**Chapter One**

“They laugh at me because I’m different.

I laugh at them because they’re all the same.”

- Kurt Cobain

**FRAN**

Nikki flies out of the girls’ locker room, barely able to contain herself with what she’s heard on the soccer field. She heads to me like a homing pigeon, all long legs and flying wet hair, a stretched-out version of her kindergarten self with boobs. Normally she dishes out gossip as she drives me home. We stop for fries if we have money. She drives and we dissect the day, speculating about who is pregnant, who got accepted to what college, and who is a first degree burnout destined for jail. What I don’t know is that this time the rumors are about me. They’re true and terrifying and are going to change my life.

Nikki and I have been best friends since kindergarten when she sidled up to me at playtime with her arms crossed, sniffing at the babyish scene. Her thick brown hair was braided, tied with matching red bows. “See that kid over there?” She pointed to a boy with a suspiciously bulging nostril. “He has a Lego stuffed up his nose.”

 I’d already spotted a tiny girl carefully licking her fingers at the craft table. “That red-haired girl is eating glue.” Nikki didn’t care that my sweater was threadbare and missing two buttons or that my hair was a nest of snarls. A friendship sparked and grew. I basked in the glow of her unclouded family life, gobbled the square meals she took for granted. I was her willing audience, the person along for the crazy, adrenalin fueled rocket of Nikki’s life. She can’t wait for anything, ever. I am always the first to know.

In fourth grade Nikki marched right out of Mrs. Lainley’s class, down the hall into my classroom. “Kyle Parder peed his pants. It went all over the floor and touched Lisa Steeney’s shoe.” She hugged herself in delight, waiting dramatically to unveil the deliciously disgusting finale. “She barfed.” After a mighty bear hug, she whispered, “I won’t see you at recess. I’m going to get busted for leaving the class. You’re my bestie forever.” We linked pinkies and said our solemn goodbyes.

It’s senior year and no, she hasn’t changed all that much.

She’s perfect.

 Sure enough, when she reaches the bench where I always wait for her after yearbook, Nikki blurts, “Someone nominated you for prom queen 1993.” The last three words are very dramatic, as if it’s the name of a Broadway show: Prom Queen 1993. It would be totally funny, this dramatic delivery with me sitting on the bench and her dripping wet from a hasty shower. Aberdeen School is behind us, as grey and dismal as the cloudy late spring day. But nothing about it is the slightest bit amusing because she’s talking about me.

 “Totally hilarious. Not.” I hoist my backpack as we head to the senior lot. Every day after soccer and yearbook she gives me a ride home. It’s always the best part of my day.

 “Totally true. Totally funny and by the way, like totally freaking awesome.”

 I study her face as we walk to her car. “WTF? You serious?”

 She nods. “As a heart attack.” This part she sings. “They posted the announcement right after third period. Taylor Davis was a mess at practice. Going on and on about how you don’t even care and she does and how it’s not fair. I automatically love anything that pisses her off.”

 I’m not listening. I’m too busy working myself into grade A panic attack. My palms sweat, my heart flips. I have survived high school like a barnacle clinging to the edge of a deepwater reef, hunkering down. People could and will talk. When you’re popular, like Taylor, you don’t mind because most of it is sheer jealousy. In my case, it’s poisonous darts aimed at my exposed hide. Nikki, with her epically normal family, of course, doesn’t get this. “Why would someone nominate me?”

 She frowns, balancing on me to take a rock out of her fancy Nike slide. “Um, because you’re like freaking awesome?”

 Right. There is a small fringe minority that when pushed, might call me, at very best, nice. But the majority of the school actively despises me. As in, if burning at the stake were still a thing, they’d whip out their Zippos. “Nikki, they’re doing it because I’m gay and they think it’s funny. It’s like nominating a whale for mayor.”

 She sighs. “Another really good idea. Who cares, just do it!”

 Nikki is this horrible living, breathing Nike ad. She never dwells on the negative because an obstacle is something she effortlessly sails over or dies trying, bashing her head against it like a deranged water buffalo until she finds another goal. When I was first slapped with the word “gay,”she didn’t let me moan or complain or feel sorry for myself unless we were otherwise occupied in something she deemed positive, like doodling mustaches on fashion magazine models or having a two-person MTV dance-a-thon in her living room. Although it’s seriously irritating, she’s my lifeline. She’s the Ernie to my Bert, the Charlie Brown to my Lucy. Nikki’s parents are people who protest, people who believe in causes; people who think their opinions matter. Nikki inherited their oppressively optimistic genes. I don’t even want to think about what I’ve inherited.

 “Taylor thinks prom queen is hers, signed sealed and delivered.” We reach the student parking lot. Fat raindrops flop onto the pavement. On the Washington coast, we don’t have weather. We have rain. “She’ll kill me.”

Nikki rakes through her backpack for the car keys. “Not if we kill her first.”

“Now you’re just scaring me.”

 “Which is exactly why you need to run.” She struggles with the car lock. If all the rust in the world suddenly vanished, Nikki’s mom’s Volvo would collapse. “If there ever was someone who needed an opponent, it’s like Taylor Freaking Davis. Who says she has to win?”

 She’s a little too thrilled about this. Also, she has her own reasons for hating Taylor Davis. “Is this about you and Taylor on the soccer field?” *Or Paul?*

 “No,” she says a little too quickly, followed by, “Although it was a brilliant idea.” *It’s about Paul.* “Look, I know you think this is about me and Taylor.”  *Um, no, I think it’s about Paul.* “But who says you don’t have a right to this thing?’

