

## 540 °

If Braley could've gotten out of work and come snowboarding with my family and me like he was supposed to, I might never have ended up in a hot tub with Delia.

Blue Mountain's trails aren't crazy kamikaze or anything, but their snowboard park is wicked nice. When we get to the condo, my parents unpack their suitcases and fill cupboards. Mikey lines up stuffed animals on his bed. But our car has barely cooled off before I bee-line it for the park.

I warm up, get a little air. Braley would love this. "Check this out, Shann," he'd say and land a perfect backflip off the highest jump. With mint conditions, I get overconfident. I nail a 360 nose grab. Braley's been doing 540s for the two years since I've dated him, but I can't try them when he's around. Too self-conscious, maybe. Now's a different story. I'm alone and psyched to be free—free from midterm fret and college admissions essays—540 here I come.

Up the pipe, and down. Up the pipe and down faster. The board hits the air and... I lose track of which body part is where. Smackhipshouldercheekblack.

"You okay?" This girl in a red patrol jacket stands over me. I nod, blinking away fuzzy vision.

I'm lying at the bottom of the half pipe. My shoulder hurts like hell, but I'm not broken. I push myself up with my good side. "No big deal," I say. The sun's white glare sears through my temple.

The girl hops out of her snowboard and sits cross-legged, facing me.

*Please don't make me go in one of those ski patrol stretchers, I think.*

She's smaller than me and darker, with straight black hair that juts just past her red patrol hat. There's a confetti-sized mole on her upper cheekbone. Plump lips break into a smile. A craving struggles to the forefront, but I push it down.

Then she lifts her goggles.

She belongs on a runway, not on a half-pipe.

I wish I could untangle the nervous knot in my gut. "Hi." A brilliant conversationalist am I.

"That was a good spill," she says. "I'm Delia."

"I'm good." I grab my shoulder.

She doesn't take her eyes off me. "Your name?"

I smack my head, which is stupid. Tunnel vision threatens from the headache.

"Shannon."

"You come here often?"

"A few times a winter. My parents own a condo." I immediately wish I hadn't said that. Now she'll think I'm a rich kid. Except I'm not rich. Her big eyes, eyes whose color matches the mole on her cheekbone, beckon. I try to think of places that she might know—a club or a pool hall—but the part of my brain that controls my tongue has gone defunct. My mouth spurts, "Are you from around here?" That's the best I could come up with?

“Close—Lincoln,” Delia says. She pulls a mitten off and turns my face to get a better look at my wound. “Moved here from Montana last summer.”

Her fingers warm my skin. My voice raises three octaves too high. “We’ll be here until Tuesday.” Lust threatens to monopolize me, and I’m irritated at it. Shouldn’t this feeling be for Braley?

“Tuesday. Good.” She rises, smiling.

As much as I’d like to stare at this beauty in front of me, all I can think to do is get to my couch. I need ice and aspirin. “Well, my parents are waiting for me.” I sound like a total dork. Surely, she sees through this lie.

“I’d check that cheek if I were you.” She winks at me as she straps back into her snowboard. “You go first.”

Logically, she wants me to go first to see how banged up I am. I imagine, though, that she wants me to go first so she can check out my butt as I bend into the slope’s turn. As I descend the slope, I bend down deeper in case she’s looking.

The condo clock says 10:30 a.m. My parents and Mikey will be out for another two hours before we’re supposed to meet for lunch. I lay sideways on the couch so I can ice my cheek and read a book simultaneously. The headache wanes. I read half a sentence of *Wuthering Heights* before Delia eclipses the words. I imagine her dark hair and eyes in a more exotic place—in my mind she’s in a belly dancer’s costume, ankles jingling and fingers busy with those tiny cymbal things. *It’s a ski patroller, I think. Get over it, Shannon.*

The truth is, she's the second girl that's disrupted the mostly serene balance of my insides. The other girl who had anything resembling this effect on me was on my freshman soccer team. It was kind of like obsession. Not freaky obsession. I mean, call it a crush. But that crush ate at me; I hated it. I locked myself in my room for one terrible week and tried to squelch the feeling. And then the girl moved away.

