

I stepped out of the creamery

and into a furnace. With no clouds to interfere, the sun beat down so hard I thought I was beneath a magnifying glass. Combined with the kind of humidity usually reserved for a rain forest, it added up to a typical East Texas summer day.

Beads of sweat had already popped up on my forehead by the time I'd crossed the street and reached my truck. Mrs. Rollins, my History teacher back in eighth grade, was parked next to me. She had her little boy with her. He was red in the face, wailing away as he pointed to the shopping bag in her hand.

She looked up with a weary, half-smile. "Hi, Eric."

"Something wrong?"

With a deep sigh, she said, "I picked up a couple things at the grocery store and threw them in the car while I ran over to the book store. It took longer than I thought it would, and Jake's candy bar turned to soup."

She opened the grocery bag. I peeked inside and saw the peeled-back candy bar wrapper, revealing a puddle of chocolate.

Jake, still pointing and crying, said, "Candy, mama! Candy!"

She tried reasoning with him, explaining that the candy bar was ruined, but logic doesn't always work on a three-year-old.

"Hang on for a second," I said.

I ran back inside the creamery for a straw and a handful of marshmallows that they used in the Rocky Road. I stuck the straw through one of the marshmallows, and when I got back to Mrs. Rollins' car, I dipped it in the chocolate.

"Here you go, Jake. Marshmallow fondue."

He beamed as he gobbled up the gooey treat. Mrs. Rollins smiled as well.

"Eric, that's awesome! Thank you so much."

I handed her the other marshmallows. "No problem, Mrs. R. Hopefully that'll keep him happy at least 'til you get home."

Inside my truck, I grabbed the seat belt buckle and the metal scorched my hand. A lot hotter and my palm would have been branded with the Ford logo. I tried again, this time using my shirt like an oven mitt.

The drive to work only took ten minutes, but without a working air conditioner in that heat, that was ten minutes too long. The milkshake would make the trip a little less miserable. You had to go a long ways to find a better shake than the ones from Dyson's. A couple girls

from school worked there and every now and then I could talk my way into a freebie, but that day all anybody wanted to talk about was the earthquake we'd had the night before. There had been three or four over the past week, which alone was big news. No one could remember Carthage being the epicenter for anything except maybe the annual quilting festival. We'd all gotten a crash course in the Richter scale, the latest one measuring 3.8; small potatoes to people in California, but for us, the earth might as well have been flat and we were about to slide off the edge.

I slurped as much of my shake as the straw allowed and swallowed, the vanilla frostiness radiating against my chest, just before brain freeze set in. Even with the windows down, sweat trickled down my face, a drop or two seeping into my eye. As a kid, I hated that – the salt from the sweat stung – but I'd long since gotten used to it. I didn't bother to wipe it from my eyes anymore, not even earlier that day when I was shooting my free throws – a hundred right-handed and a hundred left, like always.

As I rested the to-go cup against my forehead for an extra chill, I made a note to hit up J. Stu for an advance so I could get the A/C fixed.

At the top of Swanson's Hill, I saw a car below, pulled over with its hood popped. The car was a light blue

convertible BMW. The legs on the body poking out from beneath the hood on the driver's side – long, toned and covered only by some skimpy denim shorts – belonged on a model. Or a beach volleyball player. There weren't many of either in Carthage.

She must've heard me coming because she eased from under the hood and got a face full of sun. Squinting, she smiled.

My truck rolled to a stop and framed her in the open passenger window. Silky brown hair, deep brown eyes, and a snug white spaghetti-strap tee that read *Your Boyfriend Bought Me This Shirt*.

"Trouble?" I asked. *No kidding. Nice grasp of the obvious.*

She passed a hand through her hair, almost displacing the sunglasses resting atop her head. "Yeah. It just, like, conked out, you know?" As she leaned forward into the window and gave me a little pout, I noticed the spray of freckles across her nose. "I've been stuck here forever. I was beginning to think nobody was ever going to come by. Where am I like, the middle of nowhere?"

