



Soak

JULES KELLEY

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Cover Photography by Tookapic at Pexels; Cover Design by Jules Kelley.

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Grace has never been a “Spring Breaker” in the sense that a lot of her friends are. No trips to Cancun or even Daytona for questionably supervised underage drinking and terrorizing hotel managers. Her parents would never stand for it. The closest she had was her senior year of high school—last year, actually—when she went to Pensacola Beach with her best friend Ellie and Ellie’s family, and it had rained all week.

But on the scale of Spring Breaks, that one still ranks about ten million times higher than this one. This one, she’d been picked up at the airport by Rob’s wife Rachel and driven home in awkward silence punctuated by snippets of even more awkward conversation and the local Christian music station turned down too low to hear more than the occasional bass line. Her parents’ house, though, had been a jumble of noise and chaos, and she’d walked in just in time to hear Rob yell, “*Dammit, Dad!*”

Rachel had given her an apologetic, sidelong wince, and Grace had held onto her suitcase and the hope that her presence might be enough to defuse the situation as she stepped into the living room. It had worked for all of five minutes, and then her father had gone back to insisting he felt just fine and didn’t need to take “that stuff,” and Rob had gone back to yelling that the medication was *why* he felt fine and he needed to keep taking it if he wanted to keep feeling fine.

Grace had taken her suitcase up to her bedroom and hadn’t come down until her mom called up to ask her if she wanted dinner. And so she’d gone down to dinner with her mother, who was clinging to a glass of white wine with even whiter knuckles, and her father, who was muttering about his son treating him like a child. Grace hadn’t seen him since before the heart attack he’d had late last week that had changed her plans for her first collegiate Spring Break. It had also landed him on a regimen of anticoagulants and ACE inhibitors and a bunch of other things that Rob had told her about on a very frantic phone call that she doesn’t fully remember.

It’s the second day, and she still can’t tell if her dad actually looks pale and fragile or if that’s her imagination and lingering anxiety. She does her best to help him without getting in his way, but she can see right away where he’s been driving Rob crazy. He won’t ask for help when he needs it, and her mother—who will probably go to her grave embarrassed about “making a fuss” and hates conflict more than anything—won’t step in.

When her dad ends up taking an impromptu nap in his recliner that afternoon, Grace finds her mom out behind their house, sitting beside the pool in a tank top and shorts, “getting some sun.”

“Hey Mom, I’m gonna go for a walk,” she says, and Sarah doesn’t even look up from her book.

“Okay, sweetie. Take your phone.”

But walking in their neighborhood means she gets stopped at every other yard by their neighbors asking how her dad is doing and expressing their sympathy and concern, so she cuts through the hedges by the main road and takes the sidewalk toward her old high school to give herself some time alone with her thoughts and feelings. She already knows the choice she’s going to have to make, but what was it her grandmother used to say? “*You don’t need time to make a decision. We make decisions in an instant. What takes time is accepting the decision we already made.*”

Yeah, that. And she’s going to need a lot of time to accept that she’s going to be moving home at the end of this semester. More time than is actually left in the semester, if she’s honest. She likes Colorado—she does—but the phone call she’d gotten from Rob as he followed the ambulance to the emergency room had made her feel helpless and terribly separated from her family. She also knows that there’s no way she can live in the same house as her parents. She’s only been on her own for a semester and a half, but there’s no going back now. Auburn is fifteen or twenty minutes away. If she transfers, she can live on campus and be close enough for emergencies but hopefully not so close she’ll feel smothered.

She’s going to mourn the decision for the rest of the spring, though. She’d only recently started feeling like she had the room to stretch her wings, fully feel herself out, get comfortable with thinking of herself as bisexual without shying away from the label. She hasn’t done a *ton* of dating, but just the ability to express interest in whomever she finds interesting has been wildly freeing. She’s not sure she would have ever made a move on Maya back in September if she had still been living full-time in Alabama. *Maya*. She lives here all the time; how does she deal with it?

Just the thought of Maya is enough to lighten the heaviness on her shoulders. That would be one bright spot in moving back. Maybe they could hook up again and maybe they couldn’t, but it would be nice to have someone to talk to who knows *exactly* where she’s coming from. Even if it’s just talking. She doesn’t have to explain her parents or her brother to Maya, and that’s worth a lot. Maya already knows her family and the unique balancing act of their relationships. If nothing else, Maya could probably help her navigate dating in Alabama with one foot in the closet, maybe recommend a few places to go.

