BUT WE CARRY ON



Melinda Alice

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By Melinda Alice

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To my Gramma B., who read the first (and terrifically terrible) edition of this story and offered me nothing but encouragement. Thank you. Until we meet again . . .

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Pull. Yourself. Together. Closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, I repeat the words quietly in a desperate attempt to steady myself. Because really, this is ridiculous. All I need to do is put one foot in front of the other; how hard can that be? After all, I accomplish such enormous feats of coordination every day. I wonder if this morning might be a whole lot easier, though, if I didn't feel like every single eye in the school was trained directly on me. Do those looks of morbid curiosity really exist? It's kind of hard to tell seeing as I haven't actually taken my head out of my locker since I opened it almost ten minutes ago. Breathe, Maggie Rae. Just breathe.

"Hey, Mags." Amelia greets me cautiously, her voice a soothing mixture of sympathy and concern. She slips an arm around my waist, squeezing gently. "How's it going?"

"Terrible." I frown, genuinely puzzled at my complete lack of foresight. This whole morning just seems like something I should have predicted. "I'm an idiot, right? Because being here feels like a really bad idea."

"There's only one idiot in this story, and it definitely isn't you." Amelia rolls her eyes. "Have you seen him yet?" she asks, her eyes darting quickly past my shoulder.

"No," I groan, throwing my books back into my locker. "I

can't do this. I'm going home."

"Sorry, sweetie, but you most definitely are *not* going home." Amelia pushes me aside before grabbing my physics text, placing it firmly back into my hands and shutting the door with a bang. "If you don't do it today, you'll have to do it tomorrow," she says decisively, "or the next day. Or the next. It's like tearing off a band-aid, Mags; always better if you do it fast."

Amelia materializing by my side finally gives me the courage I couldn't seem to muster just minutes before, and I'm suddenly feeling brave enough to navigate the unbearably loud halls—at least as far as physics class. Sensing my dread, she reaches for my hand and squeezes tightly while maintaining a steady stream of cheerful chatter. Her efforts at keeping me distracted are sweet, but they fail. Miserably. And in a sudden flash of panic, I consider shaking Amelia loose and running, but what would even be the point? She'd only chase me down and drag me ruthlessly back, and then I'd have to make this never-ending walk all over again. So I march on, like the brave little soldier that I am.

But the thing about marching feet is that they inevitably take you somewhere, and unfortunately, today is no exception. My stomach does a slow and sickening drop when I finally catch sight of him down the crowded hall. Thankfully, Marcus has his back towards us, and for just a short and hopeful minute I think we'll manage to slip by unnoticed. But then, like he somehow senses me coming, he turns and meets my eyes—briefly, but intensely—and I can't look away. It's almost like we're frozen in this awful moment,

and my mind scrambles to find an escape—any escape. But there's only one way out; I know that. And so in spite of the freshly blooming pain, I keep putting one foot in front of the other with methodical precision, even as my eyes blink back sudden tears. With what feels like superhuman effort, I finally manage to break away, but not before I notice his pale face and the dark bags hanging under his tired eyes. He looks like he hasn't slept in days, and my heart is torn mercilessly between pity and satisfaction. Even in this moment, I can't help but wonder how that can be. Pity? But *why*?

I close my eyes once we're past, letting Amelia guide me while I will my heart to slow and the tears to recede. And even though each footstep puts more space between us, I can feel him watching me as I walk away. Our moment may be fading, but his eyes still linger—full of sadness and full of regret.

Once that early morning walk to physics is behind me, the day improves somewhat. Not much, but enough. There are probably a lot of things more excruciating than the first meeting after a break-up, but at the advanced age of eighteen, I have yet to experience them. I feel oddly detached, and a little bit like I'm sleepwalking through each morning class, but somehow I manage to pull it all off. It helps that Amelia touches base every chance she gets, always with a smile and some piece of gossip that she hopes will lift my spirits. Even though it doesn't really help, I love her for trying. But what's most exhausting, by far, is the constant effort involved in

avoiding Marcus. I know his schedule as well as my own which means it isn't really hard, but it is really draining. So once the noontime bell rings, I decide I've had enough. Of just about everything. Catching Amelia's eye across the cafeteria, I give her a small wave before slipping out the door and into the warm October sunshine. Lunch off of campus is definitely my favorite senior privilege, and I take advantage of it every chance I get.

It's a short walk, and I'm relieved when I turn the corner at the end of the street and spot the café—my home away from home. Wrought iron tables are sprinkled across the patio, each holding a vase of fresh flowers in rich hues of russet, crimson, and gold. The tables are filled with the usual lunchtime rush, and I find myself smiling hellos at many familiar faces as I make my way towards the doors. Both are propped open, letting in the crisp autumn air, and I head straight for an open stool at the counter.

Mom's working the grill with a colorful apron tied tightly around her waist, flipping veggie burgers and bantering with customers at the counter behind her. With her short haircut and small stature, she always reminds me of some energetic little pixie. I'm not quite sure how she manages the boundless enthusiasm, but right now I really wish she'd share some of it with me.

"Hi there." Mom smiles, walking over and wiping her hands on her apron. She studies my face closely before nodding, apparently satisfied with what she sees. "It looks like you survived the morning. That's my girl." She smiles again, and I get the distinct impression that my having made it through the past four hours is

somehow a direct reflection of her skills as a parent.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I shrug. I figure it's close enough to the truth to count.

"Some days that's all you can ask for," she says, grabbing a plate from the stack beneath the counter. Filling it quickly, she places it in front of me: a delicious mountain of chickpea pasta, veggie-balls and fresh herbs, all drizzled with olive oil. Instantly famished, I dig in before the plate is even down.

As strict organic vegans living in a small town, our dining-out options are severely limited—as in, no options. So basically, Mom *created* an option. I guess she just chooses to ignore the minor detail that she's still the one doing all of the cooking.

A low, familiar laugh behind me lets me know that Grams is here, too, efficiently juggling the midday chaos. Technically, her job is to serve food, bus tables, and man the register. Her preference, however, is to chat up the customers, which she spends at least half of every day doing. Swiveling around on my stool, I watch as she makes her way towards me, a heavy tray balanced in her hands.

"Hi, honey," she says, leaning over the pile of dirty dishes to plant a light kiss on my cheek.

"Hey, Grams," I greet her, giving her soft cheek a kiss in return. She smiles at me gently, and I can tell by her sad expression that Mom must have filled her in on the whole Marcus situation. Realizing, however, that now isn't exactly the best time to talk about my newly broken heart, she just moves carefully past, pushing open the door to the kitchen with her hip and disappearing inside.

Calmly, I chew my pasta and start breathing easy for the first time all day. Unlike the commotion of school, the din of the café is a welcome comfort. Behind me, voices murmur in quiet conversation and silverware clinks. And as my mind finally settles down, I'm grateful to find my body responding; tension leaves my neck, and the small throb of a headache recedes. I reassure myself that if I was able to make it through the morning, then I'm positive I can conquer the afternoon too. Or almost positive anyway.

A sharp tug on my shirt pulls me abruptly from my thoughts. Looking down, I see Myra gazing back up at me, her eyes brimming with disapproval. "Why aren't you in school?" she demands, her fists resting sternly on her hips.

"I was hungry," I say, patting her head and shaking mine at the same time. I always wonder how such a big attitude can fit inside such a tiny body.

"Well, *I'm* hungry too," she pouts, and somehow that little grimace tugs at my heart in a way that only Myra can manage.

"Why are *you* here?" I ask, motioning for her to climb up onto my lap. "And where's your sister?"

"Helping Daddy," she says simply.

"The dishwasher's acting up again. Last I knew, the twins were back there lending Dad a hand." Mom flashes me a quick grin, quickly smothered before Myra notices. I grin back because we both know this for the lie it is. The girls' version of helping usually means more work in the end. Luckily, they're so cute you forgive them almost immediately.

"Myra! Stop that!" I gasp dramatically, eliciting a highly rewarding giggle. "How am I going to make it through the afternoon if you steal my whole lunch?" She's so intent on pilfering strand after strand of spaghetti from my plate that she doesn't even pause when I swat at her chubby hand. It's not like I actually object though; my exasperation is a total farce, and we both know it. She could steal every last morsel on my plate and I'd smile stupidly, even as I starved to death.

"Really? You're heading back?" Mom asks.

"I have to. Amelia will probably give herself a stroke if I'm not in history."

"Gotcha." She looks at me carefully. "Has it been horrible though?"

Briefly, I consider just putting on a happy face, but it isn't as if I could hide anything from her even if I tried. She has this finely tuned sixth sense that picks up on the smallest of negative vibes, which translates into reading me like a book. An open book, with super large print.

"Yeah, kind of horrible," I admit. "But I'm okay." I see her watching me quietly, no doubt reading my energy and deciding whether or not to call me an outright liar. *"Really*. I'm okay."

"If you say so," she nods. "Don't forget there's a bigger picture here, Maggie Rae," she pauses, waiting until I reluctantly meet her eyes. "You remember that, right?"

"I remember, but it doesn't make this feel any *less* pointless."

She sighs. "I know."

"I just don't get why God had to make life into this big impossible riddle. I mean, things aren't complicated enough? And how come there always has to be a bigger picture anyway? Because you know what? I don't *feel* like learning this lesson, and I don't *feel* like solving this riddle because everything about this *stinks*," I fume, attempting without success to wipe the scowl from my face. "So I'm supposed to just wait, right?" The thought only frustrates me more. "Because that really sucks too."

Myra twists around, pointing a finger at me. "Don't use bad words," she scolds. I notice that in the time I've been talking to Mom, she's stolen almost every piece of food off my plate. But it's perfectly fine with me, considering how my appetite has completely disappeared again anyhow.

"Maggie Rae, you can do with this what you want." Mom shakes her head at me. "You can waste time being furious at the way things are, or you can get on with your life and let the answers find you. Just be patient and it'll work out in the end." She shrugs. "Doesn't it always?"

I watch Myra clearing my plate of the last few crumbs while I consider Mom's words. Because as much as I sometimes hate to admit it, she's right more often than she's not. Unfortunately, at the moment I feel a little too bent on self-pity to ponder the value of this particular life lesson. I wasn't the one who screwed up here, and it feels totally unfair to me that I have to waste so much of my energy trying to make sense of someone else's mistake. A quick glance at the clock tells me that I'd better get moving, but knowing

Mom, this conversation will resume at a later date.

"Crap, I'm gonna be late." Myra turns around with another look of reproach. "I know, I know, bad word." I drop a kiss on the top of her head before sliding her off my lap. "Thanks for lunch, Mom. Bye, peanut."

Slipping from the stool, I head back out into the sunshine. But before disappearing around the corner, I look back to find Mom still watching me, a thoughtful expression on her face. I know her well enough to realize she's probably wondering what the universe has in store for me next. I just hope that when she finds out, she's nice enough to let me know.

The afternoon feels like it'll never end, and I'm so exhausted by the time I finally get home that I find myself on the verge of tears. Again. Somehow I rally, though, pretending all is well and putting on a happy face for the twins while we eat dinner. Their animated chatter is as entertaining as usual, but the closer I get to the end of this day, the heavier my heart feels. As soon as I'm finally able to break free, I head up to the quiet of my room. Laughter drifts up the stairs behind me as Dad's voice starts crooning Madonna from the kitchen. He's unbelievably bad, but the twins seem to find him hilarious. I'd smile if I didn't feel quite so much like I'd been run over by a truck.

"Sir Bartholomew?" I sing, whistling two soft notes as I open the door to my room. The little yellow bird appears to be sleeping

soundly on his perch, but I know better. I whistle again, louder this time, and laugh as one eye pops open and fixes directly on me. He feigns disinterest, but I'm still not fooled. A twitch of a wing. A shift of a foot. A slow yawn of the beak. Then in a flash, he zips across the room to land on my shoulder where he perches, bobbing his head in happiness.

I nuzzle him for as long as he'll allow it, but eventually he tires of me and sets off for a potted hibiscus by the window. And finally, heaving an enormous sigh of relief, I fall back onto my bed and just lie there, motionless. Corpse-like even. My hope is that if I can just stop moving for a while, it'll somehow make this horrible pain in my heart disappear. My hope is quickly dashed, though, because as soon as my body is still, it leaves my mind free to wander to places I'd much rather avoid. Almost immediately, his face flashes through my mind, and I'm hammered by a medley of emotions that only causes the heart pain to increase exponentially.

Sadness, self-pity, and jealousy all vie loudly for my undivided attention; some pretty fierce anger is hanging out in there too. I've always been good at just letting things go, so I'm not really sure what to do with these swells of rage. They almost manage to convince me that raving like a lunatic for a while would be the best course of action—really, the only course of action. And let's not forget the crushing humiliation, like somehow this whole thing is my fault. Which is completely crazy. I mean, it isn't like I poured the alcohol down his throat, turned down the bed, and unzipped his pants for him. Crap, there's some disgust. Duly noted and added to

the ever-growing list of emotions I'd rather just ignore.

It doesn't take me long to realize that all of this uncensored thinking is only leading me deeper into depression, so I reach for the distraction of my phone. I know Amelia will be checking in on me, and as much as I don't want to talk to him, part of me still hopes to find a message from Marcus.

Nothing from Marcus, but I wince at the eight unread messages from Amelia.

6:04 – Mandatory check in. Hows it going?

6:10 - Mags??

6:16 - Blow ur snotty nose and TALK TO ME

6:19 - Mags, im getting v mad

6:24 - Srsly mags, u have 30 seconds…

6:24 - 20 seconds

6:24 - My jacket is on…

6:25 - Damn it. Be there in 20

I can't help but smile as I read through the barrage of messages, even though I know I've made her worry. To be fair, I accidentally make her worry at least three times every day. Realizing that she'll probably be here any minute, I haul myself up off the bed and head over to my desk, collapsing into the chair. That enormous effort pretty much drains the last of my energy, so I just sit there, waiting for Amelia to sweep in and rescue me from myself.

I can hear her coming long before my bedroom door finally swings open with a bang and she lurches in, waving her arms wildly. Clinging to each of her legs is an adorable blonde monster dressed

only in Disney princess undies and shrieking with unrestrained glee.

"Maggie, heeeeellllp meeeee," Amelia wails. Her desperate cries only incite the twins to scream even louder before all three collapse onto my bed in a tangle of hysterical laughter. The girls scale her legs and begin to cover her with wet and affectionate kisses. "Can't… escape…" Amelia moans.

"Hide us, Meely, hide us," Myra begs.

"We don't want a bath," Zoe whimpers. I hear a quiet laugh and know that Mom and Dad lurk just beyond the door.

"I shall save you, my precious little peas. Quick—under the covers!" Amelia cries, sprawling lightly across the wiggling lumps just as Mom and Dad stroll in.

"I'm afraid I have some truly terrible news, Amelia," Mom says, heaving a deep and overly dramatic sigh. "The twins have vanished into thin air; I can't find them *anywhere*." She winks as a fresh wave of giggles erupts from beneath the blankets. "It's too bad, really, because Daddy and I were going to pop up a batch of popcorn and snuggle down for movie night. We were thinking about *Shrek*, but it looks like we'll be watching it all alone." She waits as the giggling abruptly stops, and the covers go still. I can just imagine them under there, somehow making eye contact in the dark and communicating in their silent way.

"Nope, sorry, Mrs. B., I haven't seen the little goblins anywhere. Did you check the toilet? Maybe they went for a swim."

After one last round of muffled giggles, followed by some pretty desperate thrashing, the blankets are tossed aside and a fuzzy

little head reemerges.

"Mommy, please, please can we have cinnamon popcorn?" Myra begs as she frees herself from the sheets and scrambles madly across the room. "And I don't wanna watch *Shrek*, I wanna watch *Nemo*. Can we, Mommy? Can we watch *Nemo*? *Please*?"

Zoe follows her sister out, but not with nearly as much enthusiasm. I had a feeling she wouldn't relish the idea of a refreshing toilet bowl swim. "Meely," she says with a frown, her giggles quickly forgotten, "the toilet is *so* dirty. I would never play in there. Never. Not *ever*." She shakes her head emphatically.

"I know, pumpkin, I was only teasing." Amelia kisses her cheek. "Really I was," she says solemnly. Zoe hesitates indecisively, her tiny nose still wrinkled in distaste, before finally flashing Amelia a relieved grin. Racing across the room to join Myra, Dad scoops them both up and tucks a squirming girl under each arm. They head down the hallway to a steady chant of *Nemo, Nemo, Nemo,* and Mom blows a kiss at us as she leaves the room.

Amelia turns to glare at me before the door has even closed, the smile instantly melting from her face. The transformation is abrupt, and I prepare myself for the inevitable reprimand.

"*Why* do you *hate* me so much?" she scowls, throwing herself back on my bed with an irritated huff. "I was worried about you, you know." Crossing the room, I lie down next to her, both of us gazing up at the ceiling while she most likely contemplates how best to lecture me.

"Sorry," I offer lamely. "Maybe you can just blame it on the

river of tears that seems to perpetually leak from my eyes."

Amelia is uncharacteristically silent at the confession, knowing that tears are my least favorite mode of expression. I wonder, though, if it was enough of a surprise to earn me a pardon.

"That was a really pathetic apology," she finally sighs, "but under the circumstances, I feel forced to accept. Any word?"

"Nope. Nothing."

"I heard he ditched practice. Jonah told me Coach was pretty ticked," Amelia offers, hoping to console my pain with his, I guess.

"Well, it's reassuring to know that he might feel some remorse after being such a gigantic asshole." Marcus, an asshole? It feels totally wrong for those words to come out of my mouth together, yet here we are. Although I'm not sure how much I believe them, even now.

"Really Mags? Asshole is the worst you can come up with after what he did to you? I mean, c'mon. Was he even *thinking*?" She struggles to make sense of the unexpected turn of events, but I want to tell her not to bother. Because no matter how you twist things, the pieces still refuse to fit.

"He was drinking."

"Of course he was," she says. "As if that's solved any of his problems. Ever."

"Part of me knew that eventually something bad would happen. I mean, it had to, right?"

"Obviously, but I'm still pretty pissed that he hurt you in the process. I don't know why you couldn't just tell him to quit the

parties or quit you."

"Yeah, because that's how I work." I'm surprised when a small laugh escapes me. "I hated those parties, and he knew it. But I can't tell him what to do with his life, Amelia."

"Really? Well, what about when his decisions affect you, as they clearly did—do you get a say then?"

"I don't know," I moan. "What could I have done differently? It's his life to wreck if he wants to."

"Right. And how does it feel to be collateral damage?"

I sigh. "Pretty terrible."

"See, I don't get how you can be so damn *calm*. Can't you just, like, throw something? Smash some dishes? Set fire to something, maybe? I mean, where's all the crazy rage of a woman wronged?"

"It's definitely in there." I frown. "But I don't really get how this is supposed to work. Do I just *forget* all of the things he did right every day, but then remember forever this one thing he did wrong? Yeah, it's a giant mistake, but why is that one night so much bigger than all the rest?"

"Because betrayal is a huge deal, Mags. Like the kind of huge that smashes 'asshole' to smithereens." Amelia heaves an angry sigh before turning her head to look at me. "So I don't know what to tell you; I wish I did, but I don't have any idea how you make sense out of something like this. Maybe you just need time, you know, to figure it all out."

"Maybe." I like maybe. At least it sounds optimistic and hopeful, even though I can't quite convince myself to feel that way.

"Don't worry, you'll never find yourself in this kind of a mess. Jonah worships you." I squeeze her hand. "Not that I blame him."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right." She sighs. "It'll be me and Jonah. Forever." I notice a weirdly sad tone in Amelia's voice which seems completely at odds with the words she just spoke.

"What's wrong? Are you guys fighting?"

"No. Everything's fine. Same as it's been forever and ever. Fine, just *fine*."

"Yeah, because you sound fine."

"Maggie Rae, we're here to discuss *your* miserable love life tonight," she says firmly.

"What, as opposed to yours?" Because last I knew, things were perfectly okay with her and Jonah.

"I don't *know* what's wrong," she says, her voice frustrated and short. "Maybe, as sad as you are, you're just better off. Maybe we've been hanging on to a *dream*, Mags. Maybe we never even stood a chance because we only fooled ourselves into thinking we had something special."

"Amelia, I'm not even sure what we're talking about." Maybe I could make sense of our conversation if I wasn't so exhausted, but as it stands, it just sounds like gibberish.

"You. Marcus. Me. Jonah. What if it's not real? What if—"

"What if *what*?"

"What if it was *never* real?"

What if *what* was never real? And real? What does that even mean? All I know is that this break-up, and the resulting heartache,

feels more real than anything else in my life right now.

"So what exactly are you getting at?" I ask pointedly.

"I'm not *getting* at anything. Just wondering how you know when it's time to let go."

"I can't answer that," I say dryly. "My goodbye was kind of forced on me."

Amelia squeezes my hand gently, instantly reigning in her frustration. "Aw, I'm sorry, sweetie. I never know when to shut up; forget I said anything. Besides, this is *my* problem, and I'll figure it out."

We lie there silently, each of us lost in our own thoughts. I can hear the twins squealing in the tub and the soft chirping of Sir Bartholomew as we ponder love, loss, and other deep things.

"Marcus will fix this, Mags," she finally says quietly. "He will. I know he will."

"You sound so sure."

"I am."

I squeeze her hand back, hoping she's right as I let her words echo through my mind. *Marcus will fix this. Marcus will fix this. Marcus will fix this.* But I can't help but wonder if some things are just unfixable, especially when you pin your hopes on the one who destroyed it all in the first place.

1 year 6 months ago

I head towards the front office, hoping to get this over with as quickly as possible. Meet and greet really isn't my style, and I'm only helping out because Amelia begged me to, claiming her sore throat made it too painful to talk. Usually, she's the one to meet the new students who have the misfortune of starting the school year already in progress, giving them the "grand tour." Her bubbly, perky self ensures that their first impression is a positive one as she leads them through the halls, pointing out bathrooms and classrooms. Today, however, the job falls to me, and while being nice to strangers isn't the problem, small talk has never been my forte. There could be a few awkward silences in my near future.

I see the back of a head through the office windows and figure that's him, the "new guy." He looks up as I pull open the door and walk in, a warm smile spreading across his face. His unexpectedly cute face.

"Hi, I'm Maggie Rae," I say, with a warm smile of my own.

"Hey, I'm Marcus." When he stands up, it gives me a small thrill to find that he's taller than me; my height of five feet ten inches ensures that this doesn't happen too often. His hair is soft, dark, and slightly curly where it falls below his ears. It hangs

shaggy in the front, almost into his eyes, and I have this crazy weird urge to brush it aside.

"You ready to be wowed by Willow Creek?" I ask with a wry grin. He doesn't get the joke yet, but he will. Willow Creek is tiny, and this whole tour guide thing is more a matter of kindness than necessity.

"Lead the way, Maggie Rae," he says, theatrically opening the door.

We finish wandering the halls a short fifteen minutes later, and that's with me dragging my feet. I scramble to come up with a room I may have missed and seriously contemplate showing him the janitor's closet, but I decide that might be pushing it just a little bit.

"So where are you from?" I ask, trying to ignore the fluttering of an unexpected butterfly in my belly.

"Florida, right outside Orlando."

"Oh. That's…" I scramble to come up with an appropriate adjective, "…nice." It sounds lame, even to me, but it's probably not necessary to mention the fact that I hate Florida, every single hot and humid minute I've spent in it. But out of prudence, I refrain from sharing that. First impressions and all.

"Don't sound so enthusiastic," Marcus laughs as we head back towards the office.

"Sorry." I shrug with a grin. "It was the best I could come up with."

We reach the office all too soon, and I ask to see his schedule, knowing I can't possibly drag this out any longer.

"Your first class is down there, on the right. Not that you couldn't have figured that out on your own. The last school you came from was probably three times the size of this one."

"More like four," he says, grinning.

"Yeah, well, it looks like we have gym together, so I guess I'll see you later." The thought sparks another explosion of butterflies in my stomach.

"Excellent."

"You probably won't be saying that after you see how I butcher a good game of softball"—I wrinkle my nose—"or basketball or volleyball. Or anything, really."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Yeah, that just means you'll need me. On your team, I mean."

"It won't matter," I say. "Sports and I don't really get along, no matter whose team I'm on."

"I'm a little worried though. I mean, what if I get lost on my way to the gym? This place is pretty overwhelming." He's looking at me with wide eyes, and I shake my head with a laugh.

"Somehow, I think you'll manage."

"But if I don't?"

"The school's small. I won't be hard to find." I start walking

away, heading towards my first class.

"How about if I wait for you?" he calls out after me.

I stop and turn back toward him. Yes, yes, yes, wait for me.

"Um, sure," I say in a voice that sounds deceptively nonchalant. I hope.

"Thanks for the tour," he says with another one of those irresistible grins.

"Not a problem." I really wish he'd stop smiling. It's highly disorienting. And distracting. I raise my hand to give a small wave goodbye, and I can still sense his eyes on me as I turn the corner. I'm not really sure what just happened because it kind of feels like those fifteen minutes have been the most exciting of my life so far. I suspect witchcraft. Definitely witchcraft, hidden somewhere behind that smile.

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Screw beginnings with all of their shiny possibilities, tricking us into believing that things will stay sunshine and butterflies forever. Because here's the thing: We never know where we'll end up when we take that first step, and yet we take it anyway. Are we *insane*? All caught up in the new and exciting, the risk somehow seems justified and we conveniently forget how much it sucks when things turn ugly. When things go exactly where we never would have thought they could go. And now here I am, firmly stuck in that ugly place, and it's even worse than I imagined it could be. I'm furious, but also ridiculously confused. Like I want to let go, but like I want to hold on—at the same time. Which is obviously impossible. And more than anything else, I just really, *really* wish I could have my sunshine and butterflies back.

With a deep sigh, I stretch slowly beneath the warm sheets and decide it's way too early in the day to start wishing for the impossible. Instead, I wonder if my camera batteries are charged because I've decided to make Mom proud and do some inner healing today—more commonly known as ditching class. The day is too perfect to pass up, and I know that being outside will do more for me than sitting in school for seven hours, watching the minutes tick slowly by. My camera calls to me, begging me to capture the

little fragments of beauty that still exist everywhere. Taking pictures always forces me to shift my perspective from big down to small. Minute, even. It moves my attention off of all the things that are wrong with the world and onto all of the things that are right and whole and perfect.

Crawling out of bed with far less enthusiasm than usual, I pull on jeans and a sweatshirt before heading downstairs. I fill Mom and Dad in on my plans during breakfast and give the twins each a kiss goodbye before heading out, armed with the day's supplies. Pausing on the porch to tie my sneakers, I look around the backyard, still laden with morning dew. The grass is littered with the crunchy refuse of fall, the air is cool, the skies are blue, and the sunshine is warm. Looks like a picture-perfect day and I head out eagerly, making my way through the wet grass.

A field opens up before me as I carefully climb over the crumbling stone wall at the back of the yard. After a chilly night, wood smoke lingers in the morning air, fragrant and familiar. Birds call happily back and forth to each other, while the screech of blue jays borders on unnerving. The treetops are a frenzy of activity as squirrels race madly through the branches, pausing only long enough to chatter furiously at each other. I see two particularly feisty critters involved in a wrestling match; may the best nut-gatherer win.

Wading through the waist-high grasses, I'm almost to the rear of the field now. The far end meets up with more trees, tall evergreens that seem to touch the sky and then keep on going. At

the edge, I climb over another stone wall before stepping into the chilly silence of the woods, relaxing as peace settles over me for the first time in days. Pockets of sunlight filter through the leaves to reach the forest floor, all covered in inches of soft, spongy debris. The smell of it hangs wet and heavy.

Wayward leaves crunch under my feet—castoffs from a random maple or oak that has somehow managed to survive in this forest of perpetual green. I climb over fallen trees along the way and occasionally pick through prehistoric patches of dying ferns. It's about a ten-minute walk before the trees end abruptly and open into a small clearing. Stepping into the sunlight again, I'm overcome with a feeling that I've come home.

When I was a kid, Dad and I were hiking out here and discovered this place. He jokingly called it Fairy Grove after one of my most favorite childhood stories, never realizing that the name would stick. Although I have yet to spy one of those fairies—magical and elusive as they are—every visit has me wondering if maybe today will be the day. Because if fairies truly do exist, this is definitely where they would gather.

I cross the sunlit space and head towards a tall maple, mostly stripped of its leaves. Its naked branches, so graceful against the sky, stand guard over the brook that moves beneath its now-gone summertime shade. Releasing my bag, I slide down along the trunk until I'm resting on the ground. Breathing deeply, I let my eyes close; it's such a relief to be here, alone and away from the world. But my gratitude is short-lived as the buzz of my phone disturbs the

silence, vibrating with someone trying to reach me when all I want to do is get away. I'm not surprised when I see four unread texts, knowing they can only be from Amelia. I read through them, each one becoming increasingly anxious with every silent minute that passes. It's the norm: Where am I? Why aren't I in school? Am I okay? I shoot off a reply as quickly as I can, letting her know that I'm safe in Fairy Grove, and I'll catch up with her later. Oh yeah, and I'm sorry. She's sadly resigned to me sneaking out here and probably would have figured it out herself if she hadn't been so busy freaking out. But that's just my Amelia: she has a gift for imagining the worst-case scenario.

Tossing my phone back into my bag—and hoping it will stay quiet this time—I grab something to eat while I sit. Listening to the birdsong and smelling autumn on the breeze, I'm surprised by an unexpected flash of happiness. Fairy Grove has a funny way of doing that to me—of reminding me that while things might feel impossible to fix sometimes, they'll eventually sort themselves out. And likely in unpredictable ways. This reassuring thought lingers and comforts me for a whole five seconds before an unfamiliar flash of white catches my eye. Curious, I look over to find a small plastic bag with a folded sheet of paper inside. I can't know—yet I do know, instantly—that it's a letter from Marcus. *No. Not here.* It's like I can never escape it, no matter how hard I try, and the unexpected intrusion makes my hands shake and my chest tight. I haven't checked my email in days, and except for the unfortunate passing in the hall that first morning, I've managed to avoid him at

school. But he knows me well enough to realize that I would eventually end up here. I stare at the paper, methodically crunching my apple even though my appetite has vanished, and wonder if I have the courage to open it.

Not yet. Instead, I willfully choose denial and reach for my camera. Beginning to wander, I happily lose myself in the process. It's amazing how detailed the world gets when my camera is in hand. All of a sudden, it's about the tiny pieces instead of the big picture; it's an amazing change of perspective. My vision just keeps shrinking as one piece leads to another, each one smaller, yet just as perfectly created. Sometimes hours will pass as I lie stretched out on the grass, discovering the tiny world beneath my feet that I would normally miss. Today, a small green frog captures my attention, and I wonder how much longer before this little guy hibernates for the winter. I snap away, experimenting with the lighting, and wonder if tomorrow he'll be gone. Eventually I wander off again, mesmerized by the sunlight illuminating some of the last leaves left on the tree. They dance in the cool breeze, and even as I watch, one decides the time has come to bravely release, leaving behind all that it knows to dance with the autumn winds.

As much as I might want to, I know I can't avoid it any longer. The tremors that I first felt when I noticed Marcus's letter have passed. Taking pictures quieted the unwelcome surprise I felt at finding a piece of him here, as if the memories aren't bad enough. Making my way reluctantly back towards the maple, I start to feel slightly nauseated the closer I get to that sinister little bag. Moving

with intentional slowness, I pull a small blanket from my backpack before spreading it carefully on the ground. A check of my phone reveals no new messages, and so with no excuses left, I reach for the bag with the note tucked inside. A rock holds it all in place, and the plastic has kept its secrets safe and dry. The paper is folded in quarters, and I open it slowly, my breath catching at the familiar sight of his handwriting: small, cramped, and slightly messy.

Maggie Rae

It's been over an hour and I'm still just sitting here, staring at this blank paper like an idiot. But what can I say that will ever make you forget what an asshole I am? If you tell me there's a way to fix this, consider it done. No matter what it is. I'll do anything, Mags, because I never meant to hurt you. I just never thought about anything more than running—as fast and as far as I could. But sitting here now, I wonder how come I didn't just run to you. The worst part is that I knew how awesome I had it. I knew it, Maggie Rae, every damn day. But because I'm a selfish prick, I had to screw it all up and lose you anyway. How can you forgive me? Do I even deserve a second chance? Would it be better to just give you space, or do I spend every minute trying to convince you that it'll never happen again? Because it would NEVER happen again. I love you, Mags, and I'm sorry. I almost wish you'd walked away when you had the chance because even though I never would have had you, I never would have hurt you. So damn sorry, Mags. Forever sorry.

By the time I reach the end, I'm sobbing. Dammit, how do I turn these things off? Has there ever been a time in my life when I didn't spend a good part of every day crying? I attempt to rein it in, but it's just too big. Bigger than me. Little whimpering moans escape me and I stand up quickly, desperate to get away from this overwhelming sadness. But where can I go to escape myself? Acknowledging the futility, I sink back to my knees before I've taken even a single step. Cradling my head in my hands, I take one ragged breath after another. The breeze blows, the birds sing, the leaves fall, and all I can do is cry. Shuddering, broken sobs, until I think that I'll break—just shatter into a million sad little pieces.

I feel like I've probably exhausted a lifetime of tears sitting here, and as numbing exhaustion breaks over me, I lie down slowly and curl up on the blanket. My head aches, my stomach hurts, and my eyes burn. I came here today to feel better, but instead, I easily feel a million times worse. I don't fight it as my eyes, heavy with heartache, slowly close. Drifting off gratefully, I find relief in sleep as the words *forever sorry* keep time to the beating of my heart.

The sound of tinny music can only mean one thing, so instead of going inside, I drop my bag on the porch and cross the driveway. Heading over to the workshop, I notice that the doors are open to the sunshine, and some familiar old-school rock plays on the small radio that I'm pretty sure is a relic from the seventies. Tools and rags litter the shelves, and a carburetor and distributor—both in

various stages of repair—lay on the grease-stained bench. The smell of gasoline and motor oil assaults me, triggering memories of my twelve-year-old tomboy self lying on that same dolly and singing along to The Doors. When I was eleven, Dad came home one Saturday morning nearly bursting with excitement. Giddy, even. Covering my eyes, he led me out to the driveway, whipping off the blindfold with a flourish to reveal my sweet sixteen birthday present. Yes, I was only eleven at the time, but it would take us four and a half years to remodel the sad, sad car in front of me. Where I saw dents, rust, and torn vinyl, Dad saw a lemon yellow, perfectly restored 1974 Volkswagen Beetle. I think there were actually tears in his eyes as he imagined what would one day be a masterpiece. Working together out in this workshop was one of the happiest parts of my childhood, and since I had a pretty perfect childhood, that's saying a lot.

Two overall-clad legs poke out from beneath the frame of a 1969 Camaro in desperate need of a paint job. And headlights. And a steering wheel. And an engine. He likes to find cars at their worst and rescue them, much as a normal person would rescue a dog from the pound. But instead of bringing home a five-pound ball of adorable fluff, Dad brings home a three-thousand-pound piece of rusted metal. And he thinks it's just as cute.

I hang off to the side and enjoy the sunshine on my back as I watch him wheel himself out from underneath the car. Standing up, he heads over to the bench but only makes it about halfway across the room before he starts singing along quietly to the music. I grin,

knowing exactly how this is going to all play out because the same scene has unfolded countless times before, usually with me crooning backup. The singing escalates, gaining both momentum and volume. He pauses occasionally to belt out an especially heartfelt line or two until he's finally overcome by awesome drum solos and stops suddenly to play a ferocious air guitar. A quiet *thank you, thank you,* as he waves to an audience only his eyes can see, signals the end of his performance.

"Still a master of imaginary instruments, huh, Dad?"

"We all need to be master of something, Mags." Dad turns to me with a laugh. "How was your day?"

"I've had better." I shrug, and he quietly nods his understanding. "How come you're not at the garage?"

"Snuck out early. I figured if you could skip, then so could I." We both smile, one naughty kid to another.

"Need any help?" I ask, moving over to the bench.

"Nah, I'm done messing around for the day. Your mom should be home soon," he says, climbing out of his overalls. He hangs the oil-stained pants on a hook before heading over to stand beside me. "You hanging in there?"

"I guess so." That may be somewhat of a stretch, but I'm not about to disclose the breakdown I just had. Pretty sure it's clearly etched across my face anyway.

"You know, I'm guessing that your mom and I probably called it quits once a month in the beginning." He grimaces. "No one figured we'd make it past the six-month mark, but here we are,

twenty years later." He looks past me, out into the sunshine. "All I can say is that sometimes it's worth waiting for people to stumble through their mess of a life, figuring junk out. I won't lie and say that the waiting is easy, on either end, but I'm glad your mom has the patience of a saint." He laughs, dropping his arm around my shoulders and kissing the top of my head. I poke at the carburetor, wondering if I have even a fraction of that same patience.

The crunch of tires in the driveway tells us that Mom and the girls are home, so we make our way out of the workshop together.

"Hey," Mom says, surprised to see me. "Back so soon?" She opens the door of the car, letting the girls scramble madly out.

"Yeah, Fairy Grove wasn't so magical today," I say with a frown, eager to change the subject. "Dad was just telling me how glad he is that you waited until he got his act together."

"He got his act together? Funny, I hadn't noticed."

"Ouch, Bobbi, a little help please? I was trying to console our daughter, telling her that even the biggest of fools can redeem themselves."

Mom laughs. "Then yes, Mags, miracles do happen because you're looking at one." She rolls her eyes as he swaggers over, hands still grubby from work.

"Unless it's just my charming ways? It could be that too."

"Grease-monkeys aren't charming, Jimmy. They're filthy." She plants a hand firmly on his chest, but her protest is half-hearted; even I can see that. "Quit it, you're a mess. Besides, you just saw me two hours ago; you've barely had time to miss me."

"Barely had time?" Dad pushes aside her hand, wrapping Mom in a greasy embrace. "It's been two long and miserable hours of missing you." He leans over to kiss her lips gently.

I'm watching them and wondering if the public display of affection is almost over when Dad starts nibbling on her neck. And when her only reply is to laugh quietly before the whispering commences, I take that as my cue and make my way into the house. Besides, I'm suddenly famished and head straight for the refrigerator, feeling desperate enough to eat the first thing that even resembles food. I'm guessing that sobbing must be a pretty good workout to whip up such an appetite. But before I've made all that much progress, there's a sharp rap of knuckles on the door, and I look up to see Amelia gesturing wildly at me through the glass. Taking another careful bite, I watch her thoughtfully and wonder what would happen if I pretended I didn't see her. Or locked the door and ran. But I deliberate too long, and my chance is lost.

"For crap's sake, Maggie Rae, are you *trying* to kill me?" Amelia blows in, frustration clearly written across her face. "For all I knew, Slender Man finally found you out there in the woods and dismembered you, one gorgeous limb at a time!" Her scowl is ferocious, and I know she's totally serious, but I still can't stop myself from smiling at her fury. This scene plays out almost exactly the same way every time I visit Fairy Grove. I usually don't even tell her when I'm heading out anymore, knowing full well that this will be her reaction. You'd think that over the years things would've changed, but despite the fact that I make it home safely each time,

she still flips out. Once again, I wave the white flag of surrender.

"I'm sorry, Amelia," I say contritely.

"You're always sorry." She's still glaring at me with narrowed eyes. "I really, *really* wish you wouldn't go out there alone! I can't believe your parents let you, or that Marcus is okay with it, either." Realizing immediately that she's spoken the taboo name, she closes her mouth quickly, pursing her lips. I can see her wondering if the mention of Marcus was too much, too fast. I decide to ignore it.

"I'm unruly, Amelia, truly." I try a small smile, wondering if my lecture is almost over. "Forgive me?"

"For the hundredth time?" She's still scowling, but I can sense a softening. She's really been far too easy on me since the whole break-up thing. "*Fine*. But I swear, one day as you get carried off screaming and begging for mercy, you'll remember this conversation. But"—she throws up her hands—"it'll be too late, and in your last moments you'll wonder why you had to be so freakishly stubborn." Her eyes flash for another minute, focused on a future that only she can imagine. Sometimes I think it must be scary to live in her head, so many bad things happen there. "Besides, you look terrible," she sighs. "Have you been crying again?" The rapid tone change signals the end of my scolding. It was pretty mild as far as Amelia goes.

"Gee, thanks." I half-heartedly run my hands through my hair before reaching down to pull the letter from my bag. Just seeing the tear-stained note makes my eyes well up again, and I hand it to her quickly. Turning to look out the kitchen window, I wait as she

quietly reads it through. A long minute or two passes before she comes up behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist and leaning her head against my back.

"It all just seems so unfair. It's probably your own fault, though, for being so understanding. And nice. Do you always have to be so damn *nice*?" She squeezes me tightly. "Forgive and forget? Or not a chance?"

"Forgive and *forget*? I'm not really sure how to do that. Even though all I want to do is pretend the whole stupid thing never happened."

"Maybe if there was some way to start over again. Don't people do that somehow? You look so sad, and Marcus is a total mess. He just sounds so . . . broken." She frowns. "It's all wrong, you know? You guys *belong* together."

I turn slowly, with eyes narrowed. "*Sounds* broken?"

"Yes," she mutters, dropping her arms and heading over to the table where she sinks dramatically into a chair. "I couldn't stand it, Mags. I know that it's totally his fault, but he just looks so pathetic. When I found him sitting outside during lunch today, I was all set to rip him a new one . . . but then I just couldn't do it." She groans, as if being kind is some type of character flaw. "I know he screwed up, and I'm not saying that you should give him a second chance, but I wanted to hear what he had to say for himself. You're mad, right?"

I sit down across from her. "No, I'm not *mad*. But I'm not sure I want to hear what he said, either."

"He just kept moaning on and on about how sorry he was, and how much he misses you. How he can't sleep. How he can't eat. Oh, and did I mention that he misses you? Because he does. He must have said that at least a dozen times." She shakes her head; in sympathy or irritation, I can't tell. "So then he asked me whether or not I thought he should try and talk to you yet, but are you kidding me? It's a *horrible* idea. I can just imagine it now—a total sob-fest."

"Honestly, what is there to say anyway? If I could just hate him, this would be so much easier."

"Most people probably would."

I can't help but wonder if it makes me a terrible person that I'm relieved he's so broken and sad. As if I need his fractured heart to validate mine.

"What ever made us think we wanted boys anyway?" Amelia asks, frustrated. "They're such a pain in the ass." I'm reminded of our odd conversation last night and wonder if it was just some kind of momentary glitch.

"You know exactly when this started." I give her a look.

"Patrick Swayze," we say at the same time.

"I rue the day we ever saw that sliver of a butt cheek. It has ruined us forever." Amelia swoons, falling back in her chair. I'm surprised when a laugh bubbles up from deep inside, just happy to know that somewhere in there I still exist, even if I have briefly lost sight of myself. But if anyone can lead me back, Amelia can. Although a little help from Johnny Castle probably wouldn't hurt, either.

1 year 6 months ago

I force myself to walk at a natural pace and pretend that my heart isn't racing at the thought of seeing him again. Because let's be real, he might not even remember to wait for me. A lot could have happened in the forty-five minutes we've been apart.

"So where you zippin' to so fast, Maggie Rae? I know it can't be gym class since we're meeting the boys down at the field for a relaxing game of softball." Amelia smirks at me. "Your favorite, I know."

Crap. On a good day gym class just sucks, but on a co-ed softball day? Let's just say I haven't participated in one since the first week of my freshman year, better known as the most humiliating forty-five minutes of my life.

"No . . ." I groan, my shoulders slumping in early defeat. Softball, really? And today, of all days? But almost immediately, an image of Marcus flashes through my mind, and I figure that maybe I haven't given softball a fair chance. After all, it was just one ball to the stomach, and I was able to breathe again after only a couple of excruciating minutes.

"I'm sure it has absolutely nothing to do with that drop-dead gorgeous piece of boy-flesh that you escorted around school this morning."

"And how would *you* know he's drop-dead gorgeous?" I look at her briefly with narrowed eyes and wonder why her voice sounds suspiciously smug. And how come she's gloating like that?

"Oh, Maggie Rae, I have a terrible sore throat," she says in a quiet, raspy voice—the very same voice, in fact, that she used this morning to coerce me into doing her job. "Could you please, please walk the new boy around for me today? I'll owe you . . ." She falters weakly, or so it seems. Because looking at her now, with her rosy cheeks and cheerful grin, she appears to be in perfect health. I should have known she was behind this, but before I can say another word, we round the corner and there he stands. Waiting for me, as promised.

"Hey, Maggie Rae," he grins, making his way through the crowded hall towards me.

"Decided you weren't feeling confident enough to brave the halls alone yet, huh?" My smile at seeing him again is inappropriately huge. I really hope he can't tell.

"If I got lost, I'd miss your exceptional athletic skills." He shakes his head. "Couldn't risk it."

"Yeah, that would be a shame." The mention of gym class slightly deflates me, but I bounce back pretty quickly. "Your day going okay?"

"Not bad, but I'm only one class in," he laughs. "Things could get ugly fast."

"Optimism. I like that." I'm instantly rewarded with another laugh.

"I don't know, one school is pretty much the same as any other. First I get the stares, but those should stop after a day or two. Then, if people decide I'm interesting enough, someone will start talking to me. And if I win over one, the rest follow suit."

"And if you don't get that one?"

"It's a long year," he shrugs. But I don't really get the feeling that's something he needs to worry about. Probably ever. "Things are already looking hopeful though."

"How's that?"

"I'm working on winning over this really cool girl I met this morning."

"Making any progress?" What started as one lone butterfly has morphed into a whole swarm, loose in my belly and swirling madly.

"Too soon to tell." He grins at me again, and I shake my head, not naive enough to let him know that the progress is significant. Honestly, he's probably already accomplished his goal, but he doesn't need to hear that just yet. In a flash, I remember Amelia and figure she's probably getting a kick out of this conversation. But looking over to introduce her, I find that she's already vanished; although if I know her, she's hiding behind the nearest locker and listening to every word.

"You make it sound like you start new schools all the

time." I steer the conversation back to something a little bit safer. Something that doesn't make my stomach somersault.

"I do. My parents say this is it, but they've been feeding me that line since I was six."

"Military?"

"No. I'm not really sure what it is; sometimes I think maybe they just get bored. We've seen some pretty cool stuff, but after a while it gets old." I nod like I understand, but really I'm just thinking about how much I would hate that. That feeling like you never really belong anywhere.

"How many times?"

"Nine. The first was when I was six, and it's been pretty much every year since."

I'm stunned into momentary silence and question the sanity of his parents.

"Is it hard? Leaving so many people behind?"

"Sometimes." He nods without further elaboration. I wonder if he's left behind a bronzed and beautiful girlfriend in sunny Florida. "What about you?"

"My story has been pretty much the exact opposite of yours." I laugh. "I've lived here my entire life, and we're as settled as it gets. Just one of those boring, small-town girls," I say as we head towards the locker rooms.

"Boring?"

"I may have rare moments of brilliance," I shrug. "What

made your parents pick Willow Creek anyway? It sounds like a pretty radical change from what you're used to."

"I have no idea. Sometimes I think they just close their eyes and stick a pin into a map."

We reach the gym, and I turn to him with a grimace.

"Well, here we go. Prepare to be shocked and amazed at my athletic prowess."

"C'mon, you can't be that bad," he laughs, while I fervently start praying that I don't humiliate myself too badly over the course of the next forty minutes.

"You're right." I start walking towards the girls' locker room. "I'm *so* much worse."

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"But Daddy, Bert *wants* to play outside with us!"

"Myra, Bert is not going out into your playhouse, no matter how sweetly you ask me."

"*Please,* Daddy," she tries one more time, "rats *like* it outside!"

From the exasperated look on Dad's face, I can tell that Myra's been working him for a while, but he stands his ground. Suddenly realizing that the whining isn't getting her anywhere, she radically changes her position, planting her little hands firmly on her hips and twisting her mouth into a scowl. I watch in amazement as she stamps her tiny foot. Dad, however, is completely unfazed.

"Bert belongs inside with Ernie. Where it's safe." Dad stares at her firmly, signaling that the "discussion" is over. In reply, Myra turns and stalks away, her small feet pounding out her obvious disapproval. But knowing her, she'll be back; defeat isn't a word she likes to accept with grace. Or accept at all, really. I debate sticking around to watch the finale—because there's always a finale—but I'm already running late. With riveting little one-act plays like this to entertain me, it's no big surprise that I'm late virtually every day; it's actually more amazing that I ever make it to school on time.

But despite the early morning show, I pull into the parking lot with a couple of minutes to spare, totally feeling like I've got my act

together. It's short-lived, though, because as soon as I open my locker, I realize that I forgot my homework in the car. Heading back outside with a sigh, I decide that if I haven't figured out this whole punctual thing by now, then it's probably a lost cause.

