



**T H E
F I L E**

ON

**A N G E L Y N
S T A R K**

a novel by

CATHERINE ATKINS

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ON

ANGELYN
STARK

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Alfred A. Knopf
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Angelyn, Fifteen

New girl walks through the three of us smoking in the bathroom. Jacey and me on the sink, our long legs dangling. Charity, opposite, leaning against a partition. “She must think she’s hot,” Charity says as the girl disappears into a stall.

I try and think if I’ve seen her before. One thing’s for sure.

New girl doesn’t know about us.

You don’t use *this* bathroom without asking first. Not during morning break.

Ten-thirty to ten-forty, Monday through Friday, the second-floor Vocational Building girls’ room belongs to us. Everybody knows it.

We snicker when we hear the girl peeing. As if we’ve never done *that*. Charity moves to the stall and thumps a fist against the door. Once. Twice. The flow stops. And starts. Jacey and I exchange a grin.

“Thinks she’s so cool,” Jacey says when the girl comes out. She’s scared. Dark eyes taking us in. Ballerina body. Charity’s in her face, twice her size.

I push off from the sink. Jacey does too. I flick my cigarette to the drain. Jacey drops her head on the floor. I’m warm watching the girl squirm, warm in my stomach like I’ve just had cocoa. Curious too. Excited. I’m not bored.

We take Charity’s back, a triangle of tough.

“This is our space,” Charity says.

“I didn’t know.” The girl’s voice comes out dry.

We have her blocked. The only way out that doesn’t go through us is the window high on the wall behind her. It’s a long way down.

“Did you have a good pee?” Charity asks.

“The way you were banging—” The girl takes a breath. “I thought you wanted to come and see for yourself.”

That makes me laugh. The girl lifts her chin. In profile, in the speckled mirror, she looks proud. Pretty girl in crap clothes. No makeup.

“During break we come in here to smoke,” I say. “The first-floor girls’ room is where you want to be.”

“What if I want to smoke?” the girl asks.

“Try Mr. Rossi’s room, down the hall,” Jacey says. “He’s a sweetie. He’ll let you, no problem.”

She’s messing with her. Mr. Rossi would never.

“Got it,” the girl says. “Now can I go?”

I lean to a sink and flip the water on. “Wash your hands first.”

“Wouldn’t want to be unsanitary,” Jacey says.

“Pig.” From Charity.

The girl’s eyes get wide. “Don’t call me that.”

Charity steps in. “I’ll call you whatever.”

The girl stumbles from her. “I don’t want to be late.”

“Then wash,” Jacey says.

Time twitches at me. “Hey, I don’t want to be late either.”

Charity looks at me. “Don’t try to stop this.”

“I’m not,” I say. “But you know Mr. Rossi.”

“He’ll wait for *you*,” she says.

“Shut up.”

“Maybe we should go,” Jacey says.

“Come on!” Charity’s whining. “We’ve got time.”

The girl starts through us. Charity hip-checks her to the sink.

“Wash your damn hands,” she says in a voice that would scare me.

The girl stands head down. She takes a shuddery breath.

“I’ll fight you. All three. Is that how it is here?”

Charity watches her. Jacey is still.

“This school sucks,” I say. “Where are you from?”

“The Bay Area,” the girl says. “San Jose. I know how to fight.”

Small as she is, it’s hard to believe.

“What, you got a knife?” Charity asks.

The girl holds up her hands. “I got claws.”

Her nails are short. Unpainted. *No-style*, like the rest of her.

“Is she trying to be funny?” Jacey asks.

“Wash,” I tell the girl. “Then we all can leave.”

The water’s run hot. Steam on the mirror.

“This is my first day at Blue Creek High,” the girl says.

“Aww. Poor you,” Jacey says.

“Angelyn, *make* her do it,” Charity says. “Make her wash her hands.”

The first bell goes off. Five minutes to World Cultures.

I stand back. “I’m not being late for this.”

“Yeah, let her be dirty,” Jacey says.

Charity jabs a finger at the girl. “Watch yourself.”

We turn our backs on her.

