

An Examination of Contemporary Realistic Young Adult Fiction and
“This Town”: A Suite of Stories

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An Examination of Contemporary Realistic Young Adult Fiction

From its humble beginnings in 1942 to its roaring success in today's publishing market, Young Adult fiction has undergone many changes in the last seventy years. What began as trivial reading for teenagers became serious literature in which adolescents can explore formidable subjects and develop complex worldviews. This paper will analyze the state of Young Adult fiction in today's publishing market and illuminate the significance of the Contemporary Realistic subcategory.

Because these novels are often grouped together with Children's books, there can be some confusion among readers and critics alike about what qualifies as Young Adult (YA). Literary agent Regina Brooks writes, "Most publishing industry insiders consider YA fiction to be fiction written for readers from about the age of twelve to eighteen, featuring characters in that same range."¹ Often, YA fiction is referred to as a genre, but that is not the case. The words *young adult* specify an intended audience, not a genre.² For the purposes of this paper, Young Adult literature will be referred to as a category.

To better understand the importance of Young Adult literature, it is important to examine some of the groundbreaking novels within the category as well as several recent bestsellers. Prior to the publication of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* in 1967, books written for teenagers focused on dating, proms, and other trivial events or details. In addition, more often than not an adult was around to save the day or steer the characters into the right course of action. These novels lacked substance and truth and thus were not regarded highly.³ The only novel to capture something real about the adolescent experience prior to *The Outsiders* was *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1951 as a

standard novel. J.D. Salinger was able to create an authentic teenage voice and a character who had something to say that would connect with readers for many years to come.

Salinger's antihero, Holden Caulfield, gave a voice to a generation and many more afterward.⁴ Though this novel was written in the forties, Holden's experiences of feeling like an outsider, prolonging his punishment and disappointment over something he has done, and questioning everything and everyone around him are not unfamiliar with teenagers of today. These situations are timeless. Holden's angry, self-absorbed viewpoint of the world is just as relevant and real now as it was then. In short, Salinger gave the world something of which it did not yet know it desperately needed—raw, honest truth in the form of Young Adult fiction.

With the publication of *The Outsiders*, Young Adult fiction saw a vast improvement in the subject matter and maturity of the category. Novels began to focus on more realistic teenage situations and moved away from the previous storylines of early YA literature. In the years that followed, authors established the framework for what the category of YA would become. When Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* was published in 1974, critics realized YA fiction could be much more than they had originally anticipated. "[Cormier] was the first to show the literary world that YA novels could be not only realistic about adolescent concerns but also unflinchingly honest about the big questions like the abuse of power, the roles of courage and forgiveness and redemption, and the struggle to stay human in the face of evil" (Campbell 1). These developments in the category attracted a larger readership, and it was at this time that literary organizations decided to recognize great works of fiction⁵ such as *Are You There*

God? It 's Me, Margaret, The Upstairs Room, The Westing Game, Forever, Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, and others, with honors and awards.

Though many consider *The Chocolate War* to be unnecessarily dark and heavy-handed, this was not Cormier's intended purpose. Jerry Renault's defeat at the end of the novel is not inevitable, and there lies Cormier's point. Throughout the novel, there are many opportunities for others to stand with Jerry against the evil of Brother Leon and the Vigils, but no one makes the tough choice. Jerry, alone, dares to disturb the universe. Though he is both physically and emotionally beaten for it, he makes the right choice. "[Cormier] does not imply that resistance is easy, but he insists it is mandatory."⁶ Such a theme was groundbreaking for Young Adult literature at the time, and many thought the novel should have been published for adults. *The Chocolate War* has been challenged and banned many times over the years, with critics claiming the book teaches adolescents to conform to adult society rather than to find their own personal identity, while others believe it teaches resistance to power structures.⁷ The novel, however, continues to stand as a classic in Young Adult literature. In her book about the role of censorship in adolescent fiction, literary scholar Caren Town states, "this novel (...) establish[ed] a tradition of writing for young people that continues to this day: one that challenges adolescents to think long and hard about the world in which they live" (Town 48). Because of this, Cormier's first Young Adult novel opened doors for other writers to explore what the category could become.

Soon after the category began to shift and develop, authors and editors saw an opportunity to expand the idea of moral lessons through fiction, offering help and guidance. Prior to the seventies, didactic fiction was scarce within the category,

particularly within Contemporary Realistic fiction. The growing popularity of YA fiction gave adults an opening to teach ethics or model respectable choices through narrative.

This new subcategory became known as the Problem Novel phenomenon. Marc Aronson explains the trend of these Problem Novels:

Each book centered around a problem of teenage life and showed the reader that he or she was not alone in facing it. Whether it was being overweight, or having parents who were getting divorced, or falling in love with ad person of the same sex, or struggling with drugs, or being a secret alcoholic, or facing child abuse or even incest at home, (...) there was a book whose plot followed very closely that actual experience and, as often as not, provided either models for coping or even listed groups to contact for help. (...) [Problem novels] were very much like the booming adult industry of self-help and coping books, but generally in the form of a first-person novel.⁸

Though many Problem Novels of the seventies lacked literary substance, contemporary teenagers embraced these stories and the Young Adult fiction market began to grow. Eventually, this trend faded, making way for the paperback revolution of serial novels. A few authors such as Robert Cormier and Judy Blume continued to write quality novels about problems facing young adults (Aronson 55). These books sustained the uphill progress of Young Adult literature toward a respected category within the literary community.

Another advancement in the category came in the form of Nancy Garden's 1982 novel, *Annie on My Mind*. Garden's story was not the first Young Adult novel about

homosexuality; however, it was the first to depict love as a part of the lifestyle. Garden's novel, much of which was based on her personal story, follows two girls as they develop an intense friendship that leads to the realization they are in love. According to a 2013 article by Michael Cart, a nationally recognized expert in YA, "It fomented a quiet revolution in GLBT books of young adults thanks to its expression of the truth that homosexuality is an aspect of love not simply a soulless form of sexual activity."⁹ It was also the first Young Adult book to portray two generations of gay people.¹⁰ Garden's novel led the way for a radical change in the way lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) books were being written and published in Young Adult literature.

Throughout the eighties and nineties, Young Adult fiction continued to make great strides. With the publication of Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* in 1999, the Contemporary Realistic subcategory was introduced to a bold, new approach to structure, point of view, and voice through the character of Melinda Sordino. The victim of a rape, Melinda, retreats into herself, refusing to speak and spiraling into a deeper and deeper depression. Through a choppy, nonlinear narrative, Anderson is able to utilize the structure of her novel and the voice of the character to tell readers something they won't forget—you matter, so stand up, find your voice, and be an advocate for yourself.

This novel resonates with readers long after they read it. Literary scholar Janet Alsup writes, "One of the things I like best about *Speak* is how its theme of finding voice (and hence identity and personal power) is one that is mirrored every day in real teenagers' lives as they seek to become independent, yet integrated, members of their school and home communities."¹¹ Anderson uses minimal dialogue, odd structuring, and a lot of internal conversation to tie her readers to the character of Melinda. It's impossible

to read the novel and not feel something for the girl and what she has brutally experienced.

Speak received broad recognition in the form of nine different honors, awards, and nominations, including the Printz Honor in 2000. Books such as these resonate with teenagers, and critics have given it the praise it deserves. “*Speak* does not tell the ‘rape story’ in a way that is identical to others readers have heard or in a way that is easy to ignore. Anderson narrates Melinda’s story so that adolescent readers are compelled to pay attention instead of dismissing it as yet another example of a sad story...” (Alsop 165). Because of this, those readers are able to look at a terrifying, dangerous situation from an outside perspective and determine how he or she might react.

John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars*, published in 2012, is evidence that groundbreaking novels are still being written. The story follows Hazel, a girl with terminal cancer, who meets Augustus, a cancer survivor, and the pair fall in love despite their grim realities. “[This book] is all the more heart-rending for its bluntness about the medical realities of cancer. There are harrowing descriptions of pain, shame, anger and bodily fluids of every type. It is a narrative without rainbows or flamingoes; there are no magical summer snowstorms.”¹² And though Green’s novel packs a terrible punch, the author is able to spin a beautifully romantic tale in the midst of the sadness. This book, like many other trailblazing novels, gives teenagers the opportunity to better understand the realities of living outside of the norm—and for adolescents in similar situations, recognition that they are not alone.

As Young Adult literature grew through the years and unprecedented work was produced within the category, literary establishments recognized the need for honors and

awards. These include the Alex Awards, Edwards Award, Morris Award, and the Odyssey Award. The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) also has created a number of book and media lists such as Great Graphic Novels, which recognizes outstanding graphic novels and illustrated nonfiction for readers ages twelve to eighteen. Other book lists include Readers' Choice and Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers, which provide a list of fiction and nonfiction titles aimed at teenage nonreaders. YALSA also organized Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults, which spans a wide variety of subcategories and encourages reading for pleasure. Within Popular Paperbacks, YALSA breaks the list down further into categories such as Fairy Tales Retold, Unreliable Narrators, Adventure Seekers, and more.¹³ Each of the aforementioned lists includes a range of material for different maturity and reading levels from ages twelve to eighteen. In addition, the lists are updated yearly and include a long as well as a top ten list.

The most notable of the awards created for the Young Adult category are the Michael L. Printz Award and the National Book Award.¹⁴ Established in 1999, the Printz Award is given annually for literary excellence. The guidelines for consideration of the award require that the book is published as Young Adult, meaning it is intended for an audience within the ages of twelve to eighteen. "This demonstrates that young adult literature has come of age not only in the United States, but globally" (Cart, "Insider" 95-97). The awards committee considers not only fiction but also nonfiction, graphic novels, short story anthologies, and poetry collections. Librarians across the country largely consider Printz Award and Honor books to be the best that YA has to offer (Cart, "Insider" 95-97).

The National Book Award was created in 1950, but it was not until 1996 that a new category was added for young adult fiction. The new category, “Young People’s Literature,” was created to award Children’s as well as YA fiction. According to Cart, “The first award in the new category went to a young adult novel, Victor Martinez’s *Parrot in the Oven*, and so—it could be argued—has every one since” (Cart, “Insider” 95-97). Like the Printz Award, the National Book Award winners are also chosen for literary merit. Both awards are equally prestigious and highly regarded by literary professionals and readers.

