

now
it's strike three

Even when I'm only stepping from my bed to the closet, my dog trails me like a detective on a stakeout. I pull on a black turtleneck. "Lie down, baby. Go to sleep. You're not coming with me."

Barney wags his tail so half-hearted you might think a breeze blew it – if not for the fact it's thirty-five degrees and pitch black outside, and the house is locked up tight. My dog is the only one who senses I'm up to no good.

"You're all right," I tell him, stroking his head, but he's not fooled easy. He's smart. That's why Dad picked him. *Labs make great bird dogs*, Dad said last Christmas Eve as my new baby Barney trotted around the foyer with that giant red bow around his neck. *We'll go pheasant hunting*, he insisted, and he smiled at me and mussed up my hair, knowing I'd feel terrible about killing some poor bird. But he also knew I couldn't resist a challenge. *Every girl should learn to shoot. How about we take him Up North next fall for his first hunt?*

It's late fall now, feels like winter but it's fall. And there won't be any hunting – at least not for pheasants. Soon there won't be any Barney. Already there's no Dad.

I open my bedroom door with Barney's nose at my hip. It's pointless to tell him to stay, so me and my shadow go to the hall closet where I slide a bar of soap in my pocket. Then we head down the stairs, and Barney's tippy-toeing behind me instead of clopping ahead like normal. Like he's my bodyguard sticking tight. I know he's thinking if he follows close enough he can slip right out the front door when I go, but it won't happen.

Mom's at the kitchen table in her sweats and glasses, writing on a notepad, probably redoing our household budget for the fiftieth time. Probably tomorrow morning we'll have another family meeting where she talks at me and Bobby and Mike, and we do nothing but listen whether we like it or not.

To think I used to be sneaky about taking stuff, nervous Mom actually might notice. Now I just open the fridge, pop the Styrofoam egg container, pick out an egg, roll it in the bottom of

my shirt and hold it there with one hand. With the other hand I snap open the lid of the honey ham, peel out a slice and toss it. Barney catches it mid-air and swallows without chewing.

“Danielle,” Mom says without looking, “I’ve said it a million times. Barney is to eat nothing but his own food, or he’ll get fat and sick. Not to mention I can’t afford him eating our lunch meat.” Now she glances up as I’m walking past. I’m not even worried she’ll notice my hand pressing the egg against my belly under my shirt. “Did you hear me?”

“Yup.” I keep moving.

“What did I say?”

“No ham for the dog.” I love it when I prove her wrong.

My little brother Bobby is watching TV in the family room two steps down from the kitchen. He swings a look at me.

“I’m going to Justine’s house,” I say over my shoulder to Mom.

“Be home by ten.”

“I’m coming,” Bobby shouts, and he’s up and flicking off the TV and running ahead of me before I can answer.

“No you’re not.” I follow him down the hall to the front closet. Barney’s toenails click on the stone foyer floor. I slide the egg into the pocket of my coat before I pull it off the hanger.

I can barely hear Mom’s mumbling whine, but no problem; I know it by heart: “Please can’t you two find a way to get along.” Question as statement.

Bobby’s got one arm in his coat. I grab the empty sleeve and yank him toward me. “What are you doing?” I whisper. “I’m not taking you with me.”

“Yes you are.” He’s whispering too. “I know what you’ve been doing to Creeper. Either take me, or I’m telling Mom.”

He smirks the tiniest bit, and I want to smack him. How’d he figure out it was me? He slides his coat on all the way, holding my gaze. Barney nudges my hand with his head to break the tension. I rub his ears.

“Fine. Just don’t get mad at me if you get caught. We ran from the cops last week.”

“So? I’m not a scaredy cat.”

I laugh. “Yeah, right.” I close my eyes and put a finger on each side of my forehead. “I’m thinking of a cabin at the lake...”

I squint through one eye, and he's flashing mad. "We're in a rowboat and it's starting to storm..."

"Shut up!" he says. So much for keeping his voice down.

"Knock it off, Dani!" Mom shouts at me.

I keep whispering. "I start the motor, but you blubber like a baby, because..." I sniffle and quiver my lips in a fake cry, "because Mommy doesn't let us use the motor..."

Bobby lunges and shoves me. I stumble but keep on. "So I shut it off and explain to you it's the only way..."

"I hate you, Dani!"

I open my eyes and look him straight in the face. "Only now I can't get the motor started again, and we have to drift into rocks until someone rescues us."

