

# *My Week With Him*

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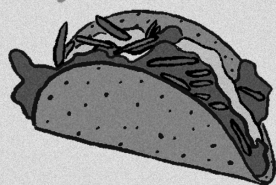
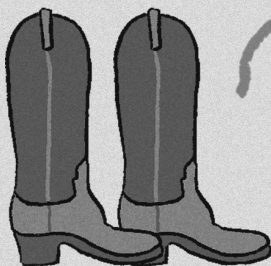
HOT  
KEY  
BOOKS

**@AntTheProdigy:** Nikki! Not sure if you know who I am, but you follow me, so maybe? I'm loving your videos. I especially love your voice and your look. My boss, THE Derek Atkins, is putting together a girl group for his label, and I think you'd be perfect. Auditions are on the 18th and another round on the 25th. Not only do I think you could make the group, I think you have a lot of lead-singer potential. Think you could make it to LA? Let me know!



*Friday*

(the first night of spring break)





7:56 p.m.

Riley somehow manages to snap along to the music, despite the red claws attached to her fingers. My mother would never let me paint my nails such a grown-woman color or keep them so long and pointy. But Riley's parents are lax, and she's quite honestly super spoiled.

She has a full-on orange-and-pink color-coordinated room, as if she snatched the whole thing straight out of a Target catalog. *And* she has her own attached bathroom and walk-in closet. Even Mal doesn't have a walk-in closet, and his house is the closest I've ever come to stepping foot in a castle.

"Daeja!" Riley shouts from her bedroom.

"What?" Daeja shouts back from the bathroom.

"Come here, babe. *Please.*" She's spinning in circles, letting the tulip skirt of her red dress flip and flap in the wind. Riley looks really good in red. She's told me why before, but I can't remember. Something about her skin tone. She's a mixed girl

with brown, shoulder-length curly hair—white dad, Black mom.

Daeja grumbles about doing her eyeliner, but she still comes out grinning. It's obvious how beautiful she finds her girlfriend.

I'm sitting on the floor with my back against Riley's bed frame, painting my toenails white, while they dance together. We're supposed to be pregaming for Mal's annual Spring Break Bash tonight, but my head isn't really in the game. . . . Probably because I'm not *going* to the party tonight.

Riley's mom comes waltzing in, wearing fuzzy slippers and a really sweet-smelling (expensive) perfume, and holding a half-full glass of white wine. "Girls, look at this." She holds up her phone.

Riley struts over in her eighty-inch heels, not even the tiniest bit scared of what her mom will say about her outfit. Daeja follows.

"Six Flags wristbands are on sale," Mrs. Ross explains, before Daeja and Riley can even read the screen. "We could go have some fun over spring break. And then when summer rolls around, we could have, like, a graduation last hurrah there, with all your school friends. Nikki, you too," Mrs. Ross says enthusiastically.

I smile over my shoulder, knowing my mom isn't about to pay for a Six Flags wristband. Hell, I probably won't get through this week without her yelling at me about getting a job. But still I say, "That sounds like fun."

"I don't know," Riley says, popping out her hip. "Over

spring break, sure, but I hate going to Six Flags during the summer. It's too crowded and hot. My skin *hates* too much sun."

"Your skin hates everything."

"It's not my fault that my skin is sensitive," Riley snaps at Daeja.

Mrs. Ross ignores their bickering, being as used to it as I am. "Rie, is this what you're wearing to the party? It's *so* cute. My baby's growing up too fast."

When I glance over my shoulder again, Mrs. Ross is gazing at her daughter, on the brink of tears. My eye catches Daeja's. She looks just as confused as me. Can't even imagine having a mom like Mrs. Ross. I could get away with so much shit. Life would be good.

"And Daeja, this outfit is everything," Mrs. Ross compliments her.

Daeja's wearing black jeans, baggy and formless, with a fitted black tee. Her skinny, two-strand twists all fold to the right side of her head, hanging over the shaved part. She looks really put-together, like she tried harder than usual.

Then Mrs. Ross looks at me. "Oh," she says, with her free hand rushing up to cover her mouth. "Nikki, *sweetie*, you look absolutely gorgeous. You are definitely gonna catch a lot of eyes tonight."

"Oh, I'm not going to the party. I'm—"

"But she might stop by," Riley interrupts. "That's why Daeja did her hair and why I did her makeup." Riley throws me a look, like *keep to the plan, idiot*.

Damn, I almost forgot. “No, yeah. I’ll probably stop by,” I say. “Yeah, for sure, for sure.”

Mrs. Ross studies me for a second, then she nods slowly as if she understands something new about the situation. “Well, either way, I love this dress on you, and I think *Malachai* will too.”

I immediately snap my gaze over to Riley, who’s currently trying to sneak back to her bathroom. “You told her?”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Mrs. Ross cries, sitting on the bed, close to where I’m leaning. “Trust me, I get it: Mal is cute, rich, and he’s very respectable. I think you two would be great together.”

“We’re just friends, Mrs. Ross,” I say, finishing up my toes. Not even waiting for them to dry before standing up. “We’ve been friends since eighth grade,” I add on, hoping this will be the end of the conversation. “Besides, he already has a girlfriend.”

Mrs. Ross shoots up from the edge of the bed, nearly spilling her wine on Riley’s pink rug. “Since when?”

“Since he did a huge promposal in front of the entire school for some random cheerleader,” Daeja says, then goes back to the bathroom to finish her eyeliner.

“What’s the girl’s name?”

“Cynthia,” Riley answers for me.

“Last name?”

“Valle.”

“Valle?” Mrs. Ross repeats. “I know that family. Her dad is Brazilian, right?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

I *really* don’t want to talk about this. “Riley, you said you were going to let me try on some earrings, right?” I say, attempting to turn the conversation around.

Riley ignores me and keeps filling her mom in on everything about Cynthia Valle and how Mal practically stopped the whole school day to prompose to her two weeks ago.

