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# Teardrop Teens and Happy Pills

Rebecca Easton

*Elizabethtown College, eastonr@etown.edu*

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# happy pills



by rebecca easton

## June

My summer began in a hospital bed, but I try not to think about those three weeks, so I like to say my summer began at McDonald's on my first day of freedom. Dad got me a Happy meal and I tried to ignore the incredible irony there, and when I was going to get ketchup, I asked Dad if he needed a straw. It was my first time talking since leaving the hospital, so he proceeded to cry in the middle of the busy fast-food restaurant. He never did get a straw.

Which is why now, on my second day of freedom, I decide that it's better to keep my mouth shut. For instance, he's sitting much too close to me on the vinyl couch. It'd be perfectly reasonable for me to tell him that he has plenty of space to move over, since we're the only two people in the waiting area.

So yeah. If my dad is willing to cry in the middle of a crowded McDonald's, he's definitely going to cry if I tell him to move over and away from me.

Instead of speaking, then, I close my eyes and lean my head back. I float up to the sound of waterfall noises and gentle piano keys and pretend I'm anywhere else.

Footsteps come traipsing down the nearby steps, and I jolt up. I lock eyes with her. Lyn Calhoun. My shrink.

Dad showed me a picture of her last week, when I was finishing up my inpatient stay. Faded blonde hair, laugh lines, narrow eyes. He said he'd found her online and that she seemed nice. I was hoping we'd get catfished, and some creepy balding guy would come out and ask for a few minutes alone with me.

Maybe then I'd actually have a reason to be depressed.

"Can you come with me real quick, Dad?" she asks.

Screw off, lady, he's my father. Not yours.

Dad gets up, gives me a reassuring pat on the shoulder (at least I think it's supposed to be reassuring—but what's he assuring me of, anyways?), and follows her up the stairs. She smiles politely at me before they vanish. I hear them chatting away, making small talk seem so easy. A door opens and closes, and their voices disappear.

The receptionist stumbles out of the bathroom, gives me a strange look, and takes a seat at her desk. She rocks her chair back and forth. The sound makes me want to knock her out of the chair and throw it out the window, but that's too much effort. So I sit on the couch,

hands folded in my lap, and read the cartoon cat poster on the opposite wall for the five billionth time.

“Signs of Anxiety: Stress! Increased Heartrate! Sweat!”

Sounds like gym class.

A door opens upstairs, and Dad comes down. For a few seconds he looks at me, studying my body as if he’s worried I stuck a carbon copy there and the real me was about to jump off a bridge. He motions toward the staircase.

“First room on the right,” he says. “Lyn’s ready to see you.”

I guess they’re on a first-name basis. I stand and brush my leggings off even though there’s nothing there. Dad gives me another pat on the shoulder. I just nod, because I have no idea how the hell I’m supposed to respond. I’m not sure he’s entirely satisfied with how our silent conversation has panned out, but he sits back down and grabs a dogeared magazine from the side table.

I make my way up the stairs and knock on the wall beside the open doorway. Lyn turns around, removing her pink bedazzled reading glasses. She stands and smiles, extending her hand as she approaches me.

“Hi, Rachel,” she says. “I’m Lyn. Have a seat anywhere you’d like.”

There’s an exponential amount of options in this room. It’s like she crammed every Goodwill chair she could find into her closet-sized office. I settle on the one closest to the door—a dull red. I briefly wonder if she’ll psychoanalyze my choice of chair, but decide I don’t care enough to let the thought impact my decision.

Lyn grabs a manila folder and thumbs through it, occasionally mouthing along with what she reads. I sit there for a solid five minutes before I realize she’s reading my file. In front of me. Why does that make me so goddamn angry? The vitriol mixes with the prickly feeling I got when my dad shook her hand and smiled at her, and suddenly I’m all too willing to speak.

“Were you and my dad flirting?”

Lyn sits up, marking her spot in the file with one painted nail. “Would you like me to flirt with your father?”

“What?”

“I’m joking.”

Thank God.

“I was, too.” Kind of. Dad did look a little pink when he came back downstairs, and he hasn’t dated in a while. Oh my God, I think I’d die of embarrassment if he dated my therapist. Though, with my track record, dying doesn’t sound half-bad.

Lyn looks back down at my file and resumes her creepy, silent reading. Since I’d rather not watch her learn how messed up I am, I examine the room. There’s a shelf next to me full of kid’s toys, just little gadgets and gizmos. I grab a nearby Rubik’s cube. It’s solved. I twist it around randomly a few times, but it already looks impossible to figure out. I put it back. Some savant will come by later this week and fix it, I assume.

Lyn shuts the file just loudly enough for me to pay attention.

“Alright, Rachel.” She puts a legal pad on top of the folder and grabs a pen. “Tell me why you’re here today.”

I’m about to say, “Because my dad made me come,” but that will probably elongate this appointment. So I settle on, “Because I tried to kill myself.”

She nods and writes something down. I imagine she's drawing my suicide attempt with stick figures and lots of frowny faces. "Do you feel suicidal right now?"

"I don't really feel anything."

Lyn doesn't react, just keeps scribbling. "Explain."

I hold in a sigh and lean back in the chair. "Do you know that feeling when you get up in the morning, and you're all bleary-eyed and the world is gray, and your brain is lagging ten minutes behind your body?" It's kind of a rhetorical question, but I wish she'd flash a thumbs-up or do something to signify she knows what I mean. "It's like that. But all the time."

"Does that mean you're tired a lot?"

"Yeah. I guess that's my main emotion."

"Mm." She scratches something out. "And you're taking your medication?"

"Two pills a day."

"And you've been taking them since...?"

"Last Wednesday." They're pale blue and bitter and kind of chalky on the tongue, and I'm pretty sure they aren't working.

"Hm." Lyn peeks up at me. "You should be experiencing a boost in energy any day now. That change comes before any changes in mood, typically. Any side-effects so far?"

"None."

"Alright." She clears her throat and flips to a fresh page. "Tell me about your stay at Sacred Spirit."

"I hated it."

"I don't blame you." I have to stick my finger in my ear to make sure there's not some little voice talking. Nope, sure enough, those are my shrink's words. She stares at me with a bemused look. "They're really into humanistic psychology there. You strike me as the kind of person who doesn't like all that 'positive thinking' mumbo jumbo."

"I thought you were supposed to be all about that stuff. Are you really a registered therapist?"

"I'm not, but I am." Lyn motions toward the wall above her desk, where two diplomas hang in tarnished gold frames.

I frown. She's making incredibly accurate assumptions about me after ten minutes of reading my file and seeing me face-to-face. My chest clenches at that.

I don't want her to know me. I didn't ask to see her. I don't need her. I need to go back home and pretend that everything is normal, that I didn't try to kill myself, that my brothers don't hate me.

"Rachel?" Lyn's voice snaps me to the present. "Let's talk about your family, alright? We'll start with your childhood."

This is going to be the longest hour of my life.



The car ride home is uncomfortable, to say the least. Dad keeps asking questions about my session, but he's struggling to straddle the line between "that answer is obvious" and "that answer is personal."

"Did you talk about your family?"

“Yeah.”

“Did you say anything about Elijah?”

“No.”

“What about Drew?”

“No.”

“Mom?”

“No.”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“What’d you say?”

“Patient confidentiality, Dad.”

“Nothing bad, I hope.” I think he’s joking around, but there’s an edge to his voice.

“I asked if you two were flirting.”

He hits the brakes a little too hard. “I—huh?”

“I’m joking.” Not.

He huffs out an uneasy laugh and releases the brakes, rolling through the intersection.

“It’s nice to know you still have a sense of humor.”

I’m not entirely sure what he means by that. Is he implying that he thought I would fundamentally change as a person after The Attempt? Because I haven’t changed. I’m still me. I’m still depressed. I’m still undeniably and unfortunately Rachel.

It’s just clearer now that I’m a bit messed up.

We turn left onto Walker Street and left again up to the house. Pulling into the driveway is like entering a recurring dream. It’s my second time approaching the house after my stay at Sacred Spirit, but the façade still gives me this uneasy feeling. It looks and feels so familiar, with the rusted mailbox leaning too far left and miniature pine trees standing like soldiers at attention up against the weathered brick, but at the same time something feels off. I hadn’t spent my first few weeks of summer waking up in the farthest bedroom on the second floor, eating scrambled eggs, reading under the yew tree in the bench Drew made in shop junior year.

I’d spent it waking up to beeping and crying, eating unidentifiable gray mush, reading torn-up books that were missing half their pages under the semi-watchful gaze of a woman who wasn’t getting paid enough to make sure teens didn’t try to kill themselves again.

I’m startled from my reverie when Dad opens the passenger-side door. He’s giving me this twisted frown, the typical sign that he has no clue what to say or do. I brush past him and hurry up the curved stone path towards the russet front door. As my hand reaches for the tarnished brass knob, my throat constricts. This place doesn’t feel like home. It feels fake, like a dollhouse. I really don’t want to go inside.

But then Dad is hovering over my shoulder, and I can hear a wet noise as his mouth opens to ask if I’m okay, and I’m sick of that question, so I just push the door open and head inside.

I’m met with the sounds of steel hitting steel. My heart does a little excited jump as I head to the left of the stairs and turn into the living room. Sure enough, Elijah’s in the room playing Xbox. He hasn’t noticed me yet—I’m coming up from behind.

I take a few steps, still behind the couch. He’s playing *ShieldQuest*, some fantasy game that he’s obsessed with. I’m struck with a memory from the week of finals, when I’d stumbled

downstairs after staring blankly at my precalc book for an hour. He'd been playing video games all week. Lucky fourth graders, never have any homework. He'd talked to me, filling the silence with descriptions of the Hound's deep-seated hatred for the Clan of the Moon and the new DLC pack that's coming out in July.

I like when he talks, because it quiets the angry buzzing in my head.

But now, in the twenty-four hours since I've come back, he doesn't talk. He never even visited me in the hospital. It's like he's chosen to ignore my very existence. Which hurts.

I summon the courage to tap Elijah on the head. He pauses his game and looks up at me. "Hey." I try to smile.

It must not be successful, because Elijah silently turns back to the game, unpausing and fighting a Blackshire Knight.

I swallow thickly and head around the couch to sit next to him. It's impressive—for a ten-year-old, he hasn't left much space on the sofa. "Is this a new profile?"

He reaches for the remote and turns the volume up.

My hands clench. Is he *mad* at me? Is *Elijah* mad at me?

Elijah's lip trembles. I stand, partly out of respect and partly out of shock.

He's not angry with me.

He's scared of me.

I try to head out of the living room and notice that Dad's there. He's been standing there this whole time. He's frowning again, too, with that twisted grimace that makes him look like a really hairy baby that just ate a lemon.

"I'm going to take a nap," I say quietly. He doesn't say anything, just kind of shuffles aside to let me pass. As I go upstairs I hear him ask Elijah, "Where's your brother?"

I walk faster and louder to avoid hearing the response.



### *Ten Fun Things That Happen When You Try to Kill Yourself*

*By Rachel Badgerow*

- 1. Your bedroom door gets removed*
- 2. The locks get taken off all the bathroom doors*
- 3. Your dad baby-proofs the house*
- 4. All the sharp objects get locked in an undisclosed location*
- 5. Your older brother isn't allowed to leave the house, because*
- 6. You require a babysitter 24/7*
- 7. Your phone gets taken away*
- 8. Your room gets ransacked to make sure you aren't hiding any illicit substances*
- 9. Your showers get timed*
- 10. Your dad gets obsessed with family bonding, because he thinks your suicide attempt was a retaliation against poor parenting and thinks renting a movie every night will rectify a problem that most certainly will not be rectified by another Happy Disney Ending*



Without a phone, laptop, or access to the television (that last one's only because Elijah won't get off his Xbox), I suppose I should be constructive. Which is no fun, because it's summer and usually the most constructive thing I've ever done during the summer is burn my old SCANTRON sheets in a fire pit. But Dad won't let me around fire, and he's weirdly sentimental about old homework assignments of mine.

But even something as simple as reorganizing my closet is too great a task. And so, as I enter my bedroom, I flop on the bed and stare out the blind-less window.

To be fair, there isn't much to do besides that. Here's what I'm working with now that I'm officially home from Sacred Spirit: Half of the books on my shelf are missing. Felt-tipped markers have replaced my assortment of pencils. My DVDs sit uselessly on my dresser, since I've got no laptop to play them on. Still, much of it is the same as before. My bed is shoved in the distant right corner, beneath the window to the backyard. It's made up nice, definitely my dad's doing, and several of the knickknacks on my nightstand have been repositioned into a grid-like formation. On the opposite side of the room, however, the closet still vomits up a stream of clothes. Home sweet home.

I watch tree branches tremble outside of my window, my hand groping the slot of space between my bed and the wall. There's a bit of peeling wallpaper down that I can tug at if I'm feeling anxious, but I'm having trouble finding it. My hands need something to do, though, so I keep running my fingers along the cool surface, squeezing myself against the crack until my fingers brush the hardwood floor. And then, there's pilled fabric at my fingertips. I grab the material and pull Oz the kangaroo out from under my bed.

My eyes scan his tawny fur, focusing on dark discoloration along his pouch and left foot. My throat goes dry. I don't remember all the details of my attempt, but I know that I'd tossed a few things around my room at some point. I'm kind of glad I threw him into such a good hiding spot. Based on the crisp bedsheets and brand-new throw rug, I'm pretty sure anything that I stained got thrown out.

But not Oz. He's always been a trooper.

The floorboards creak as someone shuffles down the hallway towards my room. I cram Oz back in his hiding spot. That's about as frantic as I get, though; I don't bother rolling over. Dad's been checking on me every twenty minutes. The conversation never changes.

"You alright, Rachel?" he'll ask.

"Yeah."

"Need anything?"

"No."

"Alright." Dad will pat my doorframe, as if reassuring the house's internal structure, and head off.

Now, twenty minutes later, footsteps once again stop at my room. I'm really not in the mood to discuss anything, so I keep staring out the window. Just like I did at Sacred Spirit, except there are no birds running into the terminal ward's windows.

Instead of my dad's gruff voice, however, it's a knock that interrupts the silence. I glance over and lock eyes with Drew, whose eyes are weighed down by bags and whose mouth is a tight but shy frown.

"Hey, Rache."



I sit up despite the invisible weight on my body. “Hi... Dad was looking for you.” He shrugs, hovering in the doorway like a vampire that hasn’t been invited in. “I ran to the library to get a few books.”

“Is Dad mad that you left?” I ask, shrinking in on myself a bit. What a weird question. Drew doesn’t seem to think it’s weird. He just shrugs again.

I’m struck by the realization that, in this moment, we really look like twins. I mean, we always have—he’s short for a boy, I’m average height for a girl, we both have dark brown hair and pink skin and bright blue eyes. Even though I’m a full year younger than him, there were times when we wished we were twins. According to Dad, Drew cried every morning throughout the first month of kindergarten because I was too young to tag along. Finally, Drew managed to get over it by befriending Sam Horinger, a rowdy classmate who ended up getting held back in second grade and becoming my friend as well.

But right now, the elephant in the room is reducing us both to quiet, awkward messes. And Sam’s not here to poach the elephant with a witty (read: stupid) comment.

Drew exhales sharply, crossing his arms. I shiver under his harsh gaze. I grab the throw blanket from the foot of my bed and toss it over my shoulders, making myself a tattered *Aladdin* burrito.

“Eli’s upset, you know.”

Another tremor. “We went over this yesterday. Like, the moment I got home. So yeah, I do know.”

“I think it needs to be reiterated.”

“Are you going to keep pushing this?” I snap, trying to ignore the way my arms *burnburnburn*. “I feel bad enough as it is. Elijah won’t even talk to me.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t really blame him.”

Judging from Drew’s tone, this isn’t the best time to ask why he never dropped by during my hospital-slash-psych-ward stay.

Drew turns to leave, but pauses. For a moment, I wonder if he’ll apologize, or say something nice, or do anything to make my wrists stop aching.

“Dinner’s gonna be ready soon,” is all he says.

Despite the fact I barely ate anything at lunch, I’m suddenly not hungry.



By the time I enter the dining room, now wearing a fleece jacket, Drew and Elijah are already seated. They face across from each other and pointedly don’t look at me. I slip into my spot—facing away from the front yard window—as Dad makes a ruckus in the kitchen over the meatloaf. As I wait, I try to make eye contact with Elijah, but he kind of just stares at his plate like some starving kid in a commercial. My only other options are Drew, who I can tell is staring way too intensely at me, and the horrendous family portrait hanging on the wall behind him.

I have to do a double-take to make sure that it’s really there, because oh my god.

We had a photoshoot when Elijah turned four, because Dad’s work friend was a photographer on the side and Dad got guilted into sitting for a half-hour session. The guy, Charles or something, led our family to his studio basement, shoved me into a piss-yellow Victorian nightgown, and crammed Dad, Drew, and Elijah into ill-fitting suits. The discomfort on

our faces isn't too clear, since the guy had no idea how to blow up a picture without pixelating it, but the painful memory lingers.

And now, it's lingering over my brother's head, about to watch me force down Dad's meatloaf.

I have no idea what it's doing out of the dark corner of the basement to which we'd cast it all those years ago. There's one thing I'm certain of at this point, and it's that I'm not a big fan of the fond way Dad smiles at it when he brings in the dish of meatloaf.

He removes his oven mitts and settles in across from me. I can't get a good read on his expression. I think he's grouchy, but I can't tell if it's because I'm blocking what is probably a lovely view of Walker Street, or if he overcooked the meatloaf again.

Something tells me it's a mix of both.

Before he sits, he claps his hands and gestures at the food. "Alright, dig in!"

There's a moment of hesitation, a silence so deafening I want to shatter it by breaking my plate on the floor. But then Drew reaches for the meatloaf and plops a corner piece onto Elijah's plate, and Elijah passes the asparagus to Dad, and things seem okay.

Drew puts a generous helping of meatloaf on my plate. Even though my stomach is the size of a pea, I shovel one forkful into my mouth.

I hold back a grimace. Dad definitely overcooked it. I glance up at the portrait again. Victorian Rachel frowns down at me, almost sympathetic. It's a little creepy, just how accurate her expression is to the situation, so I quickly avert my gaze.

As my teeth grind down on the world's most undercooked pasta, Drew clears his throat. "Hey, Dad, Sam asked if I wanted to come over tonight, and—"

"Did he ask if you were allowed?"

Drew frowns. "Uh, no... Am I allowed?"

"No, Drew, you aren't." Dad dabs at the corner of his mouth with a napkin but misses a good amount of the sauce smeared across his face. "Everyone is staying in tonight."

Drew opens his mouth, but Dad shakes his head. "And no, your friends can't come over either."

I hold in a sigh as Drew sulks into his dinner. Yeah, the last thing I want is for classmates to come galumphing into the house and asking where Drew's sister is hiding, or why she hasn't answered any of Louise's snapchats from the Forever 21 dressing room, or why she isn't exchanging memes with Sam at odd hours of the morning.

(Also, the last conversation I had with Sam was, "I've decided that I don't like you, because everything will be easier if you hate me when I die," but I didn't tell him that last part, and I also didn't die. Which kind of complicates things.)

Still, I don't really want to be stuck in the house with Drew.

"Dad," I say quietly, because my voice is hoarse, and I've barely touched my water, "don't keep Drew in the house because of me."

Drew snorts and throws his fork down. "Oh, my god, Rachel, it's not all about you."

"Drew," Dad warns.

I frown. "Sorry, I guess I'm just used to being the issue as of late."

"Rachel—"

Dad goes on, trying to placate the boiling resentment. I try to focus, but I've got all this anger pent up inside, trying to claw its way out. Any other day, I'd help it out with the end of a

razor or a bit of sharp something or other. However, as of right now I have no access to any of my typical means, so my arms itch with no relief. I think it's understandable that I'd be a bit cranky.

It's quiet for a while, besides the halfhearted scraping of silverware on china.

"Dad?" Elijah asks. Of course his voice is the one that fills the silence and brings me back from the dark edges in my mind.

I can tell Dad's holding in a sigh. "Yes, Elijah?"

"Can I play Xbox tonight?"

"No, Elijah, you can't play your games tonight. You played all afternoon. Besides, tonight is going to be another family movie night."

Drew and I exchange a look that's somewhere between "are we in Hell" and "let's both sneak out." He looks away sooner than I do.

"What movie?" Drew asks.

"I don't know yet. But we're going to rent one. And we're going to *watch* it." Dad glares at each of us in turn. "Like a *family*."

Elijah raises his hand, as if he's in class.

"No, Elijah, this will not be converted into family video game night."

My pea-sized stomach resorts to autocannibalism, so I spend the rest of dinner squishing my meal into a paste with the back of my fork and trying not to think about the lack of knives at the table.



Yesterday's family movie night (the inaugural "Rachel Isn't Dead!" Movie Extravaganza) included popcorn that didn't get eaten and a Disney movie that no one really paid attention to. Tonight's is familiar only in that we're eating the leftover popcorn. For some undetermined reason, Dad ends up renting *Animal House*. You know, the National Lampoon movie that shows a bunch of topless girls (and I mean *topless girls*).

And even after the first appearance of a nipple, Dad lets Elijah sit there and watch it with us. I'm wedged between Drew and Dad on the couch, with Elijah down in a beanbag chair by Dad's feet. Every few minutes Elijah asks a question about a word or image on screen, to which Dad just replies, "I'm not sure." If Mom was still around, I'm sure he'd tack on, "Ask your mother."

During the scene where a bunch of topless girls have a completely unrealistic pillow fight, Drew pulls out his phone. I read his conversation out of the corner of my eye.

**Sam (8:32 p.m.)**  
**so he said no?**

**Drew (8:33 p.m.)**  
**Yup. We're having another movie night.**

**Sam (8:33 p.m.)**  
**gayyyyyyy**

more mulan?

**Drew (8:34 p.m.)**  
**Animal House.**

**Sam (8:35 p.m.)**  
**wait wait wait**  
**the one about the frat guys?**

**Drew (8:35 p.m.)**  
**Uncensored.**

I don't get to see Sam's (likely emoji-filled) response, because Dad snaps that Drew needs to put his phone away.

"Jesus, Dad, can you blame me? There are *tits* on the screen."

Elijah pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Tits?"

"Drew, please put your phone down. And watch your language."

Elijah blushes in the glow of the television. "Was that a bad word?"

Dad sighs. "Yes, Elijah, please don't repeat it."

Elijah nods sagely and relaxes a little in the beanbag chair.

When Elijah was five, and before Drew and I reached high school, we did movie nights a lot like this (sans tits). Once every two weeks, we piled in Dad's old blue Taurus and headed to the Blockbuster on Main Street. We'd pick out popcorn and candy, and rotated who chose the movie. Dad never liked my choices, which I usually grabbed from the horror section because red was my favorite color and gee, those VHS cases sure had a lot of red on them. I do remember my choice of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* was so popular that it was the only movie we watched for three months.

When we got home, we'd roll out this long roll of red felt and walk down it dressed like movie stars. Dad would take pictures with a disposable camera, and we'd scrapbook after the movie (or the next morning, if we fell asleep too soon).

I don't remember when we stopped doing that.

I wipe at my wet eyes and realize the movie is ending. Soon enough the credits roll, and that derp "Animal House" song blares from the speakers.

Dad leans back, apparently satisfied that he exposed his children to soft-core pornography. I make the mistake of glancing at him, and he catches my eye. "What did you think, Rachel?" Dad asks. He's staring at me. Drew's staring at me. Elijah's staring at his hands.

"It was... sufficiently uncomfortable."

I'm eighty percent sure I was going for a joke, but Dad looks crestfallen and Elijah does this weird grunt and then I just feel awful. I stand, mumble out that I'm going to bed, and hurry up the stairs before I can disappoint anyone further.

I've just changed into my pajamas when someone knocks on my doorjamb—Dad.

"Can I come in?" he asks.

"I can't exactly lock you out."

His face twists up, but he manages to compose himself. “We haven’t really talked since you’ve been home. You know, a good talk.”

There’s no way I’m getting out of this one, unless I manage to open my window and punch the screen out before Dad can react.

Which is unlikely.

So I sit down on the edge of my bed as he pulls my desk chair over. He positions it so that our knees are almost touching.

“You took your medication, right?”

“Yeah,” I say. He keeps in on the spice rack in the kitchen. It’s hard to miss.

“Good. How are you feeling?”

The question of the hour. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know how I feel.” I say it carefully. I guarantee he’s not going to understand.

“Can you help me understand?” he asks.

So I was right.

“I don’t know how to explain it,” I say.

Which is also right. I’ve been trying to put it into words since I woke up with a needle in my arm and Dad crying in a pleather chair next to me. Doctors and nurses have been asking me to describe my depression. I got close with Lyn today, but it’s one thing to explain it to a virtual stranger. It’s another to explain it to my father.

“Do you feel sad?” Dad asks. “Angry? Irritable? Numb?”

These are yes or no questions, but I can’t answer any of them so simply because I *don’t* feel. If I did, I’m sure I would feel sad, or angry, or irritable, or numb, but I don’t feel anything. I haven’t for a long time. And the reason I never told my dad that I don’t feel is that I don’t feel enough to *care* to tell him, but now I’m supposed to care because by some miracle I’m alive when I’m supposed to be cold and dead. I do feel guilt, occasionally, for my brothers who have to put up with a walking corpse, but other than that there’s a big old nothingness inside of me that should have swallowed me whole back on June fifth.

Of course, the nothingness decided that I needed a bit more time here on Earth.

Dad’s still staring at me. How long had I been zoned out?

“I... I think I’m better.” It’s nebulous to say that—what’s better? What am I comparing “better” to?

But then I see Dad smile this tired smile that makes him look way too old. I think I’m aging him.

“I’m so glad, Rachel.” He pats my shoulder, then pulls me into a tight hug. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Drew passes the doorway without looking my way.

“Me, too,” I say.

True or False: I’m being honest. I’ll give you two guesses.



Another day, another session with Lyn. Dad wakes me up at the ass-crack of dawn by burning pancakes. By the time I dress myself and shuffle downstairs, he’s muttering profanities

as he bangs dishes around. I sit at the table in the dining room and watch with as much interest as I can muster. He doesn't let me have coffee ("It doesn't mix well with your meds"), which is conveniently the one thing that he didn't burn. I settle for water and dry cereal, because we're out of milk.

Victorian Rachel and the Bourgeois Badgerows stand against a murky slate background and watch in silence.

As we leave for Lyn's office, the gray morning fog has dissipated. Middleburg yawns in that muggy, lazy way that so many slow summer mornings start. I'm bemused at the reminder that I wasn't even supposed to see this town or even this summer, much less any future ones.

Lyn's office looks more like a cute cottage than an actual office. Even though I've been here before, I expect it to suddenly have cinderblock walls and bars crisscrossing windows. Instead, I see eggshell-white clapboard with freshly-painted navy shutters. Dad pulls through the driveway and into the wide back lot. There are two cars there already—Lyn and her secretary, I assume.

Inside, Dad takes the same seat he had yesterday. I sit next to him, even though once again he's left very little room for me.

I check the clock on the wall nearby. We're early.

The secretary kind of pokes her head above her computer, looks at me with beady eyes, and taps something on the world's loudest keyboard. I shut my eyes and try to ignore the return of the waterfall sounds.

Closing my eyes makes me think of movie night, which makes me think of breasts, which makes me open my eyes and hope that no one in this room is secretly psychic. As far as I can tell, I'm safe for now.

