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Crushin'

Courtney takes the quiz and it tells her that she'll meet her crush on the beach. "Surf's up! A laid-back chica like you is bound to meet her future BF at the shore!" it says. The girl in the photo has red hair. She's skinny and she is laughing, all big, white teeth, as she clings to the back of a sporty boy. He is not wearing a shirt. The only time Courtney ever made it to the beach, she remembers the scrape of sand inside of her suit against her softer parts. She remembers a floating plastic bag that she thought was a jellyfish. And she remembers actual jellyfish, so many that the lifeguards cleared the water. The quiz doesn't mention any of that.

She will meet a cutie at the beach. But what she wonders about is how the boy who steals her Rainbow Brite doll — wiry, brown-haired Daniel James McCarthy, who lives next door — figures into all of this. Though he's older than her, they'd always been friends. But something's changed in both of them. Now, she gets nervous. She goes quiet. Gets flushed. This, she thinks, is real and live and it's definitely a crush.

Daniel James insists that Courtney call him by his first two names even though it seems like a lot of work. The two-name thing is a recent development. Last summer, whenever they'd played hide and seek in the backyard or when he'd eaten hamburgers with Courtney and her grandmother on their patio — he was just Danny. He's

going into seventh grade at the end of the summer, and she'll be in fourth and she wonders what he will make all of his classmates call him. Like how you can just change your name like that?

Here's how he steals the doll: he comes by to visit Courtney's grandma, to ask if she has any small chores he can do — a lawn that needs mowing, a garage to be swept. He says something like, "Oh hey there Mrs. D. I was noticing that your hostas were being invaded by weeds. I could pull those out for you." Danny knows a weird amount about plants and flowers and his clothes are always very bright and baggy. Though he never asks for money, Courtney's grandmother hands him a \$20 bill every time. When Danny finishes his task for the day, he comes back into the house and asks if he can say hello to Courtney, whose room is down a small, carpeted hallway from the too-cushioned and pillowed living room where Mrs. D watches her soap operas all afternoon. At Courtney's door, he'll stand there, looking like all of his bones are going to fold in on one another and say something like, "Hey there, Courtney. What're you doing?" Courtney might blush, blink her big, blue eyes, and look down. She knows what he will ask next. "Want to play dolls?"

Courtney and Danny would then quietly play with the dolls laid out on her floor, their hands might touch once or twice and Courtney's stomach will flutter. After those few delicate moments, Danny would grab Rainbow Brite, pawing at her blonde hair and adjusting her shimmering blue dress. Then, inevitably, he'd say, "Courtney, I think her hair would look real good if ..." before revealing some elaborate reason as to why he needs to take Rainbow Brite with him for a while. Out the kitchen window, at a table with an Oreo between her fingers turning to mush in milk, Courtney will watch as Danny runs the wide green hill that forms their houses' yards, spinning the doll around by her arms, by her hair, tossing her so high in the air that Courtney worries the Rainbow will get stuck in the pines. He does it again. He laughs and laughs and laughs.

Rainbow Brite will be gone for hours. Courtney will retreat to her room to play with the other, lesser dolls. That night, Danny will knock at their door and his mom will be standing over him. His face will be red and he'll be holding Rainbow Brite out at arms' length. The mother mutters something about being sorry. Danny doesn't say a thing.

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"It's 'cause he likes you, duh," Jenny says, laying on the floor of Courtney's room, looking like she smells something awful. Her hair blonde spills all around her like a halo on the deep blue carpet — she's a mermaid on the ocean. Courtney thinks of showing Jenny the quiz from the magazine, believing that somehow it's all coming together, that Danny will finally tell her that he likes her, too. No boy has said that to her yet, the way they did to Jenny all of the time — all of the notes slipped into desks and whispers in the hallway. Courtney moves a Barbie's arm up and down, waving at the parade of toys passing by. She feels hot and leaves the magazine where it is, on the nightstand. "Danny loves you," Jenny says, crooning to a Ken doll in a tuxedo. "He totally loves you."

Courtney's belly clenches. Danny could be anywhere, hearing the words spilling out of Jenny's big, perfect mouth. He's always around their house lately — in fact, he could be in the next room right now talking to Mrs. D, or under Courtney's window snipping shaggy boughs off the hedges. But he is not. In fact he is way off at the back edge of the yard, peeking over his shoulder and slipping into the woods. Courtney says, "Jenny, look," and points out the window.

"We should follow him!" Jenny squeals, throwing Ken, half dressed, to the floor. Courtney picks him up, thinking that if she doesn't answer Jenny, they don't have to do it. "Come on! Who wants to stay inside and play stupid dolls all day anyway?" Jenny begs.

"No," Courtney mumbles, just above a whisper. "We can't do that."

“But don’t you want to see what he’s doing up there?” Jenny — pretty, golden Jenny — says, pointing, and maybe even jumping up and down.

“Jenny!” Courtney is surprised by the way this comes out — sharp and loud. “We can’t!”

Why?

