

So, this is the trouble with girls like me—

I stole that from my mother, by the way. Pass that woman a double shot of whiskey after a long day at the broadcast station, and three minutes later she'll be sitting cross-legged on the kitchen floor with a shoebox full of photos, searching for the best of me.

JoJo at fourteen, brace-faced but beautiful, a tiara pinned in her sun-streaked hair.

Joey at fifteen, sophomore class president, stunned at her landslide victory.

Joles at sixteen, June's Scooper of the Month at Costello's Frozen Custard, posing a touch too proudly with her bonus check.

No matter how often we repeat this scene—and trust me, it's often—my mother never strays far from the script. "My Lord, Jo-Lynn, just look at you," she likes to say, booze bringing loose the Tennessee twang in her voice. "Look who you could be if you still tried."

Sometimes I fight her on it, like: "Sure is a shame I blew my shot in beauty pageants, high school government, *and* ice cream alternatives."

Most times, I endure her wrath silently until she sighs, not mad, just disappointed, and says, "You won't try. You never do. That's the trouble with girls like you."

She means wild girls. Reckless girls. Difficult girls who talk back and slack off, tease bright boys with even brighter futures and roll their eyes when other girls dare speak—not in a nasty way, necessarily, but not nicely either.

Or else find a synonym for "bad," and that's the kind of girl I am.

Was, I mean. Past tense. I'm trying—*trying*—to be better, or at least less terrible. But the trouble with girls like me is that screwing up comes to us so easily.

“Okay, it’s okay,” I say now, alone in my bedroom. “We’re cool.”

I’m not panicking. Not yet. No, right now I’m multitasking: I wiggle into a pair of black leggings, dig in my hamper for a cleanish sweater, call Miles Metcalf on my flip phone. (I don’t use a flip phone by choice, to be clear; this is a *consequence of my actions*.) The line rings once. Twice. On the third ring, I finger-comb a knot from my soaked, snarled hair. The fourth, I tug a turtleneck, drab green and two sizes too big, from the hamper.

The fifth, I heave a sigh and say, “Oh, my God, Miles, will you pick up?”

He does not. I drop the phone on my bed as the call goes to voicemail: *Hey, this is Miles Metcalf. Apologies that I missed your call, but I’ll give you a ring as soon as I can.*

“Yo, it’s Jo.” I poke my head through the turtleneck. “You urgently need a new greeting, dude. ‘I’ll give you a ring’? What are you, ninety?” I stop. Compose myself. Pick up the phone, say, “I know you’re probably at school already or en route or whatever, but I need a ride, okay? You’d be my hero forever and ever, love you, bye.”

I clap the phone shut, its snap startling my cat, Bay Leaf. She stares, unblinking, from her window perch. She has yet to realize a web of ice crusts the glass, frosting the view of our snowy street. Bay may be beautiful, but she has nothing in that skull but elevator music.

I point a finger at her. “I don’t need your judgement, Bay Leaf.”

Blame this—the multitasking, the not-panicking—on my broken alarm clock.

Okay, so it’s broken in the sense that I forgot to set it last night, despite scribbling SET ALARM!!! on a hot pink sticky note and slapping it to my bathroom mirror. The reminder was

right there, right in my face as I brushed my teeth before bed, and I thought, *Oh, yeah, I should do that*, and then I did not do that.

But I'm not panicking, remember? I dab concealer on a monster chin zit, hoist my backpack off the floor, hustle into the hall. Bay zooms past me, down the stairs, but I don't follow; I need to make a critical pit stop first since Miles didn't pick up my call.

"Lee!" I pound my fist on my brother's bedroom door. His mattress squeaks, shifts, yet he says nothing. I knock harder. "C'mon, jackass, I know you're awake. I need a ride to school."

"Huh?"

Louder, I say, "I missed the bus," and push open his door. My eyes strain against the sudden dark shift: blackout shades drawn, faded fleece blanket tucked into the curtain rod. I blink my vision into focus. "Cripes, are you on your deathbed?"