“Angelyn,” the girl says. “You’re not Angelyn Stark?”

Jacey and Charity look at each other.

“Yeah, I *am* Angelyn Stark,” I say. “You think you know me?”

The girl says no. “But I know someone who does.”

I wave my friends out. Charity peeks back. I wait.

“Who knows me?” I ask when we’re alone.

The girl walks to the sink, adjusts the temperature, and sticks her hands under.

“My mom is an aide at a nursing home. I was talking with one of the residents, and she said she knew a girl who goes here. You.”

I watch her scrub. “I don’t know anyone like that.”

“Thanks for not letting that girl kill me, by the way.”

“I wanted to leave on time. That was it.”

She shuts off the water. “Thanks, still. I’m Jeni Traynor.”

I shrug.

"I guess we should both leave," Jeni says.

"Wait," I say as she hoists her backpack.

"Don't worry. I won't come in here again."

I shake my head. "What exactly did this *resident* say about me?"

"Well—that you used to be neighbors."

I get cold. "Is her name Mrs. Daly?"

"The residents go by first names, mostly. Hers is Eleanor."

"Eleanor Daly." I nod. "Don't talk to her again."

Jeni blinks. "What?"

"You heard me. Stay away from her."

"But—Eleanor didn't say much, and all I did was listen."

My chest is tight. "All you did was *listen* to crap about me."

"No! She said nice things."

Even worse. "You don't talk to her, you don't talk *about* me. My friends will know if you do, and they'll tell me."

"Those girls?" Jeni shudders. "I wouldn't say a thing around them."

"So why'd you talk to me? I'm the same as they are."

She searches me. "Hey, Angelyn, I'm sorry."

"You will be," I say. Staring.

Jeni takes a step back. "Eleanor said you'd be friendly. Not like this."

I follow. "*This* is me. How I am."

We stop at the wall. She turns her head.

"All right. I'll keep quiet."

"What else did Mrs. Daly say about me?"

"She said— She said you'd had some trouble."

I draw my fist back. "I *am* trouble."

Out of the girls' room the hall is empty. I take off running, past pink lockers and closed classroom doors until I reach Mr. Rossi's. The late bell is starting as I turn the handle. I'm as it ends, door shut.

Mr. Rossi stands from his desk. "Ms. Stark, you're late."

"No." I'm breathing hard. "The bell was still ringing."

He looks at the clock. "That's a technicality. If you're late, own it."

I straighten. "I'm not late. It's a technicality if you say I am."

The class moans. Someone laughs. Charity?

Through lowered eyes Mr. Rossi watches me. With a muscled body and blond buzzed hair he looks more like a jock than a teacher.

"I was not late," I say.

"Lunch detention," he says.

"Mr. Rossi! That's not fair."

"Take your seat, Ms. Stark."

I face the class. "You guys saw. I got here in time. Tell him."

Some kids grin. Others look away. Charity mouths something.

At the front of our row, prep-boy Eric takes the time to study *me*.

Mr. Rossi is seated, frowning. "I've made my decision."

"Get me for something I do," I say. "Not this."

"You're holding up class," he says.

"I *can't* have detention. My mom will be so mad."

Mr. Rossi's eyes are icy. Chips of blue.

"Please," I say. Direct to him.

He opens his mouth and shuts it.

What people say about Mr. Rossi is that he's a *hard-ass*. Tough on kids.

But he's young. He hasn't taught long. Maybe he remembers.

"We'll discuss it after class," he says.

I can't tell if I'm in more trouble or less.

"Angelyn, take your seat."

My name. Not *Ms. Stark*. Still, I wait.

Squeaky shoes in the corridor. The noise stops at the classroom door. A knock and the girl from the bathroom—Jeni—steps in.

"Is this World Cultures?" Her voice falls off when she sees me.

"This is World Cultures," Mr. Rossi says. "You're late."

I stare at her. *Not one word*.

"I'm new," Jeni says. "I got lost. I guess."

"You could have asked someone," Mr. Rossi says. "Being new is no excuse."

