

**WE ARE
THE
GHOSTS**

**VICKY
SKINNER**

Swoon **READS**

New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

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FOR ALICE

*“Their love and their hatred and their envy have already
perished; neither have they any more a share in anything
that is done under the sun.”*

—ECCLESIASTES 9:6 (AMPC)

“When my time comes, forget the wrong that I’ve done.”

—LINKIN PARK

ONE

I have a sex dream about James Dean the night I find out my brother is dead. I watched *Rebel Without a Cause* before bed, hours before my mother woke me in a panic, and it's all I can think about while she tells me Luke's Mazda slid on an icy road, taking him right off the side of a bridge somewhere in Michigan.

I stare down at the dining room table, unsure of what to do. I want to tell my parents that they can't be saying this to me right now because it's the middle of the night and I have to work in the morning. Instead of telling them this, I think about James Dean. I think of him in my mind yelling, "You're tearing me apart!" instead of my mother telling me that someone from the police station in Ann Arbor called her an hour ago, after they found Luke's car upside down in the Huron River.

"Ellie? Are you okay?"

Later, when I think back on this moment, I'll focus on the fact that neither of my parents is crying. Shouldn't they be blubbering?

Shouldn't they be crawling over each other to get to me, the only child they have left? It feels like it should be that way, like pictures of parents when they've found out their children went away to war and never came back. But my parents aren't crying. My father is staring down at the table, his eyes wide and unfocused, like he's not actually seeing anything, and my mother is just staring at me. What is she waiting for? They're not touching each other. My mother sits with her hands in her lap while my father keeps his arms on the tabletop. Neither of them reaches for me.

"Ellie?"

I know my mother is asking me a question, but I can't see her anymore. Or hear her. My world goes fuzzy, and I stand up from the table, holding my stomach because I suddenly feel like all my insides are going to come spilling out, until I'm nothing but a lumpy mess on the carpet.

My brother's body is lying on a slab in a morgue in Ann Arbor. I imagine it as I walk away from the table, his skin cold and pale the way that they always portray it on TV, his chest cut open down the middle so that someone can do an autopsy. Maybe this is really how it is. Maybe it isn't. I don't really know.

According to my mother, it's pretty clear that his tires slipped on the icy road, so I don't think they'd even do an autopsy. Luke never drove on ice. After that time he skidded on his way to school and ended up facing oncoming traffic, he did everything he could to avoid it. I want to tell her she's mistaken. That he slid off that bridge but that some kind bystander dove in after him, pulling him free and performing mouth-to-mouth on the edge of the highway.

But that isn't what happened. No one saved Luke. Luke is gone.

Luke is dead.

I'm chanting it over and over in my head as I move down the hallway toward the bathroom. I don't make it all the way there. I throw up on the carpet outside of my parents' bedroom.



I **don't want** to go to the funeral. It's more than just everyone staring at me. They've been staring for the last week, making my skin crawl, making me feel like I should walk around with a black veil over my face or something, like I'm on display.

And it's more than seeing everyone I know in the church. I know everyone from Eaton High will be there. They'll be there because everyone loved Luke and everyone knew him and now he's gone. To them, he'll be the track star, the debate champion, the golden boy forever, a smiling face in the yearbook. What it must be like to be able to shed a tear at a funeral and then move on with your life.

But it's more than the fact that it's Luke's funeral. To me, funerals are some kind of social ritual, something you do so that you can put your grief on display, but experts (apparently) say that not going to a funeral can stunt your grieving process.

Grieving process. Like it's a science experiment.

I always thought of funerals happening on cold, cloudy days, people holding umbrellas or pulling their thick coats tight around them. But on the day of Luke's funeral, the sun is shining. It's a sweltering Texas summer day as we walk into the church with everyone's eyes on us—my father, my mother, and me, trailing behind because I'd rather be the one going in the ground than the one witnessing it.

When we get to the front of the room, my mother goes into the pew first, but my father gestures for me to scoot in before him. They're going to trap me between them like a child at a movie theater so that I can't make a run for it while their attention is diverted.

I keep my eyes away from the casket the whole time. It's closed, thank God, even though no one explained to me why. I can't bring myself to ask any questions. Too many graphic possibilities cross my mind. My hands tremble slightly, and I'm not positive if it's because of the attention, eyes hot on my skin, or the huge picture of Luke

sitting on a stand at the front of the room. I keep my eyes off it, too, the picture from his graduation, even though knowing it's there is enough to make something heavy settle right at the base of my throat. I think I can handle being watched by the whole city of Eaton today; I can't take being watched by Luke, too.

I don't sing the hymns. I don't listen to the scripture being quoted. My family isn't religious, but this is Texas and funerals happen in churches. I didn't go with my parents when they met with this priest for the service, but I imagine them picking out his eulogy like someone picking out a cool design at a tattoo parlor. The words are cold and generic. I'm sure the speaker plugged Luke's name into the empty blanks on his handy-dandy eulogy form like Eulogy Mad Libs, though I'm sure they're supposed to be comforting.

He died too young. He was so loved by everyone. He was a good kid.

He was a good kid who walked out of our lives a year ago and never came back.

For one uncomfortable second, a picture flashes in my mind, the one that always flashes in my mind when I think about Luke, about the last time we were together. The two of us driving home from the Nova concert the night before he left, laughing, singing, acting normal. He was acting normal, even though he knew what he was going to do.

I rub my forehead, like I can force the image out, and look around the church. Family from out of town; business associates of my father's; professors who teach at Tate University with my mother, the school that sits in the center of Eaton; and in the back half of the room, people from Eaton High School, some of them in my grade and some of them people who graduated with Luke. Most of them are now Eaton High School alumni and current Tate students.

I scan the faces for Wes, but I don't see him, which makes something in my chest ache. At the very least, I thought I would see Wes.

I don't see him, but I do see Gwen Garcia. I almost miss her, invisible in the corner of the room, standing behind two guys from the football team who are almost twice her size. She doesn't seem to have a problem with them blocking her view because she's not watching the service. Her eyes are squeezed shut behind her glasses, and she's crying quietly, her face puffed and wet, her hands clenching a pack of tissues that she's not even using.

I look away from her before I can get caught up in her sadness, my eyes continuing to travel until they land on Cade Matthews, standing with his back against the closed doors, his eyes on the floor and his hands stuffed in the pockets of his black slacks. His jaw is firm with solemnity and respect, ever the perfect gentleman.

While I'm still watching him, his eyes lift from their spot on the floor and find mine. The entire room is between us, but when his focus lands on me, I feel it like a shock to my nervous system.

My mother's hand lands on my knee, bare except my pantyhose—because she made me wear a dress, and I spin around.

“Can you pay attention, please?” she hisses in my ear.

