

# **Saccades Project**

## **Comprehensive Outline**

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*Saccades*

1.

*6:49 PM April 6<sup>th</sup>*

—And then he looked up and said, What if God was a teenage girl?

2.

*11:32 AM April 8<sup>th</sup>*

—I shouldn't have mentioned the grid, but Cam used to joke about that all the time, going off the grid, how he was going to try it one day, just to see if it could be done.

3.

*2:47 PM April 7<sup>th</sup>*

—Got my phone taken away in fifth period. I told him it wasn't my fault, but do they listen? Does anyone ever listen to me?

4.

*5:47 PM April 9<sup>th</sup>*

—I called him, I texted, I even sent an email, asking him, Cam, where the hell are you?

5.

*11:32 AM April 8th '1*

—Mrs. Kirkpatrick, the secretary, walked me to the end of the hall, not saying a word, and then she knocked on the conference room door. Principal Cheswick smiled, opening the door and told me to come in, and I couldn't figure out why he was being so nice, and then I noticed a man, standing at the very end of the table, in front of the blackboard. He looked at me, waiting for Mrs. Kirkpatrick to shut the door, and then said, Hello, Thea, I'm Detective Knox, and I'd like to ask you a few questions, if that's all right?

Is this about Cam? I asked, and he nodded.

Have you seen or spoken to him since Monday night?

No.

He hasn't contacted you?

No.

Do you have any idea where he is?

No.

Do you have any idea where he could be?

No.

His mother tells me you two are dating.

Yes.

How long have you two been dating?

Since September.

And how did you meet?

School.

Yes, he said, nodding his head at me, waiting.

He was my geometry tutor, I said.

That's useful in a boyfriend, he said, scratching the side of his nose.

Yeah, well, I was useful in my own ways, I said, and then he cleared his throat, looking at Cheswick again for backup.

Do you have any classes together?

No.

So he tutored you in geometry, and then you started dating?

Yes.

Does he have many friends?

At school?

Yes.

Not really. I mean, a few, but no one he really hangs out with.

As far as you know.

And you have no idea where he could be?

I don't know, I mean . . . maybe he went off the grid.

Pardon?

The grid. What if he's just off the grid for a few days?

Why would he do that?

To see if it can be done. Look, I don't know where he is.

He was doing well in school?

He's going to MIT next fall, so yeah, you could say that.

But you're a sophomore?

The worst year, I said.

Why is that? he asked.

That's what everyone says. Personally, I don't think there's such thing as a better year of high school, but whatever. So what happens now?

We try and find him.

How comforting.

Thank you for your time, Thea.

Can I ask you something? I asked.

Yes?

Aren't you supposed to have a partner? I asked, and he just looked at me. On TV, they always have hot female partners, like she-cops, I said.

In a perfect world, he said, smiling. Yes, I have a partner, but she's on maternity leave for three months.

So what does that make you now, the good cop or the bad cop?

You know, I keep asking myself that same question.

Can I go now? I asked, looking at the door.

Just one more question: did you two have a fight?

When? I asked.

That night? No.

Often?

No. I mean we had fights, but who doesn't?

About what? What did you two fight about?

I looked at him, and then I looked at Cheswick, like that's really none of your business.

Stupid shit, I said, like everyone else.

Give me an example.

I don't know, like . . . video games.

You fought over video games?

No . . . one time, we were supposed to go see this movie, and we'd been planning it all week. I was so excited to see this movie, so I bought tickets ahead of time, but it was opening weekend, so we needed to get there. I just looked at him nodding, like this is stupid. Why am I telling you this? Whatever, I said. It was nothing.

Go on.

I don't know. It's just like I went to pick Cam up, and he was playing a video game, and he was like, Relax, will you? We don't need to get there an hour early, and he just kept playing, and sure enough, by the time I got him out the door, we were late.

You missed your movie?

We missed the opening five minutes, so yeah, basically. But then Cam was like, So we missed five minutes, what's the big deal? And I was so pissed—you can't watch a movie if you don't see the opening frame. Who does that? I asked, and I could see he had no idea what I was talking about. Anyhow, why did you think we had a fight?

I just had to ask, he said, smiling. You can go now, he said, pulling a business card out of his inside pocket, handing it to me. Call me if you need anything or if you think of anything. We'll be in touch, he said, opening the door for me.

Hey, Knox?

Yeah?

What's your first name?

Detective. But you can call me Knox.

Thanks.

6.

*7:47 PM September 23, 2008*

—That night, after the first time we met in the library, after school, Cam sent me a text that said, *If people don't believe that mathematics is simple, it's only because they don't realize how complicated life is.* So I texted him right back: *Yeah, and if a high school boy doesn't want to spend the rest of his life masturbating and alone, he should keep his clever thoughts to himself.*

7.

*10:33 AM April 14*

—Finally, I realized what was going on, and I said, Wait a minute, am I suspect here? You are a person of interest, he said.

8.

*2:32 PM April 27<sup>th</sup>*

—The whole time they were taking my blood, Mom just kept holding my head between her hands, saying, Look at me, look at me . . .

9.

*4:36 PM April 30<sup>th</sup>*

—Then I turned the lights back on and I said, You see? You see! And he said, All right, all right, just calm down—. I said, Don't tell me to calm down, Knox, you aren't the one who's fucking glowing in the dark here!

10.

*1:44 PM April 13<sup>th</sup>*

—Mmm . . . mmm . . . oh, Daddy! All day long. That's all I hear in the halls.

11.

*3:56 PM April 16<sup>th</sup>*

—Knox was taking me home when he got a call. He answered just like you always see them on TV, he was like, Yeah, Knox, and there was a voice—I think it was a woman, and it was. It wasn't a case; it was his babysitter. She said it was an emergency.

I'm sorry to do this, he said, but our babysitter has to pick her son up from school.

What happened? I asked.

He stuffed a box of raisins up his nose.

A box? Like an entire little box of raisins?

Who knows with these kids anymore, he said. Anyhow, she has to go pick him up now.

So I need to get home until my wife gets off work. It'll only be about half an hour, he said, do you mind?

No, that's fine. Whatever. I didn't know you had a little girl.

Yeah.

How old is she?

About your age.

My age? She's my age and she still has a babysitter?

He didn't say anything. He just looked ahead, driving the car.

I sniffed the air, and then I smelled it on him. You smoke, don't you?

No comment, he said.

Does your wife know?

Like I said.

Bad. Bad, bad detective—that's what I'm going to call you from now on, Bad Detective,

I taunted him in my taunting voice, holding my hand to my mouth in a trailer baritone bugle call: Thea and the Bad, Bad Detective.

He didn't say anything, and then he started laughing, but just with his shoulders, really.

Wow, I said. I think that's the first time I've ever seen you laugh.

Feel free to return the favor, he said.

Hey, it's not my fault if I'm funny and you're not, I said, and then he nodded his head, rubbing his temples with his index finger and thumb. I said, And once again, Detective

Knox rubbed his temples with one hand, sitting, waiting for the light to turn.

Tell me about your dad, he said.

Why?

Because you never mention him.

What was your first clue? I said.

Go on, let's hear. I want all the gruesome details.

Okay, well, let's see . . . once upon a time, he was a prick.

Yes?

And before that, he was a prick. So, based on experience, even though we barely speak anyone, I'm willing to be he's still a prick. He left my mom for his secretary. Who does that? Men who buy sports cars and have combovers.

Does he have a combover?

No, he has good hair, actually. But he does have a sports car and a wife whose half his age, I said, before pointing my finger down my throat: gag, gag, gag. Knox didn't say anything, he just looked out his window. My mom was a mess.

And you?

And me what?

How were you?

So many things came to mind, but all I could say was, Not good. I wasn't good.

I'm sorry, he said. I'm sorry, Thea.

Why? You didn't do anything.

Don't have to do a thing to be sorry.

Guess not.

Not all men are like that, you know?

No, they aren't. But a lot of them are.

Cameron wasn't like that, was he?

No, my dad would run away, but he'd never run away and then post tapes on the internet of the two of us having sex together. He's a spineless cheat, but he's not that stupid.

You know you're very funny when you're being funny.

And don't you forget it, mister, I said.

So when was the last time you two spoke, you and your dad?

Christmas.

Christmas?

Yes.

That was four months ago.

Four months and three years, actually: Christmas 2006

Thea.

What?

Well, I don't know . . . he's your father.

You should remind him of that, not me, Knox. And when you're through there, try reminding yourself that you don't know anything about it.

Then why don't you tell me how it is?

He didn't call to wish me a Merry Christmas; he called to tell me his wife was pregnant.

Four years ago?

Yes. What?

Did she have the baby?

Apparently. They sent a birth announcement.

Boy or girl?

I forget.

Thea.

Now, isn't it nice having someone else to feel sorry for besides yourself, Knox?

There you go again: behaving like a teenager again, he said, pulling into the apartment parking lot.

Shocking, isn't it? I said, grabbing my bag off the floor, putting it on my lap. Knox, while we're having this intimate moment, tell me, do you screw around on your wife? I asked, turning to stare at him.

Well, Thea, he said, turning off the engine, that is what I like to call, none of your fucking business, young lady.

The most intimate details—my whole life is your business, you'd think you could be honest with me.

We aren't having this conversation.

I take that as a yes.

I can't stop you if that's what you think.

Gross, I said, and he just raised his hands, staring ahead, like, I'm not touching it, sorry.

All right, well, I'll see you around, I said, opening my door.

Hey, Thea?

Yes?

What's he like, Cam?

That's the first time you've really asked me about him.

I'm trying—I'll try to do better.

By the way, I'm supposed to give you a message.

What's that?

You're forgiven?

For what? he said, laughing.

Wishing it'd never happened.

Excuse me?

For wishing your daughter never been born. Melody asked me to tell you that you can stop beating yourself up, I said. She told me that you get so drunk sometimes you practically piss yourself, getting down on your knees, begging God to forgive you for wishing your daughter hadn't been born, I said, and he hunched over, gripping the wheel with both hands. He looked over at me, and for a second there, he like he'd slap me if I kept talking, and then he looked like he'd slap me if I quit.

So I kept talking: She knows, Knox. She knows everything. She hears you. You think just because you put her to bed, she's sleeping, that she doesn't know what's going on in her own house, but you're wrong. You are so wrong. But she still forgives you.

This, this isn't real . . . you're a smart girl, but this, this—.

You drink Maker's Mark, don't you? I said, but he didn't answer. Don't you, Detective?

Yes, he said.

Anytime you want to ask her something about herself, let me know. I think you'd be surprised how much there is to know. You don't believe me, do you?

That my daughter spoke to you and said she wants a nose ring for her birthday?

I'm telling you, that's what she said.

Let's just leave it alone, okay?

I can prove it, I said. I mean, really, why would I lie?

I have to tell you, Thea, there are times I don't know what to believe—if you've being straight with me, if I'm getting played.

Well, I am being straight with you.

I'm just saying.

Yeah, because I just love spending so much time with a small-town cop and his mute daughter. I mean, what? I said, asking him. Sorry, I said, turning around, apologizing to Melody. I didn't mean it like that.

Thea, I was trying to tell you where I'm coming from, trying to be honest, and your response is to be mean.

Tell him to ask you a question. Anything about me, Melody said, and I looked at her, then I turned back to face him.

If you don't believe me, I said, ask me something—let's go back to your house, and you ask me a question that only she would know, and I'll prove it. Go on, you can ask me anything you like—.

Thea, you've been through a lot this past week, and I think, I think you need to get some sleep—I think we both need to get some sleep.

You're afraid it's true. That's why, isn't it? You won't let me prove it to you because it might be true.

No . . . no, that's not why. The reason why is because I'm afraid it's not true, and then I'll be so angry at you that won't know how the hell to do my job.

Fine, I said. Fine. But I'm not lying: she said she loved my hair cut, and if you know how to do your job, why haven't you found Cameron yet? I said, and then I got out of the car and slammed the door.

Thea? Thea? Hold on—come on, he said, getting out of the car, talking to me over the hood.

What? What, already?

Can I read it sometime, your script? Can I read your script sometime?

Maybe, I said.

I'd like that, he said.

If Cam says it's cool, I said. I'll have to ask, because it's his, too—I can't let you see it without asking him first.

Of course, he said, nodding. Understood.

So find him, and maybe you can read it.

I'm trying. I really am.

Then try harder, I said, my throat contracting, turning around again.

It wasn't until Friday night that I finally cried. Mostly because I was so angry, so humiliated, when they find you, I'm gonna fucking kill you.

12.

*7:48 PM April 24th*

—I sat down, and I started writing him: Where are you? Where the hell are you? And why are you doing this to me? I thought you loved me, Cam. But how could you do this to me, if you love me? It's such bullshit, I wrote. I sat back in my chair, and then I deleted the email, trying not to cry, I was so angry. Then I got a new message—I didn't recognize the address, and I have high security, so I just opened it, and the message read: I do love you, Thea. More than anything. My mouth fell open, and I lifted my hands off the keyboard, like it was poison . . . I'm losing my fucking mind. They were right—they were all right about me: I am crazy.

13.

*5:27 PM April 13<sup>th</sup>*

—I need you to tell me about that afternoon. He didn't tell you he was leaving, he didn't mention anyone, anything unusual?

I told you no already.

I know, let's just go over it once. So after school, the two of you went to your house?

Yes.

And then what? he said.

I just looked at him like, *What do you think we did after school, alone in my house? We had sex*, I said.

And then?

We had sex again.

The usual.

Exactly, I said.

Anything else?

Not that I can remember.

Thea—.

What? You want details, what?

What I'm saying is, did you do anything besides have sex?

