The Girl In Between
By
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Smashwords Edition

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Chapter 1
Bryn

The tide surged, carving a crescent in the sand. Water collapsed against my knees, tearing the beach out from under my legs. But when the wave receded the foam clung to something dark. Something long and still.

I saw his face, lashes tangled over blue lids, his lips parted against the sand. The breeze rippled off his clothes, ocean peeling from his face and dripping onto my hands. I was steeled there, not sure if he was real, until I saw his eyes, a flash of his dark pupils.

My hands trembled, afraid to move him, to wake him. Afraid he wouldn’t. Another wave spilled over him, the sand giving way, rocking him. I reached for his shoulder, pushing until he was on his back. He was the color of a hydrangea before it blooms, wilting like one too, every inch of him sunken and bruised.

I bent down, listening for a heartbeat. Nothing. My fingers trembled against his face and then I took a deep breath. His lips were cold and I pressed down hard, burying his mouth with my own. The water trickled down his jaw, foam sticking to his skin. I drew in another breath and then I forced it down to his lungs.

He was still and I sunk against his chest, pushing, pushing. Breathe. Please. The tide curled underneath him and then his muscles tensed. His back arched, air driving down to his lungs.

And then he opened his eyes and so did I.

***

“Bryn.”
I blinked.
“Are you okay?”
I heard my mom’s voice, her hands freeing me from the blankets.
“Awake?” she said.

I nodded, the dull shade of my room coming into view. I saw my David Mach Spaceman poster, my LP collage above my desk, my welding gloves on top of my hamper, and my mom’s face, shadows spilling down the bridge of her nose. This time I was awake.

“How long?” I said, my voice shallow and hoarse.
She brushed the hair from my face and I felt it stiff and sticking to her fingers.
“Four weeks,” she said.

Four. I sunk against the mattress. “That’s not…” Better. I’m not getting better. “At least you didn’t miss Christmas,” she reminded me.
My pulse was in my ears as she gripped my hands.
“We’ll try again,” she said.
“We’ve…”
“We’ll try again.”
I let go of her.
“I’ll get you some water. Are you hungry?” she asked.
I shook my head, tears sliding down the back of my throat. But she didn’t see them.

“I’ll make you something just in case. Do you want me to grab you some clothes? I’ll run a bath—”

“Mom. Stop.”

She liked to fill the emptiness, especially when she was nervous, which was all the time. But words were just a side effect not a remedy.

“I can do it,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

I rolled to the edge of the bed and planted my feet on the cold wooden floor. I let the chill rise through the soles, waking the rest of me. Those first few steps were always shaky, muscles remembering to contract, blood trailing down to places that felt numb enough to cut off, but this time I’d been asleep for four weeks.

The last time I’d slept that long was two years ago when Dr. Sabine set me up in a hospital room for observation during some experimental therapy. I’d woken up five weeks later thinking I’d been cured. A month passed. Then another. Then six. Six whole months without an episode. But then one day I slumped to the floor in the middle of art class, out cold for two weeks, and I knew I hadn’t been cured. I still had Klein-Levin Syndrome and it still had me.

I shuffled to the bathroom, each step like needles pricking the balls of my feet. I sat on the edge of the tub, catching my breath while steam climbed the vanity mirror, but not before I caught a glimpse of my reflection. That was always the worst part because I always looked like shit.

This time was particularly nasty. My hair was in a tangled mess on top of my head, curls matted into knots I knew I’d spend the next hour desperately trying to untangle. I could see my collarbones sharp beneath my grey skin. My fingernails were long and cracked—the ones on the left shaved down from where my mom had most likely tried to clip them.

I thought about her wrestling with my 130 pounds of symptomatic defiance; with my disease. I hoped I hadn’t made it too hard for her even though I knew I always did, because when I was sleeping, I wasn’t always out completely.

It was a strange thing knowing that my body was able to function without consciousness. During an episode I could still eat and drink and do all of the necessary things it takes to live. I just couldn’t remember doing them. And yet those strange symptoms were really the only things doctors knew for sure when it came to KLS: the sleeping for long periods of time, the aggression, the binge eating, the delirium.

But the symptoms were subjective and inconsistent and, for me, sometimes non-existent. I didn’t have a normal strand of the disease. I had something else. Something worse.

I stared down at my hips, at my thighs. They looked foreign but not sharp enough to cut straight through. Not like last time. Sometimes I’d wake up ten pounds heavier and sometimes I’d wake up looking like a bag of bones. I didn’t even remember what my body was actually supposed to look like anymore. I didn’t remember normal.

I slipped down into the tub, the water pouring over me in a rush. I just simmered there, wanting to melt. But then I remembered the boy, the sallow color of his skin, lips peeling and blue.
I never dreamed when I was sleeping. Not like that. I went somewhere, tucked between moving photographs—the past and the present, every memory I’d ever had stitched into some fluid breathing patchwork. And the water. It was everywhere.

I spent most of my episodes sitting on some illusory beach waiting to wake up—the conscious’ coping mechanism, my doctors had always said, though no other KLS patients had experienced anything like it.

But this time when I felt myself drifting, just on the verge of waking, I’d looked down the shoreline and there he was. Spat out by the waves. A floating corpse.

Until I filled his lungs with air and he woke up.

I heard a knock and the knob springing loose. I pulled the curtain, hiding my face.

“Bryn?”

I felt the steam pour out, cold air rushing in. Then my cousin Dani shut the door.

“Thank God. That was a long one.” I heard her lean against the bathroom counter.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

No doubt my mom had already filled her in. Four weeks. She’s still sick.

“What day is it?” I asked.

“December 21st.”

I exhaled, feeling the water rise. I’d missed semester exams and my mom’s birthday. I’d missed the deadline for the scholarship contest at Emory.

“At least you woke up in time for Christmas,” Dani offered.

I imagined the parts of the house I hadn’t seen in four weeks covered in tinsel and ceramic ornaments; fake flower arrangements on every side table, my mom’s favorite Native American wind instrument Christmas CD on repeat.

In the past six years I’d missed three Christmases. I tried not to think about my mom and grandmother wrapping presents they weren’t sure when exactly I’d open, hoping that I’d be lying with them on the couch on Christmas morning watching old home movies and eating cinnamon rolls when really I’d still be in bed, neither of them able to gather enough resolve to even switch on the Christmas tree.

That was one of the worst things about being sick. Someone was always waiting on you, which meant disappointing people was inevitable.

“How was…?” My voice cracked and I swallowed. “How was I?”

I knew Dani would have been here most days, checking on my mom, she and my aunt bringing by groceries when my mom was too afraid to leave me and run to the store. She and I had grown up more like twins, though she had our mom’s signature dark skin and straight black hair while I inherited cork screw curls and a strange egg shell coloring from some long lost relative on my dad’s side.

“Not bad,” Dani finally said. “You pretty much stayed in bed the whole time. Got a little annoyed when your mom tried to turn you but that’s it.”

I remembered the first time I got bedsores. They looked like bruises at first, swirling up from the waist of my yoga pants and near the collar of my shirt. I’d been asleep for six weeks. Luckily that’s as bad as they’d gotten and once my mom started turning me every day I hadn’t gotten them since.

“And how was she?” I asked.

I heard Dani sigh. “Fine. Like always.”

Fine. That’s not what I’d heard in her voice that morning. My mom’s face was
always the first thing I saw once I finally opened my eyes and every time she looked older. This time it had looked like I’d been gone for years, her laugh lines deeper and crawling to the translucent skin under her eyes. She looked tired.

“Are you sure nothing happened?” I asked.
“Nothing out of the ordinary.”
“What’s ordinary?”
I heard the air cut through Dani’s nose. “You know.”
“Did I miss anything at school?” I asked.
She grew quiet. Something Dani never did.
“Hello? Did something bad happen?”
“Well, I don’t know if it’s bad necessarily. Actually in your case it might be good news. Unless—”
“Spit it out, Dani.”
I hated when people tried to act like the world didn’t exist while I was sleeping, erasing the past however many days from their own memories for my sake. I wished they’d just hand me some kind of running list, _Things Bryn Missed_, and be done with it. No awkward skirting around whatever emotions they thought I’d still attached to things like time. I was way past that.

“Are you sure?” she said. “I mean you just woke up and—”
“I’ve been sleeping, not off to war or something. Stop tip-toeing.”
“Drew’s dating someone.”
“Someone…”
“Else.”
“Yeah. Got that. Who?”
“I don’t know. She doesn’t go to Imperial.”
My throat tightened.
“Are you okay?” Dani asked.
I bent my knees, letting the water rise to my chin. It was cold.
“Fine,” I said.
“Are you sure? You remember last time when he—”
“I’m fine.”
I thought about that stupid red box sitting on my nightstand. The anniversary present I couldn’t open. The one he’d thrown against my headboard because I wasn’t ready. Because he was tired of waiting and I still wasn’t ready.

Four weeks. It had felt like a long time when I’d first woken up but just then it felt like a flash, like it took him no time at all to find someone else. Someone normal. But as angry as I was, as much as I hated him, I hated myself a little too. _Why can’t I just be normal?_

“Can you wait out there?” I said. “I want to finish up in here.”
“Sure.”
I heard the door slide closed and then I was underwater, watching the soft ripple of the vanity lights as they swirled with tears.
My throat burned, those first few breaths setting my lungs on fire. I rolled onto my side, staring at those footsteps in the sand, at the deep impression of her knees. She was just here. I saw her. But then she wasn’t.

I blinked, sunlight searing. Sulfur tears peeled down my sunburned skin, my fingers padding them dry. I finally opened my eyes and stared down at my hands, examining the unfamiliar scars and callouses. I looked down at my clothes, dark jeans and some t-shirt with weird shapes on it sticking to my skin.

I stumbled to my feet but my legs were still liquid and I sunk back down, crawling to the first sand dune. The tide licked at me, still reaching, and I kept crawling, getting as far away from the water as possible.

I looked down the beach to where the water seemed to disappear behind the tree line, and then just past the next sand dune, the beach giving way to tall grass and a narrow dirt road that spilled into a bright blue sky. None of it looked familiar. Not the dark trees. Not the road veering around the bend. Not the beach. Not even my own shadow trembling next to me. I stared at my hands, throat tightening, trying to remember.


But there was nothing. There was no one. No echo of a past I might have lived, of a place I might have come from. There was nothing and I was empty.
Chapter 3
Bryn

My hair was still dripping down my back when I walked into the kitchen. My mom, my grandmother, and my uncle were circled around an open box of blueberry muffins and ignoring how my clothes hung like they weren’t my own. They were good at that, at not treating me like a ghost, even though waking up always made me feel like one.

“Hey kiddo, hungry?” My uncle Brian grabbed a clean glass from the dishwasher and poured me some orange juice.

Waking up from a long episode always felt a little like my birthday, everyone waiting around to see me, doting on me like I was some kind of pet. But seeing my uncle after a long sleep was even more jarring. Not because I didn’t see him almost every day—he was always coming by the house fixing something for my mom; helping her with some new project—but because he was my dad’s twin. The dad I hadn’t seen in eight months. The dad who’d left us, all of us, when I was seven.

I looked at my uncle, his face expectant. I’d just started Dr. Sabine’s latest drug trial before my episode and it was supposed to be the miracle we’d all been waiting for.

I shook my head. “Shit didn’t work.”

He shrugged. “Hey, everyone’s a little fucked up.”

“Language,” my mom cut in. “Jesus, you weren’t raised by wolves.” Then she laughed. “Nice to see you’re in a good mood.”

“It’s nice not to be a zombie anymore,” I said. “For now.”

The room grew quiet and then my uncle said, “Brought you some parts. They’re in the backyard.”

My uncle always stopped by the scrapyard on his way over, bringing me whatever salvageable metals he could find for my sculptures.

I stared down into my glass of orange juice. “I missed the deadline.”

“What?” my uncle said. “When was it?”

“Last day of the fall semester.” I inhaled. “It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry, kid.”

“They’ll have another in May,” I said. “It’ll be cutting it close but if I won maybe they’d let me use the scholarship for the fall semester.”

My mom cleared the empty plates from the counter before straightening the napkins and putting the orange juice back in the fridge. She was trying to avoid my eyes. But I wouldn’t let her, not this time.

“We should probably plan our visit to the campus soon,” I said. “I’ll have to turn in my application by March.”

I’d wanted to go to Emory since I was twelve, majoring in sculpture and spending every waking hour in some cramped studio with a bunch of dread-locked hippies and new age ingénues who still thought art could save the world.

I wanted to live in a tiny dorm that smelled like coffee beans and old socks and I
wanted to walk across campus with my hair a mess and no attempt at makeup because college kids didn’t give a shit what they looked like. Not the cool ones anyway.

I wanted all of that despite the fact that I was sick. Despite the fact that I knew it could never happen. Unless we tried again. Unless we went back to Dr. Sabine and we tried again.

“We’ll see,” was all my mom said.

I followed my uncle into the backyard, rusting car parts scattered on a tarp near the garage. The sweet musk of the lawn floated up my nose and I sneezed, absorbing the daylight in harsh flashes.

I bent down, picking through the pile, fingers trailing over every sharp edge and coming back orange.

“Did you bring stuff every weekend?” I asked.

“Just about,” he said. “Thought you’d be pressed for time when you woke up.”

I knelt there, sun burning my eyes as I tried to catch my breath. “Thanks.”

I tried to stand, tried to hide that I couldn’t, and then my uncle reached out a hand and pulled me to my feet.

“Sorry you missed the deadline.”

He helped me lift the garage door and I saw my sculpture for the first time in weeks. I’d spent the two just before my episode in this musty garage working under the glow of a red spotlight, fingers calloused and cheeks painted with dirt. Sunlight glinted off the steel petals, flashes of copper and aluminum, everything now trapped under a small film of dust.

It was a giant sunflower, the kind that grew around my grandparent’s farmhouse before my grandfather passed away and we had to sell it. Vines and wild grass wound around the stem spotted with bugs made of screws and bolts. I’d ground each piece down by hand and welded them with a hot flame. But it still looked bare. It still wasn’t finished.

“Even if I tried again she still wouldn’t let me go,” I said.

We both knew it was true. Maybe my mom would have considered it if I’d wanted to stay in Austin. But Emory was five hours east in another state and I knew the distance was something she’d never go for.

“She’s just afraid,” he said.

“So am I.” I pressed a finger to one of the sharp petals. “But what if I never get better? I can’t just keep waiting.”

“You will get better. People grow out of this condition all the time.”

It was true. KLS seemed to mostly afflict the young, stealing our best years before mysteriously abandoning us to adulthood but, “I was asleep for four weeks.”

“Okay, longer than last time but nothing out of the ordinary. Don’t look at this as a step backwards.”

“That’s what it feels like.”

“But it’s not. It’s one last long episode, one last finale before they start to teeter off. They’ll get shorter. You’ll get better. You’ll see.”

“But what if it’s not in time for school?”

“Then you’ll go later.”

“Yeah and be the only college freshman who’s thirty,” I scoffed.

“Who cares? I bet you won’t look a day over twenty-seven.”
I shoved him, his girth barely moving an inch. My uncle was 6’3” and worked in the oil fields, which meant he was not only covered in filth ninety percent of the time but he was also loaded. Though you wouldn’t know it by his standard uniform of flannel shirts and faded jeans, blonde scruff covering his chin.

“So what if you live life on a different schedule?” he said. “You’re still living it.”

I thought about being hunched over the desk in my bedroom, spending my waking hours sifting through mounds of homework. “Barely.”

“With that attitude, yeah.” He gripped my shoulder. “Get it together. You’re not weak. This isn’t you.”

“But what if I’m tired?”

He smiled. “Then take another power nap.”

“Fuck off,” I laughed.

“Ah, there she is.”

***

I spent the rest of Christmas break on the couch trying not to overexert myself. My mom was afraid it would set me off again so I was prohibited from venturing into the garage or leaving the house at all.

Even Christmas morning had been subdued. I slept in, my mom no doubt pacing the living room until the moment I finally appeared coherent, worried that I’d slipped into another episode.

When she saw me she’d rushed to the doorway, leading me by the arm around to the couch.

“Breakfast?” she’d said, even though it was almost noon.

“Cinnamon rolls?” I asked, pulling out of her grasp. It had been almost a week and I felt fine.

“Of course.”

My grandmother waved a hand, cheap gold bangles jingling around her wrist.

“There’s a pan full of leftover quiche in the fridge. You don’t want it to go to waste, Elena.”

Never wasting anything—one of my grandmother’s specialties.

My mom ignored her, clicking on the oven. “Bryn wants cinnamon rolls. That’s our tradition.”

My grandmother shuffled into the kitchen, long ratty shawl sweeping the floor, and then she opened the fridge and grabbed the quiche.

After we ate, we took turns unwrapping presents, the packages of mine all lined with dollar bills and little notes. My mom always went all out on Christmas, springing for velvet wrapping paper and these big elaborate bows, gourmet chocolates and enough food to last her, my grandmother, and I the rest of the break.

She held her breath while I unwrapped each gift—gift cards and new clothes for the summer that always came early, sketchbooks and vintage records for my grandfather’s old phonograph. I gave her and my grandmother each a necklace with a silver chain and a wooden charm I’d carved myself and since then neither one of them had taken it off.

My mom was clutching it the morning of New Year’s Eve while we sat in Dr. Sabine’s waiting room. It was empty—no patients, no nurses. When Dr. Sabine got back from her holiday in Aspen or New York or wherever rich people liked to go during the
winter, she’d made an exception to see me a week earlier than scheduled. My mom sensed urgency even though there was none and I thought the charm I’d made was going to disintegrate in her hand.

“I’m fine,” I sighed.

My mom glanced at me, trying to keep a straight face. “I know.”

“Then relax,” I said.

“I am.” She crossed her legs, then uncrossed them. “I’m fine. Everything’s fine.”

But I knew the truth behind that strain in her voice. I’d heard it buzzing there behind every word and every sigh since the bad dreams first started, since I first got sick.

I stared at the aquarium across from us, empty for cleaning, and remembered pressing my hands against the glass the first time I sat in Dr. Sabine’s waiting room. I was ten when the dreams first started, eleven when they were replaced by sporadic comas spent on an imaginary beach, and twelve when I was finally diagnosed with KLS.

I choked down the smell of rain and tried not to feel its cold patter against my skin. For some reason it would always rain in those childhood nightmares, so hard that I could barely make out my own silhouette. And the flowers. Dead. Everywhere. I remembered trudging through them, trying to run, their roots twisting up from the ground and clinging to my ankles. I never knew what I was running from and when the dreams finally stopped part of me thought that I’d gotten away. But as I sat in Dr. Sabine’s waiting room, thinking about my lips pressed to the boy’s corpse, I wondered if maybe I was wrong.

My mom clutched my hand and then Dr. Sabine stepped into the waiting room.

“How are we doing today?” she asked.

My mom shot out of her seat. “Fine. Fine.”

“Glad to hear it,” Dr. Sabine said, ushering us into her office. “And Bryn?” She sat at her desk and pulled up my file on her computer.

“Fine,” I repeated.

“Fine…” Dr. Sabine faced us with a cautious smile. “But a long one this time, correct?”

“Longer than usual,” I said.

“Anything happen just before?” She started typing something on her computer that I couldn’t see. “Were you under a lot of stress at school maybe? Worried about finals?”

“Oh, maybe,” I said, still trying to make out what she was typing. “But I feel fine.”

“You said that.”

“Right. I mean I’ve felt good. Well, as good as…” someone with a debilitating neurological disorder.

“The drowsiness,” my mom cut in. “It was a bit more severe last semester and I really wasn’t cooking as much as I should have been. I know you had that theory about some foods being a trigger. I was working a lot and we were getting a lot of take-out but I’ve made a grocery list and maybe you could look over it.” She dug around in her purse and slid the list to Dr. Sabine. “And you know I’ve been meaning to get one of those water purifiers installed on the kitchen sink. Oh and we’re switching to all natural cleaning supplies. That’s on the list too.”

“Ms. Reyes, you know we’ve talked about this.”
I watched my mom take a breath, grow still.
“This is all great and incredibly proactive,” Dr. Sabine continued, “but this last episode might have had nothing to do with Bryn’s environment at all. I don’t want either of you getting worked up over this. There’s an ebb and flow to KLS, we’ve seen it.”
“Right,” my mom said. “You’re right.”
Dr. Sabine handed her back the list and she tucked it into her purse.
“Just to be safe, we’ll run some tests.” Dr. Sabine looked at me. “Nothing too invasive. Just routine. You know the drill.”
I nodded, tried to smile. But none of it felt routine. Not the empty waiting room.
Not the strange chill in Dr. Sabine’s voice, left over from the vacation she’d cut short to come back for this appointment. Not the feeling twisting in my gut. And when she stuck me with the needle, for the first time in a long time I felt that too.
When we got home my aunt and my grandmother were squared off in the middle of the kitchen. My grandmother was clutching a Tupperware container full of moldy carne asada and my aunt was trying to get her to throw it in the trash.
“It’s still good,” my grandmother said.
My aunt snatched it out of her hands. “You’re going to kill yourself.”
“Well, good riddance,” my grandmother said as she made her way back to the couch.
My aunt lowered her voice. “If only.” She gave me a hug, gaze trailing down to the gauze tied around my arm. “How’d it go?”
I waited for my mom to say fine but she didn’t. Instead, she just stood there, arms braced over the island.
I tried to think of a way out of there and finally said, “I’m going to go change,” before escaping to my room.
When I closed the door behind me I saw Dani thumbing around my desk. She was still in her running shorts, black hair thrown up in a messy bun.
“Can I help you find something?” I asked.
She waved me off. “What’s this?” She held up the red box from Drew.
I flopped down on the bed, not looking at her. “Nothing. Toss it.”
She cocked an eyebrow, her face still flushed from her morning run. “Exactly. Toss it.”
She slumped down on the edge of my bed and pulled at the small bow, the top of the box springing open.
I rolled my eyes and fell back against the bed. “Just get rid of it.”
I heard something slip into her palm, clinking against my uncle’s class ring that she always wore.
“Whoa.”
I sat up, eyes settling on the silver chain. “What the hell is that?” I reached for it, examining the charm engraved with a shallow inscription. His initials.
“Wow,” Dani said. “Why not stick a branding iron to your forehead?”
It lay there in my hand, cold and heavy, my thumbnail chipping at the letters of his name. I tried to imagine him picking it out, slipping it around my wrist, waiting for my face to light up. Even though I’d never have worn something like that. Even though I didn’t believe in promises.
I let it slip between my fingers, my stomach in a knot.

Dani reached for it. “What an asshole. You know, I’m really relieved to see how well you’re taking all of this…you know, the whole Drew dating someone else thing. It’s obvious this didn’t mean anything to him.” She flung the bracelet in the trash and I tried not to flinch as it hit the bottom.

Every time Dani said his name I felt like she was tugging at a thread I wasn’t ready to unravel yet. Or maybe that thread was me. “Can we not talk about him?” I said. “Like, ever again?”

“You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to hear you say that,” she sighed. “So anyway, you think you’re ready to join the rest of the world today?”

I lowered my voice. “You think this prison sentence is self-imposed? My mom freaked out about how long I was asleep and now she’s got me on lock down to keep me from wearing myself out.”

“But you feel fine?”

“I feel bored out of my mind.”

“Well, good, so you’ll come with me to—”

“Don’t say to a party.”

She shook her head. “A very small, very intimate get together of our closest friends and maybe a few dozen of our most hated fellow classmates. But it’ll be—”

“Oh God. Do not say fun.”

“Not fun. Necessary.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means no one has seen you in more than a month and while I know you weren’t in bed gorging on Fudgsicles and Cheetos, the timing of it just doesn’t look good. People think you’re avoiding Drew. Actually they think you probably lost it when you found out he was dating someone else and that you’re just using your illness as a cover while you mourn in private.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Not to mention they’re expecting you to be like four hundred pounds and covered in a months’ worth of unshaven leg and facial hair.”

“What the hell is wrong with people?”

She looked me square in the eyes. “Don’t you want to prove them wrong?”

I buried my face in the blankets again. “No.”

“I know you’re sick of this bed.” She yanked on my arm, pulling me to my feet.

“No,” I moaned.

She gripped my shoulders. “If you don’t go Drew will think it’s because of him and do you know how much he’s going to love that? Don’t you want to figuratively take that stupid bracelet and shove it up his ass?”

“That’s disgusting,” I laughed. “But yes. Yes, I would like that.”

“Then get dressed.” She smacked my ass and nodded to the hallway. “Bathroom’s that way.”
The street was buzzing, a heavy bass slipping out of the open doors and windows of the party house and rattling against the windshield. It felt like we were driving through some kind of magnetic force field and apparently the kind that blows off all your clothes and has you clinging to whatever bare skin you can find.

Girls in their underwear ran out in front of the car, one of them clutching some poor guy’s shorts and stark tighty-whities. He came scrambling after them as we pulled to a stop in the empty field behind the house.

It had taken some coaxing but my mom finally caved, letting me go out on the condition that I didn’t drink and that I actually made an attempt at socializing unlike the other three and a half years of my high school experience during which I spoke to no one and instead silently judged them from the corner of the room. But walking up to the house, I suddenly wished I hadn’t let Dani convince me that these few hours of freedom would be worth it.

“Not long,” I reminded Dani. “Just long enough for everyone to see that I am still psychologically intact and then we ditch.”

She was quiet, staring up at the silhouettes writhing in the windows as we approached the house.

“I’m serious,” I said.

“Got it.”

My stomach twisted as we ascended the front steps. I knew I shouldn’t care what anyone else thought of me. They’d always been good at doing the same. In fact, for the past four years most of these people had barely said a word to me. No matter how hard I’d tried it was more fun for everyone else to just keep pretending like I didn’t exist. Because I was the sick girl. And that’s exactly what they did.

Until Drew. But I had to stop caring what he thought of me too. I just had to stop caring. He already had. That’s what stepping through that doorway was supposed to be about. That’s why I’d let Dani drag me out tonight. Because I needed to prove to them and to myself that I could and that I could do it without Drew next to me.

The front door flew open, someone stumbling past us and heaving over the side of the porch. We were frozen in disgust and then Jessie Fowler wiped his mouth clean and said, “Hey Dani, who’s your friend?”

We rolled our eyes in unison.

“I’ve only sat next to you in Stats for the past four months,” I said.

He cocked his head and dared to take a step closer, trying to get a better look at me.

“Bryn,” Dani offered.

I wondered if she ever got tired of introducing me to people we’d gone to school with for years. I was certainly tired of their surprised reactions after they finally managed to pull my face from whatever mental Rolodex they had of classmates they didn’t
actually give a shit about.

“Holy shit,” Jessie laughed. “I thought you died or something.”

Jessie stumbled down the steps of the house and then Dani and I rushed inside.

“Well, at least he remembered you eventually,” Dani offered.

I just shook my head.

“See?” she said. “Maybe that’s why you should come to more parties. So you
don’t get confused for some foreign exchange student or…” She eyed my outfit.

“Someone’s mom who’s here looking for her freshman daughter.”

“Excuse me?” I snapped.

Someone stepped between us, knocking me into the wall in the entryway. I skirted
back from it when I saw that it was covered in neon colored condoms. Someone had
tacked up hundreds of them with an accompanying sign that read—FREE. Someone
pushed past us and ripped one off, stuffing it into the back pocket of his jeans.

I rolled my eyes. “Fucking genius. It’s like a redneck version of Russian roulette.”

“I know. Couldn’t wait six more months. They just had to become a statistic.”

Dani pointed. “Oh, look there’s Felix.”

I spotted him dipping his red solo cup into the punch bowl. Felix lived across the
street from Dani. The three of us had grown up together and his dad owned a mechanic’s
shop and sometimes he let me pick through their scraps.

“ Heard that’s how you catch gonorrhea,” I said as he lifted the cup to his lips.
He made a face, poured it out. “Hey, look who’s back from the dead.”

“I wasn’t dead,” I snapped. “I was perfectly fine.”

“Chill,” Dani mumbled. “Paranoid?”

Felix lowered his voice. “Trust me, you do not want to give these people another
reason to think you’re crazy.”

“Thanks.”

“Just trying to help,” he said.

Dani turned to me. “You’ll thank us later. Now smile or…something, you look
miserable.”

“Maybe because I am.”

“Yeah well, everyone’s going to think it’s because of Drew.”

“Or that you’re still sleeping,” Felix cut in. “You do look a little zombie-ish this
evening.”

I exhaled. “And thanks for another blow to my self-esteem…”

“Sorry,” Felix said, “but friends don’t let friends impersonate the undead.”

“Yeah,” Dani nudged me, “especially when she’s supposed to be making
someone jealous. I told you to look hot and then you threw on the first shirt you could
find? You could at least try to be normal, you know.”

“What’s wrong with my shirt?”

“Hello,” Dani said. “I can’t even see your boobs.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but I believe the very definition of a shirt is something that
covers your boobs.”

“Actually,” Felix said, “Dani’s right.”

Dani froze, confused. “Did you just—?”

“Did you just say she was right?” I finished for her.

“You never say I’m right,” Dani said.
“Because, usually, you never are. And it might just be the beer talking, or a sign of the apocalypse, but the girl’s got a point.” Felix turned to me. “You like to be invisible. We get it.”

“What? I don’t—”

“But if you want to make Drew feel like shit you’re gonna have to hit him where it hurts.”

“With my boobs…”

“Yes,” he said. “In case your mom hasn’t had the talk with you yet that’s kind of what they’re for. You know, turning men into dribbling, fumbling jackasses and controlling the world and shit.”

“Controlling the world and shit,” I repeated. “Sounds important.”

“Hey,” Felix said, “don’t underestimate the power of a good push up bra.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks for the tip.”

I tried not to look at the door. I tried not to look like a miserable flat-chested zombie. I tried to act normal but it only made me feel even more like a freak so I just sunk against the wall, waiting for Drew to walk in, hoping he wouldn’t.

Dani nudged me. “I think I see Matt, I’ll be right back.”

“But wait, you—”

She slipped out of my grasp and wound through the sweaty people dancing in the empty living room. Then I watched her approach some bulky guy in a muscle shirt that was two sizes too small for him. He didn’t look familiar but as my run-in with Jessie proved, I wasn’t in school enough to notice every transfer student.

“Who’s Matt?” I finally asked.

Felix stared past me, eyes narrowed. “Who the fuck cares?”

“You.”

Felix had been in love with Dani since we were eight years old.

He shook his head, dipping his cup in the punch bowl again.

“So, I guess we’re watching your whole fumbling jackass theory in action?”

He ignored me, taking another drink.

“Get trashed, that’ll solve it,” I said.

“Judge me for self-medicating?” he mumbled. “Just because your drug of choice has a dick…”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Drew.” He laughed. “You’re a fucking junkie and you don’t even know it.”

“I’m not a junkie. I don’t care what he does anymore.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“Prove it.”

“Fine.”

“Don’t talk to him all night.”

“Easy. Done.”

“I took a step towards him. “As fucking pie.”

“Well, good because he’s coming over right now.” Felix’s gaze flashed over my left shoulder. “Hey, Drew.”

Shit. I reached for Felix’s cup and took a long drink, the liquid burning a hot trail
down the back of my throat. I felt my name flutter against the back of my neck but I
didn’t turn around. I locked eyes with Felix but he just shook his head, a big smirk on his
face as he reached for his cup and then turned to go.
“Bryn?”
I scanned the living room for Dani but she’d already disappeared somewhere with
that guy Matt, one of those corrupt neon condoms probably tucked into his back pocket.
When I realized that I couldn’t just keep staring at the wall like an idiot, I turned
around, my eyes clinging to my shoes. From his shadow on the floor I could see that his
head was bent too. But then I felt him look at me, waiting for me to look back.
“Can we talk?” he said.
“No.”
“Bryn, please.”

Jesus, I already lost. I spotted Felix on the other side of the room. He flashed me
the finger and then puckered his lips, the loud smack cutting through the music.
I stepped past Drew, finding the stairs and taking them two at a time. Then I very
impolitely opened closet doors and walked through seemingly empty bedrooms where
people were making out or stripping out of their clothes under some stranger’s sheets.
“Dani?” I called, but my voice barely cut through the noise, the music rattling
under my feet and setting the walls buzzing.
“Hey.” Drew caught up with me, reaching for my hand.
I yanked it back and threw open a closet door to reveal two girls making out while
a skinny guy in glasses taped it on his phone. I opened another narrow door, some kind of
pantry or towel closet and I was pushed inside, Drew pulling the door shut behind us.
“Let me out,” I said.
“Not until you talk to me.”
For a second I was glad it was dark. I didn’t want to have to look at his face. At
his stupid blonde hair. At his stupid blue eyes, glazed and insincere. At his stupid mouth,
bottom lip between his teeth because that’s what he always did when he was trying to
coerce me into doing something I didn’t want to do but also kind of did. But even though
I couldn’t see Drew I could still feel him there and maybe that was worse.
I could smell the gum hidden under his tongue and I remembered how his lips
always tasted like an orange dreamsicle. I felt them brush past mine but he didn’t kiss me.
It didn’t matter. I was already frozen.
I thought about being sprawled out on a sleeping bag in the bed of his truck, of
him climbing in through my window late after a baseball game. I thought about the past
two years—of breaking up and getting back together, the push and pull of hating him and
wanting him at the same time.
And then I thought about him hovering over me. Angry. Buzzed. Trying to rip my
shirt off. The sound of that stupid red box smashing against my headboard.
Don’t let him in. Not again.
I felt his fingers trail down to my wrists.
“Did you open it?” he asked.
I was quiet.
“You didn’t.” He exhaled. “Look, I know I messed up. I was wrong and selfish
and stupid but I thought if you opened it—”
“You have a girlfriend,” I said.
“She’s…it’s nothing.”
“What the hell does that mean?”
He let out another long breath and I tried not to breathe it in.
“It means it was a mistake. You were—”
“Asleep for four weeks. Four weeks. Really?”
“We weren’t together,” he snapped. “You told me to go fuck myself remember?”
He was right. I remembered pushing him onto the floor, trying to pull my shirt back on, to bite back the tears before he saw them, and I’d told him to go fuck himself. To leave. To never come back. And then I was the one who’d left, sleep dragging me under for four weeks while he found some other girl who would do what I wouldn’t.
“Bryn, don’t be like this.”
His signature line. My signature guilt trip. The implication being that a normal girl wouldn’t be so overdramatic. That a normal girl would let it slide. And those few seconds of silence when I tried to determine whether or not he was right, whether or not a normal girl would be more understanding, more forgiving, more low maintenance, more everything, was just enough time for me to hesitate and him to make his move.
His arm curled around my waist and I grew still.
“It’s hard,” he said. “I know you’ve got it worse but it’s hard always being the one left behind. I miss you and you’re not there. I need you and you’re gone. And in the meantime I screw up. I make mistakes. I’m not fucking perfect.” He lowered his voice. “I know you probably hate me. I just thought that if you saw the bracelet you’d—”
“Forgive you? And now you want me to wear it like some badge of honor while you screw other girls behind my back?”
“I didn’t give you…” He stopped, looked down. “Bryn, I gave you the bracelet because I love you.”
“You what?”
“I love you.”
Those words had been scarce from his lips. He wasn’t the sentimental type. The desperate, divulging type. He was the quiet stare. The firm grip. Interactions and acknowledgments that could either make me feel alive or invisible. Sometimes both. And it had been that way since the first day we spoke. Since that day he’d found me eating lunch in the art room.
I’d been hiding as usual, pretending to catch up on homework while I raided Mrs. Castillo’s supply cabinet. He’d come in looking for her, planning on wooing her with some excuse as to why he hadn’t turned in that week’s assignment.
But then he’d found me instead and I was the one who’d been wooed. Because after he’d said, “Hey you’re that girl,” and I’d ignored him, he’d sat down across from me, eyes wide and sincere and said, “What’s it like?” No hint of mocking or malice in his voice.
I still remembered the first time his hand slipped into mine on our way to English class. In the middle of the hallway. In front of everyone, he’d touched me. I’d seen it. They’d seen it. And when their gazes grew hot he didn’t let go. It was in that moment that those kids who’d made me feel invisible my entire life didn’t just see Drew hold my hand. They saw me too. Me.
“Bryn,” he said again. “I love you.”
My hand pulled out of Drew’s grasp but before I could reach for the door he
kissed me. Hard. Desperate. And I swallowed every bit of it, absorbing every exhale, letting him bury me somewhere deep. His hands fell to my waist, to the hem of my shirt, fingers scaling my bare skin.

There was a knock. Breathing. Laughing.

“Bryn?”

It was Dani. I saw her jiggle the door handle and I froze. Then she pulled it free and the stairwell was full of wide eyes, pupils glazed and burning a hole right through me.

“Shit,” I said. “Get off.”

I pulled my shirt down and pushed Drew out of the way. Then I grabbed Dani’s hand and we ran down the stairs and out to the car.

“What was that?” she asked.

I threw open the passenger door and climbed inside.

“Bryn, what the hell?”

I looked back and saw Drew on the front steps of the house.

“Shit, Dani, can you just drive?”

She hesitated, biting back words, and then she started the engine.

As we drove away, I sunk against the passenger seat, watching the streetlights flash in long streaks across the glass. I expected Dani to try and say something else but thankfully she didn’t. I could already taste the guilt on my lips. I didn’t need her judging me too.

I stared at the street, at the storefronts, at the people on the sidewalk, anything but my reflection. We pulled to a light and I found a silhouette at the end of the street, someone standing out of the glow of the streetlight. I felt them looking even though I knew they weren’t. They were a stranger, just darkness, but after what I’d done it still felt like they could see straight through me.

I traced their shadow until the light flashed green and as my eyes fought to stay open I felt another long sleep already tugging at me.
Chapter 5

I sat on the beach, waiting for night. The sky had been stuck in this strange orbit, sunlight sinking into a thin line but never blinking out. I could see stars but the landscape was paralyzed, time as forgotten as me.

I blinked, waiting to wake up. I buried my face in my hands, watching the horizon line from between my fingers like the long hand on a clock. But it was still.

I stared down the road, waiting for the sound of someone coming up the hill—an engine, footsteps. But it was quiet. A cold breeze crept up the back of my shirt and I shivered as I finally got to my feet. I took slow quiet steps as I trudged through the tall grass, freezing at every sound and every shadow.

The place was deserted, nothing but strange trees and the sound of insects, but I still felt like I was trespassing. I kept walking, looking for a house, for some kind of park ranger, for any sign of life at all.

The grass disappeared, the meadow receding. Suddenly I was at the top of a hill and the sky split—cobalt sinking into a swirling grey. I had one foot in the meadow and the other buried in snow. Snow? The chill stung the sole of my foot, warm and cold air converging against my skin. I knelt down, brushing the snow with my hand. It came back burning. What the hell?

I scanned the snow for other footsteps. For her footsteps. But it was empty just like everything else. I closed my eyes. Tight. Waiting for it to disappear. But I could still feel the chill. Ice settled against my skin, making me feel exposed and I kept glancing over my shoulder, still waiting for someone to jump out of the shadows, to tell me it was all just some fucking joke.

I looked back across the meadow at that invisible line where two seasons converged, searching the shadows for some kind of machine, for the artificial source of the snow. Still nothing.

When I reached the trees the roots were lined with puddles where the snow was starting to melt. Summer again. But I was still dazed. I stumbled, staring up at the trees, my hand brushing one of the trunks. They were massive, the grain completely smooth, frozen in stone. They seemed ancient and I felt like I was walking through the pages of some fairy tale. What is this place?

I still didn’t have my memory but I had my instincts and my instincts were telling me that there was something very wrong about this place. And about me in it.

My hand snagged a jagged twig, catching thorns. A line of blood trickled up from the center of my palm and as I examined the wound something pricked at my senses. Heat. White.

There was a flash of light so bright that I couldn’t see anything else. I thought I was drowning again, or maybe waking from this nightmare. I blinked, tears welling up as it seared my vision. My knees found the soil and I gripped it, tearing at it. And then the
light let go of me.

I was afraid to open my eyes again but when I did I was back on the beach. And then I just froze there. Afraid to move another inch. I was perfectly still, waiting for the pain again but then I heard a soft knocking. That’s when I saw the small rowboat tethered to a dock and bobbing along the top of the water.

*People. Rescue.*

I ran for it, arms pumping as fast as I could. I reached the edge and looked inside. It was empty. No fishing poles or other gear. No wet footprints. I picked up the rope, checking the age, but it didn’t feel brittle, wet fibers still tight as I flung it back into the water.

I wanted to sink there, to catch my breath, but when I turned back towards the empty beach it was…buried. Two seconds before I’d been running through sand and shells and sea sludge and now it was gone, covered in rows and rows of giant sunflowers—dark red faces opened wide like a yawn, thick stalks bowing in the breeze blowing off the ocean.

*What the...*

Every time I blinked I waited for the landscape to reset again, for the ground to give way, for me to fall off the edge of the earth. I waited to disappear.

Slowly, I made my way back up the dock, itching and on edge, and then I was peering in between the sunflowers. I took a few steps between the stalks, hesitant, petals brushing and bouncing off the top of my head. Caterpillars scaled the leaves and dragonflies zipped from one bud to another.

I stopped, that low insect hum rising, drowning out everything. I followed it toward the other side, being careful not to snap any stems. But they just kept going, rows growing dense, petals curling in a thick canopy over my head that cast red shadows along my skin.

I turned, trying to find my way back but I couldn’t hear the waves any more, just the whirr of insects riled into a frenzy the harder I tried to tear free. Everything was moving, shifting, like I was tumbling inside a kaleidoscope.

I looked for a break in the row, for the sky, for emptiness, but there were only the sunflowers. I pushed past the thick stalks, finding my footing and then I stopped being careful and I started running. Green necks snapped under my feet, petals spilling onto the ground behind me.

*Shit. Where is it?*

I pushed through a wall of dark petals, dizzy, and then I slammed to a stop. She was standing in front of me, eyes wide, a leaf clutching at a strand of her black hair.

“You,” she said.

I caught my reflection in her eyes, swirling and green. I could see that my own were dark and muddy, my hair black and stiff from seawater. My face was dark too, shadows spilling over a wide nose, thick eyebrows and tight lips.

“Who are you?” she said.

And then I felt the air go. She didn’t know who I was either. I shook my head. I thought I might cry; I could feel that raw sting at the back of my throat. But I was still frozen.

She pulled the strand of her hair free and tucked it behind her ear, still staring at
me. “How…?” But then she grew quiet.

She reached for me, hand trembling. It hung there, me staring at the tip of her thumbnail, her staring at my face. Then I felt her thumb pressing into my cheek, trailing down my jaw. She was warm.

“Please,” I said. “I don’t know anything.”

She gave a small nod, eyes flitting toward a break in the row of flowers and I followed her.

It had been empty earlier, nothing but sunflowers and sand. But now there was a small farmhouse. Porch swing. Blue door.

“What is this?” I asked.

She led me inside and opened the windows, dust swirling in the sunlight spilling across a leather couch and a tall bookcase. She held out a blanket and I curled it around my shoulders. But I wasn’t cold anymore. My clothes were dry. Soft. Like they’d never been wet. Like I hadn’t almost drowned.

She stood in the center of the room, her green eyes wide, teal-colored fingernails scraping nervously at her forearm. Black curls dusted her pink cheeks and she gripped them in her fist, her shoulders tensed.

I looked down, away from the heat of her gaze, but I could still feel it pouring over me. Her eyes settled on my shoes, on the floor between my feet, and then they climbed every inch of me. I stood there, forgetting to breathe, not wanting to, because even my lungs felt foreign.

It was so quiet and I could hear the blood rushing in my ears, my pulse thrashing until there was only static. Until there was only her eyes on me. I wanted to shake out of that skin and as she took a step toward me, examining my face again, I thought I just might.

“You’re not…” She inhaled. “How…?” Exhaled. “This isn’t possible.”

“What’s not?”

“You being here. It isn’t—”

“Where am I? What is this place?”

“It isn’t…” She narrowed her eyes. “Real.” The word trailed off, uncertain.

“What do you mean it isn’t real?” I said.

“You,” she said, gripping her scalp. “You’re not real.” She walked to the other side of the kitchen, then back to the center of the room.

“But…yes I’m…” Am I?

“This can’t happen,” she said, pressing her palms over her eyes.

“Look, I’m lost in more ways than one. Can you just please explain this to me?”

She sat down on the couch. “I’m sick,” she finally said, not looking at me. “I have Klein-Levin Syndrome. It makes me sleep a lot, for long periods of time, and this is where I go when I’m…”

“Sleeping?”

She nodded.

“You mean like a dream?”

She looked at me. “They don’t know. The doctors, I mean. I’m not supposed to dream during an episode.”

“But you do? But this isn’t…this doesn’t make any sense. I’m real. I’m here.

How?”
“I don’t know,” she said, a quake in her voice. I moved to the window, watching the tide roll in. *A dream?* No. This was real. I glanced back at her. What if she was sick? Only it wasn’t Klein-Levin Syndrome, whatever that was, but some kind of psychosis—schizophrenia, some other shit that makes you think you’re dreaming.

No. I’m just...I’m lost. I must have shipwrecked or something. I must have been with other people right? A family maybe? I just hit my head. That’s why I can’t remember anything. I hit my head and she obviously hit hers too. Hard. But what about the snow?

“No,” I said, tossing the blanket on the couch. “This is crazy. Where’s everyone else?”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. Your family? The other people who live in this house? People that live nearby? Anyone?”

“It’s just me,” she said, her voice small.

“I’m supposed to believe that?”

“I don’t care what you believe,” she snapped. “You’re the guest here. You’re in *my* head, remember? And I’m not going to waste my time arguing with some figment of my imagination.”

“Me? You think I’m the one who’s not real? You’re probably just some psycho who recently escaped the mental ward. So, yeah, don’t waste your time trying to convince me of anything. I wouldn’t believe you anyway.”

“Oh, call me crazy,” she huffed. “That’s original. Whatever. Have fun sleeping on the beach.”

I walked back outside and as the door closed behind me it was like someone snuffing out a match. The sun disappeared in the same beat that she bolted the lock and it was suddenly night. *What the hell?*

I turned back toward the door but I didn’t dare knock. *Shit.* I looked toward the beach, no longer covered in sunflowers, but I wasn’t ready to face the water. Instead I wandered out into the yard, staring at the big farmer’s moon swallowing the sky. It was orange and so wide that I felt like I could see every dimple and every crater, the horizon completely obscured. And the light, I swear I could feel its heat.

I stood there, the water in front of me, trees cinching me on either side, not sure where to go. Not sure if it was safe. I wasn’t sure how long I’d been there but in that time I hadn’t seen another person except for the girl. And what if she was right? What if there was no one else?

The air suddenly felt charged, the solitude almost supernatural and I felt a chill cut through the heat pouring from the moon. I made my way back up the steps, fist raised over the door. But then it fell back down to my side and I curled up on the porch swing, searching for the girl’s silhouette through the window until I fell asleep.
His shoulder was pressed against the window, rising and falling. He was sleeping. *Here.* I took quiet steps around my grandparents’ farmhouse as if trying not to stir him, as if he was real.

That night after Dani had dropped me off I’d curled into bed, blankets pulled tight over my head, and I’d felt that slow wave slipping down over my skin, pinning me to the mattress, sleep stifling everything. I’d blinked and I was back on the beach. That’s when I’d seen the boy abandoning the sand and disappearing between the rows of sunflowers.

The scene had shifted while I’d been gone and I wasn’t sure if he was just another one of those moving parts. Here one second and gone the next. I was used to the landscape always changing—evolving and re-building itself to match my memories. But as I watched him stray farther down the row, suddenly everything had felt foreign and haunted and even then as I watched him sleep, I was afraid.

For five years I’d been coming here in my sleep, spending those long episodes among the landscapes of my childhood, the terrain literally sutured by my memories—the big hill I’d sled down that one winter it snowed, the meadow behind our grandparents’ house where Dani and I would spend hours picking wildflowers, the beach where we used to go every summer.