I grit my teeth against the things I want to say and stare at the hymnal in the shelf on the back of the pew in front of me. I can't look up at the rent-a-priest or the casket or the bouquet of gardenias that's overflowing onto the podium. It all feels like a circus. Why should his funeral be perfect when nothing else was?

The guy my mother is speaking to looks familiar. I think he might work at Tate, and based on the conversation that my mother is having with him, she's still trying to sell him on Luke being a good student, like he's going to show up at any moment, ready to enroll.

“Luke was so assertive and intelligent,” she says, putting her hand out as if she can demonstrate. “You know, he was on the debate team. I was surprised when he chose to join on top of all the work he

was doing as class president, not to mention the track team, but he really enjoyed it. Cleaned house at competition.” She sounds like a commercial for Luke’s accomplishments, and she looks like one, too, her eyes bright, her mouth smiling, her hands poised just so. I’m almost able to believe that she actually liked Luke. But I have too much evidence to prove otherwise. The sound of their constant shouting back and forth plays on repeat in my brain all the time.

Controlling.

Ungrateful.

Obnoxious.

Childish.

Tyrant.

I’ve maneuvered myself into a corner of the living room, half-hidden behind my father, watching my mother through the unobstructed doorway and trying to be invisible to all the people floating around my house. They’re looking at our pictures and picking apart the little pieces of Luke that still remain: his high school diploma framed on the wall, his old pair of running shoes tucked under the entry table, the stupid video-game console he begged my parents for, taking up one shelf of the entertainment unit.

They approach my father, one-by-one, shaking his hand or pulling him into a hug and offering him condolences, only to smile at me sadly without a word before walking away. No one feels the need to tell me they’re sorry, and I’m thankful for it. I just want to stay in this corner and try to disconnect, try to pretend this isn’t all for Luke. My hands are fisted in my skirt, sweaty and achy. My father’s eyes are glassy. He’s a zombie, shaking hands with people while barely making eye contact.

“Ellie?”

I don’t even realize that Cade is standing right next to me until he’s saying my name, and I’m immediately caught off guard by how close he is to me, so close I’m worried he can hear my heart ham-

mering in my chest. Can he see that every muscle in my body is tense, ready to detonate?

“Oh. Cade. Hi.” Cade and I have been something like friends for years, always partnering up for projects, always hanging out in the halls after school. I’ve known him half my life, until that night I ruined everything. But I’ve never seen him like this, his green eyes uneasy, full of concern. He says something, his mouth moving slowly, but I can’t make out the words. All I can hear is my mother’s voice in the kitchen.

“He was special, you know? That way that some people just are. They walk into a room and command the attention of every person in it.” Her eyes go starry, like she’s imagining Luke walking into this room right now. I don’t even know where this is all coming from. I’ve never heard her talk about Luke like this. If she wasn’t fighting with him, she was complaining about him. Always the Luke-induced sigh.

Luke never picks up after himself. Always expecting me to be his maid.

Would it kill Luke to show up to one family dinner on time?

Why can’t Luke ever meet deadlines? I’m sick of having to do things for him.

Sigh.

The man, looking down into his coffee cup, nods solemnly. “I know the type.”

“I’m sorry, but I have to go,” I say to Cade and walk away from him without another glance. I rush upstairs and into my room, shutting the door behind me and leaning against it. I gasp in a breath and wait to wake up from whatever this is, this dream I’m floating around in, someone else’s life. Not mine.

I sit on the edge of my bed and take off my heels. My mother bought them, a size too small, and I spread my toes the second they’re off. I scrub my hands over my face, through my hair, down my neck. The heat is stifling, even sitting directly under the air-conditioner vent, and I’m starting to think that maybe it has nothing to do with

the thermostat and more to do with listening to my mother spout those lies downstairs. There was affection in her voice. Stiff, artificial affection.

Something becomes unsettled in my stomach, and I have to lie down, wrapping my arms around myself and curling in tight. My hands ball into fists and my jaw clenches and I think maybe I'll live like this forever, my entire body tensed, braced for a life I don't recognize anymore.

I fall asleep like that, my body finally giving up the fight, and I wake up at sunset to the sound of a car door slamming. The house is quiet, and I push myself up on my bed to look out my window in time to see my dad's boss get into his car and drive away. There are no more cars in the driveway or against the curb. Everyone is gone.

I hear footsteps on the stairs. Without thinking, I drop back down on my bed, turning my back to my door and pretending to be asleep. My mother knocks softly and then the door opens. I squeeze my eyes shut, even though I know she can't see.

After a pause, the door closes again, and I listen to the sound of her heels moving back down the stairs.

And then it starts, quiet at first, like she's trying not to wake me, and then worse, louder with every second.

"You barely spoke to anyone," I hear her say. The house is so quiet that I feel like I can hear the breaths she takes between sentences. "You just stood there. You barely even *looked* at anyone." I know she's talking to my dad. This is always how she talks to my dad. It's how she talks to everyone.

It's how she talked to Luke.

"You think the world is any better outside of Eaton?" she would say to him. "You think you're going to find fame and success and happiness if you leave? You won't. It's misery everywhere else, too, Lucas, just different misery."

"We're supposed to be doing this together," she says now. "We're

supposed to do everything together, but every time I turned around, you weren't there. How am I supposed to do this by myself?"

I listen hard, but I don't hear my father answer her, and when she speaks again, her words are shrill, so loud, my heart pounds and my blood goes cold. "Say something!" she yells, and I'm on my feet before she can shout anything else, feeling the same chill crawl up my back the way it does every time she yells. It's a kind of fear, even though the anger is never directed at me. I move to the window.

Luke and I perfected the art of climbing down the trellis that separates my window from his years ago. We never did anything too terrible, mostly just went to parties at Tate or met up with Luke's friends to go for late-night drives or play drunk pool in someone's basement. Sometimes he snuck out without me to meet Gwen in the middle of the night.

The only difference between then and now is that I've never actually scaled the trellis in a dress and pantyhose, and the wood is slippery beneath the nylon. But I make it to the bottom, where the grass feels nice under my feet, and make a run for my car.

I **stand outside** Wes's house and stare at the metal knocker on the door. It's shaped like an elephant, and as well as I can remember, I've never seen it before. But it's been over a year since the last time I stood on this welcome mat.

I lift my hand to knock when the door flies open and Wes appears in the doorway, shirtless and holding a cordless game controller. I focus on his face instead of his long, dark torso. That's a lot of bare skin.

"Ellie?" His eyebrows come together in confusion, and I don't miss the way his eyes glance over my shoulder quickly, like he's expecting someone else, before meeting mine again. "I saw your car pull up. What are you doing here?" I look down at my feet, and I

guess he does, too, because he says, “And why aren’t you wearing shoes?”

