



# THE WEIGHT OF THE STARS

K . A N C R U M



{Imprint}  
MAKE YOUR MARK  
New York



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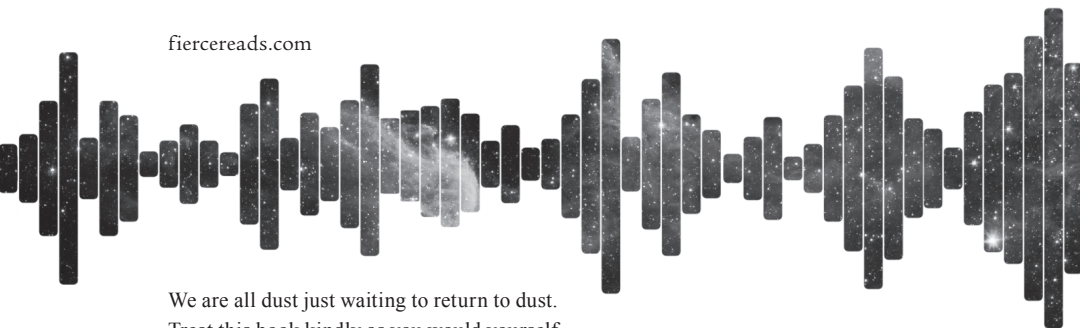
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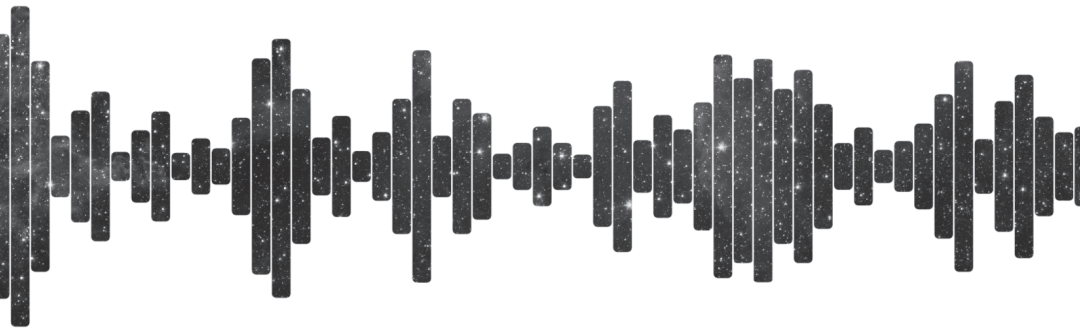
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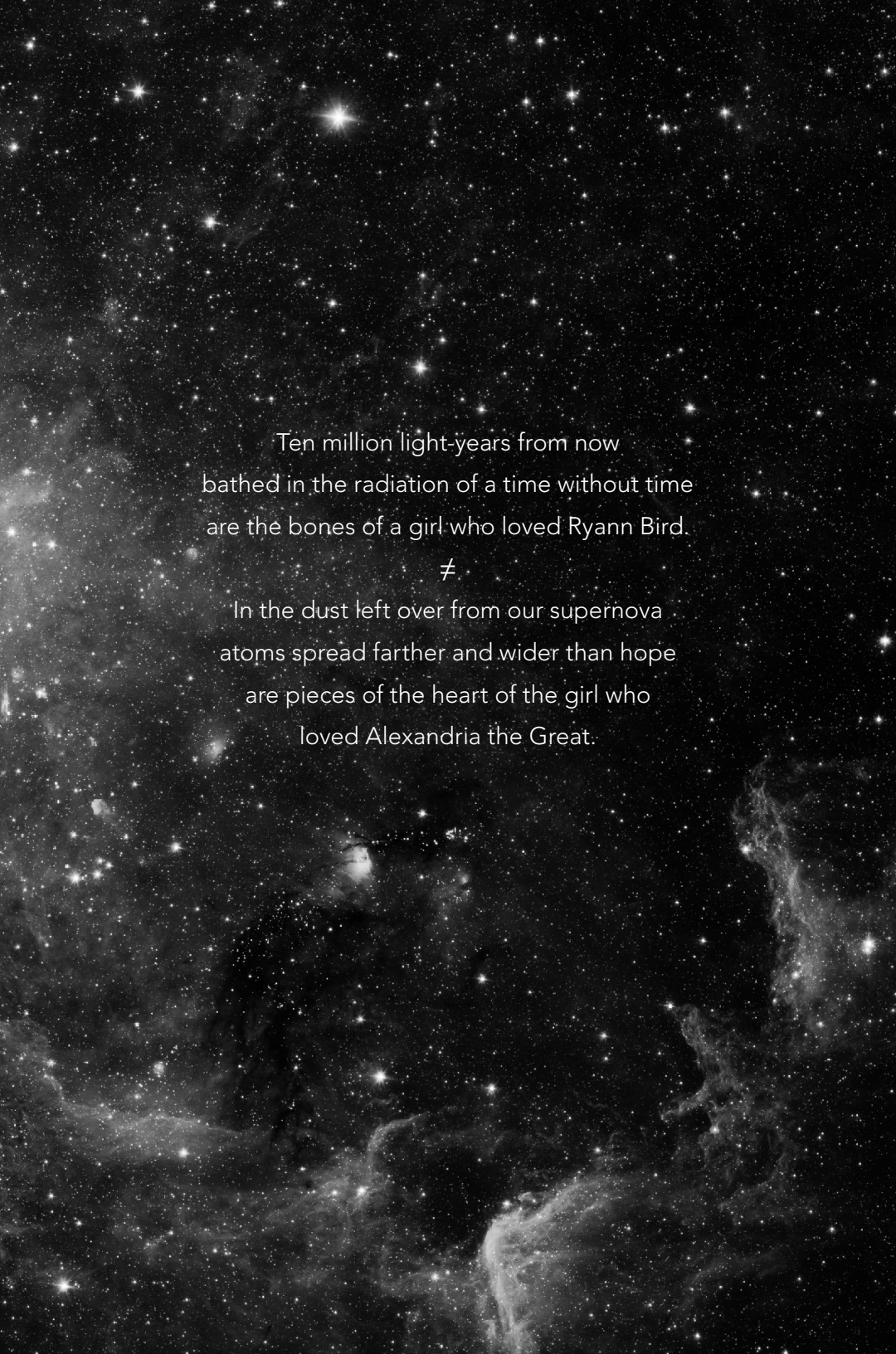
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We are all dust just waiting to return to dust.  
Treat this book kindly as you would yourself,  
Because when our sun burns all into one, it will be.