I’d trekked for miles, never tired, re-discovering cotton fields and drive in movie theatres, abandoned playgrounds and old tree houses. Snapshots from every family vacation, every place I’d ever been to, familiar sensations still clinging to them like phantoms. But every place had been empty and I’d always been alone.

When I found my grandparents’ farmhouse it was exactly how I’d remembered it. Same worn furniture, my grandmother’s flower embossed dishes, my grandfather’s coin collection under a faulty floorboard in the bottom of his closet. I’d sifted through her jewelry boxes and buried myself in the scent of his old work clothes.

But as the years went by the small house started to fill with new things. New memories. Every book I’d ever read lined the shelves above the antique fireplace, held upright by trinkets I’d picked up at a flea market outside of town, by the scented candles Dani always gave me for my birthday, by some of my small sculptures.

The shelves were choking now, five years of social exclusion resulting in the kind of loneliness that can only be remedied with words. Lots of them. I plucked one of the books free, a copy of *Tuck Everlasting*, the cover bowed from countless nights pressed flat against my thighs.

I put it back and reached for a copy of *Life of Pi*, some loose pages spilling onto the floor. I stopped pretending to browse and finally grabbed my favorite copy of *Through The Looking-Glass*. It wasn’t my favorite book. I wasn’t sure I had one. But it was one I hadn’t seen in the real world for almost five years. It was a vintage copy, one my grandfather had given me for my seventh birthday. He’d written an inscription on the first page—*My dearest Bryn, dream with your heart and the universe will bend at your
will.

But then we moved out of my dad’s house and in between packing and trying to salvage the broken pieces of my mom, this little piece of me had gotten left behind. Somewhere. I wasn’t sure. I never saw it again until I got sick, until I came here and then there it was, tucked between an old farmer’s almanac and some of my grandfather’s western movies on VHS.

I sat on the couch, flipping through the pages, corners of them thin and transparent from the oily swipe of my fingers. But I couldn’t stop glancing back toward the window. I couldn’t stop waiting for him to disappear. Because he wasn’t supposed to be here. He couldn’t be. It was impossible.

I remembered the first time I’d told Dr. Sabine about this place. Twelve-year-old me was gripping the seat of my chair, palms sweaty.

“It’s okay, Bryn,” my mom encouraged.

I chipped at the armrest, staring at my shoes. “It’s like a dream…but it’s not.”

“Are you sure?” Dr. Sabine said. “You know it’s possible—”

“No.”

I knew what dreaming felt like and I knew how hard it was to hold on to them when you were awake. But this place was different.

“Is it like the bad dreams you used to have?” Dr. Sabine asked.

I shook my head. “It’s like…memories.” I smiled. “Like everywhere I’ve ever been and everything I’ve seen.”

Dr. Sabine turned to my mom. “It’s unusual. Normally KLS patients don’t dream during an episode.”

“But it’s not a dream,” I interrupted.

“It’s unusual,” she’d said again. “But we’ll run some tests during your observation.”

Those tests turned up nothing. Nothing you could measure anyway. So I did my own research, spending every hour of wakefulness possible on the internet, buried in some book on KLS, on dreams, on delusions, parallel dimensions—everything I could get my hands on having to do with the brain and its ability to bend reality.

And what I’d concluded—the consensus among every doctor, author, and scientist I came across—was that we know more about outer space than we do about the human brain. In other words almost nothing. Humanity had barely scratched the surface, and wherever I was, whatever this was, was still buried somewhere just below that surface.

The wind surged, catching the boy’s shirtsleeve. I watched it flutter against the glass, almost tangling with the pink roses growing along the sill, the one’s I’d given my grandmother last year for her birthday. She’d harvested the seeds and now the window outside her bedroom was overflowing with them.

I watched the wind tear a few petals free and then I was walking towards the door, one hand reaching for the bolt, the other clutching a blanket. I cracked the door, peering out.

That old farmer’s moon from a night my uncle took me and my mom fishing was hanging in the sky. I was eight and remembered unbuckling my seatbelt and crawling onto the dash, my mom’s hands around my waist as I watched it rising over the hill in front of us.

I moved to drape the blanket across the boy’s shoulders but then the moonlight
shifted, glinting against him like scales. I stopped, his veins churning a strange color under his skin. The breeze ruffled his hair and as he shifted I took a step back, the light growing dim.

When I dared, I inched closer again. His veins shown through, the light returning, and I jumped back, dropping the blanket.

I stood there, examining him more closely. The color had returned to his cheeks, blushed from the chill, and pressed against his arm they looked swollen like a child’s.

He didn’t look familiar. But even if he had, my memories here never evolved past the landscape, past inanimate objects and vacant buildings. I was the only living, breathing thing here. Until now.
I woke with the blanket tucked under my chin and pink rose petals caught in the collar of my shirt. I sat up, shaking them free, but when I looked up at the flowers growing along the windowsill they weren’t just wilting. They were black.
I plucked one from the stem and it fell apart in my hands. Ashes.
The girl’s silhouette flashed on the other side of the window and I wiped my hands on my jeans. That’s when I noticed that the door was cracked, the smell of coffee beans drifting out.

I sat up, staring at the seam, relieved that she hadn’t disappeared again, but also afraid that she might still be angry. When I finally stepped to the door she was sitting at the table, eyes scanning the pages of a book. I draped the blanket over my forearm and when I finally stepped inside, she looked up, startled.

I hung by the door, not sure what to say or do. A million questions buzzed on the edge of my lips but I couldn’t get them out. All I could manage was, “This is weird?”

She eased back from her chair, slowly, as if I was some feral animal that had snuck in through an open window.

“Considering I’m an expert,” she said, “yes, this is weird.”
“Thanks for the blanket,” I said.
“Sure.”

Her voice was thin and I felt strange standing there. But everything felt transitory. I felt transitory. Like either one of us could disappear at any moment. Like I was supposed to but somehow I’d taken a wrong turn and gotten stuck here, wherever the hell that was.

“Do you want to sit?” she asked.
I reached for a chair, waiting for it to self-destruct. When it didn’t I sat down across from her and she poured me a cup of coffee, her eyes wide on my face as I took a sip. I looked down, waiting for her to stop examining me, every inch of me tensed.

“The moon,” I finally said, “it was...” I wasn’t sure what it was.
I looked to her for some kind of explanation but she just shook her head. “I can’t.”
“You can’t explain why it looked that way?”
She looked down at the cup between her hands. “I can’t explain anything.”
“Try,” I said. “Just try.”
“It was a farmer’s moon,” she said, “from a night when I was eight. My mom, my uncle and I were driving back home from a day at the lake.”
I still remembered its face, the glow igniting the ocean like it had been ripped from a children’s story.
“But that thing, it was unreal.”
“That must have been how it looked to my eight-year-old self.”
I thought about that moon, the trees turned to stone, the farmhouse. And the snow.
“The farmhouse,” I said, “it wasn’t there before. The beach was empty and then the sunflowers...”
“This house belonged to my grandparents.”
“And now?”
“They had to sell it when my grandfather passed away. My grandmother lives with us now. Me and my mom.”
“But you’re here,” I said.
Her eyes narrowed. “You still think I’m crazy.”
“I think one of us is.”
“Fine.” She crossed her arms. “It’s you.”
“Me?”
“You’re the one who doesn’t belong here.”
“Well, I’m not hanging around on purpose. I don’t even know how the hell I got here. I don’t remember anything. I don’t even know who the hell I am.” I clenched my fists, tried to stop shaking.
“You think you’re the only one who’s stuck here?” She bit her lip, looked away. Then she let out a breath. “It’s usually only temporary. I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”
“Wait and see? How long could that take?”
“It depends. Time is…it’s not the same here.”
“What is that supposed to mean?”
“It means that I don’t know what it means,” she snapped.
I gripped my scalp, elbows on the table. “I can’t do this.”
“Do what?” she asked.
“What are you even talking about?”
“Look.” She exhaled, staring at her hands. “I don’t know what you want from me. But for the sake of my own sanity I’m just going to assume that you are some strange figment of my imagination and maybe you should do the same.”
“Great. Just live in denial then.”
“It’s always worked for me.”
“No.” I gripped the edge of the table. “This is real. I am real.”
“I’m telling you, there’s no answer.” She sunk against the chair, arms crossed.
“And trust me, I’ve been looking for one for most of my life.”
“But your memory. How do you have your memory and why am I so fucking empty?”
“Do I look like a psychiatrist?” She bit back the words. “I’m sleeping. Maybe I don’t forget because I don’t really go anywhere. I’m just sleeping.”
“And me?”
She gave a slight shrug. “I’m sorry.”
I tried to sit still, to breathe. Breathe.
“Where does it end?” I asked.
She looked down at her hands again.
Breathe. “Where does it end?”
She finally faced me, lowered her voice. “It doesn’t.”
It was impossible. The snow, the sunflowers, her, me. All of it. It was impossible because…
I leaned forward, searching her face. “You’re dreaming.”
She shook her head, eyes fierce. “I’m sick.” She stopped, catching her breath.
“Don’t you get it? I’m sick.”

I pushed out of my chair and charged back outside. I stared into the sun until it burned and then I just closed my eyes, waiting to wake up, because I must have been sleeping too. It was all just one bad dream. A very weird, very beautiful bad dream and if I could just catch my breath. If I could just stop…shaking…and…

“Hey.” I felt her hand on my arm. “You okay?”

I finally opened my eyes, hoping for the thousandth time that when I did I’d be home. That I’d be home and safe and I’d remember my own fucking name. But all I saw this time was her, eyes swollen with something like fear. I felt it too, because what if she wasn’t the only one who was sick?

I started walking down the beach, letting the waves spill into my shoes, climbing to my calves, to my waist. The water surged against my chest but I wasn’t afraid of drowning. I wanted it to drag me under, to gut me and ravage me and fill me with the things I’d lost.

I saw it coming, a wave swelling and ready to collapse. I swam for it and in that split second before it came crashing down, I took a deep breath and let myself sink.

I blinked and it burned but when I looked around everything was dark. I searched for the sun dancing along the surface, for the shadow of clouds. But I couldn’t even see my hands as I scrambled for air. I started kicking, ignoring my lungs, and searched the darkness for the silhouette of a wrecked boat. For something. Anything.

My chest ached and I finally found the surface, breaking to fill my lungs before diving back towards the bottom. And then I just kept kicking, dragging my body forward, trying to cut through the darkness. I kept kicking until my knees burned and my lungs felt like they were about to explode and then I was sucked back out, water rushing past me, sand scraping my skin as I was tossed back onto shore.

I rolled onto my back, coughing up saltwater.

“Don’t move.” I heard her voice and when I blinked she was so bright.

I sat up.

“Slow…” she said.

“No.” I stumbled to my feet again, pushing past her.

“Stop.” She chased after me. “This isn’t the way.”

But it was the way. It was the way I’d come in and it had to be the way out. She reached for my arm but I shook her off, wading out into the water again.

A wave knocked me to my knees, my muscles taut and tired. I crawled forward, taking a deep breath before diving under again. I felt the ocean’s grip on me and I pushed off the first sandbar, letting it drag me away from shore. I tried to cling to the current, to keep kicking against that invisible pull trying to fling me back onto shore but as my eyes fought to stay open suddenly I was so tired.

I was sinking.

A hand gripped my arm, pulling me toward the surface. I blinked and saw the sun. I tasted the tears then, the sting still caught in my throat. I tried to swallow but when she reached for me again I knew she’d already seen them.

“Can I show you something?” she asked.

I wasn’t sure if I should follow her or even if I could but I didn’t want her to let go of me. I didn’t want her to disappear again and leave me there alone, still lost. So I nodded.
We swam to the end of the dock and she untied the small rowboat. She climbed in first, reaching for the oars and holding it steady as I sat down across from her. I watched the house recede. My eyes trailed back to the road, still waiting for someone to come down it. They didn’t.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Not far.”

I searched the horizon but it was empty. No land. No boats. It felt like we were headed straight for the skyline, about to fall off into nothing. The waves grew choppy and I wanted to take the oars from her but I didn’t know where we were going and for some reason I liked listening to the slow rhythm of her breathing as she fought the waves.

The boat finally grinded to a stop and when I looked over the edge the water was so clear I could see tiny creatures bedding in the sand, their thin shadows eclipsed by the girl as she climbed onto the sandbar.

“I went to the Bahamas once when I was thirteen,” she said. “The water was so blue. I strapped on a snorkel and spent the entire week just walking from sandbar to sandbar, face underwater watching the fish swim by.”

I followed her out of the boat and a school of bright yellow fish cut between us, scales glinting.

“This?” I said.

She smiled and walked around to the other side of the boat. The water was a dark grey, my legs tangled in a mess of rust colored seaweed. I could barely see my feet, their shadows disappearing beneath swirls of mud.

“This is the Gulf of Mexico near Galveston. I tagged along on one of my mom’s work trips. It was just a few weeks after Hurricane Ike.”

I stared at the muddled outline where the two oceans converged—one light, one dark. I waited for them to mix, for that invisible seam to break free but it didn’t.

We waded farther out into the clear water, another school of fish bumping against my calf, bright red coral twisting near my ankles. It was startling.

“I used to come here,” she said. “When I first got sick I would stand here and it wouldn’t feel like purgatory anymore. They’re memories.” She faced the beach. “My memories.” Then she looked at me. “I don’t know why you’re here or if you’re—”

“Real?” I asked.

She nodded and I wasn’t so sure anymore either.

“But you don’t have to be afraid,” she said. “It doesn’t have to feel like purgatory.”

I watched the sunlight reflecting off the ocean and dancing against her skin. Her eyes were lighter in the sun; green churning to a soft sea foam like the waves crashing near our feet. And standing there in that invisible seam between two oceans, two worlds, she was just as startling.

The tide swirled in her gaze and I watched it shimmer there, glinting from a soft grey to jade and then I said, “It doesn’t.”
I felt my mom’s hand on my face. “How are you feeling?”
“Tired.” I swallowed and it tasted like death. “How long?”
“Six days,” she said. “Quick one this time.”
Quick. I thought about standing on the beach, waiting for the boy to surface. I’d watched him vanish and then I’d held my breath for so long that I was almost certain he wasn’t coming back. But then he did.
“Is something wrong?” my mom asked.
Something? I don’t... “No.” I tried to smile. “I’m just a little groggy.”
She sat there, looking at me. “You sure?”
I looked past her, tried not to let her see my eyes. I didn’t know what to say. That I’d seen something? Someone?
But I knew I couldn’t. Even her reflection in my vanity mirror looked tired, her face thinner under the sunlight streaming in from my window.
“I’m fine.”
The words rolled off my tongue. I’d stopped telling my mom the truth a long time ago when I’d found that the jewelry box I’d given her for her birthday one year was full of prescription sleeping pills. There had always been cracks but now every time I looked at her that was all I could see.
“You sure?” she said again, eyeing me.
I nodded. “Promise.”
I stretched my arms and noticed something pricking my skin. I glanced down at the rotting rosemary tied around my wrist.
My mom just rolled her eyes.
“What?” I asked, ripping it free. “How long has it been rotting in my bed?”
“Just smells like a day...” She made a face. “Or two. She must have snuck in here while I was taking a shower last night.”
“I do not sneak.” My grandmother was suddenly in the doorway. “And the girl wasn’t sleeping well.”
“Nothing.” She shot my grandmother a look. “Nothing.”
“Did some—?”
“No.” My mom reached for my hand, pulling me to my feet. “It was just another normal episode.”
She helped me to the bathroom, my legs stiffer than usual. I took careful steps, examining every sensation for some kind of sign, because I felt different and it wasn’t the fear. It was the boy. For five years I’d been alone. For five years my symptoms hadn’t changed. But now I could feel it in my bones. Something was wrong with me, worse than KLS, worse than the dreams. There was something different.
I scratched at the shadow of the rosemary on my wrist. Maybe it had been a rough
one. Maybe that was a sign too.

My grandmother hung in the doorway, a hand swatting at the steam from the bath. “By the way...” she started, looking at me. “Someone deleted my shows from the TV.” My mom shot her a look. “And Bryn has been sleeping for the past six days.”

My grandmother shrugged. “Well you say it wasn’t you.” “I didn’t delete your stupid telenovelas. Jesus, I should never have shown you how to use the DVR.” “How dare you use the Lord’s name in vain?” I pulled the towel over my mouth, trying not to laugh. I glanced at the mirror slowly filling with steam, daring to catch a glimpse of what this most recent episode had done to me. But as the steam shifted, my eyes caught sight of the tub, water rushing over the edge, the entire thing overflowing. My mom was soaked as she knelt over the side, trying to switch off the spout.

“Mom…” But when I faced her she was still standing. Still dry. The tub wasn’t overflowing; the floor wasn’t wet.

How...?

“You really have a problem with my language? You watch trash.” I looked from the mirror then back to my mom, both images of her with her hands on her hips, eyes hard and trained on my grandmother. “Secreto Amor is not trash. I knew you deleted my shows.” I glanced back at the tub. The water was rising, creeping toward the edge but not spilling over it yet. I looked back to the mirror and it showed the same. But when I faced the tub again the first drops were trickling onto the floor, bleeding into the rug.

What the...?

I tried reaching around my mom to shut it off but she stepped in front of me. “I’m sorry but maybe I deleted your shows because I have to work in the morning and it’s a little hard to sleep with the TV blaring all night.” My grandmother waved a hand. “It’s not my fault you live in a cheap house with thin walls.”

I raised my voice. “Uh, mom...?”

“And it’s not my fault you’re too deaf to hear the television.” “I’m seventy-nine years old. On a good day that damn DVR’s all I got. Show some respect.” Water raced along the grout. “Mom.” I reached for her arm.

“Oh,” my mom said, her voice dry. “I thought you left.” She turned to me, put a hand on my shoulder. “You with me?”
“Huh?”
She looked back toward the floor. “Jesus, now I’ve gotta clean up this mess. Bryn…”
She waved a hand and I snapped in her direction.
“Sorry, I just…” I didn’t know what else to say.
“Hand me those towels behind you, will you?”
I handed her the towels and watched her spread them across the floor.
“You still goggy?” she asked.
“No, I’m…” I wasn’t sure what I was. “Yeah. I guess so.”
My mom finally stepped outside, closing the door behind her. I sat there for a long time, just staring at the mirror, the steam slowly receding and revealing my face. When I finally forced myself into the tub it was cold.

My grandmother was rummaging around the fridge, still ignoring both of us by the time I left for school. I’d missed my first three classes and we idled in the parking lot, waiting for the bell to ring so I could slip in during the next passing period.
“I’ll miss this,” my mom said.
“What?”
“Driving you to school every day.”
Having KLS meant it was technically illegal for me to drive myself anywhere. Just in case I passed out at the wheel going seventy on the highway and drove myself off a bridge. That meant my mom had been driving me to school every day for the past thirteen years.
“I won’t,” I said.
“Excuse me?”
“It’s not you.” I backtracked. My mom was sensitive, and especially just after an episode. “I just…I like the idea of going places on my own. Even if I have to walk.”
“Like Emory?” she asked.
“Emory…anywhere really.”
A few students trickled into the parking lot early, getting into their cars and heading to lunch.
“It won’t be long,” she said. “You’ll graduate soon and then you’ll be out there in the world. Away from me…”
“Not too far away.”
I said it to make her feel better but all it did was remind me that staying close wasn’t really a choice. There were things I couldn’t do on my own. Not with KLS. I needed her, even if I didn’t want to.
I spotted Dani coming down the steps and got out of the car. My mom idled near the stop sign until she saw me go inside.
“So, what’s the damage?” I said.
“You got lucky. Someone put some naked pictures of Candace Johnson from the party on the internet.”
“Eclipsed by Candace’s tits.”
“Again,” Dani laughed.
“Well, thank God.”
“Some girls get all the luck. Speaking of luck, you couldn’t play Sleeping Beauty for a couple more days? I mean at least miss the first day of the spring semester.”
“I’ve missed enough school, trust me it’s not as fun as it sounds. I barely got all of my homework finished in those few weeks I was actually awake.”
“Yeah, weird having them so close together like that. I guess seeing Drew must have really, you know, set you off.”
“I guess.” I didn’t even want to think about that night. I’d been asleep for almost a week and I could still feel him pressed against me in that towel closet. I could still feel every move, every mistake. Because it was. A huge one. “Have you heard anything?” I asked. “About Drew or what happened, I mean?” I swallowed, expecting the worst.
But then Dani said, “Not much. He’s mostly just been posting a lot of really cryptic song lyrics. That guy’s such a cliché. What do you think will happen when you see him in class?”
“I don’t know.”
I could think of a few scenarios, most of them ending with Drew in some kind of physical agony. But hadn’t that been how I’d imagined the party? That I’d face him. That I’d be strong. And then it was like I forgot everything. That night in my room when he wanted me to sleep with him. When I wasn’t ready. When he told me I was ruining everything.
“What do you want to happen?” Dani asked.
The truth? I didn’t know. But I swallowed it back down, words laced with disgust. “Ideally, nothing. That night was a mistake.”
I opened my locker and grabbed my stats book.
“Are you sure?” Dani asked.
“You just said it. The guy’s a cliché. I’m done with that.”
“Well, I guess we’ll see.”
“I’m serious. He’s…”
“Right behind you?”
“What?”
I closed my locker and there was Drew. He was leaning against the door next to mine, chewing on a piece of gum. I watched it curl around his tongue before clinging to a molar. It was disgusting.
Dani fell into the crowd as I headed for the stairs.
“You feeling okay?” Drew asked. “I heard—”
“Fine.”
I barreled up the steps and he reached for my arm.
“Hey, slow down.”
“Sorry, kind of in a hurry,” I lied.
He jumped in front of me and I slammed into his chest.
“Shit. Move.”
“What’s your problem?” he said.
“What’s your problem?” I spat back. I really didn’t want to deal with him on my first day back. But mostly I just didn’t want him to see my face, to see that I was angry and embarrassed. To see that I was still hurting.
I lowered my voice. “Just, please, get out of my way.”
He stared down at me, blue eyes dark. Then he stepped aside. “Fine. Whatever.”
I rushed into class, tripping over the recycling bin on the way to my desk.
“Good one, Bryn.” Jessie Fowler turned to me and winked.
“Fuck off.”
“Sure but I could use some help.”
I gave him the finger and he finally turned around. The rest of the class filed in,
everyone stealing a glance at coma chick before finding their seats. I always hated that
first day back. The staring, the speculating about what I’d really been doing the past six
days. I’d heard everything from prison to joining some religious sect and becoming one
of those child brides.
This time I felt their eyes longer than usual but I couldn’t tell if it was because of
what happened at the party or because of what was happening inside my head. I knew I
was being paranoid. I hoped I was being paranoid. But what if they could tell? What if
Dr. Sabine could tell and that’s what all that blood work had been about?
I sunk in my seat, piling my books on the edge of the desk so I wouldn’t have to
see Jessie in the corner of my eye and more importantly so no one could see me. I
thumbed through Dani’s stats notes, trying to make sense of them. But I’d missed so
much that everything Mrs. Wheeler drivel ed on about felt like it was in a foreign
language.
Technically it was. I mean numbers and I had never really gotten along all that
well. When I was younger I thought I’d wanted to be an architect but sitting through my
first geometry class made me want to puke so that dream shriveled up fast.
I liked to make things with just my hands—calloused fingers, heat from my
palms, the sharp corner of my thumbnail. But I didn’t like all the measuring, the
precision, the knowing exactly what it was going to look like before I even started. There
was no fun in that.
I sat there, trying to focus on the projection screen, Mrs. Wheeler’s man-hands
smudging the answers before I could write them down. I tried to sit still, listening to
every word. I tried not to think about what I’d seen in the mirror that morning and I tried
not to think about the boy in my head. Either of them.
I tightened my grip and scratched through the page, tip of my pen carving out a
few thin layers.

Why does he always do this?
Ever since that first breakup, Drew had always made me feel like I wasn’t
allowed to move on. Like maybe I didn’t want to.
I’d walk away and he’d reach for me.
“It’s me,” he’d say, pulling at a strand of my hair and letting it spring back toward
my face.
“It’s always you,” I’d say.
“I’m sorry.”
Then he’d kiss me, a lazy apology that never tasted like the truth. Because it
wasn’t.
He’d left me so many times. Standing in the parking lot after one of his baseball
games. Crawling out of my bedroom window while I tried not to cry. After dinner at my
grandparent’s house the night of my fifteenth birthday. He’d left me. Why couldn’t I do
the same?
I flipped to a clean page in my notebook, pen carving out the mechanical cog shapes on the boy’s shirt. I tried to remember if I’d ever seen it before, if it was my memory stamped there and not his. But it was faded, part of the graphic peeling off—like something worn and owned and cherished.

Who are you?
“She?”
I sat up. “Yes?”
“Do you have an answer?” Mrs. Wheeler asked.
I swallowed. “Um…no I’m still working on it.”
Mrs. Wheeler gave me a half smile and nodded. Sick girl: one. Statistics: zero.
The bell rang and I ducked into the girl’s bathroom, searching the foot traffic for Drew. When I didn’t see him I finally stepped out, pausing over every face I didn’t recognize, wondering for a moment if I might see the boy from the beach.
Everything else in that place had come from the present—a moment, a meeting. Memories. And maybe I had seen him. But as I scanned every person who passed by, some with the same dark hair, the same shoulders, the same height, none of them had his eyes.
They’d poured into me, dark and afraid, and every time I didn’t see him in the hallway, I was afraid too. I hoped that he existed, that maybe he had KLS too, because thinking about the alternative was worse. That I was getting worse and whoever, whatever he was, it was a side effect of my illness teetering on that torrential edge of no return.
Doctors always referred to KLS as a “non-fatal” disease but that didn’t mean there weren’t exceptions and that didn’t mean there weren’t possible outcomes even worse than death. I’d heard the horror stories, patients getting stuck in that in-between state and becoming some dribbling vegetable. Patients slipping into a coma and never coming out of it, some pale-faced family member exhaling a sigh of relief as the doctor pulled the plug.
The truth was it could get a lot worse.
Even though I could still remember his cheek against the soft tip of my finger. Warm. Giving way. Even though he’d felt real. Even though I wanted him to be, maybe he wasn’t. Maybe he was just some kind of omen of things to come. Bad things.
Unless I found him.
Which is why I lingered in the hall during every passing period—in between hiding from Drew and anyone else who may have seen me make a fool of myself at Candace’s party—and examined every boy with black hair and dark eyes. Stopping them by dropping my books at their feet, by reaching for them and saying I thought they were someone else. I looked for him everywhere but I never saw him.
On my way to lunch, someone brushed past me and when I turned I saw Candace and her lap dog Jessica Childress. I ignored them both, waiting for them to go away.
Jessica had spent every hour of our History class in 8th grade sticking random objects in my hair—pencil erasers, wads of paper, gum—and as is the plight of most girls with curly hair I wouldn’t find the junk until later that night when I was in the shower. Meaning I’d spent four hours walking around school with shit in my hair like some kind of human trash can.
She’d also been in love with Drew since we were twelve years old.
I could feel her waiting for me to look up and I could taste her perfume sticking to the back of my throat. I coughed.

“Oh, good,” she said, “I thought maybe you’d passed out again.”

“No Jessica, in fact I’m waiting very patiently for you to be struck by a falling meteor or to catch on fire or for the floor to spontaneously cave in and you to fall to your death in a disgusting sink hole. Also, I’m kind of walking so that should have been your first clue.”

Candace narrowed her eyes. “Thanks for providing some much needed entertainment at my party.”

“Yeah, well that was a—”

“Mistake? Funny. Drew said the same thing.” Jessica looked right at me. “You should stay away from him.”

“Believe me, I’m trying to.”

“Well try harder,” she said. But she didn’t look angry. She looked afraid.

I looked down the hall and spotted Drew at my locker.

“Well, it’s a little hard to do that when he keeps hanging around my locker,” I said.

Jessica followed my eyes and then she pushed past me toward the parking lot.

I met Dani in the courtyard for lunch. She was dabbing at her slice of pizza with a napkin.

“That’s gross,” I said.

“No. What’s gross is all this grease.”

I took a bite of mine, that very grease dripping down my chin. She grimaced and I rolled my eyes, reaching for a napkin.

“He’s staring at you.”

“What?” I turned, still cleaning the grease off my face when I saw Drew sitting with his friends.

“Well, was before you turned around.”

I thought about what Jessica had said. How she’d been right. I should stay away from Drew.

I lowered my voice. “Did I wake up this time, like, super hot or something? Jesus, I mean he’s never had a problem ignoring me before.”

“Rejection,” Dani said. “It makes them horny.”

“What?”

“It’s true. Look at Felix.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why do you string him along?”

“I don’t,” she snapped. “I just…”

I spotted Matt across the courtyard. He had three slices of pizza stacked on top of each other and was trying to fit the whole thing in his mouth.

“You’d just rather go out with that?” I asked.

“I’d rather know what I’m getting myself into,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Matt, he’s simple.”

“Obviously.”

“And simple is easy. Simple is safe. Don’t you think that’s why you keep getting
back with Drew?” she said. “It’s comfortable and not because he makes you happy—the
guy’s a total asshole—but because you already know what to expect. You already know
how he’ll hurt you.”

I was quiet for a long time, wondering if maybe she was right. But I wasn’t like
her. I didn’t have a new boyfriend every week just so I didn’t have to feel alone. I wasn’t
weak…like that.

“Felix is different,” Dani finally said. “Felix is good.”

“Exactly. So why don’t you give him a chance? The guy’s been in love with you
since we were eight.”

“Just because he’s a good guy doesn’t mean he won’t hurt me and with him it will
come out of nowhere, totally unexpected.”

“You don’t know that.”

She shook her head. “Don’t act like I’m the only one with daddy issues.”

My uncle had passed away when we were thirteen in a construction accident. I
remembered sitting in the other room when they told Dani. It was quiet, so quiet, and
then it wasn’t.

“I’m sorry,” I said, though I wasn’t sure for what.

She waved a hand. “It’s whatever. But with Felix…I just can’t.”

I picked at a slice of pepperoni. “Do you like him?”

She shook her head. “Bryn, I can’t.”

That night when I got home from school my mom had gone all out on dinner. I
thought about what she and my grandmother had been eating for the past week—
probably whatever Christmas leftovers hadn’t sprouted mold yet and an assortment of
Lean Cuisines.

I could never understand why they just stopped everything when I was asleep. It’s
not like I’d ever know. I just couldn’t stand the thought of them trudging through this
self-imposed misery all because of me.

“Dr. Sabine called,” my mom said as she piled some lasagna on my plate. “She’d
like to have you come in this weekend.”

I knew my mom had probably called the office the second I’d conked out again.
Under normal circumstances I probably would have been annoyed by the inconvenience
but I was actually relieved. Because I could pretend there wasn’t a pattern, that things
weren’t starting to feel like they had those first few years I was sick. When my mom had
to home school me. When I spent every summer in bed. When I missed birthdays and
holidays and the last Christmas my grandfather was alive. When the disease was on
hyper-drive, assimilating to my body, possessing me every chance it got. Eventually
they’d mellowed out. I’d hit puberty and they were easier to manage. But something
about the frequency lately just felt different. It felt scary.

“Sure.”

“The girl’s fine,” my grandmother said. “She just needs a little bit more beauty
rest than most. But steam her over a pot of boiling thyme…” She pinched the back of my
arm. “And if she puts on a few more pounds she’ll look just like Sophia Loren.”

Backhanded compliments. Another one of my grandmother’s specialties.

My mom ignored her. “She said she has some news. An alternative treatment
maybe.”
Great. Another one. I’d been playing guinea pig for some new KLS miracle drug at least once a year since I was first diagnosed. Usually the same ones, some new variation added, small amendments to the original design, and they were usually always duds. For me at least.

I’d heard of a few drugs being widely prescribed and helping at least a handful of patients manage their symptoms. But they’d still never found a cure and I was still waiting on my miracle.

“Have they tested it on rats yet?” I asked.

“Funny,” my mom huffed. “It’s out of Germany so it was probably dogs.”

“Oh good, so does that mean I’ll be the first human test case?”

“We’ll see. You feel up to trying something new?”

“You mean trying again?”

She nodded.

I thought about being laid up in a hospital bed, being poked and prodded, nurses filling vials full of my tainted blood, med students being paraded past my room and scribbling notes down for some research paper they were writing on rare neurological diseases. I thought about the monotony. The discomfort. The disappointment. But then I thought about the boy in my head. About what would happen to me if I kept getting worse.

I exhaled, looked at my mom, and said, “Let’s do it.”
Chapter 9

I’d just stepped onto the dock, reaching back for the rope, for her hand. But she wasn’t there. She’d felt like a flash. Like I was trapped on some deserted island and she was the only person in the world who knew I was here. The only person in the world who knew I existed at all.

I stood there, just staring at the waves—crests identical until you actually waded out into the water and looked close up. It was more than strange. It was like magic. What if she was right? What if…?

No. It…she…what if she was wrong? What if there were others? I’d seen the landscape change, daylight snuffed out like a match; the snow, the sand—it was different every time I blinked. Nothing was absolute. Not the landscape. Not time. Not me. What if the solitude wasn’t either?

I headed for the forest again, trying to spot a break in the leaves and I could just make out something jutting up through the treetops. White. Massive. I headed straight for it, zigzagging over puddles and swollen roots, sunlight careening off the structure and cutting a path across the forest floor. I stumbled, foot caught on a fallen branch, and then I heard a faint hiss tangled in the leaves. I wiped the dirt from my jeans, rose to my feet, and the hiss grew louder.

“Who’s there?” I stumbled backwards, scanning the trees. “Hello?”

I looked up and dotting the branches were hundreds of eyes—wide on my face, flashing gold like the farmer’s moon that had been hanging in the sky the night before.

The owls let out a soft unified purr, wobbling from side to side on pronged feet. But even higher there were others—darker, slimmer, hanging like rotting fruit. Bats. A few extended their wings, blue veins cutting through translucent skin and I fell against another tree, watching them. Then they all fell at once, the bats swooping down over my head, a black sheet flung out over everything and then…gone. Shred by the breeze like smoke.

I tried not to breathe it in, a sinister weight floating down from the ashes. But then that was gone too, nothing but those strange shapes and sharp angles edging out from the leaves. I crept closer, still shivering as I waited for something else to disappear, and the white mass revealed itself in pieces. I spotted rails and tracks and boxcars. Concrete edged out of the grass beneath my feet and I craned my neck at a rusting Ferris wheel.

Rain started sprinkling down in patches and I watched the sun carve through it as it fell from a cloudless sky. It disappeared through the trees and then the sky was red, a spontaneous sunset that just hung there.

I stepped around the Ferris wheel, spotting a carousel sunken in the grass, poles cracked, horses strangled under thick vines. A few of the lights flickered, a short in the circuits. They shuddered, so bright, until they were all I could see.

I was on my knees again, the same light I’d seen earlier stinging me from the inside.

Pain.
Heat.

I groaned, kneading my eyes with the heels of my palms. It was stronger this time, too strong. But this time I smelled something harsh. Something chemical. Gasoline. It clung to the back of my throat, a different kind of burning. I scrambled, trying to get to my feet again and then I heard the soft tinkle of bells.

The music started, low at first, warped like it was playing under water, and the hairs rose on the back of my neck. The light finally disappeared and I blinked once, twice, letting my eyes adjust.

I finally caught my balance, took a few steps back, watching the trees for movement, and then I saw the signs—corroded and rotting. FUNNEL CAKES. TICKET BOOTH. REAL MERMAIDS. THE SMALLEST WOMAN IN THE WORLD. The carnival signs were scattered among the trees, hanging from low branches by rusting nail heads and scattered in pieces across the grass.

Suddenly it felt like fall, humid air replaced by a chill, and I shivered. I stared at the shadows between the lights, tracing the trees as they receded into darkness. But the longer I stared into it, the more the shadows seemed to swell. Something stood upright, peering at me from between the trees. It shifted, lithe like someone moving.

“Is someone there?”
It grew still and so did I.
“Hello?” I didn’t mean to whisper.

I narrowed my eyes, staring into the trees until I couldn’t see their outline anymore. And then I heard it, the sound like I was trapped in a vacuum, all of the air rushing towards me at once.

I ran along the concrete of the playground as it narrowed into a sidewalk; the lights shuddering off behind me and the music growing faint as I followed it up a gravel driveway to a small yellow trailer house. A row of pinwheels had been buried in the rocks by the door and there was a pink bike wedged between the cinderblocks under the house.

I knew it. We aren’t alone.

The trees bowed behind me, the darkness moving closer. I raced up to the door but I didn’t bother knocking.

“Well?” I leaned inside. “Is anyone here?”

No one answered and without looking back at what was chasing me I hurled myself inside. I pressed my back to the door, waiting for something to slam into it, to find me there. I crawled to the window, peering outside but the trees were still and everything was quiet.

I faced the room and saw a couch, a TV, and a small card table in the corner of the kitchen. I opened the fridge. Empty. I followed the tile floor to where it disappeared under orange shag carpet. There was a bare mattress and an ironing board next to the window. A small nightstand sat next to the bed topped with a few picture frames and I picked one up, clearing off the dust with my shirt. It was of a little girl, wide-eyed and smiling. Dark curly hair was pulled into a ponytail on top of her head. And they were green—her eyes—sea foam.

I walked to the other end of the house and found the little girl’s bedroom. There were a few stuffed animals tucked behind an empty clothes hamper but the bed was stripped just like the other one.
I clicked the light on in a small closet and another bird shot past me, dizzying out on the floor before flying into the hallway. I was pressed against the back of the closet, trying to catch my breath when I spotted something along the baseboard. There was a crack in the floor, something gold flickering in the darkness. I pulled it out—a copy of Through The Looking-Glass—and the cover splayed open in my palm. My Dearest Bryn...

*Bryn.* Is that her name? The book slipped from my fingers, pages still limp and opened to the inscription.

“Bryn.”

I let the name swell in the small space, the echo bouncing against the closet’s exposed ribs. But the moment it dissipated an ache climbed into my throat. Because even though I knew her name I still didn’t have one of my own.

*Who are you? Fucking remember.*

“They sure do like to hide, don’t they?”
Mrs. Michelle was one of the worst nurses I’d ever had. What she lacked in precision she made up for in southern charm but it still wasn’t enough to coax one of my arteries to the surface.
“Maybe because they know what’s coming,” I said.
“Oh, found one.”
She stuck me and I pretended not to feel it. She filled a vial full of my blood, stuck me again, filled another vial. Then she dabbed me with a cotton ball and pulled the gauze so tight I could feel my pulse in my throat.
“Okay, all done.” She smiled, proud of herself. “You can head back into the waiting room until Dr. Sabine calls you back.”
She pointed down the hall even though I’d already been to the office three times that month. If anyone knew the drill, it was me.
My mom was frantically flipping through a magazine when I sat down next to her.
“How’d it go?” she asked.
“I had Michelle.”
She grimaced. “Poor thing couldn’t pin the tail on a donkey even without the blindfold.”
I reached for a magazine, searching for a page that wasn’t an ad. There was some retro song pouring from the speaker but it wasn’t loud enough to drown out the snoring to my right. I glanced over. Michael Erickson.
He was your stereotypical narcoleptic. Fell asleep in the middle of the pool at his twelfth birthday party. I was standing in line for cake when someone started screaming. Thirty minutes later the ambulance was toting him off to the ER while everyone stood there in shock, well except me for me and Monica Row—another one of Dr. Sabine’s narcolepsy patients. I never got my cake.
Monica’s case was less severe. I heard that she was actually a cheerleader these days or something else terribly normal. One summer she and I spent every Sunday morning before our appointments naming the fish in the aquarium above the magazine rack. I spent a lot of time making the rounds with Dr. Sabine’s other patients but those friendships were as sporadic and unreliable as my disease.
I was the only KLS patient Dr. Sabine had ever had—I knew I was the only one in the entire city of Austin; probably the entire state—so those forced friendships shriveled up fast. It was a little hard to plan play dates around narcolepsy and even harder to plan them around a coma. And the dream-state. No one had ever heard of anything like it and I didn’t exactly feel comfortable discussing it after Michael started claiming I was some kind of alien.
Maybe I was. Better than dying I guess.
I saw nurse Michelle back at the front desk. She was whispering to one of the other nurses and eyeing me through a plastic fern. I tried to read her face and see if she was still holding my file. What if they’d found something in my blood? What if they knew?

They’d taken a lot of blood, more than usual, and even though I couldn’t tell if the nausea was from that or something else, I reached for one of the vanilla wafers she’d given me.

I let it dissolve on my tongue but I still felt on edge. The cold hit me and I scratched at my forearms, nausea settling like a pulse between my eyes. I felt like I was about to pass out. No. Not now. It’s nothing. He’s nothing.

Dr. Sabine stepped into the waiting room, ushering me back, and I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know if I should tell her or if I should wait. Part of me was sick of hearing them refer to the place in my head as a coping mechanism because part of me was afraid that’s all it was. I was tired of being patronized, of them trying to convince me of some explanation for every strange unexplainable thing that happened to me. And I was tired of waiting for a cure. If I told them about the boy, what if I couldn’t participate in the trial anymore?

“How are you feeling today, Bryn?” Dr. Sabine asked.

“Fine.”

“Our favorite word,” she laughed. “Well, glad to hear it.”

I tried to concentrate while Dr. Sabine walked us through the rest of the procedure. It was simple. Basically they’d just stick a few needles in me and see how my body reacted to the medicine, test for allergies and abnormalities. If it seemed safe, because nothing is ever certain, then they’d distill it in capsule form and I would take a few pills a day, waiting to see if it kept the episodes at bay.

She kept talking but soon her voice faded out. I’d heard it all before. The drug is experimental. Results are subjective. Sign here, here, and here. I let my mom thumb through the paperwork, even though she probably had that memorized by now too.

Dr. Sabine faced me. “Now this particular medication might induce an episode.”

I picked at the gauze, trying to loosen it.

“Bryn?”

I looked up. “Sorry. You said it might induce an episode.”

“Right, but that’s a good thing. We want the medicine to be in control because it might also be a means of waking you.”

I nodded, not absorbing a single word. I didn’t need to after hearing the word might. It might work was always code for probably not.

On the way home we stopped by Felix’s dad’s garage. I’d been working on my sculpture sporadically. But all of the parts my uncle had brought me just weren’t the right texture. They were too corroded, flecks peeling off in my hands as I tried to heat them with the flame.

I let myself in through a side door, my mom waiting out front and taking the opportunity to ask Felix’s dad about some strange knocking sound under the hood that was probably just another imaginary product of her anxiety.

I spotted Felix standing under a black GTO, one I hadn’t seen in the shop before. He spun when he heard my footsteps echoing off the garage.
“Shit. Don’t sneak up on me,” he said.
“Sorry, slow day?”
He looked up and I saw that the car was completely gutted.
“Special delivery,” he said.
“For who? The mob?”
“Hey, hey.” He raised a hand. “Lower your voice.” He nodded to a table covered in shiny chrome parts. “Check it out. We’re putting in a new street engine. Seven-hundred horsepower. This things gonna fuckin’ fly.”
I brushed the finish. I’d never seen one in person, though I’d watched my uncle drool over plenty all of those Saturday afternoons we used to spend watching car shows on TV.
I ran my hand along the valves “And the camshaft?”
“Hydraulic roller, of course.”
“Any of these up for auction?” I asked, patting a valve spring that would have looked awesome on my sculpture.
“Yeah, right. I’ll take you to the scraps.”
I followed Felix to the back where they kept the recently dismembered—tables covered in glinting metal, garbage cans filled to the brim with scraps.
“Anything good?” I said, picking through a pile of license plates. “You guys sure do get a lot of these.”
“We’re the only shop that can do an exterior paint job in one night.” He winked. “In the dark.”
“Didn’t need to know that.”
“Don’t worry, it’s totally illegal.”
I tucked a few cracked spotlights into my bag along with a few of those license plates—one from Kansas, one from New Mexico.
“Sorry you missed the deadline,” he said. “That blows.”
“I’ve still got another shot. Have you applied anywhere yet?”
“Who? Me? Um, no, I’ll be here.”
I nodded. “Take over the family business. That’s cool.”
Felix had never been big on school. He was always that one kid who turned his pencil into a drumstick and every assignment into a paper football. He always had to be doing something with his hands, a tick that was perfect for being a mechanic.
But I knew that wasn’t the only reason Felix wasn’t going away to school. He had four younger siblings and after his grandmother had a stroke last year and went to live with them, they suddenly became his responsibility. I remembered us sitting on his back porch one afternoon, me teaching him how to French braid his little sister’s hair so he could do it for her before school in the mornings. Half an hour and a few expletives later, he was a total pro, two more sisters perched at his knees, waiting for their turn.
“Yeah.” Felix jumped up on one of the tables, swinging his legs. “I like it. It’s not so bad.” He cleared his throat. “So uh, is Dani going with you? Away to school, I mean.”
“I don’t know. School’s not really her thing. Why?” I said, eyeing him.
“Just asking.”
“Sure.” I grabbed some silver and copper coils, oil slipping under my fingernails. I raked them on my jeans. “You know Matt’s got two more weeks. Tops.”
Felix laughed. “Wow, that’s pretty serious.”
“Yeah, I think it’ll be a new record.”
I stuffed one last scrap of metal in my bag, the shiny partial exterior of a bumper, and then tried to wrestle it closed. It finally snapped shut and I looked up at Felix.
“Yeah, well no one ever wants what’s good for them, do they?”
“Do you know she’s scared right?”
That’s all it was. Because even though Dani was afraid to be alone she was also afraid to get hurt again. Because the moment you find out you’re not exempt from heartache, it feels like that’s all you’re good for. Getting your heart broken. Breaking someone else’s. I knew Dani had feelings for Felix and so did she. But she also knew how it would end, thought she did anyway, and it was that anticipation that kept her at bay. Even if it meant she’d be crying over losers like Matt the rest of her life.
Felix stared at the ground. “I know.”
“She’ll come around,” I said, even though I wasn’t so sure.
He flicked a drill bit across the table and it spun.
“She knows you’d be good for her,” I said.
“Yeah, well no one ever wants what’s good for them, do they?”
I bent down, angling my face in his line of sight. “Don’t give up.” I patted my bag. “Thanks for the goods. There won’t be black sedans full of FBI agents waiting for me outside will there?”
“Don’t worry,” he said. “We paid them off. You’re good to go.”
Chapter 11
Bryn

I stood over my workbench, pieces lined in neat rows, running my fingers over each of them. I waited for that electric pull, that itch to pick one up and turn it over in my palm. I tried to look at my sculpture, the one I’d been slaving over for months, and not just see a mess. But that’s hard to do when you feel like one yourself.

My emotions on the day before a new trial always existed on this manic spectrum between reserved hope and total indifference. There was a part of me that believed it would work as if that belief was its own serum and if I just let it fill every inch of me, maybe it would tell my body to relent. To let the cure work. To be a miracle for once. But there was another part of me that knew my body would never be a miracle, that I would never get better, and sometimes that ache filled me too, suffusing out everything else.

That’s where I was sinking to as I gripped the sketches I’d done, pages ripping as I wadded them in my fist. I thought about how it was my self-righteous defiance that had always sustained me in the past. I’m sick but I’ll get better. They said I can’t do it but I’ll prove them wrong. Mantras that suddenly felt like lies. The kind that settle at the base of your stomach and make life feel even heavier.

Because the truth was I was tired. I was tired of fighting but more importantly I was tired of losing, of being disappointed. And as I stared at my sculpture, hand hovering over a broken spotlight like a finger poised over a trigger, I was trying to figure out how to keep it from turning into another disappointment.

I heard my uncle’s truck pull into the driveway, heavy footsteps in the grass, him clearing his throat as he lifted the door to the garage.

“How’s it coming?” he asked.
I tossed the broken spotlight in the trash. “It’s not.”
“Maybe you need to take a break.”
“Maybe,” I said, even though I was already searching the table for another piece.
“You thinking about tomorrow?” he asked.
“Trying not to.”
“Nervous?”
“Kind of.”

