

Catchfly

1: Seeing Stars

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A novel

Maud Brummans

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*For the 14-year-old who didn't believe in love,
From the 24-year-old who does.*

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[each chapter is accompanied by a song, adding a soundtrack to the story]

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1 New Slang

September 2 – 6:57 PM

The moment I step into my dad's car, silence washes over me.

Levi's house in the rear-view mirror looks ominous, so large and dark behind me, while in front of me, the sun is setting, drawing beautiful colors in the sky. It feels like the world is trying to tell me something as I start the car and drive into the sunset, leaving the house behind me. Eyes on the front door. Waiting for him to run after me. He never lets me leave if he knows I'm upset. He can't stand it when conversations are left unfinished. I suppose that is exactly what we are.

Finished.

I wonder how he's feeling. Relieved, ecstatic, maybe. He could already be texting a football groupie to replace me with.

But I know Levi's not like that. His eyes couldn't stay dry the whole time he talked, it seemed hard for him to do. I didn't really understand what he was saying, or maybe I didn't want to. On my end, the feeling was there the first time I talked to him, at the first high school party I ever went to. The feeling was still there last week when he ran up the bleachers to hug me after he made the winning touchdown in a game against the Raleigh Lions.

I floor the gas pedal, knowing no one gets on these roads, anyhow. The horizon grows pink. So contrastingly beautiful to my hurting soul, tears roll down my face. I look to the rearview mirror again, hoping he followed me. But the empty road behind me tells me I am all alone.

A car honks, and I jump. I catch bright headlights before I yank on the steering wheel to straighten the car. Another vehicle speeds by me. I slow down, feeling my fingers quiver on the wheel. I'm ridding my eyes of tears when a shadow emerges from the side of the road. I slam my foot on the brakes. The tires shriek in sync with my voice. My head nearly smacks against the wheel when the car comes to an abrupt halt.

Big, unblinking eyes stare into the window. They seem to go straight to my soul. The sun beams above its head, glowing behind its antlers, like I'm watching something of a mythical creature. Completely frozen in place, we stare at each other. The deer on

its guard. Probably wondering if the metal box is a threat. Meanwhile, I just gape at the biggest animal I've ever seen up-close, standing in the center of the road against the backdrop of a beautiful sunset.

Am I dreaming?

Its ears move down at the sound of another car, even if it's still at the end of the road. The deer hops away into the bushes. A shaky breath comes up my throat, my eyes frozen on the empty road. I could've hit it. I could've killed a creature so awing and at peace with nature because I was all up in my head about the fact that I've been *dumped*. That should be an offense. Like driving under the influence.

I roll the car to the side of the road and kill the engine. I reach for my phone. Avery's number is third on my list of favorites, right after my mom and dad. I put her there pretty much the day I got my first phone. Only now her contact name is just **'Avery'** and back then it was **'Aves bffae <3333'**.

"Hey!" She answers the phone cheerfully. I hear music and voices in the background. A few people from school are having a bonfire party at the beach, kind of a last hurrah before Summer's officially gone. Avery'd asked me to come with her and the guys, but I thought Levi and I were having a cozy night in. All day I was thinking what movie would be fun to watch, while Levi himself was thinking what break-up tactic would be fun to use.

My conclusion was *The Pursuit of Happyness*, because I remembered how much he loves Will Smith as an actor.

His conclusion was explaining why he didn't love me anymore, because he remembered how much I love crying.

"What's up? I thought you were with Levi." Avery says.

For a moment, I consider telling her everything is fine. Just so I can pretend for a little while longer that I'm still Levi's girlfriend. Ostrichism at its finest.

"I was. But then he broke up with me, so it didn't really seem that much fun to stay at his house." I use irony in an attempt to mask my sadness, but then my voice breaks, and apparently that's all I need to start crying again.

"Wow, what?" Avery's almost yelling in my ear. "Why? Are you okay?"

"I don't know. A car almost hit me and then I almost hit a deer, I--"

"*What? Paisley--*"

"It's okay, nothing happened. I pulled over." I'm far too calm considering the circumstances. If this was any other day, I would have probably been screaming in the car for twenty minutes straight because of the mere hypothetical of murdering a deer.

“Okay, good.” She sighs. “What the hell happened with Levi?”

I press the back of my head against the car seat. “I don’t know. He said that it didn’t... It didn’t feel like we were going anywhere. And that he cares about me a lot, but it’s not the way it used to be.”

I couldn’t do anything but stare at him with big, teary eyes. As if I was the deer and he was the car coming at me with blinding headlights.

Avery scoffs. “The way it used to be? You mean when you were a cup size smaller and still wearing braces?”

I smile through my tears. The background noises get fainter. She must’ve stepped away from the party.

“He just, uh... He felt like I loved him more than he loved me.”

“Aw, baby...” Her pity is another stimulant for my tears. “I’m sorry. I can’t believe he did this so out of the blue, that’s such a jackass move. He could’ve dropped some signals in the last two years, or tried to talk to you—immature little rat.”

She’s only saying this to make me feel better. I know how much she loves Levi—everyone does. There’s really nothing bad you can say about him. He’s a good friend, and he was the best boyfriend. I’ve always thought I wasn’t good enough for him, and maybe now he’s realized that, too.

“This is weird,” Avery sighs. “We’ve had this phone call millions of times, but it’s never been this way around.”

“I know.”

Avery’s had her share of break-ups. Her tenth-grade boyfriend Logan dumped her when he found out she was still wearing her training bra. Then she briefly dated Logan’s best friend Eddie to get back at him. Her first real boyfriend, Scotty, she dated for six months in freshman year—until he forwarded her nudes to his friends, and I almost killed him with my bare hands. Avery swore off boys for a while, until she met Carter, at the start of our junior year. I really thought Carter was different. He was an exchange student from Canada, the sweetest guy you can imagine. He had to move again just before the start of Summer. Him and Avery made a long-distance FaceTime schedule and she’d already bought a plane ticket to visit him in Dakota for Thanksgiving, when he suddenly broke up with her.

In a text message.

“Do you need me to come pick you up?” She asks. “You should come down here!”

I take a deep breath. “I don’t know, Ave—”

“Come on, the guys are here. We can roast marshmallows and drink beer, it’ll cheer you up. And hey, if you hate it, we can go back to my house and watch that creepy documentary on the little girl that disappeared, the one you’ve been so hyped about.”

The Disappearance of Madeleine McCann. I smile because I know Avery hates true crime, but she’s tried her best to conceal that in her voice. It’s so sweet I’m tempted to say yes, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the rear-view mirror. Tears blended with mascara form a pattern down from my puffy eyes and red skin.

“Okay, I’ll come your way. Just... give me a little time to collect myself before I show up and immediately start bawling my eyes out.” I blot my face dry with the sleeve of my sweater.

“Yeah, of course. You gonna go home?”

“I think I’ll go visit the lake for a bit.”

She sighs into the phone. “Paisley, seriously? The sun’s about to go down, that place is creepy at night.”

“So I’ll be gone before the sun’s down. I’ll be fine, you know no one comes there.”

“Yeah, Pais, “no one” includes the witnesses to your murder, and in a few months, I’ll be watching a creepy documentary on *your* disappearance. They’ll say you ran away, but I’ll know what really happened.”

“That’s not going to happen. You know, there’s a higher chance a predator is hiding somewhere in the bushes at your bonfire party to lure in drunk girls—”

“Okay, I know you’re just making a point, but you’re still freaking me out. Please just come down here soon.”

I smile. “Yeah, okay. I’ll text you when I’m on my way.”

“Please do.”

“Hey, do you mind not telling the guys about what happened just yet? I don’t want them to get all uncomfortable like they did when I told them my grandma was in the hospital.”

My grandma had an embolic stroke last year. Physically she’s pretty much fine now, but it kind of messed with her memory and at the time we weren’t sure she’d make it. When I told our guy friends about it, they would go into pity-overload any time they saw me, to the point where it felt like *I* was the one who’d had a stroke.

“Oh, of course.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you soon.”

“Those words will forever haunt me when the documentary comes out.”

“Shut up.” I laugh– the last thing I feel like doing, yet Avery’s managed. I shouldn’t be surprised.

“Oh, and Pais?”

“Yeah?” I switch my phone to my left hand as I turn the engine back on.

“Levi’s an idiot.” Avery says.

I shut my eyes for a moment. I love Avery for saying the words, but I can’t help but feel like Levi’s name should be replaced by my own.

“Love you.” I say.

“Love you too.”



The sun is still low on the horizon when I get to the lake, though the fairy lights in the trees are already sparkling. They turn on automatically at 5 PM every day. They were just there from one day to the next, when I was little. They always looked like stars to me. Like the sky had come really far down.

I always assumed some passionate local must have taken it upon themselves to hang them. The same person whose boat is docked by the left side of the pier and has been as long as I can remember. It looks old, a bit chipped in some places, but it doesn’t seem abandoned, which tells me someone likes coming here as much as I do. I’ve just always missed them.

I walk down the dirt path of the forest to the pier, planting my hand on the wood to support me as I sit down at the edge. My feet swing across. If I were two feet taller, they would touch the lake below. The still water reflects the orange of the sky and the trees surrounding the waterline, as if it is an alternate reality of this place. Also reflected is me. An alternate Paisley stares back at me, sad and disappointed.

Five years ago, I would see grandpa sitting next to me. Sometimes it seems like he’s still there, but it only takes one blink of an eye for him to leave again. All I hear is the wind flowing through the trees and a few birds making their evening rounds. I’m alone, but I never feel like it here. Like my grandfather lives here, like he went here after his death. I’m sure if heaven exists, his looks like our lake and our forest. The water would be frozen and there would be a coat of snow on everything. Winter was his favorite time of the year.