As evidenced above, Young Adult fiction has grown over the last seventy years into a respected literary category. Through the years, YA authors have taken risks with voice, writing style, and themes. Those ventures have advanced the category, paving the way for more quality books and better publishing opportunities. In an article in *Publisher’s Weekly*, children’s book reviewer Sue Corbett writes, “What was once a fledgling segment of the market, kids 12 and up, has matured into a vital category.”¹⁵ In 2012, the amount of YA titles published rose to 10,276 from 4,668 in 2002.¹⁶ Because the category is growing so quickly, the amount of publishing insiders vying for the next bestseller in YA is flourishing as well. *Publisher’s Marketplace*, an online platform where agents and editors can connect, announce publishing deals, and catalog their information for aspiring writers, lists 217 literary agents who represent Juvenile fiction.¹⁷

The number of publishing houses that acquire YA manuscripts has become quite extensive, as well. According to *PublishersArchive.com*, 102 separate companies are in the market for Young Adult literature.¹⁸ Those publishers include a number of large houses as well as independent companies, such as TOR Books, Simon and Schuster,

Random House, Penguin Group, Chronicle Books, and Orca Book Publishers. After a look at how many YA books are being published, it is easy to see why so many are interested in working within the Young Adult market. According to StatShot Annual, a yearly survey conducted on the publishing industry's size and scope, the national book and journal publishing industry generated \$27.98 billion in net revenue in 2014.¹⁹ Of that amount, the Children's and Young Adult division had the largest area of growth for both revenue and units sold in the trade category. It also outsold the adult fiction market by nearly 100 million units (Bluestone).

Part of the appeal of YA is the many subcategories and blends of subcategories. Horror, Romance, Dystopian, and High Fantasy are among the list, but it goes on to include Steampunk, Paranormal, Mystery/Thriller, Science Fiction, Historical, and more. The number of subcategories is large because, like the teenagers they target, YA editors tend to be more willing to take risks with genre, structure, and point of view than editors of Adult literature (Brooks xi). For this reason, there is a wide range of work within Young Adult fiction, and the category has seen a number of trends through the years in regards to specific subcategories. Within the last decade, those trends have ranged from Paranormal to Dystopian, and a majority of those books were produced in trilogies. Now, editors and agents are on the lookout for the next bestseller, each hoping to find a breakout voice (Corbett). Though it is nearly impossible to predict trends or how long they will last, there is one subcategory within YA fiction that has stood the test of time—Contemporary Realistic fiction (Kole 14-20). From the earliest publications intended for the Young Adult audience to many of the award-winners today, realistic stories have

stolen the hearts and minds of readers and critics. Books within this subcategory often stand at the forefront of editors' buying lists.

As evidenced in the novels mentioned previously, many of the significant, groundbreaking works of Young Adult fiction are housed within the subcategory of Contemporary Realistic fiction. Because teenagers often feel different and alone, infinite and exposed, misunderstood and undervalued all at once, while at the same time experiencing first loves, first betrayals, and first heartbreaks, these novels are invaluable. It is an all-consuming, bittersweet, and profound time in life (Kole 20). Finding people like themselves within a novel allows readers accessibility to characters and helps them to better understand the situations of the people around them. They are also given the opportunity to practice self-acceptance.

By publishing relatable and realistic fiction, editors are giving teenagers an opportunity to engage with literature. A teen with a terminally ill sibling may find comfort in the pages of a novel about characters in a similar situation. The question of gender identity might not be as taboo or frightening after reading the stories of others who have had the same doubts and fears. Through reading and discussing events and issues that characters encounter, adolescents are able to consider problems in a fictional context such as dating violence, depression, identity issues, or bullying. Exploring how one might react in a situation without having to think about it directly happening to oneself is one way teens can grow and adapt into intellectual, ethical adults (Alsup 163-66). Whether or not the reader is experiencing the same issues the main character faces, adolescents have the opportunity to expand their ideas of society. "[Teens] might even begin to acquire a mature 'narrative imagination' that will help them be better citizens

and more empathetic human beings” (Alsup 166). In an interview with the author of *Speak*, Laurie Halse Anderson discusses the impact Young Adult fiction—and her book in particular—can have on teenage thinking. “My experience watching it taught [in schools] is that many boys don’t understand the emotional impact that sexual assault can have on a woman. (...) and when people they respect explain to them the rules of the road, (...) the boys go, *Ohhhhhh, now I get it.*”²⁰ When adolescents are given the opportunity to learn through fiction, literature becomes a real-life tool with which they can better interpret their world.

Contemporary Realistic fiction also allows teenagers to realize that the problems they encounter are not unique. Many situations are universal, but most adolescents are still learning to observe the world around them through a more objective lens. A study about conversational and narrative speaking in adolescents states:

Adolescence is (...) a time when moral reasoning becomes more sophisticated as young people move from a perspective that focuses primarily on the self to one that is more socially oriented. With these cognitive advances, adolescents begin to express greater interest in making decisions and performing actions that will enhance the good of society.

They also begin to question established facts and beliefs and to formulate their own ideas and opinions.²¹

Because teenagers are at a crucial cognitive development stage, quality Young Adult fiction is an important tool for expanding their world and societal views. Literary scholar L.M. Rosenblatt states, “As the student shares through literary experience the emotions and aspirations of other human beings, he can gain heightened sensitivity to the needs

and problems of those remote from him in temperament, in space, or in social environment” (qtd. in Alsup 159). Reading and engaging with such texts leads to more empathetic, caring individuals who are able to interpret the world around them in honest, authentic ways.

Another valuable aspect of Contemporary Realistic fiction is the opportunity to learn about other cultures and races through narrative. In school, students are taught foreign languages and about other places through technical, systematic approaches. Fiction allows adolescents the occasion to see culture through the eyes of the characters living within that particular society. Values, attitudes, etiquette, and more can be discovered within the pages of a novel, giving readers insight into a world outside of their own. Books such as *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* give readers a humorous and entertaining means to learn about life on a reservation. Exploring how others live is a powerful tool as teenagers develop their worldviews and become adults. Through literature, readers have the option to become educated, empathetic members of society.

In 2009 Melanie D. Koss and William H. Teale undertook the compilation of a database of Young Adult novels published between 1999 and 2005, examining them to determine some of their defining details, such as how many of them could be considered literary examples of Contemporary Realistic fiction, how many featured GLBT characters, how many used first-person point of view, and more.²² The Young Adult novels examined by Koss and Teale included Printz Award winners and Honor books as well as Bookseller Off-the Cuff Award winners. They also took titles from several lists, including Best Books for Young Adults, Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults, Teen

Top Ten, and the Publisher's Weekly Bestsellers. The complete list comprised a total of 370 books, and the researchers felt this was a representative sample of the most popular Young Adult books published within the six-year timeframe. The research concluded "the majority of the fiction titles were contemporary realistic fiction..." (Koss and Teale 563-72). The study also found a trend in the use of first-person narrator, which tends to dominate the category. The authors concluded there is a shift away from coming-of-age themes to those of teen issues such as finding oneself, fitting in, or dealing with life changes. Because the books considered for this study were among the most popular, the study may not have been completely representative of the category. However, the conclusions suggest Contemporary Realistic fiction is exceedingly important to Young Adult fiction as a whole, securing the future of the subcategory. Though editors and publishers see trends through the years, Contemporary Realistic Young Adult fiction has a rich history and continues to dominate the category.

Though Contemporary Realistic fiction can cross into other subcategories such as Romance, Mystery/Thriller, and Historical, it is the limitation to real life and believable settings, plots, characters, and dialogue that sets Contemporary Realistic fiction apart from other subcategories. These details allow readers to easily connect with the story and find themselves immersed within its pages. This subcategory is significant because teenagers have the opportunity to learn from these novels and develop more complex worldviews. In a category that is ever-expanding and experimenting with new trends, Contemporary Realistic fiction is an important staple for publishing insiders and readers alike.

Notes:

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3. Patty Campbell, *Robert Cormier: Daring to Disturb the Universe*. 1st ed. New York: Delacorte Press, 2006. 1-64. Print.

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“This Town”: A Suite of Stories

This suite of stories is comprised of three standalone short stories, each with its own protagonist facing a tough situation. However, these stories are meant to be read in the order they are presented. *Stand Still*, *The Choice*, and *The Corner of Confusion* are located in the fictional town of Cypress Bend, South Carolina and feature overlapping characters. As the reader progresses through each story, he or she will have the opportunity to revisit characters and learn more about their lives.

Stand Still

Sometimes the rebellious act of standing still, of standing up for yourself, can change everything.

I shoved my glasses further up my nose, leaving charcoal smudges in the wake of my fingers. The black frames had become loose over the last year, and I made a mental note to set an appointment with the eye doctor. Switching to contacts would've probably made my life easier in the long run, but my face felt naked without glasses, and the idea of touching my eyeballs sort of eeked me out. Especially considering how often my hands were covered in ink or paint.

The fox on the paper was beginning to take shape. The shading of his facial structure had been difficult, but the more time I spent with the portrait, the more I liked it. My hands slid across the page, adding thin, wispy whiskers to his cheeks. The ears needed more attention, but they'd have to wait until after I made tea. I pushed myself out of my desk chair and glanced out the window. The sky had grown dark, but it was the empty driveway that caught my attention. I cherished Saturday nights home alone. I only hoped that this one would last.

In the kitchen, I set the kettle on to boil and checked the dishwasher for my T.A.R.D.I.S. mug. It was my good luck charm time and time again, and if the fox was going to place in the art show, the mug was absolutely necessary. Along with my tea, I grabbed a box of Tagalongs and retreated to my room. It was such a pity there was no one to share with.

Once settled, I returned to my fox. The insides of the ears needed to be darker, but not enough to take away from the rest of his face. Charcoal was a delicate balance, and one I had yet to master, but I would do it this time. I'd show up on Monday with an entry that'd shock Mrs. Nettles. Maybe she'd even go ahead and declare me the winner. I wished anyway. Placing in the Cypress High Art Show meant automatic entry into the South Carolina Art Contest, and the prize for *that* was a large scholarship to the school of your choice—something I was in desperate need of.

Minutes later, the backdoor opened and closed, and my hand paused over the left ear. There went my night alone. Mom nearly always called out in a sing-song voice as soon as she set foot in the house. Silence meant my father had arrived. The *clomp clomp* of carelessly tossed shoes confirmed my suspicion. Heavy footsteps patrolled the house until a head poked into my room just as I dusted the charcoal from my fingers.

“Hey, Lex.” He stepped inside and leaned against the doorframe.

“You're early,” I observed. “Don't tell me you guys lost.” As head of the Cypress High basketball team, he was rarely home at a decent hour on game nights, spending hours reviewing plays or preparing plans with the other coaches. It was a ritual I'd expected . . . and so did my mom.

He folded his arms across his chest and smirked, the right side of his mouth pulling up slightly higher than the left. “Of course not. Just decided to call it a night.” His eyes drifted away from me and scanned the contents of my room— clothes, notebooks, paintbrushes, and magazines littered every available surface. For me, it was a bit messier than I liked, but business as usual. For him, it was a disaster area. I braced myself for the lecture, the one about how a bedroom should be a reflection of the person living in it.