I shrug but don’t tell him that I left my shoes at home in my hurry to get out. I’m second-guessing my decision to come here, even though it was the only thing that made sense when I made it to my car. It wasn’t until I pulled up to his curb that the nerves set in. But this is Wes, and I know I shouldn’t be so nervous. “Can’t be at home right now.” There are more reasons why I’m here, standing in front of Luke’s ex–best friend when we haven’t spoken in over a year, but his front porch just doesn’t seem like the best place for that kind of explanation. “Could I come in?”

He watches me, his thumb moving over the buttons on the controller absently, and then moves to let me in. When I step into his living room, I’m hit with a wave of nostalgia for this place where I spent more time than I spent at my own house. It smells like dinner and fresh laundry and scented candles, and I breathe in the scent of it, thinking of all the times Luke and I came here because we couldn’t stand to be at home. So many hours spent watching TV, playing video games, having burping contests, carving our names on the underside of all the beds. I’ve wished I could move in here and never go back home more times than I can count. I wish it right now. Somehow I miss it, even as I’m standing here.

“Give me a second,” Wes mutters, and I wait in the hallway as he disappears into his bedroom and comes back wearing a T-shirt. EATON HIGH TRACK AND FIELD. My heart stutters when I see it. That was Luke’s shirt, probably transferred to Wes the way so many clothes were, their entire wardrobes moving back and forth between the two with perfect ease.

I can hear Wes’s mother in the kitchen, but she doesn’t seem to know I’m here, so she continues what she’s doing, the sound of pans clacking together streaming from the open doorway. She was at the funeral, but I don’t remember seeing her in our house after. Or maybe she was there, but my brain was too fuzzy to notice.

I know her well enough to know that if she knew I'd just walked into her house on the day of Luke's funeral, she'd smother me with affection and sympathy. Wes seems to know it, too, and he ushers me quickly toward the dining room, where a door leads down to the basement.

This, at least, hasn't changed. The recliners, the huge TV, the shelves and shelves of Cowboys fan memorabilia. The basement is usually Wes's dad's haven, but when he's at work, Wes gets to use it. I settle into one of the recliners. The only light in the room is coming from the TV, where something is paused. A video game, I'm presuming. The curtains are pulled over the window. Music plays from a stereo at a mostly reasonable volume, a soft rock ballad, something I don't recognize.

"It's really good to see you," Wes says after a moment, his eyes on the TV.

I consider not saying anything. I pull my feet up onto the chair with me and wrap my arms around them. It would be easier to say nothing, to stay silent like I have at home, to clamp my lips shut and not risk crying or screaming or something else unimaginable. "I'm sorry I haven't been around."

Wes shrugs. "Just because I was Luke's best friend doesn't mean you have any obligation to come around."

"I'm still sorry." This much is true. There were days growing up when Wes felt just as much of a brother to me as Luke did. They'd been friends for as long as I can remember, and when Luke left, I was the one who had to tell Wes that he disappeared in the middle of the night without a word to anyone. Wes was just as confused as I was. And then Wes went to Tate, and I went back to high school, and we forgot we knew each other.

I watch his hands squeeze and unclench around the controller. "How have things been?"

I know what he's asking. How're Mom and Dad holding up? Is our world still the same as it was a year ago? Have our lives gone

completely off-kilter since we got the call from the police? I shrug. “I don’t know.” What I mean is, I don’t know how to say what I need to. I don’t know how to juggle everything I’m feeling and not feeling all at the same time. I don’t know how to feel anything without feeling too much.

This makes his fingers stop fiddling with the controller. I can feel his eyes on me, but I can’t look at him. I haven’t spoken to anyone about Luke leaving, and I definitely haven’t spoken to anyone about him dying, and right here, in Wes’s basement that smells like Febreze and the subtle lingering scent of barbecue, I can’t tell him that something inside me is on fire, an animal that waits patiently for its moment to strike, a moment when it can rip free from my chest and raze the whole universe, and that to cage that animal, I’ve chosen to be numb instead. Being numb, being hollow, it’s easier than anything else.

He opens his mouth to say something, but at that moment, the music changes, and a familiar song plays low from the speakers. And like a golden retriever, my ears perk up at the well-known guitar notes. I’m rushing to the stereo before I’m aware my brain has sent my limbs any messages. I can’t find the button to change it to the next song or the power button or anything, so I reach down and rip the cord from the outlet, and the room plummets into silence.

I stare down at the speaker system as my pulse slowly goes back to normal. I’m breathing heavy, like I just sprinted a mile, and embarrassed heat spreads across my skin. I’ve become so good at not reacting, when my mother says something cruel, when my father says nothing at all, when I find one of Luke’s shirts in the laundry or a pack of his gum in my glovebox or a pair of his shoes in my closet, when anyone says Luke’s name or tells me they’re sorry or asks me how I am. I should have been able to hear that song without snapping. I’m slipping.

Wes is standing now, his arms crossed, looking tentative. “I’m sorry, Ellie.” He says it so carefully, like somehow this is all his fault,

and if he says just the wrong thing, I might attack. I don't have the energy to attack.

I take a step forward and sit down on the recliner gently. This thing between us is so fragile, and I'm not ready for it to shatter just yet.

Wes settles back onto his seat. He scrubs his fingers through his curly hair, cut short against his scalp.

"You didn't come to the funeral." I didn't even realize until just now that it's bothering me, that his not being there somehow made everything *more*, more empty, more confusing, more unreal, more alone. If he'd been there, he would have sat with me and maybe I wouldn't have had to face everyone alone.

His hands fall open by his sides. "I couldn't handle it. I'm sorry, but I just couldn't sit there and listen to the songs and see all the flowers—"

"But you're his best friend! And I needed you there!" I don't mean to yell, but it doesn't matter. I'm terrified that I've just broken the spell. I curl my lips in between my teeth, like holding them there will be able to hold in everything that's threatening to crawl to the surface. I have to force it down, keep it in.

"I *was* his best friend," Wes says quietly. "He didn't want to be my friend anymore, remember?"

The room is so quiet that I can hear Wes's mom talking to someone on the phone. She laughs, and I envy her.

"Was it bad?"

I shrug. "Everyone kept saying how tragic it was that he died so young. Like it didn't matter that he died, just that he died when he was twenty. It was bullshit." I cross my arms hard over my stomach, holding myself together. "Way too many flowers."

Wes rolls his eyes. "The worst."

All the things we want to ask each other lie on the floor between us. We have a year's worth of crap to talk about, but I don't want to talk about any of it.

“Can I play?”

He looks over at me slowly, and I see his mouth twitch, like he wants to smile, but then his eyes widen, his mouth going firm again. Maybe he thinks he’s not allowed to smile. Maybe he’s right.

He doesn’t say a word as he passes me a controller, but before he can start the game, his mom is calling down the stairs to him. “Wes! Baby, dinner is ready! Come help your girlfriend set the table! I taught you better than this!”

