

Creeps

Chapter Seven

What follows is **not** the story of what transpired between Stacey and Kira Reeves.

The first time Kira consumed alcohol, outside of church, was at the tender age of thirteen. Her parents had left town, for the first time leaving their 16-year-old in charge of the house for two nights while they celebrated their anniversary at the cottage they shared between Mrs. Reeves' four siblings, a generous inheritance from their late parents. Stacey of course seized the opportunity in an instant to throw a house party, what she hoped would become and indeed did become the party of the summer. Kira, having recently completed the 8th grade, was permitted to attend as a bribe for her complicity, and on strict orders not to "do anything" with any high school boys, a nebulous term that wildly excited the imagination of the naïve girl whose sex education had been transmitted in diagrams, threats and omens.

Stacey watched her sister closely, doling out her limited intake of the beer acquired from a senior whose uncle owned a liquor store in town. No more than one per hour, Stacey stipulated, and saw to it. At least, she did so until her attention was diverted by the presence of classmates Shaun Reid and Kiki LaBelle using their parents room for, according to the little snitch who notified Stacey, what must be amazing sex. (They had been in there for over *twenty* minutes!) While Stacey snuck into the room and stealthily observed what little she could make out of Kiki's generous but not too generous posterior for filing in her own spank bank, Kira availed herself of as much as she could guzzle from the now untended trove of PBR, making up for some six hours in the span of time needed for the partiers to boo the DJ, self-appointed in absence of Stacey's executorship of the tablet that controlled her dad's speaker system, into tearfully abandoning his dreams.

When junior Troy Bogen asked to dance with her, imagined anythings suddenly became looming possibilities. It was her first time dancing with a boy without adult eyes upon her. Kira copied (or at least believed she was copying) the moves she had seen the older girls employing in the dance floor. Booty-bumping, crotch-grinding, titty-shaking skankery, all of it tarnished further by a substantial impairment of her balance by the alcohol (an issue she would go on to reverse before stumbling into the Manning Mental Wellness Clinic some five years later).

Troy, a local pioneer in the field of wooing the ladies, said he thought she was pretty, and asked if she wanted to go somewhere to talk, classic Troy moves. Troy was hot. He was the sort of guy who Stacey might have dated, if Stacey might have dated a guy. In fact, unbeknownst to the girl guiding Troy up to her bedroom with a tremulous skip in her step, it was that very subject which triggered his feigned interest in young

Kira. She blushed as he asked her about photos on her wall, what grade she was going to be in next year, what movies she had seen that summer. The dialogue felt very mature. Kira, meanwhile, cursed her braces for chafing in her suddenly dry mouth, and stammered out answers as requested. Mostly she listened to him talk while wondering what the individual steps were between dancing with a cute boy and kissing one. If she had sprayed on enough of her mother's perfume (eight puffs out to do it, she'd reasoned), hopefully Troy would show her.

Only then, Troy began to ask about Stacey. What it was like, growing up with a "girl like that." "A girl like what?" she asked, the beer adding more heat to her voice than she otherwise might have dared, or preferred. Troy said he meant nothing by it. But what *was* up with her, though? Stacey was so hot, but she never dated anybody, didn't flirt, only went to school dances with friends. What was she into? What kind of guys did she like? Any tips Kira might give him?

Elevations in both BAC and libidinous hope meant that it took her longer than it might have at other times to realize this was another boy trying to get with Stacey. That was a prospect Stacey had roundly rejected as far back as Kira had known of those categories: boys, and Stacey. Her sister's excuses varied. Sometimes the boy wasn't up to snuff. Sometimes she had too much going on to make time for boys. Sometimes Stacey said that Dad had forbidden her from seeing this guy or that, which had made Kira nervous to talk about boys with him even though she never heard these edicts from his own lips.

Sometimes, Stacey would fidget her wrists for a moment, get real quiet, and then tell Kira she wouldn't understand and stalk off to her room. It was those times Kira thought she understood her sister best.

She'd had a friend, Carrie, who had come out last year. It had been hard for her. Things were better for "that sort of thing" than they had ever been, Mrs. Reeves had told her when Kira asked what she could do to stop the other kids being so mean to Carrie. "Maybe too good." Kira wondered how bad they used to be, taking her mother's answer to mean that nothing could be done but wait for them to be better still. Stacey, she supposed, must be waiting too.

"She doesn't really like dating," she told Troy, thinking this an appropriately circumspect answer. "I can't wait to, though. My last boyfriend was some middle schooler." Her nose wrinkled in distaste. She was older now. Too cool for that. Excellent segue.

Troy nodded, said a few things, though none of them about her. Those anythings Stacey had forbidden Kira to do still burned in her mind enough to let him continue in his way. Time and again, he circled around to Stacey, and every time, Kira deflected him the best she could. Even once they were sitting side by side on her bed – a *high school* boy, in *her bed!* – it still seemed he only had interest in one Reeves, and it was not the

one sitting on Queen Elsa's face on her comforter. (Ironically, sitting on Elsa's face had been a confusing but exciting fantasy of her sister's when she had been that age.)

Equal parts resentful of being duped into thinking this older boy had been interested in her and suspicious of his probing, Kira dug in her feet. "Let's talk about us," she said, not quite sure how two people became an us but desirous of learning.

"Us? Look at you, working your game," Troy answered, bemused. He asked Kira her age, and then how much younger she was than Stacey.

"Stacey doesn't like you and I'm right here!" she barked, the beer triggering her peak of volatility. The outburst surprised even her, and embarrassed her more than a little.

"What, Stacey doesn't like guys or something?" Troy asked a bit too innocently.

And even in the dim light, even drunk, even horny, even crushed by his disinterest, Kira saw that he wasn't being playful. That this was the real question Troy had danced with her to ask.

The answer wasn't for him to know. Kira locked her jaw in place and said nothing. She didn't know that the fire in her eyes, the ice in her clenched fists, had been all the answer the boy needed.

Troy fuzzed Kira's head and left her bedroom. Before he made it all the way down the exposed staircase, he announced to everyone that Stacey's little sister had told him that Stacey was gay, his delivery rendering certain that all listening would understand was something deviant. (Not that Stacey wasn't a deviant, but creeping on her peers' clumsy attempts at fucking was not something Troy, or anyone, knew about, and therefore a mostly unjust portrayal of her.)

Kira ran out behind him, hissing denials that failed to reach the broader audience. She forcefully shoved Troy out of the party, something he allowed her to do alongside a smirk at the elder Reeves daughter, who had finally retreated from her observation post to see why the music had stopped. Stacey killed the rumor in its infancy, or at least fed it a few spoonfuls of poison, by flipping Troy off as Kira slammed the door in his face, switching on the speakers, and grabbing the nearest guy. She made Kira's dancing look chaste. Stacey made out with him for a while on the sofa before passing out, which was not an act but rather the natural result of a girl her age and size pounding beers until her friends, alarmed, cut her off. Then Kira was hostess, bustling around keeping people out of places, tidying up spills before they became stains, and making sure nobody left without a sober driver, as she had been proud earlier in the day to hear Stacey explain would be one of the tasks for which a hostess was responsible.

Afterwards, they didn't fight or anything. Kira apologized, explained what had happened, and Stacey told her it was fine, and gave her a hug. A little hug. And things weren't different after, but neither were they the same. The rumor persisted, quietly, nurtured by douchebags like Troy Bogen and other guys who thought themselves

unfairly spurned by Stacey. By the time she finished high school, it was more or less taken as an established fact, though never talked about openly in their household. Their parents knew – at least one of them even before it became public domain – but whatever conversations they had with one another, with Stacey, never included Kira. Not directly. Mrs. Reeves began to take quite the interest in their younger daughter's dating life, introducing her to any young man of quality who entered her sphere of awareness. As for the girls, Stacey really did keep busy, and it was her senior year, so Kira only got to spend so much time with her as it was, and she left for college after the following summer.

