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# July

‘Did you ever have a physical confrontation with Miss Putnam?’

‘Did what?’

‘Did you ever have a—’

‘Oh. Yeah. Um, yeah, I guess there was the one time in the locker room.’

The lawyer writes this down, even though the tape recorder is on, has been on the whole time. Also, she already knows the answer to the question. Also, the law firm’s intern is taking notes, too. I shouldn’t notice how hot he is, but he’s the only good thing to look at in here. He’s also the only other person anywhere near my age – the lawyers are fortyish and the stenographer lady looks like she’s 105 – plus he’s new, probably since it’s summer now and law school is out for break or whatever. Must be nice. Since the whole . . . *thing* happened, I missed a bunch of junior year, so now I’m in summer school.

And here.

‘This was the incident of January the twenty-third?’

This lawyer is all cold and matter-of-fact and wasting everyone’s time. She’s the head of the firm or something, I don’t know. Usually I just meet with Natalie. Who isn’t much better, but at least she looks me in the face when we talk. Except today she’s *also* taking notes, and somehow barely paying attention at the same time. Maybe they’re all just writing their grocery lists or something.

Natalie suddenly looks up at me, raising her eyebrows. Like, *Answer the question*.

‘Yeah. I guess so. Was that a Tuesday? You know, because we have gym on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so I think it was a Tuesday.’

The no-eye-contact lawyer nods and then, of course, writes that down. Or she writes down, *toilet paper, orange juice*, I don’t know. Jesus, this is boring.

Like everything else, this whole process is not at all like it is on TV. I mean, I’m wearing jean shorts right now. There’s no dramatic courtroom scene or anything – like, with the afternoon sunlight streaming through big windows while I cry and confess everything on the witness stand or whatever. Apparently you’re not even supposed to want to go court at all, though it’s gotta beat this, even if it’s not pretty or cinematic. We’re all sitting in a windowless room with a peeling fake-wood table (which I guess doesn’t matter, except I’ve been staring at it for three hours), and the lights are too bright and the AC is on so high I don’t even feel cold anymore, just numb.

I guess I've been numb for a while now.

But I didn't kill anybody.

I sneak another glance at the intern. He's black, with short hair and the smoothest skin ever. It's very dark, and it looks nice against his shirt, which is a bright lilac colour. It reminds me of one of the nail polishes I used to always pick for pedicures, back when going to the salon was no big deal. Before everything was in the newspaper every other day and people at the grocery store started calling me names. Even when I'm just picking up stupid chips and salsa for my little brothers. They've yelled at me in the aisles, said the meanest things.

I never really understood *irony* when Mrs Thale tried to teach us about it in english, but I sure get it now. Now that I get bullied for being a bully. I haven't tried explaining it to the people at the grocery store, though. Mom says that they're morons and I should ignore them, and for once I agree with her.

'Tell us what happened that day.'

Great. Natalie has been making me go through everything all summer, but I still don't like to. Hot Intern is looking at me now, all professional and stone-faced, but I bet if he saw me at the grocery store he'd yell too.

*You worthless piece of trash. It should have been you and your friends.*

'Um, okay.'

Everyone stops taking notes for a second, and my mouth dries right up. I look down at my feet, my favourite red

flip-flops and the stupid silver polish on my toes, and remember how this used to happen in junior high. The year I became friends with Brielle Greggs, eighth grade, I was hopeless. We got paired up in speech and I was sure she'd hate me when she saw how jittery I got during presentations. I don't like to be the centre of attention.

But Brielle was – still is – fearless. She'd smirk at the whole class and start blabbing on and on about the death penalty or leash laws or whatever random topic we were supposed to give a speech on, and I'd stand there, her mute sidekick. Mr Needy (really, that was his name) would say, 'And Sara, what do you think?' all pointedly. I'd open my desert-dry mouth and nothing would come out, but Brielle would chirp, 'She agrees with me, obviously. She did all the research.' And we'd get an A.

Anyway, now I'm back to dry-mouth-land. And Brielle isn't here. She's doing her own interviews, I guess, somewhere else. With her own lawyers. We're not supposed to talk to each other. And we haven't, not in more than two months.

