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THE TEAM

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

THE TEAM

BY CAMILLE WILSON

The Team contains the first four chapters of a young adult novel in progress. After a house party, a student, Colin Turner, supposedly dies of alcohol poisoning. However, following further inspection, the police suspect foul play and decide to investigate the incident as a homicide. This murder mystery trails four female college ultimate frisbee teammates, Birdee, Sloan, Cookie, and Trix, as they attempt to cope with the death of their fellow student and their potential involvement in his death. Although the girls are wrongly suspected of murder themselves, when it seems they may have been among the last to see Colin alive, they feel obligated to discover the truth of what happened that night. The plot explores the concepts of guilt and culpability, while simultaneously playing with the concept of the team dynamic through the shifting of character perspectives with each chapter.

1. Birdee

Birdee chuckled the disc to the side as her teammates ran onto the field to congratulate her. Three points in a row, one more to tie, two more to win. She jogged off the field, slapping hands as she went. She unscrewed the top of the first water bottle she recognized on the sideline and chugged, half the water pouring past the sides of her mouth and onto her jersey.

Her quads were bordering on a cramp, so she searched for her backpack among the strewn shoes and warm-up jackets. Advil and Gatorade, which she'd finally remembered to bring, would solve all of her problems. About ten feet from where she remembered leaving them, she spotted her things. She lifted her baby blue Nike hat, sleek and smooth in the front, perforated in the back, with one hand, then used the damp hem of her shirt to wipe her forehead with the other.

She heard the stampede of cleats pounding across the field behind her. Usually, she didn't bother with her phone during games, but something drew her to check this once. The first thing on the screen was a message from her roommate saying, "Weren't you at this party?" *I guess the news is out*, thought Birdee. The message included a link to an article from the school paper – "Student Dies After House Party." She had just regained a regular breathing rate and now her heart was racing again. She clicked the link. In the couple seconds it took to load, she wondered if the irregular thumpings in her chest were considered heart palpitations.

With too much adrenaline flowing to read line by line, she skimmed and then went back over the article to make sure she'd understood correctly.

Student Colin Turner was pronounced dead this gloomy Sunday morning at 9:23 A.M. due to complications from alcohol poisoning. Turner attended a party at an apartment on Westview Thursday night. He showed signs of alcohol poisoning

and was taken to the emergency room early Friday morning. He appeared to be in stable condition, but died of alcohol-related issues this morning.

Birdee dropped her phone like it had suddenly burned her shaking hands. She wondered if it was her fault.

“Birdee,” her coach called out.

“Birdee,” her team echoed.

Hands grabbed her under the armpits and pulled her onto her feet. She couldn’t feel the strain in her quads anymore. She couldn’t really feel anything except a light buzz that seemed to run through the length of her body. A hand came down on the brim of her hat, momentarily blinding her and sending an additional buzzing sensation through the top of her head. She lined up on the left side of the end zone, the last to join her six other teammates. The closest one, bouncing on the balls of her neon-cleated feet, nodded to Birdee with a quick smile before sprinting away from her down the field.

Still numb, Birdee took three heavy, staggered steps to follow and collapsed onto her hands and knees, her banana, crackers, and fruit snacks from earlier that day all coming back up and out onto the field. The vomiting dragged feeling back into her body as if it had been stuck at the bottom of her stomach. She felt tears form and slide down her face, mixing with her sweat, as she waited for her teammates to notice they were playing down a girl.

“Injury!”

Birdee just balanced there on her hands and knees, barely able to hold herself up over the small pile of mush on the ground. Too ashamed and exhausted to look up, she didn’t know who was coming to her rescue until two plain white cleats with blue laces appeared in front of her.

“Come on. Let’s get you out of here.”

Cook pulled Birdee up. Birdee leaned into her, briefly wondered how the mess would be cleaned since they were playing on turf, and then let herself be shuffled away from the game and toward the bathroom. Syd trailed the two, carrying Birdee's water bottle and a concerned look.

In the outdoor bathroom, girls from other teams made sympathetic noises and well wishes before clearing out. Cook cleaned Birdee up with wet paper towels, starting with her mouth, then moving to the stains on her chest and finally her forehead and eyes. Birdee let Cook clean and tried not to make eye contact, sniffing occasionally. Syd looked on, periodically offering water, which Birdee refused until Cook insisted she drink some.

She adored Cook so she didn't mind. Cookie, or Cook as her teammates called her, was like the life of the party, a star student, and a mom all rolled into one, not to mention a powerhouse ultimate player. At least, that's how Birdee thought of her. She always seemed genuinely positive. Even when they were losing and the rest of the team was falling apart, her competitive side would be more prominent, but she never seemed mean or angry. During her freshman year, Birdee had been mentioned her dilemma about getting to the airport to make it home in time for her grandmother's ninety-fifth birthday at the start of spring break. Cook had overheard and offered to drive her, despite needing to leave around three in the morning to catch the six A.M. flight. Later Birdee found out that Cook hadn't slept that night since she'd been up studying for her last exam before the break. Desperate to pay her back, Birdee invited Cook to dinner in the dining halls often, and although there was nothing particularly special about those meals, they were some of Birdee's favorites that year.

"What happened?"

Birdee erupted in another wave of tears in response to Syd's question. Cook grabbed a handful of paper towels and tried to contain the rush.

“She’s probably just a little dehydrated and stressed,” Cook said.

“The game is pretty close right now, so if she could –”

“Thanks, Syd,” Cook interrupted. “I think I can take it from here.”

Syd hesitated, squeezed Birdee’s shoulder in support, and then ran out of the bathroom back toward the field. Rubbing her back, Cook balanced in a crouch next to Birdee.

“He’s dead,” Birdee choked out.

“What? Who’s dead?”

“Colin. That guy we tried to help at the party on Thursday.”

“Oh.”

Cook dropped her hand and sat back on her heels. She slowly stood up and walked over to the mirror, putting both hands on the edge of the sink. She took deep breaths. Birdee wondered about the mental conversation she must be having. Always so composed, Cook visibly steeled herself and turned back to Birdee.

“We should talk about this later.”

Cook led her back to the field, no longer supporting her weight. Both teams were packing up. Based on the loud music coming from one sideline and the somber, slow movements of Birdee’s team on the other, she guessed they’d lost. The twins on the opposing team, widely known as the most annoying players in the region, started making choking noises as Birdee and Cook walked past. Remembering the article, Birdee involuntarily heaved again, but nothing came out. *My pride has taken a tremendous beating today*, she thought. Cook said something to the twins, but Birdee hurried away too quickly to hear.

Upon returning to her team, she was bombarded with a smattering of, “Are you ok”s and “What happened”s. Birdee quickly scanned her teammates until she found Sloan. They made eye

contact for an instant before Sloan turned away. Birdee knew she must have heard the news too. Birdee's eyes started to fill again. Too scared to open her mouth, she just nodded to everyone and pulled her hat down a little lower. She sat near her things with her back to the team and started pulling at her left shoelace with one hand. Concerned, but not knowing how to handle the situation, the team pretended like everything was fine and went on about their normal conversations – where to stop for lunch and how much work they hadn't done over the weekend – but in slightly lower voices.