Maybe the distance was nothing. Or maybe it was that. A weed that grows slowly is often mistaken for one more plant that was always in the garden.

The human mind is a complex thing. A host of factors – many of them stemming from that party, but so many more – had turned Kira tight-lipped where Stacey was concerned. Some were buried deep in her subconscious, layers of guilt and resentment and pain. Others were right there on the surface, the accommodations one makes to oneself to avoid unwinnable fights and undesired condolences.

The night of her 19th birthday, Kira left her party and went to sit alone in a room, drunk, to meet an older boy – a teacher this time, but not so much older than Troy Bogen – and he asked her questions that got her excited and let her hope there would soon be more.

Then he suddenly asked her about Stacey, and her secrets, and things her mother had made crystal clear without ever actually saying that one simply did not discuss.

There was only one reason Martin Manning received an answer where Troy Bogen had met a closed fist, and it was right there in the difference between the two. Troy Bogen had wanted to claim Stacey for himself, or burn her down if he couldn't. Martin Manning, she knew – she *knew* – only wanted to help. To help Kira, to help Stacey, and maybe somehow to save their whole damned family.

Kira Reeves trusted Martin Manning.

It was an event. That was the first bit Martin was able to pry from her. Not a feeling, not a reaction, not an argument for which neither made amends. Something had happened, he pried from her, which brought him right back to his first question.

“So what happened to make things so bad between the two of you?”

What follows **is** the story of what transpired between Stacey and Kira Reeves.

(It should be noted that this is a retelling of her retelling. It is filtered in order to reduce bias; restore accuracy where damaged by faults in recollection; omit sidetracks, blubbing, evasions, and the painfully numerous instances in which intervention was required to prompt continuation of the tale; and of course, for style. The meandering thoughts of a nineteen-year-old-girl, even a relatively bright one, are poor fodder for this sort of narrative.)

It began at their cousin Chelsea’s wedding, though neither sister would go on to remember it that way. The two shared a hotel room, their parents in the room next door. They groaned in tandem at the sound of their alarms chiming in unison. Stacey chided Kira for her snoring; Kira warned Stacey not to take forever in the shower for once. They ate breakfast together in the hotel lobby, sneering together at a pair of sub-par male specimens who tried to chat them up, then giggled together when they shuffled away in defeat, tapping plastic spoons to toast their victory. A shared smile permeated their silent breakfast, born of pragmatism but sustained by sisterhood. Both were mindful that they had agreed to dogsit for Chelsea’s two over-energetic pitties while she and her new husband were on honeymoon the following week, and were like-minded in wanting to start off their week of intensive cohabitation in this small rural town amicably.

As bridesmaids, they were expected earlier than their parents, but still not until after noon. They hit the hotel gym together, and then Stacey humored Kira’s suggestion to try feeding the ducks at the pond out back. Stacey had no experience with ducks but disliked them anyway, yet it was a warm June day and the outdoors sounded good so why not hang out by the pond. The ducks felt about the same regarding Reeveses.

Then it was time to get ready. The girls returned to their rooms to get dressed. They had been fitted separately for their matching dresses, and so this was to be the first time they saw one another in them. Stacey, who some years later would remind her co-conspirator that she and her sister did not lounge around together in their underwear, dressed in the bathroom. When she emerged, more than satisfied with her appearance, she rounded the corner and came face to face with Kira.

“Oh my gosh we look so hot!”

“Oh my gosh we look like twins!”

The words came out in perfect unison, and once they were said, neither girl was even certain who had said what. The two erupted into peals of laughter, falling into each other’s arms for support.

Weddings have a way of making people mindful about their connections to one another, doubly so for bridesmaids. It was a perfect moment, and as they released one another, they each realized it. Stacey gently adjusted a strand of Kira's hair that was hanging down too close to her eye hitting it with a ghost of a blast of hairspray to lock it into place. Kira beamed, inspecting Stacey's ensemble, but as ever finding no fault in her.

"You know I love you, right? One of these days I'm going to be standing beside you at your wedding and trying not to hate the guy who takes you away from me."

There was no remedy for Kira's makeup in the face of sappy earnestness of that magnitude. They both knew it was wedding-inspired emotions getting the best of them, that they knew sisters who were closer, who loved each other more, and that the intensity of their affection in this moment would draw down from this peak. They knew it was there, though, in that moment, and that some portion of it would linger on in their hearts.

The two hugged again, and then it was Kira's turn to inject a little levity, hamming up their capacity to slay at the reception. The bridesmaid dresses were undeniably too sexy. Mr. Reeves had frowned when he saw his usually modest Stacey in the thing when he took her to get fitted for it, and Mrs. Reeves had gone so far as to text Aunt Kate to see if there was anything that could be done when she saw Kira trying on hers. It had grown into a protracted commiseration, Aunt Kate bemoaning her daughter's beau. She assured Mrs. Reeves that the two would never make it to the altar, not once the man's family realized what people must think of her sinful life. "Sinful life," her usual code for the breast augmentation Chelsea had received the winter before she met him but which she had concealed from her mother until well after. The clit piercing Aunt Kate would only learn about when the two tried to board an airplane together some years later, and she blushed all the way to Boston.

The wedding was great, and the girls did slay. Stacey was less excited by the attention she received, and Kira was rather jealous that Stacey seemed to receive a teensy bit more of it than her, but both left the reception with a strut. Chelsea, unquestionably their coolest cousin, actually had some lesbians enumerated among her friends, and Stacey left the hall arm in arm with a very queer girl with short cropped hair dyed electric blue, metal studs seemingly adorning more bits of her than not. Kira watched them slip away to the parking lot as she danced in a group with the flower girl and some of the other kids.

The next day, Mr. and Mrs. Reeves dropped their girls off at Chelsea's home, a cabin in a sparsely populated portion of this sparsely populated area. After a brief greeting and a how-to on handling the grandiosely named Scylla and Charybdis – Silly and Cherry in practice – she handed off the keys and ran off to meet her new husband at the airport. Before they quite knew what was happening, they were alone.

Objectively, it was idyllic. The cabin overlooked a naturally occurring reservoir, blue and beautiful, surrounded by warm, verdant foliage. It would look gorgeous in the fall. Their nearest neighbor was outside shouting distance, though not quite out of barking distance. It was perfect for Chelsea's art, with a large studio on the back end of the house surrounded by windows overlooking the wooded descent toward the water.

When Chelsea had asked Stacey if she would be up for it, this version was how she had pitched it to her. Stacey had been unmoved; a week in the middle of nowhere might be restful, but she wasn't sure she liked that much rest. Kira overheard them talking about it, seizing on the fantasy of a week in postcard paradise with two giant puppies, and she had begged to come with as if the deal were already sealed. Which had indeed sealed it.

In practice, it was a trial. There was no internet. Bugs, familiar and novel, came and went at their leisure. Silly and Cherry were sweet, yes, but willful, flailing their legs in the air like wild horses whenever they saw one of the girls for the first time in a short while. A trip to the bathroom was usually enough. Both dogs were magnets for ticks. Swimming was prohibited in the reservoir, rendering their weeks' worth of swimsuits and bikinis useless. There was no air conditioning, and even at night that time of year it was in the upper eighties. There was only one bedroom, displacing Kira to the sofa; whenever her skin slipped around the sheets, the leather stuck to her sweaty body like, well, leather. They had no car, only the phone number of a neighbor who understood their situation and, according to Chelsea, "would be happy" to give the girls a lift to town if they needed groceries, or the dogs ran into problems. It was a place where distractions were hard to come by, and harder still to cling to against the rising tide of adversities.

Stacey found solace in books, selecting tomes at random and camping out in front of the cabin's sole electric fan. She wasn't content, quite, but a lifetime of enduring discontent had inured her to much of the tedium. As for Kira, she tried to follow her sister's example, as she had so many times before. That lasted almost six agonizing hours, at which point she gave up and announced that she was walking to town.

