

Change the locks

Change the scene

Change it all

But can't change what we've been.

—Atlas Genius, “Trojans”

Chapter One

We'd been at the barbeque for less than two minutes, but several things were clear.

1. I was underdressed.
2. I had no idea how to pronounce several of the items on the menu.
3. I had completely underestimated the length of time a group of moderately intelligent, narcissistic rich kids would hold a grudge.

"Where are the hot dogs?" I said. "Salmonella-infested potato salad? I thought this was a barbeque."

Neither Abby nor my mom answered. They stared at the huge white tent set up on the athletic field, at the banks of solar panels just past the grass, at the tablecloths and crystal glasses and real silverware on the tables, at the waiters and glowing LED lamps and jazz band.

Then Sam ran into one of the display tables with his cane, knocking picture frames and flowers all over the ground. His face red, shirt partially tucked into his pants, he started muttering to himself. His voice got louder as heads turned and conversations around us stopped. The spell was broken.

Mom tried to steady him and keep him from melting down while Abby and I gathered everything up. I stayed there, crouched down, trying to hide my bright red face. So much for trying to blend in.

A waiter rushed over to put everything back, and we moved out of the way. Abby laughed, but when she saw how irritated I was, she tried to stifle it with a cough. "Let's get some food," she said, elbowing me. "What kind of theme are they going for? Luau? Mardi Gras?"

“Money,” my mom answered, brushing some crumbs off Sam’s shirt. “That’s the theme.”

The invitation said casual dress, but clearly that meant something different at Bannerman Prep School. The women wore sundresses and heels that kept getting stuck in the grass; the men were in khakis and stiff shirts. Even the guys I’d passed earlier when I was moving into the dorm had exchanged their t-shirts for polos. I looked down at my flip flops and thought about running back up to my room to change, but before I could decide, a tan middle-aged man approached.

“You must be Tanner.” He extended his hand. I shook it. It was sweaty. “The defending California state champion in Policy Debate. I should get your autograph.” The guy laughed. None of the rest of us did. He didn’t seem to notice. “We expect great things from you. I have to tell you, none of the alumni were too thrilled with that loss at the state finals last spring. So when Watterson suggested we recruit the guy who’d humiliated us, we were all on board. Glad to have the tiger on *our* side.”

Abby looked at me, eyebrows raised, and mouthed the word “*Tiger?*” and I looked away so I wouldn’t laugh. He turned to my mom, who pretended to be interested while gripping Sam’s arm with one hand.

“My daughter Peyton is on the team. I’ll have to introduce them. She spent the summer in Prague—”

“We’re going to take Sam and get some food,” I said and nudged Abby. She looped her arm through Sam’s and we made our way to the buffet table.

“Harsh,” Abby said as she grabbed a plate. “Leaving your mom on her own.”

“I’ll throw you under the bus too if I have to.”

I stared at the food in front of us, and it hit me for the seventeenth time that day that I did not belong here. There was a sign behind the buffet, boasting that the vegetables and herbs were

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all grown on-site in the school's organic garden. I'd grown up eating pizza pockets and macaroni and cheese. Somehow, I doubted those were under any of the silver lids on the long table. I shook my head at the pile of greens the server tried to put on my plate. That was supposed to be a salad? It looked like dandelions. Maybe it was. Gourmet dandelions.

I carried Sam's plate and my own, hoping the food being scooped onto our plates tasted better than it looked, while Abby helped Sam get through the line. Fully loaded, we surveyed the tent, looking for a table. It seemed that all two hundred students, as well as their parents, were already seated.

"You pick," Abby said. "All I see are a bunch of dill holes with trust funds."

Sam pointed his cane at a table full of girls. "Check out the babes," he said, way too loudly. His deep voice, nurtured in speech therapy for years, was another of the contradictions that made up his life. Sure, he loved playing with trucks and ardently believed in Santa Claus, but get him around a group of pretty girls and he turned into a total horn-dog, like the thirteen-year-old he was.

Abby elbowed him. "Sam, you don't want one of these babes. Way too high maintenance."

We found a half empty table a few feet away. I was about to set our plates down when one of the girls jumped up. "You can't sit there. These are reserved."

As we turned and looked around, her friend asked, "Is that him?"

"Yeah. He thinks he can just take anybody's seat. Could he be any cockier?"

A guy bumped my shoulder as he walked by, and I almost dropped our plates. He sat down at the table with the gossip girls with his back to me. "He'll be kicked out by Thanksgiving," he said. "The only reason he won at State was because he cheated."

I recognized the voice. It was the guy we'd defeated in finals. His name was Tran, but my partner and I had called him Anal-Retentive Asian Guy. It still fit.

