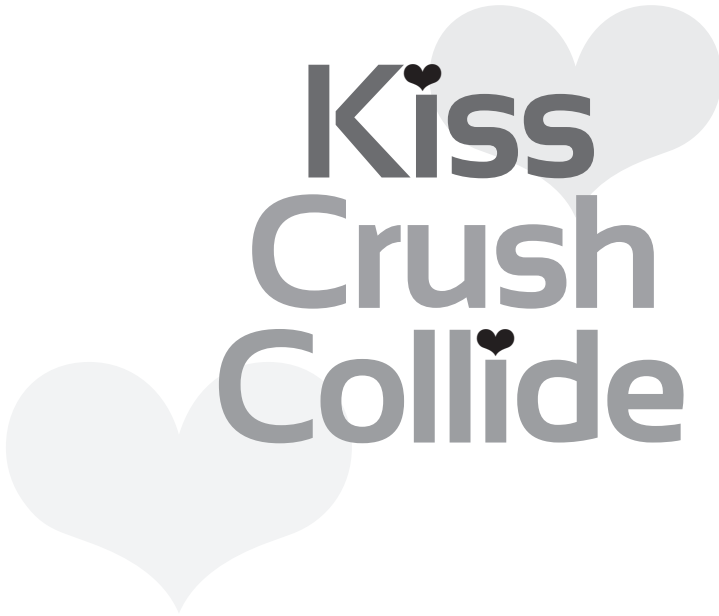


CHRISTINA MEREDITH



Kiss
Crush
Collide



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One

“Leah!” My mother rolls her eyes, sounding completely exasperated as she steps down the three thick stone slabs at our front door, her heels clacking. Leaving the double doors flung open behind her, she bends down and examines one of the yellow rosebushes that line every inch of our driveway.

Shane slowly rolls the convertible alongside her, and we grind to a stop on the thick carpet of gravel, just behind a small red M3 I don’t recognize. Shane

pulls up the emergency brake with a crank, and my mother stands, smoothing the hem of her sweater, wilted yellow petals drifting to her feet. “Thank God you’re finally home.”

“You know I have practice till four,” I say. Her heels sink into the sea of salt-and-pepper pebbles with a crunch, the bright metallic sound of the three thin silver bracelets she never takes off trailing behind her as she walks out into the middle of our circular drive.

“We were starting to get worried,” she says, raising her eyebrows at me, ignoring my scowl. The bracelets slip down her arm one by one, *shink, shink, shink*, as she reaches up and gives my boyfriend her standard greeting, a kiss on the left cheek that leaves a coral stain.

“Just like always,” I mumble to myself, and lean over, pushing the heavy car door open with a huff. I feel the part of my butt cheek that has become one with the sun-baked seat peel away as I climb out of the car. I kick the door shut behind me with my heel before Shane can even manage to untangle himself

from my mother and jog his way around the front of the car to help me out.

“Oh, Shane.” My mother’s laughter bubbles up, floating over the sound of his size twelves chewing up the gravel, trying to catch up with me. “You’re too good to her. You know she’s kept us all waiting.”

I stop. Her bracelets brush together again with a silvery sound as my mother and my boyfriend step past me. She walks him up the front stairs and into the house, her heels echoing across the canyon of black-and-white tile we call a foyer. I unclench my hand just long enough to push the button on the side of my phone to check the time. It’s 4:12.

Standing on the curb in front of the school’s entrance exactly eight minutes earlier, I cocked my head and twisted my hair, cursing Shane under my breath.

“Come on, come on, come on,” I breathed, my unwillingness to drive factoring into my frustration, ratcheting it up a notch, as I bounced impatiently in the tiny square of shade cast by a yellow school

zone sign, while I watched the entire student body roll by in front of me, free for the day.

It's not that I can't drive. I just don't. Shane asked me out the second day of our sophomore year. I slid into the passenger seat on our first date. Shane climbed behind the wheel, smiled, crooked two fingers around the curve of the wheel, and dropped his other hand onto my left knee. It's almost two years later, and not much has changed.

I got a car, just like my sisters did—it's a sweet sixteen standard—but mine just seems to sit in our driveway. It's cute and fun, a shiny bright blue convertible bug, and I think it's in the exact same spot it was when my dad handed over the keys, hugged me tight, and wished me a happy birthday.

Sometimes he threatens to drive it himself when he goes to the golf course, and I try to picture his fuzzy covered clubs sticking out of the tiny backseat, but he always ends up backing out the company truck instead, JOHNSON CUSTOM CONSTRUCTION—WE BUILD BIG HOUSES, sliding past the kitchen window as he drives off in the early-morning light.

My parents have been together forever, high school sweethearts destined for domestic bliss. My dad started his construction business right after school, building a tiny house for the two of them. Over the years the business got bigger, the houses got bigger, and his truck got huge.

It's so big now that it beeps when it backs up, driving my mother crazy if she hasn't had her morning latte yet. She yaps around the kitchen like a little dog until he shifts into drive and rolls away.

I don't know why my parents don't get rid of my car. I wouldn't mind. But my mother says of course I'll want a car when I go off to college. My oldest sister, Yorke, drives her car everywhere on campus. I can picture her, all ballsy and blond, double-parking her BMW in front of every lecture hall, carelessly dropping cardboard boxes onto her leather seats when she makes beer runs for her sorority sisters, pissing off the campus cops on a daily basis. I am sure my dad has the tickets to prove it.

My cell said 4:04. Which meant that I had gotten out of practice, collected all my stuff, and jogged out

here in less than four minutes. It's Friday, and that means yet another Friday night family dinner at the club. It's a tradition my mother instituted when we were little, back in the days when she could dress us up in matching pastel dresses.