I smiled. I couldn't tell whether or not the ditzzy thing was an act, but it was working...for me anyway. "Middle of nowhere? Didn't you know you're right outside Carthage, Texas?" She stared at me like I was the bottom

line on an eye chart. “Gas capitol of America? Home of the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame?”

“Oh.”

I pulled forward and parked just ahead of her. Nerves tickled my gut, and I wished I’d spent more Saturdays with Dad working on that old junker of his instead of running off to play ball or hang out at the lake. I hopped from the truck and began scratching my thumb against my jeans, a nervous habit I’d gotten into. She stood tall and straight with her hands in her back pockets, twisting back and forth in time with the warm breeze. She had very nice...posture.

When I got within arm’s reach, I put out my hand. “Eric.”

“Allison.” She smiled but took neither hand from her pockets.

Alrighty then. “So, where you headed?”

“New Orleans.”

New Orleans? I glanced back at the tag on her bumper. The Grand Canyon State. “It looks like you’re a little off your route.”

“I thought this was a shortcut.”

I laughed. “It is if you’re trying to get to Texarkana, but it ain’t gonna help you find New Orleans.”

The guys at work were not going to believe this. I

decided I'd better look under the hood. I may not have known what I was looking for, but at least I could hide that I was laughing at her expense. Heat radiating from the engine greeted me as I leaned in, and I caught a whiff of motor oil. No way she'd been waiting "forever." Her sense of time wasn't any better than her sense of direction. "Just conked out, huh?"

"Mm hm."

"Will it start?" I looked up to see her shaking her head. Her hair looked like she'd just come from the stylist. In fact, despite being stuck by the roadside – whether it was five minutes or forty-five – she was straight off the cover of Maxim. On the other hand, I was blinking sweat from my eyes.

Some of the engine block made sense – carb, distributor, alternator – but plenty more didn't. Why couldn't everybody just drive old trucks instead of something related to Optimus Prime?

Working my way around the wires, hoses and belts, it didn't take long until I was wrist deep in grease, and if I didn't get going pretty soon, I'd be getting a call from J. Stu: *Eric, did you make a wrong turn? 'Cause there's only four of 'em between your house and the store. Eric, do you still want to work here?* Fun stuff like that. I dabbed some sweat with my shoulder and snuck a glance at Allison. I couldn't tell

whether she was bored or frustrated. Both, maybe.

I hunted around for several more minutes, but couldn't make heads or tails out of what I was looking at. My back was cramping up from being hunched over her car and I needed a shower. It didn't look like I was going to be her hero. Reed and Griffin knew more about cars than I did; maybe one of them was around. I was just about to give up and grab my phone out of the truck when I spotted it: a loose spark plug socket. Two...no, three of them. I'd never seen that many come loose at once.

I wanted to kick myself for looking past something so simple. I wiggled them back into place. "See if it'll start now."

Allison climbed behind the wheel, punched the ignition button and, just like that, all 300 horses were raring to go. She sprang from the car, clapping her hands and wearing a huge smile. She spread her arms and dashed toward me. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" I was all set to wrap her up in a bear hug when she stopped short and crinkled her nose. "You're kinda sweaty."

That bad(?) escaped me, but I played dumb and checked myself out. "Yeah, I guess I am." We stared back and forth until I said, "Well, I gotta —"

"Follow me, okay?" Allison didn't bother waiting for my response. She hopped back in her car, pulled off a

three-point turn that would've made any driving instructor in America proud, and sped off, spraying dirt and a few rocks. I stood there, dazed, but only for a second or two. I was sixteen and the hottest girl I'd ever put eyes on just invited me to follow her. Hell yes.

I caught up to her two miles later, where the road snaked its way around the lake. She was out and leaning against her car, grinning like she'd just stolen something. I parked behind her and climbed out. The air was several degrees cooler, thanks to the clusters of huge oak trees blotting out the sun, though still humid. "So, what's up?"