I retreat to the bathroom, past Daeja doing her mascara in the mirror. I can still hear Riley and her mom chatting about me in the bedroom, but at least there’s a slight muffle from the rap music blaring over Riley’s speakers.

“You were absolutely no help,” I hiss at Daeja.

She runs the mascara wand through her lashes, slowly and carefully. “I wasn’t *trying* to help.”

“Clearly.”

“I just think you should stop by the party tonight, seriously, Nikki . . . and make him look at you.”

“Why would I want him to look at me?”

She laughs, and her breath leaves a small radius of fog on the glass. “You know why. You look hot. And he’ll regret ever dissing you.”

“He didn’t *diss* me,” I say for the umpteenth time tonight.

She scoffs. “At this point, it’s not even a matter of *if* he dissed you. It’s how many *times* he’s dissed you. From the whole prom thing, to how he couldn’t even be happy for you about the audition, to the fact that he’s dating Cynthia now—a girl he barely knows.” Daeja drops the mascara and puts on her



nonprescription glasses. “I never liked Mal,” she says.

“Yeah, I know.”

“And I can’t wait to see his stupid face when you’re performing at the BET Awards or at Coachella or something. You should come tonight—it’d be a good preview for him.”

I try not to flinch. Because I’m not supposed to care. When Daeja heard that I was finally done with Mal, she jumped for joy. I’ve really liked having her on my side about this California thing. I don’t even care that the only reason she’s on board is because Mal is deathly against it. I just appreciate her support.

Mrs. Ross finds me sitting on the toilet seat, and then Riley appears behind her. The two of them crowd the doorway and give me no space to run. “Nikki, Malachai is stupid,” Mrs. Ross assures me.

My jaw hardens. I’m tired of talking about Mal. I’m tired of hearing his name.

“That’s normal for boys your age,” she says. “Sometimes they’re just stupid.”

Riley nods. “Mal is stupid all the time.”

“He’s a *straight A* student,” I say, looking at the two of them, perplexed. “Mal is far from stupid. He knows what he wants. And anyway, I’m fine with it. I can see why Mal likes Cynthia. She’s really pretty and . . . she’s not a bad person.”

“She’s not *great*, either,” Daeja says, giving me a disgusted look.


“She’s terrible,” Riley counters. “A serious bitch, Mom.”

“Yeah, I know her parents,” Mrs. Ross says, A-OK with her

daughter cussing in front of her. I can't even imagine.

"It doesn't matter. I don't care," I say, standing from the toilet to face the mirror. All three of them watch my reflection, and none of them look convinced. "I *don't*," I say, rubbing my glossy lips together.

Mrs. Ross slowly shakes her head at me, sympathetic. "Oh, *honey . . .*"



**8:13 p.m.**

Riley thankfully steered her mom out of the room. And Daeja left, too, saying she was going to grab another beer.

*“Hope you find a way away. Baby, you’re my sunny day,”* Vontae raps from the bedroom, while I stare at myself in Riley’s mile-long bathroom mirror. I can see so much of myself. At home, my mirror is square and tiny, dotted with white toothpaste splatters, and only really there to make sure I don’t forget what I look like. But here, the row of vanity lighting at the top makes the edges of my reflection glow. I look like I’m not of this world. I look *admittedly* sexy.

Black lace exposes portions of my midriff. My ass kinda hangs out of the spandex shorts underneath, while the corset top pushes up my boobs in a way that it doesn’t when Riley wears this dress. I told her it doesn’t fit me right, but she’s convinced it looks better on me than it ever looked on her. She’s tall and thin while I’m shorter and a bit curvier.

I imagine how Mal would react if I actually showed up to his party like this. He's never seen me in a dress, or really anything that isn't a ten-dollar outfit from Goodwill.

Riley steps back in. She's fixing a pair of gold hoop earrings to her ears. "Nikki, I'm sorry. I know that was shitty."

"I don't need your mom pitying me like that, Riley."

"She wasn't pitying you. She really wasn't. She just . . . We've all seen how Mal looks at you, and how he *talks* to you, and how he drops everything for you—"

"He does not drop everything for me." I roll my eyes, tired of hearing that exaggeration from everyone I know.

"Well, fine, but he does a lot for you." She crosses her arms over her chest. "He does *boyfriend* things for you—and y'all aren't even having sex."

"Ew, Riley."

"I'm just saying, boys don't usually do that kind of shit for free."

"What shit? He doesn't do anything for me, but like . . . sometimes he does my homework."

"Nikki." She purses her lips. "Don't act like he didn't drive all the way to Cactus and back to pick you and your little sister up for school for damn near a week. He was late to practice for you. That's serious, and you know it."

I look away with a slight smack of my gums. I was hoping she wouldn't bring that up.

"Which is why I get it—I get why you're trying to do this LA thing." She glosses her lips in the mirror, then she rubs them

together. “I think it’s *crazy*. But I get it.”

“I already told you, Riley. None of this is about Mal. I’m going to California because it’s my *dream*.”

She exhales through her nostrils. Props a hand on her counter, then turns to me with a smile. “Okay. I believe you.”

She doesn’t *look* like she believes me.

“All I’m asking is for you to drop by his party tonight, before you get on the road.”

“Why? So he can see me dressed like this?”

“No, so you can *talk* to him. I’m happy for you about the audition, but just talk to Mal first. Don’t go to California for the wrong reasons. If this really is about your dream, go say goodbye to your best friend before you road trip across the country, Nikki. At least say goodbye.”



**8:27 p.m.**

**I'm coming back to Texas after the audition. I'll be back in** just a couple of days. And it's not like I've said two words to Malachai in the past two weeks. Why should I say goodbye now?

He's not stupid—he knows exactly what he wants for his future. He wants to go to prom with the prettiest girl in school, graduate, and go to college with her in Dallas . . . and leave me here in Bumfuck, Texas. His burnt-out best friend. And I'm supposed to just smile and say congratulations. He never told *me* congratulations.

