

CARTER'S BIG BREAK

A NOVEL BY BRENT CRAWFORD



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CARTER'S **BIG BREAK**

A NOVEL BY BRENT CRAWFORD

HYPERION • NEW YORK

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TO SARAH AND THE BOYS

SUMMER

1. S'UP?

On the last day of school, I'm happily strolling down the hall after Mr. Rumpford's ridiculously hard algebra final. He told me last week that if I failed it, I'd have to go to summer school . . . as if! I studied so hard last night, I thought my brain would fall out. But it didn't, and I aced that sucker with a D+! I waited around after the bell rang and watched as Rumpford graded the tests. Yes, I had better things to do, but my summer was hanging in the balance, so I kind of didn't. I knew I'd passed when he looked up. He gave me a nod and said, "Imagine if you'd applied yourself like this all year, Mr. Carter."

I laughed at his joke, returned the nod, and replied, "Yeah!" as I headed for the door.

My freshman year of high school was "difficult," to say the least. I overcame a slight stuttering/confidence problem; I took on a couple of bullies; drove (perhaps wrecked) a car (and truck); figured out how to talk to/make out with chicks; discovered that hard work can get you through anything; and wound up with the lead in the spring musical (*Guys and Dolls*) and a hot-ass girlfriend. But Abby's not just a pretty face, great boobs, and a perfect butt. She's also ridiculously smart, reads books for fun, listens to cool music that they don't play on the radio, and watches movies that my boys and I would never see. They aren't even movies—they're "films," and most of them are so far over my head, I've got a neck ache when they're over. But after Abby explains the plot, I start to understand and actually enjoy the story long after the credits have rolled. I don't tell my boys this (especially EJ, my closest friend since birth), but Abby's kind of my best friend now. And she lets me touch her boobs, which tips the scales in her favor every time. My friends try to hate, and call me whipped because she holds my hand every once in a while, and I may have stood them up on a "bros before hos" night to play Scattergories with her. But whatever. I've accused enough dudes of being "on the leash" to know that my boys are just jealous.

In the weight room the other day, my friend Nutt's older brother, Bart, gave me some advice: "You gotta go off on that bitch every once in a while. . . . Just, out of nowhere, call her a whore. It keeps her on her toes and therefore . . . on your jock!"

Bart can bench 275, but I've noticed he doesn't have a girlfriend, and to my knowledge, never has. He claims it's his choice, but I've had one for about a month and it's been pretty sweet, so I'm going to hold off on Bart's relationship tips until I'm proven wrong.

I give out a few nods, high fives, and a bunch of "S'ups" as I make my way toward Abby's locker. I'm about twenty feet away when I hear footsteps coming up behind me, a little too fast for comfort. I squint my eyes and flex down because I know that someone is about to tackle, punch, or slap me. A sharp sting in the kidney region confirms my theory. I arch backward, scream in pain, and turn to find EJ, Bag, and Doc cackling with laughter.

"OOOOWWWWE!!" I exclaim, swinging my backpack at all three of them.

EJ is able to ask, "You ready—?" before the bag nails him in the ribs. "HRUUAHHHH!"

I rub my back and reply, "Hell yeah. Are we rollin' out to Grey Goose Lake in the CRX?"

Bag replies, "Naw, we gotta ride our bikes. Hormone's dad is still pissed off about that cop bitching him out for givin' a fifteen-year-old a car."

"Still?"

Three weeks ago, Doc figured out that if you remove the windshield-wiper fluid hose on an '87 Honda CRX and angle it to the right, it will shoot pedestrians, cyclists, and unsuspecting drivers with surprising accuracy and force. You're pretty screwed if you want to wash your windshield, but if you want a laugh, pull up next to somebody and ask them to roll down their window.

Bag would say, "Pardon me, sir? Do you have any Grey Poop-on?" then, *SQUUUUIIIIRRRRTT*, right in the face!

We shot everybody . . . including an undercover cop. It was super funny when the drenched officer was pushing Hormone's terrified face into the hatchback glass and yelling something about "vehicular terrorism" and asking us the obvious question: "What's so funny?!" Comedy can't be explained to her victims, and it's not nearly as humorous now that Hormone's dad has confiscated our wheels and we have to ride our bikes again. But it was hilarious at the time.

My boys join up for the last few steps to Abby's locker. My back is still stinging, but oddly, the pain in my ass is directly in front of me. Bitchy Nicky, Abby's best frenemy, is holding court, standing with my girlfriend and a few other random chicks. You never know from one day to the next if they'll be at each other's throats or BFFs. Abby and Nicky usually have a third member in their trio: Amber Lee. I was actually in love with Amber until she publicly screwed me over at the homecoming dance last fall. But she's been absent for the last couple of days, and because she was heard vomiting in the girl's bathroom last week, rumors are flying around that she's knocked up. You never know what to believe, because I've also heard that the baby is mine, and unless I missed something in that sex-ed video they showed in health class . . . that's as untrue as it is impossible. The movie was about fifty years old, but it still managed to give me a boner, which tends to distract my absorption of information . . . but I did not get Amber Lee pregnant.

Abby doesn't see me at first because Nicky is ranting about something or someone that's pissed her off. If you can't be happy on the last day of school, when can you? Her left hand is on her hip, and her right one is waving all around like she's a ghetto mama from the mean streets of Merrian, and not a cheerleader who's getting a car for her birthday and going to Florida for a vacation.

She points at Abby's nose and yells, "I'm all, like, 'Oh no, you didn't disrespect ME!'"