I've fifteen years old, I said. And you're a serious perv, you know that, Knox? No wonder you went into law enforcement.

You don't talk about anything, watch television, eat a snack?

Eat a snack?

He sighed, hiding his face in his hands.

We did some work, I said.

Homework?

No, not homework, real work—we worked on our script.

Anything else you can share?

We had sex, we worked on our script, we took a break and had sex again.

You're working on a script together?

Yes.

What kind of script?

A film script.

Can I ask what it's about, your script?

Yes, but I won't tell you.

Why not?

Because that would be telling, I said, and he just looked at me. That would be telling, *The Prisoner*? He had no clue what I was talking about. Never mind, I said. I'll tell you if you promise not to try and steal our idea.

I promise.

You swear?

I swear I won't steal your idea.

It's about an arsonist in a wax museum, I said, watching him wrap his mind around the idea. See, it's about this guy, this mastermind arsonist who decides the ultimate, like the crowning achievement of his brilliant career would be burning down Madame Tussaud's in London! I said, and he just looked at me, nodding.

Go on, he said, still nodding.

Well, so he's got it all planned, every last detail, but then, when he gets there, he falls in love with a girl working at the gift store. So it's all about him fighting with his demons, because what could be better, what could possibly top Madame Tussaud's? And it's such a perfect crime, he almost wants to get caught, just so people will know, you know? So it's all that stuff—watching this woman from afar.

Do they have a gift shop at Madame Tussaud's?

Of course they do. I mean, how could they not have a gift shop?

I was just asking.

Well, maybe that will be a fictional touch, I don't know. We'll figure it out. But that's why we were gonna go—to really research the place, we wanted to go to London.

London.

As my graduation gift.

That's two years away.

What's your point?

Just overstating the obvious, ma'am.

Anyhow, they have this Warhols Women thing that looks good, too. They're recreated Warhol's studio—maybe the whole factory, I don't know. But we were going to write that into the script, how much Andy Warhol would've worshipped this—like imagine Daniel Craig if he were the greatest pyromaniac in history—like an arsonist for hire, instead of an assassin for hire, right? And, and he was the greatest celebrity serial killer of all time.

Interesting. Whose idea what that?

I don't remember now.

You don't remember whose idea it was?

I think it was mine, but no, I really don't remember. Doesn't matter whose idea it was, anyhow.

Why is that?

Because it's not the idea that matters, Knox, it's the expression of the idea.

I'll keep that in mind.

Anyhow, he wasn't just any old arsonist, either. We're talking a totally sexy, hot arsonist dude—.

A hot arsonist?

You know what I mean. Like stylin', you know, like Saville Row suits—Bond, James Bon, I said. Fire gets him off, too—like the fantasies he has, it's like, I don't know, have you ever seen the Jimi Hendrix video, where he sets his guitar on fire? And it's just . . . Hot? he asked.

Exactly, I said, raising my hands, sort of imitating Jimi Hendrix, and Knox just nodded, like, no comment.

Okay, so . . . Daniel Craig in the wax museum—is there a statue of him, too?

How did you know, Knox?

So he kills himself, basically?

Of course. I told you: it's a love story.

14.

*11:25 AM April 8<sup>th</sup>*

—There was a knock and Mr. Jenssen went to the door, and then he turned around and said, Thea, they want to see you in the office. Everyone turned and looked at me, like, What’s up? What did you do this time? And I was just like, Dunno—I didn’t do anything that I know about. So I got up, and then he said, Go ahead and take your books, and he folded the pink slip and handed it to me.

So I went to the principal’s office, and Mrs. Lyle, the school secretary who’s been there since the dawn of time, said, Follow me, and I was just like, what the hell is going on? So we walked to the backroom at the end of the hall, the conference room, and she knocked and opened the door. Mr. Cheswick was sitting at the table with a man, and he said, Come in, Thea. The police are here. They have some questions for you.

So I walked into the room, and then I saw my mom was there, too, looking totally freaked out, and I was just like, WTF? What the hell is going on, you know? I didn’t do anything.

15.

*3:56 PM April 16<sup>th</sup>*

—Thea, Knox said, I’d like you to meet my daughter, Melody.

Mel, this is Thea. I’m working with her—it’s business.

You didn’t need to put it like that.

Excuse me, he said.

And there she was, sitting in a wheelchair at a table in her bedroom. That's why she had a babysitter, because she was in a chair. She moved about, seeing us walk in, and she looked so excited. I didn't know what else to do, so I held out my hand, and she tried to move, to reach for my hand, so I grabbed her hand, and it was like . . . it was like being electrocuted. Except it didn't hurt—it wasn't like that at all, it was like, it was this voice—just the most beautiful voice, and she said, slowly, clearly, I'm so glad you're here.

I said, Thank you.

And he said, For what?

I wasn't talking to you, I was talking to her.

I don't understand, he said.

I said thank you, because she said she liked my hair.

Thea . . .?

What did you want me to say? She said she liked my hair, I said, and he looked at me, and then he looked at her, and then I saw her, as she is. I didn't think about it at first, but how could Melody have said that? How could she have said anything? I don't . . . I don't know, but I heard it—I heard her say the words.

Knox's mouth started to open, and then she did it again—she said, I want to get my haircut. Will you tell him I want to get my hair cut, too?

She said she wants to get her hair cut.

Thea, this isn't funny—.

For her birthday. She said you asked her what she wants for her birthday this year, just this morning, when you were putting on her shoes, didn't you? You asked her what she

wants, and she wants you to take her to get her hair cut. And a nose ring—she says don't say no, she just wants a little stud.

Knox's face—I'd seen that look on a face before. And then, I don't know why, but I started crying. Because I was scared.

Yes, I said, trying not to cry.

Yes, what, Thea?

She asked me if I'd go with her to help choose a style, I said, and my eyes began welling with tears.

She says she'll hold still—she promises. She won't flail around or twist a single muscle if you let her get her hair cut? She says, Please. Please, Daddy, please let me get my hair cut? At least let her get some layers.

Layers?

I agree: I think she'd look so much better if you took some of the weight off, I said, and he just nodded his head. I heard her. I'm telling you, I heard her voice.

Thea? he said.

What?

He nodded at me, like he wasn't going to say it, but that just pissed me off. What, already? What?

I believe you, he said. But that's as far as I'm willing to go right now.

Okay. Okay, I said, nodding, my eyes welling again. What is up with the waterworks, already? Seriously, I've never cried so much in my life—at least not in a good twelve years.

Then the door opened, and a woman walked in, Hey, there you are, she said, and then she looking at us, her eyes kept moving in a circle, from me, to Melody, to Knox, and back again. She didn't say anything, she gives me this look like, who the hell are you and what the fuck are you doing in my house?

Hello, I'm Heather, she says.

Hi, I'm Thea.

Oh, Thea, of course.

Of course what? I wonder.

I was just taking her home, and Shelley called, Dylan stuck a box of raisins up his nose?

A whole box?

We don't know yet, he said. Anyhow, I was taking Thea home when she called.

Well, I'm sorry I couldn't leave work—.

Oh, it's fine. It was really nice meeting Melody. Thank you, I said, and she smiled, and nodded, looking at Melody, then she looked at Knox, still smiling, like, Well?

I'll be home in a couple hours? he asked, taking the cue, stepping forward to kiss her goodbye.

Nice meeting you, Thea.

You, too, I said.

I waited until we got in the car, and then I asked him, straight out: What did you tell her about me?

What do you mean?

Don't give me that. You've been talking about me, haven't you?

16.

—It was just a joke, you know. It was just...I don't know, like one of those stupid things we used to say to each other. Like Cam would say, Okay, I'll be in touch, going off the grid for a few hours.

Cam was always talking about the grid: he loved this idea of this world, this underworld with all these revolutionaries who lived entirely off the grid, just waiting, preparing themselves for the coming Apocalypse. He said if the next Che Guevara would be a hacker, but that he'd have to use virtual guerilla warfare tactics, always on the move, hiding out in the jungles—he'd go on and on, and I'd just be like, Whatever. Pass me the Cheetos, will you?

We'd sit around, watching old movies, and I'd ask him all these questions, like, Which would be easier to hack into, NASA or . . . Twitter? Twitter, he said. Hands down. What makes you say that? Because I've tried. Now shush, and watch the movie, he said, patting my thigh, and I started laughing, grabbing a hand of popcorn, and just looking at him, like, you are so full of shite.

What, you don't believe me?

No.

I know you just love me for my boyish good looks, but no, no, missy, I am one of the world's foremost hackers. Living right here, in a small upstate New York town—perfect cover. Why do you think we had to move here? he said, but I just rolled my eyes, and told him to shush himself.

Cam loved the idea of virtual graffiti artists—he called them hanksters, hacker pranksters, who'd tag the homepages of major corporations. Or just small-time stuff, like

fucking with people's Facebook family photos, shit like that, you know. He said he was working on a way to draw over Mr. Cheswick's family photos—nothing too lewd, but maybe a man bra that would look like it'd been drawn with a sharpie, stuff like that.

17.

*6:47 AM April 7<sup>th</sup>*

—The next morning, I hear this knocking and screaming. My mom got up to see what was going on, and it was Karen, at our front door. Cam's mom was banging on our front door at six in the morning. Where is he? she said. Thea, get out here, my mom said. He's not here, I said, opening my door, and then they both walked into my room, not even asking. I said he's not here.

His car's in the drive, Karen said.

Well, I don't know what to tell you—he's not with me, Jesus. She walked right into my room, and then her face . . .

Where is he, then?

I said I don't know, Karen.

You don't know?

Karen, I swear, I don't know where he is.

I could tell something was wrong by her face. Not just like he'd taken off, but she was afraid of something else. After she left, I tried calling him. I tried calling him twenty times, but his phone was turned off. I emailed him, texted, I went to his site, and his site was gone. I wasn't worried until then. That when I remembered what he'd asked me, once, on one of his many rants, asking me, What if we had a secret site, a roaming site

like roaming clubs? There would be a phone number that you'd call, and it would tell you an address like an hour before the party started, and you'd have to run or you'd miss the party, because it would just keep moving . . . But I didn't have any number. Not that I knew about.

No one knew at school. I had a bad feeling. And Karen kept calling me at school, like once every period, to ask if I'd heard anything. There was a point I got pissed—it was fucked up for him to take off like that, and leave me with his mother and my mother. Then I stared wondering . . . it was just a joke, really. The grid. Everything became about the grid—it was this running joke, how we needed to get rid of our cell phones and credit cards and debit cards and stay offline . . . He said there were already groups of people, living off the grid, purposefully, waiting for the worst to happen . . . He was obsessed with two things: hacking and comics.

I didn't sleep Tuesday night. Wednesday morning, Karen called, but she didn't ask. She said she just wanted me to know she was calling the police. All I could do was nod, and then I hung up the phone. When it rang again, ten seconds later, I was sure it was her, but it was a text with an address and a time. I stared at the phone, thinking, What are you doing? Why are you doing this? I was furious, then I got up and walked to my computer, hearing a new message. It was a link, so I clicked it, sitting down, and there was a video. It was a video of the two of us from Monday afternoon. I quit and stepped away from the table. My phone rang again, and it was Karen. Hello? Thea, I wanted you to know I spoke with the police and I'm filing a missing person report. Okay, I said. And they'd like to talk to you after school, she said.

18.

*3:46 PM September 23, 2008*

—Cam was assigned to be my tutor. He'd just transferred, and I guess he was some sort of math whiz, and I'm some sort of math retard. Right off the bat, he started in, asking my favorite subject, and I said English, so he then starts telling me how math was like poetry, and I just held up my hand.

I said, Please don't give me that Dead Poet's shit, Oh, Captain, my Captain! If it were poetry, I'd be passing the class, but it's not poetry, and I'm not passing.

But what if? What if it were poetry?

What if there were rainbows in the sky and a herd of unicorns in the gymnasium?

What I—.

Don't talk to me like I'm stupid, okay?

Okay, if you stop acting like stupid and start passing this class.

I just glared at him, standing up.

Thea, two things before you leave.

What's that?

One, sit your ass down, because we aren't done, and two, quit worrying about the grade and try learning something.

You know, part of teaching is tact—and you have none.

Who said part of teaching was tact?

I did.

I have no tact. No?

None.

So would it be totally inappropriate to ask you on a date?

Dunno. Would it be totally inappropriate to offer you a blowjob in exchange for doing my geometry homework all week? I asked, and then he propped his chin in his left hand, his index finger curled around this difficult problem. Tempting, isn't it?

19.

*2:47 PM April 8<sup>th</sup>*

—Mr. Jossen took my phone away, after scolding me in front of the whole class for not turning it off after he'd just warned me to turn it off, and I told him, I said, I did—I did turn it off, and he goes, Oh, well, not off enough, apparently. Give it here, he said, holding out his hand, so I took out my phone and I gave it to him, and then he checked, turning it on and turning it off again, like I tried to pull a fast one on him, before he put it in his desk and went back to the problem on the board. I was so pissed, because I did turn it off, and I hate being scolded in front of the whole class, and then, like two minutes later, there was this guitar riff, coming from his desk. . .

Whose phone is that? he asked, turning to look at the class. What's that?

It's Bauhaus, Teddy Meyers said, looking up, like that's what Jossen was asking, and everyone started laughing.

I said, Whose phone is that? Mr. Jossen asked, his neck turning red.

I think it's mine, I said, staring at my desk.

We all watched him: we all saw him turn it on, and then turn it off. We heard the chimes, powering off. So he took my phone out of his desk, and he turned it on, waiting, and then he turned it off again. Everyone got sort of quiet, like that's weird, you know?