My song slowly comes through Riley's computer speakers. She's playing it from Spotify, adding to the half a million plays it's already gotten since I dropped it a few months ago. When my vocals come in, I mime singing and focus solely on my performance. I push myself. Make every motion sharp. Make every single body roll full and intentional.

“Yes, honey!” Mrs. Ross shouts. “Give me more face.”

I toss in more sultry expressions. Mrs. Ross smiles and nods in approval.

Just one last rehearsal in front of my girls, then I’m out. By the end of the performance, though, Riley gasps and jumps to turn off the music. With my heart racing and my breath heavy, I ask, “What’s wrong?”

“You’re not performing barefoot, are you?”

I look down at my white toenails. This whole time I’ve been imagining this dress, this performance, these pristinely painted toenails with black open-toe dancing shoes . . . the ones I completely forgot to grab from home this morning.

“You told me not to buy shoes, remember?” Riley says, sharpening her gaze.

I nod, hands on my hips, dread washing over my entire body. “Yeah. About that . . .”

“Nikki, you had one job!”

Riley supplied my dress and my makeup—including the perfect shade of foundation for me—while I was supposed to bring the shoes. I told her I had the perfect black pumps at home, because I felt so weird having her buy shit for me. It’s one thing when Mal does it, but Riley?

“Well, what size do you wear?” Mrs. Ross asks. “I might have some you can wear.”

“Mom, Nikki wears an eight.” Riley and her mom both wear seven and a half.

I rush to grab my phone and keys off Riley’s bed. “I’ll just

run home and get 'em. No big deal.”

“Except, isn’t your mom home?” Daeja says.

I glance at the clock on my phone. “I’m pretty sure she went grocery shopping after work. I’ll beat her home.”

“And what if you don’t?”

“Then I’ll go to Cal—” My eyes jerk to Mrs. Ross’s. “I mean, I’ll go to Mal’s party without the shoes,” I say, like it’s obvious. “They’re just shoes.”

“I knew I should have gotten a backup pair. If only we wore the same size!”

“Riley, everything will be fine. If I have to go barefoot, I will.”

She makes a disgusted face.

“I’ll text later,” I say, slipping my feet into my busted-ass sneakers, holding on to the draping black tulle skirt so it doesn’t drag on the ground.

Riley rushes over and pulls me into her arms. She smells like the same expensive perfume her mom is wearing. “Please stop by Mal’s. Talk to him,” she whispers to me.

I roll my eyes and say nothing.

Mrs. Ross joins the hug. “You look gorgeous, Nikki. And if Mal can’t get his act together and realize the mistake he made, then he doesn’t deserve you.”

I sigh and say, “Thank you. Thank you both.”

Daeja remains seated on Riley’s bed. She’s not a hugger—neither am I. “Seriously, Nikki, be careful. If your mom sees you dressed like that, you’re done.”



“I know.” I nod at her. “I’ll catch y’all later.”

Hell, I know better than *her* how done I would be. If my mama found out I lied about “staying at Riley’s all weekend,” and that I was actually going to an audition in California, she’d probably resort to violence. Which is why it’s a good thing she went shopping after work today. I mean, hopefully that was still her plan.

On the way to my car, I grab my phone to call Vae, but she doesn’t answer. I call her again. The girl has never been good at keeping up with her phone—which is so *strange* to me. It’s hard to catch me without my phone, but Vae will leave hers on the charger for days. I figure it’s because she doesn’t have time for it. She’s so close to being valedictorian that things like spring break have absolutely no power over her. It’s not like she has a social life. . . .

After the fourth missed call, though, I start to worry. What if Mama has her trapped at home, in a line of questioning? Vae knows everything about my plans this weekend because I tell her everything, but dammit, she’s really bad at lying to Mama.

As I’m racing across Dumas to get back home to Cactus, I’m hoping to God that Mama isn’t behind me. Hell, I hope she hasn’t left Walmart yet.

Sometimes she takes so long grocery shopping that I think it must be her escape, because even after what feels like hours of her “being at Walmart,” she never comes home with more than a few bags of food.

Twenty minutes later, I turn into my trailer-park

neighborhood, prepared to dip if I spot my mama's car, but the driveway is empty. And the house looks *dark*.

After school, Vae told me she had a ride home with some kid from the marching band. I didn't think too deeply about it, because of who I know her to be. She's not one to hang out with friends. She's definitely not one to be secretive or sneaky.

Disappearing and not answering her phone? That's some shit *I* would do.

The neighborhood is relatively quiet, considering that it's the weekend. Usually, I can hear Tejano music from two streets over and smell weed everywhere. So much weed that it almost covers the shit smell of the factory down the street. But tonight, I guess, *everyone's* taking their festivities outside of Cactus.

I have to admit, though, the silence is ominous. Like the calm before a storm.

As I'm running to the front door, my phone vibrates. *Vae?* Nope, it's just a text from Riley—a shit ton of pictures she snapped of me after she finished doing my makeup. I stagger up the steps, mesmerized by the images. I look like I belong on magazine covers—like *Ebony* or *Essence*. A brown-skinned beauty. Maybe it *wouldn't* be such a bad idea to let Mal see me all dolled up like this.

But even the thought of his name puts a bad taste in my mouth. This isn't about him. It's about my dream.

As soon as I get the door unlocked, I race to my mama's bedroom. Flip on the closet light. I spot some dusty dress shoes that look like she bought them twenty years ago, a few shirts that

have fallen off their hangers, but not the black pumps.

It's probably a good thing I didn't mention to Daeja and Riley that the shoes I plan to wear are my mama's favorite (and only) pair of name-brand shoes. Daeja would have fought tooth and nail to find an alternative.

*Dammit*, I know she's on her way home.

I text Vae: **Do you know where Mama keeps her shoes? You know the ones.**

*Please answer me. Please answer me.* She texts back: **In a box, under her bed.**

My heart settles. *Finally*, she responded.

After sweeping my hand under Mama's unmade queen-sized bed, I find a black Calvin Klein shoebox. They're open-toe, black and shiny without a scuff in sight. I pull my tennis shoes off and slip into the black high heels. They fit a little tight, but they're cute while not being too tall to perform in.