Abby is politely listening to the story that probably never happened. She's wearing a summer dress with a tank top underneath. It's not tight, but she pokes out of it in just the right spots. She's smokin' hot, and did I mention she's my girlfriend?! I fight off a smile as I walk up behind Nicky, put my hand on my hip, and start to act out her moves. I purse my lips and circle my head around, then check my fingernails and mouth her words as she cackles, "I kicked that fool to the CURB!"

Abby laughs like Nicky is the funniest comedian in the world before brushing past her and jumping into my arms. "Hello, lover!" she says as I spin her around like a pimp (not a guy who's trying not to fall down).

EJ rolls his eyes with judgment, but I don't care, because she smells so good and I'm proud to have a hottie in my arms calling me "lover," even if the term isn't exactly correct. EJ knows that she and I have not had sex yet, but he doesn't say anything, because we both know that, at the moment, I'm a lot closer to having *it* with her than he is with any other chick. So she can call me anything she wants!

"S'up?" I ask her.

"I've got the grade-school drama camp in a few minutes, and Ms. McDougle wants to see both of us. Can you walk me down to the drama department?"

"Sure," I reply as if I hadn't completely forgotten about her summer job teaching kids how to ta

louder and sing all the time.

Abby kisses me again and squeals, “Did you know that the drama camp staff is made up entirely of college kids? They’re all drama majors, and then me!”

If I was working off of Bart’s advice, this would be a good time to call her a bitch or make fun of people who go to college and actually major in “drama.” But I like seeing her happy, and kissing her, so I just say, “That’s awesome.”

Nicky finally butts herself back into the conversation. “ABBY! I was telling a story—”

But she’s interrupted by a screeching boy sprinting down the hall toward us. Jeremy is a drama geek but super cool . . . and super gay. He violently hugs us and gasps for air to deliver his news. “Oh my God, did you hear?!” he pants. “A movie—is being shot—at this ratty-ass school—in this Podunk town—this summer! I just heard—Principal Banks say—”

That’s about all we can understand, because he starts hyperventilating like he’s giving birth, while Nicky is trying, in vain, to finish her tale. But “Excuse me” is all she gets out before EJ swings his backpack at me.

“Dude, let’s go!” he exclaims. His bag is filled with the entire contents of his locker, so he loses control of it when I step out of the way. He grips the shoulder strap with both hands and his body flails from the momentum. He sees the path of destruction before anyone else and closes his eyes with dread as the load smashes into Bitchy Nicky’s chest and slams her into the lockers with a teeth-chattering *BANG!*

I instinctively point at EJ and go, “OOHHHH!!!” with everyone else. Nicky has no idea what hit her, but there is no doubt she soon will, and it’s not going to be good for EJ. He’s super fast, so he’s able to grab the angry cheerleader before she crashes to the linoleum. His arms are wrapped around her overstuffed Jansport and Nicky’s waist in a bizarre romance-novel pose.

He futilely cries, “Oh my God, I’m so sorry!!!”

Nicky is just trying to breathe and figure out what’s happening to her. The weight of the backpack and the girl are too much for my boy to hold, but letting go doesn’t seem to cross his mind, so they slowly slide down the face of the lockers and crumple to the floor. EJ and Nicky are nose to nose like unfortunate Siamese twins joined at the Jansport. The once-deafening hall is dead silent as we wait for her to claw his wide eyes out. He nervously chatters, “That was a total accident . . . It’s all Carter’s fault. . . .”

Nicky and I ask in unison, “WHAT?!”

“I cleaned my locker and my baseball cleats have mud in them, so it’s heavier—”

She’s still dazed, but notices all of the people looking at her, so she yells, “Get the hell off of me FOOL!!!”

He finally releases her and stammers another apology before springing to his feet and awkwardly trying to help her up. He squats down and grabs at her armpits, but grazes boob on the way in. His eyes light up and he exclaims, “SORRY!” before wrapping his arms around her back to avoid a slap. His face knocks into hers as he hauls the confused, beaten, and mortified girl back to standing.

I offer up a fist bump and mutter, “Smooooth.”

He leaves me hanging and asks her, “Are you sure you’re okay?” as he brushes the hair out of her eyes.

She takes a deep breath, and with a red face, replies, “Yes, I’m fine . . . thank you.”

My eyebrows fly up, and I look over at Abby for confirmation. She mouths the words “thank

you” in disbelief.

EJ says, “It’s not a problem. . . . You are very light and easy to lift and also very firm . . . to touch. So, I thank you.”

She smiles, and the crowd groans with disappointment. I snap my fingers in his face. “Dude . . . gotta go see what Ms. McDougle wants.”

He’s still staring at Nicky when he asks, “Huh?”

Abby jumps in. “EJ, why don’t you get some ice for Nicky’s head and a Diet Coke, maybe?”

EJ puts his arm around Nicky’s waist and walks her toward the nurse’s office. I shoot Abby a suspicious look. She giddily replies, “What? I think they would make a cute couple, and she could use a nice guy.”

“What, to sacrifice?”

2. DOWN GETS OUT

Abby and I walk into the drama department holding hands. She's telling me about the French final she just "bombed," but I know she probably missed three questions and might have to suffer the humiliation of an A-.

I space off for a second and think about my dad's grand plan for ruining my summer. I was going to be a junior lifeguard at the pool, but I guess you have to be fifteen to wade around the baby pool and tell kids when to use the slide. Since I don't turn until the end of July, they rejected my application. My dad thought I was upset about not having a job, so he decided to take some time off of work and tear out our old deck to build a new one . . . with me. But I didn't want just any job; I wanted to be a lifeguard! I wanted to twirl a whistle, jump off the diving boards, and check out bikinis all day. He offered to pay me ten bucks an hour, which is twice as much as a junior lifeguard, but the work is going to be twenty times harder.