I try not to seem shocked as I look over at Wes, but I can tell he didn’t mean for me to hear about this from the way he can’t meet my eye, from the blush I can see in his cheeks when he goes to turn on the light and turn off the TV.

“Sorry,” he says. “Duty calls.”

“Right. Yeah. That’s fine.”

“Did you want—”

“I should probably—”

We both stop talking, but as we move up the stairs to the dining room, Wes asks, “Do you want to stay for dinner? I’m sure there’s enough for everyone.”

I wave him off, but he doesn’t see me with his back turned toward me as we emerge into the dining room, and I don’t have a chance to answer before the door shuts behind us, and I’m met by Wes’s mother. And his girlfriend.

Gwen.

“Ellie!” Wes’s mom squeaks. “I had no clue you were here!”

She isn’t the only one. With an empty plate in each hand, bent slightly over the table, Gwen stops, her eyes as wide as the dinner plates she’s holding. “Ellie,” she says, her quiet voice in perfect contrast to Wes’s mother’s.

All the nostalgia I had for this place just minutes ago vanishes, and I immediately feel out of place, like I just stepped into an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. I try to somehow reconcile how life has been for

the last year for me with whatever I just stepped into here in Wes's kitchen. Wes's mom called Gwen Wes's *girlfriend*.

"I have to get home," I lie.

"I'll walk you out," Wes says. He doesn't even seem like the same person he was a minute ago, when we were in the basement. Now, he's a person who's dating Luke's ex-girlfriend and I feel like I don't know that person. Everyone is staring at me, and I'm starting to sweat.

"It's okay," I say, moving for the door before anyone else can try to persuade me to stay.

I feel like I don't recognize anything or anyone anymore, now that the world looks so different than it did a year ago. Just when I thought I knew what my new reality looked like, everything has changed, and I've lost track of where I fit in.

It turns out that getting back up the trellis is way harder than getting down it in the first place. It also turns out I was wrong about my parents not knowing I was gone, and when I tumble into my bedroom through my window, my mother is already standing in the doorway, waiting for me.

"Where were you?" she asks. Her voice isn't angry, but there's enough anger written across her face to make up for it.

I stop in front of her, trying to concoct a lie in my head. I wasn't prepared for this, assuming she would just be asleep or completely clueless when I got here, and now that she's standing in front of me, anything I might want to say gets caught in my throat. I can't tell her the truth. My mother hasn't seen Wes in a year, either. I still remember the last time he came over, three days before Luke disappeared. Mom made lasagna, she and Luke argued about what he was going to major in at Tate, and then Wes and Luke sat in the living room, playing *Call of Duty* until my mother stumbled in and told Wes it was

time to go home. I remember Luke storming out of the room before Wes was even gone. My mother never kicked Wes out of the house.

So, I can't tell her I was with Wes, even if I wanted to. And I don't. I can't even describe it, but I feel like I need to keep it a secret, especially since I'm pretty sure that was the end of it. Wes and Gwen have moved on without me, and it was stupid of me to think they wouldn't. But knowing it, having the evidence right in front of me in that dining room, feels like being untethered from anything that might have been left of my old life.

"Just went for a drive." I regret saying it as soon as it comes out of my mouth, but I regret it more when I see the way my mother's eyes go wide, the way her mouth takes on a horrified shape.

Just went for a drive. Luke used to say that all the time. He told me once that he would sometimes turn his music up loud and circle the entire town of Eaton twice. He said other times he would drive to Eaton High, park in the lot by the softball field, and listen to an entire Nova album with his eyes closed and his air conditioner running. Other times he would be gone for hours and never tell me where he went. He would come home quiet and pensive.

I can't blame my mother for looking at me like I just slapped her. Because it isn't my thing, *just went for a drive*; it's his. *Was* his.

"I'm tired," I say, hoping that will make her leave. It doesn't. I can't take her standing in the doorway anymore. I need a moment to breathe, to just *be*.

"There's dinner," she says instead, her voice uncharacteristically hesitant. "Rita Matthews left us a casserole. I didn't really expect to see her today. Don't think I've ever had a conversation with the woman—"

"I'm not hungry." She holds my eyes for a long moment, and I know she's surprised. I never talk back to my mother. I never argue with her authority. But I just want to do what I want *just once*. "Ellie, I haven't seen you eat in days."

“I said, I’m not hungry.” I say it loud over her, since she didn’t seem to get the hint the first time. I just want her to leave me alone. I want her to stop trying to play attentive mother, like she needs to take care of me. I don’t need her to take care of me.

I’m ready for the argument. My mother’s favorite thing to do is argue. She’ll pick a fight with anyone standing too close, and picking fights with Luke used to be her favorite pastime.

For a second, I remember the argument they had last year, the one they don’t know I heard, the one I still don’t really understand.

My mother doesn’t argue. Maybe she’s cutting me some slack because of the funeral, maybe she’s just too tired to be her normal, angry self. I don’t care what the reason is. I’m just grateful for it when she finally turns and goes back downstairs, leaving me in peace.

I shut the door and immediately slip out of my clothes, ready to be rid of them. Instead of putting the dress in my hamper to be washed, I toss it into a bag in the back of my closet, full of clothes I intend to donate. I’m never wearing the thing again.

I take a shower because I still feel like I smell like gardenias and polyester, and while I sit on my bed, brushing my hair, I see it.

Among the books and miscellaneous junk on my desk is an envelope. I don’t know if it was there before I went to see Wes, but I know it wasn’t there this morning. At least, I don’t think it was. I try to remember the last time I paid attention to anything in my room other than my bed. I pick it up and look at the return address, and my heart leaps into my throat.

There’s no name, just an address. A Michigan address. It isn’t in Ann Arbor. It’s in a town called Dexter.

My hands tremble as I rip open the envelope and pull out the contents. I stare at the folded map in my hand, seeing just fragments of highways and state lines and blue bodies of water before I unfold it.

I recognize it immediately, and it’s my first instinct to drop it, my heart beating loud in my ears. Because it’s like having Luke’s ghost in

the room with me. I press my hands to my stomach and look down at it, lying sprawled open on my carpet. I can't really be looking at this map. That map can't really be on my floor. That map has been lost for ages.

"These are all the places we have to visit before we die," Luke said when he brought the map home. It was the summer before my freshman year of high school, before his junior year, and he spread the map across the dining room table like we were about to discuss war strategy. "If you want to add anything to it, just put X's over the places, but I've already got most of the big stuff. Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore, Times Square . . ."

For months, we took turns researching new places to add to the map, and eventually we brought Wes into it. We picked big cities, ghost towns, weird attractions along the side of the highway. It was a whole summer of daydreaming about adventures in the mountains, relaxing on the beach, soaking up history and culture and sunshine.

