

ON BOTH SIDES: A NOVEL

A THESIS IN
Creative Writing and Media Arts

Presented to the faculty of the University
of Missouri—Kansas City in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by
CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL ARNONE

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Christopher Michael Arnone, Candidate for Master of Fine Arts Degree

University of Missouri—Kansas City, 2020

ABSTRACT

On August 11 and 12, 2017, Charlottesville, Virginia was the site of a rally for Unite the Right, an Alt-Right (neo-Nazi) group. This group sought to further white nationalist ideals and to protest the proposed removal of statues of Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Numerous counter-protesters filled the streets of Charlottesville, defying the white nationalists. At 1:45 p.m. on August 12, 2017, James Alex Fields Jr. drove his Dodge Challenger into the crowd, injuring 19 and killing Heather Heyer. While much of the country—Democrats and Republicans alike—rallied behind Heyer and the counter protesters, President Donald Trump’s remarks did not. His initial remarks included, “hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides.” A few days later, when given the chance to fully denounce the white supremacists, he doubled down on his own remarks by saying, “Well, I do think there’s blame, yes, I think there’s blame on both sides.”

On Both Sides is a young adult novel that takes place one year after the deadly 2017 protests, examining the divided nature of the United States at this time through the lens of its youth. Erica Betancourt is a 20-year-old, Black UVA student marching on the one-year anniversary. Mandy Stephenson is a 19-year-old, white UVA student and Erica’s girlfriend.

Over the course of the novel, both women come to grips with how the United States views race and how they both move through a world that tries to pull them apart. Along with Erica and Mandy, other narrative voices are woven in, like a woman who is a Daughter of the Confederacy, a rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel, and a Latina State Trooper. Together, these voices unpack how deeply racism is embedded in the fabric of America and how it affects people from all walks of life.

APPROVAL

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “On Both Sides: A Novel,” presented by Christopher Michael Arnone, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts Degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Supervisory Committee

Christie Hodgen, Ph.D., Committee Chair
Department of English

Michael Pritchett, M.F.A.
Department of English

John Barton, Ph.D.
Department of English

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

On Both Sides began when I was listening to NPR on August 12, 2018. The reporter was talking about the planned Alt-Right demonstration in Washington D.C. that day, marking the one-year anniversary of the Alt-Right march in Charlottesville, VA, that resulted in the death of Heather Heyer. The Alt-Right were marching in DC because they had been denied a permit to march in Charlottesville, but there was a peaceful protest planned for Charlottesville later that day. A year of presidential tweets, rallies, and op-eds, and yet it felt like nothing had changed.

I began to think about the people who live in Charlottesville. They work there, raise children there, go to church and cook meals and wake up and go to sleep there. This horrible thing happened in their town, and then they had to go to sleep in their same beds, wake up the next morning, and go about their lives. The nation was turning its eyes back to Charlottesville, and these people were just living there. The people who lived and still live in Charlottesville aren't isolated, either, but a snapshot of the nation. The earliest writings for *On Both Sides* were these vignettes of regular people who don't necessarily pull hard to the right or left but find themselves living somewhere between. At that point, I envisioned the project as primarily short fiction pieces with some poetry mixed in. "The Shopkeep" was the first piece I ever wrote for this project. Some of those other early vignettes found their way into the book: "The Teacher," "The Quarterback," and "The Gamer."

I felt called to write about Charlottesville and the state of our country. This wasn't just in my prose, but in poetry. Before my first poetry workshop at UMKC, I had no understanding of the genre, but learned to love it by writing, reading, and workshopping poems with Hadara Bar-Nadav. I wrote and workshopped about a dozen poems focused on

Charlottesville: the people, the tragedy, and responses to it from various politicians, including President Trump. Half of these poems have found homes in the current draft of *On Both Sides*.

Another very early piece was called, “The Student.” It told the story of a white UVA student from Minnesota arguing with her parents about whether she should go back after everything that happened. That student would eventually become Mandy, one of the protagonists of *On Both Sides*. Victoria and Erica rose up out of different vignettes as other strong voices, and a central narrative started to take shape, guided in part by feedback from various workshops in the MFA program.

Being my first foray into historical fiction, I knew research was important. News websites for NBC 29 (local Charlottesville NBC affiliate), *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, CBS News, The Daily Progress, and *The Washington Post* all provided critical historical details for 2017 and 2018. Spencer Hawes’ *Summer of Hate* was particularly helpful. Hawes was the *New York Times* reporter assigned to the tragedy in Charlottesville, and his book provided detailed information in and around the events of August 12, 2017. In August 2019, I traveled to Charlottesville, VA with help from a grant from Sigma Tau Delta. I walked the protest routes, cried at Heather Heyer Memorial Way, visited UVA and Monticello, made sensory notes everywhere I went, talked to the locals, and wrote what is now the afterword in *On Both Sides*. After several fits and starts, I finished an entire first draft by the end of summer 2019, using three protagonists in shifting, first-person perspectives.

The book still wasn’t quite there. I had moved Mandy from Minnesota to Baltimore, but she never went to Charlottesville in this draft. A workshop with Whitney Terrell put a

spotlight on this, that there was an intellectual conflict in the white girl who is separated and able to turn a blind eye to racism, but not enough conflict on the page. Erica was angry, but not angry enough. I found the right collision course for Mandy to go to Charlottesville and amped up Erica's anger, but the book still wasn't there. The book was too polemic, and the physical stakes weren't high enough, and Michael Pritchett urged me to let go of the actual events of August 11 and 12, 2018, and to give priority to my characters and my narrative.

Then Christie Hodgen suggested what I had in front of me was a young adult novel, an idea I initially resisted. After several attempts at finding the right voice for *On Both Sides*, I started examining what I already had. In an online Q&A with agent Eric Smith, he said the one defining characteristic every YA novel must have is the coming-of-age element, the bildungsroman. At that time, the draft of my book had two: Mandy and Erica. I set myself on this path following Dr. Hodgen's advice. I took out Victoria as a primary character because the young people need to drive the story in a YA novel. I settled into dueling first-person narratives. Finally, the book started clicking.

While I was already someone who includes YA in their reading, I purposely sought out more. I took an independent study in Dr. Frangos' Popular Literature course, reading books like *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *I Am Alfonso Jones* by Tony Medina and Stacey Robinson, and *Binti* by Nnedi Okorafor. Outside of class, I also read *Little & Lion* by Brandy Colbert and *The Black Tides of Heaven* by Iy Yang to find books with which I was in conversation. I also read nonfiction like essays from Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison upon Whitney Terrell's recommendation, as well as *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Bad Feminist* by Roxane Gay, and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Upon urging from Dr. Hodgen, I set my sights on the PEN/Bellwether prize. While a lofty goal for an MFA thesis, I've found I work best under deadlines, and so I agreed with her urging. Much to my surprise, the 2020 prize moved from their normal deadline of October to August 15. Nevertheless, I committed to the deadline, writing and editing daily once the spring semester ended.

During the summer of 2020, I completed a brand-new draft, revised it twice, and then sent it to Dr. Hodgen along with four beta readers, two of which were sensitivity readers. I had struggled before this new draft figuring out if the original vignettes had any place in this novel, but then found it when I decided to give Robert his own chapter after his arrest. I suddenly felt that his chapter not only justified the other vignettes, but the those vignettes earned me the Robert chapter. They also included "The Barista" and "The State Trooper," which brought Victoria's important voice into the story.

I made more revisions after Dr. Hodgen's comments and those from the beta readers. I made large adjustments to the order of the flashback and vignette chapters. I created lines of interconnectivity between all the vignettes to reinforce the sense of Charlottesville as a single community. I also added three more Robert chapters, fleshing out his own story, stakes, and voice in the book. On August 13, 2020, I submitted the book for consideration for the PEN/Bellwether Prize.

This program gave me such an incredible opportunity to focus on my writing. I learned a great deal not only from the professors, but also from my fellow students in workshops and conversations about writing and literature. No matter where writers are in their development, they always have something to learn and something to teach other writers. I've learned to listen to what a story is trying to be, rather than pushing a story in a direction

it shouldn't go. I've learned to find a balance between intellectual conflict and here-and-now conflict on the page. I also learned about the joy and artistry of poetry, how to explore a subject with language, and the power a well-chosen noun or verb can then bring into my prose as well. I've learned exactly how valuable daily writing is, not only for production and practice, but for how it makes a story better when my mind is thinking about it and working on it every single day. Above all, I've learned how to really listen to feedback, to humble myself and consider every comment to find the best path for a story or poem.

Foreword

Facts:

On August 11 and 12, 2017, Charlottesville, Virginia was the site of a rally for Unite the Right, an Alt-Right (neo-Nazi) group. This group sought to further white nationalist ideals and to protest the proposed removal of statues of Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Numerous counter-protesters filled the streets of Charlottesville, defying the white nationalists. At 1:45 p.m. on August 12, 2017, James Alex Fields Jr. drove his Dodge Challenger into the crowd, injuring 19 and killing Heather Heyer. Two Virginia State Troopers—Lt. H. Jay Cullen and Trooper-Pilot Berke M.M. Bates—died when their helicopter crashed that day after monitoring the riots from above. While much of the country—Democrats and Republicans alike—rallied behind Heyer and the counter protesters, President Donald Trump’s remarks did not. His initial remarks included, “hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides.” A few days later, when given the chance to fully denounce the white supremacists, he doubled down on his own remarks by saying, “Well, I do think there’s blame, yes, I think there’s blame on both sides.”

On December 7, 2018, Fields was found guilty of first-degree murder, five counts of aggravated malicious wounding, three counts of malicious wounding, and one hit and run. He is serving life plus 419 years in prison.

As of the December 8, 2020, the Confederate statues in Charlottesville are still standing.

Fiction:

The characters and some of the places in these stories and poems are works of fiction. While there are numerous, very important reports and interviews with actual people living in Charlottesville, fiction has a different role to play. Fiction seeks to speak truth to power, to peek into the intimate lives and thoughts of people in ways that interviews and objective reporting cannot.

Disclaimer:

This collection seeks to explore people on both sides of this divisive country as well as the vast sea of people living somewhere in the middle. These views and beliefs do not necessarily reflect the views and beliefs of the author. The author believes love is love, everyone does better when everyone does better, and you should always punch Nazis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to Heather Heyer. You marched against hatred and bigotry. You fought for people less privileged than yourself and paid the ultimate price. I never knew you personally, but I admire your spirit and your love. Rest in power.

Thank you to the other protestors in 2017 and 2018 who marched against white supremacy in Charlottesville, particularly the multitude injured in 2017, many of whom will bear those scars—physically and emotionally—for the rest of their lives.

Thank you to Lt. H. Jay Cullen, Trooper-Pilot Berke M.M. Bates, and the other men and women who serve and protect Virginia and Charlottesville, who put their lives on the line regularly in service to their communities.

Thank you to the English faculty of the University of Missouri - Kansas City for their support and guidance, in particular the creative writing faculty: Hadara Bar-Nadav, Christie Hodgen, Michael Pritchett, and Whitney Terrell. Thanks to Nicole Coffey, Rhiannon Minster, Heather Miller, and the innumerable classmates who workshopped these stories and poems with me during my time at UMKC. Thanks to the Stanley Durwood Foundation, Sigma Tau Delta, the Gary William Bargar Trust, the John Mark Eberhart Trust, and the Crystal Fields Trust for their support of this project and my MFA.

The people of Charlottesville, Virginia were invaluable to this book. I made my way there in August 2019, walking the streets and talking to the people who live there everyday. They were kind and welcoming, even if I interacted with very few of them. Bill Munkacsy, my AirBnB host, was warm and open about his own thoughts, experiences, and impressions of Charlottesville.

The biggest thanks to my wife Christy. Her hard work, sacrifice, and patience made this

book possible.

For Heather Heyer
Lieutenant H. Jay Cullen
Trooper-Pilot Berke M.M. Bates

4th and Water

Chalk and flowers smother sidewalks and spill up these walls
Scribbled epitaphs and love letters drip from these walls

Tiki torches and white polos and khaki shorts overstuff
the Charlottesville landfill just outside these walls.

A barking exhaust pipe cues pedestrians: flinch and scatter as a Dodge
Challenger's roar rebounds off these walls.

Raindrops slice through the Virginia swelter, washing clean
short memories of Heather and *on both sides* off these walls.

Students still arrive late summer and flee before Christmas
as the nation hastens to confirm another bigot beyond these walls.

Mandy

August 11, 2018

The Egyptian-style eyeliner isn't quite what the YouTube video showed, but it's not a bad first try. I save the video so I can try again tomorrow. I can't draw lines quite so flawlessly as Celeste, but so long as she doesn't give me shit about it later, I'll call it a success. I shove eyeliner back in my makeup case, stashing it in the drawer of my dresser. It's a pre-war dresser that I plastered with Hannah Montana and Kim Possible stickers when I was 8. Dad keeps saying he's going to refinish it when I'm back at school, but he said that last year, too. I lean back, tossing my blonde hair out of my face. I really wanted to dye it this summer. Teal or purple or something crazy, but just the imagined lecture from Mom held me back. I grab my phone. No new messages. Just Instagram notifications. I look at a few pictures: an impossibly stretchy pose from a local yoga studio, a picture of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez with a cute dog, a shirtless Louis Cole standing under a waterfall. Like. Like. Like.

Then I head into the settings and log in as SGT_Pr1Mary. I scroll through recent stories from Newsha Syeh, Sabrina Haley, Theresa Carpenter, Lesbian Story Archives, and a few hundred other lesbian influencers. I keep finding new ones to follow every few days, hoping I'll stumble across something that tells me, definitely, the kind of lesbian I am. There are the gorgeous, super-model fabulous. There's the butch and edgy. I like both. And lots of in-between. I've even been stalking a few BDSM accounts recently, but I haven't worked up the courage to like any pictures. Not that anyone knows who SGT_Pr1Mary is.

A block of blotchy black type on a stark, white background makes me stop: "I AM A lezzie butch pervert feminist amazon bulldagger dyke AND SO ARE YOU." That's so

badass. So fire. I wish I had the balls to wear that on a t-shirt. I give it a like, bookmark it, and flip over to Google, searching “bulldagger.” *Bulldagger is pejorative slang for a very masculine lesbian, which often carries a more racialized meaning than its synonyms bulldyke, bulldiker, and diesel dyke. Bulldaggers are associated with physical strength, sexual prowess, emotional reserve, and butch chivalry.*

“So a bulldyke, basically,” I whisper. “Okay, but how is it racialized?”

I spend the next 20 minutes down the Google-hole of searches, learning the history and usage of the term. The Harlem Renaissance sounds crazy. Wild cabarets, Langston Hughes, and lesbianism was totally cool so long as you were married to a guy. Except they didn’t call it lesbianism. They didn’t call it anything. Mae Cowdery was 100. My secret summer of Google-holes, though they are fewer and farther between now. I can’t wait to talk to Erica like I know something about being a lesbian.

Time to get dressed. Pull up some Panic! at the Disco on my MacBook and nod at the trio of Panic! posters on the wall next to my dresser. The only posters on that wall. Not like when I was 13 and every available surface was covered with posters of My Chemical Romance, Justin Timberlake, and *High School Musical* posters. Now I have taste, and I’m no longer sure if my obsession with *High School Musical* was because of my crush on Zac Efron or on Vanessa Hudgens. A hotter couple, there has never been. I log out of my SGT_Pr1Mary account, making sure to completely log out, not just switch to my primary. Then I manually reboot the app and double-check to make sure sure I’m only logged in as WonderMandy98. All the while, Brendan Urie wails those high notes.

“Dude,” Alice yells from her room nextdoor.

Damn. Too bright and chipper for the little emo monster of a sister. I turn the music

down. My phone buzzes.

Erica:

poke

I blush. Still. This is ridiculous. We've been going out since September of last year, and I still blush.

Mandy:

Hey gorgeous 🥰

Erica:

how was ur nap

did u dream of me

Mandy:



I sit at my dresser and pull a brush through my hair a few times.

Erica:

send noods

Mandy:

Very funny

Erica:



“Amanda,” Dad says, knocking on the door that lazily swings open. I turn my phone face-down before he says, “Your mom almost has dinner ready.”

I pull my robe closed tighter. I can see him in my mirror as I blink the clumps out of my mascara. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

Dad glances my way, nods, and then makes a visual sweep of the room. His eyes linger on the trio of bookshelves, the long runs of *Babysitter’s Club* and Golden books caked with dust. I wonder if he’s going to comment on my unmade bed, but he glances past it and fixates on the pile of clean clothes sitting on top of my very empty suitcase. He says, “You started packing for school yet?”

“Not yet.” I try to keep the exasperation out of my voice. I don’t think it worked. If he and Mom could stop asking me that everyday, that would be great.

“You’ll regret it if—”

“If I save it all for next week. I know.”

Dad sighs and lowers his voice. “About tomorrow: Are you sure these costumes are okay? Your sister is making a big deal about this Minneapolis comic convention thing, and I don’t want to look—”

“They’re going to be great, Dad. Didn’t you see how excited Alice is?”

Dad’s grimace locks into place. He definitely saw Alice. My little sister wore nothing but My Little Pony from the time she could point at them until about a year ago. Since then, she’s perpetually dressed in black. Boots, pants, skirts, shirts, eyeliner. She even dyed her hair black at a sleepover, though Mom grounded her for a month. But ever since the parents agreed to make a whole family outing to this convention, complete with costumes, she has been bouncing around like a pinball. I still can’t picture Dad wearing a costume, but he agreed to it.

“Yeah, well,” he says. “Don’t take too long. You know how quick your mom’s stir fry

gets cold and dry.”

“And salty.”

“Some things never change,” Dad says, chuckling as he leaves. The hallway and stairs creak as he mosies away. Suddenly I have to pee, so I grab my phone and dart into the jack-and-jill bathroom connecting my room to my little sister’s. One of these days the parents will have to change out the Lizzy McGuire decor in here. Both Alice and I are WAY past that phase.

Back to my phone, to see what I missed.

Erica:

wut u up 2?

Mandy:

Getting ready 😊

Erica:

4 wut?

Mandy:

The game with Roxy and Celeste

I told you about it

Erica:

sry

forgot

preocupado

wut u wearing? 🍑😬

Mandy:

Just my robe easy access 😊

Erica:

yum

Mandy:

Hey has it started yet

Erica:

not yet

soon

standing around wishing u here

My chest tightens and I just know my face is flushing. It's warm. The sound of her braids. The smell that I can never put a finger on, but she just calls "Pink Lotion." I can't wait to see her back at school. Just a couple more weeks. Back in my room, I pick up the text conversation on my MacBook. I can grab my phone from the sink later.

Mandy:

Me too damn parents 😊

Erica:

robert is here now. gonna start marching soon ❤️

Mandy:

Okay be safe glad you're not alone

Erica:

def not alone. good crowd

Mandy:



I miss her so much it hurts. It's a cliché, but it's true. Two more weeks of keeping this a secret. Well, more than that, but only two more weeks living here and keeping it a secret. Easy. Mom and Dad are clueless. Celeste and Roxy—my two best friends—are sure there is a boy back at college. They keep asking me about this mythical “him.” Two more weeks. Just two more weeks. Then back to The University of Virginia. Back to Erica.

Erica.

“Amanda!” Mom yells from downstairs. “Dinner is ready now. You need to eat before you leave!”

“Getting dressed. I'll be down in ten.”

Bedroom door closed. I lock it. Alice is already downstairs, so I'm not worried about her barging in through the bathroom. I ease onto my bed, close my eyes, and see Erica. Feel her. Remember our first night together. And our second. I slide my hand under my robe. Plenty of time for this.

“Amanda?” Dad's voice asks, not loud, but way too close. I think he is in the bathroom.

“Yeah?” I ask absently, wiping my hand on my sheets, trying to look like I wasn't just doing what I was doing, and looking around for my phone.

An arm reaches into my room from the bathroom. Dad's arm. My phone, fully awake and unlocked, is in his hand. My throat closes up. He asks, almost in a whisper, “Who is Erica?”

Erica

August 11, 2018

“How do you spell Nazi? C-O-P!” The chant rings out around the Thomas Jefferson statue, maybe fifty feet away from me in front of The University of Virginia Rotunda. They’re starting already. I scrape the bottom of my sneaker against the brick steps, trying to get the gunk out of the worn treads of the nasty red Nikes. They’re not my favorite sneakers, and I don’t normally wear them in daylight. Ever since some boat-shoes-wearing dudebro scuffed the whole side of one, they’ve been magnets for spills and people stepping on my feet. They’re relegated to the gym, but not today.

“Erica,” Robert says as he weaves through the crowd toward me. He’s in a Dr. Who t-shirt, jorts that must be from the 90s, and some ratty, off-brand, actually-made-for-tennis tennis shoes.

“Hey,” I say, and we bro-hug. Hands clenched between us and one arm around the back. I turn back to my sneakers. Pink-and-green-beaded braids tumble off my shoulders. I’m about to use the stick-end of my sign to dig the gunk out of my shoe when it finally comes loose, staying on the step. Despite the scuffs, the red of the sneakers is still glowing against the concrete gray and brick maroon.

“You know if Marcus Martin is here this weekend?” I ask Robert.

“Who?”

“Damn, man. The guy wearing the red shoes. Hit by the car last year. Broke his leg. It was all over the news. That’s why I’m wearing my red sneakers.”

“Oh.” Robert looks kicked. “I didn’t know his name.”

“Then you don’t know if he’ll be here.”

Robert shakes his head, then digs a pick out of his jorts and starts messing with his high-top fade. I shake my head and tell him, “You look like Eddie from *Family Matters*.”

“Better than Urkel.”

“Barely,” I say. “It’s 2018.”

“I always thought I look more like Junior from *black-ish*, only nerdy.”

“That’s not really something to aspire to,” I say.

“Okay, Moesha,” he says, a dig at my braids.

“Oh shit, it’s like that?”

“You’re not the only one with archaic sit-com knowledge.

“Touche, Eddie.”

He asks, “What does your sign say?”

I pick it up off the ground so he can read it.

Not my AmeriKKKa, with a few couple rainbow-colored peace signs in the corners.

“Cool,” Robert says.

“Shit,” I say. “It’s better than cool.” I pull my phone out of my back pocket, suddenly worried about how ‘cool’ my girlfriend is right now. I never expected my first real girlfriend would be with a white girl from Baltimore. Probably chilling at home, having spaghetti with her perfect, white, suburban family. Probably worried about me. I don’t know who’s wound tighter about me being here: Mandy or my mom.

Erica:

poke

Mandy:

Hey gorgeous 🥰

Erica:

how was ur nap

did u dream of me

Mandy:



Erica:

send noods

Mandy:

Very funny

Erica:



wut u up 2?

She doesn't answer for a bit. I look up and see the crowd grew denser just in the time I was looking at my phone, but everyone is still shuffling around. I ask Robert, "When do we start marching?"

"Soon," a guy next to us says. Curly blonde hair frames his lean face, his chin trying so hard to grow a baby goatee. "I think they're chanting for the cameras right now, then we'll start walking around campus."

"Good," I say. "I'm over this waiting."

Then my phone buzzes again.

Mandy:

Getting ready 😊

Erica:

4 wut?

Mandy:

The game with Roxy and Celeste

I told you about it

Erica:

sry

forgot

preocupado

wut u wearing? 🍑😋

Mandy:

Just my robe easy access 😊

Erica:

yum

Mandy:

Hey has it started yet

Erica:

not yet

soon

standing around wishing u here

We text a little more, and part of me just wants to get lost in those texts. I can't wait for

her to come back to school, to be together again. It's been a long summer.

A white couple with painted faces squeezes between Robert and I, pushing a baby in a stroller. They look like they are out at an amusement park instead of a rally. But they're here. That's the important part. I keep telling myself that. And another of Jewel's—my oldest sister's—mantras. *Be present. Be mindful.* Crowds dense with signs are still chanting by the Jefferson statue. On the steps of the rotunda, speckling the boundaries of the crowd, are Charlottesville and UVA police. They aren't in riot gear, just their regular uniforms, plus thick, black vests crowded with bulging pockets.

"Heh, you see this?" Robert leans to me, showing his phone. A live shot from the helicopter flying circles overhead. He waves, a lanky brown arm screaming *hey, look at this black guy right here, throwing gang signs at the helicopter.* I know Robert wouldn't know a gang sign from a salute, but my heart double-dutches thinking about how the news will spin it, and I yank his arm down.

"Hey," he says. "I wanted to see—"

"I know what you wanted to see," I say.

"Sorry," Robert says. Over his shoulder, I see a couple cops. These two are all dressed up for a riot, whispering and pointing.

"Hey!" I yell at them, grabbing Robert's wrist and pulling it up so they can see his phone in his hand. "It's just a goddamn cellphone, assholes. Go back to Krispy Kreme!"

Robert twists his wrist from my hand, jamming his phone in his pocket. He spits and sputters before words come out of his mouth. "What the hell, Erica? Why—?"

"I saw how they were looking at us," I say. "What they were thinking. Fuck them and their assumptions."

“And what about your assumptions?” Robert asks.

“The day they quit stopping and frisking and shooting us,” I say. “Is the day I’ll rethink my assumptions about them. Until then, I will keep on assuming every one of them is looking for a reason to shoot us or throw us in prison.”

“Damn right,” the baby goatee guy says, presenting a fist. I bumped it.

Mandy

August 11, 2018

“Answer the question,” Dad says. He steps the rest of the way into my room, his face is unreadable stone. I throw my purple blankets over my bare legs.

“She’s a friend from school,” I say. Not a lie, just not the whole truth.

“She’s more than a friend.”

I say nothing. Dad sits on the foot of my bed. I can see my texts still open on the phone. He looks to it again and reads, “What you wearing? Just my robe.” He pauses, swallows hard, and closes his eyes before finishing. “Easy access.” He looks back to me, but only for a second, and then focuses on the lamp next to my bed. “Is she your...”

I want to attack, to do anything to change the subject. I could ask him why he’s spying on me, if he came in through Alice’s room just to catch me. If he’s been listening to my phone conversations or checking my emails or anything other than answer the question he’s trying to ask. Instead, all I do is whisper, “My what?”

“Don’t make me say it.”

I want to say, *say what*, but that won’t go over well. His mind can’t be going where I think it’s going. He’d met my high school friend Kyle—who is about as subtle as a drag queen—more than a dozen times over the course of six months, and was still shocked to learn he was gay. Everybody has blind spots, and homosexuality is definitely one of Dad’s. It’s been one of my comforts this summer, knowing there’s no way he thought I was anything but the straight daughter he raised. Surely he doesn’t suspect Erica’s my girlfriend. That I love her. That we’ve had—

“Are you two having sex?” Dad says, louder than I expected, like the words came rushing out of his mouth before he could stop them.

“Dad!” I say like I’m 12 and he’s asking me about kissing. My tone takes me by surprise.

He tosses my phone next to me and hops to his feet. He’s pacing. “Your mom can’t find out. She’d...she’d...I don’t know, but this would not set well with her.”

“But she—”

“No,” Dad says, cutting me off. “Her number one concern is your success. You and your brother and sister. I can’t imagine how this would fit into her plans for you.”

I don’t know how to read him right now. Nervous? Does my dad get nervous? I’ve never seen him think out loud or rant or whatever it is he’s doing right now. But he’s not going to tell Mom. I don’t remember anything ever happening that Dad didn’t tell Mom, or vice versa. It feels like I’m lying to her by association. I’ve seen her around gay people before. She treated Kyle just like every other one of my friends. But maybe Dad is right. Kyle isn’t her kid.

“Thanks, Dad,” I say.

He stops and looks at me. Utter surprise on his face. “You’re thanking me?”

“Yeah,” I say. “For not telling Mom.”

“I’m not doing that for you,” he says, sitting back down. “This would destroy her. Break her heart. You’re supposed to be Dr. Amanda Stephenson. Noted psychiatrist. We watched every episode of *Frasier* three times while you were away at school. Your mom insisted, saying how you were going to be a great psychiatrist like the Crane brothers, but better, because you’ll have a wonderful, supportive husband and a gaggle of children running around. Being...” He gestures wildly at my phone, unable to say the word, apparently.

“...doesn’t fit into her plans. Her dreams.”

“I can still have all of that,” I say. “Maybe not the husband, but the career and the children and—”

“You think it’s that easy? You think EVERYONE is okay with this just because you’ve met some people at college who are okay with it? Free love! Rainbows and puppies! The world is not like that, Amanda. The world will...” He stops again. Takes a deep breath and seems to reign himself in. “The world isn’t as tolerant as you’ve been led to believe.”

“The world is changing.”

Dad gives me a long, hard look before he says, “And what about the church? That shaggy pastor you and your friends love so much. What does he say about all this?”

I look at my nails, picking at the flaking teal polish. “Kyle still goes to church.”

“And you’re sure your pastor knows that Kyle is—”

“Everybody with ears and eyes knows Kyle is gay,” I say. I instantly regret it. Can’t believe I said something sarcastic in the middle of a lecture. Only my brother Adam can get away with that.

“How dare you take that tone,” Dad says. “So unlike you. So—” He trails off again.

“I’m sorry.”

“Who else knows? You and this Erica, obviously. Who else have you told? Your pastor, since he’s apparently so tolerant?”

I shake my head, picking at my nails again.

“Of course not,” Dad says. “Who else is like this? Do I need to be worried about you alone with Roxy or Celeste? I won’t have my children doing any...any...anything sexual going on in my house.”

“No,” I say. “Roxy and Celeste are straight. They don’t even know that I’m—”

“Who have you told?” He cuts me off.

I sigh. Usually not answering works with Dad. He’ll give up and leave, find a different tactic later. Not today, apparently. “I haven’t told anyone here.”

“Here in this house, or here in this town? This state?”

“Nobody here at home knows.”

“Good,” Dad says, rising from my bed. He’s pacing again. “Keep it that way.”

“Keep it that way?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Until you—” he says and stops. Stops talking. Stops walking. He just looks at me. Yet another look I don’t know on his face. Confusion, maybe?

“Dad?”

“Are you…” he says, taking several deep breaths before he continues. “Are you a lesbian?”

My cheeks warm. “I’m not sure.”

“How are you not sure? I saw those texts. They seem—”

“I might be bi.”

“That’s not better.”

“Jesus, Dad. There’s nothing wrong with being lesbian or bisexual.”

“I didn’t mean it that way, Amanda,” Dad says, sitting back down on the corner of my bed. I wish he wouldn’t do that. When I was little, sure, it was comforting to have him there, feel the weight of him tug at the blankets. But now, when I’m barely wearing anything and

we're talking about this, I just want him far away. A different room or a different state, maybe.

"I really like Erica," I say. I love her, but I'm not telling Dad that. "That doesn't mean I don't like boys, too. And the world—"

"The world seems to be more tolerant?" Dad rubs his chin. "Maybe in a college town. But here? In this neighborhood? This town? My job? Do you know what this would do to me or your mom or your siblings if this got out?"

"A few MAGA hats will be pissed? Who cares what they think?"

Dad's jaw works, the little bumps on the sides of his face popping up and down. The doorbell chimes through the house. He locks his eyes with mine. "You'd be surprised who wears those hats. Or who doesn't and votes along those lines. And who cares about those people you seem to hate so much." He gets up off my bed and walks to the door, his shoulders slump like he's carrying something. He stops at the door, not looking back. "Just keep this to yourself. And put on some clothes. You're going to be late."

"You don't expect me to—"

"Smile for your mom. Eat dinner. Go to volleyball like nothing is wrong."

"But something is—"

"Don't you dare make your mom suspect anything. She couldn't take it. Get dressed."

Robert

August 11, 2018

Marching around campus, participating in my first protest, is certainly not how I imagined it. I've seen plenty of YouTube videos of protests. Phone footage on Instagram or Twitter. Mom will occasionally make me read something in a newspaper when she thinks it's *important for your education*. So I thought I knew what to expect: angry mobs getting up in the faces of police, white guys standing idly by with assault rifles, police dragging people away. Instead, it feels more like a parade.

"This is kinda fun," I say to Erica.

She looks at me like I just told her *The Phantom Menace* is the best Star Wars movie, then she rolls her eyes and continues chanting, "Black lives matter! Black lives matter!"

But hey, she didn't say I was wrong. There are a couple hundred of us, I think, marching right down the street. I'm not sure why it's called a march, though. We're just walking. Walking and chanting.

"Lots of people carrying signs like at a WWE event," I say. "Except we're rooting for social justice instead of The Rock."

"That's where your mind goes right now? The Rock?"

"When doesn't my mind go to The Rock? He's in everything."

She opens her mouth like she's going to object, and then her eyebrows lift, conceding my point.

"Does he even wrestle anymore?" I ask.

"You think I know?"

“Don’t lie. You watched when you were a kid. I didn’t miss that Farooq and Bradshaw line you threw out the other night.”

She shakes her head, but she’s smiling. Totally caught her.

Doesn’t matter if he still wrestles, I guess. I haven’t watched since I was a kid, either, when Dad and I would get the TV all to ourselves every Monday night. He never questioned who I rooted for, but now that I think about it, he only let me buy shirts for The Rock or Mark Henry or Booker T. Black wrestlers. He gently guided me away from Undertaker or Stone Cold, but didn’t say why. I wish I still had that Booker T shirt. I suddenly realize I didn’t dress for a protest. I see lots of rainbow, Black Lives Matter, and other political shirts. I didn’t even think about what I was wearing this morning, no more than any other morning. Didn’t think that my shorts or my Dr. Who t-shirt might be seen as some sort of political statement. Too late now.

There are police cars—Charlottesville and UVA—at every intersection, their cars parked to block the cross-streets, the officers standing idly by, many in dark sunglasses and their thumbs hooked onto their belts. I give one a smile as we walk by. His goateed lip doesn’t even twitch. Maybe he just didn’t see me. So I smile at the next one. And the next. I even wave, but it’s like I’m not even here. Definitely not like back home. I know every officer that patrols my neighborhood, and they know me. Probably because I’m Judge McNealy’s kid, but still.

“Why are you waving?” Erica asks.

“Why aren’t they?” I ask.

“They’re cops,” she says like that’s somehow enough of a reason. We truly grew up in different worlds.

“But we aren’t doing anything illegal. Why can’t they be in a good mood?”

Again, I get the eyeroll before she says, “Welcome to America.”

Like I wasn’t born and raised here. Though really, this whole day reminds me more of a colder, wetter day thousands of miles away and several years back. One of many family trips to England.

“I can’t see,” my little brother said, holding his hands up to Dad, begging for some elevation.

“You’re too big for that, Anthony,” Dad said, trying to juggle an umbrella in one hand and his phone in the other. My 14-year-old hands weren’t big enough or deft enough for the task.

Anthony stomped his foot, splashing Dad’s leg with cold rainwater. His bottom lip started to wobble. Ten years old, and he still had Mom and Dad wrapped around his little finger.

“Let’s see if we can move forward, get closer so you can see,” Mom said.

So the four of us shoved forward, Mom leading the way, as usual. No matter where she was, she was Judge McNealy, taking charge and bossing people around. She was like Thor if Thor wasn’t cool. Even if she didn’t have her magical wooden hammer, she was always Judge McNealy. She didn’t whisper *excuse me*, she commanded it, and people moved out of the way as though their own mothers were telling them to move. Though I guess here in London, it would be their mums, not mothers. I followed in Mom’s wake, wishing she hadn’t told me to leave my 3DS in the hotel room. I didn’t want to watch some stupid parade in the rain; I wanted to keep playing *Zelda*.

I didn’t get the fascination with marching bands. I tried to play clarinet in 6th grade, but

gave it up when the teacher started talking about marching at football games and parades in high school. Everyone was so excited about it, but I was out. Friday night was Dungeons and Dragons night with Greg and Hollis and Stacie. I wasn't giving up D&D night to play clarinet at a football game. But here I was across an ocean with hundreds of adults watching American teenagers marching and playing. Stupid hats and uniforms and instruments were all soaking wet. That couldn't be good for the instruments.

"This is so awesome!" Anthony said, pumping his fists in the air.

Dad put a hand on his shoulder. Like I said, wrapped around his little finger. I couldn't remember the last time Dad had put his arm around my shoulders like that. I leaned against the railing, watching the rain patter against the asphalt, wishing the deafening, off-key rendition of Oasis' "Wonderwall" would stop. Then a hand was rubbing my back. Mom.

"Isn't this great?" she asked.

I shrugged. It was definitely not great. At least the band was moving on.

"Oh, would you look at that?" Mom said.

I looked up and was amazed that the parade had somehow gotten worse. Before I caught myself, the words escaped my lips, "Old men on mopeds?"

"Robert!" Mom said. Dad gave me a look that said the same thing.

"What?" I said. "I don't get it. Why is this fun? We've seen guys on mopeds the whole time we've been here. All over London. Why are they in the parade?"

"They're probably a charity organization," Dad said. "Like the Shriners back home. You shouldn't be so quick to judge, Robert."

I sighed and resigned myself to keeping my mouth shut and just getting through this. After the old men on mopeds was another marching band. Then a bunch of people twirling

flags. Then old men on bicycles. Another marching band. A few old cars came by, which were okay, even though I had no idea who the supposedly famous people inside were. Then yet another marching band. Where did they get all these bands?

Then came a bunch of people—some of them kids younger than Anthony—wearing black pants and beanies and hoodies. They were jumping around and hollering at the crowd. Anthony practically started vibrating with excitement, so I figured whoever they were, they were lowering the bar even more for this parade. I turned my attention back to the asphalt. But then there were a pair of black and white Converse standing on my little patch of street, just on the other side of the metal fence. I looked up and saw the prettiest pair of eyes I'd ever seen. She was almost my height, her skin smooth and close to the same shade of brown as mine. She was looking right at me, smiling an impossibly beautiful smile.

“Oi,” she said in the most amazing English accent, “aren’t you having fun?”

I smiled. Or tried to. I’m not sure what my face did, but it made her smile even more. It took me a minute before I noticed the Olympic rings on her hoodie. Right. 2012. London was hosting the Olympics later this year. Was this an Olympian? Right in front of me? Talking to me? Because that would be pretty cool.

“Aren’t you excited about the Olympics, sad boy?”

“Y-yeah,” I stuttered. “Of course. Go team USA!”

She laughed. “Go team England, sad boy!”

“Ha, right. Of course. Them too.”

“Smile, sad boy,” she said. “It’s a new year, full of possibilities. Don’t waste it being sad.”

“I…” I didn’t know what to say. How to respond. No clue what my face was doing.

“Okay,” I finally said.

She winked at me, squeezed my hand, and skipped away to catch up to her group. And I was apparently having a stroke. My face was frozen in a smile and my entire right side—the same side as the hand she squeezed—was tingling. Not really a stroke, but apparently a pretty girl could have a similar effect.

“Next time,” a voice said, way too close to my ear. I jumped before I realized it was Dad, his hand on my shoulder. “Get her number.”

“Oh my God,” Mom said. “He’s only fourteen.”

“He can’t have a phone call?” Dad said, straightening back up and giving me a wink and a half smile.

Mom just shook her head, and then pointed past the Olympians to another marching band. Somehow, they didn’t seem as horrible. Despite the rain and the cold, the band members were smiling and waving, enjoying every minute of the parade before they started in on another song. I don’t know how I hadn’t noticed it before. So many smiling faces, waving hands, and the air was filled with food truck smells and songs echoing off the buildings. Maybe today wasn’t going to suck as much as I’d thought.

Now I was the one in the parade, even if the police weren’t returning my smiles or waves. If this is what protests are all about, I’m here for it. Grab some friends, make some signs, high-step it in front of some news cameras, and change the world. As we pass a blocked intersection, a few stopped cars start honking. Peace signs are waving from the windows. I wave back. The couple in the front seats catch my eyes and smile, waving even harder. It feels good to be the one in the parade for once, to be with my best friend, and as an added

bonus, we are making the world a little better.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Erica asks, her words like a punch to the gut.

“They’re waving,” I say. “I just thought—”

“Do you know why we’re marching?”

“Of course, Heather Heyer—”

“This isn’t about Heather,” Erica says, her face deadly serious. “Not entirely.”

“But all these signs. The memorial at 4th and Water. What else if not her?”

“Why was she marching last year?”

I open my mouth and close it. I’ve never thought about it, never thought about anything before beyond the car barreling through the crowd, the buildup to today’s march. But then the answer seems obvious. “Of course,” I say. “The Alt-Right marching through town.”

“And why were they marching around C’ville?”

That was harder. I shrug. I don’t know what answer she wants, but it’s obvious I don’t have it.

Erica works her jaw. In our whole friendship, I’ve seen her anger plenty of times, but never directed at me. It’s scary, like looking into the Sarlacc Pit. She swallows hard and says, “Just stop smiling. Remember you’re at a protest and this is serious.”

“Okay, but—”

“Later. For now, just be part of the protest, not whatever happy thing you think this is.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Erica says. “Be serious.”

Erica

August 11, 2018

I wipe the sweat from my eyes. Again. We'd finished our lap around the campus. My throat is dry from chanting, and my arms are a little sore from pumping my sign up and down in rhythm to the chants. The compact line of protestors is dispersing across The Lawn, turning back into the massive crowd we began as. Sweat glistens on my skin, looking a deeper shade of brown than normal after all day in the sun. I hold my hair up and away from my neck, letting what little breeze the Virginia summer has to offer blow by. I want to kick myself for not bringing a hair tie. Suddenly, a painful cold is there on my neck, jolting down my spine and buckling my knees. I spin away from whatever it is.

I bark, "What the f—"

"Whoa!" Robert says, holding up his hands in surrender, both holding glistening bottles of water. "Whoa! It's just me. Sorry. You looked hot."

"Damn, man," I say. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

Robert puts a bottle in my hand once I ask for it, and then grabs a pick out of the back pocket of his jean shorts. He plucks at his high-top fade briefly before putting the pick back, straightening the back of his Doctor Who t-shirt.

"Sorry," he says again. He shrugs and glugs down some of his own water.

"And what was all that waving back there?"

"Just being friendly."

"We're not here to make friends, you know."

"Hey, my mom always said you catch more flies with honey."

Yeah. His white mom would say that. My phone buzzes in my pocket.

Jewel:

How'd it go?

Jewel, my oldest sister, checking up on me. The lawyer. Pride of the family not just because of law school and the "esquire" that goes after her name, but because she's a lawyer for the ACLU. Veteran of many protests. Defender of the innocent. Voice for the voiceless. She Who Can Do No Wrong.

Erica:

good

dont think were done

Jewel:

Keep me posted

You should text Momma

A sigh pushes past my lips. There are no two-text or three-text exchanges with Momma. Like reading my mind, Jewel texts again.

Jewel:

You know it will be worse if you wait

Erica:

i no

fine

Jewel:

Love you

Erica:



“Everything okay?” Robert asks, polishing off his bottle of water.

“Mmm hmm,” I say. “Just gotta check in with the fam.”

“Shit,” Robert says, pulling his own phone from his pocket. “Right.”

Erica:

finished walkin round—

I stop typing, instead holding down the backspace. Momma has no tolerance for any typos or shorthand. “Youthspeak,” she calls it.

Just finished walking around campus.

Hydrating now.

Robert is here with me.

Momma:

Good.

Thank you.

You done for the day?

I look around, escaping the gravity of my phone. There had been talk of more as the simple walk around campus ended, and now I can see the energy shifting in the crowd. A buzz like before the headliner for a big concert taking the stage. The warm-up acts are done and people are antsy.

Erica:

Not sure yet.

Going to find some shade and drink water.

Robert’s hand is suddenly covering my phone. “You need to hydrate. Heat stroke causes

permanent damage in less than 30 minutes. It's a leading cause of death in our age group."

"Seriously?"

"It's probably in the top 100," he says with an embarrassed smile.

I open my mouth to give him shit, rolling my eyes at another in Robert's Medical Factoids, but the scratch in my throat agrees with him. He brought water. I need to drink it. And find shade.

"Is it always like this?" Robert asks, following my wandering lead.

"Like what?"

"Hotter than Tattooine, but with signs."

"Why can't you just say, 'super hot?'"

He shrugs. "It's more fun. Tattooine is—"

"I know what Tattooine is," I say. "It's *Star Wars*, not some obscure sci-fi book you read in high school."

He gives me that smirk he always uses when I get one of his nerdy references. I get more than I let on but I don't want to give him the satisfaction. Gotta keep that smugness in check. "I was actually a bigger Michael Crichton fan in high school," he says. "But you didn't answer the question."

"It's Virginia in August," I say. "It's not Atlanta, but it's probably always hot."

"But protests—"

"You protest where you need to protest. If Nazis had marched in Alaska last year, then we'd be there."

"I don't think my parents would pay for a flight to Alaska."

"You know what I mean," I say.

We find a plot of grass that isn't so crowded, shaded a little by a Pavilion, and I down half my water in one go. The cold spreads through my belly, a fresh reprieve from the heat. My throat is happier, too.

“So what now?” Robert asks.

I shrug. People are milling about. A few chants fire up around The Lawn, but none of them stick. “This is when I usually chat with friends for a bit before heading out. I need a shower.”

“Yeah, you smell like—,” Robert starts.

Don't say bantha. Don't say bantha.

“—a bantha.”

“I'm guessing that's an insult,” I say. Again, I get the reference, but I can't have him thinking that.

“Whatever,” Robert says. He looks a little dismayed. He'll get over it. “I'm hungry. I could murder a stack of pancakes right now.”

“I could—” I was about to say eat, but then I hear a chant start up in earnest.

“What goes up,” a chant echoes from nearby, toward the east end of campus, “must come down. Tear those fucking statues down. What goes up, must come down. Tear those fucking statues down...” On and on it goes. A crowd is gathering between Pavilion II and Pavilion IV. Keep going that direction, through campus and on toward the town, a bronze Robert E. Lee sits astride his horse in the middle of a park. A little farther, and Stonewall Jackson sits atop his, too.

“What's going on?” Robert asks.

“It's not over,” I say. “Looks like time to march to the Lee statue.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Robert says, a hand on my arm. As soon as I stop trying to get up, his fingers are on my wrist. His eyes on his watch.

“What are you doing?”

He doesn’t answer, just keeps focused on his watch.

“Robert?”

“Your heart is a little elevated,” he finally says. “You need to keep cooling down.”

My eyebrows shoot up, giving him my best *excuse me, but you did not just* look.

“What? Heat exhaustion and stroke are real things. They—”

“I know,” I say, ripping my arm out of his grip and climbing to my feet. “And so is racism. I’ll be fine, but so long as Nazis think it’s okay to march through the streets with assault rifles, I’ll just grab some water and keep on keeping on.”

He sighs, putting too much drama into it, but then he gets up, too.

“Okay,” he says, nodding his head to the gathering crowd. “We’d better get over there.”

“We?”

“What, did you think I’d let you go alone? Somebody has to be there to tell the EMTs your name when you get heat stroke.”

“Very funny.”

“Sure,” he says. “It’s funny now.”

I roll my eyes and turn back to my phone.

Erica:

Marching to the Lee statue now.

Momma:

Do you think that’s wise?

Don't make yourself a target

No point in going another round with Momma. Not now. She'd call, and I'd miss the entire march just trying to convince her I *should* go on the march. For someone who has a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the living room and donates what she can spare to Black Lives Matter, she always reads me the riot act every time I go on a protest. Even ones like this that haven't organized some civil disobedience.

Erica:

I'll text when it's over.

Momma:

Be safe.

I love you.

I smile, but then a new message pops up. Mandy. My girl.

Mandy:

Finally listened to Indigo Girls

I don't get it

Erica:

r u googling lesbian things again

The three little dots bounce around for a while. I can see her now, typing, deleting, and retyping. Probably blushing even if nobody is around to see it. Never in my life have I known someone so easily embarrassed. It's cute. Or annoying. Depends on the day. But honestly, it was one of the first things I noticed about her, and it just made me want to chase her even more.

"Somebody's texting her girlfriend," Robert says, adding in way too many syllables and

key changes in the last word.

“What?” I say, tucking my phone back in my pocket.

“Your dimples come out when you talk to her.”

“Shut up,” I say, but I just smile more. “You’re just jealous.”

Robert looks overly thoughtful for a few seconds before he shrugs and says, “Probably.”

I raise my eyebrows at him.

“Your girlfriend is hot,” he says.

I just chuckle and then my phone buzzes again.

Mandy:

I’m still new to this

The three dots dance again, but I decide to put her out of her misery.

Erica:

u cant do lesbian wrong

just do u

like wut u like

Mandy:



Erica:



“Now that *that’s* out of the way,” I say, shoving the phone back in my pocket again.

Robert stares at his phone, a look of worry on his face.

“My dad is worried about this,” Robert says. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“You afraid?” I ask.

Robert stares at his shoes, digging a toe into the ground. Yeah. He's afraid. First protest is getting real. I get that. Hell, I remember my first protest, which was pretty tame. But Momma, the night before Jewel and I flew up to New York for it, that was a different story.

"I'm going," I said, my hands pruned from washing dishes.

"Is that what you think?" Momma said. "You live under my roof, you eat my food—"

"I pay my bills," I said before my 16-year-old brain caught up to my mouth. This wasn't going to be good.

"Don't you interrupt me," Momma said. Jewel put a hand on my shoulder, giving me a look that told me I just stepped in it. As if I didn't already know. "And don't you talk about that little job you have at the mall like you pay bills. You just pay for the stuff I won't pay for. You aren't putting food on that table or keeping the lights on. So don't talk to me about bills."

"Yes, Momma," I said.

Her jaw leapt a few times, still simmering, but that seemed to mollify her enough to get back to the issue at hand.

"This is important," I said.

"I know," Momma said, her face softening. "You are not an adult yet, Erica. I can't stop your big sister from going up to New York and marching. But—"

Now, there's a certain look I'd learned to give Momma over the years that made her feel guilty as anything. A secret weapon, if you will. I don't break it out all the time, because she might catch on and it would definitely lose its effectiveness with overuse, but I deployed it now. A little pout of the lips. A downcast, slightly-to-the-right, middle-distance gaze. A

tension in the jaw.

Momma stopped mid-sentence and knelt down, eye-to-eye with me sitting. “What those police did to Eric Garner wasn’t right. He was selling cigarettes, I know, Maybe it wasn’t legal, but nothing to take a man’s life over. I understand your anger. I feel it, too. I get it. But protesting can be dangerous.” Momma gently took hold of my chin and directed my gaze at her. “It has always been dangerous for people who look like us. Dr. King was shot for making too much noise.”

“He also changed the world,” Jewel chimed in. She said she would. Told me to keep my mouth shut before I broached the subject with Momma, but I just had to open my mouth.

“I know he did,” Momma said, standing back up to talk to both of us. “But he gave his life for it.”

“And John Lewis marched right next to Dr. King,” Jewel said. “And he’s still kickin’, still serving as Congressman for the 5th District of Georgia.”

“I know,” Momma said. “I know who John Lewis is.”

“Point is,” Jewel said, “protesting can be dangerous, sure, but you can make a difference and still live a long, healthy life.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Momma hummed, giving Jewel that look that said *I concede your point, but you better finish your argument right quick before I ground you*. Not that Momma could ground Jewel. She was an adult. Moved out a few years ago.

“I’ll be there the whole time,” Jewel said, giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze. “We’ll be safe. Subdued, even. And I know the law, Momma. It’s what I do for a living. She’ll be back home before dinner tomorrow. I promise.”

Momma narrowed her eyes and shifted her weight. I knew right then that Jewel won the

argument. I could never win arguments with Momma, but Jewel was a master at it. Probably why she makes such a good lawyer. If you can beat Momma with logic, judges and juries are easy pickings. Momma started moving toward me, and I wondered if I was wrong, if her backhand was coming, but instead I was suddenly wrapped up in her arms, surrounded by the smell of her powder-fresh deodorant and light dusting of flour on her shirt.

“Fine,” Momma said. Her voice was even, but I could feel a little shaking in her chest. “But you keep your heads down.” Momma pulled me back to arms length, staring long and hard at me. Then she turned her gaze directly to Jewel with that *This is not a request, this is a threat* look, “And your baby sister does not leave your sight.”