"I'm going back to work today," Dad says, as if I couldn't already tell by his nice button-down and corduroy slacks. "Drew will be home with you."

Great.

I hear Lyn's footsteps before I see her, and soon enough I'm following her ugly purple shawl up the stairs and into her office. I sit down in the red chair again and cross my arms and legs. I don't like her... what is it, confidence? She looks like she knows what she wants to talk about and how she's going to cure me or whatever. Meanwhile, I don't even know what I'm going to eat for lunch, or if I'll eat anything.

"Alright, Rachel." She pulls her notepad and pen out and smiles at me. It doesn't quite reach her eyes. "How are you today?"

"Fine." I say it automatically.

She arches an eyebrow. It's a small gesture, but enough to make me sigh and backtrack.

"More of the same, I guess."

That must be a great quote, because she springs into action to write stuff down. "Any urges to cut?"

"Jesus."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You just—that came out of nowhere."

She shrugs. "These are questions I'll always start our sessions off with. Just to gauge your progress."

"Oh. Uh, no... urges." *Lies. Lies. Lies.*

Lyn doesn't look convinced. Maybe she's psychic or something.

Oh, god, I hope she didn't read my mind when I was downstairs.

"Alright," Lyn says. "Use one word to describe your current mood."

I'm between "sick" and "tired," mainly because I'm sick and tired of being asked how I feel. I settle on "tired" because it's more self-explanatory.

"More tired than yesterday?"

"I don't think so."

She reaches back, sets the notepad on her desk, and leans forward. I'm prepared for her to deliver life-changing news, but all she asks is, "What did you do yesterday?"

"I hung out in my room," I say.

She nods. "What's your room like? Are you a tidy person?"

"Kind of. I just have a lot of stuff. I should probably go through it all at some point." My synapses flash as I unwittingly recall comic sans text from a poster at Sacred Spirit. "I'm not going to give it all away and kill myself, though. It's just something to do."

She hesitates, then grabs the notepad. Fantastic. Probably writing down "Big Ol' Phony."

"You don't want to kill yourself?" she asks.

"I don't want anything." I'm tired of trying to explain this. I'm tired of being tired. I'm not even sure what I am anymore, besides a bundle of blood and bones and *tired*.

"Do you want to get better?"

She asks the question so slowly, so carefully, that I'm simultaneously touched and embittered. The latter takes over in due time; I just said I don't know what I want. Is that so hard to understand?

"Because," she continues, "therapy and recovery are two-way streets. I can meet you halfway, but you have to put in the effort, too."

I'm too tired to explain that I'm too tired to put effort into anything at this point.

She leaves her comment hanging in the air for a couple of moments, then asks what else I did yesterday. I tell her about movie night, and she actually laughs when I mention the title of the film.

"Your dad sounds like fun," she says.

I try to hold back a sneer, because that laugh reminds me of something I don't want to think about. Apparently my mask of indifference isn't very effective, as Lyn frowns. "Did you not enjoy the movie?"

"That's—that's not the point." She's decidedly not psychic, because I'm imagining punching her in the face and she's made no moves to protect herself.

"Explain the point to me," she says.

God, she looks almost bored. When she'd come downstairs to fetch me, she'd been all smiles and "Looking sharp!" to my dad. Does she like him more than me? Am I just wasting her time? Am I just a roadblock in her attempts to get closer to him?

I glare across the room at Lyn. She's wearing more makeup today than she did yesterday. Her black shirt shows just enough cleavage. I notice her ring finger doesn't even bear a wedding ring.

"Rachel?" she prompts.

"You're flirting with my dad."

She looks genuinely surprised, and I'm momentarily pleased to have the upper hand. But then my mind starts spinning, and I feel like a hamster caught in a wheel that's going too fast.

"This happened yesterday," I say, pointing an accusatory finger at her. "You're trying to take advantage of him or—or something, so you can get a whole bunch of dirt on me and lock me up or whatever it is you do with suicidal kids, because then you'll have him all to yourself. You're all dolled up and I guarantee when we go back downstairs you're going to start flirting with him again, because you want to drive me crazy so that I'll be out of the way. And then he'll be all distraught and he'll come to you for therapy because his daughter's so fucked up and you'll have him all to yourself."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, they leave my short-term memory. What the hell was I just yelling about? I know that things came out of my mouth, and now I'm standing and my fingernails are digging half-moons into my palms as my clenched fists shake. My eyes are dry and burning.

Lyn regards me with an expression so level that I almost really do punch her.

"That's not at all the case," she says calmly.

"Prove it." It feels good to spit the words out with such vitriol. I stay standing, cross my arms, try to appear like I'm as confident as she is.

Lyn points to a picture frame on her desk, next to her laptop. It shows her and another woman on a beach.

"That's my girlfriend."

When I don't immediately react, she says, "I'm a lesbian." That jars me from my internal monologue of "oh shit" ad infinitum.

"I like girls," she elaborates.

"No, I know what—" I shake my head. "Oh my god." I fall back into my seat and put my head in my hands. What the hell is wrong with me? At this rate, maybe I should be locked up for good. If not because of my mental health, because of my complete and utter embarrassment.

"You seem to have a lot of pent-up emotion," Lyn says quietly. I glare at her from between my fingers. She's as placid as ever. "I'm not saying that to be funny. I'm saying it because you tell me you're tired, and yet you have this firecracker energy. Have you had outbursts like this before?"

I'm not fond of the word "outburst," but I'm too humiliated to react. "Yeah. In the hospital a few times, and once when I came home."

"It may be a side effect to your medication... Tell me about the one you had at home."

I sigh, settling back in the chair and trying to get comfortable. My skin tingles with residue of my rage. "When I found out my door was gone. I started freaking out, just like hitting the wall and yelling. I don't really remember much of it, though. It kind of just ended."

Lyn opens her mouth, then clamps it shut and scribbles something on her notepad. "So your door was removed?"

"For my safety, apparently."

"And you became upset about that?" She doesn't ask it in an accusatory way. She sounds more like a private investigator, getting the facts of a murder straight.

"I don't know where it came from," I admit. "Suddenly, I just blew up. Out of nowhere."



Lyn sets the notepad down. “That anger comes from some tiny corner of your body where you’ve shoved any and all emotion. I see it a lot—someone comes in, thinks they’re numb and unfeeling, when really their emotions are hiding inside.”

She’s doing that uncanny thing again where she suddenly knows me despite having barely met me. I clench and unclench my hands, partly to ground myself and partly because they’re stiff from being balled up moments before.

“Bottling up emotions isn’t safe,” Lyn says, as if I haven’t heard that time and time again from the nurses at Sacred Spirit. “It has unintended consequences.”

“Like what?” I know the answer. I already know it and I still ask because I have no clue how else to fill in the mile-long silences between her sentences.

“Bursts of anger,” she says. “Drug use. Alcohol consumption. Self-harm.”

My arms scream out. I cross them, but the fabric of my jacket is too much, too tantalizing, so I immediately uncross them. I sit on my hands to keep from scratching.

Lyn watches this play out without a word. I wish she’d stop staring at me. I kind of wish I had a blind therapist. Then I wouldn’t worry she’s going to ask to see my scars.

Then again, the blind have braille, so maybe a blind therapist would...

I cross my arms again.

“You aren’t the first person to hurt yourself,” Lyn says quietly. “And you sadly won’t be the last.”

I glance down at the dark fleece that covers my marred arms. Arms that bear vertical and horizontal marks, arms that are tree-bark rough, arms that haven’t seen the light of day in a long time.

I think back to yesterday, and how Drew and Elijah hate me. I think of my door-less room, too, and watching bare-chested ladies at family movie night. All yesterday, I had wished I could find something as simple as a jagged pen cap, because my nails were bitten to the quick and everything had been baby-proofed.

“I wanted to,” I whisper. It comes out of nowhere, but suddenly my eyes are burning. If I could cry, I’m sure I would.

“Did you?”

I open my mouth. No sound comes out at first. And then, just as air starts pushing its way out of my throat, Lyn’s timer goes off.

She doesn’t move to silence it, just keeps staring.

“No,” I eventually manage.

She nods, the ghost of a smile gracing her features. “I’m glad, Rachel. Recovery is going to be hard, but baby steps can carry you pretty far.”

I stand shakily, suddenly exhausted from my anger and my confession. Before I move my feet, though, my mouth opens and a sloppy mess of an apology spills out.

“I’m sorry about the thing with my dad. I just... yeah, I’m, y’know, sorry.”

She dismisses my apology with a wave of her hand. “I appreciate it, Rachel, but I’ve heard much worse from some of my other patients. One of them threatened to kill me because I was gay.”

Damn. “What did you do?”

“I went into conversion therapy and became straight.” She stares at me so seriously that for a second I almost believe her. I’m catching on, though.

“How’d that work out for you?”

“Not very well. I turned the counselors gay.”

Something hiccups out of my throat. It takes me far too long to realize that it was a single, genuine laugh.

Lyn smiles again, showing a bit of tooth. I give an awkward, unfamiliar smile of my own and head for the door.

“Rachel, wait.” I pause in the doorway and glance over my shoulder at her. “Was there something specific upsetting you about the idea of me flirting with your dad? I want to be sure that I didn’t trigger anything.”

That’s a pretty loaded question to ask after our session has ended, Lyn. I don’t exactly have another hour to spend with her, not with Dad waiting downstairs to drop me off at home and go to work.

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” I say, and I shut the door behind me before I can hear her response.

I’m guessing she writes this all down on her stupid notepad: “Baby’s first laugh! Also, Rachel’s hiding some deep shit.”



“Lyn’s gay,” I blurt out.

We’ve just gotten into the car, and the keys hover centimeters from their cozy slot.

Dad barely glances in my direction as he resumes starting the engine. “I’m aware.”

I bite my tongue to keep from voicing any of the profanities swimming around in my mind. As the car pulls out of the parking lot, Dad finally speaks again.

“Lyn’s page on Calhoun Counseling’s website mentions her wife.”

“Girlfriend.”

“Right.” He flips on the turn signal. “Is she... are you okay with keeping her as your counselor?”

It’s a trick question. Dad can’t afford anyone else, especially not when the medical bills are still rolling in.

“I’m not homophobic,” I mutter, because that’s all I can be bothered to say.

Dad nods. “Good. I didn’t think you were.”

I run his response on loop in my mind as we pull up to the house. “Good. Good. Good.” What the hell kind of reaction is that? It’s like he’s satisfied over something minimal. I think somewhere in translation, he mixed up “I’m not homophobic” with “I did the dishes.”

Dad has to go to work, so he watches me shuffle up the walk. When I reach the door, I look back at him. He leans over the steering wheel. His hands clutch it tightly. He watches, seemingly not breathing.

I give a small wave.

He perks up, looking perplexed. Then, a small smile melts across his face and he waves back.

He still doesn’t pull away until I’m inside the house. He probably wanted to make sure I still had the brain capacity to use doors or something. Or that I don’t suddenly blow my brains out on the front step with a gun that I magically procured from some pocket dimension.

Honestly, all I want to do is find Oz and get a closer look at the bloodstain, which isn't exactly self-injurious behavior, so in theory he has nothing to worry about.

I've taken two steps into the house when Drew pops into view. His hands clutch the banister as he takes a few slow steps down the stairs. "Hey."

"H-hey?" I can't help but freeze in place. Drew sounds nervous, not angry or upset. My heart does a little pathetic flutter—is he done being angry with me? Can we pretend everything is normal, that I didn't try to off myself?

"Is Dad here?" he asks.

I shake my head. "He left for work." Which means it's the perfect time to talk to me, uninterrupted, about high school or parties or how much we want to convince Dad to get a dog. Or we could find one of our old jigsaw puzzles downstairs and piece it together. Or we could play Nintendo games. Or we could do a crossword together. Or, or, or.

We could return to normalcy.

I'm about to ask something—I'm not sure what, but I feel a question on the tip of my tongue—but Drew speaks first.

"Don't freak out."

"I don't freak out?"

His eyebrow quirks. Alright, I do freak out.

Before I can ask what he's talking about, a second person appears at the top of the stairs. He flips his blond bangs out of his face and grins down at me.

"Hey, Rae!"

"Sam?" I blink up at him like he's a ghost hovering over my brother's shoulder. He just keeps on grinning, as if I hadn't told him I hated his guts just a few days before my suicide attempt. I blink again. Yup, he's still smiling, and now he's coming down the stairs towards me.

Sam pulls me into a hug, and at the top of the stairs Drew mouths something to me. It looks suspiciously like "I'm sorry." The realization that he knows hits me like a brick.

Sam pulls back but keeps his hands on my shoulders. He smiles, but his eyes betray unease. It's the same way my dad held me and looked at me when he'd visit Sacred Spirit. I pull back a bit, so that Sam's arms fall down to his sides. His mouth twitches, but in an instant he's typical, goofy Sam.

"Haven't heard from you in a while," he says.

My eyes flick up towards Drew, who looks like he's about to shit himself for some reason. "I've... yeah. Sorry."

It's a sloppy response, but what the hell am I supposed to say? How about, "I haven't had phone access because my dad took it away because I tried to kill myself. Anyway, how's your summer going?"

Sam clears his throat. "I know we haven't been on the best of terms, but the fact that our Snapchat streak has ended—by no fault of my own—is a red flag in this relationship. So." He slings his arm over my shoulders and pulls me against him. "That ignoring ends now!"

"You think I've been ignoring you?"

"Well, I think you've been weird ever since Louise came out—"

I don't hear anything else. All I hear is that word, "Weird." *Weirdweirdweirdweird such a freak such a waste of space wasting everyone's time should have died...*

I can't help but stare at Sam, long and hard. I can't escape his grip because he's super strong, but I want to get as far away from him as possible because he smells like sweat and woodchips, which is the scent of our shared childhood and I wanted him to hate me because it was supposed to make everything easier.

And then he has to go and mention Louise, who came out to us at lunch just days before final exams, which were just days before I tried to kill myself.

"You... you think I've been ignoring you guys because Louise is gay?"

Sam frowns. "Why else would you be avoiding us?"

He doesn't know. Oh, my god, he doesn't know. Drew picks at his nails, pointedly not watching.

Adrenaline grants me the strength to push Sam off of me. "I'm not homophobic!" I spit. "Why does everyone think I'm homophobic?"

Sam's expression sours. It's not a good look on him. "Maybe because you didn't even tell her that you're still friends! You haven't talked to us at *all* since she came out. I think it's reasonable to assume you're not okay with her being gay. Louise is really hurt, Rachel, so I suggest you get over whatever the hell is going on and apologize."

I can't just "get over whatever the hell is going on." I'd try, I would, but I'm seeing red and my arms are screaming and they itch and my head hurts and my heart hurts and everything burns and burns and burns and burns and burns and burns and burns and burns and I start shouting words that have no meaning and the world is so dark I can't see a thing but I don't care because I'm in pain.

I hurt.



There's something cold in my hand. I blink my way back into the present tense.

In my hand is a half-melted ice cube, cold water dribbling between my fingers and onto my legs.

I'm on the couch in our living room, a blanket draped over me, probably because I'm shivering for some reason.

Drew's face hovers into view as he enters the room. He sits next to me and holds out a paper towel. I guess he wants me to take it, because when I don't move he leans over and wipes my wet hand.

The world comes more and more into focus as he dries my fingers.

"Where's Sam?" I ask.

Drew jumps at my voice, which is raw from the screaming. He sets the balled-up paper towel down on the coffee table.

"He left."

"Sorry."

Drew gives me a sad, concerned look. "Why are you sorry?"

I don't know, so I say nothing. But then he doesn't say anything, so I feel obligated to fill the silence.

"What's with the ice?"

He picks up the paper towel and tears at a corner. "It was to help ground you. Did... did it work?"

"I think so." I flex my hand, which is still a little red and numb. "How'd you think to do that?"

"When your sister tries to kill herself, you do some research."

Right. "Is Sam freaked out?"

"I think so, yeah. I will say, it's impressive that you managed to get *Sam Horinger* freaked out." Drew actually does sound impressed. His lips even quirk up into a crooked smile. "Remember the eighth grade Halloween dance, when the high school hosted that haunted house? And you and Louise and Sam went in, and one of the football players jumped out and scared Louise, so Sam punched him in the face?"

My second laugh of the day jumps out of my throat. "Yeah. Bill Wahl—he went to Homecoming with a broken nose... Why are you bringing that up?"

"Because you scared Sam so badly, you're lucky he didn't punch you."

I watch Drew carefully, searching his face for any sign of bitterness or mockery, but it's just my average brother, making an average jest at his (not so) average sister. There goes laugh number three.

My smile is short-lived, though, when I remember *why* I scared Sam. "I didn't say anything bad, did I?"

"You didn't tell him that you were in the hospital, if that's what you mean."

"Oh. Then what *did* I say?"

"Something along the lines of—" Drew scrunches up his face and whined in a falsetto voice, "—'You only ever think of yourself! You're an ass! You're a c—'" His face falls. "Some of those things don't bear repeating. I will say a few of them started with the letter C."

Relief blooms in my chest, but along with it comes yet another question. "I thought Sam knew what happened to me. Isn't he, like, your best friend? I assumed you'd tell him."

Drew shrugged. "It wasn't my story to tell. I just told him the two of us had a fight, which was kind of true. I guess he took that as, 'I'm going to show up to their house unannounced and accuse one of my friends for being homophobic because she ruined our Snapchat streak.'"

"Reasonable assumption," I mutter.

Drew opens and closes his mouth a few times. I can tell he wants to say something, but is in the midst of that weird process of deciding whether or not it will trigger another temper tantrum. I lean back against the arm of the sofa and watch him flounder for a bit. Finally, he tosses the paper-towel-ball-turned-confetti onto the coffee table and sits crisscross facing me.

"I want to be mad at you," he says. "I really, really do."

Gee. Thanks.

"But I'm tired of being mad."

To keep from having to look at him, I focus on the books stacked on the coffee table. A photography anthology from the 1970s. A guide to some video game. A dogeared text about cursed films. The autobiography of some old guy. All collecting dust. All untouched.

"You're my baby sister, Rachel," Drew says. "That basically makes you my child. I'm supposed to protect you, and threaten anyone who takes you out on a date, and remind you to eat your vegetables or whatever Dad-brothers do."

“That’s pretty accurate, actually.”

“The point is,” he continues, “as much as I want to be angry at you, I care about you too damn much. Right now, I just want to help you.”

I rub circles into my warming palm with my opposite thumb. “I don’t think ice cubes are going to fix me.”

“I didn’t say I’d fix you,” he says. “I just... I want to help you.”

“They’re synonymous.”

Drew grimaces, then glances away.

I cross my arms and watch light from the windows play on the blank TV. “Alright, let’s pretend they have slight variations in meaning. Even if you think it’s all fine and dandy to want to help me, you missed your chance. You never came to the hospital.”

He scoffs. “Did you really want your angry brother storming into the room and telling you off?”

“It would’ve been better than Dad crying because you finally ate the regurgitated slop they called ‘dinner.’”

Drew tosses a piece of paper towel at me. “Give that man a break. I don’t think he’s slept since you...” Drew purses his lips. “I don’t think he’s slept at all.”

Guilt comes again in rolling waves, cold saltwater undulating in my stomach. I cradle my abdomen and readjust how I’m leaning against the throw pillow.

“Are you okay?” Drew asks.

I just give him a long look.

“Right. Stupid question.” He rolls a piece of paper towel between two fingers.

More uncomfortable silence falls between us, and I’m sick of uncomfortable silences so I take the plunge.

“Is that really why you didn’t visit?” I venture. “Because you were mad?”

He flicks the balled-up fiber across the room. “Yeah. I was thinking about myself more than you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I say, even though it’s not really okay. But this is the most normal conversation I’ve had in weeks, so I decide to let it slide.

“I really do regret it,” Drew says.

“I know. It’s okay.” It’s not, it’s not, it’s not.

But right now, it has to be.

“I just—”

“Drew, stop.” I rub my hands over my face, trying to scrub the frustrated wrinkles out of my features. “God, this sucks. I just want things to go back to normal. Do you think they can prescribe ‘normal pills’?”

When I sit back up, Drew’s frowning at me. He looks oddly like our dad, with sagging eyes and untamed stubble and tight lips.

“I don’t think we’ll ever get back to that same normal we had,” he says. “But we can make a new one.”

For a few seconds, my chest feels warm, the kind of dizzy warm that reminds me of picnics and water golf and ice cream melting off of sugar cones.

I don’t like the feeling—it’s not normal for me. So I rear back and kick his leg.

“Ow! What the hell, Rachel?”

“You sound like my therapist.”

It isn't until Drew laughs that I realize what a risky joke that was. If I'd said that to Dad, he would've launched into a three-hour tirade about “respect” and “behaving myself” and “preaching self-love” or some other garbage he read about online.

My skin crawls a bit, my forearms itchy and hungry for something. I close my eyes, take a breath, remember the packet of self-harm alternatives I was forced to study at Sacred Spirit. It's the first time in a while I really don't want to hurt myself, even if my arms demand it.

When I open my eyes, Drew's moving my hand from where it was clutching my wrist. He studies me carefully.

I exhale, letting all the tension I can control leave my body. “Do you think Sam's going to come around again?” I ask.

Drew motions to his phone on the coffee table. “He hasn't texted at all. If he does, I'll say you just need some space.”

“And that I'm not homophobic.”

“Right. That, too.” His arms pull away from me, but he still leans in close. “Are you ever going to tell them?” he asks.

“I'll have to, eventually.” I glance at my sleeves. “Especially since I'll be wearing long sleeves until the end of time.”

“I wasn't talking about that,” he says softly.

I don't respond. Instead, I stand up and leave the room. I head upstairs, slam the bathroom door shut, throw my clothes off and get into the shower. I turn the water on as hot as it goes and stand under the stream.

I stay there for five minutes, until there's a knock at the door. My time's up.

I turn the water off and step out of the shower. When I wipe the steam off the mirror, I'm met with a red reflection. It looks like my skin has been pulled off, leaving behind my glistening muscles and tendons.

My arms *itchitchitch*, but Drew knocks again.

I don't want him to worry.

I throw on my bathrobe, the soft fabric barely muffling the cries of my wrists. When I open the door, he waves his phone in front of my face.

“Time's up, I know,” I snap.

Drew recoils, and I feel bad for a second, but his brow furrows and he waves the phone again. “Did you get Dad's text?”

“No. He took away my phone.”

Drew blanches. “Oh. Right.”

“Why?”

It takes several long, silent seconds of waffling before Drew simply hands me the phone. I skim Dad's message, which is about five paragraphs too long, and out of the hundred or so words I only glean four:

“Your mother's coming home.”

## July

“Let’s talk about your mother.”

I muster what’s at best a half-convincing glare and sink into the red chair. Lyn meets my gaze from over the rim of her librarian glasses.

To my annoyance, I’d actually been excited to come to therapy today. I had good news, after all—a rekindled relationship with Drew. Even if he checks up on me every hour to make sure I’m not fashioning a shiv out of a Jolly Rancher, he’s still putting up with me. Like, last night we watched a horror movie together and laughed at every ridiculous death. It felt normal, up until Dad berated us for watching something that was “violent” and could “trigger” me.

But I can’t talk about normal things at therapy, because apparently becoming well-adjusted doesn’t line a therapist’s pockets.

“Zara Badgerow,” Lyn reads from my file. “Currently in... Germany? How long has she been in Germany for?”

“Nine and a half years.” She left after my birthday, the same year Elijah was born.

“Does it upset you that she left?”

“As much as it would upset anyone else.” I’m not doing so hot with yes-or-no questions lately. But I don’t want Lyn thinking I tried to kill myself because my mother abandoned her family almost a decade ago. My depression is my problem, not my family’s.

Which is why I’m not even supposed to be alive to burden them further.

“How much does it upset you? Try to quantify it for me.”

“I’m not good with numbers.”

“You don’t have to quantify with numbers. You can try using feelings.”

“I’m bad with those, too.”

I’m pretty sure Lyn smirks, but it looks more like a facial twitch. “Were you and your mother close?”

“Kind of. I’ve always had more of a father-daughter thing going on.”

Lyn writes some stupid comment down with her stupid pen. I’m starting to hate ballpoints. “Did you feel bad for your father when your mother left?”

“Not really.”

Lyn’s brows go up by a millimeter, but it’s enough that I notice. Her writing stops.

“I just—” I hold in a sigh. “I didn’t really understand it, I guess.”



That's not true. I understood enough, with some explanation from Drew, that Mom didn't love us enough to stay. That she didn't love Dad enough to stay. That life just wasn't going to be the same because the woman who fed me suddenly decided that running off to Germany to start a new life would be a good use of her time.

"Do you understand it now?" Lyn asks. "Why she left?"

"No."

I shrug as if I don't care.

By the time our session comes to a close, I don't want to talk about Drew. I just want to go home and sleep the rest of the day away.

But naturally, the moment I enter the lobby Dad stands up and smiles.

"What'd you talk about today?" Dad asks.

I curl my hands into angry, trembling fists, grateful for the generous depth of my jacket pockets. "How Drew and I are getting along."

It comes out easily. Dad smiles, pats my shoulder, and guides me to the door.



As the slow summer days crawl by, my life stays more or less the same. My weekday schedule is as follows:

7 a.m.: Wake up

8 a.m.: Go to Lyn's

9:30 a.m.: Return home and sleep

12:00 p.m.: Eat (because Drew makes me)

12:30 p.m.: Try to talk to Elijah

12:34 p.m.: Give up trying to talk to Elijah

12:35 p.m.: Read

3 p.m.: Sleep

5 p.m.: Eat dinner and pretend to be okay

6:30 p.m.: Suffer through another Family Movie Night

9 p.m.: Take my meds (because Drew makes me)

10 p.m.: Spiral into an existential crisis in which I liken myself to Schrödinger's Cat, both alive and dead because I was supposed to be dead and I kind of want to be dead, but I'm also satisfied to just go through the motions while I'm alive

11 p.m.: Sleep

Weekends are almost identical. The only difference is that Dad's around and peppers me with more questions than even a game show contestant would be comfortable with. He also does this thing where he picks up my pill bottle, shakes it, opens it to see how many I have left, and then tells me to remind him when I need a refill.

If it's not obvious, I prefer weekdays. As soon as Dad's car leaves the driveway, I can have a few moments alone. Not a lot, though, because Drew's usually waiting just around the corner, ready to ask the same questions Dad just did in the car.

As I enter the house, his head pokes out from the dining room. Speak of the devil.

“Hey, Rache.”

“Hey.”

“How was your appointment?”

“It’s not a check-up, Drew. You can call it ‘therapy.’”

Drew shrugs, fully entering the front hall. “How was therapy, then?”

“Fine.”

“What’d you talk about?”

I’ll take “Mind Your Own Business” for 500, Alex. “Stuff.”

Drew gives an exaggerated frown. “It’s like pulling teeth with you.”

I brush past him on my way up the stairs. I kind of want to sleep the rest of the day away—hell, I’ll have sleep for lunch at this rate—but Drew follows me. I freeze in front of my door-less doorway and wait for him to catch up.

“So... your birthday’s coming up.”

I bristle. Am I really going to dedicate this entire day to talking about the things that make my blood curdle?

“Have you thought about what you want to do?”

I wonder how he’d react if I said, “Drink bleach.” I must spend too long pondering this, because he starts talking again.

“Because I can—y’know, if you want, we can... I’ll try to convince Dad to let your friends come over?”

