

Life is a daring adventure  
or nothing at all.

—HELEN KELLER, AUTHOR AND ACTIVIST, 1880–1968

I manage to grab the snake, but not without twisting my foot and falling butt-first into the creek. When I stand, lightning shoots through my ankle.

I take a long, deep yoga breath, an Ujjayi ocean breath, to be calm. Steady. Strong. Hopping on one foot, I hold the wriggling snake and scramble over to a large rock. As I unshoulder my backpack, the snake flicks its tongue at me. It must think I'm crazy.

I can think of worse things. Better crazy than mild. Or timid, or meek, or boring.

From my backpack, I pull out the mason jar I brought for snake containment. "Your temporary quarters." He slithers in, curls up at the bottom.

After popping the ventilated lid on, I hold him up for a better look: velvety black, yellow lines running the length of his back. Garter snake, or ribbon? I sniff the jar. A bit skunky but not overwhelming. Probably ribbon. "Either way, you're a beauty." I set the container down.

Now, to call for help. I flip my cell phone open. It doesn't chime. Of course I forgot to charge it.

Lightning splices my ankle when I shift weight. It's already getting puffy and it's throbbing. Gingerly, I set it into the creek so the cool water can help the swelling.

The snake, nonplussed, watches me. I unzip my backpack and move aside my drawing journal, the tin of colored pencils, the jar of filtered water. Ah, here it is: an emergency kit, packed by Martha. Score one for Martha, and moms everywhere. Hello, blister pack of ibuprofen! I swallow a couple of tablets with a swig of water and paw through the rest of the kit: band-aids and an ace bandage, a whistle, waterproof matches, a mirror. Plus I packed two homemade oatmeal bars and a jar of peanuts and raisins. At least I won't starve.

Stranded, hurt, but I can handle it.

No freak-outs. No worries. This girl is different.

I wrap the ace bandage around my ankle and dip it back into the water. Crimson maple leaves float by, brown dappling their curling tips. They swirl

and laze in the eddy from my foot. I might as well try to slow down, too; it will be awhile before Martha realizes I'm hurt. After her shift at Walmart, she'll probably stop at the food co-op, and the library, and who knows what else. Plus, it would take her a long time to hike this far along the creek. So even if she gets home early, and she notices my note and doesn't just assume I'm in the barn or doing yoga, I'm stuck here well past sundown. At the earliest.

From the position of the sun, it's not yet noon. Which leaves eight or nine hours to wait, or to come up with a better idea. Just me and my new friend Ribbons.

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Hours later, still without an exit strategy, I take a break from drawing in my journal to compare my sketches to Ribbons in his container. I ought to let him go, but I like the company. Sighing, I run my fingers over the smooth glass. I should probably try to find him a tasty worm or cricket to eat—

Wait. Voices in the woods.

A twig snaps. The voices get closer. I can pick out some words, a male voice: school, shop, classes. Is it two people out there, or three?

"Hey! Hello?" I call.

The voices go silent.

"I'm down by the creek!" I regard my throbbing ankle. "Actually, I'm pretty much up the creek!"

The voices return, low and quiet, like they're discussing what to do. Then: branches move, leaves rustle. A boy about my age, in cut-off cargo shorts and hiking boots, pops out of the trees. I've seen him before, in town—once in the library, a few times at the coffee shop. You can't help but see him. He is that kind of beautiful. A crunchier, leaner version of Kumar from *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*. His hair is glossy black, his eyes dark and smoldering.

Blood rushes into my cheeks.

"Hi," he says. The frays of his shorts brush against his legs when he moves. His leather hiking boots are scuffed and worn into whorls of color, whipped cream melting into milky coffee.

"Hi." I will not sound like a damsel in distress. Although, technically, with a sprained ankle and no cell phone, I kind of am.

But where is the source of the other voice, or voices?

As if on cue, someone else stumbles out from the woods.

Kumar turns to catch the jumble of limbs. Coltish legs steady themselves and unfold to reveal a girl, very pretty. I've seen her around, too.

“Hi” I fan a small wave. “I’m Evie.” My heart won’t stop pounding.

“Hi!” The girl is all eyelashes and toenail polish, in flip-flops and a short sundress. Not the most practical hiking attire, but who am I to judge? After all, I’m barefoot. The girl is petite and thin and gamine, Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, but with richer, tawny brown skin. Indian maybe, or latin american?

“What’s up?” She pokes her fingers into her short, jet-black hair.

“I hurt my ankle. It won’t take weight, and no one really knows where I am.”

Kumar looks around. What’s he looking for? Is someone else with them?

Audrey Hepburn asks, “You came out this far alone?” and I realize she is voicing Kumar’s thoughts. She says it like it’s unimaginable, like, You just flew back from the moon?