Tonight we will be celebrating my sister Freddie's valedictorianness. Freddie is less brassy than Yorke, in color and volume. She is perfection. Her big graduation party with the tent and the band and the whole world invited is tomorrow. Tonight is just for family, and I can't be late.

Not that I can ever be late, really, with my mother running the show, but especially not tonight. I'm sure she was expecting me at least four minutes ago. She seems to think that Shane drives a time machine, not a convertible Mercedes.

I looked up from my phone and saw Dani and Len waving to me from the parking lot, red and gold poms stuffed under their arms, purses and bags slung everywhere. I smiled and waved back.

Valerie Dickens, math genius and serious contender for future senior class valedictorian, was

slinking along the hot pavement, lurking a few steps behind my two best friends. Valerie and I used to be close. Until the fourth grade, when the geography of our new house and her serious competitive streak separated us.

Thin, spindly, and slightly translucent, she slid around the cars like something you would poke at in the bottom of a petri dish. She looked over at me with a scowl.

I dropped my hand so fast when her eyes met mine that my bag slid off my shoulder with a jerk and practically yanked my hair from my head.

She stuck a key into the door of a dark green VW, an oversize rusty cheese grater with bald tires and a bad dent in the back end. I watched her pry the door open. The stack of books that had been cradled in her arms slipped and spread out across the sticky blacktop, spines cracking. I didn't have to watch her stoop to pick them up, I knew what they were: *Trigonometry*, *Applied Mathematics*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*. She stood, frizzy hair hanging in her face, and gave me the same knowing look

she had given me only an hour before.

The final bell had just rung, waking up half the class, when Mr. Hobart stopped by my desk and said, “Johnson, hang back for a second. I have a matter to discuss with you.”

It is not a treat to have AP Calc as the last class of the day. And toward the end of the semester even the thought of the class has been leaving me with a burning knot in my stomach.

I used to not even think about AP Calc. It used to be like most of my classes—easy, doable, not a lot of effort. Then somewhere during these last few weeks we took a quantum leap and entered a world that makes absolutely no sense to me. Zero.

I have been getting by with a lot of guessing and by copping Freddie’s old notes and papers. She keeps *everything*, every bit of schoolwork, every scrap of paper, anything she ever did since kindergarten. It’s kind of sad.

My grades must finally be slipping or why else would Mr. Hobart want to talk to me? Fighting the urge to curl up like a shrimp and rock back and forth

at my desk, I got up, grabbed my bag and my books, and walked toward the front of the room, thinking, Say good-bye to ever being valedictorian.

Mr. Hobart has a huge metal table parked at the front of his classroom that he uses as a command station. With stacks and stacks of papers, probably dating back to the 1970s, his organizational system is legendary. He can reach blindly into a pile while lecturing and extract exactly the right paper.

I was tempted to throw the windows open wide and watch the papers and his toupee flutter back down to earth. Instead I mentally prepared a speech about my trying harder and his being a great teacher and how much I have learned, and then I planned on finishing it all off with a big smile.

“So, Little Johnson,” Mr. Hobart said, his stubby, ink-covered fingers tapping along the edge of his tin table like he was sending a telegram. I smiled at him and his stacks of papers placed at right angles and remembered the first time I had heard someone call me that.

It happened the first week that all three of us,

Yorke, Freddie, and I, were in high school at the same time. I had just shown up for freshman gym class, all short shorts and ponytail and fresh summer tan, when I heard some older boys up in the balcony. They were leaning over the railing, watching the freshman girls file into the gym.

“Look, it’s Little Johnson,” one of them said in a deep voice.

I glanced up, and some random guy I’m pretty sure I’d seen Yorke kissing in our driveway late one night pointed at me.

“Hey, Little Johnson,” he called out, and I looked around the room before I looked up at him again, very aware of myself standing outside the circle of girls on the shining, wooden floor.

Some other guy with big, meaty arms laughed and said, “I like me some Little Johnson.”

I was flattered and embarrassed and confused all at the same time. And suddenly very conscious of my exposed legs and how tight my T-shirt was.

Finally, Ms. Kemp blew her whistle and shouted, “Line up, girls!”

She called out our names, and we lined up, matching shorts and Ts all in a row.

When Ms. K got to me, she glanced up from her clipboard, smirked, and yelled, “Little Johnson!”

With a very Yorke-like curtsy, I took my place at the front of the third line amid low whistles and laughter from the balcony above. The name has been with me ever since. I just wish it didn’t make me sound like a tiny dick.

Mr. Hobart finally found the paper he was looking for and handed it to me. “Your ability to show your work really helped boost your grade,” he said.

I slowly reached for the paper. I recognized my deliberate, detailed work. It was my AP Calc final with a large A minus written in the upper right corner. I guess I had been holding my breath because when I finally breathed, it came out in a whoosh that disturbed the closest stack but not Mr. Hobart’s hair. He pinned the papers down with a thick thumb. I was a bit stunned.

“An A minus?” I asked. I was hoping for a C. To be honest, a C minus really seemed more likely when

I remembered how much looking out the window and hair twisting I had done during the exam. I held the paper out toward Mr. Hobart, ready for it to be returned to its resting place at the bottom of a pile. It didn't seem mine to keep.

He took the exam from me, lifted a year's worth of papers like a magician splits a deck of cards, and inserted my paper deftly somewhere in the middle. I'll bet he could find it again, even after a shuffle, with a blindfold on.

