|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ShooterCaroline Pignat | This is not a drillA lockdown catches five grade 12 students by surprise and throws them together in an unlocked boys’ washroom. |

01:00:00

**ALICE**

"Hey...you okay?” The deep voice echoes as I come to, flat on my back on the cold tile. A huge rabbit leans over me. Yes, rabbit. Whiskers. Buck teeth and ears. Tartan vest—the works. My head aches. I don’t have to touch the lump pulsing on my brow to know it’s there.

“What happ—?”

“You came barreling in,” the rabbit says, but its wide smile never moves. Like it’s speaking inside my head. “You tripped and fell.”

Down the rabbit hole?

I always dreamed of that as a little girl. That one day I’d find a way into those books I loved. Has it finally happened?

I try to get my bearings as my eyes struggle to focus, but there is no magic beyond the rabbit. Only the white brick wall on which hang three oddly

shaped sinks of some kind. My gaze drifts back to the stained ceiling tiles.

Where am I?

The rabbit stands and moves past me. Paper tears. Water runs. I glance over to see it standing at a wide marble semicircular sink.

The washroom?

It’s all wrong. And yet, so familiar. Flecked marble sink. Rusted paper-towel holder on the white brick wall. Two beige metal stalls in the far corner. Only everything is mirror opposite, as though I’m in some alternate reality.

One with giant, telepathic rabbits.

Its whiskered, furry face floats above me, going in and out of focus as it kneels beside me again.

My, what short ears you have for a rabbit.

Frowning, I blink a few times.

“You don’t look so good,” it says.

And that voice—it’s all wrong. Everyone knows a rabbit in a tartan vest has a British accent.

“Curiouser...” I mumble. The room spins and I groan.

“Here.” It presses the wet wad of paper on my forehead and some of the spinning slows.

A large, brown, shaggy paw grips my shoulder. “Do you think you can sit up —?”

“I’m coming in!” a girl’s voice calls. “Girl entering the boys’ washroom. So, like, stop...whatever you’re doing.”

I half expect to see Mrs. Rabbit come bounding in. Actually, I’m kind of disappointed it’s just a girl. In one hand, she clutches a stack of yellow flyers. The other shields her eyes from seeing whatever mysteries of the boys’ washroom she'd rather not know. Her hair is straight, long and glossy black. Her red lips, full and almost heart-shaped. Her skin, flawless. She’s Asian. A life-sized china doll? But no, she is real enough.

“Isabelle Parks?” The name floats up and out of me.

She uncovers her eyes, shrieking as she takes in the bizarre scene: me, flat on my back beneath this gigantic, looming animal.

“Ohmigod!” Isabelle drops her papers and runs at us. “Get off of her! Get off of her right now, you perv!” She thrusts her knee hard in the animal’s side and shoves it over with both hands. Grunting, the rabbit keels over and sprawls with a curse among the yellow7 flyers scattering across the floor.

“Are you okay?” Isabelle takes my arm and helps me sit.

The room whirls around me like the Mad Tea Party ride. I feel like I’m going to throw up, just like I did ten years ago in that horrible teacup.

“You see it too?” I ask, relieved to know7 I’m not actually hallucinating. We glance at where the large creature now sits lounging against the far wall, long legs stretched out, huge feet splayed on either side. I eye it suspiciously, half expecting it to disappear in a poof of sparkles. “The rabbit—you can see it, right?”

“What?” Isabelle’s dark eyes narrow. She looks at me like I am crazy then goes over to it and kicks the rabbit’s foot. “Did you, like, drug her?” she demands. “Is that it, Hogan? Like roofies or something?”

“Ya, Izzy. That’s exactly it,” the rabbit says. “I have this thing for dressing up like a loser and molesting helpless nerds in the boys’ bathroom.”

Wait—what? Molesting?!

It raises its furry arms in mock-defeat. “My secret’s out. You caught me.” Then it shoves its paws up against its puffy cheeks. “Just shut up and help me.”

Sighing, Isabelle grabs its face in both hands and cranks hard, ripping head from body in one fierce twist like some kind of psycho vampire killer. The head falls to the floor and rolls to a stop beside me, where it vacantly stares at me with its google-eyes. I don’t know whether to scream or laugh or vomit —or maybe all three.

