

# the **truth** about us

They never meant to fall in love.



Janet Gurtler

bestselling author of *I'm Not Her*

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the **truth** about us

Janet Gurtler



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Published by Sourcebooks Fire, an imprint of Sourcebooks, Inc.

P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410

(630) 961-3900

Fax: (630) 961-2168

[www.sourcebooks.com](http://www.sourcebooks.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gurtler, Janet.

The truth about us / Janet Gurtler.

pages cm

Summary: When Jess's father orders her to work at a soup kitchen for the summer, she meets Flynn, a classmate from the wrong side of the tracks, and discovers that sometimes the person who should not fit in your world is the one who finally makes you feel as if you belong.

(alk. paper)

[1. Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. 2. Social classes—Fiction. 3. Family problems—Fiction. 4. Soup kitchens—Fiction. 5. Voluntarism—Fiction. 6. Conduct of life—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.G9818Tru 2015

[Fic]—dc23

2014042461

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For those who aren't where they want to be yet but plan to get there.

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# chapter one

I have fifteen minutes to get home. It's a twenty-five-minute walk.

I'm so dead.

If I were smarter, I'd run, rise to the challenge or something, but I'm not even moving at all. Instead, I'm stuck, my feet immobile on the sidewalk, all because of a pedestrian sign flashing a red hand at me, commanding me to stay where I am. The *Jeopardy* theme song plays in my head as I wait for the green light. Penny and I used to love watching *Jeopardy*. She always knew more answers. I wonder if she still watches. I gave it up when Penny and I stopped being best friends and Nance took her place.

"Hey, Jess," a girl says as she and a boy walk past. I wave and my cheeks burn brighter, because it's awkward and weird to be busted with my feet refusing to move until a light turns green. The girl is a friend of my sister; I don't know the guy. They obviously don't share my hang-up about jaywalking and they cross the street without even glancing around for cars.

No matter how hard I try to shake it off, choke it out, and squeeze it out, some of my lameness still lingers in my cells, part of who I really am. Or who I was. I don't know anymore.

"It's not a good idea to walk all alone at night," she calls back like she's a friggin' genius and I'm the poster child for bad choices. The light finally changes, and I step onto the road and walk, glancing down at my phone. My head is fuzzy and my heart pounds thinking about my dad at home waiting for me. I didn't plan to screw up again, but apparently it's kind of a gift, because I'm really, really good at it. Being late will equal no phone for a few days at least. My dad knows how much I hate to lose my phone.

I jump when a car toots the horn as it whizzes by. A boy screams something about my ass and whistles. My heart beats faster, and for a second, fear springs the hairs up on my arms and a swooshing sensation swells in my belly. Fear feels a lot like excitement. The fact that some pervert thinks I'm whistle-worthy might be the best part of my day. Of course, *pervert* is the key word. Since he's probably not that picky.

"Does your stupidity not know any bounds?" I hear my dad say in my head.

I worry it doesn't. And wish he were away on one of his business trips so I wasn't in this bind. In lots of ways, things are easier when he's gone. I think about blaming Nance for my predicament. She does have a knack for getting me into these situations. Of course, I have a knack for letting her. Besides, responsibility for my own actions and all that. Blaming her will get me exactly nowhere.

Another car whizzes past, and I glance back to see if my sister's friend is still behind me, but she's nowhere in sight. They must have turned down another street or live somewhere close by. There's another car coming now, and it's driving slower. I know from every horror show I've ever watched that it's not a good sign. Man, I know from what happened to my mom it's not a good sign.

I force myself to glare at the car. It's an old rust bucket, "an eyesore" as my dad would say. Not the kind of car usually seen in this neighborhood. I frown and peer inside, keeping my expression fierce. When I see the driver grinning at me, I relax a little. He's about my age, and his smile reminds me of a floppy-eared golden retriever. Friendly. Wouldn't hurt a soul. The guy in the passenger seat stares off into the distance, as if he doesn't see me.

"Hey," the driver calls and leans forward to look at me with an even bigger smile. "Where you headed?"

He's cute. Blond with overly spiky hair. I have an urge to offer him a treat. Scratch him behind the ear. His car is a total piece of crap, and the guys inside obviously aren't from around here, but they look harmless.

"Home," I tell him and glance at the passenger again. He's good looking too but in a totally different way. His hair is longish and black. His eyes are dark. He looks biracial or something. Exotic and almost pretty. He turns his head and looks right at me. When our eyes meet, my insides mush together. Fear or excitement? It's hard to tell them apart sometimes.

"Come on. I'll give you a lift," the driver calls. "I'm Braxton Brooks," he offers. "This is Flynn." He's not as badass as he thinks he is."

Flynn. I have an urge to say the name out loud. To feel the shape of the quick and hard sound on my lips.

"Screw you, Brooks," Flynn says, and I turn away so he doesn't see me smile.

The car drives slowly beside me.

"No strings," Braxton calls. "We're not serial killers or anything."

"You sure about that?" the passenger asks. His voice is deep and low.

I stop walking and narrow my eyes, a nervous sensation pooling in my stomach. When my gaze locks with Flynn's, goose bumps run up my arm and I'm as woozy as if my blood sugar plummeted. I get a sort of déjà vu vibe from him, as if we've met before.

"What's the matter? Are you drunk?" he asks.

