

PLAYER

When I get to Jasmine's house, I see her sitting on the porch smoking a cigarette. I step out of the car and open the gate as she runs up to me, throwing her cigarette in the dry grass.

It's 8 p.m. on my first day back for winter break, and I've just gotten into Sherman Oaks.

"Hey dude," she says and squeezes my shoulder, looking directly into my eyes. Clearly she's high because we're not good enough friends to warrant that kind of look. But I mirror her excitement and hug her, asking her if she has anything to drink. She says yes and spins around to lead me through the front door. Jasmine's a big girl—not fat but the kind of hulky big that lets you know she has Nordic ancestors. She could probably sling me over her shoulder and carry me to safety if my house were on fire and I had passed out from smoke inhalation. Tonight she's wearing a puffy jacket that says *Team USA* over her heart.

Inside, she pulls a few bottles out of the freezer and tells me to have whatever I want. Usually her boyfriend's here—a tiny dude with a severe widow's peak who calls me *player* and carries most of the conversation—but tonight it's just her. The kitchen smells weird and Jasmine keeps hovering close and trying to stare into my eyes nonstop, so I ask her where the bathroom is. She points me down the hall.

Jasmine doesn't think of herself as a dealer, or not like

a *dealer's* dealer, because she only sells to people she knows. But since her parents cut her off last year, she's been getting more serious about it, like selling ketamine and ecstasy and "Quaaludes from the 80s" that she says she buys on the "darkweb eBay." Like, *oh-kay*, Jasmine, those are probably Xanax and Adderall and baby powder that some crackhead presses in his basement in Lima, Ohio. But anyway, she doesn't want to be thought of as just a dealer, so I have to go through the motions of having a drink with her and asking about her dad's recent documentaries before she'll give me my coke.

The bathroom's walls are seafoam green and so glossy that I can almost see my reflection. While I'm peeing, I hear the front door open and Jasmine starts yelling. There's a second girl's voice echoing back at her and they keep getting louder and louder, arguing about *I can't trust you anymore* and *You fucked up too and won't even admit it*. I turn the faucet on. My phone starts buzzing, and I put it to my ear.

"Hi," I murmur, and it's Brett and he's saying something about dinner in Pasadena but I'm too distracted to really hear him.

I tell him I'm in and to text me the details. Wash my hands and look in the mirror and squeeze a whitehead that I know I should leave alone but then I hear the front door slam shut so I come back out to the kitchen. It's just Jasmine's voice now. She's talking to someone on the phone in the living room, so I make a gin and tonic, searching for any kind of citrus when she comes in.

"Here," she says, reaching into the fridge and handing me a near empty bottle of lime juice. "Sorry about that

bitch. She's owed me a thousand dollars for like two years now." Jasmine makes herself a drink, too, which means she pours a lot of vodka in a glass and tops it off with a couple ice cubes. "Said she needed it to prosecute some guy who sideswiped her on PCH and that she'd pay me back when she was out of court."

"Oh," I say, taking a sip and looking down at my phone. Brett's sent me the info and told me to show up in an hour.

"Says she only borrowed 500 from me, but that's bullshit. Lying as usual."

Jasmine looks at me expectantly so I tell her that's awful and what a shitty friend and she looks pleased. Tells me to wait here and she'll get my shit.

I get to Pasadena early, so I sit in my car outside the restaurant and smoke a few cigarettes. Turn the radio on and get sick of the music, switch to NPR and get bored, so I turn it off and call Alana.

"Hello," she says, and it's kind of muted because she's on speakerphone.

"I'm having dinner with Brett at Wolvesmouth. You should come."

"Who is this?" She says. Shouldn't my face have popped up on her phone?

"Taylor."

"Oh, hey." She sounds annoyed, and I wonder if she's still upset about the end of summer. "I'm actually on my

way; Brett didn't tell me you were coming."

"Oh," I say. "He just invited me an hour ago." There's a long pause and then I say I'll see her soon and hang up before she can respond.

I'm sitting there for ten more minutes before Alana arrives, and I watch her park and touch up her makeup in the rearview mirror and walk in the building before I get out of my car and follow her. Inside, she hugs me quickly and says that she wants to get a drink.

We both order gin and tonics with our fakes. The bartender, a thirty-ish woman with big gold hoops and brown lipstick, looks at Alana's ID and then up at her face, does that two more times and then a phone starts ringing on the opposite side of the bar and she goes to answer it. Probably her ex-husband calling about visitation rights, again.