I shrug. “I live about five miles downstream.”

“You live here?” the boy asks. They look at each other.

The girl juts out her hip, sets her hand on it. “Did you like, just move or something?”

I know what they’re thinking. Our town only has one high school, so everyone knows everyone. Well, obviously not everyone. I shake my head. “I’ve lived here two years. I’m a homeschooler.”

They look at each other again. They are saying a lot with those looks.

"I'm normal, I swear!" I smile to reassure them. "I'm actually going to school this year. Starting Monday." Only three days away. Oh man, I can't wait. I want to see what it's like; Martha is horrified that it will ruin me. It took a protracted battle to convince her to let me enroll. I finally wore her down—a brutal campaign of attrition—with ceaseless appeals for my own empowerment and personal decision-making. Also I convinced her I could be a gonzo journalist and treat high school like ethnographic research.

"I'll be a senior." I lift my ankle out of the creek so I can turn all the way around to face Kumar and Audrey.

"That's awesome!" says the girl. She wiggles her thumb at herself and the boy, "Us, too."

The boy's eyes go wide; he is staring at my ankle. It looks swollen even with the ace bandage.

"You weren't kidding about your ankle. Nasty sprain." He steps closer and bends down to look at it. "All right if I have a look? I've had some of these."

I nod. He kneels in front of me. My heart is thumping. Please tell me he can't hear it. The closer he gets, the harder it hammers. These two are probably together, they're a couple. Isn't that what

I'm supposed to assume? I'm not really an expert at this kind of thing.

"Can I unwrap the bandage?"

I swallow hard, and nod again, and hope that my heart can take the strain of him touching me.

Audrey tucks her dress behind her knees and dips into a knees-together, ladylike squat next to Kumar. Her eyes skim my bare feet, slide up to my cut-offs and tank top, stop at my make-up-less face. Why do girls always look me over like this? Where is the love?

My heart sinks. Which makes me feel lame, because my life is not about feeling insecure. But if Audrey is the kind of girl Kumar likes, he would have zero interest in me. Petite I'm not. I'm not fat, I'm just ... built. Muscled and solid and tall. As for girly? Put it this way: I'm proud of being a girl, but girly? Not so much. I glance at my bare feet and unpolished toes, the light hairs on my unshaved shins, and I reach back to tighten my long brown ponytail. Whatever. I am what I am.

Besides, if they're together I shouldn't even be thinking these things.

Kumar cups the back of my foot and lifts it. I take a deep breath because it hurts, and because my heart is pounding so hard.

Audrey and Kumar confer. Their words seem to float between them, bubbles that glint and pop.

“OHMIGOD!” The girl scrambles backward.

The boy frowns at my ankle. “It’s not that bad.”

The color has drained from her face, leaving it ashy. In terror, she points at the jar. “Snake! Snake!”

“Oh no. I’m sorry! I should have warned you.” I hate that people are afraid of such wonderful creatures. I don’t want to be the cause of any snake-hate. “He’s just a little ribbon snake. Completely harmless.”

She shakes her head, apparently unconvinced. She takes another step back.

“Would it be better if I let it go? Or do you want me to keep it contained?”

“Con- contained.”

“Okay. Don’t worry. I’ll keep it in the jar and—”

The boy rolls his eyes at Audrey. “Don’t be such a wuss.” He turns to me and asks, “Planning on keeping it?”

“No. I was just doing some—”

“Drawings.” He’s spotted my journal. “Wow. Can I see?”

“Sure.”

He picks it up and thumbs through the pages. “Holy crap. These are amazing.”

“Thanks.”

“What?” The girl tries to see without moving closer.



“Drawings. The snake and other stuff.” He flips my journal shut and hands it to me, then turns to the girl. “Jay, why don’t you start back. We’ll wait until you get far ahead before we let the snake loose.”

“No no no no no no no. I am not liking your plan. Trudging back through the forest alone? I don’t think so.” She wraps her arms around herself. “There might be more snakes or other various reptiles. Or what if I take a wrong turn and get lost forever?”

The boy groans.

“How about this?” I say. “On the count of three, you run, and I’ll let the snake go in the other direction—”

“And I’ll carry you out of here,” Kumar says.

Oh yeah. My ankle. He’s going to carry me, like I need to be rescued. How humiliating!

Plus, can I handle being that close to him? His beauty is pathological. Which pisses me off, really. Me being all swooning and hyperventilating—it’s so lame.

But he’s already counting: “One, two ...”

The girl takes off, and I hurry to let Ribbons the snake go. The boy picks me up, grunting a little with the effort. Yeah, I’m not small.

“I’m not a damsel in distress, you know.”

He laughs. “Trust me: the thought did not occur.”