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THE RED ROAD

A NOVEL

JENNI WILTZ



THE RED ROAD

ALSO BY JENNI WILTZ

I Never Arkansas It Coming

A Vampire in Versailles

The Romanov Legacy

The Cherbourg Jewels

THE RED ROAD

A Novel

JENNI WILTZ



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DEDICATION

For Mom and Dad

CHAPTER ONE

Wednesday, March 26

FOUR METAL SPEAKERS BLARED INTO the courtyard. Emma watched the perforated cones pulse in rapid succession, strained by the exuberance of a mariachi band. She tried to remember how to describe the tempo of a piece of music. Beats per measure? Time signature? She couldn't remember anything from the two years she'd taken flute. If pressed, she could pick out "Lean on Me" on the piano, but that was all. She hated "Lean on Me." And she hated the ranchero music the school played during lunch.

A handful of Mexican boys got up to dance, pulling their girlfriends behind them. Emma picked one couple and watched their sensual sway. The boy wore pointy cowboy boots and a lizard belt. When he smiled, his teeth shone cloud white against his brown desert face. He danced with a girl wearing a midriff

shirt, the fingers of his right hand resting on the waistband of her jeans. Half an inch up and they'd be on her bare skin.

Emma sighed. The only thing that touched her bare skin was the too-tight elastic of her bra and underwear, a situation unlikely to change anytime soon. She swallowed hard to push down the pang of jealousy burning the back of her throat.

Emma and her friends occupied their usual table at the far end of the courtyard. On one side, Rachel Cooper sat with pale legs folded to her chest, a waterfall of red hair shielding her face from the sun. Emma sat on the other side. Next to her, Via Mebrete bounced her right leg with a rhythm that would have put a drummer to shame. "What's for lunch?" Rachel asked, pointing at Emma's brown bag. "You know I eat vicariously through you."

Rachel's parents had divorced sophomore year. She and her mom lived with an aunt and uncle, but were thinking of moving in with her grandma instead. If they did, it would be the third place Rachel had lived in less than a year. Her mom worked two jobs, one at a motel and one at a gas station, because Rachel's dad, a lawyer, had all the money. Emma wondered what he did that was so bad Rachel's mom couldn't stand to be married to him anymore.

She opened her sack lunch, packed with a turkey sandwich, a sliced Granny Smith apple, two oatmeal cookies, a can of lemonade, and a paper napkin folded in half lengthwise. Her mom had wrapped the refrigerated soda can in foil so its condensation wouldn't liquefy the napkin.

"Your mom is so cute," Via said. "Mine gives me loose change and tells me to go to the cafeteria." She nudged the cardboard

tray that held soggy fries, a plastic cup of apple juice, and a hamburger. “They don’t even have pickle relish in there.”

Via’s family was in even worse shape than Rachel’s. Her parents split up before she started kindergarten, when her dad left to join a group of fellow Ethiopian expats in Washington, D.C. He sent a postcard with a picture of Kennedy’s grave for her tenth birthday. She had no idea if he was still there.

Every time the subject of fathers came up, Emma was the odd man out. Her dad taught her to throw a football (she sprained a thumb), ride a bike (she fell off, mostly), and put things on the grill (there was a picture of her, shirtless, at age three, using tongs to turn hot dogs over the flame). He remarked on all unforeseen events by saying, “What are the odds? It’s like Lou Gehrig getting Lou Gehrig’s disease.” She couldn’t imagine life without him.

“I don’t know,” Emma said. “Sometimes I’d rather have a hamburger.”

“I can’t remember the last time my mom made me anything,” Rachel said. “She keeps her purse in the oven.”

“Don’t your aunt and uncle cook?”

“They like Hot Pockets.”

At the far end of the courtyard, behind a folding table draped in plastic, a student council representative sold prom tickets. Rachel’s gaze drifted toward the line of people waiting to buy. It happened every time there was a formal dance. Rachel picked out a mark and found a reason to stand by his locker. She twirled her strawberry curls, put on two coats of mascara, and waited for an invitation. It always came. She’d been the only freshman to attend the junior prom.