A low rumble works its way through the air, pulling her from her thoughts, and she looks up at the sky. When did it get so cloudy? And so *dark*? Oh jeez. She pauses for a moment, looks around. Where is she? Opelika's not that big of a town, but she is *so* far off track. It's going to take at least a half-hour to get back home, and that's hoofing it. How long has she been walking?

She turns back toward home, fishing out her phone to see if the maps application has any advice for shortcuts, but the screen is dim and the battery indicator is flashing at her. Dammit. She'd forgotten that the wall plug had come loose last night and left her with only half a charge this morning. A droplet lands on the *Low Battery* warning, and she swears softly. There's no time.

She pulls up her contact list and just...stares. Her dad was taking a nap when she left, and he needs his rest. Her mom keeps her phone on the loudest, most obnoxious ringtone she can find—"So I can hear it when it's in the bottom of my purse, honey"—so calling her won't save her dad any sleep. Rob is home with Rachel, so she could call him, but he lives all the way across town from here. She'll be soaked to the bone before he even gets in his car, and anyway, he deserves a break. A second drop, then a third. Crap. She might not have much choice.

Maya.

Well.

There is *that* option.

The rain isn't going to wait for her to accept this decision, so she just hits Dial and holds her breath, not sure if she wants Maya to answer or not.

She does.

"Next time I get caught out in the rain, remind me to do it somewhere there's an overhang of some kind," Grace grumbles as she climbs into the passenger's seat of Maya's Firebird. Her hair is wet enough that it smacks audibly against her shoulders, and her dress makes an uncomfortable squelch as she sits on the towel Maya was smart enough to put down for her.

"I'll make a note of it," Maya chuckles, handing her another towel, which she immediately shoves her face into.

"Thanks for coming to get me," Grace mumbles into the terrycloth. "My phone was almost dead so I'm extremely glad you answered."

Her phone, as a matter of fact, had disconnected in the middle of their phone call, and Grace is just glad she'd been able to tell Maya where she was before it had died. She's probably going to have to put the damn thing in rice, because her dress pocket wasn't enough to protect it from the deluge.

"I was surprised to see your number pop up," Maya admits. "I know we haven't talked much. At all." Grace pulls the towel down far enough that she can see when Maya glances at her before she pulls out into traffic, windshield wipers slapping. "I'm glad it was just that you needed a ride, honestly. I was afraid something might have happened to Rob. Or your dad."

Oh jeez. She's going to need to call her parents. Maybe on Maya's phone.

"I'm sorry I worried you," she says, squeezing her hair with the towel.

"I'm just happy it wasn't worse," Maya assures her. "We'll give your family a call when we get home." She clears her throat and corrects herself. "To my house. We can charge your phone and dry your clothes, too." She waits until they're paused at a red light to look over at Grace, glancing her up and down. Grace shivers, gooseflesh rising on her arms and chest tightening, and Maya reaches up and flips the car's air to heat, punches the button to turn on the cassette player that Grace still found wildly amusing. "I've probably got some clothes you can wear while they're drying."

If they fit, Grace thinks with some amusement. She's at least a couple of inches shorter than Maya but also a couple of inches thicker. "I'm sure it'll be fine. Thank you."

Maya's smile is warmer than the air coming out of the car vents. "Don't mention it, princess."

Her whole family has called her *princess* for as long as she can remember, but hearing it from Maya has always given her a little extra thrill. Especially now. She can just imagine Maya murmuring it into her skin while they—

"How's your dad doing, anyway?"

Mood: killed.

"Stubborn," Grace answers, "as always." She hesitates, unsure if she should unload everything onto poor Maya. "It's a little scary, honestly. At least five times a day I think about how Rob could have been calling me to tell me that Dad had died instead of telling me they were taking him to the hospital. And I guess things could still go downhill, or he could have another one, or..." She trails off, throat tightening, and forces a stiff laugh. "But he's telling anybody who will listen that he's fine and doesn't need to be babied, so that's where we are."

Maya nods. “Dads can be like that,” she agrees. “No wonder Rob sent me a text full of rage emojis three days ago. I told him my garage is open for beer night whenever he wants, but he’s still a newlywed, you know. Spends every spare minute with Rachel.”

