

Kelsey

As I passed by the cafeteria worker with my tray of undercooked pizza and heaping pile of lettuce that was supposedly a salad, she gave me a little half smile. “Hi, Kelsey.” *Great, you really know you’ve reached loser status when the lunch lady knows your name.* I stepped out of the line and surveyed the lunch room scene. I had come too late to secure my usual table alone in the back corner. Instead, it was occupied by a group of overly happy freshmen girls whose giggles could be heard clear across eight rows of tables. I sighed as I continued to look around. I must seem like such an idiot, just awkwardly standing here, wishfully thinking that maybe someone will catch my eye and invite me over to their table. But unlike everyone else in this crowded cafeteria, I belong nowhere. I turned my head to the overcast sky and the rough pavement outside the window. *I guess I’ll just eat outside today, and pray that the rain holds off.*

Nicole

“Ugh, why is Kelsey sitting outside like a smoker or something?” Annabel’s high-pitched, singsong-y voice pierced the airwaves, and I fought the urge to cover my ears. I wish she would just leave her alone; doesn’t she have anything better to talk about? Like her new boyfriend of the week or something? *Oh no, I didn’t say that out loud, did I?* I could feel Annabel’s eyes, glaring at me as if expecting an answer. “Yeah, what a psycho.” I added, hoping I sounded convincing enough for her. The truth was, I didn’t really hate Kelsey like the rest of my friends did. I know what it’s like to be her, to be looked down upon by all of your peers, to be made fun of and pushed around like your feelings don’t even exist. *Sheesh, Nic, get a grip. Being all touchy-feely and acting sorry for losers is not what got you here.* I looked around at my über-popular best friends. At Annabel, our fearless leader, who was at the same time the most

intimidating and most caring person I know. Her looks could kill, but one smile from her could brighten your whole day. Sitting to her immediate right is Sophie, captain of the girls field hockey team and singles state champion in tennis. Then there was Jenny, president of student council, and Kyla, the prettiest girl in the entire school. Without them, I would be no one. So as they continued to laugh and gossip, I stole one last glance at Kelsey, sitting outside with the black hood of her sweatshirt up to block out the rain. This time, I joined right in with my friends. *I hope they never find out.*

Kelsey

Just my luck. The heavens opened up and rain began to fall fast and hard. My safe place was not so safe anymore. I picked up the hood of my sweatshirt and relocated to a spot underneath a small oak tree. At least then some of the rain was blocked. The biggest downside to my new eating spot was that I now had to face the cafeteria and meet the eyes of all the people staring at me, wondering why on earth someone would be outside in this weather. As I picked up my soggy slice of pizza and opened my mouth to take a bite, I was startled by a high-pitched cackle, easily discernible through the glass window as the laugh of Annabel Romero. I gently placed my pizza back on the Styrofoam tray and picked my head up. Five heads were turned in my direction. I quickly averted my eyes to the wet asphalt in front of me. *Nothing to see here, just some loser girl trying to enjoy her lunch in peace.* I cautiously lifted my eyes again. *Wonderful, they've stopped staring like I'm some freak show at a circus.* I could tell by the way that Annabel was gesturing out the window that she and her clone friends were still talking about me. Some people might say I was being paranoid, but I know better than to trust those bitches. Suddenly something inside me changed and I watched their ongoing conversation with

heightened interest. An amused smirk formed on my lips. *Ha, look at them. I love how they just keep on talking, without ever pausing to think if any of their little stories hold any truth.* Just then, Nicole O'Shaughnessy's eyes met mine. She looked ashamed, almost apologetic. But her conscience didn't hold up too much longer before she went right back to gossiping with her friends. I took one last good look at them before going back to my waterlogged pizza. *Annabel, Sophie, Jenny, Kyla. I know something you don't know.*

