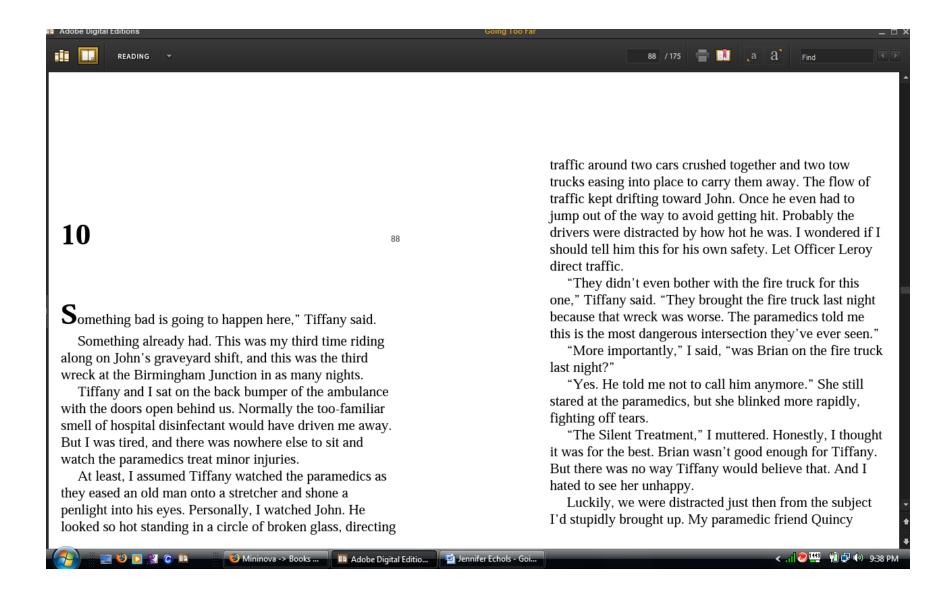












I've matured in taste."

Tiffany sang quietly, "You like Johnafter, you like Johnafter."

"He's easy on the eyes." I liked his halt motion to cars. My favorite, though, was his what are you waiting for motion, waving curtly beside his ear. "But nothing will come of it."

"If anyone could date the cop who arrested her, it would be vou."

"Thanks, Tiff,"

Maybe my ploy had worked. I wore a respectable shirt that buttoned down the front, only-whoops!-I must have forgotten to fasten the button over my cleavage. No respectable girl would wear her shirt open that low. (Cough.)

Also, just before the shift started tonight, I had walked to the drugstore across the street from Eggstra! Eggstra! and used one of their perfume testers. Nothing too obviou90 or flowery, just a body spray with a hint of musk that said you admired your captor.















He was wearing cologne again, too, which meant at the very least he didn't go home and throw away all his toiletries in horror after I told him he smelled good. I hoped the two of us together didn't smell too overpowering to other people, like we were trying to attract water buffalo.

By now the tow trucks had lumbered away with their loads of broken car. John pointed at me to get my attention. He circled his finger in the air to tell me to wrap it up, then pointed to his cop car.

I made a series of baseball catcher's signs.

He smiled. Cocked his head toward his car.

I gave him a thumbs-up.

"You're right," Tiffany said. "I don't think he likes you very much."

I couldn't help smiling myself. Then I felt the smile fade. "Anyway, it wouldn't work out. I'm leaving, and he's staying."

"It might work out."

"It can't." Catching a whiff of disinfectant from the ambulance, I jumped down from the bumper and walked to John's car. The night wind turned bitter, and I shivered in my jacket.

I opened the passenger door of the cop car and was about to sit down when something stopped me in mid-sit. John was reading my notebook.

Without looking up at me in alarm, without looking up from the notebook at all, he said, "Got a call from Lois. We need to head to Martini's to break up a fight."

90 /175 📳 🚺 a a Find

I sat down slowly and closed the door. He was reading my notebook. Since our talk last night, we'd gotten along great. Because of the truce. Or because we understood a little more about each other, like a beam of sunlight shining into the dark night shift.

And now this!

In my mind, I reviewed all the phrases in the notebook. Should I snatch it from him? This would save me if he hadn't gotten very far in his reading. It would also expose how embarrassing the notebook was to me. Or should I play it cool? Ostensibly the notebook was information for my Goody Two-shoes proposal. It embarrassed me only because it was information about him, and I was falling hard.

The snatch won out. "Give me that," I said, grabbing 91 for the notebook.

He held it away from me, over his head, and gave me a cocky grin and one dimple.

My heart rushed through a beat. What was this, middle school? "That's mine."

"It's evidence."

It certainly was.

He lowered the notebook and studied it against the steering wheel. "It's a haiku."





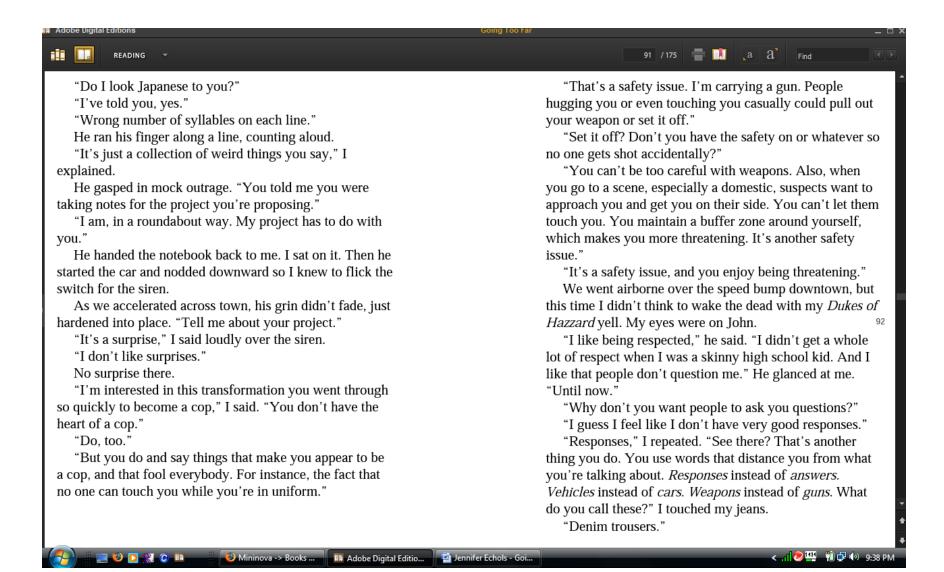


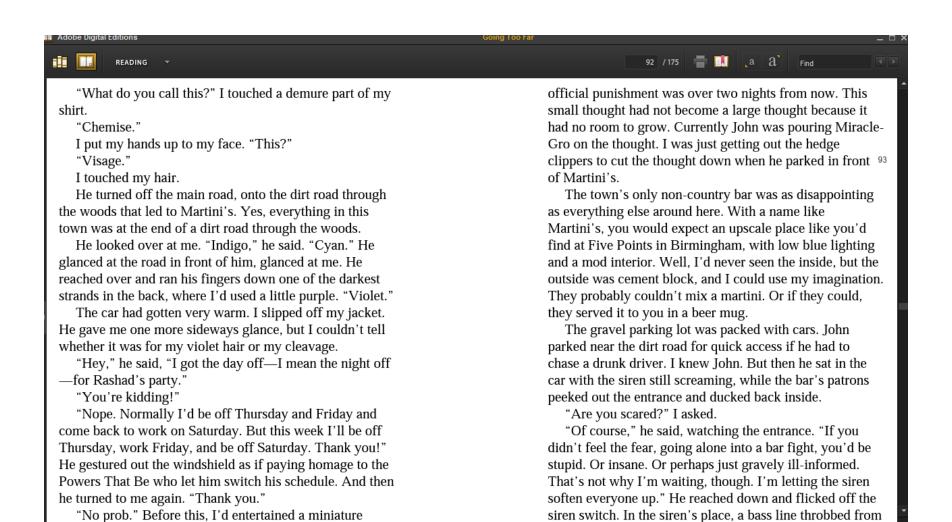












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the bar. "Back in a flash."

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thought of what might happen if I saw John when my

my knee. "Meg, please stay in the vehicle."

"Okay."

My knee radiated heat. As I watched him pull himself from the car and walk casually across the brightly lit parking lot, I thought dumb things: I will never wash my knee again. I will never wash these jeans again. I will cut the knee out of these jeans and sew a pillow to sleep on every night, just to have a molecule of him in my bed with

He slipped his nightstick from a loop in his belt and disappeared into the bar. The throbbing music stopped. low level. Hmmm, what was that drunk wanker doing with the midget?

But any inkling of them was gone the second John appeared in the doorway of the bar, unshot, unstabbed, as casual and composed in his cop-like way as when he went in. I gripped the front of the seat with both sweaty hands to keep from jumping out of the car and running to him.

And then I got completely freaking furious with myself. I did hope that I was not entertaining a plot to somehow date Johnafter? I cranked up the chain saw to cut down the plot made by Miracle-Gro.













I straightened in my seat and shrugged halfheartedly. "I don't know anything about her except that she wears clothes made for Bratz."

He couldn't have been very jealous, because he didn't argue. Instead, he produced the ol' clipboard.

Eric sat behind the wheel of the Beamer now, with Angie in the passenger seat. But he was scared to make a move as long as John remained across the parking lot from him. "Aren't you going to walk over there?" I asked. "I know Eric won't go to jail for underage drinking, but at least you could get his parents to take away his TV privileges."

John crossed through some of his clipboard forms. "I think I'll call him and Angie over here. It's more

the suspects, talking down to them, if possible. But in this case"—he gestured to the official police equipment and the

one hand. Eric easily could have pretended he didn't know

He did dare to open Angie's door for her (a gentlemanly custom I'd had no idea he understood) and hold her hand again as they crossed the lot unsteadily.

John didn't watch them coming. He bent his head to the clipboard.

"What do you write in those forms?" I asked.

"Nothing. I just do this to look threatening."

I watched him scribble, and I made out his tiny drawing of a martini glass, with olive. It wasn't often that I got to study him like this, concentrating, in full light. He gently bit his soft bottom lip.

Maybe I was experiencing more Stockholm Syndrome. But that's not what it felt like. It felt like relief that he was alive, and joy that he was here in the car with me. I















side of the car. "Look bored," he told me.

Whatever!

He hit the switch to roll down his window. "Mr. Wexler. Ms. Pettit."

Eric nodded and slurred, "Officer After." Angie shrank behind Eric.

car and slap her.

"It's a law enforcement vehicle, not a taxi," John said.

I pressed a hand to my mouth to suppress a burst of laughter, then acted like I was clearing my throat.

Eric leaned down to give me the evil eye through the open window. I half expected him to call me a stupid bitch. But such things did not happen when you were allied with Officer After.















You gotta box your weight. "She wants you back," I said.

"I don't want her. She was very decided and very detailed when she explained why she didn't want me anymore last fall. I'm sure this will pass. College must not be working out for her."

"Speaking of which," I said.

He rubbed his thumb back and forth slowly across his soft bottom lip. "Where were we? 6:01 A.M. on Thursday, huh?"

I grinned.

He swallowed. "What exactly are we talking about?"





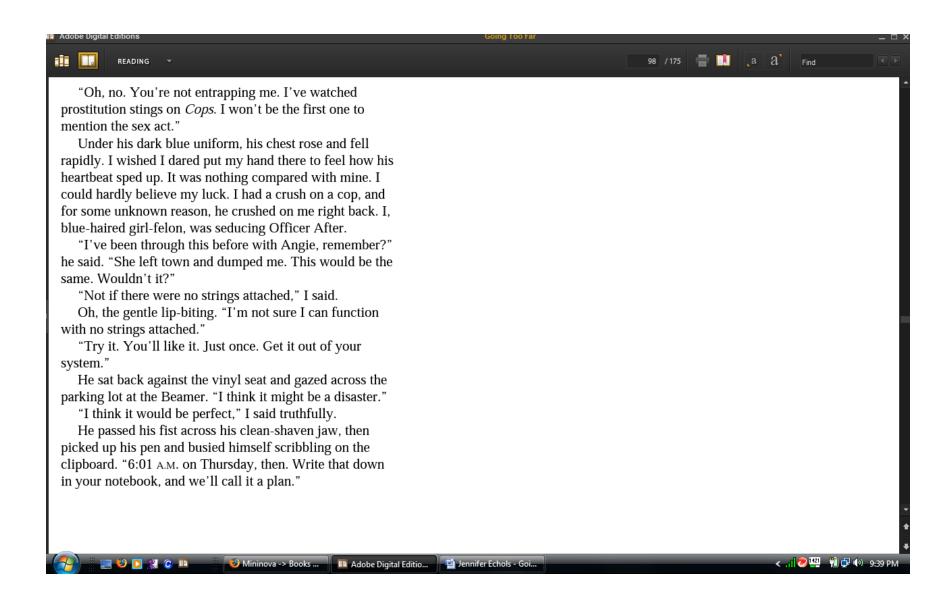


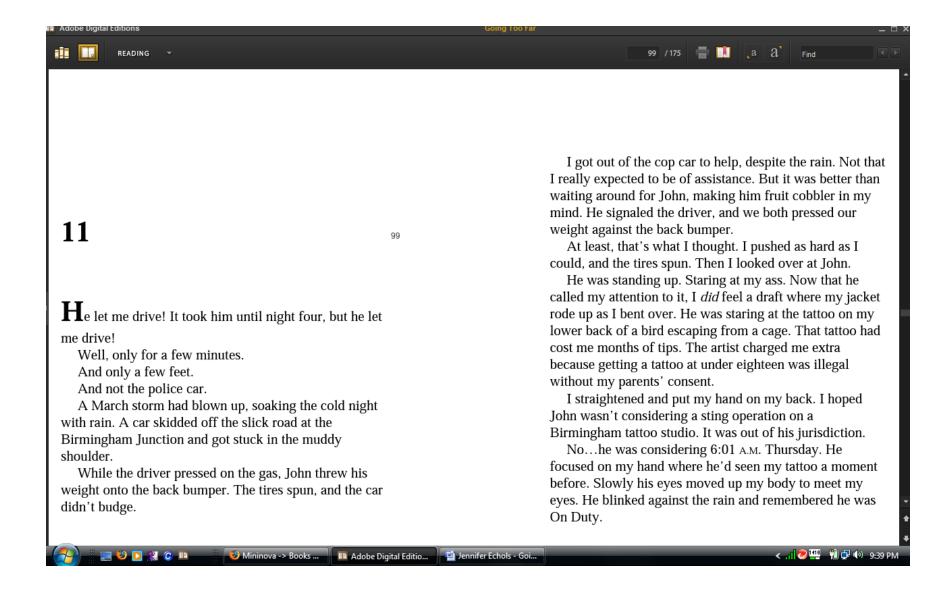












the interstate. They housed people who worked at the car factory here in town but didn't want to commute from Birmingham. That is, people with no life.