And it was so weird, it was only then that I realized that's not my ringtone—maybe it wasn't my phone? I didn't understand. Very strange, you know. Anyhow, Mr. Jenssen went back to the board again, and then, not two minutes later, it happened again.

Maybe it's broken, one of the guys said. I think it was Jake Bowen, I don't know who said it.

Maybe, I said, shrugging, and then Mr. Jenssen curled his finger at me, and I just looked at him.

That's an interesting trick, Ms. Denny, he said.

You just turned it off, so why are you blaming me?

Office, he said, snapping his finger at me, and I was just like, Don't snap your finger at me. Of course everyone was staring, and my phone was singing the whole time, too, so I bit my tongue and I gathered my books, heading for the door.

What should I tell him I did wrong, Mr. J.? And he looked at me, Totally unamused, and he goes, I'll handle that when I get there, and I said, Okay. Would you mind bringing my phone with you, too?

I walked out and closed the door, perfectly calm, and I started heading for the office, down the main hall, and then, all of sudden, I heard this—it was like a chorus of phones, in harmony, like every phone in the whole room must have been going off, “She's in parties!”

20.

*10:33 AM April 14<sup>th</sup>*

—I thought it must be Knox, but it wasn't. It was this other dude, and before I could ask, he said, Hello, Theadora, I'm Agent Foley. There was something about him that was just so annoying, especially, like just the way he was looking at me and then he goes, Hello, Theadora, I'm Agent Foley, FBI. I'd like to ask you a few questions, if that's all right?

Where's Knox?

Who is Knox?

Detective Knox?

Oh, he said, probably at work.

Can I see your badge again? I asked, because he'd put it away before I had a chance to look at it, so he smiled and removed his badge, holding it up for me.

Very shiny, I said, but still. How do I know you are who you say you are?

I ask myself that question all the time, he said, folding the badge and returning it to his breast pocket.

What is that, like missing persons' humor?

Apparently not, seeing as you didn't laugh.

So what, you're here because you think Cam's been kidnapped or something?

No, we're here because we think Cam's been kidnapped because he was breaking into top-security sites, and then he disappeared the very day the NSA was about to arrest him.

Oh, bullshit, I said, unable to keep from laughing.

No?

Seriously, like . . . I'm sorry, but that was just a line. It wasn't real. What, you went through desk and—.

There were two NSA agents on their way to arrest John at the very moment that he left your house.

So why don't you ask them where he is?

Because they're dead. See, I'm just trying to get some answers because your boyfriend is missing; two agents are dead; a sex tape that appears to be of the two of you, having sex, has been posted on YouTube; and there's blood in the trunk of your missing boyfriend's car that's not his blood; and, last but not least, his computer is missing, as well. Besides which, videos are being posted that we can't seem to track, trace and/or remove from various sites. Every attempt to remove these videos results in what appears to be a virus, causing two more videos to appear in their place. And, given your age, given appearances, federal laws are being broken. Let me ask you this, Theadora, do you know John's IQ?

No. And no one calls him John.

Yes, we'll get to that in time. One fifty nine: he has an IQ of one fifty nine.

Smart.

Genius.

Don't tell him: he'll never let me live it down.

As a matter of fact, and I don't mean to be rude here, Theadora, but what do you think he saw in you?

I'm sorry, but what part of that was the part where you didn't meant to be rude, exactly?

I'm asking you what you two have in common.

Where are you going with this, Foley? And wherever it is, could you just step on it, already?

21.

*3:59 April 19*

—I like your hair, Melody said, just as we were heading out the door.

Thank you, I said.

For what? Knox asked, looking back.

For the compliment, I said.

What compliment? hee asked.

She said she liked my hair cut, and I said thank you. What? I asked, because I didn't understand what he was saying at first, then I turned to look at her again, and then I was just like, *Oh, yeah . . . duh. She can't talk. I heard her talking, but she can't talk, so what the hell was I saying, you know?* But the thing is, I swear I heard her. I know I heard her voice. And then, out of nowhere, she started yelling at me—in my head—I'm here, I'm here! Don't go!

Knox was waiting for me to say something, so I told him the truth: You can't hear that? She's shouting, I said, touching my left ear. Knox didn't blink, nothing, but he started biting the inside of his lip, and I was just like, Listen, you think you're freaked out, you go no idea just how freaky freaky can get, Detective!

Once we got in the car, I buckled my seatbelt, and then I just looked at him, like, Dude, you can't be serious . . .

What? What's wrong?

You told your wife we're working on a case? I said. What, like she was going to look at you, then look at me, and think, what, that something was going on between us that wasn't professional?

I was just telling her.

And I'm just telling you: get real. I'm fifteen, and you're like, what? Forty? Seriously, dude, you gotta ask yourself: what's wrong with this picture?

Excuse me. I just wanted to be sure there was no misunderstanding.

Well, try beginning with yourself, I mean, please.

I hear you. And it won't happen again.

Thank you.

One other thing.

What's that?

It's Detective Dude to you.

Oh, har, har, har, here comes the dad humor, roll out the red carpet, ladies and gentleman, dad humor coming through, dad humor . . . Knox laughed and started the car, and I let him pull out before I asked him, So, like, how old are you, really?

22.

*9:27 AM April 15<sup>th</sup>*

—They said he posted videos of us. Foley returned a couple days later, and he said Cam posted videos of the two of us, having sex, that he made sex tapes of us, but and I don't believe it.

Thank you for coming in, Theadora. Please sit down, won't you?

I didn't have a choice, do I? And I told you, no one calls me Theadora. So ask your questions, because I have to get back to class, okay?

All right, then, tell me, how long have you and John been having sexual relations?

I don't know anyone named John.

Cameron, he said. You and Cameron. How long have you been having sexual relations?

I looked at him, like, *you are such a perv . . .* and then I said, Define sexual relations, Agent.

Sexual intercourse.

Define sexual intercourse, Agent.

It's a shame what's become of a public school education, he said, folding his hands and nodding his head.

What, penetration, oral sex, is that what you had I mind?

Something like that, yes.

Well, frankly, that's none of your business.

Unfortunately, it is—now it is. You're boyfriend's missing and—.

Wait a second—am I . . . am I suspect? Do you think I had something to do with his disappearance?

That's what we're trying to figure out.

We who?

Have a seat, please, he said, and I finally sat down at the conference table, across from him. Now, tell me about the videos.

What videos?

The sex tapes.

Whose?

Yours. You and John—Cameron, he said. If that's what he goes by.

What are you talking about?

He didn't tell you?

He didn't tell me what? What are you talking about?

He posted videos of the two of you—.

Nuht uh.

Yes.

He did not.

Yes, he did.

I don't believe you.

You two are sexually active—you have had sex.

That's none of your business.

Do you want to see them for yourself?

No.

Well, I'm afraid we don't have much choice, he said, pointing the remote at the set in the corner.

That's . . . that's not me, I said, watching us onscreen.

She looks like you.

Maybe, but that's not me.

All right. So what we have is a video of a boy approximately eighteen years old in age, who bares striking resemblance to your missing boyfriend, John Cameron Conlon, having

sex with a girl approximately fifteen years of age, who bares striking resemblance to you in a bedroom that looks exactly your bedroom?

Don't know what to tell you, Foley.

There: stop it there, he said, freeze-framing. Is that Cam?

I don't know—I can't see him well enough.

Then let's watch it again.

You're enjoying this, aren't you?

Actually, the reason we should watch it again is because one of the strange things about this video is that every time this video plays, it becomes clearer, and seeing as it's become an internet phenomenon, in the past week, the video has gone from grainy super 8 quality to almost high def. The other thing that's interesting, Theadora, is that the tape is dated April 6, 2009, the day Cam disappeared.

I'm telling you, we never . . . we never taped ourselves.

I'm telling you, your boyfriend posted these videos on the internet, and I can prove it. So, if it's not you in the tape, who is that girl sleeping in your bed?

I told you, I don't know who she is, Foley, but Cam would never do that—he would never ever betray me like that.

It must be a huge shock, Theadora, I know.

How? Did someone post videos of you having sex with your boyfriend? Can I go now? I asked, standing.

Theadora, he said. Sit down.

Or what, you're going to handcuff me and videotape it?

Your mother should be here any minute, he said.

Oh . . . fuck me, I said, slapping my own forehead. Like things weren't bad enough?

Please . . . please don't tell my mom—.

I'm sorry, he said, looking up, hearing a knock at the door. Come in.

I just held my face in my hands: why me? Why is this happening to me?

23.

—Thea? Mom said.

What?

Look who's here, she said, smiling as Ray-Ray walked into the living room from the kitchen.

Hey, hey, Theadory, what's up?

I just looked at him, wondering what the hell he was doing there.

Thea, Ray came to see you because he's worried.

You're kidding me.

No, he's truly concerned.

Don't give me that—you used my boyfriend's disappearance as an excuse to call your loser ex-boyfriend who only took your call because he probably needs to get laid—.

Thea!

Why don't I give you two a minute? he said, looking at my mom with such sympathy for the heartache I must be causing her.

Why stop at one, Ray?

Thea, go to your room.

No problem, I said, getting up and walking out. One thing, I said, turning back: I just spent an entire day listening to five hundred kids laugh and snicker and whisper and yell at me down the hall, thinking they've seen me naked, fucking my boyfriend, who is now missing. What sort of support did you think Ray-Ray, your lecherous, cheating ex-boyfriend, could offer me right now? She was so furious, she couldn't answer. She just stood there, huffing and puffing, curling her hands into fists.

I locked my bedroom door behind me, and checked my phone. There was another text from Cam's number; it said, Do you trust me? I sat there for ten minutes, just staring as the letters started blurring, because I was starting to cry.

24.

6:58 PM April 23<sup>rd</sup>

—Then he goes, Can you . . . look, I'm sorry, but I just, I need you to give me a sign when she's speaking, okay? I can't tell, and it's driving me crazy—.

You? It's driving you crazy?

Please, could you just, I don't know, raise your hand when she's speaking?

What, like I'm swearing on the bible, or like, *How, white man*, I said, doing my best Native American baritone.

I don't care if you want to stand on one leg and rub your stomach, just do something so I know, okay? Trust me, it'll help improve communication if we just have a sign.

Okay. Okay, okay.

Okay.

How, white man . . . How have you come to rape our women, kill our children, burn our houses, steal our lands, and spread your plague?

Okay, maybe not that particular sign. What about like, I don't know, he said, placing two fingers to his forehead, Aye, aye, Captain?

I looked at Melody, and then I looked at Knox.

What? What's wrong with that? he said.

And then I spoke for both of us: Get over yourself, already. *God*. We all got a good laugh out of that, and then I turned to face Melody, and I said, Well, guess I should be going, I said, speaking to Melody.

Can't she hear you if you just think it? Knox asked, looking at her in the rearview mirror.

No, it doesn't work that way. It's one-way. I mean, she might know what I'm thinking, because we're friends, but I need to tell her, I said, and he shook his head, smiling, staring ahead. What is it?

No, nothing, he said, it's just I've never heard anyone say that. I've never heard anyone—her age—call her their friend.

Well, it's true, I said, shrugging. I hadn't really thought about it, but it was definitely true.

Thea, when, when you hear her, when you hear Melody's voice?

Yes.

No, it's just—what's it like, her voice? What's her voice sound like?

Adoring. She sings beautifully.

She sings?

All the time.

What's she sing? Like songs or does she hum?

Songs, yeah. All the time: she loves to sing. She loves music, you know—not your music, but most music.

What next? First, it's my jeans, next, it's my music—.

Your hair.

Don't . . . don't start.

She says you could both use a hair cut, I said, laughing.

You were just leaving? Knox said.

Oh, yeah, I knew I had to do something, I said, reaching back, squeezing Melody's knee, before getting out, clapping my hand on her window.

25.

—Thea . . . Thea, can I come in? Please? Mom asked, knocking on my door. I knew was something up, too, just by the way she knocked.

What? I asked, looking at her, opening the door without my permission.

There's a woman on the phone—she's a producer from CNN.

Hang up.

Thea, I'm not telling you so you'll speak to her—I've hired a lawyer—.

A lawyer for what? I didn't do anything.

You have got to understand that this is—.

Oh, and you understand, Mom? Do you understand?

No. No, I don't, and that's why I want to make sure you're protected—.

Since when?

Thea, there were eighty-six calls on the machine by 9:15 this morning, and the machine's tape was full by ten.

Unplug the phone.

Thea, we need to talk about this.

Please close my door.

I spoke with your father today. We both want you to see someone. I want to find someone you can talk to, someone—.

I found someone I could talk to, and look where it go me.

I'm trying, she said. I'm really trying here.

Then stop, because it's not working.

People want you to sell your story. Thea, a man called today and said there's an offer—a seven-figure offer for you to tell your story.

Tell him he can blow me for free.

She nodded at me, stunned, and then, finally, she said, Your father asked me to give you a message.

I don't want to hear it.

He said to tell you that he loves you, no matter what.

My mouth tasted bitter; my cheeks. I didn't know what to say, and she just stood there, in the door, waiting.

Mom?

Yes?

I'm not going to school tomorrow.

Okay. It's your life, she said, closing the door.

Knox stopped by the next day to check on me, and I told him.

He texted me, Cam did. Or someone pretending to be came.

Let me see that, he asked, reaching for me phone.

There's no record of a text.

I'm telling you that he texted me.

All right. And what did he say?

He said, Do you trust me?

And?

And what?

Did you text him back, Thea?

Yes.

What did you say?

No. I said no.

Let me ask you something, Knox. What do you think of our drug laws?

Thea—.

Detective.

Are you drunk?

Not exactly.

What part of that's inexact?