This book is for all of us who looked up at the  
sky in wonder, and then cried when we learned  
how much calculus separated us from the stars.



A black and white photograph of a starry night sky. The background is filled with numerous stars of varying brightness. A prominent nebula, likely the Orion Nebula, is visible in the lower right quadrant, showing intricate, wispy structures of gas and dust. The overall scene is dark and expansive, evoking a sense of cosmic scale.

Ten million light-years from now  
bathed in the radiation of a time without time  
are the bones of a girl who loved Ryann Bird.

≠

In the dust left over from our supernova  
atoms spread farther and wider than hope  
are pieces of the heart of the girl who  
loved Alexandria the Great.

## DAWN

She woke up to the sound of screaming.

She *always* woke up to the sound of screaming. Ryann scrunched her eyes against it for a minute and then rubbed her face in exhaustion. Eventually, she heaved herself from bed and lumbered into the living room.

“Hey, *heyheyhey*,” she whispered. “It’s okay.”

She picked up Charlie and put him in his rocker on the floor, tipping it gently back and forth with her foot as she opened the fridge.

Her younger brother, James, was still snoring loudly a couple of rooms over, but she waited until Charlie was clean and fed to pop her head in and wake him up.

“Get up, it’s six forty-five.”

James just sighed and flopped over.

“Seriously, James.” Ryann pushed herself into James’s room, kicking dirty clothes and magazines out of the way. She yanked his dresser open and pulled out a pair of torn jeans and a black T-shirt and tossed them on James’s bed.

“I’m leaving in ten minutes.” She slammed the door shut behind her.

## 15 MINUTES

Ryann wiped Charlie's face clean and buttoned him up into his cold-weather onesie. She packed the baby some food and then dropped him off with their neighbor Ms. Worthing.

By the time she got back, James was awake, dressed, and smoking on the front stairs.

"Did you eat yet?" she asked.

He stared at Ryann blankly, eyes bleary with exhaustion. His purple hair was a tangled nest. Ryann sighed in exasperation and went back inside so that she could grab some granola bars and her leather jacket.

She tossed one bar into his lap on her way out and hopped onto her motorcycle. Ryann waited patiently until she felt James sluggishly climb on behind her and put his arms loosely around her waist. Then she took off up the highway to the next town over.

## 30 MINUTES

The Bird siblings had had many good things snatched from them.

Their father had been a handyman with a small business and loyal clients. He'd had a big red beard and large hands and a laugh that echoed over fields and hills. Their mother had been a mathematician working for NASA. They loved their wild tall girl and small round boy as best they could. But, one bright morning, they died. Sometimes, people just die.

A little while afterward, James stopped talking altogether. Then, a year later he brought a baby home. A baby with red hair, owlish eyes, and a laugh that echoed. Ryann had questions, but James never answered them. And like on that terrible bright morning a year before, she swallowed hard, tightened her shoelaces, and stood up to meet it.

So there they were:

Sitting in the ruins of the best that they could build.

And it would always have to be enough.

## 45 MINUTES

There was a larger town near the one Ryann Bird lived in. Ryann drove them miles to get there every morning.

It didn't have a trailer park where girls could live, snug with their little brother and his baby. Or a Laundromat where most of the machines were broken. Or a big parking lot that was supposed to become a grocery store, but didn't.

This town had a school and a mall and the sort of families who made sure both kids ate their breakfast before they left the house. Who drove them to school in luxury cars and made sure they had school supplies.

It was the best in the district. They were lucky it was that close.

Ryann tucked her bike behind the school in the lot where teachers liked to park. James hopped off, smacked her on the shoulder in thanks, and ran to class. Ryann swung her bookbag over her shoulder and walked slowly into the building.



## 10 MINUTES

Ryann was always late, so she didn't bother to hurry. She used to run to get to her seat, but none of the teachers ever gave her a break so she just figured, why even bother?

She knew what she looked like, and she looked like trouble. So she was nearly always in it regardless of the circumstances.

Ryann had been trimming her wild black hair herself since junior year and it showed. After the bright morning accident, she had a deep scar on one cheekbone, and no matter how much concealer she used, nothing ever quite hid it. Then, to make things worse, she'd become so exhausted and red-eyed since Charlie arrived that she kept getting accused of being high even though she didn't even smoke. She looked meaner and harder than she had any business looking at this nice rich school in this nice rich neighborhood. So she just became what she looked like. It was easier than fighting it.

Ryann slammed the door open and walked in, passing right in front of the room, obscuring the light of the projector.

"Always a pleasure, Ryann," Mrs. Marsh, their history teacher, drawled sarcastically.