If I thought I was frozen before, I must have been sorely mistaken. Drew thinks it’d be okay to invite Louise and Sam, two people who think I’m a hateful bigoted *freak*, to eat cake and act like everything’s all right, like I didn’t drop off the radar because I tried to off myself.

I wish I could snuff out my burning arms like birthday candles.

“I’ll think about it,” I murmur. Drew says something, but I ignore him in favor of flopping onto my bed and pretending to be asleep.

I hear him leave, eventually. When he does, I pull Oz from his hiding spot and press him against my nose, inhaling the musty scent of the old stuffed animal. Razorwire coils in my stomach; I shove him back under the bed and *scratchscratchscratch* until my wrists are numb.



“Your mother booked a flight,” Dad says at dinner. I try not to choke on a cooked carrot, but Drew has to slap my back a few times. And here I thought Dad wanted his daughter alive.

Above Drew’s head, the Victorian Badgerows are nonplussed. Lucky bastards.

“When’s she coming in?” Drew asks.

“July twenty-second,” Dad says.

Of course. The day *after* my birthday. I’ve never cared for birthdays much, but something about this small detail really bothers me. Yeah, I don’t want her here at the house at all, but did she really not care enough to be here on my birthday? Does she even remember my birthday?

It’s too quiet at the table, but it’s too loud in my head.

“I think you overcooked the pork,” Drew says quietly.

He’s right. It’s dry.

“So.” Dad clears his throat, like he’s about to announce something that is so important it should be accompanied by trumpet fanfare. “I was thinking we do something a little different tonight.”

Elijah’s head shoots up—it’s been bowed every night at dinner before this moment.

“Board games!” Dad declares. “We’ll do a Badgerow Family Board Game Night!”

I think we’re supposed to applaud, but Elijah just kind of sighs and Drew continues chewing on his steamed vegetables. Dad glances between them while I glance up at Victorian Rachel, studying the thin line of her lips. Then, Dad clears his throat and I realize he’s staring at me. I finish sipping on my water and as I set my glass down, I ask, “Do we even have any board games?”

“Of course we do. They’re downstairs.”

“What games do we have?” Drew asks. “I thought we sold them all at that yard sale a few years back.”

“I kept a few,” Dad says. “We’ll go down and take a look after we do the dishes, alright?”

Somehow, the idea of a family game night is more foreboding than another Badgerow Family Movie Night (the previous few nights, I should mention, included *Caddyshack* and *The Terminator*, because Dad apparently doesn’t care if movies have way-too-long sex scenes or actual tits). Board games involve socializing, which is already something I avoid at all costs.

Especially now, since one of the people I’m supposed to be playing games with is ten years old and terrified of me.

Dinner passes with Dad jabbering on about how excited he is to roll some dice and have some Good Old-Fashioned Family Fun.

Dad asks me to follow him downstairs while Drew and Elijah make popcorn.

“Are you sure we should be putting this much sodium into our bodies?” I ask, glancing back as Elijah softly laughs at one of Drew’s jokes.

“Popcorn is good for you!” Dad says.

“Not the ‘extra butter’ kind.”

Dad lumbers over to a cabinet by our old tube TV and pulls the doors open with some effort. “They’re sticky,” Dad mutters. Probably because the basement is humid and gross. He bends over and starts pulling our options out one by one.

The first box he picks up is a battered bicycle deck. “Go Fish?”

“That’s the *actual* dumbest game in existence.” It was also the only game Dad played with me at Sacred Spirit.

“Clue?”

“No.” I played too much Clue in the hospital as well. Not sure how Miss Scarlet and her knife got past the anti-sharps provision, but it had been the only board game there that still had all its pieces.

“Monopoly?”

“As excited as I am for the Badgerow Family Board Game night—” which is not excited at all “—I’d rather not have it last for two weeks.”

“Yahtzee?”

“Too much math.”

“Rack-o?”

“What even is that?”

Dad frowns down at the small box. “I’m not sure.” He tosses it onto the ever-growing pile of rejects. “Settlers of Catan?”

“It would take two weeks just to explain the rules.”

“Scrabble?” Dad holds up the box and shakes it. Little wooden blocks shake inside.

“Fine.” I only give my assent because it’s the last box in the cabinet, and if I say no to everything then Dad’s gonna get all teary-eyed and ugly-faced.

And we can’t have that kind of negativity, not at the Badgerow Family Board Game Night.

So, Dad carries Scrabble upstairs while I shove the other games back into the cabinet. Once they’re all situated, I stand up and brush dust off of my shorts. Somewhere upstairs, Dad roars with laughter. I haven’t heard that in a long time. I wonder what humored him so much. Maybe he realized that the stupid portrait is hanging in the stupid dining room and was like, “Oh, how’d that get there? Man, that thing is ugly!”

I’m about to join him and probably ruin the jolly mood when I notice a nearby door is ajar. It’s the door to my dad’s workshop, where he tinkers with model trains and occasionally helps construct props for Drew’s marching band shows.

I was in there two years ago. October fourth. The chilly fall day when I stole one of Dad’s razors and made my first cut. Along my thigh. Shallow and biting. The razor was too dull. I had to buy a pack at Wal-Mart to make efficient cuts. There was a thrill in buying those razors—I’d added a model train to the purchase, to avoid too much suspicion, but I’m sure the pothead cashier wouldn’t have cared either way.

“Rachel!” Drew calls down from the top of the stairs. I’m standing in front of the open cabinet, still staring into the dark sliver of the workshop. “Are you coming?”

I manage something along the lines of, “Yeah,” and slowly make my way to the staircase. I glance back one more time and hope that the next time I’m down here, the door is still ajar.



I’m not sure that I’m supposed to have three X’s, especially considering there’s only supposed to be one per box, but at least Dad started off with BRIAR. I play AX and hope that Drew doesn’t launch into a discussion of the etymological implications of AX versus AXE.

“I see you opted for the more contemporary, Americanized spelling of the word.” Whenever Drew gets into one of these moods (which I’ve lovingly dubbed his “I Think, Therefore I’m Smart” episodes), his voice drawls out and he sounds like an obnoxious college philosophy professor.

“I wish I had an ax right about now,” I mutter.

“With or without an E?”

“Doesn’t matter, as long as it’ll cleave your oversized skull.”

Dad gives me a disappointed look. I roll my eyes and watch Elijah carefully set out EAR. Dad congratulates Elijah on correctly spelling a kindergarten word and plays EMOTE.

Drew uses the Y from his initial BULLY to play SILLY. It takes an embarrassingly long amount of time for him to settle on such a simple word.

I'm already bored and want to break the too-pleasant silence that has fallen upon our clearly uncomfortable group. "How long is this game again?"

"Are you out of good letters already?" Drew asks as he fishes in the black felt bag for more tiles.

"I'm out of patience for this game," I say. "There's too much thinking."

"A little thinking never hurt anybody!" Dad says.

I'm a little busy thinking about entering the room downstairs and relieving an itch that's plagued me for weeks. What's a good Scrabble word for someone who's suicidal?

SICK goes off of Drew's SILLY.

My brain goes back to the workbench so quickly that I almost miss Elijah's next word—KOALA.

"Good one, Elijah!" Dad sounds genuinely happy. Like Elijah playing KOALA solved world hunger and eradicated polio. Like everything's perfectly fine now, nothing wrong in the Badgerow household, thank you very much.

The next turns are painstakingly slow and ultimately frustrating. No, I do not care that Dad puts down ELDER or Drew plays LOW or that Elijah won't even look at me. I don't care at all. Doesn't even matter.

So I kind of go on autopilot, which results in a little bit of dyslexia, which results in me spelling out the word SHIT.

Dad and Drew stare at the board. Elijah stares at his hands.

"Missing an R in there, Rachel?" Drew asks.

To my surprise and—seconds later—frustration, Dad just chuckles and rearranges it into HITS. He even plays HAUGHTY off of my H after Elijah goes.

The game continues with uncomfortable laughter, Dad congratulating Elijah for his use of the word OAR, and Drew debating whether or not my play of PRESIDENT counts as a use of a proper noun (which would be, he says adamantly, against the rules). It isn't until Dad grows impatient with Drew's indecisiveness that he says to just let the word be.

My gut feeling at the start of the night was right—Badgerow Family Board Game Night should never replace movie night. Because the forced interaction and fake laughter isn't helping us ignore anything anymore. We have to pay attention. We have to socialize. We have to think, use our brains and live in the harsh universe where PRESIDENT may or may not be a proper noun.

I glance down at my tiles. The three that catch my eye are K, U, and C.

It's quiet again, so much so that the only thing stimulating my buzzing brain is the residual smell of Dad's burnt cooking. No one's talking. I hate being the reason they don't know what to say. I want to make Dad smile—I don't want his face to fall every time he looks at me or remembers I'm a big old screw-up. So, I take the plunge and play those letters off of the F in SOFA.

Drew laughs—I think he's obligated to, since we're best friends now or whatever. Dad chuckles again, but it's more strained this time.

Elijah doesn't react. Goddamn it, I know he knows this word. We just watched *Animal House*. I counted four f-bombs in that movie.

"Alright, Rachel," Dad says, the same way he used to say it when eight-year-old me told one too many knock-knock jokes.

And so I can do nothing but cross my arms and petulantly play the most basic words I know. Naturally, I receive no congratulations from Dad for MAP or TREE.

The board's almost filled, and no one seems keen on starting another game. That means Badgerow Family Board Game Night is almost over. Additionally, that means I single-handedly ruined another event by being a *stupiduglyloser* who doesn't know when—or how—to control herself.

So. One last chance.

On my final turn, I opt for a word that isn't technically real (but what really makes a word real, anyways, Drew?). It's a word that at least one other person on the floor will be familiar with.

"Varmile?" Dad reads.

"It's from *ShieldQuest*," I say. "It's a type of meat. Not a proper noun." I glance at Drew as I say this, half to give him a pointed look and half to avoid Elijah's reaction. He has to react—please, please let it be something positive. Even just a smile would mean the world to me.

It's quiet for far too long. I turn my head slowly to see what's taking Elijah so long to react.

"It's spelled with a Y," he says quietly, not looking up from his own letters.

"O-oh."

Dad glances between us. "Do you have a Y, Rachel?"

"No."

There's still one turn left—Elijah's. So I have to do something. I move around the letters, tossing a few back onto my rack. In place of VARMILE, I simply put VILE.

I don't pay attention to the end of the game. I think Drew ends up winning, because he's the only one who cares enough to keep score.

I watch Dad take the Scrabble box back downstairs. Something tells me he doesn't plan on playing more board games anytime soon.

I wonder, briefly, if he'll see that his workshop door is open. A cold serpent coils in my gut and points out that he's got the whole weekend to hang around the house and realize he left it ajar. But once Monday comes, once he's out at work, he'll be off my case.

And I can slip in there, undetected, and find a remedy for my crying wrists.



Saturday. The weekend means no Lyn, but it also means I'm trapped inside the house with Dad. From the moment I wake until the moment I fall asleep, he's there. Watching. It's a little creepy.

I mention this because I wake up to him standing in my doorway, which gives me a heart attack.

"Jesus—Dad!"

"It's late," he says. I glance at my bedside clock—it's only ten.

"It's summer?"

"Well, it's time to get up. I've got a job for you, Rachel. Okay?"

If it's anything like my job last summer, which was clearing out the spider-infested shed, I think I'd rather stick my face in an anthill.

“Why don’t you get up and get some breakfast in you?” Dad asks (read: demands).

I make a show of pushing the covers off of me, hoping he’ll take the hint and leave.

Instead, he stays and purses his lips.

“Do you need that many blankets?”

“My room’s cold.”

He sticks his hand out, as if his fingers are magical thermometers. “It feels fine.”

“I’ll be downstairs in a minute.”

I don’t mean to snap, but I need a moment alone to collect my thoughts and prepare for the day. Dad retracts his hand, nods, and leaves. He does that stupid “pat the doorframe” thing as he goes. Maybe I should glue thumbtacks to it, just to keep him from clutching it or patting it or leaning against it.

Then again, I haven’t seen a thumbtack since I’ve been back. Something tells me those are locked up with equally dangerous paraphernalia, like razorblades and Dad’s gun.

I take a second to peek into the dark crevice between my bed and the wall. Oz stares up at me with dull bead eyes. It’s kind of creepy, really, like some horror movie monster ready to crawl up onto my mattress and rip my throat out.

I throw on a pair of jeans and a different jacket before heading downstairs. I hesitate in my doorway, patting my pockets. Where’d I put my phone?

Oh. Right.

By the time I get to the kitchen, Dad’s scraping pancakes onto plates.

“Grab the syrup?” he asks. I wordlessly open the cabinet and pull out the sticky bottle.

“It tastes better if you put it in the fridge,” I say. Dad just huffs.

Drew’s the only person in the dining room. I’d ask where Elijah is, but then I’d have to say his name, and after last night I’d really rather not think about him. Dad follows out, bringing a plate of pancakes, but before he can sit down his phone rings. He hurries away to answer it.

“Thank god,” I mutter, stabbing a bit too violently into the pancake with my fork.

Drew looks up from where he’s spreading butter on his food with a spoon. “What’s up?”

“I nearly shit myself because he was hovering above my bed and woke me up.”

“That’s Dad for you.” Drew sets his phone on the table, clicks the home button, and frowns. “Ugh. Sam’s being annoying.”

“That’s new.”

“He’s been asking about you.”

“I don’t care.” I pause. “Is that what’s annoying?”

“No, sorry. Two unrelated thoughts.” Drew pockets his phone. “Did Dad tell you about our task?”

“No.”

“Alright. We’re supposed to go through the books downstairs. Apparently his boss’ kid is doing a book drive.”

Drew says something else, but my brain flies into yesterday, stumbles down the stairs, and lumbers over to that enticing door, the one open just a sliver, just enough to tantalize. I didn’t know I’d be back down there again so soon. As long as I can slip in that room, get what I need...

Drew’s staring at me. I think he just asked something.

I clear my throat. “Uh, what? Sorry, I just... zoned out.”

He keeps staring. I'm pretty sure he hasn't blinked in three minutes, but that's the least of my concerns. If he sees the door open, sees me acting weird, he's going to know. And then he's not going to trust me anymore and our relationship will fall apart and then I'll have no one and I'll probably have a breakdown and—

"Do you want the rest of my coffee?" Drew asks, pushing a steaming Mickey Mouse mug towards me. "You look exhausted."

How suspicious would it be if I poured hot coffee on my arms? "Uh, no, thanks. I'm not supposed to have caffeine on my meds."

Drew's mouth twitches up into a smile. "You can live a little, Rache."

I'd rather not, if you catch my drift. "One sip. Don't tell Dad."

"Oh my god, Rachel, it's not beer." He thrusts the cup towards me. I conceal my smile by tipping the mug up to my mouth. I funnel a few precious drops of liquid through my lips, over my tongue, and—

"Ach!" I push the mug back into Drew's hands. "Since when do you drink your coffee black?"

"It's a recent development."

"I don't know my own brother anymore." I shake my head and push away from the table. I've eaten one small pancake, leaving the other two to drown in too much syrup. "What kind of monster have you become?"

Drew laughs, then notices my plate. "Want me to take that out to the kitchen for you?"

I'm about to snap that I can do it myself, because he sounds like Dad and that makes my blood boil. But the boiling becomes a simmer when I realize he isn't judging my small appetite, or making any comments, or even giving me a weird look. He just wants to do a small, innocuous favor.

"I'll get it," I say. "I have to take my meds still. They're on the spice rack."

Drew sighs. "Dad puts stuff in the weirdest places. He used to change our diapers in the dining room, you know."

I do know. He changed Elijah's diapers in there. I saw things I never wanted to see in the room where I ate. My stomach clenches at the thought of Elijah as a baby, all gummy smiles and bright eyes. None of the tension or fear he has now.

When he was a baby, I could hold him tight whenever I wanted. These days, he has a say in the matter.

I force myself into the kitchen as I suppress the memory. Scrape food in trash. Place plate in sink. Unscrew pill bottle cap. Take one. Place on tongue. Swallow. Don't think about Elijah. Don't think about Elijah. Don't don't don't.

"We should head downstairs," Drew says.

I nod mechanically and follow him through the dining room to the basement door. I pause, though and make a big deal of pointing out the portrait. I don't know why—maybe it's my nerves over the opportunity to find something sharp. Maybe I just need something to say, something to maintain this relative normalcy. After all, the moment Drew suspects something's up, I'm screwed.

"So, who dug that up from the depths of hell?"

Drew blinks, confused, and then his eyes focus on the portrait. He laughs, but his expression is troubled. "That would be Dad. He got really into memorabilia."



The phrase “after your suicide attempt” hangs in the open air, intermingling with the pork and sauerkraut from last night’s dinner. Sour bile sits on my tongue.

“And he decided to hang it up?”

Drew raises a brow because yeah, that’s kind of a rude thing to say, since Dad’s all emotionally unstable right now. But aren’t I emotionally unstable, too? Where are my rights?

I shouldn’t have brought it up. Now Drew thinks something’s wrong.

“Well,” Drew eventually says, “I think it’s his method of torturing us, slowly but surely, with memories from the past of his creepy coworker and said coworker’s dank basement.”

Relief floods me like cool, refreshing water. “And here I thought having my phone taken away would be punishment enough.”

Drew laughs, something bright and natural, and shoves my shoulder. “Just wait until he finishes going through the photo albums. He’s almost at your eighth birthday trip to the beach.”

It takes a millisecond for my brain to connect what Drew’s talking about, and I shove him back harder. “I swear, if you let him hang any pictures from that ice cream parlor, I’ll kick your ass.”

Drew just rolls his eyes and smiles wider, if that’s possible, and leads the way out of the dining room and to the basement door. He makes a sweeping motion and lets me go down first. As I descend the stairs, my legs shake. I’m almost giddy at the thought of being mere feet from the room that houses my one desire, the thing that kept me up late into the night. Just thinking about its jagged edge is enough to make me shake. I clench and unclench my hands as I reach the basement. My eyes shoot to the door of the workroom. I suck in a breath.

It’s still open.

Drew elbows me as he brushes past. “What’s with the breathing?”

“It smells gross down here.”

“Yeah. Pretty sure there’s mold, but Dad’s busy enough as is. He doesn’t need to deal with that.”

Dad’s too busy because of me. It goes unspoken, but we both know what he means. He winces, as if he hadn’t intended to insult me. But I flick a switch in my brain and suddenly I don’t care. Some might call it “apathetic behavior attributed to clinical depression,” but I call it “magic.”

We approach our battle station—a huge, creaky walnut bookshelf from approximately 1431. Drew flips through books and passes them to me, and I place them in the corresponding pile. I’m glad I have this job. It gives me time to plan how I’ll get into that room.

An hour later, when Drew has finally decided that no, we don’t need two copies of *Green Eggs and Ham*, he dumps our “Donate” books into a laundry basket.

“I’ll carry this upstairs,” Drew says.

Before he can give me a task that would take me out of the basement, I say, “I’ll load up another basket for when you get back.”

I’m half-convinced Drew’s already aware of the open door and my plan. Instead, he just gives me a smarmy grin. “Good idea. You’re not as buff as me, after all.”

I make a show of rolling my eyes. “You’re full of it. Just go upstairs.”

And he does. He hoists the basket, doing his best to hide the fact that it’s definitely too heavy for him, and he approaches the stairs. I start tossing books into a basket, just to pass the time until he’s out of eyeshot. Once he’s gone, I drop a box set of picture books and dash

towards the workroom. I push my fingers into the sliver of black and push the door open enough to slide through. I have to run my hand along the wall to find the light switch.

I flip the switch, and suddenly the room is awash in warm incandescent light. It's disheveled, as expected—several train models sit unpainted on the desk, old newspaper yellowing in a box by Dad's blistered stool. Shelves lining the room bear cabooses, freight cars, and flatcars.

I wonder briefly when he last painted a train, but the thought vanishes when I spot the tool shelf. It's got hooks for hammers and little plastic drawers with all types of screws and smaller paraphernalia.

I open a drawer at random and frown. A thumbtack isn't sharp enough.

The next ten drawers aren't helpful—this is taking too long. I can't find them. Drew's gonna come downstairs and find me in here and figure everything out and then I'll really be screwed.

Laughter comes from the floor directly above me. I exhale. Drew and Dad are distracting each other. I've got time. With trembling fingers, I yank drawers open and slam them shut as my disappointment balloons. Screws? No. Nails? No. Where the hell did he put the razors? They've got to be in here. He can't have hid every single blade in this house.

I open what feels like the thousandth drawer and *bingo*. Three tiny cardboard boxes greet me. I bite my lip and scoop one out of the drawer. I pull the cardboard lid off and smile. Four perfectly sharp, perfectly perfect razors glint at me.

More laughter from upstairs. More time.

I shake the razors into my palm. They don't look like they've been used. I set the box down and check the doorway before I pocket one. I'll hide it in my room later.

I've just picked up a second one, but there's a whine from behind me. I jump, dropping the other two razors as I whirl around.

Elijah stands in the doorway, staring at the floor where three razors rest.

"I..." What the hell am I supposed to say?

Elijah keeps staring. His lip trembles like he's going to cry. If he cries... I don't know if I can handle that.

"I'll put them away," I hiss, kneeling to pick up the blades. I stand up and cram them back into the box, then toss the box into its drawer. I turn back around and find Elijah blocking the doorway still.

Bile rises in my throat. Dad and Drew can't know I was in here poking around. They can't know that I held a damn razor blade in my hands. They'll send me away or—god, lock me in a cage to keep track of me. With sea legs I stumble towards Elijah and point a finger at him. He's staring at me still. Why the hell is he still staring at me? I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine.

"Don't tell *anyone* about this, or I'll break your X-box."

Elijah squeaks, nods, and scampers away. I turn out the light, close the door, and follow him into the main room of the basement, watch him scurry up the stairs. He doesn't look back.

It's fine that he's scared of me, right? I mean, he's going to keep my secrets. That's what matters. It's fine. *It's fine it's fine it's fine it's fine it's—*

"Rachel?" Drew asks. "What's up with Elijah? He just ran past me up to his room."

I swallow. The feather-light razor suddenly feels like a boulder. I put my hands into my pockets and curl my left hand around the blade. I squeeze just enough to feel its bite. The pain is reassuring. I feel like I'm floating.

"He's scared of me," I whisper.

Drew's mouth puckers. He hesitates, a million unspoken words filling the empty air between us. But whatever is perched on his tongue flies back down his throat. He grabs the half-full laundry basket and heads back for the staircase.

I grip the razor tighter. More bite. More pain. I could fly now, if I wanted to.



"Any urges to cut?" Lyn asks on Monday.

"Yes," I say truthfully.

"Did you act on them?"

"No," I say, not so truthfully. Then, "Dad hid everything sharp."

Lyn's brow arches. "You're clever, Rachel. I'm sure you'd think of something."

If that's a compliment, it's an odd one for sure.

"So, what do you do instead of cutting?" Lyn asks.

"I just... read. I have a lot of books at home."

Lyn nods. I catch her eyeing my sleeves. I try to swallow my fear in a way that's surreptitious, but it goes down the wrong pipe and I start coughing. While I hack up my lung, Lyn does a 180 in her chair and flips through my file on her desk.

My coughing spree comes to a graceful end. Lyn shuffles a few papers on her desk and clears her throat. "So. Your birthday is coming up. The big one-seven."

"What's so big about it?"

"What's big is that you're here for it." Lyn swivels back around and fixes me in place with her librarian-glasses stare. "I'm sure it's bittersweet for you."

More bitter than sweet, Lyn. "I guess."

She frowns. A lot of people have been frowning at me lately. "What do you want for your birthday?"

Whenever Dad asked me this question in the past, I'd shrug and say, "A book." But now, I don't have a single clue what I want. Because I don't want anything. I don't want. I don't feel. I'm a big black hole of nothingness with a sprinkle of exhaustion in there somewhere.

I summarize for Lyn: "I don't know."

She removes her glasses, sets them carefully on the desk. "Do you want to get better?"

"For my birthday?" I'm struck with the image of me blowing out the candles, being told to make a wish, and wishing for my serotonin to achieve nirvana.

"In general," she clarifies.

It's a trick question, I can tell—if I say "yes," she'll catch on eventually and know that I lied to her. If I say "no," she'll lock me up and I'll have to spend my birthday at Sacred Spirit with that girl who plucked out her eyelashes and the boy who punched walls.

"I don't know what I want," I say slowly. "I don't want anything."

She nods, then flips back a few pages on her notepad. "You told me as much the first time we met. Do you remember that?"

Vaguely. "Yeah."

"Do you remember what I told you?"

"That recovery is a two-way street."

"It seems like you've been in park, Rachel. You've got to at least shift into neutral if recovery is going to work."

"I never learned how to drive."

Lyn actually laughs at that, even though I'm cross-armed as my body is being eaten by the chair.

"People will teach you," Lyn says. "Speaking of people, how're your friends?"

Ah, yes. My "friends." I made the mistake of mentioning the f-word to Lyn a few days ago, and she hasn't let it go.

"Louise and Sam still hate me."

Lyn goes into battle mode, pen scribbling and glasses being pushed up the bridge of her nose. "Why do you think they hate you?"

"Because they think I'm a bigot."

"Why would they think you're a bigot?"

"Because I stopped talking to them after Louise came out as gay. And Sam stopped by the house and got in my face about it."

"What did you say to Sam?"

"I don't remember. I kind of blacked out."

Lyn very clearly bites her tongue.

"We talked about this already," I say. "This was the day Drew gave me an ice cube."

"I'm just thinking," Lyn says. "Rachel, do you think you're a bigot?"

"Everyone else seems to."

"Not what I asked."

"I—fine. Yes. I guess I am."

"Why do you think you're a bigot? And don't say it's because people think that."

I close my eyes and think of that lunch period. I think of Louise setting down her fork and knife, wiping pasta sauce from her lips, frowning at the cardboard tray. I think of Sam being the one to speak up when he finally realized something was off. I remember the tunnel vision, the muting of the cafeteria around us as Louise raised her chin but spoke with a shaky voice: "I'm gay." I remember nodding, not saying anything, my mouth zippered shut. I remember hellfire along my wrists as Sam cracked a joke to alleviate tension. I remember Sam coming up to Louise's locker the next day and giving her a small gay pride pin. I remember plastering on a smile but staying silent.

"Because I never said anything," I whisper. "When Louise came out, I didn't reassure her or anything."

Lyn leans forward. "How did you feel when Louise came out?"

"Empty. Dizzy."

"Was it a shock to you?"

"I guess. When she started talking I kind of knew, though."

"Do you hate her because she's gay?"

I finally look Lyn in the eye. I wonder how her gaze can be so steady, so sure when she is a lesbian asking if I'm homophobic.

I swallow, quickly averting my eyes. I shrug, because I don't know who I am or what I believe or why I'm alive when I feel so dead.



The dinner table seems to be Dad's preferred location to drop atomic bombs of information on me.

Tonight, the news is, "Louise and Sam can come to your birthday party."

Once I've hacked up a bite of meatballs and half a lung, I turn my watery eyes on Dad. "What?"

"Drew reminded me that you haven't seen them since... the school year." Dad picks up a crumb with the pad of his finger and wipes it on his plate. "I thought it might be nice for you to have some visitors."

I'm about to say that I have in fact seen Sam, but Dad doesn't know that we had a house guest. Drew doesn't seem keen on mentioning this either, if his lackadaisical fork scraping is anything to go by.

"So, Rachel? Would you like Drew to ask them?"