I started to say, “I’m not a—”

“Yes, Momma,” Jewel interrupted.

Momma looked at me. Me and my big mouth. “You will always be my baby. You stay with your sister. Do what she says. I expect you back by dinner tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry,” I say to Robert. “We’ll be fine.”

“I know we’ll be fine,” Robert says with unexpected indignation. “I just think we did our thing, now we should go and rest up for tomorrow.”

“So the first amendment isn’t a good idea?”

“That’s not what I—”

“That’s what I heard.”

“But—”

“Nope,” I say, pointing east. “Let’s go,” I start marching toward the rest of the chanting crowd without waiting for another response.

“We marched,” Robert says, jogging to catch up to me. “We did our part. Can we just go home now? Come back tomorrow?”

“You do what you want,” I say, turning to look back at him and walking backward, still toward the growing chants, “I’ve got a date with that statue.”

“What does that mean?” Robert asks.

I look at him with a smirk, bob my eyebrows up and down once, challenging him to step up. I down the rest of her water and crush the empty bottle in my hand.

“Are they,” Robert stutters. “Are they going to vandalize that statue?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?” Robert looks like he’s on the verge of losing his shit. “Maybe? You don’t know? I can’t—”

“Robert,” I say, more serious and firm this time. I stop walking. “This is literally why we’re here this weekend.” I hoist my sign back up in the air, “Not My AmeriKKKa” with the Ks drawn like a rainbow flag in relief. Little hearts and peace signs dotted the front and back, representing the full spectrum of ROYGBV.

“I don’t know—” Robert says, his voice trailing off. He looks wounded. Scared.

And that just pisses me off. “Suck it up,” I say. “This isn’t a field trip or a country club. This is making change. Look at you. Look at me.”

Robert looks confused. Of every emotion he could throw at me, that pisses me off the most.

“You asked if they were going to vandalize that statue,” I say, spinning my fanny pack around to face the front and unzipping it, though just doing that makes my heart race. “Who do you think is the ‘they?’ It’s us. We. You and me and all these other people.” I reach in and

pull out a small can of Rustoleum. A red called Strawberry Fields. “This is all about getting attention, shining a light on a country that venerates dead, racist, slaveholding generals in bronze. Don’t you think maybe, MAYBE painting #BLM on that statue will get some attention?”

Robert swallows hard, but says nothing.

“Given the chance,” I say. “Yeah, we’re going to fuck up that statue.”

The Barista

August 11, 2018

Funny how time can make things seem totally different, and yet completely the same all at once. Charlottesville has always been clash of college town and booming little city, ever since Jefferson put his house on the mountain nearby. In some ways, it feels the same as a year ago or five or ten. Same streets and street signs. The Downtown Mall, a mile or so of restaurants and local shops, plus a CVS and an Urban Outfitters is the hub of the town. Wide enough for four or five lanes, but it's paved with bricks and criss-crossing concrete, strictly for pedestrians. Fenced-in, outdoor dining areas take up chunks of space in the center. Middle aged men and women are out walking their dogs or power-walking, swinging their arms with too much energy. They're not the same men and women from when Madeline Stower was a girl, but if she squints her eyes, they look the same. The Corner still buzzes with students and professors every day during the school year. The Downtown Mall is almost too crowded on weekends, but not quite. Certainly not this weekend. Not with the lockdown. Almost nobody out today. Madeline is setting up her outdoor tables and chairs, wiping off the pollen. The air lays like a blanket of sweat across her, just like it did when she was a teen in summer. All this talk about global warming, but some places are just hot. Maybe it's hotter now. She doesn't know. She did fine in science classes as a kid, but she became a barista and entrepreneur, not a meteorologist or whatever.

A phone buzzes close enough for her to hear. Not hers. She left hers on the counter inside. She looks around and sees a short, brown woman digging a phone out of her pocket. She moves into the shade of the building so she can see the screen.

“Crap,” she says. Nice phone. The clothes are pretty nice, but probably Walmart nice. Madeline keeps working, keeping the woman in her field of vision. The woman doesn’t seem to notice, too engrossed in her phone. It rings, and she keeps typing.

The businesses are different from Madeline’s childhood, of course. Not all of them, but most. She didn’t really notice the change as it was happening. She grew up only a few miles away from the Downtown Mall, which has always been a center for commerce in town. She’s had the cafe for almost ten years. Businesses come and go, and then one day she looked up and realized most of them were different from when she opened.

The woman’s phone rings again. Still, she just types.

Madeline is worried about tomorrow, about the protest. About the lockdown of the Mall and the sheer volume of police coming into town. For the last three days, she and Daniel—her husband—have watched them roll in from out of town. All the motels and AirBnBs are booked up. Probably trying to prevent a repeat of last year. The UVA police and C’ville PD were overwhelmed on that Friday. They didn’t know how big it was going to be that night. And then came August 12. So many men with assault rifles and torches. They were pissed. Boys wearing cargo shorts and polos like they were uniforms. Grown men marching around in military gear, carrying assault rifles. Sometimes it was hard to tell them from the police. Daniel said they ought to write “WHITE OWNED” on the front windows, but they didn’t. Nobody looted or damaged the cafe, at least.

Again, the woman’s phone rings. Why won’t she just answer the damn thing?

Madeline actually liked the Tiki torches, thought it added a nice, calming effect to that evening, though there wasn’t much else calm about it. Had to throw away all their torches after that. Didn’t want to give anybody the wrong idea. Saw somebody get hit over the head

with one, lucky the thing didn't break and set her face on fire. Blood got in her eye, though. Madeline saw it on the news after she'd locked up the cafe and went home before things got too bad.

"Hi, Amy," the woman says on her phone, finally. "This is Victoria Cardenas. I'm out of town and need to reschedule my appointment."

"I know. 24 hours. I'll have to pay to reschedule. I forgot to call earlier."

"I do."

"Like I said," she says, sounding a little flustered. "I'm out of town. Working the rally in Charlottesville. Driving back Monday."

Working the rally? The protest scheduled for today? The woman—Victoria—keeps going back and forth like that for a few more minutes with whoever is on the other end of the phone, reassuring this Amy that she's not reprioritizing her mental health, and finally rescheduling for Wednesday. Great. So a looney is marching through our streets soon. Figures.

Victoria hangs up and finally notices me. "Good morning," she says.

"Morning," Madeline says, following Victoria into the coffee shop. A little bell on the door rings. She looks a few years younger than Madeline, somewhere early-to-mid thirties. Her shoulder-length black hair is pulled back into a ponytail, through a green, red, and white scrunchie.

"What's good?" Victoria asks and starts scanning the menu board. Chalkboards covered in swirling, colored writing.

Madeline squeezes behind the counter and says, "Everything. This is my place, and I stand behind everything on the menu."

“Great,” Victoria says with a smile.

“Just visiting C’ville, or—” Madeline says, letting the sentence trail off.

Victoria gives her a smile and says, “I grew up around here.”

The looney grew up around here? Madeline wonders if she knows the woman’s family, when they moved here from Mexico or wherever. She smiles brightly, though, and extends a hand in greeting. “I’m Madeline. You are?”

“Victoria.” She orders an iced latte and makes her way to a table without further discussion.

Madeline isn’t comfortable, though. Somebody worried about her mental health and “working” the rally? In her cafe? She grabs her washcloth and finds a table nearby Victoria that looks a tad dusty. “So what brings you back to town?”

“The anniversary,” she says. “The rally tomorrow.”

Madeline stops wiping for just a moment. She resumes as she speaks, “Here for the protests? I really don’t understand that. What do you hope to accomplish?”

“Well, I—”

Madeline doesn’t let her finish, but stops wiping the table and throws a truly dirty look her way. Better to get it out in the open, maybe drive this woman off before other customers show up. “Why would you come back? Didn’t you do enough?”

“Okay,” Victoria says. She leans back in the chair and crosses her arms like Madeline’s daughter used to do when she was a teenager.

“With your signs and picking fights with those good old boys?” Madeline says. “If you all had just stayed home and let them march around, that girl would still be alive. And those troopers.”

Victoria clenches her jaw, the little muscles working the sides of her face. But she says nothing.

“And I’ll tell you another thing,” Madeline continues.

“Ma’am,” Victoria says in a voice radically different from before. Full of authority, confidence. It reminds Madeline of her own father, may he rest in peace. When Madeline stops short, Victoria continues. “I’m a trooper for the Virginia State Police.”

“Well,” Madeline says, struggling to process the new information. The looney is an officer of the law. A state trooper. Madeline folds and refolds her towel, unable to hold Victoria’s eyes now when she says, “Why didn’t you, um, you don’t look, I mean—”

“Whatever made you think differently is on you, ma’am. I was here last year to protect the people of Charlottesville. I’m here this year for the same reason.”

Madeline takes a deep breath and stands up a little straighter, rallying, “Good for you. Glad to see someone like you putting on the uniform to serve and protect.”

Looking at Victoria now, Madeline sees a different person. Not a looney, but a state trooper. Those brave men and women with their shields and batons last year, standing in the face of all that chaos while she and Daniel were safe at home. So they could BE safe at home.

“I’m sorry,” Madeline says, leaving it up to Victoria to figure out what the apology is for.

Victoria’s phone buzzes. She holds Madeline’s gaze for a few moments before fetching her phone again, and the typing resumes, but only briefly. She buries the phone in her back pocket, and then fishes a crumpled dollar from a front pocket. She pins it to the table with her half-empty coffee cup.

“Leaving?” Madeline asks, but it sounds more like relief.

“Duty calls.”

“You don’t need to leave a tip, you know. I’m the proprietor.”

Victoria stops halfway to the door, turning to meet Madeline’s eyes. Madeline tries to hold that gaze, to meet it, but her embarrassment overwhelms her, and she looks back to her wiping after a few seconds. “Yeah,” Victoria says. “I don’t need to leave a tip. But you sure as shit need one, lady.”

Madeline opens her mouth, spinning to face the trooper and give a retort, but the bell above the door is already ringing, the woman already outside and hustling away.

Mandy

August 11, 2018

I'm glad I don't have to drive. My hands are shaking too much. I probably would run off the road before I get out of my neighborhood. Roxy picks me up, with Celeste already in the car. They are talking about something, the line of anime Funko Pop figures on the dashboard nodding and shaking heads with their collective opinion. I need to tune them in, to get my mind off Dad, but that's easier said than done.

"...wouldn't you just watch *Mean Girls*?" Celeste says, her eyes on the visor mirror, adjusting every strand of blonde hair on her head. Some girls are born with arrow-straight, luscious hair that always seems to fall into place without a split end or frizz. Some girls spend hours in front of the mirror each day making it look that way. Celeste is the weird intersection of both. But no matter how many times we tell her that she looks amazing, to stop making us look like bridge trolls (Roxy's term), she never stops primping.

"Because," Roxy says, already exasperated, "I can watch *Yamada-Kun and the Seven Witches* or *Magical Girl Site*, get the whole bitchy girl thing, plus magic!"

"Oh my God, you're not getting it."

"Not getting what? You told me what *Mean Girls* is about, and it sounds like a less interesting version, of like, a dozen different anime I've watched."

This is when I would usually interject, play peacemaker between these two. Tell Roxy it's because we've all watched *Mean Girls* and just want to include her, but I'm not feeling it. Every time I blink, I see my phone in Dad's hand, reaching into my bedroom. The look on his face. It was the same look he had when Grandpa—his father—died a couple years ago.

He was crushed. By me.

“Mandy,” Celeste says. “Would you please tell your friend that she needs to watch normal, American things once in a while?”

“Yes, Mandy,” Roxy chimes in. “Would you tell your friend that anime is as normal—whatever that means—as her ancient, Lindsey Lohan rom-com?”

I slink down into the seat so Roxy can’t see me in her rearview mirror. “I love you both and you’re awesome and I wish I’d brought popcorn.”

Celeste pauses her primping briefly before continuing and saying, “That’s cheating.”

“That’s what my grandma says whenever I talk about not going to church,” Roxy says.

“I love you both and you’re awesome and popcorn?” Celeste asks.

“Not the popcorn part, but yeah,” Roxy says.

“So, she cheats?”

“Like Lando Calrissian.”

“See,” Celeste says. “Just when I thought we were speaking the same language.”

“Oh, come on,” Roxy says. “You’ve seen *Star Wars*.”

“She saw it with me,” I say.

“Not helping,” Celeste says, but she’s starting to laugh. Roxy joins in. And finally, surprising myself, so do I. It feels good, but also wrong to laugh. Wrong to feel good when Dad is back home, all mixed up in his own feelings, lying to Mom and Adam and Alice. What is he thinking? He won’t throw me out, I don’t think. Last year, there was one of those Lifetime movies Mom was watching. Mom and Dad both, though Dad always claims he hates them. It was a kid who comes out and his parents kicked him to the streets. Pretty much the same plot of a dozen different YA books I’ve read. Anyway, Mom got up, mumbling to

the TV, “that’s still your kid.” But Dad said nothing. What would Mom do if she found out? When she finds out it’s her kid?

“You okay?” Celeste asks. When I wasn’t looking, she turned around. Those big, blue eyes framed by long, fake lashes and shadowy makeup are focused on me.

“Um,” I say. I don’t want to lie, but I don’t want to tell either of them the truth, either. I honestly have no idea how they’ll react. We all grew up in the same church. Didn’t drink any alcohol or take any drugs in high school. But we weren’t the evangelizing, holy-roller church or anything. But Sunday school and lock-ins and retreats. Loving Jesus in the 21st Century. It was cool. Fun. Kyle and at least a few other guys started coming out of the closet, but kept coming to church.

At least, I did until last year at UVA. Erica. She was my first, and it was amazing. Since Celeste, Roxy, and I were in kindergarten, the three of us have told each other everything, and it feels shitty to be keeping this from them. But I haven’t been able to bring myself to talk about it, to come out, to even hint. We’ve talked about lots of crushes, flirting at the summer league volleyball games and a few parties, a handful of semi-serious boyfriends. Our three-way pinky swear at high school graduation to save ourselves for marriage is still clear in my mind, and fortunately neither of them have brought up sex all summer, either.

“You’re not okay,” Celeste says.

Roxy adjusts her mirror so she can glance at me while she drives. “Spill it.”

“My dad,” I say, hoping I can come up with some middle ground between truth and lie as I go along.

“Not Mom,” Roxy says, turning off the highway. “That’s new.”

Celeste says nothing, but those blue eyes are imploring, not letting me stay silent.

“We had a fight,” I say. Not a lie.

“About?” Celeste says.

I search her eyes, not knowing what I might find there. Answers? Acceptance? These two are my best friends. If anybody in this whole world will understand, I hope it will be them. Roxy keeps glancing in the mirror, her brown eyes and freckled cheeks full of worry under the brim of her Pokemon hat. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, remember what Erica told me in one of our many conversations about coming out, “If they don’t accept every part of you, they don’t really love you.” She’d been talking about my family, but it applies here too. I’ve tried to talk about her a dozen times this summer, but every time, my throat closes up. Just like now. But I swallow.

I swallow again.

I swallow REALLY hard.

“Okay, so,” I say. “I’ve been keeping something from you two. Please don’t hate me.”

They exchange a look that says, *I don’t like where this is going, but okay*. Celeste says, “Go on.”

“I’m sort of dating someone back at school.”

“I knew there was a dude!” Roxy says, slapping a hand on the steering wheel and inadvertently honking the horn. “Sorry!” she says to the driver of the blue Malibu in front of us.

Celeste smiles, her grin like a fox who just spotted a stray cat.

Here we go. Now or never. It’ll be okay. It will. It has to be. They love me. They know me. If I can’t come out to these two, I’ll be living in the closet forever. I take a deep breath, blow out all the air, and take another before saying, “There’s no dude. No guy.”

“No—” Celeste starts, stops, looks confused for a few seconds, and then her eyes go wide. “Oh.”

I bite my lip, waiting for the reaction. To be dumped out of the car in downtown Baltimore. For screams or crying or whatever is about to come.

“What?” Roxy says. She is glancing back and forth between me in the mirror and navigating crowded Friday night streets.

“Mandy has a girlfriend,” Celeste says, her voice flat, giving me nothing.

“Oh,” Roxy says like she’s found an spare penny in her pocket. Then it was her turn for wide eyes as a huge smile breaks across her face. “Oh. Oh! Oh my god! That’s exciting!”

Celeste looks back to me, a sly grin creeping up one side of her face. “We knew you were hiding something. Picture. Name. Now.” She extends a hand around her seat, begging for my phone.

I pull it out of my pocket and start scrolling for a good picture of her. “Her name is Erica,” I say with ease. Like coasting down a gentle hill after scaling a sheer rock face. What seemed impossible all summer, even just a moment ago, comes spilling out of me. “She’s from Atlanta. She’s a year ahead of me.” Then the phone is out of my hand, my need for the perfect picture overpowered by Celeste’s impatience. She turns back around, flipping through pictures, showing Roxy a few, both of them oohing and ah-ing with too much enthusiasm.

“Oh, Mandy,” Roxy says. She’s glancing at me, but I don’t know the look. “Are you in love with her?”

I look at my shoes and nod. Teardrops splatter my cutoff shorts and bare legs. A hand enters the frame, grabbing my knee. Then another hand. Roxy and Celeste, holding on as best they could while still strapped into their seats. A sob lurches out of me from somewhere deep.

Some crazy mix of sad and guilty for keeping this from them, but thrilled that I'm out, at least to somebody, that my best friends are still my best friends knowing my most guarded secret.

"We got you," Roxy says.

"You idiot. Not telling us. What did you think would happen?" Celeste says.

I look up, hair plastering my wet cheeks. I shrug.

"Dude," Roxy says, her eyes still on the road, "we're not your mom."

"But our pinky promises and all those chastity—" I begin.

"Fuck that," Roxy says. "I had sex with two guys in Seattle. And neither was my first."

"What?" Celeste and I say together.

"You two are still on the virgin train," Roxy says. "I didn't want to make you—"

"I," Celeste says, taking a deep breath before continuing. "Sort of left that train last semester."

I forgot why I was crying. Who were these women? What happened to us? Also, this was totally awesome. "So none of us are virgins anymore," I say.

"None of us?" Celeste says, looking squarely at me now. Roxy even whips her head around for a moment. Yeah, I guess telling them I had a girlfriend didn't mean I admitted to sex.

I smile, blush, and cover my face. All I can do is nod.

"Yes, girl!" Celeste says, banging a drum solo on the dashboard.

"We're not really surprised," Roxy says.

"You're not?" I say, peeking between my fingers.

"Well," Celeste says, "I'm a little surprised."

“So we’ve been going to volleyball almost every week, and you’ve just been staring at the ladies?” Roxy says.

“And the guys,” I say.

“So you’re bi?” Celeste says.

I shrug. I really hadn’t thought about how to label myself.

“By the way,” Roxy says, “she is super hot. Like, five fire emojis hot. You two are cute.”

I smile. I can’t help it. We are cute.

“Come on, sexy Charlie Brown!” Roxy screams, hands cupped over her mouth. Celeste blushes in splotches on her cheeks and chest. She quickly slathers sunscreen over the splotches, hoping to hide them, I guess.

“Jesus Christ, Roxy,” Celeste whimpers, one hand in front of her face and the other over said chest.

I giggle, but cover my face too. Warmth is there, and not just from the sun setting across Baltimore’s Inner Harbor. Roxy loves to embarrass us. I’m still setting up my camping chair, right between Celeste’s and Roxy’s. We got here early enough that nobody will be able to set up between us and the array of sand volleyball courts. Every volleyball court is in use, shuffling between the lackadaisical sweat wipe, rotations, and resets; and the frenetic volleys of bump, set, and spike. The match right in front of us is a mixed group, and Sexy Charlie Brown is Celeste’s brother, Todd. Blonde hair and freckles, the yellow and black striped shorts are just begging for Roxy to throw him that nickname. The abs don’t hurt. Though my eyes are drawn to the girl to his right, high-fiving him in her two-piece. Her abs don’t hurt, either. Out of habit, I quickly look away from her, though.

“So,” Roxy says, leaning in closer. “The pixie-cut brunette?”

“Amber,” Celeste says. Since Todd still plays, she knows all the players.

“Ponytail brunette,” Roxy continues with only a small eye-roll.

“Stephanie,” Celeste adds.

“Or the little green-haired girl sitting on the bench?”

“Melinda,” Celeste says. “Though she goes by Mel.”

I feel my cheeks warm again, but squeak out, “Ponytail.”

Roxy squints and nods her head, some strange blend of approval and judgment.

“She’s straight,” Celeste says.

“Dude!” Roxy yelps. “Why would you do that?”

Celeste shrugs. “It’s true. Are we not telling truths?”

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I fish it out and see Mom sent me a text. My mouth goes dry wondering what the text is. Did Dad tell her after all? Did she somehow find out? No. No way. If she knew, she’d be calling or she’d just show up. Mom does not freak out over text.

Mom:

Going to the store. You want anything?

My mouth goes from dry to over-salivated in relief. She doesn’t know. Still, seeing those words on this little screen feels strange. A text I’ve seen so many times before, again on my phone as if nothing has changed since this afternoon. Dad said he would keep it from her.

She truly has no clue. For now. There’s no way that will last.

Mandy:

More hummus

Not too much though leaving in two weeks.

Mom:

I know. Don't remind me.

Olive and red pepper?

Mandy:

Please and thank you

Mom:

Okay.

Love you!

Mandy:

Love you too

"Dad?" Celeste asks.

"Mom," I say.

"Did he tell her?"

I shake my head.

"Hasn't he ever watched a TV show ever?" Roxy says. "There's no way he's keeping this from her, from his wife. This is not going to end well for him."

"Or for me," I say. Then I'm sandwiched between besties in a group hug, which is so nice, if rather sweaty.

Suddenly Celeste straightens up, back to full primp mode.

"Oh no," Roxy drones. "Can't go looking like a nice, selfless friend in front of the hot jocks."

"Not just any hot jock," Celeste says with a flip of her hair.

Then I see Tony Lewis striding in front of the benches, pulling off his Affliction shirt, his

torso well tanned from a summer of volleyball. Tony was one of my closest friends growing up. Class clown through elementary school. Plagued by zits throughout middle school like locusts in Egypt. Over the course of high school, he transformed from pock-marked, lanky nerd to downright handsome. All those superhero movies didn't hurt. He was reading comics when we were kids, before it was cool. Now everybody is talking about Captain America and Iron Man and Thanos. We were just catching up to him. Balancing out band with volleyball and track helped his stock, too. He filled out his tall frame. Figured out how to style his blonde hair.

“Been trying to get you to talk to him all summer,” Celeste says, giving him a wink I'm not sure he sees. “Now I know why you didn't, so he's fair game.”

“Jesus,” Roxy moans. “I don't even have an appropriate pop culture reference to deal with this.”

Celeste's eyes grow suddenly round, and she jerks her face toward me. “He is fair game, right?”

I can't help but laugh a little. “Yeah,” I say. “He's hot, but I'm very taken.”

She flips her face back to him, tossing her hair and giving her lip a little bite, just waiting for him to notice. Tony glances up and gives her a smile, then turns away. He's stretching his shoulders, the Celtic cross tattoo in the middle of his back contorting with the movements.

“This is fascinating, ladies and gentlemen,” Roxy says in a horrible, over-the-top Steve Irwin impression. “Two peacocks in the wild, engaging in their mating rituals. Watch how the male stretches and squeezes his muscles, proving he has won the genetic lottery and spends more time in the gym than with his family.”

“Roxy...” Celeste grumbles out the side of her mouth.

“While the female of the species grooms obsessively, contorting her face like a palsied porn star.”

A laugh explodes from me, and Roxy joins in. Celeste spins on her, trying to look indignant, but I can tell she’s also trying not to laugh. And failing. By the time we recover, Tony is only a few steps from us.

“Hey,” he says to all three of us, but his eyes linger on Celeste. Everybody’s eyes linger on Celeste.

“Hey,” she says.

“Captivating,” Roxy whispers in my ear.

“What’s so funny?” Tony says.

“Roxy being Roxy.”

“Sure,” he says, pulling one arm across his chest, a tattoo of the constellation Orion squeezing into a misshapen Little Dipper. “Came to watch me play?”

Roxy snorts out a little laugh. He looks up at her like he’s offended. Or confused. Or maybe just smelled a really bad fart. I don’t know.

“Sorry,” Celeste says to him. “My brother is playing. That’s why we’re here.”

His offense turns to overwrought dismay, obviously playing it up for Celeste.

“But you’re a wonderful surprise to see,” she says, flipping her hair again. I swear she is going to get whiplash one day from that.

His dismay morphs into a goofy grin, and his eyes are firmly plastered on Celeste.

“So what are you up to after the game?” she asks.

Dismay slides back into place. “Actually, I’m packing up and leaving pretty late tonight.”

“Oh no!” Roxy says, slathered in sarcasm.

“Yeah,” he says, either ignoring the tone or not picking up on it. “Driving down to Charlottesville.”

“Oh,” Celeste says. “That’s where Mandy goes to school!”

Now my face is flushing as he looks at me. Not in the same way he looked at Celeste, but there it is. An old crush, but one still there, much to my surprise. Tony and I did come close to going out. We were friends in elementary school before I discovered cooties. We rarely saw each other in middle school, but wound up in the same homeroom once high school started. We nearly had a date freshman year. Once. He asked me out and I accepted. He was going to take me to P.F. Chang’s for dinner, and then to see *Catching Fire* at the local AMC. But my little brother, Adam, had to go and break his arm in a pickup football game that afternoon. I was pissed at the time, pissed that Adam was clumsy and triggered Mom’s “family comes first” lecture. Needless to say, I had to cancel the date.

The next week, Tracy Wood asked him out. A sophomore and future captain of the dance squad. She was pretty in every conventional way. Drove a Mustang. Could actually walk in heels. Definitely not a virgin. She was an instant upgrade from me and a big boost to his social status at school. High school was a string of high-profile relationships for Tony after that. We remained friendly. Not hugging-friendly, but smile-friendly. Now that smile is aimed at me again.

“That’s cool,” he says, nodding like maybe it isn’t so cool, and then his eyes are back on Celeste. “Big protest tomorrow, so I have to leave tonight.”

“So you’re political?” she asks.

He says something in response, but I don’t hear. I see his lips moving, head bobbing, but Erica is on my mind, already marching down in C’ville. I wonder if she’s texted me. I haven’t

told her about the Dad situation yet. I dig out my phone. No messages from Dad. None from Erica, either. That's weird. It's after 8. She should have finished with the protest a while ago. So I text her.

Mandy:

How did the protest go

Didn't get a sunburn did you

Both messages are marked *Delivered* in a few seconds. But not *Read*. I wait, holding onto my phone. I catch Roxy's eyes. Her face turns inquisitive. I must look worried or something. Then she pointedly looks at my phone, back to me, back to my phone, and finally back to me. Wordless code for *What's going on?* I shake my head with a halfhearted smile, my own code for *Nothing*. She twists her own face into the half frown of *I don't believe you, but okay*.

Back to my phone. Still not read. I must have some of my mom in me, because I'm running through worst-case-scenarios one after the next. Some police officer beat her and dragged her off to jail. They doused the crowd with pepper spray, and she was too blinded to even look at her phone. White nationalists showed up after all, waving their Tiki torches and Nazi flags. The violence to follow isn't hard to imagine. Who hadn't seen the videos? The news coverage? I blink and I can see the images. Fists and batons and torches pummeling people. Distended faces screaming obscenities, while others wept. That gray Dodge Challenger. The deep, masculine growl of its engine, bolting up the street and right into the crowd. Bodies bouncing off its hood, Marcus Martin and his red shoes tumbling over the car. Heather Heyer.

I take a deep breath. This isn't last year. The white nationalists were denied permits to march. Everything will be fine. She's just busy. Forgot her phone in her car again. Taking a

shower. Something simple. I text her again.

Mandy:

I love you hope you're okay

Delivered again. Before I can put it away, my phone buzzes in my hand.

Mom:

Going to bed. Arming the house alarm. Adam is still out with his friends. Love you.

Be safe.

A string of useless information from Mom. She knows where I am, what I'm doing. And she complains that *I* waste text messages. Nothing about Erica, though. She still doesn't know. Dad said not to tell her, but I still expected him to talk to her. He tells her everything. How many lectures had I gotten about open, honest communications in relationships? It's Dad's go-to. He's keeping this from her. I don't even know what to do with that. I need to just text Mom back and focus on my friends.

Mandy:

Love you too

Night

Mom:



I flip over to the text thread with Erica. She still hadn't seen them. My face is heating up, probably turning red. Shit. I'm still freaking out. I look at Instagram. She posted a few times on campus. A pic with Robert and her *America Needs Nasty Women* t-shirt. A group of protestors on campus, all waving signs. A short video of the whole group marching, again around campus. Nothing in the last couple hours. Google. Google will help. A quick search

of “Charlottesville” in the news. A couple entries down, I find what I need. The protest kept going. Circled the campus, and then onto the—oh shit—Robert E. Lee statue. I skim the article.

“Anti-police rhetoric...”

Erica said this was about peace and unity, a prelude to the bigger protest tomorrow. On the anniversary. She didn’t say anything about anti-police.

“What goes up, must come down, tear those fucking statues down...”

They’re chanting f-bombs. Vandalism. What’s next? Looting? Fires? Turning over cars? God, that sounds like my parents in my head. Really, though, don’t they know how chanting f-bombs and vandalism looks to the rest of the country?

“Cops and Klan go hand-in-hand...”

Oh, God. They are going to get themselves arrested or killed or something. Why would they do that? Why would the protestors say those things about the police? And why would Erica, of all people, join in? Did she join in? Not answering her phone. Her texts. I try to stay calm, to measure my breathing. To imagine her in the shower, away from her phone. Or—like I thought earlier—her phone stranded in her car. She and Robert eating some pancakes while her phone uselessly buzzes, cooking in her car. But I can’t shake the feeling that she’s with them, marching on to the statue. Because that’s totally something she would do.

At the bottom of the article is a picture that sucks the breath from me. It’s nearly dark in Charlottesville, just like here. Someone has taken a picture of the Robert E. Lee statue, barely visible in the grainy shot. The only thing clear is the reflection of camera flash on an army of police in riot gear. No faces. No names. Just a sea of heavily armed police protecting that damn statue.

Erica

Two Years Ago

August 23, 2016

Gilmer Hall smelled like lemon antiseptic, like the janitors got really bored and just kept cleaning it over and over all summer. The smell stung my eyes. I weaved through other students, everybody all bright and first-day bubbly, and ducked into room 130, one of the big, semicircular rooms made like a theater, with the professor down in front and row after row of chairs each a step up from the last. My high school had nothing like that. Our one and only auditorium was about twice the size, but there were never classes in there. Just the fancy assemblies and the theater kids' performances of *West Side Story* and shit like that with costumes older than any of us. I took a pic and texted it to Jewel, my oldest sister.

Erica:

huge

this is a classroom?

Jewel:

Welcome to college, lil sis 😊

Erica:

no thx

Jewel:

You'll be fine. They won't all be that big

Erica:

I hope not

Jewel:

That's what she said



Erica:

omg

ew

Jewel:

lol

Back to work. Have fun!

I snagged an aisle seat a few rows from the back, tossing my backpack into the open seat next to me.

“You know you’re going to have to move for everybody who needs to get into that row, right?” a guy said. I was digging through my bag, so his voice towered up behind me in the aisle.

“Yeah,” I said, not looking back. “Or they could just go around. Or pick another seat.”

“Damn,” he said. “It’s like that?”

I turned and confirmed the deep shade of melanin of this guy. He wasn’t as black as he was trying to sound, but definitely black. His hair was close-cropped like he was just from the barber, but he was sporting some jorts and a gray t-shirt that declared in all caps: **WORLD’S OKAYEST DOCTOR**. Black Nikes from three years ago that didn’t even match the shirt. And nothing matched those damn jorts.

“It’s like that,” I said.

“All right, I’ll just Riker this,” he said, crossing behind me, but then he just stepped right

on over the chairs and into my row, planting his bony ass in the seat next to my bag. He was tall. Not like basketball tall, but tall enough that he stepped over the row pretty easily and looked like he didn't know what to do with his knees once he sat down.

“Riker?” I asked.

“Next Generation.”

“I hear words coming from your mouth,” I said, “and they're mostly English, but they do not make sense strung together like that.”

“Star Trek,” he said. “The Next Generation. Riker was the first officer. He used to step over chairs like that. They had all these short-ass chairs on the Enterprise, and Riker was one tall dude.”

“Star Trek?” I asked, giving him one more chance to tell me he was joking or something.

“Star Trek,” he said, all proud of it. Gotta hand it to him, he didn't shy away from what he was into.

“Lucky for you the seat isn't taken,” I said.

“I'm not sure if it's lucky yet.” He winked at me.

Winked.

“It's definitely not THAT lucky.”

“Come on,” he said with a ridiculous pouty face, “you don't even know me yet.”

“No, but I'm guessing you have a dick between your legs?”

New guy was definitely light enough to blush. In the whole gamut of reactions I tend to get from people, blushing was one of my favorites. What's the point in giving people a hard time if they just shrug it off. To my surprise, he recovered pretty quickly. “Awfully forward of you,” he said, “and yes.”

“Then you’re definitely not getting that lucky.” I threw out the words and continued to dig through my bag. I already had my pen in hand, but I was going for the effect.

He laughed. Boisterous at first, then uncomfortable. When he went quiet, I looked up and watched him. Dude was so confused. He looked around like somebody else he knew might come by and give him a reason to run off. Then he looked back to me, caught my eyes, and his eyes went rolling for something else to look at. They drifted down to my bag and lingered. Staring right at him was an iron-on patch of the lesbian flag—shades of white and pink and red. A pin that said “Queer” and another that was a pair of overlapping female symbols—the circle with the cross underneath—both in rainbow colors. He squinted. “Oh,” he mumbled, and then his eyes went wide. “Oh!”

“Yeah. Oh,” I said and waited for it. Waited for him to make up an excuse to leave, to look over my shoulder and shout some random name, Rikering his way back over the seats and away from me as fast as his long-ass legs could carry him. I’d seen it so many times now, I just expected it. Especially from a black guy. You’d think after hundreds of years of oppression and close-minded assholes telling us we’re less than them, the black community would embrace difference a little better. But in my experience, we were worse. So I kept my face blank, waiting for this guy to escape.

“Cool,” he said, fully recovered, and extended a hand to me. “I’m Robert.”

My eyebrows shot up. Just like that? He was cool? I wasn’t sure I trusted it, but it was a refreshing reaction. I grabbed his hand in a firm squeeze, just like Momma taught me. “I’m Erica.”

October 20, 2016

Freshman year was like a blur. For the first time in my life, I was living in a new place surrounded by new people. Not living with my family. Momma, Jewel, Monique, and I were tight. Bonds forged in fire tight. Jewel had been my best friend since I could talk. Before the bullet, Monique was the buoy of the family, always finding the bright, silver lining to whatever was happening. Momma had to work a double at the hospital? Monique would make a picnic basket (Well, an old record box. Who has an actual basket?) and drag all three of us to the hospital to have lunch. Jewel's first arrest at a protest? Monique cut out the article in the paper mentioning Jewel and made a collage out of it, presenting it to Jewel once enough time had passed to move the incident from scary to funny. She was still perpetually upbeat, but her happiness came from ignorance, not that willful need to inject happiness into our lives.

So my freshmen year felt a little rudderless. My roommate was okay. Sharon. Kept to herself or away, mostly. She hung curtains from the ceiling to create a little cocoon on her side of the room, so when she was there, she was hidden and headphoned, doing whatever she did over there. But she was usually out. Joined a sorority. Played soccer. But she was clean and respectful, which was better than what some people got, I suppose. I didn't make a lot of friends that year. Texted Momma and Jewel mostly. Joined the campus Democrats for a while, but got frustrated with their lack of real action. They were all into bringing senators or an Obama to campus to speak, which was cool, but whenever I suggested some real action like a protest or a sit-in or whatever, I was shot down with a quickness. They were all for voting blue and equal rights, but not willing to do anything that jeopardized their scholarships.

Then there was Robert.

“They couldn’t hire a choreographer?” Robert said, tossing an off-brand Cheez-It into his mouth.

“I think that would have made it look too polished,” I said, grabbing a handful myself. We were watching Spike Lee’s *Chi-Raq*. Making fun of Spike Lee’s *Chi-Raq*, more like. Working on Robert’s education via Spike Lee’s filmography. I can watch *Do the Right Thing* or *4 Little Girls* any day, but *Chi-Raq* was a hot mess that I just couldn’t watch without good snacks and lots of heckling. Jewel and I had made it an annual tradition since the movie came out, but Robert was a decent stand-in, sitting on my dorm room bed, slouching against the wall.

“How do you have Samuel L. Jackson, Angela Bassett, Jennifer Hudson, and still make this atonal garbage?” he asked.

“I think it was doomed when Spike cast Nick Cannon,” I said. “And as the lead!”

“How is Nick Cannon still in things? I saw *Drumline*. It was okay. But this guy—”

“I know!”

Then the scene with the crazy, horny Nazi started. Ugly old white dude stripping down to Confederate flag undies and mounting a cannon. It was nasty. I had to watch through my fingers.

“It’s like I can’t look away,” Robert said. “It’s horrible.”

“Mmmhmm.”

“I get it. *Lysistrata*. Gang violence in Chicago. But the message is so lost in all this insanity.”

“Mmmhmm.”

He turned the volume down and looked at me. “Jewel got you into these movies?”

“Momma, actually.”

“Really?” he said.

We’d been down the twin black holes of our families a few times already. Spilling our guts with each other like I’d never done with anybody before. You don’t need to tell a lot of stories to your sisters or mom; they were there. Momma was the one to pick me up from school the first time a boy punched me for being a lesbian. Jewel was marching next to me at my first protest. All four of us gathered around the TV for Barack Obama’s inauguration, all three of us girls bringing Momma Kleenexes. They already know the stories from their own perspectives. Needless to say, he already knew Jewel was the activist and Momma was the disciplinarian after all the stories I’d told him.

“Oh yeah,” I said. “Why do you think Jewel got so political anyway?”

“Your mom doesn’t seem political at all, so I figured it was some of Jewel’s friends.”

“Nah. It was Momma. She doesn’t talk about it much, but we’ve seen some pictures. Some of her old friends would tell stories when they visited. Momma wasn’t a Black Panther, but she was Panther-adjacent. There’s a picture of her from nursing school, big-ol afro, bellbottoms, and a bunch of dudes in the black leather jackets. Nana said she dated a Panther back in the day.”

“I can’t imagine your mom with her fist in the air,” Robert said.

“You haven’t even met my Momma,” I said, ribbing him with my elbow.

“No, but the way you talk about her makes it sound like she tries to stay as far from politics as possible.”

“I think that’s ever since Jewel got political,” I said. “Trying to protect her. Protect all of us girls. But she knows the color of her skin. Can’t be black in this country without being

political. The country gets political on us whether we want it to or not.”

“Yeah,” Robert said. “I guess.”

“Hold up,” I said, fumbling with the remote and full-on pausing the movie. “You guess?”

“I just,” Robert started to say. I could see him picking his words, worried about upsetting me or something. But I wasn’t going to help him. “I didn’t see much of that growing up. I know about it. Read about it. Dad sort-of had ‘the talk’ with me when I was about 12, but it wasn’t as good as the one on *black-ish*, you know?”

I know. I don’t think anybody’s Momma or dad gave that good a talk. A group of Hollywood writers crafting the perfect monolog for Anthony Anderson. Cutting away to footage of President Barack Obama walking the streets after his inauguration and shit. That was a good talk.

“Where I grew up,” Robert continues, “everybody knew I was Judge McNealy’s kid. I got pulled over once my junior year because I actually ran a stop sign. The officer let me off with a warning when he saw ‘McNealy’ on my license. Said to tell my mom to he said, ‘hi.’”

“I can’t imagine that world,” I said. “I was pulled over six times before I turned 17. Then I stopped counting.” Twice I was frisked. Once had my head slammed into the hood of Momma’s Volkswagon. Never got a ticket.

“That sucks,” Robert said. “Was that in your own neighborhood?”

“Two streets too far west,” I said. “The white neighborhood.”

He nodded, lost in his own thoughts for a bit before he said, “The only time I really experienced something was when I was like 9. Family vacation to Disney.”

“World or Land?” I asked.

“World.”

I nodded and swallowed a little jealousy. I always wanted to go to Disney. Either of them.

“We were in one of the shops at Magic Kingdom. My parents let me and my brother look for one thing each, so they let us wander the shop on our own and meet them back at the register.”

“Sounds nice.”

“It should have been, but I while I was looking at Toy Story stuff—I’ve always been a sucker for that Slinky dog—I notice this gal straightening clothes and toys. Every time I moved down an aisle or whatever, she was still behind me, straightening things, glancing at me.”

“Ah, a close second to Driving While Black,” I said. “Shopping While Black.”

“Yeah. I didn’t get it at the time. Didn’t know what she was doing, just had that whole stranger danger thing going off in my head, so I went and told my parents.”

“Ooh. Judge McNealy have something to say about that?”

“No. My dad.”

“Mr. Quiet Surgeon?”

“Yeah. Dad went off. Yelled and cursed up a storm. Had the gal who was following me crying. The manager apologizing. Finally security showed up, and that’s when Judge McNealy stepped in to calm things down. It was crazy.”

“Must be nice.”

“Nice?” Robert barked, and I realized my mistake.

“Not that whole thing,” I said. “Sorry. I meant having a judge or a lawyer for a mom who can diffuse that kind of shit.”

Robert was giving me his pity look. I hated that look.

“Sorry,” I said. “Please continue.”

“Mom and Dad sat all of us down that night to tell us what really happened. They said they should have known better, but damn. They shouldn’t have to worry about that.”

“That was the only time?” I asked. Gently, because I didn’t want his pity look again. It was a bad habit I was working on: empathizing with Robert without comparing it to what the rest of black America has to face.

“The rest of our vacations were in…” Robert started, but then let the sentence die.

“What?”

“Europe and Asia,” he said like a confession.

“Hold up! You’re 18—” I said.

“—just turned 19,” he corrected.

“Right,” I said. “Sorry. I knew that. I was there. You’re 19, and you’ve been to how many foreign countries?”

Dude looked up at my ceiling and started counting on his fingers, mumbling names of countries under his breath.

“Holy shit! You have to count?”

He ignored my question and finished before he said, “Eight.”

I sighed and fell back onto my bed, stared up at the popcorn ceiling. “I would kill to go to Europe.”

“It’s pretty cool. My parents like it more than me.”

“Is it less racist like I keep hearing?”

“Some countries. The ones we went to, yeah.”

“But other than when you were nine—”

“I’m still black,” he said. “Mixed, really. I’ve known. I’ve seen stuff. But nothing has really happened to me since then.”

“That sounds nice.” Hard to believe this 19-year-old black man was discovering racism first-hand for practically the first time. Grew up in a very special bubble, that’s for sure. I couldn’t help but be jealous.

“You know shit is going to happen to you at some point, right?” I said.

“I guess,” he said.

My eyes widened.

“I mean,” he said before I could say anything. “Sure. I live in America. Something will happen. I know. I’ve always known. Sort of inevitable.”

“Sucks,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Sucks.”

“You know I got your back, right?”

He looked at me weird, like I surprised him, but in a good way. “Yeah,” he said. “I know. I got yours. This sounds stupid, but you’re like my best friend.”

I smiled, laughed a little, and shook my head. Goddamn, he was mine, too. Hadn’t known him a month, but there it was. “Yeah,” I said with a smile. “That is stupid.” I unpaused the movie and grabbed a fresh bag of salt and vinegar chips.

“You know,” Robert said. “Tomorrow we start watching season three of *Scrubs*.”

I whined a little, but I had to admit—at least to myself—that I was into it. The show didn’t hold up in a lot of ways. LaVerne was a total mamie stereotype. I’d seen one instance of blackface that made me groan audibly. But it was funny. The dead dog bit had me rolling every time.

“Don’t whine,” Robert said. “By the time we finish, you’ll be begging to move on to *Grey’s Anatomy* or *E.R.*”

“I’m not your dad, dude.”

“Thank God. Dad would never let me eat this much junk food.”

I tried to look all mad, but couldn’t help but smile. I threw a handful of chips in his face, and we kept making fun of *Chi-Raq*.

Gotta Get Away

Another smothering Charlottesville summer creeps to a close.

Another summer without incident, unlike 2017.

Before that year, this little city was just UVA and Thomas Jefferson.

Before last week, we'd hoped 2017 was just a memory.

Can't we go back to opening stores and greeting customers?

Can't we put the racists back in the woods?

Down by the river, in private lodges, behind closed doors.

Down under our noses, under our feet, where we can pretend they don't exist anymore?

Every year, will this reminder pop up in the news?

Every time a TV van pulls up, will they be talking about Heather Heyer, mowed down by a car?

Forgetting isn't on the menu.

Forgetting the tiki torches or the red baseball caps or the white polo shirts or the sounds of bodies bouncing off the hood of a Dodge Challenger.

Gotta get out of town this weekend, close up the shop.

Gotta get away from the national reporters coming in for all their "one year later" stories.

Hell if I know if Unite the Right are planning another march.

Hell if I want to be here either way.

I can just close up and head for the mountains.

I can buy a bigger lock, maybe a gun, just in case.

Just in case.

Just in case some left-winger thinks I'm part of the right because I'm white and wear cargo shorts.

Just in case some right-winger thinks I'm on the left because I sell CBD oil.

Kind of world we live in, there's no room for gray anymore, no place to live in the middle.

Kind of think America used to be great, back before Gingrich divided the nation.

Live and let live, that's my motto.

Live in this country, and you should be free to live as you please.

Maybe I'm naive.

Maybe I'm right, but there's no money in being right.

Maybe that's really it: gotta pick a side to stay in the game of America.

The Teacher

August 11, 2018

“Did everyone like the assembly?” Mrs. Thompson asks from her perch on the edge of her desk, her heels digging into the broken edge of a green tile.

A chorus of assent from the class of fifth-graders answers Mrs. Thompson. A few faces don't look as happy, their oversized eyes downcast toward their desks. Thirty-two wooden antiques, older than Mrs. Thompson herself, cratered with decades of pencil-work. She notices the W, X, Y, and Z have come unstuck from above the board again, hanging onto the V by a single piece of tape.

“And what did we learn?” Mrs. Thompson asks, moving to the board and restapling the escaping letters.

Several hands dart into the air, a few waving for attention like the construction paper stars and moons that hang from the ceiling.

“Ariel?”

“Sometimes,” the little redhead chirps, “something really bad can be going on in the world. We can get together to talk about the bad stuff and try to make it better and-”

“And what gives us the right to do this?”

Ariel stops short at the question. A sea of blank stares watch Mrs. Thompson. Joey is picking his nose. Camila is scribbling on the corner of her desk baleened by the mid-morning sun.

“It's an amendment to the US Constitution. We talked about it last week?”

Ariel's hand shoots back up, and Mrs. Thompson nod to her.

“The First Amendment, Mrs. Thompson.”

“Very good,” Mrs. Thompson says, writing a large number one on the chalkboard, followed by *Freedom to Assemble* in her practiced hand. “And what else does the First Amendment do for us?”

Hands.

“Michael?”

“It protects news people. Reporters.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Thompson says, writing a big number two and *Freedom of the Press*, “what else?”

“Carl?”

“We shouldn’t hit people with cars,” Carl says, his freckled jowls jiggling as he speaks.

The class titters at the resident clown, just like he wanted.

“Well,” Mrs. Thompson says, quieting them, “I would hope you knew that before the assembly. But that’s not part of the First Amendment. What else does the First Amendment protect for us?”

“My dad says we should all protest the bad stuff. Not just blacks and Mexicans and snowflakes,” Carl says. More laughter.

“They’re African-Americans, Carl,” Mrs. Thompson says, quieting the class again, “and that’s quite enough, unless you want to see Principal Rodgers again.”

Carl shifts in his seat, but keeps his thoughts to himself.

Mrs. Thompson points to Anthony, who’s been patiently holding one arm up by the elbow.

“The First Amendment says we can say whatever we want,” Anthony wheezes.

“Very good Anthony,” Mrs. Thompson says, writing number three and *Freedom of Speech* on the board, “but not quite. We can’t just say anything and not get in trouble or make people mad. The First Amendment just means the *government* can’t punish us for saying things.”

“Even Nazis?” a boy named Kim asks. He is Japanese or Chinese or something like that. Mrs. Thompson can’t remember. The few hands in the air drop along with Mrs. Thompson’s gut.

“If they’re legal American citizens, then even Nazis,” Mrs. Thompson says.

Ruby’s hand flies up. Of course it does. Mrs. Thompson ignores it. “What else did we learn?”

More hands go up. Better hands.

“Amy?”

“I learned that-” Amy begins.

“Mrs. Thompson,” Ruby says, her voice tinged with panic, her eyes stark white against her black skin, “Mrs. Thompson.”

“Ruby, that was very rude. I called on Amy.”

“Yes, Mrs. Thompson, but my daddy says that Nazis are evil and hateful. They want to hurt people and hurting people isn’t protected under the First Amendment.”

Everyone in the class is now looking at Mrs. Thompson expectantly. She can’t ignore it now, even if she tries. She needs to put a stop to this before it gets out of hand.

“Well, Ruby,” Mrs. Thompson says, “just because people are Nazis doesn’t mean they’re breaking the law. It doesn’t make it okay to punch them. They’re people, too. As long

as they aren't hurting anybody—”

“But they did hurt somebody. They hurt her bad,” Ruby says.

“They killed that one lady. Heather,” Carl chimes in.

“I heard she was really nice,” Amy says.

“And that man is going to prison, but the rest of those people—” Mrs. Thompson tries, but the class erupts into comments about the car, the torches, and parents who were there. She holds up three fingers and within a minute, every fifth-grader in the room is silently mimicking the gesture.

“I understand you're all very excited today, and you all have a lot to say. But we were discussing the First Amend—”

“Mrs. Thompson?” Ruby butts in. Why does she always interrupt?

“Yes, Ruby?”

“Would that man have run over all those people if the Nazis had just stayed home?”

The sea of oversized eyes flick back to her. They need to know the answer. Cause and effect, just like she teaches in her science lesson. Cause and effect. What caused a Dodge Challenger to plow through a crowd of people? These oversized eyes need to know.

Mandy

August 11, 2018

The key sticks in the lock, just a few millimeters short of all the way in. Just like always. Same house. Same door. Same sticky lock. Same brass key. But I don't know what's waiting on the other side. Yesterday, Dad thought I was his straight-A, suburban, Protestant, heterosexual daughter. Now he knows better. My throat is tight. My insides are scraped and raw, vulnerable. I take a deep breath. Two. Then I open the door.

Everything looks normal. A little light is coming around the corner that leads into the kitchen. The light over the sink. Mom always leaves it on when one of her kids are gone when she goes to bed. I slip off my shoes, putting them next to Adam's oversized Reeboks.

"Amanda," Dad's voice is soft, but it startles me.

"Dad," I whisper, putting a hand over my thumping chest. He's sitting in the chair in the corner, only the angled streetlight streaking across him. He's in a pair of basketball shorts, slippers, and a ratty Vale, Colorado t-shirt. So perfectly normal for a summer night, except he should be in bed. Not here in the dim, waiting for me.

"Sit down," he says. No apology for the surprise. Just a command.

I walk around the sofa and obey.

"I've been thinking about earlier," he says. "About your situation."

"My situation?"

"Don't try to be PC with me. This is important."

So are words. Calling this a situation. It wasn't a situation until he made it one.

Insinuating bisexual is better or worse than any other sexual orientation. I don't say anything.

“You can never tell your mom,” he says. “Ever.”

I open my mouth and narrow my eyes, but nothing comes out. He might as well have slapped me in the face. Tears are in my eyes. I try willing them back down, but soon my nose is stuffing up, too.

