

Testing Kate

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Extract

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When I was twelve years old, I froze right in the middle of the three-meter springboard diving competition. I'd been taking diving classes at the local YMCA. When I'd stand at the edge of the rough board, my toes curled over the end, and stare down at the sprinklers spraying over the surface of the water, the whole world would go quiet. And then I'd take three steps back, turn, balance my shoulders over my hips and my hips over my feet, lift my arms out, and then it was three steps back again to the end of the board. With one final bounce, I'd leap straight up and then out, stretching my body into an arrow and slicing into the cold water, feeling like a mermaid.

At the end of the summer, the Y hosted a fun meet called Splash Day. The swimmers raced like a pack of sleek dolphins, and the synchronized swimmers spun around and fluttered their hands in time to a Christopher Cross song, and the divers sprang fearlessly from the board.

But when it was my turn to dive – a forward half-twist dive I'd been practicing for months – I stood at the edge of the springboard, staring out at the crowd, at my parents sitting side by side on the wooden bleachers, and smelling the chlorine in the air, and I just . . . froze. I don't mean that I had a moment of anxiety, or even that I decided not to dive and retreated back down the ladder. Oh, no. I was incapable of movement. I just stood there in my navy blue Speedo suit,

shivering a little, my arms wrapped around myself in a hug, and I listened to the crowd first grow quiet and then, becoming restless at the holdup, start to call out either encouragements or barbed jokes, their voices echoing over the water.

‘You can do it, honey!’ (My mother.)

‘Just jump already!’ (Mr Hunt, father of Bobby, who for some inexplicable reason wore sweatbands on his wrists when he swam the hundred-meter freestyle.)

‘Damn, that water must be *really* cold!’ (Mindy’s dad, Mr Camp, who thought – incorrectly – that he was hilarious.)

The voices just made it worse. I don’t know why. I don’t even know what it was that stopped me from making the same dive I’d completed hundreds of times in practice, the dive I’d been so sure would secure the blue ribbon. But even as I told my legs to *jump now*, they refused to obey.

In the end, Ms Hadley, my coach – one of those sturdy, capable women with a square jaw and bushy brown hair cut in a severe bob – had to climb up onto the board, take my limp hand in hers, and lead me down and away. As soon as my bare feet hit the wet tiled pool deck, I dashed for the locker room – disobeying the sign that forbade poolside running – where I sat huddled on the wooden bench while hot tears of shame dripped down my cheeks. It was the most humiliating moment of my life.

Until now.

As I sat in my very first class on my very first day of law school, only one terrified thought had crystallized in my mind:

Which one of us will he call on first?

Actually two thoughts, the other being: Please, please, please, God, please don’t let it be me.

Law schools are infamous for their use of the Socratic Method, where the professor singles out a student and questions him or her on the finer points of case law. And despite my performance anxiety, which had been lingering since the diving incident seventeen years earlier, I hadn’t

worried about the Socratic Method when I first applied to law schools.

Getting called on in class? Big deal, I'd thought as I paged through the glossy admissions catalog.

But as I sat in the too-cold lecture hall for the first time, a queasy, oily fear slid through me. And I wasn't the only one. Everyone around me was sitting a little too straight and rigid; heads were bowed over casebooks, eyes flickering around nervously.

Professor Richard Hoffman had finished his curt introduction to Criminal Law and stood leaning forward against the wood lectern, his flat grey eyes scanning row after row of students, all of whom did their best not to make eye contact with him.

Please don't let it be me, I thought again. My hands tensed into two fists, the nails pressing into the tender skin of my palms. Please, please, please don't let it be me. Not today, not when I hadn't done the reading assignment, or even brought my casebook, for that matter. Not the one day of my academic career when I was completely and totally unprepared.

'The sixth row to the right. The young woman who didn't seem to think it necessary to bring her textbook to class,' Professor Hoffman said.

Which row was I in? One, two, three, four . . . shit, shit, shit. He couldn't possibly be . . . was he really? . . . oh, God . . . he *was* . . .

I looked up and saw that all of my new classmates had swiveled around to face me, a sea of strangers, their faces stamped with relief that they hadn't been singled out as the first member of our class to be called on.

Dumb fucking luck, I thought.

You know those people who fill out a sweepstakes entry form on a lark and end up winning a new flat-panel television, or who always manage to make it to the gate just in time when they're running late for a flight, or who find priceless antiques for next-to-nothing in the back room of a dusty thrift store?

I'm not one of them.

I step in wads of gum the first time I wear a pair of shoes, and get stuck in traffic when I have an appointment I can't be late for, and my first and only new car was dinged by a hit-and-run driver less than half an hour after I drove it off the car lot.

So it really shouldn't have surprised me that I was the very first person to get called on by the professor on the very first day of class. It was just more of the freaky bad luck that had been hanging over me since the day I was born (which just happened to be right in the middle of one of the worst blizzards to hit central New York in forty years).

