

GONE TOO FAR

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To Ian, Adrienne, and Lydia.
To the moon and back times infinity.



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ONE

LATE. SO LATE. I SLAM THE CAR DOOR BEHIND ME AND race across the parking lot. My hair is tangled in the strap of my messenger bag, my shoes are untied, and I have no idea how I'm going to get to my locker without getting caught. I have to try because I *need* those chemistry notes.

Technically I needed them last night when I'd actually had time to study for my midterm, but I didn't think it was a big deal. I know the material, and I figured I could do a little last-minute cramming during first period homeroom. It was a decent plan until my phone battery died, taking my morning alarm down with it. Now I'll be lucky to catch the last ten minutes of first period.

I hop the curb and slow as I slide into the shadow of the ancient brick school. It's probably not classy to barrel through the door like an escaped convict. Of course, it probably wasn't classy flying into the parking lot doing Mach 2 either.

I check my barely charged phone for the time as I climb the

first step. My foot slips on something halfway up the stairs. It's like hitting a patch of ice. I lunge for the handrail and jerk myself upright, glaring down at the thing that tripped me—a dropped notebook.

Nothing special. It's a plain, spiral-bound pad, the kind you can get on sale at the drugstore for less than a buck. Pretty much worthless, except I know it's probably chock-full of notes. Notes someone will likely need during midterm week.

Oh, fine.

I snatch the notebook off the steps and shove it into my bag. Lost and Found is going to have to wait though. It's in the student store, which is on the opposite side of the school.

I climb the rest of the stairs and pull the heavy door open. It shuts behind me with a low *whump*, and warm, oil-soap tinged air closes around me. The office waits to my left, and the main hallway, long and dim, leads to classrooms and stairwells. My fingers and cheeks tingle, recovering from the bite of the wind.

When this hallway is empty, the stillness feels like something that lives and breathes. And waits. I shake it off and rush into the front office. Showing up late to class is bad enough. Showing up without a pass will land me in detention.

Mrs. Bluth and Mrs. Pruitt sit behind the high wooden counter, two round-faced mom types who, as far as I can tell, never leave this room. When we were freshmen, Manny and I used to take bets on whether or not they took bathroom breaks.

“Good morning, Piper,” Mrs. Bluth says, her smile bright.

She pushes the sign-in clipboard toward me. “Yearbook assignment this morning?”

Why didn’t I think of that? I spend countless hours here taking pictures of one thing or another for the yearbook. I shake my head though, and wait while she writes my pass.

“Now, straight to class. If you need to visit your locker, you can do so between periods.”

“Sure.” I force a smile though my shoulders sag. Honestly, I should have given up on the ride here. It’s not like I’d have enough time to really look anything over. There are nineteen minutes left in the period, and my locker is twelve thousand miles away from everything else. Seriously, I should get PE credit for the hike. Even if I did sneak up there unnoticed, I’d only have fifteen minutes to study while pretending I’m paying attention.

Not worth it.

I arrive at homeroom where Mr. Stiers is passing out packets to the class. The second I step inside, he swivels on his feet, dark eyes fixing on me.

“Good morning, Piper.”

He takes my pass with a smile. My lips twitch in response. Sad effort, but it’s all I’ve got.

“Hey,” I say. “Sorry I’m late.”

“No problem. I’m glad you’re here. I didn’t want you to miss the senior project talk.”

Ah, Mr. Stiers. Fluent in five languages and a world traveler, he still ended up in Nowhere, Indiana, teaching high schoolers.

I plod to my seat and Manny looks up from the desk behind mine when I set down my bag. He smirks, tapping his bare wrist to note my timing. Still, he offers me an extra packet, and I mouth a “thank you” in return.

Mr. Stiers points at a projected image on the wall that probably matches a page inside my packet. “Now that we’re well into November, it’s time to get serious about these senior projects.”

I tune him out right there and then. I’ve known what I was going to do since summer—the epidemic of poverty in small-town Indiana. I’ve got this covered. Chemistry? Not so much.