So here I am, expected to tell the lawyers more bad stuff about Brielle. Because basically, that's what this is all about. Like that stupid day in the locker room . . . that was really Brielle. Everything about what happened to Emma – it wasn't me. I mean, actually, it wasn't any of us. It was Emma. No one hung the rope for her. And even before that, it's not like Emma was innocent. At all. She was the one who—

‘Miss Wharton?’

I keep taking these long pauses, I guess. The AC should be keeping us all awake, but it’s been at least an hour since I finished the Diet Dr Pepper they gave me and I just feel zonked. I’m still turning the empty bottle over and over in my hands. The wrapper is all loose and saggy and I start to tug it down, like I’m taking off the bottle’s clothes. I want to curl up into a ball and sleep for a million years. I sleep a lot these days. It’s the easiest way to keep my mom off my case, and to keep from having to explain all of this to my brothers. Like there’s any way to explain it to anyone.

I take a deep breath. ‘Okay, yeah, so it was a Tuesday. Emma was getting changed. I mean, we were all changing clothes; it was the locker room, we had to get ready for gym.’

Everyone has started scribbling again. I feel itchy, like my skin is too tight. I throw my weight to one side, trying to make the cheap office chair I’ve been sitting in for all this time more comfortable. No dice. I wonder if the intern thinks I’m pretty, but then I remember that no one does, not anymore. He thinks I’m a monster, just like everyone else. Besides, I’m sure I don’t look pretty – in my dumb cutoffs, with my hair pulled back messily, wearing a smidge of mascara. It’s been hard to eat much lately so I feel sort of thin, but not in a good way.

I glance at Natalie and go on. ‘Brielle asked Emma why she, you know – why she was talking to Dylan so much.’

‘Mr Howe?’

I carefully don't roll my eyes. 'Yeah, Dylan Howe. My boyfriend. At the time.'

And now, my ex-boyfriend. Mostly. Or something.

'And what did Miss Putnam say?'

I shift to the other side of the chair. 'She didn't say anything. I mean, by that point she knew Brielle was mad at her.'

'And why do you say that?' The lawyer I don't really know isn't even looking up while she talks to me. I scowl at her hair; it's that shade of blonde that older women think is young-looking but actually just makes them look even older and more out of date than being, like, grey-haired would.

'Everyone was mad at her. Everyone knew she was texting all these boys all the time and that she was totally obsessed with Dylan. Brielle thought she was a psycho, and so did everyone else.'

My voice goes up and Hot Intern is looking at me kind of sharply. It's been a long time since I talked to new people about all this, and I kind of forgot how much people hate me. Even Natalie gives this little sigh, like she's sick of my crap.

But it's *not* crap. Everyone thought Emma Putnam was a pain in the ass. We didn't kill her, but I'm sorry, that doesn't mean we liked her. And now that everyone's decided we *did* kill her, or at least sort of, I think I like her even less than I did when she was alive.

'And what did you and Miss Greggs do?'



I don't answer right away, but she still doesn't look at me. 'Brielle called her a bitch,' I say. 'And I guess I sort of shoved her. A little.'

'You pushed her up against the lockers, is that right?'

'I guess.'

'And what did Miss Putnam do?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'I mean, I guess she was crying.' *She was always crying*, I want to add, but Natalie told me not to 'embellish', to just answer the questions as simply as possible.

'You guess?'

'She was crying, okay?'

'And what did you say to her?'

Sigh. 'I told her to stay away from my boyfriend.'

'Did you say anything else?'

'What?'

'We have testimony that you . . .'

 The crappy-shade-of-blondie head turns toward Hot Intern and he hands her a piece of paper with a bunch of writing on it. 'Yes, here. You called her a slut?'

'Okay.'

'Did you call Miss Putnam a slut?'

'Um, I guess so.'

'You don't remember?'

'I mean, I don't remember calling her a slut *that day*.' I do remember pushing Emma against the lockers. Her dark-red hair wasn't pulled back yet and it settled in those

annoyingly pretty curls around her shoulders as she sort of scrunched up defensively, wincing and crying in that helpless-little-girl way that just made me angrier. She whimpered a little, I remember that. She held up her hands slightly, either like she was surrendering or finally starting to protect herself – I don't know which. Or maybe I do. I guess it was surrender.

This would all be *embellishing*, though, so I don't say it.

'Do you mean you called her a slut on another occasion?'

'I mean, I thought she was a slut. I'm sure I called her a slut. I don't know if I called her a slut on *January the twenty-third*.'

