What Kind of Girl

the girls

PART ONE

Monday, April 10

one

THE POPULAR GIRL

It's hard not to want to defend him. He's one of my best friends. I've known him since we were little kids. The whole school knows how sweet he is. It's hard to believe he would ever do what he's accused of doing. And if he did, maybe he didn't mean it. Maybe it was an accident.

Or maybe it was justified, somehow.

Okay, okay, I know—no girl *deserves* to get hit by her boyfriend, no matter the circumstances, it's never okay, et cetera, et cetera. I'm as much of a feminist as the next girl. I'm all for the sisterhood. I'll wear my pink knit you-know-what hat with pride to march for women's rights, and when I turn eighteen next year, I'm going to vote for female candidates, or at least male candidates who support us. Rah-rah, feminism. *Women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights*.

But I'm not sure what that has to do with what's happening now. What's happening *here*, at my school.

What had been happening for *months*, according to the rumor mill. Though I don't know how that particular detail got out.

Which kind of makes you wonder why someone would wait so long to say anything.

Which kind of makes you wonder how long a person can live with something like that. If maybe it doesn't really hurt that much. If maybe a person can get used to being hurt.

Which kind of makes you wonder if maybe—on some level, deep down or right at the surface, I don't know—someone might actually *like* it.

two

THE GIRLFRIEND

It was my eye that did it. It wasn't quite a black eye, not at first, but there was an undeniable bruise. More of a pink eye, though not in the way that kindergarteners get pink eye. I guess I could've tried to cover it with makeup, cut school until it faded—I'd have had to pretend I had some viciously contagious strain of the flu to keep anyone from visiting—but honestly at this point, that seemed like more trouble than telling the truth.

Or maybe I just didn't *feel* like covering it up. Covering for him.

So I went to the principal's office this morning.

It happened on Saturday night. All day Sunday, the skin around my eye stayed light pink, barely noticeable. Not that my mother—the only person who saw me on Sunday, since I spent the day at home studying—ever looked that closely. Sometimes I think we live more like roommates than mother and daughter,

each keeping to her room and doing her work and reading her books and watching her shows.

But this morning, the skin around my eye had turned dark pink, almost but not quite purple. I got dressed in the clothes I'd laid out the night before: jeans and a North Bay Academy T-shirt in red and white—our school colors—because Mike has track practice after school today and I always cheer him on. I pulled my wavy brown hair back into a tight ponytail. I grabbed a sweater because even though it's April there's still a chill in the air, and I left the house early without saying goodbye (or even good morning) to Mom. She might have noticed the eye now that it's darker.

And, I wanted to be gone before Mike arrived to drive me to school like he usually does.

I walked to school through the morning fog. At some point I realized that the cardigan I was wearing over my T-shirt used to belong to Mike. He lent it to me once when I was at his house late, and I never gave it back.

I walked straight to Principal Scott's office. (*Never trust a man with two first names*; where had I read that? What about a woman with a regular woman's first name and a man's last name—could you trust her? And if she were a married woman who'd taken her husband's last name—and Principal Scott had definitely taken her husband's name—then you knew that her husband had two first names. Did *she* trust him?)

Anyway, I arrived in the office before Principal Scott, so I sat on the uncomfortable bench outside the office and waited. At eight fifteen on the nose—Principal Scott is a very on-the-nose

sort of principal—Principal Scott breezed in. She didn't seem to notice the girl sitting on the bench at first.

But when she unlocked the door to her office, I followed her inside.

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"That's a very serious accusation," Principal Scott said carefully. She'd offered to get me an ice pack from the nurse's office, but I said no, it didn't hurt anymore, though I could still feel a tiny thrum of pain beneath my eye.

It's not that she didn't believe me—or anyway, it's not *exactly* that. I had a bruised eye, after all, and our school is the sort of place that prides itself on empowering its students to speak up for themselves; it's literally in the brochure. She knew I'd been hit, it's just that she couldn't believe Mike—*her* Mike, the student who worked in her office during his free periods for extra cash (he isn't on scholarship like I am, but his parents aren't rich like some of our classmates'), the humble track star, the guy who blushed when his best friends made naughty jokes (not that Principal Scott knew that about him)—was the one who did it.

I almost felt sorry for her, trying to square that circle. I tried to imagine her thoughts:

There is a student in my office who claims her boyfriend is hitting her.

Always give the victim the benefit of the doubt.

And yet: *Not* Mike*, right? It was some other kid, some other boyfriend, who did this.*

What's a neutral response—something that will let her know I don't disbelieve her, but I'm not 100 percent all-in either?

Until finally, out loud: *That's a very serious accusation.*

I nodded. On the walk to school this morning, I decided that no matter what Principal Scott said or did, I would do my best to stay calm, appear reasonable. Because maybe she wouldn't believe me if I seemed hysterical, unhinged. Sitting in her office, I hoped she couldn't hear the way my heart was pounding, couldn't see the sweat pooling at the base of my neck, just beneath my ponytail.

"Was this the first time Mike—" She stopped herself then, looked off to the side for a moment, and finally said, "Has this happened before?"

I nodded again.

"Have you discussed this with your parents?" she asked. I shook my head. "With any of your friends here?" I shook my head again. "Why not?"