To her surprise, Stacey didn't try to forbid it. "You're really OK with that?"

"Rapists don't patrol barely used gravel roads on the off chance some random hot girl might be out hitch-hiking. Which, don't, in case it needs saying. Be careful. Don't go anywhere with anybody. Understand?"

"I'll make sure you know where I am," Kira replied, and left before Stacey could push back. If she had seen Kira shed her t-shirt on the front porch and proceed with the walk in a striped bikini, she would not have let it go so easily.

It was close to two miles to town, such that Kinland was a town. The farming hub's population was so small that Kira thought it might be worth updating the signage on her way in. She had never been, but it was easy enough to find people. The community pool was closed since a fungal infestation a month earlier, so the local

youths split between a playground behind Kinland's school, and an outdoor ice cream shop called Bizzy Bee's.

She was an instant sensation. Gone were the braces, the awkward demeanor, the half-formed curves. She strode into town in all her bouncy, curvy, hotness. Her hair wasn't dyed red yet – that would come later, when the need gripped her to distinguish herself from her sister to the extent DNA would allow – but her long black strands gleamed in the sun like polished obsidian. She had tanned for the wedding – naked, even, a first – but here it was that she was tanned so lightly, so evenly, not at all the mottled sun-kissed tone on the Kinlander girls, that lent prestige. They had quite simply never seen her like. A whole town of people, she thought warmly, who wouldn't say to her that someday she would be as pretty as her sister.

A young woman like Kira would have been a sensation arriving among any gathering of young people, but here, she was Cleopatra, royalty by right of her beauty alone. There were exactly two cliques in Kinland, bitter rivals for the scant quantity of popularity available. Kira confidently selected one on the basis of them being the one she happened upon first, and quickly allowed them to co-opt her into their social structure and their schemes against the rivals.

Suddenly the week was fun. Thanks to Stacey's advice when she straggled in that first night, Kira wisely befriended the girls of her circle first, to belay territorialism over the scant pickings. From there, the girls advised her on the boys. Which were safe to allow to pursue her, and which were worth allowing. Stacey projected quiet caution as her sister came and went in different vehicles day by day. (Different pickups, anyway.) She'd done her best acting on their mother's requests for her to help Kira settle down a bit where boys were concerned, to pick a nice one and stick to him. It had not worked. Boys liked Kira and Kira liked boys, she had come to accept. She made out with two of them and kissed a third in that week alone, not counting a bit of gentle heavy petting with one of the groom's nephews in the parking lot outside the reception hall. (That had begun as a quest to find (read "spy on") Stacey and her blue-haired companion, but ended in an enjoyable failure.) She'd only shared the last bit with Stacey, who'd given her a look of pure disgust before a little smile asserted itself. It vanished before Kira could even ask what it meant.

At any rate, it was more restful in the sweltering cabin without Kira pacing back and forth like that first awful day, so she could credit malekind for that, at least.

The fourth day of their dogsitting, Kira left mid-morning to meet up with the girls. One of their dads was driving them to Epley, the slightly less tiny town where her new friends attended a shockingly small school considering its name, Tri-County High School. There was a downtown there so they could do some shopping, and Stacey had given Kira a few bucks for a trip to the salon as well. She wished her fun on her girls day out.

Halfway to town, Kira received a call informing her that their transport was going to be late, but not to worry, they'd come by and get her once it was ready. Figuring she'd mostly only seen her sister for a short window in the morning and evening and some Reeves time might be nice, she turned back toward the cabin.

Silly and Cherry pranced maniacally at her as she slipped in the front door, like usual. It was surprising that Stacey didn't call out to ask why she'd returned so soon. Gripped by that illogical paranoia that unfamiliar places tend to give a person, she made her way back to the art studio where Stacey spent most of the day, readying herself to find her sister face-down in a pool of blood, readying herself to launch a crusade of vengeance.

Stacey was home. And alive. There she was in the studio's paint-spattered leather chair, her shorts and her panties gathered on the ankle of one fully extended leg. The other was hooked over the armrest. They were spread wide. One hand still held her book, closed around a thumb as if she'd been spontaneously overwhelmed by an urge and had not even had time to set it down. Stacey's t-shirt was bunched up around her breasts, not quite exposing them, looking more like it had simply ridden up when she slouched into her current posture, almost horizontal.

Kira froze in the doorway in shock. This was her first time seeing another girl doing... *that*. (The word "masturbate" had always made her uncomfortable.) Her guy friends back home had tried to make everyone watch some gross porn at a get-together earlier in the summer, but she had left the room to cuddle their schnoodle and tried not to overhear it. Guys in Kinland didn't do things like that, her new companions had told her. They were gentlemen.

Did girls in Kinland do things like... that?

And why didn't Stacey look up? That was the more bizarre question. Her back was mostly to the door, yes, but she had ears, and the dogs weren't subtle. Kira's ears caught it before her eyes, though. Whisper-quiet feminine moaning and panting. Earbuds, apparently, hidden beneath layers of perfect hair. Stacey liked to listen to music while she read, alternating between Chelsea's husband's record collection and a small one of her own, curated and downloaded on her phone over the course of several long days of spotty roaming data. Not all of it was music, apparently, Kira realized.

In that moment, perhaps for the first time, the full reality of her sister being a lesbian felt *real*. She had thought about it sometimes. Wondered. Tried to imagine what it was like inside that head. But she'd never fully gotten it before.

Stacey didn't just disappoint horny guys and mostly but not quite hide her sadness when people talked about their relationships. Kira peered closer, trying to see if there was a video accompanying it. Not that she wanted to *see*, only to know. It was a bad angle, though, mostly behind her target, the raised leg blocking line of sight to the

sweet spot where Stacey's legs met, or where they would meet once her knees weren't three feet apart.

Either way, Kira realized it actually didn't matter. If Stacey didn't watch girls have sex, she obviously thought about it. She liked *girls*. As in, she wanted to do things to them. Have them do things to her. Touch them. Kiss them. Use her tongue, probably. No, definitely. She would *lick* other girls. Or rather, she *did* lick them, in all sorts of places. What all had happened between her and that hot butch girl at the wedding? How far had it gone?

Stacey never talked about that kind of thing at home. Walls were thin, and some non-zero quantity of parents were usually close-by. Plus she was private by nature. Had Stacey had girlfriends? After all she was a college girl now, had been for two years. Of course at a college there would be lesbians lesbianing all over the place. And Stacey was one of them. A lesbian, not as some part of her identity that Kira was driven to protect and at times ponder, but as a girl who liked other girls. Sexually. Liked them so much that there she was, unable to restrain herself from sudden lesbian revelry, playing with herself in a room surrounded by windows, where if someone walked by they'd have an unobstructed view of the show of a lifetime.

(If they were really lucky, they wouldn't find out about Stacey's gun, a gift he'd given her the morning after Chelsea's wedding to protect her and her sister in case some creep came around looking for trouble. She kept it at her side in cases just such as these.)

Was this what being gay was, being so swept up with lust and fantasy and the sudden need to act on all those pictures in your head that you could hardly restrain yourself, right there where anyone would be watching you? Not that Kira was watching. Stacey's leg was in the way of the R-rated part, for one, and if it weren't she would have run away the second she saw anything. Three walls of glass welcomed the light of the world shining down on Stacey's softly shaking body.

No one happened by, though. Nobody ever came here. (Well, Stacey was about to, Kira thought, suppressing a snicker.) It was only the two of them. Only the one of them, as far as the whole playing-with-yourself thing went. Stacey, a lesbian, playing with herself while she listened to some other girl do the same. Or probably two girls doing stuff to each other, actually. That made more sense. Or more than two, even. And Stacey was... into it. Like, really into it.