He stood and looked me straight in the eyes through his thick black-rimmed glasses.

"Your sister Freddie struggled a bit too during the last semester of my class," he said.

He put his hand at the small of my back and spoke quietly, leading me toward the classroom door. "Consider it a sneak peak, if you will. Go off and enjoy your summer, Leah. Rest assured that our hopes for a third Johnson valedictorian are intact."

He stopped abruptly. Valerie Dickens was milling about in the open doorway, her arms laden down with textbooks, her expression unsettled, obviously

having heard everything. Mr. Hobart waved me out the door, and I slipped past Valerie without meeting her eyes.

I headed toward the gym for my last practice of the year. I am sure Valerie had studied her ass off for that test. In fact I am sure she had studied her ass off all semester. I recognized that look on her face. I've seen it before, at dances, tryouts, parties, in the girls' bathrooms, school hallways, and classrooms, all my life actually.

My mother and sisters say it is just jealousy, but I have the feeling there is more to it than that. I get that girls like Valerie might want something to hate about me—herpes, dandruff, even the occasional breakout—because mostly my life happens while I smile and watch. But they put in the time. They aim for the prize, stay home on Friday nights to study, get up early on school days to practice. They read and memorize and put their hearts into it and ache for boys who pay no attention. I just show up and get everything they're after. I would probably hate me, too.

But summer is almost here. Graduating seniors were done today; the rest of us have three long days of exams, results, and hot, closed classrooms still to go. I heaved a sigh and cracked open the tall metal gym door for my last pep squad practice of the year.

A loud, pounding dance beat and the stale smell of sweat hit me along with the realization that Valerie was going to spend the summer waiting and wondering about her class standing, but being third in such a fine line of sisters, I was all set. I had three whole months of sunny absolution spread out in front of me. So I did what any good Johnson would do; I smoothed down my shirt, shook out my hair, and bounced out onto the gym floor with a big smile.

The smell of patchouli hits me before I can even make it to the top of the stairs.

“Freddie must be practicing for her year abroad,” I whisper to Shane over my shoulder, stopping to fan my hand in front of my face.

Our bodies bounce into each other as I lag and Shane advances. Prodding me from behind, pressing

solid and strong, he's urging me toward the top of the stairs and the possibility that he is going to get some as soon as we get to my room.

"If you're lucky she is growing her armpit hair out, too," I say, delaying the inevitable with my arms out, weight suspended from the polished banisters, knowing that Shane thinks Freddie is hot. Everybody does. She is.

He smiles back at me, all white teeth and good manners, unwilling to comment and risk the possibility of pissing off one of my sisters. Shaking his head, he wrinkles up his straight, slightly sunburned nose and slides his fingers tightly around mine as we trip up the last carpeted step.

"I heard that," Freddie yells as soon as we turn into the hall. "And you're late."

I drop Shane's hand and step into Freddie's doorway. Sniffing, I can just make out a top note of nail polish swirling above the cloud of patchouli. Freddie is on her unmade bed, curled over her toes, an open bottle of fruit punch-colored polish on the small shawl-covered table next to her.

It seems like everything in Freddie's room is recently shawl covered. Or scarf covered. The lamps all burn faintly under fringed scarves. The chairs, dressing table, desk, bookshelves, even the bed—all draped.

She is getting a jump start on her foreign exchange experience. Next year she will be living in France, and this year I guess we all are. The sounds, compliments of an almost endless loop of conversational French playing through her iPod speakers, with an occasional bout of Edith Piaf, the sights, even the scent of Paris spill from Freddie's room 24-7. *J'aime Paris* and all that, but I don't know if I will make it to next fall.

"I got here in twelve minutes," I say flatly, leaning against Freddie's door frame, twisting my hair around my fingers in frustration. Twelve, I think, mentally navigating the maze of hallways, stop signs, and ass grabbing I had to navigate with Shane in that short period of time.

"Just how fast does she want Shane to drive?" I ask.

Freddie stops painting and leans back against the crazy pile of orange, pink, red, and purple pillows that threatens to take over her bed. She waves her hands around over her feet, homecoming queen style, in what can only be an attempt to speed up the drying process. I have a miniflashback, leaning there at the edge of Freddie's stinky pink room, to last fall, when she was perched up on the back of a convertible wearing a sparkly green dress and a silver crown, shivering in the sharp air as she rolled by in the homecoming parade, waving those same cupped, stiff hands at me and the crowd.

"Faster," she says while testing a nail for stickiness. She looks up at me and adds, unnecessarily, "Obviously."

"It's not like I missed anything," I say, dismissing the total duh face she is making at me from her bed. Staring down, I snap off some of the hair that is woven around my fingers like golden thread, feeling each strand stretch before it breaks with a sudden little pop. Shane reaches for me, pulling at my hand. I let his warm fingers slip through mine.

“That’s what you think,” Freddie says almost sagely, her expression unreadable behind a curtain of long blond hair as she picks up the bright little brush, starts fresh on her pinkie toe, and I wonder what she means.

Shane tries his luck again, pulling more impatiently this time, and I give in, letting him lure me away from Freddie and Edith and whatever it is that I may have missed. Hooking my fingers around his, I drag my toes through the thick cream carpet all the way down the hall, feeling his pull getting stronger and stronger the closer we get to my door. He knows my mother’s nerves may have been momentarily settled now that I am home safe, but the sound of her uptight heels clicking across the tiled foyer downstairs means we are running out of time.



