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**COLLEEN
HOOVER**

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*To Levi—
You have great taste in music and your hugs are awkward.
Never change.*

First November

9th

I am translucent, aquatic.
Drifting, aimless.
She is an anchor, sinking in my sea.

—BENTON JAMES KESSLER

Fallon

I wonder what kind of sound it would make if I were to smash this glass against the side of his head.

It's a thick glass. His head is hard. The potential for a nice big THUD is there.

I wonder if he would bleed. There are napkins on the table, but not the good kind that could soak up a lot of blood.

"So, yeah. I'm a little shocked, but it's happening," he says.

His voice causes my grip to tighten around the glass in hopes that it stays in my hand and doesn't actually end up against the side of his skull.

"Fallon?" He clears his throat and tries to soften his words, but they still come at me like knives. "Are you going to say anything?"

I stab the hollow part of an ice cube with my straw, imagining that it's his head.

"What am I supposed to say?" I mumble, resembling a bratty child, rather than the eighteen-year-old adult that I am. "Do you want me to *congratulate* you?"

My back meets the booth behind me and I fold my arms across my chest. I look at him and wonder if the regret I see in his eyes is a result of disappointing me or if he's simply acting again. It's only been five minutes since he sat down, and he's already turned his side of the booth into his stage. And once again, I'm forced to be his audience.

His fingers drum the sides of his coffee cup as he watches me silently for several beats.

Taptaptap.

Taptaptap.

Taptaptap.

He thinks I'll eventually give in and tell him what he wants to hear, but he hasn't been around me enough in the last two years to know that I'm not that girl anymore.

When I refuse to acknowledge his performance, he eventually sighs and drops his elbows to the table. "Well, I thought you'd be happy for me."

I force a quick shake of my head. "*Happy* for you?"

He can't be serious.

He shrugs, and a smug smile takes over his already irritating expression. "I didn't know I had it in me to become a father again."

A loud burst of disbelieving laughter escapes my mouth. "Releasing sperm into the vagina of a twenty-four-year-old does not a father make," I say, somewhat bitterly.

His smug smile disappears, and he leans back and cocks his head to the side. The head-cock was always his go-to move when he wasn't sure how to react onscreen. "*Just look like you're contemplating something deep and it'll pass for almost any emotion. Sad, introspective, apologetic, sympathetic.*" He must not recall that he was my acting coach for most of my life, and this look was one of the first he taught me.

"You don't think I have the right to call myself a father?" He sounds offended by my response. "What does that make me to you, then?"

I treat his question as rhetorical and stab at another piece of ice. I skillfully slip it up my straw and then slide the piece of ice into my mouth. I bite into it with a loud, uncaring crunch. Surely he doesn't expect me to answer that question. He hasn't been a "father" since the night my acting career came to a standstill when

I was just sixteen. And if I'm being honest with myself, I'm not even sure he was much of a father *before* that night, either. We were more like acting coach and student.

One of his hands finds its way through the expensive implanted follicles of hair that line his forehead. "Why are you doing this?" He's becoming increasingly annoyed with my attitude by the second. "Are you still pissed that I didn't show up for your graduation? I already told you, I had a scheduling conflict."

"No," I reply evenly. "I didn't *invite* you to my graduation."

He pulls back, looking at me incredulously. "Why not?"

"I only had four tickets."

"*And?*" he says. "I'm your *father*. Why the hell wouldn't you invite me to your high school graduation?"

"You wouldn't have come."

"You don't know that," he fires back.

"You *didn't* come."

He rolls his eyes. "Well of course I didn't, Fallon. I wasn't *invited*."

I sigh heavily. "You're impossible. Now I understand why Mom left you."

He gives his head a slight shake. "Your mother left me because I slept with her best friend. My personality had nothing to do with it."

I don't even know what to say to that. The man has absolutely zero remorse. I both hate and envy it. In a way, I wish I were more like him and less like my mother. He's oblivious to his many flaws, whereas mine are the focal point of my life. My flaws are what wake me up in the morning and what keep me awake every night.