"Not anymore." A heated blush melts my mouth into a frown.

"Chill, Flynn," Braxton says to him and leans forward to smile before returning his attention to the road. "We'll drive you home. Come on. We're from Tadita too. Not this neighborhood, but I know I've seen you around. You're not scared of us, are you?"

It sounds like a challenge, and I'm not going to admit to being scared. Still I hesitate. A tiny argument starts up in the back of my head. I don't recognize them. They don't go to my school. But they would get me home by curfew. Besides, rapists or murderers don't give out their names. I won't lose my phone privileges. I'll stay out of trouble. A swoop of adrenaline bungee jumps up and down my gut as I consider my options. I don't want more trouble at home. I want my troubles at home to leave me the hell alone.

“You’re not actually going to accept a ride from perfect strangers?” Flynn asks.

I glare at him. That’s an even bigger challenge.

“It’s a basic,” he says. “Something you learn in kindergarten.”

“Dude,” Braxton says to him. “Quit dicking around.” He leans forward. “Don’t listen to him. We’ll take you straight home. It’s safer than walking.”

The vodka coolers I drank at Nance’s earlier still linger in my system though they’re wearing off in the cool night air. I lift my chin to show him I’m not afraid. I might be a girl who can’t cross the street when the light flashes at me, but I reach for the car door handle.

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## chapter two

The car smells like hamburgers. I give Braxton my address and a couple of directions and lean back against the backseat. He keeps talking, but my head is full and all it sounds like is blah blah blah. There's a hive of angry bees buzzing around my head, and I nibble on my thumbnail. His voice sounds far away. I feel removed.

My gaze drifts to the back of the passenger's head. Flynn. His hair touches the back collar of his t-shirt. For a second I have an urge to lean forward and touch it to see if it's as soft as it looks. Braxton keeps talking in a hum of words I don't understand as Flynn stares out the side window at the night air, ignoring me. Braxton is quiet then, and I realize he's asked me a question.

"Which way?" he asks again.

I look out the window. "Uh, turn right. It's halfway up the next street."

He whistles as he turns the corner. "Holy crap. Your family rob a bank?" Braxton jokes, laughing.

There should be a punch line, but it evades me.

"The one with the lights on," I say, pointing to my house.

He stops his car in front of the driveway.

"Uh, thanks. For the ride." I reach for the door handle.

*Say something*, I silently urge Flynn.

"You're lucky that's all you got," Flynn says softly.

*Um. Not that.*

"Chill," Braxton says and turns to me. "No problem." He glances quickly at his friend's profile, but Flynn stares out at our neighbor's house, his lips turned down in a frown.

"Hey. Can I get your number? I could give you a call sometime?" Braxton asks.

Flynn turns his head and glances back at me, kind of smirking, and raises an eyebrow. We stare at each other for a brief second, and then Braxton glances at Flynn and frowns. I drop my gaze, my hand still on the door handle. I don't want to give Braxton my number. I want to give it to his friend. I have an urge to crawl over the front seat and try to make him like me.

"Uh," I say.

"Don't stop here too long," Flynn says. "Someone will call the cops or a tow truck in this neighborhood."

"Dude," Braxton says. "You don't have a car, so shut up, man."

"You call this thing a car?" Flynn laughs.

I open the door, using the interruption as a way to avoid giving out my number without offending anyone. Avoidance is another one of my skills.

“Thanks for the ride. See you around,” I say quickly, as if he never asked the question, and climb out and shut the door behind me.

• • •

I walk toward my room but stop in front of my mom’s bedroom door. It’s closed but I wrap my hand around the knob, push on it slowly, and look inside. There’s a lump under the covers, but her face isn’t visible. The hope I’d been holding in my heart—that maybe she was feeling better—squeezes out. She’s been laying low for a couple of days. I pull the door closed and wonder how long this spell will last. It’s unpredictable, how long she’ll disappear for.

“She’s still not feeling well, Jess,” a voice behind me says softly.

I bite my lip and turn to look at my dad. Even this late at night, he’s still dressed in business casual. His hair is styled with product, and I know he’s handsome for a dad—I hear it all the time—but I wish he’d relax sometimes. Maybe put on a pair of sweats, Lululemons if that’s what he needs. Forget the shave. Spill mustard on his shirt. Quit with the perfect.

“I heard a car. Did Carol drive you home?” he asks. Carol is Nance’s mom, an old friend of Mom’s. When she had friends, that is.

I shrug, the best way to lie without saying a thing. Carol left Nance and I alone so she could go to her boyfriend’s for a sleepover. Nance’s brother bought us a case of vodka coolers, with a markup for supplying underage drinkers. We drank until we felt silly and FaceTimed a couple of boys from the high school across town. Nance flashed her boobs and we both dirty danced for the camera until one of the boys’ mom’s shouted in the background and he abruptly hung up. I’d thought it was funny at the time. Now it seems stupid.

I think about the two boys in the car. Even more stupid.

“Jess?” Dad says.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Everything okay?”

“Fine.”

He clears his throat. “Okay,” he says softly. “I picked up the Audi from the shop,” he tells me. “It was parked out front. Try not to back into anything again, okay? They replaced the back bumper. She’s good as new.”

I backed into a streetlight and gave the Audi its first dent. As soon as he was home, he’d rushed in to the shop to get it fixed.