"Headache," he says, like the word aches too. Like I'm too clueless to spy the open bottle of Dad's best bourbon on his nightstand. Yawning, stretching, he says, "But I'm good."

"Good, because we need to go." I squint at his alarm clock. 7:04. That means twenty-six minutes until the first period bell, at which point my ass better be seated in Mr. Chopra's Digital Design II—or else. I swallow hard. "Like, now."

"Ask Dad."

"Dad abandoned us."

"Forever?"

"Worse." I slump against the doorframe. "For breakfast."

It's a bimonthly tradition: Dad and his old chef buddies gather at Flower City Diner in honor of their long-gone glory days, when they'd stumble drunk out of their restaurants at five a.m. in search of black coffee and pancakes.

“Then ask your friends.” Lee pauses. “Friend, singular.”

Rude, but not incorrect.

It’s just that Miles, ever the overachiever, gets to school an hour early each day. Most mornings he marks lab reports for the science faculty or runs scales on his baritone saxophone. Others, he eats his breakfast—an untoasted blueberry bagel with butter—with Principal Lund.

For fun.

I guess being a kiss-ass is why he’ll for sure secure the valedictorian title and its \$15,000 scholarship, *made possible by the generous support of the Eastman Honors High School alumni fund and viewers like you, thank you*, and I will... not.

The point is: “Miles is a no-go. Can’t you do this one thing for me, Lee? I never ask for anything.” I quickly and loudly add, “Except an occasional ride.”

“Not happening.” He flips onto his stomach. “It’s not my fault you’re a—”

“That I’m a what?” I say it like a dare. *Go ahead. Try me.*

Lee lifts his head, the movement slow. Pained. He stares at me, his sandy hair flattened on one side, his eyes glassy in the dark of his bedroom. Then he rests his head again. “Shut the door on your way out, will you?”

I could fight him on this. Say: *Don’t pretend I’m the only fuck-up between us anymore.* But I’m late enough as it is. I abandon his bedroom for the stairs, my middle fingers thrown up, his door wide open. From the landing, I shout, “You’re lucky I have a backup plan!”

He’s less lucky what the plan entails. I march into the kitchen, thick with the bold, bitter smell of Dad’s morning coffee, and snatch Lee’s keys off the counter. Just because I’ve flunked my road test four times doesn’t mean I *cannot* drive; it simply means I’m not good at it. Mostly parallel parking and left turns, anyway, and who needs those?

I am, at the very least, capable enough for the 2-mile trek to Eastman.

Bay Leaf follows me into the foyer and mews, as if to say, “Uh huh, sure.”

“Can it, Bay.” I drop the keys on the console table, next to Lee’s old senior photo. He’s pure golden boy in the picture: the pristine tuxedo and twinkling eyes; a shiny white smile that notches dimples in his cheeks.

My own portrait is *not fit to be displayed*. I keep a copy shoved inside my desk drawer, half-hidden under a dozen stray paper clips, three expired condoms, and a crumpled baggie of weed I mooched off Cody Forsythe last fall, back when I still talked to Cody Forsythe.

Back when I talked to anyone.

More quietly, I add, “It’s fine.”

That’s the trouble with girls like me; we tell ourselves lies until they sound something like the truth. As I lace my boots? It’s fine. Zip my parka to my chin, the faux-fur trim tickling my nose? It’s fine! Throw open the door and reveal the white winter morning?

“Ah, shit.”

Outside, snow falls in fat, heavy flakes, and the sky is a bruised yellow-gray, bright and dark all at once. God forbid the district call a snow day. It’s the side effect of a Rochester winter; we’re too prepared. The snowplows, salt trucks, unearned confidence behind the wheel...

Bay mews again: *Godspeed, dumbass!*

What’s my other option here? Call Miles a million more times? Or worse, call my mother at Channel 12 and admit I screwed up, again, and prove I’m exactly the girl she thinks I am?

That’s a hard pass.