I look down at my bracelet. The charm rests on my wrist, a little circle with the word *intrepidus* engraved in it, the Latin word for fearless. Levi had it made for me on

our one-year anniversary. He'd told me it would give me strength in hard times. I'm suddenly extremely angry at it: at its stupid meaning and the fact that it's silver when Levi should've known I always wear gold jewelry.

I try to rip the bracelet off my wrist, but even in my dramatic spur of heartbreak, I'm not strong enough to break silver with my bare hands. The entire meaning of the bracelet is a lie. I simply unclasp the bracelet, then raise my hand to chuck it into the water. But then I imagine a duck mistaking it for a tasty worm, choking on it and drowning to death.

I shove the bracelet inside my jacket. Gotta think of the ducks. I'm embarrassed of my thoughts even if there's literally no one around.

Grandpa was the one who introduced me to this lake. Levi never understood why I liked coming here so much after his death. He thinks I'm purposefully hurting myself by being here, but it's the opposite. Grandpa taught me that sometimes you need to step away from your life to be better at living it. He used to say that just as the water reflects you, it can reflect your thoughts.

It's too bad that my thoughts are pretty negative right now. I just wonder how on earth I've been thinking I had something that I didn't. How on earth my mind made up that not only I was happy, but that Levi was, too. Maybe I just see what I want to see: maybe I've been living in my own alternate universe this whole time.

God. I'm bad at this without my grandfather.

2 Little By Little

September 2 – 8:02 PM

New Bern is settled next to the Neuse River, a few miles away from the ocean. There's no genuine beach near our town, but several recreational beaches have been created to mock the idea, including the one where the bonfire party is. The lake is in the northern part of town and the beach is in the south side, but it's still only a twenty-minute drive. New Bern is small. And by small, I mean say any inhabitant's name to my parents and they'll be able to tell you who they are, where they live, what they do and who their family is.

Still, in a town as small as New Bern, there's a distinct classing of neighborhoods. You've got simple neighborhoods like Downtown, Ghent and Riverside, where I and most of my friends live. DeGraffenried is the young country club of New Bern, filled with politicians and founding members of the council. Avery and her parents live there. Her stepdad is a councilman of Craven County and her mom is a political campaign manager.

Riverbend and Taberna are the old country club, with old-money folks who owe their wealth to their family names. Each house on that block owns at least one boat, two cars, and a membership to the tennis court. Levi's house is on Riverbend.

And then there's Woodrow on the north-west outskirts. Happy New Bern's most crime-ridden part of town. Residents like to pretend Woodrow isn't a part of New Bern, as proud they are of our small fisher's village. And sure, New Bern's nice and all. But the law enforcement is weak, the income gap is huge, and fishy stuff happens all the time. Literally and figuratively: we do live by a river.

When I finally get to the beach, my anxiety comes to a high point. I hear the music from the parking lot, though it's not crazy loud like it was at some of the parties that happened over the Summer. The crowds are much bigger then. Lots of tourists pass through over the Summer: parents who want to go golfing and hiking whilst their kids look for other entertainment. But those people are gone now. I'm glad. I only want to be with people I know now.

"Pais!"

Avery jogs my way with a beer bottle in her hand, wrapping me in a tight hug. "How you feeling?"

“Just glad I get to have some distraction.” I laugh a little.

I hear low voices calling my name. Three guys come running my way making pitiful noises.

“Aww, Paisley!”

“Come here,”

“I’m sorry, PJ.”

The three of them draw me into a tight group hug. I stick my head out to give Avery a look. “Okay, so you told them what happened.”

“Yeah,” She smiles apologetically. “Sorry.”

They rock me back and forth. I know better than to try and wiggle my way out of it. It is true what they say about small towns: the friends you make when you’re a kid, you have forever. I’ve known Avery the longest: it’s been a true sandbox love since kindergarten. Austin and Elias used to annoy us to death. But then Will moved to town in the second grade. He came from England, so everybody wanted to be friends with him. Avery was especially assertive. Will didn’t want to choose between the two of us and Austin and Elias, so we just merged. It was a lot of hair-pulling and name-calling in the beginning, but by now we’re all family– who honest to God could not survive without each other.

The guys let me go. Half of my hair is blocking my face– I don’t know which one of them decided to rub my head.

“Are you okay?” Will asks.

“Yeah.”

“Want us to start bullying him?” Austin asks.

I snort. “No. He was... sweet about it.”

“Ugh,” Elias rolls his eyes. “Typical Levi. Always so sweet, and upfront, and noble... People who don’t have any flaws scare me.”

“So, uh...” Austin rubs my arm. “You wanna cry? ‘Cause it’s okay if you do.”

I blink at him. “Um–”

“Of course she doesn’t want to cry! Look where we are.” Avery flicks her hand at all the people gathered on the beach.

“I don’t know! She looks sad.” Austin gestures at my undeniably heartbroken expression.

“That’s because she already cried, dummy.”

I flinch. I don’t think I ever really cry in front of my guy friends– not because it’d make me uncomfortable. They just have no idea how to cope with emotion. Exhibit A:

“Oh my God, you cried?” Will gasps, looking at me like I’m an abandoned puppy.

“The bullying begins now.” Elias wants to pound off to the parking lot. Avery grabs him by his jacket.

“Oh my God! I forgot how useless you all are in emotional situations. Paisley, I am so sorry I told them.” She rolls her eyes. But honestly, the boys being boys about this is already a pretty good distraction.

“Useless?” Austin scoffs. “I’ve got anything you need: a well-sculpted shoulder to cry on; very lukewarm beer; half a joint; and a caramel I got from my grandma a month ago that I only just remembered is still in my pocket.” He lays a golden-wrapped caramel in the palm of his hand.

“No, thanks.”

Avery pushes the guys ahead. “Do I have to spell out everything? Just be there for her. Distract her.”

Elias throws his arm around me. We join the rest of the people by the bonfire. Groups of people are scattered across the beach, everyone’s kind of doing their own thing.

Austin rubs his hands together, eyeballing the beach. “Okay. Rebound time. Which one of these guys looks like a winner to you—”

“No, no, no, I’m not ready for that.” I cut him off. I can practically feel Avery rolling her eyes.

“Levi broke up with her not even an hour ago, idiot. She’s obviously not looking to hook up with any of the lame ding-dongs at this party.”

Austin drops his jaw, offended again. It’s like he’s playing a game of trying to help me but can’t get past the first boss battle to pass the level. The boss being Avery.

Elias stands up for him— literally, he stands up from the tree trunk he was sitting on. “Don’t call him an idiot. What does he know about relationships?”

“You should know, you’re in one together.” Avery jests.

Will leans in to whisper, “I know you’re sad right now but at least you’re lucky enough that tonight the stars have chosen that Avery’s sassiness will be directed towards those two.”

I grin.

“Come on, girl,” Avery hooks her arm through mine. “Let’s roast some marshmallows.”

“I feel like a fucking marshmallow right now.” Austin mutters.

I let Avery drag me on one of the wooden seats by the fire. Some of the guys from Levi's football team are here. I hope none of them saw me arrive. I'm on pretty good terms with most of them, especially Levi's best friend, Jesse.

Avery puts a stick in my hand. She takes a sip of her beer and nudges my arm. "See? Isn't this better than some creepy lake?"

The guys are having a contest over who can roast their marshmallow the fastest. Austin is too competitive and holds his marshmallow *in* the fire. When it goes up in flames, he shakes his stick so hard the marshmallow flies onto Elias' pants, who screams out that "the marshmallows are fighting back".

"Yeah, you're right." I smile. "I thought it would be smart to reflect on it, but I don't think I'm ready. I just keep wondering what I did wrong- not thinking is probably the best thing for me right now." I take a sip of the beer. I don't plan on getting drunk. I don't think heightening my emotions is the best course of action.

"Pais, if this was really about feelings, there's nothing you did wrong. It's just... what happens sometimes. Don't think you're a bad girlfriend. You were the best girlfriend to Levi, just like you're the best girlfriend to those three idiots." She nods her head at them. They're trying to catch marshmallows with their mouths now- while they're melted. Sometimes I wonder what would happen if you just let those three out in the wild by themselves, Bear Grylls style.

"I know I'm pretty biased because I'm your best friend, but feelings can change any day regardless of how amazing you are. Chances are your feelings would've changed eventually, too. But you just love a little harder than he does. That's a good thing."

I smile. If anyone gives good love advice, it's Avery. It just so happens that she's terrible at following her own advice.

"You're sweet." I put my head on her shoulder.

"I know." She pulls her melted marshmallow off her stick and pops it in her mouth "Also, I think the male brain is prone to focus on the negative, so they get bored more easily."

I laugh.

"Oh my God, guys," Elias' gasp makes my head turn. "Jenn's here."

His eyes go big like a puppy's seeing a treat. He runs his hands through his hair briskly. He looks so nervous I reach over and fix his hair for him. Elias' crush on Jenn Macy is friend group lore by now, it's been so long. She's beautiful, but what's made Elias linger is that she's the nicest girl ever. He claims his biggest weakness are girls

who are sweeter than sugar– which makes sense, because Elias is sweeter than sugar himself.

“So talk to her.” Austin says.

“What do I say?”

“Well, she’s a rich girl.” Austin clears her throat. “So just be like: *Oh, this just reminds me of the beaches on the Maldives.*” He puts on an obnoxious voice and pretends to flick his hair back. “*Have you been? My family summers there every year. Don’t you just love the southern wind in your hair? My dad owns multiple companies that exploit low-wage workers, but no one cares because he donates to charity.*” He laughs in the fakest way possible, pressing his palm to his chest.