I'm at my second impasse of the day. "Yes" means they'll be invited. "No" means I'll be put under the microscope. And I can't arouse suspicion, not now, not when I've got fresh new secrets scabbing under my sleeves.

I take a sip of water to buy time. At the very least, they hate me. Even if they get invitations, they'll probably decide that my birthday—and by extension, friendship—won't be worth their time.

"Sure."

Dad beams. Drew pushes food around his plate with a little more purpose.

Elijah continues to tap his water glass, watching the liquid ripple. It's the most he's done all dinner.



Long after dinner, when I've showered and changed and crawled into bed, I procure the razor from where it hides inside my box of markers. I shift under the covers. With the lights out and the comforter concealing all but my head, I look like I'm asleep.

In actuality, I'm dragging the jagged teeth of the blade along my forearm, up by my elbow. I've got tissues ready to press against it to ensure that no blood stains my bed.

There's a knock at my doorjamb. I jump, so startled that I accidentally press the razor too deep. It's too much, the pain matching the intensity of the itching urge that prefaces the act.

"Rachel?" Damn it, Drew.

"What?"

"Are you asleep?"

I try to surreptitiously shove the tissues up my sleeve as I pull it down, still hidden under a mountain of bedsheets. "Not anymore."

"Sorry, sorry. I mean, it's only 10 p.m., but..."

He hovers in the doorway. He doesn't look like he's about to leave, but he hasn't given a reason to stay.

I move my good arm out from under the blanket and wave him in. "Alright. Get in here. Hit the light."

He turns the overhead light on and approaches, sitting on the edge of my bed. I glare at him, partly from the sudden wash of fluorescence and partly because I want him to leave.

"Is it okay that they're coming?" Drew asks.

My stomach drops. "They never said they were coming."

He pulls his phone from his pocket and shakes it. "Sam just texted, RSVP'd for himself and Louise. They'll be here at eleven that morning."

I grimace. I'm not ready to see Sam again, nor Louise. In fact, I'm just about to cancel my birthday altogether. I don't want to pretend everything's fine, that I'm happy I'm alive, that I'm happy I'll finally be seventeen. I'm not sure I'd have the energy to do that even if I did want to.

"They don't like me," I whisper, voice much weaker than I anticipated. My eyes burn and—damn it, this might be the first time I've cried in a while.

Drew reclines next to me, putting one hand on my bicep. "Rachel, they don't hate you."

"They think I hate them."

"Then you'll have to prove otherwise."

"What if I don't want to?"

Drew does a double-take. "You want them to hate you?"

"I mean... what if they don't want to give me a second chance?"

Drew sighs. "Rachel... you don't have to be fully open with them. You just have to—"

"Act like everything's fine?" Drew doesn't respond. "There's a reason I never did theatre, Drew."

He sighs again. "I just think it'd be good for you to see people besides your immediate family and therapist. And Dad agreed, and Sam and Louise said they'd like to come. So, there's that." Drew shifts, but makes no move to get up. "Sam's been asking about you, you know."

Asking if I've officially lost it. Asking if I had it in the first place. Asking why I was wearing long sleeves in the middle of the summer because *that's really suspicious and she seems crazy*.

"He wants to apologize for getting angry at you. He said he feels bad."

Sam feeling a negative emotion? That's new.

"If he feels so bad, why didn't he come talk to me?"

"You're on house arrest."

"Didn't stop him before."

Drew bites his tongue. I wonder what is so bad that he feels he can't say it to me. He does eventually open his mouth to say, "He's coming on the twenty-first. So, you've got a few days to prepare."

I run my thumb across the flat side of the blade. A few days to prepare, and a lifetime to react. That's all the time that should have gone with me to the grave, now being used to reconstruct a life that I didn't ask for.

"Okay," I say quietly.

Drew smiles at that. "You're good with the plan?"

"Yeah."

He ruffles my hair, which strikes me as a very not-Drew thing, but I guess suicide struck everyone as a not-Rachel thing until recently; people change and all that jazz.

Drew leaves, slipping into the shadow of the hallway. I listen for his bedroom door to squeal shut before fixing the blade once more to my wrist.

A few days to prepare.

When I'm finished and the razor is back in the box, I find that I'm weighed down, my body too heavy to get up and turn off the lights. No big deal—Dad will check on me soon enough. So I press up near the wall, so close that my nose almost touches it, and press tissues against my wounds.

When they've finally dried and I shove the tissues down my shirt to deal with in the morning, I find that my hand moves of its own accord towards the space between my bed and the wall. My fingers, with minds of their own, latch around one of Oz' floppy feet and tug him up out of the depths.

I hold him against my mattress with one hand, staring into his tiny black eyes for a really long time. He doesn't seem too happy that he's been living under my bed. He looks downright miserable, really. The blood on his body probably isn't helping.

Maybe I should give him to Dad. Then Dad can throw away another thing that I ruined. Then Oz wouldn't have to be shoved under my bed in the dark, only to be pulled into the light when I demand it.

The idea of not having Oz in my room, though, is kind of terrifying. So, I get up on shaky legs, pad over to my closet, and throw him into the back. At least he'll have some clothes to sleep on.

I return to my bed and fall in just moments before Dad's footsteps stop in my doorway. I hear him call my name a few times, and I slow my breathing. He lets out a sigh, and the lights go out.

His footsteps disappear, leaving me with darkness and stinging arms and a numb heart and a kangaroo in the closet.



T-minus three days until my birthday, and still no word on Mom. I assume the worst—that she's still coming—and wonder if I should broach the subject on the off chance she had to cancel.

Then again, broaching the subject is something I'm not willing to do. Thus, I go to Lyn's and hope she doesn't mention Mom. Or my birthday. Or really anything, because I didn't sleep and my arms are aching and it's very difficult to maintain the illusion of normalcy today.

Lyn greets me. I greet her back with a forced smile and sit down in the red chair that's definitely starting to mold to my butt. Her office smells like cherry cough drops today, which is weird but not exactly unpleasant.

"So," Lyn begins. "Your birthday is Monday."

Fantastic. "Yeah."

"You're on the far edge of being a Cancer," Lyn says. "The 23<sup>rd</sup> is the official start date for Leos."

"You believe in horoscopes?"

“Do you?”

“No. And even if I did, I’d hate mine. Having cancer *and* crabs isn’t something to be happy about.”

Lyn laughs, looking more relaxed than I’ve seen her in a while. It’s hard to imagine her having a life outside of talking to me, but apparently she talks to a lot of people. A lot of messed-up, unhappy people.

“Well, Rachel, what do you know about the Cancer zodiac?”

I suddenly remember a line from one of Elijah’s video games, one that described a character as a “Satanic lesbian witch-doctor.” If Lyn pulls out a deck of tarot cards and tries to heal me through spells, I think I’ll excuse myself from the room and never come back. You know, as a little birthday present to myself.

“I’ll take your silence as a ‘no,’” Lyn says. “Cancer is a water sign. At their best, Cancers are compassionate and friendly, putting others before themselves. They can even be a bit romantic. At their worst, they stay isolated and often struggle with moodiness and sensitivity.”

That sounds vaguely like me, but it also sounds vaguely like every other person on the earth. I don’t really want to offend Lyn, though, so I just ask, “How do you know all this?”

“I dated a Wiccan in college,” Lyn explains. “She claimed I was too elitist because of my Capricorn sign mixing with a Scorpio moon, or some garbage like that.” She rolls her eyes in a good-natured way, probably able to laugh only now that she’s well out of college and far away from her Wiccan ex-girlfriend. “No, I don’t believe horoscopes. I think we make our own paths, you know, choose our own destinies. And there are too many personalities on this earth to be determined by twelve random star formations.”

The more Lyn talks about zodiacs, though, the more I wish they were real. I wish a bunch of burning suns billions of miles away could give me answers. I wish the stars would tell me when—or if—Mom is coming. I wish a vaguely crab-shaped collection of light could explain why I’m alive, what greater purpose my life is supposed to fulfill.

Or maybe the zodiacs are real and that stupid crab is pulling a fast one on me.

“I was also forced to listen to daily zodiacs in traffic,” Lyn says. “My car radio’s busted. Apparently I’m going to find love this year.”

I briefly eye the picture of Lyn and her girlfriend (who I recently learned is named Candice). “What about me?”

“You’re going to overcome hardship.”

I pull a loose hair off of my sleeve, but not before I catch Lyn smiling.

She clears her throat and opens my folder. “Alright, Rachel, let’s move on from space omens.”



On the car ride home from Lyn’s, I finally decide that not talking about Mom is going to make her arrival even harder for me. That is, if she’s coming at all. The not knowing is absolutely killing me on the inside, but it’s not doing a very good job because I’m still breathing.

It takes several minutes, but as we’re finally passing the fancy hotel across from the abandoned gas station, I find my voice.

“Dad?”



“Hm?”

“So... is Mom actually coming home?”

It’s barely noticeable, but I’m pretty sure his grip on the wheel tightens. “Yes, she is.” A pregnant pause follows. “But... she won’t be here until Tuesday.”

Right. Nothing’s changed. “She couldn’t be bothered to come on my birthday?”

At a stoplight, he glances at me. “Do you *want* her there on your birthday?”

“Well—I mean, no, but... it’s the lack of effort, I guess.”

Dad sighs. “Well, Rachel, she does have a new life now, and Germany was hit hard by that nor’easter—”

“Then why didn’t she come sooner?”

“I don’t *know*, Rachel, alright?”

I press back in my seat. Dad’s face is red. The light is green. Behind us, a car beeps. Dad inhales, exhales, and pulls into the intersection. I stare at my reflection in the rearview mirror. Through the window, I look more ghastly than human. More dead than alive.

It isn’t for another five minutes, when we pull into the driveway, that Dad finally speaks again.

“Your mother will be here Tuesday,” he says. “She... I know it seems like she didn’t try, Rachel. I know it’s going to be another tough adjustment for you. But there are going to be a lot of those—not just in the near future, but throughout your entire life. And you’ll just have to learn to deal with them. Just... stick it out, alright?”

My hands are shaking. My arms are itching. I’m not sure if I end up responding, but I stumble out of the car and up the front step. As I grab the handle, Dad pulls away.

He’s around the corner and gone before I’ve even opened the door.



I don’t know why I end up in Drew’s room, but he sees me hovering in the doorway and takes on earbud out of his ear. “Yo.”

“Yo,” I reply half-heartedly. I step into the room as if I’m stepping into an alien spaceship. I don’t remember the last time I was actually in here. I’ve spent so much time in my room, even back before my attempt, that I never really went down the hall towards Drew’s space. I don’t know when he got those dorky marching band posters, for example. And when did Louise give him that charcoal portrait of his Dungeons and Dragons character?

“Your desk is a mess,” I say, because if I don’t use my throat it’s going to close up.

Drew glances at his desk, stares at it for a solid ten seconds, and then shoots me a look of mock frustration. “Did you come in here just to criticize me?”

“... Yes?”

He frowns, then shrugs. “Fair enough.”

It’s been sufficiently awkward so far, and I’m prepared to turn around and go back to my room and shove my face into a pillow for the next ten hours. But, Drew pats his bedspread and wiggles towards the far end of the bed. “Do you wanna see what Sam and Louise were up to last night?”

His Dungeons and Dragons character—a half-orc named Ragnar or something equally ridiculous—watches this whole uncomfortable conversation, face frozen in a perpetual expression of joviality.

“Do I?” I ask, because I’m legitimately not sure if I want to or not.

“One way to find out.” Drew shakes his phone in one hand, offering an earbud with the other. “No spoilers, but Sam sent me a *lot* of videos.”

My curiosity wins out over my apprehension. After all, won’t seeing their faces on camera ease me into seeing them in person tomorrow?

Definitely.

Probably.

Hopefully.

I curl up on the bed next to Drew and accept the earbud. He scrolls through his messages and selects Sam’s name. Sure enough, there’s a series of twenty videos that Drew received between midnight and two in the morning.

“Bit of backstory,” Drew says. “Sara and Sadie McBride threw last night, and Louise and Sam went. Huge party, huge house, you know how it is.”

I do know how it is, actually. The McBride twins threw a party last summer, and Drew and Sam forced me and Louise to go. It was loud and sweaty and I got jungle juice spilled all over my shirt and I had a beer, decided I didn’t like it, and sat on a couch in the basement with Louise watching Drew and Sam smoke weed with a bunch of senior marching band members that we only vaguely knew. All in all, not my worst night.

“You didn’t go?” I ask.

Drew shrugs. “Hard to sneak out when Dad doesn’t sleep.”

Right.

For most of the videos, it’s hard to see what’s going on. There are bodies moving and lots of shouting and laughter and someone’s ridiculous rap playlist blaring in the background. One thing is clear from the messy videos, though—Sam and Louise are absolutely trashed.

“Geez,” I say. I don’t remember Louise being super into parties, but there’s a shot of her flipping her blonde hair over her shoulder as she puts a bottle of Natty Light to her lips, Sam cheering her on from behind the camera.

“They’ve gone wild,” Drew says. “Officially off the rails.”

The last video is more of the same, and as soon as it ends I finally get to read the response that Drew wrote at 9 in the morning—“yall crazy smh.”

“Wow,” I say. “That was headache-inducing.”

“Louise texted me earlier. Said she’s got a wicked hangover.”

“I could imagine.”

Drew eyes me, the smile on his face falling. “Everything okay?”

“Not... not really. Maybe? I don’t know.”

He sets the phone down, tugging the earbuds out of our ears. Then, he shifts so that he’s facing me, elbows propped up against his pillow. “What’s up?”

“I just... I don’t know.” I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. My brain feels like the haze of that party, all marijuana smoke and beer foam. “It’s weird to see that stuff.”

“Because you aren’t with them?”

I blink at Drew, then let out a huff. “Since when are you a mind-reader?”

He snorts, rolling over so he can flop on his back. “I developed strange and unusual powers after being bitten by a radioactive baby sister.”

“I don’t bite.”

“You used to, when you were a baby.”

“How do you remember? You’re only one year older than me.”

He shrugs, smiling. But his smile falls when the silence between us stretches on. “They aren’t forgetting you, you know.”

I sigh, pulling my legs up to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. “I know. I’m being stupid. It just... it feels like that, sometimes. When you haven’t seen or heard from people in weeks, and then you see them out having fun... Ugh. It’s not like I don’t want them to have fun or whatever, either. It’s just...”

“Complicated?” Drew finishes.

I huff, dropping my head to my knees. “Complicated. Yeah.”

I don’t bother mentioning that they probably hate me, that they’re better off hanging out and having fun and forgetting that I exist. Except they’ll be here tomorrow, which makes my stomach churn, which makes me feel like I’m going to vomit, which is the opposite of fun.

“Aren’t people supposed to enjoy their summers?” I ask.

Drew pats my back. “You aren’t enjoying being cooped up in the house all summer, huh? Surprising.”

It’s honestly a miracle he can understand what I’m saying, what with my face smooshed against my legs and my voice caught in the echo-chamber of my thighs. It’s even more of a miracle that he sounds like we’re a normal brother and sister, like I didn’t try to kill myself not too long ago.

“If you really want to have the summer experience, I can ask Dad if we can get a keg for tomorrow.”

I laugh so hard, so violently, that my head shoots away from my legs and my hands drop to my sides. “Jesus, Drew!”

Drew flashes a brilliant grin at me. “For your sixteenth birthday, you have to do a keg stand for sixteen seconds. How’s that sound?”

“Like a nightmare.” I’m still laughing, though. It kind of hurts my chest.

Drew laughs, too, and then he’s pulling me out of bed towards the kitchen so he can make egg sandwiches for lunch.

We pass Elijah’s room, and I look in—perhaps on instinct, or perhaps by habit. Elijah’s sitting on his bed, and we lock eyes, and he quickly looks away.

As I near the stairs, I hear his bedroom door slam. As the sound reverberates, all but ignored by Drew, it makes my stomach shrink and shrink and shrink and my wrists itch and itch and itch.

I eat three bites of the egg sandwich, tell Drew it’s undercooked, and sleep the rest of the afternoon away.



On Monday morning, I wake up and my eyes are caked with the Sandman's gritty residue. I sit up, rubbing my face. Something shifts against my wrist and I wince—right, wadded-up tissues. I'll have to flush them.

I used to hate having a summer birthday. Back in elementary school, before everything with half a gram of sugar was banned, parents sent cupcakes and other special treats to the classroom. Little Timmy turning seven years old was, apparently, reason to cut the subtraction lesson short and celebrate. Not that any of us complained; anything to get out of schoolwork was A-OK in our books.

But when you have a summer birthday, you don't get a pack of Disney pencils from your teacher, or the week-long fame of being the Birthday Kid Whose Mere Existence Put A Hold On "See Spot Run." You get RSVP rejections from so-called friends who may or may not actually be on vacation, and the people who do end up coming are people like Sam, whose mother sent him so he could hang out with your older brother instead of you.

I should clarify: I still hate having a summer birthday. But this time, it's not because no one will celebrate. No, it's because my family is *going* to celebrate, and Dad's going to cry over the candles, and Elijah will ignore me in favor of moping in the corner, and Drew will lead the family through a warbling funeral dirge of "Happy Birthday."

And Louise will be there, thinking I hate her. Sam will be her guardian, cracking jokes but still sneaking glares at me. At least I have three hours to prepare for that, and a day off of therapy to boot.

When I come downstairs, Dad's smiling at me. He moves away from the coffee pot to kiss my head. He's been a little too touchy-feely since he snapped at me on Friday.

"Happy birthday, Rachel," he murmurs.

"Thanks," I say. "You, too."

He laughs and goes back to his coffee. I quietly exhale. I made Dad laugh and didn't cry when he wished me a *happy* birthday. So far, so good.

A few nights ago, he asked what I wanted to do for my birthday. He'd suggested about fifteen different activities—"We could go mini golfing, or see a movie in the theater, or—oh, what's that restaurant that just opened up near the turnpike? It's some sports bar. They've got all-you-can-eat wings—we could go there for dinner!"

It had taken all of my energy to calmly explain that I wanted a laid-back, event-free birthday party. Which of course made Dad frown, because I finally made a choice for myself but it wasn't the right one.

So I relented and said he could order pizza and get an ice cream cake, like when I was a kid. And he smiled and looked pleased that I'd suggested something that wasn't sitting around a room and pretending I hadn't tried to kill myself.

I open the fridge to grab the milk. The ice cream cake is in the fridge, for some reason. It's already starting to melt a bit, but the crisp blue icing clearly reads, "Happy 17<sup>th</sup>, Rachel!" I'd prefer it say, "Depressed 17<sup>th</sup>, Rachel!", but I suppose that wasn't my choice to make.

Dad peeks over my shoulder and huffs. "You weren't supposed to see that yet."

"It's not supposed to be in the fridge. It goes in the freezer."

"But won't it be hard as rock?"

"It'll be liquid by the time we actually go to eat it, Dad. Put it in the freezer."

He grumbles. I move aside, and he hoists the cake up into the freezer. He has to move a few Tupperware containers of leftovers that have probably been in there for too long.

When the freezer door's closed and my milk has been poured, Dad leans against the counter and stares me down from over the rim of his steaming coffee cup.

"When was the last birthday party you went to?" he asks.

"Uh..."

We celebrated one girl's birthday at Sacred Spirit. She was a skeleton girl, twig-thin with thorny joints wrapped in layers of warm clothes. Anorexic. Her heart stopped three times in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.

They served cake on her birthday, which caused her to have an anxiety attack, which caused this guy everyone called Crunch to freak out and break a chair, which caused the nurses to come in and restrain him, which caused a fight that knocked the cake to the ground, which... well, you get the idea. It was a shame, really.

"Louise's sweet sixteen, I think."

Dad nods and sips a bit of coffee, then grabs my bottle of pills. He rattles it, then sets the coffee mug down to unscrew the cap. He mouths along as he counts the tiny pills inside. "Make sure you take your medication."

"Okay." I watch him leave, coffee mug forgotten on the counter. I dry-swallow my dosage and hide the bottle under the sink, out of sight from today's guests.

When I go out to the dining room to eat, my presents are already sitting on the table. Two from Dad, one from Drew and Elijah. I frown as I sit at the opposite end, where Dad usually sits for dinner. Elijah always makes a drawing for me, something where we're fighting dragons or slaughtering bandits. He's not a very good artist, but he tries.

There's no sign of his colored pencil sketches anywhere when, every other year, art has greeted me in the morning. I swallow the milk, wincing as it mixes with something bitter in my throat.

Drew comes downstairs just as I'm cleaning up. He smiles, wishes me a happy birthday, and elbows my side. I try my best to smile, even though I'm one hour in and already ready for bed.

I pull on an old sweater from middle school and a pair of leggings. If there's any time for me to be thankful for how cold this house can get, it's today. Dad traipses past my room, likely to check on me, wearing his own fleece jacket.

"Well, Rachel," he says. "Seventeen."

"Yeah. Seventeen." Too old to be excited about driving, too young to buy a lottery ticket. Not sure what the big deal is, besides the fact my heart's still beating.

He keeps smiling as he looks around my room. My heart *thatumps* in my chest as his eyes fall on my nightstand. I'm sure he isn't suddenly psychic and able to see the razor hidden in the Crayola box, but I have to physically ground myself to keep from running over and throwing it out the window.

It strikes me, suddenly and with painful intensity, that Dad stands in the room where I've hidden a blade that he might find out is missing if he goes downstairs and—I've made a huge mistake. I need to put it back.

But I need it.

But he might find out.

But I need it.

Dad's smile falls. "You alright, Rachel?"

"Uh, yeah." I clear my throat. My voice sounds too weak. "Just nervous, I guess."

"Your friends will be happy to see you," he says.

That's not what I'm nervous about, but I smile and nod to appease him.

"Now, let's go downstairs. You can help hang up the streamers."



I go into fight-or-flight mode as soon as the doorbell rings. Drew already went and got the pizza, and Dad's in the kitchen with the ice cream cake, and Elijah is nowhere to be found, so that means it's my duty to open the door and greet the people I supposedly hate.

Happy birthday, indeed.

When I finally pull the front door open, Sam is reaching for the doorbell again. He retracts his hand and gives me a crooked smile, one that makes it seem like he hadn't witnessed a full-on meltdown just a few weeks prior.

From behind him, two bottle-green eyes peek over his shoulder. I try not to swallow too audibly as I meet Louise's gaze for the first time since before I tried to kill myself.

Of course, she doesn't know that, and likely doesn't have the same weight in her stomach that I do in mine. It's like my stomach acid transmogrified into lead. I clutch the wall to keep my knees from buckling.

All things considered, they look pretty good for being two days off a McBride party.

"Hey," Louise says gently. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," I murmur. Her smile looks genuine, if a bit uncomfortable. Hopefully she doesn't mistake my reservation for homophobia or whatever.

Sam scratches the back of his neck. "So. Is your birthday bash going to be on the front stoop, or are we allowed inside?"

"Oh—right." I step back and attempt a flourish of the arm. "Sorry, it's kind of chilly in here."

"Better than outside," Louise says. "This heat wave has been killing me. Dad's on my ass about my tanning. Thinks I'll shrivel up and die if I'm outside for more than five seconds."

I manage a laugh that sounds more like I'm choking on air, but Drew swoops into the front hall and does a bro handshake with Sam and ruffles Louise's hair, which is the closest to normalcy we're probably going to get all day.

Louise holds up a small shiny gift bag. "This is for you. Where should I put it?"

I open my mouth, but Drew interrupts and directs her to the dining room. Elijah scurries down the stairs, not even acknowledging us as he heads to the kitchen. Sam and I are left alone in the same spots where I'd screamed and he'd been scared.

He doesn't show any apprehension, though, just leans against the wall casually and smirks at me.

"So," I say.

"So." He stands up straight, taking a step towards me. "You feeling alright?"

That's the million-dollar question right now. "I'm sorry I yelled."

The weird thing is, I'm not sure if I actually am sorry. I wish I hadn't had a breakdown in front of him, but that's mostly because of the lingering embarrassment, not guilt.

Sam just dismisses me with a wave of his hand. "You worry too much, dude. You can't keep me away for long. I stick to people like a... a sticker."

"Clever."

"I try."

There's a pause, and I'm expecting Drew or Dad to pop in and inform us that it's time to sing and blow out the candles. But there's only distant laughter. I pick up on Elijah's voice in the throng, and my heart suddenly aches. No birthday doodle. No smiles. Nothing.

Sam moves his arm as if he's about to touch my shoulder, but he pulls away at the last second. "Rachel... are you really okay?"

There's a seriousness in his eyes that rivals what I saw back in June. He looks concerned. Genuinely concerned. It's not something I'm used to from the guy who diligently replaces all the nouns in Top 40 songs with "penis" and other less savory variants.

And perhaps the peculiarity of it all—of standing in the front hall of my own house, old and new cuts concealed by sleeves, being scrutinized by the boy who actually streaked at a football game—that makes me say, "No."

There are no tears. My vision doesn't blur. My eyes don't burn. Sam watches me carefully, so still that I think I've accidentally stopped time.

But then there's laughter in the kitchen.

Sam tilts his head. "You know... you can text me. Or Louise. If you need anything."

"I... lost phone privileges."

"Oh, right. Forgot about that."

I do a double-take. "What?"

"Drew filled me in," Sam says. "Didn't give all the gory details. Just said your dad caught you smoking the devil's lettuce."

"Huh?"

"The devil's lettuce, you know." Sam gestures vaguely with his hands. "Mary Jane. The reefer. Mary-joo-wahnna?"

"I know what pot is, Sam."

"You seem surprised."

Drew's been covering my ass this whole time? I glance towards the kitchen, even though I can't see through walls. I picture Drew leaning against the counter, hands tucked into his pockets, smiling as he talks with Louise. I knew he wouldn't tell them what really happened, but he's been keeping up an elaborate lie.

"Quite frankly, I'm convinced your brother is bullshitting me."

My gaze slingshots back to Sam. He's scrutinizing me again. "Uh?"

"Pretty sure your dad already knows Drew's a party animal. He found Drew's vodka stash last year, remember? Drew got a slap on the wrist and a weekend of no social engagements—which he broke by sneaking out and going to Mikey K's homecoming party. Meanwhile, you roll a wee doobie and get your door taken off?"

"I—did Drew—"

"I was upstairs with Drew," Sam says. "The day we... had an *altercation*."

"Oh."

Sam's mouth twists, and he finally gets close enough to nudge me. "You're living in an Amish paradise right now and can only communicate via carrier pigeon. I honestly don't think that has to do with a bit of green stuff. Besides, you don't strike me as a pothead in the first place. Xanax, maybe. Or ecstasy. Or wait—have you ever dropped a gallon of LSD?"

"None of the above."

Sam nods, satisfied. "I knew it." He sobers up quickly and nudges me again. "If you want to talk about—whatever's going on. I don't even have a guess as to what's going on in that oversized cranium of yours. But I know that you aren't afraid of catching The Gay. Drew convinced me of that much."

"You don't think he's bullshitting that, too?"

Sam rolls his eyes. "You being homophobic is a lot less believable than you smoking weed, alright? Give me some credit, I've been Nancy Drew-ing you for the past month."

Clearly he isn't very good at solving mysteries, or he'd be ripping my sleeves off and telling me that my life is precious, that I matter.

I think I prefer he doesn't know. It's making this pretending schtick a lot easier.