"Remember when we bought these from that thirty-year-old who was dating Jessica?" Alana says, putting the ID back in her pocket.

I nod, even though she's not looking at me.

"What was his name? Jackson? I kept telling Jessica he was a pervert." Alana's nervous, I think, twisting her fingers and pressing her lips together hard. She's gotten really skinny since I saw her last and I wonder if she still takes her sister's Vyvanse. "Remember that party at Jessica's where he kept giving coke to Olivia's little sister? Fucking pervert."

"I think they're still together," I say.

"Yeah, and she just turned eighteen like last month. Fucking Dateline shit."

She laughs kind of and then it's silent except for some sports commentators picking apart a basketball game on the TV behind us. I'm bored and Alana must be, too. She pulls her phone out and I tell her I'm going to go smoke a cigarette, but she doesn't look up or say anything. On TV, some incredibly tall basketball player gets knocked into a row of cheerleaders and his elbow connects with a redhead's nose and blood starts spilling out of it, but she just smiles and clutches her pom-poms to her chest as the camera zooms in closer and closer on her face.

I smoke two cigarettes before Brett shows up. He's shaved his head since I saw him last and, tonight, has wrapped a thin silver chain a few times around his left ear.

"Taylor," he says, walking up to me.

"Hey, Brett."

He wraps an arm around my shoulder and pulls me hard into his side. Sometimes when he does this, he'll relax his arm down the length of my body and, when I'm dizzy from his cologne and BO, will work a couple fingers under my pants and snap the elastic on my underwear. Tonight, he's shaky—his legs, his arms literally buzzing.

He releases me after a second and bounces up and down on his toes. He starts asking me questions about Ithaca and classes and what people I'm seeing and if I've watched Chloe's new film, but never lets me answer.

I tell him Alana's at the bar, and he asks what the fuck we're doing out here then, and pulls me inside.

Alana's finished her second gin and tonic by the time we find her at a table by the bar, talking to some guy she knows from Parson's. His name's Troy and he's tan and has tattoos creeping up his neck from under his shirt. His eyes keep drifting between me and Brett, and he tells us all to come to his place after we've finished eating. Alana smiles at Troy as he speaks, and I wonder if she's fucking him or if he's gay or if she even knows him that well. Looking at her, I can't stop thinking about summer and how different everything was. How much healthier she looked then and how often she would yell at me for not listening.

Once we've been seated, we all realize we're not hungry, so Brett orders oysters and we all get gin and tonics. Alana asks Brett about New Hampshire, and I envision an enormous, muscled basketball player bursting through the doors and crashing through the restaurant, everyone smiling as he knocks them to the floor because it's not really a big deal, and he was just doing his job.

I realize it's silent and they're both looking at me expectantly, but whoever asked me a question doesn't repeat it. Alana says she's drunk and wants to go to Troy's, so Brett asks the waiter to put everything on his father's tab and we leave. We all get into Brett's car because he's drunk the least, and after he takes a bump from the little vial in his pocket, we take off.

August, and I'm stretched out in this older dude's backyard. My back's thick with scratches from rough lawn-chair fabric with little red flowers and stripes up and down and his hands running

up my back. I'm not arching, not extending into his palm, his pinch on the new slide of my body. He ignores my heavy pulse. Dips a finger in his glass of ice water and paints it down my vertebrae. My phone buzzes and when I answer, it's Alana, asking me where I am, again. I tell her I'm on my way and turn onto my back so I don't burn.

In the car, it's quiet again, and Brett keeps having to ask Alana where to turn because she's looking down at her phone the whole time. She's in the passenger seat, and her long hair is dangling over the back of her seat and sweeping across my knees.

I'm tired and dizzy from all the liquor, slouched low in the backseat, so I take a bump from the gram I just bought and am starting to feel it when Alana turns around to look at me. I can tell it's about to happen because she's staring at my mouth—can't bring herself to look me in the eyes.

In this moment, I feel sorry for her or something, stuck here in the Valley—watching her mother doing Pilates in front of the TV, having lunch with her father every few weeks at Duke's, listening to her sister throw up after every meal.

I see Alana crashing to the floor, high and uncoordinated and tired, Alana motioning for me to help her out of bed and into the shower, Alana's face popping up on my phone, calling me nonstop. Alana's stick body turned around in Brett's car to face me, trying to slough off some heaviness onto me, giving me pain in my lower back. "You're doing it

again,” she says, still looking at me.

