Here is what happens when you stay late after school.
Your teacher leaves the room with an extensive list of things to do. She’s all laughter, gesturing between you both with a teasing grin.

“Now I trust you two not to do anything unsavory, but I’d better not come back to find this classroom looking like it’s April 1st. I’ll be back in about half an hour, and don’t tell the principal I left you here alone.”

You both laugh along with her, spouting promises left and right. You both need the extra time to work on your project, and you wouldn’t jeopardize this extra study time for the world.

Later you’ll look back and wonder why you put so much work in. You’ll break off your partnership— as well as your friendship —only a day later. But for now, the grade looming above both of your heads feels like the only thing in the world that matters. So you immerse yourself in textbook passages and internet articles, blissfully oblivious as he inches closer to you under the pretext of finding a direct quote from your books. Or maybe he really was trying to work. You’ll never know, and you’ll never want to think about the why or the what afterwards.

Your friend— one of your oldest friends, one of precious few who’ve stuck it out with you from the day you set foot in the halls of your painfully average middle school all the way up until this moment —stands up, walking to the door. You barely notice, engrossed in the fascinating (ha) world of AP Gov work.

“Hey Catalina...” It’s the tone in his voice that gets you to turn. It’s strange, not like anything you’ve ever heard from him— and you two have been through a lot together. You look up just as the door shuts with a resounding click. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

You shoot a glance at your laptop, but the decision is easy. Of course you’re going to choose to listen to him over doing schoolwork. What teen wouldn’t? So you shut the laptop. Another click. “What’s up?”

He crosses the room in a matter of seconds, and suddenly words are flying through the air, quick and nervous. You barely hear a thing after the first three fall from his lips: I love you. Everything after that is a blur. You laugh awkwardly, one hand inching back towards the familiar monotony of your textbooks.

I love you, Catalina.

And you love me too, right?

You can admit it. I won’t tell your parents.

You don’t move. You can’t move. It would be so easy just to scream out to anyone, but something inside you has shut down. Your voice is gone. He comes a few steps closer and your heart starts pounding. What’s about to happen here?
Some last-ditch instinct kicks into gear and you reach for your laptop, though you're not sure what you'll actually do with it. Go back to working as if nothing's happened? No, you already know you won't be able to do that. Not with the look in your (now former) friend's eyes.

His hand covers yours and you freeze again, watching it slowly creep from your hand to between your legs. "Come on, Catalina. The teacher doesn't have to know."

She doesn't ever find out. Thirty minutes later when she pushes a cart full of supplies through the door with a cheery smile, you mumble a goodbye, brushing past her and taking off at a sprint the second you're out of view. You don't stop until you can't breathe any longer, finding yourself in a neighborhood you've never seen before.

A scream tears free from your throat.

Then another.

You scream and scream, drawing stares from an old woman tending her lawn and a few worried glances from dog walkers. A young mother pushing a stroller approaches you like a wild animal.

*Are you okay, honey? Do you want me to call someone for you? Are you lost?*

No, you are not okay. No, you don't want to talk to anyone, not even her. Yes, you're lost, yes, yes, yes, your whole world has come undone and you feel lost in your own traitorous body. You want to scream forever until the world knows some semblance of the pain you've gone through.

You are Catalina Cabrera, and in that moment you burn.

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Here is what happens when you call home.

Eventually, the mother gives you an ultimatum: let her call someone to pick you up, or let her call the police. You ignore her at first, in hopes that she'll go away. But she's annoyingly stubborn, or perhaps it's because she's new to motherhood and still thinks your problems can be solved with a few gentle words and a kind smile.

You whisper your cousin's number through a raw throat, your voice cracking as you force out the numbers. The phone rings three times, and then he picks up. "Hello?"

You exchange a few short, rapid-fire words, switching back and forth between English and Spanish as the woman watches and struggles to keep track of your conversation. He agrees to pick you up and drop you home, showing up a handful of minutes later. The woman waits with you until you get into your cousin's car, then she returns to her walk as if nothing's happened.

Of course she does. Why would she ever believe something had happened? Certainly not to a nice girl like you, right?

Right?

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Here is what happens when you get home.
You spend the car ride home in silence, thankful your cousin has never been the talkative one. That’s usually your job, only today there is nothing for you to talk about. (You can’t talk about it. You can’t even think about it). You’ve already decided not to tell your parents. It would destroy them, the way it’s slowly begun to destroy you. By the time you reach home, you’ve already concocted the ghost of a story to explain your sudden flight into a new neighborhood. A fight between friends, a bad falling out, you tried to run off your anger and only succeeded in getting lost. You’ll get a lecture on being more responsible in the future, but they’ll leave you alone to deal with the loss of your friend.

After all, that part isn’t exactly a lie.