Everyone stops writing and looks at me, stunned and silent. My heart is pounding. I can't meet anyone's eye. I just stare at the table, wishing I could disappear.

'We need a break,' Natalie says. The first helpful thing she's said all morning. 'Let's take ten.'

The blonde lawyer nods, looking like she'd love to be anywhere but stuck in an ugly conference room with me. Maybe she won't come back – maybe I'll be able to go home.

Instead, I walk stiffly into the slightly less cold hallway, waiting for the feeling to come back to my toes. There are chairs out here, set up in a waiting area, but no one is waiting for me. I drove myself.

'Sara,' Natalie hisses. 'You need to calm down in there. It's just a few more questions, and it's *important*.'

I nod automatically and pace over to the window. It

overlooks the office park parking lot. The sun glares off the windshields of row after row of nondescript four-doors. You can tell how hot it is just by looking, but I have gooseflesh on my arms.

I start silently counting all the white cars while my lawyer keeps talking at me. There are a ton, including mine, which I can't see from here because I parked on the other side. I see a silver Mercedes just like Brielle's and remember how her tyres got slashed, back when we were all first on the news. Maybe she has a new car now. I shove my hands into my shorts pockets. There's a gum wrapper on the right side and I knead it into a little ball.

Natalie finally shuts up for a minute, just as I get to sixteen white cars. When she speaks again, I hear her. I mean, I forget to block out her voice out, so it gets in.

'We're trying to get you out of this. A girl is dead, and everyone wants to hold you and your friends accountable for what happened.'

'But we're *not*,' I blurt out. 'We didn't *do* anything.'

'It's not that simple.'

'It should be.'

Natalie heaves a big sigh. 'I know, but it's just not. People are sad and angry and they just want to see how sorry you are.'

But that's the thing right there.

I'm *not* sorry.

Emma was a boyfriend-stealing bitch right up until the day in March when she killed herself.

I didn't do anything wrong, but she totally ruined my life.

By the time I get back to my old Honda accord, it's basically an oven inside. The dark upholstery soaked up every minute of sunshine, so even though I'm finally free from the damn interrogation room, I can't leave yet – I have to stand around with the doors open and the fans turned on full blast, waiting for the seats to cool down enough to just sit. I lean carefully against the back door, making sure none of my skin touches the metal, and check my phone. All I have is a text from my mom about picking up milk and an unfinished game on my Free Cell app.

I'm supposed to go to the therapist now, and then home to do summer schoolwork. This is seriously the funnest summer *ever*. And people wonder why I'm not crying about Emma all the time.

I wonder what Brielle told her lawyers about the locker room thing. Everyone seems to know a version of something by now. Most of the school has been interviewed by *someone*, and there were a lot of people in that locker room, and at school with us, and at the other schools Emma went to. Well, maybe not a *lot* in the locker room. Not a teacher, anyway. Not the one girl Emma had been sort of friends with, Megan Corley. Megan is kind of slutty too, and they didn't always get along. Since March Megan's been everywhere, including on a trip to New York to be on the *Today* show with her mom. I guess Brielle and I weren't

very nice to Megan, either, because she's basically called us murderers on national television.

And now the whole world thinks Emma Putnam killed herself because we called her a slut – not because she *was* a slut. That makes sense.

Waving my hand around in the car, I decide it's safe to at least sit on the edge of the front seat. Sweat is starting to make my shirt stick to my back and I aim one of the vents toward it, but there's not much point.

The real mistake I'm making, at least according to Natalie, is acting like I don't care that we were mean to Emma. No matter how much I try to explain that Emma did her share of crap to us, that it wasn't this big conspiracy like the papers keep saying, it doesn't matter. So now I have a lawyer, Brielle has a lawyer, the guys have their lawyers. We're all blaming each other. No one's blaming Emma for anything.

My chances of graduating on time are slim to none. I might never get into college. But if I'm more careful, if I work hard and do what Natalie says and *be sorry*, things might be okay, even if we go to trial.

That's what they all say. But it's not like I was ever getting into Harvard or anything. I wasn't such a great student before all this. And I'm not saying I was a great person, either. It's just – it's like Brielle said, after it happened: Emma got off easy. Everyone keeps saying she's not here to defend herself – but I'm here, and it seriously sucks. It's like, someone dies, so everyone left alive is

automatically guilty.