Coach Hartford didn't quite know how to handle the situation either, but he figured it was his obligation to try. He came and crouched next to Birdee and she noticeably tensed. He began with a compliment about how well she'd played. She whispered "thanks" to her feet. When Coach Hartford saw her wipe another tear from her eye as she tried to build up the courage to apologize to him, he abandoned all noble plans of comfort and decided to tell her he would check in tomorrow to see how she was doing. Both were relieved as Birdee nodded and went back to picking at her laces.

Trix came up behind Birdee and kissed the top of her head. Moving around to kneel in front of her, she took Birdee's face between her hands and tilted it up to look at her. Birdee continued looking down out of the corners of her eyes to the point where she started to get a headache from the angle.

"Are you actually ok?"

Birdee met Trix's gaze and then looked away again, slightly shaking her head. Trix moved her thumbs across the tops of Birdee's cheekbones to wipe them dry and then swiveled around to sit beside her. Trix pulled Birdee close with one arm.

They both sat there, Trix making drawing little circles on Birdee's arm with her thumb. As the rest of the team began to collect themselves, one by one they deposited Birdee's belongings into or around the bag in front of her and touch her shoulder or head as they made their way to their respective cars. It was as if Birdee was in mourning and her athletic tape, running shoes, and Gatorade were flowers being deposited on the coffin that was her backpack. Realizing Colin's family would soon be going through that same process, Birdee began to shake again. Trix stopped drawing circles and squeezed Birdee's arm to steady her before Syd, Trix's driver for this tournament, gently called her away.

"I'll see you at home," Trix assured her. "I'm coming over after I shower."

She kissed the top of Birdee's head again and jogged off the field with her bag.

Birdee finally removed her cleats and slid into the pre-tied running shoes that had been left next to her, her socks already damp and crusting. She threw everything else into her backpack and wiped her face again with her sleeve before pulling her hat back down. When she stood up and looked around, she realized only the members of her car were left standing by the fence exit, Wren, Pepper, and Web.

They all walked to Wren's old silver Honda Civic with Birdee a few steps behind. Pepper hopped into the front seat and threw her backpack on the floor in front of her. Wren climbed into the driver's seat and pointed to Pepper's cleats. Pepper groaned and moved them into the trunk, leaving a trail of turf in her wake. Birdee smiled a little, but it didn't quite feel normal again, so she stopped.

About two hours into what had turned out to be a generally quiet and somber car ride, Birdee tucked her head into the space between the backseat and the door and closed her eyes.

"Is she asleep," Birdee heard Wren's voice ask minutes later.

She wasn't, but she didn't feel like moving or talking to indicate otherwise.

"Yeah, looks like it," Web's voice confirmed from the other side of the backseat.

"Good, she probably needs it."

"If she wasn't fine, she should have said something before the point so we could put a line on that wasn't going to lose the game. We all know that play doesn't work without her."

"Definitely not ideal."

"Not ideal? We're about to have a shitty seed going into regionals thanks to her."

"Hey, Web," Pepper chimed in from the passenger seat. "Maybe try not to be an asshole sometimes."

"I'm just saying if you can't play, then tell someone before you screw us all over."

Birdee focused her energy on remaining motionless so as not to give away that she had heard everything. She had always thought Web took the sport too seriously. It was ultimate frisbee for god sakes. Birdee found it annoying, but it usually worked in the team's favor, so most of the time she pretended she didn't mind.

Now, she envied her. Birdee would have loved to spend this time remembering specific plays of their games over the weekend, analyzing holes in their coach's strategy, and trying to find someone to blame for their loss. Instead, with her eyes still closed, she replayed the events of the party, wishing she had never gone in the first place.

Thursday night she sat on her couch, already showered and bundled up for the night. She had planned to get ahead on homework before the tournament weekend completely disrupted her productivity like it always did. She opened her planner, checked her long to-do list, and decided to start with the readings for her philosophy class. Halfway through reading the second

paragraph for the fifth time, Trix called. Birdee was close with a lot of her teammates. Her relationships would fluctuate depending on how games and post-practice meals went throughout the season, but Trix usually remained the closest.

A minute after hanging up, Birdee was changing out of her t-shirt and sweats into a crop top and skintight black jeans. Trix was a bad influence. She'd told Birdee they would study together after the Saturday games to make up for the work they wouldn't finish thanks to the party. Birdee knew almost for a fact this would not happen, but she pretended like it was still a possibility and started applying eyeliner.

Trix, being the free spirit that she was, knew an endless stream of random people and was constantly getting invited to parties like this. Walking into the apartment, Birdee momentarily felt the need to find and thank the host, had she even known who it was, like her mother had taught her. But this was college and nobody did that. The party was packed, and Birdee immediately thanked herself for choosing a crop top over the flannel she'd considered as an alternative. Elbowing their way into a space at the Rage Cage table, Trix and Birdee spotted Sloan on the other side who pointed over to Cook talking in the corner to a guy Birdee didn't recognize. Trix and Birdee evaluated the guy then approvingly raised their eyebrows at each other while Sloan laughed.

They played a few rounds and the same kid ended up with the bitch cup twice in a row. He was a good sport about chugging, but he started to get sloppy. Sloan stood next to him at the table. While waiting for the cup to come back their way, Birdee noticed the guy slide a hand under Sloan's flowing shirt. She didn't seem to mind. But as his hand worked its way further down her back, Sloan seemed to mind. Every time she tried to shoot, he would knock the cup out from under her shot. Sloan let it slide twice, but the third time, she took a cup and dumped it on

his head to a round of “oh”s. The guy licked as far around his mouth as he could, slurping up the alcohol that had just been poured all over him. He ran a hand through his almost shoulder-length hair, and it stayed slicked back with the sticky liquid dripping down around his ears.

“Oh, feisty.”

He wiped his eyes and then grabbed the belt buckles of Sloan’s jeans and pulled her waist to his, trying to kiss her.

“Asshole,” Sloan said as she slapped his hands away.

She shoved him as hard as she could and left the table. Someone came up behind them and apologized to Sloan before dragging the guy away.

“That’s it, Colin,” he said. “You’re done, man.”

He dragged Colin down the hallway. Birdee figured the apartment must be his.

Trix and Birdee followed Sloan in support. They both agreed the act of Sloan pouring her drink on someone was something they would usually hear she’d done, but had never actually witnessed for themselves. Birdee figured a short night was probably for the best, but instead of taking a right toward the door, Sloan made a left toward the kitchen and pulled a beer out of the fridge. Birdee and Trix did the same. Sloan yelled over the noise that some idiot wasn’t going to ruin her night. Birdee shrugged while Sloan and Trix high-fived. Sloan had gotten hit pretty hard in practice earlier that day and Birdee was worried about a possible concussion.

“You probably shouldn’t be playing drinking games anyway,” Birdee said. “Take it easy just in case.”

Sloan ignored her and wandered back into the more concentrated areas of the apartment. As they pushed past people, they came across Colin again, this time as he was beginning a vodka

handle pull. The small circle of guys around him started counting. Colin began to lower the 59-ounce bottle at “three,” and Sloan, shouting “weak,” tilted it back up to some cheers.