I had two screwdrivers and a percaset—I'm saving the other one for later. So what do you think about our drug laws?

He called, Thea.

What?

I came by to tell you that Cam called his mother a few hours ago, and I wanted to be the one to tell you.

He called Karen?

Yes.

Where is he—what, what did he say?

He said he's on a walkabout.

A what?

He said he needed some time to think—.

It wasn't him.

It was his phone number. His mother spoke with him.

I don't care. You don't believe it, either, do you? Do you, Knox?

I don't know what to believe anymore. Where's your mom?

I think she's out with Ray, I said, gagging myself.

I take it you aren't his biggest fan.

I hate him—I hate the guy, because he's screwed around on my mother more than once, and each time she broke it off with him, she'd spend the weekend in bed, watching *Gray's Anatomy* and drinking Bloody Mary's all day.

What part of that offends you, the television or the booze?

Please, anyone with any class knows you never drink a Bloody Mary after three in the afternoon.

Who told you that?

My dad.

So what's wrong with *Gray's Anatomy*?

Seriously, Knox.

Seriously, what?

Seriously, it makes me want to punch somebody. And the real problem is that my mom watches it, wishing she could be Meredith and fuck and marry Patrick Dempsey, but instead, she's really just fucking nobody who's fucking nobody, when she's not fucking fucking Ray-Ray, that's what's wrong with it.

Have you been drinking, Thea?

Speaking of, I said, how is your wife, doing, Knox?

Are you trying to piss me off, here?

Sometimes, yes, I said, agreeing. Other times, it just comes naturally. See what you're missing, not having a teenage daughter who can speak? I'm sorry, I didn't mean it—.

I should be going now, he said, standing.

It just came out, Knox.

Funny how that keeps happening, he said.

26.

—I slept until one, and when I finally got up, I walked out my bedroom and my mom called me. She was in the living room, so I walked in, and she was sitting with this man and a woman, two suits. I would've figured it out, but she went ahead and introduced them, telling me the endless name of the firm they were with. Course I knew what they wanted: money. There was money to be made off my tapes, and they'd come to collect. They even had a computer with them—the woman must've frozen the frame, hearing me walk out.

For the record, I never said that, I said, looking her in the eye.

You never said what? the man asked.

I never said those words. I thought that, but I never said the words---it was just . . . it was just a fantasy. In other words, you're wasting your time, and mine, I said, turning around. Thea, I'm sorry you've been dragged into this, but obviously there are some legal issues to consider, since you're underage. There are statutory rape laws to consider, as well, the woman said.

If that was me, maybe, but it's not.

You didn't have sex with your boyfriend on the afternoon of April 6, ten days ago? the man said, turning a page of his notebook over.

Yes, I did. We did—but I didn't say that—those words. I never said that.

Well, maybe that was edited in, the woman suggested.

Maybe, but he couldn't have filmed that without me knowing. The camera—.

Let me get this straight: you're saying this can't be real because you only fantasized about this as you were having sex? he asked.

Exactly, I said.

And he didn't have a camera with him?

No—that's what I'm telling you. This can't be real, because he wasn't filming me. I think I'd know if he were pointing a camera at my crotch. You can give me a lie detector test, a polygraph or whatever—.

I don't think that will be necessary, the man said. I'm sorry, Thea, I know this must be very confusing for you, but—.

But it's not me. I'm telling you, it's not me!

But it's your room? the man, the lawyer asked.

Yes.

Your bedroom?

Yes.

Your boyfriend, John Cameron Conlon?

I don't know.

The clock—.

Yes, yes. The clock is mine.

What were you doing at three forty-five on Monday afternoon?

We were having sex.

Where?

In my room.

In your bed?

In my room, in my bed, yes.

See, this is where I get confused, Thea, the woman said. You're telling me that you and your boyfriend Cam were having sex in your room at three-forty-five on April 6, the day he was last seen, and you agree that that is your boyfriend and that is your bedroom, but you're saying that's not you and your boyfriend having sex at three forty-five last

Monday in your bedroom?

No.

Can you explain that to me?

Because I never said that: I thought it, but I never said those words.

Which words?

Any of them—I'm not a big talker, okay?

Well, maybe in the heat of the moment—.

No. Maybe no. I'd never say that: that's the point: it's a fantasy. That's why I don't say it.

And that's why it can't be me: because you can't film a fantasy!

You want me to believe that you didn't videotape yourselves having sex?

Well, the woman said, be that as it may, Cam was at your house the day he disappeared?

Yes.

And here, she said, look at the time code. Surveillance corroborates—.

What surveillance?

You know they were watching him, so they were watching you, too.

They're receiving hundreds of thousands of hits per—.

Per hour. Thea, we have to stop this.

They took the video down. You said they took the videos down, I said, looking at my mom.

They said they did, but they're still there. The videos are back up, the man said.

We filed a cease and desist, and we're threatening them with a lawsuit. We have to stop this, Thea.

Stop who?

Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, iTunes—they're all showing the video.

You want to sue them?

Yes.

For what?

For knowingly and willfully showing a minor performing sexual acts, in what is, at least technically, a case of statutory rape.

Thea, the woman said, we've been contacted by every major news agency in the world, and—.

Stop.

I'm sorry, but you have to know, Mom said, reaching for my hands, and I pulled away.

You didn't tell me you hired lawyers.

I haven't hired them yet, really, but I think we need to take the next step.

Immediately, the man said. And there's more.

More what? I asked.

We can't understand how, but the resolution is getting better every time they're pulled down. And it gets better with every download.

They can't seem to remove the tapes, the woman said. They're claiming its some sort of virus.

No kidding, I said, standing. I want . . . I want you to leave now—or better yet, I will, I said, heading for the front door.

Thea, Mom said, have you looked outside today?

No, why? I asked, frowning at her.

Maybe you should, she said, so I walked over the window, and I twisted the blinds. In the parking lot—we live on the second floor in the center of three connected apartment buildings that all share an asphalt parking, and it was full of camera crews, throngs of vans with satellites and men with plastic helmet hair, standing across the street, reporting.

What do they want? I asked, peeking through the blinds. There were camera crews, at least ten different vans with satellites and dozens of reporters standing in the parking lot.

You: you're famous, he said.

The video . . . all those people know about the video?

This is news. This is big news, the man said, but I didn't say anything more. I closed the blinds, turned around, walked back to my room and shut the door.

Yes.

And your boyfriend didn't make this videotape of the two of you having sex?

No.

Maybe it is someone else . . . in my room, in my bed, at the same time—.

You see the problem.

Yeah, I do: you're a bunch of assholes, that's a big problem, I said, getting up to leave.

27.

*5:32 PM April 21<sup>st</sup>*

—Knox just sat there, at the end of the table, looking away while I watched the video. It was us, but it wasn't. I knew it wasn't, I just didn't know how to explain. All I could say was no. No . . .

You had sex with him that day—you told me yourself, right here—.

Yes! Yes, yes, we had sex—every day—but that's not me; it's not possible.

He could have—.

No, that's what I'm telling you: he couldn't. He couldn't, because that ever happened—at least not like that. I never said those words.

You think it's dubbed?

No, what I'm saying is, I never said those words, I thought them. It was a fantasy.

I felt like I was going to throw up.

That's a tape of what I was thinking, not what actually happened—I was just fantasizing.

I don't care how smart he is, how high his IQ, you can't videotape someone else's fantasy. Not like that.

Knox?

Yes, Thea?

Squeeze my hand.

Excuse me?

Squeeze my hand, please, because I'm not even sure this is happening. I think I'm losing my mind, and this is so much worse than last time.

28.

*12:32 PM June 6<sup>th</sup>*

—I was just like, Your mother hates me, you know? And Melody was just like, Please, my mother hates everybody, herself, most of all. And I said, Hey, you know what we should do? We should go shopping. Seriously, next week, we'll get you some new clothes, and we'll get your hair cut—you're going to be sixteen years old, if not now, when? And she looked scared, at first, and then she goes, Totally: let's go: it's now or never, and I said, Damn straight, and I grabbed her hand and smacked it, high five.

29.

*10:42 AM April 14<sup>th</sup>*

—Theadora, you're telling me you have no idea where he could be.

That's what I'm telling you, yes.

And it didn't worry you, those first couple days?

No. Cam takes off sometimes.

Did he mention that he might be taking off, Theadora?

All the time, but I never took him seriously.

Where did he say he was going?

Off the grid, I said, shrugging: I don't know.

Did you know he was about to be arrested?

I started laughing, Pfut...

The NSA was literally on their way to arrest him the night he disappeared.

*Come on.*

30.

*6:21 PM April 28<sup>th</sup>*

—My phone went off in the car; my mom was calling, so I silenced the ring tone.

You really like eighties music, huh? Knox asked, hearing the song, and I just shrugged.

A couple years ago, I said, when my dad split and we had to move out of our house, I was going through some shit in the attic, and I found this old shoe box with all these old mixed tapes. They all had titles, and some of them had little hearts and whatever. My dad must've made like a hundred tapes for my mom.

The real shocker was that they're good. They're really, really good. Like my dad actually had taste in music—once.

What happened?

I don't know! That's the mystery, right? How do you just lose your cool—is it like falling out of love, and Cool says, Sorry, it's not you, it's me?

I wouldn't know really.

Oh. Right. Sorry.

I meant what happened with your folks? You never talk about your dad, he said.

Long story, I said, shrugging. Anyhow, Cam took the whole box of tapes and digitized them for me, because the tapes were falling apart. I just have to listen on headphones.

Why's that?

Because of my mom. Just because I'm a teenage girl doesn't mean I'm totally heartless, you know?

I know you aren't.

You know it made me feel better, thinking that at least he must have loved her once. I mean you don't make a hundred mixed tapes for a woman unless you truly love her, right? It kind of gave me hope, that box. Like maybe it wasn't all a lie, you know?

What wasn't?

Our lives. Maybe he wasn't pretending all the time, just some of it.

31.

—Here’s the problem: people want you to behave like an adult—like how many times do you have to hear your mom or dad, someone say, Grow up, or, When are you going to grow up, already? And then, when you do, they want you to act like a child. They’re like, Oh, she grew up so fast...well, what did you expect? Like which is it, you know? Seriously, what do you people want from us?

32.

“How Do You Spell Clara Bow?”

—Tell me something, Knox said.

*Ah, Detective . . .* I sighed: where to begin?

What do you call that style, your haircut? Is it a pageboy?

A pageboy? No! It’s a Clara Bow—.

Take it easy—just want to get my facts straight.

Please do. Pageboy—do I look like the sort of girl who’d have a pageboy?

Clara, he said, reaching and pulling his notebook out . . . Bow?

Yes: bangs, bob, sleek, chic, iconic: Clara Bow. And me. Well, actually, this is more

Louise Brooks, but anyhow.

How do you spell that, Bow? Like bow and arrow?

Knox, seriously, is your middle name Caveman? I asked, and he folded his notebook and put it away.

Okay, listen, I wanted to ask you a favor, he said.

Favor meaning that you would owe me one?

Exactly.

Let's hear it.

I was wondering if maybe you could meet me and Melody in the park once or twice a week, or maybe we'll take her somewhere for a bite to eat after school?

Why at the park?

Because her mother thinks it might be inappropriate.

What might be inappropriate?

The situation.

And what is the situation, exactly?

I don't know what she thinks—it's not that she thinks there's anything going on with you and me, it's just she's just not comfortable with it.

With having me around your house, you mean?

No.

Does she think I have a thing for you, or more like you have a thing for me?

No, it's not that. It's something else?

There is nothing else—tell her that. Just tell her the truth.

I can see you've never been married before, have you?

I don't know, Knox.

An hour or two, Thea, that's all. Please. You gotta understand—I never get to speak to my daughter.

Yes, you do. Every day. You just don't listen.

Please? I'm asking you.

What time?

Saturday, ten-thirty?

Ten-thirty? That's a little early—.

Eleven? One hour. She'll be so excited when I tell her we're meeting you, he said, and for once, I couldn't help smiling.

All right, eleven o'clock. And don't be late, I said, opening the car door.

33.

*Foley Foley*

—Agent Foley, I said, walking into the conference room: you look happy today, what happened? Have you been watching my sex tapes again?

Oh, that's funny. Very funny, Theadora. And, as a matter of fact, why, yes, I was, not two minutes ago. I will say one thing: you two certainly give new meaning to the term puppy love, don't you?

Oh, good one, Foley—that was, that was clever . . . I said, laughing sweetly as I rubbed my middle finger across my forehead.

Such a shame you won't be making any more of them—at least not with your ex-boyfriend.

Just out of curiosity, Foley, are you naturally an asshole, like does that just come naturally to you or do you actually practice every day, doing all you can to be the biggest and best asshole in the world?

34.

—See, isn't this nice? Sitting in the park, beautiful day . . . Knox said, handing me a bottle of water. Thank you.

So what about the haircut? I asked.

What about it?

She says she wants to get her hair cut and she wants you to take her to New York for her birthday. She wants to see it. She says New York or a nose ring: take your pick.

Nose ring.

We'll talk about New York.

And she wants a Wii.

A we what? he said, looking at her, like she might be sick. What is it? Are you okay?

A Wii—the game. Not a wee . . . drr! Ohmygod, Dad, I said, raising my right hand.

Okay, let's see if I've got this right: you want to get your hair cut, you want a nose ring, you want a trip to New York, and you want a video game.

No, I want a Wii, I said.

Anything else, m'lady?

Yes. A boob job, I said, and Foley cocked his head. Just kidding . . . god, lighten up, old man.

Anything else? Anything else I can get you, girls?

One other thing, I said. She said she'll go to New York with you on one condition.