Distracted—and wondering how I can get out of the inevitable detention—I barely register the group of guys hanging out in the cafeteria as I make my way back into the school. Their conversation is quiet and mostly indistinct until the word *faggot* drifts through the air. My whole body involuntarily tenses at the derogatory term and without even realizing I'm going to do it, I turn around and head back over to the threesome. It's almost like my brain hijacks my body when I feel like some kind of injustice is unraveling, and I think it would be as hard to stop breathing as it would be to refrain from intervening. The first time I remember doing it I was six years old, and I very sternly told a mother why it was wrong to spank her son. It's been years, but my mom still likes to tell that story.

"Hey, guys." I smile, walking over as though invited. "What's up?"

All three look at me, and while I immediately recognize two of Willow's Creek's most revered football players, Chris and Steve, the third boy is only vaguely familiar. I think he's a sophomore, quiet and artistic in some way, and I've seen him at the café once or twice on a Saturday afternoon. I'm pretty sure his name is Toby.

"Not much," says Chris. "Just having a chat with our little buddy here." He throws a heavy arm over Toby's shoulders.

All it takes is a quick glance at Toby to realize that he's hardly a willing participant in this conversation. His face is tense, and his hands are clenched tightly at his sides.

"Cool. About what?" I make the question sound friendly even though the situation seems like anything but.

"Nothing much that would interest you, Maggie Rae." Chris stares back at me, unblinking. I remember that the first time I ever saw Marcus drunk was at a party at Chris's house. So really, if we want to get nit-picky here, we could say that Chris is the reason my life feels like it's falling apart around me. The thought doesn't make me feel all that chummy.

"C'mon, Chris." I smile tightly. "Enlighten me."

"What the hell is your problem, Maggie Rae?" He shakes his head, clearly irritated at the interruption.

"A little bitchy now that she's not gettin' any from Marcus." Steve snickers. I shoot him my best look of withering contempt but Steve's not the brightest of bulbs, so it's completely wasted on him.

"We were just wondering"—Chris squeezes Toby tightly, his arm still around his shoulders—"who our little pal here is taking to homecoming." Toby swallows hard, and his cheeks burn pink. I watch as his fists clench even tighter, but he stands motionless and quiet—even though the silence is clearly killing him.

I stare hard at Chris, wondering how long I would survive if I were to launch myself at him. Even if I only had thirty seconds, I decide it might be worth it to wipe that condescending look from his face. Somewhere deep inside, I realize that my reaction seems

slightly out of proportion; I'm feeling unreasonably furious. Maybe this is some of that "woman wronged" attitude that Amelia so desperately wanted to see, finally fighting its way out. It's possible that things could get ugly.

"*What*?" Chris spits out. "Is this little queer a friend of yours or something?"

"Toby? You bet." God. I really hope his name is Toby.

"Well, then, I'll be sure to leave your *friend* alone, Mags, as soon as I find out what little hottie he's hoping to bang after the dance." He looks over at Steve, and the two buffoons share a hearty laugh. Toby's nostrils flare, but he's still standing rigid, so I decide it's time to release some of my brewing fury. In an act of sheer courage—or perhaps sheer stupidity—I step forward, deliberately pushing Chris's arm off of Toby.

"I'm just wondering why all the interest, Chris. Kind of seems like it's none of your business."

"Piss off, Maggie Rae," Chris growls. "This has nothing to do with you."

"It has everything to do with me."

"Really?" he sneers. "And how's that, exactly?"

"How's that?" I pause, staring defiantly back at Chris even as my mind scrambles to come up with something plausible. "Because it just so happens that *I* am the 'hottie' Toby's taking to the dance."

"Seriously? You went from Marcus to this little retard?" Chris asks, disbelief clearly written across his face. "Are you shittin' me?"

"Do I *look* like I'm shittin' you?" Toby's watching me intently,

an ever-so-small smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. I want to warn him not to get cocky because this isn't over yet, but I'm definitely feeling like I could break something. Amelia would be so proud.

"Whatever," Chris snaps, stepping back quickly and knocking over a chair in the process. "If you want to be seen with this little faggot, be my guest. As for you, Toby, we'll continue our chat when Maggie Rae isn't around to protect your scrawny ass."

"First his date, now his ass. I don't know, Chris, seems a little . . . weird." I say with a shrug.

"Cute, Maggie Rae. And speaking of asses, it's about fucking time Marcus dumped yours." I struggle to keep my expression neutral despite the stinging flash of pain.

Toby and I watch silently as they saunter out of the room, laughing—most likely at my expense. I turn to look at him once they're gone. "You okay?"

"Oh, I'll survive," he answers with a grimace. "Whoever says that high school is the time of their lives has obviously never lived a day in mine."

"I don't know. Someone tried to tell me once that bullying builds character," I say with a roll of my eyes. Obviously, it didn't come from someone on the receiving end. "What exactly prompted that little love-fest anyway?"

"I'm alive. I'm breathing. I was imbecilic enough to come to school."

"Oh. It's a regular thing then?"

"Yeah, pretty regular. Their witty repertoire never fails to amaze me. Football may be their sport of choice, but I'm pretty certain that a good game of hectoring Toby comes in a close second." He picks up his backpack, slinging it over his shoulder. "And you want to know what's most ridiculous about this whole thing? They come after me with the same homophobic jokes day after day . . . and I'm not even gay. Apparently, Chris just randomly decided that I was, and he hasn't let up since." He shakes his head in exasperation, like he's spent considerable hours trying to understand the workings of Chris's brain. I'm pretty sure it was a complete waste of his time. "Thanks for running interference. It made the show slightly more interesting than usual. Appreciate that." He offers me a small grin of gratitude as we leave the cafeteria.

"Anytime." I shrug, like it's no big deal.

"Great. Same time, same place tomorrow." He laughs and I join him, but I don't find it all that funny. And I'm pretty sure Toby doesn't, either.

No matter how much of an effort I make, I can't seem to keep my mind off of Toby for more than two seconds. I'm sure my preoccupation plays a part, but for some reason I run into Marcus countless times over the course of the morning, and I'm wondering if it's intentional. On his part or mine, I can't tell. No matter who's behind all of these "chance" meetings, it's still exhausting to see

Toby's eyes one minute and Marcus's the next—both equally sad, both equally unsettling. I need to talk to Amelia, but every time I try to corner her, she races off in a different direction; I get the distinct feeling that she's evading me. At lunchtime, I make my way to our regular table and sit down next to her before she can escape. I'm prepared to physically hold her in place if it comes to that.

"Why are you avoiding me?" I stare at her, waiting, until she finally looks up from her lunch and briefly meets my eyes.

"Would you believe me if I told you that I wasn't?"

"No."

"I didn't think so," she sighs, picking at her food. "But you're not going to like this."

"Tell me anyway."

Putting her fork down, she turns to look at me. "Hank asked me to a movie on Friday night," she says, taking a deep breath. "And I'm going to say yes." She looks away again, quickly, like she can't quite bring herself to watch my reaction.

Of all the things I was expecting to hear, this wasn't it. Moving to Germany? Maybe. Dying her trademark red hair a delicious shade of green? Perhaps. But cheating on Jonah? Not in a million years. Especially right now while she's watching me fight my way through the same pain.

"But what about Jonah?" I ask, struggling to suspend judgment, at least until I hear her out.

"I'll take care of that." Her words are short and clipped, like he's a simple enough nuisance to dispose of. And I'm feeling like

I've somehow stepped into the Twilight Zone.

"*Take care of that*?"

"Yes. I'm breaking up with him tonight."

"Are you kidding me?" I swear, I don't even recognize this girl across from me; her face shows absolutely no emotion. You'd never guess that she's talking about walking away from her best friend, severing the ties like it was nothing. I *knew* something really weird was going on. "Did Jonah do something that I don't know about?"

"Nope."

"Then why?"

"It's time."

"*Time*?"

"Yes."

"But, I don't get it. Why would Hank even think you're available?" I can't help but notice that she hasn't looked at me, not even once, since she mentioned Hank. Maybe it's because she's so intent on stabbing her pile of green beans to death.

"Hank's been asking me out for, like, four years. He doesn't care if I'm available or not."

"And that doesn't bother you?" I ask in surprise. Seems like a pretty clear indication of character to me.

"No."

"Amelia, *why* are you doing this?" I'm watching her face carefully, just looking for clues. She's quiet for so long that I wonder if she plans on ignoring me completely, but eventually she

looks up, a frustrated expression on her face.

"I would think, of all people, that *you* would understand that things change. All the time. They just *change*."

"Maybe, but this isn't 'just a change.' This is more like you, forcing a change that doesn't have to happen. For reasons you refuse to share."

"It's going to happen, Mags, sooner or later. What are the odds that Jonah and I, stupid high school sweethearts, will stay together?" Her face is twisted into an angry scowl that I still don't understand, but the "stupid" is definitely some kind of clue. I think.

"Who cares about the odds. Besides, what if you beat them?"

She laughs. "Beat them? I don't think so." Her voice is uncharacteristically cynical.

"So . . . you think it's a better idea to just throw this all away? You know, just in case."

"It beats waiting around for Jonah to come and tell me that he woke up next to some nameless girl that he doesn't even remember climbing into bed with." The reference to Marcus makes my stomach hurt, but I ignore it and stay focused on this strange conversation.

"Why would that happen to you?" I ask.

"Why would it happen to *you*?" she throws back. I don't know what to say to that since I'm not really sure why it happened to me, either. "Besides, this is just dumb kids' stuff anyway," she mutters, back to stabbing her helpless vegetables. "Why are we even wasting our time? This is *it*, Mags," she fumes. "After this year, everything

changes. We're all done here. High school is over and college starts. Who even knows where we'll *be* a year from now? If things with Jonah are going to end, better now than later."

"No one is telling you that it has to end," I say calmly, even though I feel frustration building. Because she's kind of acting like a lunatic. "And what do you think Jonah is going to say?"

"I'm making it easy on him. If I say yes to Hank, then he's angry. Furious, even. And anger is a lot easier to deal with than heartbreak. Besides, we're in high school; people make up and break up every day. It's just the way of things. He'll be fine."

He won't be fine; I know it, and she knows it. Which is probably why she's back to studiously avoiding eye contact.

"I think you're making a mistake," I say. "A huge mistake." Is it possible to stop her from doing something I know she's going to regret? "And Hank? Really?"

"He's cute. He likes me. And he's not looking for anything serious."

"Of course he's not." I snap the words out, but then take a deep breath to calm myself. "Amelia, can you *please* just think about this some more? Don't do anything yet, we can talk tonight."

"No, Mags. I've already thought about it. It's over." Her voice catches, revealing a small crack in her stoicism. I'm pretty positive that her heart is breaking inside, but since I'm not even sure where she's coming from, there seems to be no way to reach her. No way to stop her from doing something completely unnecessary and insane. For some reason, she's already planned this preemptive

strike—maybe thinking it will hurt less. I want to tell her it won't, but she's already packing up her stuff, clearly indicating that the conversation is done. When she looks over and sees my sad expression, she gently kisses my cheek.

"It's okay, sweetie. Everything will be fine," she says. But I'm not really sure who she's reassuring. Me? Or herself? And I can't help but wonder how many more pieces of my life are going to come crashing down around me before this is all over. Will anything—or anyone—be left standing? Or just me, in a pile of rubble that one short week ago was a pretty happy life. "Everything will be just fine," Amelia repeats, nodding firmly. As if her words can make it so.

"Detention again?" Grams asks with an amused smile. She's settled on the couch and crocheting, a half-finished blanket spread across her lap. The animated voices of Myra and Zoe drift in from the kitchen.

"Yeah," I groan, heading across the room. "I can't seem to be on time, no matter how hard I try."

"That's because you don't try all that hard," Grams says with a laugh, and she's right. Most days, I don't try at all. "How was your day?"

"Long," I sigh, leaning over to kiss her soft cheek before collapsing onto the couch beside her. I briefly consider trying to fill her in on all of the day's unexpected happenings, but the mere

thought overwhelms me. "What're you doing here?"

"Oh, your mom had some errands to run, so I told her I'd take the girls home with me if she'd feed me dinner. She thought that was a lovely idea."

"Of course she did; it's my night to cook."

"She's sneaky, that one." She laughs again and picks up my hand, kissing my palm. "Well, Magpie, I can't wait to see what you whip up."

We both look towards the kitchen as a squabble erupts, waiting to see if intervention is required.

"They're in there discussing how soon to expect babies from Bert and Ernie," she says with a shake of her head. "I don't have the heart to break it to them."

I nod, easily imagining Myra's meltdown, but mostly I'm just thinking about how nice it is that she's still holding my hand. I squeeze her gently and figure that maybe any warm hand will do when your fingers are lonely. We're quiet for a couple of minutes, listening to the girls chatter in the next room.

"I was sad to hear about you and Marcus. You doing okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just kind of figuring it out as I go."

"Sounds like a good plan to me. We humans tend to overthink our problems anyway." She smiles. "If we could just let life play itself out, we might have a much easier go of it. But that whole patience thing trips us up every time."

"I miss him."

"I know, honey. Change can hurt. But whatever you do, don't

fight it." She's shaking my hand. "Without change, we wouldn't be able to create anything new—anything at all. Can you imagine how many of our dreams would never come to be without a change to first prompt them? So you just hang in there, okay? These growing pains will pass, and you'll be better for them."

"Promise?"

"I solemnly swear."

I curl up next to her on the couch and lay my head on her shoulder, resolving to never let go of her hand.

"How'd you get so smart anyway?" I ask with a small smile.

"I'm old, sweetie. Just part of the package, I guess." She chuckles, and it's weird because I never think of Grams as being old. Her wrinkles and white hair just kind of give her . . . character. And somehow make her beautiful.

"You'll never be old," I say firmly.

She laughs. "I think it's already happened, Magpie. With or without your approval."

"But only on the outside." I stubbornly refuse to let her win this one.

"I'll admit that might be true. Inside, I intend to stay eternally young." She nods her agreement as Myra races into the room. Scrambling up onto Grams's lap, she places one chubby hand on either side of her face, looking at her with sad eyes.

"Grammy, I'm *so* hungry," she moans. I can only roll my eyes at the little drama queen in action because I'm sure she's positively starving to death. After all, snack time was almost a whole hour ago.

"Oh, you poor little thing," Grams commiserates, patting Myra's cheek. "What should we do about that?"

"Feed me," she whimpers.

"I'm sorry, but I can't hear you past the whine," Grams says sweetly, her face still pinched between Myra's hands.

"Feed me," Myra tries again, ". . . please?"

"Much better, but don't look at me." Grams tips her head in my direction, and I can't help but laugh when they turn towards me in unison.

"Alright. I'm on it," I say, shaking my head. I give Grams's hand one last squeeze before pushing myself up off of the couch and heading to the kitchen.

"PIZZA! PIZZA! PIZZA!" Myra chants out wildly behind me. ". . . please."

1 year 5 months 2 weeks ago

"The awkward stares have finally ended. I am now an accepted member of the clan." He's been here for almost two weeks, and the school has finally moved on to bigger and better things. Currently, it's all about the rumor that the gym teacher is dating my English Lit teacher. They're both married, making it mildly more interesting news than the arrival of the gorgeous new guy, but not by much. I'm pretty sure they'll have moved onto something else by tomorrow.

"I'm not so sure. Claire was doing some pretty awkward staring during study hall." I had to work embarrassingly hard at not getting jealous; I was only moderately successful.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Well, maybe we should end that too."

"How's that exactly?"

"I don't know." He slowly shuts his locker, turning to look directly at me. "How about we get on with things and make this official?"

"Official? I mean, it's not a *terrible* idea." I shoot for a nonchalant shrug, but it's impossible to contain the grin that tugs at my lips. It's not like I've been waiting for this or anything.

"We should probably seal the deal."

"Oh, right. What do you suggest?" I ask, innocently.

"I don't know," he says. "This?"

He leans in slowly, grinning back at me before his lips finally meet mine. It's instantly enough to get my overactive brain to stop thinking, but not before I register that it's even better than I'd imagined. And I've been doing way too much imagining. I feel a current move up my body, starting at my toes and exploding out the top of my head.

"Move it along, Mr. O'Connor." The vice principal taps him on the shoulder as she walks by, thus ending our first official—and all too brief—kiss.

He backs up a step, his hand reaching for my fingers. "Not too bad," he says, nodding his head in obvious approval.

"But not too good, either." I suppress a laugh when he does a double take. "I just think we could use a little more practice, that's all. It's not your fault. The first kiss is never that great." He's watching me carefully because I'm doing a remarkable job of sounding completely serious. Even though my lips are still tingling and there's no feeling in my toes.

Slowly, he catches on. "So what you're saying is there's always room for improvement, right?"

"Right." I nod solemnly.

"Just like with anything, it's all about the practice."

"Definitely the practice."

"And we should probably seal it again later?"

"Yeah," I nod again. "Because really, was that the *best* you can do?"

Reluctantly, we head towards our last class, still bantering between ourselves. In the short time we've known each other, we've gotten remarkably good at this. In fact, it may be our thing. Either that or hand-holding. Now that our hands have been formally introduced, I'm not all that eager to let go.

"Pretty sure a girl has never said that to me before," he says. "Usually, they just fall head over heels."

"Because you're irresistible?"

"That's what they tell me."

I laugh. "Well, maybe you've never dated someone as classy as me. You might have to step up your game."

"Or you might have to lower your standards." He looks at me with raised eyebrows, and I lean over to kiss him again, risking another reprimand.

"Let's start by allotting an hour of practice this afternoon. What do you say?" I ask.

"Only an hour? I've been told I'm not that good, so I probably need more like two. Just to be safe."

"I think I can arrange that." I say, as he brings our hands up and kisses my knuckles. "Just to be safe."

16

I sleep like total crap, tossing and turning all night long. While I could blame it on the full moon, it's more likely that my brain has gone into overdrive trying to process all of the day's drama; Toby, Amelia, Jonah, Marcus, and Chris all whirled madly through my dreams. I'm awake before my alarm has a chance to jar me from my half-sleep, glad to call this night quits.

For probably the first time in four years, I get to school early, pulling into the nearly empty parking lot and hoping to catch Toby on his way in. It seems kind of ridiculous, even to me, since it's not like I can keep watch over him all day long. And honestly, who's to say he'd even want me to? But doing something—*anything*—helps to make me feel a little less useless.

Cars start trickling in and as the students head towards the school, a human clot starts to quickly form by the doors. As expected, Chris and Steve are part of the steadily growing group who stand around, talking and joking loudly while slugging morning coffees. They seem completely confident of their place in the social hierarchy, and I realize that any of the less secure will have to kick off their morning by walking past the loud group. Maybe not a problem for all, but for someone like Toby, it's probably a painful way to start the day.

I hear the rumble of Marcus's motorcycle before I can actually see him, and as hard as I try not to, I still find myself riveted as he drives into the lot. Pulling off his helmet, he runs a hand through his hair before climbing from his bike. His backpack fits snugly over his leather jacket, and with his helmet hanging loosely from one hand, he heads straight inside without pausing to mingle with the group. Watching his long legs carry him away makes my throat tight, and this totally irrational part of me wants to race after him, forgetting that the past several days even happened. With a sigh, I realize that it's getting late—almost time for first bell—and I begin to wonder if Toby's even coming in today.

Finally, I see him trudging up the street, his backpack swollen with books and a guitar case hanging from his hand. I climb from my car just as he's walking by.

"Morning," I say cheerfully.

"Morning," he echoes with a small start. He may be surprised when I greet him, but he's even more so when I start walking beside him. After only several steps, he looks at me with a sideways glance. "I know what you're doing."

"And I don't know what you're talking about." While avoiding his gaze, I notice that Chris has spotted us; I can see the ugly look in his eyes from all the way across the parking lot.

"I'm not sure this is such a great idea," Toby says, obviously uneasy. "For you, I mean."

"So you have a better plan? Because the way I see it, there's safety in numbers. As much of an idiot as Chris is, I'm hoping he's

not dumb enough to hit a girl."

"You give him far too much credit."

"Dangerous, I know," I say with a shake of my head.

"What exactly is it that you're hoping to accomplish?" Toby asks. It's a legitimate question, and one that I don't really have a clear answer to.

"I just thought that getting through the front doors—you know, *without* the verbal abuse—would be a great way to start the day." But all of a sudden, I wonder if my being here will only make things much worse for him in the long run. "Would you rather I leave?" I stop abruptly, waiting for his answer. I was hoping to just deflect some of Chris's attention off of Toby and onto me, but what if it has the opposite effect instead?

"Ahh, no. I'm willing if you are, as cowardly as that probably sounds."

The rest of the crowd gathered around the door is busy cramming in their last laugh before first bell, but Chris moves to stand in front of the entrance, watching us. He leans in quickly as I reach for the door handle, and my stomach tightens in a small spasm of fear. It may only be simple self-preservation, but I'm still disgusted by my reaction.

"Looks like the pussy found himself a bodyguard. You plan on holding his hand all day, Maggie Rae?"

"Why? Would you rather I hold yours?" I smile sweetly, even as inwardly I shudder at the thought of his big, meaty hand swallowing mine. A muscle twitches beneath his left eye.

"You know, I never liked you much, but I had no idea you were such a total *bitch*. What the hell did Marcus see in you anyway?"

"Honestly? Probably not something you'd understand."

"Yeah. I'm not into prissy chicks."

"Aw, how disappointing." My shoulders slump, and I adopt a sad expression. "Because you're such a charmer, Chris, and you know girls just love that." I sigh, feigning sincerity. "Bet those high standards of yours are breaking a whole lot of hearts." Toby bites back a snort, but not quickly enough to avoid attention. I notice that the group has gotten strangely silent as they watch the scene unfold.

"Shut up, you little prick." Chris reaches over with a lazy hand, giving Toby a shove. It isn't much, and Toby only has to step back to regain his balance, but it's enough to reawaken that slumbering, woman-wronged rage that I discovered lurking inside me yesterday.

"*Really*?" I keep my voice low and controlled as I take a step closer. Too close, really. "So instead of using all that brawn to *protect* him from assholes like yourself, you're going to *be* the asshole?" I look around me, shaking my head. "And this is perfectly fine with all of you?" One or two have the decency to drop their eyes, but not Chris. Unfortunately, he just steps closer. Now we're nose to nose, and he's breathing hard into my face.

"You know what I don't get, Maggie Rae? Why this little dick is worth stirring up a shitload of trouble over. Now why would you

wanna go and do something stupid like that?" His voice is low and menacing. "For *him*."

It's a tricky question because I'm not sure how to explain kindness and compassion to someone who seems to have none.

"Right and wrong," I say bluntly.

"*I'm* wrong? Have you taken a good look at him, Maggie Rae? He's a goddamn freak of nature!"

"Funny, because you know what *I* see? I see someone just trying to get through these four never-ending years of high school as best he can. Just like you. Just like me. Except that unlike you and me, he *can't."* Somehow, I've become bigger than I am, and without thinking, I reach over and poke his chest to punctuate my words. His eyes narrow, but he doesn't move to stop me. "Because every single day here you are, in his face, making life so much harder and more miserable than it has to be." My eyes are almost level with his as I hold his gaze, unflinching. Outwardly, I'm calm, but inside I'm so fired up that my body has lost all thought of fear. "Have you ever thought about how much courage it takes to show up here every morning, knowing exactly what's waiting for him?"

We've jammed up the door standing in front of it like this, but those waiting to get into the school are wise enough to keep quiet. Chris looks like a volcano about to erupt, and I briefly wonder why we haven't attracted the attention of any teachers yet.

"Being brave enough to show up here every day means that he wins. And if he's the winner, Chris, what does that make you?" He finally pushes my hand away, squeezing it so hard that I'm afraid

my fingers are about to break.

"'Scuse me, 'scuse me, 'scuse me." I hear Amelia's voice slicing through the group, making its way towards me. "Maggie Rae? *What* is going on?" Her eyes jump from me to Chris and then back again, trying to figure out why we're standing here looking like two bulls about to charge.

"Oh, you know, just saving the world." I look directly at Chris, meeting his gaze head-on. "One loser at a time." Before he can reply—either in words or with fists—I reach around him for the handle and pull hard, slipping into the cafeteria with Toby close behind. I can hear Amelia demanding answers through the glass, and I know she won't leave until she gets them.

As soon as we're out of sight, I take a deep and shaky breath before turning to look at Toby. I can feel the adrenaline coursing through my body, looking for a release now that the danger has passed.

"You realize that now he'll try and make your life a living hell too, right?" he asks.

"Yeah, but ask me if I care."

"Let me know if you feel any differently after a week or two of his Neanderthal abuse. Or better yet, come back to me in about three months. Or a year." I have no answer for that because I can only imagine how constant torment could and would break a spirit. "You want to know what's really crazy about this whole thing? Yesterday you probably didn't even know my name, and now today you not only duel with the biggest meathead in school, but walk

away victorious. For me, a virtual stranger. Why would you do that?"

"Why wouldn't I?" I ask, surprised. It seems simple, really; if I see someone in trouble and I can help, I do.

"It's just that no one has ever done that for me before," he says. "So . . . thanks."

"Well, I figure it's the least that I can do for my homecoming date. After all, he seems like a pretty nice guy." The bell rings, and I look back over my shoulder as I head for class. "If you want to meet me here after school, I can give you a lift home."

"I have to give a lesson after school."

"That's okay, I can wait." I grin, my hand raised in goodbye. He raises his in response, and a small smile creeps across his face. It's instantly enough to erase the memory of Chris's black fury, and I can't help but marvel at the infinite power of a smile.

Hurrying to get to my locker, I turn the corner quickly, nearly colliding with Jonah.

"Sorry," we both say together. I smile. Jonah does not.

"You probably knew, right?" he asks, a frown darkening his normally cheerful face. So much for the fury Amelia had hoped for because all I see is the dreaded heartbreak that she was trying to avoid.

"Not until yesterday."

"But *Hank*?" Jonah shakes his head in disgust. "You know he's only after one thing, right?"

"Obviously. Don't worry, Jonah, Amelia's smart; it won't take

her long to figure it out."

"Does it matter even if she does?"

"I don't know." I wish I had a better answer for him, but I'm not even sure where Amelia's at right now. "For whatever reason, this whole thing with Marcus really made her freak out," I say. "Just give her some time."

He nods, but his expression tells me he doesn't quite believe my optimism.

"I'm sorry," I say, reaching out and squeezing his arm lightly. I know how he feels—mostly because I'm still feeling it myself—and I just wish I could come up with something encouraging to offer him. Unexpectedly, we both found ourselves in the same wretched boat at the same wretched time, and while it seems like that thought should be somehow comforting, it's not. "I'm really sorry," I repeat, at a loss for anything more helpful. What I wouldn't give to see one of his cocky grins right now.

"I'm thinking maybe I should beat the shit out of Marcus since this is obviously all his fault."

"Maybe," I laugh. "I'm not sure I'd stop you right now." If I can't get a cocky grin, his sarcasm is a close second best.

"So what you're saying is that you wouldn't hold it against me?"

"Nope. I'd probably even cheer you on."

"Cool," he says, keeping his voice light. But we both know that if things could be so easily solved, I would have happily beaten up Marcus days ago. Jonah turns to leave, lifting his hand in a silent

goodbye, and I wonder why Amelia had to go and turn one broken heart into two. Watching him walk away, I'm not sure who I feel sorrier for—myself or Jonah. And beating up Marcus is sounding better by the second.

Toby isn't waiting by my car after school, so I figure he's still giving his lesson. Finding myself with time to kill, I settle into the sun-warmed seat of the car and crack open my book with a contented sigh. The window is partly rolled down, letting in the warm afternoon air, and I slip back into the gloomy and strange world of *Wuthering Heights*. Yeah, it's a little bit dark, a lot bit depressing, and sometimes downright creepy, but that's what makes it such a great story. And let's face it, no one writes like this anymore. I'm not sure what it says about me, but I think I'm just a little bit in love with Heathcliffe.

I'm so lost in the troubled mind of Catherine that I miss his footsteps entirely, and it isn't until a shadow falls across my book that I glance up to find Marcus peering in at me.

"Hey," he says, shifting his bag.

"Hey."

"Everything okay?" he ask, looking down at me with concern.

"Yeah. Just waiting to give someone a ride home."

"Toby?"

"How did you know?" I ask in surprise, a split second before the answer dawns.

"Amelia," we say in unison. For an unexpected moment it's just us, as we've always been. We smile at each other, briefly forgetting the situation as it currently stands.

"She told me what happened this morning. I didn't know you had a death wish."

"Yeah, well, I thought it'd be an interesting way to start the day."

"If it helps, I told him to back off. And you were right about him; he is an ass."

I agree with a nod. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know."

There's an awkward silence following our conversation. I just sit quietly, waiting, while he shifts his bag again and looks around the lot. I see him struggling to find the words. Or maybe it's simply the courage.

"Can we talk?" Talk? Hell no. While this mess with Toby and the Amelia/Jonah split have all somewhat distracted me from the pain of our breakup, I'm positive the tears would flow just as easily if given half the chance. I sit there, unable to answer, while he watches my face intently. *Can we talk*?

"Okay, not yet. I get it."

Not yet? Seems optimistic, implying that one day I *will* be ready, but is that even true? Because the mere thought of that conversation kind of makes me want to gag. "I need time."

"Yeah, sure, Mags. Take as long as you want." He looks down, kicking the sand at his feet, before meeting my eyes again.

"You know I'll wait."

All I want to do is somehow forget everything. I want to open the door, climb out, take his hand, and tell him a funny story about something the twins did last night. I want him to ask me how my day was and whether or not I aced the history test. I want to say *I forgive you*, and I want to mean it. So what's stopping me from doing exactly that? Whatever it is, it holds me completely still and firmly planted in my seat. Like it never intends to let me go.

"I'm not giving up on us, Mags."

I want to tell Marcus that I haven't given up either, not completely, not yet. But once again, the words won't come. With relief, I see Toby heading towards my car. He's hesitant, as if unsure that this is still okay, so I smile and wave him over.

"Hey." Marcus nods, watching him curiously as he gets closer.

"Hi," Toby says. He stands awkwardly by the door, not sure of his place in this whole scene.

"Guess I'll catch you guys later."

"See you." I say it so quietly that I'm not sure if he can even hear the words. Turning, he heads over to his motorcycle, slipping on his helmet as he goes. His bike roars to life, and somehow the noise makes me inexplicably sad. He lifts his hand in a small wave of goodbye before he's gone, raising a cloud of dust, dirt, and gravel as he goes.

"Sorry. Did I interrupt something?" Toby opens the door and climbs in, sliding his guitar onto the back seat.

I sigh. "Not really. We just broke up a couple days ago."

"Yeah, I know. Actually, I'm pretty sure the entire school knows."

"Of course they do. Let's face it, they probably knew before I even did. Anyway, he wants to talk, and I can't. Not yet." I'm not sure why I'm telling him this, but the words flow nonetheless. "I mean, I wish that I could, but I don't even know what I want to say. I'm just in this really sad but furious place right now."

"That's okay, he's not going anywhere."

"What makes you say that?" I turn to look at him with surprise.

"Isn't it obvious? He's head over heels."

"Yeah, well, we'll see." I start the car before turning to face him again. "So, where to?"

The drive is as short as I guessed it would be, considering I found him walking to school this morning. I do manage, however, to surreptitiously steal a couple of quick glances over during the brief and quiet drive. It's strange to think that I've probably walked past him in the halls countless times, never really seeing him until yesterday when I found Chris munching on him like a morning snack. A light morning snack. If he tops a hundred pounds, I'd be shocked. His wavy hair looks to be unruly if given the chance, but it's kept tame and short, framing a sweetly freckled face. He's adorable. Grandmothers everywhere must want to pinch those cheeks.

I study the house curiously as I pull into the driveway. It's a small white Cape in need of a paint job, but the grass is cut, the

leaves are raked, and the yard is neat.

"So listen," Toby begins awkwardly, "about this whole dance thing? I appreciate what you did, but no one really expects us to show up together. Especially me," he adds with a wry grin. "Consider yourself free from the obligation."

"Oh. You already have a date?"

"Well, no." He shakes his head.

"Is there someone you were planning on asking then?"

"Actually, I had no intention of going to the dance at all. To some of us, dances are more a form of cruel and unusual punishment than anything else."

"I see. Well, would you reconsider your decision if a date forced herself on you?" He's looking at me now like I've sprouted a third eye, and I can't help but laugh. "C'mon, it'll be fun, really. Besides, Amelia's on the homecoming court, and she'll kill me if I'm not there. But I don't feel like going alone, so it just makes sense to go together."

"Perhaps *you'll* reconsider when I tell you that I don't dance."

"Don't or won't?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well, yeah." I roll my eyes. "If it's just a matter of *don't*, then there's absolutely nothing I can do to help." I'm slightly better at dancing than I am at sports, but not by much. "On the other hand, if it's only a matter of *won't*, then I'll need to use my incredible powers of persuasion."

"I'm sure they're truly remarkable, but have you really given

any thought to how we'll look on the dance floor? Like, together?"

"What do you mean, how we'll look?"

"Jeez, Maggie Rae, you're like a foot and a half taller than me. We'll look ridiculous."

"So what?"

"*So what*?"

"You care about that?" I watch him with eyebrows raised. The silence stretches while he thinks, a small frown wrinkling his brow.

"No. But I thought maybe a girl would."

"I should probably tell you right now that if you're expecting someone 'normal,' you might want to consider another date because that definitely isn't me," I say with a shake of my head. "Half the time I wonder if I've accidentally stepped into a parallel universe where everyone looks the same as I do, but they think and act so differently that we might as well be a totally separate species."

Toby laughs, like, for real. Out loud. Okay, maybe more like a chuckle, but it's still the best thing I've heard all day.

"Maybe we both somehow stepped through the same portal. I've spent considerable time trying to get back home; I'm finding this planet extremely *hostile*." He's still grinning, but I get the feeling that he makes it sound lighter than it really is.

I smile at him and wait as he turns it over in his mind, carefully weighing his options. Finally, he shakes his head at me, like he's just confirmed I'm completely crazy.

"All right," he half-heartedly agrees. "If you want to do this,

we'll do it. Remember, though, I gave you an out. Any sane person would have taken it."

"Maybe. Good thing I'm not one of those."

"Yeah, what a relief." He climbs out of the car, pulling his guitar and backpack with him. It looks like he may have half the library in that bag; I almost expect him to buckle under the weight. He leans back in before shutting the door.

"Thanks, Maggie Rae. It's been an interesting few days."

"Not a problem. But I'm thinking that maybe I should thank you. At least now Chris and I don't have to pretend we like each other anymore."

"In that case, you're welcome." He bows slightly. "See you tomorrow?"

"Absolutely."

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"Should we celebrate?"

"Celebrate what?" I do a quick mental tally of major holidays and come up with nothing. Crap, what if it's his birthday? I'm probably the worst girlfriend ever since I have absolutely no idea when that is.

"We've been official for a week now. Don't girls usually celebrate things like that?"

I almost make a snarky comment about the sweeping generalization until I realize that Amelia actually does celebrate every anniversary, real or imagined. But then this is quickly followed by the even bigger realization that he remembers our one-week anniversary.

"Well?" He's still waiting for an answer. "We can split a giant ice cream sundae and eat until we're sick."

"Ice cream? I don't think so." Suppressing a sigh, I wait for what comes next.

Confusion is written across his face while he tries to understand my lack of enthusiasm. It takes a minute or two, but finally it clicks. "Oh, right. The whole vegan thing. News flash, Maggie Rae, no cows died to make your ice cream." He grins at me, waiting for me to join in.

I'm quiet while I wonder how to tackle this because it's always risky in the beginning. I know that if I handle it well, after a while he'll just accept that this is how I do things, and it won't be such a big deal. But I also know that until it's clear that I make no exceptions, there's always going to be that push to "break my rules," like it's something up for discussion. Or compromise. I'm also fighting the frustration that surfaces whenever animal cruelty comes up in a conversation because I know how cleverly the truth is hidden. And it reminds me that I'm not mad at humans in general, but at a heartless industry that can only survive shrouded in secrecy and lies. Thankfully, the subject doesn't come up all that often, or my friend tally would probably hang at zero.

"Great," he groans, when I'm silent for much longer than I need to be. "You're going to ruin ice cream for me, too, aren't you?" He's already made the mistake of asking me about eggs.

"Well, I don't have to," I offer, even though I know it's the coward's way out.

"Shoot," he says, with a reluctant shake of his head.

Choosing my words very carefully, I tell the facts in a way that somehow keeps the heartbreaking story bearable. Having lived a vegan life since I was born, all of the information is forever stored in my brain; it spills out at the slightest provocation and with very little effort. Without thinking, I throw out phrases like "somatic cell count" and "bovine growth

hormone," then have to back up and explain things that I forget aren't exactly common knowledge. Yet.

"So, a cow typically lives for about twenty-five years, but these ladies are so completely worn out after only five or six that they're now considered *useless*, and so sent to slaughter." I pause, looking over at Marcus while I wait for him to realize that those cows do indeed die for such grave necessities as ice cream. He looks back at me with a sideways glance, his face spread into a grimace. "And those are just some of the reasons why I avoid all dairy. Now and forever."

At this point, I decide that even though I've glossed over a lot and spared him some of the more horrifying details—like the grim fate of all those beautiful babies—it's probably a good idea to wrap things up. If this is how I plan on celebrating future anniversaries, I might as well call it quits now.

Marcus is silent while he processes all I've told him, so I wait, not sure what his reaction is going to be. For all I know, at some point I'm going to cross the line into just a little bit too crazy, especially given that we've only been dating a week. But even so, it isn't enough to make me compromise on something I believe in so deeply.

"Orrrrr," Marcus starts quietly, "maybe we could split a fruit salad instead? Unless there's something I should know about baby apples being torn from the mother tree before they're fully weaned?" He reaches for my hand, squeezing gently

to let me know we're okay.

I'm startled to hear myself laugh; that's not usually how this conversation ends.

"Orrrr," I squeeze back. "We can try ice cream my way."

"Your way?" He wrinkles his nose at me with a look of distaste. "Fine, if I'm on board with setting the chickens free, might as well let the cows out too. Count me in."

"Excellent. I know this great little café . . ."

15

Amelia appears just as Mom is sliding dinner onto the table; she has this uncanny knack for showing up after all the work is done. This isn't anything unusual, though, and most nights we have at least one guest around our table. Occasionally, if Grams, Amelia, and Marcus decide to show up together, we'll make room for all three. But I really can't blame them—delicious food, interesting conversation, and Amelia as entertainment all make for a pretty lively evening. She can somehow add just a splash of drama to a simple everyday happening and transform practically anything into a riveting story. Sometimes she'll even render the twins speechless, mesmerized by her animated expressions and frantic hand gestures. Mealtimes tend to be pretty interesting affairs around here.

Heading up to my room after dinner, I broach the subject of Jonah but get nowhere. Turning instantly cold, she refuses to let me even mention his name.

"Well, how's it going with Hank then?" I finally ask in exasperation, even though he's the last thing I want talk about.

"It's fine," she shrugs, collapsing on my bed. It doesn't seem like a very enthusiastic answer, but I can't pretend I'm not happy about her lackluster response; maybe it'll fall apart before it even really gets going.

"That's it? That's all you can give me?"

"What do you want me to say, Mags? It's just fine." She sighs loudly, and when she glances at her watch for the third time in five minutes, I realize that she probably has plans.

"Big date, huh?" I ask.

"Big?" she laughs. "Hardly. We're watching some dumb zombie flick; I just hope I don't fall asleep."

And just like that, the sadness descends. After the craziness of the last couple days, I'd already begun to forget how heavy it feels—suffocating, even. It's Friday night, and Friday night is date night. Or at least it used to be, before the four of us fell apart with alarming speed. Amelia, Jonah, Marcus, and I always made plans on Friday nights. Movies, bowling, mini golf; it didn't matter what we did, we always had fun. Together. I see Amelia's face fall as she remembers the same thing.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry." Her shoulders slump as she picks at a thread on her jeans. She's silent for a minute before throwing out a horrifying suggestion. "Hey, why don't you come with me? Maybe we could keep each other awake?"

I snort. "Yeah, Hank would just love that."

"Maybe not," she scowls, "but who picks a *zombie* movie for their first date? What a way to woo a girl."

"Thanks, but don't worry about me; I promised the twins a movie night here. And I'm pretty sure I'll enjoy my date way more than you'll enjoy yours."

"You're probably right." When she rolls her eyes, I can't help

but feel another spark of hope.

"Two little girls are ready and waiting," Mom says, poking her head into my room.

"Thanks, Mom. Be right down."

"I guess it's time for me to skedaddle anyway." Amelia sighs, dragging herself up off the bed. I'm tempted to point out the fact that her total lack of enthusiasm for this date should be some sort of clue, but since it seems pretty obvious, I don't bother. She'll connect the dots eventually.

Myra and Zoe are waiting for me on the couch, fresh from their bath—all damp hair, pink cheeks, and warm pj's. I settle myself snugly in the middle.

"Have fun, girls," Amelia says with a grin, pausing to look into the living room on her way out. She stands there for an extra long minute, her cheerful grin slowly fading.

"I'll be fine, really," I reassure her. "Go. Enjoy zombie-land." I can tell she doesn't believe me, so I give her my biggest smile and wave her towards the door. "Give Hank a big kiss from me," I smirk as she reluctantly turns to go. I hit play as soon as the door closes behind her, and the girls cuddle up beside me.

We're all of two minutes into *The Incredibles* before the front door opens again, and Amelia stalks back into the room. To Myra's delight, she scoops her up before sinking down beside me on the couch.

I look at her in surprise. "What're you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? Watching a movie with my

most favorite girls." She nibbles Myra's ear before reaching over to tickle Zoe's toes.

"What about Hank?"

"What *about* Hank?" she shoots back. "I texted him and told him to watch the zombie movie without me, and then maybe we could do something that's *actually* fun later."

"If there *is* a later," I mumble.

"Yeah, well, whatever. Are we watching this or what?"

I hit play again, but before even a single minute has passed, Amelia starts whispering to Myra.

"Problem?" I ask.

"I'm just wondering," Amelia says with a huff, "where the popcorn is at?" Myra giggles, infecting Zoe who attempts to smother hers with a hand. Amelia's eyes dance, and I realize it's not really a request, but more of a friendly demand; three to one means I'm easily outnumbered.

I bow to the pressure and return from the kitchen a few minutes later with enough snacks for everyone, and our movie night is officially underway. Amelia's her usual obnoxious self: talking back to the TV, chucking popcorn at the screen, and hooting with laughter. Halfway through, Zoe leans over, her small lips tickling my ear.

"Meely's so funny," she whispers, patting my cheek. "I love her."

"She's *crazy*," I whisper back, just as Amelia launches another flurry of popcorn at the TV. Myra mimics her, giggling hysterically,

and I look over at Zoe with a grin. “But I love her too.”

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Marcus is already waiting for me in the parking lot after school. It's one of those incredibly warm days at the end of winter; the ones that fool you into thinking spring is here early, only to hammer you with three feet of snow the next week. The sleeves of Marcus's shirt are rolled up past his elbows, and the front hangs open, revealing a navy-blue t-shirt underneath. My eyes travel down to the beat-up Converse on his feet before sliding back up again to his tousled hair. As usual, it falls across his forehead, and while on most anyone else it would drive me crazy, somehow Marcus pulls it off perfectly. He's standing next to my car and texting someone; I briefly wonder who as I watch quietly from the door. Finishing with his message, he looks up and scans the lot. To my embarrassment, his gaze finds me standing in the doorway like a crazy stalker.

"Let's *go*, Maggie Rae!" he yells over to me, rubbing his hands in exaggerated anticipation. I roll my eyes, laughing as I walk over. I find myself doing that a lot lately. Laughing, I mean.

"I get the distinct feeling that you're mocking me," I say, as he tosses his bag into the backseat.

"Mocking you? Never. I can't wait to see how you transform tofu into ice cream." He grins, and I wonder how he

can be both cocky and endearing at the same time.

"An hour from now, I'll expect your deep and heartfelt apology when you realize how very, very wrong you are."

"Wrong? I doubt it. My mom had a vegetarian friend once, and all I ever saw her eat were salads, nuts, and water. Talk about depressing."

"Maybe she just loves salads and nuts, Marcus. What's wrong with that? After all, you eat beef jerky by the case," I say with a shudder. "So if we want to talk about depressing . . ."

Marcus laughs, but he's still poking fun at vegan cuisine up until I pull into the small parking lot of the café. It's okay, though, because soon he'll eat his words right along with his ice cream sundae.

Stepping through the doors, I'm immediately accosted by a little ball of sunshine; Zoe smiles up at me, and I squat down to give her cheek a loud kiss.

"How's it going, peanut?"

"Good," she giggles, before turning to Marcus with a careful glance. She studies him thoughtfully, her little brow wrinkled. "Hi," she says seriously. "I'm Zoe."

"Hey." Marcus stretches out his arm, and Zoe's tiny hand disappears in his as they exchange a solemn handshake. "I'm Marcus."

She nods, satisfied, and races off back to the kitchen.

"Cute kid. You friends with the owners?" asks Marcus.

"Yeah, something like that," I answer evasively, heading for the counter.

The café closes at three, which means it's nearly the end of Mom's day, but she's still busy flipping veggie burgers. The smell of roasted butternut squash fills the air, making me instantly hungry.

"Hey, Maggie Rae. How was your day?" Mom asks, walking over with a smile.

"Fantastic!" I can tell this unusually enthusiastic response catches her off guard, and I'm just relieved that she somehow manages to keep her surprise in check. She turns towards Marcus with an inquisitive and interested look on her face, but I make an intentionally vague introduction before she can ruin my plan.

"This is Marcus, a friend from school and yet another non-believer. He's under the mistaken impression that vegans live on dirt, grass, and water." I can also tell that she's slightly bewildered at my introduction of Marcus as simply "friend," especially considering that I told her all about him last week. But thankfully, she plays along. I just feel like the situation won't be all that neutral if he knows it's my mom's food he's eating.

"Well, that's not exactly what I said." His protest is weak and a hint of embarrassment marks his face. Poor guy; just wait until he finds out who he's really talking to.

Mom's eyes light up at the challenge; each doubting

Thomas that she meets is in some weird way exciting for her.

"Do you have something specific in mind?"

"I'm thinking two brownie sundaes should do it." We share a conspiratorial smile before I lead Marcus outside. Apparently, everyone's eager to soak up the sun after several months of voluntary hibernation, and so we sit down at the only table still left empty.

"Huh, I didn't know there was such a demand for vegan food around here. This seems more like McDonald's territory."

"Unfortunately, we've got those, too," I say, wrinkling my nose in distaste. It isn't long before I see Mom heading our way. She places a brownie sundae in front of me and another in front of Marcus.

"Enjoy," she says simply, retreating back into the café with a knowing smile. Marcus is studying his sundae with interest.

"Well . . . it looks pretty normal," he says reluctantly.

"Looking good is the easy part, but it's really only the tasting good that matters." Lifting my spoon, I dig in. Marcus takes my cue and manages a tiny and cowardly nibble. I've seen this before—that apprehension, like it's going to taste like steamed broccoli or something. I ignore him, instead focusing on the minty ice cream melting on my tongue. I pretend I don't notice him going back for another bite, this time much bigger and much more spoon-worthy. We're both too busy munching on chocolate chips and roasted almonds to bother with

conversation, and it isn't long before we're scraping our bowls for those last elusive bites. While I'm tempted to lick it clean, I refrain. But only just. With a satisfied sigh, I sit back and grin at Marcus.

"I'll wait."

"It was . . ." he shrugs, pushing his bowl away. "Edible."

"Edible, huh?"

"Yup. Edible. Barely." He's staring at me, unblinking. "And that's all I have to say about that."

"And I said," I cross my arms, staring him down, "that I'll wait."

Our staredown continues for a whole ten seconds before Marcus laughs, leaning towards me. "Maggie Rae," he says, reaching for my hand across the table and lacing his long fingers slowly and carefully through mine, "I am deeply sorry that I was such an ass. Unfortunately, I can't guarantee that it won't happen again."

His skin is warm from the sun, and his thumb moves gently, rubbing small circles against my palm.

"That sounds a little bit like a warning, but I accept your apology."

Truthfully, though, I'm unable to really revel in my victory because I'm having a lot of trouble tearing my eyes from our hands, fingers entwined. I see them as if through the lens of a camera, bathed in the golden afternoon light. Startled, I feel

something let go inside, somewhere around my heart. This is the beginning, I realize; that moment when you first realize that you're falling head over heels in love. This is my last chance to walk away, unless it's already too late.

Here's where we start, the journey of us.

14

Marcus and I usually help out at the café on Saturdays, but for obvious reasons, I fly solo this weekend. So not only are there tons of hungry customers, but they all want to know where Marcus is, and could I please tell him they said hello? Grams weaves in and out of the tables with me while Mom does her best to keep up with the grill and counter. Saturdays are frenzied, but in a weirdly cheerful way. It's like one big family gathering: tables get pulled together, the talk and laughter hover at a dull roar, and there's never an empty seat. It's a madhouse, and we're all usually exhausted by the time we shoo the last customer out the door, most often long after closing time.

