

At the Party

*includes Falling Hard, Telling Secrets and
Getting Close*

Lauren Barnholdt



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**Includes FALLING HARD, TELLING
SECRETS, and GETTING CLOSE**

By Lauren Barnholdt

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FALLING HARD

(At the Party)

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Emily

Throwing parties, to me, is a waste of time. Who wants to let tons of strangers into your house (because, let's face it, half the people who show up are randoms), let them drink and cause destruction, and then have to clean up after them the next day? Not me.

The only reason I have even have these ridiculous parties is because of my mom. She was pretty scandalous when she was younger. You know the type --lots of boyfriends, lots of football players, and lots of cheerleading parties. She was a total walking cliché, which I've figured out is the main problem with our relationship -- she just can't wrap her head around the fact that I don't weigh 115

(135), I'm not 5'8", (5'3") and I don't have beautiful blonde hair (a weird color halfway between blonde and brown that's kind of drab and not shiny at all.) So I throw these parties because she gets really excited about it. And people *do* come, not because I'm popular or because they care about hanging out with me, but because they need a place to party.

So I guess it kind of works out. The only problem is that a lot of time I end up standing in a corner of my own house ,feeling like an outsider. Although it's not like I really try. I mostly only talk to my best friend, Jasper. I should probably socialize more, I think, as I stand off to the side in my living room , surveying the scene. Jasper's not here yet, so I've hardly talked to anyone. I take a sip out of the water bottle I'm holding and wait to see someone I semi-know.

Miraculously, I don't have to wait long. A girl in my class, Brooke, goes walking by with her two friends, Gabriella and Paige.

"Hi, Brooke," I say, smiling at her. "I'm glad you could come. How are you?"

"Fine," she says, not sounding at all like she's fine. Brooke hates me. She thinks I stole her boyfriend in eighth grade. Which I didn't. (I won't get into it, but there was

a misunderstanding where the guy in question told me they were already broken up, and silly me, I believed him. But then he dumped me like three days later and moved on to Shana Gold, telling her that *I* broke up with *him*.) Anyway, that was like, five years ago, but Brooke's still holding a grudge.

It just goes to show you. Brooke's here, at *my* house, at *my* party, and she hates me.

I decide I need something stronger than water if I'm going to make it through this crazy shindig. My mom doesn't care if we drink, or at least, she thinks she doesn't. Whenever I have one of these parties, she takes off and goes out to dinner with whatever guy she's dating at the time (my mom has become like Super Crazy Dating Woman ever since my parents got divorced six months ago), and then usually ends up spending the night at his house. Which means she doesn't have to see the end result of teenagers drinking, which is usually crying, puking, confessions, and lots of taxis being called. If she did, she might have a different idea about her laissez-faire, European attitude.

I pull a pitcher out of the cabinet, fill it with water, and then add a packet of cherry Kool-Aid. I guess I'll put some vodka in it or something. I should have made Jell-o shots. Not because I like them, but because when you make Jell-o shots, you have a reason to stay in the kitchen, away from your own party.

There's a lot that goes into Jell-o shots – boiling water and adding ice to make them set quicker and checking on them when they're in the refrigerator and --

"You're making it wrong," a voice says behind me.

"Excuse me?" I ask, turning around. Ashton Wagner is standing there, looking over my shoulder at what I'm doing with the Kool-Aid. He's so close that his chest is almost touching my back, and I can smell his cologne, something yummy that makes my breath catch in my throat. "What do you mean I'm making it wrong?"

“You’re supposed to put the Kool-Aid in *before* you add the water.” He shakes his head, like he can’t believe how dumb I’m being. Then he grabs a paper cup off the counter and pours himself some of the half-made Kool-Aid. He takes a sip and then makes a face. “Disgusting.”

“It’s disgusting because it doesn’t have any sugar in it yet.”

He ignores me, and instead picks up the pitcher, and then pours the whole thing down the drain.

“What the hell are you *doing*?” I ask, grabbing the pitcher out of his hand.

“That’s fucked up. You can’t just go around wasting other people’s Kool-aid.”

Seriously, who does he think he is? Just because half the school worships him doesn’t mean he can just come in here and take over my Kool-Aid making. I mean, the nerve.

Ashton looks around the kitchen, taking in the granite countertops, brand new cabinets, and double broiler flat top oven. He raises his eyebrows at me as if to say, “*I think you’ll survive.*” But then he shrugs, reaches his hand into his pocket, and pulls out a handful of coins. He sets them on the counter.

“What’s that?” I ask.

He counts the change. “Fifty-seven cents,” he says. “I think that’s about what Kool-Aid is going for nowadays.”

“Kool-Aid is way more than fifty-seven cents,” I say, not knowing if it’s true. “Especially if you include the sugar.”

“There was no sugar in that pitcher,” he says. “Remember?” His tone is teasing, and he smiles at me, and I have that weird feeling in my throat again, the kind

where it feels like I can't swallow, and my heart is racing.

"Oh," I say. "Right." I push my hair out of my face, feeling awkward.

Ashton Wagner and I don't hang out in the same social circles. His is the kind of circle that my mom would love me to be in. The super popular, super athletic, super arrogant circle.

"So," he says, "Now that I've paid for the wasted Kool-Aid, have I earned the right to make the pitcher myself?"

"I guess," I say, reluctantly stepping out of the way.

He adds the sugar and the Kool-Aid packet first, then slides the pitcher under the faucet until it's full. He stirs it all with a spoon, and then takes a sip RIGHT OUT OF THE PITCHER. Without even bothering to get a cup or anything. "Perfect," he declares. "And ready for the alcohol."

He holds it out to me, indicating that I should take a sip from the pitcher. I hesitate, but I don't want him to think I'm some kind of wimp, so finally, I lean forward and take a drink. He's watching me, waiting for my approval, and the way he's looking at me is making flames shoot out all down my body. "It's good," I say after I swallow.

And it is. Definitely way more delicious than what I normally make.

Although it could have something to do with the feeling in my stomach.

He grins at me, and then disappears into the crowd. I turn around and grip the edge of the kitchen counter, trying to calm my heart. God, I really need to get it together. If all it takes is one conversation with a cute boy to get me this worked up, I have problems. I add a little bit of vodka to the Kool-Aid and then pour myself a glass, hoping it will wash away the jittery feeling that's pulsing through my body.

Forget it, I tell myself. It's Ashton Wagner. He has gorgeous tan skin and perfect teeth and spiky brown hair and the perfect amount of stubble. He's beautiful. And if I start fantasizing about him, then I really am drinking the Kool-Aid.

Ashton

Emily Mulally is beautiful. The kind of beautiful that assaults you out of nowhere, the kind of beautiful that you never realized you wanted until you're making Kool-Aid with it. Okay, that sounds lame.

But seriously, when I walked into the kitchen, and she was there, making Kool-Aid, and I came up behind her.... I don't know, something about the look on her face, and the way her body felt pressed against my chest made me feel like I wanted to get to know her better. Of course, then I had to go and leave. But that was mostly because I just didn't know what else to say.

"What do you know about Emily Mulally?" I ask my friend Tucker, sitting down next to him on the couch in Emily's living room. Tucker's girlfriend, Gilda, is a big gossip. She knows everything about everyone, and then she tells Tucker, so this is a good place to start.

"Emily Mulally?" Tucker shakes his head. "Never heard of her."

"Never heard of her? This is her party."

Tucker blinks at me, then shakes his head. "Gilda!" he yells across the room. "What do you know about Emily Mulally?"

"Shhh!" I put my hand over his mouth. Jesus Christ.

Tucker breaks free and looks at me, understanding dawning on his face.

“You like her.”

“No, I don’t.” I feel uncomfortable, and I look around for something to drink. I should have grabbed a glass of that Kool-Aid.

“Yes, you do.” He gets up and starts humping the couch. “You want to bang her, you want to bone her, you want to get all up in that!”

I stand up and start to walk away, but Tucker grabs my arm. “Sorry, sorry.” He shakes his head. “I’m listening.” He pats the sofa next to him. “Sit here and tell Uncle Tucker all about it.”

I sit back down. “All about what?”

“About Emma Mulally.”

“Emily.”

“Right. Emily.”

“Nothing,” I say, shrugging. “I just talked to her in the kitchen, and she seemed cool.”

“You *talked* to her in the *kitchen*?” Tucker slaps his hand to his forehead.

“Please, tell me you’ve had more contact with her than just a chat in her kitchen.”

“No.”

“Well, then, you should probably try talking to her.”

“I did talk to her.”

“I mean, about something important.”

I look at him. He’s right. “Good idea,” I say, giving him a pat on the shoulder. “Thanks, Uncle Tuck.”

But when I get back to the kitchen, Emily Mulally is gone. The pitcher of Kool-Aid is still on the counter, so I pour myself a glass, hoping no one’s spiked it with the date rape drug while I was away. Then I move through the crowd, searching, until I find her over in the corner by the sliding glass door.

She’s talking to a guy. A guy! Her boyfriend? I’ve never seen him before, this interloper, this intruder, this complete and total jerk. Jealousy flashes through me, and I watch as Emily leans into him, her hair falling over The Jerk’s shoulder. She laughs. I love her laugh. It’s soft and sweet, and genuine, not one of those ridiculous laughs girls usually give when they’re trying to act like you’re the funniest thing in the world but they don’t really think you are.

I’m about to turn around and head back to where Tucker is, but then I decide I shouldn’t be intimidated by this tool. I don’t know for sure that it’s her boyfriend, and if it is, whatever. They’re not married. That sounds fucked up, I know, but I’m not thinking straight, because all I can think about is that laugh.

So I make my way through the crowd and over to her, and she turns around, and sees me with the Kool-Aid in my hand, and I hold the cup up, like

“Hey, see, I’m drinking it!” and she smiles. She has a very cute smile. Her bottom teeth are slightly crooked and it makes her look adorable.

“Oh, hello,” I say. “Just thought I’d commend you on the wonderful Kool-Aid you made.”

“I didn’t make it,” she reminds me. “You did.”

“Oh.” I look at the cup in wonder, like I can’t imagine something so amazing could come from little old me. “I did, didn’t I?”

She nods. “Well, kudos to me!” I take a big drink. The guy standing next to her is glaring at me, so I clap him on the shoulder. “Hello!” I say. “How are you?”

“Fine,” he says. I recognize him from my math class. What’s his name?

Jason or Jordan or –

“This is Jasper,” Emily says. That’s it. Jasper. Sounds like a dog’s name.

“And Jasper, this is...” She trails off as she looks at me, and I realize she and I haven’t even been properly introduced. Until I spotted her in the kitchen, having problems with the Kool-Aid, I’d never talked to her before in my life. The only reason I even knew her name was because I knew this was her party. But even more surprising was the realization that I just assumed she would know *my* name.

How arrogant is that?

“I’m Ashton,” I say. “And any friend of Emily’s is a friend of mine.” I hold my hand out to Jasper, and he takes it. Emily smiles, because of course I hardly know her, so we’re not exactly friends. “So what’s the haps with this party?” I say. “Like, when does it get good?” It’s supposed to be a joke, since we’re all standing over in the corner talking, but Emily’s face falls. “Sorry,” I say, “I didn’t mean that--”

“No,” she says, “It’s fine.”

Jasper glares at me even more. What’s with this guy? He’s like a silent crazy protective...I don’t even know. Boyfriend? I decide it’s time to ditch this Jasper person. “Emily,” I say, “Can you come over here for a minute? I need to ask you something in private.” I turn to Jasper. “You don’t mind, do you Jasper?”

“No,” he says, speaking for the first time and clearly lying. “Go ahead.”

But he doesn't move, so I take Emily's hand and lead her through the first door I see. There's a step, so I step down, bringing her with me.

“Um, we're in my garage,” she says. I look around. Grease stains on the floor. Cold. Smells like paint. Definitely a garage.

“That we are,” I say.

“So what did you need to talk to me about?” She crosses her arms over her chest, challenging. Right. What did I need to talk to her about? “Well,” I say, taking a step toward her. “I wanted to see if you needed any more cooking lessons.” I move closer. She smells like strawberries and some kind of other fruity, girly thing that I can't put my finger on.

“I don't think making Kool-Aid constitutes as a cooking lesson,” she says.

“Then we'll have to move on to something more complicated.” I take another step toward her. It's dark, but I can feel her closeness and smell her skin and all I can think about is kissing her. Which is crazy, because I hardly know her. I can't explain it. But I need to kiss her. I'm about to, but then I realize I can't just go around kissing her in her garage. Talk about douchey. I've only known the girl for fifteen minutes. “Do you want to get out of here?” I ask her.

“It's my party.”

“Oh.”

My heart drops, and my face must fall because she quickly says, “But I do.”

“Do what?”

“Do want to get out of here.”

I grin. “Where will we go?” I ask.

“*You* asked *me* to leave,” she says. “So you figure it out.”

“A challenge,” I say, “I like that.”

“Meet you in the front yard in fifteen minutes?”

“Yes,” I say.

And then she’s gone, disappearing back into the house through her garage door.

Emily

Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod. Was I just flirting? I think I was flirting.

And I’m not sure, but I think I was pretty good at it, too. Who’d have thought that I, Emily Mulally, could flirt like that? And with Ashton Wagner, too! He’s so....hot. And how cool was it when I pretended I didn’t know his name? Ha!

I’m flying through the crowd of my own party, over to Jasper, who’s standing in the corner talking to this guy from our sociology class.

“Jasper!” I scream.

“Emily!” he says. He hands his drink to sociology guy and then whisks me into my dad’s old office, shutting the door behind him and leaning against it dramatically. “What were you doing in the garage with Ashton Wagner?” He’s not jealous. Jasper likes boys only. But he is crazy overprotective of me, and I already know what’s going to happen when I ask him to watch the party so I can leave with Ashton.

“He just wanted to talk,” I say carefully.

“About what?”

I think about it. “I’m not exactly sure.” I remember how it felt to be with him in the dark, how I could see the shadow of his profile and feel his closeness even though I couldn’t see him clearly. He smelled sooo good, like woodchips and cologne and fabric softener.

Jasper narrows his eyes. “You do know that he just broke up with Haven Richardson, don’t you?”

“Of course,” I say. I roll my eyes, but I didn’t really know that. I don’t keep up with the goings on of the popular crowd, although now that he says it, I do remember seeing them together a lot. If I think hard enough, I can even conjure up an image of the two of them holding hands in the hall outside of my math class.

Haven Richardson. She’s the kind of girl my mom wishes I was. The kind with perfect hair and a perfect body and a perfect everything. Blah.

“So,” Jasper says. “Are they really broken up?”

Now I’m confused. “You just said they were.”

“Yes, they’re broken up,” Jasper says. “But are they *broken up* broken up?”

“I have no idea what you’re even talking about.” I look at my watch. I have to meet Ashton in ten minutes.