 *God help me she has that look.* “Taylor Davis will win prom queen. It’s written in stone somewhere. Her birth certificate says Taylor Davis, future prom queen, class of 1993.”

 Nikki gives me a long, loaded look. “Unless you win.” If you want Nikki to do something, tell her she can’t.

 “There isn’t going to be a Big Gay Prom.”

 She puts the car in reverse and guns it backwards without a glance. Luckily there is no one behind us. Nikki’s attitude toward driving is the same as her attitude about life: look out world, here I come. “I totally would have dropped this until you said big gay prom. I can see the posters now. It’s going to be totally freaking awesome.”

**NIKKI**

My dad was the first one to point out that Fran and I make a great team. “Everyone needs a linebacker to run interference.” I’m Fran’s linebacker. I can ease the way and also, bring her into the conflict. Like running for prom queen. See, Fran’s whole life is about not being noticed. The one time she was caught off guard and shared something personal it led to her being outed in the most brutal way possible and since that summer in 6th grade, she’s been shrinking into herself. She’s like this human sinkhole that has been slowly but surely caving in. I figure it’s my job to make sure that doesn’t happen. Not on my freaking watch.

 Did I mention I’m very good at getting my own way? Maybe I learned it from my dad, who is a public defender. He loves arguing with me about everything, even stupid things like do eggs really need refrigerating or if I deserve to drive after those dumb neighbors said I came too close to their stupid kid and the other one who ratted me out for running over their boxwood hedge. I’m like a dog in a fight. I just go for the neck and hang on like hell until I wear my dad out. Most of the time, it totally freaking works.

 When we turn into her driveway, Mrs. Worthy’s latest live-in loser staggers outside, bellowing at Fran, telling her to get inside for dinner, she’s late. Except he doesn’t say, “Hey Fran, come in for dinner,” like a normal person. He says, “Get inside for fucking dinner. You’re fucking late.” Totally classy.

My mom says Fran’s mom never quite left high school, which is like just about the scariest possible thing I can freaking imagine. Fran needs to get out of here. Fast.

 Winning prom queen is the first step. And no, the fact that Paul is dating Taylor has nothing to do with it. Okay, well, maybe a little. If Fran won and Taylor was denied prom queen that would make me happy dance from here to Seattle.

Did I mention that I hate Taylor?

There. I said it.

I hate Taylor.

She’s mean. And tiny. And beautiful.

Also – she’s dating the guy I’ve been in love with for like, eons. The only thing worse than seeing the really nice guy I love dating someone else is having that person be Taylor. Maybe I can blame my college situation on Taylor. Maybe I’ve been so distracted by watching Paul stick his hand in her back pocket that I have screwed up my life. Maybe that’s what I’ll tell my parents. When I tell them.

 Did I mention that I hate Taylor?

**PAUL**

The last thing Dad said when he ditched us was, “Son, I sure as hell hope you understand women better than I do because they are a foreign species.”

 Of course, Dad didn’t leave a forwarding address or much of anything else so if I did puzzle anything out in that department, I wouldn’t be able to contact him. But no, I cannot figure women out, least of all Taylor. You’d think after chasing a girl for year and dating her for three, you’d know more than you did at square one. Nope. Doesn’t work that way.

 Taylor is yelling at me because Fran Worthy was nominated for prom queen. When I first heard about it in the locker room I didn’t think much about it. Yes, Taylor informed me sophomore year that as her boyfriend, I would be prom king but honestly, who cares? You stand on stage like a moron with a crown on your head. Your friends, who would trade places with me in a white hot second if Taylor crooked her perfect little finger, will make fun of you unless you break the stupid crown in half, which will piss off Taylor. It’s all just high school drama. I have legit concerns, like keeping my turd brother from drinking all the grocery money.

Taylor sees it as the culmination of working four years to stay at the head of the pack. Ninety-nine percent of the school wants to bed her or be her. Popularity is her drug of choice and honestly, living on Planet Taylor is exciting. Sometimes though, I wonder. Dating her is like a full-time job.

As far as I know anyone is allowed to be nominated for prom queen but that’s not the way Taylor sees it. She’s pacing up and down in her kitchen, screaming about how Fran can’t just waltz in and steal this from her, really getting herself worked up. By the time her mother comes in and drops her purse on the kitchen table Taylor is full on screaming.

 “Paul! Do something!” Taylor’s mom yells like I know how to control her daughter. Nobody talks Taylor out of anything, least of all me.

 Not only have I not figured out women, I have not figured out Taylor. When I heard she wanted to go out with me it was like being struck by a meteor. For one thing, she’s gorgeous. Also, she’s rich. Her dad is an orthodontist and their house looks like something out of a magazine. When Lyle Dennam told me at soccer practice that Taylor wanted me to ask her out, I kind of freaked. A girl like Taylor could have any guy she wanted. Why in the hell did she want me?

 By the time Taylor’s mom has calmed her down, we’re all sitting at the kitchen table drinking Diet Cokes. Well, Taylor’s mom is drinking wine. After the first glass, she’s up to speed.

 “She doesn’t even freaking care, Mom! Whoever nominated her meant it as a freaking joke!”

 “Don’t swear honey, it’s vulgar.”