“I’m pretty sure his friend doesn’t want him to drink anymore,” Birdee yelled to Sloan over the music.

“He’s a grown man,” Sloan yelled back. “He can handle himself.”

An hour or so later, a sober Cook found them on the couch to say she was leaving with the corner guy she had been talking to. Sloan told her not to forget her bra in the morning. Cook shook her head, then left. Shortly after, Birdee, Trix, and Sloan decided to leave as well. They ran into Cook near the door and walked out together, the corner guy leading the way, with Cook’s hand in his. Another guy at the end of the driveway to the right called to him. He kissed Cook’s hand and said he’d only be a second before letting go and walking to his friend.

Cook turned back to face her friends who were all smirking. She rolled her eyes, before spotting a figure slumped over on the front steps of the apartment next door. It was Colin again.

“Great,” Cook said. “Here, help me with him.”

“Ew, why,” Trix complained.

“It’s the right thing to do.”

“No,” Sloan said. “Absolutely not. Someone else will help him eventually.”

“You *did* pour beer all over him,” Cook reminded her. “Maybe it will be good for your karma.”

“Cook, you go,” Birdee said. “We can do this.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” said Birdee, eager to please. “Can’t be that hard.”

Cook hesitated before agreeing and catching up with Corner Guy down the driveway.

Sloan grumbled something about Birdee owing her as she looped an arm under Colin. Birdee moved to help Sloan, and Trix reluctantly did the same. They struggled to drag him back into the party, Sloan rudely yelling at people to move the whole way. They tossed him onto the bed in the first room. Trix systematically grabbed a trashcan to slide near his face, turned Colin onto his side with help from Sloan, and left a Solo cup of water on the floor. Birdee took off his shoes and left them at the foot of the bed.

“He feels kind of cold,” she said. “We should put a blanket on him.”

Birdee folded the comforter back across Colin so that the underside was facing up. If she ignored the trashcan and his still wet, disheveled hair, he only looked like he was asleep. Still, she felt uneasy.

“Is this normal,” Birdee wondered out loud. “Maybe we should call someone just to make su—”

“This kid would be passed out on the street right now if it weren’t for us.” Sloan said, annoyed. “Plus he needs to learn some manners. We’ve done more than enough. I’m going home and going to sleep. You’re the one who said I should take it easy anyway, right?”

Birdee hesitated, and then followed Sloan and Trix out of the room. She owed it to Sloan not to care. It was like a breakup between two friends, but with no actual attachment to Colin, it was easy to wholeheartedly choose Sloan’s side.

They closed the door and left the party. Sloan lightly kicked a recycling bin on their way down the driveway.

Birdee opened her eyes as the car came to a stop outside of her apartment. She was the first drop-off and she wondered if they all just wanted to be rid of her. She thanked Wren, extracted her backpack from under two duffle bags in the trunk, and walked into her apartment.

After dropping her things outside the bathroom door, she turned on the faucet. The pieces of her ripe uniform made a pile in the corner between the door and tub. Without any attempt at scrubbing herself down, she just stood under the hot water then slowly slid down along the tiled wall. It had been so effortless for her to choose Sloan's approval over a stranger's life. Hyperaware of her own body, she sat with her knees tucked in, the water from the showerhead raining down on her in the spotlight of the light above the tub, and waited.

2. Sloan

Sloan never cried. Everyone knew this. Many times she'd been commended for her high pain tolerance, and many times she'd been questioned about her lack of feelings. But she just felt well balanced. Crying meant something was off. It was a way for the body to reset itself back to a level of homeostasis. She did yell though, which she felt was a quicker, more effective way to return that balance. This was how she'd received her nickname. Somewhere on a Google doc, buried in the email inboxes of the older girls who'd already graduated from the team, was a chart with a list of names. At the end of the row dedicated to Sloan, the final box says, "Never cries," a thin black arrow points to "is a hot head," another arrow, "tears must turn to steam," another arrow, "McSteamy," parentheses "Grey's," and a final arrow followed by a bolded name in all caps, SLOAN.

As Sloan sat in the passenger seat next to Cookie and sensed her eyes welling up, the first thing she felt was panic. She closed her eyes tight, hoping to tuck the tears back in, but this act only unlatched the floodgates. Before long, half of Sloan's right sleeve was soaked from trying to staunch the steady stream. She'd turned as far toward the window and away from Cookie as she could, but her sniffing gave her away. Sloan cringed at every sniffle, dreading the moment when Cookie would ask her what was wrong or try to comfort her, partly because she wasn't in a talking mood, and partly because she wouldn't know how to answer.

Cookie had been generous enough to offer to drive Sloan to her appointment on Sunday after their tournament ended since the fields had been somewhat nearby. Having sustained the concussion on Thursday, she wanted to get her CT scan over with as soon as possible so she could move on. She was glad they'd been able to put their other teammates in different cars for the ride home so only one person would have to see her like this.

The male British voice on the navigation system chimed in, telling Cookie to take a right in five hundred feet. When the music faded back up following the navigation, it jumped a couple levels louder than before, almost drowning Sloan's sniffing out. Surprised, she gained enough composure to look over her shoulder toward the driver's seat. Cookie glanced over as she made the right turn and gave Sloan a small smile. Cookie wasn't going to ask what was wrong or try to comfort her. *Thank God for Cookie*, Sloan thought for the first time in her life.

Sloan and Cookie shared the same rookie class, but that was about it. Thinking back on their freshman year, Sloan could remember having lots of meals as a group, but couldn't remember spending any time with Cookie alone. They'd been friendly, but not exactly friends. Sloan considered Cookie a good player and a decent captain. She respected her for that, but they hadn't needed to interact much on the field (Sloan mostly played offense and Cookie defense), much less off the field. There was nothing truly wrong with Cookie in Sloan's opinion, aside from the fact that she was an overachiever and seemed to do it with ease. Cookie was the type of person who would go to office hours just to chat with her professors. At least that's how Sloan always thought of her. Sloan had her occasional difficult class, but did well in school and didn't feel the need to showcase it like Cookie seemed to. She didn't need the same recognition and she took pride in that. She was better in that sense.

Cookie pulled up to the turnaround in front of the building and told Sloan to check in while she parked. Sloan walked in with just her phone and an old pair of earphones wrapped around it. The woman at the front desk greeted her, but she made a beeline for the bathroom down the hall. Staring into her own puffy, red eyes in the mirror, she felt humiliated. *One more reason not to cry*, she thought to herself. *It's ugly*. As she viciously scrubbed her face with soap and cold water, she wondered if she should eventually try to get her tear ducts removed just to be

safe. She decided if she won the lottery or invented a multi-million dollar tech company and started itching for reconstructive surgery, she'd have that done first.

Moderately satisfied with how she looked, she left the bathroom and walked up to the front desk. According to her nametag, the woman who'd greeted her was called Susan. She wore her strawberry blonde hair in a bob and Sloan thought she must have stepped into the lobby of a sitcom hospital. This lady couldn't be any more of a "stereotypical nurse." Susan even spoke with a southern accent. Sloan quickly filled out the paperwork and handed it back to Susan. Was it a sitcom nurse she was thinking of, or just one of those annoyingly sweet neighbors on a sitcom? Now she was confused.