“But I’ve never been to the Maldives!” Elias panics, as if Austin was in any way serious. “And my dad doesn’t own a company. I mean, he might, I haven’t spoken to him in fifteen years–”

“Ooh, use that.” Austin pats his shoulder. “You were raised by a single mom, that’s good material.”

“You mean exploit my trauma like my fake dad exploits low-wage workers?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Avery cuts in. “Just be yourself. You’re a pretty guy. You make me laugh sometimes.”

“Yes!” Elias jumps up. “More of that. I’m pretty, I’m funny. What else?” He points at Austin.

“You’re a great baller.”

Elias nods, then points at me.

“Oh, you want *all* of us to go?”

“Obviously.”

“Fine. I love your smile.” I don’t have to lie. Avery’s right: Elias Flores is a pretty boy. He’s Colombian, his dark hair falls like a young Leo DiCaprio’s, and he’s got these playful brown eyes– puppy eyes if you’ve ever seen them.

He beams at my compliment. Then he turns to Will.

“You’ve got a big heart, man.”

“Awwwww.” Austin and Avery coo in unison.

“Thanks guys. I’m going for it.” Elias rolls his neck like he’s about to run a marathon. He prances towards Jenn and her friends. Austin and Will prod each other and scurry after him to spy on him.

“They grow up so fast.” Avery speaks melancholically. “One minute they’re just dumb kids, the next minute they’re... larger, dumb kids.”

"I know." I prick another marshmallow on my stick. I hand Avery one, but her attention appears to be nowhere near me.

"Willow!" She shrieks and hops towards a girl I have a hard time placing at first. She must be someone from Avery's old dance crew. She used to dance in Newport when she was younger, a few towns over. I don't think she sees her old teammates that much anymore, which explains the hugging and yelling.

I roast my marshmallow while I let my gaze move over to Elias. He seems to be doing pretty well for himself. Jenn is smiling, even if her friends won't let her be alone with him. Will and Austin are goofing off in the distance: Austin's chugging down a beer while Will cheers him on. I smile to myself.

The brief peace washes away as fast as it came when I hear his voice. My head snaps in his direction so fast my neck cramps up. He walks up the beach with Troy, another one of his teammates. The football team welcomes him with open arms and pats on the back. Levi accepts a beer that's shoved in his face. My heart jumps out of my chest.

Oh *shit*. I'm not ready for this.

"Avery." I hiss at her, but my voice is overpowered by the music and the group of people that stands between me and her. She's too focused on Willow to even notice that Levi just arrived. Meanwhile I am too aware of the fact that him and his teammates are moving closer.

I drop my roasting stick, submerging my marshmallows in the flames. I run away from the bonfire, but the beach is so open it doesn't even matter, I'm still right in his line of sight. I can't go back to my car either, I'd have to walk right past him.

My eyes lift to the lifeguard tower. I don't even think it through and hurry up the narrow steps. My adrenaline makes me trust the shaky thing more than I usually would.

Once I get up, I fly to the edge to watch him. Levi isn't looking in this direction, thank God. He doesn't have time to: the entire football team has eyes on him as he's talking, no doubt telling them what happened. The fact that he actually looks sad makes my heart hum in pain.

"Uh, hey—"

I shriek at the voice, because I realize there's *another person* up here. I jump back, eyes flying to the guy next to me.

“Okay, wow.” He frowns at my panic. I feel eyes on us from below– people heard me. I duck down, planting my back against the wooden panels that enclose the tower. I shut my eyes.

“Oh my God, I’m such an idiot.”

I peek through my lashes. The guy casts a look over the edge whilst taking a hit of the joint between his fingers. “Who’s the bad guy?”

I tilt my head to look up at the stars. “There’s no bad guy. Just a... guy.” I look back at him, trying to figure out if his face looks familiar. Granted, it’s dark up here, but I still don’t think I’ve ever seen him before.

“What are you doing up here?” I ask.

“Oh, you know. Being super paranoid about seeing some guy.” He fakes a panicked tone. I roll my eyes. Mocking me, that’s great.

“You can come up, you know. No one’s looking anymore.”

I hesitate, but come to my feet. I inch to the edge and find he’s right. No one’s paying attention to us.

I hate how anxious I am.

Suddenly his hand is in front of my face, the smoke of his joint floating up. He’s offering. When I take too long to do anything, he looks at me. Then he shrugs.

“What the hell,” I take it from him. I put it to my lips and inhale deeply. I feel him watching me as I let the smoke sit in my lungs for a few seconds.

Austin taught me how to smoke. I remember I used to be so against it. More scared of it, because it’s illegal in North Carolina. It seemed like if you wanted to get some weed, you’d have to sell your soul to the Grim Reaper. But then I grew older and realized good weed is easier to get than good strawberries. Levi never liked it when I smoked. He’s an aspiring athlete, so it’s like forbidden fruit. Meanwhile Austin, Elias and Will are on the basketball team, and they smoke on the regular– but Levi always thought it’d ruin his performance, and I understood. It’s not like I do it regularly, either. I try to stay away from it unless I get it from Austin, because I know he has a good dealer.

But tonight is just one of those exceptions.

It’s pretty strong stuff, I notice. My brain is already a little woozy. I close my eyes and try to focus on the waves crashing against the riverside, rather than the music and the people below. Because we’re so high up, it feels like we’re floating above everyone. I take another hit and hand the joint back to the guy.

"Thanks." I say, smoke leaving my mouth. My gaze is pulled down to Levi again. Laughing with Jesse. Why do I hate that? What could he possibly be laughing about right now?

"Don't do that."

I frown at the guy. He brings his joint to his lips.

"Don't do what?"

"You keep looking down."

"So?"

"So," He blows out smoke. "Don't. Keep your head high."

My frown deepens. "What are you, an aspiring life coach?"

He smirks. "If you want me to be."

I know he's not coming on to me. He just has this way of talking. Either way, it makes me sigh.

"See that guy in the green hoodie?" I throw my arms over the wooden banister, ignoring the stranger's advice as my eyes cling onto Levi.

"Yeah. Quarterback, right?"

Of course he knows who Levi is. Everyone does.

"Yeah. He dumped me about an hour ago." I plant my chin on my fist.

"Bad breakup?"

"No. Not at all. That's the thing, he was really kind and respectful. We should be fine. I just don't want to see him."

"Of course not. Why would you want to see a guy who doesn't love you? The people who don't want to love you shouldn't be in your life."

I chew on my lip anxiously. Levi smiles whilst listening to Jesse tell him something. A twisted, horrible part of myself imagines he's smiling at me like that.

"What if I love *them*?" My voice goes soft. I would feel pathetic saying this in front of my friends, but right now, with this random dude, it doesn't matter. I'll probably never talk to him again. Our conversation will disappear when this night does. There's something easy in that.

"It doesn't stop from one day to another." He says. "But he stopped little by little, so you'll stop too. Little by little."

I eye him. I know people get profound after smoking weed, but I've never seen *this*. "Thanks... Edgar Allan Poe."

"That was Pablo Neruda, actually."

"You were actually quoting a poet?" I raise a brow. "Oh, I get it. You're not a life coach, you're just a little pretentious."

He grins, not looking at me. This guy may as well just be a projection of my imagination.

"Can I guess who your friends are from up here?" I ask bluntly.

"I feel like it wouldn't even matter if I said no." He says.

"You're right."

He hands over the joint again. I take it and inspect the people down at the beach. Then I look at him again— really looking at him, for the first time. His hair is dark, black almost. In between wavy and curly— he'd probably have glorious curls if he grew out his hair. It's longer on top, short on the sides, a few locks fall over his head. His eyes look golden in the fire, but I don't know if they're actually that bright. He's wearing a green jacket over a grey hoodie. When he meets my gaze, I appoint mine to the crowd again and take a hit of the joint.

"You're not a jock," I say. "I'm just gonna cross off the people that I already know that are here... Hm. Ooh, not that guy." I say about Derek Randall, wandering on the beach by himself, probably looking for a girl he can creep out.

"Not those." I eye the group of stoners sitting by the water.

"What criteria are you using here?" He asks me.

"Well, you're not flashy, or loud. Your friends aren't up here with you so either they don't smoke, or you just like to be alone. Then there's the necessary factor of who could possibly tolerate you quoting Pablo Neruda." I hand him back his joint. And then I find a perfect candidate.

Mike Ko. He's with a couple of other guys, a little removed from the central party. They're not drunk, not really that present. They're just... chill. Chill is the embodiment of Mike Ko. I know he does smoke weed sometimes, but there's a beer in his hand, so maybe he doesn't want to mix the two. He has style and charm when he needs to, but most of the time he keeps himself in the background, which is exactly what makes him so intriguing. Avery's had a crush on him since forever, and I don't blame her. Mike Ko's pretty much the Korean version of the Neruda partisan next to me.

"Mike Ko." I say confidently.

He's in the middle of taking a hit. I know he's surprised when I watch the joint stop burning for a second. He looks my way, light furrow in his brows.

I grin. "You don't even have to give me the satisfaction of confirming it. This right here... is enough." I gesture at his facial expression.

He shakes his head. "You're oddly amusing."

"And you're amusingly odd."

He puts his joint out on the banister, chucking it into a tin can in the corner. "I'm gonna head back to my friend... Mike." He gives me a look. I can't hide my smile.

"Have fun hiding up here."

"Don't patronize me."

He puts up his palms innocently and turns around the corner. A moment later I watch him strut on the beach. He's indeed walking towards Mike, but before he can get to him, he's halted by my own guy friends, who run up to him all excited. While they're practically jumping up and down, the guy himself greets them nonchalantly, with that same lazy grin on his face.