Two

Roger has perfectly trimmed dark hair that stands up in a neat line along the edge of his forehead, like a hedge. He also has sharp creases down the front of his khakis and fine, shiny driving moccasins that match his leather belt. His arms are tan from golfing; his face is tan from skiing in the winter and from summers manning the barbecue at his family's lake house. So, in short, he is just like every boyfriend Yorke has ever had, but with maybe a little bit more money, as I discovered that evening while waiting with my sisters on our front steps for a ride to the

club and he pulled up in the little red M3 Shane and I had parked behind earlier that day.

This manicured man is now standing with an arm wrapped tightly around my oldest sister's waist as the soft tinkling notes from the club's piano bar drift over to our table. Our middle school music teacher is moonlighting for tips. Hunching over the gleaming black baby grand in the corner, her frizzy hair bounces in time as her eyes, magnified to the tenth power by her thick, smudged glasses, trail along on the photocopied sheet music. She pauses a moment for applause at the end of each piece, then silently cracks her knuckles and starts in on another melancholy, boozy tune.

My dad sits at the head of the table, his smile beaming out into the room. My mother, to his right, dabs at her eyes, leaving dark mascara spots across her expensive linen country club napkin.

I look around the table, my wineglass at half-mast. We are supposed to be celebrating Freddie's graduation, yet only Shane and Evan, Freddie's boyfriend whom she is planning to dump at the end

of the summer so she can get buck wild during her year abroad, seemed truly surprised to hear Yorke's engagement news. They jumped up and clapped, giving themselves away as outsiders. The rest of us were already in on it.

Yorke could never keep a secret. Ever. She was always the one who guessed where our Christmas gifts were hidden each year. Then she would convince me, or Freddie, but usually me since Freddie kind of has an iron will, to come along on the expedition to uncover them.

If we refused, Yorke would find the gifts herself and then, afterward, pin us down and tell us what we were getting. I remember being under the stairs in my dad's office late one December afternoon when I was about eight, holding a big yellow flashlight while Yorke shifted boxes around and called out everything she found. "Dollhouse . . . board game . . . dresses . . . books for Freddie . . . paint set." My heart dropped and the flashlight bobbed every time she found another box.

For other occasions, she would tell you what a

present was just as you were starting to tear off the wrapping paper. It was like someone snuffing out the candles on your cake just as you were about to blow, your lungs full of air and your mind full of wishes and then whoosh . . . gone.

It didn't matter whom the gift was from or whom it was for; she had to tell. And not just us. I remember going to birthday parties as kids. Yorke got us invited to everything, as she is, and was even then, the most popular and social person I have ever met.

We would walk in the front door, wearing our matching but different-colored dresses, and Yorke would hand over our perfectly wrapped gift and announce baldly, "It's a baby doll." Then she would walk away to pin the tail on the donkey or join the circle of little girls with freshly brushed hair and pink dresses who were just dying to play with her and Freddie and I would be left standing, embarrassed, in the front hall with an upset mother and a confused little birthday girl.

She didn't grow out of it.

"Leah, you made the squad!" she screamed just

thirty minutes after I had finished my freshman pep squad tryout. We weren't supposed to know the results until the next morning, so did I mind keeping it a secret until then? "Leah, I heard you got captain!" she cheered, calling from her dorm room the next year, an insider even when she was on the outside. She knew before I did, before anyone else did, and of course she had to be the first to tell. It was the same thing with her engagement; she even had to trump herself.

We had been driving along in Roger's red convertible earlier that night, the smooth tan leather seats smelling new and expensive, his frat boy rock barely loud enough to be heard over the sizzle of the tires and the swirl of the warm June breeze. Freddie and I were squeezed in the back, our short black dresses fluttering, our legs angled toward the middle, knees knocking together, as we pulled out of our driveway for the short trip to the country club. Yorke lowered the volume on the power ballad as soon as we hit the street and turned around to face us.

“Guess what?” she gushed, and I leaned forward, gripping the side of her seat with my fingers. Roger gunned it just as she squealed, “Roger and I are engaged!” and she was snapped back into her seat, momentarily pinned down by the force of the engine.

I took this opportunity to look to my right at Freddie, who was sitting back in her seat, her eyebrows raised. She smiled at me and then turned her head to look at the passing countryside. I settled back. Of course she already knew. Freddie and Yorke are alike in a lot of ways, but not this one. Freddie can keep a secret. She’s like a vault.

Yorke swiveled back around, and I plastered a huge grin on my face as Roger jerked us into a higher gear.

“I was going to wait until we made the big announcement tonight at dinner, but I just couldn’t . . .” she said as she smoothed her hair back with her right hand, pausing long enough for me to see the weighty diamond sparkling on her finger. “Don’t say anything to Mother or Dad, okay? I mean, they already know, but still, act surprised, okay?”

“Okay.” I nodded, going along with Yorke’s scheme, like always. “Now,” I said with a big breath, “let me see that ring.”

Yorke held out her hand just as Roger took a wild right, the swing of the car pulling her fingers away from mine. I grabbed on to Yorke’s seat and steadied myself. I looked up to see Roger smiling benignly at me in the rearview mirror.

It seemed a bit dangerous to be crowded up near the front of the car with Yorke’s diamond, Freddie’s knees, and Roger’s testosterone, so I leaned back and listened to Yorke’s stream of wedding plans: cream roses, champagne cocktails, and strawberry dresses. Or maybe that was cream-colored dresses and strawberry champagne cocktails?

I looked out over the lake as we whizzed by. It was smooth, the water dark with splashes of sunlight trailing a boat or two. There were dads and kids out on the docks, tying up Sunfishes or just casting off for an evening sail.