Nicole

The bell rang to signal the end of the lunch wave, and I slung my Victoria's secret messenger bag over my shoulder. As I headed out into the hallways, I pushed right through the crowds of underclassmen and annoying band couples to reach my locker in the middle of purple hall. "Hurry up, out of the way dorks!" A group of geeky freshmen guys with zits on top of their zits and matching pairs of oversized glasses sheepishly backed up against the lockers, clearing a path for Annabel to storm through. "Geez, Annie, you're such a bitch," Sophie teased with more than a hint of admiration in her voice. Annabel's reply was drowned out by a loud commotion towards the end of the hall. I stood up on my tiptoes to try to see over a crowd of junior boys in their red and white letterman jackets. *Ow, my calves. Being 5'2'' definitely has its downsides.* From my lower level, I could see a slim, unrecognizable figure being shoved against a locker. As I pushed my way through the small audience that had begun to form, I made out an article of clothing on the victim. A black sweatshirt. *Oh shit, not her again.* Kelsey slowly got up, and it was evident in her defeated expression that she was trying to mask the pain. She tugged the hood of her sweatshirt over her head, fixed her long dark hair so that it shrouded her face, and turned to walk off in the other direction. "What's going on over here?" Officer Russo arrived at the

scene, and the knot that had been forming in my stomach began to loosen. “Nothing, I, I just tripped and fell against the lockers.” Kelsey muttered timidly. *Why does she always try to take the blame?* I shook my head. *No, it’s not her fault. It never is.* Thankfully Officer Russo had been working in a school long enough to know that this was not the case. “You two, come with me.” He nodded reprovably, gesturing at Kelsey’s tormentors, senior lacrosse players Louis and Nick. As they made their way to the administrative office, Louis turned around for one final blow. “Watch out, Kelsey, the police aren’t always going to be there to protect you.”

Kelsey

I sat in the back corner of my Precalculus class, scraping at my fingernails to peel off the already chipped black polish. My shoulder was throbbing, but I couldn’t cry. I couldn’t give people the satisfaction of knowing they’d gotten to me. *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Whoever came up with that saying obviously never attended high school.* As I absentmindedly traced the initials “J.R. + A. C.” engraved on my desk with my finger, I felt a light tap on my shoulder. “Kelsey, they just called your name over the intercom. You need to go see Mrs. Johansson in guidance.” *Great. As if I don’t already have “I have issues and need counseling” written all over my face.* I slowly rose from my chair and trudged to the front of the room and out the door. The purple laces of my beat-up Converse dragged depressingly behind me. *I bet some of these kids didn’t even know I was in their class. Who knows, maybe not existing hurts less.*

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“Are you okay after the events that transpired earlier today?” Mrs. Johansson asked concernedly. For some reason, she had always reminded me of someone’s grandmother, even

though she couldn't be much older than my mom. I guess she just seems like she would make a good grandmother someday. I stared down at the maroon and navy patterning of the carpet, trying my best not to meet her eyes. Although I was grateful for her sympathy, I would rather handle things on my own. "Yeah, I'm good." I said, throwing in a little half-smile for good measure. Mrs. Johansson eyed me suspiciously, and I could tell she knew I was lying. "Do you mind if I ask why those boys felt the need to push you like that?" *Wouldn't I love to know the answer to that?* "Uh, I don't know, I guess they don't like me very much." I mumbled in a barely audible whisper. Mrs. Johansson smiled at me kindheartedly. "Now who wouldn't like you? You seem like such a nice person." She continued on, "I don't mean to keep you out of class for too long, so one last question. What did Louis say to you as they were leaving? Something about the police?" *Watch out, Kelsey, the police aren't always going to be there to protect you.* I nervously curled a thick strand of hair around my index finger. "Well, um, there was this party, sophomore year. I kind of called the cops, and yeah..." I trailed off. As soon as the words left my lips, I hated myself. Mrs. Johansson nodded as if she understood. "Well, you can go now Kelsey. I know it wasn't the popular thing to do, but you did the right thing. At the party, I mean. Doing something like that takes guts." I faked a smile and wordlessly left the guidance office. *But the thing is, Mrs. Johansson, I didn't do the right thing. I could have stood up for myself, but I didn't. I could have told the truth, but I didn't. Because doing something like that take guts.*

