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The Choice

Lauren Lucas

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Hey Rachel! Did you see Melissa's tweet about Coachella? T-8 weeks, leggo!!!

I squint at my cell phone, the bright screen illuminating the dark den of my bedroom. Eight weeks. Eight weeks until I fly to sunny California. Henderson, Nevada is sunny, too, but it's different in CA; brighter somehow. Eight weeks until I reunite with my best friend, who's been out of town visiting her cousins in Michigan. Alexis is bringing her boyfriend Tyler to the festival, so I won't get much quality time with her; but it's better than nothing. Eight weeks until I meet *True Blood* hunk Alexander Skarsgard. Okay so the chances of us meeting are slim, but I hear he'll be there so I figure I have as good a chance as anyone. Four weeks until all the fun, craziness, and memories of Coachella.

Eight weeks until my savings account is in the red.

Alexis had some trouble paying for Coachella on her own, too, saving almost every penny she made working at the little ice cream store downtown. Her birthday came at a good time, and she was able to get enough birthday money from family to cover the costs. Melissa's parents always foot the bill. Being the only child, Melissa was deemed Daddy's Little Princess from day one, and never has to ask for money; it's just given. It doesn't bother me too much, though. Melissa is spoiled, sure, but she doesn't act like it. At least not most of the time. Melissa means well and doesn't gloat about her father's successful gas station chain, but every once in a while I can't help but roll my eyes at the newest purse Melissa *has* to show off, or the five star dinner she had over the weekend.

Melissa's parents are fortunate with money. Mine aren't. I don't talk to Melissa about it much, out of embarrassment I guess, but Alexis knows everything. Five months ago, my Grandma Gigi was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. It progressed faster than the doctors imagined, and – since her husband had died years before and there was no room in my house – we put her in a nursing home. As the only child nearby, my mom was unofficially named the sole caretaker. My uncle in Philadelphia is an alcoholic and can't be counted on to hold a steady job for more than six months, let alone care for another human being. So my folks took on the time commitment and expenses of caring for Granny G.

I know that financial stress was inevitable, but it's still strange. My parents have never been the wealthiest in the neighborhood, but we've always lived well. I don't blame her parents for having money problems. But I feel resentment to...to something. I'm not quite sure what.

I've been looking forward to Coachella since last summer's festival. The lineup was insane. And this year I finally going to see Vampire Weekend perform live, my all-time favorite band. Melissa, Alex, and I have talked about the upcoming festival all year. Until Grandma Gigi got sick, that is. Mom and Dad have always helped me out a little with the cost, but this year would is going to be different. Looking at my phone now, I remember the conversation with Dad.

"Hey Dad."

"Hi Rach. How was school?"

"Fine, nothing knew. Is Mom with Grandma?"

"Yeah. Guess she had a good day today. She's been eating more, even walking around the home a little."

"That's good. When will she be back? I wanted to talk to you guys about Coachella. Melissa wants to get the ticket and hotel package, but she likes the most expensive hotel, of course. Alex and I found one that's not so pricey. I'll let you know how much exactly when I know more. We went on Priceline, too. If you buy a ticket now it won't be as much as if we wait..."

"Rachel."

"I know, I'll wait until Mom's here to give all the details, but..."

"Rachel we can't."

"What?"

"We can't afford it. Not this year. Not now that your grandmother is in the nursing home. It's too much for us right now."

"You don't have to pay for all of it. I'll buy the ticket like always and pay for part of..."

"I'm sorry, Rach. Your mother and I just can't afford it this year. Money's gotten pretty tight, you know that. The nursing home and medical bills are crazier than we expected. We'll be ok, I don't want you to worry, but we just don't have the money for unnecessary expenses."

The tears welling in my eyes, I shake away the memory and look back at my phone. *T-8 weeks, leggooo!!*

Everyone will be at Coachella; everyone was there last year. Well, obviously not everyone; but everyone who matters. In Henderson, you don't make friends in the classroom. You go to parties; to concerts, clubs, weekend getaways. That's how you meet people, make connections. And if my parents have taught me anything, it's not about what you know, but who you know. If I want a good recommendation letter to get into an Ivy League college, I

need connections to high places (a.k.a. Melissa's father, who runs in a circle with CEOs and Fortune 500 A-listers).

Melissa's dad will be in California at the time of the concert at some conference, and he's planning to meet up with us for dinner Friday night. I have to be there. He needs to know me; like me. I need Melissa to tell him about me. I need to buddy up to her at Coachella.

A wave of inspiration rushing over me, I feel in my nightstand for a pen and notepad. If I'm going to make it to Coachella, I'm gonna need some cash. Ok, what did my parents spend last year?

General admission pass + shuttle = \$435
4 nights at ~~La Quinta Resort~~ Westin Resort = \$446
Plane ticket = \$222
Tips = \$50
Spending money = \$250

Total = \$1403

How do Melissa's parents afford this every year? Shit... How did mine? I've got more work to do than I realized. With the ice cream shop closed due to a pipe bursting, I have no money coming in. And there's not enough time to get a new job.

I start racking my brain for things I could do to make money in time for the concert. Tutor? The only class I qualify to tutor for is math, but who needs my help? I guess I could find some freshmen. But that will get me, what, twenty bucks per session? That means I'd need to tutor for...71 hours to make \$1403. That's not going to happen. What else? Our neighbor is always looking for someone to watch her dogs when she leaves for the weekend. But Alexis did that once and the lady only paid her ten dollars for an overnight stay. That's out.

Shit. My mind races as I try to find a solution. I think about other kids at my school, and how they afford it. Most of them –like me –rely on their parents to cover most of the cost. But surely not everyone, right? Who would I know that...