It was only a minute's drive from the Birmingham Junction. Why, he could probably hear the car crashes from his patio. He definitely could hear the drone of the interstate. I heard it as soon as he pulled into a space and turned off the engine.

"And forty-seven minutes," he said so close to my shoulder that I felt the low notes of his voice vibrate through me. "But if you stay in the car, I'll have to leave the keys so you can keep the heat on. And now that I've let you behind a steering wheel once tonight, I'm afraid you'll go for a joyride."

I smiled and winked at him.

"Come on in."















101

I expected his apartment to have walls, carpet, and kitchen tile the color of masking tape, as virgin as the day he moved in. Or little touches of homeyness, calico curtains and cookie-scented candles, left by the cobblerbaking phantom wife. This is not what I got. The living room was a gallery. Bold drawings crowded the walls, some framed, most tacked up bare.

My first thought was shock at what cool taste he had. My second thought was wonder at how he paid for actual drawings by actual artists. My third thought was suspicion the drawings were all by the same artist. They were similar in style, somewhere between photographic realism and manga. And similar to the little sketches in the margins of Johnafter's Spanish homework, perro, sombrero, corazón.

"You can draw!" I exclaimed.

"Yeah," his voice echoed from the kitchen.

"I mean really draw, like a professional. How can we claim to call a truce, and be friends, and plan for 6:01 A.M. Thursday, when you're hiding this whole other side of vourself from me?"

"I told you I would major in art, hypothetically."

"Yeah, but I thought the bullshit you fed me about lifting up the human spirit was compensation for not being able to draw."

He laughed.

I took a couple of steps over so I could lean around the kitchen doorway and see his dimples. "What do you use? Is this chalk?"

101 /175 📑 🚺 a a Find

"Oil pastel, and some pencil."

"Instead of paint?"

"More control." He had taken off his muddy boots and stood in his socks by the sink. He reached up his pants leg, unstrapped a gun in a holster, and slid it onto the kitchen table. Then he ran the edge of his hand down his pants leg and threw the mud in the garbage can.

"No matter how careful you are," I said, "there's going to be a mess, and you're going to have to clean it up afterward."

"Mmph," he said, scraping off more mud.

I began beside the kitchen and moved around the living room, examining each drawing. Every one was a treasure 102 of color and penciled detail. I could have stared at each of them for hours, but I felt like I had to hurry and get them all in. I would be back here at 6:01 A.M. sharp tomorrow morning, at which point I would be busy doing something else. And after that, I would never come back.

The drawings were like a map of his trip through Europe. There was the pyramid at the Louvre, the Matterhorn, and beach after beautiful beach that could have been anywhere on the Mediterranean. People stood in the foreground with their backs turned, enjoying the view.





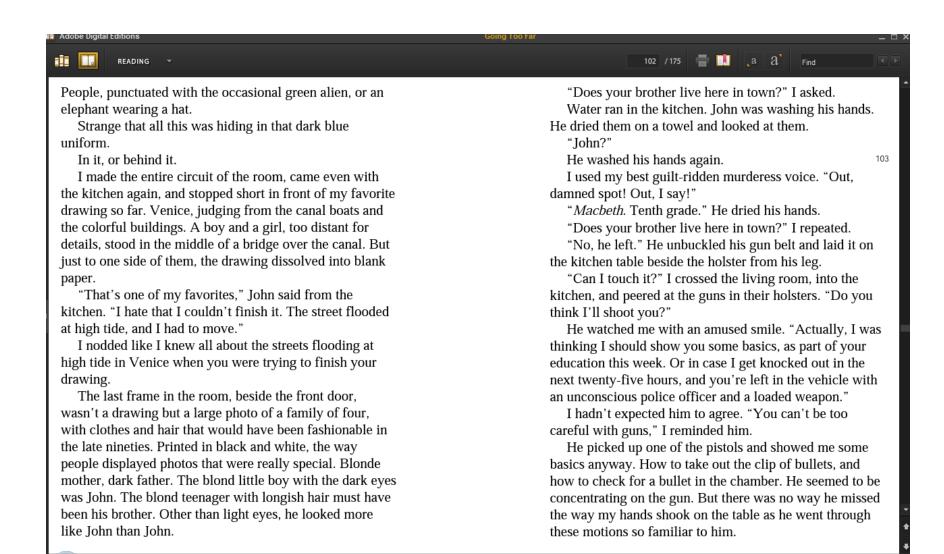












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frightened girl. I hated myself for being frightened.

He offered the gun to me, with the muzzle pointed toward himself. "No bullets," he said. "Safe."

I held out my shaking hand, and he placed the gun in my palm.

"Heavy," I said. Foreign. Strange to hold it in my hand. Warm from his body.

I held it as long as I could stand it, then offered it back to him-with the muzzle pointed toward the door, not myself. "Okay, I'm through with it."

"So soon?" He took the gun gently back from me. Click, click, pop, and it was together again.

"I am full of fear."

"Of a gun?" He cocked his head to one side, watching me. His voice was honey as he guessed, "Of 6:01 A.M. Thursday."

I'd never been scared of sex. It was what might come after that terrified me, tethers tying me down here. I shivered.

He touched my shoulder. "God, here I am worried about what I look like to suspects when you're soaked, too. Come with me."

I followed him through the living room and into his bedroom. More drawings covered the walls. On his bedside table sat a police scanner, humming, occasionally crackling with Lois's voice.

He disappeared into his closet and brought out a longsleeved T-shirt emblazoned with the words To Protect and Serve.

I took it from him. "Wow. I've crossed over."

He disappeared again and brought out another leather cop jacket.

I took it. "Does this mean we're going steady?"

He gave me the one-dimpled smile before looking in the closet once more for a clean, pressed uniform on a hanger. "Be right back." He walked into the bathroom and closed the door.

I could have secreted myself in the closet to change. But since I was me, I shed my wet jacket and shirt there in his bedroom. I paused just a few moments in the hope he would (gasp!) catch me in my bra. But even if that happened, that's all that would happen, because it was not yet 6:01 A.M. Thursday, and John went By The Book. I pulled on his warm, dry shirt and jacket.

I started my circle around this new room of the art gallery. One of the first drawings I came to was of the Devil fountain at Five Points, with several of the animal statues coming to life and wearing hats. Then more angles of the artsy section of Birmingham, ornate mansions next door to dilapidated apartment buildings.

And then, across from his bed, right where he could see it first thing when he woke up each morning (or afternoon), was a large drawing of the bridge.





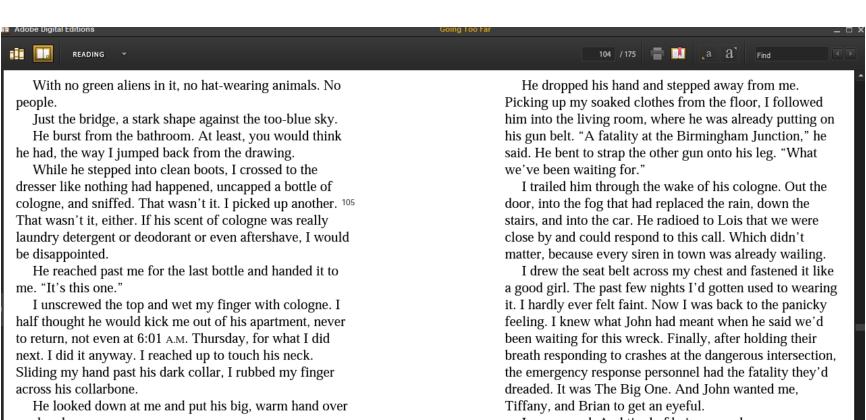












my hand.

The scanner buzzed to life with Lois's voice. John didn't move, but those worried creases appeared between his eyebrows.

"I don't understand Lois's code," I whispered. "What is it?"

I was scared. And tired of being scared.

As he checked both ways for nonexistent traffic and pulled onto the main road, I said, "My favorite drawing 106 wasn't the one of Venice. It was the one of the bridge. Your bridge."

He took a deep breath and sighed through his nose: Here we go again.















Normally I would have jumped at the chance to get out of the cop car with him on a call. Brian and Tiffany were there already. They stood on either side of the mangled car, far apart from each other, both with their arms folded. But I hung back against the hood of the cop car, trying to tamp the panic down.

John crossed the accident scene and talked to a couple of firemen in their long coats with their helmets on and face shields down. He slid an engine enclosed in a cube-

Brian put himself in my path. He shook his head at me. "Meg. You don't want to see this."

Behind Brian, John still motioned to me. He called, "Come on."

Brian walked over to John. "Don't make her." He put his hand against John's shoulder to stop him.

John flinched away. "Do not touch me while I'm in uniform," he shouted.

Brian ducked back.





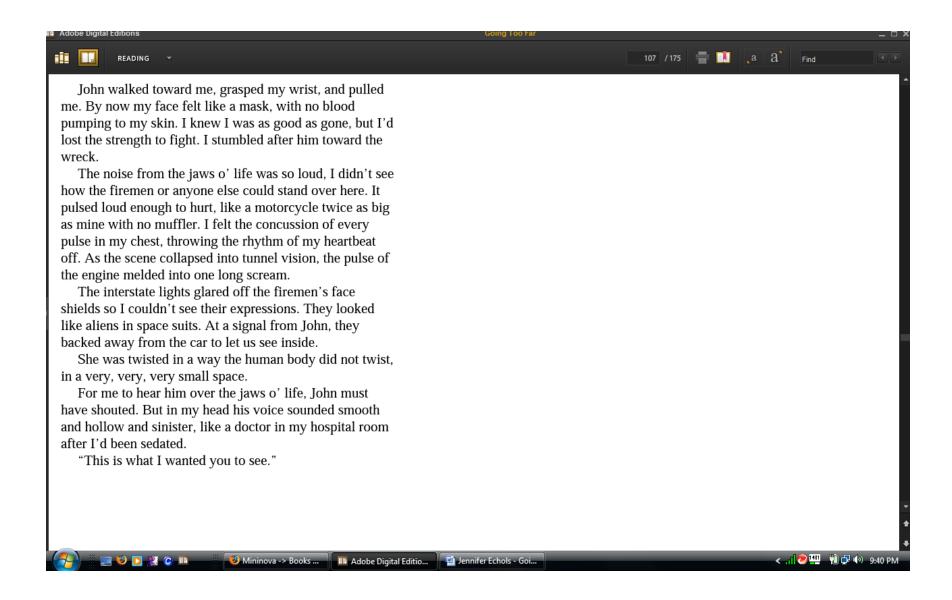


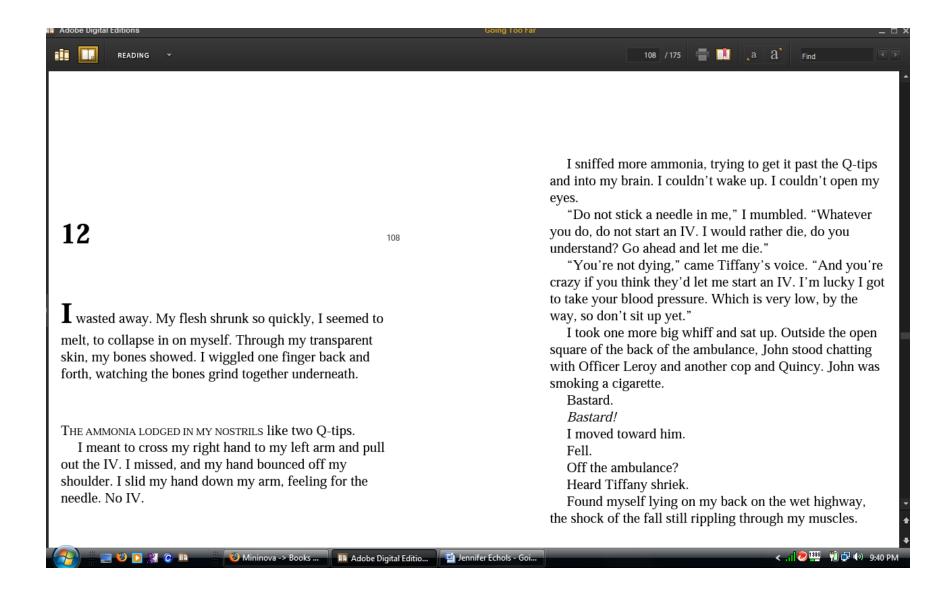


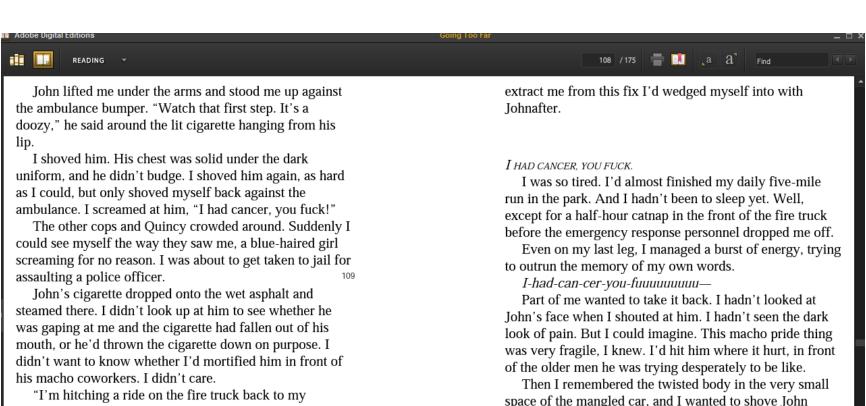












motorcycle," I told the cigarette. "I've had enough of what you wanted me to see. I'm done for the night."