He'd repeated it regularly over the last ten years. So it surprised me when he asked:

"What're you working on?"

I glanced down at the fox and back at him. "A charcoal."

"I see that. But why? You don't do those much, do you?" Shock registered on my face before I could hide it. "You think I don't pay attention," he accused, though his tone was soft. His scrutiny fell away from me and focused on his feet. I followed his gaze and noticed his socks were crimson, the same color as the river hawk emblem on his coach's polo. Did he always put so much effort into his clothing choices? "I notice," he finally said, shrugging.

Immediately, I felt guilty. I'd never acknowledged his lack of interest in my artwork before, and I certainly didn't want to dispel any curiosity he had now. "It's for an art show," I rushed to tell him. "I'm submitting several pieces, but I'm really hoping to surprise people with this one. The winner takes home a large scholarship, and we both know how much I need that for Northridge." Even I could hear the optimism in my voice, and for a moment, I thought he'd share it.

But his face darkened, and he pushed off the doorframe, standing tall and filling the space with his immense presence. Regret twisted in my stomach. It was the wrong thing to say. Mentioning Northridge had the same effect as Dr. Jekyll swallowing the potion that transformed him into Mr. Hyde. He was still my dad, but a much angrier version of himself. My college choice wasn't a subject I broached lightly with my parents. Neither approved.

"So you're still on that plan, then?" His mouth twisted with a cruel smirk. "You know you can't afford it without our help. And you're not getting it." He stared hard,

daring me to argue, but I sat silent. He was right. They'd never help me. Turning away from him, I stared at my fox. My shimmer of hope. I didn't tell him there was another option. I couldn't. Voicing the words would've pushed him closer to an outburst.

He stomped out of my room, slamming the door. But I knew better than to relax. I wouldn't be the only one to piss him off before the night was over. Closing my eyes, I said a tiny prayer that tonight, just this one night, would be the one when my mom wouldn't make things worse.

Ultimately, I knew better, though. I knew that she wouldn't answer when he called. And I definitely knew she wasn't where she'd said she was. It wasn't that she'd told me these things—it was more of an instinct or perhaps a conditioned intuition. My mom was a rebel wherever she saw an opportunity, and my dad's controlling behavior gave her the perfect excuse to be sneaky.

Not an hour later, my stomach in knots, I sat perched on the edge of my bed, looking into the eyes of a dragon. His nostrils flared, and the veins in his neck bulged. Gone was the man who admitted to noticing my artwork, and in his place, a man at the start of a hunt. Unfortunately, I was the only prey in sight.

He pounded his fist into the doorframe so hard I was surprised the house didn't shake. "Dammit, Alexa. I *know* you know where she is." His eyes bored into mine, and I dropped my gaze to my lap. If I wasn't on guard, I'd cry. I hated it, but my frustration toward my father almost always turned into humiliation. "Tell me!" he shouted, and I risked a glance up at him.

He glared at me, hard, and almost immediately, my eyes started to water. Stupid, stupid traitor tears. "I . . . I don't know," I stammered. And then I raised my chin and put

a little more force into my words. “I told you. I don’t know.” It was and wasn’t a lie. I didn’t know *exactly* where she was. But I did have a pretty good idea.

He stood there for another moment, watching the tears slip down my cheeks without an ounce of remorse. Seeing his only daughter, his only child, cry didn’t affect him in the least. “*Fine*, Alexa. Have it your way.” His voice was gruff with suppressed rage. “But you’re grounded.”

“*What?*”

“Clean your room while you’re in here,” he bellowed, slamming the door and abandoning me to my anger. I heaved a sigh and tried to control the sobs before they started. It was no use, though. The more I fought the urge to cry, the worse I felt.

But I couldn’t do this tonight. I wouldn’t. Instead, I hopped out of bed, snatched the towel off my closet door, and sprinted for the bathroom, locking myself in. The shower was my escape—the one place at home where I wouldn’t be bothered. The hot water beat down on my head, and I began to feel like myself again, though the lingering resentment for my father remained.

Cypress Bend was a relatively small town. And as the basketball coach, Dad was well-loved around here. But no one knew the other side of him—the rage, the violence, the control tactics. No one but his wife and daughter. He had a real talent for hiding his anger from other people. And Mom? Well, she was exceptionally proficient in pissing him off. But she loved me, and she did everything in her power to protect me from him when she could. I tried to do the same for her. Though, honestly, my brain couldn’t wrap around her decision to stay married to him.

When I turned off the faucet, I heard Mom's voice, defiant and defensive. ". . . a grown woman!" she shouted. "I don't need your *permission* to go out with my friends." I hadn't heard her come in, but I almost wished she'd stayed out later, maybe given him time to cool off.

"Well, you've sure as hell made that clear! And just how many drinks did you have before you drove home?" The sarcasm and irritation were evident, but I knew he was probably right. She couldn't resist a glass or two of wine when she thought she could get away with it. And when it came to Dad, alcohol was something that needed to be hidden. Or better yet avoided.

"Does it matter? I'm here . . . aren't I?" Something crashed, and I wondered if she'd fallen into something or if he'd pushed her. Most likely, it was the latter. But as much as I loved her, I wanted to choke her at times, too. She seemed to enjoy pushing him over the edge, and guaranteed ways to do that included drinking or ignoring his phone calls. And she'd done both tonight. When he calls, we're expected to answer—no matter the circumstances. Cell phones were more of an electronic leash than a luxury.

"Your own daughter didn't know where you were."

I cringed. I did not want to be dragged into this. But sure enough, standing in the bathroom, dripping wet and wrapped in a towel, I heard her say: "Sure, she did. I told her this morning." And I sighed. She'd told me she'd had book club tonight, but I knew it wasn't the truth. That so-called group met far too often, and I almost never saw her reading. But maybe I should've just fed Dad the lie she'd told me. It was my fault for trying to protect her.

Dad was quiet for a moment, most likely processing my lie and cataloging it for later. “So you have Alexa *lying* for you now?” he roared suddenly. “That’s great. That’s *really* great, Cheryl.”

Glass shattered outside the bathroom door—he’d thrown something in my direction. “Nice,” I heard her say quietly, followed by footsteps and the slamming of a door.

Quickly, I dragged a brush through my damp hair and prepared to make my escape. He began to pound on their bedroom door and yell. “Open this door right now! Open it!” It was a scene I’d watched them play out many times before. “I’ll kick it down. You know I will.” Unfortunately, he’d done it before.

I waited, and as soon as I heard the door open and close, I peeked out from my hiding spot in the hallway bathroom. At this point, any words or actions on my part would be insignificant. Or they’d fuel the flame. When the yelling started again, it was slightly muffled by the wall. I dashed out and found a shattered photo of the three of us broken on the floor. In the picture, we looked happy. I was eight, and we’d spent the day at Disney World. Most of the trip had actually been fun. We’d braved crowds and stood in long lines, but it’d been worth it. At least until that night. Mom ordered a glass of wine with dinner, and Dad totally lost his mind. He was so angry that he packed our bags and cut our vacation short by three days.

Back in my room, I pulled on a t-shirt, jeans, and my bright red California State University, Northridge sweatshirt. I knew I was inviting trouble by wearing it, but the thrill of rebellion was beginning to course through me. Hopefully, they wouldn’t see me any time soon, anyway. I had earned my acceptance to the school, and I was proud of it,

even if my parents weren't. Even if I didn't have a solid financial plan yet. But that would change. I was beginning to see that any option was better than none.

I tucked my wet hair into a bun and snatched the black backpack from my desk chair, shoving my sketchpad and journal inside. I tossed in the small bag of charcoals and packed the fox portrait into a portfolio. It was a long shot, but I hoped to find quiet both in my head and somewhere in town so I could continue working. If I could win the scholarship, I wouldn't have to accept Nan's offer. But if not, was her proposition really that bad? Either way, it meant a move to California, with an entire country between me and my parents.

Quietly getting outside wasn't an issue, but I started to breathe a little easier once I was in my car. It was more than a little surprising that neither of my parents had left the house. Yet. At some point they'd give up yelling, and one of them would stomp from the house and spin their tires in the gravel as they drove away.

Magnolia Avenue took me south to the main part of downtown near the Riverwalk. But nightlife wasn't on my mind. Instead, I made a left on Rose Drive toward my grandmother's. Nan lived off Main in one of the sizeable founders' homes. Our family had been in Cypress for generations, a point of pride for my father and Nan both. But the house was the only great part about it. Their asinine groups such as the Daughters of the Confederacy or the Heritage House of Cypress Bend served only to feed their egos from what I could tell.

Massive oak trees surrounded the two story home. And just enough light from the streetlamps filtered through the thick branches to set the pale yellow house aglow. The wind whipped around me as I walked up the sidewalk to her door. I regretted not taking

the time to dry my hair, but I was grateful for the warmth of my sweatshirt. Nan had bought it for me back in October when we flew out to California to visit Northridge against my parents' wishes. She tried to understand my desire to get away, even if she desperately hoped I'd change my mind.

Dark green shutters outlined dark windows—my first clue that Nan wasn't home. Still, I rang the bell and waited. The feisty old woman refused to carry a cell, claiming they're an invasion of privacy, so I tried her landline. When no one answered, I gave up. She was out more than she was home, playing bridge or planning the next ridiculous heritage festival for Cypress Bend. She kept herself busy, doing her own thing. Personally, I thought she was happy to be out from under my grandfather's tyrannical rule. I could identify with that.

I climbed back into my car and debated my next move. Staying with Nan would have given me time and space away from my parents and allowed me to continue working. It also would've given me an opportunity to discuss her financial proposition more thoroughly. She'd named a few conditions when she suggested the idea, none of which thrilled or enticed me. I'd turned her down immediately. But now I felt the urgency of the situation. If I didn't nail down a plan, I could miss this opportunity. Surely, she'd help me without forcing me to take a part-time job or join the Daughters of the Confederacy for the remainder of my time in town.

My cell phone lit up in the seat beside me, and anxiously, I checked the caller ID. *Home*, it read, and I hit the button to silence it. They shouldn't have been surprised that I'd left. What possible reason did I have to stick around?

The Dizzy Bean was my favorite, not to mention the only, coffee shop in town. But as I pulled into its parking lot and noticed the abundance of vehicles, it dawned on me that Saturdays were open mic night. And sure enough, when I peeked in the front window, I saw a grey-haired man speaking on the makeshift stage. People came here to try their hand at comedy, share their writing, or even sing. The eclectic crowd gathered and shared each other's passions week after week. I'd been drawn there like a moth to a flame when I first heard about it, and I almost always enjoyed myself. These were my people—the ones seeking more than the average day-to-day hustle. But it wasn't what I needed tonight. I wasn't in the mindset to enjoy the lighthearted nature of open mic night, and more than anything, I just wanted to focus on my fox.