On good days, Emma tried to convince herself she could do the same. Awake or asleep, though, the dream always ended when she saw her face in the mirror. She lifted her hand and tapped the massive zit on her chin. *Yep*, she thought. *Still there*.

A breeze whipped through the courtyard, shuffling papers and stealing loose napkins. Via zipped up her hoodie. “We have a chem test tomorrow, you guys.”

Rachel groaned. “I’ll lose four hours of study time at work.”

“A few hours of slave labor at the Falafel Hut isn’t worth failing this test.”

“That’s slave labor *plus tips*. I have a car payment, you know.”

“I’m not taking any chances.” Via shoved her chemistry binder at Emma. “Quiz me.”

Via’s loopy letters filled every college-ruled line from edge to edge, exhibiting a reckless disregard for margins. Emma scanned her notes and tried to think like a teacher. “The change in potential energy of a chemical reaction is a reflection of what?”

“Are you trying to fucking kill me? Give me a warm-up question first.”

Rachel sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Sorry,” Via said. “I forgot you joined the morality patrol.”

“It’s a youth group.”

“You mean it’s where Tim hangs out.” Like Rachel, Via had a car and an after-school job. She also had a CV, two letters of reference, four art shows under her belt, and this past Halloween, she’d driven to Santa Barbara by herself just to go to a party. On the scale of bravery, Emma topped out at killing small spiders.

“Moving on,” Emma said, turning the page in Via’s binder. “What is a coulomb?”

“A unit of electric charge.”

“Correct.”

“Okay, now ask me a harder one.”

Emma looked at Via’s drawing of an electrochemical cell and blanked on the difference between electrolytic and voltaic cells. Tomorrow’s test, covering electricity, voltage, and half-cell potentials, was going to be hell. The whole year had been hell. She’d already suffered through seven and a half months of Honors English, AP Chemistry, AP US History, third-year French, pre-calculus, and PE. She did homework every weekday until bedtime and all day Sunday.

It still wasn’t enough.

On the university-prep track, getting straight A’s was the equivalent of treading water in a shark-infested sea: You used up all your energy maintaining the status quo and the sharks still got you in the end. The good schools *expected* perfect grades. Unless you also led a successful crowd-funding campaign to build a girls’ school in Uganda, discovered the cure for cancer as part of your science fair project, and spent weekends teaching foster children to read, you were average — borderline disposable. Some days it was all Emma could do to remember to bring her math book home. *Maybe the students who get accepted are all mutants*, she thought. *With adamantium skeletons that can stand up to the weight of all those expectations.*

“You guys,” she said. “I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“The SAT, college, scholarship applications, all our regular homework.” Emma brushed her fingertip over a word carved in the table’s wooden surface — NORTE. Her nail slipped easily into the shaft of the *t*. “I’m signed up for five AP classes next year.”

Via shrugged. “We were scared of this year, too, but we’re surviving.”

Emma’s eyes drifted back to the Mexican kids. None of them brought their books to lunch. They smiled and laughed like they were actually having fun. She, on the other hand, would have an ulcer before she could vote. “I don’t think it’s supposed to be this way. We shouldn’t just be wishing it was over.”

“I don’t wish that,” Rachel said.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not valedictorian yet.”

As valedictorian of her middle school, Emma had been given a \$25 savings bond and told to make a speech at graduation. Before going on stage, she threw up in the bathroom twice, leaving a speck of celebratory pre-ceremony canapé on the hem of her dress. The experience resulted in no net gain of which she was aware. “You have a 4.0,” she said. “You do lacrosse and tennis and you’re on the yearbook staff and the leadership committee. You volunteer at the soup kitchen. Your transcript is perfect.”

“It’s not enough,” Rachel said softly. “You know that.”

Emma looked away. Her own transcript was pockmarked with two B-plusses in the first semesters of chemistry and pre-calculus. She pictured a pair of Old West gunslingers, aiming for each other’s hearts beneath the blazing sun of high noon. She, not Rachel, was the one who fell backward, clutching a gaping hole in her side. “We’re sixteen. We’re supposed to be having fun.”

