

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects

Spring 5-1-2014

180 Degrees Away

Megan Daniels

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Daniels, Megan, "180 Degrees Away" (2014). *Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects*. 735.

https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/735

This Honors Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

180 Degrees Away

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

Megan Daniels
Candidate for BS Degree
and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2014

Honors Capstone Project in English and Textual Studies

Capstone Project Advisor: _____
Professor Arthur Flowers

Capstone Project Reader: _____
Assoc. Dir. Sarah Harwell

Honors Director: _____
Stephen Kuusisto, Director

Date: 4/23/2014

© Megan Daniels, 2014

Abstract

180 Degrees Away is a novel that started as a capstone project for the honors department and further developed into a work that will later be submitted to literary agencies and publishing houses.

The novel tells the story of eighteen-year-old Ames Treadway, who has been nothing but a punching bag to his father for years. After walking in on a particularly horrifying event involving his father and younger sister, Layla, Ames nearly kills his father before taking his sister and running away. Layla, Ames, and three of Ames' friends journey from their home in New Jersey to Nashville, where he believes his mother resides. With his sole desire of getting Layla somewhere safe before he is arrested for the crime he committed against his father, Ames is desperate. But after his mother rejects his plea for help, the group carries on north toward Philadelphia where his aunt – one last hope for a guardian to four-year-old Layla – lives.

Along with Ames on the road trip are his two best friends, Henry and Daisy, and Henry's girlfriend, Reign. Through his travels, Ames grows close to the troubled Reign, meets a professor and a homeless man who both truly believe in him and a boy that reminds him of himself, learns how to be there for his sister in ways he couldn't before, and discovers himself. The story is about familial love and romantic love, about friendship and betrayal, about desire and fear, about hate and compassion, and about freedom and what it is like to forfeit that freedom. It is about how Ames loses everything but finds himself in the rubble.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Executive Summary.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	viii
<i>180 Degrees Away.....</i>	1
Reflective Essay: “The Journey’s Journey”.....	342
Appendices.....	354

Executive Summary

180 Degrees Away is a creative writing project intended to intertwine what I have learned throughout my education in creative writing with bits and pieces of my other major, psychology. The novel serves as an experience for the reader to follow an eighteen-year-old boy on a quest to get his younger sister to safety while coming to terms with the inevitable loss of his freedom that is soon to come.

At the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to Ames, the main character, as he embarks on a road trip with three of his friends and his little sister, Layla. It is soon made clear that he is on said road trip because he nearly killed his father, tried to kill himself, and is now in search of his mother in hopes of her taking his little sister before his quickly approaching arrest. As the novel progresses, the reader gets a greater sense of the reasoning behind Ames' actions – his father's abuse toward him and later toward his younger sister. Ames finds his mother and fails to convince her both to take Layla and to help him when he is on trial in the future. His search for his mother leads him to Nashville; and then his journey to find his aunt lead him north to Kentucky, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

On this road trip with Ames are Layla, Henry, Daisy, and Reign. Both Ames and Henry have separate intimate relationships with Reign, and through this and the many experiences on his road trip to and from his mother's home, Ames discovers aspects of himself that have been deeply buried from a time before his father's attempted murder. There will be a parallel between the relationship that Ames has with his two friends and Reign, and the feelings he has toward the

freedom (the heaviest theme throughout the novel) that he is likely going to lose by going to prison.

By the end of the novel, Ames comes to terms with what has happened to him as he grew up and with having responsibility over Layla, despite finally finding his aunt in Philadelphia and convincing her to take care of Layla for him. Also at the end of the novel, Ames accepts that he is going to be arrested. This is not nearly as important as the moment when Ames realizes that he must do one thing: he must tell the authorities about what happened when he and his sister were living with his father. He intends to press charges against his father because of the abuse he experienced, regardless of the charges of attempted murder that his father is pressing against him, and Ames and Layla both intend on testifying in court.

I feel that *180 Degrees Away* is a coming of age story about the acceptance of one's self. With help from various characters along the way and with his friends and sister, Ames gains this acceptance and therefore gains the ability to tell the court what his father did to him. The reader will never know if Ames gets convicted of attempted murder or if his father goes to prison for child abuse because that is not important. What's important is both that Ames acknowledges what happened to him and that he finally takes his fate into his own hands instead of leaving it in the hands of his father.

I would not have been able to write a large majority of this book without the financial help of the honors department and the Crown-Wise Award. With this funding, I traveled from Syracuse to New Brunswick. From there I ventured down

toward the south, following the same route and staying in the same motels that the characters stayed in, and experiencing what they experienced. I would not have known what Nashville was like, nor would I have known anything about the small Podunk towns in Kentucky and Virginia that I visited. I traveled to Cleveland and Philadelphia as well, two large cities I had never been to despite the characters stopping there. It was an enlightening experience that helped my writing of the novel in unimaginable ways.

The process of writing *180 Degrees Away* has been a long one. A lot had to be changed between the first draft and the second. One hundred and forty pages were scrapped. The book went from being split into three parts to just being about that one middle part consisting of the road trip. Characters and smaller plot lines were eliminated. In the first draft, Layla was not on the road trip with the group, which seems silly now. Ames' aunt, Jeanie, and her husband have a significantly smaller storyline in the second draft, as does his lawyer. To inform the reader of what happened in the past that I deleted from the first draft, I added small flashbacks at the beginning of every chapter. This allows the reader to understand many things that they would otherwise not understand.

It is my hope that people can read my book and understand that books geared toward younger people can have depth. It is also my hope that people will be able to see that truly, at the heart of *180 Degrees Away*, the story is about a boy and his relationship with his sister, and their attempt at escaping a horrible situation. I want people to see a boy who is willing to give up everything to protect this four-year-old child who cannot protect herself, a boy that *does* give up

everything to protect her. I want people to understand not that the police are corrupt, but that anyone, regardless of his or her power or job position, can be like Ames' father.

180 Degrees Away has been a work in progress for nearly two years now, and I have never had a project feel so important to me. I have put everything into this novel, and I hope that if it were to one day be published, it may encourage other children in similar situations to Ames' to speak up about what is happening to them.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would have to thank my advisor and mentor of three years, Arthur Flowers. He has been there with my writing and me since the very beginning of this work, and he was there to tell me both when it was terrible and when it was a little bit decent. There is no way that this book would be what it is without his guidance and honesty.

I would also like to thank my reader, Sarah Harwell, who did not know if she was even allowed to be my reader but took the task anyway.

I want to thank Season Butler, my creative nonfiction teacher in London at SU Abroad. She read bits of my project when there were only bits to read, and gave me the best advice she could.

I want to thank the honors department at Syracuse University who helped me fund the research I needed to do for the book and for putting deadlines on my work that I probably would have otherwise not met.

Lastly, I want to thank the great friends I have for pushing me to write and to finish the book when I was tired and resistant, and my mother and grandmother, who wouldn't stop asking when the book was going to be done even though I always answered with a dull, "I don't know, sometime in April." And to my grandfather, who passed before he could ever see this become real, thank you for everything and for always believing I could do *it*.

180 Degrees Away

By Megan Daniels

Chapter One

I slipped.

No, I didn't.

I stepped forward.

And for a moment, I saw darkness. Expected darkness so much that it filled my sharp, distinguished vision. I heard rain drops pitter-pattering – pounding – against the river. The ocean of hope.

And then there was air swimming into my lungs when I expected a gust of water. Fingers intruded upon me and wrapped themselves around my wrist.

One moment sooner. One thought before. A million raindrops ago, but only one pitter-patter. I could have had my gusty water.

(Dark hopes put aside, the fingers fractured my wrist)

She cries.

The set of lungs she has is magnificent.

And she is relentless.

No one tells her to shut up, Layla, you're not a baby anymore. No one tells her to calm down, Layla. No one knows what to tell her. I don't know what to tell her. I rock her back and forth, bounce her on my knee like I used to when she was a baby. Still, nothing seems to sooth her. Snot dribbles from her nose, mixes with tears on her chin, and drips onto the sleeve of my shirt.

“Shh,” I say.

Daisy is beside me, reaching across me, rubbing Layla’s back. I only see her face through brief flashes of streetlights we pass. Eyebrows drawn together, the corners of her mouth pulled low. She combs some hair away from Layla’s face and tucks it behind her ear.

“It’s okay,” I try. I notice a small smudge of red on Layla’s cheek and I quickly try to rub it off. But it’s dried on, even with her tears dripping. No one cleaned her up. I was gone for so long, and Henry never thought to clean her up.

I pull her close, but she bumps against my other hand and I let out a sharp hiss. My wrist, now wrapped in a hard cast, feels swollen and sore.

“You okay?” Henry asks from the drivers’ seat.

“Fine.”

I catch Reign glancing over her shoulder, peering through heavy lidded eyes in my direction. I focus on Layla instead, and Reign turns back around and sinks into her seat. She shouldn’t be in this car, on this trip, this half-assed escape. She should be at home, warm in her bed, trying her best to wipe away the memory of tonight, of a couple hours ago when she and her father found me.

Warm. It’s a stupid thing to hope for considering the temperature both inside and out of the car. End of June weather, sticky and humid, and a sky threatening to open up above.

“We’ve been driving for a while,” Henry says. “Maybe we should find a place to –”

“Not yet,” I say. “Keep going.”

“Ames,” he tries.

“Henry.”

“Where are we even going?” Reign asks from beside him. “This is bloody ridiculous, Ames. We don’t –”

“Keep driving,” I say, ignoring her. “Please.”

Henry sighs. No other words are exchanged.

*

Hours pass, and Layla’s cries simmer to a low but consistent whimpering. She’s been up for nearly twenty-four hours. I press my lips to the top of her head.

She whines my name and threads her fingers into my shirt. Daisy has fallen asleep with her head against the cushions of her seat, hair frizzed and wild and tickling my neck every so often. Henry and Reign have been murmuring soft words to each other for the past hour or so. I can’t make out what they’re saying, but his right hand is gripping her left.

“Pull off at the next exit,” I say quietly.

Henry gives a small nod. He veers to the right and turns off the highway and onto a lonesome Virginia street.

“I’m going to pull in here, okay?” Henry says, gesturing toward the motel on the corner. “We’ll see if they have any openings.”

“Yeah,” I say. I can’t imagine they’re too full. The town looks like the backyard of the backwoods.

Henry pulls into the spot closest to the entrance, and turns the ignition off. I whisper Layla’s name into her ear and wrap an arm tightly around her as I open

the door and step outside. My legs feel like wooden two-by-fours and I stumble. She screeches and hangs on tightly.

“I’ve got you,” I say and bounce her up.

Daisy yawns as she steps out of the car and she taps me on the shoulder. “Is she okay?” she asks quietly, nodding at Layla.

I look down, away. I’m not sure if she’s okay. I’m not sure if she’ll ever be okay, now. I head toward the entrance of the motel, but Henry runs to stop me, a backpack now slung over his shoulder. “No, I got it. Give me some cash. You might be on the news or something.”

The news. I might be on the news.

It takes me a moment to realize that I’m supposed to do something, to give him money, to reach into my pocket and retrieve my wallet and give him some appropriate amount of bills to pay for a room. I do those things, hand him a crumpled hundred. He takes it without asking. I give it without telling.

“Are you loaded all of a sudden?” Reign says, suddenly too close.

I step back. “Let me know which room. I’m waiting out here.”

Henry nods once and jogs off through the entrance, grabbing Reign’s hand and taking her with him. Daisy stays with me. She takes Layla’s small hand in hers and says, “Hey, pumpkin. Do you think you want some ice cream later? Maybe I can convince our chauffer to takes us to get some.”

“Daisy,” I start, but Layla peeks up from my shoulder and sniffles.

“Maybe . . . oh, what was your favorite?”

Layla sniffles again. “Cookie dough,” she murmurs into my shirt.

“Maybe we’ll get some cookie dough,” Daisy says.

“How about that, huh, Layla?” I adjust an arm under her bottom and lift her higher. “Does that sound good?”

She sniffles in response, shrugs, says, “I want sprinkles.”

I smile, and mouth a silent, “Thank you,” in Daisy’s direction.

When Henry returns, he’s holding two room keys. I take one and follow him back inside, quickly past the front desk, into the elevator. “Sixty bucks for the night. You share a bed with Daisy, okay?”

“Didn’t think I was going to share with you,” I say.

“When are we getting ice cream?” Layla asks when we get out of the elevator.

“Here, this room.” Henry sticks his card into the slot and the door clicks open. He pushes his way inside and drops his backpack onto the floor.

“It’s cold in here,” Reign says.

“Maybe wear something without holes in it.”

She glares at me.

I place Layla on the bed, and she reluctantly lets go of my shoulders.

“When are we getting ice cream?” she asks again.

I notice a splotch on the side of her neck and I lick my thumb and wipe it off. She cringes and scoots away.

Henry collapses on his bed, clothes still on, shoes still on. He wraps himself in the blanket and says, “Wake me up tomorrow.”

I don't say anything. He drove through the night, watched the sunrise front and center. Daisy sits beside Layla and kisses the side of her head. Layla pushes her away. "You said ice cream. Not sleep. Ice cream."

"Ice cream. Yum," Reign says. She sits beside Layla. "I can take you looking for some if you want."

Layla smiles. I reach for her hand and hold it in mine. "Layla, sweetie. How about a nap first?"

Her eyes well. "Daisy said ice cream. Cookie dough. Daisy said."

She is exhausted, eyes reddened, hair in her face, eyebrows drawn together and wrinkled. She uses the back of her wrist to wipe her eyes. I pick her back up, away from Reign, nod, and say, "Okay, there's a McDonalds across the street. I don't know if they'll have cookie dough, though. Is vanilla okay for now?"

She ponders this and eventually nods. "Sprinkles?"

"Sprinkles," I say, and then, "I'll be right back," to the others.

I leave without anyone else, just Layla, legs clasp my waist, arms knotted around my neck. I carry her to the McDonalds, but she's asleep by the time I reach the door, head resting on my shoulder, soft breaths against my neck like dandelion petals brushing against my skin. I buy her a little cup of ice cream with rainbow sprinkles and carry it back to the room with her. It'll be there for her if she wakes up, and if it melts by then, I'll take her again. Right now, I lay her on the bed, tuck her beneath the covers, comb her hair behind her ear.

“Didn’t make it there, huh?” Reign asks. She’s sitting beside a snoozing and snoring Henry. He’s burrowed beneath the quilt, all but the top of his head hidden.

“Here, let’s put that in the fridge,” Daisy says. She takes the ice cream from me and walks it to the other side of the room. “It’ll keep it frozen a little longer at least.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Ames, why are we running?” Daisy asks quietly. She looks at me, sad and confused, and she knows what happened, at least that something happened, at least some smidgen of a particle of what went on not that long ago.

“I told you before,” I say. “I have to find my mom.”

“In Nashville,” Daisy says slowly.

“In Nashville,” I repeat. “That’s where she sent her last letter from. That’s where she is.”

Daisy looks down, lip bitten. I want to tell her not to chew on her lip; tell her that my mother is there, in Nashville, waiting with open arms; tell her that her leaving so long ago doesn’t mean anything. I want to tell her that I *need* my mother to be there, that the rest can’t matter, that I have no alternative, no plan b. Instead, I stay silent.

The room fills with that silence almost like silence is a thing, is something, tangible and whole and all encompassing. It is thick and I feel it get caught in my nose and throat. I choke on it just as Reign says, “Well, Henry was right. You were on the news.”

“What?” I say.

Daisy sighs and sits on the corner of Layla’s bed. “Reign, shut up.”

“What?” I say again, louder.

“You tried to kill the man? Bloody hell, Ames.” Reign whistles, impressed. “No wonder you were out on that bridge, ready –”

“Shut the hell up,” I say, eyeing Daisy quickly. But really, I can only think about . . . did Reign say *tried*?

“What’s she talking about? What bridge?” Daisy asks, crossing her arms over her ribcage.

“The man is righteously hurt, Ames. You did quite the number on him.” The corner of Reign’s mouth is quirked up, challenging or happy or something that I don’t understand right now because does the girl have no sympathy? None?

The air still feels thick, like ooze, like melted plastic or molten lava, like silence but worse. I need to get out of the motel room. I need to breathe fresh air, cool air. She can’t . . . she’s not right. She can’t be right. I did . . . I tried so hard to end this.

And now.

Now.

Now it’s not over.

I look at Layla, sleeping, blonde hair over her face, once innocent but now . . . she’s been through so much. Seen so much. How can she be okay? And now it’s not over. For her. For me.

Why didn’t I jump sooner? One moment sooner?

*

I'm outside of the room. Running. When did I start running? Before Daisy called my name? Before Reign chased after me for about two feet? Before I heard Layla stir awake and say something like *Ames don't scream or ice cream?*

I keep running.

The town is full of nothing. There's a lot of grass, a mobile home yard that I consider and decide against sneaking into, some fast food restaurants, and a police station that looks more like a mansion.

The dark is a dark I have never experienced before. Without streetlights. Without headlights. Far enough down the road, I can no longer see in front of me. I stop running. I hold my hand outward, marvel at my blindness. I wonder if this is what death feels like. I wonder if he experienced this even for a moment. I wonder how he survived a hit like the one I gave him, straight over the head. I'm sure there's an entire police force searching for me at home. Just the way he'd have it. And he wouldn't press charges and then he'd kill me himself. He's going to get out of the hospital, get his men to hunt me down, slap cuffs on me, drag me back, and then slit my throat himself.

I wonder if it's really that bad to be encased in darkness like this. Maybe he'll spare Layla.

Maybe.

Or maybe I can find my mother, get her to take us in, hope that she'll find some motherly instinct stashed away in an old overall pocket or something.

And then I wonder how Layla's doing, and I turn back around.

I feel like I can run to Nashville from here. If it wasn't for her, maybe I'd leave the others and try. How selfish would that be? To drag them out here, hours and hours of driving, and then ditch them for a longer more arduous form of travel.

I'm gone for nearly an hour before I finally make it back to the hotel.

Reign is sitting on the curb outside the front doors. She's smoking a cigarette, her cell phone balanced on her knee. First rule was to leave cell phones at home. They can be tracked. Henry and Daisy left theirs at home. I left mine at home. But Reign . . . unbelievable. I try to walk past her, but she grabs my hand and tugs me back.

"Ames, wait," she says.

I pull my hand free and yank the door open.

"I'm sorry, okay?" she says. "I'm sorry I was a bitch. I'm sorry for the bridge thing."

I keep walking toward the staircase, toward our room. Layla's asleep when I get back, an empty ice cream cup beside her, hair sticking to her face with sugar, a few sprinkles on her cheeks. Daisy is also asleep on the bed, arm tossed over Layla's small waist.

I kneel at the bedside and kiss the side of Layla's head. "We'll be okay," I whisper into her ear. "We'll find her and we'll be okay."

Chapter Two

“Who are you?” English. Definitely English. What English girl ends up here?

“You first,” I said.

She started walking down the sidewalk in the same direction as Henry’s house so I followed her. “You were outside my house.”

“Your house? I was stopping by to see if Jim was here.”

“Why?”

“I’m supposed to help him set up for a barbeque later.”

“Oh.” She pulled a cigarette from her purse and stuck it between her lips.

“So, is he home?”

“No, he’s out buying something overly American.”

“Oh.”

We continued walking for a few seconds, silent. Her shoe scraped against the sidewalk and I cringed.

“Who are you?” she tried again.

“Ladies first.”

“Ah, a gentleman, I see.”

I glanced at her every few steps. Things I made note of: pale skin in that porcelain type of way; dark hair; blue eyes – blue? – no, grey; sloped nose that was a little crooked at the end but somehow endearing.

“I’m Ames.”

She looked at me. Yeah, definitely grey eyes. “You caved. How uninteresting of you.”

I stared at her. “Why were you in Jim’s house?”

“I’m Rain,” she said instead, holding her cigarette between two fingers of one hand and stretching her other hand toward me.

Her hand felt small in mine. “Like the kind you can drown in,” I whispered.

“No,” she said, “like the kind that rules over empires. R.E.I.G.N.”

“Oh. Interesting name.”

We turn left at the corner. “Interesting fascination with drowning.”

“Interesting that you suspect that.”

She tapped the ash from her cigarette onto the ground.

“Where are you headed?” I asked.

“Hospital,” she said.

“Are you sick?”

“No.”

“Do you work there?”

“I volunteer there. I don’t think they hire sixteen year olds.”

Sixteen.

We were nearing Henry’s house and I could see his banged up jeep in the driveway. The dents in the front bumper, from a deer that had decided to commit suicide by running headfirst into the hunk of metal. But we’d been parked when it

happened, so the deer had only mildly concussed itself and had then taken off. His mom's car was beside the jeep, looking pristine in comparison.

“So you're staying with Jim now,” I said, prying.

“Yes.” She dropped the butt of her cigarette to the ground and pulled the box out of her purse again, opened it, tapped the bottom, and pulled one out. She offered it to me.

I took it from her and placed it my mouth. She lit it and I inhaled the smoke, savoring the warmth.

She lit one for herself and said, “I knew you were a smoker.”

“My teeth that bad?”

“Just a vibe you have.”

“How do you know Jim?”

She blew a stream of smoke into the air. “He may or may not be my biological father.”

“Your father? I didn't know he had any kids.”

“Neither did he. Surprises all around.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Wow.” I wanted to say more but we reached Henry's house, and I couldn't walk much further. I cleared my throat loudly. “Well, this is my stop.”

“Your house?”

“No. A friend's.”

Like he heard me, Henry's front door opened. He stumbled outside, shouting something angrily over his shoulder, probably at his mother, who then slammed the door behind him. He spotted me standing in front of his driveway and grinned big. "Ames, man! Good, you're here!"

Reign flicked ash onto the ground. I felt the first drop of rainwater water against my face.

"And who's this?" Henry asked.

"Reign," she answered.

"Reign," he repeated. His slightly triangular eyebrows became even more triangular when they rose. I could see the idea in his eyes. I wanted to say, No, Henry. I wanted to say that I'd met her first. "Pretty name. I'm Henry."

She blinked at him, raindrops collecting in her eyelashes and falling down her cheeks like small tears. Her eyes ventured to me. "I'm running late," she said. "But I'll be at Dice tonight. You guys should stop by."

I hadn't been to Dice in ages. Before I answered her, she started to back away.

"Don't drown," she said, hand held out, gathering raindrops. She spread her fingers and let them seep through, and then she left with only another burnt out cigarette butt left in her place. I take a drag from the one she'd given me.

Henry whistled. "Wow, man."

I wake up with a weight on my chest. Small and warm and rising up and down with each breath. I open my eyes slowly, against the sun's rays that are slipping through the cracks in the blinds. Layla's entire body is huddled into my side, arms and legs clinging to me. But she's still asleep.

Past her, on the other side of the bed, is Daisy, head buried into a pillow, hair fanned out on either side. On the other bed is just Henry, still hidden beneath the blanket, but alone. Reign isn't there with him, nor is she in the room at all.

I check the clock – nearly one in the afternoon. By the time I got to sleep earlier, the sun was rising up in the sky. I don't think the others fared much better than that either.

I ease out from underneath Layla, careful not to knock her with my cast, and tuck her back underneath the quilt. A backpack of my things is sitting on the floor against the wall. Someone – probably Daisy – must have brought it in last night when I was either out with Layla getting ice cream or out walking. I dig through it and retrieve a clean pair of underwear and a t-shirt from the mess of balled up clothing and toiletries.

The bathroom door creaks when I open it and I stop in fear of it waking someone, but no one moves. I close it quietly and drop my clothes onto the closed lid of the toilet. Shower on as hot as it goes. Shower curtain pulled back.

I try to keep my cast away from the water. I don't have a plastic bag to wrap it in like I used to do for my broken leg back in seventh grade. My broken leg . . . that's a thought I'd rather avoid right now. Still, some water hits it regardless. I can feel my wrist throbbing underneath. I ran out of the hospital

before they gave me any painkillers. They cased my arm and then I was gone. See ya. I don't need the police catching me there before I had a chance, a true chance.

I wonder if that's even what I have right now. A true chance. I wonder how awake my father is, how capable he is of sending his dogs after me. And even if he isn't awake, how many cops are already looking. Reign did say I was on the news.

I move quicker, suddenly worried. We didn't drive *that* far out of New Brunswick. Just to Virginia. Just a handful of hours into Virginia. I scrub shampoo into and out of my hair, wash up, stop thinking about my father, about that broken leg, about his broken head and how he could've possibly survived.

And then I'm out of the shower, drying off, putting on clean clothes, ignoring the subtle pain in my wrist. When I walk out of the bathroom, Reign is back and Henry and Daisy are awake and getting their things together. Layla's still asleep, a little ball beneath a pile of blankets.

"Hey," I say.

Henry pulls a shirt over his head and cuffs up the sleeves. "Hey, I was thinking we could grab a bight to eat and then get back on the road."

"Yeah, sounds good."

"Where'd you go last night?" Daisy asks. She scoops her unruly curls back into a ponytail and wraps a band around it.

"Just took a walk."

Reign pulls a cigarette out from her purse and sticks it in her mouth but I snatch it away from her. “Hey,” she says angrily.

“Not around Layla,” I say and toss the cigarette into the garbage.

Reign rolls her eyes. “Whatever. I’m going outside then.”

I shrug and kneel beside Layla’s still form and gently shake what I suspect to be her shoulder. She groans a little and rolls over.

“Layla, sweetie, time to wake up, okay?”

She retreats away from my hand and digs herself deeper into the mattress.

I pull the quilt away and she lets out a dreadful whine. “Layla, come on. You can sleep in the car, okay?”

“No, I want to sleep here.” She tries to tug the blanket back but I keep a tight hold on it.

“We’re going to get lunch. Are you hungry?”

“Sleepy,” she says, eyes tearing up. “Daddy let me sleep a lot.”

Yeah. Because he didn’t want to deal with her. “Well, Daddy isn’t here. Come on, get your butt up.”

She struggles against me when I grab her waist and lift her out of bed, and she starts crying when I won’t let her back up. I shake my wrist out a little and grimace at the ache there. “Stop, Ames!” She balls up her fist and pounds it against my leg.

“Hey, now. No hitting.” I stand with her in my arms and try to avoid her thrashing limbs. Her hair is a little greasy, stuck to the sides of her neck, and I see

a small splatter of red on the crease of her elbow. “Actually, we should probably give you a bath.”

This really sets her off, screaming and crying and pushing against me, craving escape.

“We can give her a bath in Nashville,” Daisy reasons. “Right, Layla?”

Layla just says, “No bath!”

“Okay, no bath,” Daisy says, and takes Layla from me with ease. Layla hardly struggles against her.

“Where’s my ice cream?” she asks.

Daisy smiles and bounces her up a little. “We’ll get you some more on the way out, okay?”

Layla, still frowning, nods.

“But you have to let Ames help you brush your teeth and get ready, okay?”

Again, begrudgingly, Layla nods.

Daisy hands her back to me.

*

Back on the road, ice cream smeared on Layla’s smiling face. Smiling. At least she can still smile. She hands me the empty cup and even says, “Thank you!”

I tousle her hair a little and use a napkin to wipe her face. She giggles and bites my hand playfully. All exhaustion and tantrum-esque behavior seems to have completely vanished. She even ate some lunch with us at the McDonalds.

“How do you even know your mom is in Nashville, Ames?” Henry asks.

“She could be anywhere.”

I reach into my pocket and pull out a crumpled piece of paper. “Because she sent me a letter once.”

Reign unbuckles her seatbelt and turns around in her seat, resting her chin beside the headrest. “What’d it say?”

I glance at her. “None of your business. But the return address was from Nashville. Plus, she grew up there. I think she just wanted to go back home.”

“Without you?” Reign says, eyebrow quirked. “How nice.”

“Shut up, Reign,” I say, jaw clenched.

“Babe, turn back around,” Henry says.

Daisy rolls her eyes.

Layla says, “We’re finding our Mommy? Like Henry’s Mommy?”

I smile at her. “We’re finding our Mommy.”

We’re finding my mom actually. She’s not Layla’s mom. No, that position goes to Bethany Star, an exotic dancer my father knocked up almost five years ago. But Layla doesn’t need to know anything about that. And really, I’m sure my mom would take her in. Raise her as her own. Keep her when I’m sent off to jail because, well, jail seems kind of likely right now. I just need to be out long enough – out of my father’s reach – to get Layla to my mom. To drop her off and make sure she has a home. Stable and loving and completely different than what she’s used to.

“When did she send the letter, exactly?” Henry asks. He pulls his visor down to block out the sun. Reign does the same.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, shoving the paper back into my pocket. “She’s there.”

Henry doesn’t say anything else. Reign asks him to turn on the radio, and he does, and then we’re driving to The Best of the 80s, 90s, and Today. I watch the cars around us, and make note of each driver – an old man in a cowboy hat, a teenage girl no older than Reign, a middle aged guy arguing with his wife beside him. I create these little vignettes about their lives. The old man is on his way to one of the last rodeos he’s hosting, the girl visiting her older boyfriend at his new apartment, the couple preparing to divorce and arguing about how to tell their two kids.

I do this for the next few hours until Reign twists around, pokes her head over her seat, and says, “Fifty year old man, recently divorced because his wife couldn’t handle his lifestyle choice in becoming a clown, moderately to severely depressed that this is his life.”

And I almost counter with, “Fifty year old man, recently married to fellow clown, moderately to severely joyous that he has found a clown to love and who loves him in return.”

But I don’t and I lean my head back and close my eyes and try to sleep, and I assume she turns back around. And I can hear that small breath of disappointment escape her.

She knows what she did. So I don't – I can't – care about her disappointment in me.

*

Two bathroom stops, another drive-through McDonald's excursion for dinner, and an hour in standstill traffic beside cow pastures and fields of hay later, we're in Nashville. We pull into the parking lot of some shabby looking motel off the highway and Daisy looks around skeptically. I'm about to open my door when there's a loud *tap tap tap* on Henry's window, and the face of an old, gap-toothed man staring in.

Henry locks the doors quickly and breaths a, "Holy shit."

"Ames!" Layla grabs my hand and tries to weasel onto my lap, but her seatbelt keeps her in place.

With one eye drifting to the right, the man rubs his fingers together and mouths, "Money?"

Henry shakes his head slowly, but Reign fishes out a few dollars from the small compartment on the top of her backpack. She hands it to Henry, who stares at her, bewildered. She nods at the old man, and when Henry doesn't move, she reaches over him and opens the window.

"Here you go, sir," Reign says, taking the money from Henry and giving it to the man.

The old man smiles, displaying half the amount of teeth he should have. He kisses his fingers and presses them against Reign's cheek before scurrying away. She sits back in her seat and, and Henry quickly rolls the window up.

“What the hell was that?” Henry asks angrily. “He could have killed us.”

Reign rolls her eyes. “Oh, please. He just looked hungry.”

“Hungry?” Henry snorts. “He probably just gave you gonorrhea with that touch. You expect me to kiss that face now?”

Reign leans forward and shoves her face against his. “I dunno,” she giggles. “But here, have some gonorrhea.”

He can't help but laugh and he actually does plant a kiss or two on her other cheek and her lips. I shift in my seat and look down toward Layla instead, who's fiddling with her seatbelt. I help her unbuckle it, and she scoots onto my lap.

“Well,” I say, glancing outside. “It seems we're back in the ghetto.”

“Feels like home, doesn't it?” Henry says when he and Reign have separated their faces from one another.

“Yeah,” I say.

We get out of the jeep, and when I stretch, at least three different joints pop. Layla grimaces at the noise, and I sweep her up quickly before another crazed homeless man can come along and take her.

Daisy wrinkles her nose. “It smells like car fumes.”

“In the ghetto,” Henry sings and Daisy rolls her eyes.

I wait outside with Layla and Daisy, while Henry and Reign go into the office and ask for two rooms, except they only have one room available because their renovating the second floor, and the first floor is pretty booked up. Reign comes out complaining about the guy at the front desk, that he chastised them for

not coming in with a reservation, that he looked like a bum and acted like an asshole, and that his accent was hardly understandable. Daisy asks about his nationality, and Reign just says, “American.”

The room isn't bad. There are two king sized beds, like the ones in Virginia, but Henry seems more skeptical of these and he checks the blankets thoroughly. “For blood, or you know, other fluids,” he says.

I set Layla down onto the bed, and my backpack down onto the floor. When I turn back around, Layla's jumping up and down. I smile and catch her mid air and she giggles. “Hey, remember that story about the monkeys?” I ask.

She shakes her head and giggles. “No!”

“No? The ones who fell off the bed? No jumping on the bed, okay?”

She sticks her tongue out at me and giggles once more, and when I set her down she starts jumping again. “You can't catch me!” she shouts, bouncing out of my reach.

I sigh and Reign comes over, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. “So I hear you're going to be a dad,” she says, elbowing me.

I step back, keeping close watch of Layla. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Well, you ran away with your sister. I assume you understand what that entails, yeah? Raising her and feeding her and getting her in school next year. Very fatherly things, you're attaching yourself to.”

“Shut up, Reign,” I murmur just as Layla slips on the blanket and falls back, her forearm knocking against the corner of the table.

She screams and I let out a breath. Her eyes are filling with tears and her mouth opens up, round and pained, and she starts crying. I sit crawl onto the bed beside her, past Reign, and pull her onto my lap. “That’s why I said no jumping, Layla,” I tell her.

She continues to cry, burying her face into my shoulder.

“What happened?” Henry asks from the other side of the room.

“Is she okay?” Daisy shouts from the bathroom.

“She’s fine,” I say. “Layla, let me see your arm.”

She lets me hold her arm out for inspection, and I see a small scratch where the corner nicked her. It’s barely bleeding. I wipe the pad of my thumb and kiss the cut gently. “There, is that better?”

“No!” Layla shouts.

Reign laughs.

“Here, let’s wash it off, okay?”

Layla nods and snivels into my shirt. I bring her over to the sink and run cool water over her arm. I use some soap and scrub a little against her skin, and then rinse her arm off again, and when we’re done, I wrap a washcloth around it.

When she sees it, she smiles, cheeks still wet with tears. “Look, I’m like you.”

“Yup!” I hold up my casted arm and knock her head gently with it. The ache in my arm is still there, but it’s getting a little better, I think. Or I’m distracted. I’m not sure.

Daisy emerges from the bathroom frowning. “What happened, baby girl?” she asks, Layla.

Layla holds up her washcloth-bandaged arm. “I broke my arm like Ames.”

Daisy looks at me.

“It’s a scratch,” I tell her.

She nods slowly. “Okay, well, Miss Layla, what would you like to do? How about watch some TV with me, huh?”

“Actually,” I say, clearing my throat. “I was hoping we could go to the address on the letter my mom sent? I want to find her as soon as possible.”

“At night?” Henry asks.

“Yeah, it’s rude to stop by someone’s house at . . .” Reign checks her watch, “. . . nine o’clock. And by the time we found the place . . . we should wait until tomorrow, Ames.”

I ignore her and head toward the door. “Who’s with me?”

“Ames,” Henry says. “She’s right. We’ve been driving for the past eight hours. Just rest a little and we can find her tomorrow, okay?”

He’s supposed to be my friend, to side with me. Daisy must see that flicker of betrayal I feel, because she crosses the room quickly and grabs my hand. “Let’s just hang out here for the night, and we’ll wake up early tomorrow and head out to find her, okay?”

I pull my arm free, and mutter a, “Fine, but I’m going on a walk. Can you watch Layla?”

“You probably shouldn’t be out by yourself in this neighborhood,” Daisy reasons. “And you probably shouldn’t leave Layla so much if –”

“Will you watch her?” I ask.

She sighs. “Yeah, I’ll watch her.”

“Thanks.” I walk outside and close the door a little too harshly. I won’t go looking for her today, but tomorrow I’m going to find her. And right now I just need some air. I just needed out of the room. I just needed time to think. About . . .

About what?

About being a father?

It’s ridiculous. I am eighteen years old. I’m not Layla’s father. I’m her brother. And as soon as we find my mom, she can be Layla’s mother. I’d be a shitty parent to Layla, anyway, considering the probability of heading off to prison in the not too distant future. Really, though, how could I raise her?

Reign was just trying to start something, an argument, maybe. She likes riling me up. She always has. She’s –

“Hey, wait up!”

She’s right behind me.

I swing around, nearly out of the parking lot and to the sidewalk. “What do you want?”

“I want to come,” she says.

I nearly laugh. “Yeah, right. What do you really want?”

“I want to go on a walk with you.”

I stare at her. “Go back inside, Reign.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“Why can’t I come? Henry thinks I’m going to search for the nearest gas station to stock up the mini-fridge with snacks. I can come with you instead.”

“Lying to your boyfriend? That’s awfully rude of you,” I say, turning back around. I hop up the curb, onto the sidewalk.

She jogs up to me. Déjà vu. She might as well offer me a cigarette and call this the mirror image of our last *civilized* encounter. Also our first encounter.

“Where are you headed?” she asks.

“Go back to the motel, Reign.”

“I like adventures.”

“I know you do.”

“And how would you know that?” She smiles coyly.

“Go back to the motel.”

She links arms with me. I try to detangle myself but she holds on tightly.

“Stop it, okay? I saved you. I deserve –”

“Saved me?” I scoff and yank free from her. “You damned me. Now go back to the room, Reign.”

She crosses her arms over her chest tightly. “No.”

I groan and continue walking. We’re silent for a while, awkwardly walking side by side, neither of us speaking. But then we start onto a bridge and the weirdness gets a little out of control. Reign starts laughing quietly.

“Shut up,” I say.

She raises an eyebrow. “What’s wrong, Ames? Feel familiar?”

“Shut up, Reign.”

She lets out a breath. “I’m not sorry,” she says.

I’m not responding to that.

“I’d do it again. If you tried to jump right now, I’d do it again. With or without my dad to help me.”

I speed up, not trying to lose her necessarily, because I know it’s not possible, but more so to put a little distance between us, a little air.

But then she says, “Wouldn’t you?”

I stop, and I don’t turn around, and I do turn around, and she’s climbing up onto the side of the bridge, the skyline of downtown Nashville behind her, and I’m ready to run toward her but I don’t. I stay still, stay where I am, and watch her stand tall. Maybe with her arms out to the side like a certain someone. Maybe with her chest up to the sky.

“Wouldn’t you?” she asks again.

I feel a brief sting in my eyes, but I blink against it and turn back around and start off down the bridge once more. She won’t jump. She’s too in love with herself to consider suicide. And I’m not wrong, because not moments later, quick footsteps come pitter-pattering behind me, then a hand on my shoulder.

“You would’ve let me jump?” she asks angrily.

“I would’ve bet my life that you weren’t going to jump,” I say.

“You don’t think your life is worth very much though.”

I shrug.

She glares at me, and for once, just for a split second, I can't help but smile a little. But I clear my throat and look down. We're quiet the rest of the way off the bridge and down the street. We're walking toward bright lights and loud music, and I wonder if we're getting into the heart of the city.

The heart, where it's beginning to smell different, I think. Like fresh grass, maybe. The air is cooler than back in New Brunswick and maybe that's because it's night here, and maybe that's because I want it to be cooler here, but still, I think it really is. I stuff one hand into my pocket and let the casted arm hang dead and limp at my side. It knocks into Reign and she shoves me to the side. It was a playful gesture, but I take advantage of that new gap between us and keep it there.

"I understand what you're going through," she says.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask, exasperated. I just wanted a peaceful walk alone, toward Downtown Nashville, which is where we're headed, I've come to realize.

"Doing what?"

"Trying so damn hard."

"Trying?"

"To befriend me. You hated me a few days ago. Before . . . before everything. You hated me when I was just Henry's best friend. So why are you trying to become my friend now? It's really cruel of you to do that out of pity, if that's what —"

“I never hated you,” she says simply, looking at her nails in the moonlight. She pulls at a cuticle and rips some skin off. “And I’m not trying to befriend you out of pity. I mean, to be honest, Ames, you’re rather intriguing.”

“Because I killed my father?”

“Because you didn’t. And because you had the chance to make sure he was dead, and instead you ran. And because you tried to kill yourself, failed, and didn’t try again. And because there’s a little girl waiting for you in the hotel who you are now fully responsible for, and because the world is about to hate you, but you don’t seem like the type that the world should hate, so something really horrible must have brought you to this point. Even though I don’t know what. Even though I can certainly imagine what.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and stare at the glitz and the glam in front of me, a strip of stores and restaurants and bars. And I decide that it’s not worth having Reign tag along. So I turn back around and head back toward the bridge, back toward the hotel, and she follows behind me.

Chapter Three

“Where’s Mommy?” I asked.

“Gone, kid. It’s just you and me now.”

He placed his hands on my shoulders and squeezed hard, giving me my very first set of finger shaped bruises.

“Good morning children!” Henry shouts.

I shield my eyes from the sunlight streaming through the newly pulled back blinds. “What time is it?” I ask groggily. I notice Layla sitting up beside me, wide awake, ready for me to help her get ready.

Daisy’s at the other end of the bed, a blanket pulled entirely over her head. “Five more minutes, dad?” she asks. I’m not sure if she’s joking or if she’s enough in a sleepless stupor to call Henry dad.

“No, dear,” Henry says, climbing onto our bed. He jumps a few times, until Layla chastises him and shows him her scratched elbow. Then he stops and returns to his own bed.

It’s then that I notice Reign’s absence. I look toward the bathroom and realize that it’s vacant. “Where’s Reign?” I ask before I can stop myself. I’d like to hit myself in the head for that.

“Out smoking, and checking to see if another room is available so we don’t have to share with you guys. She took some cash from your stash, if that’s alright.”

“Not really,” I mutter, reaching for my abandoned pair of jeans on the floor. I dig my hand into the pocket and pull out the wad of bills. It feels a bit lighter, but not significantly so. I wonder how much I’m paying a night for this place. It’s pretty shabby. It can’t be that expensive.

“Listen, man,” Henry starts, smirking. “We can’t exactly do the deed with you guys here, so . . . we’d like it if there were two separate rooms. Reign brought it up first. I can chip in if you can’t afford it.”

Reign brought it up first. Lovely. “Whatever,” I say and roll out of bed. “Come on, Layla. Let’s get you ready, okay?”

Layla smiles and shuffles off the bed. She grabs onto my pajama pants and follows me to the bathroom, where I sit her on the counter. I put some tooth paste on her toothbrush and hand it to her. She sticks it in her mouth and haphazardly begins scrubbing her teeth.

I grab my toothbrush and do the same.

Reign *would* suggest that she and Henry get a separate room. After all her sympathy toward me, she'd rather spend her nights *doing the deed* with Henry. Whatever. I shouldn't care. Hell, I'm the one who's turned down her recent attempts at friendship, or at least cordialness. But really, right now when I'm scrambling to get Layla to a safe and stable home, when I'm on a time constraint, when I am literally running from the law, she thinks it's more important to have sex with Henry? Regardless of the extra cost that I'm not sure I even have, and that I'm sure Henry doesn't have, despite what he says.

"Ames," Layla says, mouth full of toothpaste foam.

I turn the faucet on and say, "Good job, Layla. Spit it out, okay?"

She spits the foam into the sink and puts her mouth beside the stream of water, letting it rinse the rest of the toothpaste out. I brush my teeth beside her and do the same.

Half an hour later both Layla and I are dressed and bathed. I'd gotten back too late last night to get her in the bath, but she seemed almost eager this morning, so things moved along quickly. I let her pick her own outfit from the little suitcase she packed before we left, and she goes with a pink dress and a pair of rainbow tights. I help her put the tights on and pull the dress over her head, and she threads her arms through the sleeves easily.

Layla jumps onto Henry's bed, where he's decided to "rest" while she and I got ready and while Daisy went on a coffee run with his car. Reign is still missing. Layla grabs onto Henry's arm and shakes him.

“Wake up!” she shouts into his ear, and he flinches, turning onto his opposite side.

“I’ll wake up when you guys are ready, kid,” he says, shoving her away playfully. She bounces onto her ass and giggles.

“Nooooo, wake up now.” She takes his wrist and tugs it toward her, but he over extends his arm and tickles her side. She bursts out laughing and rolls away from him and off the bed before running to me. “Ames, up!”

I pick her up and her legs lock around my waist. “What’s wrong?”

“Henry poked my belly. Yell at him!”

I smile and kiss her cheek. “Henry, how could you?”

He grumbles something unintelligible into his pillow and tugs the blanket over his head.

“Was it something like this?” I ask Layla, letting my fingers prod just underneath her ribs. She shrieks and squirms in my hold, just as Daisy walks through the door holding a tray of four coffees.

She frowns and asks, “What’s wrong, Sweetie?”

“Ames is tickling me!” Layla declares angrily.

My mouth drops open. “I would never!”

Daisy smiles and shakes her head as she places the coffees onto the nightstand. “Reign’s still not back yet?”

I shrug. “Haven’t seen her.”

“She left a couple hours ago. She said she’d be back by nine,” Henry says, still hidden beneath the blanket.

“Where’d she go?” Daisy asks.

“I dunno,” he says, finally emerging. His hair is a mess, eyes squinted against the light, a slight frown on his face. “She didn’t say.”

I place Layla on the bed, take a coffee, and roll my eyes maybe a little too obviously, because Henry glares at me with narrowed eyes. I ignore him and take a sip, burning my tongue and cringing. Reign disappearing without saying where she’s going and when she’ll be back? Sounds pretty appropriate.

Henry eases out of bed slowly and stretches his arms out to the side. He takes one of the coffees and rips the tops off a few packets of sugar. He grumbles something about there being no milk, takes a sip of coffee, complains about it’s bitterness, and then takes another sip.

“Can I have some?” Layla asks, propping herself up on her knees. She reaches for my cup, but I shake my head and raise it out of her reach.

“It’s a grown up drink,” I tell her.

She scowls. “Daddy let me drink grown up drinks.”

I swallow and clear my throat. “Well, Daddy’s not here.”

“Why?”

Daisy and Henry look at me expectantly. I lick my lips, suddenly dry.

“You don’t remember what happened?”

Layla taps her chin with her fingers, something she must have seen Dad do. “You hit him even though you say hands to yourself.”

Just then the front door opens and Reign struts in, sunglasses balanced on her nose, a slight pink on her shoulders and cheeks. Sunbathing somewhere,

maybe? She should've stayed out longer. A little longer. Any bit longer so she wouldn't come back in the middle of this conversation.

"But it's okay 'cause he hits you lots, too," Layla says.

"Layla, that's enough," I snap, but I didn't mean to snap. Reign's sudden return had me frazzled, and now Layla's eyes are filling up with tears and her lower lip is trembling.

"Daddy doesn't yell at me," she manages before breaking out in a series of sobs and running to Daisy. To *Daisy*, who isn't even her family. Daisy, who scoops Layla up and rubs her back as she cries into her shoulder.

My face grows warm, and I clench my jaw. Yeah, he didn't yell at her. Yelling at her wasn't the problem. Reign steps forward and links her thumbs into her belt loops.

"Um, hi," she says.

"Let's just get on the road," I say, grabbing my wallet off the dresser and knocking shoulders with her as I leave the room.

*

"So how far out are we?" I ask Henry. The GPS is suctioned to the glass in front of him, the address from my mother's final letter scrawled across the top as our final destination.

"Stop stressing. We'll get there when we get there." Henry cranks the AC all the way up and continues down the highway. Reign pops gum in the seat beside him. She never asked anything further about what Layla had said, at least not to me. And Layla hasn't said any more about our father. The car ride has been

a peaceful, if not slightly awkward, drive. That's how it remains: quiet small talk, soft bubblegum popping, a little strained laughter that no one questions. Layla points out the window occasionally, until we pull off the highway and the scenery takes a pretty drastic turn in the wrong direction. Our motel was in a bad neighborhood. This monstrosity of an area we just drove into is a different level of bad.

No one says anything about it, but I can see Daisy's hesitance and I can hear Henry clear his throat nervously as we pass someone cutting through a bike lock and making a swift escape. A few minutes later, Henry follows the GPS's instructions down a few small side roads, and there we are.

"This is it," Henry says warily, pulling the key from the ignition. The apartment building we're parked in front of is shabby and run down, paint chipping off the sides, black gaps where shingles used to be; crisp, brown grass with unruly dandelions to the side. "Let's check it out."

Henry is out of the jeep. Reign and Daisy are out of the jeep. Even Layla is out of the jeep, holding onto Reign's hand. I am still in the jeep. For some reason, my legs don't want to work. My muscles feel so stiff that the stiffness reminds me of the rigor of the dead. The dead are stiff like this. Except not really because I'm still breathing and my heart is still beating and my skin is still sweating.

"Ames?" Daisy knocks on the car window, and suddenly I can feel my legs again and my hands want to move and I open the door.

"Yeah," I say. "Let's go."

The walk to the front door is an experience, mainly because I'm nervous and every step seems to take the effort of twelve steps; but also somewhat because there are a million cracks in the pavement and in avoiding a seemingly inevitable stumble, every step seems to take the effort of twelve steps. I step onto the welcome mat in front of the door. It reads: *Only Welcome If Bring Beer*. The amount of grammar in that sentence is zero.

"Classy," Reign mutters.

I ignore her.

"Aren't you going to knock?" Daisy asks.

"Yeah."

They wait. I swallow. My palms feel sweaty and I wipe them on my jeans. Okay. Fingers close in a fist. I knock. Once, twice, three times.

I'm hoping for my mother. I just have to keep that in mind. I'm hoping for her to be here, regardless of how nervous I am, regardless of how much I do but don't want to talk to her, regardless of how I feel about her leaving. I'm still hoping she's behind this door.

It opens and the woman standing behind the threshold is not my mother. Two things give this away immediately: 1) the woman is in her mid-sixties, and 2) the woman is black.

"Can I help ya'll?" she asks with a deep southern twang. She doesn't sound mean, exactly, but more skeptical. "If you're some of them traveling preachers, I don't want none of —"

"Hi," I say, clearing my throat. "I'm looking for Cary Treadway."

“I don’t know no one by that name,” the woman says, and starts to close the door.

“Wait,” I say, thrusting my hand out. It slams against the door, and the noise is too loud. The woman looks angry. “She’s my mother,” I explain. “She’d be thirty-nine now. Blonde. Tall, from what I remember. Her eyes were blue, I think. Maybe. I’m not sure.”

“My eyes are blue!” Layla exclaims.

The woman looks at her and smiles kindly, but then she hesitates. “I may know her. I still never heard that name, though.”

“Ma’am,” Henry sighs. “Are you going to invite us in or are we going to have to stand here on the porch in the heat?”

She puts her hands on her hips and points her chin at me. “I’ll invite this one in. Ya’ll gonna stay out here, though. I don’t need youths in my home, tearin’ it apart.”

“Tearing it apart?” Henry scoffs. “Why would we –”

“Shut up,” Reign says quietly. “We’ll meet Ames at the car when he’s finished, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Yeah, okay. Layla, come with me, okay?”