Around two o'clock, I see Toby walking up the street with a small dog trotting at his side. He drops his bag onto an open table and pulls out a chair just as I'm making my way over.

"You walked here?" I ask in surprise. His house isn't far, but it's far enough to make for a pretty long stroll.

"I would've taken my bike, but this guy likes to tag along." He points to the dog that's now waiting patiently at his feet. It looks up at Toby in obvious adoration, his little tail wagging in wild enthusiasm.

"Aww, he's cute. What's his name?" I ask, sinking into the

chair across from him with a sigh of relief.

"Bowser," he says, gently scooping him up.

"Suits him," I smile. "Hungry?"

"Starving," he says, reaching over Bowser to pull his laptop from the bag.

"Need to hear the specials?"

"Actually, no. Just surprise me."

"Great, but how do you feel about company? Because I could really use a break."

"Sounds good to me," he grins. "Looks like we're becoming a pretty regular thing though."

I laugh, standing up. "Be right back."

Making my way back to the table a couple of minutes later, I notice that Toby has his laptop open, and a scowl is quickly spreading across his face

"Wow," I say, sliding him his lunch. "Your mood changed fast. I've been gone for a whole ten minutes."

"Just . . . frustrated," he says, his scowl deepening. "And losing my faith in humanity more and more every day. How come it seems like instead of making progress, all we do is take giant leaps backwards? Why do we *do* that?"

"I'm not sure we can help it. It must be coded into our DNA or something."

"More like a genetic mutation," he grumbles, and I have to admit he's got a point.

"Well? What have we done this time?"

"It's this miserable Ag-Gag bill. I just don't *get* it. How are we even capable of such cruelty?" He's still furiously scrolling and getting more fired up by the second. "Like as long as this all plays out in secret, that somehow makes everything okay. But if we're not sneaking in there to expose these monsters, will it ever end?"

"Amen, brotha." This comes from behind me—low, like I'm not sure if I was supposed to hear that they were just eavesdropping on our conversation.

"What's going on now?" I ask, trying to eat and listen at the same time.

He finally looks up from his screen, obviously surprised that I'm not more well-informed. I just raise my eyebrows and wait, still working on my lunch. He, on the other hand, hasn't touched his.

"Just more of the same," he says, his voice heavy with sarcasm, "but I don't even get how this is *legal*? Obviously, outlawing undercover investigations at factory farms and slaughterhouses is the 'best' way to go. You know, so everyone stays in the dark about what goes on in those hellholes, and the violence can continue unpunished. Because really, who cares about a stupid pig when you can eat bacon?" he fumes.

Wow. I've never seen him so animated. Granted, I've really only known him for two days, but even when Chris had him by the throat he was more collected than he is now. Based on his facial expression, I think it's safe to assume he's an ethical vegan.

"I guess that depends on your definition of unpunished. It's the whole karma thing, you know? All choices have consequences.

Choose violence and one day it'll choose you right back."

"I don't think there are all that many people connecting *those* dots." He rolls his eyes at me, obviously demanding quick and painful justice. "So that's just great. Eventually karmic law will settle all, but what if I don't want to just wait around? Especially for, I don't know, *ever*?"

"So what you're saying is that the two hundred animals you *personally* save every single year by living vegan is really a lazy game of just waiting? Yeah, I don't think so. And you can call *this* just waiting?" I point to the full tables all around us. "Why would you even think that? I'm disappointed in you, Toby," I say lightly, shaking my head. "Don't you watch the classics? *Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Star Wars*. Evil never wins forever; if it did, we'd be a brand-new generation of Hitler Youth." I shake my head and resume eating. "I have a feeling you'd be great at that whole blind allegiance thing."

"Good will triumph?" he scoffs, clearly ignoring my attempt to lighten the moment. "Well, I think evil topples because there are people willing to risk the wrong end of a cattle prod to expose it all."

"Okay, sure. But don't you think it makes a difference that the more we choose vegan, the more we force the world to accommodate us?"

"It just seems like such a *slow* evolution doing it the passive way. All I can think about in the meantime is all these animals." He closes his eyes, rubbing them hard as if it can erase what he knows.

I reach over and shut the laptop carefully.

"Maybe you should stop watching those horrible videos. You already know what's going on; you don't need to remind yourself every day. Watching them just makes you feel helpless and hopeless. And obviously furious."

"Just because I stop watching them doesn't mean that they don't exist." He pushes his plate away impatiently, even though he hasn't taken a single bite. "So what are you saying? I should just sit back all Zen-like and smile at the madness? Oh, and wait. I forgot that part."

"Listen, Gandhi didn't sit back and do *nothing*. He just didn't go off raving like a lunatic."

"But don't you ever feel like you need to do something a little more . . . *dramatic*?" Toby's watching me, clearly frustrated, and I'm gauging how best to respond. Who knew the kid had so much fire in him? I really wish he'd use some of it on Chris. Before I can answer, though, someone takes advantage of the silence to jump in on our conversation.

"Ah, excuse me?" I turn around and recognize our eavesdropper; he's here almost every Saturday. He seems like a nice enough guy—late-twenties, probably, and kind of shaggy-looking. "Sorry, I overheard pretty much all of your conversation," he says with a sheepish grin. "Do you mind if I say something here? Completely on topic."

"Uh, sure," Toby says. At least confusion has replaced the irritation on his face.

"You guys are in high school, right?" Toby and I both nod. "Well, I think you're overlooking the obvious and probably most productive place to start. You're surrounded by hundreds of *potential* vegans every single day. Think about it: if you can open eyes and change minds now, then the kids you guys have one day will already be light-years ahead of where most of the world is right now." He pauses, watching our faces. I don't have to see Toby to know he's listening intently. "Just say you convince ten people, who convince their future spouses, who raise their two point five kids as vegans. And if they each spare two hundred animals per year, that's"—he holds up his phone, open to the calculator—"nine thousand animals in just one year. *Nine thousand*."

He looks from Toby to me and then back again. Just letting that nine thousand sink in, I guess. It *is* a pretty impressive number to get to, especially when you only need to start with ten.

"Hey, just food for thought." Shaggy Guy grins, getting up from the table. "See you next week," he says to me before heading inside, bill in hand. Slowly, I turn back around in my chair and meet Toby's wide eyes.

"Ten people? We could probably do that," I say cautiously.

"*Probably*? Of course we could do that!" Toby's leaning towards me. "We need to come up with a plan though. A *great* plan."

I laugh. "While I would love to tackle this now, I'm pretty sure Mom needs me inside."

"But Maggie Rae, who needs you more? Your mom . . . or the

animals?" He holds up his hands, clearly representing the scales tipped in favor of the critters. I'm happy to see his eyes shining again as he suppresses a grin.

"Right now? My mom. Definitely my mom," I say as a party of ten makes its way through the doors. "Eat." I slide his food towards him. "And think while you do. Work on a plan. If you want, we can get together tomorrow."

"Yes. Tomorrow. Here's my number." He digs around in his bag for a pen before scribbling on a napkin. "Text me in the morning. I'm free all day, so whenever."

I take the napkin and raise my eyebrows at him. "So that was pretty cool, right? Almost seems like something Gandhi would approve of."

"We'll see," he laughs. "We still have to figure out some compelling way to convince ten people using only the power of love." He finally starts shoveling in his lunch as I stand up to leave. Through it all, Bowser has been sprawled across Toby's lap and sleeping soundly.

"Maggie Rae?"

"Yeah?"

"Text me. First thing, okay?"

"First thing," I say with a laugh, heading back to work.

The rest of the afternoon is crazy busy, but it's hard to get myself into the flow of things again, and it's even harder to focus. I'm hugely distracted by these unexpected waves of energy that keep washing over me, like something really important is about to

happen, only I don't know what it is or when it will take place. It's definitely coming, though, and based on the building suspense, it's going to be big—maybe even really big. But all I can do right now is wait. And hope that I'm ready for whatever's headed my way.

"Hey, Mags, can I come in?" Dad knocks, coming through the door before I even have time to answer. I'm sitting at my desk and perusing the PETA website for ideas while Sir Bartholomew preens on my shoulder. I've been at it ever since getting home from the café, but it's pretty much what I figured—way too "in your face" for me. It does sound like their campaigns would be right up Toby's alley though.

"Sure, Dad, what's up?" Instead of answering, he offers a finger to Sir Bartholomew, who steps onto it with his dainty toes. I watch him talking to the bird and gently scratching his cheeks while I wonder what's going on. He hasn't met my gaze since he walked in, and he's starting to make me nervous. "Uh, Dad?"

"Yeah . . . I need to run something by you. Got a minute?"

"I guess so," I say slowly as he reaches over and places Sir Bartholomew back on my shoulder. He sits carefully on the edge of the bed, running his palms down the front of his jeans. Oh great, sweaty palms. What could possibly have happened in the three hours since I got home from the café?

"You're kind of freaking me out. What's up?"

"Marcus called me today," he says abruptly, letting that short

sentence hang for a long and quiet minute. A week ago this wouldn't have been anything unusual since my dad and Marcus talked virtually every day. While the excuse to call was often under the pretense of great importance—usually car related—I got the feeling that they really just wanted to "shoot the shit," as my dad likes to say. But as far as I know, the phone calls stopped right around the same time that Marcus broke my heart.

"Well, he was actually returning *my* call," Dad continues. "I've been worried about him, Mags." He stands up and walks over to the window, looking out. "You've got this great support system to help you through all of this, but Marcus? Who does he have? And while I understand that this whole situation is entirely his fault, it doesn't change the fact that he's pretty much on his own." He turns around to look at me. "For a year and a half now he's been a fixture around here, and even though he made some really bad choices, I can't just turn my back on him." It's true. Marcus became a part of our family, and it's obviously not just me that misses having him around.

"I never really thought you'd turn your back on him, Dad."

"Good," he nods. "Because he's not doing so great, Maggie Rae."

I wonder why it hurts so much to hear that. These are the moments that make figuring this mess out so hard; it seems like I should be glad that he's suffering, but I'm not. It just makes me sad to think of him hurting; but somehow, still not sad enough to do anything about it.

"I want him to know that I'm still here if he needs me, regardless of what happens." Dad runs a hand through his hair, clearly agitated. "Mostly, though, he needs to know that I don't hate him." He looks at me carefully. "Even after what he did to you."

"I don't hate him, either," I say softly. It would be so much easier if I did. And honestly, I'm still not sure why I don't.

"Good." He looks relieved. "Then maybe you'll be better able to consider what I have to say." I brace myself, not sure of where he's taking this. "I need to know," he starts slowly, "if it would be all right with you if Marcus came over to help me out in the workshop once in a while."

I can tell that having to ask me this is extremely painful for him, and yet he's doing it anyway. A testament to how much Marcus means to him. How did he imprint so indelibly on us, the whole family, that even when he screws up we all just want to take him back?

Dad looks enormously uncomfortable as he waits for my reaction, but at the moment I'm not sure what to say. Marcus, here? It actually sounds like a pretty terrible idea.

"I talked to Mom, and she thought that maybe it would be easier for you if we agreed that he wouldn't come into the house. You wouldn't have to see him or talk to him unless you wanted to. We'd stay out in the workshop, and you could pretend like he wasn't even here."

"But he *will* be here, Dad, and every second that he's out there with you? I'll know it."

He nods. "I'm sorry if I'm making this harder for you than it already is, Mags."

"You are," I frown. Because he's right. Why *do* things just keep getting harder? I'd thought they would start easing with each day that passed, but instead life just keeps swinging at me—and laughing while I try to dodge the blows.

"Do you want some time to think about it? Maybe you can't do this, and that's okay."

Before the whole break-up, Marcus worked outside with Dad several days a week, just because he loved it. Sometimes I wouldn't even realize he was here until they walked into the kitchen together, greasy up to their elbows and laughing at some private joke. His face was always so relaxed and happy after spending a couple of hours digging around inside of a car. Am I angry enough to take that happiness away from him? The answer to that is definitely yes. A resounding yes. Especially when I find myself wondering, *Was she beautiful*? Or *How often does she think of him*? But the anger is so new; how can it possibly be bigger than everything else? Damn. Nothing about this can be easy.

Dad's still watching me and waiting for some kind of answer, but I'm not sure what to say. Standing up slowly, I join him at the window. It's golden hour, my favorite time of day; the backyard is bathed in a soft and warm hue. It's hard to believe that things can be so beautiful on the outside, while on the inside there's so much chaos and confusion.

"Okay," I say, with eyes closed. After a deep breath, I nod

and say it again, a little bit more definitively. "Okay."

"You sure about this?" Dad looks concerned, and I can tell he doesn't quite believe me, but that's all right; I'm not sure I believe me, either. In fact, part of me wants to immediately retract my agreement.

I sigh. "I'm sure. You're probably the best person for him to be around right now. And maybe you can do for him what I couldn't."

"Mags, this never had anything to do with you."

He steps closer and wraps his arms around me, being careful not to crush Sir Bartholomew. I rest my cheek on his chest and breathe in the smell of Dad. When I was small, I truly and honestly believed that he could and would always fix everything. It's only now that I realize how much harder it is to mend a broken heart than a broken toy. But still, there's this stubborn place in me that believes in the magical power of dads. Maybe if anyone can help, it's him.

"Wow," he whispers.

"Wow, what?"

"We did a pretty fantastic job, didn't we? It was probably more of your mom's doing, but I'm still happy to take some of the credit."

"What are you talking about?"

"You, Maggie Rae. You turned out pretty great." He's squeezing me so tightly that I can't get a deep breath. "Thanks for being brave enough to help him, even after he hurt you."

I'm glad my face is hidden because I can feel my cheeks flaming red. Why does kindness always seem to *impress* people?

"It'll be fine, Mags, I promise." People keep making me so many promises that they can't possibly keep, but maybe if I can just believe hard enough, then I'll find that Dad magic still working. After all, maybe it's not so impossible to mend a heart if you just know how. With the right tools and enough determination, maybe anything is possible.

1 year 4 months 3 weeks ago

"I don't know, maybe this isn't such a great idea." Marcus is slowly and with great care slicing a celery stalk. It's obvious he doesn't spend much time in the kitchen since he's been working on those three measly stalks for the past half hour. "You can just tell them I went home. I didn't feel good or something."

"Seriously? It's just dinner, Marcus. Can you hand me those shallots?" He stares blankly at the counter, following my pointing finger.

"You mean the tiny onions?"

"Yes, Marcus, the tiny onions." He's nervous enough without me teasing him, but it's hard. So hard.

"What if they hate me?"

"*Hate* you?" I put the knife down and turn to look him full in the face. "Why would you even say that?"

"I don't know," he groans, still slicing with methodical precision. "Maybe they'll just figure you can do better."

"Once you actually sit down at the table, you'll realize how crazy this whole conversation really is."

"I mean, I can talk about ball all day, but will anyone else care? That would suck, boring everyone to death at the dinner table. Great. Just great." He's shaking his head, and mumbling

under his breath.

"Stop worrying," I say, interrupting his self-destructive rambling. "This isn't some kind of test. You'll be fine."

Dinner's almost ready, with the exception of that slow-growing pile of celery slices, but I somehow manage to refrain from grabbing his knife and finishing the job for him. Thankfully, he makes his last careful cut, and I add the perfectly even slices to the rest of the vegetables already cooking on the stove. But without the celery to keep him distracted, he just stands helplessly at the cutting board, looking like he'll bolt for the door if he can just find a reason. Out of pity, I place a stack of plates into his hands and gently push him towards the table. Maybe if I can keep him busy until it's time to eat, he won't have quite so much time to torture himself over nothing.

This was Mom's idea, having Marcus over for dinner. We've been dating for over a month now, and while my parents have met him numerous times, I guess she thought it was time to formally meet him. I honestly didn't think it was a big deal until about an hour ago, when I realized that Marcus was a nervous wreck.

"Please tell me everything's ready," Mom moans, walking into the kitchen with a whining Myra on her hip. Zoe pads quietly behind.

"Everything's ready," I say, and for a couple of minutes there's crazy commotion trying to get dinner on the table while

the twins impatiently demand food faster than Mom can serve it. It isn't until I sit down that I realize Marcus is still standing over by the sink, lost in the dinnertime rush.

"You plan on joining us, Marcus?" Mom asks him with a smile.

"Is it safe?"

"That's debatable. You could lose a finger if you get between Myra and her peas," Dad jokes back. The twins sit at either end of the table, one beside each parent, and Marcus slides into the chair next to me.

Mom's in charge of Myra, a job I have relieved myself of forever. I have a hard time watching Myra eat; it's as if she's been mercilessly starved all day long. She shovels in whole handfuls of food, and I'm pretty sure she doesn't chew a thing. Occasionally, she'll gag and spit out what looks like an entire plate's worth of food, only to pick it up and try again. It's completely gross. Once in a while, Mom tells her to slow it down, but I seem to be the only one who thinks that each meal is going to be her last—at least until Marcus. When I sneak a peek to see how he's faring, I find him staring at her with a mixture of awe and horror as she tries to cram what appears to be an entire slice of bread into her already full mouth. I look away quickly before I have time to envision her untimely death.

"How was your history test today, Mags?" Mom asks.

"Easy. Pretty much stuff I already knew." I don't have to

look up to know that, as always, she's shaking her head at me. I'm not sure why she even bothers to ask me about school anymore.

"Maggie Rae, you make me so *crazy*," she moans with the usual frustration in her voice. "If I had known it would take you this long to come to your senses, I would have put up more of a fight."

"Fight? Some days you could barely walk straight."

"I would have mustered the energy," she says dryly.

I realize the conversation probably seems a little strange to Marcus, especially since I haven't exactly gotten around to filling him in on my homeschooled past yet. I sneak a sideways glance to find a puzzled look on his face, and now it's my turn to think that maybe this dinner wasn't such a stellar idea after all.

"I gather you didn't know that Maggie Rae was homeschooled?" Dad's staring at me, just as confused as Marcus is because it's never been anything we've kept hidden. Although to be fair, I wasn't exactly *hiding* it, I just hadn't quite gotten around to sharing it yet.

Marcus turns to look at me. "How come you never told me?"

"It just hasn't come up, I guess," I say, picking at my food. "Does it really matter?"

"For how long?" He presses, obviously intrigued and choosing to ignore my question.

"Most of my life."

"She'd be home still, if she wasn't so stubborn." Mom's frowning at me in exasperation; this familiar conversation is a continual source of irritation for her.

I can feel the weight of Marcus's eyes on me, and I reluctantly turn to gauge where he's at.

"Does it matter?" I ask him again.

"No," he says, not breaking eye contact. "It's just kind of interesting. Seems like something that would've come up." I look away first, feeling distinctly uncomfortable and like I did something sneaky. But homeschooling is a lot like veganism; it can be a pretty touchy subject. People seem to be more accepting of it now than when I was younger, but there are still a lot of stereotypes. The subject sometimes puts me on guard and makes me wary. But I feel sorry pretty quickly because it's not his fault this whole thing was just sprung on him.

"The twins were something of a happy surprise," Mom jumps in, sensing how awkward this conversation is and like Dad, probably wondering why. "And Maggie Rae felt like I had too much on my plate. So without discussing things with either me or her father, she decided she was going to high school that fall."

"Admit it, things were crazy around here." I look at Mom, challenging her to disagree. She only shrugs at the hazy memory of getting by on virtually no sleep while struggling to keep the

café running. "I just felt like maybe Mom could handle things better without me hanging around."

"Did I ever tell you I was having trouble handling things?"

"You didn't have to."

"Wow, Mags." Marcus knocks his knee against mine under the table. "I never pegged you for a rebel."

"There's a lot about me you don't know," I joke lightly, really hoping for a change of subject.

"Obviously." He nods his head seriously before turning to Mom. "Did you try and stop her?"

"I knew I could have kept her home if I'd forced her to, but then I thought about what kind of a year we'd have, and I decided to let her give it a try. Besides, I was exhausted, and fighting seemed like way too much effort."

"And we also figured she'd be back home within a month," Dad says with a shrug.

"Did you like it?" Marcus asks.

"Like it?" I laugh. "No, I hated it."

"Why did you stay then?"

"Amelia."

His brow wrinkles. "Amelia?"

"There was really no turning back when I told her I was coming to school." I can still see her ecstatic expression when she found out. "And even after I knew it wasn't for me, I just couldn't break her heart and leave again. I decided to give it a

year and then let her know over the summer that I wouldn't be going back."

"But you did go back."

"I did. It just seemed easier than saying no to her."

"But she has no trouble saying no to her own mother." Mom shakes her head.

I grin at her. "Yeah, because you don't hold a grudge."

She laughs, nodding her head knowingly. "That's true."

"Anyway, that is the strange and wonderful tale of Maggie Rae," I finish theatrically, giving him a small smile of apology.

"Cool." Marcus smiles back, before finally turning to the food on his plate and shoveling it in almost as fast as Myra.

When Dad and Marcus start talking bikes and cars I kind of zone out, relieved that the conversation has moved on. I can't help but be impressed with how easily Marcus accepts everything I throw at him. Really, one thing after another just rolls off his back. Even when he's completely caught off guard, he just takes a minute to process it before moving on. I don't think I've ever met anyone quite like that; it's like acceptance is just in his nature.

I tune back in when I hear Dad and Marcus making plans to work together in the shop. Apparently, Marcus has an unexplored interest in cars that has Dad practically quivering with excitement.

It isn't until we're clearing the table close to an hour later

that I realize football never came up.

Not even once.

13

I don't know if it's true for everyone, but I think my brain works more efficiently while I sleep. It's like God sneaks in, using the cover of darkness to rearrange my messy thoughts and somehow create order from the chaos. I've been secretly hoping He'd do that with the Marcus situation—just kind of hand me an answer so I can bypass the turmoil—but so far, no such luck. Thankfully, it did happen with the animals though, and as soon as I open my eyes, I can feel the seed of a plan germinating. Climbing out of bed, I run across the cold floor and snatch my phone from the desk before scooting back under the warm covers. Glancing at the clock, I realize that it's probably too early to text Toby, but I'm going to do it anyway.

Me: Morning

Toby: FINALLY

Me: Good, you're awake

Toby: Awake? What took you so long?

Me: Sorry, I do this awesome thing called sleep. You should try it.

Toby: Maybe later. We need to talk. Ideas percolating…

Me: Definitely. Me too.

Toby: So what's the plan?

Me: Well, I'm not even out of bed yet…

Toby: Jeez, you're killing me!

Me: I could probably be over in like an hour?

Toby: Forget it. Where do you live?

Me: Wait, what?

Toby: Address, give me your address.

Me: 35 Peeptoad Road

Toby: Peeptoad? Seriously? Hang on…

Toby: Okay, I'll be there in like 30 minutes. Ciao.

The house is still quiet, and I'm busy eating a bowl of granola when Toby's face appears at the kitchen door—red, slightly sweaty, and disheveled. I wave him in, and he slides into the chair across from me, a happy grin on his freckled face.

"How'd you even get here?"

"My bike. I didn't realize you lived so close."

"Your bike? It's not *that* close. And isn't it freezing out?"

"Nah, it's fine," he says hurriedly, reaching into his backpack and pulling out a stack of papers. Curious, I look over and see many of the same aggressive activist demonstrations that I came across yesterday. It looks like Toby was perusing the PETA website too. I see people in stacks of tiny boxes meant to represent cages, humans packaged up to look like meat, and a photo of Joaquin Phoenix drowning in water as a fish drowns in air. And so much skin. Just tons and tons of famous people—all proudly naked. PETA is obviously in support of all animals keeping and using their flesh in whatever way they see fit.

"So I wasn't sure if it would be better to use a great idea that's already been done, or to come up with something unique and all our own. I think"—he looks at me pointedly—"that it should have *some* shock value, even though I know you'll probably disagree. I just feel like it'll change minds *quicker*."

"And I feel like it'll just disgust people, not necessarily motivate them to change. Isn't information the key here? Know better, do better and all that? The facts are pretty shocking all on their own."

"Maggie Rae," he says, clearly exasperated with my make-love-not-war stance. "We need to make an *impression*. Something they can't forget. Something they'll remember when they reach for that chicken finger or that slice of bacon."

"I get what you're saying, Toby, but I just don't think that's the way to go about it. Shock seems like it would work for the short term, but long term? Wouldn't you rather have someone become a committed vegan instead of just skipping the hot dog at dinner tonight?"

"Definitely. We just disagree on how to get there. Only minutes in and it appears that we're already at an impasse," he says, pursing his lips and looking at me thoughtfully. "Any suggestions?"

"Okay, here's my thought," I start slowly. "It's still rough, but I think the premise is good. The other day you told me you went vegan after watching *Food Inc.*, right?"

"Right."

"And even though I was already vegan, that same movie

made me more committed than ever. And it isn't the only documentary out there, right?"

"Right."

"So we can probably agree that these movies pack a lot of information into a short amount of time and leave a pretty good impression, agreed?"

"Agreed." He says, obviously impatient for me to get to the point already.

"Well, what I was thinking is that we could organize some kind of, like, gathering. I'd have to talk to my mom, but maybe we could use the café as home base. Serve vegan food, hand out information, and play the documentary on a big movie screen." I say, the details of my idea coming fast and furious. "Afterward there's bound to be at least *one* person who'll find the movie as disturbing as we did, and then maybe we could get some kind of a discussion going."

"Hmmm, free food. People always love that," Toby says, nodding. "I don't know, it's not a *bad* idea." I have another thought while I watch him mulling it over, a possible way to bring his vision more into harmony with mine.

"And what if we did something at the school first, some kind of 'more dramatic' attention grabber . . ."

". . . to steer them to the café?" he finishes, nodding more emphatically now. "So my idea hooks them, while yours reels them in?"

"Yeah, something like that," I laugh.

"It could work," he says slowly, "especially if we can rope your mom into serving some of her food. But we still need to come up with some clever way to get the word out."

"I know," I admit. "I haven't had time to think that far ahead yet."

Toby starts shuffling through the pile of papers in front of him again. "What if we were to stage something like this—" But he stops mid-sentence when an ungodly scream rings through the house. Myra. Toby leaps up, his eyes wide and panicked, but I'm already racing out of the kitchen and fully expecting to find my little sister being brutally dismembered. Mom and I nearly collide in the hallway before turning into the living room. Myra is standing in front of the rat cage, her face buried in her chubby hands. Oh no, which one is dead? I have a flash of the two hamsters I had when I was ten. When one died, the other ate its brain; it was enough to scar me for life.

"Sweetie, what's wrong?" Mom asks quickly, trying to decide if this is a true emergency or simply an overreaction. With Myra, it's always a toss-up.

"Mommy, Bertie's *gone*!" she wails, turning to bury her face in Mom's bathrobe. Dead gone or escaped gone? I walk over to the cage to find a small hole chewed in the cover. Ernie looks up at me with terrified eyes, undoubtedly due to Myra's wake-the-dead screams. Oh, sweet relief; no cannibalism today.

"Myra, relax," Mom says with a deep exhale, attempting to soothe the sobbing mess currently using her bathrobe as a tissue.

"We'll find him. He's around here somewhere."

"No, Mommy, no," she moans again. "He's gone, gone, *gooooone*."

"We'll find him, Myra-bean," I reassure her, bending to look under the couches and chair. "It isn't like he can open the door and sneak away, right?"

"No, we'll never, *never* find him," Myra's voice is muffled, but no less dramatic. "He's probably gone for*ever*."

"Forever? Well, that seems highly unlikely, doesn't it? I mean, your house is big, but it's not *that* big. So unless you've got a magic wardrobe hidden in here somewhere, then I predict he'll be back home within the hour. And that's hardly forever." Mom looks up, startled at the unfamiliar voice, to see Toby standing in the doorway. Even Myra, distraught as she is, is surprised into temporary silence. "May I be of service?" he asks. "I'm somewhat of an expert at catching runaway rats."

"Toby, this is Mom. Mom, this is Toby," I say, pulling my head out from under the sofa. No sign of Bert there. Sitting back up, I can see the questions written all over Mom's face, but she pulls it together and gives Toby a smile.

"Thanks, Toby, we could use the extra hands. Myra, you sit"—Mom picks her up and heads to the couch—"right here until we find him. But he may never come out if you scream like that again, so please be quiet while we look."

Since I've got the living room covered, Toby heads down the hall, and Mom makes her way into the kitchen. All the while, Myra

sniffles pitifully from the sidelines. Fifteen minutes of fruitless searching pass before I hear Toby's voice again.

"Got him," he says. Bert is perched on his shoulder, looking pretty darn proud of himself.

"Thank God." I stand up, brushing off my jeans. "Where did you find the little devil?"

"I used to have a rat who escaped almost nightly. The next morning I'd always find her stuck in one of the baseboard heaters. Your rodent friend seems to have the same neurotic tendency." He heads over to the couch, and Myra's eyes widen comically when she spies her furry friend.

"You found him, you found him," she claps, her cheeks still shiny with tears.

"I told you I was an expert, didn't I?" Toby smiles, handing her Bert.

"Thank you, Toby," Mom breathes with relief, squeezing his arm as she walks into the room. Dad follows her in with a sleepy Zoe in his arms.

"Thank you, Toby," Myra mimics shyly, and I swear Bert winks from her lap.

"Toby?" Dad asks, a puzzled look on his face. "Who's Toby?"

"I am, sir," Toby raises his hand with a friendly grin. "Good morning," he says, reaching out to shake Dad's hand.

"Good morning." Dad's eyebrows are raised in surprise. "So Toby, tell me what brings you to my home at six-thirty on a Sunday

morning?"

"Well, sir, to make an interesting but long story short," Toby begins, taking a deep breath, "I've been relentlessly bullied since we moved to Willow Creek two years ago." I see Mom wince, but Toby presses on very matter-of-factly. "Maggie Rae had the unfortunate luck to stumble upon an episode recently and felt compelled to rescue me using only her wit and savvy street smarts." Toby looks over at me, and I roll my eyes in reply.

"She did?" Mom and Dad ask in unison.

"You don't have to sound so surprised," I mutter, sinking down beside Myra on the couch.

"She has since designated herself my sworn protector, and I have humbly allowed her to fill that position. Due in large part to the fact that no one else has volunteered their services." He looks at me with a grin, bowing deeply. "While dining at your amazing café yesterday," he looks at Mom, "your daughter and I discovered a common interest and began to formulate a plan to save as many of the suffering and violently abused animals of the world that we possibly can. I came here this morning, to your home," he now looks at Dad, "to further work on said plan before we were interrupted by the Great and Daring Rat Escape."

Mom is shaking her head slowly, while Dad just stares at Toby, completely surprised and struggling to catch up. None of this is really what you'd expect to find in your living room first thing in the morning.

"Huh." It takes a lot to catch Mom off guard, but I think

Toby's done it. "Okay then." She pauses. "Toby, you hungry?"

He smiles. "Starving."

"Great. Then what I'm going to do first is make breakfast; it's hard enough hunting rats on an empty stomach, let alone making a plan to change the world. And after that, you two can fill us in on your plan, the one urgent enough to get Toby here so bright and early. Jimmy, can you give me a hand?"

"Sure," Dad says, looking like he's still having trouble processing Toby's abridged story. But instead of asking the questions he so clearly wants to pepper Toby with, he follows Mom into the kitchen, shooting us one more confused glance as he does.

Grams appears at the same time that the pancakes do; her timing is as impeccable as Amelia's when it comes to mealtimes. Immediately interested in our new guest, she settles herself in the chair next to his and effortlessly strikes up a friendly conversation. Before long the two are jabbering away like they've known each other forever, and—just as I could have predicted—as soon as she catches wind of the Chris debacle, she wants every last detail. But it's an awkward and embarrassing story to tell, and after I attempt to gloss over it several times, Grams finally commands Toby to take charge. "Don't leave out any details, no matter how insignificant they may seem," she instructs him.

My embarrassment increases tenfold when I see Mom, Dad, and Grams all looking at me with satisfied pride. It doesn't help that Toby is a natural storyteller; even the twins are captivated while he replays the events of the past couple days.

"Chris sounds so scary," Zoe whispers, looking at me with wide eyes. I nod my agreement because stupidity always scares me too.

I'm intensely relieved when he finally reaches the end, and we can all move on to more important things. While Toby and I lay out our tentative plans, I watch Mom's reaction carefully, but she's immediately on board. In fact, the energy in the room becomes charged, and I'm pretty sure that Grams is so eager to help that she may actually be twitching in her chair.

"But we're stuck on the hook. What'll draw a crowd and get people interested enough to give up their Friday night? And then spend it watching a *documentary*?" I look around the table, stumped. It seems an unlikely scenario, especially since it involves high school students.

"I have an idea," Grams says, slowly, "but let me look into it first. I'll report back soon."

That's good enough for us, and we quickly disperse as soon as the pancakes have been demolished. Toby and I immediately launch into planning mode, and the rest of the day passes in a frenzied kind of blur. The whole idea is pretty overwhelming—especially considering that we don't really have a clue what we're doing—but neither of us seems to care as much as we probably should. And as exciting as it all is, it's even more of a relief—a *huge* relief—to feel like my life has purpose again. Especially since it's a purpose other than crying. At least now I can stay productive while I wait for the answers to find me because they will, eventually. And I just think

it'll be easier to see them without the veil of tears.

1 year 3 months ago

I've missed most of the show, but I'm jarred out of my daydreams and back to the present moment when Marcus lets out a loud laugh. I'm glad because it's a pretty nice moment. The lamps are on, making the room soft and cozy while some ridiculous sitcom plays on TV. And even though it's springtime, the still chilly weather means a small fire winks back at me from behind the glass door of the woodstove. My legs are stretched across Marcus's lap, and a book lies open on mine, not that I've read a single word.

As my eyes travel back to Marcus, still laughing on the couch, I can't help but smile. I didn't know that I had a "type," but if I could piece together a boyfriend from scratch, he would definitely be Marcus. Just looking at him throws me slightly off balance, and not in a way that I really mind. But then this reminds me of a conversation I've been putting off having, and the moment loses a little bit of its perfection. Sex. I wish I could just ignore the whole thing, but I know that eventually it'll have to be addressed because we'll get there, that being the normal progression of things and all. And just like any other uncomfortable conversation, if I only knew the ending in advance, it would be so much easier to tackle. Well, maybe. I

guess that kind of depends on which direction it takes.

Lost in thought, I realize I've been staring for so long that he notices and turns to look at me. He grins, squeezing my leg gently.

"Daydreaming again, Mags?"

I smile back. "It's what I do best."

"What's this one about?" Poor guy. If only he knew what he was stepping into. "You, the next Dorothea Lange?"

"Not quite," I laugh.

"So we're keeping secrets now, huh?" he teases. I can tell I've made him curious, but I'm pretty sure he'd quickly drop the subject if he had any idea where this was heading. Instead, he's blindly giving me an opening and even though I didn't ask for it, I decide to get it over with and hope for the best. Because will there ever be a right time for this conversation?

"Sex," I answer truthfully. "It was about sex."

He looks a little surprised, but then nods. "Classic daydream material."

"I'm not sure my dream is all that . . . typical."

"I don't know," Marcus laughs. "I've had a lot of practice. I doubt you can surprise me."

"I'm pretty sure I can."

"Mags, you're killing me." He shakes his head. "Just tell me already."

"I was thinking," I say carefully, "how to tell you that we

won't be having sex."

"*That's* what you daydream about?" He frowns in confusion. "Funny, because mine usually run in the opposite direction."

I laugh, but find myself briefly wondering where his daydreams do wander. "I just think we should probably talk about it now, rather than . . . later."

"So what exactly makes it a 'won't'? Are we talking sex with me or sex in general?"

I frown. "What's the difference?"

"Well, one's about me and one's about you. And if this is about me, then I kind of want to know why not."

"Oh. It's not about *you*," I say, shaking my head. If anything, I'm tempted to make him my exception, but I refrain from telling him that.

"Okay, good. What *is* it about then?"

I take a moment to consider my answer, and he watches me, quietly waiting. Growing up, I'd never been taught that sex was "sinful" or wrong, just that it was nothing to play around with. Or take lightly. But it wasn't until I got to high school that I decided I was going to wait because what a *mess*. I saw firsthand how confusing and messy it made everything, and the day I overheard a classmate whispering about an abortion was the day I made my decision. I didn't need my life that complicated at fourteen, and I don't need it that complicated now.

"I just decided, a while back, that I'm going to take it slow. Like so slow that maybe there's only going to be one for me."

"And this special someone is . . ." He's looking at me like he's still not convinced this isn't personal.

"Whoever decides they can put up with me forever." I smile. "If there even is that someone."

"So, marriage?"

"Not necessarily. But maybe." I shrug. "I just figure when I find the right guy, I'll eventually know." I wait, watching his reaction. I know it's a lot, and I can see him still processing it, but I haven't said the hardest part yet. The part that I dreaded much more than telling him my boundaries. "So if you want to call it quits now, I understand." I steel myself, just in case.

"Quits? Why would I want to do that?"

"I think some guys would probably consider this a deal-breaker."

"If they're an *ass*, maybe. I'm not going anywhere. Seriously, have I given you the impression that's why I'm here?"

"No," I answer, "but still, it probably changes things, right?"

"Well, I won't lie and say I haven't imagined it, you know, about a hundred times. And I might be just a little bit disappointed, but I'm pretty sure I'll live." He shakes his head at me. "And it definitely isn't a deal-breaker."

"How can you be so sure it won't matter?"

"I don't expect you to get it, Mags." He looks back

towards the TV with a shake of his head, and I wait out a long, quiet pause before he turns to face me again. "You've always lived here, in this life. But for the first time in *my* life, I'm comfortable. When I'm here with you the rules are different—*everything's* different. I can finally relax. You guys make me think life doesn't suck so bad." He shrugs. "So yeah, sex would be great—and just so you know, it would be freaking amazing—but I'm still not gonna throw everything else away because I can't wait for it."

"I get it," I nod. Here, Marcus can just be Marcus and he knows we all love him for it. Maybe here is the only place he's ever found that.

"Good. Besides, I've got ways of releasing all that frustration if I need to."

"Really?" I ask with narrowed eyes. "Like what?"

"For starters? Maybe if you're done harassing me, you could let me get back to this really funny show I was watching. Shit, Mags, get off my back. All this sex talk. Is that all you think about?" I laugh, reaching over to punch his shoulder. I'm just relieved we're moving past weird and into familiar territory again. He grabs my hand, pulling me onto his lap and wrapping his arms tightly around my waist.

"What about your show?" I whisper.

"Show? What show?" he asks, leaning in to kiss me.

12

"Hey," I greet Amelia, eager to fill her in on my weekend. But first, I must politely inquire about hers. With Hank. "How was your date?"

Her face instantly falls into a deep scowl, and I'm pretty sure I hear her growl. I knew it wouldn't take long; Amelia's way too smart to be played by someone like Hank.

"Upon closer inspection," she says, "I have decided that Hank is *not* the right boy for me."

Somehow, I manage to keep my wild cheers to myself. "You want to tell me what happened?" I ask.

"What happened? Oh, it was lovely, really. We had a *grand* ol' time." The sarcasm is so thick that it makes me wince. "Hank decided we should go out on Saturday night," she begins, "although to say *out* implies a date of some kind which I probably should have realized was *never* going to happen." She pauses to catch her breath before resuming her tirade. "So, to recap our extremely short dating history, he has invited me to watch football practice"—big rolling of the eyes here—"rented a zombie movie, coerced me into playing violent and disturbing video games, and purchased me both a bottle of lukewarm spring water and a pizza—which he ate one hundred percent of. Oh, yes, Mags, I found myself a real Romeo."

"So you broke up with him because he's cheap?" I'm kind of confused; her anger seems slightly out of proportion, and I can think of about a hundred more pressing reasons to dump Hank.

"Oh no, I'm just laying the groundwork. All of the things that I should have seen, but didn't."

"Right," I nod.

"Anyway, we go out on Saturday night to this kegger out in the middle of nowhere and before you ask, no, Marcus was *not* there. I sincerely wish that I could say the same." Just because I didn't ask doesn't mean I wasn't wondering, but I push aside my relief so I can keep my full attention on Amelia. "We're at this ridiculous party, it's freezing out, and everyone is stupid drunk. After watching someone almost fall into the fire, and then two girls nearly claw each other's eyes out, I was beyond ready to go. An agonizing two hours later, I finally managed to convince Hank it was time to leave. Of course, by this point he was wasted."

"Sounds like fun," I grimace.

"Oh, a real blast. So we get back to the car after what feels like a mile-long trek through a field and somehow, despite the liquor that has replaced the blood in his veins, my dear Hank is feeling . . ." her voice turns cold, ". . .*frisky*. So he starts kissing me, but the spark just wasn't there, Mags. Like, at all. Really, I just wanted to be home in bed. Alone. But I'm giving it all the energy I can muster, and then"—her eyes are slits—"he unzips his pants. It takes me a minute because I'm in shock. What idiot would ever think that any part of this pathetic scene is *romantic*? The whole car

smelled like a brewery, for crap's sake. So I say, trying to hide the disgust in my voice, 'Not gonna happen, Hank.'"

I know that Amelia and I are standing in the middle of a hallway loud with conversation and slamming lockers, but honestly, all I see is her. Her angry eyes flash as I wait for the rest of the sordid tale.

"And then he gets all sugary sweet and starts feeding me some garbage about how much he likes me, and how beautiful I am, and how this would just be an expression of our love. Love? Are you freaking *kidding* me? We were miles from *love*. It sounded like a line from some cheesy movie that totally bombed in theaters. And then," she hisses, "he tries to *force* the issue."

"*What*?"

"Yeah, like maybe the reason I wasn't doing anything was because I didn't know *how*. I mean, Hank is irresistible, so what other reason could there be, right? But as soon as I realize what he's doing I start seeing red, and all the while he's talking to me, telling me what a great couple we are and how this would make things even better. Better," she snorts, "as if what we had was even *good* in the first place. So my first rabid thought is to bite really, really hard, but then I figured before he registered my teeth he might have a nanosecond of pleasure, and that was completely unacceptable. Besides, it's totally cliché." I can't help but marvel that only Amelia would be worried about her story playing out like any other. Leave it to her to be original.

"So what did you do?" I ask, almost afraid to hear. I haven't

actually seen Hank yet today; I really hope she didn't murder him.

"I. . ." she grins at me wickedly, "twisted."

"Twisted?"

"Yup, as hard as I could on that puny little thing, without killing him, of course. Although I'm not sure why I even cared. Remember those Indian sunburns we used to give each other? Well, something like that," she finishes with obvious satisfaction. "And I didn't let go until he was practically crying." Some of the anger drains from her face, and she looks pretty pleased with herself. "Then I kicked his drunk ass out of the car, left him there, and drove home."

I'm silent while the scene replays in my mind. And *this* is the face that I knew Hank would eventually show. As expected, it turns out he's a total creep, but at the moment all I can think about is Amelia.

I hug her tightly. "He could have hurt you."

"Oh, he wanted to, trust me. But in that split second I figured, let him. I honestly didn't care. I was so mad I shook for two hours after I got home." She looks at me thoughtfully. "You knew, though, didn't you?"

"That he was awful? Yeah, I knew."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Would you have listened?"

"Probably not. I didn't want to see it." She shakes her head, chewing on her lip. "That's it. I'm done. If I can't date Jonah, I'm not dating anyone."

"But you *can* date Jonah." I say, instantly frustrated. I still have no idea how to get around this wall she's put up in her head. And around her heart. Jonah would take her back in a second, but it's like she's deaf to everything I have to say.

"Maggie Rae, we are *not* starting this again." Like she isn't the one who brought up Jonah. "What's done is done."

This whole situation is ridiculous, especially with the completely unnecessary Hank detour. I wish I could just shake some sense into her, but when I see her set and stubborn face, I decide to let it go. I'll wait. There will be a time when I can reach her, and at the moment I'm just relieved that Amelia survived and came out swinging, as usual. Thankfully, it took Hank even less time to screw up than I'd anticipated. I'm so lost in my inner admiration that I jump when someone taps me softly on the shoulder. For some weird reason I expect to see Hank's ugly face looming behind me, but instead, I find Toby. It's hard to believe the changes in him over just the past week; we'll start with the fact that he's actually smiling.

"Hi," he says.

"Hey." Some of the fury at Hank dissipates in the presence of Toby's cheerful face.

"We still on for this afternoon?"

"Definitely. You want to hitch a ride home with me?"

"Yeah, sure," he says with a nod before noticing Amelia behind me and lifting a hand in greeting. Looking back, I see questions written all over her face, and it reminds me of Dad's

expression yesterday morning after discovering Toby in our living room.

"Long story," I laugh as we all turn and head down the hall.

"*Another* one?" she asks. "You were supposed to keep me posted, remember?"

"I know," I moan. I can't help but think about how quiet and steady my life used to be. "Come over this afternoon and we'll fill you in. Unless you've got other plans."

"Plans? Ha!" She reaches over, lacing her arm through mine. "It seems that all I've got now is time, my dear Maggie Rae. And rather unexpectedly, it looks like I'm also in dire need of a date for the dance." She sighs deeply. "Unless I go all by my lonesome."

"How sad."

"I know."

"We could always share Toby," I offer.

"We could. I'm not sure he'd be able to juggle the two of us, though, Mags. I'm a handful."

"You are," I agree with a sideways glance at Toby. He's watching with amused interest. "Wanna flip for him?"

"Yes. I call tails."

"Wow. It only took fifteen years for someone to finally figure out what a catch I truly am. It's about time." He grins. "And while I appreciate your concern, Amelia, I'm fairly certain I can handle the both of you. With ease."

"Oooohh," Amelia breathes, obviously impressed. "For someone so tiny, he's pretty full of himself."

"Are *you* really calling *me* tiny?" Toby laughs.

"Who *is* this little wise-ass?" Amelia looks at me with eyebrows raised. "And why have you been hiding him from me?"

"You've been busy playing kids' games." I grin. "With little boys."

"He was a surprisingly *little* boy," Amelia smirks back. "But now, I want in on this."

"I guess it's up to Toby then."

Amelia stops in the middle of the hallway to get his full attention. "What do you think, sugar? You up for a threesome?"

Toby looks at me, shaking his head. "Is she always like this?"

"Yes," I nod. "Always."

"I warned you; I'm a handful. You in?"

"Yeah. I'm in. And I get the feeling that with you around, it should be an interesting evening."

"Oh, sweetie, it'll be a night you won't forget."

"I vote that you let *me* be the naked PETA babe."

Toby and I both stare at Amelia for a split second before answering in unison.

"No."

"Sure."

I look at Toby, shaking my head. "Give me a break; she's not going to be *naked*! What does that even have to *do* with saving the animals?"

"Well, I know how you hate the whole shock value thing, so Amelia prancing around naked seems far less offensive than carrying around a dead, skinned animal prop or dripping blood on ourselves or something gross like that. In fact, I think it would be a great . . ." he grins at me widely, ". . . *compromise*."

I had a feeling it would be dangerous to put him and Amelia in the same room together. Five minutes in and they're already co-conspirators.

"No. Don't you want to be credible? Naked is just so *tacky*."

"Well, not *totally* bare, Maggie Rae. Look at these bikini tops that look like lettuce leaves. I could definitely pull that off." Amelia points to two Playboy bunny PETA girls clad in faux lettuce bras.

"But why? What exactly is the *point*?"

"I agree with Amelia, it's totally relevant," Toby says with a definitive nod. As if Amelia has offered anything relevant yet in support of lettuce covered boobs. Or to be more precise, lettuce covered nipples.

"Totally. Relevant." Amelia echoes. She's looking at me calmly, sure of her victory. "If we get to keep our hides, then animals shouldn't be stripped of theirs, right?"

"Oh, come on," I say, shaking my head, but not really sure how to tackle their argument. Amelia usually wins our battles, but this time it won't be without a fight; I'm totally against the vegetable wear on principle. I start to remind them that I agreed on a hook—not a pseudo-hooker—when Grams walks in with cheerful greetings all around. Thankfully, her entrance spares me from

further discussion on this ridiculous subject. Wasting no time, she sits down and starts digging through her purse.

"Have any of you heard of this group?" she asks, pulling out her phone and opening up Instagram. I always think it's kind of funny that Grams is more active—and way more popular—on social media than I am. Amelia and I both shake no, but Toby nods his head vigorously.

"Yeah, they take their protest to the streets, right?"

"Yes, their goal seems to be reveal and then reform. Or maybe, inform." Grams pulls up the group's page, passing her phone around the table. It shows activists, all dressed in black and wearing masks, standing in a square formation. Some hold signs, others computers or TVs, all of which are showing footage from slaughterhouses and factory farms. Other activists—maskless—work their way through the onlookers, answering questions and offering information on how to live a vegan life. "The masks represent their stand against injustice, and their rallies are peaceful, yet seemingly very effective."

"They hold demonstrations around the world, which is pretty impressive since they're relatively new." Toby studies the pictures, a thoughtful look on his face.