Huh.

Then I catch Avery, walking around with her phone in her hands, looking up every two seconds. Oh, crap. I take my phone out and see she's sent me about ten messages. I make my way down the lifeguard tower before she starts calling out my name for everybody to hear.

"Hey." I walk up to her.

Her head lifts and the panic leaves her eyes. "Where've you been, man?" She puts her phone away. "When I saw Levi, I was afraid you might have jumped in the river."

"Almost did." I sigh. "Can we get out of here?"

"Of course. You must be tired, huh?" She rubs my arm, tilting her head sympathetically. I see through her act instantly.

"You're trying to get out of watching the Madeleine McCann documentary, aren't you?"

"What? No!" She drops her hand from my arm. "I'm super pumped to watch a documentary about a little girl who was probably murdered."

"I actually think she was abducted into human trafficking."

"Oh, stop, you're spoiling all the fun." The sarcasm seeps through her voice so shamelessly I have to laugh.

"Hey, guys!" She calls for our friends' attention. I don't see the guy from before around anymore. They come our way.

"You're gonna help me get Paisley out of here without being spotted by Levi." Avery tells them.

"Got it. Turtle formation." Elias gets in front of me. Will hops to my left side, Austin to my right and Avery covers me from behind. We start moving.

“How’d it go with Jenn?” I ask Elias.

“Pretty good! But her friends don’t trust me, man. I could tell. I made her laugh a couple times and they just stayed dead silent.”

“Maybe they just didn’t think you were funny.”

“Impossible.” Elias scoffs. I try to match his speed, but it’s hard.

“Can you slow down? I can’t run in the sand.” I hear Avery behind me, gripping onto my shoulders for dear life.

“Yeah, why are we speeding up?” I pant.

“I’m trying to get a personal record.” Elias says.

“When do you think we’ll *ever* do this again?” Avery exclaims.

“I don’t know. I’m free next Wednesday.”

“Is this a good time to let you guys know everyone’s looking at us?” Austin says calmly. Avery and I shriek and push forward.

3 Deer In Headlights

September 3 – 2:28 PM

“Afternoon, Paisley.” Rhonda smiles as she stirs her coffee. She’s been the receptionist at my grandma’s retirement home as long as I can remember. She mostly works weekends, so she’s here just about every time I come to visit grandma.

“Hi Rhonda. Is she upstairs?”

“She is, she woke up from her nap around two. She had a feeling you’d come today.”

I give her a smile and take the stairs. I yawn twice on the way up. Avery and I watched the Madeleine McCann documentary when we got home last night. We were so paranoid by the end of it, we spent another hour just blasting music and dancing in my bedroom to get us in a good mood.

This morning I woke up with the urge to text Levi: say good morning, ask how his night had been. I looked at the picture of him and I on my bedroom wall, and I couldn’t take it down. Then I cried for a good half an hour. Solid morning routine.

Grandma’s soft voice tells me to come in after I’ve knocked. She sits by her window with a book in her lap. Her gray hair curls at her jaw, her reading glasses rest on the tip of her nose. Her concentrated frown shifts to a smile when she sees me.

“Hi grandma.”

“My girl.” She takes off her glasses and comes to hug me. Her hugs have been frailer since her stroke last year. She’s weakened a lot since then. She loses track of her words, she forgets entire days have passed, and she’s always cold– though she refuses to wear pants. Grandma loves her skirts and dresses. They make her feel younger.

We get some tea in the common room downstairs. Grandma makes it herself: she forces herself into the daily cooking all the time, the staff of the Carolina House just gave in, and they let her help. When she still lived at the old house, she was always cooking. She would have a variety of self-made snacks on the table whenever we visited her and grandpa. Now, the only thing close to a kitchen is the sink in her room. It makes her sadder than you can imagine.

It’s quite crowded in the common room, which is typical for a Sunday afternoon. Families come to have a cup of tea with their elders.

I take a sniff of my tea. "Smells kind of sour."

"It's citrus sunrise. Shall we?" Grandma raises her eyebrows, lifting her cup to her mouth. We sip at the same time.

"I kinda like it." I sip another time.

"I hate it." Grandma puts her cup down. I snort, almost spilling hot tea all over myself. Grandma and I have spent the last couple of years trying out an endless variation of tea flavors. Her cabinets are overflowing with boxes of tea. We've come to find that grandma's more of an herbal tea gal and I'm more into sweet flavors, like strawberry and blueberry.

"There's something wrong, isn't there?" Grandma eyes me.

I've said this a million times, and every time I do my parents laugh at me square in my face: but I think my grandmother's psychic. She must be, she sees and knows everything. She knew I was coming to visit her today, and here I am. I haven't even been here five minutes and she knows something's up.

"Well... Levi broke up with me. But it's fine."

Grandma peers at me as she sips her tea. "It is? That's strange."

I sigh. "It's not fine, but you know. I'm not... dying."

"No, I certainly don't hope so." She smiles. "You're so young... When you're young and in love it's often one of two things: either it is everything you want and need... or it is an imagination of that."

"But... why would I imagine something that isn't there?" I ask.

"Because part of it is. Levi is a sweetheart. He's got a nice family. It's comforting to find yourself standing next to someone like that. You know he'd never do you wrong. But it's not... everything."

My eyes go to the floor. Her words make me sad. Because maybe, somewhere, they're true.

"It is the loss of security you are mourning. Not him." Grandma adds. I sip my tea, trying to ignore the discomfort churning in my stomach. As if Levi was my safety net.

"Hardly anyone gets it right on the first try, dear. Lord knows I didn't." She raises her brows, making me smile. Grandma dated around quite a bit before she met grandpa. I think it's cool, especially considering she lived in a time and a town where she was expected to marry the first guy with a proper job, preferably before she could even reach her twenties.

"When it's everything, you'll know. There's no reason to dwell on this one."

I put my tea away before I snort it out of my nose again. My grandmother's basically telling me to suck it up. To her, everything always winds up being okay. I have no idea how she lives that way, especially since she's lived nearly five times longer than I have.

I play card games with her for a while before I go home. I spend the remaining hours of my weekend distracting myself in the world of Netflix and taking a two-hour long bath. I tell myself I'm doing fine, and it's easy to think I am when I can pretend I'm not actually living my own life.

But the next morning, I have to go to school and actually face Levi. And it's ridiculous how long I stand in front of the mirror trying to make myself look good.

Avery plays all my favorite songs in the car on the way to school, trying to get me to join in. Usually this would work, but today my mind is too clouded for it. I'm lucky I don't have any of my morning classes with Levi, something that used to bug me. Lunch time faces me with the inevitable. He's at his usual table with his usual friends, throwing his head back as he laughs.

Ugh.

I throw my apple core in the trash can near our table. I want to laugh that hard and I want him to see me. So he knows I'm not some weak lamb that cannot function without him.

"Dude, you gotta stop." Austin pulls my attention away from Levi. "You know how hard it is to concentrate on my work when you're sitting here looking sad as hell, yearning for that guy?" He stares at me with a pen in his mouth.

"Aren't you copying Elias' homework?" I eye the pages in front of him.

"Yeah, have you *seen* Elias' handwriting? This is probably harder than doing the assignment myself."

Elias does have the most boyish, sloppy handwriting I have ever seen. We always tell him he'd make a perfect doctor.

My eyes are drawn to Levi again, like a magnet. He's wearing his black and yellow letterman jacket, like most of the guys are. Even from where I'm sitting, I see the dimples in his cheeks when he smiles. My heart flutters. I quickly turn myself back to Austin,

"I'm not yearning for him."

Austin chuckles. "You know who looks at me like that, Paisley? Rebecca Wallace. And you know how that makes me feel." He looks across the cafeteria. Indeed, there

sits Rebecca: chin resting on her palm, staring at Austin dreamily. She tenses up when we catch her, smiling awkwardly.

In her defense: lots of people crush on Austin, with his ochre brown complexion and black curls. If Rebecca weren't a sophomore and lost the braces, I'm sure Austin would mind a lot less.

Austin shakes his head. "She's a sweet girl, but she's constantly showing up where I am. It's like, every day when I walk out the door, there she is."

"She's your neighbor."

"You know what you gotta do?" He ignores my remark completely. "Be unavailable. And look good while you're doing it. Don't show him that you're hurting: you need to show him that he can never have you again. People want what they can't have."

"I'm not trying to change his mind, I don't want someone who doesn't want me."

"No, but it's fun to make him confused." He taps his index finger on his temple and continues writing. I can never really tell when Austin is being serious and when he's just messing with me, but it's part of his charm.

"I'm gonna go to my locker, okay?" I throw my bag over my shoulder. Levi's locker is close to mine. In about five minutes, he'll be there to get his Math books, I better beat him to it.

Aaaand I am officially pathetic.

"No, I need your company." Austin pleads. "I don't wanna sit here all on my own."

"Come on, you're never alone with Rebecca around." I grin.

"Yeah, when I'm tied up in her basement surrounded by millions of pictures of myself, we'll see if you're still laughing."

"You are so dramatic." I roll my eyes— as I do, I spot Elias and Will coming our way. "Don't worry, the relief squad is almost here."

Austin flashes a grin when he sees the guys, patting the table for them to join him. "Finally! My English oral only took like ten minutes. You've been gone for, what, half an hour?"

"Because one of us suddenly forgot the entire plot of Macbeth." Will gives Elias a look.

"I didn't forget. You can't forget something you've never read." Elias defends himself. "Besides, I totally saved us by doing that Romeo and Juliet reenactment. Miss Coby loved it."

