

“We’re going to crash,” Sara yelled as we glided down the hill.

“We are not going to crash,” I yelled back, accelerating into the turn.

“I can’t stand not being able to steer,” she complained.

“Then be quiet and pedal.”

I couldn’t imagine what we must have looked like coming down the sidewalk on the two person bicycle. I would have laughed at us if Sara wasn’t so paranoid about crashing.

“Please slow down,” Sara pleaded from behind me.

“Relax,” I called back to her with a smile, “we’re almost there.”

Just then, a man cut in front of us, holding three leashes attached to three small, white fluffy dogs.

“Oh no,” Sara exclaimed, slamming on the back brakes.

I swerved the handle bars and dumped us on the grass that ran along the sidewalk. The man with the dogs came over to see if we were okay. His dogs started licking our faces. The whole scene made me burst out laughing.

“You’re laughing? We crash and you’re laughing?”

Sara slid out from under the bike and stood over me. I couldn’t get up. I was laughing too hard. The little dogs licking me didn’t help. Every time I began to reel my fit in, I would feel this little wet tongue on my cheek, and started up all over again. I collapsed on my back, with one leg over the bike and one leg under, and my arms spread out at my sides. I looked up at the palm tree swaying with the breeze. I could get used to this. Then Sara came into view. She towered over me with her arms on her hips. I smiled. She was trying to be annoyed with me. She couldn’t, and reluctantly smiled back.

We walked the bike the remaining two blocks to the bike shop, and continued to the beach. We were told it was a warmer day than usual for February, but even if it was ten degrees cooler, it was still much warmer than Connecticut this time of year.

“Could you imagine studying on the beach?” Sara asked when the beige sands came into view. “How much better could it get than that?”

The only thing wrong with her statement was that it would mean that I didn’t get into Stanford, or that she was here and I was five hours away. Despite the positive meetings I had with each of the coaches, I still had to take the SAT’s, finish my junior year, and have another season of soccer under my belt before I could truly envision myself in California.

As we neared the stairs that led to the sandy beach, we noticed a group of college guys walking toward us with their shirts off, exposing their well-built tanned bodies. Sara elbowed my side. I eyed her, trying to conceal the smile on my face. When we were close enough to smile or say “Hi” to get their attention, my sandal caught the ridge of the sidewalk, interrupting my step. I caught myself without falling, but my exaggerated stuttered step was obvious, definitely getting their attention.

I kept my head down while they passed, unwilling to see their reaction to my humiliating moment. My face was steaming. When I glanced over to ask Sara if they were laughing at me, she wasn’t there. I turned around and found her bent over, holding her stomach in a rage of laughter, while pointing her finger at me. The guys chuckled when they passed her.

“You tripped,” she said in-between breaths, “right in front of them. That was the funniest...”

“Shut up, Sara!” I was mortified. “They probably wouldn’t have noticed if you weren’t laughing at me.”

“Oh, they noticed.” She laughed again. I waited with my arms crossed for her to collect herself before we continued to the beach.

We scoped out a spot and spread the towels we borrowed from the hotel on the sand. I felt so pale next to the sun kissed bodies around us. I was afraid to take off my shorts and t-shirt knowing I’d probably blind everyone with my reflective stomach. Sara didn’t hesitate to take off her clothes, her porcelain skin looking radiant, not pasty like mine.

“Are you staying dressed?” she accused. “Em, you can’t be any paler than I am, and I never tan. It’s either pale like this, or burnt, so you have nothing to worry about.”

I slowly slid off my shorts and shirt, adjusting the revealing bikini underneath. I didn’t remember it being so small last year. Then again, I only wore it twice.

We lay on the towels, propped up on our elbows, taking in the scenery.

“I think you did really well in San Francisco,” Sara complimented. “I thought you were either going to be catatonic, or completely freaked, but you seemed fine.”

I was relieved I was so convincing. In actuality, I was searching every guy’s face we passed, hoping to see him.

“I almost called him,” I confessed, unable to look at her.

“He’s not here.” My mouth dropped open as I turned to stare at her with enlarged eyes. “He’s snowboarding in Tahoe with some friends for the week.”

“How do you know?”

“I asked Jared,” she admitted. “I called him when I knew we were going to be in San Francisco, thinking maybe we could bump into Evan so you could get some closure. Don’t worry; Jared promised not to tell him we were here.”

I didn’t know what to say. When I thought about it, I wasn’t exactly surprised by Sara’s pre-action. I had refused to think about him until we were here. When I couldn’t ignore the fact that he was, or thought he was, so close, I picked up my phone probably a million times and hit 5. Every time I saw the preprogrammed *Evan* displayed on the screen, I’d hit *Cancel*. Now the agonizing moments of trying to decide if I could push the *Send* button didn’t matter at all. He wasn’t even in San Francisco. Now we were in a different city, over five hours away, and flying home in less than six hours.

“Speaking of closure,” Sara continued, “what are you going to say to Drew?”

“I have to say something, don’t I?”

“Yeah, you can’t avoid him forever. The school isn’t that big.” After a pause, she asked nervously, “You are over, aren’t you?”

I let out a short laugh. “Don’t worry, Sara, I won’t continue torturing you. You don’t have to pretend to like him anymore. It’s over.”

“You’re right, I didn’t like him,” she stated bluntly. “But mostly, I didn’t –“

“Like me with him,” I finished. “I know.”

“What are you going to say?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “Maybe I’ll tell him that I’ve taken a vow of celibacy, and I know that it would be too torturous for him to continue in this relationship, so it’s best that he find someone else who could satisfy his needs.”

Sara started laughing. I grinned. In all seriousness, I didn’t know what I was going to say. The unavoidable *talk* was weighing on me more than I wanted to admit.

“Hi.” Sara flashed her dazzling smile at two guys who were walking past us.

My eyes widened at her spontaneous greeting. Oh no, were they actually stopping?!

“Hi,” the guy with sandy blond hair said in return. His dark haired friend grinned and nodded.

“Do you go to school around here?” Sara asked. I had no idea where she got the nerve, but I wished she’d figure out a way to bottle it so I could take a swig.

“Yeah. We go to UCLA, and you?”

Did they really think we were in college? Maybe he wasn’t as intelligent as the school he was attending.

“We’re freshmen at USC.”

I flashed my eyes toward her.

“I’m Adam and this is Brigham,” he said, pointing to his friend. Brigham nodded in casual acknowledgement.

“I’m Sara and this is Emma,” Sara said in exchange. I could only smile. There was no way I was going to say anything.

“We’re having a party tonight,” Adam stated. “You two should come.”

“Definitely,” Sara replied. Sara handed him a pen to write his number on her hand, then after declaring their interest in seeing us later, they continued their walk down the beach.

“They thought we were in college,” she glowed.

“They’re obviously idiots then. There is no way we look like we could be freshmen in college. Maybe that’s what happens when you party in the middle of the week.”

Sara laughed at me. “Only you would find something wrong with two hot guys asking us to a party.”

I shrugged. “What time are we supposed to meet your parents?”

Sara looked at the clock on her phone. “In an hour. We can stay here for another half hour then we’ll walk back. There’s no way I’m getting on that bike again.”

Before I knew it, we were back on the plane, flying home. Back to the cold. Back to the reality of George and Carol. And back to face Drew.