"I'm not sure if we have enough time to organize anything official with them, but I thought one of you might want to look into it. I've done some research and as long as the group is on the small side—which ours should be—we won't need a permit to protest on public property." Grams looks around the table. "What do you guys

think? There would be enough of us for a decently sized demonstration, especially if we can enlarge our group with some of the café regulars."

"I like it," I say with a quick look at Amelia. Her face registers disappointment as the lettuce bikini disappears before her eyes. "You would have been freezing in that thing," I offer, trying to soften the blow.

"My temporary discomfort was a sacrifice I was willing to make," she says with a pout. "But fine, count me in."

"I like it too," Toby adds.

"If students are still your primary catch, then the park across the street from the school would probably work. It's public property, and as long as we're peaceful we shouldn't have a problem." She's obviously been doing her research.

"Well, we can't do it next week because that's homecoming. I know it'll be a push to get it together for this week, but I'm game if you guys are." I look around the table. "Of course, I still have to check with Mom on the café."

"Already done, sweetie. I talked to her today, and if you're all okay with Friday night, she wants to close the café for the day."

"*Close* the café?" I would never have asked her to do that because she never takes time off. In fact, the last "vacation" she took was when the girls were born, and that could hardly be called a vacation.

"It's already been decided," Grams says. "We've even collaborated on a menu. And when I left, she was putting out

feelers and trying to hunt down a projector and screen for the night."

"So then I guess we're looking at Thursday for the protest." I turn to Amelia and Toby. "What do you think?"

"I'm in. I'm definitely in," Amelia says quickly.

"Same here," Toby nods.

"And I have another idea," Amelia mutters, her eyes unfocused and plotting. "We need an ambassador. A super cute ambassador. Something that connects the animal on the screen with something real, something you can touch. Bunnies. Bunnies are adorable; no one can resist a bunny. Where do we find one of those?"

Toby's frowning, but not in disapproval. More like he knows exactly where we can find a bunny that no one can resist. "My neighbors have rabbits. They hire me to watch them every time they go on vacation."

"Do you think you could persuade them to let us borrow a fluffy bunny for an hour or so?"

"There's only one way to find out," he says with a shrug. "Might not be such a bad idea, Amelia."

"Bad idea?" Amelia smiles sweetly. "Oh, sugar, I never have those."

"Never? Really?" I ask with an incredulous laugh. "Because Hank seemed like a terrifically bad idea to me."

Amelia sighs. "You might be right, Mags. I think maybe I've finally outgrown the kids' games," she says, her eyes shining

wickedly. "Hank was a pretty sore loser anyway."

"Is it always like that?" Toby asks as I pull up into his driveway.

"Is what always like what?"

"Your dinners. Everyone sitting around, talking, laughing."

"Yeah, usually. Was it too much?"

"Hardly. I loved it. In fact, I was wondering if I could crash dinner at your place every night."

"Well, that's good," I laugh, "because sometimes we can be a little overwhelming—especially when we're excited about something. But, yeah, you're welcome any time. Marcus ate with us almost every night too." His name slides past my lips before I even realize where my brain was heading.

Climbing out of the car, he promises to let me know about the rabbit as soon as he has an answer. My mind is still moving fast as I drive back towards home; there isn't much time, and there's still so much to do. I'm on a little bit of a high, replaying the day and wondering what part I should tackle first, when I pull into the driveway and find myself abruptly jarred back into the present moment. Marcus's motorcycle is parked up beside the workshop, thoughtfully hidden—except from this angle. My stomach does a slow lurch, and my eyes search the lit windows quickly, looking for a glimpse—any glimpse. I sit there, frozen, while a wave of unexpected emotion washes over me. I've been so distracted the last couple of days that it's been easy to push the whole Marcus

disaster to the back of my mind. Every time it bubbles up, almost always when I'm alone, I somehow manage to quickly smother it with thoughts of protests and bullies and creepy boyfriends. But here it is, reminding me that it never actually went anywhere. All along it's only been patiently waiting for me to drop my guard, so it can sneak back in.

The sadness is so thick that all I want to do is find quick relief in any way that I can. My heart tries to tell me that strolling over to the workshop door and taking him back with open arms would solve everything. That somehow this scenario would instantly end my pain. But at the same time, I see this girl; this somehow beautiful and perfect girl. Next to Marcus. I hear his voice, mingled with hers. I hear his laugh, mingled with hers. I see his hands and his lips, mingled with hers. And just as quickly, my heart freezes and I wonder if I can ever let him back in. Forgiveness implies releasing but I have absolutely no idea how to do that, especially when my imagination seems bent on ruining whatever chance we might have left. It haunts me with clear and vivid pictures of a moment I never actually knew. But somehow, even when I push away those cringe-worthy images, I still find myself holding onto them. There just doesn't seem to be any way *out*. The minutes tick past while I claw my way through the heartache, just searching for the place of balance that I'd found, however precarious, before seeing his bike. Shaking my head to fend off tears, I climb from the car and hurry inside to avoid seeing Marcus. But at the same time, watching the windows for his face.

1 year 2 months ago

"Shit," Marcus mutters, tripping for probably the tenth time in as many minutes, before turning to glare at me like it's somehow my fault.

"Relax, Marcus, we're almost there. Maybe you should try picking up those gigantic feet of yours; it usually makes walking a little easier."

"Thanks, Mags, I'll try and remember that," he replies sarcastically.

We're quiet for a couple of minutes as we walk along, although sporadic curses from Marcus each time he trips do occasionally break the silence.

"And what's up with these squirrels anyway? They're kind of creeping me out. I can just picture one of them going all rabid on me or something." Wow. I don't really know what to say to that, because it's . . . well, ridiculous. Of all things to be afraid of, he decided squirrels are the biggest threat?

"It really isn't the squirrels you need to watch out for. I mean, I only saw a bear that one time, but still." I know it's mean, but he really is acting like a lunatic. Squirrels?

"What the hell, Maggie Rae? Are you serious?" He stops to glare at me. "Maybe next time you can warn me before you try

to kill me out here in the middle of freaking nowhere!"

I somehow bite back laughter while fervently praying that no squirrel makes a menacing gesture; it would surely mean the end of this little adventure.

"Marcus, we're like ten minutes from my house. Hardly in the middle of nowhere. And I'm sorry, I was only joking about the bear," I answer calmly, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. "Really, we're almost there."

He's still studying me with narrowed eyes, and I'm pretty sure he's weighing his options: stick with me and head directly into bear territory, or take his chances stumbling back through squirrel-land on his own. I wonder if maybe this wasn't such a great idea after all. I've always thought that everyone should experience the stillness of the woods at least once in their lifetime, but I'm wondering if perhaps that was a bit too optimistic. Maybe some of us have been separated from nature for far too long to appreciate its peace.

Except for the graceful thundering of Marcus's feet, we finish the walk in silence, finally stepping out of the shadows and into the sunshine of Fairy Grove. Marcus immediately stills beside me as his senses drink it all in.

"Wow." He frowns. "It's like something out of a kid's book."

"I know. I come out here when I want to be alone or figure stuff out. On occasion, I've been known to nap," I grin.

Marcus walks away, moving through the patch of sunshine and heading slowly towards the brook. He looks just like a little kid, enthralled and mesmerized, as he cautiously picks his way along. Kicking through the tall grasses that line the stream's edge, he reaches down and picks up a long stick. Using it very carefully, he leans over to gently poke a napping turtle, sending it scrambling into the water. Still tentative but with growing confidence, he starts turning over stones, hunting for the hidden bullfrogs that croak loudly; the hunt is fruitless, though, they easily evade him and his loud city ways, splashing to safety long before he spots them. Unexpectedly, his search uncovers a salamander, and he hastily pulls back his hand, laughing quietly in surprise. Often, you're able to see sides of people that you never knew existed when they think no one is watching, and right now I'm not sure Marcus even remembers that I'm here. Marcus, meet Mother Nature. Mother Nature, Marcus.

As a sliver of bright sunlight falls across his face, I sense the perfect photo opportunity. Sliding my camera out of its bag, I start snapping pictures. It always amazes me, this ability to capture a single, beautiful moment in time. One moment that would normally be forever lost, now caught and suspended to be remembered for always. I love the idea that sixty years from now when Marcus and I are all wrinkled and gray, we'll take out this picture and breathe, *Remember when?* And in a magical instant find ourselves back beside the brook of Fairy Grove.

I shadow him quietly for a while, noting the transformation as he absorbs the energy of this place and perhaps the first moments of real stillness he's ever known. His body relaxes and his face softens as the sun, the birds, and the breeze cast their spell. After a while, I spread out the blanket and just sit, waiting for him to make his way back. Eventually he does, the worry wiped clean from his face.

"I feel like we're a million miles away from everything. Like there's no one left but us, Mags. Seriously, I don't think I've ever been anywhere so quiet. No cars, no people—nothing but trees and frogs," he finishes with a grin.

"Does that mean you like it or that you hate it?"

"It's pretty cool," he says, lowering himself onto the blanket beside me. "So yeah, I guess I like it."

"So does that poor turtle you tried to drown," I tease.

"But don't you get scared out here all by yourself?" His tone is serious now, and he's studying me thoughtfully.

"Scared?" Of what? Killer squirrels?

"Like what if something happened to you out here? How long before someone even knew you were in trouble?"

"I always tell Mom or Dad where I'm going, so eventually one of them would notice that I never came home. And I always carry my phone. And my pepper spray," I say with a shrug. His concern is actually pretty sweet, and it gives me this warm feeling inside.

"I don't know, it doesn't seem . . . safe, or something."

"Don't you think it's far less likely that something bad will happen to me out here, all by myself in Fairy Grove, than in a city? Surrounded by thousands and thousands of people?" I roll my eyes. "I think the odds are in my favor."

"Maybe," he agrees, "but what if one day someone *was* out here? How would you protect yourself?"

"Protect myself? Why is every stranger a potential threat? I'm out here, and I'm obviously not." I lie on my back, looking up at the trees. This kind of conversation almost always frustrates me. So much fear, everywhere. I wish that instead of always imagining the worst, people tried to imagine the best instead. Now *there's* a novel idea.

"Well, that's a relief."

"What is?" I've lost track of the conversation, what with the one I'm busy having in my head.

"On the way out here, I was pretty sure this was a trap. You know, you planning on making me bear food." He's grinning as he stretches out beside me, his fingers finding mine. "So I'm relieved to find out that you're not some crazy ax murderer." I don't know how he manages to do that so easily. He takes my anger or my frustration, and with a simple joke somehow makes it disappear. Just like that.

The silence spins out, long and comfortable. It's nice to know he can just be here without having to fill all of the quiet

with idle noise. My mind wanders, but it keeps coming back to the warm weight of his hand in mine. I'm not sure when it happens, but it was inevitable; my eyes close, and I drift in that soft space between sleeping and awake.

I don't know how long I linger there before the lightest of touches brings me back. His thumb slowly maps my face, and he gently brushes away a stray hair before smiling down into my sleepy eyes.

"This could all be part of my evil plan," I say, still drowsy. "I lure you in, and then *bam*, squirrel chow."

"It could be," he agrees.

"Aren't you scared?"

"Terrified."

The look in his eyes is too much, and I close mine again just so I can breathe. More quiet minutes pass.

"Man, what did I do before you?"

My heart catches at his words. I wonder if he's talking to me or to himself, but I'm afraid to look—afraid of what I'll see. I'm pretty sure I'm still breathing, but just barely.

"Thank you," he says as I finally summon the courage to open my eyes. He's watching me closely and somehow reads the question in my mind. "For being you." An adorable grin melts across his face, and it would be impossible to ignore the rush that moves through me. No longer drowsy, I smile back, thinking that maybe those are the nicest words anyone has ever said to

me.

He leans over, gently pressing his lips to mine. Sweet kisses melt softly across my cheeks, my chin, my ears. Moving slowly, he travels my face before his lips roam gently down my neck. His breath smells like peppermint, his lips are impossibly warm, and I think that maybe I could stay here, just like this, forever. And then forever again. But then his lips find mine and all coherent thoughts stop; all I can do is feel and taste and smell.

Eventually he pulls away, gently, but after the warmth of his mouth I'm unexpectedly disoriented. He's still close—close enough that I can feel his breath on my face—and I will his lips to come back to mine, reluctant for this to ever end. But even the taste of him is quickly forgotten as my brain registers the look in his eyes. I know that look. It's one that I see countless times every day: across the kitchen table, over the heads of the twins, as my dad walks in the door and again as he leaves. It's how he looks at my mom. It's love. I'd know it anywhere. Marcus's expression says it all, and I wonder if my heart is as clearly visible in my eyes for him to read and to know.

His smile starts small, but it grows and grows until it lights up his whole beautiful face and, in that instant, I realize.

He knows.

How could he not?

11

"Well, my little carrot top, you just might be a genius." Toby walks over to us, smiling at Amelia in admiration.

I'm standing by Amelia's locker and listening patiently as she fills me in on all of the high school happenings that developed overnight. It seems like she must pick up on these things through osmosis because how else could she know every single detail before I've even walked through the doors?

"You'll have to be more specific, sugar." Amelia smiles sweetly. "I have so many genius ideas that they're hard to keep track of."

"I'm sure you do," Toby laughs. "The cute factor? Looks like it just might work."

"Of course it'll work; cute *always* works. But I'm still not sure what we're talking about here."

"I'm guessing he's talking about the rabbit and not about how adorable you look in that dress." I roll my eyes because I know that's exactly what she was thinking.

"Why thank you, Mags. I wasn't sure if I could pull it off, but you just made my day." She turns back to Toby. "So to be clear, are we talking about the rabbit, or me in this killer dress?"

"Amelia, you are truly breathtaking in that dress," Toby says,

nodding his approval. "And I'm not quite sure how you manage to show up every day looking like you stepped straight from the pages of *Vogue*—"

"*Vogue*?"

"Yes, *Vogue*. But you do. So it could not possibly be you that I'm referring to, having far exceeded the boundaries of merely cute."

"Better than *cute*?"

"Much."

"Guys, really?" I interrupt them impatiently as soon as I see where this is heading; if I don't break things up now, it's likely to go on all day. I swear, it's like these two were made for each other. "I'm sure we can all agree that Amelia's taste is impeccable, but we've got, like, one minute until the bell rings. So . . . rabbits?"

"Right, sorry." Toby shrugs at Amelia, their banter prematurely crushed. "As I was saying, if we all agree that a rabbit ambassador is still a good idea, then it looks like it's a go."

"A *good* idea?" Amelia asks, confused.

"Yeah. You know, ethically. I just want to make sure that we're employing the rabbit to help the rabbit and not only to help ourselves. Otherwise, it's just more exploitation, which completely defeats our purpose."

"Isn't it the same thing? If it helps *us,* then it helps our cause, which helps the animals, right?"

"Yeah, but it's a fine line." He frowns, turning to look at me. "What are your thoughts?"

I get his hesitation, but I also know that sometimes people need living, breathing visuals. Watching a bunny being tortured on a screen in the name of science might seem way more real if you're petting a sweet, fluffy head at the same time. I almost feel like it gives the rabbit a chance to speak for itself, in the only way that rabbits can.

"I had the same reservations, but I still think it could help," I say.

"Of *course* it can help," Amelia fumes. "I'm not even sure why we're having this conversation."

"Because after you watch enough of those documentaries, you realize that virtually one hundred percent of the time any relationship between humans and animals is rooted in the exploitation of the animal. We use animals, Amelia, for whatever we want." Toby shakes his head in disgust. "And since it's not like I can ask for the rabbit's permission, I just wanted to make sure we're all on the same page."

"We're all on the same page," she scowls. "We involve the animal to save the animals. Period. Can we continue now?"

"Okay, great. Then we forge ahead with Project Cute," he says, attempting to placate a now-riled Amelia. She glares back, but I think it's only superficial. "So here's the scoop: Marge, my neighbor, thinks that the concept of an animal ambassador is a pretty solid one. What I didn't know until yesterday is that her rabbits were all adopted from the animal rescue where she volunteers on Saturday mornings, which means that she's pretty

passionate about the cause. After hearing about our idea, she gave us two options: Our first choice is Attila the Bun."

Amelia snorts out a laugh, her irritation quickly forgotten.

"Seriously?" I ask.

"Pretty great, right? Although if a less aggressive rabbit exists, I'd like to meet it. Marge brought him out last night, and he's easily as large as a barbarian, but he's the most docile rabbit I've ever seen. He just sat there in Marge's lap for the entire conversation before falling soundly asleep. He walks—or hops, I guess—calmly on a harness and is completely comfortable in crowds. Marge pretty much brings him everywhere she can get away with."

"What's to decide? Sounds perfect to me." Amelia nods.

"Well, just wait a second until you hear option number two." Toby grins, and I wonder what could be better than Attila. "Marge is also fostering a litter of three baby bunnies that are so cute you can hardly stand to look at them. Honestly, I managed about ten seconds before I felt my eyeballs start to melt, and my insides went all soft and mushy. Marge says they've been handled since they were tiny, so they're comfortable with human contact, but she'd still want them to be crated for their safety."

"Oooh, babies," Amelia gushes. "They get my vote. *Nothing* is cuter than teeny-tiny bunnies!"

"Yeah, they're definitely cute, but walking around with an overflowing armful of fuzzy rabbit is pretty cute too. And the babies would be closed up in a crate the whole time. My vote is for Attila," I say, before we both look back at Toby.

"Really? You're making me decide? Can't we just flip a coin or something?" Toby winces while we wait expectantly. "Fine, let me think about it, and I'll let you know later. Although I'm not sure how you choose between adorable and adorable."

"That's fine, pumpkin, take all the time you need." Amelia slides her arm through his before turning to give me a wink. We both know that if there's a guy alive who's resistant to her charms, she hasn't found him yet. And although I'm curious to see how Toby fares, hope is slim. Very slim. My guess is that the babies are about to enjoy their time in the spotlight.

"Hey, Mags," he says softly, and I wonder how it's possible to miss someone's voice so much. Looking up, I find Marcus standing beside me. "Can I sit down for a sec?"

When I nod, suddenly struck mute, he slides into the chair across from me. I notice that he looks better, not quite so sad and drawn, and I can't help but wonder if maybe that's a good thing. At least I'd never have to work through my chaotic emotions if he decided to move on before I'd even found the courage to sit down and hash this all out.

"I just wanted to say thanks for letting me work with your dad." All I can do is nod again and wonder where my voice went. "I've been firmly instructed to stay away from the house and not to bother you under any circumstances," he says solemnly, although I can hear the faintest whisper of a tease in his tone. "But it's all

good. I just like knowing you're around."

He's looking at me, unnervingly familiar, his eyes holding mine. And even though I try to look away, I can't. I just want him to keep sitting here, talking. Talking like it's any other day. Talking like we used to. Slowly he smiles, and it's just the tiniest bit tentative—like he's not sure if it's safe or even allowed. What a strange and quiet moment this is, stuck here in the middle of a cafeteria so loud with movement.

"Sometimes I think about you inside, talking to Sir Bartholomew or playing with the twins, and it doesn't feel as impossible to fix." He's watching me closely, gauging my reaction. I'm not sure what he sees on my face, but it prompts him to keep going. "Being there makes it easier to remember what we were and how great this all used to be before . . ." he pauses, taking a deep breath. ". . . before I had to screw everything up. Before I forgot it was the only thing holding me together."

As if I'm powerless to stop it, my hand reaches across the table; out of habit, I lace my fingers through his.

"If I could have saved you, I would have," I say simply, happy to have found my voice again. "But I don't really think that's how things work."

"Maybe not," he shrugs, "but it was nice to pretend." He smiles again before his eyes slide to our hands, and I get the feeling that I'm not the only one reluctant to let go. I feel a sharp pang as he stands up slowly and our fingers slip apart.

"So yeah, that's it. I just wanted to say thanks."

"You're welcome," I answer him, almost on automatic. But I'm surprised, and even more relieved, to realize just how much I mean it.

Our group now boasts a new member. When Toby asked me if I thought my parents would mind if he brought Bowser along, I assured him that it wouldn't be a problem. The little dog was perfectly happy to stay curled up and sleeping on Toby's lap, but then the twins got home and he was quickly dog-napped. The last time I checked, Bowser was sprawled on the living room floor with them while they watched their afternoon show. He looked pretty content being the center of all that adoration.

"Great news," Mom crows as she comes into the kitchen with Grams close behind. "I managed to track down both a DVD projector and a screen; they'll be dropped off at the café tomorrow. That'll give Dad enough time to play around with things and get it all set up for Friday." She smiles when Amelia cheers her approval. "But that's not even the best part," she says, eyes shining. "While I was talking to this one customer about the projector and explaining why we needed it, another customer overheard. He's a regular, but he keeps to himself, so I don't know him all that well. Well, come to find out"—she pauses dramatically—"he used to work in a *slaughterhouse* down south."

"No kidding," Toby says quietly, watching Mom intently.

"So when he offered to come and talk a little bit at your

gathering, I didn't think you'd mind if I said yes," she grins, her eyes twinkling.

"Mind?" Toby asks, incredulous.

Mom laughs at his obviously rhetorical question. "Apparently, he left the job because it was too much, too overwhelming. That was seven or eight years ago, and he's been a hardcore vegan ever since."

"That's *awesome*, but now we really need to make sure we draw people in," Toby says, sounding worried. "We can't have this guy all ready to give his speech to an audience of one."

"I was thinking the exact same thing," Gram nods, "which is why I called my old beau Tom. He's been a reporter at the *Sunny Meadows Press* for what seems like forever, right out of high school, I think. Anyhoo, he's coming over here tomorrow after school to interview the three of you, and he plans on covering your protest and getting some photos for the paper. He'll add in a blurb about the café, and I imagine that'll be intriguing enough to send some people our way."

Amelia, Toby, and I look at each other, speechless. Is this even happening? Not that the *Sunny Meadows Press* is a big-time paper or anything, but around here everyone reads it for all the local news.

"He also promised to be at the café Friday night, and he wants to run a follow-up article."

Amelia squeals, so excited at the thought of her face plastered across the front page that she jumps up, pulling both Grams and

Mom into a huge three-way hug. "You guys are the *best*!"

"I've also been spreading the word at the café," Mom laughs, "and there are more than a few people interested in joining your protest."

It's really unbelievable when I think about how one friendly guy, eavesdropping on one small conversation, started this whole ball rolling. It's even more unbelievable how easily everything has come together. Listening to Amelia and Toby joking with each other while Mom and Grams solidify their menu choices, I can't help but marvel at the simple brilliance of it all. How the pieces just kind of fell right into place, with minimal effort. I can virtually see our energies feeding each other and multiplying; the room seems almost alive with them. The level only swells when Zoe and Myra, irresistibly drawn by our laughter, wander in a little while later with a perky Bowser trotting at their heels.

The night passes in a flurry of activity with the table once again crammed with dinner guests and the conversation loud and animated. As soon as we're done eating, Dad disappears out to the workshop again, and I realize that Marcus is most likely out there with him. I steel myself for the inevitable blanket of sadness, but with the thought of his thanks still fresh, I manage to keep it at bay. I'd definitely call that progress and even if it's only a baby step, it still counts. I'll gladly take all my victories, no matter how small.

1 year ago

I'm sprawled across my bed, working and reworking a trigonometry problem, and I can't help but wonder why I decided on another year in school. I know it had a little something to do with Marcus, but I'm having trouble remembering what exactly the selling point was since both he and this math problem are currently driving me crazy.

"Will you *please* sit down?" I don't even try to hide the exasperation in my voice, and Marcus turns in surprise. I'm hoping he'll quit the relentless pacing; it's making concentration pretty much impossible. Besides, we agreed to get some homework done before meeting Jonah and Amelia at the movies, and so far I've accomplished absolutely nothing.

"Sure, sorry."

I sigh my thanks as he drops down onto the end of the bed, but sadly, it doesn't last long. I've had just enough time to pick up my pencil and refocus before he bounces back up again to resume his endless circles. To make things even worse, he's slapping a football back and forth between his hands, tossing it lightly and catching it mindlessly. Toss, catch, slap. Toss, catch, slap. I rub my temple and feel the slight pressure of a headache coming on as I watch him pace. I close my trig book in defeat

and decide to wait him out, knowing that eventually he'll start talking.

"Can I ask you something?" he asks. Finally. I pull myself upright, crossing my legs and getting comfortable. This could take a while.

"Sure, what's up?" The silence stretches. He stops moving after another thirteen more toss-catch-slap rotations and looks at me.

"So what's your plan? After high school, I mean?" I'm not sure exactly what he's referring to—the future plan of us or just the future plan in general? It seems risky to discuss the evolution of me and Marcus without knowing if that's where the conversation is heading, so I err on the side of caution.

"I don't really know yet," I begin slowly, "but if you're asking me what I *most* want to do, then it would be me and my camera—on the road." I pause to see if this is where his question was actually leading. He's quiet, watching me intently, so it feels safe to continue. "No destination and no restrictions—just me, taking pictures of anything and everything I see." I feel the familiar tingles of anticipation as I talk; this dream is well-worn and familiar. I take it out and shine it up often, even though it's not all that realistic. But that's the thing about dreams; they don't have to be. "There are just so many things I want to see, you know? I want to capture beautiful people in beautiful places—everywhere." My voice kind of trails

off as I lose myself in happy daydreams, but Marcus obviously isn't thrilled with my answer and pulls me abruptly back.

"So still no college?" He's frozen, waiting for my answer. And right then, I realize that he probably had another "family discussion" last night, creating this incredibly tense mood. And as usual, Marcus found it unproductive and frustrating. We've had similar conversations before, usually after a chat with his parents, but every time he asks me the college question it's like he's hoping for a different answer. Or maybe he's actually hoping it hasn't changed.

"College? I don't know. Maybe, but maybe not." I shrug. "And since I'm not really sure either way, it's probably not a super smart idea to just jump right in. It's a pretty expensive mistake to make, you know?"

"Well, yeah, *I* know, but how come your parents aren't all over you about this?"

"Marcus, you've been practically living here for the past six months. You know my parents better than that."

"Yeah, they're weird," he mutters, resuming his agitated pacing. "How come if I don't go to college I'm some kind of colossal failure, but your parents are all like, 'You want to join the circus? Well, Maggie Rae, that's just wonderful!'" He's waving one of his hands around and talking in a high-pitched voice that's apparently meant to mimic my parents. He's still moving back and forth, irritation practically oozing from his

moving body.

"The circus?" I ask, eyebrows raised.

"Whatever. You know what I mean, Mags. If you walked downstairs right now and told them you wanted to race cars or climb mountains or become a Buddhist monk, their answer would stay the same: 'Whatever floats your boat, Maggie Rae.'"

"Maybe," I agree. "But come on, a colossal failure? Your words or theirs?"

"Mine, but only because I condensed a three-hour lecture into two words."

"I don't know. Maybe it's super selfish of me, but making a decision based only on how others feel seems like a really bad idea. I mean, what if you end up with this completely miserable life because it's what someone else wanted for you? It's not your parents who have to live with your choices, Marcus. It's you." He's still moving, but at least the ball has stopped its relentless motions, and his steps are slower. "Besides, a college education is no guarantee of a happy life."

"Maybe not, but it's a guarantee of more money," he says with a grimace. Toss. Catch. Slap.

"Hardly. Who says anything is guaranteed? Life doesn't promise you anything, ever. But it does give us choices. Maybe before you do anything else you should figure out what kind of a life you even want. How much do you really care about making a ton of money?" I watch as he shakes his head, mumbling to

himself. "I guess maybe I'd just feel like more of a failure if I went to college to make someone else happy, but then realized I'd wasted all that time and money heading in the wrong direction. I mean, if they left it up to you, would you even want to play football?" I ask pointedly.

"How do I know? My parents have been telling me what I want since I was, like, two. It seems crazy to me that you're even given a choice." He slaps the ball, hard. "Yeah, I like to play ball, but do I seriously want this to be what my life is all about? Probably not, but then if you were to ask me what I do want? I have no clue. No freakin' clue." Clearly frustrated again, he's back to toss, catch, slap.

"Maybe that's because no one's ever given you the chance to figure it out for yourself," I say, feeling as frustrated as he looks. "And doesn't it seem just a little bit ridiculous that you're expected to have the rest of your life planned out by the time you reach eighteen? I mean, give me a break." He pauses to look at me because it really is insane. A lucky few are just kind of born knowing, but all the rest of us? Sometimes I think we've got it all wrong, about a lot of things. Too many things.

"Sometimes I try and imagine a life doing exactly what I want." He turns to look out the windows, shaking his head. "And I come up with nothing. Nothing, Mags. How come there isn't anything there?"

"Marcus, sit." I'm relieved when he listens, dropping heavily

onto the bed. "Can you maybe look at it this way? Like this whole choice thing is really kind of exciting?"

"Exciting? Really? Since when do you think fights are exciting?" He's right. Typically, I tend to avoid the whole wrath-spilling-over-into-words thing.

"Well, not that part. But the part where you're seventeen years old and you finally realize that you haven't even officially met yourself yet." He looks me, and I can tell that he's biting back some flippant reply, but I can also tell that he wants to believe me. For right now, I figure it's enough that *I* believe me.

"That doesn't sound exciting," he says flatly.

"Really? I think it does. Because who knows what you'll find."

"And what if you're wrong? What if there's nothing to find?"

I laugh. "Not possible. I think that everyone has something that they do exceptionally well. And once you find it, you'll probably wonder how you ever could have missed it." He's still sitting, so I take that as a good sign. "That's what happens when I pick up my camera." I smile. "I feel instantly comfortable and more like *myself* when I'm holding it."

"And you think I'll find it, huh?"

"I bet the clues are already there. Just waiting for you to smarten up, you dummy." I smile, trying to coax one from Marcus, but nothing yet.

"Great, this might take a while." He tosses the ball up and catches it with another irritated slap. "But I'm thinking that the next time my parents want to ruin my night, I'm taking you along. Maybe if you spin your whole happy ending story, they'll figure you're a bigger headcase than I am and get off my freaking back."

"Maybe," I laugh, grabbing the football from his hands. "But I doubt it."

"Still, we could try." Marcus easily snatches it back. A sneaky look on his face has me hopeful that this black mood is lifting.

"Definitely not a great idea." I say, shaking my head.

"One reason why not."

"One reason? Okay, right now I don't think your parents object all that much to you hanging out here. But if they find out we're all feeding you the whole 'follow your heart' gooey love stuff?"

"Right." He nods. "They probably wouldn't like that."

"So how about I just keep patching you up whenever you come crying to me instead?" I grin.

"Crying? That was hardly crying." Marcus rolls his eyes. "But sure. If you want the job, it's all yours."

"Deal. On one condition." I grab the ball, tossing it across the room. "Next time? Leave the stupid ball at home."

10

"Pretty dumb I was worried about *that* all day," I say after Reporter Tom leaves the room.

"You were worried?" Toby's looking at me in disbelief. "About what, exactly?"

"Well, we're not all as eloquent and persuasive with our words as you are, Toby. Or as photogenic as this one." I wave towards Amelia, who just shoots me her sweet smile. "So I was feeling a little . . . apprehensive."

"Well, you didn't act it. Totally a natural." Amelia nods her approval.

"Absolutely. I didn't even know you were nervous," Toby says. "I am wondering, though, if it wasn't so much the teenage passion that drew in our new friend Tom, but more the amazing white-haired lady playing Twister with the girls in the next room."

I laugh, having had the same thought myself. "Did you see how fast he left us when he found out Grams was here?"

"Smitten," Toby nods.

"Definitely," I agree, reaching for my computer. We're supposed to be solidifying our plan and figuring out if there are any last-minute details to take care of before tomorrow. Amelia's quiet, absorbed in something on her phone, and Toby's hard at work

scribbling down notes. Or more likely, new ideas; I'm not sure he ever runs out of them. But honestly, I'm mostly busy feeling relieved that the whole interview thing is over, even if it was a relatively painless twenty minutes. Now that only leaves the protest to feel slightly uneasy about. It's not that I'm afraid anything *bad* will happen; it's just that I don't know *what* will happen. It could go in any direction, really. And for someone as organized as I am, it leaves me feeling somewhat on edge. And like I can't quite sit still.

Lost as I am in my thoughts about tomorrow, it takes my brain a minute to register the sniffles; they start soft, but get louder and more distressed by the second.

"Amelia, what's wrong?" Toby asks, just as she lays her head down on her arms and dissolves into helpless tears. I feel as confused as Toby looks, but because she can't speak past the sobs, my mind has time to run through about a dozen possible scenarios while she chokes out one gasping breath after another. I quickly discard them all as soon as I glance at her phone, still clutched in her hand. With a grimace, I pull it free and hand it over to Toby. He frowns, nodding his understanding. Down feathers and how they're harvested; it's enough to make anyone cry.

"I can't stand it," Amelia moans. "I just can't *stand* it. How can they do it?" She looks up at both of us desperately, hoping we have the answer. But at the moment, I can't think of anything soothing to offer her, mostly because I can so easily remember what those undercover videos did to me. It felt like the world had gone mad, and I seriously started to wonder if compassion and empathy

were somehow being bred right out of the human genome.

"Amelia, it's okay." I rub her back.

"I don't think you understand." She turns to look at me, her face shiny with tears and the sadness still spilling from her eyes. "How can it ever be *okay*? I *own* a down comforter, and I *own* a down jacket. Every night I wrap myself up in a blanket," she wails, "of *torture*!"

She's completely inconsolable again, and Toby's just watching me from across the table with surprised eyes. He hasn't been around long enough to witness heartbreak, Amelia-style. The tears flow in rivers, and her pitiful little moans somehow make you want to start crying right along with her. It's like her sadness is somehow contagious.

"I used to *hate* them in the beginning," Toby says, when the sobs finally quiet enough that he can be heard. "And by *them*, I mean anyone and everyone who contributes to the violence. I hated them all equally, those who slit the throats as much as those who ate the meat or paraded around in their leather boots and their fur coats. In my eyes, they were all murderers."

"Aren't we? *Aren't we all*?" Amelia's voice is muffled, her head still resting on her arms. I keep rubbing her back in big, slow circles.

"Not exactly." I look over at Toby and smile.

"It isn't like you have no say in the matter, Amelia," Toby says. "Once you have the information, you get to decide."

"Actually, you having a complete breakdown at my kitchen table gives me hope. I mean, how long have we known each other?"

"Forever," she sniffs.

"Right, and I've been a vegan for the *entire* time," I say pointedly. "You're here practically every single day, eating our food and seeing how we live, and it still took that horrible video to finally show you the *why* of my life. It makes me want to believe that most people would choose differently if they knew the whole story. The *real* story."

"I can't pretend anymore, can I?" Amelia has always been something of a halfhearted vegetarian. She rarely eats meat, but it certainly isn't a hundred percent commitment. I think her life is about to change.

"Well, you *can*; people do it all the time," Toby frowns, shaking his head in frustration.

"Not me," she says, her voice firm. "But still, how do I *unsee* that?" She waves her hand towards the phone screen, wisely refusing to look at it.

"Do you really want to? Because when you unsee, you forget. And forgetting means those animals keep on suffering." Toby's voice is calm and controlled, but I can hear the conviction behind it. Maybe this is why he loves those PETA ads so much; their controversy is what makes them stick. And if they stick, they have the power and the potential to remind over and over again. Even when you'd rather turn them off and forget everything.

"No," Amelia says wearily, "I guess not, but I had planned on sleeping tonight. *Without* nightmares."

"Well, all I can say is that I'm even *more* relieved that the

interview is over," I sigh. "No offense, but there's nothing photogenic about you now. Reporter Tom would probably love a close-up of your swollen face." She's a total mess with her puffy eyes and dripping nose.

"Talk about making an impact." Toby shakes his head. "I think he's still in the living room, hanging out with Grams. Maybe I should get him?"

"And maybe I should pin your scrawny little ass to the floor and give you knuckle sandwiches 'til you cry," Amelia grumbles, wiping her cheeks.

"If *you* agree to stop sobbing, then it's a deal."

"Are you telling me to stop *crying*?" Amelia looks at him, horrified.

"Yes, I am. I wasn't sure if you'd catch my subtle meaning what with all your bawling." Wow. I'm not sure he realizes what he's getting into here.

Amelia glares at him. "Perhaps you aren't aware that this is how *healthy* people release their emotions."

"Really?" Toby maintains eye contact, and I'm mesmerized as I wonder where he's going with this. And more importantly, why?

"Yes. *Really*."

"Even when they could do something productive? Something more effective at stopping the madness than the saltwater puddle you just left on the table?"

"And what do you suggest?" Amelia's words are cold. Almost as cold as her eyes at the suggestion that she should curb the flow

of her tears.

"First: go vegan. You'll never feel guilt over those videos again."

"Done."

"It's not always as easy as you think." Toby shakes his head. "In general, the world doesn't like to accommodate us much."

"Done." Amelia says it again, louder this time. They haven't broken eye contact since this conversation started, and I think that maybe they've forgotten I'm still in the room.

"Second: take all of that sadness and frustration and passion and *use it*. Turn it around, and somehow make people understand what's happening out there. When people ask you why you're vegan, tell them. Be educated. Be smart. Redirect all of that energy and change the world with it." They're still locked in a stare-down, this time silently. I know Amelia all too well; she wants to hold onto her indignation, but she's softening. And apparently Toby's already adept at accurately reading her, too, because just as she's about to crumble, he flashes her a wide grin.

"Truce?"

"Truce, ya big jerk." Amelia scowls. "But on one condition."

"Name it."

"I'll forget you ever called me a crybaby"—she holds up her hand at his protest—"if you teach me how to change the world."

"Deal. We start tomorrow; you ready?"

"More than you know."

11 months ago

"Hey," I say, sliding into the booth with Marcus close behind. He's been quiet since I picked him up, but when I asked if he wanted to talk about it, his only reply was: *What's the point*? Based on that scant information, I gather he's had another fight with his parents.

"Hey, guys!" Amelia leans over to give me a quick hug while Jonah somehow manages a mumbled hello around what looks like an entire side of cow in his mouth. I grimace, and he just grins wickedly back. Obviously, I'm used to people eating meat; I mean, pretty much everyone does. But Jonah takes it to a whole new and disgusting level, and for whatever reason, he finds it particularly amusing to eat in front of me. And yet despite his pleasure in causing me pain, I still love the guy to death. I sometimes wonder how that can be.

"So, do we have a plan?" Amelia asks, looking from me to Marcus.

I shake my head and shrug.

"Movie?" Marcus throws out.

"There's nothing that I want to see," I say. We rarely find a movie the four of us can agree on anyway.

"Me neither," Amelia echoes.

"Bowling? Mini golf?" In response to my suggestions, Jonah holds up a bandaged wrist, sprained in football practice. "Sorry, forgot."

We're all quiet, thinking. This is our fourth week of date nights, started after Amelia complained of yet another Saturday night spent home in her sweatpants watching Netflix on the basement couch with Jonah. *Life has got to be more interesting than this*, she'd complained. And so our weekly date night was born.

"There's a party tonight; we could check it out," Jonah offers. "If anyone wants to."

"The one at Chris's?" Marcus asks with a frown. "I don't know if that's a great idea."

"Why not?" I'm not sure what I'm missing because with nothing else on the table, a party sounds fine to me.

"Chris can be kind of . . ." Marcus pauses, uncomfortable.

"An ass," Jonah cuts in easily. "Especially when he's drinking."

Amelia nods her agreement. "Jonah's right, the kid's definitely got some issues. But since we don't have a better plan, I vote we go. We'll just stay away from Chris."

"At his own party?" Marcus frowns again, clearly not convinced.

"If it stinks, we can always leave," Amelia says, shrugging. She's studying Marcus curiously now, too, because he really is

acting weird.

"I just don't think it's a great idea," Marcus repeats stubbornly.

"Dude, what's your problem?" Jonah's asks, looking at Marcus in irritation. "You got a better plan then?"

"Fine. Forget it, we'll go." Marcus throws up his hands in surrender. "But don't say I didn't warn you," he mutters under his breath. He says it so quietly that I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who hears his doomsday prediction.

We agree to pile into Jonah's Jeep and ride over together. I can tell that Marcus is making a brave attempt to be more cheerful, and while I think he's convinced Amelia and Jonah, I'm not fooled. I can only hope the party will distract him from this miserable mood.

"A word of advice?" Amelia turns around in her seat to look at me. "Avoid Chris, if you can. Somehow, he'll manage to grab your ass or brush your boob. Or both, probably at the same time."

She grimaces before turning back to mess around with the radio. I'm a little bit confused by all of the warnings. I mean, I know Chris—after all, I've been going to school with him for two years now. But excluding these three in the car with me, I've never gotten to know anyone on a super personal level. Coming from a small town, most of these kids have been best friends since birth; even their parents went to school together

and trying to break into those well-established circles has proven nearly impossible. Not that I really tried all that hard because, honestly, keeping up with Amelia is enough work as it is. But still, Chris and I already know each other, so I'm not sure what's up with all of the sinister warnings.

"I'm sure it'll be *fine*," I say to no one in particular. Really, how big of a jerk can he be?

Chris's house is set far back from the road, and even though it's early when we drive up, there are already a ton of cars parked along the driveway. The front door's open, light and music spilling out onto the lawn, and people are moving back and forth between the house and the yard where a keg is set up by the garage.

As we walk in through the front door, I can't help but notice the huge group in the living room that's already deeply involved in some kind of drinking game. Amelia immediately gets busy with her mingling, and when Jonah and Marcus start talking to some friends, I decide to wander off. It's a beautiful house, impeccably decorated, and I'm wondering how come Chris isn't at all worried about the white carpet in the dining room. I'm studying a row of pictures at the top of the stairs when Amelia finds me a while later.

"You almost wouldn't recognize him," she says, pointing to a shot of a much younger and happier Chris. "His dad's president of some tech company or something, and his parents

are always off traveling somewhere exotic. Chris plays it off like it's cool, but he's always here alone, so how much fun can that be? In this *giant* house? They're gone this weekend, hence the beer fest downstairs."

"Sounds pretty depressing."

"Yeah, well. C'mon, there's a bonfire out back. It's ridiculously loud in here."

Marcus meets me at the bottom of the stairs. Reaching for my hand, he leans down so I can hear him. "Have you seen Chris anywhere?" he yells over the thumping music. I shake my head, not even trying to talk.

We make our way slowly towards the back door, and Amelia reaches out to grab Jonah's arm on the way by, pulling him along with us. Bypassing another loud group gathered around the kitchen table, we finally step through the door and out into the relative quiet of the backyard. A fire blazes at the far end, surrounded by small clusters of people standing around and talking. As we get closer, I see Chris walking towards us.

"'Sup, dude?" Chris slaps Marcus on the back. "Glad you guys made it." He punches Jonah on the shoulder. "Ladies," he says, with a nod at me and Amelia.

"Hey," we say in unison.

"Did you miss the keg?" Chris is staring at all of our empty hands.

"I'm good," I say with a small smile.

"I'm driving." Jonah shrugs.

Chris pushes his beer into Marcus's hand. "Take mine, I'll get another. I gotta see what's happening inside anyway. Catch you guys later." I watch him jog back across the lawn before turning to see what Marcus does with that red solo cup, now nestled snugly in his hand. Amelia and Jonah move off to talk to someone across the fire, and I watch as Marcus brings the cup to his lips and takes a long pull. I'm a little surprised since we've been dating for almost a year now, and I've never seen him drink. Granted, most of the time we're hanging out at my house, and it isn't like my dad is going to crack open a cold one for him, but still. He smiles somewhat awkwardly when he sees me watching him.

"I need to talk to Paul." He points across the yard. "You want to come?"

"Nah, I'm good." I wave him away and move off to join Amelia who's laughing with a couple of friends; I easily lose myself for a while in the animated conversation. The fire is warm against my back, and the noise out here is friendly and relaxing in contrast to the loud laughter and music blaring from the house. Jonah's standing behind Amelia, his arms wrapped around her waist, and every so often he'll lean forward and kiss her neck. It doesn't distract her in the least; she carries on with her story as if he wasn't even there. I can't help but wonder how she does that. When Marcus kisses me it's like my brain short-circuits,

and conversation becomes pretty much impossible. The thought makes me smile, and I realize it's been a while since I've seen him; it really isn't much of a date night if we don't spend any of it together. I can't spot him anywhere around the fire, though, so figure he must have gone back inside at some point. Suddenly missing him, I decide to go and hunt him down.

The group gathered around the kitchen table has at least doubled in size, with more now standing than sitting, and it's so loud in here that I'm not sure how they can hear one another. It's even more packed in the living room, with people piled on the couches, sprawled on the floor, and standing in every corner. I notice one girl vomiting into a trash can and wonder how anyone can think that's a good time. To each his own, I guess, but the whole scene is starting to make me tired, and Marcus is nowhere to be seen.

Heading upstairs, I pause outside of a closed door and wonder what I'll find if I'm brave enough to open it. How badly do I really need to find Marcus anyway? When I finally turn the handle, all I see is a group of guys gathered around a giant flat screen playing video games; the smell of pot hangs heavy in the air. I move on quickly after shutting the door, but a half-dressed couple in the next room has me thinking I don't really need to find Marcus all that desperately; he'll just have to hunt me down when he misses me enough. As I'm forcing my way back through the living room, I feel an arm slipping around my waist.

"Hey, sexy." I know it's Marcus by his voice, but "sexy" isn't a term of endearment he uses on me often. Or ever. When I turn around, he starts kissing me in a wet and sloppy kind of way; not at all the like the kiss I was dreaming about outside.

"Hey." I wrinkle my nose. "Been drinking, huh?"

"Just a couple." He leans over to kiss me again, and somehow I manage to turn away without making it too obvious.

"You ready to go?" I smile hopefully because all of a sudden, the party has gotten old.

"Aww, not yet, Mags. Things are just getting interesting." He laughs as loud cheers erupt from the kitchen. "Just a little bit longer? A little, little bit?" he begs. And in case I don't understand, he holds up two fingers and brings them together, demonstrating what exactly a "little bit" is. He won't really meet my eyes, but that doesn't stop him from trying to kiss me again. This time I don't care so much about being obvious.

I push him back firmly, my hand flat on his chest. "Okay. I'm going back outside; you come get me when you're ready to go."

"Aw, Mags, you mad at me?" He moans dramatically, his face forlorn. "Why are you mad at me?"

"I'm not mad." Yet. "But I'll be outside," I say again, before pushing my way back out through the horde of people that seems to grow by the second. Amelia knows something's wrong as soon as she sees my face, but instead of getting into it, I just

smile and try to step back into the conversation. But it's no use; all I want to do is leave. Seeing Marcus unexpectedly drunk embarrasses me for some reason, and every time someone comes through the back door, I find myself hoping it won't be him. I'm also feeling this tired sort of growing frustration because without my car, I can't just take off like I so badly want to. But really, who could have predicted this? So I stand it for another miserable hour, during which time I get a splitting headache, before finally begging Amelia to leave.

"Yeah, sure. Where's Marcus anyway?" Her eyes narrow as she looks at me rubbing my temples. "I don't think I've seen him all night," she says suspiciously.

"Inside somewhere," I answer curtly. "Do you think you can go find him? I'll just be at the car."

Fifteen quiet minutes pass while I wait. Leaning against the car with my eyes closed, I find myself desperately wishing I was already home and lost in the oblivion of sleep. Just as I'm wondering if I should go back inside and see what the problem is, I hear Marcus's voice drifting across the lawn—much louder and more animated than it needs to be. Reluctantly, I open my eyes to see him walking unsteadily, his arm thrown around Jonah's shoulder for support. He's not close enough to notice me yet, but I can hear every word he's saying. Actually, I'm pretty sure anyone within a mile radius can hear every word he's saying. I get into the backseat before he spots me.

"Man, I love you. You know that? Dudes never say that, but I love you, man." Marcus squeezes Jonah tightly—apparently overwhelmed by his boundless affection. Jonah may be laughing, but all I can think is that it's going to be a very long and irritating drive home. "And Meely? You are so freakin' incredible. I love you too. But not as much as I love Maggie Rae. Shit, I fucking *love* her."

Amelia slides into the front seat and turns to look at me, rolling her eyes with a shake of her head. Her reaction pretty much sums up how I feel at the moment.

"Maggie Rae," he crows, climbing into the backseat and obviously forgetting my earlier irritation. All I can manage is a cold stare while I wonder where in this miserable mess *my* Marcus went. "Awww, shit. You're mad," he whispers. I want to tell him we've already had this conversation, but I'm pretty sure it would be a waste of time.

"What makes you say that?" I ask dryly.

"Mags, don't be like that," he pleads, his forehead wrinkled. With horror, I notice that his eyes are now shiny with unshed tears, and I almost want to exit the car and walk home. So that's great. On top of everything else, he's a weepy drunk.

"Jonah, can we drop Marcus off first?" My voice is so short and clipped that I barely recognize it as my own.

"Sure thing, Mags," Jonah says lightly, struggling mightily to keep a straight face. His eyes dart to Marcus in the back seat,

and he's obviously just on the brink of laughter. Amelia shoots him a warning look, and somehow he manages to control himself.