"Amazingly, he's right." Will sighs.

Elias rubs my hair to pucker me up. He's been doing that a lot since he grew taller than me. There was a sweet spot in freshman year when Avery and I started growing before the boys did and we were taller than them for a good half a year. Will and Austin grew bigger than us pretty soon, but up until six months ago, I could always look down on Elias' head. I miss that.

Will and Elias take up the empty seats surrounding Austin. A basketball-related conversation emerges.

"Alright, I'll see you guys later."

"Oh, Pais." Austin halts me. "Remember," He glides his hand in front of his face, and suddenly his expression is stone-cold. "Don't even look at him. And shake those hips that your mama gave you."

"Mama?" Elias speaks up. "I say papa James can get it, too."

The three of them laugh. No matter how ridiculous it is, I take Austin's advice: I lift my head and walk, keeping my eyes on the cafeteria doors. I don't realize I've been holding my breath until they close behind me and I damn near get a headache. For a first-timer, that went pretty okay.

On my way to my locker, I pass Jesse Davis, also in his letterman jacket. Next to being Levi's best friend, Jesse is kind a notorious party-thrower. I've never been to one of his parties that hasn't been absolutely crazy. He's always been one of my favorite friends of Levi.

He gives me an awkward smile, followed by an even more awkward wave. And that's it. Not even a chat.

I'm in a crappy mood when I get to my locker. Goodbye self-blame stage of the break-up, hello bitterness. I hadn't realized how much of a divorce-situation this is. People are going to be picking sides. Levi is the quarterback of the football team, so I know how scarce my side is going to end up looking.

Just as I get a hold of my Biology book, a big shadow falls over me. My heart jumps: I don't know why I'm still not used to this, after two years.

There used to be two high schools in New Bern: Wilson Creek High and New Bern High. Wilson Creek closed down due to budget cuts a couple years back, and there was a huge stream of new students at New Bern High. A lot of us had to switch lockers so the new freshmen could join the others in the east wing. And at first, I couldn't be happier, because I'm only four lockers removed from Avery.

But I'm zero lockers removed from Danny Rayas.

The Rayas name extends this small town by a long shot. Vito Rayas used to be the infamous crime lord of the Rayas cartel in Mexico. In the seventies, Vito and his family went into hiding in New Bern, while his henchmen took control over almost four U.S. States, including North Carolina. By then he didn't really have to hide anymore, and he never went back to Mexico, either: New Bern was an ideal control center for his operations in the U.S., I don't even want to know how many estates he owns here. He died in the seventies, and his legacy was left to his four sons:

Raphael Rayas, the eldest, is the only traceable Rayas brother. He still lives in the ominous Rayas house on Woodrow: running into him is like running into Darth Vader, which is why I try to avoid that at all times.

Nicolas Rayas, the second oldest, is on wanted lists throughout five different states for running a scary amount of illegal drug industries. A few weeks ago, the police found an entire basement network in Tennessee connected through tunnels, built for mass production of crystal meth. They picked up about six of Nicolas' associates, but they couldn't find Nicolas. They never can.

Ricardo Rayas hasn't been on the radar for a while, but word is he left the cartel behind to go solo.

Benito Rayas is the youngest, but arguably most notorious Rayas brother. He took over the cartel even before his father Vito died: he held all four states where the Rayas resided, managed to take Alabama with it, and parts of Mexico. Governmental agencies and the cops stayed out of his way: he had so many connections, at one point they went above the law. If I'm to believe my parents, he was set to rise to Pablo Escobar-levels of power.

Until his body was found in the Atlantic Ocean in the early 2000s.

And my locker-neighbor Danny so happens to be Benito Rayas' youngest son.

Jesse Davis is known for his fun parties, Danny Rayas is known for his fun, homicidal family.

I try not to noticeably pick up speed as I swap my books. With Danny around, you never really want to do anything noticeable. He's so big. Tall like a tree and broad like a tank. Even in elementary school, I remember Danny was already bigger than the rest of the guys in his year. Levi always joked how he'd be a perfect fit for the football team.

When I shut my locker, I am appalled to see he shuts his at the same time. We even turn around simultaneously, making my eyes meet with his chest.

"Oh, I—"

He struts off without even looking at me, as if he didn't even see me. Before I can sigh in relief, he walks up to a girl with black hair in a black hoodie. And she smiles at him.

Smiles.

It gets weirder. Danny not only smiles back, he grabs the girl's hand and kisses the side of her head. They strut off together.

This might've been the most normal human interaction to witness in a high school hallway if the guy wasn't Danny Rayas. I can't even get the guy to smile at me, let alone did I think he was ever capable of showing affection like *that*.

I tried, once. It took me months of sharing my locker space with him to work up the courage. I thought I could get on his good side: I thought, maybe Danny and I would have this funny thing where we'd always see each other at our lockers, and we'd just smile and say hi. That's it. That's all I wanted. I'd have even settled for a nod.

Avery had called me delirious, and she'd been right. Because I smiled. Danny slammed his locker so hard the lock fell off. He stared at me while he kept leaning forward, until I had backed up so far I fell to the ground. I didn't even dare to get up until he'd turned the corner.

I watch him walk off with the girl, and I'm not the only one. People whisper to each other as they pass by— only once they're sure Danny can't hear them. I catch the girl peeking around, she feels the stares. She looks so tiny next to him.

But then again, who doesn't?

Then the Pablo Neruda guy from the lifeguard tower turns the corner, with Mike Ko by his side. It's like the hallway turns into a live movie for me to watch: because before I can even think about saying hello to him, his eyes lock with Danny's. They hold each other's stare as they walk by. Even if I can only see the side of Danny's head, he looks like he wants to kill Pablo Neruda.

To be fair, Danny looks at everyone that way. But Pablo Neruda looks like he wants to kill him *back*. That's rare. Danny always holds the high ground because people fear him. They just submit themselves to him.

Eyes glued on the interaction, I back up around the corner. My butt bumps into someone, and I snap out of it.

"Oh, sorry—" I freeze mid-turning. "Levi."

He's at his locker. Math books in his hands.

He smiles. "Hi... What are you doing?"

“Nothing.” The scent of his shampoo makes my stomach sink. I take a step back from him. “I was just... practicing moonwalking.”

I wonder if my subconscious has some sort of affiliation with Michael Jackson.

“Well, that was terrible.” He jokes.

“That’s why I’m practicing. Gotta make MJ proud.”

Levi smiles at my ridicule– it gives me butterflies. I hate that.

“Okay. Bye.” I turn the other way.

“Wait, Paisley...”

I pretend I don’t hear him and basically sprint to the Bio classroom. I find Avery and drop down next to her.

“Hey, how was your meeting with Miss Jules?” I don’t give Avery the time to get a good look at me. She’ll know something’s up.

“Oh, you know.” Avery says. “I just smiled and nodded as she went through my options for college. We mostly talked about Johns Hopkins... What’s wrong with you?”

My gaze whips to her. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve got this face.”

“What face?”

“You get this twitchy look when you’re anxious. Like a deer in headlights.”

I squirm at the mistimed comparison. Avery’s eyes widen when she realizes what she just said. “Wow, that was so unintentional. Isn’t that crazy? It’s like when you almost hit that deer, you almost hit this anxious version of yourself, like–”

“Avery.”

“Too soon? I thought so.”

I sigh, “I just bumped into Levi.”

“Oof.”

“Yeah. I ran away.”

“Oof.”

“Yeah.”

“Sooner or later you’re gonna have to talk to him.” Avery flips open her book.

“Why?” I heat up at the thought of it.

“You know how Levi is. If something doesn’t sit right with him, he’s gonna want to talk about it.”

“Oh, ugh,” Elias turns around in his seat in front of us. I hadn’t even noticed he’d sat down. “That is exactly what I’m talking about. Levi has to be such a perfect human being.”

“Do *you* need to talk to Levi?” Avery grins at him.

He scoffs. “Please. I could do better than Levi.”

I give him a look. His face slacks, suddenly remembering who he’s talking to.

“Oh, I– you know, it’s not like–”

“Just shut up.” I let him off the hook.

“Thank you.” He whispers and turns back around.

I take my books out. “Hey, do you know if Danny Rayas has a girlfriend?”

Avery snorts. “Pais, if you’re looking for a rebound, Danny isn’t the Rayas I would go for.”

“I’m not asking for me.” I cringe at the mere thought of it. “I saw– Who *is* the Rayas you would go for?”

“Cyrus, Danny’s brother. He’s more mature. Or Raphael.”

“The uncle? Avery, he’s like sixty-five years old.”

“I’m just saying, if I *had* to choose between being single for the rest of my life or dating a Rayas, it’d be either of those two. Who’d you choose?”

“I’m not gonna date a Rayas–”

“But if you had to. Gun to your head.” She says. “It’s not that hard, the Rayas are a pretty attractive bloodline. They’re like the Kardashians if they were a mafia.”

“Which they pretty much are.” Elias joins the conversation again. “Hey, I know which Rayas Paisley would date.”

“Well, it can’t be Danny, because I just saw him holding hands with a girl in the hallway.”

Avery’s eyes grow big. “Oh my God! Why didn’t you lead with that?!”

“I was getting there, but then you started proclaiming your love for Raphael Rayas.”

She rolls her eyes. “Who is she?”

“I don’t know, I’d never seen her before.”

Mr. Hicks claps his hands together, standing up in front of the class. “Please turn over to page twenty-two and start by discussing the processes of cellular respiration with your partner. You have five minutes.”