'Your name?' Hoffman asked.

My skin felt very hot and very tight stretched over the bones of my face, and my throat closed up. 'Kate. Kate Bennett,' I croaked.

'Ms Bennett, please stand.'

'Ex-excuse me?'

Hoffman sighed dramatically. 'If you are not capable of speaking loudly enough for the rest of the class to hear you, you must stand. Up. Now,' he said. He raised his hand, with the palm facing up.

But all I could do was gape back at the professor, while the eyes of my classmates burned into me. And just like that, I was twelve years old again, frozen at the end of the diving board.

Twenty minutes earlier, I'd been standing on the Freret Street sidewalk and staring up at the imposing three-story brick facade of John Giffen Weinmann Hall. The morning sun cut down at a sharp angle, and I had to hold my hand up for shade to get a good look at the building that housed the Tulane School of Law, where I was now officially enrolled as a first-year law student.

I was sweating. Heavily.

Perspiration beaded up on my forehead, rinsing away the

tinted moisturizer I'd so carefully applied that morning, and my white cotton T-shirt dampened under my armpits in two wet crescents.

Great, I thought, shifting my black leather knapsack on my shoulder and plucking the thin cotton of the shirt away from my skin. Nothing like making an elegant first impression.

It was only nine in the morning, but it must have already been ninety degrees in New Orleans. The late August humidity made the temperature even more oppressive, blanketing the city with a heavy wet heat that was causing my blonde wavy hair to rise up from my head in a halo of frizz. And I thought we'd had heat waves back home in Ithaca, those brief summer spells that baked the spring mud until it was dry and cracked. Graham and I would sit in front of an oscillating fan set on high, wet towels wrapped around our necks, and bemoan our lack of air-conditioning for those nine days a year when we actually needed it.

Back home . . . Only Ithaca wasn't home anymore, and I no longer shared an old Victorian house, with a wraparound porch, poky kitchen, and hideous blue floral wallpaper in its one dated bathroom, with Graham.

Now I lived in New Orleans, in a shabby shotgun-style apartment on the corner of Magazine and Fourth, on the second floor of a converted Greek Revival house. The house had probably been grand in its glory days but had long since faded into a state of genteel decay. My apartment had no closets, the toilet ran nonstop, and when I walked barefoot across the narrow-planked wooden floors that ran from the living room to the bedroom, the bottoms of my feet turned black from decades of worn-in grime.

My new roommate was a cockroach the size of a rat, which had leapt out at me the night before when I went into the kitchen for a glass of water. I'd shrieked and dropped my glass, only remembering at the precise moment that it shattered on the black-and-white linoleum tiled floor that I still hadn't gotten around to buying a broom and dustpan.

Afterward, I huddled in my bed, giving myself the heebie-jeebies by wondering if the ticklish feeling on my arm was the roach climbing into bed with me.

‘You said you wanted to get out of Ithaca,’ I now muttered to myself. ‘And this is out. Hell, they even have palm trees here.’ Palm trees were exotic, the stuff of vacation resorts and *Miami Vice* reruns.

Students streamed past me, most walking in small chatty clusters, on their way into the law school. I still had a few minutes before class started, so I held back and tried to figure out what the hell I was smelling. It wasn’t the sweetly Southern aroma of magnolias and mint juleps I’d expected, but instead an odd odor of burned toast that hung in the air.

Just then, a tall, thin woman strolled by. She had a sleek dark bob that reminded me of Uma Thurman’s in *Pulp Fiction*, and she looked effortlessly elegant in slinky jeans, a slim-fitting charcoal-gray T-shirt, and black leather thong sandals. An equally tall skinny guy with spiky brown hair and a nose ring loped along next to her. He was gesticulating wildly as he talked, and the brunette threw back her head in appreciative laughter at whatever it was he was saying. I watched them turn into the law school, disappearing behind the heavy glass doors.

Was I the only person at this goddamned school who didn’t know anyone?

‘Excuse me,’ a voice said. I pivoted around to see who it belonged to.

The man standing there was roughly my age – late twenties, or possibly early thirties – and he was gazing at me expectantly. He had short dark curly hair that rose in peaks over his high forehead. His nose, peeling from a sunburn, was a little too big for his face and his chin was a little too long, but he had the brightest blue eyes I’d ever seen. ‘Are you talking to me?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, actually, I’ve been trying to catch up with you since we got off the streetcar,’ he said.

I had heard someone calling out after me as I'd trekked across campus. But since I didn't know anyone in New Orleans, much less anyone at Tulane, I'd assumed that whoever it was wasn't talking to me.

'I'm sorry . . . have we met?' I said. I looked at him a little closer. 'Actually, you do look sort of familiar.'