I turned, still holding our plates. "I'm not a cheater. But go ahead and tell yourself that, if it makes you feel better."

Tran didn't turn around, but one of the girls rolled her eyes. "Whatever. We're trying to eat."

Abby pulled at my sleeve and pointed to a table in the back. "How about there?"

I recognized a guy seated alone. He was watching something on his phone. I couldn't remember his name, but I remembered his afro. It was tamer—shorter maybe—than the last time I'd seen him. He probably hated me too, but the other tables were filling up and we were running out of options.

"Anyone sitting here?" Afro guy shook his head, so I set our plates down. "I'm Tanner, and this is my cousin, Abby, and my brother, Sam."

He nodded. "Jason."

He didn't say a lot, but as we ate we found out that Jason was from Berkeley, also a junior, and tragically, a vegetarian—thereby forced to eat the salad made from yard waste.

"Berkeley," Abby said. "That's not that far away. Do you live at home?"

Jason shook his head. "No. Commuting is a pain. Some people do it. But I don't have a car."

"Berkeley is a cool city," I said.

Jason shrugged, then went back to his salad. I couldn't tell if he was just quiet or still pissed off about losing to me. I told myself it didn't matter. I tried not to think about Tran and what he was probably telling everyone. I tried to pretend I didn't hear my name mentioned. I ate,

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to have something to do, but I didn't taste the food. Sam nearly spilled his water, and he dropped his fork three times. I wiped his face as discreetly as possible, but he still ended up with sauce all over his shirt.

When the waiters brought dessert trays around, we were joined by two other guys. One looked like the evil blond guy from *Harry Potter*. The other looked like Mario Lopez. I didn't even have time to take a bite before Mario started hitting on Abby.

"You must be new. I know I'd remember your face."

"I'm sure I'd forget yours," Abby said, and kicked me under the table.

Sam laughed. Even he could appreciate a good burn.

Everyone looked at Sam, and I knew what they were thinking. They wanted to know what was wrong with him.

Abby, who'd shared the job of looking out for Sam since we were kids, turned her attention on Jason. Running her finger around the rim of her crystal glass, she asked, "So, smooth jazz and chicken kabobs. You Bannerman boys really know how to party."

The blond guy had a huge grin on his face. "Oh, we *know* how to party. This is for the parents. Let them believe what they want to believe. Once the Duke gets back, you'll see what I'm talking about."

"The what?" I asked.

"Andrew Tate," said Mario. "Everyone calls him the Duke. His stepdad is some kind of billionaire, like thirty-second in line for the throne in England."

From the table next to us, a skinny blond girl chimed in. "That's not why he's rich. The Duke was a soap opera star in Brazil when he was twelve. He made all kinds of money. He was loaded before his mom got remarried."

Jason rolled his eyes. “That’s a rumor. But he is some kind of statistics wiz or something. Makes a lot of money at the casinos, if you know what I mean.”

They all started talking at once, each with a more outlandish story. The Duke was friends with Bill Gates. He’d invested in that indie movie that won all the Oscars. He’d saved the governor’s life when he was on vacation with his family. I elbowed Abby and when she looked at me, she was wearing the same expression of disbelief I felt on my face. The blond guy must have seen it too.

“He has this house out on the coast,” he said, “and his parents are never there. The parties are legendary. You’ll see.”

A screech came out of the speakers. Conversations stopped as a short, balding man stood on the platform next to the jazz band. Dean Kramer. Projectors hanging from the ceiling flashed slides onto the sides of the tent, so the presentation could be seen from any seat. Pictures came up, set to music, and the crowd laughed as they recognized the faces: students dressed in white coats and safety glasses, conducting lab experiments; a group of students in hiking gear at the top of a hill, looking through telescopes; the Golden Gate Bridge framed in the background as another group picked up trash on the beach; and in the final shot, last year’s debate team, holding their second place trophy.

The Dean began to speak into a tiny microphone clipped to his lapel. “It’s my privilege to welcome you to another year at Bannerman. I suspect you’ve all already seen the article in *Forbes* that came out this week, calling us the premier preparatory school in Northern California, the perfect blend of tradition and technology. . .”

He droned on about how great Bannerman was. We had the latest technology, brand new tablets for faculty and students, the fastest onsite network, an amazing new cyber-security

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system. And the irony of that was, instead of listening, most people were on their phones. The students tried to hide them, but the parents openly checked email and sent messages through the whole speech, pausing only to clap half-heartedly when there was an awkward pause.