Oh, will she, now? I haven't spoken with her in fifteen years, and in one hour's time, there are conditions. All right, let's hear her terms.

New jeans. She says you need to get some new jeans.

I also need to win the lottery, because, unfortunately, young lady, money doesn't grow on trees.

You didn't just say that. For real?

I damn well did.

She knows it doesn't. But at least get some 501's.

Why? I have plenty of jeans—I don't need any new jeans.

Yes, you do, actually. Because there's only one thing worse than mommy jeans, and that's mommy jeans on daddies, I said, speaking for her, and then I started laughing. That was really funny, I said, leaning over Knox, talking to Melody.

She did not say that.

Yes, she did. And I happen to agree.

I don't understand the problem.

Well, I said, let me put it this way: you don't look cool.

I thought we all agreed I'm not cool.

I started laughing again, listening to her answer, and then Knox rolled his finger, let's have it.

Pretend. She said, Pretend.

I see how it is, he said, nodding. Anything else?

Yes.

What?

I love you, Daddy. She says, I love you, Daddy, I said, and then Melody sat back, turning her body toward Knox. Remember when you used to ask her the best part of her day?

Yes . . . yes, I remember, he said, nodding.

Why did you stop asking her that? She can hear you, you know; she just can't answer.

Your mom thinks it would be too stressful for you to go to the city.

They don't have children with palsy in New York?

They don't have you, but we do. Your mom wants to keep it that way.

That's not fair.

I didn't say it was fair, I said your mom put down her foot.

So you aren't going to stand up for me?

Don't do this, please.

I'm asking a question.

You know your mother.

You know her better.

Mel, baby . . .

It's not Mom, though, is it?

What do you mean?

I mean, are you embarrassed of me, is that why? Because you're embarrassed to be seen with me? I said, raising my head, looking at him, hearing the words come out of my mouth.

No. That is not why.

Then why do you drink so much at night?

Because . . . because I'm an alcoholic. Which has nothing to do with you, okay?

Maybe you should go to a meeting.

Let me rephrase that: because I am an unrepentant alcoholic, he said, looking at her, his eyes welling, and then he leaned forward, over her waist, clasping her hands.

35.

3:15 PM April 26<sup>th</sup>

—Jesus, Knox, what took you so long?

Hey, I got work to do, besides—.

Yeah, yeah, listen: something really strange is going on.

You don't say.

No, with my computer—look, I said, patting the couch beside me, telling him to take a seat. See, I said, as he sat down: this is a video we shot a few months ago in my room. Cam's got a brand new video camera, too—he got it for Christmas. And now, look at it, look at how it's all, like, grainy and queasy—.

Oh, wow . . . I've seen this before. It's, it's disintegrating, he said, and I said, What do you mean, it's disintegrating? It can't—it can't disintegrate—it's digital, digitized, whatever. It can't do that—it's not real, it can't fall apart—.

Well, of course it can fall apart—.

You know what I'm saying!

I know, I know . . . I'm sorry. But you see it; I see it; what else do you want me to say?

Uh . . . that you're *wrong*?

You know what it is? I think it's . . . it's BETAMAX. It looks like BETA?

BETA, is that bad? What's BETAMAX?

Don't worry: it's not contagious. They eradicated it years ago, keep it in a top-security vault with smallpox. Can I watch the video? he asked, and I nodded, pushing play. It was an iMovie of me and Cam. I was sitting on his lap, in front of the computer screen, and I

said, Ha, you're so funny, I forgot to slap you—oh, no, I didn't! I said, slapping him, and then he got me in a bear hug, and he took one of my hands and made me slap myself, telling me: Thea, quit hitting yourself. Quit hitting yourself, you silly teenage girl!

Can we stop now? I said.

Yes, I'm sorry, I just—.

No, it's not that—we don't have sex. It's just that every time I watch this, it gets fainter.

It just gets more and more grainy. That's what I was trying to tell you. It's like the video is decomposing, or rotting—I don't understand.

Don't watch it again, he said, closing my computer, and I just looked at him, like, come on. No, seriously. Listen, can you burn me a copy?

Sure. But why?

I want to show it to a friend—I don't know jack squat about this stuff, so let me show it to someone who knows what they're doing. Is this the only one? Is this the only video that it's happened to?

No, there's one other.

Okay, don't watch either of them, just burn me a copy, and we'll see what we can find out.

It looks like, like an old photograph, don't you think? Sepia—that's what it's called, right? Wait—look at this one, I said, showing him the Andy Rooney iMovie we made, because Cam was giving me so much shit about saying, Meow, meow, meow . . .

This is Andy Rooney reporting from the tweenage wasteland called America . . . You know, folks, I've been looking around and I have to ask, who are these little sex kittens, saying things like, Meow, meow, meow? Me, I come from another time, and I realize

times have changed, but I only just got used to this blah blah blah people say. What is this blah blah blah, and now it's not even blah blah blah, it's mew meow meow. When I was a teenager, back in the day of black and white photographs of me as a boy standing in front of trees with my wholesome-looking family, we didn't have these young girls walking around saying, Oh, dude, I'm so hungover, which must mean it's Thursday, right, meow, meow . . . What does that mean? In my day, we called attractive single young women, birds. And now there are no birds, there are just kittens meowing everywhere like it's the Roman ruins. What has become of this country, I ask you? Or better yet, Who let the dogs out? And where have they gone, America?

Oh, shit! Look at that, it's—it's like sepia now. Do you see that? Knox, do you see what it's doing?

Don't watch this again until we figure out what's going on, okay?

Okay, I said, pressing stop and shutting down.

36.

*Socrates: Take 1*

—Cam! Ugh, it's not working. Fix it, will you?

There. I told you—.

Cam, I told you, I don't care. I just want it to work. Like a car: just work, that's all I ask.

It works fine.

My hero, I said, standing up, letting Cam sit down on the chair, then sitting on his lap.

Hey, Cam, you know what Socrates said?

The unexamined life is not worth living.

Okay, but you know what else Socrates said?

An honest man is always a child. Beauty is a short-lived tyranny?

That was a good one, I admit.

Let him that would move the world first move himself. Once made equal to man, woman become superior, he said, I started laughing, and he tickled my ribs, making me fall over.

37.

*3:34 PM June 7<sup>th</sup>*

—Did you know John was in prison, Theadora?

John who, Foley? I asked.

John Cameron Conlon, your boyfriend, who's been missing for more than six weeks. He was in prison.

Cam? In prison? I said, laughing. It was so ridiculous.

He started a fire, burned down several buildings, and then he spent three years in juvenile detention. He was in a serious lockdown facility, believe it or not.

Well, I don't. I don't believe you.

Maybe not, but doesn't it make you wonder how much you truly know about him?

No.

It's your choice, I suppose.

Foley, why should I believe you?

Because I'm here. I'm real. And I have the proof. Go on, he said, throwing a manilla folder on the table: take a look for yourself.

No, I said, nodding, looking away.

Go on, Theadora, see for yourself.

No.

Then let me help you, he said, opening the file, standing over me.

If you don't believe me, why don't you ask his mother. Ask Karen Conlon who Jeremy Naas is, see what she says. Go on, you know him so well, right? Better than anyone?

He was so smug, I just started laughing.

Something funny?

Not really. It's just that it never occurred to me before, but now that I look at you, Foley, I kinda have to believe that if the angel of death appeared at my door, he'd probably be wearing a cheap suit and a bad tie. That's all.

Jeremy Naas, he said, N-A-A-S. Ask her, he said, opening the door, excusing me.

38.

### *The Homecoming*

—Thea, there's someone here to see you.

Not again—why can't they just leave me alone? I don't know where he is!

Thea?

It was my dad. In the living room. Sitting on our couch. He stood up, seeing me. I just looked at him for the longest time. Finally, I spoke: What are you doing here? What are you doing here?

I came to see you.

No. No, you didn't. You came because you're a fucking vampire: you smell blood, and you smell money, I said. I thought I was going to puke.

Thea, I think we should talk.

Think again. And get the hell out of our house, I said, but he just stood there, frozen. I said, Get out. Get out! Get out of our house!

I don't know what happened—I started screaming, I felt faint, and then I blacked out.

39.

*4:15 PM June 7<sup>th</sup>*

—I went straight over to Karen's house after that. I didn't think she'd be home, but she was in the back yard, gardening. Hello, there, come in, come in, she said, taking off her gloves and giving me a kiss.

I need to talk to you about something, I said.

Of course. Can I get you something to drink?

No, thank you.

Sit down, Thea. Go on. Give me just a second to wash my hands and I'll be right with you. Sure you don't want some tea, something?

No thank you.

Well, then, she said, sitting. She looked tired, ashen. What is it? she asked, smiling, grabbing my hand.

Who is Jeremy Naas? I asked.

Who told you that name?

Is it true? I asked, hoping she'd deny it. Tell me it's not true, Karen.

I'm so sorry.

You lied to me? All this time, you've been lying to me?

Please, let me explain.

No.

Thea—he wanted to tell you.

Not enough to tell me. Everything I've been through, and you knew all along?

He was afraid—we were both afraid, but then he met you and he didn't want you to know.

What did he do?

He started a fire—he was very young, and he knew what he was doing, but he had no idea . . .

They sent him to lockdown for starting a fire?

It was an accident, she said, looking down, and then I knew.

Did he hurt someone? I asked, and she bit her lip. He killed someone?

It was an accident?

Was it a girl? I asked, and she nodded. I said, was it a girl? She nodded yes, and I reached for my bag and I took out my phone and I texted him, right there, saying it out loud: I texted him, right there, sitting on the couch with his mother; I said, You lied to me. You . . . are . . . a . . . fucking . . . liar!

40.

*Blood Tests*

—Agent Foley, I said, what a surprise.

Theadora, please take a seat.

I'd rather not. Say what you have to say.

I'm told you spent time under medical supervision.

I was committed.

Apparently so. Tell me what happened that led to you being committed, Theadora.

I'm sure it's in the file.

Yes, but I'd much rather hear it from you.

I couldn't feel anything, I said, shrugging. One day, I woke up, and I couldn't feel a damn thing. You must understand what that's like.

Yes, but here's what I don't understand, he said. There's blood in his car. There is blood in John's trunk.

Whose blood?

Yours, we believe.

No. Not possible: I never bled in his car—I would know.

Well. Not yet, maybe. Just kidding. In any case, he said, standing, opening the door: Mrs.

Denny, please come in.

I looked at my mom, and she nodded no, she didn't know what was going on.

Mrs. Denny, we need to take a blood sample.

From me? I said.

Yes, that's right.

No. No you cannot take my blood.

We can, actually.

Mom nodded.

41.

*No Tesla at the Table*

—Thea, I want you to know something, she said.

What's that?

He wasn't, your dad . . . he wasn't always like that. I wish you could've known him—I don't know, when we were younger, I don't, I don't how to explain, but I wish you'd known him at his best.

Then I guess you guys shouldn't have gotten married.

Maybe not, but we did. And being mean to me isn't going to help anything.

What, what did you ever see in him?

He was in a band when I met him, she said, and I just looked at her. You didn't know that, did you?

No one told me.

For good reason.

Which was what?

They were called The Tesla Coils.

Ewe, I said, wincing.

They called themselves synth punks.

Please, stop.

They wore leather jackets—.

I'm losing my appetite.

What's the difference, you weren't eating before. They sang a cover of The Stranglers' "Peaches," and I just about swooned.

Don't know it, I said, nodding.

Yes, you do, baby: peaches on beaches?

Oh . . . is that what they're saying? I thought it was, bitches on beaches.

No, she said, laughing.

Don't laugh at me.

I'm not—it's the accent. The funny part was that there was another Tesla Coils—after they started putting up flyers for shows, they found out that there was another band that beat them to the band-name punch, so they changed the spelling to a y, Tesla Coyls.

Ohmygod, that is so repulsive, it's making my hair stand on end, I said, showing her my forearm.

And—.

No.

And—.

Please, Mom, don't?

They wore eyeliner.

Ohmygod: stop. You have to stop, I said, getting up, about to take my plate with me.

You know he used me tapes, that was as close as he ever got to writing me poetry. I even have the mixed tape your dad gave me the night you were conceived, she said, laughing, slapping the table.

Mom, have you been drinking?

It's called survival—I'm a survivor, sweetheart.

Okay, but that's . . . that's just miserable and disgusting. So unless you're offering me a drink, I said, standing again.

Oh, sit down, and eat your dinner, Thea, she said, and I sat down. Thea, when are you going to forgive him?

When I'm ready.

Fair enough. But don't wait so long that you're the only one's who's hurting.

Now you tell me, I said, and then, I don't know why, I just started sobbing.

Shh . . . come on, it's going to be all right. They're going to find hi, and he's . . . well, he has some explaining to do, or . . . I'll kill him, myself.

Mom starting reaching for my hand, then she stopped, placing her right hand flat on the table, spreading her fingers wide apart, butting my fingers.

Wait, I said, pulling away, so Dad plays an instrument?

Kind of: keyboard.

Ohmygod . . . let me die now, I said, hiding my face in my hands. You got together with a keyboardist?

It was a different time, Thea.

Seriously, are you trying to make things better by making them so much worse, first?

Because it's not going to work, you know, I said, pushing my chair away from the table, standing up.

Sit. Down. Sit you ass down, right now, young lady, and finish your dinner, she said, so I parked it. I want you to eat some of your dinner before you leave this table, she said.

I'm not hungry.

I didn't ask if you were hungry—in fact, I didn't ask you anything. Four bites, she said.

Please, Mom—.

Thea, you're losing weight. Everyone's noticed. Now I want you to start taking care of yourself. I didn't argue—I didn't say a word about school, nothing—but you're going to eat something. Right now. Come on: four bites.