'If I had a dime for every time a woman said that to me. I used to think it was because I was starring in everyone's sexual fantasies,' the guy said. 'Let me guess, I look just like the brother of one of your friends. Or the friend of one of your brothers.'

I laughed. 'No, I don't think so. I don't have a brother.'

'No? Really? That's usually it. Well, then maybe it's because we live in the same building.'

'We do?' I asked. I hadn't met any of the other three tenants in my new apartment building. I hoped he wasn't the person who lived in the other second-floor apartment. Every time I stood on the narrow landing at the top of our shared staircase, fumbling with my key and sticky dead bolt, I could smell cat urine wafting out from under his door. And then, last night, while I was trying to fall asleep after my run-in with the gargantuan cockroach, I'd heard what sounded like someone over there tap dancing, their steps reverberating through the cheap hardwood.

He nodded. 'Yep. I live in the bottom right apartment. I saw you leaving today, and we were on the same streetcar. I was right behind you. We both had to run to catch it. . . .'

I nodded. 'Oh, right. That must be it.'

Now that he mentioned it, I did have a vague memory of someone getting on the streetcar right behind me, joking with the driver as he boarded. I'd taken the rattling green streetcar from my stop at Fourth Street all the way up St. Charles Avenue to the Tulane campus, gawking out the open window at the Greek Revival mansions we passed along the way, sitting like dowager queens on their carefully manicured lawns.

‘But that’s not why I was trying to stop you. You have a . . .’ His voice trailed off, and he looked uncomfortable.

‘I have a what?’

‘A . . . thingy. Um. Something. Stuck to . . .’ He made a vague gesture toward my hips. ‘On the back of your skirt,’ he said. He blushed and averted his eyes.

I reached back, brushing at my skirt, trying to figure out what he was talking about, what was causing him such obvious embarrassment. And then I felt it.

Oh. *Shit.*

There was a maxipad stuck to my ass.

I could feel the blood flooding to the surface of my skin as I peeled the pad off my skirt and stuffed it into my knapsack. It wasn’t used – thank *God* – but still. *Still.* I’d just walked across the entire campus with a sanitary napkin stuck to my skirt.

‘Ah. Um. Thank you,’ I said stiffly, trying to regain some smidgen of dignity. I glanced nervously at the law school, wondering how many of my new classmates had seen me. Would I spend the next three years known as the Maxi Girl? ‘Well. Um. I’d better get to class.’

‘Are you a law student too?’ the guy asked.

Too? Oh, no.

‘Please tell me you’re not a first-year law student,’ I said, briefly closing my eyes in the hopes that he would disappear. When I opened them, he was still standing there, looking a little confused.

‘Yeah, I am.’

‘Of course you are,’ I said dryly. ‘Because this wouldn’t have been sufficiently mortifying otherwise.’

At this, he laughed. It was a nice laugh, full and deep.

‘Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. So you’re a One-L too? I don’t remember seeing you at orientation,’ he said.

‘I wasn’t there. My U-Haul truck broke down in Pennsylvania. I spent three days outside Pittsburgh waiting for a replacement,’ I said.

‘You didn’t miss much,’ he said. ‘They made us wear name tags.’

‘Yeah, but now everyone knows everyone else,’ I said. ‘Except for me.’

‘You know me.’

‘No, I don’t, actually.’

‘That we can remedy immediately. I’m Nick Crosby,’ he said.

‘Hi, Nick. I’m Kate. Kate Bennett,’ I said. I sniffed again as the burned-toast aroma became even stronger. ‘What is that smell?’

‘What smell?’

‘You don’t smell that? It smells like burned toast.’

‘Maybe someone burned some toast,’ Nick suggested.

‘I don’t think so. I smelled it earlier, when I was leaving my apartment. Unless people are burning toast all over the city, all at once,’ I said.

‘Did you know that carob trees smell like semen?’ Nick said.

I blinked. ‘What?’

‘I thought we were having a conversation about things that smell weird.’

‘No. Just the one smell,’ I said.

‘Right, sorry. So what classes do you have today?’

I consulted the slip of paper the school had sent me over the summer. ‘This morning I have Criminal Law with Hoffman. And then Torts with Professor Gupta,’ I said.

‘Excellent. We must be in the same section,’ Nick said. When I looked at him questioningly, he explained. ‘They break the One-Ls into four sections. Each section has all of their classes together.’

‘Just like at Hogwarts in the Harry Potter books,’ I said.

Nick laughed. ‘Minus the magic and all of the other cool stuff. Come on, we’d better get in there.’

We walked up the steps, and then Nick held a glass door open for me, and I stepped inside. The ground-floor corridor

of the law school was bustling with students standing around in groups or winding their way through the crowd en route to class. Up ahead, to the left, there was a student lounge furnished with green upholstered chairs and couches and lined with glowing vending machines that spat out soda cans with a loud clatter.