Nicole

I sat in the back corner of the school library, watching as a new wave of kids passed by on their way to lunch. My AP European History book lay unopened on a table in front of me. I should have been studying for my big test the next block, but I couldn't get myself to focus. In

my mind, I saw Kelsey being shoved into the lockers. I saw how everyone took Louis and Nick's side, how no one tried to help her up or see if she was okay. Just then, my right thigh vibrated, interrupting my sick mental movie. I reached into my jean pocket to grab my phone; it was a message from Annabel. *Noah Elliot's having a party Friday nite. U in?* I groaned inwardly and slid my phone into my messenger bag without responding. It wasn't like I didn't want to go. I really liked Noah, and he had a wicked nice house. It was just that I didn't want to remember any more about that night sophomore year.

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I was standing alone on the trails behind Noah's backyard, shivering as the wind whipped through my hair. I remembered wishing I had brought my coat; it was freezing and my dress wasn't doing a very good job of keeping me warm. No one had noticed my absence. No one had really noticed me the entire night. I remembered thinking how young and childish I looked compared to the other girls in my grade. Especially Annabel and Kyla. I took one last look back at everyone dancing and sitting by the fire and having a great time without me. With shaking palms, I pulled my phone out of my purse and unlocked it. My fingers were so frozen that I could barely get the touch screen to work as I dialed. *9-1-1*. I remembered how bad my voice shook as I spoke to the police and told them about the party with underage drinking. I still didn't remember why I did it. I guess I was tired of all the so-called "popular" kids and how they treated me like I didn't exist.

Regardless of my reasoning, I will never forget what happened next. I remembered seeing a dark shadow about 20 feet away. How I almost screamed, but didn't. I remembered how relieved I was when I realized it was only Kelsey Gagliardi. But I was only relieved for a

fraction of a second before it hit me: she had heard me call the cops. “It’s okay, I won’t tell anyone what you did.” She said, smiling at me. “Now come on, let’s get out of here.”

I wasn’t thinking that night, that’s for sure. Panic makes you do some pretty dumb things. I guess I was scared that Kelsey would accidentally tell someone and my life would be ruined, all because of three digits typed into a phone. All I could think of in my frenzied state was this: when I got back to school on Monday, Kelsey Gagliardi had called the cops on Noah Elliot’s party. I thought, better her than me.

Better her than me, better her than me. Better she take the blame for something I did, than I have to deal with the consequences of what I had done. Those words echoed through my thoughts as I stared through the window of the library, eating away at my sanity. Just then I heard Kelsey’s name over the intercom, calling her to go see Mrs. Johansson in guidance. *I have to go talk to her. I have to tell the truth.* I stood up, pushed in my chair, and hurried out of the library without bothering to take my bag or sign out. As I ran up the stairs to orange hall, my heart racing with the knowledge of what I was about to do, I realized I didn’t have a plan. What was I going to do, burst into the guidance office and proclaim the truth for all to hear? In the end, I decided to wait by the corner where one would turn to get to guidance. *Man, I am such a stalker.* Finally after what seemed like ages, Kelsey emerged from the guidance office, her dark hair shielding her face from the world. Without even leaving time for second thoughts, I dashed over to her, almost knocking her over. “Kelsey! Oh my gosh, Kelsey! I, I’m so sorry…” Tears began to flood my eyes as Kelsey stared at me with a “what the hell is this” expression on her pale face. *Oh my goodness, I must look like such a mess right now. I must look really freaking insane.* “Hey, um, I know I must look pretty crazy right now, and I know this is a little late, but I’m going to tell the truth about what happened. I used to think it was better you than me, but

now I know that it's so much worse watching you take the blame for what I did." Kelsey pulled her hair pack away from her eyes, and I swear to God, I saw pity in them. "I said I wouldn't tell anyone what you did, and I didn't, and I won't. You don't have to either. It's okay." She walked over and put her arm around me. "Now come on, let's get out of here."