“Fuck fun,” Via said. “I’m going to Amherst.”

Rachel glared at her and took a deep breath.

“Here.” Emma shoved her bag of apple slices toward Rachel. “Eat. My mom gave me too many.”

As Rachel reached for a slice, a group of tall boys wandered into the courtyard. There were five of them, all on the water polo team. The tallest, Dan MacLeod, wore knee-length green shorts, a black T-shirt, and black plastic flip-flops. Even when it was forty degrees outside, Dan wore the same black plastic flip-flops. He had a weird backpack, too, a striped woven sack with thin rope straps.

He sat next to her in AP Chemistry, but never seemed to have the requisite supplies. At the beginning of the year, she became his go-to paper provider, and he'd agreed to be her lab partner. Lucky for her, he was the most precise measurer she'd ever met, and that included her mom, who was like Attila the Hun with measuring cups.

Everything was fine until February 8, when he'd leaned over their lab table and asked if she had a hot date for Valentine's Day. Her pencil slipped, and instead of entering "NR" for the cross of Pb with $\text{Pb}(\text{NO}_3)_2$, she blistered through the page with the tip of her Ticonderoga. "What did you say?" she asked.

His dark hair flopped over his eyebrows, almost reaching his cheekbones. "Here," he said. "Let me do that. You're messing it up again." Since that moment, she'd been haunted by the implications of his question. No one had ever asked her out and she'd assumed no one ever would, not while she had baby fat and bad skin.

One day during sophomore year, class president Javier Benavides flung an arm around her after biology class. Javier's friend said, "Hey, is this your new girl?" Javier raised both hands quicker than a cowboy in a calf-tying contest. "No way," he'd said. "These are the ones you save for marriage." Emma had no idea what that meant, aside from the fact that it was mortally

embarrassing for Javier's name to be linked with hers in any romantic context. She was dating kryptonite — until February 8 at 11:42 a.m., when Dan joked about her having a date on Valentine's Day.

This was no small thing.

She watched Dan and his friends walk toward her table. They were heading for the main hall, its doorway just behind her. She liked the way he walked, with slightly turned-out legs that weren't bowed but definitely weren't straight. He had very smooth lips, while hers were always chapped. It didn't seem fair.

She tried to smile, in case he looked at her. The boys shuffled by, talking about the match on Saturday. He didn't see her. He didn't even look in her general direction.

Story of my life, she thought.

CHAPTER TWO

Wednesday, March 26

THE SMELL OF WARM SESAME oil wafted from the kitchen to the dining room. It reminded Emma of Chinese food, even though she knew that wasn't what they were having. The culprit had to be stir-fry. Her mom was obsessed with stir-fry. Somehow, she'd been fooled by the labels on the frozen bags that claimed there were different flavors: Spicy Szechuan, Veggie Delight, Mandarin Lo Mein. They all tasted like sawdust.

Emma turned back to Mr. Lopez's study guide. There was a lot of ground to make up on tomorrow's chem test — her last quiz scored a seventy-three percent. There was an English paper due on Friday, plus a French vocabulary quiz, and her nightly batch of pre-calculus problems. If she devoted an hour to pre-calc and three hours to chemistry, the rest could be dealt with tomorrow night. Three hours of chemistry felt like a death

sentence, but she had no choice. That seventy-three was entirely due to partial credit for showing her work.

She remembered the Mexican kids dancing in the courtyard at lunch. What did they do after school? She didn't even know. Three years on the university-prep track meant that she and normal kids were developing into two different species, like Darwin's finches. Separate them for too much longer and they'd lose the ability to communicate, let alone produce viable offspring.

Emma shoved her study guide away in disgust.

"Everything okay over there?" her dad asked.

He sat in his recliner, a threadbare pile of rust-colored velvet her mom tried to throw away when they moved out of the old house. He held a shoe in one hand and a brush with no handle in the other.