“It’s hotter than hell in there.” The rabbit’s deep voice is coming from its body, still resting against the wall. Headless, yes, but not decapitated, exactly. More like cracked open, like one of Gran’s rosy-cheeked nesting figurines. A doll in a doll in a doll. The furry costume ends at the thick neck and sweaty head of some guy. Some huge guy. He’s rubbing his face with his paw, swiping it up his red-faced scowl and over his head as his blond hair

juts out in angry spikes. My stomach lurches again—only this time, it’s in recognition.

Hogan King. As in, the Hulk.

How did I end up in here with that guy?

The Hulk yanks off his furry mitt and plucks the smoking cigarette left balanced on the edge of the porcelain urinal. Even in a bunny suit and plaid vest he scares me. Anger radiates off of him like distorting heat waves— burning fierce from his cold, blue eyes as they meet mine. I look away.

Did he follow me?

Hit me?

The tremor in my stomach ripples up my back and down to my fingertips as I reach for my forehead.

Did he drag me in here...to molest me?

I can’t stop shaking. Can’t stop imagining the story that might have happened if Isabelle hadn’t come in and saved me.

“No smoking.” Isabelle points up at the small metal sign.

Is she crazy? Surely she knows better than to rile the Hulk.

He glowers at her, but she only shrugs. “I don’t make the rules.”

“And I don’t follow them.” He takes a long drag and blows in our direction. It smells strange. But everything in here has that mystery man-tang. I glance at the filthy floor, the graffitied stall, the stained urinal, the smeared mirror. Some things are better left a mystery.

“Still the badass, Hogan?” Isabelle pulls a slim silver phone from her jean shorts’ pocket. She eyes the floor, the stall, and, disgusted, eventually shifts over to lean against the wall. “I don’t know why Wilson insisted we use you. You’re, like, not even part of Student Council.”

The muscles in his jaw clench.

“I mean, seriously.” She texts as she talks, like we aren’t worth her time or attention. “You’ve missed every Spirit Club meeting. You’re always late to class—when you come. You have, like, zero enthusiasm.” She glances up momentarily. “No offense.”

It always surprises me how she can do that, add “no offense” to any statement and assume none is taken. Yet not once has anyone, ever, in all our years together at school, once told her, “You’re really mean sometimes. No offense.”

Isabelle continues, “You quit sports and skip most classes—you basically hate school.” She looks up at him once more. “And now you’re stoned.”

I wave in front of my face and try to stand but stagger into the garbage can and spill trash at Isabelle’s feet.

I must be stoned too! Drugged, definitely.

I felt like this before—when I had my wisdom teeth out and Gran had to practically carry me to the truck to go home. No, it’s okay, I protested, I can fly, Gran. I can fly! Hand on the wall for stability, I look into the cracked mirror, searching for a portal out of here—but I see only my pale face, the welt, angry and red on my forehead, my pupils wide and black in the blue iris. But, thankfully, they are the same.

No, no concussion at least.

I’ve had them before. In part because I’m a klutz, in part because of Noah. People who have mild traumatic brain injuries are more susceptible to having another.

Where did I read that? Dr. Schmidt’s office, maybe?

It’s only when they both look at me that I realize I’m speaking aloud.

“It’s okay...I’m good,” I say awkwardly. “Well, back to normal anyway.” Neither speaks. Their expressions clearly tell me they think I am anything but normal. “So...yeah.” I tuck my hair behind my ear, unsure of what to say next.

Fortunately they just dismiss me and return to their conversation.

The Hulk turns back to Isabelle. “It would take a lot more than a few drags to get me stoned. I just needed some pep before the pep rally.” He says it in a girly voice, like the very concept of pep rallies is ludicrous.

“Like I said,” Isabelle scoffs, “perfect choice for school mascot.”

“We have a mascot?” I blurt. I’ve attended St. Francis Xavier High School since grade 7, and in the six years I’ve been here we’ve never had a mascot— unless you count those weird comic book characters this year, Professor somebody, and that other one with the helmet. But that’s just kids messing around. They aren’t real mascots. Mind you, neither is this mangy character smoking up on the bathroom floor.