“The woods aren’t allowed. My grandma says so. And besides, last summer I went up there and I’m never going back. There’s these two boys up there, and one of them is missing teeth. I think they’re high school boys — maybe eighth graders. I don’t know. But they’re big and dirty and last summer I heard this sound like buzzing and screaming coming from up there when I was playing out back and I kept walking and the sounds got closer and further and closer again and then I saw them just as it all went quiet,” she gasps for air. “I was hiding in the bushes and their dirtbikes were on the ground and they were swatting at this bird’s nest up in a tree — of course I know it’s a bird’s nest. Everyone knows that — duh! And they kept swinging at it and you could hear the little baby birds just cheeping away for their mommy and I kept hoping the mommy bird would come back and attack those mean boys — they’re ugly, Jenny. My grandma says they live back behind the woods — which, like how can you live behind woods? But yeah my grandma says they live behind the woods back where the adults are doing drugs. No, the mommy never came back — she just left them there like that, yelling for her, and the boys just kept laughing and screaming and then one of them knocked it out of the tree and all of the little bodies and twigs and leaves went flying and the bigger boy sounded like a werewolf and jumped up in the air and I had to run away.”

It all spills out of her.

What Courtney doesn’t say is that she actually stayed a few minutes longer. That she crouched in the bushes, and that when the boys’ big bodies came down and down again, stomping on everything in the clearing, her body turned inside out and Courtney threw up between her knees. The liquid splashed hot against her legs.

“No way,” Jenny says, slack-jawed and still looking out the window.

“Yes, way, Jenny.”

“Courtney. I mean they totally could have raped you,” Jenny hisses. Courtney isn’t sure what this means, but assumes that she would be dead afterward. “That’s dumb, Court. You need to be more careful.”

Mrs. D comes to Courtney’s door and asks if the two girls would like tuna on toast.

“Yes, Mrs. D,” Jenny says, like powdered sugar hitting pie. Courtney doesn’t get a chance to say a thing.

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A few days later, Danny has taken up the task of painting the foundation of Courtney’s house. Every day, he comes inside with white smears across his face. On the third and final day of the paint job, he takes Rainbow Brite home with him, but this time doesn’t bring her back. After two days, Courtney starts to worry. From the narrow strip of grass between their two houses, Courtney calls up at Danny’s window until he finally slides his screen open.

“Can I have her back now?” she asks.

He looks up at the sky for a moment, as though he is really wondering about the question. Without a word, he disappears briefly and returns. He hangs his arms and head out of the window, Rainbow Brite dangling from his bony fingertips.

“You’re being a selfish little bitch, Courtney,” he spits, then drops the doll. It lands with a thud in the grass as he slams his screen shut. All around her, heavy summer flowers bob their sleepy heads. Bees dip and hover. A centipede crawls up the wall of Danny’s house, jawing at nothing. Courtney’s heart pounds. She snatches the doll and runs inside.

That night, laying in bed, clutching the doll, hot tears slide over Courtney’s freckled cheeks and hit the pillow. In the yellow glow of a nightlight, she wonders what the girls in her magazines might say. On all of the

pictures of those happy, smiling girls, there's always a little quote like, "Never give up on your dreams," or "You're bigger than all of your haters." But Courtney doesn't know how that can possibly be. She's never been called a b-i-t-c-h before. She didn't think Danny could sound so evil, or look at her like someone fat and friendless. She sees the faint faces of the band that all her girl classmates like smiling from a poster on the wall.

Courtney's tears are for all of that. And for the fact that they live nowhere near a beach — that she feels so completely alone. In one of Courtney's dreams that night, she sees trees. In another, there are dogs. In one, she follows Danny into the woods and they stand so close that she can smell something like heat on his neck and old sugar on his breath.

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Summer drags on — one week becomes the next and the next. Danny hasn't come by at all. Courtney grows sick of playing in her room by herself and asks her grandmother if she can use the telephone to call Jenny and invite her over for a sleepover. They'll make s'mores over the stove and set up her small, cartoon-covered tent in the middle of her bedroom. Maybe if Jenny comes over early enough, Courtney can talk her into to going up in the woods to spy on Danny. She's feeling brave lately, and while Danny hasn't come over, Courtney's seen him slipping in and out of the woods almost every day.

Courtney dials the only number she has memorized besides her own. She says, "Hello, Mrs. Thomas. Can I talk to Jenny?" She hears familiar girls' voices in the background — Jenny, Katie, Hillary — and laughter.

"Jenny," Mrs Thomas begins saying, then pauses. Courtney hears the sound of a hand being placed over the receiver and the other end is muffled, then clear again. "Jenny isn't here. I'm sorry, Courtney."

"But I can —"

“I’ll tell her you called, dear,” Mrs. Thomas says before hanging up. Courtney stands in the kitchen, her legs locked into place. She presses her fingertips hard into the wall. They turn red, then white, then purple. She feels like she’s been caught passing a note and taken to the front of the classroom and everyone’s laughing at her. The phone is an anvil in her hand. She heaves it back up on the wall, standing as tall as she can on her toes.

Out the kitchen window she sees Danny cross the invisible line that separates their yards way up by the woods. He looks over his shoulder — she swears he sees her, she waves but he does not — and in a second, he’s gone.