Ryann trudged to a chair in the back of the room. She dropped her bookbag on the floor, then tapped the kid in

front of her on the back to ask for a pencil. Jefferson, who sat in front of her most of the time and generally had loads of pencils, waved his empty pencil case. He reached forward and tapped the girl in front of him on the shoulder.

“Hey. Ryann Bird needs a pencil.”

The girl didn’t even turn around. She just sat ramrod straight in her chair and said very quietly. “Ryann can bring her own pencils to school. Just like everyone else.”

It was deafeningly quiet. Mrs. Marsh cleared her throat meaningfully.

“Any student who needs a pencil can get one from the pencil jar on the front of my desk.” she said, looking at Ryann pointedly.

Ryann got up, went to the front of the room, and grabbed a few.

As she walked back to her desk, she reached out and let her fingertips glide over the top of the desk of the girl who’d denied her. As gentle and silent as a promise.

## 33 MINUTES

Their town was small. New residents couldn't escape scrutiny if they tried, but this was definitely the first time Ryann had seen this girl at her school. Even so, Ryann couldn't quite shake the feeling that she was familiar somehow.

She hadn't been called on in class at all, so Ryann didn't know her name. She was brand-new, so it wasn't like Ryann could look her up on Facebook by looking up mutual friends from school and scouring their network for her name.

And she looked different.

She was at least half black—which was rare here. This town was unfortunately pretty homogenous.

She had very short bleached-blond hair and severe, thunderous eyebrows. Her mouth had been tight and angry looking—which was rich because she was the one being rude.

Ryann stared at the back of the girl's head and tapped her pencil against the side of her desk.

## 12 MINUTES

The bell rang. Ryann shoved her things back into her book-bag and rushed toward the door.

“Miss Bird, can I see you for a minute?”

A wave of exhaustion and irritation swept over her, but Ryann turned around to face her history teacher.

“Come wait by my desk.”

Mrs. Marsh wiped off the projector and cleared the white-board while the rest of the students filed out. When the last person besides Ryann had gone, she closed the door.

She settled back down at her desk and pushed a small stack of worksheets to the side. “I have a favor to ask you.”

“Will I get extra credit?” Ryann crossed her arms and stared down at Mrs. Marsh.

“Hmmm . . . maybe I’ll round up when we do a bell curve.”

Ryann nodded. “Continue.”

“As you noticed, we have a new student with us. Her name is Alexandria Macallough.”

“Rude girl, won’t make direct eye contact?” Ryann asked.

“Yes. Now, I know that normally a request like this wouldn’t come to someone like you naturally, but it would be a huge help if you could look after her a bit. She’s going to have some difficulty adjusting and making friends here, and from

what I can see, you have a bit of a track record for reaching out to people like that. Plus with the circumstances—”

“What circumstances?” Ryann interrupted.

Mrs. Marsh explained further. Ryann nodded and relaxed a bit as she listened.

“That’s different,” she said when Mrs. Marsh finished. “I thought you were going to ask me something else. But yeah, it’s no problem. I’ll see if I can get her to open up.”

“I’m sorry. This is such a difficult circumstance for me. I’ve never had to assign someone to befriend someone else before,” Mrs. Marsh admitted. “But I just felt like you might be the only person who could reach out in a way that would work.”

Ryann snorted. “Well, that’s flattering. Are you going to want to check in with me about it?”

“Maybe every few weeks or so. It’s important, but not so important that we need to meet every day,” Mrs. Marsh said.

“Hmm.” Ryann crossed her arms again and thought about it for a bit.

“I would really appreciate it and I’m sure Alexandria would, too,” Mrs. Marsh said softly.

Ryann’s phone buzzed in her pocket, so she whipped it out. Her best friend, Ahmed, had texted a bunch of question marks. She sent back a single exclamation point.

“I’ve gotta go, but we’ve got a deal. If you don’t want to do regular meetings, I’ll just swing by after class if I have any questions or updates.” Ryann walked over to the door, but stopped right before stepping through it. “And thanks for the bell curve leniency.” She smirked.

Mrs. Marsh rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, you’re welcome. Go to your next class before I have to write you a pass.”

## 2 HOURS AND 15 MINUTES

Ahmed Bateman, Ryann's best friend, was ten times what anyone expected him to be. He was beautiful, with black eyes and black hair that he wound up tightly into his navy blue turban. His face was angular, but pretty, and he was a bit on the shorter side.

He looked like his parents. Like all three of them. Two dads and one mom.

They showed up to report-card pickups and school events shamelessly, all three, hand in hand. There were ghosts of them all over Ahmed, to the point where it was impossible to ask who fathered Ahmed without being savagely impolite and overly specific.

Ryann liked Ahmed because weathering that had made him tough, but living it had made him sweet. A winning combination, which prompted Ahmed to decide it was a great idea to backhand Thompson when he called Ryann a dyke when they were in fifth grade—even though he and Ryann had never spoken to each other before.

They'd been close ever since. No one but James knew her better.

So when Ryann texted Ahmed that exclamation point, he knew to gather the others so they all could discuss something important.

## 2 CLASS PERIODS

A little past the baseball diamonds, behind the building, there was a huge hill. There were a lot of places to meet in the city, but this was the only one close enough to get to between classes without shirking the entire day.

Shannon, Blake, Tomas, and James were already waiting for Ahmed and Ryann at the top.

Shannon was exceptionally popular, but Blake and Tomas were a year younger, juniors like James. They'd both opted to be a bit more alternative than was considered appropriate—Tomas, gangly and tall with his bright red Mohawk, and Blake who shaved his head and had been giving himself stick-and-poke tattoos since middle school. They didn't have anyone else to be with, so Ryann had gathered them beneath her wing.