She nodded across the road to the lake, grin still in place. I know what I wanted to believe she meant, but random invitations to go swimming with supermodels weren't the sort of thing that happened to me. The closest I'd ever come was when Claire Dixon asked me to dance at the winter formal, but she was just trying to piss off her ex.

Allison stepped out of her flip-flops and tossed them onto the passenger seat. "Come on...E," she sang. I watched, equal parts amusement and confusion, as she dashed across the road. At the lake's edge, she eased into the water, and when she was up to her knees, she turned to give me another smile. She waded out until the water was chest high, and then dipped under the surface. Ripples

fanned out from the spot where I last saw her, and just when the water was calm again, her head broke the surface and she breathed deeply. She raised an arm to show me her t-shirt as it dangled from her fingertips. Giggling, she wound it like a lasso – four times, maybe five – before flinging it toward me. The flimsy white shirt sailed through the air, a ribbon of lake water trailing behind like the tail of a comet, until it landed with a *splosh* on the seat of her car, right next to the flip-flops. Then she gave me a “Well?” raise of her eyebrows.

Stuart’s Hardware be damned.

I kicked off my sneakers, peeled away my shirt and jeans, both slick with sweat, and took off to join Allison. I hadn’t gone swimming here since freshman year, and then it was just me and some guys from school. This promised to be way more interesting.

I waded into the lake, water that was cooler than I remembered lapping against my legs. As soon as I was waist deep, I dunked myself, hoping at least to downgrade the funk that had kept me from getting close to her once already. When I came up for air, she was treading water farther out. “Hey,” she called. “Are you ready for me?”

Again, my nerves got the better of me. The truth was, I had no idea whether I was ready for a girl like her. I’d never met one.

She bobbed in the water, submerged from the neck down. Even though the lake was shrouded by trees, I saw a sparkle in her eye. She smiled as I swam closer. “You were so sweet to stop and help me.”

I returned the smile but before I could tell her it wasn't any trouble, I heard the squeal of brakes. I whipped back toward the road and saw a dingy old RV stop next to Allison's car, belching black smoke. The driver spilled out of the door, yelling at the top of his voice, “Little help over here? I've got an emergency! Please!”

First Allison and now this? *What am I, Triple-A?*

“Don't go anywhere, okay?”

“E,” she pleaded.

“I'll be right back,” I said, before returning to the shore. At the same moment I pulled myself from the water, I remembered my boxers were the only thing between me and the rest of the world. The guy driving the RV, older, average looking with a salt-and-pepper beard, chuckled at the sight of me scurrying over to my truck, where I hopped back into my jeans. He wore a black jacket, lightweight but still it had to be murder in the heat.

“You any good with cars?” he asked as I approached, zipping up.

I shrugged. “A little.” *So far, so good today.*

“Okay, good.” Then he thumbed toward the lake.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt.”

I joined him at the front of the RV as he popped the hood, freeing a curl of acrid, black smoke. We fanned our faces, and I struggled not to cough. “What happened?” I managed.

“Sorry!” he yelled.

Another round of coughs came on, and I couldn’t fight these off. Seconds later, the smoke stopped, and as it began to drift away, I saw a hose mounted just above the wheel well spitting out the last remnants of the cloudy filth. Someone went to a lot of trouble to make it look like the engine really was on fire.

“Sorry, kid,” he said again. Using the sleeve of his jacket, he mopped his forehead, and I wondered why he didn’t just take it off. That was when he grabbed me and pinned my arms behind my back.

“Dude, what the hell?” I tried to break the hold, but his arms were too strong.

“Help!” I screamed as loud as I could. “Help!”

He dragged me toward the back of his vehicle. The rocks from the pavement cut into my bare feet. I tried kicking, flailing my legs in every direction. “Allison! Call 9-1-1! Call 9-1-1!”

I thrashed back and forth, and he dug his fingers even harder into my arms. He began to pant. I thought