"I should have known this was a dumb idea," Amelia mumbles from the front seat, and Marcus can only groan his agreement. Jonah is wisely silent despite the laughter in his eyes, and I do my best to stay calm. Getting mad isn't going to change this irritating situation anyway.

Thankfully, the drive is short, and I'm extremely relieved when we pull up to Marcus's house. He crawls out of the car with a quick glance at me.

"Mags?" he tries one more time. I only shake my head in reply, trying not to cringe at the quiver in his voice.

Jonah helps him to the door, and they disappear inside; I don't even want to *imagine* the conversation happening in there right now.

"Well, that was pretty," Amelia says, looking at me with a frown.

"No kidding."

"Who even was that?"

"I have no idea." I know my replies are curt, but all I can think about right now is ending this ridiculous night.

We're quiet until Jonah reappears, still fighting to contain his mirth. When they drop me off at my car, Amelia makes me promise to text her when I get home. I'm surprised to see that

it's still so early, not even eleven o'clock yet. It's funny how time can mess with you like that.

My mind is tired but extremely irritated at the same time, so instead of sleeping, I end up just lying in bed and reliving the night while willing my headache to disappear. And I can't help but wonder exactly what I'll say to Marcus when he shows up at my door tomorrow.

If he shows up at my door tomorrow.

9

Ten people—less than a dozen. Realistically, our goal seems completely doable. But while ten sounds like a pretty reasonable number, I have small moments of doubt because sometimes people can get crazy defensive when you try to come between them and their food. So while it may be foolishly optimistic to think it will be easy to convince those anonymous ten, I'm still choosing to stay hopeful. I might not know exactly what I'm getting into with this protest, but I'm definitely ready to find out. Besides, there's always the possibility we reach *more* than ten—and that would be really incredible.

"What *took* you so long?" Amelia moans. I don't bother to point out that I'm actually early, mostly because I'm too busy thinking that this may be the first time—ever—that she's been ready and waiting. It's a pretty big deal, and so I savor this rare moment as she climbs eagerly into the car. "How do I look?" she asks, turning to me expectantly.

"Um . . . fine?" She's dressed in all black, just like I am. I'm not really sure how you can go wrong, but I smile my approval anyway. Satisfied, she starts talking a mile a minute and keeps it up the whole drive to Toby's.

The three of us agreed yesterday on the solidarity of driving

in together and like Amelia, Toby's already restlessly pacing outside. He jogs over to meet the car with a grin of pure excitement plastered across his face, and I get the feeling he's been waiting his whole life for a moment just like this.

"Marge will meet us at the park with Attila," he says, climbing into the backseat. I was shocked when Toby agreed with me on Attila over the bunnies; I guess Amelia's persuasive charms have little to no effect on Toby. It was a noteworthy and unprecedented moment; I'm just glad Amelia accepted her defeat so graciously.

"Do we have everything? Signs? Laptops? Flyers?" He's talking quickly, his voice tense with anticipation.

I meet his eyes in the rearview and grin. "Everything's back there," I reassure him. "Mom said she thinks there are about twenty people showing up from the café, so we're looking good."

"We got this, guys," Amelia sings cheerfully, easily filling the short drive to school with more of her chatter while Toby fidgets in the backseat. I pull into the still-empty lot and slide into a parking space before turning to look at them both.

"Okay." I take a deep breath. "Are we ready?"

"Ready," Amelia grins, even as Toby's already climbing out of the car. I guess that's probably answer enough.

It's a short walk down to the park, and when we get there I see a small crowd already gathered. Mom, Dad, the twins, and Grams beat us here, along with a group of café regulars. Marge shows up minutes later with Attila, and my first impression is that

there's been some mistake. If it wasn't for the giant bunny ears, I would have guessed he was a medium-sized dog; he's bigger than Bowser, for crying out loud. Toby wasn't exaggerating when he said the rabbit was huge, all thirteen gorgeous and fluffy pounds of him. I seriously wonder how long Amelia will manage to hold on to that beast before her arms give out, and I'm relieved when Marge pulls out a folding chair. With a laugh, she tells us that Attila gets heavy pretty quickly, but will stay in your arms for as long as you'll hold him. Sitting seems like the smartest way to go.

"Okay, so what I need you all to do is get your laptops fired up and your videos running." Grams hands around flash drives, preloaded with footage from several different animal advocacy groups—PETA being one of them—that shows mostly feedlot, slaughterhouse, and auction horrors.

Grams turns to smile at me as I join them. "You still with us, sweetie?"

"Of course," I answer emphatically, having already decided to be one of those silently holding a screen. Toby, on the other hand, opted for a position where speaking is a requirement. He's already busy organizing the volunteers and relaxing everyone with light jokes and last-minute instructions. *Stay friendly, no matter what gets thrown at you*, he tells them while also offering some tips on how to handle the angry or defensive people who will likely appear. I'm impressed; it sounds like he's been doing his research. And I figure he'll probably be more successful than me this morning since I can't even mange to get this one silly video to play. But even though I'm

distracted, it's impossible to miss the voice I unexpectedly hear behind me; the voice I would know anywhere. His voice. What is he even *doing* here?

"Can I help?" Turning around, I spot Marcus standing in front of Grams and grinning down at her. She seems unusually happy to see him, and even a little bit like she was expecting him; I wonder whose idea this was anyway. Seems suspiciously Grams-like to me.

"Of course," Grams smiles, with a quick glance at me. "The more, the merrier," she says, pressing a sign into his empty hands. "Okay, folks, here's the plan," she says, addressing the whole group. She's leading us all across the wet grass when my video finally decides to pop up on the screen. "I'm going to have you all line up along the sidewalk, just be careful not to block the way. We don't need to give anyone a reason to ask us to leave; our message will be disturbing enough." This draws a chuckle from several people, but I just nod. Not everyone is going to be super pleased to see us here.

"Hold your screens steady and try to avoid eye contact if you can. It's hard enough watching these videos without someone staring you down." She moves along the line, spacing us evenly. Somehow Marcus ends up next to me, and it doesn't feel at all accidental. "Basically, your job is to be the silent messenger."

I'm far less nervous now that things have actually begun, especially since half of my attention is focused on pretending that Marcus isn't standing next to me. But it's a challenge. Especially when his arm keeps accidentally brushing mine. In an effort to

distract myself, I search out Amelia; I can hear her cooing from here, obviously pretty content to be on rabbit duty. She's positioned herself at the end of the line, thankfully seated, next to a video showing footage of lab testing. We're hoping Attila can help connect the dots between the adorable pet and the disposable animal—because after all, they're one and the same. *Whatever you do, don't look at the screen*, I'd warned her this morning, although I can just imagine the sympathy she'd get were she to dissolve into helpless tears again.

It doesn't take long before our group starts drawing attention, both from students heading to school and others simply passing by. I'm sure people are more than a little bit surprised to see us all standing here and just as we'd hoped, curiosity starts pulling them in. Things get even more interesting when Reporter Tom shows up and starts taking pictures; there's just something about the possibility of seeing their faces in the local paper that lures passersby over and gives some credibility to our peaceful rally. As the crowd grows, Grams, Toby, and the others move quietly through them all, mostly just hanging back until they somehow sense that they're needed. Bits and pieces of different conversations float over to me, and I strain to hear what the overall attitude of the group seems to be.

"But *protein* . . ." I hear one guy talking to Grams. "Where do you get protein?" When Grams starts listing the highest sources of plant protein and explaining the benefits, I can hear the skepticism in his voice. "But I work out," he stresses. Like she must not have

understood his particular dilemma.

"I'm pretty sure Mike Tyson works out too." Grams looks at him carefully. "Vegan since 2013." He responds with a frown of disbelief. "And Ricky Williams? Carl Lewis? Both vegans. And they seem to be doing very well for themselves." She smiles now that she has his attention, and their talk continues.

Slowly, more people are drawn to the screens, and when they register what it is they're seeing, many turn and walk away in disgust. Not necessarily at the industry, but at us, for bringing it to their attention first thing on a Thursday morning. It would be discouraging except for the fact that some *don't* turn away. Some stand riveted and horrified, and I'm pretty sure I see one girl crying. She's quietly wiping her eyes while watching a particularly brutal clip from a chicken farm.

"Hey, don't cry," Marcus says softly. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him looking around. "Grams," he calls, loud enough to get her attention. He nods towards the girl, relieved when Grams heads our way.

"You're not supposed to talk," I mutter under my breath. "Silent messenger, remember?"

"But she was *crying*, Mags. What did you want me to do?" I shake my head and wonder how I'm going to make it through another forty-five minutes of standing here next to him. There's sure to be someone else shedding tears before this is all over, and next time he's likely to step out of line, hand them a tissue, and instantly befriend them. I'm torn between irritation and amusement,

but I push it firmly aside and get back to ignoring him. Even though he smells really, really good.

"Seriously, though, don't you *miss* meat?" one guy asks Toby. They're standing just off to the side of my screen, so the conversation is clear. "Like a fat, juicy burger?"

Toby laughs in a light way. "Sure, sometimes I think about how good a crispy drumstick would taste. But then I remember this." Toby turns to point at a screen behind him where a worker is carelessly throwing chicks into a macerator. Those "useless" baby roosters are ground alive before they're even a day old. "And I know that no matter how good it tastes, it's never worth it. That burger isn't a burger; that burger is a cow."

"I don't know," he frowns. "I think I'd miss it forever."

"The craving passes." Toby shrugs. "And if you're doing it for the animals, the thought of eating meat becomes unthinkable after a while."

"It's true, dude," Marcus adds in. I refrain from groaning because he's really, *really* terrible at this.

"You're a vegan?" The guy's question rings with disbelief as he studies Marcus carefully. Tall, athletic Marcus.

"Vegetarian transitioning to vegan." I can hear the grin in his voice, and I know he's looking at me when he says it. I close my eyes briefly to suppress a wave of unwanted emotion. Even though I'm trying really hard to maintain distance, both literally and figuratively, he's doing his best to make this impossible. The transitioning-to-vegan conversation is one we've had about a

million times. Because while his diet is virtually cruelty free, he flatly refuses to give up his leather jacket. Consequently, he resists the vegan label saying it makes him feel like a liar to use it. I've tried to explain to him how this is okay—preferable, even—to just throwing the jacket away, but he'll never agree. It's all I can do not to turn my head and look at him, but somehow I refrain.

Wrenching my attention away from Marcus, I refocus on the protest. Toby, Mom, Grams, and a couple of others are still moving quietly through the crowd. They all seem to be doing a pretty good job of maintaining their poise and calmly answering all of the questions thrown at them, mostly by people just trying to understand what it is they're seeing in the videos before them. Flyers appear in the hands of many, and I see a lot of people walking away with the information packets we put together. I take that as a very promising sign.

"But what do vegans even *eat*?" a woman asks Mom, just a little way down the line. "I don't think I could ever survive on vegetables alone." She shakes her head, even as her eyes are drawn back to the screen.

"Well, what do *you* eat?" Mom gives her a friendly smile to show that it's a friendly question. The woman starts listing off the typical American favorites.

Mom smiles again. "We eat those too."

"Yes, but mine are good," the woman grimaces. Mom just laughs and tells her about the gathering tomorrow night, and how she's welcome to come test some vegan fare and decide for herself.

"I heard the ice cream is pretty good," Marcus says quietly next to me. I look over and meet his eyes before I'm even aware that I'm going to. He smiles at me.

"Why are you even here?" I whisper.

"Shh," he says. "No talking, remember?"

I turn back to the front, shaking my head. This is not at all how I thought things were going to go. And *why* does his arm keep touching mine?

A small crowd is gathered around Amelia, of course; no big surprise that the giant, docile rabbit is drawing attention. Both Zoe and Myra are over there too, dressed in black like the rest of us. I'm sure it doesn't hurt that their adorable faces are part of the whole scene.

"Ewww." Myra's distressed voice floats over the crowd. "We never eat animals!" Her little face is horrified, and I have to bite back a laugh at the looks of surprise from those gathered around her. Myra is obviously an activist in the making. Her hand is resting protectively on Attila's head, and she stares defiantly at the whole group, not intimidated in the least. "*Never*," she repeats.

It isn't long before the traffic thins because school is about to start. Being so early on a weekday morning, I knew we wouldn't have a huge window of time, but I have a feeling that we made a pretty decent impression. The stacks of flyers are mostly gone, Toby's been doing an awful lot of talking, and I don't know how many people I've heard Grams direct to the café tomorrow night, but it's a lot. After about an hour, Amelia, Toby and I make eye

contact, silently deciding to wrap things up. Amelia's eyes widen when she notices Marcus standing next to me, and a look of surprise spreads across her face. I just shrug and shake my head to show her I had nothing to do with it.

And while it seems anticlimactic to imagine spending the rest of the day behind a desk, I slip out of my place in line and head up towards the school anyway. Mom, Grams, and the café folks will be staying for a while longer to catch the people trickling through the park all morning. I see Marge stepping in to take charge of Attila, and I walk away quietly so as not to disturb the mood.

Turning around at the edge of the park, I surreptitiously scan for Marcus. He's handing his sign back to Grams, and she reaches up to hug him tightly. Kissing his cheek, she says something that makes him laugh, and the familiar intimacy makes my heart hurt. I turn away quickly before he sees me, just as Amelia and Toby come over, both grinning widely.

"Ahhh! Can you *believe* that?" Amelia crows quietly as we leave the park.

"It was pretty incredible," Toby laughs his agreement.

"I heard you trying to convince someone that the craving passes." I look at Toby. "Were you successful?"

"I don't think so, but he didn't really want to believe it anyway." He laughs with me because we didn't expect to win them all.

"How about you?" Toby turns to Amelia. "Did you manage to curb the flow of tears?"

"Oh, sweetie, you'd be so proud. Not a tear from *me*, but there were salt water puddles all around. I think I may be a natural." She throws her arm around his shoulders, leaning over to kiss his cheek.

"I never doubted you for a second."

"Thanks for the coaching."

"Anytime, my little red-headed star."

Amelia looks around Toby, directly at me. "But what's up with the tall, handsome dude standing next to you?"

"I have no idea," I say. "But I'm pretty sure Grams was in on it, although I can't figure out why."

We're talking back and forth, so animated that we're not really paying all that much attention to anything besides our current high. It's a surprise to all of us when a low voice cuts through our laughter.

"Look, Steve. It's the three musketeers." My stomach drops quickly when I see Chris lounging against the old oak tree not far from the entrance of the parking lot. Steve stands casually beside him, but there's a look on his face that makes me immediately uncomfortable. I quickly notice that there's no one else around, both the street and parking lot are empty. Our trio goes silent, and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. It doesn't take a genius to sense trouble.

"Quite a show y'all put on this morning," Steve says quietly.

"No shit." Chris looks at Steve with exaggerated surprise. "I mean, who knew he could even talk? All I've ever heard him do is

cry like a baby." I hear Amelia growl beside me, and I grab her hand, hoping to restrain her.

"Let's just leave," I say under my breath. Of course, the only way into the lot is around them, but what choice do we have? We go to move calmly past them; calm except for Amelia's eyes, which are spitting fire.

"Aw, c'mon. I thought we could have a little chat; I miss my good pal, Toby." Chris steps towards us, pulling Toby into a headlock before dragging his knuckles roughly across the top of Toby's head. "I'll bet you miss me too, doncha, little buddy?"

"Again?" I snap at Chris, "Doesn't this ever get old?"

"Let him go," Amelia hisses, "*right now*."

Chris stares at her coldly. "Or what?"

"I suggest we find out," Amelia spits back. She reminds me of a mighty Chihuahua taking on a Rottweiler ten times her size.

"You know, Hank told us all about your date. It's funny, I had you pegged for a whore," Chris sneers.

"Interesting that Hank told you what happened." Although her voice sounds totally in control, I know her well enough to pick up on the barely-concealed fury. "So then, did he tell you how I made *him* cry like a baby?"

Chris is quiet; obviously Hank chose not to disclose that little detail. Toby is still trapped in a tight headlock.

"Perhaps you'd like to drop your pants, and I can demonstrate my technique." Oh crap, this can only end badly.

"Chris, just let Toby go," I say, squeezing Amelia's hand

tightly while praying for a lightning bolt to knock Chris senseless.

"Well," Chris says thoughtfully, dragging his knuckles across Toby's head again. When Toby winces, I start seeing red; Steve just laughs like the fool that he is. "I might let him go . . ." Every other word is punctuated with another drag of his knuckles, but he never gets the chance to finish. Toby somehow slips through his arm and takes a shaky step back.

"I'm done, Chris," he says quietly. His face is red, and his hair is sticking up everywhere, but his voice is firm and strong.

"What? You little *shit*. You're *done*?" He looms over Toby and with one quick hand reaches out and shoves him hard. Toby lands on the sidewalk with a grunt before he slowly stands back up.

"You're *done*?" Chris repeats in a quietly menacing voice, knocking him down again. He looks down at Toby with inexplicable hatred. Really, what has Toby *ever* done to him? Out of the corner of my eye, I see Steve start shifting eagerly from foot to foot. A slow knot of anger starts to grow, but I struggle to stay calm because it obviously isn't going to be Amelia who keeps a level head.

"One day," I say coldly, releasing Amelia's hand and moving towards Chris, "maybe you'll wake up and realize what a gigantic prick you actually are." I almost take a step back when he turns to look at me because I'm pretty sure that in all my life I've never felt like someone really and truly hated me. Until now.

With her hand finally free and Chris's attention focused briefly on me, Amelia seizes her opportunity. Looking something

like a small, red tornado, she launches herself at Chris, leaping onto his back. With a shriek, she throws her arms around his neck, squeezing tightly. Toby makes a small exclamation of surprise, but all I can register is the look on Chris's face. Can he murder all three of us at the same time?

While Chris is distracted, I move to help Toby, who's watching Amelia with wide and admiring eyes. He's got my hand and is halfway to his feet again when Chris's foot connects with his stomach, and he falls back down with a groan. I hear Steve howling with laughter—at Amelia or Toby, I'm not sure. Another vicious kick and Toby's breath leaves him in a whoosh. If anything, Amelia slowly suffocating Chris has only made him more enraged. I'm bent over and trying to get Toby up, so it isn't hard for Chris to knock me off balance with just a push of his foot. I join Toby on the ground, not hurt but now furious.

"Get the bitch *off* me!" Chris yells, and Steve—still laughing—pulls a thrashing Amelia off of Chris. Despite her resistance, he holds her easily, even though I'm pretty sure she's making a valiant effort to gouge his eyes out. But now that Amelia has become Steve's problem, Chris turns back to Toby and starts kicking hard, anywhere his foot makes purchase.

"Done? Done?" Chris grunts out, accenting each word with another kick. Toby is curled up in the fetal position with his arms wrapped around his head.

"Yes," Toby says in a muffled voice. I pray Chris didn't hear him, but no such luck.

"*Yes*?" Chris roars. And in that moment, I'm terrified he's going to kill Toby. Seriously, kill him. Jumping to my feet, I rush blindly towards Chris. I have absolutely no idea how I could ever stop someone as massive as him, but maybe I have the advantage of surprise. Despite his rage, however, he sees me coming before I can do anything useful and shifts his body towards me. I slam into his shoulder before I can stop, immediately thrown to the ground. Stunned and trying to catch my breath, I watch helplessly as Chris resumes his brutal attack on Toby. With only one option left, I crawl over and spread myself over Toby, covering as much of his small body as I can. I tense, waiting with closed eyes for the first hard kick, but all I hear is a loud gasp from Amelia. Instantly afraid for her now, my eyes snap back open as my brain struggles to make sense of Chris being knocked violently to the ground. He lets out a surprised groan, but he's immediately back on his feet and now nose to nose with Marcus.

"What the *hell* are you doing?" Marcus's voice is angrier than I've ever heard. Chris may be bigger than him, but Marcus's fury makes him twice as intimidating.

"What the fuck is your problem?" Chris yells as he takes a step closer to Marcus. My stomach drops in anticipation of a brawl, but I'm frozen in place, we all are, watching the scene unfold. Even Amelia has stopped her thrashing, and Steve is paying close attention, clearly not sure what to do with this unexpected turn of events.

"You, beating the piss out of my girlfriend, is kind of a

problem."

"Girlfriend?" He sneers. "That's funny. I heard the bitch was up for grabs."

Marcus is silent, but I see his jaw tense as he quietly watches Chris.

"Guess maybe she didn't like the idea of you banging some random chick." Chris's face twists into a cruel grin, his eyes never leaving Marcus. "Heard she was pretty smokin' though."

I can see Marcus flexing his fingers, and this whole thing feels unreal. How far will it go? And why hasn't anyone noticed us out here yet? Part of me wants to run for help, but I still can't make myself move.

"Some pretty rough shit must have gone down in your house, Chris," he says, his voice so low I almost can't hear him, "to make you want to beat on girls."

Chris takes a step closer to Marcus, fury once again flashing in his eyes. "At least no chick's got *me* by the balls." He spits out the words, now just inches from Marcus's face. "You fuckin' pussy." He reaches up and puts his hand on Marcus's shoulder, giving him a slow and deliberate shove. "So maybe I should beat on *you* now," he says, and I watch as Marcus's fingers close into a tight fist.

"Shit," Amelia says, finally wrenching herself free from Steve. She runs over to Marcus and grabs his arm, maybe hoping to prevent an all-out attack. Thankfully, seeing her snap back into action somehow gets me moving again, and I carefully climb off of Toby before helping him up. We join Amelia and Marcus, the four

of us standing in silence as one united front. It's not like I think Chris will find us all that threatening, but at least he knows we'll go down fighting.

"Let's go, man," Steve mutters, walking over to grab Chris's arm. Chris throws him off, never losing eye contact with Marcus. "Let's *go*," he says more forcefully, pulling Chris's arm again in spite of the resistance.

Chris stands there, most likely considering his options, before he very deliberately turns to face Toby. "We'll finish this later," he says, his voice cold and hard. Taking a couple of slow steps backwards, he lifts both of his hands to flip us off. "Later, bitches," he sneers, before turning around and finally heading to his car. He and Steve climb in, pulling out of the parking lot with a scream of tires as the smell of rubber fills the air.

The four of us stand motionless, listening to the car roar down the street, until I see Toby stumble out of the corner of my eye. Looking over, I'm horrified to see that his face is a bloody mess, and it's enough to get us all moving again. Amelia rushes into the school, coming back out quickly with the principal and nurse in tow. Someone calls 911, and I see countless faces plastered to the windows, watching as the ambulance pulls up with its lights flashing. It's all kind of fuzzy, and things seem to be happening in fits and bursts; I wonder if I'm in shock.

"Don't forget the flyers," Toby murmurs after he's settled on the gurney.

"What did you say?" I ask, leaning closer. His bottom lip is

swollen to twice its normal size, and he has blood all over his chin.

"You and Amelia need to get the rest of those flyers passed out." He winces as his lip splits afresh and starts bleeding profusely again.

"*What*? I'm not going in there now. I'll follow you to the hospital."

"You can't. I'll be fine." He wipes his bleeding lip with a shaky hand. "For probably the first time in his life, Chris just did something right," he mumbles, closing his eyes as they load him into the ambulance. "It's perfect—spread the story," he finishes quietly with a small and satisfied smile.

Perfect? That's really his spin on this? I see Amelia nodding next to me.

"He's right, this'll probably pack'em in," she says. "We've got this covered, Toby," Amelia calls as the doors close, and the ambulance pulls away.

I shake my head, trying to clear away the fog as Amelia, Marcus, and I follow the principal back into the school. Walking down the hall, I look over at Marcus, his face set and still so angry. His whole body is tense, and he carefully avoids my eyes. Not sure of how to thank him, I reach for his hand and squeeze it gently. He looks at me, surprised, before he softly squeezes back. I only rest there for a minute, though, before letting my hand slip away again. Over the past year and a half, our hands have created a language all their own; the meaning is always clear, without any words ever spoken. *Thank you*, my hand says to his. *I'm sorry*, his says back.

11 months ago

Marcus doesn't show up until after lunch, just as I was beginning to wonder if he'd show up at all. He's unusually quiet, and I decide to just wait until he brings up last night. But first Dad wants him, then the twins demand his attention, and so we don't really find ourselves with a quiet moment to talk until well into the afternoon. But when Myra and Zoe make the decision to play in the yard, I follow them outside, bringing Marcus with me. Sitting on the porch steps while the girls giggle together on the swings, we finally find ourselves alone and with no distractions.

"So on a scale of one to ten, how mad are you?" he finally asks.

"Last night I probably would've said a twelve," I say with a small glare, forcing him to meet my eyes. "But today I'm thinking more surprised than mad."

"Yeah," he says quietly. "I don't blame you."

"You want to tell me what last night was all about?" I've spent all of today—up until this moment—trying to puzzle out our unexpectedly bad date night.

He sighs. "I had another fight with my parents."

"And?" I mean, he fights with his parents on a weekly basis. "What made last night any different?"

"Last night was *different*," he grimaces, watching the twins play, "because someone put a beer in my hand."

"And?" I repeat, still not understanding.

He stands up now and runs a hand through his hair, clearly agitated.

"Remember when I told you that my parents move whenever they feel like it? Well, it's true, except for last year. Last year they moved because of *me*." He starts pacing the way he does whenever he's upset. "They were always on me about something. All the time. It's like they could never let it go, college and football, over and over. They were making me crazy," he groans. "So I started spending as much time away from home as I could. Friends. Parties. *Anything* so I wouldn't have to listen to them."

Watching him pace, he reminds me of a caged animal, trapped and with no way out. And while I want to grab his hand and make him be still, I don't. Instead, I watch him walk out his frustration, hoping it somehow helps.

"So I started drinking. It wasn't hard to find company and even if I couldn't, it didn't matter; all that mattered was that for a little while I could forget. Everything just stopped feeling like such a big deal—I could laugh and pretend like I didn't care. So I drank more. All the time more." He stops moving for a minute as he watches the girls chase each other around the yard. "And then everything just kind of . . ." He turns around to look at me

with a frown. ". . . fell apart."

"Fell apart how?" I ask.

"I started failing classes and missing practice. I just didn't give a shit about anything anymore. It all seemed so pointless, you know? It got so bad that I even freaked my parents out. They probably just saw their football dream vanishing, but they decided I needed therapy. It lasted about six months, and then we moved right around the time they figured out that *they* were my problem."

That finally makes sense, moving from a huge city to tiny Willow Creek. They must have thought things would be "safer" here. Marcus comes back over and sits down next to me again.

"And then I get to Willow Creek, and the first person I meet? You. Shit, Mags, I don't think I've stopped thinking about you since that first day. And then I step into this family? It was insane." He reaches for my hand. "I just love everything about this." Looking at me, he smiles in a sad kind of way. "But I'm thinking that if I had met Chris first, things would've turned out different."

"So what happened last night?"

"I don't know. The fight was as stupid as any other. Normally, I'd just hang out with you and let it go. But then last night, when Chris put that freaking beer in my hand? I remembered; I remembered that I could forget. And I did. Until I woke up this morning," he pauses, "and remembered you."

It's my turn to look away while I consider everything he just told me. It's hard to imagine Marcus a drunken mess all the time, and if last night is any indication, it wasn't pretty. But things make a little bit more sense now, or at least the why of it all does.

"Do you plan on making this a habit again?" I ask.

"No," he answers quickly, but finishes quietly, "I don't think so."

"So then we forget about it." And I choose to ignore the "I don't think so" part.

"Yeah?" The disbelief is written clearly across his face.

"Yeah. It was one bad night. And if it's not going to happen again, then what's the point in fighting about it? You were an ass, and I'm pretty sure you told me a long time ago that it was bound to happen."

"I did warn you," he says with a shrug.

"And I probably should have listened." I roll my eyes. "But I didn't. So it looks like I'm stuck with you."

"It's not too late, Mags." He puts an arm around my shoulder, pulling me closer on the step and whispering in my ear. "There's still time to get away."

I don't answer, pretty sure it was already too late by the time we finished that first brownie sundae.

"C'mon." He stands up, pulling me to my feet. He flashes me a giant grin before turning around and jogging across the

yard towards Zoe and Myra.

"Girls, you better watch out," he warns, "because Maggie's IT!"

The twins screech, obviously thrilled at the unexpected game. They hold hands and start running towards the back of the yard with their ponytails swinging and tiny legs pumping. I shake my head, laughing as I step into the grass and run gently towards them. They're easy to catch, on account of their hysterical laughter, and I tag them both before rolling to the ground in a giant pile. Marcus joins us, and the girls explode into giggles.

"Again! Again!" Myra chants from somewhere deep in the pile. Marcus rolls off as the twins scramble to their feet. Moving past me, his voice is quiet but clear.

"Love you, Mags," he says, before jumping to his feet and running off after the twins.

"I love you, too," I whisper. And I was right; it's definitely too late.

8

"Mom," I whisper, waving her over. It's almost six o'clock and we're just about ready to open the doors. The food is prepped, the tables and chairs are arranged, and our pamphlets and info have been set out for the curious. And it all got done with about three minutes to spare.

Dad set up the projector and screen at some point during the day, and Mom hung a sign on the door apologizing for the café being closed but inviting any and all to join us here tonight. Based on the crowd outside, it looks like her customers are even more loyal than we originally thought.

"Uh oh," she says, looking outside at the line of people snaking down the side of the building. Instead of the elation that I expected to see, her face shows concern.

"Uh oh? Isn't this what we *wanted*?" Maybe she's afraid that she doesn't have enough food prepared? Somehow I doubt the worry is legitimate, though, since she and Grams have been cooking since eight o'clock this morning.

"Fire code says the max building occupancy is fifty-five people. If there are that many outside before we even open the doors, then we might have a slight problem."

"Oh." There are probably at least thirty people already milling

around in front of the café; some are even wearing gloves and hats to keep warm.

"No, wait, let me think." She stands there quietly for a minute, staring out at the crowd. "Hang on, I'll be right back," she says, heading into the kitchen as Toby joins me at the window.

"Wow," he breathes. "This is *fantastic*!" With the exception of his split and swollen bottom lip, he looks surprisingly normal today. You'd never guess that less than twenty-four hours ago he'd been attacked by the biggest jerk in school. He lifted his shirt earlier, per Amelia's persistent demands, and displayed the motley of angry bruises across his back and ribs; at least by some miracle there were no broken bones.

"There might be a problem," I admit reluctantly.

"Nope. Problem solved," Mom says, coming back through the swinging kitchen door. "But it means more work. You guys in?"

"Yes." We answer quickly, before even hearing her solution.

Mom laughs. "Okay. Dad's going to man the front door and only let in as many as we're allowed. Maggie Rae, you're going to head into my office and whip up some tickets on my computer, and he'll hand them out to anyone left standing."

"Tickets?"

"Yup. Looks like we'll be doing this again tomorrow night," she says, walking away. "Hope you didn't have any plans."

Toby's shaking his head and looking at me with a somewhat dazed expression on his face.

"You look like you won the lotto," I say with a laugh.

"I feel like I won the lotto." We both just smile stupidly at each other for a minute until Toby remembers that Mom gave me a job to do. "Why are you still standing here?" His face clears abruptly as he pushes me towards the office. "Get *moving*."

"You should probably catch Amelia up to speed," I yell over my shoulder.

"I'm on it. You. Tickets." He points to the office severely, even though his eyes are shining with barely contained excitement. "And Maggie Rae?' he calls, his tone turning suddenly serious.

"Yeah?"

"No pressure or anything, but the fate of countless animals is resting on us right now." He shrugs with feigned nonchalance. "We really can't afford to screw this up."

"Screw this up? Never gonna happen," I say with a shake of my head. "Especially now that Ghandi's got our back."

The room is more packed than I've ever seen it. Reporter Tom is quietly snapping pictures as he moves through the crowd, and I catch sight of the shaggy guy whose suggestion started this whole ball rolling. He gives me a thumbs up before heading towards the food table. Amelia's parents are talking to my biology teacher, and I see Marge—her arms seem strangely empty without the big, floppy-eared rabbit—standing near the back.

We reach capacity by six-thirty, and Dad hands out about thirty vouchers. There are quite a few students and also several of

Mom's regulars, but many of the faces are unknown, and we figure they're here in response to Reporter Tom's article. A little before seven o'clock, Toby makes his way to the front of the room.

"Wow," he says, shaking his head. "When Maggie Rae and I hatched this plan, we were just hoping to lure in a couple of people, so a full house is really unbelievable. In fact, we had to turn people *away*. So already, this is bigger than we'd ever dreamed." He turns to smile at Mom and Grams. "Likely due in large part to the amazing food selection, right?" Amelia does some *whoop whoop* thing, and the room claps their approval. I'm pretty sure I hear Dad whistle from somewhere in the back.

"So we're just going to jump right in with the movie that changed everything for me. If you're unfamiliar with the meat industry, then it'll likely be upsetting. But don't worry too much about that because if you want out, we can help." Toby's standing up there talking and smiling, completely at ease in front of the roomful of people. "When I first watched this documentary, I was home alone with nothing to do. It looked interesting, so I thought I could kill some time. Truthfully, I had no idea what a vegan even was, but by the time the movie was over it had somehow managed to convince me that going vegan was the only sustainable and reasonable choice. Not only for me personally, but also for the animals and for our planet. Maybe it'll have the same impact on one of you." He looks around the room, almost like he's wondering who it'll touch—and most likely willing it to touch more than one. "And after the movie, we have a guest speaker. His name's

Raymond, and he'll tell us what's really going on behind those slaughterhouse walls. We're pretty excited that he offered up his Friday night to be here, so thanks, Raymond." He lifts his hand and nods to a man seated in the back of the room. He arrived earlier, but I haven't had a chance to meet him yet. "I just want to thank you all for coming, and we'll see you after the show."

Mom shuts off most of the lights, leaving just a couple of lamps lit, and Dad gets the movie started. There's a jingle from the bell over the door, and I look up to make sure Amelia's still got it covered. Even though Mom posted a sign outside stating we were full to capacity, someone still tries to sneak past occasionally, and it's Amelia's job to turn them away with a smile; we all agreed that her perkiness was best suited for the job. I see her talking quietly to a woman who looks somehow familiar. Curious, I watch Toby walk over and lead her to an empty seat just as the documentary begins.

I spend the movie refreshing waters and teas, but the food has pretty much been demolished. Mom and Grams are resting in the office while the twins build Lego creations and imaginary worlds. Whenever I have a spare minute, I look around the room, studying faces. Pretty much everyone is watching intently, which I take as a good sign; no one walks out, which is even better. The time passes quickly, and before I know it the lights are back on, and the credits are rolling.

"Hi, everybody, my name is Raymond."

I study him carefully, trying to remember if I've noticed him around the café before. All I can settle on is a hesitant maybe. He looks like he's in his early thirties, definitely a good-looking guy; he's fit, healthy, and his skin is practically glowing. Although I hate to perpetuate any stereotype, he should be a poster child for the vegan movement. I'm anxious to hear what he has to say, but kind of nervous at the same time—sometimes I have a really hard time processing this stuff.

"I'll apologize now if I'm not very good at this; public speaking isn't exactly my thing." His laugh is low and warm. "But when I heard about what these kids wanted to do, it motivated me to step past my discomfort and see if maybe I could help them out." He pauses, looking over at Mom with a smile. "I'm already so impressed with this little café and what Bobbi does here. It's usually enough of a stretch getting people to consider organic produce over conventional, but it's much more so when you slap a vegan label on it. I'm not quite sure how you did it in this little town."

"Dogged persistence," Dad calls out, "and it doesn't hurt that she's gorgeous." Mom rolls her eyes, and I hear a couple of chuckles when he winks at her from across the room. They probably think it's cute, but what they don't realize is that this is standard practice for my parents.

"Well whatever it is, it's working, and finding this place was exactly the thing I was looking for. I didn't even realize how badly I needed it until I walked through those doors one day, but the information that's shared and the discussions that happen here are

really incredible. Anyway, I'm already wandering. I told you I wasn't great at this kind of thing." He smiles out at the sea of faces. Everyone is listening intently and waiting to hear his story. I wonder what would happen if you put him and Toby together in front of a crowd. We might have some instant and spontaneous vegan conversions.

"Well, I was twenty-five years old, freshly laid-off and job hunting, but coming up with nothing. Rent was due in a week, and I was starting to panic because things weren't looking great. So when my uncle offered to help me out, I jumped at it. I knew he worked in the slaughterhouse just outside of town and had been there for as long as I could remember, but it wasn't something he ever really talked about. Honestly, I wasn't even sure what his work involved." He's pacing slowly in front of the screen while he talks, and I get the feeling images are flashing through his mind. Images I'd rather not ever have to see, although I bet Toby would love to make a poster out of them and parade it up and down Main Street.

"So the cattle start off in a holding pen before walking down the chute and into what's called the knocking box. My first position was working in those chutes, and my job was to keep the cattle moving steadily along. The chutes are designed in such a way that all those cows can see is the massive rear-end of the cow in front of them. This helps to keep them relaxed and moving, so as not to hold up the whole process. These poor beasts were coming in by the truckload, and they were filthy—just covered in shit and vomit." He looks at Mom apologetically, before continuing with his story.

"They were also obese. Some came off of the trucks crippled, injured, or both. Others came off dead." He pauses, obviously unsettled by the memories. The images find me in the brief moment of quiet—gentle brown eyes that make my heart hurt. "While I can't tell you whether or not they knew that walking down that chute meant death, once in a while one must have sensed something because they'd make a desperate bolt for freedom. Unfortunately, they never made it far." I hear some shifting and look around the room to see discomfort on some faces. Others are rapt, eyes riveted to Raymond.

"Next stop was the knocker. He'd be armed with a gun that would shoot a metal bolt, about as long as a pencil, between the eyes and into the brain. It isn't meant to necessarily kill the animal, but hopefully render it brain dead, or at the very least stun it." When Raymond starts to go into too much detail here, I intentionally zone out for a bit. The little information I already have is more than enough to keep me up at night, so I take some time to study faces and reactions; I notice Toby doing the same. He smiles at the mystery woman, and once again I wonder who she is.

"Maybe you've heard the stories about animals being skinned and dismembered alive? Well, it happens," Raymond continues. Finally this is too much, and two girls quietly get up and leave. Raymond shoots them a small smile of understanding as they head for the door, and I follow them out, handing them each a pamphlet on the simple steps to becoming a vegan. They give me a soft thanks before moving off down the street together. Pausing a

minute, I take a couple of deep breaths, somewhat reluctant to head back inside. I usually have to push the reality of the meat industry to the far back of my mind; it sometimes makes me so sad that it overwhelms me, and Raymond is bringing it all too close again. Eventually, though, I know I need to be brave and step back into the café. Raymond's still talking about what happens to the cow as it moves down the line, detailing the separate stations and their jobs.

"There are hundreds of people working in there and many, if not most, are immigrants who can't even speak English. But it doesn't matter—if you can wield a knife, you can work the job. There are also a lot of hardened criminals because, in a way, they've already been prepped for this business." He pauses to take a long drink from a glass of water next to him. I wonder if he's thirsty or just looking for an excuse to stop talking. For someone who's supposedly not good at this, he's somehow managing to keep a pretty captive audience.

"So, I did the math. And if the knocker averaged about a cow every twelve seconds, then that means we were killing over half of a million cows each year. In *one* slaughterhouse. How the hell are we eating that much meat?" He's shaking his head, a look of disbelief on his face.

"I went from working in the chutes to working on the floor. My job was to pull the kidneys from the carcasses moving by, one bloody organ after another. I didn't last long there, and after that I held one more position before I finally called it quits. Using a small

electric knife, I cleaned every last piece of meat off of the decapitated heads." He stops his pacing for a moment and looks out at us again, a grimace lining his handsome face. The room is silent, waiting for the end of this bloody and disturbing tale.

"It's gross, right? But that's not what made me quit. What finally forced me to walk away was that I stopped *caring*. At some point, I stopped seeing the animal and just saw a job: a kidney or a skull. I 'forgot' that just an hour ago this animal had been *alive*. It's like my brain kept trying to switch off, to protect me maybe. I can almost understand now how a southern plantation owner could erase the humanity of his slaves. Or how the Nazis could decimate millions. It's like under certain conditions a person can *lose* his sense of compassion and humanity. I felt it happening to me, and I knew I had to get out. I was lucky because I didn't have a wife and kids to support; it was just me and my conscience." He starts to pace again, collecting his thoughts as the memories briefly overwhelm him. Taking a deep breath, he continues.

"The day that I walked out of that factory was the day that I swore off meat. I'm not sure how it all works, but I feel like I need to atone for all of those lives I helped end. Maybe telling you this story today is part of that process. Maybe we can even help each other." He's standing still, just looking out at all of us. There's a hopeful yet somehow sad expression on his face, and I realize that this is the reason why he wanted to speak here tonight. Maybe he's hoping it'll help him to find some relief from the guilt he carries with him.

The room is quiet, but after a minute I see some people start shifting as they realize the long silence signals the end of his talk. I wonder who will be the first to work up the courage to ask a question; it probably feels like risky business to ask for additional information when you have no idea how distressing the answer is going to be. But finally, they begin. It quickly becomes clear that the slaughterhouse workers have it pretty bad—maybe not as bad as the cows, but bad just the same. While the suffering of the cow is over in minutes, these people languish in it day after day, to varying degrees: injuries, pain, stress, and low pay. Who knew that meatpacking was the most dangerous job in the U.S.? I guess all those knives and all that pressure, coupled with the quick pace, breed injuries and deaths in staggering numbers.

The questions swell, and the room becomes noisy. At times the discussion is heated, alternating between defensive and angry, but there's also a lot of disgust. Others are quick to shift the blame, pointing fingers at everyone and anyone else—which, to me, sounds like just another excuse to keep on doing nothing. But then there are also the ones who direct the anger at themselves; I can see it on their faces. I feel kind of bad for them, actually, but I know that those are the very people that Toby's watching closely. The ones who seem the most willing and open to making a change.

It's almost eleven-thirty before the group slowly breaks up. They stand, stretch, and talk in small groups before we finally usher the last few out the door. The twins have been sleeping on the couch in the office for hours now, and I'm happy when the mystery

is finally solved, and Toby introduces me to his mom, Debbie. She's super friendly, wrapping me in a tight hug on her way out the door.

The café is a huge mess, but we agree to tackle it in the morning; we'll be back here anyway to prep for round two. Raymond is talking to Grams at the back of the room, and while he looks beat, there's a relaxed and peaceful look on his face. Like maybe absolution won't be eluding him after all.

4 months ago

"Prepare to be humiliated," Jonah growls as he struts over, his arm thrown casually around Amelia's shoulders.

"Because we are gonna kick. Your. Ass." Amelia punctuates each word with a poke on Marcus's chest. She looks up at him, her eyes small and fierce.

"Whatever," Marcus says with a shrug. "Being mini-golf king has never really been a dream of mine, Amelia." He just looks at me with a roll of his eyes because whenever a date night involves competition—of any kind—Amelia and Jonah turn crazy. I must be a huge disappointment to their competitive spirit since I don't ever care whether I win or lose. Sometimes, I even concede defeat early if I'm tired of the game. The look of shock on their faces always makes surrender worth it.

The four of us walk over to the course that's brightly lit with twinkle lights and glowing waterfalls. Jonah grabs the scorecard, obviously not trusting anyone else with it, and offers Amelia first choice of ball colors. He then carefully selects his own before tossing the obvious rejects to me. I grab one without even looking, trying not to laugh as they discuss their game plan. A mini-golf game plan? I just kind of whack at balls and hope for the best.

"Pretty ruthless tonight," Marcus whispers as we make our way to the first hole.

"I know," I laugh quietly. "I'm not sure they even like us right now."

We start moving through the course, and I do okay at first, but the easiest holes are always in the beginning. Marcus and I spend more time making fun of each other than anything else. We also spend a fair amount of time teasing Amelia and Jonah, but either they're so engrossed in their game that they don't hear us, or they just don't care.

"Nice one, babe," Amelia crows when Jonah drives his little red ball straight down the green. It stops only inches from the hole. I swing next, and my ball flies off of the green entirely and into the bushes nearby.

"Wow, Mags, you really do stink at this." Marcus laughs behind me. "Is there any sport you're good at?"

"Maybe. But I haven't found it yet," I say, pulling my ball from the shrub and dropping it back randomly onto the course.

"You can't do that!" Jonah shouts.

"Yeah, cheater." Marcus can barely contain his laughter, looking at Jonah out of the corner of his eye. I shrug my agreement before taking yet another wild and erratic swing.

The only reason the scores are even remotely close is because Marcus is good without even trying. He's pretty much on par with each hole and even manages a couple of holes-in-

one which might save us from crushing defeat. But we'll see. It's pretty funny watching how effortless the whole thing is for him, especially when compared to Amelia and Jonah who swing with such careful concentration.

"Easy, babe, easy," Amelia calls as Jonah tries to figure out a tricky spot. "Maybe if you bank it off the side there? Yeah, that might work. Try that."

"Amelia." Jonah looks up in frustration. "Just be quiet. I got this." The game is still surprisingly close, hence the tension lining Jonah's face.

Amelia glares at the reprimand. "Just try not to screw it up."

"Yes, dear," Jonah mumbles. "Because I came here to *lose* this game . . ."

"It's starting to look like it!" Amelia snaps back.

I can't help it; I laugh, loudly, before I even have time to bite it back. Amelia narrows her eyes at me, and I have to turn away to get control. Unfortunately, I meet Marcus's eye as I do, and then we're both gone. Pretty soon I'm laughing so hard tears are streaming from my eyes, and he's bent over howling. I know it's bad, and we're just feeding each other, but that doesn't make it any easier to stop. By the time we get ourselves under control, both Amelia and Jonah are silently staring at us. But at least now they're standing together, united once again against the two of us.

"You finished?" Amelia asks.

"Just give me a minute," I say, wiping the tears from my cheeks. I drop my ball and whack at it—there's really no point in pretending anymore—and when it bounces off a tree, Marcus starts to laugh again. We're both perched right on the edge of hysteria, and if we don't pull it together soon, Amelia's going to lose it. I can already see it building on her face as she storms off to the next hole, not even waiting for me to finish up.

"Maybe we should be nicer," Marcus grins, knocking my ball into the hole while Jonah's back is turned. "I think we're pissing Amelia off."

"Don't worry about it. As soon as this game is over and they win, she won't remember a thing."

The last couple holes are the trickiest, and Amelia and Jonah bicker at each one. Tension builds briefly when Marcus scores under par, but I quickly remedy that by tripling it on the next hole.

"It's a good thing you didn't dream of being king tonight," I grimace as I finally make the hole.

"I think if I wanted king, I'd have to start looking for a new queen," he says, walking over to me. "You're really, really bad at this."

"Oh, so maybe *this* is the deal-breaker?" I look at him with a smile.

"Not a chance." He leans over to kiss me. "At least if I

stick with you, I'll win every game we ever play. But those two will probably just end up killing each other."

We're finally on the last hole, and the mood has dramatically lightened owing to the fact that Amelia's victory is pretty much guaranteed.

"Move your hands like this, Maggie Rae," Amelia demonstrates. "And don't hit it so damn hard." Maybe her tips would have been more helpful at the beginning, but at least she's smiling again. They win, of course.

"Sorry, dude," Jonah says, throwing his arm around Marcus's shoulders. "Better luck next time."

Marcus looks at me, and I can just see him thinking, *There's going to be a next time?* We agree to meet at the restaurant down the road because as usual, Jonah is hungry. They leave in a hurry—famished from their efforts, I guess.

"Another interesting date night," he says.

"I'm just sorry I couldn't be your queen." I shake my head.

"I *am* a little disappointed. I was hoping for better from you."

"Keep dreaming," I advise seriously. "It's important to always keep dreaming."

He laughs. "Maybe someday you'll surprise me, Mags."

"Maybe," I laugh, pretty sure that'll never happen. "But it's more likely you'll surprise me."

7

I can't help but shoot my alarm clock an irrational, hate-filled glare when it wakes me bright and early. I swear, the stupid thing sounds cheerful, almost like it's *begging* me to chuck it out the window. Four hours of sleep just doesn't seem like enough, but somehow I manage to swing my still-tired legs out of bed with a groan. Watching Sir Bartholomew chirping quietly from his perch, I struggle to muster enough energy to tackle the day. I reassure myself that it's all for the animals, and that finally seems to give me the push that I need to get moving; I figure I'll catch up on sleep eventually.

Although I wasn't expecting him, I'm not surprised to find Toby eating breakfast at our kitchen table. He's nodding very seriously at Myra as she chatters away, obviously thrilled with the early morning audience. Bert is perched on her shoulder, nibbling daintily on a sunflower seed, and Zoe is sitting next to her looking as tired as I feel.

"Will you cut it out? I would have picked you up." I swat Toby's head as I move past him on my way to the toaster. His nose is still bright red from the ride over, and looking outside I see a pretty heavy frost. If he keeps this up, he's going to lose all of his toes to frostbite by December. "It would just kind of stink, you

know? If I came down here one morning and looked out the window to find you frozen solid, still clutching your handlebars."