Cypress had sadly limited options for the environment I was looking for. Ultimately, I didn't have much money to spend, so a restaurant was out of the question. Instead, I decided to call Jenny.

“Hey Lex.”

“Hey Jen. What are you up to tonight?”

“I'm at home,” she replied, and it was obvious she was smiling as she spoke.

“Brandon is here, too.” I rolled my eyes. How could I have forgotten about him? They'd been dating for a few months now, and it seemed the more time I spent focusing on getting into college, the more time she spent revolving around him.

“Oh, okay,” I said, feeling the sudden defeat in my gut. I was going to have to go home. “Well, I'll let you go.”

“We’re having some people over tonight,” she added quickly, and I cringed at the implied meaning. Her parents must’ve been out, and they were playing a version of house.

“That’s cool.” I feigned nonchalance, hoping to cover the irritation I felt.

“Do you want to come?”

“To your house?” I asked, a little shocked, though it had been the reason for my call in the first place. Brandon was the star of my dad’s basketball team, and the vast majority of his crowd didn’t intermix with my own—Jenny excluded.

“Yeah, sure. Why not? It could be fun,” she said, sounding as if she were convincing her boyfriend instead of me.

I paused, debating. My options were rather limited at the moment. I could go to Jenny’s and try to be a more social version of myself. Or I could go home and listen to my parents fight with one another or shout at me, and eventually, I’d find the peace and quiet to work. But probably not. They weren’t going to let me earn a scholarship to get away from them. They’d probably harass me on purpose. But a basketball party?

“Maybe,” I finally replied. “Is it a big thing or just a few people?” I wasn’t sure which would be worse. “I don’t want to impose.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Brandon invited some of the guys from the team, and we’re not sure who all is . . . Oh! There’s someone here now. Come on. I’ll see you in a bit.” She disconnected the call.

Though Jenny was a year behind me in school, her personality never made her seem younger. She was thoughtful and kind, and we’d bonded over our shared love of Beatles music in middle-school gym class. But those things made her decision to date a

basketball player all the more strange. Most of those guys were jocks through and through—devoid of any imagination and intense about sports the way my father was. Maybe Brandon was different, but I doubted it. Dad thought of him as his golden boy, the savior of his team. And now Jenny worshipped him, too.

There were quite a few cars outside of Jenny's house and even more people inside when I let myself in the door. "You came!" she chirped as I emerged from the foyer into the den. Her long blonde hair was swept back at the sides, and bright blue feathered earrings dangled from each ear. The color accented her sapphire eyes perfectly, and I found myself smiling at her astonishment. I would've been shocked to see me at a party, too.

"Here I am," I said, holding my hands up in mock surrender. I'd left my backpack in the car, having given up completely on the idea of working tonight. "What do I do now?" I asked, scanning the crowd for familiar faces. I recognized several basketball players and their girlfriends. We all went to the same small high school, but my social status was quite a bit lower than theirs. Even if I knew their names, I'd never spoken to the majority of these people.

Jenny laughed and led the way to the kitchen. "How about a drink? I've got sodas."

"What? No beer?" I feigned shock, throwing a hand to my chest in my best Southern girl imitation.

She smiled and lowered her voice. "Actually, some of the guys *do* have coolers of beer in their cars," she admitted. "But I wouldn't let them bring it in the house. My parents would *kill* me." I grinned. Jenny was brave. I doubted that I'd have been able to

stand up to these towering teenage guys over alcohol. They were annoying, sure, but they were a bit intimidating, too.

“That’s awesome,” I said. “I’ll just have a Sprite, though.” I watched as she busied herself finding a glass and filling it with ice. How had she infiltrated this group of people so easily? Or better yet, why? Surely, Brandon wasn’t *that* special.

She pressed a cold glass into my hand. “Go mingle,” she instructed. I eyed her.

“No way. I can’t hang out with these people.”

“You can. Alexa, at some point, you’re going to have to branch out. How else are you going to make friends when you go to college?” she asked, nodding her head toward my sweatshirt. I knew she was right, but I didn’t want to make friends with *these* people. “I’m going to find Brandon.” She darted from the room.

Sighing, I leaned against the counter. It wasn’t that I was antisocial. It was more that I had a close group of friends, and I tended to stay within that crowd. Randomly starting conversations wasn’t my idea of a great time. But her assumption was true. How would I make friends in college if I couldn’t even *try* to be sociable here?

Before I could rethink my decision, I left the kitchen and stepped back into the den. Music thumped from speakers hidden around the room. Several guys huddled near the television, discussing the basketball game they watched. A few girls claimed one of the sofas, each holding a red, plastic cup. It was bizarre. Jenny’s family cherished this space and spent most of their time here. The conversion to a high school party was unsettling.

I retreated to an empty spot near a wall and sagged against it, sipping my drink. At some point, I’d have to try to talk to someone if I wanted to make this little

experiment work. But who? And how? Tiny, fizzy bubbles dodged the ice cubes in my glass, fighting their way to the top.

“C.S.U.N.?” I glanced up from my cup to find a tall, dark-haired guy standing in front of me, his eyebrows raised in surprise. “Are you going to California?”

My face heated under his scrutiny. “Uh, yeah. I mean, I hope,” I stammered and felt the blush deepen. What was wrong with me? I lifted my eyes to his and tried again. “I was accepted, but I haven’t gotten it all worked out, yet.”

He nodded, looking impressed. His amber eyes stayed on mine. “That’s awesome. I *love* that area.”

“You know the school?” I could hear my own surprise. No one around here had even heard of it because there weren’t any big, amazing sports teams there.

“Well.” He leaned closer to me, and the scent of alcohol lingered in the space around him. “I don’t know it, know it. But we just moved from Glendora. It’s about an hour away.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense.” And it explained why I’d never seen this guy around before.

He threaded a hand through his close-cropped hair and loomed even closer. “Don’t tell anyone. But this place sucks. I miss California.” I smiled, though he was uncomfortably close. But I understood. Cypress must be awful compared to his home. He grinned and stepped back, pulling a flask from his pocket. “Want some?”

I shook my head. “No. Thanks though.”

“Okay,” he said, sauntering away, his long limbs moving slowly as he headed toward the couch of girls. I exhaled. Drunken teenage boys weren’t my favorite, but he’d

seemed nice enough. Maybe I could discuss L.A. with him in a different situation. I'd never met anyone from the area before.

Swallowing my last bit of Sprite, I meandered toward the kitchen to ditch my glass. Jenny would have a mess to clean up when these people left. At least they were mostly using disposable cups. If I could survive the whole party, I'd help her. I seriously doubted her boyfriend would.

But as I turned the corner into the kitchen, I collided with none other than Brandon himself. "Oh!" He stumbled back a step. "Sorry, Alexa. I didn't see you."

"It's cool." I stepped around him and continued toward the sink.

"Thanks for coming," he said, and I glanced back to find him watching me.

"Jenny was really hoping you'd come."

"Yeah." I nodded slowly. "She's my best friend." It was weird that *he'd* thank me for being at her house. Irritating, really.

"So, C.S.U.N.? Jenny said you were accepted."

"Yeah," I said again awkwardly. Where was this going?

"For animation?" He picked at a fingernail, not looking at me. We were both floundering in this conversation. And then it hit me. He was *trying* to be friendly, and I wasn't making it easy.

"Uh, yeah. I want to work on children's movies."

He quit his fingernail examination and focused on me. "Like Disney movies or animated short films?"

Surprise crossed my face. "You know what an animated short is?"

He chuckled, relaxing. “Yeah, how could I not? They give Oscars for them every year. That’s how I first heard about them. And then I started looking them up online. There’s some really good ones.”

“There really are,” I said, enthusiastically. “But I want to do movies. I was obsessed with so many as a kid. They’re the first stories that start to shape kids’ ideals and thought patterns. I love the idea of creating art for them.”

“That’s awesome.” He opened the fridge and pulled a soda from inside, before turning back to me. “But why that school? Do they have animation programs in other places?”

“They do. But Northridge has an amazing program. Plus, it’s right there in the heart of filmmaking.”

“That makes sense. Well, I’m excited for you.”

I smiled at him. “Thanks. Really,” I said and meant it. He left the kitchen, leaving me to ponder over this new information. Maybe he wasn’t who I’d thought he was.

Moments later, the new guy entered the kitchen. I still didn’t know his name. When he saw me, his eyes lit up a little, and he grinned. I returned it. Maybe all of these people weren’t who I’d thought they were.

“There you are.” He inched closer until he was right in front of me. “A California girl right here in South Carolina.” His breath was worse than before. “What are the odds?”

I took a step back, leaning against the sink to give myself some room. “Well, I’m not a California girl, yet.”

But he stepped closer, placing a hand on the counter on either side of me. “Close enough.”

I couldn’t breathe. He was cute, sure. But no one had ever been so *forward* with me before. “I . . . uh . . .”

“I was hoping you wanted to get out of here.” His face was inches from mine. “What do you think?”

“With you?” My voice sounded incredulous. What gave him any indication that I was into him?

“Yeah, why not?” His tone was cocky.

“How about why?” I finally asked, anger coursing through me. “You don’t know me, and I don’t know you.”

“What’s there to know?” His words were low, and his eyes were lidded like he was about to try and kiss me. I shoved him back, and he stumbled. Confusion crossed his face before turning to annoyance.

“You can’t trap me and expect me to be into it.” I stepped away from the counter so that he couldn’t do it again.

“I wasn’t trying to trap you. Some nerdy girl at a party. You looked lonely. Why wouldn’t you be into me?”

My eyes widened, and I felt the urge to punch him in the stomach. If there was ever a time to take on Dad’s temper, this was it. But I didn’t punch him. I raised my chin and stared directly into his brown eyes. Forcing resolve into my voice, I said, “You’re an asshole. And I’m too good for you anyway.” And I walked away.

Triumph emboldened my steps, and I almost bounced on my toes as I left the party. I felt empowered. Standing up for myself wasn't as hard as I'd thought it'd be. Maybe I could do the same to Dad. It was time to try. I had to stop running from my parents. They needed to know Nan had offered me help, and I planned to take it, no matter what the conditions were. This was my life, and I needed to take a stand.

Driving through the darkened town toward home, I rehearsed what I'd say to my parents. Though I was nervous, I knew this would be the right step. Who knew? Maybe if Mom and Dad would stop fighting and start talking openly to one another, things would change. I hoped anyway.