I leave them. Down the aisle Jacey mimes applause. Charity is grinning. Mr. Rossi gives Jeni the lecture he started with me. The detention part too. I'm guessing that lets me off.

After class I check.

Mr. Rossi shuffles papers. "We're good."

I meet my friends in the hall. I've won and don't know why.

“It’s ’cause he likes you,” Charity says when we’re on our way to lunch.

I shiver in my stomach. “Does not. He’s a teacher.”

“Rossi let you out of trouble quick enough,” Jacey says.

“It was that girl coming in. That’s why.”

“Where does she know you from anyway?” Charity asks.

“Nowhere.” I walk faster. “She was being stupid. I fixed that.”

“You hit her,” Jacey says, like she’s seen it all before. With me, she has.

I rub a fist against my jeans pocket. “Sure.”

We take the sidewalk three across. Girls step off the curb. Guys let us by without giving t shit. It’s good to be us.

Lunch is in the back of my boyfriend Steve’s truck on the street behind the Agriculture Building. While the boys holler up the block, Jacey, Charity, and I take beers from the cooler and share chips around. Every couple of minutes I check for Steve, pissed at the time he’s not spending with me.

“He’ll count those cans,” I say when Charity reaches for a second one.

“You don’t have to tell me!” But she pulls her hand back.

“Angelyn,” Jacey says, a spark in her voice. “Your dog is following you again.”

I swing around. “What?” And see him. “Shit.”

It’s Nathan Daly, the Ghost of Blue Creek High, fingers twisted in the hurricane fence that divides the street from Ag, staring at me like I’ve got his dinner.

I stand, wobbly on my heels. “Go home, dog!”

The girls are laughing.

“Retard,” Charity calls.

“Loser,” Jacey says.

Nathan doesn’t flinch. “Angelyn, I need to talk to you.”

“No!” I say so loud it scrapes my throat. My friends stare at me.

I call him the Ghost because I wish he’d disappear.

Steve molds me to the driver’s side door, blocking out the daylight, my butt gripped in his hands, my arms around his neck. He kisses me and I taste beer and cigarettes and *him*. I try to forget that Nathan could be watching and that Charity *is*, as she passes beers over the side to Steve’s friends. Jacey’s up the street with her boyfriend, and I’m wishing mine weren’t quite so popular.

“What we need is to be alone,” Steve says, an inch from my lips.

I grin. “You read my mind.”

With that he pushes off, shooing his friends, ordering Charity from the truck.

I straighten my T. “Wait,” I say to no one. Nathan isn’t where he was.

Steve comes back, his eyes lit up like Christmas. “Okay, let’s go.”

“Um.” Everybody’s watching. Charity looks mad. “Like, where?”

“The reservoir,” he says, smile fading. He is big, sandy-haired, good-looking.

“We’d never make it back in time.”

Steve taps his fingers along his thigh. “So, today we ditch fifth period.”

“I can’t. I almost got detention already. Ask Charity.”

Charity steps forward. “She did. From Rossi. He barely let her off.”

Steve’s head is down. “Angelyn, you’re not being cool.”

I spread a look around the ones watching. Most of them turn.

“Steve.” I touch his hand. “I said I couldn’t go today. I didn’t mean, not ever.”

He raises his eyes. “It’s been too long.”

Dry-mouthed, I nod. “Yes.” I’d say anything.

Steve jerks his head to the back of the truck. “We’ll have some fun right here.”

I roll with Steve in a slow-motion wrestle, my back to his chest, his legs anchoring mine like we’re on a toboggan. Empties and half empties rattle and tip around us, splotching my jeans and his from ankle to seat. Steve nips at my neck and runs his hands along my ribs like he’s trying to count them. I squirm, breath caught as his fingers spread and stretch. From the street I hear loud talk from the boys and Charity’s brassy voice trying to stay even with them.

Steve flips me so I face him, my legs bent between his, his arm around my back, our shoulders to the cab. Covering my mouth with his, he dips his hand to my waist, my stomach between my thighs, working the denim against me. The rising rhythm takes me and I reach for him, not caring anymore for anything but this feeling between us.