Layla nods and lets go of Reign’s hand for my own. The woman takes my wrist in her leathery hands and leads me into her home. It smells like breakfast.

“Have a seat,” she instructs once we’re in the kitchen. I sit at the table and lift Layla onto my lap. She balances herself on my knee, and the woman nudges a

bowl full of biscuits toward us. “And take a biscuit. They just came outta the oven.”

“Thanks.”

“Now,” she sighs, “what’s your name, child?”

“Ames, and this is Layla.” I take a bite out of a biscuit, and nothing has ever tasted this good. It tastes like winning the lottery. I slouch against the kitchen chair and Layla leans back into my chest. I give her a bite and then take another for myself. I hadn’t contemplated being hungry.

When she asks if I want a second biscuit, I say yes and eat that one just as quickly.

“I’m Betty,” she finally says.

“These are amazing,” I say, mouth full, manners lost.

“My grandmama’s recipe.” She leans against the table beside me and says, “Now that lady you were talkin’ ’bout.”

Layla giggles. “You talk funny.”

“Layla –,” I start, but the woman interrupts me with a quick raised finger.

“Now, now that’s ’cause I’m not from where ya’ll are from. To me, you talk funny.”

Instead of responding, Layla looks up at me, silently asking for another bite of biscuit. I let her take a nibble from mine before finishing it.

“She’s my mom,” I say, returning to our original topic.

“Hold on.” She leaves the kitchen and I have to sit on my hands to keep myself from grabbing another biscuit. A minute or so later, Betty returns with a

small, square piece of cardstock in her hand. When she sits beside me I see that it's a Polaroid picture.

“This you, here?” she asks, holding the picture up for me to see.

I study it in all of its grainy and blurred glory. My mother how I remember her. I'm sitting on her lap and her arms are around my shoulders and we're both smiling or laughing – I can't tell which but I'd like to think we were laughing. It must have been just before she left; I look to be about five.

“Hey.” Betty snaps her fingers in front of my face.

“Yeah,” I manage. “Yeah, that's me. That's her. Where did you get that?”

She places it on the table, and I snatch it up quickly, like I was worried that if I waited too long, she'd have taken it back and I'd never see it again.

“I found it behind the bed when I moved the furniture 'round a few years ago. Figured it belonged to the lady here before.” She takes a biscuit and sinks her teeth into it.

“Did you know her?”

Betty shakes her head. “Nah, she left 'fore I moved in. I think she worked at some café down the street, though, 'cause they kept callin' here 'bout her schedule for the first few days I been here. She didn't tell 'em she got a new number, I guess.”

“A café?”

“Yeah,” Betty says. Crumbs fall onto the table and she brushes them onto the floor subtly. “It's called the Back Alley Diner. It's 'bout five minutes up the road.”

“You think they’ll know where she is?”

Betty shrugs. “Child, I don’t know. Maybe. You can hope.”

I stand a little too suddenly, lifting Layla up with me, who squeaks in surprise. Betty scoots her chair back. “Sorry,” I mutter, and then say, “You’ve been so much help. Thank you.”

“It was no problem, hun.” She stands and holds the bowl of biscuits toward me. “Take some for your friends”

I smile. “Sure. Thanks.”

*

Layla’s hungry. She makes that much clear as we enter Henry’s car. Unlike myself, she is not satiated by the biscuits, but they instead ignite a fiery hunger in her that she expresses through loud and persistent whining.

I tell her we’ll get food at the diner. I tell Henry about the diner. And then I hand the biscuits over to the rest of the car as we take off back down the road. The neighborhood gets a little less sketchy as we make our way to said diner.

My mom was a waitress back home, too. Before she ran away, I mean. I guess it was only natural for her to pick up where she left off: making less than minimum wage with mediocre tips at best.

“Stop, this is it,” I tell Henry.

He continues slowly down the street before doing a poor job of parallel parking between two pickup trucks. He turns the car off and says, “You sure this is the place, and that the old bat wasn’t just making shit up to get you to leave?”

“She was really nice,” I say, unbuckling my seatbelt.

He snorts.

“She gave you scones,” Reign says. “That was nice of her.”

“Biscuits,” Henry corrects.

Reign steps out of the car and heads up the sidewalk, toward the restaurant. I hurry after her with Layla dashing beside me. She could be in here. My mom. She could be in this little shack of a diner. Henry and Daisy follow us up the stairs and I hold the door for everyone as they head inside.

The place is poorly lit, but it’s not terrible looking. There’s a bar in the corner with one baseball capped and one bandana-ed older guys sitting at it, and a bunch of tables scattered about. In the corner opposite the bar, there’re two girls singing and playing guitars. They’re about half bad.

A waitress greets us as we walk in, and she smiles. Her lips are flamboyantly pink, her hair big and hairsprayed, her face painted a little too heavily in makeup.

“Howdy,” she chips. “How many?”

“Five,” Henry says.

We’re led to a table in the far corner of the restaurant, beside the doors to the kitchen. I sit Layla in the seat beside me, and we ask for waters all around, which seems to annoy the waitress. She snaps her gum and then smiles. “Sure thing.”

“I want ice cream,” Layla declares, banging two fists on the table.

“After you eat lunch,” I say.

She scowls and shakes her head fervently. “Now!”

“Layla,” I sigh, opening a menu and splaying it out on the table between us. “Do you want chicken fingers? Or a hamburger?”

“Ice cream!”

Henry lets out a short burst of laughter and then smothers it with the palm of his hand when he catches the look I give him.

“Layla,” I try. “Pick something off the menu with me, okay? Look, they have mozzarella sticks. You like those. Wanna share them with me?”

Her face turns red and she starts hitting the table. “Ice cream! Ice cream!”

The two old guys at the bar look over their shoulder at us, and I grab Layla’s hands and hold them still. “Stop it, *now*.”

“Ow!” she cries, trying to pull free. “Ow, ow, ow!”

“Ames, let her go,” Reign says quickly.

“Layla,” I start, voice low, hands tight on hers, “behave.”

She continues crying, twisting her arms in a frantic attempt to get away.

Reign stands up, her chair nearly falling backward. “You’re hurting her, Ames!”

Instantly, I release my hold on Layla’s wrists and drop my hands to my side. My cast bangs against the edge of the table and the crack echoes despite the music filling the air.

One of the two guys from the bar gets to his feet, as well. “Something wrong, miss?” he asks Reign. “Is this kid causing problems?”

I look at him and then at Layla, her face buried in her folded arms, her shoulder shaking. Did I . . . I did that. I hurt her. How could I hurt her?

I feel sick.

I stand up and my chair does fall to the ground. The guy approaches me, seeing that as a threat. He's twice my size. At least twice my size. And he has a folded bandana tied around his head. *A bandana.*

I focus on Layla, and I think about comforting her, but I'm the one who caused those tears to begin with, so I just push past the bandana ridden man, and hurry outside. Air in my lungs. I need the air in my lungs, clear and fresh, and not pollution ridden like the air I'm breathing.

Suffocating.

I feel like I'm suffocating.

I crouch and rest my hands on my knees and think back to the times I had bruises on my wrists, dark and finger shaped and hard to hide in the summer when long sleeves seemed stupid. And I wonder if Layla will have those bruises on her wrists right now, and I wonder how I ever thought I could take care of her, even for this temporary amount of time, even for this period before I find my mother.

Holy shit. I'm no different. I'm no different than him. God damn.

I breath deeply through my nose and let it drift out of my mouth slowly. The door opens behind me and I pray – oh, how I fucking pray – that it is/isn't the bandana guy coming to kick my ass. I can't decide which I'd prefer.

“You okay?”

I laugh. Of course. “Reign, how shocking.”

“Layla decided on mozzarella sticks,” she says. “Guess she does like them after all.”

I stand up straight and nod curtly. “Listen, I’m going to stay –”

“No, you’re coming inside,” she says.

I press my lips together.

“Henry ordered a double bacon cheese burger for you. I hope you enjoy your arteries being clogged.”

“Immensely so,” I say.

She gives a small smile. “What happened back in there? You lost it a bit.”

I look down at my shoes, at the cracks in the sidewalk. “I just want to get her to my mom’s. That’s all.”

She nods. “Of course. But –”

“That’s it,” I say, and glance back into the restaurant. “Let’s go back in, right?”

“Right,” she says quietly.

“Right,” I say again, and we walk back into the restaurant together.

*

Layla didn’t cry for the rest of lunch, and no one said anything about what happened. It was almost like *nothing* had happened actually, other than the strange looks I got from the bandana guy who had returned to his seat at the bar. The burger was alright, and the music provided a nice background noise for those moments where only silence filled the air between.

When the waitress comes back to the table with the bill and says, “Alrighty, thanks for everything, ya’ll,” I pull the Polaroid of my mother and me out of my pocket.

“Actually,” I say, “I just have a quick question.”

“No problem, sweetie. What’s up?”

“This woman used to work here, or maybe still does. I’m not sure.” I hold up the picture. “I was wondering if you knew her? Or where she is?”

The waitress takes the picture from me and studies it for a few seconds. “If she worked here, she don’t no more,” she says.

“Is there anyone who’s been here a while that might know her?” I quirk the right corner of my mouth upward, smiling shyly. I’m not sure if I look cute or like I’m having a minor stroke.

The waitress bites her lip, leaving a small pink smudge on one of her front teeth. She hands me the picture. “Our boss, Danny, might know. He’s in the kitchen. I’ll go get him.”

When she leaves, I turn toward the others and let out a breath.

“That lipstick,” Daisy says, giggling. “Sheesh.”

“Sh,” I laugh.

Moments later, the waitress returns with her boss, Danny. He holds his hand out and introduces himself as, “Daniel.”

“Ames,” I say, shaking his hand. “These are my friends.”

He gives a two fingered salute to them. A salute. Okay.

“Whatchya’ll need?”

“I was wondering if you’ve seen this woman. She’s my mother.” I show him the picture.

He takes a few moments to decide whether or not he knows her. “Yeah, yeah. Cary. Jeez, I haven’t seen that face in years.”

“Yeah. Do you –”

“Like a lot of years,” he continues. “Maybe nine or ten.”

“Right,” I say. My gut sinks a little. So she doesn’t work here. So finding her won’t be as easy as it could’ve been. “Do you know where she might be?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I think she got some bartender job at Margaritaville downtown. Not sure if she’s still there, but pretty girls make nice money in that part of town, and she had quite the face.”

I swallow. “Yeah, quite the face.”

He smiles awkwardly and we’re both silent until Daisy says, “Alright, thanks for the help.”

Danny leaves, and Henry stands up first. “Guess we’re heading downtown.”

Chapter Four

“Ames, have you talked about college with your dad yet?”

“No, Ms. Roberts. I haven’t talked to my dad about college yet.” I was always so sick of hearing about college, of having teachers pull me aside and talk to me like I didn’t know how smart I was. I got good grades. I did well on tests. It didn’t mean I was a genius, but to them, it did mean I was going to some topnotch school.

“Well you should really consider –”

“I’m staying in state. I have to commute, so probably Rutgers if anything,” I said.

“Ames,” she said. “Rutgers is a very good school, but with your grades and SAT scores, you could go anywhere. You could –”

“Listen,” I said. “If I go to college at all, it’ll be somewhere close to home. Okay?”

She backed off and said, “Okay,” and didn’t bring it up again.

Time to kill. Weird.

Margaritaville is open, but the bar isn’t going to be . . . poppin’ at two thirty in the afternoon. I’d rather go when there’s more of a chance that she or someone she knows would be working. Also, I’m starting to wonder where I am

on the Most Wanted list. Number One because he was the chief of police? I'm sorry, *is* the chief of police. I couldn't even kill him right.

Henry wants to stay downtown, something I don't argue with him about, but rather request that he drop me off somewhere else, instead. I consider holing myself away in the motel room with Layla. I consider hiding, only going out when entirely necessary to avoid being recognized. But then I consider the amount of time I have left, this period of freedom I've granted myself in order to get Layla to a safe place. And I want to take advantage of that freedom, because I can't help but imagine what it will be like as an eighteen year old locked away for the rest of my life.

I should be looking forward to school in the fall, college maybe. Like Henry, heading to Rutgers, or Daisy off to MassArt. Or even Reign, heading into her senior year of high school, time to decide what to do with the rest of her life, even if she ends up being a prostitute on a New Brunswick corner with her ripped tights and smudged makeup. At least she can choose that.

I can't choose anything.

And I worked so hard – *so* fucking hard – to get out. But there was Layla, and I don't know how I ever thought I'd be able to leave her in that house alone. So yeah, maybe I applied to Rutgers. So yeah, maybe I got in. So yeah, I could've commuted. But that's out the door. That's a far cry into a void of fucking hell.

I'm okay with that now. I've come to terms with my lack of future. I've even come to terms with being locked away. I just want Layla to have something better than that.

But maybe I'm a masochist. Maybe I just want to see what I'll be missing out on. Maybe that's why I ask Henry to drop me off at Vanderbilt while the others plan to tour the Country Music Hall of Fame. Aside from bits and pieces of Rutgers in New Jersey, I've never seen an actual college campus before. They ask if I want to leave Layla with them for a little alone time, but I can't bring myself to give her up when I don't have that much time left with her, so I take her with me.

I tell Henry to pick me up at six, same spot. And then we'll head downtown. But for now, I'm standing outside the main entrance to Vanderbilt, Layla's hand in mine, her other hand wiping her tired eyes. She was napping when Henry pulled up to the curb to drop me off. I'm hoping she's not going to be cranky the whole time. I pay attention to her hands, noticing that there's no bruise forming on her wrists, and I'm thankful for that. I didn't hurt her too badly.

Nobody stops me from walking onto the campus, even with a small child accompanying me. There's a guard at the entrance, but she seems to only be approaching cars that are trying to pull into an already full parking lot and providing directions for where they should park instead. It's hot outside, almost brutally so, and Layla pulls her hand from mine to wipe her palms on her dress.

"Ames," she says. "I'm thirsty."

I look down at her and smile. "We'll find you some water, okay?"

She nods and reaches up for my hand again. We walk on the sidewalk along the edge of the quad, dodging students who give us weird looks, probably

because they're not used to seeing a four year old on campus. There're also more of them around than I expected. Summer school must be a big deal here.

“Where are we going?” Layla asks, skipping beside me.

I lift her up by her hand and give her a little more hop to her skip, and she giggles. “We're just looking around,” I say.

I'm stunned by the buildings, most brick-red and historical looking. Most with an air of character to them, scratched up a little, but filled with a story. Rutgers is spread out, but Vanderbilt is condensed around a singular quad. At least, that's what it seems like. It's rather beautiful, though I'm not sure if I'd fit in with the polo shirt and khaki pants wearing kids walking around. Most look like they've just walked out of a Ralph Lauren Ad.

Something must catch Layla's eye because she lets go of my hand and takes off running across the obnoxiously green grass. A few students gasp and step out of her way like she's a bullet flying toward them.

“Layla!” I run after her, and manage to knock over a kid in the process. “Sorry!” I shout over my shoulder. I catch up to her when she stops in front of a statue and points up at it.

“Ames, look! Baby!”

The statue is of a baby reaching upward with open arms toward a woman who seems to be neglecting the thing. Now, I'm not going to do that whole metaphor thing, like woe is me, I am that baby, but really. Out of all the statues around, and I can see at least three or four, Layla chooses this one to approach.

“Yup, baby. Let’s go, now.” I take her hand again and she follows me on a new direction around the quad, walking through crossed sidewalks, near buildings that I wish I could feel connected to, buildings that I’ll never have classes in.

We reach the student center, and I figure I can find Layla something to drink in there, so I head inside. I can’t find a vending machine, but I sneak into the dining area and ask whether she wants water or juice, to which she responds, “Juice,” so I steal some orange juice from the soft drink dispenser. I hand Layla the cup, and she says, “Thanks!” when she takes it.

She starts drinking as we walk out of the student center, and I wonder why I told Henry to pick us up so late. It’s barely three. I have no idea what I’m supposed to do around here with Layla for the next three hours. She lets go of my hand again, to point at a circular sculpture off to the side of the pathway.

“That way?” I ask, and she nods fervently, pulling me along, some orange juice sloshing over the sides of her cup. We walk up to the circular sculpture and I pick her up slowly, grasping on as tight as possible with the fingers of my casted hand, and place her on top of it.

She places her hands on my shoulders for balance and laughs loudly. “It’s like the thing at the carnival! The spinny thing!”

“The Ferris wheel?”

“Do you sit in a furs wheel?”

“You sit in the little cars around it,” I say. “Have you been on one of those?” I surely never took her to the carnival. My father would –

“Mhm! Daddy took me on it. It went too high. I didn’t like it.”

Imagining the two of them together at all anymore is difficult. I blink away the image of them sitting beside each other at the top of the Ferris wheel, his hands a little too *on* her. “Oh. Well, this one’s not very high up.”

I lift Layla off the circle and place her back on the ground. She keeps a tight hold on her orange juice and takes a rather large gulp when we start off again. There are a few guys playing around with a football in the middle of the quad, and I’m too busy watching their game for a few seconds, that I don’t notice my diagonal trajectory, and therefore don’t expect to crash directly into another person. A person whose books and papers and coffee tumble out of his arms and onto the sidewalk.

“Jesus, kid. Watch it!”

I drop to my knees instantly, helping to collect the fallen items whilst muttering numerous apologies. The person I ran into crouches down as well.

He lets out a breathy sigh. “It’s no problem. Unless you have my class. Then you may get an F.”

I look up from the two books and the stack of twenty or so papers pinned between my good hand and my cast and see the man dressed in a tie and blazer, but with jeans instead of matching slacks. He has hair that’s well past his shoulders, shaggy and brown, unlike his grey goatee. A well-groomed Captain Hook.

Layla starts crying, and I notice that she also bumped into the guy and dropped her half-full cup. “It’s okay,” I tell her. “We’ll get you more juice,

alright?” And then to Captain Hook, I say, “Sorry,” again, and hand him the books and papers. I notice the title of the topmost textbook – Quantum Physics.

The man must see my interest because he says, “Hey, kid, I was just joking. If you’re in my class, I won’t give you an F. I’m not that much of an asshole. Are you in my class?”

I shake my head. Layla grabs onto my hand with both of hers and hides behind my back, sniffing. He stands and I follow, awkwardly shoving my hands into my pockets. Layla grabs onto my leg.

“I really like physics, though,” I say. “Do you teach physics?”

“Of the quantum variety,” he says. “Who’s this little girl?”

“That’s really cool!” I say, and then, “She’s my sister.” I quickly realize that I probably seem like a lunatic. Here I am, this random kid with this random little girl who both collide with this professor, making him drop his books and spill his coffee, and then I basically declare my love for quantum physics, while said little girl continues to cry behind me.

“Uh huh.” He nods slowly. He eyes Layla skeptically, and it seems as though he may not be a *kid-person*. “Family in for the weekend?”

“Something like that,” I say, scratching the back of my head.

“So you’re a physics major then?”

“Oh, no,” I laugh. “No, I’m not in college.”

I’m so getting kicked out. How am I *this* stupid?

“Oh?”

“I’m not some crazy campus lurker or something,” I explain quickly (and rather poorly). “I just graduated high school. I wanted to check out a few schools.”

“Does the administration know you’re exploring?”

I bite my lip. “Um.”

He laughs. “A rebel, I see. And no one could watch your little sister?”

“Um.” Ames, use your words. “I didn’t expect to stop by, so I didn’t have enough time to call them or anything, or really get her a babysitter.”

He switches the textbooks to his other arm. “I like a good rebel. What’s your name?”

“Ames, sir.” I hold my good hand out, but then drop it quickly when I remember that he’s holding a stack of books. Layla refuses to relinquish her hold on my cast.

“Ames, I’m Farro. Well, Professor Farro, I suppose, but doesn’t Farro sound more badass. Like Cher or Gandhi. *Farro*.”

“Uh huh.”

“So tell me, do you really like physics as much as you say you do?”

“It’s what I want to go to school for,” I say. It’s what I would want to go to school for if I could go to school.

“Hmm.”

“Yes, sir?”

“I just find this very interesting,” he says, repositioning his books again, so that one hand is free to stroke his goatee.

“You do?”

“It’s rare to meet a student that actually seems to have a passion for the subject. Even the kids who major in it kind of hate it, you know?”

“No, not really.”

“Exactly,” he says. “Very interesting.”

“Thanks, I think.”

Professor Farro/*Farro* takes a moment to ponder something, and then says, “Since my coffee is now providing energy to the many ants that trail up our sidewalks and not to me, I am forced to retreat to Atmology. And because I like you, I’m going to ask if you want to come with me. I’ll tell you a few things about our school. I guess I can even treat the little one to some more juice. What was it, orange juice?”

Layla pokes her head around my knee and nods.

“Pulp?”

Her face scrunches up.

“Alright,” he says to her. “So, Ames, what do you say?”

I don’t know what an Atmology is, but I say, “That’d be really great.”

*

The café is a hipster’s dream. There’s a room with no chairs, but instead with pillows on the floor, where you are not allowed to wear shoes and where they encourage meditation. There’s a room with ten or so students meeting for what looks like a school project. There’s a menu with eight dollar juices and lunches that seem too small for what they’re priced.

Farro bought me a large coffee and Layla a glass of fresh squeezed orange juice. He found us a nice place to sit in one of their empty rooms. There are motivational posters on the wall and a rustic dining table in the center of the room. The place is definitely no Starbucks, and for what he paid for our combined drinks, we could've bought lunch at the Panera down the street for all of us.

“So you just graduated?” Professor Farro asks, sipping on a cappuccino with some really professional looking latté art.

“Yeah, this past May.”

“And you haven't applied to any universities yet?”

“Yeah, a few, but I'm not going to school in the fall,” I say, clearing my throat and glancing down at my coffee. I can see a distorted reflection of myself in it. “Something personal came up and I had to take this year off.” Bending the truth. But not necessarily lying. I am taking this year off. I just may be taking many more years off from school as well. And spending said years in a cell.

“Ah.” There's cappuccino foam in his moustache. “So you're on some family trip or you're from Nashville or . . .?”

“I'm on a family trip.” I take a gulp of coffee and cringe. The coffee is only subpar. I look at Layla, who seems to be enjoying her juice. Though I don't think a glass of orange juice is worth five bucks.

“And where are they?”

“They're spending the day perusing country music memorabilia.”

“They didn't want to take this cute one?” he asks, nodding toward Layla.

I shrug. “I wanted to take her with me. We're kind of close.”

“That’s really good,” he says. “And that place is so overrated, anyway. You’re not missing much.”

“Good,” I say, “I thought I’d possibly lose the opportunity to try on Tim McGraw’s cowboy hat.”

Farro laughs. “I like you, kid. You’re quippy.”

“I try my best.”

After awkwardly bumping into him, and awkwardly walking to the café together, and the semi-awkward wait in line for coffee, the tension broke when I made a joke about the number of khaki pants being worn around campus.

“So physics, huh?”

“Physics.”

“You took it in high school?”

“I did.”

“AP?” he asks, taking another sip of cappuccino and adding more foam to his moustache.

“Of course,” I say, smiling.

“And you did well?”

“Yeah, pretty well.”

“And you did well in high school?”

“Valedictorian,” I answer.

“Well, slather some honey on me and call me a pig.” He says this casually, like I’m not supposed to just stop what I’m doing and stare at him because he just requested to be slathered with honey. “It’s a southern thing,” he says, and then

explains, like I couldn't have already figured it out, that the phrase means, "I'll be damned."

I drink more coffee after adding sugar to ease the bitterness. "It wasn't really a big deal."

"It is. All this time, I expected you to try and win me over and get you in here or something. But now, I feel like it's *my* job to sell the school to *you*."

"I don't have any khaki's," I say sadly.

He laughs, and Layla looks at him curiously. "You have bubbles on your face," she says, and he wipes the foam from his moustache and goatee. She looks at me and reaches for my coffee. "Can I try?"

"You won't like it," I say.

"I want to try," she says, pouting. I sip the coffee and make sure it's not still too hot, and then I let her taste a little. She spits it back into the cup and scrunches up her nose. "Yuck!"

"See," I say. "I told you."

And now there's Layla spit in my coffee. Farro grimaces.

"But really," I say, sitting up straight, focusing on him once more. "If I did need your help getting into a place like this, if I promised to major in physics and take all your classes, would you help a kid out?"

He takes a deep breath. "I think I'd get sick of you if you took all my classes."

"I mean, I would only –"

He reaches over the small table and grabs my shoulder. "I'd try to help the best I could. I really do like you, Ames. You seem to have a lot of passion, something these kids rarely have. These little sacks of potential may want a good job in life, but they don't love the subject anymore than I would love studying the geography of Russia."

"Thanks," I say. "It means a lot to me."

"What do you want to do after college, anyway? Or is it too soon to know?"

But I do know. "No. I have an idea. There's this major particle physics lab in Switzerland. It'd be really cool to work there."

"You want to work at CERN," he says, placing his coffee down. "Well, you never seemed to lack ambition."

"Or I could be a physics teacher. Whichever."

"Yeah, you could either play with the Large Hadron Collider or you can teach these little snot-faced brats." He points his thumb toward a girl beside him. She scowls.

Layla holds her finger toward the girl and says, "Snot!", whilst giggling.

I finish my coffee with one final swig. "Yeah, well, I'd be happy with either, I think. Whatever happens, happens, right?"

"Que sera sera," he says.

"Que sera sera," I agree.

*

Before we parted ways, Professor Farro said to email him when (not if) I apply to the school. It felt nice to have someone believe that I can do something with my life. It felt new.

After I leave the campus and he heads back to class, there seems to be a different sort of weight on my shoulders. The pressure to fight it seems to be weighing me down. I don't want to go to jail. I want to go to school, and I want to watch Layla grow up, and I want to be able to stay friends with Henry and Daisy, and I want to find my mom and see if she could maybe help me. Not just Layla. She knows what my father is like more than anyone else. She can testify. She can legally file for custody of Layla. She can change everything.

Suddenly, I feel a new hope.

Maybe it could work out.

Maybe.

When Henry picks us up, I tell him to hurry downtown, tell him that we should've just gone during the afternoon and asked about her, but then realize that if I went during the afternoon, I would've never met Farro. He and Reign are both wearing cowboy hats. Daisy has a new plaid shirt on, the front tied up, showing her tan stomach. She smiles at me and has Daisy sit on her lap for the rest of the car ride. Daisy hands her a small pink cowboy hat and Layla grabs it enthusiastically and places it onto her head.

"What do you say?" I ask, pinching Layla's cheek playfully.

Layla looks up at Daisy and says, "Pink is my favorite color."

Daisy laughs.

“What else?” I say.

Layla looks at me puzzled, and then says, “Thank you?”

“You’re welcome,” Daisy says, tousling Layla’s hair gently.

“You missed out, man,” Henry says. “We had a pretty good time, right, babe?”

Reign looks back me and shrugs. “Country music’s not really my thing.”

Henry frowns. “You look like you were having a decent time.”

She shrugs again and looks out at the road.

When we find a place to park downtown and walk back to the main strip, it's nearly seven o'clock, and Layla's whining about being hungry. Which is perfect, because we go to Margaritaville and get seated, and order food and wait to get served. The theme is tropical, colored lights reflected along the ceiling and walls, and Layla seems mesmerized by the palm trees in the corners. I look around at the waitresses, none of which seem to be my mother.

"I'm going to go check out the bar, okay?" I say.

Henry nods. "Sure. Get me a beer?"

"Same," Reign says. "Actually, no. Get me a margarita. Appropriate, right?"

"Yeah, whatever," I say. I leave the table for the bar, which is pretty crowded despite only being seven o'clock.

My mother isn't back there either. Or I just don't see her. I stand on my toes and crane my neck, but there's only a heavy-set red head and a woman with a Mohawk behind the bar. When I weasel my way up to the front, I pull my wallet out of my pocket and ask for the cheapest beer on tap and Reign's margarita. She asks for my ID. I show her the fake ID I've had since sophomore year. It didn't work as well then – I was about four inches shorter and twenty pounds lighter, but now I could pass for twenty-one. At least, I think so.

When she comes back with my two drinks, I ask retrieve the picture of my mother from my back pocket. I show it to her and she looks at me curiously because though I am talking, it's a bit too loud for her to hear me.

"Do you know this woman?" I shout above the roar of the people around me.

The Mohawk woman shakes her head and moves on to the next customer.

I take a deep breath and wave my hand at the other woman, who's carrying four beer bottles to this group at the other end of the counter. She acknowledges me with a quick nod, and I take a sip of Henry's beer. For cheap beer, it's not bad. Not Keystone, anyway, and that's what Henry's used to drinking out of his house while his mom was away on business. Lots and lots of Keystone.

I wait another few minutes for that bartender to get to me, and this time I make sure to shout the first time. "Have you seen this woman? She use to work here!" I hold up the picture. "She'd be about ten years older now!"

The woman frowns. "Nope! Sorry, sweetie! I've only been here for 'bout six months, but Shaney is coming in around eleven, if you wanna stick around! She's been here for at least five or six years. I swear, she has a share in the place or somethin'!"

Eleven. Four hours. Sticking around for four hours doesn't sound like the most miserable thing to do, but it definitely doesn't sound entirely enjoyable. I head back to the table, give Henry and Reign their drinks, and explain to them that we may have to stick around for a bit.

Layla taps my leg, and when I look at her, she crosses her arms angrily over her chest.

“Yes?” I ask.

“You didn’t get me a drink, too!” She scowls, and I can’t help but laugh a little.

“Those are grown up drinks. What would you have liked?”

“Chocolate milk!”

We all laugh. Even Reign, who seems a bit keen on being the downer tonight. She glances at her cell phone at the corner of the table when the screen lights up, but her shoulders fall and she decides to stuff it into her purse.

“I’ll get you chocolate milk when the waitress comes back, alright?”

She gives me a thumbs up.

I give her one back.

Chapter Five

She was leaning against the bar, a shot glass full of tequila in her hand. I almost didn't recognize her. She'd been pretty when I'd met her, but there, standing at the bar, she looked unbelievable. Her hair was down in waves, falling just below her shoulders, a short skirt on, a tight shirt that showed just a little bit of her stomach. More makeup – bold and black around her eyes.

“You're here,” I said, thinking it was stupid immediately after.

“I said I'd be. I like Dice.”

Henry stepped forward. It was like it was impossible for him to mind his own damn business. “Great! You made it!”

She tossed her shot back. She must have had a pretty good fake ID to get in.

“Dance with me,” I said.

She set the shot glass on the bar counter and grabbed my hand. I caught Henry holding his middle finger up high for me to see as she led me onto the dance floor. I caught Daisy watching with her arms over her chest, a crease between her brow. Reign and I tangled ourselves in the crowd until I lost sight of the bar completely.

For a little while, we just danced, her back against my chest, my hands on her hips, moving to the beat of the music, her body like a space heater against me. My fingers rested on the bare skin of her midriff and that skin felt soft.

“How long have you been in town?” I asked, lips against her ear.

She turned around and rested her hands on my chest, hips still swaying.

“Two weeks.”

“Do you like it?”

“What?”

“Do you like it?” I said louder, against the music.

“What?”

“Let’s move over here.” I took her hand and pulled her toward one of the walls, behind a hanging speaker. Her hands returned to my chest. “Do you like it here?”

“No.”

“You like England better?” Her hipbone was against my hand. I hadn’t realized she was so thin before.

“No.”

“Why’d you move?”

She closed her eyes for a moment. “Because it rained too much in England,” she said.

I brushed hair away from her face.

“You’re an enigma,” I told her.

“Big word.”

“For an American?”

She grinned. “For an American. For a boy.”

“Well, what can I say? I’m going to be valedictorian in a few months.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Too smart for your own good?”

“Something like that.”

“Well,” she started, right hand clenching and balling up the side of my shirt, “I either like them really smart or really dense.”

“That so?”

She bit her lip as she worked to suppress a smile. I could see it lighting up her eyes – a small flicker of humor in the pale grey. The song changed and our dancing picked up a little, like the change of music reminded us that we were in a club.

“Ames,” Reign said. “Who named you something so weird?”

My mother’s maiden name. *Cary Ames*. It was only good for dredging up the few memories I had of her.

“That coming from someone named Reign,” I said. Talking about my mother wasn’t on the list for the night.

Her hands moved up my shoulders, finding a place to rest against my collarbones. She leaned in closer. Her breasts against my chest; hips against my hips. I couldn’t help my breathy sigh.

“Where did you come from,” I managed to whisper.

She tilted her head up, and stepped onto her toes. Her lips brushed against mine just barely.

And then Daisy was behind me, tapping on my shoulder and holding up her cell phone. “It’s your father. He’s calling me. I don’t know what he wants. Should I answer?”

My eyes went wide and I took the phone from her, and I just said, “I gotta go,” to Reign, and then I left, and the next day, Reign was leaving Henry’s house as I was showing up, and she had hickey shaped bruises on her neck, and I had finger shaped bruises around my forearm and a few new welts on my back.

After dinner, we decided to leave and come back at eleven instead of waiting around. The others had all been downtown before to go to the Country Music Hall of Fame, but it was new for Layla and me. We left Margaritaville with three more beers in Henry and two tequila shots in Reign, aside from her original Margarita. Neither was wobbly yet, but both seemed a bit giddy. Reign was on Henry’s back as he piggybacked her down the sidewalk. I looked at Daisy, who hadn’t had a single drink, and she was in the middle of an in depth roll of her eyes. I smiled at that and gave Layla’s hand a soft squeeze.

“Hey, look. I think that may be an ice cream shop downtown. Are you too full?”

She looks up at me, mouth open a little. “No! Can we go, Ames?”

I lift her up onto my shoulders and she giggles, wrapping her arms around the top of my head. “Of course,” I say, keeping a tight grip onto her legs.

So Daisy and I head to Mike's Ice Cream, while Henry and Reign head off to another bar, and I tell them to meet us at Margaritaville by eleven, but I'm not sure they hear me. Layla's eyes widen at the ice cream selection, and she asks me if they have cookie dough.

"I'm sure they do," I tell her, and pull her off my shoulders. I hold her up in front of the glass so she can see all the flavors, and I ask if she may want Moose Tracks mixed in with her cookie dough.

"Duh!" she says, and Daisy laughs.

We order and all have a seat at a table in the corner, and as Layla eats her ice cream, I glance at Daisy. Her hair is tied up in a bun on the top of her head, and the small curls the pop out are endearing.

"Do you think Henry and Reign will manage to find their way back up the street in a few hours?" I ask her.

She snorts. "Doubtful."

"Can I ask you something?"

She shrugs and scoops some ice cream in her mouth. "Sure."

"Do you think we're going to find my mom?"

Layla giggles to herself as she tries to lick some ice cream off the tip of her own nose. I smile and wipe it off with a napkin.

"I don't know," Daisy says honestly. "Hopefully. But then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"Let's say we find your mom? Then what?"

“Then we G-I-V-E Layla to her,” I say, checking to see if Layla caught my mention of her. She’s too preoccupied with her ice cream.

“Okay, and then what? This trip has to end somewhere. Are you coming back to Jersey with us? He’s looking for you, Ames.”

I stare at my fingers, the ones in the cast bending with only a minimal amount of pain spreading to my wrist now. “I have a plan,” I say.

“Yeah, and what’s that?” she asks, doubt hardly hidden in her voice. She pushes her ice cream around in its cup.

“I’m going to ask my mom to help,” I say. “To come back and testify for me.”

She looks up, surprised. “To testify?”

“Yeah, you honestly think this won’t end up in court?”

“Ames, you think he’s going to press charges against you when he . . .”

When he what? I want to ask. But I know. Because I’ve been Daisy’s friend for a very long time, and though she doesn’t know nearly as much as Henry, she does know what went on in my house. At least somewhat. At least a semblance of an idea. And now with Layla along on this trip, she must know more than she lets on. “I’m on the news. Nationwide. I don’t think it can end any other way. I left, Daisy. I, for lack of any better word, kidnapped Layla. I tried to kill him. I’m going to jail.”

She drops her spoon in her ice cream and pinches the bridge of her nose.

“Ames, you can fight back. You can explain what he did to you,” she all but

shouts. Layla looks up from her ice cream curiously. “What he did to *her*,” she says quietly.

“I *am*,” I say. “I mean I will. If my mom can help, they might believe me. I don’t have the best record, Daisy. They’re going to side with him. He’s chief of the department. And I almost killed him. But if I can get my mom —”

“And what if you don’t find her? What if all this doesn’t work? She could be fucking anywhere. She could’ve moved to fucking, China. You don’t know. It’s been years. I hope you find her. I *want* you to find her. But if you don’t, then what? Then we go back home and give Layla back to your father and send you off to prison?”

I look down, away from Daisy at the pool of melting ice cream in front of me. “I’ll figure it out,” I say. “I’ll figure something out.”

She pushes her cup away. “I’m worried for you, Ames.”

“Don’t be.”

“I’m worried for Layla, too.”

“We’ll figure something out,” I say.

Layla hears her name again and looks from Daisy to me. “Why aren’t you eating?” she asks. She nudges her cup toward us and says, “Mine’s good. Want some?”

I feel a small prickle in the back of my throat, one that travels up behind my nose and to the back of my eyes. I swallow. “No, Layla. You eat it. We’re okay.” I brush her hair behind her ear and kiss the top of her head.

I catch Daisy staring at me, and when my eyes meet hers, she looks away.

*

We go to a few stores after that. Daisy wants to look at boots. She does, and then sees that most are nearly a thousand bucks and decides against looking at boots anymore. There are a number of bars we pass, most of which have loud music emanating from the open doors. Layla clings to me tightly. She never liked loud noises much. We pass by a statue of Elvis, and I notice one on the other side of the street as well.

“Want a picture with him, Layla?” I ask.

She shakes her head and buries her face in the crook of my neck. I hold her against me and bounce her up.

“You sure? He’s the king of rock n’ roll,” Daisy says, pinching Layla’s cheek gently.

Layla bats her hand away and whines something incomprehensible.

I look over Layla’s head to Daisy. “I think it’s past someone’s bed time.”

She must be pretty tired, because even Layla doesn’t dispute that. She just puts her thumb in her mouth and rests her forehead on my shoulder.

“Don’t suck your thumb, kiddo,” I say.

She pays no attention to me and closes her eyes.

“Want a picture, anyway?” Daisy asks me.

“With what?” I ask. “You didn’t bring your phone on the trip.”

“Oh, right.”

I hug Layla close, hoping she's warm enough. It's pretty hot outside, but she tends to get cold, and her arms are bare. I notice a music store across the street, and point toward it. "Want to go check that out?"

Daisy's eyes brighten. She's always been really into music. We wait for the nearest car to pass, and jog across the lanes. The bouncing barely stirs Layla.

And for the next hour or so, we look through old records, some more rare than others. We head to the back of the store and try on goofy looking cowboy hats and look at some t-shirts. I check out the guitars along the walls and get yelled at when I reach up and touch one of them. I never played, but my father did. I wanted to learn one day, maybe. In the end, neither of us buys anything. Records are a little too cumbersome to carry around, and Daisy realizes she can just buy any CD in the store online as well.

By the time we return to Margaritaville just past eleven, Henry and Reign are nowhere to be found. Predictable. And even through the noise, Layla is fast asleep on my shoulder. Daisy gave me the cardigan she'd tied around her waist to drape over Layla's shoulders, and I let it fall a little over her head, as well.

"Well, now what?" Daisy asks, looking behind herself and into Margaritaville. "Do we go looking for Henry and Reign now or after we talk to the bartender lady?"

"After," I say. I don't have time for those two right now. If they want to gallivant around town ignoring the reason we're on this trip to begin with than they can do that. I, on the other hand, am going to find out where my mother is.

Inside, the bar is significantly more crowded than before. Layla squirms against me, whines into my shoulder, and presses her hand against her ear. I hold her tightly against me and whisper, “We’re leaving in a second, okay?”

She starts crying.

Beautiful.

I rock her up and down while I try to maneuver my way through the crowd. Daisy’s hand is latched onto the back of my shirt in an effort not to lose me amongst the people surrounding the bar. “Excuse me,” I say. “Not cutting, I swear. Excuse me. Excuse me.” People grunt and grumble around me, but with Layla around my hip, no one confronts me.

By the time we reach the front, there isn’t a single bartender free. I have to wait another minute or so to be noticed by one of them. And when I ask if she’s Shaney, she shakes her head and shouts, “Shaney!” over her shoulder.

I wait another minute or so, with Layla crying into my ear and with Daisy beside me. I try to shush Layla, but she’s determined in her ways, and she’s tired, and I really should have left her with Daisy outside. Just as I’m about to suggest this to Daisy, a bartender with a face tattoo comes up to me. The tattoo, a bald eagle with its wings spanned up the side of her jaw, is hard to ignore.

“Sir, you cannot have that child at the bar,” she says, southern accent thick.

I secure my hold on Layla and say, “I’m going in a second. I’m just looking for Shaney. I was told to come back around now.”

“I’m Shaney,” the woman says. When she speaks, the bald eagles wings expand and contract. It’s startling. “What d’you need?”

I glance at Daisy and nudge Layla toward her. “Can you take her outside?”

Daisy is distracted, though. I follow her gaze and see that she’s watching the TV hanging in the corner. She’s watching my face plastered on the screen with *Wanted* scrawled below the picture. I swallow and say, “Daisy!”

She looks at me, wide-eyed, and I hand Layla to her. She takes her without any question and pushes her way back through the crowd around us. Okay, before someone notices me. Before Shaney turns around and looks at the TV and sees my face there.

I clear my throat. “Hi,” I say. “Listen, I’m looking for this woman. Her name is Cary. I’ve been told she worked here at some point.”

She stares at me for a moment, and then scoffs. “Cary? Blonde little thing?”

I grab onto the edge of the counter and nod fervently. “Yeah, yeah. That’s her. Do you know where she is now?”

“Honey, she worked here at least five or six years ago.”

I hold onto the table, hoping. “Please,” I try. “I’m her son. I’m just trying to find my mother. Do you know *anything*? At all?”

She takes a breath and pulls a rag from her apron. She starts cleaning the counter in front of me. “So you’re the son. She talked ’bout you lots. Can’t believe you’re so big now. I know she left us to shack up with some hotshot country singer down in Belle Meade.”

Some hotshot country singer? “Belle Meade?”

“It’s maybe twenty minutes out. One of the big mansions. I helped her move in. I don’t remember the address, but I remember how to get there. I can write down the directions if you want, sweetie. But I told you, that was quite a few years ago. She’s likely not there anymore. She never did stay with a guy for long.”

It’s hard to imagine my mother playing the field and then it’s hard to not get angry at the accusation. “Can you please just write it down for me?”

She pulls out a small notepad from her apron and begins scribbling.

*

By the time we found Henry and Reign, he’s shitfaced. Reign’s sober and obviously frustrated with him. She can’t hold him up, so I have to help her, and Daisy has to fish his keys out of his pocket and pick up the car while I try to babysit not only Layla, but also Henry.

In the jeep, I keep Layla on my lap in the front. I don’t want her sitting beside Henry in the back as he throws up in his own lap. A beautiful sight that I’m glad Layla sleeps through. That is, until Daisy makes a swift turn into the parking lot of motel that wakes Layla immediately.

She grips onto the collar of my shirt tightly and, instead of crying, begins to quake in my arms. I hug her close and kiss her cheek. “Layla, it’s okay.”

She pulls back from my chest and looks at me, eyes wide and damp. “I was dreaming bad,” she says. “Where’s daddy?”

Daisy parks the car and looks at us before glancing over her shoulder at Henry. She unbuckles her seatbelt, hops out of the car, and opens his door. “Come on, get out.”

He grumbles something unintelligible and stumbles out of the jeep. Reign follows after him, and then the doors are closed. I frame Layla’s face in my hands. “Daddy’s not here.”

“I know that,” she says, almost frustrated. “Where is he?”

I wish I could say dead. I wish I could say gone forever. I can only say, “At home. We’re not going back there, okay?”

“You promise?”

I hug her close, holding on tightly. “I promise.”

She sighs against me, and I refrain from asking what she dreamed of, refrain from wondering why she seemed too afraid to even cry.

“Let’s go inside and go to sleep in a real bed, okay?”

She nods against my chest.

I step out of the car, and head toward the door. Henry’s retching can be heard from inside the bathroom. Daisy is sitting on the edge of our bed, already in pajama pants and a tank top. She offers her hands out to me, ready to grab Layla. I shake my head and place Layla down on the bed. She curls up beneath the quilt and I tuck it over her shoulders and around her neck. Her thumb finds its way into her mouth, and I decide not to chastise her for it. Instead, I whisper, “goodnight,” into her ear and kiss her temple. She’s asleep by the time I’m standing up straight.

Reign appears next to me and takes my forearm in her hands. “Hey.”

Henry vomits loudly in the background.

“Reign,” I say. “I’m tired. Not now, okay?”

She cringes when he throws up again. “Do you want a smoke?”

I almost say no. I think no, but then my mouth says, “Fine,” and then we’re both outside with Daisy watching Henry and Layla. We walk to the curb and she has a sweet. I stay standing, hands in my pocket.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Sitting. What are you doing?” She’s holding a pack of cigarettes in one hand, her lighter in the other. She taps the bottom of the pack and pulls free two cigarettes, handing me one.

“Thanks,” I say, waiting for the lighter. “Why aren’t you in there taking care of Henry?”

“Why aren’t you?”

I continue waiting for the lighter as she prolongs lighting her own cigarette.

“You can’t just sit here and talk to me while we share a smoke?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I say, but I do sit. “Is this going to incite a talk I don’t want to have?”

“Not sure,” she says, finally handing me the lighter and blowing out a stream of smoke. “Your sister seems really fucked up. Your house must have been real shit to live in.”

“And there it is,” I say, and start to stand. She grabs onto my hand and pulls me down.

“Sorry,” she says. “That came out wrong. She seems sweet.”

I take a drag of the cigarette and feel the smoke warm my insides. I hand her back the lighter and she holds onto it. “I don’t let her near people, usually. Other than Henry and Daisy.”

“Nice to know I’m an exception.” She gives a small smile. Her eyes look glazed over beneath the scattered lamp posts, and I know that despite her coherent sentences, she is still at least somewhat intoxicated from her barhopping downtown. I don’t want to talk about Layla with Reign while she’s sober, let alone drunk.

“Yeah, well it wasn’t intentional.”

She taps some glowing ash onto the parking lot floor. Some particles fly away, red dust caught in a breeze. “Why are you so unkind to me, Ames?”

“Are you implying that you’re nice to me?”

“You’re upset because I’m dating your friend. That doesn’t make me cruel or —”

“I am not upset that you’re dating Henry. Not everything is about that.”

“Whatever,” she sighs.

A few moments of silence fill the air between us, and I wonder how long it’s been since I’ve had an actual conversation with Reign. A real conversation.

“Doesn’t your father ever wonder where you are?” I say. “I mean, you’re out on this trip. You’re seventeen. What does he think?”

“Doesn’t yours? Oh, wait.” Her eyebrow flicks up.

I kick my feet forward and cross my ankles. “I thought you said you weren’t cruel.”

She blows out two smoke rings and smiles at the feat. “My father doesn’t care where I am,” she says instead.

“Okay,” I say. I don’t want to argue with her. It’s late, and I’m tired, and I’m going to sleep when I’m finished with this cigarette.

“Do you think your mum is still in Tennessee?” she asks, suddenly quiet and staring at the ground.

“I hope.”

She stares at her cigarette and takes a drag just as I do. “I think she will be.”

Her eyes are closed for a moment, and for those few seconds I can appreciate how pretty she is, how pretty she can be when she’s not making me miserable. Her arm brushes against mine, and I don’t move it away.

“Yeah?” I say.

“You deserve that much at least.” She links her arm with mine, laces her fingers through mine, and I look behind me to make sure Henry cannot see through the window of our motel room. But he can’t because he’s too busy being sick in the bathroom. And I realize how small her hand is. How is it so small? She acts so tall that I forget she’s so small, that her hand is the size of a child’s hand. That she is still a child, isn’t she?

“Tell me something,” Reign says.

“Tell you what?”

“I don’t know. Anything.”

I take one final puff off my cigarette and drop it onto the concrete. I look ahead, at the dark trees against the backdrop of a black sky. And yet, “I’m trapped.”

“Outside of some shitty motel in Nashville?” She emits a breathy laugh and adjusts herself on the curb. She gives my hand a tight squeeze.

“In general,” I say.

“Well, stop.”

“Stop being trapped?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not how it works, exactly.”

“Why? If you don’t want to be trapped anymore, step out of your cage.”

My thumb traces the grooves of her knuckles lightly. “It’s a metaphorical cage.”

“So metaphorically step out. You make everything so difficult, Ames. Just live. Just be.” Like it can be so simple. Nothing’s that simple.

“Tell me something,” I say.

“What?”

“Anything”

She knows her answer immediately, like she’s rehearsed this. “Henry James once said, ‘try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost’.”

I wait for more, but that’s all there is. The quote; nothing else. I said something personal. I should’ve have expected that of Reign. She never lets

anything personal loose. She's like a shadow of a real person, a silhouette. There's the general shape of her, but nothing beneath it.

"That's it?" I say.

"I'm quite fond of that quote," she breathes quietly.

"I told you something about myself, something that I feel," I argue.

"So did I."

"Yeah, but I –"

"No buts."

I take a breath and let go of her hand. "Okay."

There's silence again, and she doesn't say anything at all. She just pulls out another cigarette and continues to smoke.

"I think I'm going to head to bed," I say. "It's been a long day."

"Yeah, I'm going to stay out here for a bit longer."

"Okay."

"Okay."

I walk back inside the motel room.

*

When I wake up the next morning, Reign's back in the room, lying beside Henry, but fully clothed. I go out for a walk while the others all sleep, and Reign just watches as I leave. Henry seems content in being buried beneath the blanket, and he groans in discontent when I try to wake him up, so I figure I can let him sleep a little and just get some fresh air. I let Daisy and Layla sleep, and I leave quietly. I don't go far – just to the bridge, where I stand for a while. A while . . .

like at least a couple hours, dropping coins into the water below, wondering what it'd be like to drop into that water myself, and then not wondering that because I'm past that and I have Layla now.

But still, the opportunity stands strong. No one stops me when I sit on the ledge of the bridge. I almost don't want to get down, but judging by the sun in the sky, it's nearing noon, and I know the others are all probably awake and wondering where I've gone, so I hop back down and head in the direction of the motel.

I was right. They are all awake, but Henry's still in his boxers and even Daisy hopped in the shower first, so by the time I have Layla ready and we actually leave, it's a little past one. Henry drives with sunglasses on, as he's apparently a tad bit hung over. Which is a shame. Such a shame. I sit beside him as navigator when we're back on the road, Shaney's instructions in my lap. Layla sits between Daisy and Reign in the back seat and is preoccupied with the fringes on the bottom of Daisy's shirt. Henry grumbles something about being the only one who drives, which causes Reign to blabber about having a license in the UK. I don't say why I don't have a license and Henry doesn't bring that up.