Stacey came quietly, though not silently. A year in the dorms, then another sharing a room at DAT House, had trained her to be surreptitious. Plus, the other day when she'd abused the freedom, cutting loose and applying some volume, she'd startled herself as well as the dogs. Kira stared, numb, and finally backed out of the doorway and excused herself as quietly as she could the same way she'd entered. So far as she knew, and she was indeed correct, Stacey never knew that had ever happened. She and her

then-girlfriend, a woman she'd met at Lakeview but wisely not a fellow DAT girl, had each embraced the podcast craze and recorded a few sexy sound files for one another, to tide them over during summer break. That the girl had been so bad at it wound up being the reason Stacey broke up with her in a text later that week while Kira was riding around on the back of some country boy's four wheeler. Bitch could've just ripped the audio from some porn and pretended she knew how to satisfy a woman.

Their last day in town, Kira woke up early and made the two of them breakfast. Burnt eggs and soggy bacon, a thing she did on purpose now after doing it accidentally as a child. Taking after her big sister, she responded to the criticism by doubling down about her intentionality and refusing to admit she'd ever erred. Now it was simply what she did, though she mitigated the worst of it for Stacey's plate.

"Look at you, taking over Mom duties. Somebody needs more money for their last day with their little playmates, huh." Stacey waved her fork tauntingly.

"No! I'm good, actually. The guys pretty much pay for anything I want, but they weren't at the salon the other day, so." Stacey thumbs-upped her entrepreneurship around a mouthful of crunchy egg whites. "Actually, I wanted to offer *you* something."

"Oh yeah? You guys have an arts and craft day?" She laughed, then a bit harder. "Oh man, do you remember – well, no, you wouldn't – but back when you were in either kindergarten or first grade, you came home and gave me this macaroni picture you'd made at school of you and me. I told you I loved it, of course, and you asked if I would hang it in my room. Only then we found out it had been a Mother's Day thing they'd had you do, and it was actually supposed to be you and Mom. No slam on baby K's skills or anything. Macaroni art's abstract by nature.

"Anyway yeah, so Mom came in and told me, and asked if she could hang it on the fridge, and you *flipped* your *lid*. Just atomic meltdown level crying that mom would make me take our picture down, like you didn't get that it was only being moved. So it stayed up there, and Dad got you another card to give to her or something. Oh, wow. That was... You used to be pretty cute, you know."

Kira rolled her eyes, because that's what one does to such stories, though inside she was smiling with all her heart. She did not remember any part of that, except that their dad was, as far back as she remembered, a major stickler when it came to them having quality Mother's Day presents. "No, we did not have an arts and craft day. I'm pretty sure they're all in, what do you call it? 4-H, or something. They're seriously pro at making and fixing things. And animals! Though hey, maybe I could see if they could get you a pig, so you won't be alone." She stuck her tongue out.

"Is the pig single? 'Cause, been a lonely week, just sayin'." Stacey was surprised the reply was a blush rather than a grossed-out outburst. After an awkward moment, she went on. "Anyway, I'll stop being a bitch. You said you wanted to give me something, and I put you through story hour and swine fantasies."

“Right. So anyway, I wanted to invite you to come hang out with us tonight. Before you say no, it’s going to be really fun. There’s a quarry, whatever that is, and we’re going diving? So I guess there’s swimming, at least. Everybody’s really excited to meet you. I told you how they got blown away by the ‘cute city girl.’” She preened. “I don’t think they believed me when I told them my sister is even prettier.”

Stacey grinned tightly. “A quarry is like where Fred Flinstone worked. Big hole in the ground, where they got stone from for construction or whatever. And don’t think you can drag me out to join your game of Queen of the Rednecks with a little flattery. Gurl, I know I’m prettier than you.”

“Come on, Stace! It’ll be fun! They’re not bad people. I mean sure, a little rednecky, but they’re still nice. And you and me haven’t done anything together all week!”

“You and I,” Stacey corrected, establishing herself as a suitable subject for karmic reprisals. “And whose fault is it we haven’t hung out?”

“Nobody’s! It’s super boring here. You cannot blame me for not wanting to spend a week watching you read while I soak through my bra with boob sweat.”

“Graphic.”

“Pleeeeeease? I promise it’ll be fun. If it’s not fun, I’ll... do your laundry the rest of the summer.”

“You don’t know how to fold. No.”

“I’ll cook for you?”

It was a joke, but Stacey rebutted anyway, shaking a floppy piece of pinkish bacon at her.

“I’ll be your slave for a week!”

“And what use do you think I have for a slave like you?” Stacey retorted dryly.

“Pleeeeeeease?”

“No! I don’t want to hang out with a bunch of derpy high school kids. I didn’t want to hang out with high school kids when I was in high school, much less now that I’ve escaped.”

“So teach them a little class! Do some philanthropy. You’ll make me look soooo cool, I’ll be soooo grateful. Pleeeeeeease?”

By the time breakfast was over, earnest begging had won the day. Stacey insisted on a defined time window, and that they each be promised rides to and from, independently if needs be.

“Why does ‘if needs be’ sound like code for ‘in case my baby sis decides to thot it up with some dude?’”

“Read it however you want. But if it goes shitty, I’m not walking back here in the dark.”

Kira ran over and gave her sister a hug. “Thank you, Stacey!”

So long as Kira couldn't see it, Stacey smiled a toothy smile. "Don't make me regret it."

There was one factor Kira had counted on to make the night run smoothly. If there was one thing Stacey got off to – other than that lesbian stuff she'd been listening to the other day, that is – it was having people be in awe of her.

Stacey Reeves was used to attention. She was used to impressing. She was used to turning heads, receiving compliments, and being remembered long after an encounter. None of those were the same thing as awe, though. What was awe? Awe was the look on those kids' faces when she strode out of the Kinland liquor store.

"How did you do that?" ask one of the boys, Tommy.

"Do what?" Stacey casually handed out everyone's orders. Each of them had gotten their own bottle, except Kira. It was orders of magnitude too much, but then, they'd made the orders assuming they'd never get it. It had been a wish list, not a grocery list. This city girl didn't even have her driver's license with her, and had told them she didn't turn twenty-one until next year besides. It turned out she must be some kind of genie.

"Seriously, Stacey, how did you do that?" Kira pressed. They'd all watched it happen from the sidewalk across the street. Stacey had walked up to the counter, set half a dozen bottles on it, and after a brief exchange, handed over a wad of cash. She'd even gotten change! If it wasn't a bribe, then what?

"I didn't do anything. I just put the bottles on the counter and told him that was what I wanted."

"He didn't ask for some ID?"

"You give him your number or something?"

"You ain't got a gun on you or nothin'? That wouldn't be fair."

"Not on me. And he did ask for ID. I told him I didn't have any, but I'd appreciate it a bunch if he looked the other way. So he did." She shrugged, as if it were the sort of thing she'd done so often that she'd forgotten mortals needed reasons and permission.

It became a running joke of the evening, "I appreciate it a bunch" any time anyone delivered the slightest favor, especially if it was for Stacey or Kira. Booty in hand, the group swaggered their way down Fourth Street to where it hit the aptly named Quarry Road. The quarry had a ledge about forty feet up looking over still, dark water. It was a proving ground for all, as well as an opportunity for the Reeves to finally get some mileage out of their swimsuits. By turns, they took a shot from their respective bottles, jumped, swam around, walked up the trail, took a shot, and so on.

"I can't believe you got everyone something to drink but me, Stacey," Kira grumbled as the two navigated the gravelly terrain on their way to rejoin the group. Stacey led the way, her tightly sculpted backside creeping out of the frame of her backless swimsuit, tied on with a single pair of strings behind her neck. That ass was waving a little too arrogantly a little too close to Kira's face for her comfort. She was

back in the stripey bikini from her first day in town. She knew it did wonders with her boobs, but it was a rerun. Stacey was new and shiny. “You’re so lame sometimes.”