I unzip my bag, rifling through stuff that’s worthless right now: proof sheets from the homecoming dance, my history textbook—might be useful if I hadn’t already taken that test—an extra lens cap. My fingers close around a slim, spiral-bound spine. That notebook I found.

I pull it out. Maybe, by some stroke of cosmic luck, it’s someone else’s AP chemistry notes. Fat chance, but I’m desperate.

I open the book and frown at the three large words handwritten on the inside of the cover.

Malum Non Vide

Great. Latin notes. I think it’s Latin, anyway. Regardless, it’s useless to me.

I sigh, running a finger down the cardboard pocket insert that protects the first page. Funny. I’ve never seen anyone use

these stupid things, but I can feel a thick lump in this one. I pull back the cardboard far enough to see what's inside—pictures. A whole stack of them. A photographer not checking out a stack of prints is about as likely as a cat resisting an open can of tuna. It's not exactly snooping, more like creative curiosity.

I slide a couple of photos out by the edges. Poor quality black and white snapshots taken around the school from what I can tell. I straighten the top photo to get a better look. It's Isaac Cooper... but it's *wrong*.

Isaac's eyes are empty. White sockets glare out at me, windows to a place where Isaac's soul used to be.

I feather my thumb over the face, feeling the jagged scrapes and tears in the photo. The eyes weren't just colored over—they were *gouged* out. And someone took their time about it, picking out bits of iris and pupil, leaving nothing but a pale oval framed by his eyelids.

A chill ghosts up my spine, nesting in the hair at the nape of my neck.

Who would do this? I try to picture it; someone hunched over with a needle, scratching away. The image sends my stomach into free fall.

I flip to the next picture. Anna Price. Her eyes are gone too. I keep flipping—Kristen, Ming, that guy who always seems to be dating one of the cheerleaders. Three more pictures. Six more gaping holes where eyes should be. My heart beats faster, pushing ice into my veins.

I put the pictures back with shaking hands.

What the hell kind of book is this?

Halloween prank. Has to be. It was only last month, after all. I check the pages after the divider. No more pictures and no more Latin, but every line is filled with narrow, precise writing.

Tuesday, 9/5

*WhtCrane stole cash from cafeteria register
Lincoln caught drinking, CCR didn't report
RTN fwds pictures of penis to freshman girls*

The class chuckles and my head snaps up, a counterfeit smile forming on my mouth.

Never mind that I have no idea what's so funny. Never mind that I can't imagine anybody buying this smile anyway, since I'm sure I look like someone's got a gun pressed to my temple.

I shouldn't have this book. I don't know who wrote this, but they could be in this classroom. The thought makes me cold. But no one's looking. And my eyes drag down again.

Wednesday, 9/6

*Magpie threatens to stab WTR in the neck with a pen
Snakchrn calls Wisguy Homo in Bathroom*

Friday, 9/8

Tricky dealing Happy Pills behind bleachers during lunch period

Okay, it's not real. These aren't even real names—they're like gamer handles. For all I know, this is some role-playing thing, or a fantasy football team.

Yes, because nothing says let's-talk-touchdowns quite like photograph mutilation and a sin diary. I flip through the book, determined to find who's behind this—or proof that it's a joke.

The last entry is twenty pages in. It's from yesterday.

Tuesday, 11/16

Gemini hits RJG's car in parking lot—denies incident

Okay, that actually happened. I mean, I didn't see it, but I heard Shane Haywood and some girl I didn't recognize fighting in the parking lot yesterday at lunch. He was pointing at his back fender, claiming something about her paint color. Apparently, no one saw anything.

Except that's not true, is it? Obviously someone *did* see—someone who's keeping a list and checking it twice.

And carving up eyes in his spare time.

I close the notebook, pressing cold, damp hands into the cover. Time to get a grip. I'm not the girl who covers my eyes

during scary movies. I'm the one who tells everyone where the special effects suck.