"Do you have any metal on you, dear," Susan asked, smiling.

"Yeah," Sloan replied, pointing to her ear.

"Those will have to come out."

Sloan took a seat and started taking out the first of her seven ear piercings. Cookie plopped down next to her with her backpack practically bursting at the seams. Sloan glanced at it, and then looked up at Cookie who shrugged.

"I didn't know how long we would be here, so I brought everything."

Cookie dug out her water bottle from inside her backpack and offered it to Sloan who still suffered from shaky post-cry breaths, although now they occurred further apart. Sloan accepted some of the water and then went back to picking at her ear. Cookie took her near-empty bottle and walked off toward the fountain next to the bathrooms.

Sloan had only been able to get four earrings out so far and her frustration grew by the second. She could feel her ears reddening and beginning to throb from the irritation. Sloan looked down into the partially open backpack. *I wonder if she has any snacks in there.*

“Meredith Henderson?”

Cookie sat back down just as another nurse came from behind double doors, calling Sloan’s name. Sloan signaled to the nurse that she was almost ready. The nurse nodded and walked over to speak with Susan.

“Uh, can you help me,” Sloan asked Cookie without looking at her. “I’m supposed to take these out.”

Cookie slid closer to Sloan and examined her ear.

“It’s a little red.”

“I know,” Sloan said, annoyed. “Can you get it, or not?”

Within a few seconds, another piercing was out. The last two took a bit longer. At this point, Cookie was so focused on Sloan’s inflamed ear that her face was only inches away. Sloan, trying to remain still, felt the tickle of Cookie’s evenly paced breath against her cheek. It almost alternated perfectly with the throbbing of her ear. She fought the urge to shiver. With a final tug, Cookie pulled out the last earring and Sloan immediately put a hand to her ear to rub it.

“Thanks,” Sloan said.

She stood, one hand cupped around her seven earrings, which she realized would need to be cleaned. How long had it been since she’d changed them? She took a quick survey of the room and her eyes landed on the coffee table a couple feet in front of their chairs. Cookie must have been watching.

“Here, I’ll take them,” Cookie said as Sloan started to reach out toward the table.

“Oh,” Sloan sounded surprised. “Thanks.”

Sloan dumped the slightly rusted earrings into Cookie’s hand and walked to meet the nurse who led her down a long hallway to take her vitals.

About thirty minutes later Sloan found herself on a thin, hard plastic table, slowly rising and sliding backward into the CT scanner. Instead of distracting her, the deafening whir of the machine finally offered some peace from the mental fog she'd been in since her concussion Thursday afternoon. The nurse's voice – Sloan had already forgotten what she'd said her name was – from the speakers pushed through the noise of the machine and reminded Sloan to stay as still as possible. An image of her lanky, pale body sliding into the circular entrance of the scanner popped into Sloan's head. *It's like I'm dead and being cremated.* Moments from the party came flooding back – the chanting, kicking ping-pong balls back under the table, the suffocating air. How long had Colin's handle pull been? Twenty-something seconds? Much of the night was blurred around the edges, but as if she had been someone else, she could clearly see herself tilting the bottle back up as Colin tried to lower it. A blurry flash of Colin's limp body came to the forefront of her mind. Would he be cremated?

"Meredith?"

Sloan then realized the table was sliding back out. She looked around wildly, remembering she was at a hospital, not back at the apartment party. Did that count as a hallucination? Fully removed from the tunnel, Sloan sat up and pulled her hair back into a loose bun on top of her head. *Lock it up, Mere.*

"Meredith," the nurse said, entering the room. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, sorry. Just got lost in my thoughts."

"We'll try it again, but you need to stay still so we can get a clear picture of what's going on up there."

Sloan nodded and eased back onto the bed, relaxing into the small adjustments the nurse made to her positioning. The nurse left the room again and within a few minutes, the bed was

sliding back into the tunnel. Sloan's thoughts quickly jumped from cremation to Colin to the events of Thursday night again. She realized she'd tensed up. Her head started to hurt. Her eyes watered again, but she was all cried out.

Finding an outlet for her frustration had long been a talent of Sloan's. Vowing not to move, she bit the inside of her cheek and directed all of her thoughts at the girl who'd put her here in the first place. Tall and strong, Sloan could take a hit, but when it came to dangerous plays like the one she'd experienced, she was the first to remind everyone that ultimate was a non-contact sport, even though her particular style of play involved quite a bit of contact. Starting at eight years old, she'd watched her grandfather deteriorate from Alzheimer's. She used to wake up in the middle of the night after dreaming that she suddenly could not speak or move with her brain was sitting outside of her body, just out of reach. She heard Alzheimer's skipped a generation and feared she would have to experience the same slow torture when she became gray and old.

Alzheimer's was a distant danger though, and after her grandfather's funeral, the brainless nightmares slowly subsided. Sloan began to fear for her brain's safety all over again during her sophomore year in high school. Marina, the older sister of Sloan's friend, Michelle, who she'd since grown apart from, took a knee to the head during a soccer game her junior year. Sloan hadn't witnessed the actual concussion, but she'd seen the footage and practically all of the aftermath. Marina had sustained a special kind of TBI (as Sloan had gotten used to calling it) that caused her to undergo a personality change. Marina, and most of her family members for that matter, went through varying stages of depression, struggling to cope with Marina's new preferences and tendencies, as well as an extended period of loneliness as she and her old friends slowly realized they had next to nothing in common anymore. Sloan only occasionally went to

Michelle's house after that because the environment was just too uncomfortable. Sloan worried an unfortunate knee at the wrong place and time during a game would completely change her life someday too. Irrational, maybe, but definitely possible.

The table began to slide back out from the tunnel, bringing Sloan back to reality. As she emerged, she wondered what happened to cremated bodies after incineration. How was the ash collected? Surely they couldn't get every piece out. Would Colin become little specks of dust, or a decaying corpse six feet under? A reminder image of Sloan tipping the bottle back up to Colin's mouth popped into her head. Would he still have met the same fate without that incident? She paused a minute, shivered, and then dismissed it. He was already bad before that anyway. She'd only wanted him to suffer a little and he'd provided her with an easy opportunity to ensure a bad hangover. She didn't mean for it to turn into anything serious. If he hadn't been such an asshole this never would have happened. A wave of heat flowed through Sloan's body. She cursed him for making her feel like this, and then tried to take it back, not knowing if his afterlife location had been assigned yet, if that's how it worked. But she no longer wanted to think about Colin or his burial or his family and friends watching it happen.

The nurse came in and told Sloan she could expect a call from her doctor with the results. Sloan walked back out to the waiting room to find Cookie asleep with her head leaning back against the seat, mouth hanging open, and her neuroscience textbook dangerously close to sliding off her lap. Sloan smirked, but admitted that she enjoyed seeing Cookie like this, like a normal person. She removed the textbook from Cookie's lap before waking her.

The drive back felt much shorter than before, but Sloan hated every minute of it because she could only think of what a mess she'd been on the way there.

"Hey, Cook?"

Cookie raised her eyebrows, signaling she was listening as she flipped her blinker on and changed lanes.