Now that the feeling is back, it's harder to resist. I mean, I'm more open-minded now that I'm four years older. And so are people at school. At Shawna's house last week, Desmond offered her and me twenty bucks to tongue. I might have done it, but Braley told Desmond to shut up and punched him in the arm.

I attempt to return to *Wuthering Heights*. I have a test on it the day I get back from winter break. Even if I'm accepted into college, they still require final grades. I've pretty much packed my bags for The University of Vermont, so I'd better not slack now. I wonder if Braley would answer his phone if I call him at school. He'd love to hear about the snow crash. I'll do that damn 540 someday.

My parents don't bug much when they see my battered cheek. "It could be worse." My mom brags (again) about how she broke each wrist and busted her knee in gymnastics back in the day. Her trophies from thirty years ago still line a shelf in our living room.

"You should at least wear a helmet." Dad gives me a fresh pack of ice. "Come on the easy trails with us after lunch?" he asks. I shrug.

After lunch, I put extra care into my hair. I let it fall in a ponytail instead of squishing it all underneath my hat like it had been in the morning. You never know who you're going to meet.

On our way to the chair lift from our condo, we pass a faux ivory fountain. In the fountain's center, a Venus statue poses with a lotus flower that spurts out water when it's warm enough. Mikey is telling me about his new video game when a spunky red figure prances down the hill. I fight away the image of her belly dancing in snowboard boots.

“Delia!” Again, the pillar of conversation.

“How's that cheek?”

“Better,” I say. My parents step out of the condo and head toward the slopes. Mikey joins them. “I'll catch up,” I holler to them. I turn back to those dark eyes. “Thanks for making sure I was okay before.”

“That's my job.” She laughs. “But really, that would've been sick if you landed it. Not many chicks—hell, not many guys here can do 540s. You should give me a lesson.” She raises her eyebrows at me.

“A lesson?”

“Or we could just ride. I'm done with work at 4:00. If you're over by the half pipe then, we could do a few runs before dark.”

“Sure!” I'm glad the cold's gotten to me a little already; maybe it hides the blush I know is rising.

“I'll show you some rad trails after the pipe, too.” Her gloved hand touches my arm.

Delia and I meet up around four and, though I'm nervous as hell at first, soon we're riding like we're the only two on the mountain. Delia does this board grab thing off the rail. I nail 180s all over the place. 360s, too. But every time I hit a jump, an anchor hits the ground and I can't even try that 540.

Then we go to the summit and Delia leads, carving through narrow forest trails.

I barely miss a tree with my board's back edge and I laugh. "This is awesome!"

"I thought you might love it!" she yells behind her. The craving for her breaks out of whatever steel bars I try to cage it in. It whirls through the wind and snow and tree limbs with me. Delia whips me a quick smile and turns forward again.

I reel in the feeling as we ride down to the condos. We're both out of breath, me because of what's in my head, too. We make a plan to hang out later, exchange numbers. I head to my condo door wanting to let that feeling be free for good. But I bottle it up before turning the doorknob.

I'm late for dinner and my parents are peeved. I mean, it is a family vacation and my father doesn't exactly make it home for dinner often. But my sugar face gleams and my good girl voice sings until they let me meet up with Delia that night.

"Be back by midnight," Dad says. "Or else." His refrain, *or else*. I just got off a grounding for missing curfew last month.

"Behave," Mom says, as she unloads the dishwasher.

“Bye.” Mikey looks up from his wooden block structure. He’s an architect at ten.

As I walk out the door, Mom says, “Shannon, Braley called the condo phone earlier.” I’d left my cell in the condo while I was boarding. I didn’t want to risk losing or cracking it. When I got home, I saw he called, but I couldn’t get my fingers to dial his number.

A twinge of guilt stings me.

“I’ll call him later,” I say.

A girl Delia works with lives in a condo close to mine. Her parents must be away. Delia and I walk through the back door and the music floods over us. The kitchen is identical to my parents’—except the identical floor tile is caked with mud and spilled beer. In the living room, framed photo collages hang where my mother’s yard sale paintings should be and I feel like I’m in an alternate universe. Delia reaches behind her and I hesitate enough for her to turn her head. She doesn’t grab my hand; she waits for me to offer mine.