Bracing myself, I walked confidently into my house and found my parents on opposite sides of the house. "Mom, Dad," I said loudly. "We need to talk."

The Choice

Sweat trickles down between Brandon's shoulder blades, and in the moment, he feels like the whole world is watching, waiting. He jumps, extending his arm, and shoots the basketball through the hoop.

"Yeah!" Jenny cheers, and Brandon turns to her with a grin. "You're amazing," she croons, wrapping him into a loose hug.

The reflection of the setting sun make her eyes shine, and suddenly, unprovoked, his mother's eyes materialize in his mind—the deep brown color shimmering with unshed tears. He blinks and glances over at the sideline. "So they say," he mumbles. He makes a beeline for the bottle of water on an aluminum bench, smothering the memory.

"I'm telling you," she says, following. "The college scouts are going to call any day now."

Brandon's eyebrows pull together. "Jenny, really?"

"What?" she asks, feigning innocence. "I'm totally serious."

He sighs. "Can we *not* talk about that today?" He shakes his head and stares at the court. As a kid, he'd spent countless hours perfecting his free throws out there, dreaming of the pros. But that's most likely all it was—a dream. "Maybe they'll call. Maybe they won't. I don't care anymore." He swipes his keys from the bench and starts toward his car.

"Fine." She jogs to catch up with him. "So what's the plan, then? Where are we eating?"

He glances up at the dark clouds in the fading light and smirks. “As if that’s even a question,” he taunts, and breaks into a sprint.

“Hey!” Jenny shouts, clearly surprised. She reaches the parking lot just as he pulls his ringing phone from the car.

“What’s up?” Brandon answers, making a pained face at his girlfriend.

“Where are you?” his dad asks immediately.

“At the court with Jenny.” He listens to the man sigh. “What’s up?” he asks again.

“You’re gonna need to cut that short.” He pauses. “Sam went home sick earlier, and I’m slammed at the shop. There’s no one else to drive the tow truck.”

“No. No. It’s my weekend off. We’ve got plans.” Brandon leans his forehead on the cool metal of the car’s roof. It’s not fair of his dad to ask. He’d worked the past three weekends without complaint.

“Look, I know. I’m sorry. It is what it is.”

“Dad,” his voice is quiet, but the defiance is clear.

“Brandon. I’ve said I’m sorry, but I’m not backing down here. I’ve told you . . . if you’re not gonna go to college next year, if you’re not even gonna *try* to play basketball, then . . . then this is how it’s gonna be.” He pauses. “I’ll see you soon.”

Brandon disconnects the call and slumps into the driver seat. He knows his dad warned there’d be consequences for his impending decision to stick around Cypress but had no idea he’d find out so soon.

“I’m guessing that didn’t go well.” Jenny observes him from the passenger seat.

“There’s always next weekend.”

He nods and starts the car, trying to control his swarming emotions, but as the engine sparks to life, so does his anger. “No. You know what? It’s not happening. I’m not going.”

“What?” Jenny asks, disbelief coloring her tone.

“I’m not going.” Brandon shrugs, backing his car out of the parking space. “Still up for pizza?”

“You’re joking. You have to be joking.” Jenny scans him. She’s never known him to shirk responsibilities. “You can’t *not* go.”

“Well. I’m not.” He keeps his eyes focused on the road. “So, pizza . . . or no?”

“No,” she practically shouts. “It’s one thing for you to be wound up about basketball—though I honestly don’t understand it.” She folds her arms across her chest, willing him to return to normal. “You can’t just stop going to work.”

Brandon squeezes the steering wheel noticeably tighter, but doesn’t comment. She, like his dad, expects him to do everything he’s told to. Instead, he turns the car in the direction of Main Street, the opposite direction of the automotive shop, toward food and freedom.

“Take me home.”

“What?”

“Take me home,” she repeats and digs around in her purse, producing her own set of keys. “I’m not going to be part of this. Your dad already doesn’t like me.”

He rolls his eyes and reaches a hand toward hers. “What are you talking about? Of course he likes you.”

She snatches her hand away before he can entwine his fingers with hers. “No, he doesn’t. He thinks you don’t want to leave town because of me. Everyone thinks that.”

“No one thinks that, Jenny,” Brandon says quietly. “Besides, it’s not true.”

“It’s not?” She crosses her arms and meets his eyes. “Then why don’t you?”

He glances back at the road. This wasn’t how he’d envisioned their date night.

“I’m not doing this. I don’t have to explain myself. If you want to go home, I’ll take you home.”

“Fine,” she snaps and glares out her window.

After a tense goodbye, Brandon rakes his hands through his hair, frustrated. It had been weeks since he and Jenny had gotten to hang out alone, and he’d been looking forward to it.

Pizza didn’t feel like an option any longer, but the idea of going to work was laughable. His dad, Jenny, everyone . . . they were asking too much. Why couldn’t he make his own decisions about his future? Why did it have to be college or disgrace? And why the *hell* did anyone think he still had a chance to play basketball next year? No one had called, and April was days away. The chance of a college offer was slipping away with every hour. All that work, all that hope—it’d been for nothing. At least his mom isn’t around to see him fail.

The buzz of his phone makes him jump, and he checks it, hoping Jenny has changed her mind. Instead, it’s Shaun, hoping to find a ride for himself and Terence, and though he’s hungry, Brandon leaps at the opportunity to turn the night around. Anything is better than sitting in his girlfriend’s driveway debating his life choices.

When he pulls up at Shaun's, the front porch light is off. Large oak trees shade the house from the streetlamps, casting the house in shadows. His friend isn't the type to remember something like turning a light on, and since it's Saturday night, his parents most likely aren't home. Brandon honks twice, impatient. But he's nearly shocked out of his skin when his two friends pop up in front of the headlights seemingly from nowhere.

"Jesus, guys! Where the hell did you come from?" he asks, as they climb into his car. Shaun bursts out laughing, squeezing his large frame into the front seat. A stench rolls off the pair of them, and Brandon shakes his head, sighing. "And how much did you smoke?" He quickly hits a button, and all four windows roll down.

Terence shrugs in the back seat and grins, his bright white teeth a stark contrast from his russet, reddish-brown skin. "Not much . . . enough."

Brandon laughs, relieved to let go of the earlier tension. "So what's the plan?"

"We've got a little surprise for you," Shaun says, clearly excited. His sandy blonde hair hasn't been cut in months, and Brandon is sure he's trying to grow a mullet.

"A surprise? I thought you just needed a ride."

"We do," Shaun replies. "But there's a surprise involved."

"Oookay." Brandon wonders if he should be worried. "But what *are* we doing?"

Terence reaches forward and squeezes his shoulder. "No worries, dude. No worries."

Brandon drives the duo outside of town, leaving manicured lawns and modern houses behind. Outside of a dollar store and a gas station, there isn't much northwest of town. But Shaun insists they're going the right way, and soon they stop the car in front of a small, beat-up house, just as rain starts to fall. Several windows are broken, and

cardboard replaced missing glass. The only light outside is provided by a streetlamp and a bare bulb hanging from the porch ceiling. From what he can see, the yard consists of dirt covered by tiny patches of grass. Rain is quickly causing it to become a mud-pit. Shaun clambers out of the car, but Brandon sits, staring at the house . . . and his phone. His dad has called twice since their initial conversation, and both times, he's ignored it.

"Fuck, dude. You coming or not?" Shaun asks, leaning back into the car, impatient as usual.

Brandon stares at his friend for a moment before looking at the house again. "Are you *sure* this is the right place?"

"Yep," Shaun says and dashes toward the front porch.

In the back seat, Terence waits for Brandon. "Just trust us. It'll be great." His tall, lanky physique is so different from Shaun's, much like his personality, but the three had been friends since elementary school.

"Alright. But you never said what we're doing here." He glances at his phone again and hits the power button.

"Just come on," Terence pleads, running a hand over his close-cropped black hair.

Reluctantly, Brandon gets out of the car and follows Terence to the porch where Shaun is already chatting with a skinny teenager near their own age. And though he's sure he doesn't know anyone on this side of town, he faintly recognizes the voice.

When Brandon climbs the few stairs and the guy's eyes find his, he notices the large scar stretching from his jawline up to his eyebrow. He pinpoints the memory.

"You're Ronan, right?" he asks.

“Uh yeah. It’s Roach now. Mostly anyway.” His words are slow as if he’s unsure about what he’s saying or he isn’t sure he trusts this newcomer. “Do I know you?”

“Brandon Styles,” he says, automatically reaching his hand out. It’s a habit his dad taught him at a young age.

Roach smiles, revealing several missing teeth, and Brandon works to hide his shock. “Oh yeah. You’re that hotshot basketball player. I’ve heard about you.” He gestures for the boys to step inside. “Come in. Come in before we all get soaked.”

Brandon drops his hand awkwardly. “We, uh, we played together a few years back,” he says, stepping into the tiny home. Inside, two mismatched, dingy couches sit in an L around a large coffee table. The latter is covered in cigarette packs, ashtrays, pill bottles, a large bag of weed, and other unidentifiable items.

“That so?” Roach drags a hand across the bottom half of his face. “It’s hard to remember those days.”

Brandon nods, wondering how many drugs it takes to forget just three years ago. He forces himself to sit on one of the thread-bare couches, worried that Ronan received his nickname from the state of his home.

Shaun runs his hands across his jeans, a sign that he’s sweating, which makes Brandon nervous. “How much do we owe you, man?”

“Hundred even,” Roach says, plucking a cigarette from a pack on the table. Terence pulls a wad of cash from his back pocket, counts it, and passes it over.

Shoving the money in his pocket, Roach sifts through the items on his table, eventually producing a folded-over scrap of aluminum foil. “Here ya go,” he says,

handing it to Terence. Brandon sits forward, watching him tear it open, revealing a white strip of paper with rows of stars in two columns.

“Acid!” Brandon nearly yells, surprising everyone.

Roach laughs. “Surprised your boy.” He grins at Shaun. “Ten hits. Have fun.”

“What the hell, guys?” Brandon jumps up from the couch and paces around the small room. “This is the surprise?” He knows he’s embarrassing them, but he doesn’t care. “You could’ve told me.”

“Well, dude,” Shaun says from the couch, “we didn’t think you’d freak out.” His eyes are on the paper blotter while he speaks, and his expression is pure excitement.

“More for us.”

Terence stands and blocks Brandon’s path. “If you’re not up for it, it’s cool. You can be D.D.”

Brandon looks between his friends. “Okay, yeah. Somebody needs to look out for you guys.” He bites the inside of his cheek, wondering why he didn’t just go to work. At least he knew what to expect there.

“Yeah. Cool.” Roach takes a drag from his cigarette, looking bored. “Go ahead. It’s going to take a while to kick in.”