“It happens all the time,” Jasper says wisely, although how he knows the workings of the popular crowd’s relationships I have no idea. Jasper hasn’t even had a boyfriend in like, three years, preferring to meet college guys on Craig’s List and

then disappear for what he calls “lost weekends” where he doesn’t answer texts or phone calls and then comes back hungover, reeking of alcohol, and refusing to answer questions about where he’s been.

“*What* happens all the time?”

“People break up, but they’re not *really* broken up.” He bites his lip, thinking about it, and then his eyes light up. “Let’s go on his facebook page!”

“Why the hell would we do that?”

“Because we can see what he’s been writing about her!”

I don’t really want to know, because my head is spinning with the possibilities. Plus? I really kind of want to meet up with him. I’m not sure if it was all in my head or not, but for a second, when we were out in that garage, I was almost sure Ashton was going to kiss me. And I really, really, really wanted to kiss him. More than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life. I get shivers just thinking about it.

“I don’t want to,” I say.

But Jasper’s already over at the computer. “Wow, look at this,” he says,

“Someone was in here writing an essay on *The Great Gatsby*. At your party.”

Great. My mom would love that. ‘Honey, how was the party? Did people get drunk?’ ‘Not really, mom, but someone did write a paper for school in dad’s old office.’ Jasper closes out the word doc, and pulls up the internet.

“Shit,” he says, “His facebook is private.”

“Well, that settles that.” Thank you, Mark Zuckerberg, and your new facebook privacy settings.

But Jasper won't be foiled. "No, it doesn't," he insists. "We'll just look at hers." He pulls up Haven's page. I know we're in trouble as soon as I see her status, which says, *'Haven Richardson is brokenhearted and raging.'*

"Raging?" I whisper fearfully. "What does that mean?"

"I guess that she's pissed," Jasper says. He clicks over to her pictures.

About eighty percent of them are of her and Ashton. Her and Ashton at school.

Her and Ashton on a ski trip. Her and Ashton near the pool with a bunch of friends, holding up drinks. In a lot of them, Haven is wearing a skimpy bikini or a tight shirt, her ample chest practically falling out of her top. Her skin is perfect, her teeth are perfect, her eyes are perfect, even her nails and eyebrows are perfect.

I run my tongue over my bottom teeth, feeling the slight crookedness.

Then I swallow, a weird feeling rising up in my stomach.

"Well, obviously she still likes him," Jasper says. He turns around and sees the weird look on my face. "But he might not like her still."

"It doesn't matter," I say. I look at my watch. I'm supposed to be meeting him now. But seeing Haven's facebook is making me hesitate. What if Ashton's just looking for a rebound? I mean, it makes sense. We've never even talked before tonight. I think about it, and then say finally, "I guess I probably shouldn't go."

"Definitely not," Jasper says. He doesn't even try to pretend to talk me out of it, and spends the next ten minutes clicking all around facebook, showing me pictures of guys he's either met, wants to meet, or wouldn't mind meeting.

But I'm not really paying attention. Because all I can think about is Ashton. And so,

finally, when I can't take it any longer, I stand up.

Jasper looks at me, cutting off some story about a guy with the best stomach he's ever seen. He sighs. "You're going to meet him, aren't you?"

"Yes," I say. "Watch the party."

I walk toward the door, and then turn back around. "And make sure you delete the history on that computer when you're done. My mom will flip if she thinks I've been internet surfing at my own party."

Ashton

She's not here. It's the time we're supposed to meet, and she's not here.

Could she be standing me up? I've never been stood up before. Have I stood anyone up before? I'm a big believer in karma, so if I have, it serves me right.

But I can't think of anyone I've stood up.

I wait a couple more minutes, then decide to just go back into the party and find her. Being out here, waiting for her, is almost too much. I need to see her, to be near her, to talk to her. It's like a weird anticipation thing.

I head back into her house, but after a thorough search, I don't see her anywhere.

"Hey!" Tucker yells. "Where the hell have you been?" He's on his way to getting completely fucked up.

"I'm right here," I say.

"Sorry about your girl." Tucker puts a fake pout on his face, puffing out his lower lip. "Boo hoo," he says.

“What are you talking about?” I’m looking over his head, still scanning the crowd for Emily.

“Emily,” Tucker says, “She went in there.” He points to a closed door.

“Her *bedroom*. With *Jasper*.” He pats me on the back. “Sorry, buddy. Better luck next time.”

Shit. Why the fuck didn’t I kiss her when I had the chance? If I had, maybe she’d be with me right now, instead of in there with that douchebag. The thought of her lips on someone else’s is making me extremely jealous, and I’m about to go over to her bedroom door and if not barge right in, at least knock , but before I can, there’s a voice behind me.

“Ashton!”

I turn around. Haven Richardson is standing there, a smile on her face, but anger in her eyes. She wraps her arms around me. “Helllooo,” she says, all flirty. She’s wearing this ridiculously tight skirt, and I’m positive that if she turned around, you could almost see her thong. Soft, silky blonde hair, perfectly styled, and a pair of hooker shoes complete the look.

“Hi, Haven,” I say. Haven is my ex-girlfriend. We were together for nine months before I caught her cheating on me with Evan Simmons, this guy who graduated a couple of years ago. And now, even though Haven is the one who cheated on me, she can’t let it go. The truth is, we were done even before it happened.

“Ashton,” she says. “I need to talk to you.” Her eyes are on me, and so are a lot of people’s, because everyone thinks we’re like Scarlett and Ryan or something, and they’re obsessed with what’s going on with us. I look one more time at the closed door to Emily’s bedroom. But if I don’t talk to Haven, she might cause a scene. Haven loves to cause a scene.

So I sigh and follow her outside to the backyard, all the way to the back, in case she starts yelling at me. That's the other thing about Haven, and one of the other reasons we broke up. She's always the victim.

"What is it?" I ask once we're standing underneath a willow tree. I look toward the house nervously, wondering if anyone's watching.

"Did you know I started drinking this afternoon? I don't even have to drink tonight, because I'm already hungover." She grins and then leans into me.

"Haven," I say, catching her, "You shouldn't have done that."

"I know," she says. And when she looks at me, her face is streaked with tears. "I just miss you so much."

"I miss you, too," I say. It's true, to an extent. Haven is fun when she wants to be, and kind when she wants to be, and generous when she wants to be.

But when she wants to be isn't all that often, and when she's *not* being those things, she's pretty self-centered. I liked being with her because it was exciting, and there were always fun things to do, and because, I'm sorry to say, she's hot.

But that got old quickly. The thing is, I do still care about her. But any romantic feelings that used to be there are completely gone. Emily's face flashes through my mind again, and I think about her, in there, and me, out here, maybe missing my chance.

"Then why aren't we together?" Haven asks.

"Hav," I say gently, "We've talked about this."

"Because I cheated on you?" she says, sounding incredulous. "Shit happens,

Ashton. Grow up. It was just a one time thing.”

It’s a lie, and we both know it. “Haven,” I say, sighing. “Let me take you home.”

“No!” She screams and tries to push me away, and as she does, I can smell the alcohol on her.

“Yes,” I say, “You can’t drive.”

“I’m fine.” She’s walking away from me now, her shoes sliding all around in the grass. She stumbles and then rights herself.

“Haven,” I say, “Let me take you home.”

I run and catch up with her, and finally, she lets me.

Emily

He’s not here. I know I’m late, by like ten minutes, but honestly, who the hell doesn’t wait ten minutes for someone? It’s, like, a rule that people are never on time. Even for my parties, you tell people to come at eight, and no one even shows up until nine. Not that I invite people to my parties anymore. They just kind of know that it’s happening.

But still. Even my mom’s stupid book club doesn’t show up on time!

And they’re old. Besides, I’m the girl! I’m supposed to be fashionably late, aren’t I? Boys should know that. Maybe he went inside to look for me. That could happen, couldn’t it? Well, I’m waiting right here, thank you very much.

That’s what they always say to do when you’re lost – to stay in one place so that the other person can find you. And obviously I’m not lost, but I *am* trying to be found.

I look back over my shoulder through the front window, where I can see the party starting to heat up. Jasper's looking out, and I give him a wave. He waves back, and gives me a rueful look, as if to say, "*Where is he, hmmm?*"

I turn my back and sit down on my front steps, stretching my legs out in front of me. I'm wearing a white skirt that earlier I thought showed off my tan.

But now I'm not so sure. My legs look kind of stumpy. I think about Haven, about how she looked in those pics of her online, how she looked in her bikini.

I wonder what it would feel like to look like that. To be so perfect. Girls like that are always so weird to me. Sometimes I can't stop staring at them, just wondering, what is it like to know you could have any guy you want? To know you can just go up to anyone and not be worried about getting rejected? To be able to wear anything you want and not worry that it makes you look too fat or too skinny or too wide or too five million other things? Although I guess Haven

can't get any guy she wants, since it seems like she still wants Ashton.

I check my cell. Ten minutes late has turned into fifteen minutes late. I'm staring to wonder if maybe I should go back into the party. I know it's not good to be chasing him around, but if I want him, if I want to see him, then shouldn't I go just after it?

But before I can decide, I hear the sound of shuffling feet. Someone's drunk. This isn't anything noteworthy – more people have been drunk at my house than I care to count, and a good percentage of them have thrown up. As a result, I know the drunk shuffle when I hear it.

I hear a girl's voice, saying she's fine, and then a boy's voice, saying he doesn't care, that he's taking her home. And my heart sinks completely into my stomach, because even though I've hardly heard it, the voice is already imprinted on my memory.

And when he comes around from the backyard, following Haven Richardson, I have to swallow the wave of disappointment that flows through me.

“You’re not fine,” he says again. “Hav, please.” He takes her arm, and she leans into him, and starts crying, and he wraps his arms around her. “Let me take you home,” he says softly.

She pulls away, and nods, and he puts his hand on her back as he steers her toward his car. He opens the door for her, and she gets in, and then he heads to the driver’s side, and drives away. They don’t see me, and I feel almost sick.

Stop, I tell myself. It’s ridiculous to be upset over some guy I don’t even know. Getting my heart all set on something before it’s even a reality can only lead to a big fall. I’m just glad I found out now, before I was in too deep.

I think about the way it felt when he was close to me in the garage. I touch my lips, wondering what would have happened if we’d kissed. But I force the thoughts out of my head, and I force myself not to cry. A few hours ago, I didn’t even know Ashton Wagner. So there’s no reason to think I shouldn’t be able to forget about him.

Ashton

Haven’s going on and on about who the fuck knows what, and all I can think about is Emily Mulally. She’s going to think I stood her up. After *I* thought *she* stood *me* up, now *she*’s going to think *I* stood her up. Unless she was standing me up in the first place. This is turning out to be a very confusing night.

“Are you listening?” Haven yells. She went from being sweet and crying to a raging bitch in about thirty seconds, which is pretty much par for the course with Haven.

“Not really,” I admit.

“Typical.” She doesn’t say anything the rest of the way to her house.

When we pull in the driveway, I turn to her. “Are you going to be okay?”

“No.” She’s looking out the window, not saying anything.

“Look, Hav....I want to be friends, I do.” It’s a half-truth. I’d like to be friendly with her. But as far as being friends... we were never friends in the first place. I think that was our main problem as far as being together. We never had the same sense of humor, we never meshed, we could never just... talk. Our conversations revolved around where we were going, or what new rumor had been started about us, or what kind of trip we wanted to take. There was no substance.

She sighs. “I know I’ll get over it. I think it’s just more wounded pride than anything.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Well, listen. Call me if you need anything, okay?”

She nods, then gets out of the car. And I head back to the party to find Emily Mulally.

The door that Tucker claimed Emily disappeared behind with Jasper is open when I get back to her house, and I look in. Big desk. Filing cabinets.

Leather chairs. It’s an office. Not her bedroom like Tucker claimed. At first I’m relieved, but then I realize that might be worse. Jasper probably took her in there and seduced her on the couch.

The thought makes me start to feel like maybe this whole thing is pointless, and then I wonder if maybe she’s already left the party. But *then* I realize that she *couldn’t* have left the party, because it’s her stupid party.

So I start looking for her. And I finally I find her in the kitchen, standing in front of

the refrigerator, the door open. She's looking inside like she's not sure exactly what she's looking for. It's somehow poetic, us meeting again in the kitchen, back where it all began.

"Hello," I say, leaning over her. "Do you need some help cooking?" I survey the contents of the fridge. "I could whip up a Croque Monsieur."

She looks at me blankly, then slams the fridge. "I don't even know what that is."

"Yeah, me neither." I shrug. "I think it has something to do with ham. I saw it on Barefoot Contessa." She's still giving me that same blank look. "You know, the cooking show?"

"Yeah, I know what it is," she says. "I just didn't know that guys watched it."

"They don't," I say. "Well, / don't anyway. But my mom's a big fan."

God, she's beautiful. Haven's beautiful, but Emily... Emily is beautiful in a totally understated way. She doesn't even know just how gorgeous she is. I need to kiss her. None of this waiting shit. I step closer to her, and whisper into her ear, "Can we get out of here now?" Fuck Jasper. I don't care about that dude.

I'll make her forget him.

"I don't know," she says, pulling away. "Why don't we ask Haven?"

"Haven?" I'm confused.

"Don't act confused," she says. "I saw you leaving with her."

"I wasn't leaving with her!" I say. "She needed a ride home." I lean in close to her again. "Haven has a drinking problem," I whisper. "Sometimes she needs rides home."

“That’s not what it looked like to me.”

“What did it look like to you?”

She opens her mouth to say something, then shuts it again. God, she has perfect lips. “It doesn’t matter,” she says.

“It does to me.”

“Well, it *doesn’t* to me.” She looks over my shoulder, surveying the party.

“Anyway, I hope you have a good night.”

“Hey,” I say, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” she says, “I just don’t think this is a good idea.”

“You don’t think what’s a good idea?”

“This. Conversing with you.”

“Oh.” I think about it. “Well, it’s probably not, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t do it.” It’s supposed to be a joke, but she doesn’t smile. And then I get it. She’s rejecting me. Whoever this Jasper guy is, she feels some kind of loyalty to him. Although she was quick to cast him aside when I asked her out to the garage. So I say, “Does this have anything to do with Jasper?”

“Jasper?” She looks like she’s about to say something else, but then she changes her mind. And for a second, I see indecision flash across her face, I can almost see her thinking that maybe she wants to stay with me. But instead, she walks away, leaving me standing in front of the refrigerator by myself.

Emily

If Ashton Wagner thinks he can just waltz back into my house, to my party, and try to.. .to ... to *seduce* me with his sexy smile and his perfect hair and his ice blue eyes, he has another thing coming. I mean, like I'm going to want to hang out with him now? After he just ditched me for Haven Richardson? Maybe he thinks I'm, like, desperate or something.

I might not be Haven Richardson, but nobody puts Baby in the corner.