"Yeah. It's just chemistry."

He pushed back his gold-rimmed glasses. "What are you studying?"

"Half-cell potentials."

"I don't even know what that means."

"Dad, you took chemistry." She glanced at his textbook, still sitting in the oak bookcase in the living room. She'd consulted it in December, when her shitty book failed to explain orbital diagrams in plain English.

"That was a long time ago. I think they made it harder, just for you."

"Do you remember anything about half cells, osmosis, and diffusion?"

"You'll ace it. You always do."

Something hot and bright crept up from the pit of her stomach, a rush of panic she'd been feeling for two years now. It started right after they moved into this house.

Before the sliding kitchen chairs put the first scratches in the hardwood floor, her dad's boss at SeedCorp announced the company was moving to Tennessee. They offered to hold his job, but the Malo Verde housing market made a quick sale impossible and they couldn't afford to sell at a loss. At least that's what he told his boss.

Dad, she'd said, please don't make me leave my school. I like the teachers and the counselors and the university-prep program here is so strong. The problem was she'd never met her guidance counselor and had no idea what other schools' programs were like. The only reason she said it was because she was afraid.

In that moment, her grades went from a present to a penance.

While Emma struggled with geometry and biology, he struggled to update a twenty-three-year-old resume. Despite hundreds of applications and dozens of interviews, no one hired him. "It's my age," he said, running his fingers through hair the color of fireplace ash. One year went by and then another. To keep the house, they gave up everything that could be given up. Her mom took on freelance bookkeeping work for a neighbor's daycare business, and they limped along as best they could. Then, two weeks ago, her dad had landed a job as a census taker. It was temporary, but better than nothing.

Tomorrow was his first day.

"You'll do fine, Em," he said. "You've never disappointed me yet."

Her mom came out of the kitchen with a dish towel clutched in her hands. She smiled and swept long golden-brown bangs behind her ear. In direct sunlight, her hair looked almost red. Her eyes were like that, too, changing from brown to hazel depending on the light. "You guys ready for dinner?"

"I'm always ready," her dad said.

Her mom's eyes traveled down his arm to the shoe in his hand. "You're not wearing those tomorrow, are you?"

"I am."

"Roger, you're going door-to-door. Your feet will be killing you. Just wear tennis shoes like everyone else."

He looked at the shoe, carefully shined to help camouflage the worn patches near the ball of the foot. "I'm wearing these."

"You don't work for SeedCorp anymore."

"I know where I work, Sharon."

Her mom tossed the dish towel over her shoulder, lips moving in silent retort.

Emma glanced at her dad to make sure he hadn't seen her mom's gesture. "Come on. Last one to the kitchen has to clear the table."

Her thirteen-year-old sister, Mattie, waited for them at the small table in the breakfast nook. Thin, blonde, and blue-eyed, she already had a boyfriend. Martin Rodriguez, a basketball player who lived two blocks away, presented her with a new stuffed animal every week.

"Hey, Em," Mattie said. "Can I borrow ten dollars?"

"I don't have ten dollars."

"I told you not to ask your sister," her mom said.

"What's it for?" Emma asked.

"The girls are going to the mall on Friday after school."

“So go, but don’t buy anything.”

“I have to.”

“No, you don’t.”

Her mom carted four plates to the table, two in her hands and two balanced on her forearms. “Who needs milk?”

“I do,” said Mattie and her dad, at the same time.

Her mom filled each glass halfway before sitting down. When they were all seated, hands folded in their laps, her father began to say grace. “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest,” they chanted. “Let these gifts to us be blessed. Amen.”

When he finished, he looked around the table.

“What?” her mom asked.

“Soy sauce?”

“You haven’t even tried it.”

For a moment, no one moved. Then her mother sighed, got up, and grabbed the bottle from the pantry. Unperturbed, her dad picked it up and turned the bed of rice and broccoli into something that resembled an oil spill. He scooped up a dripping mouthful and nodded in approval as he chewed. One drop trickled out the side of his mouth and he tried to lick it up with his tongue.