Brandon’s friends tear the paper into bits, and he sinks back onto the couch. “So what are you doing these days, Ronan?” he asks, not quite able to call him by his nickname.

“I’m . . . I’m over at the plant now. That’s how I ran into these two.”

Brandon nods, remembering that his friends had both recently signed on to work at the local paper factory. The jobs wouldn’t start until after graduation, but they’d

already filled out their paperwork and been through an orientation of sorts. It made sense that they'd met some of their future co-workers. But how did Ronan end up there? He'd been one of the better basketball players Cypress had seen.

"I'm so pumped right now," Shaun suddenly exclaims, bouncing on his toes near the front door. "Let's go do something."

Terence stands and wraps the rest of the paper strip back in the foil, shoving it in his front pocket. "Yeah, let's go to the arcade or something."

They both look to Brandon, who runs a hand through his hair and shrugs. "Okay. Let's go." He stands and awkwardly glances back at Roach. "Uh thanks for having us, man. It was good to see you," he lies. How many other Cypress basketball alums are still around town doing the exact same thing? He knows a few of the guys had gone to play ball at the community college, but is this how they ended up? He hopes not.

An hour later, video game beeps and buzzes surround them. There aren't many other people in the arcade, and Brandon looks up from his game and eyes his friend. He's wary of his friends' state of mind. So far nothing seems to be happening. And then he realizes . . . Terence isn't playing his game. Instead, he's just staring at the lights, dazed.

"Hey." Brandon nudges his friend. When Terence turns to him, his pupils are so large his eyes appear mostly black. "Whoa," Brandon says, "are you okay?"

"Yeah," he whispers. "Those lights. They really sucked me in."

"Right." Brandon glances at the game. "They are pretty bright." The machine is a beacon of flashing, colored brilliance, and it is sort of alarming now that he's thinking about it—in fact, the whole place was. He could be overreacting, but he'd seen *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and this was probably not the best place for his friends, not if he

didn't want a full-scale situation on his hands. "Let's get out of here," he says. "Where's Shaun anyway?"

Once he spots him, Brandon lures both of his friends outside with the promise of cigarettes though he doesn't have any. The rain has become a downpour, and they all sprint to the car, his friends both climbing into the back seat. No one notices the lack of tobacco. "Really? I'm a chauffeur now?" Brandon sighs but doesn't complain further. At least he got them out of the arcade.

"I'm so glad we got out of there," Shaun whispers, eyeing the building. "That place was crazy."

"Yeah," Terence agrees. "Did you see that hole in the wall when we were leaving? It was right by the door. We could've climbed in."

"What hole? What are you talking about?" Brandon asks. "No, never mind. I've got an idea," Brandon says, starting the car. "Tacos. We'll go get some tacos." A rational conversation seems like an outrageous request at this point. Earlier, work seemed like the worst idea, but now he isn't as sure. Maybe the quiet, dark of the tow truck's cab is exactly what he'd needed. His dad was surely furious by now, and for what? A fight with Jenny and an unpaid babysitting gig. He'd take his friends for food, and then he'd take them home.

"You guys want some tacos?" Brandon asks again, parking in front of the Taco Palace.

No one responds, and when he turns, he sees they are fixated on the large, plastic taco man in front of the building. Bright lights illuminate the giant Señor Taco so that all can see his smiling face through the rain, and they are parked right next to him.

Brandon looks between the taco man and his friends several times. “Shaun? Terence? You guys okay?” He pauses. “It’s just a plastic taco. No big deal. We’ve seen him before.”

“No. No,” Shaun shouts. “You can’t see me!” Suddenly, he throws open his car door and jumps out, running from the parking lot to the street and out of sight.

“*What. The. Fuck?*” He’d never seen Shaun run, and he’d definitely never seen him run so *fast*. He looks back at Terence, who is still staring at Señor Taco. Slowly, Brandon climbs out of the car and engages the child safety lock on Shaun’s door. He opens Terence’s door and does the same, trying not to draw any attention to himself and getting soaked in the process. If anything, the rain was getting heavier.

“Okay, T,” he says once he’s back in his seat. “Looks like we’ve got to find Shaun.”

“Where did he go?” Even on drugs, Terence is quiet, his deep brown eyes curious.

“No effing clue, buddy. No effing clue.” He backs out of the Taco Palace and drives in the direction Shaun ran, hoping this won’t take long.

Street lamps line the streets, but large oaks draped in Spanish moss provide plenty of places for a person to remain unseen. The deluge didn’t help, either. Surely Shaun would run for cover, but where? Brandon drove three blocks before panic began to set in. It wasn’t like Shaun to disappear—or, for that matter, to exert physical effort. It wouldn’t take much for him to hurt himself or to be noticed by the wrong people. Surely the police would notice a sizeable guy running through the rain, terrified of a plastic taco man.

His phone is still in his pocket, and he fishes out, punching the power button. Immediately, the device begins to buzz with voicemail and text messages. Brandon

surveys each side of the street before glancing back at his phone—five texts from Jenny, three from his dad, and six voice messages. This would be painful. He opts for the texts first—

“Watch out!” Terence shouts from the back seat. Surprised, Brandon hits the brakes just in time to see Shaun standing in the road. The tires lose traction, separating from the pavement. The car starts to spin. He yanks the steering wheel to the left, but it’s no use.

“Shiiit,” Brandon yells just as Shaun dives off the road. The car narrowly misses a street lamp and slams into a massive oak, crushing the passenger side, and slamming both occupants back in their seats.

Time stops, the rain still beating down. Eventually, Brandon looks around, gathering his bearings. He shakily climbs from the car and pulls open the back door. Terence is unharmed but shocked, seat-belted in place, eyes wide with trepidation.

“It’s . . . it’s okay, buddy,” Brandon stammers as much to reassure himself as his friend. “We’re both okay.” He scans the area and sees Shaun laying on the ground. Only then does he remember seeing him in the middle of the road. Panic creeps up his throat as he makes his way toward his friend. Did the car hit him? He doesn’t know.

His hair drenched and water running into his eyes, Brandon stares down at Shaun’s unmoving body. Dread turns into raw fear as the sudden horror of a memory claws its way from the depths of his soul. Unwillingly, he remembers a night much like this one, only the person he rushed to was not a friend—it was his mother. She’d been thrown from the car. He’d found her lying in the wet grass. Tears slide down his cheeks as he recalls her brown eyes staring up at him, her last words of love. It’d been his fault

for making her rush. It's his fault now. He could've gone to work. He *should've* gone to work.

Suddenly, Shaun begins to move. He pushes himself up and blinks a few times, finally focusing on Brandon standing above him. "Hey," he whispers.

"Hey man," Brandon replies, thrusting a hand forward to help his friend off the ground. Relief floods through him. Shaun isn't dead. He finds himself smiling and pulling the guy into a bear hug.

But as they walk to his car, the night crashes down around him once again. The whole night had been a mistake. Or rather a series of them. He digs his phone out of his car and calls Jenny.

"Where *are* you?"

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he tells her, rain dripping down his face. The massive oak tree provides little shelter from the downpour, but the notion of a private conversation keeps him from climbing back into the driver seat. "It's been an awful night."

"Brandon, your dad is losing his mind," she cuts in. "Have you called him yet?"

"No," he replies, swiping rain from his face. "I called you first. I need your help. I know you're pissed at me, and I'm sorry. But I really do need your help."

"Okay. Okay. What's wrong?" she asks. "What can I do?"

"I need you to meet me and pick up Shaun and Terence. They need to go home, and I can't get them there."

"What? Why are you hanging out with them?"

"It's a long story. I'll explain later. Just please. I need you to do this first."

“Fine,” she agrees reluctantly.

When they end the call, Brandon braces himself for what’s next. He hits the call button and holds his breath.

“You’re okay.” Relief is evident in his Dad’s tone. It wasn’t the reaction Brandon expected. He feels a little tension ease from his shoulders.

“Yeah, I am. Dad, I’m so sorry.”

“You should be. Scared the hell outta me. Not showing up. Disappearing.” The old man’s gruff voice is laced with emotion. Brandon wonders if he’s been crying but pushes the thought away. That would be too much.

“I’m sorry. Sorry doesn’t even cover it.”

“Well, explain.”

“I will.” He pauses, taking a moment to prepare himself. “I will, but Dad, there’s something else. I need you to bring the tow truck.”

“*What?*” His earlier calm is replaced by unguarded fear. “Why? Brandon, *are* you okay?”

“Yeah, I am. But my car’s not.”

“Tell me where you are.”

Jenny is the first to arrive, just as Brandon hoped, and though she’s full of questions, he sends her away with his friends, promising to call when he gets home. Facing his dad is something he needs to do. And something he prefers to do alone. Sitting in the dark interior of his car, he thinks back over the night. It hadn’t been just this

day. It'd been a progression. And though he's unsure of whether it's the right decision, he comes up with a plan.

When the tow truck rumbles to a stop, its rusted red paint is a beacon under the street lamps. Brandon watches as his father shoves open the creaking door and climbs out, lumbering toward him.

"You're not hurt?" he asks, inspecting his son and then the car.

"No. I'm fine."

"Took a beating, didn't it?" the man asks, patting the car's roof affectionately. "I knew this thing was tougher than she looked." When his eyes meet Brandon's, the emotion is hard for his son to see. They're both thinking of that night little more than a year before—the rain falling around them as they stood on the side of the road and watched helplessly as paramedics failed to save her.

"Dad . . ." he begins, but his father raises a hand, and he stops.

"I need to say something first. I know it's been hard this last year without your mom. And I know I've not made it much easier on you." He swallows once and takes a deep breath. "It's been hard for me, too. I just . . . I just want you to know that I love you."

"I know you do," Brandon replies, trying hard to hold back the tears. "I'm sorry about tonight." He glances at his car. "It's more than that though. I'm sorry I've let you down."

His dad's eyebrows pull together. "You've never let me down, son. Not really. This was just a stupid—"

“Dad,” he cuts in. “They’re not calling. No one is offering me a place on their team. Everything you and mom wanted for me. It’s not going to happen.”

“Brandon.”

“No,” he slams a fist into the roof of his crushed car. “Dad. Stop telling me to wait. I’m so tired of waiting. It’s over. But I’ve made a decision.” He focuses on his dad, stares at him right in the eyes, the way his dad has always told him to do. “I’m going to go to school anyway. Basketball or not, I don’t want to stick around here.” Once the words have left his lips, he feels the truth of them lifting him up and setting him free. Basketball, Cypress, school, it’s all weighed on him for so long. But now that he’s made the decision, it doesn’t feel like one he should’ve wasted so much time on. His mom wanted so much for him, but he’d felt resistant, hesitant, and afraid to leave her memories behind. But he knew now, that it wasn’t possible. He’d carry her everywhere with him, and he’d make her proud somehow.