"Who had the salmon?" the waiter asks. Impeccable timing.

I lift my hand, and he sets my plate in front of me. I don't even have an appetite anymore, so I scoot the rice around with my fork.

"Hey, wait a second." I look up at the waiter, but he isn't ad-

dressing his comment at me. He's staring intently at my father.
"Are you . . ."

Oh, God. Here we go.

The waiter slaps his hand on the table and I flinch. "You *are*! You're Donovan O'Neil! You played Max Epcott!"

My father shrugs modestly, but I know there isn't a modest thing about this man. Even though he hasn't played the role of Max Epcott since the show went off the air ten years ago, he still acts like it's the biggest thing on television. And people who recognize him are the reason he still responds this way. They act like they've never seen an actor in real life before. This is L.A., for Christ's sake! Everyone here is an actor!

My stabbing mood continues as I spear at my salmon with my fork, but then the waiter interrupts to ask if I'll take a picture of the two of them.

Sigh.

I begrudgingly slide out of the booth. He tries to hand me his phone for the picture, but I hold up my hand in protest and proceed to walk around him.

"I need to use the restroom," I mutter, walking away from the booth. "Just take a selfie with him. He loves selfies."

I rush toward the restroom to find a moment of reprieve from my father. I don't know why I asked him to meet me today. It could be because I'm moving and I won't see him for God knows how long, but that's not even a good enough excuse to put myself through this.

I swing open the door to the first stall. I lock it behind me and pull a protective seat cover out of the dispenser and place it over the toilet seat.

I read a study on bacteria in public restrooms once. The first stall in every bathroom studied was found to have the least amount of bacteria. People assume the first stall is the most utilized, so most people skip over it. Not me. It's the only one I'll use.

I haven't always been a germaphobe, but spending two months in the hospital when I was sixteen left me a bit obsessive-compulsive when it comes to hygiene.

Once I'm finished using the restroom, I take at least a full minute to wash my hands. I stare down at them the entire time, refusing to look in the mirror. Avoiding my reflection becomes easier by the day, but I still catch a glimpse of myself while reaching for a paper towel. No matter how many times I've looked in a mirror, I still haven't grown used to what I see.

I bring my left hand up and touch the scars that run across the left side of my face, over my jaw and down my neck. They disappear beneath the collar of my shirt, but underneath my clothing, the scars run down the entire left side of my torso, stopping just below my waistline. I run my fingers over the areas of skin that now resemble puckered leather. Scars that constantly remind me that the fire was real and not just a nightmare I can force myself awake from with a pinch on the arm.

I was bandaged up for months after the fire, unable to touch most of my body. Now that the burns are healed and I'm left with the scars, I catch myself touching them obsessively. The scars feel like stretched velvet, and it would be normal to be as revolted by their feel as I am by their appearance. But instead, I actually like the way they feel. I'm always absentmindedly running my fingers up and down my neck or arm, reading the braille on my skin, until I realize what I'm doing and stop. I shouldn't like any aspect of the one thing that ripped my life out from under me, even if it is simply the way it feels beneath my fingertips.

The way it *looks* is something else. Like each of my flaws has been blanketed in pink highlights, put on display for the entire world to see. No matter how hard I try to hide them with my hair and clothes, they're there. They'll always be there. A permanent reminder of the night that destroyed all the best parts of me.

I'm not one to really focus on dates or anniversaries, but when I woke up this morning, today's date was the first thought that popped into my head. Probably because it was the last thought I had before falling asleep last night. It's been two years to the day since my father's home was engulfed by the fire that almost claimed my life. Maybe that's why I wanted to see my father today. Maybe I hoped he would remember—say something to comfort me. I know he's apologized enough, but how much can I actually forgive him for forgetting about me?

I only stayed at his house once a week on average. But I had texted him that morning to let him know I would be staying the night. So one would think that when my father accidentally catches his own house on fire, he would come rescue me from my sleep.