“My little breakdown earlier. Do you think we could not mention that... ever?”

“Done.”

Cookie smiled. Maybe she'd enjoyed seeing Sloan out of her usual element too.

As they rounded the corner of Sloan's block, she could see her parent's minivan already parked outside. Sloan's parents insisted on taking her home, despite still having class that week, until they decided for themselves their little girl was ready to face the world again. It took many texts and phone calls just to convince them to let her stay with the team over the weekend and watch the tournament from the sidelines. Though perhaps it would have been better to go home anyway. Nothing frustrated Sloan more than seeing her team struggle and not being able to do anything about it. Her head throbbed nonstop throughout those games.

Sloan's parents had told her they would arrive about twenty minutes ago, but she still held out a little hope that they had gotten held up. No such luck. As Cookie pulled into Sloan's long apartment driveway, both of her parents climbed out of the car with concerned looks. They searched Sloan's face through the window as if the effects of the concussion would show up like a scar on her forehead. As soon as Cookie put the car in park, they rushed at Sloan who'd barely pulled her other foot out of the car before she was enveloped in an awkward group hug.

Sloan extracted herself, mumbled that she needed to grab her bag upstairs, and hurried away, leaving Cookie alone with her parents. From her bedroom window, she could barely see the edge of the driveway where Cookie's car idled while she spoke with Sloan's parents.

Cookie's gestures were animated. What could they possibly be talking about?

Being in college allowed Sloan and the rest of her teammates to live in a bubble where they gave off the illusion of self-sufficiency because their families were almost never present. Only interacting with Cookie and their peers for a while had allowed Sloan to forget how good Cookie was with real adults. Leave it to Cookie to stay and speak with her parents when she could just as easily and understandably head back to her own apartment. But of course she was a parent-pleaser. She probably loved this stuff.

As Sloan began packing the bag she'd told her mom she only needed to collect from her room, she realized without Cookie, her mom would be up here packing right along with her. Sloan shuddered at the thought of being an only child and having all of her parents' attention to herself, especially her mother's. She probably would have dropped out of high school, and moved overseas, unable to wait until college to get away.

Sloan adored her younger sister, Rachel, and now wondered if their relationship had bloomed early on due to the temporary moments of peace they allowed each other when distracting their parents. Sloan was exaggerating, but felt the exaggeration was justified. When she was three, both of her parents cried when they dropped her off at preschool, even though she would only be away for a half-day. When she was eight, they both volunteered to coach her soccer team. Neither of them had had any prior experience with the sport, but they suddenly became experts when Sloan showed some interest in it. When she was thirteen, both of her parents had known she'd started her period within the hour she'd found out herself. Rachel, of course, had her own similar list of fun parent stories.

Growing up, Sloan's parents had both attended all of her parent-teacher conferences. At least one of them had been to every sporting event she'd ever had, even the traveling ones, up until college when she either told them not to come, or took the safer route and didn't tell them

when or where her tournaments were happening at all. Even so, they had their ways. Some of Sloan's friends would tell her she was lucky to have parents who wanted to be such a huge part of her life. Over the years, she'd come up with the safest and truest answer to this acknowledgment – it's a blessing and a curse.

Sloan peeked back out the window before heading down. Cookie had the full attention of Mr. and Mrs. Henderson. Sloan had to admit, Cookie had her perks.

"Just had to grab your bag, huh," her mom said as Sloan approached them. "I told you she hadn't started packing."

Before finally heading to her own apartment, Cookie gave Sloan a quick courtesy hug, but gave her a tighter, more meaningful squeeze before stepping back and turning toward her car, which she had turned completely off in the time it had taken Sloan to pack.

"Send me updates," Cookie told her, and after a short pause, added, "so I can let the team know how you're doing."

"Sure," Sloan said. "Thanks. For driving me and everything."

"Anytime."

After Sloan's parents graciously thanked Cookie as well, they walked to their minivan. Her mother had hooked her arm around Sloan's waist and forced them into an uncomfortable step, trying to account for their difference in height. Her father walked beside them, carrying her bag. They gushed about Cookie on the way to the car, saying how nice she was and what a shame it was they hadn't gotten to know her better over the years. Sloan nodded and hmm'd at the appropriate times.

Once settled in the car, they reversed out of the parking spot and headed down the street. Cookie's car pulled into place behind them, finally having finished texting, or whatever it was

that she was doing on her phone. Sloan's mom turned around from the passenger seat and grabbed Sloan's hand that had formerly been resting on her knee, the other cupped under her chin with her elbow perched on the adjustable armrest.

"How are you, sweetie, really?"

Her mother asked in earnest. *She hasn't gotten the chance to probe me in a while. This could be a long car ride.* Sloan turned around to see Cookie's car turn left behind them, back toward her apartment and the campus, as Sloan and her parents turned right.

"Well, let's see. I probably failed my last midterm, got a concussion that makes my brain feel like a potato, oh, and I killed a guy, so I'd say I'm just peachy. Thanks for asking, Lynn."

3. Cookie

Cookie stared at her reflection in the laptop screen as the timer counted down from fifteen. She became disgusted upon realizing the figure with the dead stare and slightly open mouth reflected in the screen was actually her. She closed her mouth and pulled her comforter higher and tighter around her neck. The last seconds ticked by and the screen came back to life. Cookie's reflection became much harder to see and much easier to bear, so she relaxed again and forgot herself.

She would need to get ready for practice soon. Ten more minutes. She waited fifteen, and then slipped a finger out from under her sheets to slide across the mouse pad. 4:39. She should have gotten up nine minutes ago, but she knew she would still be able to make it on time if she left at 4:45. She would give herself another minute before getting ready.

Three minutes later, she was still cocooned in her sheets. She calculated. If she got up now, she'd just need to change her shirt, socks, and hang her cleats from her backpack. She could jog and still make it there in time. Two minutes later she was still in bed. *You're a captain, damn it! Get up!* And yet, she couldn't. The tension in her body rose until the clock said 4:58 and she knew there was no way she was going to practice. Having made the decision to stay home, she felt relieved and calm as the next episode loaded.

As Jess complained and pitied Cece's modeling career on Cookie's screen, she began to wonder about her own career and where she would end up now. Thinking about her future used to make her giddy. She could hardly sit still fantasizing about all the people she was going to save and how much she'd love going to work every day; how she and her coworkers would complain about their long shifts, but they would always be worth it. Now she just felt her breath

shortening and her throat growing tighter. She didn't deserve to get into med school after the events of the past week.

On her way to class yesterday morning, Cookie had seen the infamous shaggy brown hair of a kid walking in front of her. Once he turned around and she could see his face, she exhaled, only then realizing that she'd been holding her breath. It wasn't Colin. She'd learned to recognize Colin's face from the school newspaper and online publications, which seemed to be posting new articles every day, each simply rewording the same old information. Of course it wasn't Colin. Neither she nor anyone else would ever see him walking around again because he was buried, forever stuck inside a coffin. Or an urn. Or scattered in the sea. She didn't know what his family had decided to do with his cold body. She didn't know anything about them. She didn't know anything about *him*. And yet, she felt she'd played a part in one of the most defining and final moments of his life.