And Mama will never even know they're gone. She tries saving these for special occasions, but the last "special occasion" was when Grandma Bobbie died. I'll be doing her a favor, knocking off some of the dust, taking them out into the world for the first time in months.

I sprint to the door, relishing the *click, click, click* they make against the linoleum in the kitchen. But as I slip outside with my dirty sneakers in hand, I'm too late. There's a car parked in the driveway, the headlights like a spotlight on my scantily clad body.



8:56 p.m.

**My racing heart beats like a drum in my ears. It's drowning out my rationality.**

What's Mama gonna do to me?

What *won't* she do to me—dressed the way I am, while also wearing her shoes?

They were a gift from a man she dated a couple years ago. An African man she worked with at the factory. Let Daeja's mom tell it, the two of them were in "love." It was weird and gross hearing Daeja detail it to me. Mostly because I can't imagine my mama being in love with anybody. Not even me.

But I think Amadi did, at least, make her happy—as happy as anyone *could*. It wasn't like she was suddenly prancing around the house in a tutu, singing love songs. She was just a little more understanding with me and Vae. A little more open and human and sometimes even *nice* to us.

They'd go on dates once a month. Out to Amarillo and

back. Vae and I met Amadi, and we'd see him every so often, when he'd knock on the door to pick Mama up, but he never slept over. She went to his house a couple times, but all in all, she pretty much shielded him from us. Like maybe she thought we'd run him off or something. She had nothing to worry about. We didn't hate him. I think Vae and I were *surprised*, more than anything. That Mama was capable of being soft with someone.

Anyway, he died three years ago. From an untreated, infected wound he got on the line. So crazy to think you could die from something that happened at work. Vae and I didn't go to the funeral. Mama didn't ask if we wanted to. She just told us where she'd be all day and then left, dressed head to toe in black—including the shoes he bought her for Christmas.

The ones on my feet right now.

As I'm slowly closing the front door, I'm waiting for her to come barreling out of her car, screaming her head off about my outfit, but I've been staring into those headlights for at least ten seconds now and nothing has happened. Not a single door has opened.

I lean in, narrowing my eyes. There's someone sitting inside. Wait, no, that's two people . . . and they're *kissing*?

Oh my God. Is that *Vae*?

I've barely ever heard her talk about a crush, but now she's staying out late and kissing boys in our driveway? This must be what distant relatives mean when they say they feel old looking at how much I've grown.

As I make my way down the rickety porch steps in Mama's heels, I notice the color of the car and the make of it—a bright red Camaro. *Damn*, Vae. Not only is she staying out late and kissing boys, but she's kissing boys who drive really nice . . . Wait.

I know that car.

My eyes widen at the familiar license plate frame on the front bumper—burnt orange, covered in tiny white longhorns. Adrenaline pumps through my veins. I can smell the inside of the car from here—men's body spray mixed with Black & Mild cigars. I used to wear that smell in my hair and all over my clothes. I used to wear it proudly.

All those girls. All those names I watched Sarge drag through the mud, and I thought I was somehow . . . different.

*Vae.*

I drop my tennis shoes on the side of the rotten porch steps and take off. The heels of Mama's shoes get caught between the rocks of our driveway. I nearly twist my ankle. But I manage to land against the passenger-side door, yelling, "Vae, stop!"

She pulls away from Sarge's lips, fear in her eyes.

"What are you doing?" I ask through the glass. "Where have you been with him?"

She glances at Sarge and says something to him, then slowly opens her door.

"Huh, Vae? Answer me. Where did he take you?" I grab her arm as soon as she's on her feet, then slam Sarge's door behind her. "Have you been drinking?" I go in for a sniff, but she pushes away from me.

“Stop,” she hisses. “You’re embarrassing me.”

“Embarrassing you?” I say, astounded.

*How can she not see the gravity of this situation?*

But then again, I guess she wouldn’t. The grossly untrue rumors Sarge spread about us having sex had mostly cleared out when she got to high school. And I sure as hell didn’t tell her about him. Not with how judgmental Vae can be.

“You don’t know who he really is,” I try to explain to her.

“Nikki, seriously, you’re *yelling*. Let’s just go inside.”

But then Sarge whirs down the passenger-side window. “Bae,” he coos to her, “everything okay?”

I can see what it does to her, hearing him call her *bae*. She turns to him with a soft expression and nods.

“Call me later?” he says. She nods eagerly, and he backs out of our driveway with his windows down. As he gets closer to the street, he says loud enough for both of us to hear, “*Daaaamn*, Nikki—looking that good, you can call me *too*.” He laughs. Cackles.

My sister is quite obviously in love with him, yet he openly hits on me, and then he fucking laughs about it, like Vae doesn’t mean *shit* to him.

She stiffens and narrows her eyes at me.

Just as Sarge is about to back his car onto the road, another car blocks him in.

Mama’s home.



9:00 p.m.

**Mama gets out of the car. When Vae looks at me, we share the same terrified expression.** “Fuuuuck,” I hiss under my breath. This is worst-case-scenario shit. Absolutely worst-case scenario.

Not only am I caught dressed like an extra grown woman, but there’s a boy backing out of our driveway. And Vae is clearly drunk (clear to *me* anyway).

Mama stops at Sarge’s open window. And for a second, I’m happy he got caught here, ’cause if anybody will set him straight, it’ll be my mama.

“And who are you?” she says, but she doesn’t let him answer. “What are you doing in my driveway, young man?”

“Uh, yes, ma’am, I was just dropping off your daughter,” he says, and we can barely hear him from here. Funny how far that laugh of his carried, but he’s not so loud now that my mama’s all up in his face. *Li’l bitch.*



“Get the hell off my property,” Mama says sternly. “And don’t come back.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Then her fiery eyes cut to us—her two helpless baby fawns. Her slow footsteps toward us look tired but determined. Especially with Sarge’s headlights flashing across her back. He moves around her car and peels out onto the street, never to return, I’m sure.