That's a line from the movie Dirty Dancing. I love that movie. It's about this totally plain girl named Baby who goes away with her family on this summer vacation and meets a super sexy dance instructor who, like, takes her virginity and makes her fall in love. They cause all these scandals and to make a long story short, the sexy dance instructor Johnny loses his job because he's been having sex with Baby. But then at the end he shows up and says to Baby's overprotective father, "Nobody puts Baby in the corner!" and then they go up onstage and dance the final dance of the summer and Baby comes into her own and ends up with Johnny.

It really is an amazing movie. Anyway. The point is, that's a movie. Not real life. And Ashton Wagner cannot just come walking back in, expecting that I'm going to just listen to what he has to say. Especially since he had the lamest excuse. Haven was drunk? Yeah, right. She couldn't call a cab? Or walk home?

Although now that I think about it, if it really is true, it was pretty nice of him to drive her home. But that's what he *wants* me to think. He probably thinks I'm gullible.

Not to mention trying to turn the whole thing around on me, to ask me if this whole thing had to do with Jasper! Ha! The only reason I didn't tell him that Jasper was gay is because – well, honestly, why should I? He left with Haven, so why shouldn't I --Ohmigod. How disgusting. What the hell is—

Fuuuccck. I've stepped in puke.

“Sorry,” a girl says. She sways away and out of the bushes, where she’s been vomiting. How. Freaking. Disgusting.

This is the problem with having parties at your house. I go through all this trouble and then I’m the one getting puked on. I blow out a big deep breath, and then walk around the side of the house to get the hose. Vomit Girl has decided to leave her dinner in my mom’s roses, which is, like, the one thing my mom cares about. Seriously, she does these ridiculous rose tours and everything, where she opens up our yard, and people, like, come to look at the roses.

So I’m going to have to spray away the puke and hope she doesn’t notice.

I wonder if roses die if they get puked on? I think they’re a pretty delicate flower.

That’s why those rose tours are such a big deal.

God, this hose is heavy.

“Hello!” a voice says. Ashton Wagner.

“Go away,” I say. “I’m very busy.”

“You have puke on your shoe,” he says conversationally.

“I know.”

“And that hose is way too heavy for you.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s ---“ I break off, deciding I am too mature to sink to his level. I will not be brought down by Ashton Wagner. I will rise above all this. Once I get the hose over to the flowerbed, I can’t get the nozzle out of the sprinkler head, so I decide to just set the sprinkler down in the roses.

I do, and then turn the knob on the sprinkler. The water comes shooting straight up and into my face. I scream as the icy cold spray hits my face.

“Whoa,” Ashton yells, and then he comes over to try and help me turn it off.

“Turn it to the right!” I scream.

“I am!” he says. I’m backed out of the spray now, but I’m soaked. My white skirt is completely drenched, and my blue t-shirt sticks to my skin.

“Turn it harder!” He does. The spray finally turns off, but when it does, he’s completely wet. I’m completely wet. He looks down at the roses. “At least the puke’s gone,” he says.

I look at him. He looks at me. And then we burst out laughing. “I’m sorry,” I say. “You just look really funny.”

“*Me? You* look really funny.” He moves closer to me and then reaches out, pushing a drop of water off of my cheek with his fingertip. My body responds to his touch, sending electric shocks all the way down to my legs. “Are you cold?” he asks.

“Freezing,” I lie. I should be freezing, I know I should, but his voice and his touch are making me feel like I might burst into flames.

“You should change,” he says. “You’re soaked.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine,” he says. But his lips are looking a little shivery. It’s all I can do not to reach out and put my lips on his to warm him up. But my lips feel like two fires, and if I kissed him now, he’d feel it and wonder why I was so warm. So instead, I take a deep breath and say, “Come on. I’ll get you some clothes.”

Ashton

She takes me to her bedroom. Her *real* bedroom, not the office that Tucker *said* was her bedroom. If anyone at the party notices, they don’t say anything.

Her room is clean and neat, and suddenly, I feel kind of weird. It’s always strange being in a girl’s room. And Emily’s room is nothing like Haven’s.

Haven’s room was kind of like Haven— all flash and no substance. It was plastered with pictures of her and her friends, and had expensive white furniture that her mom bought her for her sixteenth birthday.

Emily’s room is different. She has a vanity and a poster of Dirty Dancing on the wall. Her bookshelves are lined with books, and I scan the titles.

“You like *The Long Walk*?” I say, as I take it off the shelf. It’s a Stephen King book, but one of his first ones, written under a pseudonym before he got famous. It’s amazing, but not many people have read it. And she has the first edition, the one that contains all four of King’s early novellas.

“It’s my favorite,” she says.

She’s over by her dresser, rummaging around for clothes, and I see a flash of something pink and lacy in one of her drawers, so I look away quickly. “Did you

know he wrote it in like two weeks?" I ask.

"Yeah," I say, "He was –"

"In college," she finishes.

"Yeah," I say, grinning. I look at the Dirty Dancing poster. "Nobody puts Baby in a corner, huh?"

She hesitates. "So," she says finally. She's standing in front of the door to what I assume is her bathroom, holding her clothes in her hands. "I can get you a t-shirt or something to wear."

"That would be great," I say. "I can, uh, give it back to you."

"Okay." She leaves the room and returns a second later, holding a t-shirt and a sloppily folded pair of sweatpants.

"They're my dad's," she says, "He, um, left them after he moved out.

Sorry, I don't know why I said that."

"Said what?"

"About my dad," she says.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Okay." I take the clothes.

"What's going on with you and Haven?" she asks. She's moving back and forth,

hopping from foot to foot on her carpet, the water from her t-shirt making little spots on the carpet. I want to rush over, grab her in my arms, and keep her warm.

“Nothing,” I say, looking right into her eyes. “Haven and I are over.”

She cocks her head and looks at me, like she’s not sure she really believes it.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“You can call her and ask her,” I say, pulling my phone out of my pocket.

“Or you can ask my best friend, Tucker. He’s out in your party somewhere. In fact, there might be a good chance that he’s puking into your rosebushes right now.”

“I believe you.” She looks at me, questioning. “What are we doing?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “But now I have a question for you. What’s going on with you and Jasper?”

She grins. “Jasper,” she says, “Is gay.”

I’m going to kill Tucker.

Emily

So this is definitely the weirdest thing that’s ever happened to me. For real. I mean, I’m in my shower, while Ashton Wagner is in my room, changing into my dad’s clothes. Ashton Wagner is getting naked in my room! Well, not completely naked. He’ll probably leave his underwear on. Won’t he? He definitely won’t want to be without his underwear. At least, I wouldn’t think he would.

The thought of him sliding his boxers down makes me feel all light-headed, and I rest my head against the tile of the shower. He’s out there. In my room. Right now. At least shirtless. I’ll bet he has a nice chest. I’ll bet it’s smooth and hard and

just.... Oh, God. I bite my lip.

I wonder how long I can get away with being in here. How am I going to go out there? What's going to happen? What is happening with us? How can I feel this strongly about someone I just met?

I turn the water off and wrap a towel around my head, then step out of the shower. I dry off, then step into the pajama pants and spaghetti strap tank that are hanging over the towel rack.

I think about putting on some make up, but then I think fuck it, makeup isn't going to make me look like Haven, and besides, if he doesn't like me the way I am, it's better to find out now, before I get crushed.

I open the door to the bedroom, half-expecting to catch him changing. But he's not. He's just sitting at my desk, thumbing through the copy of *The Long Walk*, wearing the t-shirt and sweatpants I gave him.

"Hey," he says when he sees me. He looks me up and down, and I feel a deep blush starting at my face and burning all the way down my body. I cross my arms over my chest, suddenly self-conscious.

But he walks over to me, slowly, and takes my hands in his, pulling them down to my sides. Our fingers intertwine. "You're beautiful," he whispers.

I look up and our eyes meet. It's like nothing I've ever felt before, this thing between us, pulsing and getting stronger. I think about protesting, but before I can, his lips are moving closer.

At the last second, I turn my head away. "I'm not going to sleep with you," I say.

"Who said anything about sleeping?" He's teasing.

“I’m not going to have sex with you.”

“I don’t want to have sex with you.”

“You don’t?”

“Well, not yet. You’re too....”

“I’m too what?” Suddenly, I’m mad, and I take my hands away from his.

“No, that’s not... that’s not what I meant.” He seems flustered, and I have a weird, startling revelation. I’m making Ashton Wagner flustered. “You just...

you’re so... you’re just.. you’re like a dessert that needs to be savored. You can’t just go having the whole thing in one sitting.”

I grin, the side of my mouth twisting up. “Did you just compare me to a crème brulee or something?”

“Not crème brulee,” he says. He pretends to think about it. “You’re not as pretentious as crème brulee. You’re more like an amazingly perfect...strawberry shortcake. Sweet and refreshing and perfect.”

I start to say something else, but before I can, his mouth is on mine. His lips are soft and strong, and he is such a GOOD KISSER. I feel like I could melt into him, and I do, his hands encircling my waist and pulling me close to him.

And I just let go, falling, falling, falling....

We spend the night kissing, talking, and cuddling on my bed. When the sun finally starts to rise, and slats of light peek through the blinds in my room, we get up. He helps me clean up the damage from the party. And then we go out for breakfast. And even though it’s only ten am, I order strawberry shortcake.

TELLING SECRETS

At the Party

By Lauren Barnholdt

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*** This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to any persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental ***

Brooke

I don't even really want to be at this stupid party, and here are the reasons: 1. I hate the person who's giving it, this girl named Emily Mulally, because in the seventh grade she stole my boyfriend. And once she had him, she dumped him like, three days later. Not that it was that devastating. I mean, it was seventh grade. But still. What was the sense of even going after him if she was going to dump him almost immediately? Some people might think that holding a grudge from seventh grade until senior year is kind of ridiculous, and those people would be right. But lately I've been getting very good at the whole being angry for no reason thing, and so I say I'll hold a grudge if I want.

2. My best friend Natalia moved to New Hampshire a month ago, right before the start of our senior year. New Hampshire isn't that far away

– thirty minutes by car – but since I don't have a car, and since being in New Hampshire doesn't allow Nat to be here every day, in school with me, in my classes, helping me deal with the landmines of my senior year, it might as well be Fiji. Not to mention that now that Natalia's gone, I'm stuck hanging out with Gabriella and Paige. And it's not that Gabriella and Paige are bad people, it's just nowhere near the same as having Natalia here.

3. The party started five minutes ago and I've already spilled a drink all over myself. I always do this, so it's not that surprising, and I had a sweater tied around my waist that I was able to put on over my tank top. But now I'm going to have to keep the sweater on all night even though it's about a million bazillion degrees in this house.

4. Aiden James is still not here.

Anyway, so I'm at this party with Paige and Gabriella, even though I totally don't want to be for all the aforementioned reasons, and they're standing in the corner

acting like they're all above it all and talking crap about the party, when they should be, I don't know, mingling or hooking up with guys or whatever other ridiculousness is normal for these kind of events. I mean, they begged and begged me to come to this party.

"I can't believe Ry didn't come with us," Paige is saying. She's wearing this crazy blue bubble skirt over a tight black tank top, and every five seconds she reaches down to smooth it. It's so short that if she didn't, you'd be able to see her underwear. She looks kind of like a slutty ballerina. But a hot one.

"I can," Gabriella says. "This party is super lame."

It's time like this that I wish I drank. Letting the party get all fuzzy around the edges and losing my inhibitions sounds kind of appealing right about now.

"I'm going to go get some cranberry juice," I announce. "You guys want anything?"

"No thanks," they chorus, and then turn back to each other, their heads pushed close together as they chatter away.

But I don't go to the kitchen to get a drink. Instead I push through the sweaty throng of people and out into the backyard, where I peel off my sweater, lie down in the grass, and look up at the stars. I take a deep breath of the warm late summer air, trying to relax.

After a few minutes, I feel someone lie down next to me. My eyes are closed, and without even opening them, I know who it is.

"Hi, Ry," I say.

"Hi, Brooke. What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

“It looks like you’re lying on the ground out here instead of enjoying the party like everyone else.”

“Is everyone else enjoying the party?”

“Doesn’t seem like it,” he says.

I prop myself up on my elbows and grin. “What are you doing here?”

He shrugs, his hair flopping over into his blue eyes. “Got out of work early and thought I’d check it out. Where are the other two?”

“Inside,” I say.

“Bitching?”

“Yup.” This is why I love Ry. He knows how ridiculous Paige and Gabriella are. Lately, he’s been the closest thing I’ve had to Natalia, although since he’s a guy it’s not exactly the same. I can’t gossip with him about what’s going on with Aiden – although, to be fair, no one knows what’s going on with me and Aiden except Natalia – or trade clothes with him or borrow his lip gloss.

He slides over closer to me on the grass, and after a few minutes he says,

“Are you happy?”

Which isn’t as random as it seems. Ry and I have been doing this thing for, like, ever where we’ll just ask each other questions that have nothing to do with our current conversation or what’s going on at the moment. Usually the questions are broad and have something to do with life, like “If you had a daughter what would you name her?” or “Do you think there’s life on other planets?” I’m not sure exactly when and where it started, but I kind of love it.

Plus it drives Gab and Paige crazy, which is always a plus.

“Like, right at this moment?” I ask. “Or in general?”

“In general.”

I think about it. Am I happy? I don’t think anyone’s ever asked me that before, in fact, I’ve never asked myself that before, so I quickly take a mental report card of my life.

Friends: Natalia is gone, and I can hardly stand Gabriella and Paige. But I have Ry, and Natalia’s not that far away, and we’re hoping to both end up at BC

next year, so I give myself a B-.

Family: Ehh. Normal stuff. My parents got separated a couple of months ago and blah blah blah. Normal teenage dysfunction. I give myself a C, since it seems pretty average.

School: Always came easy, and I’m in the top ten percent of my class.

While everyone else is staring to angst over whether or not they’re going to get into a good school, I don’t really have to worry about it. A.

Love: This one makes me pause, and I think about Aiden James. Aiden James with his black hair and deep blue eyes and ratty t-shirts that he wears over baggy jeans and scuffed sneakers. Aiden James, whose kisses make me so breathless I can hardly take it, who never calls when he says he’s going to, who always leaves me hanging. I can’t decide if I should get a D because I’m obsessed with him, or an A because the kisses are so amazing.

Overall, that’s a pretty shitty report card, no matter how you slice it. Still.

I can't tell Ry that. I can't tell anyone that.

"Brooke?" he asks, probably because I'm taking so long to answer.

"Yeah?"

"Do you – "

But before he can finish, a shadow cuts through the outside lights of Emily's backyard, and Aiden Ryan is leaning over me. Well, over us.

"Hey," he says, smiling lazily. "What the hell are you doing down there?"

He's amused, like oh ha ha, look at little Brooke lying on the ground looking up at the stars. If he cares that I'm with Ry, he doesn't show it.

"Looking at the stars," I say, "And talking about whether or not I'm happy." Next to me, I can feel Ry shift, and I make sure not to look over at him.