He was quiet. He knew I didn’t mean the needles or that warm chemical smell of the dying. I’d spent enough time in hospitals to know what to expect and I’d been poked and pricked so often I didn’t even feel it anymore. He knew I was talking about the trial, about whether or not it would work.

“You’ve got time,” he said, as if that was some kind of reassurance. “If this one doesn’t work you can keep trying.”
“And keep being disappointed?”

I expected a repeat of his last lecture. You’re not weak. This isn’t you. But he didn’t say any of it. He didn’t say anything for a long time and I thought maybe he was finally giving me permission not just to be weak but to be honest about it.
But then he said, “I’m sorry.”

And it was more than I’m sorry that you have to do this, that you’re sick, that you’re scared. I could see it in those dark shadows on his face, in those lines that hadn’t been there before I was born. It was an, I’m sorry you’re going to be disappointed again. I’m sorry he left you.

“I know,” I said.

He gripped my shoulder, squeezed, and gave me a kiss on the head. “It’ll be okay.”

Those three little words were so generically beautiful that I felt raw. I tucked them away—the sound of his voice, his grip on me—like all of the other things he’d said to me growing up. Truths and secrets, lessons and white lies, bedtime stories and cautionary tales. Things my dad should have said to me. But all he’d ever said was goodbye.

I watched my uncle climb the steps into the house and I stood there waiting for his words to sink in but all I could think about was that aluminum trailer on FM 685, about the sound of footsteps on the gravel drive; me running to the window to see if it was my dad. If he’d come back. If he’d come back for me. But it was always my grandfather or my aunt, my uncle or the postman or some guy looking for work, out-of-towners needing directions. But never him. I never saw him.

My mom and I finally left the trailer. We waited there for six months and then one day my grandfather came with his work truck, he and my uncle loading the bed with mattresses, bags of clothes, my obnoxious collection of stuffed animals, and my mom’s china. Only the necessities. We moved in with my grandparents while my mom went back to school. I only really saw her on the weekends and it made her seem like this romantic rarity. Like someone who probably had more important things to do than spend time with her eight-year-old daughter—more mysterious things, more exciting. But she did it anyway and every Saturday felt like my birthday.

My dad showed up three years later. I was eleven. We had our own apartment by then but somehow he’d found us. I was watching TV when someone knocked on the door. I shouldn’t have answered it. When I stood on my toes, finding his bulbous face inside the peephole, I shouldn’t have opened the door.

But I did, pausing to run a hand over my hair, to rub the crust out of my eyes, to waste ten seconds on the idea that maybe it was me. That maybe I was the reason he’d left and that maybe this was my second chance, not his. So I reached for the knob, trying to look like my mom, like the pieces of her he’d fallen in love with, and then I cracked the door open.

He stayed in town for two months. Two months of trying to get my mom to let him take me out to lunch, to let him buy me a new bike, to let him pretend like the last three years hadn’t happened. He was persistent. He seemed changed and my mom caved. Four weeks later he was gone again.

Every once in a while I’d get a birthday card in the mail, a spontaneous phone call from an out of state payphone, his voice crackling before it finally cut out. When we moved again I thought I saw him idling in his truck across the street one night. He never came to the door.

It had been eight months since I’d seen my dad, though I knew how he’d aged; every nuance of his face. I tried not to look at my uncle and see my dad’s shadow but I did and it hurt.
That’s why I spent every waking hour fighting the temporary. That’s why I liked sculptures. My mom took me to see one of the outdoor exhibits at the museum when I was ten and the first piece I ever saw was called *Infinity*.

It was fifteen feet long, a rushing river curled out of thin sheets of gold and copper and iron. The description written by the author said: *The plight of mankind—stalling infinity*—and in that one piece, she’d done it. She’d stopped time, folding it into the metal, trapping it there in something equally as infinite. Something strong. Something that would last.

I wanted to make something that would last. I liked knowing that there were pieces of me—strong, unyielding, permanent pieces that weren’t sick or weak or afraid. They were perfectly intact even when I wasn’t and when I disappeared for good, slipping into one last long sleep, those pieces of me would still be there. Somewhere.

I held one of the license plates over the flame, blowing out the embers and then molding it with a gloved hand. Some of the fingertips were fraying, my skin absorbing the heat. But I didn’t flinch.

I clipped the metal, twisting each individual strip, and then I slipped off my gloves. I smoothed out the edges with a flint stone and knocked it against my thigh to shake off the ashes. Then I held the flame under each strip until they drooped like the petals on a lily.

A shadow caught in the sheen of the piece I was working on. I looked down at the metal flower and saw a drop of my blood. I checked my hands, palms up, and I saw it trickling down from the tip of my index finger.

I set the piece down on my worktable and stuck the wound in my mouth. But it didn’t taste like blood and when I stared down at my finger again there was suddenly no hole. I turned my hands over, searching for a wound but there was nothing.

Something scraped across the garage floor and I jumped, a sharp edge cutting into my skin. I looked down and I was still holding the flower, the tip of one of the petals biting into my index finger. I held it up, watched the blood trickle down from the very same spot it had bubbled from just seconds before, and then my grandmother’s shadow was pouring over me.

“You’re just like your grandfather,” she said. “Gloves on the table instead of on your hands.”

I watched my blood trickle onto the metal.

“You deaf, girl?”

“Sorry.”

I stood but my legs felt weak.

“Since when are you afraid of a little blood?” She reached for my hand, twisting my finger in a dishtowel until I could feel my pulse.

It swelled in my ears. *What just...?*

“Bryn.”

“What?”

My grandmother pulled me over to one of the shelves. “Hand me those pruning sheers.”

She was still gripping my finger but I managed to reach them. I handed them to her and then she was dragging me into the yard. She bent over her herbs, checking their leaves, plucking a few free before sticking them in her mouth.
“Mint.” She pressed the leaf between my lips. “Chew.”

I did.

She dragged me all around the backyard, each of us sidestepping over metal cages full of green tomatoes and ducking under potted plants hanging from the trees. She clipped some more rosemary and stuffed it into the pocket of her overalls.

“Oh no.” She stomped over to the side of the house. “This damned drought.”

She ripped a rose bulb from the stem, petals crumbling in her hand. I’d given her the seeds for her birthday last year. Pink. Her favorite. Now they were black.

“What happened to them?” I asked.

“Dead.” She let out a long breath.

But they looked more than dead. They looked rotten. They looked…like the flowers in my nightmares, black vines scaling me until I couldn’t breathe.

My grandmother pulled a piece of rosemary from her pocket, chewed on it.

“Grandma, what’s the rosemary for?”

She looked at me, eyes strange as if I should already know the answer. Then she said, “Bad dreams.”

“But I don’t have bad dreams anymore, remember?” I tried to make my voice light. “I sleep fine.”

“Oh, Bryn.” She looked at me for a long time, expectantly, almost anxious, and then she said, “Bad dreams don’t just come when you’re sleeping.”

She was still holding my hand, still looking at me as if there was more she wanted to say or more she was hoping to hear. But I just tried to smile, shaking off whatever in her voice had felt like some kind of accusation.

She let out a faint sigh and then she stuffed a piece of rosemary in my pocket before finally letting go of my hand and walking inside.

I stared at the roses, at the dark veins carving across each dry petal. The breeze shook a few free and suddenly I heard my mom’s voice, then my uncle’s, and I leaned against the side of the house, matching his lips with the stilted voice coming through the screen.

“Give her something to look forward to,” he said.

My mom’s words were thin, trapped in a sigh, and I couldn’t make them out.

“I’ll pay for her school,” he said. “You know you don’t have to worry about the money.”

“She can’t.”

He shook his head. “That kid can do anything she wants. She always does.”

“But—”

“Give her this. Don’t give her your fear. Give her something to look forward to.”

I thought my mom had started to cry but I was still clinging to my uncle’s words.

Anything. Always. Maybe he was right. And maybe my mom would give me her blessing, maybe she wouldn’t. But maybe I could give myself something too—permission to keep trying. Even when it felt like it was all for nothing. Even if trying was all I ever did, I shouldn’t stop.

I made my way back to the garage and looked at my sculpture—raw and twisted—and I realized that it would only be another disappointment if I abandoned it for good. I saw my sketch sputtering, wind kicking it out into the grass, and I chased after it, uncurling it in my palm, pressing it down until I could see the lines again and then I got
back to work.
I hid in that empty trailer house for what seemed like hours, waiting for the sun to peek out over the trees again but when I finally stepped outside it was still stalled red in the exact same place it had been earlier. The forest was gone and I followed a chalk road, waiting for the farmhouse to rise on my left, to hear the waves, to feel the breeze cutting across the snow. But suddenly I was walking through a desert, a sunburn already creeping up the back of my neck despite the setting sun. And I was still fighting it. Still waiting for that road to carry me home, somewhere that actually made sense.

Something shifted to my left and I paused. I examined the flat dusty terrain, still waiting for my eyes to adjust. Shapes were strewn along the path, darkness winding and clawing across the desert floor, the shadows of giant constellations in orbit. I shuddered and the heat suddenly felt alive. Everything felt alive.

The night seemed to flex and groan, sun finally sinking. I picked up my pace, glancing over my shoulder until I tripped over a loose stone. I hadn’t realized I’d been running. I hadn’t realized I’d been afraid. But as I rose to my knees, still staring into the darkness; feeling paralyzed, I realized that maybe I was. When I saw those shadows moving in the distance I realized that maybe I should be.

I was steeled to the ground, watching it inch towards me. It was thick and rolling and endless. It was reaching. For me. I tried to tell myself that it was some kind of wall cloud, a part of the landscape. I tried to tell myself to move.

Shit. Shit.

I stumbled onto my knees, ready to break into a run, trying to.

Move. Run.

The darkness closed in on me. I closed my eyes and when I opened them again I was sitting on the front porch of the farmhouse.

And I just kept sitting there. Afraid to move. Afraid to be moved. Because something had just shifted. Not just the trees or the desert or the ocean. But inside me. I could feel it. I thought of the shadows and I just tried to hold onto Bryn’s words. *You don’t have to be afraid.*

I waited for her to step outside but when she didn’t I let myself in again, that one step over the threshold drying the sweat from my clothes. I hoped maybe she’d be inside but it was empty.

She’d said time was strange here—like everything else—and I wondered how long she’d really been gone. How long it had been since I’d been gone too. Though, from where, I still wasn’t sure.

I hovered by the window for a while, staring into the dark. When it felt like it was staring back I closed the curtains and double-checked the locks, my sweaty palms gripping my pant legs as I searched for some kind of distraction.

I scanned the bookshelf, spotting that same gold scroll lining one of the spines. I expected it to be just another copy of *Through The Looking-Glass* but when I flipped it open I saw the same inscription. The pages even splayed the same in my palm, edges thin
and tearing, brown glue unstuck from the binding. My hand trembled as I laid it back on the shelf, wondering if maybe it had been moved here by something else too. Something I had the slightest feeling wasn’t necessarily good. I tried to ignore it, thumbing through a few more books and then through the old western movies lining the middle row, dust clinging to the tips of my fingers. Nothing I’d ever read or remembered watching.

I reached for one of the strange metal sculptures, a robot holding a pitchfork, prongs dulled. I spotted another face, eyes fashioned out of the heads of screws, smile made out of the small spring you find in pens. Its chest was exposed, a coil welded within the frame like intestines.

The shelves were bowed under the weight of trinkets and old leather journals, VHS tapes and wooden boxes with velvet linings. The bottom shelf was stuffed with the cracked sleeves of old records and that’s when I noticed the old record player next to the shelf under the window.

The lid lifted with a crack, a vinyl copy of Tusk by Fleetwood Mac just waiting for the needle. I stared at the cover, waiting for something to click. When it didn’t, I lowered it, turning the player on. It coughed out that signature scratch and then the sound of a piano sifted out.

I let the record play, the melody just as foreign as everything else, while I examined the rest of the bookshelf. I spotted a small journal, paisley spine, a broken lock clanking against my hand as I pulled it free. Her full name, Bryn Reyes, was scrolled across the first page in juvenile cursive but as I flipped through I noticed the letters tightening, the slant more defined.

I watched the door waiting for her to walk inside. I peered through the windows, checking the beach but it was still empty. I sat on the couch, Bryn’s diary opened against my knees and then I started flipping through the pages.

Young, scribbling Bryn made Christmas lists and wrote about slumber parties at her cousin Dani’s house while swirling, cursive-writing Bryn wrote about waking up a week after Christmas Eve having slept through the entire thing and lying to her aunt about Dani staying the night at her house so her cousin could go out with a guy.

I tried to remember Christmas—making my own lists, waiting for sleep and Santa at the same time. But for some reason all I could drudge up were the smells. New things and old things. Plastic and crackling cedar. Did we even have a fireplace?

I kept flipping through paragraphs about Bryn’s first day of high school and her first date with some guy named Drew. He’d idled in his truck, her mom glaring at him from the doorway and then he’d taken Bryn to see a movie. She didn’t remember any of it. She was too busy trying to act normal, resting her hand within holding distance, waiting for him to reach for it. He didn’t.

I wondered if I’d ever felt that nervous, that uncomfortable in my own body and then I thought about washing up on the beach, scrambling for air on my hands and knees. I thought about the first time I saw my face, floating there in Bryn’s eyes.

I’d felt so disgustingly foreign like I’d been transplanted into this strange flesh that didn’t even belong to me. But could another person make you feel that way? Like jumping out of your skin, wanting to, just to escape the anticipation of their rejection. I tried to find a face, a pair of lips, eyes I could stare at for hours. Some girl I’d wanted to kiss, maybe had. Some girl who might have been waiting for me wherever it was that I’d come from.
I didn’t know if I’d ever been in love. I couldn’t remember. But in that second I wished I hadn’t. Because if I had and I couldn’t remember her, what would that mean? About people. About soul mates. It would mean that they’re not real. It might mean that nothing is. And I have to be real. I couldn’t just be some side effect of Bryn’s illness, some product of her imagination. I couldn’t. Could I?

Pages slipped past my fingers in a fury about Bryn’s uncle and her deadbeat dad and her widowed grandmother. Bryn’s grandfather had died of a stroke when she was fifteen. She’d slept in one of his old work shirts for three weeks and she’d cried every night for two. Two years earlier they’d lost Bryn’s uncle, Dani’s dad, and in the years since, still mourning those losses on half-hearted holidays and stolen birthdays, the rest of them had clung to each other.

And I couldn’t help but wonder what they were like—my family. Maybe my dad was tall like me. Maybe I had his nose or his chin. He could have been a doctor or a teacher or maybe he worked in the oil fields too. We’d watch football together on Sundays while my mom lay on the couch reading a book. She’d have hair the same color as mine, always thrown into a ponytail. Or maybe it was always loose, curled around her shoulders. Maybe I used to pull on it when I was a baby, tiny fingers gripping those soft strands until she winced and smiled.

They were high school sweethearts. Or maybe they’d met in college, both of them working off their student loan debt in some dive bar that was famous for their margaritas. But they didn’t drink. Well maybe my mom had a glass of wine on Sundays but that was it. And maybe my dad sipped on a beer during a game. Maybe he’d even let me sneak a taste once when my mom wasn’t looking. I’d wrinkled my nose, spit it out. He was glad.

He coached my youth football team. My mom brought snacks. She showed up still in her slacks and blazer, high heels biting into the grass. She was project manager for some environmental firm. Or maybe she was an artist, old jeans covered in dried paint, a few drips at the edge of her hairline. My dad would clean it off with his thumbnail and then he’d kiss her. He’d kiss her and she’d kiss him back.

I was an only child, spoiled rotten. I had grandparents who came over on Saturday mornings and maybe I had cousins like Dani. Maybe they lived down the street and we ran barefoot down the sidewalk, a pack of adorable heathens with our late great grandmother’s thick eyebrows. She was an immigrant. From Italy. Maybe Spain. I stared down at my arms. They were dark, even my palms were a light russet color, the pigment hiding in my DNA and not from spending every summer day out in the sun.

Who are you?

I waited for the answer to finally hit me, for all of the daydreaming to weave itself into something real. I tried not to hold my breath but my lungs were tired of the silence, every inch of me tired of feeling empty. But the quiet lingered. My memory still lost. So I turned to the next page in Bryn’s diary, sifting through her past while trying to snuff out the ache for my own.
Chapter 13
Bryn

I hated hospital gowns. The strings cutting into your shoulders, the incessant draft, the self-imposed shame of wearing a giant baby blanket complete with ducks in sailor’s hats all because, technically, I was only seventeen and therefore still belonged in the children’s ward.

My mom was downstairs looking for something to eat, no doubt trying to decide between the hamburgers that tasted like greasy cardboard and the chicken strips that tasted like greasy cardboard. She’d go with the chicken.

We’d developed a routine a long time ago. Turn the TV to some awful reality show, open the curtains, and pretend we were on vacation instead of in the hospital. In fact the word hospital was not even allowed to be uttered in the midst of our little game. Instead we’d say resort or timeshare or hotel or we’d skirt around the specifics of the location altogether and just not say anything at all.

I usually preferred the silence, although it never lasted long. My mom would always start rambling about something and it didn’t take long for me to absorb her nerves and do the same. I hated being tethered to her like that but it had always been that way, two mirror reflections on the opposite end of the emotional spectrum, her fear sneaking up on me when I was trying my hardest not to let it. Because I was her daughter.

And that day as I lay in that hospital bed, trying to bury the hope and the anxiety and all of the other things pricking at my skin, I just couldn’t bury the fear. So I was afraid. Because I was sick. Because I was Elena Reyes’ daughter and as she slipped back into the room clutching a greasy bag of hospital take-out she looked scared too.

Dr. Sabine finally came in, eyes scanning a clipboard. She was flanked on either side by two strange men in identical lab coats. The older one stepped forward, one hand steady against his cane while reaching out to my mom with the other.

“Ms. Reyes, this is Dr. Banz and his associate Gregor Vogle. They’re two of the specialists behind this latest drug trial.”

“Good morning. It’s nice to meet you both,” Dr. Banz said. His voice was thick and muddled. Definitely German. He stopped, scrubbed his glasses, and then he smiled at me. “Good day today, Miss…”

“Bryn,” his associate offered. He was younger, maybe early-fifties, his coat buttoned and his hands stiff at his sides.

I felt someone stick me with the IV, the liquid running hot in my veins.

“Bryn,” Dr. Banz continued. “Yes. Very exciting day.”

I managed to croak out a, “Hello.”

“It’s so great to finally meet you both,” Dr. Banz said. His voice was thick and muddled. Definitely German. He stopped, scrubbed his glasses, and then he smiled at me. “Good day today, Miss…”

“Bryn,” his associate offered. He was younger, maybe early-fifties, his coat buttoned and his hands stiff at his sides.

I felt someone stick me with the IV, the liquid running hot in my veins.

“Bryn,” Dr. Banz continued. “Yes. Very exciting day.”

I managed to croak out a, “Hello.”

“It’s so great to finally meet you, and under these circumstances…”

I wasn’t sure what circumstances he was talking about but I tried to smile anyway, to absorb his sentiment somehow even though my eyes were already fighting to stay open. He said something I couldn’t make out, patted my foot. I tried not to look at his associate who’d retreated to the corner, though his eyes were still trained on my face.
His own looked pained and it made me feel cold.

Dr. Sabine stepped forward again, reiterating everything we’d been over the weekend before. The treatment’s experimental. Results are subjective. Might induce an episode. Blah blah blah. This might sting a little.

They finally left the room and my mom settled in a chair by my bed. She looked tired and it made me tired. So tired. I heard her say my name. She looked at me, stars cutting across her face, her features bleeding into static, and then I felt the light pull of the breeze as it rippled off the ocean.

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I saw his silhouette through the window and I felt a surge in my pulse. Still here. I stood there, watching him, waiting for some false move that didn’t feel intrinsically human. If he was born from my own psyche, wouldn’t there be holes? Cracks in the design? Subtle fallacies you’d never notice unless you were looking?

But I was looking. I was looking right at him and there was nothing—not yet—and he seemed so perfectly human.

I opened the door and I saw him slip something between the couch cushions. He froze and for a while neither of us moved, both waiting for the other to disappear.

“What was that?” I finally said.

“You’re back.” He stood. “That was…How long were you gone?”

I reached under the couch cushion, pulling out the diary.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have…”

I sat down, my thumb marking the page he’d been reading. I heard the window slide free. He was still in his uniform and he smelled like mints and sweat.

“Really? You couldn’t find anything more interesting to read?”

I slammed it closed and put it back on the shelf, facing the wall until the heat left my cheeks. He just kept standing there, watching my every move. In the quiet I heard the low whirr of the record player.

“So…” I turned around, slow, desperate to change the subject. “What were you listening to?”

He exhaled, probably grateful. “I’m not sure. It was already on there.”

I glanced back at him. “Did you like it?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so.”

I crawled to the bottom shelf, thumbing through a few of my grandfather’s records before settling on one of my own. I slipped it from the sleeve and placed it on the table, watching his face as I lowered the needle.

“What about this?” I asked.

Robert Smith’s voice cut through the small speaker, an LP of The Head On the Door spinning under the needle.

“This is good?” He pursed his lips, listening.

I nodded. “Just let it simmer for a little bit.”

In Between Days faded into the next track and I could feel him watching me again. I let my hair fall in front of my face, desperate to cut the quiet.

“I’m in the hospital,” I said.

His eyes snapped to my face. “Did something happen?”

“No, I’m undergoing an experimental treatment. They’re trying to find a way for me to manage it.”
“Your Klein…”
“Klein-Levin. KLS for short.”
“Did it work?”
I looked down at my hands, my legs curled under me, then back at him. “Not exactly.” I shrugged. “But eventually. Maybe.”
“How long were you gone?” he asked. “I feel like I just saw you this morning.”
“Two weeks.”
He narrowed his eyes at the floor. “So it doesn’t stop.”
“What doesn’t?” I asked.
“When you’re gone,” he clarified. “Time doesn’t stop here when you’re gone.”
I shrugged. “I…guess not.”
We both grew quiet, just listening to the music.
“Do you remember anything yet?” I asked. “Your name maybe?”
He chewed on his bottom lip, staring at his hands. He shook his head. Another song started.
“Oh, what about this one?” I asked.
We sat there, letting the song play. I watched his fingers dance along the top of his knee.
“Maybe…” He shrugged again, defeated.
I flipped through a few more records, looking for something simple, universal, and freed an old Sinatra album. It started to play and I watched him sink against the couch, head spilling back.
I was still waiting for some hint of definition, a personality that I couldn’t have created. But he was still so confused, his face pained every time the song changed. I wondered if a little coaxing might help, if he might finally let himself take a deep breath.
“You like this,” I said.
“I do?”
I moved next to him on the couch, watching the way the cushion dimpled around his legs. I thought about finding him tangled in those sunflowers, his cheek giving way under my thumb. He’d felt real but so did everything else here.
I watched his face, his jaw tense, a vein carving a thick line down from his temple. And it was pulsing. I felt myself reaching for him, wanting to feel what was inside him. Wanting proof that he was real and not just some part of my disease.
I took his hand, the weight startling in my palm. But he was wary, flinching. Then I pressed his hand over his chest, my thumb still buried under his palm, waiting for a heartbeat. It was shallow. But it was there.
“My heartbeat?” he said, staring down at our hands. “At least that’s still there.”
I nodded, his pulse drumming against my thumb. He found my eyes and I let go.
“You like this,” I said, trying to maneuver his attention back to the music.
“Everyone likes this.”
“Do you?” he asked.
I leaned back against the couch, still watching the way the cushions puckered against his back. “Yeah. It’s pretty.” I nodded to the stack of LPs. “You pick one.”
He grabbed a copy of Blonde on Blonde by Bob Dylan. I bit my lip, waiting as he fit it under the needle. Here was his first test. Dylan was a global institution. People died for his drab acoustic rants and pretentious lyrics. Except me. Dylan’s voice cracked
through the old brass speaker and the boy grimaced.
   “This is awful.” He lifted the needle.
   “Tell that to the rest of the world,” I said, not looking at him. Shit. Someone else who thought Bob Dylan sucked? What if I had made him up?
   “People like this?” he asked.
   I shook my head. “People love this.”
   He flipped through a few more records. “Well, at least I’m not average.”
   He loaded a copy of 2112 by Rush. An acquired taste, not necessarily mine. The track started and when the thrum of a bass finally bled through the speakers he smiled.
   I sank there, just watching him. “No,” I said. “You certainly are not.”
   He gripped his knees, tapping his thumb against his shins. We sat there just listening. Him watching the needle. Me watching him. But even though I’d just felt his heartbeat, I was still afraid. From the way his shoulders bristled, his grip tightening, I could tell he was too. The needle scratched off and it was quiet.
   He looked at me. “Do you think maybe I’m sick too?”
   I picked at the fraying cuff of my jeans. “I don’t know.”
   “But I could be. I mean that’s why you’re here. I could be sick too.”
   “Maybe, but…”
   I didn’t know what to say. KLS could have been the explanation we were looking for but I didn’t want it to be. It was awful and lonely and I wouldn’t wish it on anyone. I watched him sink against the wall in the corner of my eye.
   “I don’t think so,” I said. “I’ve never lost my memory before.”
   “Then maybe it’s not KLS but it could be something else.” He exhaled.
   “Something worse.”
   “We don’t know that.”
   “How else do you explain what I saw today? I’m messed up. I’ve got to be.”
   “What do you mean?” I asked.
   “The shadows.” He cracked his knuckles, shaking his head.
   “The shadows?”
   “I was…something was following me but before I could see what it was I blinked and I was back on the porch.” He gripped his pant legs. “Something moved me.”
   “Something.” He looked afraid and I steadied my voice. “Not something. It’s—”
   He cut me off. “Something’s out there.”
   I narrowed my eyes at him. “What do you mean something?”
   He was quiet for a long time and then, “I think I saw something. No.” He closed his eyes. “I think something saw me.”
   “Like what?”
   He glanced out the window. Condensation stuck to the glass and he traced a circle into the fog, two drips migrating toward the center. “I don’t know.”
   “Nothing lives here,” I tried to reassure him.
   “Except you.”
   “Yeah…”
   “And now me. What if…?” He stopped himself.
   “What if what?”
   “What if there’s something else?”
   I tried to picture what he might have seen but the landscape was constantly
shifting, moving like some living thing. Even though it really wasn’t. Even though it was really just trapped like everything else. Including me.

“Do you think it’s like some kind of head trauma?” he asked. “A concussion or some fucking brain tumor?”

“No. You’re not…” But I stopped. Because I wasn’t sure.

He reached for another LP, hands shaking as he slipped it out of the sleeve, and then he dropped the needle. We sat there, neither of us saying too much. He played the rest of the LPs in the living room and I could see the anticipation fluxing behind his eyes. He was waiting to remember. His breath hitching at the start of every song, shoulders slumping, deflated, every time he didn’t recognize it.

He slipped the last record back into the sleeve and set it on the bottom shelf.

“There’s more,” I said.

His face lit up and I led him to the closet in the spare bedroom, my mom’s old room. I stood on a small end table to reach the boxes of my mom’s old records and then he carried them back to the couch, blowing off the dust and reading the inside covers. His eyes scanned the song titles but there was not a hint of recognition in them. We listened to The Black Crowes, Johnny Cash, Prince, The Who, and Otis Redding.

“Oh, leave it here.” I was walking back to the couch clutching a cup of coffee as Love Man started to play.

I watched him sitting there next to the record player, arms curled around his knees. Stiff, like he was still afraid to disappear.

I set my cup on the shelf and then I reached for his hand, the weight just as startling as the first time.

“Oh no,” he said. “That I definitely don’t remember how to do.”

“Oh, come on.”

I started to sway, keeping an eye on his face. He was awkward and still stiff, his fingers sweaty. Not at all how I’d expected boys in dreams to be.

“You’re serious,” he said.

I grabbed his hand, my thumb slipping down to his wrist and finding his pulse again. But this isn’t a dream.

“Dead serious,” I said. “An advantage to losing your memory, you get to stop giving a shit.”

“Is that what you do?”

I nodded in time with the music. “Pretty much on a daily basis. And seeing as I’m still not sure whether or not you’re just a dream, I’m not going to bother wasting my time trying to impress you.”

He smirked, finally gripped my hand, spinning me. I stumbled against the ottoman, landing against his chest.

He looked down at me. “I thought you don’t dream.”

I could see the horizon line in his eyes, sun sinking low. The needle spun to the edge of the record, lifting with a crack. It was quiet and I could feel his pulse again, riding there under mine until they were tangled and loud. I let go of him.

“I don’t.”

He stood there, looking at me. Then his voice trickled out, low, afraid. “If you find a cure…does that mean that I’ll disappear?” His question hung there in the silence. His eyes trailed down to the floor.
“No,” I lied. “I don’t know.”
“What if I can’t find a way back?”
“You will. I’ll help you.” I took a step toward him, eyes tracing the lines on his shirt. “I’ve been drawing this,” I said. “I’ve been trying to figure out what it is.”
He gripped the hem of his shirt, holding it out. “Me too. For a while I thought maybe I was some kind of alien.”
“Crossed my mind. But aliens are usually pretty disgusting looking. Not to mention bald and like four feet tall. Oh, and usually they’re genderless and you, well… you’re obviously a guy.”
He smiled. “You talk a lot.”
“A side effect of being my mother’s daughter,” I mumbled.
“So, you remember this when you leave?” he asked. “When you’re in the real world, I mean.”
I nodded.
“So, maybe you could try and figure out what this is. Maybe it’s like code or something. What if I’m from another dimension or a parallel universe? Or what if I’m from the future?”
“Okay. Slow down. We’ll figure this out.”
“Okay.”
“But we need more clues,” I said.
“We need my memory.”
“Ideally, yeah that would probably help,” I said. “But we’ll just have to make do without it.”
“How?”
“Well, we know you despise Bob Dylan.”
He laughed. “And that I can’t dance.”
“You don’t really like coffee either.”
“You noticed?” he asked.
“Don’t worry, I’m not offended. Shit’s disgusting. I only drink it for nostalgic purposes. Oh, and you like the bass.”
“I do?”
“You were tapping along with it on every song which isn’t normal. Most people follow the drums, lead guitar. Hey, maybe you play the bass.”
“I don’t know,” he said. “I sort of have this feeling that I’m not all that coordinated. I mean I was checking myself out in the hall mirror while you were gone and it definitely doesn’t look like I play sports or anything.”
“You were checking yourself out. While I was gone.”
“I was just, you know, looking for clues like you said.”
“By looking at yourself naked.”
“I wasn’t naked. I was…never mind.”
“Don’t worry,” I said. “If it turns out you play an instrument you won’t need muscles.”
He cocked an eyebrow.
“Focus. Enough about your body. Have you checked the beach?” I asked.
“The beach?”
“Something could have washed up with you.”
I headed for the door but he hesitated. The sun was still stalled in a dark red sunset and he still looked afraid.

“The light should last,” I said.

“How do you know?”

I looked up at the sky, shook my head. “I don’t know but sometimes when I want it to last, it does.”

He gave a slight nod and then we headed for the sand. We walked along the tide, foam lapping against my bare feet. I’d never seen anything on the shore here. It was untouched, clean. But I’d also never seen another person here before. There could have been something, a piece of a boat, some kind of time travel machine, a cell phone from the future, anything.

“Quick-fire round,” I said after we’d been walking for a while. “If you could go anywhere in the world where would you go?”

He chewed on his bottom lip, the skin there starting to peel. “Um…”

“The whole purpose of the quick fire round is that you don’t have time to over-think your answers. Just say the first place that comes to mind. We’re looking for clues, remember?”

“Okay. I don’t know…”

“First place.”

“The moon.”

“Bending the confines of my question. I like it. Okay, if you could have a million dollars or lifelong happiness which would you choose?”

“Is that a trick question?”

I shrugged.

“Neither.”

“Neither?”

“Money isn’t everything and happiness is relative. Next question.”

“Okay…” I chewed on the inside of my cheek, thinking. “Summer or winter?”

He looked back toward the hill. “I like the cold,” he said, trying to shake the uncertainty from his voice. “I feel like I can barely breathe here.”

“The humidity. Maybe you’re not used to it.”

“Maybe. Like I’m an Eskimo or something.”

“Maybe you’re a professional dog sledder.”

He laughed. “I think I like dogs.”

“What about cats?”

He shook his head. “Cats are gross.”

“Fish?”

“Pointless.”

“Birds?”

“Annoying.”

“I guess we know you’re not exactly the outdoorsy type.”

He stared past me into the waves. “I wouldn’t rule it out. Although almost drowning doesn’t really help.”

“Do you remember that part at least?” I asked.

He looked at me. “I remember waking up.” He shifted, shoes sinking in the sand.

“I remember you.”
“And then I blinked,” I breathed.
“You woke up?”
“I can’t really control it.”
“So that’s what that trial was about?” he asked.
I nodded.
“But not a cure,” he said.
“There isn’t one, not yet, so in the meantime I’m just trying to find something that’ll…”
“What?”
I sighed. “Let me be normal.”
He stuffed his hands in his pockets, smiled. “I know I can’t really remember reality right now, but I’m pretty sure there’s no such thing.”
“Try convincing the rest of the world.”
“If I ever see it again.” He was quiet, still staring at the water.
I inched closer, trying to think of something to say, anything to sever his doubt. I stared into the sun, still hanging in the same spot it had been earlier. “What’s your favorite time of day?”
He narrowed his gaze on the horizon. “Dusk. I like being able to see the sun and the moon at the same time. It makes me feel small.”
“That’s…” fucking beautiful “interesting.”
We stopped walking and he knelt down, picking through a pile of sand. There were a few seashells but nothing more. He stood up, wiped his hands on his jeans.
“What’s your favorite color?” I said.
He scanned the landscape, eyes flitting from the water to the field of sunflowers, then back to me. His eyes roamed my face then grew still. “Green.” He took a step closer, lowered his voice. “That trailer in the woods…”
“Found it while you were exploring today?” I asked.
He nodded. “Did you used to live there?”
“With my dad.”
“Before he left?”
“How did you know that?”
“I have to warn you,” he said. “I did read some pretty revealing things about you in that diary.”
“Oh yeah?” I swallowed, bracing myself. “What else did you read?”
He narrowed his eyes. “Everything. Who’s Drew?”
“A boy. Next question.”
“Nah-huh. Quick-fire rounds over, Bryn.” My name spilled out of his mouth. It was warm.
“Sorry,” he said. “You don’t seem like the type who gets embarrassed.”
“I don’t.” Usually. “He’s someone I dated.”
“Past tense. So he’s a jerk.”
“You gathered that much, I see.”
“By the third break-up, yeah.”
I let out a long breath. “Actually, that is embarrassing. I’m not that girl.”
“What girl?”
The girl who has a shitty boyfriend because it’s better than being alone. The girl
who needs people.”
    “So you’re the solitary type.”
    “No, I’m the ‘has no friends because she’s asleep all the time’ type.”
    “Friends. Who needs ‘em?” he said. “I don’t have any and look at me.”
    I laughed. “I’m sure you had a lot. I’m sure you were like, president of the French club and wrote these insanely poetic music reviews for your school newspaper. And I bet you were captain of the rugby team or some other obscure, totally cool, non-American sport.”
    “Again. No muscles remember?”
    I stuck a finger in his gut and he coughed.
    “Are you kidding me? Those abs are practically made of steel.”
    He caught his breath and stood there, just staring at me. “You’re strange,” he said, smiling.
    “I told you this place was strange.”
    He smiled. “And beautiful.”
    “Right,” I said. “That too.”
Chapter 14

I blinked and it was night again. I wavered, disoriented. Bryn grabbed my arm. “Okay?”
My heart was racing in my chest. “Does it always do that?”
I followed her eyes and the sky was on fire, stars blinking in long trails leading into infinity. There were thousands of them winking in and out, swirling, falling.
“Is this real?”
She smiled, words caught in a sigh. “Does it matter?” She stared up at the sky. “I haven’t seen this one in a while.”
“Are they on a rotation or something?”
“I don’t know. Sometimes they seem random but other times they’re not.” She started walking towards the tree line, still looking up. “Sometimes I’ll see an old photo from a trip I took when I was a kid and then I’ll fall asleep and suddenly I’ll be back there.”

I was stiff, staring into the trees. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to go back in there. But then Bryn looked back at me. “You coming?” She reached out a hand, her face soft. “It’s okay.”
And something in her smile made me think it was. I reached back.
A dull light radiated from the trunks of the trees. Little plastic stars were stuck to the bark, the kind people used to stick on their pop-corned ceiling.
“They were my cousin Dani’s,” Bryn said, peeling them free. The stars rested in her hand and as we walked she stuck them to the trees we passed. “To light our way back.”

The two of us dodged rocks and low hanging limbs before coming to a large hill. There was a small fire at the very top, flames cinched in by large stones. Ashes spit onto the grass, wood crackling. Bryn sat down at the edge of the fire, letting the shadows of the flames dance along her open palms. I sat down next to her, spotting a large tent, fishing poles stacked on sleeping bags.
“This wasn’t here earlier,” I said.
She gave me a sly smile.
“Right,” I said. “Nothing here makes sense.” Though I wished something did.
“It looks different,” she said.
“What do you mean?”
She shook her head. “I don’t know, brighter, if that’s possible.” She lay back, pointing. “That’s the milky way.”
I leaned back, my head resting on a few strands of her hair.
“Have you ever seen it before?” she asked.
I was quiet. I wasn’t sure.
“Sorry,” she said.
“It’s okay.”
I stared at the stars, low and pulsing as if they were strung along the tops of the trees. There were so many. I tried to remember if I’d ever seen them before or anything like them but every preconception I had felt duller; artificial like some movie still or a page out of a magazine.

I heard Bryn exhale. “Sometimes it’s better than the real thing.”
“What do you mean?”
“When I think about that camping trip, I don’t just think about the stars. I think about the heat and my uncle burning our dinner and he and my mom and I huddled in our tent eating beef jerky while some coyotes sniffed at our tent. I think about getting lost trying to find the place and someone running off with our travel chairs and lanterns while we were sleeping.”
“Sounds like a blast.”
“And I didn’t even mention my hair almost catching on fire,” she laughed. “But here it’s different. It’s filtered and perfect and no coyotes.”
“That you know of.”
She was quiet and I bristled.
“Don’t worry,” she finally said, her voice hesitant. “You’re safe here.” But the words felt forced this time, something strange in her eyes.
“But I’m still lost.”
I looked up when I heard the explosion. A long flame tore across the sky, climbing at an angle. A rocket. Bryn wrinkled her nose, watching as it shrunk to a small ball of light before blinking out completely, and I wondered what memory it had come from; if it was something she’d been thinking of.

My hand brushed hers in the dark.
Bryn rolled over, facing me. “I’m going to figure out who you are.”
“I hope so.”
“I will.”
But her voice was thin, unsure. What if she still didn’t believe in me? What if she still just thought I was some kind of dream?
“You think I’m…real don’t you?” I said. “I mean, you think I’m out there? Somewhere?”
Her chin slipped into her hand. She looked right at me, flames tangled in her green eyes. “I think you are very real.”
I tried to believe her but I was still afraid. Of being lost forever. Of Bryn finding a cure and leaving me here alone.
Her face grew dark. “You worry.”
“You don’t?” I asked.
“All the time.”
I tore at a tuft of grass, not sure if I should say what I was thinking or how. I inhaled, not looking at her. “What’s it like?”
I felt her almost flinch at the words. Shit. Why did I open my mouth? But then she sat up, her back to me.
“Being sick?” she asked.
“Yeah. I mean you don’t have—”
“It’s like drowning.” She hugged her knees. “This wave pulls me under, completely out of nowhere, and then I wash up somewhere else. I don’t remember how or
when. Entire weeks get stripped from my memory and all I do when I’m awake is try and put the pieces back together.”

I felt that familiar ache in my throat because that’s exactly what I was doing. Flailing and trying to stay afloat. Trying not to get sucked into the fear that I might be lost for good. That I might never find a way out of this. That I was only temporary. That I was no one. I was still trying not to drown and Bryn had to do the same thing every time she woke up.

“But you go to school?” I asked.

“I try. Catching back up though, it’s hard. Right now I’m just trying to graduate.”

“What will you do after that?”

“I don’t know. I wanted to go to school out of state.” She let out a tight breathy laugh. “Ridiculous, right? I spend half my life as a vegetable and I think I can still pretend to be normal. That I could actually survive on my own. That’s the problem, the worst part of all of it.” I sat up and she looked at me. “If I don’t get better I’ll need… someone forever. Like a child,” she said, voice cracking. “I’ll never be able to get by on my own.” But then she was solid again. She cleared her throat. “But that’s life, I guess. Everyone’s a little fucked up right?”

“Right…yeah, I guess so.” I didn’t know what to say. “But I don’t think you’re fucked up.”

“You don’t?”

Her cheeks were flushed and I couldn’t tell if it was from the fire or something else.

“No.”

“Well, I do.” Her voice was hard. “Something’s…changed.”

“What do you mean?”

Her voice rattled as she tore at the grass. “Strange things have been happening.”

“You mean besides me?”

She nodded.

“Like what?”

She looked into my eyes. “Like I’ve been seeing things. Out of order. Like I’m seeing them before they happen.” She shook her head. “I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Maybe it’s nothing,” I offered.

“Maybe,” she breathed.

I didn’t like that look on her face, shadows replacing her blushed cheeks and starlit eyes. My fingers crawled across the grass, curling around her thumb. But the second our skin touched, I flinched. Again. Fingers trembling. Not because it reminded me that I might not be real but because it made me feel, for certain, that I was.

Bryn stared too, at our hands, at the shadow of the flames dancing across them. But she wasn’t marveling at their closeness, she was marveling at my skin. At how it burned red, my veins ignited like the fire in front of us.

I pulled away, cradling my hand to my chest, the light climbing to my wrist, to my elbow. Bryn reached for me.

“I saw it before,” she said. “When you were sleeping.”

“What’s happening?”

“I don’t know.”

She maneuvered my wrist, spreading my fingers, my open palm pressed against
hers. Whatever was inside me reached back, surging. There was a shock, Bryn parted her lips, feeling it too, and then she was gone.

I stared down at my hand as the light started to dull, the only heat now coming from the flames in front of me. I crept forward, kneeling over them, and as I led my hand into the fire I didn’t feel a thing.
I spent lunch in the library, which wasn’t all that unusual. What was a little unusual was the way I had my bag so inconspicuously hanging from a coat hook in order to block the computer screen from view.

I knew I was being paranoid but all of the secrecy wasn’t because I didn’t want people to think I was weird. That was sort of a given. But because the last time I went on a research binge concerning my disease I sort of freaked out.

I’d already been living with it for a few years but when I got into high school things changed. I was growing up and there were things I wanted to do and wanted to be a part of. I wanted friends. I wanted a boyfriend. I wanted school dances and debate club and homecoming and to try out for the spring play. I wanted that cliché high school experience you see in movies.

But then I started missing classes, buying dresses I never wore, talking to boys who forgot that I even existed during those three weeks of school I’d missed during an episode. And when I was trying so desperately to fit in, only to be yanked back out every three months by my disease, I realized the truth—that I wouldn’t be able to have any of it unless I found a cure.

I spent almost my entire Freshman year in the library pretending to finish makeup work when I was really researching potential cures for KLS online. I was obsessed. I was afraid. And when they made me stop, when the librarian figured out what I was doing and they sent me to the school psychologist, I was angry.

I hated that feeling of standing still, of being a bystander to this thing that was happening to my body and not being able to do anything about it. All of the reading and the research, all of the knowing, it made me feel stronger somehow.

But then they were right. After chasing down every false cure and success story, I had nothing. So I stopped.

As I sat there, scrolling through webpages that looked vaguely familiar, I realized another unfortunate truth. Since my days of trying to find a cure via Google, nothing on the KLS front had really changed.

Someone in Europe was still trying to sell some kind of liquid “cure” on Ebay. The number of people with the disease was still hovering just around a thousand, seventy percent of which were still of the male variety. They were still using stimulants to combat the drowsiness but not much else. And there was still no one else out there like me.

I checked forums and blogs, scanning personal testimonies from people living with the disease. But none of them went anywhere during an episode except from their bed to the nearest bathroom.

Basically, there was still no cure, no answers, and I was still strange even by KLS standards. Even stranger now that my mind was apparently open for lease.

If I just had his name I could ask Dr. Sabine to check some kind of medical database for KLS patients. She’d help me, right? If there was someone else out there like
me she’d want to find them too. The entire scientific community would. But what if he hadn’t been diagnosed yet?

KLS was always getting misdiagnosed for all sorts of things—depression, narcolepsy. It was even harder to pinpoint for me. Apparently I was suffering from some kind of hyper-evolved form of the disease, which was their only explanation for the place in my head.

At first I’d thought it was a dream. They might have chalked it up to just that if I hadn’t described them as being so intense, the colors so bright, everything tactile and real.

Some KLS patients suffered from hallucinations. I’d had a few when the disease first started—mostly just reaching for things that weren’t really there or hearing my mom’s voice when she wasn’t in the room. But in that state, everything had been filtered and blurry. I remembered the lights burning my eyes and every sound making me shudder.

They’d said that was the norm. For people with KLS, the hyper-realism of the world is stripped during an episode, and even during a hallucination everything is dulled under the film of the disease, almost like you’re travelling through a fog. But even I’d managed to escape that somehow. Because even during that brief period when I’d had the hallucinations, suddenly I’d just blink and then I’d be back on the beach again, like I’d slipped through some trap door of my brain that no other KLS patient had access to.

What if the boy had found the trap door too?

Or what if he was just a sign that I hadn’t managed to escape anything at all? The bathtub overflowing, pricking my finger that day in the garage, I’d seen those things before they happened. Or had I? What if they were just symptomatic hallucinations, hyper-realistic because so were all of my other symptoms? What if this was how it really all started, all of those symptoms having been delayed but not indefinitely?

Someone was hovering over me and I clicked the browser closed. I turned and saw Drew sitting on one of the empty tables.

“You can’t avoid me forever,” he said.
“Watch me.”
“Have been. What’s that you’re researching over there?”
“Make-up work.”
Mrs. Mendoza came around the corner. “Off my table, please, Mr. Mitchell.”
“Sorry.” He slipped down, smiled. “Just helping Bryn here with some make-up work.”

Mrs. Mendoza pinched her reading glasses and gave me a look. “Auh.”
I looked away, cheeks burning. Mrs. Mendoza had caught Drew and I making out in the history section one study hall last year. Drew had walked into my class, a forged note summoning me to the office. Then he’d pulled me into the library, a biography on James Madison pressed into my back as he slid his hands under my shirt.