Abby says something in French and laughs at herself, but I don't speak French, and all I can think about is how to get out of this stupid deck venture. I tried to explain that I couldn't possibly help him because there's nothing wrong with the old deck, and deforestation is a very big problem for our planet. He didn't seem to buy it and told me that the old wood was totally rotten and that we were going to use recycled products on the new one. He was so proud of his arguments, but I shut him down. "I'm just too busy, Dad! I've still got to go to the pool every afternoon. And my boys and I are planning to work out at the Merrian High gym every morning so that we look swollen when we take off our shirts."

But he wouldn't listen to reason and kept yammering on about how much he's looking forward to hanging out with me, and how Lynn and I will be going off to college in a few years, and how fast we've grown up, and something slipping by us. . . .

Abby interrupts my thoughts by asking, "Can you believe that?"

"Nope," I instinctively reply as we walk into the classroom.

Ms. McDougle is standing in front of her desk, smiling from ear to ear. She bum-rushes us as we walk in the door. It's okay to hug this teacher because we're in the drama department and that's how they roll down here. She's crazy cool and obviously as fired up for this summer as we are.

She asks, "Do you guys remember that writer friend of mine who came to school in December?"

"C. B. Down?" I reply like a guy who knows writers, but I only know this one. His book, *Down Gets Out*, is my all-time favorite. Yes, it's the only one I've ever read, but Abby's read a million of them, and she thought it was awesome, too.

Ms. McDougle continues, "Yes, well, he's also a film director—"

Abby interrupts, "Yeah, his first movie just won the Cannes Film Festival!"

I ask, "It did?"

Abby adds, "Carter and I are seeing it this weekend."

"We are?"

She gives me a look and says, "Yeah, I sent you that article; did you not read it?"

"Oh yeah, that!" I exclaim as if I just finished it.

McDougle continues her story. “Well, the film rights to his novel sold, and he’s going to direct the movie . . . right here in Merrian, this summer!”

Abby and I are giggling like idiots as McDougle fills us in on the movie details. “C. B. saw our production of *Guys and Dolls* and was so blown away by both of your performances that he wants you to audition for the lead parts!”

Everything after that sounded like she’d jumped in a pool and was talking to us from underwater. I love movies more than I can possibly explain. I believe she’s describing the audition process and what a “producer” is, but I’m way too busy writing my acceptance speech for next year’s Academy Awards. I’ll have to ask Abby for the information later. I’ll be sure to thank her in my speech.

McDougle hands us each a thick stack of paper that’s bound with a black clip. I assume it’s the screenplay, and I’d like to ask if I really need to read it, because I’ve already read the book, but I’m smiling so wide that my lips won’t work. She tells us a few more things and then asks, “You got it?”

“Sure,” I reply with Abby (whom I hope actually does).

I hug them both good-bye, because we’re still in the drama department, and grade school kids are starting to trickle in and things are about to get LOUD! I’m supposed to ride out to Grey Goose Lake with my boys, but I need to go freak out for a while.

I duck into the auditorium and bound onto the stage screaming, “HuuuuWHAAAA!!!” There’s something about a theater that just gives you permission to lose your mind. I yell, “YEESSSSS!!!” and “OH MY GOD!!!” to no one.

Playing Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls* was probably the most fun thing I’ve ever done, but I never dreamed that acting in the spring musical would change my life the way it has. And not just because my “raw talent” has been discovered by a film director. Doing that play ripped me out of my comfort zone and showed me that although my friends are awesome, I don’t need their approval if I want to do something. Plus, they’re going to make fun of me no matter what I do, so I might as well enjoy it.

I’m standing in about the same spot where C. B. Down read to us from his book. I totally remember the haunted look in his eyes that sent a chill down my spine and shut five hundred kids up instantly. It didn’t hurt that he was a total bad-ass, like a UFC fighter blended with a rock star. He has full-sleeve tattoos and more ink on his neck and hands. His dreadlocks were pulled back into a ponytail, and a thick beard covered his chiseled face. His voice was soft and sounded like he’d been smoking a pack a day since birth.

I totally remember him reading to us from the first chapter. “The first time my parents left me alone, I was fifteen years old.”

At the time, I chuckled, but then realized I’d never been left alone either. My older sister, Lynn, is always there to bitch at me when my parents are unavailable. Then he got into the point of his story how he (Chris in the book) hadn’t really been “left alone.” His parents drove off of a bridge on their way home from a party. He’s not sure if they did it on purpose, until the end of the book. Chris has to go live in a foster home, but he’s a spoiled little bitch at this point in the story and can’t handle it. He gets into a fight with his foster father and is told that he has to go live in a group home. His guidance counselor had warned him that he’d have to go to this tough-ass boys’ home if he couldn’t get along with the foster family and that he was too big of a pussy to live there. So, Chris takes off and comes to Merrian and squats in the basement of the scary old Saur mansion. This chick Maggie (Ms. McDougle, we assume) helps him out all the time, and he enrolls at Merrian High, gets a job at the Hy-Vee, makes friends, falls in love, starts writing for fun, and eventually wins a writing contest but gets busted as a result. I can’t remember all of the details, but it’s really good (way better than I just

made it sound). It's funny because the kid on the cover of the book kind of looks like me, and when I was reading it, I always saw myself as Chris.

Abby told me that it's very common to cast yourself as the lead character in the book you're reading, and because she's a smart-ass, she added, "If you'd read more, you'd know that." *I wonder how common it is to actually get to audition for the film version of your favorite book, smarty-pants?* Abby also used to say that the story was "very Dickens." So that's how I would describe it to people who didn't know that I had no idea what or who "Dickens" was. Abby got me three of Charles Dickens's novels as punishment. I started to read all of them, but they weren't as good as *Down Gets Out*, so I didn't finish. I did find out that "what the dickens?" and "you little dickens" have nothing to do with that writer.