I reach for the keys and crash out the door in one quick motion. Too quick. The keys fall to the floor, and I end up outside, empty-handed. I sigh, swear, but when I spin back—

“Looking for these?” Lee jingles the keys. He’s sick-pale, his face a queasy green. Yet he still manages a smirk when he says, “Nice try, Jo.”

Then he slams the door in my face.

The force of it rattles the leaded glass. Clinks the mail slot open, shut. Stuns me so still that I never even think to lunge for the doorknob until the deadbolt latches with a hollow click.

I smack my forehead against the glass. “Kill me.”

“Will do!”

I whip my head back. Any other day, and I might joke about it. *Wow, that’s quick service, ha ha ha.* Not today. Today I exhale, my breath a cloud in the cold, and I do the one thing I try to never, ever do: I look across the street.

Like a camera finding its focus, there’s pretty, nice Maddie Price.

She stands in the glow of the last lingering streetlamp, a golden ray of light shining upon her and—this part is crucial—her stupid white Prius. One gloved hand wields a snow brush. The other holds her phone to her ear.

“I said fine.” Her words barely carry, but her tone is clipped. Like she’s annoyed, maybe.

Nix that. Now she’s giggling. Must be Cody on the other end. They’ve been dating, what, three months? Four? The way she gushes about him being the best boyfriend on the planet, you’d think she was the first girl to ever fall in love. Never mind that none of what she says is true.

Believe me: I know the real Cody Forsythe. Someday Maddie will too.

For now, she says, “I’ll see you soon,” and ends the call with a dreamy smile.

Excellent opportunity for me to shout, “Maddie!”

She jerks her head toward me, startled, but looks away just as quick. If I had to guess, I’d guess she’s thinking, *Ew, what does she want?* I dash down the snow-packed walkway, up to her.

Maddie keeps her back to me, sweeps the last layer of snow from her windshield. She'd likely ignore me forever, except I skid on a patch of ice and slam into the trunk of her car, hard, which is objectively pretty funny, but Maddie doesn't laugh. Or smile. Or blink.

I nod at her, righting myself. "What's up?"

"Are you lost?" She swipes a snowflake from her cheek, bored with me already.

"Oh, no." I jab my thumb behind me. "I live right over there."

"I was kidding."

"Right. I was also kidding." I fake a laugh. She doesn't seem to find it as funny. "See, the joke is that we're neighbors, so—"

"Did you want something, Jo?" Maddie crosses her arms. Shivers. The air has stung her face a painful pink. The tips of her ears burn even redder. Her outfit of the day—fitted trousers, ankle boots, a soft cream sweater under an unbuttoned wool coat—is both fashion *and* function.

"You look like a dang L.L. Bean catalogue," I blurt out.

"That's what you wanted to tell me?"

"Yes. Actually, no. Can I hitch a ride? I was going to commit grand theft auto, but..."

What I mean is: *You're my only hope*. Maddie knows it too. Knows the bus schedule by heart from her pre-license days, knows I'll be late without her. She sighs, annoyed, but I swear the edge in those ice-blue eyes softens. I'm positive her posture relaxes. I'm certain—

"No."

I laugh, sort of. "Come again?"

Maddie takes one big step toward me. We're close enough for me to see the smudge of pink lip balm in the corner of her mouth. To smell her orange blossom perfume. She's a solid five inches taller than me, but I don't shrink back. I refuse.

Not even when she says, “No, Jo. Never,” with a grin so big it could split her face in two.

We stand like this—silent, still—for what feels like forever. Then I tuck a frozen lock of hair behind my ear and say, “That certainly sucks.”

“I don’t know what you expected.” Maddie heaves open the car door, fighting a gust of wind that flutters the soft waves in her hair. “Not to be mean, but why would I ever help *you*?”

“Because, Maddie.” I’m shameless. Daring her to think back to when this—the two of us, together, talking at the curb—felt so normal only a few years ago. I know she remembers it, too.