Elias sighs and turns back around. I turn over my page vacantly. Avery leans in. “I don’t know if he has a girlfriend. I do know that Amber Riley’s father went to the hospital last night with broken hands.” She whispers– because Amber Riley is sitting at the front of the class, shoulders up like she’s trying to hide.

“Frank Riley? The guy who sells boats?” I match Avery’s volume.

She nods. "My stepdad told me."

Avery's stepdad being a councilman means Avery's always first to know about the crazy stuff that happens in this town.

"But his hands, they weren't just broken. They were shattered."

My jaw drops. I scoot closer to Avery. "What happened?"

"Frank's story was that he accidentally trapped himself underneath a boat engine. But the medics said that it was almost impossible for him to have hurt himself that way. His hands were so messed up, it was more like someone *threw* the engine on them."

Shivers run over my legs.

"Holy shit."

"Yeah. Apparently the Rayas had him do some sort of job and he didn't deliver."

After Benito's death, the Rayas were quiet for years, having lost their kingpin. Some people thought the cartel died with him. But a few years ago, criminal activities started rising again. Cyrus Rayas, Danny's older brother and Avery's dream Rayas, apparently, was barely fourteen when he was rumored to have murdered someone. They say he was mentored by Raphael his entire childhood, being prepped to take over the cartel. He's rebuilt the Rayas empire at his twenty-three years of age. He has people working for him in every nook and cranny of North Carolina: it's every week that I hear something about a car chase, shootout, or house raid.

"Danny was probably in on it, too. If he really has a girlfriend, I imagine she must be completely under his control." Avery shakes her head. "Didn't you say something once about how some women fall in love with serial killers?"

I nod. "Lots of women were totally obsessed with Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy."

Avery gasps. "Oh, and you showed me those blog posts about those girls who were all fawning over school shooters." She gags, wiggling her fingers in disgust. "I know I was joking with my Rayas dating line-up, but I can't even imagine having romantic feelings for people like that."

Romanticizing psychopaths has happened for centuries. It can be *hybristophilia*: the arousal of being with someone so dangerous. Or *Stockholm Syndrome*. But it starts way lower than that: how many girls say they can't help but fall for 'bad boys'? Avery is a walking poster-ad for that. You could say it's for the rush of being with someone like that, or out of deep belief that the man can be changed—

but honestly, I think most of the time it's because there are way too many manipulative, horrible men on this planet.

"Paisley and Avery." Mr. Hicks calls us out. "Please shut your books and start us off with the first stage of cellular respiration."

Shit.

"The first stage is glycolysis." Avery narrates perfectly. "It's basically splitting sugar into CO₂ and H₂O. In the process, ATP is generated as well as NADH."

"Excellent." Mr. Hicks says. "Now, I'd like Paisley to illustrate this first stage on the board." He holds out a piece of chalk. I give Avery a side-eye. She gives me an apologetic glance.

I clear my throat and get up as slowly as possible. Elias can barely contain his laughter when I walk by him.

This should be fun.

4 Dark Circles

September 4 – 2:16 PM

“Personally, I thought it was really funny when you demonstrated the Krebs cycle using actual crabs.” Avery reminds me of my utter failure as we walk out of class.

I roll my eyes. “Quizzing me on knowledge I usually stomp inside my head the night before a test a *month* in advance, is delirious.”

Avery snickers. We say bye to Elias, he doesn’t have History with us next. The daily announcements blare in the background, mostly focused on the football game this Friday night. The first one ever that I won’t be attending. Though it stings a little, I can’t say I ever cared much for the sport besides the fact that my boyfriend was the quarterback, even if they have been state champion twice in the past three years. I grew up with three boys who play basketball and dad’s TV content of choice is Home Renovation shows, not sports.

“Avery!” Kendall Fisher stops us in the hallway. Well, Avery. “We *need* to talk about the Halloween party.”

Avery is head of the school’s party planning committee. She’s organized many killer parties in our high school career so far, she’s just got a knack for it. The preparations beforehand are as chaotic as the parties themselves are flawless. She always butts heads with the rest of the committee. Mostly...

“What’d Randy do now?” Avery sighs.

Kendall looks pained. “He wants to let his friend’s band play. They exclusively do heavy metal versions of Disney movie soundtracks.”

What the hell would that even sound like? Is it bad that I’m curious to know?

“Oh my God,” Avery grits her teeth. “I’m gonna kill him.” She snatches her phone out of her pocket. Her fingers race across the screen. “Ew, he’s sending me some of their cover songs already. *Can You Feel The Hate Tonight? Circle Of Death?*”

“They just did a Lion King EP. Or, Lion Cunt, as they call it.”

“Does kind of match the Halloween theme.” I grin.

Kendall and Avery both scowl at me.

“That’s it, I’m calling that deejay from Wakefield. I don’t care how expensive he is.” Avery starts typing even more aggressively. Kendall peers along with her. I announce I’m going to the bathroom, but they’re both too aggravated to bat an eye.

I spend more time studying myself in the mirror than I do peeing. My dark circles make me sigh. They would be there regardless of poor sleep or anxiety or having just been dumped: I've had them since I was little. I've tried serums and stupid at-home remedies, but mom tells me they're genetic. Like from my birth it was decided that I should always look tired. Usually I stick a coat of concealer on there, but this morning I couldn't be bothered.

I want to walk out when I hear a soft whimper come out of one of the bathroom stalls. I had no idea anyone else was even in here with me. Only one of the doors is locked. A pair of black Vans underneath, that belong to the sniffing girl who must've thought I left already, as silently as I've been staring at myself.

"Hey, are you okay?"

The crying stops abruptly. "Oh, I'm fine. Just allergies."

I don't know what to do. Something has to be seriously wrong if you're crying on the school toilet. I should know. When I got my first period in gym class and leaked through my shorts, I bawled my eyes out on the bathroom. All I wanted was my mom, or Avery. Not some random girl.

"...Are you sure?" I clasp and unclasp my fingers. "Do you want me to get anyone for you?"

A few seconds pass. Then the stall door opens up. The girl that steps out is none other than the girl I saw with Danny Rayas. I immediately wonder if she didn't answer my question because the person she would've wanted me to get, was Danny.

She glances at me for only a millisecond before her gaze darts to the floor. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes puffy.

"I'm fine." She utters as she walks to the sink. She's embarrassed. I don't know how to tell her not to be. My lips part, words caught in the back of my throat. It's none of my business, anyway. I should shut up.

Her sleeve rolls up as she rinses her hands. I catch the dark shadow on her forearm. Similar to a bruise Elias got after a basketball game a few weeks ago, when a player on the opposite team had decided to make it personal.

She pulls her sleeve down when she feels me staring- so harshly water splashes all over her sweater. Her anxiety rubs off on me. Danny's girlfriend was crying on the bathroom. Danny's girlfriend has a bruise on her arm. Danny and his brother smashed a boat engine on Frank Riley's hands.

I open my mouth again, but before words can even come out, Avery and Kendall enter the restroom. The girl takes the momentum to grab her bag and hurry out.

“Hey– wow.” Avery steps aside as she slips past her. Avery gives me a quizzical look. “Who was that?”

“You don’t know?” Kendall lowers her voice. “That’s Sienna Sadik. Danny Rayas’ girlfriend.”

Avery’s eyebrows lift. “Well. There’s your answer.” She looks at me. Not the answer I was hoping for.

“How batshit crazy do you have to be to be attracted to that creep, right?” Kendall keeps her voice low, like Danny himself might be lurking around the corner.

“Kendall, didn’t you go out with an arsonist over the Summer?” Avery turns to her.

“Ooh, Toby!” Her eyes twinkle. “I should call him.” She smiles to herself and heads into one of the stalls. Avery gives me a look as we leave the bathroom. “I cannot believe some of the people we go to school with are real human beings.”

My eyes dart across the hallway, but of course Sienna is long gone.

“Paisley,” Avery laughs. “What is up with you today?”

“I just have a bad feeling about this,” I mutter. “Her and Danny.”

“Really? Because it sounds like you’re just distracting yourself with some conspiracy so you don’t have to think about Levi.”

I halt for a moment. Levi.

Right.

“Maybe,” I keep walking. “But that doesn’t mean I should ignore it.”



After school I have an extra hour to kill, since Avery called an emergency party committee meeting after the whole band debacle. I decide to study in the media center, because apparently, I really need to work on my Bio. But glycolysis creation doesn’t have my attention: Levi does.

I had a crush on him since the first day of high school. We didn’t really talk at all our freshman year, I just admired him from afar for a year before I finally grew the balls to say something to him at a party– well, Avery shoved me in front of him, so I didn’t really have much of a choice. The next party, we kissed for the first time. I couldn’t think about much else besides him when we first started dating. We didn’t really fight. It’s not like we ever talked about getting married, or something. But I never doubted that what I felt for him was real, and I guess somewhere I’d assumed

that would last forever. In the back of my head, I think I always feared I'd lose him one day. I knew he loved me, I just didn't know how long he would. I wonder if I dug my own grave by thinking that way.

My eyes refocus when I catch the movement of a person through the window—anything to get myself out of my own head.

I sit up when I realize who that person is, walking across the parking lot. Black hoodie. Anxious eyes.

I slam my books shut and throw them into my bag, hurrying out of the media center. This has to be a sign. I was thinking about Levi when I saw her, that can't have been a coincidence. More important things require my attention.

I rush out of the exit doors. There she is. Unlocking her bike. I step forward, only to take a step back.

I don't even know what I want to say to her. I really have no clue how to contact new people. The friends I have, I've had for the past decade. My friendship with Avery was solidified for no other reason than because we sat together on the first day of kindergarten. Why does it get so much harder as you get older?

"Hey," Easy start.