I slowly reach down and pick it back up. All the X's, in different color marker, his and mine and Wes's, are so plentiful, I almost can't see the city names beneath them. Notes in the margins about gas mileage and hotels and entrance fees. It's been folded and refolded and laid out flat so many times that the original creases are gone. It was just a stupid thing he got excited about, the way he got excited about things and then didn't usually follow through on them. The map was our world for a few months and then it was forgotten about, and that was that.

That was three years ago. Three years ago, and here it is, in my hands, and I feel dizzy with confusion and disbelief and maybe even a little fear. Where the hell did it come from?

I turn the envelope over again, looking at the address it came from. My name is written as Ellie Johnston. Not from some stranger, then. A stranger wouldn't know I go by Ellie instead of Eloise. Someone who knows me personally?

But that can't be possible because other than Luke, I have never known anyone who lived in Michigan, and the idea that someone in Michigan knows my name and my address is enough to make me glance over my shoulder, like there might be someone behind me, watching me.

I look back at the map, at the places that are circled. All this time, we've never really been sure where Luke went when he disappeared. My mother called the cops, but very specific things were missing from his room: his computer, his backpack, his phone charger. And his car. That was gone, too. The police told my mother there was nothing they could do because Luke was eighteen, and it seemed pretty obvious that he just took off, not that anything bad happened.

I run my finger over the line that connects city-to-city, from Eaton to New Orleans to St. Louis to Indianapolis to Chicago. He had to have followed these roads, stopped at all of these places. In my hands I have evidence of where Luke spent the last year of his life, and the knowledge sends a shock through my bloodstream. How many hours did I spend wondering where he went, lying in bed, wishing he would just come back? I kept hoping he'd just be gone a few days, that he had gone off to Oklahoma for some kind of wilderness hike or something.

But one day turned into one weekend which turned into a month, and I guess a part of me was still waiting for him to come home when my parents told me about the accident. I cough around the solid thing that's settled in the base of my throat.

If I'm right and Luke used this map when he left, then who sent it to me? And why? Why would I need to know now, after Luke is gone, where he was this whole time?

The only answer this map seems to give me is this: Ann Arbor was never in the plan. Nevertheless, if that's where this map came from, that's where I have to go. Because suddenly, after almost a year of feeling lifeless, like a ghost walking through the halls at school and

sitting at the dinner table and attempting to get on with my life, I buzz with urgency. What if, somewhere in Michigan, there's a person with answers? What if there's a person who can tell me *why* Luke left and where he's been and who he's been *with*?

And why he never called.

Whoever it is, I have to find them.

TWO

I heard someone say once that if you suck enough water into your lungs that you'll die happy. If you get to the point of death, drowning somehow becomes euphoric. It's something that I've thought about a lot since I heard about Luke. I tried to imagine drowning turning quickly from terrifying to blissful. It just doesn't compute.

This is what I think about as I step into J-Mart the day after Luke's funeral. I don't imagine drowning as something exquisite. I imagine it like this, walking into a grocery store in a small town for the first time since you found out your brother died and having all eyes on you.

I know they're not all really looking. I know it just *feels* like they're all looking. But that feeling is so intense that I feel like I can't breathe. I live in a college town with a population of twenty thousand in theory, but Tate students make up so much of that. The rest of us, the permanent ones, we all know each other, see each other around

the blurry faces of four-year Tate University residents who will pick up and leave when their time here is done. And I see so many of them now, the ones who live here every day of the year. Almost every single person I pass is someone who was at Luke's funeral or at my house afterward, and I feel like I can't hide from them like I used to. My business is on display for everyone, whether they're looking or not. I'm careful not to make eye contact, in case anyone is planning on sending me any sympathetic looks. I came here for toilet paper and milk, so I just need to get those things and go back home. Quickly.

I grab the first package of toilet paper my fingers find and am on my way to the cold-food aisle when I walk right into someone. I stumble back and two hands reach out to steady me.

"Whoa. Might help if you look up from the ground every once in a while."

At first, I think it's an insult, and I'm ready to argue with the person whose hands are still clutching my shoulders. But when I look up and see the smile aimed at me, all the fight dies.

Cade.

His hands fall away from me, and he tucks them into the pockets of his jeans. I can see the second he remembers that the last time we saw each other was at a funeral. Whatever easy joy there was on his face a moment ago is quickly replaced with a frown. Death ruins everything.

"Hey, Ellie."

I blush furiously, the way I have around Cade since freshman year, when he started to buzz his hair short and his jaw took on a very irresistibly square quality.

"Hey," I say, still looking at the ground, despite his teasing suggestion that I do the opposite.

I watch his feet shuffle around me, and I think maybe he's trying to escape the awkwardness of this encounter, but when I look up, I

realize he's just moving out of the way of an older lady trying to get down the aisle. She glances over her shoulder at me as she reaches for a box of pasta, and I realize it's Mrs. Mori, my world history teacher.

She smiles at me, but I look back at Cade. A huge mistake. I almost forgot how handsome he is, and it's almost startling to have the full force of his attention on me again.

"Doing okay?" he asks, so gently that I'm not as frustrated with him asking me the question as I have been with anyone who's asked me in the last week. Because of course I'm not okay.

But there's something in his eyes that makes me think maybe he's not talking about Luke. Or, not Luke specifically, but just life in general.

It makes me want to tell him the truth: that I'm numb. That I'm empty. That I'm directionless. That I feel like the map in my bag may be the only way back to my sanity.

He watches me, and I almost say it. Cade has always been so easy to talk to.

But that was before. Before we went on that date. Before Luke left. Before I stopped answering Cade's calls and stopped flirting with him and stopped saying hi in the halls.

"I'm fine," I finally say.

"Look, if you need to talk—"

"Thanks," I say quick. "I have to go. I'll see you around."

"Yeah. I guess I'll see you around." My stomach twists when hurt flashes across his face. I've seen that hurt expression before, and seeing it again now makes me want to get away faster. I rush to the cold section, grab a gallon of milk, and head back for the front of the store, carefully checking around each corner to ensure I don't run into Cade again.

It's my first high school lunch period, and my stomach is in knots. I know Luke isn't going to want to sit with me. Wes, either. They're high school

boys, on the track team, and I know there's no way they're going to let me crash their lunch table when I'm just a freshman. There's some kind of high school law against that, I'm pretty sure.

I come out of the line with my head down, but before I've taken more than a step, there's a commotion, and when I look up, I realize that the entire track team is standing up on their chairs. I recognize most of them from meets and parties that Luke snuck me into.

Someone behind me shouts something I don't understand and then every member of the track team is saluting. I stand where I am, all of them in front of me, towering over me, while everyone else in the cafeteria laughs or takes pictures or catcalls.

And then Luke appears at my side. "Everyone, come say hi to my baby sister, Ellie! Welcome her to Eaton High School!"