 “Freaking is not swearing. Tell her Paul, it’s not swearing.”

 Mrs. Davis glares at me so I mumble something.

“Paul, stick up for me here. Why are you being so quiet?” Taylor snaps, crunching her ice.

 “It’s not really swearing.”

 “I meant about Fran!” Taylor coughs as she accidentally swallows some ice. “Whose side are you on? I swear to god I’m going to start screaming if you don’t show me more support.”

 I know it won’t do any good to point out that she’s already been hollering pretty much nonstop since we entered her house. Her Pekinese dogs trail her around like yapping wind-up toys. Between them and her screaming I have a massive headache. This was supposed to be a ride home after soccer but she was so upset I came inside even though I haven’t showered and it’s my night to cook.

I told Taylor all this in the car and yet here I am. Taylor has this way of almost crying that makes her cornflower blue eyes the size of dinner plates. When those suckers brim with tears, I panic, as if someone is dangling a mewing kitten over a vat of boiling water. She knows that I will do absolutely anything to avoid watching her cry. Anything. Because no matter what it is; somehow, it’s always my fault. Although it’s irrational, it’s predictable. Taylor counts on it.

 Mrs. Davis is patting Taylor’s arm, giving me a cold look like I’m the biggest loser in the world. Like if I were a better boyfriend, I would be coming up with a plan that would soothe her troubled child. They both have this way of making me feel completely useless. As if they got the same manual on dealing with men that includes tips like *Give the man a dirty look when you are dealing with an emotional woman. It will make the man feel like he’s not doing his job and you’re doing it for them. Then they’ll be in your debt, right under your thumb. This is where you want them. Always.*

Taylor likes dating me because I’m captain of the soccer team and she thinks we look good together. I complement her petite frame, making the other girls jealous. Yes, she’s high maintenance and makes me feel like an idiot. But when a girl like Taylor likes you, you go out with her. That’s just how it works. No one turns down a Super Bowl Ring.

Mrs. Davis’ diamonds sparkle in the overhead light. The kitchen, like the rest of the house, is blindingly white. Even the dogs look bleached, with matching white satin bows holding the hair out of their beady little eyes. One of them bit me the first time I came over. Taylor said, “Oh my god – isn’t that cute?” I’d love to put those dogs outside and see if eagles carry them off. That would be awesome.

Taylor’s mom shoots me another look while talking to her daughter. “Don’t you worry about a thing, honey. I’ll go talk to Principal P and work this out. He cannot allow a lesbian girl to run for prom queen.”

 “Why not?” I blurt, like a total moron. I know Fran. If it wasn’t common knowledge, I wouldn’t even know she was gay. She doesn’t look or act different. She’s just a pretty, normal girl, as far as I can tell.

 Taylor and her mom whip their heads around so fast they are a blur of tawny blonde hair and Chicklet teeth. Identical blue eyes narrow in on me, making me itch with nerves. These are two women I do not want gunning for me.

“Paul are you saying that Fran is a more suitable choice for prom queen than your own girlfriend?” Mrs. Davis doesn’t let me answer, just plows ahead, tapping the table with one long nail. “Do you think that it’s okay to have a known *lesbian* represent the student body and set an example for the students?” She wrinkles her nose when she says lesbian. I open my mouth to respond but she keeps on. “Do you think the school should uphold that kind of deviant behavior?”

 Finally, she stops. Taylor studies me critically. “Paul?” she says, sniffing delicately. “I don’t care that she’s a lesbian but I do care that you support me.” Oh no, she’s going to cry. Shit. Better choose my words carefully.

 “She won’t win. I mean, obviously.”

 Taylor feels a little bit better but her mother is still blinking her gunky eyelashes. “True. But do you honestly feel I can sit back and let this girl mock my daughter?”

 I don’t really see the problem. Taylor will win. She’ll drag me up on stage wearing some monkey suit and I’ll stand there like a jerk, holding her hand. Running against Fran won’t change anything except maybe people will talk about Fran, which is what this is about.

 “No, I guess not.”

 Taylor’s mom stands, dusting off her immaculate hands. “You guess not?” She tucks her thick hair behind an ear studded with a fat diamond. “Paul honey, you’d better think long and hard about this. There is a right side and wrong side to this issue and you do not want to be coming down on the wrong side. Things could get very ugly for you.”

 Outside I sit in my car for a very long time. I’d just been threatened by my girlfriend’s mother. Things are getting very weird. And they are about to get a hell of a lot weirder.

 To make matters worse, when I get home there is a letter on the kitchen table. It’s from my dad.

**FRAN**

Mom and Dwayne both turn to stare at me, when I come in the front door, which is strange. What is even more bizarre is that they are sitting at the little rickety linoleum table in the kitchen like some 1950s family, if 1950s fashion included mullets and acid-washed jeans. We never eat together.

The first time I went to dinner at Nikki’s house I automatically carried my dinner into the den to watch TV. I didn’t think it was physically possible to digest food away from the television. I mean, sure, I saw TV families eating together but I didn’t know it happened in real life. Normally when I come home Mom is glued to the TV in the tiny room off the kitchen with her hand in a box of Wheat Thins. Dwayne is in his “lounge” in carport with the ugly lamp glowing and his bigger, better TV.