The voices blur to a steady hum that’s easy to ignore. Until it stops.

I pull my mouth from Steve’s, listening.

He presses my hand where it rests on his crotch. “Angelyn—”

“Wait.” My voice is ragged.

“Teacher coming,” someone says.

My heart beats like a bird’s as I struggle to untangle.

“Relax,” Steve says, sprawling off. “They never come this far.”

“Yeah, and if they do?” I ask, pissed that he can’t see it. “The *beer*.”

Steve goes white. Possession can get you tossed from Blue Creek High.

I peek over the gate while he crabs for cans, winging them into the cooler.

Charity and the boys are gone. In the auto shop yard that borders the street, six or seven kids bend and stoop like they’re trying to find something. Sacks on their backs.

“It’s the lunch detention crew,” I say. “Picking trash.”

Steve grunts. “I got some cans for them.”

In the yard a big boy shifts, and I see the teacher behind him.

I duck, I turn, I grab Steve’s arm. “Mr. Rossi’s with them.”

Together we tamp the cooler lid. “Stay down,” he says to it, to me, to us.

On our backs I stare at the sky. Cloudless blue.

“Rossi hates me,” Steve says. “He has since freshman football.”

I snort. "He almost gave *me* detention today."

"Yeah. But he didn't, did he?"

We look at each other, noses close to touching.

The shop gate creaks open to the street.

"Hurry it up." Mr. Rossi's voice.

Steve's throat works. Me, it's hard to swallow.

"We should sit up," I say. "It'll look worse if—"

"Quiet," he says.

Outside, the *scrape scrape* of shoes on asphalt works my nerves as it stops and starts, each time a little closer to where we hide.

Then: "Party down," some guy says.

Steve's eyes look questions at me. I shrug, one-shouldered.

"Whose truck is this?" Mr. Rossi asks.

"Coslow's, I think."

"Steve Coslow's?" Mr. Rossi's voice is sharper. Closer.

Steve is mouthing swears. I curl in like that's going to save us.

His shadow knifes across. Mr. Rossi, looking down.

"Well, what is this?" he says after forever.

"We were just—" I've got nothing else.

Steve lifts himself on an elbow. "Coach, hey. We fell asleep. Is lunch over?"

"Sit up," Mr. Rossi says. "Both of you."

As Steve rises, his arm hits the cooler. The lid slides, settling tilted. I kneel beside him, trying not to look.

Mr. Rossi watches us. Behind him, the detention kids point and grin, whispering things I'm glad that I can't hear. One girl isn't smiling. Jeni, from the bathroom this morning. She's seeing this. I shut my eyes.

"What's the deal?" Steve says. "We were only sleeping."

Mr. Rossi points outside the truck. "Sleeping it off?"

We look. Beer cans around the back tire where the boys stood. Some tipped, others flattened, some nearly full, ready to drink. Souvenirs.

Steve clears his throat. "Those aren't mine. Right, Angelyn?"

"Right." I croak it out.

Mr. Rossi eyes me. "Is this what you do for lunch?"

My face burns. "We're off-campus, Mr. Rossi."

"That excuses nothing. Tell me about the beer."

Steve squeezes my thigh. I put my hand on his.

"I don't know anything about it."

Mr. Rossi takes a step in. The cooler pulses, sending its own light.

"I should have given you detention before."

Steve's fingers twine with mine. His hand is wet.

"Give it to me now," I say.

Mr. Rossi looks off. "Ms. Stark, you come see me after school."

I sink back on my heels. "Okay."

He faces the trash crew. "I need someone to pick up these cans."

Everyone but Jeni finds somewhere else to look.

Mr. Rossi points to her. "Get them, please."

He leads the crew off as Jeni crouches by the truck scooping cans. I'm almost sorry for her.

Our eyes meet. The look she gives makes me wish I'd hit her after all.

I push into the V building as everyone is pushing out. My boot heels ring like gunshots on the steps to the second floor. *You're the best*, Steve said when we were alone. Down the hall to Mr. Rossi's room, I play the words back.

"Come in," he says, like he's been waiting.