The pictures are creepy, but I can name a handful of kids in this school that I'm pretty sure are future felons. I still sit in class with them every day. So, what's my problem? I'm afraid of scary, white eyes? I'm shocked at the seedy underbelly of Claireville High? It's not like I live in some rainbows-and-sunshine version of this place. I've personally seen how bad these people can get.

I guess I just didn't know anyone else really noticed.

The book is closed, but I can still see the pictures, the black writing crawling across the pages like veins. I slide the book back into my bag and flip open the senior project packet, but I can't read anything for the chill running up the length of my spine.

Mr. Stiers is almost finished presenting, but I feign fascination. Because I'm not bothered. And I definitely don't feel like anyone's watching me.

My shoulder blades smack the back of my chair when the bell rings. People tumble from the desks around me, stacking books and tapping pencils, shoving into everything and everyone on their way to the door. Manny knocks on my desk and waves on his way out, but I sit frozen to my chair.

I have an AP chemistry test in seven minutes.

Okay. Not the best morning, but I've dealt with worse. I know the material. I'll probably pull a B, which isn't the A that I wanted, but still.

I grab my bag and apologize to Mr. Stiers again on my way out. The hallway surges in its typical between-periods way, people streaming in every direction. It's like being in a wad of used chewing gum—the walls are a graying pink, and everything I touch is disturbingly sticky.

I put my chin up and try to stay positive. In six months, this place will be a distant memory. A couple of months after that, I'll be on my way to a photography degree at NYU, maybe even Columbia. That's when my *real* life starts and I can't wait.

I focus all my energy into looking like a girl on a mission as I move down the hall, pushing through clusters of conversation and banging locker doors, taking the steps to the second floor two at a time. Kristen Green's just outside the restroom. She's ripping another price tag off another pair of jeans that I'd bet a million dollars she didn't actually buy. She catches my eye and immediately checks her hair.

Hazard of being a school photographer, I guess—the pretty ones always check their hair. Even before they check to see if I have my camera.

They also suck in their nonexistent guts and try to present me with their best side. If I ever manage to get a picture of a group of these girls without one of them over-posing, I'll nominate myself for a Pulitzer.

I check the clock above the gymnasium hallway. Six minutes. I'm making good time.

I find my locker, putting English books away and pulling out a couple of fresh pencils. Just need to grab my notes. I'll look them over on the way.

Beside me, a slim hand with bright red nails reaches for the locker next to mine.

Stella DuBois.

Stella never checks her hair. But then, she doesn't need to, because she always looks like she just stepped out of a Pantene commercial.

"Have any Hollywood directors called yet?"

The question is loud, but Stella stays silent, twirling her combination lock with her crimson-tipped fingers. She tucks some long red strands behind her ear and pretends she can't sense the person who's standing right behind her. The one who's obviously talking *to* her.

"No? I'll bet someone will be calling. Maybe a 1-900 number," the same someone says. I'm pretty sure it's Jackson Pierce. I really don't have time for an in-crowd peacock session, so I search a little more frantically through a couple of folders, finding nothing. What is *with* this day?

"I can't decide which performance I like better," he goes on. "What about you, Tate?"

"Good question," someone, probably Tate, answers. He's quieter. Sounds pissed off.

I risk a glance over my shoulder to be sure. Dark hair and a linebacker's shoulders—yeah, it's Jackson. He's flanked by Tate Donovan and Nick Patterson. Tate and Nick are both taller and blond, but Tate's got a model's face, all sharp lines and cool eyes, the complete opposite of Nick's dimpled smile and perpetually messy hair.

Tate looks like he might stroke out on the floor. Nick looks... well, kind of oblivious. It actually seems like he's watching me. Which isn't likely.

I turn around, searching for whoever Nick's gaze is aimed at, but I just see Stella. She's shoving papers in her locker now, still pretending to be deaf. I don't get it. The trio of jock junk behind me is the "trifecta of hot" around here, according to most. They're also *her* people, so this whole showdown is beyond weird.

But not interesting enough to make me late for my test. *Ugh*, where the hell are those notes?