‘We have mailboxes in there,’ Nick told me, pointing to the lounge. ‘Only they’re not really boxes, they’re hanging folders; but, whatever, they call them mailboxes. The Powers That Be have ordered us to check them once a day.’

‘You see, you did learn something at orientation. Did I miss anything else?’ I asked.

‘No, not really. They gave us a tour of the building, told us what to expect at lectures, stuff like that. Mostly it was just a chance for people to meet and settle into cliques at the earliest possible point,’ Nick said.

‘Oh, good. That makes me feel better,’ I said, rolling my eyes.

We turned left and walked to the end of a locker-lined hall, where even more students were milling around, some of them shoving heavy legal books into the lockers before slamming them shut. The hollow metallic clang reminded me of high school. The law school smelled like a high school too, that unmistakable bouquet of tuna fish sandwiches, new sneakers, and freshly shampooed hair.

‘Do we have lockers assigned to us?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, but to get one you have to fill out paperwork at the reception desk we just passed back there,’ Nick said. ‘Give the Powers That Be your student ID, take a blood oath that you won’t deal drugs out of it, promise them your firstborn, and they’ll give you your combination.’

When I laughed, the tangle of nerves in my stomach loosened.

Directly ahead of us was a set of heavy wooden doors. Just through it was a large, sunken lecture hall, so that when we stood at the doors, we were at the highest point in the room,

looking down. At the front of the hall, a wooden lectern sat on a slightly raised platform. Long tables were bolted into the floor across the center of the room, set up in a stadium style, so that each was on lower level than the one behind it. There were two sets of staircase corridors – the one where I was standing, and another to the right of the long tables. The room was already half filled with our new classmates sitting in green upholstered task chairs lined up behind the tables. Their voices, buzzing with excitement and anxiety, echoed around us. The chic dark-haired girl I'd seen earlier was there, I noticed, along with her skinny companion with the nose ring.

'Do you want to sit here?' Nick asked, gesturing to one of the shorter tables just to our left, which was still empty.

'Sure,' I said. We sat down, and I got out a yellow lined legal pad and a pen. Nick unzipped his black messenger bag and pulled out a thick brown textbook with gold lettering on its face: CRIMINAL LAW, 8TH EDITION, ALAN M. HOFSTEADER.

'You already got your textbook?' I asked him.

Nick's eyebrows arched. 'You didn't?'

'No, I just got into town on Saturday, and since then I've been unpacking and getting groceries and things. I figured I'd just go the bookstore today after class,' I said, trying to keep the shrill edge of panic out of my voice.

Nick nodded. 'That must have been your U-Haul parked in front of the house on Saturday. I saw it when I came back from the library.'

'The library . . . you mean you've already started studying?'

'Yeah, we had a reading assignment for class today.'

'What?'

'That's right – you weren't at orientation. They posted the first class assignments over by the student lounge. This class was the worst. We had two chapters to read, and the cases were unbelievably boring. I thought Crim Law would have been the most interesting assignment, but apparently not,' Nick said.

‘Oh, no,’ I said, slumping forward. ‘I’m already behind. Stupid U-Haul . . .’

‘Don’t worry, I’m sure you won’t get called on. What are the odds? There must be over a hundred students in here,’ Nick said.

‘Called on? He’s going to start *calling* on people today?’ I asked, and when Nick nodded, my stomach did that dropping thing where it feels like you’re falling off a tall building. I *never* thought the professors would be calling on us on the first day of classes.

‘Hoffman is supposed to be the worst of the worst when it comes to humiliating students in class. The upperclassmen call him Professor Satan. Actually, I think that’s him there,’ Nick said, nodding at the back of a man cutting through the students.

I turned and saw a middle-aged man making his way down the stairs. He led with his crotch as he walked, and the fluorescent lights shone on his pate. He reached the front of the room, stepped up on the platform, and turned to face us. From where I sat, he didn’t look outwardly satanic. Just your average academic type. He wore the hair he had left a bit too long, and his blue oxford shirt was rumpled. His pants were low on his hips to accommodate his stomach paunch. The professor crossed his arms and leaned forward against his lectern, looking blandly disinterested as he waited for the noise level to drop to a nervous buzz before finally tapering off. When silence stretched across the room, he continued to stare back at us for a few uncomfortable moments.

‘This is Introductory Criminal Law. I am Professor Hoffman. If you are in the wrong place, please leave. For those of you who are in the right place, I’m going to go over the ground rules. First, do not be late to my class. We will begin promptly at nine a.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

‘I will be passing around a seating chart. The seat you are now sitting in will be your seat for the remainder of the

semester. Locate your seat on the chart and fill in your name in large block letters.

‘My system for calling on students is as follows: Everyone will be called on at least once over the course of the semester. If you volunteer to answer a question during class, you will inoculate yourself from being called on for the rest of that week.