When the Dean finally finished, everyone stood to go. Parents hugged their kids, reminding them not to stay up too late, and the place cleared out. I'd expected more of a tearful goodbye scene, but then I remembered that with the exception of the freshmen—and maybe a handful of transfer students like me—everyone else was used to this.

We found my mom as we were leaving the tent. “That was really something,” she said, under her breath.

A tall, dark-haired woman with at least twenty bracelets on her arm stopped and handed Mom her card. “Here. Email me your information. I’m sure we can get some services set up.”

“Thank you.” Mom smiled. “That would be wonderful.”

“Happy to do it. I can’t wait to see what Tanner does this year.”

The woman walked away, bracelets jingling as she left.

“What was that?” I asked.

“She’s an attorney. Her firm does pro bono work with Special Education litigation. She thinks she can get some occupational therapy for Sam, maybe even a living skills aide. I think if you’d asked for a kidney tonight, one of the many surgeons in attendance would have harvested one for you before dessert.”

“That’s crazy.”

Mom put her arm around me. “You don’t have to prove anything. And if you’re not happy, you can come home. No questions asked, okay?”

Great plan. In theory. But I hadn't learned how to turn off that part of my brain that worried about stuff. The part that made all these plans for my future. The part that didn't want to juggle classes at the junior college and the night shift at Wendy's, until it all got to be too much and I dropped one class, then two, then dropped out completely so I could be a shift supervisor and maybe one day make assistant manager. I'd watched it happen to guys I knew back home. I needed this. Bannerman Prep was my ticket to a good college. And debate was my only hope of a scholarship. I couldn't let my mom see that. So I smiled and nodded.

"Sam!" Abby shouted, and we all turned. He was popping M&M's into his mouth, eating them one color at a time like always, while blood ran out of his nose. With the efficiency honed in a trauma center, Mom grabbed a cloth napkin from a table that hadn't been bussed, dipped it in a pitcher of ice water, and started cleaning him up.

"Sam, what happened?" Mom asked. My brother was silent. "Did you take your vitamin C this morning?" Nothing. She stood. "I'm going to try and get some ice. Tanner, come take over for me."

I took her place, pinching the bridge of Sam's nose while I held the napkin to his face. As I looked at his fingerprint smudged glasses, I couldn't help but think, *I won't have to do this 24/7 anymore*. As quickly as I had the thought, I felt guilty for thinking that about my own brother. So there it is. I'm not a saint. I'm a selfish jerk like everyone else.

It was us and the catering staff in the tent, and for that, I was grateful. By the time Mom got the bleeding stopped and Sam cleaned up as best she could, the campus was pretty quiet. Along the walkways, the streetlights had come on, sleek black paddles glowing with light so bright it looked almost alien.

"We'd better head home," Mom said. "We've got a long drive."

“I’ll walk you to the car.”

“Tanner?” Sam said. “Giddyup?” Blood was crusted on his nostrils and chocolate was smeared all over his mouth. But it was there in his eyes—that look of anticipation and trust and belief that I wasn’t just some sixteen-year-old kid, but the greatest man that ever lived.

I hoisted Sam onto my back. He held his cane in one hand, the other wrapped around my neck shouting *woo-hoo* as we galloped across the lawn. We passed the classroom buildings, all smooth stucco and huge dark windows, and Sam swatted his cane at the towering palm trees that lined the walkway. We reached the parking lot and I set him down in front of the Honda. I caught my breath while we waited for my mom and Abby to catch up.

The girls’ and boys’ dorms were at the edge of campus, separated by a parking lot the size of a football field, complete with charging stations with a dozen electric cars plugged in. There was a loud rumble, like somebody had fired up a jet engine, then the iron gate slid open and a small silver convertible turned into the parking lot. Sam stared, his mouth open in disbelief. The car rolled to a stop under one of the solar panel-covered awnings. At least thirty people rushed out of the dorms, hurrying to greet the driver. With the engine still running, he grinned and nodded to everyone that walked over, like he was the Pope or something—minus the pointy hat.

“Who do you think that is?” Abby asked.

“Some kind of rebel. I’m guessing he doesn’t have a cause,” Mom said.

“What?” Abby asked.

“Look at that car,” I said. “That’s a Porsche 550 Spyder.”

Abby was unimpressed. “It looks old.”

“It is,” Mom said. “It’s a ’55.”

“Since when do you care about cars?” I asked.

Mom shrugged. “I don’t. But that’s the kind of car that James Dean died in. And that guy looks like he’s trying awfully hard.”

I tried to see past the crowd to the guy in the driver’s seat. “He even looks like James Dean,” my mom said. “Same dirty blond hair that’s way too long on top. He needs a haircut.”

He opened the door and three different girls were all over him before he could get a foot on the asphalt.