Isabelle glances at me. “See? No one even knew we had one. And I’m, like, every school should have a mascot. So I was going to get us one, something really cool like a Viking. Then Wilson tells me we already have a mascot assigned. A fisher. I’m, like, seriously? A fisher? What brilliant school board official came up with that? Anyway, I figured promoting it, you know, having it lead the cheering at games and pep rallies would be good for school spirit, even if it wasn’t as cool as a Viking. The mascot was my idea.” She turns back to the Hulk. "He was not.”

He shrugs. “Talk to Wilson.”

“ ‘Fitting the suit,’ ” she says, with dramatically mimed air quotations, “does not make you mascot material.”

And a mascot who smokes? That’s even worse.

The Hulk glares at me and I realize, once again, I’ve blurted my thoughts. But it’s true. Grampa smoked cigarettes his whole life and it cost him. “It really wrecks your cardiovascular system,” I add. The Hulk’s breathing grows louder and I cringe. “I mean...if you’re planning on cheering...or doing cartwheels...and mascot stuff...”

Cartwheels? Why in God’s name do I keep talking to the Hulk? Even I know the gossip about his suspensions, his arrests—his infamous temper. Rumor is he killed his brother, but that can’t be true. They’d never let a murderer loose in a high school. Right? Unless...unless it’s some kind of high-school- halfway-house thing.

I look back at him to find his eyes drilling into mine. And then it happens. The babble.

Any time I find myself at the center of unwanted attention, usually thanks to my brother’s behavior, I go on autopilot. Other trapped creatures spray ink, quills, or stink as a defense. Apparently, I spew words.

Babble, then bolt. That’s my strategy. Only this time, there’s nowhere to run.

“Yeah...cartwheels,” I continue, feeling the panic rise hot around my chest and neck, “or jumping. Because you do kind of look like a rabbit with the floppy ears and all. Still, your ears are a bit short for a rabbit’s. Unless you are a short-eared rabbit? Like an American Fuzzy Lop? Or maybe a Mini Lop?”

His scowl darkens.

“But, clearly, you’re a fisher. Vicious. Mean. You’ve got that down. We get fishers on the farm.” I fiddle with my fanny pack. “Fun fact: a fisher is one of the few animals that’ll eat a porcupine—”

Isabelle raises her eyebrows—but not in that that’s-amazing kind of way, more in that are-you-freaking-kidding-me-right-now look. She waits for me

to stop. I wish she’d just interrupt me all together.

“—but I don’t know why we even call them fun facts, really,” I say, “because they’re facts, of course, but if you think about it, they’re not really—”

“Oh. My. God,” she snaps. “Do you, like, ever shut up?”

“—fun.” I breathe, glad to finally let someone else take the spotlight.

“Still the bitch, Izzy?” The Hulk exhales a gray halo over his head and smirks. “Some things never change.”

**HOGAN**

Nerd Girl finally shuts up, but she’s still swaying a bit as she backs up to the door. “So, uh, I’m gonna go now,” she mutters. “I really should get to class...”

“What are you talking about?” Izzy looks at her like she’s crazy. “Hello? We’re in lockdown.”

“Lockdown?” Nerd Girl frowns. I guess she hit her head harder than I thought.

“Well, duh.” Izzy rolls her eyes and goes back to her texting. “Mr. Wilson just called it, and this was the only unlocked door. Why else would we be in this stinkhole? Maybe you like to hang here, but being stuck in here with you guys is, like, the last place I wanna be. No offense.”

"It’s just...” Nerd Girl is shaking. Her big blue eyes get all watery. She looks at me. At the door. Back at me. "I don’t remember...”

Izzy stops texting and gives me that look again. Like I did something wrong.

"What?” I snap. Do they seriously think I had something to do with it? "Look.” I speak loud and slow7 so they hear it. So they get it. "I was in here getting this stupid costume on when Wilson announces we’re in lockdown. Someone starts banging on the girls’ door and next thing she comes flying in here, trips over that,” I wave at the red gym bag by the door, "and hits her head on the sink. End. Of. Story.”

"So why were you holding her down?” Izzy asks, with that accusing eyebrow raised.

"I was helping her up.”