“Do you understand me?” Dad asks.

I nod, a terse, shaky movement.

“I need to hear you say it,” he says.

“I—” I start, but have to take a quaking breath. “I understand.”

“You’re going to see a therapist.”

“But I don’t—”

“Harford has some great therapists,” Dad cuts me off. “And it’s a great school. I was reading about it today. I’ll pay for it all.”

“Harford—?” I start, but can’t wrap my head around what he’s saying. Harford Community College. Community. College. Because that’s totally going to fit into Mom’s master plan for success. It’s like watching everything I’ve ever wanted just burn up in front of me.

“You’re not going back to Virginia,” Dad says. My insides feel scraped out, dry and raw. I can’t breathe.

I’ve enrolled in classes at UVA, written my letters for scholarship donors, and emailed my new roommate. I literally go back to Virginia in two weeks. He can’t just change that.

“Dad—”

“Your mom has been really worried with all of this protesting down there,” Dad says.

“I’ve been reassuring her that everything is fine, that you wouldn’t get mixed up in that, but it

won't take much to convince her that you'd be better off somewhere else. Somewhere less volatile. Somewhere closer to home."

"You can't—"

"I can. I'm going to talk to her tomorrow morning."

"But Dad—"

"You'll enroll at Harford," he says like I'm not even here. "It's close. A good school. You'll live here, where we can keep an eye on you."

"Dad," I say, fighting to keep my voice level. "There's nothing wrong with—"

"I sent my daughter off to school, and she was perfectly fine," he says, his eyes locked with mine. "That place seems to have confused you. Gotten you off track. My job is to get you back on track."

I shake my head, tears flinging side to side. "You can't do this to me. I have a life and friends and—"

"It wasn't a request." He stands up, looking at me like I'm someone he doesn't know. My chest is collapsing under that look. "I want the best for you. UVA isn't the best. So you're going to Harford, at least for a year, then we can figure out your plan."

"I have a plan," I say, sounding sterner than I feel.

"A better plan."

"You can't make me."

Dad sighs and shrugs. "Okay. Pay your own cell phone bill. Food plan. How about the 15 grand a year that your scholarships don't cover?"

"You wouldn't—"

"And you can find somewhere else to go for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Find some

family that doesn't care if you're throwing your future away."

"The church doesn't teach—"

"I don't care about your church. I care about you making things harder on yourself. It isn't a smart decision. Maybe you saw no other choice, but there is always another choice."

Before I know it, I've raised my voice, "Nobody chooses to be lesb—"

Dad flashes me a look filled with more anger than I've ever seen, and the word dies on my lips. "Life is full of choices. There are always choices. You want success in life, then you need to choose it. You have obviously lost that ability, so I'm choosing for you."

I look away from him. I have to. I don't recognize this man. He bears little resemblance to the father I've known, who's always been so kind, my ally against Mom and the rest of the world. I want to stop crying, but I can't seem to make that choice stick either.

"Have I made myself clear?" he asks. "No Virginia. Tell this Erica girl whatever you like. You're staying home."

I grit my teeth and say, "Okay, Dad."

Dad nods, his face drifting outside. I follow his gaze, more to not look at him than to figure out what he's looking at. The neighbors across the street—the Schneiders—painted their shutters a different color. Something darker. Hard to tell exactly what at night. I don't know how I didn't notice all summer.

"I'm going to bed," Dad says. He's striding down the hall without another word. With no one around, I let the tears fall. I'm soggy and gross in seconds. My breath is heaving, though I stay quiet. I don't want to wake anybody, and I don't want Dad to know how much this hurts.

Erica

August 11, 2018

I hate feeling like a tour guide or a teacher, and that's what I feel like. His first protest. A little mosey around campus, like we were just taking a walk, but with a bunch of strangers chanting and waving signs. I joined in the chants, cheered for the honking horns, and I kept telling him he was doing a good job. Answered his questions. Made him feel like part of the crowd. But now, it's down to business. The whole energy shifted when we left campus. No longer a little forerunner to tomorrow's big rally, but a meaningful march in its own right.

"You sure you're okay?" Robert asks.

"I'm fine," I say. I don't feel fine. My shirt is drenched in sweat, my throat is raw, and I feel a little chilled even though it's really hot.

"We should go."

"Stop saying stupid shit."

"You look like you're going to pass out."

"I'm fine, Robert," I say, digging out my Momma voice.

Robert sighs before he says, "I don't like this."

"I said—" I say.

"Not that," he says. "This march to the statue. This doesn't feel right."

"It does feel right. Just new to you."

"So it's supposed to feel like this?"

"For me," I say, "this feels like potential, like making a difference and putting ourselves out there. Protests are only effective when they're at least inconvenient, if not flat-out

disruptive. Stonewall was a riot, baby.”

He gives me a strange look. Not sure if it’s because I’ve never talked about Stonewall with him, or because I don’t ever call him ‘baby,’ it just felt right in the moment.

“I still don’t like this,” he says. “What happens if—”

“Robert,” I say, interrupting him. “Whatever happens, I got your back. Okay?”

He nods. “Okay.” He seems calmer, but his eyes are still darting around like prey watching for signs of a predator behind every building and street sign. He’s so twitchy, he’s liable to do something bad.

“Hey,” I say, giving his arm a squeeze. “I’m only going to say this once, and it doesn’t mean I’m a nerd or anything.”

His forehead scrunches up with curiosity. “Okay...”

“I know you’re afraid. That’s okay. ‘Fear leads to anger,’” I say, quoting Yoda before pivoting to Avengers. “And I need you angry. Like the Hulk angry.”

He rolls his eyes and a smile cracks through his fear. “Holy shit. Mark this on the calendar.”

“Don’t—” I say.

“Erica Betancourt not only quoted *Star Wars*,” he says. “She then threw in The Incredible Hulk, totally mixing her nerdy metaphors, but SHE KNOWS THEM!”

“This was a bad idea,” I say, but I don’t mean it. I shook him out of his slump, out of a potential spiral of fear. And even if I had to use nerd lingo to do it, it was true. The fear is always there, and the anger is what’s needed. When people turn on their TVs and see coverage of protests, they need to see how angry we are. And I’m embracing the anger. Grabbing hold of it for fuel, to drive me beyond polite discourse and into the realm of piss-

off-the-man protest. Anger over the continued persecution of my people in this country. Angry over Nazis marching through my college town last year. Angry that all this bullshit took away Monique's future. That anger fuels me now, and it fueled Jewel to the lawyer she is today, though I still remember the first time she was arrested.

I didn't know Momma's Volkswagon could go so fast, take corners so hard. The seatbelt bit into my shoulder as she took another left turn, tires squealing the whole way.

"When I get a hold of your sister..." Momma mumbled, her threat trailing off.

"You should slow down, Momma," I said, trying to sound pleading instead of accusing. "Or we might end up in jail with her."

Momma just pressed the accelerator even harder. Maybe one day I would learn to keep my mouth shut with Momma, know that when she was mad, the last thing she wanted was criticism from one of her daughters. She took another hard right and Monique giggle-squealed from the back seat.

"Faster, Momma," Monique said. "Faster."

That, of all things, made Momma slow down. Monique was confusing a simple car ride for a roller coaster, so Momma backed off. Figured.

"No, Momma," Monique whined. "Faster!" She threw her stuffed kangaroo at the back of Momma's headrest. It bounced limply to the floorboard. I reached around and tossed it back to Monique before she could whine or cry about that, too. Momma, who was usually infinitely patient with Monique and masterful at soothing her, said nothing.

"You're welcome," I said to my older sister.

Monique looked at me, chewing on one of her cheeks like usual, a toddler's defiance in a

20-year-old face. “Thank you,” she finally said.

“Yes,” Momma said, giving my knee a gentle squeeze. “Thank you, Erica.” She pulled the car into a parking spot at the police station. At least it was in Atlanta this time, not some faraway city where Momma had to wire bail money and arrange a taxi. I swore police were sticking to ancient crap just to make things harder for people. God forbid they take Venmo or allow an Uber to pick somebody up.

“Stay here,” Momma said. She pulled the keys from the ignition and unbuckled her seatbelt in one fluid motion.

“But—” I started.

“Do you want to wrangle Monique in and out of there?”

“No,” I said. She was right. Taking Monique on trips was challenging. She tended to fight with whoever was putting her seatbelt on, like it was a game that she was trying to win. New places were a problem. They led to a nonstop stream of *What’s that?* and *Who that?* and begging to explore every room, every nook and cranny. *We can’t* wasn’t a phrase she reacted well to. Sitting quietly in a corner while Momma paid bail and talked to the cops? Out of the question.

“Where Momma going?” Monique asked once Momma was out of the car.

“She’s getting Jewel,” I said.

“Jewel!” Monique’s eyes lit up. She wasn’t big on strangers but she loved it when Jewel came to visit. I wondered if her face would flash with joy and wonder for me once I moved out and came back to visit. I thought so. Hard to tell with her.

“That’s right, we’re picking up Jewel.”

“Is Jewel coming back home with us?”

“Yes,” I said. “For a little while.”

“Good.” Monique squeezed her plush kangaroo extra-tight. “I miss Jewel.”

Me too, girl, me too. Jewel was more than a decade older than me. An “oopsie” baby from when Momma was young, before she met Monique and I’s dad. Jewel was a huge help when Monique and I were little, babysitting while Momma worked swing shifts at the hospital. By the time I was old enough to pour my own cereal, Momma had the seniority to work the shifts she wanted. That’s when my big mouth started getting me in trouble, though. Would have been worse if Jewel hadn’t been around. She’d always been our buffer, the translator between Momma’s moods and my filterless mouth. I swore I was getting better at reading Momma’s moods, but I just couldn’t seem to tell my mouth to shut up when that mood turned sour.

“Tay Tay?” Monique asked. She was four years older than me, but she could really sound like a little girl when she wanted something. She knew I wasn’t into Taylor Swift. I’d tried to get her hooked on Drake or Fetty Wap or DJ Khaled, but it’s always been Tay Tay with this girl. Whatever. This was why I brought my own Beats. I pulled up the Monique playlist in the car, the one Momma curated just for her. It was like 90% Taylor. She started singing about shaking it off. Not sure what the “it” was. Every time I heard her say “haters gonna hate,” I rolled my eyes. I couldn’t help it, like jerking back from a hot pan, the muscles just knew what to do. I eased my Beats over my ears and let Rihanna and Drake “Work” me over. Eyes closed. Head against the headrest. I couldn’t get this song out of my brain recently. Why fight it?

I didn’t know how much time passed. About four and a half songs. The car jostled and the warm air from outside blew on the back of my braids. I opened my eyes and pulled the

headphones down around my neck.

“...don’t care how old you are,” Momma was saying to Jewel. “If I have to bail you out of jail, then you have to deal with a lecture.”

I turned and saw Jewel climbing into the back seat next to Monique. “Hey, Monique,” Jewel said like Momma wasn’t chewing her out.

Monique just smiled at our big sister, showing all of her teeth, almost closing her eyes.

“Sup, Lil Ricky?” Jewel said to me.

“Nobody calls me that anymore,” I said.

“Whatever,” she said. “You’re my baby sister. I can call you—”

“You can shut up and listen for a change,” Momma said, still standing outside the car, near-yelling through the open door.

“Yes, Momma,” Jewel said.

Momma slammed Jewel’s door and stomped her way around the car, flinging herself into the driver’s seat. One of these days, I swear a door was going to fall off the old Passat, but not today. She started the car and dived back into her lecture before she even put the car in reverse.

“You think you’re invincible, going off from one city to another, marching for every brokenhearted black momma who loses her baby. I get it. My heart breaks, too. Every time I see another child shot in the streets, I think of you three. I can imagine all too well what it must feel like. I know what it is to get that call. To have police show up at the door and tell me my child is in the hospital.

“But you put yourself in danger when you go out there. You are a lawyer. I put you through college and law school to give you another option to fight with,” Momma said.

Really, scholarships did most of the putting-Jewel-through-law-school business, but Momma sent her money. Bought plane tickets. Definitely not a point any of us wanted to argue with Momma. “You can do what so many other black folks can’t do: put on your suit, stand in front of a judge, and protect people with your words and your mind. You don’t need to run through the streets pissing off cops. They can shoot you as easily as anybody else.”

“There are many ways to fight, Momma,” Jewel said.

“And you think this helps? You think getting arrested makes any difference?”

“Sometimes. African Americans marched in Alabama, marched on DC. Rosa Parks—”
Jewel started.

“I know about Rosa Parks. Who do you think taught you about her? About the Civil Rights Movement? About those marches? The Freedom Riders and the Little Rock Nine and 16th Street Baptist and *I Have a Dream*? Me! But that was the 1960s. They were fighting Jim Crow. They were telling the world about what was hidden, buried under bullsh... under clever laws that were trying to keep slavery going. They didn’t live in a world with smartphones and Twitter and all that. They needed to march. You don’t.”

“I don’t march for me, Momma,” Jewel said. She paused, probably waiting for Momma to snap back, but the snap didn’t come. I glanced over, trying to turn my head as little as possible and get a read on Momma. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. I didn’t know how she could see to drive. But I couldn’t make out her expression. It wasn’t the pure rage she had when she threw herself into the car. I knew her faces, at least I thought I knew them all. This was new, though, some blend of happy and sad and terrified all rolled into one.

“Why do you march, baby?” Momma said, only the smallest hitch in her voice.

“I march for all the people who can’t. Who are shot or silenced. For the people afraid to

leave their homes. I march so we can finally pass a lynching law in this country. Our people are either pissed or ignorant. We should all be pissed.”

“Pissed!” Monique parroted.

“Monique,” Momma said in her warning voice.

“But Jewel—” Monique whined.

“I’m sorry, Monique,” Jewel said. “I shouldn’t be using that language. My bad.”

The tension in the car lifted. Only a little, but that was something. I thought we all felt it. Even when we’re mad, we’re family. It was good to have that reminder.

“Momma,” Jewel said. “I’m sorry you had to drive all this way to get me, but I’m not going to apologize for fighting, for marching, for being a voice for victims. We should all be angry. We should all be marching in the streets! And I will get thrown in jail every day of the week if it makes this country better for people like us.”

“How do you spell Nazi?” I yell along with the rest of the crowd. “C-O-P!”

I know how it sounds. Extreme. Radical. Inciting. It’s all of those, but not without a nugget of truth. Last year, these cops stood by while hundreds of torch-bearing, Nazi-flag-waving, MAGA-hat-wearing, Alt-Right white supremacists marched down these streets screaming hate at people who look like me. Cops just stood there like nothing was wrong. Like those words weren’t inciting violence. I know, first amendment and all that, but there are limits even to what the first amendment protects. You can’t tell me that an old white man waving a Nazi flag isn’t trying to stir people to violence against blacks and Jews and LGBT. Hell, I’m two out of the three. Less than a hundred years ago, they would have dragged me through the streets and hung me on a tree, but not before raping me to show me what I’d been

missing. I guarantee you lots of those “good old boys” still want to do that.

And the cops just stood there. They can get on TV all they want, talk about doing their jobs and following orders and “serve and protect.” They don’t serve people like me. They didn’t protect Monique. They may even think they’re good people. But it’s like Dr. King said, “He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.” So yeah, maybe C-O-P is one way to spell Nazi.

The media got there before us. Not surprising. I saw a couple news vans peeling out when we turned away from campus to start this way. It’s all different now that the sun has set, closing in on full dark. Their camera lights are like little stadium floods, casting pools of unnatural brightness, throwing 20-foot-tall shadows on the buildings. I can’t imagine standing just a few feet away, staring directly at them while talking on a microphone. Can those cameras even see us in the background yet?

The chant dies down like it always does. Comes and goes in waves. We march on in relative silence for a while, people conversing as we walk.

“What’s the plan?” Robert asks.

“No plan,” I say, wiping sweat from my eyebrows with the sleeve of my shirt. My throat is scratchy again, and I feel like my braids are heavy, soaked in sweat.

“But you said—”

“That doesn’t mean I have a plan.”

“I thought these things were organized.”

“The march around campus was,” I say. “This is extracurricular.”

“Can we make a plan?”

“Fine,” I say, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice. Why can’t he just go with it? Hasn’t he ever seen a protest on TV? “We’re all going to march up to that statue. We’re going to keep chanting, showing how angry we are that that piece of shit is still standing.”

“That’s it?”

“I don’t know, Robert,” I say, frustration lacing every word. “Just march, goddamnit!”

“Sorry,” he says. So timid. So beaten by those few words. I feel bad. I hurt his feelings, and part of me wanted to or at least knew that I would before I said that. But I’m also more pissed that he’s so easily offended, so incapable of just being angry and in the moment. No matter how much I’ve told him, he just doesn’t get it, doesn’t realize just how much is taken from us in this country, how much they can still take away. I get his fear more than he could ever know, more than I could ever describe, and maybe that’s what really pisses me off so much.

“At this point,” the news anchor said, “it is still unclear who fired on the crowd. We’re still awaiting confirmation...” the news anchor said. I tuned out after *awaiting confirmation*. They didn’t know anything. That’s what they were saying. Bunch of talking heads were spouting crap they didn’t know. Some said it was the cops. Some said protestors or rioters or ‘paid actors,’ whatever those were. I was pacing the living room, still getting used to my 15-year-old legs after the painful growth spurt I’d just finished. I was probably wearing a path in the carpet.

“Sit down, Erica,” Momma said.

I wanted to scream at her, but one glance calmed me. She was perched on the couch, her mouth in her hands, well-trodden paths of tears connecting her eyes to those hands. Totally

wasn't the time to scream at her. I sat down on the other end of the couch, but I was rocking back and forth. I tried to still myself, but I couldn't seem to do it. I stopped rocking, but my legs shook. I stopped that, and suddenly I was fidgeting with the seam on my jeans. I hopped back up and resumed my pacing. If I was going to be moving, I could at least be closer to the phone. The landline that we all had listed as our emergency contact number.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't sit still."

Momma just nodded, her eyes still plastered to the TV.

I checked my cell phone, but nothing. Nothing from Monique. Some friends from school had texted, asking if I'd heard anything. If I'd seen the news. *Is Jewel okay? Did Jewel go?* Only a couple asked about Monique. My friends had brothers and sisters that went to our same high school with Monique and Jewel. Everybody expected Jewel to go to every protest under the sun. This was only Monique's third. Then the news cut in with *shots have been fired at the protest*. We were in the middle of dinner, and suddenly our world stopped spinning.

Momma's cell phone rang, and she jumped at the sound. Not the landline. She answered it so quickly that I didn't even see who was calling.

"Yeah?" Momma answered. Anyone who knew Momma would know she was upset by that answer. I'd been grounded for more polite ways of picking up the phone. "Yes, she is... Thank you... I know... Thank you. Okay, I can... Okay. Let me know if they show up there, if you can. I know it's a madhouse, but if you see them... Thank you. Bye."

Momma hung up and looked to me.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"The hospital," Momma said, absently trying to rub a hole in her cell phone with her

thumb. “I think they were calling to ask me to come in, but with your sisters—” she trailed off.

I sat down beside her, throwing an arm around her. “I know, Momma. They’ll be okay. Jewel is always okay. She’s taking care of both of them. They’ll be home before we know it.”

“I know,” Momma said, but her heart wasn’t in it. “I know.”

I popped up and paced again, fiddling with a braid of my hair. Momma still sat, picking at her cuticle. After several long, silent minutes, the landline rang. Momma jumped from her seat, crossing the room in two long, frantic strides. She almost dropped the cordless as she scooped it off the base.

“Hello?” she said. Immediately, her nails were between her teeth. Then she went pale. “Yes, this is she.” Her hand darted out, reaching for me. I stepped to her and took it. She squeezed hard. “Yes. I understand. I’m a nurse, so please...yes.” Her eyes closed, tears squeezing out of both. I heard a voice, tinny and small from the phone, but I couldn’t make anything out. Momma nodded a few times, shook her head. I didn’t remind her that whoever was on the phone could not see her. Finally, she opened her soaked eyes, more tears spilling out, and looked to the ceiling. “Thank you. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“What is it?” I asked.

Momma sucked her lips into her mouth, clamping down hard. She grabbed my other hand, leading me to the sofa.

“Momma?”

She sat, her hands pulling mine to make sure I did the same. My knees were already buckling. My sisters. What happened to my sisters? Were they dead? Was that them? Momma wasn’t talking like she would to Jewel or Monique, so who was that? What did they say?

“Momma?”

“Baby,” Momma started real slow. “Erica. You saw on the news that there were shots.” She didn’t say it like a question. I nodded, fighting back my own tears. “That was the hospital. Monique—” Momma stopped. Took a deep breath. Tears leapt up in both our eyes now. “A bullet hit her.”

“Is she—?” I started.

“She’s alive, thank God. But she’s unconscious.”

“Unconscious? How—?”

“The bullet hit her in the head. Through-and-through,” Momma said. That meant it went in one side and out the other. Live with a nurse for a mother, and you pick up a few things.

“The head? Oh, shit. Oh, no. No, no, no,” I said. Momma grabbed me, quick and rough, scooping me up and into her chest like when I was a little girl. Sobs jumped out of me. I couldn’t help it. Somebody shot my sister in the head. The damn head. My sweet sister. Monique. The sister who never crossed anybody. The one who graduated valedictorian, killing it at Princeton, and bound for grad school. Of all three of us, she’s the one who would never jump in front of a bullet, would never have to.

“Until she wakes up, we won’t know the extent of anything,” Momma said, rocking me, holding my heaving face to her bosom. My tears soaked her blouse. “But we need to get down there, and bring both your sisters clean clothes.”

She pulled me away, looking me in the eyes. Her mascara was running a marathon down her face. “Erica, I need you now. We have to stick together. Be there for Monique and Jewel and for each other. You hear me?”

I nodded, sucking snot up, but it didn’t help me breathe.

“Okay. Go grab some clean clothes for Jewel. I’ll get Monique. I want you back here, ready to leave this house in two minutes. You get me?”

I nodded again.

She grabbed my face, pulling it in, and kissed my forehead. “Let’s be strong for your sister. Be strong for each other.”

I see a glint in the distance, beyond the reporters and their lights. I squint and focus there, anywhere other than right here, trying to see beyond this fog of heat and rage. Other cameras are taking pictures, their momentary flashes making the glint repeat. Reflectors in the distance. It looks like someone took a glowing Tetris puzzle and blew it apart. Geometric strips and shapes. They shift only a little between flashes. It takes me a while to realize what I’m seeing.

Cops.

All day, we’ve seen them. In their uniforms, blocking traffic, a few waving at us, but most scowling or trying not to look directly at any of us. Hard to blame them, really, when we’ve been calling out their shit all day. These cops are different, though. They aren’t just in patrol uniforms, but fucking riot gear. That’s the reflection. Those plexiglass helmets. Reflective strips on their body armor and shields. They’re geared up for a fight. For a war.

“How do you spell Nazi?” I scream, all on my own, pushing past the clawing pain in my throat.

“C-O-P!” a handful of people around me respond.

“How to you spell Nazi?”

“C-O-P!” It’s more than a handful this time. It’s twenty or thirty. I glance at Robert, and

he looks determined, if still quiet and afraid. He gives me dap. I give it back. And then the chant starts back up. I'm not the only one that sees the line of riot-gear cops beyond the media. We're almost there. Almost to that damn statue. They're guarding it. Okay. They want a fight. Here we are.

The Quarterback

August 11, 2018

“Omaha! Omaha! Hut!” Russell Thompson barks the words and grips the ball underneath his center already stepping back into the pocket.

Russell knows Mikkleson - his center - has the hardest job on the field. The offense looks to Russell, but Mikkleson starts every play. Ball gripped against the ground, not allowed to twitch or sneeze until Russell is ready, and then the big ginger gets his hands up and fights the biggest man on the defense in less than a second. Good thing Mikkleson is the biggest center in high school ball in the state of Virginia. Pull to the left. Pull to the right. Then do it all over again the next down. He never complains, though. Never complains about anything. When he got a D on his American History midterm last year, he just hunkered down and studied to retake it. Green eyes staring at every page through the mop of red hair that he never seems to comb. Probably gets it from his dad. Two tours in Iraq, and works two jobs as a security guard to put food on their table. And Mikkleson eats a lot of food.

Right foot down. Left foot moving back. Russell scans to his right.

A linebacker comes up in front of Russell, hands flying and feet pumping, while Johnson—the right guard—gets his enormous, gloved hands up under pads. Johnson was all-state the last two years. Word is there are going to be scouts for Alabama and Missouri in the stands for their home opener. There to watch Johnson. Nobody Russell would rather have watching his front side, either. Earlier this summer, Russell got confused about which drink he dosed and drank his own roofies. Johnson got him home safely, though Russell had to tell his dad it was Mikkleson. Johnson doesn't pass what Russell's dad calls the “paper bag test.”

Russell didn't remember anything between the drink and waking up on his own front lawn, but Johnson told him once he saw the blackface lawn jockeys on either side of the driveway, he knew it was best not to knock.

Left foot down. Right foot moving back. 82 is smothered, so Russell scans to the left, looking for his second option.

Russell hears Faamoana—the left guard—grunting behind him, pushing against another linebacker. The only Samoan in the school, Faamoana is super-popular, probably because he plays football just like his three older brothers did. The guy speaks softly and laughs loudly, like a Prius that occasionally backfires, if that's even possible. Russell has never gotten Faamoana to open up about anything. Even last year, when all that shit went down with the protesters, the big Samoan was quiet. While all the black guys on the team were fired up and ready pounce on those Unite the Right guys, Faamoana just sat down on the bench. Maybe he was crying. Russell doesn't get that dude.

Right foot down. Left foot down. Second option is on his ass. Russell looks for his check-down, his tight end.

Staley—the left tackle—is fighting off one of the inside linebackers, but he's losing ground. Russell knows he won't have this pocket for long; he needs to unload the ball. Staley is built like a bulldog, but just can't keep up with the bigger guys. Probably why he has such a temper. Big, but never the biggest. Fast, but never the fastest. Strong, but usually the first lineman to lose containment on his defender. When the rest of the team was fired up last year to fight those Nazi guys, Staley stood there, his usually pale cheeks red, like a bomb ready to explode, but he didn't say a word. The next week at practice, he had shaved off all of his blonde hair. Hardly a week goes by that he doesn't get in a fight with Johnson or one of the

safeties.

Bounce once. Twice. The tight end is double-covered. Time to get rid of the ball before...

A cornerback is bolting up out of the secondary, making a line straight for Russell. A delayed blitz. Russell rolls to his right, pumping the ball a couple times, giving his receivers a few more seconds to get open. This guy is like a missile, no chance to just outrun him. Russell needs help if he's going to escape. Hennessey—the team clown and right tackle—is trying to chase the cornerback down. That guy's always good for a laugh. He's the only reason the team didn't go into town last year. Leave it to a well-timed joke to diffuse a situation. It was one of those Richard Pryor, Chris Rock-type jokes that only a black guy can tell without being racist. It made everybody laugh. The team couldn't get their minds back into football, but at least they didn't go down to the protest. They were in the showers when that neo-Nazi ran his car through those people. Johnson and a few of the guys have stickers on their helmets that say "HH." Heather Heyer. Coach hasn't said anything.

Still running to his right, Russell pumps one more time. Suddenly there's a guy on his back. Russell pulls the ball down into his chest and wraps it with both arms, helmets rattling between the turf and each other. Whistles. The weight is off Russell almost as fast as it was on him. The cornerback runs off, howling in triumph. Then Hennessey's helmet is blocking the sun, standing over Russell with a hand extended, "Don't tell your dad you keep getting pounded from behind by a black guy, Thompson!"

Hennessey was funnier last year.

Prohibited: “Implement of Riot”

By order of the city manager of Charlottesville, numerous items were prohibited from the Downtown Mall from August 10-12, 2018, as items “considered an implement of riot.”

Saturday outside C'ville, men speckle
their friends with BBs and pellets, paint
balls splotch camo, making faux

but only if they stay amongst the haystacks

Every adolescent dreams in discount
nunchucks, swords, knives, daggers
through the hearts of their foes

in their blood-soaked video games

Upscale hair stylists prohibited
with their complimentary glass bottles and beer cans,
aerosol sprays, razor blades or *other sharp items*

but they can still wash your hair

young men borrowed from a Bradbury
story can pedal away their bricks, rocks, fire-
works, bats, sticks, and *wrist rockets*

but their bicycles make for fine barricades

the riot gear will break the barbaric the siege
of poles, axes, hatchets, flaming
catapults, clubs, and axe handles

in case *lengths of lumber or wood* weren't clear enough

Ghost Rider with his *heavy gauge metal chains* and open flames
Joker with his *acidic or caustic materials* from discount clown flower
Green Goblin's *hazardous or flammable or combustible liquids* wearing pumpkin faces

but comic books only corrupt your minds

best not skateboard on metal half-pipes or pick

ice or drone on about bears you can't spray or pepper
or in any way explode, and of course you can't have mace

unless STATE POLICE is swathed across your riot shield.

Robert

August 11, 2018

I don't even know where to look. Camera flashes are coming from every direction, glaring in the dark and leaving spots in my vision. Professional cameras have these square lights that seem brighter than the sun, swinging back and forth like spotlights shining on all of us. And then the police. These aren't the friendly neighborhood variety. Not the dark-shades stoics, even. Shining through the dark are the reflector strips on their riot gear. Shields and helmets and vests and who knows what else is hidden in the gloom ahead. And we're marching straight to them.

"How do you spell Nazi?" Erica tries to shout, her voice cracking. A few others are shouting with her.

"C-O-P!" almost everybody else yells in answer. That is NOT how you spell Nazi. I don't understand this chant, what it hopes to accomplish. Police serve and protect; they aren't throwing us in concentration camps or ovens. It's too much. Too hyperbolic. Too cruel. I don't see how it will do anything but anger the police. I can't bring myself to shout along with them, but I can't leave Erica, either. She looks ashy and faint. Not good. I told her she needed more water.

"How do you spell Nazi?"

"C-O-P!"

"How do you spell Nazi?"

"C-O-P!"

Closer and closer we get to the statue and that ring of police. Police that we're equating to

Nazis. My heart is screaming in my chest, my imagination running wild. I look to Erica, and her face is set as stone. She's laser-focused on the police and the statue beyond. That can of spray paint hidden in her fanny pack. The empty water bottle crushed in her hand. Sweat pouring off her forehead. I can't leave her. Maybe I can stop her from doing something horrible.

Closer and closer we get. The head of our group a dozen feet from the riot shields.

"How do you spell Nazi?"

Ten feet.

"C-O-P!"

"How do you spell Nazi?"

Eight feet.

"C-O-P!"

Six feet. The chant dies away as the front of our group moves in, stopping only inches from the police. But the rest of us aren't stopping. I don't know where to go, what to do with my feet or my hands. I just follow Erica, who doesn't look at me or speak to me or give any inclination. We're spreading out like a wave hitting a rock, flowing around the statue and surrounding the circle of police, getting right up in their faces. Erica moves in front of an absolutely humongous white officer with a big, Ron-Swanson style mustache. She's looking up at him, and even though I can't see her face, I see the set of her shoulders and know she's not giving the big man an inch.

And then everyone is talking at once. Everyone on our side, at least. I can't make out anything. The big officer is looking right over Erica, his eyes looking around at everyone but her. Scanning the crowd? Looking for threats? No way he's scared of her. Then the big guy

locks eyes with me. It's only for a second, but the look sends a spike of cold down my spine. My knees wobble. There's none of the jovial, "I'm here to protect you," sense I always got from my neighborhood officers. This man doesn't want to know if I'm okay. He doesn't want to protect or help me. He sees me as a threat, and he's dressed for violence. For war. His shield—a curved rectangle of clear plexiglass—is scuffed and scratched all over. How many fists and faces have slammed against it? How many baseball bats or golf clubs or bottle rockets or Molotov cocktails? How many bodies have been pinned to the ground, plexiglass grinding into hair and flesh and asphalt alike? Nobody carries a shield or wears armor unless they expect to need it. And this big man expects to use it against me, I can see it in his eyes, imagining my head slamming against it, my blood splattering on it. Maybe he's not imagining that, maybe it's just me.

I reach for Erica, for a shoulder or hand or something to steady me. Something to hold onto, someone I know cares for me and has my back. My hand finds her elbow, but she pushes me off. It's fine. Fine. Maybe she doesn't know it's me. She's surrounded by screaming protestors and armored cops. Police, I mean. I'd flinch away from a hand, too. It's fine. Nobody is attacking anyone. No nightsticks or pepper spray. This is crazy, but it's fine. We're all fine and safe. Fine and safe.

But then a new chant starts working its way around the circle from the other side. At first, all I hear are an occasional "up" or "down" from the other side of the statue. In less than a minute, the chant has clarified, moving like a wave of solidarity, a call to action taking life. Maybe not as bad as the Nazi chant, but not good. Not peaceful. Not likely to go over well with the big mustache or his fellow officers.

"What goes up," a couple dozen voices yell, stomping their feet in time with the chant,

“must come down. Tear those fucking statues down!”

I haven't been so torn between fight and flight since I was 12.

“Hey!” I yelled at the trio of second graders. I wasn't running toward them, but walking like I was their king and they should have known better than to mess with my family. I figured it looked cooler than running, and I wasn't really sure what I was going to do when I got over there.

The three looked at up me, the towering sixth grader. They were casting nervous glances at each other and then down to my little brother. He was on the ground, holding his ankle in both hands, woodchips stuck in his little twisted curls and on his clothes.

“Which one of you shoved him?”

The three looked at each other before the one in the middle, probably their leader—Gage, based on what my brother told me—said, “Why do you care?”

“I'm Robert McNealy,” I said, closing the distance to stand by my brother. The three glanced down at him, and then back to me. “Yeah,” I said, “as in Anthony McNealy's big brother.”

“Whatever, dude,” Gage said. His buddies chuckled.

I looked down at Anthony. His face was scraped, and he was still holding that ankle, still sitting in the woodchips. He looked up at me, pleading and grateful and fighting back tears, just like when he told me last night about Gage, begging me not to tell Mom or Dad.

“Not whatever,” I said. “You're going to apologize.”

“To Tiny Tony? I just said his mother is a whore and he didn't like it. That's what he gets!”

“His name is Anthony. And our mom isn’t a…” I said, trying to form the word in my mouth. I didn’t know what it meant (and looking back, I doubt Gage did, either), but it sounded nasty. “...whore. She’s not.”

All three of these little bullies laughed. I towered over them all by at least a foot, though I’d always been skinny. I’d never wanted to punch anybody so much in my life, but Dad’s voice was in my head telling me to never start a fight. But those laughs. They were going to keep bullying my brother unless I did something.

Gage said, “Tiny Tony needs his big brother to—”

I didn’t let him finish. I pushed him hard, and he stumbled back, spinning and falling face-first into a muddy puddle. The laughter from the friends stopped like hitting mute on a TV. Mouths open, they stared down at their friend before looking at me. I juked my shoulders at them, and they both ran, abandoning their friend.

“My brother’s name is Anthony,” I practically yelled at Gage. He was climbing out of the puddle, dripping with mud, his bottom lip quivering.

“Hey,” a deeper voice said from somewhere to my right.

I turned and was met with a broad fist. One second it was inches in front of me. The next second, my knees were crumbling, a pain blossoming from my nose, and I stumbled back next to my brother. Tears leapt to my eyes, and I blinked and shook my head, trying to clear my vision. Finally I took in Sarah Brown towering over me. We were in the same grade, but puberty had hit Sarah early and hard, so she was easily twice my size. And she’d been a bully since kindergarten.

“What are you doing to my brother?” she asked.

“Your brother?” I asked.

Then Gage moved behind Sarah, wiping mud from his face and losing the battle to get it off his shirt.

“Gage Brown,” I asked my brother. “You didn’t tell me he was Sarah’s brother.”

“Who’s Sarah?” Anthony asked.

“You want to pick on somebody smaller than you,” Sarah said, dramatically popping her knuckles and moving toward me as I got back to my feet. “Sounds like fun.”

I could have run. Sarah was bigger than any kid in the school, but I’d seen her at kickball. She was slow. I wasn’t. But Anthony was still sitting in the woodchips, nursing his ankle. I couldn’t imagine what she would have done to him. It would be years before I knew about the fight-or-flight response, but I was definitely in the middle of it then. There was only one real choice for me, I moved between Sarah and my brother, put my fists up, and prepared to take a beating.

“Sarah! Robert! Put your hands to your sides RIGHT NOW!” Mrs. Alvarez screamed at us as she stomped over, plowing straight through the kickball game that had paused to watch her. Everyone on the playground was watching her. For a second, I didn’t think Sarah would stop. I kept my hands up, ready to defend myself, her eyes blazing with rage.

“Unless you both want detention, DO NOT make me ask again!” Mrs. Alvarez yelled, much closer now.

Sarah sighed, the pizza from lunch on her breath, and she finally dropped her hands. So did I.

“...and that’s what happened,” I said, finishing my story to Principal Lawrence for the second time.

“He’s a liar!” Sarah shouted from her chair, but stayed seated. She was in the chair farthest from me, for obvious reasons, Anthony next to me, and an empty seat between them, the fabric and wood of the chair caked in mud from when Gage had been there. He was in the bathroom changing clothes now that his dad was here.

“Do not yell at me, Sarah,” Principal Lawrence said.

“I’m sorry,” Sarah said, picking at a spot on her shirt. “He was bullying my brother. You saw him. All that mud.”

“After something clearly happened to Anthony,” Principal Lawrence said, gesturing to the icepack my little brother was holding to his ankle. He looked back to Sarah. “Which your brother is mysteriously silent about.”

Sarah glanced at Anthony, the icepack and the scrape on his face, then she gave me the evil eye.

“We do not tolerate bullying at this school, and it looks like Anthony is the only one innocent here. If no one can agree on a story, I think I’ll be handing out three detentions today. At. Least.”

My heart started racing more than when Sarah was about to pound my face. Detention? I’d never had a detention in my life. This was my first time in the principal’s office ever. I couldn’t be getting detention, could I? Sarah must have seen the fear on my face. Her look turned smug, and she crossed her arms. She and her brother were no strangers to detention. Another day for her, but she knew I was out of my depth.

There was a gentle knock at the door, and it swung open. Mom. Judge McNealy. The principal’s secretary was standing behind her, looking flustered and plowed over, pretty typical for an interaction with Mom. Mom looked at Anthony with pity, me with cold

contempt, and then turned to Principal Lawrence.

“Dr. Lawrence,” she said. Her voice was calm and quiet. “Might I have a word?”

I swore I heard Principal Lawrence audibly gulp. Then he nodded and walked out of the room with her.

“I’m going to kill you,” Sarah said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I don’t like her,” Anthony said to me so quietly that I could barely hear him. “Can we go home?”

“Soon, I think,” I said. But I didn’t know. I didn’t know if we’d go home or back to class or to detention or if Sarah was going to pummel my face until my heart stopped. Before I had a chance to think more about it, the door opened again. Principal Lawrence led the way, followed by Mom, Gage, and Gage’s Dad.

“I’m very disappointed in you all,” Principal Lawrence said, settling back into his chair and sweeping his gaze across the lot of us. “This is not how we handle disagreements in my school.”

He focused on Gage. “Gage: a week’s detention.”

Gage slumped down in his chair.

Principal Lawrence’s eyes swung over to Sarah. “Sarah, Sarah. Apparently detentions aren’t getting through to you, so you’re suspended for three days, and then two weeks of detention after.”

“That’s bullsh…” Sarah exploded, and then quickly reigned herself in, her eyes darting between Principal Lawrence and her dad, like she suddenly remembered who was in the room.

Then Principal Lawrence’s eyes were on me. “Robert,” he said, but I caught his eyes

glancing up and behind me, at Judge McNealy looming. “I understand you were defending your brother. That’s noble.” He glanced up at her again, and I got the distinct feeling he was uncomfortable. “Your teachers and your mom and I are here to help with these situations. To fix things. Not your fists. You can go back to class. Consider this a warning. I don’t want to see you in here again.”

Now here I am again. Fight or flight. Adrenal glands firing catecholamines. Pupils dilating. Heart rate and breathing racing. Just like the books say. My lungs drop into my stomach. No teachers or Principal Lawrence or Judge McNealy to help me. This big, armored, mustachioed man should be the one to fix things, to help, but my friend is standing against him. My friend who needs me. *Stay with Erica. Stay with Erica*, I tell myself over and over. All I want to do is run, leave, but I can’t leave her here alone. I look down at her, her stance still defiant, and I can see by the shake of her shoulders that she’s chanting and stomping along with them, even though I know she barely even has a voice right now.

If she can do it, then so can I. I set my shoulders, lock my eyes on Mustache, and he looks at me again right as I join in with, “Tear those fucking statues down!”

Erica

August 11, 2018

“What goes up, must come down. Tear those fucking statues down!” the crowd around me chants, our steps keeping time with our words.

My game face is locked in. Jewel and I talked about it so many times the last few years. That moment in a rally when shit is about to get real, when the risk of arrest or violence dramatically increases. Cameras are everywhere, their flashes blinding in the darkness. Momma might be able to see me on the news if she flips to the right station. I can see the ticker now: *One Year Later, Protests Fill the Charlottesville Streets*. Not looking forward to that conversation, but Momma’s the least of my worries right now. That damn Robert E. Lee statue is ringed in metal barriers and cops in riot gear. They’re prepared for what happened last year, though I’m sure nobody wants that. I hope they don’t break out the tear gas; I didn’t come prepared for that.

“What goes up,” the crowd continues, “must come down. Tear those fucking statues down.”

I’m mouthing the words, not making a sound. My throat is just raw and parched. I’ve been at this for hours already. I smell like sweat, and I’m still sweating, even after the sun has set. Gotta bring more water tomorrow. Assuming I’m not in jail tonight.

I’m looking up at a white face, a thick salt-and-pepper mustache on his lip. He’s looking up and over me, off into the distance, keeping his face neutral. Sweat is pouring down from his helmet. Looking all smug and superior, hiding behind the clear plastic of his face-protector and the shield. There are scratches on both. Wonder how he got those. Who has he

bludgeoned with that baton in his right hand? When he pulls over a black driver in an old Impala, does he give them the same courtesy he gives a white driver in a BMW? Nah. I see him. I see his blue eyes desperate to avoid my black ones.

A big white guy next to me half-falls into me, bumping up against the cop. The two beefy men exchange glances, and my shoulders tense, ready for some shit to go down. But the big guy apologizes, first to the cop and then to me, before wiggling his way back to where he was. Mustache nods to the man and resumes staring off into the distance. I wonder if he would have let me off the hook if I'd been the one to accidentally bump into him, or if I'd be pinned to the ground under his shield. I already know the answer, and it pisses me off.

“What goes up!” I scream right into his face. “Must come down!”

Over and over, I scream it. My throat burns. Tears well up in my eyes. This is for Heather Heyer. This is for Marcus Martin. This is for Eric Garner and Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin and Jesse McIlherron and Hayes Turner. This is for my sister, Monique. For the bullet she caught in the head during a protest that changed her from a college student to a 24-year-old toddler. My fists ball up, and I know I should take a step back, but I don't want to, and I'm not sure if I can. The world is spinning. The cop's eyes are trying to trade places. I try to shake it off, blink rapidly, but it doesn't seem to help.

“Tear those fucking statues down!” I yell, though more like a hoarse whisper at this point. One bottle of water can only do so much good. One bottle of water more than an hour ago.

The bottle of water. Empty and crinkling in my squeezing fist.

Before I give it anymore thought, the empty bottle is out of my hand, and the spinning stops. Everything slows and clarifies. The clear plastic slapping against a lady cop's shield. It pops up and over, landing uselessly to in the bushes behind her, a few little droplets of water

clinging to the shield, slowly finding paths to the ground, twisting past the scratches. Now Mustache is looking right at me, his eyes focused and angry. His mouth moves, his eyes darting between me and the lady cop next to him. He sneers like I've awoken some beast. His baton hand twitches. And then the spinning resumes, but worse this time, like the ground and sky are hell-bent on swapping places.

“What goes up!” I scream at him, or at least near him, I can't tell. “Must come down!”

He takes a step toward me, and that seems to unhinge what was left of any certainty in my reality. Everything goes sideways and dark. Like they have a mind of their own, my feet stumble back, and I'm suddenly on my ass, hard. I imagine all eyes on me. Cameras watching as this cop starts making an example of me. As the world goes dark and I slip from consciousness, the last thought I have is that I was prepared for this, I'm ready for it, that it will all do some good.

The State Trooper

August 11, 2018

The chant is all around. “What goes up, must come down!” Even with the helmet on, it’s almost deafening.

A man with Grace Jones-dark skin screams in Trooper Victoria Cardenas’ face, his spittle dotting her riot shield. Better than the chant equating them with Nazis, at least. Her knees are shaking, the left one twanging like someone is plucking the nerves to the beat of the chanting. *Relax your knees or you’ll fall over*, a teacher’s voice from high school acting classes rings in her head. She relaxes. Not a lot. Not visibly. But enough to calm the shaking.

“Tear those fucking statues down!”

The guy is at least a foot taller than Victoria, pointing a looming finger at her face as he screams. She stares a hole through his “Black Lives Matter” t-shirt. Avoid eye contact. Don’t escalate. Some people see eye contact as a direct challenge. Even while her knees want to shake, she finds firm footing in years of training and experience. They could do this all night if needed, but then a big protestor pushes into Ailey’s shield. Not hard enough to make Ailey lose a step, but enough to jostle him a bit. The guy is big, but not Ailey big. Victoria moves sideways a few inches, just enough to bump elbows with her partner, to remind him that she is there, that she has his back. She watches the big protestor for a few moments, watching for escalation. He steps back, looks around, and then apologizes to Ailey and another protestor, a young black woman with long braids. Shoved from behind, looks like. Thank God.

“What goes up!”

She moves her eyes back to the enormous white letters on the black shirt just in time to

feel a twang off the top of her shield, skipping across her helmet and behind her. Her knees lock without her permission, bringing the shaking back. She looks over her shoulders, first with her peripheral vision, and then with slight turns of her head. She can't see what it was that hit her. It didn't feel heavy, but the helmet could be deceiving, could deflect with surprising effectiveness.

“What was that?” Victoria yells.

“What?” Ailey yells back.

“Something hit me,” she says. “Shield and helmet. I don't know what it was.”

“Me too!” Ailey says.

Now both Ailey and the black trooper on her other side are looking around, all three of them still keeping their focus forward, at the protestors, but trying to ascertain the threat. It could be anything. A shoe. A rock. A wad of dirt. A bird could have careened off her. A Molotov cocktail. Her eyes dart to the bushes behind her, then to the crowd. Back to see if anything is stuck in the orange fencing, then to the crowd again. She scans the ground behind Ailey. Boots on the concrete, heels almost touching the orange fencing, bushes behind that. Nothing out of the ordinary. Then her eyes pass back over the crowd to look behind the black trooper on her other side.

Dark hair. Black glasses. White polo shirt. Fields. Fields? Here? She turns back to the crowd, eyes darting from face to face. Over and over. The “Black Lives Matter” shirt still taking up half her field of vision. She saw him. She...but no. She couldn't have seen him. He is in jail. Standing trial. He's not here. He's not here. He can't be here. This is not that day. Not that year.

“Water bottle,” the black trooper beside her yells.

“Water bottle?” Victoria asks.

“Just an empty water bottle,” Black Trooper says. “Bushes behind you. Just a water bottle.”

“Water bottle!” she yells to Ailey.

“Got it!” Ailey says, and then locks onto Braids with his eyes.

Victoria steadies herself. *Just a water bottle.* In through the nose. Out through the mouth. Even the towering man in the Black Lives Matter shirt looks concerned for her, though he is still chanting. She looks around for Fields, but doesn't see a white polo shirt anywhere in sight. Her mind is playing tricks on her again. She wonders if she took her meds that morning, but can't recall. She'll have to count them when she gets back to the hotel room. *The only way I'm clearing you for this protest, her unit-issued psychiatrist said, is if you promise to stay on top of your meds. PTSD can come and bite you in the ass at the worst times.* She shakes her head, flinging the cobwebs out. Adjusts her grip on the shield, and realizes her other hand is grasping the handle of her baton. She releases it, letting it hang from its holster.

She can't mentally escape right now, needs to stay in the moment, so she flexes each leg and envisions the panic and anxiety melting into the ground, just like she's been taught. It helps. Her focus returns, her awareness. She resumes scanning the crowd.

Victoria's eyes drift back to Braids, standing in front of Ailey, but looking wobbly. She looks angry, spitting each syllable of “Must come down,” but no sound is coming out of her. She looks ashen. Sweat is dripping down her face worse than it is for Victoria, and Braids is only wearing a t-shirt and shorts, not full riot gear. She keeps flinging her braids out of her face, little green and pink beads flying over her shoulders. Victoria sees the young woman's

eyes roll once, and then refocus. Whoever this is, she doesn't look good. She is about to go down.

But Ailey doesn't see it. He is on edge, hand on his baton, ready to explode. Victoria wonders if she threw the water bottle, not understanding why else Ailey would be so coiled up.

"Ailey!" Victoria yells over the chanting crowd.

He doesn't seem to hear her. He starts sliding his baton from its holster.

And then Braids goes down, knees buckling, crumpling backwards onto her ass and back, eyes rolling up, the back of her head bouncing against the thigh of a young, black man behind her. His hands are instantly on her shoulders, holding her steady.

"Back up! Back up!" Victoria yells, dropping her shield into the bushes. "Give her some air."

The crowd obliges, multiple hands outstretched backward, a semi-circle opening up around the young woman, passed out, her braids haphazardly flung around her and the tall man who caught her.

"Do you know her?" Victoria asks the young man.

"Yes," he says, bursting into a rambling monologue. "She's my friend. I think it's heat exhaustion. She hasn't had enough water today. Her name is Erica Betancourt, 20, from Atlanta, no known allergies, A negative blood type. Is she okay?"

Victoria drops to her knees, pulling off her gloves, and putting bare fingers to the young woman's neck. Habit. The woman is obviously still alive. Breathing. Just passed out. Likely heat exhaustion, just like the young man said, but training kicks in nonetheless. "I think you're right," she finally says. "What's your name?"

“My name?” he asks. “I’m fine. Her name is Erica.”

“Thank you,” Victoria says, locking eyes with him and wrenching off her helmet, trying to get his full attention with hers. “And you already told me that. I appreciate it. Now take a deep breath.”

He does so, maintaining eye contact with her, but the fear is evident in his face.

“Good,” Victoria says. “Now what is your name, Friend of Erica?”

“Oh, right,” he says. “Sorry. I’m Robert.”

“It’s okay, Robert. Erica is going to be okay. We just need to get her cooled off and hydrated.”

Robert nods quickly, obvious worry wilting a little from his face.

Then a flurry of activity. Ailey hands Victoria a black bottle of water, which Victoria sprays on Erica’s face and down the collar of her shirt. Protestors moved into action, calling for water, for a doctor or nurse. The big white guy who bumped into Ailey moves in, picking up Erica’s legs. He and Robert look to Victoria, who points away from the crowd. The two hoist Erica off the ground and carry her under a nearby tree. Victoria calls for an EMT, and finds a pair and their ambulance conveniently waiting at one corner of the park, standard procedure for a protest. The EMTs jog over, propping up Erica’s legs, putting ice packs on her forehead and neck, and pumping IV fluids into her within minutes. Flashlights and pen lights dance over Erica’s exhausted body.

“Are you okay?” Victoria asks Robert, who is watching all this in awe.

He nods and says, “I told her. I brought her water before we turned to march away from campus. I said we should just go. Eat and shower. She was obviously overheating. I told her. I told her.”

“She’s going to be fine, Robert,” Victoria says, putting a hand on his shoulder, though he doesn’t seem to notice.

After a few minutes, Erica finally comes around, blinking in confusion at the swarming EMTs and blinding lights around her. As Erica’s head starts to move on its own, Victoria kneels down and takes one of her hands.