"There's a new kid!" Ahmed hollered up the hill.

"Really?!" Tomas shouted back. "Are you sure someone didn't just get a bad haircut?"

"NO!" Ahmed yelled indignantly.

When they finally reached the top, Ahmed collapsed to the grass, panting, and covered his eyes.

"It's a girl," Ahmed explained. "She's cute and stuff. She's got history with Ryann, but that's not—"



Blake cut Ahmed off. "So what, who cares?"

"I do," Ryann said firmly. She slung her bookbag to the ground and lay down between Shannon and James. "She's a celebrity. Well, kind of . . . Do any of you remember that project I did for Science Fair last year?"

"No," Shannon, Tomas, and Blake all said in unison.

Ryann scowled. "Okay. Twenty years ago, after NASA was absorbed into the US military, a bunch of private space exploration companies got a ton of investments in, because a lot of people disapproved of the militarization of a public good like space exploration, which made space privatization seem a lot less sinister in comparison. Anyway, there was this company called SCOUT that was super focused on extended missions. They used their investment to gather a bunch of people to send off to the edge of space—"

"Why?" Blake interrupted.

Ryann shrugged. "It was a combination science and art thing. They wanted to have human beings experience the actual journey outside of our solar system. Kind of like the Golden Record, but instead of being there for observation, they're supposed to send back their feelings about the experiences they'll have. Plus, it was a privatized company so their regulations were a bit more flexible. Which leads me to my next point.

"The reason I did my project on SCOUT was because it

was super controversial. Privatized space companies have more flexibility, but they still have to follow general laws. For this mission, SCOUT seemed to be scraping the edge of every limit. Everyone who went had to be at least eighteen so they could personally make the choice to go legally, but young so they'd have around fifty years of mission time. And SCOUT picked only girls because they naturally have better longevity and also did consistently better in psych simulations for long-term travel in tight confines."

"Yikes," Blake said.

"All the candidates were chosen specifically to avoid family attachments," Ryann continued. "But then a journalist uncovered that one of the girls got pregnant and had the kid right before she left. Apparently SCOUT suppressed information about that and waited to deliver the newborn to the family until the candidate left on the mission. Then they covered up their ethical fuckup to avoid bad press, at the expense of a whole family, but news about it wound up getting out anyway. The scandal was so dramatic that a bunch of regulations were passed immediately afterward to stop anything like it from happening again."

"Yiiiiikeesssssss," Blake said, wincing even harder.

"Why isn't any of this more common knowledge?" Shannon asked curiously.

"It happened when we were all maybe one or two years old. It *was* common knowledge and extremely scandalous, but it was a long time ago," Ryann explained. "The only reason I know so much about it is—"

"Because you're a turbo-nerd in love with space-trash. Or at least you used to be," Tomas interrupted. He was texting and barely paying attention.

"Wow." Ahmed turned to scowl at Tomas. "What is wrong with you today?"

"Anyway," Ryann said louder. "The only reason I know about this is because my mom used to be really mad about it and talked about it with her coworkers a lot."

"So what does any of this have to do with anything?" Blake asked.

"*She's* the kid," Ryann said.

Tomas looked up from his phone. "What?"

"The new girl is that kid," Ahmed said. "The one whose teen mom went to *die in space*, Tomas." He slapped Tomas's phone out of his hands and onto the grass. "Did you even listen to any of that? Her name is Alexandria."

Shannon put her chin in her hands contemplatively. "Did she tell you all this herself?"

"No. I . . . haven't spoken to her directly yet. But for obvious reasons, Mrs. Marsh wants me to look after her," Ryann

said. She tapped her fingers against the ground anxiously, then turned to Tomas. "Alexandria seems really standoffish in a way that reminded me of you when I first met you, so she probably needs a tougher approach rather than anything straightforward."

"Great," Tomas griped. "More strays."

"You say that like Ryann didn't come to find you, too," Blake said. He picked up Tomas's phone and rubbed it clean with his shirt.

## 2 HOURS LATER

Ryann walked back to school from the hill to pick up James. He'd left earlier to go to woodshop, one of the after-school electives. James seemed happy to see her and showed her the chair he was building, which was nice. But she kept thinking about the girl from this morning and how rude she was. It was beginning to piss her off all over again.

As they walked over to her bike, James bumped Ryann with his shoulder and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"It's nothing," Ryann replied.

James scowled and gripped her arm gently, but Ryann shrugged him off and got on her bike.

"Quit it. I mean it," she snapped, revving the engine a bit to drive her point.

But it didn't help. James always knew when she was feeling any type of way.

He climbed onto the bike behind her and put the point of his chin right in her spine. Ryann sucked her teeth in sharp annoyance, but took off anyway.

After a while, James sighed in resignation and laid his head flat against her back. Ryann felt bad for snapping at him.

“I have to pick up some groceries, Birdie,” she said gently, using his nickname from when they were little. “Can you carry them?”

He nodded into her jacket. She swerved past the exit home and headed to the store.

## 30 MINUTES

Ryann didn't like shopping in this town, but she didn't have many other options. Everyone always stared at her and James like they shouldn't be in there. But it had everything they needed, and the pharmacist was nice enough to remember James's name. Even though the prices were a bit higher than in the town they were from, the quality was always better so it was worth it.

Ryann pushed the cart down the cereal aisle and handed a box of Cheerios to James, who had wedged himself in the part of the cart where food usually goes.

"We getting eggs this week?"

James shook his head.

"Do you even like eggs anymore?" Ryann asked.

James scowled and pointed to the next aisle over. Ryann smiled fondly.