No one knows about me and Aiden, and I was pretty sure that Aiden wanted to keep it that way, but now, here he is, in Emily's backyard, talking to me in front of everyone. Well, not everyone. I mean, just Ry is out here. But still. The backyard is like, public.

"You're crazy," Aiden says. I like something about the way he says it.

He thinks I'm crazy. No one has ever called me crazy before, mostly because I'm not. I get straight As. I don't drink. I don't do drugs. I don't even stay out after curfew. In fact, the craziest thing I've probably ever done is get involved with Aiden.

He holds his hand out, and pulls me up. I brush off the back of my jeans, hoping there isn't a big grass stain on the back.

“I’ll text you later?” I say to Ry.

He looks confused, and I’m not sure, but I think also a little hurt, probably because he knows I haven’t told him about Aiden. But all he says is, “Sure.” And then Aiden’s pulling me away.

Ry

I had the chance to kiss Brooke in the eighth grade. We went to the end-of-the-year dance together, double dating with Natalia and Frank Smith, and when the night was over, she tried to get me to kiss her in the parking lot behind the gym.

I wanted to do it, but I was too chicken shit. She would have been my first kiss, and so instead of going for it, I panicked. What if I'd done it wrong and she'd laughed, or even worse, told everyone I was a horrible kisser? So I said I just wanted to be friends. Since it was eighth grade, Brooke was over it like two days later. But I wasn't.

Which is why I'm still thinking about it now, five years later, when I'm outside of Emily Mulally's house, lying on the lawn all by myself, watching Brooke leave with Aiden James. Aiden James? What the fuck is up with that?

Aiden James is such a doucher. Not to mention that Brooke's most likely been hooking up with him for a while, and just happened not to mention it to me.

Why wouldn't she mention it to me? Does she know I like her? Aiden James! I really cannot believe that shit. I'm starting to get really worked up out here, thinking about how I'm going to have to end up kicking that dude's ass, when Trip Conrad comes outside.

"Yo, Ry," he says.

"Yo, Trip," I say. I'm on the grass looking up at the sky, but Trip doesn't comment. Probably he doesn't notice.

"You gonna do my paper?" he asks.

"Yes, Trip," I say patiently.

“When?”

“Soon.”

“Right now?”

“You want me to do your paper now?” Trip and I work together at the Cinema Six. I was scheduled to close tonight, but I convinced Trip to let me leave early so I could come to the party, mostly because I wanted to see Brooke.

She’s been acting kind of weird lately, and I wanted to spend some time with her and make sure she was okay. (Of course, now I know why she’s been acting weird. She had a secret douches boyfriend.) Anyway, when I got out of work I spent like two hours showering and getting ready, so by the time I got here, Trip was already out of work, which made the whole point of me doing his paper in order to switch with him kind of pointless. But still. A deal’s a deal, I guess.

“Yeah.” Trip belches, then blows it into the wind. The dude’s disgusting.

“It’s due Monday.”

“Monday?!” Trip conveniently forgot to pass along this little tidbit of information when we were working out the details of our arrangement.

“Yeah,” Trip says. “And I’m going out of town tomorrow with my family.”

“I’ll drop it off at your house in the morning.”

“You can’t do that, numbskull. What if my mom sees it? Plus I have to be there, you know, watching you write it in case Mr. Momsen starts asking me questions about it after the fact.”

“Fine,” I say, getting up. “Should we go to your house or mine?”

“I’m not leaving this party,” Trip says. “Emily said we can use her dad’s office.”

Great.

**

A few minutes later, I’m sitting at Emily’s dad’s big oak desk with Trip Conrad breathing his disgusting beer breath all over me.

“Don’t make it sound too smart,” he instructs. “Because we don’t want to get caught.”

“Yeah,” I say, “Sure.” I rub my eyes. “What’s this paper about again?”

Trip’s mouth drops open. “You don’t even know what the fucking paper is about? Jesus, Ry, how are you going to write the damn thing?”

“You’re right,” I agree amicably. “You should probably do it yourself.” I start to push the chair back and stand up, but Trip stops me.

“No, no, no,” he says. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it. The paper’s on the themes of *The Great Gatsby*.”

“Piece of cake,” I say. I read *The Great Gatsby* last year. I don’t remember much about the themes, but really, how hard can it be? Half the time teachers probably don’t even read our stupid papers. They just skim to make sure you have some smart ideas and a good grasp of the English language. Bonus points if you can sound smart without actually being smart. Which I’m actually quite good at.

“Don’t make it sound too good, though,” Trip says. He lies down on the leather couch against the wall and starts throwing a wadded up piece of paper up in the air

and then catching it.

“Yes, Trip,” I say. “Don’t worry, I won’t make it too good.”

I’m finishing up the thesis paragraph when the door to the office opens, and Maci Mulvaney comes walking in. Maci works with us at the multiplex, and, uh, I think she might have a thing for me. Not that she’s ever come out and said this, but every time we work together, she pours slushies for herself and ends up sucking on the straw in what I’m sure she thinks is a very seductive matter. Plus she drops a lot of things, more than a normal person should unless they have some kind of neurological disorder. Then she bends over in front of me to pick them up.

I’m not sure if she knows how obvious she’s being. And it’s not that I don’t enjoy the show (if nothing else, it makes the time at work go flying by), but being in love with Brooke makes it hard to be interested in any other girl. Not that I haven’t tried. There was Jessica Morrison in ninth grade, and Veronica Bistix last year, and a handful of girls I’d kissed along the way. But no one like Brooke.

“Hey,” Maci says. “What are you guys doing in here?”

“Ry’s doing my paper,” Trip says.

Maci, true to her character, doesn’t ask why. She just crosses the room to where I’m sitting and leans over the back of my chair, so that her boobs are practically in my face. Her long red hair brushes against my shoulder, and her breath is sweet on my cheek when she says, “What’s the paper about?”

“The Great Gatsby.” God, I’m a real disappointment to mankind. Maci’s pretty hot, and she’s wearing one of those dresses that’s so short and tight it’s probably supposed to be a shirt. But all I can think about is Brooke, out with Aiden. I wonder what they’re doing right now. If they’re kissing. If he’s running his fingers through her long dark hair, if he’s touching her face. I wonder if he’s getting her naked. Please God, don’t let him be getting her naked. I really want to bash that fucker’s

face in. It's going to make things really uncomfortable during biology. Aiden's my lab partner.

"Wow," Maci says, reading what I've written. "It's really good so far."

"It is?" Trip jumps off the couch and comes over. "Lemme see." He reads the paragraph, his lips moving. "I dunno," he says, frowning. "It sounds a little too smart."

"It's not too smart," Maci says. She shoots Trip a look. "But I can help dumb it down." She sounds proud of this fact, and she perches on the arm of my chair. The short red dress she's wearing hikes up even higher, exposing an expanse of creamy white thigh. "You should go," she tells Trip. "Me and Ry can finish it."

Trip shrugs. "Just email it to my phone before you leave," he says. "So I can check it."

"Of course," I say like it's a given. Trip closes the door behind him.

"Hi," Maci says to me breathily. Uh-oh.

"Um, hi," I say dumbly.

And then before I even know it's coming, she kisses me.

Brooke

There are two things to know.

The first is that I met Aiden at a party exactly like this a few months ago.

Well, not met met. I mean, I already knew him because we'd a couple of classes together sophomore and junior years, although we'd hardly ever spoken.

The only reason I'd gone to that party was because Natalia wanted to go (what's up with me going to parties at Emily's house because my friends want to?

--that definitely has to be remedied), but then her mom had called this big family meeting so that her parents could tell her they were moving. She texted me to let me know she wasn't going to be able to come, but by then I was already there, standing in Emily's kitchen by myself.

Aiden saw me and asked if I wanted a drink, so I had him get me a cranberry juice, and I told him I didn't drink because of my dad. My parents had just told me a week before that they were separating, and it felt kind of good to trash my dad, even if it was to someone I hardly knew. We ended up in Aiden's truck at the end of the night, making out, and ever since then, he's kept me guessing and obsessing, constantly checking my phone and my email, waiting for him to make contact. We don't talk in school, and we hardly ever go anywhere unless it's somewhere we can make out. I'm not as bothered by this arrangement as I probably should be.

The other thing to know is that I lied when I said my family life scores a C

on the report card of my life. If I'm being completely honest, it gets a big fat F.

My parents are getting separated, that part is true. But it's not normal teenage angst stuff. At least, it doesn't feel that way to me, mostly because of the car. A

2003 Dodge Neon, to be exact. My mom's 2003 Dodge Neon that was supposed to be mine. But the Neon is in my dad's name, and now that they're working on figuring out what belongs to who, my dad has the car, and says he's not giving it to me unless my mom cuts him a deal on the child support. Which is ridiculous, since my dad doesn't even need the money. (Seriously, he doesn't. He has enough money. I saw his tax return once when I was looking for stamps in his office, and I was kind of shocked. My dad's always acting like we're about one step away from the poor house.)

It hasn't escaped me that it's actually kind of funny that the big point of contention in my parents' divorce is a Dodge Neon. It's not even something worth getting upset about, like a BMW, or a Range Rover, or even a nice Sonata or something. But that Neon means trips to New Hampshire to see Natalia. It means getting out of the house when I need to. It means not having to ride the bus home on the days Ry has to work and can't give me a ride. But my dad is determined to hurt my mom, and in the meantime, he obviously doesn't really care if he's hurting me.

Anyway, I'm thinking about all of this as I follow Aiden around the side of Emily Mulally's house. Something about the way Ry just looked at me now made my stomach feel all flippy and anxious. With Natalia gone, he's probably my best friend right now, and he had no idea about me and Aiden, and he has no idea about what's going on with my family. The thought makes me uncomfortable, but I can't quite figure out why.

"This party fucking blows," Aiden says. He's leading me past Emily Mulally's garden. Which has a lot of sunflowers in it, which is kind funny, since when I think of Emily Mulally, I definitely do not think of sunflowers. More like black roses.

"It is a pretty shitty party," I agree, even though I'm not sure it's true. I haven't really given the party enough of a chance. He's leading me down the driveway now, and toward his truck. This is how it is with Aiden – he leads, and I follow. "Where are we going?"

“Somewhere else.”

All righty then.

I climb into his truck, and he reaches over to get his GPS out of the glove compartment, and his hand brushes against my thigh, and God, I want him to kiss me. Before Aiden, I'd never been really kissed. There was Jacob in seventh grade, and I went out with Jim Hughes for most of sophomore year, but kissing Aiden... kissing Aiden is like ecstasy. He runs his fingers through my hair and looks into my eyes and he has stubble on his chin and he makes me feel like I'm the only girl in the whole world. Of course, when we're not kissing, he makes me feel like I'm not in the world at all, i.e., he ignores me.

He drives to the car wash, which is both surprising and not surprising at the same time. It's a weird place to go on a Friday night, but not so weird if you know Aiden. He doesn't like to go places by himself, which goes against his tough-guy exterior. We sit there while the suds bubble up outside and the big huge brushes come down and rub all over the car.

“So,” Aiden says, “What's new in Brooke-land?”

Something tells me he doesn't care that I got an A on my English test, so I look out the window and shrug. “Not much.”

“Nothing?”

“No.”

“Come on, Brooke,” he says, and this time he seems annoyed. “There has to be something.”

“Well,” I say. “I made chicken marsala for dinner tonight.”

“Oh yeah? All by yourself?”

He’s mocking me, and so I just turn my head and look out the window.

Aiden moves across the seat then, and kisses me. His lips taste like salt, and his tongue tastes like bubble gum. I fall into the kiss, like I always do, forgetting about everything that’s going on with my dad, everything that’s going on with my whole family, forgetting the fact that Natalia is gone. That’s how Aiden makes me feel – like there’s just him and me and the kisses.

We kiss like that for a long time, so long that finally, a car pulls up behind us and starts honking.

“Yeah, yeah, I hear you,” Aiden says, but he takes his time pulling out of the car wash.

“Where are we going now?” I ask.

“Back to the party.”

I want to ask him why we left the party in the first place, but I already know the answer. Like I said, Aiden doesn’t like to do things alone. He wanted me to go with him to get his car washed. Which you’d think is sweet, but I’m not naïve enough to think he was desperate for my company. He had no one else to go with, and that’s that. Still, him approaching me in Emily’s backyard was the first time we’ve ever really spoken in “public.”

I settle back in my seat, wondering what’s going to happen when we’re back there.

Ry

I pull away from the kiss, not sure exactly how to handle this. I mean, Maci's a nice girl and everything. At least, she's always been nice to me. And I don't want to crush her spirit. But I don't have to worry, because it seems as if Maci doesn't know I pulled away. I'm pretty sure she thinks that we just kissed, and now we're done.

"So," she says, smiling and batting her eyelashes at me. "Should we finish up the paper so we can get out of here?"

I'm not sure if she means get out of here like, out of here and back to the party, or like, out of here so we can go and have sex somewhere. The latter is definitely not an option, so I say, "Yeah, because I really have to ... " Shit.

What is something I'd have to do this late at night? "...get home to babysit my little brother."

"You have to babysit your little brother?" She frowns, and I swear to God her dress is so tight that even that little movement makes it slide up another inch.

"Yeah."

"Isn't your brother like fourteen?"

"Yes," I say, remembering that Jack's come into my work sometimes when Maci's there. "But he gets scared being home alone. So I have to get home and keep him company."

"I'll go with you," she decides.

"I don't know if that's such a great idea."

“Why not?” Her green eyes narrow at me suspiciously.

“Well, because my parents would flip out.”

“Parents love me.” She readjusts her dress, this time the top in an effort to keep her boobs from toppling out. I highly doubt my parents, and anyone else’s for that matter, would be psyched to see her showing up with their son. She’s like a walking sign blinking “You better make sure your son knows about safe sex or there’s going to be big, big trouble in his future!”

“Um,” I say, “Well, we’ll see.”

She seems satisfied by this, so we go back to the paper. And when I say

“we” I mean me. It actually would have been easier to do this paper without her.

She keeps piping up and telling me what to write, even when it doesn’t make any sense.

Twenty minutes later, we haven’t made much progress.

“Yo,” Trip says, opening the door and poking his head in. “You guys are still in here?” A smile plays on his lips, like he knows what we’ve been up to.

“Yes,” Maci says. “We’re still working.”

Trip doesn’t take the hint. He opens the door even further, and that’s when I see Brooke go walking down the hall behind him. What is she doing back here? Did something happen between her and Aiden? I’ll kill that motherfucker.

“I gotta take a break,” I say, standing up and almost dumping Maci off the side of the chair.

“What do you mean a break?” Maci huffs.

“Yeah, what do you mean a break?” Trip asks.

“Don’t worry,” I say, “I’ll be right back.”