I drink a couple beers. Delia hardly leaves my side. We talk about the Winter X Games and laugh when a guy trips over a dog toy. We find a telescope and try to focus it through a picture window.

“Have you ever been in a hot tub in winter?” Delia gives up on the telescope and replaces the lens cap. She swallows the last of her beer and places it on the coffee table. “There’s one out there.”

“Not in January!”

Delia nods. “You want to go in?”

“In the hot tub?”

“Where’s your sense of adventure? Used it all up in the woods today?” She elbows me, leans into me softly. “Hmm, Shannon?”

My name sounds really good coming out of her mouth.

“Do *you* want to go in?” I elbow her gently back. “I don’t have any other clothes, though.”

“Me neither.” She smiles.

If this was a guy, Braley would tweak. Is this any different? But my eyes meet hers and the guilt falls to oblivion.

The blaring music muffles as I close the sliding glass door behind us. The night air freezes my nostrils. I look up at the stars as Delia takes the cover off, turns on the jets. I wonder how she knows how to get the hot tub going. How many times has she done this before?

She doesn’t say, “hop in,” or, “I won’t peek.” She just stands beside the hot tub and pulls her clothes over her head. I see her back muscles in the moonlight. She glances over her shoulder. “You coming?” The curve of her breast paralyzes me while she unzips her pants.

I pull my sweater up. I ease my pants off while Delia dips under the water. She looks straight into my face and smiles as I climb in.

I find a jet to sit in front of.

Delia slides next to me. “Your face looks better.” She reaches for my cheek. “Today was fun.”

Something crashes inside the condo—a table maybe or a person. I look over but the blinds are down in the windows and in the sliding glass door. Her fingers linger on my cheek. “It’s not every day I meet girls who are chill *and* decent at snowboarding.”

Her hand lowers from my cheek into the hot tub. She rests it on my thigh, down by the knee at first, then higher. I could push her away, but I don’t want to. I look into the water, but I can’t see her hand or my leg through the bubbles. She leans toward me. And I know what’s going to happen next.

The kiss is slow at first. Her full lips press my thin ones over and over. She adjusts her body in the hot tub seat to face me, almost kneeling on one leg, a hand on the side of the tub for stability. I sit up straighter, my shoulders just above the water, and fill my palm with her breast. I find her tongue with mine and kiss her harder, hoping she will do something with the hand that’s on my thigh. Delia slides her hand up, and I breathe audibly. She kisses me, too. I never knew it could be this perfect.

I lean my head back, indulging. Her finger follows the path to my insides, retreats and enters again, faster. And then faster.

She sighs. And moans. And I sigh, too.

And sound comes out of me and my hips lift toward her hand, leaving the hot tub seat altogether. And it’s like my body is thrown into hers, into the hot tub, into the universe.

She giggles, and shushes my lips with her finger. She rests her head on my shoulder.

I lean toward her lips again when the door clangs open and a posse spills onto the deck. I jump, and ecstasy slips away. Some people wave, but they don't really look at us as they light cigarettes.

Now that I'm back on earth, I realize I'm late for curfew. "I should get back."

"You could sleep here with me." She does not keep her hands to herself.

"I can't."

We wait until the smokers go inside, and we climb out of the hot tub.

Delia walks me to my condo. On her tip-toes, she kisses me once, twice, more.

"Tomorrow?" she says.

"What time?"

"Half pipe at eleven."

It's not even fair how I want to kiss her again. I am still tingly, floating outside myself.

I open the door. My parents are waiting on the couch. Reality reigns.

"You're late." Dad stands. He pulls at his moustache. It needs a trim. "We told you what would happen if you were late again."

I look at my cell phone. They called twice. Oops. "It's only 12:45," I try.

"It's irresponsible, Shannon. Forget about leaving this condo tomorrow." Dad says.

"Dad!"

Dad narrows his hazel eyes. “I don’t know what kind of friends you’ve met, but you can just kiss them goodbye.”