“What are you wearing, Shaniqua?” She’s smiling, on the verge of laughing. “Where do you think you going, dressed like that? Or I guess”—she points over her shoulder toward Sarge’s car, disappearing down the street—“I guess I should ask where you’re coming from.”

“No, he—”

She cuts me off. “You must think I’m stupid. You think I don’t know what ‘staying at Riley’s’ means? Riley’s mama just wanna be friends with her daughter. I know she don’t keep an eye on y’all. And I had a *feeling* you were meeting up with boys, but . . .” Her unbothered smile scares me to the bone. “I thought it was just Malachai. Never in my days did I think you had multiple boys with their nice cars, and their nice houses, running you up and down the street.”

“He wasn’t here for me,” I say, like a cry, begging her to believe me. She thinks I’m something I’m not. She thinks I’m having sex with rich boys to get stuff from them—that’s always been her theory about why Mal has kept me around for so long. But “staying at Riley’s” usually means that I’m staying at Riley’s.

“If he wasn’t here for you, then what was he doing here?” she asks.

“Vae,” I call to my little sister, in disbelief. I mean, like, why hasn’t she *said* anything? Why hasn’t she set Mama straight yet? She’s just staring at the ground, facing north, like she’s not even involved in this.

I motion to Vae. “He was here dropping her off.”

Mama glances at Vae, standing in the driveway in her school clothes. “Stop lying.” Mama rolls her eyes back to me. “That boy wouldn’t be here for Vae.”

“If you smell her hair and her breath, you’ll believe me.”

Vae looks at me sharply, like she can’t believe that I’d sell her out like that. But *I* can’t believe she hasn’t stood up for me yet. She knows this whole thing will be worse for me than it will be for her. Vae isn’t a stranger to Mama’s ways. She typically rides for me more than she rides for Mama. But at the same time, Vae looks out for *Vae*. And she likes being the favorite daughter. So hearing Mama put her down is a much bigger deal for her than it is for me.

“Actually, *yes*, he was here for me,” Vae says. “But I was forced to catch a ride home with him from band practice . . . because Nikki never showed up. She was too busy trying to get to LA this weekend.”



**10:30 p.m.**

*(much later into the first night of spring break)*

Okay, so. I guess I'm homeless now?



10:45 p.m.

**My fingers drum against my steering wheel to absolutely no music.** Only me and my thoughts. I haven't stopped drumming my fingers since I left Cactus. My nostrils haven't stopped burning.

As I turn the sharp corner, into a middle-class, suburban neighborhood, my phone vibrates in my cup holder. Vae.

I turn my eyes back to the windshield, swallowing the acidic sewage tunneling up my throat. Let's add Vae to the list of people in my life who I'm completely done with. But while I'm at it . . . should I take Mal *off* that list? I'm not sure yet. I'm here, at his house, crashing his party, because I can't fucking *see* straight right now.

Despite what happened between us two weeks ago, I just . . . need my best friend right now.



**11:03 p.m.**

**Each side of his street is packed. I've never seen this place so crowded—not even at one of his previous spring break bashes.**

Takes me ten minutes to find a spot on the next street over. But I don't get out immediately. I adjust my rearview mirror so that I can see myself, to see if I look like how I feel. I don't. My face is still intact—I look beautiful. I look like someone who doesn't deserve the hand she's been dealt. But I'm not about to sit here and feel sorry for myself. I have an audition in California with a world-renowned producer and world-famous hip-hop sensation Derek Atkins. Once I leave Moore County, I'm never coming back. No matter how much everyone thinks I'll end up just like my mama—pregnant and stuck working at the meat factory for the rest of my life—I'm not coming back to this sinkhole of a town. I swear that.

I push open my door and leave my phone and all of the ignored texts from Vae in my car. Then I start walking the block.

Mama ripped her shoes off my feet the second she saw them—took some of the white toenail polish with them—so I'm back to wearing my sneakers. At least my feet won't hurt by the time I get to Mal's house.

Honestly don't think I've ever walked this path before. Anytime I'd hang out at his house, we mostly stayed inside. Playing video games. Doing homework. Even when we did nothing together, we were never bored enough to go outside.

Come to think of it, the very last time I was in this neighborhood was two weeks ago. I don't typically go three days without being at his house for something or another. It's so close to the high school, it just makes sense to chill there until my mama is due home from work. But nothing had felt comfortable between us since he'd gone off and expressed his love for Cynthia. We'd been carrying out the motions and holding in a lot of our words for days. So, for me to just show up at his house that day was . . . unexpected.

But I had good news. I had *really* good news. I had decided to put our differences aside and drove to his house, smiling so big that the edges of my mouth hurt. Until he opened the door with Cynthia at his hip. The way he looked at me, it felt as if now wasn't a good time. Like maybe I was interrupting something.

Suddenly my good news felt like a secret . . . a secret I should keep from him too.

Things had changed between us, but I hadn't been ready for that when I drove to his house that day. I hadn't been ready to

accept that we would be like this *forever*.

That's why I can't really figure out what I'm doing here right now. I had good news that day and he all but shat on my dreams. What makes me think he'll give a shit about my bad news *tonight*?

I spot Riley's car on the way up Mal's street. I wonder what she and Daeja will say when they see me—having sweated out my edges and still wearing my busted-up sneakers. Even better: What will I say to them? If I tell them what happened at home, I already know they'll try to stop me from going to California, as if that's not my only option now that I'm homeless.

Slow-rolling 808s pass through my body as I stand outside his front door. I can hear laughter and chatter on the other side. Everything feels slow—my thoughts, the blinking of my eyes, my pulse.

I really, really expected tonight to go differently. I thought I'd drive to California, get to LA tomorrow and hopefully make it in time for the audition, and the whole time my mama would think I was at Riley's. I'd come back (with a record deal) either Sunday or Monday, like nothing happened. But now that coming back to Texas isn't an option, I might as well stay in Cali. Right? So long as I get into the group, I'll be fine. I'll be better than fine. I'll be rich and famous and shit.