"Give me a break, Maggie Rae. My social calendar hasn't been this jammed since I was five, and my mom accidentally signed me up for two library hours in the same week. Let me tell you, it was an *exciting* time."

Mom laughs as she walks into the kitchen, and I think it's pretty funny that having Toby around is suddenly our new norm. He's starting to feel like the little brother I never had.

Since it's Saturday, we're all free—and required—to head over to the café and help Mom and Grams with the cooking for Movie Night, round two. I'm wondering how all of Mom's regulars are going to feel about another day with a closed café, especially a Saturday, but she seems unconcerned. *Sometimes these things must be done*, is her shrugging reply. Eating my bagel, I text Amelia to let her know the plan; she'll meet us there as soon as she's ready, which could mean anytime, really.

"I don't know how you can look so glum." Toby shakes his head, deeply disappointed in my lack of early-morning enthusiasm.

"I think you're mistaking exhaustion for glumness," I say. "Just let me eat my breakfast, and I'll be as chipper as you in no time." That might be a little bit too optimistic; I think maybe the only one in the house who can match Toby's energy is Myra. And that's on a good day.

"Maggie Rae, you're *eighteen* years old," he reprimands me. "I think you should be able to handle one late night, don't you?" Mom

echoes her agreement from across the kitchen as Dad walks in whistling; he's obviously in a great mood and probably going on less sleep than I am. Toby raises his eyebrows, looking pointedly over at Dad and then back at me again.

I shrug. "What can I say? Maybe I'm an old soul." I smile. "Who really needs her sleep."

"Or maybe you're not paying attention to what's going on here." He rolls his eyes. "Maggie Rae, things are *happening*. People are listening—to *us*. Teenagers." His voice is getting more animated, and even Myra is quiet as she watches him with interest. "Now we're not just *passively* saving animals by not eating them; we're *actively* giving them a voice and telling their story to anyone who'll listen. We're helping them to save themselves, and if that doesn't energize you, then I don't know what could." Toby sits back, throwing up his hands in disgust, and over his shoulder I see Mom and Dad smiling at each other.

Myra looks over at me now that Toby's lecture is done. "Yeah. You should be more happy," she says sternly, and all I can do is shake my head at all of these unexpected sermons. Personally, I just thought I needed some breakfast.

"Fine. You're right." I push aside my plate and stand up. "I'm fully energized"—I look down at Myra with a wide grin—"and super *happy*. So let's get back to work."

"Now that's more like it," Toby nods, glancing over at Myra. "Should we forgive her?"

"No." Myra answers emphatically, not even looking up from

her cereal.

"Hey!" I protest. "Seems kind of harsh, don't you think?"

Toby leans over towards Myra and starts whispering to her in a conspiratorial way. "She does drive me a lot of places, though, and if she doesn't bring *me* here, then I can't bring *Bowser* here. And I think he really likes you girls." Myra looks at Toby with wide eyes. "Besides, I think maybe she deserves a second chance." He looks directly at me when he says this, and I know he's talking about Marcus, even though I don't quite know how he managed to get the conversation here. Or why. "So what do you think? Forgive?"

Myra nods quickly. "Maybe Bowser should live here with us. And *you* can visit *him*," she says seriously.

"But then Bert would be jealous, and we can't have that," Mom says, quickly intervening when she sees where the conversation is heading. Somehow the inevitable hysterics are narrowly avoided as she gets the girls moving and herds them upstairs to get ready for the day.

"Ready for round two?" Toby asks.

"Let's do this," I say. With a really big grin.

It takes a while to get cleaned up from last night; the enormous mountain of dishes really slows us down. It's either that, or the fact that we can't stop talking: rehashing the evening, debating how the conversations went, wondering what kind of an impact the movie made, and predicting whether or not tonight will be a repeat

performance. Toby can't get past his admiration of Raymond; he just keeps bringing the talk back around to him, over and over, and I get the feeling that Raymond's reached hero status, at least in Toby's admiring eyes.

Eventually, Mom and Grams show up with the twins and immediately head to the kitchen. They busy themselves with deciding whether or not to just replicate yesterday's menu or to try something different, but by the time we finally join them, Mom's ready to get started and quickly doling out jobs. Even the twins are hard at work cubing avocadoes with butter knives, and tears are streaming down Toby's face as the pile of onions grows steadily in front of him.

"You okay with some music, Mrs. B?" Amelia asks, already pulling her phone from her pocket.

"Are you giving me a choice?" Mom grins at the obviously rhetorical question. I'm guessing it'll take all of ten minutes before they're dancing around the room together.

Turns out I was wrong; we're only on song number two when Amelia starts twirling Myra around the kitchen and singing into her makeshift spatula microphone. Toby and I croon back-up, maybe with a little less flare, but only because we're still working; Amelia, on the other hand, has abandoned her station completely.

"Shall we dance, my little dumpling?" Amelia holds out her hand to Toby in invitation.

"An offer I can't refuse," he laughs, reaching for her outstretched fingers. But I'm a little surprised by his quick

acceptance because all I can remember is our recent conversation in the car. The one where I was busy trying to coerce him into going to the dance with me, and all he did was vehemently resist. But I guess maybe I shouldn't be all that shocked; Amelia does have a mysteriously powerful way about her. What's most confusing, though, is that Toby has no trouble keeping up with the dancing queen.

"You *liar!*" I shout as Toby turns to me with a ready grin. "You told me you couldn't dance!"

"Uh-uh," he shakes his head, but doesn't stop moving. "If you'll remember our conversation correctly, I never said that I *couldn't* dance." And now he's spinning Amelia while laughing at the look of surprise on my face. "Actually, I took dance lessons until I was twelve."

"Maggie Rae!" Amelia demands. "Will you get your gorgeous self *over* here already?"

And like Toby, I'm powerless to resist. Myra and Zoe are jumping around with wild laughter, and eventually even Grams is lured in, abandoning her mixing bowls to join the party.

"Mags, you're going the wrong way," Amelia laughs as I struggle to pick up some fancy steps that Toby's trying to teach us. She already has them perfected like she's been doing this her whole life, and then there's me—just stumbling along, as usual. It feels pretty much impossible to keep up with their fast feet, and I don't even *know* what the rest of their bodies are doing; all I can do is resign myself to the fact that dancing is just one more sport that I

stink at. I can't help but think that Marcus would find this hilarious.

"Still sure you want to go to the dance with me?" I ask Toby when he finally throws up his hands in defeat; I'm impressed because I would have given up on me long ago.

"Definitely," he laughs. "Because for the first time, I'm thinking *you* need *me*."

"It's true," I grin, scooping Zoe up into my arms. "And now we can call it even." I twirl Zoe, leaving Toby and Amelia to their graceful steps and thinking that it's probably going to be as painful teaching me how to dance as it was running head-on into Chris. At least that was over relatively quickly, whereas Toby's job could stretch on into forever.

"And here I was feeling *bad* for you all, thinking you'd be so swamped that you might need my help." Somewhere in the midst of all the commotion, Dad arrived. He's standing in the doorway, shaking his head, and I can just see him thinking how typical this is of us all. "How come no one told me there was going to be a dance party?" he asks, coming up behind Mom and wrapping his big arms around her small waist. She laughs, turning around and taking his face between her hands before giving him a kiss.

"It's these good-for-nothing kids." She looks at us with a frown. "They're a terrible, *terrible* influence. Especially that one!" She points at Amelia who only sings louder in reply.

"Well, those good-for-nothing kids are front-page news." He points to the pile of papers on the counter. "I'd expect another full house tonight."

"Which means we should *probably* get back to chopping veggies," Grams says reluctantly before one last spin with a giggling Myra.

Amelia and Toby wrap up their dance, ending with a dip that looks incredibly polished for their short dancing history.

"*You* are absolutely my new favorite person," she says, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing his cheek loudly.

"I've been *demoted*?" I gasp at Amelia from across the kitchen. "It's because I can't dance, isn't it?"

"Sweetie, you'll *always* be my old favorite person." She blows me a kiss before making her way over to the stack of papers. Toby returns to his mountain of onions, and I resume my dicing.

"I guess worrying that you'd feel out of place on the dance floor was a waste of time, huh?" I ask him with a shake of my head.

"I can hold my own." He shrugs with a smirk. "But admit it; you're relieved, aren't you? Because at least the dork can dance."

3 months ago

"Amelia!" Jonah shouts up the stairs. "Let's *go*!"

Marcus and I are waiting in the living room, but really, I'm not in the same kind of rush that Jonah is. Our house isn't air-conditioned because my mom has this thing about fresh air, which means that walking into Amelia's artificially cooled home mid-summer is always refreshing. So until the sun sets—in, like, three hours—I'm perfectly happy to stay right where I am.

"These things take time, Jonah," Amelia scolds as she comes down the stairs, pointing out her festive outfit and perfectly styled hair. Without realizing it, I reach up to neaten mine, but I guess a messy bun pretty much speaks for itself.

"Must be nice," Marcus whispers, leaning towards me, "looking so awesome *without* the three hours of prep." I smile back my thanks; he's always quick to remind me that I'm enough, even next to the sparkle that is Amelia.

"Besides, what's the hurry? We've got all night." She brushes past Jonah and heads for the kitchen, her red curls in beautiful disarray. We listen while they bicker back and forth because apparently Jonah is starving, and can we *leave* already?

Next to me, Marcus shakes his head. "We're never getting out of here," he mutters. But this is pretty typical Amelia

behavior, and I predict just another minute or two before she stops tormenting Jonah, and we can head out.

"Ready?" Amelia breezes into the room as if we haven't been sitting here for twenty minutes already.

"Just waiting on you, girl," I say, standing up. "You look so pretty." With her blue skinny jeans, white cold shoulder blouse, and that head of wild red hair, she looks like the Fourth of July personified. I'm sure that was her intention all along; I just hope she doesn't die of heatstroke in those pants. She blows me a grateful kiss before we all head out the door.

Downtown is a madhouse, and also suffocatingly hot. After Jonah inhales three hot dogs—making sure that I notice each and every one—he's his usual pleasant self again. We wander for a while, checking out street vendors and seeking shade whenever we're on the verge of overheating, until eventually we end up under a tree in the park. It's getting late, and the streetlights have all popped on even though full darkness is still probably an hour away. The Battle of the Bands is in full swing, playing pretty much anything and everything from the classics to pop to rock; a little something for everyone, I guess. Each set is met with cheers that range from wildly enthusiastic to politely mediocre, and I see a table of judges noting the applause. Kids twirl in the shade of the bandstand, giddy on cotton candy highs, and people greet each other with hugs and smiles. There's a definite festival vibe in the air.

Amelia and Jonah are still talking next to me, and I marvel at how they never seem to run out of things to say. Marcus and I, on the other hand, are content to sit quietly and watch the bands while the night unravels around us. Occasionally, we point out something that catches our eye, or laugh at the kids, or share some random thought that strikes us. But mostly, we're just happy to listen to the music and wait for the cool that darkness will bring.

The last band is wrapping up their last song, and they were pretty good, probably one of the best; the cheers begin building before the song is even over. It's almost dark now, and people are readying themselves for the river fire. The smell of chowder and fried food fills the air, and it's another one of those easy moments that makes you think life isn't so bad after all. One by one the floating fire-pots are lit, illuminating and reflecting on the river. Marcus leans back against the tree, and I settle in between his knees, resting against his chest and looking out over the water. Despite the heat, he wraps his arms around me and despite the heat, I let him.

"Which band was your favorite?" he asks, leaning over to kiss my neck lightly.

"I'm thinking Peter, Paul and Mary totally stole the show."

"Right," Marcus laughs. "And all of the seventy-year-olds agree with you." He finds most of my music choices ridiculous;

we're even, though, because I find all of his obnoxious.

The judges are announcing the results behind us, and the winners take the stage for an encore round. Fires are blazing, kids are laughing, couples are dancing, and the music spills out over it all, settling into the empty spaces and filling the night with movement. Meanwhile, the four of us are happy to stay settled under our tree, unraveling the night with jokes, talk, and more than a little teasing—pretty typical behavior for us. Tucked away in our own little world, we're perfectly content with just each other for company.

Eventually, though, the fires are extinguished, and all at once the park starts to empty out around us. Even so, we stay where we are, happy to wait out the crazy mass exodus.

"Maggie Rae, settle this," Amelia says. "Personally, I think I'm more of a queen, but Jonah . . ."

". . . thinks she's a spoiled rotten princess," he finishes with a shake of his head.

"Maggie Rae, tell him." Amelia looks perfectly smug and sure of my vote, but I can only speak the truth.

"Sorry, but I'm with Jonah on this one," I grin while he hoots with laughter and reaches over for a high-five. When his hand slaps mine, Amelia's princess eyes narrow, and I can see her brain coming up with something wicked in retaliation. I'm aware of Marcus standing up behind me, but I'm too busy watching Amelia getting ready to launch her attack—on me or

Jonah, she hasn't decided yet—to ask him where he's going. When she turns to Jonah, I make my quick escape and look around to see where Marcus went. He's crouched just a ways off, talking to a little girl who looks like she's . . . crying? Confused, I stand up and make my way over, feeling a little bit like a fish swimming upstream as I make my way through the people surging to get out.

"Well, can you tell me your name?" Marcus asks as I come up behind him.

"Gabby," she stutters out around the tears.

"So Gabby, do you want me to help you find your mom?" He looks over at me quickly with wide eyes before turning back to the little girl with a gentle smile. "I bet I can help you find her."

"But you're a . . . a . . . *stranger*!" she wails pitifully, her eyes a heartbreaking mixture of hope and fear.

"That's true," he nods seriously. "Will it make you feel any better if Maggie Rae helps us out?" Gabby looks up at me with eyes still brimming with tears, and I smile what I hope is my most non-threatening smile. After a minute she nods, hesitantly, and Marcus stands up, taking her small hand in his.

"Can you tell me what your mom looks like?" he asks. With so many people making their way out of the park it's tricky, but I'm hoping a hysterical woman will be easy to find.

"She has yellow hair and glasses, and she's really, really

pretty." Her little voice catches, and the tears start flowing again.

"Okay, Gabby, don't worry; we'll find her." He's walking along slowly, his eyes peeled like mine. There are just so many people moving that we make super slow progress; not that poor Gabby is moving all that fast. Marcus maintains his quiet talking, trying to keep her calm while we both scan the crowd.

I spot her first, noting the blonde hair and glasses, but it's her panicked eyes that really give her away. Tapping Marcus on the shoulder, I point her out, and he steers Gabby through the throng of people. A minute later, the two are tearfully reunited; Gabby's head is resting on her mom's shoulder, and she's sobbing with unrestrained relief. Her mom hugs Marcus with obvious gratitude, but I hang back, letting Marcus get his due.

"So you thought playing hero tonight sounded like fun, huh?" I ask as he walks back over to me.

"Well, Mags, someone's got to do it," he shrugs. "Might as well be me."

"You do look a little bit like the hero type."

"So . . . ruggedly handsome?"

I laugh. "That's exactly what I was thinking." We make our way slowly back to the tree.

"Man, that would really suck," he says, his voice all of a sudden serious. "All these people, in the dark—her mom must have been freaking out. I hope that's not our kid someday."

The words sink in slowly because I'm having trouble

processing them. *What* did he just say? It takes him a minute to realize he's lost me in the crowd.

"What're you doing?" he asks, walking back with a look of confusion on his face. He's probably wondering why I'm just standing here and looking like an idiot.

"*Our* kid? We have kids?"

"Not last I checked. But eventually, right?" he laughs. "Why are you looking at me like that? Like you didn't know that's where we're going."

"Know?" I shake my head. Just because you daydream about something doesn't make it a knowing. "And you do?"

"Well, yeah."

"Since when?"

"Remember that conversation, the one where you told me you *weren't* having sex with me?" He rolls his eyes at the memory. "I knew then, Mags. I knew *I* was going to be your one."

I'm speechless, and I can honestly say I never predicted this conversation unfolding tonight. He laughs again, reaching for my hand and pulling me along.

"I was thinking," he says, like that unexpected detour into our future never happened, "that if I'm a hero, I probably need a cape."

"Have you ever seen me sew?" I ask, struggling to keep my voice as light as his. But his words are still echoing in my

mind. He knew, *from the beginning*, that he would be my one? I'd call it pure arrogance, but that would make me a hypocrite since I was hoping for the very same thing.

"Sew? No, but you could start."

"Or maybe hero-boys should sew their own capes." I smile sweetly.

"But the greater good, Mags. You're willing to risk the future of all mankind?"

I shrug. "Apparently, I'll be too busy raising your babies to save mankind."

Marcus laughs, and this time it's him who stops. Taking my face in his hands, he leans over to kiss me gently.

"You and me, Mags." He kisses me again, just two small people in the middle of this enormous moving crowd.

I pull back slightly, flashing him a cheeky smile. "And our two point five kids."

6

After another long and successful night spent at the café, I've decided to pass the morning happily lost in my current read: *The Scarlet Letter*. I'm so engrossed in feelings of great admiration for Hester Prynne's stoicism that I don't even realize I've registered the rumble of Marcus's bike pulling into the driveway. I stand up to let him in, just like old times, but it only takes a minute to remember the situation as it currently stands. I sink back down abruptly, Hester Prynne and her bastard child no longer such a big deal in light of my more personal betrayal. The tumble into self-pity is quick and overwhelming, so I'm not totally sure when the idea creeps in. *Must see Marcus,* it whispers. *Yeah, I don't think so,* I whisper back. *Must see Marcus,* it repeats. I wrestle with this ridiculous brain spasm for as long as I can, even picking my book back up and reading an entire chapter before dropping it in defeat.

But somehow the brain spasm wins, and I find myself tiptoeing carefully around the front of the house while doing my best not to crunch too many leaves underfoot. Why am I such an idiot? Why am I such an *idiot*? The mantra is stuck on repeat, relentlessly mocking and chastising me. I feel like I've been hijacked, taken prisoner by an ego obviously bent on self-destruction. I mean, I know I have the tendency to act in stupid

ways occasionally, but overall I figured I was a reasonable person. Maybe even a little bit smart sometimes. But I'm depressed to find it obviously isn't so because this is crazy. Stupid crazy. Besides, what exactly do I hope to accomplish with this little stealth-mission anyway?

There are no windows on the front of the workshop, so I can stay undetected as long as no one opens the door. I make it safely over, slipping around the front towards one of the windows along the side. It's open and music floats out, thankfully covering the crunch of leaves. Once I get close enough, I slide down the side of the workshop and shimmy over to sit underneath the window, wondering for the millionth time what I'm even doing here.

For the next ten minutes there's no noise except for the music, the wheels of the dolly moving across the floor, and the clatter of tools. At one point, I hear my dad's muffled voice coming from underneath the car and Marcus's answering laugh. It's quiet for so long that the reasonable side of my brain regains control, and I move to head back into the house. But just as I'm cautiously standing up, Marcus starts talking to Dad, his voice unexpectedly loud and close. With a quiet groan, I realize he must be working at the bench right in front of the window, right above my shoulder. I pull my legs in tightly, hoping to stay invisible.

"It's cool. I like him," Marcus says, but I didn't hear Dad's question over the clattering of tools, so I'm not really sure who they're talking about.

"Is he giving you anything you think you can work with?"

"Maybe. I guess."

"Careful, you're almost starting to sound optimistic," Dad laughs.

"I just haven't had a lot of luck with this stuff." Marcus sighs. "But I'm trying."

"That's good enough for me, and it's good enough for Bobbi," Dad says. "What about the dance next weekend? You going?"

"Nah, I think I'll skip it this year."

"You sure about that? It'll be your last homecoming," Dad says, his voice becoming louder as he rolls out from under the car and joins Marcus at the window. I hear him open a drawer and start picking through tools.

"Yeah, I'm not exactly in the dancing mood," Marcus says. "Besides, I heard that Maggie Rae already has a date, so what's the point?"

"She's going with Toby; you know him?" Dad's voice fades again as he slides back under the car.

"Not really, just seen him around."

"He's a nice kid."

"Am I in danger of losing my apprenticeship?" Marcus asks lightly, but I detect a sad edge in his voice.

"Hardly," Dad laughs. "Not unless there's a starving cow out here that needs rescuing."

"Cool," Marcus says, and once again, I'm pretty sure Dad misses the subtle tones of relief.

"I don't get the impression that Toby's the greasy type."

"That's too bad," Marcus mumbles under his breath, and I can't help but smile at the sarcasm.

When he starts singing along quietly to the radio, I close my eyes and take in a deep breath, like I can somehow inhale him through the soft lyrics floating out over my head. With my eyes closed like this, the walls between us fade away and I just hover there, remembering all the little things that I haven't let myself think about for the past two weeks. The little things that would make it impossible to stay angry if I were to let the memories trickle back in. Like the way he always says *I love you* before he leaves, and how if he forgets, he comes right back, even if he's only heading out to the workshop. Like how he rubs my feet when I have a headache, without me ever asking, just because he knows it'll make me feel better. Like his insistence when I'm down that we take a walk in the woods, knowing how it always cheers me up. Like the feel of my arms wrapped tightly around his chest as we rumble along country roads on his bike, feeling timeless and invincible. The smell of his skin. The feel of his hair.

In this moment, I can forgive him. Remembering all of the good and beautiful parts of us, I'm sure of it. So this one bad thing happens; so what? How could it possibly erase all of the sweet and thoughtful things he did every single day? If I was brave enough, I'd stand up right now and meet his eyes through the window. All I'd have to do was smile, and he'd know. Right away he'd know what I was saying, and we could be okay again.

I'm so lost in my thoughts, happy that for even a brief moment the mysterious "other girl" is firmly locked away, that I almost scream when something brushes lightly against my shoulder. Fearful of finding Marcus beside me, my eyes snap open to see Myra standing there, a puzzled expression on her face.

"What are you doing?" she asks. Quickly I pull her down, putting a finger to my lips and miming silence. The singing continues behind me.

"Hiding," I whisper, since nothing better comes to mind.

"Hiding from who?" I'm relieved that her voice has dropped to an exaggerated whisper.

"Umm . . . Marcus?"

"Is it a game? Can I play? Can I, Maggie Rae?" Her eyes light up and excitement makes her loud again.

"No, I'm all done. I'm going back inside now," I say, shaking my head. "But I'm going to *sneak* in, real quiet. I'd ask you to come, but I'm not sure you can be quiet enough."

"I can *too* be quiet, Maggie Rae," she scowls, her voice even louder.

"See," I frown, "that's not quiet at all." I end it with a shrug, as if I don't really care one way or the other.

"I can be more quiet than *you*," she says, her voice so low that I almost can't hear her. Perfect. And she's right; stealth isn't exactly my strong suit.

"Okay, then, here's the rule: We win the game if we get to the house without Dad or Marcus hearing us or seeing us." Myra nods

at me with big eyes, and I get to my feet, being careful to stay crouched low. Myra mimics me, her eyes feverish with the challenge, and I breathe a huge sigh of relief when we make it out from under the window without detection. Giving Myra a thumbs-up, I'm walking towards the house as quickly and quietly as I can when it happens. Confident of my escape, I'm not watching my feet, and my shoe hits one of the girl's toys that's been buried in a pile of leaves. Immediately thrown off balance, my arms start pinwheeling madly, and I almost manage to stay on my feet. Almost. But instead, I fall to my knees with a groan. The whole thing is too much for Myra, and the giggles erupt into full-fledged hysterics; she immediately abandons our game, throwing her little body to the ground. Still laughing madly, she covers her mouth with a chubby hand that does absolutely nothing to muffle the noise.

"What's going on?" Dad asks, the workshop door swinging open. The sight of Myra prone on the grass brings an immediate smile to his face.

"Daddy, you *missed* it!" Myra gasps. "Maggie Rae was trying to sneak away, and she *fell*!" She's practically screeching at this point, and it's all I can do not to hang my head in shame. Instead, I pull myself slowly to my feet, deciding whether to turn around and feign nonchalance or just make a mad dash for the house.

"Sneaking?" Dad asks. I turn reluctantly and find him looking at me, his eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, Daddy, *sneaking*, and she"—more gasping—"*fell*!"

"Yeah, I think he gets it, Myra." It doesn't help that now Dad

is laughing too.

"Just a game that Myra and I were playing," I answer, brushing off my jeans and rolling my eyes like it's no big deal. But I can tell that Dad doesn't buy it for a second. Myra finally drags her little body up off the ground and runs for him; with one flying leap she's up in his arms and still giggling uncontrollably.

"You win, Marcus!" she calls over Dad's shoulder. I'm wondering if she can yell that just a little bit louder; I'm not sure the neighbors down the street heard the story yet.

"Win? Win what?" Marcus asks, joining Dad at the door. I can't help but sigh deeply and cross my arms in resignation.

"The game!" Myra yells.

"Game?"

"The *game* you were playing with Maggie Rae," she says, exasperated. "You know, the *hiding* game. You win 'cause Maggie Rae fell when she was sneaking away!" When Dad starts laughing, it reignites Myra who's just about snorting with glee. I wish I was more pleased to be the source of such mirth, but from here I have the horrible advantage of being able to clearly see Marcus's face. I watch as his mind slowly starts putting the pieces together, and a smile spreads across his face. The last thing I see before I turn and head for the house is a grin wider than Myra's.

"Great game, Mags," he calls to my retreating back.

And with that, my shame is complete.

2 months ago

"Happy birthday, Maggie Rae!" Mom says, placing the cake in front of me. It's beautiful; vanilla on vanilla and decorated with pretty little icing flowers. Eighteen candles blaze brightly. Everyone echoes their birthday wishes, except for Marcus.

"It's a big year," he grins. "Maybe we should sing."

"Or maybe we shouldn't." Amelia says with a roll of her eyes. "Unless you thought being single was pretty cool."

It's probably weird, but I hate the "Happy Birthday" song. Everyone singing, badly, just staring at me and waiting. Waiting for what? When I was about six, I decided I couldn't stand it anymore and took to hiding under the table whenever the song would start. Finally, everyone gave up, and I'm allowed to fully enjoy my birthdays now—sans serenade.

"Can I have a blue flower?" Myra asks loudly.

"I want purple, *please* can I have purple, Mommy?" Zoe begs, her voice tinged with desperation.

"The birthday girl gets first pick," says Grams. "And I bet I can guess what color."

"Green," Marcus cuts in easily, and I smile my agreement. We're all in the backyard, having just finished my dinner of choice. It's hot, but not so hot that it chases us inside; instead,

we all just kind of glow in the summer heat. Presents follow cake, and the girls demand that I open theirs first.

"Do you like it, Maggie Rae? Do you?" Myra asks, hopping up and down in her excitement. I look carefully at the Popsicle stick construction before me, not sure of what I'm seeing.

"I *love* it." I smile at the twins, flashing Mom a quick look for help.

"The girls thought Sir Bartholomew would really enjoy a new perch," she answers my silent plea.

"And I'm sure he will," I nod seriously.

I keep making my way through the small stack of gifts, groaning when I get to Jonah's—a gift certificate for a free game of mini golf. I tell him thanks, as long as we never have to play on the same team. I reach the bottom of the pile, noticing that there's nothing from Amelia or Marcus, and it only makes me more curious when Marcus whispers, "Later."

Eventually, we all end up around a bonfire, but it's time for half of the party to call it a night when the girls start falling asleep in their chairs. As soon as the whining of the twins disappears into the house, I hear Amelia whispering to Marcus.

"Give her the gift," she says quietly.

"Now?"

"Now."

"Be right back." Marcus jogs across the yard and into the

house, coming back a minute later with an impressively big box. It's all wrapped up in a huge and gaudy bow; the presentation definitely looks like an Amelia touch.

"Happy Birthday, Mags." Marcus says, placing the box on my lap. He seems strangely nervous, but also strangely impatient, as he waits for me to open it. I hesitate, though, not wanting the suspense to be over. Who knows what's hidden in this box?

"Open it, Mags!" Marcus reaches over, yanking off the giant bow before I'm able to smack his hand away.

"It's *my* present," I say, tearing off the paper carefully and slowly lifting the lid. I'm surprised to find a scrapbook inside; puzzled, I look at Marcus.

"Open it!" he says again, thoroughly exasperated now.

Pulling out the book, I open the cover page to find two messages inscribed there. The first is from Marcus: *Happy Birthday, Mags. You'll always be my queen. Love, Marcus*. The next is from Amelia: *Happy Birthday Maggie Rae, to my best girl. You and me forever. Love you to the moon and back, Amelia*. Above them is a picture of the four of us, just a selfie taken on one of our date nights. But the picture is perfect, our expressions all so happy and light. Like nothing could ever be wrong in our world as long as it's just the four of us. I look over at Amelia with a smile, and I can feel Marcus fidgeting next to me. Turning the pages, I see pictures upon pictures: of date nights spanning a year, of random moments just hanging out, and strangely, even

some *I've* snapped. There's one of me and Marcus in Fairy Grove and another of Marcus playing with the twins. I look over at him in surprise.

"We had to ask your mom for help," he says sheepishly. "She agreed to steal some of your pictures for us."

The pages are all decorated with anything and everything: stickers, embellishments, and massive amounts of adorable doodles. Honestly, I see Marcus doodles in virtually every corner. Turning page after page, I exclaim over each one and laugh at the moments so easily brought back.

"But when did you guys do this?" I can't figure out how they managed to find the time; the scrapbook is literally jammed full of our life.

"All of those late practices?" Marcus grins.

"Yup, we've been cheating on you for a month now," Amelia smirks. "And you never suspected a thing."

I look over at Jonah with raised eyebrows. "Maybe that should concern you."

"Amelia ain't never finding better than this," Jonah says, leaning back smugly in his chair.

"He was usually there," Marcus shakes his head. "Always eating. But there."

"Where's that girlfriend radar, Mags? I thought you would've picked up on something." Amelia looks at me in disapproval, like only a fool would be so trusting.

"Guess I don't have any," I shrug. Maybe that would worry me if I had a boyfriend other than Marcus.

"Amelia kept vetoing all of my best ideas," Marcus grumbles. "I had some real winners."

"Mags, don't believe him. He was trying to ruin the whole damn present. Besides, I let him doodle; I thought that was more than fair."

I laugh, flipping back to admire the little drawings everywhere—footballs, tiny gremlins, fruit, cows, trees, chickens, and I think I even saw the twins in there somewhere.

"The doodles might be my favorite part," I say, leaning over to kiss Marcus.

"I told you she'd like them," he says, glaring triumphantly at Amelia.

"I thought the whole freaking present was stupid," Jonah shrugs. "I told her you'd probably like a meat-of-the-month club or something cool like that."

"Jonah, will you shut up already?" Amelia gives him a push, almost knocking him into the fire.

"Well?" Marcus asks. "What do you think?"

What do I think? Of probably the most thoughtful gift I've ever received? I'm not sure I have the words.

"I think"—I stand up, carefully putting the scrapbook down on my chair and walking over to Amelia—"that I love *you* to the moon and back." I take her pretty little face in my hands

and give her a big kiss, right on her pretty little lips. "Thank you." I say simply, holding her face for just another minute. She smiles sweetly back at me.

"And you, you giant pain in my ass," I move over to Jonah and take his face in my hands next, but perhaps without the same tenderness. "I love you, too, even when I can't remember why." Another kiss on his grinning lips.

"Yasssss, I always knew you had a thing for me, Mags."

"Too bad you reek of animal flesh," I say with a shrug before walking over to Marcus, who's watching this all with interest. I reach for his hand, pulling him up until he's standing in front of me. Wrapping my arms around his neck, his arms reach around my waist at the same time, pulling me so close that we're almost nose to nose.

"I'm not sure this is appropriate in front of the kids," he whispers with a grin.

"And I'm thinking get a room," Jonah mutters.

"You're such a fool," Amelia mutters back, and I think I hear her push him again.

"Thank you." I kiss him softly. "For the nicest present anyone has ever given me."

"Even though I've been lying to you for a month?"

"A minor detail in light of your creative efforts."

"So that was a good gift, right?" He leans forward, resting his forehead on mine.

"I don't know how you're going to top it for the next fifty years."

"Yeah, I set the bar kind of high, didn't I?"

"You only have yourself to blame," I laugh.

"I kind of wish you'd stop talking and just kiss me already," Marcus says, his hands moving up my back.

"Quit complaining, dude. At least *your* girl isn't trying to throw you into the fire," Jonah grumbles.

"I was just going to say . . ."

"Seriously, Mags, if you don't shut up I'm going to throw *myself* into the fire." Tired of waiting, he kisses me so long and so sweet that my whole world goes quiet. So quiet that somehow I even stop hearing Jonah, wildly hooting behind me.

5

I'm still pretty mortified over the whole sneaking-up-on-Marcus episode, so I've managed to diligently avoid him all day. But there are only so many places to hide in the cafeteria, so here I am. Feeling completely trapped. The only thing I can do is position myself so that I'm not facing him, hoping he can't see my face and how it's still tinged pink from yesterday's humiliation.

"Is there any particular reason why"—Amelia points at me with a soggy french fry—"I've caught Marcus staring at you four, no, make that *five* times since we sat down?" Her eyebrows are raised while she carefully studies my face. I shake my head quickly, definitely not eager to talk about it, but she's far too practiced in reading my body language. Her eyes narrow in suspicion. "What aren't you telling me?" she demands as Toby slides into the seat next to her.

"Hey," he says in wary greeting, taking in our faces. "What's going on?"

"That's exactly what I want to know." Amelia stuffs the fry into her mouth and reaches for another, chewing and staring at me fiercely. Evasion is useless, and so I share my cringe-worthy story as quickly as I can; sadly, speed doesn't make it any less painful. By the time I reach the end, Amelia's eyes are shining, and she's covering

her mouth in an attempt to smother the giggles, which only reminds me of Myra doing the same thing. But at least *she's* trying. Toby doesn't even pretend; his snickers start in the middle, and by the end he's outright laughing at me.

"Oh, that's priceless," he snorts, shaking his head. "Myra—you gotta love that kid." And then, to my horror, he turns around and flashes Marcus a million-watt smile. It's possible that he even gave him a thumbs-up, but I can't be sure. Either way, I don't think I've ever witnessed a more blatant act of betrayal.

"So much for friendship," I mutter, glaring at Toby.

"Maggie Rae, just admit it." He's still grinning widely. "He's crazy about you, you're crazy about him—will you just talk this out already, so you can get on with your life?" I maintain my irritation for as long as I can, but their laughter is working on me. And when images of Myra start replaying in my head, I can finally see the humor of the whole thing. I think my face finally loses its pink tone, and a small laugh escapes me.

"Okay then." Toby stands up, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. "Thanks for the laugh, Maggie Rae, but I need to mosey along now." I look up in surprise; he's barely had enough time to shovel down his food, and he looks unusually—and suspiciously—anxious to leave us.

"Where to in such a mad rush?" Amelia asks, popping the last fry into her mouth.

"Guitar lesson." He answers way too quickly, taking slow steps away from the table.

"Really? During *lunchtime*?" Now it's Toby's turn for the same penetrating gaze.

"Well, yeah, it happens to be the only time she's available."

"*She*?" Amelia turns in her seat and pins him under her searching eyes. I'm just glad they're off me, and if it wasn't for his traitorous grin earlier, I might be more inclined to come to Toby's defense. As it stands, however, I think I'll let him squirm. While I crunch on my apple, I can't help but marvel at Amelia's uncanny ability to detect the most minor acts of subterfuge. I bet if you locked her in King Tut's tomb and gave her enough time with that moldy sarcophagus, even he'd spill all of his secrets to her.

"Yes, *she*," Toby says with an exaggerated sigh. "Let's make this quick, Amelia; she's waiting. What exactly would you like to know?"

"Let's start with who this mysterious *she* is."

"Her name is Julia. Any more questions?"

"My, my, you're awfully testy with me. Do I detect a love-struck tone in your growly little voice?" Now it's my turn to laugh. When Toby shoots me a glare, I only shrug in reply. He stands there, silently staring at Amelia and probably trying to figure out how to get away with not answering her question. As usual, though, she's relentless.

"I asked you," Amelia enunciates clearly, "if you're smitten with Miss Julia?" His eyes narrow as the tips of his ears turn pink—they would have nicely matched my face yesterday. "As in, 'I'm using this farce of a guitar lesson to quietly lure you in, but the first

chance I get, I'm going to devour your pretty little lips.'" Amelia turns to me with a smirk.

"Farce?" he asks with a glare. I'd believe him if it wasn't for those pink ears. Amelia's watching him, her head cocked to the side. Toby adjusts his bag and looks longingly at the door.

"Alright, yes, I like her, okay?" he finally relents. "I've liked her for a year now, and this morning when she asked me for a guitar lesson I thought she must be joking. But she *wasn't*," he stresses, "and now that something is finally happening, instead of sitting with her, I'm busy fighting with you. So thanks," he finishes in a slightly sarcastic tone.

"Oh, how sweet," Amelia grins. "Young love."

"Well, I'm glad you approve, Amelia. Now may I please be dismissed?" Toby asks, shaking his head. "Or perhaps you'd like to chaperone?"

"No, that will be all," Amelia waves her hand. "And for future reference? If you hadn't wasted all of that time being *evasive,* then you'd already be getting nice and cozy with Miss Julia. So let that be a lesson to you." Amelia blows him a dismissive kiss, and he loses no time making for the door.

"You really shouldn't do that," I laugh.

"Do what?" Amelia asks.

"Torment him."

"Torment? Hardly. I'd do the exact same thing to you, you know."

"Oh, I know, but I've had years of practice; he's just a

newbie."

"They all gotta start somewhere, Mags."

1 month 3 weeks ago

"Shit," Marcus says, coming into my room. He collapses on my bed and looks up at the ceiling. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

"Problem?" I ask, looking up from my computer.

"Yeah, there's a problem," he mutters. "My parents are taking me on *vacation*."

"Vacation?" I frown. Seems kind of odd. Especially considering that when they're together all they do is fight.

"Yeah. And 'while we're there'?" He pushes himself up on an elbow to look at me. "Maybe we'll check out a couple colleges. You know, just to keep my options open." He scowls.

"Ohhh," I say slowly. "Sneaky."

"No shit." He collapses back on my bed.

"When do you leave?"

"In a week. And we'll be gone for *two weeks*, Mags. How am I going to survive two freaking weeks with my parents?" he moans.

"Well, maybe it'll be fun," I offer. But it sounds lame, even to me.

"Fun?" he laughs. "No. I don't think so."

"Sorry, Marcus." I scramble, trying to think of something helpful to say. "Maybe being in a different place will distract

them. Maybe it'll be better than you think."

"Nothing distracts them; it's going to be hell," he says. He's just lying there, motionless, and staring up at the ceiling. "Hell."

I have nothing left to offer; my one attempt was pathetic enough. I turn quietly back to my desk, leaving him to sulk alone.

"Shit," he mumbles again. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

4

"Oh, look, if it isn't our famous little vagitarian." Chris's girlfriend Chloe is leaning against a locker, smirking at me as I pass. "Oops, did I say that? I meant, *animal lovers of the world unite*," she says sweetly, pumping her fist in the air.

I just stare at her while considering my response because I actually feel kind of sorry for her. I mean, what kind of a person do you have to be to date someone like Chris? And if she's been paying any attention, she probably realizes that she's got about three days before he dumps her and moves on. But maybe the fact that he's been expelled from school will buy her a little bit more time. Maybe.

"I get it; you were homeschooled, right? Protected and sheltered and raised to believe that everyone is out to get you." She smiles sympathetically. "Those big, bad farmers, hurting all those wee baby animals."

Sheltered? Me? Which one of us still believes in the fairy tale that the cow she ate for lunch lived its life happily munching grass in the sunshine? But I stay silent, which is starting to tick her off.

"Get a grip, Maggie Rae, we're carnivores. We have *teeth*, don't we?"

"So do horses," I say, eyebrows raised; she's making this too

easy. I don't even attempt to address the fact that we're definitely not carnivores; choose my battles and all that.

"You know that isn't what I meant," she says coldly.

"But that's what you said," I reply with a shrug.

Her eyes narrow as she plans her verbal attack. I almost want to tell her not to waste her time because I've heard it all before. When Mom opened the café, she got a ton of flak; for whatever reason, some people were personally offended by her vegan stance, and they made sure to let her know it. She taught me how to stay calm and clear—and how not to take things personally. It's a hard skill to learn, and honestly, sometimes I still fail.

"So what if a family was starving, Maggie Rae? Starving. And someone offered them a turkey. You'd have them walk away and die, wouldn't you? Just so that one *hideous* bird could live?"

"So I'm just wondering how come this good Samaritan couldn't hand them a loaf of bread? Or some beans? Maybe even a bag of apples?" I wait a second while she glares at me. "Oh, I get it. There's only one store in town, and all they sell is turkeys, right?"

"Right," she spits out; I think I'm beginning to understand why she and Chris get along so well.

"Well then, tell me why the life of the starving family is more important than the life of the turkey?"

"They're *animals,* Maggie Rae!" She's looking at me like she really can't figure me out. It's okay though, because I'm probably looking at her in much the same way.

"So are we."

"We can talk."

"They can fly."

"I should have known I couldn't carry on an intelligent conversation with a vegelesbian," she scoffs.

"Oh, that was us trying to have an intelligent conversation? I must've missed that part."

"Miss this: Tonight, when I'm chowing down on my bacon burger, happy as can be, I'll think of you. I'll imagine you hanging by your leg next to all of those cows that you love so much. And I'll laugh, Maggie Rae, because there's absolutely nothing you can do about it. Nothing. Why not? Because most of us don't give a flying fuck about a stupid freaking *cow*. So keep up your cute little protests if it makes you feel better, but you're not gonna change a damn thing." She gives me a final, hateful glare before turning and moving down the hall. I'm thinking she probably feels like she won that little battle, but I can't get over the venom. Where does it even come from? It's crazy, really, but I've seen it before; like I'm the evil one for choosing life. Some things just kind of defy understanding.

Toby ditches us at lunch again, claiming a make-up lesson for the time Julia missed yesterday.

"Bet he's hoping for something more along the lines of a *make-out* lesson," Amelia snickers under her breath, but Toby doesn't hear because he's already running out the door. We agree to eat at the café, and I breathe a sigh of relief. My brain is just so

messy lately; I'm finding it harder than ever to be around Marcus. The more time that passes, the more I want to forgive him, but strangely the less possible it seems. So today the cafeteria feels just a little bit too small for the two of us, and I'm relieved to walk out the door. I fill Amelia in on my inner struggles while we wait for our bean burgers at the café.

"Mags, I don't know what to tell you except that somehow you'll forgive him. And you'll work this out, and then you'll move on—together. It's just how it has to be."

"Oh, so now you're psychic?"

"Nothing psychic about it, I just happen to know you better than you know yourself." She looks smugly confident, but she's probably right. "Besides, he's doing everything he possibly can to make this better, and I'm tired of watching you mope around."

"I haven't been *moping*," I say defensively.

"Sure, sweetie, whatever you say."

"You know that I could say the same thing about you, right?" Two can definitely play at this clairvoyant game.

"*What* same thing?"

"I just might know you better than you know yourself." She's looking at me suspiciously, and I think maybe I'm enjoying this a little too much.

"How so?" she asks, cautiously.

"Any regrets about breaking-up with Jonah?" I ask, hoping to finally get to the bottom of this whole thing. "Or was it still the 'right thing' to do?"

She stares at me, looking like she's preparing to do battle, before dropping her shoulders in sudden defeat. And finally, I see the first crack.

"I'm thinking that I may have acted in a slightly . . ." she sighs deeply, ". . . irrational way."

"Regrets?"

"Some." She pauses. "A lot of somes, actually." After another pause, she throws her hands up in frustration. "Oh, who am I *kidding*? It's probably the single most stupid thing I'll ever do in my entire life."

I smile at her. "So are you finally ready to tell me what's been going on?"

"How about *you* just read my mind and tell *me*," she huffs, but I'm not buying the whole attitude thing. Amelia can usually keep something from me for all of two minutes before it nearly kills her, so I'm guessing that after all this time she's more than ready to talk.

"You're afraid, obviously." I've had my suspicions for a while now, and fear is the only thing I could come up with to explain how she could get herself to believe in so many crazy ideas so crazy fast. Somehow it snuck in, messing with all of her intelligent reasoning, and convinced her to do something really bizarre—to break up with *her* loyal boyfriend in response to *my* boyfriend's betrayal. "But afraid of what, I haven't been able to figure out."

"*Afraid*?" she frowns.

"Yes. Maybe even terrified, based on your obvious overreaction." I roll my eyes. "Amelia, will you just *say* it? Besides,

since when do we keep secrets?" She glares at me, and I just smile back because I can sense the crack widening. And just like that, her face loses its scowl, instantly replaced by remorse. It's so sudden that even I'm a little surprised, but with Amelia it's all about the feelings, no matter where they lead her or how fast they take her there.

"Oh, Mags," she sighs. "I've ruined *everything*. Just everything." She abruptly drops her head onto the table with a despairing moan. And then, the whole wall comes crashing down.

I pat her head gently in sympathy. "I just don't get why you did it."

"*Why*?" She lifts her head with another groan, sadness scribbled all across her face. "Because ever since I was eight years old, Mags, and this scrawny little smart-ass boy told me that 'only ugly girls have red hair,' Jonah's had my heart; just stole it, really. And then? He never gave the damn thing back." She shakes her head like even she can't believe it. "But not once was I worried that he'd break it. Not once."

"Eight, huh?"

"Yup, he was a real smooth talker, even then." She rolls her eyes. "And then you and Marcus happen—pretty much a match made in heaven, right?" I sigh, because up until the end we really were good together. "And even though he *adores* you, he goes and does something so insanely *insane* that I think it must be some kind of a cruel joke. I'm waiting for the punch line, Mags, because I still can't believe it's true. I mean, Jonah checks out every damn girl that

walks by, but Marcus doesn't even *see* them. So how did he end up with one?" She's looking at me with wide eyes, like she wants an answer, but I don't have a good one; I've been wondering the same thing for two weeks now.

"Some ugly twist of fate, I guess." I give her a sad smile, thinking how a punch line that could erase this whole nightmare would be really great.

"*Exactly*. And that's why I freaked out. Because for the first time, I realized that it *could* be me. If it could be you, then any day, it could be *me*." She frowns. "I like to pretend I'm special, Mags, but I'm not. I'm just a girl like any other, with a heart just *waiting* to be broken. Broken beyond all hope of repair," she groans, and I try not to laugh because I know she's being completely serious.

"Amelia, Jonah wouldn't do that to you."

"And you thought Marcus would?" She's looking at me with eyebrows raised, and it's a pretty good point. Of all the futures I saw with Marcus, a heart reduced to rubble was never one of them.

"So what you're telling me is that you broke up with Jonah for absolutely no reason except that you were *scared* of something that probably never would have happened."

"Yup," she nods. "Petrified. Have you ever heard of anything more asinine?"

"Not really, no."

"I wasn't willing to risk Jonah breaking my heart; so instead, I shot myself in the foot and broke my own damn heart. What was I even *thinking*?" She closes her eyes at the stupidity of it all.

"You need to talk to him."

"Are you *kidding* me?" she gasps. "Mags, think about it. I did the very same thing to him that I was afraid he'd do to me. It was heartless, really," she sighs, regret written all over her face. "I already told you, I wrecked everything."

"I don't believe it." I shake my head vehemently because I get the feeling Jonah's just been waiting for Amelia to come to her senses. "He's still got your heart, doesn't he? And considering that he's taken pretty good care of it so far, I think you should trust him. Talk to him."

"Uh-uh. That's it for me, sweetie; this is how the story ends. Me, an old maid." She looks hopelessly dejected, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to shake her. Because even though she's finally started opening up, she's not acting in a reasonable way. Not talking to Jonah seems like the surest way to prolong her pain, not to mention his. "Besides, I've had a boyfriend for, like, *ever*. Maybe it's just time that I fly free—no strings attached and all that good stuff. Maybe it'll be nice, just being by myself. In case you haven't noticed, I'm pretty awesome."

"Oh, I've noticed." I laugh, pretending that I don't see her weak attempt to self-soothe. "And at least you'll always have me, and I can be just a little bit awesome myself sometimes."

"Yes," she says, nodding solemnly. "It's true. But here's the real question: Will you send me flowers on Valentine's Day?"

"Absolutely."

"And hold my hand when I'm sad?"

"Every time." I reach across the table and grab her hand, leaning over to kiss it.

"Well then, what more could a girl ask for?" She bats her eyes flirtatiously just as Mom comes over with a plate in each hand, sliding them in front of us. With a sigh, she drops into the chair next to me.

"Busy day?" I ask, noticing how tired she looks.

"You could say that." She moans, kicking her shoes off under the table. "It's been packed. If this keeps up I'm going to need to hire more help; who knew my little café would ever need multiple hired hands?" She shakes her head, like she can't quite believe it.

"I knew it was only a matter of time," Amelia says very matter-of-factly. Almost like she's been predicting this for years.