“Yeah, I saw,” I say and then force out, “Thanks.” He likes his cars flawless.

“You’re welcome,” he says and clears his throat. “Allie’s sleeping at Dana’s house tonight. The boys both worked late,” he says, as if I’m worried about where my sister is.

“Yeah?” I ask. She’s not. She’s at her boyfriend’s. Doug Henderson. They’ve been dating for three years. Dad has no idea Doug’s mom allows her to stay over all the time. I suppose she feels sorry for

Allie and her messed-up home life. The family secret isn't much of a secret, no matter how much Dad pretends it is.

I wonder if my dad even knows the last time we had an honest conversation. He doesn't want to hear truth from me or from my sister, not really. He's not as good at Mom's job. She used to check up on us. She'd make sure we were where we said we'd be. I don't think he can fathom that the people he created could lie to him.

He walks down the hall to his bedroom then, the separate room he moved into to give Mom space to recover. Something else we don't talk about. He looks over his shoulder before he disappears into it. "I have to be at work early. Can you check on Mom in the morning? Text me and let me know how she is."

I nod and he pauses, as if he's going to say something more, but then he steps inside his bedroom and shuts the door behind him.

Stupid Allie for leaving stupid Mom in my hands tomorrow. I cringe and immediately guilt sticks to my belly. I wish every day for my mom to be back. The mom I used to know. I don't blame her for the way she is now; how could I? But still.

I miss her.

•••

A greasy scent floats under my bedroom door. Bacon. Mom is obviously out of bed today. And apparently she's cooking. Out of bed and cooking means it's a good day. I haven't seen one in a while so I push off my covers and stretch and head downstairs to the kitchen.

She's in front of the stove holding a spatula, staring down at hissing and popping bacon. She looks up and smiles when she hears me, and it almost reaches her eyes, but they're a little fuzzy, a little off. She meets me as I walk over and puts her arm around me. For a moment I let her try to convince me everything is fine. I lean against the warmth of her, and my heart fills with sadness, remembering days when her touch could convince me nothing bad could happen.

I step away, and she goes back to the stove. I lean up against the counter, bringing one leg up into tree pose. My favorite standing position. Mom and Allie do it too.

"You want to make some toast?" she asks.

"Sure." The toaster sits permanently on the counter. Mom used to put the toaster away when it wasn't being used. Everything had its place. I open up a loaf of white bread and pop in a couple slices. We eat white bread when Dad does the grocery shopping.

"Allie's at Dana's," I say.

"Yeah," she says softly. "I texted her this morning when I saw she wasn't in bed."

We don't discuss that she didn't know Allie was gone until the morning. We don't discuss that she was in bed all day yesterday with the lights off. Or why. We don't even discuss that she has her own bedroom now.

"Everything okay, Jess?" She piles the bacon on a plate and heads toward the kitchen table.

I snag a piece of crisp bacon as she passes and take a bite, suppressing an urge to blurt out what

did last night. Drank coolers, stayed at Nance's too late, and then got in a car with two boys I didn't know.

I imagine telling her I'm worried that Nance is a little too fond of flashing her boobs at boys and that her mom is too busy with her new boyfriend to notice. But it would send her back to her bedroom so I keep chewing.

"Everything's fine," I tell her.

The toast pops up so I butter the slices and take them to the table.

"You sure you're feeling okay?" she asks. "You've lost weight. You're getting too thin."

"No. I mean, I'm fine. Fine." She used to be the kind of mom I could tell anything to. We used to have long talks. She used to want to listen.

"Okay," she says as I sit across from her. "But you're not dieting, are you? You girls are born naturally thin. You don't have to do that."

"Nope. No dieting," I tell her. "How about you, Mom?" I ask her softly. "You okay?"

For a second, our eyes meet. We stare at each other, and the pain that's nestled inside her soul shines out. It breaks my heart and I drop my eyes.

"I'm sorry," she says. She doesn't say what for, but I know.

For disappearing.

"No," I say softly. "You have nothing to feel sorry for." I don't look up because I don't want her to see that I'm lying. I do blame her sometimes. I want her to get over it. Go through it or around it or under it, like the hunting song she used to sing to me when I was little. Sometimes I hate who she is now. Weak. Afraid.

She's left us to deal with things, and I, for one, am really messing it all up. I want to be allowed to get mad at her like Nance gets mad at her mom. Fight with her. Yell at her. Tell her off. But I can't.

She stares down at her plate for a moment, playing with a piece of toast, then looks up. Tries to smile. "Do you need some spending money?" she offers. "It's almost time for back-to-school shopping. You and Penny could go."

I swallow my bitterness. She doesn't acknowledge that Penny and I aren't friends anymore. For years it was Penny and Jess, the kind of best friends who could look across a room and know what each other was thinking. But I screwed that up. Now it's me and Nance, and I'm living a life I never would have imagined.

"Sure, I could go shopping," I say. Dad already gave me money for back-to-school shopping, but it's not like they'll discuss it. She stands and walks over to the counter where she leaves her purse and pulls out her wallet.

"Is five hundred enough?" she asks as she sifts through her cash.

"That'll buy me a pair of boots I have my eyes on," I say, testing her, pushing for a reaction.

"Really?" She looks up, but she doesn't even give me the crap I deserve. Instead, she sighs. "Things are so expensive these days. I used to get my entire back-to-school outfits from a thrift store."