Brandon’s dad clamps a hand down on his shoulder. “I’m proud of you, son. And basketball has never had anything to do with that.” He wraps him into a hug and holds him there, tears slipping down his face. Suddenly, he pushes him back, but still holds him by the arms. “Now I have to tell you something.” He smiles then. “Newberry called. They tried your phone, but when they got your voicemail, they called me. The coach wants to talk to you.”

Brandon’s shock keeps him from responding. Instead, he stands there, staring at his father in bewilderment. “Say something,” his dad pleads.

“Newberry called? They called for me?” he asks.

“Yes!”

“And you’re sure it was the *basketball* coach, right?”

“Brandon, yes!”

When his son finally laughs, he does, too, and they hug again. “I guess that whole spiel about going to school didn’t matter at all, then, did it?”

“It matters much more than you think.”

The Corner of Confusion

Blue and yellow swirl together, and I watch as green steals their place on my palette. I have no actual talent for painting, but the thrill of creation fascinates me. From molding a slab of clay into a disproportionate version of a coffee mug to throwing colors on a canvas and calling it an abstract, I love the process much more than the product.

“Cassie,” a voice whispers. “Hey, Cassie.”

I glance to my right and find one of the senior art students perched on the stool next to my own, beaming. “Aren’t you supposed to be in P.E.?” I ask, though I’m happy to see her. As a sophomore, I’m allowed in the studio only during my class, but seniors can come and go as they please.

Alexa’s smile vanishes. “No. No freaking way are they going to make me run laps again today. It’s cruel to ask people to exercise so much.”

I smother a laugh with my hand. “What excuse did you use this time?”

“My portfolio.” She sets a blank canvas on the easel and begins to pull paint bottles from her bag. “I told Coach King that it’s essential to finish it for my scholarship applications.”

I roll my eyes. Teachers could be naïve at times. If anyone at Cypress High has an outstanding, *completed* portfolio, it’s Alexa Thompson. She’d spent months cultivating the best of the best art projects, and it’d paid off. Already, her top choice of schools had accepted her, *and* she’d secured a few smaller scholarships. “You’re such a *liar*,” I whisper-shout.

She shrugs, clearly not worried about getting caught. “Is your mom home, yet?”

The words trigger the anxiety I've been working to forget. Uncertainty twists in my gut, and I shake my head.

"You're so lucky. I wish my parents would go out of town and leave me alone for a week."

"Yeah." Historically, my mom didn't make the best decisions, and I fear this is one of those times. "I'm sort of worried," I admit.

She looks up from her paint, and her eyebrows crowd together. "Really? Why?"

"I just . . . I have a bad feeling." I feel so lame for saying it aloud. "She was supposed to be home yesterday and well . . . she isn't." Nor has she called. Last night, when I tried to reach her, the call went straight to voicemail. I don't tell Alexa that part, though. I don't want anyone to think she's a bad mom.

"Oh." My friend visibly relaxes. "I'm sure it's no big deal, Cass. She's probably having a great time, and they lost track of time or decided to stay longer. Who wouldn't want to extend their vacation a little longer?"

"Yeah." Mom had known this latest boyfriend for only two weeks when he suggested they take a trip to Myrtle Beach, more than three hours away. It seemed rather sudden at the time, and I'm still not comfortable with her decision to go, even if she had reported having fun earlier in the week. Something feels off about it. And about him. But I haven't put my finger on it, yet.

"Girls," the art teacher snaps suddenly. "Get to work." She frowns at us and then strides away.

Embarrassed, I dip my brush into the green paint and swipe it across the canvas. I force my mind to float away from Mom and Luke and focus on the project before me.

Later, seated alone on the hot, black vinyl bus seat, I question my motives for not trusting Luke. Was I making something from nothing as I did in Art? Or did it have something to do with the many terrible boyfriends she'd had in the past? Or could I be right and he's a little strange? I wasn't sure.

The tires hit a rough patch in the road, jostling me and throwing my backpack to the floor. Kids all around me laugh and joke with one another, but I might as well be on another planet. I recover my bag. No one speaks to me. They never do. A new girl in a small town isn't a novelty. Instead, I'm an oddity, even if it'd been months since we'd arrived.

When the bus stops, I have to duck while descending the stairs. At nearly six feet, I tower over many of the other students—a detail that doesn't help things out socially. Though if I could play basketball decently, I'm sure that would change.

Shelley, a tiny first-grader, is waiting for me on the sidewalk, and I take her hand when I reach her. "How was your day?"

She looks up, up, up at me with huge brown eyes framed by curly auburn hair. "So awful," she reports. We cross the street and begin the short trek to the apartment complex. "First, I got jelly on my white shirt. *And then*, Ms. Heard wouldn't let us play outside for recess because *some* people were getting in trouble."

"Oh, that is bad." I notice her bright pink backpack is more stuffed than usual, and she's struggling with it. "Let me carry your bag," I say, and she happily passes it over.

When we reach the door to her apartment, her mom is already standing in the doorway, waiting. Her face brightens when she sees us, and the little boy clinging to her

leg runs out to greet us. “Sissy!” he declares, and hugs Shelley. His mop of hair is the exact same shade as his sister’s.

Their mom laughs, and I can’t help but smile, too. “Come on, guys. Let’s get inside.” I give her the backpack. “Thank you, Cassie,” she says solemnly, and I know she means it. The woman looks exhausted, and I’m sure the newborn in her arms has everything to do with it. She’s a good mom from what I can tell. I glance at the ground.

“It’s no problem. I’m happy to help.”

“Let me know if you need anything at all,” she says, and steps inside. “Oh, and enjoy your weekend!”

Heading toward my apartment, dread creeps into my mind. I just know Mom isn’t there. My steps slow, and I drag my feet, trying to preserve the hope that everything is fine—that she’ll be home. But when I turn the corner, I don’t see the 12B denoting our apartment door. Instead, a dark-haired man in a blue jumpsuit is taping something to our door. I dash toward him.

“Excuse me? Can I help you?” I ask, snatching the pink paper he’d just posted. *Notice of Disconnection*, it reads across the top. “What is this?” My heart pounds in my chest.

“I . . . uh . . . I’m sorry,” he stammers. “It’s a disconnection notice for your power.”

“I see that! But *why*?”

“Your bill. It’s late. By at least two weeks or they wouldn’t have sent me. We tried to call, but we haven’t heard back from anyone.”

Irritated, I scan the letter. He's right. The bill is overdue. And the payment is more money than I have access to. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. "Can you wait here a moment?" I ask. He glances around, and I feel my desperation grow. "Please?"

"Uh, yeah," he responds finally. "But only for a moment."

I unlock the door and bolt inside. Any lingering hope that Mom is here melts away. No one is home. Moments later, I emerge from the apartment and hand the cash to the man. "This is all I have," I explain. "Can you take it? Can you just leave the power on for a few more days?"

Surprised, he takes it and then passes it right back. "I . . . uh . . . I can't."

"Please? Please," I beg, humiliated and desperate.

His face softens. "I'm sorry. Let me see what I can do." He pulls a cell from his pocket. "How much do you have?"

"Forty-two dollars." I watch as he steps away to make the call.

My body is electric with panic, and I bounce on my toes. They can't do this. Surely, they couldn't leave a teenaged girl home alone without power. But they don't know I'm alone. No one does. Tears prickle my eyes. How could Mom leave me like this? Doesn't she care about me anymore?

"Ma'am?"

I quickly brush the moisture from my eyes and turn to the man. "Will you take it?"

A tight-lipped smile appears. "Yes. But listen. You'll need to pay the rest by next Friday. They won't give you any longer."

"Thank you," I tell him. "Thank you so much." I hand him the money again.

“Sure. We’ll mail you a receipt. I don’t usually collect.” He pockets the cash and walks away.

Inside, I flop down on the couch and wrap my arms around myself. At least the power is on. But where is Mom? I bite my lip to stop it from quivering. It’s not like her to disappear like this. But falling apart isn’t going to help.

I push myself up and drag my feet toward the kitchen. Focusing on dinner will distract me. And then I remember—the food is nearly gone. I hadn’t shopped for groceries all week, expecting Mom to come home and take care of it. And now I’ve given all the money to the power company. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

It’s not the first time we’ve run low in the food department. The difference is that normally Mom figures out how to make meals last for days. She’s also good at coming up with extra money seemingly from nowhere. I have no experience doing it on my own.

After taking inventory of the kitchen, I realize there’s not enough food to last me for more than a few days. A couple of eggs, a slice of cheese, a can of green beans, a package of oatmeal, and two slices of bread. I could make it work. I’d have to. A grilled cheese and some of the beans tonight. Eggs and oatmeal tomorrow. She’d be home after that. There was no way she’d miss another week of work no matter how much fun she was having.

I try to call her again, but her phone must be turned off. If I had my own cell, I’d send texts, but that’s another luxury we can’t afford. Besides, she probably wouldn’t see those either. Our landline doesn’t have voicemail or an answering machine, so there’s no way to know if she—or anyone else—has tried to get in touch with me. Frustrated, I give up for now.

After eating, I settle in for a night of reading. At least it'll get my mind off the current situation. The Cypress library doesn't have an extensive selection, but I'm grateful for any new-to-me books, even if that means reading mostly classics and romance.

Before I fall asleep, I try my mom's phone one last time, but it's her voicemail again. Throughout the night, I toss and turn, my dreams waking me again and again. I'm grateful when the sun peeks through my bedroom window, and I have an excuse to drag myself from the bed. But the truth is, I'm also disappointed. It's Saturday, and I have no plans, no money, and no one to spend the day with.

The oatmeal will hold me over for a good portion of the day, but that leaves me with only a few eggs to conserve and eat as needed. It's a more desperate situation than I want to admit to myself. And I have to decide when to tell someone about the mystery of Mom. And who to tell. If I call the police, what happens? Do they help me find her and then leave us alone? Or would they deem her an unfit parent and call in Child Protective Services? I've known other kids who were taken away from their families, and the idea terrifies me.

The day passes slowly. Watching television is an option, but I'm limited to the free, public channels, and there is hardly ever anything on. Instead, I spend the day cleaning the apartment until every inch sparkles. When Mom finally makes it home, she'll be impressed.

As night falls and my stomach rumbles with pain, I know I can't wait any longer. I scramble two eggs and finish off the green beans. It's not the best dinner, but my body

is grateful for the food. Exhausted from worry and less sleep than I'm used to, I fall asleep early on the couch, the TV on in the background just for the company of noise.

