

“I’m talking about Isaac. About you finding him.”

I tensed up. Anytime I thought about the morning two months earlier when I’d found Isaac’s body, I wanted to puke. Which is exactly why I tried to *never* think about it.

Kendall touched the mini Magic 8 Ball dangling from the key ring on my belt loop. She knew it was Isaac’s. Everyone knew. It had been his good-luck charm for years and he never went anywhere without it—until the night he’d given it to me, saying I needed its advice more than he did. It was all a joke, really, and I would have given the stupid thing back to him the next day. If only he’d woken up.

FREEFALL

M I N D I S C O T T

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8:19 P.M.

This was Daniel's deal. He'd taken the order, contacted a supplier, and set it all up. I was just the sucker he'd roped into driving him for the actual delivery. Which meant, technically, I was also the guy who had the police cruiser riding his ass through town.

Just like always.

"You know, Dick," Daniel said, "I'm pretty sure you bring this cop bullshit on yourself."

"Oh yeah?" I kept the steering wheel as steady as I could and stole another glance in the rearview. All I could make out in the dusky darkness were bright headlights and the outline of the light bar on the cruiser's roof, which—so far—wasn't flashing. "How do I bring it on myself? By hauling you around everywhere in my brother's unlucky car?"

“No,” Daniel said. “By driving like a paranoid old lady. You’ve got to blend in better on the road. And go faster. You might not realize this, but cops pay close attention when people are under the speed limit too.”

“I *know* that.”

What I didn’t know was why Daniel thought he was some kind of speed-estimating expert; the Mustang’s speedometer was always stuck at zero whether I was at a dead stop or cruising the highway.

I looked in my side-view mirror. From what I could tell, the cop had no plans to stop tailgating me anytime soon. The experience was *not* doing wonders for my hangover headache or crazy-nervous heartbeat.

“You’ve got to quit looking at him,” Daniel said between swigs of his Jack and Coke. “And take some deep breaths or something. The street you want is coming up next left.”

The moment of truth. I flipped on my blinker, and then eased into a pretty smooth turn, even with all the weight Daniel had piled in the back. I peeked in the rearview again, trying to be casual about it.

To my relief the cruiser hadn’t followed. We were in the clear for now.

A minute later we hit the crest of Ray Fitch Hill—“Rich Bitch Hill” to those of us unlucky enough to live by the river—where huge houses sat on square, perfect lawns with clipped hedges and lit-up flower beds. Amaz-

ing, really, the ritziness of this part of town. Most of the cars alone were worth three, maybe even four, times as much as the single-wide mobile homes Daniel and I called home.

Daniel directed me to the place, and as I backed into the driveway, Pete Zimmer, the Kenburn High football god himself, was waiting on the sidewalk with two other jocks. They all looked alike with their buzz-cut hair and T-shirts that said, I AM COLLEGE, I'D DO ME, and SEXY NEVER LEFT.

"Just let me handle this," Daniel said to me.

"I always do."

We climbed out of the car. I fidgeted with Isaac's miniature Magic 8 Ball while Daniel clasped I-Am-College Pete's hand all secret-handshake-style. This crap had been going on for over a year, so I should have been used to it, but Daniel acting buddy-buddy with guys we'd always hated still weirded me out.

Pete nodded toward me. "Hey, Seth." Then he got down to business. "Danny, I have all these people showing up. Last big party of the summer and you're late with the beer. What's up with that?"

"Hey, these things take time," Daniel said.

The fact that he didn't correct Pete over the Danny thing bugged me too. Everyone got a nickname from Daniel—he'd been calling me Dick instead of Seth for years—but he usually didn't let people get away with calling him anything but Daniel.

I popped the trunk, which was packed tight with cases of beer and a whole mess of Jack Daniel's and vodka. Then I went around, leaned into the car, and pulled out the blankets from the backseat that had been covering up more stacks of the same.

Pete stood at the back of the car, staring down. "What's all this single-serving shit? I ordered a keg."