I don't say anything. She grew up without a lot, but she made up for it by marrying Dad and also made a killing of her own selling real estate. There was a time she'd wanted Allie and I to have all the things she never did. The best schools, the best clothes. The best friends. I don't know what she wanted.

now.

---

“You can take my credit card. You know the PIN, right?”

“Yeah, I do. Nance and I will shop till we drop.” I emphasize Nance’s name and sound angrier than I intend. I pick up a piece of bacon, chew on the end, and stare at my mom, willing her to see me.

She walks over and puts her gold MasterCard on the table beside me. “Put it back when you’re done and leave me the receipts. Not too overboard, right? A couple of tops and a couple of pairs of jeans to go with the boots. Maybe a dress. Okay?”

“You know I don’t hang out with Penny anymore. I’ll be shopping with Nance,” I say, spelling out for her.

She sits and frowns down at her plate and sighs. “You know, I never really thought you and Nance would be such good friends,” she says. “Penny...”

I hold my breath. Hoping she’ll ask me about Penny. Listen to me. Maybe even offer some advice. Tears pop up in the corners of my eyes, and I blink fast to keep them from spilling out.

“I miss Penny,” she says. “You and Nance are so different.”

My breath sticks to my throat, waiting for her to ask, silently begging her to ask. I remember how much it hurt to cry alone in my room when I lost Penny. It ached even more because I suspected my mom heard me. And I needed her. But she let me cry all alone.

“How’s Carol?” Mom asks.

I press my lips tight. She’s gone too, I want to tell her. But her absence is different. She has a new boyfriend. She’s finally over Nance’s dad fooling around on her and moving out, and she’s going on with her life, pretty excited to have new attention from the sounds of it. Nance doesn’t see her mom much either, but we don’t talk about that. She and I don’t talk the way I did with Penny.

“Carol’s okay.” I press my lips tight. Blow out a big breath. “You know something, Mom?” I ask.

She blinks. Waiting.

“Me and Nance,” I tell her. “We’re not so different anymore.”

Her eyes are getting cloudier and she frowns. We sit in silence for a while longer, both of us nibbling quietly at toast and bacon. Finally she pushes her plate away.

“I’m feeling a little tired. I’m going to go up and have a nap. Would you mind cleaning up, sweetie?”

“No.” I stare at my plate, holding in tears, wanting to cry, wanting to yell. Make a scene. Do something. Instead, I push my own plate away and stand and start piling the dishes. “It’s fine.”

I’ll clean up and then I have to get out. I’ll choke on the quiet in the house.

“I’m heading to Nance’s later when I’m done,” I tell her.

She stands and moves away from the table, nodding. “Okay,” she says. “Have fun.”

“I’ll drink to that,” I mumble softly, but she’s already gone, shuffling up the stairs. She doesn’t hear me. Or maybe she pretends not to.

I watch her leave me. It feels like the hole inside my heart is growing bigger instead of healing.

---

## chapter three

I twirl my huge key chain around and around as I head down the driveway. I only have a couple of keys, but my chain is a huge wad of ornaments. People started adding to my collection of key chain when they noticed I was collecting them.

I walk toward the dent-free Audi. Dad bought it for Allie and me. But Allie hardly even uses our car, since Doug drives her everywhere.

He and Mom each have a Tesla electric car; he has the roadster, and she has the sedan, though she hardly drives hers anymore. He pretends buying hybrids and electric cars makes him green.

I'm about to jump in the Audi when crying reaches my ears. It's feeble, as if trying not to attract attention. I glance around and spot Carly, the little girl who lives next door, sitting on her driveway, clutching a piece of pink sidewalk chalk, crying. She's an adorable kid, and the sight of her tugs on my dark heart. I'm no body language expert, but it looks like her entire world is crashing in. Like she's been deserted by everyone. I know that feeling, so I walk slowly toward her. When I reach her, I bend down so I'm at her level.

"Hey, Carly," I say softly. "Are you okay?"

She hiccups and rapidly sucks in breaths and blinks at me with her big eyes and manages to nod.

"Funny. 'Cause you look a little sad to me."

Her teary eyes reach inside and wrap around my heart. "I'm supposed to be brave. I shouldn't cry," she tells me. She glances around. "My parents are getting a divorce," she whispers. "I have to be brave."

My heart aches for her. Man, that sucks. "Being brave is hard sometimes," I tell her and look around, wondering what I can do. The mini sock monkey on my key chain stares at me. Impulsively, I unhook it. "But I happen to have a solution." I hand her the monkey. "This is a special monkey," I say. "Her name is Brave Monkey. She has powers. Magical ones. Keep her close and she will help you be brave."

Carly opens her eyes wider, and I stand up.

"I can keep it?" she asks.

"As long as you promise to take good care of her," I say solemnly.

She clutches the little sock monkey in her hand and nods, her eyes big and her expression serious. The monkey was a present and it's been on my key chain for a long time, but Carly looks like she needs it more than I do right now. I can always get myself another one to replace it.

“Brave,” I tell her and wink.

“Brave,” she whispers and nods again.

I pat her on the head. “See you soon, Carly,” I say and walk to my car, watching her for a moment. She’s talking to Brave Monkey, probably telling her the way things are with her parents. With a sad smile, I drive off toward Nance’s.