But not only did that not happen—he forgot I was there. No one knew anyone was in the house until they heard me scream from the second floor. I know he holds a lot of guilt for that. He apologized every time he saw me for weeks, but the apologies became as scarce as his visits and phone calls. The resentment I hold is still very much there, even though I wish it wasn't. The fire was an accident. I survived. Those are the two things I try to focus on, but it's hard when I think about it every time I look at myself.

I think about it every time someone *else* looks at me.

The bathroom door swings open, and a woman walks in, glances at me and then quickly looks away as she heads toward the last stall.

Should have picked the first one, lady.

I look myself over one more time in the mirror. I used to wear my hair above the shoulders with edgy bangs, but it's grown a lot in the last couple of years. And not without reason. I brush my fingers through the long, dark strands of hair that I've trained to cover most of the left side of my face. I pull the sleeve of my left arm down to my wrist and then pull the collar up to cover most of

my neck. The scars are barely visible like this, and I can actually stomach looking at myself in the mirror.

I used to think I was pretty. But hair and clothes can only cover up so much now.

I hear a toilet flush, so I turn quickly and make my way to the door before the woman can exit the stall. I do what I can to avoid people most of the time, and not because I'm afraid they'll stare at my scars. I avoid them because they *don't* stare. The second people notice me, they look away just as fast, because they're afraid to appear rude or judgmental. Just once it would be nice if someone looked me in the eyes and held my stare. It's been so long since that's happened. I hate to admit that I miss the attention I used to get, but I do.

I exit the bathroom and head back toward the booth, disappointed to still see the back of my father's head. I was hoping he would have had some kind of emergency and been required to leave while I was in the restroom.

It's sad that I'd rather be greeted by an empty booth than by my own father. The thought almost makes me frown, but I'm suddenly sidetracked by the guy seated in the booth I'm about to walk past.

I don't usually notice people, considering they do everything in their power to avoid eye contact with me. However, this guy's eyes are intense, curious and staring straight at me.

My first thought when I see him is, "*If only this were two years ago.*"

I think that a lot when I come across guys I could possibly be attracted to. And this guy is definitely cute. Not in a typical Hollywood way, much like most of the guys who inhabit this city. Those guys all look the same, as if there's a perfect mold for a successful actor and they're all trying to fit it.

This guy is the complete opposite. His five o'clock shadow isn't a symmetrical, purposeful work of art. Instead, his stubble is splotchy and uneven, like he spent the night working late and actu-

ally didn't have time to shave. His hair isn't styled with gel to give him the messy, just-rolled-out-of-bed look. This guy's hair actually *is* messy. Strands of chocolate hair sweep across his forehead, some of them erratic and wild. It's like he woke up late for an appointment and was too hurried to bother with looking in a mirror.

Such an unkempt appearance should be a turnoff, but that's what I find so odd. Despite him looking like he doesn't have one iota of self-absorption, he's one of the most attractive guys I've ever seen.

I think.

This could just be a side effect of my obsession with cleanliness. Maybe I so desperately long for the kind of carelessness this guy exhibits that I'm mistaking jealousy for fascination.

I also might think he's cute simply because he's one of the few people in the last two years who doesn't immediately look away the moment my eyes meet his.

I still have to pass his table in order to get to my booth behind him, and I can't decide if I want to break out in a sprint in order to get his eyes off me, or if I should walk in slow motion so I can soak up the attention.

His body shifts as I begin to pass him, and his stare becomes too much all of a sudden. Too invasive. I feel my cheeks flush and my skin tingle, so I look down at my feet and allow my hair to fall in front of my face. I even pull a strand of it into my mouth in order to block more of his view. I don't know why his stare is making me uncomfortable, but it is. Just a few moments ago, I was thinking about how much I miss being stared at, but now that it's happening, I just want him to look away.

Right before he's out of my peripheral vision, I cut my eyes in his direction and catch a ghost of a smile.

He must not have noticed my scars. That's the only reason a guy like him would have smiled at me.