The Outdoor Lounge was my mom’s idea. One of the many things she didn’t think about when she dragged him home was that our house would shrink. Although my whole life we’d lived with an assortment of her boyfriends, we’d had an entire year in this house to ourselves. So, when Dwayne moved in with his big loud voice and explosive farts, there was no place to escape. I could hear every move he made through the paper-thin walls of my bedroom. He’d watch sports late into the night, yelling at the television. Mom convinced him that the carport was an extension of the house, like a den, without walls. But, instead of removing him, the lounge just put him on display, like a Komodo dragon during the rain until it smells meat nearby. When he coated the television with shrink wrap to keep out the moisture it was a proud moment.

Mom came up with the term lounge. I came up with the term White Trash Terrace.

 As I stand there studying him, Dwayne puts down his Oly and pushes out my chair with his foot. “Drink some fucking milk.”

I resist the urge to sneer, “Why thank you Dwayne.”

I cautiously sit and peel back the tinfoil from my Hungry Man dinner. Inside is a gelatinous grey substance that could be road kill. Dwayne sees my distaste, adding, “You need to put some meat on you. Maybe you’ll grow some boobs.” He chuckles as if this is hilarious.

A note about Dwayne’s sense of humor: he doesn’t have one. Or rather, what he thinks is funny just isn’t.

 Mom says “Du-wayyyyyne,” as if she knows it’s weird that her boyfriend just commented on my breasts or lack thereof and yet she’s going to put up with it because Dwayne helps with the rent and she doesn’t want to live with Grandma June who lives above a biker bar. Once a year, at my request, we have dinner together. Mom and Grandma drink cheap wine. By the time we get to dessert they’re telling each other how the other one ruined their lives.

So that’s Christmas.

 While I’m drinking my milk, Dwayne points out that he chose the Salisbury steaks especially for me, which is ironic because I’m a vegetarian. “Thanks.”

When Dwayne moved in two years ago Mom neglected to mention the whole vegetarian thing. The gay thing was off the table too since Mom and I have never discussed it.

Dwayne discovered that I was gay from someone at his uncle’s hardware store who had a kid at the high school. I had become known as That Lesbian Girl or That Freak or this year, compliments of PC, That Fucking Dyke. The day Dwayne found out he came home furious, informing me that although it was perfectly acceptable to show girl-on-girl action in Playboy magazine, he wasn’t going to live with a “rug munching pervert” because it was “against the laws of nature.”

I didn’t ask him what laws of nature he was following. Nor did I point out that homosexuality abounds in nature. I just went into my room and listened to *Nevermind* three times in a row with the volume cranked at ten on my Walkman.

There are a couple things in life that Kurt Cobain’s wailing voice can’t soothe but I don’t know what they are. And I don’t really care. Summer of 1990 I wandered into Disc Jockey Records in the corn-dog scented South Shore Mall. I had an hour to kill while Nikki and her mom shopped for school clothes. The manager was listening to *Bleach* so I sat down on a milk crate and stayed until it was done. Then I asked him to play it again. After the third spin, I got up the courage to ask him about the band. When he told me that they were originally from Aberdeen I just about swallowed my tongue. The idea that someone from Aberdeen had produced music that was played on the radio blew me away. Not just any album, an album filled with rage and anger, detachment and loneliness. The kind of record I could listen to every single day a hundred times, letting the music sink into my skin until it became part of me.

It was the first time that music didn’t just sound good, it sounded like my life. Nirvana’s songs cracked me open like a nut. All I wanted was more. More music, more time, more freedom from a life that dragged me down. The manager hadn’t ordered any more copies because no one would buy it locally but when I asked, he promised he’d order me a copy.

That record changed my life. Saved my life.

Moving the dripping hamburger patty around, I study Dwayne, knowing he has a scheme. I can see it in his beady eyes when he nods meaningfully at my Mom. “Tell her Doll baby.”

 Doll baby knits her brows like she knows this is a bad idea but also, she likes being able to afford meat. Two summers ago, we subsisted primarily on day-old fruit pies she carried home from work. By the time they reached us, they were smashed and nasty. She told me not to worry. Plenty of girls grow up and marry rich men. Look at Audrey Hepburn in “Sabrina.” Also, “How to Marry a Millionaire.” Marilyn Munroe knew her stuff. And Eliza Doolittle in “My Fair Lady.” If I just paid more attention to her movies, I’d stop being such a silly worry wart. By the end of the month, after we’d spent our food stamps, my mouth would break out in canker sores. I’d beg her to please go to the food bank.

 “It’s humiliating,” she’d mumble, eyes glued to the TV. I’d point out that since we didn’t have a dental plan (or any other plan) we’d better get some canned vegetables or something. Half the town skulked down to the food bank. No wonder so many people in Aberdeen thought suicide was a good exit strategy.

 I can tell by the way Mom’s eyes pinball around that Operation Saving Fran isn’t her idea. Confrontation isn’t her style. But she’ll go along with it. And if I want a roof over my head, I will too.

 Forcing my face into a smile, I listen to their plan to ruin my life.

**Chapter Two**

“I'm so happy because today I found my

friends - they're in my head.”

- Kurt Cobain

**FRAN**

“It’s called the South Aberdeen Baptist Church,” Mom says, keeping her eyes on Dwayne like a robot. “It’s Dwayne’s church.”

 I throw the empty foil trays into the garbage. “You have a church?”

 Dwayne empties his beer, crushing the can under his boot. “Hell to the yes. Since I was that high.” He tosses me his empty.