We had grown up on that lake. Learned to swim, sail, and fish there. Spent our summers in

that water wearing matching but different-colored bathing suits.

Freddie is an excellent diver. She spent hours practicing off our dock, my dad in the water up to his neck, encouraging her. I used to watch how Freddie would bend her legs, how they would tense right before she pushed off, the way she kept her toes pointed as she hit the water.

She held my hand the first time I went to dive, our toes curled over the edge of the old wooden dock. When she let go, I sailed into the water. I knew what to do. I had learned all I needed to know from watching her.

Days and days went by when all we did was swim and lie on the dock, wrapping ourselves in our thick beach towels when the sun started to set, our hair still dripping from its sun-bleached ends.

My sisters were my best friends. We shared secrets, sandwiches, every minute of our lives, even a bathroom. I was jealous that Yorke got to sail in her little boat alone, that Freddie was taller than I was, that they both could French braid and do a

perfect cartwheel. I spent all my time trying to catch up with them and measure up. I still do.

Roger took a tight curve. I reached up, fingers tangling in my hair, and settled back with Yorke's news, waiting for the familiar feeling of jealousy to kick in.

Every time we drove past our old house on our way to the club, my mother would insist we slow down so she could curse the new owners. "Geraniums. How common," she would comment, her eyes following the house, her head motionless. "Mason," she would say to my dad, "did you see the color of the shutters?"

With Roger behind the wheel, there was no slowing down for the lake house, even though flashes of it appeared between the trees and then disappeared as quickly as the memories running through my mind. There was no slowing down, period. Freddie and I were going to be lucky to get out of this drive with our kneecaps intact. Summer already seemed to be rushing by, and it hadn't even officially started yet.

Roger slammed to a stop at the club's curved

entry, and my knees smacked into Freddie's with a sick thud. Our bodies flung forward until our seat belts caught and tightened us down.

Roger was out in a flash, not having said a word the entire drive. It seemed he preferred to communicate nonverbally through erratic gearshifting and sudden, violent braking.

He was around to Yorke's side of the car with his hand on the door before the engine even stopped. He opened it gallantly, she stepped out and kissed him, then he pushed the seat forward and held the door for Freddie. I was left to fend for myself.

Struggling with my seat belt and my wind-whipped hair, I didn't notice the hand held out for me until it was right there in my face. It was not the large, lumbering hand of my boyfriend. It was masculine, yes, but in a thinner, more energetic, knuckle-cracking kind of way.

I glanced up into green eyes with bits of brown dancing in them as I shook my hair over my shoulder, rubbed my sore knee, grabbed my purse, and then reached for the outstretched hand.

“Smooth ride?” he asked. A smile curved up one side of his mouth.

I laughed. When he wrapped his fingers around mine, a warm current of electricity flowed through me. I felt suddenly solid, as if my world had been rolling past me and it had stopped, right now, amazingly sharp and in focus as if I had just taken off my roller skates. I didn’t want to let go.

Roger appeared in front of us. His sharp creases and crisp lines were unaffected by his driving. His face was serious, and the key to the red M3 was swinging from one of his fingers. He dangled it and then finally dropped it. Those electric fingers snagged the key, breaking our hold, and my heart, midair.

“Keep it close,” Roger requested as he leaned in to read the embroidered name on the red nylon club jacket. He clapped his hand down twice on the broad shoulder next to mine and said, “Porter,” with a small smile and a folded five-dollar bill.

Then he cleared his throat, slid his hand up to check that his hair was at full attention, and

proceeded to circle his entire car once, admiring and assessing it before he reached for Yorke again and pulled her across the warm blacktop toward the stairs leading up to the club.

I could feel Porter's green eyes on me as I crossed the parking lot, my sharp heels stabbing into the soft tar that had spent the day in the sun.

My face flushed and my pace quickened as I realized that at this moment I was not jealous of Yorke, not at all. Not of her engagement, or her huge diamond ring, and especially not of Roger, a man whose shoes and belt matched the interior of his car.

I reached the stairs and paused, burning a memory in my mind, one that was all mine, that didn't involve my sisters.

His eyes, the green so bright, the sideways smile, the way it felt when he held my hand. My fingers tingled still, and I wrapped them into a fist, trying to hold on tight.

"Hurry up," my sisters called out to me from

the entrance, and I followed after them, one step behind. It was Yorke, Freddie, and then me, like always, up the curved stairs and into the club.

My parents lean in to each other, looking like the picture-perfect, if a bit inebriated, married couple, and give each other a quick peck on the lips before dropping their napkins onto the cluttered table and rising out of their chairs.

It is time for them to make the rounds, to say hello to old friends, giving people a chance to congratulate them on Freddie's brilliance. Time to spread the news of Yorke and Roger's engagement.

The lights are low in the private alcove my mother reserved for this special family occasion, the knotty pine paneling and framed mallard and drake prints muted by the candlelight and windows swagged with thick velvet drapes.

"Ready or not, Leah," Shane says under his breath. Beneath the long dark tablecloth he clamps his thick hand over my knee with such force that my front teeth knock against my wineglass just as

I am taking a sip. I start steadying myself for the impending approach of my mother.

She's making her way down the table, kissing everyone as she passes behind our chairs. My dad is giving out handshakes like a politician to his shiny pink family now full of expensive steaks and red wine.

I set my glass down and shove my dinner plate away. The meat, red in the middle because that is the way my family eats it, is untouched.

Strings of summer squash dangle from the tines of my heavy sterling fork. I moved the carrots and fancy piped potatoes around on the plate but didn't manage to actually consume any of them.