We pull through a McDonalds drive through for lunch, and then slowly, but actually not that slowly at all, we drive out of the ghetto, and into a rather nice area of town. Trees and ponds and small children laughing on the streets with their parents and people walking dogs that look to pedigree standard.

We turn down a street that has a canopy of trees over head, a street that has colorful flowers planted along the road, one with fresh looking grass and

cobble stone sidewalks. And when we pull up to a gate, my eyes widen. I roll down the window and crane my neck out of the jeep. Peering through the bars of the gate, try to see the house ahead, but I can't through the shrubbery. Still, though, the gate has small statues on the edge. Angels in cast iron. And there's a button I can push, and a speaker with a small microphone I can speak into. And then I realize it: she found something better. She found something better and she never came back for me.

Henry exhales a slow, "Holy shit."

Chapter Six

“Mommy, where are you going?”

“Ames, would you hand me that pair of shoes there?”

“Here, you go.”

“Thank you, sweetie.”

“But where are you going?”

“Away, sweetie.”

“Can I come? What about my truck? Can I bring my truck?”

She looked at me sadly and continued packing.

Henry reaches his arm out and presses the call button beside the jeep. A moment later, there’s a sharp click and then, in a heavy Hispanic accent, “Can I help you?”

“I’m here to see Cary,” I shout over Henry.

“Who is this?”

“Her son,” I say.

The woman mutters something angrily in Spanish. “I am sick of prank calls. I will call police,” she threatens. The line disconnects.

I sit for a second, baffled. Henry clears his throat, wraps one of his hands around the wheel, and says, “Again?”

I nod.

He pushes the call button again. “Take two.”

When the woman answers, fiery tone and all, I don't let her finish speaking. Instead, I quickly give her my name and tell her to pass it on to Cary. Henry blasts the air conditioner as we wait. Half the cold air exits through Reign's open window, and over my shoulder I see her fanning her face with an open hand.

Without another word, the gate buzzes, and slowly, it opens.

Henry puts the car into drive, and begins the trip down a cobblestone path. The driveway winds through a blooming garden, past a small koi pond flourishing with large, colorful fish.

"I didn't know you came from money," Reign says. They're the first words she's spoken to me since last night, and they sound as bitter.

"I don't," I say, sinking into my seat. I don't care about the driveway, the garden, the pond. She is living here. My *mother* is living here, in the fucking lap of luxury. And all the while I've been stuck in New Jersey with someone who liked to carve shapes into the bottoms of my feet with a steak knife. I cringe and try to shake the thought. Layla has now unbuckled herself and crawled onto Daisy's lap where she surveys the surroundings with big, bright eyes.

We park between a red sports car and a black minivan. I'm out of the jeep with Layla beside me, up the porch, and ringing the doorbell before the others have even closed their doors. Layla tries to pull her hand from mine, but I hold onto it tightly. She begins to whine, but it's hard for me to pay attention to it.

Time does not pass. The door opens, and over the threshold, just beyond my reach, stands a woman, stands my mother. She's not hard to recognize. Blonde hair, cut shorter than I remember, but just as bright. Blue eyes, lighter than

mine and my father's. Freckles decorating the tops of her cheeks. I remember them because I used to count them. I used to count them, and now –

“Oh my God,” she says.

What do I even say?

The others are behind me now, watching as I search for words like I'm playing scrabble with only consonants.

I settle on, “Hi, Mom.”

“Oh my God,” she says again. She throws her arms around my neck and hugs me over the threshold. Out of instinct, I let go of Layla's hand and wrap my arms around her waist. She's smaller than me, shorter and thinner and not at all like I remember. It's almost like hugging a stranger.

“My boy.” Her breath settles against my ear. “My baby.”

Layla clings to my leg, and angrily, she says, “Who are you?”

*

“Here you go, sir.” The Hispanic woman, who I've learned is their maid, Maricella, hands me a glass of lemonade and Layla a small cup filled with chocolate milk. She gives lemonade to Henry, Daisy, and Reign, as well; are of whom are sitting on the couch adjacent to the one Layla and I are on with Cary.

“Thanks,” I say, taking the glass and holding it atop my knee. The coolness of it is welcome against my sweating palm. I keep my casted arm around Layla's waist, holding her onto my other knee.

“So,” Cary starts, laying her hand on my casted one. “Who's this little one?”

“Layla,” Layla replies loudly, eyebrows wrinkled and lips pressed together.

“My sister,” I say. “Um, half sister, I guess.”

“Oh!” Cary exclaims, giving my cast a squeeze that I don’t feel. She pinches Layla’s cheek and says, “Well, you’re quire adorable.”

Layla bats her hand away. “No, I’m not.”

Cary looks to me, then. She says, “I can’t believe you’re here.”

“Yeah.”

Her smile is so intense that the tops of her cheeks look ready to pop out of her skin and roll away like marbles. Wrinkles crease at the corners of her eyes.

“I’ve missed you so much, you know,” she says, leaning in for another embrace. I balance the lemonade on the couch’s armrest and hug my mother again. Layla’s stuck in between and she lets out a small squeal.

Reign makes some disappointed noise in the back of her throat, and over Cary’s shoulder, I watch her whisper into Henry’s ear. He shakes his head in response to whatever she said.

“I missed you, too,” I say to Cary. Her hair brushes against the side of my face when she pulls away, and it smells like strawberries, sweet and fresh.

She quickly wipes the underneath of her eyes. “There’s so much I want to ask you, so much I don’t know.”

“Yeah,” Reign mutters. “Thirteen years worth.”

I glare at her and she returns my look with a challenging one of her own.

Cary smiles kindly and says, “What, sweetie?”

Don't say anything else. I plead with her silently. If Reign cares about me at all, if she *ever* gave a damn, she'll keep her mouth shut. "Where's the bathroom?" she asks.

My lungs deflate.

"There's one down that hall and to the left. Maricella will show you."

Reign tugs her hand out of Henry's grasp and stands. She follows Maricella and I look back at Cary.

"So tell me," she says. "How have you been? What have I missed? And you, Layla, tell me about you!"

Layla sticks her tongue out at Cary.

"Um." I swallow a lump in my throat. I glance at Henry and Daisy. I'd rather they not be here for any talk of my father.

"How did you find me here?" she asks when I take too long to answer. "Did Jeanie tell you?"

I haven't seen Aunt Jeanie in years, I want to say, but instead, I mumble, "Um." I pull her letter from my pocket and unfold it. The writing is blurred, nearly illegible. I can no longer see her handwriting spelling out *I love you* or *I miss you, baby* or *Don't worry, I'll come back*. "Your letter."

She rests a gentle hand on my arm. "You have to fill me in on everything I missed."

"Um," I say again.

*

I kind of bullshit my way around the past thirteen years of my life, well past sunset. I want to spend some time with her before I really unload. There's this fault line ready to crack open between us if I don't tread carefully, and we've only just reunited. I don't want that gap in the earth right now. But as I finish my fourth glass of fresh squeezed lemonade, the front door opens, and a deep and southern sounding, "Honey? You home?" resonates.

For hours. I've been talking to her for hours, and she felt the need to leave out any information about anyone that would call her Honey upon his arrival to the home he also seemed to live in.

"Mommy? Mommy!"

A small kid, maybe six or seven, comes barreling into the living room. He dives onto Cary's lap, knocking her into the couch cushions. This is a joke, right?

"Oh," Reign breathes quietly.

Oh. She can say oh, while I'm left sitting here without a single syllable to utter, sitting here with my mouth hanging open like a dunce. She had another son.

Layla, no sitting beside me and not on my lap, sits up on her knees and whispers in my ear, "Ames, who's that?"

I don't answer because I don't know the answer, or rather I don't want to be right about my answer.

"Hey!" Cary laughs and sits the kid beside her. "Falcon, this is Ames."

His name is Falcon. She named her second son Falcon. Is this real life? The kid stares at me for a moment before looking back at Cary. "Can I play with my trucks?"

He looks nothing like me – blonde hair, brown eyes, a short nose, chubby.

“No,” she says. “Maricella made dinner. It’ll be ready in a second. Go sit in your seat.”

He takes off toward the kitchen and I fold my hands in my lap. My fingers link tightly between one another. Layla links her arms with mine. “So.”

Cary frowns. “I should have said something earlier.” If I look close enough, the wrinkles at the corner of her lips look like little rivers leading into her mouth, carrying her secrets with them. “I was going to say something, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Reign says under her breath.

“Stop it,” Henry scolds.

I don’t pay attention to either of them. “How old is he?”

“Six.”

“Honey?”

Cary closes her eyes and lets out a frustrated breath. Did she plan on keeping her family from me? I would’ve found out eventually.

A man strides into the living room, cowboy hat on his head, wearing a plaid shirt tucked into his blue jeans, a belt with a large bull-horn shaped buckle parting the two. When he sees us, he pauses and then approaches with more caution. “Who are these guys here?”

“Layla!” Layla says proudly, one arm still wrapped around my arm, her free hand on her hip.

“Bryan,” Cary says slowly. “Bryan, this is Ames and his little sister Layla.”

He thinks for a moment before it comes to him. “Ames,” he says. “Well slap my ass and call me a donkey. I’ll be damned.” He grabs my hand (I don’t think I offered it) and pulls me off the couch, into a hug. He’s heard of me, at least, unlike Falcon. Though, it did take Bryan a solid twenty seconds to dig my name up from the back of his skull.

Cary nods behind me. “These are his friends.”

“Please to me ya’ll,” Bryan says. He lets go of me and tips his hat in their direction. “I didn’t know you were stopping by. And you, little girl. Look how cute you are!”

“No, I’m not!” Layla argues.

“It was a surprise,” I say.

Cary stands. “A great surprise.”

“Yeah. Great,” I say. Really great.

“Dinner is ready!” Maricella’s calls. We all breathe in deeply, as if our group shares a pair of lungs.

*

Dinner was hardly less awkward. Bryan tried his best to make small talk with me, but I wasn’t overly receptive, so he turned to Henry. Daisy spent the majority of the meal talking with Cary about art. I hadn’t been aware of my mother’s love for it. Reign was mostly quiet, occasionally making little comments here and there, most backhanded or subtly rude, all of which went ignored. Layla ate mashed potatoes with her hands to show how uncute and unadorable she was.

Afterward, Cary shows everyone to their bedrooms, and Layla gets handed off to Daisy so I can spend some time with Cary. There are enough guestrooms for each of us. I'm somehow not surprised. The others separate into their rooms while I follow my mother to hers. It's down a wood planked hallway, up a white staircase, and down another carpeted hallway. She invites me in and asks Bryan to excuse us, to which he says, "No problem. I'll just be writin' some tunes in the studio room."

Really? A studio room?

We both have a seat on the edge of her bed. There's a navy canopy above our heads. It creates sharp, angular shadows across Cary's face, emphasizing the severity of her cheekbones.

"How have you been, honey?" She brushes the back of her hand against my face.

My lips feel dry. Too dry. I lick them and say, "I have to tell you something, and then ask you something, because I didn't just come here to visit. I mean, I wanted to visit, too, because I thought you were dead before, but you weren't, and I found that out and I would have loved to come just to visit you and see your life, but there's another reason that's more –"

"Honey," she interrupts. "You're rambling."

"Yeah," I half-laugh-half-cough. "Sorry."

"What do you need?"

“Why did you leave me there?” I should have asked for her help first, but this question has been beating inside my head since I found out she was alive. “I thought you were dead.”

She crosses her legs, and I see the grooves in her knee cap as she rocks her foot back and forth. She’s so tan now, so healthy looking.

Her tooth snags onto her bottom lip, keeping hold until finally, after finding her words, she says, “Did Jeanie tell you what your father was like when we were together?”

“I haven’t seen Jeanie since I was twelve. She moved to Philadelphia, I think.”

Cary looks down and fumbles with her fingers in her lap. “Oh. She never told me she was moving. We don’t talk much anymore.”

I don’t ask why. I don’t really care why. But I’m stuck on what she said, what my father *was* like. Like it’s changed at all. “I assume it was much like how he was after you were together,” I say.

“What?”

“Nothing changed, you know,” I say, staring at the lines in the textured wallpaper. They create abstract shapes that eventually disappear beneath the curtains. “He was who he was.”

“Wait,” she says. She blinks, eyebrows drawn together, until she finally pushes herself off the bed. “He hurt you?”

“Of course he hurt me,” I snap. I didn’t mean to sound angry, but *she* left me there. “What did you expect? You saw what he was like. And then with Layla . . .”

Her eyes fill up, and she covers her mouth. She turns away, and I think I hear her crying. She has no right to cry. She is here, living in her uppity life with her new uppity family. I am the one with the right to cry, and she doesn’t see me doing that.

“Stop it,” I say.

“I didn’t know, Ames. He loved you more than anything.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose hard enough for me to see speckles of black. “Well, he’s in the hospital now because . . .” I can’t finish. I can’t say it out loud, because it’s weird. Because I know she hates him, or hated him, or whatever. And I know she did everything in her power to leave him; but when I say he’s in the hospital she freezes and a cry slips out, like his pain causes her some sort of agony in her. But it can’t, because she left him because he beat her.

“I came here for your help,” I say. “They’re looking for me. They want to arrest me, lock me away. You’re the only person who experienced what I did, the only one who can testify what it was like in that house. You’re the only one I know who can take Layla.”

Cary’s widen at the mention of her keeping Layla after this, and she runs her hands over her face, lets her palms settle against her eyes before tangling her fingers through the front of her blonde locks. “Why do they want to send you to prison?” she asks but she already knows.

“He was trying to hurt her,” I say. “I needed to stop him. I never meant . . . he wasn’t supposed to bash his head open, but I couldn’t let him hurt her.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister before” Cary breathes.

“And apparently a brother named Falcon.”

“Oh my God.” She moves back to the bed, where she sits and buries her face in her hands. “What did you do, Ames? What did you do? He’s on the force. He has people that do things for him. You don’t have a chance.”

“He’s chief now,” I say quietly.

This only makes her emit a louder, more pained cry. I sit beside her, but it seems like there’s a canyon parting us. She knows that I nearly killed her ex-husband, knows that I’m a criminal, and that I am her son, and that I am asking for her help, that I am also asking for her to take on this little girl and raise her like she didn’t raise me.

“What do you want me to do?” she finally asks, voice raw like she could’ve swallowed a bit of gravel when I wasn’t looking.

I glance down at my knees, at my hands cuffed between them, at the beige carpet beneath my feet. She is my mother. She can’t say no. She can’t. A mother wouldn’t do that. But a mother wouldn’t leave her child with his abusive father either. A mother wouldn’t abandon her son.

“I want you to take Layla. I can’t bring her back there. I can’t leave her with him if I go to jail. She can’t grow up like that,” I say, and then take a breath. “And I know you haven’t been back in a while, but when I get arrested and when

I go to court, will you come back to testify? No one will believe me when I tell them what he was like. They need a solid witness.”

“Ames.”

“Will you help me?”

She wipes her palms on her knees. “Layla doesn’t know me, Ames. She isn’t going to want to stay here.”

“I don’t care what she wants,” I nearly snap. “I care about keeping her safe.”

She folds her fingers into her hands to keep them from shaking. “I have a life here, Ames. I haven’t been back to —”

“It wouldn’t be for long,” I say. “And you can bring Bryan. Dad can’t hurt you anymore. It’s been a long time. You’re stronger now. Just please.”

“Ames.” A mother wouldn’t say no. She wouldn’t do that.

“I am your son.” I shift my body toward her, take her hands, force her to twist, to look at me, too. “I am your son,” I say again, quietly. “Just do these two things for me, please. If you don’t want to help me, then fine, but Layla’s just a little girl. Please, help her, then.”

She closes her fingers around mine. I see myself in her face a little. Maybe the slope of her nose, maybe the way she bites just the left side of her lip. I don’t know, maybe I’m imagining it. Maybe I want to see myself in her face. Maybe I’m trying to distract myself while she considers saying no to me.

“I can try,” she says faintly.

Her hands slip from mine, but I catch them and squeeze. “Really? Both?”

“I can try,” she says again. “You’re my baby, my first baby. I can’t . . . they can’t put you away. You’re just a baby. And she’s just a baby, too.”

I don’t know how to thank her.

She’s smiling at me, and despite the subtle doubt in her eyes, she says, “I never stopped loving you. You know that, right?”

I open my mouth and only manage a, “Yeah.”

*

The next morning, Reign isn’t at breakfast. I take a seat in front of the Henry and Daisy, set Layla on my lap, and a plate of eggs and bacon is set in front of me. Layla immediately grabs a strip of bacon and bites down on it.

“Thanks,” I tell Maricella.

She smiles and sets a small bowl of scrambled eggs near Layla just as her fingers are about to reach for some of mine. I hand her a fork and she begrudgingly uses it to shovel eggs into her mouth.

“Where’s Reign?” I ask.

“She said she wasn’t hungry,” Henry says, shrugging.

“Oh. Where’s my mom?”

“She said she’d be back in a second,” Daisy says, mouth half full with bran muffin. “She went upstairs to help dress Falcon.”

Right on cue, Falcon runs into the kitchen. Cary chases after him, arms outstretched, shouting, “Falcon, I’m gonna get you!”

Layla drops her fork into her bowl and grips onto my arm, face all pulled together in anger. “I don’t like him,” she states adamantly and not quietly.

“Shh,” I say, bouncing her a little.

Falcon seems not to notice her as he giggles maniacally when Cary swoops him up. He grabs her shoulders and kisses her on the cheek. “Momma, are we seeing the horses today?”

Cary bounces him a few times. “If Ames wants to go the ranch, we will.”

“You have a ranch?” I ask.

“Ponies?” Layla asks.

“Mhm. We have a few horses, if you want to go. It’s pretty cool, right, Falcon?”

The kid nods fervently.

“Ames?”

I look at Henry and Daisy and wonder if they’re invited.

“We’re going to go check out Nashville,” Henry says. “Don’t worry about us. We’ll just meet you back here later.”

“Okay,” I say. “Layla, you want to go see some horses?”

“Ponies!” she shouts, smiling.

I smile, too. “I guess we’re good with going to the ranch.”

“Cool!” Cary says.

*

Falcon barely acknowledges me. And when he does, he just looks jealous, like I’m trying to steal his mom from him. Which I guess I understand. He doesn’t know who I am, and Cary has been devoting a lot of attention toward Layla and me.

“Are you sure you don’t want to ride?” Cary asks.

“I’m sure,” I say, helping Layla atop a horse.

Falcon is currently on one of the horses. Cary is leading it around the fence so I do the same with Layla’s horse. It’s hot out, but not nearly as bad as yesterday. A thick layer of clouds blocks the harshest rays from the sun. I don’t think we’re going to be able to stay out here much longer without rain.

“Falcon’s been riding his whole life.”

“That’s cool. Layla’s never ridden before.”

She nods. “So, what do you like to do?”

I’m not even sure. I’ve never had a legitimate hobby, never played a sport or an instrument, never collected anything or been a part of any school clubs. I was never really allowed to get involved with much after school.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I guess just hanging out with Henry and Daisy, mostly.”

“What about Reign?”

“She’s a new addition,” I explain vaguely. To go further into it would force me to explain who her father is and how I know him, which would inevitably lead to the bridge incident, and I’d rather just avoid that entirely.

“She’s Henry’s girlfriend?”

“Yeah.”

We continue walking in circles with the horse beside us and Falcon on top of him.

“So how did the whole Bryan thing happen?” I ask.

She grins and a slight blush creeps up her cheeks. “He came into the diner I was working at one day. And . . .”

And I realize quickly that I don’t care. She continues to explain how they fell in love over numerous cups of lukewarm diner coffee. I’m not sure why I even asked. And she barely asks about Layla, who sits quietly on the horse, screeching every time there’s a small wobble or bump, or giggling when the horse neighs.

By the end of the afternoon, I’m beyond ready to leave. I’m sick of hearing her talk about Bryan and I’m sick of watching Falcon lay his claim over her and I’m sick of him trying to shove Layla off her horse when they get too close. The horses were nice, but it’s just so hot outside, that it stopped being about the horses and more about looking for portions of the ranch with shaded patches and ways to ignore Falcon.

On the way back, we stop for fro-yo. It’s a place a few blocks away from the house, and Falcon’s incessant begging began the moment we sat in Cary’s electronically pre-cooled car seats. She gave in almost immediately, just as Layla asked if fro-yo was like ice cream.

I sit there with them eating the frozen yogurt, wondering how many times a week they get fro-yo together, and wondering whether he appreciates having a mother to take him for fro-yo. Probably not. He sits across from me and kicks his feet back and forth aimlessly, though with the amount of times he knocks my shins, I’m starting to doubt his aimlessness.

I want to say something about it, to possibly tell him to maybe stop kicking me, but the way Cary is doting on his every bite of yogurt and his every deafeningly high-pitched giggle makes me bite the inside of my cheek to keep my mouth shut.

Layla scowls at him and doesn't even finish her bowl. Unusual for her, but then she says, "I like ice cream more. Can we get ice cream later?"

I say maybe and don't finish the fro-yo Cary bought me either. It tastes a bit too much like her money for me to really enjoy it.

*

Henry, Daisy, and Reign are all on the couch playing Guitar Hero when we get back to Cary's house. Reign is balanced on Henry's knee, plucking the plastic switch while Henry maneuvers his fingers across the colorful buttons on the neck of the guitar.

"Hey," I say, sitting down beside Daisy, who is shockingly able to manage the other guitar entirely on her own. I help Layla onto the couch beside me and she watches the screen, interested.

"Hi," Daisy chirps. "How was the ranch?"

I rest my arm over her shoulders. Reign glances at me quickly. "Okay," I say. "Hot."

"Surprising," Reign says, still tapping the white notch, though mildly out of rhythm with *I Love Rock 'n Roll*.

Henry throws a brief glance over his shoulder to make sure that no one is lingering behind him and then asks, "How was the other kid?"

“Fine,” I say. I’m not going to talk poorly of a six year old.

“Who?” Layla asks. “The boy? He’s mean.”

Henry smiles at her.

“You’re looking a little green,” Reign says to me as she misses five consecutive notes.

I look past Daisy and Henry at her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It just must be weird seeing your mum with another son.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“Did I say the word jealous?”

“You said green.”

She shrugs.

I’m about to start something, but Henry kisses her cheek, and she giggles, and it all just seems kind of pointless.

*

After another awkward dinner, and after the others have all retired to their own rooms, I beeline to Cary’s bedroom. Layla’s being put to sleep by Daisy, who promised her ice cream tomorrow. I’m going to join her soon. I waited a while last night, but she had a nightmare and woke up without me, and the screaming was pretty horrendous.

I hoped Cary would be alone, but Bryan’s lying beside her in bed. They’re watching some sitcom and I walk in mid-laugh. Both look at me, surprised. I probably should’ve knocked. In fact, why didn’t I knock? They could’ve been doing anything.

“Hey, sweetie,” Cary says. “What’s up?”

I feel small when I approach the bed, like a child who’s just had a bad dream and is searching for comfort. I feel like maybe this has happened before, like maybe I did have a bad dream once and maybe I did come to her bed when I was four or five. Those were different times, and suddenly, I don’t feel so happy about seeing her. Suddenly, I feel a little bitter, but I swallow it. I store it deep down my throat and into my chest and I keep it there.

“I wanted to talk about heading back to New Jersey,” I say quietly. I clear my throat and remind myself to speak up because children whimper words and I am not a child anymore. I have not been a child for a very long time.

“Aw, you’re headin’ back already? Ya’ll just got here,” Bryan says. I don’t know why he sounds so earnestly troubled by it. I’ve barely spoken to the man.

“Yeah.” I look at Cary. She doesn’t say anything. “Can I speak to my mother alone for a second?”

His smile falls. “No problem.”

I wait until he leaves to sit beside Cary. She barely looks in my direction. Moments ago she seemed happy, called me “Sweetie”.

“I was thinking I could take everyone and leave around eight tomorrow. I’m going to talk to Layla tonight about it. She’s not going to be happy, but –” I start.

“Ames –”

“Or we could wait until a bit later. I would just rather get home and get this whole arrest and trial thing going because being on the run kind of sucks, you know? And –”

“Ames, stop.”

I wait.

“I can’t take her.”

I stop breathing for a few seconds. My heart feels like it’s stilled. “What?”

“And I can’t come back to Jersey, Sweetie. Falcon and Bryan need me to –”

“Then just take her and forget about coming back. That was a ridiculous idea anyway. I don’t need your help for me. Just help Layla, okay?” I’m losing my chance somehow, even after I already got that chance, even after she already said yes. She said yes. She can’t do this. “She’s a really good kid. She won’t be trouble. I swear.” I’m grasping at these straws like I used to grasp at the hem of her shirt when I was little, like Falcon grasps at her desperately now.

She won’t meet my eyes. “I tried so hard to leave there, you know.”

“He’s not going to come here,” I say bluntly, pulling one of my legs onto the bed and taking her hand in mine. “He can’t do anything to you anymore. Just forget about me. Help Layla. Just take her, okay? It’s not like you don’t have the money to bring her up.”

She pulls her hand free and wipes one of her eyes. “Ames, it is *not* about money. I have a life here. You just threw this at me. I had no time to even –”

“There isn’t any time! I have to go back before I get everyone else in trouble and I can’t go back with Layla –”

“I don’t want . . . I can’t take her. If I take her, it links me to him. He’s going to want her back, Ames. Why do you think I didn’t take you?” She uses the pads of her fingers to wipe away any tears.

I stare at her, suddenly with breath heaving in my chest. How can she look at me – really look at me – and let my father do the same thing to Layla that he did to me, and let them drag me behind bars for nearly killing the man that she hated.

“You said . . .” I don’t know how to finish the sentence. I don’t know how to make her understand just what she’s doing to me right now. “You said you were going to help her. You said you were going to help *me*. I’m your *son*. You never wanted to see me after that, did you? This has all been miserable for you, a fucking joke that I came here, hasn’t it?”

She begins to truly cry, face contorted and ugly.

I stand, angry with her for everything. For keeping me here an extra day when she knew this was going to happen. For letting a little girl go back to a father that will destroy her in every way he destroyed me and then some.

She continues to cry. Stop it. Stop fucking crying. What right does she have for crying like a child in front of me? She should claim some responsibility for her actions. She’s an adult. A mother. She abandoned me. And she’s doing it again.

That bitterness I swallowed comes back up and lodges itself in my throat, and it is sharp and cutting, and it is so strong that it hurts.

She stares at her hands; at her fingernails, perhaps; at how manicured they are, remembering how they probably scratched off flesh from my father in one of their many physical altercations. And then she says it. “You are his child, you know? You look like him, talk like him. You are your father’s son.”

I don’t feel bitterness anymore. I don’t know what I feel. I don’t know if I feel at all. She sucked the air right out of me. When I leave her room, I don’t slam the door. I don’t yell anything over my shoulder. I don’t make a scene. And she does nothing to keep me from leaving.

I need to get out of the house, need to breathe. I’m suffocating in here now – in the hallway, in the living room, under this roof. I’m can’t breathe.

I’m gasping when I step outside. I’m sick. I’m really sick. I’m going to be sick. I feel it in my stomach, the bubbling waves of nausea. I make it into the driveway when the door closes behind me. I think it’s her, Cary, coming to tell me that she’s sorry, that she didn’t mean it, that she’ll at least take Layla, that she’ll maybe even come help me in New Jersey with the only thing I’ve ever needed from her. I want it to be her so badly that the nausea disappears and is replaced by a still heart full of hope.

“Ames?”

No.

“Leave me alone,” I say, my back turned toward her. A breeze caresses the back of my neck almost kindly, pitying as it creates a chasm between Reign and me.

“I don’t know your father,” she says instead, and God, just fucking leave, Reign. Just leave me alone. “I’ve never met him. I don’t know what color his hair was or if he’d be nice upon an introduction or how he likes his tea. But I know that you are not like him.”

I spin in her direction so quickly that I lose my balance and step to the left, crushing one of the flowers in the garden that borders the driveway. She was listening, eavesdropping on a conversation that I would never have wanted to be listened to or eavesdropped on. She’s nosy and relentless in her attempts to invade my privacy, and I want to hate her for it and for her preemptive bitterness and for her uncharacteristically kind words following.

Instead I just say, “I have to leave here. Now.”

And she says, “Okay, I’ll get the others.”

And that’s it.

Chapter Seven

I knocked on Henry's door and waited.

And waited.

And then knocked some more until he decided to open it. He was wearing boxers, no shirt.

He wiped his eyes clumsily. "What time is it?"

"Late," I said dully. "So how was your night?"

"*Dude*," he said, smirking. "I'm in love."

"You've only known her for a day."

"I know, but she's perfect," he said. "Seriously perfect. Like you can't imagine."

I could imagine.

As if on cue, Reign's voice echoed from within the house. "Henry, I can't find my shirt." Over his shoulder I saw her come out of his room. She'd gone home with him. She'd gone *home* with him! She sauntered up to the door, clad only in a black lacy bra and the same pair of dark jeans from the night before.

I was staring.

But like, she had no shirt on. Was it wrong to stare when they were right there, and she was doing nothing to cover up, and my pants felt a bit tighter, and I thought she looked absolutely perfect? Was that wrong?

“Looking classy.” I swallowed loudly. A gulp of epic proportions. I was sure she heard it. It took a great deal of effort to drag my eyes up from her newly exposed skin – her stomach, her ribs, her breasts.

Henry draped his arm over her shoulders, drawing her close, and I could imagine the feeling of her skin against his, and I was jealous.

“Why would I want to be classy when I can have people like you staring at my tits,” she said. I hadn’t realized my gaze lowered again. She looked up at Henry and asked, “Have you seen it?”

“Seen what?”

“My shirt.”

“I threw it somewhere last night.”

I rolled my eyes.

Reign caught that and pulled away from Henry a little. When she noticed her withdrawal from him, she overcompensated and wrapped her arm tightly around his bare waist. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“What am *I* doing here? What are *you* doing here?”

She made a face.

“Okay,” Henry laughed awkwardly. “I’m going to put some clothes on. Ames, you want to come inside?”

“No, thanks,” I said, still watching Reign. “I should get home.”

“Oh,” he said. “Well, Reign, you can –”

“Actually, I should get home, too,” she said.

Henry frowned. “Okay. I’ll go see if I can find your shirt.”

“Can I just borrow one of yours? I’ll come back later to get mine,” she said as he started toward his room.

He seemed to like that idea because when he looked back at her, he was smiling. He knew that she’d just made a commitment to come back. “Okay, sure.”

I was left alone with Reign. The threshold between us, a barrier that neither of us was willing to cross at the moment. We were in a silent battle. She crossed her arms in front of her, creating a greater cleavage between her breasts.

“Stop staring at my chest.”

“Wear a shirt next time you come to the door, then.” She must’ve thought me stupid – she’d obviously done this on purpose. She’d heard me at the door, so she’d come out in her bra. She was a tease. That, at least, was pretty apparent considering our dance last night.

Henry came jogging down the hallway, now in a pair of grey sweats. He had a t-shirt in tow and he handed it to Reign. She pulled it over her head, threading her spaghetti-thin arms through the sleeves. It looked like an ocean of green on her, the hem reaching mid-thigh, the sleeves nearly down to her elbows. She still somehow looked kind of hot.

Reign and I left Henry’s at the same time. She kissed him goodbye, and I averted my eyes. And then we were stuck walking together in silence. We were both so stubborn; neither of us wanted to start a conversation, and for some reason, Reign seemed angry with me. I’d done nothing wrong. She’d been the one who deserted me for Henry when Jeanie called.

“Have fun last night?” I finally said.

“What’s my last name?” she asked, looking ahead down the sidewalk.

“Huh?”

“My last name, do you know it?”

“Brookes?” I answered, though there was a heavy sense of inquiry attached. I assumed that her last name was the same as her father’s, but once I said it aloud, I realized that it was probably not. She hadn’t been raised by her father. She probably had her mother’s last name.

“No,” she sighed, disappointed. I didn’t know how she could’ve possibly thought I’d know the correct answer to that. “And I’d rather not be judged by someone who doesn’t even know my last name, so shove it.”

I blinked. “Judged?”

“I can sleep with whomever I want.”

“I never said you couldn’t. I’ve only known you for a day. Why would I care who you sleep with?”

“Your tone implied it.”

“My tone is consistently the same.”

“No, you sounded condescending.”

I shake my head and *tsk*. “You see, that’s what you get for only knowing me for a day.”

“What?”

“You haven’t had time to realize that I always sound condescending. That’s my natural tone. Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it.”

She glared at me for a second before looking ahead again.

“See,” I continued, “*you* misjudged *me* as someone who wasn’t that big of an asshole.”

“You’re right, I should have known better.”

Silence again.

“It’s Hudson, by the way,” she finally said.

“What is?”

“My last name.”

We turned the corner. I could just see her father’s police car poking out of the driveway a bit down the street.

“Am I free to judge you now?” I said wryly.

She pondered that for a moment, and then replied, “Do you see a lion judge a zebra before it devours the poor thing?”

I tilted my head a little. “Are you the zebra in that scenario? Because I feel like you’re more of a lion in general. Also, if you are the zebra, is that statement meant for the purpose of declaring how devourable you are? I think that’s a little conceited on your part, don’t you?”

I got a smile out of her. A real one, by the looks of it. Toothy and reaching her eyes. “You should ask Henry,” she said, in a whimsical breath.

I paused for a moment, staring, and she slapped my cheek playfully before hopping up the stairs of the stoop. I followed her up the concrete steps. “You are the lion, you know.”

She swung around, and her face was so close to my chest that I could feel her breath on my neck. “That’s because I hide my stripes well. You should hide yours a little better.”

I just wanted to kiss her. Our faces were so close, close enough for me to smell coconut in her hair and the faint scent of alcohol lingering from last night, and just a tad of morning breath. I’d have just had to bow my head a little, catch her lips with mine. But no. Henry had wanted her; Henry could have her. I wasn’t going to be a part of someone’s game. If she wanted to make her father angry, that was fine. She could have even used me, but I was not going to be sucked into this triangle she was trying to create.

I took a step back. She was noticeably disappointed.

“Henry seems to really like you,” I said, clasping my hands together behind me.

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “I like him, too.”

“Good. His last name is Middleton. Now nothing shall stand between you two.”

She leaned against her door and tucked her thumbs into her jean pockets. Henry’s green t-shirt pooled above her hands. “Grand.”

We were both quiet and still in our stubbornness until Reign began to laugh.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She opened the door behind her and slipped inside. “See you around, Ames Treadway.”

And then she was gone.

“That bitch.” Henry swerves and the cars to either side of us honk. Layla clings to Daisy. “She calls herself a mother? She’d probably abandon Falcon for the next rock ‘n roll star that swings by.”

I try to ignore him, despite the fact that he’s doing it on my behalf. He bolted out of Cary’s house so quickly that he forgot all his belongings inside and had to go back to retrieve them. Daisy’s been rubbing both my back and Layla’s back in an alternating pattern. She’s also been murmuring quiet apologies since we left. Her hand is wearing a hole between my shoulder blades. Maybe she’ll be able to reach in and remove my heart soon, and that will be the end of everything.

Cary was my last chance – my only chance. Layla’s only chance. Without her, there’s no way to keep Layla out of my father’s hands, no way I can stay out of jail. So now what am I supposed to do? Go home, give Layla back, wait to be shoved behind bars?

“Let’s go have fun somewhere,” Henry suggests suddenly. “It’ll take your mind off everything.”

I actually consider it for a second, drinking the night away, but honestly, I’m just tired, and what would I do with Layla? It’s almost all I feel – just an all encompassing exhaustion. At least with my father and everything he did to me, I still had some semblance of hope for the future. Now I have nothing.

“Ames?” Henry glances over his shoulder briefly.

“I just want to find a place to sleep tonight,” I say.

“Getting out will make you feel better,” he says. “You know it will.”

I don’t want to argue anymore, so I lean my head back against the headrest, forcing Daisy to remove her hand from my back. She tucks it under her thigh.

“Let’s just find a hotel, Henry,” Reign says. “You can go out tonight without Ames. He’s had a rough day, no?”

He turns his head quickly and the jeep veers to the right. “I’m not going to leave him alone,” he says. “Do you really think I’d leave my best friend alone after something like that?”

She doesn’t say anything. I watch the streetlights brief glow on her hair as we speed by each one. It’s brown, but under the light it looks golden.

“We’ll find a hotel,” Henry says. “No problem.”

“Where are we going?” Layla asks me, and when I don’t answer, she leans back against Daisy, scowling.

I close my eyes and count the times the insides of my eyelids glow with each passing streetlight.

Twelve before I fall asleep.

*

Daisy shakes me awake, and I’m that kind of tired where I can feel my heart beating behind my eyes, the kind of tired where my muscles seem to have atrophied and my body has no intention of moving. I blink a few times. I couldn’t have been out for long.

“Ames, you okay?” she asks.

I feel like I’ve been chewed up and spit out, bones mangled, organs pulverized. “Yeah,” I say. “Where are we?”

“At some motel Henry saw off the side of the road.”

I look out the window and see Henry and Reign already approaching the front door of the place. He’s not going to be able to get a room without the money that’s sitting heavy in my wallet.

“Oh,” I say.

Daisy and I get out of the jeep and I muster up the energy to jog to reception, where I find Henry talking to the front desk lady and Reign leaning against a wall with peeling pastel wallpaper and a suspicious line of black mold in the corner.

I meet Henry at the desk and quickly dish out the money for the cheapest room that will fit all of us – one with two queen sized beds and no cable. We get the cardkeys and we’re directed toward our room. And then it’s just kind of quiet. Awkwardly so, like when I breathe, they stare at me because it’s somehow a miracle that I’m still breathing right now, and that the complete confirmation of abandonment hasn’t smashed me to dust. I wonder if it’d be appropriate to just lie down and go to sleep with them staring at me.

“I’m hungry,” Layla says, hopping off the bed and marching in front of me. “I want mac-cheese.”

“Not now, Layla,” I say, and even though she holds her arms up to me, I leave her standing on the ground.

“I’m *hungry*,” she whines.

I sigh and reach down for her, but Daisy beats me to it. “Hey, little girl,” she says, tickling Layla under her arms. “You just ate dinner! You’re so silly!”

“But I’m hungry,” Layla manages between giggles.

“Take her somewhere to eat?” I say, quietly even though I mean for it to be loud. “I’ll wait here, okay?”

Being alone sounds nice. Sounds peaceful, for once. Sounds like a calm before the shit storm I’m about to drive back into.

“No,” Henry says. “You should come with us.”

“Henry, I’m really tired. I just want to sleep right now, and I kind of want to be alone anyway, so –”

“Just come out and –”

“I said I just want to be alone.”

He takes a small step back. “Oh.”

“It’s nothing that –”

“No,” he says. “It’s fine. We’ll leave you alone for a while. Whatever.”

I didn’t want to make him angry, but it’s not something I have much patience for right now. So I just say, “Thanks.”

“Do I get food now?” Layla asks. “Mac-cheese, right?”

“Yeah, silly goose,” Daisy says warily, eyeing me slightly. “We’ll get you some food.”

I wait for them to leave – Henry in a huff, Daisy with sympathetic eyes, Reign without looking back. I sit on the edge of the bed, and when the door

finally closes behind them, the air is quick to escape me. The breath has been pulled from my lungs, and I quickly take another; fearing that if I don't fill myself with air immediately, I'll lose the opportunity.

I'm alone. I wanted this, but now I don't know what to do. Something feels disturbed within me, something that was waiting for me to be alone before it surfaced and latched onto my lungs and heart, and squeezed. Squeezed with relentless fingers, squeezed until water bubbled up, hot and angry in my eyes.

My chest feels tight, and my lungs lose their chance to fill themselves. I gasp and choke in an effort to bury the feeling back where it was nesting inconspicuously. I do not want to cry. My elbows rest on my knees and I press my thumbs into my eyelids hard enough to see sparks. They feel damp; I press harder. It hurts – actually physically hurts – inside my chest, inside my gut. It's okay that she doesn't want to help. I keep trying to tell myself that it's okay, to just let it be okay so that I can stop the thoughts and stop the pain and just sleep.

But it's not okay. How could it be?

She didn't want to take me with her, and the only time I've ever needed her, she wouldn't help. And she knows that without her help, Layla will end up back with my father, that without her help, I'm done for, kaput, that's it, over.

But I look like him. I am my father's son.

The door to the hotel room opens, and damn it, I told them. I told them I didn't want them here, told them to take Layla for food somewhere so I can have a few hours to just collect myself. I don't remove my hands from my face. The last thing I need now is for Henry to see me on the verge of crying.

“I said I just wanted a while alone,” I croak. Where is my voice? “Can you just leave?”

Hands on my wrists. Small and delicate enough to belong to an angel, but still strong enough to pull my hands from my face and hold them for a moment, two moments, three. She’s standing between my knees, and I see her face even though I won’t look up. I see her staring down, and watching; and through that shade of brown hair falling on either side of her face, she’s seeing the relentless fingers squeezing.

“Get out.” I pull my hands from hers and wipe my eyes. “Please, can you just leave me alone for once, Reign?”

She nudges my face upward with curled fingers, and I meet her grey eyes, and she looks sympathetic. There’s this solid, cold lump of steel settling in my stomach when I realize how much Rein must pity me right now. I’m a grown adult, crying like a child, with red, swollen eyes and a quivering lip. I bite it hard. I bite it and silently plead for it to stop.

“Reign, just –”

She stops me midsentence with her own lips, not quivering but confident. I’m frozen for a moment, not reciprocating the kiss, not withdrawing, just frozen because *what is she doing right now?* And then I do kiss her back and I bring my fingers up to the back of her neck and let them tangle in her hair, and she feels warm like she has only ever lived under the sun. My lips press against hers, and she tastes of salt and strawberry Chap Stick and cigarettes.

The kiss is slow; it’s sad.

But still, it's hungry.

Her lips part enough for my tongue to brush hers, and when she moans softly, I feel the vibration against my mouth. I further twine my fingers in her hair and pull her closer against me. I feel her warmth everywhere.

She brings her knees up around my waist and onto the mattress, and I feel her thighs against my sides, the skin burning through my shirt. I kiss her more fervently, like she is all I have at the moment, because she *is* all I have at the moment.

But she is Henry's.

Henry. His name rings loudly in my head, and *what are you doing right now, Ames? Stop it.*

This is wrong.

Her legs clench around my waist just as I and push her shoulders back. She remains on my lap, breathing deeply, mouth cherry red. She reaches for my face, but I look away, and shake my head, and place my hands on her hips, ready to push her off regardless of how warm she feels.

"Henry," I say. She should understand.

"He's out with Daisy." The first thing she's said since she came back here, words breathy and raw, like kissing me has stripped her of everything else. I don't know how she got out of going with them, how he willingly let her stay here with me, but then I realize that no one *let's* Reign do anything. She does what she wants and she wanted to stay and forge a rift between him and me. She wanted to ruin things further and –

“Stop,” she says. “Stop thinking. It’ll drive you mad.”

She kisses me again, and I’m ready to push her off completely, but instead, I pull her closer and my mouth opens a little and I let this happen. Her hands slip under my shirt, and mine follow suit under hers. I feel the softness of her back, the flat plane of her stomach, the way her ribs, like the strings of a harp, almost play music when I run my fingers over them. She lifts her hands upward, and then my shirt is gone, and then hers is gone too; and I’m playing with the latch of her bra while we kiss. We’re wrong; I know we are, but I feel like I need nothing more than I need this.

I hold onto her tightly; and she clings to me, arms circled around my neck, lips only parting from mine for small gasps of air. Now that I’ve felt her – now that I feel her – I don’t want to let her go.

Things change: I’m no longer sitting with her on my lap; we’re lying on the bed, her skin against mine completely; I’m watching her underneath me. She’s making quiet noises and kissing my collarbone and digging her fingernails into my back.

I look at her, bump my nose against hers, kiss her lips and then her jaw and then her lips again. Her skin is sweet like vanilla and salty like fresh tears, and I plant a soft kiss on her neck to taste her again. I brush a lock of hair from her eyes and I whisper, “Reign,” and my eyes fall on hers, but she doesn’t hold the gaze for long. Instead, she lifts her head and kisses me. But still, I caught a brief glimmer, a reflection of something real within her, maybe.

“Pretend it’s the end of the world,” she whispers. “Everything is better when it feels like it’s the end of the world.”

It’s the end of the world.

*

There’s a point in the middle of the night where I wake up and my arms are around Reign, and she is what’s keeping me warm; and then there is a later point where I’m woken up by some sort of loud commotion outside and my arms are empty and I’m cold.

Daisy’s voice is the first I hear, speaking soothingly to Daisy and then angrily to Henry as she helps him into the room. I crack my eyes open and see his arm draped over her shoulders as she tries to balance a snoozing Layla on her hip. She’s supporting the brunt of his weight, and he starts to cackle. Daisy keeps telling him to be quiet and she eases the door closed behind them in an effort not to disturb Layla or me. I appreciate her effort. Henry, on the other hand, I do not appreciate. In fact, if I wasn’t completely naked under the quilt, I’d probably make a scene. Because he’s drunk. He’s drunk and he’s with Layla, and I don’t want her around that. I want her as far from that as possible.

“Ames is sleeping, Henry.” She drops him in bed and pulls the quilt over him. “And you’re going to wake Layla. Shut up and go to sleep.”

“Ames?” Henry continues laughing. He stretches his neck upward to peak in my direction. I close my eyes and hug the quilt to my chest. “Is he naked under there?”

Um.

“No,” Daisy replies quickly. “Go to sleep, Henry. I have to clean your vomit out of my hair.”

I should've gone with them. I should've just taken care of Layla and fed her. Like how shitty of a person am I, to have her say she's hungry and then tell her not right now. Henry's an awful drunk, especially for Daisy to handle alone. She's short and she's small and she had a four year old to tow around with her. I should've gone.

He rolls over onto his stomach. “Where's Reign?”

Daisy glances at my bed. She won't find anything incriminating other than my nakedness, which I'd like to hope she doesn't actually find. “I don't know.”

Henry's deep breaths melt into low snores and Daisy tiptoes to the bathroom with Layla, whispering something about giving her a quick wash up.

If Reign isn't here with me and if she's not with them, I don't know where she could possibly be. But it's not like I can go looking for her right now.

So I stop thinking and try to fall back asleep.

Chapter Eight

The loud noises scared her.

She never liked loud noises.

She covered her ears and hid her face in my chest.

And when lights showered over us from above, she had no clue of their beauty because she was so afraid.

“America!”

I’m awoken to zealous shouts of our country’s name and other phrases relating to independence and freedom and barbequing. I want to grab the spare pillow next to mine and catapult it at Henry, but I realize that the room is bright, and if Henry’s awake after his drunken return last night, it’s probably time for me to wake up, too.

I open my eyes, and barely two inches from my face is a leg. It’s tan and definitely not Reign’s, and I glance upward to see Daisy sitting beside me. Oh, right. We’re supposed to be sleeping in the same bed. I wonder when she snuck in next to me last night. And I wonder where she put Layla, because I’m hoping it wasn’t next to my naked form.

Daisy must notice that I'm awake because she tugs the quilt down a little, revealing a pair of folded boxers. I grab them slyly and slip them on beneath the covers as I sit up.

"Where's Layla?" I ask.

Daisy nods toward her other side, where Layla is sitting. She's wide-awake with headphone buds in her ears, listening to the music on Daisy's phone. Good, she slept on that side.

"About time you're awake." Henry grins. "We have things to do. It's July 4th!"

July 4th. I'd forgotten all about July 4th. I see Reign beside him, rolling her eyes, and I remember last night and how she was all I needed, and how she disappeared – where did she even go? – and how she won't make eye contact with me right now. She has the motel's copy of the bible in her hands and she's flipping through the pages like they belong in a magazine.

I want to yell at Henry for last night, but there seems like no use for that right now, especially with everyone else around, especially because he can further delve into the reasons of why I'm mostly naked underneath the blanket.

"Good morning," I say. Reign still doesn't acknowledge me. Maybe I imagined last night.

"Afternoon," Henry corrects. "It's almost one o'clock. Get ready. We want to leave."

"Leave for home?" My legs fall over the side of the bed, and I stand.

“No,” Henry says. “We want to scope the town a little. We didn’t actually do that much yesterday. Nashville’s pretty huge, you know?”

“We need to head home,” I say slowly.

“Ames, why would you want to go home? As soon as you step foot in New Brunswick, they’re going to arrest you and take Layla. Don’t you want to push that off for as long as possible?”

“No,” I say slowly. “The longer we’re gone, the more trouble *you* guys are going to be in for aiding in my escape. We need to get back.”

Henry takes a breath, deep and long. “Okay, I’m not saying you’re going to jail, but if you were to go to jail, don’t you want a little time to experience what there is outside of Jersey? Don’t you want Layla to experience that?”

I should have expected this. Henry was so gung-ho for this road trip . . . there had to be an ulterior motive. He wants an adventure.

“He’s right, you know,” Reign says, eyes still down, though I know she’s not reading anything. “You deserve to have a little fun.”

I’m suddenly feeling really exposed and vulnerable standing in my underwear in the middle of the room. “Henry –”

“Come on, man.” He smiles hopefully. “Let’s just take it easy getting back. Layla doesn’t seem to be complaining.”

I glance at her and she’s bobbing her head to whatever song is playing in her headphones.

“Henry,” Daisy says finally. “Ames wants to get home. We shouldn’t –”

“Shut up, Daisy,” Henry snaps. Daisy’s nostrils flare. Considering the vomit she washed out of her hair last night, he has no right to talk to her like that.

I take a deep breath and just say, “Fine, I’m showering before we go anywhere.”

I head toward the bathroom as Henry cheers in victory, but I stop on the other side of the bed and kneel beside Layla.

She looks at me and frowns. “Where’s your clothes?” she shouts above her music.

“Hey, guess what,” I say, ignoring her question.

“What?”

“We’re going to stay in town for another day or so. Do you like it here?”

She shakes her head. “Falcon is stupid.”

I smile and tousle her hair. She tries to sink out of my reach. “Falcon won’t be around.”

“Okay, I guess,” she says and then continues dancing to her music.

Inside the bathroom, I lock the door behind me and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I look away and start the shower, turning the knob as far left as possible. I step in, and the water isn’t even that hot. I do my best to keep my casted arm out of the water, but it’s difficult.

When I turn, the water stings my back. I reach behind me and feel shallow scratches there, and I know I did not imagine last night with Reign. But now she’s with her boyfriend. It sounds wrong. That Henry is her boyfriend. But regardless, he is, and that means I screwed up last night. I’m not that person. I’m not the

person who sleeps with his best friend's girlfriend. Last night with Reign may have been what I needed, but it was a mistake. I shouldn't have let it happen.