 Mom silently pleads me not to ask when, exactly, this church-going happens what with his busy schedule of calling in sick at his uncle’s hardware store, grooming his mullet and watching TV. “We’ve signed you up for a Teen Life class. It’ll be like Billy Holliday in ‘Born Yesterday’. She’s this uncouth tough chick and they hire William Holden to smarten her up. He’s a handsome lawyer.”

 “I’m an uncouth tough chick?”

“Dwayne, you tell her.” She jumps up from the table, grabs her plant spritzer; racing to her colony of African violets as if they are dying of thirst. Those plants are probably the closest thing to siblings I’ll ever get.

 Dwayne nods proudly. “Yep. Teen Life.” Heavy emphasis on the last word as if I’m confusing it with Teen Death.

 We all know Teen Life is aimed at deprogramming me from a gay cult. I don’t know who the cult leader is but I bet he’s a funny guy with a cool job, who lives in a city and dresses super well. The anti-Dwayne. After some nervous spritzing action, Mom slides over a brochure. On the cover is a basic assortment pack of beaming straight kids with perfect teeth: black, white, Asian and Mexican. The Native American kid off to the side doesn’t look very happy. Maybe she’s hiding weapons in her backpack. I hope so. When I open the brochure, I’m offered a weekly option and a twice weekly option, which is circled. “Twice a week?”

 The poor violets are being spritzed to death. “Yes,” Mom says, her rabbity eyes darting between Dwayne and me. I can feel Dwayne pulling her strings. “The twice weekly option will get you ready for life?” To her, it’s a question.

 There’s nothing more to clean in the kitchen so I sit down across from Dwayne. “So, this class will get me ready for waitressing at Plaza Garcia’s until my teeth fall out?” I’m a tad bitter that I’m the only one of my friends without college plans.

 Now she’s dusting her huge video collection, itching to slide one into the player we rescued from someone’s trash. “There are much nicer places in Aberdeen than Plaza Garcia.”

 What Mom really hates about Plaza Garcia is that my grandma got me the job. “But both classes conflict with yearbook.”

 Dwayne opens the slider, goes out and returns with another Oly. “Who fucking cares about yearbook? A bunch of fags who can’t make the football team.”

 “Yes, but they’re my fags.” Whoops.

 Dwayne’s sagging jowls open wide, stunned at my temerity, a word he wouldn’t know. He looks at my mom, asking permission to beat the living crap out of me.

 She hurries into the kitchen.

Permission denied.

 He opens the garbage can, removing the tinfoil platter containing my uneaten, congealed Salisbury steak, waving Exhibit A. “Fucking ingrate.” He then launches into one of his three speeches. This one is called “After All I Have Done For You.” It is subtitled: You Ungrateful Little Bitch. (Speech 2: “I Could Have Played Pro Ball Except For My Torn Ligament.” Speech 3: “I’m Smarter Than Everyone, including Bill Clinton, who should do his own thing and not listen to that Stupid Nosy Bitch Hillary.”)

 Dwayne storms off, doing his best to slam the sliding glass door, which sticks in the runner which is quite funny. I am smart enough not to laugh. Mom rinses my milk glass, pouring me a half glass of beer. I don’t normally like beer but I drink. If anyone needs a drinking buddy it’s my mom. “Just give the class a chance. Dwayne is just looking out for your best interests.”

 “No, he’s not.”

 “I know you can’t see it this way but Dwayne is taking an interest in you.”

 “I know you can’t see this but he hates me.” I sip my beer, wishing it was orange juice, the kind that comes in cartons fortified with calcium for growing bones, like at Nikki’s house. I also wish that my mom was like Nikki’s, a registered nurse who embarrasses the hell out of me with brochures on safe gay sex and keeps Chunky Monkey Ben and Jerry’s in her freezer with a note: Unless you are Fran, Don’t Eat Me.

 Televised cheers from Dwayne’s Mariner’s game floats through the glass. I study the Texas shaped water stain on the wall. When we moved in, it was as small as Rhode Island. Mom lights a cigarette. She opens the window over the sink to blow out smoke before turning to me. “You’ll probably end up liking it. Who knows, you might even meet some nice people.”

 And then it occurs to me. This might be a good place to meet my people. The queers.

**NIKKI**

I’m already pissed at Taylor from the soccer field so when she snaps at me in the locker room, it’s like on.

“You’d better tell your friend that she’d better drop out of running for prom queen,” she sneers as she comes around the corner with a towel wrapped around her torso, fresh out of the shower. The fact that she looks like a freaking MTV video, with her long, wet hair and fake tan makes it worse, somehow.

 It’s cold and inhospitable in our locker room, which is attached to the track and field buildings. Most people hustle out of here to get to their homework or fast-food jobs. Taylor always hangs out, gossiping. “Afraid of the competition?” I sneer.

 Taylor looks up from applying lotion to her legs. The look on her face means I’ve nailed it. “As if.”

 There are twelve girls left in the locker room, all pretending very hard not to eavesdrop. Since freshman year it’s been all out war. Two girls like Taylor and me, both aggressive, fast power forwards, were bound to bump heads, although I didn’t help matters much. As soon as I realized I’d be competing for captain with She Devil, I was freaking ruthless. The worst part of it is that we’re team cocaptains. The two people that are supposed to set the example of leadership despise one another.

 I try to stay calm. “She has just as much right to be prom queen as you do.”