Ugh. It annoys me that I even think this way. I used to not be

this girl. I used to be confident, but the fire melted away every ounce of my self-esteem. I've tried getting it back, but it's hard to believe someone could ever find me attractive when I can't even look at myself in the mirror.

"That never gets old," my father says as I slide back into the booth.

I glance up at him, almost having forgotten he was here. "What never gets old?"

He waves his fork toward the waiter, who is now standing at the cash register. "That," he says. "Having fans." He shoves a bite of food in his mouth and begins speaking with a mouthful. "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

"What makes you think I wanted to talk to you about something in particular?"

He gestures over the table. "We're having lunch together. You obviously need to tell me something."

It's sad that this is what our relationship has come to. Knowing that a simple lunch date has to be more than just a daughter wanting to see her father.

"I'm moving to New York tomorrow. Well, tonight, actually. But my flight isn't until late and I don't officially land in New York until the 10th."

He grabs his napkin and covers a cough. At least I think it's a cough. Surely that news didn't make him choke on his food.

"New York?" he sputters.

And then . . . he laughs. *Laughs*. As if me living in New York is a joke. *Stay calm, Fallon. Your father is an asshole. That's old news.*

"What in the world? *Why?* What's in New York?" His questions keep coming as he processes the information. "And please don't tell me you met someone online."

My pulse is raging. Can't he at least *pretend* to support one of my decisions?

“I want a change of pace. I was thinking about auditioning for Broadway.”

When I was seven, my father took me to see *Cats* on Broadway. It was the first time I had ever been to New York and it was one of the best trips of my life. Up until that moment, he had always pushed me to be an actress. But it wasn't until I saw that live performance that I knew I *had* to be an actress. I never had the chance to pursue theater because my father dictated each step of my career and he's more fond of film. But it's been two years now since I've done anything with myself. I don't know if I actually have the courage to audition anytime soon, but making the choice to move to New York is one of the most proactive things I've done since the fire.

My father takes a drink and after he sets down his glass, his shoulders drop with a sigh. “Fallon, listen,” he says. “I know you miss acting, but don't you think it's time you pursue other options?”

I'm so beyond caring about his motives now, I don't even point out the pile of bullshit he just threw at me. My entire life, all he did was push me to follow in his footsteps. After the fire, his encouragement came to a complete halt. I'm not an idiot. I know he thinks I don't have what it takes to be an actress anymore, and part of me knows he's right. Looks are really important in Hollywood.

Which is precisely why I want to move to New York. If I ever want to act again, theater may be my best hope.

I wish he wasn't so transparent. My mother was ecstatic when I told her I wanted to move. Since graduation and moving in with Amber, I rarely leave my apartment. Mom was sad to find out I would be moving away from her, but happy to see that I was willing to leave the confines of not only my apartment, but the entire state of California.

I wish my father could see what a huge step this is for me.

“What happened with that narrating job?” he asks.

“I’m still with them. Audiobooks are recorded in studios. Studios exist in New York.”

He rolls his eyes. “Unfortunately.”

“What’s wrong with audiobooks?”

He shoots me a look of disbelief. “Aside from the fact that narrating audiobooks is considered the cesspool of acting? You can do better, Fallon. Hell, go to college or something.”

My heart sinks. Just when I thought he couldn’t be more self-absorbed.

He stops chewing and looks straight at me when he realizes what he implied. He quickly wipes his mouth with his napkin and points at me. “You know that’s not what I meant. I’m not saying you’ve reduced yourself to audiobooks. What I’m saying is that you can find a better career to fall back on now that you can’t act anymore. There isn’t enough money in narration. Or Broadway, for that matter.”

He says *Broadway* like it’s poison in his mouth. “For your information, there are a lot of respectable actors who also narrate audiobooks. And do you need me to name A-list actors on Broadway right now? I have all day.”

He yields with a shake of his head, even though I know he doesn’t really agree with me. He just feels bad for insulting one of the few acting-related professions I’m able to pursue.