I’m out the door before they can protest. I head down the hall in the direction Brooke was going, but I don’t see her. I can’t find her, I don’t know where she is. I pull out my phone, thinking that I should text her. And then, through the crowd, I see Aiden James’s stupid face bobbing toward me.

I start walking in his direction, rage burning through my veins as I go.

When I get close, I push past him, jostling his elbow a little harder than normal.

“Hey, man,” he says. “Watch it.”

“Sorry.” I shrug. “I didn’t see you.” But from the way I say it, he can tell that I did see him and that I just don’t give a fuck.

“What’s your problem?” He’s readjusting his stupid white t-shirt that he always wears over his stupid ratty jeans and his stupid scuffed up boots.

“What are you doing with her?” I ask.

“What?”

“You heard me.” We stand there, staring at each other, in that weird zone guys sometimes get into when they’re on the brink of a fight. Truthfully, Aiden could probably kick my ass. Not because he’s that much bigger than me, but because he’s the type of guy who gets crazy. I hit the gym once in a while, but I haven’t been in a fight since sixth grade. And that was with my brother.

“No,” he says. “I don’t think I did.” He goes to move by me, but I grab his shirt, twisting the material in my hand.

“If you hurt her,” I say. “I’ll kill you.”

And then I let him go. He doesn’t care, I can tell he doesn’t care, that he thinks it’s a joke, that he probably doesn’t even know who I am, even though I’m her best friend, and that to me, is fucked up. Not on his part, but on Brooke’s.

But anyway, he should care, because he really has no idea what I’m capable of, and if he fucks with her even a little bit, I’ll fuck with him right back.

I push through the party and go to find Brooke.

Brooke

Once we're back inside the party, Aiden abandons me at the door and moves to the back of the house, where a bunch of his friends are hanging out and smoking pot in the sunroom.

And I walk down the hall and return to Gabriella and Paige.

"Where the hell have you been?" Paige demands. She pushes her long blonde curls away from her face, her bangle bracelets sliding down her wrist.

"In the backyard," I say. It's not a complete lie. I was in the backyard, even if I was somewhere else after that.

"Well, you missed it," Paige reports. "Gabriella flashed the crowd!"

"You did?" This was highly slutty behavior, even for Gab.

"Not on purpose," Gabriella says. "My shirt just... slipped." Her face flushes red, but it doesn't seem like it's from embarrassment. More like excitement.

"Who saw?" I ask, interested in spite of myself.

"A lot of people," Paige reports. She takes a sip of the drink she's holding and looks at Gabriella for confirmation.

Gab nods. "Almost everyone that was in the room."

"That's because she let her shirt hang for, like, an extra second even after she realized what was going on."

"I did not!" Gabriella shrieks, but it's halfhearted, and she's smirking, so I know she

did. Not that I can blame her. Gabriella doesn't have to worry about any Tara Reid type embarrassment when it comes to her boobs. I've seen her in a bathing suit enough times to know she has nothing to be ashamed of.

"What are you guys talking about?" Ry asks, appearing next to us. He holds out a glass of cranberry juice to me, and I take it gratefully. I always drink cranberry juice at parties. Usually I bring my own, but Emily Mulally's house always has a fully stocked bar. Cranberry juice is a good thing to drink if you want to look like you're drinking, but not really be drinking. Otherwise, you end up getting the "Why aren't you drinking, let me get you a drink ohmigod, why don't you drink?" Which is annoying.

"Oh, you missed it?" I ask, deciding to ignore the weird feeling that passed between us earlier when we were outside with Aiden. Why should I feel weird? I don't have to tell Ry everything. I don't tell anyone everything. Even Natalia. "Gabs apparently flashed the whole party."

"Not the whole party," she says. "Just the room." But she says it like she wouldn't have minded flashing the whole party.

"Wow," Ry says. "Are you going to do it again?"

She punches him playfully in the arm.

"Hey, Brooke," Ry says. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

"Umm..." Obviously he wants to ask me about Aiden, and I'm just not ready to talk about that. "How about later?" Later meaning, you know, never.

"How about now?"

I'm about to protest again, but Gabriella and Paige are looking at us curiously, and the last thing I need is for Ry to ask me about Aiden in front of them, because

they're the last people I want knowing. So when Ry takes my hand and pulls me into Emily Mulally's bedroom, I follow him.

**

Ry knows I lied, and not just about Aiden, because when he shuts the door to Emily's room, instead of asking me about Aiden, he says, "Brooke?" and crosses his arms over his chest. It's like he's trying to be gentle with me instead of calling me out, which is somehow even worse.

"Ry?" I counter. I move over to Emily's vanity and open up her jewelry box. Emily is the kind of girl who buys different jewelry for every outfit. Really pretty stuff, too, like an aquamarine dolphin ring and a southwestern style glass beaded bracelet.

"What's going on with you?" He moves over and sits down on Emily's bed.

"Nothing," I say. But somehow, for some reason, my eyes are filling with tears.

And then he's behind me, and I'm turning around, and I just want to tell him everything, about Aiden, about my parents, about missing Natalia so much it hurts.

"Brooke," he says. "It's me. You can tell me, it's okay."

I squeeze my eyes shut and turn back around, putting the bracelet I'm holding back in Emily's jewelry box. "It's nothing," I say.

"Brooke."

"It's stupid."

"That's okay."

I look at him, and there's softness in his eyes. "Remember the first day we met?" I

ask. I push past him and over to the bed, because his closeness is making me nervous.

“Yeah.” He leans back against the vanity and grins. “How could I forget?

You asked me to the eighth grade dance.”

“Yeah, on a dare,” I say. “Which so doesn’t count.” At the end of eighth grade, Natalia and I dared each other to ask a guy of the other one’s choosing to the end-of-the-year dance. But we kept fighting over which guys were off-limits (Natalie was trying to get me to ask Julian Finch, which wasn’t really fair since he smelled like tuna fish), until finally we just decided that the next guys to walk through the doors of the library where we were sitting were going to get asked.

And when it was my turn, Ry walked in. I went up to him and said, “This is going to sound totally random, but do you want to go to the eighth grade dance with me?” First he asked me my name. Then I asked him his. And then he said yes. We went to the dance, and I wore a black dress and at the end of the night I tried to kiss him, and Ry gently told me he only liked me as a friend. I was over it by the next day, because that’s how it was in eighth grade, and we’ve been BFF

ever since.

“Still,” he says. “You tried to kiss me.”

“You would have been my first French kiss,” I say. “And since you rejected me, now it’s forever going to be Trey Wilkins.” I wrinkle up my nose.

Then I reach down and pull my cell out of my purse, wondering if Aiden’s going to text me soon. That’s our usual pattern. He’ll text me at the end of the night when he’s done doing whatever he’s been up to with whatever nefarious characters he’s been hanging out with, and I’ll meet up with him, and we’ll go somewhere, either back to my house, where he’ll climb up over my deck and into my room, or an

empty parking lot and make out until my lips are raw and my chin is bruised from his stubble.

But there's no text from Aiden.

"Waiting for a text?" Ry asks easily.

"No," I say. "I mean, yes, but..."

"Brooke," Ry says again. "What are you doing with him?"

"My parents," I say, before I can stop myself, even though my parents have nothing to do with Aiden, and even though I haven't told anyone this, not even Natalia when she calls me late at night and we end up on the phone until three in the morning, not even over the text messages that we exchange all day.

"What about them?" Ry asks. He moves over and sits down next to me on the bed.

"They're getting divorced," I say, even though of course he already knows that. But something about this conversation and how it's going is making me feel anxious, and the fact that he's so close to me is making me even more anxious, and so I stand up and walk back over to Emily's jewelry box. I slide a garnet ring onto my finger and hold my hand out, admiring it in the mirror.

"I know," Ry says. And he waits.

"And so...they're trying to figure out what to do. Like, with their, um, money and stuff." I slide the ring off my finger and put it back in the box. I can't turn around. If I turn around I'll have to look at Ry, and if I look at Ry, I might not be able to tell him about this, and I want to, I want to tell him. I can picture him, sitting there on the bed, his face serious as he waits for me to go on. "And you know my mom's car? It was supposed to be mine. But he's.. he's not giving it to us, he's going to sell it."

“To who?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Put it on craig’s list or something, I guess.” Now I have a ruby ring in my hand. It’s probably fake, because Emily is rich but not that rich, and if she had a real ruby I would hope she wouldn’t be stupid enough to leave it out while she was having a party. I slip it on my finger.

The bed rustles behind me, and suddenly, Ry’s behind me. His hands are on my shoulders, and I turn around, and bury my face in his chest. “It’s okay,” he says, “It’s going to be okay.” He’s stroking my hair, and I love the fact that he didn’t ask any questions, that he knows that it’s not about some stupid junker car, it’s about the fact that my dad would rather sell it than give it to me, that he doesn’t even care enough about me to think about how this whole thing is effecting me. “I know,” I say. “I know it will be okay, but it just sucks right now.”

I pull away and wipe my tears with my fingers. “This is crazy,” I say, laughing a little, “Crying in Emily Mulally’s room.”

“It’s not crazy.” Ry disappears into Emily’s bathroom and returns a few seconds later with a handful of tissues. I blow my nose and wipe my face.

“I’m a disaster,” I say, pushing my hair back away from my face.

“No,” Ry says softly. “No, you’re not.” And it’s something about the way he says it that makes me nervous. Really nervous.

“Yes,” I say. But it hardly comes out, because there’s something in the air, all of a sudden, something palpable and electric, and somehow, I know what’s coming.

“What’s going on with Aiden?” Ry asks. “I mean, you don’t have to tell me, but--”

“We’re hanging out.” It’s not a lie. We are hanging out.

“Hanging out like what kind of hanging out?”

“I don’t know,” I say, suddenly annoyed, and my tone makes the vibe in the room go from electric to tense. “Just hanging out.” I wipe my eyes one more time, then bend down and check for stray traces of mascara in the mirror over Emily’s vanity.

“Why?” Ry asks.

“Why what?”

“Why are you hanging out with him?”

“Because I want to.”

He’s back behind me now, and I turn around. “Brooke,” he says. It’s the way he says my name that lets me know. I turn to him, my heart pounding. And now his lips are only a centimeter from mine, but this is Ry and we’re here and oh my god this is weird and I’m not sure if I like it but do I and I never realized he has nice lips but what about Aiden and before I know what I’m doing I’m stepping away from him.

“I should go.” And then I’m running down the stairs, down the hallway and back out to the party.

Ry

She left. She left *again*. I don't know why or where or what the fuck is going on, just that she left. She told me all that stuff about her family, and then she just left. I look around Emily's room, feeling depressed. I should have told her. I wanted to tell her, I almost kissed her, she had to have known.

And then I just let her walk out. I go searching for her, back out into the party, realizing that my night has become all about chasing her, and not really caring. I spot her in the sunroom, and she's holding Aiden's hand and pulling him through the crowd and out the front door.

I watch her go, and I'm mad, but I'm more worried than anything.

After what she told me about her parents in the bedroom, about what she's been going through... God, how could I not have known all that? I don't know what else to do, so I pull my phone out and call Natalia.

But she doesn't answer. "Hey, it's Nat," her voicemail chirps, "Leave it."

"Hey, Natalia, it's Ry," I say, putting my finger in my ear and shouting to make sure I'm heard over the noise of the party. "I need to talk to you. Um, it's pretty important. Can you call me as soon as you get this? I don't care what time it is." I think about telling her it's about Brooke, but I don't want to make her too nervous, so finally I just say, "Thanks."

I haven't even clicked off when all of a sudden I feel someone's arms around my waist. I turn around, hoping it's Brooke.

"Heyyyyyy," Maci purrs into my ear. "Where did you go? I was waiting for you." She stamps her foot and puts a pout on her face.

“Sorry,” I say, detangling myself from her. “Listen, I’ll be right back.”

She starts to say something, but I put my finger to her lips. “Seriously, I will,” I say. “Now you stay here.” I make sure my tone is firm, so that she knows not to follow me, and then I head to the front hallway, where Gabriella and Paige are camped out, bitching and gossiping.

“Hey,” I say, “Do you guys know where Brooke went?”

“No,” Paige says.

“She keeps disappearing,” Gabriella says. “She’s, like, weird now.” She makes a face, like Brooke is defective or something.

I stare at her blankly. “She’s, like, weird now?”

“Yeah, ever since Natalia left.”

I realize I can’t really be mad at Gabriella and Paige for being so clueless, since I’ve noticed that Brooke’s “weird now” too and I hadn’t tried to talk to her about it until tonight.

“Yeah, well, she just left with Aiden James.” The words are out before I realize Brooke probably doesn’t want the two of them knowing about her and Aiden, but at this point, I don’t really care. I just want to find her. I pull my phone out and send her a text, asking her to please call me. Then I have a fucked up thought. What if now she knows that I like her, that I wanted to kiss her and so she left with Aiden because she wants nothing to do with me? What if we’re not even going to be friends anymore?

“Aiden James?” Paige gasps. “But he’s so icky!”

“Hot, though,” Gabriella says, then swigs more of her drink. It’s no wonder she

flashed the party earlier, with the way she's pounding them down.

"Yeah, well," I say. "If you see her, will you let her know I'm looking for her?"

"Sure," they say. But I doubt they will.

I take my phone out and think about texting Brooke again. I make my way to the back of the living room, where an empty seat is opening on the couch, and I plop myself down. This really is just my luck. Brooke has hardly dated anyone since I've known her, and now, when I finally get the courage to make a move, she's not only hooking up with someone else, but she's having a huge personal crisis. Talk about fucked up timing.

"There you are!"

Oh, Jesus Christ.

"Hi, Maci," I say cheerfully. "How are you?"

"Are you trying to avoid me?" She slides down on the couch, right in between me and the person next to me, who gets pushed off to the side and then gets up in disgust.

"Of course not," I lie.

"Good." She leans into me, and I have to admit that she smells good.

Really good, like some kind of fruity perfume, and her hair is very soft and shiny.

Fuck Brooke, I think to myself, fuck Aiden James and fuck this whole party. The thought is kind of freeing. Why should I get all caught up in Brooke when she's never shown the least bit of interest in me, like, ever? Why should I get so worried about what's she's thinking, why should I even worry about her and what's going on

with her and her family when she obviously doesn't even give a shit about me?

"Did you know," Maci says, "That I have a crush on you?" She licks her lips.

I feign shock. "You do?"

"Yes," she says. Her lips are right on my ear now, and she kisses my earlobe softly. "I have for a really long time."

I pull my phone out of my pocket, checking to see if Brooke's called or texted. But there's nothing. And even though just a minute ago I was desperate to find her, I've had a couple of minutes to cool off, and now all I feel is anger.

Why should I be so worried about her after she ran out on me like that? Let her call Aiden if she needs to talk.

My hand hovers over the button to shut my phone off. I want to, but what if she's hurt or stranded and I'm the only one who can save her? Get real, Ry, I tell myself. You wouldn't be the only one who could help her. She'll call Gabriella or Paige. But what if something happened with her family? What if I'm the only one she wants to talk to? Have you ever been the only one she wants to talk to? the annoying voice in my head says.