The two of them look at me like I’m speaking bull. Screw it. Screw them. I take a drag.

Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

Just breathe, like Coach Dufour says. Sometimes even that is hard enough. My chest tightens. It’s so freaking hot in this stupid costume.

Inhale. Exhale. Deep. Slow.

Nerd Girl stares at the floor but doesn’t sit down. Izzy goes back to her phone. I pick up the fisher head and twist one of the whiskers around my finger. I knew this mascot crap was a stupid idea. I told him. But Wilson called it an "opportunity,” a "chance to give back to the school.”

Give back? What the hell did St. F-this ever give me?

*Like you deserve anything anyways.*

And Wilson is all, "It’s not too late to redeem yourself.” How will jumping around in a fur suit, making a total fool out of myself in front of the whole school, on purpose, do me any good? Why does Wilson even care, anyways? There’s no redeeming me. I know that. My teachers know that. They’ve given up asking why I miss work, miss class, miss detention. I can tell by the way they look at me. The way Dad looks at me. The way Izzy doesn’t look at me. They’ve all given up on me. Why won’t Wilson?

Screw it. I’m not doing it. He can expel me if he wants.

The whisker snaps, uncoiling itself from my purpled finger.

Izzy looks over at me and rolls her eyes again. This time, I rip out a whole fistful of whiskers. She just snorts and goes back to texting.

But Nerd Girl can’t stop watching me, all wide-eyed and twitchy. She looks away when I catch her staring. Hell, she’s even trembling. Yeah. She’s afraid of me. Can’t stand being near me. Whatever. I get it, though.

I can’t stand to be around me either.

We sit for a few minutes, the silence broken by the click-click of Izzy’s texting. A sound she could have muted, but no, not Izzy.

“Ughhh,” Izzy moans in her overly dramatic way, like she’s always on stage. Like we’re always her audience. But I can’t stop watching. “Why do we even have these drills? Hello? This is Birchtown. The boonies. Geez, it’s not like we’re living in some inner-city gangland.”

“Maybe it’s not a drill,” Nerd Girl says. “Maybe it’s another one of those pranks. It is a Friday.”

“I doubt it,” Izzy says. “You think those idiots would try pranking a lockdown?”

“Well, idiots aren’t typically known for being intelligent,” Nerd Girl says. She looks at me and her face goes all red. “Not that you’re an idiot...I mean... statistically speaking...uh, jocks and...criminals aren’t very...”

She mumbles on.

Yeah, a lockdown prank sounds exactly like something those guys would do.

They’ve been pulling the fire alarm every Friday for weeks now, setting up their stupid jokes after we evacuate, then painting their red-circled X. It’s all over the school, like it’s their calling card. Total Marvel rip-off. Some kids even started wearing homemade T-shirts with the X or "Brotherhood of Mutants.” Lame. Still, I got to miss a few7 tests thanks to these X-Men geeks. I glance down at my costume. And maybe even the dumbass pep rally today. But, even I have to admit, a lockdown is taking this prank thing to a whole other level.

“Wilson’s not gonna like this.” Izzy rolls her eyes. “At that last assembly *two* weeks ago, he told the whole school that if the pranks didn’t stop, our extracurriculars would. Can you believe it?! No dance. No sports. He even threatened to cancel my prom.” She shakes her head in frustration. I knew somehow she’d make even this about her. “Why do I have to suffer because some stupid X-morons, whoever they are, get off on playing stupid pranks? It’s not my fault...” She glances back at her phone, more interested in whatever conversation is going on there.

I don’t blame her.

**ISABELLE**

BRI: Where you at?

Helloooo—earth to Izzy? You back in class? Getting the evil
eye from Carter because your phone keeps buzzing?

BUZZ!!

BUZZ!!

BUZZ!!

Mwah ha ha ha!

IZZY: Got caught in the stairwell putting up flyers.

You’ll never guess where I ended up

Or with who.

BRI: Library?

Not the psycho janitor’s closet?

IZZY: Worse.

BRI: I dunno...that closet’s pretty creepy.

Lead pipe, in the conservatory, with Colonel Mustard?

IZZY: Try: Hogan. With a joint. In the boys’ bathroom.