“Bryn?”
“What?”
Mrs. Mendoza sighed. “I said why don’t you two go ahead to class.”
“Oh, right. Yeah, we’ll get going.”
Mrs. Mendoza disappeared around the corner just as the bell rang. I scrambled for my things but Drew reached for the strap on my bag.
“Distracted?” he said.
“No.”
“No particular presidents come to mind?”
I shrugged him off.
“Can you just hang on a minute?” he asked.
“What?” Jesus, he was making this so exhausting. All I wanted was to forget about what had happened. The things he’d said. The way he’d looked at me as if saying no had been some kind of betrayal. And then the girl he’d found. Whoever she was. I just wanted to forget about her too.
“Bryn…” His familiar drawl climbed up my neck.
I shook it off, lowered my voice. “I don’t have time for this right now.”
“Right now or never?”
Both.
He exhaled. “I just want to—”
“What? Talk? We tried that, remember?”
“Talk.” He shrugged. “Look, I just don’t want you to hate me anymore.”
Flatter him and maybe he’ll go away.
I let out a long breath. “I don’t hate you… all the time.”
He cracked a smile. “That’s a relief. I just thought…I mean I just want to…”
I raised an eyebrow, waiting.
“Be friends,” he said.
“Friends?”
“Yeah.”
Something sputtered in my stomach. I tried to imagine being friends with Drew but I knew exactly where we’d end up. Our mouths inches apart. Yelling. Kissing.
I anchored my arms over my chest. “It would never work and you know it.”
“No, I don’t know that.”
I raised an eyebrow. “Trust me. I can see where this is going.”
“Oh really? What are you some kind of psychic now? Come on, Bryn.”
“It won’t end well.”
He smiled. “Then change the ending.”
I tried not to smile back. “Look, I have to go. I’m supposed to meet with Mrs. Ward before class.”
“And the friend thing?”
“Fine. I’ll think about it.”
He finally let go of my pack and I shrugged it on.
“Thinking’s good,” he said.
I shook my head. “Don’t hold your breath.”
He smiled again, always confusing my annoyance for snark. But even as I walked away, I could still feel that invisible tether between us growing taut. I still felt raw.
When I got to English class Mrs. Ward broke us up into pairs. We’d just read The Kite Runner and were building kites out of construction paper, marking the four corners with examples of symbolism and archetypes and foreshadowing and all of the other things most writers probably did completely by accident.
“I saw you talking with Drew,” Dani said. “He was smiling. Why was he smiling?”
She was cutting out a drawing I’d done of a pomegranate—our symbol for sin.
“Because he thinks I’m an idiot, that’s why.”
“Well, where did he get that impression? By the way he better not be smiling
within five feet of you at the lake tonight.”
“I’m a good actress.” I involuntarily rolled my eyes, already dreading running into
him at the senior bonfire tonight. “Trust me,” I said. “I don’t plan on being anywhere
near him.”
“Acting. Sure.”
My stomach twisted, ashamed at how weak I really was. And not because I had
KLS but because I was some stupid teenage girl still clinging to some pathetic delusion.
I was afraid to admit that I couldn’t trust myself so I changed the subject.
Yeah, you know what you do to pretend like you’re not in love with Felix too.”
Mrs. Ward walked by our table, a finger to her lips. “Ladies.”
Mrs. Ward walked back to her desk.
“Nice save,” I said.
Dani glowered. “Cut it out with the whole Felix thing. I’m serious.” She chewed
on her bottom lip, not looking at me.
I raised an eyebrow. “You’re not telling me something.”
She flinched.
“No.”
“Dani. What happened?”
“Nothing.”
“You’re lying. Since when do we have secrets?” I said, even though I’d been
hiding one of my own. I still wasn’t sure if I should tell her about the guy in my head.
Just in case that’s all he was. I didn’t want her to think I was crazy too.
“We don’t,” she said under her breath.
“So?”
“So…” She was staring at the table. “I didn’t want to tell you because I thought
you’d judge me.”
“Judge you? Oh God. What is it?”
“See?” she hissed.
“Sorry,” I said, palms raised. “No judging. I swear.”
Dani scanned the room. “Not here.”
She nodded toward the door and when Mrs. Ward wasn’t looking we slipped into
the hallway, heading for the girl’s bathroom. It was empty.
Dani leaned against the window. “I slept with Felix.”
“What?” I asked. “When?”
“A long time ago.”
“How long is long, exactly?”
“Long…” she said, “as in two years ago.”
“You were…fourteen? Are you kidding?”
“I’d just turned fifteen. It was…”
“Let me guess, a mistake?”
“An accident,” she said.
“An accident? How do you accidentally…” I lowered my voice, “do that?”
“It was the anniversary of the funeral. You remember we all went to the gravesite.
It was…I was having a hard time.”
I remembered. Dani had sat on the grass next to her dad’s headstone, fingers
curling into the ground, tearing at it.
“That night Felix knocked on my window. He’d come to check on me. He stayed
with me all night, curled under the blankets with me, letting me cry into his shirt. And
then it just happened. I don’t know. It just…”
“And you regret it?”
“No.”
“But you won’t be with him.”
She didn’t say anything, just stared at the dingy tiled floor, cheeks turning red.
“Jesus, no wonder he’s in love with you,” I said. “You’ve got his fucking v-card
in your back pocket.”
She let out a small laugh. “Some secret, right?”
“I’m surprised you actually kept it from me. That’s a first.”
“And it’ll be the last.”
“Good, because you can tell me anything.”
“I know,” she said. “Likewise.”
Likewise. I hope.
“I have something to tell you too,” I said, not sure how to start.
“About Drew?”
“No.”
“What is it?”
I hesitated, mulling over the words.
“Is it bad? Oh God, it is about Drew isn’t it?”
“No,” I hissed. “And no judging, remember?” I moved toward the window,
lowering my voice. “You know that place I go when I’m sleeping?”
“The place that’s not a dream?” she said.
I nodded. “I saw someone. Well, more like found. This boy, he just washed up on
shore. I thought he was dead, that he’d drowned, but then he woke up.”
Her eyes were wide. “Did you tell anyone about this? Like, your doctor?”
“No. Why? Do you think something’s wrong?”
“Well, that’s not normal is it?”
I sunk against the wall. “Neither is being conscious somewhere else while I’m
supposed to be sleeping. But I’ve always been kind of an anomaly. Part of me doesn’t
think they’d believe me.”
“Why not?”
“I think they’d just say it was all in my head, like everything else.”
“You don’t think so?” she asked.
“I used to.” I thought about the weight of his hands, his finger curled around my
thumb. “Now I’m not so sure.”
“Is he still there?”
“He’s staying at the farmhouse.”
She narrowed her eyes at me. “So let me get this straight. You’re shacking up
with some guy in your head who may or may not really exist.”
“T’m not shacking up. He’s lost. What am I supposed to do with him?”
“What’s he look like?”
“Um, dark skin. Black hair. Nice teeth.”
She shook her head. “Nice teeth?”
“Well, I don’t know. I mean what do you want? He’s a guy.”
“I want details. I want to know everything.”
“So you don’t think I’m crazy?” I asked.
“No. Why would I?”
“Thanks.” I smiled, relieved. “Well, he doesn’t remember his name. He hates coffee. He may or may not play the bass. Oh, and he hates Bob Dylan.”
She narrowed her eyes. “Okay. Now I think you’re a little crazy.”
I rolled one of the pills between two fingers, staring at the tiny granules within the dissolvable casing. They smelled like sulfur and piss, not exactly the things miracles are made of. I tossed it in my mouth and washed it down with a glass of water. I’d been taking them four times a day, which didn’t exactly help to keep my mind off of the fear that they might not work. What did help was staring at the sketch of the boy’s shirt in my notebook.

My mattress was dimpled with stacks of library books, three of them opened to symbols similar to the one in my notebook but not quite right. One was from a top secret NASA memo that had been leaked by some hacker group trying to force the government to admit that extraterrestrials really exist. Another was of some Egyptian hieroglyphic and the third was a logo for a software company in Silicon Valley.

I’d scrolled through a hundred web pages on everything from constellations to crop circle formations to conspiracy theories about the Vatican. But none of it felt like it was heading in the right direction.

Because for some reason my gut was telling me that this wasn’t some kind of science experiment gone bad. The boy in my head was not some kind of extraterrestrial sent to harvest the memories of one random sick girl who probably knew as much about the social intricacies of the world as they did.

He was real and he was out there somewhere. I just needed to find the physical connection. That almost imperceptible fissure in the fabric of the universe, that split second he’d managed to slip in between the cracks and land in my memories. He was out there, in the flesh, I knew it.

I heard a knock on my door and Dani stepped inside. She immediately let her hair down and stripped out of her mom-approved outfit and into her bikini top and denim skirt.

“Planning on getting in the water tonight?” I asked.

“Yeah, right. I just spent half an hour straightening my hair.”

She sat down on the bed, pulling one of the books into her lap. “Egypt. Planning to run away or something?”

“Into that humidity? Yeah, right.”

She pulled at one of the curls tucked behind my ear. “You know how much people pay for this hair?”

“Not as much as they pay to get rid of it.”

Dani picked up one of the books I hadn’t gotten to yet. “What is this stuff?”

“Research.”

Dani read the headline. “Crop Circles? Wait, is this about the guy in your head?”

I lowered my voice. “Maybe.”

She raised an eyebrow. “So now you think he’s an alien?”

I crawled off the bed, spotted my grandmother in the living room and then closed
the door.
“You could be a little more discreet,” I said.
“You know grandma can’t hear anyway.”
“Still. I’m just…”
“Paranoid?” she said.
“A little.”
“Hence all the books on extraterrestrials.”
“I’m just trying to be thorough.” I snatched back the book and stuffed it into my bag. “I know it’s stupid.”
She shook her head. “It’s…not. A little weird maybe, but this whole thing is a little weird.”
“I know.” I sat back down on the bed. “Which is why I’m trying to be discreet. I don’t want my mom freaking out. If I told her, she’d probably think I was getting worse.”
“Do you? I mean, do you think—?”
“Yes.” I looked at her. “I don’t know.”
“And you don’t want to tell your doctor?”
“So she can tell me it’s just another coping mechanism?” I exhaled. “I’ve thought about it and maybe I will. I just, I need…something first. Some kind of proof that it could even be possible. Proof that I’m not crazy.”
“And so far all signs point to?”
“A figment of my imagination. Or another KLS patient. In other words, I’m getting nowhere.” I picked up my sketchbook, turning it to face Dani. “But I do have this. It’s the symbol on his t-shirt.” I flipped the cover closed. “Unless it’s just another dead end.”
Dani narrowed her eyes, finger tracing my pen. “But if not? I mean, let’s say you do find out who he is or what’s causing him to be there. What then?”
“Then I help him figure out who he is. I help him go home.”
“Home. And then it’ll just be you again. Alone over there?”
Alone. I’d never thought of being alone as all that bad. I’d managed a comfortable existence in my grandparent’s abandoned farmhouse and it wasn’t until the boy showed up that I’d finally felt afraid. Even that first time I’d gotten sick, walking along the beach and trying to find a way back, it wasn’t the solitude that scared me, it was waking up and finding that things had changed.
My cell phone buzzed and when I reached for it I saw that it was Drew.
-Still thinking about what I said?
“Who’s that?” Dani asked.
I tossed the phone back on the bed. “No one.”
“That means Drew.” Dani reached for it.
“I’m not texting him back.”
She scanned the screen. “Thinking? What are you supposed to be thinking about?”
“It’s nothing.”
“Doesn’t sound like nothing. Did you really already forget that he—?”
“No.”
“And how you—?”
“I remember, okay. All of it.”
“Well, good.”

And I did. I remembered the empty house. Drew lying next to me. His breath on the back of my neck. His hands gripping my waist, pulling down my underwear. And I remembered being afraid. I remembered telling him I wasn’t ready.

He’d sat up, shoulders tensed. “Really, Bryn?”

I sunk against my headboard, gripping the blankets. Wishing he’d just turn around and look at me.

“We’ve been together for two years. I’ve been patient with you, not pushing, but it’s like you don’t trust me and I’m sick of it. I’m sick of waiting. You can’t even just fucking try.”

“I did. I do try.”

He exhaled. “Everything’s always about you.”

“No it’s—”

“Fuck this. I’m over it.” He pulled on his clothes, still facing the window.

“Drew.”

He finally faced me, something gripped in his fist. He threw it at the headboard, the tiny box cracking against the wood and I flinched. He leaned over me in the dark, seething. But then he just shook his head.

“Do you know how many girls wish they were you right now?”

“What?”

“We’re done.”

Then he slipped out through the open window and I buried myself under the blankets, the pillow moist and sticking to my face until I finally fell asleep.

I looked at Dani. “And that’s why I’m ignoring him.”

“You mean why you’re hiding in your room and the library and the art room reading books on…” She picked one up. “Lucid Dreaming.”

“It’s research.”

“Or maybe you’re trying to get the wrong guy out of your head.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“It means I get to be the judgmental one for once.”

“I told you I’m ignoring him.”

“For now.”

“Like you haven’t done the same thing,” I said. “How many times did you and Dillon Hastings break up and get back together last summer?”

“And every time who was the one telling me what an idiot I was for getting back with such a jerk?” she said. “I could call you a hypocrite but I don’t.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“Well, you kind of are one.” Dani was quiet, picking at her thumbnail. Then she looked at me. “What is it with him?”

My stomach dropped. I didn’t know what to say. That I loved him because he smelled like rain after a game. That he’d grabbed my hand when everyone was looking. That even though he’d changed, even though we both had, there were still pieces of the boy I knew—soft careful pieces that were somehow more alluring the less he showed them. “He’s just…”

“Familiar?” Dani said.
I nodded. “I know I’m hard on you but I don’t mean to be.”
“It’s just easier to be honest with me than it is with yourself?”
“When did you get all intuitive?”
“When you got all mopey and clingy,” Dani said. “Threw off our whole balance.”
I laughed. “Is this how I sound?”
“Sometimes.”
“I’m sorry.”
“Don’t be. Sometimes I need to hear it. Not twenty-four-seven,” she sighed. “But sometimes. I know I don’t always have the best taste in guys.”
“And apparently neither do I.”
“So why bother with him? I mean, why don’t you tell him it’s over? For good this time.”
I looked away. “I don’t know.”
But the truth was, I did know. Because for every girl in the history of girls there is always that one guy she can’t seem to shake. Even though she knows he’s not just bad for her but probably the worst thing.

The kind of guy who says all of the right things just as she was about to cut that last thread, writing him off for good. But then he slips back in somehow, she can never really remember. Not that it matters. She had one second of weakness, one second of fear and he tasted it. And he says he’s sorry and that’s it. He’s salvaged that one last thread just in time.

“He said he wants to be friends.”
Dani shook her head. “Bad idea.”
I was quiet.
“Right?” she said.
I stared at my hands. “Would it be?”

**Friends.** One word and I’d hesitated. I’d spent half a second too long mulling over that possibility when I should have been cutting him off. Because he’ll need that last thread, thin as it may be, to strangle me with later. That’s what they do. They cut you into pieces with lies and false apologies and those three little words that always manage to gut you in just the right way.

I couldn’t let Drew cut me open like that. Not again. Not now. But for some reason, I just couldn’t let myself cut him open either. So I did the only thing I could do. I ignored him. I buried him under my KLS and my mountains of homework and my unfinished sculpture and my unplanned campus visit to Emory and I left him there.

I thought maybe he’d slip deep enough to disappear. A part of me was afraid that he would. Maybe that’s why I couldn’t confront him—about Jessica, about that night in my room. Maybe that’s why I just couldn’t let him go. Not completely.

“I’ve tried that a few times,” Dani said. “Sort of explains the proverbial ping pong match I had going between Dillon and Josh last summer. We’d fight, break up, try to be friends, and after running into each other randomly at some party, we’d just start talking, things would feel brand new again even though we were probably fighting less than a week earlier. And then we’d get back together. Because the truth is, you can never be friends with an ex. Not just friends.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” She laughed. “Now if I tell someone I still want to be friends, it
really just means I’d like to keep them on speed dial in case I feel like making a booty call.”

“And do you?”

“Occasionally.” She shook her head. “But that’s not the point. The point is being friends with an ex is dangerous and Drew’s already dangerous enough as it is.” I felt her looking at me and I finally looked back. “He hurt you and I don’t like that.”

“And you think I do?”

“I think you’d rather hurt when you’re together than hurt when you’re not.”

I slumped against the bed, the book tumbling off my lap. “Why do we do this?”

“Because we’re afraid that there’s nothing better.”

“And when did we become our mothers?”

Dani shrugged. “I’m thinking around the time we got boobs. They sort of ruined everything.”

“Yeah, definitely not the keys to world domination like Felix thinks.”

“Maybe we should just swear off men.”

“Might as well. By the way my episodes have been happening so close together lately, it looks like I’ll be spending most of my time at some imaginary timeshare anyway.”

“At least now you’ll have a roommate,” Dani laughed.

I tried to think about that night under the stars, the way his face had looked staring up at the Milky Way. But all I could see was the way it had looked breaking out of those waves, how he’d fought against that first breath of air.

“For his sake, I hope not,” I said.

“And yours?”

I shrugged. “I deal. But him…I don’t know. I just get the feeling that he doesn’t belong there.”

“But you do?”

“It’s all mine. Every inch of that place is constructed from my memories.”

“Are you sure?”

“Everything. Every color. Every texture. Right down to the breeze blowing off the ocean. I remember it all.”

“Except for him.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what if this isn’t about conspiracy theories or even KLS. What if this is about you?”

“What about me?”

“Your memories. What if he belongs there with them but the present just hasn’t caught up with them yet?”

***

Lights glimmered on the water, a twisted line of beer bottles already clanking on the bank. Trucks were parked near the waterline, beds and windows down, a different song blaring from each of them. I watched girls in bikinis dance in front of the headlights, the alcohol in their veins fighting the chill that was blowing off the water.

There was no springtime in Austin, summer taking hold as early as February. But something about the night smelled strangely like autumn.

I scanned the crowd that was still growing, waiting for Dani to be right and the
boy to suddenly appear. Out of the darkness carrying firewood or from the backseat of someone’s car or on the arm of some girl who’s straight hair actually looked attractive in this breeze.

I folded my arms, pulling my sweater tighter. Someone tugged on my elbow.

“I should have known you’d come to the lake in a parka,” Felix said.

“It’s not a parka.”

“I’m sorry, it’s a sweater. In eighty degree weather.”

“There’s a chill.”

“Yeah, and its name is Bryn. You know, if you’d be more comfortable standing over there with the Astronomy club, go for it.”

I spotted some other kids from school parked near the dock a few yards away. They were setting up telescopes.

“Why are they here?”

“Some people are launching model rockets on the other side of the lake tonight,” Felix said. “Probably won’t be able to see a thing.” He popped the top on a can of orange soda before handing it to me.

“Thanks.”

“Maybe holding that can will give you something to do. This bonfire’s fuckin’ lame.”

I followed his gaze and caught sight of Matt biting the top off a beer bottle with his teeth before handing it to Dani. Felix just rolled his eyes.

“Anyone ever told you jealousy is really unattractive?” I asked.

“Anyone ever told you to mind your own business?”

“Jesus, you sound like Dani.”

His eyes widened. “Wait, she said something about me? What did she say?”

I let out a breath. “You two are impossible.”

“Bryn…” His eyes were pleading.

I gave in. “She said you’re a good guy.”

“She said…I’m a what?”

He tore the can of soda out of my grasp and chugged it.

“What’s your problem?”

“A good guy? Why didn’t she just take it one step further and say he’s like a brother to me?”

“Well, if it helps, you’re sort of like a brother to me.”

“You don’t get it.” He finished off the can and crumpled it in his fist.

“You know that’s not alcohol, right?”

“I don’t care,” he said. “I like the way it burns.” Then he stormed off.

When I realized my hands were empty I wandered over to the bed of someone’s truck, rummaging through the cooler, trying to look like I had something to do.

“Hey.”

I turned and Drew was holding out a root beer. My favorite. I examined his other hand and noticed a Corona.

“You started early.”

Drew glanced at the moon. “Sun’s down. Plus, I’m sort of at a party.”

I turned to walk away but was stopped by the waterline.

“You know you don’t have to run from me,” he said.
Yes. Yes, I do. “I’m not.”

“Then walk with me.”

Drew took a few steps west. I turned and headed east.

“Or I’ll walk with you.”

A horn blared and suddenly I was caught in the beam of headlights. I blinked against the light, stumbling, and Drew caught me by the arm. When my eyes finally adjusted I saw Jessica and her friends laughing in the front seat of her car.

“Don’t let her get to you.”

I shrugged out of Drew’s grasp. “She’s not.”

I kept walking and Drew kept following me.

“She hasn’t said anything…about me, has she?”

“Jessica?” I asked.

“You know she’s a liar.”

“I guess it takes one to know one.”

He let out a long breath. “Look, I’m just trying to warn you.”

“About someone you supposedly enjoy sleeping with on occasion.”

“Did she tell you that?”

I waved him off.

“You know that’s not true,” he said. “I can’t stand her.”

“Funny, since every time I turn around she’s standing next to you.”

“So you are watching me.” He grinned. “All that, she just wants people to see us together. It doesn’t mean anything. She only does it to try and make you jealous. But really she’s jealous of you. Always has been.”

“Right. Jessica Childress is jealous of me.”

He stepped in front of me. “Of course she is.” The way he said it almost made me feel like it was true. “Why do you always have to be so hard on yourself?”

“What?” I snapped.

Me? You. I thought about all of the times one touch or one word from him had made me second-guess every cell in my body.

But then he smiled. “Do you remember that time we drove up here when it was snowing?”

“You mean when the rain froze for about an hour and turned the highway to mush?”

“It was snow,” he said.

“I know you’ve never been anywhere up north, but trust me on this one, it wasn’t snow. You tried to make a snowball and ended up clobbering me with a handful of mud.”

“And then you chased me out into the lake.”

“And then you tripped,” I said.

“Actually, I sort of remember you pushing me.”

“Well, I sort of remember you tripping over your own feet and screaming like a little girl.”

“Well, I’m sorry but it was fucking freezing,” he laughed.

“I know. And you were soaked. I thought you were going to be so pissed.”

He wrinkled his nose. “What do you mean?”

“I…” I stopped.

“What?”
“I just thought it would set you off. Ruin the night.” Like it always did.
I thought if anyone understood the fragility of Drew’s temper, it would be him.
But he was looking at me like I was describing a stranger.
“I don’t remember it ruining anything,” he said. “Well, except maybe my pants.
We always had fun together.” The words trailed off like a question. When I didn’t answer
him he skirted around the awkwardness and said, “You know I still have a scar from
when we climbed that old water tower.”

It had been Drew’s idea. Most of our dates were. He’d discovered an abandoned
water tower on the land his grandparent’s used for hunting and for some reason he
thought it would be a good idea to climb to the very top with a sleeping bag and a bottle
of cheap champagne.

I had to admit, it had been sort of romantic. Just the two of us watching the sun set
over the trees. But then Drew downed the champagne and ended up pissing over the edge
of the railing. I remembered the rusting ladder almost giving way under Drew’s weight
on the way down, one of the spokes raking up through his palm.

He held it out, leading it into the moonlight. The raised skin was almost silver, the
thin line cutting all the way up to his index finger. Suddenly my own was grazing the
scar. It was smooth, his hand sweaty. Or maybe it was mine. He let out a sigh and I
pulled away.

“Why do you do that?” he said, his voice low.
“Do what?”
“Stop yourself.”
“Because I have to.” I didn’t have the energy to lie.
“You don’t have to be afraid of me.” And apparently he didn’t have the energy to
tell the truth. “We’ve been through a lot Bryn. It’s always been the two of us. Always.”
He sounded like his insides were all twisted. He sounded hurt.

I felt it too. Even though I didn’t want to. I felt it.
“Bryn…”
He inched closer and for the first time I noticed the trees. All around us. It was so
dark that I couldn’t even tell Drew was standing next to me. I heard his lungs working but
every time I blinked I saw something else.
“I’m—”
“What’s that?” I stopped him.
I saw something moving in the shadows. Someone. Drew followed my voice and
I almost reached for him.
“I don’t see anything,” he said.
I searched for the lake in the dark and finally spotted the blurry reflection of
headlights between the trunks of two trees. They blinked out, a dark silhouette moving in
front of them.
“What was it?” Drew asked.
“I…” I pointed but then my hand fell limp.
The shadow seemed to stretch from the floor to the canopy and then the trees
were swaying, their trunks bowed as it pushed its way toward us. I took off running and
Drew followed behind. I couldn’t tell what was the night and what wasn’t but I could feel
the air changing. Cold. Charged. Cinching us in.

The trunks groaning behind us made me tremble and I tripped over something in
the dark. Drew pulled me back onto my feet and when I broke into a run I didn’t let go of his hand.

Suddenly there was a rip in the silence, flames sputtering close to the ground.

“Shit. What was that?” Drew huffed.

We ran through the trees, following the voices back to the rows of cars near the water. I saw the embers scattered across the mud, growing dim.

I finally stopped when I reached the lake, the trees rustling behind us with nothing more than the wind. I stared into them, trying to make out a face, a body, something.

“What happened?” Drew asked.

I narrowed my eyes, straining against the dark. Drew grabbed my arm.

“I just…” I tried to catch my breath. “The trees.”

“What about them?”

He gave me a strange look, waiting for some kind of answer. That’s when I realized that he hadn’t heard them almost snapping. He hadn’t seen what I’d seen.

“I thought I saw…” I swallowed, confused, “a mountain lion or something.”

I made my way over to Felix, Drew still following close behind.

“A mountain lion?” he said, reaching for me again. “Bryn…” He angled in close.

“Are you okay?”

I shrugged away, still trying to put as much space between me and the trees as possible. “Yeah. I just…it startled me, that’s all.” He inhaled but before he could say anything else I nudged Felix’s arm. “What happened over here?”

“Fucking drunk idiots are trying to screw up the rocket launches across the lake.”

Felix looked to me then Drew. He cocked an eyebrow. “Where’ve you two been?”

I ignored his question. “What was all that noise?”

“Matt tried to light some fireworks but that idiot knocked over the canister. Shit exploded under Jessica’s car.”

I saw her coughing and fanning the smoke. I heard a light hiss.

“Great,” Felix said. “Here we go again.”

I looked up, gripping my ears as the flame raced up the fuse. But the sky didn’t ignite in fireworks. Instead it was empty save for one bright tear. The last rocket climbed into the sky, arcing over us before blinking out.
Chapter 17

It was colder, the grass rough against my skin. I looked up at the stars and they were fading too, lights shuddering out one by one as I made my way back to the farmhouse. I sprawled out on the couch, listening to the rest of Bryn’s records, filling the empty house with ghosts I’d never heard of before. I felt strangely deflated. I was sick of wandering around this island, delirious and confused, and finding nothing that actually meant anything to me. No clues. No answers.

And in my defiance I decided to just sit and wait. Which lasted a good half hour. Then I got restless, which made me anxious, which made me panic. I started to feel caged, as lost as I’d felt that first time I’d opened my eyes. *Clues. I need to find some fucking clues.*

I found Bryn’s grandparent’s old bedroom. It wasn’t stripped bare like the rooms in the trailer house. There was a quilt over the bed topped with thin pillows still pressed in the shadow of someone’s sleeping head.

I’d read about the coin collection in her grandfather’s closet under his shoes and boxes of shotgun ammo from Bryn’s diary. He probably had some old stuff in there, old stuff I might recognize if I’d been misplaced here by way of some faulty time travel machine. Or if I was some kind of ghost. Maybe a soldier lost at war. No, not a soldier, a real badass—an infantry sergeant or something. I found the faulty floorboard and slipped it free. There were binders full of coins and paper bills, catalogues, and indexes, and pamphlets from coin shows.

I reached for one of the binders, turning the heavy pages, and reading the dates on the coins. Some were American—vintage pennies from before the civil war—but some were foreign.

I closed the binder and reached for a shiny red box, skin smooth like velvet. It cracked open and sealed in a thick plastic case was a gold coin stamped with a male profile wearing a crown of leaves. A slip of paper spilled into my hand and I unfolded it. It said the coin was a genuine replica of Roman currency from the... *Roman.* I grew still, the box tumbling back into the closet.

*Roman.*

My pulse quickened.

*Roman...*
I traced the ink rippling up from the sketch of the boy’s t-shirt, thumbnail grazing every smear and tear. It didn’t feel so foreign anymore or like some ancient thing that needed unraveling. Because he was a person. A person who might belong there among my old books and records and my grandmother’s quilt and every tree I’d ever climbed as a child. A person I might have been meant to meet. He was a person.

I sat there trying to make sense of things, wafting between fear and impatience. Because I had two choices: I could wait on the universe or I could find him first. I could find him.

There was a light knock on the door. “Homework?”
I flipped my sketchbook closed. “Yeah, still catching up.”
My mom sat on the edge of my bed. “So, I just talked to Dr. Sabine.”
“About the trial?”
“No, not exactly. I…might have asked her what she thought about you touring some college campuses this spring.”
“What?” I sat up. “Really? What did she say?”
“She said it couldn’t hurt. But she also said we have to be realistic about our expectations.”
“I know.”
“You may not get to go as far as you’d like.”
“I know,” I repeated.
“You may not get to…”
“I get it. Trust me. I am expectation free,” I said, even though I’d already decorated my dorm in my head and decided what I’d pack and made my class schedule. “Zero expectations.”
“You’re sure you want to do this?” she asked.
“Yes. Positive.”

And I was sure. I knew I wanted to go, to live that life even if it was just for a day. What I wasn’t sure of was whether or not I’d be able to find a way to manage my episodes, if some spontaneous discovery in the next few months would lead to a cure. Or if the things that were happening to me were a sign that a cure, even if I did manage to find one, wouldn’t do much good.

But I could hope, right? I could go and I could hope.

“Okay,” my mom sighed, “then I’ll make the arrangements.” She placed a hand on my forehead. It was warm. “You’re brave, you know that?”

I smiled even though all sick people are brave by default. My mom’s eyes flicked to my window. That’s when I registered the voices, someone yelling. She shot up and I followed her outside, shadows tangled in the grass. My uncle’s shoulders were tensed and then for the first time in eight months I saw my dad. He was pinned against the door of a truck I didn’t recognize, my uncle’s hand gripping his shoulder.
“Patrick?”
My uncle loosened his grip and turned toward my mom’s voice.
“Elena,” my dad choked out. He took a step toward us. “Bryn?”
We were both quiet and I could see my mom’s hands stiff at her sides, knuckles white.
“What are you doing here?” she finally said.
“I came to see you.”
“Well, you’ve seen us,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady.
My mom shot me a look. “Go inside.”
“Elena, please,” he pleaded.
My mom just kept staring at me. “Go.”

I watched the three of them through the small kitchen window. My uncle was yelling. My mom grabbed his hand and said something I couldn’t quite make out. My uncle crossed his arms. My dad wiped his brow. My mom never moved an inch. But then I finally saw her lips move, hurling something fierce and controlled. Then my dad walked back to his truck and I watched the all too familiar gleam of his taillights as they disappeared at the end of the street.

It had been eight months since I’d last seen him. Six months since he’d tried to call. I thought maybe he’d fallen off the face of the earth. Done us all a favor and disappeared for good. The moment I saw him I felt raw. But I was supposed to forget about him, to hate him. And I had. I did. I hated him. But then why did I feel like crying?

I spent the rest of the afternoon hiding in the garage, a hot flame poised between my fingers. I watched the tips burn pink, my skin sweating, the callouses lost during another long episode. Another weakness to remedy now that I was finally awake again, though I wasn’t sure I wanted to be. I always hated the reconditioning but sometimes it was nice to have somewhere to escape to. Somewhere transitory and yet stitched together with all the things I’d thought I’d lost. With all the things I hadn’t even realized I’d found.

I stuck metallic burrs on the flower’s stem and sharp wings on the backs of bugs that shouldn’t fly—trying to figure out how to finish it and trying to forget that my dad was just here. That he still existed at all.

I stared at the sculpture, snapping off pieces until the sharp edge of one carved into my palm. I bit down on the wound until it stopped bleeding. The flower stood there, dull, static. It needed more contrast, more fervor, more life. It needed a pulse. My eyes fell on the stack of gears I’d been picking from to make the seeds. It needs a pulse.

I walked into the kitchen to see if my uncle had some kind of wiring in the back of his truck but he wasn’t there. I checked the living room. Empty. Then I peered into the hallway and I saw my mom pressed against the wall, one of my uncle’s hands gripping hers, the other tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Her cheeks were stained, eyes red, and then he leaned in and kissed her. She glanced over his shoulder, the air tripping over her lips the moment she saw me.

“But I didn’t say anything. I just pushed past them both and locked myself in my room. She hovered by the door for a while, knocking, asking me to come out. I heard her sigh, deflated. Then I watched her shadow disappear from the base of the door. A minute
later I heard my uncle’s truck rumble to life and then he was pulling out of the driveway. 
My grandmother’s voice rose over the muffled hum of the television.
“She’s not a kid.”
My mom lowered her voice, whispering something I couldn’t quite make out.
“Well, maybe it’s not her you don’t want to be honest with,” my grandmother huffed. “Maybe it’s you.”
They were quiet after that, the only sound the buzz of the microwave as my grandmother, no doubt, was trying to finish off the last of the week’s leftovers.
I couldn’t stop thinking about them standing there. No. Curled into each other in the shadows. Too close. And they’d never said a word. Not to me at least.
My insides felt bruised as if I’d been the one who’d done something wrong. Like I’d revealed this secret that didn’t even belong to me. Even though they were the ones who’d lied. They lied.
I texted Dani and told her to meet me at Nacho’s Tacos—a little hole in the wall where all the college kids went to nurse a hangover. I climbed out of my bedroom window and five blocks later I found Dani and Felix in one of the dark green booths.
“Glad you could make it seeing as you weren’t invited,” I said.
“He’s just here for the food,” Dani said.
“I do love tacos.”
“So what happened?” Dani asked.
“You ready?” I took a deep breath. “I caught my uncle and my mom kissing.”
“Shit,” Felix said. “I knew I should have ordered something stronger.”
“Really?” Dani asked. “You saw them?”
I nodded.
“Were they vertical or horizontal?” Felix asked. Dani smacked his arm and he dropped a salsa filled chip into his lap. “That was perfectly good salsa and that was a perfectly legitimate question.”
“You’re sick.” I chewed on my straw, took a drink. “They were vertical.”
“Ah…now you see here, Dani…” he narrowed his eyes, “body language is key. Where did your uncle have his hands exactly?”
“His hands? I don’t know. By her face.”
“Like this?” He slid a hand behind Dani’s neck and she flinched. I shook my head. “Like this?” He curled his fingers behind her ear.
Dani shivered. “Get off me you creep.”
“Hmm…” I was stalling, reveling in Dani’s discomfort. “Maybe. Try resting your thumb on her cheek. There, now just brush it slightly.”
Felix leaned in, his breath painting Dani’s neck. “Okay. Enough. You two get off on the sickest shit.”
The waitress came out with our tacos and Felix was lost for a few minutes, Dani regaining her cool.
“So were you upset?” she finally asked.
“I…I mean yes. Shouldn’t I be?”
“Maybe. Did they lie about it?”
“More like a lie by omission.”
“Your uncle’s always around anyway,” Dani said. “Would it really be that bad?”
I tried to imagine how much different it would be if my mom and my uncle were the real thing. If he lived with us. If they shared a room. I dropped my taco back onto my plate mid-bite.
“Your mom’s been alone a long time, hasn’t she?” Felix asked. “I mean have you ever seen her date anyone?”
“There was that one guy she’d met online during her brief attempt at internet dating. He always smelled like Vienna sausages. Oh, and the guy who worked at the exotic pet store. He always kind of smelled like Vienna sausages too.”
“Anyone serious?” Felix asked.
“Not really.”
“Well,” Dani said, “maybe now you know why.”
“Or maybe she just didn’t like Vienna sausages,” Felix said.
“Or maybe her heart has always belonged to another man,” Dani shot back.
“Or maybe you read too many romance novels,” he said.
“Well, maybe you should try one. Might learn something.”
“Like what?” he said. “How to cradle a baby while flexing my biceps? Or how to stalk someone and convince them I’m their soul mate as opposed to just some creepy fuck who gets off on watching chicks shave their legs? No thanks. I’ll just stick to porn.”
“You’re unbelievable,” she said.
“Thank you. It feels nice to be appreciated.”
“Are you guys done?” I asked.
“Sorry,” Dani said. “But your uncle’s a good guy. Were you really that surprised?”
“It’s my mom we’re talking about here. Yes, I was surprised.”
“And obviously a little pissed off?” she asked.
“Well, yeah it…I don’t know what to think,” I finally said. “Can we just talk about something else?”
“Like maybe the guy in your head?” Felix asked.
“What?” I snapped in Dani’s direction. “You told him?”
“I…I was just trying to make conversation while we were waiting. You were late. It slipped out. I’m sorry.”
“How did it slip out?”
“Calm down, Bryn,” Felix said. “In fact, I’m a little surprised you didn’t come to me sooner seeing as I am the resident expert on all things science fiction.”
“Playing lame video games about robots does not make you an expert,” Dani said. He shot her a look. “They are not robots. They’re cyborgs.”
“Like that’s any better,” she huffed.
He ignored her, facing me. “So, there’s a guy in your head. He’s in there right now? Like, he can talk through you and shit?”
“That’s not how it works.”
“Good. Just making sure he’s not divulging any of our secrets.”
“Secrets?” Dani laughed. “Like what? That you all masturbate in the shower?”
“Are you going to keep interrupting me or are you going to let me help our sick friend who has a guy in her head who may or may not be the link to some parallel
universe where you are not a bitch?”
She froze, glaring at him. Then she lifted the last chip out of Felix’s grasp and shoved it in her mouth. “Now who’s the bitch?”
He cracked a smile, pinched the tip of her nose. “Still you. That’s the one that fell on my crotch.”
She gagged and took a long gulp of her drink.
He looked at me. “It’s an acquired taste. Anyway, Dani said he’s dead.”
“Not exactly,” I said. “I don’t really know what he is.”
“He’s just stuck.”
“Right.”
“You know my mom says she had a dream once that she and my aunt were back in Mexico, still kids,” Felix said. “They’d climbed the windmill on my grandfather’s farm and they were dropping a litter of kittens off the edge.”
“That’s…creepy,” I said.
“No, what’s creepy is that my aunt had the exact same dream. The details were spot on. It was like they were in the same place at the same time.”
“But it’s not a dream,” I said. “KLS patients don’t dream during an episode. And his memory…”
“He doesn’t have one,” Dani added.
I looked at Felix. “And shouldn’t he? If he was dreaming, wouldn’t that imply that at some point he would wake up?”
“So maybe it’s not a dream,” Felix said. He stared out the window. “What about an out of body experience?”
“You mean like all that dramatic white light kind of stuff?” Dani said.
“Or watching yourself have open heart surgery,” I added.
“Or people waking up with different identities,” Felix said. “I once heard about this guy who got fucked up on LSD. Shit sent him into a coma for six weeks.”
“That’s one long trip,” Dani said.
“Yeah, and when he woke up he told his doctors he’d been a soldier in the French Revolution. He even spoke French.”
Do you think the guy in your head might have done something like that?” Dani asked.
“I don’t know, I guess he could have taken something, but his memory…” I shook my head. Things still weren’t making sense. I turned to Felix. “Who was the guy before?”
Apparently just some random guy who worked at Best Buy. He’d never even been to France.”
“So the coma gave him a new identity,” Dani said.
“It wiped his memory…”
“And replaced it with a new one.” Dani looked at me. “Do you think that’s what happened to him? What if he’s in that in between place waiting for some new identity to pop into his head?”
“I don’t know…”
“Think about it,” she said. “Maybe he took some kind of drugs, blacked out, and he was supposed to be shot back out on the other side with super human strength or an Italian accent and then he…”
“Got stuck,” I said.
“In your head.” Felix raised an eyebrow. “All of this might almost make sense if it wasn’t for that last part.”

“Besides, the place in Bryn’s head, it’s made up of memories not people,” Dani said.

“And you’re sure you’ve never met him before?” Felix asked.

I shook my head. “No. I’d remember him.”

I would have and not just because of the way he’d held his breath staring at those stars, or the way that wet shirt had clung to his arms, or because of the way he’d looked at me, afraid and then not. But because that place, illusory or not, wasn’t made up of menial every-day things. It was made up of important things. Things I’d cherished and absorbed into my very DNA.

A pen rolled across the table and landed against my hand. “Show him the sketch,” Dani said, handing me a napkin.

I drew the cogs from the boy’s shirt and handed it to Felix. “He was wearing this.”

Felix stared at it. “I don’t…” His eyes flicked over my shoulder and then he was getting to his feet.

“Where’s he going?” I asked.

But then he stopped at the bar, eyes flitting from the sketch to the magazine clippings taped to the back wall. It was a chaotic mural of everything from flyers to posters of local bands sprawling from one end of the restaurant to the other.

Felix sidestepped between bar stools, leaning over patrons to get a better look. Dani and I followed him toward the front door and then he stopped. He handed me the sketch and then he pointed.

I saw the symbol I’d drawn—a small glossy cutout partially obscured by a newspaper clipping and a poster of Prince. It was a band flyer from a show three years ago. My breath hitched.

“I wonder if they’re local,” Dani said.

“Does it say who they are?” I pushed a fake plant out of the way and tried to get a closer look.

“Doesn’t look like it,” Felix said.

I pressed my hand to the picture, feeling the shadow of the glue underneath.

“Not a dead end,” Dani said.

My cell phone buzzed in my pocket.

-Where are you?
It was my mom.

“Shit. Busted.”

“Gotta go?” Dani asked.
I nodded. “She’s probably worried.”

“I can keep looking,” Felix said. “Ask around.”

I handed him back the napkin. “Thanks, let me know if you find anything.”

When Dani dropped me off back at the house I didn’t even bother sneaking in through my bedroom window. My mom was sitting on the couch, flipping through the guide on the TV.

“Bryn?”

“I just got some food with Dani, sorry.”
She patted the couch. *Great.* I sunk down next to her but she didn’t look at me.
“About earlier,” she said. “Bryn, I’m sorry.”
“Don’t.”
She reached for me. “Bryn…”
“You lied to me.”
“We—”
“You lied.”
She looked away. “There was nothing to tell.”
“You call that kiss nothing?”
“Nothing you needed to worry about.”
“What does that mean?”
“Bryn.” She took a breath. “The last thing I ever want is for you to be upset.”
“No. The last thing you want is for you to be upset.”
She looked at me. “You know it’s a trigger.”
“A trigger. You thought I’d have an episode?”
“I was just trying to protect you.”
I heard the quake in her voice then and I bit back my own.
“Well, stop trying.” I stood. “You can’t protect me from everything. I’m not a child.”
“You are my child.”
“I’m seventeen and just because you’re used to caring for me like some kind of infant doesn’t mean I am one. I’m sick, I need you, but don’t use that as an excuse to keep things from me. Not things like this.”
“I knew you’d be upset,” she said, “and now you are.”
“Because you lied to me.”
“Because I lied or because he’s not your dad?”
I took a step back. “How could you even say that?”
“Bryn. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean…”
I waited for her to finish but she didn’t. She just sat there, not looking at me. I saw the first tear and then I was running. Because I had to. Because I could.

The street was dark but I’d run up and down that sidewalk barefoot so many times that even that felt familiar. I walked to the end of the block, counting the cars parked at the middle school across the street. I could hear music spilling from the gym—some spring play or basketball game—and it made me feel safe.

When I reached the schoolyard I sat down on one of the empty swings, rusty metal heaving with a sharp sigh. I waited for the anger to bubble up inside me like it had been earlier but all I could think about was my mom’s face—something between shame and surprise coloring her cheeks that awful shade of red. And I felt guilty because I loved my mom and because I finally understood why she was alone. *Me.*

Seeing her with my uncle had stung but suddenly I wasn’t sure why. Maybe because I’d just seen my dad? And because he’d reminded me of everything we’d lost, of everything he’d taken from us. All because he was weak or afraid or just a fucking asshole.

He’d left one day and just disappeared and that was the template for every major change in my life. This huge cosmic disruption. *Toxic.* Ruining everything. My uncle’s death. My grandfather’s. My dad leaving. My disease. So I was afraid. That was the sting
I’d felt. I was afraid of things changing again.

The breeze caught the swing next to me, twisting it, and I closed my eyes, listening to it slowly unravel. I scratched at the chill settling over my arms but the cold just hung there, the warm summer night snuffed out completely.

My eyes were suddenly heavy and when I finally forced them open, the swing next to me was still twisting, a shadow winding between the braided handles. I watched it dance there like spilled ink, winding in and out until it was creeping towards my face.

I inhaled and it tasted like ash. Then it stretched, reaching for me, and when the cold scraped against my skin I shuffled out of the swing, stumbling on the rocks. I watched the shadow swell and contract, the air pouring from my lungs thick and tangled in it. Fog hung on my lips, the cold steeling me to the ground.

The same cold I’d felt that night in the trees with Drew.

I tried to run but all I could do was flinch against the burning, my skin on fire. It crept towards me and in the mist there were haunches, the darkness beastly like something feral on the prowl. But it wasn’t just fear that pinned me there or even the cold. Something heavy radiated from the shadow, it’s thickness approaching like a storm. It sunk down to my lungs, filling me up, tugging my eyes closed and making me drowsy.

Sleep. It was made of it.

But then, just as I was about to give in, to close my eyes and let it drag me under, the darkness shuddered out in a gasp and the cold lifted. When I looked again the shadow was gone and I scrambled to my feet, running all the way home.

***

I rolled over, staring at the clock. It was almost midnight but I couldn’t sleep. The chill was still cleaving to my insides and I couldn’t stop thinking about the thing I’d seen. Or didn’t see. I still wasn’t sure. All I knew was that something had seen me. Right through me. And it was the same thing I’d felt that night at the lake.

My bedroom door pushed open and I stiffened, peering out from beneath my blankets. I saw my grandmother, another tuft of rosemary in her hands. She sat on the edge of my bed and tucked the rosemary under my pillow before brushing a hand across my forehead.

I rolled over, letting her know I was awake.

“Bad dreams?” she asked.

I swallowed. “I don’t know.”

“You’d tell me, Bryn. If you were having bad dreams you’d tell me wouldn’t you?”

“What do you—?”

“Have you?” Her hand slid to my shoulder, her grip on me tightening.

“No.” I shook my head. It wasn’t a dream. That much I knew for sure.

“Good.” She sighed, her eyes narrowed at the wall. “That’s good, Bryn.” Her voice was soft and it sounded strange. Unnatural.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

She pursed her lips, lifted a finger. “You know, maybe you should ask your mom.”

I lowered my voice. “She’s still awake?”

“I guess she can’t sleep either,” my grandmother said.

When she finally left the room I reached for the empty glass on my nightstand and
headed for the kitchen, blinking against the lamplight already pouring from the living room. My mom was still sitting on the couch.

I abandoned the glass and made my way over to where she was sitting.

“Oh, Bryn, did I wake you?” she asked.

“The TVs off,” I said.

She glanced over at the blank screen, trying to hide her face.

“Mom—”

She stopped me. “It won’t happen again, Bryn. I’m sorry if it made you… uncomfortable, angry maybe? I just…it won’t happen again.”

“It’s over?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Don’t,” I said.

“What?”

I thought about her fighting with me during an episode—fighting to turn me, to change my clothes, to just keep shit together. And she always did this. Acting like she didn’t even exist. Acting like I was some kind of proverbial sun around which everything in her life should orbit. Even though I was the one who was sick, she was the one who chose to be miserable.

“Don’t do that because of me,” I said.

“Bryn—”

“I’m serious. I’m not angry. I’m not…uncomfortable. I was at first. I was taken off guard, that’s all, but don’t do this because of me.”

“It’s done.”

“Then undo it.”

“What? I can’t. I—”

“Stop being miserable,” I breathed.

“What are you talking about?”

I looked her in the eyes. “Are you happy?”

Her lip trembled, void of words for the first time. She sat there, not looking at me and then she didn’t say yes. She didn’t lie. She didn’t say anything at all.
Chapter 19
Bryn

I woke to Dani’s wet hair dripping onto my shoulder. She’d stayed the night when she missed curfew and was too afraid to face her mom in the morning. She’d been out with Matt, parked somewhere and making out in the bed of his truck. My bed was going to smell like fish and pond water for a week but when she’d texted me I was relieved. I was tired of staring out my bedroom window, shuddering every time the curtains fluttered, waiting for that thing to find me.

I crawled out from under the blankets, trying not to wake her, and grabbed my laptop. I scanned my inbox but there weren’t any new emails from Felix. I checked my phone—no texts either. I glanced at the clock. 10:30. He would probably sleep in until his shift at the garage at noon.