My legs wobbled underneath me as I staggered to the fire truck, but no one offered to help me, not even Tiffany or Brian. Keeping my head turned away from the wreck. I pulled myself into the roomy cab of the fire truck. I curled up like a cat next to the giant pliers from the jaws o' life. Which was probably a good thing. I would need them to

harder.

Done. I reached the wall of handprints and walked around it to cool down. I half expected the ghost of Johnafter to round the bend toward me.

We hadn't met in the park since that first afternoon. One night I'd asked him whether he was trying to avoid 110 seeing me there. He'd responded like the honest do-gooder he was. Sometimes he had to stay late at the police station





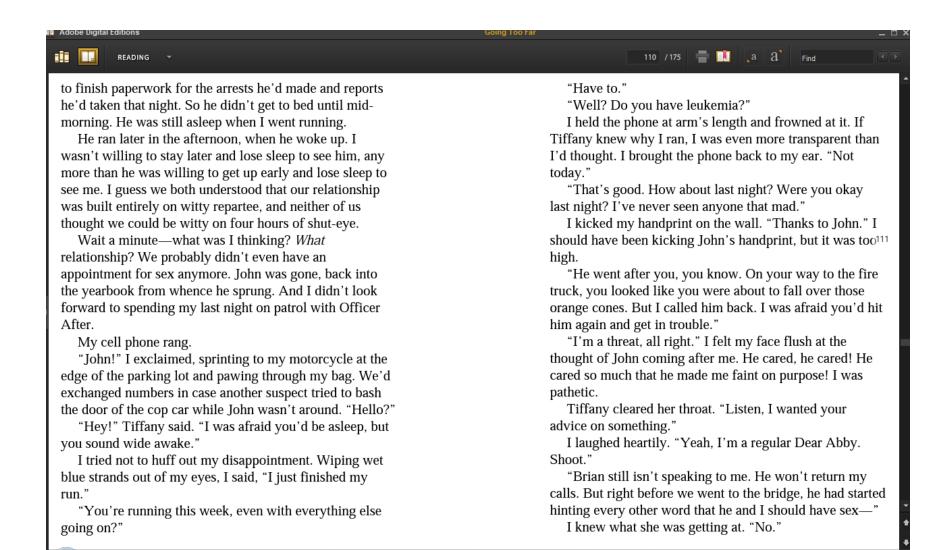






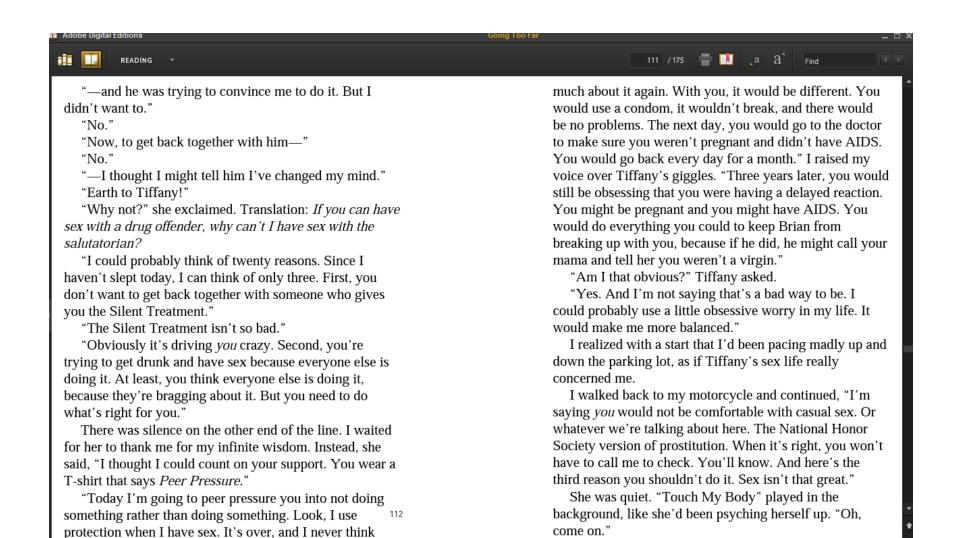






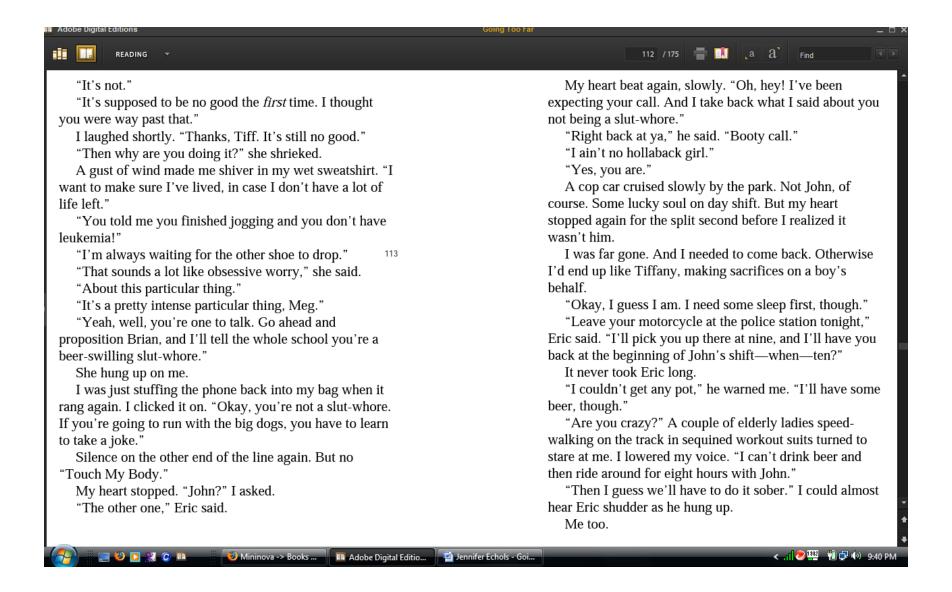
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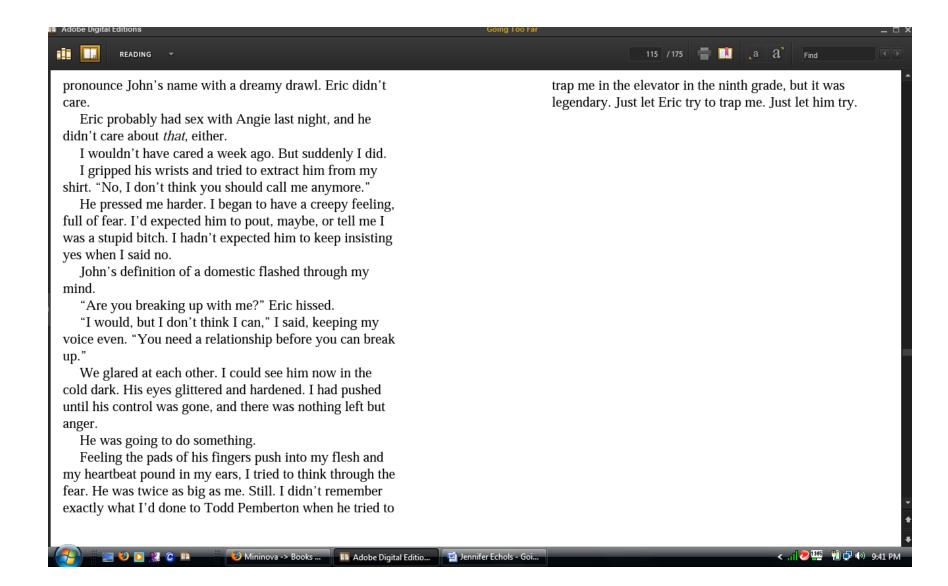


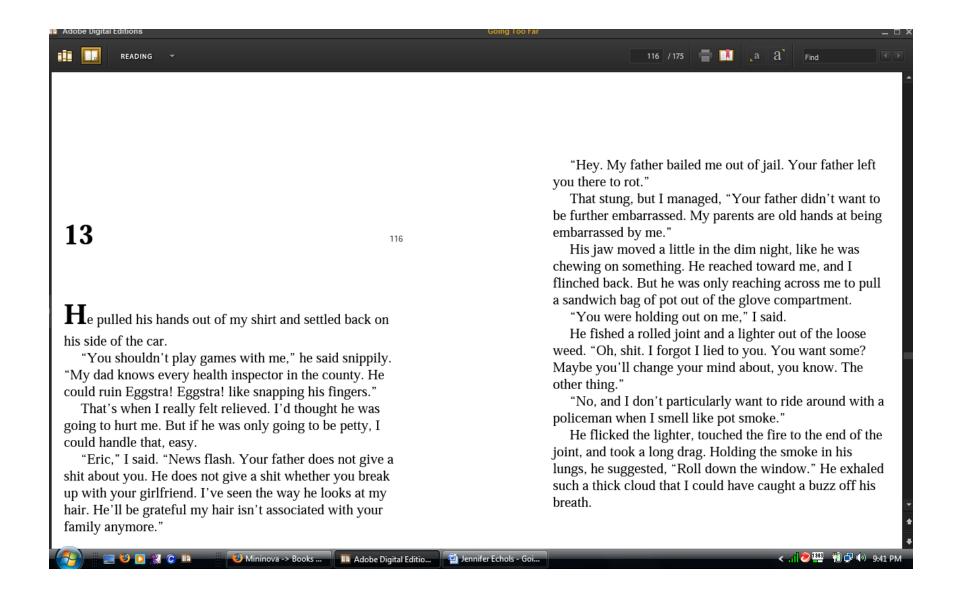
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and John—or there had been. I couldn't help but

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"Foreplay," he murmured, like this was a new idea.





I felt for the window controls before I thought. "They're automatic windows, Eric. Turn on the engine."

He moved to crank the car.

"No, wait!" I exclaimed. "What are you thinking? Why are you smoking pot before you take me back? You're not really going to drive. Stoned. To. The police station?"

"Why not? My dad can get me out of anything." He took another drag.

What could I do? I could leave the car and call John. Or just stand in the dark and wait for John to show up, since he loved the bridge so. But then I would have to explain how I got here, and why my motorcycle was at the police station.

And I would have saved myself while sending Eric off to have a wreck, killing innocent people. Not that there was any more chance of this now than all the other times he'd driven drunk and/or stoned, and I'd ridden with him. But I had to admit, seeing the dead woman last night had exactly the effect on me that John and the Powers That Be had intended. I hated it, but there it was.

Okay, I would call John and tell him to pull Eric over, then come retrieve me.

I got out and slammed the heavy door of the Beamer. Immediately hearing the low hum, I turned toward the bridge and looked for the train's headlight.

Blue lights burst to life behind me.

Heart racing, I whirled around and waited for John to say something to humiliate me through his megaphone.

"Driver, stay in the car. And don't even try to hide that contraband."

It was Officer Leroy's voice.

He left his engine humming as he walked from his cop car to the Beamer, coming close to me.

"I know what this looks like," I said quickly, before he could take out his handcuffs.

"Looks like every other time I catch kids parking." In the swirling blue light, I couldn't tell whether he was giving me the Disapproving Adult look.

"But it's not," I said. I racked my brain for any argument I could possibly make to convince him not to tell John. Even though I didn't care what John thought.

Officer Leroy nodded over his shoulder. "Go to After's car. He wants to talk to you."

After. I strained my eyes to see through the darkness. Sure enough, a second cop car was parked behind Officer Leroy's. Oh, no. "Can't *you* just give me the lecture?"

"He's pretty pissed," Officer Leroy said. "I wouldn't mess with him if I were you."

"He's pissed," I muttered. I was really mad. At least, I wanted to be really mad, and yet all I felt was scared and guilty. But there was nothing to feel scared or guilty about. I hadn't done anything wrong.













Which got me worse than anything else could have. Because it meant we could have salvaged 6:01 A.M. Thursday, and I had thrown it away.

Just to rub it in, a whiff of the cologne he'd worn for me tickled my nose.

"You know I check down here a lot." He'd never let me hear this tone from him before: hurt, accusatory, nineteen. "You wanted me to find you here, doing Eric."

"I wasn't doing Eric. I was standing outside the car when you got here, so that would be kind of a stretch." "And then you followed me!"

He closed his eyes. "I--"

"I'm embarrassed enough already. Why'd you have to bring Leroy out here? You wanted me to feel as embarrassed as possible, right? You get off on making other people feel vulnerable and captured, because it makes you feel stronger and more in control."