BRI: OMG !!! EWWWWWW!!!!!!

Hands off!

IZZY: Nice. It was a long time ago.

Just one kiss.

Do you have to keep bringing it up?

BRI: :/

I meant the bathroom—that’s like ground zero for boy cooties.

Seriously. I saw a documentary on that.

Don’t even touch the walls.

IZZY: Too late.

BRI: Ew. Ew. Ew. Go wash your hands.

IZZY: No thanks. Sink looks like a science experiment.

BRI: So...Hogan? Seriously? Is it just the 2 of you?

IZZY: No. Another girl. At least I’m not the only one.

BRI: Who?

IZZY: I forget her name.

 That weird guy’s sister.

BRI: ?

IZZY: The one that mops with the janitors in the caf.

BRI: Noel?

IZZY: Ya. His sister.

 Wears those dog T-shirts and that fanny pack.

BRI: Oh ya. Dresses like a tourist.

IZZY: Well she’s lost for sure.

BRI: LOL! Lost in the 80s.

IZZY: Where are you?

BRI: Main office. Under secretary’s desk by the copiers.

Wilson can’t see me txt here.

I was photocopying more flyers when he called lockdown.

IZZY: Weird time to have a drill.

BRI: You shoulda seen the secretaries bolt.

Single file to the staff room. You’d think it was real.

IZZY: Probably “hiding” in the staff room cracking open their TGIF wine.

BRI: So did Darren ask you to prom yet?

IZZY: No. Why?

BRI: Just wondering.

IZZY: Maybe he’s taking his time-working on a big promposal.

Maybe this drill is it.

Dress up like a cop and go door-to-door looking for me.

Give me a rose, ask me to prom and charge me with “stealing his heart.”

\*sigh\*

BRI: You think Wilson would let him do that? A lockdown is a big deal.

IZZY: Hello?! So is my prom. We only get to do this once...And it has to be perfect.

BRI: He would look hot in a uniform. Just saying.;)

IZZY: He’s taking so long to ask.

I worry he’s thinking about asking someone else.

I know, I’m being stupid.

BRI: Really?? WHO? Did he say anything?

IZZY: No. Just a feeling I get sometimes.

BRI: Who knows, Iz, someone else might sweep you off your feet.

Maybe even the Hulk.;)

Throw you over his shoulder.

Neanderthal style.

Fisher costume-kinda like a uniform.

Might be hot...

...and you are such an animal lover. :P

IZZY: Don’t. Even. Go there.

If Darren doesn’t ask, I’m not going.

BRI: WHAT?! You have to go!! You've been planning it all year. The band. The decorations. Your dress! OMG the dress!

IZZY: Like I wanna show up SOLO at my prom.

What would everyone think?!

Not gonna happen. I’d rather stay home.

BRI: Officer Scott just arrived.

IZZY: Good. They should start unlocking the rooms soon.

The sooner this drill is over the better.

BRI: Hot cop with him, too.

IZZY: You need help. Seriously.

00:53:20

**ALICE**

The pounding in my head eventually slows to a pulse in the growing lump. What I need is ice, but for now a cold compress will do. Come to think of it, didn’t the Hulk give me one just as Isabelle burst in? Didn’t he try to help me up? Maybe he is telling the truth. After all, being a total klutz sounds way more like me than being the desired target of a sexual assault. I stand next to him as I crank the paper towel, rip it off, and move to the opposite side of the sink, as far as possible from where he sits.

He is the Hulk, after all.

The foot pedal squeaks as I press it. A pathetic trickle of water drips onto my wadded paper towel. The Hulk sits on the other side of the marble trough, staring intently at the stall doors across from him, breathing fiercely. Sidelong I watch him, mesmerized by his energy and intensity, the way the muscles in his cheek and jaw clench, how his nostrils flare as he inhales and exhales. He’s a mass of angry muscle just looking for a reason to charge, kind of like the bull at our neighbor’s farm. Gran always warned me about it, told me to never EVER cross that fence. Yet, here I am inside its very pen.

“I think it’s wet enough,” he says, not looking at me.