"And in case you haven't heard, she's psychic, Mom. Apparently, she can see the future." Amelia's only response is to stick her tongue out at me and take another bite of her bean burger.

"I think you girls will like hearing this." Mom pauses, making sure she has our attention. "For the past two days, just about every other customer has been asking me"—she looks at us with eyebrows raised—"when our next movie night is."

"You're *kidding*," Amelia says, looking as surprised as I feel.

"What have you been telling them?" I ask. It was never supposed to go beyond one night, let alone two.

"That we have no future events planned, but this is definitely something we all need to talk more about. For whatever reason, people seem ripe for change; planets must be aligned or something.

Half the faces in here today have been new, and I just think it would be a huge mistake to ignore what's happening."

"Toby's going to *freak out* when he hears this," I say with a laugh. "So what're you thinking we should do?"

"I'm not sure yet," she says slowly, "I've got a couple ideas, but I need to think about it some more. And you guys need to discuss exactly how much time and energy you're willing to invest in this." She slips on her shoes and stands up, straightening her apron. "Okay, I need to get back to the grill. You girls enjoy your lunch, and make sure you fill Toby in; we'll talk about it again later this week."

"Thanks, Mom, we'll let him know."

Amelia and I finish our burgers, trying to figure out what we want to do with this bit of exciting information; the potential to change the world, even on a small scale, is pretty heady stuff. We're still talking about it when we get back to school, and we fill Toby in as soon as we see him. As predicted, he's practically dancing down the hall with excitement. He's actually doing this weird skipping thing as he walks away, not caring who sees him, like his happiness is too big to contain.

"Look at us." He turns as he's halfway down the hall, throwing his arms up for emphasis and laughing a little bit like a crazy person. "Little people doing big things."

"I *love* that kid," Amelia grins.

I'm briefly overcome with overwhelming affection for him. How did Chris reduce this huge and beautiful personality into

something so small and quiet? Turns out his voice might be loud enough for the whole world to hear.

"Yeah, he's something else," I nod. Right before he breaks into song.

4 weeks ago

"There's my boy." Amelia grins as Jonah pulls into the parking lot. "And isn't he just the cutest thing you ever saw," she says admiringly, watching him walk over to where we're sitting in the grass.

"Hey," he greets us, kicking gently at Amelia's feet. "Nice toes," he nods, immediately earning brownie points for admiring the freshly painted nails.

She beams up at him. "Thanks for noticing, cupcake."

"Marcus isn't here yet?" he asks, looking around the nearly empty lot. After spending a night of quality bonding time with Amelia, we're here to meet the guys for an early morning hike.

"Not yet," I answer.

"Maybe you should text him," he suggests, his voice oddly tense.

Amelia's watching him with suspicious eyes. "But *why*? He's not even late yet."

"You know; in case he overslept or something," He's acting really strange—evasive, even—but before Amelia has a chance to figure it out, I'm already walking away to text Marcus. After a couple of minutes without a reply, I head back over to

where they're still standing.

"What were you *thinking*?" Amelia hisses.

"I was *thinking*," Jonah hisses back, "that I'm not his *mother*."

"What's going on?" I ask, my stomach turning over slowly.

"Jonah thought it would be a *great* idea," Amelia turns to glare at him, "to go to a party with Marcus last night." Jonah is wisely silent, returning Amelia's look with a glare of his own.

"Was he drinking?" I ask, staring at Jonah until he finally meets my eyes.

"Yes."

"A lot?"

"Yeah." Jonah looks down. "A lot."

"I can't leave you alone for a minute, can I?" Amelia mutters, turning around and walking over to the car. Jonah follows her.

"I don't get how this is *my* fault?" he snaps.

Heading over to a picnic table that's far enough away to mute their bickering, I try calling his phone. It rings a couple of times before going to voicemail, and I hang up without leaving a message. Pulling my hair back impatiently, I knot it on my head before shooting off one more text. Nothing.

Thinking about it, I'm not all that surprised; things have been pretty bad since the "vacation" with his parents. He's been

moody and quiet and hasn't really wanted to talk about it, so I haven't pressed; but now I'm thinking I probably should have. When things got rough, it looks like he fell right back into his old habits, and it doesn't sound like it took all that much of a push. Looking up, I can see Amelia—still fighting with Jonah—and I immediately feel bad. It isn't his fault; I just really wish they'd gone bowling instead.

"Okay," I say, rejoining them. "Let's go."

"Sorry," Jonah says sullenly, with a quick look at Amelia, "that our hike is ruined."

"Ruined? I said let's go." I start walking towards the trail head, but halfway there I stop abruptly and turn around. "But we're not going anywhere until you two kiss and make up. Now." I cross my arms to show I'm serious. "Because you're mad at Marcus, not Jonah," I say to Amelia.

Amelia shakes her head. "No, I'm pretty mad at *Jonah*."

"Then I guess the hike *is* off." Watching Amelia, I wonder if she can do it. Her face is almost comical, struggling between letting go or dragging this fight out for another hour.

"Fine," she huffs. "I'll save it all for when I see Marcus next. Besides," she adds, turning to look at Jonah, "you did notice the toes."

"Well, I'm pretty thoughtful like that," Jonah agrees, looking at me in silent thanks. "So is that what you do when I'm not around? Paint toenails?"

"That, and talk about how much easier our lives would be without boys," she growls lightly.

I hear them making a valiant attempt at normalcy while I'm just busy trying to pretend that my stomach doesn't hurt. And that I'm not hopelessly distracted wondering how this is all going to play out. Amelia catches my eye, and I smile, reassuring her that I'm perfectly fine—even though she's smart enough to know that I'm not. Because she always knows, no matter how convincing the smile.

3

"She's actually picking it up pretty quickly, and she hasn't complained about her sore fingers at all. I remember how much it hurts, and sometimes I'll even see her wince, but not *once* has she complained." Even with his back turned, I can hear the admiration in Toby's voice. His words tumble out quickly; he's eager to tell me each and every detail, no matter how small, of his time spent with Julia.

We're only supposed to be making a quick pit-stop to scoop up the dog, but at this rate we'll be here all night. Bowser is lying next to me on the bed, his tail thumping every time Toby even glances over in our direction.

"And she makes this weird little noise when she laughs." He turns to look at me and rolls his eyes—at least he realizes he's moved into obsessive mode. "She hates it, but it's actually pretty cute."

I laugh, thinking *he's* actually pretty cute. "Okay, so when do I get to meet this Julia?"

"Meet? I'm just giving her lessons, remember? That might be kind of weird, you know? Introducing her to my friends like she's my girlfriend or something. But maybe during lunch one day. She's pretty busy, though; she babysits her neighbor's kids after school

every afternoon, which is why she wants her lessons during lunch…" He keeps rambling, and I can't help but think it's pretty impressive the amount of information he's gotten out of her after only a couple of guitar lessons. I'm wondering if within a week he'll have her whole life story memorized; I think he might already be halfway there.

I start wandering around his room while he talks, flipping through books and looking at pictures. One small frame sitting on his bureau catches my eye, and I pick it up to study it closer. A little girl, close to the same age as the twins, is sitting on a young Toby's lap; his arms are wrapped tightly around her, and he's laughing at something. Her brown hair is cut into a short bob, and freckles are sprinkled lightly across her nose. She's wearing a half-smile that makes you believe she's privy to some secret—one she's not about to share with me.

"Who's this?" I ask, walking over to the desk and interrupting more of his Julia monologue.

Toby glances over at the picture before looking down again. "My sister," he says quietly, his mood rapidly changing with those two small words.

"I didn't even know you had a sister." I'm not sure why this surprises me since I don't know much of anything about Toby's family life.

"Technically, I don't. Not anymore." He turns back to his desk, digging around in the same drawer he's been looking through since we got here twenty minutes ago—I can tell he's just buying

himself some time. Eventually he gives up, shutting it carefully and heading over to the bed; I follow, picture still in hand. As soon as he sits down, Bowser climbs up into his lap, breathing a deep sigh of doggy bliss while Toby stares silently out the window.

"What does that mean?" I ask, glancing back down at the picture like she can somehow answer me. Toby makes no indication that he heard me, except for the obvious—he's no longer rambling on about Julia and her wardrobe. "If you don't want to tell me, that's fine," I say, offering him an out because he kind of looks like he's waiting for one.

"No," he says, turning from the window to look at me. "But it's not exactly the happiest story ever told. Nothing like the fairy tale you've got going on."

"Fairy tale?" I ask with eyebrows raised. "I must have missed the one where the alcoholic boyfriend cheats on his loyal and devoted girlfriend. Sounds like a typical Grimms though."

Toby smiles. "Okay, maybe not that part. But you watch—in the end it'll be another perfect happily-ever-after. Not that anything is *actually* perfect." He sighs. "But sometimes it can be close enough to count."

"You know what? Forget it." I touch his hand lightly. "We don't have to talk about this."

"No, it's okay. It's just not a story that I really like to tell. Well, actually, it's not a story that I've ever *chosen* to tell." He frowns. "I'm warning you, it's moderately dysfunctional, fairly depressing, and altogether not the most cheerful of tales. Oh, and

the ending pretty much sucks."

"How do you know?" I ask. "Your ending hasn't even been written yet; you're probably on, like, chapter two of your life. Kind of early to give up on it, don't you think? And if *my* life is still wide open to a Cinderella ending, then why isn't yours?"

"Alright, fine; maybe it is," he agrees, but it's obvious he doesn't believe me.

"Right. So why don't you just tell me your story, and then I'll decide whether or not you should call it quits at fifteen."

He nods, taking a deep breath, and I steel myself for whatever's coming next.

"I think we started off normal enough," he says with a small shrug. "It was pretty much the traditional storyline—boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love, boy and girl get married, boy and girl have bouncing baby boy."

"You? Bouncing?" I look at his slight build and find that hard to believe.

"Touché. But for the record? There's never been a cuter baby than me. Anyway, they wanted more kids, but nothing much was happening on the stork front, so it was a pretty awesome surprise when my sister made an unexpected appearance nine years later." He turns back to stare out the window again, and all I can hear is steady cadence of Bowser snoring. "We found out right away that she was born with a pretty serious heart defect and probably wouldn't make it past her first year. But I guess Nellie liked it here because she outlived all the predictions and stuck around until she

was almost four." He looks at me with a sad smile.

"I'm so sorry." My thoughts immediately turn to Zoe and Myra.

"Yeah," he nods, "it was pretty rough. But you would have loved her. She was the sweetest little kid; all she wanted to do was sit on your lap, for hours. And I wish you could have heard her giggle; just all the time, over anything. Over *everything*." He smiles softly at the memory. "For whatever reason, my dad was her favorite, even though he started to fall apart pretty much right after she was born."

"Fall apart?"

"Yeah, he just couldn't handle it—*any* of it." All of a sudden his voice turns bitter, and he's shaking his head in disgust. "He hardly spent any time at home, which was fine, because when he *was* home all he did was sit with Nellie on his lap, crying. It used to make me so *mad*, you know? He was so busy imagining her death that he never even really got to know her." When his voice starts to shake—from anger, I think—he looks down at Bowser, smoothing his coat and taking several long, deep breaths.

"Anyway, he wasn't around much, so it was mostly just the three of us. Nellie liked it best when I'd play my guitar and sing her silly songs. She got breathless real easy, though, so she'd snuggle up with my mom on the couch and just listen; most nights that's how she fell asleep, with Mom wrapped up around her, listening to her breathe. And me, sleeping on the floor beside them. I was always afraid she'd be gone when I woke up." His voice catches, and he

swallows hard before he can talk again. "It's funny, but I never remember her crying, not even when she was a baby. It's like she knew right away she didn't want to waste any time."

"She sounds like a gift," I say softly.

"She was, only one we couldn't keep." His eyelashes glitter with unshed tears, and he quickly wipes them away. Bowser looks up at the sudden movement, whining gently with anxious eyes. Toby runs a hand down his back before bending over to kiss the top of his fuzzy head. "My dad managed to hold it together while Nels was still alive, but just barely. Once she was gone, so was he."

"Gone?"

"He left, just walked away; I guess it didn't matter that he still had one kid left." His voice is hard and obviously angry now. "He left a note for my mom saying he just couldn't handle it. Can you believe that? A *note*? For a while he was sending her most of his paycheck, but eventually that stopped too."

"So first you lose your sister, and then you lose your dad." Somehow it just doesn't seem fair. How does one person move through so much sadness?

"Yeah. Although, honestly, it felt like I'd lost my dad before Nellie was even gone. He just kind of gave up on everything—me included. You know, your life is moving along all nice and normal-like and then *bam*, change of course. Sometimes I'll think back five years and remember how insanely different things were; I don't even feel like the same person anymore."

"Wouldn't it be great if the universe asked for your input

before it took your life and shook it all to hell?"

"Yeah, I've always thought we should at least have a say."

We're both quiet—Toby lost in his memories, and me trying to process it all.

"So what about your mom?" I'm almost afraid of his answer.

"Mom's pretty amazing. You'll like her," he says, nodding. "She dealt with things okay; better than me. Maybe because she feels like Nellie never really left her. 'How can you miss someone who isn't truly gone?' She said that all the time."

"That sounds like something *my* mom would say."

"I know. I think they'd get along really well." He laughs quietly. "We moved here right before I started high school, but it's been hard—she's working two jobs since she doesn't get anything from my dad anymore. Honestly, I'm not even sure he knows where we are; I haven't heard from him since we moved. But as soon as I turn sixteen and get my license, I plan on getting a job to help out."

"She sounds strong; you're lucky."

"She is," he nods, "and I am. Life just keeps knocking her down, and she just keeps getting back up and asking, 'Okay, now what?' I don't even know how she can be so perpetually positive. Somehow she manages to accept all these things that make me furious."

"I think some people are just really good at that."

"Probably, but sometimes it seems more satisfying to get angry. I feel like if I accept my dad leaving, then I'm telling him that

it's okay, and it's definitely not okay." He shakes his head vehemently. "The only thing that really bothers my mom is that I'm here by myself so much. That's why she found me Bowser—for the company."

Just then, a thought strikes me. "You never told her *anything* about Chris, did you?"

"No. Absolutely not; as if she needed to deal with that on top of everything else."

"And that's why you took it so quietly, isn't it? If you went to anyone about it, they would have involved your mom."

"Yeah." He looks down at Bowser. "I figured it couldn't last forever, but then you came along." He's shaking his head at me, like I ruined everything.

"I'm sorry?"

He smiles. "That's okay. It was getting old anyway."

"So your entire life pretty much falls apart, and yet here you are, still trying to save the world." I shake my head in obvious admiration. "How do you do that?"

"I don't know. What choice do I have?" He pauses, and I can see him thinking carefully. "It's like there have been so many things in my life that I couldn't change—no matter how much I wanted to—that when I found something that I had a say in, well, you saw what happened."

"Unstoppable?"

"Yeah; it's probably the difference between us. Now that I can use my voice about something, I just want to scream it out. Not

that I can't see the value of your approach," he adds, rolling his eyes.

I just study him for a minute, his long lashes still wet with tears. How many kids witnessed Chris bullying Toby? How many people laughed it off, or thought it was nothing more than some rite of passage, or simply heaved a sigh of relief that it wasn't directed at them? And there he was, mourning the death of his sister and the disappearance of his dad. His whole world sort of imploded and instead of compassion, he got aggression. Yet here he is: still living, and smiling, and maybe even falling in love.

"You're pretty incredible," I say with a smile.

"Incredible? No," he shakes his head. "It's just life. We all get our hearts broken, in different ways." He looks at me, and I can practically hear him telling me to forgive already and get on with my life.

"Have you forgiven your dad?" I ask, looking back down at the sweet little girl smiling up at me from the frame.

"Not yet," he admits quietly. "But I'm getting there. Sometimes I guess maybe people just do really heartless things," he adds, pausing until I look up at him. "Even to the ones that they care about the most." I nod, thinking of Marcus. "Besides, with Amelia in my life, who has time to hold a grudge?" He grins, and I can't help but laugh because he's totally right.

"So if you figure out the whole forgive and forget thing, can you share the secret?" I ask. Because there must be a secret.

"When I solve the mystery, you'll be the very first to know."

He gives me a solemn nod while making an imaginary mark on his chest. "Cross my heart and hope to die. Well, maybe not the die part," he smiles. "Because what would Bowser do without me?"

"Bowser? What about me?"

"Right. Who else is going to teach you how to dance?"

4 weeks ago

"Really, Mags?" Marcus rubs his temple before running an impatient hand through his hair. "Do we have to do this now?" His voice is short and irritated, which kind of takes me by surprise; I had figured on more apologies and less of an attitude after missing our hike. But he showed up here long after I'd gotten home, and he's been nothing short of an ass since he arrived.

"So there's a better time?" I ask, feeling myself getting angry in response to his overall lack of remorse.

"Why can't you just leave it alone? Shit, it was one stupid hike." He stands up and starts to pace, his go-to movement. I'm completely caught off guard; honestly, I'm thinking he's never been such a jerk to me, especially when he's the one who screwed up. I want to stay calm, so I try to keep my voice controlled.

"You plan on telling me what's wrong?" Besides being hung over, of course. "Or do you just want me to guess?"

"Nothing is *wrong* with me," he spits out. "It was just one freaking party. Let it go." He shakes his head with an irritated sigh; at my obvious immaturity, I guess.

"Well, it's funny, because I'm pretty sure I remember a

conversation where you told me this wasn't going to happen again."

"Turns out I'm no good at predicting the future, am I?" He turns to look at me, his eyes cold.

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm *saying* that maybe you should just get off my back."

"Consider it done."

We stare at each other, fuming. I know why I'm furious at him, but I haven't yet figured out his problem with me. He finally breaks eye contact and starts pacing again.

"So is this what we're doing today?" he asks. "Because I've got better things to do."

"Really? Like what, exactly?"

"Anything," he snaps.

"Great. Then maybe you should just leave," I say, my voice cold and clipped.

"Maybe I should." He stops moving and turns to look at me. We stand there, glaring at each other, before he grabs his jacket and heads for the door. "Well, this was fun," he mutters, brushing past me. I have nothing to say to that, so I'm just furiously quiet. Slamming the door behind him, he's gone, but my brain continues to seethe with all of the witty—and viciously hurtful—things I could have said but didn't. I know tomorrow I'll be glad for that, but right now I'm pretty sure I've never been so angry in my life—and definitely never at Marcus.

2

"Morning," Mom says. She's kneeling in front of the woodstove, coaxing a fire to life.

"Morning." The kindling snaps, and I step closer, sighing as the warmth washes over me. We watch the scraps of wood burn as the stove begins to radiate heat, and when she finally closes the door and heads into the kitchen, I follow. I need to run an idea by her, and it has to happen before the twins appear.

"Do you think it would be a problem," I begin slowly, "if I skipped school and hung out with the twins for the day?"

She turns to look at me, a little surprised. "I'm sure they'd be thrilled, but what's the occasion?" she asks, pulling the overnight oats from the refrigerator and switching on the coffee maker. So as gently as I can, I fill her in on Nellie. As soon as she realizes where the conversation is going, she abandons her breakfast prep and comes to sit with me at the table, listening quietly.

"Today is all about expressing gratitude, isn't it?"

"Pretty much," I nod. "And there's one more thing. Would it be okay if we invited Toby and his mom here for dinner?" I pause with an apologetic look. "Like, tonight?"

"Not much warning," she replies, eyebrows raised.

"I know, but I'll cook, obviously. It just sounds so *lonely* over

there, Mom." Just picturing Toby all by himself, all the time, makes me feel incredibly sad. Especially knowing how much he loves being a part of things—the bigger the better, in fact.

"Well, if you're cooking, then I can't complain. In fact, I think it's a lovely idea, and I'll tell Dad to be on his best behavior," she says as he walks into the kitchen. Leaning over, he kisses the top of her head on his way by.

"I'll do my best," he says, sniffing deeply as the aroma of coffee fills the room. "But I make no promises."

Once I have the green light, I head upstairs and into the girls' room; they're both still sleeping, a messy tangle of arms and legs down the center of the bed. I climb over one of them—Zoe I think—and slide under the covers between the two. The movement disrupts Myra, and her eyes open slowly in confusion. After a couple of minutes, our whispering wakes Zoe, and their eyes begin to shine as I tell them my idea.

"*Whatever* we want?" Zoe can't seem to believe her good luck. "Is it our birthday, Maggie Rae?" she asks seriously, still confused by her unexpected good fortune.

"Nope," I laugh, "unless we want to call it your unbirthday?"

"YEAH!" Myra shouts, directly into my ear. "Like ALICE! Zoe, it's our UNBIRTHDAY!"

"And yes, whatever you want." I untangle myself, climbing over Myra to get out of the bed. "So hurry up, get dressed, and I'll meet you downstairs!"

I text Toby about dinner tonight, letting him know that I

won't be in school because I'm spending the day with the girls. He immediately replies with a *yes* for dinner, and tells me he'll bring his guitar—he knows from experience that little girls like goofy songs.

The twins beat me to the kitchen where Myra informs me, very seriously, that they didn't make their bed because they didn't *want* to, and I said we could do whatever they *want* today, not whatever they *didn't* want. Zoe's giggling behind her, and even though I know the chore now falls to me, I can't help but admire the solid reasoning.

We start with blueberry muffins and pancakes because they can't decide between the two, and from there the day takes on a life of its own, filled with one adventure after another. First we collect pinecones, which are quickly covered in peanut butter and seed before being hung outside for happy birds. This is followed by Lego towers, a coloring contest, a reading marathon, lunch at the café, and a Barbie doll fashion show. I do have to veto a couple of suggestions like "go camping" and "ride a roller coaster," but Myra seems to take my *no*s in stride.

"Okay, girls," I say, realizing how late it's getting. "I need to make dinner. Anyone feel like helping me?" The living room looks like a tornado blew through, and we're sitting in a blanket fort, surrounded by an enormous pile of Barbie paraphernalia. Neither of them greets my request with all that much enthusiasm; Zoe can't even be bothered to look up from the doll she's dressing with such care. Maybe we're all a little relieved when I leave them to their Barbie business and head out to the kitchen alone; who knew

playing all day could be so exhausting?

Creamy mushroom soup simmers on the stove, and a sheet pan of veggies—smothered with herbs and garlic—is roasting in the oven. Just as I'm finishing up the apple pie and thinking I might actually make this happen, Toby and his mom show up, right on time. Myra greets them at the door, and it isn't long before the click of dog toes and the happy shrieks of little girls lets me know that everyone's settling in just fine. Within minutes, I can hear the steady cadence of Mom's voice as she and Debbie hit it off almost instantly, already deeply engrossed in some kind of stimulating conversation. Weird, but I think they're talking about water filtration systems.

"Smells good," Toby says, wandering into the kitchen. "Need any help?"

"No, thanks. Everything's almost ready," I smile, pulling the veggies out of the oven and sliding the apple pie in.

"Fun day?"

"Exhausting," I sigh, pulling off my apron before finally dropping into a chair. "But yes, so much fun." Toby sits down next to me in his designated spot. I wonder what'll happen if Marcus comes back since they can't exactly share the chair. This could potentially be a problem.

"Thanks for the invite, by the way; it beats the veggie burgers I was going to reheat."

"Anytime. Besides"—I nod towards the living room as I hear Mom erupt in laughter—"it sounds like our moms have bypassed

all that superficial getting-to-know-you business and have some serious bonding going on."

"Are you surprised?"

"Not at all."

As it turns out, there's none of that awkward small talk. It's almost like Toby and his mom have been sharing our dinner table for years, and the conversation is comfortable and interesting. Every so often I see Debbie watching one of the girls, a soft smile on her face. She's especially interested in our day, and Myra and Zoe fill her in on all the tiniest of details. Myra even includes the color of Barbie's dress, and Zoe lists the books we read—in order.

We're content to sit around the table until long after the food has disappeared. Eventually, though, the girls wander off, and Dad follows a little later to usher them up to their bath. That leaves the four of us still relaxing around the table and talking easily, like we could just stay here all night.

"That was a *delicious* meal, Maggie Rae." Debbie squeezes my hand in thanks.

"I had a pretty competent teacher." I grin over at Mom. "Have you ever eaten at the café?"

Debbie shakes her head, a sheepish look on her face. "No—and I'm so embarrassed to admit that."

"Well, if you ever get around to it, your first meal's on me," Mom laughs.

"Working two jobs doesn't leave me much time for a life; I can't remember the last time I ate a meal in a restaurant, let alone

cooked one for myself." Mom nods her sympathy. "But as soon as I can manage it, I'll take you up on that."

"You know," Mom says slowly, a thoughtful expression on her face, "I've been thinking about hiring more help; I'm having trouble keeping up ever since the kids embarked on this save-the-animals adventure. I'm not sure if it would make life any easier for you, but the tips are pretty good." She looks at Debbie with a shrug. "Even if it just meant swapping out one job for another, at least you'd get free food at the café."

Debbie's looking at Mom curiously. "What would the job involve?"

"A little bit of everything, actually," Mom laughs. "How about this—I'll start thinking more seriously about what I'd need, and then I'll give it to you to think about. You can just let me know."

"You'd love it there, Mom," Toby says, nodding enthusiastically.

"Toby, Toby, it's *time*," Myra yells, racing down the stairs and tearing back into the kitchen. "It's time for SONGS!" Zoe follows just a minute later, her wet hair slicked back and anticipation shining in her eyes. They each take one of Toby's hands, pulling him into the living room, and he doesn't look at all unhappy to be the object of such obvious affection. Mom and Debbie move to clean up and wash dishes—still engrossed in café talk—while I follow the trio into the next room.

Toby serenades them with one silly song after another. This is the first time I've heard him play, and he's really, really good—

maybe even a little great. Myra particularly loves one disgusting song about gopher guts and chopped up baby parakeets, and Zoe requests "Puff the Magic Dragon" at least three times. Toby strums away, singing one song after another, and I wonder how much this reminds him of another time and another little girl. But if Nellie's sitting here with us, it seems to bring him nothing but peace.

Myra sits worshipful at Toby's feet while Zoe lies curled up on my lap, getting heavier and heavier with each passing minute. Looking down, I laugh quietly at her half-closed eyes and her lips curved into a soft smile. Dad eventually has to break things up when it's at least an hour past their bedtime, scooping up a sleepy Zoe while herding out a still wide-awake and complaining Myra.

"So you know that you can never show up at my door again unless you have your guitar, right?" I shake my head, knowing this past hour won't be something the girls quickly forget.

"I figured that," Toby laughs, packing up his guitar before heading to the kitchen to see if Debbie is ready to go. *Just ten more minutes, Toby, promise* is her quick answer, and Toby comes back in with a smirk.

"That likely means we'll be here for at least another hour," he says with a shake of his head.

We wander upstairs because Toby wants to meet Sir Bartholomew; the bird takes an instant liking to him, and the feeling is definitely mutual. Eventually, Toby and I end up collapsed on the bed, side by side with Bowser in between. We talk quietly for a while, mostly about Julia, but also about our moms' instant

connection and what we're going to do about the café. Honestly, though, he does most of the talking; I'm so tired from the unbirthday celebration that I can hardly keep my eyes open.

Toby's right, and it's at least an hour—closer to two—before Mom and Debbie come upstairs to find us.

Both Bowser and I are sound asleep. And Toby's still rambling on about Julia.

4 weeks ago

His motorcycle is parked in its usual spot, but thankfully, it doesn't look like his parents are home. I pull into the driveway, thinking about how weird it is that I've only been to his house three or four times. I barely know his parents, even though he's practically been adopted by mine.

I test the handle when no one answers my knocks, relieved to find it open. But walking in uninvited makes me feel a little bit like I'm trespassing, so I quickly head up the stairs to Marcus's room. Even though the door's closed, I can hear the TV blaring, so I know he's in there; either ignoring me or dying, I'm not sure which. He hasn't replied to a single one of the texts I've sent him today, so I don't really know what to expect. But before I can think about it anymore, I push the door open, sticking my head in.

"Hey," I say cautiously. He's lying on his bed and looking like he just woke up, despite the fact that it's three o'clock in the afternoon. He moves his eyes to glance at me before looking back at the TV, barely acknowledging my greeting. The blinds are still drawn, and the room smells terrible, all closed up and dark like this. Making my way carefully past him, I open both the blinds and the windows to let in some fresh air and sunshine;

almost instantly, things feel better. Or at the very least, brighter. Marcus is still lying motionless, and his only reaction is to squint his eyes at the sudden light.

"Are you sick?" I ask him, sitting down on the end of the bed and watching his face closely.

"No."

"How come you weren't in school then?"

"Didn't feel like it," he answers, his voice quiet and uncharacteristically curt.

"Because you're still mad at me?" Although I still haven't figured out why *he* was ever mad at *me*.

"I'm not mad at you," he says, his eyes still glued to the TV.

It's usually pretty easy for me to read Marcus because he doesn't really try to hide things, but right now I don't have any idea what to make of this mood. I've never seen it before, and it leaves me unsure of what I should do or say. And more than anything else right now, I really wish he'd look at me.

"You want to talk about it?" I try, even though it seems doubtful.

"No."

We're silent for a couple more minutes while I try and figure out how to get him talking.

"I'm sorry we fought yesterday," I say, willing him to meet my eyes. After a long pause he does—briefly—before

looking away again.

"Me, too," he says quietly.

"I guess it had to happen eventually."

"Guess so."

"Marcus," I say, quickly frustrated with how our conversation is going. Or not going, actually. "Will you *look* at me?" Reluctantly, he moves his eyes up to meet mine. "This is me, remember? Tell me what's wrong." I can see the struggle in his eyes, and things look hopeful for a minute before he shuts down again.

"I don't want to talk about it, Mags. Maybe later." He's back to looking at the screen. "You should just go."

"I'm not leaving."

"I have nothing to say," he says with just a tiny spark of life in his voice. Finally.

"Well, then, I'll sit here. I'll sit here all night if you make me." I kick off my shoes and pull my legs up onto the bed. My face is set into a small scowl, and I can tell he's watching me out of the corner of his eye, but all he does is sigh. Letting me know that I'm a huge nuisance but still not saying a word. His eyes are riveted to the TV, and I realize it's an easy distraction as long as it's on. Digging around in the blankets, I come up with the remote. I turn to face him as I click it off—a slightly triumphant look on my face—and he drags his eyes over to mine again.

"You just don't give up, do you?" he asks, sitting up and

climbing out of bed. I stay where I am, not sure what he's doing—leaving, for all I know. But I hear the bathroom door close and then the water running before he comes back into the room, smelling of mint. I figure he brushed his teeth and probably rinsed his face because he looks a little bit more alive than he did five minutes ago. He sits down next to me on the bed, shaking his head.

"Could I even get rid of you if I tried?"

"Maybe if you pick me up and carry me out." I shrug.

"I'd think about it, if I wasn't so damn tired." He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees and cradling his head in his hands. He looks so defeated; like since I saw him last, he's just given up.

"You know you're going to feel better as soon as you talk it out." I start rubbing my hand in small circles on his back. It works for the twins, and it works for Amelia; maybe it'll help here too. Long, long minutes pass silently while I wait.

"I shouldn't have gone to that party," he starts. "I knew it was a bad idea, but it's like no matter how many times I tell myself no, I still do it anyway. I spent all afternoon telling myself why it was a dumbass idea—I knew we'd fight, or worse. I knew I'd drink; I knew I'd feel shitty the next day; I knew I was breaking a promise. I knew all of these things and then? *I went to the fucking party*." He shakes his head with a frustrated sigh. "Why do I *do* that?" I'm relieved when he finally looks up at me,

but I stay quiet, letting my hand drop back into my lap. "I just wish I was *out* of here—out of this house, out of school. Away from my parents. I just feel so damn *trapped*." His eyes are still locked on mine, and they have a desperate look, willing me to understand. "Sometimes life just really, really sucks," he finishes bitterly.

He's right; sometimes it does. So I don't bother telling him that it's almost over and that he should just hang on. I don't bother telling him that it's just one more short year before he can walk away. I don't bother, because it won't matter. Right now—as miserable, frustrated, and lost as he is—that one year feels more like a lifetime. Instead, I just keep listening. And resume my rubbing.

"And I want to tell you that I won't drink again, but I can't, 'cause I'd be lying. They make me so *crazy*, Mags." He sighs again and with a small groan, lies back on the bed. Staring up at the ceiling, he keeps talking; now that he's started, maybe he can't stop. "When I'm with you things are different, you know? You just make me believe that things can be better. But when I'm not? Shit; maybe I need a babysitter. I think Myra has more self-control than I do." He laughs, but it's a laugh with no humor. He's silent again, his eyes still fixed on the ceiling and sorrow written across his face.

I've already forgotten my anger; now I'm just sad that he's struggling so much, and that there's not really anything I can

do to help. And then I feel my heart break just a little bit when a tear rolls from his eye, running down his cheek before dropping quietly onto the pillow. He doesn't move to brush it away; it's almost like he doesn't even notice the sadness spilling out. I've never seen Marcus cry, ever. Not even when he broke his wrist in football practice and then drove himself home. So I'm riveted as another tear follows the first.

"Why do I keep *fucking* this up?" he asks, irritated, and I know he's talking about us. His voice shakes with frustration, and he reaches up to wipe his cheeks angrily. Still saying nothing, I crawl over and lay my head down on his chest. He wraps his arms around me, his breathing just quick enough to tell me that the tears still fall. Eventually, he reaches for my hand, bringing my palm up to his lips and kissing it softly.

"I'm sorry about the fight, Mags."

"I know."

"It was my fault—all of it—and I'm really sorry," he says again.

He doesn't tell me that things will be better. He doesn't tell me that it won't happen again. He doesn't tell me that he's done drinking. He doesn't tell me any of these things because he knows they wouldn't be true. I think he wants me to understand that he expects to fail, as much as he doesn't want to.

1

"Okay, let me have it." Amelia demands.

"Have what?" I ask. Turning around, I find her waiting with her eyes tightly closed and obviously prepared for some terrible news. Toby and I look at each other in confusion until she slowly lifts her purse up in front of her face, and Toby nods in sudden understanding.

"Oh," he says. "Leather?"

"Tell me the *real* story behind this bag that I love more than life itself." She looks at us both, her eyes pleading. "I mean, what I really want you to tell me is that I don't have to feel bad about leather; it's just *waste*, and it's a really great way of *recycling* a product that would otherwise be thrown out. But I know that isn't what you're going to say, is it?"

Toby and I both shake our heads, but neither of us wants to be the one who tells her.

"Really, I can handle it. Go," she says firmly.

"No," I answer with another shake of my head. "You don't want to know—maybe you should just get rid of the bag."

"Tell me," she growls. "I *need* to know."

Toby takes a deep breath, choosing his words very carefully because we don't really want a repeat performance of the break-

down at my kitchen table. "I guess what I'll never understand is how the majority of people are horrified by fur, but somehow manage to convince themselves that leather isn't *exactly the same thing*." He shrugs, but underneath I can sense his anger mounting as Amelia's shoulders slump in resignation.

"But if we're already eating the meat, then leather is just kind of like . . . leftovers," Amelia says, her voice trailing off weakly as soon as she sees the look on Toby's face.

"The meat industry is about maximizing profit, not minimizing 'leftovers'; I highly doubt that the environment is a top concern of theirs. And actually, they make more money—a lot more money—off of the leather than they do the meat. So if anything, you could say *meat* is a byproduct of the leather industry. In terms of profit, that cow technically died so that you could enjoy your soft and luxurious designer bag." And from there, he proceeds to fill her in on all of the ugly little secrets, like the bone-chilling and inhumane treatment of cows in India, and I start digging frantically in my bag for a tissue.

"Why are you giving me that?" she demands, knitting her eyebrows when I hold it out to her.

"Just take it," I say. "This part is worse."

Toby reluctantly picks up where he left off, looking to me for help, and this time I take pity on him. Pressing the tissue into her hand, I gently break the news that her coveted handbag may actually be a newborn calf or a freshly harvested calf fetus, chosen because they make the softest bags. Through it all, Amelia only

stares in silent horror at her purse while Toby and I wait for some kind of eruption—either of tears or fury. Maybe both. The fury wins, and her eyes turn dangerously angry, dangerously fast. "Mags, give me your bag," she says impatiently.

"My bag?"

"Yes, give it here." She grabs my backpack and proceeds to dump the entire contents of her purse into it. Standing back up, she turns around. "Here." She thrusts it at a group of girls walking by. "Does anyone want this? It cost me over a hundred bucks, but if you want it, it's yours." One of the girls reaches for it eagerly. "And how about a pair of boots?" Amelia's already unzipping her boots and slipping them off her feet.

"Amelia, wait," I beg. I sneak a quick look at Toby, hoping for some help, but I'm not surprised to see that he's barely suppressing a laugh. When I turn back to Amelia, she's glaring at me with hands on her hips and feet bare. I don't know how he can laugh; I'm feeling slightly terrified.

"Why are we so freaking *awful*?" she explodes. "Everywhere I look, we've done something *tragic*. Are we *monsters*?" Before either Toby or I can say anything else, she turns and storms off down the hall. We're both silent while we watch her stalk away and disappear around the corner.

"Wow." Toby turns to me with a grin, sounding impressed. *"What* have we created? I really hope I can take some of the credit because she is unbelievably awesome. We should clone her, don't you think?"

I nod, thinking that clones aren't such a bad idea; with a small army of Amelias, we could probably take over the world.

"Maggie Rae, I have to tell you something." Myra says very solemnly.

"Sure, peanut, what is it?"

"Me and Zoe think tomorrow should be our unbirthday too."

Mom laughs, winking at me from across the table.

"You do, huh?" Myra nods emphatically. "And Zoe, you think so, too?" I turn to look at Zoe, who's chasing the last couple of peas across her plate intently. She glances up at me, nodding seriously, even as a hint of mischief sneaks across her face.

"We think *every* day should be our unbirthday," Zoe says.

"*What*?" I gasp. "But we'd run out of cool things to do."

"No, we *wouldn't*!" Zoe says firmly.

"We wouldn't *ever*!" Myra chimes in.

"That does sound like fun," I say, choosing my words very carefully, "and I definitely think we need to make unbirthdays a regular thing. But tomorrow's the dance, so we'll have to do it another day. Okay?"

"Why do you have go to the dance?" Myra's whines, her hopes quickly dashed.

"Well, I don't *have* to, but Toby and Amelia are counting on me. Maybe you guys could help me get ready instead? Amelia will be here, and I'm sure she'd love your help too."

"Well . . . okay," Zoe says with a small shrug. Apparently, she's fine with the change of plans if it means make-up, curls, pretty dresses, and possibly a glittering crown atop a ginger head. Myra's chin is resting in her pudgy hands, and she's looking down at the table, morose; Zoe goes back to chasing her rogue peas.

"I need opinions." Mom says, abruptly changing the subject. "I'm still working out the details, but what would you think," she begins, looking at me and Dad carefully, "if I were to say that I was thinking about offering a series of workshops?"

"Workshops? You have *time* for that?" I ask realistically.

"I'd start small, maybe just one night a month? And Grams wants to help, so we'd be sharing the workload. The fee would be minimal; this is more about the education, not the profit, you know? Maybe one about veganism or learning to read labels." She's talking quickly, like she's afraid we're going to shoot down her idea; an idea that she's obviously been doing a lot of thinking about. "All that stuff is just second nature to *us* now, but for most people it would be brand new. Plus, Raymond's already told me to just holler if I need him again. I don't know, is it crazy? Maybe it won't work, and I'm biting off more than I can chew." She's looking at us nervously, waiting for one of us to speak.

"Sounds like your kind of thing," Dad says with a nod. "And to show my support, I'll be sure to clear my schedule, so I can keep an eye on the girls. Consider it my contribution to your new endeavor."

"How gracious of you," Mom says, rolling her eyes.

"I don't think it's crazy at all." I say, adding my approval to Dad's. "Especially if Grams is going to help."

"Yeah? There's just been so much interest at the café since the protest; I'd hate to waste an opportunity like this one."

"I say go for it." I can't help but smile at her enthusiasm—in this moment she reminds me a lot of Toby.

"I've been mulling it over for a couple of days now, and I just keep getting more excited by it," she frowns. "I just hope—"

An unexpected knock at the kitchen door interrupts Mom's thought, startling all of us. A dripping wet Marcus peers in through the glass.

"Oh, shoot," Dad mutters, jumping up. "I forgot to unlock the shop. Mags, is it a problem if he comes in for just a quick minute?" He looks over at me, already heading for the door.

"It's fine," I nod.

"Sorry, Marcus," Dad says, opening the door and waving him in. "Come on in and dry off." When Marcus looks over at me, Dad answers his unasked question. "You're safe; Mags already gave it her blessing."

Marcus steps in carefully, water running down his jacket and pooling on the rug under his feet.

"Can I feed him?" Mom whispers apologetically.

"Mom," I groan. Dad and Marcus are still talking at the door, her question unheard; I can say no, and no one ever has to know.

"But he's trying so hard, sweetie. So hard." Her words seem odd. How does *she* know how hard he's trying? Without further

elaboration, she just sits there and waits for my answer, a strangely sympathetic smile on her face.

"I guess so," I sigh.

"Great." She squeezes my arm, turning to Marcus. "Did you eat?" she asks him, heading across the kitchen to fill a plate before he's even had time to answer.

"No." I can hear the caution in his voice, and I know without turning that he's looking at me again. Reluctantly, I meet his eyes and give him a small smile to show it's okay. Although I'm not all that sure it *is* okay. I'm getting this strong kind of déjà vu feeling, like I've been here before. Which I have, seeing as he's eaten at this table hundreds of times.

He hangs his jacket by the door before making his way over to the chair beside me—his chair. Well, the one he now shares with Toby. He shakes his head lightly, spraying water droplets over a still sulking Myra, as Mom slides a full plate of food in front of him.

"Thanks." He gives her a grin before digging in.

Our conversation resumes as Mom quickly brings us back to her workshop idea. She wants our opinions on extending the café hours, and whether or not we think Debbie would be a good fit. It's kind of a family tradition, figuring stuff out around the kitchen table. Marcus is quiet, content to just listen while we talk; I notice him wiping his cheek occasionally, his hair still dripping wet. It's kind of weird because he hasn't been here in weeks, but the longer he sits there, the more it feels like he never left. He smells like fresh air and wet earth, and when his knee touches mine, I tense.

"Marcus, I think I'm going to skip the shop tonight." Dad looks at him with a sheepish grin.

"Okay, that's cool."

"Sorry to make you come out for nothing."

"Nothing? I just got a free meal and Mags didn't kick me out of the house; I'd say that's something." Mom and Dad laugh, but I just shake my head and wonder how they've managed to so easily forgive him the heinous crime against their own daughter.

"It's just that the longer I sit here the lazier I get, and the more it seems like the perfect game night to me." Dad looks slyly at the girls. "A rousing game of Go Fish and a heaping bowl of popcorn. I don't know, what do you think, Bobbi?" He turns innocently towards my mom.

"Well… I'm not sure the girls could manage it. They'd have to skedaddle up to the tub without a *single* complaint if we were to have enough time for that." Mom's shaking her head. "Impossible, I think."

"No, Mommy, we can too do it." Myra knocks over a chair in her eagerness to get upstairs, and Zoe isn't far behind. Mom stands up, leaning over to kiss Dad's cheek with a laugh before following the twins upstairs. They walk out of the room, hand in hand, leaving Marcus and I at the table. Alone.

We just sit there, listening to the wind and the rain. Both of us are awkwardly quiet, unsure of how this should go, but he's the first to break the uncomfortable silence.

"Will you talk to me yet?" He turns to look at me, but he's

just sitting so *close* that I can't bring myself to meet his eyes. I keep staring straight ahead, playing with my napkin, while I figure out how to answer his question.

"I'm not really sure what there even is to talk about." I've heard the story, and I'd really rather not hear it again.

"So does that mean it's over then?" he asks, his voice tired and sad. "For good?"

"For good?"

"Well, yeah. If you can't forgive me, then what are we left with? Besides me being an asshole forever." He abruptly reaches for my hand like he can't believe he just said the words. Like he can't believe that we can be over. "Tell me, Mags—just tell me what to do, so I can *fix* this."

And all of a sudden, I'm angry—so, so angry. Angry enough to yank my hand from his and stand up quickly, walking across the kitchen for some space. How am I supposed to *think* with him so close to me? With all of the *irritating* memories sneaking in to confuse me?

"Do? What can you *do* to make this girl go away? She's sitting there, right between us at the table." He turns around slowly to look at me, but I still refuse to meet his eyes. "And say I agree to try this again—how long before I stop wondering whether or not every ridiculous fight with your parents is going to have you sneaking off and drinking yourself into a coma?" I start pacing the kitchen. "And if you do drink, how can I ever trust you again? You just get to pick up the pieces, almost where we left off. But me? I'll need to work *all*

the time at believing in you again."

He looks like he's going to stand up and come over to me, but I hold up my hand before he can move.

"So what can you *do*? I'm not sure I can answer that. Unless you can somehow turn back time and make a decision that doesn't wreck my whole damn life."

Marcus winces. "I'm done drinking, Mags," he says softly. "I haven't had anything to drink since that night. And there have been plenty of fights that made me want to."

"You say that now, but can you say that always?"

"Yes, and you want to know why? Because I've never felt *worse* than after I hurt you. I've never felt more like drinking myself into oblivion than I did after I had to come over and tell you about that night. But I didn't, and I won't. Because I *need* you to believe in me." He frowns. "Like you used to."

Walking over to the window, I stare out into the darkness. The sound of the rain is loud, but I can still hear him pushing back his chair and coming to stand behind me.

"Don't touch me," I say softly.

"Will you look at me?"

I turn around slowly, not because I want to, but because it's Marcus. Underneath all of this mess, it's still Marcus. And ever since that first brownie sundae, it's always been Marcus.

"Just say you'll try." He's staring at me with such intensity, begging me to agree. "You might not be able to trust me right now, but you will; I promise, you will." I see the pain in his eyes, and I

know all he wants to hear are the words. Like this is his last-ditch effort at convincing me that broken things can be fixed. And if he fails, we fail.

"I want to forgive you—more than anything, I want to do that." I shake my head. "But I don't know how."

"Would it make a difference if I told you I'm getting help?" he asks. He's watching me carefully, waiting for some kind of reaction, but all I can give him is surprise. Making that kind of an effort seems like something he would have immediately wanted me to know.

"Help? What kind of help?"

"Counseling. You know, someone to pick me apart and tell me everything I'm doing wrong. It was one of the conditions your dad made me agree to if I wanted to work out in the shop. That, and stay out of the house." He frowns. "I'm obviously not doing so great with the second one."

"*Dad* made you see a therapist?"

"Well, he didn't *make* me, Mags, but he and your mom thought I needed help." He shrugs. "I mean, they weren't wrong."

"*Mom* knew too?" And all of a sudden, her comment at the table a little while ago makes more sense. "And Grams? Amelia?" I'm guessing that even Toby somehow knew which is why everyone seemed so ready to cut Marcus some slack. Apparently everyone *except* me—the one who needed to know most of all—was in on the secret. And instead of relief, all I feel is more anger. "So when were you planning on telling *me* this?"

"When I knew it wasn't a waste of time."

"Oh, really. And when exactly would that be?" I ask, my voice shaking with fury. Here I am, working so hard at forgiving him, and all along he's been hiding something that could have made it a whole lot easier.

"Don't be mad at them," Marcus says quickly. "I asked them not to say anything. If you're going to blame anyone, blame me."

"Oh, I do," I say coldly, before turning back to look out the window.

"I just didn't want you to forgive me based on that." He's still standing behind me, and his tone is colored with frustration. "What if I can't *fix* me? I'd have to disappoint you all over again, and I'm not going to do that," he says forcefully. "Not if I can help it."

Staring out at the darkness, I just want to wash my hands of everything—of this whole giant mess that just keeps getting bigger every day. How do people find their way through when everything is so confusing? All of a sudden, I'm so damn tired. Tired of trying, and tired of sadness, and tired of wanting something I can't have back. I'm too tired even to cry, and a sense of hopelessness creeps over me. It's not going to work. It's never going to work, and I'm done pretending that it will.

When I turn back around, he's still standing exactly as I left him and as hard as it is to do, I force myself to meet his eyes. He silently pleads with me, having used all the words he has, and for a second it almost works. With just a small space between us, I can hear his laugh, feel his hand, taste his lips, and see his love. But

almost doesn't really count. It's safer here with this wall up around my heart, keeping Marcus and his sadness out, and me and my sadness in.

"Maybe I need to show you first. Maybe you can't forgive me until I earn it." He pauses. "Let me earn it, Mags."

"I can't," I say softly.

"But I love you."

"I know," I say, moving carefully past him and out of the kitchen. When I get to the doorway, I turn back around. He's watching me walk away, sadness shining in his eyes. *I love you too*, I think. So how come that's not enough?

3 weeks ago

"You look terrible," I say, frowning at Marcus as he walks into my room. His eyes are incredibly bloodshot, and his face is pale and tense; I'm mostly just wondering why he's here and not home in bed.