Except, in this case, only five of us are. And with all the separate lawyers and charges, my best hope is to just avoid taking *all* the blame.

After another minute of the car not cooling down, I sigh and pull my red-flip-flopped feet in, yank the door shut, and try to steer out of the parking space with my fingertips. Muttering every curse word I know, I almost don't see the person walking up to the passenger-side window until she's tapping on it.

'Gah!' I scream, slamming on the brakes and accidentally grabbing the wheel. My hands are instantly scorched and I curse again.

Outside the car I hear, 'God, you skank, you almost ran me over!'

Brielle.

I put the car back into park right where it is, halfway out of the space, and jump out again. Sweat is pouring down my back and my neck now, but Brielle looks fresh as a daisy. She's actually wearing a loose white tank top with daisy cutouts around the hem.

'Hey,' she says easily, like we haven't just spent a solid ten weeks not speaking. I haven't even been able to Facebook-stalk her – Natalie made my mom shut down my account. Which was just as well; if I thought the people at the grocery store were mean, I was completely unprepared for what they'd be like online. I probably should've closed the account myself, instead of staying up

until two a.m. Every night, looking at how many insanely mean comments people posted under any and all photos I was tagged in. Hundreds of mean things, millions. A lot of dislike out there.

‘Hi,’ I say lamely. I must look like a nutjob, almost driving into her and then jumping out of my car like it’s on fire. Pulling my shirt out a little, to let some air in between it and my back, I try to smile at my (former?) BFF and say something normal. ‘Your, um – your lawyer’s office is here, too?’ I guess I was right; that must’ve been her SUV I saw.

‘Uch, yeah,’ she says. She tilts her head to the side and shrugs, her perfect beach hair falling over her shoulders in its perfectly highlighted, slight messy waves. I resist the urge to touch my unintentionally messy ponytail.

She looks like maybe she’s put on a little weight, though, and she isn’t as tan as I would’ve expected for this far into the summer. The Greggses have a huge pool in their backyard, so usually Brielle and I are both pretty dark by the time school starts in the fall. Maybe I’m not the only one who’s been spending all her time inside, watching TV or sleeping.

‘This whole thing is such bullshit,’ she says. She doesn’t actually sound worried. Just tired. Or maybe . . . Is she stoned? I actually open my mouth to ask before thinking better of it. ‘Oh,’ she goes on, waving her hand like she’s daintily chasing away a fly, ‘I guess we’re not supposed to talk.’

When she says that her voice gets an edge to it, like it

was my idea not to talk and she's mad at me. 'I—' I start to say, then stop. Suddenly I miss my best friend so much – so much it feels like a physical pain, like the heat that's still trapped in my hands after grabbing the sunbaked steering wheel. 'How are you?' I finally manage.

'Well, I'm *fat*,' she says with a dry laugh. She's not fat, of course. I'm shaking my head and she adds, 'No, I totally am. I can't, like, go to the gym anymore, my parents are being total Hitlers. God, Emma really fucked everything up, right?'

She rolls her eyes in that dramatic way she always has and I nod, totally agreeing. God, what a relief, after all this time, to know she's still there, she still gets how hard this is, she doesn't hate me—

I want to walk around the car, to reach out and just hug her – even though we never really do that – but I haven't moved an inch before her face changes completely, goes totally back to that casual, not-a-care-in-the-world expression.

'Blah blah blah,' she says, shaking out her hands at her sides, shaking it all off. She's definitely stoned. '*You* look skinny, you whore.'

I look down, trying not to smile or be too flattered. 'Thanks,' I say, but my voice is too quiet. A little louder I add, 'You look great, really. It's nice to see you.'

'Yeah, right – so nice you almost hit me with your car!' she says with a laugh. The edge is back in her voice, and I don't know what I said wrong. 'Anyway, you're leaving,



I just wanted to say hi. So, you know, hi. And bye! Ha!

And just like that, before I can even say 'Hi' – or 'Bye' – back, Brielle has disappeared into the rows of cars.

When I get back into my car, I just turn the AC off. It feels better to be too hot. I feel like I'm suffocating, anyway, and what difference does it make if it's hard to breathe? It's always hard to breathe now. I haven't had a good, deep breath in months.