"I--"

"This is what you want, right? This is exactly how you want me."















John shook his head. "I wasn't handcuffing you or locking you up. I had no idea you'd pass out. I just wanted to show you this accident to scare you, because I don't want you to get hurt." He turned around in his seat and pulled himself close to the metal grate between us, as if he would pull himself through it. "I care about you, Meg."

"You were going to, though," he repeated.

Both these things seemed true, but didn't add up. "I wasn't going to," I said. "Maybe I thought I was, but I wasn't."

He watched me carefully. "Because of me?" I sighed. "Because of you."















steering wheel. Like nothing had happened—no induced fainting, no near-sex with pot-smoking boyfriend, no virtual hug—he said, "Come up in the front seat where you belong, and let's get out of here. We have work to do."

WE DROVE TO THE INTERSTATE AND downtown and the bridge and McDonald's and Martini's and Eggstra! Eggstra! and the bridge and the bad side of town and the Birmingham Junction and the bridge. Then Lois radioed to us about an

said, "We haven't talked about anything important the whole shift."

"Like?" I hoped he meant we should talk about 6:01 A.M. Thursday, which was approximately two hours from now. I hoped we were back on.

"Like cancer," he said.

Now there was a disappointment. But I could tell this 122 was really bothering him. He avoided my eyes and kept examining Dixie Dental's posters of smiling cartoon tooth people, to make it easier for me to answer.















"The treatment dragged on until I was a sophomore," I said. "But all the business of my hair falling out, the ambulance rushing to school to pick me up when I collapsed in the hall, everything that would get your attention—that was in eighth grade, middle school, when you were already in ninth grade at the high school. There's no reason you would have heard about it. And it doesn't even make sense for me to get on you about your

my deathbed."

Nodding to show me he was still listening, he turned away and shone his flashlight into the store again so I could talk, which I appreciated. As he finished examining Bama Blinds, Curtains, and More and moved up the sidewalk to the next store, he half turned to make sure I followed along with him in the parking lot.





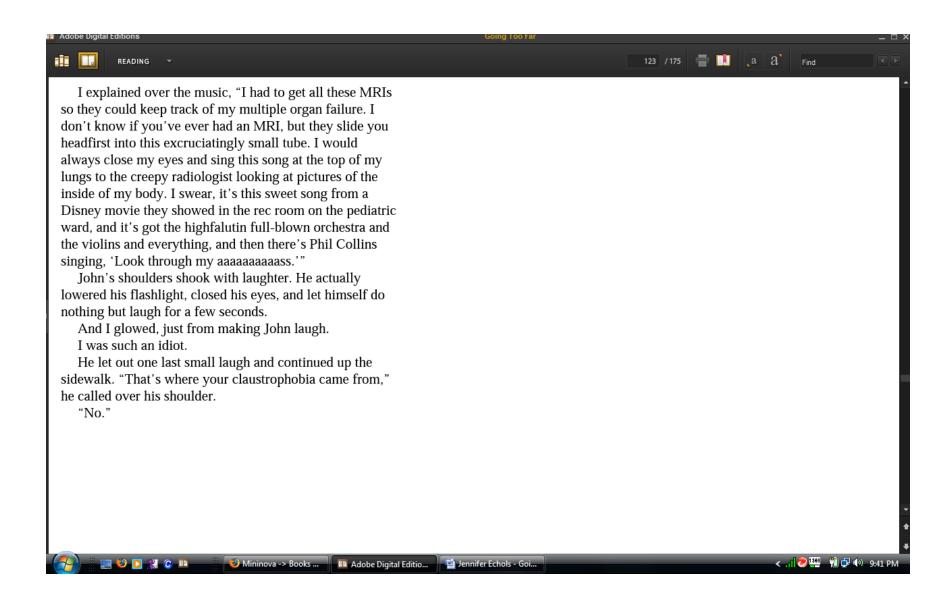


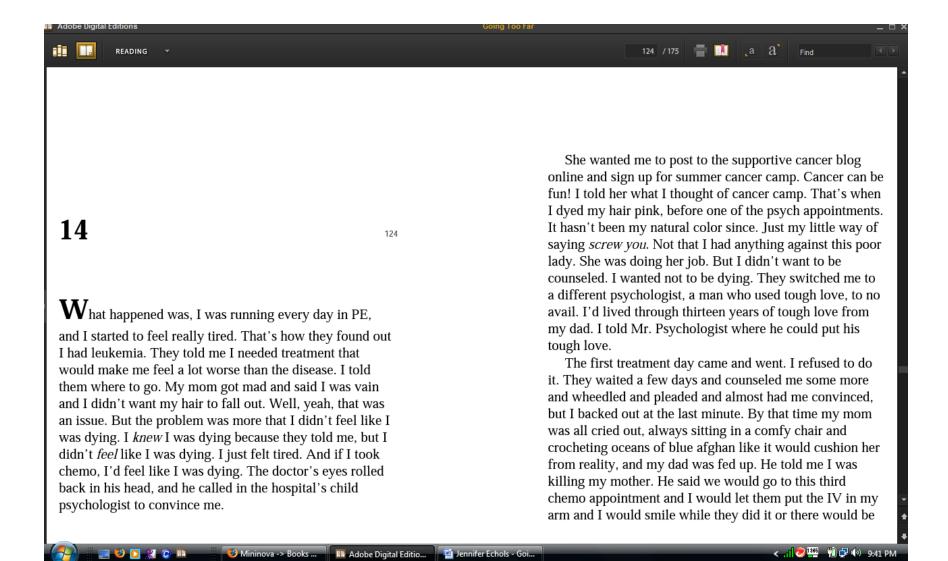












Thirteenth Avenue, running for my life. I ran until I couldn't run anymore. I didn't get far. Birmingham is uphill both ways and, oh yeah, I had leukemia. I made it past ten houses and around a bend in the road before I collapsed in somebody's azaleas. It was about this time of year, chilly but everything was blooming. A cherry tree scattered delicate pink petals across me as I lay there. That's when I finally realized I was going to die. And what was I being so emo about? People died every day. I was nothing special. On the other hand, most girls my age, like Tiffany and Julie Meadows and LaShonda Smith, were sitting in algebra class at that very moment, humming pop songs and memorizing the Pythagorean theorem while I was expiring in a stranger's shrubbery. Why me? I had been just like them until a few weeks before. But I wasn't one of them anymore. Now I was a teenager who defied

her parents and cussed at adults. Dying made more sense

A cop car came around the corner. I knew instantly my dad had called the heat on me. I tried to stand up and run, but I was still out of breath. They tackled me and handcuffed me and I struggled and cussed, beyond caring. They drove a few blocks and parked at the emergency room of the hospital. They tried to get me out of the car and I started kicking. They strapped my legs together and picked me up like a sheep going to slaughter. My dad pulled in right behind them. My mom was crying in the passenger seat. I could hear her, even with all the noise of 126 the city I could hear her crying inside the car, and my dad told her to go park the fucking car and he followed us inside. The two cops carried me into the elevator with my dad. Somebody got on the elevator with us, some hapless secretary who had nothing to do with us, somebody you would normally nod to politely when she got on the elevator. Suddenly it struck me as hilarious that I would have this thought about propriety while hanging facedown from two policemen with my hands and feet bound. I giggled. The policemen asked if I could be a good girl and go nicely to my execution now. I started kicking again as best I could, bucking. For the first time in this whole ordeal. I wanted to hurt someone.

We got off on our floor. The cops put me on a stretcher, but they stayed to help hold me while they wheeled me















Doctor: She's the borderline age where we'd respect her wishes and counsel her longer, seeking her consent to treatment.

like they weren't even speaking the same language.

Dad: I know.

Doctor: It's also the borderline time when if we don't treat? her, she'll be at high risk of treatment failure no matter what we do later.

Dad: I know.

Doctor: But her chart suggests she is likely to remain combativeDad: Look, Doc, I know. Just strap her down and give it to

We got to the room and the cops pressed me down on the bed until the nurses could get the tethers around my wrists and ankles. I strained against the bindings until my hands went numb. This wasn't happening, this couldn't possibly be the way it ended, but it was. I screamed so loud, I could hardly hear the nurse telling my dad he would need to fill out a form to consent to them restraining me and a form to consent to them sedating me, and maybe he would like to come to the nurse's station to do that. He left the room. Another nurse whispered calmly in my ear, Sweetie-pie, which hand do you want the IV in? She tried to fool me into thinking I had some choice as she gave me a shot of tranquilizer. Calm down, sweetie-pie, it'll all be over soon. I felt it right away. They took the restraints off. I thought, I'm free now, but I couldn't move. It was like the restraints were still there. I went to sleep, and later I woke up dying.

I went willingly to every chemo session after that, and every radiation session, because I didn't want to be strapped down again. Sometimes my hair would grow back in a sad little way between sessions, and my mom would tell me how pretty I looked, and I would dye my hair purple. And every time I had an adverse reaction and











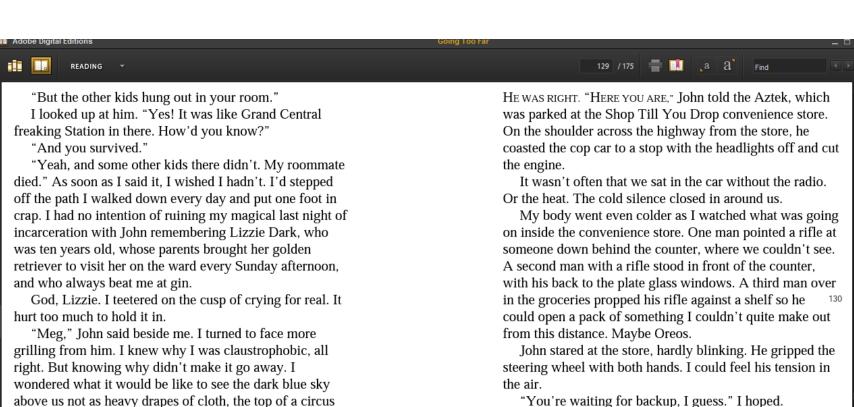




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"Uh. no."

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tent, but as an infinite expanse. As everybody else saw it. John had more important things to worry about than my neuroses. Listening to Lois on the radio at his shoulder, he said, "The panic button was set off at the Shop Till You Drop. I'll bet that's our Aztek."

He nodded once, without taking his eyes from the store.

"Why are they conducting this crime in front of the window, where anyone could see them?" I asked, just to get him talking. To release some of his tension. Or mine. "I realize it's four thirty in the morning, but you never know when a cop is sitting across the highway, watching you."













wasn't sure I'd ever seen a genuine gun in person, except John's. I had thought he'd been in danger previous nights, but it had all been distant and unreal until now.

What I ended up asking was, "Doesn't this car have bulletproof glass?" I leaned forward a little so I could see his face better.

Then wished I hadn't. The worry lines had appeared between his brows. "More like bullet-resistant."

I sat back in my seat and watched the men inside the store. Where was John's backup? If I sat here waiting much longer, I would panic. And I couldn't hear John breathing. It was so quiet in the car, my ears rang.

"Are you scared?" I whispered.

"I'm well trained."

Yes, he was well trained to enter a robbery in progress with three guns pointed at him. Or well trained to hide that he was scared.

130 /175 📑 🚺 a a Find

His death-hold on the steering wheel gave him away. "Do you want me to kiss you for luck?" I asked.

His eyes cut to me for a split second, then returned to the store. He waited so long that I thought he wasn't going to answer. He would ignore my inappropriate question.

Then he said, "Yes."

I scooted next to him on the seat. The heat of his leg soaked through my jeans. Inhaling his cologne, I leaned my head toward his. He didn't turn to me or take his eyes off the store—and of course I didn't want him to, because that would not be safe.

I closed my eyes and softly, slowly kissed his jaw.

His big hand closed over my knee, then slid up my leg. His fingers massaged as they went.

I opened my eyes again to make sure I wasn't ruining his official police work. He still watched the store. But when I ended the kiss, he sighed.

I kissed him again, farther back toward his ear. He took a sharp breath. His hand clamped my thigh.

Reluctantly, I pulled back. Sliding my leg out from under his hand, I scooted over to the passenger seat. I was liable to get him in trouble. And strangely, even though he still stared at the store, I felt like I had more self-control than he did right then.









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through the front windows. When they reached the building, Officer Leroy and another cop crouched at the front corner. John and a fourth cop disappeared around the back.

The men inside the store went on as if nothing were about to happen. One had finally gotten the contents of the safe from the clerk and was stuffing his coat pockets with stacks of bills. Another still stood guard very ineffectively, with his back to the cop cars across the highway. The other ate Oreos.

Then he looked up at me. I was sure he couldn't see me watching him at that distance, out in the dark. But he looked up at me. And gave me a little wave.

I gasped in the freezing car, and realized I'd been holding my breath. I was so relieved.

And not. Because at some time in the last five days, I had freaking fallen in love with John After.