I check the clock. "I can't stay long. I have to meet my mom."

Mr. Rossi points to a desk near his. "Sit."

I slide in. "Sorry for whatever."

"I hated seeing you like that," he says.

"Can you just give me the detention?"

"You changed your shirt," Mr. Rossi says.

"Yes," I say, like a question. "I keep an extra in my gym locker."

He stands. "I can still smell it on you."

In shock I watch him start down the length of the board. Erasing.

"Smell what? Mr. Rossi, I do not stink."

He erases some more. "Beer. Did you drink your lunch?"

I've showered. Brushed my teeth.

"No," I say, picking at my jeans.

Mr. Rossi turns. "I saw the cooler. I know *you* didn't bring it."

"If this is about Steve—" I stop.

"You're here and Coslow isn't." He sits on his desk. "Why is that?"

"You told me to come." I work to keep my voice steady.

"You volunteered. He let you do that."

"However it went."

"Give yourself away and you'll have nothing left."

Now I'm squirming. "Tell me what you want me to do."

"Is that what you say to Coslow? During those lunches?"

I stare at him. "What?"

Mr. Rossi curls his lip. "Rolling around in the back of some kid's truck—"

Face burning, I stand. "I'll be there at detention."

"Whoa," he says. "Angelyn, don't take me wrong. Sit. Please."

I bite my lip. And sit.

"You're not in trouble. You don't have detention. I only want to talk."

"About Steve? I won't."

Mr. Rossi moves from his desk to one by me. I stare ahead.

"You're on a path it's hard to turn back from," he says.

"You don't know me to say that."

"I could be wrong. I hope I'm wrong."

I fold my arms. "You are."

"I saw what I saw. But I think you're better than that."

"What makes me better?" I ask.

"You're smart. There's more to you than people know. Am I right?"

"I make C's," I say. "When I'm lucky."

"You could do better," Mr. Rossi says. "Couldn't you?"

I look at him. "In elementary I made A's. Check if you don't believe me."

"I believe you. What was different in your life then?"

"Oh." No one's ever asked. "There was a neighbor lady who helped me with my homework. Mrs. Daly. She used to be a teacher. I'd stop by her place after school."

Mr. Rossi nods. "And? What, she moved?"

I swallow past a sour taste. "Yeah. And I guess I just grew up."

"It's good you had someone like that. Do you now?"

"No," I say.

He taps the desk. "I could help, if you'll let me."

The late-afternoon sun is streaming in, baking the room. I watch the dust dance in the light.

"Why would you want to?"

"I don't know. Maybe because I've been like Coslow."

"Mr. Rossi—"

"And I've been like you. Giving myself up."

I don't know what to say.

"Got ten minutes? I'll tell you about Africa."

"I guess I do. But why Africa?"

He smiles. "That's the unit we're studying in class."

"Oh." I grin. "I knew that."

Mr. Rossi tells me to turn my desk to his. He talks about Africa and AIDS, about the starving people and the economy. He says that his mother was there with the Peace Corps in the 1970s, and he tells me about a trip he made with her when he was only seventeen—*It was beautiful, Angelyn*. I listen to him like I never do in class. I almost forget why I'm here. Almost.

Mr. Rossi asks if I've understood everything.

"Yes," I tell him. "Thanks. I want to travel sometime. And see things."

He motions me up. "Then you will."

We put the desks in line.

"I want to do those things, Mr. Rossi. But I don't know how I can. I'm not going to college or anything. Mom's never been out of state. Neither have I."

"When I was student-teaching in the Bay Area," he says, "I had a student join the Coast Guard. They sent her everywhere. All over the world. She loved it."

"Coast Guard?" First time I've heard those words together.

"I can tell you more another time," he says, back behind his desk.

I gather my stuff. "You'd do that?"

"Sure I would. Now, you will get that homework done."

"I will, Mr. Rossi."

"Okay. I'll be expecting it."

I stop at the door. "The thing with Steve, and the beer—"

He waits.

"It's not what we do every day."

"That's good to know," Mr. Rossi says. "Oh, and, Angelyn?"

“Yes?”