For a second, Maddie falters—grin flattening, eyebrows pinching in the middle.

This is pretty, nice Maddie Price, after all. I never meant for the rhyme to stick. To stalk her until our senior year. But it’s not like it ruined her life, and it’s not like it isn’t true. The girl has perfect attendance, top-notch grades, an early acceptance to NYU all but guaranteed. Throw in the soccer star boyfriend, the popular friends, and everything about her is what you’d expect.

No one thinks twice about a girl like that.

Maddie shakes her head, like she’s shaking that exact same thought from her head, and drops behind the wheel. “Good luck with the ride.”

“Maddie, wait.” I wedge my foot in the door. “You know I can’t be late. Like, cannot.”

Her lips curve. “Why is that again?”

Rhetorical question. I’ve spent the past six weeks under academic review, and she knows it. A late arrival would add a week to my sentence, which is supposed to expire tomorrow when first semester report cards post, so again: *I cannot be late*.

“God, Maddie, do you need me to beg? I’ll beg.” I drop to my knees and spread my arms out wide. “You know I’d never ask if I weren’t desperate, but I am beyond—”

She yanks the door shut. It echoes down our street, straight to my bones.

I guess this is how it ends: Maddie, gone; me, alone.

But first, she lowers the window and leans her head out, snow swirling fiercely, furiously around her. “I don’t feel sorry for you, Jo,” she says, serious as ever. “You have no one to blame but yourself.”

I choke out another laugh, but this one hurts. Burns. With one final sweet smile, Maddie shifts into drive, pulls away from the curb—and she leaves me behind.

Something hot prickles behind my eyes. I won’t cry. I don’t cry. Not when I was nine and tripped on a crack in the sidewalk, my front teeth shattering, mouth slick with blood. Not when I pierced my foot on a rusted nail last summer, and not the summer before that, when the boys got drunk and told me they were the ones who scratched my name onto that urinal that one time, and why couldn’t I let it go, it’s just a joke, you know?

So, no. Maddie Price will not unravel me either.

Instead I stand. I wipe the slush from my cold, drenched knees.

And I think, inexplicably, of another photo—one my mother can never see.

Last fall, late October. The night of the bonfire at Durand Eastman Beach. In the photo, I wear tight denim shorts, beat-up white Keds, a black zip-up that isn’t mine. It’s bad enough how I tilt my head, just so, a hickey bruised on the curve of my neck, but even worse is my smile. Sly. Coy. Like I know more in this moment than some girls will ever know.

I didn’t know shit.

I especially didn’t know that when the night sky filled with stars, when the fire hissed, half-dead, when every phone pinged with SIX NEW IMAGES, I’d so seamlessly become the worst of me: Jo at seventeen, outcast.

But I guess that’s the trouble with girls like me. We always get what we deserve.

It takes less than a minute for my fingers to go numb. Snow slides inside my boot a minute after that. In two more, I round the corner by the fish market and slip on the ice, catching myself on a bus stop sign, whispering, “Shitshitshit.”

There’s no need to whisper; no one’s around to hear me. Even the plaza across the street is dead, from the drive-thru ATM to the 7-Eleven where me and the boys—back when the boys were my buds—used to satisfy our munchies. I’d buy the same assortment of snacks each time: Cheez-Its, a tube of raw cinnamon rolls, and a box of Capri Sun.

My heart pangs. It’s such a small thing to miss. How I’d slam six juice pouches in a row. How we’d pop open the rolls and eat the icing with our fingers. How we’d almost choke trying not to laugh, since we were stupid and stoned and certain nothing could touch us.

The digital sign at the bank flicks from 19° F to 7:21 a.m.

My heart pangs again, deeper. Angrier. The extension to my review is all but inevitable, and so is Maddie’s delight. I can just see her looping her arms around Cody’s freckled neck and brushing her lips to his ear, like: *Jo sure is quick to get on her knees, huh?*

Behind me, a car horn blares. I pull my hand from my pocket, middle finger raised, but the horn honkhonks again. I’m ready to fight when I peer inside the open window to see—

“My hero!”