“Did he find anything?” Dani sat up, yawning.
“Not yet. Sorry, did I wake you up?”
“Couldn’t sleep.”
“Did something happen last night?” I asked.
“With Matt? Not exactly.”
I raised any eyebrow.
“Okay. So maybe he’s not as…”
“Great as you thought?”
“He has a lower back tattoo,” she said, deadpanned.
“What?”
She shook her head. “And I mean lower lower back. As in more like an ass tattoo. Of his grandmother’s name.”
“You’re joking.”
“I wish.”
“Are you sure it’s his grandmother’s name? Could be an ex and he just—”
“I met her at a match once. Plus, how many seventeen-year-olds do you know by the name of Ethel?”
“Yikes.”
“I know. I’m hung-over and we didn’t even drink.”
“There’s orange juice,” I said. “Oh, and some Pop-Tarts.”
“Do you have anything sugar free?”
I crept into the kitchen but it looked like my mom and grandmother were already out for the day. I opened every cabinet and searched every pantry shelf but I couldn’t find anything that hadn’t been chemically processed and wasn’t choked in sugar.
I stepped back into my bedroom and Dani was at my desk. I handed her a mug. “Coffee. Black.”
“Thanks.” She took a long drink without batting an eye. “So what next?”
“What do you mean?”
“The symbol wasn’t a dead end but who knows how long it’ll take Felix to track
down which band it belongs to. In the meantime what’s your next move?”
“I don’t really have one. I guess wait?”
“That’s it?”
“I don’t know. If he’s a future memory, won’t I end up meeting him anyway?”
“Maybe. But he didn’t show up out of normal circumstances. What if you don’t
meet under normal circumstances?”
Normal. I waited for that word to mean something. My life wasn’t normal but
since the boy showed up even the abnormalities were starting to feel tame. Because
things had changed. I had changed.
I thought about the night before and I looked at Dani. “I think I…” saw
something.
“What?”
I felt the chill again, could taste it on the tip of my tongue. I bit it back.
“I think I forgot something in the kitchen.”
I took Dani’s cup and refilled it before bracing my hands over the sink. Then I
stared into the steel bottom, my reflection warped and fuzzy and wrong. Breathe Bryn.
Just breathe.
I ran the water, holding my fingertips under the stream before trailing it onto the
back of my neck, and then I went back to my room.
Dani’s phone buzzed and she flopped onto my bed with a sigh.
“Matt?” I asked.
“Felix.”
“Felix. What happened to Matt?”
“Nothing. Felix is just asking me what we’re doing.”
“We. Right.”
“Are you going to be annoying about this forever?”
“Maybe,” I said. “Did he say if he found something?”
“He says he’s still working on it.”
She rolled onto her back, smiled at something Felix said.
“You know he asked if you were going away to school next year.” She ignored
me. “Have you thought about that?”
Dani hadn’t even thought about starting her senior project yet—a required
summary by every senior of the past four years of high school: all of their assignments,
class projects, awards, pep rallies and other methods of forced participation—everything
boiled down to some cheesy slideshow or weird installation or 5,000 word essay. I
doubted she’d thought as far ahead as her freshman year of college.
The truth though was that I hadn’t really started on my senior project either. There
were too many holes in my high school experience to be able to even call it that. It was
more like a very brief observation. One in which I hung back in Dani’s shadow, walking
that line between trying to make people notice me and trying to make sure they didn’t.
Neither ever really worked.
“Dani?”
“Huh?” She didn’t look up.
“School. Have you thought about it?”
“Oh. I don’t know. Stay here I guess. If I go at all…”
“If?” I took a breath, tried not to sound like my aunt. “So you haven’t decided
yet?”

“No.” She rolled onto her stomach, still texting. “I don’t know. College is kind of a waste these days, don’t you think?”

“A waste?”

All I could hear was the sharp click of her nails on her phone. My face grew hot and I moved to sit by the window.

All I’d ever wanted was to go to Emory. That’s it. I’d never been the typical kid who wanted a pony or a goddamned trip to Disney World or a new car or a closet full of designer clothes. I didn’t live in the real world long enough to actually enjoy any of those things anyway. No. What I lacked, what I wanted was to live. To really live. The way other people my age did. Moving away to school, being independent, being free. College to me was freedom and Dani just thought it was a waste.

Suddenly the sound of her phone buzzing was drowned out by another sound—tires grating against the curb, an engine ticking off. I looked outside and I saw my dad’s face behind the dusty window of his truck. He was just sitting there, staring at our front door.

“He came back.”

“What?” Dani sunk down beside me. “Who?”

“My dad. I mean Patrick. I mean…what the hell is he doing here?”

“Is he coming to the door?” she said.

I watched him walk past my bedroom window and then I heard a light knock. My mom had taken my grandmother out for the day and my uncle hadn’t come by since the day I’d caught him with my mom.

“You going to answer it?” Dani asked.

I knew what my mom would do. Turn up the volume on the television, pretend like he wasn’t out there the same way he’d pretended that we didn’t exist. Maybe my grandmother would chase him off the porch with a broom, threaten to call the police, throw some of her leftover spaghetti at him as he stumbled back down the steps. Because they’d all had their say.

My mom had cussed him out in a Wendy’s parking lot. I sat in the car for almost an hour while she cried and yelled and cried some more. According to myth my grandfather gave him an epic ripping once after he’d disappeared for a weekend shortly after I was born. And my uncle had taken every one of his rare reappearances as an opportunity to do the same. Everyone had had their say except for me.

I walked to the door, steps muted against the carpet, and then I just stared at him through the peephole. His face hadn’t changed much since the first time I’d stood there trying to decide whether or not I should open the door. He still had the same grey eyes, same blonde scruff on his chin, same dingy baseball cap. He gripped his chin, waiting, and I could see the chalk dust on the side of his hand. Maybe he’d found a construction job in town. Maybe that’s why he’d come back. Not so he could see us. Not for me.

I turned the knob and watched him stiffen.

“Bryn,” he said. “You’re home.”

There was something like surprise in his voice and it made me wonder if he’d been hoping my mom would answer the door. He had that same wanting look in his eyes he’d had that day I tried to be like her—fixing my hair and my clothes in a fury just on the other side of the door. Because I’d always known that I’d been the easy one to leave.
It was her he still wanted.

“What do you want?” I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Can I come in?” he asked.

“She’s not here.”

“Oh. I could wait. We could talk. We haven’t talked in a long time. It’d be nice.”

“Six months,” I said.

“What?”

“That’s how long it’s been since we talked.”

He cleared his throat, uncomfortable. “Bryn, can I come inside?”

He sounded tired and for some reason that made him sound sincere. Like it had been a struggle to come back, to find us again, to even just get out of his truck and walk to our front door. I wanted to believe that he’d been through hell and back; that he’d fought his way here. That he was still fighting. That against my doubt and childhood memories, he would win.

“Why should I let you?” I said, staring at the sawdust coating his shoes.

He looked right at me and said, “Because I’m sorry.”

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to let him inside. But I’d done that before and it hadn’t changed a thing. Except me. So this time, even though there was a part of me that wanted to hear what he had to say, and an even more pathetic part that just wanted to hear his voice, when I felt that eight-year-old hope pressing down on my lungs, I pushed it back down.

“You’ve had seventeen years to apologize but you’ll never really be sorry. You’ll never really change. And she’ll never forgive you.”

He clenched his jaw and I inhaled.

“You don’t just get to have a family whenever you feel like it. Being a dad is something you earn by being there when the people you love need you. But you’ve never loved anything.”

“Bryn—”

“You’re worthless,” I said. “And I already have a dad.” Then I slammed the door closed, my back pressed to the window absorbing his footsteps through the glass as he got in his truck and drove away.
Chapter 20
Roman

I felt her in the doorway; long shadow spilling into the closet.
“Roman,” I breathed.
“What?”
She sank down next to me and I handed her the coin. It glinted in her palm, finger pressed to the plastic case.
“My name is Roman,” I said.
She looked at me, wide-eyed. “You remember?”
“My name. I saw it and I knew.”
She traced the case with her thumbnail. “Roman.” Her lips curled into a smile. “I like it. It’s…”
“Ancient?”
She looked at me. “It’s strong.”
Strong. Am I strong?
“Anything else?” she asked.
I shook my head. “No, not yet, and I’ve looked through everything in this house.”
She slipped the coin back into the box and rose to her feet. “Then maybe we should start looking somewhere else.”

The ocean was gone, the tide replaced by the soft whisper of copper reeds. We tramped through the wheat field, each of us hollowing out dark trails that tangled and crossed.
“I saw a crop circle once.” She wrinkled her nose. “It was fake.”
“Aren’t they all fake?”
She raised an eyebrow. “Hmm, that’s what they want you to think.”
“You’re strange,” I said.
“Knew that,” she said.

There was a pop, something exploding overhead. I looked up and saw the sinking silhouettes of balloons, rubber skins bursting with glittering confetti. One by one they popped, littering the grass, clinging to our hair and clothes. Bryn started running, igniting more explosions.
“Sixth grade birthday party,” she huffed. “Kid’s parents were loaded.”
Sixth grade. I tried to picture it, me in overalls, mouth full of braces. Maybe I was still friends with some of the same kids I’d known in elementary school. Maybe there were pictures of us waiting for the bus on that first day—all wide smiles and God awful nineties haircuts. The nineties...
“What year is it?” I asked.
Bryn smiled. “2014.” She stopped. “Sometimes I think we’ve got to be close in age.” She inched closer, examining my face. “But other times you look…older.”
“Maybe because I almost drowned.”
“Or maybe because for a long time you were, you just didn’t know it.” She shook her head. “Sometimes you remind me of someone.” She turned and kept walking.

I caught up with her. “Who?”

“My mom.”

We reached another field. The grass was darker and marked with large statues like the ones lining the bookshelf back at the farmhouse.

They looked like skeletons, bones jutting up from the ground. There were robots and other mechanical beasts—cats with long sharp whiskers; children’s exoskeletons sprawled out on the grass, a giant chessboard.

“So these are all your memories,” I said.

She nodded.

“But they’re random just like the Milky Way?”

She stopped walking and suddenly the concrete receded.

“Have you ever tried to control them?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You said that sometimes they’re not random; that sometimes you’ll think of a photograph or something and then it’ll be here.”

“Sometimes.”

I took a step toward her, the grass spiking to our knees, to our waists.

“What are you thinking of now?” I asked.

She shook her head, hesitant. “I…don’t know.”

“Do you want to try it?” I asked.

She closed her eyes for a moment, a faint smile creeping across her face. I blinked and suddenly there were horses fashioned out of wood.

“What were you thinking of?” I asked.

Bryn’s eyes were still closed. She chewed on her lip and then she said, “I was thinking of the Brownstone exhibit.”

“What about it?”

She sighed. “The horses.”

Then I said, “Look.”

Their bellies were made of curling branches, bark still rough, and their heads were made of thick twigs, knobs and burrs positioned in a snout, eyes, bared teeth.

“Did you make these?” I asked.

Bryn seemed stunned for a moment and then she ran a hand along the snout of one of the horses. “No. These are…amazing. I don’t make things like this.” A slight tremor crept into her fingertips. “It’s driftwood. The artist molds the shape with a steel frame and fiberglass and then she sets each piece of wood with screws.”

I stepped around her. “They look real.”

“That’s sort of the point.”

“So it worked?” I asked.

She looked at me, then back at the horses. “Did it?” She stepped past the horse and approached a metal sculpture, running her hand along the bolts and knobs. “This one…I saw it when I was twelve. We went to an outdoor exhibit they were hosting in the park.”

“They’re like your sculptures,” I said. “The ones on the bookshelf.”

“You mean my attempts at a sculpture.”
“I like them,” I said, trying not to sound defensive but for some reason I was.

When Bryn wasn’t there I spent hours looking through her things, constructing some kind of identity out of the random objects she’d spent a lifetime collecting. And they were important, her things. For some reason I just knew that they were important.

“Do you?” she said.

She chipped some rust off a fan. Light cut across the surface, burning my eyes. I followed her hands, tracing the timing chain that formed the spine; flywheel fashioned like a mouth.

“These are vintage,” I said.

“What?”

I bent down, parting the tall blades of grass. “These ignition timers. They’re off a model T.”

Bryn knelt over me, gripping a strand of her hair. “What did you say?”

I froze, my hand still grazing the rusting timers. Suddenly they felt cold.

“You knew that,” she said. “You remembered that?”

“I don’t know—”

“Try again.”

I examined the rest of the sculpture, my mind sifting through names and textures and serial numbers and auctions prices.

“These aluminum valve covers are really rare. Exclusive to an Oldsmobile. These rockers look like they’re from the same model.” I pointed to an exhaust pipe. “This is old too. Looks like it came off a GTO. 1969. No. 1968.” I finally took a breath, looking at Bryn. Her eyes were wide and my hands were shaking. I gripped the grass.

“You remember.” She laid a hand on my chest again and my pulse was writhing against her palm.

I waited for more words, more pieces, but then I felt the air shift, giving way behind me, and the sculptures were gone. I got to my feet and there was a sudden slope, a large valley spreading out in front of us. Splashes of color lined the hillside, dimpled and fluttering in the wind.

“What are those?” I asked.

“Hot air balloons,” Bryn said.

“Do they work?”

“Not sure. They mostly just lie there. I’ve gotten lost under the balloon before. Never found the basket.”

“I wonder how far they’d go.” I paused, chewing on my lip. “When I was in the water… I was swimming and then it was like I’d triggered some kind of reset button.”

Bryn nodded. “I used to try to find a way back but I’ve walked all over this place and I’ve never reached the end. I’ve sort of just concluded that maybe there isn’t one.”

“Does that scare you?” I asked.

Her mouth twisted. “Sometimes.”

She kept going, tramping across one of the hot air balloons, maneuvering the air trapped inside. The edges curled off the ground and I heard a faint squawking. Geese waddled out from beneath the balloon, long necks swaying with each step. They picked at their feathers, ruffling them, the down scattered along the grass.

Bryn laughed, calling back. “We used to feed the geese at this park by my house.”

She knelt down, held out a hand. One of the rogue geese wobbled forward, snapping at
her fingers, and she stumbled back onto her feet, laughing. “Sorry, I’m all out of Cheetos.”

“Aren’t you supposed to feed them bread?”
Bryn shrugged. “My grandmother would only let us take the stale chips.”
I cut between the geese, scattering them and they shot up into the sky. The wind billowed off their wings and when they disappeared it was still slicing between us. The wind picked up, swirling Bryn’s hair around her face. She gripped it in her hand, staring at something behind me. I turned and there were shadows twisting out of the trees.
Leaves spun into the clearing, red and gold, and settling in big lush piles.
Bryn bit her lip, thinking.
“What’s wrong?” I asked.
“I don’t remember this many,” she said, voice fighting the wind. “What about you? Ever remember jumping into a pile of leaves?” She kicked at one of the piles, leaves exploding against my chest.
“Maybe raking them,” I said. I was sure I’d probably done that before. Who hadn’t?
She kicked again, leaves spilling down over my head. “Does this help?”
I coughed, leaves stuck to my lips. “Don’t think so. But maybe…” I grabbed her shoulder and spun us both down into one of the piles. Leaves scattered, sticking to our clothes. I sneezed and then she was glaring up at me. “Vaguely familiar,” I said.
“Are you kidding?” She narrowed her eyes, leaves tangled in her hair.
I took off running. “Oh my God,” I choked. “You should see your hair right now.”
She laughed, gasping. “You better run, asshole.”
I kept running, the ground beneath me shifting, each evolution imperceptible and startling. The hot air balloons were gone and so were the leaves, the landscape replaced by a desert, white sands sprawling out in all directions. It was soft, clinging to our shoes, slowing me down until I was forced to stop. Bryn finally caught up with me, pausing, gripping her knees.
“Yeah, so I think you’re wrong about that whole not playing sports thing.”
I was still staring at the sand, the sun’s reflection burning my eyes. “Where is it taking us?”
She shrugged. “You’ll see.”
I climbed after Bryn, sand flying. Then she slumped down, letting it slide through her fingers and I knelt down next to her, running my palms along its cool surface.
“What were you thinking of?” I asked.
“New Mexico,” she said. “I think I was ten.”
“You’ve been to a lot of places,” I said.
She shrugged “Before I was sick.”
The wind picked up, wrangling the sand into the air. Bryn was staring straight into it.
“What are you thinking of now?” I asked.
She turned. “Just wait.”
It swirled around us like ghosts, soft flecks whipping my skin until it was pink. It split, slipping to the ground in a gasp and then we were sitting on a moss covered cliff face. I skirted back from the edge but Bryn just sat there. I grabbed her wrist and she
stood next me.

“You afraid of heights?” she asked.

She let the toe of her shoe slip over the edge, wind surging, her hair twisting around her face. I inched closer but then I stopped.

“No, I mean…” I took a few steps back, arm stretched and still holding onto her.

“Yes. I am definitely afraid of heights.”

“Another clue,” she said, skipping back from the ledge. She nodded to the skyline. “North Carolina. The last trip before I got sick. I was almost thirteen.”

“North Carolina…”

“Look familiar?”

“Not really.” I stared at the horizon, clouds curling and translucent. “Do you think we’re from the same place?”

“Where?” she said. “Texas?”

I nodded.

“Maybe. Austin’s a big city.”

“Do you think that’s how I got here? Maybe we’ve met or something.”

“No,” she said. “I would remember you.”

I chewed on a smile. “What’s it like?”

We wandered back into the trees, taking slow careful steps to nowhere in particular.

“It’s…it’s like this weird kaleidoscope of summer all year round and there’s always something to see or do or hear. It’s crowded but it’s warm and the people know you. We also have the biggest bugs you’ve ever seen in your life and the best ice cream you’ve ever eaten.”

“Do you think I would like it?” I said.

She stopped, looking at me. “Yes.”

“You’re pretty certain.”

Her foot tangled on something slick. She tripped and I pulled her up by the arm, her gaze drifting towards the trees. I looked up and I saw tails, hundreds of them tangled in the leaves, fluttering in the wind.

“What are these?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” She reached up, snatching the tail of one and ripping it down. It was blue and yellow with a crude drawing of a lamb in thick black marker. “Someone made this for my English class.”

She let the kite sputter to the ground, our necks craned as we kept walking. The breeze shook a few free, thin wooden frames snapping as they hit the ground.

“What’s that?” I said, hanging back.

There were large black bodies sitting like boulders around a fountain, the sun highlighting hints of plum and red caught in their feathers. They fluttered in the wind, large wings outstretched or curled in at their sides. But they weren’t moving.

Bryn stepped to one of the crows and I followed, both of us examining the steel beak and glass eyes. They were crude and creepy, red veins scaling each pupil, gunk clinging to its eyelids. They looked so real.

“Statues?” I said.

Bryn was quiet.

“Where are these from?”
She pressed her finger to one of the eyes, nose crinkled. “I don’t know.”
“But you’ve been to a lot of exhibits, right?”
She gave a slow nod.
“It could have been at a museum or something,” I offered.
“Yeah…” the word trailed off, breathless. Then Bryn stepped to the fountain.
Thick roots tore up from the ground beneath our feet and climbed into the marble base, wide leaves slung over the edge. There were three tall tiers, birds warbling and splashing at the very top. Moss had grown along the cracks, splitting them wide, water trickling out.
“I don’t remember this,” she said.
“But you’ve seen it.”
She followed the moss path, dark green designs carved into the soil. They looked like scroll.
“I must have,” she said, a hint of uncertainty in her voice. “I’m not sure where.” She shook it off. “Probably across the street from my mom’s office. She works for a design company and they’re always changing the landscaping around their building.”
I spotted a break in the trees and kept walking but Bryn was still looking at the fountain.
“You’re quiet,” I finally said.
“Thinking.”
“What?”
She stared past me and when I turned I saw a thick grey wall swelling overhead.
Rain.
“That’s moving fast,” I said, searching the trees and vines for some kind of shelter.
Bryn grabbed my hand, tugging me back toward a seam in the cliff face. I felt the first drops, cold and stinging my skin, and then I couldn’t see. Bryn was a trembling shadow, cold, wet, her grip slipping. We tore through the rain, Bryn stumbling, me yanking her back onto her feet. We threw ourselves into a narrow slit in the rocks and sprawled out on our backs, catching our breath.
I watched the rain peel down in thick grey sheets. I couldn’t even see the trees anymore, just their lucid outlines, drips of brown, green and black. I felt my clothes sticking to me. Great. Soaked again.
Bryn was leaning against one of the stone walls, gripping her knees. The collar of her shirt was twisted, exposing her shoulder. I watched the rain carve down her collarbone, disappearing against the fabric clinging to her skin.
She reached a hand up, pulling her wet hair from her face and that’s when I saw the strange markings on the cave wall above her head. They were pale, fading—some kind of face or maybe the sun?
“What’s that?” I asked.
Bryn glanced up. “Maybe I saw it on that trip to North Carolina?”
“But you’re not sure?”
Her voice was low. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s just getting harder to remember some of these things.”
“Good, I’m not the only one.”
“Everyone forgets things,” she said. “In fact people forget most things. That’s
“Little things, maybe. Not the ones actually worth remembering.”

She shook her head, wringing the hem of her shirt. “People only remember the things they want to remember. Not the bad things, the true things. Do you ever think about that?”

“About what?”

“That when you get your memory back you won’t just get the good things but the bad things too. Do you ever wonder if it’s better to not remember at all?”

“I don’t know. I guess I haven’t really thought of that. Is that how you feel?”

“Sometimes,” she said. “I mean I’m glad I’m here during an episode instead of being conscious in the real world. I’d hate to see myself that way.”

“Have you?”

“Not really,” Bryn said. “I know there’s a tape of me somewhere. Dr. Sabine had my mom record me during an episode so they could monitor the severity of my symptoms. I’ve never seen it though.”

“Would you want to?”

“No, I don’t think I could.”

“But what if it’s not as bad as you think?”

“No.” Bryn stared out into the rain. “I’ve seen my mom’s face when I wake up. That’s enough.”

The way Bryn talked about her disease made it seem like some kind of possession rather than just a long nap and it made me wonder if she thought the worst because she was here, not there, not really living it.

Sometimes the things we imagine are worse than the real thing, right? Like whatever bad memories might have been lurking in the deep recesses of my brain. They could have been bad—my parents getting divorced, my grandmother’s funeral, getting into a fight at school. Or they could have been really bad. The worst.

I tried not to think about all of the things that might be waiting for me. Bad things I might have given anything to forget. Things that had left a mark so deep it took drowning to finally scrape myself clean.

But then I reminded myself that that wasn’t all it had taken. It took my memories, all of them, the good and the bad. My entire identity. Because don’t you need both? People don’t exist in just the light or the dark. They exist in the contrast. In the shadows where the two overlap. So even though I was afraid of what I’d find, I knew I’d never be myself again without all of it, the entire truth of me.

The rain suddenly sputtered out all at once, sunlight tearing through the clouds.

“Keep going?” Bryn asked, never dazed by the way things were constantly disappearing here.

I nodded and she led us back through the trees now growing in dense clusters, branches tangled and sinking low to the ground. There were no trunks, only leaves, tall bushes hollowed out and rustling with the sounds of birds.

Bryn spread the leaves, stepping into the tree’s wide crown and I followed, branches snapping shut behind me. Sunlight sifted in and glinted off the shuddering leaves, their emerald shadows dancing along Bryn’s skin. A band of wind cut through the canopy, igniting a soft clanking overhead. When I looked up there were glass bottles strung over us, their red, and russet, and dark blue silhouettes bleeding across the dirt.
beneath our feet.

“It’s supposed to be a pirate ship.” Bryn shrugged. “Eight-year-olds.”

“You did this?”

“With my cousin Dani and our friend Felix.” Bryn knelt down, reaching for a bright red Cardinal feather before tucking it behind her ear. “We used to spend all summer in here.”

She rapped her knuckles against the trunk of the tree. It was hollow. She slipped her hand inside a small hole and pulled out some dingy swaths of fabric, two caped action figures, a Looney tunes Pez dispenser, and some of those sparkly rocks that are supposed to be fake gold.

“Pirates who don’t bury their treasure,” I said.

“Of course not. That would be way too cliché.”

I reached for the Pez dispenser in her hand. Tweety Bird.

“Six Flags,” she said. “It’s a theme park. Have you been there?”

I waited for the words to sprout in my brain the way they had when I was looking at those vintage car parts. I waited for some spark of recognition, a memory, a smell, a vision of me in tall socks and a cheap sun visor. Earlier it had felt like a small nudge, one slight tug deep in my gut and then I’d tasted the truth. But I waited and there was nothing.

I shook my head. “Have you been?”

“With my dad. Once.”

She grew quiet, picking at a tuft of leaves. Her smile slid into something dark, teeth grating on her bottom lip as she looked up at the bottles twisting above our heads. She blinked, eyes trailing to the ground.

“I saw him,” she finally said.

“You did?”

She nodded.

“How was that?” I asked, wondering if I was prodding too deep, over-stepping my bounds.

But then she said, “The same.”

I took a step closer. “I’m sorry.” I wafted there, afraid of saying the wrong thing. She narrowed her eyes, still staring into the sun. “You know he’s right?”

“About what?”

“About leaving.”

I thought about her diary and the episodic way her dad came in and out of her life, disappearing when he knew she wouldn’t be awake to see him go.

“That’s not true,” I said. “He’s running.”

“That’s more than I can say for my mom. At least he’s moving.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Her eyes snapped to my face. “How do you know what I mean? You don’t even know me.” But it wasn’t anger thrashing behind her gaze. It was defeat. Disappointment. Stale and heavy. She drew in a breath. “I’m sorry.”

I felt the words on my lips and I let them go. “I could.”

“What?” She looked at me.

“I could know you.”

She sunk against the trunk of the tree, spurring a nest of butterflies. One tangled in a strand of her hair, wings flapping and wild. I reached for her, slipping it free.
“I think I might like that,” she said, her breath trailing down my arm.
“You know not everyone leaves,” I said.
She looked away, putting her eight-year-old treasure back in the tree. I reached behind her ear and she watched me free the feather before tucking it in with Tweety Bird and the fake gold.
“Who?” she said. “You mean like lonely single moms and lost boys who wash up on beaches that don’t even exist.”
“Yes.”
“You don’t count. You’re stuck here.”
“I thought you said this isn’t purgatory.”
“You’re still just waiting,” she said. “And so is my mom. Who’d want a lifetime of waiting?”
I stared at the soft lines of her lips. “Someone who knows what it is they’re waiting for.”
I thought about flipping through the rest of Bryn’s diary, reconciling the words with the long-winded peculiar voice I’d come to recognize.
Within the pages there were doodles matching the rough outline of some of the strange sculptures lining the bookshelf. There were lists of her favorite things—teal fingernail polish, salted cantaloupe, the smell of things burning. There were pages ripped out, dark holes where her pen had carved something in a fury. And there were grey smudges, ink from her pen spilling into something long dry. Stories about her dad and about Drew marked with the translucent shadow of her tears.
And for some reason I knew how she felt. Left behind. Always. I didn’t know how I knew. I was in a constant state of waiting when she wasn’t there but that was different. It didn’t feel deliberate or personal.
She wrote about her dad showing up a few days after her birthday and then disappearing again. I could see her watching him go and I could feel that same ache in my throat. And Drew. Whoever the fuck he was. He liked playing with those tattered strings of Bryn’s existence, yanking on them, pulling her close, and then unraveling them again.
I hadn’t been able to make out the seams before. I’d been too busy feeling impermanent. But now that I saw them—in the way she had to get the words out before losing them, in the way she’d hung her blanket over a stranger—I could see that it wasn’t just a cure she was looking for but a promise. And for some reason that made me feel real. Like it wasn’t coincidence that had carried me in with the tide at all.
Bryn leaned forward, heat pouring from her mouth. I let it dance on my tongue, hovering there. But when I leaned forward, trying to close the space between us, there was a flash, light cutting across my vision. I smelled something burning; that same echo of gasoline. Then another sharp pain, this one rattling between my teeth, a scream between my ears.
Bryn pulled away, startled. “I’m sorry.”
“No. I…” I doubled over, barely able to hear my own voice.
I blinked, my eyes flitting across the leaves, waiting for the light to recede. It was so bright. Just like it had been when I was staring at that carousel. When I touched that sculpture, the heat almost tactile.
“I think I…” I tried to catch my breath, the light dimming. “I think I saw
something.”

Bryn laid a hand on my back and when I looked up she was watching my face, her own wary.

“What was it?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. Just light. It was so bright.”

Bryn looked at me expectantly, fear in her eyes.

“It’s happened before.” I shook my head. “I don’t know why but every once in a while I’ll just see this flash of light. Then I’ll smell something or hear something.”

“Your memory,” she said.

“What?”

“Maybe it’s working,” she said. “Your memory. Maybe it’s coming back.”

The light still swirled at the edge of my vision and I tried to wrangle it into something I’d lost. But then it blinked out and I was just staring into the sun. Maybe it was working. Maybe I was starting to remember. Or maybe the light wasn’t some glimpse of the past. Maybe the light was me, a flash just on the verge of disappearing for good.

It was so quiet and that’s when I realized that Bryn wasn’t breathing. Her eyes were wide and I saw the darkness in them, its reflection pouring through the leaves. I turned and saw the shadow. Breathing. Reaching.

“Bryn. Run.”
Chapter 21
Bryn

I could still see it, lithe and bristling like some kind of animal. There were no raised haunches or bared teeth. It didn’t growl or groan or say my name. But it knew me. It wanted me.

Roman had told me to run but then I’d blinked. I’d blinked and I was dry and I was alone. And Roman was still back there.

I sat up in bed and for a minute I just stayed there. I could feel the light pouring in from the window. I could hear the warble of water from a faucet, the clinking of drawer handles as my mom shuffled around the kitchen. I heard my grandmother flipping the channels on the TV. A car driving by outside. Doors opening and falling closed. The real world so loud that I couldn’t think.

_Because Roman could be hurt. He could be...Stop it. Stop._

The dream-state is safe, it’s always been safe. Because it’s made of my memories, of me.

I took a deep breath. One more. I looked down at my wrist, threaded with another string of rosemary. It was shriveled and stiff and I ripped it free.

_Useless._

My door pushed open, my mom carrying an armful of clean laundry. When she saw me sitting up she dropped it onto the floor.

“Oh Bryn, you’re awake.” She reached for me. “How are you feeling?” My mouth was pinned shut. “Are you hungry? You feel a little warm. Let’s get you some ice water.”

I followed her into the kitchen, wordless, anxious.

My grandmother was standing in front of the microwave, eyes inches from the metallic lining of the small window. She was about to say something but then she looked up at me, face softening the way it had the night she’d come to my room.

“Was it long?” I glanced at the calendar, counting for myself. Eleven days.

“How...did you sleep?” my grandmother said as she came around to the table.

I avoided her eyes, confused. I wasn’t sure why she was so concerned with how I was sleeping lately but exposing the cracks in my psyche was the last thing I needed to do, especially with my mom in the room.

“Fine,” I said, not looking at her. I noticed a stack of papers on the table with the Emory seal in the top right corner. “What are those?”

My mom was quiet. Unusually quiet.

I sat down across from her. “Is this about the campus visit? You made the arrangements, right?”

“I did...”

“We’re still going?”

She finally looked at me. “They’re getting more frequent, Bryn.”

“Mom.” My voice slipped into that annoying desperate whine reserved for those few moments I liked to pretend I was still a kid. That I could still get my way. “You
promised. You said—"

“I know what I said but...they’re...they’re happening more often, Bryn. We just have to be careful. You have to be careful.”

“I am careful. I’m always careful. Just don’t cancel the trip. Please. Let’s just go. Let me have that at least. We’ll decide when we get back. Just, please.”

Her face softened.

“Let the girl go,” my grandmother said. “It might be her one chance to set foot on a college campus.” Again there was that strange lilt to her voice, a softness that made me feel afraid rather than comforted. She must have noticed the strange looks my mom and I were giving her because she immediately hardened her voice as she added, mid-chew, “Let her get it out of her system and then you can force her back here to rot.”

“Fine,” my mom sighed.

I leaned over, kissing her on the cheek. She made a face.


***

Emory was a walking campus, sprawled across 1,200 acres of lush green grass pocked with Magnolia and Dogwood trees in full bloom, the breeze tossing the flowers onto the sidewalk like snow. The sharp scent of spring filled my lungs and I sneezed, my mom picking petals out of my hair as we followed the guide down winding sidewalks and between Spanish style buildings.

We spent the morning touring the campus, me snapping pictures of every building and every sculpture. There was a series of bronze portraits near the student union building and some whimsical replicas of famous authors and storybook characters outside the library. I saw someone sharing a cigarette with the one of Edgar Allan Poe, a beanie pulled down over his head.

Everything was so bright and novel and alive. I wanted to feel that. I wanted to feel something other than fear. But I couldn’t stop thinking about Roman. About how I’d abandoned him, left him there with that...thing. That thing that felt ancient and angry and hungry. For me.

After lunch they let us sit in on a few of the art classes and I tried to absorb everything the professors were saying, to distract myself. One was an introductory Photography class, the teacher flipping through a slideshow of National Geographic’s photos of the year. The last class we sat in on was a Sculpture class.

The student’s long worktables were covered in scraps—pieces of plastic, torn strips of fabric, old road signs, rubber tires, and other miscellaneous things they’d picked up on campus. Their assignment was to construct the faux plant life for a bio dome project on waste and commercialism. Just the sort of rebel art I couldn’t wait to start making.

The professor let me play assistant to some of the students while he, the guide, and my mom talked about the curriculum. I held a bowl of marbles for a guy with a long beard and thick square glasses.

“My name’s Pete,” he said. “Where you from?”

“Austin.”

“Not too far. What is that, like five hours?”

“Four if you speed.”

“In a hurry?” he laughed. “You want to be an Art major?”
I nodded. “I make sculptures, mostly modernist stuff. I’m working on a sunflower installation for the scholarship contest. I missed the deadline in the fall.”

“I applied for that my freshman year,” he said. “Didn’t get it. They’re pretty tough. What do you use?”

“Mostly metal scraps from a local car garage. I have a friend who works there. I have a small weld and I just work in our garage.”

“Nice. I do a little welding.” He took some marbles from the bowl, gluing them like seeds along the bud of a flower made of a broken mirror. “Well, prepare to be broke,” he finally said. “I’ve been living off ramen noodles and microwave popcorn for the past five months. Oh and coffee. Lots of coffee.” He stood up straight, back cracking. He exhaled. “But it’s been the best fucking time of my life. You won’t regret it.”

“Is he trying to convert you to the dark side?” A blonde in an oversized button down stepped in front of Pete.

“She doesn’t need converting,” Pete said. “She’s applying for the Hendrix Scholarship. Hey Rachel, didn’t you win that your freshman year?”

The blonde nodded. “I made a self-portrait out of these really brutal stills from a documentary on puppy mills.”

“That’s…”

“A little over-dramatic?” she laughed. “I was seventeen.” She shot Pete a look, then turned back to me. “Hey, why don’t you grab some coffee with us after class? Are you free?”

“I think we were going to meet with the financial advisor.”

“Ditch. Your mom’s taking care of that anyway right?”

“Oh, yeah, I mean I guess.”

“Cool. We’ll just head to Sugar Brown’s. It’s not far. We make the walk every Thursday night.”

It took a good ten minutes to pry my mom’s hands from the sleeve of my sweater.

“How long?” she said.

“Not long.”

“And where is it?”

“Right down the street. Walking distance.”

“You have your phone?”

“Yes.”

“Charged?”

“Yes.”

“The volume’s up where you can hear it? You know I hate when you leave it on vibrate.”

“Yes.”

I saw Pete and Rachel waiting for me on the front steps of the Art building.

“Okay, but—”

“Mom, I’ll be fine. I promise.”

I followed them back through campus, the sidewalks more crowded than they’d been that morning. People were sprawled out on the grass doing homework, napping; clusters of students posed along the grounds like stills ripped from an enrollment magazine.
The coffee shop was a hole in the wall, literally. The entrance was down a side alley, the smell of hazelnut and coffee grounds mixing with the stale garbage sticking to the pavement still wet from the morning dew.

Rachel ordered me the house specialty—a dark roast that made my grandparent’s coffee taste like a chocolate shake. I tried to force it down without wincing, making my face as still and cold and sophisticated as the other art students sitting on mix-matched bar stools lining the painted windows.

“So how was your tour?” Pete asked.
“I loved it.”
“Yeah, we’ve got a great campus. That was definitely a draw,” Rachel said. “I love being outside.”
“When we have time,” Pete huffed.
“Right. I doubt I’ll lose this vampire tan by August.”
“And Johnson wants me to take on that apprenticeship this summer,” Pete said.
“What about your job at the gallery?”
“You mean my unpaid internship?” Pete shrugged. “I’ll have to ditch it, I guess.”
“It might not be so bad. Maybe you’ll be able to get some sleep this first summer session.” Rachel lifted her glass, looked at me. “Prepare to develop a rather severe addiction to caffeine if you don’t already have one.”
“Course load’s that intense?” I asked, trying to keep my voice cool.
“Hmm…” Rachel turned to Pete. “How many hours of sleep did you clock in this week Pete?”
“Let me count. Eight this weekend. Three on Monday. Tuesday and Wednesday I was setting up a show at the gallery and finishing my project for Carter’s class, so zero. And yesterday four. Hey, I got more than last week.”
Fifteen hours? For me that was a normal, non-episodic weeknight. For Pete that was a victory over his grueling schedule.
“How many hours are you taking?” I asked.
I knew things would be different for me. Maybe I’d just be a part-time student, taking small bites out of the curriculum. Something I knew I could manage. I’d need notes from my professors, compliance with my unorthodox sleep patterns. I’d need flexibility.
“Twelve.”
“Isn’t that, like the bare minimum?” I asked.
“Bare,” Rachel scoffed. “Any more and we’d be dead. That’s twelve hours of lecture but we still have to make it into the studio on our own time. We still have projects and deadlines and every teacher thinks their class is the most fucking important thing on the planet.”
“Egos,” Pete muttered.
“Professor Carter had an installation commissioned for some prince’s thirteenth birthday party and he thinks he shits gold.”
“If he could, he’d probably try and sell it,” Pete said.
“I wouldn’t be surprised if he already has.” Rachel pulled her hair back, tying it in a knot on top of her head. Then she yawned, dark shadows spilling down over her cheeks. “Uh-oh. It’s catching up to me.”
Pete waved toward her cup. “Drink.”
She groaned, reached for it.

“Hurry, you’re scaring the kid.”

I shook my head, smiled, even though she kind of was. Even though they kind of both were. I knew my KLS would affect my college experience. Change it. Delude it somehow. But until now I’d never settled for the idea that it might ruin it. Not completely. But sleep, how much you get and how often, is vital even in a normal person’s life. These two people were perfectly healthy and they were struggling. What was going to happen to me?

If I had to pull an all-nighter studying for a test or too many looming deadlines had me pulling out my hair, I wouldn’t end up with just some trendy coffee addiction. I’d end up in a mini-coma, face down in the middle of the studio or on the floor of the community showers.

Rachel smiled. “Glamorous right?”

“Oh, definitely.”

“But don’t let us freak you out,” she said. “It’s totally worth it.”

“Oh, yeah.” Pete exhaled. “I wouldn’t trade these stomach ulcers and insomnia for the world.”

“You’ll love it.”

Rachel smiled and I tried to smile back.

***

That night back at the hotel I couldn’t sleep. So many things were running through my head—about Roman, about Emory. Impossible things. Scary things. The shadow. Roman’s lips.

Because I’d almost kissed him. He was leaning over me, a strand of my hair curled around his finger and I’d almost kissed him. Because he was stuck. Because he wanted to know me and I wanted to let him. Even if it was just because he was lost and I was his only tether to the real world, I wanted to let him.

But then he’d flinched. Again. He’d seen something and in that split second between pretending he was real and pretending I was normal, I was suddenly reminded of his impermanence. Of mine too. Because even though I knew he was right, that not everyone leaves, I also knew that I was right too. That they should.

That was the real reason I’d always gone back to Drew. Not because I knew what to expect but because I knew what I deserved. I thought I did. I thought trying to love someone who left you as much as you left them was only fair. I thought it made sense. And now this. This…Roman. He didn’t make sense even though I wanted him to.

I’d watched his face, the way the rain carved down his jaw line, settling in the dimple on his left cheek and all I could think about was the symbol on his shirt, about finding it in the real world, about telling him it wasn’t a dead end. But then I felt the weight of all that time I’d spent looking and turning up nothing, and in that moment, air rushing out of his mouth and into my lungs, I didn’t want to give him that. Not until I had proof. So I was still, lips waiting and then he’d leaned forward.

But then I’d disappeared.

I felt my mom tossing next to me, fists punching her pillow, trying to get comfortable. She’d been sleeping alone for almost ten years and was not good at sharing a bed. She threw the blankets off and fiddled with the thermostat. When she finally climbed back under the covers she lay on her back, arms crossed.
“So how was it?” she asked, giving up on sleep altogether.

I tried to remember the morning, not letting my mind stray past that ten minute walk to Sugar Browns. “Great.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

“Sorry I didn’t change my mind.” And I hadn’t. Yet. I’d fought for this trip and I wasn’t going to let myself give up that easily.

“I didn’t think you would,” my mom said. “I just don’t want you to be disappointed.”

“I’m used to it,” I said, rolling onto my side.

“You shouldn’t be.” She curled up next to me.

“That’s life,” I said.

I grew quiet then, pretending to sleep. I hated those kind of heart to hearts. They usually ended up with my mom crying over me being sick and me just sitting there. Still sick. Sure, I’d cried over it before. But crying made my face hurt. Crying made a lot of things hurt. So I didn’t. There was no use in crying over things I couldn’t change anyway.

But as I lay there, I didn’t hear that soft gasp of tears. I didn’t feel that quake of her holding them in. Instead, my mom was perfectly still and then she said, “You’re right.”

But the words barely registered, the cold pulling her voice to pieces. I was looking at the shadow in the corner of the room. The one that was following me. Not Roman. I watched it contract. Faceless. Hollow. And then it smiled.

***

Dr. Sabine was sitting at her desk, some colorful stills of my brain activity during the latest trial pulled up on her computer screen. Dr. Banz and his associate were there too, hovering in the corner, making the room feel even smaller.

Our first meeting was a little foggy. I remembered Dr. Banz’s cane and his thick bifocals but seeing him now, he looked much older. His associate was just as stiff as I remembered him, though the angles of his face were even sharper in this light. Something about them made him look ancient too even though he was probably no older than mid-fifties.

We’d wasted half an hour discussing my campus visit to Emory, me shifting in my seat every time I felt Dr. Banz eyeing me. I tried to stick to short unassuming sentences. I didn’t want to waste my breath on recounting my little adventure only for it to come out sounding like some sort of plea. I knew exactly what Dr. Sabine was about to say.

She let out a long breath, pen tapping against her knuckles. “So you’re still having episodes. We’ve adjusted the medication a few times and while they’re shorter, they’re also more frequent. Whether a result of the medication or the disease’s natural progression, we’re still not sure.”

“Is that...bad?” I asked.

“It’s inconclusive.”

“Then what’s next?” my mom said.

“We have two options. We can discontinue the medication and continue to monitor the disease without it—the frequency, the severity. Or we can continue to modify the medication until another trial becomes available.”

“How long could that take?” I asked.
Dr. Sabine looked to Dr. Banz and he stepped forward.
“We’re hoping within the next six months,” he said.
“Months,” I said, turning back to Dr. Sabine. “So this summer?”
“Dr. Banz is spear-heading research into a new development.”
“New. So I could try again?”
“Possibly,” Dr. Sabine said.
“Hopefully.” Dr. Banz turned to me. “The problem is funding for research on KLS is extremely limited. It’s rare. The disease itself isn’t terminal. There’s just not a high demand.”
I sunk against the chair, my mom’s hand gripping my shoulder.
“But if we can get the proper funding in place,” he continued, “I’ve assured Dr. Sabine that you would make a very likely candidate.”
“Likely?” I needed something more substantial than that, especially after what happened at Emory. Because something was happening to me, something not good, and I needed a way to manage my KLS now more than ever. That’s why the strange doctor had shown up, wasn’t it? I was getting worse. Dr. Sabine knew it. I knew it. And even more than my miracle, I needed answers.
I turned to my mom. “Can I talk to Dr. Sabine alone?”
I hadn’t planned on telling her about Roman. But what if there was something to him? What if there was a reason he’d turned up just as the episodes started to become more frequent? It could mean I was getting better. Or it could mean I was getting worse. It could mean that he wasn’t real. And the shadows…what if they were all from the same place, haunting me for the same reason?
It had hung in the corner of the room all night, watching me, but never venturing any closer. Another hallucination. Another symptom.
“Sure,” my mom said. “I’ll be right outside.”
I could tell she was hurt but I also knew that she wasn’t going to argue with me, not today, not after knowing she had secrets of her own. She’d still have questions, she always did, but for now I was grateful she was giving me some space.
Dr. Banz and his associate each took a step toward the door. But I wanted them to hear it too. I needed them to if I was going to become anything more than just a likely candidate.
“They can stay,” I said.
I heard my mom’s footsteps recede down the hall and then the door finally fell closed.
I looked at Dr. Sabine. “I just didn’t want to worry my mom.”
“Is everything alright?” she asked.
“I’m not sure. The dream state…“ I used Dr. Sabine’s words.
“Yes?”
“It’s changed recently.” Just three words and my throat started throbbing, my palms sweating. But I felt lighter.
“You said it was like walking through an old photo album,” she recalled. “It’s made up of memories?”
I nodded. “It was. But I saw someone, more like found. A boy washed up on shore. I thought he’d drowned but then he opened his eyes. He couldn’t remember who he was or where he’d come from.”
“You interact with him?”
“Yes.”
“Interesting. Is it someone you go to school with? Someone—”
“No. I’d never seen him before.”
She grew quiet, pen still clicking against her knuckles. Suddenly Dr. Banz was moving toward the center of the room, a hand gripping Dr. Sabine’s desk.
“Like we’ve talked about,” she finally said, “there’s a lot we don’t know about KLS. Every patient is different, especially you. I’ve never seen a case like yours before. You’ve been dealing with this disease for a long time and sometimes the body learns to… cope in interesting ways.”
“But how do you explain the boy?”
I saw Dr. Banz in the corner of my eye, his mouth quirked as if he was about to speak.
But then Dr. Sabine said, “Having KLS has isolated you quite a bit. I wouldn’t be surprised if your subconscious mind is simply trying to compensate for those social interactions you’ve missed out on.”
“Like I made him up?”
Dr. Sabine hesitated. “Yes.”
No.
“What about out of body experiences? Coma patients have them all the time. I’ve read about them.” I looked to Dr. Banz. “Or what about mutual dreaming? What if—?”
“Bryn,” Dr. Sabine stopped me. “I can see you’re getting worked up over this. Look, I don’t want you expending all of this energy trying to find an explanation or a cure. That’s my job. You just need to focus on the here and now. Focus on school, on your friends.”
“But there has to be—”
“I know it’s hard, Bryn, not being in control, but you have to trust me. Sometimes there is no explanation and sometimes that has to be enough.”
“So that’s it?”
“I appreciate you being open with me, Bryn.” She clasped her hands, looked down for a moment. “I think the next step might be to have you talk with someone else. I work very closely with Dr. Smith who sees many of my patients.” She handed me a business card. Dr. Smith was a child psychologist.
“You think I’m losing my mind or something.”
“No, Bryn.”
“Dr. Sabine,” Dr. Banz finally cut in. “If I may.” He faced me. “I’ve read a little on your case, Bryn, and it’s just fascinating. While I’ve never seen another patient with symptoms quite like yours, the variations I’ve seen when it comes to hallucinations has —”
“It’s not a hallucination.” I said the words before I could think. Before I was even certain that I really believed them. I looked down at my hands, tasting regret. What if Dr. Sabine was right?
“I’m sorry,” Dr. Banz said. “I just meant that Klein-Levin Syndrome is still a mystery to even the most experienced researchers in the field, and while I agree with Dr. Sabine that you shouldn’t get worked up over these…changes you’ve been experiencing, I also don’t discount what you’ve seen. I’ve developed this next trial specifically for
patients like you with unique strands of the disease and I know that together we can find a way to help you manage it.”

I stood, uninterested in another formulaic answer that I’d heard a hundred times before.

Dr. Sabine followed me to the door. “Let me know if anything else changes,” she said, squeezing my arm. “And try not to worry.”

I stepped out into the hall and saw my mom watching me from the lobby. She was pacing near the nurse’s station. So much for not upsetting her.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I just had some questions about the medication that’s all. You ready to go?”