"Fine. No eggs this week. But you need prot—"

"We have two more days before the movers send our stuff over?!" someone shouted.

Ryann looked up.

At the end of the aisle was the girl, Alexandria. She was shopping with a stern-looking older blond man, who was clearly ignoring her.

James twisted around to see what Ryann was staring at, then looked up at her in concern.

“It’s already been three weeks!” Alexandria continued. “I don’t know why—”

Alexandria gazed up the aisle to find the Bird siblings gawking at her. She stopped short, staring back.

Ryann schooled her face into a mask and studied Alexandria.

She was shorter than Ryann had thought from seeing her sitting down this morning. Her hair had been dyed platinum, but she hadn’t kept up with it, so dark roots were starting to show. She was one of those people with red splotchy faces who always look like they are about to cry. But her eyes were dark and angry.

Ryann itched to fill the awkward silence with something, but nothing seemed to be right. Instead she looked down at James, gripped the cart railing so tight her knuckles turned white, and pushed the cart down a different aisle.



## 4 HOURS

Later that night, Ryann lay in her bed. She curled her arm around Charlie and breathed.

The moon washed her room out in light blue, and it was hard to sleep when the sky was so bright. She'd broken her blinds a couple months ago and kept forgetting to get new ones, so James had tacked up one of his extra sheets. But it wasn't completely opaque.

She was so exhausted these days that it was beginning to affect her mood. It was easier now than when Charlie had first arrived a year ago, since he was old enough to sleep through the night these days. But it was still ten times harder to get enough rest than it was before any of this happened.

She pulled out her phone and texted Ahmed.

**Ryann:** You awake?

Ahmed texted back immediately.

**Ahmed:** Yes. My parents have friends over and they're being loud as fuck. It's like 1am please come here and kill us all so I can finally find rest in death

Ryann snorted. Drama Queen.

**Ryann:** That's too much effort. Have you tried asking them to settle down?

**Ahmed:** Have . . . you met . . . my family . . .

Then a few seconds later:

**Ahmed:** I'm considering going to sleep in the woods.

**Ryann:** You could always come up here?

**Ahmed:** Too far. Too lazy. I'll just lie here and struggle.

I'll see you tomorrow

## THE NEXT DAY

This time, Ryann got to class early. She put her boots up on the desk and motioned for Ahmed to come sit next to her. Ahmed usually sat near the front, but he raised an eyebrow in curiosity and shuffled his supplies to Ryann's right side.

Ryann tapped her pencil on the desk. "I ran into Alexandria in the store yesterday. She reminds me of Blake."

Ahmed snorted. "Blake's an asshole."

"Yeah, but like . . . an asshole in a lonely, isolated, lashing-out way," Ryann said. "She was yelling at her dad in public, which was kind of wild. I feel bad for her."

Ahmed tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling for a solid two minutes, then sighed deeply. "You're not going to feel satisfied until you try to be her friend for real. Like . . . I know Mrs. Marsh asked you to do this, but I *know* you," he said resignedly. "Because that's what you do. Literally compulsively rescuing people from themselves like it's a part-time job or whatever. Just . . . go and try so we can either add her to our group or she can yell at you like she's already yelled at like five other people."

Ryann crossed her arms. "Fine. I will."

### 3 CLASS PERIODS

The lunchroom was largely segregated by grade and then again by social class. No one was allowed to leave the building for any reason, so it was always packed.

Ryann and her friends usually sat at the back near some of the baseball players. On their other side was the pom-squad. Shannon Greenly from the squad, who was entirely too popular to be hanging out with them in the first place, had moved to the back to sit with Ryann. The entire squad eventually followed and they never left.

Today, however, Ryann opted to seek out Alexandria, who was—predictably—sitting alone. She was wearing a jean jacket and holding her fork in a fist as she scraped at the dry chicken nuggets they were serving today. She looked angry and disgusted. Ryann walked past Tomas, Blake, and Ahmed, who watched her curiously.

Ryann slid her tray onto Alexandria's table and sat down. Ahmed, watching from across the room, silently shook his head.

Alexandria looked up instantly and narrowed her eyes at Ryann.

"Why are you here?" she demanded.

"Why are you alone?" Ryann asked back, popping a french fry into her mouth.

“Why are *you*?” she shot back.

“I’m not.” Ryann smiled. “I’m Ryann, we have history together. We don’t get new people in this town often, so I’m curious. What’s your name?”

Alexandria’s mouth pressed into a thin angry line. Then she wordlessly got up, scraped all her food into the trash, and walked out of the lunchroom, leaving Ryann sitting alone.

“YIKES,” Tomas yelled from across the room.

Ryann got up, grabbed her tray, and walked to where she usually sat. Shannon patted her hand sympathetically.

“It was a nice try,” she said, then turned back to continue her conversation. “Anyway, Samantha’s boyfriend’s cousin invited Morgan and me to a party tonight. But Jenny’s going to be there and I totally hate her because last year she wore the same dress as me to homecoming and she knew I was going to buy that one because I texted her about it beforehand, but she still bought the same one anyway.”

“That bitch,” Ryann replied. She tossed a french fry into her mouth and gazed at the empty table where Alexandria had been sitting.

“I know.” Shannon rolled her eyes. “So anyway, Jenny’s boyfriend, Chad, is a huge dick who always gets drunk and tries to fight people, which is totally gross because he’s in

college. And I don't know whether I want to go tonight and I don't have a ride."

"Eh. You should make an appearance at least," Ryann said after some thought. "Keep your name in other people's mouths. I'll take care of it." She nudged Ahmed with the toe of her boot. "Greenly needs a ride; you wanna party tonight?"