I'm rudely sprung from my daydream when my boys rush into the auditorium. Bag says, "I told you he'd be in here . . . drama fag!"

I snottily tell them about the benefits of being a "drama fag." "Have any of you jackasses been asked to star in a movie today?"

They may not love theater the way I do, but we all dig movies, so proper jealousy flows my way

3. HOW MANY FINGERS?

On the ride out to Grey Goose, I'm spacing off, polishing up that acceptance speech when EJ crashes into my rear wheel, and I almost wreck. He keeps riding like nothing happened, so I ask, "S'up, dude?!"

He looks at me, still lost in thought, and asks, "Yo, does Bitchy Nicky have a boyfriend?"

In unison, everybody yells, "NO, and there's a reason!"

We approach the ditch-jump behind Pizza Barn, and my friend Bag's about to turn into it so he can bust a cool trick like he always does, but I accelerate ahead and cut him off.

"What the hell, Carter?" he asks, as I angle into the yard and zip down into the ditch before anyone can say anything else or I chicken out. I'm known for being a bit of a wuss. Typically, I would go last off of a jump and only get a few inches of air, but I'm feeling like a million bucks today . . . and perhaps a bit overconfident. I pump the pedals hard as I make the approach. I hit the lip going ten times faster than usual, rock my weight back, and rip the handlebars toward my chest.

EJ and Hormone cheer, "YEEEEAAAHHHH!" as I launch into the air. So high. Way higher than Bag has ever soared. Way, way, WAY too damn high! This is the spot where a guy in the X Games would bust a tail whip, or go for the backflip, but I decide not to. I've got other things to worry about. Flying through the air is probably more enjoyable when you have some idea how you're going to land, but I don't. I simply start screaming, "HUUUAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!"

Intellectually, I know I should kick the bike away and try to land on my feet, but the signals are not getting below my neck, so I simply death grip the handlebars and watch the blacktop get closer and closer to my fragile, helmetless skull, and listen to the front tire violently *POP* and the metal frame *CRUNCH* beneath my weight. Then all sounds are drowned out by the *WHAAAAM* of my head hitting the pavement, and the chorus of ringing bells.

I'm fairly certain that I slid on my face for a few feet . . . but not a hundred percent. The rest of the bike wreck is pure conjecture, because my lights went out when the first bells started to chime, and I don't remember a damn thing.

A foghorn blasting inside of my head rudely wakes me a moment later. My body is twitching as my central nervous system tries to reboot itself. My eyes are fluttering inside their lids and I can barely hear Doc yelling, "Call 911!!!"

I'm trying to tell them that I'm fine, but I'm just moaning "Muggggeddiiii" instead.

"He's awake!" EJ gasps, and starts slapping me.

I try to block his shots and figure out what possible good could come from beating me as I roll around the dirty street. The ringing does get quieter as his slaps get stronger. He cries, "Stay with us, Carter!"

Finally my mouth works, and I yell, "Quit it!"

"He's fine," Nutt says, holding up his hand and demanding, "How many fingers am I holdin' up, Carter?"

I'm slightly annoyed because he's moving them all around, so I snap, "Four, dumbass!"

They all look at each other with concern before EJ adds, "That doesn't mean anything. Carter's

always sucked at math.”

After a half hour of playing, “How many fingers?!” and getting most of the answers right, we start walking our bikes toward Hormone’s house.

Bag still wants me to go to the hospital, but nobody else wants to sit in a smelly waiting room on the last day of school, and Hormone thinks he can use me to get his car back.

They show his dad my mangled bike and face as exhibits A and B in the case of why we shouldn’t have to ride our bikes anymore. He looks at me suspiciously because I’m leaning on EJ, and my left eye is blinking like I’m flirting with him. He asks, “Are you sure we shouldn’t take him to the ER?”

“No, no, he’s fine,” Hormone assures him. “Show ’em, Carter . . . how many fingers?!”

“Three!” I declare.

I must have gotten it right because Doc adds, “See?”

Hormone’s dad accepts the diagnosis as if the surgeon general had made it. He hands over the keys and tells us, “Stay out of trouble.” Either that or he said, “Learn how to juggle.”

We abandon our bikes, and Nutt calls “Shotgun” as we pile into the little car.

We’re barreling down the street when I ask EJ, “Hmmm?” as if he asked me a question.

He looks over at me with concern. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

For the hundredth time I say, “Yes.”

Nutt turns around suspiciously and asks, “How many fingers?!”

“Shut up,” I reply. “Where are we going?”

Hormone yells back, “Grey Goose Lake!”

“Why?”

Nutt answers, “There’s a party.”

“How come?”

EJ snidely replies, “We just wanted to do something nice for you.”

I flip them off before taking a quick nap.

Twice more I wake and ask where we’re going. EJ reminds them how forgetful I am even when I haven’t hit my head. We pull off of the main road and park beside the Grey Goose Golf Course so that we can sneak into the lake area undetected by the security guard.

The next thing I know, it’s dark outside and the CRX’s dome light flickers on. My face isn’t working right, and I’ve got a terrible HEADACHE. I hear EJ whispering to someone, “No, baby, it’s cool. Carter’s passed out . . . he won’t mind.” My left eye won’t open, but my right one cracks just wide enough to observe Bitchy Nicky climbing on top of EJ in the passenger seat. I’m trying to shake away the cobwebs and figure out why I would be imagining such a horrific thing, as he shuts the door and starts sucking her face.

