

GIRL
IN A
BAD
PLACE

Kaitlin Ward

Point

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ONE

“Do you want to continue down a path of emptiness, or do you want to help bring order to this chaotic earth?”

When I hear this come out of the mouth of a girl no older than six, I stop walking. It’s not the sort of thing you expect a kid that young to say—especially not at the mall on a Saturday afternoon. She’s staring up at me earnestly with wild curls of brown hair pulled into two pigtails, and a tiny smudge of food on her cheek. I glance around, but there are no adults nearby who she might belong to.

“Are you lost?” My best friend, Cara, crouches so she’s at eye level with the girl.

“No.” The little girl smiles a precious, dimple-cheeked smile. “My mom’s right over there. But I saw you walking and I thought you were the kind of people we need and I didn’t want you to get away.”

Cara and I exchange a look. This kid is . . . a touch creepy. “Let’s get you back to your mom,” Cara says uneasily.

We don't have to find the girl's mom, though; she finds us first, wild-eyed with panic. "Avalon! What have I *told* you about running off! Thank God."

The kid's mom is young—not as young as Cara and I, but young enough that even though I know I'm not supposed to judge . . . I'm judging a little. She's got bright green eyes and a thick braid of dark hair pulled over her shoulder. It's so long that it reaches the middle of her stomach. Her clothes are clean but her fingernails are filthy.

"Your little girl came up to us," Cara says. "We were about to help her find you, but she should really be careful about approaching strangers. It can be dangerous."

The woman's nostrils flare a bit. "I know that. Why do you think I was so worried?"

"She wasn't trying to judge your parenting." I step in. "She was just . . ."

My voice kinda fades out because I don't know where to go with my sentence. Cara doesn't mean to condescend, but she's pretty sensitive about the safety of kids after losing her younger sister in a car accident a couple years ago.

"I'm sorry," Cara says. "I didn't mean anything by it. I'm glad she's okay."

The woman lets out a breath and nods. "I shouldn't have snapped at you. You just get wound up when you turn around and your kid's not there, you know?"

"Mommy, I think they should come to the Haven," says the little girl—Avalon, I guess—tugging on her mother's shirt.

“Oh, sweetie, that’s not what—”

But Avalon has turned back to us, enthusiastically. “We live at this place called the Haven. It’s in the mountains and it’s so pretty there. You should come. Please come?”

“It’s a commune,” the woman says quickly, almost apologetically. “Not anything weird. We just live off the land and stuff. We’re not looking for more residents right now.” The woman pauses and smiles at her daughter. “But Avalon is usually right about people, so if you wanted to come and visit, I think it’d be cool.”

“A commune?” I don’t know much about communes, but nature is gross. And filled with spiders. “I’m not sure—”

“Can you tell us more about it?” Cara interrupts. I blink at her. She doesn’t notice my reaction, though, because her eyes are on the little girl.

“Sure! Come on, let’s sit or something.” The woman gestures toward a bench. “I’m Alexa, by the way.”

“We’re Cara and Mailee,” says Cara as we join Alexa on the bench. Avalon squeezes between them.

“Well, about the Haven, there’s not a lot to explain, really. We each have our own little houses. I mean, Avalon and I live together, but she’s the only kid. So everyone else has their own house. Most of us are pretty young, like, early twenties. Firehorse is the oldest, he’s forty-one. He’s our founder.” There’s something reverent about the way she says his name.

“Firehorse?” It slips out before I can stop myself.

Alexa's expression cools. "Yes, Firehorse. And like I was saying, he's our founder. He's the reason the Haven exists. He created this beautiful, safe place for us to live, and he's *wonderful*."

"It sounds nice," Cara says, throwing me a sharp glance.

I keep my mouth shut. Maybe Alexa's into that guy or something, but don't tell me that's not a weird name.