“I didn’t get you a bottle because you and I aren’t alcoholics, and can share the one bottle,” Stacey countered.

Kira’s eyes lit up. Not one time since that house party years earlier had Stacey ever offered her a drink. “Seriously?”

“Of course, seriously. You think I’m going to let those Dixie chick wannabes upstage the Reeves sisters? Hell no. You and I are the boss bitches, baby K.”

She held out her index finger to do the sizzling *tsssss* finger kiss thing they used to do, but Kira threw herself at her sister, a fierce hug. After a moment, though, she remembered the other day in the art studio, and became very conscious that she was wearing a particularly skimpy bikini, that her breasts were wrapped around Stacey’s arm, that it was the arm that had been maneuvering between her sister’s very bare legs. She let go.

“You OK?” Stacey asked, sensing something off.

“What? No, I stepped on a pebble or something, I think.”

“Maybe I ought to cut you off, then.”

“Gotta catch me first!”

Stacey had bought for herself what she had thought was an amusing, perhaps even condescending, novelty. It was a bottle of tequila. The label read *Vagabundo de Medianoche*, surrounded by a ring of moons in different phases. Stacey’s Spanish wasn’t great, yet she’d been correct that everyone else there mistook the flowing, elegant Spanish as something fancy. They were all of them impressed, Kira included. It had cost \$12 for a fifth of the stuff. Stacey was pretty sure it translated to something like “midnight hobo.” It certainly tasted like bum-grade booze, the sort of swill the frats on DAT’s ban list served to the horse-faced skanks they somehow enticed into their lairs.

Kira, worldly connoisseur, proclaimed that it was the best tequila she’d ever had. Nay, the best alcohol, period. Stacey, meanwhile, had a single shot and snatched the keys to Tommy’s truck right out of his hands when it was getting too dark to continue their fun safely, as if drunken cliff diving had theretofore been a harmless diversion.

Kira proposed that the group retire to the cabin, ideal as it was the only indoor place they knew of that lacked parental oversight and wasn’t a barn. Exacting Kira’s promise that she would clean up before Chelsea returned the following afternoon, and an oath from the rest to treat Chelsea’s pad like it was a holy site, Stacey acquiesced. Kira had known she would. She hadn’t been this drunk on awe even at Chelsea’s wedding, when people had lined up to gush over how amazing she looked even right in front of the other bridesmaids.

These were people used to hunting dogs and mastiffs, so they reacted to Silly and Cherry like feisty pomeranians. Stacey was even impressed when one of the girls

recognized their full names from school. The dogs were in heaven with all the company and attention. The group gathered in the kitchen, an open place with ample seating. Knowing that it would be their last night with these gorgeous extraterrestrial creatures, and being themselves teenagers, it was inevitable that someone propose passing the time with a sexually charged game or two.

They opened with spin the bottle.

“Please, dearest lord in heaven, let Kira land on Stacey,” Bobby muttered with reasonable comedic timing and volume.

Stacey laughed it off like the joke it mostly was, but Kira wilted. She’d been about to spin, but her hand recoiled. “Wait. If I... We don’t have to... No way!”

Stacey poured herself another shot, aiming to catch up with the rest now that one of the boys had agreed to start sobering to play DD later. “Wow, look who’s a homophobe all of the sudden,” she remarked wryly.

“I’m not a homophobe! But... you’re my... You guys!”

“Gonna need a few more prayers, huh Bobby?”

“Let us join hands. Our Father, who art in heaven...”

“Come on now, that’s too far!”

But they were laughing, and the game commenced. It ended only two spins in, neither of them involving the Reeves, when Eliza threw up on her way to James’ lips. True to Kira’s word, the Kinlander comported himself as a gentleman, shedding his shirt over admittedly impressive muscles and escorting her to the bathroom. Meanwhile Kira feverishly scrubbed up the vomit before the dogs could get to it.

“I don’t think I could stomach kissing anybody after seeing that,” someone said.

“Agreed. Two truths and a lie?”

“Naw, that’s no fair, we hardly know them two!” Left unsaid was that now that touching had been greenlit, nobody wanted to revert to games that were merely verbal.

“OK, how about truth or dare, huh? Make things fun!”

They were teenagers. It was truth or dare. They all agreed. All pledged to honor their commitment, hands over hearts like they were reciting the pledge. There was some debate about whether or not it was fair to request that nobody take things “too far,” then some debate over where “too far” began, but no one was willing to tank the game over semantics. As always it was a judgment call, with truths sure to be held to the highest standards, and dares subjected to the mood of the crowd.

One last spin of the bottle determined the first of them to be given the right to demand answers or actions. It landed on Tommy. He peered around the circle, building suspense, before making the inevitable gesture to Stacey.

“Truth or dare.”

Stacey poured herself a tequila shot. “I’m a little rusty, so let’s warm up with a truth. What you got for me, farm boy?”

He stroked his chin, eyes narrowing, using her mild pejorative (which so happened to be accurate in his case) as an excuse to cut deep on the first chance. “It true? You a lezzie?”

Kira’s jaw dropped. “Tommy!”

The ensuing seconds of silence formed a dialogue between Stacey and Kira Reeves, one in many ways deeper and more revelatory than any they had heretofore shared.

Stacey swirled her shot glass, the tension drawing out like a blade. At last, she downed it. “I a lezzie.”

Immediate responses varied from innocent shock to spiritual despair to voyeuristic nosiness. Stacey kept her eyes on Kira, who, during the commotion, stalked over to snatch their tequila bottle from her. She took a pull from it in the corner, her back to her unspoken accuser.

“So you’ve seriously never been even a little interested in guys?” demanded Tommy.

Stacey shook her head, chuckling. “Nope. Why, have you? I’d love to hear what’s supposedly so exciting about them.”

Like that, it was OK again. The spectacle was over, and all reverted to an atmosphere of camaraderie. The circle went on. Stacey soon received a turn, avenging herself on Tommy. At her suggestion, he also took a truth. After a glance to the back of Kira’s head, where she was still pounding tequila in the corner, she calmly asked him if he had a problem with gay people. Everyone watched him closely, so closely that it was obvious they all knew the answer and were on tenterhooks to see if he’d have the guts to say it to her face.

“Not any more,” he answered instead.

Stacey smiled evenly, magnanimously. “Well I appreciate it a bunch.”

The boy laughed, then lifted his shot glass to her. The rest followed suit, raising glasses to avowed homo and reformed homophobe alike. It was a great moment. For some it would become the inspiration for lessons they would years later teach their children about tolerance, this lesbian chick they’d met once who was actually pretty cool. All were inspired. Except Kira, that is, who remained in the corner for another lap around the circuit. She passed her own turn. The others’ truths and dares – banal, typical, unworthy of elaboration here – until it was Avery’s turn.

Avery did not like Kira. She had been thinking about how much she did not like Kira for several days now. The moment she had heard truth or dare was on the table, she had been excited to show Kira that she did not like her. The only reason she had wasted her first turn daring Bobby to eat a whole tablespoon of mayonnaise was because Kira had looked sad, and the optics weren’t yet right. Her second turn, Kira still looked sad, but she sensed the crowd had transitioned from pity to apathy.

“Kira.”

The younger Reeves’ head was elsewhere, several nights earlier when she’d opened her idiot mouth and told them what she had known, known in her heart, was none of their business. Kira had only brought it up because she’d witnessed that scene in the art studio and couldn’t get it out of her head. She’d had to tell *someone*. After outing Stacey, there had been some teasing, suggestions that she was afraid to go back and get incested by her gay dyke sister, but Kira smashed that down hard.

“*Don’t talk about her like that. She’s my sister, and I love her.*” She had been proud of that response, though her pride was inadequate to mask her shame. Had she only told them to get that feeling back, to retrieve her uplifting sense of guardianship and revoke... whatever that other feeling was?