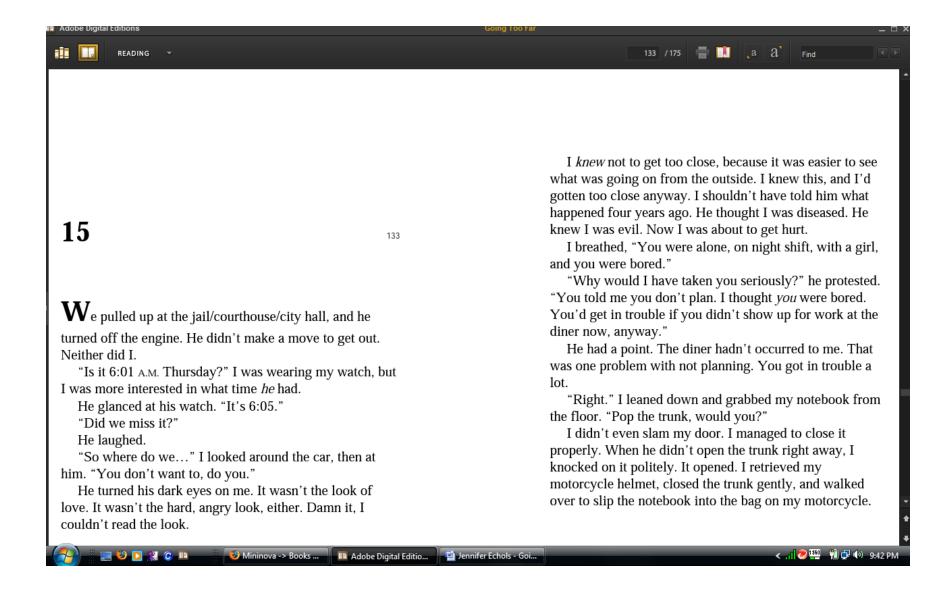












As if I had the last laugh. The last laugh was definitely his. He had done what he set out to do. He had taught the dead girl a lesson.

It felt like the longest shift of my greasy spoon career. Some days I almost enjoyed parts of working at Eggstra! Eggstra! Cooking. Making up new recipes. Observing the more colorful customers, like the hunters

my e-mail in the office. Today we were so busy, I didn't get a break until almost two in the afternoon, quitting time. Good news, though. The DA had accepted my bullshit proposal to discourage other errant teens from following 1195 my footsteps. In fact, the city was instituting my proposal today. Suddenly I was a model citizen. Go figure.

John would love my project. Or hate it. And me. Not that I cared anymore.















scrubbing chair legs or something else the paid employees didn't bother to do, and-oh, yeah-obsessing about John some more. Would you believe it, a customer had the audacity to walk in just then. I couldn't see his face in the blinding beam of sunlight behind him. But I could tell from the way he walked he was a teenager.

On my way toward him, I grabbed a menu from the stack. I wished I could tell this kid to go to McDonald's, because teenagers didn't tip. But he might cause a hullabaloo that would get back to my parents. I knew this from experience.

When I walked in front of him, where his head and shoulders blocked the sun, I stopped dead. It was John. The sun behind his back made the edges of his blond hair glow like a halo.

I had never seen him look so good. I mean, Officer After was manly. Johnafter the runner was hot. But this boy wore loose jeans and a faded T-shirt that clung to his chest. An Incubus T-shirt, the one with a heart inside a grenade. His hair was short, but not abnormally so. It stuck out in strange places like he'd run his hands through it on the drive over here. Despite the halo, he was a mess.

Exactly as a boy should be.

I looked around for Corey. He could wait on John instead of me. But he must have taken a bathroom break.

Then I glanced out the front windows into the parking lot, on the chance Bonita had pulled up. Usually she was fifteen minutes early for her shift, which was miraculous considering what my parents paid people. No such luck today.

135 /175 📑 🚺 a a Find

John walked right past me. He slid into our booth, the Elvis table.

I walked toward him and stopped in front of the table, holding the menu awkwardly. At a complete loss for words. For once.

"I don't need a menu," he said.

I was not supposed to be flabbergasted at seeing him. And definitely not ecstatic. I was supposed to be angry with him for blowing me off this morning. I called up some fake anger. "What do you want?"

"The Meg Special." He pinned me to the spot with his dark, sleepy eyes and looked me up and down.

That did make me angry. "We're all out."

"Then why are you still advertising?"

Two could play that game. I slid the menu in front of him and put both hands on the table. Leaning forward so he could see down my shirt, I said low, "I did the crime. I did the time. You got nothing on me, copper."

I started to stand up straight, but he covered my hand with his hand and gestured with his eyes to the booth seat beside him. "Sit down."















What he'd told me at Martini's flashed through my mind: You want to be higher than the suspects, talking down to them. Right now, I was talking down to him. If I sat, he'd be talking down to me.

He raised his eyebrows and smiled. Both dimples showed.

I sat down.

He squeezed my hand and leaned closer. I felt the warmth of his body and caught the scent of his cologne. "I want to show you something," he said.

"Thanks, but you've shown me plenty." I tried to back out of the booth.

He held me in place with his hand on mine. "No, nothing like that. Something different. Something good."

So John finally wanted to show me something good, huh? I let my eyes travel from his strong neck down to the T-shirt covering his broad chest. I could think of several sights that would qualify. "Like what?"

"The beach."

Fighting the sudden urge to cry, I pulled my hand out from under his and sat back. I pointed at him, as he'd pointed at me with his pen in the cop car one night. "Don't tease me."

"Miami's too far, though. I have to work tomorrow night. I was hoping you'd settle for the Redneck Riviera."

Of course I would settle for the Florida Panhandle. With John. And of course he couldn't be serious.

And of course I couldn't go, anyway. "I have to be back before you do, for my shift at six A.M. tomorrow. And don't tell me you forgot about the diner. You were kind enough to remind me this morning."

136 /175 📑 🚺 a a Find

"No, I haven't forgotten. I figure it will take us five hours to drive down there—"

"Three, if you let me drive."

He cleared his throat and gave me a stern look. "It will take me five hours to drive down there and five to drive back. That leaves you six hours of spring break."

I was beginning to think he was serious. "When will I sleep? I have to sleep before work tomorrow."

"You can sleep in my truck on the way down, and on the way back."

"When will *you* sleep?"

"I've been asleep for the last seven hours, and I'll sleep again when you go to work tomorrow morning." He leaned back in the booth and tapped his fingers on the menu. "Next argument."

I hadn't slept since yesterday, right after my run and my conversation with Tiffany about the possibility of her becoming a slut-whore. And right before I almost slutwhored myself to Eric again. It seemed like a year ago, but nothing in the diner had changed. Same bright afternoon sunlight slanting through the front windows. Same secondhand tables, same kitschy saltshakers.









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steak and eggs with steamed vegetables while I ran to the 138 trailer and took the quickest shower of my greasy spoon career. Suddenly my career had sped up, with my pulse.

I pulled on clean jeans and the skimpiest shirt I owned, which was saying a lot because I owned some fine examples. As I saw it, the occasion called for cleave and even belly button. I paused for a split second in front of the mirror and wished for the umpteenth time this week that

We sloshed together through the waves, with our jeans rolled up past our knees. When we'd first gotten here half an hour before, the sun was still up over the dark blue ocean. I had heard the Gulf Coast had the world's whitest beaches, but I hadn't expected them to be this white. They weren't paper-white, but just off—the color of John's hands.

Now the beach was tinted pink, the clouds and ocean glowed neon pink, and a huge orange sun sank in the violet















He swung my hand as we splashed along. "It's so beautiful that I wouldn't know how to begin to draw it." 139

"You've drawn the Matterhorn, John. I'm sure you'd manage a Florida sunset."

"This one is special. It would be hard to convey how jarring and in-your-face it is." He turned to me. "And still so beautiful."

I smiled back at him, choosing to tune out the *jarring* part and listen to the beautiful part. "Besides, where would you put the elephants wearing hats?"

"I think I put those in because I'm not confident in my art. Other people aren't as likely to judge me if I already have elephants wearing hats in the drawing, judging it themselves."

"You know what might help that problem?"

The light had faded to the point that I couldn't make out his hard, dark eyes. I was glad. "A college education in art?" he asked flatly.

"No. Drawing nothing but the bridge over and over. There are no judgmental creatures in your drawing of the railroad bridge."

We walked on in our silence underneath the roar of the ocean. I waited for him to get revenge.

Here it came. "Something's been bothering me since I found out you had leukemia. Your parents stuck with you through it. Doesn't that make you feel like you owe

"They're my parents. What else could they do? Let me die in the street?"

Strangely, we were still holding hands as we threw sharp darts at each other. But he stopped playfully swinging my hand.

"Of course I owe them," I said. "Insurance didn't cover everything. That's why they make me work at the diner for free. My dad says I'm still paying off the methotrexate and daunomycin."

I could feel John shaking his head above me, like I was missing the point. "You needed them, and they helped you. Now they need you. Don't you want to stay and help them? Don't you feel grateful?"

"I feel grateful. Grateful, like, send them a card. Grateful, like, build myself a career and make them proud of me. Grateful, like, have children someday and bring them back to town for Christmas. Not grateful, like, spend the rest of my life with them, running their shitty little diner in the middle of nowhere."

I wished he hadn't brought it up. Or I hadn't. We had to get off this subject and stay off it for the rest of the night. or we'd never get laid.





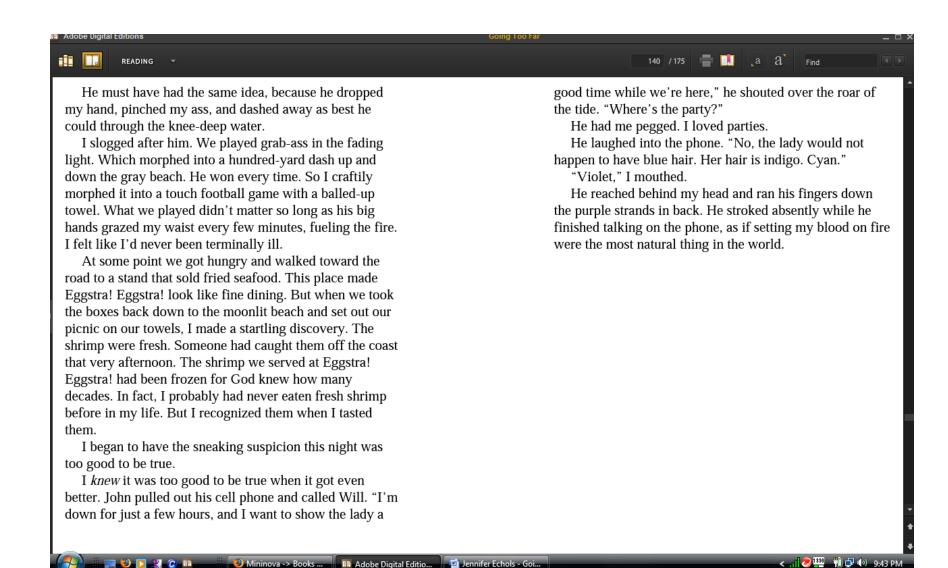


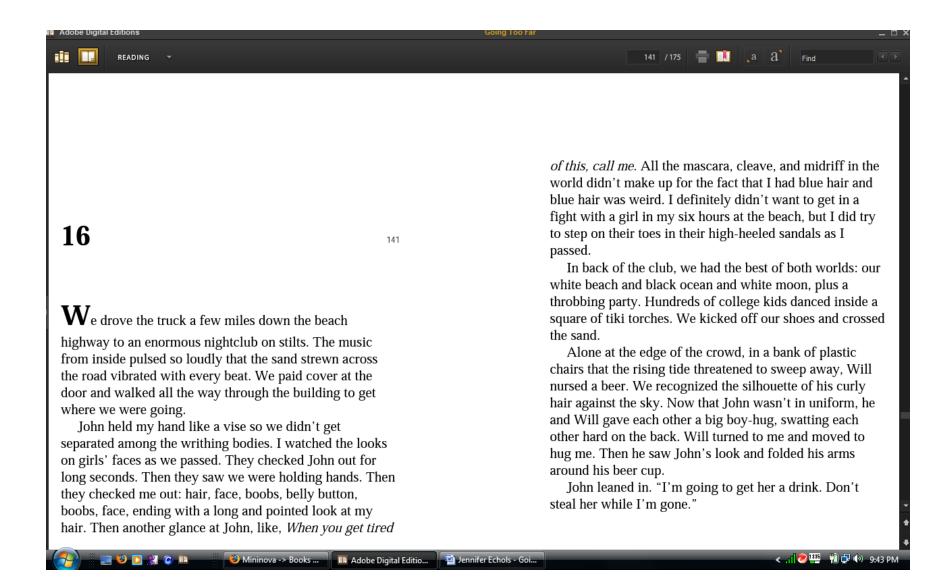


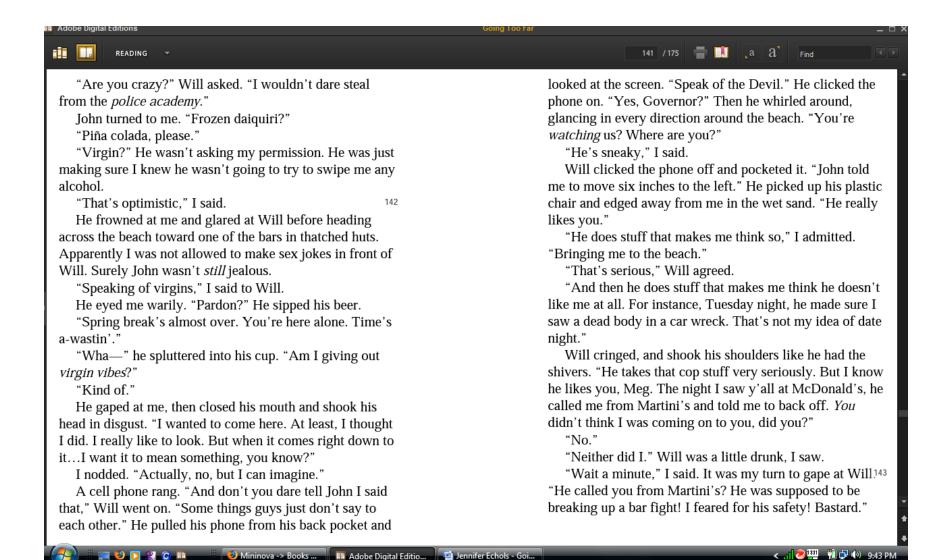












"She broke up with him, though."