"It is." Alexa smiles at Cara, and so does Avalon. "Firehorse owns the land, but it's surrounded by a bunch of preserves, mostly. It's so pretty. Just trees, a lake, nature. You kinda realize you don't need anything else once you're there, you know? Everything feels better, clearer. Body and mind. I love it. We're basically self-sustaining, and we work together at everything. You always know what needs to be done at any given time, you never have to feel purposeless. It's the best."

It doesn't sound bad, but it sounds *very* outdoorsy. Outdoors and I don't get along very well. My parents took my brother and me camping one time and it'll never happen again. Montana may be known for its wilderness, but it's easy enough to avoid nature if you're not a fan.

"So we could visit sometime, see what it's like?" Cara asks. Cara is about five percent more outdoorsy than I am, so I'm pretty surprised she's into this.

"Yes, absolutely. You'll have to call Firehorse and set up a time. To be courteous, you know? But it would be great if you visited, I think."

"So great!" Avalon pipes in.

"We'd love to."

I wish Cara had consulted me before using the word *we*, but . . . I don't know.

Here's the thing about Cara: She is right about everything. The only time she has ever been wrong was when we were ten years old and she thought that my fear of spiders could be cured by holding a tarantula at the pet store.

So, her one time being wrong, she was *super* wrong. But other than that, she's never led me astray. Which means that if she thinks it's a good idea to go visit some people we just met, at a commune in the woods with a leader named Firehorse, then it's probably a good idea.

Or, at least, not a *bad* idea.

So long as a spider doesn't try to touch me.

Cara gets Firehorse's contact details from Alexa and we say good-bye and go our separate ways. Once we're out of earshot, I turn to her.

"So . . . a commune?"

"I know," she says gleefully. "And a guy named *Firehorse*. If nothing else about this interests you, we have to at least see what a person named Firehorse looks like."

"Okay. You've got me there. Ten dollars says he has a red beard."

"That is *way* too obvious. I'll take that bet."

"I bet Jackson and Gavin are going to want to come with us."

"Probably. But I don't see why that'd be a problem."

I shrug. I'd rather they come, anyway. Safety in numbers. The commune sounds harmless, but like anywhere rural,

Montana has its fair share of off-the-grid weirdos. You never know.

Thinking about it, though, I do want to go. If I want a career as an actress—which I do—life experiences like this will be a big help.

“Well, that was quite a detour,” I say. “We’d better get you that new planner you wanted. Otherwise we’re *both* going to be disorganized, and that can only end in disaster. Can you even believe that this time next year we’ll have *graduated*? This is our last summer as high schoolers.”

“Yeah. It’s crazy.” Cara folds her arms, smile slipping.

I pretend not to notice the change in her mood. It’s been like this since the last day of school; certain things seem to set her off, close her inside herself. I haven’t figured out a pattern yet, and when I ask, she brushes me off. So I’ve stopped asking.

“Anyway,” Cara says lightly, “we still have to clean your room, which has somehow turned into a *major* pigsty since I was in there last.”

“My room is totally fine. Your standards are too high.”

“Mailee. You can’t see the floor.”

This has been our friendship for the past decade. I am a whirlwind of chaos, and Cara is my rock. My parents love her because she cleans my room, and I love her because we are simultaneously total opposites and yet exactly the same.

We became best friends in second grade after she asked if she could clean my desk. I let her, and in return, I gave her a freshly sharpened pencil. It was a good trade; freshly sharpened

pencils were a pretty serious commodity back then, and I prided myself on my ability to get the point *just right*. Our teacher gave us both gold stars that day for our cooperation, and we are major suckers for positive reinforcement.

The rest is history.



You can definitely see at least *some* of my floor.

Cara stands in the doorway, hands on her hips, and takes it all in like she's a general studying the map of a battlefield. My room is definitely cleaner than a battlefield.

"I don't understand how one person can make so much mess in so little time."

"I couldn't find the shirt I wanted, so I just pulled everything out."

She arches a blonde eyebrow at me. "Pulled?"

"Whatever, threw. Same difference."