“You have a napkin,” her mom said.

“Oh!” He faked surprise when he picked up the folded paper napkin beneath his knife and spoon. “That’s what these things are for.”

Mattie giggled. “Dad, you’re funny.”

“What did you do in school today, Matt?”

Her sister pushed a piece of broccoli to the side of her plate. “We had a debate in English class about John Steinbeck and whether his representation of farm workers was fair.”

Emma's father nodded. "Which book did you read?"

"In Dubious Battle."

He looked to Emma. "You've read that one, haven't you?"

"No."

"I thought you read it a few years ago," her mom said. "You complained about it."

"That was *The Pearl*, Mom. We read it in eighth grade."

"What didn't you like about it?" her father asked.

"I don't remember. I was thirteen."

"It must have been different for Steinbeck. Not like it is now."

Her parents' eyes met across the dinner table. Sometimes one or both of them would slip and say something about gang members or farm workers, both code for "Mexicans." Before she was born, Malo Verde was a coastal farm town where they grew lettuce and broccoli and artichokes and strawberries. Now, it was a stronghold for drug smugglers, gangs, and former inmates of the nearby state prison. Locking them up had little effect since the gang leaders they wanted to impress were all in prison anyway. On the wrong day (or sometimes the wrong week), the headlines made Malo Verde sound like Iraq, but with fog.

"Dad," Mattie said. "Are you excited about tomorrow?"

"I am."

"What do you have to do?"

"They'll hand out our assignments in the training session."

"I hope you get a good one."

"It's going to be a big day for you, too, Em."

"Oh?" Her mom tilted her head, one golden earring sparkling in the light.

"Chem test," she answered.

Her dad carted another forkful of soy-soaked rice to his mouth. "Have you given any more thought to Cal Poly?"

"Dad, they require two years of a performing or visual art."

"But everything else you have is so good. They can't turn you down."

"They can. Those are the rules."

"Can you do something this summer? And then next year?"

"No, Dad, I can't." Her schedule for high school had been full since eighth grade. Just thinking about it liquefied the contents of her stomach. "I'll already have AP Government, AP English, AP French, AP European History, AP Physics, and maybe calculus. Plus the SAT and finding scholarships."

She said the last part softly, hoping he might not hear.

From the moment she'd learned the alphabet, he promised to put her through college. "Any school you want," he said. "You get the grades, and I'll handle the rest." But that was before SeedCorp, before unemployment, before her mom started jotting down the phone numbers of bankruptcy lawyers. The one time Emma had mentioned loans, her dad shook his head. "Loans are for the kids who get Cs. You'll do better than that."

What if I can't? she wanted to say.

"Can I have more milk?" Mattie asked. "This stir-fry is spicy."

"It's not spicy," her mom said. "And we're almost out."

Mattie set down her glass, a meniscus of milk resting at the bottom. "Being poor sucks."

"We're not poor." Her mom sat straighter than the rest of them, holding the knife and fork with her fingertips, the way rich people did in movies. She held a pen the same way, as if the lightest pressure was all she needed to produce elfin-perfect

cursive. Emma, a lefty, clutched all pencils and utensils in a sweaty death grip.

“Then what are we?” Mattie asked.

“Lucky,” her dad replied.

Emma looked past her mom to the stack of bills sitting in the basket on the kitchen counter. There were three unopened envelopes that hadn’t been in the stack yesterday. *Are we?* she thought.

After dinner, Emma carted the dishes to the sink, where her mom scrubbed them and loaded them in the dishwasher. It seemed weird to Emma that her mom washed the dishes before putting them inside a machine designed to do the exact same job, but adults did things that made no sense all the time. Just yesterday, Mrs. Evans wore pantyhose with sandals. If it were up to her, Emma decided she’d never own a pair of pantyhose and she’d never wash anything twice.

She watched her mom’s quick fingers swipe food scraps from the plates to a mesh grate set over the drain. The garbage disposal had stopped working a year ago and there was no money to fix it. Every night, her mom cleaned the grate with her hands and a sponge.