Still flustered, she entered her lecture hall eight minutes early and took her usual seat on the left-hand side of the front row. She was hoping to run into her TA, Megan. On the first day of class, Cookie had felt a kinship with Megan after the first few words of her introduction. She had only graduated a couple years ago, so there was barely an age gap, and they just seemed compatible. Feeling antsy already, Cookie waited until two minutes before the professor usually started speaking, and then decided she wouldn't be able to pay attention. She stuffed her laptop into her backpack and on her way out, walked straight into Megan, accidentally causing Megan to spill her coffee onto the chiffon blouse she seemed to have in every color of the rainbow.

"Sorry," Cookie whispered, mortified. "I'll grab you another one."

She hurried past Megan before hearing any kind of response and went directly to the nearest coffee shop. *I hope to run into Megan and then I literally run into her and spill her*

coffee? Good to know God has a sense of humor, Cookie thought while waiting in line. She ordered almost without thinking. Megan constantly joked about her caffeine dependence. Once she mentioned how she could tell from the taste that the barista had added one less shot of espresso than she'd asked for. It had been weeks ago, but Cookie remembered the specifics of the drink easily – large cappuccino, extra shot, soymilk, dry.

While she waited for the drink, she mindlessly organized the packs of honey and sugar at the counter. She noticed a few people glance over at her. She supposed this must not be something everyone did, and remembered the meaning behind her nickname. Her rookie year, the team had caught onto the idea that she liked things to be in order, immaculate. Immaculate Baking Company in Flat Rock, North Carolina is famous for one thing, baking the world's largest cookie. And then she was Cookie.

“Colin!”

Cookie looked up from the sugar packets, panicked. An older-looking man in a powder blue dress shirt approached the counter and took his coffee. Of all the names. She stepped aside as he approached. He nodded at her in thanks as he reached for the cream. Up close, she noticed little white hairs sticking out of his ears and wondered what color his hair used to be. Colin didn't seem like a fitting name for an older man. Cookie looked away from him. The Colin from the party would never have the opportunity to be an older man.

As soon as she heard her name, she grabbed the drink from the counter and practically ran back to her class. Upon seeing the door, she realized she hadn't fully thought through this plan. How could she walk inside and give Megan a drink she didn't necessarily want, and then exit the class without drawing too much attention? She took a deep breath, entered, and eased the door closed behind her. Megan sat in her usual corner cluster of TA's. Cookie awkwardly

walked up to them and whispered as sincere an apology as she could muster in the uncomfortable moment while handing over the drink.

“In case any of you were thinking of bribing your TA,” the professor said as Cookie walked back toward the door, interrupting his own lesson. “Don’t. Bringing them coffee will not be enough to make up for skipping lecture and a bad midterm grade.”

Half of the class chuckled nervously, and sweat beads immediately broke out on Cookie’s forehead and chest. There were no good options. She couldn’t sit in on the lecture now, she couldn’t leave, and she couldn’t defend herself without looking like a smart aleck even though she’d scored in the ninety-fifth percentile on the last midterm. She looked to Megan for support and saw that she was as red as Cookie felt. Megan placed the new coffee on the floor, away from her things and poised her fingers over her keyboard, determined to look unfazed and ready to take notes on the next slide. Cookie left, mortified. On her way down the hallway, she mentally planned every potential class schedule that would allow her to drop the class and still graduate on time. There were none.

After recovering from the initial embarrassment, Cookie realized she couldn’t talk to Megan now, and she hadn’t quite figured out her backup plan. She knew she technically had a whole team of twenty-two girls for support, but she was a captain. As soon as she’d taken over captain duties, she felt a new barrier had been constructed between she and her teammates, even the ones to which she used to feel closest. Cookie had a hunch it was all in her head, but that didn’t make it seem any less palpable. Talking to a teammate simply wasn’t an option.

Cookie wandered aimlessly through campus. She thought about Colin and Birdee and Sloan and Trix and the rest of the team and herself. She thought about med school and how the

first rule as a doctor was “do no harm.” It was a command. She hadn’t technically done any harm that night, but she also hadn’t done any good. Was there a difference?

Last summer, Cookie had stayed at school to help run orientations for new students. Almost an entire day was dedicated to alcohol education – how to take care of yourself, how to take care of others, and of course the rules of consent. She knew exactly what she should have done to help Colin. She would have known to check for signs of a lower body temperature or for abnormally slow breathing. She’d spent that whole summer surrounded by people who all knew to look out for these things, so maybe she’d just gotten careless and forgotten that not everyone had the same knowledge at hand. She didn’t know what would have happened if she had stayed, if she would have actually remembered her training, but there’s a chance she could have saved a life – her first one.

Cookie didn’t usually dwell on her mistakes and shortcomings. Whenever she had trouble letting something go, she remembered a homily she’d heard in church once when the priest had told the congregation not to live in the past. “Do not put a question mark where God has already put a period.” But surely this was different. It had to be.

What made Cookie’s skin crawl was her reason for leaving that night – to be with some guy she’d recently met, just in case it turned into something. Just in case. Cookie hated even thinking about it, but the reason she always kept her options open was because if she was being honest with herself, she wanted her shot at love, true love. She’d seen her sister, Beth, fall in love and even her brother, Sean, who’d always said he would never settle down. Around Christmastime a few years ago, Cookie and Sean sat on a curb outside Baskin Robbins eating their ice cream cones – Snickers for her, Pralines ‘n Cream for him – which had become their little tradition. He told her then that he was going to propose to his girlfriend at the time, and

Cookie had cried watching and listening to him describe how excited he felt. She'd never loved or envied her brother more than in that moment.

Cookie had dated occasionally, but it never worked out. As consolation, everyone always said no guy would ever be good enough for her. They meant it as a compliment, but essentially they were telling her she was either doomed to loneliness or doomed to dissatisfaction. She always responded as if sadly flattered, but just like any other time someone told her she couldn't do something, her competitive drive kicked in and she ached to prove them wrong. When she went out, she didn't throw herself at people, but she wasn't as hesitant as she probably should be. And Thursday night was no exception. She knew she wasn't going to find Prince Charming at any of the parties she went to, but what if she did? It was cheesy, but she couldn't help herself. Maybe she'd seen one too many Disney movies. Maybe she'd seen just enough real-life couples that seemed to have it figured out. Maybe it wasn't something she'd seen and she was just wired to have this hope, for better or for worse. Well, obviously worse. In this case, it was just selfish.

Cookie's friends usually labeled her the mom of the group, sometimes the fun mom, but still the mom. She took care of them, giving rides and making dinner for the younger girls on the team, occasionally checking in on everyone. They all thought she was just being nice. And wasn't she? Cookie admitted that she felt good about her reputation, but even if those things didn't positively affect the way people saw her, she believed she would act the same. She reminded herself that had she known this was going to happen, she would have stayed to help Colin, but not knowing it, she didn't. And she hated herself for it.

Being so involved, Cookie had a lot of friends. They were drawn to her positive energy and her general love of life. She almost constantly exuded a glow, but sometimes, like when her dog developed a brain tumor and they had to put him down, Cookie would let her worst thoughts

consume her. Controlling this was one of her strong suits, but on the rare occasion she couldn't help but sink into these dark places, the people closest to her would get scared. They had no clue how to deal with her when she was like this because they had never needed to. And practice makes perfect.