“Tell Genius not to bring that stuff anywhere near school.”

“It won’t be a problem.” I leave smiling.

I lied to Mr. Rossi. I don't *have* to meet my mother. Not right away.

After I leave him, I head toward town instead of the bus yard, where Mom works as a dispatcher. Town is three blocks uphill, and I reach the top hungry. Down Main Street I stop at a food cart by the park for a hot dog and Coke. Paying, I see two skate kids watching me while they toe their boards. The bigger boy says something about "boobs," and the smaller one palms his chest. When they see *me* watching *them*, they giggle together like a pair of first grade girls.

They need to be squelched.

"That isn't cool," I say, down to the bench where the boys are kicking it.

The bigger one fades, but the smaller kid is grinning. "What isn't?" he asks.

"Saying stuff about some girl." I look at each of them. "Some *older* girl."

"Sorry," the big boy says, eyes down.

"You should be."

"What are you going to do with that hot dog?" the little one asks.

Not believing it, I stare. A dirty grin splits his face. The kid is maybe eleven.

"You're too young to know," I tell him.

"You're beautiful. Both of us think so."

"Yeah?" The boys nod. "Go and play with your boards."

The little one starts a spin with his toes. "You going to watch us?"

"I might. If my hot dog gets boring."

The park is small and shaped like a bike wheel, spokes out from a cobblestone center, oaks and pine trees keeping it shaded. I settle on a bench on the spoke opposite the boys and get to eating.

You're smart, Mr. Rossi said. Mrs. Daly used to say it. That makes two.

The shadows grow long. The skate kids leave. I watch the traffic, keeping an eye out for Mom's truck.

I see Jeni before she sees me, hurrying toward the park from deeper downtown. *Keep going*, I think, but when she stops, I say hey.

Jeni nods from the sidewalk. "Hi." Lukewarm.

Coming in, she takes the bench the boys left.

"You know what time it is?" I call.

Jeni checks her watch. "Quarter to five."

I rub my arms. It's getting cold. I check the traffic. Still no Mom.

"Waiting for someone?" I ask.

She huddles in her jacket. "I think maybe I missed them."

I toss the hot dog wrapper and soda cup in the nearest can and cross to her.

"Tell me about Mrs. Daly."

Jeni is stiff as I sit. "She's in a wheelchair. I don't know why."

"That sucks. Mrs. Daly always liked to garden."

"I think Eleanor's okay for how she is. Just old."

"Not Eleanor," I say. "Mrs. Daly." At Jeni's expression: "That's how I knew her."

Jeni nods. "Mrs. Daly. Okay."

"She was a grandma to me. The only one I knew."

"I miss mine," Jeni says. "It's too far to visit her from here."

"You're from the Bay Area?"

"Oh, you heard that? In the bathroom. I wasn't sure."

"What are you doing downtown anyway?" I ask.

"Exploring," Jeni says. "This place is like a toy town."

I look for Mom's truck. "The same crap happens here as anywhere."

"I guess it does. School today was as bad as at my last one."

"Hey, I didn't know Mr. Rossi would give you detention. Or that you'd be in class with u

He has this thing about kids being late."

"You knew I'd be in *some* class. Late *somewhere*."

"We're not in the bathroom now. Or at school. Forget that stuff."

Jeni dips her head. "He got you anyway. On the street, with the beer."

"Yeah. He got me. So, call it even?"

"If you want."

We're quiet.

"Come see Mrs. Daly," Jeni says. "I volunteer there on weekends. It's Blue Creek Ca

Home."

"No. Her grandson wrecked what we had. Years ago. He's a freak."

"Her grandson—Nathan?"

"Yeah." I draw it out. "Nathan Daly. You know him?"

"Nathan's my ride," Jeni says.

"He's coming here?"

She looks confused. "I think Nathan is sweet."

I'm standing, scooping my backpack. "Got to go."

"Wait, Angelyn. What did Nathan do?"

I check the street. Finally, Mom's truck.

"Ask him," I say. Then: "Don't. Nathan lies."