‘Office hours are Wednesdays from two to four p.m. Do not bother me at any other time, including before and after lectures. And do not waste my time during office hours by asking questions that were addressed during the lecture. If you attempt to do so, I will not be pleased. And I assure you, ladies and gentlemen, you do not want to displease me. Any questions? Good. Open your casebooks to chapter one,’ Hoffman said. His biting voice had just the faintest trace of a Northeastern accent. Connecticut? I wondered. Rhode Island, maybe.

Nick opened his book and moved it between us on the table so that I could share it with him. I shot him a grateful look and began speed-reading through the introductory paragraphs of the chapter, praying that I wouldn’t be called on.

‘Ms Bennett, I don’t like to be kept waiting,’ Hoffman snapped. ‘Stand up now.’

Finally my legs obeyed me, and as I stood shakily, my chair rolled backward, turning as it went, so that the hard, curved plastic of the armrest was pressing into my right thigh. My hands shook slightly as I clasped and then unclasped them, and I tried to resist the urge to wipe my slick palms on the front of my skirt. Nick gave me a tight-lipped smile of encouragement and pushed his book even closer to me.

‘Define *mens rea*,’ Professor Hoffman said. He continued to stare at me blandly, with eyes that were light and flat, like a shark’s.

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted. ‘My moving van broke down, and so I missed orientation and I didn’t know there was a

reading assignment due today. I'm sorry. I'll be prepared next time.'

I started to sit down.

'I didn't tell you to sit. I asked you to define the term *mens rea* for the class,' Hoffman said.

My mouth went dry and my throat was so scratchy, it felt like I'd swallowed a handful of sand. He wasn't going to let me off the hook, I realized. He was going to make an example out of me in front of everyone. I slowly stood back up, my legs shaky.

'Um . . . I don't know. I'll have to pass,' I said lamely. I crossed my arms in front of me, pressing my elbows down so that no one would be able to see my sweaty armpits.

'I don't allow passing in my class,' Hoffman said.

Mens rea, mens rea, I thought wildly. I'd watched every episode of *Law & Order* at least three times. Hadn't Assistant District Attorney Jack McCoy used that term during that episode with the teenager who'd killed his friend? It had something to do with . . .

'Is that . . . does that mean . . . the mental state of a . . . um, criminal . . . person?' I asked, stumbling over the words.

'Are you asking me or telling me?' Hoffman asked.

Asshole, I thought, biting down so hard, the muscles in my jaw twinged.

'*Mens rea* refers to the, um, mental state of a criminal,' I said loudly.

'And why is that important?'

'Because a person's intent when they commit a crime is important for . . . um . . . determining . . . um . . . what kind of a crime . . . it is,' I said, hoping that that made sense. I had a feeling that Jack McCoy had been more eloquent when he was explaining it to the police detectives.

'And what are the four levels of criminal intent under the Model Penal Code?' Hoffman asked.

Four levels? I didn't have the slightest fucking clue. *Law & Order* wasn't going to save me now.

‘Ms Bennett?’ Hoffman said.

I shook my head. ‘I don’t know,’ I mumbled.

Hoffman strode to the whiteboard behind his lectern, picked up a black Magic Marker, and began writing: PURPOSELY, KNOWINGLY, RECKLESSLY, NEGLIGENCE. Then he drew a line under the four words, and below the line wrote: STRICT LIABILITY.

‘This is a basic concept of criminal law,’ Hoffman said, pointing to the board with the uncapped marker. ‘Your inability to answer does not bode well for how you’ll do in my class. I gather it would be a waste of everyone’s time to ask you for a summary of *Staples v. U.S.*?’

Somehow his bland, sneering tone was worse than if he’d yelled at me.

‘Yes,’ I said in a small voice.

‘You can sit down now. And don’t come to my class unprepared ever again,’ Hoffman said.

I reached behind me for my chair, sat down shakily, and edged it back toward the table. Resting my hands on my forehead, I stared at Nick’s casebook, but the words on the pages didn’t make any sense. They just floated around, an impenetrable sea of tiny type.

‘That wasn’t so bad. Could have been a lot worse. At least you were able to answer a few of his questions,’ Nick whispered. His breath was warm on my ear and smelled like mint toothpaste.

I just shook my head at him and tried to focus on the casebook. If that was how Hoffman treated a student who was unprepared, I could only imagine how he’d deal with our whispering in the middle of a lecture. I certainly wasn’t about to find out.



I was in the back of the student-union bookstore, where the law textbooks were shelved, when a giggling female voice from the other side of the stacks said, ‘I heard Professor Hoffman made a One-L cry in class today.’

I clutched a Torts textbook up to my chest, holding it like a shield, and crouched down before they could see me.

‘He did! She was in my class. It was awful; she practically broke down right in the middle of the lecture,’ her friend replied.

‘I’m so glad I didn’t end up with him. I heard he’s the hardest professor in the whole damned school,’ the first woman said. ‘You want to go get a coffee?’