“*Ooooooh, you love her?*” crowed someone, predictably, but others had seen that a mistake had been made, and they were about to cross a line they had never been meant to toe. They shifted topics, and let it stay buried. At least until Tommy had needed to know if he ought to waste his time trying to fuck Stacey before the night was out.

The truth had left a bad taste in Kira’s mouth. So she answered Avery, “Dare.”

“Kiss her,” the girl ordered.

“Who, Stacey?” Kira gaped. “She’s my sister. No. No way, that’s freaking gross.”

“You said dare,” Avery countered. A strong argument.

“No. I’ll kiss anyone else. I’ll kiss the dogs, if you want. But I’m not doing that.”

Laughter, some of it jeering, cut in. “Sounds like somebody still hasn’t prayed hard enough...”

“Prayer circle, prayer circle!”

“This always happens when we play this, somebody chickens out and ruins it.”

“Dooo it. Dooo it. Dooo it. Dooo it.”

“What about,” interjected Bobby, gently guiding Kira back toward the circle, “if we scaled it down a smidge. Like...” He looked around, then grabbed her bottle. “She kisses one side, and you t’other. Just, do it like the bottle weren’t there. Yeah? How’s that? No touching.”

After seeing that Kira was still dreading it, perhaps still ready to ruin the game and shred her iconic status, Avery agreed that would satisfy her. Kira looked to Stacey for support, but her sister’s face was a blank slate. At least, until she saw Kira was preparing to yield.

“We’ll do it,” Stacey announced. “Give us a sec.”

“What? There’s no ‘sec,’” Avery complained.

“Do you want us to look good doing it, or do you want to see us—” Stacey made an ugly face, lips in a rictus snarl, “—against a bottle?”

As the boys loudly affirmed their preference, squashing Avery’s protests, Stacey dragged her sister by the arm out of the kitchen and down the hallway, out of earshot if

they kept their voices low. Cherry trotted after, hopeful that it meant they were going to bed at last.

“Kira, I’m not mad.”

That was all it took for the tears to start. “Well you should be!”

“It’s OK. I’m OK with who I am, and I don’t care if these people who I’ll never see again after tonight are OK with it or not. With the kind of job I’ll get through the DAT network I’ll be able to buy and sell their whole shitty town. But what I can’t do is watch my sister get bullied by some hick bitch. What’d you do, hook up with the guy she likes?”

Kira shook her head, which after all she’d had to drink, made her more than a little dizzy. “No. I actually turned down the guy she likes, which I think pissed her off even more.”

Stacey grinned. “And you want a petty bitch like that to get one over on you? You want to leave here letting them think she drove you out of town?”

“Well, no, but—”

“But nothing. Kiss the bottle. Think of it like some dude’s cock, if that sweetens the deal for you, somehow.”

“Why would that sweeten—”

“Listen here. I *know* you’re not ashamed of me. I know you’re not Mom. I know you love me. Now do you want them to know it, or do you want to let this dumb girl put that doubt in you?”

Kira nodded. The pep talk was working. Or she’d drunk so much that her judgment had gone to rot. “All right. Let’s do it.”

“Let’s give that bottle the night of its life. Dry your eyes, baby K.” The sizzling finger kiss landed this time. Then Stacey blew a bright pink kiss, caught it herself, and mimed it dragging her back into the room. Considering how much she’d had to drink, it was an impressively choreographed bit, and an adequate distraction while Kira dried her eyes.

The Reeves girls re-entered the room side by side, all heads turned their direction. Suddenly Stacey’s hand was on her ass. Firmly. Why did she have to...?! Kira fought down panic. Avery smugly swaggered over, holding the tequila bottle aloft. “All right. Since y’all’re using the bottle, though, ya have to do it for a whole minute or it don’t count. Yeah?”

“No problem,” Stacey declared, her hand slipping away as she moved to her side, opposite Kira. It left one side of her butt warmer than the other.

“Only one?” Kira channeled Stacey’s confidence, finding none of her own.

Tommy organized a countdown, and Bobby held up his phone, stopwatch function at the ready. Eliza and James had returned from the bathroom, looking as excited as anyone for the spectacle.

“Three! Two! One!” It ended in a different word for everyone – Go! Kiss! Do it! – but the will was the same. Spectacle at its finest. Outsiders, sexy ones, sisters, at least one of them a lesbian, proving it for the roar of the Kinland crowd. The Reeves sisters stepped together, and pressed their lips to each side of the bottle.

It's cold. That was Kira's first thought as the assembly roared in excitement in a way that only a crowd of teenagers watching an idiotically contrived sexual display can. Stacey's breath, though, that was warm. Then she realized her sister's eyes were closed, and figured, sluggishly, that she should do the same. You didn't kiss with your eyes open, no matter who it was. *No matter.*

Then there was only sensation. Someone – it must be Stacey – seized the bottle from the spiteful country girl holding it. *Yeah. Can't be bullied.* Stacey's breath tasted like that vile tequila she'd pretended to like. But it was warm, still warmer than the chilly bottle. She grasped for the bottle, her hand closing over her sister's.

“That's not kissing! They're just standing there!” someone yelled, and the displeasure of the crowd was expressed in jeers and boos. Stacey stepped closer. Kira stepped closer. *We're so close.* Their breasts touched, even. Both were still wearing their swimwear from the quarry, each merely having added a pair of shorts for decency. Her breasts were touching Stacey's breasts.

Was this gay? What was this?

But the crowd was still riled, and she thought she heard someone announce that the clock had stopped. Though Kira would never know it, Stacey peeked, ready to follow her sister's lead if she bowed out, readying her rhetorical skills to spin this mounting insult to Reeves' dignity into a different fight. One she could win.

Win. Kira's lips glided around the neck of the bottle. She was wearing Stacey's lipstick, that same pink, and it smeared its way across the green glass until she found the woman on the other side.

Those lips weren't warm. *They're fire.* Fire that burned all the dinosaurs to death to pave the way for pushy lesbian sorority babes and their sweet but indecisive buxom coed sisters.

Stacey's tongue was even hotter, Kira discovered as she slithered her inside. Instinct was taking over. *Hotter.* Together they lowered the bottle through the slight friction of their intertwined tongues; some unseen looker-on relieved them of it. It gave Kira back her hands, hands which clenched the back of Stacey's head – *her hair. Feels just like mine* – and held her there until she could have wept with joy to find she didn't shrink away.

She kissed back.

What do they feel like? Kira wondered. *Too far? No. She likes girls. Hot girls. I'm a hot girl. Can't be bullied. I'll show them.*

Stacey's breasts were... slippery, actually, in the slick fabric of her swimsuit. But they were soft. Pleasingly, yieldingly, wonderfully soft. This was too much though, way too much – only then there were two hands gripping her ass, pressing her whole body to Stacey's, clinging to her. *She loves me.* They slipped inside her shorts almost immediately. Kira's bikini briefs sank into her crack from Stacey's aggressive fondling in a flash. Hands, on her bare skin. Soft, delicate woman's hands. *Not how I thought at all.*

Though she'd thought she'd never be able to taste anything but that hateful tequila ever again, she was discovering that Stacey's lips, her tongue, had a taste all their own. More tequila, yes, but something else. Something a little bit salty, and a little floral. *Nectar. That's what's in flowers. Ms. Gobuzzi said it feeds the world.* She lapped up more of it, sucking that tongue into her mouth to drink down all she could.

It was then her hand discovered, quite on its own, a way to get inside Stacey's swimsuit. Had she thought her lips were fire? *Burns. Burn me melt me drink the melt.* If her lips were fire, then her tits were the molten core of the sun, beaming down skin cancer by the thousands solely for Staceys and Kiras to feel justified stripping down to these skimpy spandex sheaths to cool off. *Show off.* Stacey whimpered with surprise, or excitement, or both, as Kira squeezed down too hard. Was that a nipple? Was that little tough bump her nipple? The hand still in Stacey's hair became a fist, refusing to let her escape.