“Poor Rachel.” The joke is mostly reflex born out of a sisterly duty to rag on her brother at every opportunity, but she’s seen him with his wife. She doesn’t think they’ve ever had a fight in their entire three-year relationship. “I’m sure he’ll take you up on it soon.” She squeezes her hair into the towel, smiling at a memory. “When he was about twelve or thirteen, Mom used to complain that he’d rather spend time with you than his own family. I think I was six? And he told her that he’d trade me to have you for his sister instead.”

Maya grins brightly. “I remember that. He got grounded for two weekends in a row.”

“He probably meant it at the time too.” Grace leans her head back against the seat and lets out a long breath. “I think my parents kept expecting him to announce that the two of you were dating. Until…” She trails off, not knowing how to put it. There had actually been fights in their house over finding out that Maya was a lesbian, about not wanting her around Grace, about not being sure Rob should still be spending time alone with her, but when Maya had needed a place to sleep, they’d opened the door.

“Until my parents read my diary about my massive crush on Angelina Jolie and decided I was a pervert?” Maya guesses lightly.

“That did kind of change their expectations, yes.”

“To be fair, I did write some pretty explicit stuff in that diary. Learned that lesson the hard way.”

Maya pulls into the driveway of her house, a tiny cinderblock thing that she’s been renting from her boss’s brother-in-law since the week she’d turned eighteen, and punches the garage door opener. When they glide into the garage and the thrum of the rain recedes, Grace breathes a sigh of relief.

“I feel drier already,” she laughs, gathering up the towels as she climbs out of the car. The lightweight fabric of her sundress sticks to her skin everywhere it touches, and she’d be more annoyed by it if Maya wasn’t so obviously eyeing her.

“C’mon, princess,” Maya says, holding open the door into the house. “I’ll get you some dry towels and find you something to wear.”

Grace slides by with a sly grin, and Maya rolls her eyes playfully, but there’s still a spark low in Grace’s stomach.

After Maya trades her wet towels for dry ones along with a pair of soft boxers and a T-shirt, Grace pushes the bathroom door closed, amused when it sticks and won't quite close all the way. She strips out of her wet, clinging dress and grimaces as she wrings it out over the sink, cold water running in rivulets over her fingers. She already feels about a dozen degrees warmer, even though her skin is still wet, and she drops the garment into the sink with a sigh. The soft yellow towels Maya gave her are old and a little worn in places, but they're clean and they smell amazing. Grace tucks her face into one and just breathes in the scent for a moment before she starts patting down the rest of her body, letting them soak up all the clammy moisture from her skin.

Her underwear is another matter. If she puts on the borrowed shorts and shirt over it, it's just going to soak right through, but there's no way she's going to be able to hide the fact she's not wearing a bra. After a brief deliberation, she steps out of her panties and unhooks her bra, squeezing them both out and dropping them in the sink with her dress. Maya's boxers fit all right, soft and stretchy, but the Pat Benatar T-shirt is tight over her chest, and that makes it ride up to show her stomach. She tugs it down, but it creeps back up, and she decides there are worse things than Maya seeing a little of her skin. Or a lot.

She gathers her wet clothes, trying not to soak the dry ones she's wearing, and heads into the kitchen as she pushes her damp hair out of her face.

"Hey, princess," Maya says as she crosses the threshold. "Dryer's in here." She folds open the white accordion doors against the far wall, revealing the appliances. Grace bundles her wet clothes in, and her pulse skips an odd beat when Maya tosses a dryer sheet in with them, the familiar scent wafting up to her nose.

It's the first time she's consciously realized that she knows what Maya smells like—motor oil and Suavitel Heavenly Vanilla—and suddenly the fact that they haven't talked at *all* since Rob's wedding is unbearable.

Maya closes the dryer door and sets it on forty minutes, then turns toward her.

"I texted your brother while you were changing. Do you want some..."

She trails off as Grace steps into her space.

"...coffee or something? Jesus, you're freezing."

Grace puts her hands on either side of Maya's neck and leans in. "I don't really care about coffee," she murmurs, "but I could use some warming up."

Maya rubs her upper arms softly, under the sleeves of the borrowed T-shirt, and Grace steps in closer, until their chests are touching. Maya doesn't step back, just watches her steadily, dark brown eyes even darker than usual.