Between bites of pepperoni pizza, Dad asks Louise if the school has a gay-straight alliance. Thankfully I'm not eating, because I've had way too many close calls at this table, and there'd be nothing more embarrassing than choking on greasy pizza and store-brand soda pop at your own depressing birthday party.

"Not right now, but I'm in contact with a few people," Louise replies deftly, as if my dad is *supposed* to know she's a lesbian (granted, she may be more out than I thought).

"It'd be good for the school to start that," Dad says, as if he has ever in his life been an advocate for LGBT rights (granted, he's never said anything bad about gay people).

"You should talk to Mr. Lisitol. He used to do drag in New York," Drew says, as if it even matters if we have a stupid GSA or not because he's graduating soon (granted, he's always said he wants to leave a legacy somehow).

I say nothing, because I have nothing to say.

"I'd join!" Sam announces. "As long as I'm secretary."

"That's the worst idea I've ever heard," I mutter. Drew snorts.

Sam's eyes glow. "Wait, no. *President*."

"I take it back," I say.

Louise giggles from across the table. "Yeah, no offense, Sam, but..." she notices the way I'm staring. "Never mind. Offense."

The last thing I want to do is talk about Louise starting a club, because I don't want to think about the fact that Louise is gay and Lyn is gay and my dad is okay with them being gay when—

"I'll join," I say.

Louise drops her fork—yes, she eats pizza with a fork. Her shocked expression grows into a wide smile. "Really?"

Everyone's eyes are on me, even Elijah's. I fiddle with one of my abandoned pizza crusts. "I mean, sure. Unless you... don't want me to?"



“No, no!” Louise shakes her head almost violently. “I want you to, Rachel. It’d mean a lot to me.”

“And me,” Sam says. There’s a shuffle as Louise kicks him under the table. He winces. “But mostly Louise.”

I only eat the crust to keep from having to continue the conversation. There’s far too much to take in, and I’m honestly a little nauseous from all this pizza grease and soda. Dad shouldn’t have let me have caffeine—it buzzes uncomfortably under my skin.

When we’ve finished the main course, Dad brings out the cake. There are three candles in the corner, artfully placed. Everyone except Elijah smiles as Dad lights the wicks.

Then comes “Happy Birthday.” It’s the worst ten seconds of my entire life, which is saying something, because I’m clinically depressed and hate everything. Dad’s baritone voice drowns out everything except for Sam’s shrill falsetto. I notice Elijah mouthing along as he picks up crumbs with his fingertip, but I’m pretty sure he’s not actually making noise.

Dad’s looking teary-eyed by the time they get to my name, and it’s all I can do to plaster on a smile, roll my eyes good-naturedly and blow out the candles without a second to spare.

Cake is served, conversation filling the air around me. I mechanically shovel the flavorless food into my mouth and down the colder chunks with more soda.

Healthy eating isn’t really my main focus right now.

As we eat, I open presents. A journal and pens from Drew and Elijah. Well, I’m pretty sure that’s Drew’s handwriting for both of them, so I’m guessing the latter was a last-minute addition to the gift tag. Dad got me a blanket, joking that I’m always cold as I pull it from the wrapping paper. It’s a little scratchy, but I thank him.

Louise and Sam got me candy. I’m not hungry, but I open a bag of gummies and eat one just to make them happy.

I’m not sure what I expect to follow. Maybe a Badgerow and Company Fun Activity. Maybe a movie, or a board game, or a video game, or just sitting around and talking about old, fond memories.

What follows is an uncomfortable stretch of time during which Dad and Elijah clean up in the kitchen while Drew takes the rest of us out into the living room to hang out.

It’s silent for a good long while, just the sound of Dad whistling in the kitchen and Elijah stacking plates in the sink. Then, I look at Louise’s profile, see the edges of her bright green eyes, and flash back to the videos I watched with Drew.

“How was the McBride party?” I ask.

Louise startles, as if I’ve woken her up from a nap, but she gives a sweet smile and admits, “I honestly don’t remember much. Remind me to never drink again.”

Sam laughs. “You were *gone*, my dude.”

Louise blushes. “It’s not my fault Abbi V is the world’s worst bartender!”

Sam shoots ramrod straight and grins madly at me and Drew. “Wait, guys, story time. You know Victor Shambe from the soccer team, right?”

I nod. I probably know him. Small school, after all.

“Alright, so he went to the party with Abbi, but Abbi took over bartending because she says she wants to move to New York and work in gay bars because she likes gay people—”

“Which I said was a ridiculous idea for so many reasons,” Louise butts in.

“Absolutely,” Sam agrees. “So Abbi takes over bartending in the kitchen, except Kelsey Guildkrantz is running late with most of the drink stuff, so all they have is beer and cranberry juice and vodka...”

From the reactions that Drew makes, which I try to imitate at the appropriate times, it’s a crazy story. But the names all mash together in my head, like some gross, sweaty, acne-ridden amalgamation of high school drama, and I realize I have no idea how I’m supposed to feel about these people. I vaguely know Abbi and Kelsey and Victor and the other characters in this tale of broken hearts and spilled vodka, but I should know them, because Sam mentions kids that he says I’ve had classes and done projects with.

I can’t help but look toward the windows that face the front yard. There’s a whole world of people out there, people I’ll have to look at and interact with.

From the corner of my eye, I watch Elijah scamper out of the dining room and up the stairs. He doesn’t even cast a glance in our direction or call out a greeting.

If I can’t communicate with someone I love, how am I supposed to interact with complete strangers? I shiver, and hope it looks like I’m just cold. In reality, I’m terrified.

I want to turn the conversation to something more comfortable and neutral, like family vacations or interior design, but Louise and Sam stand up and start saying their goodbyes.

My stomach clenches. God, I hope the ice cream cake and pizza taste alright if they come back up.

I lead them to the front door, ready to give a simple goodbye and wave them away. But Louise turns to me, and her eyes are shining, and I instinctively take a step back.

“Text us sometime, alright?” she asks. “When you get your phone back.”

“I... okay.”

She frowns, then jumps forward and pulls me into a hug. I watch over her shoulder as Sam stares out the window.

“Louise?” I say.

She hugs me tighter. “Yeah?”

And there are words in my mouth—so many goddamn words. Words that explain everything and anything and all she could possibly want to know. They’re the words I’ve hidden for so long, the words I don’t say. The words I could easily have carried to the grave, or left in a note, or really voiced at any time.

I could tell her where I’ve been, what’s going on, why I’m not squeezing my arms around her as hard as she is around me.

When I open my mouth, though, all of the little characters get stage fright. Only two words remain, speaking softly from the wings.

“I’m sorry.”

It doesn’t seem possible, but she manages to squeeze me even tighter than before. “I know,” she says.

I’m not sure how long we’re hugging. But when she pulls away, and Sam ruffles my hair, and the two of them leave, and Sam’s car pulls out of the driveway, I decide that I’m cold and need something around me. I grab Dad’s blanket and Drew’s journal and go upstairs while everyone else does the dishes.

I sit on my bed for three hours, blanket draped over my shoulders and pen in hand. The journal is open to the first crisp page. I press the ballpoint down, hesitate, then lift it. There's a tiny black mark in its wake.

I decide that words are too complicated and close the journal.

That's when Dad comes to my room, shirt stained with pizza grease and a tiny bit of sauce stuck on the corner of his mouth.

"Hey, kiddo," he greets. "Have a good party?"

Honestly, I'm not sure. I feel like I've been having an about-of-body experience all day. Words bang against my skull and my chest and my throat, demanding to be let out, but I don't know what the words are or what they mean.

"Uh, yeah," I manage. "Did... did you?"

Dad comes over, ruffles my hair, and presses a kiss to my temple. "I did," he says with a small smile.

I blink and he's gone, feet stomping down the staircase.

I don't know what to feel or think, so I just lie down and take a nap until dinner.



My birthday has been a blur of simultaneous discomfort and familiarity. I'm honestly more confused about my opinion of the day than I am about what happens after we die, or whether dolphins are secretly plotting to kill us.

We watched a weird conspiracy theory documentary about dating apps and human trafficking last night, and it's changed my perception on just about everything. "Trust no one," the documentary advised.

In fact, I'm so hung up on my birthday that I forget the world's shittiest sequel is in the works. It's not until the next morning, when I find Dad untangling the vacuum cord, that I remember the special visitor coming to the house.

"Do you need help?" I ask.

Dad tosses the cord on the ground. He kind of looks like a toddler, sitting crisscross applesauce. "No, Rachel, I'm alright. Could you load the dishwasher, though?"

I shrug and head to the kitchen, just as Drew is closing the door to the very machine I'm supposed to load.

He leans against the counter. "Dad tell you to load the dishwasher?"

"Yeah."

"He already told me to do it twice." He motions to the spice rack. "Where are your pills?"

I nudge him out of the way and hunker down to open the cabinet door below the sink. After popping two into my mouth and accepting the glass of water Drew shoves at me, I peek out in the living room. He's finally got the cord untangled but is struggling to wedge the plug into the wall socket behind the couch. "What's he so concerned about? The house looks fine."

Drew brushes a clump of dust from one of the figurines on the windowsill. "No matter how much things have changed, Dad thinks Mom's still a neat freak. I'm convinced of the same, honestly. When I was five, she freaked out because left my coat on my doorknob instead of putting it away in the closet."

I huff. “Well, maybe if he had a proper cleaning schedule, he wouldn’t be having a panic attack on the living room floor.”

“He did have a cleaning schedule,” Drew says. “But things changed.”

I know what he means by “things changed,” and even though I’ve got half the mind to tell him not to pin this all on me, I’d much rather shift the topic of discussion.

“Do you think Elijah’s gonna be okay?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“She left before he ever got to know her. I feel like it’ll be weird for him.”

Drew picks up the figurine. Closer inspection reveals it’s a ceramic giraffe painted with tiger stripes. I’m pretty sure it’s something Drew made at summer camp years ago. I used to have a kangaroo, painted just like Oz, but I gave it to toddler-Elijah and he broke it.

“Elijah’s going to be fine,” Drew assures. I wouldn’t quite say he assures *me*, because I’m still concerned about this strange woman sweeping into the house, back into our lives as if the last ten years weren’t completely her fault. Still, I’m sure Drew could convince *someone* that Elijah’s going to be fine. Maybe a stranger. Just not me.

“He doesn’t even remember what she looks like,” I protest.

“He’s seen pictures.”

“But that’s not his memory, that’s a camera’s memory.”

“You... you really don’t want Mom to come back here, do you?”

“Do you?” He doesn’t respond. I lean against the counter next to him. “Lyn says sudden change isn’t good for my mental health.”

“It’s not good for anyone’s.”

My fingers curl around my wrists as I cross my arms. “I’m a bit of a special case.”

He puts an arm over my shoulder and pulls me uncomfortably close. “Have you and Lyn talked about this? About Mom?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“I talk, she listens. She asks things that make me question my own sanity.”

Drew hums. “Sounds like your therapist is gaslighting you.”

“I should probably talk to someone about that.”

“Like Dad?”

“Like a therapist... oh, I see the problem.”

Drew laughs. I manage a snort.

Dad stumbles into the room, apparently surprised to see us standing there.

“Oh, good,” he says. “You’re in the kitchen. Listen, while I vacuum, can one of you—”

“Load the dishwasher?” Drew finishes. “That’s been done for twenty minutes.”

Dad nods, apparently satisfied and not at all concerned with his fleeting memory. “Well, go ahead and get ready. Your mother will be here soon.”

A harsh comment perches on my tongue, but I swallow it down when Dad’s appearance hits me. He’s combed over his bald spot for the first time in years, and he’s wearing the one button-down of his that isn’t wrinkled. He even matched his black belt to his black shoes, which is something Mom always pestered him about.

And is he wearing cologne?

“Rachel,” Drew says, and suddenly he’s pulling me away from the kitchen. “C’mon, you can brush your teeth before I shower.”

“Since when do you take morning showers? Or showers in general?”

He pushes me towards the bathroom and flips me off over his shoulder. I snort, slam the door shut behind me, and pretend it’s just another day.

I’m only able to pretend for so long. I can pretend while I brush my teeth and pull on comfortable clothes and fix my hair and make my bed. I can pretend when I go downstairs to get a glass of water, only for Drew to be there and hand me the one I’d abandoned during our earlier conversation. I can even pretend when Dad comes in wearing a different plaid button-down, his eyes flicking towards the dishwasher as he asks if I’ve taken my meds.

But it’s hard to pretend when the front door opens of its own accord and a wispy-haired head appears.

Lo and behold, poking her head into the kitchen is my mother. Zara Westing, formerly Zara Badgerow. She bears a few more wrinkles now, and gray roots that need a touch-up to match the blonde of the rest of her hair, but I recognize her.

And I immediately hate her.

She barged into the house as if she still lives here, as if ten years haven’t passed in her absence. But she wasn’t there for Elijah’s first steps, or Drew’s fifth-grade graduation, or Dad’s layoff and subsequent three-month job search. Of course, none of that matters to her; no, not to Zara goddamn Westing.

Before I can make an exit and hide in my bedroom until hell freezes over, she spots me. She brushes past Dad, not even casting Drew a glance, and reaches her shaky hands out to hold mine.

“Oh, Rachel,” she warbles, minty fresh breath tickling my nose. She throws herself onto me, holding me so tight that I suspect she’s trying to kill me. “Oh, Rachel.”

I look between Dad and Drew over her shoulder. Drew’s expression is unreadable, while Dad stands by the fridge and motions for me to hug Mom back.

Oh, right. She’s hugging me. How beautifully maternal.

Thankfully, I don’t have time to move my arms. Mom pulls away, her face surprisingly tear-free. Was she just wailing over my shoulder without crying?

Her gaze trails my body, taking in the fact that I’m no longer a rug rat. I’m a newly-knighted seventeen-year-old who almost bled out and stained a Home Depot carpet. She hones in on my clothed arms, making my skin prickle and hair stand on end. How much does she know?

“Zara,” Dad interrupts gently, “Why don’t I help you up to the guest room? We can talk to Rachel after, alright?”

She wipes at her nose and nods. As she turns away, she stares at Drew. Her hand reaches out, caresses his cheek. Her thumb rubs him a bit, as if she’s wiping away invisible tears. Then, she whispers, “I missed you,” and backs away to help Dad hoist the suitcase upstairs.

As soon as she’s gone, air forces itself from my lungs. It sounds like a laugh, and Drew gives me a look.

“Are you okay?”

I hear a squeal upstairs. Mom must’ve found Elijah. “Fine.”

I don't want Drew to interrogate me—I'm about to suffer through god knows how many hours of it with Zara. Before he can ask any more questions, I go to the living room, carefully wrap the vacuum cord up, place the equipment in the closet, and perch on the couch. I don't know how long Mom's staying, but I'm about ready for her to leave.

She didn't even wish me a happy belated birthday.



The way Mom and Dad enter the living room, I start to wonder if I'm about to receive The Talk. At this point, I'm not sure if that'd be better or worse than talking about my suicide attempt. At least with The Talk I'd probably, hopefully feel something: embarrassment.

Mom slowly sits on the edge of one of the lounge chairs. Dad takes the other. We sit in silence for a few minutes. Upstairs, a door closes. Muffled rock music wafts down from Drew's room. Elijah's probably upstairs, too, but I haven't seen him all morning.

"Your mother and I had a conversation a few nights ago," Dad says. "And we've decided on some... new rules."

"Am I getting my door back?"

"No," Mom snaps. Gone is the woman who pulled me into a hug and mournfully said my name. Her brow is furrowed, and her hands are on her knees, clutching them tightly.

"You will continue to see Lyn every weekday," Dad says. "Additionally, you'll take your medication every morning."

"I didn't expect those to change," I say. "They're the doctor's orders."

"Please listen, Rachel," Mom says.

"Everything will stay more or less the same," Dad says. "But..."

"But?"

"There's one additional... change."

I cross my arms. "Lyn says change is bad for me."

"Rachel, that's enough." Mom sounds tired of me, but she's barely been here an hour.

Dad clears his throat. "Because of your, well, history of... self-injury, your mother and I believe it may be best for you to..." He glances at Mom. I hold my breath. I can't breathe. I can't think. I can't can't can't.

Mom smooths her slacks. "We'd like you to wear short-sleeves around the house, Rachel."



When I was in fourth grade, we had an assembly about fire safety. Local firefighters came to the school and brought all sorts of equipment. There was a wooden frame with little glass windows hiding erasers and other prizes. Each window was etched with "In Case of Emergency Break Glass." They asked for volunteers to smash some of those windows, and my hand shot up. I dashed up to the stage, reeled back, and punched right through the fragile glass. It broke apart completely, bits of it spraying me and scattering across the floor.

I feel like the glass.



I'm on my feet, even though I feel like I'm about to fall over. "You—you can't just barge in here and try to change everything!"

"It's a small change," Dad says. "I know you feel—"

"I'm not talking to you, Dad." I point an accusatory finger at Mom. "You haven't even been here a whole day! You weren't there when I was in the hospital. You weren't there when I was hurting! You weren't there for *anything*."

I'm so used to people staying seated during my outbursts that I stumble back as Mom stands up. She takes a few steps towards me. "Oh, no. You do not get to do this to me, Rachel. I flew all the way here, away from my husband and children, and I will not spend this time being yelled at!"

"*Your children?* Oh, that's rich. Newsflash—I'm one of your children. You're my mom."

"And I'm here."

"But you haven't been! And trying to—trying to trigger me by making me walk around with my scars on display proves that you know nothing about me."

Dad pipes up, voice high, "It's only when you're in the house."

"I'm always in the house! You never let me leave!"

Dad's eyes are as wide as twin full moons. "Why are you so upset, Rachel? If it's because of the stitches—"

I press the palm of my hand to my forehead. It's all too much, too many voices and itching wrists. "Just—can everyone just shut the hell up?"

"Rachel Elizabeth Badgerow, go to your room!"

I freeze in place, unable to do anything but blink. I can't remember the last time anyone ever used my full name. Mom's intense stare doesn't weaken. In fact, I'd say it hardens with each passing second.

If it had been just Dad here, he would've given me a moment to breathe. But Zara is intent on squeezing the air from my lungs.

"Go to your room," she repeats, quiet but stern. "When you come down for dinner tonight, I don't want to see any sleeves. Understood?"

I don't want to agree. I can't. I look to Dad, pleading. There's a millisecond of connection before he decides the carpet is very interesting.

I don't want to agree. But I have to.

I nod numbly. Mom says something, but I'm floating out of the room, up the stairs, through my doorway, finally collapsing onto my bed.

I think Drew comes to check on me, but I pretend to be asleep. I'm sure my haggard breaths aren't fooling anyone.

*By dinnertime, they'll all hate me.*



"Rachel," Mom says.

"Mom," I reply.

It's a standoff—she's standing in the doorway, and I'm sitting up in bed. My arms ache because I couldn't stop rubbing the raw wounds all afternoon.

"Dinner's ready," she says.

"I'm not hungry."

Her mouth puckers, her attention focused on my fleece. "Rachel. Jacket."

"I'm cold."

Mom gestures to herself. "I'm in a short-sleeved shirt, and I'm fine."

She takes a few steps forward, and I grip the sheets for dear life. She's in my room, invading my solace. I've kept this place clean of her for so long. I want her out.

"Rachel." I hate my name on her tongue.

"I'm cold and I'm not hungry."

"I won't hesitate to call your counselor."

Lyn doesn't know any of this. Lyn doesn't know I'm still cutting. She needs to stay out of this, because as soon as someone finds out I'm going to get locked away again and won't have Drew and won't have Dad and won't have anything to hurt myself with and—

—I'm heaving for breaths as cold air hits my arms. Bare arms, red and raw. Striped with white and red and pink. Ugly purple sewn up with black. I'm more scar than skin.

Mom stands above me, clutching my jacket, eyes wide and pupils dilated.

And then Mom's yelling for Dad, and there are footsteps running up the stairs, and I shut my eyes and try to breathe because suddenly my lungs don't want to work.

"I *hate* you," I manage. "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you."

There are hands on me, brushing against the old and new cuts. I'm frozen in place, only aware of the hands on me and the uncontrollable urge to peel my own skin off and burn it.



I don't eat dinner.



When I was in the hospital, I kept having dreams where I was falling, only to jerk forward in bed at the last moment before body met pavement. I awaken the same way now. I push myself into a sitting position, tossing off a flimsy blanket. My bedroom light is on, but the windows are closed. I let out a shaky breath, a whine leaking past my throat.

From a chair beside my bed, Drew jolts. He looks—god, he looks frantic.

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. His eyes are not on my face. They're on my arms.

He never visited in the hospital. He never saw this.

He knows now.

He looks at me again, expression stony, before he stands and stumbles out of the room.



The box of markers is no longer on my nightstand.





I must have fallen asleep at some point, because I wake up to shouting. Screaming, actually, might be a better term. The voices are shrill, but they bounce across the walls and make my head and heart and arms ache.

“—fine, Zara, it’s not—”

“Don’t you *dare* tell me this is fine, Henry. Our daughter is mutilating herself! She almost died! How can you sit back and say everything’s fine? What the hell have you done to stop any of this?”

“I took her door and her phone away.”

“And that clearly hasn’t helped! If it hadn’t been for me, you’d be clueless as to her... her *activities*.”

“She deserves her privacy!”

“Don’t bullshit me. This isn’t about her privacy, Henry, this is about pretending everything is fine! Well, as you can see, everything is most certainly *not* fine! Where do you think she got that razor?”

“My... I don’t...”

“You were careless, and I had to fly all the way out here to mop up your mistakes.”

“Zara, don’t you *dare* talk to me about ‘mopping things up.’ I cleaned my daughter’s blood with old rags and soapy water. I visited her every day in the hospital. I’ve taken her to every single appointment, paid every single medical bill—”

“I would have done that, Henry, but you failed to tell me anything about Rachel until a few weeks ago!”

“I don’t want to complicate things for her. She’s very sensitive right now.”

“You’re the one who’s being sensitive, Henry.”

I can’t drown it out. I cover my ears, shove my head under a pillow, but it’s useless. I’m powerless against the force of their anger. I swing my legs out of bed, stumble shakily towards my closet, and stick my hand into my winter boots.

They only know about one razor, right? No one knows about the second... right?

Right.

My fingers wrap around the cool metal, and I bring it up from the depths of the shoe. It’s pristine, not russet-edged like the one I’d been using.

The one they’d found.

And with vibrating fingers and buzzing in my ears, I stick the razor down past the hem of my sweatpants and drag it across my thigh, light enough to make a mark as thin as a papercut.

The blood comes first. The stinging comes next.

I expect numbness to complete the trilogy, but instead feel a wave of nausea. There’s no cool calm, just dizziness and too-bright light.

I grimace, shove the razor back in its place, and go to bed.

It takes me two hours to sleep, long after Mom and Dad have stopped yelling and doors are slammed.

Outside my window is nothing but darkness. In the hallway, the grandfather clock chimes twice.



Mom takes me to Lyn's. I hate being in the car with her, and I especially hate the pine-scented air freshener that dangles from the rent-a-car's rearview mirror.

I put my hands in my jean pockets, rubbing my fingers along last night's wound. I don't press too hard. The pain makes me sick.

"I'm going to talk to Lyn about this." Mom gestures to my arms without taking her eyes off of the road. "And then, *you're* going to talk to Lyn about this."

Too exhausted to protest, I nod weakly.

I wish Dad was driving. At least he turns on the radio when it's silent.

Lyn's building has never looked so ominous. The driveway crunches painfully under Mom's too-plump tires. Dark clouds hang overhead. How unironically and unnecessarily foreboding.

We enter, and the secretary sends a quick phone message up to Lyn to let her know we're here. My mom makes small-talk with her, as if her suicidal daughter isn't the reason she's here, as if this isn't a shrink's office.

The secretary reveals her name, but I don't bother locking it away in my memory bank because I really, *really* don't care.

Lyn's footsteps precede her arrival. She eyes me, expression unreadable, then sweeps over with overwhelming grace to shake my mom's hand. Mom looks a little more uncomfortable. I think it's suddenly hitting her, more than before, that her daughter is seeing a therapist. I almost died.

They go upstairs. I wait, silently, and ignore the secretary's passing glances.

I'm not sure how long they're gone, but soon Mom is back and Lyn's bringing me upstairs, alone. I sit in the red chair. Red like my cuts—I feel like I'm about to get psychoanalyzed.

"So." Lyn crosses her legs. "Mom and Dad are concerned."

For a fleeting moment, I hope she's talking about her own Mom and Dad, her own problems. But that's stupid. *Stupid stupid stupid.*

"I have to ask a few questions, Rachel. Is that okay?"

I nod.

"I know you have been hurting yourself. Is there any suicidal intent in your self-harm?"

I can't speak, so I just shake my head *no*.

"Do you have suicidal thoughts?"

I hesitate. Then nod. *Yes.*

"Do you plan on acting on those thoughts?"

*No.*

"Do you personally feel that you pose a risk to yourself?"

*No. I have no door. I have no secrets. Nothing.*

Lyn hands me a bottle of water. It's already been opened. I take a few sips and hope the cool liquid chases down the bile that's rising in my throat. When I set aside the drink, I manage to whisper, "Am I going back to the hospital?"

Lyn arches a brow. "Do you want to?"

I shake my head quickly.

“Do you think you should?”

Again, I shake my head. No hesitation.

“I’m not going to make you, Rachel. I trust your judgment.” Lyn sips something from a travel mug on her desk. “You know, this is normal.”

I give her a look because, quite frankly, I’m under the assumption that “normal” teens don’t slice their skin and try to die and have doors ripped from hinges.

She sets the mug down, puts her hands up in defense. “Let me explain, Rachel. What I mean is that this is a normal reaction to the medication in your body. This slump, it’s temporary. Your serotonin levels are balancing themselves out.”

“But...” she waits patiently as I fish for words, trying to grasp smoke. “But it’s not. Okay, I mean.”

“I didn’t say it was,” Lyn says. “It’s unfair.”

“I feel empty. I’m tired of feeling like this.”

“That’s understandable. No one wants to feel depressed.”

“You don’t get it.”

It’s a dumb thing to say, because Lyn is a licensed therapist and literally studied this stuff. But Lyn just nods slowly. “Explain it to me, then.”

I take a few deep breaths. My arms hurt. My stomach churns. I finally feel, after all this time, but it’s this sickness that I just can’t stand. “I want to have the summer to myself. I’m always surrounded by people. I hate trying to please everybody or having to take orders or whatever. It was bad enough with Dad on my ass, but now Mom’s back and I just... I can’t do this.” I bury my head in my hands, because I can feel my eyes burning and cheeks heating up and lips being pulled tight and I don’t want Lyn to see that. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“You’re recovering.” Lyn says it so plainly that for a few seconds I feel like an idiot. “Rachel, did you really think that recovery would be a streamlined process?”

“I didn’t think I’d take so many steps back,” I grumble into my hands.

“Unfortunately, this kind of stuff isn’t so linear. Your self-harm isn’t going to stop overnight. Neither will your anxiety, or self-doubt, or whatever else you’re dealing with. Relapse happens, Rachel.”

I let my hands drop from my face. “You make it sound like I’m shooting up heroin.”

“Self-harm can be addictive. You can experience withdrawal, just like someone with a drug addiction or gambling problem.”

I’m struck with an image of myself playing slots to stave off depression. I can’t help but snort. Lyn notices and flashes a smile.

“Can I suggest an exercise, for your next urges?”

The inevitable urges. “Sure.”

“Alright. When you next feel the urge to cut, try occupying your hands with something else—drawing, knitting, petting a stuffed animal, just anything that’ll keep your hands away from sharp things.”