"I *feel* terrible," he says quietly, heading slowly over to the window.

He'd texted me this morning saying he wasn't feeling well, so it's kind of a surprise to see him standing here. Especially when he looks so bad that I'm tempted to touch his forehead and check for a fever. A couple of silent minutes pass while he watches the twins playing outside in a pile of leaves, and I think it's strange that he hasn't looked at me even once since he walked in.

"Is something wrong? I thought you were just going to hang out at home today." Watching him silently stare out the window is giving me this really uneasy feeling. I spent last night with Amelia, and I slowly realize that I don't know for sure where Marcus spent his, but I'm starting to get an idea. The longer he's quiet, the more tense I get; and while it would be premature to get angry, I can feel that starting too. A hangover looks an awful lot like sick, but if that's the case, it makes even

less sense why he'd be here.

"Marcus, just tell me."

"I'm not really sure how," he falters, looking at me for the first time. My hands start to shake at his words, and all of a sudden, I feel like I should be sitting down for whatever's coming next. Walking over to my desk, I very carefully lower myself into the chair and just wait for Marcus to ruin my day.

He follows me, walking over to the bed and dropping down. Even though he's facing me, he still won't meet my eyes, and a couple of minutes pass before he works up the courage to speak. "I went out last last night," he starts, but then pauses for so long that I'm not sure he's going to start again. "There was a party, and I drank . . ." he looks at me quickly before looking back down at his hands, ". . . a lot. I guess I must've blacked out because I don't remember most of the night."

"*Blacked out*?"

"Yeah, it happens sometimes," he says, his voice tired. "Or it used to, anyway." He closes his eyes and drops his head into his hands. My stomach is tight and sick because I can tell that I haven't heard the worst yet.

"When I woke up . . ." his voice is so quiet I can hardly hear him, ". . . I wasn't alone."

I can't move—I'm not even sure I'm breathing, and there's this really terrible pain in my heart, like I want to double over.

"Not alone?" I ask, my voice deceivingly calm.

"There was a girl . . . in bed . . . with me." He finishes with a groan, his head still resting in his hands.

"Like maybe you both just passed out in the same bed together?" Naively hopeful, but please, *please* let it be this.

"I don't think so," he says slowly, shaking his head.

He doesn't offer anything more, and I can't quite bring myself to ask the question I know I need to. Did he really just have sex with some random girl? I wait, hoping he can give me something—anything—to make this sick feeling disappear, but he's quiet. And I feel a little bit like I'm going to scream.

"Marcus." Somehow I manage to get at least that out. "*Marcus!*" I say more forcefully, waiting for him to lift his head from his hands. I wait until he finally meets my eyes before I ask him the question I never thought I'd have to ask. "Did you sleep with her?"

"I don't know, Mags," he says miserably, getting up and walking back to the window. "I don't even know who she was or how we got there; I don't even know whose dorm we were in."

"How can you not know? Did you ask her?"

"*Ask* her?" He looks at me in surprise. "No, Mags, I didn't ask her."

So what does that even mean, he doesn't *know*? Just because he doesn't remember doesn't mean nothing happened, since he obviously lost a whole night in some kind of drunken haze. But if it wasn't even a possibility, then why would he be

here and telling me this? I should just tell him to leave, I *want* to just tell him to leave, but then there's this morbid part of me that has to know everything. Even though it might kill me.

"Were you . . . ?" What are the words to ask if your boyfriend was naked in bed with another girl? "Were you . . . ?" I can't do it. My mouth refuses to say the words; his silence answers my question anyway. I wonder if this is what shock feels like; this complete absence of emotion. Because suddenly, I'm eerily calm, but not in a Zen way—more like a dead and lifeless way. He's watching me carefully now, and waiting to see my reaction.

"I never meant for this to happen," he says quietly.

"Give me a break, Marcus. Where exactly did you think these drinking binges were going to lead you?"

"Not *here*," he says forcefully. "I just thought they could help me get through this last shitty year at home."

"By running away? Yeah, I find that always works."

"What do I do, Mags? Tell me. Anything."

"Can you *un*do last night?" I snap. There's a look of deep remorse on his face, but I can barely register his pain, let alone feel it. "You broke us." Holy shit; he broke us. "It's over, Marcus," I say, practically choking on the words.

"Are we breaking up?" I'm surprised at how surprised he sounds. Isn't this where the conversation had to go?

"Yes," I say, looking him straight in the eye, like this isn't

the hardest thing I've ever had to do. "We're breaking up."

"Mags, c'mon." He walks across the room, coming to kneel in front of me. "Can we just talk about this some more?"

"Talk about what? It seems pretty black and white to me." He's looking at me, thunderstruck. I don't think I've ever shut down a conversation so abruptly. "And now you need to go."

"Where do I go?" His eyes are so sad. "This is the only place I've ever belonged."

"Not anymore," I say quietly. I need to turn away to hold myself together because my eyes are beginning to prick with the approach of tears. I will him to leave, *now*, because I'm afraid once they start they'll never stop. Finally he stands up, slowly, never taking his eyes off my face. I feel the first tear break free and another quickly follows. *Leave. Please leave*, I silently beg. He stands there, helplessly watching my sadness and knowing he's the cause. Gently he reaches over, brushing the tears from my cheek.

"I'm sorry." His thumb lingers, and sharp pains begin to stab my chest. I close my eyes, willing this to end. *Please leave. Please leave. Please leave.*

And then he does.

0

Just as I'm running the zipper up Amelia's back, I hear Toby's mom pull into the driveway. When she found out that Toby had planned on riding his bike here tonight, she immediately nixed the idea. I'm pretty sure she called it ludicrous, which it definitely was.

"How do I look?" Amelia spins around for the girls. They sit with dazed expressions frozen on their faces, hypnotized by the shimmer of sequins. The girls aren't the only ones spellbound, though, and Amelia lets out a tiny shriek when Sir Bartholomew launches himself from his perch and zips towards her glitter.

"My hair, Mags, MY HAIR!" She throws her hands over her head as Zoe's eyes widen in horror, but I only laugh, gently pulling Sir Bartholomew off of her shoulder. No lie, she has spent the last two hours perfecting her curls, and I have to admit that it was well worth the effort—she looks amazing. Prior to that, she spent at least an hour weaving my hair into a fairy-like braid that winds around the back of my head, ending in an elegant bun off to the side. I'm pretty sure that even if I had six arms and a week to accomplish it, I personally could never duplicate it; I feel decidedly princess-like.

"Can you girls go let Toby know that we're almost ready?" I ask. Reluctantly, they slide off the bed and head out of the room,

their eyes still glued to Amelia. At some point in their long vigil, I heard Zoe whispering to Myra, *I wish I had red hair*. Myra, just as awestruck, could only nod her solemn agreement.

Amelia turns to me with a grin. "Are we ready?"

"I don't know. Are you sure every curl is in place?" I tease.

"I'm sure." She pats her hair with a smug smile. "You realize we'll have to fight over Toby for the slow dances, right? Things could get ugly."

I laugh. "I think we'll manage."

She links her arm through mine, and we head down the hallway together. "That boy," she sighs. "He has absolutely no idea how lucky he is."

"No," I disagree with a quick shake of my head. "He definitely knows."

A cluster stands at the bottom of the stairs; Mom, Dad, the girls, Toby, and Debbie are all waiting for us to make our appearance. I'm pretty sure I see Debbie wipe away a little tear—probably dazzled by the ginger waves too—but then it's lost in the girls' frantic hopping up and down.

"Maggie Rae, Toby got you *flowers*!" Myra shouts with wide eyes.

Toby's looking at us both with an embarrassed grin. "I'm sorry if this is outdated or something," he says, holding out two boxes, "but Mom said this is what you do—especially if one of your dates is potentially homecoming queen."

"Awww, thanks, sweetie." Amelia leans over and kisses his

cheek. "But proper protocol states that you must do the honors. Here," she hands the box back to him, "put it on me, if you please."

She holds out her arm like royalty, and Toby slips the corsage on, leaning over to kiss her hand when he's done.

"My lady," he says with a smile, and Amelia nods her approval. After that, it's a whirlwind of pictures, posing, and last-minute adjustments.

"Okay, we gots to *go*. Potential queens must not be late for their inauguration; totally bad form." Amelia herds us towards the door in a flurry of *have fun, drive safe,* and *good luck*. The air is crisp and cool as we step outside, and a blanket of stars shimmers above us.

"You guys look . . ." Toby pauses, searching for the word, *"extraordinary."*

"You're looking pretty dapper yourself, young man." Amelia winks, sliding her arm through his as they make their ways towards the car.

"Have you stopped to think about how unbelievable this all is?" he asks, shaking his head in awe.

"This what?"

"This *life*. One minute you're moving along thinking about how things couldn't possibly get any *worse,* and then the next you wonder if they could possibly get any *better*. Have you ever really thought about that? How fast it can all change? How in just one day, just one *hour*, your whole life can shift?"

Actually, I've thought about that an awful lot lately.

"Yeah," Amelia agrees. "Like no matter how crappy things get, it would be crazy to give up, right? I mean, Maggie Rae forgets her notebook and we end up *here*? How did that even happen? It's completely insane." She nods at Toby solemnly before they both fall quiet, likely pondering the mysteries of the universe and their role in it all. It's so cold that my teeth are starting to chatter, but I'm instantly warmed by a rush of happiness that moves through me as I realize just how much I l love these two beautiful humans.

"Okay, boys and girls," Amelia says, bringing us out of this unexpectedly serious moment. Sliding her other arm through mine, she tosses her head back like the queen that she already is. "Enough with the chit-chat; I have a crown to accept. Let's rock and roll."

"Sorry you didn't get homecoming queen," I yell to Amelia over the music.

"Eh," she waves me away, "no biggie. It made me sad enough just having to walk in with Jonah once." When their nominations for homecoming court were announced several weeks ago, they were still a happy couple. Obviously, we've had some pretty big changes since then. "If I'd been crowned his queen, you might have had to mop me up off the floor."

I nod in sympathy. I noticed Jonah slip out right after their "walk down the aisle," and I'm guessing he probably feels pretty much the same. As for me, I'm just relieved that Marcus is nowhere in sight.

"But this night is super weird, isn't it?" Amelia shakes her head. "I was all set to be queen to Jonah's king, and you and Marcus should be busy getting cozy on the dance floor by now. That's how the night was *supposed* to go, you know? But instead, we cut them loose and replace them both with that one awesome little dude." Amelia points at Toby as he makes his way around the dance floor and over to us. "It's all just so weird," she repeats, and I nod my agreement. I guess if I had to replace Marcus with anyone, though, it couldn't get better than Toby.

The cafeteria's been transformed, and while I have no idea what little elves did the actual work, the decorating job is pretty outstanding. The autumn harvest theme includes pumpkins, hay bales, cornstalks, and even a scarecrow that kind of gives me the creeps. Most of the tables and chairs have been pushed up against the walls to make space for a dance floor that's illuminated in bursts and flashes by a strobe light. A DJ takes song requests, and the room is practically vibrating in time to the loud music; talking proves nearly impossible unless your mouth is only inches from an ear.

"Why aren't you guys out there yet?" Toby yells.

"Just waiting on you, my handsome prince." Amelia grabs my hand, pulling me out into the throng of people already dancing. The floor is pretty packed, but we manage to carve out a space all our own. As I watch Toby goofing around with Amelia and doing some weird John Travolta thing with his hands, I'm amazed at the change in him. He laughs so easily now, taking Amelia's hand and spinning

her before sliding into an effortless moon walk. I want to tell him to slow down because we've got the whole night, and he doesn't need to hit all of the classic dance moves in the very first song. But then he grabs my hand, and now it's me who's spinning while the world flashes green and red and blue, and I know that the moment is too perfect to ruin with words.

The night plays out in song after song. I brought my camera with me—something told me tonight might be worth recording, and we all keep grabbing it and snapping photos at random; I can't wait to see what I'll find on there tomorrow. Occasionally, the DJ slows it down with some sappy love song, and all of the couples—hopeful or real—surge onto the floor. There's never a shortage of dancing partners for Amelia—as if on cue, a fresh guy appears at the start of each song—but Toby and I use most of the crooning love ballads to collapse and catch our breath.

At some point during the night, Amelia pokes Toby, pointing over to the door where Julia is walking in with a girlfriend. "You gonna go talk to her?"

"Maybe," he shrugs, uncharacteristically awkward and shy.

"*Maybe*?" Amelia shakes her head. "I don't think so." She pushes him in Julia's direction as another slow song starts, looking over at me with a roll of her eyes. He resists, but only weakly, and a moment later he's making his way across the room. We watch as he leads Julia to the floor, flashing Amelia a grin of victory.

"Our little boy is growing up," she says, wiping away an imaginary tear.

The rest of the night passes in a blur of music, laughter, and more than a touch of magic. It's almost eleven, at which time the coach will turn back into a pumpkin. I'm beginning to feel happy exhaustion when the DJ announces the last couples' dance of the night.

"Who gets Toby?" Amelia looks at me with a pout.

"You guys go; I'll sit this one out," I say, relieved to rest my feet and wondering why I didn't think to kick off my shoes two hours ago.

"Let's go, my almost-queen." Toby stands up, offering his arm to Amelia as they make their way back out onto the floor.

I close my eyes and let the music wash over me, so lost in the song that I barely register the soft touch on my shoulder.

"Hey, Mags." I tip my head back at the sound of his voice, looking up in surprise. Marcus is gazing down at me.

"Hey," I say, more than a little bit confused; it's the end of the night, and he shows up now? "I didn't think you were coming."

He shrugs. "I missed you."

I'm still staring up at him, unsure of what to say—the way we left things last night seemed like an ending. Or at the very least, not an invitation to dance.

"So, last dance. You and me?"

When he reaches down his hand, I can't think of anything else to do but accept; catching me off guard like this has somehow made me weak, and I'm not sure I could say no if I tried. Our hands touch, shooting out sparks, and I half expect to see them sizzle in

the dark. Leaving my shoes behind, I follow him out to the dance floor, and when he turns around his arms slide easily into place. He looks at me and smiles before leaning over, only inches from my ear.

"You look beautiful," he says.

And for this dance, this one short dance, I choose to forget. For a couple of minutes I let it be us, just us, just like we used to be. Because maybe it'll never be this way again.

This should be awkward, but for whatever reason, it's not. I'm close enough to smell him—that delicious earthy smell that's all his—and I close my eyes, breathing in deeply. I feel his hands making slow circles on my back, and his chest lightly touching mine.

The song is over all too quickly, and I see one of the teachers take the microphone. She's congratulating our new homecoming king and queen and thanking everyone for a great night, but I'm distracted by Marcus's hands, still on my back. I'm reluctant to end the dance even though the music has stopped, but I finally take a couple of steps back, only meeting his gaze when there's space between us again. He's watching me intently, and there's a spark of something in his eyes that makes it impossible for me to walk away.

"Last night, when I left your house? I thought it was done; I figured we were over," he says, shaking his head. "But then today, I knew I'd regret it forever if I didn't fight harder for you. So I'm *not* giving up. Not yet." He smiles, reaching over to tuck a loose hair behind my ear. "I'll earn it, Mags. You'll believe in me again, and

this time I won't let you down." I haven't moved since he started talking, and for the first time since this whole disaster happened, I see him. I *see* Marcus. And more than anything else, I want him to be right. He leans over, gently kissing my forehead. "Someday I'll be more than just the asshole that broke your heart again. I promise." He takes a couple of slow steps backwards, his eyes never leaving mine. And giving me one last smile, he turns around and heads for the doors.

The DJ has the microphone again, wrapping things up and calling the last song of the night. The first three notes are all it takes to register the tune, and Amelia runs to me from the dance floor, her eyes wide.

"IT'S OUR SONG!" she screeches, as the first line of "I've Had the Time of My Life," the classic *Dirty Dancing* theme song, starts to play. Per my request.

When we were thirteen, Amelia and I watched this movie for three weeks straight, predictably holding our breath each time for that nanosecond flash of Patrick Swayze's butt. It took us two weeks, but we memorized the whole dance routine. Of course, my height always meant I played the role of Johnny, while Amelia's curly locks earned her Baby every time. Now, six years later, I start singing to Amelia, calling her over with the classic crook of the finger and walking in my best Swayze imitation. We sing along, every word forever etched in our memories, and Amelia does her little swishy dress move as she waits for me. I really can't remember the last time we danced this together, but without hesitation our

feet remember each step. The rest of the room disappears, even though I'm aware that some of the kids around us are staring. Undeterred, we give this performance our all.

Somehow, I notice Marcus watching from over by the door and Toby standing next to Julia. But really, they just fade into the background; my attention is focused only on Amelia, and I can't help but think about how much I adore her. The kids around us start clapping in time to the music, and we're nearing the memorable lift scene. When Amelia and I used to practice this in my living room, we never had any doubts about our success. All went well until I fell over backwards during one afternoon practice session, and Amelia cracked her forehead on the coffee table. At that point, Mom intervened and we were forced to cut it from the routine. Out of prudence, we skip it now too; I just think a concussion might be a bad way to end the night.

The song's almost over, and most of the kids are still watching us when Amelia and I come together for the last slow, heartfelt lines; we're both breathing fast as we finish the final steps of our impromptu little show. When the closing note fades, everyone around us erupts in hoots and whistles, and Amelia throws her arms around my waist.

"Does it get any better than this?" she asks, reaching up to yell in my ear. I look down at her joyful, beautiful face. I look over at Toby, still clapping and whistling. I look over at Marcus, smiling by the door. *Better than this*? I'm not sure how to answer that because the moment feels kind of bittersweet. But maybe that's just

life; maybe this is how it'll always be, no matter how great the moment. But even if disappointment is an inevitable part of living, I figure it can only take away from the perfection of this moment if I let it. So, better?

I look down at Amelia and laugh. I don't think it gets much better than this.

Impact

Some noise jars me from sleep, but by the time I've pulled myself fully awake, it's already gone. All I hear now is the light breathing of Amelia, her warm back pressed up against mine, her foot thrown over my leg. I drag the clock closer to check the time and groan when I realize that it's only a little after five-thirty. Three hours of shut-eye is most definitely *not* enough recovery time.

Closing my eyes, I reach for sleep again, but it's no use. All I can think about is seeing Marcus last night, and I wonder how he's suddenly confident enough to promise me that he can earn my trust back. Does he really think it's a promise he can keep? The thought makes me both hopeful and sad at the same time because if *I* don't even know what will heal me, then how can *he*? But despite my doubts, I still send up a desperate prayer that he can make it happen, no matter how unlikely it seems; I figure nothing's beyond the realm of divine intervention. It's way too early for this, though, and I'm crazy jealous of Amelia still snoring lightly beside me. But unfortunately, this small, unexpected surge of hope has me wide awake, and I'm pretty sure slipping back into dreamland again is completely out of the question. With a sigh, I slide out of bed and head downstairs, being careful not to disturb Sleeping Beauty.

There's already a fire going, and the lights are on, but the kitchen is empty. Through the window I can see that Dad's truck is

gone, which is odd because it seems kind of early for that. After slicing a bagel and sliding it into the toaster, I sit down at the table, trying to rub the lingering sleep out of my eyes. Flashes of the dance last night make me smile, and all I can see is Toby doing his best imitation of John Travolta. But then I'm immediately brought back to Marcus, and the thoughts swirl together madly as I wonder how he's going to fix this broken problem of us. Trying to distract myself, I reach for my camera—to scroll through last night's pictures for the fourth time—and that's when I notice it; an envelope sits on the table with *Maggie Rae* written across the front in Toby's handwriting. When did he manage to get this here? I mean, it's not even six yet. Heading over to the drawer for the letter opener, I look down at the envelope curiously and wonder what Toby's up to now. He's probably concocted some grand plan that he just *had* to tell me about before the sun is even up. I hear Mom coming down the stairs just as Dad walks in through the front door, but I'm so preoccupied with looking for a letter opener that I'm not paying any attention to their conversation until I register both the tone and the decibel. Both sound . . . ominous. And is Mom *crying*?

"Oh my God." Mom's voice is muffled. "I've got to go to her, Jimmy; she has no one now." Her voice is almost a whisper, and I have to strain to hear it. Dad's reply is impossible for me to make out, so I shut the drawer and head for the kitchen door.

"I'll call my mom and have her come and help out with the girls."

"Bobbi, I can handle the twins; just go."

"I'm not talking about the twins, Jimmy—Amelia and Maggie Rae are sleeping upstairs." At the mention of my name, I start to freak out a little bit. *What* is going on? Mom jumps as I come down the hall, wiping at her eyes.

"Hi, sweetie. I didn't know you were up," she says quietly.

"Something woke me, and I couldn't fall back asleep." Mom and Dad exchange a brief look. "What's with all the whispering?" I ask with a frown.

Mom walks over to me, reaching for my hand. "Mags, honey, come sit down for a minute." Her voice is gentle. Too gentle.

"Why? No." Why is she *looking* at me like that? I shake off her hand. "No, I don't want to sit down. What's going on?"

"Maggie Rae—" She's looking at me carefully, and her long pause makes my heart race. "There's been an accident."

"An accident?" I ask, starting to feel panicky. My mind is doing a quick tally—obviously not Mom or Dad. Not Grams, either, if they were going to call her. Not Amelia and not the twins. Marcus? I look at Dad in confusion and follow his eyes to my hand, still clutching the unopened letter. Toby. Oh no. No. No. Not Toby.

I turn around and move for the stairs, but Mom grabs my arm to stop me. "Honey, where are you going?"

"I have to get Amelia. We need to get to the hospital." I try shaking off her hand. "Toby will want us there." They're both quiet, and I know it must be bad if they're looking at me like that. Adrenaline shoots through my body, and I feel myself starting to

shake. Dad steps around Mom and comes over to me, sliding an arm around my shoulders and steering me towards the living room. I don't say a word as he guides me down onto the couch.

"Mags, honey, Toby isn't at the hospital." Dad speaks carefully and clearly, as if he's not sure I'm able to comprehend his words. "There was an accident this morning, just up the road. It was probably the sirens that woke you." His voice is gentle, and I'm watching him like I've been suddenly struck both deaf and mute. Maybe I'm dreaming, Amelia's back still pressed up against mine. "I was already up when Toby stopped by with your letter. We talked for a minute, and I offered to drive him home, but he just laughed and climbed back onto his bike."

"It's like he doesn't even feel the cold," I say quietly, my voice coming from very far away. Mom sits on my other side and squeezes my hand, the one still clutching the letter.

"When the sirens passed a little while later, I felt like I had to check, to make sure he was okay . . ." Dad trails off, staring into the fire.

"Well? What happened?" My voice is so shrill that I don't really recognize it as my own. When Dad can't finish, Mom takes my face in her hands, turning me to look at her and waiting until my eyes focus on hers.

"Mom, why won't he tell me? Where's Toby? *Why won't someone tell me what happened to Toby*?" My breath is coming in short gasps now. I can hear the steady ticking of the clock, and the silence that surrounds it. Mom's watching me as she softly wipes a tear

from my cheek with her thumb.

"Tell me," I whisper desperately.

"He's gone, Maggie Rae." Her voice is so quiet that I think maybe I heard her wrong. Tears stream from her eyes, but her voice is louder this time, making it harder to pretend I can't hear. "Toby's gone."

3 weeks after

I'm picking my way through the woods with camera in hand, hoping to lose myself in the tiny details of Fairy Grove. Being there helps me to forget, at least for a little while, this horrible thing that has happened.

For the first couple of days after the accident, Amelia and I barely left my bed. At one point, we started crying so hard while looking at pictures from the dance that Mom heard us from downstairs and came running, not sure of what she'd find.

"I'll take that for now," she said, gently prying the camera from my hands. I think I can understand why she hasn't let me see the photos since. Besides, it's not like I really want to anyway.

And every morning she gives me that same look, the one that intuitively knows where I stand, even before I know myself. "School today?" she asks, and I can only give her a quick shake of my head in reply. I know she's wondering when I'll finally pull myself together, but to be honest, Sir Bartholomew is the only company I can really stand. I talk to Amelia every day, but I refuse to see anyone who comes to the door, including Marcus. He shows up faithfully, though, waiting to see if today I might let him in. Sometimes he stays for hours—I can hear him playing with the girls downstairs—but eventually, he always leaves again.

Chris was arrested following the accident with a blood alcohol

content far exceeding the legal limit. I knew I saw rage big enough to kill in his eyes, but I still can't believe it went so far. After being expelled, his football scholarships just disappeared overnight, and with nothing left to lose, revenge must have seemed like his only course of action. But it doesn't feel real, and it's just one more thing I haven't been able to wrap my head around. Chris *killing* Toby? What kind of a person can do that?

Stepping into the clearing, I can't help but think how grateful I am that I never brought Toby to Fairy Grove. I probably would have eventually, but we didn't really have enough time. At least this way, his face isn't waiting for me here with painful memories tagging along—I already have more than enough of those. Heading over to the brook, I pull out my phone to find a message from Amelia.

Amelia: Hey sweetie u doing ok today?

Me: I'm fine. At Fairy Grove

Amelia: Watch out for slender man . . .

Somehow Amelia has slowly managed to pull herself together; better than me anyway. She's back in school and remembering how to smile again, and a little part of me wants to hate her for it. She's been working with the principal to get some kind of anti-bullying chapter started at school, but I don't see the point; bullies will be bullies, and people will always look the other way. Maybe I should have looked the other way too; Toby would probably still be alive if I had. Miserable, but alive.

Toby might not be waiting for me here in the woods, but

Marcus is everywhere I turn; walking by the brook, laughing in the sun, kissing in the grass. I can't bring myself to talk to him, and some days I wonder if I *want* to hang on to this sadness. Every day he silently offers me his help, and every day I just as silently push him away. He won't wait forever, but maybe that's fine. Maybe I don't want him to.

It's starting to get chilly, and I know it's probably time to head back. Being outside helps, but eventually I always have to go home again. Walking through the front door, I can hear Mom and the girls in the kitchen, but I head straight up to my room because I'm not really in the mood to talk. As usual, the first thing that catches my eye is the letter from Toby, still unopened on my desk. Sitting down, I pick it up carefully, but I haven't been brave enough to read what's inside. These are some of the very last thoughts he had, and it somehow feels dangerous to tear open the envelope and release them.

There's a soft knock on my door before Grams pokes her head in. "Can I come in, Magpie?"

"I don't really feel like talking." I look at my desk as if to show how busy I am, but it's virtually empty. Kind of like me.

"That's okay," she says, stepping into the room and heading over to the bed where she sits down, patting the spot next to her. "Come sit with me." She waits patiently, reaching for my hand as I reluctantly join her.

"Alright, Miss Maggie. It's time we had a little talk." She's smiling gently to soften her words, but I know she means business;

Grams has never been one to beat around the bush. In fact, I'm pretty amazed she waited this long to deal with me and my giving-up-on-life attitude. "How about we start with you telling me what's wrong."

"What's *wrong*?" Did she really just ask me that? I look at her like this must be some kind of a trick question, but she only stares steadily back. "Oh, I don't know; maybe it has a little something to do with Toby being *dead*." My words are so harsh that even I flinch—I don't think I've ever talked to Grams that way in my life. But she just pats my hand, overlooking my wretchedness.

"I figured that much, sweetie," she nods. "But what part of all this has you the most upset?"

I'm not really sure what that question means. The most upset? That he's *dead*, I want to scream again. But she's just calmly watching me and waiting.

"*Most* upset? I don't think I can limit myself to just one."

"I've got all night, Magpie; start listing."

The words come surprisingly easy, forced out by the knot of fury that's keeping close company with my grief. "I'm *most* upset that he'll never get that first kiss with Julia." Grams nods at me, encouraging me to keep going. "I'm *most* upset that he'll never become president of PETA. I'm *most* upset that he'll never play his guitar for the girls—or for anyone else—ever again." Grams squeezes my hand, and the tears drip from my chin. "I'm *most* upset that we'll never dance again, never talk again, never laugh again. I'm *most* upset that he'll never grow up, never be more than a stupid

fifteen-year-old kid." I'm crying so hard now that the *most*s are all jumbled together, and I drop my head into my hand, overwhelmed by my sadness. "I'm *most* upset that he's gone"—my chest heaves with shuddering sobs—"and for the rest of my life, I never get to see him again."

She's quiet while I cry, and long minutes pass while she holds my hand and waits for the tears to ebb. "That's a pretty good list of mosts," she finally says. "And I understand why you're sad; losing Toby was a pretty big blow, to all of us. And you'll miss him, sweetie, probably for a very long time. But do you think those things matter to Toby anymore?"

"No, but they matter to *me*," I say bitterly.

"Fair enough, they matter to you. But does it surprise you that most of them don't mean a thing to me, or to your mom, or even to Debbie?"

"Yes, actually, it *does* surprise me," I say angrily. "Why don't you guys even *care* that he never got to *live*? That he never got to *finish* his life? That he barely even got to *start*." I had thought, for just a minute, that the tears had washed away the anger. But here it is, as strong as ever and battling my grief to be heard.

"We do care, Magpie, more than I think you know. But all of those details are just that—details. Yes, they most certainly would have made Toby's life interesting and exciting. They would have shaped him, and guided him, and given his time here purpose, but you're giving them more importance than they deserve."

"So then *life* isn't important, right? Because that's what he lost,

all the little pieces of his life, or what would have been his life if he'd been allowed to live it. So what's even the *point*? Of *anything*?" I get up from the bed; so much anger makes me need to move. And all of a sudden, I understand Marcus's need to pace and to shed some of the suffocating energy. "So we just play at this whole *stupid* life game, never caring how it all turns out? Because it doesn't *matter*? It's not *important*?"

"Magpie, I never said life doesn't—"

"How can Debbie even *do* that?" I interrupt, desperate to purge all of this confusion. "She just keeps on talking, and laughing, and eating, and sleeping after losing her entire family. *How come she doesn't care more*?" My hands are shaking, and my voice is shaking, and I'm pretty sure my heart is shaking too. Looking out the window, all I can feel is despair; despair that this world is full of so much suffering and pain, but in the end, maybe it doesn't mean a thing. Maybe Toby raising his voice to shout out for the voiceless was all just a waste of time. Was it *pointless*?

"I never said that life doesn't matter," Grams tries again. "Of course, doing better and being better matters while you're alive; changing the world and making it a more peaceful and loving place matters while you're here. But, Magpie, he's not here anymore," she says gently. "So hanging on to what could have been Toby's life is like hanging on to a dream."

"So Toby's gone, and Nellie's gone, and Debbie's just *fine* with that?" Without realizing how close they are the surface, the tears start again—hopeless, angry tears. I look at Grams, begging

her to help me make sense of it all.

"It sounds like what you're telling me is that spending the rest of your life crying in bed is the *best* way to honor Toby." Grams looks at me with eyebrows raised. "And Debbie picking up the pieces and finding a way to carry out what Toby started is somehow a *less* worthy approach?"

"Maybe not"—I wipe my cheeks angrily—"but I don't understand how you can all just get on with things."

She gets up, walking over to where I'm still standing at the window and puts her arm around me, pulling me close. Resting my head on her shoulder, I let the tears fall—unchecked, bottomless. So much sadness—first Marcus, now Toby. When does it all end?

"So what will make you feel better?" she asks quietly.

"Besides bringing Toby back?"

Grams laughs, but gently. "Yes, sweetie, besides that. What will help you heal?" She pauses. "What about letting Marcus help?"

"No," I say quickly; and I can feel her nod next to me.

"Okay; what then?"

That's a good question. How do I even begin to heal a hurt this big? As soon as I ask the question, I realize I already know the answer.

"I want to get away from here—so everything's not so *familiar*. So I don't see him everywhere I look." I squeeze my eyes shut against a fresh wave of pain and wait for her to tell me that running away won't solve anything.

"Well, let's go then."

Those aren't quite the words I expected her to say. "Go? Where?"

"Oh, Magpie, I was afraid this would happen." She shakes her head.

"What would happen?"

"You'd *forget* how to think outside of the box. That you'd conform."

"I did not," I reply heatedly, lifting my head to look at her.

"It's a shame, really; you used to be so good at it."

"I did not *conform*." I frown at her while she just shrugs. Like she doesn't believe me.

"Prove it."

"Well," I stammer. Being put on the spot to actually think after three weeks of suffocating depression is straining my brain slightly. But where would I go? And with who? I really have no interest in taking off alone, but since I don't really want to be around anyone either, what does that leave me with? Grams is looking at me very carefully, waiting almost, and I remember how just a minute ago she said *let's go*. *Let's* implies a me and a her.

"You'd really want to do this with me? Even though it sounds completely crazy?" I ask with narrowed eyes. "Even though I'm running away?"

"Sometimes we need distance to heal, Maggie Rae. You're only running if you refuse to deal with it, here or there."

"But how would you even manage that? What about Mom and the café? And the twins?"

"So many questions," she laughs. "You just watch it all fall into place. What we need is a little imagination"—she taps her forehead—"with a sprinkling of genius. And it just so happens that I have both." She winks at me. "And to answer your question, yes, Magpie, I would love to be your traveling companion on this adventure. If you'll have me, of course." Her eyes are twinkling, and I feel a little rush of something other than sadness. If I could just get away and clear my head some, things would be easier. Maybe she's right. Maybe all I need is a little space, so I can start to be okay again.

Maggie Rae,

It's late, and you and Amelia left almost two hours ago, but I'm still so wired that it feels like I'll never sleep again. I just can't believe all that's happened to me—to us—over the last few weeks. It almost feels like a dream because really, how does this much awesome happen in the real world? But please don't tell me if I'm sleeping because I'm not ready to wake up yet.

I've been pretty lost since Nellie died. I used to wake up each morning with just one goal: get through the day. I couldn't help but wonder if it got any better, any easier. Ever. But then here I am tonight, not having any idea what to do with this incredible happiness that somehow snuck in. I almost feel like it's going to suffocate me, but then I think that wouldn't be such a bad way to go—drowning in happiness. Actually, if I have any say in my exit, I'm making it known now. Definitely death by happiness.

Bowser keeps looking at me like I'm crazy, and will I just turn off the light already? God, I love this dog. But I just keep seeing these scenes flash through my mind like a mini movie screen. You know what I see, over and over? You. You cooking. You listening. You talking. You singing. You dancing. You laughing. How can we only have known each other for three weeks? It feels like we've got a lifetime of memories already stored, and I can't imagine how long this movie will run by the time we hit fifty.

Before I freak you out, let me assure you that the point of this note isn't to declare my undying love for you (although admit it, I'm sure that's what you were secretly hoping for). I just keep

coming back to that first moment when you turned around and came back into the cafeteria. It just goes to show that you never really know how much of a difference your choices will make, and the not knowing should never keep you from a small act of kindness.

What I've decided is that I truly believe you were the catalyst for it all. You'll probably argue that it was Chris and his idiocy, but by definition a catalyst isn't used up in the process, and while you've grown to epic proportions, Chris has shrunk to less than miniscule. Someday I might even feel sorry for him. Maybe.

So if you were the catalyst, then none of what has happened over the last couple of weeks would ever have transpired without you (excluding the beating from Chris because that probably would have happened no matter what). And then that brings me right back around to this tidal wave of happiness, and I figure I have you to thank, but somehow that just doesn't seem like enough.

I'm listening to a song right now, it's one of my favorites—mostly because it sounds like it was written about my life. The song is about circumstances, all these different kinds, that leave holes in peoples' lives, but instead of letting them beat us we just . . . carry on. It makes me realize that that's exactly what my mom does so well. And it's what I've finally managed to do—just carry on. Obviously, the holes in everyone's lives will be different—for me, they've involved the loss of Nels and the desertion of my dad. For you, the betrayal of someone you trusted. Nellie left a hole that I think I'll always feel, and the one left by my dad still stings pretty

bad, but despite them I can still move on. And not only move on; I can do better than that. I can keep on laughing and loving and changing the parts of this world that need changing. I don't need to live a life of sadness as a testament to how much Nellie meant to me. We might just keep on getting hammered, Maggie Rae, but we carry on.

So I wanted to say thanks, and in case you can't sense it through this paper, it's probably the most heartfelt and sincere *thank you* that you'll ever receive. Like I said, it doesn't seem like enough, but it's the best I can do right now. If I come up with anything better, you'll be the first to know.

Thanks for coming to my defense. Thanks for reminding me how to laugh. Thanks for being my friend. Thanks for listening. Thanks for showing me that life can be fun. Thanks for offering to be my date. Thanks for bringing Amelia into my world. The list goes on and on.

I don't know where our friendship will go from here. One thing I've realized is that life can take you by surprise, without any warning. So before I get thrown another curveball, it feels imperative to express my gratitude and say a final thank you for one of the best nights of my life. Not because it was some stupid dance, but because I realize now how powerful one person can be. One person can change the world and make it a much better place, like you did for me.

We're going to make amazing things happen, I can feel it. Thanks for everything, always. Love, Toby

Epilogue

"I miss the twins," Grams says, rolling over to look at me as soon as she wakes up. "And your mom and your dad."

"I miss Amelia. And Marcus."

"Home?"

"Home."

Within an hour, we're showered, dressed, and homeward bound. After seventy-two days of being on the road, I have crazy butterflies thinking of driving back into Willow Creek and wondering what waits for me there. I'm driving the last leg home, Grams snoring lightly next to me, and we've just crossed the New Jersey border. And this trip? It's been unforgettable.

Once Grams had prepped Mom and Dad, the plans just fell together with very little effort as she knew they would. "Just a little help from above," she'd said with a wink. Grams funded the whole thing, dipping into her impressive nest egg. When Mom protested, Grams had argued: "She either gets the money now, or once I die. It'll be more fun to spend it together." And that was that.

We had no plan, no ultimate destination; we just started driving. Each night, we'd find a hotel and plot the next day's journey. We've traveled from coast to coast, exploring all of the places Mom taught me about in history books. I don't know how many thousands of pictures I've got stored on my computer; it'll

take me at least a year to sort through them all. But I've done it—I've captured people living, and loving, and dreaming everywhere. Each face tells a story.

The only parts of my life that I wasn't certain about leaving behind, even temporarily, were the twins. But I've talked to them every night before bed, so they've been able to fill me in on the day's events—down to the tiniest detail—and we all adjusted just fine. They were enormously concerned, however, that Sir Bartholomew would forget me in my extended absence, so he's been included in every video chat we have. Honestly, though, he's spent so much time with Mom while I've been gone that I'm not sure he's even missed me. But as we cross into Connecticut, I realize I can't wait to squeeze those munchkins—and that bird—again. Almost home.

"I'm coming with," Amelia had said, as if it were up to her; but of course, her parents put their foot down. She was horrified, so I made sure to text her countless times a day, trying to make her feel like she was right there with me. Several weeks ago, though, an actual phone call was needed.

"I called Jonah," she'd said.

"You *did*?"

"I had to apologize; all that regret was *killing* me."

"And?" I'd asked, hopeful.

"And . . . we talked for three hours." I could hear her smiling through the phone.

"*And*?" Usually I can't get Amelia to stop talking, so I

couldn't figure out why she was making me pry this out of her.

"And we'll see, I guess."

"So you were wrong, right? Because Jonah forgave you."

"Yes, Mags. Take notes because it may not ever happen again," she'd laughed. "But I was wrong; I've been forgiven." She ended all this with a happy sigh. I don't know, but maybe that's enough.

I look over when I hear Grams stretching beside me. "How much farther, Magpie?" she asks with a yawn.

"About an hour." She looks at me with a smile when she hears the barely-contained emotion in my voice.

"I wonder who you're most excited to see?" she muses with a knowing chuckle, and I think my smirk is answer enough. "Does Marcus know you'll be home today?"

Like I didn't text him the very first thing this morning. He's made me update him with each state we enter and again when we leave.

"He said he'll be at the café with everyone else."

"I wonder if he's as excited as you are." She says, her eyes twinkling.

"Maybe," I try for a nonchalant shrug, but my grin easily gives me away. I saw Marcus briefly before I left, mostly just to tell him I was going. He'd looked at me, steady and calm. *I'll be here when you get back*, he'd said.

I've had a lot of time to think about things since Grams and I are both content with silence—sometimes hours will pass without a

word, each of us thinking our own thoughts. All that quiet contemplation gives a person some serious time to get their life in order, but it isn't *always* quiet. I've learned so much about Grams on this trip: countless stories of her childhood, of her and Gramps, of a baby Mom. And we've also had a couple of really good heart-to-hearts sprinkled in there. Driving through one endless desert in Arizona, she decided it was finally time to talk about Marcus.

"Magpie? Don't you think that maybe it's time to turn off that sad movie you're so engrossed in?"

"Movie?" I'd looked at her in confusion, and she'd glanced back at me from the driver's seat.

"I think you know what movie." I swear, sometimes it's like she and Mom live in my head. How did she know I was thinking about Marcus? "You ready for my two cents yet, sweetie?"

I could've said no without hurting her feelings because Grams is pretty tough like that. But I'd been chasing this around for months now, and it was really getting old. I was stuck, and if anyone could get me unstuck, it'd be Grams.

"Yes," I'd sighed. "What am I doing wrong?"

"Wrong? Well, nothing, if you're happy here." She'd chuckled. "But I get the feeling you'd rather be somewhere else."

"Anywhere else, really." I'd shaken my head, kind of surprised that after so long Marcus could still make me so sad.

"That's what I thought," she'd nodded. "So I'm going to paint you one of my metaphors, Magpie, because you know how much I like them." I'd nodded back, not surprised; figures of speech are

Grams favorite mode of communication. "Well, from where I stand, it looks like you've got a choice between two movies. The first one is the story of you and Marcus *before* that infamous night, and from what I remember, it's a pretty good movie."

"It is good," I'd agreed. Sometimes it was even a little bit great. Or I'd thought so anyway.

"But the second movie isn't quite so happy—the story *of* that infamous night. That's it, sweetie; it's a pretty short movie. Just that one night."

Right—that one night when everything fell apart around me. And this movie *isn't* great; it isn't even good. Actually, it's pretty terrible.

"So with two movies to choose from, which one was has you spellbound?" She'd turned to look at me, but really, it was a rhetorical question. We both knew which movie I'd been watching. "And while you've been so busy watching that one sad tale, you've completely ignored the other. Almost like it never existed."

"Sometimes it's hard to even remember the first movie." I'd frowned.

"What I don't think you realize, Magpie, is that you have a *choice*. You get to decide which movie to watch. And if you want to fix things with Marcus, then you need to shut off that second horror show and put your attention back on the first film. Besides, when it comes down to it, isn't that the only one that really matters anyway?"

After that conversation, I spent a long time just thinking

about what she'd said. It wasn't an instant change, but over the next days and weeks, I realized she was right. And when I started playing around, I understood that I *could* decide, and that I did have a choice. So every time I started replaying the betrayal scene, I'd experiment and replace it with another, much happier memory. And the more I worked at it, the easier it got to remember who Marcus and I really were, before the one night that wrecked us.

Slowly, I started to realize that this mysterious, beautiful, lonely girl wasn't quite so important anymore, especially in the face of death and all. Toby leaving so abruptly showed me how things can change in a second, and if I kept making the choice to watch only that second story—kept making the choice to hold onto it—then that's the story I was going to have to live. The story without Marcus. And that just seems like a waste of a really good movie.

Our texts were tentative at first, but they increased with each week that passed. Now I hear from him at least once a day, sometimes more, and each message has made it easier to connect. Or reconnect, I guess.

"Your mom tells me Marcus spends more nights in the guest room than he does at home," Grams says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah." I frown. "His parents freaked out when he told them he was taking a year off after high school." I shake my head. "Things got pretty ugly, actually." He said they threatened to move again, but he told them this time he wasn't going with them—turning eighteen has its advantages. He's still in counseling and

working part-time at Dad's garage; I'm told he's a natural and I think they're probably really good company for each other.

And if Dad's adopted Marcus, then I think Mom and Debbie have adopted each other; from what Dad tells me, they've become fast friends. The seat around the dinner table that first belonged to Marcus, and then Toby, now has Debbie's name written all over it. She's working full-time at the café, and it sounds like the perfect fit. Together they held the first of Mom's workshops: a two-part series on the benefits and realities of veganism. Apparently, it was a huge success, and the next classes are booked full all the way through January. I guess Mom was right; people are ready. Last week she proudly hung a picture of Toby over the grill in the café. "Who better to bless the food?" she'd said.

A lot has changed since we've been gone. It's kind of weird to think I wasn't around to see any of it, but now here we are, ready to step back in. As for me? I'm not really sure where my life is going yet. I've decided to finish up my last year of school at home because this little adventure with Grams cost me a ton of credits, and there's absolutely no way I'm repeating my senior year. Which is fine really, because I'm tired of staying there for everyone else's sake. I've already signed up for a photography course at the community college in the spring, and I'm actually looking forward to it; I know I have a lot to learn. But as for everything else? I've realized I can just let it unfold as it will, knowing that there will likely be many surprises along the way.

I had a dream last night. It started off with just a sensation—

the warmth of a hand holding mine. But when I followed it up, I couldn't see a face, and I just kept blinking over and over, trying to bring it into focus. Finally, the longer I looked, the sharper things got: first a nose, then an eyebrow, then his hair, and by the time I got to the big, dopey grin I was finally able to see what my subconscious probably knew all along. Clear and in focus, Toby was smiling back at me. He didn't say anything and neither did I, but the joy I felt at finding him alive again was almost overpowering. Just as I was waking up, I could see his lips start to move. *Take care of Bowser,* he said, and I opened my eyes with his laughter still ringing in my ears and the sensation of his hand still squeezing mine. It left me feeling whole and balanced and knowing that it was time to go home, back to the lives that have been waiting for us.

I'll still carry Toby with me everywhere I go. I feel incredibly lucky to have known him for even the short time that I did, and I'm still trying to figure out how to continue on with what we started. I know when the time is right, he'll let me know.

It's snowing lightly as I pull into town.

"Home sweet home," Grams says with a sigh.

As we pull up to the cafe, I see one figure braving the flurry at a table outside, and I know right away that it's Marcus.

"I'll tell them you'll be right in," Grams says with a smile before hurrying inside.

Marcus stands up, waiting for me beside the table, a steaming mug next to him. His beanie is pulled low, and the collar of his jacket is turned up to keep out the snow. His eyes light up when he

sees me, and I can't help it; I run across the patio to him, launching myself into his arms.

"You're back," he breathes into my hair.

"I'm back," I say, feeling the unexpected prick of happy tears. His arms are wrapped tightly around me, and neither one of us wants to be the first to let go. But eventually we do, and he pulls me down into the seat across from him. I pat my lap and up jumps Bowser, wet feet and all.

As we were leaving town, I'd asked Grams if we could stop at Debbie's for a minute. Toby's room was exactly as he had left it, his clothes from the dance still tossed over the back of the chair. And then my heart almost broke when I spotted Bowser, curled up in a nest of blankets on the bed and watching me with melancholy eyes; Debbie was afraid if we didn't do something, Bowser was going to join Toby. The only thought that occurred to me was to bring him along. And now I've spent seventy-two nights curled up around that little hairball, as much to comfort him as to comfort myself. Two months have passed and he's put the weight back on, his coat is glossy, and his eyes sparkle again; we're refreshed, Bowser and I.

"Here." Marcus slides the steaming mug over to me.

"How did you know the exact moment I would drive up?" I ask with a laugh, smelling Mint Medley tea—my favorite.

"I didn't. I've been sitting out here for an hour and a half; I can't even feel my toes anymore. But your mom keeps refilling the mug whenever it cools down," he grins.

I sip the hot, minty tea gratefully, looking at him over the rim;

I think he's somehow cuter than when I left.

"Almost two years ago we sat here, at this same table," I say, the memory as strong as ever.

"And I'm pretty sure that after just having met you I was already making my first apology."

"You were." We both laugh.

"I wish I could promise you that the screw-ups are over, but that would probably be a lie." He shakes his head. "My track record isn't all that great." I'm experiencing strong déjà vu as he reaches his hand across the table and threads his fingers through mine. "I missed you, Mags."

He says it simply, and the moment kind of freezes. His warm smile and his soft eyes are all I can see, his cold hand is all I can feel.

"I missed you too," I say with a smile. I guess this is me, picking up the pieces.

And I carry on.

Additional Resources

Movies

- *Food Inc.*
- *Cowspiracy*
- *Food Choices*
- *Forks Over Knives*
- *What the Health*
- *Game Changers*
- *Eating Our Way to Extinction*
- *Called to Rescue*

warning: graphic and disturbing content and won't be suitable for all viewers

- *Earthlings*
- *Dominion*

Websites

www.challenge22.com – *a twenty-two-day challenge designed to serve as an introduction to veganism, providing recipes and suggestions as well as a network of mentors, dieticians, and fellow participants.*

www.vgneration.com - *a non-profit organization working to provide young vegans and vegetarians with support and social opportunities with like-minded peers.*

www.anonymousforthevoiceless.org – *a grassroots organization of activists whose aim is to spread awareness of animal exploitation by the food industry through the sharing of information in a non-confrontational way.*