Her head turns. She recognizes me, as well. It's concerning how frightened she looks of me. I've never deemed myself to be a very intimidating person. I get self-conscious when I have to walk past a group of twelve-year-olds. Then again, I did just run out of the school building to creep up on her on the parking lot, and she has no idea who I am or what I want from her.

"I spotted you from the media center," I say. "I just wanted to apologize about that thing in the restroom. I didn't want to make you feel uncomfortable."

Her shoulders lose tension a little. Her fear melts into shyness. "That's okay." She looks a bit younger than me— I think her composure makes her appear younger, anyway, but since I don't recognize her, I have to assume she's not a senior.

"You're with Danny, right?" I hope she doesn't mistake my question for judgment.

"Yeah."

"That's... cool." Cool? Really? "Hey, I know this is totally out of the blue, but I was just studying in the media center... Do you maybe want to study together?"

She doesn't answer. Instead, her eyes move to something behind me.

I turn my head. Danny walks our way. My reflexes make me want to jump at least thirty feet back, but I force myself to stay still. I'm experiencing a strange sensation of fear mixed with anger, wanting to protect the girl in front of me.

"Oh, hi... hello." I gulp.

Danny doesn't say a word as he walks over to her side. I feel blood rush to my head. "I was just... asking if Sienna wanted to study together." I look at her, smiling hopefully. She's avoiding my eyes.

"We have plans." He draws her closer to him. My eyes fixate on his hand on her shoulder. I hate that she won't answer herself.

"Okay, well, maybe another time." My voice wobbles a bit. "Maybe tomorrow after school? I don't know if you're any good at Bio, but I could really use a study partner."

She blinks at me in confusion. I try to tell her to go along with it by giving her a gentle smile.

"Who the hell even are you?" Danny drops his arm from her shoulder. She eyes him nervously.

"I just--"

"Stay the fuck away from us." Danny grumbles. He yanks Sienna's bike out of the lock. She takes it from him and turns her back to me. Anxiety burns in my throat.

"You don't have to go with him, okay? We can go back to my house and--"

Danny stomps toward me so fast I don't anticipate his hand clawing around my throat. His grey eyes blaze with anger.

"Danny!" Sienna drops her bike to the ground. His fingers hold a tight grip, but he isn't choking me. Just keeping me where I am. My instincts are begging me to run, to plead for him to let go of me.

"What the *fuck* are you implying, huh?" He pushes me against the car behind me. His nostrils flare, a vein in his neck bulges out. I get another reflex, and this time I don't ignore it. My knee thrusts up against his groin. He moans as he bends over in pain. He doesn't let me go, but his grip is weakened. I can release myself. He looks at me shocked, like he hadn't anticipated I would defend myself against him.

Neither had I.

"Danny, come on." Sienna keeps her distance. "Let's go, please." Tears shine in her eyes. It looks like she's not a stranger to this type of behavior, but her reaction differentiates her from all those cases I've heard of before: women falling in love with psychopaths. Hydrophilia, Stockholm syndrome.

Whether she loves him or not is still anybody's guess, but she definitely doesn't love this part of him. The Rayas part.

Danny recovers and his eyes seem even darker. I try to mimic his broad-shouldered stance, but it's not like I can suddenly grow six inches to meet his height.

"I'm not implying anything," I say. "I'm just trying to make sure she doesn't end up like Frank Riley." My lips tremble in anger. Fire kindles in his pupils. He balls his hand into a fist, and I prepare for the worst.

"Frank Riley?" Sienna speaks up. "What- what is she talking about? You didn't..." She shakes her head. "You promised you had nothing to do with that." A tear falls from her eyes. Even if I don't know the girl, I hurt for her.

Danny's frown fades. His gaze softens. The fire goes out. I think back to his smile in the hallway.

He cares about her.

In midst of my psychoanalysis, Danny hurls at me. My back throbs when he shoves me against the car, I can't repress a wince. I try to push him away from me, but he won't let me. I flatten my palm and smack him in the face. His head sweeps to the side- only for a split second.

His arm swings towards my face. Of all the things I could do: shield myself, duck, sprint away- I just close my eyes, feel his fist collide with my skull, and the sharp pain that follows.

"Danny!" I hear Sienna shriek, but it sounds like she's about three worlds removed from me. My arms go over my head, cradling myself against the cold metal of the car, moaning. I try to open my eyes, but my vision is shadowed. Oh God, did Danny hit me into blindness?

I hear someone running. The car vibrates as another person is shoved against it- I jump away, not knowing where. I hear grunts and slamming. I rub my eyes. The adrenaline helps me come back to the world.

Danny is no longer in front of me. I still see Sienna. Cupping her mouth, tears rolling down her face. I want to go to her, until I realize what she's looking at. Some guy has Danny pinned against the car. He doesn't even hesitate when he punches Danny in the face- two, three times. I've *never* seen someone do that.

Danny fights back. He kicks the guy away from him, and that's when I see who it is.

Pablo Neruda. As cool and composed as he was at the bonfire the other day, he is his own polar opposite in this moment: angry and vigorous. Painter of words by night, painter of blood by day.

What are my thoughts right now?

"You always try to be the hero, don't you, Jace?" Blood oozes between Danny's teeth as he grins.

Jace, not Pablo Neruda, is breathing heavy. "It's not that hard to look like a hero when I'm standing next to you." He grabs Danny by his shirt and punches him in the stomach. Danny immediately throws his fist back at him. Jace manages to avert in time: Danny's fist smashes against the metal of the car instead. It must hurt like a bitch, but any pain Danny feels seems to be instantly transformed into anger. He pounds on Jace at an insane velocity.

"Danny, stop!" Sienna runs into the fight.

Danny holds her off. "Get *out of here* Sienna!" He shoves her out of the way. I jump to catch her before she falls backwards. I step forward in an attempt to shove Danny back, but before I can even touch him, Jace slams him against the hood of the car.

"Nah, she should see this," Jace hisses at him. "How pathetic you are. How you just put a man in a pile of debt for the rest of his life that he can't work off because you took his fucking hands from him!" He thrusts Danny's head against the car. I'm in small euphoria, but then Danny kicks his legs up and hits the guy in the knee.

"Frank Riley was already indebted to *us*." Danny lunges himself away from the car and thrusts his elbow into Jace's chest, who stumbles back, almost falling into me and Sienna. Danny pushes Jace into the ground, and Sienna and I have to jump away.

Ahore que, eh? [What now, huh?!] He roars.

Jace tries to get up, but Danny stomps his foot onto his back.

"That's enough!" I yell.

"Please stop!" Sienna cries out.

He spits out blood onto the concrete. And then he just pounds off, tugging Sienna's bike from the ground. She watches him.

"Sienna," I plead.

She stares at me through tear-ridden eyes. "Stay away from me."

A hole opens in my stomach. She follows Danny. It's over.

Jace lets out a groan. He's still on the ground.

"Oh my God," I crouch down to his side. "Are you okay?"

“Yeah. Just face-down on the asphalt for fun.” He croaks out. I put my hand on his back. “Come on, we should get you to the school nurse... Or the hospital.”

“No, no-” He grunts as he pushes himself up. His knuckles are red from the hits he gave out. His face is mostly untouched, besides his jaw. But I imagine his torso must look worse.

“School can’t know about this.” He says. “They’ll call my house. I don’t want to make a big deal out of this.”

“I think it became a big deal when you decided to fight Danny Rayas.” My eyes go to the road, but Danny and Sienna are already gone.

“I’ll be fine.” He mutters. He uses the car to help himself up. His face looks pained when he tries to straighten his shoulders. He can barely stand up right.

“Really?” I cross my arms. “So, you think if you walk into your house looking all Hunchback of the Notre Dame, your family’s just not gonna notice?”

He rolls his eyes.

“Come on.” I cock my head for him to follow me. I hear his footsteps saunter behind me.

5 Unfinished Business

September 4 – 4:35 PM

My hand is starting to feel numb. I rush into the boys' bathroom, juggling two bags of ice between my left and right hand. The kid's right where I left him: by the sink, cleaning himself up in the mirror.

"You're lucky the cafeteria lady likes me." I say with a sigh. Rhianna was about to leave for the day when I caught her. She was cursing a hundred different words in Ukrainian when she led me to the freezer.

I raise an ice bag to his jaw. He winces a little.

"Why'd he hit your jaw? That's one of the hardest parts of the body." I comment.

"After the first few punches, you don't really feel your hands anymore." He says, clearly speaking out of experience. I frown.

"How's your stomach?"

He lifts the hem of his shirt to take a look. My eyes go wide. His hip is already purple, mixing with red. The colors continue to his back.

"Hold this." I make him hold the ice against his face, while I press the second bag against his stomach.

"Ow!" He jerks back.

I blink at him. "That's the loudest I've heard you be this whole time, and I watched you take a foot in your ribs."

"It's freezing."

"That's the point." I press anyhow. His lips flatten, trying to hold back a reaction.

"Here," He lowers the bag from his face. "You should use this for yours."

My fingertips fly up to my temple. I don't know how I could have possibly forgotten that Danny Rayas punched me in the face– but perhaps that's exactly its effect.

"Can you see it?" I turn to the mirror to investigate.

"It's not that obvious." Jace looks at my reflection. "But you should ice it before it can swell. You can cover up a bruise, but not when it turns into a lump."

"I don't want a lump on my head!" I yank the ice bag out of his hand to press it against my skull. I eye his naked face. "I should probably get some more for your jaw–"

"It's fine," He waves it off. "He didn't get my face that bad."

I wet a few paper towels under the tap and hand them to him.

"Thanks." He uses them to wipe off his bloody knuckles. "What was going on between you and him?"