You hide in your room all night; your parents believe your lies, or perhaps they see the dark thing hiding behind your eyes and decide it’s better not to press. At first you burrow deep in your bedsheets, trying to hide from the word that has begun to blossom in your mind. The Incident, you have already begun to call it. Anything to avoid that word. But it’s too late, your thoughts have already spiraled out of control—everything is out of control, all because of him—and suddenly the pillows and sheets around you are too stifling, too hot, too much.

And they all smell like him.

That single thought is enough to launch you into action, and you try to pull yourself free only to find your arms and legs have tangled in the blankets. You half limp, half drag yourself to the bathroom, tearing off all your clothes and dumping them in a pile. They smell too much like him, too, and you can practically see all the places his hands touched the fabric. The shirt— one of your favorites—and pants are completely ruined with his ghost. Later, your mother will make a fuss over your sudden decision to rid yourself of the horrible outfit, venting in exasperated Spanish. 

Such nice clothes, and you refuse to wear them? What did I buy this for, then? For my daughter to complain that they are dirty, when there isn’t a spot on them?

You will insist on throwing them out, despite the guilt. After all, she’s right, at least from her point of view. She doesn’t know why the very sight of the clothes makes you sick. And she never will.

But for now, you are determined to rid yourself of every last trace of him. The shower water scalds your skin as you step under the spray, burning away the imprints of his fingers. Soap suds sting your eyes as you scrub yourself down, scraping away at the echoes of his touch. You grab the razor, too, stripping the hair from your body until there is nothing left of the fine hairs that carry his fingerprints.

For one precarious moment, you consider pressing the blade a little deeper, letting it slip through your skin and carve out the pain boiling in your blood. It would be more than a little satisfying, in that moment, to watch the streaks of red trail down your arm and disappear down the drain, the way you wish you could make your memories of today disappear.
But you set the razor back on the shelf, arranging it neatly beside the bottles of shampoo and exchanging the bubblegum-pink plastic for another round of soap. It’s a difficult decision, but you make it anyway.
Perhaps you already know it’s far from the last one you’ll face.

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Here is what happens when you tell your friends.
Your friend Divya curses his name in as many ways as she can think of. She pledges her support and encourages you to talk to someone in charge. The teacher. The principal. She’ll take this as far as the school board if she has to.
The heavy weight on your chest sings. Maybe the anger you feel isn’t wrong, if she shares it.
Maybe it’s not untoward, something to shove away. Maybe the Incident is something worth fighting over, not just running from.
Your friend Máire’s eyes widen in confusion. Then, when she understands the meaning of the horrible word, concern. Cat, are you okay?
You don’t know how to answer that one. You are terribly, terribly angry. You are terribly, terribly confused. Okay? The word is foreign. You don’t know what it is, and so you cannot tell whether you feel it.
Sera, who explained your situation to Máire, shakes her head helplessly. I’m sorry. She is reasonably enraged and horrified on your behalf, but she already knows there is nothing she can do but support you as best she can.
You accept her apology, but not her defeatism. You’re going to make him pay.
More voices chime in. More girls you never realized had your back. Their names and faces blur together, and some offer condolences and leave… but some stay. Their names and faces, you will never forget.
They believe you, wholeheartedly. Of course they do. Why wouldn’t they? Why would anyone not believe you?
You’ll find out soon enough.

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Here is what happens when you approach the counselor.
She peers at you from the other side of her desk.
Catalina, I need to ask a few more questions before we can figure out our next step.
You agree, of course, because she’s a teacher. And besides, it’s her job to help you through this. To help you stop him from ever laying a hand on anyone else.
You identify as bisexual, don’t you?
You nod, confused. Yes, you’re bi. You’re out to your parents and the school, though not in the stereotypically flashy way. You can count on one hand the number of other students who have given you shit for it. What does your sexuality have to do with him?
The counselor clicks her long fingernails on the desk. They are painted a pale, buttery yellow. You’ll remember this detail later, in the weeks that come. You don’t know why.

Miss Cabrera… are you sure you’re reading this situation correctly? After all, teens such as yourself do tend to experiment, and, well… given your identifying as bisexual, it’s just… People like you tend to be more likely to give in to sexual instincts.

You reel back as if she’s hit you. The counselor stares at you calmly.

Miss Cabrera, there’s no need to overreact.

You wouldn’t consider this an overreaction. She thinks you wanted this? All because you’re bi? It’s preposterous. You remember every detail of the Incident. Including the fact that you did not want anything that happened to you.

You try again to walk her through the events of the Incident, hoping that if you go slower she’ll understand. You tell her about pushing your seat farther away. About your nervous fidgeting. The way you pitched your voice to show your discomfort. The way he ignored it all.