The track boys immediately dismount their cafeteria stools, and next thing I know, someone whose name I can't even remember is carrying my tray of square-cut pizza and chocolate milk to my spot at their table, and they're all telling me hi and patting me on the back, and I feel like a celebrity or something.

Once I've been herded toward my seat, Luke drops down in the seat beside me and throws his arm around my shoulder. "Welcome to high school."

The bookstore/antique shop where I work is alive and full of people when I get there. It's a month until school starts, which means that half the people here are buying their books for school already and the other half are looking for something to do other than sneak into movies at the Cinemark.

When Laurie comes around the corner, pushing a cart piled high with books, her eyes go wide. "Ellie. What are you doing here?"

"It's Monday. I always work on Mondays." Especially since school starts in a month, and then my hours will be cut in half. I need these hours because my mother says I'll be responsible for all of my own

expenses when I go to Tate, so I'm saving every penny. And more than that, without this job, I would be at home, with her and Dad, and I would lose my mind. This morning, I pressed my hands to my ears while Mom yelled at Dad for calling into work again. She's been on him all week about vegging on the couch. I'm pretty sure he's been sleeping there, too.

Laurie grips the handle on the cart and bites her lip. Laurie, my boss and the owner of the shop, is pushing fifty. She wears skintight jeans and enough jewelry that I'm surprised it doesn't knock her off balance, but somehow, right now, she looks like a little kid, wanting to speak but not sure if she should. Two girls I go to Eaton High with walk by us, and Laurie watches them go before leaning across the cart to speak to me quietly. "Ellie, if you need more time, it's okay, I promise. I can handle back-to-school rush on my own."

My heart rate picks up. If she asks me to go home, I don't know what I'll do. I can't be there anymore, with my mother who's home most of the day and my father who sits glassy-eyed on the couch. It's like a prison. "It's either this or be at home with my parents."

Laurie makes a weird shape with her mouth and nods. "Yeah, I guess you got me there."

I sigh, relieved, and stash my stuff behind the counter. Laurie pushes the cart she has with her in my direction. "Well, here, you can stock the Required Reading display."

The Required Reading display sits at the front of the shop, right by the front window, and I push the cart over to it and start stocking copies of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Great Gatsby* while Laurie rings up customers at the register.

Outside the window, I can see Main Street, running right in front of the strip mall, and at the end of the parking lot, the garage where Cade works. I can see him in there now, through the glass doors. He's talking to a customer, holding a large chunk of metal in his hand that I can't identify from this far away. Not that I would know what it was

if I were able to see it better. I don't know anything about cars. My stomach does that uncomfortable, fluttering thing it does every time Cade is anywhere near me.

I've caught glimpses of him over at that shop so many times that it's almost become part of my work routine. Sometimes, I'll see him on his lunch break, leaned against the side of the building, his shoulders against the brick and his hips pitched forward, talking to one of the other guys that works there while he drinks from a coffee cup or munches on a bag of chips.

Cade hands the object to the customer, and I can only imagine that the part has left grease on his skin. Cade always has darkly stained fingers. He started working at the garage when he was fourteen, as young as he was allowed by law. He's always been so fascinated with the mechanics of things.

"Mostly just oil changes," he said to me once when I asked him what he did there when he was younger.

"You want to date a grease monkey?" Luke said, only weeks before that night I spent with Cade at the drive-in. I smacked him on the arm, and he swatted me away. "I don't know, Ellie. The kid is weird. Spends more time at that garage than he does with people."

We were driving home from school after Luke's track practice, passing by the garage in question, and I saw Cade inside, underneath a pickup truck on lifts.

"He works with people," I said when we stopped at the next traffic light, and Luke rolled his eyes.

"Coworkers don't count."

When I didn't answer, Luke glanced over at me. He always seemed to know exactly what I was thinking, and he sighed loudly. "If you think he's your knight in slightly greasy armor, then you have my blessing, Ellie."

Looking at Cade now, I regret all of it. I should have just let it be. Maybe then he wouldn't look so hurt every time I can't speak to him.

He smiles, just a flash across his face, and then nods at something behind the guy he's talking to. The guy walks away, and Cade stands there for a beat longer, his eyes wandering until I swear he's looking straight into the bookstore's window, right at me.

On my break, I sit in the back office with the map spread out on the desk in front of me. My nerves seem to vibrate around inside me, like they're trying to get out, like they alone can propel me forward, out of Eaton and toward someplace I've never been before. I have my fingers pressed to my mouth, wondering if this is what it would have been like to see Luke in an open coffin. I bite down on the tips of my fingers.

I've only figured out half the plan, how I'll leave on Friday, drive up to Michigan, see who sent me the map, and then drive right back. It'll take a day to get there and a day to get back, if the only stop I make is in Michigan. I think that's a short enough trip that my mother will only be mostly pissed off. She'll panic, but by the time she tries to do anything too rash, I'll be home and grounded forever, and she won't have to worry again. It's not like I'm ever leaving Eaton after this trip.

I just want to know who sent the map. I just want to see where Luke was when it happened. I calculated the miles between Eaton and Dexter. Over 1,200 miles. I can't even imagine Luke 1,200 miles away. It makes my throat burn.

I look down at the map, at all the things we added, all the lines and the stars and the notes, but our handwriting is faded slightly. It's Luke's red ink that's the easiest to see. He traced over the highways in red, like he might lose them if he didn't make them stand out.

New Orleans, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Chicago, New York, D.C. Miami. Those cities are connected in a red circle on one side of the map. Phoenix, San Diego, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, San Francisco,

Seattle. A bigger circle, on the other side. It doesn't make much sense, and I can't even figure out where Ann Arbor would have fit in, much less the small town of Dexter, which I found out is a miniscule suburb outside of Ann Arbor.

"What's that?"

I jump and spin around in my seat to find Wes in the doorway, looking down at the map in front of me. I scramble to fold it up, but I suck at it, and I end up with a crumpled mess in my shaking hands. "It's nothing. You shouldn't even be back here. Employees only."

Wes scowls at me. "Laurie said I could. Is that . . . ?"

I stop struggling with the map when Wes reaches for it, and I feel a weird sense of possessiveness when he takes it. It feels like mine. Whoever had it sent it to me, not Wes. But I know he has as much a right to it as I do. That note scribbled over Las Vegas that reads *nude girls* is one of Wes's classy contributions. I watch him examine it, like it's brand-new, like his handwriting isn't all over the margins. Like he didn't put an X over the salt flats in Nevada because his dad used to talk about taking his family there all the time, even though they never got around to it.

"God, where did you find this thing?" he asks, unfolding it. His green eyes run over the whole thing, and I wonder if he's thinking of the hours we spent with Luke, conspiring like criminals over a bank heist. Is he thinking about the way Luke always locked the map away so lovingly at the end of each meeting, like it was an antique, worth a fortune? That's all I've been thinking about since I opened that envelope, every memory of Luke touching that thing crossing my mind. None of it seems real anymore.

