

monday

I wake up, and the bruises on my arms have turned really yellow and brown, so I have to wear long sleeves, even though fall is doing its best impression of summer and the air is sticky and hot. Anna decided we'll all wear tank tops and miniskirts for as long as the weather holds—before winter confines us to less revealing outfits—and I agreed, so I don't know what I'll tell her when she sees me to-day and asks what my deal is.

And I'll have to tell her something, because I can't tell her the truth.

I debate various lies over breakfast, a pale pink antacid with coffee. I'm a pretty good liar as long as I'm talking to an easy sell, but Anna is not an easy sell. If she finds out I'm hiding something, she'll want to know what. Maybe she'll be mad. Maybe she won't give a damn. Anna is funny like that.

I decide to tell her I'm having a fat day.

"Little warm out for that shirt, isn't it, Regina?" Mom asks, setting a plate of eggs and toast in front of Dad. Her comment draws his eyes up from the paper.

"You'll melt," he says.

I shrug and drain my coffee. "Whatever. I'll see you later."

Halfway to school, I feel like I'm going to throw up. I fan my face with my hand, and the air that meets my skin is hot. My shirt clings to my back, pressed uncomfortably into place by my book bag. A

pay phone looms on the horizon, the closest thing I've got to a cell phone, because my parents kind of suck. I drop my bag and rifle through my pockets for change until I find a quarter. I use it to call Josh.

Pick up, Josh. Pick up. I imagine the song that plays when someone calls his cell, exploding from his pocket until he picks up, but he never does, which is weird because Josh always picks up, and he's always good for a ride. He's my boyfriend.

Hallowell High: The parking lot pulses with scantily clad life, and I'm in the middle of it all, wearing a sweater. My scraggly black hair is plastered to my forehead, and a couple people point and stare at me because I look that ridiculous, but I don't care. I'm still better than them. It's not hard. Hallowell is one of those in-between towns, stuck between a city and another city, and everyone here knows everyone else. It's too small for a social landscape more complicated than this: You're either someone or you're not.

I'm someone.

I'm Regina Afton. I'm Anna Morrison's best friend. These aren't small things, and Kara's right: They're worth keeping my mouth shut for. So I kept my mouth shut the whole weekend, and I'm still Regina Afton and I'm still Anna Morrison's best friend.

Friday never happened.

I wipe a light sheen of sweat from my forehead. Anna, Kara, Jeannette, and Marta usually wait for me at the front so we can enter school—the Fearsome Fivesome. It's the only part of the day I sort of like, standing next to Anna, untouchable.

Everyone is afraid of us.

Today, they're nowhere to be found.

I scope out the parking lot just in time to see a black convertible pull in. Donnie. My stomach twists and I can't breathe. I feel wrong in all the wrong places. I have to get inside. Now. I navigate the cacophony of voices, drug deals and insults—

“—See you at lunch, okay?—”

“—I didn’t finish it, but I don’t think Bradbury will care—”

“—Wait up, I’ve got to get—”

“—For one pill? Fuck you! I can get them cheaper from—”

“—Slut! HEY, SLUT—”

—and push through the front doors, into the air-conditioned main corridor. I scan the halls. They can’t be that far off. I just need to find them. I feel naked without them.

A flash of blond hair catches my eye.

“Kara!” She doesn’t turn around. She must not have heard me. “Kara!”

She stops and I hurry over. Being next to her calms me a little; I’m not invincible yet, but it’s better than nothing. And it’s weird. I never thought we could be friendly, but she was nice to me. So I’ll be nice to her. For a while.

“Have you seen Anna?”

But she stares at me like I’ve just told her to stab her eyes out with a pen, and even though she gives me that look a lot, I don’t get it today.

“Uh, yeah?” Bitch-voice. Okay.

I readjust my book bag and clear my throat.

“Where is she? I want to talk to her. She called this weekend and I didn’t pick up.” I wasn’t ready. “You know Anna. She’ll be pissed.”