Miles Metcalf grins, tongue pressed in the gap between his front teeth. “You flatter me.”

“Only when you deserve it, and you deserve it, dude.”

He shrugs, sheepish. “Well, you lucked out; I overslept and saw your voicemail before I left, but I figured you’d forgotten your phone so I should drive the...” He trails off when he sees my face. “Sorry. Rambling. Come on in!”

I tug the car handle, and out roll two empty cans of Red Bull. There’s another ten in the footwell, plus a dozen cracked candy hearts on the passenger seat.

“Crap, sorry about the crap.” He sweeps the shards onto his palm, then stares, like: *What do I do with a handful of broken hearts?* He flings it into the backseat.

“No offense,” I say as I climb inside, kicking aside the heap of cans, “but when has your car not looked like this?”

He frowns but doesn’t argue the point. How can he? Miles sustains his body on sugar and caffeine, keeps packets of sour candy in his pockets, chugs energy drinks like water. If it’ll raise his heart rate and/or turn his tongue blue, he’ll consume it.

I pluck a pink Starburst from the cupholder and unwrap it into my mouth. “Drive fast,” I say. He waits for me to fasten my seatbelt, and we’re off, tires fishtailing, steering wheel wobbly under his white-knuckled grip. My hand flies to the panic handle. “Please also drive good.”

“Sorry, sorry, sorry.” He pumps the brakes until the tires regain traction. Back in control, he exhales. “Not bad for my first time, eh?”

I steal another Starburst. “First time?”

“First time driving in inclement weather conditions. It’s been a mild winter, so...” Miles trails off again, pale face flushing. The kid is a ferocious blusher. The littlest things set him off: incorrect test answers; redheads with blunt bangs; the mere mention of S-E-X.

After we read *Romeo & Juliet* in ninth-grade English, Mr. Hardy let us watch the movie adaptation so long as we swore not to lose it during the millisecond you see Juliet’s boobs. Most

of the boys salivated as they waited for the scene. Not Miles. His knee bounced, rattled his desk. His death grip nearly snapped his pencil in half.

As the shot approached, as we inched forward in our seats, Cody muttered, “All clear, man,” so Miles looked up at the exact right (wrong?) moment. He ducked his head, mortified, but he wasn’t fast enough. He saw.

Worse, we all saw him see.

We gave that kid hell. The boys cackled, kicked his chair, chucked his pencil across the classroom. I tapped his shoulder and loudly whispered, “Oh, my God, do you have a boner?”

He tried to speak, squeak out a denial, but no sound came out. What’s a rich red? Scarlet? Crimson? That’s how hot his face burned. And the rest of us—me and the boys, *my* boys, boys I thought were my friends—laughed and laughed at poor, shy, innocent Miles.

But just look at us now! Me and Miles, the one person who didn’t completely abandon me after everything blew up last fall. My friend, singular.

I pinch his cheek. “I’m honored your first time is with me.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He swats my hand away. “You think you’re funny, don’t you?”

“I *am* funny. I wish everyone were as funny as me.”

Miles snorts out a laugh. Fusses with his loose curls, flattened from his knit cap. Starts to speak, I think, but lets the words die on his lips. This happens a lot with him: our banter broken, back-and-forth fizzling into a sad, deflated silence.

“Whomp, whomp,” I say, and it’s a joke. Really.

The quiet hangs between us as he dips through the underpass. When we emerge from the tunnel, the city skyline appears in the distance, jagged and gray against an even darker sky. The snow will lose its charm soon, but right now it’s sort of beautiful.

I mean, I still hate it. Rochester is all I've ever known, and I know I want out. Badly.

But sometimes I still imagine what it'd be like to stay.

When I do, I think of slow snowfall on cold mornings like this one, when it feels like the world has paused. Like I can just... breathe. Then the sky stays gray for six months straight or I hear someone whisper, *See that girl? That's the girl whose nudes—*

My eyes find the dashboard clock. "Miles, I want to ask you something." His thick brows tick up a notch, and I smile in a way I hope is sweet. Helpless, even.