My mother's hand, cool and smooth, presses lightly on my right shoulder when she arrives behind my chair. My head is heavy, sloshing full of wine, and I feel slightly trapped. I attempt to cover up my plate with my napkin, pulling the edges of the napkin down over the thick steak. I'm kind of a mess.

She leans down near my ear. She is an

intoxicating mix of Chanel No. 5, grilled meat, and merlot. “And next year?” she asks, her eyes locking on to mine meaningfully before she finishes her thought. “Should I expect to be up there again?”

She lifts her glass toward the head of the table, where my sisters, the engaged and the graduating, sit wrapped in dark plaid wallpaper and cozy candlelight.

Avoiding her gaze, I watch the wine in her glass swirl. It coats the inside of the crystal, like a good wine should, before slipping back down into the bowl.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” my dad says with a rumbling laugh when he arrives at my side at last.

I lean toward her, and she gives me a quick kiss on the cheek, dismissing me. My dad catches her up into the crook of his arm, his dark suit coat crinkling against her as he pulls her away.

Reaching over Shane, I grab the sweating silver ice bucket from the middle of the table and dangle it by its curved handles in front of my face. There it is:

the dreaded coral lip print. I smudge it off with the back of my hand, looking past my curved reflection to see my parents in miniature, disappearing hand in hand into the crowd of tan faces, highlighted hair, and friendly smiles.

I feel Shane's hand slip from my thigh as I lean forward to set the ice bucket back down and spy Freddie near the end of the long table, hovering over the blown-out candles and half-eaten cake. Thick chocolate slabs are missing, but yellow roses still sit primly around the edges. It's just like our driveway, but in cake form. Freddie is calm and amazingly composed, considering that Yorke is stealing her hard-earned graduation thunder with an overstarched, shrub-haired frat boy and a diamond ring. I guess she's had a lot of practice at being second.

"Congrats, Freddie," I yell in her direction. She lifts her rosy face, and we raise our glasses toward each other. I down mine in one, the wine amplifying my pride and my volume.

Shane pushes back from the table, his plate

scraped clean, decorative garnishes and all. He grabs a bottle from the middle of the table and refills my glass with the dregs. Chucking the spent bottle upside down into the silver bucket with a splash, he holds up his empty glass and tips it back and forth in my direction, his fingers looking freakishly large on the thin stem.

“Shall we?” he asks.

Knowing we will need adults for any possible refills, he is eager to stay close to my parents. I nod and stand too quickly, my brain filling with booze until I slide sideways against the overstuffed country club chair and find myself sitting again, hands resting in my lap.

Shane reaches for me. I put my fingers in his, feeling no electricity, no warm tingling, just the calluses and rough skin left over from his championship baseball season. I let him pull me up.

“Hey, Rog,” Shane yells as soon as I am steady. His hand presses on the small of my back as we walk toward the end of the table. “I haven’t had the chance to congratulate you personally.”

Their hands meet like two leather baseball mitts, and Yorke looks ready to burst. You can tell they are measuring each other up. Looking at Roger's trim pinstriped suit and gelled bangs, I hope Shane wins.

Yorke reaches past Roger to hug me, maneuvering her way to get closer to the open dining room and the masses that haven't heard about her impending marriage.

She squeezes me halfheartedly with one arm, and her drink, brimming with mint and ice, drips down my back, soaking my dress and my hair. She lets go quickly, grabs Roger, and leads him away. She smiles back at me over her shoulder, dangling her drink in one hand and Roger in the other, before melting into a sea of sparkling silverware and well-fed families.

I feel my hair lying damp and sticky against my back. Thanks, Yorke. I lean over to wipe my fingers on the soft linen tablecloth.

"I am going to—" I start explaining to Shane, but he is busy dragging a chair across the classic

tartan carpet, pulling in close to Freddie with a big smile on his face, his teeth stained dark and grayish by the wine. He holds his empty glass out in front of him like it's some red plastic cup he paid three dollars for at a keg party.

Freddie and Evan are still sitting at the end of our table. Leaning in very close to each other, speaking in French, they are lost deep in a conversation. They have been in advanced languages together since the first semester of their freshman year, seriously dating since the second. Oblivious to Shane and the fact that they are huddling around the last bottle of wine and it's at least half full, their voices lilt and trill above the din. I wish Shane luck, knowing that the best he can do in French is a butchered version of "*Je joue au tennis,*" and head off for the bathroom.

As I pass the buffet near the front door, I swipe a handful of the pastel-colored dinner mints usually reserved for alcoholics and small children. I pull out the pink ones and drop the rest into a potted plant.

For years, at the end of every Friday night family dinner, I have secretly gobbled them down. The

first time they appeared on the buffet near the host stand, mounded up in that silver tray with a tiny silver caviar spoon, they sparkled at me like little candy diamonds. Yorke, bold even at eight, stepped right up and scooped a small spoonful for all of us to share. They were three perfect shades of pastel, just like us.

Huddled in a tight circle in a pool of light in the parking lot, we stretched out our hands and discovered that they were not blue, yellow, and pink, like our matching dresses. They were, under closer inspection, *green*, yellow, and pink, practically perfect but not close enough for Yorke. She threw hers down onto the pavement with a loud “Those are for babies!” and stomped off to the car, the heels of her little blue dress shoes clacking loudly along the blacktop.

The green candies bounced away, out of the circle of light that had given them up as impostors, and rolled off into the dark, lost under the bellies of our friends’ and neighbors’ cars.

I knew those candies weren’t for babies. I also

knew that Yorke wouldn't eat them just because they weren't blue, her signature color, and that there was *no* way Freddie would eat the yellow ones, not now.