Then the front door opens. Loud music and Cynthia's best friend, Aneeshah, come pouring out at me.

"Oh," I say, drawing backward.

Aneeshah gives me a quick once-over, her eyes hesitating on

my dirty shoes. “Are you okay?” Her gaze makes it back up to my eyes. It looks like she’s forcing herself to be “friendly” with me. It *always* looks like that when she and Cynthia talk to me, especially since Cynthia started dating Mal.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks.” I move around her and go inside, where lights dance and flash across the walls. Music blares from the main speakers, sounding like incomprehensible mush, as I approach them from behind. I forgot Mal said he was hiring a professional DJ for this party.

I make it to the edge of the living room, and *holy shit* this place looks amazing. I’m used to the couch being in the middle of the floor, facing the television that’s mounted above the fireplace, but he moved it—along with the heavy oak end tables and the matching ottoman—right next to the kitchen doorway. The living room floor is filled with bodies, some of them dancing, but most of them just hanging out in groups. Regardless, the strobe lights make everyone look like they’re in slow motion.

I take a step onto the crowded floor. I can’t really see my shoes or anyone else’s. I immediately bump shoulders with a sophomore girl. She looks surprised, then she glances at my outfit and looks floored. “Ohmygod, I love it,” she says. I don’t remember her name, but I smile my thanks, making my way through the bodies. I don’t know where I’m going, and I don’t know why I’m here.

I haven’t even made it halfway through when I’m bombarded. “What are you doing here?” Daeja shouts over the music.



“And why are you still wearing those shoes?” Riley points her whole hand at my feet.

“Oh, I . . .” I never figured out what I was going to tell them.

Daeja studies me closer. “Wait, Nikki, what happened? Did your mom catch you?”

“No,” I say like a reflex. “She wasn’t home.”

“So then, why didn’t you get the shoes?” Riley asks.

Daeja cuts in, “And why are you even *here* right now? I thought you were on your way to California three *hours* ago. You’re losing a lot of time being here.”

“No, I know, I just . . .” I shake my head because you know what? I hadn’t even thought about that. About how much time I wasted banging on my front door, begging my mother to open it. *God*, I should have never gone home. Damn the shoes—never shoulda been there.

“Is Mal around?” I ask, getting to the heart of the matter.

Then both their eyes droop, as if they’ve realized something simultaneously.

“Oh,” Riley says.

“You’re having second thoughts?” Daeja asks.

“No—”

“It’s about her *love* for him,” Riley says with doe eyes. “She doesn’t want to go all the way to California mad at him. She wants to open up and be honest with him.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Riley, stop. I’m not in love with Mal.” I hiss the L word and his name. They both look at me, unconvinced.

Daeja asks, “So then, why are you here, Nikki?”

I don’t *know*. That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out. But I can’t tell her that. I can’t tell her what happened at home. My eyes roam across the tops of everyone’s head, looking for him. But then I see Cynthia before I see him, and she’s sitting in his lap. There’s that pang again. That feeling that I shouldn’t be here.

Mal has always been good at defusing my bombs, though. All those emotions bubbling up to the surface, clouding my eyes and my mind and my judgment—he clears them away. Especially the ones about my home life. Every time I’ve ever run away, I’ve always come straight here, straight to Mal’s house.

But this is different. This time I got kicked out.

As I make my way through the crowd in his living room, I’m doing my best to hold down my emotions. But it’s getting really difficult, because every time I look up from the hips and shoulders I’m brushing past, I catch him mid-flirt with Cynthia. And the closer I get, the more I can see the smile on his face, flashing in and out of my view in time with the strobe light.

He’s surrounded by his friends and his football buddies—all of whom are watching a group of senior cheerleaders dirty dance with each other. But Mal’s not watching them. He’s watching Cynthia.

When I stop in front of him, he doesn’t even look up. It’s Dex who notices me first. “Yooooo, Nikki.” He checks me out with his mouth open. “You look . . . *wow*.” And I have to be honest with myself—it’s how I wish Mal would react to seeing

me, but he still hasn't looked away from Cynthia.

She's a light-skinned mixed girl with sandy brown curly hair and light eyes. She's wearing a cute miniskirt, crop top set—having put much less effort into her appearance than me—and she still looks exceptional. I peer down at my shoes. I almost wanna laugh at how ridiculous they look beneath this dress. Figures that this would happen to me. Fancy isn't something I was born into, or something I can pretend to be. Everything about me screams poor.

Dex finally elbows Mal in the side. "What the hell?" Mal complains, before following Dex's gaze to me. I stop breathing the second our eyes meet. "Nikki?" he says, taking a quick glance over my outfit. Cynthia looks at me, too, but with much more stank on her face. "What's going on?"

I can't actually hear him, because the couch is sitting right next to a speaker on a tripod, but I know how to read his lips. I know how he thinks.

He can see the exhaustion on my face. "Wanna talk?"

I nod, not even thinking about it. Honestly, I didn't expect him to be so merciful. And maybe that's why I'm here—just to see if there's still a chance . . . for us.

*NOTE TO SELF: Fill up gas tank before I leave town tonight.*

What if I made it all the way to New Mexico or Arizona, and then broke down? I can't even imagine what I would do. Get out and thumb my way to California? Either that or I'd have to bite the bullet and call Mal to come rescue me off the side of the road. *Again.*

My fuel gauge is broken. One day it just got stuck or something, and now it always says I have half a tank. It's harder than you might think to keep up with that shit on your own. A lot of times, I don't know how much gas I have until I'm sputtering on the side of the road. It happens more often than I'd like to admit, and every single time, Vae has called Mal to come scrape us off the road. She's so damn sneaky about it, too, because she knows how much it pisses me off.