“Duuude!” I protest.

Nicky yells, “Get the hell out of here, Carter!”

I try to tell EJ he’s making a big mistake, but nothing comes out when I open my mouth, so I just pop the hatchback and stumble across the golf course toward my party.

I’m headed for the lake to go for a swim, but my sister spots me fighting to peel off my T-shirt. I hear her laughing at my painful struggle. “Carter, are you drunk?!”

The neckline of the shirt scrapes my mangled face and causes me to gasp. Her eyes fly open as

she barks, “Oh my God! Who did this to you?”

I point to myself, because I am, as usual, my own worst enemy.

I think that she dragged me through the party and showed her friends how jacked up I was. I bet she hunted down my boys and yelled at them for bringing me out here in this condition, but I’m not sure. I know that her boyfriend, Nick, gave me a ride home, because he carried me into my house and was drooling/bleeding on his shoulder when my mom’s screaming woke me up. He’s, like, six-five, two-hundred-and-fifty pounds. He’s going to play college football next year and he’s really cool, so when my eye snapped open and I found myself in his massive arms like a little papoose, I had no idea how to handle the situation, so I just pretended to go back to sleep.

4. THE KIDZ CHANNEL

I took it easy on my first few days of vacation. I think it's called a "semi-coma" in medical circles, but my dad didn't make me work on the deck, and I had a chance to read the *Down Gets Out* script. I'm disappointed to find that it's really different from the book, so I call Abby to make sure I'm reading it correctly.

She's pissed off at me for not calling her for three days, but after listening to me mumble the excuse, she feels bad for me. She's also not happy about the script changes, but I guess Ms. McDougle explained all of the reasons on the last day of school. The story is less about the homeless kid and more about the girl who helps him.

Abby says, "It's because stories about empowered young women are very hot this year."

I mutter, "But that's not what the book is about."

"Well, you can tell C. B. Down and the producers at the audition."

"Maybe I will," I joke.

Sometimes she thinks I'm a complete dumbass, so she begs, "Please don't!"

She asks if she can bring me anything for my pain, so I inquire if there is any way she could get hold of a slutty nurse's uniform and hook me up with a nice sponge bath.

She isn't really on board with dirty talk yet, so she just starts yapping about how busy she is with drama camp and drill team practice. We make plans to see a movie tomorrow so that she can see for herself how jacked up I am and give me some proper sympathy. She fills me in on more gossip about the movie: "The Kidz Channel is producing it," she says with dread.

"Cool! We might get to be on Kidz?"

"Not cool," she replies. "They have their own talent pool, but that's not what's got Ms. McDougle freaked out. She thinks they're going to cheese up C. B.'s story even more. It's supposed to be a Sundance type of film, not a Kidz movie, and just because it stars young people, they think—"

I cut her off, "What do you mean, 'their own talent pool'? Like, we won't get to audition?"

"No, McDougle says that C. B. really wants the producers to see what we can do, but because of all the money they are throwing at him . . . they're trying to force him to cast those Kidz Channel actors who've grown up in front of the camera. McDougle says they'll ruin the film with their bad acting."

"It's his story, right? He can do whatever he wants with it. That guy didn't seem like a sellout to me."

"It's the first film he's done with a decent budget. She says he's always been really poor, so he might not be able to handle it very well."

I start to freak out, but Abby tells me that there's nothing we can do except be great at the audition. We talk through the scene a few times, and she explains all of the weird script terminology. One of the drama camp guys has done some film work, and he was nice enough to teach it to her. The dialogue we're reading from is almost at the end of the movie. It's really short, and it seems to be an argument between her character, Maggie, and my character, Chris. The lines are really sad, too, because we're coming to the realization that we shouldn't be together anymore. The script says that

I'm supposed to cry, but it doesn't say how I'm supposed to make that happen. Abby says I shouldn't even try, but it says it right there on the page: "Chris sobs." She also explains that her character is forcing my character to break up with her so that Chris can move on and accept the scholarship and not feel tied down. We go through all of the lines a few times and Abby sounds really good already. I on the other hand, need to work on it. She tells me not to worry about getting too emotional or anything and to just keep it simple and see what happens. The lazy side of me wants to agree with her and just wing it, but there's this new side of me that's learned about the power of hard work and how effective it can be. My head is really starting to pound from all of the thinking I'm doing . . . that and the blunt trauma I suffered a few days ago.

She says, "Take some Advil, Carter. I can't wait to see you tomorrow."

I don't say anything for a couple seconds because I'm trying to read what's written on my hand. She reminds me with a slight tinge of bitchiness, "We're seeing a movie tomorrow, at one o'clock. Write it on your arm, please."

"Dude, I got it!"

The next day I wake to the sound of a saw ripping through the old deck and my mom yelling at my dad, "Knock that racket off!" I can tell by the tone of her voice that she's not angry with him for building a new deck, she just wants to make it clear that she's not helping with it. I go back to sleep for a minute but am awoken again by the sound of the car starting. Dang it! Mom and Lynn are going shopping and leaving me to fend for myself. I remove my crusty bandages for emphasis and go down to break the news to Dad that I can't help him today.

"I-I-I'm still in a lot of pain," I dramatically explain. "And Abby really wants to go to the movies."

He seems disappointed but doesn't make me help. He revs the saw and says, "You're going to miss the best part— demolition!"

I point to my swollen face and tell him that I'm sorry, before going inside to eat cereal and look at the audition sides again. I can't stop thinking about it. The dialogue is way better than *Guys and Dolls*, but it's that same kind of rapid-fire talking, so I know that I need to have the lines down pat. Ms. McDougle has trained us to analyze dialogue in terms of the emotions as well as the words. She always asks us, "What do you want from this scene?" But I have no idea what my character wants yet. I can tell that it's going to require a very subtle, passive-aggressive anger and various levels of hurt. I'm not sure how I'm going to play all of that, but I'll keep working on it until I do.