Catalina, I know all this seems confusing to you…

You shake your head, words failing you the way they did during the Incident. Why can’t she just listen to you? You didn’t want this.

Did you even tell him no?

The question leaves you gasping like a fish washed up on shore. No, you didn’t tell him no. You couldn’t. The word was bouncing through your mind at a million miles per hour, but you never said it out loud.

But you shook your head, didn’t you? You pulled away. You sent out as many signals as you could, each one telegraphing your negation.

Yes, you did all of those things. But you didn’t tell him no.

You’re not stupid. You’re not one of those girls in the movies or on TV. You know you could have said that word. You know those two letters could have formed on your lips and filled the too-small space between you and him. Something deep in the back of your mind stopped you from speaking up. From saying no.

Telling him no would have made things real.

You wouldn’t have been Catalina Cabrera, the average high schooler from an average high school. You would have been like them. The girls in the movies. The girls on TV. The girls in the news, their horror stories laid bare for all to see.

You wouldn’t have been the main character of your own life. You wouldn’t have been the girl in control of her world.

You would have been a victim.

No.

You didn’t tell him no?

I didn’t.

The counselor’s disappointed eyes will follow you for the rest of the week. You stare resolutely at her desk, at the handful of family photos and scattered papers and pens. You
cannot meet her gaze for fear of something worse lying beneath. The realization that she’s right? But she can’t be. You know...

I’m sorry, Miss Cabrera. There’s nothing I can do to help you. First you have to admit the truth to yourself.
You keep your eyes on your sneakers as you walk towards the door. Divya was wrong. She won’t help you.
You’ll just have to find someone who will.

Here is what happens when you talk to the principal.
And you say this happened on school property?
Yes. Yes, of course it was. Why else would you come to the principal of the school?
When was this, again?
After school. After school, in that classroom, on the desk you can’t stand to look at anymore. Being in the same room with it every day is bad enough.
Why was there no teacher present?
Shit. You stumble out an excuse, explaining that she had only ducked out for a few moments to use the restroom and hadn’t wanted to uproot your entire project all for a minutes-long bathroom break. Only she took longer than a few minutes, you explain, not that it was her fault. And then he decided to use that to his advantage.
This was your friend?
Not anymore, you think, but you nod your head. He was, once.
And you’re sure you weren’t just confused? I remember being your age, Miss Cabrera. Teenage hormones, and all that.
No. No. You weren’t “confused.” You were violated. You were desecrated. You were hurt on school grounds, and isn’t it his job to keep you safe? The angry words boil inside you but you swallow them down before they can spill out and burn you both. Instead, you shake your head slowly, emphasizing your point. Apparently he only takes it as hesitation, as he smiles triumphantly, patting your shoulder like one would a dog.
See, just a little misunderstanding. I’m sure you two will work it out.
Even you have a breaking point. The fury that’s been building in your chest finally explodes out of you all at once. “It wasn’t a misunderstanding! I told you everything that happened! I didn’t want him—”
The principal holds up a hand, cutting you off with a well-meaning smile that only serves to infuriate you further. Miss Cabrera. The student in question is an upstanding one. Straight A’s. a valued member of the school soccer team, all his teachers report him as a pleasure to have in class and his friends would gladly say the same. Do you know what you would need to incriminate this boy? A lawyer— and an expensive one at that. You’d need evidence, real evidence, not just your word. Did you use a sexual assault kit after the fact?
You shake your head—you didn’t even think to. You were panicking and shattered and all you wanted to do was wash away the Incident. And damn it all, you’ve screwed yourself over because of it.

Then you have no solid evidence, and in a court of law your word alone will not hold. The worst part is that he isn’t angry. He isn’t smug. He isn’t defeated. He isn’t anything. Your principal looks you in the eye and speaks in a flat, toneless voice, striking down any defense you stutter out. There are no security cameras in the classrooms, no other eyewitness accounts, and no other indicators that the student in question would be disposed to this type of behavior.

You know what his answer will be even before he speaks, his hollow gaze cutting into you from behind those thick black glasses.

I’m sorry, Miss Cabrera. There’s nothing that can be done.

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Here is what happens when a school ignores its angry girls.

Your friend Divya, whose bark is often far worse than her bite, suggests a ludicrous idea. She does so almost flippantly, waiting for one of you to blink.

And so you all wait together for one of you to blink. To challenge this idea. To acknowledge reality looming above you. To burst the bubble of imagination. To rid the air of this silly prospect and get back to finding a real way to fix things.

None of you blink.

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Here is how you take your revenge.

You don’t ask Sera how she got her hands on a pair of keys to the school.

You do ask Divya how much the supplies cost, but she brushes you off and gives only a grim smile.

The price of all this is a damn good one to pay to watch those fuckers squirm.