Was this what being a lesbian felt like? Was this what Stacey had turned her back on for those fleeting minutes after Troy Bogen's accusation? Was this what had made Carrie forsake her place on the social ladder to endure ridicule and scorn?

Could this be what she'd been looking for when she was left wiping some boy's cum off her wrist and wondering why she didn't feel the same?

"Um, that's time."

Her eyes opened, and Kira was back in the room. She stumbled back from a wide-eyed Stacey. Tugged her shorts back up, dragged her bottoms out of her butt. Around them, the group of Kinlanders stared in utter shock. She didn't think their eyes would be bigger if the Reeves sisters sprouted wings. Or horns.

"Thanks a bunch," mumbled Tommy.

"GET OUT!" Kira sprinted. Only, she forgot that when one sprints, especially in confined spaces, that one must sprint *somewhere*. She hadn't picked a somewhere, so she just sort of collided with the fridge. Chelsea's save the date magnet for her wedding held on fine, but others, chip clips and a bottle opener and strange little anthropomorphized fish, were less lucky, clattering to the tile floor. Then Kira remembered the door, and sprinted for that. The dogs trailed after, dashing excitedly around her as she stumbled through dark woods, no real sense of direction except downward, the lake was downward, not stopping until she reached the foot of the little boat launch on the reservoir hundreds of feet below. Silly flew right past her, leaping

clumsily into the water. Cherry recognized the water for what it was, stopping short and eyeing Kira anxiously as she Kira curled up in the cold dirt beside the dock in the tiniest ball she could manage and screamed until she could only sob.

It had been so hot that whole week that she had forgotten it could be cold. Lying on the wood of the dock, Kira shivered in the grip of what ought to have been a soothing breeze coming in from over the water. That moment, that whatever it was that had just happened, was a vortex at the center of her mind. All of her thoughts swirled around it, were swept up in its current, dragged down into the depths and crushed. Cherry nestled in behind her as she trembled. By the time Stacey found them, Silly had joined them, his sleek fur already mostly dry.

“So I guess we ought to talk, huh,” said Stacey’s voice, looming over her.

“Are they gone?” Kira asked into her knees.

“They’re gone.”

“Satisfied?”

“I don’t know if they left satisfied, but I don’t think anyone could say you didn’t honor—”

Kira looked up. Her voice hurt, was hoarse, but she refused to let that silence her. “Not them. You.”

“Me? Am I satisfied? With what?”

“You made me do that stupid bet! What the hell is the matter with you?!”

Stacey, who had been about to sit down and try a tender approach, instead took a step back. “Me? Hey now, I just wanted you to stop moping. To take a little pride in yourself in front of the locals.”

“Why should I care about what ‘the locals’ think? You said yourself they’re just a bunch of hicks I’m never gonna see again. But no, I’m an idiot, and I listened to you! And I—!” The words stuck in her throat. “And we—!” Again. “And you—” That was easier. “You made me feel bad for you so I’d... do that!”

“I made *you* feel bad for *me*. You’re the one who gets off telling everybody who’ll listen about your creepy lesbian sister. But I’m not allowed to have feelings about that? Hey, why don’t I go tell all my friends about...” She shook her head. “No. You know what, I’m not going to compare your stupid little crap to my orientation, because your shit is petty, and nobody would even care if I told them. But you can’t understand that because you’ve never met the guy you weren’t ready to prove how un-gay you are!”

Then Kira was sitting up. Incrementalism was not the way to go in a shouting match, so she kept going on up to her feet. Her balance was still weak, but fear of falling and hurting one of the dogs kept her steady.

“Right, because liking guys couldn’t be natural, right? Has to be me proving myself! Gee, I wonder where the whole human race comes from? Could it be from boys and girls doing it? I dunno! Let’s try having everybody lez up see how it works!”

Stacey's nostrils flared with each breath, but she allowed a few before responding, lest she take the bait. "Kira, you're drunk, and I'm a little less drunk, so I'm going to let whatever that dickhead bullshit was slide. Honestly, I don't think *me* being gay is the issue we need to be discussing right now."

Kira tried to shove her, but Stacey never had quite caught up, and dodged it with grace left over to help keep her from falling. "Are you saying *I'm* a gay?!" She'd meant to say "a lesbian" or "gay" but combined the two. Once more Stacey let it slide, but it was getting harder, accident or no.

"I'm not saying anything. But you just rammed your tongue down my throat and felt me up like no woman ever has. That was real, real intense for a stupid dare. And I think you owe it to yourself to talk about it. And who better to—"

"I'm not like you!" Kira shouted.

Stacey folded her arms and regarded the dirt-smearred, tear-stained girl with a cluster of leaves sticking to her hair with all her condescension. "I can see that."

"If I got carried away, it's because I'm drunk. What's your excuse, huh?!"

Stacey planted her hands on her hips. "You haven't had that much more than me. I've been watching you. Don't want a repeat of that party when you were in middle school."

"I was in high school!"

"You hadn't started yet. It was the summer before."

"Oh, my god, fine! You're right! Because the beautiful, brilliant Stacey could never POSSIBLY be wrong! You win! I was in fucking *middle school*, OK?!"

"It's OK to say you liked it, Kira."

Kira's stomach turned. "To say I liked what? That party? Because your stupid party sucked even worse than tonight's! And tonight was the worst party ever!"

"It's OK to say you liked kissing me. Touching me." Stacey took a step closer. "I liked kissing you."

Kira stumbled back like her sister had lashed out with a cudgel, her bare feet thumping onto the wooden dock. "You liked kissing your own sister? Holy shit, I knew you were fucked up, but I didn't know you were a total freak!" *Fire.*

"I won't judge you. Just be honest with yourself. Damn, Kira, that's the best thing about being drunk is that you can blurt out crap you're not normally supposed to say. I'm still processing myself, so who knows, I might even let you pretend you don't mean it tomorrow."

"Well I hope you rolled a few kegs down here with you." She dragged her forearm across her mouth to wipe away Stacey's lipstick. Their lipstick. Pink. *Lips.* "No. If this whole lake were tequila and I drank the whole thing, and they refilled it and—"

Stacey held up a hand. "I get it. You're in denial."

“Denial? Denying what? That my sister grabbed my ass? That she tricked me into making out with her? What are you, like, you think you’re Dr. Rivers, like you can *spwish, squish* make some noise and I’ll just wake up and be whoever you think I’m supposed to be? Well that sure as shit didn’t work for Mom, so good luck!”

“I think you’re beautiful, Kira.” Stacey took another step. Kira backed off, but then it was simply one Reeves pursuing the other as they moved further down the dock. The dogs, confused, waited on the shore.

“I know I’m hot, I don’t need you to—”

“I think you’re sexy. Sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Shut up. Don’t say that. You can’t say—”

“And I don’t know why tonight happened, and I don’t care. Maybe you’re right and I pushed you too hard. Maybe it was selfish, or ulterior motives, or... I don’t know. I don’t think I...” She shook her head. “But I don’t care. I loved the feel of your lips.”

“Shut UP!”

“You’re a crap liar even sober, baby K. I know you liked it. I *felt* you like it. I felt the heat between your legs when you touched me, and I want you to know I was every bit as hot as you.”

“This isn’t happening. You’re messed up, Stacey. Like so, *royally* messed up.”

The two were nearing the end of the dock, dark water stretching out for half a mile beyond. “There’s nothing wrong with those feelings.”

“You’re my *sister*.”

Stacey lifted her hair and undid the tie behind her neck. Her swimsuit jerked down, baring her chest so suddenly Kira simply stared, trying to make sense of it, to navigate around that vortex. “So? What, are we gonna knock each other up and have a bunch of inbred babies like those dickheads up there? How’s your sperm count?”