Before I can decide what to do, Maci takes the phone out of my hand and shuts it off. "We don't want any interruptions," she says. She wrinkles up her nose, and I'm not sure if it's because she knows I'm checking for a call from another girl, or because she really just doesn't want any interruptions. Either way, whatever. I take the phone and slide it back into my pocket.

"So," I say. "Tell me about your crush." And then she climbs into my lap.

Brooke

I made Aiden take me to Jemima's diner. After being in Emily's room with Ry, my head was swirling with all kinds of crazy, dizzy thoughts, and all I wanted was to find Aiden and get the hell out of there. It kind of went against the rules of our whole relationship, which are basically that I leave him alone and wait for him to contact me. But I needed to get out of there, and I wanted to get out of there with him. I needed his kisses, his face, the way he makes me forget about everything.

So I pushed my way to the sunroom and through the wall of smoke and the smell of pot and over to where he was sitting on a lounge chair in the corner. I was almost right in front of him before I realized I could have just texted him.

But texting him sometimes doesn't work because I never know if he's going to text me back or not.

"Hey," I said. "Do you want to get out of here?" I was trying to sound confident and in control, like it didn't really matter to me if we left or not, and I must have pulled it off, because he shrugged and stood up.

I was almost expecting everyone to stare at us as we left, that it was going to be some big deal that we were actually finally being seen in public, but it wasn't. No one even cared.

So we climbed into his truck and I told him I wanted to eat, and so he drove to Jemima's. At first I was disappointed, because a diner is so not romantic and also because one time I made the mistake of ordering the shrimp dinner here and ended up puking in the bushes on my way out. But then I realized it's probably the only thing that's open. At least, that's what I'm telling myself as we push through the doors and into the cool air-conditioning.

"Do you come here a lot?" I ask Aiden once we're settled into one of the orange

vinyl booths.

“Not really,” he says.

“Oh.” There’s a long pause that’s finally broken by the waitress coming over to take our order.

“What will you have?” she asks. She’s in my class, and I think her name’s Kylie or Kimberly or something with a K, but she looks right through me like I’m not even there. In fact, it’s kind of anti-climatic, this whole being out with Aiden thing. I kind of wanted to cause a stir. All I’m causing is myself a bunch of disappointment.

“Um,” I say. “I’ll have the fruit salad.” I figure fruit should be safe. How can they screw fruit up? They just cut it up and put it in a bowl. Although. I guess they could leave it out on the counter until it gets e. coli or something. Also it might not be fresh. I have a mental image of an open can of fruit sitting on the counter while Kylie/Kimberly chats away on her cell phone, letting the can become a breeding ground of bacteria and microbes.

“I’ll have a salad,” Aiden says.

“A salad?” I ask in surprise.

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “What’s wrong with a salad?”

“Nothing,” I say. Wow. A salad isn’t really that manly. It’s kind of surprising. I’d expected him to order sausage or bacon or maybe one of those 9.99 steaks.

“You think salads are girly?” he asks.

“No,” I say. Yes.

“So what’s new?” Aiden asks once Kylie/Kimberly is gone.

“You already asked me that.”

“I did?”

“Yeah.” And then I look at him. Really look at him. And I ask myself why I’m getting all giddy around him when all we’ve done is make out. We’ve never gone on a date. We’ve never held hands in school, we’ve never even talked at school. And yet I’ve spent the better part of three months getting all worked up over him. Isn’t that weird? For some reason, at that moment, Ry’s face flashes through my mind.

Don’t try to explain it, I tell myself, it’s not about Ry being nicer or Aiden being bad. It’s about chemistry or physical attraction or whatever weird thing that causes us to want certain people. Scientists have been trying to figure it out for years. There’s nothing wrong with me except for the fact that I’m a normal teenage girl.

When his salad comes, Aiden pours honey mustard dressing over it and then wolfs it down in two bites. He hardly even waits for me to finish my fruit salad before he’s whisking me back to his truck. At least he pays the check, throwing a few crumpled bills onto the table. I make a mental note to apologize to Kylie/Kimberly next time I see her for the crappy tip he left.

“That was fun,” I try once we’re in the car.

“Yeah,” he says, not sounding like he really means it. He drives to the corner of the parking lot, then turns off the ignition.

“Come here,” he says, and then reaches over, pulling me across the seat. I crawl onto his lap, and he kisses me on the mouth. His tongue is against mine, and his hands are running up and down my sides and it feels good and perfect and I sink into him. This is why I could never be with Ry, this this this is why Aiden and I make sense, this this this is what I want to feel.

I get lost in the kisses for a while, and then finally pull back to catch my breath. My eyes open lazily, and when they do, Aiden's staring past me out the front windshield of his car. I turn around to see what he's looking at. And that's when I see Kylie/Kimberly, getting out of work and sashaying across the parking lot. And Aiden is watching her. And not just, like, watching her. Watching her watching her. Like, checking her out watching her.

It's like a slap. Not because I'm even that upset about him looking at someone else. Because in that second, it's like I've woken up. And I realize what it is. The reason I like being with Aiden, the reason I like kissing him, making out with him, waiting for him. And that's because it helps me not to feel.

I mean, obviously I feel something. My body is most definitely responding to his. But that's it. It's all physical. And when I'm with him, I don't feel anything else. And I don't think about anything, either. I don't worry about my family, I don't miss Natalia, nothing. It's like a void. That's why you like it, a voice in my head whispers. You like it because you don't feel anything.

To think that about myself makes me feel extremely freaked out (it's one thing to hook up with an inappropriate boy because you're having a hard time, it's quite another to think that maybe you're just a big emotional wasteland), and I roll over the gearshift and back onto the passenger side. My breath catches in my throat, and before I know what I'm doing, I'm pushing open the door and jumping out of the truck.

"What the hell are you doing?" Aiden asks.

I turn around, the truck door open, and I look at him. "Do you remember the first time we hooked up?"

"Brooke, don't be crazy. Get back in the car."

"Do you?" I press.

“Of course.” He rolls his eyes and a feeling of resignation passes over his face, like he’s expected this moment to come, like it was inevitable. And I guess it was, but not in the way he’s thinking.

“Why did I tell you? About the reason I don’t drink?” It’s a test. A test to see if he ever even listened to me. Not that it matters. My mind’s made up.

“What? Brooke, please, get in the car.” He’s looking at me like I’m nuts now, but I don’t care. I turn my back on him and walk quickly back toward the restaurant. When I look down at my phone, I see that Ry’s sent me a text, and I call him, but I get his voicemail, so I send him a text back.

“where r u?” And then I call Paige.

“Hello?” she screams into the phone, and I can hear the party sounds in the background, people and music and laughter. “Brooke?”

“Paige,” I say, “Paige, you have to come and get me.”

“Come and get you?”

“Yes,” I say. “Have you been drinking?”

“No,” she says. “I’m the designated. Where are you? Ry said you left with Aiden James! Since when is that a thing?”

“Can you come get me or not?”

“Where are you?”

“Jemima’s Diner,” I say. “And please, hurry.” I hang up the phone, knowing that when she gets here she’s going to have like five million questions, but I don’t really

care. I just need to see Ry.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Aiden asks. He’s circled back around, and pulled his truck up alongside the sidewalk where I’m now standing. “Get back in the car.”

“Sorry,” I say. “I... I can’t.” A breeze moves through the air, and pushes my hair across my face. Aiden stares at me for a second, then opens his mouth like he wants to say something. But then he changes his mind, and zooms by me and out of the parking lot.

And then I walk back into Jemima’s to wait for Paige.

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“So let me get this straight,” Paige says. “You were hooking up with him for three months?”

“Yeah,” I say. “About.” The stoplight in front of us turns red, and I curse at it silently. Ry never stays late at parties, he hardly ever even goes to parties, and I need to get back before he leaves. If I don’t, if I can’t see him tonight, I might lose my nerve.

“And you never told us? Does Natalia know?”

I think about lying, but then decide to go for the truth. “Yes.”

She looks hurt, but then she nods, like she can accept it. “And Ry knows?”

“Yes.” I swallow. “But he just found out tonight. By accident, kind of.”

“Okay.” She thinks about it. “So are you guys, like, a thing?”

“No,” I say. “Obviously not, since I just crawled out of his car like a crazy person in

the middle of a make-out session.”

“You what? Brooke, what the hell is going on with you?” She’s turning onto Emily Mulally’s street now, and I’m already unbuckling my seatbelt even though there are tons of crazy teenagers congregated at Emily’s house, and so if there was ever a place deemed most likely to get into an accident, it would be here. But I don’t care, I’m feeling reckless, a real kind of reckless, a real I-want-to-take-a-risk-and-put-my-feelings-out-there kind of reckless, not the kind of reckless that makes you hook up with a guy you don’t even like.

I have the door open before Paige even stops the car, and I rush up the driveway with her screaming, “Brooke! Seriously, are you out of your mind?

Where are you going?”

I really do want to talk to her later, to explain what was going on with me and Aiden, and to let her know about what’s happening with my parents. I mean, she left the party to come and pick me up, she’s at least entitled to that. I wonder how much of me being annoyed with Paige and Gabriella had to do with not wanting to get too close – if I told myself they were clueless, I didn’t have to worry about feeling guilty for keeping secrets from them.

I’m elbowing through the party now, pushing bodies out of my way, looking for Ry everywhere. Seriously, I’m kind of crazed – its’ a little bit like the real life version of the last-minute airport scene in every cheesy romantic comedy.

But I don’t see him and I’m checking my phone again to see if maybe he’s called me or texted me but he hasn’t and I can’t stand it and I’m wondering if I can somehow get to his house, if maybe Paige will take me, if she’ll do it without asking too many questions, because I know I’m going to have to tell her eventually, but if I talk about it too much right now I might lose my nerve.

And then, just when I’m starting to wonder if maybe I’ve blown it, and losing my

nerve and wondering if the whole thing is a mistake, I see him. In the corner of Emily's living room, way in the back on one of the khaki-colored couches. I start to cross the room toward him, and then I stop. Because Maci Mulvaney is sitting in his lap. She's leaning into him, her long strawberry blonde hair falling over his face as he laughs at something she said.

I stop. I turn around, wanting to block it out, telling myself this was a mistake, and that I need to get home, I need to go to sleep, I need to just --But then, before I can stop myself, before my thoughts take over, I turn back around . Because I'm sick of not feeling. And I march right up to him and I say, "Ry? I need to talk to you." And then before I can worry about if anything's going on with him and Maci, or what his friends are going to think, or if Ry really still likes me or if I've messed it all up by walking out on him earlier or the million other things that are swirling in my head, I take his hand and pull him outside to the front porch.

"Brooke," Ry says when we're out there, "Look, I know I texted you, but you don't have to -- "

"Why do you like me?" I blurt. It's a version of the game we play, where we ask each other questions about things that have nothing to do with what we're talking about, but this one is the most important of all the questions I've ever asked.

"Why do I like you?" He looks thrown.

"Yes," I say. "I mean, you do like me, right? You were going to kiss me in there, in Emily's room, you were going to" My words disappear into the warm night air, and I wonder if maybe I've gotten it all wrong, if maybe I've imagined the whole thing. But no, he sent me a text after it happened, and he wouldn't have done that if he didn't like me. Right?

He sighs. "Brooke, what are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

“What are you doing?” he repeats. “You just walked out of here with Aiden, and if I’m not mistaken, I can tell what you two were up to.”

I look down at my wrinkled shirt and my generally disheveled appearance.

I smooth my hair down. “We weren’t... I mean, we were but we....” I take a deep breath. “I pushed you away,” I say.

“Yeah.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “No shit.”

“But it wasn’t you, it was me. I was scared. Aiden, he...it was safe, mostly because it was just...wrong... I didn’t feel anything.”

I’m babbling now, and Ry shouldn’t know what I’m talking about, because I sound like a crazy person, but something in his eyes softens, and I feel like maybe he does get it, that he does know. Because that’s the thing about Ry.

He always knows. He takes a step toward me. “Why didn’t you tell me about your parents?” he asks.

“I don’t know.” I look down at the grass, but Ry reaches out and tilts my chin up toward his.

“What are you afraid of?” he whispers.

“I don’t know,” I say again. “I guess maybe of dealing with it, of facing it, of having to hurt about all of it.”

“Are you still?”

“Still what?”

“Still afraid.”

“I’m working on it.”

He grins, and then his lips are on mine, and it’s nothing like kissing Aiden, This how it is to be kissed, wonderful and perfect and real. I pull away, and the breeze blows my hair across my face.

“You want to get out of here?” Ry asks.

“Where will we go?”

“Jemima’s?”

I grin. “Will you order a salad?”

“A salad?” He looks horrified.

“Let’s go,” I say. “I’m starving.”

Ry

I don't order a salad. I have a cheeseburger. And it's the best one I've ever eaten.

GETTING CLOSE

(At the Party)

by Lauren Barnholdt

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Gabriella

I broke up with my boyfriend this morning, and it's kind of like a dirty little secret. If I told people, they'd start freaking out, and asking me why, and how, and ohmigod you and Landon were the perfect couple and blah blah blah.

It's not anyone else's business, and I really shouldn't have to deal with all the questions, but everyone is always so annoying when you break up with someone. (Not that I've broken up with that many people, but I've seen enough relationships go down to know that's how it goes.) For the first few days after the break up, people just talk about it constantly, bothering you until you break down and tell them what happened.

Not that I'm above stuff like that. I mean, take right now, for example.

I'm on my way to this party at Emily Mulally's house with my two best friends, Paige and Brooke, and me and Paige are gossiping about this guy we know, Nathan Rudowski, and his girlfriend, Alexa Ronson. Supposedly Nathan and Alexa are having major problems, and they're about to break up because all Nathan wants to do is go to strip clubs.

"I wouldn't care if my boyfriend went to a strip club," Paige says. She tucks a strand of blonde hair behind her ear and then turns the steering wheel, pulling her car onto Emily's street. "As long as he came home to me, it wouldn't matter."

"Strip clubs are so sleazy," I say, wrinkling my nose.

“You’ve never been to a strip club,” Paige points out.

“I’ve seen them on tv. And I’ve heard stories about them. And it’s all a bunch of girls getting naked and then offering to give guys blow jobs for money.”

In the sideview mirror, I see Brooke rolling her eyes at me from the passenger seat. Whatever. If she wants to be naïve about the inner workings of strip clubs, that’s her business.

“Would you care if Landon went to one?” Paige asks.

“Of course I would,” I say, not sure if it’s a lie or not. On one hand, I broke up with him this morning, so I wouldn’t technically really have a right to be mad if he went to a strip club. On the other hand, it would be pretty upsetting if he was at a strip club, because I’d like to think that the day we broke up didn’t send him flying off into some stripper’s arms.