“I meant more like this,” Grace says, tilting her head up to brush her lips softly across Maya’s, almost asking permission. She doesn’t want to assume; it’s been six months since Rob’s wedding and their firmament-shaking tryst in the Sunday school room before the reception. She has no idea if Maya is on board for this still.

But then Maya’s hands slide around her back, pulling her in, warm fingertips against the strip of cool, damp skin that the shirt doesn’t cover, and Grace closes her eyes and lets herself get lost in the pressure of their mouths together, the heat of their tongues.

After the past week or so, it feels good to not think, to just focus on the way Maya’s touch is spider-soft on her spine, up under the shirt, or the way her other hand is curling into Grace’s wet hair now, pulling just a little, angling her head to change the depth of the kiss.

“Gracie,” Maya rasps against her mouth, a little breathless. “Hang on a minute—”

There’s a knock at the front door, and Grace jumps back, flushed hot, embarrassed and irritable and anxious. *Who’s there?* Is it Rob? Had he seen anything through the windows...?

Maya lets go of her and heads to answer the door, and Grace fidgets, wishing suddenly that she didn’t have bare feet, that she wasn’t wearing shorts and a tight shirt with no underwear, that she could just... go home... She edges toward the door, listening.

“—told you I was going to bring her home—”

“—was already closer to here than home. Is she all right?” Then, louder: “Gracie?”

Grace pulls the edge of the T-shirt down hard at the sound of her brother’s voice, hiding her skin like Maya’s fingerprints might be as visible as they feel, warm and glowing against the cold.

“Rob, I’m here. I’m fine.” She steps out of the kitchen, still tugging the shirt down, and Rob rushes forward to embrace her. She pats his back awkwardly, but he doesn’t seem to notice, pulling away to look at her.

“What happened to your clothes?”

“I got caught in the rain,” she says.

“They’re in the dryer. I was going to bring her home after they’re done,” Maya says from near the door, and Grace only has a moment to see that she’s leaning against the wall with her arms crossed, tension in the set of her shoulders and jaw.

“Why didn’t you call me? I could have taken you home.” Rob looks her up and down, and she steps back, folding her arms across her stomach. She doesn’t like the disapproval she can read in the flattening of his lips when he sees her bare midriff. It reminds her of her sixteenth birthday, with the bikini and the way her father had frowned when she’d pulled the two-piece out of the Dillard’s bag. She hated it then, and she hates it now.

“It’s fine, Rob,” she says, maybe a bit sharper than she meant, and she sees it land, sees the way he falters, frowns. Despite herself, she gentles her tone. “You had other things to think about. You don’t have to do everything yourself, you know.”

The way he falters, the sudden redness in his eyes and thinness of his lips, tells her she’s hit a button she didn’t even know was there. But of course; she should have seen it. Rob, who’s always taken the role of oldest child very seriously, who’s always tried to be the one who stands up, steps in, takes over. He’s been taking care of things the whole time she’s been in Colorado, torn between their parents and his new wife.

“When’s the last time you even saw Rachel this week?” she asks gently. “Go on and go home. *Your* home. Maya will take me to Mom and Dad’s when my clothes are dry, and I’ll be on parent duty tonight.” Before he can protest, she continues, “You have literally everything written down in that notebook Dad refuses to touch, so I’m sure I can make it work.” She smiles. “And if I have any trouble, I promise I’ll call you. Okay?”

He chews on his bottom lip, and for just a second, she’s sure he’s going to be bullheaded about it, but then he closes the distance between them and hugs her, planting a kiss on the top of her head.

“Okay,” he says as he pulls back with a soft, wry smile. “Fine, I guess. A big brother can’t even pull rank anymore.”

The teasing is halfhearted, but it feels good and normal, and she shakes her head. “Nope. Rank not recognized.”

He turns to leave and she sees him pause when he makes eye contact with Maya, who’s still leaning against the wall, chewing on a thumbnail, posture defensive. He winces, and Grace quietly retreats into the kitchen to give them a moment, though she lingers by the door to eavesdrop.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you,” Rob says quietly. “You didn’t deserve that.”

“You’re stressed,” Maya answers, a brush-off, but she still sounds unhappy.

“It’s no excuse. Thanks for... for looking out for Gracie.”

“Of course.” Maya’s voice is so soft Grace has to hold her breath to hear her. “She’s important to me too, you know.”

Whatever she says next is lost in the rush of blood in Grace’s ears, and Grace feels her knees go a little wobbly. Is that... Was that... Does she want it to be...?