“Looks like a dill hole,” I said.

“With a trust fund,” Abby added.

He must have noticed us watching him and said something, because his crowd of groupies disbanded. He shut the car off and walked over.

I spoke first. “Hey. I’m Tanner.”

He smiled, full of perfect white teeth and oozing with confidence, and ran his hand through his hair. “Oh, I know who you are, mate. I’m Andrew. Andrew Tate. Everyone calls me the Duke.”

Abby shot me a look, her eyes so wide they were threatening to bug out of her head.

“I’ve heard about you too. For some reason, I thought you’d have an accent.”

He laughed. “No. But my mum lives in England, so I’m there quite a bit.” He turned and took in Abby and Sam. “And this is your move-in crew?”

“This is my mom,” I said, “My brother Sam, and Abby, my cousin.”

He shook hands with everyone, as Mom’s cell rang. She dug it out of her purse, and after checking the number, excused herself to take it and walked away.

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Like every other guy at Bannerman, the Duke didn't take his eyes off Abby. "You leaving?" the Duke asked. Abby nodded. "Any way I can convince you to stay?"

"Afraid not," Abby said.

"Buy her a Laffy Taffy," Sam said. "Purple one."

The Duke laughed. "Is that all it takes?"

"Yeah," Sam said, nodding proudly.

Abby was blushing. "I'm not quite that easy."

"Well, I'm fresh out of Laffy Taffy at the moment, but I'm having a party in a couple of weeks. You should come."

She tilted her head. "And will there be Laffy Taffy?"

"Truckloads. Just for you." The Duke winked.

I glared at Abby, but she didn't seem to notice.

"I'll think about it," she said.

The Duke nodded. "Nice meeting you all." He walked over to the sidewalk, then turned back. "See you in a couple of weeks, Abby."

"What's in a couple of weeks?" Mom asked, rejoining us.

Abby stared at his back. "James Dean is having a party."

It didn't escape my notice that my cousin, who didn't even go to the school, had gotten an invitation, while I was completely ignored.

Mom shrugged. "I've got to get back. That was the hospital. I need to get a few hours of sleep so I can cover a six am shift."

Wiping the tears below her bottom lashes, Mom wrapped me in a tight hug. I lifted her tiny body off the ground, because I could. She looked like a little kid, not the take-no-prisoners

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nurse that intimidated most of the doctors at the hospital where she worked. When I set her back down, I promised I'd call and text and check in as often as she wanted. Finally letting me go, she nodded, unable to speak.

I hugged Sam next. "See you soon, buddy. Don't break too many hearts." I held the door to the backseat while he slid in.

Then it was me and Abby, standing on the sidewalk, staring at our shoes.

"Don't hurt yourself, you know, falling off the pyramid or whatever you cheerleaders do," I said.

She rolled her eyes. "I won't."

"Make sure Mom doesn't fall asleep on the way home. She's worked two doubles this week. And don't let Sam—"

"Tanner. I know. It'll be fine."

She didn't say it, but I knew what she was implying. They'd be fine *without me*. I wanted it to be true and didn't want it to be true at the same time. I swallowed the lump in my throat.

"And if you want to come to that party, let me know. You can even bring your Neanderthal boyfriend, if you can get him toilet trained by then."

"Ha ha. We'll see," she said. "It might be fun. I've never been to a nerd party before."

I shook my head.

And then I hugged Abby quickly, patting her back, and she climbed into the front seat. I stood there while they drove away, watching my mom make an illegal U-turn onto El Camino, and waited until her tail lights were gone.

I'll admit it. I was nervous. But it was exciting too. It was the start of something. Something important. Something big. I looked at all the cars in the parking lot, the rows of SUVs

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and Audis and BMWs and the occasional Honda or Toyota. My '96 Ford Bronco stood out like a scab on a supermodel, but I didn't care.

I couldn't quit staring at the Duke's car.

It could barely seat two people, didn't have air conditioning, cruise control, or power anything, and even though it had been fast in its day, there were other cars in the lot that had more torque and horsepower straight from the factory. None of that mattered. That car was something else—some kind of passport into a world that I didn't know existed until that moment.

As I stood there under the darkening sky, the sounds of a hundred conversations and the same five hip-hop songs filtering down through the open dorm windows, I promised myself that someday, I'd have a car like that. I wouldn't be one of those thirty-something lemmings lining up for the newest Lexus or Mercedes so everyone would know that I'd dropped eighty grand on a ride to haul my kid to soccer practice. No. I'd find something unique, something iconic, like he had. Even if it cost twice as much.

As I walked back to the dorm, I didn't care how hard I'd have to work. I just knew that I wanted it.