"With who?" Ahmed asked, not looking up from the game of cards he, Blake, and Tomas were playing.

"Prep kids from uptown. Shit music, probably, but they might have free food."

"I'm always a slut for free food," Ahmed said, putting a card down. "What time?"

Ryann looked over to Shannon, who shrugged.

"Pick her up at nine," Ryann said.

## AT THE END OF THE DAY

Charlie wouldn't stop fussing. The instant Ryann had pulled him from Ms. Worthing's arms, he'd begun to cry and hadn't stopped after more than an hour.

Ryann jiggled the baby in one arm as she pulled clean clothes off the clothesline in the back, rocked him while she Febrezed her leather jacket, sang to him a bit while she tidied up her room. But nothing seemed to work. Eventually James smacked at Ryann's arms in aggravation, scooped Charlie up, and took him into his room to give him a bottle.

Ryann used the rare moment of freedom to throw on some clean black jeans and a white T-shirt. She put a pot on the stove and put some water on to boil. She took out some macaroni, tomato paste, garlic powder, and cheese, and left them on the counter with some hastily written instructions for James.

Then she tossed on her jacket and knocked on the wall leading to James's room. "Can I come in?"

James knocked back twice, so she opened the door.

"You coming tonight?" Ryann asked, leaning against the door frame.

James shook his head and nodded at Charlie, who had finally dropped off to sleep in his arms.

Ryann watched them for a bit.

“You’re better with him than I am,” she said quietly.

James shrugged, pulled out his phone, and typed into the notes section: *He’s my kid, that’s a good thing. Plus, not all girls are domestic. You don’t have to be the best at everything.*

Ryann snorted and shrugged. “Yeah whatever.”

James raised an eyebrow and continued typing: *Don’t get into any fights*



## 1 HOUR

An hour later, Ryann punched—Chad? Chuck? He was Jenny's boyfriend, whatever his name was—in the throat.

Jenny's boyfriend launched himself across the beer pong table, but Ryann sidestepped him and he fell drunkenly, skidding across the floor. Before he could get up, Ryann sat on his chest, pinning an arm beneath each leg and slapping Chuck? Chad? across the face a couple times with her open palm.

A few people laughed, which made the man even angrier.

"Someone get this trailer trash off me, or I'm calling the cops!" he screamed.

"What the fuck did you just say?!" Ryann leaned in close, daring him to repeat it.

Jenny's boyfriend spat into her face.

Ryann snatched a beer bottle off the ground and smashed the bottom off against the wall, but Ahmed grabbed her arm.

"No, Ryann, no. It's not worth it. Let's just go," Ahmed pleaded.

Ryann dropped the bottle, curled her hand into a fist, and went to punch the guy again, but stopped short.

Jenny's boyfriend flinched.

"You're a coward and you're way too old to be here, you

pompous piece of shit.” She got up, rolled her shoulders, and stalked into the kitchen to grab a glass of water. Shannon ran in after her.

“So . . . you guys should probably leave,” she said, putting a hand gently on Ryann’s arm. “But Jenny’s crying now, so I’m having a *great* time. I’ll grab a ride home with one of the pom-squad.”

“Yeah. *Yeah*. Okay,” Ryann agreed, shaking her head, trying to pull herself out of the fog. “We’ll take off.”

She called out to Tomas and the rest of her friends. Then she paused, leaned down, and patted Shannon on the cheek. “Night, Greenly.”

Shannon grinned. “Get home safe!”

## 30 MINUTES

Ahmed was driving everyone home down a road in one of the nicer parts of town, when Tomas spotted something strange.

Ahead of them, balanced precariously on the edge of the roof of a house, was the new kid from their history class. Alexandria's hair was crisp white in the moonlight, and she wasn't wearing a jacket even though it was getting cold outside.

She was holding her arm up high in the air, and there was something in her hand.

"Pull up next to the house," Ryann said.

Ahmed looked at her warily but did it anyway.

Ryann hopped out of the car and cupped her hand around her mouth.

"Hey, new kid, what the fuck are you doing up there?" she yelled.

The girl turned, looked down to see who was talking to her, then turned completely back around. She didn't respond.

"Yo. Asshole," Blake yelled.

Alexandria didn't even turn around this time.

"Chill out a bit," Ryann hissed.

"Why are you so fucking rude?" she called out instead.

"Who just sits on their roof staring at the sky? It's like

one a.m. We have school tomorrow,” Tomas muttered.

“Just let it go.” Blake rolled his eyes. “She’s a dick, *you’re* a dick. Everyone in this school is a dick. Just look her up in the yearbook at the end of the year, or fight her and get it over with.”

Ryann glared at Alexandria’s back.

“Well now we know she’s into astronomy. At least you two have that in common,” Tomas said thoughtfully.

“If I don’t get a name, I’m making one up,” Ryann yelled.

The girl sat so still, but after a second, her head turned—just a little bit—to catch the sound.

Ryann grinned victoriously. *There we are.* She opened the car door and slid inside.

## 2 DAYS

You couldn't nice some people open. Ryann knew that well.

Sometimes the only way to pry your arms away from tightly holding yourself together is when you're given a reason to hold up your fists. Fighting for yourself is another way of loving yourself.

That's the sort of knowledge you have to earn through experience.

It was indelicate, but it was honest. Angry people like Alexandria preferred that kind of honesty. Angry like Tomas had been. Angry like Ryann had been.

## NEXT WEEK

They began to bother her.