“Erica? Erica?” Victoria asks her. “Do you know where you are?”

“What?” Erica asks, blinking up rapidly at the flurry of lights.

“Do you know where you are?” Victoria repeats, sweat dripping down her nose. She looks up at one of the EMTs, a young brown man whose eyes are darting to the IV, the blood pressure cuff, and the slew of other equipment sitting nearby.

Victoria reaches up toward Robert with one hand, keeping Erica’s hand in the other. Robert blinks blankly a few times, and then takes the offered hand. Victoria pulls Robert down beside her.

“Erica?” Victoria says. “I’m Victoria, a state trooper. I have your friend, Robert. Do you know where you are?”

“Robert?” Erica blinks, looking around, and finally locking eyes with her friend.

It seems to rouse Robert from his trance. “Hey,” he says.

“What happened?” Erica asks.

“You, um,” Robert says. “Fainted?”

“Heat exhaustion,” Victoria says. She glances at the EMT, who nods agreement.

“Stupid,” Erica says. “Didn’t drink enough water.”

“I know,” Robert says. “I told you.”

The EMTs, Victoria, and the surrounding protestors all chuckle.

“That can happen,” Victoria says, trying to get back to her protocols. She isn’t an EMT, but every cop got some medical training. They need to know Erica is okay, that she knows who she is, what day, and where before they can get her up and moving. “Do you remember what happened before you passed out?”

Slowly, Erica recounts marching to the statue, running out of water well before reaching downtown. The cameras and reporters. Circling around the statue and the troopers. “I threw my empty water bottle,” Erica says absently. Victoria works her jaw, trying not to show any reaction on her face. “It was so stupid. I was mad at myself for not preparing. My sister is going to be so pissed when she finds out. Then I tried to scream, to chant with everybody else, and then—”

“And then?” Robert asks when Victoria doesn’t.

“I woke up here?” Erica says, looking around. She is definitely coming out of her stupor. “Where are we?”

“Same park with the statue,” Robert says. “They hauled you over here under this tree.”

“Oh,” Erica says. “I’m sorry.”

Those words hit Victoria in a way she doesn’t expect. Probably just embarrassment on the young woman’s part, really. She’d felt similarly when she fell and knocked herself out during police academy years ago. She awoke, surrounded by other recruits and training officers, more embarrassed that she’d caused such a fuss than for doing anything wrong. Victoria can feel that is the source of the apology from Erica, but can’t help but carry it over to the thrown bottle, the fit of flashback that Erica could never have known she would trigger. Victoria turns away, taking a few breaths to keep from showing her own emotions, to keep her mask unbroken.

The crowd is still amassed around the statue and her fellow troopers, but the wind has been knocked out of them. At least half are looking over to Erica on the ground, the dying flurry of activity around her. From this vantage point, the group doesn't look so big. A few dozen protestors, maybe. It doesn't feel that way from the inside. Feels like a riot when you're circled around a statue, a wall of protestors pushing and screaming at you. She silently laughs at herself, at how much she'd built this up in her head, at how she'd reacted to a fucking water bottle. Then she scoops her helmet off the grass, not even remembering when she dropped it. She turns it in her hands, wiping grass of the little sugar skull sticker she'd put there. Found it in a Mexican grocery on a trip to DC. It caught her eye, looking so much like the sugar skull Papi had painted when she was 8, the first Dia de los Muertos without her mom.

“Come here, Victory,” Papi said, wielding the nickname nobody else ever used. “Let's put your mask on.”

Victoria smiled so hard her ears hurt as Papi dangled the new sugar-skull mask, more tempting than actual sugar. Dia de los Muertos was her favorite holiday growing up. It lost something in adulthood, or maybe just lost something for her. Papi gently moved the mask down over her face, adjusting so she could see through the eye-holes, lifting her stick-straight hair up and out so it fell over and hid the elastic string.

He stepped back, arms wide, begging for approval. “What do you think?”

Victoria nodded and giggled, the sound muffled and echoing behind the plastic mask. “I can see!”

“Good,” Papi said. “Go look at yourself.”

She sprinted down the hallway from the living room, past her room, her brothers' rooms, and into the bathroom they all shared, which was blessedly empty at the moment. A rare thing. Four different sizes of boys' underpants hung across the shower rod, along with her new training bra, which she refused to wear around the house. She skidded to a stop in front of the mirror. It was perfect. Three blood-red roses arced across the forehead, the biggest in the center. Viny eyebrows, thorned like rose stems, curved up from between the eye holes. Little red-orange flicks, somehow both flower petals and flames, spoked out from the eyeholes. Scarlet daisies punctuated the cheekbones, blooming with golden crosses in their centers. Fleshy pink gums highlighted the skeleton grin, outlined black-red into the shapes of hearts. Swirls of teal and red and violet swooped and twirled from chin to forehead, filling the spaces and the edges to leave only a little of the off-white, bone color showing.

“Do you like it?” Papi was standing in the doorway, watching her take it in.

“It’s the best one yet!” She ran to him, wrapping him up in a hug, her ear buried in his belly. He let out a soft grunt with the collision.

“I’m glad,” he said. “I’ve been painting it for weeks.”

He meant between his days tending to five children and his nights as a security guard. If he found 10 minutes each day to work on it, Victoria would have been surprised. It would be years before she would truly appreciate his Herculean effort after Mama left. She assumed he slept, but didn’t know when. Asking him to take time for himself was met with a waving hand and a change of subject. He wouldn’t hear of it.

Victoria skipped back to the mirror. Dia de los Muertos. The day when they all wore masks in the house, lit candles for their abuelos, abuelas, and other ancestors who’d passed on. Papi talked about growing up outside Chicago, where the whole neighborhood celebrated

Dia de los Muertos. Shrines weren't just in homes, but on street corners and in schools and restaurants. They were everywhere. There was still a parade there every year, he told her. Back then, she wanted to move away from Charlottesville once she was grown, go somewhere with a parade for the dead, with a whole neighborhood of people who looked like her, who made their own tortillas and tamales, who painted their Dia de los Muertos masks for their children.

Looking in the mirror, at herself in the mask, she felt different. Not like herself. She could imagine Papi as a little boy wearing his mask. Papi's brother Eduardo. His sisters Francesca and Izabela. Abuelo and Abuela as little children in Mexico. Even then, Victoria understood the power of a mask. They change us, hide us, let us slip into someone else. She lifted the mask and saw herself. Just Victoria with her plain black eyes, plain, slim nose, and plain, thin lips. She pulled the mask back down and found herself beautiful. Her whole family, alive and dead, all painted up and presented to the world in their honor.

She wipes the last of the grass off her helmet and then tugs it over her head, securing the chin strap. This isn't the time or place for beautiful paint or honoring her dead. She marches back to her spot, the crowds parting, watching her approach, seeing not Victoria, Papi's little girl who loves Dia de los Muertos, but Trooper Cardenas, clad in black armor, there to do a job.

Mandy

Last Year

August 19, 2017

No matter how many times I saw the pictures online, in the information brochure, or in the welcome packet, it was still so strange to be there, staring up at the University of Virginia Rotunda. The pictures hadn't done it justice. A perfectly round, domed building, fronted by six columns, each topped with some ornate carvings or whatever they were called. Flat, brick buildings sprawled to either side of it, and I knew from the brochures that these buildings turned 90 degrees and kept going, creating the old quad behind it. Steps spilled down from the front of the Rotunda, and the signature Thomas Jefferson statue—the man who built the university and pretty much the whole city of Charlottesville—stood there amid the expanse of brick, concrete, old-time street lamps, concrete pedestals, plain wooden benches, and all sorts of greenery. The pictures showed this area empty, but right now it was buzzing with other freshmen and parents, peppered with UVA students in their matching “Fall Orientation” t-shirts.

“I’m pretty sure this isn’t anywhere near your dorm,” Dad said. There was a little frustration in his voice, but he was beaming. His first child going to college. Adam rolled his eyes. Dad had his hands on the hips of his khaki cargo shorts, sucking in his gut, though it still pushed out the front of his orange polo shirt. Mom tried to get him to wear navy blue—a better pairing with the khaki, and also a UVA color—but he insisted on orange. Not burnt orange, either, but road-barrel orange. He adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses as he gawked at the Rotunda and the Thomas Jefferson statue in front of it.

“No,” Mom said, adjusting her own Coach glasses as she thumbed through the tri-fold brochure that included a map. “Amanda’s dorm is in the northwest corner of campus. This is the east side.” She looked up from the map and practically broke her face in half smiling at me. “But this is the center of campus life right here. The statue and the Rotunda. We have to get some pictures here before we take her to the dorm.”

“Yay,” Adam said, flatly sarcastic and flipping his brown hair out of his eyes. “Pictures.”

Alice just scuffed one black combat boot against a little white omega painted onto the bricks, right near a big, white 7. There was also an “A” and an infinity sign. Weird emblems from the “secret” societies that peppered the campus. I’d gone down a Google-hole looking them up when I was applying. The symbols Alice was kicking represented the Seven Society. There were also T.I.L.K.A., Eli Banana (which still made me giggle when I thought about it), Z, IMP, and Thirteen Societies. Hard to call them secret when each one has a Wikipedia page, but then I couldn’t find a list of members or anything, so I guess they still have some secrets.

“You three,” Mom said, stuffing the brochure in her purse and pulling out her phone. “Get in front of the statue.”

We started to move, but another family jumped in, parents equally beaming with pride. Then another family. And another. Then a single girl who looked mortified. Then a group of about 30 Asian women. Seemed we weren’t the only ones who wanted a picture with our third president. Finally, Mom practically shoved us in as the big group wandered off. We shuffled into position for another sibling photo, though I couldn’t really muster any frustration. I was at college. Finally. After an unending parade of classes at Park School since I was five, college was finally here. Sure, it wasn’t Ivy League like Mom or Dad really wanted, but UVA had everything I wanted: a rich history, big campus life, good sports, and a

killer physical therapy program. I'd always loved science and medicine, but I had no interest in disimpacting colons or cutting people open. So physical therapy sounded like a winning compromise.

"Amanda," Mom said, waving me to the right like she was swatting away a wasp, "stand in the center."

Adam and I swapped. He'd been taller than me since he turned 11, so he usually stood in the middle of sibling photos. Habit.

"You know Jefferson owned slaves, right?" Alice said from under her black beanie, the compromise for Mom not letting her dye her hair. And black lipstick. And black eyeliner. The middle of August in Virginia, and she was wearing a long-sleeve, black, My Chemical Romance shirt. Black jeans. Black everything. About a month ago, she woke up and switched from *My Little Pony* to *American Horror Story*.

"Yes, Alice," Dad said. "We all know he owned slaves. But today is about your sister. Now smile, please."

I was looking at Mom fumbling with her phone, looking down her nose at the screen, one finger hovering, ready to press the button to take the picture. And I could guarantee Alice wasn't smiling. Smiles only happened by accident with her now, when her guard was down or something funny surprised her. None of us could get her to explain why.

Mom tapped her phone, checked the picture, and gave us instructions. *Adam, move your arm. Alice, smile. Amanda, chin up, honey. Alice, smile. Adam, stand up straight. Alice, for God's sake.* Little bubbles of families waiting their turn were circling like vultures, moms and dad growing more frustrated with each passing picture Mom studiously took. After probably a dozen, Mom finally said, "I'm so thrilled! Okay. Let's get you moved in!"

Dad looked triumphant as we walked over to him. “So,” he said. “What’s on the agenda tonight after we leave?”

I started to say, “I think I’ll head to the concert—”

“—at the John Paul Jones arena,” Mom said, completing my sentence with her nose buried in the brochure again. “Featuring Future and Lil Yachty.” She pronounced ‘Lil’ as ‘little,’ invoking a little snort of a laugh from Adam.

“What?” she said.

“Nothing,” Adam said, and then he turned to me in a whisper. “So what are you actually doing once we all leave?”

“It’s a party,” I said, “Why wouldn’t I go?”

“Which party?” he said, leaning in close enough that I could smell his BO.

“Dude,” I said, pushing him away. “Deodorant. Make it a habit.”

He tucked his hands in his pockets and stopped bothering me, which was the goal. For a month, the parents had been nagging me about not going to the off-campus block party that was apparently infamous at UVA. The school sent letters urging students away and begging parents to reinforce the message. Honestly, I wouldn’t have even known about that off-campus rager had it not been for the letters. But once I found out, it didn’t take much Googling to learn all about it. Thousands of people every year. Booze. Drugs. Sex. The cops got called every time. I’d had a few beers in high school, smoked pot once, but otherwise been a pretty straight arrow. But this was college. Future and Lil Yachty weren’t going to entice me away from my first true college party, especially a party of that magnitude. If the school had Taylor Swift, maybe, but it was past time for me to get some experiences under my belt.

“Honey,” Dad said to Mom, “did you grab my back brace?”

She nodded. “It’s under your seat.”

“Excellent,” he said, cracking his knuckles and eliciting the expected cringe from Mom.

Three more hours with the family, loading into my dorm, and then I would be free. I couldn’t wait.

If this was what college parties were like, they were totally not my scene. Curb-to-curb people. Alcohol sloshing into mouths, onto the street, and down lots of polo shirts and mostly exposed décolletage. Though I wasn’t necessarily upset about the latter. I’d never seen so many drooping necklines in one place, but watching a guy take a shot straight from a girl’s ample bosom without using his hands turned my stomach a bit. Music was blaring from a dozen different houses, turning into a flood of atonal sound in the street. A pair of drunken guys practically fell into me, almost spilling my half-filled cup of cheap beer. I threw my free hand up and reflexively yelled, “hey!” They both just smiled stupidly at me and kept on limping by. I’d been here for 30 minutes, and I’d had more drink spilled on me than in me. I was already thinking about leaving.

“Hey,” this guy said, walking straight at me and yelling over the deafening music. He must have been at least six feet tall. His shiny, brown pompadour adding another few inches to his height. White polo shirt with the collar turned up. Cargo shorts. Expensive flip-flops. Still sporting the deep tan from wherever his parents took him over the summer. “Aren’t you Amanda? From the little walking tour this morning?”

I nodded and said, “Mandy, actually.” Okay. Maybe this was a lifeline, somebody who would be a friend, who could guide me through or even out of this insane crush of

inebriation.

“Mandy,” he repeated, and I heard the wavering in his voice.

“That’s me!” I said with force merriment. Please be cool. Please be cool.

“Cool,” he said. “I’m Nick. You’re hot.”

Oh, not cool. Damn. I smiled a little, looking around for anyone I knew, which was nobody unless my roommates showed up. And I’d only met them for about 15 minutes before my parents whisked me off to lunch. Happy first week of college!

“Freshman?” Nick asked, pushing some random, dancing guy out of the way with his shoulder.

I nodded.

“Cool, cool,” Nick said. He, too, looked around like he wasn’t sure how interested he was in me. What a stunning conversationalist. “You here with anybody?”

I shook my head.

“Got a boyfriend?”

Wow, right to it. Do not pass go or collect any pertinent information about me. I didn’t want to say no and encourage this behavior, but didn’t want to lie and say yes, either. I gave him some sort of pained look and started weaving through the crowd, ducking into the nearest house with an open door and thumping music, which may have not been the best move. Like teenagers in a scary movie running upstairs instead of out of the house when the monster is closing in. The house was way more packed than the street, my progress stalled, and since I’d never been there before, I had no idea how else to leave the throng of dancing, drunken bodies. I turned on my heels, aiming for the door.

And there was Nick. He saw me turn back to him and lifted his shirt, revealing a chiseled

six-pack, and said, “You want to get out of here?”

I blinked. What did he think that would do? Had that worked before? I could only imagine some animal part of his brain, working in the gym, pounding fists and slapping asses with his bros, imagining how much pussy he would get every time he did a crunch. Had this ever worked for him? I had to imagine that yes, some girls had been drunk enough to see a six pack and wander off with him. That that was all it took. And here I was, staring at his abs, probably giving him the same impression. I moved my eyes back to his face, confronted with a drunken version of the *Friends* ‘how you doin’?’ look. My beer suddenly tasted even worse. I just shook my head.

“Come on,” he whined.

I looked around more, really hoping I would see any familiar or friendly face. A classmate or a TA or even some girl who’d been on the campus tour with me back in April. Anybody. Instead, just a sea of drunken idiots grinding on each other, making out, and one girl dancing on a coffee table in her bra and underwear, a dozen phones recording her.

A cold hand was on my waist, still wet with condensation from the beer can. Nick. His thumb slid under my shirt. I jerked away, and then his other hand was on me, too. His eyes were glazed over and he licked his lips. I ducked underneath his arm, hoping for the door, but found a wall of new people pushing in. I scooted to the side, finding a little space between a couch and another coffee table. I squeezed and shuffled, putting a couple paces between us before I spun to keep my eyes on him.

“You’re so sexy,” he said, sauntering toward me. He stepped right over the table I’d just knocked my shins against. “Everybody is here for some fun, Mandy. Just some fun. I’m like, nine inches of fun.”

I took a step back, bumping into a couple of guys practically humping as they danced. “Sorry,” I mumbled, stepping around them, falling into a chair on my way, and knocking a pair empty bottles off the table on my way down. Nobody seemed to notice. Nobody but Nick.

“It works better if I sit down first, not you,” Nick said, his smile looking more like a predatory sneer now. A wolf that suddenly found its prey cornered. He was stumbling toward me, casually shoving people out of his way. They barely even took notice of him, let alone me in the chair, looking everywhere for a lifeline.

“Nick!” a voice hollered from behind me, from the next room.

Nick pulled up short, his wolfish eyes finding a new target. “Yeah?” he said.

The owner of the voice walked into view, her ripped jeans swaying at my eye level, an extra-tall, black leather belt that was definitely there more for style than need. The jeans so tight around her curves, they certainly weren’t going anywhere. A white top straight out of a 70’s fashion magazine revealed more than it covered, showing ample black cleavage, midriff, and shoulders. It tied in the front, two long strips of white fabric swaying as she walked, trying to hypnotize me out of my fear. Her hair was poofed out past her shoulders in a soft afro.

“Do I know you?” Nick asked. I looked back to him, wondering how long I’d been staring at the newcomer, or if she’d noticed. My stomach fluttered the tiniest amount.

“Oh, Nick,” the woman said. “Erica. We had chemistry together last semester, don’t you remember?”

Nick’s face skipped from confused, to dumbfounded, and back to predatory in as many heartbeats. “Yeah,” Nick said, nodding. “Chemistry.”

I looked up to Erica just in time to see her looking back down at me. My cheeks and chest warmed, so I looked back to Nick quickly, hoping to toss my hair across my face and hide. A trick I've used since I was little. Except I put my hair up tonight, so there was no hiding the flush on my face.

“We were lab partners,” Erica said. “Which you obviously don't remember.”

“What?” Nick said, overdoing his shock and offense. “How could I ever forget you, Erica?”

“I know what you do remember,” Erica said, moving closer to Nick.

The jeans swayed back and forth to the rhythm of the music. The muscles in her lower back worked like pistons, her spine a lazily slithering snake. I was mesmerized. I'd never gazed so intently at anyone's ass before. I consciously pulled my eyes up to watch the interaction of faces.

“Oh,” Nick said, his smile growing somehow more disgusting. “Did we—?”

“We were at Monty's party, over at the Delta house.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You were all up in my business, kind of like you were with her,” Erica gestured to me, still huddled on the chair, “just now.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Erica said. She suddenly turned to me, holding her red solo cup out and winking. “Will you hold this a sec?”

I nodded and took the drink, our fingers brushing slightly in the exchange, and it was like I'd stuck my fingers in an electrical socket.

Erica turned back to face Nick, putting her hands on his shoulders. She said something

else, getting closer and closer to Nick's face. He looked like he was reliving a particularly orgasmic memory, until his face suddenly turned to an expression of stunned realization.

Then came Erica's knee to Nick's groin along with her yelling, "No!"

Nick dropped his beer, suds spilling onto the hardwood. I pulled my feet back from the mess, curling up on the chair. Nick tried to double over, but Erica held him up by his shoulders, wrinkled tufts of white polo shirt clenched in her fists.

She continued, "means no!" She gave him another knee to punctuate the second 'no,' and then let him tumble into a heap on the floor. I imagined the music stopping, perfectly timed to a record scratch, and all heads turning, all conversations stopping, like in a movie. Shock and awe. But the music was coming from someone's computer, still pumping and thumping oblivious to Nick's squirming. People were looking, no doubt, but there was little awe and no shock. A few people were laughing. Somebody high-fived Erica. A few others gave her fist bumps. Some other guy knelt down next to Nick. Then she turned to me, holding out a hand. Already short of breath, my lungs squeezed tight while my heart raced. People were looking at me now, and this woman, bold and gorgeous, was extending a hand to me. Me.

"Um," I said.

"My drink?"

"Oh, right." I handed the cup back, and Erica downed the rest of it in one go. I just looked up at her, wondering how anyone could be so bold, so uncaring. What if somebody called the cops? What if Nick did, claiming assault? What if he had friends here to defend him? The what-ifs were rambling through me before Erica interrupted them.

"I'm Erica," she said, extending her other hand.

"I know," I said, staring at the outstretched hand, wondering what it meant.

Then the hand retreated, taking up space on Erica’s hip, which cocked out to one side. Against my better judgment, my eyes moved up from the hand, the hips, lingering on... I blinked and focused on Erica’s face. What was I doing? Why—? The thought trailed off when I realized how I’d just answered this woman who’d come to my rescue.

“Oh,” I said, scrambling to my feet. “I’m sorry. You— I— I’m Amanda. Mandy. I heard Nick say your name before you, well, before—”

“Before I reminded him of who I am and that he shouldn’t fuck with women like that?”

I nodded.

“Shall we try this again?”

I nodded, feeling stupid that I couldn’t say anything smart right now.

Erica proffered her hand once more. “I’m Erica.”

I glanced at the hand, making sure to snap my eyes back to Erica’s face. I took the hand, which was cool and soft. I’d never shook a woman’s hand before, only Dad’s business associates and other random adults from school and church and whatever. Mom had taught me to be demure, to lay my fingers over the man’s, to let him do the shaking. I laid my fingers over Erica’s, a warmth racing up my arm, and then Erica adjusted her grip to somewhere between a handshake and holding hands. It wasn’t solid or firm like a man’s, but soft and confident.

Erica squinted at me and tilted her head just a bit.

“Sorry,” I blurted out. “I’m Mandy.”

Erica smiled. “I need another drink,” she said. “And you look like you could use another.”

“I guess,” I said. Then our hands dropped, but stayed together. Fingers interlaced with

mine. Erica's fingers. Palm to palm. A jolt ran up from those fingers, spreading warmth across my chest and making my knees wobble. I pulled my hand back in an instant, and just as quickly wished I hadn't. I stared at Erica's feet. High-top Nikes so white they looked brand new and bleached. Those Nikes turned, carrying the attached legs and body to face closer to me. I didn't want to look up, to see what sort of hurt or offense lay in Erica's eyes. This woman had just saved me from the asshole still writhing on the ground, and this was how I showed her gratitude. I could hear Mom's voice in my head, *Look up, Amanda. Make eye contact. Speak, for God's sake.* But Mom wasn't here right now.

"Sorry," I said to the shoes, and then I darted for the exit, not giving Erica a chance to make things harder.

Erica

Last Year

August 19, 2017

Same halls. Same statues and campus greens and old-ass buildings on the Grounds. Lots of the same faces from last year. But it all felt different, too. Maybe it was my afro, which was getting a little bigger than I liked, puffed out almost as wide as my shoulders. People were just acting different. Quieter. Too nice. It was almost like that town from *Get Out*, where all the white people were being oh-so-nice until the nefarious shit came to the surface. Freshman still buzzed around the Rotunda taking selfies and getting lost, but the normal welcome week hullabaloo felt more like a celebration of life. People were happy to be back, but there was a gloom hanging over everything, knowing that just one week ago, all that shit went down right here.

A trio of white girls approached, two of them holding onto the straps of their backpacks. Their laughter died six feet from me, and their faces quickly moved from relaxed to apprehensive to overly polite.

“Hi,” the one closest to me said as they passed.

“Hey,” I said.

So weird. I mean, campus seemed to be a friendlier, more tolerant place than most I’d known in my life, but this was a little ridiculous. Like Beaver Cleaver friendly, but with black people. And it just kept happening as I made my way to class.

I saw Professor Abernathy ahead, walking with intense purpose somewhere, probably to a class or a meeting. He saw me, and his grin damn near split his face in half. Creepy.

“Welcome back, Miss—” He trailed off, still smiling and cocking his head a little, waiting for me to finish his sentence.

“—Betancourt,” I said. I couldn’t blame him. I was in his accounting class last year for all of a week before I figured out accounting is boring. So, so boring. The textbook was over 1200 pages of tiny-print boring. His lecture voice was Ben-Stein boring. No wonder accountants made so much money, nobody wanted to do what they do.

“Betancourt, yes!” he said. “How was your summer?”

I shrugged, trying not to show how strange it was that he was talking to me. “Pretty good. Worked. Hung out with the fam. Did a few protests. The usual.”

When I said, ‘protests,’ his face flickered, but he recovered quickly. “Wonderful, wonderful! Taking any interesting classes this semester?”

I shrugged again, “Not really,” I said. What was his deal? Why so interested all of a sudden? No way he really remembered me more than a vague familiarity, one in a sea of a couple hundred faces for a week last year. I remembered him because this was one of my favorite walks on campus, and it always brought me by his office. Not that I ever went in. I continued, “Knocking out some gen eds, mostly.”

“Well, those are important, too. Coming back to accounting?”

“Thanks,” I said, “but no thanks. Not for me. I’m taking macroeconomics to knock that requirement out.”

“Ah! World economics. That’s important, too. Accounting isn’t for everyone.”

I smiled and started to turn, feeling like that was a good stopping point, more than enough conversation with what was essentially a stranger with no influence on my life.

“Well,” he said, stopping me mid-turn. “You have a great semester. And if you ever feel

you need anything, need someone to talk to or anything, my door is open. Most of the faculty have open door policies. And if you're not comfortable talking to me, Drs. Morgan or Johnson are always available."

"Oh," I said, trying to keep the surprise from my voice. This was weird. We had advisors and, as a psych major, the psych faculty for those kinds of things. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

"Of course," he said. "Our faculty is always here for students. All students, no matter their backgrounds." And then he stepped past me without another word or glance. Backgrounds? I would have put any amount of money down betting Drs. Morgan and Johnson were black.

I walked away, his words rattling around in me. I tried to ignore the weird vibe on campus, but it was tough. I was used to white faces averting their gazes when they looked too long, but now they were acting like I was funding their scholarships. A forced, overenthusiastic smile, a quick glance to the floor, conversations instantly dying in my presence, and some people almost running into walls trying to give me a wide berth. A pair of black guys gave me dap, which wasn't unusual. Some white girl staring at her phone nearly bumped into my shoulder. Also not new.

A guy in cargo shorts and a MAGA hat sneered at me. That wasn't new, but it was weird to see here on campus. Was it going to be like this all semester? All year?

Whatever. I needed to get to my next class in Gilmer Hall. First I needed to pee. Had since my last class ended, but my bladder was only whispering then, so I thought I could wait. The restrooms in Gilmer Hall were SO much better than Monroe. Cleaner. Newer. Felt like they were made for adults instead of kindergarteners. But after my little exchange with

Professor Abernathy, my bladder was a raging inferno trying to scorch its way through my pelvic wall.

I yanked open the door to Gilmer Hall and didn't even look back as I walked in; if anyone was behind me, they would have to get the door themselves. I refused to make eye contact with anyone for fear of being sidetracked, and made the straightest line I could for the first-floor restroom.

I took up the first open stall. I normally go for the stall farthest from the door. Seemed like the least used, thereby cleanest. Not today. Today, there was only one available. I slammed the stall door, locked it, and threw my backpack on the hook with one hand while already undoing my belt with the other. In the blink of an eye, I was settled on the ice-cold toilet, awash in blessed relief.

"Um," came a slightly familiar voice from the next stall.

A chunky, strappy sandal was visible under the stall wall. The chunky sole looked like it was wrapped in thin rope. The straps were wide, yellow suede. Khaki pants were scrunched down over the top of them. I decided to wait and see if Um had anything important to say, or if I could recognize the voice if she said more than one syllable.

Instead, the bare toes poking out of the sandal squirmed a bit. Nails tapped on a cell phone. After a while, I finished peeing.

She sighed, then spoke again, "Um, do you—"

Oh my God, this was the girl from the party. I think it was the "um" that gave it away. It was loud at the block party, and our exchange was brief, but the combination of that voice and that ridiculous shyness immediately made me think of her. Whatever her name was. Sexy little blonde thing that Nick was fucking with. We didn't talk long. Hell, she didn't talk much

at all, but I'm pretty sure it was her.

"Blonde party girl?" I said.

"What?"

"The block party. That dumbass Nick was trying to get up on you. That was you, right?"

Silence.

"I'm Erica," I said. "The girl who planted my knee in his nuts."

"Oh," she said with that trademark nervousness. Definitely her. "Hi."

I was scrambling for her name. Something with an M or N. It was so loud, and I'd had a few shots before I met her. Fuck it. Best to just ask. "What was your name again?"

She paused, and I heard a sigh. "Mandy."

"Right. Mandy. Nice shoes." I wasn't sure if I made this better or worse for her, she was so skittish. Reminded me of a cat we had at home when I was a kid. Ran and hid under the bed whenever we had company. I said, "You need something?"

"Um," she said. "Toilet paper?"

A laugh escaped my lips before I could stop it.

"Sorry," she said.

"You have nothing to apologize for. But why did it take you so long just to ask for TP?"

The toes were squirming again. "I don't know."

This girl was somehow both infuriating and adorable at the same time. Over there, pants around her ankles, out of TP, and too shy to just ask for the most basic help from a stranger.

"Okay, I'll make you a deal. And don't say um."

A pause before she said, "okay."

I didn't know what it was about this girl. She was so unlike anyone I'd ever dated. Or just

hooked up with. Those toes were fidgeting with nerves, but I remembered her face from the block party. Girl knew how to put on makeup without going overboard, those ice-blue eyes popping out of blue and purple eye shadow. The way her hair cascaded around her face and shoulders. The barest glimpse of her bellybutton between the sequined top and the low-rise jeans. Made me thirsty. Which I realized was probably weird to think about while we were both sitting on toilets. I said, "I'll pass you some TP, but you have to go on a date with me."

The toes froze again. She didn't say anything. I opened the TP dispenser and freed the spare roll. I was giving her the TP either way, really. Still she didn't say anything. Did I read it wrong? I thought I was being flirty and funny, and I was pretty sure she was staring at me a little last weekend. She did jerk away from me before bolting for the door, though, but I thought that was just her anxiety talking. But maybe I was totally off base.

"Erica," she finally whispered, "right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"I'll go on a date with you," she said, her voice trailing off until it was nearly unintelligible.

I reached up and snagged a pen from my backpack and wrote 'Erica 470-555-3825' with a couple hearts. I passed the roll under the stall wall, and she snatched it up.

"Thanks," she said.

"Don't expect me to chase you down," I said. "But I expect a call."

"Okay," she said. But she didn't move or make a squeak for several seconds. "Thanks," she finally said. And she did call me, obviously. Took a few days, though.

Mandy

August 11, 2018

Mandy:

Hey

It's Mandy

I watch the screen intently, taking deep breaths as DELIVERED changes to READ, and then the bubbling ellipses waves.

Tony:

Mandy?

Mandy:

Mandy Stevenson

Tony:

Oh

Hey

Sup

Mandy:

You still leaving tonight

Tony:

Change ur mind? 🙄

Jesus, not a winky face. Another deep breath. More of a sigh. My clothes are half-strewn, half packed. That's what I get for deciding to run away in the middle of the night. With a boy I barely know. Knew.

Mandy:

Yeah

Tony:

Cool. Leaving in 30. What's your address

My stomach turns in knots at the idea of giving him my address. Maybe it's that stupid winky face. More likely it's Mom's voice in my head, *I know you're going to start dating*, she told me before they took me to college for the first time. *Don't give boys your address. I know it's chivalrous to pick up the lady for a date, but just meet them there. It's a different time, you know. Can't be too safe.* She never had that concern when I was in high school. Boys picked me up for dates or prom, but then again, she and Dad were here whenever that happened. They're both asleep now, unaware of my frantic packing or texting.

Mandy:

I'll come to you

The least I can do

Tony:

You sure? It's no trouble.

Mandy:

I'm sure

What's your address

The Uber is a Prius, thankfully. The last thing I wanted was some noisy SUV rumbling up to the house, waking Mom and Dad and half the neighborhood. The hybrid is practically silent, but the driver isn't.

"Good evening," he says, so loud and boisterous, I cringe. Jeffrey, the app said. He's so

tall, but lanky. Way more beard than in his picture. It doesn't look good on him. All scraggly and growing in clumps on his neck. Must be trying to make up for his bald head. Jeffrey looks at my two huge rolling bags, both overstuffed with unfolded clothes and shoes and whatnot. "You bring enough stuff?"

"Can you help?" I ask, failing to lift one of them.

"Oh," he says, opening the back of the Prius and extending a hand for the bag. "Sorry."

Even rolling them to him makes me grunt.

He tosses the first bag in the back with his own grunt. The Prius rocks as it thumps in. He looks up at the house, then back to me. "You running away?"

I roll the other bag to him and hop into the back seat before he even has a chance to toss it on top of my other bag.

"You okay?" the driver asks as he slides into the driver's seat.

"Sorry," I say. "I'm tired and in a hurry."

Jeffrey rattles off Tony's address as a question. I double-check the text. "Yeah."

"Why such a hurry?" he asks as he pulls away from my parents' house.

Why can't Uber drivers just be silent? I sigh. "Catching a ride back to college."

"Oh yeah?" Jeffrey is suddenly bright. "What school?"

Twelve minutes to Tony's house. Jesus. Maybe I should have let him to pick me up.

"UVA," I say.

Jeffrey nods. "My nephew goes to Georgetown. Good school."

I nod. Not that he can see it. At a stop sign, looking both ways. I take the momentary silence to pop AirPods into my ears and stare out the side window. After a few moments, I hear him say something, but can't make out what. He'll get the hint.

“You made it,” Tony says, closing the back door to his Ford after throwing a bag in.

“Yeah,” I say as my Uber driver grunts one of my bags out of his Prius. “I hope I didn’t delay you.”

Tony shrugs. “The festivities in Charlottesville start tomorrow morning. I’ll still get there in plenty of time.”

I roll my first bag over to his car. “Won’t it be like, two in the morning when we get there?”

“Something like that,” Tony says, taking the bag from me. “But I’ll be too pumped up to sleep anyway.”

Sounds like Erica. I grab my second bag from the Uber driver, who gives me a little wave and climbs back into his hybrid. I roll my second bag over to Tony, who is manhandling the first into his trunk with significantly more ease than Uber. “I don’t know if I’ll stay awake on the ride down.”

“All good,” Tony says, moving things around in the trunk. He eyeballs my second bag, and moves things around some more. “I’ll just listen to a podcast while you sleep.”

“A podcast would put me right out,” I say. “I usually listen to one each night for just that reason.”

“Not me,” Tony says, motioning for me to bring the second bag, and I roll it over. He closes the trunk after packing both my bags in. “They keep my brain going, which keeps me awake. I need white noise or ASMR to sleep.”

I nod. I don’t know what else to say.

“You ready to go?” he asks.

I nod again, still looking at the trunk.

“You okay?” he asks, putting a hand on my shoulder.

I’m not. I’m running away from home. “I’m fine,” I say with a fake half-smile. “Just tired.”

We climb into the Ford, and before he can ask or say anything else, I shove my AirPods in. Three and a half hours. I don’t think I can bring myself to talk to this new, dudebro version of Tony for 30 minutes, let alone three and a half hours. I’ll be in C’ville soon. With Erica. That’s all that matters. The alternative is never seeing her again. “Life is full of choices,” Dad said. “There are always choices.” Yeah. Here’s my choice. I choose Erica. I choose to live my life how I want. Not by Dad’s script. I don’t care what the neighbors think. Or what he thinks. I lean my head against the passenger window and close my eyes, letting Selena Gomez drown out the world.

Erica

August 11, 2018

“I threw my empty water bottle,” I say to Robert and the cop, Victoria.

The cop’s face goes all stony, just like I’d hoped. But Robert’s eyes go wide, begging those words back into my mouth. Shit.

“It was so stupid,” I say. Hoping it will calm the cop for Robert’s sake. “I was mad at myself for not preparing. My sister is going to be so pissed when she finds out. Then I tried to scream, to chant with everybody else, and then—” I’ve said more than I wanted, like my mouth forgot to turn off. I don’t talk about this shit with strangers. I don’t know why I started rambling.

“And then?” Robert asks.

“I woke up here?” I say, looking around. Robert needs to feel useful, so I throw out, “Where are we?”

“Same park with the statue,” Robert says. “They hauled you over here under this tree.”

“Oh,” I say, looking Robert straight in the eyes and giving his hand a good squeeze. “I’m sorry.”

He smiles, and I’ll be damned, but there are a couple tears in his eyes as he asks, “You okay?”

I nod, turn to the EMTs, and ask, “Can I go now?”

“You look a lot better,” the EMT says, sweating through her uniform. She pulls a thermometer out of her bag while saying, “Let’s just check.”

Then the thermometer is in my mouth.

“They need to make sure your core body temp is normal,” Robert says. “It was only a touch elevated, or else they would have taken you to the ER.”

I nod to Robert. He needs to feel useful, so a nod goes a long way. And admittedly, his concern is nice.

The EMT takes the thermometer out, checks it, and nods. “Okay. I think you’re good. But you shouldn’t stay out in this heat. Drink more water. Maybe get something to eat. Do you have a cool place to stay tonight?”

“Yes,” Robert answers for me. I swallow my anger, letting him have this one. Just this once. He’s more scared than I am. “We’re staying with a couple friends in their rented house. They have central air.”

“Good,” the EMT says, but not to Robert. She’s looking squarely at me. “Do you feel normal? Any headache or nausea?”

“I’m good,” I say.

“Good,” the EMT says, and then she removes the IV, sliding it out painlessly, and covers the hole with a cotton ball and bandage. Then she and Robert help me to my feet. They both keep holding on after I’m vertical, looking at me, waiting for me to fall back down or something.

“I’m good,” I say, making sure to keep any frustration out of my voice. They slowly let go, and then Robert and I are walking back toward campus.

“We should get an Uber back to my car,” he says.

“Probably a good idea,” I say. I do feel better, but not like walking all the way back to campus. I pull my phone out of my pocket, only to find the screen completely spider-webbed. I try the buttons on the sides, but nothing happens. “Shit.”

“What?”

“I busted my phone.”

“Must have been when you fell. Damn.”

“You’ll have to get the Uber this time. And then you’ll have to call my Momma, let her know I’ll be out of touch for a minute.”

Robert nods, pulling up the Uber app and getting us a ride. Then he asks, “how you feel?”

“Better. Thanks.”

I did feel good. Even if today ended weird, it all felt good. Good to scream in their faces. To throw things. I was ready to get arrested, to tell the press how I feel as they haul me away in handcuffs. But looking up at Robert, the relief plain on his face, my resolve ebbs. So different, so opposite from me at my first protest.

We resumed our chants, this time an echo of Eric Garner’s last words, *I can’t breathe*. It was creepy coming from so many screaming, marching mouths. I watched that video half a dozen times, each time more disgusted and shocked than the last. Eric was a big guy, sure, but he wasn’t fighting them. He was talking to them, surrendering, and then just trying to survive. He died in a chokehold on a New York City sidewalk because he was selling allegedly illegal cigarettes. His murderer still wore a badge. The hurt of Eric Garner’s recent murder was still fresh on so many faces.

“I can’t breathe!” we all chanted. Three staccato words, a beat, and then we all repeated. Some people were clapping their hands in time to the rhythm. Jewel and many others were stabbing their signs in the air in percussive punctuation.

“Get your hands off me!” a woman yelled from some ways behind. The marching

stopped around us. I couldn't see what was going on, but Jewel was better than a foot taller than me, and she saw.

"I gave you an order," a gruff man's voice said. Phones came out, all pointed in the direction of those voices. I tried to get a look, ducking and weaving my head to get a view, but it was no good. I stepped in front of Jewel to move to a better location, when a vice-like grip took hold of my elbow. Jewel. She gave me a look. A mix of *Oh, no you don't* and *I feel you, baby girl*. I'd never seen that mix. I didn't understand. She looked back at whatever was going on. I could see her struggle. Probably wanted to help. To do something. She looked back down at me and seemed disappointed.

"We have to go, Erica." She started walking away from the commotion, pulling me by my elbow.

I yanked my elbow out of her grip and stood my ground. "Hold up, you're the one always telling me to fight, to stand up and be heard."

Jewel started, "I did, but—"

"You say," I kept going, "when it's hardest is exactly when you have to stand your ground. Defend the innocent. Be a voice for the voiceless."

She crossed her arms and smirked. I knew that look, it said, *You already lost this argument, but I'm gonna let you finish*. I hated it. But it only appeared for a moment before she looked back at whatever was happening behind me, that commotion, and grabbed my elbow again.

"Why are we running away?" I said, squirming out of her grip again.

"Because I promised Momma you'd be home for dinner tomorrow," Jewel said.

"Seriously?"

“Seriously,” Jewel said. “You want to go to college and make a difference? Don’t get arrested. It’s one thing for me to go pick a fight and spend a night in jail. I make bail and threaten to sue the department for harassment. I go back to work. You get arrested, you might be throwing away your whole future. There’s a time and a place to fight, this isn’t either for you. Not yet.”

I started, “But I—”

“Your heart’s in the right place, Erica,” Jewel cut me off. “But now’s not the time. Once you’re in college, get it, girl, but not yet.”

“What’s your mom’s number?” Robert asks.

I rattle off the number without thinking as we wait at the corner of the park, away from the statue, while “No justice, no peace!” bounces off the surrounding buildings.

“It says, ‘Undeliverable,’” Robert says.

“It,” I ask, confused. “What?”

He shows me his screen. A text to “Erica’s Mom” that says “Hey, this is Robert, Erica’s friend. She busted her phone, but she’s fine.” And yeah. Of course it’s undeliverable.

“That’s her landline,” I say. “Probably the only phone number I know other than mine since I had to memorize it in kindergarten.”

“She still has a landline? Why?”

“Probably for moments just like this,” I say, holding out my hand for the phone. “If you would?”

He hands me his phone and I call her.

“Hello?” Momma says after the second ring, her greeting as much accusation as etiquette.

“Who is this?”

“It’s me, Momma.”

“Erica? Baby, what’s this number?”

“It’s Robert’s phone. I busted mine, and I want you to know I’m okay and give you his number so you can get a hold of me.”

“Oh,” she says, a single syllable extended too long, telling me just how much she’s processing. “How did you bust your phone? I’m not made of money.”

I knew she was going to ask. I really hoped she wouldn’t, and I’m just not feeling up to lying about it. “I fell.”

“Fell? Fell how? Did somebody hit you? They spray you? What happened, Erica?”

I roll my eyes. “Heat exhaustion.”

“Baby, I told you to take plenty of water. You know better than that! What happened? Did you hit your head? Anything bleeding or broken? Nausea? Headache? Are you still dizzy?”

I take a deep breath and relay the whole story: how much water I drank, Robert being the friend he is and doing his best to keep me hydrated, passing out and waking up with an IV in my arm.

“And you’re sure it wasn’t heat stroke?” Momma asks, the nurse voice creeping into her mom voice. “No vomiting? What was your core temp?”

“I don’t think it was a heat stroke.”

“You don’t think?”

Robert is shaking his head.

“No, Momma,” I say. “Robert says it wasn’t heat stroke.”

“Robert?” Momma says. “What the hell does Robert know?”

“He’s pre-med.”

“Pre-med? Pre? Those baby doctors fresh out of med school don’t know a hematoma from a hole in the ground. What is pre-med going to know?”

“They gave me fluids, Momma, the EMTs. They checked me out. Said I was fine.”

Momma sighs. “Okay,” she says. “I’ll have to trust that, I suppose. What are you doing now?”

“We’re waiting for an Uber to take us back to Robert’s car. Then we’re going to get some food and head back to our friend’s house.”

“Okay,” Momma says. “Baby, you drink plenty of water and keep cool. Turn up that air conditioning full blast, you hear me?”

“Yes, Momma,” I say, giving Robert an *OMG, she’s never going to stop lecturing me* look.

He smiles and shakes his head a little, but I have a feeling if he could hear Momma’s rant, he’d just be agreeing with her. Always trying to take care of me whether I want him to or not.

“Good,” Momma says. “Good. How did it go?”

“Momma, I’m on Robert’s cell phone,” I say. “He needs to call his parents, too.”

He looks at me in surprise, his eyebrows shooting up. Yeah, I made that up, but it’s probably true. Like he’s reading my mind, he shrugs his shoulders and nods.

“Okay,” Momma says. “Give me his number.”

Robert and I relay the number to her, and she writes it down, then makes me stay on the phone while she slowly saves the number in her cell phone, texting to make sure she has it right, and making sure Robert saves her number in his phone, too. I wonder if all moms are this thorough, or if it’s the nurse in her.

We finally hang up, and I hand Robert his phone.

“Probably should text my parents,” he says.

“Probably.”

“I can’t believe you broke your phone. I never understand why girls put phones in their back pockets,” Robert says. “That’s where you sit. Or fall.”

I give him my best attempt at Momma’s withering look. “Boy,” I say. “Unless you have Mandy’s number in your phone, I don’t want to hear it.”

“You don’t know your girlfriend’s number?”

“How many numbers do you have memorized?”

His face twists up like he ate a fermented lemon. “Uh,” he mumbled. “Mine. My parents. I think. Yeah, okay.”

“Fuck.”

“So,” he says. “What now?”

“I need a shower,” I say. My voice is barely a creaking whisper.

“You do smell.”

“Oh, he’s a funny man now.”

“I’ve been known to pull a chuckle from you,” he says with a smirk. “Uber is almost here.”

“Good,” I say. I look back to the statue as a little Nissan pulls up to get us. Someone has stepped up into the spot I abandoned, carrying on the chant in the face of Mustache. Nobody is touching. Nobody has a megaphone. No tear gas. Reporters are everywhere. My people are loud, but nobody is stepping out of line. Was I the only one willing to start a riot tonight? Maybe it’s the reporters. Maybe it’s the end of a long day, an extra march nobody planned.

Maybe it's because we all still know the real circus is tomorrow. Every eye in the country will be looking at Charlottesville on the anniversary of Heather Heyer's death, of those Nazis marching openly for the first time in God knows. About a year since President Bonespurs said there were "very fine people on both sides." Both sides my ass.

"Erica?" Robert says.

I probably look drunk or something. I stand up straighter. I can't really believe I'm leaving before it's over. I've never done that before. I croak, "Yeah, let's go."

Mandy

August 12, 2018

“Your friend still isn’t answering?” Tony asks. Despite my intentions to silently listen to music and text, my frustration boiled over in to a big sigh after an hour in the car. Tony asked, I took my AirPods out, and now we’re having a conversation I never wanted.

“Still unread?” he follows up.

“Yeah,” I say, shaking my head and staring at my phone.

“You’re welcome to stay with us.”

“Who is ‘us’?”

“We met online, and then we all met in person last year. I’m going to Derek’s house. He lives here in Charlottesville. Derek, me, Mike, Pete, Frank, and Dave. We all stayed here last year, too.”

“I didn’t know you were so political,” I say.

“Jesus didn’t just sit around. He went out there, stuck out his neck. Be the change you want to see in the world, you know?”

So there’s still a flicker of the Tony I knew in grade school. Maybe his interests have changed, but he’s still got some passion. Not as bad as I suspected. “I know. I definitely know. My—” I almost say ‘girlfriend,’ but pull back just in time, “—friend has been protesting since she was old enough to carry a sign and sneak out of the house.”

“First amendment,” Tony says. “Gotta exercise those rights so nobody takes them away.”

“Derek, you—?” I say, leaving the door open for him to list them again.

“Yeah,” he says. “And Mike, Frank, Pete, and Dave.”

“That’s a lot of dudes.”

He chuckles. “Right. Derek’s wife will be there. I think Dave and Mike’s wives, too. Maybe Pete’s girlfriend. You won’t be the only lady.”

“No worries,” I say, but I am a little worried now. He definitely said, ‘lady’ like it’s not the word he was going to use. Weird that he only listed his guy friends until I asked, but I guess that’s dudes. Every time Mom and Dad have any sort of party or family gathering at the house, inevitably the men and women split up at some point. It’s no wonder the ‘drawing room’ in big, old houses was named for the place for women to ‘draw away’ while men lit cigars and talked politics. Some bullshit never seems to change.

I check my phone again. More texts from Dad, but nothing from Erica.

“Still nothing?” he asks, pulling off the highway.

“No,” I say. “Are you sure it’ll be okay staying with your friends? Do you need to call and ask?”

“I guarantee it’ll be cool,” he says. “The more, the merrier.”

After 10 minutes of silence, he unpauses his podcast. Some guy is droning on about Dungeons and Dragons, so I pop my AirPods back in and keep staring at my phone. At some point, I drift off.

I wake when Tony hits a pothole in on a dark, residential street.

“Sorry,” Tony says.

I pop the AirPods out and try to figure out where we are.

“Almost there, actually,” he says and points to a house a few doors up. “Good timing. It’s right there.”

The house is cute enough. What Dad would call a bungalow. Not big, but not tiny. Short gravel drive leading to a garage in the back. Floodlights pouring over a line of pickup trucks almost to the curb. A piss-yellow porch light throwing shadows of a dozen chairs, assorted tables, ceiling fans at rest, and a Confederate flag undulating in the breeze. I stare at it, but Mom's voice drifts through me, *Don't assume the worst until you get to know people. You'll drive yourself crazy if you assume the worst.* Right. I'm definitely back in the south, even if it's only a few hours from home. Some people fly that flag and don't even realize how hateful it is. I consciously relax my shoulders and look.

Tony pulls up to the curb in front of the house, turns off the car, and digs out his phone. He's texting someone. "They have a kid," he says to my unasked question. "Don't want to ring the doorbell and wake her." A message pops up and he looks up to the house. On cue, a tall, balding man opens the front door. He scratches his chest through a plain, white t-shirt. Better than scratching through his boxer shorts. "That's Derek," Tony says. "Let's go say hi and then find a bed."

"Two beds," I say, whipping my head back to him.

"Your loss," he says, shrugging out of the seatbelt.

Still nothing from Erica. Nothing to do but sleep here, I guess.

The Gamer

August 12, 2018

“Left, left!” DaVonte barks into his headset, thumbs whirling on the analog sticks of his Xbox controller.

“On it,” Taylor says, her voice loud in DaVonte’s ear.

“No, your other left!”

Too late. Digital blood and brains shoot out of the Army Ranger Taylor is controlling, the hi-res body slumping to the ground.

“Shit,” Taylor says, “why can’t you use 3 o’clock or 9 o’clock?”

“Don’t blame me,” DaVonte says, moving his guy in an S-pattern toward the burned-out church, the home of the sniper that just took out Taylor. “Not my fault your momma didn’t teach you left from right.”

“And your daddy didn’t teach you how to read a clock like my dad did.”

DaVonte suppresses a snarky comeback. First time he had dinner with Taylor’s family was the most *Get Out* situation he’d ever been in. Everyone was really nice. Too nice. Detective Jones—Mr. Jones, he’d insisted being called—was smiling like Taylor had brought home a college scholarship, not a black boyfriend.

“I’m about to get my revenge for you, though. This sniper’s gonna—” DaVonte starts, but then runs straight into a claymore mine.

“Shit,” DaVonte says. “Shoulda been watching that. You got me all distracted.”

“Now who’s playing the blame game?” Taylor says.

“I’ll play all the games I can before the semester starts. I’ve got, like, six classes next

semester.”

“Damn,” Taylor says, “why?”

“Added a second major,” DaVonte says. “We gonna play another match?”