We reached the elevator and my mom spun. “Geez, I think I left my purse in Dr. Sabine’s office. Will you grab it for me?”

“Sure, I’ll meet you downstairs.”

I took slow quiet steps back down the hall to Dr. Sabine’s office. I didn’t feel like facing any of them again after having divulged my little secret only for them to shoot it down as some kind of hallucination.

“Do you think—?”

I heard their voices on the other side of the door, clipped and quiet and I waited for a lull.

“Strange, yes.” It was Dr. Banz’s associate. “How long did she…?”

“She didn’t. Hopefully it’s recent. We’ll need to keep a close eye on it,” Dr. Banz said. “And we need to find out if she’s seen anything else.”

“Don’t you think she would have mentioned it? Surely it would have frightened her.”

“Dr. Sabine just recommended she see a psychologist. I’m not sure the girl will feel comfortable enough to confide in her again.”

“So what should we do? If she’s already seen them then we’re running out of time. We can’t let this happen again.”

Again?

I heard footsteps and then I saw Dr. Sabine coming down the hallway back to her office. She stopped when she spotted me outside the door. “Bryn, did you forget something?”

I nodded. “My mom’s purse.”

She pushed the door open slowly and Dr. Banz and Vogle were both frozen in the center of the room. I eyed each of them but their faces were blank.

Dr. Sabine handed me my mom’s bag. “Is that everything?”

I nodded again, words still eluding me. Say something. But I couldn’t. I turned to go, the door to Dr. Sabine’s office shutting behind me with a sharp click.

No explanation? What did they know? They’d just stood there while Dr. Sabine told me to let it go. Not to worry. To accept that sometimes there isn’t an explanation; that sometimes that had to be enough.

But it wasn’t enough. Maybe I couldn’t control everything; maybe most days I couldn’t even control my own body but at least I could try to understand it. At least I could try to find out where Roman came from, whether that was some city I’d never been to or somewhere dark and deep in my own fucking head. I could find out what Dr. Banz
knew too; who he and his associate really were and what exactly they wanted from me. I could try to find some kind of answers. Real ones. Finally.
I went to sleep every night afraid. Of the darkness. Of slipping into another episode. Of not. I watched the ceiling, waiting for the shadow, for that feeling that someone was watching me. That maybe they always had been. But when it didn’t come all I could do was think about what I’d overheard outside of Dr. Sabine’s office.

_Again._ I’d let that one word swell inside me, filling every empty space until I was raw. Because that was the sound I’d heard in their voices through the door to Dr. Sabine’s office. It wasn’t curiosity or even caution. It was fear I’d heard and it was fear I’d felt as I rushed down the hall to meet Felix and Dani in the courtyard the next day at school.

I stepped outside and Trisha Berry noticed me lingering a little too close to her table and tossed her bag in the only empty chair. Two years later and she still hated me for passing out on stage during the spring play freshman year. It was right in the middle of her solo.

People were congregating near the gym doors, everyone pushing to get a better look at something up in the trees. I spotted Felix’s green baseball cap and then Dani standing next to him, pointing at something.

“I made my way toward them, people heading back to their tables.”

“What is it?” I asked when I reached Dani.

She pointed. “Jerks. Some kind of prank.”

I looked up and I saw the kites, the entire senior class’ final English project strewn among the branches.

“What?”

I scanned the leaves for ours, big red pomegranate flush to the leaves, and then one fluttered down, landing at my feet with a crack.

“I idiots. Mrs. Ward better give us all As. Bryn?” Dani grabbed my arm. “You okay?”

I shook off the blank stare and nodded even though I wasn’t sure. I’d seen the kites just like this with Roman and I’d thought they’d gotten stuck when the landscape changed or that my memory had gotten twisted somehow. But it wasn’t a memory. It was…

“Hello? Bryn?”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t freak. I know you stayed up all weekend finishing your half but—”

“It’s not…I’m…”

I let Dani lead me to an empty table and I tried not to glance over my shoulder, to see if they were still there or if I was still dreaming.

“You feeling okay?” Felix asked. “You don’t look so good.”

“I…something happened.”

“What do you mean?” Dani asked. “Is this about…?” She gave me a look. “You
“I went to the doctor.”
“Did you finally decide to tell her?” I nodded.
“Well?” Felix pressed.
“She told me it was just another coping mechanism.”
“How does that even make sense?” Felix said.
“Apparently I made him up because I’m lonely.”
“She said that?” Dani snapped.
“That’s not all they said. After my appointment I went back to her office to get my mom’s bag that she’d left. I was about to knock when I heard…”
“What?”
“Two new doctors from Germany. They said that I was running out of time and then they said something about it not happening again.”
Dani raised an eyebrow. “It…?”
“It was hard to make out every word but they said they’d have to keep a close eye on me.” I gripped the braided tabletop. “What if they meant…?”
“Yeah,” Felix said. “They could have been talking about anything.”
“They were talking about me,” I said. “Me. There’s something wrong with me.”
“So they gave you some fake explanation,” Felix said. “It doesn’t mean the real one is as bad as you think it is. Maybe they don’t even have a real explanation yet.”
“Then why all the secrecy?” I said.
“Sounds like they’re still putting the pieces together. They probably don’t want you to worry.”
“But I am worried. I’m kind of freaking the fuck out. I’m seeing things and hearing things. And there’s something…something out there…”
“Whoa, Bryn. Calm down.” Dani reached for me and then she gave Felix a small nod.
“Bryn, I found something.” Felix pulled out his cell phone, thumbs racing over the keypad. He laid it on the table and pushed it over to me. “Mismatched Machine. Finally found them last night.”
“You what?” I reached for it, scrolling through their webpage. I clicked on one of their song titles and it started to play.
“I’ve never heard of them,” Dani said.
“You wouldn’t listening to that top forty bullshit,” Felix shot back.
“Yeah, me and the rest of the world.”
He rolled his eyes. “Don’t get me started on corporate conspiracies and the communist mind fuck that is public radio.”
“Okay. Guys. Focus.” I stared at the screen, some Julian Casablancas look-alike screaming into a microphone. “Are they local?”
Felix shook his head. “They’re from Seattle, I think.”
“How obscure are they exactly?”
“Strictly digital, if that’s what you mean,” Felix said.
“Great.”
“Don’t you have an iPod?”

know.”
I did but in the land of lost memories an iPod was like a needle in a haystack. Maybe it was somewhere on my grandfather’s bookshelf. Maybe it was tucked under the pillow on my mom’s childhood bed. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen it there and if I wanted to show the band to Roman I had to have something tangible.

“So what now?” Dani asked. “I mean, we know his first name and we know his favorite band. What do we do with that?”

“It’s just pieces,” I said.

“Just pieces,” Felix repeated. “But it’s more pieces than your doctors might have. I say we put this shit together before they do and find out what exactly it is they’re hiding.”

“And how do we do that?” Dani asked.

Felix chewed on his lip, mouth slipping into a smile. “I might be able to come up with something.”

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Felix told us to hang tight with our cell phones, a pair of running shoes, and a black hoodie nearby. So far his plan didn’t exactly sound fool proof but what other choice did I have?

I sat at my desk the rest of the afternoon, loading my hard drive with a bunch of songs I’d never heard of. I was scrolling through the playlist I’d just made when I saw my uncle’s truck pull into the driveway. I watched him walk to the front door, which was unusual considering he always came in through the garage. Then he knocked, which was even weirder.

I opened the door. “What’s with all the formalities?”

“Bryn. Hey, kiddo. Is anyone else around? Your mom’s car—”

“She’s out. You two still avoiding each other?” I asked, taking a step back so he could come inside.

He leaned against the kitchen counter. “Bryn, about what happened…”

I waved a hand. “Please. I’m over it.”

He hung his head. “Good. I mean I’m relieved. I thought maybe you’d hate me.”

He tried to smile.

“Why? You’re not my father.”

“He hasn’t come by again, has he?”

I stared at the floor. I hadn’t told my mom that he’d come by. For some reason I kind of liked keeping our little confrontation a secret. It made me feel like an adult somehow, doing my own dirty work this time and sparing my mom’s feelings instead of the other way around. But I’d said things to him, things I’d never said to anyone. And as I’d said them, I’d realized that they were less of a reproach for my dad and more of a thanks to the man who’d been nothing but.

“He did,” I finally said. “Once, while mom was out.”

“Did you see him?”

“I may have opened the door.”

“Why?”

“I just…I was angry, I guess. Everyone’s said their piece but me. Mom always sends me inside or makes me wait in the car or go to my room. I understand her not wanting me to be upset but it’s too late for that. I had things I needed to say too.”

He cleared his throat, bracing himself. “Like what?”
“I told him being a dad is something you earn.” I looked at my uncle. “And I told him that I already had one. I didn’t want him to ever think he was doing us any favors by just showing up here. Like we need him. We don’t. Not when we have you.”

“You said that?”
My throat was dry. I swallowed. “It’s the truth.”
He gripped my shoulder, his jaw tight. “You’re a good kid.”
“You’re a good dad.”
He hugged me, hard, and I felt everything I’d ever needed from my dad in that hug. Only it was better because my uncle didn’t stick around out of obligation or guilt. He stuck around because he loved us, and not the easy, inherited kind of love either.

Our relationship hadn’t been forged just by blood, it had been forged by afternoons spent in the garage, me holding the spotlight while he worked on my mom’s car, by summers coaching my co-ed softball team and dragging little boys off the field by their shirt collars when they told me I threw like a girl. Time had forged that bond. Memories. Things that were thicker than blood. Things that were more important.

“I’m okay,” I said, “with you and her. If that’s what you want.”
He ran a hand down his face. “I don’t know what she wants anymore.”
“She’s afraid.”
They were the same words I’d told Felix about Dani. Why were the women in my family so afraid of everything?

“You know her,” he said.
“I do.”
“Do you think she’ll come around?”
“If you do. No more avoiding us.”
“Deal, this last month was torture,” he laughed.

The front door pushed open and my uncle grew still. My mom walked in, mirroring his stiffness as she set a bag of takeout on the kitchen counter.

“Brian.”
“I just stopped by,” he said. “Thought I’d check on Bryn.”
They both just stood there, staring at each other.

“Is this Chinese?” I said. “Smells great.” I reached for the carton with my name on it. “I think I’ll eat in my room.”

They barely registered my exit and I was relieved. I ate at my desk, still waiting for a text from Felix but it never came.

I finally curled into bed, jeans still on under my bedspread, and spent the night listening to Mismatched Machine. I stared at the flow of my iPod until my eyes burned, tracing the symbols from Roman’s shirt as the songs wandered between prolific concept ballads and electronic instrumentals. It was this twisted hodgepodge of South Eastern influence, contemporary street poetry, and heavy metal. One minute every instrument was grinding at a fever pitch and then the song would reach this abrupt lull, the lead singer’s voice clinging to the rhythm more like an echo while my ears tried to adjust.

It was wild and honeyed and electric. I thought of Roman dropping the needle on that Rush album, lips parting slightly as if it was so good he’d wanted to taste it. This is him, I thought, and through whatever reconfiguration and almost drowning he’d been through, that part of him was still intact. Individual. Inherent. Maybe I hadn’t made him up. How could I have?
I played the next track, eyes burning from the bright blue glow of my iPod. I let them flutter shut. Just for a second. Just for…
I knelt by the window, fingers parting the blinds, peering out. The sun was still out and I examined the trees, waiting for every dark corner and every shadow to swell like the forest’s lungs. I waited for it to come for me. But back in Bryn’s tree house, when I’d reached for her hand, stroking empty air, she wasn’t the only thing that had disappeared.

When I’d turned back around the shadow was gone too and so was the cold. When the ice in my veins finally started to melt that’s when I ran back to the farmhouse.

I heard the door shudder, the knob turning, and I bolted upright. When I saw that it was Bryn, her smile impossibly wide as she stepped through the front door, my stomach clenched. She found me?

Bryn reached for me, lacing her arms around my neck, pulling me tight. “You’re alright,” she breathed into my shirt.

“And you?”

Her eyes darkened, remembering. “I’ve seen it but that’s it. I’m not sure what it is…”

I felt the chill of it hanging over us again, shook off the memory. “Or what it wants.”

She moved to her grandparent’s bedroom, rifling through the closets, checking the pockets on every article of clothing, inside shoeboxes, and beneath the faulty floorboards. I looked too. Checking under the mattresses, on the top shelf of the closets where she couldn’t reach. But there was nothing. We went back to the living room and she searched the kitchen cabinets and in the utensil drawers before wandering back to the bookshelf, tipping the spines of books back one more time. She finally sunk down on the couch.

“I found something,” she said.

“What?” I stood in front of her, restless.

“Your shirt. That symbol, it’s a logo for a band called Mismatched Machine.”

My hands grazed the raised monogram on my shirt, cracked and fading. I tried to remember where I’d bought it—a concert, an old record store, some shoddy band website. I tried to remember slipping it on, the scent of cigarette smoke still clinging to the fabric.

“Wait.” Bryn slipped her hands between the couch cushions, digging under the pillows.
I helped her pull them free, exposing the springs underneath and there wedged between the frame of the pull out bed were those signature white ear buds, cord snaking down to something shiny. Bryn pulled out her iPod, thumb tracing over the screen, waking it. Then she slipped one tiny speaker in her ear and the other in mine.

I caught hold of the bass, tethering myself to it as the song sprang into chaos. The first verse kicked in and I tried to recognize the sound of his voice, then I felt Bryn’s gaze slip to my lips. I felt them mouthing the words.

“I… I remember this song.”

But that wasn’t all I remembered. I remembered bodies pressed against me, the smell of their sweat and beer and cigarette smoke. I remembered screaming until my lungs burned. I remembered the pulse of the drum writhing against my heartbeat. Every city. Every concert. I grabbed the iPod, scrolling through songs—choruses and drum solos ignited in my memory.

My finger bounced off another one of the tracks, a growl buzzing in my ears.

“Holy shit!”

I grabbed Bryn by the shoulders, shaking her, and she laughed.

“Holy fucking shit is right,” she said.

In that moment of remembering I forgot about being embarrassed, or wrong, or afraid, or empty. I scooped her up with one arm, the two of us spinning and jumping and laughing. And singing. I was singing, my voice swelling and then cracking. I thought I might choke on the words. I thought I might cry. I almost did. But then I looked at Bryn, at her flushed cheeks, the birthmark on her chapped lips, her eyes—green irises fluttering like a pair of leaves—and I knew. That she was real and so was I. That I was real and I was somewhere and she would be the one to find me.

So I let it simmer, hope filling me to the brim. And it felt good. Touching her, that thrum of the music riding under my pulse, knowing it could last. It felt good.

Bryn grew still as she stared through the open front door. I turned, the trees bleeding into the sky. Dark trunks splaying into these pale blossoms, the petals swirling and spilling to the ground like snow. She led me into the dizzying scent of spring, flowers bedding in her hair. We stood under the branches, sunlight a shadow against the white leaves, me staring straight into it, her staring straight into me.

“You’re real,” she said.

I looked down at her. “I’m real. I’m real and you’re going to find me.” My fingers scaled her arms, her shoulders, the slope of her neck. They curled into her hair, warm, soft. “Please don’t disappear this time.”

She held her breath, waiting for me to kiss her, to wake up. But it wasn’t her this time. This time it was me. I kissed her, letting the heat trail from her lips to mine. Still. Soft. Unrelenting. And when I opened my eyes I was for the first time, finally and undeniably awake.

She saw the moment it happened but the second I met her eyes they fell. Straight down. Away from me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She wrestled with something, words and worries that weren’t supposed to exist now that I was real. All that was supposed to exist was us. Here. Now. The realness better than magic.

“Bryn?”
“What if you’re not sick?” She finally said, still not looking up at me. I let out a tight breath, confused. “What do you mean?” “I mean what if I find you and you’re not sick? What if you’re normal?” “Then how would I be here?” I said, still trying to figure out where she was going with this. “I don’t know,” Bryn said. “But hypothetically what if we’re different?” “Then we’re different.” “That doesn’t scare you?” she asked. The only thing that scared me was Bryn disappearing for good. “No,” I said. “Why should it?” She shook her head, eyes pleading with me but for what I didn’t know. “You don’t know what it’s like. It’s hard. It’s not—” “I don’t want normal,” I said, realizing that Bryn’s fears weren’t about us in the here and now. They were about us in the real world. I squeezed her tight. “I want you.” She looked up at me, breathless. “Follow me?” I asked.

The sun set slow for the first time since I’d washed up on shore. It hung above the trees, sinking as I led Bryn into the trees. At the top of a small hill was a checkered quilt, both of us kneeling just as something flickered, a crack of static ignited in the spontaneous night. The giant screen shuddered to life, a beam of light from an invisible projector spilling past us into the forest.

“How did you know this was here?” Bryn asked. “I saw it on my way back to the farmhouse,” I said. “You haven’t seen it before?” “Not like this. Not here.” “What is this place?” I asked. “When I was younger there used to be a drive-in movie theatre just outside of Austin.” Her cheeks warmed with the memory. “We’d buy dinner at the small snack bar at the back of the parking lot, stocking up on corn fritters and beer salt and these corn tortilla sandwiches filled with meat and cabbage and pimiento cheese. I’d stuff myself sick and then we’d lie in the bed of my uncle’s truck, soundtrack pouring from the speakers of every car and out of the open windows.”

Just as she spoke the words the audio swelled from the darkness. I sprawled out on my back, one arm tucked behind my head. Bryn just sat there, watching the light from the screen spill across the grass. “E.T.,” she said. “What?” I glanced up at the opening scene, tape flashing along the bottom of the screen. “It used to be my favorite movie,” she said. “Really?” “Until I saw Jurassic Park.” Her eyes fell on the quilt dimpling next to me and I reached for her hand, fingers climbing to her wrist, giving it a slight tug. “Want to come down here?” She slid onto her side, still facing me. I closed the space between us, my arm slipping around her shoulder, her chin resting on my chest. I brushed her hair back with my hand, trying to get her to shed the hesitancy she’d been shrouded in earlier, my thumb resting there as we faced the screen.
She rose with my lungs, eyes fluttering closed, as if every inhale lulled her. And as I held her under the dull twinkle of those artificial lights, time almost felt tangible again. Like something real that you could tuck into your pocket. Like something worth saving.

“Don’t worry,” I said, words trapped under my breath.
Bryn looked up. “What?”
“Don’t worry about this. About me.”
“Why not?”
I stared straight into her. “Because this isn’t a coincidence.”
“No?”
“No.”
I kissed her and I felt the sting in the balls of my feet. My tongue roamed her mouth, my fingers clinging to the nape of her neck. She pressed her mouth over mine, making me feel raw and new and exposed. Like I was a fossil, her lips tearing me from the illusory confines of time and space and I was on fire. But then she pulled away, long breaths tearing from her lips. She was staring at my own and that’s when I realized they were glowing, sparks igniting where our fingertips touched, where my skin brushed hers.

“This is not a coincidence,” I said again and I knew this time she believed me.

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Bryn shifted next to me, my arm numb and tingling and still curled under her head. I clenched my fist, trying not to stir her as I slipped it free. But she was perfectly still, staring up at the screen, though her face was hidden, and I thought if this is what it looks like when she’s sleeping—soft, small, serene—I wouldn’t mind spending most of my life waiting for her to wake up.

Because she made things and wrote things down and saved every detail like it was the most important thing in the world. Because she was strange and beautiful and even more than this place, she was the thing that haunted me. The thing I couldn’t figure out. Because she made me feel real.

The film clicked off, static transitioning into another one of Bryn’s favorite movies.

“Please tell me it’s not another documentary on Siberian tigers,” I said.
She smiled. “I watch a lot of Netflix.”
“When you’re busy not sleeping?”
She nodded, sitting up. “I do a lot of boring things when I’m busy not sleeping.”
“Like?”
“I eat a lot,” she said. “There’s this great little restaurant by my house—Nacho’s Tacos.” She narrowed her gaze. “Do you like Tacos?”

Tacos. Mexican food. Universally revered, right?

“Yes?”
“You don’t remember tacos?”
“I remember tacos I just don’t remember if I like them or not.”
“Well, you will.”
“What else do you do?” I asked.
She toyed with one of the quilt’s loose seams. “I like to make things.”
“Like your sculptures.”
“Right. I was working on something for a scholarship contest—sunflowers like
the ones around the farmhouse.”
   “Was,” I said, watching her face. “Past tense?”
She ripped the thread free, unraveling one of the squares. “I like to pretend I’m normal sometimes.”
She threw that word around a lot. Detached, like she didn’t care. But even when she shrugged it off, I could still hear something sad in her voice.
   “What do you mean, normal?” I asked.
   “Like college is an option for me. Like I’ll get better.”
And there it was again. She’d talked about her disease so many times before. My entire existence felt like it had been spent within the confines of her symptoms. But this time she looked defeated. She looked afraid.
   “Could you? Get better, I mean?” I tried to keep the words flat, like she wasn’t making me afraid too. But I was. Because what if losing her meant I’d lose more than just a way out?
   “Maybe.”
I looked at her. “Maybe?”
   “Some people grow out of it but not soon enough. I don’t want to go to school when I’m thirty.”
   “Who cares how old you are?”
   “You sound like my uncle.”
   “The one who’s hot for your mom?”
   “What?”
   “Sorry. Your diary—”
She shook her head. “He is. He totally is.” She sighed, raking a hand down her face. “You know I caught them kissing. Recently. And I…I don’t know I was mad but then I wasn’t. It was weird.”
   “Is it weird that he’s not your dad?”
   “No. It’s a relief. I think I’m just so used to my mom being alone. Even though she hasn’t been. Not really. My uncle’s always been around. I guess I should have known.” She grew quiet, holding her knees.
   “Are you okay?” I asked.
   “Something happened,” she said.
   “Something…”
   “I told my doctor about you.”
I sat up. “What did she say?”
   “Nothing at first.”
   “But then?”
   “But then I went back to her office to grab my mom’s bag and I overheard two other doctors through the door. They said they’d have to keep an eye on me. They said it wouldn’t happen again.”
   “What wouldn’t happen again?”
   “I don’t know.”
We both just sat there, quiet, and I could sense her trying to stifle the panic.

*Again.* What did they mean, again?
   “But whatever it is it can’t be good,” she finally added.
   “You don’t know that.”
“I know what I’ve seen.” She looked down “I saw it again.”
“The…” I stopped. I wasn’t sure what it was.
“It was watching me sleep.”
I reached for her hand. “Did it hurt you?”
“No. But…”
“What?”
She met my eyes. “I know it wants to.”
“It seems like it wants both of us.” I swallowed. “Do you think it has something to
do with why I’m here?”
“I hope not.” Bryn stiffened, her gaze flashing to something between the trees.
“Do you see that?” Her voice was almost a whisper.
“What?” I scanned the trees, waiting for the shadow, but they were empty.
“There…it almost looks like…deer,” she said, squinting.
“I don’t see anything,” I said.
She crouched on her knees and I turned to follow her gaze but the lingering
sunrise suddenly ignited a pulse within the blank screen.
“What…?”
Bryn turned, the screen flickering. The tape rolled, frames sticking and
shuddering out.
“What is that?” she asked.
I saw grass and a small white fence. Clouds pooled at the top of the frame and
then the images started to race, the tape on fast-forward. There was a red plastic
lawnmower, a kid in a diaper pushing it around the yard and igniting a stream of bubbles.
A shadow spilled over his shoulder and onto the grass. Then hands were tucking
themselves under his arms. Lifting him.
“I don’t remember this,” Bryn said.
As the man’s face slid into frame, five o’clock shadow stark against his skin, wide
mouth opened in a smile, I said, “This one’s not yours. It’s mine.”
Chapter 24
Bryn

The screen shuddered to black and then so did I. I remembered staring past Roman into the trees. They were empty and then…they weren’t. There were deer, three of them, white tails flashing between the trunks. But Roman hadn’t seen them. He’d seen something else. Instead of my grandmother’s old quilt I suddenly felt my sheets, moist from sweat. I rolled and then I felt a hand on my arm.

“Don’t move.”

“What?”

I opened my eyes and saw my grandmother. Her eyes were wide behind a pair of thick bifocals, the ones she wore when she was sewing.

I felt a tug and realized she was gripping a strand of my hair, her other hand holding a pair of scissors.

I pulled back. “What are you doing?”

“You want this in your eye?” she said. “Stop moving.”

There was a sharp snip and then one of my curls was resting in her palm. I sat there, wide-eyed.

“Roots need it more than you do,” she said.

“What roots?”

She held up the strand of hair, narrowed her eyes, and said, “Whatever killed the roses is spreading.” Then she hurried out of the room.

I watched through the window as she carried it to the roses planted along the sill. The backyard looked strangely pale—the roses, the flowers potted next to them, even the herbs planted out in the yard frail and muted grey.

My grandmother was muttering something to herself, working the hair through her fingers like beads on a rosary. But as she carved a small trench in the dirt, burying the strand of hair, she wasn’t chanting about the roses. She was chanting something else, dark and pleading—a prayer—and then she said my name.

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror glaring at that one hair that was now so short I looked like some kind of mad scientist. I tried tucking it behind my ear but it just sprung back out. Great. I finally pinned it out of the way but I couldn’t tear myself from the mirror.

I was staring at my lips. At the place Roman had touched them. Kissed them. He was real. I thought I would feel relieved. Vindicated. Happy. But for some reason, the minute his lips had slipped from mine, cold air trickling into their absence, I’d felt afraid.

What if he wasn’t like me? What if he wasn’t sick? What if he was normal? I wasn’t good at normal. I never had been and even though he said he didn’t care, that he wanted me, just me, what if he didn’t know what that meant he’d be giving up? What if
normal really was what he wanted? The him in the real world.

In the dream-state time wasn’t constant; it was slow and malleable and six weeks was just a sunrise. He didn’t know what it felt like to be left, not really. And that’s what I did. I left people. And now that he was real he would have real expectations just like everyone else. Like a future. Like college and a job and a family and going to sleep at night and waking up the next morning and not scrambling to catch up with the rest of the world all because you blinked. You blinked and you were gone while the people you left behind were still living. Without you.

That would be the selfless thing to do right? To leave him be. To let him be normal. Especially after what I’d overheard in Dr. Sabine’s office. I could be getting worse, irrevocably, fatally worse. If something happened to me, what would happen to Roman?

All night I’d stared at his hands as if the answer were written along the scars there. As if I would believe it. I stared at my reflection in the mirror now, still trying to summon the same thing. But suddenly my reflection dimmed, my eyes burning as I replayed Roman’s words. It's mine.

A memory? He remembered? I could still see that little boy, diaper sagging over chubby legs, three small teeth exposed in a smile as the man hovered over him. Roman. He remembered.

I wasn’t sure what I’d expected. That he would be as lost in the real world as he was in mine. But what if he wasn’t alone? He hadn’t been, at least not as a child. And from the way that large hand rested on the top of his head, the way the man swung him into his arms—he’d been loved too. Probably still was. Roman had a family. Roman belonged to someone else as much as I belonged to my mom. And what if they were far away? From here. From me.

He was starting to remember. It wouldn’t be long before he’d start stitching the memories together, feeling whole again. What if that’s all it would take for him to finally wake up? And what if when he did he wanted the memories more than he wanted me?

When I finally came out of the bathroom, my uncle was sitting on one end of the couch, my mom on the other.

“You hungry, kiddo? There’s food.”

I saw the pizza box sitting on the counter. I reached for a slice and it was cold. I could still see their heads peaking over the back of the couch, so far apart, and it made my throat ache. I glanced at the calendar. One week. When I was in the real world time felt like this infinite string I was constantly trying to unravel.

But I wasn’t so afraid of the episodes anymore. I had somewhere to go, someone to be with. But standing there, holding that cold slice of pizza and watching my mom still afraid to indulge in the kind of normalcy I would never get to have with Roman I was angry. And more than that I was scared. I didn’t want time to unravel anymore. I wanted it to stop. To just stop and let me exist in that invisible overlap between my dreams and his. To let me be happy for just a little while longer.

The phone rang, buzzing along the counter, and when I answered it I heard the nasal voice of Dr. Sabine’s receptionist. She wanted us to come in this week if we could. She had something she wanted to discuss with us.

Felix. I rushed to my room, checking my cell phone. Seven missed calls all from the last night I was awake. I dialed his number and he picked up on the third ring.
“Bryn?”
“I’m up.”
“Yeah, after I’ve done all the heavy lifting. How convenient?”
“What is that supposed to mean?”
“Dani and I spent the night in the parking lot outside Dr. Sabine’s office.”
“Gross. I did not need to know that.”
“I was breaking into their network,” he said, his voice dry.
“You what?”
“We tried waiting but three days passed and then three more.”
“I know, shitty timing too. Did you find anything?”
“There’s some interesting emails I forwarded to you. You said the other doctor’s name was Banz? German, right? They were going back and forth talking about Nilostasia?” He fumbled over the word.
“Maybe that’s the new trial,” I said.
“There was stuff about you too. Most of it seemed pretty straightforward but you’ll be forwarded all of their future emails.”
“Anything else?”
“I’m still working on decrypting the files I found on Dr. Sabine’s hard drive but it looks like Dr. Banz has been logging in remotely. Probably from a laptop. If I’m gonna hack into his files I need to get closer.”
“You mean he’ll have to be in the office?”
“Ideally. I’d rather not sneak into his hotel room.”
“So it would have to be during the day?”
“No worries. I’ll need thirty minutes, tops.”
“And there’s no way they can trace this right?”
“Well…”
“Felix!”
“I don’t think so.”
“You don’t think so?”
“It’ll be fine, Bryn, I promise.”
“We’ll see. Dr. Sabine called this morning and asked if I could come in.”
“Oh…”
“Felix, I swear—”
“It’ll be fine. Look, text me your appointment time and I’ll wait out in the parking lot. You can be my eyes while I break into the other quack’s computer.”
I was pretty sure helping Felix hack into Dr. Banz’s computer was something that could possibly land me in jail if we were somehow caught. But what other choice did I have? I sighed. “Fine, what do you want me to do?”

***

An hour later my mom and I were sitting in Dr. Sabine’s office. Dr. Banz and his creepy assistant were there too. I wasn’t really listening, mostly just glancing out the window, trying to spot Felix’s car in the parking lot.
“What do you mean by new development?” my mom asked.
I snapped to attention.
“We’ve been having some very recent success using a drug called Nilostasia.”
“The trial you mentioned before?” I asked.
“Yes,” Dr. Banz said. “A few of our patients have seen some remarkable results in just the past month.” He spoke quickly, excitement painting his cheeks. But there was also a sense of urgency to his words and it made me wonder what had happened to the funding problem he’d mentioned a few weeks ago. “That’s amazing,” my mom sighed, gripping my hand. “So when do I get to try it?” I asked. “Well…” Dr. Banz took a breath, smiled. “We’ve been looking to deepen the pool a little bit. It’s not ready to be tested outside my supervision but we are looking to fly in some potential candidates to participate in the next phase of our study.” “Fly in. As in go to Germany?” my mom asked. Germany? It felt so far away. “How long?” I asked. “Three to four months,” Dr. Banz said. I inhaled. “When?” “Dr. Banz and Mr. Vogle will be with us until the end of the month,” Dr. Sabine said. “You could leave for Germany right after graduation.” “In four weeks?” I asked. My mom leaned forward. “We’ll have to think about it.” Dr. Sabine nodded. “Of course.” I almost said no, that I was ready to go, that I’d wanted to find a cure more than anything and that I was ready. But then I started thinking about a barrage of creepy German doctors that looked like Vogle. I thought about the drug being a fluke. Of it not working for me or worse. What if I ended up in a permanent coma and then I couldn’t find Roman and I couldn’t go to college and one day my mom would be bent over my bedside, grey hair falling into her face as she told them to pull the plug? I realized that I’d always felt safer doing the trials under Dr. Sabine’s supervision because I knew they’d been properly vetted by the time they finally reached her small office in Austin from whatever European laboratory they’d come from. But this was new and scary and what if I couldn’t do it? Or even worse, if I could do it, what would happen to Roman if the drugs finally worked?

After the appointment my mom and I had lunch at a little outdoor café downtown. I was pushing my pasta around the plate, trying not to think about dying. “You thinking about what Dr. Sabine said?” my mom asked. I nodded. “You don’t have to do it, you know.” “I know.” “If it’s too much, it’s too much. The trial will still go on without you and if they find a cure then it won’t be long before it makes it to Dr. Sabine.” “And if they don’t?” “Then they keep trying. We keep trying too.” “And what if trying means we go to Germany?” She looked at me, reaching a hand across the table. “Then we go to Germany.” She folded her napkin into her lap. “You know me, I’m the nervous wreck who worries about every little thing. But you’re different. I still remember the day you climbed that old oak tree behind your grandparents’ farmhouse. Grandpa caught you dragging the
ladder over to reach the first branch.”

“Yeah and he took it away.”

“He said, ‘you want to climb that tree? Then climb it on your own and climb down on your own.’”

“He always said if I couldn’t climb back down without his help then I couldn’t climb at all.”

“Right, and you did it. You were, what, six years old? You climbed that tree to the very top and then you just sat there.”

“For an entire day,” I laughed. “I couldn’t figure out how to get down.”

“And he wouldn’t help you. I remember I was so scared. Your grandpa sat under that tree all afternoon waiting for you to come down but he must have nodded off because when I went to check on you, you weren’t in the tree. You were sitting at the kitchen table with your grandmother and drinking a glass of milk.”

I started to laugh. “Milk. Yeah, I remember that. Not how I got down but I do remember the milk.”

“No one’s really sure how you did it but the point is that you did and you’ve always been that way. You always figure things out.”

“So you’re saying I should sleep on it?”

“Not too long.” She smiled. “You’ll figure it out, Bryn.”

I tried to believe her. I wanted to. But suddenly I felt small, like I was still that little kid who’d climbed that tree, only minus the boldness.

“Do you want to see something?” she asked.

“What?”

“We just finished a design project in Bluestone Park.”

I glanced across the street, the trees lining the footpath in full bloom.

“We can stop by Amy’s for some ice cream on the way back.”

I smiled. “And suddenly I’m feeling a lot better.”

We decided to walk, leaving the car at the restaurant and cutting through the food trucks on our way to the other side of the park. I looped our arms and it felt strange being so close.

I usually rushed our hugs and pulled away when she tried to kiss me on the cheek. I was distant because being close made me feel weak. But in that moment, I was weak. I was worried. About Germany and Roman and my mom and me. So I reached for her and she reached back.

I saw the crows first. Black. Bulky. Paper feathers quavering in the wind. They circled the fountain like they were guarding it, wings extended, sharp beaks opened wide. It had three tiers, the fountain. Birds were splashing near the top and moss scaled the marble design, spilling onto the ground in long scrolls that looked synthetic.

“I thought it was such a lucky coincidence that we finished it just in time for the museum’s newest installation to go up. I thought the birds were a little creepy at first but I figured it was something you’d like.”

I could feel her watching my face, waiting for it to change, for me to smile.

“It’s less modern than what—”

“Are you sure I’ve never seen this before?” I stopped her.

She shook her head. “They put all of the landscaping in last week.”

“And the birds?”
“A few days ago. You were—”
“Sleeping.” But I remembered it. All of it. “Are you…?” And then I was quiet, just staring at the birds splashing in the bath. Cardinals.
We stood there for a long time and I could see my mom’s face in the corner of my eye. Worried. Tired.
She gripped my shoulders and then she said, “You know I’ll be right there with you if you want to go to Germany. Or if you don’t, I’ll be right there too.”
“I know,” I said. “You always are.”
“And I always will be.”
Hot tears pricked at my lashes. I blinked. Because she was wrong. Because she would get older and so would I. She wouldn’t always be there. Whether I still needed her or not, she wouldn’t always be there.
That’s why I had to do it. That’s why I had to swallow the fear and go to Germany. Because things were happening to me. Because I was seeing things and feelings things. And because my mom couldn’t take care of me forever. At some point I had to start taking care of myself.
Chapter 25
Roman

The film tapered off, darkness lingering for just a second before light trickled onto the screen again. I saw me standing on the beach. Young. Maybe ten. I was cradling a football. It disappeared out of frame and then I started running into the water, hurdling over waves as the ball flew through the air. I dove, missed, a wave crashing over my head.

The screen cut to my mom. She was sitting under an umbrella, eyes hidden behind a pair of large sunglasses, mouth shadowed by a wide-brimmed hat. She was flipping through a magazine, pages fighting the wind. She wasn’t looking at the camera or my dad or me.

I felt a searing pain in my skull. Light. That damned light was burning me from the inside and then it disappeared. I blinked, eyes adjusting as I watched the tape cut to the faint beam of flashlights. They were racing across stone, fighting our shadows. Another light blinked on, then another—a whole row of them lining a narrow bridge. The camera shook, my dad ducking, me watching from between my fingers as a swarm of bats flew over our heads. A man in cargo shorts pointed out the drawings along the walls—crude stick figures and geometric shapes. Simple. White paint. Like the ones I’d seen when Bryn and I had hidden from the rain.

The camera zoomed in on my face and the light returned. I doubled over, hands gripping my scalp, the smell of gasoline singing my nose, and then the flash was gone again. I tried to catch my breath. I tried to focus. I looked up and my dad and I were walking along some boardwalk. We played the skeet shooting game and he won me a vintage jersey.

It cut to me squaring up to bat, missing, squaring up again. I saw us building a fort in our backyard. I saw me eating a thick slice of watermelon, seeds dripping down my chin. I saw my childhood bedroom, sports posters tacked along the walls, my Green Bay Packers bed spread in a clump on the floor.

I watched a kaleidoscope composition of Christmases and birthdays and New Year’s Eves; trips to the beach; to amusement parks; to the pet store, everything pulsing in and out between bright flashes of light. I watched Sunday mornings in my pajamas, my dad and I spooning Reese’s Puffs out of a popcorn bowl while we watched the pre-game.

There was another flash, that screaming pain between my ears returning. I smelled something burning. I heard a loud shriek that made my eyes water. I tore at the grass. Waiting to see. Waiting to remember.

And then I did.
I sat there, panting, eyes burning. And I remembered.
My dad liked chocolate milk and so did I. We used to take turns folding laundry during the commercials. He had big feet and I used to try to climb the stairs in his shoes. He only knew how to cook breakfast and on nights when my mom stayed in her room we’d make chocolate chip pancakes and fill the sink with every pan and every dish we
had, dirty for no reason, soaking until the next morning when my dad would wake up early, dress shirt rolled to his elbows, to scrub them clean.

I was an only child and I always would be. An accident that never felt like one because my dad was my best friend. Was. Until...he wasn’t.

But after sitting on the top of that hill until my legs were numb, I still couldn’t remember what had happened, what had changed. And I still couldn’t remember what my mom looked like when she smiled.
Chapter 26
Bryn

I was hiding out in the art room, breathing in the smell of charcoal and acrylics and catching up on homework while I waited for Felix to update me on the files he’d decrypted.

Apparently he and Dani weren’t speaking. She and Matt had gotten into a huge fight in the middle of the school parking lot in front of everyone. Something I’d missed because I was taking a make-up history test. She’d run to her car, peeling out of the lot. Then Felix punched Matt in the face.

I tried to find somewhere neutral to meet up, not to mention quiet. I wasn’t sure how much trouble Felix might get in if someone found out what he’d done.

I used to eat lunch in the art room with Mrs. Castillo a lot during freshman year. She’d even let me keep the spare key and I used it to grab extra supplies now and then or to hide from the rest of the world.

I was working on stats, trying to solve the problems in reverse from the answers in the back of the book while I waited to hear from Felix. I cleared the page, the metal around the eraser letting out a shrill squeak. Then the door clicked open. Shit. I’d forgotten to lock it. Mrs. Castillo was supposed to be in a meeting until two. I thought maybe she’d gotten out early but then I saw Drew. He closed the door behind him, reached for the light switch.

“Don’t.”

I’d spent the last week on edge, waiting for another episode, waiting for Felix to send me the files he’d found. I couldn’t sleep and had spent the night before scrolling through tour photos on Mismatched Machine’s website. Nothing turned up, not yet, which only heightened my anxiety even more. If Drew knew what was best for him he would have backpedaled right then and there. But he didn’t.

“How’s it going?”

“Stats,” I said, not looking at him.

He let his bag slip onto the table, someone’s drawing crinkling under the weight as he sat down in the seat across from me.

“You busy?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Bryn, I wanted to ask you something.”

I let out an annoyed breath. “Whatever. We’re friends.”

“Not that.”

He was waiting for me to look at him. I didn’t. In the corner of my eye I saw him reach for my stats book.

“I wanted to know if—”

But then there was a shudder. I looked up and Drew’s hands were at his sides and he reached for the book again, repeating himself.

“I wanted to know if you’d go to prom with me.”
“What?” The lead in my pencil cracked. *Prom*?
“I know you’ve kind of been avoiding me—”
Another shudder.
“I know you’ve kind of been avoiding me. I’ve tried to give you space. I just
thought maybe we could start over.”
I was frozen, trapped in some kind of loop.
“Did you hear—?”
He stuttered, the scene resetting again.
“Did you hear me?”
I gripped my neck, trying to will the echo to stop. *Stop. Stop.*
“Bryn. Prom?” His voice was normal again but his face wasn’t. He almost looked
angry.
I finally managed to speak. “What?” There were other words—expletives mostly
—flitting in that elusive place between my mouth and my brain. But I couldn’t pin them
down. I gripped the side of the table, afraid I was about to fall over.

*What the hell just happened?*
“Prom?” His voice quavered, anxious. “With me?”
I looked back down at my book, still trying to compose myself, but not before I
got a good look at his face. It looked strange in the corner of my eye, the boy I’d first met
hidden under sharp cheekbones and a permanent tan—older than I’d ever seen him.

“Um, I’m not going,” I said.
“You’re not? It’s our Senior Prom.”
“I went last year.”
“Yeah. With me.”
“I remember.”
Drew had gotten drunk and tried to rip my dress off in Candace Johnson’s
bathroom. I’d walked home alone.

“We had—”
“Fun?” I stood, my pulse still racing. “You had fun getting shitfaced while I cried
myself to sleep.” I chewed on my lip, cheeks burning. *Why did I just say that?*
“I didn’t know you were that upset. I…don’t even remember much about that
night after the dance. I’m sorry.”
“It was a long time ago.” I headed for the door, desperate for some air.
He reached for my hand, stopped me. “Let me make it up to you? This year we’ll
—”
“I have to go.”
“Bryn, would you listen to me? Look I get that you’re pissed but Jesus, it’s been
months. Fucking get over it. I have.”
I looked him in the eye. “Well, good for you.” I flung my bag over my shoulder,
reached for the door.
“I didn’t mean that. I shouldn’t have—”
But I was already wading into the fray of students getting back from lunch. When
I glanced back Drew was already walking in the opposite direction, shoulders tensed.
My cell phone buzzed and I looked down to see a message from Felix. He told me
to meet him in the library.

The row of computers lining the windows was mostly empty despite the fact that
every student should have been studying for finals. I found Felix sitting down in the far corner of the room, out of sight.

I sat down next to him. “So?”
He reached in his pocket and pulled out a flash drive. “Done.”
I reached for it but he pulled away.
“What is it?” I asked.
“Are you sure you want to do this?” he said.
I wondered what he’d found—about me, about my disease. Bad things I might rather not know. The truth.
“Yes.”
He loaded the flash drive and opened the first file. There were over a thousand images, all scans of someone’s hand written notes, the shadow of the binding clear at the edge of every page.
“What is this?” I asked.
Felix was quiet.
“I know you’ve already looked at this,” I said. “Spill.”
“It’s about a girl,” he said.
“A girl with KLS?”
He nodded, clicking through a few more images.
“These look ancient,” I said.
“Late 1970s. At least I think so. That was the only date I could find.”
I looked at Felix. “How long have you had these?”
He was quiet.
“Felix.”
“Since last week.”
“What?”
“I just wanted—”
“What? To make me go crazy?”
“Actually, the opposite.” He lowered his voice. “Look, I know you can handle yourself, I just…”
“What are you getting at?”
“If there was something bad in there, I mean really bad…I didn’t want you to freak out.”
“You didn’t want me to have an episode,” I clarified.
“Or worse. You’re my best friend, Bryn, and I know how you are. When shit’s bothering you, you don’t say a word and if I’d sent you these files and you’d found something, that’s exactly what you would have done. Keep everyone in the dark so you don’t have to deal. So I read it. Most of it. Okay, a lot but most of it’s pretty boring. The point is, I’m not letting you deal with this alone.”
I swallowed. “Felix…”
“No way. Don’t give me that face.”
I hugged him and he patted me once on the back.
Mrs. Mendoza came around the corner, cleared her throat.
Felix pulled away. “That’s…good. Thanks.”
I had a free period next and Felix skipped Health while we scrolled through the journal from the beginning. It read like notes taken by a doctor—names and dates and
dosages all concerning a girl named Eve. But it was all in German and we mostly just scanned every other page, hoping for some bit in English, some kind of clue.

“This folder looks familiar,” Felix said. “I think I saw a few short letters in English the first time I looked through everything.”

We spent another hour opening file after file before I finally spotted the word Dear scribbled across the top of one of the pages. There was a date too but the cursive was so manic I could hardly make it out.

Patient X responded negatively to electroconvulsive therapy. Voltage was delivered in progressive increments up to 300 V both during and after a neurological episode during a three-week period.

I clicked on a few more images before I found another letter.

The staff was made aware of the new protocol. The nurse in question has taken temporary leave and Patient X is now being supervised at all times.

“Patient X? Wait…” I scrolled through the muddied scans of the journal again, the print easier to read. I scanned every sentence, flipping through page after page. And then… “There.” I pointed. Next to Eve’s name was “Patient X”

Felix found another letter in English and opened it.

Neurological episodes seem to be increasing in their frequency. Patient X is often lethargic and mildly delirious even in times of wakefulness. Other motor skills seem to be deteriorating. She is still complaining about having strange dreams.

“Dreams…”
“Like you,” Felix said.
“Like me.”

Before becoming unresponsive Patient X suffered an episode lasting approximately nine weeks. She was unresponsive during that time and showed no physical response to food or water. Electroconvulsive therapy was once again unsuccessful in waking the patient and despite intravenous therapy the body slowly deteriorated. Time of death was 3:36 AM, December 20th, 1979.

“What?”
Felix shook his head. “We shouldn’t have looked at this.”
“She…”
“Bryn…”

He reached for me but I pushed out of my chair and grabbed my bag. I glanced at the clock. I had fifteen minutes until my Spanish final, yet another test I’d barely studied for in the past week.

I used to care about grades, about being able to measure my success in numbers and letters, the culmination of an entire semester boiled down to a few small digits in
black and white. But that was when I thought going away to school was more than a possibility. That was when I was certain I’d get better. But after reading about Eve, about her dreams, about her death, I wasn’t so certain anymore.

“Bryn,” Felix reached for me. “Where are you going?”
I headed for the door. “To find out the truth.”

***

Dr. Sabine was in her office when I pushed through the door.
“Bryn.” She stood.
But I wasn’t there to see her. I was there to see Dr. Banz.
“Who is Eve?” I said.
Dr. Sabine took a step toward me. “Bryn, what’s wrong?”
Dr. Banz was still, his face pained. He tried to get to his feet.
“Who is she?” I pressed.
He clutched his cane, let out a deep breath. “My daughter.”

***

I couldn’t remember how I ended up sitting in Dr. Sabine’s chair, a Styrofoam cup full of water balanced in my hand. I couldn’t remember how it ended up empty, my throat dry and tasting like tears.

Eve was seventeen years old when she died. KLS had struck her like a bolt of lightning when she was just nine, her episodes a violent dance between comatose and hysterical. The dreams started out as hallucinations, or so they thought, a cat named Blue who was invisible to everyone but Eve, the first sign of an oncoming episode.

It had been misdiagnosed as schizophrenia and they’d tried treating it with everything from electro-shock therapy to insulin shock therapy. The latter made her slip into a medically induced coma and it was thought that her periods of “unresponsiveness” were just a lingering side effect.