Maya’s laughing, and Grace shakes herself out of that girlish daze, looking around the corner in time to see her shove Rob affectionately. “You’re not the only Nelson I care about, you dick.”

“Lies,” Rob says, and Grace is glad to hear that his voice sounds lighter already.

After Maya closes the door behind him, Grace leans against the door frame, watching her, unsure of what to say or how to say it. Maya hesitates too, the rattle of the dryer filling the space between them until she finally says, “You, uh, wanna dry your hair? I might have a hair dryer out in the garage. I can check.”

Grace laughs. “In the garage? Not in the bathroom?”

Maya shrugs with a crooked smile that does all kinds of things to Grace’s insides. “I mean, I need it more often for drying something on the workbench.” She ruffles her short hair to show the even shorter buzz cut underneath the floppy top layer. “I don’t really need it for my hair. Yours is...” She trails off as she reaches out to finger the dripping ends of Grace’s hair, and Grace wonders if she’s imagining how hard Maya swallows.

“It’s fine,” Grace says softly. “It’ll probably be mostly dry by the time my clothes are done.” She can’t stand the awkwardness between them, and she isn’t bold enough to initiate a second kiss, not when her brother was *just* there, so she gestures to the couch. “Um—I can just sit and watch TV or something. You don’t have to hang out with me, if you’re busy.”

Maya shrugs. “Can’t really do anything I wanted to do while it’s raining anyway,” she says, and Grace thinks of the mess that she saw scattered in the garage when they pulled in. She’d obviously been working on the car before she’d come to get Grace, and she probably can’t now that the Firebird’s all wet.

“Sorry,” Grace says with a little wince, and Maya picks up the remote for the TV, turning it on and turning the volume down immediately when static blares.

“For what?” Maya laughs. “You can make it rain and didn’t tell me?”

Grace chuckles and edges toward the couch, consciously letting go of the hem of the shirt so she’ll stop tugging it down. “For disrupting your afternoon.”

“Not all disruptions are bad, princess,” Maya says gently, then gestures to the TV. “What do you want to watch? I’ve got, uh, a couple *Fast and Furious*, the first two *Harry Potter* movies but I think one of them’s scratched...”

“Whatever,” Grace says easily, folding her legs under herself as she sinks onto the couch cushions. “I’m not picky.”

Maya frowns as she presses buttons on the remote and then on the DVD player itself. Nothing happens. “Well...good, cause I don’t think this disc is coming out of the player, but I don’t remember what it is.”

Grace, who has worked her way through the full seasons of three entire television shows on Netflix just since January, is wholly endeared that Maya a) only has a DVD player, and b) apparently never uses it.

The movie turns out to be *Die Hard*, which Grace has only seen in bits and pieces. “Rob used to watch this all the time,” she muses, and Maya laughs.

“This might be his disc, honestly.”

Grace’s attention starts wandering about five minutes in, and she remembers why she never hung around and watched it with Rob. It provides fine background noise for picking through the thoughts that had been interrupted by the rain, though, and she eventually circles back around to the questions of identity and honesty and familial tension.

“Can I ask you a... a personal question?” Grace asks quietly, eyes fixed on the TV screen, though she’s not actually paying attention.

“Yeah, of course.” Maya shifts on the couch, looking over at her, waiting. Grace doesn’t look back. Not yet.

“So your parents.” She clears her throat; this is delicate. Maya stayed with the Nelsons for almost a week back when she and Rob were in high school because her parents had found out she was gay and kicked her out. Grace still doesn’t know how much Maya has actually reconciled with them. “Did they ever...” She frowns. “How does... How do you...”

“Mm.” Maya reaches for the TV remote and turns the volume down a little. Grace kind of wishes she hadn’t, so she could still hide behind the sound of explosions and Bruce Willis yelling. “How do we get along?” she fills in, and Grace nods. Maya sighs. “I don’t lie to them. I just don’t... tell them.” She shrugs. “I’m sure they know, but they choose to ignore it. We talk. We just don’t talk about, you know, that.”

Grace chews her lip, biting at the dry skin there, arms folded tight across her stomach. “How do you... I mean, when you date somebody. How does that go?” She couldn’t imagine not telling her parents if she got into a serious relationship, but she also couldn’t imagine them accepting it with open arms if that relationship was with a woman.