“A second major? Dude, you’re crazy to even go back to that town, Charlottes-
whatever. Now you’re going to stay there even longer?”

“Charlottesville. Lots of overlap between bio and chem. Overloading to make sure I
get out in four. I’m good.”

“Whatever, babe,” Taylor says. “Just keep your head down.”

“Why? Because I’m black?”

“Hell, yes, because you’re black.”

“You know,” DaVonte says, “they didn’t run over a black guy. They ran down a white
girl. Like you. Maybe you need to keep your head down.”

Taylor is silent on the headset for several long seconds. DaVonte’s avatar stands on
the screen, overburdened with all of his hard-earned equipment. The avatar is bouncing on
his toes to the waiting room music—some aggressive techno—as though he isn’t wearing an
unrealistic amount of gear.

“You still there?” DaVonte asks. He knows she is. The game would have notified him
if she’d logged off. Now he’s starting to feel bad. He wasn’t trying to make her mad.

“Yeah. I’m here,” she finally says.

“You okay?”

“I just worry about you,” Taylor says. “I know it’s been your whole life, but it’s new
to me.”

DaVonte sighs. They’d had this conversation too many times. “I appreciate the

concern. I got this.”

More silence answers. He could feel an argument coming. Again. He glances at his clock.

“Don’t you need to leave for work?” DaVonte asks.

“Oh, shit,” Taylor says. “I do. Are you off tonight?”

“Yep. Last night off before I head back to school in a couple weeks. Picking up shifts left and right.”

“Okay. Enjoy it. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

A light click sounds through the headset, followed by a notification in the corner of his screen, *Abracadabra96 has signed off*. DaVonte backs out of the group waiting room and navigates to a public room. He isn’t a fan of pick-up games with strangers, but what else is he going to do today?

Waiting...

Waiting...

Gathering party...

Negotiating...

Ready!

The waiting room screen fades out. Several clicks echoes through the headset as a list of the party’s gamertags fills the next screen, DaVonte’s at the top.

20Wakanda4EVER18

steveRoxx!

GuerillaGorilla90

xXJ0hnSn0wXx

PUlyferl33t

MonKKKeyKKKiller02

DaVonte stares at the last one and debates just logging off. *How long before this dude gets banned?* His thumb hovers over the red “B” button. It would be that easy. One press, a confirmation, and he could back out of the group.

“What’s up, guys?” PUlyferl33t says.

“Ready to blow some shit up,” GuerillaGorilla90 says. Another black guy. At least DaVonte isn’t alone.

“Sounds good,” steveRoxx! says.

“I’m down,” DaVonte chimes in.

MonKKKeyKKKiller02 stays silent. Good. That will make the game a lot easier. The screen fades out again. In the digital blackout, blowing wind, rustling papers, and distant gunfire come through the TV speakers.

“Man, I love this map,” PUlyferl33t says, his voice a whisper in DaVonte’s headset.

“This map sucks,” steveRoxx! says.

DaVonte’s avatar fades into existence, crouched in a men’s bathroom of an abandoned Russian subway station. Not a bad map, though not his favorite. He knows his way around. Five other over-muscled male avatars stand around in the digital bathroom, all just as overloaded with gear as his own. No n00bs in this group, at least.

“Where’s everybody from?” GuerillaGorilla90 asks. “I’m up in Texas. Go Longhorns.”

“Vancouver,” steveRoxx! says.

“Pennsylvania,” DaVonte says, “though I go to UVA. Be back there soon.”

“Isn’t that in Charlottesville?” GuerillaGorilla90 asks.

“Yeah.”

“Fuck, man,” GuerillaGorilla90 says. “That was some shit last year.”

“I wasn’t there. Home for the summer, but yeah,” DaVonte says.

“Glad you weren’t there. Probably wasn’t safe for someone like you,” PUPlyfer133t says. DaVonte decides to ignore it. The guy probably means well. Still not even a peep from MonKKKeyKKKiller02.

Match beginning in 3...

“All right,” PUPlyfer133t says.

2...

“Here we go,” DaVonte says.

“Hell yeah,” steveRoxx! says.

1...

“Let’s do it,” GuerillaGorilla90 says.

An airhorn sounds, and the doors to the bathroom swing open. DaVonte and the rest of his party sprint out. DaVonte runs left, heading for a series of interconnected rooms that make for great cover and melee combat.

“Wakanda and PUP went left,” GuerillaGorilla90 says. “I’m going right. Who’s with me?”

“I’m with you,” steveRoxx! says. “Anybody working the middle? Killer, where are you?”

“I’m on middle,” MonKKKeyKKKiller02 finally chimes in. His voice is like fine-

grain sandpaper over balsa wood.

“Glad you joined the party, Killer,” PUPlyfer133t says.

DaVonte snags the first kill, and the match only gets better from there. He and PUPlyfer133t work well together, working the left side of the map and racking up kills with melee and shotgun. Occasionally, the enemy team tries to swarm the open middle of the map, so DaVonte snipes one after another while PUP watches his back. Guerilla and steve are holding the enemies off on the right side, though their kill counts aren't as high. MonKKKeyKKKiller02 remains silent and largely ineffectual. Until five minutes have gone by, at least.

“Man, this game sucks,” MonKKKeyKKKiller02 says.

“He speaks! You better at talking than shooting, Killer?” PUPlyfer133t says.

“I shoot just fine. You homeboys want to go out to the range sometime? I'll show you how I shoot,” MonKKKeyKKKiller02 says, his tone flat. DaVonte's stomach twists.

“On your 2 o'clock, Killer,” steve says.

Instead of shooting, MonKKKeyKKKiller02 just crouches behind cover. “Active Shooter is so much better than this game,” he says.

“Less talking, more shooting, Killer,” GuerillaGorilla90 says.

“Active shooter?” DaVonte asks.

“No, don't ask about—” PUPlyfer133t starts.

“Can't get it on a console or Steam, boys,” MonKKKeyKKKiller02 says. “You can find it on torrent, though. School. Concert. Hospital. Lots of options. You can play as the police or the mass shooter.”

“Fuck, dude!” steveRoxx! says.

“Fuck off, man,” PUPlyfer133t says at the same time.

“So it’s fine to shoot Nazis and zombies and aliens and shit, but not cops or kids? I like the urban jungle map—” MonKKKeyKKKiller02 begins.

“There he is, gentlemen. The guy so racist he had to put KKK in his gamertag twice,” GuerillaGorilla90 says. “Couldn’t just let us play in peace?”

Back and forth they go. Three on one, but MonKKKeyKKKiller02 doesn’t back down. He starts throwing around the “n” word like a part of speech. Gorilla, steve, and PUP call him every horrible name DaVonte has ever heard. DaVonte wants to speak. To step in. A dozen things run through his mind. Things to say. Reporting this guy. Just leaving the match. But why bother? This random guy will keep on harassing people. Probably gets off on riling people up. And what will DaVonte get for his trouble? A headache. A powerful need to punch the next white boy he sees. Not worth it. Instead, he throws the headset on the floor and focuses on the game. Racks up his best kill count ever. All the while, he can hear tinny voices, unintelligible screaming from the headset at his feet.

And then the match is over. DaVonte doesn’t report the racist. He just turns off his Xbox.

He turns on his computer.

Searches a torrent site for “Active Shooter.”

Clicks “Download.”

The Night is Dark and Full of Texts

August 11, 2018

Mandy:

Are you still up

I maybe did a stupid thing

I'm in a car heading to you should be there around 2

I hope you're ok

Maybe asleep

Erica?

Dad found out about you

I left my phone in the bathroom this morning

He saw our texts

He decided I wasn't going back to C'ville

And he's not telling mom

It was a shitshow

I really need to talk to you

Hello?

I left

Jumped in a car with an old friend

Erica?

Where are you staying

What's the address

Hello?

Robert:

Back at Greg's house! Safe and sound!

Mom:

Great 🥰

Dad:

How did it go?

Robert:

Okay. We walked around campus. I joined the chants. Erica had her sign.

Dad:

Anybody give you problems?

Robert:

No.

Mom:

Did Erica behave?

Robert:

She's here safe, too.

Mom:

That doesn't answer my question

Robert:

It was my first protest. How does one behave in those circumstances?

We were surrounded by cops the whole time.

Mom:

You mean police.

What did she do?

Robert:

She yelled at them a few times.

And threw a bottle at them. But that was an accident. Nothing happened.

Mom:

...

Dad:

And what did you do?

Robert:

She passed out right after.

Heat exhaustion.

Mom:

OMG

Dad:

But she's okay now?

Robert:

Yes.

Dad:

Any nausea or headache when she came to?

Did you call 911?

Robert:

One of the cops helped. There were paramedics, too.

Mom:

Police, Robert. Not cops.

Robert:

Sorry, Mom.

Dad:

They gave her fluids? Cooled her? What was her core temp?

Robert:

Yes and yes. Don't know her temp, but they said she was fine after.

Dad:

Kept your cool?

Robert:

Of course.

Mom:

Did she get in trouble for throwing the bottle?

Robert:

No.

I think they didn't know or forgot when she passed out.

I don't really get why she's so angry. Today was kinda fun. Walking around campus with a bunch of people yelling for peace and love.

Mom:

Comparing police to Nazis isn't love or peace.

Or trying to tear down statues.

It was on the news. Did you go to the Lee statue tonight?

Robert:

...

Yes. That's where E threw the bottle. But it was an accident. I swear.

Mom:

That's not the right way to protest.

Dad:

You need to be more careful.

Robert:

She's my friend.

Mom:

She is putting you in the crosshairs of police.

Stay away tomorrow. Go buy your books. I don't think you should go protesting tomorrow.

Robert:

I can't do that.

She's my friend.

Mom:

Then keep her away, too. She needs to stay cool and rest, right?

Robert:

This is important to her. And she's important to me.

Dad:

I respect that.

But we need you to respect that this is a dangerous situation. A woman died last year and she was white. We see boys who look like you on the news dying every day.

Robert:

I know. I am careful.

I have to go out tomorrow with Erica. I promised her.

Mom?

Mom:

Sorry. Talking to your dad.

I don't like it, but I understand.

Be a good friend. A man of your word.

Maybe you can help keep her in line.

Robert:

Thanks.

I will.

Love you guys.

Mom:

I love you!

Dad:

Be safe, son.

When in doubt, just walk away.

Mandy:

So you two know, I'm on my way back to C'ville

Roxy:

Why so late?

Celeste:

OMG. Don't u 2 sleep?

Mandy:

Got a ride with Tony

Celeste:

OoO! Deets. NOW.

Roxy:

WTF?!

Celeste:

Why r u going back so late?

Mandy:

Dad said I couldn't go back to UVA

Celeste:

Fuck. Y?

Roxy:

Oof. Darth Father much? WTF?

Mandy:

Don't hate me

Roxy:

Dude. No hate. We love you.

Celeste:

Y would we h8 u?

Mandy:

For not telling you two sooner

Everything happened so fast

Roxy:

What did yr dad say?

Celeste:

No h8. Promise. ❤️

Mandy:

Dad said I could never tell mom

Never go back to UVA

Transfer to Harford

See a therapist

Celeste:

W8.

does he think theres something wrong w/U?

Roxy:

Fuck him. Sorry, M. I know he's your dad, but fuck all that.

Mandy:

I kinda feel the same way right now

Just threw stuff in a bag and left

Celeste:

do u need anything? U ok?

Roxy:

I kinda dig this new M. Badass M.

Lesbian M is the new black.

Celeste:

OMG, Roxy! wut does that even mean?

Mandy:



Celeste:



Roxy:



Mandy:

Love you two

I just need my friends. Someone to talk to. Erica isn't answering her phone

Roxy:

she ignoring u?

ill bite her



Mandy:

Don't think so

I'm worried

Messages unread

Celeste:

Maybe she's just asleep.

She was protesting all day. Being out in the sun always makes me tired.

Mandy:

Maybe

I hope so

Thanks

Roxy:

By the way.

Erica is super hot.

Like, 🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥. You two are cute.

Celeste:

adorbs

Text us when you get there.

Roxy:

b safe

Dad:

Amanda, where are you?

I know you're angry, but this is not how you deal with it.

This is not how to be a responsible adult.

Why aren't you in my find friends app?

You can't ignore me. This isn't funny. Your mom and sister and brother are going to be so worried in the morning.

Just come home. We can talk about this.

Maybe I was rash. We can talk about UVA.

Come home.

Are you okay?

At least let me know you're safe.

Please.

Text or call or whatever.

I won't be mad. I promise.

Please be safe.

I love you.

Erica

August 12, 2018

“Rule number one,” the lady in red jeans says. I missed her name and don’t want to ask. Don’t want to look stupid. Not sure who I’d ask, anyway. Robert trotted off to get us some water. The dude is obsessed. Red Jeans continues, “Don’t go anywhere alone.”

I know the rules but like hearing them. There is a comfort to them. The structure and repetition. Like Momma pulling a hot comb through my hair every Sunday morning. That shit hurt. I hated it. It wasn’t joyful or fun, but after years of it, it became comforting, a tradition. Sitting in front of Momma, the painful heat and pull familiar, while she hummed hymns. One of those things I didn’t realized I’d miss.

“Alone we are weak,” Red Jeans continues, standing up on the hill of Washington Park. Like a preacher at the pulpit, she was talking into a microphone, the tiny PA amplifying her into a loud, tin-can voice. “Together we stay safe and witness for each other.”

I nod and mmm-hmm with everyone else. Bigger crowd than last night. Well over a hundred people, and still milling in from all around the park.

“We’re here to promote peace,” Red Jeans says. “Love. Diversity. Even if you weren’t here last year, you know what happened. Unite the Right isn’t scheduled to rally today, but that doesn’t mean some of them won’t show up. I want everyone to come back safe this year. Everyone.”

I take it all in. Is this what it felt like last year? Part of me wishes I had been here, maybe could have done something, made a difference, done anything to prevent the escalation. But I’m also glad I wasn’t. Who knows what could have happened to me in that riot? That car. I

look around for Robert, but don't see him. Knowing him, he's probably trying to lecture people on the importance of hydration and sunblock, so I'm not worried yet.

"Rule number two," Red Jeans says, and I get the craziest sense of déjà vu. "If the police are nearby—"

"Now girls." Momma looked at all three of us, one after another. I was focused on my black Mary Janes, brand new from Payless for first grade. They were the first brand-new shoes I could remember. Long before my first Nikes. I loved those shoes. Tried to convince Momma to let me wear them every day of first grade.

"Eyes on me, girls," Momma said with more force. I looked up. "What do you do if a policeman talks to you?"

"Don't look him in the eye," said Jewel, my oldest sister. Sixteen and studying for her driver's license. Technically my half sister, but Momma said we don't do anything in half-measures in the Betancourt house. Even if Jewel wasn't actually a Betancourt. Her last name was Johnson. Jewel continued, "We gotta keep our eyes down and say, 'yes sir' and 'no sir.'"

"That's right," Momma said. "What else?"

"Keep our hands where they can see them," I said. My scalp ached from the hot comb, but I loved being all done up for church. I watched the bounce of beads in my braids reflected in those shiny shoes.

"Erica." Momma's tone was a command. I looked up at her again. "I know you like your new shoes, honey, but this is important."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"One more," Momma said, and then looked at Monique, our middle sister. Four years

older than me, and we shared the same daddy. He was at work, at the state prison, *making sure my babies stay safe from all those hooligans they got locked up*, as he liked to say. I wouldn't learn for years the prison was called Sussex 1. We just called it the state prison. He died there a few years later.

"Don't run," Monique said in answer to Momma's question. So quick, Monique. I was jealous of that. She got the best grades, had the brightest friends. She could have done so much if not for that bullet that entered her brain years later. "Don't go anywhere until the policeman says you can go."

"Rule number three," Red Jeans says. "Stay clear of private property. We have every right to public spaces and land, but not private property. We do not want to give the police any excuse to arrest us. Same goes for littering. Don't do it. Don't give them a reason to arrest us or deny our next permit."

"Like they need an excuse," someone yells from nearer to the front.

"Fuck the police!" someone behind me says.

"Cops and Klan go hand-in-hand!" another voice says from the other end of the park.

Then everyone is talking.

"Okay," Robert says, out of breath and way too close to my ear. I jump damn near out of my sneakers. "I took as many bottles of water as they would let me have."

I grab my chest and give him a half-hearted smile. Those lanky fingers are good for something; he has three bottles of water in each hand, balanced in little pyramids.

"What am I going to do with three bottles?" I ask.

"One now," he says, "and one in each pocket."

“Oh, Bobby,” I say. He hates that nickname, so I only use it when I’m making a point. He gives me the expected grimace.

“You do realize I’m a girl, right? I can barely squeeze two dimes and a nickel into my pockets.”

He looks at my shorts like an inspector, frowns, and then flips to a smile. “Well, good thing I wore cargo shorts today!”

“Oh—” I start to say, but he cuts me off.

“No, no! Now you see them coming in handy, carrying YOUR water, so no making fun of them.”

I roll my eyes, but hold my tongue regarding his shorts. Then I roll my eyes again and say, “Suburbia.”

“Yeah,” he says. “What’s wrong with suburbia?”

“There’s nothing *wrong* with suburbia,” I say, though there is something creepy about the overabundance of Applebee’s and Walmarts, without a local barbershop or market in sight. “I just mean you grew up where neighbors wave at each other. Guys wear cargo shorts and boat shoes. How many women named Karen were on your PTA?”

He shrugs.

“More than two?”

He looks up a little, like he’s remembering. “Yeah,” he says. “I think so.”

“And at the cops,” I say. “Your parents were probably on the PTA with cops.”

“Mom is a judge and Dad is a heart surgeon. They never had time for PTA.”

“I stand corrected, but I think that makes my point for me. Nobody got shot on your block.”

“Nobody got shot on *your* block, either,” Robert says. “You grew up in the suburbs, too. You told me.”

I turn to him fully, ready to pounce. I grew up in the *black* suburbs. Do I start with his white momma or the Lexus he drives?

“I know it wasn’t paradise,” Robert says before I can attack. “I know I’m privileged. We’ve talked about it. A. Lot. But I’m black, too. I get it.”

He doesn’t really get it, I know. It’s why we keep talking about it. He gets it intellectually, but his life growing up black is so different from mine.

“Okay, okay, okay!” Red Jeans says through the PA. The crowd quiets a little, but everyone is still restless. “Let’s save it for the streets. They can’t arrest you for your words, but they don’t need much else.

“Rule number four: If police attempt to stop or detain you—”

“What else?” Momma said.

Three sisters who usually never shut up, but we were silent. Answers ran through my mind, but I didn’t want Monique or Jewel mad at me. We all hated these little lectures. The longer they went, the worse they got. Momma was fully willing to have us run late to anything, even church, than leave a lecture unfinished. Better to let Momma get through it than say something that would make it take longer. If I said anything, Jewel and Monique would take it out on me later. I moved my foot, and something caught my eye. My shoes were so shiny, I could look at each of my sisters without them knowing. A little curved, black-and-white mirror. I smiled.

“How do you talk to the police?” Momma said.

“You don’t,” Monique said. Oh, shit, the lecture just got longer.

“Not quite,” Momma said. “Erica, will you help your sister out?”

I nodded, a little happy she called on me, but more delighted by the smell of Pink lotion blossoming around my head. “Only speak when spoken to. Only answer their questions. Don’t say nothing more.”

“Don’t you mean, ‘anything more?’” Jewel said, whipping around to glare at me. She wasn’t mad about my grammar. But Momma called on me. Not my fault. You don’t just not answer when Momma calls on you.

“Don’t say anything more,” Erica said, returning the glare and resisting the urge to stick my tongue out.

“That’s right,” Momma said. “And Jewel, what do you do if the police try to take you anywhere?”

“Go limp and yell for you,” Jewel said.

Momma knelt down close to all three of us. “You tell them they can’t take you anywhere without talking to me. That’s the only time you talk back. Don’t scream. Don’t curse. Don’t hit or try to run. Just go limp and—”

“—say nothing,” Red Jeans says. “Remember your Miranda rights. Remain silent.”

“Y’all, Erica Betancourt is here,” Robert says with a goofy grin on his face. “No force on this earth will keep her silent.”

“Real funny,” I say, suppressing my own laugh.

“I know, right? I should do stand-up.”

“Call it Robert McNealy: Punchlines and Crickets.”

“That’s cold.”

“Gotta keep you from making a fool of yourself,” I say and bump my shoulder against his.

Robert smiles down at me, then stares at his phone for a minute before he says, “Do you think this will be like last year?”

“I hope not,” I say.

“Instagram is pretty quiet,” he says.

“None of them showed last night,” I say. “The city denied all those Nazi fucks their event permits this weekend.”

“They can’t protest without a truckload of press and police anyway.” Robert rolls his eyes.

“It’s the anniversary. You know there’s going to be a ton of press and police.”

Robert makes scare quotes with his fingers. “Just in case.”

“Fuck that,” I say.

Robert just nods, still scrolling through his phone.

“Were you able to get a hold of Mandy?” I ask.

“Nope,” he says. “Is she on Facebook?”

“No. Are you?”

“Yeah,” Robert says, looking at me like my hair has fallen out.

“My momma is on Facebook. No way I’m getting on there.”

“Whatever,” he says, returning his attention to his phone. “So no, she hasn’t messaged me either. Or emailed. Or tweeted. Or whatever. Sorry.”

“You suck.”

“I didn’t break your phone.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Red Jeans says, even louder than before. “I know we’re all excited and nervous, but this is important. I want every one of you back here this afternoon, not in jail or in the ground.”

Robert sighs, but turns to the top of the hill.

“Let’s talk about what not to wear today,” Red Jeans says.

“Jewel,” Momma said. “I know your friends are wearing booty shorts and hoodies, but I will ground your little ass quick if I see you in those again.”

“But, Momma—” Jewel said with a huff.

“Don’t ‘but Momma’ me. Those shorts send the wrong message. You want to have sex? That’s a whole other conversation, but right now I’m talking about keeping you safe. Those boys are walking hormones and you don’t need that.”

Boys were nasty. I crossed my arms and scrunched up my nose. I knew I was putting on a show, but none of that sounded right and I wanted Momma to know she didn’t need to worry about me in booty shorts. I didn’t understand what a hormone was, but it sounded like a disease.

“I know the school is selling hoodies for the basketball team,” Momma said. “I’ve called the school, and they’re going to make some t-shirts, too.”

“Tammy wears hoodies every day,” Monique chimed in with way too much sass. Momma’s backhand flinched, but didn’t fly.

“Honey, is Tammy white?” Momma said.

Monique nodded, her beaded braids tapping, but she didn’t say a word. She saw that hand

flinch, too.

“It isn’t fair, but the police don’t see you like they see white girls. To them, wearing a hoodie is telling them you’re out looking for trouble.”

“But I don’t make trouble,” Monique said.

“Me neither,” I said.

“I know, babies,” Momma said. “I know.” She looked up at Jewel, waiting for her third daughter to echo the first two.

“What?” Jewel said.

“Little girl, you need to learn to read the room,” Momma said.

Jewel looked confused for a few seconds, her eyes darting between Momma, Monique, and me. Then she rolled her eyes and put her arm around Monique, “Okay, okay. I won’t make trouble.”

Momma gave her that *are you lying to me right now?* look.

“What?” Jewel said. “I finish trouble when it comes my way. I don’t start it.”

“I know it isn’t fair,” Red Jeans says, “but please leave your hoodies in your cars. If you don’t have a place to store them, talk to people, find someone who drove and will keep your items safe.”

“It’s like she only just heard about hoodies yesterday,” Robert says. “I think I was sixteen the first time my dad told me never to wear one when we visited my auntie and cousins. I had this new *Fullmetal Alchemist* hoodie that I was wearing everywhere.”

A little laugh escapes my nose, shaking the braids that run halfway down my back. A few bounce around and across my chest. I finger one, and bring it up to my face. Pink lotion

smell, just like Momma. She sends me a new bottle every couple weeks. I smile in spite of myself. "I was six," I say. "And it was everywhere. My sister Jewel brought a new hoodie home. She was so proud of it, bought it with money from her first job. Momma told her to take it back, get her money back. Jewel was pissed. And then Jewel argued with Momma. Shit. She had this bright red Nike hoodie, the little white swoosh on the chest. It was really simple, but nice. And she was ready to defend that thing all day."

"Your mom is harsh," Robert says.

"When she needs to be, sure," I say. "Anyway, they got into a yelling match. Momma didn't care where the hoodie came from, who paid for it, what was on it, nothing. *It's a hoodie. You're black. The two don't mix. End of discussion*, she said. It was not the end of the discussion. They argued for two hours before Momma grabbed the hoodie, threw it outside, and then tossed some bleach on it."

"Oh, shit," Robert says.

"Yeah. Jewel lost her damn mind. No taking it back now, the damn thing was ruined. Brand new, now with a big, pink splotch across the chest and hood."

"Did your mom and Jewel ever get along?" Robert asks. "Every story you tell me about them has them butting heads."

"Jewel actually gets Momma better than I do," I say. "More like sisters when they're not at each others' throats. Jewel still has that hoodie. Used to wear it around the house when she was mad at Momma. Momma would call her 'Splotches' whenever she wore it. It became like a little pet name eventually. So they do get along, but I guess I tend to tell all the shitty stories."

"They're not shitty," Robert says. "They're good stories. A lot better than anything I have

growing up.”

I shrug. What kind of stories have I been telling? Making my sister or Momma look like monsters or something. “I think it’s because they’re so alike. Momma and Jewel. They’re both really cool.” They’re my heroes, really, but that feels so cheesy to say out loud. But whatever’s going on in my life, there’s nobody I’d rather have in my corner than Momma or Jewel. Those two will fight so hard, they’ll leave their acrylics embedded in some poor fool’s eyes. They may not always see eye-to-eye, but they share so much more than they don’t.

“Wear comfortable shoes,” Red Jeans says. “If you forgot, text someone to bring them now. This isn’t a fashion show, and we’re going to walk a lot. We’re walking from here, through the Downtown Mall, and ending at 4th and Water, at the Heather Heyer Memorial. It’s a little over a mile, and most of you might be walking back here after. Leave your valuables here. That includes wedding rings, watches, anything some asshole might want to steal. You should only have money, ID, food, water, and your phone.”

“You sure you’re good to go?” Robert asks.

“For the fifteenth time,” I say. “I’m sure.”

“Hey,” he says. “Just watching out for you.”

“And for what will hopefully be the last time, I don’t need it. You watch out for yourself.”

“Okay,” he says, but totally doesn’t mean it.

“It won’t be the last time, will it?”

“No chance,” he says with a goofy smile.

“Speaking of phones,” Red Jeans says, “make sure you’re charged. We’ll be outside all day, no chance to stop and recharge. Hopefully some of you brought portable power. Take

pictures. Post to social media. Our protests grow beyond Charlottesville when we show them to the world.”

Some cross between a grunt and sigh slips through my lips.

“Phones and back pockets,” Robert says, letting the rest of his rant trail off.

“Thanks, Dad,” I snarl at him.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Red Jeans says. “Thank you again for being here today. More than nine times out of ten, protests like this are literally walks in the park. Police stand around and hold up traffic for us, cars honk in support, we get a few middle fingers thrown up at us, and then we all go home, safe and sound.

“But we all know what happened last year. It was anything but a walk in the park. Nazis were here. Right here. Marching through UVA and through downtown. They waved torches and flags and screamed at us in their fear of losing that supremacy they cling to so hard. They drove a car through us, killing Heather Heyer and injuring several others.”

Red Jeans’ throat catches. Lots of sniffles are all over the park right now. I look up, taking a few deep breathes to keep tears from leaping up in my own eyes.

“Please bow your heads with me in a moment of silence for Heather,” Red Jeans says.

I bow my head. Join the relative silence. Birds sing. The drone of cars both near Washington Park and farther away. A siren off in the distance. Indecipherable voices from around the corner. A few murmurs from our own crowd. A cell phone rings and is quickly silenced. Robert’s measured breathing beside me.

“Thank you, everyone,” Red Jeans says, concluding the moment. “And thank you for being here, truly. I know Heather is watching us and is so proud.” She dabs tears from her eyes with the leopard-print bandana around her neck, and then her tone brightens. “Now let’s

get marching! The Downtown Mall is that way,” she says, gesturing with one arm. “We’re heading to 4th and Water. Stay safe everyone!”

“So,” Robert says. “Does this feel more like normal? Or last night?”

“Neither,” I say. “All of this is heavy. But that’s why we’re here.”

Mandy

August 12, 2018

Butter, bacon, and frying potatoes wake me. Sizzling scents and the murmur of quiet voices in another room. I don't open my eyes. The bed is thinner than I'm used to. The pillow fluffier. But Mom would sometimes make bacon and eggs and fried potatoes. The smells are nearly the same here. But I don't recognize the hushed voices. Tony might be awake, but I'd only briefly met Derek last night as he showed me to the pull-out couch in the basement rec room. It's not Mom or Dad or Alice or Adam upstairs, but a group of strangers. *Before you panic*, Mom always says, *take a deep breath. Then another*. I keep my eyes closed for a little longer, breathing and imagining being at home. Laughs over breakfast. Alice picking the onions out of her potatoes. Cartoons in the next room. I open my eyes to an unfamiliar drop ceiling, like what our rooms in grade school had, not somebody's house. A gold-brown stain in one corner of the room is shaped like the state of Missouri. Or Mississippi. One of those tall states. I roll out, planting both feet on cold concrete, which somehow surprises me more than anything else, sending a shiver zipping up me. The room isn't cold. Just the floor. Cold and clean like a morgue. Not that I've ever been in a morgue. I check my phone. Missed texts and voicemails from Dad, Mom, and even Adam. I'll bet at least one of these voicemails is actually Alice; she just isn't old enough for her own phone yet.

No texts or anything from Erica.

"Fuck," I breathe. I was telling myself over and over that she was just tired. She was in the shower or went to bed early after all day in the sun protesting. But now? She should have been up by now. Today is the big protest, the one she was really looking forward to. I've seen

her on a protest day. She's up early, making a big breakfast and bouncing around with uncharacteristic energy. She would have responded by now. Or posted to Instagram or Twitter. Something. But it's just silence. I don't know what else to do, so I push up to my feet.

It takes me longer than it should to get dressed, digging through the random handfuls of clothes I threw into my bags last night. Two pairs of jeans. A few shorts. Some t-shirts I was planning to donate to Goodwill, some others that I actually like. A blazer that doesn't match anything else I packed. More underwear and bras than I know what to do with; I just dumped those drawers into my bags last night. Unplanned travel is definitely less glamorous than a well-planned vacation.

I throw on a pair of khaki shorts and a blue UVA t-shirt. "You can do this," I say to myself, echoing words Mom has told me a million times, "do anything. You control your anxiety." I take one more deep breath, and then head upstairs.

"Good morning," Tony says, leaning over a what's left of a plate of scrambled eggs, fried potatoes, and onions.

A sea of strange faces look to me, waving and bidding me good morning. Lots of smiles and kitschy coffee mugs. In addition to Tony, there are five guys and three women, all older than Tony or I. Derek, the homeowner who let us in last night, adds a pair of cotton pajama pants to last night's ensemble.

"There's plenty of food, sugar," the woman next to Derek says, rising and padding into the kitchen. "I'm Beth."

"Hi," I say. "Mandy."

"Tony's a great guy," Beth says, her southern drawl slight, but definitely there. "I'm so

glad he brought you along!”

Great guy? What did he say to them? Probably not that he was helping me run away. I hope not. Shit, that might be worse than them thinking I was here with him like a girlfriend. I glance at Beth with a smile, and then take in the rest of the group. I try not to linger on Tony longer than I have to. And now he’s walking toward me with his empty plate.

“How did you sleep?” he asks, sliding past me and putting his plate in the sink.

“Okay,” I say, which is being generous.

“I see you met Beth,” Tony says, leaning against the counter. His arms ripple a bit as he crosses them over his chest.

Beth and I exchange smiles in response.

“Beth is Derek’s wife,” Tony says, “who let us in last night.”

“Right,” I say.

Then Tony gives me a tour of the group. This is Derek and Beth’s house here in C’ville. Mike and Tabitha are married. Tabitha and Derek grew up together. They live in Virginia Beach. Pete is here alone. He works for Mike. Frank is up from Tybee Island. Finally, Dave and Abernathy are here from DC. They are both lawyers. No way I’m going to remember this whole jigsaw puzzle of strangers.

“How did you meet everybody?” I ask Tony.

“Online,” he says.

“That’s how we met Frank, Dave, and Abernathy, too,” Beth says.

“Cool,” I say, squeezing past Tony to grab a plate. He lingers there, letting our arms touch for way too long.

“Need any help?” he asks.

I just shake my head and start scooping potatoes onto my plate. He finally saunters away. Actually saunters, like he is a peacock or drag queen or something. Does that actually work on some women? By the time I load my plate, Beth and Tony are back with the rest of the group. Beth points to an open seat next to Tony, like she's in on Tony's plan to woo me or whatever. I suppress an eye-roll and take the seat, balancing the plate on my knees.

"We're game planning our day," Beth says.

"Have you done one of these protests before?" Abernathy asks me, brushing a non-existent hair out of her face. Her blonde mane is pulled back in a tight ponytail, tugging her forehead taut like Botox.

I shake my head while chewing. They use way more salt on their potatoes than Mom.

"The march is heading from Washington Park," Derek says, "through the Downtown Mall, and ending at 4th and Water."

"Is that where we're going?" Mike—I think—says, stroking his graying goatee. "4th and Water? With all that sidewalk chalk?"

"No," Derek says. "I think it will be too crazy there. Heyer's mom is going to be there. I'm thinking 3rd, from the north. We can skirt over along Jefferson to hit the Mall."

"Will there be enough police and news there?" Abernathy asks.

"After last year?" Tony says. "They'll be everywhere."

"The police scanner has been nonstop," Pete says, wiping some food off his Washington Redskins t-shirt. "I think there's more police than last year."

"That's good," Derek says. "We might be outnumbered, so it's good to know there will be plenty of police."

Nods all around. Sips of coffee. Damn, these eggs are good.

“What time does the march start?” I ask.

Beth looks past me briefly, probably at a clock somewhere, before answering, “About 20 minutes ago.”

“We should start getting ready,” Tony says, jumping to his feet and striding down the hall. Everyone else follows suit while I shovel food even faster.

“We’re wearing all black today,” Beth says before she heads down the same hall. “In case Tony didn’t tell you.”

“Oh,” I say after swallowing. He definitely didn’t tell me. I don’t know if I grabbed enough black clothing, or any, actually. And why would we wear black to protest? Mourning Heather Heyer, maybe? Beth looks a little impatient, so I answer, “He didn’t tell me, but I’ll see what I have.”

I put the plate in the sink with the rest, resisting the urge to wash them. It feels like I should do something as the uninvited guest, but I don’t know what.

“Anybody got a spare hat?” One of the guys hollers from down the hall. A raspy tenor. I don’t know their voices, so I don’t know which guy.

“I do,” Tony hollers back.

“Do we need to wear hats?” I ask Beth before she disappears. “I didn’t bring one.”

“No honey,” she answers. “You’re fine.” And then she’s gone down the hall.

I start down the stairs back to the rec room, my impromptu bedroom, when I hear one of the women yell, “Which signs are we carrying today?”

“One sec,” one of the other women yells. After a few moments and a few more steps down into the rec room, she continues, “Not sure if there are any Jews. The news is just showing a bunch of—”

A word echoes through the house, pounding between my ears, pulverizing my brain. Starts with an “N.” I’ve seen the word in print. All over Huck Finn. Heard it a few times in movies. Hollered by strangers talking to other strangers in unfamiliar places. Never from someone I was just eating breakfast with. Who are these people? Why does Tony know them? How did they meet? He’s just some Jesus-y dudebro who used to love the X-Men, right?

They are still talking, but I’m totally zoned out. I must have misheard them. Had to. I creep back up the stairs and swallow hard, listening again.

“—all look the same to me,” one of the guys says. I think that was Derek again.

“I’ve got my battle flag,” another guy says. Battle flag?

“Think you can carry it with the American flag?” Derek asks.

“Yeah,” the other guy answers. “Why?”

“Confederates are Americans too, not just the snowflakes.”

Oh no.

“Good call.”

“I’m feeling ‘Blood and Soil.’” Tony says. “Or ‘Heritage, Not Hate.’”

No. No. No. Tony, of all people. Why is it hard to breathe? How can I get out of here?

What would Mom say? Or Dad? Not Dad. What can I do?

“Classic,” one of the women says. “I’m going with whichever one you’re not.”

I just want to get out of the house, get to the C'ville I know and adore, to Erica. This isn't right. All the bits of their earlier conversation start falling into place like LEGO blocks, and I remember a conversation with Erica last year about police. She got so angry whenever police came up in conversation, she even gave them her evil eye when she saw them out and about,

just doing their jobs or whatever, so I took her police rants with a big grain of salt. But she said in white neighborhoods, people call police to make things better. In black neighborhoods, calling police makes things worse. These people *want* the police to be at the protest today. Every face in this house is white. There is a Confederate flag on the front porch. Every warning sign Erica ever told me to watch for is staring me in the face, but I was up there, having breakfast. Making polite conversation. Grateful for a roof over my head. I just saw a room of people who let me crash on a couch.

I sneak down the stairs, forcing myself to breathe in and out, trying not to hyperventilate. I grab my phone, ignoring the unread messages from Mom and Dad and Adam. Still nothing from Erica, but I message her anyway as I half-fall onto the couch that was my bed last night.

Mandy:

SOS

911

I fucked up and I need you

I hope she's just busy, but my messages keep being marked 'Delivered' and not 'Read,' so I know that isn't it. I hoped she's okay, but I'm more worried about me right now.

"Hey, hon," a woman's voice says, making me jump. It's Tabitha, standing halfway down the stairs and leaning down to see me.

"Oh," I say. "Hi."

"Do you need a sign for the protest?" she asks.

I need a sign that says, 'I'm not with them.'

I need a sign that says, 'Erica, why aren't you answering my texts?'

A sign that says, 'I'm not racist. My girlfriend is black.'

‘These are not my people.’

‘Jesus was a brown-skinned socialist.’

‘Tell my parents this isn’t why I ran away.’

‘Black lives matter.’

I need a sign that says, ‘Help me.’

“Um,” is all I can squeak out as a white supremacist just stares at me.

The Daughter

August 12, 2018

Only 9am, and the sun is already scorching Cybil's neck. She adjusts the big-brimmed straw hat as she leans over the waist-high bushes, clipping stray leaves and stems with fastidious attention. She really wishes they would take the fencing away. It is such an eyesore. Bright orange plastic, barely higher than the bushes themselves. Zip-tied and twisted around garish metal posts. Designed for temporary protection, but it has been there over a year now, collecting bits of trash blowing through the park. She runs a hand over a section she just trimmed, freeing loose clippings to fly to the ground.

Cybil backs up to check her work, stretching her back and slowly working her way up to a standing position. Everything seems to hurt more since she had her 70th birthday, which makes no sense. Going to bed 69, and then waking up the next morning 70 years old, and her knees were screaming louder than ever. Finally standing, she takes in her work. The bush is certainly less wild, a nice, rounded shape now. She gazes up at General Lee, proud in bronze astride his bronze horse. She knows it isn't possible, but there always seems a little more twinkle in his metal eyes when all the landscaping around the statue is maintained. She smiles and sighs, and then steps around the sign rising just above the fence, one of four: CITY PERSONNEL ONLY, it screams in large capital letters. Then a little smaller, but still capitalized: NO TRESPASSING. She leans over again to work on the bushes, ignoring the sign. If she isn't here, it wouldn't get done, thank you very much.

She hears a few footfalls on the sidewalk behind her. She stretches up again, providing pretense to rock back onto her feet and give a casual look. Three black teens. One is tall and

lanky, his hair buzzed short to his scalp, with that weird line they like across their foreheads. Another looks like the tall one's younger brother, though not terribly younger. Similar flat nose and lips that look like they're puckered. His hair is a little longer, in little twists all over his head. Then there is a girl with big, wavy hair flying everywhere down to her shoulders. Who knows if the hair is real. You can never tell with them. The boys are dressed nice. The girl, though, she wears one of those BLACK LIVES MATTER shirts. They all have backpacks, like they are on their way to school or something. But it is a Sunday. And school doesn't start for another week and a half. Cybil draws a handkerchief out of her back pocket, nice and slow, keeping one eye on them. Might be drugs or cans of spray paint instead of books in those bags. They glance at Cybil, but seem to be more involved in their own conversations. So Cybil turns back to her hedges, but only partway. She needs to keep an eye on them.

"...can't wait until September 7," Cybil hears the younger boy say once they are in earshot, which is closer than Cybil likes.

"Whatever," the girl says. "You be the white web-crawler all you want. I'm dropping hints to my moms about that new Tomb Raider."

"She's white, too," the older boy says. Web-crawler? Tomb raider? Must be code for something. They're aren't fans of white people, that much is plain.

"Bro," the younger boy says. "Don't tell me you didn't play Nathan Drake for days and days."

The older boy shrugs and adjusts his backpack. Cybil knew a few Drakes in the 80s, before they moved away. Very wonderful people. She wonders what playing him means. Doesn't sound good. The trio are passing her now, moving around behind the statue, so Cybil

scoots sideways, continuing to trim, and keeping them in her sights.

“Ma’am?” A deep voice asks from behind her. Cybil nearly leaps out of her Crocs. She gathers herself and turns to see a tall, broad-shouldered police officer, thumbs hooked in his belt loops. He looks like he is far too young for the uniform, a little rosininess to his cheeks, blonde hair almost shaved, no wrinkles. Another officer stands behind and to the side of this one, his bald, brown head shining in the morning sunlight. He looks older, closer to the age of Cybil’s children. Cybil puts her clippers on the ground, brushes clippings from her trousers, and takes a last glance at the teens. They’ve stopped walking, gawking at her, an old woman startled by police officers. Cybil slowly lifts herself to her feet, her knees creaking again in protest.

“Yes?” she asks. She knows what he is going to ask. Why can’t she ever get the same officer twice? Avoid this whole mess?

“Just here to check on you, see what you’re doing,” the officer says.

“I’m trimming the bushes,” Cybil says. “Same as I always am.”

The blonde officer looks at her closely: her wide-brim straw hat, loose-fitting green button up from her husband’s closet—may he rest in peace—over a white tank top, khaki capris, just pressed this morning, and her faded brown Crocs. Cybil returns the close inspection: the police uniform smartly pressed, with creases in all the right places. She sees his name tag, reading Jones. No telling if he is from around here originally or not, not with a name like Jones. Jones’ partner is looking around the park, not meeting her eye. She finally notices his name tag reads Miller. Another name as inscrutable as Jones.

“Can I see some identification?” Jones asks.

“Of course,” Cybil says, reaching into her back pocket, pulling out her driver’s license

and her United Daughters of the Confederacy membership card, handing them to Jones. Miller glances over Jones' shoulder, then returns to scanning the rest of the park. Cybil watches Miller for a moment, his narrow nose and thin lips reminding her of her late husband, such a handsome man. Miller is blessed with such features, so rare for his people. She watches Miller's eyes pass behind her, where the teenagers are, or at least were, but he seems as unconcerned with them as with the few clouds lazily drifting across the sky. Of course he isn't concerned. If only Jones was watching for them.

"Pemberton," Jones asks, reading Cybil's ID. "As in—?"

"Yes, sir," Cybil says with a broad smile, pride in her southern heritage. "THOSE Pembertons."

"Who?" Miller asks.

"Practically Charlottesville royalty, right here," Jones says. "Family goes back longer than the city, right?"

"That's right," Cybil says, beaming.

Jones nods as he look at her Daughters of the Confederacy ID, like he's impressed. Miller is just looking around the park, nonplussed. Of course he is.

"I've been coming here for almost 20 years, maintaining this hedge," Cybil says, tired of the silence. "Not that it's always me, mind you. When is this ridiculous fence coming down?"

"I'm not sure, ma'am," Jones says.

"It makes it so much harder to take care of things," she says. "How often does the city parks department come out here and take care of these bushes?"

"I don't know, ma'am," Jones says in the exact tone as before, handing her ID back. "Did you see the signs? I'm guessing you're not city personnel?"

“Young man,” Cybil says. “It was the United Daughters of the Confederacy that put this statue here. If the city wants to step in and make all of this look presentable, then be my guest. You work for the city, right?”

Jones starts to answer, not realizing her question is rhetorical.

“My taxes can pay for you to trim bushes as well as walk around and harass old women,” Cybil says. “Any idea when this fence is coming down? Any talks around the station? Plans?”

Miller smirks like he thinks the question is funny, like Cybil is telling a joke. He gives his partner a helpless look. Obviously, his parents didn’t teach him any manners. Cybil makes a mental note to look up this officer Miller later. Find out who his parents are. Where he grew up.

“It’s not like it stops anyone from vandalizing General Lee, anyway,” Cybil continues, pinching the fabric of her gloves to keep the anger from her voice. She looks up at the statue over her shoulder. General Robert E. Lee, life-size astride his horse.

“Well, ma’am,” Jones says. “That’s why we make the rounds.”

“There should be officers stationed here around the clock,” Cybil says. “It seems about every month we’re having to come out and clean off some vile scribbles.”

“That sounds terrible, ma’am,” Jones says. He already looks uninterested. What happened to teaching the value of history? Of heritage? Cybil has the same issues with her granddaughters; she has yet to convince even one of them to join the United Daughters of the Confederacy, to take an active role in preserving their family legacy. Those girls are more interested in taking selfies and doing whatever it is they do on their phones.

“And what do you two think?” Cybil asks before the officers can turn away.

“Ma’am?” Jones asks.

“About all this with the statues and these marches,” Cybil says. “This used to be a quiet town. A good place to raise a family, get an education, find a good meal. But now... Is this going to be a regular occurrence every year now? Some people that don’t even live here marching through our streets?”

“I don’t know, ma’am,” Jones says. “I just know some people are upset about the statues.” He shrugs, glancing up at the statue behind Cybil.

“What about you,” Cybil asks, making a show of squinting to look at Miller’s name tag. “Miller?”

“I just go where I’m told, ma’am,” Miller says. “You have a nice day, now.”

“And what about those?” Cybil says before the officers can stride away. She cocks a thumb over her shoulder, to where the teens are standing.

“Those what, ma’am?” Miller asks.

Cybil glances back, but the trio of teenagers are no longer there. Her heart gallops for a moment. Where did they go? Sneak off behind her back? Her clippers are still on the ground a few feet behind her. She didn’t hear any spray paint cans rattling. Any spraying.

“They were right there,” Cybil says. “Did they leave?”

“They who, ma’am?” Miller asks.

“Those...” Cybil starts, but every noun that comes to her mind catches in her throat. She knows a trap when she hears it. What was the acceptable word now? Blacks? African Americans? That always sounds so pompous. Nobody calls her family English American. Nothing that starts with an N, she knows that. Finally, she surrenders to the most generic word she can think of, “...those teenagers.”

“Mmm,” Miller hums and nods. “They left.”

“Left where?” Cybil asks.

“I don’t know,” Miller says. “That’s their business. Probably going to Reggie’s house to play video games.”

“Oh,” Cybil says. “Of course *you* know them.”

“Reggie, his brother Doug, and their friend Queenie,” Miller says. How did he know them, too? “They live around here. Great kids.”

Cybil genuinely doesn’t know what to say. What about that Nathan Drake fellow? Raiding tombs? She hears a rattle and cranes her head around to find the sound, but it is just a squirrel working at a walnut.

Both officers turn on their heels, heading back toward the Downtown Mall. Cybil wants to protest, to demand more. They should follow those three, make sure they aren’t up to anything. She faintly hears the whup-whup-whup of a helicopter off in the direction of Washington Park. The start of today’s march. An indelicate reminder that protestors might be coming this way, according to the news. She makes a lap around the statue, just to make sure, but the teens are nowhere in sight. No new graffiti, either. She sighs and wipes her drenched brow, and then gets back to her bushes. General Lee can’t be overdue for a trim, especially not if he is going to be TV.

Mandy

Last Year

September 9, 2017

I had been on all of three dates in high school. And all with boys. Each time, the guy picked out everything we did, and he paid. Dinner and a movie. Dinner and homecoming dance. Dinner and prom. So when I finally gathered enough courage to call Erica, that was my expectation: she would pick what we would do and would pay. Except neither of us were boys. And I swore she took a devilish pleasure in saying things that made me squirm. *Took you long enough to call*, she said. Then after I fumbled for words, she said, *Now you pick where we're going. What we're doing.*

Was I the boy in this situation? No. That's dumb. I was so new to even the idea of going on a date with a girl. I was all mixed up. Picking out where to go and what to do on a date? That wasn't me. I'd never been on a date or even thought about a date with a girl, but I certainly wasn't wearing pants on a first date. Not my style.

"Zip me, please," I said to my roommate, Helen.

"You look amazing," Helen said with a sigh, obliging my request with a roll of her eyes. "Whatever."

It was the highest compliment I'd heard her pay anyone in the two weeks we'd been roommates. I blinked a few times, turned my hips in the mirror, and made sure everything was in place. I had to admit, I did look cute. The top was sleeveless, black, with see-through lace over the back and swooping down my neckline. The midi skirt had a subtle red and black floral pattern. It sloped asymmetrically from right to left, with a slit totally hidden by

the fall of the fabric, until I took a step, ankle to upper thigh popping out, and then hiding again as I walked. Apparently I was terrible at first and second impressions, but I was not blowing my third. I was amazed to even be getting a third, but still more amazed that I was about to go on a date with a girl. That I had agreed to it. But for once in my life, I was not going to let my anxiety get the best of me.

One high-heeled, sparkly-toed foot in front of the other.

I was running late. Of course. I didn't know anything about anything on campus yet, let alone off campus. A quick Google search while I was on the phone with Erica turned up the Mellow Mushroom, which sounded like either a bong store or a nice Italian restaurant. Google said it was the latter, so I went with that. I didn't realize how many hills there were on campus between my dorm and the restaurant and would have seriously rethought my shoe choice had I known. I was finally crossing the street from campus and spotted Erica.

She was wearing a slashed-up Justin Timberlake t-shirt, cutoff shorts, and flip-flops. The beads in her hair were blue and pink, matching the colors printed on the shirt. Don't get me wrong, she was hot, but definitely not dressed for a fancy dinner like I was. My anxiety came raging back, alarm bells telling me I had totally misread this. Was this really a date? Was she just messing with me?

"Goddamn!" Erica hollered while I was only halfway across the street.

I stopped in the middle of the road and looked around. Was there a car? A raccoon or dog or something? Did I drop my purse? "What?" I said.

"You," she said. "Looking fine. Damn. I'm looking like a slob here. Now get out of the road!"

I tried to hide my sigh of relief, which I either successfully did, or she ignored. I finished crossing the road to her.

“Surprised by your choice of dinner,” she said. “But I’m always down for Mellow Mushroom.”

“Good,” I said, finally matching her smile. Okay. Maybe this really was a date.

Except the Mellow Mushroom was totally not a nice Italian place. It was Italian. Sort of. A pizza-and-beer kind of place, not a white-tablecloths-and-veal-parmesan place. No wonder she dressed casual. This was definitely a shorts-and-flip-flops restaurant, not a skirt-and-heels place.

“You didn’t know what this was, did you?” she asked, either reading my mind or the blood rushing into my cheeks.

I bit my lip in reply.

She smiled and laughed under her breath. Then she winked at me and took my hand, pulling me toward an open table near the back. “I should have told you,” she said. “So this is on me. You’ll love it. Trust.”

I’m glad she was pulling me along, because if my cheeks were red before, the touch of her hand was turning them into glowing embers. It wasn’t a romantic hand-hold, just a grab-and-go, but in that instant, I knew my third impression was going much better than the first two.