When I arrive, I park in her driveway and open the door to hear music rumbling from the back deck. No one answers the front doorbell, but it’s unlocked so I walk inside, slipping off my shoes and heading through the kitchen to the patio doors. Nance is stretched out on a lounge chair, and she waves and mouths hello to me but keeps talking on her phone.

I strip off my shorts and tank, down to my bathing suit, and spray myself with sunscreen. A second later, her brother struts out on the deck holding a twelve-pack of vodka coolers. I smile and he opens the cooler, checks me out without smiling back, emphasizing how inappropriately tiny my bikini is. Serves me right. I glance down at my skimpy suit. Not exactly a suit for swimming laps.

He hands me a grape cooler and I take it, grateful for the drink even though I could do without him. I’ve known Scott since I was five years old, but he’s still a jerk who enjoys making me feel like an entrée in an all-you-can-eat buffet. He takes his eyes off of me and scowls at Nance until she reaches for her purse and hands him some bills, and he hands over the coolers. I stretch out on the chair beside her and he turns back to me. “All grown up, hey Jess-A-cup,” he says and chuckles. “Or should I say Jess-C-cup.”

I make a face at him, but my skin shivers under the hot rays of the sun. When he leaves the deck, I breathe a sigh of relief.

“I know, Dad,” Nance is saying into the phone, and she rolls her eyes at me. “But Mom decided it wasn’t a good idea.”

I try to remember the last time my mom made a decision for me. It’s a stretch.

Nance hangs up and turns to me. “Hey!”

I force a smile. “What’s up with your dad?” I ask.

“He asked if I wanted to go to Vegas with him and his child bride. Mom nixed the idea. She was worried I’d roam around the whole weekend in the land of free booze and single men. Plus they didn’t invite Scott. Dad said it was because he’s working, but Scott can get time off whenever he wants. I don’t think the child bride likes him.”

I don’t blame her but say nothing.

“Party poopers.” She checks her phone again and then snaps a quick selfie and puts it down. It’ll show up on Instagram or somewhere later. Within minutes of posting, she’ll have fifty comments telling her how pretty she is. “The child bride is pissed off because Scott’s working at the golf club and Dad’s still footing all his college bills. Plus he told her about the campus tour he’s taking me on in September. Berkeley, Stanford, Brown, maybe Duke. She’s pissed off I’m not picking a school in Washington. Honestly I think she’s worried Scott and I are going to spend all the money before her child grows up. She doesn’t understand that he’ll never run out. He loves making money too much. It’s a competition for him.” She pauses. “Do you think she’s kind of low class?”

It’s not the first time she’s asked, but I don’t answer. I’m not stupid. There is no way to win this

conversation, so I do what I do best. Ignore it.

“Ugh, colleges,” I say. “I don’t even want to think about them.” The year ahead has so many big decisions. Exams, colleges, career options. Maybe even taking a year off to travel, which would probably make my dad lose his mind.

“You okay?” Nance asks. She flips onto her back and stretches her arms high over her head and points her toes. I glance at her wrists. The slight scars. She doesn’t hide them.

“I’m fine,” I tell her.

“Yeah?” She reaches for a pack of smokes under her chair and holds it out to offer me one. I don’t smoke, but she offers me one every time as if she’s convinced she’ll convert me. “Liar.”

“I’m fine,” I say again. “I just don’t want to think about school or trying to impress people next year.”

“It’s a big year. And we will rock it. But whatevs.” Nance rolls her eyes as she reaches for the lighter and inhales and blows out smoke in my direction. “So you actually made it home on time last night? Your dad didn’t freak?”

“Yeah. It was fine.” I don’t mention the ride home or the boys, even though it would both surprise and intrigue her. They were hot after all. And it was pretty daring.

“My mom was up this morning.” I’m not sure why I tell her that.

“Yeah?” She watches me. “How’s she doing?” she asks softly, and her cheeks suck in as she inhales from her cigarette.

“Okay.” I don’t think she wants to hear the truth. Not really.

She waits for more, but when I don’t say anything, she sighs. “Our parents suck,” she finally says and her voice catches. “We might as well be orphans.” She’s staring at the smoke from her cigarette as it fades away. The serious expression on her face surprises me. “My therapist says I’m acting out to try and get attention. He thinks I feel unloved.” She turns her gaze to me. Her eyes shine. As if she’s daring me to deny it. Or agree.

“You’re seeing a therapist again?” I ask tentatively and make a shield with my hand over my eyes and pretend to gaze at some clouds.

“Not again. Still.” She inhales deeply and blows out smoke again and then laughs. Bitter, angry laughter. “My dad insists. We all have secrets, you know. Not just your family.”

I should say something, ask more. Why? What’s wrong? Obviously she has things she wants to say or talk about, but I pause too long. We hang out together for a reason. We don’t over examine things. We find ways to forget them.

“You okay?” I ask, but insincerity stiffens my voice. My words sound cold and wrapped in bubble wrap.

She laughs. “Nothing a few vodka coolers won’t fix.”

“Seriously,” I say. “Oh, wait, I have news!” I reach down to my purse and, with great flourish, pull out the credit card and wave it in the air. “Gold MasterCard. My mom gave it to me to go shopping.”

Nance stares at it for a moment. Presses her lips closed and sits up straight. “Nice,” she says. “I’ll go in. We can head to Seattle. How about the Shops at the Bravern? And then Alderwood Mall? I’ll get you some cash from my dad.”