“What?” I say, too loudly.

“Not listening to me.”

“I’m drunk.”

“You’re an asshole.” She sort of yells this, and Brett turns the music down in response—I lean forward.

“*You’re* drunk,” I say. “Take some more Vyvanse.” She turns around to face forward. “Or here,” and I toss my little baggie of coke into her lap. “Take as much as you need.”

“Fucking faggots ruining my life,” she says in response, and pulls a key out of her purse to take a bump. It’s quiet in the car then, besides Brett’s K-pop playing quietly and the sound of all of us sniffing intermittently. By the time we make it to Troy’s house, deep in the murky hills of Malibu, Alana’s taken three more bumps and braided, then unbraided, her hair. I’m not paying attention to anything.

The house is gated—gaudy twists of bronze and iron—and Brett has to hit the buzzer on the intercom over and over until, after a tense minute or two pass, the gate swings backwards smoothly. The driveway extends for a couple hundred feet, and we roll along it until we reach a group of twenty or so cars, glossy black or tan convertibles and SUVs. We park and Alana gets out and strides into the house, this enormous thing, without waiting for us. I tell Brett to go in without me—that I want to smoke a cigarette—and so he also walks in, leaving me alone in the dark glow of the porchlight.

Alana's bed, September, and she's snoring, staccato gravel. Her arms and legs splayed out like tattered seaweed in the surf. She's sweating. With one finger on her neck, I can feel the vibration in her airway, the dim jumping of blood in deep passageways; with my whole hand, I can feel the abnormal hotness running through her. Her fever. I inch closer to her—want to soften her with my cool body—but when her eyes flick open, I shift back.

Two cigarettes later, I follow them inside. Nobody's in the foyer except for some guy crying into his phone, but I hear people screaming and laughing down the hall and follow the noise to find a group of about forty circled around one guy. He's big and tan and muscular and completely naked and lying on his back with his arms covering his face so that his elbows are over his mouth. The way his chest is moving up and down, I think he's crying or maybe moving in some choreographed way, and when I've been standing there at the edge of the room watching him for a few seconds, he brings his arms to his sides and says "Next" really loudly and starts to shake. With his face uncovered, I can see the blood pouring out of his nose and mouth, down his cheeks and onto the parquet. Everyone in the crowd starts screaming and some people are laughing so hard they're doubled over, and one small redheaded girl with lots of braids tied up into a ponytail comes forward and stands above him, her feet planted on either side of his chest. She takes her phone out of her pocket and bends over and takes a few pictures of his face, then puts her phone away, draws her right arm back, and brings her fist down hard into his

face, grunting with force of it. Everyone is laughing now. The guy screams and flinches back in pain, recoiling into a fetal position and holding his legs tight into his body. After she takes another picture, the redheaded girl walks back into the ring of people to rejoin her friends and the crowd gets quieter, people turning back to their friends, taking sips of their drinks. I don't feel great.

I see Alana and Brett standing with Troy, and walk over to them. Alana doesn't say anything to me, but Brett hugs me into his side and Troy smiles at me.

"Hey, Taylor," he says. "How are you?"

"Fine," I say and extricate myself from Brett, who's already talking to some guy who I think I recognize from high school. Alana's looking at her phone. "Kind of tired, actually."

"Do you want something?" Troy pulls a little vial out of his pocket and offers it to me, but I shake my head.

"No, I think I'm getting sick or something. I want to go home."

"We can't go home yet," Alana says, still looking at her phone.

Troy keeps looking at me, smiling. He takes a step closer to me, but when he's about to speak, the boy on the ground screams "Next" so shrilly that I flinch. Troy puts his arm around my shoulder like he's trying to comfort me, and I close my eyes because I don't want to see him looking at me anymore.

When I open them, Alana's walking forward towards the boy on the ground. She looks severe, but good, and I

realize that she's cut her dark hair to shoulder length since summer. Her outfit, a big loose-knit black sweater over a tan bodysuit, highlights her thinness, makes her look older, and I can't remember if she's seventeen or eighteen, this girl—my best friend—standing over a cowering boy in a mansion, hidden in the hills of Malibu. She looks over at me, and I think she's crying or something because of the way her eyes are flickering and looking directly into mine, and I can't hold her stare. She bends down over the boy and I can feel Troy's body heaving as he laughs harder and harder. Alana makes a fist and I don't feel good anymore, and when she draws it back purposefully, I close my eyes and wait for the scream, the hard body laughter, and the silence that follows.