He lifts his empty glass of water to his mouth and tilts his head back far enough to salvage a sip from the melting ice. “Water,” he says, shaking his glass in the air until the waiter nods and walks over to refill it.

I stab at my salmon again, which is no longer warm. I hope he finishes his meal soon, because I’m not sure I can stomach much more of this visit. The only sense of relief I feel at this point is from knowing I’ll be on the opposite coast from him come this time tomorrow. Even if I am trading sunshine for snow.

“Don’t make plans for mid-January,” he says, changing the subject. “I’ll need you to fly back to L.A. for a week.”

“Why? What’s happening in January?”

“Your old man is getting hitched.”

I squeeze the back of my neck and look down at my lap. “Kill me now.”

I feel a pang of guilt, because as much as I wish someone would actually kill me right now, I didn’t mean to say those words out loud.

“Fallon, you can’t judge whether or not you’ll like her until you’ve met her.”

“I don’t have to meet her to know I won’t like her,” I say. “She is marrying you, after all.” I try to disguise the truth in my words with a sarcastic smile, but I’m sure he knows I mean every word I say to him.

“In case you’ve forgotten, your mother also chose to marry me, and you seem to like her just fine,” he says in retort.

He has me there.

“Touché. But in my defense, this makes your fifth proposal since I was ten.”

“But only the third wife,” he clarifies.

I finally sink my fork into the salmon and take a bite. “You make me want to swear off men forever,” I say with a mouthful.

He laughs. “That shouldn’t be a problem. I’ve only known you to go on one date, and that was over two years ago.”

I swallow the bite of salmon with a gulp.

Seriously? Where was I when they were assigning decent fathers? Why did I have to get stuck with the obtuse asshole?

I wonder how many times he’s put his foot in his mouth during lunch today. He better watch out or his gums are going to get athlete’s foot. He honestly has no idea what today is. If he did, he would never have said something so careless.

I can see in the sudden furrow of his brow that he’s attempting

to construct an apology for what he just said. I'm sure he didn't mean it in the way I took it, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to retaliate with my own words.

I reach up and tuck my hair behind my left ear, putting my scars on full display as I look him square in the eye. "Well, Dad. I don't really get the same attention from guys that I used to get. You know, before *this* happened." I wave my hand across my face, but I already regret the words that just slipped from my mouth.

Why do I always stoop to his level? I'm better than this.

His eyes fall to my cheek and then quickly drop to the table.

He actually looks remorseful, and I contemplate laying off the bitterness and being a little nicer to him. However, before anything nice can come out of my mouth, the guy in the booth behind my father begins to stand up and my attention span is shot to hell. I try to pull my hair back in front of my face before he turns around, but it's too late. He's already staring at me again.

The same smile he shot at me earlier is still affixed to his face, but this time I don't look away from him. In fact, my eyes don't leave his as he makes his way to our booth. Before I can react, he's sliding into the seat with me.

Holy shit. What is he doing?

"Sorry I'm late, babe," he says, wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

He just called me babe. This random dude just put his arm around me and called me babe.

What the hell is going on?

I glance at my father, thinking he's in on this somehow, but he's looking at the stranger next to me with even more confusion than I probably am.

I stiffen beneath the guy's arm when I feel his lips press against the side of my head. "Damn L.A. traffic," he mutters.

Random Dude just put his lips in my hair.

What.

Is going.

On.

The guy reaches across the table for my father's hand. "I'm Ben," he says. "Benton James Kessler. Your daughter's boyfriend."

Your daughter's . . . *what?*

My father returns the handshake. I'm pretty sure my mouth is hanging open, so I immediately clamp it shut. I don't want my father to know I have no idea who this guy is. I also don't want this Benton guy to think my jaw is touching the floor because I like his attention. I'm only looking at him like this because . . . well . . . because he's obviously a lunatic.

He releases my father's hand and settles against the booth. He gives me a quick wink and leans toward me, bringing his mouth close enough to my ear to warrant being punched.