Her phone vibrated. She pushed her laptop slightly off to the side and inched forward so she could look over the side of the bed at the lit up screen below. It was Coach Hartford. He must be wondering why she had missed practice without any notice. Cookie figured she should call him back when she was feeling more up to it. She needed to come up with a good excuse. She sent the call to voicemail. Almost immediately, a new notification popped onto the screen. Another article about Colin.

In a recent development in the death of Colin Turner, sources say the police are now looking at what had originally been deemed a fatal accident, as a homicide. The police department gave no comment toward any leads or theories besides simply stating that a thorough investigation would follow.

Cookie shoved her phone off the bed, back onto the floor, and rolled over to face the wall. Now there would be an investigation? Cookie knew next to nothing about the law, but she was pretty sure giving poor aid to someone with alcohol poisoning could not be considered a homicidal act. It might have been stupid, but not murder. Cookie opened her eyes and scanned her wall, connecting each imperfect paint bubble with her finger. Failure to act surely couldn't be considered a homicide, unless that's not actually what happened. Cookie pondered the possibility that her friends had done this on purpose before actually realizing what she was thinking. She shook her head firmly. Her friends were not capable of murder in any capacity. Cookie rolled back and forth to tuck herself into the folds of her comforter as snugly as possible, closed her

eyes, and took a deep breath. When nothing goes right, go to sleep. For a brief moment, she wished she never had to wake up and deal with her problems. Then she thought of Colin.

4. Trix

Trix noticed her feet slapping loudly against the concrete as she rounded the corner of the grass fields at the center of campus and reminded herself not to run like that or she'd have to deal with shin splits again. Without breaking stride she unhooked her backpack from her left shoulder, and in one swoop, swung it around her back and used the momentum to throw it over the fence ahead of her. She jumped at the fence, threw her legs over, and hopped down, falling just to the left of her backpack, picked it up, and continued jogging with it hanging off her right shoulder. Just as she reached the far field, the team began their usual chant, the official start of practice. Syd leaned out of the huddle with a smirk on her face and shook her head at Trix who responded with a two-fingered salute. Arriving at practice only a couple minutes late from class was pretty good in her book.

After cleating, she sprinted the first half of the warm-up jog around the field to catch the back of the pack. No longer focused on getting to practice, she was finally able to think; the rest of the warm-up was habit. She caught a glimpse of Birdee's cleats in the swarm ahead. She and Birdee had been in almost constant communication since the tournament and hearing about Colin, but still hadn't been able to meet in person. Birdee was at the front of the pack though and Trix didn't want to talk about everything in front of the whole team. She'd wait.

Wren called out the first exercise of the warm-up. Trix looked around curiously. Cook usually led the warm-ups. Jogging over, Trix took a spot in the line next to Syd. She rushed through a couple lunges to catch up.

"Hey Syd, where's Cook?"

"No idea," Syd said. "I think Coach Hartford's calling her right now."

Trix glanced over toward the heap of bags, extra clothes, and water bottles piled up in the corner of their designated field. Sure enough, Coach Hartford was slowly pacing back and forth with his phone to his ear. Trix went back to her lunges, and Syd chatted about her day, specifically a rude customer to whom she'd had to give a free drink after supposedly ruining her order. Trix only listened halfway. Syd, the only one on the team whose nickname just never stuck, was usually in a good mood and fine to be around, but they didn't seem to have much in common besides their sport and their team. This made for good small talk and awkward silences when the small talk had run its course. In essence, they had a practice-only friendship and Trix didn't really care to change that.

During the first water break, Trix clapped Birdee on her lower back as Birdee bent down to get her water bottle. She looked up at Trix through her legs and smiled a sad smile that sobered Trix immediately. The rest of the team was oblivious, or at least pretended to be. They all knew about the party and that some of their teammates had been there, but nobody knew what actually happened. Aside from a few small private conversations and messages, they didn't know how to deal with it as a group, so they kept quiet at practice. Birdee stood and took a sip from her water bottle, then tossed it back onto her bag. Trix watched, and almost felt annoyed at how frail her friend looked.

During their throwing drills, Trix partnered with Web and Coral. Instead of counting the stall, when guarding Trix, Coral kept asking questions about Birdee and details about the party. Trix usually felt neutrally toward Coral. She was talkative and friendly, but extremely nosey. So she was only annoying when she was pumping someone for information she had no business knowing. With each iteration of the defensive drill, Coral's questions between back and forth sprints to Trix and Web became more breathless. But the girl was persistent.

“How is Birdee taking it? She looks bad.”

“She’s fine.”

Coral ran across the space to defend Web, and came chasing after the disc once it was thrown back to Trix, next question ready to fire.

“Did you see him die?”

“No.”

Trix threw the disc with a little too much force toward Web, who caught it and then took a moment to rub the sting out of her hands. Trix wondered what it must have felt like for whoever did see him die. She was sorry about the whole situation, but she wasn’t distraught. She felt about as sad as she would feel upon hearing about any death of a person she didn’t know. The loss of life is always hardest on the friends and family. Seeing as Trix wasn’t part of either of the groups, she sympathized, but continued on with her own life. She couldn’t do anything now anyway. What was the point in dwelling on it?

“Do you think Birdee will go to jail?”

“For what?”

Coral sprinted over to Web, then came sprinting back half a minute later, panting.

“I don’t know. Manslaughter or something.”

“Shut up, Coral.”

Trix only provided the minimum amount of information, supplying one-word answers and grunts whenever possible. She threw the disc back to Web almost as fast as she could receive it to keep Coral away. Web continued to rub her hands, but after five consecutive throws like this, she gave up and called across the space, asking Trix to put more touch on her throws.

Finally, Wren shouted the next drill in which the team would be split into two big groups instead of a cluster of small groups. Trix let out a huge sigh, which everyone mistook for her distaste of the new drill. Wren sent daggers in her direction. Trix ignored her. Coral trailed right behind Trix, speaking into her ear, and Trix swatted at her like a bee.

“Cook’s not here, Sloan is home thanks to her concussion, and Birdee’s a mess. God, this team is such a shit show these days.”

Trix whirled on Coral, and deliberately enunciating each word said, “For once, could you fucking not?”

Coral shrugged, and continued in front of Trix to join one of the two lines for the drill. Trix watched her in disbelief. How could someone so nice be so goddamn annoying? Then she walked pointedly to the opposite line. Coral didn’t notice.

Trix was a second-year in school, but this being her rookie season, she was experiencing everything frisbee-related for the first time, including this mid-season slump. The older players had complained about it before, but she hadn’t noticed the so-called slump affecting anyone until today. Everyone seemed a bit lethargic and clumsy, which slightly hid the fact that Birdee was so far below her usual level of play. Over the next two drills, Trix felt like she was watching a blooper reel. Birdee turfed the disc, forgot her role in basic plays they’d been practicing all season, and tripped three times when she was usually light on her feet. After the last fall, she slowly picked herself up from the ground and took a deep breath, something Trix had noticed she did when she was becoming emotional. She watched Birdee walk over to Coach Hartford and tell him something while she interlaced her hands and put them over her head, something she usually did when she was trying to recover after a hard sprint. Coach Hartford awkwardly patted her

shoulder and nodded. Then Birdee jogged over to the team's pile of things and sat down to untie her cleats.