EJ skids to a stop in front of my garage as I'm inflating the new front tire my dad brought home yesterday. "You ready?" EJ asks.

"For what?"

He notices my pus-filled scabs and yells, "Daang, your face is gross!" then does a reenactment of the wipeout, complete with sound effects, slow-motion action, and instant replay.

"Very nice. What am I supposed to be ready for?"

He replies, "The movie!"

"No, dude, I'm seeing a film with Abby."

"So am I."

I shake my head. "It isn't a tricycle date; you're not invited."

"Yeah, I am. We're meeting up with her and Nicky at one o'clock."

“Bitchy Nicky?” I ask.

“Yep,” he clarifies. “And don’t call her that anymore.”

“What do I call her?”

“Just Nicky, dude.”

“That’s not her name.”

“Yes, it is. Actually, it’s Nichole.” He giggles.

I do a mean impression of his giggling, so he’s aware of it and won’t do it again. When his dumb smile has faded, I hop on my bike, and we roll out. I’m not trying to be a hater here, but EJ is making a big mistake, and I don’t want to double-date with it!

As we ride he tells me, “Yo, you need a hat or an eye patch so Nicky doesn’t freak out about your evil eye.”

My mouth is still sore, so I just shoot him a dirty look, as if to ask, “Why would I do anything for that hose beast?”

EJ catches my meaning and replies, “She’s got a nice ass!”

I cannot dispute that, but she’s still the spawn of hell, so I mutter, “She was so mean to me last year—”

“Yeah, I think that’s what makes her such a badger in the sack!”

Pain flies through my skull as my jaw drops. “Son of a bitch, you’ve already had sex?!”

“Hell yeah!” he yells, and goes to high-five me. “Three times!” he adds. I stick out my hand for the slap, because he’s my boy, but I’d rather run him off the friggin’ road. This SOB hooked up with Sara “the Caboose” Ruiz a few months ago, and then he got lucky with a drunk Hooker High slut at his church. The Caboose heard about the Hooker and cut him off, and I was secretly very happy about that because I was more than a little jealous. I had been slightly ahead of him in this department until he tapped the Caboose. But now he’s pulling ahead of me like a race car from a go-cart.

“Did you or did you not *speak* to her for the first time . . . four days ago?” I ask.

“That is a fact.” He beams.

“Man, she’s a slut!”

“No doubt, but you can’t call her that, either.”

I shoot him another look.

“Dude, I need you to be cool to her,” he says nicely. I’m considering his request when he looks over at me, puppy-eyed, and adds, “We’re in love, man.”

UGHHHHH, what the hell is wrong with this summer?

We pull up to the movie theater just in time to see Abby and Nicky hugging like long-lost friends under the marquee.

“Must be a friend day,” EJ observes.

Abby looks super cute, so I pop a wheelie into standing and give her a painful kiss. “S’up?”

Abby notices my busted-up mug and gasps. *Finally. Thank you.*

Nicky’s arms are folded when she snidely says, “You’re late!”

I look at my watch and see that she is absolutely right . . . We’re one minute late. I glance up from my watch and sigh, “You gotta be kid—”

Abby shuts me up by touching my bruised face and asking, “How’s your face, baby?”

I flash a wincing smile because I was just referred to as “baby” for the first time since I was an actual “baby.”

“It’s killing us!” Nicky laughs like a horse and punches EJ in the chest.

EJ laughs his ass off at the lame joke his whore made, so I seethe, “Wow, that joke was funny . . . in sixth grade.”

I cannot believe those two have had sex!

“Be nice,” Abby says, grabbing my hand.

Nicky looks at EJ’s bike, then at her manicure, and snickers. “I don’t know why I thought when you said that you were ‘riding bikes,’ that you meant motorcycles. Of course you boys only have Big Wheels.”

I ball up my fists to end this double-date disaster, when Abby jumps in to defend us. “Bicycles are way cooler than motorcycles. You get exercise and peace and quiet, and you’re not destroying the environment.”

“And it’s not illegal for us to ride them,” I add.

Abby finally asks, “What movie do you guys want to see?”

“*Cheer! The Musical!*” Nicky barks.

“Yeah right,” I snort.

Nicky screeches, “EJ?!” in protest.

As if my best friend would side with *her* over *me* and see friggin’ *Cheer! The Musical!*

EJ looks at Nicky’s boobs and then explains to my Nikes, “Carter, um, Hilary Idaho plays the head cheerleader. She was always your favorite *Get Up Gang* member. . . .”

My left eye pops open for the first time in two days. “I do not, nor have I ever had, a favorite *Get Up Gang* member!”

The Get Up Gang was this morning show on the Kidz Channel that Lynn used to like, so therefore I watched. It was about this band of kids who lived in a cool clubhouse/ loft and sang corny edited versions of gangster rap songs and worked out elaborate dance routines to them. I remember kind of digging a Halloween number, “99 Problems but a Witch Ain’t One,” but Lynn stopped watching when the gang took a field trip to Iowa, and they put on overalls and cowboy hats and proceeded to assassinate the old 2 Live Crew song “Me So Horny” by turning it into “Me So Corny.” That was too much. The show was really popular, though, and those guys were everywhere for a while: magazines, cereal boxes . . . *America’s Most Wanted*. This one kid, Tito, who wore an eye patch, died of a drug overdose, and they just replaced him with another one-eyed guy named Tito, like we wouldn’t notice. They all seem so cheesy and happy on the show, but in real life they’re always getting arrested or going to rehab. Every episode has a moral about “abstinence” or “truth and justice in the hood,” but it’s tough to sell honesty and chastity when mug shots and sex tapes keep coming out.