That time Riley was talking about? When Mal "dropped everything for me" and chauffeured me to school and back every day for a week? That was Vae's fault. We weren't even close to being out of Cactus. I pulled over, turned my flashers on, and slammed my head back against the headrest. "Dammit." After a long sigh, I turned to Vae in my passenger seat, about to suggest that we walk back and catch the bus, because we were early enough where that was still an option, but she was *already on her phone.*

"Mal. We're stuck again."

“Vae!” I snapped at her.

She hung up without another word, because I’m sure Mal said “I’m on my way” without question.

“You can’t keep doing that.”

“What else are we supposed to do?” she asked.

“Catch the bus.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to walk all the way back home just to catch the bus.”

“Well, you can’t call Mal every time something goes wrong. What are you gonna do when he goes to college in a few months?”

“What are *you* gonna do, Nikki?” she asked quietly. She was biting the corner of her lip, worried. “What are you gonna do after you graduate? Are you really gonna work at the factory with Mama?”

“No,” I said, knowing for sure I would never settle for that. I’ve seen what that place has done to her. How mean it’s made her. How it’s fucked up her body and her mind.

“I’ll be fine,” I told Vae, as if I was sure everything would work out. “I’ll figure it out.”

She watched me for a while, then she turned back to the windshield, and we waited in silence for Mal to come rescue us *again*.

Fifteen minutes later, his black-on-black Dodge Charger pulled over behind my piece-of-shit car. I watched in my rear-view as he got out, wearing dark jeans and a tightish black T-shirt and black tinted sunglasses. He looked like a movie star.

Vae got out and met him between our cars. He grabbed her backpack with a joking smile. He was probably giving her shit for how it was ten times bigger than her. Mal was the only person—outside of me—who could make Vae smile like that. She's quiet and small like a tiny church mouse and she keeps to herself a lot, but somehow Mal has made his way into her comfort zone.

Mal lugged the backpack onto one of his shoulders and ushered her into the back seat of his Charger. Then as he opened his trunk, to put her backpack with his athletic bag, I turned off my flashers, grabbed my keys, and got out.

That day I was wearing baggy Goodwill jeans, a T-shirt I'd gotten for free back in junior high in support of our shitty eighth-grade football team—it had a hole in the left armpit—and dirty sneakers that were coming apart at the soles. My hair was pulled back in a bun that was probably already coming apart, and I was wearing just enough makeup to cover the scar on my jaw and the pimple on my chin.

I went around the back of the car and joined him at the trunk. Mal watched as I threw my backpack beside Vae's. Then I looked up at him, my breath heavy with exhaustion. I was exhausted from lack of sleep and lack of answers to so many questions, from breaking down on the side of the road all the time, from having to be such a burden to him all the time, from never having enough money for anything, from fighting with my mom, like, every day.

He could see the exhaustion in my eyes. He reached over

and playfully pinched my nose. “You okay?”

I just stared at him, trying to find his eyes behind those dark sunglasses. When I didn’t say anything, he pulled the glasses off and showed me his concern. I started crying. Just out of nowhere. Because I knew Mama was at work, pissed at me. And Vae was in his back seat, worried about me. And he had missed practice for this, and we were all about to be late to school *again* because of me.

He pulled me into his chest. He was warm and solid and he smelled good, like his Old Spice soap and the matching deodorant and that single spritz of Acqua di Giò on his neck.

“You’re okay. I promise, you’re okay.”

I wanted to spill everything to him. I wanted to apologize for being such a hassle all the time. The words were clawing their way up my throat, but all that came out were croaks and moans.

Then he said, “I’m always going to be here for you. No matter what.”

*No matter what?*

Did he really mean that?



**11:16 p.m.**

**He leads me up the stairs, past the dancing shadows on the wall.** The music muffles behind us. And when he opens his bedroom door, the bedside lamp is already on. He waits for me to walk inside before swinging the door shut. I slowly cross the dimly lit room. Then I sit at his desk, cross my legs, and face him.

“So?” he says, taking a few steps in my direction, looking at me like he doesn’t recognize me. He doesn’t sound eager to hear what I have to say. So it’s really hard for me to open my mouth.

“I know it’s been a while—”

He raises his eyebrows, like what I said is an understatement. I guess when it comes to how often we’re usually around each other, two weeks of no talking feels like centuries for us.

My lips are stuck again.

“Nikki, what’s going on?” he says, demanding an answer.



“There are a million people downstairs right now, totally unsupervised. And my parents are probably watching the cameras. They’ll kill me if they see that I’m not down there—”

“Okay, okay. It’s just that this is really awkward.”

“Yeah, probably because you’ve been acting weird ever since me and Cynthia started dating.”

My breath catches in my throat. And just like that, my lips clamp shut again. I really shouldn’t be here right now, should I? He doesn’t care. He proved that to me the last time I came to his house. Why do I keep giving him chances to hurt me?

It’s over. I should just go. . . .



**11:19 p.m.**

**I'm running down the stairs.**

I told Mal that he was right. That he should get back downstairs and enjoy his party. I told him I'd get out of his hair and leave. But I didn't say goodbye. And I didn't tell him where I was going tonight, either. I don't need to tell him, because I don't need his permission. I'm leaving and I'm never coming back.

Daeja meets me at the bottom step. "Come with me," she growls, pulling me through the crowd, past people who I barely take the time to distinguish from each other, because it's not like I'm ever going to see them again.

Daeja pulls me into Mrs. Brown's office. Riley follows us in, turns on the light, and closes the door. I've only ever been in here twice in my life. "We shouldn't be in here," I say. I can't even believe Mrs. Brown left it unlocked, knowing how many teenagers would be in her house tonight.

Daeja searches my eyes. “Nikki, what happened at home?”

I’m caught off guard. “What are you talking about?”

“Vae just called me in tears, saying that your mom kicked you out. She’s convinced you’re going to California and never coming back.”

*Oh.* So she knows.

I’m trying to keep a hold on the bile that came up at the sound of Vae’s name. Then, calmly, I shake my head. “She’s overreacting. I’m coming back.”

Riley leaves my side to join Daeja, both of them inquiring with their eyes before they can get the words out of their mouths. “What happened?” Daeja insists.