Adam Kischer. He goes to concerts and stuff all the time! His parents don't have much money, so he pays for it all on his own. I don't know him personally but I've heard rumors. Apparently his mom his depressed and all kinds of stuff, and he steals her antidepressants and sells them to people. God, that's horrible. And how would he even get away with it? Wouldn't his mom notice her meds are missing?

I shake the thought away from my head and brainstorm again. Five minutes later, my mind is back to Adam Kischer. I try not to, but I can't help but think of the rumors I've heard. Melissa told me he once made three hundred dollars in just one week. That's probably not realistic if I were to do it, but if I tutor on the side, I might make it to the \$1403 mark. Hell, I'll even watch the neighbor's dogs if it'll get me the last few bucks.

Wait. I can't do this; it's not me. And where would I get drugs? Do people at my school even do drugs? Who am I kidding, of course they do, even I do. Melissa smokes almost every

weekend. She even lied to her dad that she thought she had ADD so he bought her Adderall. Now she takes it whenever she has a big exam coming up, or just wants to have a good night. People are always looking for Adderall. I could get some from her and sell it. No, I shouldn't get it from Melissa. I need another way. Why don't I just do what she did? I'll fake a reason for Adderall, and sell it. Alexis' brother has pot hidden all over his room. I know because she and I have stolen it who knows how many times, and he never notices because he's too high or dumb to notice; usually both. She says he has Molly, too, but that might be harder to get my hands on.

I never thought I'd do this. I've taken drugs before, sure. But steal? Sell? Who knew? God I hope I don't get caught.

Now I have a choice. Is it worth it? This will mean going behind my best friend's back, stealing from her home. The drugs aren't hers, though, so technically I'm not taking from her. She wouldn't be mad, right? Is this who I am? I mean it's just a concert. But damn, it's so fun. The parties are insane, the music is great. And it's a chance to see Melissa's dad. I'm doing this from a good place, really. I want to get into a good college, so I have to do this.

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A brief conversation with my dad is all it takes. I tell him I'm feeling stressed about Grandma Gigi –I feel guilty about this, I honestly love her to death –and that I'm having trouble focusing on my schoolwork. It so happens our insurance covers the medicine, so I have Adderall in my hands just a few days later. On Friday I go to Alexis' house. While she's setting up a movie downstairs, I say I have to pee and sneak into her brothers room on the second floor. I find the pot easily, and stumble upon some other white stuff, I don't know what it is to be honest.

I see Adam Kischer in school the next week. His hair is greasy and hangs limp to his shoulders, brushing against his polo. The dress code requires khakis and button down shirts, but Adam still manages to look like a burnout. I once overheard a few teachers talking about him in the staff lounge; I eavesdropped on their conversation while I was supposed to be getting a projector for class. "That Kischer needs to get his act together; always skipping class, hanging with the wrong crowd. It's boys like that who end up with no diploma and no job. Shame too; he's a smart kid."

They won't think that I'll end up like that, will they? Of course not. I'm a good girl; I'm not doing anything wrong.

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Three weeks later, and I've made \$552. The tutoring and dog sitting has helped, but selling has been great. (I never thought I'd say that.) I guess I never realized how many people depended on Adderall. Most of kids that I'm selling to have bad relationships with their parents –so many in Henderson do, parents put too much pressure on us. That means they don't confide in their parents, don't go to them for help, for pills. They come to me. Me and Adam Kischer, that is. I had a little trouble selling at first because so many go to him to buy. But I eventually found a niche group of people who don't hang with Adam, and want to buy from me. A lot of them were surprised that I'm doing this, which I think is part of the reason they're buying from me.

So \$552 in three weeks. How much is that on average per week?

$$552 / 3 = \$184 \text{ per week}$$

If I keep going at \$184 a week, that will get me...

$$\$184 \times 8 = \$1472$$

Enough for Coachella! More than enough. I'll keep tutoring and dog sitting, but I think I'll actually make it. Shit, I should've been doing this all along. And the thing is, I really don't feel bad. So many other people do it, even famous people. Jay-Z did it for years, and now he's one of the biggest rappers in music.

One of the kids I'm selling to has connections to someone with Ecstasy. I'm meeting him after school to pick some up. I sell the E and keep 15% of the profits. It won't be much at first, maybe 40 bucks, but he promised he'll have another stash next week.

The final bell rings and I say my goodbyes. Alex and I are working on a project tonight, Melissa's stopping by later. I get in my car and drive to the designated meeting spot, some gas station on the outside of town. He's in a red minivan; not the kind of car I'd expect. I'm suddenly nervous. I've never met this guy before, I don't even know his name, or where he goes to school. He might not even be in school.

The minivan door opens and a skinny guy with dark hair steps out. I walk towards him, clutching my car keys in my right hand. I've never taken a self-defense class; I don't know any moves if this guy comes at me. I guess these keys will have to do. My palms sweating, we reach each other.

"Rachel?"

"Yeah."

"Let's make this fast. You know the deal. We'll meet back here in a week; bring all the money and I'll split up your share on spot."

I nod my head, take the bag, and he walks away. He's back in his minivan turning the key into his ignition. The rusty car is so loud I can barely hear it. It's not until the cop car is on front of me that I realize what's happening. A second car swings behind the minivan; I see the boy hang his head in the drivers seat, reality setting in that we've been caught. I don't even know his name. Why am I here? What was I thinking?

I see my future slipping away from me. No Ivy League college, no recommendation from Melissa's father, no chance at a good job, no Coachella. Screw Coachella. Why did I think a concert was worth this? I don't know what to say to the cop standing in front of me; I have no idea what I'll say to my parents, to my friends. All I can manage to say between the tears is, "I'm sorry. I know...I made a bad choice. I'm sorry."