I take off running. And hear him calling: "*Angelyn!*"

Mom's got me spotted. In stopped traffic, she's waving like she's on the *Titanic*. I sprint th

rest of the way, settling beside her in a sweaty lump.

"Let's go," I say.

We're stuck.

Mom clears her throat. "That is not who I think it is. It can't be."

"It's not my fault," I say, and see Nathan stopped on the sidewalk, his mouth turned down

like some sad clown's.

"Angelyn, it's never your fault."

"Mom, don't blame me! He just showed up."

Her mouth is tight. "You are not to see that boy. Not to talk to him."

"I *know*. Like I'd want to. I hate Nathan worse than anyone."

"Do you hear me?" she says, punching out each word.

"Yes," I say.

Traffic moves. I sit back.

Mom sniffs. "Is that beer I smell?"

My heart beats faster. "Not on me."

She cracks a window.

My stepdad is in the front room, spread along the couch watching baseball. Danny works on call construction, but no one's called in a while. He doesn't look up as I cut through on the way to my room. Mom follows, and I hear him say, "Hey, Beautiful."

"I ate in town," I call back.

"You're eating with us," Mom says behind me.

Dinner is premade lasagna. I pick while Danny shovels. Mom talks about her job—directing traffic for the whole school, the way she tells it.

"Angelyn screwed up again," she says at the end of one story.

I drop my fork. "Mom, I told you how it was."

She pokes Danny's shoulder. "Hon, you'd be so mad if you knew."

"What was it this time?" he asks.

"Mom," I say, as loud as I dare.

"That boy—the one who used to live next door—Nathan—"

"Mom!" I shout it.

Danny's eyes flick past. "Sherry, you handle it. She's yours."

"Angelyn, you're grounded," Mom says.

She sounds so happy it makes me sick.

Angelyn, Twelve

From behind the couch, Danny flips the bill of my ball cap down.

“Got you, Angie,” he whispers. Mom is still asleep.

“Nuh-uh.” I push it up, grinning as he vaults over to join me.

Danny pats the cushions. “Where’s the remote?”

I snuggle into my corner. “Sunday mornings I say what’s on.”

“But—” He flaps his hand at the TV. “This stuff will rot your brain.”

MTV. A hip-hop video. The volume, low. “It’s my favorite,” I say.

Danny folds his arms, but pretty soon he’s rapping along, wiggling his hips, dancing on the couch. So stupid I have to laugh.

“You coming to my game?” I ask. “I pitch better when you do.”

“You bet I am,” he says. “Change the channel, ’kay?”

“With this?” I lift the remote from where I’ve got it hid.

“Oh, girl. Give it here.”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

This is our game. Our Sunday-morning game. Mom doesn’t know.

Danny makes puppy eyes. “Please?”

“Well ...” I hold out the remote.

He reaches. I pull it away.

“Angelyn.”

I blink.

“Hand it over.” Like he ain’t kidding.

This time I send it closer to Danny, unfolding my arm by inches.

He rubs his fingers like, “Gimme, gimme.”

I pull it away again.

He looks at me like he can’t believe it.

I lift my shoulders and drop them. Big sigh.

Danny sinks against the couch like he just doesn’t care.

I hold the remote like it’s my life.

With a low roar he springs at me. I yelp—soft—sliding under so his arms close on nothing, dropping to the floor to escape. My bare feet slap linoleum to the kitchen. Danny shuffles behind me, taking a zombie walk. Down the hall I tiptoe past Mom’s room, hand over mouth, swallowing laughter. Danny’s circled back and he’s in the front room before me.

“I’ll pass to you,” I say, setting my arm like a quarterback’s.

Danny fades to the TV, hands up like a wide receiver.

I stretch like the toss will be massive. And stay that way.

“Fake!” I say, breathing out the letters.

He comes at me like a train, slinging an arm around my waist, heaving me to the couch, tumbling after so it’s both of us lengthways. I breathe upholstery as Danny grabs for the remote, laughing at the fabric as I hold it to my stomach.

“Angelyn?” someone says. Close.

Danny stops. I shift around. “Oh. Nathan.”