 “Just listen to yourself. You’re totally deluded. My mom is talking to the principal right now to see if he’ll stop her.”

 “The principal? Why?”

 Taylor’s mouth curls into an ugly snarl. “Because she’ll embarrass herself.”

 “At least she’s not, like a total bitch.”

 Taylor’s head snakes back and forth like a cobra. “I know what this is about. You couldn’t get Paul so you have to get back at me somehow.”

The first time I saw the TV show The Incredible Hulk and that guy morph into a huge green monster I thought – that’s me. I get this white-hot rage that bubbles up into my brain, blinding me. And although my parents, coaches, and teachers don’t believe me – I have no control. Nobody pushes my buttons more than Taylor.

I’ve spent four years trying to manage my feelings around her in a never-ending battle to not smash her stupid face. Normally I can control it but right now every shitty thing Taylor has said or done comes raining down on me and I want to freaking kill her. I grab the nearest thing at hand -- a Costco-sized bottle of Kirkland brand shampoo and lob it at her as hard as I can. Her stupid blue eyes go wide as she sees the heavy projectile. She turns but not before the bottle nails her face. She’s screaming bloody murder, saying I attacked her. Half the team is standing there with their jaws open in total shock.

The other half is rushing to comfort her. Everyone stares at me like I’m a serial killer.

Candy Heller whispers to Dana Juarez. “Did that just happen?”

From outside the cement locker room I can hear Taylor’s mom. “Taylor? Baby? Are you okay? It’s Mom, I’m outside.”

 “Mom? Nikki attacked me!” Taylor takes her hand off her cheek. Oh no. There’s a long, jagged scratch and blood welling up.

 “I didn’t freaking attack you!” I’m a little panicked.

 “Yes, you did! My face! If you thought you had problems before you had no idea!”

 Shit.

**FRAN**

The basement of South Aberdeen Baptist Church feels like a bunker. Looking up at the grimy rain-speckled windows, I can see the feet of the people from the last meeting: AA people in worn-down heels and scuffed boots. Their smoke floats in through the cracked window. Seated at the long tables formed into a square are a bunch of surly teenagers, plus a kid I know from yearbook named Mike. His nickname is Dirty Mike, given his penchant for talking smut. He’s a classic stoner and tonight, true to form, his eyes are glazed to a fine reddish-hued patina. We nod and I glance at the other kids. There is a girl with major eyeliner. A Walkman cord snakes out of her ear.

The song playing in my head is “Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge.” The soothing thing about this song, besides the lyrics and Kurt’s familiar voice, is that Kurt’s baby daughter and I share the same name. Yes, the actress Frances Farmer did end up in a mental institution where she received shock treatment for her radical ways, which is tragic but still, it’s a nice connection. So yes, I like the song.

A pot-bellied guy in a beige cardigan ushers in stragglers, shaking hands, proclaiming proudly, “I’m Don,” as if this is an impressive feat. He has a beatific stare, which lasts a beat too long.

There is a slight commotion by the door before the single most amazing thing in my life happens. In walks the most interesting girl I have ever seen in my life. Scratch that, she doesn’t walk, she stomps. Her eyes are behind glossy black bangs but I know they are angry. Her furious stomping is a language I understand. She doesn’t want to be here anymore than I do and she’s not going to take this sitting down. She’s furious and beautiful and exotic in a way that clearly doesn’t belong in Aberdeen. I’ve worshipped her from afar for a year.

Allison showed up junior year and gave me a heart attack in third period.

I was sitting in English lit, time had morphed into a Jell-O like thickness. We were all so bored we were technically dead. A fly was driving me nuts and I wished Mr. Cronner would open a window. The door opened and it was like that moment in the Wizard of Oz when everything turns to color. I wasn’t the only one who felt it. The entire class sat up and stared. Allison had this urban cool thing going on, all torn black jeans, a tiny nose stud, and shiny black hair slanting over her almond eyes. New Girl. It should have been written in neon. Transfer students were a big deal but this girl stood out like a gazelle among the clueless meerkats. No one had to tell me she was from a big city. It was written all over her like graffiti.

As Mr. Cronner droned on: “Boys and girls, I’d like you to welcome Allison Kondo, a new student who has transferred from San Francisco...” blah, blah, blah, I fell in love. Yes, I know. It was pathetic and corny and a walking teenaged cliché but Allison had this presence. This ‘I’m Just Killing Time ‘til I Go Do Something Spectacular With My Life’ that you don’t see here. Aberdeen is the kind of place to drink yourself to death. In the rain. Wearing polyester slacks.

Immediately after developing a tornado of a crush I hit reality. Hard. The odds of her being into girls was roughly the same as a Great White shark jumping through the window, followed by an asteroid and six leprechauns named Mick. Las Vegas odds would be something like one trillion to one. Not favoring me.

*Shit*.

 “So, Allison, have you read *The Dead* by James Joyce?” Mr. Cronner had asked after his standard waiting-for-everyone to quiet down/fall asleep.

 “Yeah, last year,” Allison said. “I wrote a paper on James’ treatment of women in *Dubliners*.”

 Of course she did.

And now, a year later, she’s here. In a church basement.

With me.

Causing every cell in my body to come to life, tracking her like a magnet.

Thank you baby Jesus. Thank you Dwayne even though I still hate you.

“Welcome,” says Don. “Please sit down.”