A shiver runs down my spine. She’s speaking fairly candidly about this. “Okay.”

“Do that for approximately ten minutes.”

“Okay.”

“If the urge persists, talk to your parents or call me. You have my business card, right?”

“Um, yeah. I think so.”

She reaches into a drawer and passes me one. “Just to be safe.”

“Thanks.” I pocket it.

“You can talk to anyone you want,” Lyn says. “Dad. Mom. Brothers. Me. Suicide hotline.”

“Even if I’m not about to kill myself?”

“You can call them if you’re in crisis for any reason, Rachel.”

I’m not sure talking to a complete stranger will be any more helpful than talking to Lyn, but I suppose it’s good to know. I open my mouth to thank her, but the words that come out are, “I don’t want to talk to my mom.”

Huh. I hadn’t meant to say that.

But Lyn can’t ask me about it, because her timer goes off and my cue to leave has come. I scurry out of the room, back towards my Mom, who snaps to attention as soon as I appear. She stands, slinging her purse over her shoulder.

“All good?” she asks.

Far from it. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

The drive home is quiet. I replay the therapy session over and over in my head.

I don’t remember Lyn staring at my bare arms. Not even once.



Home hasn’t felt like home in a long time. I don’t remember the last time the façade of the house actually filled me with relief. It’s just been a lot of guilt, honestly; sour bile and cramps and the like.

Mom gets to babysit me while Dad’s gone, so I can’t quite shake her as I go upstairs. It doesn’t help that Drew isn’t coming out to greet me as usual—his bedroom door is open, which means he isn’t in there, which means he can’t jump out and protect me from the wrath of Zara.

Mom doesn’t hover in my doorway like everyone else; no, she keeps following me until I’m sitting in bed. She sits down next to me, perched so far along the edge that I’m surprised she doesn’t slip off and hit the floor.

“What are your plans for the day?” she asks.

“Sleep.” For effect, I toss a blanket across my legs.

Mom purses her lips. “Didn’t you sleep last night?”

“Your yelling kind of kept me up.”

Her eyes flash, and I flinch.

She hesitates.

I hesitate.

“I’m not—Rachel, I’m not going to *hurt* you.”

I know this—god, I know this. She’s never hit me. Dad’s never hit me, either. My gaze focuses on my chewed-up nails. Why the hell did I flinch?

She runs a hand through my hair, and I honestly don’t want her to touch me because my skin feels hyper-sensitive, but I let her. Because I’m honestly not prepared for anyone to leave me alone. There’s still a blade in my snow boot, and it scares me.

“Are you being honest with Lyn?” she asks.

My head snaps up. “What kind of question is that?”

“Are you being honest with Lyn?” she repeats. “About how you’re feeling? What you’re doing?”

I curl further into the blanket. “It’s hard not to be honest when it’s on display.”

Mom pinches her nose. I want her to leave me alone, but I don’t want to *be* alone. But Drew isn’t swooping in to save me anytime soon.

“Rachel... just talk to me.”

“What are you doing?” The words come out before I can stop them. “Seriously, Mom, you’ve been MIA for half my life, then you come running back here as soon as you think Dad’s failed? What’s your grand plan, to kidnap me and take me back to Germany?”

Mom frowns. “You’re being paranoid.”

“Maybe I am.” I definitely am. “But I don’t want you here. I’m trying to recover—”

“You call this ‘recovery’?” Mom snaps, pulling the blanket away and exposing my arms. “This isn’t ‘recovery,’ Rachel, this is... this is *madness*. Clearly your father hasn’t done enough to prevent you from continuing this behavior.”

“He took my door away!”

“And yet you’ve got recent cuts!”

“Don’t blame Dad for this.”

“Well, he certainly isn’t helping.”

“He’s got enough on his plate,” I growl.

“And your attitude certainly isn’t helping.”

My hands curl into tight fists, so tight they shake. “My attitude?”

“You barely talk, you barely eat, you ignore Elijah—”

“He ignores me, Mom. He’s scared of me. He *hates* me.”

“Because you almost died!”

My arms shake with the crushing force of my fists. “Why the hell do you care? Why did you come back? Why are you sitting here yelling at me?”

“*Because I am your mother!*”

The house falls silent, save for the window by my head rattling. I want to push away, further back on my bed to escape the intense fury of Mom’s gaze. Because I see something there, and I don’t want to see it. I don’t want this.

“I am your mother,” she says again, quieter, slouching as if she’s expended all of her energy on those four words. “I... I’m your mother, Rachel. I flew here from Germany, left my other family behind, and came all the way to the house to sleep in the guest room that your father clearly hasn’t dusted in years... because I’m your mother. And it’s my job.”

I could easily fire back that the job was too hard for her all those years ago. She left—she gave up, then decided to make a grand re-entrance.

But I don’t say anything, because my jaw has been padlocked shut. So I sit, numb, as she stands up, folds the blanket, sets it at the foot of my bed, and leaves the room.



At Sacred Spirit, they made us do weird devotional things at every group session. Each day we had a special quote that we had to chant like some cult initiation. My last day there, the quote was, “Once you hit rock-bottom, the only way you can go is up.”

The irony was not lost on me when I saw Dad reading the newspaper my first night home, and the front-page headline was about a local politician who, faced with corruption charges, decided the best way out was to throw himself into a rock quarry. True rock-bottom.

My rock-bottom, I assume, is being told that my mother is contractually obligated to come and rescue me from my self-harm and suicidal thoughts, despite not having been in my life since before they even started.

Three hours later, when I trek down to the kitchen for a glass of water, I realize just how wrong I am.

Because rock-bottom is staring the immaculate Louise Christine Lewis in the face and watching her eyes read the lines in my arms.

I’m well within my right to ask what the hell she’s doing here, but my frayed nerves only allow me to stumble, the small of my back hitting the counter’s edge.

She just stares, eyes wide and tan skin suddenly too pale.

“Rachel...?” she asks, soft but still audible over the roaring in my ears. “Rachel, what... oh, my god, what...?”

Lyn hadn’t stared. I’d been okay—thought it’d continue to be okay, damn it, because Lyn hadn’t stared.

But Louise stares. She stares long and hard and her hands start shaking and she pales, then goes a little green, then fluctuates between the two like some indecisive chameleon.

The purples and reds and pinks and whites aren’t pretty—I’ve known that since the moment I first dragged a jagged piece of plastic along my wrist. It’s just that standing here with Louise staring, face as green as her eyes, shaking because I’m scaring her...

I’m sick. Oh, my god.

I brush past, nearly bowling her over as I go back up to my room. There’s no door, though, no way to brace myself against the onslaught of questions that might be footsteps behind. Even when I glance down the hall and see that she hasn’t followed me, I still press my back against the wall of my bedroom between the doorframe and my closet and just press my head into my hands. I rub my palms against my closed eyeballs until colors burst like fireworks. Behind those colors are flashes of black and white, as my breathing picks up and I can’t breathe too tight chest hurts *can’t breathe*.



No one talks to me for the rest of the day. I overhear a conversation on my way to the dining room. Mom and Dad argue over whether or not Drew is allowed to have friends over.

“He needs his friends” (Mom).

“Rachel needs privacy” (Dad).

I sit at the table and ignore how Drew and Elijah’s eyes scan my arms. I don’t know what privacy is anymore. I feel like I’m trapped in that dream where you’re in front of the whole school naked, and they’re all pointing and watching and laughing and no one thinks to shut the curtain and protect you, because they want to stare, too.

We eat in silence. Dad tries to make conversation with Elijah, but that's a disaster just in concept, so we just chew.

There is a point when Mom sighs and sets down her fork. I brace for impact, willing myself to not explode the moment she berates me for not wearing matching socks or something equally ridiculous.

Instead, the words that come out of her mouth are, "Henry, what in God's name is that portrait all about?"

Five pairs of eyes meet four pairs of eyes. The present Badgerows, angry and scared and broken, lock eyes with the past. Victorian Rachel looks unphased by the whole thing, so I do my best to emulate her, even though on the inside I'm rejoicing that the attention is finally off of me.

"Got it done by Chuck years ago," Dad says.

"Chuck?"

"He worked in sales with me a while back." Dad smiles at the portrait, fondly, as if it's a beautiful shot of the Grand Canyon instead of four people on a gray backdrop wearing ill-fitting clothes. "Found it in the basement and decided to hang it up. The wall was looking pretty bare."

"It's..."

"Ugly?" Dad asks.

Mom looks startled, but nods.

Dad lets out a chuckle. "Yeah, I know."

The conversation dies, and it can't be resuscitated, so I mechanically swallow all the food I can and pray that time hurries its ass up.

After dinner, Elijah goes to his room. Dad goes downstairs. Mom heads off to FaceTime her husband, leaving me and Drew to do the dishes.

My head hurts. I say as much, so Drew goes and fetches me an Advil. I pop it in my mouth as I'm dumping Elijah's unfinished cup of milk into the sink.

"You shouldn't dry-swallow pills. That'll—"

"Burn a hole in my throat? Dad has told me that several times."

I can tell Drew's staring, but I don't bother turning around. "It's good advice. You should listen to him."

No door. No sleeves. No phone. No control. "I don't want to listen to any of you."

I turn around quickly, bringing my fingers to my lips. That wasn't supposed to come out of my mouth.

Drew huffs. "Rachel. You're not exactly in a place to make decisions for yourself."

"Well, I'm sick of having decisions made for me. Dad chose my therapist. Dad chose when I got to come home from the hospital. Dad chose to remove my door—"

"Because you *locked* it, Rachel!" His face is all white, eyes wide like he can't open his lids enough. "You tried to kill yourself. That's why you can't just start making choices again. Because you almost died."

"It wasn't a choice!" I protest. "It—god, Drew, it just *happened*. It was sudden."

"So sudden that you didn't even leave a note?"

Pangs of hurt strike my body. My chest. My arms. "Would you have wanted one?"

Drew reels back. "I—what the hell kind of question is that? I want you *alive*, Rachel."

“But if I died?” I take slow steps forward, pushing him back against the kitchen counter. “If I didn’t make it, if I wasn’t pumped full of new blood and stapled shut, would you have wanted to know why? Would you have wanted to know every single thing I couldn’t feel, every agonizing truth about every thought in my brain?”

“I would’ve wanted *something!*” he cries. “You can’t just disappear, Rachel! No matter how much you want to, you can’t.”

“You’re right. I can’t. I tried, and I managed to screw that up.”

“Don’t say that,” he hisses.

“Don’t say what, the truth? You just said you were willing to hear the truth!”

“You can’t soften the blow?”

“You want me to sugarcoat the fact I wanted to kill myself?”

He pauses. The past tense “wanted” does not go unnoticed. I wish I could take it back. I wish he’d stop caring. I wish he’d hate me.

I huff, crossing my arms and staring at the grout-lined tiles. “I don’t want to fight, Drew, alright? I fight depression. I fight self-harm. I fight suicide. Why the hell are you trying to fight me when I’ve got all this other shit?”

“We’re always going to fight, Rachel! We’re siblings!”

Mom’s voice echoes in my head: “*I am your mother. I am your mother.*”

“I thought you were done being mad at me.”

“I’m not mad, Rachel, I’m... fuck, I’m frustrated. Because you’re pushing us away... again.” He shuts his eyes, shaking his head. “Just like you did back in May.” Drew cards his hand through his hair. He looks ready to pass out. “You really freaked Louise out, dude. She just came upstairs to grab chips, and—”

Something unfamiliar flares in my gut. “Is that what this fight’s about?”

“It’s not—”

“Why are you coming to Louise’s rescue, Drew? I’m the one who’s hurting! I’m the one who has absolutely no privacy. You just... you actually invited her over here to hang out, when you knew full-well that I’m basically a zoo animal on display. Do you ever think of anyone except for yourself?”

“I’m not allowed to try to make myself happy?”

“Not so selfishly.”

“Honestly, Rachel? I think you’re being the selfish one. I didn’t...”

The white-hot fury burns away, leaving his voice and tension to fade. He looks guilty. I lean forward, frowning.

“You didn’t what?”

“Rachel...”

“You. Didn’t. What?”

His head hangs, but I see his face scrunch up a bit. If he cries, I might just implode.

“I didn’t ask for a suicidal sister,” he whispers.

I expect an ache, even just a whisper from my arms. But Drew’s words make my whole body go numb. It’s a bone-chilling numbness that comes so fast it makes me dizzy.

I mutter, “Well, I didn’t ask to live.” And then I go back upstairs and pretend there’s not a razor blade in the snow boot in my closet.





I can't sleep.

My legs have minds of their own. They kick and jerk and move and I feel like I can't control them at all. I hold in a sob as my restless legs kick out, toes curling in an attempt to scratch an impossible itch.

That's how I find myself crouched in front of the closet at 1:09 a.m. I scrounge inside the snow boot for the blade, barely able to see it in the all-encompassing darkness. I lay my right leg out, twisted so the inside of my ankle faces up. In one smooth motion, I take the razor and drag it along the unruly skin.

I feel blood ooze, feel the familiar sting, but I'm once more wracked with an overwhelming nausea.

"Fuck," I hiss. I toss the razor deep into the closet, then scratch my legs. They still tingle and hurt and don't feel right. I hate it.

But sitting there doesn't help. I scramble up onto my feet and hurry to the bathroom, closing the door and turning on the light.

I lift the toilet lid and hover over the water. God, my head hurts. My heart thrums as I wonder if maybe I cut too deep. Am I losing blood?

One glance at my leg proves the contrary. It's a shallow cut, like I nicked myself shaving. Not like I purposefully draw a razor across my skin.

"Oh, god," I groan, coughing into the toilet. Purposefully. I did this shit purposefully. Not long ago, I did this with the intent to *die*. I tried to bleed myself out—who the hell does that? And in my own bedroom? What was I thinking? What's wrong with me?

I stand, brushing my pants off as if that'll help me stop panicking. My chest tingles with millions of tiny firecrackers, and I don't know how to douse them. I don't even know if I can.

I return to my room and fumble in the back of the dark closet. After a lot of flailing I find the razor, but I'm being the exact opposite of careful and end up slicing my finger. As I suck on the bleeding digit, the murky forms on the floor of my closet take shape. Well, one does.

Oz, upside down with his blood-stained left foot pointing directly at me. Light from the moon shines through the window and glints over his eyes, making it look like he's glaring right at my cuts, right at the marred skin of my wrists, right at the blade in my hand and the finger in my mouth. I can feel my lip tremble—I toss the nearest shirt over his body and slip the razor in my pocket. Then, trying to shake off the chill that a goddamn stuffed animal has given me, I creep downstairs.

The razor burns a hole in my pocket, searing my skin, as I tip-toe through the kitchen. When my hand reaches for the doorknob to the basement, bees buzz under my skin. The basement. I want to be in the basement. I have to need to go into the basement.

I open the squeaky basement door and am immediately met with a gentle blue glow. There's a distant tinny sound, too, as if someone's using the old tube TV.

I pat my pocket, ensuring the object is still there, and decide that I should go downstairs and investigate. I'd rather not go to bed, and while someone else being in the basement certainly throws a wrench in my plans... well, maybe it's serendipity.

I'm not going to create any dramatic buildup about who's downstairs—it's Elijah. He's got an old gray Nintendo controller in his hands, and the TV is playing a quiet melody from a *Zelda* game.

"Hi," I say, because my finger's still bleeding a bit and it's one-thirty in the morning and Elijah's still wearing his clothes from earlier today.

It's hard to see his eyes because the TV reflects off his glasses, but I'm pretty sure he's looking right at me.

I consider turning around, because this has been about as uncomfortable as I can manage going on no sleep, but he does something that I really don't expect: he shifts over, towards the far side of the couch. He goes back to playing the game, but I hear the unspoken invitation in every "hya!" of his Nintendo avatar.

So, I approach. And I sit. I pull my legs up and sit on them, hoping that if I can't fall asleep, my legs may damn well be able to.

I watch Elijah's character run through a series of flaming walls, dodging blasts of fire and mottled boulders.

"Drew and I used to play this a lot," I say, voice raspy.

Elijah doesn't react.

"This is... this is the Fire Temple, right?"

He makes a hum as he opens the menu, scrolling to a map of the dungeon. I notice that he hasn't collected all the keys yet, nor does he have the compass.

"You're missing the compass," I say.

He sets down the controller and adjusts his glasses, not tearing his gaze from the screen. "I can't find it."

Words. He's using words. I wipe my scabbing finger on my jacket, then hold my shaking hand out. "If you, y'know, wanted, I can look. I might have some muscle memory left."

Elijah continues staring at the screen, as if he can will the compass into existence with just his mind. However, video games don't really work like that, so I'm both relieved and surprised when he does, in fact, pass me the controller.

"Thanks," I say.

He doesn't react, just watches intently as I take charge. It sucks, because I definitely don't have any muscle memory from this game, but I'm sitting with Elijah and he isn't crying and I'm not crying and... it's okay.

I'm not sure how much time passes, but I do eventually find the compass and pass the controller back to Elijah. He makes a beeline for the dungeon boss. I adjust my position on the sofa, cringing as my legs officially go into that static-y sleep. Note to self: I'd rather have restless legs than sleeping ones.

"There's a new speedrun record for this game," Elijah says.

I start—is he talking to me? I glance around the room, just to make sure Drew isn't hiding out somewhere.

But it's just us. Elijah is addressing me.

"I—oh." Very intelligent, Rachel.

"There's a new glitch," Elijah explains. He goes on and on about shortcuts and Deku Trees and Kokiri Swords, and I get lost in his words. The stinging in my legs dies down, and I

manage to shut my eyes and recline a bit. I'm warm, comfortable. For the first time in I don't know how long, my chest isn't so tight. I burrow my hands into my jacket pockets.

I shoot up, gasping.

Elijah stops talking. He watches, looking scared while I try to hold in my hyperventilating. I don't do a very good job. My left hand brushes against the razor, cold from disuse but still able to burn me with a single touch. I yank it out and throw it across the room. It clatters next to the game console.

Elijah watches with wide eyes, letting out a whine when he sees just what I've revealed.

"I'm—I'm sorry," I manage, shaking harder, legs awake and alive and arms searing. "I shouldn't do this. I'm supposed to be *normal*, what the hell? Oh, my god. Elijah, what's wrong with me? What did I do?"

Elijah pauses the game, but his gaze never leaves mine. He looks ten years older now, older than me, older than Drew. Old enough to maybe know what the hell is happening in my head. Old enough to help me.

"Rachel?" he asks. "Are you gonna hurt yourself again?"

"I—I don't *want* to, Elijah!" My hands keep shaking. I run them through my hair, wondering if I'm strong enough to crush my own skull by squeezing.

He kicks his feet out—I feel the couch shake. "I... Rachel?"

"W-what?"

"Please don't hurt yourself."

"I'm... it's hard, Elijah, I'm trying."

"I have nightmares."

My blood freezes.

"I have nightmares," he repeats. "You're all... bloody. It's scary."

I rub my sleeves compulsively, the sleeves that hide my wounds. The sleeves I can only wear at night, when it doesn't even matter. "I'm sorry, Elijah, I'm so sorry."

"You were really cold." His voice warbles.

And that right there is the moment my stomach drops out of my ass and through the center of the earth. Because suddenly it all makes sense—his silence, his fear, everything. And if I hated myself before I tried to die, I can't possibly verbalize how I feel now. So I ask a question.

"Elijah? Did you... did you find me?"

He says nothing. The TV buzzes. The grandfather clock chimes in the distance.

Elijah broke the lock on the door—I don't know how, but he did it. Because of course my little brother got into my room and found me bleeding, centimeters from death. My eyes *burnburnburn*. I'm hurting everyone.

"I'm scared," he whispers.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"I don't want you to die." He's crying too. "Rachel, please don't die."

I can't promise that I won't—that's what pains me. But I scoot closer and slowly pull him into my arms, and he doesn't shy away like I expect. In fact, he throws himself into my embrace, and we hold each other tight against the blue waves of early morning video games.

I hurt Elijah by trying to kill myself, but I'd hurt him more if I died. And now, I'm at an impasse. How can I stop him from hurting, too?

## AUGUST

"There was a razor in my shoe."

Lyn's gaze flicks down to my beat-up Converse, and then back up to me.

"At home," I clarify. "In my boot."

Once again, Lyn studies me silently. Her expression makes me wonder if carrots have sprouted from my ears.

"I had two razors," I say, slowly, as if I'm talking to a child. "My parents only found the one by my nightstand. There was a second one hidden in a boot in my closet."

Lyn nods slowly. "How long did you have it?"

"A few weeks, I think."

"Where is it now?"

"In the trash." I didn't put it back in Dad's workshop. I didn't want to touch it again. Elijah took it and threw it away.

"Are you still having urges to cut?"

"Yeah, but I'm... handling them."

"How so?"

I stare down at my arms, crisscrossed with angry red lines and ugly purple gashes. "Sometimes I snap hairbands on my wrist."

Lyn smiles. "That's better, Rachel. No permanent marks, no skin breaking... lots of people in self-harm recovery do that. Anything else?"

I shrug. "Sometimes I play a video game with my brother."

"Drew?"

"Elijah."

Lyn blinks, surprised. "You and Elijah are getting along?"

"Yeah... guess I forgot to mention that."

"For how long?"

"About a week."

Lyn clasps her hands. "That's good, Rachel. I'm glad." She leans forward, eyes narrowed as she scans my face. "I do have to ask one question, though."

"O-okay?"

"Why are you telling me all of this?"

My throat goes dry. The room is too quiet in the wake of her question. I wish I could hear Mom flipping through pages of a magazine downstairs, or the *whoosh* of the bathroom door, or the clacking of the secretary's too-long fingernails on the bulky keyboard.

When I do find my voice, I'm barely able to squeak out, "Because you're my therapist."

Lyn shakes her head. "Let me rephrase. Why now? What changed that you feel you can trust me with this information?"

I scrape my shoes against the coarse carpet. "I don't know. I guess... if I'm not allowed to wear long sleeves, what's the point of secrets?"

"Mmhmm," Lyn says, writing something down.

"And you said back in June that recovery is a two-way street. So... this is me trying to meet you in the middle."

Lyn stares me down, as if knowing there's more. And she's right. There's more to it than my scars being on display, more to it than wanting to recover. It's a trial-run of honesty until I'm ready to be fully transparent—and god, I hope this works out.

"I'm proud of you, Rachel." Lyn's got a genuine smile on her face and a sparkle in her eyes. "Really. It may not seem like much has changed, but you've come a long way from when I first met you in June."

I frown. I don't feel different. Dizzier, maybe. A little lighter. Okay, I guess those are differences. "How so?"

"You exude more confidence," Lyn supplies. "I think you know more about yourself than you realize. You're coming to terms with who you are, and you're finally embracing your character instead of shying away." Lyn takes a sip of tea and leans back in her chair. "This is probably as good a time as any to ask... who do you think you are? What are your personality traits?"

Words immediately come to mind. "Bitter. Dissatisfied. Numb."

Lyn makes a buzzer noise. "Wrong. Those are traits of depression. Depression isn't a personality. It's a parasite." She adjusts her legs and smirks. "Who's the girl behind the curtain?"

I hesitate. Who was I pre-depression? Who was I before sixth-grade hormones and seventh-grade numbness? Who am I supposed to be?

The timer goes off before I can figure that out. Lyn doesn't look disappointed, though—she resets the timer, scribbles something on her notepad, and says, "Think about that for next time, alright?"

"Okay."

As I head downstairs and silently follow Mom to the car, the question echoes in my skull. Who am I? Who am I? Who am I?



By the time we get home, I'm certain Mom wants to know what's on my mind. Thankfully, before she can ask, Elijah spots me as he heads up to his room.

"Rachel, c'mere," he calls. "I wanna show you something!"

Mom says something behind me, but I ignore her in favor of following my brother upstairs. He leads me to his bedroom and points to a new poster on his wall. I'm not quite sure what I'm looking at, but it's forest-green and has a glowing sword in the middle.

"That's cool," I say, unable to hide my smirk as Elijah bounces up and down. "Where'd you get it?"

"Louise brought it over."

The name hits me like a bowling strike, ears ringing as the pins in my head clatter uselessly. Louise was here? Louise came back?

"When?"

My voice is too sharp. Elijah notices; he winces. "When you were gone."

"This morning?"

Elijah nods.

I cross my arms. "Was... Louise was here?"

Someone knocks on the door, even though it's open. I turn to see Drew standing there, frowning. "Everything good?"

He hasn't talked to me since our fight a week ago, so why is he suddenly checking in? I shake off the realization that he's probably been eavesdropping from his room across the hall. "Fine. Elijah was just telling me about this morning's surprise guest."

Drew blanches. "Elijah!"

"I wanted to show her the poster!" Elijah protests.

Drew pinches the bridge of his nose. "God, alright. Rachel, sit down. We need to talk."

It takes a second before I notice he's completely blocking the door. Guess we're having a fun sibling chat, then. I plop on Elijah's bed. He shuffles over and crawls up next to me, pressing against my side. Drew drags Elijah's desk chair over and sits there, leaning forward with his hands clasped between his knees.

"So," he begins.

"So," I echo.

"So," says Elijah, just for fun.

Drew makes a "zip your lip" motion at Elijah. To me, he says, "Louise stopped by."

"As I gathered."

"She was looking for you."

I clench my hands. Of *course* she was. Probably wanted to see what freaky Rachel was up to. Freaky, scarred-up, homophobic Rachel Badgerow.

"I think you should talk to her," Drew says to me.

I choke out a laugh. "About what, exactly? She's got eyes. She can fill in the blanks."

"Not about everything."

"You're being cryptic."

"As are you."

We stare at each other for a few terse moments. Drew's the one to look away, almost guiltily.

"Rachel... summer's almost over."

My shoulders sag.

"Soon, you're going to have to go back to school and face the music. You'll only be a junior. If you're going to... y'know, survive... you need your friends to back you up."

"I have you and Elijah," I say, even though the argument is pointless. Elijah's still in elementary school, and Drew's a senior. If I can't put my trust in someone, I'm going to be eating alone in a bathroom stall until I graduate. "What did Louise want?" I ask quietly. "Did she just bring gifts over?"

"She didn't stay long when I said you weren't around," Drew says. "She brought Elijah the poster, me a coffee mug, and you a letter."

I swallow. "A letter?"

"It's on your bed," Drew says. "We didn't read it, don't worry."

That makes me feel even worse.

"Did she say anything?" I ask.

Drew's frown deepens. "She looked... god, Rachel, she looked messed up. Like she hadn't slept."

*You did this.*

"Her eyes were all red."

*It's your fault.*

"Her hands were shaking."

*You've ruined Louise's life.*

I clear my throat, shaking the thoughts out of my head. "What... what else?"

Drew sighs. "Nothing. She really wanted to see you, though. She said she wanted to give the letter to you in person."

"But she didn't want to talk to me?"

Drew picks at a hangnail. "I don't know. She didn't say. I guess if she had a letter, probably not?"

I bury my head in my hands and let out a groan. Elijah's small fingers ruffle my hair.

"I scared her," I whisper.

"What?" Drew asks.

I peek out from between my fingers. "I freaked her out, Drew. No wonder she looks all frazzled. She saw my arms."

Drew snorts. I sit up straight, knocking Elijah's hand away in the process. I didn't mishear, though—Drew's chuckling. Smiling. Laughing as if I'm not sitting there in the throes of a crisis.