“Mom,” Mattie called from the couch. “What channel’s *Wheel of Fortune* on?”

“You know what channel,” her mom replied.

“I’m going to check on the roses,” her dad said. A minute later, Emma saw him through the back window, carrying a spray bottle and a pair of shears. Six manicured bushes lined their backyard, all with finger-width thorns ready to inflict grievous harm on any cats that fell off the fence.

“Em,” her mom said, wrist-deep in lemon-scented suds. “Do you need the table to study tonight?”

“Chemistry test, remember, Mom?”

“Would it help if there was pudding?”

Emma smiled. “It always helps if there’s pudding.”

“Mom, come on,” Mattie called. “*Wheel of Fortune’s* starting.”

Her mom pulled out a metal bowl and a hand mixer older than Emma. She poured a package of store-brand pie filling into the bowl and added the rest of the milk. Now Emma knew why her mom didn’t let Mattie have a second glass at dinner.

I’m such an asshole, she thought. All I do is complain, and all Mom does is think about how to make it better for us. “Thanks, Mom,” she said, slipping away into the dining room. Her chemistry book was right where she left it, spine flat on the linen tablecloth. “I hate you,” she said. “Everyone hates you. You know that, right?”

The chemistry book, unperturbed, flashed its cover art at her: red, yellow, and green molecules with white swoosh marks behind them, intended to make it look as if they were zooming across the cover. “You’re not even that fast,” she said.

CHAPTER THREE

Thursday, March 27

“ISOTONIC MEANS EQUAL CONCENTRATIONS of solute. Hypertonic means high solute concentration. Hypotonic means low solute concentration.” Emma chanted it like a mantra as she walked into class and sank into her plastic seat. This was it — the last chemistry test before the final. Mr. Lopez erased the board, his arm swiping right to left. When he finished, the tops and bottoms of numbers floated, dismembered, on the vacant field of green.

Emma took a deep breath and pulled out her scientific calculator. They didn't have the money for a new one, so she used her father's Texas Instruments from college. The buttons were as yellow as a coffee taster's teeth and the plastic cover split like a fat man's pants, but the original user's manual still lay in the inside pocket. She could have cheated and written notes to herself, thumbing through the pages during the test, but she didn't.

Things, she believed, carried some essence of their owners.

On her right, Dan MacLeod twirled a dull-tipped yellow pencil in his fingers. He wore his usual black plastic flip-flops, board shorts, and black T-shirt. Today, his hair looked gelled. It created a perfect arc over his eyebrows, swooped down at the end of his brow, and curved up again over his ear. His long legs stretched halfway beneath the desk in front of him. They were smoother than hers. *So not fair*, she thought.

"You ready for this?" he asked.

"No."

"You always say that when you've spent, like, a thousand hours studying."

"Then how come you're the one who gets the A?"

He shrugged his wide swimmer's shoulders. "Natural talent."

"Your talent is dull," she said, pointing at his pencil. "It needs sharpening."

"I like doing it in the middle of the test. Gives me an excuse to get up and stretch."

"More like cheat off Angela Hong in the front row."

"That hurts. You know I only cheat off you."

Emma reached into her backpack's front zipper pouch and pulled out her spare pencil. White with red strawberries, it was a souvenir of her father's days at SeedCorp. "Here. It's bad luck to start a test with a dull pencil."

"Says who?"

"Confucius."

He held the pencil beneath his nose. "Is it scratch and sniff?"

"It is now."

"You're mean today. I like nice Emma better."

She thought of the English paper she had to write that night, the French quiz tomorrow afternoon, and the long-ass book she had to start reading for her history report. “Nice Emma’s gone away for a while.”

“Anything I can do to help bring her back?”

Emma shifted in her seat, the plastic creaking like the floor of a haunted house. If she actually asked him for something, he might say no. If that happened, she wouldn’t be able to look him in the eye until June. She knew who she was and what she looked like. “No. There’s nothing.”

