

Reply All

"Stop acting crazy," your boyfriend, Mateo, says in his Puerto Rican accent.

You ignore him and throw another handful of sand on the book propped open in his lap. You grind your bare heels into his crumpled, wet T-shirt, pressing it down into the sand, wishing he was inside it.

"I'm not an idiot," you say. "I know she wants to fuck you!"

He shakes his head, lifts the book and blows sand out of the binding, then stands to leave. "I don't want to fuck *her*." He traipses down the beach, book in hand.

You stretch out on the blanket, pulling his half over you. You're in the shaded area next to an empty, red lifeguard stand. It was warm enough to swim when you first arrived, but now the sun is setting and your wet hair makes the breeze feel cooler. The water smells like a sea salt facial. You're trying to relax by taking slow, deep, rhythmic breaths. The way he says *fuck* turns you on. You put your hand inside your pink and black striped bikini bottoms. But your secluded stretch of beach was just invaded by a man and woman wearing matching wind-breakers; his neon green, hers bright pink. They're walking a dog. You worry that they saw suspicious movement under your blanket, so you pretend to brush sand out of your bikini top—sand that's been scratching your left nipple for the last few minutes; you kind of liked it.

The couple stops near a glowing lamp post at the base of a wood plank ramp that leads to the sidewalk. The dog lifts his leg and pees on a dead seagull, then nudges it playfully and waits for a response. As if his piss was an adrenaline shot to the bird's heart. You probably won't touch yourself again for a while after they leave.

You stare up at hints of cloud in the darkening sky—North Carolina blue. Fitting, since that's where you are. The lifeguard stand looms overhead. This is *your* spot. Yours and your old friend, Lainey's. The place you would huddle and talk about the boys waiting back at the bonfire. The ones you hoped to kiss after you wandered back too drunk to play coy anymore.

She kissed you once, standing almost exactly where you're lying now. The moon was full and her blonde ponytail looked like a glowing crown. You remember the kiss and the smell of her beer breath in your mouth. But that was nearly fifteen years ago. The world's gotten bigger. You've been to Italy, Costa Rica, Brazil, and actually moved away twice since.

The first move was for a college in Baltimore. You made it three years before getting dumped by a boy from Delaware, a theater major. After failing that semester, you decided college was pointless for a wannabe actress. You moved home, saved money waitressing at a bar one summer, then moved to California with another friend—a girl whose aunt lived in The Valley.

You lived in a studio apartment that used to be her garage. Until you came home from work one day and found the aunt's boyfriend laying on your twin size mattress, dick in hand, a pair of your red panties wrapped around his face. A week later, you moved into a small place above the Hibachi grill where you worked. It had a yellow and orange tile shower and smelled like burned Teriyaki sauce. You lived there for two years. Ten pounds gained and not a single positive response from an audition—not even the tampon commercial—and you decided to move back to your hometown. You haven't bought red underwear since.

The memory of that scene usually prevents you from touching yourself in public even at ideal moments like this. But now it's some teenage boys wandering past your blanket. They nod. Assurance that they're not drunk enough to step on you as they pass. Mateo is behind them, walking toward you.

You pull the blanket over your head and groan. It's one of your mother's old patchwork quilts that you keep in the trunk of your car for days like this. Days you wonder why you gave up on your dreams. Mostly you don't care because having a "day job" pays your rent. You've done enough traveling to know that a clean bathroom and independence is more valuable than the delusional pursuit of fame.

"I'm going home," Mateo says, staring down at you.

His phone chimes. You wonder if it's her, texting. You want to reach up his shorts with a handful of sand and knead his scrotum like a ball of play-doh.

Mateo was born in Chicago, but spent most of his childhood in Puerto Rico where his mother was born. He lives close to the beach and manages a popular seafood restaurant near the jetty. You think he might be cheating on you with the head waitress—a big-breasted, strawberry-blond moron in her late twenties with a mole centered just above the bridge of her nose that gives the impression that she possesses inner peace. You hope he doesn't find out that you were the one who slashed her tires two weeks ago after seeing a graphic text message from her that she said was meant for one of the younger male servers at the restaurant. She *accidentally* selected "reply all."

While everyone was trying to track down the tire-slasher, you acted appalled. You suggested it was the teenagers who often put their purple tags on the green dumpster. No one seemed convinced, so you asked about a jealous ex-boyfriend, someone who could have heard about the "reply all" text. The excitement settled after she called and cursed at some guy named Jackson while a group of female servers cheered her on. Your boyfriend filed for the company insurance. He blamed the parking lot vandals, and got her tires replaced at no cost, so you never felt guilty.

Even if the truth comes out, you'll just plead emotional duress because you recently found out that Lainey and your older sister aren't just roommates. No doubt your sister knows your intimate high school secret. Bitch. She stole everything from you: the bigger bedroom, your favorite clothes, jewelry, boys (ha!), Grandma's wedding ring, and now Lainey. Who the hell does she think she is?

Mateo stops texting and gathers up his things. "Are you coming by my place later?"
"Maybe."

You watch him walk away until he's practically home. Then you think about kissing Lainey just to spite your sister, and Mateo. Your nipples get hard. The cool compacted sand on your back helps. You pull your bikini top down so your breasts brush up against the soft blanket that's shifting in an arousing way from your arm movements. It's dark now, so someone would have to stand directly over you to figure it out. You're getting pretty wet, so fast you think you might actually finish without interruption this time. But the bonfire that's been slowly growing for the past hour is sending black clouds of barbecued hotdog smoke down the beach and you can hear giggly girls nearing the lifeguard stand.

You drag your blanket off the beach, hoping Mateo will still be awake to finish you off when you crawl through his window after a few drinks at the bar.