Her dad supplies her with cash for clothes on a regular basis. Nance calls it guilt money. For ditching her mom for a younger woman and a new baby.

“When do you want to go?” she asks.

“I don’t know. It’s supposed to rain in a couple of days.” I tuck the card back in my purse.

Nance crosses her legs and lifts her bottle in the air. I raise mine and then we clink and pull back and bring them to our lips, tip, and chug.

I manage to finish the whole bottle in one go, but Nance still has half hers left when she drops it from her mouth. I grin and wipe off my mouth. “Beat that, beey-otch,” I tell her and smile wider.

“You may beat me at drinking, but I beat you at life,” she says and belches loudly.

“I love it when you talk dirty to me,” I say, relieved the serious stuff is forgotten.

“You would,” she retorts.

I reach for a new vodka cooler as Nance blows another smoke ring into the air. I watch it drift up and slowly expand until it’s gone. The smell bothers me, but like many things with Nance, I put up with it and don’t say anything. She leans back against her lawn chair and grins.

“So, liquor pig,” she says. “Let’s talk about boys.”

“Boys?” I ask as if Nance asked a question.

“Hot boys,” she says, and it makes me remember how Penny and I used to tease Nance about how crazy she was. At least that hasn’t changed. My cheeks burn remembering how Penny and I swore we’d be mature teenagers, not girls who cared too much about makeup, clothes, and boys. We swore we’d never do stupid things just to be popular. Like drinking or smoking.

One of us was wrong.

“We need to find summer flings,” Nance says. “Not Josh.” Josh being my on-again, off-again something or other. We’re off. For good, I hope. It’s awkward.

“I’m over Josh,” I tell her and swallow back a healthy amount of the new cooler, enjoying the buzz that’s starting to lighten my head.

“Good. I mean, despite his ‘good on paper’ pedigree, Josh’s not worthy of a summer fling.” Nance takes a dainty sip of her drink and watches me over the top of the bottle.

“Good on paper?” I say.

“You know what I mean. There’s a certain kind of guy that girls like us will be expected to date next year. But not this summer!”

I pretend to gag, but she shakes her head sadly and blows out a smoke ring.

“It’s true. We’re seniors this year, and everything we do matters. The right parties, the right people—we’re going to need Josh-like boyfriends. Only Not Josh ’cause he smells like chlorine.”

The first part sounds like Carol talking. Nance’s mom worries a lot about what other people think. She’s already nagging Nance about who’s going to take her to prom. She wants it to be a boy with a good family name, to show the world she still has clout even if her husband left her. Her priorities are questionable, even to me.

Nance tosses the rest of her cigarette into her bottle and claps her hands together. “Anyhow, this is a summer for boys!” Nance says. “Last chance for summer flings.”

“We’re not going off to war,” I say, rolling my eyes at her.

“No. We are going to be seniors. It matters. But first, boys.”

I close my eyes and an image of Flynn fills my mind. I quickly open them, startled, and take a drink to wash his image away. Nance doesn't notice my distraction and continues on about summer flings and summer parties until she stops to light another smoke.

“Jennifer says there're lots of hot guys hanging out at Alderwood Mall. We can go there to shop and check out the merchandise.” She wiggles her eyebrows up and down. “I can't believe Jennifer's dad actually made her get a job this summer, though I love that she showed him by getting one at the lingerie store. At least she gets to dress slutty.”

“My boobs aren't perky enough to work at a lingerie store,” I say, looking down at them.

“Oh, your boobs are fine.”

I stick my tongue out at her, and we drink more and gossip as time passes by.

Later, after going inside to pee, I stumble back to the deck and Nance is on the phone, FaceTiming someone. I can tell it's a guy by the way she's flipping her hair. She turns the phone to me. “Say hi to Bryan,” she says. I pirouette for him and then bow, giggling, and almost trip. God. The coolers have definitely gone to my head. I don't even like Bryan. He's a jerk, just like his politician dad.

I plunk down on my chair but Nance seems intent on chatting him up. “Not fling material,” I say too loud.

She laughs but shushes me at the same time.

“Bryan. Bryan. Do you have a trust fund?” I yell with drunken gusto. “That's not going to get you Nance action this summer.”

She waves her hand at me to shut me up. I listen for a while but quickly get bored and pull out my own phone. There are no new texts from anyone, so I flip to my eBay app. I'm addicted to watching bids on eBay.

I search dresses. After all, Mom said I could buy a dress.

I scan a bunch and then see one that makes my eyes pop. I laugh because it's so ridiculous and yet so perfect at the same time. It's short. Gold sequins. Ostrich feathers. Giorgio vintage. I imagine myself wearing it to school on the first day. Or better, to my college interviews. That cracks me up even more. Ostrich feathers at a college interview.

“Oh God. I totally want this!” I hold up my phone to Nance and point, but she's making prune lips at Bryan and ignores me. Ugh.

“Gross,” I say and look down at the dress, really stare at it. “It is an important year,” I say out loud to it in my snooty lady voice. “Everyone says so.” I giggle some more. I've definitely had too many coolers. I imagine pirouetting in the dress. Maybe Josh is my date for prom. Ew. No. The Flynn guy. Taking a boy like him would get lots more attention. Not positive attention, but still. I laugh to myself and wonder how much the limit on my mom's credit card is. I glance down at the auction button. The Buy It Now button says it's \$9,999. It's regularly \$15,000. It's actually a total bargain.