Sunday morning I open and inspect each cabinet and the fridge, hoping something new and edible will magically appear. But of course, nothing does. Mom is much better at this than I am. The last egg sings my name. I ignore it. When I can't wait any longer, I'll eat it, but I need to make it last. Pulling on my shoes, I decide to leave the apartment. I call Mom's phone, but it's still the same result. Today, I will be proactive. Somehow.

A warm spring day greets me outside the door, and I step into the light and tip my face up toward the sun, soaking in its rays. The various plants outside the apartment complex have begun to bloom in the last week. Beautiful shades of pink pop against green leaves. Tiny buds promise more color in the near future, and I pause to appreciate my change of scenery. It's slightly easier to ignore my anxiety when I'm outside. But I bite my nails as I walk.

All of Cypress seems to be here, enjoying the sunny day. People lounge on blankets, chatting or reading. Others maneuver dogs through the crowd. And kids run excitedly around the playground, chasing one another. It's almost picturesque—the way the old ladies from the Heritage House hope for everyone to see their town. I wish Mom were here to enjoy it. This is the sort of place she hoped we'd find when we moved to Cypress.

I settle on the grass, content to observe my fellow park patrons. Some guys from school throw a football on the other side of a gazebo, but I don't know any of them, really. My stomach rumbles loudly, and I cover it with my arms, embarrassed. I hope no one heard. Clearly, my body isn't a fan of the situation. At least I know I'll get breakfast

and lunch at school tomorrow and for the week. We'd qualified for free lunch when we moved here because my mom is single and makes so little.

But that left me without dinner all week. And what about next weekend? What if she never came back? My chest rises and falls with rapid breaths. I put my fingers to my temples and try to calm down. There could be some money in the bank, but I didn't have access to it. Could I pawn something? Would they let me? I'd watched Mom do it plenty of times in the past. Those guys would take pretty much anything with some value. I suck in a deep breath and look around.

A few feet from me, a woman on a blue blanket calls out to a friend. Another woman turns, and the two meet in the middle, excited to see one another. Almost immediately, they set out on the sidewalk, continuing the walk the second lady was on. I glance at the abandoned blanket. She'd left all of her belongings behind. My eyes bulge. Cypress could be a little *too* picturesque at times. How could anyone be so trusting?

Her cell phone chirps, drawing my attention, and I see it peeking out from under a book. The women are well out of sight now. I gasp. Could it really be this easy? I could grab it, pawn it, and have food. My stomach twists, and my heart pumps rapidly. I've never stolen in my life. Could I do it now? I inch closer to the blanket. No one notices. My hands shake, and I hold my breath. Quickly, I snatch it, shoving it in my bag.

I'm officially a criminal.

It's too obvious to leave immediately. I decide to play it cool, but my heart pounds in my chest. Sweat collects on my palms. I lay back in the grass, trying to calm myself down. Fat, white clouds move slowly across the blue expanse of sky. How have things come to this? Did stealing to feed myself make me any better than someone

committing a crime of vengeance? I'm sure those people felt justified, too. I think of books I've read. Would my favorite characters have done the same? Probably not. I'm a bad person.

"Excuse me?" a voice calls out, and I sit up. The woman has returned. She watches me anxiously. "Have you seen a cell phone?" Her voice is desperate.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Have you seen a phone? I thought I left it here, but it's not here. It's gone."

"Um, no." I fight the urge to spill the truth to her and glance around instead. "Have you looked everywhere?"

She doesn't respond and instead throws everything scattered about into a bag, looping it over her shoulder. Then she yanks the blanket off the ground, shaking it out. When nothing appears, she sits down and puts her head in her hands. "This can't be happening," she mumbles. My stomach sinks to my feet. I should've left. Or I shouldn't have taken it at all. She looks over at me. "I'm waiting for a call," she says. "My mom is really sick."

I nod. Waiting for a call is pretty much all I've done for days. And now I've put this woman in a situation where she can't be reached by her mom. "Weren't you gone a moment ago?" I ask, hoping she'll take the bait. "Did you take the phone with you and then drop it?"

"Maybe. I'll go look around, I guess." This time she takes her bag with her and leaves only her blanket behind.

As soon as she's out of sight, I drop the phone on the blanket and dart away from the park. She might not realize it was me, but she might. Either way, I don't want to be anywhere nearby when she finds it.

My steps slow when I reach the sidewalk, and I pinch my nose. I can't believe that just happened. I close my eyes for a moment and make a decision. I head for the library. Sometimes the older librarians bake cookies and set them out for everyone to share. I desperately hope this is one of those days.

But when the white, wooden building looms ahead of me, I stop and lean against a tree instead of going inside. Bright pink and white azaleas line the front entrance, giving the library an appropriate Southern, small-town vibe. It's my favorite part of Cypress, despite the small selection. I love that everyone is welcome. No one is ever turned away. It's like a church without the guilt factor. And if anyone is feeling guilty today, it's me. I nearly committed a crime.

One of the double black doors swings open, and I watch Alexa step out onto the stairs. "What're you doing here?"

"I could ask the same of you. This isn't your scene." I'd been recommending books to her for months to no avail.

She rolls her eyes. "Tell me about it. Nan requested I volunteer for a thing they had earlier." Her hand flicks through the air. "It's finally over, though, and I'm freeeeeeee," she sings. She can't carry a tune whatsoever.

I smirk, starting to feel more like myself. "So more college money stipulations?" Because Alexa wants to go to college in California, her parents refuse to help with any of

the costs. But she has a grandmother with money who is willing to help. It comes at the cost of participating in Cypress-related events, though.

“Yes. Nan is determined to make sure I love and appreciate this town as much as she does. She’s hoping I’ll move back after school, I guess.”

“I get it. That’s pretty cool actually.” Alexa’s a great person, but sometimes, I don’t think she knows how lucky she is to have such a good family. Her parents are mad that she wants to move away from them, and her grandmother is doing everything she can in hopes that she’ll move back.

“But what about you? Need a new book already?”

“No,” I confessed. “Just needed something to do. I had to get out of the apartment.”

“Oh! Well, do you want to grab some lunch? I’m starving.”

The words hit me hard. I don’t respond immediately. I fidget with the strap of my bag. “I . . . uh . . .”

“Cass? You don’t have to, but it’s my treat.” Her voice is careful as if I’m fragile. And maybe I am. I certainly feel like I could break apart, the pieces of myself spilling on the grass in front of the library. The loneliness of the past week, the anxiety over my mom, the shock of the power bill, the hunger of today—I ease my grip on all of it and feel a tear fall from my eyes. I’ve never felt more alone in my life.

Alexa grabs me and pulls me into a hug. “Are you okay? What’s going on?” I don’t say anything, and soon the full-body sobs start. “Come on. My car’s just over here. Let’s get away from here.” She takes my hand and drags me toward the parking lot.

Struggling to calm down, I climb into the passenger seat and put my head in my hands. I hadn't meant to fall apart in front of Alexa, or to fall apart at all, for that matter. But I already feel a little saner because of it.

"Cass? What can I do?"

I wipe my face with my hands, knowing it's probably bright red and swollen-looking. "The police station. I need to go to the police station."

"What happened? Are you okay?"

"No. I'm not," I admit both to her and myself. "I haven't spoken to my mom since Wednesday, and I don't know where she is." It's so much scarier to say aloud.

"What?! Cassie, why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't know what to say. But now I know what I've gotta do."

She starts the car. "Okay, let's go."

At least a dozen police cars are parked outside the red brick building. Alexa parks right by the front door, and we stare at the place for a moment before going in.

"Ready?"

I exhale. "Yes."

A grey haired woman about my height stands behind a counter, peering into a computer screen. I walk right up to her. But she ignores me and continues to type. I clear my throat, hoping to draw her attention. And she glances at me from the corner of her eye.

"Can I help you?"

"I hope so. I need to report a missing person."

My words have the desired effect, and she turns to me. "Who is this person?"

“My mom.”

At my words, she stands up from her chair. “Let’s move this to a more private place, okay?”

“Yeah. Okay.” Alexa and I follow her down a hallway to a small office where she gestures for us to take the two wooden chairs facing the desk. We sit.

“What’s your mother’s name?”

“Sarah Stephens.”

Her eyes widen slightly, and she turns to the computer, typing something. “Are you Cassie?” she asks urgently, and my stomach clenches. Something is wrong. How else would she know that?

“Yes.” I try to brace for the worst.

“We’ve been trying to contact you all day. Your mom was in an accident.”

I close my eyes. My mouth goes dry. I don’t want her to say it. Please don’t say she’s gone.

I force myself to say the words. “Is she okay?”

“Well, she’s conscious. She’s pretty beat-up, though. And she’s been asking for you ever since she woke up according to her doctors.” The woman’s voice is more matter-of-fact than sympathetic, but I don’t care. My mom isn’t dead.

“Where is she?”

“Myrtle Beach. She was assaulted and left and then later discovered by some other tourists. The police there are working on her case.”

Horrified, I press my hand to my throat. “Assaulted? By whom? Luke?”

“Luke?” She scans the page in front of her. “We don’t have any information about a Luke.”

“He’s not with her?” I nearly shout. “He did this. I know he did.”

“Well, your mom hasn’t told anyone that. She says she doesn’t remember.”

“Bull. I need to go to her. How can I get there?”

“Well. We need to discuss that. Do you have anyone that can take you?”

“I . . . no. No, I don’t.”

“The other option is that we can transport you to the next police jurisdiction toward Myrtle Beach and then they’ll transfer you to the next and so on until you get there.”

I frown. That sounds awful. But if it means I get to my mom, I’ll do it. “Uh, yeah. Okay.”

“No,” Alexa breaks in. “I’ll drive you.”

Turning to face her, I ask, “Are you sure? Won’t your parents mind?”

Her smile is small and sad. “This is pretty big, Cass. You’re my friend. They’ll understand.”

Gratitude for her fills my heart. I don’t have a lot of friends in Cypress, but I got really lucky with the few I have. “Thank you.” The words aren’t enough, but I know I’ll find a way to repay her. I turn back to the woman. I don’t want to ask, but I have to know. “Is she really okay? She’s not going to die, is she?”

The woman’s coldness diminishes a bit. “She’s okay. But she’ll probably be in the hospital a while longer.”

I nod. "Thank you." It's a relief to know for certain that Mom would never abandon me. But Luke . . . my gut is telling me this was him. I hadn't been creating something from nothing.

The woman hands me a paper. "Here's all the information you need. We'll inform the local police and your mother that you're on your way."

"Thanks," I say again.

We walk quietly to the car, and tears slip down my cheeks. This time they're from relief more than anything else. Before we reach the car, Alexa pulls me into a hug.

"Don't worry," she says. "We'll get through this. Together."