I jump and the sopping paper falls into the filthy basin, but there is no way I’m going near him to get more. I pat my wet hands against my hot face and neck, mumble something about needing to cool off, and move to the corner farthest from him and closest to the door. Sitting on the floor on the other side of the gym bag, I try to do what I do best: disappear.

Most of my life I’ve felt invisible. In fact, I kind of like it that way. There are no threats or expectations, no misunderstandings, no mistakes when you’re just watching. I love to read life. From afar, that is. Body language. The sounds or smells of a setting. How all the pieces come together, or how they symbolize something bigger. It’s like I’m there, but not really, so my brain is free to read all those details other people probably miss. Ms. Carter said that’s why my own writing is so strong. I soak up what I see and put it in my stories. I’ve got about twenty notebooks full of them. Not that anyone ever reads them, except for Ms. Carter. I’ve shown her a few. That was the first time I ever felt like maybe I wanted to be seen. Maybe I wanted to be heard. That maybe, in some small way, I mattered too.

Now I wish I hadn't shown her. Not because she said they were terrible. No, Ms. Carter did something worse—she said they were amazing. Riveting. That’s the word she used. She told me that I had a great voice, original ideas, and, worst of all, that I should apply to UBC’s Creative Writing Program. I wish she hadn’t told me that. Because I would not have dared to dream it otherwise. I would not have made a portfolio or filled out an application. I would not have gotten the e-mail that arrived yesterday from the University of British Columbia, the one that that broke my heart.

I could blame Ms. Carter for that. But really, it’s my fault, for getting my hopes up. I should have known better. I should have stayed invisible.

The e-mail.

I remember now. I had just left Writer’s Craft class for my appointment with Mrs. Goodwin, my guidance counselor, when Mr. Wilson called the lockdown. Just as well, I figured. I’d printed the e-mail from UBC to show her. I knew she’d want to talk about it. But really, why bother? How was sitting in Mrs. Goodwin’s office, sucking on a Lifesaver, squirming under the weight of her concerned gaze, going to make any difference? Pity is the last thing I need. Or want. Besides, talking won’t change anything. I am not going to UBC.

But by the time I got back to class, Ms. Carter was in full lockdown mode. Lights out. Door locked. She’d even covered the long rectangular window with her Snoopy poster: “Be the author of your own life.” I knocked anyway, called out, jostled the handle only to hear shuffling, giggling, shushing—but no one let me in. They were gathered in the dark corner trying to make each other laugh. Trying to secretly text their friends doing the exact same thing in every other room. That door wasn’t opening until the police or the principal unlocked it. And getting caught by them, out there like that, would not only ruin Principal Wilson’s perfect lockdown drill record, but also my invisible life. I could just imagine being the lockdown loser—the butt of everyone’s jokes. Bad enough my own class was laughing at me, I didn’t need the whole school mocking me, too.

I remember trying the door to the women’s washroom in the far corner down the hall. I banged on the locked door a few times but no one opened it either. At the other end of the hall, the stairwell handle clanged as someone pulled on the latch and, instinctively, I lunged for the next door on the other side of me. MEN. Vandalized, just like every men’s room door here, with a helmet drawn in red Sharpie on the man icon standing beside the wheelchair one, and that big red X before the word MEN. But I hardly gave it—or the fact that I was resorting to the men’s room—a second thought. I needed to hide.

I shoved the door—relieved to feel it give way as I blundered in. I barely glimpsed the red bag by the entrance as I tripped over it, or the marble sink on the right that I tried to avoid as I fell. But the last thing I saw before slamming my head was what surprised me most: a six-foot, 250-pound rabbit in a plaid vest, standing at a urinal.

“I remember now,” I say, clearing my throat. “I did trip coming in.”

Absorbed by her tiny screen, Isabelle completely ignores me.

Indifferent, the Hulk flicks his ash on the floor.

Just as well. I’m not looking to be noticed by either of them. Especially him. But I can’t help but wonder: What is his story. Where do all those rumors come from? And if Isabelle hadn’t come in...what would he have done? My

mind pulls at threads, trying to weave his story in a way that doesn’t leave my stomach in knots.