‘Sure. I just have to buy my Contracts book.’

Great, I thought. I slid down a little farther, until I was sitting on the ground, leaning against the book stacks, hoping they’d leave without seeing me. And as if it wasn’t bad enough that they were gossiping about me, they didn’t even have their facts straight. I hadn’t broken down. I’d spent the remaining hour of class staring down at Nick’s textbook. Only after Hoffman had finished – ending his lecture with the menacing warning, ‘I expect everyone will be prepared for Wednesday’s lecture. No excuses this time’ – did I pack up my supplies and hurry out of the lecture hall. I heard Nick call out to me, but I didn’t stop.

Now, sitting on the cold floor in the back of the bookstore,

I sighed and rested my forehead against my bent knees, closing my eyes against the series of mortifying events that had been my day thus far. A little bit of bad luck was one thing, but this was turning into an epidemic.

‘I surrender. Just make it stop,’ I muttered into my knees.

‘It really wasn’t that bad,’ a voice said.

I opened my eyes. Two thin denim-clad legs were standing in front of me. I tilted my head back, looked up, and saw that it was the *Pulp Fiction* girl. She was peering down at me, her slanting eyes sympathetic.

‘Really. In a few weeks, no one will even remember,’ she said.

‘Do you mean the part where I came to school with a maxipad stuck to my skirt, or the part where the professor called me a simpleminded moron in front of the whole class?’ I asked.

She laughed. ‘He didn’t say that,’ she said.

‘He implied it,’ I said darkly.

She reached down, holding out her hand to help me up. ‘It’s safe to get up now. Those girls who were talking about you left. Besides, I can see your underwear.’ She pointed down at my skirt, which was now gaping open, thanks to my bent knees.

‘Of course you can,’ I said, accepting the proffered hand as I stood. ‘Thanks.’

‘No problem. I’m Lexi, by the way. Lexi Vandenberg.’

‘Kate,’ I said.

‘I know,’ Lexi said. She grinned impishly. ‘Kate Bennett. You’re infamous.’

Lexi waited for me as I paid for my textbooks, which weighed a ton and looked like they’d burst out of the over-stuffed plastic shopping bags at any minute. Together we walked out of the student union and across the outdoor patio.

‘Hey, you guys! Over here!’

Nick was sitting on one of the benches that flanked the

patio. With him was the spiky-haired guy I'd seen with Lexi earlier. A second woman, who had a long tangle of burnished red hair falling around her shoulders, was sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of them, leaning back on one hand and holding a cigarette in the other.

'Hey, Add,' Lexi called out. 'Come on, you have to meet Addison. He's hysterical. Oh, and that's Jen with them. She's in our section too.'

'Is Addison your boyfriend?' I asked.

Lexi let out a snort of laughter.

'As if,' she said. When I looked at her questioningly, she said, 'Wait until you meet him. Add's a riot, but he's not exactly boyfriend material.'

'We were just talking about what a dick Hoffman is,' Nick said, once we reached them. I dropped the heavy bags on the ground, grateful for the rest. My arms felt like they were being stretched out from the weight.

'*Such* a dick,' the redhead said. She was big-boned, with the wide shoulders of an athlete, and her pale white skin was sprayed with freckles. 'I used to work for a law firm in town as a paralegal, and the lawyers there said that Hoffman has a horrible reputation. Total egomaniac. Oh, I'm Jen, by the way,' she added, smiling at me. There was a slight gap between her two front teeth and a dimple in her right cheek.

'And that's Addison,' Lexi said, nodding to the spiky-haired guy.

'Hi.' I sat down awkwardly on the bench next to Nick, scooting forward so that I could see everyone. Addison looked different somehow. 'Weren't you wearing a nose ring earlier?' I asked him.

'It's a clip-on,' Addison said, holding the gold ring up. 'I was hoping it would keep me from getting called on.'

'How so?'

'I thought facial piercings might intimidate the professors,' Addison said, grinning affably. He had a narrow face and a long beaky nose, and wore black-plastic-framed glasses.

‘So why didn’t you just get your nose pierced?’ Nick asked.

‘Because that would really fucking hurt,’ Addison said.

‘Better than being called on,’ I said, sighing. ‘Trust me.’

‘I heard that Hoffman married one of his students,’ Addison said.

Jen snorted. ‘I find that hard to believe. Who would find that man attractive?’

‘Someone who’s into S&M?’ Nick guessed. ‘Only instead of being into handcuffs and leather, she gets her jollies by having a middle-aged dork scream at her.’

At this everyone laughed, and I could feel my shoulders relax.

‘I can’t believe I was the first one to get called on,’ I said. ‘It was like that dream where you’re walking around in your underwear.’

‘I love that dream,’ Addison said.