Allison stares at him for a very long time as if he is an insect she’s getting ready to squish. For an awkward eternity, she stands there indecisively, ready to bolt. I’m waiting for her to say, “Screw this,” before she flees. If she does, I’ll be right behind. We can bond over the stupidity of anything called Teen Life. Or Teen anything for that matter. I’m ready.

She exhales slowly, clomping to a free chair between a kid with Duran Duran hair and eyeliner girl. I’m dying to see the source of this clomping so I sneak a look under the table at her boots. They are Frye motorcycle boots with a thick silver buckle on the side. The kind Peter Fonda wore in *Easy Rider*. They are boots to get stoned in and make love in at the bottom of a desert canyon. They are shit-kicking boots. I add this to the list of things I know about Allison: she has the coolest boots on the planet.

When I raise my head, Allison is seated. She nods with recognition, which is encouraging. Don goes on about how this class is going to teach us how to embrace a Christian, moral life full of values and blah, blah, blah. Allison lowers her chin. Her hair becomes a curtain between us. She puts her hand to her head and makes a gun, pulling the trigger and silently mouths a gunshot noise.

It’s the most eloquent gesture in history.

Besides the boots, she’s funny. It’s like going down a ledge, this falling in love thing. There are degrees of slipping. Just when you think you’ve leveled out, you’re in a deeper.

 While Don continues his peppy Way of Christ speech, Allison pulls out her backpack, which is plastered with a mass of Sharpie doodles so insanely cool I want to study them for hours. She dislodges a huge calculator.

 Don pats her shoulder. “Sorry, this is time for life talks, not homework.” He says Life Talks with capitalization, which is super annoying.

 Allison gives him a look so dark, so angry that I want to stand up and applaud. Doesn’t he see that she’s far too cool for anything that he could ever say? Doesn’t he realize that the coolest person in the universe has just graced us with her presence? How could he not bow down to her eloquent indifference?

With supreme boredom and resentment, she shoves the backpack under the table, leaning down to retrieve a Sharpie. She uncaps it and puts it to her nose, sniffing so deeply it’s almost obscene. Like she’s disappearing into the portal of her mind and has begun the ejection sequence.

A thing for Sharpies: another thing to love about Allison. I open my notebook and right across from the ever-changing, constantly re-ordered list of my hierarchy of favorite Nirvana songs (current favorite: “All Apologies” because, well, ‘everyone is gay,’ is a great line and fun to think about.) I begin my new lists:

*Things I Know About Allison:*

*Thing for Sharpies and Frye Boots.*

*She’s funny.*

Three things.

 After Don makes sure that eyeliner girl has stowed her earphones, he claps his hands. “Anyone want a Coke?”

 While Don hands out drinks and bags of chips, he begins his sermon, asking how many of us have accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as our true savior. Several kids raise their hands. I immediately label them as ass-kissing suck-ups. Mike grabs three bags of chips. Don makes him put back one, which Mike thinks is a real coup.

Eyeliner girl stares out the window, thinking about whatever tape is in her Walkman. Allison takes a bag of Barbecue Lays. “We’re Christian and Buddhist.”

 “What? Hold the phone!” Don says, holding out the box of chips. Eyeliner girls takes two bags without looking.

 “My parents are Japanese and American. I’m both.”

 Don reaches the front of the room, ripping open his own bag of plain chips. “But you believe in Jesus, right?”

 Allison frowns at a chip. Her nails are black and short. “Not really. Just God.”

 Don stares at her as if she’s just sprouted a third eye. “But Jesus is the son of God.”

 Allison studies the map of Ancient Rome on the wall. “What if he didn’t have kids?” she asks.

 “Mmmm-hm,” Don says, turning slightly purple, pausing to eat a chip, dusting the salt from his fingers. “Well, that’s a great place to start our chat.” He places a thinking finger on his chin. “Mmmm-hm. You see, Jesus is a vibrant and essential part of guiding us through these turbulent teenaged years. He is the very human embodiment of God himself.” He jams in three more chips, washing them down with 7UP. He hums as he speaks, interjecting Mmmm-hm into every sentence. “Jesus is there to see us through the temptations of the physical world because just like you and me, Jesus walked this earth and dealt with the same urges. I know this is hard to believe--” His eyes go wide as if he’s about ready to explode. “But Jesus was a teenager.” He waits for someone to comment about this shocking revelation. Nobody cares. Mike is so into his potato chips it’s kind of obscene.

Don waves a hand around the table. “Our bodies, mmm-hmmm, they are telling us that we want something that is wrong. Temptation is the battle of these formative teen years.”

He stops dramatically, trying to maintain eye contact with each and every one of us which comes off as creepy, as if he’s trying to drill a pathway into our brains. “Our job is to listen to Jesus, who shows us the path towards self-control, family and faith.” He points as he counts each one off, nearly breaking his fingers on a ceiling so low it feels like we’re being crushed by the church. “Self-control, even if it means...” His face turns flaming crimson as he studies the threadbare carpet. “Even if it means pleasuring.... alone... which is better than acting on our sinful urges.”

 Eyeliner girl snorts. Allison doodles. Mike licks salt off his fingers. The smiling dorks grin harder. We’re all thinking the same thing. *Is he really telling us to masturbate? Did this just happen? It’s day one and that’s what you’re giving us – masturbation?*

 “Even if it means spilling seed without procreation, which is really what sex is all about later. Much, much later. A little private time is good for you boys.” He finally looks up from the carpet, blinking sixteen, maybe seventeen times before he says, “I don’t know what the girls do but I’m sure you can talk to your health teacher at school.”