“Yeah,” Kara agrees. “You could say that.”

“What? Did you talk to her?”

Kara shrugs and flounces down the hall, her golden curls bouncing off her shoulders as she goes. A bitter taste works its way up my throat in spite of the antacid I took. I follow her. She turns a corner. I turn it.

Jeanette and Marta are at Marta’s locker. Kara prances over, and they enfold her into our secret huddle, the one I should be at the heart of, but my feet are cemented into place by some kind of animal instinct that tells me I’m not allowed over there. Marta spots me. My

heart leaps. *Invite me over.* She murmurs something to the other girls.

Invite me over. They laugh. *Invite me over.*

They turn their backs to me. No.

No way.

This is not a freeze-out.

But I have to find Anna to be sure.

She's not at her locker. I check her homeroom. She's not there either. I stalk the halls, and people are looking at me, whispering. But it's the sweater.

I detour into the girls' washroom, not because I think Anna will be there, but because my stomach is upset. I pop two more antacids and lean over the sink. My heart spazzes in my chest and my arms itch. I scratch along the outside of my sweater because I don't want to look at the bruises, even though I could close my eyes and see them.

I could close my eyes and see—

Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror. My hair is limp, dead, and my face is an unattractive overheated red. Anna would not approve. Anna doesn't want to talk to me because . . . Because. Because.

I haven't returned her clothes yet.

I ignored her all weekend.

Duh.

Anna doesn't want to talk to me, and the other girls are giving me the Cryptic Cold Shoulder until I apologize to her. I exhale. It's almost comforting in its familiarity. I've been here before and I can handle it. It's not fun, but it's easy.

It's not a freeze-out.

I'll find her. Apologize.

The first bell rings. Homeroom. I haven't even gotten my books. I leave the washroom and step into the hall, forcing my way past the whispers and stares.

It's the sweater. That's all it is.

And then I push through the crowd converged in front of my locker so I can get a good look at the word spray-painted across it.

WHORE

This is a freeze-out.

The scene fades out until it's me and that word and nothing else.

I step forward and touch my fingers to one of the letters. It comes back black. I rub my sleeve across the metal. The paint is fresh enough to ruin my shirt but dry enough to keep from smearing into an unintelligible mess.

"Is it true?" Someone asks. I touch the paint again. It's really there. "Did you really bone Donnie Henderson?"

The scene fades back in. Voices assert themselves over the sound of my heart pounding in my chest, and they're all saying something about me.

Me. Donnie Henderson. Did I really bone Donnie Henderson.

His hand up my skirt. Mouth on my neck.

I step back and end up on someone's foot. They swear at me. *Watch it, bitch.* I focus on not looking like a cornered animal and try to zero in on a face I know, someone familiar amid the slack-jawed rubbernecks.

Josh. My boyfriend.

He hovers just outside the mob. Our eyes meet.

He turns away.

"Oh, my *God*, here comes Holt." Another voice. "This is *so awesome!*"

The second bell rings. Principal Holt is there before I can escape, the decrepit old janitor trailing behind him. His face purples as he

surveys the damage. He paces, yells, and makes such a fuss, a new crowd is born. He orders a temporary cover for my locker until the paint can be removed, and he vows the perpetrators will be brought to justice.

And then he asks me if I know who they are.

After homeroom, I'm gone. I'm at that pay phone again and I'm calling Josh. Again. I pick at the phone book dangling from a string, half torn away by some vandal with nothing better to do, while the sun continues its slow rise overhead. It's hot in this booth. I turn my back to the cars rushing past me, on their way to the main street.

I finally get his voice mail.

"It's me." A car goes by. I swallow twice and try to figure out what to say while the silence on the other end of the line waits for me to fill it. "Look, what they're—what they're all saying—what I—" I can't tell this to Josh. Not on the phone. ". . . You heard it from Kara, didn't you?"

I hang up. Kara.

Kara, Kara, Kara.

Kara Myers.

Kara.

I am such a fool.