We’ve been in here just a few minutes and it already feels like a lifetime. Maybe I’m picking up on their feelings—his anger or her irritation. Sometimes my empathy overwhelms me. Or maybe it’s just a mashup of my fears: being trapped...feeling exposed and vulnerable. Antsy, that’s the word. Either way, I want out. Now. If only there were a DRINK ME bottle or an EAT ME cake. A magic mirror. A tiny door—I'd take it. I’d take anything over this.

Poor Noah. This must be how he feels most of the time. I hug my legs and rest my forehead on my knees. Ten more minutes. I can do ten more minutes in here, can’t I?

I reason it through. Isabelle has a phone. Worst-case scenario, we call for Mr. Wilson to come let us out first in his drill rounds. Surely he will, if Isabelle Parks asks. Besides, most drills only last about fifteen minutes, and if Noah can do it, so can I.

I think about my brother. Period 4 is his quiet time with Kim. And even though she’s absent today, the supply educational assistant is with him. There’s space in the High Needs room—much more than in here. Books to keep him quiet. Of the two of us, I’d say Noah is the lucky one.

For a change.

**NOAH**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Period 1**art**Room 214 - Miss Jackson |  |
| Period 2***gym***gymnasium -- Mr. Dufour |  |
| lunch |
| Period 3**life skills**Room 109 -Miss Kim |  |
| Period 4**Library**Miss Kim |  |
| **home**Pack my bagGo to the bus |  |

**HOGAN**

I stub the joint on the tile and flick it at the wall. With a ping, it ricochets off the rusty towel box beside Izzy. She looks up, disgusted, and just goes back to her texting.

Man, I’d give anything to have her see me like she did that day back in grade 10. When I scored that touchdown. When I felt like I could do almost anything because of how she looked at me—like I was awesome. Because of her, I believed it too.

And at the bush party later that night, how she sat next to me on the log and leaned in. Man, she was beautiful. Hair swept high in a ponytail, firelight glowing on the curve of her neck. Her face warm. And her eyes dark and sparkling as she smiled at me. I just wanted to kiss her—and next thing, I did. Isabelle Parks—the girl every guy wanted. And she wanted me. Hogan King.

I wish I could go back two years. Back to that night. And stay there. Forever.

Before everything happened. Before I was this loser, stinking of weed and sweat in a mangy Value Village reject costume, sitting on the bathroom floor.

*Oh ya, Hulkster, she must find you irresistible now.*

I got a glimpse of what it must be like for guys like Darren Greene or my brother Randy. But who am I kidding? That kind of life, that kind of love— it’s not for me.

After Randy died, everything changed. Nothing matters any more. Mom and Dad. Teachers. Wilson. Everyone looks at me like I’m a problem. A problem they can’t solve. The ones I never get on Hurley’s math tests. Solve for X. I gave up trying to make sense of it. I gave up talking about it. They can ask the question fifty different ways but sometimes X is just a dumb X. Nothing more.

*Once a loser, always a loser.*

“That’s my last one,” I say to her, nodding at the butt on the floor by her feet. I want her to know. “I’m done with that crap. Just so you know.”

“Right.”

“No, seriously. I’m done.”

“Whatever, Hogan. It’s your life. I don’t care.”

And the thing is, she doesn’t. I can’t get mad at her for that, even though I am. She did care once—I had my chance with her and I blew it. Hell, I’ve blown a million chances these past two years—with football, school, my job, my parents. Coach Dufour tried to kick me in the ass a few times. But he didn’t get it. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t do anything but watch as it all went up in smoke.

It’s like, whenever someone cares—I can’t. When they believe there’s still good in me, I go outta my way to prove them wrong. Because there can’t be good in me. There isn’t.

Not after what I’ve done.

Still, I made a promise to Coach not to buy any more weed. And I haven’t. I won’t. That doesn’t mean I’m about to let this last one go to waste. It’s not like I’m in training or anything. But if Dufour catches me, he’ll kick me out of Outdoor Ed, and honestly, it’s the only reason I come to school any more. Izzy’s right. I do hate school; I’m probably failing everything—but I like Coach’s class. When we go out on the trails up in the Gatineau Hills, it’s like I leave all that other crap behind. I blast my tunes, pump my legs until the sweat is dripping off me, just like I used to in football practice, and I feel myself rising above it all the more we climb. I swear, that is a high way better than any hit. Coach even brought in a mountain bike I could use when I said I didn’t have one.