I cut a piece of the battered chicken off, and I tried . . . I can't do it. I can't do this . . . I started crying at the table. I didn't think she'd budge, and then she stood and walked to my chair, before hugging me.

It's going to be all right, she said, kissing my head.

How can you say that? How can you know?

Good question. I don't know, sweetheart . . . I guess, I guess you just have to believe, she said, hugging my head to her stomach.

Believe in what, Mom, in what?

In you. I believe in you.

42.

### *Birthday Wishes*

—Anything else your heart desires? Knox asked, turning to look at Melody.

Take out your notebook, I said. Go on...

Shoot.

She wants a dog.

Sure . . . any particular breed?

Black lab—preferably a rescue, and it has to be an holder dog, because she can't have things jumping on her, you know.

Rescue, got it. What else, a pony, maybe?

See, she says, now you're listening. She would love to go horseback riding.

Over her mother's dead body.

Its' very good for them, you know. The rocking action of their pelvis can't be replicated in any PT or device.

There is no way in hell your mother would ever allow it.

That's why she's asking you, I said, and Knox grinned at his notebook, folding it up again. Because you're her hero, I said, and he nodded, grinning at Melody, biting the inside of his cheek.

43.

### *Smalltown Boy*

—I put on some music in the car, and Knox said, Wait—I know this song. I used to love this song, he said, and then he started singing in this falsetto: *Tell me whyyyyy!*

Bronski Beat, “Smalltown Boy.” It's the Gay National Anthem, and Ohmygod, if you could have seen his face at that moment.o

What is that? he asked, seeing me dancing. What does that mean?

Why, it's the greasy hairless chests of every Chelsea gay boy between 1984 to the present, dancing to their favorite song. And yours, too, Knox. Come on, hold up your arms, and swirl, swirl, swirl your arms together like a Cuisinart Mixer, and then, change it up with a little double-fisted punch, punch, punching the sky—duke'ing it out with God

Almighty at The Cock and Bull nightclub. Try it. Seriously, you gotta try it at least once in this life.

Hey, I like this song.

So? You can't like it now that you know it's a queer anthem?

What are you talking about? I used to dance to this song—just last weekend, he said, raising his hands, shadowboxing. Oh, god, did I hit you? he said, accidentally catching the side of my face as he raised his hands.

No—I mean, yes, but it didn't hurt. It's just that I miss him. We used to screw around like this when he'd drop me off, just so I could get through another night alone with my mom.

Everyone talks about me—I thought it was bad before, but it's so much worse now.

Everyone talks about me, the whole world has seen me having sex, and I don't have anyone anymore. I'm so alone. See what you've been missing out on, not having a daughter? Oh, god, I'm sorry—I didn't mean it like that.

44.

*Activate!*

—Wonder twin powers: activate! I said, holding up Melody's fist for her, gently punching it against my own.

Thee, who are the Wonder Twins? she said, still laughing.

I don't know, really. It's just something my mom used to do.

Oh, she said.

Yeah, whatever. Let's go.

45.

*My Best Friend Can't Even Speak*

—She said stop blubbering, Knox, you're embarrassing her. Totally embarrassing—sor'ry! She says between that and your mommy-daddy jeans—.

Yes.

What?

She said you know what we need?

Out with it—.

A race.

I'll kick you and your old man's old ass all the way around the block.

My boyfriend's missing, possibly dead, and my best friend can't even speak.

Personally, in my experience—.

Manly experience, you mean?

Yes, very. Speaking from very manly experience, if you ask me, that's the basis of a true lifelong friendship—no talking. Just keep your mouths shut.

That's why you're so popular, huh?

And my good looks, obviously. Thea?

Knox?

Her doctors, Mel's therapists, they've all noticed a huge change in her. They say she's progressing, that she's got more energy, more stamina, she argues with them.

Gets that from me.

No doubt. Thank you, Thea. I've never really thanked you, and you know—.

Now you have.

Yes.

Good.

Done.

So. If you really think you can take the Team Knox, let's go. Because we're going to wipe this park with your little Clara Bow haircut...

Oh...you're on. You two are so on...

46.

*Socrates iMovie: Take 2*

—Go on, I said, you start—let's hear.

Okay, I'll start. Hey, Thea, you know what Socrates said?

Bend over?

You know what else Socrates said?

Blow me, I said, leaning into the video camera, mouthing the words: And. Blow. Me.

No.

He did—that's what he said. Citizens of the republic . . . blow me!

No, Socrates said—.

First, tell me why—first, please tell me why guys always do that?

Do what?

Spend so much time telling you what some other, like, way, way smarter, but still dead, dead guy said?

What's your point?

It's a two-pointer, actually: one, don't you know how dumb you sound when you spend all your time quoting some other way, way smarter dude? And two, why not women?

I like women—love the womenfolk.

Oh, yeah? Let's hear. Let's hear you quote a woman . . .

All right, well, here's a personal favorite: Citizens of the republic, blow me! How's that? he asked, biting my neck.

Listen, don't think you're getting down my pants just because you're clever and funny.

Actually, that wasn't why I thought I was getting down your pants . . .

47.

*4:32 PM May 14<sup>th</sup>*

— You never answered my question, Thea.

Which one, Knox?

Exactly.

What's he like? What's Cam really like?

Nothing like what they're saying. They don't know him. And I do. And he knows me, too, better than anyone. Last week, one night, I sat in the tub, holding my razor. I wanted it so bad—I wanted it to like you want food or air or water or . . . love. It's like this pressure that builds up in your head, and you don't even want to do it, necessarily, but there's no other way to relieve the pressure. Knox, you asked what we used to argue about—that was the first thing we ever argued about. Cam couldn't deal with the cutting, and I didn't stop right away. It actually got worse when we started going out, when I

knew he really cared about me. I didn't know how else to deal with it—I didn't have any other tools but razors and knives. He told me there was another way out.

What was that?

To trust him, to believe in him. It worked too—until now. I still don't believe what they're saying about him—whatever he's done, I trust him a hell of a lot more than I trust anybody else.

Who else do you trust?

No one.

I hope you could trust me.

Let me ask you something.

Out with it.

You believe me, right?

Well, what can I say?

I don't know, yes?

Thea, he said, trying to find the words. Sometimes I can't help but wonder, just this little voice, not the big voices—.

So you hear voices too?

We all hear voices. But sometimes a little voice in my head wants to believe you talk to my daughter so badly that I can't believe it. I know that doesn't make any sense, but that's it. I do believe you ninety-five, ninety-eight percent of the time. It's that two percent that will kill you.

It's hard to explain, I know—but it's not like . . . it's not like I can see her lips moving or whatever—I see, I think I see exactly what you see, but it's more like how, when you

know someone so well, and you know what they're thinking at the very moment they're thinking it—you can see it in their eyes. It's like that, but all the time. I hear her like I've known her my whole life, like I hear my own voice. So yeah, it's hard to know if it's me or her, talking in my head, but that's why I have to I ask her things—things I couldn't possibly know, and she tells me. Just to make sure I don't feel like I'm completely out of my mind. But anytime you want to test it, give me a question, and I'll ask her. There is something you should think about, though.

What's that?

That maybe some day she won't answer. Maybe some day I won't hear her voice anymore. You ever think of that?

48.

*4:12 PM April 16<sup>th</sup>*

—I didn't know who to ask, so I turned to Knox and said, How old is she?

Almost your age. She has a birthday coming up.

When?

In June—she'll be sixteen on June 14.

Hey, that's my birthday! We're both Geminis. The twins. Maybe she's my twin sister, I said, as Knox opened the back door, into the kitchen, offering to let me walk in first.

Deb? Hey, Deb, you here? he said. This way . . . Mel? Melody, I'm home. I've brought someone to meet you. Thea, this is my daughter, Melody.

49.

*12:32 PM June 14<sup>th</sup>*

—I brought you a present, Mel—it’s vintage, I said, opening it up for her, holding up the shirt.

Do you like it?

Ohmygod! I love it!

And this too. And a hat. For your trip to New York.

Help me try it on? she said, and I helped her get the shirt.

It’s so cool . . . she said, and I started laughing, because she was squealing. Ohmygod,

The Smiths! Put it on, put it on, she said.

She wants to hear the song, I said.

Which song? Knox asked.

*There Is A Light That Never Goes Out*, she said.

*There Is A Light That Never Goes Out*, I said.

Duh, Dad, she said.

Duh, I said, raising my hand.

Drr, she said, still making fun of him, and I just laughed, listening. Singing, Take me out, and then Knox furrows his brow and he balks, going, What, what . . . what is this song?

What, what is this song, what? I said, not even bothering to raise my hand.

Thea, he said, seriously. Have you seen this?

Like a thousand times, I said.

They’re driving and dying—why would you? Why would you show that to her? It’s so . . .  
. depressing.

We like it. We don't have a problem with it. Sad songs make us happy, I said, raising my hand. They do, I said. So true, I said, nodding at her.

I do, he said. I have a problem with it.

Then that's your problem, I said.

Is that you saying that? he asked.

No, I said, raising both hands: Melody agrees. We don't find it at all depressing.

Okay, all right, drink and drive and kill yourselves, kids, what do I care?

Ohmygod, I said, speaking for her.

What did she say?

She said, Ohmygod, Dad.

You know, girls, he said, I'm learning to value silence more every day.

Doesn't she look so cute? Your hair looks so great—totally rockin' the bob, I said, ignoring him. Oh! I almost forgot! Last present. We'll let your dad open it. One of my last packs of Polaroid film—so we can take pictures.

Ohmygod, she said, I'm going to cry.

No, don't cry . . .

I don't have any Polaroids, she said.

Well, now you will. Ten of them. Forever and ever, I said, tearing open the film. Knox looked at me, waiting for me to translate, and what could I say? What, she's in there—she's so alive in there. That's all you need to know. No. I handed him the camera and said, Take our picture?

50.

*5:16 PM May 18<sup>th</sup>*

—What are you talking about? he asked, looking at me, then looking to Melody to see if it's true. What's wrong with the gifts I buy you?

Nothing. I just don't like them, I said, raising my hand. I'm sorry, I said.

You're sorry or she's sorry?

We're both sorry, I said. She didn't want to hurt your feelings.

You're telling me she doesn't like the gifts I buy her? The clothes?

Listen, it's not about you, okay. God, you guys are all the same—even when you're dads.

I'm sorry . . . you're right.

Don't take it so personally, it's just that she wants to look cool—she wants to look cool and feel cool, inside and out. I can help. And you can help, too, by paying.

51.

*Glowing In the Darkness*

—Thea, what are you doing here? What's wrong?

I have to show you something. Can we go to one of the rooms in the back—without windows?

Sure, okay. What is it?

Okay, you aren't going to believe this, but—. I started unbuttoning my shirt.

Whoa-whoa-whoa, don't, don't do that—.

I have to show you my shoulder. Now, please, turn out the lights, give me a little privacy.

Thea, tell me—tell me this isn't going to look as bad as it looks right now?

Would you just turn out the lights, please? I asked, and he did, stepping as far away as he could, and then I pulled my shirt off, showing him my shoulder blade.

What is that . . . is that like some sort of highlighter or paint?

It's not a highlighter or paint. It's a heart with an arrow drawn through it. It's a glow-in-the-dark tattoos.

Where did you get that? I never . . . I've never seen one of those.

That's what I'm telling you, Knox! I didn't get it: it got me! I woke up, and there it was.

Wait, wait, wait . . . what is that? And what's the feather stuff?

*Drr.* it's a heart with an arrow through it, and the feathery part of the arrow is my scar—it's been drawn into my scar, you see?

You didn't . . . did you do that to yourself?

What, paint myself with plutonium dye?

No, I meant the scar.

How? It's on my shoulder—I never used three-way mirrors when I was cutting myself, okay.

Sorry, I was just asking how you got that scar, he said, and I couldn't see it, but I could feel him hold up both his hands in self-defense. How did you get that scar? he asked.

None of your business, I said. Anyhow, turn on the lights, because you haven't seen the half of it, I said, exhaling.

I've never heard of such a thing—a glow-in-the-dark tattoo

Because they don't exist, that's why! Now turn the light back on. He turned the lights on, blinking for a second. Now come here, and look. You can't see it now, can you?

No. Just your scar.

Knox, you think I could be radioactive?

Calm down, it's—there's gotta be some—.

Calm down? Don't tell me to calm down, you aren't the one who's fucking glowing in the dark here, Knox!

Okay, okay, breathe—just breathe for me, tell me what happened.

Nothing. Nothing happened, I said. Last night, I got up to pee in the middle of the night, stumbled into the bathroom, and sat down—and our bathroom's tiny, the toilet is perpendicular to the mirror, smooshed between the faucet wall and the shower, you know what I mean? Anyhow, I reach over to get some toilet paper, whatever, and I almost started screaming because of this.

I've had this scar for years, but . . .

Holy shit.

No kidding.

And then, when I saw what it was, I was afraid to look down, in case anything else was glowing, you know what I mean? What other part of my—.

Okay, okay, that's enough. I hear you. What do I keep telling you about boundaries?

Wait a minute . . . hold it, hold it, he said, turning off the light again: you know what that is?

No! No, I don't know what that is! What the hell is it?

That flashing? It's Morse code—short, short, long . . .

What's it saying?

I don't know.

You don't know? You were a Marine, what do you mean you don't know?

I told you, that was a long time ago.

Ohmygod . . .

Take it easy, take it easy, I can get someone.

Who? Who, Knox? I can't show this to just anybody, you know?

I know, I know . . . my dad. You can trust him.

Oh, like he's going to remember from World War II, when you can't remember Iraq 1?