It was little things at first: bumping her shoulder in the hallway, laughing whenever she said anything in class, mimicking her until her face got red. Eventually, it began to escalate. Tomas knocked her hat off while he was walking by. Ahmed flicked water at the back of her neck for a full class period. Blake filled her locker with bits of paper by painstakingly shoving it all through the tiny slats.

Ryann kept her hands clean.

She never did anything directly, just watched—curious—as Alexandria took it all in silence and rage. Curious, when Alexandria pushed Tomas down the stairs and walked away. When she threw her water bottle at the back of Ahmed's neck when he got up to leave, drenching him as well as he had drenched her and giving him a welt on top of it. When she cleaned up the mess from her locker wordlessly, and then when Blake showed up for school the next day, his entire locker door had been removed from the hinges.

It was like nothing Ryann had ever seen before.

At the moment, Ahmed was casually tossing bits of paper at the back of Alexandria's head—trying to get them to stick

in her hair. She was sitting stock-still, only flinching when pieces would tumble free and brush her neck.

Ryann watched dispassionately for a while.

Suddenly, Alexandria gripped her pen like she was ready to stab Ahmed, so Ryann nudged his arm.

“Quit it.”

Ahmed sighed loudly and stopped.

After a moment, Alexandria reached up, gently brushed the paper out of her hair and onto the ground, rearranged her pen in her hands, and then continued writing.

Mrs. Marsh caught Ryann’s eye. She looked worried. She didn’t need to be.

## 5 HOURS

Mrs. Marsh kept Ryann waiting as she tidied up the room.

“Do you need any help with that?” Ryann asked after a while.

“Do you mind erasing the board and wiping down the whiteboard?” Mrs. Marsh picked up the broom and began sweeping.

Ryann sighed and grabbed the eraser.

“So how are things going with Alexandria?” Mrs. Marsh asked warily. “She seems . . .”

“Angrier?” Ryann replied. “Yeah. You should have seen Tomas though, that whole situation was *much* worse.”

“I’m sure.”

“No, really,” Ryann said as she scrubbed. “He’s the only person who’s successfully punched me in the face.” Ryann added under her breath, “Nearly knocked me the fuck out.”

Mrs. Marsh looked shocked. “Did he get suspended?!”

“It wasn’t on school grounds, so no. And he did it because I kidnapped him and he woke up in rehab, so . . .”

“Ah.”

“Blake was much simpler,” Ryann said. “At least no one got arrested.”

Mrs. Marsh dumped the dustpan in the trash and stuck



the broom back into the corner. "I don't mean to be frank, but I'm uncomfortable with the way you're handling this. Why do you think this will work? And she seems like she's not reacting well. If you don't get a handle on this, we'll terminate this arrangement and we'll have to have a discussion with the principal about how to resolve any damages."

Ryann shrugged. "It will work itself out, I promise. Besides, my mom used to say that if something that comes hard for others comes easy to you, you should do it for them. Getting people to open up is hard for other people, but it's easy for me."

"You got punched in the face," Mrs. Marsh remarked. "It really doesn't sound easy."

Ryann looked out the window at the other students leaving class. "It is, though. People are easy. We're all made of the same stuff. Even if you arrange it in different ways or make puzzles of it."

Mrs. Marsh grinned. "Do you mean that in a chemistry way or in a psychology way?"

"Both?" Ryann replied seriously. "Maybe the reason the psychology way works is because of the chemistry reason."

Mrs. Marsh bit her lip and drummed her nails on the desk behind her. "Are you in AP psych, chem, or physics?"

Ryann shook her head.

“You should be,” Mrs. Marsh said firmly.

“I don’t have time for the homework,” Ryann replied. She tossed her bookbag over her shoulders.

“But you have time for this?”

Ryann hummed contemplatively. “I have to go. See you tomorrow.”

“It’s because this is more important, isn’t it?” Mrs. Marsh called.

Ryann closed the door behind her.

## BLUR

This part was always difficult for Ryann to remember clearly. There were only bits and pieces that came in fits and starts.

She remembered leaving her bike at school.

She remembered the hazy smoke she shared with Shannon Greenly in the back of Ahmed's car. The kaleidoscope sunshine, and the warmth of James's hand as he dragged it through her hair. She didn't remember who had decided to stop by Blake's and get drinks.

She was just suddenly there and laughing with his friends and someone dropped their keys and that was so funny for some reason.

She had her hand out the car window. Letting her fingers ride the wind's waves.

Then it was night and Tomas wouldn't shut up. And he was doing that stupid dance he did sometimes, while Shannon laughed. She felt grounded by James's soft weight by her side. But it wasn't enough, because Ahmed wanted to do something exciting. He wanted adventure. His black eyes were glittering like beetles.

Ryann slung her arm around Ahmed's neck and joined his howling.

Then the engine rumbled underneath them, screeching

crisp and clear as they whipped down the street. And everything was blue and black and blue and black and orange like the streetlights, blurring together until there was a pinprick of white that got closer and closer as Ahmed pressed on the gas, and then Ryann's sneakers hit the pavement outside as they all got out of the car, and then everything went crisp.

## 8 MINUTES

What happened next was difficult for Ryann to forget.

Rising like a monolith out of the din.

There was the straight back and shittily bleached hair, arm held high, shadow long against the pavement in the light of the moon.

Violent in its relief.

And like Ryann's eyes, had sucked away the senses from her ears. She heard her friends, yelling and laughing like they were at the end of a tunnel, and saw Alexandria sitting on the roof like she was a handbreadth away.

Ryann *knew* Alexandria heard them. She'd flinched the moment they drove up to her house.

Ryann remembered Ahmed yelling something teasing. Nothing mean, but enough to get Alexandria's attention.