Trix followed, pretending she needed water. When she reached Birdee, she realized Birdee had only been able to untie one shoe because her hands were shaking just as they had been at the end of the tournament over the weekend. Trix crouched down next to Birdee and grabbed her hands to steady them. Birdee looked down at their hands. Trix squeezed them.

"I can't do this," Birdee said, letting out a shaky sigh.

"Want me to walk you home?"

Birdee shook her head. She removed her hands from Trix's and finished untying her cleats and organizing her bag.

"Thanks though. Let me know what I miss."

"Well, I'll walk you home anyway."

Birdee nodded.

They had been close early on. Birdee had even named Trix at the naming meeting, which is why Trix already knew the meaning behind her name. Rookies usually had to spend a year in the dark about their nicknames, but Birdee was proud of her work, and it wasn't hard for Trix to tease it out of her.

On the way to a pre-season tournament last year, she'd told the story of how she used to babysit, and when she deemed the kids too wholesome, she'd act out elaborate murder mysteries with their Barbies or Legos, complete with rape and betrayal. This led to the game Clue, then Colonel Mustard, then "General" since that was another rank in the Army, then General Mills cereal, Trix is a General Mills cereal, and finally Trixie. The irony of the slogan "Trix is for kids," and the initial story that started the chain worked out nicely too.

They walked in silence, reaching Birdee's block and continuing past her apartment without hesitation. The wind cut through Trix's loose reversible and she tensed her upper body to counter the breeze. She moved stiffly, the same way she'd walked after the three-day tournament last month, the tournament where she'd finally been able to prove herself and earn a spot on the starting O-line. She'd never worked harder in her life, especially feeling like she was a step behind everyone for having started the sport a year after most people on her team did. It felt good; mind and body in sync, everything falling into place at last. With every sore step she'd taken after that weekend, she'd felt stronger. Now, she felt quite the same way, but without any sense of accomplishment.

Next to her, Birdee let out a quick fierce breath through her nose like she always did when she was frustrated and couldn't find her words.

"We were just trying to help," Trix said in a comforting tone, hoping she had guessed the source of Birdee's frustration correctly. "We didn't do anything wrong."

"We clearly didn't do anything right either," Birdee said immediately. "And that's not the point. Someone is *dead*."

They had somehow ended up in a park Trix hadn't known was in the neighborhood. Birdee kicked at the gravel on the path while Trix walked in the grass next to it.

"Don't you get it?"

Trix was startled at the volume with which Birdee threw the question at her. Trix almost never felt aware of the one-year age gap between them, but now it seemed painfully obvious. She felt small. She pulled on the belts of her backpack, tightening her shoulder straps. Her steps parted the damp grass, leaving the edges and tops of her shoes slick and shiny.

Trix glanced up and Birdee raised her eyebrows expectantly, waiting for a response. Trix didn't know what she was supposed to say. Birdee lowered her eyebrows and turned away, shaking her head. Birdee had almost nailed the look of disappointment Trix's mother had given her after any grade school report card with less than straight A's. Rounding the outskirts of the park, they were back on a road that Trix recognized.

Instead of feeling remorse like she expected Birdee would want, Trix's blood, formerly cold and slow, coursed through her veins at boiling temperatures. *Who the hell does she think she is trying to tell me what morals I should have*, Trix fumed.

They finished their walk in silence at a much faster pace than they'd begun. Birdee said a terse "bye" when they parted ways, which Trix returned with a silent nod.

Back in her own bedroom, Trix fell onto her bed, still dressed in the same clothes she'd worn to practice, and pulled a pillow over her face, lacing her arms around the outside to hold it in place. She held her breath until the back of her throat burned. Trix quickly allowed herself to repeat the events of the night to see if maybe Birdee had a point. They'd clearly done Colin a favor by moving him off the steps outside. After dragging him into the first bedroom they reached, Trix remembered saying she'd seen people in just as poor conditions before. He only needed to sleep it off. She went through the normal routine – trashcan, water, recovery position – it wasn't her first rodeo. With everything in place, just before leaving the room, Trix remembered saying, "There. We're golden."

So they weren't exactly golden. She started to think maybe Birdee was onto something, but decided against it. You could make anything "the cause" for anything in your mind. It simply required a little creativity.

As Trix sat contemplating her innocence, there was a knock on the door. It was a little late for someone to be showing up unannounced. One roommate was in the shower and one was blasting music in the kitchen, so Trix assumed the responsibility of opening the door to the stiff man and woman waiting outside.

“Dylan Walsh?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m Detective Cooper, and this is my partner Detective Robins. We have a few questions to ask you about the party you attended on Thursday night. Would you mind coming down to the station with us?”

“Right now?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Why?”

“We just need your statement for our investigation.”

Trix thought back to every episode of crime television she’d ever watched. Right now, she should probably ask for a lawyer, or just shut her door. Her thoughts flashed to Birdee. This would set her straight. If she didn’t want to believe Trix when she said they were innocent, maybe Birdee would believe the police.

“Fine. Can you give me a second?”

Trix entered her bedroom and grabbed a sweatshirt from the pile of clothes camouflaging her desk chair. Her roommate, Cindy came into the room in her underwear with a towel wrapped around her head while Trix was busy looking for her phone.

“Hey,” Cindy said, sliding back the closet door.

“Hey,” Trix replied without looking up.

“Have you been keeping up with that stuff about the kid who died last week?”

“Yeah, I’m actually going to give a statement about the party right now.”

“A statement?”

Cindy pulled the towel off of her head, her damp hair slapping against her back. She came over to Trix and grabbed her arm, eyes wide enough Trix could tell they were more football-shaped than spherical.

“Dylan, you know they think someone murdered him, right?”

“What are you talking about? He died from alcohol poisoning.”

“Well, apparently not,” Cindy said, rushing to find the web article as proof. “Or at least that wasn’t the only factor.”

“Shit,” Trix whispered as she skimmed the article on Cindy’s phone.

“Oh my God, what if you’re a suspect?”

“I’m not. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

With that, Trix regained her resolve. She remembered leaving her phone in the smallest pocket of her backpack, pulled it out, and headed to meet the detectives.

“I have nothing to hide.”

Trix attempted to ask the detectives questions about why they needed her specifically, but after two vague replies, she gave up and rode the rest of the short drive to the station in silence. Detective Cooper held the door to the building open for Trix and Detective Robins. Trix followed Detective Robins down a narrow hallway, Detective Cooper bringing up the rear. They turned a corner to a small, silent waiting room and Trix saw Birdee and Sloan waiting among some other kids who looked vaguely familiar. A guard was standing in the corner watching over

them. Birdee looked like she'd seen a ghost and Sloan looked sick. Trix was still taking in the scene when a door to a side room opened and Cookie exited. She greeted Trix politely.

“Ms. Walsh?”

Trix looked to Detective Robins.

“Come with me.”