She died after an experimental treatment had induced an episode, one that had numbed her biological needs and left her to rot from the inside out. And that’s exactly what she did. Her body rejected all forms of nutrients and she starved to death. Because she couldn’t wake up. She died.

My mom finally arrived, face a stark patchwork of grief.
“I’m sorry,” I said.
But she just shook her head.

We all sat in Dr. Sabine’s office, everyone both waiting for me to break so they could pick up the pieces and waiting for me to tell them how I knew. I didn’t do either.

Dr. Banz was wilting in the corner, trying to keep his composure. “It was never my intention to be dishonest,” he finally said, “But I was. Because I’m a doctor but I was also her dad. Because this is personal to me. I’m so very—”

“I’ll go,” I stopped him.
“What?” My mom turned to me.
“To Germany.”
“Bryn…”
“I’ll do it.”
When I got home the first thing I did was pop my iPod onto the base, turn up the speaker, and let it shuffle through every song I’d found by Mismatched Machine from live versions recorded on someone’s cell phone to leaked studio recordings that never made it onto an album.

The small speaker rattled against my desk, drowning out everything—the fear, the truth—and burying it under guitar solos and growling vocals.

I’d learned most of the words over the past four weeks, screaming them into the showerhead until my grandmother banged on the door and told me to turn off the Satan music. My favorite song, Stabilizer, bled through the speaker and I whispered every word until my throat was raw. I’d scribbled the verses all over my notebooks, the chorus engraved with the hot tip of a nail onto one of the leaves on my sunflower sculpture. My sculpture that still wasn’t finished.

I’d been meaning to get back to it but with everything else going on, it just didn’t seem like the most important thing. Not like it used to. Part of me wondered if it ever would again, if come fall I’d be getting ready to start school again, if I’d still want to.

I used to yearn for it, fingertips itching for the flame, for something sharp to press into my skin. I needed that. But lying there in my bed, thinking of Eve, I needed something else. The kind of distraction that didn’t make me feel, that didn’t remind my body that it was alive.

I muted the song but I couldn’t maneuver the quiet either. So I sat up and checked my email, plucking Dr. Sabine’s correspondence with Dr. Banz from out of my spam folder. I read through a few, skimming mostly.

Felix was right. It was all pretty straight forward. There was talk about the trial and about my diagnosis. I opened some attachments containing my medical history and a list of the previous trials I’d participated in, the name of the drug to the left, the results to the right. None were successful.

My phone buzzed. I was dreading a message from Drew but it was another text from Felix.

- Hey, so, I kind of need a favor.
- I guess I owe you one. Shoot.
- I need you to distract Dani tonight so I can break into her bedroom and steal her underwear.
- Don’t you have enough pairs already?
- I want to ask her to prom.
- So you’re going to hide in her closet, sniffing her underwear until she comes in and then you scare the shit out of her?
- No. I’m going to hide under the bed.
- Oh. Well in that case what do you want me to do?
I managed to lure Dani out of the house with guilt. My mom had been driving me everywhere for the past week and I told Dani she was out and could she give me a ride to the grocery store. In truth I was leading her to our once favorite little ice cream shop on Main, hoping to cheer her up. Luckily she said yes and I was able to convince my mom to let me go before she ran herself ragged running back and forth from my bedroom.

The minute she learned that Eve was dead she’d been reassuring me that I was different, that my case was too. Every few minutes she’d knock on my bedroom door, slipping inside to leave behind more words of comfort but when she realized those words meant nothing she stopped saying anything, just pushing the door open to make sure I was still there.

Dani and I sat by the window, headlights blinding us every time someone parked in front of the shop. Dani’s eyes were swollen, red freckles spotting her cheeks.

I wasn’t really in the mood for Dani’s drama. Next to the tragedy of Eve it felt vain and stale and all I wanted to do was grab Dani’s shoulders and shake some sense into her. I thought about telling her about Eve, about what had happened, but part of me thought it could wait and every time she was almost on the verge of tears again, I knew it could.

She started talking about the fight again and I sunk against my chair, taking my cue.

“He was a waste of space,” I said, mouth full of Oreo ice cream.
“He was—”
“Hot. I know. Whatever.”
“You’re in a foul mood,” she said. “I thought you dragged me out of bed to try and cheer me up not to mock me.”
“I did.” I gave her cup of ice cream a little nudge. “So eat.”
“Yeah, then I’ll be fat and alone.”
“Oh God, Dani. You’re not fat and one scoop of ice cream isn’t going to kill you.”
“I don’t want it,” she whined.
“Fine.” I reached for it. “Then I’ll eat it.”

Dani’s mild eating disorder was definitely the most annoying thing about her. One Christmas break I’d gained ten pounds and went up two cup-sizes—a post episode binge that finally made me look normal, like a woman. I would have killed to hold onto that version of me and all Dani did was count calories and complain about her non-existent cellulite. She was lucky. Most people were, they just couldn’t see it.

Dani leaned against the window, a long sigh pouring from her mouth. “Distract me?”

I fiddled with my spoon, staring out the window. My mind immediately went to Eve but I thought better of it and chose something slightly less tragic.

“Drew asked me to prom.”
“He did?” She sat up. “When?”
“Today.”
“What did you say?”
“I said I wasn’t going.”
“What? You’re not?”
“No, I mean I doubt it. It’s only a matter of time before I have another episode
anyway. Why waste money on a dress I’ll never wear?”

“Because it’s your senior prom.”

“So? That doesn’t mean anything to me. I barely even went to high school. I don’t need some epic moment to commemorate this experience I didn’t even get to have.”

Dani was quiet, eyes suddenly dry.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to sound bitter or angry or anything like that,” I said. “I really don’t even care.”

“If you do that’s okay. And if you’re angry or bitter about it, that’s okay too,” she said. “I mean I’d probably be pissed too.” She reached for her cup of ice cream, taking a small bite. “And you’re right about Matt. He was a waste of space.”

“Totally.”

“And he always smelled like Vaseline.”

“What? Why?”

“He’d grease up before a match, make it harder for the opponent to pin him down.”

“Isn’t that, like, cheating?”

“Yeah,” she huffed. “Got a scholarship and everything. What a prick.”

“You should turn him in. Write an anonymous letter or something.”

She cleared her throat. “Dear Mr. Wrestling Coach, believe it or not but the slime oozing from Matt Thompson’s pasty orifices is not a convenient physical ailment but it is in fact artificial and can be purchased at your nearest convenient store in the aisle marked Masturbation Starter Kits.”

I choked on my ice cream, eyes tearing up. “Shit. Oh God. Please do it.”

She smiled. “I think I just might.”

I rode back with Dani to her house, claiming that I needed to borrow her notes for the Stats test the next day. Really I just wanted to see her face when she found Felix strewn across her mattress with accompanying candlelight, rose petals scattered across her bedroom floor. This was going to be good.

I hung back as she opened the door. The window was open, curtain fluttering. But there was no Felix. She reached for the light but it didn’t turn on.

“What the hell?”

She looked up to the fan where the bulbs had been stripped and there along the ceiling were tiny constellations, glowing green, and spelling out the words—Prom? Felix.

“What?”

Dani stared up at them, at the tiny stars she’d ripped from her ceiling the night after her dad’s funeral. The night she decided to grow up.

She looked at me. “He did this?”

“For you,” I said.

The stars spilled down towards the top of the window. Dani pushed back the curtains and there were more trailing down the side of the house, jumping from one tree trunk to another, dotting the pavement before disappearing across the street at the window to Felix’s bedroom. For a minute I just stood there, remembering the way I’d placed those stars on the trees leading to that empty clearing.

The kites.
I startled, taking a step back from the window. But it wasn’t like it had been before. This time I hadn’t just seen them on those trees in the dream-state. This time I’d put them there.

My lips parted and I almost said something but then I saw Dani’s face. I saw her smile, try to bite it back. Then she reached for the window and slid it closed.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Bryn, don’t.”

“Me? You. You should go with him,” I said. “Stop being such a fucking coward.”

Her lip trembled between her teeth. She bit down harder, eyes narrowed at me.

“Just leave.”

I shook my head. “Fine. I’ll go. But if you don’t you’re going to regret it. You may think you’re protecting yourself from something but all you’re doing is making yourself miserable. Because as much as you don’t want to believe it, the truth is you need him just as much as he needs you. But he’s not going to wait forever.”

I stormed out and then I stood by the front door waiting for Dani to climb out of her bedroom window and make the walk to Felix’s house. I watched her bathroom light flick on, then off, and then nothing.

Nine years of riding bikes and chalkling the sidewalk and copying each other’s homework and spying on the neighbors. Nine years of growing up together and she still wouldn’t trust him. She wouldn’t trust herself.

I passed our old tree house, moonlight sifting through the leaves and luring me inside. It felt small. Not the way it did in my head when Roman and I were staring up at the glass bottles that in the real world had all smashed or rotted away. Not the way it did when he’d almost kissed me.

I remembered his mouth. The way it had felt hovering over mine, that anticipation throbbing like a pulse on the edge of my lips. And then the way they’d felt when we finally touched—warm and soft and electric.

I knocked against the hollow trunk of the tree, finding the hole. When I reached inside I felt the cold plastic of the Pez dispenser, the rough grain of the fake gold, and then I felt something soft. I pulled it out, moonlight turning it to blood. The Cardinal’s feather. The one that I’d tucked behind my ear, that Roman had slipped free.

I gripped it tight, thin bone snapping. He’d touched it. He’d put it there. And now it was here.

Headlights cut through the leaves and I tore my way back out. I tucked the feather into my pocket and after taking one last glance at Dani’s window, still closed, I headed home.

The street was dark but I knew the way. Dani and Felix and I had snuck out of our bedroom windows for top secret, late night meetings at the tree house enough times growing up that I still knew which fences hid dogs and which yards ran their sprinklers at night.

I cut down an alley to avoid a cul-de-sac and ignited a barrage of loud barking against the slats to my left. I kept walking but suddenly there was more barking, more gums thrashing against the slats, more nails scraping at the wood. I turned, walking backwards to get a better look at the fence line and making sure there were no holes where one of the dogs was trying to tear free.

More howls rose up around me, some faint and far away, pouring over the tops of
the houses. Dogs in the entire neighborhood were in a frenzy. I faced the street again, concrete edging onto the gravel road and then I saw why.

I could barely make out the silhouette, moonlight trapped behind the clouds. But I could feel the cold. I could feel it racing through my veins, trying to pin me there.

And then it did.

I was still and I was cold and I was sinking. The shadow grew dense, not animal this time, but standing upright like a man. It drifted closer, a slow cyclone winding all around me as the frozen air fell in sharp pricks against my skin. That’s when I realized that it was raining. I felt the mud beneath my feet and saw the grass, thick and climbing to my knees. Vines twisted out of the ground and I felt the thorns bite at my ankles.

The nightmare from my childhood was alive and all around me, ripping up from the pavement, shredding reality like the thorns that were shredding my skin. The vines tightened the more I tried to struggle, like locked jaws dragging me down to my knees. I sunk into the wet ground as the dark shadow solidified, slithering out, reaching for me. It scaled my scalp, curling into my hair like fingers. And I couldn’t run. I couldn’t move. Not like before when it was just a dream. When I could wake up. When I could just open my eyes and…

My back arched, spine twisting and heaving. I tried to fight it but it was so cold.

Headlights flashed against my skin, tires grating to a stop, and suddenly the cold lifted and I could feel my pulse again.

“Bryn? Bryn, what happened? Bryn…” Dani reached for me and I stumbled to my feet. “Are you hurt?”

I looked down at my hands, the sting trailing out of my fingertips, every inch of me dry.

“I…”

“Bryn, what happened?”

The vines were gone and so was the rain. Summer had stolen the cold again and the shadow had disintegrated within the night all around us. I stared up at Dani, confused, horrified, and she stared back at me with the same expression, waiting for me to explain why I was lying in the middle of the road.

“Bryn, I need you to tell me what happened.”

I finally found my bearings, caught my breath, and for some reason my first instinct wasn’t to tell Dani the truth. It was to tell her everything. About Roman. About Eve. About the shadows. So I did.

I trembled and she clutched tight to my wrists, guiding me to the car, brushing the hair from my face.

When my teeth finally stopped chattering I said, “It wants me.”

“But why?” she breathed, terror in her voice.

I thought of Dr. Banz, of his confession, and then I thought of Eve. I thought of those scribbled journal pages. I thought of how they said she’d died. “I don’t know,” I finally said. “But I’m going to find out.”

Dani drove me home, walking me to my window that was still ajar. We both crept inside and she examined every closet and every dark corner, checking under my bed and then peering into the hall before pulling the door closed and locking it behind her.

“Do you want me to stay?” she asked.

Yes.
“Where were you going?” I asked. “When you found me…”
She shrugged, looked away. “I didn’t want Felix to know I’d seen it yet. I just needed some time to think.”
“And did you?”
Even in the dark I could see her cheeks reddening.
“You really think it would be good for me?” she said.
“Felix?”
She nodded.
“What do you think?” I asked.
“I think I’m afraid of what I think.”
“Don’t be,” I said.
She stepped to the open window and said, “I’ll try.” She hesitated and then she faced me. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

I nodded, relieved. I watched her walk to her car and then I closed the window. I wasn’t sure how long she’d be with Felix but I knew I couldn’t sleep, even though I wanted to, every part of me secretly hoping for something even deeper. I needed to see Roman. I needed to talk to him.

I pulled up Mismatched Machine’s website, searching the gift shop for Roman’s shirt. It wasn’t there. Must have been from another tour. I checked the dates. They were touring the east coast this summer, their last show in New Orleans. Eight hours away in some shoddy club called The Lounge.

People had posted some photos on the band’s website—everyone in black t-shirts, arms raised, hair wet and sticking to their faces. I scrolled through them. No names. No dates. I clicked through page after page waiting to see Roman’s face in profile. Him riding over the crowd. Waiting in line outside the building. Meeting the band after the show. There were thousands of photos. Thousands of people I didn’t recognize.

Suddenly I heard a light knock on my window and I grew tense. Dani? I walked over, the light in my room still off, and peered through the curtain. I saw Drew and he saw me, my face lit up by the laptop glowing behind me. Shit. Again? He mouthed something I couldn’t quite make out. Then he slid the window open, the glass giving way under my fingers.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered.
“I came…” He lowered his voice. “I came to talk to you.”
“We talked. I told you I wasn’t going to prom.”
“No.” He stepped over the window seat. “We haven’t talked.”
“We—”
“No, blowing me off, acting like a bitch, that’s not talking.”
“Excuse me?”
“You forget,” he said. “You don’t scare me. I know you.”
Maybe he had. That girl who’d settled for invisible. He’d picked me up like some kind of stray and I’d clung to him. But I wasn’t lost.
I looked at him. “Not anymore.”
He shook his head, gripped his neck. “You think one semester of pretending to hate me can change two years of late night phone calls and ditching class and sneaking me into your room?”

I tried not to think about that first time. A light knock, his face beaming on the
other side of the glass. I’d slid it open, letting him in.

“My mom’s in the next room,” I’d said.
He’d walked to my door, sly smile on his face.
“Don’t.”
He opened it, peered out. I held a finger to my lips and pushed him out of the way.

“Are those your pajamas?” he asked, eyeing my ratty tank top and yoga pants.
I turned away, throwing my hair up in a bun.
He reached for my hand. “No. I like it down.”
It fell in a mess around my shoulders, his fingers climbing behind my neck. He kissed me and I felt every bit of it but when he pulled away, I felt that most of all.
“I can’t stay long,” he said. “I just wanted to see you.”
And just to make sure he was real, I’d said, “Why?”
He stepped back, nose grazing my cheek. “Just in case you disappear again.”

I tried to shake off the memory, every word and every touch unraveling. Except for the last six. For some reason, every time I played it back in my head, it wasn’t sadness in his voice, it was accusation and whether it was real or not, I’d made it real. I’d chained myself to Drew with guilt and every time I disappeared, every time I thought I hurt him, I cut the links a little shorter, waiting for him to hurt me back.

Drew inched closer.
I swallowed, trying not to look at him. “Drew this isn’t going to work. Not this time.” And it wasn’t. I saw the feather on my nightstand in the corner of my eye. Not some ephemeral memory but a living, breathing piece of the present. A piece of Roman.
He reached for me. “Are you sure?”
I pulled away. “I...I met someone else.”
He stilled. His face was dark. “Who?”
“You don’t know him.”
He was quiet for a long time and then he looked at me. “I don’t need to.” He took another step closer. “I don’t need to know who this fucking asshole is to know he’s not right for you.”

“And you are?”
“Yes.”

Don’t indulge him, Bryn. Stay cool. “I don’t trust you,” I said.
“You shouldn’t.”
“No shit.”
“But we could start over. Forget about the past six months.”
“You mean the past two years?”
“Okay.” He exhaled. “You’re right. Maybe I don’t have the best track record but that’s the point. We’ll start over. Both of us. I’ll be better. I’ll do better.”
“What’s with you? This being desperate. It’s not—”
“Me? It’s not me. Or at least it wasn’t. You’ve always pushed me away but not like this. Not so far that I didn’t think I could get you back.”
“Wow. Thanks.”
He sighed. “I just mean you’ve never...scared me like this before.”
“I thought you said you weren’t afraid of me.”
He lowered his voice. “I’m not afraid of you. I’m afraid of losing you.”

Well, it’s too late. Say it. Tell him.

He leaned in.

“Don’t,” I stopped him.

“Bryn.” He gripped my arms and I waited for him to snap. For him to hurt me again. But then he loosened his grip. “I won’t. Even though I know you want me to.”

Enough.

Two years and I’d never told him no, to leave, to disappear for good and even then I could feel my lungs straining against every word. Because part of me was afraid it wouldn’t work—it never did—and because part of me was afraid that I’d be right about Roman, about him wanting the memories more than he’d want me, about us being too different.

Drew and I, we were different too, but at least he knew what he was getting himself into. I thought of Dani, of what she’d said that day in the courtyard about how it wasn’t Drew I was in love with, but his consistency and the relief of already knowing exactly how he’d hurt me, and she was right. About me. About everything.

I was just as afraid as she was.

Until now.

“Don’t fucking touch me.” I pushed Drew back and he stumbled against the bed.

“You hurt me.”

“Bryn…”

I heard that same quaver in his voice that I’d heard in my dad’s.

“You hurt me. You hurt me with your fucking words and your fucking hands. I said no and you hurt me.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“You did.”

I stepped toward him and he was pressed against the window frame. A car passed by, headlights cutting across his face. It was strained and pale and wet.

“Bryn, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Leave.”

“And then what? Bryn…” He stood there, watching me, waiting for me to break. I didn’t.

I held back the curtain. “And then don’t come back.”

He stepped over the sill, hesitating as if he were contemplating looking back one last time, but then I pulled it closed. His headlights flashed against the window as he drove away and within the glare I saw my breath clinging to the glass and within it the circle Roman had drawn on that farmhouse window, two drips falling toward the center.
I was sitting across from Dr. Banz’s empty desk when he walked in. The room was bare, just his laptop blinking on top of a small wooden desk, an empty coffee cup and a few pens perched on top of a yellow notepad—the brevity of his stay clearly evident.

“Bryn…” He lowered himself into his chair, resting his cane within reaching distance. He tried to smile. “What brings you into the office to—?”

“What is it?”
“What is what?” he said.
I steadied my voice. “What’s following me?”
I waited for him to ask me to explain or for him to give me an explanation of his own. For him to call it another symptom, another coping mechanism, another aspect of my illness that felt less and less like an illness and more like a prison every day.
But then he said, “I don’t know.”
“But you know something.”
I reached back, pushing the door closed until I heard a click. He stiffened.
“What is it?” I repeated.
“Evil.”
I grew still, forgetting to breathe until he spoke again.
“There’s no name for a thing like that.”
“But it’s bad?” I asked.
He nodded.
“What does it want?”
He looked right at me. “You.”
And Eve.
“So it’s hunting me?” The words tripped over my lips, soft and weak like a whisper. “But why?”
“We’re not positive.”
“But you have a theory?”
Dr. Banz’s eyes softened. “I’m afraid not, Bryn. We’ve been waiting decades to find someone else with Eve’s symptoms so we could finally unravel the mystery of her death but now that we have it’s just not that simple. As of now, whatever’s following you, whatever it is, we have to assume that it’s dangerous and we have to assume that it wants—”
“To hurt me…” I started.
“Have they?” he asked.
“I’m not sure.” I wasn’t. I’d felt its closeness the night before in that alley. I’d felt its heaviness, its hunger. It had pressed down on me, steeling me there cold and helpless. But it hadn’t really hurt me. Not yet. “It’s gotten close.” I inhaled. “Is that what really happened to Eve?”
He was quiet for a long time, face twisted and pained. “She’d seen them. She said there was something watching her. She’d mentioned strange things like that before she got sick, some kind of recurring nightmare. I thought she just had a vivid imagination.”

“Bad dreams?”

“That’s all they were at first. But then she started sleeping for longer periods of time, hallucinating during episodes, and then that stopped too. It was easier for her mother and I to manage but there was still something happening to her. She would wake up and describe these vivid scenes.”

“Like the dream state?” I asked.

He nodded. “That was what brought me here. Your case was described as incredibly rare but when I read Dr. Sabine’s notes, it felt so familiar. The dream state, as she calls it, Eve used to write about it in her journal.”

“Was it made up of memories?” I asked.

“Sometimes it seemed that way but…then that started to change too.”

“How?”

“Eve was obviously being traumatized by something and the more often she lashed out, the longer her episodes became. She was breaking down. They…they broke her.”

“They.” I swallowed, my voice slipping and faint. “Shadows.”

“Shadows?” he repeated.

I met his eyes. “That’s all they are. Darkness.”

His face paled. “Anytime Eve was asked to describe what she was seeing that was the only word she ever used. Whatever darkness she’d seen, whatever darkness you’re seeing now, I can’t deny the connection between its sudden presence and the sudden worsening of your symptoms.”

“But you don’t know how?” I asked, “or why? What if they’re not just hallucinations? Or what if they are and it means that my KLS has caused some kind of irreparable damage to my brain?”

His hands shook and he clenched them tight. “That’s something we’re still trying to figure out.”

I let myself slip back to that night I was sitting on those swings, the shadow trying to force me into something deeper than sleep. “Whenever they’re around all I want to do is close my eyes. The cold is so fierce it hurts and I can feel myself drifting.”

“You’re becoming more debilitated. Eve was bed-ridden by the time she…” He pinched his forehead. “She was so small.”

The room seemed to tilt and Dr. Banz was quiet for a long time as I held tight to my chair. Every time I learned something new about Eve I felt like I was learning something new about myself and it only made me that much more afraid of what was happening to me.

“Eve.” I swallowed. “How did she…? How did it end?”

Dr. Banz looked down. “For a long time her doctors were still clinging to the theory that it was schizophrenia or some other mental illness in tandem with the KLS. They wouldn’t listen to her.” He cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t listen to her. Eventually she stopped talking about the shadows. She stopped talking at all.”

I wanted to ask Dr. Banz about the notes I’d read about Eve. It had sounded like she’d attacked one of the nurses. But I hadn’t confessed yet how I’d even heard about
Eve and I wasn’t sure I wanted to.
   “Is that when…?” I couldn’t finish the rest.
   “It wasn’t long after. A few weeks after she stopped talking we were forced to
move her to a psychiatric facility permanently. At the hospital where she’d previously
been receiving treatment she’d…attacked one of the nurses. Not intentionally. I’d tried to
explain that to the physicians. She was afraid. She never would have hurt someone.” He
was breathless then. “I could see it in her eyes that she was delirious. When we saw her
she was just so afraid.” He grew quiet for a long time and I didn’t like sitting in that
silence of his grief. I didn’t like watching it tear at his insides. So I was relieved when he
finally said, “The boy…”
   “Do you think he’s like the shadows?” I asked, even though I knew it was
impossible. I just needed Dr. Banz to tell me that he was real, for someone to promise me
that he was.
   Dr. Banz shook his head, glancing out the window as he said, “Vogle, he’s not
just my assistant.”
   “What do you mean?”
   “Vogle and Eve had a very special connection. I guess you’d call it a soul mate.
To be that ruined on the day she died, he could be nothing but.”
   “And Roman? What does any of this have to do with him?”
   Dr. Banz looked me right in the eye. “I’m afraid, everything.”
   I stiffened. “You know why he’s there in my dreams?”
   “I’m not sure of that either. But what I do know, if my theory is correct, is that
he’s not supposed to be.”
   “What theory? What else do you know that you’re not telling me?”
   The door pushed open and Dr. Banz only had time to mouth the words, “Find
him,” before Dr. Sabine interrupted.
   The moment she saw me she almost losing her grip on the stack of folders she
was carrying. “Bryn, well, what a nice surprise. Is everything alright?” she asked, gaze
flitting from me to Dr. Banz.
   “Yes.” I stood. “I just stopped by for a minute to ask a few questions about the
trip. I didn’t see you in your office so I came in here to ask Dr. Banz.”
   “Oh, I must have been downstairs grabbing lunch.”
   From the way she said it I wasn’t sure if she believed me, but I decided to get out
of there before she could ask me anything else.
   “Thanks, Dr. Banz.”
   He nodded. “I’m not sure I’ll be seeing you until you land. My flight heads out
tomorrow.”
   “I look forward to it,” I said, and then I headed for the elevators.
   My grandmother was out in the yard when I got home, whatever sickness that had
stripped the garden in the backyard starting to contaminate the flowers near the front
steps. The rose bloom she held was dry and cracking.
   When she heard me, she let if fall to the ground. She sniffed. “You smell like
public transportation. Where have you been?”
   “Well, be warned. Your mother’s dying to take you prom dress shopping. I told
her you could wear her old one; save her some money. I still have it under my bed, you
know. But oh no, that woman won’t even reuse her paper plates.”
   “I’m not sure that you’re supposed…”
   My mom came down the steps. “Oh, there you are. I was looking for you. Did you go somewhere this morning?”
   “Just out for a walk.”
   My grandmother shot me a disbelieving look.
   “With Dani,” I clarified.
   “Well, how are you feeling?”
   “Um, fine. Why?”
   “Good enough to have a day out of the house?”
   “A day of what?”
   “Oh, drop it,” my grandmother said. “I already told the girl you wanted to force her to buy a new prom dress instead of wearing your old one.”
   “You what?”
   “That I spent twelve hours sewing I might add. All because you wanted to look like that hussy Paula Abdul. I should have told you not even the grace of God could—”
   “It was supposed to be a surprise,” my mom said. She turned to me, eyes pleading. “We could grab lunch downtown. Maybe walk the shops. Find you a prom dress there?”
   “You what?”
   I watched her face, nose wrinkled in anticipation.
   “I’m not going.”
   She sighed. “I heard.”
   “From who?”
   “Your aunt. She said Dani’s going with Felix.”
   “I don’t want to waste money on a dress I probably won’t wear. It’s been four weeks and my internal KLS clock is ticking.”
   “See?” my grandmother cut in. “At least she’s got a good head on her shoulders. Girl’s practical.”
   “We’ll just go look,” my mom said, ignoring her.
   “You never just look,” I said.
   “It’ll be fun. Come on.”
   I watched her face, nose wrinkled in anticipation.
   “Okay,” I said. “Just to look.”

We didn’t just look. I was immediately hurled into the dressing room, hangers flung over the door, my mom trying to zip me into sample sizes that were all that was left. I held my breath.
   “Just a…little…more…” she said, face turning red.
   “I can’t,” I choked, and then I let out a deep breath, something tearing. “Oh sh…crap.” I lowered my voice. “Did it just rip?”
   My mom shushed me. “Hurry. Get it off.” She pulled it up over my head, burying it under the pile of discarded dresses on the floor.
   There was a knock. “You doing alright in there?”
   “Uh, just fine,” I said, pulling on my clothes in a rush.
   The woman’s footsteps receded and then we ran for the door.
   “We’ll find something else,” my mom said.
   “We were in there for two hours. Please don’t make me do it again,” I groaned.
“It’s your senior prom, Bryn. I put up with your anti-social, smart-ass attitude 365 days out of the year. I think you can give me this one. At least pretend for me.”

“Fine.” I smiled wide, deranged. “How’s this?”

“Creepy,” she said. “But it’ll do.”

We found another store, a small boutique tucked behind a pair of tall trees. We thumbed through the racks, a large stack flung over my mom’s forearm, one black dress tucked under mine.

“So has anyone asked you? To prom?”

“I’d rather go alone. Or with Dani and Felix.” I instantly thought about how awkward and uncomfortable that would be and said, “Scratch that. Alone is good.”

My mom stopped, looking at me. “You know sometimes I worry—”

“Sometimes?”

“Very funny. I just think sometimes you’re a little too comfortable with being alone. I know you like your privacy and everything and that’s fine but being alone isn’t all that great, not all the time.”

I thought of my mom sitting on the couch, her silence after I’d asked if she was happy. I felt a lump in my throat and tried to swallow it back down.

“It’s just easier,” I said. The truth.

“For who?”

“Me.” I paused. “Everyone.”

Her face darkened and I scrambled for a lighter explanation.

“It’s not just that. Time…” I looked away, thinking of Eve, and trying to bite back the fear in my voice. “I don’t have that much of it. I’d rather not waste it on people I don’t particularly like or doing things I don’t really like to do.”

“Isn’t that a little isolating?”

“I hang out with Dani. And you. My family. Maybe I have a smaller social circle than most people but—”

“It’s more like a triangle. I just don’t want you to miss out on anything,” she said.

“Like you?”

She looked at me. “Like me.”

“You know you don’t have to be alone either,” I said.

She leaned against the door to the dressing room. “I’ll try if you will.”


She didn’t need to know that it might not matter.

“Deal?”

I looked at my mom, at the parts of her that didn’t want to be sad anymore. I didn’t want her to be sad anymore.

“Deal,” I said.

She ushered me inside and handed me a slinky red halter dress. “Then start with this.”

Back home I stood in front of the mirror, that red dress clinging to my hips, to the dimples and curves—to the body that finally looked normal. I wasn’t just bones anymore, my collarbone finally hidden, my cheeks full, my chest spilling over my bra.

I’d gained ten pounds in the four weeks I’d been awake. Late night ice cream runs with my uncle Brian and afternoons binging on leftovers with my grandmother while my
mom worked late carving me into someone I didn’t quite recognize.

I stood there, eyes scanning every inch of myself, and I tried to imagine what some other girl might have thought if she’d been standing in that body. What Dani might have thought. That my thighs were too big, dimples trailing into my lower back. That my stomach wasn’t flat, my underwear cutting into my hips.

But for some reason I couldn’t absorb any of it. My lip trembled, my throat raw, and I started to cry. But not because I didn’t look perfect. But because I looked healthy and because I wasn’t sure how long I’d stay that way.

I heard the sharp squeal of breaks, someone pulling to a stop in front of the house. I wiped my eyes and then I watched through my window as my dad sat in his truck. He was glancing at the front door in the corner of his eye but he didn’t get out. I knew my mom was in the kitchen making dinner and I waited for her to spot him through the window and run him off again. But I could hear her singing to some commercial jingle on the TV, the volume on full blast.

So I just stood there watching him.

I didn’t want to watch him. I wanted my uncle to get back with the can of chicken stock my mom forgot and I wanted my grandmother to step outside to check on the flowers she’d just planted and I wanted my mom to pull back the curtains and see him there. I wanted him to leave. Because I didn’t like looking at him, his face already flushed beneath his thin beard, his eyes closed for a long time while he gripped the steering wheel.

His shoulders slumped and then he opened the door and stepped onto the street. It was empty but he kept looking from one end to the other, waiting for a car or something else to force him back into the truck. Or maybe he was waiting for someone to run him over. By the look on his face, it looked like someone already had.

I thought about the last time I’d seen him, the things I’d said. I’d wanted to say my piece but maybe that wasn’t all I’d done. What if I’d hurt him? What if I’d wanted to?

He made it to our front yard and then he stopped again. He was clutching something, his fingers gripping the binding. I waited for him to lift his hand, to hold it up so I could read the spine but he was stuck there, one foot in the grass, the other still on the sidewalk. He turned back toward the truck, took a step, and then he stopped. He gripped his scalp and when he turned back toward the front door, I was pulling it closed behind me.

He froze there and that’s when I remembered the dress I was wearing. I crossed my arms, making my way toward him.

“What do you want?” I said.

He looked down, still gripping the book. Then he handed it to me—the vintage copy of Through The Looking-Glass my grandfather had given me, the one I’d lost.

“Where did you get this?” I asked.

“It’s still empty,” he said and I knew he meant the trailer. “It was on the floor of the closet in your old room.”

I imagined it there, exposed, and wondered how I hadn’t found it. I’d gone back to the trailer more than once looking for it. But for years it was never there.

I imagined my dad standing in that empty tin shell, the wind cutting right through the walls. The last time we’d driven by the windows were all busted out, the frame warped from the heat and years of stagnant rainwater.
I wondered how he’d managed to stand it long enough to find the book—the smell and the dust and the emptiness. But then I remembered that he’d hardly been there. For my mom and I, that trailer was the place we’d lived. But for my dad it was just a place he drove by sometimes, coming inside on those rare occasions when he’d needed somewhere to sleep.

I clutched the book, pressing my fingers between the pages until they were numb. “I’m sorry, Bryn.”

I tasted those tears I’d stifled earlier because I didn’t know if he meant that he was sorry for leaving us or if he was sorry because he was about to do it again.

He stared at the ground. “Are you leaving?” I asked. “If you want me to.” “And if not?”

My uncle turned down the street and I watched my dad tense. The truck pulled into the driveway and then they were squared off again. “Bryn, go inside,” my uncle said.

And even though the way he said it made me feel like a child, that’s exactly what I did. Because my dad actually looked sad. Because he finally looked sorry. And I couldn’t stand it.

I went back inside, passing my mom who’d finally looked out the window. I slipped out of the dress, hanging it on my closet door and then I sat on my bed, the base of the laptop hot against my bare skin.

I waited for the voices outside my window to grow faint, for my dad’s truck to churn to life, and for the quiet commotion of my mom cooking to continue on the other side of the wall.

I didn’t want to think about my dad. I wanted to think about Roman instead. So I curled up in the blankets, thinking about his hands on my hips, gripping me in handfuls, making this new body feel real.

Then I scrolled through the rest of the photos on Mismatched Machine’s website, resolved to finding him before another sleep, before I remembered that I was sick and that red dress didn’t hang on me quite the same way.

***

He was hanging over the security gate in the front row, one fist in the air, sweat pouring into his eyes. He was smiling. Breathless. Wild. Roman.

I found him. After two more days of scrolling through photos on the band’s website, of searching the archives on their social media page, their fan’s pages, the label’s page, blogs and newspaper articles covering the shows, I found him. But he was still lost.

He wasn’t tagged in any of the photos and they didn’t list the venue. The crowd was tight, shadows concealing most of them. The photographer hadn’t meant to capture them anyway. He’d been aiming for the lead singer who was hunched over the microphone. But still, there Roman was. Another dark face, another opened mouth. That’s what I’d seen first. His lips, his teeth bared in a growl as he sang with the music. Just the way I’d remembered them. Four weeks. It felt longer now. It felt like forever. I had to get back and then I had to make him remember.

I ventured back downtown telling my mom I was going to look for some prom
jewelry with Dani. But Dani was with Felix helping him pick out his tux and I took the bus.

I was wandering around a music store, the humid cedar smell of instruments leading me toward a wall of bass guitars. I stared up at them—glossed faces and shiny tuning pegs—trying to find the one he’d like. The one he’d pick himself. Nothing too polished. No. He’d probably go with a matte finish. No crazy colors. He’d stick with black. But something unique, vintage, romantic. My eyes settled on a bass near the top row. I squinted, reading the tag. A Schecter Nikki Sixx.

*That’s it.*

“Excuse me.” I found an employee at the register, pointed out the bass. “Can I see that one?”

He brought one out from the back and I pretended to fiddle around with it, running my hands over the strings, twisting the pegs. I plucked a few strings, a low thrum vibrating against my palms.

“How’s it feel?” he asked.

“Perfect. I’ll take it.”

He gave a wary smile. “Okay, I’ll ring you up.”

He relayed the total and I swallowed, reaching into my purse. I’d been saving my birthday and Christmas money since I was thirteen, first for a pony and then for Emory, but in that moment I was so tired of waiting. To get better. To go to school. To live my fucking life exactly the way I wanted to.

So I rode that city bus twenty blocks and there I was, about to fork over a significant chunk of my life’s savings and all for a boy who could end up being as temporary as everything else. But what if this would help Roman remember? What if I could find him in the real world?

The clerk eyed me and I felt the cash growing moist in my hand. But I wasn’t going to be afraid. Not anymore. So I handed it over, leading the strap of the case over my shoulder before letting the receipt flutter into the trash on my way out.
Chapter 29
Roman

I sat in the grass, not wanting to move. I’d seen me as a child—all chubby cheeks and gap-toothed smile. I’d seen my dad. Tall. Strong. Same eyes as mine. Same tight jaw. And my mom. Tight lipped. Biting back a smile every chance she got.

I knew it was them. I knew it. And now I couldn’t move because I wasn’t just starting to remember. I was starting to feel. And not just Bryn but everything.

Bryn wasn’t at the farmhouse when I got back. She wasn’t down on the beach. She wasn’t in her childhood pirate ship or at the edge of the dock or on that snow covered hill. I was alone again. Except that I wasn’t. Not with all of those thoughts pinging around my brain. Not with the revelation that I had a family, a real one, swelling in that tight space between my lungs.

I wasn’t alone.

I pushed the door open to the farmhouse, heading for the couch, for Bryn’s diary still resting on the arm. But the sunlight was tangled in something, so bright in the corner of my eye. I turned and I saw the bass guitar, pegs glinting, sunlight bleeding red over the strings. In that pool of light and shadow there was an entire sunset and when I picked it up, plucking at the strings, I could taste every color.

Bryn. Had she sent this to me? What if she’d found me? If we’d met? Then why was I still in her grandparent’s farmhouse? I cradled the bass, letting it sink against my chest. I ran my hand along the frets, waiting for an itch, an inkling. She thought it had been a clue but I wasn’t so sure.

I tried to lure out a note, a melody, but even the bass itself felt heavy and foreign. I sat there picking at the strings, thumb resting on the tuning pegs, waiting for some kind of ephemeral nudge. But in that silence, in my head and all around me, my hands began to tremble. All of that wanting was concentrated in my fingertips and still I couldn’t remember a thing. I sat there trying not to cry even though I could already feel the tears like thorns in the back of my throat.

But just before I gave in I spotted the record player, another Rush album waiting for the needle. I dropped it, the first track sifting out, my fingers idling over the strings in hesitation until I found the bass. And then, as soon as the solo kicked in, the strings bit into my skin and my fingers went flying across the frets. I rode under the notes. On beat. In sync. I felt another flash flit across my vision until I couldn’t even see the strings anymore. My hands slipped but I didn’t let go. It burned there with my pulse. In and out. In and out. And I just kept playing. Through the burning, through everything. I kept playing, following the song and she was right.

She was right.

Bryn was right.

When the last song faded out, the needle spinning off the record, I kept playing. I kept plucking the strings until my fingers were red and raw and sore. I kept playing—songs by Mismatched Machine, songs I couldn’t remember the name of, songs I hadn’t
even remembered learning. I played chaotic riffs and complicated melodies before
sinking into a slow rhythm, hands tired but fingers still just wanting to move, to coddle
out another sound. Just one more sound.

Then I couldn’t help it. Tears slipped onto my hands, carving down my cheeks but
I still didn’t let go. Until the door creaked open and I saw Bryn. She was standing there,
twilight ignited behind her as she stared at the bass, at my hands curled around it.

“You—”
I looked down, hiding my face.
“Roman?”
“I’m starting to remember,” I said.
She sunk down next to me but I still couldn’t look at her.
“Was it long?” I asked.
She looked at me, cheeks flushed. “The longest.”
“Did you find this?” I asked her, one hand still gripping the bass’ neck.
“I bought it.”
“What?” My eyes flashed to her face. “This is a Schecter. Those cost like—”
She shook her head. “It was nothing.” She looked right at me, right through me
this time. “What’s wrong?”
I bit my lip and then her hand was against my neck, gripping me.
“Roman.”
“I remember them,” I finally said.
“Who?”
“My parents. I think I’m starting to remember them. And this.” I nodded to the
bass. “I remember it too.” I looked right at her. “I’m starting to remember.”
“I found your picture,” she said, voice catching.
“Where?”
“Online. I found tour photos from a Mismatched Machine concert last summer.”
“Did you find out where?”
“No yet.”
“But you found me.” My pulse rioted in my veins. I was real. I existed.
Somewhere. Not just there in that farmhouse. Not just there with Bryn.
“I’m close,” she said.
She leaned in, her lips drawing my eyes closed. But then I opened them again and
she was gone.
Chapter 30
Bryn

Three days. I’d only been out for three days. I hadn’t missed final exams, or prom. I hadn’t missed seeing Dani swallow her fear, hand gripping Felix’s arm as they stepped onto the dance floor. I hadn’t missed the look on Drew’s face when he saw me in that red dress, alone and in love with someone else.

It had felt like a flash. One second I was staring at Roman’s picture and the next I was staring at the real thing in my grandparent’s farmhouse. Only it wasn’t. Not yet. I still had to find him.

I was sitting at the kitchen table, my mom hovering over me with a mouth full of bobby pins. She’d spent an hour curling my hair, painting my nails, pretending like someone might be glancing in my direction the moment I walked inside. Pretending like I wasn’t dying. But as she stood there, pins caught in her smile, I let her. She looked happy and I wanted her to be even if I couldn’t.

I spent the rest of the afternoon clicking away on my laptop, sifting Roman’s photo through a list of search engines Felix had sent me and scrolling through the results. So far they’d all turned up nothing.

“You almost ready?” My mom was in the doorway.

I only had a few more sites to check.
“Uh, just a minute.”
“What are you looking at?”
“I felt her over my shoulder and I slammed the laptop closed. “Nothing. I’m ready.”

When you have friends you spend dinner before prom at some expensive restaurant, all of you already buzzed from the ride over in your ghetto-chic party bus complete with stripper poles and light up seats. But when you have no friends, like me, you spend dinner before prom at Nacho’s Tacos with your hyper-emotional mom who is on the verge of tears every time she looks at you and your grandmother who hasn’t eaten anything besides leftovers in four months and has probably absorbed the kind of radiation amounts typical after a trip to Chernobyl.

So there we were. Stuffed into the only empty booth—me trying to be as inconspicuous as possible while my grandmother asked to speak to the manager because this wasn’t real Mexican food.

“It’s modern,” my mom tried to tell her.

“Modern. Well you modern people eat like rabbits. Where’s the meat? My taco’s all lettuce. I can’t eat just lettuce.”

“Here, you can have some of mine.” I pushed my plate over, staring at my phone in my lap as I tried to connect to the shoddy Wi-Fi in that place. I pulled up another one of Felix’s links, uploaded Roman’s picture, and waited for the results to load.

“Are you excited?”
“Huh?”
My mom waved a hand. “What are you doing over there?”
“Oh, uh, just texting Dani, sorry.”
“Well, tell her we said hi.”
“And tell her she better keep her legs closed tonight,” my grandmother cut in.
My mom shot her a look. “Mom.”
My grandmother shook her head, ignoring my mom. “You’ve always been the good one Bryn. But Dani, she’s—”
“Had a rough couple of years,” my mom said.
My grandmother nodded slowly. “She has. But that’s no reason to be a hussy.”
“Jesus, we can’t take you anywhere.”
“Take me? I would have been fine staying at home eating the leftover lasagna before it goes bad—you two are just so wasteful—but no. You had to take Bryn out to dinner. You had to drag me along. It’s not my fault the girl’s got no friends. Maybe she would if you’d wean her off your goddamn teat.”
The quiet hit me then. One of those public lulls that sneaks up on you just as something mortifying is happening.
“She has dementia,” I announced. “Mind your own damn business.”
The quiet spilled into a few muffled words, then sentences, and then the place was buzzing again. The waiter brought out a complimentary desert. Sick girl: one. Nacho’s Tacos drunk patrons: zero.
My grandmother said something about me splitting my dress if I took another bite of my fried ice cream but I wasn’t listening. I was still scrolling through matches on my cellphone, each one taking what felt like an infinity to load.
“So do you have any plans after the prom?” my mom asked.
“After? Oh no, doubt it. I’ll probably be home by eleven.”
“Are you sure? No parties or hanging out with Dani and Felix?”
“I’m sure they’d rather be alone.”
“Alone?” my grandmother coughed. “Over my dead body.” She looked at me.
“No. You watch her.”
“Bryn can’t babysit her cousin,” my mom said.
“It’s her responsibility to the family, Elena. Just make sure that girl doesn’t lose her virginity behind the Ihops.”
“It’s Ihop,” I said. And it’s too late for that.
“The KFC. The Chicken Filet. I don’t care where she goes. You keep her legs closed.”
I rolled my eyes. “Fine. I’ll do my best.”
She reached across the table, patting my face. “Good girl. I told you, you were the good one.”
“Well, at least try to have a little fun,” my mom added. “Hey.” She waved again.
“And don’t be on your cellphone all night. What if someone wants to dance with you and you’re too distracted to notice?”
“Then it will save them the embarrassment of being turned down.”
My mom didn’t let up the entire car ride over to the venue. The parking lot was already dark. Thankfully. I’d texted Dani and she and Felix were already inside which meant I had to brave that long walk past the ticket table and the photo set-up completely
alone. And in an obnoxiously red dress that suddenly felt too tight.

I edged in behind a group of four, the girls already wobbling on their stripper heels, as I tried to rub my mom’s lip-gloss off my cheek. I was almost to the door when one of the girls fell, clutching the girl next to her, dragging them both down. Then I felt a hand on my arm and I was stumbling too.

“Shit,” I said. “Get off.”

“S-sorry,” the girl slurred.

I spotted Dani in the doorway and then Felix was pulling me back onto my feet.

“Nice entrance.”

“Nice vest.” It was pink. Felix hated pink.

He gritted his teeth. “She’s been driving me crazy all week. You know she even made me go with her to get her hair done? I sat there for four hours while she—”

“What about my hair?” Dani asked.

“It’s gorgeous.” He kissed her on the cheek. “I’m gonna get a drink.”

“You torturing him?” I asked when Felix was out of earshot.

“He asked for it.”

“Felix doesn’t need to be vetted like all of your other boyfriends. We’ve known him since we were like six.”

“I don’t know, I guess it’s just habit. Plus I like watching him squirm.”

“Well, you should give him a break.”

“I’ll think about it. So how was dinner?”

Our grandmother called you a slut and tasked me with keeping you from losing your virginity behind an Ihop. “Boring. Grandma complained the whole time.”

“As usual.”

“Where’d Felix take you?”

“Some Italian place downtown. It was packed. Uh-oh.”

I turned, following Dani’s gaze.

“Incoming.”

“What?”

When I turned back she was standing with Felix at the punch bowl. But Dani was wrong. When I finally spotted Drew across the room he was still. Just staring. A group of people walked past him and he was pushed in my direction. I didn’t mean to look him in the eye, to recognize what I saw, but when I did he was walking towards me.

“You came,” he said.

“I—”

“Changed your mind?”

“Not exactly. It was just kind of a big deal to my mom. You know how she is.”

I stood there, waiting for him to go away but he didn’t. He looked me over and I crossed my arms, nails digging into my forearms.

“You look…”

“Please don’t.”

“I’m sorry.” I realized he’d been saying that a lot lately. “Bryn…” The song changed, bass thumping. I saw his lips move and then he leaned in. I braced myself but then he said, “I just wanted you to know that I’m sorry.”

He looked me in the eye one last time and then he walked away. I just stood there, alone and relieved.
For six months Drew had been following me around, cornering me, and I kept waiting for him to remind me why I’d said no, for him to grab me, force me, control me the way he used to. But when he didn’t it made me wonder if maybe he had changed, if he’d finally softened the way a man was supposed to when he was in love, if maybe he was growing up. Only it was too late.