Grandmother dozes on and off. Courtney naps. They eat boxed mac ‘n cheese for dinner, with hot dogs cut up into it. Night settles in and the phone rings as they clear their plates. Nobody is there. It happens again and again and again. On the other end, there’s never a sound. Except once, when Courtney hears slow, wet breaths.

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Rainbow Brite is not even Courtney’s favorite doll, but this is ridiculous. Danny took her on Monday and she’s still not home almost a week later. She last saw them together, jumping around out in the yard on Wednesday, but when she stands under his window now and calls his name up, he just won’t answer. Courtney’s grandmother says that the family has probably gone on vacation, but Courtney knows they haven’t. She’s peered into the cobwebbed windows of their garage, having already thought of this explanation, and their rusting Pontiac is still inside. She’s even set up her toys on the hill in front of her house to watch all day for any sign of movement or life, but there has been none.

She’d like to call Jenny.

She’d like to call anyone.

By Friday, Courtney decides that she will walk next door, knock on their front door, and demand Rainbow Brite back. In her heart she's sure that Danny has done something terrible to the doll in all of this time — taken all of her clothes off, cut her hair, drawn thick, black eyeliner across her eyes. He tried to do that to Courtney's face, once. "You'll be just like the wicked queen, Court," he'd said, his lips curling and his eyes wide. But she wouldn't let him. She knows that asking for the doll back will make him furious, that he might even call her a bad name again, but he can't have it. It's not his. She finally decides to knock on the McCarthy's door, but as she wiggles her foot into her white sneaker, as her hand curls around the back door's handle, as her thumb hits the lever, she sees Danny sprinting up the hill to the woods. He does not have Rainbow Brite.

She almost calls out for her grandmother, but does not. A little whimper builds in her chest and her bottom lip quakes ever so slightly. Now is her chance, she thinks. She could knock on the McCarthy's door and tell Danny's mom that he's stolen her Rainbow Brite. Danny'll be in deep trouble, then. He won't steal her doll ever again. But instead, Courtney slips out the door and starts climbing the hill — past the pear tree, past the willow and the shivering birch. All of the shade from these big trees begins collapsing across the wide, green expanse and eventually becomes the woods. She'd sworn she'd never go in there again. But she does. Her foot sinks into the years of matted leaves. Her soft, yellow shirt catches on the thickets of wild blackberry, mosquitos swarm her head, whining in her ears. The damp smell of cool earth fills her nose. There is a faint whiff of gasoline on the air, too. Courtney knows that she should turn around. But she does not.

Her heart pounds. She takes slow steps, unsure of exactly which way she should go, not remembering what leads where. She tries to be as silent as possible. One foot. The next. Narrow paths snake off in so many directions. Everything towers over her and swallows her whole. At the third fork, she decides to go right. Then left. Then another right until she hears a faint rustling and the tinkling sound of metal on metal, like the sound her belt makes

when she has to adjust the clasp. With a few more steps, Courtney realizes that she has come to the edge of the clearing. She knows she has gone too far. She takes two steps back, crouches, and pulls a cluster of leaves apart just enough to see through.

She sees a dirtbike leaning against a tree.

She sees one of the big boys who live behind the woods leaning back against another tree. His pants are around his ankles; his right hand pulls up his shirt to reveal a thin trail of dark hair leading down his stomach. It's matted with sweat. She sees streaks of dirt across his skin. He is looking down and his mouth is loose and dripping. With his other hand he holds the back of Daniel James McCarthy's head — Danny, who is on his knees in front of this boy, with his back to Courtney. The boy from behind the woods pushes himself into Daniel James McCarthy's face over and over. There is the sound of spit on skin.

Courtney wants to scream, but doesn't. Some odd, fluttering noise trickles up her throat and through her nose. Her body feels tight and loose at the same time. A few tears sting her eyes, and she looks through the bushes once more. They are kissing, now. They are standing and there are no pants and fingers press into white flesh and leaves are stuck to the backs of Danny's thighs. She lets the branches snap back into place, and, as if by magic, floats along the paths that brought her all this way. Invisible clouds of gnats chew at her temples. It's all green. It all vibrates.

She emerges from the woods into the backyard shadows and out of them to the place on the hill that turns orange when the sun sets. There are small rips in her clothes. Burdocks are tangled in her hair.

She walks down the hill to Danny's back door. She slides it open. The dog yips, runs towards her, licks her hand. Mrs. McCarthy is holding herself against the counter, a cigarette hanging from her lip, her whole face turned

down.

“What are you doing in here, Courtney?” she asks

“I want my doll back,” she says, holding her breath. “Danny took it.”

“That fucking kid,” Mrs. McCarthy growls, before disappearing and returning with the Rainbow Brite. “He’s like a little fucking girl.”

Courtney grabs the doll. It’s hair smells stale, but she looks the same as she did a week ago, the same as she always has.

“Danny’s in the woods, Mrs. McCarthy,” Courtney blurts out. “Danny’s in the woods right now and you should go find him.”