No pity. No judging. Not even after he found out what I did. He just brought in the bike. He’s all right, Coach Dufour—because he isn’t trying to make me

into something I’m not.

The toilet flushes in the handicap stall and the girls both jump and look over at me with the same panicked expression. They must have figured it was just us in here. A couple seconds later, out comes that skinny guy in the black jeans and an X-Men T-shirt. With all the girl drama, I forgot he was in here —not to mention his weird entrance. He came blasting in while I was taking a leak. Just dropped his bag and made a beeline for the first stall. It’s not every day you see a huge animal at a urinal, but this dude never even gave me a second glance. He sees me now, though, even though he’s trying real hard not to.

Skinny Guy sets his ratty backpack and a camera on the floor by the sink while he washes his hands. I can tell by the way he avoids eye contact that he’s freaked out by two girls in the bathroom. Or by being around girls at all, by the look of him. Probably been hiding in there waiting it out. Probably wanted to take a dump the whole time and couldn’t. Not with them listening.

He washes his hands, a little longer than necessary, and I pick up his camera by the strap. It’s a Canon. An old one by the look of it. Frayed strap. Cracked lens. The whole thing seems to be held together with gray duct tape.

"Don’t!” Skinny Guy snatches the camera from me and quickly puts it around his neck. "You’ll break it!”

And then, "Sorry,” he adds, as if realizing exactly who he’s talking to. "I just —I don’t like people touching my stuff.”

“Are you kidding me? Are you freaking kidding me right now?” Izzy stands, gawking at this dude. Like she can’t believe he’s here. I’m just glad to see it’s not me that has set her off. She points at the door behind Nerd Girl. "There’s, like, fifteen hundred people in this building. Three floors. A million rooms. And you choose mine?”

"Well, really you chose his,” Nerd Girl blurts, then when we look her way, she retreats a bit and mumbles, "I mean, it is the men’s room.”

She’s right. He was here first. And yet, somehow, in Izzy’s mind all this is about her.

"What’s your problem, Izzy?” I ask. Maybe it’s a theater-kid thing but she’s always been so overdramatic, even back in grade 7.

"My problem? MY problem? I don’t have a problem.” She points her finger at the guy, who has now squeezed himself into the far corner by the spilled garbage. "Why don’t you ask Xander-freaking-Watt? Why don't you ask him what HIS problem is?”

She’s pretty riled up. In fact, she seems almost afraid of Skinny Guy. I don’t know why. She could take him. Hell, even scrawny Nerd Girl could.

"You are not allowed to be anywhere near me, you perv. That was the agreement.”

He nods, but doesn’t look up.

"Wilson said!” Her lips are trembling. Is she gonna cry?

"But you both take Writer’s Craft,” Nerd Girl says, poking her head up again. "Period 4. He’s in your class. Our class.”

One look from Izzy and she shrinks away.

“I needed the credit,” Izzy says, turning back to him. "But Ms. Carter said we’d never have to work together. And the police warned you, Xander.”

Police?

Now I’m really curious. This is more than just Izzy overreacting. I look at the guy trying to disappear in the corner. Pulling his legs in, his backpack close. Wrapping himself around that camera like a balled-up spider. There’s gotta be more to this geek than I thought.

“Screw this!” Izzy blurts. “I am SO outta here.” She moves towards the door, but Nerd Girl jumps up and blocks her.

“You can’t leave...and, oh whoa, WHOA, WHOA!!” She twists the bolt. “People! This has to be locked!” She turns back, her eyes wide as she whispers, “We have to stay here. We have to be quiet.”

“Get out of my way!” Izzy moves to shove her aside. “I don’t have to do anything. It’s just another stupid drill. No one—”

Izzy’s phone buzzes in her hand and she glances down.

“But those are the rules,” Nerd Girl continues. “We stay until the officer unlocks the door and it is over. It won’t be much longer. Most lockdown drills are over in, like, fifteen minutes and—”

“Guys.” Surprisingly, Izzy takes a step back. I thought for sure she’d blow by her. But instead, she looks up from her phone, her face white. Her voice a whisper, she says, “...it’s not a drill.”