 Allison rolls her eyes. Her sophomore year health teacher must have looked like mine. Mrs. Donfligger is a grey, raisiny black lady who wears comfort-soled shoes that stick to the linoleum floors and an onyx cross with a tiny gold Jesus. Last year she threw a bunch of condoms on a desk and said, “If you gotta do it, use these,” before telling us all about her son Marcus who got cut from the Baltimore Ravens in training camp and was going to medical school. I loved her stories because Marcus, like Kurt Cobain and Krist Novoselic, made it out of Aberdeen alive.

 I tune out and tap my pen in time to “Heart Shaped Box,” studying Allison’s face when she’s not looking. She spends the entire time doodling. The room slowly fills with the chemical tang of Sharpie.

 After an hour of Don droning variations on a theme, I really don’t mind. A few bags of chips and some warm Coke go a long way for a girl like me. I’m free to study Allison for any tell-tale signs of latent lesbianism (none) and speculate about her glamorous life in San Francisco. I can see her on a skateboard racing the Rice-A-Roni streetcar, which is really the only thing I know about San Francisco. One of the dorks is sizing her up through his Buddy Holly glasses. Maybe he’s her type.

 I hope not.

 I keep waiting for Don to get specific, to pray away the gay but it never really happens. Perhaps, before I saw Allison, I might have even given it a shot. Being straight would make my life a hell of a lot simpler. But any doubts I had about my sexuality were wiped out at 4:23 p.m. today. I checked my watch the moment Allison walked in the door. At that moment, I fell in love.

 There’s no going back.

**PAUL**

Taylor is freaking out. I’d just walked in the door from soccer when her mom called and told me to get on over there as fast as I could. Taylor had been attacked. Those were her words. Before I could ask any details, she hung up. I raced over, driving like a maniac; worried that some pervert had dragged her into the bushes or some meth head roughed her up, taken her purse. I didn’t even knock, just walked right into their marble entryway, right into the Great Shampoo Bottle Incident.

We live in a town where people get crushed by trees or mangled by machinery every day. Meth labs burst into flames. My mom works in a lumberyard where some guy loses a finger once a month. The whole shampoo bottle thing just strikes me as melodramatic.

Her mom is on the phone with the police, insisting that she needs to file report. “Don’t you make light of this young man. It was a heavy shampoo bottle. My daughter has a cut on her face!”

 “How did this get started?” I ask Taylor, who is at the kitchen table milking this for all it’s worth. Last year she sprained her ankle in soccer. Her friends met her at her car, helping her inside like an Egyptian queen. They brought a pillow to the lunchroom so she could rest her foot.

The cut in question is more like a scratch. It’s pretty long, from the edge of her eye down to her chin but it’s not deep. Her father shook my hand on his way out when I arrived. “Good man. Good man!” he said before heading for the school like a man on a mission. They’re treating this like Nikki slashed her face with a switchblade.

 “We were talking about prom queen!” Taylor wails.

 “You were talking about Fran.”

 “Yes! Of course. She’s the *entire* problem and Nikki is on her side.” She says this as though it’s obvious and she should not be wasting her time spelling it out.

 “Well, they are best friends.”

 “Of course they are. They’re both homicidal lunatics!”

 “Let me talk to your supervisor!” Taylor’s mom screams. A moment later a wine cork pops in the kitchen.

 I shake my head. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

 Taylor’s eyes shoot open. “Paul! Whose side on your on anyway?! Do you want that girl to ruin *our* prom?”

 Taylor’s mom covers the phone with her hand. “No one is ruining prom sweetheart. Not while I am PTSA president.” She raises her eyebrows at me, with a *fix this!* look.

 I pat Taylor’s arm but she snatches it away. There is no winning with this family. “Of course not. I’m just glad you’re alright.”

 “You don’t even care about this, do you?”

 “I came over here, didn’t I?” For a brief moment I think about telling her that my dad has reached out. That he’s coming to town and wants to see me. That I’m torn up and the worst thing is, my mom wants it. Which is even more confusing.

 “Because my mom called you.”

 I can’t help but sigh. “Taylor, please. Think about it. How else would I have known?”

 “Paul - if you really care about someone you find out about things. That is the way relationships work. Anyway, you haven’t even bothered to ask me to prom.”

 “We’re going to prom Taylor. We’ve been dating for two years.”

 She sticks her lower lip out. “You haven’t asked me with flowers and a cute sign in front of the whole school.”

 “Is that what you want?”

 She’s in full pout mode with her lashes fluttering and her lips sticking out. Taylor has great lips. Full, lush and unfortunately made for pouting. “Not if I have to ask for it.”

 “I’m confused. You just did ask for it.”

 “Well, make it a surprise.”

 “Okay.”

 “And wait until my skin is healed.”

 “Alright.”

 “And make sure it’s during first period lunch and let me know so I can wear something extra cute. There’s a pair of fringe booties I’m gonna get. They’d look so totally cute with my Guess fades and my white peasant shirt. I should go tanning first, right?”

 “I thought you wanted it to be a surprise.”

 “God Paul. Do I have to do *everything* for you?”

 Here’s the silver lining of a girl like Taylor: there’s no room in this relationship for my problems. Ever.