52.

*The Sight of Blood*

—We need to talk.

You're scaring me.

I saw Foley today. He knows—he knows everything now, and I want you to know everything, too.

What does he know?

He has copies of my medical charts. I was committed for three months the year after my dad left us. Foley has the pictures.

Of what?

My scars. I was committed because I couldn't stop cutting myself. The problem was—the reason I got caught is because I faint at the sight of blood.

Wait a minute, Thea, you're a cutter—.

*Recovering.*

But, okay, sorry. You'd cut yourself, but you can't, you can't stand the sight of blood?

Why is that so strange?

Well, I mean, I guess it's no stranger than—well, any of the rest of this. I just never thought about, you know.

No kidding.

Every time, you'd pass out?

Pretty much every time, yeah. I used to just sit down on the floor in the bathroom, but then, this one time, I got in a rush and sat on the toilet for some reason, ended up on the bathroom. I guess I must've knocked my head against the sink, gave myself a concussion, and my mom found me, because I hit my head, gave myself a concussion, and she came home before I came to. She started flipping out, called an ambulance, and then, you know, secret was out. Can I ask you something? I said, and he nodded, shoot. You were in the army, weren't you?

How did you know that?

Mel told me.

It was a long time ago.

Iraq one.

Yes, he said.

Must be hard, watching it happen all over again.

What else did she tell you about me?

It's not because of the exposure, if you were exposed to anything over there—that's not why she has palsy.

We don't know that for sure.

No, but she does. And even if that was the reason why, it won't change anything now, will it?

Go on.

Go on, what?

Aren't you going to ask me if I've ever shot anyone, taken another life?

No, I'm not.

Thea, such self-control.

That's not why I'm not asking. I'm not asking, because I know you have. I already know the answer: Mel told me.

How does she know?

How does any child know the truth without needing to be told?

Was it Heather? Did Heather say something to her?

I'm telling you, no one said anything: she just knows, okay. She just knows. But you should talk to her. I bet she'll surprise you.

53.

### *Custom Plates*

—When we met, when Cam and I met, my mom had just broken up with this loser, Raymond, Ray. He sold commercial real estate, or at least that's what he told people, but there's nothing to sell around here. No one's buying anything, at least. Even worse, Ray drove a taxi-yellow Mustang with a personalized license plate that said, RAYRAY#1. I kid you not. The first day he pulled up, and I saw that thing park outside our apartment, I was just like, Please, God, please don't let my mother be having sex with that loser. So much for the power of prayer.

I heard her crying every night, and it made me want to scream. I used to hear them having sex, too, and there is really nothing more disgusting than hearing your own mother having sex. Mom was told me I was overreacting, and I said, I'm overreacting? Have you heard yourself fucking Ray Ray? I said, and she slapped my face. We never talked about it, but at least the screaming stopped. And then they broke up, of course, because she caught him cheating on her. Again. Her sobbing was almost worse than the fucking, I swear. I thought about apologizing that night, but I couldn't figure how to tell her I was sorry for how I said it, but not for saying it.

It's awful, I know, but the thing is, sometimes I want to slap her, too, because . . . because she's so lonely. Because she was willing to settle for a guy simply because she has nothing else going on. Because she has nothing else going on. God, do something with your life. She's a paralegal at a good firm—supposedly one of the best, but that doesn't mean anything when you live upstate.

Anyhow, we got into it one night, after Ray stopped by to ask how I was doing, and I told him I'd be doing a lot better if he'd leave, and then my mom told me to apologize, and I said, I'm sorry, will you excuse me? After he left, she pounded on my door, telling me to get my butt into the dining room. Then she started in, saying that I was being rude to Ray and condescending, always calling him Ray Ray #1, which I was. You're right, Mom, I am, I said, and then I got up from the table to get a glass of juice. Sit down, she said. I want you to apologize to him.

Why?

Because you're snotty and rude.

Unfortunately, Ray never seems to notice—sorry to say, Mom, but he’s not the sharpest tool in the shed, you know what I mean? So do you want me to point that out to him?

Thea, why can’t you just let me be happy?

Mom, why can’t you just be quiet when you’re having sex? I said, getting up and walking into the kitchen. She followed me into the kitchen, saying, I’m not through with you yet, Theadora: sit back down.

Fine, because I’m not through with you yet, either. I mean, seriously, Led Zeppelin? You actually have sex with a guy to “Babe, I’m Gonna Leave You,” pounding the entire bed frame against my bedroom wall all night, and you wonder why I just can’t be happy for you? I said, and then she slapped me. She was so angry, she didn’t even step away after she slapped me. And then, without even thinking about it, I slapped her right back.

A second later, my phone rang. New song, new ringtone; a song my mom would know it too. It was Joy Division. “She’s Lost Control Again.”

They’re watching us, I said, and her mouth fell open, because she knew it was true.

54.

### *I Love You, Julie Christie*

—Julie Christie. If I could be any woman in the world, I think I would’ve wanted to be Julie Christie. When I was little I must’ve watched *Dr. Zhivago* like a thousand times, because she was so beautiful. Then, one day, I saw this documentary about the movie, and the guy who plays that fat older man, the one who takes her maidenhood or whatever, he was talking about that scene where Julie Christie slaps him—and then, during one take, completely unrehearsed—he slapped her back. That wasn’t in the script. And so it’s

her real expression when she's hocked—that's the real Julie Christie on screen. I just love that story.

55.

*The Headmaster Rituals*

—It's not about teenage drinking.

I'm telling you—are you hearing this? Are you listening to the same song I am?

Yes, I'm listening, and I'm telling you it's not about drunk driving: they're from England, and people from England don't sing about teenage drinking and driving, okay. It's about love—it's a love song.

Where everyone dies.

She said, Why do you have to be so negative all the time?

I'm, I'm being negative, me?

There is a light that never goes out?

And if a double-decker bus smashes into us, please—what was that about not having a home?

We aren't having this discussion with you.

Excuse me?

I said—we both said we aren't having this discussion.

Oh . . . oh, yes, we are—we're having it all right. We're having it right now, he said. And don't look at her.

Don't try to tell me what to do, I said, rolling my eyes and nodding at Melody.

What's she saying?

Nothing. Told you.

Because I'm right, because I'm the dad?

Because you're no fun—we were having a perfectly good time. She said, why do you always have to ruin everything?

I'm ruining everything?

I'm happy, she was happy—you're the one who has a problem, so you had to make it our problem. She says, So typical.

Heavy sigh . . . I'm sorry—I just—I think that song is a little—off. But if you like it so much, I'll try—I'll try to be more fair, more open-minded.

That's all we're asking. And so what? Okay, so maybe they die, but you aren't listening to the moral of the story: *There is a light that never goes out.*

Great, but you're dead. What difference does it make? he said, and I just nodded, sighing through my nose, looking at Melody.

All right, all right, he said, lifting both hands. Let's listen to the song.

*I know*, I said.

What's that?

Nothing, I said. I wasn't talking to you.

56.

### *Malls of America*

—I hate malls—I mean, I really, really hate malls, but Mel asked me if I'd take her, and I just couldn't bring myself to tell her quite how fucking lame they are. And she was so excited, you know? So I did. I took her to the mall. I mean, Knox dropped us off, and he

gave me the total lecture about calling if there was any problem, and then he called me like ten times to ask how we were doing, and I was like, You don't want to know what Mel has to say right now, okay? In other words, we're fine, dad, thanks, buh-bye.

Anyhow, we got in line to get a smoothie, and there was this older woman just staring, and I know Mel saw, so I was like, Hello. . . . And then she snapped, and realized she was being rude, so she tried to cover it up by saying, I just wondring, are you two sisters?

Yes. Twins, I said.

Twins? She asked.

Yes. We finish each other's sentences all the time.

Oh, well . . . and such cute haircuts you have.

What's that? Oh, my sister says, Yes, they are, aren't they? But thank you, that's so sweet of you to say.

Knox picked us up, and he didn't say a word, he was just nodding his head, like, I'm not gonna do it this time, not this time, I've learned my lesson.

Doesn't she look cute?

She looks like you.

She looks nothing like me. She looks like Siouxsie.

Who is Suzy?

Siouxsie and the Banshees, she was our inspiration today, I said, showing him the video on my phone. Don't you love it? I said, we had it down, too. Same long bob, same headband and skirt and shirt.

I couldn't put the tights on her, but you get the picture.

Did you have fun, sweetheart? he asked, putting her in her car seat, and once he got her in, she started clapping.

I guess so.

Shut up.

Excuse me?

She said she hates it when she feels like a seal, clapping, and I told her to shut up.

Knox got quiet, which is what he does when he's overwhelmed by emotion and doesn't know how to articulate human emotion, which I can understand—don't get me wrong—but we got home, and I showed her the video again, showed her how we'd really nailed the whole look. Mel said she wished we could dye her hair darker, and I knew she was hinting, but I said, Don't even start—I get in enough trouble with you, as is, and just then, her door opened, and it was Heather.

Hi, I said, putting away my phone. Headband, I said, thigh-high boots, totally rockin' it.

Thea, she said.

Yes. Hi. We just went to the mall.

The mall.

Shopping.

Shopping.

Mel said, Is there an echo?

I started laughing, and Heather took it the wrong way. She said, Thea, what are you . . . what are you doing here? What is this? First, the haircut, then the clothes—.

I know, doesn't she look amazing?

No. No, she doesn't. She looks like a little version of you. And you know what? Knox walked in, and I was like, what the hell happened to you? You know what, Thea? She's not a doll. Our daughter is not a living doll.

I know, I said. That's why I thought it would be good for her to get out of the house for a change.

Get out. Get out of my house.

I didn't do anything wrong, I said, feeling my lower lip start to tremble and my throat contract.

You pity her.

No, I pity you, and you pity yourself.

Get. Out.

Heather, Knox said, let's talk—.

No, we're not talking. But here's what I have to say: I don't want you to come near my daughter every again, you understand?

Better than you do. Which is why I'll try to forgive you, but I'm not promising anything.

Mel, I said, turning to look at her: you aren't a doll. I've never ever thought of you that way, no matter what she says, okay?

And she said, I know. And I'm so sorry.

Don't sweat it—it's not you. You are not your parents, right? Then I kissed the fingers of both hands, blew her a kiss, and got the hell out of there.

I walked out, trying not to cry until I got outside, and Knox followed me.

Thea, wait, please, he said, grabbing my shoulder.

Don't touch me, I said, jerking away.

I know—I ‘m sorry. I’m very sorry about that—Heather’s just . . . I can’t. I’m sorry, I can’t explain. But one day, when you’re a parent, you’ll understand where’s coming from—.

Don’t give me that. Don’t speak to me as if I don’t understand because I think she’s wrong, and don’t give me that one day when you’re a parent bullshit. I know you’ve been caring for her for the past fifteen years, but you know what? Just because you loved her all this time, that doesn’t mean you—that either of you actually know what you’re doing here and now, does it? Does it?

No. No, Thea, it doesn’t mean we know what we’re doing here and now, and the fact is, we don’t have a fucking clue what we’re doing. But the thing is, we are doing the very best we know how to do, all we know how to do to keep our family together, here and now, so maybe, just maybe, you can cut us, cut me and Heather—Heather, especially—a little slack. Maybe?

57.

*2:34 PM May 5<sup>th</sup>*

—I’ve got catalogues . . . I said, sing-songing, as I pulled up a chair and sat down beside her at the table: New Anthropologie, new Urban Outfitters, and, the crème de la crème, new Barneys! I squealed, clapping my hands. Even though Barney’s is always a letdown, still. When I was little, my uncle Tim and I used to sit side by side, my mom’s little brother, and he’s spread out a catalogue on our laps, and he’d turn a page, and every time he turned a page, we got whatever we pointed at. Like he’d flip the page, and then you’d dive for treasure, first dibs, not knowing, you know. Like musical chairs, only with toys,

right? I thought we could do that, I said, me and you. And instead of pointing, you could call it out.

So, ready? You understand how it works? I asked, and she said, I get it, so I put the

Urban Outfitters catalogue on my lap, and I started to turn the page, and she called it.

No, no, no . . . you have to wait until we can both see it. Can you see it? I asked, and she

said she could see it, and I said, Okay, then, no cheating. And you can't call the whole

page, either, you have to call out the specific item by name, okay? Like blue cashmere

sweater: mine!

I didn't know, you didn't tell me that, she said.

Now you know, and I told you. So let's get started, okay?

Okay.

Ready?

Ready.

58.

### *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth*

—All on my own: because I'm so smart. Unfortunately, smart boys get very mean when they finally realize that they are, in fact, all alone with their big, big brains . . . But, oh, no, I'm so smart that I don't need a girlfriend or woman or anything, drr! Because I can just jerk myself off with my own right hand, what would I possibly do with a girl around?

Left hand, thank you very much.

Left-handed? Well, extraordinary!

Indeed, it is.

Tally ho and jerk off!

Oh . . . babe, come on. I'm so sorry I was being a dominating chauvinist pig.

An ignorant, dominating—.

An ignorant dominating chauvinist pig—.

Help, help, I'm being chauvinized!

Oh, and aren't you the little sauce pot . . .? As a matter of fact, Saucy, I was—.

Oh, no. No, you weren't.

Oh, yes I was . . . .

Nope, no saucy pot for you, Sire Chauvinist Pig.

It's master, actually, Master Chauvinist Pig.

Yeah, yeah, tell it to your mother.

59.