‘I totally know what you mean,’ Jen said, ignoring Addison. ‘I was white-knuckling it the whole time, praying he wouldn’t call on me next. And the guy he called on after you – What was his name? Mr Sobel? – he didn’t do any better.’

‘At least he’d read the case,’ I said.

‘Yeah, but he was so nervous he was stuttering,’ she said.

‘Where are you from, Kate?’ Lexi asked.

‘I grew up outside of Albany, New York, in Saratoga Springs. But for the past ten years, I’ve been in Ithaca,’ I said. ‘I went to school at Cornell, and then after I graduated, I worked in the admissions office.’

‘Married? Boyfriend? Any dark secrets?’ Lexi continued.

I shook my head. ‘Nope. None of the above,’ I said, and tried not to feel guilty about the ease with which I was able to push Graham aside. It wasn’t like I was lying. He wasn’t my boyfriend any longer.

‘So, we’re all single. Except for Jen; she’s married,’ Lexi said. Jen nodded at this, and for the first time I noticed the

wide gold wedding band etched with interlocking circles on her finger.

‘And we all did something else before coming back to law school,’ Lexi continued. ‘None of us came here straight from college.’

‘Where are you from?’ I asked.

‘I went to NYU and then worked for Bloomingdale’s in their PR department,’ Lexi said. She tucked a shiny tendril of blue-black hair behind her ear and smiled. Her teeth were very white and straight. It was as if every last detail on her person had been polished. I suddenly realized that Lexi wasn’t quite as pretty as I’d originally thought when all I’d seen were glossy hair, slanted eyes, and a slim figure. Her nose was a little too sharp and her lips were too thin.

‘Addison’s from L.A., and he’s been very mysterious about what he did there,’ Jen said.

Addison shrugged. ‘It’s not a mystery. It’s just not that exciting. I worked for a few of the studios, did some location scouting.’

‘Compared to being a paralegal, working in Hollywood is exciting,’ Jen said dryly. ‘Anyway, my husband and I were high-school sweethearts – we grew up in Missouri – and we both came here, to Tulane, for undergrad. Then Sean went to med school, and now that he’s finishing up his residency, it’s my turn to go back to school.’

‘D.C.,’ Nick said. ‘I worked on the Hill as a congressional staffer. Nothing too serious. Mostly I just brokered deals between the various power players. You know, shaping U.S. foreign policy, keeping my finger on the pulse of the country’s epicenter. Stuff like that.’

‘Is that what they call being the coffee gofer up there?’ Jen quipped.

‘Hey, watch it. I have CIA contacts,’ Nick joked.

‘So . . . we should form a study group,’ Lexi said. ‘We’re all in the same section together, and we’re all about the same age.’

Older than the average One-L. If we stick together, we'll be able to blow everyone else out of the water.'

'I'm in,' Addison said.

'Me too,' Nick said, and Jen nodded.

They all looked at me. 'Sure,' I said, feeling happy for pretty much the first moment since I'd arrived in New Orleans. It had been one misery after another – from getting lost in the maze of streets that made up the Garden District while I was driving around looking for a grocery store, to having to drag almost all of my furniture up the stairs on my own, aided only by a spacey-eyed guy who told me to call him Jimmy-D.

'Like the sausage,' he'd said happily.

Jimmy-D had approached me on the street while I was unlocking the back of the U-Haul and offered to help me move in for twenty bucks. It'd seemed like a good deal, right up until I discovered that he'd stolen my toaster and three pairs of pink satin Victoria's Secret panties.

'May I join your study group?' a voice asked.

I turned and noticed for the first time that there was a girl sitting on the bench behind us. She looked even younger than the undergraduates milling around, but she was dressed like a junior executive in a tan pantsuit and expertly pressed blue oxford shirt. A gold-toned pin of the scales of justice was fastened to the lapel of her suit jacket. She had a mop of brown corkscrew curls framing a serious, pointed face.

'Are you in our section?' Nick asked her.

The girl nodded. 'I'm sorry Hoffman called on you,' she said. 'Although you really should have read the assignment.'

'Ah . . . you're right, I should have,' I said, waiting for her to smile. She didn't. She just looked at me with solemn eyes and then nodded briskly, as though she was satisfied that I appreciated the gravity of my transgression.

'I heard what you were talking about – forming a study group of older students. I came here straight from undergrad, but I'd really like to join your group. I think older students are more likely to take things seriously,' she said.

‘Sure, you can join us,’ Nick said, smiling at her.

His instincts were markedly nicer than those of the rest of us, all of whom were staring at this girl, who looked so young she ought to be out shopping for a prom dress or running for student-body treasurer.

‘What’s your name?’ Lexi asked her.

‘Dana. Dana Mallick,’ she said. And then she did smile, a beaming, confident grin. It was the smile of someone who had never failed at anything in her life, the smile of someone who had won student-council campaigns, led the debate club to victory, and delivered a valedictorian speech.