"I was just doing what Mom said!"

Mom shoots around the corner still holding her paper and pencil. "Dani, stop your teasing right now. I'm tired of you picking fights."

I walk out the front door into frigid air, pulling on my coat, Bobby tagging behind. I turn my back to the cold to zip up and there's Barney, in the center of the foyer, sitting all still and straight and majestic to say, *I'll be good if you take me with you, I promise...* Bobby slams the door.

I walk briskly down the driveway, slipping on my gloves, hoping Bobby'll have trouble keeping up. He's four years younger – a fifth grader, for God's sake – so he'll be a ball and chain tonight. I need to crank up the fear, which shouldn't be tough. "Last week, we got shot at. With a shotgun."

"I don't care."

"Even Derek's too scared to do it anymore, he's staying home tonight."

It's all true.

"So?" Bobby says, but his voice is cracking.

I give up. "Fine. But I better not see any baby stuff from you."

When we reach the trail at the edge of the woods, Todd's already there smoking. He flicks his cigarette to the ground, making a face like he just swallowed a bug. "Are you kidding me?" he says.

Bobby's in front of me, his ear stuck outside of his wool cap, like an elf's. "No big deal," I say, fighting the urge to yank his cap down to his shoulders. "Let's just go."

It's a quiet walk to Creeper's house except for our scuffling steps and off-beat breaths puffing white steam.

I ask Todd, "You're not going to spray-paint this time, are you?"

"Nah."

I'm surprised Todd's not bailing since Bobby's here, although I should be more shocked we ever started hanging out at all – not to mention our moment huddling together in the bushes last week, hiding from the cops. Note to self: Quit trying to figure out Todd.

Nobody's home at Creeper's, just like the first time. No lights are on inside, and the yard is a creepy quilt of black shadows and dim gray moonlight. I reach in my pockets and shove my supplies at Bobby. "You wanted to come so bad. You do it. Get behind those big bushes. Soap first, then toss the egg."

He runs through darkness to the front picture window. I squat behind a shrub next to Todd. Bobby's soaping arm swoops across the glass like he's signing the Declaration of Independence, and I'm wishing those scribbles really did mean something – like justice being done. Back when we started I thought I'd feel satisfied getting Creeper.

I don't feel anything anymore, not even fear.

After a minute, Bobby turns and whispers, "Come help."

Todd just stares, so I say, "I don't have any stuff. Finish and we'll go."

A bedroom light comes on. Bobby's head spins toward me.

"Run!" I shout.

"Throw your egg!" Todd says, standing.

Bobby's head swivels back to the half-soaped picture window, over to the lighted bedroom and back to me.

"The egg!" Todd says, darting into the open. "I'm throwing mine! One, two . . ."

I say, "Run!" But it's drowned out by Todd's "three!"

They both fire. The window shatters.

Glass implodes. A thousand cracks shriek, spewing a million glass pieces. The sound hurts.

Todd bursts toward the woods like a deer after a shotgun blast. The piercing noise triggers my rockets too. But I run to Bobby.

His feet are cemented. His arms flail around. “I threw the soap! Ohmygod! Ohmygod! I threw the soap!”

I grab his coat collar and yank him loose. He twirls like a puppet to face me.

“I said RUN!” I shove him toward the driveway and the shadowy cover of the willow tree. I don’t follow. I watch him stumble-run, like a ventriloquist’s dummy with rubbery legs. He disappears.

I wait.

Every form of broken glass covers five feet of ground in front of me. Glass chunks, glass pebbles, glass dust, all glint in streaks of moonlight like stolen treasure, drawing my attention away from the black hole punched in Creeper’s house. Until a shimmery white window drape billows out of the hole. It looks like a ship’s sail rippling in the breeze.

I want to crawl aboard and sail away. I should run. But I won’t.

The front door rattles open. “You rotten punk!” Creeper rushes out and scrambles down the small front landing. I avoid looking at him. I stare instead at splotches of dark blue paint he used to cover the red spray-painted obscenities Todd sprawled all over the front of his light blue house the last time we were here.

Creeper squeezes my arm tight enough to cut off blood to my hand. I smell cigarettes and beer. “The cops are on their way.” His pant legs are shoved inside his boots, which aren’t tied.

“I know.”

“You’re in big trouble now, just wait.”

“Yeah.”

I’ve been in trouble for a while. Drifting toward the rocks in a tiny boat on a stormy lake with no idea how to get back home.