"That didn't work out," Daniel said, playing it cool. "But I got you a good price and threw in a bunch of hard stuff, too. You and your pals can stay sloppy drunk all night with this."

Pete frowned. "What are you trying to pull, Jackson?"

If I hadn't known better, the expression on Daniel's face would have made me believe he was actually sorry. He clamped his hand on Pete's shoulder and hunched down so they were at eye level. "Look, Zimm. I have it on good authority that the police are looking for some underage parties in your neighborhood to raid this weekend. If you have a keg, there'll be no way to hide it. You'll be screwed, I'll be screwed, we'll all be screwed. It's safer this way."

I'd-Do-Me Eric raised his eyebrows and looked down the street like he expected to spot police cars staking out the place.

"Where'd you hear that?" Pete asked. "About the cops?"

"I have people everywhere," Daniel said, waving toward the Valley.

Pete looked like he wanted to ask more questions or possibly kick Daniel's ass, but Sexy-Never-Left Garrison cut in. "Dude, beer's beer. Let's do this."

"Yes, let's," Daniel said. "Dick and I will haul everything in for you, no extra charge. Sound cool?"

Pete shrugged. "Go for it." Then he headed back to his mansion with his friends trailing behind.

When they were gone, I couldn't help laughing. "You have people? *Everywhere?*"

"Hell yeah, I do," Daniel said, grinning. "And these people of mine predicted that beer will be served in huge quantities right here tonight. Which is exactly why you and me are going to stick around."

I shook my head. "No way."

It was more of a reflex than anything. Saying no to Rich Bitch Hill parties was as automatic to me as saying yes had become to Daniel.

"Come on, Dick," he argued. "It isn't like you have anyplace better to be."

He was right. And, well, the truth was, I actually did need to do something to get my mind off all the crap from the night before.

Daniel could always pick up on it if I was wavering, so he told me his usual lie to seal the deal: "Just give me twenty minutes here and we can take off, okay?"

"Fine," I said, pretending to believe him. "Twenty minutes."

10:44 P.M.

I'd been to enough house parties to know when everything was about to fall apart. After two hours, this one was definitely on the way to disintegration. Forty or fifty rowdy drunk kids were there, all laughing and yelling their heads off while the suck-ass dance music vibrated children out of their beds the next block over.

I was ready to leave—I'd been ready since we'd walked in, to be honest—but Daniel had disappeared with some chick, so I headed back to the kitchen on my own, even though the booze was in there and I kind of wanted to steer clear. Being around these rich assholes was messing up my head worse than ever. The room I was trying not to go into was exactly where I kept ending up; the stuff I was trying not to drink was exactly what I'd been chugging all night.

Vicki Lancaster and Carr Goodwin were standing in front of the marble-y counter with a few of their friends, sipping from cans. Carr watched my every move like salespeople always did when Daniel and I walked into a store. The rest ignored me.

"This is the nastiest beer," Vicki said, making an even bitchier face than usual. "Pete was going to get a keg, but then he got some inside scoop that the police are monitoring keg rentals. I wish he'd gone for it anyway."

Daniel's cover story had spread through the party like some big conspiracy. I was the only one who knew why he

really hadn't been able to get the keg: the girl who always hooked him up was still holding a grudge after finding out he'd hooked up with her best friend.

Carr laughed his big, booming laugh and said to Vicki, "Maybe it's better this way. The last thing I need is for my position as vice president to be put in jeopardy."

Everyone started busting up at that. I never hung out with Carr, but every time I heard him talk, he was going on about school politics like he was some important man. *In jeopardy*. Who says that?

I couldn't take it anymore. I popped open a beer and gulped the whole thing down in about ten seconds. "You're right, Vicki," I said, crushing the can in my hand. "That's the worst stuff I've ever tasted."

She stared at me. It struck me that her skinny eyebrows and open mouth made her look like she'd just walked into a surprise party. I tried to keep a straight face, but burst out laughing.