Although now that I think about it, isn’t that what guys do after they break up with someone? Get drunk and high and go watch random women get naked? It’s like the guy’s equivalent of eating ice cream and watching chick flicks. It figures that when a girl gets a broken heart, she does things that will cause her to get fat and compare herself to whatever perfect-looking Hollywood starlet is in the movie she’s watching, while guys get to go have naked chicks rub up on them. So unfair.

“Brooke?” Paige asks, pulling the car over and parking on the street a few houses away from Emily’s. She pulls down her visor mirror and starts playing around with her hair.

“What?” Brooke’s staring out the window now, looking moody. Being moody is, like, Brooke’s default ever since the fourth member of our group, Natalia, moved away right before the start of our senior year. Brooke still isn’t over it. Plus there’s some weird stuff going on with her family, I think, although she pretty much refuses to talk about it.

“Do you share Gabriella’s anti-feminist approach to strip clubs?” Paige asks.

“It’s not anti-feminist,” I say, opening the door and stepping out into Emily’s street. My high-heeled sandals make a satisfying clacking noise on the concrete. “In fact, it’s very feminist,” I say, “I don’t have a problem with women being strippers. I say the more power to them. What I have a problem with is my boyfriend going to look at naked women.”

“I’m with Paige,” Brooke says as we all clomp up toward the door. “I don’t think it’s a big deal.”

I roll my eyes at her back and want to point out that she doesn’t think anything is a big deal lately, but I know that won’t go over well. Brooke has been really resistant to talking about whatever’s going on with her, and recently she’s even started acting super annoyed whenever Paige and I even open our mouths. I take a deep breath and remind myself that she’s having a hard time, and that I should be understanding.

We’re at Emily’s front steps now, the sounds of the party drifting out and over the lawn. A wave of weird longing washes over me as I realize that I’m about to see Landon, but I shake it off and step into Emily’s house, telling myself that I’m the one who broke up with him. The break-up was my decision. I’d been thinking about it for a while, and it was the right thing to do. The complete right thing to do. Things had been weird between us for a while, and it just... it had to end.

We make our way through the loose knot of bodies that’s always right in front of the door at these stupid parties even though it makes no sense for people to stand there because hello, that’s how everyone gets in.

“I’m thirsty,” Paige says. “Should we go get a drink?”

Brooke just shrugs. Brooke doesn’t drink, which is fine for her, but tonight I am

definitely going to need a cocktail. Preferably more than one. So I say “Definitely,” and then I grab the back of Paige’s shirt so I don’t lose her as she navigates through the crowd. After a few seconds, I feel Brooke grab the back of my shirt, and there’s something comforting about the three of us, in a line, pushing through everyone. It’s like we’re a unit, something I haven’t really felt since Natalia left.

And now that Landon and I are broken up, I’m not part of any unit. The thought makes me sad and suddenly anxious, and then, as if the universe is hearing my thoughts, there he is.

He’s sitting on the breakfast bar in Emily’s kitchen, his hair looking adorably messed up and perfect.

“Hey, Land,” I say, forcing a smile on my face.

“Hey,” he says, smiling back. But his doesn’t seem forced at all. He jumps off the counter.

“You having fun?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He grins, kisses me on the cheek, and then pushes past me and out into the living room. This is how we usually are at parties (I used to insist that we did our own thing when we were out together, that the two of us made sure we didn’t end up spending the whole night in the corner making out, our faces huddled together, only talking to each other, because really, how lame is that?), so anyone watching us wouldn’t suspect that Landon leaving the kitchen without me is a big deal.

My breath catches in my throat as I’m hit with a wave of longing for him, but obviously he doesn’t feel the same. He looked like everything was fine, like it was just any other party on any other day.

“Beer?” Paige asks, holding up a can.

I take it from her and down a huge gulp. We just broke up today, and Landon's already over me.

Landon

I'm still in love with Gabriella. How could I not be? She just broke up with me this morning. You can't just fall out of love with someone in a day.

Although I guess she's fallen out of love with me, even though this morning she was acting like everything was fucking fine.

I picked her up, and we went to breakfast at this place near the airfield, like we do every single Saturday. I ordered my usual, The Hungry Man (a stack of pancakes, eggs, hash browns, toast, and bacon—but I get steak instead of the bacon, chocolate chips in the pancakes, and a side order of hash, because the hash they have is wicked), and Gabriella got her usual, a bagel with low-fat cream cheese, and then made fun of me for eating so much. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, I told her, and besides, I was starving.

We get our food to go and then sat out on the grass. We watched the planes. We ate. We started to make out. We ended up back in the car. We parked the car behind the flight school so that no one would see us. We kept making out. Things got kind of heated, because she was in this crazy hot summer dress that was sort of making me lose my mind.

And then Gabriella pulled away. She looked at me and she said, "Landon, I... I don't think I can do this anymore." She was looking out the window, and her eyes were getting kind of teary.

"It's okay," I told her. "Let's take a break." Gabs and I haven't had sex.

She's not ready. The thing is, I don't care. I just want to be with her. And if that

means having to wait until she's ready, whatever.

"No, I mean..." She bit her lip and kept looking out the window. "I mean I don't think we should go out anymore."

"What?" I was shocked. She'd just been kissing me like her life depended on it.

But she wouldn't talk about it. She made me take her home. And I spent the rest of the afternoon lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering if I should call her, and feeling sorry for myself. And now I'm here at this lame-ass party, only because I wanted to see her. I was hoping maybe she'd have changed her mind. But obviously she hasn't, since when she saw me she acted like she could care less.

"You need beer," my best friend Darius says now, shoving one into my hand. "And then you need a rebound."

"Yes to the beer," I say, taking it. "No to the rebound."

"A stripper?"

"Tell me you're joking."

"Let's get strippers, yeah," my other friend Mark says. "They can come over and strip for us. It costs a lot less if you can get a bunch of people to go in on it." He starts scanning the crowd, like he's looking for a few other guys that would be willing to pitch in.

"I'm sure Emily Mulally would love it if a stripper showed up at her party," I say, rolling my eyes.

"We wouldn't let Emily know," Mark says, sounding like he's shocked by my ignorance. "We'd take her upstairs or some shit."

“Who?” Darius asks. “Emily or the stripper?”

“The stripper. Emily would have to stay down here and tend to the party.”

“What’s this about a stripper?” Julia Sullivan asks. Julia’s this girl who I dated a little bit sophomore year. And when I say dated a little bit, I mean we slept together a few times.

“We’re going to get a stripper to cheer Landon up,” Mark says.

“Why does Landon need to be cheered up?” She flips her long dark hair over her shoulder, and as she does, her shirt inches up a little bit, revealing a flat strip of tan stomach. She catches me looking and grins, lifting her arms up over her head and stretching, but really doing it just because she knows I was checking her out. It doesn’t matter. I can’t even look at any other girl right now. All I can think about is Gabriella.

“Because he got dumped,” Darius says.

“Darius!” I say, mostly because Julia has kind of a big mouth and also because I haven’t talked to Gabriella about how we’re going to handle this whole thing. Obviously she hasn’t told her friends, since they came in to the party all smiling and saying hi to me. If they knew we were broken up, they probably would have given me the cold shoulder. That’s the thing about girls- - even when they break up with you, their friends hate you because they always think you did something wrong.

“I’ll be the stripper,” Julia says, and moves her hips, causing her shirt to inch up again. “I took a stripper class.”

“A stripper class?” Mark is practically salivating. “I thought you had to be eighteen to be a stripper.”

“You don’t actually become a stripper, asshole,” she says, “You just learn the moves. It gets you in shape.” She starts gyrating, and I bury my head in my hands. The fact that Julia is dancing around and I’m not even getting into it just goes to show you how completely broken-hearted I am.

I take another sip of beer, and think about how maybe I should just leave.

I want to leave, but then I catch Gabriella watching me from across the room.

She gives me a smile, a “Look how mature we’re being about this whole thing” smile and raises the beer she’s holding. I raise mine back, even though I want to tell her that I don’t know how mature it is to break up with someone and not even give them a good reason, and then show up at a party where your friends don’t even know you’re broken up and try to pretend like everything’s okay.

But instead I just take another big sip, deciding to bury my feelings in the alcohol.

Gabriella

I cannot believe how completely over this Landon is! Seriously, he’s standing in the living room, and, like, Julia Scarborough is practically getting herself naked and rubbing all over him. She’s moving her hips around like she’s some kind pole dancer or something, and like, Landon is drinking beer and well on his way to getting drunk and probably sleeping with her. They already hooked up sophomore year, so he probably thinks it wouldn’t be a big deal.

I can’t even take this anymore, and so I decide I need to tell Paige what happened.

“I broke up with Landon,” I blurt before I can stop myself. Brooke’s gone, she disappeared into the backyard or something, which isn’t that weird for her, especially these days. She’s always taking off, usually making it out like she can’t stand to be around us for another second because we’re driving her crazy. I make another mental note to try to get her to talk to her about what’s going on.

“You what?!” Paige is already putting her drink down and steering me over toward an empty spot in the hallway.

“I broke up with him.” Saying the words out loud is harder than I thought, and I want to take them back, I want to take the whole thing back, but of course I can’t.

“But why?” Paige asks. “You guys were like the perfect couple.”

“We weren’t the perfect couple,” I say, rolling my eyes, even though I guess we kind of were. Then I think about her question, about why we broke up.

“And I guess it was because I don’t want to be tied down.”

This is true, but it obviously isn’t the complete and full story. I don’t want to be tied down, but it doesn’t have anything to do with Landon. It has to do with how scary, how absolutely terrifying it feels, to get that close to another person.

It’s like today, when we were making out in his car, I just started feeling so out of control. It made me freak out. Majorly. How can I love someone so much? How am I going to deal with that when he’s gone next year, off to college somewhere, and I’m somewhere else? I think about it constantly, about what it’s going to be like, calling him while he’s away, him answering the phone and me hearing girls in the background, not knowing who he’s talking to or where he is, or what friends he’s hanging out with.

No. It’s better to just cut it off right now, before I get really hurt.

“You don’t want to be tied down?” Paige is looking at me, frowning. She pulls on the bottom of the skirt she’s wearing.

“No,” I say, forcefully, like that will make her believe it. “I don’t.”

“Okay.” She still sounds doubtful.

“In fact,” I say, deciding the only way to make people (and myself) believe that I’m ready to move on is to start acting like it. “I think I’m going to make out with someone tonight.” The half a beer I downed is starting to course through my veins, and so I’m feeling slightly reckless. And why shouldn’t I be?

I’m single! I’m young! I pull down the top of my shirt, a strapless violet tank that’s already pretty low-cut. Girls who don’t want to be tied down should show a little more cleavage.

“Oh, shit,” Paige says, and at first I think she’s just saying it because usually I don’t wear stuff like this, much less pull it down so that everyone can get a look at me. But then I realize she’s not staring at me like that because I’m pulling down my shirt a little. It’s because I accidentally pulled down my shirt a lot, and ended up flashing everyone.

Crap, crap, crap. I pull my shirt right back up, but it was still down for enough time to give everyone a peek. How. Humiliating.

But it’s the new me. So I take another sip of my drink and decide to play it off. “That’s one way to start getting guys interested,” I say and laugh. And it is, too. I notice that a lot of guys are watching me now. Maybe I’ll even hook up with one of them. What’s that old saying? “The best way to get over someone is to get under someone else?” It sounds stupid, sure, but there has to be some truth to it.

Obviously Landon’s subscribing to that theory, since he’s over in the corner with Julia. And yeah, he’s not exactly under Julia or anything, but it’s kind of only a matter of time, I’m sure. It just goes to show me that I made the right decision in breaking up with him.

Because he doesn’t even care about me.

Landon

“Holy shit,” Mark says gleefully. “Gabriella just had a nip slip!”

“A nip slip?” I repeat dumbly. It takes me a second to realize what he’s talking about, not because I don’t know what a nip slip is, but because the words

“nip slip” and “Gabriella” are not supposed to be in the same sentence.

I turn around just in time to see her readjusting her shirt. And she doesn’t look that embarrassed about it. The thought of everyone else seeing her topless fills me with jealousy and anger, and I look around, seeing the way the guys in the room are looking at her.

My plan to play it cool goes completely out the window.

“Excuse me,” I say to Mark and Darius.

“Where are you going?” Julia asks. She looks a little bit panicked, probably because she was starting to really get into the whole strip show thing.

Not that she was really going to strip for us. Not that I care if she does, but I know enough about her to realize she’s a big tease. I should probably tell Darius and Mark, since Mark especially is getting all worked up, but I figure let them have their fantasies.

“I have to take care of something.” I march over to where Gabriella is standing with Paige. I tap her on the shoulder. “Hello!” I say happily.

“Hi,” she says. She looks a little nervous. Good. She should look nervous. “Can I talk to you for a moment please?” I ask.

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now.”

“I guess so.” She doesn’t look like she thinks it’s the best idea, but I don’t really care. She’s pissing me off.

I lead her outside, all the way to the back of Emily’s house, where the pool is.

“We’re not supposed to be back here, you know,” she says.

“I don’t care.” I need to get her far away from the party, far, far away so that I can figure out what’s going on with her and if she’s lost her mind or not.

“Well, I do.” She stops a few feet before the fence and crosses her arms over her chest. “What do you want to talk to me about?” Her voice sounds upset.

“What’s going on?” I ask her. “What were you doing in there, flashing everyone?”

She rolls her eyes. “It was an accident,” she says. “And besides, you’re one to talk, with Julia being all over you.”

“I have a right to talk to whoever I want,” I say. “You broke up with me, remember?”

“Of course I remember.” She turns around and looks back toward the party, which really fucking pisses me off. It also fills me with a rush of panic, since now that I have her here, now that we’re talking, I don’t want her to leave.

And then I remember something.

“What are we going to do about the cell phones?” I blurt.

“What?”

“Our cell phones!” I say. “What are we going to do about them?” Some genius (me) thought it would be a good idea if Gabriella and I got on the same cell phone plan. I figured we could split the bill, and it would save us both money. The problem was we had to sign a two-year contract, which was fine four months ago, but isn’t so fine now that we’re broken up. It’s gone from something that was going to save us money to something that’s going to have to be dealt with. Although it’s coming in handy right now because I have an excuse to keep her out here and talking to me.

“Oh.” She looks surprised. Probably she figured I was going to beg her to take me back. Ha! “That’s why you brought me out here? To talk about some dumb cell phone plan?”

“Yes.” I cock my head and pretend to think about it. “If you’re going to cancel the plan, then you have to give me the two hundred dollars.”

“Two hundred dollars?” she repeats.

“Yes! It’s the cancellation fee.” She’s looking at me like I’m completely crazy, which isn’t really warranted, because this is what happens when people break up. “This is what happens when people break up,” I tell her. “You have to deal with things like this, you have to give people back their stuff and work out what you’re going to do about the bills.”