"You give yourself too much credit," Drew says, smirking. "Louise is your *friend*. If she's really 'freaked out,' it comes from a place of worry. You don't think she hates you, right?"

I take too long to respond, and his smile falls.

"You... you thought she'd hate you? Why?" Drew's gaze follows mine, down to my arms. He leans back, rubbing the back of his neck. "Louise is a good person. She's not going to hate you for trying to kill yourself." His mouth twists, and I assume it's not the way he wanted to word that.

"She should."

Drew's eyes go wide. Elijah leans away. I stay still, waiting for Drew to pounce.

"Rachel... do you think you're a bad person because you tried to kill yourself?"

Don't let the tears fall. Nod. Don't cry. Don't cry.

Cry a little bit.

“No one thinks you’re a bad person, Rachel!” Drew says, hysterical. “You’re—you’re depressed! That doesn’t mean we care less about you! Why would attempted suicide make us hate you?”

“B-because it was selfish?”

Drew mutters something as he wipes his hand down his face. “Me and my big mouth, huh? Alright, get over here, Rachel. We’re going to hug it out. Because you’ve got some serious brain damage if you think anyone in your life—Louise and Sam included—hates you.”

“What about Mom?” I ask as I’m standing up.

Drew rolls his eyes. “We’re having a moment, Rachel. Just hug me. You too, Elijah.”

And that’s how we end up standing in Elijah’s room, my left arm wrapped around Drew’s torso and my right hand reaching down to rub Elijah’s back. My tears wet Drew’s shirt collar, but I feel a bit of wetness on my neck, and Elijah’s shaking, so I just pull them both closer and listen to Drew’s soft voice.

“We could never hate you, Rachel,” he whispers.



*Rachel—*

*I’m not good at talking on the spot, which is why you’re getting a letter.*

*I miss you. I don’t know if you’re trying to protect me or something, but I want you to stop. I miss my friend. We were supposed to go to Wally World this summer and eat too much cotton candy. I think this is the first time since third grade we haven’t done that. Besides, I was going to ask you to come with me to Philly Pride, too, but you didn’t answer any of the texts I sent. I didn’t go. I thought you hated me. I thought it was because I was gay, but I realized that you were one of the kindest people I’d ever met, and that just didn’t make any sense.*

*Please let me in, Rachel. I know what it’s like to have a secret, to feel so different on the inside even though you want everyone to think you’re normal. And I might not get what you did or what happened or whatever, but I want to understand. Because I trust you understand me. Everyone has secrets that are scary, but it gets easier to talk about them.*

*I’m not scared of you. I’m scared for you. I don’t want to lose my best friend.*

*I’m sorry I’m too much of a wimp to talk to you in person. But if you want me at your side, I’ll be there. If you still want to be friends, let’s try to be there for each other, alright? I want you to feel like you can talk to me. I want my friend back.*

*Love,*

*Louise*

*P.S. It’s weird if I just come to your house with a letter, right? Yeah, that’s weird. I’m going to get your brothers presents.*

*P.P.S. Is that weirder if I do that?*

*P.P.P.S. I hope you get your phone back soon. GIFs are easier to use than real words.*



The letter’s upstairs, folded up under my pillow, but it’s all I can think about at dinner. Drew and Elijah create a nice distraction for our parents while I push Mom’s decent macaroni



around on my plate. Drew caught me reading the letter just before dinner, and even though I'd tried to scrub the tears off my face, he noticed them and pulled me into the thousandth hug of the day.

"Stop hiding stuff from us," he'd said. "No more secrets."

And it's the strange coincidence of him and Louise both confronting me about my secrecy that's got my stomach shrunk to the size of a shriveled pea. Being honest with my therapist isn't enough, apparently, because other people in my life are clamoring to know things that I'm not entirely ready to share.

Or maybe I am ready.

I don't know.

"Rachel? You've barely touched your food."

I glance up at Mom. I want to say that I've been touching it, just not *eating* it, but that'll get her all riled up, and dinner's actually going okay since I've been silent. The meal doesn't smell like burnt plastic, which means it's homemade and not from a box. I'll give credit where credit is due. I mechanically shovel a large forkful into my mouth. It's lukewarm, but I chew and swallow and she seems satisfied, if a bit confused.

Dad breaks the ice by taking a sip of water and saying, "Food's good."

"Better than your cooking." I don't mean to say it, but somehow between opening my mouth and placing more food on my tongue, I forget what a filter is.

Mom's eyebrows go up to her hairline, and I grip my fork tight, bracing for a lecture.

But then, Dad laughs. He throws one of his napkins at me, but it flutters uselessly between us and settles next to the salad bowl.

"You're grounded for that one," he says around chuckles.

"Isn't she technically perma-grounded?" Drew asks.

Mom's hands go white; now, she's the one holding onto her silverware for dear life. My own grip loosens, and I kick at Drew under the table, except I end up hitting Elijah in the ankle, and he hisses a word that a ten-year-old should not be saying, and Mom's white-knuckled and red-faced while Dad's choking on laughter as he tries—and fails—to scold Elijah for using such language. He points his fork at Drew and starts to tell him off for teaching Elijah such words.

Drew holds his hands up in surrender. "Not my fault he's got a potty-mouth! You're the one who let us watch *Animal House* uncensored."

I flush at the memory of our family bonding moment while a horrified Mom swats Dad's arm—which is still shaking with his laughter. "You let our children watch *Animal House*?"

"We weren't unattended," Drew assures her. "Dad watched it with us."

"That's not—" Mom shakes her head. "We're talking after dinner, Henry."

She glances at me, lips parted as she prepares to continue her tirade, but she hesitates and, grumbling to herself, finishes her wine.

"You know, Dad," Drew says, pointing his fork over his shoulder. "That portrait really is, like, the ugliest thing in the world."

Dad laughs again, cheeks rosy with joy. "You've got that right, Drew. At least you don't have to look at it!"

We all laugh again. Even Mom can't help the smile that comes to her lips, a tiny twitch that doesn't go unnoticed by me. I get the feeling she's still going to have a chat with Dad, but maybe she'll go easy on him. Maybe that portrait is good for something after all.

Even so, it's an eyesore. "Dad," I say as the laughter dies. He looks up at me, curious. "Please take it down. I'm pretty sure it's haunted."

He tries to look offended as he explains that a *dear friend of his made it, thank you very much*, but I can see him eyeing the portrait with unfathomable disdain. That gets a giggle out of Elijah so violent that he hiccups into his drink, splashing it all over his shirt, which just sets everyone off again.

It's not until I've set my dishes in the sink and I'm heading upstairs that I pass the hallway mirror and notice an upward curve of my lips. It vanishes as soon as it appears, and, with a heavy feeling, I'm left to wonder if I've imagined it.

But then I hear Drew and Elijah laughing, and I don't feel the same separation from that laughter that I've always felt. I feel like I'm part of it, like I'm part of that bubbly fizzy joy, if only for a moment.



*Louise,  
I'm*

...

I hesitate, ballpoint hovering centimeters above the paper. My smile's been gone since I walked through my bedroom doorway. I'm back to reality, where I'm expected to talk and kind of want to talk but have no idea what to say. This is the third letter I've attempted. The first was clunky and said too much. The second was a doodle of a tree.

*I breathe slowly. Be honest, Rachel. Be honest.*

*I'm depressed. I have Major Depressive Disorder. I was hospitalized because of it earlier this summer. I haven't been able to use my phone, because my dad took it away, and I'm not really allowed outside except to go to therapy.*

*You weren't supposed to see the stuff you saw. I'm sorry you did. Then again, maybe you'd never have written a letter. Maybe that's what instigated this whole pen-and-paper conversation.*

*Sorry that this letter is garbage. Sorry that I'm garbage (that's a joke). And thank you for reaching out. I wish it'd been the other way around—me reaching out to talk to you, me putting my trust in you. But depression has a weird way of making you not trust anyone or anything.*

*When I'm ready, we can talk. For now, though, I think I need more time to myself. I've got some personal things to work out.*

*And if you haven't already told Sam about me, please don't say anything yet. If you have, or if he knows for some other reason, try to keep it under wraps. I don't want my first day back at school to be super eventful.*

*Love,  
Rachel*



Drew pushes the letter across the desk and back towards me. "It's good."  
"Just good?"

"I don't know what you want me to say, Rachel. It's your story to tell."

"You've got a complaint."

Drew sputters. "No, I don't!"

"Your voice just went up three octaves and your lips are all twisted." I lean back, crossing my arms. "What's the problem?"

What he doesn't know, thanks to my self-restraint, is that I'm practically exploding with terror. I've got half the mind to snatch up the letter, tear it into tiny pieces and flush it down the toilet. But that's a bit dramatic, even for someone who tried to kill herself.

Drew's still stewing on my question. Finally, he pulls the letter back towards himself and scans it again. "I just feel like you could've said more," he says.

"There's not much more to it," I say. "I'm pretty clear from the first paragraph that I've got Major Depressive Disorder." I point to those very words.

"I mean beyond that," Drew replies.

My face heats up. "What, you want me to explain exactly how I ended up in a hospital? Or about my medication?"

"What? No!" Drew looks just as horrified as I feel. It probably doesn't help that we're sitting in the very room that I almost died in. The room where I could've taken my final breaths.

"Drew, you're being vague," I warn.

"Sorry!" He scratches his scalp. "It's just—I'm not referring to your thing. I'm referring to the other thing."

"Too vague," I mutter.

Drew levels his gaze, watching me carefully with deep blue eyes. His mouth is pulled into a tight little frown, but I can tell his tongue is prepared to spew something that I'm not going to want to hear.

"Maybe you should tell her about yourself," he says quietly. He quickly adds, "I know that's vague, but..." he sighs. "Alright, I'm gonna just come out and say it."

"Please do," I say, even though my brain is screaming "PLEASE DO NOT."

"Maybe," Drew says slowly, "Louise would understand your perspective better if you came out to her. She's not going to care if you're bisexual, Rache."

The silence that falls upon us is louder than the screaming from moments before. When I'd come out to Drew, I had one simple instruction—don't use the word. Listen closely, because I'm only going to say it once. After this, don't talk about it. Never bring it up again.

And then Lyn and Louise waltzed into my life with pride flags flying, and I kept my mouth shut, or maybe it kept itself shut.

And now Drew's sitting across from me, remembering that I came out to him just two months before I tried to off myself, and is telling me that I need to be even more honest, so honest that secrecy becomes a foreign concept.

"It's *my* coming out," I hiss. "I'll do it when I'm ready."

"You're more ready now than you were back in April," Drew says patiently. "You know two gay people, who are obviously going to be accepting of you."

"Even so, I—" Pause. Rewind. Fast forward a bit, because I rewound too much. Press play. Wait a few seconds for the right verbiage to play. "Two gay people?"

“Louise and Lyn,” Drew says. I’m not sure what expression I’m making, but it causes Drew’s concerned look to break apart into a mix of terror and embarrassment. “I—Dad mentioned Lyn’s gay.”

“When did he mention this?”

“Last, um, last week?”

“You’re a worse liar than I am,” I snap. “How do you know about Lyn?”

“I—”

“You know what? I don’t want to hear it. Instead, how about you explain why you’re so obsessed with my sexuality?”

“Rachel—”

“Because, quite honestly, I’m sick of you looking at me like I’m—like I’m some sort of *freakish* person. I already feel that way—I’m different. I’m weird. I’m abnormal, and the fact that you’re always giving me little concerned looks is doing nothing to help my mindset. Stop treating me like I’m some monster because I’m a bisexual teen with too much angst.”

Drew’s little concerned look isn’t directed at me anymore. It’s at my doorway.

Dad stands on the border of my room and the hallway, hand raised in a loose fist near the doorjamb.

“I... was going to knock,” Dad says.

Drew whispers something next to me, and his hand finds my back. It’s the only thing keeping me upright. Icy clamps squeeze my chest—I’m not sure I could breathe if they were absent, though, because my skin goes all fuzzy and suddenly staying upright is too great of an effort. I blink dazedly. Dad’s expression is unreadable, but I can tell he’s been standing there long enough.

I’ve foiled my own coming out. For the hundredth time this summer, I feel completely and utterly naked.

Dad steps into the room and makes a move like he’s going to close the door, except I don’t have a door, so his hand hovers in nothingness for a moment. Then, slowly, as if approaching a wild animal, he comes to my bed and sits beside me. I’m sandwiched between two family members, and yet I’m cold, clammy, disoriented, and alone.

“For a private person,” Dad says in a low voice, “you’re not the best secret-keeper.”

I blink. My eyes are stinging.

“Rachel,” Dad says, still speaking too softly and too gently, “I love you no matter who you are. I love your humor, your kindness, your wit, all of it.” He clears his throat after his voice warbles. “I... I overheard you coming out to Drew earlier this year. I was out in the hallway. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but...”

I take a deep breath, fighting against the cold weight on my chest. “You overheard.”

“Yeah,” Dad says with an exhale.

“Okay,” I say. I can work with that. I need to unpack this situation, because my brain is spinning, and my synapses are working overtime to piece everything together. “And you’re not, like, upset?”

It’s Dad’s turn to look confused. “Why would I be upset?”

“Because I’m bi?” My voice trails off as I say it, because obviously he’s not upset. If he was upset, he wouldn’t be sitting here with his arm draped over my shoulders.

"I could never be upset about your sexuality," Dad says, moving his thumb to swipe at one of my tears. "I'm just sorry you didn't come out to me on your own terms."

"Yeah," I say, choking out a tired laugh. I take another deep breath. Drew and Dad are supporting me more than they realize by offering physical contact. "Is that why you chose Lyn as my therapist? Because she's gay?"

"She specializes in LGBT+ adolescent therapy," Dad explains. "Says that on her website."

"I helped pick Lyn," Drew says. "Dad and I never talked about your being bi, though."

"Okay." Did Lyn have suspicions about my sexuality? Does she think I've been lying to her all this time?

"I'm sorry, Rachel," Dad says, and his voice is going higher and I can tell he's straining and *no no no* I cannot handle more tears. "I'm sorry you feel like you have to hide yourself from your family. I'm sorry you're hurting so much over your sexuality. I'm especially sorry that being bisexual has made you feel inadequate. But I love you unconditionally, Rachel, please know that. I don't want this to impact your mental health." He lets out a wet laugh. "I suppose it's a bit late to say that, but the sentiment's what matters, right?"

I turn to him, trying (and failing) to ignore the tear tracks on his cheeks and his red eyes and his trembling lips and his five o'clock shadow. Because the puzzle pieces are sliding into place, and I'm getting closer to the full picture. "Dad?" My voice is small, but I'm afraid if I try to speak any louder, I'm going to shatter. "Do you think I tried to kill myself because I'm bi?"

Our perplexed gazes meet, and Drew's hand stops rubbing my back in favor of stilling and tensing. I have a feeling Drew's expression is the same as Dad's.

"That's..." I shake my head, trying to work through the murky water in my brain. "I'm not depressed because of my sexuality. It's biological, or chemical, or whatever."

"But... you wanted to end your life," Dad murmurs. "Is there something else? Are you being bullied? Did something happen to you that we don't know about?"

"There wasn't really an instigator," I reply, pushing words through my rough, dry throat. "I just... did it."

"But... but *why*?" Dad's desperation makes my heart ache.

"I don't know," I say as gently as I can, even though the words are harsh and hard and horrible.

"Rache," Drew says, and it's too much for me to turn around so I just shift my head a bit to let him know I'm listening. "Did you really just... do it on a whim?"

"Kind of, I guess." I wipe one hand across my cheeks. It comes away wet. "It's just... I felt like I didn't fit inside my body. Since maybe sixth grade or so. And so for five years, I had this sense that I physically didn't fit anywhere, that I was taking up space. Every minor inconvenience became the world's way of telling me that I didn't belong. The thoughts of wanting to die were already there. It was just a matter of me being too tired to go on, I guess." My breaths are shaky, my hands are shaky. I'm a human tremor. "And maybe being bisexual was part of that, was one of those inconveniences that made me feel different, or whatever. I don't know. But it's not a simple equation. It's not 'Rachel plus bisexual equals suicide.' There are fractions and parabolas and stuff." I manage a chuckle. "I suck at math, so that's a horrible metaphor. What are parabolas, again?"

I don't get an answer, though, which kind of stinks because I'd like a distraction from my teary eyes and tight chest. Instead, I get two firm hugs, one on each side, and somehow the

constrictions alleviate the pain around my lungs. Still, they make the tears fall harder, which is kind of inconvenient when I'm trying to convince my family that I'm not going to kill myself the moment I'm left to my own devices.

When Dad finally pulls away, he's got snot dribbling from his nose. He wipes it with the sleeve of his jacket. "This entire time I've been asking 'why.' I didn't understand, Rachel. Even though I thought I did—and I was wrong—I couldn't help but question everything." He wipes at his nose again, because everything's leaking faster the more he talks. "I still don't fully understand, and I'm not sure I ever will... but I think I'm closer than I was before." A third time, he wipes.

Drew lightly touches my cheek, turning me towards him. His eyes are watery, too, and his smile wavers. "Keep using shitty metaphors," he says.

"Language," Dad reprimands weakly.

Drew ignores him. "You're here and you're fighting. You're opening up. We wouldn't ask for anything else."

"We don't care how quickly you get better," Dad murmurs, pressing his lips to my scalp. "We care that you're here, and that you're not going anywhere."

I'm here. I'm alive. They're happy about that, I don't know how I feel about that, or how I'm even supposed to feel about that.

Mom chooses that moment to waltz into the room, brandishing an Uno deck. Her mouth hangs open, words lost somewhere in her throat as she glances between the three of us.

"I..." she switches the deck from one hand to the other. "I'll be downstairs. With Elijah."

We do eventually go downstairs and play Uno. I don't win a single round, but with every "Draw Four" that Elijah aims at me, every blue three I play, every wild card that Drew somehow ends up with, I repeat that mysterious mantra in my head.

I'm here.

I'm alive.



Honesty fact number one:

Being honest is liberating. I suppose it's unfair to myself to reveal all of my secrets, so I manage to keep a few things to myself, but being candid with Dad and Drew about my sexuality and mental health is... it's good. There's less pressure weighing my shoulders down like a lead blanket. There's less pressure to smile if I don't feel like smiling, and crying has basically become a daily occurrence. Lyn says it's healthy to cry. It's like going on a detox diet, or something. Gets the bad juju out.

Honesty fact number two:

Being honest is exhausting. Every time I have an intrusive thought about cutting or death or weird, water-based metaphors about depression, I have to mentally run through a bunch of questions.

1. Am I in immediate danger?
2. Did something trigger this thought?
3. What can I do to distract myself?
4. Is distracting myself working?

5. If distracting myself is not working, who can I talk to right now?

It takes a lot more brain power than you realize to answer yes or no questions. By the end of each day, I'm all too eager to flop down on my bed, roll myself up under the covers and sleep. In fact, it's the best sleep I've gotten since I started on this medication. So, yay. Fun.

I tell Lyn as much at our next session. She just nods and says, "Yeah, honesty is like that." Which I feel like is a profound statement, even if it's five simple words.

I pick at a hangnail. The great irony here is that I've yet to come out to Lyn. Drew and Dad don't know that I haven't—in fact, I'm certain they're under the impression that I came out to her early on in the summer.

Nope. Just accused her of flirting with my dad.

I seem to have issues with all the women in my life. Maybe I'm woman-phobic or something.

"Have you heard from your friend, Louise?" Lyn asks, breaking me from my reverie. "The one who saw your scars?"

Alright, I'm back to being convinced this woman is a psychic, because I was just in the middle of thinking about how Drew still hasn't taken my letter to Louise. "Oh—uh, yeah. She wrote me a letter?"

Lyn's lips twitch. "What did it say?"

"That she misses me and doesn't hate me."

"That's good, then?"

"Yeah."

"Have you had a chance to respond?"

God. Damn. Psychic.

"I... I wrote a letter back. Drew's going to give it to her. Eventually. He's been busy with marching band camp and hasn't had much free time."

Lyn takes a long sip of coffee from her steaming mug. "What was the process like, writing your letter?"

I can't help the surprised hum that escapes my throat. I'd been expecting Lyn to ask what I'd written. Therapists are nosy, after all. I'm not sure how to interpret her ability to resist asking the question—if she's even interested in what I wrote.

"Oh, it was..." I'm about to say "good," but I know that's not true and she's going to know that's not true. "It was, uh, hard."

Coffee funnels past her lips as she waits for me to continue.

"It goes back to the whole honesty thing," I say. "Because being honest isn't just liberating and exhausting. It's kind of scary. Like, what if I said something that scared Louise, or made her hate me? What if I offended her by getting my words jumbled? There were just a lot of 'what ifs' that made me reluctant to open up to her, even though she made it very clear that's what she wanted."

Lyn finally sets her cup down. "I'm picking up on a lot of past-tense verbs here. Does that imply your opinion has changed?"

"Kind of," I admit. "Being honest is always going to be scary. I guess I just had to realize that. And now... I figure the letter is just a way to open up a conversation. If I'm going to tell her a bunch of stuff, I'd rather do it in person. Leave no evidence behind."

Lyn smirks at that last sentence. "And what do you want to tell her?"

I run a hand through my hair. It's getting too long. "Well, for starters, that I have depression. And that I've been absent all summer because I was in the hospital and my dad wanted to keep a close eye on me when I finally got home. And that I... I don't hate her. That she didn't do anything wrong."

"What do you think she thinks she did wrong?"

I shrug. "Coming out to me. I don't want her to regret telling me."

Lyn's face goes all wrinkly as she regards me with a curious expression, but she doesn't press. "I don't think she regrets telling you, Rachel. In fact, I think you're both of the same mindset. You both want to be honest, despite how exhausting and scary it can be, because the liberation of being open outweighs the cost."

I shrug again. I try not to think about how selfish I am for hiding my bisexuality from my gay best friend. Oh, great, I'm thinking about it.

"How's your mom?" Lyn transitions.

"Difficult."

"How so?"

I hesitate, unsure of how to word my thoughts, and finally decide to be blunt. "She's impossible to understand. One minute, she'll say I'm paranoid and need to 'chill.' The next, she'll be super weird; like, she just stares at me and doesn't say anything. It's like she doesn't know how to interact with me."

Lyn smooths her trousers and meets my gaze. "Maybe she doesn't."

I shake my head. "It can't be that hard. I'm a seventeen-year-old girl."

"Who was recently hospitalized for a suicide attempt." Lyn glances down at her notepad and then back up at me. "And she's a mother who has been absent from her daughter's life for a long time."

"Are you defending her?" I ask, voice thick.

"I'm not trying to," Lyn says calmly. "I just think it's important to have perspective here. Is your mom the only person who's been behaving oddly?"

"I mean... no. Everyone has."

"You mean the rest of your family?"

"Yeah. Dad gets weepy a lot. Drew and Elijah are fine now, but the last few months it's like they didn't know how to act around me."

Lyn hums. "You're focused on your mother's interactions, specifically."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Because she's been gone for so long, and she waltzed back into the house without knocking and decided she was going to control my life. "Because I don't know why she's even here."

There's a pregnant pause, during which I direct my attention to the carpet. Mom's downstairs. I hope she can't hear the conversation Lyn and I are having. Then again, I don't know how she could, with the music they play down there and the white noise machine by Lyn's door drowning out our discussion.

Lyn says something that I don't quite catch. When I look up, she's frowning.



"I think," she says, "and you don't have to take my advice, but... I think you should try to talk to your mother. Nothing big, nothing groundbreaking, just a conversation. If you understand where she's coming from, you'll understand why she's acting the way she does."

I scoff. "That's not going to work."

"You don't think so?"

"No." I don't want to talk to her. End of story.

"Do you understand where Elijah came from?"

"I—well, yeah, he's the one who... who found me."

"Drew?"

"He was angry because he assumed I tried to kill myself out of selfishness."

Lyn nods. "And how do you know all of this?"

"Because I talked to—" I cut myself off before I can finish the sentence, but the damage is done. Lyn looks proud. I want to smack the smile off of her face, but my own face is turning hot as I realize that she's right.

"It's just something to think about," she says in a way that implies she'll be disappointed if I only just think about it.

And then our time is up, and I'm hurrying downstairs and practically pushing Mom out the door.

"What's the rush?" Mom asks as she slides her phone into her cracked pleather purse.

"I'm hungry."

Mom checks her watch. "We can stop at McDonald's on the way home, if you want. But no soda."

"Fine." I miss fast food, anyways. The last time I had it was the day I came home from the hospital, which was a pretty miserable experience all around.

We're halfway to McDonald's when I notice Mom keeps checking the dashboard clock. I take a few deep breaths, because Lyn has weaseled her way into my head and made me weak.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

Thank god we're at a stoplight. Mom fully turns to look at me with a wild expression, because *I'm* the one asking if someone else is okay. And with my track record, that's weird.

"No, yeah, it's fine, I'm fine," she says distractedly as she turns her attention back to the road. "Just have some errands to run today."

She says the last part more for herself than for me, but it's loud enough that I hear it. Before I can stop myself, and before I can get angry about the fact that she's running errands for a household that she willingly abandoned, I ask, "Can I come?"

She looks at me again with the same wide-eyed expression. Two cars honk behind her as the light turns green.

Mom mutters an affirmative as we pull into the intersection. "We'll get lunch and go home first."

"Okay," I say.

She turns on the radio after that, and I'm glad. Because if I thought honesty was exhausting, spending quality time with my mom may very well kill me.



We stop at home just long enough for me to scarf down my Happy Meal and grab my jacket. On the way out, I toss the Super Mario Bros. toy to Elijah, who squeals in delight at having his own Princess Peach something-or-other.

Drew pokes his head out from the kitchen. "Did you take your meds?" He asks.

I flash a thumbs-up and, just as I'm about to leave, stop short. "Where's the Victorian portrait?"

"Huh?" He follows my gaze to the blank space on the wall where Victorian Rachel used to silently criticize our family dinners. "Oh, Dad took it down. It's in the basement, I think."

"Good riddance," I say.

"He mentioned something about getting one done by a legitimate professional, though, so if you've got an opinion on whether or not the background should be mauve or chartreuse..."

I slam the front door shut behind me, but can still hear him and Elijah cackling.

I'm actually kind of giddy once I'm back in the car. This is the first time I'm getting out of the house for something other than therapy. I hadn't realized just how bad my cabin fever had been, but the prospect of stretching my legs (even at the stinky, crowded Middleburg Mall) is heavenly.

"So," I venture, because something's urging me to speak and figure out what's on Mom's mind, "where are we going?"

"I've got to get a dress for my husband's end-of-summer party," she says.

It takes me a moment to recall she remarried over in Germany, and that she's not talking about Dad. Something hot and unpleasant boils in my chest at the thought of her thinking about her husband and parties at a time like this.

"Do you need anything while we're out?" she asks.

I consider saying, "More serotonin," but I doubt that'd go over well. "No, I'm fine."

She doesn't even acknowledge my response with a grunt or hum, just keeps driving in silence. I rest my head against the window and close my eyes. I should've just stayed home.

It's funny how quickly my mood changes, especially considering how apathetic I was to everything back in June. Now, instead of being numb, I jump from nervous to pleasantly alright (not quite happy) to sad. For example, as we pull into the half-full mall parking lot, my large intestine wraps itself around my stomach and small intestine and throttles them so violently that I have to swallow back bile. Not sure what emotion that represents, but I'm fairly certain it's not "pleasantly alright."