I sigh. "I didn't mean for anything to be going on between us. I just wanted to talk to his girlfriend, I didn't even know he was there."

"Sienna?"

"You know her?"

"Of her. I know she's his girlfriend. What's she to you?"

"Nothing. I didn't even know she existed before today. But we had this weird interaction in the bathroom earlier and something just felt off. I thought she needed help."

"So you picked a fight with Danny Rayas for some girl you don't even know?" Jace cocks a brow.

"You're one to talk."

He grins a little. The door opens behind me. School's been out for over an hour, there can't be that many people at school besides the two of us and the party committee— which is why it makes sense when Randy walks in.

He halts in the doorway. "What's going on here?"

I look at Jace.

"We fell down the stairs." Jace says dryly. I hide my smile.

"Both of you?"

"Yep. I fell first and panicked, tried to grab onto anything I could find..." He points to me.

"Me." I shrug.

"Really?" Randy shuts the door. "'Cause if I didn't know any better, I'd think you two were... you know..." He raises his eyebrows up and down suggestively.

I frown at him. "Does it look like anything remotely sexual is going on here?" I lift the ice bag in my hand.

"I'm sensing a vibe!" Randy shrugs. "Ice can be used in foreplay. So can violence—"

"Oh my God!" I talk over him. "Yeah, I'm sure you of all people know all about that—"

I have to stop talking again, because before I know it Randy loosens his belt and lowers his jeans right in front of us. I turn away to face Jace, moaning in disgust.

“Randy!” I grumble. “You can’t just flash your dick to me right after talking about foreplay, you freak!” I cover my eyes, even if I’m not facing him anymore. I need double protection.

“Hey, you’re the one who’s in the boys’ bathroom.” I hear him *peeing* behind me. I gag against the ice bag.

“Don’t act like you’ve never seen a dick before, Paisley.”

My blood is boiling. I turn back to him abruptly, just as he’s zipping his pants. “That doesn’t mean I want to see *your* nasty little dick, Randy.”

“Little?” He raises his voice. I’ve hit a nerve there. “My dick is *not* little. Ask Jessica Donovan.”

“I don’t know who the hell that is, Randy!”

“Fine! See for yourself.” Randy yanks his zipper down.

“Whoa, whoa, put that away!” Jace steps forward. I squeal and lift my hands to block Randy’s penis from my sight.

“Whatever!” He blurts out. “Prudes.” With a shake of his head, he fixes his pants and turns to the door.

“You’re not even going to wash your hands?” I exclaim in utter shock. “Whoever Jessica Donovan is, I feel bad for her!”

He’s already gone. God, Avery was right. How are some of these people *real*?

I hear Jace snort behind me, like a kid trying not to laugh at something naughty. It would amuse me if I wasn’t so grossed out.

“Don’t look at me,” He raises his palms. “You’re the one who actually knew that Neanderthal.” He turns to throw some water in his face.

“You know his name is Randy Randall?” I say. “It’s like his parents wanted him to be a complete weirdo.”

Jace chuckles. I shake my head to rid my thoughts of Randy.

“Hey, um...” I lean up against the tiled wall. “Thank you for stepping in.”

“Hey, neither of us wanted to see that guy’s dong.”

I roll my eyes, smiling. “I meant with Danny. And I’m sorry. I didn’t realize he would go so ballistic on me, never mind on you.”

“What town have you been living in for the past eighteen years?” He looks in the mirror, moving his jaw from left to right. It seems to hurt. He throws the half-melted ice bag in the trash.

“In my eyes, it didn’t feel like I had much of a choice.” He lifts his backpack off the floor. “But you should stay away from him. The guy’s messed up.”

“How do you know?”

He frowns a little.

“I mean– everyone knows, obviously. But there’s something between you. It seems like you know him. Enough to hate him, anyway. Like you have unfinished business, or something.”

Jace looks away from me. “Danny and I have always had unfinished business. It’s not really something for you to worry about.”

I’m disappointed by his answer, but I don’t know why I expected anything more. I don’t know him, and he doesn’t know me.

“Okay. Noted.” I push myself away from the wall. “You should cool your bruises and put some ointment on those knuckles.”

“Yeah, I know the drill. Thanks, doc.” He shoots me a grin and heads out.

And in the moment that follows, I realize I’m in the boys’ bathroom by myself.

My eye falls on the urinal that Randy was just using. He didn’t even flush. My stomach rolls as I grab my bag. I really hope Avery convinces the committee *not* to book his friend’s band. I don’t want this guy to have any victories.

The door opens just as I want to step out– Oh, no. Not again. Who is even still at school?

Levi walks into the bathroom. I go completely solid.

Right. The football team has practice after school.

He freezes simultaneously. Then he lets out a laugh. “If you’re about to tell me you’re practicing your moonwalking in here, I’m gonna lose my mind.”

“Yeah, no... Just– it’s a long story.” I sigh. “It’s not important. I’m leaving, anyway.”

I scurry past him. Just when I think I’m safe, Levi’s voice slams into my bones, “Paisley, wait.”

I want to go. I’m already starting to hate the person I become around him. She’s nervous and unsure of herself and I want to be anything but that.

“Are you okay?” He says as I turn around. “You stormed off so suddenly Saturday night. Not that I blame you... I’ve just been kinda worried about you.”

Of course I’m not okay, what kind of stupid question is that, I want to blurt out. I don’t know how this works. I had figured we would just ignore each other. We do go to the same school and live in the same small town, so if I hadn’t run into him in the boys’ bathroom, it would’ve been somewhere else.

Preferably somewhere else.

“I’m fine. It’s cool.” I play it off. Try to, anyway. “Don’t worry about me. That’s kind of the point, isn’t it?” I try to smile. Levi’s frown deepens.

“Have a good day, Levi.” I try not to sound bitter, but everything I’ve tried to be in his presence, I’ve failed at. I can’t be breezy; I can’t be careless. I’m butthurt and bitter, and it shows. Avery was right: Levi can’t let things go. I’m gonna have to talk to him sooner or later.

But I pick later.

6 Dodgeball

September 4 – 7:42 PM

After Avery gets out of her meeting, she drops me off at Elias'. I had promised I'd help him with his French presentation. It was almost impossible to pretend nothing had happened, but Avery was thankfully too angry at Randy to notice anything was wrong. And Elias, well, Elias is not the most perceptive human being. A bit of concealer on the side of my head was enough to fool either of them.

Elias' mom insists that I stay over for dinner, and I accept because I love her Columbian cooking. Elias takes me home after. My mom's car is back in the driveway after three days of being gone. As a kid, any time my parents came back from a business conference, I would run through the door and into their arms. They always brought me back a souvenir from whatever city they'd been to— there's an entire collection of globes and magnets in my room. I never really understood what they went away to do, but I still told myself I wanted to be just like them when I grew up. They got to see so much of the world.

Now, I cannot imagine myself walking around in pantsuits like my mother and working as many late nights as they do— and loving it. They work for a company in Greenville that develops and sells sustainable industrial engines. I admire what they do, but I don't think working for a company that big would be for me. It's like the older I get, the more I seem to differ from my parents. But I like that. We overlap where it matters, like in music taste. We either play Fleetwood Mac in the car or no music at all.

"Hey sweetie!" Mom shouts from the kitchen.

Dad appears out of their home office to plant a kiss on my cheek. "Mom and I got some take-out from that new Chinese place, you can grab some if you're hungry."

"Oh, thanks, but I just ate at Elias'." I walk to the kitchen with him. Mom sits at the table with her iPad. She pulls off her reading glasses.

"How was your weekend?"

"Fine. How was Chicago?"

They have to travel for work every couple of months. Sometimes it's just a couple of days, sometimes a week. I've never minded it. When I was younger, I stayed at my grandparents' and ever since I turned fourteen, I've been getting the whole house to myself. And my parents always make up for their absence in double when they return.

“Fine, too. Ate way too much deep-dish pizza, as usual when in Illinois.” Mom grins.

Dad spreads food containers out on the table. I join them even if I’m not eating anything myself, because I still haven’t seen my parents in three days. They tell me how the electricity gave out on Saturday night and they lost their entire presentation, but it was the same for all their colleagues, so they had a laugh about it and gave these last-minute presentations that ended up working out. The two of them crack up telling me about the man in the room next to theirs in the hotel. By the end of the story I really don’t get what’s so funny, but my parents always seem to have their own inside jokes like that.

I take a can of coke with me to my room, scroll mindlessly through social media and take my laptop to bed. I get through my Math homework. I had planned to finish my Literacy essay by tomorrow, but I decide that’s for future-me to worry about. Instead, I watch Jersey Shore.

A knock on my door makes me look up from my laptop screen for the first time in hours. I blink sternly.

“Can I come in?” I hear mom.

“Yeah.”

She slips inside and sits down next to me. She frowns at my laptop. “Jersey Shore again? How often can you watch this show?”

Avery and I used to watch the show religiously when we were younger, I have to think it’s stipulated some aspects of our personalities. I have to rewatch it every once in a while, for my sanity.

“There is no limit.”

Mom smiles and pats my leg. “So, how’s my girl?”

“...Fine.”

“How’s Levi?”

I pluck at the sleeve of my sweater. “Just fine.”

Levi *is* fine. Everything seems to go on normally for him and I’m the sobbing fool who keeps wondering what the hell she did wrong.

Mom gives me a dubious stare. “You know you can tell me if something’s wrong, right?”

My parents have adored Levi since the start. He knew exactly how to lure them in: mom loves antique furniture, Levi’s mom happened to have the same obsession. Both of my parents went to Syracuse, Levi’s planning on going there next year. Dad always