"Right," Will said, pointing at me. "But now she's interested in him again."

"It makes perfect sense to me that she'd be conflicted, if she has any sense. He's this awesomely handsome, really cool guy who's chained himself to a bridge. He's hot, he's cold." I moved toward Will, and I didn't care whether John

choking his ghost. "He frustrates me. He makes me angry. And I don't think that's a good relationship, one built on frustration and anger. Do you?"

Will shook his head somberly.

"He's good for a lay, though," I mused.

"Oh, please don't say that."

I waited for Will to explain what he meant. He just stared at me.















going to want more than that from you." "I don't have anything else to give him," I said. "Not while he's chained to the bridge."

Will took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. "I wish there were some way to unchain him from the bridge, so he could go do his art. I've been trying to figure that out for years."

"I gave it a shot."

Will eyed me, then drained his beer. "What'd you do?" "To get out of trouble, I had to write a proposal to the DA for a project to keep other teenagers out of trouble. I 145 suggested that they put a camera at the bridge, with a feed to the police dispatcher. That way, they'll always know when someone tries to go on the bridge. John will have no reason to check for trespassers every five minutes. And the DA said the city is actually going to do it."

Will produced another beer from beside him in his chair and took a big gulp, then glanced at me. "Sorry. I need this

He was still thinking about that? "No prob." I felt bad about my virgin comment, especially when we were talking about his friend hooking up. Boys were so sensitive about odd things. And sometimes I couldn't keep my

"What did John say about the camera?" Will asked.

"I haven't told him. They were supposed to install it today. But I doubt it will do any good. John has a shortcircuit. Logic doesn't touch that part of his brain. It's going to take more than a camera to unchain him."

I wanted to hear what Will had to say about this, because he looked worried, and he was drinking fast. But John came back then with virgin (ha ha) drinks for us, frozen coconut and pineapple juice in plastic hurricane glasses with straws and paper umbrellas and monkey figurines stuck into the ground ice. Very spring break.

We sat with the cool tide scooting past our bare feet, sipping our drinks, watching the crush of dancers inside the tiki torches. Will chatted with us about the girl trouble Rashad and Skip had gotten into during the past four days, and the escapades of some of their other high school friends—now college friends, at least to Will. Then he made a Star Wars reference to John that was clearly boycode for sex, and stood up unsteadily. "See you on













Saturday at Rashad's party?" We both said yes and watched Will wander away into the crowd.

I settled closer to the John side of my chair. "You're not worried about him?"

John shook his head. "He'll go up to his room and watch movies, fall asleep. Rashad and Skip will come in with girls at about four A.M. and kick him out. He'll go ru¹46 fifteen miles. That's what Will does on road trips.'

"That's so sad!" Immediately I wished I could take it back. I didn't want John to think again that I was interested in Will.

I scanned his dark eyes in the moonlight. I thought I saw anger there, but no-it was lust. Oooh.

The throbbing dance beat inside the tiki torches transformed into a slow groove. John stood. "Don't be sad on spring break. Let's dance."

He led me across the sand and into the crowd of couples. This time, no mean girls gave my blue hair the evil eye. These girls were very intent on the boys they were with. More feeling up was going on than dancing.

I hoped John and I would fit right in for once. He put his arms around me, bent over with his chin resting on my shoulder, and swayed with me. As the song progressed, he slipped his hands to my waist and moved them slowly up my sides. So far so good. If his hands made it another inch, he'd be touching my boobs.

The next slow song started. Surely this would prove to be the boob song. But wait a minute. He skipped *over* my boobs to stroke the sensitive skin on the undersides of my arms. It certainly was titillating, but it wasn't the good oldfashioned feeling-up I wanted.

I wondered why he didn't touch my boobs. Maybe he was afraid I had Stockholm Syndrome after all, the kind where your captor makes your arms tingle. Maybe he was afraid of taking advantage of me. Or maybe I had read him completely wrong all this time. He liked me as a friend and didn't want to touch my boobs.

"Why don't you touch my boobs?"

He took his chin off my shoulder and looked at me. "Here?" He glanced around at the other couples. "Because we're not drunk."

"Right." I tried not to sound disappointed. But the air was charged with sex, positively sparkling with it. It didn't seem fair for us to be the sober ones and the pristine ones.

"And it's not very original." He hooked his thumbs on either side of the waistband of my jeans, and slowly, 147 slowly dragged his thumbs across my skin until they touched in front, just below my belly button.

Oh, God. He didn't put his hands any farther down my pants, but there was no question now of what he wanted. And he kissed me exactly as I had kissed him in the car: along my jaw, then back toward my ear.















He pulled me through the crowd so fast that I got the giggles. Yes, everything would work out perfectly. We would have a one-night stand. And then, as long as I skipped Rashad's party, wore my helmet when I rode my motorcycle, and managed to stay away from the bridge until I moved to Birmingham in June, I would never see John again.

I DID GET SOME SLEEP IN the truck on the way back, despite his hand softly stroking my shoulder. I think he meant it to be soothing, but of course any part of me he touched leapt to life.

The truck lurched over a bump. I sat up. We'd reached Chilton County, still about twenty minutes from home.

I lay back down on the seat with my head on his thigh, like before. But this time, I couldn't help myself. My hand slid up the inside of his hard thigh. I didn't quite dare, because I didn't want him to tell me no. But I got very 148 close to touching The Place Prisoners Should Not Touch

His breath caught. I thought he was going to pick up my hand and move it back to my side of the car, where it belonged.

He didn't.

I never really went back to sleep after that. I was so alive with thoughts of what I was going to do to him, and what he was going to do to me.

At least I thought I didn't go back to sleep. But his door slammed, and I started up. We'd already stopped at his apartment complex. He walked around to my door and opened it, bracing his big body inside the frame. "You're too tired for this," he said gently. "Come inside and sleep."

Drat, he was trying to get out of it. At least he wasn't offering to take me home.





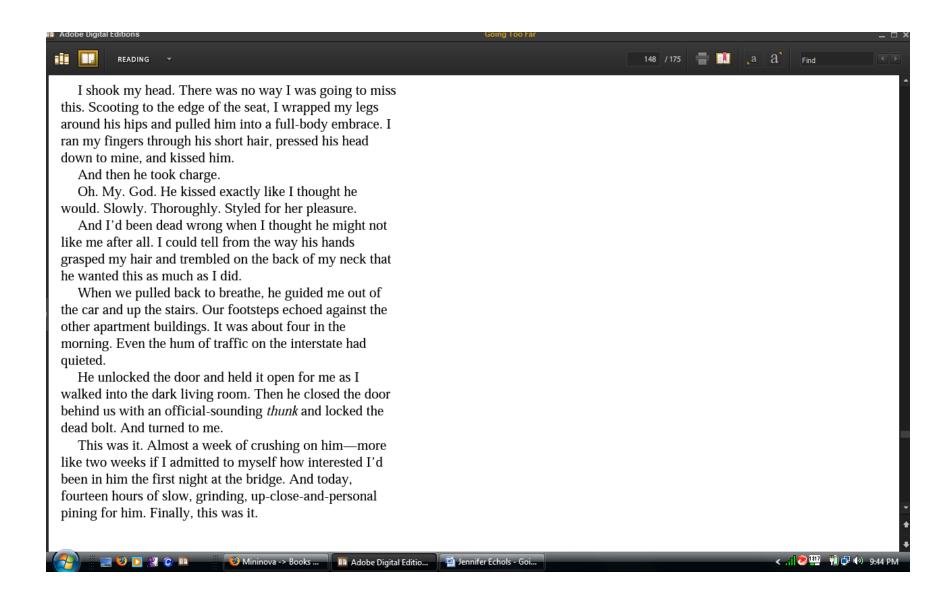


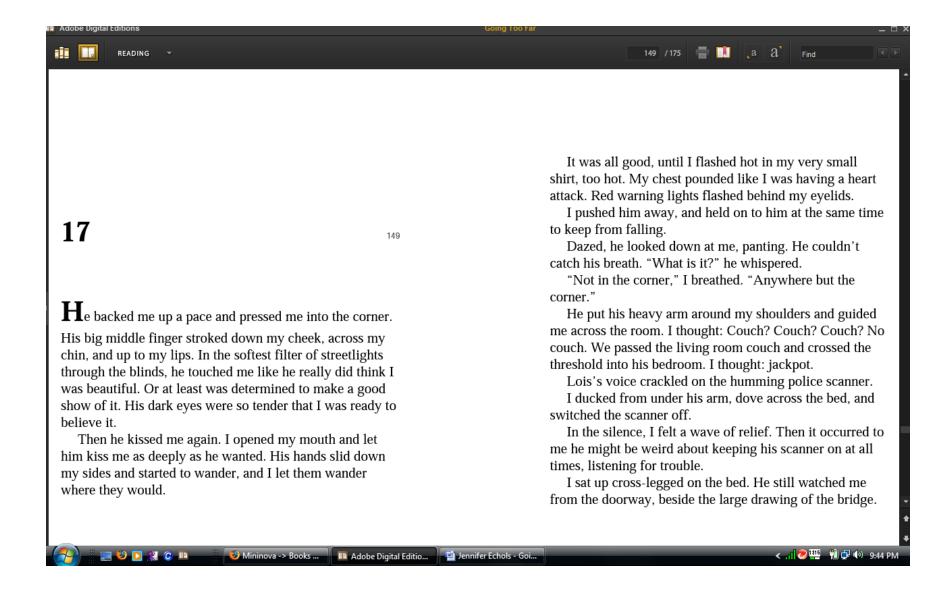












Here was more of what I expected from John. Tortured self-control. Now I didn't have nearly as much self-control as he did. I leaned in and kissed him hard.

We played this game for the next hour and a half. He would take over and kiss me carefully, with attention to detail, like I was one of his drawings. It was the slowest, most thorough, most agonizing, best make-out session imaginable. Until he tried to take my shirt off, or my jeans. I couldn't allow that.

was so über-responsible, he had his own. Even if he hadn't intended them for me. I rolled out from under him, opened the side table drawer, and fished inside. "How lucky," I murmured. "An assortment." I spread them out beside us on the bed to look.

"Meg, I don't think we should do it."

His soft words stabbed me. The only other sound was the sheets slipping against each other as we breathed. Suddenly I longed for the hum of cars on the interstate, even the scanner. Anything to drown out those gentle words I'd known were coming all along.







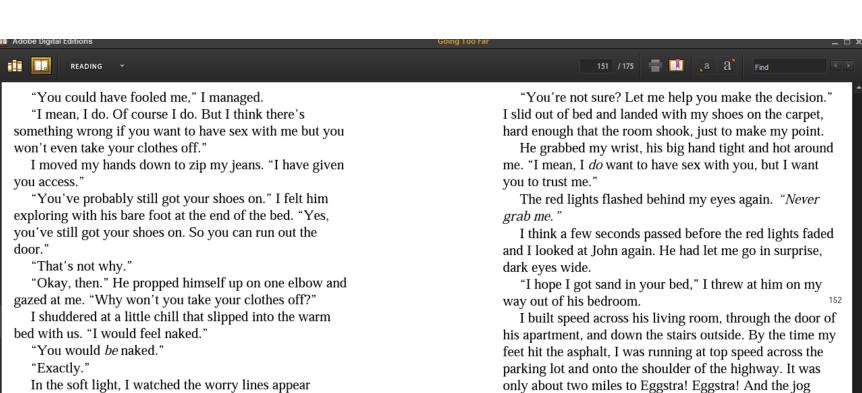








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In the soft light, I watched the worry lines appear between his eyebrows. He pulled one hand from under the covers and moved it to stroke my hair, but something in my face must have stopped him. He put his hand down. "You won't let me kiss you in the corner."

"I won't let anybody kiss me in the corner."

"Then you don't trust anybody. I'm not sure I want to have sex with a girl who doesn't trust me."

I probably had leukemia.

Through the trees, the interstate had begun to hum again with the traffic of early commuters to Birmingham. And footsteps rang behind me, gaining on me. John passed me and stepped in front of me. I stopped to keep from running right into him. He wore jogging shoes and jeans, no shirt. His white chest glowed under the streetlights.

would be good for me. I hadn't gotten my run in yesterday.

He took a big breath. "You're fast."











"Boys are supposed to be helpless in the face of their hormones, or a pair of big tits. You didn't turn me down because I had my shoes on. That's bullshit. You're in love with someone else."

"I am not in love with Angie," he said with his hands out to me. "To tell you the truth, I was kind of relieved when she broke up with me. I should have ended it a long time before that, but she'd gotten to be a habit. A bad habit."

"You're in love with that dead girl."

rape me. It's not enough to take away my spring break. You give me back a little piece of it, but only if you hold me on a leash. It's not even enough to have sex with me."

I gasped for breath, and he stepped toward me.

"You want me to beg for it," I choked out, "so you can say no."

I wished it wasn't true. But I could tell by his silence that it was. Maybe he was just now realizing it himself.

But then he said, "That's stupid. I said no because you don't love me."