“Nothing happened. Seriously.” I shrug nonchalantly. “I mean, Mama came home and caught me, but I didn’t get *kicked out*. Vae is exaggerating.”

They don’t look like they believe me. Half of me doesn’t want them to. Half of me wants them to be as pissed at Vae as I am. She’s the whole reason I got kicked out in the first place.

*Never coming back to this sinkhole of a town.*

“I need to get going.” I turn and open the door of the office.

“Wait, Nikki,” Daeja says. “You’re coming back, right?”

I sigh, really hating this part. “Of course I’m coming back. But I need to get going if I’m gonna make the audition. Like you said before, I’m losing a lot of time.” The lies come easy. It’s the smile I tack on at the end that’s shaky. “We’ll talk later.”

When I walk out of the office, back into the chaos and the

noise of the party, they follow, begging me to stop. “Nikki, seriously!”

Then Riley asks, “What about Mal? What happened upstairs?”

“What about school? You’re two months away from graduating.”

“What about . . . *us*?” Riley says.

It’s that part that makes me stop. “This isn’t about y’all,” I say, spinning around. “This isn’t about *Mal* . . . I don’t even know why we’re having this conversation. I’m *coming back*.”

“And when you come back, where will you live?” Daeja asks.

That’s the question, isn’t it.

“This is crazy.” Daeja spins on her heel and takes off through the crowd.

Riley stares at me, like I pierced her heart. “You are coming back, right?”

“Yes,” I say again.

“You promise?”

I nod, blinking slowly. “I’ll text you when I get there. Okay?”

She doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t believe me. But I have to go. I’m losing too much time.



**11:32 p.m.**

Waylon Jennings wrote a song about leaving Cactus—I read about it on the Cactus Wikipedia page. I found the song once on YouTube, and after listening to it for about ten seconds, I was like, “Cool,” then I never looked into it again.

But now I’m kinda wishing I knew what it was about. Was he just leaving Cactus? Or was he *escaping*? What I’m doing right now feels more like escaping, and nothing about it has been easy—cutting the ties on my back that were holding me facedown in the dirt. Telling myself I don’t need anyone ever again. Knowing that I barely have enough money to *make* it to California, much less stay in California.

*Never coming back to this sinkhole of a town.*

“Nikki, wait!”

There’s another one of those ties, trying to pull me back. I hurry, because my car is right there. I get to the door and unlock it as his footsteps pound the pavement behind me.

“Nikki, stop!” he begs, voice cracking on *stop*. Then he’s right next to me, and he’s shutting my car door so I can’t get inside. “You were just gonna go to California without saying shit to me?” he asks.

I sigh, staring through my window at my runaway bag. So, Daeja ran and told Mal? Wow.

He leans against my door, so close I can smell his cologne and his beer breath. The heat of his body is melting my resolve. “That’s what I mean to you, Nikki? Not shit?”

*Keep quiet, Nikki.* Even if he’s wrong, I tell myself to keep quiet, because I’m not sure how to form the words around my pride.

“Nikki, you know how much I hate it when you make that face.”

“What face?” I say, like I don’t already know the answer.

“The face you make when you’re trying to hide your feelings from me.” He studies my eyes. “What happened at home? Please, let’s go back inside and talk about this.” Then he reaches out and grabs my hand—the one holding my keys.

I planned to talk to him. That’s the reason I even came here. But then Cynthia shook her magic dust all over him, and he couldn’t give two shits about me. The anger comes roaring back.

“There’s nothing to talk about.” I rip my hand out of his grasp. “What are you even doing out here, Mal? Does your girlfriend know where you are?”

“Just please come back inside,” he says, not acknowledging

my question. "You can stay the night with me."

"Did *Cynthia* say I could stay the night with you?"

"Nikki, stop."

"Why?" I laugh. "This was going to happen in a few months anyway. Time to rip off the Band-Aid. You're going to Dallas, and I'm going to . . ."

He nods. "Going where?"

"It doesn't matter. We can't be in each other's lives forever."

"I'm not *asking* for forever. Just tonight."

"Yeah, well, I don't have tonight. I'm losing time."

I open my car door and rush inside. But when I start the engine, he opens my door again, looking in at me. "Stay with me this week. My parents will be in Mexico all spring break. Stay with me, and if you still want to run to California at the end of the week, I promise I won't try to stop you. Just do me this solid. Give me this week."

"Can't," I say, putting the car in drive. "Can you close my door, please?"

"What about school? Huh? You're about to graduate. And what about *Vae*? What about me?"

I roll my eyes, looking up at him. "What *about* you? We haven't talked in weeks, Mal. I wasn't even planning to come to this party tonight."

"Then why did you?" he asks, eyes searching for anything to hold on to. "Earlier, you wanted to talk to me. So let's go talk."

"The time for that has passed. You made your choice. *Cynthia* was clearly more important." I scowl, because dammit, I

sound bitter. I'm not supposed to care.

"Nikki, I know things have been really messy between us, but I have never stopped . . . caring about you. I *need* you. You are the best friend I have ever had."

"Mal, you don't need me. You've got a bright future ahead of yourself—scholarship to UT, a beautiful girlfriend, supportive parents. I have *nothing*." My body fills up with the fear I've been pushing down all night. Fear of going to California alone . . . and never coming back to this sinkhole of a town. "I have nothing," I say again.

"You have me."

I look into his eyes, big and bright, and down to his lips, *wishing* that was true.

"Go back inside," I say. "I'm sure Cynthia is worried." Then I shut my door and lock it. He tries pulling on the handle, shouting through the glass. "No, Nikki! Wait!"

I give him one last lingering look. Then I let off the brake.



*NOTE TO SELF: Look up that Waylon Jennings song and see if the lyrics are instructions.*

Because I'm having a really hard time leaving this shithole of a town.

**@nik\_nik\_nikki23:** Hey Ant! Change of plans. I'll be at the second audition, instead of the one today. Nothing's wrong. Just some family business to take care of.