Kira commanded her eyes back up to her sisters. “You’re a freak, Stacey! A *FREAK!*”

Kira was at the very end. Nowhere to go. (The prohibition against swimming, somehow, was a social more to which she had retained unswerving fealty.) She felt a hand seize the waistband of her shorts, pull her a step toward safety. And imminent danger. Stacey was inches away, and drawing closer.

“So,” she said, no bottle to deny her the warmth of that breath this time, “let’s get freaky.”

Their lips met again.

No force short of divine intervention could make Kira admit that she had kissed Stacey this time. Their lips had not been touching, then they were, and not even retelling a retelling could permit a rendition in which she had any part of it.

It was only that she had no part of it for such a very long time. That when Stacey at last lowered her gently to the dock and followed her down, she put up so little

resistance. That when Stacey's hand slipped inside those bikini bottoms, this time from the front – and where had her shorts gone? – the noises she made could be so easily misinterpreted as pleasure. That when Stacey's mouth took the place of her fingers, even Kira couldn't have denied how very satisfied she sounded.

It was only that when she gushed her pleasure onto her sister's wet, pink lips, her eyes slid open to marvel, with a dazed grin, and wonder whether those were the stars or some fresh devilry set in motion to destroy her.

The remainder of the story was history. By the time a weeping, shaking Kira Reeves relayed her conclusions of the evening – that her big sister had gotten her drunk and used a dare in a stupid game to molest her – he could hear Stacey’s voice concluding her rendition – that her little sis was every bit the creep that she was, but her mind too narrow to permit it. The alcohol had not robbed either of them of their memories of the night’s events, but it had given both plenty of leeway in which to rearrange and invent details to support the conclusion each needed to make.

After waking up in the pre-dawn light in her sister’s arms, Kira never did find her clothes from the night before. Eventually they became part of a mass of mud and sticks clogging a drain in the reservoir. Some years into his employment there, Tommy dislodged the mass, and for the briefest of moments before they were sucked into his machine, he wondered if he had seen anything at all.

As Kira told it, she hurried up to the cabin before someone could stumble upon her nakedness. There she took a shower and curled up in that chair in the art studio, too dazed to think to scratch at the many fresh mosquito bites she’d received during her night of exposure. Thank god the dogs had stayed close through the night; elated to be home, they settled across from her in a pile. The three watched Stacey, her clothes intact, make her way up the trail some time later. The dogs ran out to flail at her, leaving Kira to wait for her big sister to shower and dress as well.

There was no playfully warning her not to take forever, this time.

It was the nonchalant way Stacey called out a jibe at her for not making breakfast that pushed her from self-loathing into sister-loathing. She accused Stacey of abusing her, recounting the entire night to her in what Martin believed to be very much the manner in which he was told the story. To Kira, it had been a series of maneuvers, deceptions, betrayals and abuses connived by Stacey to take advantage of a confused girl. And perhaps it had been.

The sun would be coming up over the Lakeview campus soon. Word vomit was better than actual vomit, considering how much the girl had told Martin she’d had to drink, but even so he was far too tired to hear her tell the part of the story where she told the story she’d just told him to Stacey. He interceded and forestalled it deftly.

In her story, Stacey, unlike Martin, listened to this distortion of the evening without interruption. When Kira at last shouted for her to say something, anything, to justify what she had done, Stacey merely shook her head and said, “If that’s what you have to tell yourself. And Troy Bogen.” She let out a soul-weary sigh. “Then fine. I’ll be the monster.”

That triggered fresh hysterics, but there was only so long you could shriek at someone while they calmly went about tidying up the house. Kira finally gave up dogging her for an apology, a confession, even a simple acknowledgment and started in on the kitchen. She started with that bottle of Vagabundo de Medianoche, dumping it in

the bottom of the trash bag and burying it beneath every other trace of the night she could find.

By the time Chelsea and her husband arrived that afternoon, overjoyed to greet dogs and Reeves alike, the two had spoken only twice more. Once when Kira forgot she didn't ever want to talk to Stacey again for any reason and said "excuse me" when they had to squeeze past one another in the laundry room. The other during the long, post-cleaning wait, when she issued an ultimatum that so long as Stacey never brought it up again, she wouldn't tell their parents. Stacey snorted, shrugged, and told her she could tell anyone she wanted. "It's what you're best at, right?" Kira pressed, and finally received an irritated, "Fine, don't worry, I won't tell anyone I made you come harder than anybody ever has or will."

It was as good as she would ever get. She let it drop.

The first Lakeview campus bus didn't come until 7, so Martin offered to buy her breakfast at the nearby Denny's to kill time, anything to escape the emotional fallout zone that his office had become last night. He was loath to use his Sherri money without need, but all she wound up ordering was a coffee. He had a water. No lemon. A 10% tip on the coffee.

Finally, as the two waited at the bus stop, he made his first attempt at a reply. "That was very brave, sharing that with me last night. I want you to know I'm grateful." He felt stupid saying it, such a trite sentiment in the face so monumentous a tale. It was what google said you were supposed to respond with when someone dumped their gigantic problems in your lap, though, as he'd learned while she left the table to pee.

"Mm," she replied, trying her best to tug her green dress lower. Looser, really, but lower would do. She was glad he had loaned her his coat, at least. He really was such a nice man.

The bus was coming, though its appearance made it feel closer than it really was. It was a long road, and it could be seen coming from a long way off.

"Stacey really never told you any of that?" she asked, watching its approach.

Like Kira in front of Troy Bogen, his awkward delay before sputtering the usual line about confidentiality spoke volumes.

"God. I can't believe she wouldn't talk to her therapist about *that*. I swear, sometimes I feel like there's some kind of hole inside her. Something missing. I just hope she fills it someday. Gets a dog, or something." She shook her head. "Well now that I told you, you can't tell her, right?"

"Never. Not a word. Trust me."

"I do, Professor Manning. I do. But I know if it were me, I'd have a really hard time sitting across from someone who had done something like that and not letting it show. I'd... scream. Or cry."

"You'd cry."

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” She sniffled. “I’m sorry to dump all that on you, but you were right. It does feel better that someone else knows. But scary, too. Like... I dunno. Like you knew her before you knew me, so like, what if you... took her side, or whatever. I know you wouldn’t. I mean, who could. But still. It’s a raw nerve, I guess you could say.”

“I won’t take her side, I promise,” replied Martin, who would in about two hours receive a text reading *well? when do I get that offer Mesmer? Can’t wait to see her cum her brains out for us again. happy Friday*

The bus was close now. They stood, and Kira turned to give her therapist a long, tight squeeze. “This has been a weeeeird night, Professor Manning. But thank you. Not the birthday present I thought I needed right now, but the birthday present I deserved.” She giggled, and slowly let him go. “And, um, about that other thing we talked about, um...”

“It’s fine, Kira. Try not to think about it. We’ll talk again soon. Be good to yourself this weekend, and text me if you need me.”

“I will. I mean I hope I won’t, but... oh, you get me. You always get me.”

She returned his coat and boarded the bus, her golden zipper gleaming in the morning sun. Martin walked back to the Manning Mental Wellness Clinic, sent an email to his students canceling classes for the day for a health emergency, lay down on his couch, and cried.

If there could be ambiguity in an ordeal such as that which transpired between Stacey and Kira Reeves, surely there could be some in the tears of a simple stage hypnotist. Objectively, even in retelling, there was no certainty to them. Was he a man crying in self-pity for having wedded himself to a monster? Or a man on a mission, despairing at the weight of the obstacle he would yet need to overcome?

Perhaps, Kira might reply, in a retelling of their story, one set in some very different world in which it were she hearing him unburden himself of his troubles to her instead of the reverse, he was simply tuckered out. She would lull him to sleep, tell him he was a nice man, and he would awaken to the scent of crispy eggs and soggy bacon.