"Oh, Jeez," Vicki said. "Who let the trailer trash in?"

She was always giving me shit; holding some grudge over God knows what. "Trailer trash," I said, helping myself to yet another beer. "That's a good one. Did you come up with it all by yourself?"

She tossed her blond hair over her shoulder. "I did. I also came up with 'You. Are. A. Loser.' Don't you have some meth to go smoke?"

I was bored of them already, so I gave Vicki a wink and

started for the dining room. But then I heard her say, “Maybe if we’re all lucky, Seth will end up like Isaac. Such a non-tragedy *that was*.”

I spun around, gripping the doorway to steady myself. If some guy had said it, I might have decked him. But since I wasn’t going to hit a girl—not even an evil one like Vicki—I settled for “You. Are. A. Bitch.”

It wasn’t enough. Nowhere *near* enough.

I had to get away from these people.

Two seconds later I was staggering away again and Carr was after me, grabbing my arm. “Watch it, McCoy,” he said in a low voice that was probably supposed to make me shake with terror. “I’ve got my eye on you.”

“Go to hell,” I said, jerking free.

I made my way back to the dance party revival in the living room and leaned against the wall. Daniel had five minutes to finish getting off, or I’d be leaving his ass behind.

Xander Yates—another kid I’d gone to school with forever but never hung out with—chose that moment to push his shaggy hair out of his eyes and stand next to me. “Hey, Seth. Great show!” he yelled over the music.

A bunch of hot girls in tiny tops and skirts were dancing in front of us. One of them was Felicia, a girl I’d been pretty into last year. I hadn’t seen her since the start of summer. By now I wasn’t sure if it was because of her or me. It didn’t matter anyway; she was all over I’d-Do-Me Eric’s older brother, and I couldn’t bring myself to care.

“Yes,” I said to Xander. “*Really* great show.”

He laughed. “I’m not talking about any of them. I meant your gig with the Real McCoys last night. You were awesome on that upright bass.”

“Yeah right.” I’m usually cool about accepting compliments, even when I suck—only a real asshole insults someone else’s taste—but I couldn’t be this time. “That must be why everyone was saying it was the worst they’d ever seen me play.”

Xander wasn’t fazed. “You were better at the gig you played in June, I’ll give you that. But I think your worst is a cut above most people’s best. Even when you’re falling off the stage you still put on a good show.”

He had one part of it right: I *was* better in June. Everything was better then.

Xander leaned against the wall like he was settling in for a long talk. “What did you think of those guys who played after you? I felt like the music was all right, but it was hard to get past the rough vocals. That’s a challenge, I think, when the front man . . .”

As I’d expected, he kept talking. And talking. Xander seemed halfway decent for a Rich Bitch Hill kid, but I wasn’t in the mood for conversation. Especially since I’d been too busy puking in the parking lot to have seen the set he was asking about, anyway.

I zoned out and scanned for somewhere else to go.

And that’s when I caught sight of the crazy red hair I’d woken up next to.

11:02 P.M.

Across the room from me, Kendall Eckman was running her fingers through her stop-sign red hair and laughing at whatever bullshit I-Am-College Pete was saying. She was all smiles in a black halter top and a denim skirt that barely covered her ass. No one would have guessed that less than twelve hours before, she'd been in her underwear, screaming and throwing things at me.

Kendall was the last chick in this town, in this country, on this planet, I would have wanted to lose my virginity to. And yet, at some point *after* I got wasted at the gig, fell off the stage, was chewed out by my brother, and puked in the parking lot, it happened. At some point *before* I'd woken up in my bed with a pounding head, stale beer/sour puke breath, and no clue how I'd gotten there or why Kendall was with me, it happened.

Turning back to Xander and his yammering, I considered my next move.

“. . . play a show in Seattle,” he was saying. “I told him we’d have a better chance . . .”

Kendall didn't seem to have noticed me yet. I needed to keep it that way. I could sneak away. Or pretend not to see her. If she went along with it, we could ignore each other for hours.