I deserve something fun. There's so little fun in my life these days. My house is like a morgue most of the time. And okay, I won't wear it to school the first day, and definitely not on a college interview, but I could totally pull it off for prom.

I clap my hands together, imitating Nance, pull out my mom's credit card again, then click the Buy

It Now button. I fill in the payment information with the credit card number and my home address.

“Whoo-hoo!” I yell to Nance when the payment goes through.

She takes her eyes off her phone for two seconds to look at me. “I bought it!” I tell her.

“Of course you did,” she says and goes back to her phone.

I grab another cooler and move to sit beside her and stick my face into her phone screen. “She’s not going to sleep with you, Bryan,” I tell him. “Not this summer. You have too much money.”

He smirks at me. “Yeah? Well, least you can do is show me your boobs.”

Nance grabs my hand and swings it in the air.

“Oh no,” I say. After a few drinks, the girl does love to show off her boobs. “You asked for it, Bryan,” I say as Nance turns to me, a devilish twinkle in her eyes.

“Hold this.” She puts her phone in my hand. I make a face at Bryan.

“No. Point it at me!” she shouts, so I turn the phone so the camera faces her. “The sun’s going down soon and the girls need some sunshine.” In a flash, she’s undone her bikini top and tosses it down beside her.

I hear Bryan whoop and she flips her hair back, plucks my cooler from my hand, takes a sip, and wiggles around. The girl has great boobs, but God compensated by giving her no rhythm at all. That’s not for shizzle. I try to ignore her gigantic breasts bouncing up and down in the sun, though I should be used to her flashing them around.

I turn the phone toward me. “Okay, Bryan. You’ve had enough of a show. Bye.” I click off her phone and Nance yells at me. “You’re lucky he was too busy gawking to snap a photo of you. He’ll post it everywhere. And that is *not* what you need to start your senior year. You have to stop doing that on the phone.”

She laughs. “Yeah. Fair enough. Okay. No more phone flashing. But this is fun. Join me. Be free!”

“Me?” I laugh at the absurdity and put her phone down.

“Yes. Otherwise you’ll have weird tan lines that will mess up your hot new dress.”

I giggle and jump up and down, and in a sane part of my mind, I sense it’s a little manic but don’t even care. “I bought it!” I scream again. “Oh my God. I bought it.”

“Come on, Jess. Show me your boobies!”

Can I do that? Can I? I suck in a breath as if I’m eight and have just been caught with chocolate stains all over my fingers after being told to stay out of the chocolate chip bag. “But what if your brother comes back?”

“He’s at work,” she says dismissively, lifts her hands, and twirls around on the deck. “It’s so American to be repressed about topless sunbathing.”

“Yeah. But we are American!” I shout.

“It’s no big deal. I was half-naked the whole time I went to Saint Martin.”

“Because you have great boobs,” I say. I’ve hated my boobs since eighth grade when Johnny Ryan announced to everyone that my boobs were saggy. I’ve worn a padded bra ever since. Preferably a push-up one.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Your boobs are fabulous,” she says. “They don’t have to be big to be beautiful.” Nance twirls again. “Don’t leave me topless all alone. It’s more fun with someone else.”

“You always do it,” I remind her. “Last night, you were all party of one while you were flashing those boys.”

“Boring,” she says. “You are boring.”

“Not boring,” I tell her and sit up straighter. I take another swig of my cooler. What’s the big deal? I mean besides baring my boobs to the entire world. Well. Nance’s backyard.

“Jess-I-cup,” she sings.

“No,” I tell her.

“You’re not scared, are you?”

Grr. Nance knows the buttons to push.

“Bock, bock, bock,” she says, imitating a chicken.

“Not scared.” I reach around my back, then I pull my fingers back away. “No. I can’t!”

“Free yourself!” she chants. “Lose your inhibitions.”

I shake my head. “I can’t.”

“You can! Free those boobies!”

I shake my hands. Breathe in and out, in and out quickly.

“You can do it!” she says. “Go, Jess!” she cheers. “Go!”

I can’t. I have saggy boobs. But also, I’m kinda drunk.

“Free them!” she squeals.

It makes me laugh. I’m tired of myself. I don’t want to be like the little girl next door, clutching my chalk and trying to hide my feelings. I squeeze my eyes closed, pump my fists in the air, and try hard to rock my inner *Girls Gone Wild* vibe. “Okay, okay!” I squeal as my fingers fumble over a knot. “Oh my God!” I say. “What is wrong with me?”

“Show me your boobies,” Nance chants.

There’s a weird humming noise coming from my throat as I struggle to undo the knot, and then it gives and I pull off my bathing suit top and fling it for good luck. It flies through the air, and I watch in horror as it lands way too far away, in the middle of the yard on the grass.

“Oops!” I say and stare at it, covering my boobs with my hands.

Nance is laughing so hard, tears drip from her eyes. “I can’t believe you did it!” she yells.

Actually, neither can I.

“Girls?”

I blink. Holy crap.

“Nance,” says Mrs. Green. “What the *hell* is going on here?”