We started with the basics between bites of breadsticks. She was from Atlanta. Two older sisters and her mom, who she called ‘Momma.’ She asked a lot of questions about what it was like living with guys like Dad and Adam. Smells. Weirdly specific visions of football games on television. The bathroom situation. She was amazed that in a house of five, I only

shared my bathroom with my sister, and we still had the guest bath and downstairs bath, making it so everybody could pee at the same time if needed. She told me about growing up in a house with four women and only two bathrooms, one of which her mom never let anybody else use unless it was an emergency. *Momma's lilac sanctuary*, she called it, for the privacy and rose wallpaper that made it feel smaller than it was.

Despite our many differences, each commonality we found was like a little victory. We were both throwing out facts about ourselves like we were hunting for shared space, for connections that we could cling to. I know I was. While neither of us were vegetarian, we both tried to avoid meat, though we both had weak spots for fried chicken and bacon. We both agreed Liam was the most underrated member of One Direction. Pineapple had no business on pizza. Dwayne Johnson could stand to skip some days at the gym. The Barbie Rapunzel movie was infinitely better than the Disney version. Elizabeth Olsen was way sexier than Mary Kate or Ashley.

“Did you play any sports in high school?” I asked between bites of veggie pizza, sans green peppers, another dislike we had in common.

She nodded, chewing and chomping like Roxy, without a care. Unlike Celeste, who always took the daintiest bites and dabbed her mouth with her napkin between bites—unless we were all alone. Finally, Erica swallowed and said, “Yeah. Softball. Catcher. Though I wasn’t very good.”

“You weren’t very good, but they let you play?”

“Let me? The coach practically begged me so they wouldn’t forfeit the season every year.”

“Wow,” I said. “Sports were super-competitive at my school. Even if you were on a team,

you still had to try out the next year.”

“Sounds rough,” Erica said. “What did you play?”

“Volleyball.”

“Mmm,” she said, her eyes squinting a little and her lips curving up in a Grinch-like smile.

“What?”

“Just imagining you in those tight-ass shorts they wear in volleyball.”

My chest tightened and my throat was suddenly warm. She was flirting with me. And—OMG—I knew what to say for once! I was about to flirt back. “Yeah, I rock the shorts,” I said. “I played in summer league at Baltimore Beach, too. Nothing like hours in a bikini to make for a nice tan.” I took my straw between my lips ever so slowly and gently sucked on Diet Coke.

Her eyes scanned me up and down, and I knew I was blushing, but she didn’t seem to mind. She took a bite of her pizza in the most ridiculous, bad-romantic-movie way, complete with a scarfing sound. Tomato sauce squirted down her chin and onto Justin’s face on her shirt. Diet Coke was suddenly squirting from my nose, burning the whole way. Bits of pizza shot right back out of her mouth as she burst into a laugh. We were a mess. A laughing, burning, disgusting mess.

Our first date was the first time I’d been to the Downtown Mall without my parents. Mom, Dad, and I walked the length of it and had a nice Italian dinner the weekend we visited campus back in the spring. Then when they dropped me off, the whole family had lunch outside, Mom welling up in tears randomly between bites of burger and fries. It was different

as a college student on a date, feeling like I was totally in control, not following like a duckling.

“I can’t get a read on your brother,” Erica said. “Is he a jock or a nerd or what?”

“He’s just Adam,” I said. I’d been recounting my youth, stories about the whole family. “I don’t think he knows where he fits in yet. Or he actually fits in everywhere.”

“Or nowhere.”

“Maybe. I hope not.”

“But you two get along?”

“Most of the time,” I said, stopping to look at a pair of jeans in the window of Urban Outfitters. “He’s my little brother, but he’s been taller than me since he was like 10. So he tries to pick on me occasionally.”

“Tries?” Erica said.

“He’s not very good at it. He’ll try to say something witty, like one time he called me a Republican, like he thought that was so clever.”

“Mean. Not clever.”

“Right? Or he’ll take something of mine and hold it up over his head where I can’t reach it. But he’s still as ticklish as he was when he was four, so that doesn’t end well for him.”

“Sounds like a dick,” Erica said. “And you would totally rock those jeans, bee-tee-dubs.”

“Thanks,” I say, ignoring yet another blush in my cheeks. “He’s not that way very often. He’s usually pretty cool. We cover for each other, play board games or FIFA on his Xbox.”

“Man, I remember when we got our first video game system,” Erica said. “We got a PS2 for Christmas. I was six or seven. The system had been out for a while. Hell, I think the PS3 had just come out, but to us, that thing was awesome. And the games were so cheap since it

was older. Three sisters and two controllers. The three of us would get into some crazy fights trying to get turns.”

Guilt swelled up in me, and not for the first time that night. I could feel my privilege, how Adam got a PS4 for Christmas the year it came out. Alice got one for her next birthday after she played it with Adam a little. I’m sure if I asked for one, then we’d have three in the house in short order. In spite of all the commonality we had, the commonalities we were searching for, sometimes it was like we grew up in different worlds.

“You okay?” Erica asked.

“Yeah!” I said, though I think I sounded too perky. She must have noticed me drifting off into my own thoughts.

“Where were you?”

“Just thinking about how nice this is,” I lied.

She smiled really big, reaching out and taking my hand. That jolt again, but this time, her fingers intertwined mine. Not a grab-and-go hold, but a romantic hold. Right there in the Downtown Mall with numerous strangers walking by. It was scary and exciting and oh, so nice.

“What do you think of C’ville so far?” she asked.

“It’s tiny.”

“True. Mostly pretty cool, though.”

“Yeah? I mean, I’ve only been here a couple weeks. Hell, today was my first time leaving campus since that stupid block party.”

“God, you were so dumb at that party.”

“I wasn’t dumb!” Panicky. Nervous. Completely out of my depth, sure, but dumb?

“Next time some Nick comes up and won’t let you be: Knee. To. The. Groin.”

We both laughed, long and loud enough for people to notice. To my own surprise, I didn’t even care.

Then the smile melted away from Erica’s face, though her hand didn’t leave mine. I followed her gaze. Big white-and-orange roadblocks stood in front of the street between a drug store and a bank. 4th Street.

“It was here, wasn’t it?” I asked in a whisper.

“Down at the other end, I think,” Erica said.

I didn’t know what else to say, so I just stood there with her, peering down the short block of asphalt. Down by the next street, flowers and balloons adorned both sidewalks. Chalk scribblings were everywhere. The street, the sidewalks, the walls of the surrounding buildings.

“Not even a month ago,” Erica said.

I nodded.

“Fucking Nazis right here in C’ville.”

The language startled me, caught me off guard, but I understood. Even in our white, middle-class neighborhood outside Baltimore back home, we’d been shocked and horrified by what we saw on the TV. Three days of discussions just to convince Mom and Dad that it was still safe for me to come here, that the vast majority of the neo-Nazis that marched down this very street weren’t from here, that they drove in for the demonstration.

Then Erica turned to me, taking both of my hands and locking eyes with me with powerful seriousness. “So,” she said. “When I say, ‘Black Lives Matter,’ what does that mean to you?”

I swallowed, nervous that I was about to say the wrong thing, but I only knew one way to answer. “Black lives in this country are in danger, so we have to rally behind them, defend them. Help them.”

Erica’s face turned thoughtful, appraising, and then she nodded. “Not exactly an essay thesis, but that’ll do. You pass.”

“That was a test?” I asked as we started walking again, Erica pulling me a bit past the roadblocks.

“We are an interracial lesbian couple,” she said. “Everything is going to be a test. You in?”

Each word hit me like a blow, trying to knock the wind from my lungs. Interracial. Lesbian. I nodded, smiled, and all I could say was, “Couple.”

“Well,” she said. “I’m down for a second date if you are.”

She squeezed my hand and swung our hands between us like kids on a playground.

I’d never been happier.

Erica

August 12, 2018

This almost feels normal, like just a walk from campus to the Downtown Mall. Not that I've ever walked it. Not sober. Stumbled back to the dorms from a party near the Mall once last year. But it's not normal, not even for a protest. There are maybe a couple hundred of us, I guess. And I think we're outnumbered ten to one by cops. The constant whup-whupping of helicopters has been going since I woke up. C'ville PD. Virginia State Troopers. UVA police. Albemarle County sheriffs. Cops in all shapes and sizes, different uniforms from undercover (they think they're so inconspicuous, but come on, who stands like that?) to full riot gear. All I smell is diesel from some of the big-ass trucks they're riding around in. Feels like *The Hunger Games* out here.

"You're quiet," Robert says.

"Yeah," I say. I don't even know what else to say. Where to start. We march for a few minutes in silence. I'm holding my sign, but I don't feel like chanting.

"I kinda like this protesting thing," Robert says. I can tell he's uncomfortable with the quiet.

"Thank you," I say. "Somebody finally said it out loud."

"Nobody says they like protesting?"

"Like, we're all out here marching and chanting because something is shitty and it needs to be fixed. That's not fun. It shouldn't be enjoyable to fight for the freedoms and equality you should already have, right?"

"Right," Robert says, nodding emphatically, on the verge of laughing. "I mean, I

WOULD still prefer to be sitting at home, watching YouTube or playing a video game.”

“But sometimes,” I say. “It is fun. It’s fun to be in the streets, chanting with hundreds or thousands of people who feel the same way. Who vote the same way. It’s awesome to not turn the other cheek when somebody says something horrible, like at Thanksgiving or Christmas.”

“Every goddamn holiday,” Robert says.

“Right? We’re all out here saying it. Screaming it! And the fucking police are holding up traffic for us!”

“Yeah,” Robert says, but his voice is more somber. He looks around. “There are a lot of police.”

A lot is an understatement. Most protests, there are one or two cops holding up traffic at each intersection, scanning the crowd to make sure everybody behaves. Today, though, there are like a dozen at each intersection. Black pants, neon yellow-green vests, and helmets. Some are standing next to bicycles. Not riding, just standing there with the bikes in front of them like barricades.

“This is not normal,” I say. “I’ve never seen this many cops in my life.”

“Nope,” Robert says.

“Your mom’s a judge, and you’ve never seen this many cops?” I ask.

“Not even at a police funerals.”

“But you’ve been around cops. Gone to work with your mom or social events or whatever? Don’t they have cop parties or anything?”

“It’s not *Law and Order*,” Robert says. “And she’s a judge. She really doesn’t hang out with them.”

“Huh,” I say. In my head, I’d imagined just that, Robert’s mom getting drinks after a long day at a cop bar, swapping stories about criminals and whatever. I’m glad that’s not the case.

“Did you see our caboose?” Robert asks.

I turn my head. We’re about in the middle of the protest line, but a ways back, I can see several pickups loaded with more cops. And a goddamn armored vehicle, like something that should be in Iraq or Afghanistan. I wish that was a surprising sight.

“Is that a tank?” Robert asks.

“They wish,” I say.

“What do they think we’re going to do?”

“Riot. Set fires. Murder people. Protest without a permit. It’s all the same to them.”

“Why would we do that?” Robert asks. I swear he grew up under a magical umbrella of privilege.

“We wouldn’t,” I say, but he’s not looking at me. He’s up on tip-toes, craning his head around to see something in front of us. He’s a foot taller than me, so I have no idea what’s going on.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Some guy is standing in the middle of the road,” Robert says, “probably twenty feet ahead. Police are talking to him. I can’t hear what they’re saying, but they’re pointing, telling the guy to move aside. But the guy isn’t moving.”

“Let’s just keep going,” I say absently. I’m too busy keeping an eye out. The whole parade of us is moving around, rubbernecking, crawling by to see what happens. Before long, I can actually hear them.

“...sir, I’m only going to ask you one more time,” one of the cops says. “Move aside. You

are interfering with our ability to provide safe passage for these people.”

“They don’t need safe passage!” the man says, almost screaming at the officer and all of us. Some people finally move and jostle enough for me to see. Despite his rage, he looks so innocuous. Just a boring white guy with brown lawyer hair, a half-ass goatee, horn-rimmed glasses. Wearing a white t-shirt and jorts. Though I’m sure he calls them jean shorts or denim shorts. Looks like the kind of guy who does your taxes or works at Target.

“Sir, you have to—” the cop says.

“I have every right to be here!” the guy says. “I live here. This is my country! They don’t have the right—”

Another cop grabs the guy’s arm, pulling him toward the side of the street, toward another dozen cops blocking a side street. The guy wrenches his arm free, yelling, “Get your hands offa me!”

Then a third cop grabs the guy by the back of the neck and kicks the back of his knees. Lawyer Hair is face-down on the pavement in a second. I wince at the sheer force of it, the sudden and immediate movement of three guys on one, pushing him to the ground, his chin bouncing off the pavement. I’ve seen cops do this dozens of times, and it’s usually to people who look like me or Robert, but it doesn’t make it any easier to see.

“I have rights! I have rights!” he screams over and over, wriggling while three police practically sit on him, zip-tying his hands together. The crowd gives a wide berth, and suddenly I’m damn near in the front row of this spectacle. People have their phones out, recording, including Robert. I didn’t even think to record it, but I should have. One of Jewel’s top-ten rules for protesting: record police action, and I damn forgot.

“All lives matter! All lives matter!” Lawyer Hair changes up his chant, looking at all of

us, gathered around, recording. And now I don't feel as sorry for him. I know I should, but that chant makes him the enemy, someone who supports a system that pushes people like me down. Still, I should be recording, should be making sure his rights are protected, even if he's chanting that bullshit at us. Then the cops haul him up, one on each arm, and another keeps hold of his zip-tied hands. They half-drag him, Lawyer Hair's feet stumbling along, off into the awaiting throng of cops. A few people applaud. Not me. Not Robert. We turn back to the protest, not saying a word to each other. I don't even know what to say, but guys like that are why we still have to be here. Still have to march.

I clear my throat and join in the current chant, "Fight white supremacy! Fight white supremacy!"

There's a beat to it, a rhythm. It drives our voices and our feet. It gives our mouths something to do when it's too complicated to really discuss what we just saw.

Pledges

Thomas Jefferson pledged education
to future generations, pledged to build on the backs
of enslaved carpenters, enslaved stonemasons, enslaved people.

UVA pledged \$1000 to the Klan in 1921.
Not the Highland Clans or Samurai Clans
but the Ku Klux variety.

It took Heather and upset undergrads
demanding to send that pledge to the Charlottesville
Patient Support Fund.

Adjusted for inflation, of course.

Students pledged the Sevens
and IMP and Greek and secret
societies for two hundred years before
pledging to make their university
more inclusive.

Thomas Jefferson was the great
innovator
orator
writer
president
white-supremacist in Chief.

Only now does UVA pledge
to teach the whole story of Thomas,
not just the song-and-dance president story.

UVA pledged to honor fallen
soldiers and presidents, two plaques
for confederate ~~soldiers~~ slavers.

Finally removed in 2018, a tuppence
for the 6.4% black student body, a poor
reflection of Virginia's 12.

Still UVA won't pledge to ban two
of its own Alt-right rabble rousers:
Jason Kessler
Richard Spencer

UVA is holding the white supremacy wolf
by the ears, unable to hold on or let
go of its Jeffersonian foundations.

The Shopkeep

August 12, 2018

The motor of the over-door A/C unit kicks on, blowing cold air in a mighty attempt to keep everything nasty about the Charlottesville summer out of Randall's antique store.

"Afternoon', Randall," Daniel Stower says around the wad of chew in his cheek. His cowboy hat tips low over his eyes, his thumbs hooking on either side of his belt buckle. The shiniest Confederate Battle Flag Randall has ever seen.

"Afternoon, Stower," Randall says from behind the counter. Randall moves his right hand a few inches closer to the shotgun he keeps behind the counter. Just in case. "How long you home for?"

"A few days. Got another load of PlayStations or something to pick up early next week, so I'll be getting back on the road soon enough. Thought I'd pop in and say hey."

"Hey," Randall says, "how's Madeline? The boys?"

"Doin' fine," Stower says, moseying up an aisle between antique mirrors and UVA hats. "How's business? How's Ruby?"

"Fine on both counts," Randall says. He seems to be dancing around whatever is really on his mind while he fingers a jewelry box. Surely what is on Stower's mind is on Randall's mind, is on the whole town's mind, so Randall gives him an opening, "Ruby enjoyed her school assembly yesterday, what with the anniversary this weekend and all."

"Yeah," Stower says, glancing down and then out the window, looking back at Madeline, his wife, scrubbing the windows of the coffee shop. "Can't say I'm enjoying it. Police searched us just trying to get to the shop this morning. Got the whole town so tense, so

worried about saying or doing the wrong thing.”

“People should always be worried about doing the wrong thing. Keeps us doing the right things.”

Stower looks back at Randall over his shoulder, a smirk twisting his lips. He turns his gaze back outside before replying, “You know what I mean.”

Randall knows. He and Stower went through school together. Never friends, but Stower was never friends with anyone who couldn’t pass the paper bag test. Randall is several shades darker than a paper bag. Stower and his family throw around “politically correct” like it was a four-letter word. Randall tries not to hold it against him. Stower doesn’t march or hold torches, but Randall knows how Stower votes.

“What do you need, Stower?”

“Can’t a guy just shoot the shit with an old friend?”

“Sure. What do you think about the Alex Smith trade? Been a while since we’ve had a franchise quarterback in DC.”

“You still root for the ‘Skins?’” Stower says, finally turning back to face Randall. “We got the University of Virginia right here and you’re watching NFL? They don’t get my money anymore. Not with all that kneeling.”

“Well, I’m excited for the Smith era. Gonna be an upgrade,” Randall says. If Stower is looking for a fight, Randall isn’t going to give it to him on a platter. Stower just shakes his head, looking at a display of antique-looking washboards with the UVA logo painted on them.

“Didn’t you used to have these with Confederate Flags on them?”

Yes, and I still have six of them in the back. “Yeah.”

“You sell them all? Couldn’t get any more in?”

“I might have a few in the back if you want me to check.”

Stower turns his full attention on Randall, “Why aren’t they out here? You hide ‘em?”

Absolutely. “They weren’t selling. Only so much shelf space.”

“You got plenty of room,” Stower says, and then re-sorts the UVA washboards. “See, still two stacks of UVA and room for an entire stack of the battle flag.”

“Doesn’t mean they’ll sell.”

“What? You afraid of what some people might do if they see them in here?”

Yes. “What do you want me to say, Stower? They don’t sell. That simple.”

“They don’t sell if people don’t know you have them. Bring them out.”

“You buying one?”

Stower chews a lump of tobacco and furrows his brow. Randall waits him out, wishing the over-door A/C unit could keep out more than hot air.

“What do you think about them trying to tear down ole Robert E. Lee?” Stower says, turning on a heel and continuing his mosey around the store.

“Why are you here, Stower? You trying to pick a fight?”

“Are you?”

“My ancestors were slaves, that should tell you how I feel about Robert E. Lee or that flag on your belt.”

Stower turns to face Randall again. “Oh, you never been a slave. Where do you get off-”

“This is my store. My place. I never go into your shop and start anything with those fools wearing MAGA hats. You want to start a fight, go find someone else, someone with less

to lose.”

“You kicking me out, Randall?”

“Not yet. Do I have to?”

Stower spits a brown hunk of spittle and tobacco on the concrete floor and smears it with the toe of his boot. He doesn't look back up at Randall, “You should put those Confederate flag washboards out. I know some people'd be interested in buying those. Maybe take the rest off your hands.”

Randall says nothing. His fingers just graze the handle of his shotgun.

“Be seeing you, Randall,” Stower says. He saunters out. The big A/C unit gives a bellow in his wake, finally doing its job.

Erica

Last Year

September 24, 2017

The annoyance was finally setting in like I knew it likely would. To my great surprise, we'd been dating for almost three weeks. We had a few things in common. She made me laugh. I thought she was hot and I saw a challenge: trying to get Mandy out of her shell. She was so different from any other girl I'd been with. Her kisses were sweet, but more timid than my first kiss with Angie back in 9th grade. At my house growing up, you didn't get shit unless you spoke up and either asked nicely (Momma) or demanded to be heard (everybody but Momma). Mandy couldn't speak her mind to save her damn life. Just trying to get her to tell me what she wanted to do when we were hanging out was a shit show. After only a week and a half, I had to make a rule that she wasn't allowed to say 'I don't know' or 'Whatever you want.' She had to give me an answer. She was wearing my last nerve, but I still got that zing when she held my hand or kissed me. And when that turtle of a girl would stick her head out for a just a second, she was dazzling.

Still, that was pretty rare, and I was getting bored.

"I don't see why you're going with her," Robert said, flopping onto my beanbag chair, his lanky limbs arcing out from the red pleather at every angle.

"It's free to students," I said from my closet, searching for the right shirt to wear tonight. "She's going to be there whether we're together or not." Dave Matthews was putting on a special concert for C'ville. Pharrell, Justin Timberlake, Ariana Grande, The Roots, and some others. Pretty amazing to have so many big names coming to C'ville, but it was because Dave

Matthews was from here, and he was raising money for the families of Heather Heyer and the two troopers who died.

“You could have broken up with her last night,” he said. “Then we could go together. I could be your wingman or whatever. You could be my wingwoman.”

“I hate that word,” I said, pulling on a plain, blue shirt and stepping out of my closet.

He rolled his eyes before he said, “What? You’re not wearing your Justin shirt?”

“I wore it on our first date. And it feels a little too on-message. I’ll be there singing along. Do I really need to be wearing his t-shirt, looking like some crazed fangirl?”

“Are you not a crazed fangirl?”

“Not so anybody can see!”

“I can see.”

“You don’t count.”

I move to the mirror, making sure I’m looking date ready. “It would be weird to wear the same shirt on our first date and potentially our last.”

“Does that mean you’re breaking up with her tonight?”

“At the concert?” I said. “No way. I want to enjoy this. I want her to enjoy it, too. I’ll break it off later.”

“Do I see the indomitable Erica Betancourt shying away from a confrontation?” Robert said, playing up the sarcasm for maximum effect.

I gave him my best withering Momma look.

He threw his hands up in surrender. “Whatever.”

The stadium was hella crowded, more crowded than I’d ever seen it. Not that I’d been

here much. Never been much for football, but Robert and I attended a soccer game last year. It was free, and he had a crush on one of the girls on our team. I made the introduction after the game, and they dated for about a month, so it worked, but I didn't want to play wingman for him at games anymore. Too distracting. Whatever. We never got very big crowds for soccer. I'd seen the lines and heard the crowds for the big football games, but I was pretty sure this was even crazier than those.

"OMG," Mandy said, actually saying the letters instead of 'Oh my God.' She was practically vibrating with excitement, her fingers barely staying intertwined with mine, but she was still quiet and controlled as she said, "I hope he does 'SexyBack.' And 'Cry Me a River.'"

"I have never seen you this excited!" I said, leaning in and bumping shoulders with her. I was overdoing my own excitement, trying to get her to cut loose a little. "And for old-school Justin!"

"I'm sorry," she said, but not really sounding sorry. She looked at me with big eyes, biting her bottom lip. So damn cute. No harm in enjoying this last evening together, right?

"Don't be," I said. "Be excited! Show the world who you are!"

She produced the world's tiniest, most repressed scream, like a mouse dying on the other end of campus. She bounced lightly on the balls of her feet in some weird little dance. Again, cute. Back and forth we went, naming Justin Timberlake and Ariana Grande songs we were excited for. I was mad excited for Pharrell, and she only knew his song *Happy*, so I went down a little rabbit hole of my fav Pharrell songs. She mentioned how her parents danced to Dave Matthews Band when they got married. My Momma told me she was jealous I was getting to see The Roots live. There were some other acts that night, but nothing else that got

us excited.

We found our seats in the bleachers, off to the left of the stage and only a handful of rows up from the field, which was totally transformed . A massive stage was erected at one end of the field, with all the seats behind and to the sides empty and dark. More folding chairs than I'd seen in my life filled the rest of the field, except for a riser in the middle where the tech people were hanging out, occasionally glancing at their glowing, blinking boards. The latest and greatest from Taylor Swift and Cardi B and Imagine Dragons were pumping loud from the massive speakers next to the stage. When "Strip That Down" dropped, and both Mandy and I screamed (me, loudly and she, slightly less repressed) and started dancing. Our fav 1D guy and his new hit single. Maybe she annoyed me sometimes, but we did know how to have fun together when she got out of her own way.

Dave Matthews finally kicked things off, and we both danced a little to a song we didn't know. Then came Cage the Elephant. I was glad the band we didn't know was up early. Save the best for last was always my preference. They did put on a great show, even if we didn't know any of the songs.

I cheered so loud when Pharrell took the stage after them, though. I was so ready to dance and grind up on Mandy to some songs I loved. But I'd spoken too soon. He was on to announce the first surprise guest of the night: Coldplay. Now personally, I'd never been a big fan. They're okay, but the singer's voice is little too nasal for me. Mandy, on the other hand, smiled almost as wide as the first time we kissed. She looked like a little girl about to explode from a surprise birthday pony, and then she grabbed my face and kissed me right there. Our first kiss in public, which she promptly realized right after, her face flushing. I just quirked up a little smile of my own, and she melted into me as they started playing. I could

see her lips moving a little to the lyrics.

They took a few songs before playing one I did know, “Viva la Vida,” and we both danced along with the tens of thousands of other people in the stadium. Soon, The Roots took the stage, and I took a few quick pics, texting them to Momma.

“I don’t think I know them,” Mandy said. “But they look kinda familiar.”

“Jimmy Fallon,” I said.

She looked again, squinting her eyes at the big monitors, a camera panning from face to face.

“They’re the house band for Jimmy Fallon’s show,” I clarified. “But they’ve been making great music since the 80s. My mom is a huge fan.” As if on cue, my phone buzzed in my hand.

Momma:

Oh baby thank you!!!

More pictures please

So jealous!!!

Erica:

lol

ill get more pics

will send ltr

Momma:

ltr? Is that English?

Erica:

I will send you pics later.

Momma:

That's better.

Erica:

I love you

Momma:

I love you baby be safe!

The Roots made Coldplay look like a kindergarten choir, at least in my opinion, though Mandy seemed way less enthused. They did some old Motown covers that got me dancing, and Mandy seemed to enjoy that, at least. Then Pharrell came back out and she was all about it, especially when they started playing his hits like "Get Lucky" and "Happy." We even bopped along to "Blurred Lines," even though we both thought it was too rapey. Mandy and Robert and I had a whole argument about it when we saw Pharrell in the lineup, though I think Robert's argument in favor of the song was mostly based on the uncensored, boob-filled version of the music video. And he's a guy.

Then came the country guy, Chris something. Basically a mountain of long hair wearing a cowboy hat. A quick squeeze and pull of my hand, and we were ducking down a tunnel, making a beeline for the food stand. We were both sweaty from dancing and admittedly, it had been a few hours since I'd eaten. A cold bottle of water and a burger sounded so good.

"OMG," Mandy said, spinning while she walked, still holding my hand, and flicking hair out of her face with the other, which was clinging to her sweat-drenched forehead.

"Coldplay! Can you believe it?"

"So this is you excited?" I said.

"You've seen me excited before."

“Not like this.”

“It. Was. Coldplay!”

“I know,” I said. “I was there.”

“What’s your favorite part so far?”

“You know I grew up on The Roots.”

“Everything you’d hoped for?”

“I would have hoped for another dozen songs,” I said. “But they were just as great as I’d imagined.”

“Who do you think is next?” she asked as we crept up in line, closer to ordering food.

“Justin? Ariana? Do you think Dave will come back out?”

“It’s Dave’s concert, so yeah. I’m ready to get my water and my dance on with you,” I said, bumping my hips against hers.

“This is the greatest night ever!” she said, putting so much emphasis on the last word, it was almost a yell. Almost. People actually turned to look. And of course, she blushed.

“I like this,” I said.

“What?”

“You. Coming out of that shell you like so much.”

“Oh,” she said, and the excitement drooped a bit, like she was collapsing in on herself just a little. Shit. I managed to see a little more of her, the her she hides, and just mentioning it made that little turtle of a girl curl up again.

“Don’t do that,” I said. “We’re having fun, right?”

She nodded, though it was hesitant. We moved up again, next in line after the pair of older guys in front of us.

“Isn’t it more fun when you let your hair down, lean into the fun, stop worrying so much about what people think?”

She nodded again, this time with more enthusiasm.

“Then let’s get some nachos and shit,” I said, first to her, then loudly with my hands cupped over my mouth, “and keep this party going!”

People around us cheered. I saw the cashier roll her eyes. Mandy smiled, looking a little shy, but the sparkle was back. Right there, I kissed her full on the lips, even slipping her a little tongue. The crowd cheered again. When I stepped back, her lips were pursed like she was angry, but she was smiling, too. She grabbed my hand and we stepped up to place our orders.

Country boy was finishing up as we got back to our seats. I had to give the Momma stank eye to a couple dudebros who thought they could take our seats, and it worked like a charm. I was ready to get my dance on again, and I could tell Mandy was, too; she was bopping a little to the last country song. The roadies swept in like ants, sweeping away instruments and bringing out new ones. The screens, enormous and lit mostly in green, flashed “Performances by Ariana Grande and Justin Timberlake.” Mandy squeezed my hand and cheered at me so hard. A few canned songs played before Dave Matthews came back out.

“She just flew back from Hong Kong,” he said, “at the end of her tour. And she came here instead of going home. Y’all give it up for Ariana Grande!”

The crowd cheered. We both started jumping in place and cheering. Even my sweet Mandy was almost screaming in excitement as Ariana launched into “Side to Side” before she even took the stage, her voice floating out over the stadium as Dave walked off. She sauntered on with her trademark ponytail, combat boots, army pants, and a hoodie draping

off her shoulders. She's always hot, usually dressed in all kinds of sparkly, super-femme costumes and outfits. This laid-back, chillin-but-still-smokin' look had me feeling some kind of way about her, though.

"She's so hot!" Mandy said, half-screaming into my ear.

"Fuck yes, she is!" I screamed back. Then we were dancing up on each other, like, in ways I never thought this girl would do in public.

"This is so awesome!" she said.

"You better be careful, girl," I said as quiet as I could amidst the thumping music.

"Dancing on me like that. Don't you tease."

I expected her to back off, to apologize. At best, I thought she might just keep dancing like that. Instead, she gave me the best answer I could have imagined: she kissed me, her tongue still a little chilly and tasting vaguely of her Diet Coke. We danced even closer. I don't know if anybody ever joined Ariana on stage—a guest or a drummer or whatever—I kinda forgot she was there. It was just me and Mandy in that moment until the music finally stopped. We separated, Mandy wearing the goofiest grin I'd ever seen on her. Okay, maybe this wasn't a lost cause.

"Get a room!" some asshole yelled from a few rows behind us. I flipped a middle finger in that general direction, but Mandy visibly shrunk.

I took her hand, gave it a reassuring squeeze, and said, "Fuck them. They're just jealous."

She smiled at that, but not that goofy grin I was loving so much. The crowd cheered, pulling our attention back to the stage. Ariana was running back out, grabbed the mic, and said something, but the mic must have been off. Some people cheered anyway. Mandy and I looked at each other and exchanged confused shrugs. Then the rest of the stage lights came

up. The once-vacant array of instruments were now populated. Justin Timberlake stepped up to the mic, acoustic guitar in his hands, flanked by two other guys with guitars. They started in on a quiet song that took me a second to recognize.

“Oh, shit,” I said.

“What?” Mandy asked.

“That’s ‘A Change is Gonna Come.’ Sam Cooke!”

“Who?” Mandy asked.

I did my best to withhold judgment. That conversation and musical education would have to come later. For now, I grabbed my phone and started filming. Momma would—hell, my whole family would have to see this. Sam Cooke was the soundtrack of my childhood, *the greatest singer the world has ever known*, as Momma always said. I mouthed the words, holding back from singing along. Nobody wants to hear me sing when Justin Timberlake is at the mic. As Justin worked through his set, grooving through a parade of his singles like “Suit & Tie” and “My Love,” Mandy loosened back up. She was mouthing the words to “Cry Me a River,” swaying her hips, and gladly took my hand. She cut loose a lot more when the beat dropped on “SexyBack,” though I could tell those douchebags were still bothering her, she was still turtling, her eyes darting up a few rows every now and again. The doubt crept back in. Just when she was opening up, she sank back down into that hole.

Dave Matthews finally brought his whole band on after Justin finished up. I figured he’d go last since it was his show, but I was still disappointed. Mandy recorded the first song on her phone for her dad before I asked, “Do you want to go?”

She glanced over my shoulder, up a few rows. I don’t know what she did or didn’t see, but she squeezed my hand and said, “No. Let’s stay.”

So we did. I gotta say, Dave Mathews and his ridiculously big band know how to play. Not my jam, but they have skills. I sat for a while, stood and swayed with Mandy for a couple songs, but I was definitely ready to go. The moment we had during Ariana was done, and I was ready for the evening to be done, too. After a particularly energetic song with lots of horns, Dave announced one more guest that got me off my feet and made me so glad we didn't leave.

“We got a special guest,” Dave Matthews said, pointing to an unoccupied arrangement of keyboards. “Coming up now, and it's a real honor to share a stage with him, please welcome Mr. Stevie Wonder.”

Helped out to the stage, the man himself took a microphone. The reverb was pretty bad, so it was hard to make out what he said, but he spoke about sight, about his momma hoping he'd one day be able to see, but she died. But he talked about seeing a world without hate, a world with unity, that's what he sees and what he wants us all to see. I was so caught up in trying to catch every word, I forgot to record any for Momma, or at least text her.

Then after about 10 minutes of talking, he sat down at the keyboards and started playing. It took me a bit to recognize it, the cover of such a famous song, but one he was giving his own twist, accompanied by the Dave Matthews Band. When he opened his mouth and started singing, “Imagine there's no heaven,” I heard those same notes much closer to me.

Mandy. Eyes closed. Mouth and throat wide open, was singing the old John Lennon song along with Stevie Wonder. Her voice wasn't perfect, no. She was no Ariana Grande, but her voice was full of heart. “Imagine all the people,” she belted, and a tear rolled down her cheek. It was beautiful, watching her sing, watching her bloom like that, hearing the parts of her she kept so closed off, just pouring out.

“You may say I’m a dreamer,” she sang, and I sang with her. She opened her eyes, and we watched each other, singing along with Stevie Wonder, and everybody else vanished. In that moment, in those notes, I fell in love with that silly, shy girl. In those moments, I knew I wasn’t letting her go.

Mandy

August 12, 2018

We're all squeezed into Derek and Beth's Toyota minivan. Cheerios crumbs and Happy Meal toys speckle the gray carpeting. A smear of peanut butter runs across the bottom corner of the screen affixed to the seat in front of me, a SpongeBob SquarePants episode running on mute. I'm stuffed into the third row next to Mike, his wife Tabitha on the other side of him. At least nobody insisted I sit next to Tony. Derek wants him up front to help him navigate around the protest route. I can see them talking between the bobbing heads in the second row, too quiet or too far away to make out from back here. Lots of fingers point at street signs and intersections. An occasional laugh between them makes its way back to me.

"You look nervous," Mike says, giving me a gentle elbow to the ribs.

"Michael," Tabitha whines.

"What?" he says to her. "She looks nervous. I want to help."

"I'm sorry about him," Tabitha says, leaning around her husband to look at me. "His mom left when he was little, and I'm still teaching him how women work."

I figure they are joking for a moment before Mike gives a *yeah, what do you do?* shrug. I can't imagine my mom saying anything like that about Dad, especially not with him sitting right next to her.

"How are you doing?" Tabitha asks.

I give her a weak smile, glancing at her eyes, and then darting my eyes away. I take a deep breath through my nose to steady myself, to keep my voice level, trying to ignore the musk of her husband between us and come up with a plausible lie. Or half-truth. "I've never

protested before,” I say. “I’m not sure what to expect.”

“Don’t you worry about it,” she says. “We’ve done a ton of these. You just stick with us and you’ll be fine.”

“Try to ignore the looks and the shouts,” Mike says.

“Looks?” I ask, knowing full well what looks he means. The other protestors. Erica, among others. All my hopes are pinned on finding Erica. She will know what to do, how to get me away from these people. A means to an ends. As horrible as all this is, they are going to get me to her. I hope she’s okay. Still not answering her phone.

“Yeah,” Mike continues. “Bunch of sign-waving, rainbow snowflakes will be out there today. They’ll do everything they can to convince you, the cops, and the fake news that we don’t have every right to be out here. Bunch of homo n—”

That word again. It makes my ears ring. They use it so freely, like it doesn’t mean anything. I’d gone my entire 19 years before today without hearing that word used like that, and I really hope I won’t have to hear it again. I pull out my phone and the messaging app. Even more texts from the family, especially Dad. Unread messages from Celeste and Roxy. Still none from Erica. I’m about to text her again when I smell the onion, feel the warm moisture of breath against the side of my face. Mike is watching me work my phone, not even trying to hide it. The walls of this ridiculous cage are pushing in on me, warmer and wetter and closer by the second. I want to scream, to jump out the unopenable window of this minivan, tuck and roll into the street, and find Erica. *You are stronger than you think*, Mom likes to say, *so just pretend to be that strong until you feel it*. So I don’t cry or whimper or make them think I don’t want to be here. Erica is out there, sign in hand, marching alongside Robert. She has to be. I’m going to find them. I can’t deal with an alternative story along

with my current predicament.

“Lot of texts,” Mike says like he is noticing a few clouds rolling by.

I nod and set my phone face-down in my lap. I stare out the window, trying to ignore the hulking man literally breathing down my neck. We’re still several blocks from the Downtown Mall, skirting around the blockaded areas to find decent parking. Down the intersecting streets, I can see the orange and white barricades. Cops are standing around. Black shirts and black shorts and bike helmets, leaning their city-issued bicycles up against the barricades. Definitely C'ville PD, not the state guys. I’ve seen them riding up and down the Downtown Mall in pairs on weekends.

My phone buzzes. I flip it over in a hurry, hoping against hope that Erica finally texted back. But it is just an Instagram notification. Also not from Erica. I put the phone back before Mike can glean anything. God, I wish she would just text me. Let me know she is okay. I need to tell her what is going on, to watch for me, save me. Again. Like the first time we ever met. Her knee to the groin of that guy. The way her swaying hips practically hypnotized me.

A whup-whup-whupping pulls me out of the memory, careening back into the now. A helicopter thunders overhead, oddly low, lazily drifting toward the Downtown Mall. I lean my cheek against the window, looking up to get a better angle, and spy three more helicopters circling. Two news. One police. I can’t make out the fourth, blocked from view behind a copse of trees. I’ve never seen so many at once.

“They’re just itching for a story,” one of the other guys in the second row says, turning to look at Mike.

“Bunch of vultures,” Mike says. “They don’t wanna miss getting the horror on camera.”

The minivan turns a corner, and it’s like we suddenly enter a different reality. A reality

where C'ville is a filming location for a movie, and hundreds of extras have been hired to play cops in riot gear. They're standing around in their armor. Helmets and padding and clear, plastic shields with POLICE, just like the photo I saw online last night. Except there are too many. Way too many. You only see this many riot cops in movies, not real life. And they're just milling about, like waiting for some unseen director to yell, "action!" The lady in front of me rolls down the window and sticks her sign out. I don't know what the sign says, and the police don't give me any clues. Some look at it. A few heads shake, most just glance at it before moving their eyes elsewhere.

"It's like they don't even know we're on their team," she says.

"We're here," Tony yells from the front of the van, and Derek pulls into a parking space for a hardware store. The store is closed anyway. We all pile out of the van, and I try to shrink, hide behind myself. I'm not carrying a sign, getting out of that, at least, by repeatedly shaking my head before we left the house. Beth tried to get me to wear one of her black hoodies, to match their all-black regime. I made some excuse about being allergic to fabric softener, and she let me off the hook. My shorts are khaki and my shirt is dark blue, so I don't totally look like I belong. Hopefully Erica will notice that.

"Huddle up!" Derek says, and the group moves into a circle, taking hands.

I try to hang back, but Tony waves me in. "Come on," he says. "We're going to pray."

Oh God. I can't NOT pray with them. That's got to be some level of sacrilege or something. I shuffle toward their circle, Tony's hand extended toward me, Beth's hand on the other side, patiently waiting, her head already bowed. His hand is rough and warm, Beth's cool and papery.

"Lord God," Derek says, his voice a flat drone. "Thank you for this fellowship and this

beautiful day, for the brothers and sisters gathered here to praise you and hold you up. We pray for our safety today, and to spread your message, to enlighten the sinners that are here today. We pray for strength and resolve in the face of this plague, this liberal agenda that threatens to tear apart everything we hold dear. We thank you for our voices, our healthy bodies to march, and for your holy word. Amen.”

“Amen,” the rest of the circle mutters, myself included, automatically.

“Matter!” echoes from somewhere in the distance. A collection of voices bouncing off pavement and buildings, its origin muddled. I look around, as does the rest of the breaking circle. Then it happens again, that one word.

“Aw, shit,” one of the women says, pointing down a street.

“What?” Tony says, craning to see.

I scoot in front of him to do likewise, knowing he can easily see over me. There is the protest, blocks away still. It looks so small, like a classroom of students had wandered outside and down the street. Their escort is anything but small. So many police—state troopers, judging by their blue uniforms—are walking at the head of the group. Six helicopters—a mix of police and news—are circling them, their separate thumping rotors combining into a dull roar. Behind them, even from here, I can see an armored vehicle and a few pickup trucks, all loaded down with cops. That’s just what I can see. Given how many are manning the various barricades, and 4th and Water in particular, the police must outnumber the protestors ten to one.

“That’s just pathetic,” Mike says.

“Barely even a march,” Tabitha says. The rest of them laugh.

“Okay,” Tony says. “Let’s do it.”

Six signs, two American flags, and one Confederate flag are hoisted in the air around me. The eight of them start their own little march. Now is my last chance. I can walk away, just duck down an alley, find Erica later. But how? I don't know where she is staying. She isn't answering her phone. These people are marching down the only route that will intersect the main protest, the only route to seeing Erica, to getting away from these horrible people.

I start walking, keeping a few paces behind. My head down. I don't join in when the group, starting with Tony, chants, "All lives matter! All lives matter!"

The Rabbi

August 12, 2018

Joseph Green has been staring at the same sentence for ten minutes. Nothing he types seems to fit his mood or how he thinks the congregation might feel. Something about perseverance, about things always getting better, but none of that feels right. Besides, his office is too quiet. He isn't usually here on a Sunday. Usually he is at home right now, finishing up the New York Times Book Review or watching football, depending who is playing. Not today.

He pushes up from his desk. He has all week to write next week's service. Shabbat was just yesterday, after all. He stuffs his hands in the pockets of his jeans. Even that feels off. He is always in slacks or a suit when he is at the synagogue. Feels the need to present an air of professionalism to the congregants, to anyone who might need him in his official capacity as rabbi. The jean pockets are too tight, too rough. But official capacity isn't why he is here today.

He walks past the outside door he uses most often, the one closest to his office. He is in no hurry through the halls, into the main room. This feels more normal, at least. He often comes here during the day when no one else is around. To pray. To think. To get a little solace and silence. He looks at the ark, up at the front of room near his seat, and says a little prayer now, asking for protection. Then he steps out the front doors of the synagogue, slapped in the face by humid August air and the thumping of helicopters overhead.

The big man, Donald Mikkleson, looks back over his shoulders. Once he sees Joseph, he turns his gaze back out to 3rd Street, his eyes making methodical sweeps from High Street to

Jefferson Street and back.

“How is it?” Joseph asks.

“Quiet,” Mikkleson says, his voice deep and jagged. Joseph wonders if it was the two tours in Iraq or his subsequent years as a bouncer that tore up his voice like that. Lots of things on his resume could do that.

Joseph pulls a pack of Marlboros from his pocket, tapping a cigarette out, and grabbing the filter with his mouth. He extends the pack toward Mikkleson, who plucks another loosened cigarette out with surprising delicateness. Then Joseph can't find his lighter. Mikkleson offers an already-lit Zippo, plain silver.

“Anybody been by?” Joseph asks after most of his cigarette is gone.

Mikkleson shrugs. “Some people walking. Not a lot.”

“Anybody coming from the Mall?”

“Nah,” Mikkleson says, taking a last drag from his cigarette before throwing it on the pavement and grinding it out under his heel. He dutifully picks it up and flicks it into the street. “Heard the protestors walking past third a little while ago. Just a little bit of a chant. Hard to make out with these helicopters, though.”

Joseph counts at least three. A mix of police and news, all hovering and circling. All staring at 4th, he's sure. He read in the paper that Heather Heyer's mom is here today, at the makeshift memorial. That's where today's scheduled protest is headed. Though the scheduled one isn't what he's worried about.

“You never told me why you need me here today,” Mikkleson says. “Not that I'm complaining about a paycheck, mind you.”

“Hopefully I don't,” Joseph says. “But I'd rather have you and not need you than the

reverse.”

“Sure. Sure. But why today? Why here?”

“You were here last year, Mikkleson?”

“Of course,” Mikkleson says, his eyes scanning the streets. “Grew up here. My boy plays football at the high school.”

“Those men were waving Nazi flags.”

“Right,” Mikkleson says, glancing at Joseph with understanding and pity. “Chanting about all sorts of bull. Stuff about Jews, too, right?”

“That’s right,” Joseph says. “We tried to vacate last year. To take everything and hide, leave the building empty, but we couldn’t.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing else I can do?” Laura, the administrator for the synagogue said. Her purse was already on her shoulder, ready to head out the door.

“No, Laura,” Joseph said, feeling the creak in his back as he stood from a stoop, picking up a stray doll left behind after the evening’s service. The worry was plain on Laura’s face, but Joseph knew she really didn’t want to stay here tonight. “Thank you. Have a good night.”

“You too, Rabbi,” Laura said. “Stay safe.”

Joseph nodded.

“And you, too,” Laura said, looking at each of the other men around the room. Bill was setting up a card table where the altar usually stood, now safely shoved up against the ark on the back wall. Spencer, a gentile hired as security for the night, was sitting by the front door. Joseph knew his partner from the same security agency—a man named Hawes—was standing outside. It was hot, and they were wearing bulletproof vests, so they were taking

turns outside.

“Goodnight, Laura,” Bill said, snapping a leg of the table into place.

But Laura was already gone, her heels faintly echoing down the hallway.

Joseph finished picking up. Two dolls, a comic book, a cheap lighter, and a handful of crayons. He pocketed the lighter.

Bill tossed a couple plastic-wrapped sandwiches on the table with one hand and sat a couple Diet Cokes down with the other, all of them dappled with flecks of ice. Joseph pulled his trusty Uno deck out of his jacket pocket, triple-thick, bound with two rubber bands, the original boxes and instructions long gone.

The men shuffled, dealt, ate, drank, and played in silence for a few minutes.

“There’s still time, you know,” Bill said, too low for Spencer to hear.

“There’s time,” Joseph said. “But no way to safely move them.”

Bill stared at the ark, more empty than it had been in Joseph’s entire tenure as Rabbi. “It should never have had to face this again.”

“No, it shouldn’t.”

“And there’s no way—?”

“I was on the phone to the Czech Republic four times this week,” Joseph said, playing a series of skips before playing an 8. “There wasn’t enough time to get the right equipment here to safely move it.”

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t just load it up with the rest of the scrolls,” Bill said, playing a 6. “Equipment be damned. Is it worth our lives?”

“You agreed to be here. I didn’t twist your arm.”

“You think I was just going to leave you here alone all night?”

“We hired security,” Joseph said, sweeping an arm toward Spencer, who was staring at his phone.

“You know what I mean.”

Joseph nodded this time. Bill and Joseph had been friends since high school. Grew up in this very congregation. It was one thing to have hired security around, but something entirely different having someone truly invested in your safety.

“I still think you should have just moved it,” Bill said.

Joseph sighed, turning his own gaze to the ark, the bottom half looking like a pair of wooden closet doors, the top half highlighted by brasswork, echoing the arching shapes of the stained glass above and Ten Commandments flanking the ark. The heavy altar was shoved up against both doors to make it harder to open. Just in case.

“That Torah scroll has been around since the 1700s, Bill,” Joseph said, drawing another card. “It endured 200 years of who-knows-what before the Holocaust. And it survived that, too. We aren’t going to destroy it by trying to move it.”

“So it’s in there now?” Mikkleson asks, and this time he’s offering a cigarette from a fresh pack of Camels.

“Yes,” Joseph says, waving off the cigarette. He’s already over his limit for the day.

“Along with all our other scrolls. We didn’t move them this year.”

“But you still hired me.” Mikkleson lights up. The scent of the first drag making Joseph’s craving flare.

“Just in case. The Alt-Right or whatever—”

Mikkleson interrupts him. “You can just call them Nazis.”

“I appreciate that,” Joseph says. He wonders how much of that is performative. Mikkleson seemed disinterested in everything except his job since he showed up this morning.

“I’m all for the second amendment.” Mikkleson takes a drag of the cigarette, long and deep. Blows it out slowly. “And the first, but that shit last year...”

“Terrible.”

“Absolutely terrible. No excuse.”

“That why you accepted this job today?”

“Hmm?” Mikkleson asks, facing Joseph again, blowing another plume of smoke out the side of his mouth, to the street.

“Why you took this job, here, because of last year?”

“Oh,” Mikkleson says, turning his attention back to the street. “The agency just gave me an address and a time. Same way it always works. I didn’t know this was a synagogue before I got here.” He looks up over his shoulder, at the brick, Gothic Revival towering above them, as it has towered for over a hundred years. “Hell, I thought it was a Christian church when I first saw it. Probably driven or walked by it a couple dozen times in my life, never realized it was Jewish.”

“What if you were sent somewhere, sent to protect something or someone you didn’t like?” Joseph asks. “Something you didn’t agree with?”

“Happens all the time,” Mikkleson says, stomping out the cigarette and flicking the butt into the street. “Not my job to care or agree.”

Joseph says nothing. He follows Mikkleson’s gaze a block over, toward the Downtown Mall. When the helicopters all circle away, to the other side, he can just hear the echo of

chant from that direction, though he can't make out what they're saying.

"Hey," Mikkleson says, and Joseph looks back to find the big man's eyes full of empathy. "Don't get me wrong, it's a nice bonus when I do agree. Freedom of religion means all religions, right Rabbi?"

"Absolutely," Joseph says.

They both stare off toward the Mall. Half a dozen police officers are standing in front of a barricade of orange and white roadblocks, three police bicycles, and a big, public works truck.

"Think they brought in enough cops?" Mikkleson says.

The question stings Joseph. He didn't even call them this year. Probably have the police to spare this time around, unlike last year.

"Sir," the Charlottesville police officer on the other end of the phone said. "I'm telling you, there's just nobody to spare. Every available officer is working the protests tomorrow and Saturday. We can't have somebody just standing around at your church."

"It's a synagogue," Joseph practically screamed into the phone. "Or at least temple, not church. And you understand these are Nazis, yes?"

"Sir, you can't just call them Nazis."

"And what would you call them?"

"They're officially registered as 'Unite the Right,' sir. They have a permit and—"

"I'm watching TV right now, young man." Joseph said, running a hand through his thin, mostly gray hair. He stopped when his fingers touched his kippah. There were barely enough strands left to clip it to. "These folks are waving Nazis flags and shouting, 'Jews will not

replace us!' Last time this happened, about six million of my people were killed!"

The officer sighed, but didn't budge. "I'm sorry, sir. There's just no one to spare."

"Right. So if I go out right now, will I see police guarding those statues? Will they be guarding any Christian churches or government buildings, all of which are likely empty? Because I have people in here, people that those Nazis," Joseph said, putting extra emphasis on the last word, "want to get rid of, afraid we'll replace them. Replace them at what, I don't know, but it doesn't really matter, does it? I have a scroll of the Torah from the 1700s. It survived the holocaust, do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir—" the officer began to say.

"And now there are Nazis trying to destroy it again. Do I make myself clear? Which is more important, your statues or my people and this holy document?"

The officer sighed again, even heavier. "I'm sorry sir—"

Joseph is still staring at the police at the end of the block, leaning against their makeshift barricade, relaxed, drinking bottled water like it's just another Sunday.

"Mr. Green," Mikkleson says from farther away than he was a moment ago.