"This is our future," Luke said when he brought it home. "We will not be lifelong Eatonites. I don't care what it takes."

All this time, I assumed he forgot about it, the same way I did, dismissed it as a joke or a childhood pipe dream.

But it wasn't just a joke to him.

“Someone sent it to me.” I just spit it out, and I’m not even sure why. I want this to be a secret, something I can hold inside myself, that I can protect. But if anyone deserves to know, it’s Wes.

Wes’s dark eyebrows curve in, and one corner of the map droops in his hand. “What do you mean, someone sent it to you?”

I slouch back in Laurie’s office chair. I’ve only had this secret for two days, but I feel a weight lift off me as soon as I tell Wes. Some of the pressure in my chest loosens, not yet ready to explode. “Someone sent it to me from a Michigan address. Just the map. Nothing else. No name, no letter.” I realize too late that my voice is shaking. I take a deep breath and say the part I’m terrified to utter aloud. “I’m going to go to Michigan to find out who it was.”

At this, Wes almost drops the map. “You’re going to Michigan?”

“Yes.” Doubt starts to creep into my chest when Wes doesn’t say anything. His eyebrows are so high, they almost reach the line of his almost-black hair.

“Do you think this is the route he took when he left?” He folds the map and hands it back to me, but I already know I can’t take it back. It’s ours now, not just mine.

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

When I don’t take the map, Wes smacks it against his open palm. “I want to come with you.”

Doubt is replaced by something else. Dread maybe. Regret. I never meant for anyone to go with me. This is my trip. I have to go alone. “I don’t think that’s a great idea.”

He’s already shaking his head. “You shouldn’t go alone. We’ll go, all three of us. A trip around America.”

Whoa. Things are getting way out of hand here. “America? No. I’m just going to Michigan. And who is the three of us? You, me, and—”

“Gwen.”

I snatch the map from him. “Absolutely not. Luke’s ex? No way.”

Wes snatches the map back, and I grit my teeth. I never should have said anything. I want to go alone, to just be away from everyone's eyes and grief and sympathy for a few days. This is not how this is supposed to go.

"Look," Wes says, holding the map out of my reach as I get up from my chair to get it back. "I came here to apologize that you found out about us that way. I should have told you. It's just, we haven't talked in a while, and I didn't know how to . . . you know . . ."

I stop grabbing for the map. I'm definitely not going to tell him that it bothered me to find out. I don't want him to know that the first thought I had was a selfish one: that they left me behind, too. How could I demand they be unhappy just for my sake? "Why would I care if you're dating Gwen?"

He shrugs. "She's Luke's ex." His arm sags, and I rip the map out of his hand while he's distracted. "I wasn't sure if you'd care, but I mean, it's not like they were together or anything. When he died, I mean."

I have to block out what he's saying. I can't hear him say words like *died*. I hold the map to my chest, wishing this conversation could just be over. "Wes, you and Gwen can date whoever you want. I don't care. But she's not coming on the trip."

Wes crosses his arms over his chest. "I'm not going without her, and you're not going without me. Come on, Ellie. This was our trip. Let's take it. It'll be like honoring him."

I get a strange twisting sensation in my stomach. Honor Luke? What does that even mean? I picture the enlarged photo at the front of the church at his funeral. How can anyone really honor Luke? Did anyone even really know him? How many people know he ran away? How many people know how much we fell apart afterward?

It was a mistake to tell Wes. I know him well enough to know that he's not going to let this lie, and knowing that makes my skin crawl, like I'm trapped. I know Wes is trying to do what he thinks

is right, but I don't really care what he thinks is right. I don't think I really care if Gwen feels left out or if Wes is lonely without her.

What about me? What about what I feel? I've been left out since Luke vanished in the middle of the night and everyone moved on with their lives like we didn't all orbit around him. I've been lonely since my best friend took the map in my hand and walked out the door.

I grip the map and look at Wes. He stares back, and I know I'll be the first to break, just like I always am, always the one to concede.

"Fine," I say because I can't bring myself to say no anymore.

THREE

For the first time in almost a year, every single light is on in the house when I get home, and my mother is in the kitchen. It's ten in the evening, and it smells like my mother is making seafood. My father is planted in front of the TV, his eyes glazed over as he watches some show about a pawnshop. As my mother pulls something out of the oven, I see that her eyes are a little unfocused, too. It's like a cemetery in here, solemn and quiet. I thought it was bad when Luke left, when we all stopped talking and started avoiding one another. It's worse now.

When my mother sees me, her eyes go wide. "Ellie. Finally. I thought maybe dinner was going to get cold before you got home." Pink fillets of salmon sizzle on the pan she just pulled out of the oven.

"What are you doing?"

Her eyes stick to mine, like she's afraid that if she looks away, I'll run. And maybe I will. It's hard to know at this point.

"I know it's late, but I thought it might be nice if we started hav-

ing dinner as a family again,” she finally says, pulling the oven mitts off her hands.

“As a family?” My stomach tightens. “The three of us?” I can feel an ominous ripple in my blood as I look at my mother, like something swelling inside. Sure, we’ll just have family dinner, the three of us, what’s left of our family. Now that Luke is gone, we can pretend he never existed. We can move on with our lives. We can have dinner together the way Luke always hated. I grit my teeth and turn away from her. “I’m not hungry.” It’s never bothered me before that my mother feels the need to control everyone around her. Not the way it bothered Luke. I’ve always been willing to do exactly what she tells me to, never saw any reason to argue. She wanted me to take gymnastics, so I did. She wanted me to quit gymnastics, so I did. She wanted me to get up ten minutes earlier, so I did. She wanted me to go to bed an hour earlier, so I did.

But Luke was always ready to defy her. They fought about school, about his future, about the girls he dated, the classes he took, what time he woke up in the morning, what he spent his money on. Always, always she micromanaged. She would tell him what time to get up in the morning, and he would *forget* to set his alarm clock. She wanted him to try out for the swim team, so he joined track. She told him to be home by eleven, so he snuck in at three.

She told him to stay, to go to Tate, to give Eaton a shot.

So he left and never came back.

It makes me sick just thinking about it.

Well, I’m not interested in backing down anymore. I’m not sitting next to an empty chair and pretending that we’re still a family. We haven’t been a family since Luke left. And now we’ll never be one again.

I turn for the stairs, but my mother steps out of the kitchen. “Eloise, we’re going to have dinner together.” She’s got her stern voice on now, the one she uses on her lecture classes at Tate. *This* is the mother I know: unmoving as granite. Why did I think for even a

second that she might just let me be? “And tomorrow, I think you should tell your boss that you’re not available to close up the shop anymore.”