Not that I'd be staying for any more hours. No way.

But then it was too late for pretending. I was looking at her and she was looking at me. Her huge, dark eyes narrowed and her pouty lips turned down.

Busted.

“. . . wondering,” Xander said, “do you ever play electric bass or any other styles of music besides rockabilly?”

“Nope.” I looked around for a hiding place. “I haven’t for a long time.”

Dining room, kitchen, bathroom, garage. Backyard!

“Well, if you ever want to try something different, my band—”

“I’m going out. There,” I said, pointing at the sliding glass door. “See you around.”

I pushed past two dudes, slid the door open, tripped outside, and pulled the door shut again.

The yard was like an ad for some yuppie resort, with all the matching chairs lined up and a couple of round tables with huge umbrellas poking out of them. I went around to the far side of the pool and fell onto a cushioned lounge chair, where I had a good view of everyone through the huge living room window.

What the hell was Kendall doing here?

Or, the better question: What was *I* doing? This was Kendall’s neighborhood now. These were Kendall’s fancy friends. Of course she’d be here. I hadn’t been thinking when I’d let Daniel talk me into this.

I finished my beer and tossed the can under my chair. I wanted another but I didn’t feel like going in to get it, so I leaned back and stared at the sky instead. Aside from the people who lived here, everything was better on the Hill than in the Valley; even the fucking stars were brighter.

There was sound all around me: the conversation of the guys smoking weed by the fence, the whispering of the couple making out on the air mattress, the music coming from inside Pete's house. But I wasn't part of any of it. It was all just background, swirling over and around, bouncing off me. Maybe Vicki's wish would come true and I *would* end up like Isaac. Maybe I didn't even care.

The back door slid across its track.

Open: loud music/laughing/talking.

Closed: muffled music/laughing/talking.

The unmistakable sound of flip-flops slapping the bottoms of feet echoed from across the pool and started coming close. Closer. Closest. The shoes stopped and the chair next to me scraped on the concrete. The cushion made a deflating sound.

I turned my head, expecting to see that dreaded red hair and Kendall raring to go for round two—of arguing, I mean—but the flip-flops wearer on the lounge was this hot girl with long, black hair. We'd never had a real conversation and I didn't know her name, but I'd seen her around at school some during second semester.

"I've noticed that in movies about parties, everyone always ends up falling, jumping, or pushing each other into the pool," she said, waving toward the water. "And yet here we are and no one's in there. Not *one* single person!"

Lying down felt nicer, but I sat up anyway. This chick was too cute to ignore. "That's easy enough to fix. You stand by the edge. I'll give you a shove."

She laughed, and if there's any such thing as a pretty laugh, she had one. Just hearing her was enough to snap me out of my funk for the moment. "Actually," she said, "I think I'm good for now. Thanks, though."

To make her laugh again, I said, "All right. Fine. Be that way."

It didn't work at all; I sounded like a dickhead.

We sat there for a few painful seconds with neither of us saying anything. I glanced toward the window for Kendall or Daniel while Flip-Flops stared at me.

"I am *so* glad to be out here and away from everyone right now," she said. "I hate coming to these parties."

"Why's that?"

She bit her lip in this sexy, nervous way. "I don't know. I guess because I don't really drink or any of that kind of stuff, so being around people who do is just kind of . . . surreal."

"Surreal?"

"Everyone seems fake and weird in there," she said with a shrug.

"Oh. Like being surrounded by pod people?"

I had no idea where I came up with that. I didn't even know what I was talking about.

"Kind of the opposite, maybe," she said. "See, *these* pod people are normal humans until they get loaded and suddenly start thinking whatever they say and do is super-great. But in *Body Snatchers*, they're emotionless, freaky alien creatures. So it's a little different."

Huh. So pod people were from a movie, then?

"I know exactly what you mean," I said.

It was another lame attempt at humor because, obviously, I was partway loaded—just like probably everyone except her—but I still knew full well that I wasn't funny or interesting or deep.