EJ is still pushing Nicky’s agenda when he totally sells me out. “Carter had a poster of Hilary Idaho in his room!”

“My sister!” I bark. “That was Lynn’s poster, and she had it in the bathroom to work on her makeup techniques!”

I did love that poster, though, because Hilary Idaho was super cute wearing a private-school-girl outfit and leaning back on the teacher’s desk. Her belly button was exposed, and I would get lost in it for hours. But that was years ago, and she was not my favorite *Get Up Gang* member. I actually liked Zac-Michael Wienus (lead singer and youngest of the Wienus Bros), because he was the smart-ass or

the show and he didn't do all that silly mugging for the camera that all the Kidz Channel kids do. . . . But I'm not going to get into that with these people. He's Hilary's boyfriend, and his mug shot was just on the cover of *US Weekly*. He had this cool smirk on his face, like, "Whatever."

"I'm not seeing some refried cheesefest about singing cheerleaders."

Then Abby pipes up. "I guess *Cheer! The Musical* wouldn't be so bad. I'll probably have to teach some of the songs at drama camp, so . . ."

I shake my head and exhale my contempt when Abby kisses my bruised cheek and whispers, "We'll double feature C. B. Down's movie, *Genoa Eyes*, okay?"

I give her a wink, because I've been working on my winks, and ask the ticket girl for two student tickets and where they keep their crackers.

"What crackers?" she asks.

"The crackers I'm gonna need to stomach this cheesy movie."

EJ busts up, but then looks at Nicky to see if it was funny or not. Turns out it wasn't, so he stops laughing and shakes his head at me in disappointment.

Abby grabs my hand and asks, "Can I buy you some popcorn to cut the cheese?" A fart joke! How cool is she? (I may have farted during a movie last year, and it might have been so nasty that it caused her to barf.) I can't even fake being pissed off at her. I squeeze her hand and say, "There won't be any cheese cutting at this movie, and we'll need the popcorn as a prop for the double feature."

As soon as the lights go down, EJ and Nicky start making out. I'd make a move on Abby, but my face couldn't handle it. She probably does want to watch this crap for the songs and stuff, so I shouldn't just reach over and grab some boob . . . like EJ is doing before the opening credits! At a G-rated movie, he's over there making porno grunting noises. I nudge him and tell him to "Shhh!" but it doesn't do any good.

The movie starts out just as you'd expect. Cheerleaders are singing and dancing. Everyone's happy to be alive and smiling all over the place. Zac-Michael Wienus is the lead guy, and he's supposed to be the stud football player. (A hundred-pound gay-wad with a floppy hairdo and lip gloss.) On the Merrian High football team he'd get his ass handed to him if he shimmied under the center's butt and started gyrating his hips around and rapping about "scoring." I recognize all of the dudes from Kidz Channel shows. They're doing cartwheels over each other, and no one is smashing into each other properly. They're throwing guys into the air, and the opposing team is catching them to the beat. It's completely unrealistic and totally ridiculous and . . . I absolutely love it! I wish I could be on their football team instead of mine. Practice would be so much more fun. I'd be the best singing flipping, linebacker/kicker of all time! Abby catches me bobbing my head to this song "Go! Fight! Win!" so I make a face and mouth, "Sooo lame." She laughs because she knows I'm a goof and she digs me anyway.

I guess I haven't watched enough Kidz Channel lately because Hilary Idaho has blossomed in the bra! EJ's busy right now, but we'll discuss this development privately, at great length, very soon. She's so hot! Tig ol' bitties, long hair and tan skin, and the girl can dance her ass off. She sings really great except for when she belts out a word like "Win" and adds fifteen extra syllables, so it becomes, "Weeeeeiiiiiaaahhhheeeeeiiiiiaaahhhhhuuuuunnnna!!!" The movie finishes up in exactly ninety minutes (so they can stick it on TV in six months) with the football stud, Zac-Michael, joining the cheerleading squad and helping them prevail in the national cheer championships. He hooks up with Hilary (just kissing, of course), and then they wrap it all up with a jazzier version of "Go! Fight! Win!" The picture freezes on the cheerleading squad in mid-gayness, standing on each other's

shoulders and smiling like the happiest people on earth. Zac and Hilary are holding a trophy, kissing. The credits start to roll, but the first thing that pops up reads, "A Kidz Production!" Abby and I share a look of dread as the logo slowly rolls up the screen.

The lights come on, and EJ's mouth is all red and swollen like he's been assaulted by a vacuum cleaner. He has lipstick all over his face, neck, and ears.

"Jeez, Nicky, did you reapply?" Abby asks, handing EJ a Kleenex.

Parents with strollers are glaring at us as they walk out because of the lewd acts that were performed in our row. EJ still looks kind of lost as we step out of the theater. He points to a poster and suggests, "Yo, we should see *Fart Knockers* next!"

"No, we shouldn't," Nicky declares. "I have got to see *Cheer!* again!"

EJ's eyes sadly lower, and I smile. Abby tells them that they're on their own. "I need to see something smart, or my brain will fall out."

"Yeah, good call," I say as if I'm worried about my brain too.

5. THE ROCKET SHIP QUESTION

Waiting in line at the snack bar, Abby summarizes the article I was supposed to read about C. B. Down's film, *Genoa Eyes*. I think she was saying something about how rare it is for a first-time director to win the Cannes Film Festival, but she put her hand inside the back pocket of my Levi's as she was explaining it all, so I got a little sidetracked. Anyway, she paid for popcorn, Cherry Coke, and Milk Duds for our next screening. How awesome is she?