"Just go with it," he whispers.

He pulls back, still smiling.

Just go with it?

What is this, his improv class assignment?

And then it hits me.

He overheard our entire conversation. He must be pretending to be my boyfriend as some weird way to stick it to my father.

Huh. I think I like my new fake boyfriend.

Now that I know he's toying with my father, I smile at him affectionately. "I didn't think you'd make it." I lean into Ben and look at my father.

"Babe, you know I've been wanting to meet your father. You hardly ever get to see him. No amount of traffic could have kept me from showing up today."

I shoot my new fake boyfriend a satisfied grin for that dig. Ben must have an asshole for a father, too, because he seems to know just what to say.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Ben says, focusing on my father again. “I didn’t catch your name.”

My father is already eyeing Ben with disapproval. *God, I love it.*

“Donovan O’Neil,” my father says. “You’ve probably heard the name before. I was the star of—”

“Nope,” Ben interrupts. “Doesn’t ring a bell.” He turns to me and winks. “But Fallon here has told me a lot about you.” He pinches my chin and looks back at my father. “And speaking of our girl, what do you think of her moving all the way to New York?” He looks back down at me and frowns. “I don’t want my ladybug running off to another city, but if it means she’s following her dream, I’ll be the first to make sure she’s on her flight.”

Ladybug? He better be glad he’s my fake boyfriend, because I feel like punching him in his fake nuts for that cheesy moniker.

My dad clears his throat, obviously uncomfortable with our new lunch guest. “I can think of a few dreams an eighteen-year-old should follow, but Broadway isn’t one of them. Especially with the career she’s already had. Broadway is a step down, in my opinion.”

Ben adjusts his position in his seat. He smells really good. I think. It’s been so long since I sat this close to a guy, he may smell completely normal.

“Good thing she’s eighteen,” Ben says in response. “Parental opinions on what she does with her life don’t really matter much at this point.”

I know he’s only putting on an act, but no one has ever taken up for me like this before. It’s making my lungs feel like they’re seizing up. *Stupid lungs.*

“It’s not an opinion when it comes from an industry professional,” my father says. “It’s a fact. I’ve been in this business long enough to know when someone needs to bow out.”

I snap my head toward my father at the same time Ben's arm tenses around my shoulders.

"Bow out?" Ben says. "Did you really just say—*out loud*—that your daughter needs to give up?"

My father rolls his eyes and crosses both arms over his chest as he glares at Ben. Ben removes his arm from around my shoulders and mirrors my father's movements, glaring right back at him.

God, this is so uncomfortable. And so amazing. I've never seen my father act like this. I've never seen him dislike someone instantly.

"Listen, *Ben*." He says his name with a mouthful of distaste. "Fallon doesn't need you filling her head with nonsense simply because you're excited about the prospect of having a booty-call on the East Coast."

Oh, my God. Did my father just refer to me as this guy's *booty call*? My mouth is agape as he continues.

"My daughter is smart. She's tough. She accepts that the career she worked her whole life for is out of the question now that . . ." He flicks his hand toward me. "Now that she . . ."

He's unable to finish his own sentence, and a look of regret washes over his face. I know exactly what he was about to say. He's been saying everything *but* that for two years now.

I was one of the fastest up-and-coming teen actresses just two years ago, and the moment the fire burned away my looks, the studio pulled my contract. I think he mourns the idea that he's not the father of an actress more than he mourns almost losing his daughter to a fire that was caused by his carelessness.

Once my contract was canceled, we never spoke about the possibility of me acting again. We never really speak at *all* anymore. He's gone from being the father who spent his entire days on set with me for a year and a half, to the father whom I see maybe once a month.

So I'll be damned if he doesn't finish what he was about to

say. I've been waiting two years to hear him admit that my looks are why I no longer have a career. Until today, it's always just been a silent assumption. We never talk about *why* I no longer act. We only talk about the fact that I *don't*. And while he's at it, it would also be nice to hear him admit that the fire also destroyed our relationship. He has absolutely no idea how to be a father to me now that he's no longer my acting coach and manager.