For some reason, though, she missed my meaning.

"Really?" she asked, smiling. "So you're saying I'm not the only non-pod person here for once?"

I didn't want to have to tell her she'd pegged me all wrong, that she was looking happy and beautiful for nothing, so I nodded. It wasn't exactly a lie, I figured. Somewhere in that huge house was someone else who was sober. Maybe.

Another silence.

Flip-Flops looked toward the door. Was she thinking of going in because I wasn't talking? Should I say something to make her stay?

"My car has at least enough gas to get to the ocean," I blurted out.

She leaned toward me and I could see right down her strappy top. *Nice*.

"That's good," she said. "Are you taking a trip?"

"Um, well, I wasn't for sure planning to," I tried my hardest to sound serious and sober. "But I'll take you if you want. Since you hate this party so much, I mean."

She laughed again. *Such* an awesome laugh. If I had a

recording of it, I'd play it on repeat for hours. "That's a very sweet offer. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to pass."

"Let me guess." I sounded ridiculously jokey to my own ears. It was like I couldn't *stop*. "A girl like you doesn't take rides from a guy like me?"

Before she got a chance to answer, the back door was opening again and a big group came out. Carr and Daniel were with them. Almost everyone started toward the pool, laughing and making a bunch of noise, but Daniel hung back and lit up a cigarette.

I watched Carr, hoping he'd take the opportunity to drown himself. Instead, he dragged a chair over and sat down next to Flip-Flops and me. "You okay out here?" he asked, putting his hand on her shoulder.

She smiled. "I'm fine."

"Good." Carr stuck his lips by her ear and used a whisper voice that was so loud the people inside the house could almost have heard him. "This guy's pretty hammered," he said, gesturing toward me. "I just wanted to make sure he wasn't harassing you like he was Vicki a few minutes ago."

Her smile faded. She eased away from Carr and studied my face like she was making sure she could identify me in a lineup. Carr was watching me too, and I wished I'd knocked the bastard out in the dining room when I'd had the chance.

Then the wailing of sirens cut into the night. You'd think they'd have come quietly so they could catch us offguard, but here in Kenburn, Washington, the boys in blue were all

about the scare tactics. “Cops,” Daniel said, rushing over. “Time to bail.”

No shit.

I tried to jump up but caught my foot on the cushion. The lounge chair and I crashed side by side inches from the edge of the pool. The beer can I’d stashed came rolling out and hit Flip-Flops on her foot. She glanced down at it for one long second, and then headed for the gate without looking back. I pushed myself up to get going too, but Carr gave me a hard shove, and I fell again.

Right into the pool.

The chlorinated water stung my nose and plugged my ears as I hit the shallow, tiled bottom. Being tossed in cold water while wearing all my clothes felt wrong and somehow more intense than anything I’d experienced for weeks. But thanks to the air pockets that had formed in my shirt, I surfaced easily. Carr was gone, and Daniel was poolside looking panicked. “Dick, this isn’t what I’d call a good time for a swim.”

The sirens sounded close now. And from what I could see through the sliding glass door, everyone inside was freaking out. Such amateurs.

I paddled to the steps and pulled myself out.

“Hurry up! Unless you *want* to get busted?” Daniel yelled over his shoulder as he went for the gate.

I bolted after him. My socks and shoes were sloshing, my T-shirt and jeans were heavy and suctioned against my

skin, and my coordination was for shit. But I didn't stop running until I'd caught up with Daniel at the edge of the woods. "What about the car?" I asked.

"I hate to break it to you, but you're in no shape to drive and neither am I," Daniel said. "We'll get it tomorrow."

I followed him into the woods to go the back way home. It was a forty-minute walk, and by the time it was over, I was covered with dirt after tripping my way down the hill, through bushes, over fallen trees and branches, and across the river in soaked clothes and shoes that wouldn't stay tied.

What was it Flip-Flops had been saying about movies, pools, and getting pushed in? Because as far as I could tell, it sucked balls in real life.