“So far, I haven’t gotten that serious with anybody,” Maya admits. “Why, are you seeing someone? Thinking about telling your family?”

Grace flashes back to that kiss in the kitchen, to the scorching interlude at Rob’s wedding, and blushes. “No, it’s just...” She wrinkles her nose. “Rob needs help handling Dad. It’s not fair to ask him to do it all himself, and Mom isn’t exactly well-equipped for it, either.” Wow, is that Alan

Rickman? So young in this movie. “So I’m — I haven’t told them yet, but I’m going to try to transfer to Auburn for next semester.”

“Oh?” Maya goes very, very still on the other end of the couch, and when Grace glances at her, she’s looking at the television, but she doesn’t seem to be *watching*.

“And they don’t know I’m bi.” She says it all in a rush—the first time she’s said it out loud to someone who *knows* her. Maybe it doesn’t count, because Maya already knows that she likes girls. And wow, she really, *really* knows. But it still feels like a risk, heady and breathless.

“Ah.” Maya’s voice is warm, soft, and Grace sees the moment she relaxes.

“And I guess...” Now that she’s started, Grace can’t hold it in. “I hadn’t really planned on telling them any time soon. I wanted some time to get comfortable with myself first. And I’m afraid I won’t be able to do that if I live close by. I’m afraid that if I lie to them, they’ll find out and be hurt, and I guess I owe it to them to be honest, but I’m also worried about stressing my dad out right now, you know?”

She stumbles to a stop when Maya holds up a hand.

“First, you don’t owe anyone that information,” Maya says gently. “If you get to a point that you want to share it for *your* sake, then that’s something you can explore then. But don’t feel pressured into it because you think you *should*. Safety issues aside, nobody tells their parents everything about who they date. Not even straight people.”

Grace turns that thought over in her mind a few times, examining the perspective. “But— isn’t it... I mean, being in the closet is...”

“It’s survival for some people.” Maya’s voice is so soft Grace wouldn’t be able to hear her if they were sitting farther apart. “But even if it’s not, some people are just more private. And ‘coming out’ is not as simple as the campaigns make it sound sometimes. There are a lot of different degrees of being out. For some people, being loudly, visibly queer all the time is exactly what they need, and it would be worse for them if they weren’t. For some people, it’s not a big deal, or they’d rather not.”

Grace chews on her lip for a while longer, attention brought back to the movie at a loud sound, and Maya keeps going.

“Like I said, I didn’t tell my parents I’d stopped being a lesbian. We just don’t talk about it. In a way, it’s a form of being closeted, I guess. But they get to think what they want about me, and I get to talk to my parents occasionally without it turning into a screaming match. Everybody wins.” Maya’s laugh is a little shaky, and Grace leans closer on the couch, automatically drawn to comfort her.

“Here’s my take on it, princess,” Maya says finally. “The person who’s going to have to bear most of the consequences of coming out is the one who gets to decide when, how, how much, and to whom. And it’s not a betrayal of yourself or your identity as long as you’re doing what you want.”

That... That feels right. It gives her a little breathing room. It's not going *backwards*. It's just...going. She can let it be, maybe test the waters later. It gives her time to decide what she wants. *Now that's a novel idea.*

She nods slowly, offering Maya a grateful smile. “Yeah,” she says quietly. “Okay.”

“There you go. And when Auburn doesn’t feel far enough away, you can take a weekend trip to Atlanta.” Maya shifts to face her, opening up her posture, and Grace scoots a little closer, enough to be in her space without actually leaning against her. Grace’s breathing sounds unbearably loud in her own ears, even over the movie, and she holds it for a second, just trying to feel less self-conscious. Maya dials in immediately, gaze flicking down to Grace’s mouth, and Grace thinks—just for a second—that being closer to home is starting to look appealing. Her tongue darts out over her lower lip, eager and nervous...and then the buzzer of the dryer shocks through her, her heart pounding for an entirely different reason.

Maya laughs softly and pats Grace on the shoulder. “Sounds like your clothes are done. Ready to go home?”

“Do I have to?” Grace complains lightly, then shakes her head when Maya hesitates. “I’m kidding. I do need to. Dad’s got to take his medicine in an hour or so, and I don’t trust him to do it without supervision yet.”

“All right. But just so you know, princess, the invitation to come over whenever extends to you, too.”