I narrow my eyes in his direction. "Finish your sentence, Dad."

He shakes his head, trying to dismiss the subject entirely. I arch an eyebrow, daring him to continue.

"Do you really want to do this right now?" He glances in the direction of Ben, hoping to use my pretend boyfriend as a buffer.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

My father closes his eyes and sighs heavily. When he opens them again, he leans forward and folds his arms on the table. "You know I think you're beautiful, Fallon. Stop twisting my words. It's this business that has higher standards than a father does, and all we can do is accept it. In fact, I thought we *had* accepted it," he says, cutting his eyes in Ben's direction.

I bite the inside of my cheek in order to refrain from saying something I'll regret. I've always known the truth. When I saw myself in the mirror for the first time in the hospital, I knew everything was over. But hearing my father admit out loud that he also thinks I should stop following my dreams is more than I was prepared for.

"Wow," Ben mutters under his breath. "That was . . ." He looks at my father and shakes his head in disgust. "You're her *father*."

If I didn't know better, I would say the grimace on Ben's face is genuine, and he isn't just acting.

"Exactly. I'm her *father*. Not her mother, who feeds her whatever bullshit she thinks will make her little girl feel better. New York and L.A. are filled with thousands of girls following the

same dream Fallon has been following her entire life. Girls who are wildly talented. Exceptionally beautiful. Fallon knows I believe she's got more talent than all of them put together, but she's also realistic. Everyone has dreams, but unfortunately, she no longer has the tools it takes to achieve hers. She needs to accept that before she wastes money on a cross-country move that isn't going to do a damn thing for her career."

I close my eyes. Whoever said the truth hurts was being an optimist. The truth is an excruciatingly painful son of a bitch.

"Jesus," Ben says. "You are unbelievable."

"And you're unrealistic," my father replies.

I open my eyes and nudge Ben's arm, letting him know I want out of the booth. I can't do this anymore.

Ben fails to move. Instead, he slides his hand under the table and grips my knee, urging me to stay seated.

My leg stiffens beneath his touch, because my body is sending mixed signals to my brain. I'm pissed at my father right now. *So pissed*. But somehow I feel comforted by this complete stranger who is taking up for me for no apparent reason. I want to scream and I want to smile and I want to cry, but most of all, I just want something to eat. Because now I'm actually hungry and I wish I had *warm salmon*, dammit!

I try to relax my leg so that Ben doesn't feel how tense I am, but he's the first guy in a long time to actually physically touch me. It's a little weird if I'm being honest.

"Let me ask you something, Mr. O'Neil," Ben says. "Did Johnny Cash have a cleft palate?"

My father is quiet. I'm quiet, too, hoping there's an actual point to Ben's random question. He was doing so well until he started talking about country singers.

My father looks at Ben as if he's crazy. "What in the hell does a country singer have to do with this conversation?"

“Everything,” Ben quickly replies. “And no, he didn’t have one. However, the actor who portrayed him in *Walk the Line* has a very prominent scar on his face. Joaquin Phoenix was actually nominated for an Academy Award for that role.”

My pulse quickens when I realize what he’s doing.

“What about Idi Amin?” Ben asks.

My father rolls his eyes, bored with this line of questioning. “What about him?”

“He didn’t have a lazy eye. However, the actor who played him—Forest Whitaker—*does*. Another Academy Award nominee, funny enough. *And* winner.”

This is the first time I’ve ever seen anyone put my father in his place. And even though this entire conversation is making me uncomfortable, I’m not too uncomfortable to enjoy this rare and beautiful moment.

“Congratulations,” my father says to Ben, completely unimpressed. “You listed two successful examples out of millions of failures.”

I try not to take my father’s words personally, but it’s hard not to. I know at this point it’s become more of a power struggle between the two of them, and less about him and me. It’s just really disappointing that he’d rather win an argument against a complete stranger than defend his own daughter.