It was about then that I began to wonder whether I'd gone to the wrong person. I probably should've gone to my mother first. Maybe even to *his* mother. It was weird, wasn't it, that I'd told the principal before anyone else? I tried to remember *why* I'd chosen her. I thought—I guess I thought—that she'd be able to make it stop. Isn't that what teachers and school administrators are supposed to do, step in if a student misbehaves?

Anyway, it was too late to take it back and do it differently.

Then Principal Scott said, "Have you thought about going to the police?"

My mouth went dry then, too dry to explain that going to the police seemed like too much, too big a step to take. Even just hearing the principal say the word *police* felt like too much. The sort of thing my mother would call *a bridge too far*, if I'd given her a chance to say anything at all.

Oh god, was the *principal* going to call the police? My heart beat even faster. She couldn't do that, could she, not if I didn't want her to? The only things I knew about the police came from TV shows, and I vaguely remembered some official-looking actress telling another, much less official-looking actress, that *she* had to the be the one to file a complaint with law enforcement. But if I told the principal I didn't want to go to the police, would she think I was lying about what happened? I slid my hands beneath my legs. My palms were so sweaty I worried she'd be able to see it. Weren't sweaty palms considered a sign of lying?

As though telling the truth is any less nerve racking.

"You understand, of course, that I'll want to discuss this with your parents," Principal Scott said. I had to hold my breath to keep from sighing with relief. Calling my parents didn't exactly sound *good*, but it sounded better than if she'd said she was calling the cops. She continued, "And Mike's parents." Okay, that made sense. It was only fair, if she was going to talk to my parents. "And I'll have to discuss this with Mike, of course."

I nodded again. Isn't that what I'd wanted? How else did I think she could stop it?

She added, "And the way rumors spread around here—I can only imagine your classmates will begin to hear about it too."

She said it like she was sorry that she couldn't keep it a secret. I pressed my palms into my jeans, trying to wipe away the sweat without letting the principal see that I was sweating in the first place.

Maybe I shouldn't have worn my hair in a ponytail today. Maybe it looked like I was trying to draw attention to the bruise. I decided that as soon as I left the principal's office, I would let my hair down, so I could tilt my head to hide the bruise behind a few strands. But then maybe Principal Scott would think I'd done that on purpose too: pulled my hair back for her, let it down for the kids in the halls.

I wanted to pull my legs up and rest my chin on my knees, making myself as little as possible. But I kept my feet on the floor. I even tried not to slouch. Could Principal Scott tell this was Mike's sweater? I looked at my feet. I wondered when the floor had last been vacuumed and who decided the principal's office would be carpeted, unlike the floors in the rest of the school, which are hard, cold linoleum. I was wearing a particularly beat-up pair of sneakers. Maybe I'd done that on purpose too, trying to look that much more like a victim: *See, even my* sneakers *are beat up*.

Or did it make me look that much more to blame: *You can't trust a word that girl says, even her* sneakers *are beat up*. *Clearly, she doesn't know how to take care of herself. Clearly she can't handle having nice things.*

Mike was a Very Nice Thing. I fell in love with him the day he asked me out. I mean, literally, at that moment. Until then, I didn't think he knew I was alive—no, that's an exaggeration, and I should be careful about exaggerating, given the circumstances. Of course he knew I was alive; we'd been going to school together since kindergarten and had most of the same friends. We'd gone to the same birthday parties when we were little and the same blowouts as we got older. But—until he asked me out—I never would've guessed he thought of me *that way*, so I didn't bother thinking of him *that way* either. I mean, I'm not blind; he's the most handsome boy in school. (In my opinion. But believe me, I'm not the only one who thinks so.) Sandy brown hair, tall, tan, toned. I'm not even the prettiest girl among our group of friends. I'm not the funniest or the smartest, and I don't have the best body. I'm average—I looked it up once and my height is *literally* the average height for a girl my age. My eyes and hair color (brown) are average too. Mike could've had anyone, so there would've been no point to thinking of him *that way*.

But then he asked me out—and no one ever asks anyone out like that. It's always a group hanging out or a hookup or whatever, but Mike actually *asked me out*. I felt like I was in a movie from the 1980s and he was captain of the football team and I was head cheerleader. (Or would that be a movie from the fifties? Should I have realized then that he was old-fashioned? Should I have recognized it as a warning sign?)

Anyway, when he asked me out on an actual date, I fell. Just like that. Like this whole time I simply hadn't noticed that I was

madly, desperately, completely in love with him. He stood over me while he waited for my answer, close enough that I had to tilt my head up to face him and tell him that yes, of course I'd go out with him. My heart was pounding so hard and so fast that I was sure he could hear it. It didn't even pound that hard in the principal's office this morning, and that should have been so much more nerve racking than accepting a date, shouldn't it? Maybe when all this is over, I'll need to have my heart checked.

"Are you sure about this?" Principal Scott asked, crossing then uncrossing her legs. She isn't one of those teachers who tries to act like *one of the girls*. She keeps her blond hair cut bluntly just below her shoulders and wears thick black headbands. She wears sensible flat shoes almost every day. On field day this year, she wore khakis that were pleated in the front and sneakers so clean, it looked like they'd never been worn before.

She didn't sound unsupportive. More *concerned*.

After our first date, that was that. We've been together ever since—six months. I don't remember exactly when Mike started saying that we'd be together forever. He said we'd go to the same college (wherever they recruited him to run track), that we'd live in the same dorm, that we'd end up working in the same city after graduation.

Doesn't every girl dream that her boyfriend will love her like that?