“I don’t have any of your stuff,” she says.

“Well, then we have to figure out what we’re going to do about the bills.”

I cross my own arms over my chest and wait for her to come up with some solution.

“Well, why can’t we just keep paying it? The way it is? I’ll send in my money, and you send in yours.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. I don’t trust you.”

“You don’t trust me to pay my cell phone bill?”

“No.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?” I raise my eyebrows, challenging her to fight me on it. She narrows her eyes at me, and knows that she can’t. She can’t claim she can be trusted, because she broke up with me this morning without any warning, which is pretty fucking untrustworthy if you ask me.

“Fine,” she says, her teeth clenched. “I’ll pay the two hundred dollars. Is that it?”

“Yes,” I say agreeably. “That’s it.” I force myself to smile. She turns and stomps back toward the house. But whatever sense of accomplishment I feel from telling her off disappears as I watch her retreat.

Because the thing about loving someone is that yelling at them only feels good while you’re doing it – as soon as they’re gone, all you want to do is take it all back.

Gabriella

He is so absolutely infuriating! What was that bullshit about the cell phones? He doesn’t even care about the cell phones! His stupid parents pay his part of the bill, and honestly, they’d probably pay mine without even realizing it if I wasn’t so on top of things. And I am on top of things. I collect the money and send the payment in every single month. I haven’t even been late once!

And to call me all the way out there to talk to me about the cell phone bill when it so wasn't even about that. Obviously he was upset about the fact that I flashed everyone. Like it wasn't humiliating enough, I had to be scolded?

I'm walking back into the party and my eyes are filling with tears and I don't feel like talking to Paige so when I get inside I head upstairs and into the bathroom that's at the end of the hall and away from everything and I close the door and lock it. I start to cry then, because the thing is, I really do love him.

The whole break up doesn't have anything to do with me not loving him.

In fact, the problem is, I think I love him too much. All I think about is him. And that's why I had to break up with him. Because it's not good. It's not good to be in love with someone like that, to need someone so badly.

I take a wad of toilet paper off of the roll and blow my nose. This is exactly why I need to get over this. I can't be the girl that's stuck in the bathroom at parties, blowing my nose and feeling sorry for myself.

There's a knock on the door. "I'll be right out," I say, even though I have absolutely no intention of coming out anytime soon.

But whoever it is doesn't listen, because suddenly, the door is open. Geez.

Talk about having no respect for people's privacy.

"You're lucky I wasn't going to the bathroom," I say to the intruder, a guy named Tucker who I hardly know. "And I thought I locked that door."

"Sorry," he says, starting to back out. But then he sees my face. "Oh, shit," he says. "You're crying."

“No, I’m not,” I lie. I look at myself in the mirror. My face is tearstained, and my makeup is all smudged.

He watches me for a second and then takes a step into the bathroom.

“Look,” he says, “I don’t know you, but can I give you some advice?”

“No.”

“Well, I’m going to anyway.” He grins and then comes into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. He hops up onto the counter. “Look,” he says, his face turning serious. “This isn’t anything to be getting all upset about.”

I stare at him, and my mouth drops open. I’m going to kill Paige! I specifically told her not to tell anyone about me and Landon, not even Brooke.

“People show their tits all the time,” Tucker says, and waves his hand like it’s no big deal. My mouth drops even more. “For real, it’s like....no one will even remember it tomorrow. In fact, someone out there probably already showed their tits after you. Your tits are probably old news.”

“I’m not crying about that, you dumbass,” I say, and punch him in the shoulder. “And you shouldn’t say ‘tits’, it’s gross.”

“What should I say then?” He looks like he really wants to know.

“Breasts,” I say, “Or I guess you could say boobs.”

He nods. “Sorry,” he says, and then shakes his head. “I’m a little drunk.”

“Yeah, well, I should go.”

“Wait,” he says, and grabs my arm. “What are you upset about?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell Uncle Tucker,” he says. “I’m drunk. I won’t remember it anyway.”

“I’m in love,” I say.

“And the guy doesn’t love you back?” Tucker seems shocked. “But you,”

he says, “Are hot. And you have great t--- a great... you have very nice breasts.”

“Thank you,” I say. “But the problem isn’t him. It’s me.” And then I start crying again. Because suddenly, I feel completely fucked up. Here I am, breaking up with someone I really love, stuck in the bathroom at a party, crying my eyes out to some guy I don’t even know, and teaching him to use the word

‘breasts’ instead of ‘tits.’ How humiliating.

“What’s the problem?” Tucker lowers his voice. “Are you fucked up?

You know, like in the head?”

“Completely,” I say. He nods, like this makes sense. Then he hands me another wad of toilet paper, since I’m sobbing again.

“Thanks,” I say, and take it.

“So what’s your issue?”

“Well,” I say, “I think I’m probably afraid of getting hurt because I don’t have a real example of a good relationship, you know? My parents hate each other. And they hate the new people they’re married to, too.”

Tucker nods. "Mine too."

"So you see? Why would I want to set myself up for that?"

"But you won't," he says, shaking his head. "It's like my girlfriend, Gilda, you know? She took a chance on me, and I just...I love her, man." He shakes his head, like he can't believe how much he loves her. "And I don't care.

I want to be with her. I don't care how it turns out. I can't be worried about that."

"How though? How can you not be worried about it?" I don't expect some drunk guy to have all the answers (or even, you know, one or two of them), but somehow talking to him is making me feel better.

"Because," he says, "You're sad right now anyway. And if you're going to be sad right now, you're not really saving yourself anything. You're just...

making yourself sad now instead of later."

"So you mean," I say slowly, "that I'm already sad, so it doesn't matter if I'm sad in the future if we break up, because that future sadness is just becoming my present sadness?" It's kind of like a riddle, but it also makes a lot of sense.

It's like some kind of physics puzzle or something.

"Yes!" Tucker says, nodding up and down. "And wouldn't you want to spend any moment you can being happy, right now?"

"Yes," I say.

"Even if it means you might be just as sad or sadder later?"

I think about it. "Yes," I say finally.

He stands up and looks at me. "Then you have to go and get him back."

"I do?"

"Yes," he says. "You have to go back out there and you need to get him back right now!"

And suddenly, I know that he's right.

Landon

"This party blows," I tell Darius. "Can we please get the fuck out of here now?"

"Yes," he says, draining the last of his beer. "Mark, are you ready?"

"Hell, no." Mark's watching Julia dance with herself over in the corner.

Every so often, she takes her hands and runs them up and down her body, and then does a little moan of pleasure. It's actually a little bit disturbing, but Mark's getting really into it.

"We're leaving," Darius tells him, "Put it in your spank bank and let's go."

"I don't want to leave," Mark says. "I'm having fun."

"You're not," I say.

"I am," he says.

"You're not," Darius says. "Watching a girl touch herself in the corner is not fun."

"It is to me," Mark says. "I mean, she's hot."

“She’s a tease,” I say. Which is actually only half true. Julia does like to tease, but in my experience, eventually she does end up following through on her promises.

“She can tease me,” Mark says. “I like being teased.”

And that’s when I see Gabriella coming down the stairs. She looks all disheveled, and for a second, I think that maybe it’s because of how upset I made her outside. I want to rush over to her, to ask her what’s wrong. I want to tell her that it doesn’t matter if she doesn’t want to be with me, that I just want to talk to her, to be with her, to make her feel better.

And then I see a guy coming down the stairs behind her. So that’s why she looks disheveled. God, she didn’t waste any time did she?

Darius follows my gaze, and then he elbows Mark.

“We’re leaving,” he says.

“Okay,” Mark says, getting the hint when he sees Gabriella.

So we push through the crowd and out the door.

But when we get outside, there’s a car parked behind Mark’s, and so we’re stuck.

“Fuck!” Mark says. “I knew we shouldn’t have parked in the driveway.”

He looks at Darius, accusing, since he’s the one that suggested we park there.

Then Mark shrugs. “Oh, well,” he says, “I guess we’ll have to just stay here, since there’s no way to get the car out.” He turns around and starts to head back inside, but Darius reaches out and grabs him by the back of his shirt.

“Go inside,” Darius says, “And find out whose car that is.” Then he thinks better of it. “Actually,” he says, “I’ll go with you.” He turns to me. “You okay staying out here?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I’ll wait.”

They disappear, and I sit down on the back bumper of Mark’s truck. I lean my head back and close my eyes, wishing this night would just get the fuck over with already.

And then I smell it. Her perfume on the air, next to me. And I turn around, and there she is.

“Hi,” Gabriella says softly.

“What do you want?”

“Can we talk?” she asks. “I think...I mean, I want to explain some stuff.”

But it’s too late. I’ve had it. “No.”

“No?” She looks confused, and hurt, and for a second, I want to take it back, I want to tell her that I’ll talk to her, that I’ll listen, that I’ll do whatever it takes to make her feel better. But I can’t. It hurts too much. So I just turn and look away.

And after a moment, she turns and runs back toward the house. I’m thinking about running after her when Darius and Mark coming back, followed by some guy. Probably the one whose car is blocking us in.

“What’s wrong?” Darius asks as he watches Gabriella go rushing back into the party.

“Nothing,” I say. He gives me a look, because he knows when I’m bullshitting, but

then he decides not to push me on it.

“We’re just going to move this dude’s car,” he says about the guy standing behind him. “He’s too wasted to drive it.”

“Okay,” I say.

“Shotgun!” Mark screams and jumps into the passenger seat of the random drunk dude’s car. Which is pointless since they’re not even going anywhere.

Except for when I turn around, the random drunk dude isn’t so random.

It’s the guy I saw coming down the stairs with Gabriella. I think about punching him out, but then I realize he’s drunk and it wouldn’t be a fair fight.

So instead I say, “What’s your name?” I figure I can make a note of it so that at school on Monday I can confront him and possibly knock him out then.

I’ve never been in an actual fight -- most of my grappling has been confined to scrapes when some jerk gets too worked up in gym class -- but if there was ever a reason to jump into the fray, some guy messing around with the girl I love is it.

“Tucker,” he says, and grins. “What’s yours?”

The fact that he’s asking me my name pisses me off. He was just upstairs, with Gabriella, with the girl that I love, and he has no idea who I am. That is extremely fucked up.

So I get real close to this joker. And then I say, “My name is Landon Davis. And you’re going to remember that name when I kick your ass on Monday.”

And then his eyes get really wide and he lowers his voice and says, “Is this... does this have to do with that pot I bought from Stevie Shepard? Because I’m going to

pay for it, I swear. I've just been a little short lately because – “

“No, you fool,” I practically scream. “I'm Gabriella's boyfriend!” It's technically a lie, since we're broken up, but I don't give a shit.

“Who's Gabriella?”

I grab him by the collar of his t-shirt. “Gabriella,” I say, “is the girl you were just upstairs with.”

He frowns, confused. And then something must penetrate through the drunken haze clouding his brain because he says, “The one who flashed everyone?”

I tighten my grip around his collar. “Okay, okay,” he says, wrapping his fingers around my wrist and trying to loosen it. “Look, we weren't doing anything.

She's in love with some other dude.”

“She what?”

“Yeah,” he says, “She's in love with her ex-boyfriend, some guy. She got freaked out I guess, about her feelings. And she left, she ran out so she could go tell him.”

I set him back down on the ground. “She what?” I repeat dumbly.

“She's in love with some guy. I forget his name. But she broke up with him and she... she thinks she's fucked up.” He shrugs his shoulders and then leans in to me. “If you ask me, the guy sounds like kind of a douche. She's hot.

She has very nice breasts.”

I should knock him out for that last remark, but I hardly even register it.

And that's because I'm rushing back toward the house, after Gabriella.

Gabriella

I can't believe how stupid I was. I had a guy, an amazing guy who was beautiful and perfect and brought me chicken soup when I was sick and who never even looked at another girl when I was around, even when we were at the beach and Fiona Truman was frolicking around in a thong bikini. And I screwed it all up.

Do not cry, I tell myself, do not start crying again until you're at home.

I'm back inside now, searching around for Paige, because I really, really need to get out of here. But I can't find her. I try her cell, but nothing. Then I call Brooke, and again, nothing.

I ask around, and some girl named Tanya tells me she saw them both leaving, Brooke with Aiden James, this total burnout who I didn't even know she knew, and Paige off to pick her up or something. So much for them being my best friends, although since I didn't want Brooke to know that Landon and I broke up, and I didn't even tell Paige until way after it happened, I guess I kind of deserve it.

I don't know what else to do, and tears are threatening to spill down my cheeks, so I head into the backyard and keep walking until I'm back by the pool.

There's a lock on the fence, and before I know what I'm even doing, I'm climbing it, I'm climbing this huge wrought iron fence even though I'm, like, the least coordinated person ever. I drop to the ground and end up skinning my hands on the concrete of the patio, but I don't even feel it.

I fall onto one of the lounge chairs, and I lie down and just start to cry.

Big, racking sobs because suddenly, I miss him so much. I miss him so much that I want to be one of those couples that's always together, the kind of couple that

can't be away from each other at parties, the kind of couple that everyone rolls their eyes at because they're so nauseating. And that was the problem – I wanted that so much that I couldn't let myself have it, because I thought that losing it would be worse than never having it in the first place. But I was wrong.

“Gab?”

I look up at the sound of my name, and there he is. Landon. Standing in front of me, looking perfect with his hair still messy and his face all serious and I sit up and wipe the tears from my eyes. “If you're here to talk about the cell phones,” I say, “then please go away.”

“Oh, God, Gabs, I'm so sorry.” And then he's rushing over to me and I'm in his arms and I'm melting into him and suddenly, I feel amazing and perfect but it's so overwhelming that I'm still crying.

“Why are you apologizing?” I say. “I'm the one that's all messed up.”

“You're not messed up,” he says into my hair. “I should have known, I should have tried to talk to you.”

“You did,” I say, and pull back from him. “You did try. But I couldn't.”

He grins at me. “God, I missed you.”

“Landon?” I say. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“I don't want to be apart.”

“I don't either.”

“I never really wanted to, I just....”

“Shhh,” he says, “I know.” And then we’re lying back on the lounge chair and he’s just holding me and I bury my face in his neck and we stay there for a long time and then he says, “So what now?”

And I think about letting go, about letting my emotions take over, about not having to control everything so much.

“Well,” I say slowly, “We could go swimming.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.” I grin and then I stand up and it’s like a switch has been flipped or something and I’m not afraid anymore, I want to be with him, I want to give him every part of me. And so I stand up and pull my t-shirt over my head.

He watches me and I feel so close to him, it’s like all I had to do was let myself feel, to admit that I wanted it, and then there he was.

And he’s moving toward me and now his shirt is coming off too and we’re in the water and I’m pressed up against him and his mouth is on mine. His hands are everywhere and this is right this is it this is what it feels like to be alive.

He looks at me. “You’re beautiful,” he says. “And I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I say. And then I kiss him again.

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