Joseph turns and sees Mikkleson standing at the corner of the shrubs, looking down 3rd Street, away from the Downtown Mall. Joseph hurries over and sees what Mikkleson sees: a group of less than a dozen white people, most dressed in black, marching down 3rd Street, heading toward the Downtown Mall. They aren't just out for a Sunday stroll, either. They're waving a couple American flags next to a Confederate one. Pumping signs that read, "Heritage, not Hate" and "Blood and Soil." They're already close enough that Joseph can hear them chanting, "All Lives Matter!"

“You should go inside,” Mikkleson says.

But Joseph can’t move. He wants to. Looks at his feet, snug in brown penny loafers, trying to will them to move, but they won’t budge. He looks up at his synagogue. His Congregation Beth Israel, the courtyard and its black, wrought-iron fence. No signage. Nothing to make these people—who may or may not be Nazis—think this was a Jewish place of worship. *Hell, I thought it was a Christian church when I first saw it*, Mikkleson’s words echo in Joseph’s head. *Probably driven or walked by it a couple dozen times in my life, never realized it was Jewish.*

His breath is shallow. His heart a rabid tattoo in his chest. Sweat pouring out of him, not just from the Virginia heat anymore. He runs a hand through his wispy hair again, fingertips grazing his kippah.

“Mr. Green?” Mikkleson says, taking his eyes off the black-clad group for a moment, just to glance at Joseph, worry clear on his face.

Joseph wraps his fingers around the kippah, the clips barely protesting, pulling on the spare strands of hair as he bunches the head covering in his fist, and then drops his hand to his side, doing his best to make sure that from this distance, it just looks like he was scratching his head. He shoves the kippah in his pocket. Guilty for hiding. Hiding right in plain sight. The group is closer. Mikkleson’s hand is relaxed at his side, but very close to the openly carried pistol at his waist. One of the black-clad men, young and fit, looks straight at Joseph, hollers “All Lives Matter,” and gives Joseph a slight smile and nod.

Hiding in plain sight. Just another white man. Nothing to see here. Move along.

Erica

August 12, 2018

“When I say black lives, you say matter!” Red Jeans hollers from up ahead of me. “Black Lives!”

“Matter!” We all shout in unison.

“Black Lives!”

“Matter!”

It’s one of my favorite chants. Short and to the point, plus it doesn’t overtax my still-sore throat. I toss my braids off my neck, trying to let my skin breathe a little. Robert wipes sweat from his brow, but he isn’t complaining. He looks as enthusiastic as I feel. There aren’t a lot of us, maybe a couple hundred, but it feels like the eyes of the world are watching.

Helicopters have been circling all day. Everywhere I look are cops, grouped by the half dozen or more, and reporters. Cameras and phones. Microphones and little voice recorders. I’ve seen all the local stations, the big national ones, a bunch of people who might be representing anything from Reddit to a little personal blog, and even BBC. Our ‘Black Lives Matter’ will be on every television and news website tonight.

Through the gaps between protestors and signs in front of me, I see a wall of cops in riot gear, mostly state troopers, standing as a living wall between us and Heather Heyer Memorial Way. 4th and Water. The little patch of street where Heather was killed last year. We’re bunching up now. Thick and getting thicker, louder.

“When I say black lives,” Red Jeans yells again, now through the bullhorn she hadn’t used since this morning. “You say matter! Black lives!”

“Matter!” we answer.

“Black lives!”

“Matter!”

We keep clumping up, some people pushing and jostling closer to the front, everyone trying to be in on the action. Seems to happen every time there are cameras involved with a protest. Nothing to really worry about, but I’m getting dehydration-passing-out deja vu from last night. No thank you. Robert looks down at me, and I gesture off to the side with my head. It’s too loud for words right now. We both hang back a little as people push forward, and then skate off to the side of our group, still holding my sign and chanting the whole way. We’re still here, still part of this, but after last night, I don’t want to be face-to-face with riot shields again.

“You okay?” Robert asks.

“I’m not going to pass out.”

“I don’t mean that,” he says. “The look on your face just a second ago, it’s like you went somewhere.”

“Just...” I say, trying to find the words. “Sometimes I feel tired. Tired that we keep having the same protests. The same marches. Keep seeing the same faces on TV and behind riot shields.”

“Feels like nothing changes?”

“Sometimes.” I know things are changing, getting better, but why does it have to happen so slowly?

“Hey,” Robert says, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Thanks for bringing me along.”

“To this?”

“Absolutely. First off, it’s great to hang out with you. I missed you this summer.”

“We texted like every day.”

“It’s not the same and you know it,” he says with a wink.

I just nod. I do know it.

“And for bringing me to the fight. The world is bigger than the neighborhood I grew up in. It feels good to make a difference.”

“Stick with me, friend,” I say with a cheesy smile. “And you’ll be fighting your whole life.”

Just when I can breathe, I see a couple familiar faces all dressed up for a riot. The short Latina cop who was holding my hand when I came to last night is standing next to the big cop with the mustache. It’s brighter today than last night, but there’s no mistaking them. They are dressed in the same helmets, black armor, and those damn shields. Mustache sees me, grimaces, and then his face softens. Great. I guess he recognizes me, too. Just what I want. Pity for the girl who passed out last night. He elbows Latina and nods my direction. Her look of pity is downright maternal, not that Momma has such a look. She doesn’t believe in pity for anybody except Monique. *That’s all the pity I have in me. Nobody else gets any*, she’s said probably a thousand times.

I look away from the cops, focusing on Robert instead. I can’t take their pity. There’s a little on Robert’s face, but I can handle his better than theirs. But not for long. I look off in the distance, and what do I see looking past the barricades, down 4th Street, walking right at us? A group of assholes with signs. Not even a dozen, but there’s no mistaking them. Wearing all black. A Confederate flag waving. Signs that read “Blood and Soil” and “Heritage Not Hate.”

“Shit,” I say.

“Oh no,” Robert says. “Why would they do that? Here? Today, of all days?”

“Fear.”

“Fear of what? Us?”

“No,” I say. “Not really us. I never understood it as a kid, but Jewel always knew.”

“She usually does,” Robert says.

“True. She said the only reason people hate is because they fear. They fear losing jobs or opportunities. They fear not getting the house they want, the car they want, that if other people are getting things, there won’t be enough for them.”

“I don’t get it,” Robert says. “Sure, jobs are competitive and whatever, but there are always jobs to go around. And houses. And cars.”

“Exactly,” I say, turning fully toward him. “They think life is a zero-sum game, but it’s not. Your parents have a really nice house, right?”

He nods.

“Even though there are tons of really nice houses all over, somebody like those assholes over there sees someone like your dad living in that big, nice house, and they think he must have stolen it. Or at least that he doesn’t deserve it. That it’s one less house for them. They need to make us other, different. To see the world as us and them.”

“That doesn’t make any goddamn sense,” Robert says.

“No,” I say, turning back toward the approaching group. Latina sees them too, pointing and elbowing her partner, who says something into his radio. “It doesn’t make any sense. I don’t think it ever will.”

Mustache and Latina start moving, along with half a dozen cops from the other side of

the street, lining up along the meager barricade between our big group and their little confederacy of idiots. I can't watch them anymore. Makes my stomach twist. I turn back to face 4th and Water, the "Heather Heyer Memorial Way" street sign towering above all three rows of riot gear cops and our small army of protestors.

"Um—" Robert says before I can rejoin the chant. He's still watching the approaching bigots.

"What?" I ask.

"Do you see what I see?"

I look. The group is closer. Still the same bunch of assholes in black. "See what?"

"The blonde," Robert says, "trailing in the back. You can see her between the potbellied baldy and the lady with the antisemitic sign."

I slide in front of Robert to get his angle, and I see...

No.

No.

No. No. No.

That blonde hair, slightly curly, a little longer than last time I saw it. Even from here, I can see the slightly upturned nose, the sway of her hips, the crossed arms just below her boobs, like she always does when she's nervous, which is most of the time. No sign, and she's not dressed like them, but she's still with them. Walking with those people.

Mandy.

My Mandy.

Patriot

A Golden Shovel after Senator John McCain's Tweet, August 12, 2017:

"White supremacists aren't patriots. They're traitors. Americans must unite against hatred & bigotry. #Charlottesville"

We are Wonderbread white.

Advantage is the flag we fly, yet supremacists
burn bootstraps, bellow when colored brothers aren't
hanging from them. Khaki shorts and skin don't make patriots
any more than Christ or tongue, but they're
championing this false narrative, traitors
to *e pluribus unum*. Americans
kneel & salute the anthem alike. Must
we white be reminded to unite
with red & blue else we divide against
ourselves, falling prey to our own hatred
of the *golden door*? There is no us &
them, only *we the people*. Bigotry
only creates another #Charlottesville.

Mandy

August 12, 2018

Trying to hide and still keep an eye out for Erica proves to be much harder than I'd imagined. The main group of protestors are up ahead, chanting loudly in the face of several rows of riot police, surrounded on all sides by yet more police. We are a group of 10 white people dressed mostly in black, most carrying signs that are definitely not in line with the other protestors. Not a lot of them have noticed us, but a line of police form once they see us, putting a little barrier between us and the rest. My arms still crossed, trying to be as small as possible. I so don't want to be here. And then I see Robert craning his neck and pointing.

And Erica.

Oh, God. My Erica. Finally. There she is. I will finally get out of this. She will understand. I'll explain everything. Dad and Tony and everything. Tonight, I'll sleep in her arms, where I belong. Then she is climbing over the waist-high barricade. She sees me! I move forward, squeezing between Tony and one of the other guys, between Beth and Mike, practically breaking into a run. A couple cops touch Erica as she moves past them, saying something to her, but they don't stop her. Robert comes up behind her, and the cops step up, but I don't care. There is my Erica and everything is going to be oka—

“Who the fuck are you?” Erica yells, her voice more filled with venom than I've ever heard it.

“What?” I say. I don't know what else to say. How to answer.

“I said,” she spits. “Who. The fuck. Are you?”

I stand there, open mouth, still not understanding the question.

“Because you look exactly like the girl I’m with, my girlfriend, who should be at home up in Baltimore right now, not marching with a bunch of white motherfucking supremacists.”

I start to say, “Erica, I—”

“Do you see those signs?” she says. “That flag?”

“Erica, I can explain. I was just trying to get—”

“I don’t care if you brought Rosa Parks and Dr. King with you to march with us, you don’t just come waltzing up to me with these assholes!”

“Don’t you yell at her, n—,” Tony hollers from behind me, that word on his mouth making my stomach flip.

I put a hand up in his general direction, hoping that will stop him.

“Oh, motherfucker,” Erica says to Tony. “Your time is over. Go back to your woodshed, you Nazi wannabe!”

“Please,” I say in a whimper.

“Is this guy your friend?” Erica says, pointing to Tony. “These your friends now? Is this who you are?”

I look back at them, a small huddle of strangers and a guy I’ve known since before puberty. He’s a friend, I think. He was almost my best friend at one point, almost my boyfriend at another. That makes him a friend, doesn’t it? Did all that change because of, what, distance? Not talking to each other in a while? Obvious differences in opinions about love and hate?

“Goddamnit, Mandy,” Erica yells, her voice unusually hoarse. “Now is not the time to clam up like you do. It’s not the time to be shy. Answer the goddamn question!”

“Erica, please. Can we just—”

“Can you just answer the question?” She repeats.

I look up to Robert, standing behind her, but his face is almost as angry, sad, and disappointed as Erica’s. I won’t find help there, none at all. I need to answer her. I need her. So badly. I need to just say what she needs to hear. I can sort through what a friend is later. “No,” I say. “They’re not my friends. None of them. They got me to you, that’s all that matters.”

Erica’s mouth opens and closes. Opens and closes. Words failing to escape her lips. I gingerly take a few steps toward her, noticing tears streaming down her face, her eyes bloodshot. She clenches her jaw and looks up and away, probably trying to get those tears under control.

“What the fuck, Mandy?” Tony says, but I ignore him. His friends grumble something, but I ignore them, too, focusing on my Erica, standing before me in tears, tears I made happen. Fuck. I take a few more steps, and she looks me dead in the eyes. So many emotions are there, swirling behind those eyes. This is the woman I love, but she is so angry and so hurt. So wary.

“Don’t—” she whispers.

Another step, and I put my hand on her arm. It’s going to be okay. It will be. It was all worth it. She looks down at my hands, one after the other, then over my shoulder, and into my eyes again. Her arms fly up wildly, knocking mine away and the rest of me off balance.

I trip over my own feet. My ass hits the pavement hard, and then my head knocks back. For a second, I see stars and the world wobbles and blurs. Voices and sounds blend and mix, everything happening at once.

Gloved, armored hands are on Erica.

She tries to shove them off. “Get off me!”

Then Robert, the always calm and cool and nerdy, yells in a voice so angry and growling, it doesn't seem like it should be coming from his mouth, “Get off her!”

Robert

August 12, 2018

My own voice surprises me, but I can't stop now. Erica's arms are pulled up behind her by one of the officers. Her face is angry and pained, wincing as the cop wrenches the arm. She is on her tip-toes, trying to relieve the pressure, trying to spin away from the hold, but the cop has her held firm. Another, bigger cop is advancing on her, black zip-ties in his hands.

"Ma'am, you need to stop," another officer says. A woman's voice, half-muffled by a plastic face shield. I didn't even know it was a woman until she spoke.

"Get on the ground!" the bigger cop barks, loud and gruff, and it takes me a second to realize it's the one with the mustache. The mustache from last night coming at her with zip-ties. The lady officer is approaching Erica from the front. They're hurting her, and it's about to be three on one.

"Get off her!" I yell again, my own voice feeling hoarse after the first scream. I take two steps, and I'm between lady cop and Erica, staring down at the little woman and her shielded face. As I slide between them, my foot hangs up on something, twisting my knee up a little, but then it's out of the way, whatever it was.

A slender black shape slide into my field of vision, and I flinch. It's a nightstick, pointed right at my head by Mustache. "On the ground!" he screams. "On the ground now!"

Me? He wants me on the ground? I don't get it. I haven't touched any...wait. I glance over my other shoulder and see Erica sprawled on the ground. Did I trip over her? Did I trip her? Is that because of me? Do they think...?

Then a big hand has my arm, and I flinch away, flinch like Erica did from me last night. But my elbow hits something hard, immobile, smarting my funny bone. I spin back to see what it was, who grabbed me and what I hit, and find Mustache's clear face shield only inches from my nose, his breath fogging the plastic, eyes shot with blood and rage.

"On the ground!" Mustache repeats, his voice deafening this close.

The panic starts in my lungs, quaking like they're having a seizure, my breaths flitting in and out in little gasps. My heart is careening toward a panic attack, slapping against my rib cage. I can't focus on anything. Not on Mustache or the lady cop or Erica. I'm a young black man surrounded by cops. I just elbowed one in the ribs. In his armor. Men who look like me have died for less. Nowhere to run. No chance to fight those nightsticks and shields. I do the only thing I can, I launch my hands into the air and yell, "My hands are up!"

Like a car crash, everything happens at once, way too fast and far too slow at the same time. One of those big hands grabs my arm again, levering it behind my back. My feet are momentarily off the ground, and my stomach lurches, losing track of gravity. My face hits the pavement first. A dull, wet knock echoing in my ears. A knee is on my back, pressing down with the weight of a very large cop in full riot gear. My lungs are empty in an instant, and I gasp like a goldfish out of his bowl. My spine and ribs are bowing, screaming against the sudden weight. And then air rushes back into me, sweet and true, tasting of asphalt and iron.

"His hands are up!" Erica screams, springing to her feet. Blood is trickling from my nose into one of my eyes, but I see her clearly with the other. She takes two steps toward me before officers catch her arms, and then she's wriggling against them, one zip-tying her hands together. "You're hurting him!"

“Stop resisting!” Mustache says, even though I’m not. “Stop fighting me!”

I’m not fighting. I don’t know how to. This giant man with his giant knee is crushing me. And there are other hands. Other knees. Mustache isn’t alone on top of me even though I’m not fighting.

“Shoot that n—!” yells someone else, some woman. Is she talking about me? No one has ever called me that. She can’t mean me.

“Step back, ma’am,” the lady officer says to someone, maybe the woman who called me that word.

Erica is looking at me, tears streaming down her face, her hands behind her back, two officers holding her in place. Zip ties crank down on my own wrists, biting into my skin hard, and I see Mandy sitting up, those people behind her. That’s not right. She shouldn’t be there, not with them, she should be with Erica. I think one of those other people yells *shoot him*.

Zip ties lash my ankles together now, the cop knees and cop hands still moving around, grinding my cheek into the pavement. The iron taste of blood is filling my mouth, and I spit, but it just splatters on the asphalt less than an inch in front of my face.

Then Mandy is on her feet, but I can’t make sense of it. She rushes to Erica, but two officers step in front of her. They’re talking, and then they’re fighting or struggling or something. Her hands are pulled behind her as the knees leave me, and I breathe properly for the first time in what feels like hours or seconds. Strong hands are on my legs and arms, and they lift me off the ground, carrying me like a prize pig to slaughter. I try to look to Erica, to ask for help, for anything, but I can’t find her. Can’t stay with her.

The street is spinning as an officer says, his tone flat and merciless, “You have the right to remain silent, asshole.”

Erica

August 12, 2018

I thought I was prepared. Two forms of ID. A little cash. My phone. Nothing else of any real value on me. After telling the little Latina officer who arrested me that, yes, I do I understand my rights and what's happening, I started asking for my lawyer. My phone call. I've never had to do this before, but I know the drill. Went with Momma to bail Jewel out a few times, even bailed her out on my own once. And Jewel started telling me how to behave when I'm arrested before I had my first period. I know how all this goes. I'm prepared.

At least I thought I was. Cuffed to a metal table which is bolted to the floor. Plain, cinderblock walls. A mirror—no doubt two-way—behind me. I was prepared to be here, but not like this. Not with Robert and Mandy—who was with fucking Nazis—in other rooms here.

“You want to tell me what happened?” the Latina trooper across from me asks. The same trooper who was with me in the park last night, Victoria. Her black hair is drawn up into a fierce bun atop her head, pulling at the corners of her black eyes, brown skin taut. Blue uniform and black tie, all crumpled from being under the riot gear earlier. Her name badge reads Cardenas. Victoria Cardenas. She doesn't even look at me, just stares down at some papers.

I don't say anything.

Victoria looks up and nods. “Okay. Okay. Fine. I get paid by the hour. I guess you've got nothing else to do.”

I shake my head ever so slightly, my braids waving around my shoulders. Little beads

tinkling against each other with the motion. A reassuring sound. We let a few minutes pass in silence, but that silence grows louder, more tense as it goes on. She is staring at me, which isn't helping. I need to break the tension, so I say the single word my sister drilled into me for situations like this, "Lawyer."

"Okay," she says. "She's on her way. Long drive up from Atlanta to Charlottesville, though."

I fixate on my nails, messing with them like they're more interesting than my present situation. Focus on breathing, on keeping my temper in check.

"You could just tell me what happened. Make it easy for both of us."

"Can I get something to drink?" I ask.

"Sure," she says. "What do you want?"

"Diet Dr. Pepper."

"What if they don't have that? You want regular Dr. Pepper or whatever diet?"

"It doesn't matter," I say. I sigh, not wanting this to turn into a whole conversation, which she's obviously trying to do. Make me comfortable. Lower my guard. I'm just thirsty.

She grabs her cell phone and taps on it for a while, a back-and-forth conversation with somebody. Then she looks back to me. "My partner is getting it. Now, you want to tell me what happened?"

"Your partner?" I say, letting the anger creep back into my voice. "Big mustache? The guy who broke Robert's nose?"

"Trooper Ailey didn't break—"

"I saw blood," I say, cutting her off. "When his lawyer gets here—"

"You should worry about yourself, Ms. Betancourt," she says, putting extra juice in her

voice. “You don’t need to worry about that young man anymore.”

I work my jaw. I have some really choice words for this lady cop, but I clamp my teeth down on my tongue. *In custody is not the time or place to let your anger run wild.* I let my sister’s advice pinball around my head for a while, and then I nod and say, “Fine. Let’s talk about what happened and the bullshit your partner pulled out there.”

“That young man,” Victoria says, opening the folder and finding Robert’s name. Doesn’t even know his name after all that bullshit. “Robert McNealy. He kicked you to the ground. How long has he been doing things like that?”

“Never,” I say. “And he didn’t kick me to the ground. I tripped. For real.”

“Okay. Let’s say it’s the first time,” she says, flipping through files. “Most abusers don’t do it just once.”

“He’s not an abuser, Officer Cardenas,” I say, spitting her name like a pair of curse words.

“Please,” she says, “call me Victoria. I’m trying to help you. I know it can seem like he’s not an abuser. Things have been good up until now. He’s a nice guy. I get that. Lots of guys can seem really nice until they’re not.”

I shake my head.

“You love him,” Victoria says. “You’ve already forgiven him.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong,” I say.

“Then press charges. It’s that easy.”

“What?” I say. “No, that’s not what I mean. I mean I don’t love him. Not like that.”

She gives me this look that reminds me of Momma when she catches me out in a lie. I’ve seen that gaze leveled at Jewel, at Monique, but more at me than anybody. On Momma, it’s

terrifying, like her eyes are burrowing right through you, ripping your soul out for everyone to see. On Victoria, though, it's looks like bad acting. I bark out a laugh before I know it, and I quickly stare at my nails. This lady has no fucking clue.

“Okay, so maybe you don't love him,” she says, changing tactics. “It's a new relationship. You're going to keep silent. Then you're done with his ass, right? Not worth it. Good for you.”

I smile a little. It's amazing how she can actually be wandering even farther from the truth. But my smile drops as I think of Mandy. Done with her ass. Maybe I am. Every time I blink, I see her with those people, in the midst of a Confederate flag and signs filled with hate. She marched with some crazy racists. She started some shit, and now we're all here in cuffs. Something clouds my eyes. I blink, and the something moves to my cheeks.

Victoria leans in. I can smell the coffee on her breath. “I know this sucks, but do you know what happens next? He's going to start going out with someone else. Someone who maybe doesn't recognize what he is. Then he tosses her to the ground. And I bet there won't be state troopers standing right there when it happens next time. We won't be there to haul him off of her. He'll punch her. Kick her. Blacken her eyes and break her bones. He might even kill her. All because you didn't press charges, didn't do everything you could to make sure he never did this to anyone again.”

“Robert?” I ask, not able to keep the scoff out of my voice. “You don't know what you're talking about.”

“No? I've been a state trooper since you were in grade school. How many times do you think I've seen this go down?”

“Too many,” I say, because I'm sure she has. It's not the case this time, but I can only

imagine the shit she's seen.

"That's right," she says, "Way too many. I'm guessing this is your first experience with domestic abuse?"

"That's not what happened," I whisper.

"Then tell me what happened. Make me understand."

"He's just a friend," I say, with more emphasis on the pronoun that I intended.

"He's just...?" she starts to ask, trails off, and realization passes over her face. "The girl?"

I roll my eyes. Took her long enough.

"Okay," she says. "That doesn't make it better. Doesn't change anything, really. Abuse is abuse, no matter who does it."

"I'm not pressing charges," I say.

She leans back in her chair and glances somewhere past me. I don't bother to follow her gaze to the two-way mirror. Could be her partner or her boss or her just trying to rattle me. Won't work. Robert was crying like a baby when that mustached partner of hers hauled him away. He's not some hardened criminal or anything. Grew up in the suburbs. Scholarship student. He didn't mean to throw me down, just being an idiot trying to protect me, and I'll gladly sit behind bars to keep him out.

"Okay," she says. "Tell me what happened today."

"Look," I say, giving in. Maybe I can help him more with the truth. Maybe, just maybe, this one will listen, convince others that he's innocent. "It was Robert's first protest. Do you know where he grew up?"

"You tell me."

“The nice, white, expensive suburbs outside DC. Clarks-something. His house has a swimming pool. Two kitchens. Who the fuck needs two kitchens?”

“Your point?”

“He’s never been in trouble a day in his life. I know his dad is black, but I don’t think did the best job giving Robert ‘the talk.’”

“The talk?” she asks, but it sounds like she knows. She looks Latina. Last name Cardenas. Driving while Latina is probably the same as driving while black.

“You know,” I say. “You must know. You’re—” I gesture to her.

“Brown?” she says.

“That’s why they sent you to talk to me, right? Send the woman of color to convince the other woman of color to press charges against the black guy who got carried away?”

She leans back in her chair and sighs. “Maybe so. Can you blame them?”

I laugh under my breath just a little. I expected a lie, a dodge of the question, not the truth. It’s nice, but it won’t get her anywhere. “I’m not pressing charges against Robert.”

“Why not?”

“He got carried away trying to protect me, not hurt me.”

“Passion and violence are very closely related. That’s why we call them crimes of passion, because they happen in the throws of intense emotion. Maybe he was jealous of you and—”

“Oh. My. God,” I say, trying to leap to my feet, momentarily forgetting the table attached to my hands. None of it moves, but bangs something fierce. Victoria’s hand is hovering above her gun in an instant.

“Miss Betancourt,” she says with a gentleness I’ve only heard from Monique. “I need you

to sit back down.”

I do. As slowly as I’ve ever done anything, my heart racing.

“Those kinds of outbursts are unadvisable here,” Victoria says.

“I see that.”

She stacks and re-stacks the paperwork in front of her, a little tremor in her hands.

“I can just see some white mom in here,” I say, keeping my voice as low and steady as I can, “somebody like Robert’s mom or Mandy’s mom, getting all irate and emotional. Screaming. Crying. Demanding their son and their lawyer. And nobody would reach for their gun.”

“That’s not true,” Victoria says, smoothing out the paperwork before refocusing on me.

“It is,” I say. “I saw you at the statue last night. Big, black cop standing next to you. Mustache on the other side. But once you put on that badge and get that gun, you’re all just blue. Not black or white or brown. Maybe C-O-P is how you spell Nazi.”

“That isn’t fair,” she whispers, and I hear a tightness in her voice.

“Fair,” I say, chuckling as another tear runs down my cheek, a tear that surprises even me.

“Not a fucking thing is fair about this.”

Victoria is quiet for several moments before there’s a knock at the door. “Excuse me,” she says, getting up and stepping outside. She’s back in only moments, but not alone.

“Is my client being charged with anything?” my oldest sister, Jewel, asks, striding into the room. Her heels click against the tile floor, the picture of a lawyer in her suit and wide-collar button-up shirt. Her hair is shorter than last I saw, barely a whisper of an afro on her head. Her makeup is subtle, so subtle that somebody who didn’t grow up in the same house might not realize she’s even wearing any.

“Sis,” I say, but she keeps her eyes trained on Victoria, waiting for an answer.

“No, she’s—” Victoria starts.

“Then why is she in cuffs?” Jewel says, her words clipped.

“Ms. Betancourt was showing aggression because—”

“Because you arrested her? Charged her best friend with assault? I think those are good reasons for aggression. Or did you just think she was aggressive because she’s black and didn’t just grovel when you put her in cuffs?”

Oh damn. Jewel was not messing around. I’d never seen her in full lawyer mode, her eyes locked onto Victoria, throwing shade that would make Momma quake.

Victoria, for her part, didn’t back down either. “Your client was screaming and knocked half of the papers off my desk when we tried to have a civil conversation. So we cuffed her and brought her in here. Like I said: aggressive.”

Jewel glances at me, and I’m glad it’s impossible to see when I blush. Because my cheeks are definitely warm. Jewel’s stony expression doesn’t change, and then her eyes are back on Victoria. “But you’re not charging her with anything?”

“No,” Victoria says.

“Then we’re leaving. We’ll take the room privately while you dot whatever i’s and cross whatever t’s need crossing.”

Victoria’s jaw works. She looks at me, but not in anger. She must still think Robert is some monster, still thinking I’m letting him off the hook. She shakes her head slightly before shouldering past Jewel and leaving the room.

“Damn,” I say. “It’s good to see you. What took you so—” I start to say.

“I have never been so disappointed in you,” Jewel says, her eyes locked on me.

Somehow, she looks even more stern than when she was looking at Victoria.

I don't know what to say. My mouth works, but nothing comes out.

"Do you know what's happening to your friend? Your best friend?"

"They're trying to get me to press charges, but I won't," I say. "They've got nothing."

"They've got him on assaulting an officer and resisting—"

"Bullshit!"

"Trooper Ailey. Big guy with a mustache. Claims Robert elbowed him in the ribs trying to resist arrest."

"He was just trying to—" I start.

"It doesn't matter what he was trying to do," Jewel says, sitting down where Victoria had just been. "You know that. Black kid pushes a white officer. Elbows. Whatever. You know how this story goes."

"How could they—?"

"How could they?" Jewel interrupts, talking over me. "How could you? I expect this from them. How could you not prepare him? How long had you been planning on being in this protest?"

I huff and puff a few times, still trying to wrap my head around 'assaulting an officer' and Robert in the same thought. Finally, I sputter, "A couple months."

"And how long had you planned on it with Robert?"

"About the same, but—"

"But you didn't prepare him? Let me put it another way: Did you lay your hands on an officer?"

I think back to yesterday, remembering my own lapse in judgment with the water bottle,

but since Jewel doesn't already know, no reason to bring it up. "No," I say.

"And why is that?"

I see where she's going, the trap she's set. All I can do is walk into it now. "Because you told me, over and over, since I was a kid, to keep my hands to myself no matter what."

"Oh, so you can think straight. Good. Now, did you ever tell Robert that?"

I shake my head. Goddamnit.

Jewel takes a deep breath. When she speaks again, some of the venom is gone from her voice. Not all, but enough to make a difference. "Do you know why I told you all that over and over? Why I would quiz you on protest etiquette? Civil disobedience? All that history of Dr. King and Congressman Lewis and Rosa Parks?"

"So I wouldn't get arrested."

"Because I love you. I didn't want you arrested because I love you. That's why we fight. Why we hold signs and march and keep our heads up and hands clean. Because we need to make the world better not just for ourselves, but for people we love."

I nod, tears freely running down my cheeks. I wish she was yelling again. That's easier than this. I ask, "What's going to happen to him?"

"I don't know," Jewel says. "He's lucky. His mom is a white judge. Not here, but still. If it had been you, I don't think I could fight it. I don't have her kind of pull."

"So maybe he'll be okay?"

"Maybe," Jewel says, looking me in the eyes. "But maybe not."

"Goddamnit!" I say, jostling my cuffs against the table.

"Calm down," she says.

"Fuck calm!" I say. "I'm pissed! I came here this weekend because I'm pissed. We should

all be pissed. Why aren't you?"

"Me? You're going to question me?"

"Why weren't you up here, marching with the rest of us?"

"Because there are more ways to fight than with our anger, Erica."

"What the fuck is wrong with my anger? Malcom X—"

"Malcom X wasn't my sister!" Jewel yells, breaking that stony demeanor of hers.

It shocks me into silence.

"Momma," Jewel says, a quaking in her voice that just about breaks me. She clears her throat and continues. "Momma lost one daughter. We lost a sister to anger, to all this. I know she's not dead, but she'll never be the Monique we had before..." She trails off, unable to finish the sentence. Tears are welling in her eyes now, and it's making me tear up even more.

"Momma couldn't stand to lose another. I couldn't stand it. I need you, Erica."

"I need you, too."

She nods her head and wipes away a few tears. "So I understand the anger. I do. Sometimes, we need the anger, we need to riot to get things done. But not everyone can riot. Some of us need to sit behind a desk or in a courtroom or a classroom to make the world a little better. Robert isn't built for rioting. I've marched with dozens of people that are, and dozens more that aren't. It's my job to know the difference. I thought I taught you to know the difference. "

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize to me," she says. "You didn't take care of somebody you love. Your best damn friend. He needs your apology."

Then her arms are around me. I didn't notice her get up or move around the table, but

she's here, and I let out a sob. A big, blubbering sob. "Please tell me he's going to be okay," I say between gasps.

She pulls me back to arm's length, and we lock eyes. She says "I can't. I just don't know. From what I've read about his mom, though, the state is going to have one helluva fight."

"But," I say, stammering to put words together, "he's not built for a fight."

She pulls me close again, but says nothing. A fresh wave of sobbing erupts from me for what I've done. What I failed to do. And what our fucked-up justice system is about to do to my best friend.

Mandy

August 12, 2018

“—Erica Betancourt,” a voice penetrates my loathing. I look up to locate it. A tall, black woman in a mauve suit is standing at the front desk, her hair shorter than Robert’s. She’s the most bold, in-charge woman I’ve ever seen. She turns to look from side to side, and I see the resemblance in an instant. It must be Jewel, Erica’s oldest sister. She says to the officer at the desk, “I’m her lawyer.”

They exchange pleasantries, Jewel offering her ID, the officer tapping on his computer, and then he leads her down the hall. I watch them go, hoping to catch a glimpse of my girlfriend, but they vanish around a corner, the click-clack of Jewel’s heels echoing down the hall. And so the waiting continues.

You’d think they could at least provide a padded bench if I’m going to sit here for two hours. At least, that’s how long they told me I have to wait. Another hour to go. Another hour before my family—or at least Dad—shows up. That’s going to be fun. Could be worse. I have no idea what’s happening with Robert or Erica.

Erica.

When I’m not fighting off a panic over Mom and Dad showing up soon, I’m fighting off panic over the look on Erica’s face when she saw me on the street. What the hell was I thinking? How could I have let this happen? I hope she’s okay. I hope she can forgive me. And Robert. The look on his face, pressed against the street. Blood and tears. I don’t know if he’ll ever forgive me. I wouldn’t.

“You need a coffee or something?” Officer Catalano says as he walks by.

I'm thirsty, but I just shake my head.

"Suit yourself."

He was the officer that arrested me. Put my wrists behind my back and zip-tied them together. The thought makes me nauseous all over again. I'm not the girl who gets arrested. I'm the girl who goes to church and plays volleyball and rocks a solid B+ average.

Who am I kidding? I'm the girl who has a lesbian relationship she keeps secrets from her parents and best friends. The girl who runs away from home, catches a ride and sleeps in the home of white supremacists, and then gets arrested. Maybe this is me now. God, I wish I could text or call Roxy or Celeste. But the police still have my phone. Wallet. Keys. Pretty much everything I had on me. Keeping it all until my parents show and I am "released into their custody," Catalano told me about an hour ago. I was sitting in a steel chair, handcuffed to it, while he sat at a desk, glancing between me and a computer screen.

"You're not being charged," he said.

I nodded.

"And your parents are on their way."

"What? You called them?" I asked, surprised the words had launched from my mouth.

"But I'm 19, an adult."

"You are," he said. "But your dad had called half a dozen times today before I hauled you in."

Of course he did. He'd been texting and calling me all day. He probably called the school and every place I'd ever mentioned going to in C'ville. And the police. Of course he called the police.

"So I could just let you go," Catalano continued, the moment so fresh in my memory, I

could still smell the coffee on this breath. “But given how worried they are and that you ran away—even if you are an adult—I think it’s best to release you into your parents’ custody.”

Jesus, this day couldn’t get any worse. After all this, I was going to have to see my parents. I wasn’t ready for that. I couldn’t handle the hours and hours of lecturing sure to come, the drive back home would be one long lecture, followed by bars on my windows or locks on my doors or whatever Dad would do to keep me from coming back here.

“Hey,” Catalano said, his voice soft, his hand on my shoulder. “I don’t know the whole story because you won’t tell me, but you’re obviously going through something. Your parents love you. I’ve never seen anybody’s dad call that many times looking for their grown daughter.”

I wasn’t sure I believed him, but my eyes went misty anyway, and I shut them tight.

“I’m sure they’re not perfect. They had to have done something to make you leave like that. But trust me, it’s better to stay with a family like that, to work through those imperfections together, than to wind up in here or on the street. Talk to them. That’s why I’m not just letting you out on your own.”

His words sunk in, each one landing hard like the tears on my shirt. He was right. I was still mad at Dad, and this drive home would suck, but he was right. I nodded.

“Now then. Mandy?” he said.

I nodded slightly, but didn’t look up or open my eyes.

“I need you to look at me. I need to know you really hear me now.”

I took a deep breath, and then blew a jet of air out my pursed lips. I looked up at him.

“I want to take those cuffs off and sit you on that bench over there to wait,” Catalano said, his head gesturing to a series of benches along the wall near the door. “But I need to

know you're going to sit there and wait, not run off. Can I trust you to do that?"

Of course he could trust me to do that. That's who I am. The girl people trusted. The safe, responsible girl who doesn't miss curfew or sleep with boys or get drunk at parties. Plus they have my stuff. And where else would I go? I hadn't seen Erica leave. I couldn't move into my dorm for more than a week. I had no idea if any of my off-campus friends were here already. I certainly wasn't going back to Tony and his friends. Jesus, a bunch of my stuff was still at that house. Two overstuffed bags of clothes.

So here I sit.

A familiar click-clack invades my ears, bringing me back to the now. To this bench. A moment later, Jewel rounds the corner back into view. She still has that swagger of confidence, but looks a tad deflated, too. And then Erica appears a few steps behind. My heart flutters and panic grips my chest. She looks almost as pissed as before we were pushed into separate police cars, hands zip-tied behind our backs. But she looks chastened, too, like when her mom would lecture her on the phone. After a dozen or so steps, she finally notices me, and I see a glimmer of hope. Some of the piss-offedness goes away, though her face doesn't go happy or anything like that. Determined, maybe? I've never seen this particular look.

"Hey," I say when she's close enough.

Her jaw works, and I feel that hope slipping. She says nothing and doesn't break stride. She's walking past. I have to say something. To catch her. To stop her.

"Can I call you later?" I stutter out.

She stops, not looking at me.

After a couple steps, Jewel turns around and tells her, "We need to leave."

“One sec,” Erica says, and then turns to face me. “No. No, you shouldn’t call me.”

“But I love—” I start to say.

She holds up a hand, closing her eyes tight for a moment before she says, “I don’t want to hear that. Not now. Not ever again. I know what you want to say, but that’s done.”

Done. She says it like there’s no discussion, no chance. My chest is collapsing, my vision misting over. “Done?” I say. “Done? Look, Erica, I’m sorry about today. I didn’t—”

“You didn’t mean to march up to me with a small army of white supremacists in tow?”

Her voice is quiet. She glances around while she talks to me. She’s usually so boisterous, so loud, especially when she’s angry, but this is a scary sort of simmering.

“Exactly. I should have—”

“You should have done so many things,” she says. “I can believe you didn’t know about that guy before you got here. But fine, let’s pretend you’re telling the truth. But once you knew who they were, you could have called an Uber or Lyft or a fucking hobo on a bicycle. You should have walked out the front door and called anybody. Everybody. Your fucking parents, I don’t care. Or you could have walked. Literally anything would have been better than staying there with those people.”

“But you didn’t. I know you. You kept your mouth shut other than an occasional please or thank you or um...um...um. That’s you. Miss Non-confrontational. And then you marched yourself over, like all would be forgiven as soon as you smiled and tossed your hair.”

I’m fighting not to sob right here in the middle of a police station, in front of Erica and her sister, and my girlfriend—my ex-girlfriend—breaking up with me and laying bare everything I hate about myself. But my body is fighting the other way, tears flowing down my face and my chest shaking. Short, shallow gasps fluttering through my nose.

“Shit,” Erica says, her face and tone finally softening, which is even worse. “I do love you. I fucking do. It kills me. You have some shit to work through.” She looks at me long and hard, holding my gaze in a way I just can’t match.

I blink and look away. Of course I do. I just nod, not trusting my own voice or knowing what words I can say anyway.

“But,” Erica says, “you have to work through it without me.”

I keep my eyes on her shoes, those red Nikes she is so proud of, looking all scuffed in the way she hates. Then those Nikes walk away, the rubber not making a sound as they follow the click-clack of her sister’s heels out of the police station. Then I finally let it out. I have to. I ugly-cry right there on that bench in the middle of the C’ville police department. Cry like I haven’t since I was a kid. As I am finally gathering some strength again, a hand is on my shoulder, gentle and warm. I wipe my eyes and cheeks, sitting up to see Officer Catalano with a cup of coffee in his hand.

“Here, Ms. Stephenson,” he says, his smile and voice sympathetic. I take the cup from him, the heat of the coffee almost too much through the thin styrofoam of the cup. He smiles again and gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze before walking away.

“Thank you,” I call after him, my voice cracking. I don’t know if he hears me, because he doesn’t break his stride. I sip my coffee and keep waiting. At least another hour before my parents will arrive.

“Hi, hello. I’m looking for my daughter,” my dad’s voice rouses me from the rather uncomfortable nap I’d been having on the bench. Butt nearly sliding off, my neck sagging to one side. Drool caking my cheek. Sobbing is exhausting.

“Her name?” the desk officer says mid-yawn.

“Amanda Stephenson,” Mom says, hurrying in behind Dad. They both look like hell, dressed in the jeans-and-t-shirt getups they usually reserve for lazy weekends around the house. Dad’s Led Zeppelin shirt is untucked. Mom’s hair is up in a messy bun. They are my parents, but they don’t look like my parents.

“I’m here,” I say, standing up, my voice sounding even weaker than I feel.

They both spin at the sound and rush over, enveloping me in a massive hug. In spite of everything, this is the moment that I thought I would cry, that the waterworks would turn on, matching my mom’s tears spilling onto my shoulder. But I just feel numb.

“I see you’re okay,” Dad says once he pulls back, eyeing me up and down, his face some strange blend of happy and stern.

“Why did you leave?” Mom asks, her tone hushed. Never one to make a scene, my mom.

This is it. The moment. The chance to tell them everything. Erica Betancourt. A black woman from the suburbs of Atlanta, who I fell in love with. And I broke her heart. Worse than that. I want to tell Mom, to tell them both about my lesbian ex-girlfriend with two sisters and a single mom. About our first and second and third dates. I don’t want to tell them about how we made love for the first time in my dorm room, because parents, but I definitely think about that night, flashes of her skin hot against mine. I want to tell them how Erica marched in the streets of Charlottesville earlier today, and how I screwed everything up.

Dad and I share a glance. I don’t know what I want to see there, but panic is the only thing on his face, pleading with me to not tell her the truth. I’ve never seen this desperation on him. He’s usually so forceful and in control, but he looks genuinely afraid. But I have to do this. I have to be the kind of person Erica always wanted me to be.

I relax my knees. I didn't even realize they were shaking until I do. I hope nobody else noticed. I look Mom square in the eyes. This is going to suck, but I have to do this. I have to. *That closet sounds stuffy* flashes in front of my eyes, one of my last text messages from Erica. This is going to suck, but it'll be worth it to live my truth. Just rip off the bandage.

“Eric—” The last syllable hangs, caught in my throat. I try to blurt out the missing *uh*, but nothing comes. My phone buzzes in my back pocket, and I immediately imagine it's Erica texting me, my inability to say her name reaching through the ether, cuing her to swoop in and save me.

“Eric?” Mom asks. She looks at Dad, confusion written across both their faces.

My pits and...other areas go swampy. My lungs are too small, not giving me enough air. My heart is a racket like those weird angry emo albums Alice is listening to now. One more syllable. One more syllable and I won't be lying to Mom and Dad. I so want to talk to them about Erica, to tell them about this amazing woman who made me feel like love songs and rom coms aren't quite so idiotic. This woman who cracked me up and told me I was beautiful and is better at math and parties than me.

“Eric,” Mom repeats. “You ran away from home for a boy?”

“Um,” I say, scrambling to dig out of the hole I'm inadvertently digging.

Dad, standing just to the side and behind Mom, nods fervently. He motions with his hands and mouths the words, “Keep going.”

I want to talk about Erica. To say she's kind and funny and takes no shit from anybody. She looks up to her mom and her sister, and after everything I've heard about them, so do I. She dances like nobody I've ever known, and has an encyclopedic knowledge of Motown, Justin Timberlake, and sneakers.

“Good student?” Dad asks. “Athlete? Spit it out.”

Good student? More like great student. And it’s not like things just come easily to her. Well, some things do, but she works harder than anybody I’ve ever known. Arranges study groups and will totally blow me off when she has a final or a big paper. She doesn’t play on any teams at UVA, but she played softball in high school. And the girl is fit. Not Hollywood fit, stick thin and good on camera, but curvy fit. Not that I would ever tell Dad how much I know about how fit she is.

“She’s blushing,” Dad says.

“She must really have a thing for this young man,” Mom says.

Young man. Right. They think... I have to... I... I have to say something, so I do, “Eric Johnson. He’s kind and funny and...um...always stands up for himself and people he loves.” I tell them the rest, three-quarter truths about Erica’s sisters and mom, dancing and basketball and setting curves. But it’s all one-quarter lie. Eric instead of Erica. He instead of she. Eric sounds like a great guy, except he doesn’t exist. Mom and Dad give lots of approving nods, gleefully exchanged glances, and appreciative exclamations like *that’s wonderful* and *he has a good head on his shoulders* and *he sounds like a keeper*. I try to translate all of this to Erica, that they would love her, approve of her even, except she doesn’t have a dick between her legs, and neither do I. Maybe they could get around or over or through that one day, but I don’t know. The relief on Dad’s face is so obvious, I’m surprised Mom doesn’t notice.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Mom says. “All summer. You kept this from us all summer. I knew something was up. Someone. There were holes in your stories of last year we could drive our car through.”

I shrug.

“You can’t just take off like that,” Dad chimes in, settling back into the authoritarian. “Leave in the middle of the night and not even text or answer your phone. We pay your phone bill, so we expect you to answer it.”

“And poor Alice,” Mom says, invoking the little sister. Here comes the guilt trip. “She’s been so torn up, crying and asking every ten minutes if you’re okay. I think she left you a dozen voice mails from both of our phones.”

“I know,” I say, staring at the floor.

“Makes me wonder if you should be back here at all,” Dad says. Shit. He found a way to worm his original plan back into conversation, to present it to Mom without outing me.

Mom’s brow furrows. I’m hoping she’ll rebuke his idea, argue that I’m getting a good education here, that I just need to have my phone taken away or something. Instead, she just says, “Maybe.”

There it is. Dad’s plan coming to fruition. Keeping me from UVA without having to tell Mom that their oldest child is a lesbian, and embarrassment to the family.

“Please,” I whisper, not able to look either of them in the eye. “Don’t—”

“You should have thought about that before taking off in the middle of the night,” Dad says. “Before making us worry and panic and fear the worst.”

“Where the hell is my son?” a woman yells as she bursts through the front door of the police station. As tall as me, rounder, and sporting maximum-level Karen hair, half the bob cascading across her forehead in brown and gray streaks. She’s wearing a black skirt-suit and an even blacker briefcase swings from her hand. A tall, lanky black man follows her, hands in the pockets of his khaki pants, pulling open his navy sport coat to show a paisley button-up. He reminds me of an older—

“Robert McNealy,” the woman barks once she’s at the front desk. “Where is my son, Robert McNealy.”

“Oh my God,” Mom whispers.

“Ma’am—” the desk officer starts to say, his tone patronizing.

“Do you know who I am?” the woman says.

“No, ma’am,” the officer says. “Robert McNealy’s lawyer?”

“Judge Katherine McNealy, Officer...” she says, pausing to glare at his name tag, “...Reynolds. Bring me my son before I take your badge and make it into a desk ornament.”

The man behind Judge McNealy—Robert’s dad, I’m guessing—smirks. Officer Reynolds, to his credit, flinches, but rallies.

“Judge McNealy,” Reynolds says. “Your son is in holding. If you would like to speak with him—”

“He’s my son!” Judge McNealy practically screams. “Of course I want to speak with him. Get. Him. Now.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am—”

“If you ma’am me one more time...” Judge McNealy says, letting the threat linger unfinished.

“Your son has been charged with a felony,” Reynolds says, swallowing before pointedly saying, “ma’am. So we will not be bringing him out.”

“A felony?” Judge McNealy roars.

Mr. McNealy shakes his head, his jaw working, “sunovabitch” escaping his lips. I can’t hear it, but it doesn’t take a master lip-reader to figure it out.

“What is my son being charged with?” Judge McNealy asks, putting extra emphasis on

‘my son.’

“If you would both like to—” Reynolds says, the calm in his voice unwavering.

“Tell me what he’s charged with now!”

Reynolds sets his gaze, working his own jaw now. I’d been so focused on this exchange, I hadn’t notice the dozen other officers all standing, watching the exchange as intently as we were. For all Judge McNealy’s steel resolve, I’m a little afraid for her.

“Your son,” Reynolds finally says, his words measured, “assaulted an officer.”

Mr. McNealy takes a step forward, his face going blank in an instant, but his wife puts a hand on his arm. Her face suddenly softens when she looks at him. His simmer doesn’t abate, but he stops, staring daggers at Reynolds.

Judge McNealy turns her gaze back to Reynolds. “I highly doubt that,” she says, “and I’ll be representing him. Get me in a room with him, officer.”

Reynolds nods, first to them, and then to an officer standing nearby. Within seconds, the McNealys are following her down the hallways, Judge McNealy’s pace practically pushing the officer ahead.

“Some people,” Mom says, shaking her head. She looks at me, and the look on my face must be shocked or something, because she immediately says, “What?”

I shake off the look, flattening back to my getting-lectured face. “Nothing.”

“Assaulting an officer?” Dad says. “Just because she’s a judge, she thinks she can do what she wants? That’s what happens when you raise a thug. Did she think—?”

I don’t hear the rest of what he says. Something about the combination of Robert and ‘thug’ in the same sentence strikes me like a hand across the face. Erica was angry, wanted to start shit and get arrested. I fucked up, broke a heart, and absolutely deserve more

punishment than I am getting. Robert, though? He is one of the kindest people I've ever met. He was trying to protect Erica, his friend, and is paying a price he doesn't deserve. Something is boiling in my stomach, in my chest. My nails dig into my palms, and before I know what is happening, my mouth opens. "How dare you?" I say, much louder than I intended, but just keep on going. "Thug? Thug? You call Robert a thug? You don't even know him, and do you know how wrong that word is coming from your mouth? Or mine? Jesus, Dad! You can't even tell mom why I'm really here, but you can say that word out loud about somebody you've never even met!"

"Amanda!" Dad says, hissing quietly through clenched teeth.

"David?" Mom says, her head suddenly swiveling to him.

"Oh yeah, Mom. He knew. He's the reason! He told me last night that I couldn't come back to UVA, that this place had warped me, changed me!" The words are coming quicker and louder. My heart is thrashing, my breath racing, but it feels amazing. I start pacing since my knees are going to move whether I pace or not. Two steps left, two steps right, and just I keep talking. In for a penny, after all. "Mom, Dad, there is no Eric. Not really. But there's definitely Erica. Or there was. I mean, she's fine. Not fine. She's hellla pissed and heartbroken, but she's alive."

I stop pacing and take a deep breath. I'm rambling, and my parents are a picture of confusion. I continue, "Last year, I met Erica. We started dating. Yes, a woman. Now I don't know if I'm lesbian or bisexual or what, but we were in love and it was great. And yes, I kept it a secret from you both because of this right here," I say, pointing to their faces, both weirdly blending horror and shock and confusion. "Dad figured it out and told me I couldn't come back here. So I ran. I ran because I don't know how to stand up for myself, to say what

I'm thinking. I don't know how to talk to you and not disappoint you."

I stand there, breathing like I've just run a marathon, my face hot. Whatever will come next will come, and I will deal with it. Goodbye, UVA. Goodbye, everything I've ever known. I probably just ruined my relationship with my parents. My education. My life.

Dad's eyes are closed, his mouth partway open, breathing methodically like he is trying to reign in a massive stroke. Mom's mouth is hanging open, her lips half-forming words or sounds, but never making them. Finally, she twitches like something dawns on her, and then spins on Dad.

"David!" she barks louder than I've ever heard her talk in public. "How could you? How could you keep this from me? You did this! You!"