I finish showering quickly, leaving me with little time to think about much else. My mother crosses my mind briefly, but the water runs over my back, and I focus on the sting of the scratches instead. It's easier to manage that pain.

*

I don't know where we're driving to, but Henry seems keen on wandering, so that's what we do. We wonder until we find something 4th of July-y to do. In the end, it was Daisy who suggested going to one of those firework spectacles. Apparently, it's kind of the thing to do in Nashville on the 4th. There's a festival going on and Layla seems dazzled by the different activities. She asks to have her face painted, so I head over to the booth with her while the others go to get a couple beers.

"What do you want on your face, pretty girl?" the painter asks Layla. "Do you want to look like a fairy princess?"

Layla sticks her tongue out. "Yuck. I want to look like a tiger!"

The painter laughs and begins painting Layla's face, while I stand there and wait. Eventually the others come back over to me and hand me a beer, which I take and sip as Layla's face gets the finishing touches.

We end up standing in the middle of a field, Layla balanced on my shoulders, holding on tightly. I keep a grip on her legs and she laughs whenever I bounce her upward. We're surrounded by hundreds of people waiting for fireworks, but there're still another few minutes before they're fired up into the

sky. We spent most of the day searching for a place to end up, and really, we just ended up in a field to watch fireworks.

And despite having Layla with me, I've been handed countless beers and a few mixed drinks, and I'm feeling just a tad wobbly on my feet. In fact, Henry and Daisy are also both a bit buzzed. Reign's the only one who hasn't had a single thing to drink tonight. I think she's trying to watch out for everyone, for Layla, maybe. But that's probably just wishful thinking, that maybe she'd care enough to watch out for Layla.

But for the first time all day, Henry and Daisy leave me alone with Reign. They've taken the beer retrieval task upon themselves, and their fake IDs have been working wonders. I lift Layla off my shoulders and place her on the ground beside me, and Reign brushes the back of her hand against mine, and I wonder if it was deliberate. Layla dances in front of us to the music playing, but I'm more focused on the hum of voices meshing together into one blaring tone, both separate and joined with the music. I can't decide whether I should talk to Reign. Maybe I should just keep quiet. She's barely spoken a word to me all day. Maybe it's better to keep it that way.

"Are your insides still boiling?" she asks, without bothering to look at me. Instead, she's watching the person in front of her struggle to maintain control over their screaming toddler.

"Excuse me?" I say.

"Are you okay now?" She stoops down to pick up the toddler's fallen stuffed elephant. She hands it to him. He stops screaming and puts the elephant's

ear in his mouth. Layla watches, eyes wide. She looks from the elephant to me and back.

“Ames,” she says, pulling on the hem of my shirt.

“You’ve been ignoring me all day, and now you want to know if I’m okay?” I shove my good hand into my pocket to stop Reign from touching it, because I don’t want her to touch me, because when she touches me, I remember her touch from last night and how much I craved it.

She sighs and turns toward me. “What was I supposed to do, Ames?”

“Act normal.”

“Normal? There is no normal. We never had a normal. There is only Henry and me and you and me, and I can’t pretend to be a part of both at the same time.” Her words are sturdy, and the sureness of them makes me feel small, like how could I believe anything other than what she’s telling me, like how could I be so stupid to think we could be friends after how complicated things have become.

“There is no you and me,” I say. “Last night was a mistake. That’s all it was.”

There’s a weird pitter-patter against my ribs, as if a small someone is trying to break their way out and tell her differently. And then there’s a small pitter-pattering against my leg, and that’s Layla trying to get my attention. I look down at her for a second and notice her pointing at the toddler’s toy again.

“I want one,” she says.

I look back at Reign. “Last night was a mistake,” she repeats with just a small falter in her stubborn tone.

“You have Henry,” I say.

“And he’s brilliant.”

“So I’ll just let you guys shine bright.”

She bites her bottom lip.

“Like a diamond,” I finish quietly.

Her eyes narrow. “Don’t quote Rhianna at me.”

I smile, hoping we can have this truce and say that last night was a mistake and then never say anything about it again.

She shoves my shoulder playfully.

When Henry and Daisy return, they’re both sporting two beers. Daisy hands Reign one, and Henry hands me another. He claps his hand on the back of my neck. “Drink up, bro.”

I take sip as he wraps one arm around Reign’s shoulders, the other around mine. He glances at Daisy, who’s standing in front of us. “Sorry, babe. I can’t grow a third arm. And I’ve got my best friend and my girlfriend under these two.”

Daisy scowls, and I reach out. “Come here.” I wrap the fingers of my casted hand around her wrist and pull her beside me. My arm falls around her waist. She sighs and gulps down some beer. My limbs feel loser, my mind fuzzier. Maybe the beer is doing me good. This is my fourth or fifth. I can’t remember.

Layla grabs onto my shirt tightly and yanks hard. “Pick me up,” she says.

I stoop down and grab her and her legs latch onto my waist. She looks adorable with the orange paint on her face, the whiskers drawn over her cheeks.

“Roar!” she exclaims.

I smile and say, “Roar!” in return.

“Reign, you feelin’ a little left out?” Henry pulls her against his side, and her beer sloshes over the edge of the plastic cup.

She inhales deeply. “Why would I feel left out?”

“Because it’s July 4th, and you’re not American. Do you even understand the amazingness of this holiday?”

Oh, boy.

“Of course I understand it,” Reign says. “In my country, we celebrate July 4th too, except we barbeque Americans instead of hamburgers.”

I laugh loudly and suddenly. Even Daisy contributes a chortle or two.

Layla frowns and grabs my ear, turning my head. “I’m American, right?”

“No one’s barbequing you,” I say, kissing her cheek and feeling the dryness of the paint there.

“Not funny,” Henry says.

“Funny? Who’s joking?” Reign says. “Sometimes we make lampshades out of their skin.”

He looks at her, stale faced and stoic.

“I’m joking, babe,” Reign finally relents. “We don’t kill Americans.”

Henry removes his arms from our shoulders. “I’m aware.”

My eyes fall, and I notice a small white flower sprouting from the grass. I untangle my arm from Daisy’s waist, bend down with Layla balanced on my waist, and pluck it from the earth.

“A daisy for Daisy?” I ask, offering her the flower. She smiles and sticks it through her hair, behind her ear.

“How adorable,” Henry says sourly.

We ignore him.

The toddler in front of us drops his stuffed elephant again, and Reign immediately steps forward to retrieve it. She hands it to him, and he giggles, placing the ear in his mouth. Layla scowls.

Reign steps back from the little boy, and at that moment, there’s an enormous boom. The sky lights up with a vibrant blue firework.

The baby cries, but it’s drowned out by the cracks in the sky. Layla screams in my ear and buries her face in my shoulder, using her hands to cover her ears. One after the other, they light up with blues and reds and gold. I glance at Henry and Reign and see the lights reflecting in their eyes. Both are silent, both smiling. They seem happy. I look at Daisy, and she too is smiling at the sky.

Layla begins to cry, fully and uninterrupted now. She holds onto me and asks to leave, and I try to show her the sparks of lights above, but she’s uninterested. I forgot how much she hated loud noises, how afraid she was last 4th of July.

Reign’s arm bumps against mine, and she leaves it there. I don’t move away, and maybe I’m wrong again. No, I know I’m wrong again.

But even as the fireworks are falling above us, I can only think of her arm against mine.

And then I do step away and head toward the exit of the field with Layla holding on with all her might.

*

After the fireworks, and after the drive back to the motel, and after we all got into our beds, and after I finally got Layla showered and face-paint free and to sleep, I realize I'm not really that tired – probably because I woke up at one in the afternoon. I toss and turn and try to fall asleep, but then I notice Reign ease out of bed, slip her shoes on, and creep outside.

I slip jeans on and follow her out, not because this is the best idea, but because I'm curious as to where she can possibly go. But then as soon as I close the motel door behind me, I'm caught.

“What do you want?” She's leaning against the wall.

“How did you know –?”

“You clobber like an ape,” she says. “What do you want?”

“Where are you going?”

She hesitates.

“I'm going to either follow you or tell Henry that you sneak out every night, so you –”

“The roof,” she admits.

I stick my hands in my pockets and rock back onto my heels. “Can I come?”

*

It's quiet at first. Silent, actually. There isn't even wind to fill the gaps of nothingness. Reign's sitting on the raised edge of the roof, legs dangling over. I'm sitting opposite her, with my legs hanging over the other side and my feet planted firmly on the ground where there's no risk of slipping off and falling to a harsh concrete-y death.

"Is this where you went last night?" I finally ask. "You know, after —"

"Yes."

"You have a thing for roofs then?" Stupid. That was stupid. Why would I even say that?

"I have a thing for being alone," she quips, looking out toward the city, toward the lights of downtown.

I must be a real bother. "Those fireworks were pretty nice, huh?" Another goes off in the distance, despite how late it's gotten, and I hope it hasn't awoken Layla. There are always those few who continue firing them throughout the night, disrupting the peace or something.

She shrugs.

"Can you talk to me?" I ask.

"About what?"

"I don't know. Anything. It's just weird sitting up here in complete silence while you have your existential moment or whatever."

"No one forced you to come up here with me."

"I know."

She doesn't say anything else. I start to whistle a tune and she groans.

“Stop it.” She rubs her palms against her knees and then turns, throwing her legs over to my side. “What do you want, Ames?”

I glance at her and pay attention to her face, at how there’s no makeup on it, and how she looks fresh and innocent. And vulnerable. Her hair is swept back with a few wisps slipping out of the elastic and against her cheeks. For the first time since I saw her, she looks like a normal seventeen year old girl.

“Nothing,” I say.

“Then just go.”

“We slept together last night.” Shit.

She stares at me with pale grey eyes that are not outlined in thick black lines, but instead flush against her white skin. “I’m aware.”

“And it meant nothing to you.”

“Didn’t it mean nothing to you?” Small goose bumps have sprouted on her arms. I almost wrap my arm around her. Almost.

I look away and toward my clasped hands. “I don’t know, I guess.”

“You said it was a mistake,” she says. “Like three hours ago.”

“I know.”

“And have you had some life altering epiphany where you’ve come to decide it wasn’t a mistake?”

“Reign.”

“I have Henry.”

“I know that.”

“He’s about thirty feet below us right now.” She tucks some loose hair behind her ears and looks ahead, except now it’s toward a concrete wall and not toward an entire city.

“I’m aware,” I say. “You’re the one who initiated the sex. You’re his girlfriend, not me.”

She narrows her eyes and stands. “I’m going.”

No. No, that’s not what I wanted. I grab onto her wrist. “Stop.”

“Let me go.”

“I’m sorry, okay?”

She pulls free and crosses her arms over her chest. “You’re the one who –”

“Let’s not argue anymore,” I say. “We’re always arguing.”

She takes a deep breath and nods. Finally, she agrees with me about something. She sits beside me, and I release her wrist. “I’m sorry I coerced you into sleeping with me,” she says.

“You didn’t coerce me.”

“It wouldn’t have happened if I didn’t come back to see you. I knew that’s what was going to happen. I wanted it to happen. I’m sorry.” She’s folded over so that her arms are on her knees and her forehead is rested against her forearms. I watch the gentle rise and fall of her back.

I don’t say anything right away. Instead, I sit there, staring at that wall, hoping she’ll say something else because I don’t know what to say to her without betraying Henry.

She lifts her head from her arms and reaches toward the ground between us. When she picks her hand up, she's holding a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

"I left this here last night. I figured I'd be using up a lot of them. Want one?"

I pluck a cigarette from the pack, and stick it between my lips. She lights it for me, and then lights one of her own. Together we inhale cancer and exhale relief.

"Thanks," I say.

She rests her head against my shoulder. I forget about the inappropriateness of the situation and wrap my arm around her. She says, "What now?"

I say, "Can I ask you something?"

She says, "Yeah."

I pull the cigarette from my mouth. "Why are you with Henry?" The words are quiet and hesitant, because they are wrong of me to ask, and I know that, but I just need to know why.

She leans into my shoulder and breathes out a stream of smoke. "I have a good time with him, you know? It's not like he makes me miserable."

"I never said he did."

"He's having a rough time, Ames," she says. "With his parent's divorce, and his mum's alcoholism, and maybe losing his house. He's just been having a rough time, and he doesn't get to talk about it a lot. I listen. I actually listen to him when he tells me these things, and I try to make him feel better."

I loosen my grip on her and swallow a deep breath of air, clearing the smoke from my lungs and the fog from my head. I didn't know those things about Henry. His parents are getting a divorce? That's huge. Why wouldn't he tell me something like that? And I didn't know his mom's been drinking, or about the house. "He never told me any of that," I say. "He never really says anything important."

"Yeah," she says. "He feels better when he's out. He needs those distractions. I'm just one of them. And I don't mind that."

"You don't mind being his distraction?"

"No," she says. "Plus, is that not what I am to you?"

My arm drops from her shoulders. "No," I say firmly. "You're not. You're a person to me. A real person like I'm a real person like Henry and Daisy and Layla are real people."

"What is real, anyway?" she whispers, dropping her cigarette to the ground and stomping it out. I drop mine, too.

I pull my feet up onto the ledge and I stand facing outward toward the city. I look down and I see how small things look from up here. Like one of those miniature train landscapes that old men play with. I hold my fingers a few inches apart and fit Henry's jeep between them.

"What are you doing?" Reign asks, panicked.

"You felt that, right?"

"What?"

“That split-second of fear? That’s real. That feeling is real, and it was there in your stomach when it fell or in your heart when it sped up. It’s real.”

“Are you going to jump?”

I shrug and fill my lungs until they feel like they can burst, and then I exhale slowly. I may not have thought about it in a while, but jumping somehow seems enticing again. But I won’t. I’m past that. Layla’s waiting at home, and what kind of lunatic would jump off a building in front of someone.

Reign reaches up and grabs my cast. “Don’t?”

She pulls me down beside her. She holds my hand in place, keeping me there. I can’t fly away if she’s holding onto me.

“Stay with me for a while?” she asks.

I lean my head against hers and don’t say anything, but she knows that I’m not going anywhere. A stray firework explodes in the sky, showering us with blue light, the reflection like raindrops against our skin.

*

“Did you know it’s already past midnight?” Reign says, glancing at her phone.

“I didn’t,” I say, lifting my head from hers and looking out at the city. “It feels later.”

“I think I’m going to go to sleep.”

“Are you lying?” I ask.

“Maybe,” she says, but she stands and squeezes my shoulder.

And I say, “I’m going to wait up here a bit. I’ll be down in a bit.”

“Okay,” she says, and then she’s gone.

I look out at Nashville, at everything around me, at the trees, shadowed and dark, and at the clouds, threatening from above. I think about never seeing them again, or seeing them from behind a barbed fence or from within a cement cell. I think about Layla seeing them from the prison of our house. And I think about not being there when she grows up, and I want to see that. I want to see her complain about school, and argue with me about boys, and get into college, and I want to be there to help her escape from my father because I promise right now that I will never let him take her. I am making that promise right now.

I can’t let him take her.

I stand up abruptly and then try to find my reasoning for doing so. And then I do. I’m still in the same city as my mother. Hell, I can get there. I can try one last time to convince her. If I can get Reign before she goes to sleep . . . she knows how to drive. She may not be allowed to, but she knows how and she can.

I run down the stairs and catch her just before she gets to the room, and I explain to her that I want her to drive me to my mother’s. I explain that I need this last chance. And though she seems hesitant, and though she says it’s useless, she still sneaks inside, takes Henry’s keys, and leads me to the jeep.

The ride there is silent.

When I get there, Reign rings the buzzer to her gate and we wait, me bouncing my foot, Reign staring straight ahead. Maricella answers with, “It is very late. I will call cops. Who is this?”

“Maricella, it’s Ames,” I say over Reign and into the speaker. “Can you let me in?”

“Your mother said you left Tennessee,” she says warily.

“I did. I mean, I am. I just want to say bye to her.”

“This late?”

“Yes,” I say. “There’s no other time.”

“Okay, Mr. Treadway,” she says slowly. “I’ll buzz you in and wake Ms. Cary.”

When the gate opens, I jump out of the car, ignoring Reign, who’s calling after me. I run up the driveway, through that garden, and to the front door. I knock quickly and harshly and until my knuckles feel bruised. Finally, Cary answers.

“Mom,” I say. “Mom, hi.”

She stands in the threshold of the door, arm held out and hand plastered firmly against the wall. She is in a robe with messy hair and half-lidded eyes.

“What are you doing here, sweetie? It’s past midnight. I thought you left Nashville.”

“I came to talk to you,” I manage, between breaths. Sweat drips down my back and sticks to my shirt.

“I thought you were leaving for New Jersey.”

“I wanted to talk to you first.”

“We talked already,” she says.

“I know. But I just wanted to explain how much you could help me. Mom, you’re the only hope I have. Layla, too. Please, just think about it, at least. Please.”

She runs her fingers through her hair and it falls over her shoulders.

“Ames.”

“Mom, I missed you. I missed you for thirteen years. Didn’t you miss me?” I keep trying to catch her eyes, to plead with them. I press my hands on the outsides of the house and lean toward her. “Didn’t you?”

“Of course I missed you,” she says quietly. “But things are different now.”

“You could just come back for those few days to help me,” I explain.

“Please, you owe me this. You left me there alone with him for all those years. You owe me this. And Layla, she’s only four. He’ll kill her. You know he will. You know how he is. You know what he can do, and I don’t want what happened to me to happen to her. She’s innocent and small and she has no idea what will happen to her. Just please. Please.”

She reaches forward and brushes the back of her hand against my cheek, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t lean into her touch. It’s warm, and despite how hot I feel, it’s nice.

“I’m sorry, Ames. I’m really sorry. But I can’t go back there.” She withdraws her hand from my face and quickly shuts the door as I shout, “No, mom, please!” And she locks it so that I can’t follow her inside.

That’s it, I tell myself. That’s it. It’s done.

Chapter Nine

“I’m supposed to sign up for Driver’s Ed,” I told him. It was hesitant, and I made sure to be on the opposite side of the room. He seemed angry already, coming home from work tired and groggy and with a belt that he already unlatched.

“No,” he said.

I swallowed. “Dad, I’m sixteen. Henry –”

“I said no,” he repeated. “Do you want to get away? Is that it? Like your mother. Do you want to get a license and leave me here like that whore?”

“No,” I said. “No, that’s not it. I swear. But if I could drive, I could take Layla –”

“Come here.”

“Dad.”

“Come here, now.”

I took a step toward him. I knew what was going to happen. I wasn’t stupid. I’d never been stupid. And I always listened. So I stepped across the room toward him, and I let him grab onto the back of my hair and swing me to the floor. And I stayed on my knees as he pulled his belt free from its loops. And I stayed on my knees as he pulled my shirt up.

And I stayed on my knees when he shouted that I wouldn’t drive away from him, that I’d be stuck there, because who else would he have to come home to after a shitty day at work?

Reign doesn't say anything when I get back into the car. She doesn't say anything when I slam my casted hand against the glove compartment and crack the plastic. She doesn't say anything until we're almost back to the motel, which gives me time to think, to plan what to do with Layla, because right now, I can't think of a single thing. I suppose I could leave her at a fire house. Would they take a non-infant child? But they do take good care of those kids, I think. They find them a home, don't they? Maybe not. Maybe that's a shitty decision. I can try to find my aunt in Philly. But that sounds like another goose chase. And she has even less reason to help me than Cary. She barely knows me, barely has any relation to me, definitely doesn't know Layla. Though neither did Cary. Though look how that turned out.

I think about all the time I've missed with Layla. Why didn't I ever take her to the zoo? She always wanted to go. And I never took her. I'm such a shitty brother. She's said a million times how much she wanted to see the tigers and the elephants. I'll have to talk to her soon, tell her what's going on, that I'm going to be taken away and that no one's going to be able to afford bond to get me out even for a little while.

"Let's leave Nashville," Reign finally says while we're stopped at the red light beside the motel. She's really not a terrible driver at all. In fact, I'd say she's overly cautious if nothing else.

I look at her. "I'm fine."

“I didn’t say you weren’t fine. I said let’s leave Nashville.”

“Okay,” I say.

She pulls into the parking lot and parks across from the motel room.

“You’re driving,” she says. “Get into the driver’s seat. I’ll get the others.”

My eyes widen, and I reach for her arm but I miss. “Reign, what –”

“Oh, and I’ll grab your backpack, too.”

“Reign!” I shout, but she’s jogging toward the room, and before I’m even out of the car, she’s inside.

I don’t know how to drive. She knows that. She’s not an idiot. And neither is Henry, because there’s no way he’s going to let me drive his jeep. Still, I do as she said. I get out of the car and fall into the driver’s seat, and I buckle my seat belt and wait. I grip the wheel. It’s warm and my palms are sweaty and they slip a little.

When the others all emerge, Reign is carrying both her backpack, and my backpack. Henry’s got a sleeping Layla in his arms, and he and Daisy look pissed. I glance at the jeep’s clock. It’s just before one o’clock. I’m expecting an argument. I’m expecting to be kicked out of the front seat. But everyone’s quiet in the car, and to make things even weirder, Reign sits beside me in the passenger seat.

“What happened to the glove compartment?” Henry grumbles as he tries to buckle a completely noncompliant Layla into the middle seat. He shuts up when Reign glares at him, and I can’t help but wonder what she told them in the room, what kind of Jedi Mind Trick she pulled.

“Put it in reverse,” Reign tells me.

I take a deep breath. Okay. I can do this. I can drive. I shift the car into reverse, and then much too quickly, back out of the spot. Daisy screeches, and I slam my foot on the break.

“It’s okay,” Reign says. “Put it into drive and just go. Take some control, Ames.”

That’s what this is about. Taking control. I don’t have control over anything else. My life is a mess. But this . . . at least I can do this. I listen to her, and much slower than before, I drive to the exit of the parking lot. There’s no one coming from the left, so I carefully pull out onto the road.

The highways entrance, just a few feet from the motel, is nearly impossible to see. I manage to turn right just in time, and I swerve into the grass a little before straightening out.

“He’s going on the highway?” Henry asked nervously.

“Shut up, Henry,” Reign snaps. She doesn’t pull the GPS out of the glove compartment, so I’m driving aimlessly for a while, and I get the hang of it. It’s not that difficult.

I stare straight ahead, letting myself be absorbed into the silence of the car. The vague shadows and silhouettes of trees and bushes create a tunnel around the car, and there isn’t even a moon in the sky because storm clouds are brewing above. I’m waiting for them to open up and pour out rain, for it to become too much for amateur driver, Ames; for us to pull over for the night.

The thing about a silent car is it leaves you a lot of opportunity to think about things you were otherwise using alcohol to suppress. Things like Layla, and Cary, and my father. All of this is because of him.

You are your father's son.

I glance to my left and see myself in the reflection off my side's window. Maybe we do look alike. I see him in my face, and then me, and then him, and then me again. My mind is playing games with me. I close my eyes tightly for a brief moment and take a deep breath, slow and full and aching in my chest, and I hold it for a few seconds before letting it out. The car drifts to the right a little but I catch the wheel and pull left.

I just have to keep my foot on the gas and my hands on the wheel, and the highway is mostly straight anyway, and I don't have to worry about traffic lights or much traffic at all for that matter. The only other cars on the road are considerably spaced out.

I press harder on the gas, and slowly, I reach the speed limit, and then a little past that. Henry hovers, watching the odometer and the road ahead.

"You're doing well," Reign finally says.

I nod and press on the gas a little more. It's freeing. This whole road out there in front of me under this veil of darkness, waiting to be traveled. And I can drive anywhere. It's now that I fully understand why my father never allowed me to get my driver's license, never taught me how to drive. He wanted to control me, and what better way to do so than by keeping me on my feet, keeping me off the highways, out of anything that moved faster than I could run from him. He

was afraid I'd leave, like my mother. That I'd take Layla and flee, and then he'd have no one to keep around as a punching bag.

I think I played that part well – the punching bag. I sat pretty, night after night, never complaining, waiting for him to get home so he could shout at me, and make me feel like shit, and take off his belt, and . . .

Fuck.

My eyes start to sting. I press the gas harder and wrap my hands around the steering wheel tightly.

I sat there like a fool. I told myself it was for Layla and I couldn't leave her, but I sat there waiting for him long before Layla was born. I was so stupid. How could I be *so* stupid? To sit there and take it because I was afraid to leave, to run away, to tell anyone. Why didn't I tell anyone? He may have been the chief of police, but *someone* would have listened.

And now I'm going to end up in jail because of him, for doing the only thing I ever did to defend not even myself, but Layla. I am going to spend my life behind bars because I wasn't smart enough early enough, because I never chose to just take Layla and run. I should've killed him – I'd still end up behind bars, but at least Layla would be free of him.

"Ames, slow down!" Henry is shouting, and I wonder how long he's been shouting at me, because Daisy is shouting, too, something like, "What are you doing? Stop it, Ames!"

And then I hear Layla, awake now and screaming. *Screaming* like she's about to die or something.

I'm grasping the steering wheel so tightly that the bones in my hands throb. I feel this wall in my head collapse, and images fill me up. I see everything, every night, every broken bone and bruise and burn. And I remember why standing on that bridge seemed so enticing in an entirely different way than it seemed enticing last night with Reign. I remember what true and actual desperation felt like.

"Ames! Fucking pull over!" Henry is yelling in my ear, and my face feels damp, and I feel him grasping onto my shoulder and shaking me and saying that Layla's in the car and do I want to kill my sister? and do I want to kill my friends? Daisy is crying beside him. There's this overwhelming state of chaos around me, and somehow, I'm stuck in my head, stuck in this series of images I can't help but remember like they are being projected onto my eyes. Like my hands can't loosen their grip and my foot can't lift off the gas.

"Keep going," Reign says quietly. She's not even wearing her seatbelt. "Keep going until it doesn't hurt anymore."

I feel like I'm losing everything. It's all slipping away, and all that's left is the freedom of the road and even that can't last. I look ahead through blurred eyes.

"Ames, please," Daisy says between hiccups.

Layla screams one last time, loud and strident and deafening.

What am I *doing*? They're *begging* me to stop. *Keep going until it doesn't hurt anymore*. It will always hurt. That doesn't matter. Layla matters, and she's crying out for me to stop. I'm making her cry. What am I *doing*?

I just need to stop.

Just stop.

*

I blink and the last of my tears falls. I lift my foot off the gas pedal and loosen my hold on the steering wheel. Slowly, I bring Henry's jeep to a stop on the side of the road, and before I even put the gear into *park*, Daisy is outside puking in the grass.

"Fucker," Henry breathes. He follows her out, taking Layla with him, and he slams the door behind him.

It's just Reign and me in the car. She's not out of breath, not scared at all. I turn toward her. The night we slept together, I was so against her seeing my tears, seeing any sort of weakness in me. Now, I can't bring myself to care. She reaches over and wipes my cheeks with her thumbs, cleaning the sadness from them. "You'll be okay," she says.

The five of us spend the night sleeping in the jeep on the side of the road. It rains outside.

*

I don't wake up feeling particularly refreshed, but such is life after spending an entire night folded in on myself in the front seat of a car. I yawn and stretch my arms forward. Reign is already awake beside me, chewing on her nails. Henry and Daisy are in the backseat, his head back against the headrest, mouth open, her head against the window. Layla's between them, her feet across Henry's lap, her head in Daisy's. They're all still fast asleep. They were furious last night.

Daisy went to sleep without speaking to me; Henry only muttered curses. Layla was still whimpering.

I look at Reign and pay her an unsure smile. I'm not positive about what came over me last night or why my foot became a cement block against that gas pedal. But Reign encouraged it, and that I *am* sure about. She combs some hair away from her face and holds a pack of cigarettes toward me. I take one and stick it behind my ear. She crosses her legs and her skirt slides a bit up her thigh. I stare for a little too long.

Reign reaches over and takes my hand in hers. Her thumb sweeps circles against mine, feather light. She nods toward her door, and I nod in understanding. With one glance back at the others, I let go of her hand and step outside with her.

Any moisture from last night's rain has evaporated, and it's now sweltering outside. In the distance, waves appear to bend the pavement of the highway. Reign lights a cigarette behind the jeep. I squint in the sunlight. "Spare a light?" I ask, stepping next to her.

She hands me her lighter. I remove the cigarette from behind my ear and place it between my lips before igniting the end and sucking in smoke. Her arm brushes against mine. "Tell me something," she says.

The right corner of my mouth twitches. "Tell you what?"

"Anything."

I tap some ash free from the cigarette and then lean back against the jeep. "I don't know what we're doing together, Reign." The sex, and then last night, and then this morning with her fingers threading through mine.

Reign peers over her shoulder and into the jeep's back window. She says nothing for a while, and a breeze whispers by, carrying some strands of hair over her eyes and against her cheeks. I turn toward her and gently tuck the loose locks behind her ear. She blows a thin stream of smoke to the left of my face.

“Does it feel better, now?” she asks.

“What?”

Her hand falls onto my chest, palm flat, fingers together. It's a nice reminder that there are feelings other than a near blistering heat. I want to say yes. I want to make her happy and have her think that egging me on in the car last night helped in some profound way, and that I somehow forgot my mother's rejection and what's waiting for Layla and me back in New Jersey. But the world doesn't work like that, and I still feel those things and they still hurt. I'm just trying to push them a little further back, into the catacombs of my mind.

She notices my hesitation and says, “I wish I could help you more.” With one last puff from her cigarette, she drops it between us, and I step on it for her.

I give the lighter back to her and say, “Tell me something.”

“Anything?”

“Mhm.”

She steps toward me and looks up at my face. “I *really* wish I could help you more.”

“Reign.”

She kisses me on the cheek and then on the lips, and then I push against her back.

“We are literally behind his back right now,” I say.

She looks at the jeep for a long moment before sighing. “Rain check?”

Does she notice the irony of the term?

I don’t answer because the jeep jostles, and I’m positive one of them is awake now, and so is Reign because she’s already at her door, getting back into the car. I follow after her, scratching the back of my head, hoping that whoever just woke up didn’t look behind them.

*

It’s no surprise that I’m not the one driving as we make our way through Kentucky (which, hey, we’re in Kentucky right now, and I did not know that before). Henry and Daisy are on the lookout for a motel to nap in for a few hours as the back seat of the jeep didn’t provide much shuteye for either of them. They’re still pretty pissed at me. Layla, on the other hand, is wide-awake and in search of something to eat. She’s currently being occupied by a game on Reign’s phone, though, for which I’m grateful.

The grass seems greener in Kentucky, and though Nashville seemed very country-esque, Kentucky takes that to a new level. When we finally pull into the parking lot of a cheap looking motel, Reign is the first outside and in the trunk pulling her backpack free. Daisy retrieves Layla from the back and holds her hand as we all follow Reign’s lead, and Henry walks with his solid arms tied around her waist, meaty hands locked together, chin balanced on her shoulder, as we walk to the front office. I hear a high-pitched giggle from her that doesn’t sound

Reign-like at all. She places a kiss on his cheek before they have to separate and walk inside.

The inside of the lobby is small and quaint, and I ring a bell at the front desk to page someone ever. There's a whiteboard to the left that has a quote from the bible scrawled across it. I don't recognize the quote; I've never read the bible.

An older woman with glasses comes over and smiles and says something friendly to me, and I pay for the room just for tonight, and then we retreat to said room. Henry and Daisy collapse onto separate beds not two minutes after walking into the room. Layla, still with Reign's phone in her hands, hops onto the corner of Daisy's bed and continues to play her game. There's an odd floral theme to the room, and I roll my eyes at the framed pictures of flowers along the walls. Reign says she's going to take a shower, and I nod in acknowledgement. I sit beside Layla and watch her play some type of cartoon frog game. She does this for a few minutes, but then the phone slips from her hands and falls onto the carpet.

I pick it up quickly, but my fingers hit something, and it cancels the game. I'm about to reopen the game for Layla when I notice a "Missed Call" notification. I click on it before I realize I'm clicking it, but it brings up all of Reign's call history, and though I see that her missed call was Henry, I notice her outgoing calls. There's about ten in a row to some number I don't recognize, some number with a different country code.

And I wonder whom she's calling. But then the shower turns off, so I pull the game up for Layla again and hand her the phone. She takes it without question and laughs as the frogs appear on the screen.

When the bathroom door finally opens, a puff of steam billows out. Reign emerges, wrapped only in a short, white towel. She sees me staring, and retrieves some clothes from her backpack before heading back into the bathroom.

When she reemerges, she's clad in a short sundress, red with a white belt around her waist. It's an uncharacteristically bright and neat outfit for Reign, who's almost always sporting dark colors and ripped tights and torn up band t-shirts. It's probably a new Nashville, southern belle, inspired purchase.

"You look nice," I say quietly. She puts her finger to her lips and glances at Henry and Daisy, each of whom is still sleeping.

She rings excess water from her hair, casting a few drops onto the beige carpet. With one more look over her shoulder, she takes my hand, pulls me off the bed, and nods toward the door. I glance at Layla and then nudge Daisy slightly. She groans in response.

"Watch Layla for a second?" I say.

"Yeah, yeah," she says, and then, "Layla, come lie down next to me."

Layla listens and moves beneath the covers beside Daisy, all the while staring at the phone screen. I had no idea she'd be so into a video game. She's never played any before. Hell, I didn't know she'd understand how to play them.

Reign leads me out of the motel room, closing the front door behind her as carefully as possible. The corridor is narrow, also decorated with a floral theme. I'm confused as to what Reign wants right now, but she puts her finger against my lips and says, "Can I take you up on that rain check now?"

I slept with her once, and I said that was a mistake. Because it was a mistake. I'd just been turned away from my mother, and I wasn't thinking clearly. I'm thinking clearly now. More so, at least.

"Let's just go on a walk," she says before I can argue.

She wraps her arms around my waist and gives me a hug. I don't know what to do with my arms, whether to hug her back, whether to knot my hands behind me and whistle a tune until she's finished. I wish I didn't enjoy the feeling of her body folding against mine.

The door to the room beside ours opens, and Reign jumps back like it could be Henry even though there is no way it could be Henry. Instead, a man in his mid-fifties and his much younger companion leave the room murmuring hushed secrets in deep southern accents.

Reign waits a moment for the couple to turn the corner, and then slips out of my hold, catches their door before it closes. "Better than a walk," she says, grinning.

It feels wrong. So wrong. But I follow her inside and she switches the light on. "Reign."

She looks disappointed with me, so she takes my hands and puts them on her waist. "Ames, it's okay," she says. "I'm saying this is okay."

And I'm saying it's not. No, wait. I'm not saying that. I *should* be saying that because my best friend is on the other side of this wall, but instead, my fingers play with the thin belt at her waist. "What are we doing?" I ask.

"Why do we always have to know what we're doing?"

“Reign.”

“Stop saying my name like that.”

I brush my thumb over the belt’s buckle and feel the coolness of the metal. She reaches up and presses her own thumb between my eyebrows, trying to smooth the lines there. “Henry –”

“Sh,” she says. She smiles, but it doesn’t look real or whole. I remember her telling me that I don’t eye-smile, and how I didn’t understand what that meant, and how I understand it now. When she kisses the corner of my mouth, I sigh against her, and when she catches my bottom lip between her teeth, I give in. My fingers work quickly to unbuckle the belt and I use the two ends to pull her closer.

*

When we get back to our room, Daisy is sitting on the bed watching TV, and Henry is in the shower. Layla’s no longer playing a game on Reign’s phone, but rather watching the TV with Daisy. We were only gone half an hour or so. I expected them to stay asleep far longer than that, and by the look of surprise on Reign’s face, she expected the same.

Daisy turns the television off when we walk in and she’s about to speak when she notices something about Reign. I know what it is already. Reign’s holding the white belt that accessorized her dress. One of the two belt loops ripped when I pulled it off her.

Daisy closes her mouth and clenches her jaw. “Henry’s been in the shower for a while,” she finally says through her teeth. “You might want to change out of the dress he bought you before he sees that it’s ripped.”

The dress *he* bought her. I watch Reign move away from me and toward the corner of the room, where she kneels in front of her backpack and pulls out a new outfit, one that suits her more – black shorts and a grey tank-top.

“I want TV,” Layla says angrily, staring at Daisy.

“I’m going to talk to Ames while you get changed,” Daisy says after switching the TV back on. She gets off the bed and grabs my wrist so roughly that I think she might actually leave an imprint of her fingers there, and she drags me out of the motel room as she says, “Wait here, Layla.”

“Daisy,” I start once she’s closed the door. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to put last night behind us, Ames,” she says. “I’m going to forget that you cared so little about not only my and Henry’s life, but your own sister’s life, that you’d pull that driving stunt.” I try to interrupt, but she places her hand firmly over my mouth. “And I’m going to be your friend when I say this: stop what you’re doing with Reign. Stop it. She is Henry’s girlfriend, as weird and as foolish as that may be, and you’re doing nothing but hurting him by messing around with her. I’d expect this from her, maybe, but you’re his best friend, Ames.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I try when she drops her hand.

“I saw you this morning with her behind the jeep. And her ripped dress after the two of you came in a few minutes ago. And being naked in a motel bed

after the two of you conveniently stayed back from the bar I'd gone to with Henry. I'm not stupid, Ames."

I feel guilty enough. I don't need Daisy making it harder to swallow that.

"It's none of your business, Daisy."

"We should head back to New Jersey soon, anyway.."

"I want to try to find my aunt in Philly. I want to see if she'll take Layla,"

I say. I wasn't sure that's what I wanted, but it seems like a last hope kind of situation, right now.

I don't wait for an answer when I head back into the room. It takes a few seconds for her to follow after me, and we're confronted with a half naked Henry – a towel draped loosely around his waist. Layla's too distracted by the TV to care about Henry's nakedness, but still, I glare at him. "Put on some clothes," I say.

Reign snorts at my comment as she applies makeup to her eyes in the closet mirror. She barely pays me a glance when she finishes.

"Oh," Henry says, looking down at his towel. "Sorry."

"I want to go to Philly," I tell him. "I'm going to try to find my aunt."

Henry smiles. "Sounds fun. I'm in."

He's always in. I guess that's why he's my best friend.

Reign does pay me that glance now.

*

As it turns out, there really isn't much to do in Munfordville, Kentucky. We drive down the road and try to explore, but there's literally nothing but

country and wilderness aside from a shopping center that has a Pizza Hut, a Chinese Buffet, and a Dairy Queen.

We decide on an early dinner at the Chinese Buffet, where we're seated at a table against the wall. The place is a rather sad excuse for a buffet, with just a measly row of food to choose from, and then another row for desserts that mainly consist of Jell-O and ice cream, which pleases Layla. A waitress brings us water and then scurries off for a bit, letting us get up and browse the meager selection they have, most of which is deep fried or smothered in sauce, truly allowing Kentucky to live up to its status as the sixth most obese state in the country. I get plates for both myself and Layla and return to our table. I even almost get a bite of food in when everyone else returns, but then I hear the hearty chuckling of a man sitting at the table beside us, one of his fingers rudely pointed in our direction as he explains something to his friend. I'm going to let it go. I'm going to ignore him because I'm hungry and if we just sit here and eat, we can leave quickly and there won't be an issue.

But then Reign has to start something. "Excuse me, is there some sort of problem?" Henry takes her hand and whispers something in her ear, probably to shut up, but she pulls away.

The other man, the one that hadn't been pointing, raises his eyebrows and takes his baseball cap off. "That's some accent you got there," he says. He's younger than his friend, maybe in his mid to late twenties, and he seems to think that he has some sort of chance with Reign because he winks at her.

“What’s wrong with your teeth?” Layla asks, pointing at his gaping mouth. One of his front two teeth are missing, but I hush Layla and push her hand down to her side. The guy glowers in her general direction.

Reign ignores the guy and waits for the other asshole to answer. He says, “I was just sayin’ that it’s rare to see one of them with your kind. Mixing don’t happen much here. Just be careful.”

It takes a moment for me to comprehend what he’s saying. The guffawing man using two napkins tucked into his shirt collar as a bib is explaining to us that we should not be in Daisy’s company, as we are white and she is not.

Okay. I really didn’t want to get involved because I really did want to eat, regardless of how disgusting the food looks, but you can’t just start saying that kind of shit. I want to stand and approach the guy, but I’m blocked in by Daisy. Henry seems to have the same problem, as Reign is sitting on the outside of his seat. Hell, Daisy seems to be taking this the least offensively. She just rolls her eyes and takes a sip of water.

“We’re just trying to get something to eat,” I try. “Keep your comments to yourself.”

“And by that, he means shut up,” Henry says.

“I’m just sayin’,” the man continues, his accent so thick that I almost struggle in understanding him. “You don’t want to be seen in this group you’ve got here.” He adjusts his attention toward Daisy. “Sweetie, just stick with your own kind and all will be well.”

When she still pays him no attention, he reaches for her arm, and that's when everything kind of blows up. Reign stands and pours her glass of water over the man's head, telling him to keep his hands to himself, which causes such shock within Daisy that she nearly falls out of the booth as she stands. Layla laughs loudly, still pointing back at the two guys. I follow after Daisy, and lift Layla out of her seat and onto the ground, because we're obviously not going to be eating here anymore and it's stupid to delude myself with thoughts of food, and Henry is in the process of getting out of the booth when Reign's request for the man to keep his hands to himself somehow reminds his friend that he also has hands that have the capability of squeezing girls' asses because he reaches over and grabs Reign's, which makes both Henry and Reign furious, but as Henry is stuck in the booth, I am the one to punch the guy square in the jaw. With my casted hand. Ouch and woops.

Daisy gasps and grabs onto my arm, pulling me away and toward the restaurant's exit as the man clutches his face. My knuckles throb, and the pain branches down my fingers and shoots straight into my weakened and broken wrist. I hold onto Layla's arm with my other hand and pull her with me.

"Ow," I finally say when I'm outside. I flex my fingers and shake my hand again. Daisy takes hold of that hand and studies it.

"Is anything broken?" she asks, pushing on my knuckles.

"Other than my wrist? I hope not." I flinch at her poking. "Stop that."

Layla breaks free from my hold and backs up.

“Where are you going?” I ask her, but she continues to step away. “Layla, stop it. Come here.”

“Arseholes,” Reign says, flying out of the restaurant with Henry. “Fucking arseholes.”

“Welcome to the south,” Henry mutters.

I walk toward Layla but she holds her hands up defensively. And then I realize what she’s afraid of: I hit him. Other than that one instance of nearly killing my father, she’s never seen me hit someone before.

“Layla,” I say slowly, kneeling down to her level. “It’s okay. Come here.”

“No hitting,” she says quietly. “You said you don’t like hitting. Daddy –”

“I know,” I tell her. “I’m sorry. No hitting. Come here.”

She steps approaches me warily, and I wrap my arms around her, pulling her into a tight embrace. “No hitting,” she says again.

“No hitting,” I agree, and stand with her still in my arms. I join the others again.

“Are you okay, Daisy?” Reign asks.

“Yeah, thanks for the water spilling. I thought ignoring him was the best thing to do but then . . . yeah, thanks.”

“No problem,” Reign says. “But food. Um. You guys just want to pick something up on the way back to the motel?”

“Yeah,” Henry sighs. “So much for greasy, fake Chinese food.”

*

We ended up ordering Pizza Hut and eating it in the motel room while we watch a movie. About half way through, Reign excuses herself for a smoke.

Henry is so ingrained in the movie, he only replies with a distracted, “Uh huh.”

I sit for a while, finishing off my Sprite, combing through Layla hair with my fingers until she falls asleep, sort of paying attention to the movie and occasionally checking the alarm clock between the beds. The time it takes to smoke a cigarette has long passed, and Reign’s been gone for what edges on twenty minutes before I get off the bed and stretch. Where is she? Someone in this Podunk town could have thrown her in the back of their pickup and taken off by now.

“I’m going to go look for a vending machine. I could use another soda,” I say.

Henry waves me off without pulling his eyes away from the TV screen.

Daisy seems more suspicious. “I’ll come with you,” she offers.

“Nah,” I say, already at the door. “Don’t worry. I’ll only be gone a second. Watch Layla.”

I leave before she can answer, and instead of going to the vending machine I spot at the end of the hallway, I exit through the back door and find Reign, sitting on the curb without a cigarette between her fingers. Her cell phone is pressed against her ear. I approach her slowly, and I hear her crying, “Please, don’t call them. Please. I’ll be better. I will be. I want to come home.” And then a pause. “Yes, but I’ll stop. I swear I’ll stop. Please.” I barely hear her when she softly cries, “You’re supposed to love me.”

The person on the other line hangs up on her, and she rests her face in her hands.

I stalk over and sit beside her on the curb, and she jumps. Her hands find their way to her chest, over her heart. “Jesus,” she breathes. “Jesus. God. You scared the shit out of me.”

I nod toward the phone in her lap and ask, “Do you have another guy on the side? Henry would be devastated.” She must notice the state I’ve found her in because she quickly wipes her eyes, takes her phone, and stands. “Wait,” I say.

She hurries off toward the back door. I nearly trip on the curb as I get up to rush after her. I grab her arm just before she gets her hand on the doorknob.

“Let. Me. Go,” she hisses.

“Who were you talking to?”

“Let me go.”

When I free her arm, she hurries inside, and I wait a minute or so before heading toward the room so that I don’t follow directly after her. She’s in the bathroom when I return, and the movie’s credits are scrolling down the TV screen. Henry looks at me and frowns.

“Where’s your soda?” he asks.

Chapter Ten

Nightmares were rare. I didn't need to dream them; I lived them.

I'm awoken by a near deafening scream, and for a moment, in my drowsy stupor, I think it's Layla, and I jump out of bed. But it isn't Layla and I'm not still in my father's home in New Jersey and we're not in danger. No, I'm in a motel in Kentucky, and Reign is the one who screamed. Reign is the one quickly dressing her naked form beside her bed as Henry tries his best to comfort her. He, too, is shirtless, and I try not to think about them having sex a foot away from me as I slept.

"It was just a nightmare stop come back Reign come back please go back to sleep." It's a jumbled mess of words that tumble out of his mouth as she buttons a pair of shorts and bolts toward the door.

Henry dresses just as quickly; and Daisy, fully awake beside me, looks confused. "What the hell?"

"Ames?" Layla says, wiping her eyes with her knuckles. She sniffles.

I watch as Henry runs outside; and as Daisy looks at me, ready to slip her shoes on and follows after him. "Layla, stay with Daisy," I say, and then I hop out of bed and jog outside in my boxers and t-shirt and see Henry calling out Reign's name down the street.

I'm about to follow him, but then I realize how not stupid Reign is. She wouldn't have run off somewhere Henry would think to follow her. And she couldn't have gotten very far – the jeep is still parked in its spot.

What do I know about Reign? Almost nothing, really. But I do know that when she wants to be alone, she seems to have a particular affinity toward rooftops, so that's where I go. I hurry up a few flights of stairs and barge through a door that says no entry.

And sure enough, I find her sitting there with her back to me and her knees pulled up to her chest. A breeze catches in her hair, ballooning it over her shoulders, and I watch as she just hugs her knees like they are all she has and keeping them close is keeping her together.

“A little melodramatic for my taste.” I stuff my hands into my pockets and take a few steps forward. She doesn't respond. “And pretty stupid, actually. Henry is running the streets of Hickville Kentucky, trying to find you.” Still nothing. “Let's go back downstairs.”

She's quivering, maybe from the chill of the breeze, or maybe because she's still afraid of whatever she dreamed. I sit beside her and notice her cheeks, pale and damp under the barely brightened sky. It must be close to sunrise.

“Reign,” I say, sternly. “Go back downstairs. Henry's probably freaking out.”

Nothing. Not a sound from her.

I look out at the Pizza Hut across the parking lot and let a breath out.

“What did you dream about?”

A brief shudder escapes her lips. I notice the goose bumps on her arms, but there's nothing I can do about them. I don't have a jacket to offer. I don't even have pants on.

“Reign, please. Just come back down with me.”

Nothing.

“Forget this,” I say, getting to my feet. “I'll tell Henry your safe and up here, and he'll stop his manhunt. But this is ridi –”

She reaches up and takes my hand in hers. And this gesture – this simple gesture – of holding hands keeps me there. In a small voice that does not sound like her at all, Reign murmurs, “Can you just stay up here?”

“In silence,” I say dumbly.

She doesn't answer and drops my hand.

I sit.

And I look out onto the roads of Kentucky, and I think of the stories they hold, stories of the places they lead. That's what I was thinking about last night while I was driving. The story of the road I was on – it could be anything for me, anything for Reign. I don't know if she's also looking at the roads or if she's just looking at the moon disappear behind a tree as the sky turns a fairer shade of blue.

We're quiet for I don't know how long. Long enough for the sun's rays to brighten up the eastern corner of the sky. Long enough for the crickets to cease their song and for the birds to start theirs. I stretch my legs out and cross my ankles. When I see Reign's eyes, I notice the sun's reflection in them, a small spark against the stormy grey.

“What?” she finally asks.

“Nothing.”

She holds her knees close to her. I watch a soft pink enter the sky as the beams of sunlight reflect off clouds. The silence makes me think too much. Like last night in that car, but this time there’s no gas pedal to push. This time there’s just my head and me. I feel this gap in my chest in the shape of a heart.

I take a deep breath around that pain and ask, “Are you okay?” She’s asked me that so many times. How could it have not been the first thing I asked *her* when I got on this roof?

“It’s kind of all or nothing,” she repeats. “And right now it’s just all.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Okay. So tell me something else then. Tell me your middle name or your favorite color or an embarrassing story from your warped British childhood.”

She peers at me hesitantly. “Ames.”

“I’m up here with you. So talk to me.”

“My middle name is Annabelle,” she says.

“That’s pretty,” I tell her. “Reign Annabelle Hudson.”

“What’s yours?”

I pull my legs up and rest my arms over my knees as I give a short laugh.

“Victor. It was my father’s name.”

“And Ames was your mother’s maiden name,” Reign says quietly.

“Yeah.” I watch my hands swing between my knees. It’s bright enough outside for me to see the bruising on my knuckles from the guy I punched for her.

“I guess I wasn’t really meant to be my own person.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“So is refusing to come downstairs and go back to sleep, yet we’re still up here.”

She glares, but I ignore it. Instead, I ask her another stupid question about England, and then another about her favorite color, and then another about the school she’ll go to in the fall. I try to distract her from her thoughts for as long as I can because I know what it feels like to be trapped with them. I know that feeling more than anything, and I don’t want her to experience it, so I just keep talking. And I think she appreciates it, I really do.

I make note of the birds, and how they’re free to go wherever they please. I tell her to imagine they each have a tether keeping them tied to their nests and I tell her that is how I feel. Like I’m shackled to New Jersey, and that I will soon be shackled to a six foot by six foot room where I won’t even be able to see the birds anymore. She tells me not to think like that, and instead asks me about Layla.