Tomas picked up some gravel and tossed it onto the roof from the street. The first rock bounced off the roof and flew back into the garden. The next knocked into an upstairs window, nearly breaking it.

Alexandria turned around, eyes blazing.

"You're pathetic," she shouted.

"That may be true, but what does that make you?" Ryann said back.

Alexandria's face went ashen. She picked up one of the rocks Tomas had successfully landed on the roof and threw it with stunning accuracy.

It launched toward the sidewalk like a comet and struck Ryann on the side of the face, snapping her head back with an audible crack.

## 2 MINUTES

Ahmed gasped.

“Oh man, she actually hit you!” Blake crowed, laughing nervously.

Ryann clutched the top of her face and sucked air through her teeth to deal with the pain. Then she faced Alexandria, who had gotten to her feet and was staring down at all of them, furious. It was pleasing to feel firsthand that Alexandria was strong. It made Ryann’s blood run hot and fast.

“You have good aim.” Ryann grinned.

Alexandria’s face went soft with confusion.

“What?” she said, and leaned forward.

The roof made a startling noise.

Alexandria scrambled back from the edge instinctively, but overcorrected; the object she was holding flew out of her hand haphazardly. Then like some sort of nightmare, they all watched as she slipped.

Alexandria hit the ground with a smack.

She didn’t move or make a sound.

No one breathed.

Then Ahmed immediately turned and ran to his car without looking back. After a couple of horrifying seconds, Blake and Tomas followed.

“Shit! Shit!!” Ryann gasped. She went to run to check if Alexandria was even alive, but James dragged her back with all his might. Somewhere behind him, Shannon was crying.

A light went on in the house, and the curtains were snatched open. Ryann locked eyes with the stern man she’d seen at the grocery store. She wrenched her arm out of James’s grip and rushed over to check if Alexandria was all right, but then Alexandria’s dad opened the door.

“GET AWAY FROM MY HOUSE!” he roared. “GET AWAY FROM HER!”

His eyes were wide and terrified.

Ryann opened her mouth to say something, but James shoved her into the car.

They sped off into the night.



## 45 MINUTES

Ryann and James got home and rushed to Ms. Worthing's and picked up Charlie. Ms. Worthing looked confused when she opened the door.

"Y'all out here, tearin' down the street, white as ghosts!" Ms. Worthing said, pursing her lips suspiciously. "Don't tell me y'all are bringin' trouble round here—"

"We're not," Ryann said quickly. "Thank you for watching Charlie."

As soon as their trailer door closed behind them, James snatched Charlie out of Ryann's arms, took the baby to his room, and slammed the door.

Ryann lay awake for the whole night.

Her heart raced every time she heard sirens.

## 17 HOURS

Everybody was talking about it the next day at school. No one had the details straight. Some people said Alexandria was pushed. Others said she jumped.

Ryann sat down in the back of her history class, for once not making a racket, and opened her notebook. The seat two desks in front of her was empty.

She hadn't heard anyone mention her name yet, but she was still uneasy.

Ahmed sat down next to her. He looked shaken and exhausted.

"I won't tell," he said. "Blake's and Tomas's parents had them stay home."

Ryann nodded, still staring at the empty chair.

"...?"

Ryann shook her head to clear it, she was sure someone was talking to her.

"... I *said*, how's James?" Ahmed asked again, nudging Ryann's arm.

Ryann shook her head again and rubbed her eyes. "He's not talking to me."

Ahmed chuckled humorlessly. "Not to be a downer, bro. But James doesn't talk to anyone."

Ryann grimaced. There weren't other words to describe what she meant. James had gotten up by himself, fed the baby, and dropped him off. He'd made himself breakfast and left without Ryann. Taking the one bus that went all the way out to where they lived, rather than ride on Ryann's bike with her.

When she got up, the house was cold and empty and there was a note on the table that just said, *Fix it*.

When she saw him in the hallway at school, he'd turned away from her.

James was excellent at holding grudges. He was stubborn, principled, and virtuous, just like their mom had been.

It hadn't even been a day yet and she already missed him.

And there was the hole where Alexandria should be sitting. And Mrs. Marsh's eyes watching her, worried and dark.

## 32 MINUTES

Mrs. Marsh kept Ryann waiting in silence while she sat and stared out the window. Ryann hadn't felt this way since her mom was alive and making that same face: tired, disgusted eyes with a tight, angry set to her jaw.

Ryann shifted in her chair anxiously.

"Did you do this?" Mrs. Marsh asked quietly.

"Not on purpose."

"Did you push her?" Mrs. Marsh's eyes were still on the other students walking outside.

Ryann swallowed.

"She fell," Ryann replied quietly.

Finally, Mrs. Marsh turned to look at her. "Do you mean that in a literal way, or are you talking around your actions to avoid responsibility for something that may not have happened if you were not there to guide it?"

Ryann didn't know how to answer that without reinforcing Mrs. Marsh's suspicion, so she sat quietly and waited for the lecture that was undoubtedly about to follow.

"You're smart," Mrs. Marsh said. "But you aren't clever. Not all the time. You're a lot of things, but I never expected that cruel was one of them—"

"I was never intending to be cruel—" Ryann interrupted.

“That may be so,” Mrs. Marsh said. “But does Alexandria know that? Does her family know? Do your friends know? Do they respect this part of you?”

Ryann didn’t know how to answer any of that.

Mrs. Marsh leaned back in her chair and looked at Ryann for a while. “Figure out what kind of person you want to be. Until you make a decision about the repercussions of your actions, I think you should leave Alexandria alone. She doesn’t need this, and neither do you.”