If he only knew.

Mom is teary. I suppose I ruined her vacation, the first without Aunt Dolly, but I don’t care. My sublimity has been deflated too soon. I stomp to my room and slam the bedroom door. I don’t care if Mikey wakes up.

I don’t get up the next morning when I hear them talking or even when I smell bacon. They are gone by 9:30 a.m. Knowing Dad, he’s rigged some trap to catch me trying to sneak out. I attempt to read *Wuthering Heights* in bed, but I can’t concentrate. The condo phone rings around 11:30 and I answer it.

Braley.

“Hi.” I can’t mask my wobbly voice.

“I didn’t know if you’d answer or not.”

“I didn’t feel like riding today,” I lie. I reach for my cell on the floor next to my bed.

Dead.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lie. Again.

“Shan, I haven’t even talked to you since you’ve been up there. You hardly answer my texts. How’s it going?”

“Some dude did a 900 off a new jump. I almost killed myself trying a 540.”

“Baby, be careful.”

When he says, “Baby” part of me wants to puke. The other part feels guilty.

“I will,” I say, false sincerity.

“You sound weird.”

Silence.

“Shan, what’s up?” He half jokes, “You been messing around with that guy that did the 900?”

“I haven’t been hanging out with any boys.” Fact.

“Good. You’d tell me if you were?”

“Yep.”

There’s a knock at the condo door. My heart and stomach trade places.

“Hey, Braley. I gotta go.”

“Why?”

“My parents are waiting for me to meet them. Yadadayada.” Not fact.

“I love you, Baby,” he says.

“Loveyoubye,” I say in a breath.

Delia stands at the door with pursed lips and an eyebrow raised. I pull her in the house and hug her. “My parents are assholes. And they took my phone charger.”

I lead her to the couch and kiss her like the world is ending, our hands delicately and not so delicately exploring mountains and valleys.

In between sex, we talk about our families, friends, school, life. Delia wants to work at Blacktail Mountain ski resort in Montana after she graduates in the spring and apprentice in her cousin’s tattoo parlor while she’s in art school. Her dad hasn’t paid child support in seven years, and her mom answers phone at an insurance company, so she’s pretty sure she will get financial aid. All of the sudden UVM doesn’t seem so great. I bet they have environmental studies programs all over Montana.

Delia’s cell phone dings and I look at the condo clock. She looks at her phone. “When you didn’t show up, I said I’d work this afternoon. I should go.”

I walk her to the door and we Armageddon kiss again.

That’s when Mikey bursts in.

“Who’re you?” he asks.

“I’m Delia,” she says to my little brother.

“I’m Michael.”

“Mikey,” I find my voice, ”find that yellow truck I love.”

“But—“

“Please!” I say, and he runs to his room. I lock into her ebony eyes. “When can we see each other again?” I don’t care that I sound desperate.

“Venus fountain tomorrow at two-ish?”

“Two,” I repeat. My parents are just about to the door.

She blows me a kiss and runs in the other direction, away from my parents.

“Who was that?” Mom asks.

Dad slams the door. He flipped last time I ignored his grounding. He needs valium.

Mikey comes back from his bedroom with the yellow truck. “They were kissing.”

Fire hits my cheeks. My parents look at each other.

“*Kissing?*” Dad fumes, and I can’t tell if it’s because someone was here when I was supposed to be in trouble, or if it’s because it was a girl.

Mom points toward the kitchen. “Mikey, set the table for lunch.”

Mikey stands rooted.

“Go!” she yells.

Dad throws his hands up and storms into the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” Mom’s waiting for an explanation. Her voice is mild, though, attempting to quiet the maelstrom that is my father.

I can't speak but I can tell my eyes are guilty. And they're about to spew oceans.

Dad flies back into the living room. "What was that girl doing in this house?"

I want to tell him that the onslaught of questions is precisely what I've been trying to figure out for the last 24 hours, but I can only scream, "I don't know, okay?"

"Oh, Shan," Mom says, her voice tired. She plops down on the couch. "What did Mikey mean, you were kissing?"

"Mom..."