Grace sits up sharply with an exaggerated gasp. “Am I finally not the annoying little sister anymore?” she says, and Maya rolls her eyes.

“After the wedding, I’m really worried that you have to ask that,” she mutters, standing up and heading for the kitchen. Grace scrambles off the couch and bounces after her.

“So is this like, just a friend thing, or an open booty call, or...?”

“Change your clothes, Gracie,” Maya says with amusement as she opens the dryer. She holds Grace’s clothes out, and Grace smirks just before she grabs the edge of the borrowed Pat Benatar shirt and pulls it over her head, her nipples instantly pebbling in the cool of Maya’s kitchen.

At Maya’s strangled noise, she says, “What?” and wiggles the shorts down her legs, dropping both onto the top of the washing machine.

“You’re a menace,” Maya says, but she’s still just standing there holding the bundle of warm, dry clothes, and she’s not looking away.

“I’m a naked menace,” Grace points out, teasing.

Maya steps closer, looming over her, and Grace shivers. “And you also told me you have to be home within an hour,” she says, her voice low and delicious. “Which means you need to put your clothes on, because if I touch you now, we won’t be done in an hour.”

“Holy shit,” Grace breathes. If she was wearing panties, they’d be wet already.

Maya chuckles, rich and silky like dark chocolate, and reaches up to brush the pad of her thumb over one of Grace’s nipples. Grace tries to lean into the touch, but Maya pinches her lightly and lets go. “Tell you what. You get everything figured out with your transfer and then give me a call. Deal, princess?”

“Deal,” Grace agrees breathlessly as Maya dumps her clothes into her arms and leaves the kitchen. All right. So maybe moving back home has a bright side, especially if Maya means it that they might not just be a one-time thing. Her hands are trembling as she steps into her underwear, hooks her bra, and pulls her warm, dry dress down over her flushed skin.

They don’t talk much as Maya drives her home, but Grace is fidgety and high strung, and Maya’s amused side glances aren’t helping. Right before they turn down her parents’ street, Grace decides nothing ventured, nothing gained, and tries very hard to keep her voice casual as she says, “So can I text you? Like. Before I move back.”

“I would assume so. You’ve texted me before.”

Smartass. Grace rolls her eyes. “Okay, but can I *text* you?”

Maya flexes her hand on the steering wheel. “Do you mean can you sext me?”

Grace cringes. “Ugh, don’t say ‘sext.’ But yes.”

For a while, all she can hear is the downpour on the Firebird’s roof, and finally Maya turns into the driveway and puts the car in park, giving Grace a long, steady look. “I… am not going to solicit explicit texts from you,” she says carefully, “but if you want to send them, I promise I will be responsible with them.”

Oh. “It never occurred to me that you wouldn’t,” Grace says, and it’s a confession as much as it is an expression of confidence. “...But you make a good point. I’ll think about it.”

Maya’s smile is almost proud, and she chucks Grace fondly under the chin with the side of her knuckle. “And you can also text me about other things,” she says. “If you need to vent, ask questions, need a recommendation for rainbow-friendly weekend hangs, whatever.”

Maya unfastens her seatbelt, pulling her leather jacket off, and shakes it out, holding it out to Grace. “All right. Now, put this over your head and run for the door.”

Grace shakes her head. “It’s lightened up enough. I’ll be fine.” She grins. “I got wetter standing in your kitchen than I’m going to get running up this driveway.”

Maya coughs a laugh. “Christ, Gracie.”

“No point in you getting drenched too,” Grace says innocently, handing the jacket back. She wishes she could kiss Maya goodbye, but she knows better. Not in front of her parents’ house, not even with a curtain of rain hanging between them. So she just braces herself for the soak and launches herself into the rain.

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About the Author

There are a lot of things Jules Kelley is a fan of: Surprises. Tall boots. A sublime plate of nachos. A well-heeled turn of phrase. Genuine connections between people and the kind of love that blooms where you least expect it. She's never been afraid of questions, and "What if?" is her favorite one to explore.

She got a degree in psychology because she loves figuring out what makes people tick, and she can probably tell you the Meyers-Briggs type and zodiac sun sign for any character she has ever written. The details and settings may vary, but she always loves weird characters most of all—misfits, monsters, and messy humans just trying their best—and writes to share them with the world so that you can love them too.

Find more of Jules's work and keep up to date on new projects at her website, <http://julesrobinkelley.com>, and thank you for reading.