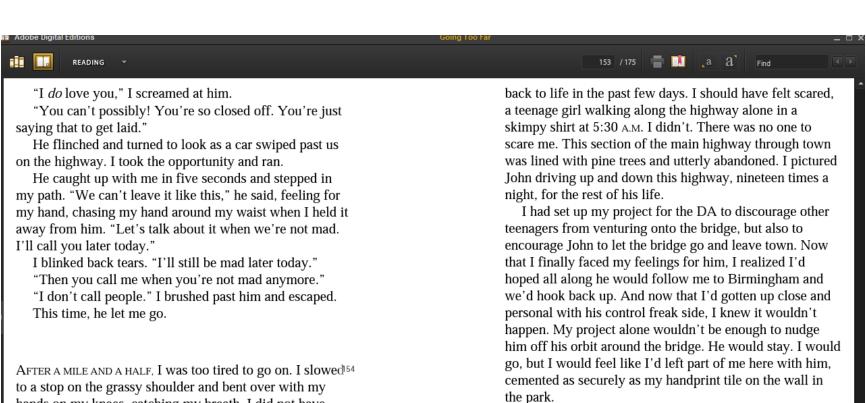












hands on my knees, catching my breath. I did not have leukemia. This fatigue was of an entirely different sort.

I glanced at my watch in the moonlight. The problem with walking was, I would never make it to the trailer in time to take a shower before my shift at the diner. I needed to wash the sand and the ocean and John off me. I smelled his cologne and his sweat on my skin.

But I couldn't run anymore. I walked along the dark highway, wading through the long grass that had sprung

This wasn't happening, this couldn't possibly be the way it ended, but it was.

Unless I did something.

With a final sigh, I started running again. I had gotten my second wind. I had a lot to do after my shift at the diner, before I finally went to bed. I needed to sweet-talk Lois. Then I would make an appointment with a train.















John had switched off, too. I repeated his name through the phone, but there was only static and the murmur of Lois's voice. He must have thrown the phone down on my

I watched across the clearing, waiting. Finally I heard the low hum of the car's motor. Then the car itself emerged from the trees, blue lights off but headlights on. He drove too fast across the clearing and skidded to a stop in the gravel. A cloud of dust rose in front of the headlights and hung in the still dawn air.

"Yes. Lois is watching us right now. Say hi." I waved in a broad motion that the camera could pick up this far away.

"Meg, you're doing exactly what you got arrested for in the first place."

"I let Lois know what I was doing so she wouldn't tell on me. The only reason it's illegal is that it's not safe. I've already informed you that for the next fifteen minutes, it's safe."















I heard him curse before he pocketed his phone and bent to unlace his boots. He cursed again, muffled, like he couldn't get them unlaced fast enough. Then he straightened and stepped in his socks across the ties, toward me.

He raised the phone to his ear. "Aren't you supposed to be at work right now?" he asked in that strange, flat voice.

it was probably night. The nighttime view from the bridge was beautiful, but there wasn't a whole lot to see, surrounded by darkness. So I'd banked on bringing John here at sunrise, when we could see more.

And I was right. The faintest hint of pink in the sky reflected far below us in the river, flat as glass. Mist rose from the water and curled up to me. Dark pines and trees with new green leaves clung desperately to the violent angle of the gorge.





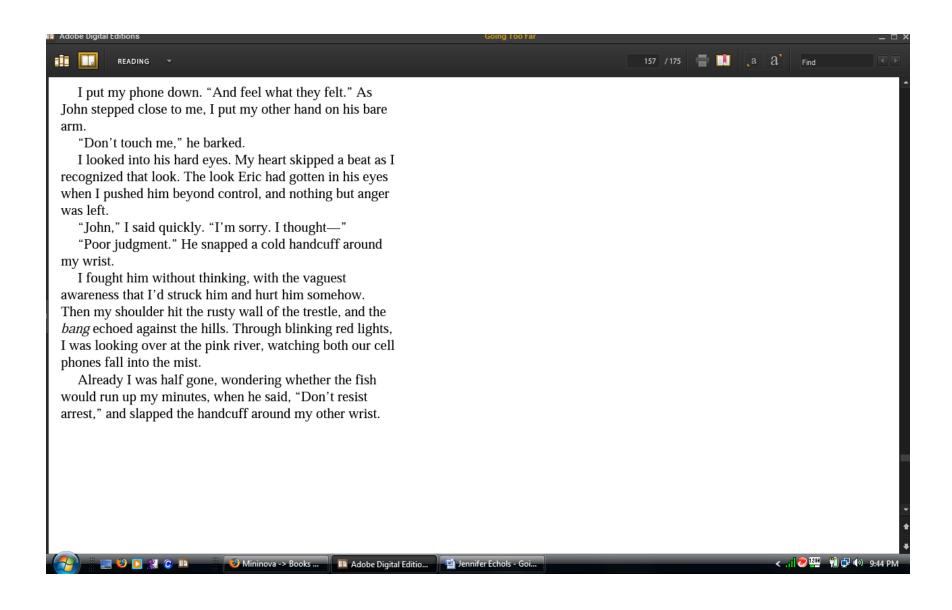


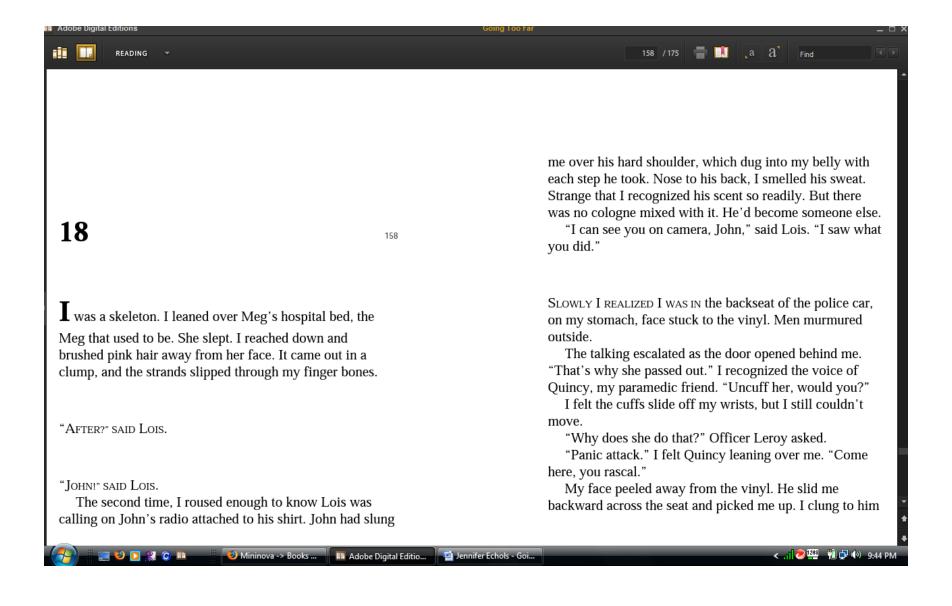












completely psychosomatic. You were sick four years ago."
He set me on the back bumper of the ambulance and held
me steady with one hand while he reached for something.
"Not the—" The smelling salts razored through my

"Not the—" The smelling salts razored through my nostrils and into my brain. At least I could see clearly again: Quincy standing in front of me, weathered face lined with concern, and Officer Leroy hovering behind him.

"Where's John?" I asked.

"Where's John," Officer Leroy muttered. He shook hid 59 finger at me. "John is having his own panic attack. That's a nice stunt you pulled, missy. You know his brother got killed on that bridge."

I tried to gasp, but it was so hard to breathe. "His brother?" I coughed out.

Quincy caught me as I started forward. Over his shoulder, he said to Officer Leroy, "You could maybe wait to tell her that later."

"John said it was a girl who lived in his neighborhood," I wailed.

"Right," said Officer Leroy. "That was his brother's girlfriend."

"Oh God." I tried to stand up, but Quincy pressed me back, saying, "Easy, now."

"And that's just between us," Officer Leroy insisted. "Most folks on the force don't know, or they don't understand that's why After joined. If the chief found out, he might kick After off. This is After's whole life, and you persist in treating it like it's a *joke*?" Officer Leroy stepped closer to me like he wanted to throttle me. When Quincy put his hands up, motioning for Officer Leroy to back off, Officer Leroy raised his voice and shouted at me instead. "Don't you go over there. You don't poke at a snake. You try to go over to him again and I'll handcuff you myself."

It all made sense now. A father who had moved to Colorado. A mother who had moved to Virginia because she couldn't stand it anymore. A framed family portrait from ten years back, with a brother who had also left town—except John had not made clear exactly where his brother had gone. A black handprint on the colorful wall in the park when John was nine.

I'd gotten so used to hearing it in the past week that I didn't even notice the low hum until the train sounded its deafening horn. We all turned to look. John stood with his back to us at the rail in front of the bridge. His head was bowed. He didn't look up at the train. He didn't cover his 160 ears.

The low hum I thought I'd been hearing for the past two weeks had been the train in John's head all along.

I crossed my arms and hugged myself, but it was no use. I whispered, "What have we done to each other?"













Monster T-shirt. I'd always loved the CM, an uninhibited glutton who lived like he was dying. I'd stopped wearing the T-shirt when I dyed my hair blue because the CM and I matched a little too well. But I didn't have time to search for something else this morning. Purcell had already stayed almost an hour late for me.

I cried as I burst through the door of Eggstra! Eggstra!, shoulders squared for the huge argument I was about to have with Purcell that would send half the customers running from the packed diner. But when Purcell and

library. Are you on day shift next week?"

He nodded.

"We can do it after school, in the lull before the dinner crowd."

He held up his fist. I wasn't sure what to do, but I touched his fist with my fist. This seemed to be right, because he took off his apron and headed out the door. I guessed he had accepted my offer with thanks. It was hard to tell, since we'd just now become friends.

I tried to dry up as Corey and I cooked breakfast for the throngs of people from the car factory who got off work at













What wasn't wrong? I told her the whole story of how John took me to the beach, we almost had sex, I induced his nervous breakdown accidentally, and he gave me a panic attack on purpose.

When I finished, she sat blinking at me for a few seconds. Then she exclaimed, "You had sex with Johnafter?"

I glanced around the diner at the patrons trying not to stare at us. "I told you, no," I said quietly. "But I saw the promised land."

can see how sex could be really, really fantastic if the guy was slow and caring and thorough and obviously very into you, and if you were in love." I was so tired of crying by then that I watched with a weird detachment as my tears plopped onto the countertop in small wet circles.

"How are you going to get him back?" Tiffany asked. I sniffled. "That's why I called you. I want to dye my hair its natural color. Of course, natural color is a relative term. When I get off work in a minute, will you go across the street to the drugstore with me and help me figure out what shade my hair used to be?"

"Wow," Tiffany said. "It's hard to remember back that163 far. Wasn't it dark brown? And with your blue eyes,





"Oh my God, Meg, what's wrong?"









Tiffany pushed her coffee away. "When do you think you'll see John again? Are you planning to rob a bank?"

"Ha. He may be at a college party in Birmingham tonight. That was the other reason I called you. I need you to go with me."

"No way," she said. "I don't want to drink."

"Believe me, I don't want you to drink. Ever. Again. You don't have to drink. A college party isn't that big a





my hair. I get along here in town because people here have

always known me. No one at college will know me. And if

you see someone you don't know with blue hair, around here where the manga aesthetic is hardly the norm, what

do you think to yourself? Blue hair says stay away from

me." I ran my fingers down one strand and held it out in

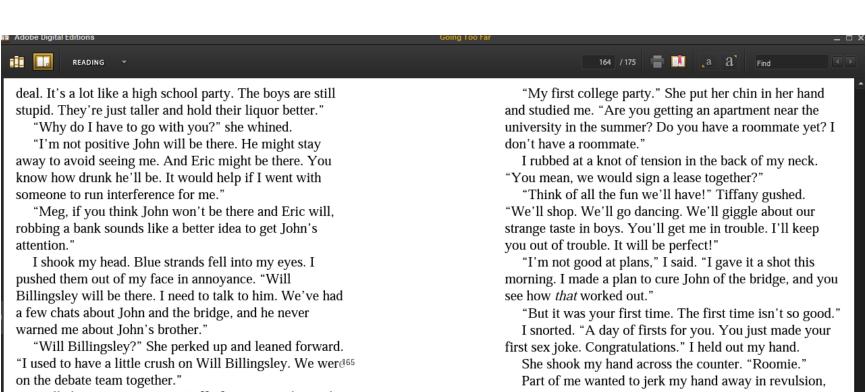
front of my eyes to study it. "But you think if I dye it











I rolled my eyes. "I swear, Tiff, if my ass made good grades, you'd want to date my ass."

"Hey!" She slapped her hand on the counter. "You have a thing for jail. You date boys in it, and you date boys who put other boys in it. I have a thing for good grades. Which is more healthy?"

"That settles it," I said. "Tonight we'll go on a boy-hunt together. Maybe this outing will turn out better than our last outing."

Part of me wanted to jerk my hand away in revulsion, but this was not polite. And more of me looked forward to having a...friend. "Roomie, maybe. Yes, okay, roomie."

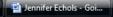
"Hooray!" She let go of my hand and put both her arms up to signal a touchdown. "Now if you and John could make up at the party tonight, it wouldn't be such a bad spring break after all."

"I doubt he'll be there," I admitted. "But just in case he is, I don't want to stand him up."