“Hey, Highlander,” one of the water polo boys called. All the team members had nicknames, just like the pilots in *Top Gun*, her mom’s favorite movie. “Paper me.”

“Shit,” Dan said, turning to her. “Can you help me out?”

Emma passed him a piece of paper. He leaned back and passed it to his teammate, one long arm stretching across a desk and a half.

I’m smaller than that desk, she thought. *I’d fit inside so easily.*

Mr. Lopez cleared his throat to get their attention and she banished all thought of Dan’s arms in light of the coming ordeal.



The test contained multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and free-form problems that ranged from difficult to apocalyptic. In Emma’s experience, teachers who wrote their own tests underestimated students’ ability to see through their strategies. For multiple-choice questions, the right answer was always there, as was a diametrically opposite wrong answer. There was usually a long-shot or humorous answer thrown in because the teacher was tired.

The fourth answer was the one to be careful with. It made sense, and distinguishing it from the right answer required the ability to remain confident in one's first impulse. Confidence wasn't Emma's strong suit, which meant she had to rely on deduction, induction, reduction, and a plea to the non-denominational patron saint of AP Chemistry.

By the time Emma carried her test up to Mr. Lopez, there were only two minutes left in the class period. When the bell rang, she picked up her backpack and headed into the hall. "How was it?" she asked, as Rachel and Via shuffled out of the classroom behind her.

"Brutal," Via said. She dropped her backpack and reached inside for a hair clip. With deft fingers, she wound her fluffy black strands into a bun. "My brain's so fried my hair hurts."

"But you were done way before both of us," Rachel said.

"I left some stuff blank."

"Why?"

"I didn't feel like begging for partial credit."

Emma shook her head. "I'm only passing this class because of partial credit."

Via shrugged. "The real world doesn't give partial credit."

"This isn't the real world," Rachel said. "This is high school."

"What was number nine?" Via hoisted her backpack and shrank visibly beneath its weight. "I spent ten minutes on that fucker and still don't know if I got it right."

Out of the corner of her eye, Emma saw Dan's woven backpack as he left the classroom and walked down the hall in the opposite direction. He didn't want to be seen with her — not even to return a pencil. "21.6 grams," she answered.

Rachel bit her lip. "Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure."

"Goddamn it," Rachel swore.

Via grinned. "Say it a little louder. I don't think Tim heard."

Rachel whirled, her red curls twirling like maypole ribbons. Tim stood behind her, one hand tucked into the front pocket of his skin-strangling Wranglers. His face was darker than his blond hair or green eyes. Emma didn't see how you could trust anyone that tan.

Rachel's voice flew up an octave. "Hi, Tim."

"Hey, girl," he said. "What are you up to?"

"Just got out of chemistry."

"What do you have next?"

"Spanish. How about you?"

"Shop."

"Are you going to PathFinders this week?"

That was the name of Rachel's youth group. Emma was secretly glad Rachel never asked her to go. When she was seven, she'd gone to church with her grandma. The minister asked everyone to find a particular sentence in the Bible, which she'd tried to do and failed. There was something inherently dishonest about a book with no page numbers or table of contents.

"That depends," Tim said. "Will I see you there?"

"You will if you give me a ride."

Via crossed her arms over her chest. "What happened to *your* car?"

"It's —"

"Missing? Vanished? Gone to join your sense of self-respect?"

"Broken." Rachel's glare reminded Emma of a gum commercial, the kind where invisible things like breath and wind sprouted ice crystals.

“Let’s go,” Emma said, nudging Via with her shoulder. “We have to get ready for PE.”

Over Tim’s shoulder, she saw a group of Mexican boys turn the corner into the hallway. They wore saggy black jeans and T-shirts, with stacks of gold chains twined around their necks. She wondered if they were actually in a gang, or just dressed like it. Three years ago, a gang initiation left eight innocent bystanders dead. Five of them died at Samaritan Hospital, less than a mile from her house. The mug shots they showed on the news looked like two-thirds of Emma’s freshman class. After that night, even white reporters learned to roll their r’s when they pronounced a suspect’s name.