We casually stroll into the empty theater, and I ask, "Are you sure we got the time right?"

But the lights dim a few seconds later and the opening credits say, "Written and directed by C. B. Down." How cool is that? A guy that I've been in the same room with! A guy that went to my high school and saw me perform in the spring play . . . wrote and directed the most boring movie of all time! Oh my God. Most of it is in French or Russian, but they don't type out what's being said like they do in the other foreign movies that Abby has dragged me to. Ten minutes into the story, and I have a pretty good idea why we're alone. Abby must have misread the article, because the only award this thing should have won was the Trash Can Film Festival. I wonder if she told me how bad this movie was going to SUCK when I was spacing off in the snack bar line. The only thing more depressing than the violin music that plays over everything . . . is the nonexistent story line. It starts out with a guy shooting up on the bathroom floor of a crack motel in some foreign country. Then it flashes back to a time before his life was so screwed up and he had a hot girlfriend, but she only speaks Russian . . . or French (whatever they speak in the Bourne movies) so all they can do is have angry sex. Which would be awesome if they actually showed anything. This movie is going to give all films a bad name because you only see the action for a second or two before they cut to a shadow on the wall or a bird in the windowsill or something. He gets drunk a lot, chain-smokes cigarettes, and out of nowhere . . . she leaves him and joins the circus! He tries to find her but doesn't speak the Bourne language, and he doesn't seem to know where he is, so he can't find her. Then he goes back to the motel, and I think it turns out he's been dead the whole time. Roll credits! Awesome movie; when do they give out the awards?

I only *think* the guy died, because after watching this non-entertainment for two hours and twenty-three minutes, a guy taps me on the shoulder, shines his flashlight in my eyes, and asks to see our tickets.

I look over at him with my mangled left eye and bark, "You gotta be kiddin' me!"

He's startled by my appearance and stumbles backward before mumbling, "W-w-we didn't sell any tickets for this movie, so you obviously don't have them."

I jump up like I've been paroled from jail on a false arrest and ask, "Where the hell were you two hours ago with your ticket-sales info and flashlight?!"

"Sir, you have to go."

"We're gone," I say as Abby grabs my hand, and we walk up the aisle.

I can tell Abby is pissed, too, because she squeezes my hand and sounds like a frog when she mutters, "Unbelievable!"

We step outside the theater, and I see that she really is crying, so I instinctively give her a hug and say, "It's okay, it's finally over."

Her face is pressed into my collarbone when she asks, “Are you kidding?”

“Yeah, I’m joking. . . . It’s probably gonna keep going for another hour or two.”

She laughs. “Oh, for a second I thought that you didn’t like the movie.”

“Nooo, why would you think that? Who would *not* like it? I friggin’ hated that movie.”

She pulls back and asks, “Wait, are you kidding?”

“I do joke a lot, but I’m dead serious when I tell you that I’d like a two-hour refund on my life.”

Her face is a combination of shock and disgust that I’d only expect to see if she were watching me eat a hot dog out of the trash. “You are so immature,” she scoffs as she marches toward the ticket window.

Immature? Where the hell did that come from? I follow her to the box office, where she demands a student ticket for the next showing.

Genoa Eyes is rated R, so I make eye contact with the ticket guy and shake my head—“No”—flash ten fingers, then five, point to Abby, and mouth the words, “She’s FIFTEEN!”

He asks to see her ID, and she flips around too fast for me to drop my hands, so I shake both of them around and say, “Jazz hands!”

She doesn’t laugh, so I try, “There goes their last chance to sell a ticket for that stinker. W-w-what do you want to do now?”

Her eyes narrow, and she storms off through the parking lot. I rush to unlock my bike, but stop to laugh when I see EJ’s BMX still secured to the rack. I know that poor bastard is stuck in there watching *Cheer! The Musical* for the third time.

I roll up behind Abby, thinking about how I could seem more mature real quick, but she’s wearing short shorts and taking really big steps. Her thighs are really strong, and they’re jiggling provocatively as they rub together. . . . Anything intelligent I was thinking was just deleted. I don’t even know where I am. I’m sure I was brewing up something super insightful that would make her forget about why she’s mad at me, but maybe not. She’s certainly striding away from me . . . kind of strutting, actually. Her booty is bouncing to a beat that makes me want to dance! *Boom, boom, boom, boom.* That damn “Go! Fight! Win!” song is burned into my brain, and it’s burrowing into my loins, so I ride up beside her and bump her butt with my hip. I take my hands off the handlebars and start to ride circles around her. I clap my hands three times before cheering, “Y’all ready? OKAY! Let’s GOOOO! Fight! Win. . . !” (*Clap clap.*) “Say it a-gain! And then we GOOOO! Fight! Win! Until we . . .” (I don’t remember the words.) “Something, Gooo! Fight! Weeeeiiiiiaaaaauuuueeeeeiiiiiaana again!”

From behind I see her back shaking, so I pull up to confirm that she’s laughing and not crying from embarrassment.

I keep riding, hands free, and act out the cheer/dance/clap routine as best I can. “Ready fo’ a show, let’s GO! With all ya might, let’s FIGHT! That’s the end and we WIN—”

Abby sings with me, “Until we Go! Fight! Win . . . again!” She jumps into the air and does the splits like it’s no big deal.

“Wow, nice herkie!” I laugh.

“How do you know what a herkie is?” she asks.

“Oh, I was forced to sit through an entire movie about cheerleading one time.”

She smiles.

“I’m sorry I didn’t like your movie,” I say seriously.

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