I found a dark corner where the swirling lights over the dance floor didn’t reach. But the room still felt small, everyone writhing in the center of the dance floor, so close I could see their makeup dripping down their faces. There was Candace Johnson tugging at her dress, boobs spilling over the top, and there was Jessica dragging Drew onto the dance floor. She glanced over his shoulder, caught me looking, and smiled.

I switched to examining the cheap decorations—clear lights flung over the rafters along the ceiling, balloons littering the dance floor and swirling near the sparse refreshments table as people walked back and forth from the punch bowl.

Everything was purple. Probably Candace Johnson’s idea seeing as her parents paid for almost everything at Imperial High. The shoddy glitter machine was probably her idea too. I could just make out the grating hum of the motor underneath the music, glitter shooting out in a tangled clump every time the song changed.

There were some of those glowing stars along the DJ booth and I glanced around looking for Dani and Felix. I could just make out a sliver of her face in the middle of the dance floor. She was laughing. So was he. Then Drew was in my line of sight again. I watched his hands slip onto Jessica’s hips, the small of her back, and I thought it would hurt but it didn’t.

No, that slight twinge in my stomach wasn’t because of Drew or Jessica, or Dani and Felix, or that one weird kid who sat behind me in Stats and always smelled like mayonnaise, or my Freshman algebra teacher whose name I could never remember and who was standing by the exit flirting with my old gym teacher who always called me Stacy.

It wasn’t Carla Friedman who was kind of my friend until she got a nose job and became a cheerleader. It wasn’t the pretentious tree hugging vegans who shunned me for shaving my legs, or all of the people who’d had classes with me and sat next to me for years and never said a word other than to ask for a pen. In fact it wasn’t the faces I recognized at all. It was the ones I didn’t. It was me standing alone in that dark corner, watching the culmination of four years of trying to skate under the radar finally working.

And it was me realizing that it was too late to change any of it now. Because sooner or later the thing that came for Eve would come for me too and if she couldn’t survive it, how would I?

I watched the dance floor until it was a blur. Until I could see tears clinging to my lashes. I wasn’t supposed to care about this stupid fucking prom or these stupid fucking people. I’d spent most of my life hating them, avoiding them, pretending like they didn’t exist. When I was the one who never really existed.

I pulled out my cell phone. No data. I held it out like a compass, watching the bars blink in and out, following it past the bathrooms and toward the service stairs. I accidentally snuck up on two people making out at the top of the stairwell and they glowered as I told them to get a fucking room. I pushed through the door that led onto the roof and there were a few people near the railing, pouring their drinks over the edge.

They ignored me as I wandered behind an air vent, the webpage finally loading. I
scrolled through the first search results. Nothing. The next page. Then the next. Nothing. Nothing. I jumped to the last link Felix had given me and loaded Roman’s picture. There were fourteen hits. Just fourteen. The page was slow to load, pixels formulating one at a time.

*Come on.*

*Load.*

I scrolled down. Down. Down. Ticked off the first photo. The second. Third. Fourth. The fifth photo was still loading, the top of the frame dark, the shapes giving way to hands, heads, eyes, a mouth.

Roman.

He appeared one centimeter at a time, that same t-shirt clinging to his skin, warped from his sweat. I clicked on the link below the photo and was shot to his profile page.

*Davide Roman Santillo.*

*Albuquerque, New Mexico.*

My pulse was in my ears. I leaned against the vent, legs suddenly liquid. The service door slammed closed, someone stepping out onto the roof, and I jumped.

I typed Roman’s full name into the search engine and there were a few links to his dad’s law practice and his grandfather’s obituary. I clicked on a link to a local news article, his name in the title line.

*Ten struck in head-on collision*

Roman’s picture was juxtaposed with one of the car he’d been driving. Frame twisted like tin foil.

*Seventeen-year-old Roman Santillo was a student at Highland High School and was injured in a one vehicle crash along 92nd street just west of Roselyn avenue. He was found alive but seriously injured at around 1:30 a.m. His vehicle had collided with a tree. The roof of the car was stripped from the vehicle and he was airlifted to Presbyterian hospital where he is still in critical condition.*

I clicked through the other links, all dated a few weeks before Christmas.

*Seventeen-year-old son of local lawyer, Marco Santillo clinging to life at Presbyterian hospital.*

*Son of Albuquerque attorney, Marco Santillo, involved in head-on collision over the weekend.*

*Local teen spends eighteenth birthday in coma.*

I sunk against the roof, rocks biting into my knees. I clutched the phone, staring at the photo of the car. Of what was left of it. And Roman. *What was left of him?*
I shuddered. Silent. I reached for the air vent, gripping the sides, trying to hold it together. I heard footsteps, tried to hold my breath, to swallow the tears. To push everything back down. To bury it before it buried me.

*Roman. He’s...*

I curled into my lap, tears caught between the sequins on my dress. I tried to fill my lungs but they felt small. I felt small. So impossibly small.

A voice cut through the wind. “Bryn?”

I didn’t look up. I didn’t move.

“Bryn.”

Something slipped over my shoulders, hands gripping my arms. I felt the air spilling from someone’s lips.

“Bryn. What’s wrong?”

Wrong. Everything was wrong. Everything was...

I felt that soft tug. The one I used to fear. The one I used to dread. Sleep. Long. Warm. But this time I wasn’t afraid. This time I was tired. I was so so tired.
Chapter 31
Roman

I sat there staring at the impression of her legs in the couch, waiting for her to fill them again. Time was starting to feel normal again, long. I didn’t want to be alone there with Bryn’s things and my half stitched memory and that bitter thing on my tongue that tasted like tears and guilt and fear. Thick and pungent like they’d been rotting there for a long time, except I’d only just begun to realize it.

I walked along the tree line, searching the shadows for something new. The sun started to sink and it was just about to blink out when I saw a light flickering up ahead. There were cracked fences slumped onto a concrete sidewalk, flies buzzing over an open dumpster that smelled like sour laundry and grease. It started to narrow, the dark silhouettes of houses and power lines rising over the fences but when I peered over one there was nothing there.

I was standing in the middle of that decrepit alleyway, one lone streetlight spilling over my shoes and then I felt my pocket swell. I reached down, fingers grazing something slick. I pulled out a plastic bag, small white pills lining the bottom. I swallowed and I could remember it resting on my tongue, tumbling down the back of my throat.

Is that why I was there? I’d been on some fucking synthetic trip the whole time? I tossed the bag in the open dumpster and kept walking. The concrete unfurled into a small parking lot, white lines freshly painted. There was a nice car parked near the back of the lot out of the glow of the streetlight. I watched my reflection wind across the glossy surface, warped there in the dark windows, and then I pressed my face to the glass.

There was a flash and I stumbled backwards. I stared at the car and I felt nauseous. I felt like I was going to jump out of my skin. I felt angry. I slammed my fists against the hood, igniting the sharp alarm. I kept walking and it wailed after me, ricocheting off the trees until I felt tangled in it. I passed road signs I didn’t recognize and came to a four-way stop, red traffic light suspended over railroad tracks. I kept walking. Albuquerque City Limits. Ten miles to Bernalillo.

The road curled under my feet. I was standing at the top of a hill and as I looked back, something rumbled to life behind me. I heard the engine, tires screaming across the pavement. The headlights swelled against my skin until they were all I could see, that same light tearing across my vision again. I smelled the gasoline, I tasted it. But it didn’t hurt this time, because this time I wasn’t in the car, this time I was just watching. I blinked against the light, eyes settling over the windshield, another pair of eyes staring back at me.

Me.

I was looking right at me and then I wasn’t.

The car raced past me, screaming all the way down. There was a rip in the atmosphere; a sonic tear that brought me to my knees and then all I could see was smoke. I waded out into the fog, losing pieces of myself as I tried to make out the sharp angles of
the car. It wasn’t until the fog lifted that I saw it twisted and severed by a large tree. The roof was gone, interior exposed. I saw the airbag deflated over the empty driver’s seat. I saw my blood pooling in the floorboard, glinting off shards of glass.

I saw my blood.

***

I wasn’t sure how long I’d been sitting there. Long enough to feel cold. Long enough to feel dead. I sensed her moving up the road but I didn’t look up. Even as she leaned over me, something red and shiny and soft slipping over my skin, I didn’t move. Her lips were by my ear, breathing my name, other words I couldn’t quite understand. Her hands slipped into mine, twisting, gripping me tight, and it was that small weight that cracked me. That made it feel okay to spill into her lap. So I did. Burying my face. Letting her string herself through the pieces of me, binding them, making me feel whole. Just for a second, our threads entwined, I remembered how to breathe. I remembered. I remembered.

I finally looked up at her, tears spilling down her cheeks. Make-up smeared. Her green eyes pale.

“Roman.”

“I remember,” I said.

“What do you remember?”

“Everything.”
His car was twisted around the trunk of the tree like the black exoskeleton of an insect, his blood trickling down the front seat. He’d found his mom the night before. That year she’d spent every day closed off in an upstairs guestroom, darkness gripping her from the inside, dragging her under, until she drowned in it and Roman came home late one night and found her in the bathtub.

I couldn’t remember how I got Roman back to the farmhouse. He was shaking, sick, and scared. I was scared too. So I held onto him and he held onto me and eventually the trees tore away and we were climbing up the front porch, sinking down onto the living room floor, the two of us curling into each other.

I watched the window as it started to snow and then I stripped the beds, dragging the blankets into the living room. We huddled there, our noses touching beneath my grandmother’s quilt as I tried not to cry.

I gripped the blankets where he couldn’t see. I held my breath. I tried to concentrate on his blurry silhouette and not his closeness. I tried not to feel him. Because I hadn’t told him what I’d found. Not yet.

“Is this what it feels like?” he said.

“What?”

“Waking up.”

I swallowed, tears burning my throat. I thought about all of the times I’d woken up and things had changed without me. My dad had been there, trying to make amends, and during an episode he’d disappeared again. The grief always felt brand new because it was. But when I woke up, no matter how much I hated him, at least I knew that he still existed somewhere in the world. That string hadn’t been cut completely.

But Roman’s mom. She’d severed that string with one of his dad’s razors. She’d abandoned him for good and it made me wonder if those strings aren’t meant to connect us to other people but to hold us together, and when one of them gets clipped, it’s not just the relationship that unravels but us.

I was lying there watching Roman unravel and it was all I could do. I couldn’t speak or think. I couldn’t change any of it. All I could do was watch him wake up. The worst kind of waking up. Because I could see it in the red sting of his eyes that he was more lost now than when he’d washed up on shore.

“Stop,” Roman mumbled into my neck.

“What?”

He blinked. “Stop looking for me.”

“Roman.”

“Bryn. Stop.”

“I won’t.”

He gripped my wrists. “You have to. You don’t…” His voice caught. “You don’t want me like that.”
He knew and I knew but I didn’t care.
“I want you,” I said.
“Am I still in the hospital? Am I some fucking vegetable?”
“I don’t know.”
“Fuck. I mean I must be. That’s why I’m here isn’t it? I’m in a fucking coma or
something.” He tried to catch his breath. “What if I don’t wake up?” He sat up, shaking.
“Bryn.”
I gripped his shoulders, tried to fold him in close.
“Bryn, what if I don’t wake up? What if I don’t wake up?”
Maybe because I didn’t have an answer or maybe because I did, I didn’t say a
word. I didn’t speak or breathe. I kissed him. I pressed into him, every inch of me
pouring into that kiss until he was still. Until we both were.
“I love you,” I said. “You will wake up. Because I love you. You have to. You
will.”
“But—”
“You will.”
He folded into my lap again, shuddering. I held onto him, arms curled over his
back, letting him feel the weight of me until it felt permanent, until he knew it was.
Because I didn’t care if he was broken. He hadn’t cared that we were different, that I was
sick, and I didn’t care either.
I watched the storm surge outside, snow whipping past the windows. The last
time it snowed here was after my grandfather’s funeral. I was trapped in his home with
his things for two weeks, though when I finally woke up all I remembered was curling up
on the floor of my bedroom in his work shirt.
From where Roman and I lay I couldn’t even see the trees anymore, or the sand,
or the sunflowers—everything was covered in snow, the white erasing everything in a
false renewal. Because what if the truth was that nothing could ever be erased?
Roman looked up at me. “I’m scared.”
I reached for his face, holding him steady. “You’re going to wake up.”
“How?”
I heard Roman’s words in my memory, swelling there next to my lungs. I kissed
him, resting there until he kissed me back. Until he sunk into it and I could feel every
inch of him relentless, trust, believe.
Then I looked right at him and said, “Because this is not a coincidence.”
Chapter 33
Bryn

There was someone sitting on my bed. I could feel their weight on the mattress, blankets pulled tight under their legs. I blinked, their hands padding toward me, shadow bleeding across the blankets. I blinked again and I saw Dani.

“Bryn?” she whispered.

I sat up. Roman.

“How long?” I said.

“A week. Short one this time.”

Another week? Seven days used to feel like nothing, a few homework assignments; a trip to the dentist. Now it felt like an eternity and every second that I kept sitting there felt even longer. I crawled off the bed, stopped, holding the wall.

“Too fast?” Dani grabbed my arm. “Bryn, are you okay?”

I shook my head. I was not okay. Roman was not okay. Nothing was okay. “I have to get dressed.”

“What about a bath first? Maybe something to eat?” She followed me into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

“I need to—”

“Bryn.” She stepped between me and the tub, voice broken by the warble of the faucet. “I know about Roman.”

“I have to find him.”

“And then what?”

I didn’t have an answer so I just shook her off and started tossing my clothes into the hamper under the sink. “Dani, I have to find him.”

“No, you need to slow down. You need to think. God, since when are you the irrational one?”

“Irrational? My boyfriend’s in a fucking coma and—”

“Wait. Boyfriend? Bryn….” Her voice trailed off and she just stood there, eyes wide and sad. Examining me like I was crazy. Because she was finally starting to think I was.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I said. “It’s complicated.”

“I’ll say.”

“Dani, please, don’t say anything to my mom.”

“You can’t ask—”

“Please.” I was so close to her then. I knew she could see the tears coming. I bit my lip, looked away.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

She shrugged. “I owe you, I guess. Just don’t do anything stupid, Bryn.”

“Have I ever?”

“There’s a first time for everything.”
I slipped into the tub, pulling the curtain until she could just see my face.

“Do you remember what happened?” she asked.

I remembered the gravel biting into my knees, seeing the picture of Roman’s car and then I was looking at the real thing, at him strewn across that dark road. “I… I was on the roof. I blacked out.”

“What were you doing up there with him?”

“Who?” I asked.

“Drew.”

“What? I didn’t go up there with him.”

“He’s the one who carried you downstairs,” she said. “When I saw him I thought you’d gotten into another fight. I thought something had happened.”

Something had happened. Only it wasn’t Drew. It was Roman.

“It wasn’t that,” I said.

“I saw the pictures on your phone,” she said. “Do you think…?”

“What?”

“Do you think that’s him?”

“It is. I’m positive. He remembers now.”

“He remembers what?”

“Everything. That’s why I have to find him.”

“And when you do?” She sighed and I could hear that her face was buried in her hands. “Bryn, what if he doesn’t wake up?”

I shook my head. “What if he does?”

She lowered her voice. “Okay, what if he does? And what if he’s not himself?”

I thought about my own fears for the past few months—that Roman wouldn’t like me in the real world, that me being sick would be too much to handle. Just like it was for my dad. Just like it was for Drew. But what if I was the one who couldn’t handle our relationship in the real world? What if he was too far gone? Not the Roman I knew but a stranger in a thin hospital gown who couldn’t even say his own name. Who’d never be able to say mine.

“Bryn?” When she said my name, the silence broke in two.

I heard myself sobbing and I tried to catch my breath. “I have to try.”

Dani exhaled, her own voice catching. “Then I’ll drive you.”

***

Dinner was quiet. Every time I tried to speak I felt that ache in my throat, every tight exhale wanting to shudder into a sob. I wanted to cry and I couldn’t. I wanted to leave, to go to him, and I couldn’t. Not yet. We’d leave after my mom went to bed, giving us ten hours of uninterrupted driving. We could make it to Presbyterian Hospital by morning.

And then…

“You’re not hungry?” my mom asked.

I stabbed holes in my baked potato, steam trailing out.

“That’s called discipline,” my grandmother cut in. “Girl’s on a diet, can’t you see?”

“She is not on a diet.” My mom looked at me. “You’re not on a diet are you?”

“No. I am not on a diet. I’m just tired, I guess.”

“Maybe you should call it an early night. Get some rest.” My mom glanced at my
“Maybe we all should.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” my grandmother asked.

“It means, I thought we already talked about the volume on the TV and you said you’d turn it down.”

“Talk? What talk?”

“That’s it. I’m getting rid of the DVR.”

“Oh, so now you’re gonna punish me like some kind of child?”

“Well, you’re acting like one.”

“Well, maybe you should have talked a little louder. I’m old. You know I can’t hear.”

“May I be excused?” I said.

No one heard me and no one answered and no one noticed when I left the room. I shut my bedroom door but they were still arguing. Maybe my mom was right about it having been a rough episode. She wasn’t usually so highly strung and she only got like that when she was stressed out—the origin of her stress usually being me.

It finally got quiet, the low clank of dishes in the sink the only sound. I heard the water shut off, the TV click on, and then the phone rang. A few minutes later there was a soft knock on my door, my mom peering inside.

“Still up?”

I minimized Roman’s picture in the newspaper, closed my laptop.

“That was Dr. Sabine.” My mom slid down next to me, knees curled into my side.

“It was about Germany.”

“They want us to start making arrangements?” I asked.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

“But soon?”

“It’s up to you. If you want to take a break after graduation…”

I could see it in her eyes that she wanted me to take a break. But not just because she thought I needed one, because she needed one.

“Do I have some time to think about it?” I asked.

I’d already made the commitment to go but that didn’t mean I wasn’t still afraid.

She reached for my hand. Her wrists were dark.

“Did I do that?”

She waved a hand, pulled them to her chest. “It was a rough one for both of us, I guess.”

“What do you mean? I…” I couldn’t finish the rest of that sentence.

“I tried to turn you. You got a little agitated, that’s all.”

“That’s all? No. Mom, I’m s—”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not.”

I thought about how upset I’d been; still was over what I’d found that night on the roof. It was still simmering there even when I was sleeping and I’d hurt her in a way that I could see.

What if Dani was right again? What if I’d been right from the beginning? Being with me would be hard no matter how fast Roman recovered, no matter how many pieces of him could be stitched back together. If he could be stitched at all. Fixed. And what if he was terminally broken? How could he love me then?
“How long, again?” I asked.
“The summer.”
“Three months?”
“Three months. They’d set us up with an apartment, money for groceries, things like that.”
“What about grandma?”
“She’d stay with your aunt I’m sure.”
“And your job?”
“I’d have to see about taking a leave of absence. I’ve been with them long enough, hopefully they wouldn’t mind.”
“Hopefully…”
“Hey, your only concern should be getting better. If you want to do this, I’ll take care of everything else. Just say the word.”

_Three months. What if he did wake up?_
“Tell Dr. Sabine I want a little more time. Please.”
“Okay, but we’ll have to let Dr. Sabine know the plan by the end of the week.”

My mom kissed the top of my head. “Get some rest. We’ll talk more in the morning.”
She flicked the light off and closed the door. I tried not to think about her face the next morning. How would I explain Roman? How would I explain any of it?

When I heard her go to bed I texted Dani to come pick me up. Then I tore a sheet from the stationery my grandfather had given me for Christmas one year. I clicked the pen with my thumb, trying to think. I heard my phone buzz and saw headlights flash across my window. They went dim, the engine cutting off. I looked back down at the stationery and then I wrote—*

_Left with Dani to help a friend. I promise I won’t be gone long._

I figured _long_ was a fairly relative term. I’d be back by the end of the week at least. I’d have to so we could give Dr. Sabine an answer about Germany. My phone buzzed again and I grabbed my jacket off the bed before climbing through the window. I ran out to the car and I saw Felix in the driver’s seat.

“So much for being discreet,” I said.
“You think I’m going to drive ten hours by myself?” Dani said. “Plus he said he’d split the gas.”

“Why?”
Felix put the car in drive. “Because this is fucking weird. There’s no way I’m missing it.”

“Glad I can entertain you.”
He was quiet, cleared his throat. “Joking aside, I’m sorry he’s—”

“Thanks.”
I really didn’t want to think about how or what Roman was—brain dead, or paralyzed, or suffering from amnesia; a stranger who’d lose all recollection of me the moment he opened his eyes. That could happen, right? He could wake up and it could erase everything. It could erase me.

There were so many things out of my control—essential important things that I couldn’t even bare to think about. So I didn’t. I just curled up next to the window, watching the city recede in harsh red flashes until the silence felt like home.

***
I slept. I hadn’t meant to sleep but when I opened my eyes, Dani in the driver’s seat and Felix drooling on the center console, I was relieved.

“Good morning,” Dani said. “Well, not technically.”

I glanced out the window, the road still dark.

“Where are we?”

“Just passed Lubbock.”

“Where?”

“Exactly. Don’t worry you haven’t missed much. Well, except for Felix getting chased out of the women’s bathroom at the last rest stop. Biker chick too. I thought he was going to get his ass kicked.”

Felix sprang up. “Yeah, thanks for just sitting in the car and watching.”

“What did you want me to do? If you couldn’t take her I sure as hell couldn’t.”

“I don’t know. Create a distraction. Run her bike over with the car. Scream bloody murder while I snuck out of her line of sight. I’m sure you could have thought of something.”

“What does it matter now? Faking that asthma attack obviously worked.”

“I was faking.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Is this what you two have been doing while I’ve been asleep?”

“Mostly,” Dani said.

“And listening to the shitty music on Dani’s IPod,” Felix added.

“I’m the one driving,” she said, “therefore I get to control the radio. Those are official road trip rules.”

“This isn’t a road trip.” Felix pointed South. “The beach is that way. We’re headed to God knows where to wake some total stranger out of a coma.”

“Could you be any more insensitive?” Dani hissed.

“Insensitive? Who offered to split gas with you and help drive?”

“Like you’re not doing it just because you’re in love with me.”

“And you better be careful before I change my mind.”

“Jesus, Felix,” I cut in. “You should have done that a long time ago.”

Dani glanced over her shoulder. “What’s your problem?”

I let out a groan, burying my face in my knees.

“So? Bryn? Oh sh*t, did she fall asleep?”

“No,” I mumbled.

“Oh good.”

“Look, Bryn,” Dani said, “if this is too much, you know, stress, I can turn—”

“It’s not this. It’s you. Both of you.”

“Us?”

“Yes. You two drive me crazy! This bickering and pretending to hate each other, it’s fucking annoying. And it’s getting old. You two just don’t get it. I have no idea what I’m going to find when we get to New Mexico. If he’ll wake up. If he’ll remember me. I know you probably think I’m crazy, that I’ve fucking lost it, but at least I’m trying. At least I try.” I buried my face again, speaking against my knees. “You guys don’t know how lucky you are.”

They were quiet for the first time.

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” Felix said. “Maybe a little strange, maybe even a
little—"
I kicked the back of his seat.
“Unique. I was going to say unique.”
“I didn’t mean to snap like that,” I said. “I was just, I don’t know, having a moment.”
“No worries,” Felix said. “You’re right though. I know it doesn’t seem like I take things seriously but I do.” He looked at Dani. “I take things seriously.”
“Just so you know…” I leaned into the empty space between them, “being overly-sentimental is equally as annoying.”
“She’s right,” Dani said. “But it’s also incredibly sexy.”
In the corner of my eye I saw Felix reach for her hand.
I slumped back in the seat. “Okay now you guys are grossing me out.”
“You’ll make out with a guy in a coma but a little hand holding grosses you out?” Felix said.
“And here we go again with the insensitivity,” Dani sighed.
“He’s not…well, he is but it’s—”
“Exactly.”
Felix let go of Dani’s hand, switching out their iPods when she wasn’t looking.
“So do you even know which part of the hospital he’s in?” Dani asked. “The room number maybe?”
“Not exactly.”
“Not exactly?”
“Okay, not at all but I know his full name. I’ll just ask a nurse or something.”
“And if someone asks how you know him? What happens if you run into someone he knows?”
“I’ll say we’re friends.”
“You might want to come up with some kind of a backstory,” Felix said. “Just in case.”
“Okay, we met at school?”
“And if one of his classmates is there dropping off flowers and doesn’t recognize you?”
“Okay, we met at a concert or something.”
“Good,” Felix said. “But what if they ask to see an ID? They’ll see it’s a Texas license and—”
“My ID? Why would they ask to see that?”
“If it was my son in a coma,” Felix said, “I would make sure that everyone who came in to gawk at him was properly vetted.”
“I’m not going to gawk.”
“Oh really? So you’re going to go in there and do what exactly?”
I hadn’t really thought about that. I’d been too busy avoiding the image of Roman in a hospital gown, tubes splicing into his arm, up through his nose. Of his skin, paled and sallow like the day he’d washed up on the beach.
“I’ll talk to him. Maybe he can hear me. Maybe…”
“Yeah,” Dani said. “Maybe.”
Maybe.
No. It would work. It had to. Because I promised him. Because it wasn’t a
coincidence. It had to work.

“Shit!” Felix leaned over the console, jerking the wheel.

I slammed into the back of his seat, ears ringing. Felix flew back against the headrest and I tumbled into the floorboard, the car still bucking. We finally skirted to a stop and Dani’s face was pale.

“What the fuck?” she huffed.

“Shit just ran across the road out of nowhere,” Felix said.

I sat up. “What was it?”

I glanced back at the road, something moving through the settling dust. I leaned forward, my arms still shaking from the impact and in the dark I spotted the white tails of a small herd of deer. They skirted into the glow of the taillights. Three of them.

When they cocked their heads I wondered if they saw me too, if they remembered. But then the small one twitched up his nose and I saw something else.

I gripped the headrest until my knuckles burned. The fawn’s ears perked up, its muscles tensed, and then it slid to the ground in one silent beat.

Lifeless.

The shadow just hung there and in that moment I knew that it wasn’t an accident, the car swerving just in time for the deer to steal my fate. But it was a promise. And by the way my veins were already frozen, I knew it was a promise that it would keep.
Chapter 34
Roman

I opened my eyes and I was alone, curled up on the floor with Bryn’s blanket. I braced it over my shoulders, snow still rushing past the windows, but I couldn’t get warm. The windows were icing over from the inside, the grass cracking as the snow outside turned to something even harder.

It sounded like bells, the storm raging like a train barreling down a track. The wind whistled, something massive heading straight toward me, and in all the chaos I almost didn’t hear her voice.

My mom was kneeling across from me. Bleeding. Reaching. In that loud blankness of the snow, the world nothing but white, I thought I was dead, detached from my body, from Bryn’s dream-state, from my own consciousness. But the moment her skin brushed mine I knew that it was her who was dead and not me.

“Roman.” Red tears carved down her face.

“Mom?”

She smiled, reeling me in. “You followed me all this way.”

Her words carried me out of the farmhouse and even though I could still feel the floor beneath me, the blanket in my grip, I was standing somewhere else. I saw the water, muddy and dark, her silhouette barely visible. My hands broke the surface and I tried not to breathe as I searched for some piece of her, but the water was empty, endless. I scraped for the base of the tub but it wasn’t there. The water was cold and thick and it stuck to my forearms. I kept sinking farther and farther, grasping for a strand of my mother’s hair, for the scrape of her fingernail, the necklace she always wore.

The vision let go of me and I saw my father on the floor. Crying. Screaming. Flashes of red stole my vision as I choked back gasoline. I gagged, but instead of coughing up chemicals I coughed up blood. Mine.

My mother brushed it from my face as the storm tore at the walls of the farmhouse. She eyed me anxiously and I shook, fear reminding me to move. The floorboards rattled beneath me, revealing deep gaps with nothing but emptiness underneath. My mother’s blood trickled towards my hands, staining me all over again.

“Stay,” she whispered.

I almost did as I was told, something in me pleading for her to close the space between us. But her words were as kind as they were familiar, which meant that it wasn’t my mother speaking them at all. It was something else.

I blinked and Bryn’s memories vanished again, replaced by my own. I was standing in the bathroom, watching as my mother tried to break open the medicine cabinet with a nail file. She shook it, cracking the glass, the reflection of her grey face cut into pieces at the bottom of the sink. For a second I was frozen, just staring at the strange color of her pupils and the shadows climbing her cheeks. They were sharp and hollow but when I tried to remember what she’d looked like before I couldn’t. She gripped the sink, breathing heavy as I reached for her.
“Mom, don’t—”


I tried to pull her back to the bedroom. I tried to be gentle. But then she tensed, her hand flew across my face, and she slipped free. I stood there, burning, and she just glared at me.

“You’re useless.” She fell against the wall, slamming it with her fist. “You fucking ruined me. You did this. But he wanted you. He wanted you and then you did this.” She slumped down to the floor, gripping her scalp. “Leave.” She started mumbling to herself, the ping of her voice turning my stomach. “It’s not a dream. It’s not a dream. It’s not a dream. Please. Please.”

Wind beat against the door, throwing it back, the current sending me tumbling into Bryn’s bookshelf. I lay there, panting, disoriented. I waited for the scene to change again, the landscape to hurl me somewhere even more terrible.

The snow whipped into a vortex and then the first wall went, snapping off in pieces before disappearing into the storm. Slats tore from the roof, the white burning my eyes. The light that had been crippling me since the moment I turned up here returned, only this time it had fangs, sinking them deep inside me and not letting go.

I rolled, my mother still begging me, commanding me to stay. But the storm was commanding something else—that I disappear. Glass shattered, the bookshelf coming apart piece by piece. I blinked back tears but the light was throbbing behind my skull, revealing the chaos around me in flashes that made me dizzy. The floorboard beneath me fell straight down and I scrambled on my hands and knees, clawing at anything that wasn’t moving.

There was a loud crack, the ground beneath me giving way. My back scraped against the side of the hole, feet dangling over darkness. It reached for me, the blackness like a fog that crept up the back of my shirt, spilling onto what remained of the floor and filling everything. The snow turned to ash, then night. It was so dark that all I could hear was the howling wind.

“Stay, Roman. You have to stay.”

I dangled, the current tossing me, my mother’s nails biting into my knuckles until she drew blood. I prayed that Bryn would walk through that door, that she would put everything back together. But I knew where she was and I knew that the only way I would ever see her again was if she found the body I couldn’t even bare to think about.

I pulled myself onto my stomach, fighting, reaching. But then the last slat crippled beneath my weight, my bloody hands too slick to grab hold, and I was falling too. Down. Down into nothing. When I reached the bottom there was no death or hell or waking up. Gravity mangled me like a doll and when I opened my eyes I was coughing up blood and laying in the glow of headlights.

The car was purring just inches from the tree. It was still whole, the engine still on, the radio still buzzing. The song was ghostly and distorted, my ears ringing as I tried to hold my head up. I rolled, still coughing. Remembering. I lay there for a long time, feeling my broken body, remembering the crash and everything that came before.

I’d spent three summers restoring that fucking car, a 1971 Dodge Challenger. Three whole summers laboring over it, doting on it, saving up for vintage parts, because during that last year the garage had been our refuge.
When my mother refused to come downstairs, when she refused to do anything at all, my dad and I spent every free hour with our hands covered in dirt and oil, our shirts smeared black and filled with holes. We’d sweat it out under harsh spotlights that we’d strung up with fishing wire and we’d talk about school and work and girls; everything but the stranger living upstairs.

It worked for a little while—pretending nothing was wrong. But then my dad started working late, avoiding me as much as we avoided my mother, and I started fucking around with Jimmy and Carlisle and spending my nights high on whatever shit Carlisle had laying around. And it was working. All three of us were starting to disappear and it felt good. Until the high wore off. Until the one night I needed him and he wasn’t there.

I’d found her in the bathroom trying to reach the pain medication her doctors were trying to wean her off of. It was locked away, just like her ability to feel anything at all, and it wasn’t my mother who had told me to get out but the shell of her.

As soon as I left I drove to my dad’s office. It was late, almost eleven, and the main doors were locked. I tried calling his cell but it went straight to his voicemail. I idled under a streetlight for a while, just watching the door, but then I noticed his car at the far end of the lot. It was dark, out of the way, but when I got closer I heard something. Rustling. Breathing. I wasn’t sure. So I pressed my face to the glass. I looked and I saw everything.

My dad was pressed into some woman, her clothes abandoned to the floorboard. She was pale and small and when she saw my face she froze. I heard the door thrown open, fumbling, panting. My dad yelled my name but I just kept walking.

When I got home I found her in the bathtub. I looked down and I saw pieces of me scattered along the base of the tub, my reflection caught in the pieces of the broken mirror. And I will never forget the way my face looked. Angry. Relieved. Useless. I felt it then. And laying there on the ground in the gleam of those headlights, remembering the way the exterior had curled and ripped apart, remembering what I’d done to it, to myself, I felt it then too.

Because I didn’t just remember the crash. I remembered my mother’s words. I remembered seeing the headlights swell over that tree line and I remembered letting go of the wheel. My hands wavering in that split second between crashing and veering back onto the road and that one second was all it took for me to make up my mind.

I could blame it on the drugs, on the grief. But the truth was, in that split second, there was no veil over anything. I could see me, my life, all of the things I’d done with aching clarity and I chose to let go of the wheel.

That’s who Bryn would find when she finally got to Albuquerque. Not some Mismatched Machine t-shirt wearing dream guy who she’d spent the last six months falling in love with but a fucking comatose coward who would only break her heart. Had to. Because I didn’t want to be a coward. I didn’t want to hurt her the way I’d hurt my mom. But if I woke up, that’s exactly what I would do.

I wondered if she was close, if she’d already found me, and if she had, why I hadn’t woken up. Why I hadn’t heard her voice and opened my eyes. Maybe I wouldn’t. Maybe I never would. Maybe that was best.

When it peered at me from between the trees I didn’t even flinch. It stood there like a man but bristling like a beast, shadow creeping across the road to where I stood.
The cold hit me but it wasn’t enough to stop the riot in my veins, to chill the rage that was pulling me to my feet. When the dark shadow reached the edge of the road, silhouette swimming with the night, my instincts weren’t telling me to run. They weren’t telling me to hide or to be afraid. No. Every cell in my body was telling me to burn.

I took a step toward the shadow, its pull making my chest ache. I felt like I was at the bottom of the ocean, an infinity pressing on my lungs, trying to hold me down. But I didn’t let it. Because this thing was haunting Bryn. It wanted Bryn and whether she found me or not, I couldn’t stay here. I knew that. But I couldn’t leave her with this. I wouldn’t.

I took another step into the vortex, then another, letting my instincts maneuver every muscle in my body. And then I saw it. What was under the shadow.

Me.

I saw my face. Eyes bloodshot and seething. Lips curled into a smile that made my insides go cold.

My mouth strained for words, and as the air cut between them, the shadow came with it. It filled me. It clawed its way into every empty space until I thought I was dead. Until I wished I was.

But then I saw the light. I blinked and it was brighter than it had ever been. Warmer. Stronger. Pouring from every inch of me.

I fell on the ground, blinded, the darkness thrashing inside me. It clawed at my insides, trying to rip free. But I felt the heat surge and suddenly I was the flame. I lay there, burning, forcing it deeper, deeper. It strained for other pieces of me—my thoughts, my memories. It tried to snake its way inside, destroying everything but I pushed back, pulling myself to the surface again.

The fire in me reached its apex and I was nowhere and everywhere at the same time. I was human and something else. I was dying and then I wasn’t. I snuffed the shadow out, clawing my way back into my body until the weight lifted, until the quiet settled, until there was nothing inside me but ashes.
Chapter 35

Bryn

The hospital was six eight-story buildings connected by a series of glass walkways. We wound through four levels in the first parking garage before we found an empty spot. Felix cut the engine and then the three of us just sat there.

I knew they were waiting for me to tell them what was next, to reveal some kind of master plan. But I didn’t have one. I didn’t have anything except a newspaper clipping, an IPod full of Roman’s favorite songs, and an insatiable swelling deep in my lungs that felt like hope. Because this is not a coincidence. We were not a coincidence.

The security guard at the base of the parking garage gave us walking directions to the children’s ward. We passed bronze sculptures like the ones I’d seen on campus at Emory—static children that said more about the patients’ lives inside a hospital than out of it, frozen and yet transitory. A physical purgatory I’d spent too many nights in since that first episode when I was twelve.

We took an elevator to the third floor and found the front desk. Women in scrubs were shuffling around, their voices low. One of them laughed, the lightness ringing in the hallway, out of place and strange. The murals along the walls were strange too. More scenes of children running, swinging, jumping. One dimensional and stationary just like all the others.

I approached the desk, cleared my throat.

“Yes? Can I help you?” the nurse said.

“I’m sorry, I’m a little lost. I was looking for a friend. Davide Roman Santillo. He’s on this floor, right?”

Her fingers bounced off her keyboard as her eyes scanned the screen. “I’m sorry.” She shook her head. “Not on this floor.”

“Are you sure?”

She checked again, nodded.

“That’s...” I looked back at Dani, my throat dry. “Do you know if he may have been moved recently?”

“Not sure. I don’t see him in any of my records. Maybe he’s been released.”

I shook my head. “No.” But then I remembered the article I’d read. The headline: *Local teen spends eighteenth birthday in coma*. “Wait. Is there any way to check if he’s in another part of the hospital? Maybe he was moved to the adult wing.”

“You’ll have to go downstairs for that. Adult wing is two buildings down, just past the first parking garage. Depending on the injury he could be in another building.”

As we made our way to the adult wing I tried not to think about the other possibility. That Roman had been here, only we were too late. When we got to the adult wing, a nurse with frizzy hair sent us in the opposite direction. We finally entered a quiet glass building through massive sliding doors and six floors later the smell of fresh paint swirled into the elevator. When the doors opened we were swallowed into the hum of EKG machines, defibrillators, and heart monitors. We walked down the hallway, steps
muted on the pink carpet as we made our way to the front desk.

“Hello,” I said. “I’m looking for a patient who may be on this floor.”

The nurse smiled. “What’s the name?”

“Davide Roman Santillo.”

She didn’t even look at her computer screen. “Last room at the end of the hall.”

Most of the doors were closed, clipboards hanging in a clear plastic tray on the outside. We reached the end of the hall and I saw a sliver of his bed from between the door. I leaned against the window. It was cold.

“Bryn?” Dani reached for me.

I watched the cars down on the street. They looked like little matchboxes, the people spilling out of them like ants. I watched them moving around on these invisible tracts and from that high up they looked planted there on purpose. I wanted to feel that too. Like I was doing the right thing.

This is not a coincidence.

I stepped to the door, eyes on the tile as I pushed it open. I reached back for Dani’s hand but I grabbed Felix’s instead. He squeezed, let go, and then I stepped inside.

I tried to absorb him in pieces, starting with the blanket rising over his feet and sinking between his legs. It dimpled over his knees, cream-colored sheets folded at his waist. I examined the tiny blue squares on his gown, the sleeves lying limp against his arm, strings untied behind his neck, the faint impression of where they’d once been still pressed into his skin. I inhaled and it sounded like a sob. Felt like one too. I inhaled again, quiet this time, and then I looked.

His eyes were trapped under bruised lids, his skin dry and translucent. His mouth was a thin line, crooked on one side, and sinking into hollow cheeks. The shadows of bruises were still fading from his pale skin. He looked like he’d been carved from himself by jagged tools, an unsteady hand giving him angles where there should have been curves; the silhouette of bone where there should have been flesh.

“Roman.” I wanted to touch him but there was no soft place for my hands. “I’m here.”

I pressed a hand down on the mattress, trying to be more than just a voice. I let it crawl closer. I let my finger trail down the side of his hospital gown.

“Roman. I found you.”

I heard the door slide open and then I was looking at the man from the film. Roman’s dad. They had the same wide eyes and the same black hair but as he stood over Roman’s bed he looked like a giant. Roman was just a sliver of his dad then, like that child we’d watched flung into the air, large hands resting on his small head.

“Hello…” His dad’s voice trailed off, questioning.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know anyone was here. The nurse—”

“Are you a friend of Roman’s?” he asked.

“Yes.” I turned back to the bed, to Roman’s hands resting flat at his sides. “I would have come sooner. I had trouble finding him.”

“It’s a big hospital.”

We both grew quiet. I could hear Felix and Dani in the hallway, all sighs and whispers.

I turned back to Roman. “How is he doing?”

Roman’s dad sunk down in the small chair at the foot of the bed, hips barely
clearing the armrests. He looked uncomfortable but I couldn’t tell if it was because of the cramped space or my question. Or maybe me. He hiked one leg onto his knee, gripped his calf. I saw his jaw grow tense and I waited for words but then he just shook his head.

I leaned against the window, waiting for him to tell me to leave. But he didn’t. He just sat there too, both of us staring at Roman, trying to will him awake. I wondered how long Roman’s dad had been sitting in that same chair, waiting for Roman to wake up. Six months. That’s how long it had been since he’d first washed up on shore. Six months is a long time and it made me wonder how long I would wait.

We didn’t have a lot of time. Graduation was next weekend. And Germany. Finding a cure was worth one summer of my life. But was it worth one summer of Roman’s?

I watched his dad’s face in the corner of my eye. He looked tired. Empty. I’d seen that look before, those familiar dark circles. My mom had been wearing them for years. And now, looking at this man who was a stranger, this man who loved Roman as much as I did, I felt just as helpless. Because it was true. No one ever wants a lifetime worth of waiting. You don’t choose that life. You tolerate it. You endure. When you know what it is you’re waiting for, you endure.

***

When visiting hours were over we piled back into Dani’s car, just idling there at the top of the parking garage.

“What now?” Dani asked.

“I don’t know.”

“It’s a long drive back,” Felix said. “I’m sure your moms are worried.”

I had eighteen missed calls from my mom, ten voice messages—each one an octave higher than the last. I knew if I called her now she’d be pissed. But I knew if I didn’t she’d be even more pissed. I dialed her number and she picked up on the second ring.

“What the hell, Bryn?”

“I’m sorry.”

“No you’re not, but you will be. You better be on your way home this second. I don’t care if you kids have to drive all night. Get your asses back here now.”

“Not yet.”

“What do you mean not yet?”

“I mean I’ll call you in the morning. Look, I’m fine. We’re fine. I’ll be home soon.”

“Soon. When exactly is soon?”

“I’ll be home soon,” I said again. “There’s just something I have to do first.”

“Bryn, if you—“

“Bye mom.”

I hung up on her mid-sentence. I just couldn’t think with her yelling in my ear, with Dani asking what now, with Roman lying in that hospital bed. Still. After everything we’d been through. After I finally found him.

I don’t know what I’d expected. That he’d hear my voice, that he’d feel me somehow. That that would be enough to wake him up. That I would be enough. But I wasn’t. I’d sat there all day listening to him breathe and it was all either of us could do. All his dad had been able to do for six months.
I sunk against the seat trying not to think about his face. It was seared there over every crooked smile and almost laugh, over his eyes pouring into mine, teeth kneading his bottom lip. I tried to remember him the way he was. The way he would be. But all I could think about was him lying in the sand and how he’d looked more dead in that hospital bed than the corpse I’d found six months earlier. The corpse I’d brought back to life.

I sat up. “We have to go back.”
“We haven’t slept,” Dani said. “Maybe we should rest for a little while before we try to drive back.”
“Yeah,” Felix said. “I can get us a hotel room.”
“Bryn—”
“Just…for a minute. I just, I want to be alone with him for a minute before we go.”
“But visiting hours are over,” Dani said.
“Then we sneak in,” Felix said. “Use a service elevator or something. Dani and I will create a distraction while you slip inside his room.”
Dani shot him a look. “And if a nurse comes? What if someone sees us?”
“Then I’ll go alone,” I said. “But I’m going.”
“No,” Felix said. “We’ll all go. We’ll help.”

We found the service stairs and slipped through the heavy door when no one was looking. We scaled them as quietly as we could but even the lightest step echoed along the concrete space. We heard other footsteps and froze. A door slammed shut, taking the sound with it, and we kept going. After six flights I peered through the small window onto Roman’s floor. The lights were dimmed, the nurses’ station casting a putrid glow over the elevators.

We watched a few nurses disappearing into rooms, quietly making their way out, still making their rounds. We spent half an hour tensing at every footstep and slamming door, waiting for a lull.
“What now?” Dani asked.
The nurses were starting to congregate behind the desk, slipping out of view behind a wall.
“Think there’s a break room or something back there?” Felix asked.
“Maybe.” I eyed the desk. It was tall and wide. If I crouched down low I thought maybe I could slip by without them seeing me.
“Okay,” Felix whispered. “Dani and I will walk to the front desk. You crouch down and follow close behind us. Hopefully they won’t see you. We’ll distract them while you make it down the hall to his room.”
“Okay,” I said. “Let’s do it.”
I examined the distance from the front desk to the window at the far end of the floor. The space seemed to narrow, overhead lights stretching on forever.
Felix pushed open the door and I followed them out on bent knees. They hooked arms, Dani holding out her jacket a bit to help hide me from view. They made it to the nurses’ desk and I crouched there, trying to find an open doorway.
“I’m sorry,” a voice said, “visiting hours were over at eight.”
Felix sighed. “Dani, I told you it would be too late to come by.”

“Well, I could have sworn he told me visiting hours lasted until nine.”

“Just like you could have sworn it was the first building on the third floor. You know we’ve been walking around this hospital for almost an hour. We got lost twice…”

I made a break for it, cutting into an open room. There was a nurse scribbling on one of those plastic clipboards and I slipped back out. I saw someone coming down the hall and I ducked into another room, pushing the door open with a loud click. It was empty except for the person lying unconscious in the bed next to the window.

I peered through the crack in the door. It was quiet. When I didn’t see anyone I leaned out, looking back toward the nurses’ station. Felix and Dani were still arguing, backs at an angle. I took off down the hall, taking long strides. I heard another door click open, a nurse stepping out into the hall. But I was so close.

I ran for it, slamming into Roman’s door with a thud. I waited for the sound to travel, for someone to find me there. I hid in the bathroom behind the shower curtain. There were footsteps. The door pushed open. I heard sneakers squeaking on the linoleum floor and then a pen scratching on a piece of paper. The door closed again, the clipboard clanking, and then it was quiet.

I eased back out into the room. It was dark, curtains pulled closed, one thin strand of light carving across the floor. But I was relieved. The night eased things. I moved to the bed and suddenly Roman’s face looked softer and behind moist eyes he almost looked whole again. I let the tears hang there, growing heavy. I wanted to touch him, to feel him in this world, even if they were only pieces. I wanted to feel him. So I did.

I leaned over him, still watching the door, and then I reached for his hand. It was cold and stiff, the skin between his fingers dry. I tried not to concentrate on the bones poking out from beneath his knuckles, on the harsh slant of his palm as it rested in mine. I let myself sink against the mattress, careful, quiet. I sat there, looking at him, holding his hand until my insides couldn’t take it anymore.

“Wake up,” I whispered. I squeezed his hand. “Please. Roman.” I rested my head on his chest. It was hard and hollow and it made me feel cold. I tried to remember what it had felt like that night in the clearing, what it had felt like kissing him under that Dogwood tree. “Please wake up.” I looked up at him but he was still. So painfully still. “Wake up. Roman. This is not a coincidence.” My fingers curled around his small shoulders and I leaned in closer, every thin exhale brushing my lips. “This is not a coincidence. Please, Roman. Please.”

I sunk there against his lips, my tears spilling onto his face. I opened my eyes, watching them peel down his cheeks. I didn’t want to move. I didn’t want to let go of him. But I did. I let go of him and then I felt the air pour from my lungs. I felt him inhale. His lips brushed mine again and then he blinked.
Also by Laekan Zea Kemp

The Things They Didn’t Bury
Orphans of Paradise
Breathing Ghosts
The Boy In Her Dreams
The Children of The Moon

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