The anger in your chest surges again and you nod, taking a few of the cans from her overflowing box. She’s right. Maybe you wouldn’t have said it in so many words— and certainly not such colorful ones—but Divya’s put a voice to the feeling pounding in your chest like a frenzied heartbeat.

The click of the doors being pushed open echoes through the long hallway. For a moment, all of you stand in a clump, afraid to take the first step. If you take the first step, then there is no going back.

Then a girl you’ve never seen before, a girl with a long sheet of midnight-hued hair and eyes that kiss in the corners, reaches a single foot forward and rests the toe of her beat-up ballet flat on the shiny tile. Not a sound can be heard, but it feels as if a collective exhale comes from your little group, and she takes another step— a real, full one—emboldened by your silent support. She makes a beeline for the countertop, a neon green can clutched tight in
her hands and fire in her eyes. The others follow, spilling out across the school. They need no instruction— you all know why you’re here.

A girl with skin the color of dark maple and braids that flow down her back like a river offers you a toothy smile as she reaches up, pointing out the security cameras in the hallway. “They can’t ignore this one. Not anymore.”

Beside you, Sera waves to the camera and jauntily sticks up her middle fingers. Normally you would laugh, but tonight you have more pressing matters to deal with. As each member of your party disperses to find their own personal hells, the little places this school has hurt them so deeply in, you make your way to the room. The place where it happened. The place that practically crushes you with memories each time you sit through class as if nothing has happened. Ground Zero, if you’re feeling particularly poetic— and tonight, you are.

Students armed with neon cans etch chilling phrases across the wall, though they’re not all words. You catch a glimpse of a shorter kid— about freshman age, only a few months or so into their high school experience—with a wild mane of curly hair scrawling a disturbing mural of hate onto a handful of lockers you know belong to the school’s resident pack of homophobes. Yellow, black, purple, and white spill over each other in a dizzying array, followed by a crimson X and a symbol of hate you’ve only seen on the pages of World War II textbooks.

You stroll past them as if it’s something you see every day— and as you’re starting to realize, you do. The hateful words, degrading phrases, all of it. It echoes through these halls every goddamn day, and none of you dare to fight back, to lash out with the truth. Quit being so sensitive, they’ll say. You’re overreacting. It was just a joke. You can practically hear the wagging tongues follow you like a shadow. But they disappear the moment you set eyes on the familiar wooden door. 

Click.

For a few moments, all you can do is stand and stare. Behind this door lies your own personal hell, the memories of everything he stole from you. The sounds of the others, their laughter and tears and nerves, all of it disappears until there is nothing left but you and your can and that goddamned door.

You no longer have control of your body, the way you did during the Incident. Your hand reaches out and rests on the door handle, but you don’t feel the cool kiss of the metal. You push down and feel no pressure, even as the edge cuts into your palm. You step inside without ever deciding to move your legs, and your gaze darts immediately to the desk where it happened, the two chairs pushed neatly against the fake wood. A deceptively innocent scene, even as your chest hitches with an overpowering urge to scream or sob or something. The feeling writhes in your chest, demanding to be let out, and you raise the can with two shaking hands, popping off the lid and aiming it like a gun.

So like one would with any gun, you pull the trigger.
Your hands shake so badly that the work ends up much wilder than you’d planned. But as you step back, the now empty can of spray paint clutched in your fist so tightly you can see your knuckles turn white in the shadowed room, you can see it. On the same desk where your best friend raped you, there is a blood-red target. Kneeling down beside the wet paint, you reach out a single finger and carve your name and his into the sticky mess, a warped version of the conjoined names etched onto high school desks and trees in the park. Then, for the first time since the Incident, you smile. They can’t ignore you now.

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Here is what will happen to you all. They can’t jail all of you. At least, you think they can’t. It’s just paint, Sera argues. They can suspend us, or expel us, but they can’t send us all to jail for some school graffiti. Divya shakes her head, glancing down at your copper skin, then her own, only a few shades darker, and her eyes fill with a sad kind of acceptance. “No. Not all of us.” It doesn’t matter. The deed has already been done, and now you wait in a line, heads held high and cans of spray paint clutched tight. The police are already on their way, according to a pale girl in jet black clothes— you’ve seen her once or twice around the school, she’s the type you’ve always been warned to stay away from, the type who comes to school with hollow, distant eyes and hangs out behind the dumpster at lunch smoking who knows what. Apparently her father is a police officer, and she’s long since learned the ins and outs of the school’s security measures.

You close your eyes, the first strains of a police siren echoing in your ears. It’s too late to run now. Not just for you. You cast your lot with this life from the second you left the school that day. But now it’s their turn. Their turn to feel trapped, sickened, unable to look away. Their turn to burn.

Your name is Catalina Cabrera.
And you are silent no longer.