"Maybe we should watch the videos again," Tate says, voice cutting like a blade.

"*Again*," Jackson says, obviously delighted with that particular word. "Oh God, oh God, *again*!" Jackson's voice drags out that last *again* in a way that tells me everything about the content of Stella's video.

I find my notes, but I don't feel triumphant. And I'm not as uninterested as I'd like. My throat's tight as I glance at Stella. She's perfectly still, like she's not even hearing this, but *everyone* is hearing this.

Time to go. Way past time. I chance a quick look over my shoulder to find a semicircle of students gathering, watching intently.

Jackson's eyes are black and bright, a weird contrast to Tate's grimace. And then there's Nick, who *now* looks completely shocked, like he's only just figured out what's going on here. I don't know, maybe he's the pretty-but-dumb type, but *come on*. This has had "torture session" written all over it since Jackson opened his mouth.

"We should go," Nick says, shifting on his feet and glancing at the ancient clock overhead. "We've got class."

"Too bad Stella isn't interested in class," Tate says. Jackson hums in agreement and—*crack!* I jump, my gaze darting to Stella's locker door, which is swinging right back open despite the impact of her slamming it shut.

All around, I hear people pause, conversations dropping into nothingness. Stella clenches her teeth so hard a muscle in her jaw jumps.

I look for an escape route and find Nick's eyes on me. His gaze feels like a question. And what the hell answer would I have? I have less than nothing to do with any of this. I reach back to close my own locker quietly and try to blend into the wall.

"I..." Despite her slamming, Stella's voice is strangely small and unsure. "I didn't—"

"Oh, it's pretty clear that you *did*," Jackson says.

"And that you enjoyed it," Tate says, that tension in his voice edging into something bitter. "So that's what you like now? Giving the whole world ringside seats?"

“Hey, whoa,” Nick says softly, grabbing Tate’s arm. “Let’s go, man.”

Stella shuffles her books, and I eye the onlookers like a cornered dog, looking for an opening. But the crowd has closed in tight. No one wants to miss this. Stella’s not the kind of girl you feel sorry for, but God. This is awful.

Tate lunges from Nick’s grip. “Is this what you’re doing for extra cash now? I mean, I knew you were broke but—”

“Are you finished?” Stella asks, finally sounding like the spitfire she’s known to be. “Or do you get off on humiliating people in front of an audience?”

“Apparently, you getting off *requires* an audience these days,” Tate shoots back.

“You unbelievable ass. You don’t even know...” Stella trails off, looking like the words are choking her.

The warning bell cuts through the tension and jerks me back to my senses. The crowd scatters and I shove my way through, desperate. People push in every direction, almost crashing me into the main players. I have to look right at them.

Tate’s face twists as he leans close to Stella. “Would have been nice to know what kind of slut you—”

“Tate!” Nick cuts him off with a hand on his shoulder.

And just like that, it’s over. The boys move off and everyone else is on their way and I’m heading down the hall on autopilot. Until I stop.

I look back. I don’t even know why, but I do. Stella’s still

there. Something in me pulls tight as I watch her, her narrowed eyes taking in the dissipating crowd. A few people laugh as they pass her. Others look on with expressions of pity I don't really buy.

The truth is, people enjoy seeing girls like Stella suffer.

“Ready for the test?” Aimee, one of my fellow AP chemistry students, pauses inside our classroom doorway. She's smiling big and bright, proof that she escaped this entire mess.

I shake my head and force myself to return her smile. “Uh, yeah. I think so.”

Aimee wishes me luck and moves inside. Everyone else is already in there. I can see Harrison lining up his pencils on the desk. I should be in there too.

And I will be. I just...

I look down the row of lockers again, thinking maybe Stella will still be there. That maybe, in the quiet, empty hallway, she'll be standing alone with her beautiful face crumpled up, needing... I don't even know what she'd need. Or why I think I should be the one to help, since I don't know her.

But it doesn't matter. Because the hallway is empty. All I can see is her locker door, still half-open.