*7:49 PM May 28<sup>th</sup>*

—Whatever you think, war didn't do this her: life did. She . . . she says you have to stop: she says, Daddy, you're so angry, it's going to kill you one of these days. You get drunk at night, alone, at the kitchen table. She hears you lifting your glass, setting it down, lifting it, setting it down. You're ashamed of yourself because you can't help thinking what if you could go back in time, what if Heather had had amnio, if she'd just taken the test, you would've known from the start, and then you could've—she could have had an abortion. And you'd have had your whole lives to conceive a healthy child. And then you hate yourself for thinking that about your own daughter, because she is the one thing in this world that's ever made you feel . . .

Feel what?

Decent. Good and decent.

I'm so sorry . . .

And then, on any given day, you can turn around and hate yourself, wishing that she'd never been born. Or, even better, that you hadn't. She says she doesn't need to forgive you—you're just being human, after all. She says she's not the one who has to forgive you, because she never blamed you.

The car ahead of us drove off, so he pulled up to the window. For a minute, we just sat there, and then he started crying. But it wasn't crying, exactly. There's something so frightening about hearing a man finally allow himself to cry, as if he hasn't cried in his whole life, and you know it's possible that he hasn't, the sound the comes out, and his shoulders to convulse, first, and the sound travels from his bowels, up, through his stomach, his goats, practically choking him from inside, getting caught in his own throat like bile, and then, finally, it's out. That cry, that howl, is out, and it's unbearable, like something that will never end.

Your total is \$14.78, please, the girl said, and I could see the bags the girl was holding out, waiting, and then she bent over, \$14.78, please? And then she saw us, she took in the whole seen, and her eyes got as big as saucers, like, Oh, shit, what's going on? So I just nodded no, wait a second, and she stood up straight, holding one bag before each breast.

I waited until he'd pulled through and parked, wiping his eyes. Hungry? He said, trying to laugh.

Yeah . . . about that, I said. There's something you should know about Melody.

Sounds serious.

It is. To her.

All right, he said, pulling over, turning off the ignition. Then he turned to face her, and he said, Tell me. Let's have it.

I sighed, and then I spit it out: She's vegetarian.

She's what?

Vegetarian, doesn't eat meat—wouldn't eat meat if she had any choice in the matter, I said, lifting my hand.

Is this you talking?

No, I'm speaking for her. This is Melody speaking.

Well, excuse my French, but fuck off, vegetarian, he said, turning back around, nodding.

No how, no fucking way: capeesh? he asked, turning back.

She says, You've never noticed? When does she throw the worst fits when you're feeding her? What are you feeding her?

She throws fits every night for god sake.

Because you forcer her to eat meat every night! Did it ever occur to you? I asked, and his mouth fell open. Finally, he said, No, it didn't. And she needs the protein.

You can get protein in other ways, you know.

Not in my house you can't.

She believes in reincarnation: she believes people can come back as animals, and if you eat them, who knows who you're eating.

This has gone too far—this, this is too far, you know—I, I am not . . . Is this your doing?

My doing? No. And she's been on my case, too, so I've cut out all red meat, and I'm thinking of giving up chicken, too. Maybe just fish.

Oh, and people can't come back as fish in the next life.

Oh, thanks. Like I need you on my case, too. Besides which, she's right: everyone agrees it's terrible for the environment—.

No, everyone does not agree: *I do not agree.*

Okay, well, that's your choice. But don't say I didn't tell you. And don't say you don't know how she truly feels. And most of all . . . don't kill the messenger and eat me, I said, looking at Melody, laughing. Wonder twin powers: activate! I said, holding up my fist for her.

60.

### *Shock Therapy*

—I have this dream that they send me back to Westwood. In my dream, I'm in a dentist's chair, and then Cam's there, and he says, Open up, baby, and he's got this tray, and I'm like, Cam, where the hell have you been? And he says, Open up, and then I'll tell you, and then, I do, and he puts in two trays, top and bottom, like for molds of your teeth, and then it's oozing down my throat, so I reach to take it out, it's the most disgusting feeling, and I realize someone's strapped my wrists, strapped me down, and then he says, It'll only take a second, and they shock me. Through my teeth.

Do you have bad dreams often?

No. Just that one. Oh, and one other.

What happens in the other dream?

That I'm taking my PSAT's, and when I come to in the dream, I'm sitting in a desk in this room with like a hundred other kids, but then I realize I'm not wearing any pants. Or

any underwear, and any second, someone's going to notice . . . that's when I wake up and realize that it was just a dream. The whole world's seen me having sex, but at least I never up showed up to school without my pants.

Well, look on the bright side.

Let's see it.

You know China's installing anti-porn software in all new computers.

So I should move to China?

61.

*Life on Mars*

—I just sat there, staring at my computer, sobbing . . .

Bowie's Life On Mars, Serious Moonlight: cheering crowd.

Is that too loud? I asked her. Good. Okay, ready?

She was ready.

That song just kills me every time, I said, taking off her headphones first. They used to have this show called Life On Mars, and it was about this cop who wakes up to find himself in 1970-something, not today—like he's from today—and it sounded good, but then I watched it, and it just didn't work. And it's like they knew it didn't work, so they put all this tail on—I guess they figured that no one would notice if they could watch a load of tail, right? But even then, it still didn't work. I did my term paper on that show for Social Science class, and in one episode, I actually counted the number of hot pants, because it's like, do they really think people are so stupid? But then, obviously, people really are sometimes, but anyhow. What can you do, you know?

Un uh . . . your hair is not mousy. Especially now.

Ohmygod, your mother would kill us.

62.

*Discount Medical Supplies*

—You know you can get 10-blades, bulk, online, these days. They're the best, really. Even if you could feel, you won't feel them for a couple seconds; they're so sharp, so precise. I stand there, in the bathroom, and I try to say what Cam made me promise to say: I have a choice, I have a choice, I have a choice . . . liar.

63.

7:32 PM May 2<sup>nd</sup>

—You know what his excuse was? He said they got married too you. He said he had no idea who he was, I said, looking at him. He couldn't look me in the eye, though, because Knox didn't know what to say. So I said, Oh, so you're going to fix your mistake by marrying a woman half your age, who is younger than you were when you made the mistake of getting married, yourself? Tell me, does she get to use that excuse, too, when she leaves you for a much younger man in ten years?

I waited, but he didn't speak, just nodding his head to the side.

Don't stick up for him, I said.

I'm not—I'm trying not to judge. I'm a cop, not a judge, remember?

Fine, but don't stand up for him.

I'm not, really, it's just that—.

That what?

That maybe it's not as easy as you think it is: maybe it's not so black and white.

Uh, sorry, but it is: it is black and white: you don't leave your wife and child for a twenty-three-year-old secretary. Afraid that's as black and white as it gets.

I'm sorry, Thea, I don't know anything about it, and I shouldn't comment.

No, you do know, because I just told you, and what you shouldn't do is stick up for a man who abandoned his family—I mean, you of all people, Knox.

64.

*12:34 PM May 30<sup>th</sup>*

—Knox returned with a couple hotdogs, and I just looked at him, nodding.

You need help, I said, raising my left arm.

You girls don't know what you're missing, he said, taking a seat and a big bite at the same time.

What are you watching? he asked leaning over to see the video screen I'd placed on the side of Mel's chair.

What the hell is that?

It's a video.

Jesus Christ, he said, wiping the corner his mouth with the back of his hand. Turn that off, will you? he asked. I just looked at him. Come on, let's go, he said.

Why? I asked, raising both hands.

Because I don't want her seeing things like that, Thea, he said, chewing his hotdog stiff counterclockwise circles. Let's go, he said, standing behind Melody and wheeling her

toward the car. I followed them to the car, got in the front seat, waiting for him to say something, but he didn't, so I said something. What, I said, turning to her: she says she's fifteen years old—what world are you living in? You can't protect her from the world her entire life, no matter how short it's going to be.

Try me, he said, stuffing the last bite in his mouth.

Listen, Knox, we need to have a talk, I said.

We who?

You and me, I said, raising my hand.

Oh, we do, do we? Go on, then. You talk, I'll listen.

All right, then, since you're listening for once. You've got to let me grow up—I'm not going to live forever, Daddy. You know that.

Stop it.

No, you stop it. Stop beating yourself up. I'm here now. I see and hear and feel and understand more than you can possibly imagine, and the truth is, you don't want to imagine. Somehow that makes it worse for you, doesn't it?

Stop it.

Let her speak, I said.

You aren't dying yet, he said, leaning over me, speaking to Melody. I'm not having this conversation with you, when you aren't dying yet.

We're all dying yet, Daddy. And maybe if you let me live, you wouldn't have to be so afraid all the time—.

You see? This is why: right here. This is why you shouldn't be allowed to listen to that morbid death music.

That's redundant, I said.

Oh, piss off. You know what I mean.

Yes, but it's still redundant.

That fucking death music, is that better?

We started laughing, because it sounded so retarded, you know, and then Knox started shouting at us: She has enough problems!

He'd never yelled before. No one had yelled at me like that in a long time. Not a man, at least.

Who are you to decide that for her? Who? I said.

I'm her father, that's who.

Then act like it.

I don't need this. I don't need this, he said, pulling on to my street.

Oh, I said, raising my hand, here we go again—what you need, huh?

Wait—I just . . . I've had this—I've had this argument before, word for word. I thought I was having a déjà vu, but it's worse than that—I had this fight once already. But with Heather . . .

I'm not Heather, I said, rolling my eyes, so annoyed. He was being such an asshole,.

You heard that? he said, speaking to Melody. Oh, God, you've heard everything . . . all along.

I'm not deaf, I said, raising my hand, looking at him.

I have to say, I let him suffer for a moment, kneeling down, bowing his head in front of her chair.

She says, I've got palsy and I'm half-blind, but I'm not deaf, Daddy, I said, raising my hand, then lowering it, seeing the look in his eyes.

That is your doing—you are a bad influence on my daughter.

Are you serious?

Yes. And that's it: no more.

No more what.

No more visits.

What are you going to do, ground me? I said, raising both my hands.

No, I'm going to ground my daughter, and she's not seeing you for two weeks. Maybe that will teach her, teach you both a little respect.

Respect? We're teenagers! What do you want?! I said, trying not to laugh. Ohmygod, I said, turning to face Melody. This is so unfuckingbelievable: he's blaming us, I said. You can't stop, can you?

We aren't doing this, he said, nodding, no more.

Doing what? What am I doing?

Bringing me hope—false hope.

Oh, and tell me, Detective, what's the difference?

You know what? Heather was right—I've crossed a line here.

Don't—oh, no, you don't—don't you dare blame me for your problems. That's all you do, all day long, blame the war for your daughter, blame Heather for not getting a test, blame yourself for not making her get tested . . . and you know what? You know what?

You don't deserve her. Not because you're a drunk, because you're a coward. You go around telling people Melody's taught you more about love than anyone—and it's

bullshit. You know it's bullshit, because in the night your dream of turning back time, you dream of making a deal with the devil and just how much you would give if she could be normal and healthy. And you're so fucking angry—with everything, everyone, and she knows it, too.

No more! he said, pounding the dash with one fist.

No, you listen—.

You will not be seeing my daughter anymore if this is how you two behave.

I said, listen, Daddy! Listen to me! I screamed, raising my hand. Knox was speechless. I lowered my hand, and I said, You aren't protecting her: you're just protecting yourself! Get out, he said. Get out of my car, he said, leaning across my lap and opening the door. I got out, and then—I didn't think he'd do it, but he drove away. Yeah, well, fuck you too! Loser. You are such a fucking loser, I hate you! You all suck! You all fucking suck, all of you, you hear me! I couldn't even breathe, waiting for him to turn around, and then I asked him, I said, Come back . . . please.

Dogs started barking, neighbors turned on lights, people were looking out their windows, and I didn't care. Fuck you, people. Fuck all of you! I screamed, about to turn around, after Knox's taillights disappeared. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something bright, glowing, and I thought there was something behind me. But it wasn't behind me: it was me. My shoulder was glowing again. I looked around, and then I pulled back my sleeve, and for a second, I couldn't breathe. My scar was glowing, but it wasn't a heart anymore, it was an anarchy symbol.

I looked up, looked around, thinking, This isn't happening—this can't be happening . . . And then a car pulled into the parking lot, pulled over. It was Foley.

Unfuckingbelievable, I said, nodding at him.

Theadora Denny?

That's my name, I said, turning to face him.

You're under arrest, he said.

For what, Foley? I said, almost laughing, gripping my left shoulder quiet with my right hand.

Kidnapping, he said.

65.

*6:49 PM April 6<sup>th</sup>*

—After school that day, we took a drive. We have this place, it's our place, in the woods. We took some pictures—I brought my camera, and Cam brought his. We stayed there and smoked a joint and watched the clouds until we'd sobered up enough to drive, and then we went to my house.

Then, just before he got in his car, Cam called up to me, and he said, You know what Theadora means, Theadora? And I said, Why, yes, I do, actually—. *Bzzt!* Wrong answer, he said. Oh, sorry, I said. Why, no, Cam, what does Theadora mean? He nodded like some wiseguy wise man, and said, It means God's gift, sweetheart, and then he winked, pointing his trigger finger at me. So I raised my arm in a flourish, gesturing toward my body like, Ta da!

So I was thinking, he said, and I said, About what a gift from God I am? I asked, leaning over, tilting, balancing my body over the second floor rail, showing off my so-called cleavage, and he said, You know those bumper stickers, the ones that say, God's

coming back, and is she pissed? I said, You're not getting one of those for your mom—. No, no, he said, I was just thinking, what if, what if God was a teenage girl? He looked at me, waiting, and then I let go of my boobs and bent over the rail again, looking down at him, grinning, because, for once in my life, I knew the answer. So I leaned over the rail, looking at him, and I said: Well, no wonder the world's so fucked up.