I’d known girls like Dana at Cornell, both during my time as a student there and the subsequent years I spent working in the admissions office. They were earnest and peppy and threw themselves at their schoolwork and activities with tireless enthusiasm. They’d always sit in the front row at lectures, take elaborate notes that would later be filed in a color-coded binder, and would fling their arms up in the air whenever the teacher asked for a volunteer to answer a question or helm a project. When they sent out college applications, they always requested interviews.

‘Cornell is a good school. It’s my first choice after Harvard and Yale,’ they’d say, with the innocent confidence of one who has never had to resort to the desperate ass-kissing that less confident candidates instinctively fall back on. Usually unsuccessfully.

I joined the others in smiling back at Dana, and we introduced ourselves in turn. And then finally Jen blurted out what we were all wondering.

‘How old *are* you?’

Dana had the grace to blush. ‘Nineteen,’ she admitted, looking down at the toe of a perfectly polished black pump with a sensible two-inch heel.

‘Nineteen? And you’re in law school?’ Addison exclaimed. ‘That means you’re, like, Girl Wonder.’

‘Are you a genius?’ Lexi asked.

Dana's cheeks stained even darker, and she shrugged. 'I was accelerated, so I graduated from high school and college early,' she said.

I decided to rescue her from further interrogation. 'When should we meet?' I asked. 'And where? Is there room in the library for study groups?'

Nick nodded. 'There is, but when I was there on Saturday, it seemed like it could be sort of a scene. And the librarian had to chase away some undergrads who were hanging out in the reading room.'

'I say we meet Sunday afternoons,' Jen said. 'That way we'll have all weekend to go over our notes from the week before we get together.'

'There's a coffee shop near my house, the Rue de la Course,' Addison said. 'The Rue, for short. It's in the lower Garden District, on Magazine Street, and it's far enough away from campus that it might not be crowded.'

'Sounds perfect. Sundays at the Rue,' Lexi said. She pulled a white box of Marlboro Light cigarettes out of her leather knapsack, packed them against the heel of her hand, and then pulled one out. She lit the cigarette with a light-pink Bic lighter and took a long, satisfied drag on it. The mannerism was fluid and self-possessed, reminding me of a Parisian woman, the kind whose elegance is so natural she can wear a scarf or hat without looking foolish.

'Cool. I'm sure we'll talk before then,' Addison said. He stood and shifted his knapsack onto a thin shoulder. 'Okay, chickadees, I'm going to split.'

'Plan on coming over to my place next Saturday,' Lexi said to him. She nodded at the rest of us. 'All of you. There's a Bar Review that night. We can hang out at my place and then all go together.'

'What's a Bar Review?' Dana asked, frowning. 'Is it a requirement for class?'

Lexi laughed and shook her head. 'No, it's just a party the law school hosts at a bar near campus. They'll have free beer

there for law students. It may be lame, but I thought we could check it out.'

'Oh. I can't drink,' Dana said. 'I'm underage.'

'You could still come,' Jen said.

Dana shook her head. 'No, that's okay. I don't have time for parties. I heard that the only way you can make Law Review is if you study pretty much all of the time.'

Was that true? I wondered. I wanted to make Law Review too. Everyone did. At the end of the school year, the illustrious legal journal extended invitations to only ten One-Is – those with the highest grade point averages in the class. They also had a writing contest in the fall, but that was an even longer shot; they only took five write-ons a year. Being on Law Review meant a whole hell of a lot of extra work for your second and third years at law school, but it was where the top law firms in the country went to recruit and was pretty much the only route to a prestigious judicial clerkship. I knew that the competition for Law Review seats was intense; I just hadn't expected it to start this early.

'You can't study all the time. You'll get burned out,' Jen said.

Dana stood and grabbed her bag. 'I'm used to it,' she said. 'See you all on Sunday.'

'I should go too,' I said. 'I still have to unpack and catch up with the reading assignments.'

'Are you taking the streetcar home?' Nick asked. When I nodded, he said, 'I'll come with you. Help you carry your books.'

'You don't have to,' I protested, but he picked the bags up as he stood.

'Just consider me your own private pack mule,' Nick said, and he grinned. 'See you guys later.'

'Bye,' I said, waving at Lexi, Jen, and Dana. And then I turned and walked with Nick across the lush green Tulane campus.

'Did you hear a guy in our building tap dancing last night?' Nick asked.

‘Yes! You heard that too?’

‘I was sleeping right under the dance floor,’ Nick said. ‘Or, I should say, I wasn’t sleeping. I went up and knocked on his back door.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He didn’t. He didn’t even answer the door. He just turned off all of his lights and got really quiet.’

‘What a freak.’

‘No kidding. And I think he has about a dozen cats in there too.’

‘Great,’ I said gloomily. ‘A sadistic Criminal Law professor and a next-door neighbour who’s a tap-dancing cat freak. It should make for an interesting year.’