My mother looks small now, sitting on the couch. She stares at her toes and I stand there, staring down at the top of her head. Time to dye her roots again. Silverware clacks in the other room as Mikey sets the table. Finally, she looks up.

"Is this an experimentation thing?"

I could deny it, but I don't want to.

Dad huffs, standing in the doorway.

"You have a boyfriend." My mother stands up.

"Wow, Mom. Thanks for stating the obvious."

"Shannon! Do not speak to your mother like that!" Dad lunges forward and pushes me down on the couch, next to Mom.

"George!" I hear Mom say, as I scramble up from the couch. I run past him, up the stairs and into my room. With my ear buds in, I listen to music and cry—for about ten hours straight.

First for not knowing what it means that I love being with Delia, then for not knowing if I still love Braley. I cry because I cheated on him, because I don't care, because I'd do it again if Delia were next to me now. I cry because Delia is so wild that she probably doesn't care about me; as soon as I leave she'll rope in the next curious girl. I cry because I can't believe I think that about her and because I don't really think that about her. I cry because I disappointed my parents for refusing to come down for dinner, because I can't believe Dad pushed me, because I'm a terrible big sister, because I haven't finished *Wuthering Heights*, because my parents took my charger, because I don't know where to find Delia even if I wanted to. I cry because I'm scared what school will be like if I come back all gung-ho on girls, and I cry because I'm mad at myself for crying. Sometime, when the sky outside my window has a hint of pink, I fall asleep.

I walk down stairs for breakfast, ready to begin my vow of silence.

Dad says, "We'll ski a half day and leave after lunch."

"Dad!" So much for the intended silent treatment. "We're supposed to stay until Tuesday! How am I supposed to get any better?"

"Better at what, Shannon?" He drips sarcasm.

Mikey's head ping pongs while Dad says he has lots of work to do anyway and I say he always has lots of work to do. He tells me I've had enough time here, gotten into enough trouble, stirred the pot enough and I tell him freedom on the mountain is better than being locked in his boring old house in his boring old town, and it's not really *my* reputation he's worried about.

"Enough!" Mom's yelling, too, now.

“Yeah, cool it!” Mikey adds.

Mom tries to convince me to ride some morning trails with them. I decline. They refuse to give me my charger, so I have to find Delia on my own.

I ride. Feel the freezing wind. Taste snow as it hits my face. Delia doesn't know I'm leaving in a couple hours.

I see her once as I ride the chair lift to the summit. She's on a beginner slope, giving young kids snowboard lessons. When I reach the bottom of the mountain, she isn't there anymore.

I hit the park one last time. My craving for Delia, my fear of bringing it home with me, the guilt and confusion for Braley, the fury at my father—it fuels me. I surge forward and a mammoth jump dares me. I hit the air and my board spins as fast as my mind has been. A 540 clean as the X Games. Not a soul around to see it.

I go to the condo and take a shower, miserable and elated. Helplessness and arrogance battle inside me. I spend extra time applying eye shadow. I will see Delia.

Mom, Dad, and Mikey come back around noon with pizza. When it gets to be 1:45 p.m. and Dad's still showering, I think I'll definitely get to see Delia. Two o'clock, she said. Waiting is torture. “I'm going for a walk,” I announce. I walk to the fountain with no hat or mittens. Where is she? After a half hour, I walk back to the condo for a hat.

“Pack the car.” Dad hands me a bag packed with snacks for the drive. He starts the car.

“Mom,” I say. She's rearranging the trunk. “I'm supposed to meet Delia.”

“Shan, we’re ready to go now.”

“I’m not.” I run the fifty or so yards to the Venus fountain and search the horizon for Delia. The wind hits my face, but that’s not where the tears come from.

I don’t hear Mikey until he’s right behind me. “Dad says you better come now.”

My brother is only ten, but he’s got his own set of worries; he doesn’t need to worry about his big sister, too. I nod. With my forearm, I wipe tears away.

Thank God Dad isn’t talking to me. Thank God Mikey’s searching highway signs for the letters of the alphabet. Mom stares out the window and sings to the country station on the radio.

Me, I rehearse the confession I owe Braley.