Distracting me. I appreciate it.

Eventually, when the sun is high and it’s nearing eight in the morning, she decides that it’s okay if we go back to the motel room. I stand and help her up, and we walk back to the room slowly. Henry’s waiting anxiously for our return, as is Daisy, who’s beside a sleeping Layla. When Henry sees her, he pulls her away from me and into this overwhelming hug.

“Why would you just leave like that?” he speaks into her hair. “We were looking everywhere for you.”

“Sorry,” she says. “I wasn’t thinking.”

When they pull apart, she kisses him, and I have to turn away.

*

A nightmare:

I’m fifteen or sixteen and I’m sitting in my bedroom, and for a moment, I don’t know why I’m there. I don’t know why the lights are off or why the door is locked or why there’s this gnawing pain in my stomach, like it wants to cave in on itself.

But then I realize I’m probably locked in my room and without food for the weekend. I calm down. This is not new. I know this. I’ll survive.

But then there’s a shriek from somewhere beyond my bedroom door. Layla. It has to be Layla. I run to the door, grip the knob, try to yank it open. I start pounding, shouting to be let out, but I only hear these horrendous cries. He’s never hurt her before; why is he hurting her?

“Layla!” I shout, but my voice is barely an echo, barely comes out at all, and when I scream her name again, I have lost my voice completely. I start to kick at the doorknob, hoping to snap it off, but I can’t seem to find the strength to do it. Without food for two days, I feel weak.

It’s when the screaming stops, when I can no longer hear Layla crying out, that I get truly afraid. I try to call for her again, but there is no noise coming from my mouth, not a whisper, a feeble rasp. Nothing.

I press my ear against my door and will myself to listen. I'm not quick enough to back away when it's unlocked and opened. It slams into the side of my face and I nearly fall backward, but my father grabs the collar of my shirt. His other hand smacks me hard across my cheek and my face snaps left.

"You want to create all that racket in here? I'll give you something to be loud about," he sneers, tossing me onto the wood-paneled floor outside my room. I land on my side, and the air escapes my lungs in one quick gust. I cough once, twice.

He kicks me swiftly and repeatedly in my abdomen. I can't breathe. There's no air inside my chest; I can't reach the air outside. I gasp and cough and wrap my arms around my middle to block as many blows as possible. When he notices my scanty attempts at defending myself, he moves to the side and his boot collides with my face.

Don't worry, he used to say, I'd never mess with that mug of yours. People would notice.

The bone in my cheek shatters. I feel my resolve crumble as I cry out, but that cry, like my previous attempts to speak, has fallen silent. My hands leave my sides to clutch my face as I roll onto my stomach. I try to get on my knees.

The fingers of his right hand thread through my hair, and that's how he lifts me up. He bats my hands away from my face and grabs it. Sparks. I feel bright sparks of pain shooting through my cheek, making me see nothing but blackness for a moment, making me swallow a bout of nausea. There would be nothing in my stomach to vomit anyway.

“Look at what you made me do,” he chastises. “That’s going to leave a bruise.”

“Dad,” I try, though no sound comes out. The pain when I open my mouth is incredible, ringing through the my face the way lightning branches out from its spot of impact. “Layla.”

He sees me struggling to utter her name and he grins, lips peeled back over his teeth. He tugs me down the hallway by my hair. “Do you want to see what you’ve done to your sister?”

As we get closer to the living room, I notice patches of blood on the wall, child-sized handprints of red. I try to hurry, but he keeps a tight hold on me, like I am his dog. And finally, as we turn the corner of the hallway, I see her there, a pile of broken bones and open wounds and blonde hair.

I don’t have enough strength to stay upright, and my father lets me fall to my knees beside Layla. I cry for her as I pull her onto my lap and brush her hair from her face and feel the stillness of her chest, feel the way her lungs don’t make her ribs expand, feel the quietness that has become her.

He killed her. He killed her.

He could have killed me, but instead, he killed her. She’s only a child, only a baby. I cry into her hair, pull her against me and beg her to wake up.

Everything I’ve suffered through has been for her.

“Look at what you’ve done,” my father says.

I look up at him, and I’m ready to end this, to kill him or have him kill me once and for all; but then I see that he’s not my father. No, it is me standing just

outside the living room. It is me watching myself cradle the corpse of my sister. He is smiling and holding his red, blood-smearred palms outward.

“Look at what you’ve done,” he says again.

*

I shoot up in bed, dizzy, sweat-soaked through my t-shirt. The sun streams brightly into the motel room, and I feel hot under it. Boiling. Smothered. I can’t breathe again. I’m trying to catch my breath, but instead, I just grow more nauseous; and unlike in my dream, I do have food in my stomach to vomit.

I run to the bathroom and lock the door behind me before I kneel in front of the toilet. Last night’s dinner resurfaces and makes a swift, burning exit out of my mouth. I choke and retch, and my eyes water.

When it’s finished, I’m left gasping for air, my forehead resting against cool porcelain. I count my breaths for a few moments, before I stand, flush the toilet, and hover over the sink. I rinse my mouth and splash some cold water on my face, hoping it’ll shock me back to reality.

It doesn’t.

I can still feel Layla’s body, warm against my chest. I can still smell the metallic scent of blood in her hair. I press my hands against the counter and glance at myself in the mirror. That is the face that killed her.

You are your father’s son.

I stare at my eyes, bloodshot and damp from throwing up, and I wonder if those eyes belong to someone that could do the things my father did. My cheek looks normal, and I press my fingers against it, testing for any residual pain. I

remember when it happened, when he bashed in my face so badly I couldn't go to school for three weeks.

I take a breath and look away from my reflection. I look like my father. I can see it, just like my mother saw it. It's a wonder that Layla isn't afraid of me yet. If I could hurt her the way she was hurt in that dream, I belong locked away behind bars.

There's a soft knock on the bathroom door, followed by Layla's quiet voice. "Ames?"

"I'm fine," I say quickly. "I'll be out in a second."

*

I can't listen to Henry, Daisy, and Reign's conversation. We're sitting in a diner, waiting for food, and I can't seem to focus on what they're saying. I just keep imagining Layla lying broken on the ground. I keep hearing my father's voice become my own. The nightmare keeps weaving through my brain, burrowing itself further into my memory each time around.

I've had nightmares before. This isn't my first time dreaming about my father's misdeeds, but they've never involved Layla. I can't scrape the image off the back of my eyes.

I can't eat. Everyone is eating around me, and I didn't order any food because I knew that if I ordered food, I wouldn't be able to keep it down. I still feel nauseous as it is, even with an empty stomach.

"Ames, are you sure you don't want some of my French toast?" Daisy nudges her plate toward me, but I shake my head. It's nearly three in the

afternoon, a little late for breakfast; but after Reign's episode this morning, we all went back to sleep. Except Layla. She played on Reign's phone the whole time.

"Dude, maybe it was dinner last night," Henry says amidst chewing. He stabs his fork through a piece of sausage and takes a bite.

"Maybe," I say.

"We all ate the same thing," Reign says. Her eyes bore into me, challenging, wanting me to come clean about something I have no intention coming clean about. I almost want to blame her, like her nightmare spurred one of my own, and now I feel like I'm dying.

"Ames," Layla says. She picks a pancake off her plate and hands it to me.

"Want this?"

I smile at her. "No thanks, Layla. You eat it."

She shrugs and takes a bite out of the edge.

I look at Reign and bite my lip. "Can I bum a smoke?" I ask her.

"I'll come with you," she says, pushing Henry out of the booth.

I wave my hand emphatically. "And disrupt Henry's meal? Nonsense."

Henry shrugs and continues eating. "Fine." She says and reaches into her bag to pull the pack out with a lighter. She hands both to me, and I take them with a forced smile.

"Thanks. I'll be right back, Layla." I kiss the top of her head and then scoot out of the booth.

Outside, the heat feels both disgusting and liberating. At least out here, with the sun beating down on the back of my neck, I'm alone with my thoughts. I

don't need Reign scrutinizing my every move, as if she doesn't have her own problems to worry about. I think our little excursion to the roof last night made it clear that I'm not the only one with thoughts that would best be kept inside.

I stick the cigarette in my mouth and light the end before dropping both the pack and the lighter into my pocket. I take a seat on the curb and close my eyes. Now I can't stop imagining Layla – bloody, broken down, deformed, dead. I can't stop remembering the night I found our father with her, the night that he nearly died. The night he should have died.

The fingers of my free hand tangle in my hair and pull hard. Stop thinking about it. Stop.

Layla, dinner's on the stove. You almost ready?

Stop. Stop. Stop. I lift the cigarette to my mouth. I don't have to think about that night.

Layla?

Ames. Stop it. Please, just stop it. There was a reason that incident drove you to the ledge of a bridge. Just stop it.

The stairs creaked, maybe in their desperate attempt to warn me. And the doorknob to her room felt warm when I gripped it, like someone had been holding onto it not that long ago as they peered into her room. Inside, I found him with her, hovering over her bed. I found him –

The cigarette falls from my mouth and onto the pavement when two arms wrap tightly around my torso in a surprise hug from behind. The force of the grip

knocks me out of the memory, and in my ear, it's Daisy's voice saying, "You ready? We're going to go to explore."

I cough. Try to think of words. People generally speak in words. What was her question?

"Ames?" Henry says, coming up beside me. "You feeling okay?"

Words. "Yeah, fine." Good. That's all I needed to say. Henry offers his hand to me, and I grab on, letting him pull me to my feet. I feel like a sack of bones wrapped in skin when he tugs me upward. Light. Nothing filling the gaps.

I squint against the sun and follow them to the jeep. I notice Reign's subtle looks in my direction. Not that many hours ago was I comforting her up on the roof, and now look at me.

Henry starts the car and I feel the vibration against my back.

*

We decide against driving to Pennsylvania for the day, mainly because it's a pretty long drive there, but also because the weather starts to get atrocious not long after lunch. Rain clouds brew above, and the fact that we're in tornado alley during tornado season doesn't exactly ease my qualms. We spend the rest of the day hanging out in the motel, watching TV and playing card games with a deck of cards Daisy had in her backpack. I manage to stomach something for dinner, and then while they're getting ready for sleep, I ask Daisy if she can watch Layla for a bit. She reluctantly accepts but not without arguing. It's raining outside. And tornadoes – but not really – and whatnot. I tell her I just want to go on a walk. I'm not lying. I really do just want to go on a walk.

I don't know what I'm walking toward. I don't know how long I want to be outside. It's so dark, I can barely see in front of me, but still, I walk. Actually, I really only walk in the parking lot of the Pizza Hut because outside of that, it's too dark to see anything at all, and at least the parking lot has an overhang to protect me from the brunt of the rain.

I need to think a few things over. I feel like I'm drowning, and the people around me are all in the same pool I'm in, but somehow, they're breathing fine. I keep hearing his voice, hearing him scream things at me – *You will never be good for anything besides this, you hear, boy?* Hearing his soft, cooing voice when I'd walked in on him with Layla that night – *Shh, baby girl, be quiet, be quiet.*

I close my eyes and try to shake the thought, the voice, the memory. That son of a bitch ruined everything we could have had. We could have been a family, but now that thought seems comical. I hope I can find Aunt Jeanie, and I hope she'll take Layla and be good to her.

With my eyes still closed, I trip. Just like that, trip over something, and fall flat on my chest, barely catching myself before my face becomes one with the concrete. Eyes open now, I look around to see if anyone noticed my tumble, but there's no one else around. As if the universe hadn't kicked me enough while I was down. Now it literally has to bring me to my hands and knees.

“You alright, son?”

I turn quickly and find an old homeless man sitting the wall of a nail salon. He's clad in a t-shirt that's array of browns and grays but may have once been

white, and a matching grayish brown Newsboy Cap. His legs are outstretched in front of him, there to lure invalids like myself to trip over his ankles.

“Yeah,” I say. “Fine.”

“Didn’t mean to trip ya. Sorry ’bout that.”

“It’s fine.” I stand and start off again, but he shouts after me.

“Wait! You dropped this!” I turn around and repress a groan. He’s holding my – well, Reign’s, really – pack of cigarettes. I reach for them, and with a little unexpected resistance, he lets go. “Those’ll kill ya, ya know?”

I drop them in my pocket. “I wasn’t aware. Tell me more about this killing you speak of.”

The old man narrows his eyes. “No need to mouth off, boy. I’m just tryna help out.” He coughs once and pulls his legs inward, folding his knees to the side so no other pedestrians make the same mistake I made.

“Sorry.”

“And ya can’t be more than seventeen, eighteen, can ya? All ya’ll kids be ruinin’ your damn lives with them cancer sticks there.” He shakes his head, disgusted. I almost want to say that I’m holding them for a friend, but then I realize how cliché that sounds.

“I’d offer you one if I thought you smoked,” I say instead.

He grimaces. “How ’bout offerin’ me somethin’ useful, like coffee or money?”

“You want me to pay you for tripping me,” I retort. “Okay, mister.” I start off on the sidewalk again when *again* he calls out.

“Hey, wait!”

I don't refrain from groaning this time. “What?” I ask, spinning on my heel.

“How 'bout some conversation then?” He throws me a crooked smile, revealing the three teeth he's missing on the left side of his mouth.

“I'm busy.”

“Doin' what? Meanderin' 'round town all night? Oh, please. You were so lost in thought when you tripped, I thought maybe you wouldn't find yer way out even after fallin'.”

Okay, so I don't have anywhere to actually be right now, and the remainder of the night seemed to be promising bout after bout of unwanted memories and miles of treading until I circled back to the motel.

I shrug and take a seat next to him. “I have no money,” I say, mostly true. The money I brought from New Jersey is in my backpack back in the room.

He shrugs. “Neither do I.”

“How'd you lose your teeth?”

“Pleasure to meet you to.”

“Conversation,” I justify, giving him my own half smile.

“What's yer name?” He adjusts his body so he can shake my hand when I tell him.

“Ames.” I stretch out my hand. It's pale against his, and his palm feels like leather.

“Ames, I'm Gary.”

“Hi, Gary.”

Some time passes where I’m literally twiddling my thumbs and Gary is folding his newspaper neatly beside him. “So.” He clears his throat. “What brings you to a slum like this?”

“I don’t think this is really a slum.”

“I grew up here. It’s a slum. Now why are ya here?”

I shrug. Am I really supposed to be absolutely honest to this strange homeless man. “On my way back home from Nashville.”

“All by yerself?”

“With some friends and my little sister. They’re back in the motel.”

“Motel,” he snorts. “Some cushy lifestyle you live.”

Yeah. Cushy. That’s me.

“Cushy?” I say, open-mouthed. “But one might say that’s some mighty fine cardboard you’re sitting on there. One might even say it’s the best cardboard any homeless man has ever sat on. So rich in color, plush yet firm. And you’re calling my motel cushy. Psh.”

“Pokin’ fun at me for bein’ homeless, I see. Originality yer strongpoint?”

I roll my eyes. “You get a lot of tourists talking to you?”

“We don’t get a lot of tourists at all. Where ya headin’ back to?”

“New Jersey.”

“From Nashville? This is some roundabout way of getting’ there.”

“We’re taking a slight detour for personal reasons.”

“Personal reasons,” he repeats quietly. “Like prolonging the inevitable?”
He pronounces each syllable of inevitable slowly, like he’s making sure that none get left out.

“Something like that.”

“Yeah, I know how that is.”

“Do you, now?”

“I do. You think I was always livin’ on the streets?”

“No, I assumed there were pretty typical reasons for your homelessness.”

“Like?”

“Alcoholism? Gambling? Schizophrenia?”

He scratches at his beard and sighs. “Them older folk always passin’ down those ideas to the youth.”

“Well.”

“Shut up. I’m saner than a piece of toast. I’m stuck on the streets of this slum of a town because I lost everythin’.”

“And here I thought you were on the streets of this slum town because you *found* everything.”

“You always this sarcastic?”

“About eighty percent of the time.”

“My house burned down,” he says, and I stop smiling. “Right to the ground. No insurance. No family. Nothin’. That was about eight or so years ago. Then some alcohol may have followed out of mere depression, but it was long after I’d been sleepin’ in boxes, you hear?”

“Sorry,” I say.

Gary licks his lips, and I wonder if he tastes dirt.

“I don’t exactly have a home right now, either. If that makes you feel better,” I offer.

“But you got some family helpin’, no?”

“My father almost died, so no, not really.”

“Sorry to hear –”

“No,” I interrupt, and then laugh. “No, it was a good thing. Well, it would have, if he would’ve actually died.”

“A good thing?”

“He was a bastard.”

Gary nods, but he doesn’t seem to understand. “No one deserves to die.”

“What about child molesters? Do they deserve to die?”

He hesitates. “This is a whole batch of morals I did not expect to be talkin’ to you ’bout.”

“My father deserved to die.” I don’t say anything else and I think he adds two and two together.

Gary leans back against the wall and stretches his legs outward, forgetting about the initial reason he’d drawn them in. The wind carries a few raindrops underneath the overhang and his shoes get dampened. “Sometimes, the human species is convoluted, disgustin’. Gotta rise above that.”

He makes it sound so easy. Like, just step up and be better than your father. Fuck nature versus nurture. Fuck the memories that have been carved into your brain. Just be better.

“I had a father, ya know?”

“You mean you weren’t the product of immaculate conception?”

“He used to beat the livin’ hell outa me. I mean, knock me blind sometimes. It don’t change nothin’ ’boutchya if ya don’t let it. When I had my little girl, I treated her like gold. Little Susanne. Spoiled.”

I’m suddenly interested. “You have a daughter?”

“Had,” he says sadly. “Had a daughter. That house fire . . . such a shame.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Life’s a three-legged whore, ain’t she?”

“What . . .” I pause. “You said your father was horrible to you?”

“He wasn’t daddy of the year.”

“And you never – honestly, I’m never going to see you again after tonight so you can tell me the truth – you never hurt your kid?” My palms are sweaty, maybe because of the humidity, maybe because I’m nervous about his answer. I wipe them on my jeans.

“Never once, Ames. I swore to never lay a finger on her. And I never did.”

I rest my head against the wall and just let that concept roll around in my head, spreading like oil. Assuming that Gary is being honest with me, he didn’t turn out like his father at all. I mean it’s stupid to think I have no control over it. It’s stupid to think that I’ll just wake up one day, and my hands will force

themselves into fists, and I won't be able to stop myself from hitting Layla. I'm like him. But really, I don't have to be.

I stand so suddenly that I surprise myself. Gary looks up at me. "Thank you," I say. "Thank you so much. Seriously."

"Fer what?"

I pull my wallet from my back pocket and look inside. Six dollars and – I dig my hand into my front pocket and withdraw a handful of change – sixty-three cents. I hand it all to Gary. "Sorry. I guess I lied about not having cash. This is all I have. Take it." He shakes his head but I kneel beside him and place it on top of his newspaper. "Don't buy alcohol."

"I won't," he says. "But where are ya goin'?"

"Back to the motel. I'm going to talk to my sister and –"

"In the middle of the night?"

"Tomorrow. I'm going to wait until she wakes up and I'll talk to her tomorrow. But I'm going to get back and get some rest." I stand again. "Gary, you've really . . . just thank you."

"I still don't know what for," he mutters, taking the money and placing it in his jacket pocket.

I smile before taking off toward the motel in the pouring rain. By the time I'm there, I'm thoroughly out of breath and soaked, and it's nearly two in the morning. I close the door quietly behind me and I'm ready to brush my teeth and head to bed when I notice that I'm not the only person awake in the room.

No, Reign is also awake, and she's out of bed and walking toward me. She's a shadow moving through the room's darkness, and when she takes my hand in hers, it feels soft like I imagine a shadow would feel.

"What are you doing up?" I whisper. I'm starting to realize that I've never actually seen her asleep. I've been in the same living quarters with her for a week, and still, the only reason I can assume that she sleeps at all is because she woke up from a nightmare yesterday morning.

"Wanna get out of here?" she asks just as quietly. "I'm feeling a little trapped."

I nod once and allow Reign to ease the door open. Over my shoulder, I see Daisy in bed, eyes open and watching me head out of the room behind Reign. Layla is lying on her chest, fast asleep. I put a finger to my lips, and she closes her eyes.

Chapter Eleven

I showed up because I had nowhere else to go, because I was bleeding and I didn't have a place to clean up and recuperate, because I didn't know where I could hide. Because I trusted him.

And he answered the door in only his underwear and a t-shirt, clearly having just been woken up. And I said sorry. And he knew because he saw me. And I said sorry again when he took me into his house, gave me a clean shirt and a wet rag to clean my face with, and a bed to sleep in while he took the couch.

And he lied to his mother because I asked him to. And I told him he was the best friend I ever had. And I told him that even Daisy didn't know anything. And I told him that he was the only person I could trust.

And he said, "Same, man. Same."

We're on a makeshift sheet composed of my sweatshirt and t-shirt and her tank-top and leather jacket. With our jeans back on, we lay together topless, legs tangled. Her face feels right against my chest, her arm right around my waist.

She plays a quick rhythm with her fingers against the side of my chest. "Thump thump. Thump thump."

My fingers trace abstract artwork along the plane of her back. Her shoulder blades protrude like the beginnings of bird wings. "It's not all hollow in there after all?"

“It always beats so fast,” she says softly.

I shrug.

She tilts her face upward and kisses just underneath my jaw. It radiates through the rest of my face, and I can’t help but shiver. I hold her closer and she sighs. I stare at the stars above. You don’t see many stars in New Jersey, with the pollution and everything. But here, the sky looks clear enough to reach into and retrieve one of the shining specs.

“I spoke to this homeless guy earlier tonight,” I say.

She doesn’t seem fazed by this. “Was he enlightening? You seem in a better mood than before.”

I gingerly twist my fingers in her hair, feeling the waves splash over my hand. “He said that I don’t have to be like my father.”

“I said that, too.”

“He had some life experiences that made me consider what he was saying, I guess.”

“So you believe him?” she asks, propping her chin on my chest. “You believe that your future is in your own hands? Not bound to some lunatic?”

“I don’t know. More than I did earlier.”

She uses her elbows to inch higher up my body until her face is above mine and her curtain of hair has fallen around me, blocking out all else. One of her legs, still wound with mine, has risen so that her inner thigh is lying atop my thigh, and I feel that more than anything else. She kisses me.

I re-tangle my fingers in her hair with one of my hands and bring the other up to frame the side of her face. Those fingers fall behind her ears and I pull her face closer against mine until she's lying on top of me, our bare stomachs pressed against one another.

When she finally breaks for air, she tucks her hair behind her ears. "What if you go to jail?" she asks suddenly, like the concept is just occurring to her now. Her eyes are owl wide, her mouth, with slightly swollen and reddened lips, open. She pushes herself off me, detangles her legs from mine, and scoots a few inches away.

I sit up and pull her back to me with a loose grip around her wrist, and when she looks up, I'm surprised by how earnest her eyes seem. They're finally open – really open to me – and looking at me, and letting my eyes connect with them. Where's her shield? "What if you go to jail?" she whispers again.

I smile for her and kiss the side of her head. "Then you'll just come over for some conjugal visit fun."

"What's that?"

"Prison sex, basically." She sighs and starts to pull away again, but I hold onto her. "Kidding," I say. "Sorry."

"Ames."

"What do you want me to say, Reign?"

"I don't know." Her fingers link through mine to keep my arm tightly wound around her.

“What does it matter anyway?” I stare at the wall ahead and wonder why our backs are to the Kentucky landscape. “You have Henry. You’ll keep having Henry. Don’t worry about me.”

She rests her forehead in the palm of her free hand and pulls her other hand out of mine. “And what about Layla? Will she be prepared for that?”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” Reign snaps, standing up. She starts pacing on the rooftop, only half dressed, the moonlight reflecting off her stomach, and she is so pale. I stand, too.

“Don’t bring my sister’s name into this like you have any idea what’s best for her.”

“Is it best for her to have you live the rest of your life in prison? Is that what’s best for her?” She pushes against my shoulders when I get too close, and a breeze whips her hair into her face.

“What is *wrong* with you?” I say, looking upward, like I’m asking the heavens to answer me because I sure as hell know Reign won’t. “You knew this was my deal. You knew what’s waiting for me back home before you went on this trip with me, Reign. Before you seduced your way into my life.”

“Seduced?” She scoffs. “*Seduced?* Like you didn’t want any of this, Ames?”

I press my hands against my face and rub them against my cheeks and eyes. How did this even happen? We were lying together, happy. She was counting the beats of my heart; I was counting the stars. How did *this* happen?

“Whatever,” I say. I don’t want to argue with her anymore. She sneers before grabbing her clothes from the ground and stomping off toward the rooftop door. I hurry after her, grab her wrist. “Don’t leave.”

“Do you even care?” She pulls free from my grip and folds her arms over her chest. It brings me back to the first time I saw her without her shirt on, standing in Henry’s doorway, testing my patience and calling me out for staring at her breasts. I’m not staring at them right now; I’m staring at her.

“About what?”

“About what this will do to everyone around you? Going to prison, leaving everyone here alone. Do you even care? Or are you still enticed by those high bridges?”

“I’m not suicidal.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Reign.”

She waits for me to say something else. Anything else. But I just watch her, watch the shadows on her face and the way the moon reflects off the tops of her cheeks. She runs her hands through her hair. “I’m going to go back downstairs,” she whispers, and I think she’s afraid to speak any louder. “And I’m going to get in bed beside Henry, and I’m going to wrap my arm around his waist, and he’s going to think that I love him.”

“Do you?”

The movement is so slight that I can't tell if it's the shake of her head or if it's just her caught up in taking a deep breath, but she doesn't say anything. If she could just commit to this conversation, if she could just talk about something real.

I reach forward and take her face between my hands; and she drops her arms to her sides, and then to my sides, and then her hands clasp behind my back. I kiss her forehead, and then her cheek, and then I pull her close and whisper, "I could love you if you let me. I really could."

And in her own broken way, she says, "That's exactly what Henry said."

*

We set out to leave Kentucky the next day. We never intended on staying long, or at all, really. And I'd like to get to Philadelphia as soon as possible.

Henry is shoving clothes into his backpack, stuffing them down to the very bottom and dropping his minimal amount of toiletries on top. Daisy is braiding her damp hair in the mirror, having already packed her things the night before. I catch her staring at me. She's itching to talk about what she saw last night.

Reign's arm has disappeared into her backpack. She's digging for something. I don't know what, but she seems beyond frustrated. She blows a lock of hair away from her face, and in a moment of rage, yanks her hand free from the bag. A t-shirt and something that rattles within it fall out against the floor, but she snatches the bundle up and tosses it back in her bag.

"Looking for something?" I ask.

Her face is set against a mane of untamed hair. “My cigarettes,” she responds gruffly.

Oh. Woops. I reach into the pocket of my jeans – the same jeans I wore yesterday – and hand her the slightly crumpled box and the lighter. She stares at it for a moment, almost in awe, and then rips it out of my hand.

She lifts her backpack onto her shoulders, sticks one of the cigarettes in the corner of her mouth, and heads toward the door. “I’m waiting by the car.”

“Wait, babe, I’m coming!” Henry shouts, zipping his backpack and dashing out after her.

“I want to wait in the car,” Layla says, looking up at me.

I lift her up onto my hip and kiss her cheek. I loop my casted arm through a strap on my backpack and lift that onto my shoulder. “We’re going now,” I say.

When I head toward the door, Daisy hurries in front of me.

I clear my throat.

She looks over her shoulder at the door, assuring that no one is about to barge in, and then steps closer. “Ames.”

“I know,” I say, because I *do* know. I just don’t want to hear it.

“Please.” Her eyes, rich in the depth of their brownness, are opened completely and searching mine for any semblance of understanding. “Please, stop what you’re doing with her.”

“Daisy,” I sigh.

“You’ll destroy Henry.”

“Daisy.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose between two fingers. “Do you hear yourself? He’s your best friend.”

“Ames,” Layla whines. “Outside.”

Daisy’s not wrong, and I know that. But she doesn’t understand, either. She doesn’t understand that Reign doesn’t love Henry. She doesn’t understand that I could maybe feel something real toward Reign, something powerful and significant.

“Yeah, Layla. Let’s go outside,” I say. I step around Daisy and I leave her standing there.

*

We forgo having a sit down lunch and instead take a trip through a Burger King drive through. Daisy spends most of the drive staring out of her window, watching the trees pass, and avoiding eye contact with me.

Layla plays with a small plush horse that Henry bought from a small convenience store outside a gas station. She has it trot over her legs, then mine, then hers again.

And Reign sits up front, fussing over her cuticles, systematically scratching the nail polish off each nail, biting the corners. And when she’s done with that, she pulls a pair of sunglasses out of the glove compartment – Henry’s old aviators – places them on her face, and promptly pretends to take a nap.

So yeah, we’re driving mostly in silence. And when we make it out of Kentucky and twenty minutes into Ohio, we spot him. Well, Reign spots him first.

She clears her throat, breaking her nap façade, and says, “Look, some kid hitchhiking.”

“What’s hitchhiking?” Layla asks.

“Good luck with that.” Henry snorts. “He has a better chance of getting gang raped in the back of a pickup truck and left for the bears to chew on than getting where he needs to go.”

“What’s gang raped?” Layla asks.

“Henry!” I scold, and then mutter, “Nothing, Layla. Just keep playing with your horse.”

As we pass the kid – with his thumb out and all – I catch sight of his face, if only for a second. Bruised and cut up. And there’s something on his shoulder, but I can’t make it out as we speed by. I turn in my seat and see the kid drop his hand to his side, his head falling between his shoulders, body deflating like a puppet whose strings are released. He looks no older than thirteen or fourteen.

“Stop the car,” I say quietly, and then again louder. “Stop the car.”

“What?” Henry laughs. “Ames, you can’t be serious.”

“Stop. The. Car.” I unbuckle my seatbelt and wait.

Henry pulls onto the shoulder of the road. “This is stupid,” he says.

I ignore him while I open door and take off in a quick jog toward the kid.

When he sees me, he takes a few steps backward. I don’t look dangerous. At least I don’t think so. My father always looked threatening, even when he wasn’t barreling toward me, but I always thought it was because of the lines in his face –

harsh and etched deep so that even when he wasn't angry, he looked angry. I'm too young for those lines.

I raise my hands up, palms out, to show the kid I'm not holding anything. My jog becomes a brisk walk. As I get closer to him, I notice that the *thing* on his shoulder is a parrot. A *parrot*. One of those really big blue and yellow macaws with a beak that looks sharp enough to excise fingers.

"Hey," I shout, letting the kid walk the rest of the way to me. He approaches slowly, cautiously, like a stray dog inching toward a stranger. One of the kid's hands is raised and pressed against the side of his parrot.

"Can you give me a ride?" he asks when he stops in front of me. I can see the blues and purples against his face clearer now. They look new, fresh, with no yellowing or fading. It's the entire left side, almost precisely, like he was hit in the face with a frying pan or something. He must notice me staring because he pivots his hip to the left a little, allowing the right, clean side of his face to tilt more in my direction.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"Cleveland. But I can just go as far as you'll take me." He bites his lip and I notice the split there, the thin red sliver of flesh pillowing out a little from beneath torn skin. Someone really messed him up, and I can't help but remember a time not that long ago when I had more blue and purple on me than not.

It's a game. Every time you make a noise, I kick harder. Let's see how quiet you can be, son.

I shake the memory away. “We can get you to Cleveland.” There’s an alarm in my head buzzing about Aunt Jeanie and Philadelphia and getting Layla somewhere safe before they find me. But I press snooze on that. This kid needs help. If *I* were on the streets, running away from my father like I should have done years ago, I would want someone to help me.

His eyes light up, but then they fade into a harsher skepticism. “Were you headed to Cleveland, too?”

“No, but we can take you. No problem.”

“That sounds like something a murderer would say.” He rubs the side of the parrot, which nuzzles its beak in the kid’s hair.

I catch myself in the midst of a shudder when he says the word *murderer*. “I understand why you think that. I mean, I can tell you I’m not going to kill you, nor are any of my friends, if that counts for anything.”

“Not really. You look kind of familiar.”

Familiar. Maybe from the news? Maybe where my picture’s been plastered for a while now. I wonder how diligently they’re looking now, more than a week later. I shouldn’t think about that right now. “You need a ride, right. Sometimes you just gotta take a chance.”

He looks up at the parrot. “What do you think, Bernard?” It squawks. Maybe it hasn’t memorized any real words. “I’m going to take that as a yes.”

“Cool,” I say. “I’m Ames.”

“Dillon,” he says.

I lead him back to the jeep, where I scoot into the middle seat and lift Layla onto my lap. Dillon sits beside me, dropping his backpack between his knees. The parrot walks down his arm and hops onto his leg. Everyone in the jeep stares at it.

Layla says, “Birdy!” She tries to reach toward it, but I keep her planted firmly on my lap.

I look at Henry. “Hey, we’re going to drop him off in Cleveland, okay?”

I’m not sure if Henry knows where that is in Ohio, but I do. It’s decently out of the way. “Ames, this is stupid,” he whispers. “We’re supposed to get to Philly.”

I glance at the kid and then back at Henry. “We’re going to drop him off in Cleveland,” I say again. “I’m not concerned with anything else right now.”

Henry doesn’t say anything. He just reprograms the GPS, puts the car into drive, and pulls back onto the highway. I glance at Reign, who returns my look, confused.

“Everyone,” I say above the sound of tires against pavement. “This is Dillon. And his parrot, Bernard.”

Chapter Twelve

“Dude, why don’t you just leave? Run away. Take the kid, and go,” Henry said, handing me a bag of frozen corn to hold against the side of my face while I balanced a sleeping Layla against my chest.

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I just can’t.”

He didn’t say anything else because I didn’t want to argue at the time and because there was no use in arguing. Because I knew that even though Henry wouldn’t say it, he knew I was too much of a coward to run away.

Because, really. I would have had to be so unbelievably brave to leave the only person who I’d known as a father. Regardless of everything else. And I was never that brave. And I was a fool.

“Un, deux, trios! Squawk! Un, deux, trios! Squawk!”

So it turns out that the parrot does speak. In fact, it’s been speaking a lot. Specifically counting. Specifically in French. No one in the car seems entirely pleased with the situation. *“Bernard, s’il vous plaît! Soyez tranquille.”* Also, Dillon speaks French.

After so long of the only conversation in the car being spoken in French between a parrot and a human, Layla asks, “Why’d you name him Bernard?”

Dillon looks at her, clears his throat, and coughs once. “Um. I don’t know.”

“But what if he’s a she. Maybe it’s a girl. Bernard is a boys name,” she says.

“He’s a he.”

“But there’s more red than blue on her. Red is like pink. It’s for girls.”

Dillon looks at me, and I bounce Layla on my knee. “I’m pretty sure Dillon knows that Bernard is a he. Red can be a boys color, too, Layla.”

Layla looks up at me, eyebrows pulled together in frustration. “Oh.”

Another few moments pass before Reign unbuckles her seatbelt, turns in her chair, and says, “I’m Reign, by the way.”

Dillon pets the parrot in a desperate attempt to quiet it, but still, “*Un, deux, trois! Squawk!*” When he looks up at Reign, his gaze sticks.

“Um, I, um, hi, um.” He tries to smile. It looks weird on a face that’s purple.

“Dillon, right?” she asks.

He nods.

“Dillon, how old are you?”

“Why?”

“Just wondering.”

“Eighteen.”

She bites her lip before saying, “Eighteen.”

“Yeah.”

“No. There’s no way your older than I am. How old are you really?”

“Eighteen,” he says.

She waits.

“Kid, do we seem like the type of people that are going to call the cops on your ass or drag you back to mommy and daddy?” Henry grumbles from the driver’s seat. He has one hand gripped on the steering wheel and the other drumming a beat on his knee.

Dillon takes a moment to think, and in that moment, the parrot’s French echoes throughout the jeep. “Fifteen,” he relents. Even fifteen seems to be stretching it.

“And what brings you out on this beautiful Ohio highway on such a fine day?” Reign asks.

He shrugs, and finally, the parrot stops screaming. The car itself seems to let out a breath. “Just trying to get to where I’m going.”

“Where’s that, again?” I butt in. I glance at Reign and I really hope nothing happens to Henry’s car in the next few minutes. With her back to the windshield, knees supporting the brunt of her weight, and nothing strapping her into the car, she’s not in the safest position.

“Cleveland. I told you that already. Not that I can’t say it again. I mean Reign wasn’t even the one who asked. She probably wants to know, too. I mean, she knew. But you’d probably want to hear it from me or something.” It’s like he’s on fast-forward.

Reign giggles in a very un-Reign type of way, and I wonder why she's playing into the kid's apparent crush.

"I know that," I say. "I mean, where in Cleveland. Like who are you staying with? It'd be kind of irresponsible of us to just leave you on the side of the road near the *Welcome to Cleveland* sign or whatever."

"Oh. My sister's apartment. It's right by Cleveland State. The University. She goes there."

"Cool." Reign smiles, showing all her teeth. "Are you visiting? Like for summer holiday?"

I keep my eyes on her. She knows damn well he's not just visiting. Not with half his face in the lovely shade of eggplant and not by hitchhiking there. He's running away. Reign isn't stupid, so what's she doing, then?

"Not really," Dillon answers vaguely. He looks down at Bernard and absent mindedly scratches the side of his cheek. The parrot makes a soft cooing noise and buries its face into Dillon's palm. "Are we going to stop at all for lunch on the way? I haven't eaten in a while. But if you don't want to, that's fine. I can wait until I see my sister. It's just that we're about four hours out, so if you guys are hungry we could always stop. Sorry." He's big on rambling.

"Actually," Henry starts, "We're kind of on a time –"

"I'm kind of hungry," I interrupt.

"Same," Reign says.

"I want ice cream," Layla says. She twists around to look up at me, and I smile at her.

“Ames,” Daisy says. “You really need to get back to –”

“Let’s get some food,” I say loudly. “Reign’s in. Dillon’s in. Layla’s in. I’m in. Four against two. Henry get off at the next exit.”

From my seat in the back, I see Henry’s knuckles turning white in their grasp on the wheel. “Fine,” he says through his teeth. “We’ll get food.”

*

“So you’re fifteen. That puts you in, what, grade nine?” Reign asks, holding a fry between her fingers like a cigarette. Layla studies Reign’s fry-holding technique and does the same with hers before taking a bite off the end.

“Going into tenth grade,” Dillon says, mouth full of burger. The parrot is sitting on the area of booth between him and me, and it keeps chewing on the seam of my jeans.

“Cool. And where are you from again?”

I’ve never seen Reign talk so much. It’s weird, watching her smile brightly, possibly even eye-smiling; and to know she’s faking it all in an attempt to gain some insight into Dillon’s life.

“Just this small suburb. It’s really close to Cincinnati. And to Kentucky. Like I can drive to either in under half an hour.”

Henry snorts. “Drive? You?”

“Figuratively,” Dillon says. He looks down at his food and pushes one of his fries into the other. “Figuratively, I could drive. If I had my license.”

Reign pinches Henry’s arm, and he emits a short grunt.

“I’m sure you’ll get your license soon,” Reign says.

“Yeah, I’m almost sixteen. Sort of. In eight months I’ll be sixteen. How old are you again?”

“Seventeen.”

“That’s not even that much older than me. Just a year and change.”

Reign giggles again and reaches over to steal a fry from his plate even though she has plenty left on her own.

Layla tugs on my sleeve and says, “Ames, ice cream now?”

I glance at her plate and shake my head. “Eat another chicken finger first. Then I’ll get you ice cream.”

She frowns and crosses her arms over her chest. “No. Ice cream now.”

“Layla,” I say calmly. “Eat more of your food. You can get ice cream after.”

“No!” Her eyes fill with tears. “No, no, no. I want it now.”

Reign and Dillon have stopped chatting and they’re both watching Layla, along with Henry and Daisy.

I clear my throat and rest my hand on Layla shoulder. “Listen, Layla. Ice cream is a treat. You can have it after you eat, but not right now, okay? This isn’t up for discussion. Eat some more of your meal. I promise I’ll order you ice cream afterward.”

“But –”

“No buts,” I say, lifting a chicken finger from her plate and holding it in front of her mouth. Begrudgingly she bites the end of it, before taking it from me and nibbling on the chicken some more.

Reign smiles at me and then continues her conversation with Dillon. I glance at Daisy, who's on Henry's other side and watching Reign and Dillon intently. She returns my look after another moment or so and mouths, "Can I talk to you?"

I'm starting to hate my little chats with Daisy. She slides out of the booth, and I ask Layla to scoot just for a second. She rolls her eyes, and I wonder where she learned that, and then she hops out. I have to detach Bernard's beak from my belt loop. He catches my finger in his mouth and I hiss, tugging it away. "Damn it!"

"Sorry! Sorry! He never usually bites. Sorry. I would've kept him in the car, but it was just really hot and I didn't want him to die. I'm just really sorry. Here, take this." Dillon gives me his semi-soiled napkin.

I look at my finger and notice two thin lines of blood forming – one just below my fingernail and one just above my knuckle. I take the napkin from him and use one of the clean corners to press against the cuts. "It's fine," I tell him. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm really sorry, Ames. Seriously. I'm –"

"I said it's fine. Don't worry. We're still taking you to your sister." I follow Daisy out of the booth and order Layla to hop back up. She does so enthusiastically and pets the back of Bernard's head. He doesn't bite her. "We'll be right back."

No one asks where we're going. Instead, as Daisy and I are heading for the front door, I hear Reign say, "So why doesn't that bird ever fly away from you?"

“Oh,” Dillon replies, “His wings are clipped. He’s not going anywhere.”

*

Outside, Daisy is standing in front of me in a pose I’ve found quite familiar lately – hands on her hips, eyebrows raised, head cocked to one side.

“What are you doing, Ames? A hitchhiker?”

I stuff my hands into my pockets. “The kid needed help.”

“And are you a saint all of a sudden? You have to get to Philly and sometimes you have to look out for yourself, you know? You don’t seem to have a problem doing that in *other* areas of your life.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She clicks her tongue against her teeth and moves her arms upward so that they cross snugly over her chest. “It means that you do seem to enjoy picking and choosing when you get to be selfish.”

Selfish? I’m selfish? “Talk to me again when I’m not going to jail for protecting my four year old sister.”

Daisy’s face softens like a crumpled piece of paper being flattened and smoothed. “For protecting your sister? What are you talking about?”

“Nothing.”

“Ames.”

“Nothing, okay? Nothing. Forget it.” The little Henry knows . . . well, halve that, and *maybe* that’s what Daisy knows. Maybe. And I don’t want that to change.

“Ames, what did you mean?”

“You just don’t like Dillon because he’s got a thing for Reign,” I joke. Take the bait, Daisy. Come on. I’m not talking about Layla and my father right now. Just take the bait.

“That is *not* it.”

Perfect. “Oh?”

“No, I don’t not like him at all. I just think that you need to be in Philadelphia tonight. And *you* think that, too. Hell, even Henry thinks that.”

“Listen. It’s fine. I’ll get there tomorrow. Whatever. He needs help, Daisy. Can you really stand there right now, and picture his face in your head, and then just throw him back on the street? He’s running away from something.”

“I know that.”

“Good. Then there shouldn’t be a problem.”

Right on cue, Dillon, Reign, Henry, and Layla all come outside. Henry has Layla balanced on his shoulders and she has her arms wrapped tightly around his face. He fights to see around them. Daisy doesn’t have time to spew a rebuttal at me, and instead, we both turn in the group’s direction and wait for an explanation.

“The parrot started counting in French again,” Henry says.

“Loudly,” Reign adds.

“Sorry,” Dillon mutters.

And then Henry again, with, “The waiters and fellow eaters didn’t appreciate the noise.”

“Sorry,” Dillon says again, miserably. The parrot is sitting on his shoulder, currently not speaking, but I hear the rumble of stress and discontent in small screeches, and I figure it’s best to get back on the road, anyway.

“Come on,” I say. “Let’s just go.”

I drop the napkin wrapped around my finger in the trash and follow them toward the jeep.

*

By the time we get to Cleveland, it’s night. Some of the houses we pass are beautiful and made of brick with cobblestone paths leading up to them and pine trees in the driveway. We pull up outside a far less fancy apartment that Dillon says belongs to his sister, and we sit there for a moment. The place isn’t wildly fancy, but it doesn’t look terrible. It seems appropriate for a college aged girl and her roommates.

“Well.” Dillon clears his throat. “Thanks for taking me here. Thanks so much. Seriously.”

“No problem,” I say.

“Wait, you’re leaving?” Layla asks. She scoots toward Dillon and reaches toward the bird.

“Yeah, sorry,” Dillon says.

“With Bernard?”

Dillon nods. “But he’ll miss your company.”

Layla smiles and kisses the top of Bernard’s head. It worries me for a moment, but the bird doesn’t make any move to snip at her.

When Dillon gets out of the car with his backpack and his parrot, Reign blows him a kiss. Henry rolls his eyes, and still, I wonder what she's doing. Henry puts the jeep into *Drive*, but I tell him to wait. Dillon rings the doorbell. Henry twists in his seat for a moment and asks, "Why did we have to take the kid all the way here, again?"

"Because he reminds me of someone," I say quietly. Henry's good at understanding; he doesn't say anything else.

Dillon waits in front of the door. He waits. And waits. And waits. At least a minute passes, and he looks over his shoulder at our jeep, uneasiness settled harshly on his shoulders, like their unsure whether to straighten in stoic, emotionless, courage; or to slouch in lost hope.

"We are not getting stuck with him for good," Henry says sternly.

"I like him," Reign argues.

"I can tell," Henry fires back. "You've been awfully flirty with a *child*."

She ignores that, and eventually, Dillon drags his feet back to the jeep and opens the back door.

"She's not home," he says. "Is there any way I can possibly stay with you guys for the night, if you're staying in Cleveland?"

Henry and Daisy immediately start coming up with excuses as to why the kid cannot stay with us, most of which are directed toward me. Their speech gets garbled together in a mesh of nonsense, and no further clarity comes when Reign starts arguing with them. The car is a mess of words, a few getting tossed

here and there that I manage to catch; but overall, I don't understand what anyone is saying.

Dillon doesn't seem to fare much better, but he does grasp that at least half of this car does not want him. "I can just find somewhere else," he says. "No worries."

They don't even seem to hear him. That's how into their argument they all are. I'm about to butt in myself when there's a loud, high pitched squawk from Bernard, and then, "*Shut up! Worthless! Worthless! You're worthless!*"

Everyone stops. I'm not sure any of us are breathing. We stare at Bernard and then look at Dillon, whose head is hung shamefully, forehead bumping against the side of the jeep with a dull thud.

"We're going to spend the night somewhere in town," I say quickly. "You can stay with us." No one argues with me. Not after that glimpse into his life. Maybe Reign will stop flirting. Maybe Henry will stop being a bitch about everything. Maybe Daisy will understand why I wanted to help him in the first place. "Get back in the car." I slide closer to Daisy, and I feel her tense beside me.

Dillon sits down, and the car is so quiet that you hear the squelch of leather beneath him, complaining against his weight. He closes the door and Bernard resumes his counting. It becomes a beautiful sound, slicing through the silence nicely, leaving us something to fall back on. It's becoming an almost song with an almost melody. Maybe I'm going crazy.

"Yay!" Layla cheers, clapping her hands. "You're back!"

*

We drop our bags off in the motel, but we're not there long. In fact, and to great surprise, Henry suggests taking Dillon out for his first drink (after Dillon claimed that he'd never had an alcoholic beverage before). I provide them with a number of reasons that it is not a good idea to get Dillon drunk, but everyone seems excited for the outing, and I'm outvoted. I then remind them that I have Layla, and that I can't bring her into a bar. But that's okay because Henry says that he'll just take Dillon himself. And then Reign says that she's joining. And then Daisy offers to stay back with Layla, Bernard, and me.

"No," I tell her when the others are all outside already. "Go with them. Watch Dillon. I don't exactly trust Henry or Reign with him."

She rolls her eyes and leaves without another word.

I look at Layla. She's standing in front of the dresser, staring at Bernard, who's perched at the top. "Will he fly to me?" she asks.

I come up behind her and use my good arm to lift her up. She giggles. "Bernard doesn't fly," I say. "But you can fly!"

She looks at me quizzically, and I throw her onto the bed. She bounces a few times and laughs as I drop next to her and poke at her ribs. "That tickles! Stop!"

"What tickles?" I ask, my fingers venturing under her arms and pressing there. She lets out a tremendous screech. "Surely not this!"

"Ames! Ames, stop!" she manages between bouts of laughter.

Eventually I relent and let her catch her breath beside me.

"No fair!" she exclaims. "You don't get tickled."

“You don’t try,” I tell her.

She digs her fingers into my ribs, and I cup my hands over my side and collapse backward into the pillows. “Oh, the agony!” I shout. “The tickling torment!”

She smiles and then kisses my cheek quickly. I move to kiss her back but instead I slobber on her face. She pushes me away and yells something like *gross!* or *ew!* or something I don’t quite make out.

She frowns, but I make a motion in her direction that may indicate possible tickling and she stops frowning. I haven’t spent time alone with Layla in so long. And I miss it, miss this. Miss her grimacing as I try to tickle her and her smile before she kisses me on the cheek. Miss her smiling all together, because she hasn’t been doing very much of that on this trip.

“Want pizza for dinner?” I ask.

Her eyes widen and she nods enthusiastically. “Yes!”

I use the motel phone to order pizza, and then I sit back with Layla on one of the beds and turn the TV on, and we watch cartoons. And she laughs, and I watch her laugh because it’s the most beautiful sight in the entire world.

When the pizza comes we eat it on the bed even though she says that it wasn’t allowed back home. And afterward I think she might be ready to go to sleep, but she crawls next to me during a particularly engaging episode of *The Power Puff Girls*, and places her hands on either side of my face.

“Hey,” she says.

I move my head sideways and bite her hand gently. She pulls free and sticks her tongue out in my direction. “Yes, dear,” I say.

“Hey,” she says again. “Ames, when are we going home?”

I stop smiling. Hopefully, she won’t be going home. Hopefully, she’ll be staying in Philadelphia, and I’ll be going home. “Aren’t you having fun with me and the others?”

“Mhm,” she says. “But when are we going home?”

“Layla,” I say slowly. “Why are you –?”

“Does Daddy not want me there anymore?” she asks, eyes downcast.

I sit up and pull her onto my lap. “Of course he wants you.” It’s hard to say because yeah, he wants her, but for what? For a plaything? For his sick intentions? To forget to feed her? Who’d take care of her if she went back to him and I went to prison? “Why do you think he doesn’t want you?”

“I miss him,” she says instead. “I miss Daddy.”