Our neighbor stands maybe twenty feet away at the screen door.

Danny rolls off the couch. “Tell him to go.”

I sit up slowly. “What do you want, Nathan?”

He holds out a bag of tomatoes. “Grandma sent these.”

I smooth my hair. My ball cap is gone. “Leave them on the porch.”

“What were you guys doing?” Nathan asks.

“Nothing,” Danny says.

“Just go,” I say.

He stands there. “Angelyn?”

“What?”

Nathan’s face is as red as the tomatoes. “I can see your underwear.”

“Oh.” My sleep shirt is ridden to my waist. I tug at it, hating him.

Danny passes me. “I’ll take the tomatoes.”

Nathan peeks around when he opens the door. “Angelyn, you okay?”

“Yes,” I say, like, DUH!

Danny reaches for the bag and latches the screen door shut. He pushes the front door closed. I sets the tomatoes on an end table.

“That kid’s not right.”

I check Mom’s room. Her door is shut, still.

Danny comes to the couch. “Scoot.”

I sit at one end, him at the other.

“What was that about?” he asks.

“Nathan’s real dumb at school.”

“He likes you, huh?”

“Yuck! No.”

“Well, he’s seen you like that,” Danny says.

I curl my legs under. Hide my face.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” he says.

“Nathan acted like I did.”

“So what on him, and, no, you didn’t.”

I peek at Danny. He’s looking over real serious.

“Kid, I don’t want you to feel funny, or bad, or—”

“I feel good with you.”

“Yeah?” He smiles. “Me too.”

“I guess Nathan will tell everyone he saw my pants.” I try to laugh.

“That’s all, if we’re lucky.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe we’re in trouble,” Danny says. “He could tell any lie.”

“What lie? I won’t let him.”

He rubs a thumb over his lips. “We’re friends, right?”

“Yeah, we’re friends.” I’m scared.

“Friends back each other up,” he says.

Mom's door creaks open. "Was someone here?" she says, yawning.

I've still got the remote. I slide it to Danny across the cushions.

"Just now." She steps into the room. "I thought I heard—"

Danny looks at me, and me at him.

"Nothing," he says.

"Nobody," I say.

**Next Morning,
Sidewalk in Front of Ag**

Steve doesn't believe me. "Rossi was okay about the beer?"

I sway with him, my hands on his on my hips.

"Don't bring it to school was all he said."

Steve says, "Not a problem."

"That's what I told Mr. Rossi."

He pulls me to him. "Sweet."

Nearby, Jacey is wound around JT. Other couples hold each other along the walk, the unattached ones teasing across from boy/girl groups. This is our place before school. My place with Steve. Thirtysome of us gather. *Hicks*, the others call us. The prep kids, the rich kids, the jocks. Or, *cowboys*. The words don't fit everyone. They sure don't fit me. Steve's family runs cattle. So does JT's. Jacey and Charity live on ranch land—neighbors—but the dads are in real estate.

Me, I'm here because I'm friends with them and because last year Steve decided that he liked me.

Fine, hot girl, he called me then.

Cowboy Steve, I called him.

"Mom grounded me," I say against his lips.

Steve stands back. "Because of the beer?"

On tiptoe, in his ear: "Mr. Rossi didn't tell. She's just being a bitch."

He curves his hands around my butt. "Reservoir today then for sure."

I wiggle so I face front. "I don't know."

He presses against me. "You can't get any more grounded than you are."

I stare at the ball field across the street, empty but for birds hunting breakfast.

"I can't get any more grounded," I say.

"Ms. Stark," Mr. Rossi says as I walk into World Cultures with the girls.

"Hey." I stop smiling when I see yesterday's homework on the board.

Jacey stops at his desk. "Say hi to *us*, Mr. Rossi."

Charity crowds next to her. "Yeah. You see us too."

"I do," he says. "Hello, girls."

I push them on.

When we're in our desks: "Did you do the homework?" I ask.

Charity says, "No." Jacey shakes her head.

"I didn't either. I said I would. I'm screwed."

"Yeah, by him," Charity says.

Mr. Rossi stops me when class is over.

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