She laughs. "You know, someday I'm going to visit you in your grown-up LA apartment and it's going to be all neat and organized, and I'm going to know that this was all worth it. Like how Michelangelo spent all that miserable time creating the Sistine Chapel, but look how nice it turned out."

"Well *that* was a little insulting."

"It was meant to be!" she teases. "And I'll give you one guess what I'm going to tell you to do now."

"Fold."

“You got it.”

I hate folding. I hate putting clothes away. When they’re all over my floor, I can see what I have. When they’re tucked away in my drawer, I can never find anything. But my mom, and Cara, and society at large insist that clothing not be flung around my room like a decorative covering. Or as Cara puts it, like the first layer of a garbage dump.

While I fold, Cara flits around, taking care of the rest of my mess. It doesn’t make me come off too well when others find out that my best friend literally cleans my room weekly, even if I do help. But she *likes* it. She likes making sure that everything looks just so, and she likes bossing people around. That’s why she’s worked behind the scenes on school plays for as long as I’ve been in them. We’re going to rise to stardom together, me on-screen and her off. That’s been the plan ever since she put it in the Book of Life Goals she started for us in middle school.

That plan has been the best thing that could’ve ever happened to me. It keeps me focused, gives me something to look forward to. Helps me concentrate on my future instead of whatever is in front of me right this very moment.

I’ve always been a big dreamer, but Cara’s much better at taking dreams and combing through the practical aspects, bridging the gap between where I am now and where I want to end up.

She sweeps a handful of pencils and pens off my desk and deposits them in a pencil cup. Gently adjusts my emotions

journal with a small smile. It's the one thing in my room that I always keep in the same spot. The one organized thing I did all on my own. It's where I record new emotions I experience, break them down and analyze them so I can use them to improve my performances when I'm acting.

My phone chirps its text message announcement, so I pause my folding to read it.

Still seeing you tonight? It's Gavin, my boyfriend.

Yup, I type back. And my room's gonna be clean and everything.

His reply comes within seconds. Nice. So I'll be able to sit down without crushing anything then.

The kissing-face emoji he includes at the end does *not* buy him forgiveness for his teasing. We've been going out for two months now, and it was definitely more than a month before I was willing to let him in my room when it wasn't within a day or two of a Cara cleaning. After that, I figured, if he's going to date me, he should probably know that this is what he's in for.

Though it wasn't like he had no warning. On our second date, I somehow managed to get chocolate ice cream on both our shirts without having actually dropped my cone. If this makes it sound like I'm adorably clumsy, I would like to be really clear: I am not. I'm actually not clumsy at all, I'm just straight up messy. It's not cute or endearing. It's the sort of thing that people love me in spite of, not because of, and I've known that for a long time.

“Who’re you texting?” Cara asks in a singsong voice that tells me she already knows exactly who I’m texting.

“Gavin. He was just checking in about our plans for tonight.”

“And what *are* your plans, if I may ask?” She straightens a pile of textbooks that was threatening to topple.

“Just dinner. Do you and Jackson want to come?” Cara has been dating her boyfriend for a little over a year now. Gavin and I are much newer, but thankfully, the boys get along pretty well.

“He’s got some kind of family reunion thing today, so it’s just me. You probably don’t want the third wheel.”

“You can still come if you want!”

“Mailee. I am not coming on your date without my boyfriend. All you do is gaze into each other’s eyes like you’re in a Disney movie or something.”

“We do not.” I throw a shirt at her.

“Hey! This is the opposite of folding.”

“But folding is *so boring!*” I collapse dramatically onto my bed, limbs splayed.

“You are worse than a child.” She yanks me back to my feet. “You know, even Harper wasn’t this—”

She halts, voice catching in her throat. I chew on a fingernail, breath held, waiting to see if she wants to finish her sentence. She doesn’t.

“You’re thinking about her today, huh?” I ask. We both slump back on the bed, lying down on the folded clothes.