Then I point to his speedometer and say, "Can you floor it, please?"

#

It shaves a decade off his life, but Miles drives a whopping five miles above the speed limit, breezing through not one but *two* yellow lights to get us to Eastman with a minute to spare.

I leap outside before the car comes to a complete stop. "Thanksagainfortheride!"

"What?" Miles fumbles his seatbelt. "Wait!"

I don't have time to wait. I dart across the icy lot and into the door by the band room. The din of music—smashing piano keys, wailing violin strings, spit-thick trombone bellows—means no one hangs here much.

Even better, I can avoid Principal Lund. Every morning, she greets students by the main doors with the other administrators, walkie-talkies crackling on their hips. If she saw me now, I bet she'd smile that chilly, unflappable smile and say, "I suggest you hurry, Miss Kirby."

I'm hurrying, I'm hurrying.

I hang a left down the senior wing and bust into the design lab at the exact second the bell rings. It'd be impressive if I didn't heave the door into the wall. Mr. Chopra peers at me over his clear-framed glasses, his marker pressed to the whiteboard.

I gently shut the door behind me. “My bad.”

“Thank you for gracing us with your presence.” He resumes his self-portrait. “Take your seat—and try not to hurt yourself, okay?”

I shoot a finger gun with a wink and a click of my tongue, and then walk straight into the printer table. No one is subtle about it. Not the twins, Kyle and Tyler Spencer, in an identical set of grins. Not April Kirk, who glares at me through the fringe of her fierce copper hair.

Not Hudson Harper-Moore.

He tracks each step I take to the back row where we sit, an empty chair between us. He’s chewing on the plastic stirrer from his to-go coffee cup, but the way he tries to hide his smile is undeniable. The way he eyes me, one corner of his mouth lifting...

I mouth: *Do not*.

And yet he does.

He tips onto the back legs of his chair and says so only I can hear, “Comin’ in a little hot, don’t you think?” I press my hand between his shoulder blades and shove. Hudson rights himself before he falls, the chair crashing into place, metal clattering against linoleum.

Mr. Chopra steps back from the whiteboard. “Why are you still standing, Jo?”

“That wasn’t me!”

“Why are you still standing?” he asks again. I sit. He mirrors his cartoon self: arms folded across his chest; mouth set in a thin line, unamused but not unkind. “You good?”

“Yeah, I’m done.” I don’t mean it as a joke, but Hudson stifles a laugh behind the back of his hand. I shrug out of my parka, suddenly hot. “Shut up, Hudson.”

He stretches his arm across the empty chair. “Sorry, did I say something?”

“Nope. Not playing this game with you.”

“What game?” He tilts his head, all innocent, a strand of dark, longish hair slipping from behind his ear. The angle gives me the perfect view of his face: the freckles splattered across his nose; warm brown eyes flecked with gold; the small scar on his upper lip.

Then he dares to smile at me.

So, Hudson is not totally terrible. He’s nice to look at and mostly a decent guy, but we’re not friends. Not anymore. And, fine, there may have been a time (or two) when we’d gotten *very* friendly, but the bonfire, the photos, the fallout—it killed anything between us real quick.

But Hudson never turned on me like the rest of those assholes.

He’s still fucking irritating, though.

“Know what?” I flash him both middle fingers. “You’re the third person I’ve flipped off today, but I mean it most with you.”

“Thanks.” He hides another smile behind a sip of coffee, like he’s won this round of the game he pretends he never plays. The one that earned us both the Biggest Flirt superlative.

The game I can’t play anymore.

I slap my palms on the table and mouth something else. He laugh-chokes the coffee back into the cup. Swiping his chin, he says, “Mr. Chopra, Jo just told me to go f—”

“Two minutes.” Chopra pinches the bridge of his nose. “Two more minutes.”