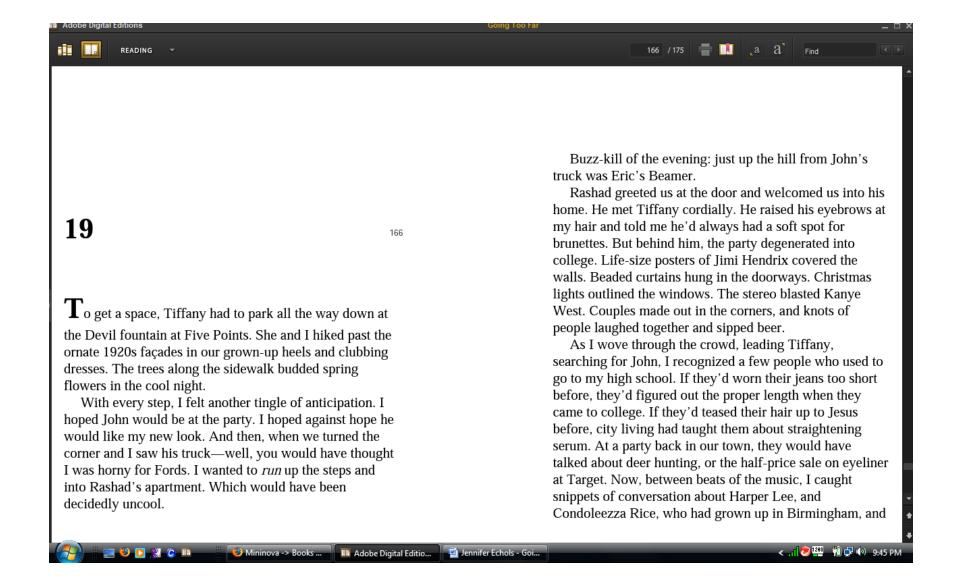


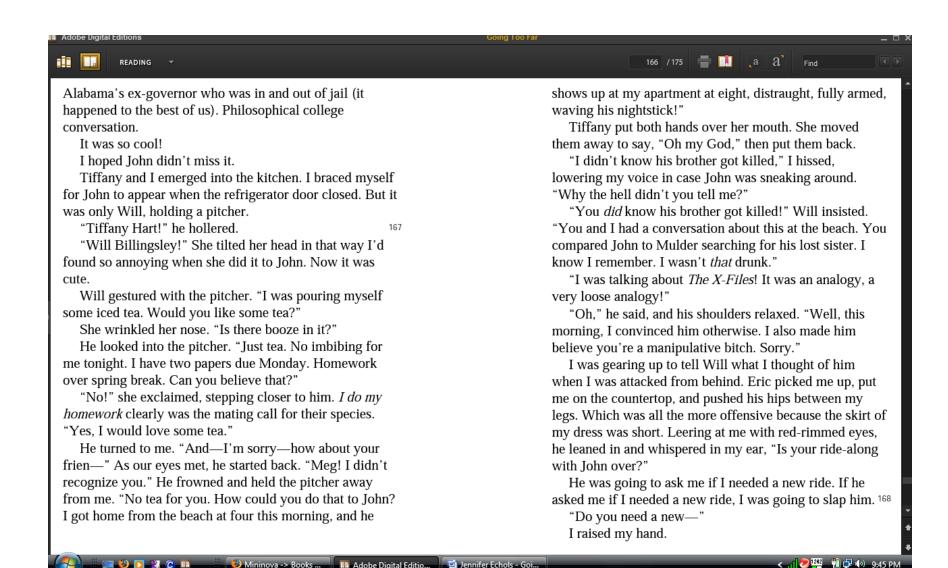




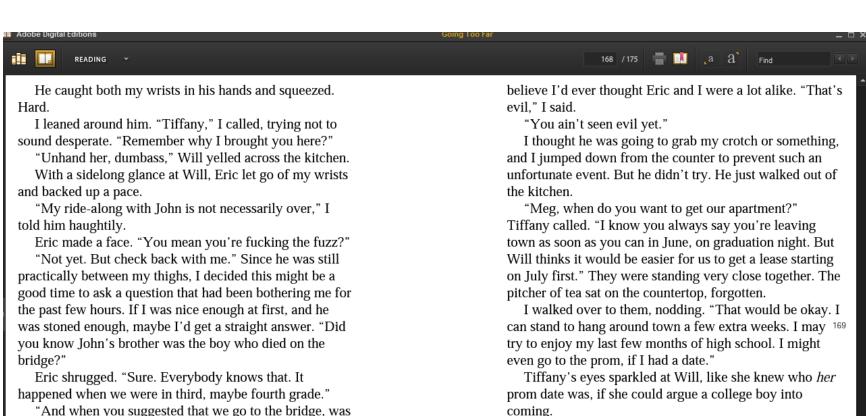








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that because you knew John would find us down there and freak out?"

"Not the first time," he said. "I didn't know then that he watches the place. But when you and I parked down there, yeah." He met my gaze, with absolutely no shame.

I went cold in the tiny kitchen, and the beat of music from the next room seemed to swell louder. I couldn't

coming.

Will leaned back against the cabinets, grinning at her. "What's your major going to be?"

"Either English or pre-med."

"English or pre-med," he mused. "That's quite a spread. Let me give you a hint. Next fall, don't go around telling people you're majoring in English or pre-med. You'll sound like a freshman."















him.

"You don't *look* naughty," Will said. He gestured to me. "This one, I can understand, but you? What's your GPA?"

"It's 4.0," she said.

"You're the freaking valedictorian?" he exclaimed. She just grinned. "What's your GPA?"

"It's a 3.75 right now, and I'm trying to bring it up to a 3.85 this semester." He shook his head sadly. "The freshman flunk classes really did a number on me. I only made a B last semester in calculus—"

I interrupted, "Let me just stop the two of you right here and tell you that you disgust me. You're both so freaking well-adjusted. Why don't you skip over this part and get a joint retirement fund?"

They both turned to me with wide eyes. Then Tiffany told me she might not want to room with me after all, at the same time Will grumbled, "She's just upset about

remembered how his knuckles had turned white on the grate in the cop car as he told me, If I had pulled Eric out of the car myself, I'm afraid of what I would have done to

"Don't do it, John," Angie's shrill voice called from the next room. "Eric's just messing with you."

John was in the kitchen doorway. Funny, I half expected to see him in his cop uniform, but he was wearing faded jeans and a green T-shirt that hugged his chest. Maybe it was the reflection from the shirt, or his eyes really were more hazel than brown, and I hadn't noticed when he wore his dark blue uniform. But now his eyes looked green.

Angie clung to him from behind, making a helpless show of holding him back.

He saw me and did a double take. But he didn't bask in my newfound beauty nearly as long as he should have.















his eyes: dark hair, low-cut dress, with Will's arm around

"Oh, that temper," I said.

me.

Will looked up at John, stepped away from Tiffany and me, and backed up a pace. "Rashad!" he called. He looked behind him, but he was against the wall. There was nowhere left to go.

John was across the room, on top of Will. Tiffany and I both put our hands between them before we were able to think through that unwise move. At least it temporarily kept John from hitting Will. John only gripped Will's shirt, pulled him upward, then whacked him down against the floor.

"Get off me, After," Will roared, red-faced. "You have completely lost it. Rashad!"

There was not enough room in the tiny kitchen for all these enormous boys, but somehow Rashad squeezed in and said, "Easy, big guy," as he pulled one of John's arms. Skip gripped John's other elbow and said in the Schwarzenegger voice, "You're terminated."

John seemed to be easing up, letting them drag him backward. Then he shook them off and went for Will again. They dove after him in a sprawl of boy on the kitchen floor.

Finally Tiffany stamped her foot and squealed, "John, he wasn't even hitting on Meg. He was hitting on me! Right, Will?"

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"Right!" Will's agonized voice came from the bottom of the pile.

"But Eric said—" John's muffled voice trailed off. He erupted from the pile. With the briefest glance at me, he stalked out of the kitchen, brushing against Eric behind Angie in the doorway.

"Still looking for a fight?" Eric called after him. "You're pretty chicken without the entire police force behind you."

"Shut up, Eric," John's voice echoed. The door slammed louder than the beat of Kanye West.

I pushed past everyone, not even noticing who I was pushing past, but I heard Will breathing hard right behind me. "What are we going to do?" Tiffany panted as we dashed through the door of Rashad's apartment and down the stairs outside, into the cool night. "Are we going to chase him in my car?"

"We'll never catch him if he doesn't want to be caught." Will stopped dead at the bottom of the stairs. "His truck's still here."

"Where would he have gone?" I cried, looking up and down the empty street.

"He likes the fountain down at Five Points," Will said. We all ran down to the corner and stopped again.















"He really likes the fountain," Will said.

Even Tiffany asked, "What the hell?"

"Great," I said. "I'm finally acting sane, and John goes crazy." I turned to Will. "He's not one of those big-headed cops who carries cuffs hidden on him when he's off duty, is he? I didn't feel any cuffs on him Thursday night."

in the center of the fountain, sitting on the lap of the Devil.

"No," Will said. "But I'll go with you if you're scared of him."

I turned back to study John, sitting motionless in the fountain. "No thanks." Crossing the street, I called over my shoulder, "I'm no more scared of him than he is of me."

John watched me coming. I stopped at the wall around the fountain. He glowered down at me from the ram's lap, arms folded. The legs of his jeans were wet from the frog statues spitting at him. An unlit cigarette hung from his lips.

I cupped my hands around my mouth like a megaphone. "Move off the Devil, toward my voice."

His expression didn't change. The cigarette quivered in the corner of his mouth as he said, "I'm trying to think like you."

My stomach knotted again at the thought of me and Eric. Surely John didn't believe by now that I had the hots for Eric, or Will, either. But he obviously believed Eric and I were alike. Just as I'd told him in the first place.

I said, "I had no idea about your brother."

He winced. I hated to hurt him. Again. But at least his glower was gone.

He took the cigarette out of his mouth and leaned forward with his fists on his knees. "Even if you didn't, Meg, how could you do that to me?"

It was my turn to wince. I stepped back from the wall of the fountain with the force of the blow. I said lamely, "I can't stay in that town, John. But I love you, and I can't leave you there." I stepped forward to the wall again. "I swear I didn't know about your brother, though. If I'd known, I would have come up with something else. Dynamited the bridge."

"Mmph," he said. "I know you didn't. Will told me you did—"

"He was wrong," I said quickly. "He is very sorry, and also his ass is grass."

"—but then I had dinner with Leroy," John went on, "and he told me you didn't know. So I went to Rashad's hoping to see you, and I've spent the past few hours















I walked to the side of the fountain nearest the rabbit, where I was as close as I could get to John without crossing the moat between us. "What kind of plans?"

He squeezed his eyes shut, then shook his head and opened those dark eyes again, watching me. They weren't green anymore. They were back to the familiar, beautiful brown. "I'm glad it happened. I mean, I wish it hadn't happened in exactly that way. But something had to happen to make me see. I thought I was protecting people. When I handcuffed you, I realized I've let the bridge turn me into a monster. It might be good for me to get out of that town."

I gaped at him for a few seconds, honestly not believing at first that I'd heard him say this. Then I laughed. Really laughed. "No!" I said sarcastically.

He grinned. "I plan to ask Will if I can move in with him this summer. And I'm joining the university track team. I was thinking you might want to, too."

I gasped in horror. "Join? A team?"

"You're running five miles a day anyway," he said. "You might as well join the track team and get more scholarship money."

"That actually sounds like"—I swallowed—"fun."

"I know we need money for rent and stuff. But if we can save enough, this summer or next summer, maybe you and I could go to Europe. I could show you what I've done, and we could discover some new places together."

"I do hope you mean that in the dirtiest sense possible." I'd had enough crying for one day, so I shut my eyes and willed the tears away.

Had I fallen into the parallel universe Will had talked about at the beach? I looked around me at the majestic church behind the fountain, the bohemian storefronts. Tiffany and Will talking under a flowering tree. The dark blue sky above me seemed infinite.

John sat up, took a deep breath, and sighed. "So you like my plans?"

"I like your plans," I said. "I like having plans with you. Now come down off the Devil. It's illegal."

He jumped from ram to rabbit, paused to balance the cigarette in a turtle's mouth, stepped on a spitting frog, made it to the wall in front of me, and jumped down beside

And then I heard a low hum. I glanced around desperately. When the blue lights and siren burst on, the cop car was already bearing down on us in the intersection.

"Let me do the talking," I yelled to John over the wail. "I have a way with cops."

"Yes, you do," he growled at me as the cop car blew past us and kept going up the hill. "They weren't after me.















"Really? Then that was a complete waste of six dollars and ninety-nine cents."

"No, not really," he laughed. "Are you kidding? Now everyone can see what I saw all along."

He wrapped his big arms more tightly around me and leaned down. I caught the scent of his cologne. His warm, sensitive lips met mine.

And the rest is happily ever After.

"I liked it better cyan."

THE NEXT NIGHT, JOHN CAME TO the diner around ten. Watching him park the cop car, I tried to look cool and aloof behind the counter. But considering what we'd done with each other after Rashad's party, there was no way. I grinned like an idiot as he hung his leather cop jacket on

the coatrack. When he turned around, he grinned back at

He squeezed between two bar stools and came right up to the counter. I stood on my tiptoes and leaned forward to kiss him. His lips touched mine, pressed harder. The tip of his tongue grazed my lips, so slowly. I shuddered. Even 175 though Bonita was in the back clocking out and I had only two customers sitting over at the Princess Diana table, we couldn't very well get into it here in the diner, with John in uniform. But I'd never wanted someone so badly, and I could tell he felt the same.

He broke the kiss, set his forehead against mine for a moment, and finally pulled back. "Didn't you work all morning? I was afraid you wouldn't be here."

"I thought you might come in at the beginning of your shift. I didn't want to miss you."

His lips pursed ever so slightly. He reached across the counter to stroke my hair away from my face.

I actually giggled. God! "You've got me so whipped, I can't think of a single sarcastic thing to say."

"That makes me feel powerful and manly. Don't worry. I'm sure you'll think of something." He glanced at the chalkboard on the back wall. "What's the Meg Special?"

"Cobbler." I nodded to a bar stool. "Have a sit-down so we can talk while I cook."