Despite the sour taste on my tongue, I hold it together and follow Mom into the mall's side entrance. It's just as gross-smelling as I remember—fake leather shoes, too many food court spices, and a hint of weed. We stroll past trendy clothes stores, and I'm pretty sure I recognize a few girls from the grade below me, but they take no notice as they swing their colorful plastic bags around and laugh at something on their phones. I instinctively press closer to Mom, unable to keep myself from doing so. She glances down at me, scrutinizes me for a second, but returns her focus to the department store up ahead.

Inside the store, she keeps looking back at me, as if she expects me to disappear and run for the nearest bridge if her attention is off of me for too long. I keep close, despite my fight-or-flight response kicking in at the smell of her perfume. Her manicured fingernails card through clothes hangers, occasionally stopping to flip over the price tag or double-check the size. Her

expression remains stony the whole time, never reacting to anything she's absorbing. It's kind of scary, honestly.

She eventually pulls an eggplant purple gown off of the rack and holds it up. "What do you think of this one?"

Oh, right, she's talking to me. "Uh, it's nice."

She purses her lips, examines the detailing along the waist, and hangs it back up.

This game of sorts continues for what feels like weeks. She'll eventually find a dress, then ask my opinion of it. I'll compliment the dress. She'll get a weird look on her face and place it back on the rack.

Maybe she's trying to torture me. Maybe this is a test to see how quickly I'll lose my sanity. If it is a test, I'm not doing very well, because I'm about to scream.

The hundredth dress is a silver number with pleats in the floor-length skirt and sloping off-the-shoulder sleeves. Channeling my acting abilities from my time as a goose in *Honk Jr.* circa fourth grade, I say, "That one's really pretty."

Mom eyes the dress, then me. She hangs it back up—I bite my tongue so hard it bleeds—but then surprises me. She pulls out a smaller size.

"Here," she says. "Why don't you try it on?"

"Uh... huh?"

Her fingers twitch impatiently. "It's the first one you seem to genuinely like. You can try it on, if you want."

I take the airy fabric from her and immediately home in on the price tag. "Oh, no, this is way too expensive."

"You don't have to buy it," she says flatly. "You can try it on."

"...Why?"

This time, it looks like Mom's the one who's about to scream. "Don't you ever go shopping and try on expensive clothing for fun?"

"I've been locked in the house for two and a half months."

I inwardly cringe at my own joke, but Mom just sighs. "I don't—look, Rachel, if you see something you like while we're here, just try it on. I won't buy it if you don't want me to, but it's supposed to be... fun."

She says "fun" as if it's a foreign concept, and somehow, I think, for her, it is. I nod slowly, rerack the dress, and head to a nearby sales rack full of party dresses. Half of them are skin-tight and as short as t-shirts, but there are a few nice ones in muted silvers and blues. My hand meets the soft fabric of a midnight blue gown and immediately clenches around it. I hold it up to see fully. It's a size too big for me, but it goes down to the knees and has dark lace to cover my chest, and I like the design, and we're not going to buy it anyway.

Fun.

I drape it over my arm and flag down Mom, who's in the middle of considering a forest green gown with a slit down the side.

"You like that one?" she asks.

I nod.

She turns from the rack, holding the green dress, and motions toward a nearby changing room area. "Let's go, then."

I enter the dressing room furthest back and, pointedly not looking in the mirror, strip. The dress slips over my head easily. I can tell it's too big right away—the cinched waistline is closer to my hips than my actual waist, and the fabric pools around my feet. Still, I smooth the fabric down over my stomach and turn to look in the mirror.



At Sacred Spirit, there were times when emotions hit me like a truck. I'd be complacent in my apathetic numbness, and then out of nowhere I'd be thrust into a panic attack or a fit of tears. Once it was because they ran out of chocolate cake for dessert; another time, I couldn't find the stuffed bear Dad brought from home.

Standing in front of this mirror, in the middle of some department store that no one under forty besides me has ever stepped foot into, wearing a dress far too expensive to even consider purchasing, I experience something different.

It's a slow crescendo, the steady swell of a balloon being blown up, something growing and pressing against my insides, shoving my guts and bones aside to make room for itself.

But my skin is too tight over my body, and the balloon bursts.

I can't stop the lone sob that escapes my throat. I throw a hand over my mouth with so much force that it makes a loud slapping noise. Still wearing the dress, I turn away from the mirror and sink down onto the dingy bench where I've set my clothes.

The only thing that keeps me from sobbing more is fear that someone has heard me. I keep my hand firmly over my face, staring hard at the wall but focusing more on the sounds of the store around me. A distant announcement is made over the PA system. A dressing room door squeals.

Two quick knocks. "Rachel?"

Shit. I move both hands to cover my entire face. My legs are shaking too hard to stand.

"Rachel, what's wrong?"

*She was never there, she left, she left because of you.*

"Rachel, open the door."

*She's mad now—good going, loser, you made her mad.*

I'm not sure what compels me to lean over and jiggle the door handle, but the next thing I know Mom is closing the door behind her and crouching in front of me, pulling my hands from my face and staring at me seriously. The way her fingers wrap around my wrists makes my skin ache.

"Rachel," she says. "You need to calm down."

"Th-that's not helpful," I manage.

"Breathe," she says quietly. "In and out. Not that fast! Slowly. Slower, just a bit... right. Good. Keep breathing like that."

I focus on not just the sensation of breathing, but the words as well. Inhale. Exhale. In. Out. My legs aren't shaking anymore, but my eyes burn, and my cheeks are wet.

"Can you look at me?" Mom asks. "Look at me, Rachel."

I do, because her voice is firm and low, and I'm scared of what she might do if I don't look at her. But there's worry creasing her brow, and a frown on her face, and she's wearing that green dress with the price tag hanging out by her armpit.

We're in a store. We're at the mall. I'm in a dress in a changing room and I want out of this dress.

"I—clothes," I choke out. Mom stands, handing me clothes as she helps me out of the dress—her hands aren't trembling, after all.

And then I'm dressed, arms covered, and I fall back onto the bench and cry into my hands. The wood creaks as Mom sits next to me, but there's enough distance that I'm untouched. Isolated. Alone.

"I'll n-never go to p-prom," I sputter, lifting my head from my snot-filled hands to stare at my mom. "My... my arms..."

She doesn't reply. She probably knows I'm right; I'll never wear a sleeveless dress, or go to the pool, or sunbathe, or do anything that girls my age do, because I've got scars running all along my arms. People will see me and know immediately that I'm a freak, a crazy person who needs to be kept at a distance.

"I'm *ugly*." I have to spit out the last word, because I'm crying again.

The glint in her eyes tells me there's a lecture coming, and my hands clutch the lip of the bench for support.

"Rachel," she begins, in a tone that suggests I'm completely in the wrong for simply having thoughts.

My grip tightens.

"You do have scars. That's true. And maybe you don't want to show them to people. But that doesn't mean you can't wear dresses. There are long-sleeved gowns." She makes an odd noise in the back of her throat. "And if you can't find one that suits you, you can always get sleeves sewn on. Or buy gloves."

"It's not that simple!" I protest, turning to face her. I stare at her blank face and channel all of my fury—the anger at myself, the anger at my mother. "I'll have these scars forever, unless I get cosmetic surgery, even the idea of a surgeon seeing them... I don't want people to know about my scars! But now my family knows, and the doctors know, and Lyn, and Louise, and Sam's probably heard about it, and what if it's spread around the school? How am I supposed to go back in September?"

"With your chin up and shoulders rolled back," Mom says calmly.

"You—you don't get it." I want to shout the words, but they come out weak and defeated. I heave a sigh. "I don't think you'll ever get it, Mom."

"Why's that?"

"Because you don't know me."

She leans back—I feel the bench shift under her weight. After a few silent moments, she finally says in a soft voice, "Who are you, Rachel?"

"I don't know," I reply, wiping a stray tear from my cheek. "I don't remember what I was like before this. Sometimes, it feels like I've always been depressed."

"But there was a time," Mom says, "before. Remember when you and Drew used to help us rake leaves?"

"I was, like, five."

"And you weren't very good with a rake."

Despite myself, I laugh.

“And you and Drew would grab fistfuls of leaves and stuff them in Henry’s pockets. Do you remember?”

“We accidentally got a caterpillar stuck in there. It died in that pocket, right.”

“He found it later in the winter,” Mom says, chuckling. “You used to laugh, Rachel. You always used to laugh. And tell jokes, and sing, and dance. And I want to believe that you’re still that little girl who acted out bedtime stories and memorized every Disney movie dance.”

I lean against the cold plaster wall and stare up at the wavering light. “Mom?”

“Hm?”

“...why did you leave?”

The silence, surprisingly enough, isn’t uncomfortable. It’s not comforting by any means, but it feels natural. And it’s nice to feel like something’s natural after having a panic attack in a department store changing room over a dress I wasn’t even going to buy.

Mom clears her throat, buying time. I don’t blame her. The question isn’t an easy one, and I didn’t let the conversation build to it. But I’m drained and hungry and I miss my friends and I just want to know. I need to know.

“I don’t know,” she says. “After having Elijah, I just... felt inadequate. That’s why I left.”

“Inadequate.”

“Like... like if I couldn’t take care of you all perfectly, there was no point in trying.”

“But you already had two children.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Rachel. I was disconnected from everything. And so I left.”

I shut my eyes and resist the urge to punch the mirror on the adjacent wall. Everything’s so cut-and-dry with her. I can’t last a day without thinking about my self-harm or suicide attempt, but she’s able to have three kids and ship herself out of the United States of America. How can the act of abandoning her children be so simple?

“I know, I’m speaking plainly, but in all honesty, I didn’t have reasoning. I just acted on impulse.”

“Your impulse told you to leave your family behind.”

I can tell she bristles, but she bites her tongue. “My impulse told me I married young and had cemented my life in place. I needed an escape. And it came at the cost of my children—that’s something I’ll never forgive myself for.”

“What about Dad?”

“He’s managed, hasn’t he?”

I decide to let her response slide, because I’m too tired to instigate a full-on fight.

“Why’d you come back, then?” I ask, eyes still closed and head still tilted back.

Her response is immediate, almost reflexive. “Because I heard my daughter had attempted suicide. I wasn’t going to stay in Germany if your father was sobbing over the phone while assuring me you were okay.”

I shake off the memories of Dad crying over my hospital bed and during visiting hours at the psychiatric ward. “So it was impulsive, too?”

She pauses. “I suppose so.”

I want to ask if her second marriage was impulsive, too. Instead, I say, “I’m mad at you.”

“I know.”

“You came back at probably the worst time for me.”

"I know."

"I hate that you don't let me wear long sleeves around my family."

I sense her cringe at the phrasing of "my family." Still, she says, "I know."

"Do you even feel any remorse? Any at all?"

"An unfathomable amount. I... I thought, perhaps, coming back would be good for me."

"So you were only thinking about yourself."

"And then I saw how bad it was."

I finally open my eyes. "It?" I swear I'll leave this mall and walk home if my depression, my entire summer, is being condensed to a neutral, third-person, two-letter pronoun.

"Your father has taken this whole situation poorly. I thought I was helping by taking over, giving tough love."

"But you weren't."

"Okay."

"Having to go sleeveless makes me miserable."

"I'm sorry."

I can't tell how genuine the apology is, but I don't care. I don't want an apology. I want her guilt to be palpable.

"I'm trying, Rachel."

"You need to try harder."

"Okay." She takes a breath. "What—how can I help you right now?"

In this moment, all I want is to get out of this dressing room and out of this store without having another meltdown. I tell her as much, and she hurries back to her changing room to get out of her dress. I wait quietly for her by the rack where I've hung my own.

She emerges, hangs her dress, and silently leads me out of the store. We shuffle through the mall, not talking, and make our way back to the car. The ride out of the parking lot is equally silent, until I feel I can trust my tongue to wag.

"Sorry that you didn't get the dress," I murmur.

Mom flicks the turn signal on far sooner than necessary. "It didn't fit well."

That's the extent of our conversation until she misses our turn off the bypass.

"Uh... that was our street?" I say, pointing my thumb over my shoulder at the rapidly disappearing intersection.

"I want to stop at the craft store," she says.

I really want to go home, but I bite my tongue and hunker down in my seat. It's only a few blocks away. With any luck, we won't be there long.

I want to stay in the car, but Mom insists I go in with her. She leads me past colorful stickers and puff paint and old women with baskets full of yarn. She suddenly turns down aisle ten and makes a beeline for the rolls of thick string. Mom grabs one and examines it like a precious gemstone. It must suffice, because she hurries off, arms swinging as she goes. I scramble to keep up as she loops around to an aisle on the other side of the store. There are wooden and plastic beads in huge plastic boxes on the shelves, every color and shape imaginable.

I'd be impressed if I weren't so confused.

"Do you like any of them?" Mom asks.

I glance at her, then at the rainbow of beads surrounding us. I'm not sure why she wants me to choose—maybe it's plan B for fun after trying on dresses ended in disaster—so I approach a safe-looking assortment of round silver beads. "What about these?"

She comes up beside me and lets a few sample beads roll over her fingers. "These should work. Grab two boxes, will you?"

We each take two and head up to the front to make our purchase. I stare at Mom's credit card as she sticks it in the payment machine, and struggle to hold in my questions until we're outside.

"What's this stuff for?" I ask as we approach the car.

Mom takes her grand old time unlocking the car and dropping the bag on the passenger-side floor. She doesn't respond as she starts the car, and certainly not as we continue back down the road towards the house.

In fact, my question hangs in the air until we've pulled into the driveway and she's turned off the car. Mom rests her hands on her legs, keys jingling a bit with the movement, and leans back against the headrest.

"Your father is reluctant to give your door back," she says. "And I am, too. But you deserve privacy. So, I'm going to make a beaded curtain for your doorway."

I blink slowly at her.

"If you don't want me to, then I won't. I thought it'd be good for you, though."

I blink again.

"I can always drive back and return these if—"

"I'd love it," I blurt out. "I... I'd like that a lot. Do you know how to make them?"

"I made one for my daughter—your stepsister," she explains. "She slammed her door one too many times, so her father removed it."

Glad to know I'm not the only door-less Badgerow-Westling in the world.

"Do you want me to teach you how to make one?" she asks, turning to me.

I stare at the front door, clenching and unclenching my fists.

"No, thanks," I say. We're not there yet.

She nods, and that's that. We exit the car. We go inside. Elijah's playing a racing game with Drew in the living room, Princess Peach watching from the coffee table.

Drew offers me a third controller while Mom says she's going downstairs to work on the curtain.

"I suck at this game," I say.

Drew smirks. "I know."

By dinner, I've all but forgotten about the dress, my arms, and the outside world.



The next morning, Drew tells me over lunch that Louise texted. Apparently I've got one of her old shirts somewhere in my closet. And, apparently, it's important that I find it immediately.

"Can you look for it today?" Drew asks. "I'll drop it off at her place on my way to band rehearsal."



“Why does she need a middle school field hockey jersey?” I ask. “Also, why does she think I have it?”

“She needs it because the color guard wants to go as their middle school selves for Throwback Thursday during band camp. And—” he glances at his phone when it buzzes, then reads from the text, “—she says you borrowed it after the Great Sleepover Disaster ruined your pajamas.” He eyes me. “Three questions. What is the Great Sleepover Disaster, why is it capitalized, and why have I never heard about it before?”

I stand up, pushing my plate towards him and booking it out of the dining room. “Sorry, can’t hear you, balls-deep in my closet looking for Louise’s shit.”

“Language!” Mom and Dad call from opposite ends of the house.

I sweep through the bead curtain and grab a pillow from my bed, placing it on the ground by my closet. I grab stuff from the back of the closet, where most of my unused clothing sits in heaps. None of them look like a middle school field hockey shirt, but they hold weird memories, little triggers to my synapses, and I can’t help but examine them and then neatly fold them and place them by my side. There’s my sweat-stained Red Dragons junior soccer shirt, from when Dad thought I had athletic potential (I didn’t). And the threadbare middle school orchestra shirt from when Dad thought I had musical potential (I didn’t). And my personal favorite, a simple black shirt with the words “Rosie’s Bakery” on the back. Remnants of flour are buried deep in the threads that millions of washes hadn’t returned the shirt to its former glory. It’s from when Dad let me have a birthday party at a bakery, because he thought I had cooking potential (I did).

I kind of miss cooking. The hospital had terrible food, and Dad was no sous chef. Maybe I should make dinner one night. He could probably use the break. So could my stomach.

I’m not sure why I have these shirts still, why I bothered keeping this stuff that didn’t fit me or was stained and torn beyond recognition. Maybe I wanted to keep a hold on my childhood. Maybe I was just too lazy to clean out my closet.

I dig for more shirts, but my hands brush something heavier. I know it’s Oz before I can pull him out from under the soft flannel I’d tossed on him all those nights ago.

Looking at the bloodstain makes my chest hurt. It’s splattered over his foot, drops pooling over his pouch. He looks wounded. His little black eyes aren’t so innocent anymore, even in the summer glow of my room, surrounded by childhood t-shirts.

He’s the only sign that anything ever happened in this room. He’s a sign of my childhood too, though, and I’m not sure how comfortable I am with the two mingling.

There’s a rattle of beads, and I turn to see Elijah standing on the other side of my room. He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “What’s that?”

My grip on Oz tightens. From Elijah’s angle, he can’t see the stain. “Just a stuffed animal. Found it in my closet.”

I want to put Oz down, stain facing the ground, and continue the conversation as if my blood isn’t on display. But Elijah comes forward and sits down next to me and his eyes widen when he sees the stain. I’m frozen, joints all locked up. It’s just like the start of the summer, with Elijah barging in and finding me and finding blood and—

He takes Oz from me with slow, gentle movements, as if handling a baby kitten. “What happened?”

“It’s... It’s from May,” I say.

Elijah pales a bit. I move to take Oz away, but I see him hold the kangaroo tighter.

"You're keeping it?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say. "I want to."

"Can you wash it?"

"I don't know," I say. It's been a while since the blood set in. "I'm not sure Dad would want to wash it."

Elijah finally looks up at me, eyes wide behind his glasses. "Why?"

"Because everything else I bled..." I clear my throat. "Anything that got... y'know, stained... Dad threw it away. I don't think he wants anything that'll remind him of it."

"Are you sure?" Elijah asks.

I sigh. "I don't want to take that risk. Oz is... I like Oz."

"Oz?"

"The kangaroo."

"Why'd you name him Oz?"

"Because I used to be obsessed with *The Wizard of Oz*."

"Oh." Elijah looks at Oz again, expression unreadable, then hands him back to me. "You should try to clean it."

I don't know if I can, honestly. Sure, there's something poetic about washing your own blood off of a childhood memento, but I don't know if I'm ready to do something that significant. I don't know if I'm mentally ready, at least.

"Don't tell Dad," I say.

"Okay," he says back.

"You promise?"

"Yeah."

"Good." I lean forward, hiding Oz under a few old sweaters and rifle through the clothes until I procure a navy blue and gold t-shirt. Elijah glances at the name printed across the back.

"That's not yours," he says.

"It's Louise's."

"Why do you have it?"

"Long story."

His eyes glint, and I can tell he knows that it's not necessarily long, but rather it'll embarrass the hell out of me. He's going to try to weasel it out of Louise the next time he sees her. I blush a bit, but I can't help but hope she does the story justice.

When I stand up, Elijah does, too. He trots behind me all the way to Drew's room, where I throw the balled-up shirt at his face, and then all the way downstairs to the living room. He plops down on the couch next to me, feet kicking the underside of the coffee table.

"Wanna watch TV?" he asks.

I'm kind of tired, but I smile and nod and let him choose the channel.

I doze with my head resting on his. In the background, technicolor superheroes save the world from evil, and Dad takes a picture that makes his phone shutter echo around the room. Elijah snores beside me, and all is right with the world.



Drew slips into my room that night, long after he gets back from band rehearsal, and places something on the bed next to my pillow. I keep my eyes closed, then listen to the squeak of his sneakers as he pads out of the room. When I'm sure he's gone, I open my eyes, Oz is staring back at me.

I sit up and gingerly lift him in one hand, turning him over to see his leg and stomach. The fur there is coarser than it is on the rest of his body, and just a hue lighter. But there's no blood. Just the mark of cleanliness, of something washed away.

I set him on my nightstand so he can watch me sleep, and for the first time I feel comfortable and safe under his gaze.



"So." Lyn leans back in her chair to study me. "Last session before school starts. How are you feeling?"

"Nervous," I say. "It's just going to be really different from the past few months."

"Are you excited to see your friends again?" Lyn asks.

"Sort of a mix of scared and relieved." I sigh, fiddling with a loose thread on my jacket. "Louise wrote me back after Drew dropped off my letter, and everything seems fine, but the whole face-to-face interaction aspect of going to school is scary."

"How so?"

I pause, trying to formulate my thoughts. "I guess because I can pick up on those social cues? Like, their eyes. I don't want Louise or Sam—or anyone, really—to look at me differently. Because... I'm bisexual." I catch her gaze for a moment, but she's completely still. No surprise whatsoever. She probably knew, that psychic bastard. "Yeah. That. And depressed. And I don't want them to treat me differently because of it. I want to be..." The word eludes me.

"Normal?" Lyn tries.

I nod. "Yeah. I want to be normal."

Lyn smiles, the kind of smile a teacher gives when a student has unwittingly brought upon his- or herself a learning moment. "This fear gets voiced a lot, Rachel. I've had several patients who don't want to take on the identity of depressed or anorexic or gay or trans. But here's a little secret." She leans forward, so far that I'm afraid she's about to fall out of her chair. "You may be depressed. You may be bisexual. But first and foremost, you are a person. A person who happens to be depressed and bisexual, but a person nonetheless. Anyone who tries to tell you otherwise can fuck off."

She leans back and changes the subject before I can reply. "What are you doing tonight?"

"It's Mom's last night before heading back to Germany," I say, slowly, because Lyn's advice still rings in my ear. "Elijah finally convinced Dad to do a video game night. I think we're playing *Mario Kart*. Oh, and I'm getting my phone back on Saturday."

Lyn laughs. "From the Dark Ages to the twenty-first century."

I laugh, too. "It'll be a weird transition, that's for sure. I don't know what memes Sam has sent me over the past few months, but I get the feeling it's somewhere in the low thousands."

Lyn rolls her eyes good-naturedly. I've told her a lot about Sam at these sessions (when I wasn't deflecting or accusing her of flirting with my dad). She's interested in him in much the same way that a 1500s scientist would be interested in a rabid raccoon.

"I know you're getting sick of this question," Lyn says, "but do you have any concerns with your current medication?"

I stare at the little humidifier on her desk, puffs of steam curling up from its opaque white surface. I don't speak for a while as I think about my prescription. I still get restless legs, but only about once a week. Last time I got them, I walked downstairs to the kitchen and found Drew wide awake, video chatting with some girl from marching band and working on a crossword. When he saw me, he just smiled and motioned for me to join. It was nice. I helped fill in the puzzle and got to meet Maddie (a senior who plays clarinet and, evidently, has a massive crush on my brother that is most definitely reciprocated).

So, in the long run, restless legs aren't unbearable. And the initial nausea from the first few days of taking the meds vanished in the blink of an eye. They're certainly giving me a bit more energy to get through the day, even if I take two-hour naps in the afternoon. Of course, that number was much higher at the start of the summer.

"There is one thing, I guess," I say.

Lyn gives a supportive smile, urging me to continue.

"I guess..." I shake my head. "I don't want to freak you out by saying this."

"I don't freak out," Lyn says, and yeah, she really doesn't. She's been surprisingly calm about every twist and turn I've taken this summer. I could probably peel my skin back to reveal a werewolf living in my ribcage and she'd just shrug and jot it down on her notepad.

"Okay," I say. "So, I'm not really having any side-effects, but I guess I'm not really having any other effects either?"

"Elaborate."

"I—I just don't feel, like, happy." I shrug, willing the heat in my cheeks to fade. "It's stupid, but I kind of hoped the medication would make me... y'know..."

"Happy?" Lyn supplies.

I nod, picking at my thumbnail.

"There aren't happy pills," Lyn says, and she sounds kind of sad. I glance up and see her staring down at the pen in her hand. "It'd be so much easier if there were. But... there aren't. There aren't happy pills to make you smile."

"Yeah." I sigh.

Lyn catches my eye and gives an odd smile, eyes distant even though she's staring right at me. "But there are coping mechanisms. There are medications that give you an extra push to keep living. There are cool counselors like me." I snort. "And there are baby steps. Those baby steps are what make Zoloft and Prozac better than any hypothetical 'happy pill.'"

My skin buzzes in a way that isn't dangerous or scary. It's actually kind of pleasant, even if I can't place the feeling. "Why's that?"

"Because baby steps teach you to love life on your own terms," Lyn says, gaze finally focusing on me. "They aren't easy to make, but once you find your footing..."

The timer goes off. Lyn silences it, and we sit quietly for a moment.

"I'll see you next Friday," she says, watching me carefully. "You'll email if you need anything beforehand?"

“Yeah,” I say. I doubt I’ll make it to Friday without a freak-out, and I’m surprisingly not embarrassed that she probably feels the same way.

“Alright,” she says, gesturing to the door. “Enjoy your last few days of freedom.”

“Thanks.”

Dad greets me from one of the sofas, pocketing his phone.

“All good?” he asks.

“All good,” I say. “I’m supposed to call if I need anything sooner than next Friday.”

“Do you think you might?”

I pause, then shrug. “Maybe. I can’t predict the future.”

He nods and leads me towards the door. On the way out, I wave to the secretary and decide that I’m in the mood for chicken nuggets.

“McDonald’s?” I ask.

Dad shakes his head. “You’ve already had fast food this week.”

“Pizza doesn’t count as fast food.”

“Yes, it does. We’re having sandwiches at home.”

I roll my eyes. “Fine.”

We get in the car, but Dad doesn’t start it. Instead, he turns to face me.

“Are you doing alright?” he asks. “I know school’s starting on Monday, and I want to know if you’ve been, well, okay these past few weeks.”

Yeah, I’ve had some low points. Really low. I relapsed. I got in a fight with Drew. I didn’t sleep for three days, and then slept for sixteen straight hours. I cried way too hard at *Mulan* and dissociated watching *Jeopardy* with Dad.

But I’m alive and I’m breathing and I’m sitting in a car with my dad, and we’re going home to eat sandwiches and play video games and laugh as Elijah wins and Drew fusses over his controller being broken when he’s really just bad at the game. And then Mom will leave and I’ll feel conflicted, but she’ll try to visit again, in the somewhat distant future, when maybe I’m better or maybe I’m not.

“I’m not good,” I tell him, “but I’ve had some good days. And for now, that’s enough.”

Dad nods and starts the car.

It’s quiet for a bit, and then Dad lets me turn on the radio. His eyes are bloodshot, and there are dark bags beneath them, but there’s an unmistakable smile stretching his lips. He flashes his turn signal, gets into the right lane, and enters the McDonald’s parking lot. I order a Happy Meal so that Elijah can have another Nintendo-themed toy.

As we pull through to the next window, I catch a glimpse of the sky, a wide blue dome arching infinitely overhead.

“Hey Dad, can you leave the windows rolled down?”

“Sure,” he says.

When we pull out onto the freeway, food in my lap and music thrumming through the stereo, I stick my arm out the open window and hold my palm against the breeze. Wind twirls around my fingers, hair curls around my eyes, and I take a deep breath. Middleburg’s summer smell is more sour than sweet, more bitter than saccharine, but I’m kind of thankful that I can breathe it in at all.