I start, “What’s in two—?”

Hudson angles his monitor toward me.

DON’T FORGET!! Today is the **last day** to apply for the Senior Experience.

Applications received after **February 5th at 11:59 p.m.** will be returned without review. **No exceptions or extensions!**

To celebrate this exciting day, Principal Lund invites the senior class to join her in the gymnasium during first period for a **SPECIAL SURPRISE** from the alumni-mentors! Light refreshments will be served.

Attendance **mandatory** :)

I slouch until my butt hangs off the chair. “That smiley is mocking me.”

“You and me both,” Hudson mumbles.

The Senior Experience is an annual mentorship program that pairs Eastman alumni with the most promising leaders of tomorrow. (Yes, I stole that line from the flyer taped inside every bathroom stall in the building.) From the “invaluable real-world experience” to that sweet, sweet networking, baby, the program is a wet dream for the top students at the top school in the district.

Yet despite the **bolded**, CAPITALIZED letters and two (!) exclamation points, I did, in fact, forget about the deadline—but I have a valid reason.

And the reason is that I don’t give a shit.

“Okay, folks,” Chopra says after taking roll. It somehow counts as a dismissal.

Backpacks zip. Chairs scrape back. Then, like an afterthought: “Jo, come here a second, will you?”

“Do I have to?” I ask. His face tells me yes. I approach his desk as the room empties, pick up a pen and draw a series of sad faces on his attendance sheet. “What’s the special surprise?”

“Meet-and-greet with the mentors,” he says. I add angry eyebrows to my latest sad face, so it’s the saddest, maddest of all. He snatches the pen from me. “Jo, your layout is late.”

“What layout?” I’m deflecting. He means the senior spotlight yearbook layout, my major design project from last marking period. It may or may not be two weeks overdue.

“And you owe me six mini-designs. *Six*. I had to—” Chopra stops, taps the pen on his keyboard. “Conti asked to see your portfolio.”

My stomach swoops. “He what? Why?”

I know why. Mr. Conti, assistant principal and pain in my ass, is executor of my review. I’ve abided by his terms and conditions for the past six weeks: no late arrivals, no detentions, no administrative interventions. We meet tomorrow about the end of my punishment.

The *end* of it.

“I told him I had to convert the file format to send it, but I’d get it to him by Wednesday.”

Each word is slow and precise. Loaded. Low, he adds, “I can’t keep doing this, Jo.”

“No, I know. I know.” I step toward the door. “It’ll be the best portfolio you’ve ever—”

“Go,” he tells me.

I do.

Here's the issue: I can't finish my portfolio by Wednesday. Not when I've made zero progress on the mini-designs and minimal progress on the yearbook layout. I'd started, but stalled after someone submitted "Senior Slut: Jo-Lynn Kirby" as a write-in superlative—thirteen times.

I ripped up each entry and dumped the scraps in the trash, like I didn't even care.

And I *don't* care.

Here's the other issue: I'd rather slam my head into a wall than go to this alumni meet-and-greet. Even before, I could not care less about the Senior Experience. I'm just not desperate enough to prove I'm the best of the best. To do what it takes to get what I want.

It's unfathomable to me, really; how anyone knows what they want. Like, I barely know what I want for breakfast most mornings. Bacon, egg, and cheese on a sesame bagel? Cereal? Or nothing at all, since it'll be lunch by the time I make up my mind?

"It's fine," I tell myself. Each step I take pounds in sync with my heartbeat.

"Sorry, are you talking to yourself?"

"Shut up, Hudson." I walk faster but he easily keeps pace. It's not fair. He's so tall that one of his strides equals three of mine. I snap, "Shouldn't you be at the meet-and-greet?"

"Wow, way to ruin the surprise." He lobs his empty coffee cup into the trash, nothing but net. "One, I had to pee. Two, I'm not exactly the strongest candidate, so."

"Oh. Right." I kind of knew that.

The *strongest candidate* has brains, ambition, and, ideally, plans for college.