I take her arm gently. She doesn’t pull away this time, but instead lets me tug her into a hug. Her body is warm against my chest. And it sucks for her. I know it does. She has no mom – she left just after Layla was born, not even coming home from the hospital with her. No father. And now she’s stuck here with me, in motel after motel, as I try to find her somewhere to live that isn’t with the same Daddy she misses.

Tears bloom in her eyes when she pulls away. “Did I make him mad?”

“No, Layla. Hey, look at me.”

She wipes her eyes with her fingertips and looks up.

“Y could never make him mad,” I say. “But you have to understand that he’s not a very good man. And sometimes it’s better to stay away from people like that.”

“But he’s the police,” she says. “911.”

I try to give her a small smile, even if it’s just for her sake. The police. She used to call them the 911 because that’s who I always told her to call in an emergency. “I know, and he should be good. But –” I take a breath. “But do you remember what happened the night we left?”

“You took me to Henry,” she says. “Even though I cried. You told me to stop acting like a baby.”

That’s what she remembers? *That?* “I’m sorry I said that,” I say, and I pull her into another tight hug. “That was really mean of me. But do you remember anything else?”

Her eyebrows pull together and she bites her lower lip. “I remember –”

I’m watching her intently, waiting for her to tell me, when the front door swings open and Henry waltz’s in, supporting most of a Dillon’s weight as he stumbles in beside him. Daisy comes in behind them, car keys in hand, steam possibly shooting out of her ears.

Layla backs up against me, and whispers, “Ames.”

“It’s okay,” I say. And then to Daisy, “What happened?”

She tosses the car keys onto the counter and places her hands firmly on her hips. “What happened? Henry and Reign allowed this fifteen year old child to

down drink after drink and then he puked in the bar, and then in the parking lot, and then in my lap while we were driving.”

I notice the giant wet spot on the tops of her legs. Dillon can barely pass for fifteen, and I wonder how they were able to smuggle him so many drinks without being caught. Henry leads him to the bathroom, where Dillon kneels in front of the toilet and vomits once more. He closes the door before Henry can sneak up behind him, and I hear a lock click into place.

“Hey, kid, let me in!” Henry shouts, but after a few seconds, he turns toward us with this obnoxious grin on his face. “Well, it didn’t take much to get Dillon sha-wasted.”

I squint my eyes at him and stand up, leaving Layla hugging the covers to her chest. “Where’s Reign?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” Henry says. “Outside. She said she had to make a quick phone call.”

I hear Dillon wretch from inside the bathroom, and I realize that I can’t do anything about that right now, so I say, “I’ll be right back.”

“Ames,” Daisy says.

I ignore her and look down at Layla. “Be right back, okay?”

“Okay,” Layla says hesitantly.

I head out of the room and down the hallway. I don’t realize Daisy followed me until I’m outside. “Go back to the room,” I tell her.

She shakes her head as we continue walking and crosses her arms tightly over her chest. She exudes attitude and I don't have patience for it right now. "I'm coming with you."

"Daisy, I swear –"

I stop midsentence because a Reign is standing a few cars down from Henry's. She has a cigarette between her fingers and she's chatting with some guy that has hair like a ninety's boy band member, bleached and spiked. He's hovering over her like she's his prey, but she doesn't seem to mind so much. She rests her hand against his arm when he makes her laugh, and he pushes her hair behind her shoulders, whispering something into her ear.

I clear my throat, and Reign snaps around. She looks at the guy, takes a step back, and says, rather loudly, "Nice to meet you and all. I hope you find where you're looking to go."

The guy stares at her for too long before he finally understands that he's supposed to leave, and he trudges off to his car, a mangled looking hunk of rusted orange metal.

"Who was that?" I ask.

She blows a stream of smoke and holds the cigarette up. "Want one?"

"I'm quitting," I say, remembering Gary and all of his Cancer Stick Preaching.

"Quitting," she repeats, a little disappointed.

"That's great," Daisy says, surprised.

"Who was that?" I ask Reign again.

“Some bloke.” She shrugs. “He was asking for directions while I had a smoke. I told him I didn’t know anything about this city.”

She sounds honest. I want to believe her, but whether I do or not, I leave it be. Daisy starts to say something, but I interrupt her. “So what have you been up to with Dillon?”

“What do you mean?” Reign asks, dropping her cigarette to the sidewalk and stomping it out.

“I mean the flirting and the drinking and the getting him wasted. You’re completely sober right now. What was your angle?”

“My angle?”

“He’s fifteen, Reign,” Daisy blurts. “Fifteen. You can’t sleep with *everyone*.”

Reign takes a step back, like we’ve come outside to attack her. She’s defensive now. I see a shield come up in her eyes, a shadow filling up the grey.

“Shut up, Daisy,” I say.

“I don’t sleep with everyone,” Reign bites. “I’m not going to sleep with him. I’m not a whore.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Daisy counters. “Henry. Ames. Dillon is the only one left that you can get your hands on. Or maybe that blonde guy that just walked away. Maybe he’ll fuck you.”

“Daisy!” I push her back a little because Reign takes a step forward and I don’t think she’s on the defensive anymore. I glare at Daisy over my shoulder,

silently begging her to stop. When I turn toward Reign, she has a wide, fragile expression.

“You told her,” she accuses.

“Reign, she saw us together.”

“Twice,” Daisy adds. The look I give her makes her take another step backward.

Reign crosses her arms over her chest, and I remember when Daisy did it, and how this is so different because she looks like she could fall apart any second or disintegrate and blow away in the wind.

“Reign,” I say. She sidesteps away from me and takes off toward the motel door but I hurry to her. “Reign, stop.”

“I am *not* a whore,” she spits, swinging around. “Dillon is the youngest of two children. His father died when he was nine. His mother is *horrible* to him. So much so that he nearly died a few weeks ago when she shoved him down the stairs. That’s when he made plans to run away. She found out, smashed his face into the kitchen counter, and went on a bender. He took his bird and left.” She’s breathing heavily. “You want to know why I’m being nice to him? Why I’m flirting with him? Because he’s never *had* any of that, and he deserves it, just like you deserve it, Ames.”

“He told you all that?” Daisy asks, suddenly quiet.

Reign’s chest is heaving. “It’s amazing what someone will tell you when you’re nice to them,” she says, and then she hurries off toward the door.

Daisy reaches for my shoulder but I shrug her off. “Nice,” I mutter.
“Really great.”

*

Retching. Loudly. In the bathroom. Right now.

Dillon has been in there for the past half hour, vomiting up all the alcohol Henry and Reign put in him. I offered to help him in there, though I wasn't sure what that would entail anyway, but he refused to unlock the door. I wonder if Henry's still proud of this. Or Reign. She hasn't said a word to Daisy or me since we returned from outside.

“Well, at least he had fun,” Henry offers, sharing a hesitant laugh with the room.

“Fun?” I get up from the edge of the bed, careful not to wake Layla. She's curled up beneath the quilt, eyes shielded from the light with the top sheet over her face. “You think this was the best thing for him right now?”

Henry shrugs.

“Sorry.” I offer my own short burst of laughter. “You think getting anyone drunk is the best thing to do. My bad.”

Henry steps away from the small section of wall he was leaning on.

“Listen, I was just trying to help him.”

“And now he's been puking in the bathroom since we got home. Good job.”

Daisy and Reign are watching us from separate sides of the room. They both seem ready to intervene.

“Please,” Henry groans. “Everyone has a night or two stuck in the bathroom puking. He’ll be fine.”

“That’s not the point!”

He’s taken aback by my shouting, and I have to check behind me to make sure that Layla’s still asleep. “The point is that this kid had a shitty life and I was trying to give him a night to forget about that. And it worked. You don’t have to get all fired up because it wasn’t your idea.”

“My idea? I would never take a fifteen year old kid out for drinks to help him forget. Never.”

“I did that for you when you were fifteen,” Henry argues. “You didn’t seem to mind so much then.”

I stare at him. We have very few unspoken rules in our friendship. One of them is that we do not talk about the nights I came to his house after my father had his fun. He’s never broken that rule before. My hands clench at my sides, knuckles popping like small champagne corks.

“Well, maybe if I had a moment to think before tequila was poured down my throat, I would mind.”

Henry steps forward. “I was *helping* you. I’ve always been helping you. Just like I was helping Dillon.”

“You didn’t even want him to come with us!” I shout. “You wanted to leave him on the side of the road like some stray dog!”

“Because I was trying to help *you* with your fucked up life! I was trying to get you to Philly to find your damn aunt!” He’s in my face now, and I push him back.

“Trying to help me? What about you and your life? I’ve heard –”

“Ames,” Reign warns. I’m not supposed to know the things she’s told me about Henry.

“What’s going on?” Layla asks from her spot on the bed. She sits up slowly and wipes her eyes.

“What?” Henry asks me, stepping closer. I feel his breath against my face when he speaks, smell the alcohol sticking there. “What, Ames? Want to comment about how my life is worse than yours? Somehow, I can’t see that being true.”

I shove him again, and this time, he shoves back. I knock into the nightstand, and it rattles against the wall. I breathe for a second, and just as I’m about to charge toward him, Daisy slides in front of me and spreads her arms. Reign does the same with Henry.

“Ames!” Layla yells. She jumps out of bed and steps between Daisy and me, wrapping her wiry arms around my leg.

“Stop this!” Daisy says firmly. “Stop it. Now.”

I watch Henry, and he watches me; and all I see in him – all I feel – is anger. Reign chimes in. “Enough,” she says. It’s nice to see her agree with Daisy on something. Different. New. “Henry wasn’t wrong,” she continues. “He just wanted to help. He always just wants to help.”

She's siding with him? Even after Henry worked so hard to keep Dillon out of the car. Even after Henry sparked the outburst of the parrot – the parrot that is now sitting atop the TV sleeping through the racket of our argument.

“Whatever.” I push past Daisy, scoop Layla up, and leave the motel room.
“Where going to go for a walk, okay, Layla?”

She locks onto my waist with her legs and rests her head on my shoulder.
“But I'm tired.”

I don't even make it to the motel door when I hear footsteps behind me. Daisy is at my side and she's clasped her hand around my casted one, like that will keep me from escaping. I take a deep breath.

“Don't tell me to leave,” she says.

“Daisy.”

“Why's everyone mad?” Layla asks.

“You're not wrong. He's wrong,” Daisy tells me.

“Daisy.”

“Let me finish. She's poison. You see that she's poison, right? She pits the two of you against one another, picks and chooses sides like it's nothing. You see that she's not –”

I yank my hand from hers and take off out the door, holding onto Layla tightly. Daisy runs after me, and I spin around so fast that Layla squeals. “Stop saying these things about her,” I snap. “It doesn't matter. None of it matters. She sides with who she wants to side with and she does what she wants to do. I don't

need you trying to whisper little coercions in my ear, trying to turn me against her. You're only making me want to speak to you less, so just stop it."

She looks down at her shoes, at the floor, at nothing. "I'm sorry," she finally says. "I won't say anything about it again."

"Thanks."

"Are you okay?"

"Dandy."

"Stop."

"What do you want me to say?"

"The truth? You never tell me anything."

"The truth," I say slowly. "The truth is that I'm feeling an awful lot like I have no one to turn to right now."

"You have me." She places her hand on mine again and gives it a small squeeze. I admire the slight frizz to her curls and the freckles on the tops of her cheeks. It's been a while since I've paid attention to Daisy's face. *Really* paid attention. She turns to Layla and pinches her cheeks playfully. "And this little one!"

Layla giggles and bats Daisy's hand away.

"Thanks," I say, finally managing a smile.

She smiles in return.

"Think I could just have a few minutes to be alone?"

She bites her lip. "Yeah, I'll go check on Dillon."

“Thanks,” I say again. “Layla, do you want to go with Daisy? You can go back to sleep.”

“Yes,” Layla says. She unwraps her arms from around my neck and I transfer her over to Daisy.

When they leave, I look to my left and to my right and I decide, on a whim, to go left.

And I just walk.

Chapter Thirteen

He avoided my face. And I was thankful for that. Because I didn't know how to explain away too many black eyes. Like how many doorknobs could I possibly hit upon tripping. There'd been that one time, where both of my eyes had been swollen shut. I hadn't been able to see for days. But that had only happened only once. And I felt grateful that he chose not to touch my face.

I felt that he was nice for doing that. I was so stupid. How could I have been so stupid to feel grateful to him?

More driving. Like I expected any differently. This time, though, there is a small dent in the jeep's bumper where Henry bumped into a pole while parking at the bar yesterday. He wasn't drunk at the time, just stupid.

We're now heading back to Dillon's sister's apartment to drop him off. We're all praying she'll be home this time around. Though, in the state we're dropping him off in, maybe it'd be better to give it another few hours. He's sitting between Daisy and me, wearing a pair of her sunglasses that are shaped like two daisies connected together by a small green vine. His head lolls against the headrest and every so often, he lets out a pitiful groan.

Aside from those groans, and the occasional French counting from Bernard, the car is silent. I haven't spoken to Henry or Reign since our argument last night, and the car is heavy with tension. It sticks in the air like humidity.

Maybe I should have apologized. I don't know. Regardless, I got back to the motel after everyone had gone to sleep. Even Reign, who may or may not have been actually sleeping, kept her back to the door and her eyes closed. They'd asked the front desk for a cot for Dillon to sleep on, and despite the sick, vomiting, state I'd left him in, he was snoring softly when I returned.

I didn't go anywhere. Not anywhere important anyway. I walked down toward the city, but I only made it about halfway, turning around when I reached that nice suburban area with the brick houses. It was getting late, and I started to think about Layla, and I just turned around and came back to the motel. That was it.

When we pull up in front of the apartment, Dillon perks up a bit. He seems more nervous today, fidgety, constantly wiping his sweaty palms against his jeans and accidentally disturbing his parrot. I give his shoulder a squeeze and get out of the car, to both let him out and accompany him to the door, leaving Layla in the backseat.

"Where are you going?" she asks, poking her head out.

"To walk Dillon to the door. His sister lives in there," I say."

"Oh. Well are you guys coming back soon?"

"I am, but Dillon's going to stay here now. Do you want to say bye?"

She unbuckles her seatbelt and reaches her arms out of the car. I wrap my arm around her waist and lift her up onto my hip. Dillon smiles at her, but she's more interested in Bernard, who's sitting on his shoulder. She pets him for a few

seconds and then kisses the top of his head. “Goodbye, Bernard. I’ll miss you,” she says. “And you too, I guess.”

Dillon chuckles. “It was nice meeting you, Layla.”

She reaches over and gives him a hug, and then I place her back in the car.

Dillon pokes his head into the car after her and says something to the others, but I can’t hear him. But I do hear Rein’s loud, “Wait!” She gets out of the car and pulls Dillon into a tight hug, where she whispers things into his ear that I can’t make out. She kisses him on the cheek once, and says, “You’re amazing. You’re brilliant. Call me when you’re eighteen.”

I think she’s joking.

Still, Henry feels obligated to shout, “Nope! Don’t do that!”

Dillon laughs and pivots toward me, but I shake my head. “I’m walking you to the door this time. Making sure you get inside.”

“Like a date?” he jokes, as he starts to walk, his backpack slung over one shoulder and Bernard on the other. We make it to the door. It’s plain. Brown. Not at all as ornate as my mother’s stained glass door in Nashville. That was the last time I was standing outside a door anxiously and it didn’t go so well. Let’s hope this goes better.

Dillon rings the doorbell. I pull Daisy’s sunglasses off his face and drop them into my pocket. He looks at me gratefully.

I’m expecting to wait a while at the door, at least some significant amount of time for Dillon to build up the nervous jitters so that yesterday wouldn’t seem so entirely out of the ordinary. But the door opens almost immediately. The girl

standing there is his sister. I know it before she speaks. They have almost identical faces – a long, sloped nose; wide brown eyes; sharp cheekbones. And the look she’s giving him. Like she’s just been greeted by Jesus riding a unicorn or something.

She cries.

She cries and wraps her arms around Dillon and pulls him close. The parrot doesn’t bite her. Instead, he walks from Dillon’s shoulder onto his sister’s shoulder and perches himself there. “*Oh mon Dieu!* Dillon! What happened? What happened to your face? Are you alright?”

I clear my throat awkwardly and take a step back. “I’ll see you around, Dillon.”

Dillon parts from his sister and takes her hand in his. “Wait. Ames, this is my sister, Melanie. Melanie, this is Ames. He and his friends drove me here.”

Melanie holds out her hand and I shake it once. “Thank you so much.”

I smile. “No problem.”

She redirects her attention back to Dillon, and I see new tears blooming in her eyes. “What happened?”

I slowly back away as he starts to tell her about their mom, and eventually, I just turn around and jog to the jeep. I did my job – Dillon’s in safe hands. I see Henry and Reign through the window as I get closer. They’re laughing about something and he plants an openmouthed wet kiss on the side of her face. She pushes him off and continues laughing. Daisy sits in the backseat, observing quietly. He’s looking at her with such adoration, like she can do no wrong, like

she's made of gold and rainbows and sunshine. They look like real people making up two halves of a real couple that may really love each other.

I get in the car beside Layla and buckle both my seatbelt and hers. Henry doesn't say anything. He stops laughing and straightens in his seat, and Reign follows suit. I have almost no clue why *she's* mad at me.

"Hey," I start, but he just starts driving. I don't know to where. "Hey," I say again. "Listen. About last night."

"What about it?"

"We were being stupid. Let's just forget about it, yeah?"

"*We?*" He stops at a stop sign.

"I was being stupid," I say. "Let's just forget that it happened, okay? It's dumb to argue right now."

"Damn right it is," he says, but I don't know if that's him accepting my apology or if it's him still being angry.

"So," I say slowly.

He looks over his shoulder and smiles, and I let out a breath. Henry's always had such a resilient personality. It's hard to keep him angry. "To Philly?"

I lean back into the seat. "To Philly."

"But maybe we should stay another night here, just so we can –," Reign starts, voice a little higher pitched, hands a little more jitter as she starts to text someone. I wonder who it is.

She doesn't get to finish her thought, though, because suddenly smoke begins to billow out of the car's hood and Henry's slams his foot onto the break.

*

We don't make it to Philly today. Apparently, Henry's small bump into that concrete poll yesterday cracked his radiator. Which then caused a leak that caused the car to overheat. It has to be left at a local mechanic over night and is costing nearly two hundred dollars to fix. Two hundred dollars of my money, since I don't want Henry using his credit card. It leaves me with only a few hundred dollars left from the stash I'd taken from my house, but it should be enough to get us to Philly, and then back to Jersey.

By the time we get the car towed and get everything settled at the mechanic it's already dinnertime. We take a cab downtown, and end up going to the same bar for dinner that they others had gone to last night for drinks – a place called The Winking Lizard. It's a rather large tavern that seems a little family friendly, at least at this time. Maybe it gets a little crazier late at night.

We order a pizza to go around and ice cream sundaes for desert. Layla eats so much, she barely finishes half of her sundae before falling into a food coma and falling asleep against Daisy's shoulder. Reign excuses herself and heads to the *loo*, and after she leaves, Henry says, "So we'll pick up the jeep tomorrow, and head to Philly from there?"

"Sounds good," I say.

"Do you know where she is in Philly?" Daisy asks.

I spoon the last of Layla's sundae into my mouth. "Yeah, I've been there once or twice."

"What if she moved?" Daisy says before taking a sip of her Pepsi.

“Then I guess I’m fucked,” I say.

“Do you think she’ll, you know, help out?” Daisy points toward the snoozing Layla between us.

“She likes kids, I think. She hasn’t had any yet, but she always liked them. Or liked me at least. I don’t know. I hope she will. I mean, she’s my last chance, right?”

“I guess,” Daisy says. She reaches around Layla and takes my hand in hers. “I mean, if she doesn’t, I can always ask my family if they can . . .”

She doesn’t finish, and I give her fingers a squeeze. I take a few seconds to process what she’s saying, and then take a few more seconds to gather my words. “Daisy, that’s nice and all. I mean that’s really nice. But I’m trying to keep her somewhere my father can’t get her. I’m trying to keep her away from him. As far away as possible. And if that’s only Philadelphia, then okay, but he’ll find her at your place no problem. I just want her to be safe.”

Daisy bites her lip. “I understand. Just know you can always depend on me, all right?”

I hold onto her hand tightly. “Yeah, all right.”

Above Layla’s head, we hold each other’s gaze for a brief moment, until Henry goes, “D’awww how fricken adoreable. Just get married already.”

Then I let go of her hand and look straight ahead. The waiter comes to the table and drops off the check. I put some cash down. And then we wait. And wait. Reign still doesn’t return, and after another few minutes, I offer to check around for her.

“She said she went to the bathroom,” Henry says.

“Yeah, like fifteen minutes ago,” I say. “She’s probably getting a drink or something. I’ll be right back.”

Daisy lets out a disappointed breath. “I’ll watch Layla,” she says, lifting a snoozing Layla up and onto her lap, where she holds her against her chest.

I get up and head toward the bar, where I scope around, but I can’t find Reign anywhere. I ask the nearest guy if I could borrow his stool for a second, to which he profoundly says, “Um. I guess.”

When he moves away, I climb the rungs of the chair and step onto the top, where I search the rest of the pub for Reign. I don’t see her anywhere, and the bartender tells me to get down. Maybe she really is just in the bathroom. I head there and spot a line of women waiting outside. I cut to the front of the line, mumbling various *excuse me*’s.

“It’s locked,” the girl at the front says. “Someone’s probably cleaning or something.”

“Do you know if some really small, skinny girl with brown hair went in there?” I realize my description describes about half the girls in this line.

The girl stares at me. “I don’t know. I was way back there.” She points at the back of the line. “Everyone in front of me eventually gave up. I just really have to pee. I’m about to use the boys’ bathroom if someone doesn’t unlock the door. This is ridiculous.”

I take a breath and then start banging on the door. “Reign? Reign, are you in there?” I press my ear against it, but it’s hard to hear anything.

Faintly. So faintly, I hear, “Get off me!”

That was her voice. Without any preemptive thought, I thrust my body against the door but I only end up hurting my shoulder. I step back and signal for the girl to also move out of the way and with a deep breath I kick at the spot just beside the lock. But I only end up hurting my foot. My leg. It reverberates through my heel and into my calf to my knee and even up my thigh a little.

“Fuck!” I growl, dropping my foot to the ground. I’ve broken into – or out of – locked rooms before. I can do this. I don’t have a credit card in my wallet, so I turn to the girl beside me and ask to use hers.

She tucks her blonde hair behind her ear. “I don’t even know you. I’m not _”

“I’m trying to open the door. Just give me it, please?” I slam my hand against the surface a few more times. There are loud cries for help inside, made minuscule by the door. I need to get in there.

The girl fishes in her purse for her wallet and then flaps that open before sliding out one of the three cards she has. She hands it to me reluctantly, and I immediately set to unlocking the door. I take the credit card and weasel it into the crack between the door and the doorjamb. I tilt it, slide it in more, tilt it more, bend it the opposite way and jiggle the door a little. When I hear the soft click, I pull the card out and drop it. The door pops open and I rush inside.

They're not out in the open, but Reign's voice sounds from one of the stalls. She's screaming, "Please!" She's screaming, "Stop!" She's screaming, "Get off!"

I hurry to the end stall, where she is; and it's locked. But these locks are small, measly, brittle. I can kick through these. I do, and it breaks open, and there in front of me is this guy holding Reign against the wall.

A second passes: I notice that his belt is open, his pants unbuttoned.

Two seconds: Reign's shirt is torn halfway down the middle so that I can see the skin between her breasts to the skin just above her navel. The bottom of her skirt has been lifted up.

Three seconds: Her tights are still on.

Nothing's happened yet.

Three seconds before I say, "Son of a bitch," and then scream, "SON OF A BITCH!" I grab him by the collar of his polo shirt and yank him off her, throwing him to the ground. He's bigger than me – wider and buffer and maybe taller – but a red shade settles over my eyes and it's all I see. I start toward him, but Reign grabs my arm.

"Ames." Her hand feels weak. It's shaking. She can't grasp onto me fully, and I stop more out of concern than by her force. "Ames, wait."

"Are you okay?"

She folds her fingers over mine and holds onto them. Her eyes are damp, but her cheeks are dry. The guy on the ground quickly scampers up and toward the door. He runs into the trashcan on the way out, spilling crumpled paper towels

everywhere. I pull away from Reign and break the grip she has on my hands to run after him. I don't know if it's my sense of manly nobility to defend her or boyish immaturity to seek out a fight but I run after him regardless, leaping over the fallen trashcan on my way out.

“Ames!” Reign screams.

I run after him, past the line of girls. I didn't catch sight of the guy's face when I pulled him off Reign, but his shirt, flamboyantly pink, is hard to lose track of. He weaves through a group of middle-aged drinkers, and past the table the others are sitting at. I'm smaller than him, thinner, more capable of catching up despite the obstacles.

And I do catch up. I grab his shoulder, turn him toward me, and deck him square in the jaw with my casted hand. He falls to the floor and the group of people around us gives a unanimous and simultaneous gasp as they back away. *Fuck!* My hand. My hand spasms. It feels like I re-broke my wrist. But I don't stop. I keep punching when he's on his back, keep aiming for the face.

The face.

I know that face.

Bleach blond hair.

He's the guy from last night, the one outside the bar. Did he stalk her? Did he follow her around today to find out where she'd be, follow her into the bathroom, kick everyone else out, and lock the door behind him?

I keep slamming my fist into his face until two sets of arms wrap around mine and lift me off him. I see Reign to my right, pinning her shirt closed, yelling

for me to stop and then for them to stop. Them. Who are them? I realize that the people holding me are not security or Henry and Daisy, but rather two other equally as big guys who seem to be the pink shirted guy's friends. On the floor, I see a sandwich bag filled with small white pills. Pink Shirt stuffs it into his pocket and raises his eyebrows at Reign. One of his eyes is swelling, his lip split, but still, he smiles. She didn't. The pills aren't hers. But even as I try to convince myself that this didn't all happen because Reign wanted some pills, I know I'm wrong.

Another man steps toward me from the sidelines. He's large too, with a shaved head and veins that pop out from his neck. I struggle against the two holding me, but their grip is iron. The new man cracks his knuckles once and doesn't give me time to brace myself before socking me right across my cheek. My head whips to the side, into one of the guys' shoulders. It feels as hard as the fist. I see black for a moment, but I don't have time to appreciate that blackness, because there's another hit to my stomach, and then another to my face before they feel confident enough that if they drop me to the ground, I won't be able to make a swift escape.

They do, and I don't.

I taste blood, see it dripping over my eyes in a new shade of red. One of the guys sends a jarring kick to my side and I flip onto my back. The pain is unreal but not unfamiliar. It's bright, it's stars piercing my side, trailing to my stomach, making their way to my face. Reign runs toward them, shoves one of

them, pulls on another. They push her back so hard that she falls to the ground. It's hard for me to care; we're in this situation because of *her*.

Pink Shirt is up, and he's helping them, and they're all kicking my sides and my back. He, in particular, steps to the left, reels his foot back, and lets it connect with the side of my face. I cry out then. I'm usually so good at keeping silent. My head slams against the floor and darkness speckles in my vision, clouding over. No. Stay conscious. No, Ames.

One of the others is holding Reign back, against him and away from me. I can see her through the clouds. Another boot is thrust into my stomach, kicking the breath straight from my lungs. I choke and fold in on myself. I may die right here. Wouldn't that be ironic?

More footsteps into our circle. More people. God, not more people, please.

"Holy *fucking* shit! What the hell is happening right now?" Henry. "I called the police!"

No. I can't have the police here. At one mention of the authorities, the brutes run away. I can't get up, can hardly move. I manage to sit with one of my hands pressed against the floor, keeping me upright. Reign and Daisy are on their knees beside me. Henry is holding Daisy so that she is facing the opposite direction, but I hear her crying.

"Holy shit," Daisy breathes. "Holy shit, Ames. Oh my God."

Henry kneels next to them, but keeps Layla tight in his arms. "Fuck. Christ. Are you okay? We need to get you to the hospital."

The crowd that formed around us starts to scatter and one of the bartenders yells that they called the cops. The corners of my vision start to turn black and that black starts to encroach upon the rest of my surroundings. I shake my head in an attempt at clearing my eyes, but that's a bad idea, because it reminds me of the throbbing inside my skull. I lift my hand and reach behind me to feel the back of my head. I nearly fall to the side, but Daisy grabs my shoulder with a swift, "Whoa."

There's blood on my fingertips when I look at them. Scarlet. Bright in a different way than the stars are bright. Bright like Hell. I wipe it on my jeans and lean my hand onto the ground again.

"Ames." Henry snaps his fingers in front of my face and I look at him. At two of him. At one of him. At three of him. I blink. "Can you get up?"

I remember needing to be in a hurry. Why was I in a hurry? Think. Think. The police. The police are coming. "The police," I say through a jaw that doesn't want to move.

Henry shakes his head. "I lied."

"The bartender didn't," I manage.

Daisy's hand is against my face, her eyes studying. She pushes gently on a spot beneath my eye and I flinch. "What if you broke something?" I almost laugh because she says it like I'm the one who bashed my own face against someone's foot, who ran straight into their fists. I started the fight, but I didn't know he had three other giants with him. "Your cheek bone," she says, pressing there. It hurts. "You're jaw." That hurts, too. "Are you missing teeth?"

Teeth. I run my tongue along the inside of my mouth, feeling for any gaps. No, I don't think I'm missing teeth.

Reign stares at me. She knows I know, saw me see the pills on the ground. She bumps the fingertips of her free hand against mine, but I lift my hand and reach for Henry's arm. I miss. It was the wrong Henry. I blink and try to focus on him.

He looks from me to Daisy. "We have to get him to the hospital. C'mon. Help me get him up?"

"No hospital," I finally say.

"Ames!" Layla cries, trying to squirm out of Henry's grasp. He holds onto her tightly.

"Ames, yes," Daisy says.

"No," I say again, shaking my head. My brain feels like it's rattling inside.

"Help me get him up?" Henry asks again. Reign immediately reaches for the arm that Henry isn't grasping, but I hold onto Daisy instead. Layla is handed to Reign and together, Henry and Daisy pull me upward. My feet feel round, like solid spheres connected to my ankles. I nearly fall back, but the two of them keep me upright. My entire torso aches. No, not ache. The pain is sharp. Through and through. I wonder if anything's broken.

If Henry and Daisy didn't swoop in, those guys would've killed me, or at least kept kicking until they had another reason to stop. I shudder. Because of Reign. I would have died because of Reign, because I was defending her. It'd almost be honorable. I'd almost be okay with that rather than rotting away in

prison, but no. To die for her drug habit or whatever it is she has with those pills?
No way.

Slowly, they lead me past the small crowds of people and outside. I feel sick enough to throw up. I throw up. Daisy rubs my back as Henry leaves to find a cab. He took Reign with him to find out what happened, and she had Layla in tow.

They return in just a couple minutes, and Daisy ushers me inside and climbs in after me. Henry is up front and Reign is behind the driver's seat with a screaming Layla on her lap. The cab pulls out onto the street, and the cab driver doesn't say anything. He must have been warned.

Daisy asks, "Should we have called an ambulance? Maybe we should have called an ambulance."

"Layla, shh shh shh, it's okay," Reign tries to sooth her, but she's still screaming.

"I'm not going to the hospital," I groan. I don't think my jaw is broken. I'm talking fine. The pain there isn't sharp, but rather dull and achy like a bruise ready to form. I lift my head a little and glance at Layla. Her face is soaked, her eyes red. "Layla, please. It's okay. Please stop crying."

"Ames," she sobs. "You're face. Ames."

"I know, Layla. Just please stop crying, okay? It's okay."

She hiccups quietly and nods, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands. She still sniveling but the unearthly screams stop.

“There’s a hospital about a mile down the street,” Henry says. “I think we passed it on the way here.”

“I’m not going to the hospital,” I repeat louder. I grip onto the seat with my hand and realize that my knuckles and wrist hurt, too. From punching. I forgot I was punching. That feels like a long time ago. Did I even do damage? Yes. I did. Pink Shirt’s eye was swelling.

“I remember it. It was on the left, I think,” Daisy says.

“I’m not going to the hospital!”

Layla lets out a small, choked cry.

“Ames,” Daisy says softly. “You have to.”

Deep breath. In through my nose. Out through my mouth. I’ve survived worse. “No, I don’t.”

“Ames,” Henry starts.

“I’m not going. They’ll get the police involved. You know I can’t have that happen,” I explain calmly.

“That doesn’t matter,” he says. “None of that matters if you’re *dead*, Ames.”

“I’m not going to die.”

“Your head is bleeding everywhere,” Daisy states. “You hit it really hard. You probably have a concussion, Ames.” They need to stop tacking my name onto every sentence.

“Bleeding everywhere in my cab?” the cab driver finally speaks. No one responds to him.

“You *do* have a concussion,” Henry follows. “You could hardly speak back there, could barely move. You were nauseous –”

“He threw up when you were finding the cab,” Daisy interjects.

“You threw up,” he says, like I didn’t hear Daisy or experience the act first hand. “You were seeing double. I know what to look for during a concussion, Ames. You know that.” I do know that. He’s helped me through enough of them to know what the symptoms are. But he should also remember that I never went to the hospital for them before. “Plus,” he adds. “Your face doesn’t look like a face anymore and you’ve probably broken at least a rib or two.”

“And internal bleeding,” Daisy says.

“And maybe internal bleeding,” Henry says. He’s at a stoplight, and I can see the hospital at the next corner.

I try not to focus on Layla’s soft cries beside me and I shuffle in my seat a little, showing them that I can, indeed, move. My ribs hurt, both when I breathe and when I don’t. I don’t know if any of them are broken. I don’t know how to differentiate that pain from any of the other pain right now. “I’m okay,” I say. “I’m functioning. I’m regaining my awareness. I was out of it, but I’m fine now. I didn’t even pass out.”

“Pull up to the Emergency Room doors and I’ll walk him in while you park,” Daisy tells the cab driver when the light turns green.

“No,” I say again. “I’m *not* going in. I’ll be fine.”

The guy drives slowly. He doesn’t know what to do. “I need to know,” he says.

Henry doesn't say anything. He thinks I need to go. He knows I'll be angry – furious – if we pull into that parking lot. He knows I know what I can handle. He just thinks I won't tell him if I can't handle it. If it's worse than I'm saying it is. If my head is slowly filling with blood, waiting for an opportunity to kill me silently.

Which makes me say, "I won't sleep tonight. I'll stay up. That's what you're scared of right? That I'll kick it in my sleep? That you won't see it coming?"

A car behind us honks, but the driver gets angry. "Someone better tell me what to do."

"This is ridiculous," Daisy says. "Take him to the hospital. If he's angry with us, then fine. At least he'll be alive."

I'm in the car. She doesn't need to speak like I'm not here. "You guys can take turns staying awake with me. We'll get two rooms so someone can stay with Layla while she sleeps. I can pull it with the money. I'll stay in one with whoever's making sure I don't die, and whoever's sleeping will stay in the other. I can deal with everything else that's wrong. Just do not take me to the hospital."

"Fine," Henry says. "Fine. We're going back to the motel." He gives the cab driver the name and location of our hotel and we head off in that direction.

I let out a breath. Suddenly, as if my worry of the hospital was the strongest distraction in the world, my body sinks into a constant ache.

"Reign," Henry murmurs quietly. "Are you alright?"

She's been so quiet that I nearly forgot she was beside me, holding onto Layla.

She doesn't answer.

*

I'm in a new room at the motel, one right beside the one we were in before. Someone – either Henry or Daisy – is going to be watching me. The thought doesn't make me happy exactly, but it's better than the hospital. This could have been done in one room. I'm not stupid. I know they could have alternated staying up with me in our other room, but Layla deserves to sleep with the lights off and without noise and in a peaceful environment. I don't want her to have to stay up with me all night. And also I don't really want to be around Reign. I don't want to see her. I don't want to talk to her. I don't want her watching me not sleep. I helped her. I saved her from that asshole. And for what? For drugs?

When I got out of the car, I was fine. I could walk. It hurt, but it was possible. My feet were no longer sphere-like and I no longer saw doubles and triples. I was only a bit nauseous.

I'm alone, waiting for either Henry or Daisy to come in here after showering and putting Layla to bed. I step into the bathroom and close the door behind me. Lock it. I place a clean pair of boxers and the t-shirt I'm holding onto the closed toilet seat. Bending over to reach the shower knob sends a new pain dancing through my bones and muscles. I let the shower warm up, turn back toward the mirror, and look at myself for the first time.

You're face doesn't look like a face anymore.

Accurate. I can see why Layla was so hysterical.

It's too covered in blood to look like a face anymore. The red is streaked down the side of my head, creating two lines down my mouth and chin from my nostrils, dripping from a gash on my forehead. The cheek that was kicked is swollen. I press my fingers there and bite my tongue to suppress the cry that bubbles up. It might be broken. I don't know. Maybe. My father always used to do his best in avoiding my face. I'm not as experienced in diagnosing injury there.

There was that one time he flipped. I stare at my eyes. Blue like his. They're all that's recognizable right now. Until I wash the blood away. Until the cuts and bruises heal. Until whatever swelling there is goes down. My eyes are all I recognize. And it's sick because I recognize them more as his than as mine.

I stop staring in the mirror when I see moisture gathering at my lower lids. There's really no point anymore. I take a deep breath and bite the inside of my cheek when I raise my arms up and pull my shirt over my head. I bite through that thin layer of skin in my cheek and I taste blood. I think one of my ribs is broken.

I look down at my sides and stomach. Most of the bruises are just starting to form, but there's already a large pool of purple and blue on my right side at the bottom of my ribcage. I breathe out slowly and drop my shirt into the trashcan. There's blood splattered all over it. Unsalvageable.

I kick my shoes off before I unbutton my jeans and pull them down with my boxers, stepping out of both slowly. I manage to lift my feet enough to peel my socks off. I look in the mirror one last time. I can only see from my chest up. I wish I could see the damage everywhere else, but the only other mirror is out in

the room, and I'm not going back out there. I turn and see the top portion of my back, yellow and blue patches starting to bloom.

The water is too hot when I step in, but my muscles are put at ease under the stream, and I take slow and even breaths in an attempt to keep my ribs happy. My stomach rumbles a little and I breathe deeply, suppressing the nausea. I will not throw up again. Henry will drag me by my hair to the hospital if I throw up again.

I don't spend long in the shower. I worry that the heat of the water and the humidity in the air will make me pass out. There's a point when I'm too dizzy to stand up straight without leaning against the wall, and that's when I know I'm finished.

The motel towels are course and cheap, and they make my skin feel raw when I dry myself with them. I rub one through my hair briefly but the pain of it against the back of my head sends a new, stronger wave of nausea through me that overcomes my need for dry hair.

Getting dressed sucks. It hurts almost as much as getting undressed.

My rib is broken. I'm sure. It is the most familiar pain I've ever felt. It's also something I can do nothing about, much like my cheek, if that's broken, too. That one I'm still not sure about. I leave the towels on the floor, too tired to hang any of them up. I want to sleep. I really do. I almost don't care if that means I'm going to die. It'd save me all the trouble when I get back home. I guess that's why Henry was so willing to take part in my deal of someone watching over me,

keeping me awake. He knew that if I were left to my own accord, I'd probably just go to sleep and preach que sera sera.

I open the bathroom door, happy to escape into air that is not mostly water and that is cool and that makes me feel less nauseous and less dizzy. I do get that air. But along with it, I get Reign sitting on the bed closest to the bathroom, waiting for me.

Chapter Fourteen

“You really think she’s the right girl for you?” I asked Henry.

“She’s beautiful.”

“But you don’t know anything about her. None of us do. She’s just this weird mysterious girl from England. She could be an ax-murderer.”

Henry laughed. “Yeah, but she’d be a hot ax-murderer, wouldn’t she?”

I rolled my eyes.

“But seriously, yes. I really think she’s right for me. And I really like her. I’m sorry about swooping in and winning her over. I know you wanted her.”

“No, I didn’t,” I snapped.

He smirked. “Dude, whatever. I’m still sorry.”

“Get out,” I say.

Her eyes are saucers, pleading with me. She’s changed out of her ripped shirt and into one of Henry’s t-shirts and she looks lost in it.

“Get out,” I say again. I don’t want to have to raise my voice.

“Ames, I’m sorry.” Tears well up in her eyes, and she quickly wipes them away.

One of my hands finds its way to my side, where it rests gently. “I said get out.”

She stands, but instead of turning toward the door, she closes the distance between us. I step back when she reaches for me and I stumble a little. My eyes close against the dizziness. I am not spinning. The room is not spinning. It's just in my head.

"I know why you're angry. The guy who was trying to force me to—" Her words break off. "I'm sorry he and his friends did this to you."

I open my eyes and focus on her and try to ignore the spinning and the swirling around us. "You think that's why I'm angry?" I manage to laugh and then regret it because pain bounces through my sides and back.

"Ames," she sighs, reaching for me again. I take her wrists and throw them down.

"You think I'm angry with *you* because I got my ass kicked by the guy who was trying to *rape* you? No, Reign. Think harder." I walk around her and sit on the edge of the bed.

She turns toward me. She knows. I know she knows. She just doesn't want to say it.

"What lie did you tell Henry for him to allow you over here," I ask instead.

She looks at the carpet when she murmurs, "That I'd take first shift in watching you. He couldn't say no, not after I told him what happened in the bathroom and why you were fighting."

My laughter is dark and dry, and the rumbling of pain is worth the look on her face. "He must really trust you."

“He does.”

“Do you think that’d change if he found out you were popping pills behind his back? And that that was how ended up in that bathroom with that guy? The reason I was fighting?”

Her eyes widen and she shakes her head. “Ames, please.”

“Please, what?” I wait, but she says nothing. “Please don’t tell him? Please accept your apology? Please help you get more drugs since I fucked up this opportunity for you? Please what, Reign?”

She’s silent. She moves between my knees and reaches for my face like that night. Like our first time. But I flinch away from her. Her hands hover in place for a moment and then fall.

“Was that guy in the bathroom even really hurting you?” I ask lowly. Even as I’m saying it, I know I’m wrong. But I can’t stop myself. “Or was the screaming just for show? Was that the deal you came up with? Sex for drugs? Maybe Daisy was right when she called you a whore.”

Her breath catches. She would slap me if my face weren’t a collage of cuts, bruises, and swelling. Instead, tears slip down her cheeks. She doesn’t bother wiping them away this time, and they fall from her chin and onto the floor. Hurting her feels good. It shouldn’t. I’m horrible for thinking it. But I can’t help but revel a little in the pain she feels. She’s caused so much of my pain tonight; she deserves a little of her own.

“How can you say something like that?” she whispers, taking a step back. Out of the gap between my knees.

I think back to her face in that bathroom stall. How scared she seemed. The trembling of her fingers on top of mine. Her shirt torn open. And now when I look at her, how tired she appears; and how she's crying because of what I accused her of; and how, when I pay close enough attention, she's still shaking.

It suddenly doesn't feel so great throwing punches anymore.

"Reign." I look up toward her face, but the ceiling light hurts my eyes and I have to squint. "How long have you been using?"

When her eyes clamp shut, more tears escape.

"Reign," I sigh.

"They're not –," she breathes. "It's not like I'm doing heroin."

"How long have you been using?" I ask again.

She wipes her cheeks quickly. "It started before I met you. They're something I need."

"What are they?"

She doesn't answer. Instead, she turns around toward the dresser, presses her hands against its surface, and watches herself in the mirror. Watches each breath she takes. Watches the black blotches under her eyes from smudged makeup and how pale her skin seems right now – like she could blend into the wallpaper – and at the slight chattering of her teeth.

"What are they?" I say just as quietly as before. I don't have the strength to yell anymore. I just want to rest.

She says nothing, doesn't move.

“You have to earn silence, Reign,” I say. My voice cracks and I clear my throat. “What pills are you taking?”

When she turns around, her face is stone. “Oxy,” she says. “I need them or I feel . . .”

“Feel what?”

She looks down.

“Feel what? Finish your sentence.” When she doesn’t I let out a breathy laugh. “Why would I ever think you’d tell me? You never tell me anything. Who was I kidding? I mean, you want all this attention, yearn for it. But when you get it, you don’t even know what to do with it.”

When she lifts her eyes, there’s a blaze behind them. Anger. A feeling. At least it’s something. “You don’t tell me anything either,” she fires. “Not about yourself.”

I stand, fighting against my body’s screams to keep still. Bones feel like they are rubbing against one another. Muscles feel like they are tearing. “That’s bullshit,” I say. “I talk to you so much, and you never say anything back. Nothing real.”

She throws her hands up like maybe she can reach the heavens and retrieve some of those straws she’s grasping for. “It is not bullshit! You never tell me anything of substance. Nothing about your father, about what he did to you, about why you’re actually wanted by the police.”

“You know why!”

“I know what’s been said about you! I know nothing about the truth. I hope. I hope and that is all. I hope that you did it because you snapped after all those years of him treating you like shit, or because you caught him murdering dogs in the backyard, or because you realized his idea of fun was shooting small children in the kneecaps or something. I hope you had a good reason so that I haven’t been traveling around for the past two weeks with a sociopath. You tell me nothing, Ames. How am I supposed to know, then?”

This is a joke. She’s questioning my motives *now*? After befriending me, sharing rooms with me, sleeping with me. *Now* is when she decides to question me? She doesn’t flinch when I growl a low, “Get. Out.” She listens this time. She steps to the side, away from me, and marches to the door. I catch her as her hand reaches the doorknob. “Reign.”

She stops moving, but she doesn’t look at me.

“I don’t know what’s so broken inside of you that you’re this hollow, empty person. This shell of something that could’ve been beautiful. But I hope you find yourself. I really do, because you can’t live like this forever.”

Over her shoulder, she says, “Fuck you, Ames.”

And then she’s out the door, letting it slam behind her.

The room is filled with this overwhelming silence. Like with Reign gone, any semblance of energy has vanished, and I feel exhausted again and my body feels like it can’t hold me up any longer, so I go back to the bed and sit on the edge. I’m going to sleep. I don’t care what Henry or Daisy want. They can come in here and try to keep me awake, but right now I’m alone, and I’m tired.

Before I can lift my legs onto the mattress and pull the blanket over myself, the door opens again, and Reign storms in, eyes set on me defiantly. She approaches me in a fury and speaks before I can even gather up an idea of what to say. Her arms wrap around her waist, gripping at her sides. “They make me feel whole,” she says harshly. It takes a moment to realize that she’s referring to the pills. “They make me feel normal. They make me feel like I’m okay and that as long as I’m taking them I’ll always be okay. They make me feel happier and less anxious. They make any pain I have blow away in the wind. They get me through the day, every day, even when everything else is wrong. I need them because without them I would crumble to pieces. I would feel it all, feel what it’s like to truly live with the fact that I –” She stops, afraid of what she’s already said, what she’s about to say. But she doesn’t give herself much time before continuing. “With the fact that I’m the reason my mum and my brother are dead.”

She says brother like *bruvva*.

Why is that what I think of when she finally lets loose, comes clean?

I can’t say anything. Nothing. She is frozen. A sculpture. Her shoulders aren’t rising with breath. Her eyes aren’t blinking. There is nothing about her that screams that she is alive. In the wake of my silence, when I don’t acknowledge her confession, when I don’t even move my mouth to show that I’m at least trying, all of her moves at once. She is the millions of pieces of a crumbling statue. I lose track of her. Barely make it to her in time.

I’m standing in the middle of the room, arms around her shoulders, hugging her against me. She’s supporting more of my weight than I hers, but my

body feels too weak to hold itself up right now. So Reign helps. And I hold her close even though it hurts. She doesn't cry. She doesn't say anything, but her fingers cling to my shirt, folding into the fabric. And I feel the warmth of her breath against my chest, just below the warmth of where she rests her forehead.

*

It's like this: we're lying in bed, side by side, on our backs. Our arms are touching, but nothing else. The ceiling is plain with yellow water stains in the corners. It makes me wish we were on the roof, and the stars were above instead. Reign is talking, and I am listening. She's pouring her heart out in small bursts.

"Last winter – it gets cold in England, you know? – well, last winter my mum's car had broken down. It was this ruddy old piece of junk from the 80s that could have honestly been thrown away. But anyway, it broke down for, like, the third time; but she didn't have enough money to buy a new car. She'd just chipped in with my stepdad and me to get me my own shitty car.

"And I agreed to take her to work and my brother, Elliot, to daycare before I went to school every day. But it was so cold there, you know, and that winter was worse than most. I was picking her up from work one day, and it was kind of late because she'd been pulling extra hours, so I'd already had Elliot with me. It's funny, because I went home with him first. I was going to leave him there to nap, but my stepdad wasn't home yet, so I had to take him with me. I picked my mum up, and there's this bridge I always had to drive over that was between our house and her office. I'd driven over it at least a hundred times. Probably more. It was

so common, and the roads never freeze there. Never. But it was our coldest winter in so long, I guess even the roads didn't know what to do.

“Elliot was singing in his car seat from the back. *Row Row Row Your Boat*. I remember it. And I was talking to my mum, asking her about her day, casually hinting at a possible spring holiday trip with my friends. And then it just happened. There was a patch of ice, I guess. That's what they told me. There was a patch of ice that I drove over, and the car slipped, and I couldn't control it. I couldn't do anything. It went straight through the barrier on the side of the bridge.

“And I remember her scream, you know? My mum never screamed.”

That's where she stops. I tilt my head to glance at her and I see that she has her hands covering her face. “Reign,” I say. My voice sounds raw.

She takes a sharp breath. “You have to understand,” she says quietly, letting her hands fall back to her sides. The one that lands between us finds my hand, and our fingers twine together. “I loved them very much. More than anything.”

“It wasn't your fault.”

“I was driving. She screamed my name when our car was falling off the bridge. *My name*.” Her voice catches. I watch her face contort, and a sob becomes a strangled gasp.

“Reign.”

“They pulled me out of the water first,” she says amidst a cry. “Why would they pull me out first when there was a baby in the back? He'd just turned four. He was a baby. Why wouldn't they get him first?”

“Reign.” I pull on her hand.

“I heard him crying for me,” she says. “And I couldn’t get out of my seatbelt, and my mum was already passed out. She hit her head against the side window, and there was so much blood. I think maybe that killed her. But Elliot – he was alive. He was breathing when the car went under. I could see him over my shoulder. I could see him when he stopped seeing me.”

I want to turn on my side to face her. I want the broken rib to be on the other side of my body, but it’s not. I pull on her hand again and say, “Reign, come here.”

She’s crying now. I think her body is tired of keeping it all in. I think she needs this moment. And her cries are harsh like falling on gravel. They rip from her chest.

“I understand that I lost her,” she manages. “I accept that. I accept that she could have died before the water ever started flooding the car. But they could have saved him, Ames. And instead they saved me. And I can’t even . . .” She’s gasping. There’s not enough air in the room for her. Not enough air in the world for her. “I can’t even be decent enough for my stepfather to want me living with him.”