I watched Freddie drop hers one by one on our way to the car, like a trail of bread crumbs on the blacktop. I held on to mine tight when my dad scooped me up and put me in the car, and I clung to them all the way home. Even though they leave your teeth kind of fuzzy and make your breath even worse, I have been eating them on the sly ever since.

In fair weather the dining room at our club opens up to a humongous wooden deck that overlooks the golf course and, beyond that, the lake. I veer to the left onto the deck when I should be veering to the right and into the ladies' room.

I step out into the evening air, and the sun is right now making its last stab at daytime, painting the sky the same bright pinks, oranges, and reds that flood Freddie's bedroom.

Leaning up against the railing, my hair still damp and my glass still almost full, I take a sip and

wonder if Paris really does look like a sunset or if that is just Freddie's interpretation. I guess I will find out eventually.

I'll probably go abroad like Freddie. My French is not nearly as good as hers, but Freddie had to overdo it like she always does and master the language in one semester. I don't have much interest in French, really. When I was picking classes for my freshman year, I had to pick a language, and both my sisters had studied French, so it seemed like the way to go.

I didn't realize it might lead to something someday, like actual French conversations or a trip to France. I am not sure if I even like French people. I am fond of shaved armpits. I detest stinky cheese. And I am pretty sure my hair won't work with a beret.

Yorke didn't go abroad, but she did get engaged to Roger. Hmm . . . nine months of smelling armpits on crowded European streets or a lifetime with a man who just might trim his hair with a hedge clipper. There must be another option.

I turn around, resting an elbow on the railing, and look through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows

that run the length of the dining room, searching the crowd for my sisters. The setting sun bounces off all the sterling, crystal, and glass. I narrow my eyes against the glare.

There they are, standing side by side, talking to the lady that lived next door to us at the lake house.

I move myself to the right until my reflection fits in and joins them. There is my hair, my smile, the way my hand covers my mouth when I laugh, my ability to make chocolate chip cookies, my best back tuck, the dress I am wearing right now, the pride I should feel when I am named valedictorian, and the sparkle I will have when wearing my engagement ring for the first time.

Gazing through that window, I see my sisters reflecting my past and presenting a prefolded map of my future. No need for me to open it up and navigate. I can simply follow the path they have laid out for me.

I drain the rest of my drink, the tannins biting at the back of my tongue. I shift, then turn and walk away, leaving my sisters and an empty glass behind me.



Somewhere down around the seventeenth hole, where the driveway curves in pretty close and almost hugs the fairway, I see the M3 speeding smoothly along in the distance, its bright redness moving through the cultivated green of the golf course.

Walking slowly through the soft, short grass, my sandals hanging loosely in my hand, I stop and watch it slow down before it whips a quick U-turn and heads back toward the club.

I hear it roaring toward me over the last hill. I align my toes along the edge of the asphalt drive and wait for Roger, trimmed and pressed, to squeal to a stop in front of me.

The car rolls up and comes to an easy, effortless stop at the tip of my toes. It's Porter. His wild brown hair sticks up all over his head, thick and messy, and his green eyes look me up and down, burning through me, finally resting on my bare feet.

I tip my head to the side, fingers lost in my hair, already twisting as I ask, "What are you doing?"

Not the smoothest of lines, but I am surprised to see him there, his hands looking so familiar as

they rest along the top of Roger's steering wheel.

"Keeping it close," he says as if it were obvious. He smiles that crooked smile again and stretches his long arms out far and wide around the interior of the car, almost grazing the passenger door with his fingertips.

I feel bolted to the ground.

"Umm . . ." I flick my hair over my shoulder and eye the clubhouse, a couple of greens behind us. "I think he meant close to the building."

It is just dark enough that the candles on the tables in the main dining room have been lit. They look like fireflies caught in a really big jar.

"Nah," he says, shaking his head, very sure of himself. "I think he meant me. Keep it close to me."

"Highly unlikely," I say, dropping my hand.

Shaking the loose broken hair from around my fingers, I look him straight in those sparkling green eyes and make the understatement of the century—"Roger is pretty attached to this car."

"I can see why."

He revs the engine a couple of times.

“This car is hot.” He drags the word out with a slight southern twang so it sounds more like *h̄h̄hawt* and leans forward to rub the dash in a very possessive way.

I watch, mesmerized, expecting to see a streak of phosphorescence trailing behind his fingers.

“Want a ride?” he asks.

I laugh, because I am not that easy. But God, do I want to say yes.

I realize I am still watching his hands. I don’t know what I am waiting for, but I can’t stop staring. I snap my head up and drag my eyes away.

I shake my head and say, “I’ve been there before,” with a nod toward the backseat.

“True,” he agrees. He rests his chin on the tips of his fingers as if he is solving an equation and breathes in quickly, the solution found. “But not with me,” he says.

My first impulse is to move toward him like a sex-starved teenage zombie, arms out, neck exposed. But I can’t. I look away from him, my eyes drawn back toward the club and the lights

flickering from inside. Want to. Can't.

"Thanks," I say, refusing him as politely as I can with another shake of my head.

Dropping my sandals over my right shoulder, I hold tight to the thin leather straps and start making my way back toward the clubhouse.

"Your choice," he says with a shrug as he puts the car into gear and rolls away slowly. Superslowly.

So slowly he paces me, one hand comfortably slung over the steering wheel, his green eyes watching my every move as I walk along the side of the road.

I turn and watch him too, crossing one arm over my chest, bare feet soft and silent in the grass, trying to look unfazed by the challenge.