“If your daughter is as talented as you claim she is, wouldn’t you want to encourage her not to give up on her dreams? Why would you want her to see the world the way you do?”

My father stiffens. “And how, exactly, do you think I see the world, Mr. Kessler?”

Ben leans back in our booth without breaking eye contact with my father. “Through the closed eyes of an arrogant asshole.”

The silence that follows is like the calm before the storm. I wait for one of them to throw the first punch, but instead, my

father reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet. He tosses cash onto the table and then looks directly at me.

"I may be honest to a fault, but if bullshit is what you prefer to hear, then this prick is perfect for you." He slides out of the booth. "I bet your mother loves him," he mutters.

I wince at his words and want so badly to hurl an insult back at him. One so epic that it would wound his ego for days. The only problem with that is there's nothing anyone could say that would wound a man who has absolutely no heart.

Rather than scream something at him as he walks out the door, I simply sit in silence.

With my fake boyfriend.

This has got to be the most humiliating, awkward moment of my life.

As soon as I feel the first tear begin to escape, I push against Ben's arm. "I need out," I whisper. "Please."

He slides out of the booth, and I keep my head down as I stand and walk past him. I don't dare look back at him as I head toward the restroom again. The fact that he felt the need to pretend to be my boyfriend is embarrassing enough. But then I had to go and have the worst fight I've ever had with my father right in front of him.

If I were Benton James Kessler, I would have fake-dumped me by now.

Ben

I hang my head in my hands and wait for her to return from the bathroom.

I should leave, actually.

I don't want to leave, though. I feel like I trampled on her day with the stunt I just pulled with her dad. As smooth as I tried to be, I didn't ease into this girl's life with the discreet grace of a fox. I barged into it with the subtlety of a fifteen-thousand-pound elephant.

Why did I feel the need to step in? Why did I think she wasn't capable of handling her father on her own? She's probably pissed at me right now, and we've only been fake-dating for half an hour.

This is why I choose not to have real-life girlfriends. I can't even *pretend* without starting a fight.

But I did just order her a warm plate of salmon, so maybe that'll make up for some of it?

She finally exits the bathroom, but the second she sees me still seated on her side of the booth, she pauses. The confusion on her face makes it apparent she was sure I'd be gone by the time she returned to the table.

I should have been gone. I should have left half an hour ago.
Coulda, shoulda, woulda.

I stand up and motion for her to sit. She eyes me suspiciously as she slides into her seat. I reach over to the other booth and collect my laptop, my plate of food and my drink. I set them all on

her table and then I occupy the seat her asshole-father was just sitting in minutes before.

She's looking down at the table, probably wondering where her food went.

"It got cold," I tell her. "I told the waiter to bring you another plate."

Her eyes flick up to mine, but her head doesn't move. She doesn't crack a smile or say thank you. She just . . . stares.

I take a bite of my burger and begin to chew.

I know she isn't shy. I could tell by the way she spoke to her father that she has sass, so I'm a little confused by her silence right now. I swallow my bite of food and take a drink of my soda, maintaining silent eye contact with her the whole time. I wish I could say I'm mentally preparing a brilliant apology, but I'm not. I seem to have a one-track mind, and that track leads straight to the two things I shouldn't even be thinking about right now.

Her boobs.

Both of them.

I know. I'm pathetic. But if we're just going to sit here and stare at each other, it'd be nice if she were showing a little cleavage, instead of wearing this long-sleeved shirt that leaves *everything* to the imagination. It's pushing eighty degrees outside. She should be in something a lot less . . . convent-inspired.

A couple seated a few tables over stands up and begins to walk past us, toward the exit. I notice Fallon tilts her head away from them and lets her hair fall in front of her face like a protective shield. I don't even think she realizes she's doing it. It seems like such a natural reaction for her to try and cover up what she sees as flaws.

That's probably why she's wearing the long-sleeved shirt. It shields everyone from seeing what's beneath it.

And of course, this thought leads me to her breasts again. Are they scarred, too? How much of her body is actually affected?