As if she’s got magical powers, Nance’s mom is suddenly standing on the deck. She’s wearing her real estate agent costume. Power suit. Tight short skirt, low-cut blouse, a fitted blazer, and mile-high heels. My mom used to wear the same thing. When she worked.

She’s glaring at us, and my face heats up. I wrap my arms tighter in front of myself and stumble. I’ve had way too much to drink to deal with this right now.

“Jesus, girls,” Nance’s mom sputters, glancing around at the coolers and cigarettes, her mouth open, her eyes shooting sparks. “This isn’t a nude beach. The neighbors can see you. Put your clothes back on.” She looks around, horrified someone might be peering over the fence, witnessing the

debauchery in her backyard.

“What will the neighbors think?” I shout with glee, but my giggle dies quickly in my throat when I see the look from Nance’s mom.

Nance nonchalantly grabs her top and slides it over her head and hooks the back together with one hand. She rolls her eyes and inhales her cigarette and exhales smoke that travels toward her mom’s face.

I’m frozen to the spot, my arms wrapped over my boobs, watching Nance’s mom cough and wave her hands in the air. Her eyes are bulging, which is kind of a feat with the amount of Botox she’s gotten injected in her face. Her eyes get even wider and her lips turn down. “Put that cigarette out. Now.” She turns her attention to me. “Jess! Put your top back on!” She looks about to commit murder. “Right now.”

I’m too shocked and kind of looped to do anything but stand there staring at her, my hands over my boobs. I glance at my bathing suit top in the grass about thirty feet away, but I can’t make myself move to get it.

“We didn’t expect you for a while,” Nance says and then glances at my face and bursts into laughter.

“Jess.” Her mom’s voice is pitchy and high. “What’s wrong with you? Put your top back on. Immediately.”

My face burns brighter, and with my arms still crossed in front, I run off the deck like a spaz and trip on the stairs. Nance laughs even harder as I scramble up and over to the spot on the grass where I threw my suit. I bend, trying to pick it up and keep myself covered. I finally manage to pull the top on and then clumsily tie up the strings in the back. Oh God. Nance’s mom saw my boobs. My mom hasn’t even seen my bare boobs in years.

“I thought you girls had more sense,” Nance’s mom says.

“So did I,” I tell her as honestly as I can, digging my toes into the grass, looking around the yard and not at her.

Nance snorts though, and the absurdity and the heat get to me. A laugh starts to build. It’s so ridiculous. And inappropriate and disrespectful. The more I try to stop the gigantic giggle that’s building, the worse it gets. I cover my mouth, but I can’t stop the laughter from spilling out of me. For a moment, I kind of lose my shit.

When I can finally breathe again, I inhale gulps of air and stand straighter. They’re both staring at me. Even Nance has a look that could almost pass for concern.

“Jess!” Nance’s mom says. “You need to go home. Are you okay to drive?”

I don’t think I am. But I don’t want to admit it. I bite my lip and stare at the grass, wiggling my toes around.

“For God’s sake, get dressed. I’ll take you home.”

Nance’s mom starts digging around her purse.

“Martin,” she says into her phone after she’s found it and dialed. “It’s Carol. Jess is here. She and Nance have been drinking. I’ll bring her home. No. She can’t drive herself. She’s had too much.”

She turns her back on me, and I can only imagine what my dad is saying in the silence that follows.

“No. It’s fine. I don’t mind. Yes. I’m sure. I’ll take her straightaway.” She listens for another moment and then hangs up.

“Get dressed, Jess,” she commands. “Nance. You go and wait for me in your room.”

I silently find my shorts and shirt and pull them on. My face is hot and it’s not only from the time in the sun. Nance is gone by the time I go to the front door to find my shoes.

Mrs. Green drives me home in silence. When we pull up to my house, she turns to look at me.

“You’re not to wake your mom,” she says. “Your dad asked you not to. You’re supposed to wait up for him.”

I nod, my head down, concentrating on my hands in my lap.

“Jess?” I hear concern in her voice. “Are you okay? Is there anything you’d like to talk about?”

“No. I’m fine. I’m very sorry,” I say. I can’t look at her or I’ll cry. Tears bunch up in the corners of my eyes. Nance and I were stupid. So stupid. I move my head so my hair falls in front of my face, hiding me.

“I hope so,” she says with a sigh.

I open the door. “I am sorry,” I say again.

“Good-bye, Jess,” she says right before I close the door behind me.

The house is quiet. There’s no movement from Mom’s room. Allie isn’t home. I sit on the couch and stare at the floor. I don’t have to wait long before my dad arrives.

He closes the door quietly behind him, but his face is white he’s so angry. “I don’t understand you, Jess,” he says.

I expect him to yell, but he doesn’t.

“Not only were you drinking and sunbathing topless. MasterCard called me,” he says in a quiet voice. “You charged over ten thousand dollars to our account? For a dress?”

“It had ostrich feathers,” I tell him and close my eyes. It doesn’t seem hilarious anymore. Or like the perfect prom dress. I don’t tell him Mom gave me permission to buy a dress. I’m stupid but not that stupid.

I wait. But there’s no yelling. Nothing.

Finally I open my eyes and what I see shocks me more than anything.

He’s sitting on his leather chair. His favorite chair. Across the room. His head is in his hands. His shoulders are shaking.

He’s crying?

I’ve never seen him cry in my life.

I feel even worse.

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