One side of his mouth lifts, and he gives me that crooked smile, making the wine flush on my cheeks even pinker. He stops the car. I walk toward the door, my steps light, our eyes locked. My fingertips brush against the cool silver of the door handle, and suddenly it's ripped away from me. I gasp and yank my hand back as Porter speeds off.

He squawks to a stop about five feet away and tries to look nonchalant. He slides his arm along the curved back of the passenger seat, turns toward me, and waits patiently as I cover the ground between us on foot.

I reach for the door again, tensed, ready to pull back at the first sign of movement, mentally accepting the possibility that my fingers are about to be removed by force.

Porter revs the engine, watching me closely. I hear the sound of the cylinders making their upward climb again, and I go for it, grabbing the handle. I scramble, pull the door open, toss my sandals onto the floor, and heave myself into the car, all arms and long blond hair and boobs escaping from my strapless dress as I crawl onto the seat, breathing like a maniac.

I look up from my undignified, hunkered spot and see Porter facing me, grinning appreciatively, my boobs practically in his face, his arm still resting lightly along the back of my seat.

The car never moved. Damn, he got me.

“Nice entrance.” He smiles, slipping his left hand onto the wheel, the other one leaving the back of my seat to reach down and put the car into gear.

“I’ve been working on it,” I say breathlessly, following his green eyes to my cleavage, which is spilling out everywhere, practically filling the car with soft white flesh.

With a faint smile, I pull up at the top of my dress while I pull down on the hem and simultaneously turn around in my seat to face forward. Porter steps on the gas, and we are gone, streaking down the road, away from the lingering lights of the club, and off, into the night.

Later, back inside the M3 with my head leaning against the leather headrest, I watch the dark golf course roll by. I am surrounded by my sisters, the air is warm, the location familiar, yet I feel off course, no longer on the map.

My eyes are trained on the horizon, on the slight rise just off the twelfth hole, to the left of the green. I wait impatiently, wishing Roger would

drive faster, so I can see the exact spot.

I think I might be holding my breath, because I know that there, just off the green, invisible from the road but burned vividly into my memory, under a large oak with branches that covered us like a canopy, there are imprints, the grass flattened into crop circles by our bodies.

Squinting through the darkness, I smile as we cruise by. I close my eyes and sink down, remembering the cool grass, soft and springy beneath my head as I rolled onto my back. Porter was splayed out next to me. My face and lips were red, hot, swollen, and a bit bruised. He leaned up on one elbow and lowered his head down to mine, ready for more.

“You smell like mint,” he had whispered as his lips grazed past my ear, teasing me.

I arched up as I kissed him, his tongue slid smoothly into my mouth, and my brain raced to keep up, to stay in control. I was pulled under again, awash in the sensations, lost.

My fingers had curled into the grass beneath

me, as his fingers trailed lightly down my arm, his touch leaving a throbbing current, flowing from soft inner elbow to wrist.

I was breathing fast, hot against his neck. Then I leaned my neck back as he kissed me from under the curve of my chin to the top of my dress, and his hand no longer rested solidly on my stomach but gently pressed up, pushing what was already almost falling out the top of my dress to the very edge.

I felt his tongue graze along my hot skin there, and I struggled against the rising tide and came up for air. I pushed up against him and pushed him away. Porter rolled off me, flat onto his back, arms flung out to the sides with his face to the sky. Panting.

I am not the type of girl to do something like that. It is not in my nature. I was prom queen last year. I will be homecoming queen in the fall. Both my sisters were. I date the captain of the football team, just like Yorke and my mother, too, when she was in school. I'd like to say I have a lock on the whole valedictorian thing next year, but with Valerie

around, I am keeping my fingers crossed.

I don't need to drive off in a suspiciously borrowed car and end up making out with some random guy. It was a whole year before I even let Shane put his hand up my shirt. He tried many, many times, and I fought him off, protecting my turf against what I knew would be an inevitable march forward. It's boobs first, then down the pants, undies off, and then, after that, everything is fair game.

We spend late Friday nights and most Saturday afternoons scrimmaging in my bed, above the sheets, with Shane slowly gaining ground. But what my boyfriend spent more than twelve months achieving inch by inch in my bedroom, Porter had plundered in a few sweaty minutes on the fairway near the twelfth hole.

I had lain there, looking up at a sky so blue it was almost black, listening to Porter's breathing as it returned to normal, feeling mine finally slowing, too. All those weekends and tangled after-school specials with Shane, combined, added up, and totaled, did not feel as good as this one brief grassy

smash with Porter. I felt like I just got a big drink of water when I didn't even know I was thirsty. It was so good it scared the shit out of me.

"Leah . . ." Freddie says softly from the snug seat next to me, her voice bringing me back to the car, to the warm night rolling past me, but I am unable to turn my head and drag my eyes away from the fairway until I feel her hand on my shoulder.

"Leah," she says again, a little louder this time, with a small, surprised laugh, "you've got grass in your hair."

She runs her fingers lightly through my hair and holds out a few blades. She drops them, long and green, into my palm, and I close my hand around them, running my knuckles softly against my bruised lips, searching for the scent of mint between my curved fingers.

Freddie is watching me closely. Yorke looks over her shoulder, glancing back from the front seat with her eyes wide.

I open my hand. The grass is a striking green against my pale palm as we pass under an amber

streetlamp, as green as Porter's eyes. Roger shifts into gear, and a breeze drops down, swirling through the convertible. It lifts the grass up and blows it away. I watch it disappear. My sisters look away as I lower my hand and slowly settle back into place.