I reach across my body with my casted hand and wrap those fingers around her wrist, too. I pull hard. “Come here,” I say again.

She finally relents and turns onto her side, pressing her face into my shoulder. I keep my fingers tangled with hers and use my other hand to stroke her hair.

“Listen to me,” I say softly. “Reign, listen to me. You didn’t kill them. It was an accident.” She shakes her head. “Yes. It was an accident. You can’t blame yourself. It’ll tear you up inside. It *is* tearing you up inside.”

It doesn’t take her long to stop crying. Maybe another minute or two before she quickly becomes embarrassed. She parts from my shoulder, detaches her hand from mine, and sits up. “Shit,” she says wiping her eyes with the heels of her hands.

“It’s fine,” I say, gritting my teeth as I sit up, too.

She looks at me through red eyes and then looks away. “I’m toxic,” she murmurs. “That’s what my dad – my stepdad, I mean – said. I’m bloody toxic. I destroy everything.”

“He shouldn’t have said something like that.”

She smiles a little. It’s a sad pull at the corners of her lips that hardly reaches her cheeks, let alone her eyes. “Look at you, Ames. You’re broken. And it’s my fault. My dad was right. I am toxic. I killed my mother. Elliot. I ruined my dad’s life. I’m slowly ruining yours.”

I turn toward her. “I don’t regret pulling that asshole off you in the bathroom. I don’t regret the punches I threw.”

“But you do,” she counters. “As soon as you saw the pills lying on the floor, you regretted it all.”

Instead of arguing with her, I just ask, “How did you get into that situation, in the bathroom?”

She shrugs. “I was running low on pills a few days ago. Volunteering at the hospital was good for me because I could always find a way to get my hands on at least a few at a time to hold me over. But now I didn’t have anyone. So I found someone.”

“How?”

“It’s not hard. You just ask around. People know people. So I met this guy outside of that bar last night, and he told his friend where I was staying. But you and Daisy interrupted before he could give me anything, so we met up again tonight.” She bites her lip. “I suggested the bathroom for privacy because I was nervous buying these pills off this random guy in a city I’d never been to. The rest, I guess, doesn’t have to really be explained. He got handsy. Then more than handsy. The end.”

I let out a breath and reach for her hand again. She lets me take it.

“How did this start?” I ask softly. “The pain meds, I mean.”

She lifts her eyes and squeezes my hand. “The car accident hurt my back pretty badly,” she explains. “One of the doctors prescribed them for the first month after.”

“Your stepdad didn’t see that there was a problem?”

“He saw,” she says, and her voice breaks, so she keeps it to a whisper after. “He saw everything. He saw me unravel. And he couldn’t handle it, so he sent me to live with James.”

“You’d just lost your mom and your brother, though,” I say. “He should have —”

“He lost them, too. I wasn’t even his. Not really. He’d had me for so long, but I don’t know if he ever actually considered me his daughter. Not like he considered Elliot his son, and I took that away from him.”

“He’s the one you were on the phone with before, when you were so upset,” I state.

She looks at our locked hands. “He’s been my dad since I was seven,” she breathes. “If I could just show him that I’m better, he’ll take me back. He has no other family.”

But you’re not better, I want to say. Instead, I give her something of mine, to distract her from her own misery maybe, or e to scrape my misery off my chest. “My father was never a father to me.” Her eyes meet mine. She knows that already. I take a deep breath, cringing at the pain it brings to my ribs. “He was a sick, sick human being.”

She reaches for me and uses the back of her hand to caress the side of my face. Her eyes look pained.

“I don’t remember the first five years of my life with him,” I explain. “I remember small things with my mom, how she smelled, how the hem of her shorts felt in my fingers when I reached for her, how her voice sounded when she sang to me. After she left, things changed. He made sure to make new memories for me. He introduced me to games. He wasn’t the type to burn cigarettes on my forearms. He was the type to say that if I threw up after every meal for a week, he wouldn’t beat me the following week. Just crazy things like that. Things that didn’t make sense, that were just amusing for him. He did that enough for my

dentist to worry that I was bulimic at the age of eight, so he made me stop seeing the dentist. I think I've been cavity-free, though."

She doesn't laugh at that even though I try to smile.

"I went to school. I had friends. I could even do things at night with Henry and Daisy. It wasn't lock down like that. He didn't want to *seem* like a bad father. He was Chief of Police. He had to look perfect. It was different before Layla was born. I just had to watch out for myself.

"But when she came along, I had to make sure she was safe. She was perfect for him to use against me. Layla is the best thing in my life, but after she was born, it just got worse. There were all these new rules. Times I had to be home for him to take his anger out on me. He called them Relief Sessions. But he never touched Layla. He didn't exactly father her to the best of his abilities, but he never touched her.

"But then there was this day, almost two months ago. I was making her dinner downstairs. I didn't even know he was home. I went to go get her, and he was in her room. She was crying. He was –" I stop myself. I realize that I've never said it out loud. Reign runs her fingers over the bruises on my knuckles. "She's just a child. She's *his* child. And he had her undressed, and his hands were . . ." I stop again. I *can't* say it. I can't do that to Layla. It's not mine to say. I silently plead with Reign, hoping she understands. That she doesn't have to hear the words to know what my father was doing with Layla that night.

Reign leans forward and rests her forehead on top of my hand. Her hair falls against my lap. I don't know if she's crying, but I feel her shudder. "I'm sorry," she whispers. My free hand rests on the back of her neck.

I clear my throat and then say, "I hit him over the head with the lamp beside her bed. I've never hit him before. He was bigger than me. No, maybe he wasn't even that much bigger than me, maybe I was just used to him being bigger than me my whole life. But when he turned around, I was really afraid he was going to kill me. Behind all the bedroom doors in our house, we kept baseball bats in case we had an intruder or something. He backed me up against the wall and he was threatening me. He was going to kill me. I don't know if he would've done it then, but one day, he'd go too far, and he'd kill me. I guess it wasn't until then that I realized that, you know? Layla was screaming. He'd promised all these years that he would never hurt her and he did. He took the bat that was beside her door, and he swung it at me, but for the first time in my entire life, I dodged it. I think he was just surprised. I think that's what made him loosen his grip enough for me to yank it out of his hands. I swung the bat, hit him in the head. And then I took Layla and dropped her off at Henry's and went to the bridge.

"I thought I killed him. It wasn't even entirely *that* that made me want to jump. It was just everything and nothing and I don't know how to explain it. There was just this feeling. Like I was already drowning even though I wasn't in the water. I'd already dropped Layla off somewhere she'd be safe. I wanted it to stop. I didn't mind if it stopped."

Reign turns so that her head is against my thigh and she's lying on her side. She continues to clutch onto my hand, like it's all that's keeping us tethered together. "But then James saved you."

I nod. "Yeah, then that happened."

"People are disgusting," she says after a few moments.

"Some." I run my fingers through her hair, combing through knots and tangles. "Reign."

She sits up quickly, and her hair falls against her shoulders. She presses her lips against mine briefly, giving me a short kiss before saying, "How could you ever think you'd be like him?"

I look at her now and I *see* her. Her eyelids droop a little, and I know she must be tired. "Will you stop taking the pills?" I ask.

"Ames, I can't."

"You can."

"No, I can't. You don't understand what it feels like without them. Everything hurts."

"Try?" I say. "You don't have any left now. Just don't get anymore."

"Ames."

"For me? Stop taking them for me, Reign. Please." I pull her face close to mine and lean my forehead against hers. The pressure makes the gash I have there sting, but I try my best to ignore it. I feel her breath against my mouth, kiss her gently and then ask again. "For me?"

She shakes at the thought. Continues to shake.

“I promise you’ll be okay. I’ll be there with you. I’ll make sure. Just please, Reign? Stop taking the pills.”

She takes a deep breath, and it feels like she’s pulling it straight from my lungs. “I’ll try,” she says and then kisses me again. Her hands cup my face, careful not to put too much pressure on my jaw or on my cheeks. My fingers slip to her neck and then to her shoulders.

We break apart when the sound of a key card clicks just outside, and the door opens. Henry is standing there, hair messy, eyes tired. “Babe, you can go to sleep. I’ll take shift now.”

She looks at me for a few seconds before she turns toward him and nods. She slips off the bed and when she reaches the door, Henry takes her waist in his hands and gives her a peck on the cheek. “Don’t wake Daisy,” he says. “She’ll just bitch at you. Layla’s sound asleep.”

Reign nods again. She says, “Feel better, Ames.” And then she’s gone, like we hadn’t just spent the past two hours screaming and crying and spilling all our secrets.

Henry sits in the spot she left vacant. “How are you doing?”

I shrug.

“Well,” he sighs, “I’m going to fall asleep if we don’t do something interactive. My phone has monopoly on it.”

Monopoly. Perfect.

Chapter Fifteen

“Layla, do you want to stay with Daddy?” I asked her. It was at least a year ago. She must have only been three, but she’d witnessed him carving some degrading word into my back with a steak knife, and she’d started crying, and I felt like that was the time to ask if she wanted to stay with him. Because I would have left. I think I would have left. Taken her. Ran away.

But she said, “Daddy gives me Chunky Monkey. I love ice cream. And Daddy.”

So I didn’t leave.

I have been awake for more than twenty-four hours. If I didn’t feel like shit before, I definitely do now. But I’m alive. I went with Henry earlier to retrieve his jeep from the mechanic. Just the two of us taking turns yawning in the car cab ride there and yawning in the jeep on the way back.

Everyone meets outside our rooms at around nine o’clock. No one looks refreshed except Layla, who’s washed and dressed and smiling thanks to Layla. Henry asks if I’m alright, and I say I am, and then we’re heading outside. I don’t say anything to Reign, but it’s hard not to notice her. Her hair hasn’t been brushed and she looks especially pale. She keeps fidgeting as we walk. Her hands picking at a loose thread hanging from the edge of her shirt, and then her fingers running

through her hair, and then her nails scratching at her cuticles nervously. Henry asks if she's okay, and she gives him a small nod and an even smaller smile.

The moment we sit in the jeep, I squeeze Daisy's knee, my thumb and forefinger. Her whole body spasms in the seat and she glares at me. "I hate when you do that."

I give her a crooked grin.

As Henry starts the jeep, I rest my head back against my seat and I place my hand securely on my side. Last night, Daisy made a stop at the convenience store next to the motel and picked up some Ace Bandages, so there's at least something keeping my ribcage in place, but still, every jostle of the car sends a new spark of light through me. I close my eyes and fall asleep before the car even gets on the road.

*

Layla wakes me up by taking my face between her hands and shaking it, and when I open my eyes, I see that the car is parked in some parking lot. I start to stretch, and then I feel my body and remember that stretching may kill me right now, so instead I sit up slowly.

Daisy is trying to comb my hair back into some kind of presentable style with her fingers. I think she fell asleep while she was still playing with it so it kind of shaped to the way it was woven between her fingers. I swat her hand away.

"Where are we?" I ask when Henry cranks his door open. Hot air enters the car, and I'm immediately less comfortable.

“McDonalds,” Henry says.

“I can see that, smartass,” I say. “What state?”

“Pennsylvania,” he says. “You guys were out for like four hours. Now come on. I’m hungry.” When he gets out of the car he extends his arms as high as they can go, and his back cracks.

Daisy follows his lead, taking Layla with her. When I step out after her, I notice Reign still in the car, pinching the bridge of her nose, her eyes closed tightly. “You coming?” I ask.

She nods and opens her door. When she’s outside, she tilts a little before leaning against the car. Henry seems oblivious. He’s too caught up in his conversation with Daisy, where he’s updating her on the various obscure road kill we missed while we were asleep. “What kind of vulture walks into the road?” he asks, cackling.

Inside McDonalds, the cold air hits me and I breathe it in deeply, along with that familiar Mc’Donalds smell. We wait in line to order and then have a seat at one of the corner booths. My leg rests against Reign’s, and it helps me think past the pain in my ribs and face and hand.

“You lost?” Henry snaps his fingers in front of me.

I blink. “Huh? No, sorry.”

I open a packet of barbeque sauce and a packet of sweet and sour sauce for Layla’s chicken nuggets. She eats a few of them before she brings up the topic of ice cream. I tell her to eat two more nuggets first. She hardly argues this time. Henry starts talking about Philly. We’re only two hours out, and we should be

there before dark. He also complains about the ridiculous amount of money he spent on tolls while I was asleep – something to the tune of \$21. And we're not even there yet, so he complains about the tolls that are still to come. I tell him I'll pay for those. When I finally allow Layla to get some ice cream, Daisy takes her up to the counter and orders it for her while I sit with Henry and Reign.

Reign hasn't contribute to the conversation much. Every so often, she bumps her knee against mine. I want to reach under the table and hold onto it, give it a reassuring squeeze or something, but I won't risk that with Henry sitting directly across from me. I've never experienced withdrawal. I've never been hooked on any type of drug before. I don't know exactly what she's going through, but I can imagine. And this is just the first bit. The first few hours after her body realized it's not getting the pills. She's barely touched any of her food.

She stands and murmurs, "Bathroom." She leaves the chair. It feels wrong not to have her knee against mine.

Henry looks at me, worried. "She's been weird all day."

I scoot my chair backward. "Yeah, I'll be right back. Bathroom, too."

The excuse is weak. I almost expect this to be the moment where Henry connects the dots. But instead, he just continues eating.

I stand slowly, holding my side, and stride away. No one's watching when I enter the girls' bathroom instead of the guys'. There are two things that quickly catch my attention.

One: A blonde putting on makeup in the mirror scowling in my general direction and saying something I don't care about because of –

Two: The rather loud retching coming from the middle stall that also seems to disturb the blonde girl.

I knock on that door and say, “Reign?”

She doesn’t answer.

“Reign,” I say again. “You okay? Open the door.”

After a few seconds, the lock clicks open and I push the door in carefully. I step inside and latch the door closed behind me. Reign’s on her knees, her face hovering over the toilet, hair wrapped around one of her hands.

“I hate you for this,” she says before the retching continues.

I kneel by her side and take her hair in one of my hands carefully, pulling it out of her grasp. I hold it behind her back and use my other hand to rub her shoulder. Her skin is damp.

“You’ll be okay,” I say. “It’ll pass.”

“I feel like I’m dying,” she says into the toilet.

“You’re not dying.”

“Everything hurts. My bones. My muscles. My back. It’d gotten better before, but now it hurts. And I can’t stop shaking. I – oh God.” More throwing up.

A few minutes pass, and I worry that Henry’s going to wonder where we both are. Eventually, her vomiting turns into dry heaving, and small convulsions rack her back.

“Just breathe,” I say. “Just try to breathe.”

She glares at me over her shoulder. “Sorry, I’ve been holding my breath this entire time. That was the real root of the problem.”

I roll my eyes when she turns back around. “We’re going to have to go back out there.”

She holds her face over the toilet and heaves again, but nothing comes up.

“Come out there with me,” I say. “I’ll explain that you’re not feeling well and that I heard you throwing up in the bathroom. Henry won’t be mad that I came in to help. We can leave after. Get back on the road to Philadelphia.”

She doesn’t object, but every time I try to pull her up, she fights me off and says, “No, I’m not ready, wait.”

And I say something along the lines of, “Reign, you can’t stay in here forever.”

And she replies with something snarky like, “Henry would love my sick all over his car. He’s been meaning to get a new interior anyway.”

Eventually, I hoist her to her feet not entirely against her will and lead her out of the stall. She rinses her mouth out at the sink and looks at herself in the mirror. “We’ll tell him you might be coming down with a bug or something,” I say.

She follows me out of the bathroom. I tell Henry what I’m supposed to tell him, and he believes me. He fusses over Reign, pulling her onto his lap and kissing her cheek. She only asks to leave.

“But I’m not done with my ice cream yet,” Layla says.

“We’ll take it with us,” I say.

On the road, we stop twice for Reign to throw up nothing. Henry holds her hair for her. I sit beside Daisy, whose accusatory staring is hard to ignore. By the time we get to Philadelphia, it's dark outside. We don't bother looking for a Super 8 or Knight's Inn. Instead we stay in a nicer place that charge for parking and has actual concierges at the front desk. Reign's asleep in the front seat with Henry's jacket over her. When he returns to the car after paying for a room, Henry parks the jeep in a garage and jostles her awake. He rubs her arm and offers water and whispers into her ear. She pushes him away and gets out of the car. He knocks his head back into his headrest and takes a breath.

"She doesn't feel well," I tell him from the back. "Everyone's moody when they're sick."

He steps outside, too.

*

Inside the hotel room, Reign immediately heads to the bathroom, leaving her backpack outside the door. She turns the shower on, and Henry sits on one of the bed and runs his fingers through his hair. And then he stands back up. "I'm going to go out and get a pizza for us or something. You guys stay with Reign?"

"Sure," I say.

"Pizza?" Layla says.

"Yup," Henry says, tousling her hair. "Pepperoni okay?"

"Yeah!" She hops onto the bed and then holds her arms out to me. Lifting her seems like it'll cause a bit too much pain, so Daisy does it for me.

Daisy also steps in front of me after Henry leaves, Layla balanced on her waist. I try to maneuver around her, but she blocks my path. “What’s wrong with Reign?”

“Looks like a stomach bug or something,” I say.

“Gross!” Layla says. “Bugs don’t live in tummies!”

Daisy doesn’t move. “What’s really wrong with her?”

“The stomach flu.”

“Is she pregnant?”

I nearly choke on my own spit. “What? No. No, she’s not pregnant.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Then what is it?”

“The. Stomach. Flu.”

“Fine, don’t tell me.” She leaves me for the bed and sits on the edge, setting Layla down beside her.

The shower is still on.

*

Henry returns with five Philly Cheese Steak Sandwiches instead of pizza. The shower is still on even after the hour Henry’s been gone. He starts knocking on the door, telling Reign that he’s brought home food. I almost don’t expect her to acknowledge him, but then the shower turns off and I can hear her feet moving around inside.

I feel like she’ll emerge a different person like the shower is her cocoon.

But that doesn't happen. Instead, she cracks the door open and steps into the motel room in only her towel. She's small. She's always been small, but she's always had this personality that made her seem big. Now she shivers, and Henry nearly trips over the bag of Cheese Steak Sandwiches rushing toward her. He grabs her backpack and hands it to her.

"Here, find some clothes. How are you feeling?"

"Okay," she says. He brushes her wet hair behind her ears and kisses her forehead.

"Go change," he says. "I bought dinner."

She disappears for about thirty seconds before reemerging just as small but now fully clothed. I look at her. I *keep* looking at her, even while we eat, even while she doesn't really eat but instead nibbles at the corners of the bread, even while Henry raves about how amazing the sandwiches are, even while Layla complains that their not pizza while eating her own Philly Cheese Stake, and even while we finish eating and don't know what to do with our time. But Reign doesn't look at me. Not once.

"I'm just going to lie down for a bit," she says with nearly an entire sandwich left in front of her.

Henry and I both sigh.

*

When everyone's asleep, I nudge Layla awake and ask her to come outside with me for a second, because tonight is the last night I will have with her. Hopefully. I hate thinking that, but hopefully after tonight, she'll be safe with

Aunt Jeanie in a steady household being made peanut butter and banana sandwiches and watching cartoons without having to worry when Daddy gets home. She wines and wipes her eyes, but I manage to convince her to follow me.

We sit in the hall, our backs against the wall beside our room's door. She rests her head in my lap and closes her eyes, but I ask her to sit up and jostle her shoulder a little. She does what I ask but she looks pissed.

“Ames, I'm sleepy,” she says.

“I know. I just wanted to talk to you for a second, okay?”

“Okay,” she says.

“You know you're my best friend, Layla?”

She smiles and gets up on her knees, wrapping her arms around my neck and giving me a hug. “You're my best friend too, beside Liza Cat and Frederick Dog.”

I laugh and strangely, there's a sharp sting in my eyes.

“Will you take me for ice cream tomorrow?” Layla asks.

“Actually, there's something I need to tell you, okay?”

She sits back down and plays with the edge of her shirt. “Okay.”

“Can I ask you a very serious question that might sound silly?”

“Okay.”

“I know you love Daddy, but –”

“Daddy always gives me ice cream and pizza and he buys me dresses when I ask for them,” she says.

I take a deep breath. “Yeah, I know, Layla. But there’s more to love than ice cream and pretty dresses, okay? Do you understand that?”

“Are you mad at me?” Her lower lip begins to quiver.

“No,” I say quickly, resting my arm over her shoulder gently. “No, I’m not mad at you. I just want you to understand that Daddy may have bought you nice things but he wasn’t a nice man.”

“But he played with me,” she says. “And we watched Lion King together.”

“I know that,” I say. “But do you remember anything else about him? Do you remember what happened the night before we left?”

Layla stretches the bottom of her shirt over her knees and pulls them under her chin. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know if you remember?”

“Can I go to sleep now?”

“No, Layla. I have to talk to you about this, okay? Do you remember that night?”

She rests her head on the tops of her knees and shrugs. “I want to go to sleep.”

“Layla,” I say quietly. “Layla, it’s okay. You can talk to me. I’m your big brother and I will always listen to you and I will *never* be mad at what you have to say. I just want to know if you understand what happened that night.”

“You got mad at me when I broke the Little Mermaid plate at home,” she says.

“I know, but I was being dopey,” I say, poking at her ribs a little. She squirms. “I promise I won’t be mad this time. Alright?”

“You hit Daddy that night,” she says after a moment’s pause. “He fell and went to sleep. Then I went to Henry’s house. I like Henry. He’s nice to me.”

“Do you remember what happened before that?”

She nods, looking up from her lap and resting her chin atop her knees.

“Daddy was playing with me, but I didn’t like what we were playing.”

I concentrate and take a deep breath because it becomes a little hard to breathe. Maybe talking to her about this was a mistake. But I want her to talk to me about this, before it becomes too late. Before I don’t see her again. I want her to get it out, to stop it from burying deep, to let her tell her story.

“What were you playing?” I ask.

“I don’t know. He says its Quiet Time. But it hurts. Daddy doesn’t like to hurt me,” she says, shrugging. “But he has to.”

“Why does he have to, Layla?” I asks, throat tight.

“Because it makes him happy, and then he gives me a present later, anyway.”

I clear my throat. “How many times?” My voice doesn’t project, and I have to ask it again because I had no idea that it had happened before that one night. I should have known.

“I can’t count very high,” she says, casually. “Lots, I guess. When you got put in your room for a long time, he would play Quiet Time with me. But I was cold, and he doesn’t tickle me like you. His tickles hurt too much.”

I bang my head back against the wall, but the pain swims through my skull, and I regret immediately. “Layla, no.”

“Why are you sad?” she asks. She crawls in front of me and grabs onto my face.

“Did he ever hit you?” I ask.

“No,” she says, confused. “I’m little.”

I take her into a hug, holding her as tightly as I can without putting too much pressure on my side. “Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask, letting her go.

Her eyes widen and she smacks her hands over her mouth. “Daddy said not to tell you. But I just said stuff.” She starts to cry immediately and without warning.

I rest my hands on her shoulders. “Layla, it’s okay. Why did Daddy say not to tell me?”

She blubbers something unintelligible.

“Hey, stop crying. It’s okay. Daddy’s not going to punish you. You can tell me anything, remember?”

“Uh huh,” she says, sniffing and wiping her nose. “He said you’d be mad, and that you’d leave like my mommy left. But I don’t want you to leave.”

That son of a bitch. He threatened her. He threatened that if she didn’t keep quiet about him molesting her, I’d leave, and she’d have no one but him. And I want to tell her I wouldn’t leave. But that’s what I’ll be doing tomorrow if everything works out perfectly. I’ll be leaving her with Jeanie. “That was a lie.”

“Okay,” she says.

“It was a lie,” I say again. “Layla, I need to tell you something.”

She adjusts herself comfortably in my lap and looks up. “Okay.”

“Tomorrow, we’re going to visit my Aunt Jeanie, and . . .” I want to finish. I want to tell her that I’m going to leave her there if I can. I want to tell her that I’ll have to leave her after all, but not because I’m angry, but instead because I want to save her. “And we’re going to have to wake up early, so maybe we should go to sleep now.”

“Okay,” Layla says. She stands with me, wraps her hand around the side of my cast and follows me inside. She whispers, “Do you love me like Daddy loves me?”

I sit down on the edge of the bed and she hops up next to me. “I love you more than Daddy does,” I say.

She smiles and plants a kiss on my cheek. “I love you too, Ames.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Will you read to me?” Layla asked. “Before bed?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Will you wait ’till I fall asleep before you leave?”

“Duh,” I said, climbing onto the bed beside her. I take the book from her –
Goldilocks.

“Will you make me breakfast tomorrow morning?”

“Duh,” I said again.

“Will you read to me tomorrow night?” she asked.

“Layla, I’ll read to you every night.”

“Forever?”

“Forever.”

The next morning, I wake up earlier than everyone else and I head up to the roof, this time without Reign. I think maybe I’ll see what she sees up there and be enlightened and maybe my soul will be opened in new ways that I can’t imagine. But that doesn’t happen. I just see City Hall and Logan Circle and some poor souls driving to work just past sunrise. By the time I return downstairs, the others are all waking up.

Layla runs toward me and grips my leg. “Ames! Where were you?”

“Thought you flew the coop,” Daisy says when I walk inside.

“Took a walk,” I say, distracted by the lump under the other bed’s quilt that Henry’s trying to console. I shoot Daisy a confused look but she only shrugs and throws her legs over the side of the bed.

“First shower,” she states and then runs to the bathroom.

“Baby, please get up,” Henry says. He tries to pull the blanket off Reign, but she holds on tightly. “Reign, please get out of bed.” He waits to see if she’ll move, but she doesn’t so he gets off the bed and walks straight into the bathroom, closing the door harshly behind him.

Daisy screams. She’s in the shower. He shouts something about only having to pee and brush his teeth and that he won’t peak at her, and she yells something back. After a second or so, it seems that Henry’s won because he doesn’t return immediately.

Layla sits on the floor playing with the little horse Henry bought her so I sit on the edge of Reign’s bed. I rest my hand on top of the quilt. “Reign,” I say quickly. “Look at me.”

Beneath my hand, I feel her shaking. Harsh and brutal, and maybe I’m imagining it but I swear I can hear the sound of her bones knocking against one another. When she doesn’t cooperate, I grab the edge of the blanket and pull. There’s a slight resistance, but then her fingers give way and the blanket comes down. She uses her forearm to shield her eyes from the light, and a small surprised cry escapes her. I sink into the mattress and pull the blanket over the two of us. In this new, dimmer light, she’s illuminated only by the small bits of sunlight that seep through the fabric of the quilt. The rest of her is hidden by

shadows. Her arms coil so tightly around her middle, I'm worried she'll bruise her own sides, break her own ribs.

Her lips tremble. Her hair is stuck to the sides of her face in the sheen of sweat plastered to her forehead and her cheeks and her neck. I push some of it away from her eyes, and she pulls her knees up to her chest. "I feel like I'm dying," she says.

"You're not dying. You knew this was going to happen," I try to reason. "You stopped the pills cold. You knew there would be symptoms of –"

"I can't pretend like everything is okay," she cuts in. "Ames, I need them. I told you. Please. I need them." Her eyes plead with me. Soft grey shadowed by slanting, pained eyebrows. Even if I wanted to help her, even if I wanted to give her a pill to hold her over I don't have any.

"You'll be okay," I tell her before sitting up and taking the blanket with me. I pull it down to my lap, uncovering her as well, and she squints against the sunlight. It's only now that I get a truly good look at her. Sweat saturates her clothing. Large strands of her hair are stuck to her neck, just in front of her ears, and on her forehead. Her quaking is so ruthless I feel it through the mattress.

She pulls her knees into the same position they were in before, holding them against her chest and resting her head on top of them. "I can't stop shaking. I'm freezing."

I get up and find Henry's jacket lying on the dresser. I wrap it around her shoulders before sitting back down beside her. She holds it close, shutting her

eyes and swallowing. She measures her breaths and tries to calm herself. I move her hair out of her face again.

“You’ll be okay,” I say, kissing her lips quickly just before the bathroom door opens.

Henry seems prepared to physically drag her out of bed but then he sees that she’s already sitting up. She’s even put on a slight smile. Her jaw is locked against the tremors and her teeth refrain from chattering.

“You’re up,” he says, surprised. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay,” she says, clutching his jacket tightly to her.

“You talk to Ames?” he asks. I should have gone back to my bed before he came out.

She nods. “We’re going to his aunts today.”

Henry eyes her skeptically. “You’re feeling alright?”

“I want to come,” she says. “I just want to shower first. But then we can go.”

“You can stay here,” I say. “To relax.”

“I want to come,” she says again.

He looks at me and bites his lip. “You think she’s okay to go out.”

No, I want to say, No, I really don’t. “Whatever she wants.”

He shrugs. “Alright. When Daisy gets out, you’ll go in. Want some company?”

I expect her to say no. I *want* her to say no. But instead she quips, “Sure. Showering alone is far less fun than showering with two. Or three, if you want to join, Ames.”

I smile smugly. “No, thanks. I’d rather go blind than see Henry naked.”

“Ditto, man,” Henry says. “About you. Not me. I see me naked all the time.”

“I got that,” I say.

The shower turns off and we all hear Daisy step out. The fact that I can hear her footsteps does not give me hope for the thickness of the bathroom walls. I don’t want to hear Henry and Reign in the shower. Reign slowly pulls Henry’s jacket from her shoulders and removes a hair tie from her wrist, tying her hair into a messy ponytail. When Daisy steps into the room clad in a short white towel, Reign turns to Henry and says, “Ready?”

“You go. I’ll be right there,” he says.

She steps off the bed and wavers a little when she stands. Her eyes close briefly as she works to maintain her balance, and then she trudges to the bathroom. Henry saw it. There’s concern splayed out on his face. When she makes it to the bathroom and shuts the door behind her, Daisy asks, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Henry and I say together.

She rolls her eyes and pulls her bag toward her, looking for something suitable to wear. I stand, and Henry meets me in the middle of the room. “Ames,” he says quietly, looking down. “I’m really worried about her.”

“She’ll be fine.”

He looks down. “No. I mean, yes. She’ll be fine. I hope. But you’ve seen her, right? What if something’s actually wrong? What if she’s really sick or something?”

“She’ll be fine,” I repeat.

“I really love her, man. Okay? I really love her.” The look in his eyes fills my gut with icy guilt. He deserves to know everything that’s happening between her and me. But I can’t tell him. I can’t even though he’s been my best friend for half my life.

I blink and just nod because I don’t know what else I can say to Henry. Daisy appears beside us in khaki shorts and a loose fitting t-shirt that says *Mass Art* across the chest. Her hair is dripping onto her shoulders.

Henry takes a step back after realizing that our conversation is no longer private, and he mutters something about his shower before heading to the bathroom. Daisy stares at me and waits for the bathroom door to close before opening her mouth. I shake my head.

“I don’t want to hear it,” I say.

*

After I return to the room, and after Henry and Reign are out of their joint shower, and after we all pile into the jeep, we get lunch. Reign looks a little better and she even stomachs some food. I don’t know how she’s such a good of an actress.

It starts raining outside as we make our way toward Aunt Jeanie's apartment in Fairmount. It's only a ten-minute drive from the hotel to her front door. We park on the street, and I realize then that I don't want to get out of the car. I hold Layla's hand tight in my own, and I look at the others, who are all waiting for me to crack my door open. And I don't move.

"Ames," Daisy says.

"Yeah?"

"You want to go?"

"Uh huh," I say, swallowing audibly. I unbuckle my seat belt and then do the same for Layla. She crawls over my lap and hops out of the jeep. I follow after her slowly, a bag of her clothes in my hand.

Through the rain, we hurry up the steps of Jeanie's stoop, and they way for me to knock. I use my casted arm to bang against the door gently. My other hand isn't in good enough shape to knock against solid wood.

I don't know what I'm hoping. Layla's hugging my leg, and I have my fingers coming through the top of her hair, and I don't want to let her go. I don't want to leave her here. I don't want to go to jail and never see her again. She's my sister. My blood. And I love her. I don't want to leave her here, but –

The door opens.

She looks older, but not by much. Her hair is no longer down to her hips with feathers woven into the strands. Her clothes are no longer loose fitting and bright. She is wearing heels. The Aunt Jeanie I once knew when I was small never wore heels. She went around barefoot, was free like a modern day hippie, taught

me how to tie-dye and make bracelets out of hemp. This Jeanie has cropped hair and lipstick on her mouth and is wearing business attire.

She smiles at us, unknowing of who we are, of who I am. It's obvious that she doesn't remember. "Can I help you?" she asks.

I clear my throat. "Um. Aunt Jeanie?"

Her eyes narrow and small crows feet stem from the outsides of her lids. She looks like my mom but not by much. Jeanie's ten years younger, and her hair is brown, not blonde. And her eyes are brown, not blue. And her face is soft, not angular.

"Ames?" she says.

"Yeah." I hold Layla closer. I want to pick her up, hold her against me, but I can barely stand straight, let alone with her pressing against my side.

"Sweetie, hi," she says, pulling me into a hug. "What are you doing here?"

I break away from her. "Can we come in?"

She looks at the three behind me and then at Layla. "Sure, of course. I'm on my lunch break."

Her lunch break. She works. Of course she works. What if she won't take Layla, not because she's selfish like my mother, but because she truly doesn't have time to raise her? We follow her through the door and into her apartment. It's beautiful inside – wooden floors and fresh flowers on glass tables and a marble countered kitchen. Layla would do so well here.

"Have a seat," she says, taking a seat at the kitchen table herself.

I sit and Layla climbs onto my lap. Henry, Daisy, and Reign stare at the chairs, and then opt for waiting in the car instead. It was Henry's request and no one objected. Which makes me happy, because I don't want them to hear what I'm about to talk about.

"So, what brings you here?" Jeanie asks. "And who is this little cutie?"

I comb through Layla's hair with my fingers. "This is my sister," I say.

"Layla."

"Your sister?" she pulls back slightly. "From my sister or –"

"No," I say. "From my father. "She's, um, four."

"Four and one quarter," Layla corrects.

Jeanie laughs. "Ah, well that's quite old. You're almost old enough to start school."

Layla nods fervently. "Kindergarten."

"Wow!" Jeanie says before redirecting her attention toward me. "So Ames, you look like you've been in a fight or two. Is your face okay?"

I forgot what my face looked like. Maybe that's why she hardly recognized me. Or maybe it was because she hasn't seen me in ten years. It's a miracle I remembered where she lived.

"It's fine," I say. "Listen, I –"

"Honey?" a voice echoes from down the hallway, and soon after, a man emerges.

"Pax," Jeanie says, when he walks into the kitchen. "You remember my nephew, Ames?"

He smiles and holds out his hand. “Of coarse,” he says. “You were just a kid the last time we met.”

“Ames, this is my husband Pax, if you don’t remember,” she says.

Her husband. He was only her boyfriend when I’d met him last. And he had blond dreadlocks down to his shoulders. Now he has a rather respectable hairdo – short and neat.

“Nice to meet you again,” I say, shaking his hand.

“Likewise,” he says. “And you are, madam?”

Layla giggles when he lifts her hand and kisses the top of it. “Layla!” she shouts.

“My sister,” I say.

“Ah,” he says.

“Can you sit down, too?” I ask. I’m going to need them both to be here for this. I should’ve give Layla to Henry for the time being. I don’t want her to hear this either, but it’s too late.

Pax looks at my quizzically and pulls out a chair from the table. “Sure.”

I take a deep breath. “Listen, what I’m about to say is going to sound crazy,” I say, wrapping my arm around Layla’s middle and holding her tightly.

“And I know you don’t know me well. But I was wondering if –”

“I don’t want to lie to you, Ames,” Jeanie says suddenly. “We know what happened with your father.”

I stare at her. “Did my mom call you?”

“You saw your mom?”

“How do you know what happened to my father, then?”

She takes a breath and folds her hands on the table. “I didn’t know you went to see your mother. We don’t talk anymore. But you’ve been on the news, especially in this area. We’re close to Jersey, Ames. They’re looking for you. It took me a minute to recognize you because of . . . your face. If you’re looking for somewhere to hide, I don’t think we’re going to be able to –”

“I’m not looking for somewhere to hide,” I say. “I’m going back to Jersey tomorrow. I’m turning myself in. That’s not why I’m here, and I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t call the police on me right now, okay?”

“We’re family. I’m not calling the police,” Jeanie says. “I just want to know what you’re doing here if you’re not looking for somewhere to stay. Among other things.”

“What other things?” I ask.

“Just,” Jeanie says, and then sighs. “Just whether I should be worried.”

“About what?”

“My safety. What you did to your father . . . well, he’s still in the hospital.”

“I did what I did because he beat the shit out of me and he hurt Layla and I had no choice,” I say blatantly. It’s hardly difficult to say anymore. “I’m not a violent person, Aunt Jeanie, and the fact that you think I could come into your home and hurt you, well, maybe it was a mistake coming here at all.”

She looks down and that at Pax. “I’m sorry,” she tells me. “I didn’t know your father did those things. I didn’t know that’s what this was all about. When

your mother left, she never said that he hurt you. She never said . . .” Her eyes begin to fill with tears that look genuine and pained, and she rests her hands over my casted one.

“Well, she never said a lot of things,” I say. “I’m going to be blatant, because I’ve been prolonging this a lot, alright? And there’s only so long I can wait, and it’s hurting me, you know? It’s hurting me to know I’m going to ask this, but I don’t have a choice. I want you to understand that I don’t have a choice and that there is no one else. I want you to understand that I trust you even though I haven’t seen you in years and that I believe you when you say you didn’t know what went on in that house. And I want you to understand that I don’t want to ask this, but I am, okay?”

“Ask what, sweetie,” Jeanie says.

“Can you take Layla?” I ask.

They both take forever to speak, and when they do, it’s a simultaneous, “What?”

*

I explained everything to them – what my father was like, what they’ve missed out on for the past ten years, even what happened to Layla. And then I asked them again, to take her, to raise her. And I told them why it was so important, why I couldn’t bring her back to Jersey with me. They listened quietly and patiently.

Layla cried, because she heard too. And she understood. And she fought. And she clawed at my arms until I let her go and she ran into Jeanie's bedroom and pushed the door closed. And I set my face in my hands and begged them.

I beg them. "Please. Please take her. Keep her safe. Can you please do that?"

"Ames," Jeanie says, resting her hand on my shoulder. "She's not our child."

"Please," I say again. "I have nowhere else to take her. If I bring her back home, I don't know what he'll do to her. But I know what he did to me and I know what I saw happen with the two of them that night. So please."

Jeanie lets out a breath and removes her hand from my shoulder. "What about the police? They're going to look for her and –"

"I don't know if they'd come here," I say honestly. "Maybe. I don't want to lie. But she needs help and she's innocent. She doesn't have anywhere else to go."

Jeanie slides her hand off me and brings it up to her face. "Your mother wouldn't help at all."

I shake my head.

She looks at Pax. "Can I talk to you privately?"

He's been speechless for the majority of the time I've been here, so he just nods and allows her to take his hand and lead him off toward her bedroom. They open the door, Layla screams, runs out and hurries into the living room. I don't

chase after her. I don't know what's going to happen and I don't want to tell her anything before I know for sure.

I can't hear anything that they're saying from their room, and they don't appear for another fifteen minutes, most of which I spend staring at the wall across from me, both hoping and dreading that they say yes. But more so hoping.

When they come back into the kitchen, they both sit at the table and breathe deeply. "Ames," Jeanie says. "We –"

"Don't say no," I say.

"Ames," Pax says. "We're –"

"Listen, I know she's not yours. And I know she's screaming and crying in the living room right now, but she's a really great kid. I love her more than anything, okay? She's amazing and she likes to eat copious amounts of ice cream, but she doesn't mind sharing. And she's a good sleeper. She almost never wakes up in the middle of the night, and when she does, she's good about going back to sleep. She like when you read stories, but I've been teaching her to read, so maybe she'll be able to read them herself soon if you don't want to be bothered or _"

"Ames, stop," Jeanie says. "We'll take her. We want her."

It's my turn to say, "What?"

*

"Layla? Can you look up, please?" I ask, placing my hand on her knee.

She stays huddled in the living room corner with those knobby knees pulled up her to chest, her face buried in them, still crying.

“Layla, please. Look at me.”

Nothing.

“Do you want to say goodbye to me? You’re such a big girl now. I know you can be brave and stay with Aunt Jeanie and Uncle Pax, right?”

“I’m not a big girl!” she screams into her knees. “I want to stay with you.”

My throat feels tight. It’s hard to swallow. I would love for her to stay with me. I would love for my only problem to be having to become an adult and raise her. I would love to do that and see what she becomes and take her to school and kick the ass of her first boyfriend. But that seems unrealistic at this point, and the most I can ask is for her to be safe. “But you can’t, okay?”

She looks up and says, “You don’t want me anymore?”

I drop my hands to the floor to keep myself from falling over, and a small sting reverberates through both of my wrists. My mouth feels dry. “Layla, no, of course I want you. Of course I do. I’m just in a lot of trouble, okay? And I need you to stay with Aunt Jeanie and Uncle Pax because they’ll keep you safe.”

She chews on her lip and says, “But you can go in time out and then you can come out and be not in trouble anymore.”

“I wish it was that easy,” I say. “I really do. But listen, they’re going to take such good care of you, Layla. They have another room you can sleep in, and I bet they’ll buy you a lot of toys, and you can eat ice cream as much as you want. You’re going to love it here, but you just have to give them a chance.”

“But I don’t want to,” she says through a clenched jaw. She squeezes her eyes shut in an attempt not to cry. “I love it with you.”

“Layla, I’m sorry, okay?” I say as I stand up. I don’t want to stand up.

“No,” she says quickly. “No, don’t leave!”

I blink back my own tears and kneel back down, just for a minute. I promise myself it will just be for a minute. “Layla.”

She crawls forward and wraps her arms tightly around my neck, locking her hands together. I reciprocate the hug, acknowledging that this may be the last time I get to do this. “I don’t want you to leave me here, Ames,” she cries.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur into her hair. I choke when I say it again. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry you had him as your dad and I’m so sorry you have to go through all of this.”

I cry into her shoulder, and she comforts me, kissing my cheek, patting the back of my head softly. “Can you stay with me here?” she asks.

“No, Layla,” I say, finally pulling away. It’s hard to look at her and to know that I’m abandoning her like my mother abandoned me. But I’m doing this in her best interest. I’m doing it *for* her. “I can’t.”

“Why not?” she asks.

“Because I have to take responsibility for what I did. You’ll understand that when you’re older.”

She stares at me before I pull her into one last embrace. “Ames.”

“I love you, Layla.”

“I love you more than Frederick Dog and Liza Cat. The most amount I can,” she says.

I let go of her and stand. I don't want to say I'll see her again, because I don't know if that's true. So I just say, "That's a lot of love, but I think I love you more."

She stands too, and she reaches for my leg, but I take a step back.

"I'm going to go now, Layla."

Her eyes widen. "No, but you take care of me."

"I'm going to go now, and Aunt Jeanie is going to take care of you," I say.

"Bye, Layla."

"No," she says again, and then she screams, "No, Ames!"

I turn around and I walk down the hallway and I pass Aunt Jeanie and Pax, who have the bag of Layla's clothes in front of them. I say, "Thank you." And then I leave as they hurry to keep Layla from following after me. I make it out into the rain, refrain from crying, get in the car, apologize for taking so long, and ask Henry to drive back to the motel. No one asks if I'm okay because they know the answer. No one says anything.

Chapter Seventeen

“Is this just a game to you?” I asked.

“Game?” Reign said.

“Between Henry and me. Which one will swoon for you more. That’s not going to happen.”

“It’s already happened. And he’s won,” She said.

“So that’s it, you’re really going out with him now?”

She smiled.

For dinner, Henry and Daisy leave to pick up pizza while Reign naps, and I feel an ache through and through because we should have had pizza last night for Layla. I don’t talk about Layla, and no one brings her up, and when I find her toothbrush in the bathroom, I toss it into the trash. Jeanie and Pax will buy her a new one. They’re good people. They’ll take care of her.

Like Reign, I fall asleep while Henry’s gone, but I’m awoken to a large bang. I sit up immediately and see Reign sitting on the opposite bed, eyes red, fists clenched. Her cell phone is on the opposite side of the room, against the wall, probably broken.

“Did you just throw your phone?” I ask.

She doesn’t answer me, only stares ahead, nostrils flared. “I hate him,” she says instead.

I get up and retrieve her phone from its spot against the wall. The screen is cracked. “What happened?” I ask.

“He blocked my number,” she says, eyes still ahead. “I just wanted to tell him that I was getting clean, and he blocked my number.”

“Your stepdad?”

“I just wanted to tell him that I was getting clean,” she says again. “God, fucked everything.”

“Reign.”

“I’m sorry you had to give up Layla. She was all you had.”

“Reign.”

“Can we go outside?”

“It’s raining.”

“So?”

I stare at her until she gets up and grabs my hand and pulls me out of the hotel room, down the elevator, through the front doors, and out into the pouring rain. We get soaked immediately.

“This is ridiculous,” I shout.

“So?” she shouts back. “We’re alone, aren’t we? Alone together?” She spins in the rain, and spins, and spins, and spins. She gets dizzy. She falls, and I catch her. She gasps as the rain picks up and slams against us.

I pull her into a hug or she pulls me into a hug, and we stay like that on the sidewalk. “Reign,” I say.

“I love you,” she says. Her lips are parted. She is stripped of everything I met her as and wrapped only in her own skin, and I feel stripped too. I feel lost too.

I kiss her. Maybe I shouldn't. I don't know. But I do it anyway. I place my hand against her face, and I kiss her. I don't let her go until I see Daisy approaching in the distance, Henry not far behind her.

“Reign,” I say, bringing her attention to Daisy as well.

She parts from me and crosses her arms tightly over her chest.

Daisy comes up to us, an umbrella in one hand, the pizza pie in the other, and she just walks past us. “Henry's parking the car,” she says without turning back.

We follow Daisy to the elevator and up to the room, and I say, “Reign, why don't you go dry of and get changed,” when we're inside.

She grabs her backpack off the floor and goes into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. I don't know what I did wrong to deserve that. I don't have time to ponder it, though. Henry strides in, looks me up and down, and laughs. “Go for a swim?” he asks.

*

Reign reemerges cleaned up and in dry clothes – a tight black skirt and a black shirt that shows her midriff. I expected her to change into pajamas, but instead, she looks ready to go out for a night on the town.

“I want to go to that club down the street,” she says while Henry, Daisy, and I are all shoveling pizza into our mouths. I work on chewing faster so I can argue.

Henry smiles. “You’re feeling okay for that?”

“Yeah. Can we go now?”

“Reign, we’re not going,” I say. “I’m not going.”

“So don’t come,” she says, shrugging. What kind of shitty revelation did she have in the bathroom after basically confessing her love to me out in the rain? I notice her cell phone in her hand. She must have brought it in with her while she changed, maybe tried to call her stepdad again even though she knew it wouldn’t work. Maybe she really does just want to go out and have some fun and get a little distracted. And I could use a little breather after today.

“We’re not leaving now,” I sigh. “I’ll go after we eat and after I change out of these soaked clothes and after there’s a little bit of time for us to digest.”

“This is stupid,” Daisy says, but no one even looks her way.

Henry beams. “Perfect!”

Reign doesn’t smile, but instead sits beside Henry, squeezes his knee, and looks me straight in the eyes.

*

None of us are really dancing. Instead, Daisy and I are made spectators to Reign and Henry’s make out session against the wall. Maybe, unbeknownst to me, I rejected her. Or maybe she’s just a really great actress again. I don’t know,

but I feel the dinner I ate a couple hours ago bubbling in my stomach, ready to make a swift escape if I watch them any longer.

“You okay?” Daisy asks.

“What? Yeah. Fine.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Nothing to talk about. I guess Reign’s feeling better after all.” I pick my beer up from the small table I’m standing at with Daisy and take a gulp.

Daisy frowns and reaches for my arm. She rests her hand there and says, “You look miserable. How was seeing Layla off.”

I place the beer back on the table slowly. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

Henry comes over before she says anything else. His face is flushed and pink and he’s giggling like Layla giggles when she’s handed candy. “Hey, guys.”

“Hi,” I say.

“Hey,” Daisy says.

“Reign went to the bathroom,” he says.

I take a swig of beer. “She seems awfully intense tonight.”

Henry grins crookedly. “Yeah, I don’t know what’s gotten into her. Maybe it’ll be me later tonight though.”

I grimace.

“We should find you someone,” Henry says. He scans the dance floor and points at some blonde dancing with two of her friends. “What about her?”

“Nah,” I say. “I’m good.”

“Ames,” he drones, grabbing my shoulders. “Today was a shitty day. Let loose a little.”

“I’m good,” I say again.

He rolls his eyes. “Why don’t you just have fun for once?”

The mere thought of having some girl dancing against me hurts my ribs. I place my hand there and say, “I said I’m good, okay?”

He drops his hands to his side. “Yeah, man. Sorry. Want another drink, then?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Sure.”

Daisy and I lean against the table, neither of us speaking, as we wait for Henry’s return. I literally resort to twiddling my thumbs until that produces a gentle ache in the bones of my hands. Then I just stuff them in my pockets and rock back onto my heels.

Eventually, he comes back with beers for all three of us. I take mine and say, “Thanks.”

“No problem.” He looks around. “Jeez, where’s Reign? She’s taking for-fucking-ever.”

The last time she disappeared into the bathroom for a long period of time, there were obvious problems. I’m starting to worry too, now that Henry said something. She wouldn’t get herself into that same situation twice. Especially since she stopped taking the pills. I’m about to tell him she’s fine, when she appears between the two of us and provides a small smile.

“Hey,” she says. “Sorry it took so long. The queue was bloody mad.”

Something's wrong. Her eyes are a little red, her hair a little messy, a stray line of black makeup at the left edge of her jaw. Why isn't Henry picking up on any of those details?

"Babe!" he shouts gleefully. "I thought you fell in or something."

She nudges him a little and he wraps his arm around her waist. "No, but I do think I'm going to go home. I'm not feeling too great anymore."

Henry's expression falls. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she says. "Just queasy."

"Oh, let's go. No problem." He takes her hand in his, but she pulls free.

"No, I'm just going to walk back. The rain stopped, and I kind of want the fresh air. It's only down the street." She glances at me. Something is wrong.

"I'll walk back with you," I say. Henry looks at me, taken aback, like why would *I* walk back with her when *he* also has legs?

"No, finish your drinks," Reign says. "Don't ruin your last night on my account. I just want to be alone for a bit anyway."

"Oh," Henry says, voice suddenly downtrodden.