She doesn't touch him, but Dad looks like she's just slapped him. "Honey, I—"

"Don't you honey me! You find out..." She points to me, furiously shaking her finger, but still staring daggers at Dad. "...and then you..." Her face contorts into a snarl, a grimace, like it's made of angry clay. She takes a deep breath and huffs it out. "You hide it from me? How dare you!" Mom glances at me, back to Dad. "I can't even look at you right now! What if she'd been hurt?"

"Mom," I say, so floored and impressed and surprised.

"Oh, no," she says to me. "You're not free and clear. You should have talked to me. I'm hurt that you didn't think you could come to me with this, that you had to hide. Does your sister or brother know?"

I shake my head.

"What kind of family is this?" she says, and then lets out some cross between a growl and a sigh and a bellow. She's working her jaw, looking back and forth between me and Dad. She

closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and looks me square in the eyes. “Amanda, I’m very disappointed in you, though I think I understand.” She gives Dad another withering glance. “Not about...” She tilts her head, like a confused puppy, like she doesn’t know how to articulate what she wants to say. “...but about the running away.”

I nod, but say nothing. Not because I can’t say anything, but because it feels like the right move.

Then Mom turns back to Dad and her face hardens. Her mouth opens and closes a few times, searching his face like she might find the right words there. Finally, she says, almost in a whisper, “Who are you? I don’t know a man who would hurt our daughter, hurt me, hurt our family like that. Christ in heaven, David.”

Dad can’t meet her gaze when he says, “I’m sorry.”

“You’re driving the whole way home,” Mom says through gritted teeth. “I don’t care if you drove here.” Then she looks at me, her face softening considerably, though she still looks pissed. “Amanda, you are grounded until it’s time to come back here.” She stops then and spins, pointing a finger in Dad’s face. “And by God, she is coming back. You want to make decisions without consulting me, then I can do the same. Let’s go!”

Then she is huffing and puffing out the door, angrier than I’ve ever seen her, while Dad and I stand there with our tails between our legs.

“Let’s go,” Dad says.

“I think you need to sign some papers,” I say, nodding toward Reynolds.

He nods, his eyes fixed outside, probably watching Mom. “I’m sorry,” he mutters. “I shouldn’t have—”

“I know,” I say. “Me too.”

Robert

August 12, 2018

Everything hurts. My chin and cheek and nose finally stopped bleeding, but only after an EMT treated my face. My head is pounding, making me wonder if that baton made contact with my face after all. I don't remember a baton actually swinging or hitting me, but it was all such a blur of knees and elbows and pavement. My back hurts the most. That mustached officer must weigh like 300 pounds, and it felt like all of it was crushing down on my spine at one point. Then the other officers piled on. I could barely breathe. Now I'm leaning against a cinderblock wall in a large holding cell, trying to stay as far away from the other men as possible. I'm not like them. I don't belong. And it is impossible to stand in a way that doesn't hurt.

I shift my weight for the tenth time, trying to ignore the smells of urine, beer, and body odor mixing all around me. My stomach is barely staying calm as it is. A dirty, likely homeless white man wearing three layers of clothes that don't fit him is taking a shit on one of the toilets in the corner. No walls or dividers or anything, just sitting there in the open. The guy I saw arrested earlier, who was trying to impede the protest, is sitting on a bench, leaning on the wall. His boring hair is a little messed up now. His white t-shirt wrinkled. He keeps eyeing me, staring daggers when he doesn't think I'm looking at him.

"You should sit down," a voice from my left says. It's an old, hefty, white man sitting on a bench. Looks like a Grateful Dead reject or a hippie Santa Claus. Long, white hair hangs in scraggles from his head and face, coming halfway down his chest. A tie-dyed shirt covers his ample belly, and red suspenders keep his wrinkled khaki pants up at his waist.

“No thanks,” I mumble. Look at me, old man, I don’t belong here.

“You were in the protest?” Hippie Santa asks.

I nod, worried about what comes next. What bigoted self-righteousness is about to spill out of him?

“Good,” Hippie Santa says. “That’s a good cause. Shame what happened last year.”

Whew. I release a fraction of the tension from my shoulders, a pinch of the worry I’m carrying, but there’s still a mountain of it left. Glad to have an ally, but I don’t know what to say to him.

“You should sit down,” Hippie Santa says. “You never know how long you’ll be here before someone bails you out or they let you go.”

Hippie Santa scoots over a bit, leaving more than enough room for my skinny ass. Maybe it will hurt less. Reluctantly, I sit, gingerly lowering myself, feeling every stretch and twist of my aching spine. I absentmindedly wipe my fingers on my shorts, the stain of fingerprinting still there.

“They processed you?” Hippie Santa asks.

“What?” I ask.

“Fingerprints. Probably took your picture? Did a bunch of paperwork?”

I nod.

Lawyer Hair pipes up, “Probably deserved it, little—”

“Don’t you finish that fucking sentence,” Hippie Santa snaps at him.

“Whose side are you on?” Lawyer Hair asks.

“America, goddamnit,” Hippie Santa says.

“Oh yeah,” Lawyer Hair asks. “Why are you in here?”

“Went to a CVS,” Hippie Santa says, puffing up his chest in pride. “Bought some shit they said was illegal to carry downtown today. To prove a point about how ridiculous that little police state out there is.”

“That’s stupid,” Lawyer Hair says.

“Oh yeah? Why are you in here?”

“I was protesting them!” Lawyer Hair says, pointing to me.

“You want to see stupid? Just look at you! They have every right to be out there today and every day. First amendment, motherfucker.” Hippie Santa turns back to me. “Protesting a protest. ‘Bout the dumbest thing I’ve ever—”

“You want to go, Grandpa?” Lawyer Hair asks, jumping to his feet.

“Jesus Christ,” Hippie Santa says, slowly rolling up to his feet.

“Hey!” a low voice barks. One of the officers pokes his head around the corner and says, “Settle down. Both of you.”

Both of the men do as they’re told, staring each other down as they retake their seats.

“Thanks,” I say. I don’t know what else to say. I’m more grateful the cop cooled the room back down than for the old man’s defense.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hippie Santa says. “So, what did you do?”

I look away, past the other men and the bars, not that there’s anything to see. I know what I didn’t do, even if they’re charging me for it. Assaulting an officer. Resisting arrest. Everything happened so fast. I wonder how Erica is doing, if they have her in a women’s holding cell for some equally ridiculous charges. And Mandy. Mandy with those people. I can’t imagine what it’s like to be in Erica’s shoes right now. She must be heartbroken.

“It’s okay, son,” Hippie Santa says. “You don’t need to tell me.”

Tears well up in my eyes, that mild, familiar stinging in my sinuses I've felt too often today. I snort the gathering snot, trying to hold back the deluge.

"Hey," Hippie Santa says, leaning forward and blocking me from Lawyer Hair's view. "Don't you do that. Don't cry. Don't give that asshole the pleasure."

I look away from both of them, fighting back the tears, trying to be stronger. I don't want to give anyone that pleasure, but I don't know if I can hold it back.

"McNealy," the officer outside says.

"Yes, sir," I say, ashamed of the quaking in my own voice.

The officer is unlocking the cell door when he says, "Come on."

I pop to my feet, momentarily forgetting my sore, eager to leave this place forever. As I cross the threshold and the officer locks the door behind me, I start to wonder why I've been called out. What comes next? It's a Sunday, so no court will be in session. Prosecutors don't like to work weekends. I know from all the stories Mom has told.

"Hands behind your back," the officer says.

I comply, and the officer squeezes cuffs back onto my wrists, the metal ratcheting back into the red marks that hadn't faded from earlier zip ties and the handcuffs that followed. The officer marches me back through the big security door. My mind is still racing, wondering what is on the other side. Why would they take me out of holding?

We weave through hallways. Two lefts. A right. Halls lined with closed door after closed door. A couple are open. Officers step aside, making room. Some are in blue uniforms. Others gray. Most of them glare at me, sending fiery hate my way. Officer assaulter, they likely think. I've gone from the straight-A, pre-med student, to an enemy of the police. The type of man who batters cops in the streets. That's what they think. It has to be.

We stop in front of a closed door. The officer knocks twice, and then opens it up.

“—the presiding county judge here?” Mom’s voice bursts out of the room as the door cracks open.

“Judge Peterson presides here, ma’am,” an officer says. I see the officer first as the door swings open. “But it’s a Sunday—”

“I’m calling him, Sergeant Tyler. I don’t care what day it is.” Mom bellows and pulls her phone out of her purse. She hasn’t even noticed the knock or door opening. Mom’s face is red, but Dad looks blank, stony. Anybody other than my family would think Dad is calm and cool right now, but I know that face. Only when Dad is truly angry does he go calm and stoic like that. But then Dad catches sight of me, and his eyes go wide. The stone face cracks, sags, and he puts a hand on Mom, who turns to look at me as well.

Then the deluge comes, sobs returning. I want to sprint to them, but the officer behind me has a hold of the cuffs.

“What did you do to my son?” Mom screams, suddenly wild in a way I’ve never seen. No matter how mad or sad or scared she’s ever been, I’ve never seen her lose control. The judge in her is always the picture of control, of focus. Now a wrath is unleashing from her, directed at Sergeant Tyler, who is visibly struggling to deal with it. Then she’s on her feet and across the room, wrapping me up in a tight hug before I realize she’s even up. Her arms squeezing my back nearly takes the wind out of me, and she must hear me whimper, because she immediately lets go. But I don’t want her to. I want my mom. I want to bury my face in her shoulder again, the smells of vanilla and powder and home.

“What did they do to you?” Dad asks, standing by the chair he was just sitting in, fists at his sides, his face still unreadable.

I shake my head. I can't form the words or shake off the sobs.

"You stay here with your dad, okay?" Mom says, not really asking. But her tone is completely different. Still commanding, but soft and full of love.

I nod again.

"You," Mom says, turning to Sergeant Tyler. "We're going to leave this room and deal with this while my husband looks after my son."

"Ma'am," Sergeant Tyler says. "We looked after his wounds and only his lawyer—"

"I AM his lawyer," Mom says, the full Judge McNealy voice back in action. "And my husband is a heart surgeon. Infinitely more qualified to look after our son than anyone on the planet."

Sergeant Tyler glances down at his papers, confusion apparent, but then he clears his throat and steadies himself. "Fine. We'll go to the captain's office. I'm sure he'll want to be part of the conversation."

"Fine," Mom says.

"And I'm locking them in this room."

"Fine," Mom says again, not even looking to Dad for confirmation. "And get those cuffs off of him."

In moments, Sergeant Tyler has gathered up his papers. I'm out of the handcuffs, and it's just me and Dad alone in the locked conference room.

"Let me see you," Dad says, taking my face in his hands.

"I'm so sorry," I say between sniffs.

"This isn't your fault," Dad says. He presses various bones on my face, and most of them hurt. I hiss with practically every probing touch. Orbital, nasal, frontal, one on the side of my

face I can't remember, I rattle them off in my head as he presses. "Nothing broken."

"It is my fault."

"How could it possibly be your fault?" Dad says. He still has my face in his hands, but he isn't checking anything, not being a doctor in this moment, just Dad.

"I elbowed this cop. He's saying I assaulted him. Resisted arrest."

"I know. We've been here for 20 minutes talking to that officer," Dad says, finally releasing my face. "But I know you. I want to know—in your words—what happened."

I tell him, step by step, from Mandy and the white supremacists showing up, all the way to the officers carrying me into a car like Han Solo to the spit. We both laugh a little at the Star Wars reference, but the laugh is sad.

Dad doesn't say anything for a while after I finish.

"Dad?"

"This is my fault," Dad says, his face in his hands, elbows on the table.

"You weren't even here," I say.

Dad takes a deep breath before looking up at me. "Robert, I knew I wanted to be a doctor when I was about 12. Did you know that?"

I shake my head. He's told me tons about med school and residency and his work, but not this.

"I was playing football with my friends. Caught the ball, but wasn't watching where I was running. Ran elbow-first into a parked car. Had to have a couple dozen stitches. Was lucky I didn't break anything. It was my first time in a hospital since I was born. I insisted on watching this doctor put in every stitch. I was mesmerized.

"Now where I grew up, nobody became doctors or lawyers or anything, really. And

suddenly I started paying attention in school, like really paying attention. Working hard. Studying. Staying in to do homework instead of going out with my friends sometimes. I was 14 the first time a kid from down the block called me an Uncle Tom. Said I was trying to be white, working hard at school. Like black kids can't be smart. Can't be more than barbers or ballers.

“It made me so mad, I started doing everything the white kids were doing. Not because they were white, but because I didn't just want to be a black kid. A black doctor or surgeon or whatever. I joined the swim team and the math club. I was third in my class in high school. Summa Cum Laude in college. I pushed aside everything that said I was black because being black wanted to push me away from what I wanted.”

“Dad,” I say. “That sucks. I didn't know.”

“I know, son. But that's me. Those were my choices. See, the problem is, I made those choices for you. Your whole life, I pushed you away from the traditionally black things. I didn't want you to just have black friends or play black sports or whatever. My God, when you started watching *Scrubs* on TV with me and told me you wanted to be a doctor, too, that lit up my world.”

“And you were the best. Always so supportive.”

Dad smiles, but the gesture is sad. “I didn't prepare you. I pushed you to be like me, to assimilate. To be more than a black kid. But I didn't prepare you to be a black man in America. You didn't grow up where I did. You grew up in a nicer neighborhood than I ever thought I'd live in. We're the only black people there. I protected you, but I was blind. Ignorant. You weren't prepared.”

I gaze down at my wrists, the indentations of the handcuffs standing out. I don't know

what to say. I want to argue, to tell Dad that he was the best, that he did everything he could. That there's nothing that could have been done to change anything today. But a little part of me wonders what would have happened if I'd grown up like Dad or like Erica. To have full awareness of my blackness thrust at me every single day. To have been surrounded by black friends and constantly aware of what that means in white America. I can't blame Dad for today. I won't, but I can't help feeling like there's too much truth in what he says. And I don't know what to say to that.

The Docent

August 12, 2018

“Now at the time of Jefferson’s retirement,” Rose says, her silver curls dancing around her face. “There were only 50,000 books in America. Amazingly, Thomas Jefferson owned 12% of those books, and they were right here, in Monticello.”

The crowd oohs as expected. Rose straightens the name tag hanging around her neck while the dozen gathered tourists study the books in the library. She reminds herself to pin the tag to her shirt so it will stop that, though she’s been reminding herself to do that for three years. Sometimes she’s proud of her Pemberton name, but not always. She still hasn’t joined the Daughters of the Confederacy, even after forty years of her mother pestering her about it. After giving the tourists a few moments to study the books, she turns and walks into the next room.

“This was what Jefferson called his cabinet, though today, we would call it an office,” Rose continues. “Like a little boy, he loved things that rotate.” A few of the moms in the gathered crowd giggle, and then Rose explains the rotating chair and desk, the polygraph Jefferson used to copy his letters, and she answers questions about the floor covering and the color of the paint on the walls. She’s perfected the art of saying, ‘good question’ before answering. She teases the alcove bed, and then leads the group past the rotating closet and into the bedroom proper.

“Now, I don’t show everyone this,” she says, lying like she’s been trained. Like she now trains new docents. She describes the rare indoor toilets in Monticello, even opening the door to the small privy off the third president’s bedroom. “When you’re outside, look around and

you'll find the privy vents, which were certainly a place to be avoided during summer months.”

“What are privy vents?” a young woman asks.

“Well,” Rose says. “There was no plumbing or running water in Jefferson’s time, so deposits in these commodes went down into the basement. The privy vents were necessary to keep certain offensive odors from overwhelming Mr. Jefferson and his family.”

The young woman seems mollified by this, though another hand darts up, this time from an older man sporting a Vietnam Veteran ball cap. Rose points at him.

“I’m guessing the servants cleaned those?” he asks.

“The enslaved house servants, yes,” Rose says. She’s still getting used to the new wording. ‘Slaves’ rolled off the tongue so much easier, but she understands the change.

“Sounds like a fun job,” the old man says with a chuckle. Rose thinks it best not to describe exactly how the enslaved servants cleaned out the privies. Some things just shouldn’t be up for polite discussion.

“Oh yeah,” a young man in a green ball cap says with exaggerated sarcasm. “Those slaves were having an awesome time.”

Oh, no, Rose thinks. Please don't be one of those tours.

“Speaking of fun,” Rose says aloud, determined to change the subject. “Can anyone guess what those three openings are up above President Jefferson’s bed were for?” The tourists all gaze up, several look around the room, but no one gives a response. Then she describes the clever remote lock—a string and an elaborate system of pulleys within the walls—on the door that connects to Jefferson’s bed, before leading the group into the parlor. Another group has just entered the atrium, and Annie—another docent—is loudly giving the

same opening spiel Rose just gave her group less than ten minutes ago.

“Now these doors,” Rose says, laying a careful hand on the little nob of one of the big, wood and glass doors separating the atrium from the parlor. “We didn’t know how they worked for a long time. Everybody watching? I’m only going to do this once.” She pulls one of the doors closed, and its partner shutters to a close right along with it. Again, the expected oohs and a few gasps accompany the trick.

“Did Jefferson design that?” an older woman asks.

“We don’t have any notes from him on it,” Rose says. “But we strongly suspect that he did.”

“And slaves built it,” Green Cap says.

“While enslaved servants built much of the house,” Rose answers, pushing all exasperation out of her voice. Her job is to be informative, delightful, and to protect the house and all it contains, not to scold people for their opinions. “We don’t have detailed records on every piece of construction, so we don’t know if it was Jefferson himself, a friend, or one of the carpenters Jefferson owned.”

“It could have been slaves,” Green Cap says.

“It is possible,” Rose says. “One piece we do know was built by an enslaved carpenter was the floor here in the parlor.” She describes the floor, the months it took to build, the money Jefferson gave the man even though he had no obligation to pay an enslaved carpenter, and how that carpenter said he would never build that floor again, not for double the money. Most of the tour group is appropriately astonished and admiring of the beautiful, floating wood floor. Green Cap, however, just looks disgusted to be standing on it. She will have to watch him. People like him have been trouble before.

The trek through the dining room and tea room is perfectly normal. The group is aghast at the intense yellow paint. People laugh at Jefferson's wine elevator system built into the fireplace. They ask clever and not-so-clever questions about the windows, the collapsible dining room table, and Jefferson's need to keep the kitchen so far away from his dining room. They marvel at another alcove bed and the octagonal shape of the room.

"Not a lot of beds for such a big house," the old man says.

"Most of the bedrooms are upstairs," Rose says. "Only Jefferson himself and this guest room are on the main floor. Jefferson's children and grandchildren slept upstairs."

"Which children and grandchildren?" Green Cap asks. Rose is pretty sure he already knows the answer, that they were NOT Jefferson's children by Sally Hemings, his enslaved servant and romantic companion through most of his life, by whom he fathered six children.

"Mary and Martha," Rose says. "Along with Martha's husband, Thomas Randolph, and their thirteen children. Jefferson's grandchildren."

A few whistles and aghast faces fill the small, eight-sided room, a common reaction to 13 children.

"What about Sally Hemings?" Green Cap asks, right on cue. "Or the six children they had?"

A round, black woman with two teenagers in tow lets out a little chuff of annoyance. Rose knows she has to grab hold of the conversation and keep it.

"We can't be exactly sure where on the property Sally lived," Rose says. "That Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings were in a relationship was, in fact, very much in dispute until DNA tests proved that at least six of Sally's children were very likely Thomas Jefferson's. Even if there was romance or any sort of companionship between Jefferson and Sally, it

would have been unlawful. Plus, keep in mind, Jefferson owned Sally and her children. In fact, when he took Sally to France with him, she was technically free as soon as she stepped off the boat in France. Jefferson kept hold of her by promising to free her children when they turned 21, provided she did not run off, and returned to Virginia with him.”

“And did he?” one of the teenagers asks.

“Those that survived to adulthood,” Rose says. “Yes. Though the youngest boys were freed in Jefferson’s will before they turned 21.”

“What about the other slaves?” Green Cap asks.

“Upon Jefferson’s death,” Rose says. “His estate was put up for sale, including approximately 130 enslaved servants at Monticello.”

One woman gasps, but this is mostly met with dismayed—but silent—heads shaking.

“Didn’t he have over 500 slaves?” Green Cap asks, looking more and more indignant with each new nugget of information. “What happened to the others?”

Rose suppresses a sigh. Normally, she sits each group down across from the Dome Room and gives her spiel on enslaved people at Monticello, taking questions and inviting a heartfelt discussion. Green Cap is pushing things along. She takes a breath and says, “Jefferson owned nearly 600 enslaved servants over the course of his lifetime at Monticello. Those weren’t all at once. Jefferson wasn’t as whole-heartedly pro-slavery as some other founding fathers or southern plantation owners. He once wrote of slavery: ‘We have the wolf by the ears and feel the danger of either holding or letting him loose.’”

“Okay,” Green Cap says, adopting the highest level of disgust. “So he freed like four out of 500. What a humanitarian.”

Rose takes another deep breath, restraining a growing desire to grab the young man by

the ear and drag him outside. Before she gathers herself up, however, the mother of the two teens chimes in, “We get it, you’re woke. Would you please stop?”

Green Cap looks like he’s been slapped, glances back and forth between Rose and the black woman who’d spoken to him so. Rose swallows an intense need to smile, noticing many others in the group smugly doing so.

“But, I—” Green Cap sputters. “This tour is trying to hide the facts, to downplay the horrors—”

“What do you know about horrors?” the woman interrupts.

“Oh, shit,” one of her teenagers says, not quite under his breath. The woman shoots him a look, and he throws up his hands in helpless surrender.

The woman turns her attention back to Green Cap. “I’m glad you’re concerned about racial inequities in this country, about slavery, but everyone in this room knows what happened. It’s no secret.”

“Look, I’m just trying to help these—” Green Cap starts again.

“You’re trying to mansplain slavery to a bunch of people who are older, and some browner than you,” the woman keeps on like a train.

“Mom!” the other teenager breaks in with a whine.

“Do you want to tell him?” she asks her kid.

“Everyone is staring,” the kid replies, trying to look as small as possible. The teen is right. Rose knows she should interrupt, take back the conversation, but the rest of the group is rapt in attention, and this woman is saying things Green Cap needs to hear.

“Let them stare,” the woman says. “Let them learn from this young man’s mistakes.” She turns her attention to Green Cap again. “You want to help? Then why are you up here instead

of down in town, marching with the rest of the people who are actually trying to do something?”

Green Cap, for once, is silent. He finds great interest in the floorboards and shrugs.

“Okay, then,” the woman says. “Now why don’t we let this kind lady continue, preferably without you messing up her job?”

Green Cap looks up at the woman, but can’t hold her gaze. Then he looks at Rose, apology in his eyes. She almost feels sorry for him.

“My apologies for interrupting,” the woman says. Her two teenagers are admirably trying to blend into the wallpaper.

“That’s quite all right,” Rose says and changes the subject before anything else happens. “Now who is ready to head upstairs and see the Dome Room?”

Gotta Wait It Out

Never you mind the flowers at 4th and Water.

Never you mind the UVA kids holding candles in the streets.

One town over, it's just another Sunday with church, sweet tea, and lazy porch swinging.

One day, maybe we can forgive and forget J ___ A ___ F ___ Jr.

One day, maybe, but not today.

Prayer is all I have to offer today.

Prayer and its kissing cousin, thoughts, are powerful in their own ways.

Queer looks I get for wearing khaki pants and a white shirt.

Queer that I've been wearing them for 50 years, but now they mean something more than comfort in the Virginia heat.

Racism is foundational here in Virginia, a commonwealth founded on the slave trade.

Racism has never been my cup of tea, though, just keep the Jews off my lawn and I'm happy.

Swinging on my front porch with a sweet tea, I'll nod to any that walks by so long as they mind their own.

Swinging from trees like strange fruit ain't the way Virginia should behave, but it's certainly in the Southern blood.

Trump confuses me something fierce.

Trump says one thing and does another, does one thing and calls it something else.

Trump got my vote once, but he won't get it again.

Unless he can do something about Roe v Wade, of course.

Unless we can save those innocent babies from unhinged doctors, I just don't think I can vote for anybody.

Virginia has been through worse than this, though, fought the losing side of the War of Northern Aggression.

Virginia will get through this, too, we always do.

Wait until the next horrible thing happens somewhere like Florida or Missouri or Texas.

Wait and see, the country has a short memory, easily distracted by the next tragedy.

Xenophobia down in Texas seems a likely distraction.

Xenophobia everywhere, really, the president doesn't seem to like any immigrants, even his wife.

Y'all just wait, things will be back to normal in no time.

Y'all will forget about Charlottesville, but I'll still be here, sitting on my porch, waiting it out.

Zero chance I'd live anywhere else.

Mandy

Two Weeks After the Arrests

August 25, 2018

“Please tell me that’s not what you’re wearing,” Zahira, my new roommate, calls from the bathroom.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” I ask, kneeling in my thrift-store overalls, digging through my boxes of books to unpack. I will never let Adam pack them again. Did he shuffle them like his Pokemon cards before literally throwing them into the boxes?

“You’re kidding, right?” Zahira says, poking her head out of the bathroom. Her black hair shines so much it’s like its own light source. I’m so jealous. One of her eyes is done in the most perfect black liner and purple/pink hues. I will definitely be getting pointers from her this year. Maybe I’ll dye my hair this semester. Check something fun off my bucket list.

“What?” I say with a smirk. “These are fashionable, comfortable, and surprisingly easy when going to the bathroom.”

“In what universe are those fashionable?”

“Kansas?”

“Very funny. If you go to the block party in that,” Zahira says, ducking back into the bathroom to finish her makeup. “I will pretend I don’t know you.”

“Yeah,” I say, finally finding *The Hamilton Affair*, completing my trilogy with the book from the musical and Chernow’s biography. Onto my bookshelf they go. “I’m not going. I’m not feeling it.”

Zahira steps fully out of the bathroom, hands on her hips. Good lord, I wish I could pull

off that dress, or whatever she calls it, but I don't have her hips and it would totally be cultural appropriation. I realize I might be staring, and force my eyes back to my books. Besides, Zahira is straight, as I had to tell my mom repeatedly during the last two weeks.

“So,” Mom said, her face tight, like she didn't really want to broach the subject. “This Zahira—”

“Yes?” I said and shoveled another spoonful of cereal into my mouth.

“Is she—?”

I chewed slowly and gave Mom a quizzical look. I knew what she was asking, but it was more fun to make her finish the question. She wasn't really excited about my sexuality, but she was trying, poking around the edges, trying to understand it. Trying to understand me. After a few days of repeatedly lecturing me about running off in the middle of the night, she finally sat down and started asking me questions. Tough questions. *When did you know? Aren't men enough? Do you think you'll get married? Have children?* I could tell she wasn't comfortable with it yet, but she was trying.

“Um,” Mom said, smoothing out her shirt, which totally did not need smoothing. “Does she?”

More slow chewing.

“You know,” Mom said, and then made her pointer and middle fingers into Vs, pushing them together, the universal sign for scissoring.

I would like to say I swallowed my cereal, looked her in the eyes, and gave her a serious, well-thought-out answer. But instead, I covered half the table in milk and over-masticated Frosted Flakes. Some came from my mouth, the rest shot through my nose.

We laughed hard together for the first time since my arrest, which felt amazing, like there was a bridge between us that we were repairing. I missed her. We didn't have the big, post-break-up ice cream session once we were back home, like we'd had every time I'd broken up with a boy in high school, but that was okay. I mean, I wanted it, I was still struggling with the Erica breakup, dreaming about her. My mind wandering to her when I least expected it. But Erica was my first love. I wasn't ready to completely close the door on that yet. Once I stopped laughing, Mom and I finished cleaning, and I blew my nose a dozen times, I said, "Zahira is straight, Mom. And how do you know what scissoring is?"

"What's scissoring?" Mom asked.

Okay. Maybe not so universal.

"Nevermind," I said. "Zahira is definitely straight. I promise."

"Okay," Mom said. "Not that I'm prejudice. I wouldn't want you rooming with some horny boy, either."

"I know, Mom." Her progress was a lot better than Dad's, who was just avoiding me. Finding reasons to run errands or take longer than normal on yardwork. I missed him, but I was still mad at him, too. He and Mom didn't have a big knock-down, drag-out or anything, but I heard plenty of heated whispers when I would walk past their bedroom the last two weeks. I didn't know when things would be back to normal. Or if.

"Hey, Mom," I asked.

"Yes?"

"Are you really okay with me being..." I chose my next word carefully, noticing how "gay" or "lesbian" had been whispered around the house like a four-letter word.

"...different?"

Mom took a deep breath. “I think your life is going to be harder, but from what I gather, it would be even harder if you hid who you are, tried to live in the closet. Your dad works with a bunch of overgrown boys, very set in their ways, so he thinks that’s what the world is like. We don’t watch the same TV or read the same books. Do I wish you were straight? I’m sorry, but yes. But from what I’ve read, it’s not a choice, it’s just who you are, so I’d rather you be you.”

I smiled and tried to choke down a tear.

“But it’s going to take some adjustment around here, especially for your dad.”

I shook my head and wiped a rogue tear away.

“Be angry with him for what he did, but try to be patient with him, too. He loves you, he just has to figure out how to love you the right way.”

“You have to go to the block party,” Zahira says. “You’re kind of a terrible wingman, but I need you. Better than no wingman.”

“First,” I say, unfolding my legs and standing up from the boxes. “You don’t need a wingman. Second, I’m not in a partying mood.”

“Is this because you were grounded for the last two weeks?”

Funny enough, it sort of is, but she doesn’t know that. She knows about the grounding since I had to use email to coordinate our move-in instead of text for the last two weeks. No phone privileges. She doesn’t know why I was grounded.

“Like,” she says. “Who gets grounded on summer vacation from college?”

“You’ve never met David and Katherine Stephenson,” I say. “Masters of the grounding.”

“You know,” Zahira says, changing tactics. “The block party is the official kickoff to the

UVA social world. By the time the party is over, all the cutest guys will be spoken for. You can't just sit it out unless you want to be a pariah all year."

That is only half-true. I think it would work on freshmen. It certainly would have worked on Freshman Mandy, still thinking she was straight, as gullible as when she was 12. But not now. My heart is still aching, the wound of the breakup too fresh. Too real. And when I'm not thinking about Erica or how my parents are handling my coming-out, I'm worried about Robert. Assaulting an officer. Resisting arrest. Bullshit charges that he is going to have to fight. I hadn't heard from him. His mom called last week to make sure I was willing to testify, to back up his story, which of course I am. But all of it is too much, way too much to make a party sound fun. The last thing I want to do is fend off drunk guys.

"You don't want to be a social pariah," Zahira says, really playing up the whine in her voice. "Do you?"

I shrug. It would be easy blow the question off, to tell her some half-true story and say it led to my grounding. Or to just clam up like I always do. We hung out enough last year that she expects that. She would just give up. That strategy has worked my entire life. But I don't want to be that anymore. Don't want to drive more people away because I can't fucking talk when I need to. I swallow hard and take a deep breath.

"Actually," I say, looking her in the eyes, forcing myself to maintain the eye contact even as my cheeks go hot. "I just went through a really shitty breakup."

"Oh, Mandy!" Zahira is across the room in an instant, her hands grabbing mine. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I shrug again. "You know me," I say.

She laughs a little, a pitying, knowing laugh. "True," she says. "Do I know him?"

Okay. Moment of truth. She's my roommate. My friend. It will be okay. She won't hate me. She has a bunch of gay friends. I've met some of them. She's totally cool. *And if anyone does hate you*, Mom's voice rings in my head, *you don't need them in your life*. "Her," I finally say. "I don't think you know her."

Zahira's eyes go wide, but only for a second, and then she's back to the sympathetic smile. "Okay," she says. "If you point her out, I can totally beat her up for you."

I laugh and tears are streaking my face. Maybe because I'm crying, or maybe because I'm laughing, I'm not even sure. Laughing because Erica would TOTALLY kick Zahira's ass. Crying because I still miss Erica, still love her. Laughing because coming out was barely a blip on Zahira's radar, and crying because of that, too.

"Do we need to stay in and drink about it?" she asks.

"No," I say. "Not yet. You go have fun. I'll keep unpacking."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'll let you know when I'm ready to drink about it."

"Okay," she says and pulls me in for a hug. "And your status as wingman just improved dramatically."

We laugh, which feels so good. That's one down. Just the rest of the world to tell. *One at a time*, just like Mom said.

Erica

Two Weeks After the Arrests

August 27, 2018

You'd think after spending my first 18 years living in Atlanta, I'd be immune to a southern summer. But no. I'm standing outside, wearing a too-thick t-shirt and khakis—not my idea—and handing out flyers to confused freshmen and apathetic upperclassmen.

“N-double-A-C-P!” I yell, though not too loudly. I feel like my throat just healed from two weeks ago. “National Association for the Advancement of Colored People! Weekly meetings, demonstrations, get involved! Be heard!”

I wave the flyer in front of a few faces. Half a dozen white guys in khaki cargo shorts who pointedly don't look at me. A trio of black guys who do the same. One gal who reminds me way too much of Mandy. She takes one and offers a polite thanks. I nod appreciatively and focus on the next group: three young, black women.

“Ladies,” I say. “Here for the NAACP?”

“I didn't know there were college chapters,” one says. She is rocking some cornrows, a vintage Jordan jersey, and matching Nike shorts and sneakers. Very nice.

“We're a youth and college division,” I say, handing all three of them flyers.

“What do y'all do?” another one asks, hiking up her tube top. I don't know anybody other than Momma still wears tube tops, but seeing this gal reminds me how much I like seeing them on women my own age. Her brown shoulders look good, like she plays ball or something. She is bald, though, which is not my thing. She pulls it off. Not like Grace Jones pulled it off, but she is working it.

“We meet weekly to discuss issues of race on campus,” I say. “But we also have guest speakers, workshops, anything to advance our members, to give us every opportunity to succeed.”

“Cool,” Jordan Jersey says, skimming over the flyer.

“You interested in joining?” I ask.

“Maybe,” Wannabe Grace says.

“Tell you what,” I say, grabbing a pen and scooting our sign-up sheet toward them. “Toss down your names and email addresses. We’ll let you know when the first meeting is, our event calendar, how to get involved. Come by a meeting. Hang at an event. Maybe you’ll like it. Or you can just delete the email, whatever. No pressure.”

Jordan Jersey and Wannabe Grace both look at the third girl, obviously the silent leader. She reminds me of Monique before the shooting. A puffy little afro on her head that is sculpted to perfection, big, gold hoop earrings swaying as she turns to look at each of her friends. The white wraparound top she is wearing shows off a tight little stomach, and those shorts aren’t leaving much to the imagination. I try not to stare. Not sure how successful I am.

“Okay,” Wannabe Grace finally says. All three sign their names and scribble down their UVA-issued email addresses. The silent one gives me a little wink and a wave as the three turn to leave. I pull back the sheet and see she’s drawn a little heart next to her name and left her phone number there, too. It was sweet. I’m not ready, but nothing wrong with saving a hot girl’s digits for later.

I start typing her name and number into my phone when a familiar voice sends my guts spinning.

“Hey,” Robert says. He barely looks like himself. Same high-top fade and jorts, but his shoulders are slumped and he’s dragging his feet like walking through quicksand. He’s walking across campus with his parents in tow, all three of them looking too serious.

“Robert!” I yell and—rather uncharacteristic of me—run out from behind the table. He says something to his parents, and then walks to meet me. I wrap him up in a hug. I’ve barely gotten a text from him in the last two weeks. No Instagram updates. He’s practically been radio silent. I wasn’t sure I’d even see him on campus ever again.

He leans into the hug, his left hand giving my back a half-hearted pat. Over his shoulder, I see his mom give me the dirtiest look I’ve ever seen on her. Robert’s dad just looks right through me.

“How are you? What’s going on?” I ask, pulling back to focus on him, trying to ignore his parents.

“Well,” he says. “I’m out on bail.”

“Bail?” I ask. “So they’re—”

“NAACP, huh?” he says, obviously changing the subject.

“Yeah,” I say. “Jewel’s idea. Her idea of community service.” More like penance. “Take all the things she taught me, and use it to help organize. Momma said it was the best idea Jewel has ever had. Threatened to keep me home this year if I didn’t agree to it.”

“You like it?”

“I don’t know yet. I just signed up online last week, and now they have me working the table. Outside. In August. I’ll let you know once we start organizing some actual events with air conditioning.”

“Cool,” he says, though he doesn’t sound particularly invested. “Cool.”

We stand there awkwardly for what feels like the longest minute that has ever existed, until I can't help but change the subject back. "The prosecutor—?"

He takes the world's biggest sigh before answering, "Moving forward with their case, yeah."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

"But it's bullshit, right? There's no way. You were just trying to protect me. To help me."

He shrugs. "I know. That's our defense. Mom thinks we can beat it, but plenty of guys have gone to prison for less."

"Hey," I say, grabbing his face. "There's no way. Your mom is going to destroy them in court. You'll be fine."

He half smiles, but his heart isn't in it. His eyes look dead. He sighs and says, "I'm not fine. I'll never be fine again. Even if we beat this thing, everything is ruined."

"You're here, out in the sunshine. You'll beat this, and it will be like nothing ever happened."

He shakes his head and works his jaw. "You don't get it."

"Don't get what?"

"I'm just here to meet with the dean and sign some papers. Mom thinks it makes a better impression than a video call and signing digitally."

"Meeting with the dean? Papers? What about classes?"

He works his jaw, averting his gaze from me. "I'm not coming back here. To school."

"But," I say, practically stuttering. "Why?"

"My scholarship—"

“They took away your scholarship?” I say much louder than I intended.

“Suspended pending the results of the trial. Just like me. Code of conduct or something...”

“That’s bullshit! Absolute bullshit!”

“It’s right there in the contract I signed for the scholarship,” Robert mumbles.

“But you didn’t do anything!”

He shrugs. He looks like he’s going to cry, but doesn’t.

“Those fuckers! But you’re fighting, your mom is fighting, you’ll be back next year.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know what comes next, what I’m doing with my life.”

“You’re going to beat this thing,” I say, “and then it’s back to becoming Dr. Robert McNealy.”

Robert shakes his head, his whole posture somehow becoming even more melancholy.

“No med school will accept me with a felony on my record.”

That punches me in the gut as much as any fist could. “But you’re going to beat it.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Even a felony acquittal looks bad. A black guy with ‘assaulting an officer’ on his record? Big red flag.”

“Come on,” I say. “You’re being overdramatic. You know—”

“No!” Robert says, his face suddenly stony. “You don’t get it. This is reality. There are some dreams that don’t hold up with something like this on your record, guilty or not. It’s done. Over. All I’ve ever wanted to be since I was like six years old, and it’s gone. I screwed it all up.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Robert sighs and closes his eyes tight, looking away from me before he opens them

again. “There’s a chance Mom can beat it, sure. But she’s so angry. Talking about Duke and keeping my head down.”

“What?”

“She went to Duke. She has pull. She thinks if she beats this case, she can pull strings and get me in.”

“Well, that’s not here, but at least—”

“And no more protests. Keeping my head down. Staying squeaky clean.”

Now the dirty looks from Judge and Doctor McNealy make sense. They don’t just want him to stay away from protests, but from me, from the girl who did this.

“I’m so, so sorry, Robert.”

His head falls back and a sigh escapes his lips. “It’s not your fault.”

“It is,” I whisper.

“What?”

Now I’m working my jaw, trying to keep it together. I knew we’d have to have this conversation, but I didn’t know about med school, about how this one arrest was completely changing his life. How much I had to apologize for.

“I should have prepared you,” I say.

He half-laughs and shakes his head. “That’s what my dad said. His fault.”

“Your dad?”

“There’s no way, Erica. You couldn’t have known Mandy would show up like that.”

Just hearing her name still stings, but I carry on. “I know. I wasn’t prepared for that. I didn’t react well. But that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“What then?” he asks.

“Eric Garner. Michael Brown. Tamir Rice. You could easily be another name on that list. You grew up in this weird little bubble. Your white mom a judge. Every cop knew you as the judge’s son. But even if you’d grown up where I did, you still need somebody to teach you. Do you know how many talks Jewel had with me before she let me go to a protest with her? How many times she pulled me back from doing something that would get me arrested for the wrong reasons? How many protests we did together before she knew I could handle it on my own?”

Robert shook his head, but remained silent.

“It was years before my first protest without her. It’s one thing to get arrested for civil disobedience, the kind of arrest that you know won’t hurt you, that does more good for our cause than harm to yourself. She taught me how to act in front of cops, the kinds of urges to ignore, like touching them. Even a handshake or a pat on the shoulder can be twisted around on us. I know that. I’ve known that for years. I should have prepared you, told you to reign in that chivalrous streak you have.”

“That wasn’t your job.”

“It was. Maybe it was your dad’s job first, but you’re my best friend. It was my job, too. As my sister so emphatically reminded me, we protest to protect the people we love. That’s why we fight. I love you like a brother, and I didn’t protect you. I fucked up.”

“Like I tried to protect you,” Robert says, his eyes downcast, off somewhere.

“I’m so sorry, Robert.”

He nods slowly, contemplatively. After several silent moments, he says, “I never thought of that. I didn’t—” He trails off.

“Hey,” I say, dipping down so my face is in his line of sight. “Are you okay?”

He looks off in the distance, slowly shaking his head. “No. Definitely not okay.”

I wait for him to say more, to explain, but what’s left to explain? He was arrested. Out on bail. Charged with a felony. Still figuring out how to make sense of a world in which he might never be a doctor. My best friend is broken. I put a hand on his arm and say, “Are we okay? We cool?”

His face changes, suddenly thoughtful and still so dour. Finally, he looks at me. “No. We’re not cool.”

Tears leap into my eyes. First Mandy breaks my heart and I have to walk away from her. Now I’ve wrecked my best friend. Practically my brother, and he’s done with me like I’m done with her.

He must see the reaction on my face, because his hands are suddenly grabbing mine. “But we will be,” he says. “We will be. I just need some time.”

I nod, fighting to keep a tear from bursting onto my cheek.

He lets go of my hands, takes a deep breath, and then wipes his hands down his face. “I’m going to go. I’ll call you. Or text. Whatever. When I’m ready.”

“Okay,” I say.

“My mom will call you soon,” he says, “about testifying at my trial.”

“Of course. Whatever you need.”

“Thanks,” he says, but he’s not looking at me. I want to say *that’s what family does* or *what are friend for* or *anything for you* or something equally sentimental, but I’m afraid the dam in me will burst if I say any of those things. So I just stand there dumbly while Robert nods as if to himself, and then walks away. His dad pats him on the shoulder, and Judge McNealy throws me once last wicked glance before they continue on toward the dean.

As I turn back to the table, I see a flash of blonde hair tossed over a shoulder. My heart drops and my jaw clenches. I hadn't thought about what I would do if I saw her, saw Mandy on campus. Of course it's going to happen, I just hadn't thought it through. I look again, but it's not Mandy after all. Just some random blonde girl. And to my great surprised, I'm not just feeling relief, but longing. Damn. I miss her. I still love the girl she was before I saw her on the street.

And it pisses me off. Makes me so angry that she did that, betrayed me. Makes me angry that it led to our arrests, to Robert's life imploding. So angry that I wasn't a better friend to Robert, didn't do what I could to help him when it mattered. And it hurts. I lost my girlfriend and my best friend on the same day, and that makes me seven different shades of pissed off. My whole life, anger has been my friend, my tool. Anger and action. Action and anger. But now I'm angry and I can't do anything. Shouldn't, really. The best thing I can do is go back to that table, hand out flyers like nothing is wrong, and let Mandy and Robert live their lives.

I walk back behind the table, straightening flyers between wiping my eyes on my sleeves. Robert and I aren't cool. That sucks. But *we will be*. The look in his eyes, the grab of my hands. And Mandy is somewhere on campus, part of her is still the girl I love. That sucks, too. But it will be okay. Not now. Maybe not for a while. But it will be. It has to be.

Epilogue: On Both Sides

August 12, 2019

I'm not the kind of person to get writer's block. Ideas are never an issue. Part of what got me rolling on a daily writing habit was when someone on Twitter—probably Delilah S. Dawson—mentioned that delaying writing the thing you're working on doesn't just hold back that idea, but all the other ideas you have that will come after it. I'm paraphrasing, but the idea really struck me. I have ideas after ideas after ideas. My brain is constantly flipping around, working on several of them at once.

But there I was in Charlottesville, Virginia—a trip made possible in part by a Lambda Iota Tau research grant from Sigma Tau Delta—walking through the intersection of 4th and Water for the sixth or seventh time, still unsure of what to write. This was the intersection where Heather Heyer was run down on August 12, 2017. Killed while protesting against neo-Nazis. What words I could leave for Heather Heyer and the mourners and activists that traverse that intersection regularly?

After settling into my AirBnB in Charlottesville on August 9, 2019, I chatted with my host, put down my bags, and rested for a while. Then I drove downtown to get dinner. After a little Googling, I decided to park at the Water Street Garage. I came down the steps, and there it was, right in front of me. Writing and drawing in chalk covered the walls of the street, the street now renamed Heather Heyer Way. I took a deep breath, got out my camera phone, and approached. I stood in the middle of the street, which was blocked off from traffic, and took it all in. Flowers, ribbons, and signs adorned the east sidewalk. Epitaphs, love letters, loving slogans, and caring puns were scribbled up the walls on both sides of the street.

On both sides.

When I began work on this project, my working title was *On Both Sides*, after the president's horrible remarks he made about the tragedy of August 12, 2017, when he said, "there were very fine people on both sides." Mostly because I didn't want to quote that man, I figured it would just be a working title, something I would change when the better title found me. But in this moment, standing in a field of chalk, I found a way to recontextualize the words. On that day in 2017, there were very fine people on only one side. Heather's side. The side that promoted peace and diversity and love. Now, on the walls of Heather Heyer Way, there is love and hope and the will to fight hatred on both sides of the street.

I walked through it yet again today, August 12, 2019, on my way to my rental car. A local news cameraman was maneuvering his camera on its tripod. Various people, a few of which I've seen over the last few days, were milling about. Someone laid a sunflower down on the sidewalk. A woman who live-streamed the "Monticello to Main Street" tour I joined back on Saturday was scribbling on a wall in chalk. A young black man was hoisting a "Black Lives Matter" flag on his back like a cape.

What do I write? What do I say that will bring hope to those who read it? The writer in me, that little voice that has demanded I write and say clever things since I was 5, wants me to think of something clever. Not too clever, though. Clever for the sake of clever comes off as phony. The poet in me wants to say something fresh, something with dynamic language, but then I know I shouldn't overthink it. A stream of words blitz through my mind:

Love

Hope

Martyr

Spark

Fire

Conquer

In vain

Heyer

That moment of hate has sparked the fires of resistance.

But part of me worries that last line is a lie. The resistance has been going on in this country since its founding. Part of the nation was founded on religious freedom, but part was also founded on profit. Profit on the backs of slave labor, the fight against which has been going on since before this country was discovered by Europeans. That fight still rages hundreds of years later and two years after Heather's death. Did it spark something? Was it more of a spark than the deaths of Michael Brown or Tamir Rice or Eric Garner? Did we need a white woman to die fighting for equality to get the nation's attention? No. All of those deaths captured the nation's attention, but only for the briefest moments. Then something else happens. Even as I began writing this from the AirBnB in Charlottesville, twin mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, were hovering over the nation, increasing police presence and vigilance. But that will pass. They always pass. Charlottesville has done well to make sure Heather Heyer is not forgotten, but we hear her name so rarely on the news nationally. I regularly mention her name in conversation, talking about my work, and most people need me to explain who she was. In Charlottesville, however, her death has become a touchstone. As I've wandered this college town for four days, I've overheard many talking about their experiences two years ago. They each remember where they were and what they were doing, not unlike those of us who were adults when 9/11 occurred. Heather doesn't leave the collective consciousness of Charlottesville, but she's a footnote for the rest of the

country, just another casualty in this divided country.

So it comes back to my central question: What do I write? Today is the two-year anniversary of her death, so I need to mark the occasion. I need to pick up that chalk and write something. The pressure of being a writer weighs on me. I claim it with my choice of MFA and my Twitter bio, so I'm a writer. So when I write, it has to be profound, right? Better than those who don't claim "writer" as a basic part of their identity? I know I'm putting too much pressure on this. I could have written something on those walls three days ago, but they need to be the right words.

I looked back through the pictures I took on August 9, 2019. There are more scribbles and drawings and words written today, but those are the pictures I had with me in the moment. There's one theme I saw repeated more than any: Love.

Love not hate
One human race

Heyer purpose

Resist hate
We persist!

It's okay to be gay

We all can create
A better
World
Even with our
Mistakes

Peace
L♥ve
Creativity

Love + Action = Change

You will
Live forever
Thru
Our
Actions

Love





This machine
Kills fascists

Dump Trump

Heal
Each other

Love will win

Vote love

| | |
|---|---|
| Let | 2020 |
| Us be | |
| Free | We've got to carry each other |
| Dump Trump | Vote!!! |
| Love wins | I miss you but Never knew you |
| Trans Rights | Spread love |
| Love each other =  | Love is a choice |
| Lovers not losers | Erase hate  |
| Black lives matter | Dismantle white oppression together |
| End white supremacy | Make love not war |
| Together | Love not hate |
| We can reach Higher | Love is a blessing |
| Hate & violence Is not the answer | Heyer love |
| All gave some Some gave all | Love Teach I  ve not hate |
| You just Magnified Her | Resist hate "The moral arc Of the universe Tends towards Justice" Dr. King |
| Love Wins  | |
| No Trump No KKK No Fascist USA | You you are resting peacefully You are loved and Never Forgotten Xoxo |

| | |
|---|---|
| We rose | Love can heal the world |
| Never forget | She did not die in vain |
| Love is the bridge | Thank You Heather |
| Hate is Heavy so Let it go | Be kind |
| Our City Our Streets Our UVA | RIP Heather |
| Remember In November | Why kill? I'm sorry. Maybe our world Will grow kinder eventually. |
| Thank you, Heather For standing up To hate | C'Ville H.H. |
| Rest in power | Block This Road |
| "Love" isn't passive "Love" means Fight like hell | |

Too often, I feel like that's what the right (far or otherwise) doesn't understand: what drives us on the left is just love. Why do we want paths to citizenship and to get those families out of cages? Love. Why do we want medicare for all and free college? Love. Why do we support equal pay for equal work, anti-discrimination laws, and try to tear down the patriarchy? Love. To the greedy, fearful mind, love and altruism are concepts that boggle. Minds like those cannot fathom why anyone would do something without getting something out of it themselves. But we do. We just love. And that love will win. Not today. Probably not

tomorrow. Maybe not in my lifetime, but I know it will. And so finally, I know what I must write.

I wander down to Heather Heyer Way one last time. I pick up the chalk, rolling it around in my fingers, letting the dust mix freely with my sweat. I find a spot not quite as crowded as some others, up a little high, squeezed under a hand-drawn UVA logo, and I write the words that will certainly wash away long before this book ever goes to print, before your eyes have a chance to read this.

Our Love Will Win.

VITA

Chris M. Arnone was born November 26, 1980 in Independence, MO where he lived until graduating from William Chrisman High School in 1999. He attended Truman State University and Ellis College before joining the workforce full time. He worked as an audience response technician, nerd culture journalist, editor-in-chief for a video game website, and senior technical writer before he received his B.A. in English-Creative Writing from the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 2018.

Chris began his M.F.A. at UMKC immediately after finishing his B.A. and was awarded a Stanley Durwood Creative Writing Fellowship. He was appointed as editor-in-chief of *No 1 Magazine*, UMKC's student literary journal, a post he held for two years. During his M.F.A., he was also awarded the Gary William Bargar Memorial Scholarship, the John Mark Eberhart Memorial Scholarship, the Crystal Fields Memorial Scholarship in Poetry, and a Lambda Iota Tau Research Grant from Sigma Tau Delta. His fiction and poetry have been published in *No 1 Magazine*, *FEED*, and *Runestone Literary Journal*. He is also a freelance contributor for Book Riot.