“I should go, too,” Rachel said.

“I’ll walk you to class,” Tim replied.

He raised his arm to put it around Rachel’s shoulders. Before she could duck into his embrace, the Mexican boys passed behind him. A thin boy with sharp cheekbones and two gold chains said something in rapid Spanish. The only word Emma understood was “*madre*.”

As he passed, the other boy shoved Tim’s raised elbow out of the way. Tim’s elbow jerked forward, catching Rachel on the side of her head. “Ow,” Rachel said. “What was that for?”

Tim spun in a half-circle, fists balled in front of his chest.

The Mexican boy stepped back and mirrored Tim’s posture. Emma saw four tattooed dots at the base of his thumb and forefinger. She knew what it meant; before her mom cancelled cable, she used to watch *Lockup* on Friday nights.

“Watch where you’re going, *hones*,” the Mexican boy said. His friends fanned out and stood with their feet spread. One

was tall with pale skin and acne scars, one had a widow's peak, and one had a moustache.

"I'm talking to my friends," Tim said. "You got a problem with that?"

"Maybe I do," the Mexican boy said.

"Tim, come on," Rachel said, wrapping her fingers around his bicep.

Suddenly, Emma's skin fit too tightly over her pulsing veins. She backed into the wall and touched it with her fingertips. Her mom would have said not to, that the germs on its surface outnumbered students in the school, but she had to know there wasn't anyone behind her. She glanced at the boys surrounding Tim, their jaws loose and smiling. They weren't scared at all.

"Well, maybe," Tim said, "you need to keep walking."

"Is that what you're going to do, *homes*?"

"I'll show you what I'm gonna do." Tim put his arm around Rachel, who stutter-stepped under the weight. "That all right with you?"

The Mexican boy grinned. "Keep walking, then, *homes*. Maybe I'll be behind you." The boys standing behind him laughed. "Maybe we all will."

"You jagers don't scare me."

The smile fell from the boy's face. "The fuck you mean, you *jagers*?"

Something tingled behind Emma's ears — a whisper of hair, dislodged by the beating of her pulse.

"Stay away from me," Tim said. "Stay away from all of us."

"Or what?" The Mexican boy balled his fists and settled into his knees.

One of his friends, the one with the moustache, said, “Do it, man.”

“Tim,” Rachel whispered.

A wave of heat crested inside her, forcing sweat through the skin of her palms. She remembered what her mom said after the city’s seventeenth homicide of the year, in March: *Never look them in the eye. Never talk to them. Just let them kill each other.*

The Mexican boy pulled back his fist.

Tim pushed Rachel out of the way.

Emma shrieked and reached for Via’s hand. Via grabbed Rachel and they stood flat against the wall, strung together like a daisy chain.

The Mexican boy’s haymaker whooshed through the air. Tim ducked, aiming a punch at the other boy’s ribs. The Mexican boy caught Tim under the chin as he straightened up. Emma watched Tim’s head snap back. A drop of spit, oblong like a galaxy, flew out of his mouth.

“Did I hear a scream?” Mr. Lopez hurried to the doorway of the chemistry classroom. He stepped into the hallway, arms held out from his sides, and inserted himself between the fighters. “All right, break it up, come on.”

Tim stood up straight, one hand holding his jaw. The Mexican boy laughed and retreated into the protective circle of his friends.

“You two, come with me,” Mr. Lopez said, pointing at each combatant and jerking his thumb down the hall. “You can explain yourselves to the principal.”

“But he didn’t do anything!” Rachel said.

The Mexican boy's friends hooted and whistled. Without turning around, their friend held up his left hand and flashed a sign: four fingers held straight up, the thumb pulled back.

"Come on," Emma said. "Let's get out of here." She pulled their human caravan down the corridor. As she slalomed past cheerleaders and football players and gamers and gangsters, she felt it: the quick pang of panic, now compounded by guilt. A voice inside her head taunted her: In Tennessee, they got in trouble for moonshine, not gang signs.