"Henry," she says in an attempt at being stern, but her voice falters.

"Finish your beer, pick up some fast food if you're hungry or something. Don't worry about me. I'm just going to rest a while, and maybe when you come back . . ." Her fingers trail down his chest and then walk up the middle to his collarbone. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. "Maybe I'll want to do something else fun."

Daisy walks away with her drink at that point. She disappears into the crowd of dancers and I wonder how difficult it'll be to find her when we have to leave.

“Okay,” Henry squeaks, then clears his throat. “I’ll see you in a bit, then.”

Her smile broadens and she plants a simple kiss on his lips. “See you in a bit.”

I watch her leave and lose her amongst a swarm of people heading toward the bar. I look at Henry. He looks concerned, but neither of us says anything. We just each drink our beer and wait for Daisy to resurface.

*

Spoiler: she doesn't resurface, and Henry has to go into the crowd to retrieve her about twenty minutes later. When he brings her back, she looks angry. Apparently she was dancing with some guy. That's all I get out of her rant.

When we get back to the hotel, Henry and Daisy park the car and drop me off out front. I stride through the lobby, take the elevator up, and retrieve the keycard from my pocket. I slip it into the slot above the doorknob, open the door, and scan the room for Reign. She's not here. The beds are empty, the bathroom door strewn open with the light off.

“Reign?”

Nothing.

Great. She's gone. I have no idea where she could be. She could've gotten abducted on the side of the road, for all I know. I'm about to leave the room to tell Henry that we have to go search for his girlfriend, when I see them.

Them: two pale feet.

Poking out from behind the bed. I walk toward them slowly. Maybe she fell asleep on the floor. I keep telling myself that. Hoping. I look over the bed, and my breath catches somewhere deep down in my chest.

Eyes closed. Lips blue. An empty pill bottle on the nightstand.

Chapter Eighteen

I knocked on the door, panicked, holding her against me. She was screaming right in my ear. I didn't have the sense to sooth her. Eventually he answered, tired eyed, in pajama pants and a t-shirt.

“Yo, man. What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Hey,” I said, bouncing Layla higher on my waist. She clung to my shirt, still crying, trying her hardest to remain latched to me. “Hey, um, I need a favor.”

“Ames, are you okay?” he asked. “What the hell happened?”

“Um,” I said. He was looking down at my clothes, at the splatter of blood on the front of my shirt. “I just need you to take Layla for a while, okay?”

“What?”

“Henry, please. I trust you with her. Can you watch her for a little while?”

She screamed, “Ames, no!”

“Okay,” he said. “Yeah, I can take her for a while. No problem. Layla, do you want to spend some time with me? We can play some videogames together.”

She cried out in defiance. I twisted toward Henry, and he stood still for a moment. I had to yank her off my side, and she let out this feral scream. She was scared. I should have stayed with her. He took her from me and held her against him, and she fought to get away.

“Thank you,” I said, taking a step back. “Thank you so much.”

“Is everything okay?” He asked as I started to walk away.

I didn't have an answer for him.

I think she's dead. The thought laps through my mind. Lips shouldn't be blue. My legs give out. I'm on my knees beside her, hands on her shoulders.

Shaking her.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no," I bumble. "Reign, wake up!"

She still feels warm. Corpses aren't warm. I press my ear against her lips, two fingers against her throat. The pulse is there. It's fast, racing, fighting. Her breathing, I don't know.

"No, come on. Reign. Please." My hands latch onto the sides of her face, shake. "Wake up. Wake up, please. Get up, Reign. Goddamn it! Get up!"

I decide that even if she is breathing, it's not enough. I decide that if it were enough, her lips would be pink. So I tilt her head back and pinch her nose. I learned this. I can do this. When I breathe into her mouth, her cheeks puff out.

Five seconds. I beg her to wake up. Beg her to stay alive.

And then another breath.

I look around, try to spot her phone. I don't see it out in the open. I can't search. I can't leave her on the floor without someone to breathe for her. I can't leave her to die.

Another breath.

She can't die.

Her knees are twisted, arms spread to her sides. I can see her hipbones protruding from her skirt, can see the hollowed out portion of her stomach,

outlined by her prominent ribcage. She's all sharp points and harsh angles. She looks like a broken bird, splayed out on the carpet.

Another breath.

Haven't I suffered enough? Or do I deserve this, too? Were the past eighteen years of my life not enough? Does the universe need to take everything away from me? If that were the case, why couldn't it just let me kill myself two months ago, and that would have been the end. That would have been the *fuck you* it was looking for.

Another breath.

Please, Reign. Please, please.

Water drips onto her nose, and it's only then that I realize tears are sliding off my face and onto hers. She can't do this.

Another breath.

The door opens.

"What the hell are you doing?"

He thinks I'm kissing her. He falls to the ground beside me when he realizes his mistake, and it's Daisy who calls an ambulance.

*

I remember once, a few months ago, before I met Reign, before the failed suicide, before I nearly killed someone. I remember being in the hospital because of my father, and I remember it so clearly because it was one of the only times he'd actually taken me to the hospital.

And I sat there, in the hospital bed, being spoken down to like a child because the hospital staff assumed that I drank that bleach in an attempt at killing myself instead of being forced to do so. I sat there in possibly the worst pain I'd ever been in, listening to them tell me that they'll have to keep me for observation over night, in case holes formed in my stomach.

Somehow, Henry found out I was there. My father must have called him and asked for him to collect my assignments at school for the next few days or something. And he rushed over, and they wouldn't let him see me because he wasn't family. They wouldn't tell him anything. Not if I was alive. Not if I was awake. Not if I'd been throwing up blood in my living room a few hours earlier.

And he was so *angry*.

And I didn't understand why.

He was just this kid who liked to smoke pot occasionally and go out on the weekends and poke fun at my proclivity for academics. He was just surface. But when they wouldn't let him see me, when they wouldn't tell him anything, he punched a hole through one of the hospital walls. He was dragged out by security, and a whole mess of expensive fines followed. At least that's what Daisy said.

Henry didn't even tell me he stopped by.

I'm on the other side now, in a waiting room, heart racing, palms sweating, teeth gnawing at the inside of my cheek until I taste blood. I smell the Windex they just used to polish the windows and I'm listening to the buzz of the Food Network playing on the TV in the corner. And I'm hoping someone isn't dead.

No. She's not dead. If she were dead, Henry wouldn't have been allowed to see her. Which is where he is. She asked for him. Not me. Him. And he was smart this time, claiming that they were cousins even though they look nothing alike, even though her skin is fair like fine china and his is tan, even though her eyes are the color of clouds in a summer thunderstorm and his are just brown.

I try to set my hands on my knees, but then I recall that I can't do that because my uncasted wrist is handcuffed to the arm of the chair. They couldn't fit the handcuffs around the cast, so they had to settle for this method of trapping me. A security guard stands in the corner, watching me intently.

I've been here for more than an hour ago.

It wasn't that hard for the hospital to figure out who I am. Officer Brooks put out a Missing Person's on Reign. I was one of the last people she was seen with. Once they identified her and contacted her father, he provided them with my history.

I didn't resist, didn't deny. It was useless. I could only think about Reign laying there on the carpet. I could only think about losing Layla to Jeanie intentionally.

When Henry appears in the waiting room with Daisy behind him, I sit up. I don't have time to brace against the punch he throws. It knocks me out of my seat and onto cold tile, my wrist still cuffed to the chair. My casted hand rises to my face, where he's reconstituted the pain that had finally started to fade.

The security guard steps between us, lifts me by my arm, and tosses me back into the chair. But otherwise, he doesn't scold Henry.

“Henry!” Daisy shouts. She grabs his arm and tugs him back, but he shoves her away.

“You son of a bitch,” Henry growls. I stare up at him, fingers still pressed against my face. The pain there branches out to the bottom of my jaw and just below my eye.

He must know. She told him.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” He gives a short dark laugh and lunges toward me again, fist clenched, but Daisy hurries between us.

“Stop! Don’t hurt him, Henry!”

Henry’s jaw locks and his nostrils flare. “You think what he did was right, Dais?”

She shakes her head. “No, but –”

“Then stay out of it.” He pushes her to the side, and I expect him to pummel me. I even lower my wrist to my lap in an effort to show him that I’m open. That I won’t even defend myself. That I deserve it.

He glares at me, seething. “You knew she was using this whole time.”

“Not the whole time,” I say quietly, ashamed. “A few days. The fight in the club . . .”

He clicks his jaw back and forth and tightens his fingers into fists at his sides. “Why wouldn’t you say something?”

“I was trying to help her. She didn’t want me to –”

“It doesn’t matter what she wanted! Your trying to help her almost got her killed, Ames! And you want to know the funniest kick?”

I wait. I don’t think I want to know.

“No one knows if it was intentional,” he finishes. Finishes is a good word. His statement holds a sense of finality too it. The same sense of finality that suicide holds whenever it’s brought into conversation.

I lean back. “What?”

“She won’t tell anyone. But damn, *Ames*, she took *a lot* of pills. You have to wonder, don’t you?”

The empty pill bottle on the nightstand. Was it full before? Did she down the entire bottle in one go? I flinch at the thought of her wanting to kill herself. She wouldn’t have done that. I know her. But then that was the first thing Daisy said to me when she joined us on the road trip.

No one knew you wanted to kill yourself. That you even could do something like that.

“You were trying to help her,” Henry accuses. “Did sleeping with her help?” I look down at my knees, but he shouts, “Look at me, Ames! At least own up to something! To one thing in your entire Goddamn life!”

What does he mean by that?

He sees the look on my face and laughs. “Oh my God, you don’t even understand, do you? Ames, the Golden Boy, the Valedictorian, doesn’t get it!”

“Get what?”

“You nearly killed someone, Ames!” The whole hospital can hear him. “You killed someone who put you through absolute hell your entire life, that probably beat Layla, too! And then you tried to kill yourself! Like you couldn’t survive or something. Like Daisy didn’t matter, like I didn’t matter, like Layla didn’t matter. You didn’t care how selfish you were being, and you tried to kill yourself, and then you let that failure hover over you like a fucking curse. Like Layla would be better off without you there.

“Well guess what, Ames? She wasn’t better off. I kept her at my house and she screamed for hours before she cried herself to sleep. She barely slept, didn’t eat, and then I got a call from Layla about you being in the hospital. I thought it was your dad again, that he put you there. And I felt *so* bad for Layla, because you were all she had. And I thought it was disgusting that someone could try to take you from her like that. But then to find out you did it to yourself? You sport it like it’s nothing, like it didn’t hurt her. Like it didn’t hurt Daisy or me.

“So just own up to it, okay? Just . . . and now with you and Reign . . . just . . . God, Ames. I don’t understand how you could be so selfish.”

I pull my wrist against the handcuffs, trying to feel that familiar pinch of skin breaking, but I don’t have the strength to tug hard enough right now. I’m shaking. I don’t know how to respond, or if I even can. I want to tell him I’m sorry, that I care about Reign just like he cares about her, but that wouldn’t do any good. I want to make excuses for why killing myself was the right thing to do, but that also wouldn’t do good.

I see it now. That I'm selfish. That I dragged them all on this trip with me, and then betrayed Henry. It doesn't change how I feel inside or how much I care about Reign, and it doesn't change how desperately I wanted to take a dive off that bridge. But I see it now.

I look at Henry, and he's breathing so hard I can see it in his chest and shoulders. I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. I try again, but still nothing. He shakes his head and just walks away.

He doesn't turn back, doesn't make more of a scene. No, it's simply one foot after the other, shoulders straight. Nothing has ever felt so final.

I see Daisy for the first time since Henry pushed her away, and I manage to whisper her name, but she looks down. "I'm done, Ames," she says. Her calm voice sounds strange following Henry's outburst. "I tried to help you. I even tried to cover things up for a while. Do you realize how wrong it was for you to make me do that?"

"Daisy."

"No," she says. "No, I'm done."

She follows after Henry, toward the red exit sign, passing a pair of police officers. They approach me in the wake of losing the only two friends I have. I pull at the handcuffs and twist my wrist a little, wondering if I get the slicing right, could I just have a still and dry alternative to my previous plan of a gusty water departure. But then I remember Henry's words and I stop rubbing the dulled metal against my wrists. That's a stupid idea anyway; I'm in a hospital.

When the police officers retrieve me, they have to lift me out of the chair and drag me outside. Not because I resist – I don't. But because I go boneless and my legs don't support me.

They lead me outside, toward their police car. It says New Brunswick Police on it. I guess that's why it took so long. I guess that's also why they "accidentally" slam my head against the edge of the door before dropping me in the backseat.

Chapter Nineteen

“Layla, dinner’s on the stove. You almost ready?”

She usually came running at the mention of food, at the sound of my voice. I’d hear her feet stampeding down the stairs. But that night, I heard nothing.

“Layla?” I shouted again, but again, she heard nothing. I’d started to wonder if her door was shut, if she was too invested in her dollhouse to hear me calling her name. So I went to look for her.

The stairs creaked, maybe in their desperate attempt to warn me. And the doorknob to her room felt warm when I gripped it, like someone had been holding onto it not that long ago. Inside, I found him with her, hovering over her bed. I found him with his hands underneath her underwear and her dress pushed up over her chest. I found her crying softly, scared that she’d anger him. I found him lying beside her in bed.

“Get off her!” They were the first words I’d ever screamed at him, the first time I’d ever raised my voice in his direction.

I counted.

47 cracks in the ceiling. 3 of which leaked water. 1 of which was directly over the bed.

19 bars that kept me imprisoned.

When I looked out the window, I counted the number of cars passing on the road outside. 764 before I stopped. I was in there for two days with no visitors. And then a lawyer came to see me, one appointed by the state, and he informed me that my father intended to press charges. Of course he wanted to press charges. I should have expected no different.

I was told what my options were – plead not guilty and go to court or plead guilty and take a plea. The plea was this: twenty years behind bars with parole. I want someone to talk to about the plea that isn't my lawyer. I want to talk to Henry or Daisy, but neither has come to see me. I want to talk to Aunt Jeanie, maybe, but we were never that close. I want to see Layla just to see her but I can't.

I tell the lawyer I'll think about it, and he leaves.

The other inmates don't bother me, and I don't have a cellmate yet.

My father shows up eventually. He's in a wheel chair, and being pushed by another police officer. There's a bandage still wrapped around his head. I retreat to the back of the cell, because even in a wheel chair, he's intimidating. The cell seems to close in around me, and it becomes difficult to breath. I sit on the edge of the bed, but he says, "Stand up," so I do.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Where's my daughter," he says.

I swallow.

He's wheeled up to the bars of my cell, and then he asks the other cop to leave us for a while. When we're alone, he says, "You're going to jail, Ames. Tell

me where your sister is so I can take care of her. And better yet, apologize for what you've put me through. If you apologize, maybe I can get them to go lighter on you."

I don't say anything.

He smiles wickedly. "You think you're so stoic in there, keeping all hush hush. What you did to me was a huge federal offense. You understand that, don't you? And with the kidnapping, sheesh! Kid, you're going away for a long time."

"I didn't kidnap her," I say.

"Well, you took her and hid her somewhere out of the state. That seems a lot like kidnapping to me. Now tell me where she is."

"I hid her from you," I say.

He takes a breath and smiles, and though he looks smaller in this injured state, the smile cuts through me. "I'm her father."

"You raped her."

He slaps his hand against the bars and I flinch. "Hey!" he shouts. "Don't you ever say something like that again. An accusation like that . . . disgusting."

"But you did it," I rasp. "You destroyed her. She's just a little kid."

"She's my little kid. Where is she? Tell me where she is, Ames. You've already fucked up enough. She's my only chance at raising a good one, isn't she?"

I look down at my knees. "She is a good one."

"I know, now tell me where is she?"

I look up and meet his eyes with my own. "I'm not telling you anything."

He stares at me. He's done playing and joking. He grips one of the bars tightly in his grasp and I see his knuckles turn white. "Ames, listen to me, goddamn it. I am telling you right now that I can make this entire jail thing happen for a lot longer and in a much worse facility. Now tell me where you're *fucking* sister is."

"No," I say.

His face turns a bit red and his jaw flexes. "I said I can make this worse. I can –"

"I don't care," I say, suddenly coming to that realization. That absolutely amazing realization. I smile and stand back up. "I don't care. Make it worse. It doesn't matter. Layla's safe. She's away from you and she'll grow up normally. She won't live through what I lived through."

"You were raised correctly," he sneers. "I fed you and gave you a house to live in and watched your grades. I let you have friends and –"

"And beat me," I say, eyes wide. I laugh. "You beat me. You tortured me for thirteen years."

He straightens in his wheel chair and rolls his shoulders back. "I don't know what you –"

"I would never put Layla through that. What you did to her was bad enough. She's safe now. You're not getting her back." I laugh again. "You're never getting her. You'll rot alone in that house. I hope you can live without your Relief Sessions, Dad."

"I can make your life a living hell, Ames," he threatens.

“Yeah?” I say. “How? I’ll be in jail, far away from you.”

He stares at me, eyes narrowed and then wide and surprised. “I’ll find her.”

“Good luck.”

“I’ll find her,” he says again. “And you’ll be punished for this. You didn’t like the Relief Sessions? Wait until they’re on a federal level.”

“You have no way to fathom it, do you?”

“What’s that?” he asks.

“That level of fear. You don’t know the half of it. You can’t imagine being that afraid of someone, not like I was afraid of you. Well, I’m not afraid anymore. And I’m coming after you, this time.”

“Is that a threat?” he growls.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I suppose not if there’s nothing for you to hide.”

He grimaces. He looks furious when he calls for the other police officer to retrieve him. Apparently he’s too weak to roll himself away. I guess I really did a number on him with that baseball bat. I smile again.

As the police officer rolls him out, I shout, “And get my lawyer on the phone, will you?”

They don’t do me that favor, but I do get another officer to allow me to use the phone. I call my lawyer, and he says, “This is Logan Shepherd. How can I help you?”

And I said, “This is Ames Treadway, and I’d like to press charges against my father for abuse and for the molestation of a child.”

I'm ready to speak about it, ready to share what I went through, ready to get Layla to do the same. And so help me, if I go down, so will he.

Chapter Twenty

I hit him with a lamp, but just in the back. It was out of instinct to hit him anywhere to get him away from her. And then he came at me. And he told me he was going to kill me and he seemed like he meant it, and even if he didn't mean it, he was going to hurt me in unimaginable ways and he was going to hurt Layla. So I grabbed the baseball bat while he advanced on me, and when he was about to take his first swing, I took mine. And I hit him right in the head. He went down hard, and Layla screamed. I left him there. I picked her up. I dropped her off at Henry's house. I walked to the bridge. I stepped on the ledge. I looked down.

“You can't make willy nilly observations, Mr. Treadway. Especially since your father was the Chief of Police. A lot of people want to see you burn,” Mr. Shepherd says.

“Yeah,” I say. “Especially him.”

We're sitting with a sheet of glass between us. He's in a suit; I'm in an orange jumpsuit. We each have a phone to our ears. He looks through a particular manila folder with my name scribbled on the edge. “They have the weapon, a baseball bat, with your prints on it. They have your prints on shards of a lamp that was used to assault your father. Your neighbor saw you run out of the house with your sister just after the incident. That's a lot working against you.”

I shrug.

“If you don’t take the plea, you’re facing a twenty to life sentence,” he says.

“Nothing was premeditated,” I say.

“Excuse me?”

“I didn’t plan on hitting him over the head,” I say. This is the first time I’m saying it out loud. “I brought you here to tell you about what he was like. I want to press –”

“Yeah, you want to press charges. I heard you on the phone. But I’m going to say it again, Ames. You can’t just accuse people of these things. There has to be –”

“He was a sick fuck,” I say quietly. “The things he did to me. What he’s done to my sister.”

Mr. Shepherd leans forward, head tilted like he might actually believe me this time. “We’re talking abuse, right? But you have to be very explicit with me, because if he has actually abused you and your sister, I can try to turn this into an entirely different type of case.” He clears his throat and there’s a brief light behind his eyes. Excitement.

I think about what to say, anything profound, Ames. Say something profound that makes him understand just how inconceivable the abuse was. Say something that makes him understand that you lived your whole life hiding under a rock and praying for escape.

“Yes,” I say, instead.

“If you’re making this up, they’ll know. They have ways of finding holes in stories.”

“I’m not making it up,” I snap.

“Do you have proof of abuse, Mr. Treadway?”

“He tried not to leave scars,” I say quietly. “But there are a few. The hospital should have some old x-rays too.”

“You understand how respected your father is in this town. No one is going to believe that he treated you poorly, especially since the hospital didn’t report it as abuse when it occurred. And you’d still have to have a reason for snapping, for trying to kill him when you did.”

“I have a reason,” I say matter-of-factly.

He waits.

I don’t say anything.

“If you want my help, you’re going to have to confide in me, Mr. Treadway. Why did you do it, if it wasn’t out of rage or —”

“I was protecting my sister,” I say, realizing that he’s right. That if I want his help, he’s going to need to know everything.

“What was going to happen to your sister?”

I shake my head.

“Mr. Treadway. Ames. Why did you try to kill him?”

“It wasn’t planned.”

“What prompted it?” he urges.

“I . . .”

“Do you want to spend the rest of your life in jail? I’m trying my best to help you.”

“I was downstairs, making her dinner, and –”

“You’re sister?”

“No, the Queen of England.”

He sighs.

“I was downstairs making my sister dinner. I’d gotten home late from school, a meeting regarding my speech –”

“Speech?”

“Valedictorian speech.”

“Of course.”

“I went upstairs to get Layla. I found my father in her room. He was hurting her. He was . . . he had her dress hiked up and his hands were underneath her underwear and he was *hurting* her. I hit him with the lamp. He came at me with the bat. I got it away from him. I hit him with the bat because he was still coming at me. The end.”

“We’ll get your sister to testify,” Mr. Shepherd says, eyes wide in revelation. “Juries love kids.”

“What? No,” I say quickly. “No. I don’t want Layla involved.”

“Mr. Treadway, if you want any chance at winning this, your sister will have to be involved. If nothing else, it’ll be good for her to talk about it with a child psychologist beforehand, which she’ll have to do. It won’t do her harm, Ames.”

“She’s only four.”

“She can still testify,” he says. “If you give up her location.”

“No.”

“To keep yourself out of –”

“If I give up her location, then he gets her, and I can’t have that,” I say.

“If he’s being accused of child molestation, she’ll be put in foster care for the time being,” he reasons.

“I don’t want her in foster care. I want her where she is.”

He sighs. “Is she with family?”

I don’t answer him.

He appears agitated, wrinkles appearing along the corners of his scowling mouth. “Listen, we can try to work something out, but she needs to testify.”

“Okay,” I say. “Let me know when you work something out.”

“I’m going to work on shaping some type of defense for you. Think about what we talked about, though. Your sister needs to be prepped for a trial and she needs to be here to testify. You can’t keep her hidden forever.”

I don’t have anything to say to that, so he just hangs up his phone.

*

Within a few days I have a cellmate. We don’t talk, but he doesn’t keep a shiv under his bed so I feel like he’s not that bad to sleep next to. I’m surprised that, on visitor’s day, I actually have a visitor.

Daisy.

She sits at a round table waiting for me, and I'm led by a police officer to the seat across from her. We're instructed not to touch, and then he leaves to stand against the wall. Daisy looks good, hair down in curls that hang against her shoulders. Her white tank top is speckled in paint. Her skin has a healthy summer glow to it.

"Hi," she says, biting the corner of her lip.

"Hi," I say.

She stares at my face, studies it like she's trying to find something there. If it's the bruise that Henry left, it's pretty easy to spot, though fainter than it was a week ago.

"I didn't think you'd speak to me again," I finally say.

"Yeah," she says.

I look down at the orange cuffs of my sleeves. "Are you okay?"

"Compared to how everyone else is, I'd say I'm doing superbly."

"Daisy."

"What, Ames?"

"If you were going to be like this why did you even come here?"

"I don't know," she replies, her voice settling into a cautious calm. "I guess I wanted to make sure you weren't dead."

"Why would I be dead?"

"I don't know," she says again. "You're a creature of habit, maybe."

Like a kick to the balls.

She must notice how that affects me, because her face softens. “Ames,” she says quietly.

“I’m alive,” I tell her. “You might as well leave now.”

“Ames.”

“What?”

She doesn’t say anything, and I look at my hands again.

“How are you doing in here?” she asks.

“Fine.”

“So you’re pressing charges against your dad?”

I look up. “Where did you hear that?”

“Your lawyer came to Henry and me, asking us to testify on your behalf,” she says.

I want to reach out and brush some of her hair out of her face, but there’s that no-touching rule, and I don’t think Daisy would want me to touch her anyway. “Oh,” I say. “Yeah.”

“And Layla’s coming back for it?”

I chew on the inside of my cheek before saying, “Yeah, my lawyer asked my Aunt to stay in the state for a few months, until the trial, and if she’s in the state, she’s able to take care of Layla.”

“That’s good. Have you seen her yet?” Daisy asks.

I get distracted by a small fight that breaks out to my left. Some longhaired and bearded guy pounced at his visitor and it had to be split up by three prison guards.

“Ames?”

“Hm?”

“Have you seen Layla let?” she asks again.

“No, not yet. I don’t want to upset her.”

“That’s understandable.”

We talk a bit longer about when she’s leaving for college and how everything else is going, until she says, “I can’t stay long. I’m meeting with Henry at one thirty for lunch.”

His name sends a new wave of regret through me. I wonder what it’ll be like to never see him again. He’s been a constant for so long. It’ll be odd with him gone. “How is he?”

She stands from her crouch and shrugs. “Angry. He won’t talk about you. He was mad that I wanted to stop by here.”

“You told him?”

“I wouldn’t lie.”

Like I did. “Daisy, if I’m creating some rift in your friendship with him, then maybe you really should just go. He should have you. Not me.”

“I’m not an object,” she bites. “You can’t give me to him, just like he can’t keep me to himself. I want to be your friend, Ames.”

“I thought you were done with me.”

She picks at a cuticle on her thumb. “Yeah, I guess I don’t want to be done with you. I’m disappointed in you. Angry with you. I’m even sad for you. But I don’t want to done with you.”

I nod once.

“I mean, you could use all the friends you can get right now, right?” She tries to smile but it comes out all wrong.

“Yeah,” I say.

“I wish I could hug you,” she says, eyes suddenly filling with tears.

“Daisy,” I say softly. “Don’t cry.”

She tries to smile again, this time through the tears. “Sorry,” she says.

“I’m sorry too,” I say. “For everything I did. For putting you in the middle and fucking Henry over and everything, okay? I just want you to know that no matter what happens to me, I’m really sorry.”

“I know you are,” she says. “I know.”

She tells me that Henry’s been keeping himself busy, but she won’t say anything else about him. And eventually, I muster up the courage to ask her the one thing I’ve been wondering since I got back to New Jersey. “How’s Reign?” It’s quiet, and I don’t know what reaction to expect. I’m hoping she doesn’t turn on me again.

“Henry went to check on her a few days ago. Her dad put her in rehab,” she says, voice short and low.

I leave it at that.

When she leaves and I’m thrown into my cell again, I feel inexplicably lonely. My cellmate grimaces in my direction, and I just lie down and try to go to sleep for a while. And I don’t meant to and I don’t want to, but my body finally gives in, and I cry.

*

Months pass with nothing. Just talking with the lawyer and the occasional visit from Daisy, until she leaves for college.

Once, Henry came. It was the day before he left for school. I think he wanted to make some kind of peace with me, or maybe see me before he comes back to town to testify. He agreed to do it, despite what happened between us. Despite me ruining our friendship.

“I’m sorry for holding a grudge,” he said. “I should have come by sooner.”

“I’m sorry too,” I said. “Everything that happened –”

“Man, we’re best friends. And you were shit as a friend for a little while, but I want to put that past us, okay?”

I smiled at him and said, “Yeah. I would love that.”

He never mentioned Reign, and I haven’t seen her since the incident. I like to think that she’s found her way through rehab and is getting ready for school. Her father was nice enough not to add a charge of kidnapping to my list, and I’m thankful for that, but he wouldn’t tell me anything going on in her life. Maybe if I get out of here one day I can find out for myself, but for now, I can only hope that she’s okay.

Today, I’m nervous. I’m seeing Layla. The trial is later this week, and Aunt Jeanie and Pax brought her town yesterday. My father still doesn’t know her whereabouts, and after hearing that I was counter charging him, he hasn’t visited again. I’m not sure if he’s allowed to now, though I did hear that he’s been put on paid leave from the force until this is all resolved.

I'm brought to the visiting room and I see them immediately, sitting at the corner table, Layla sitting atop Pax's lap. She's smiling. At least she's smiling. At least I get to see that smile again.

I approach the table slowly. Jeanie sees me first. She stands up and smiles, and I think I see a few tears bloom in her eyes. I smile back at her. Then Pax and Layla see me, and for a split second I worry about Layla remembering me or remembering what happened. But she must not, because she sets her eyes on me and she lights up like the sun, more radiant than the sun.

I sit across from them because touching isn't allowed even though Layla reaches out for a hug. "Hey, Layla," I say, throat tight. "How've you been?"

She reaches toward me and lays her hand atop mine. I look at the prison guard, who notices, but chooses to look the other way. Through my time here, most of the guys have noticed that I don't exactly belong. I think they take pity on me. "Ames," she says, suddenly tearful.

"Hey, don't cry," I say and then look toward Aunt Jeanie and Pax. "Thank you so much for bringing her."

"No problem," Aunt Jeanie says. "We're so happy you're testifying against him. Layla wanted to help in anyway possible."

"Yeah?" I say. "Is that so?"

"Uh huh," Layla says. God, she looks older already. Maybe a little taller, hair definitely longer, now well past her shoulders. "I miss you lots."

"I miss you too," I say. "Have you been having fun at Aunt Jeanie's house?"

She nods enthusiastically. “Yeah, they let me get a cat. His name is Boots and his paws are white, but he’s black. He was really little when we got him, but now he’s kind of big. He likes it when I give him tuna.”

“Wow,” I say. “That’s pretty cool. Are you doing well in school?”

“Yes!” she nearly shouts. “I get to play a lot.”

“And learn,” I say.

“And play,” she counters.

I laugh. “Yeah, and play.”

“So how long are you guys going to be here?” I ask.

“Two weeks,” Pax says. “Layla’s teacher gave us some work to give her so she won’t fall behind.”

“That’s good,” I say.

“Hey, Ames, guess what!” Layla says.

“What?” I ask. I can’t wipe the grin off my face; I’ve missed her so much.

“I’m going to get to see you for lots of days now. Aunt Jeanie said we can visit lots. But we left the cat at home. But maybe I can bring him later to show you.”

“That’s great,” I laugh. “I don’t think the cat will be allowed to come in here, but I’m really happy you get to visit so much.”

“Hey, Ames, guess what else!”

“Is it that you’re adorable?” I try.

She sticks her tongue out and says, “No! I know how to read a lot now. I read to Uncle Pax. He says I’m good at it.”

I feel a subtle burn behind my eyes and at the back of my throat. “That’s really awesome, Layla. Are you reading what we used to read together?”

“Mhm,” she says. “And I get a bowl of ice cream every time I finish a book.”

I look at Aunt Jeanie and Pax and they both shrug.

“Do you have a new favorite flavor?” I ask her.

“Yeah, I like Fish Food now. It’s my favorite,” she says.

“Yummmm,” I say.

She giggles and then stops suddenly. “How come your outfit matches everyone else’s?”

I take a breath. “Because we’re all inmates,” I say.

“Oh,” she says. “What’s an inmate?”

“It means we all live here together.”

“Oh.”

“I really missed you, you know?”

She bites her lip and looks at our touching hands. “How come you have to be here, then?”

“Remember when I told you I did a bad thing?”

She nods.

“Well, do you know what that bad thing was?” I ask.

Aunt Jeanie and Pax seem unusually calm about the situation. They must have talked to her about this already.

“You hurt daddy,” she says. “I already know that. I’m going to talk about it in front of lots of people and a scary guy with a hammer.”

I smile. “The judge? She probably won’t be that scary.”

“I have to talk about other stuff, too,” she says. “But I don’t mind, I don’t think.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, flipping my hands over and squeezing hers. I no longer have the cast on my wrist. That was sawed off last month, and I’m just starting to get used to the feeling of freedom my hand now has. “Because you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

“I want to,” she says. “I want to help you.”

“That means a lot to me, you know?” I say.

“I know,” she says.

“And you know what?” I say.

“What?”

“My lawyer says we have a really big chance at winning,” I say. “I might not have to stay here.”

Aunt Jeanie smiles. She’s talked to the lawyer. She knows the chances. They aren’t the best, but they aren’t terrible, and more and more officers are coming forward with stories about my father. He wasn’t a good dad and he wasn’t a good cop, and that’s going to be spoken about in the courtroom. And I’m going to win. I have to win.

“So I can live with you again?” she asks, eyes suddenly damp again.

I look at Jeanie and Pax, who then look at one another. They both give me a small nod, like they've discussed the possibility before. I say, "I don't know, Layla. Hopefully."

"That'd be the super best! But we'll need to get a puppy then, so you can have a pet too. Uncle Pax, can we get a puppy when Ames comes home?"

"We'll see, Layla," he says.

"Hey, Ames?" she says, squeezing my hands.

"Yeah?"

"I love you," she says.

I think back to all that we've been through for the past few months, from what I walked in on with her and my father, to nearly killing him, to going on the run, to having that affair with Reign, to giving Layla away. From knowing what it's like holding her close to not having her at all. From hearing her scream when I gave her to Jeanie to seeing her smile now. And I know that I have to win the case, that I have to get out of here. Not for me. Not to prove a point against my father or to get him fired from the squad or to get him locked up behind bars in my place. No, I need to get out of here for Layla, so she can grow up with me there to take care of her, to watch out for her, to be her brother.

"I love you too, Layla," I say.

And I do. I love her too. More than anyone else, I love her.

Reflective Essay: The Journey's Journey

For the past two years, I have been immersed in the world of writing a novel. I spent every moment of free time creating a new world with new and unique characters while trying to retain the sense of purpose the novel was intended to have. That sense of purpose was this: to show that the sense of familial protection and obligation can overcome one's innate need for freedom. I titled this novel *180 Degrees Away*.

First, and only to get this out of the way, I would like to describe what *180 Degrees Away* is about. The novel tells the tale of an eighteen-year-old boy, Ames, who runs away from home with his younger sister and three of his friends. Prior to running away from home, Ames attempts to kill his father in a desperate attempt at protecting his sister. Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that Ames' father, also the chief of police in New Brunswick, New Jersey, was abusive toward him and later toward Ames' sister as well. The majority of the novel takes place on the road as Ames tries to find a suitable home for his sister before he is sent to prison for the crime he committed against his father. The friends that accompany him on this journey are Daisy, Henry, and Reign. Ames builds a rather inappropriate relationship with the troubled Reign, who is Henry's girlfriend. Because Reign represents the freedom that Ames can achieve, their relationship teaches him that there is more to the world than his own freedom, and choosing to give up that freedom for his sister and for his friends is something that must be done.

I suppose it would now be appropriate to start from the beginning. So I sat in a Barnes and Noble in my hometown of Wellington, Florida and for a while I felt this enormous sense of writer's block. But that night, sitting in Barnes and Noble, I wrote the first paragraph of a story that would soon take over most of my life. It didn't have a title yet, didn't even have a plot really, but what it did have was an intense first few paragraphs about a boy who felt this immense sense of hopelessness on his shoulders, and he didn't know how to solve that other than taking his own life. But someone saved him, and that ruined everything.

That was all I had, and though the novel has changed quite a bit since those beginning days, what has remained consistent is those first few paragraphs. They were important to me, and they still are. The next few months became a type of whirlwind. I worked a full time summer job at a doctor's office while I tried to formulate a plot and the first chapters of the still nameless novel. I succeeded in doing at least that, and when I returned to school in the fall of my junior year, I spoke with my advisor and mentor, Arthur Flowers. I knew that this novel was going to be my capstone project for the honors department.

Soon after the beginning of that fall semester, I finally came up with a title for the book. I was in an honors psychology class taught by Professor Max Malikow. In this class, he brought up a quote by Sigmund Freud. The quote went like this: "Suicide is murder turned around 180 degrees". I knew as soon as he said it that I wanted to use that quote in some way. In the first draft of the novel, the main character, Ames, killed his father in an attempt to protect his younger sister and then tried to kill himself. This only changed marginally in the second

draft, where he attempted and failed to kill his father. Regardless, he tried to murder somebody and then tried to kill himself, and I felt that the Freud quote heavily related to this action. So I titled the book *180 Degrees Away*. I also felt that the title covered other important themes in the novel – that of evolving from someone running away to going back home, that of being selfish to being selfless. To me, the phrase, “180 Degrees Away”, represented the change and development in character that Ames exhibits throughout the novel.

In the spring of my junior year, I was fortunate enough to study abroad in London. This is where most of the novel’s plot formed. Before going to London, I had written approximately ten chapters of a first draft that would later reach thirty chapters. I bought my first Moleskine down the street from the SU Abroad campus, and in it I began to outline. I kept a timeline so that I wouldn’t get lost in my own story; I kept chapter summaries so that I always knew what to write when I had to put fingers to keys instead of pen to paper; I kept in depth descriptions of characters so I was never inconsistent with their descriptions in regards to both their personalities and their physical attributes. I sat in a café in Holborn called FreeState Coffee and I wrote every day until the café closed. I was given free coffee to keep me going and I made friends there that I feel may last a lifetime. I was encouraged to write in a way that I had never been encouraged before, and I will always attribute much of my ambitiousness on *180 Degrees Away* to London. I will forever be grateful toward the city that harbored so much of my creativity for the five months that I lived there.

At the very beginning, I made the choice to have a different outlook on the typical “love interest” in *180 Degrees Away*. I have always despised the common plot of a troubled boy being transformed into someone better by a girl that comes along. I have also always hated the concept of a “manic pixie dream girl”, an attractive and unique female character that comes along, alters a boy’s life in some profound way, makes him fall in love with her, and then leaves. Through these two very strong opinions I have toward love interests in novels, particularly those geared toward a younger audience as mine is, I created the character of Reign.

Reign, one of the five core characters of the novel, represents freedom. She is wild and open to the world and she does what she wants. She is everything Ames subconsciously wishes he could have had growing up, but instead, he was trapped under the boot heel of his father who would often chose to stomp down. Through flashbacks, it is shown that though Ames met Reign first, she ended up dating Henry. This causes a sort of electric quality to the relationship that ensues between Reign and Ames. They sneak around and they have sex on rooftops and they get into passionate arguments. Ames falls in love with the concept of Reign, rather than Reign herself; and when she overdoses on painkillers near the end of the novel, Ames understands just that. But still, Reign is wild and free. She lost her family in England in an accident, and she shows what Ames could be if he went down the destructive road she did. The road of avoidance, the road of denial. Reign is not what she is because she dared to be bad, but because something bad happened to her and she processed it in her own way. But she did not have her

little brother to help her through anything. Ames has Layla, and she is his motivation throughout the novel.

Layla. She is arguably the most important character in the entirety of the novel. She is four years old and she is the lead motivator for Ames. While he wants his freedom, he knows he is giving it up because of her. When he hits his father over the head with a baseball bat, he is not doing it to keep himself safe, but rather to keep Layla safe. When he runs from the police in New Brunswick and goes on this adventure with his friends, he doesn't do it to stay out of jail but to save Layla and find her a safe place to live. He knows that taking her away will only make it worse for him legally, but he still leaves with her. The reader sees their familial relationship develop through the novel. It is hard for Ames to care for her independently at first. It is hard for him to be a father for her, despite having taken care of her for her entire life. He becomes the soul caretaker for her on this trip, and he leans on his friends a lot for this task. Later on, though, this changes. He struggles with giving her away because he realizes that he could be a father to her if he wasn't in trouble with the law. He gets her to talk to him about what happened between their father and her. Their relationship truly blooms before he has to give her up, and when they reunite, you see a different and happier side to Layla. She seems to have grown up a little, despite only being gone for a few months.

The other two characters on the road trip are Henry and Daisy, Ames' two best friends that he has known the majority of his life. Despite Henry dropping everything to help Ames, Ames still betrays him by developing a relationship

with Reign. Because of this, a strain is also put on his friendship with Daisy. In a way, Henry portrays the ways in which Ames' selfishness and the way he hurts those around him. Henry has been nothing short of helpful toward Ames, taking Layla when needed, harboring him when he was in trouble with his father or injured; and still, Ames has an affair with Henry's girlfriend. Daisy, on the other hand, begrudgingly helps Ames hide his relationship with Reign. She never tells Henry, and she never does anything more than telling Ames that it's a bad idea. She does what he asks even when it is wrong, and she has what appears to be a crush on Ames, but this is never actually looked at throughout the novel because it is unimportant to the story taking place.

About midway through the characters' road trip, the reader meets Ames' mother in Nashville, Tennessee. I deliberately chose to build up to this moment, but then have it near the middle instead of toward the end because I didn't want their meeting to be what the story revolved around. I instead wanted the story to revolve more around Ames' journey with Layla. So when his mother rejects his request both to take Layla and to help him in his inevitable court trial, the group moves on and Ames' bond with Layla grows. I eventually have Ames find a home for Layla with his aunt in Philadelphia.

Another important occurrence in the book is Ames' encounter with the Vanderbilt professor. Before this happens, Ames nearly accepted that he would likely spend years in jail, seeing as how his mother refused to help him and he therefore had little hope left. But then he meets Professor Farro, who believes in

him and wants Ames to utilize his intelligence and go to college. This puts a bit of fire under Ames. It kick starts the drive within him.

Another character I consider important despite his short time in the novel is Dillon. He is a fifteen-year-old boy escaping his own abusive situation and is hitchhiking on the side of the road when Ames and his friends pick him up. For Ames, Dillon puts abuse in a new perspective. The situation allows Ames to look in from the outside and see what Henry must have seen the numerous times Ames showed up on his doorstep. Dillon is a younger Ames doing what Ames should have done when he was fifteen, before his father could have hurt Layla and before the abuse could have escalated any further. Dillon carries a pet parrot around with him, and this parrot has clipped wings. I wanted the parrot to represent a lack of freedom, something that can usually fly away but is now trapped. Dillon, along with Reign, also shows a sense of universality. Dillon speaks French and his mother is from France, and Reign is from England. I wanted this to show Ames that tragedy and abuse is not necessarily limited to him. This seems like an obvious observation, but for Ames it may not have been. For so long he was focused on himself and on his sister, and that may not have been bad, but exposing him to Dillon, who experienced something similar and is from Ohio with a mother from France, opens his eyes a little. He becomes aware that he is not the only one suffering, and the reader also becomes more aware that, though Ames is a type of case study for abuse in the novel, he is not the only one who experiences such torment.

An important choice that I had trouble making is what Ames walked in on when he witnessed his father abusing Layla. I decided that Ames would catch his father molesting Layla for a number of reasons, the main reason being that I wanted it to be something that Ames couldn't fully relate to and did not know how to discuss. Ames had been physically abused by his father since the age of five, but he had never been sexually abused, and because that is what happened to Layla, Ames finds it hard to reconcile it. Until the night before he gives Layla to his aunt, he never speaks to his sister about what happened to her, and even when he is talking to Reign, he cannot say the words. It isn't until the end of the novel when he is speaking with his lawyer that he finally comes out and says it himself.

At the end of the novel, it becomes clear that Ames intends to press charges against his father for the abuse he committed against both Ames and his sister. It was important for me to show Ames finally fighting back against his father and it was also important for me to not have the result of which to be clear. We don't know if Ames is sent to prison; we don't know if his father wins the case against him or if he wins his case against his father; we don't know exactly where Layla ends up and if Ames' aunt and uncle can keep her; we don't know where Reign ends up. What we do know, though, is that Ames accomplished what he set out for – he got his sister somewhere safe. He loses his freedom in the process, whether it's permanent or temporary, but that doesn't matter. What matters to Ames and what should matter to the reader is that he sacrificed his freedom protecting his sister when he nearly killed his father and then he got her to safety regardless of the consequences. And though Reign was someone that he

could confide in, it was important for me to show that she was more a bump in the road than someone who contributed help and cared for Ames. Reign is the reason Ames is arrested prematurely and she is the reason that his friendship with both Henry and Daisy wavers. She is not meant to be the hot mysterious chick that is seen in so many books, but instead someone that causes more harm than good. And in a way, despite her hating Ames' mother, Reign is comparable to her – she makes things more difficult for Ames, she slows them down at times, she rips apart friendships and contributes nothing toward Ames' relationship with Layla other than her own semi-comparable relationship with her now-dead brother.

There are many authors who influence me, but I have to say that the author who has most influenced *180 Degrees Away* was John Green. Before *The Fault in Our Stars* was released and became a worldwide phenomenon, I fell in love with his other books. He has been my favorite author since I was twelve years old and he would have to be the author that has the largest influence on my work. He's taught me write characters that are both witty and heart breaking, that are funny and angry, that have depth and that are flawed. More than his other books, I feel that his book *Looking For Alaska* has influenced *180 Degrees Away*, particularly the character Alaska. I did not base Reign off of Alaska, but there are definite similarities in their characteristics. I was also largely inspired by music. Those first few paragraphs that have stuck around for so long were written while I was listening to the Matchbox Twenty song "Long Day", and it has always been hard for me to write without music playing simultaneously.

I would not have been able to write a large majority of this book without the financial help of the honors department and the Crown-Wise Award. With this funding, I traveled from Syracuse to New Brunswick. From there I ventured down toward the south, following the same route and staying in the same motels that the characters stayed in, and experiencing what they experienced. I would not have known what Nashville was like, nor would I have known anything about the small Podunk towns in Kentucky and Virginia that I visited. I traveled to Cleveland and Philadelphia as well, two large cities I had never been to despite the characters stopping there. It was an enlightening experience that helped my writing of the novel in unimaginable ways.

It is my hope that people can read my book and understand that books geared toward younger people can have depth. It is also my hope that people will be able to see that truly, at the heart of *180 Degrees Away*, the story is about a boy and his relationship with his sister, and their attempt at escaping a horrible situation. I want people to see a boy who is willing to give up everything to protect this four-year-old child who cannot protect herself, a boy that *does* give up everything to protect her. I want people to understand not that the police are corrupt, but that anyone, regardless of his or her power or job position, can be like Ames' father.

180 Degrees Away changed a lot from the first draft to the second. One hundred and forty pages were scrapped. The book went from being split into three parts to just being about that one middle part consisting of the road trip. Characters and smaller plot lines were eliminated. In the first draft, Layla was not

on the road trip with the group, which seems silly now. Ames' aunt, Jeanie, and her husband have a significantly smaller storyline in the second draft, as does his lawyer. To inform the reader of what happened in the past that I deleted from the first draft, I added small flashbacks at the beginning of every chapter. This allows the reader to understand many things that they would otherwise not understand.

I have had many people who have helped me throughout the process of writing *180 Degrees Away*. First and foremost, I would have to thank my advisor and mentor of three years, Arthur Flowers. Arthur has been there with my writing since the beginning of my sophomore year when I understood very little about literary writing and wanted only to write fantasy. Of course, this changed as he helped mold my style and agreed to help me write my capstone novel. Arthur was the one who came to me and said that he thought I needed to cut the first third and the last third of the book out and just keep the middle. He was there to tell me when it was terrible and when it was a little bit decent. He never sugar coated anything, and that is one of the reasons I respect his word so much. I don't think I would have been able to write *180 Degrees Away* without his help.

I would also like to thank my reader, Sarah Harwell, who did not know if she was even allowed to be my reader but took on the task anyway. She was a wonderful teacher when I had her class, and she has been a wonderful reader for my project. I want to thank Season Butler, my creative nonfiction teacher in London at SU Abroad. She read bits of my project when there were only bits to read and she gave me advice that I will truly never forget. I want to thank the honors department at Syracuse University who helped me fund the research I

needed to do for the book and for putting deadlines on my work that I probably would have otherwise not met.

Lastly, I want to thank the great friends I have for pushing me to write and to finish the book when I was tired and resistant, and my mother and grandmother, who wouldn't stop asking when the book was going to be done even though I always answered with a dull, "I don't know, sometime in April."

I have never been as committed to any of my writing as I was with *180 Degrees Away*, and I hope that one day soon, it may be published. That is both the goal and the dream.

Appendices

An interview with HarperCollins editor, Sarah Barley:

Can you explain the process a writer is expected to go through in order to get their book published? Is this different for the YA or children's industry as opposed to other genres?

- General process: An author writes the best book he or she can before sending it to an agent. Agents do some revising maybe. Almost every author has an agent. They send the project to editors at each publishing house and they hopefully sell the book on the first try. There's about a year of editorial work. Then another two years before a book comes out. There's also at least one round of revision with the author.

Which is preferable: new authors or seasoned authors?

- There are tons of debut authors that break out. With seasoned authors you know what's going to happen. John Green is best-case scenario for seasoned authors. People are looking for new talent.

Are new/young writers at a disadvantage?

Nope. It depends on book. Veronica Roth (author of the wildly popular *Divergent* series) wrote her manuscript written while she was a sophomore in college. There's been a slew of 20 something authors, especially for young adult books. They're close to the teen experience.

Do most new authors have other jobs? Can they make a living off of writing?

- Yes, they almost always have other jobs. Almost none are full time writers.

They have odd jobs a lot. Librarians. Teachers.

What's the process of the book cover design?

- Editors come up with cover designs without the author. They ask if the author has specific ideas to see what they like or don't like. It's an advertisement for the book so it has to sell the book. They almost always loop the author in. What kind of book is it and what should the jacket convey to the reader? At Harper all the jackets have to be approved by the publisher in sales. If the author hates something it wouldn't go on the book.

How would I know what market my book fits in?

- Definitely read a lot in the genre. If you want to sell the book you have to know where it fits into the market.

How much is normally altered from the draft submitted to the editor? And will an editor take on a book if they feel like it needs a a lot of change? How much should an author change before they submit it to an agent or editor?

- In 99% of the cases, plot isn't changed, but it's something developmental.

Editing for little mistakes happens after.

What's the new up-and-coming genre? Ex. Vampires, or dystopian. Latest trend in authors? Old/young?

- No, no one knows what it is. Maybe speculative fiction.

Book length getting published nowadays?

- Books are often needlessly long. Teen novels are at least 200 pages but usually below 400. Middle grade books are usually 150-250.

Are there a lot of writers in the publishing industry?

- There are a few writers. Two people in our group of 5 are published writers.

Does having an MFA in creative writing help?

- No, it doesn't help at all.

What projects have you worked on?

- Mostly middle grade and teen fiction at Harper. I've been here for three and a half years. There's a lot coming out next year. Joyce Carol Oates has a new novel. Georgia Bing. City of 1000 Dolls. Ben Winters. Nobody But Us.