I grip the handrail beside me. It’s my own fault, I guess. I’ve given her free rein of my life, I’ve always been the easy one, the malleable one. “I’m not a dog,” I say, heading up the stairs, torn by both a bone-deep desire to please her and also a Luke-inspired desire to tell her off. “You can’t just order me around.”

“I can take your car away.”

I freeze, surprised, even if it is her, that she’s threatening me. She’s never had to do that before. I twist my hands into fists and consider my options. Sure, no car means my mother giving me a ride to school every morning; it means taking the bus from school to work; it means not getting to leave home anytime I want to. But there are worse things.

“I’ll take the bus,” I say. I’m determined to win this one. My mother was the one who insisted I get a job in the first place. She wanted me to learn life skills. She wanted me to have something to keep me out of trouble. She wanted me to learn what it meant to be an adult. And now she wants to take it away. Because she can.

“Maybe it’s time you quit the shop.”

I bark out a laugh. I feel manic, like I’m going to rattle apart if I don’t have something to grab onto. But there’s nothing, no anchor. Just my mother, pushing and pushing and pushing.

When Luke was twelve, he asked for a scooter for his birthday. Everyone had scooters, including Wes, and Luke wanted one of his own, a little silver thing that he could ride around the neighborhood. Mom got him a brand-new bike instead.

“You’ll like it better,” she told him. “I promise.”

He didn’t like it better. He hated it so much that he mowed lawns all summer to save up for a scooter. And then he rode it around our house to rub it in our mom’s face.

“Just leave me alone!” I shout, throwing open my bedroom door. “Please, for God’s sake, leave me alone!”

The tightness in my chest gets worse, until I can’t breathe, and even as I slide to the carpet, wrapping my arms around myself, trying to just make it stop for a minute, just a minute, I hear her voice on the stairs, then right outside my door.

“You’re not the only one who lost someone, Eloise.”

Mom and Luke fighting is like the soundtrack of my life. It’s turned into white noise, always going in the background when I’m trying to do homework, trying to do dishes, trying to live my life. I’ve learned to ignore it, learned to drown it out with a constant internal monologue of equations and lines of Shakespeare.

And yet somehow, the fight this time is happening in the hallway outside my bedroom door, and even though I’m plugging my ears as hard as I can and have my music playing loud, I can still hear them, every single word crystal clear.

“Lucas, if you’d like to run around in the middle of the night, doing God knows what, well I guess I can’t stop you, but you are absolutely not getting your sister involved in all of your shenanigans.”

I wait for Luke to growl at her not to call him Lucas, which he hates, but instead he latches onto something else. “God! Shenanigans? Really? Mom, she’s sixteen! It’s my senior year. I just want to spend a little quality time with the one member of this family who doesn’t want to put a fucking leash on me.”

Usually, I don’t want to hear it. Mostly because they never seem to fight about anything real. It’s always the same things: how Luke never does what he’s told and Mom works so hard and why can’t we just be a normal family? I almost never make an appearance in these fights, unless Mom is pleading with Luke to be a little more like me. I’ll do what Mom tells me to. I’m obedient.

“Oh, give me a break, Luke,” our mother sighs, like she’s just so exhausted. “You act like you’re so misunderstood, such a tragic case. Must be so awful to have a roof over your head and parents that love you and a future all planned out for you.”

“I don’t want a future all planned out for me!”

I flinch. Luke is always the first to raise his voice, to really get angry, and it’s always enough to make me want to cringe. I’m used to the quiet Luke, the gentle Luke. That’s who he is with me, all smiles and afternoon naps and goofy jokes whispered low where no one else can hear. I don’t like the Luke that yells.

“Great,” my mother says, sarcastic. “That’s just wonderful. I guess my job here is done.”

I hear her footsteps move down the hall, but Luke’s stay put.

The next morning, my car won’t start. I stare at my steering wheel. I’m exhausted down to my bones, and the idea that my mother may have sabotaged my car is just a little too much for me to handle this morning. I grind my teeth together, standing on the edge of rage. I will myself not to go over.

And then it starts to rain.

I get out of my car and stare at it, letting the rain drench my hair and my clothes. I know it’s not the battery because I’ve had a dead one enough times to remember the sound it makes. This is something different.

I have two options. I can take the bus.

Or I can call Cade.

The hood of my car blocks Cade from the rain as he leans under it and messes with something in the mass of metal guts. He makes a humming noise and then a clucking noise and then leans back out.

“I think I need to look inside,” he says, not meeting my eye.

I rush to open the door for him and then watch as he sits in my seat and pulls a panel free from the inside of my car. He examines it for a second and then nods.

“Yeah, it looks like your starter fuse is missing.” He pops the panel back in and looks up at me expectantly, like I have any clue what that means.

“So, I just need to replace it?” I back away from the car so he can get out and shut the door, and then we’re both standing in the rain beside my house, pretending that we’re not getting completely soaked. I’m trying not to show just how nervous I am, how the way he’s standing so close to me is affecting me. I cross my arms like a barrier.

“Oh,” he says, like he forgot something, and then he pulls an item out of his pocket. It’s a little piece of plastic with metal plugs sticking out of it. He offers it to me, and when I reach out to take it, I feel a surge of affection toward him, like he just put a blanket around me on a cold day.

“You just carry fuses around in your pocket?” I ask, a smile trying to creep up. I bite it back down. I shouldn’t be flirting or whatever it is I’m doing. I should be getting in my car and going to work. I should be planning this trip to Michigan.

I shouldn’t have called Cade. I shouldn’t have asked him to come out here in the rain when we haven’t really spoken in over a year.

He smiles down at his feet, where rain water is pooling around his shoes. “When you explained the problem, I narrowed it down, that’s all. I brought one just in case I was right.”

I grip the fuse so tight the metal spokes dig into my skin. “I can pay you for the fuse.”

“They cost, like, four dollars. It’s not a big deal.” He reaches up and runs his fingertips along his scalp. Once upon a time, Cade had thick, dark hair. And then the summer before sophomore year, he

buzzed it, and he's been wearing it short ever since. But I've noticed that he presses his fingers into his scalp like that, reaching up as if the hair might have grown back without him noticing.

"I should get to work," I say at the same time that he says my name, like a whisper beneath the sound of the rain hitting the roof, the metal gutters, the hood of my car.

He shuffles his feet and tries to put his hands in his pockets, but the denim is too wet so he lets them hang at his sides. "Would you maybe want to get dinner sometime soon? Maybe just to talk? Maybe we could even—"

"Cade." I brush the water droplets off my face. I tried to save Cade from me a year ago, when I was just beginning to fracture. Now that I'm completely broken, I can't let him any closer to me than he is right now, for both our sakes. "Now's just not a good time."

He nods, and specks of rain fly from the ends of his hair. "Right. Yeah. I'm sorry." He pushes away from my car and starts walking down my driveway, back to the bus stop at the end of my street, where the bus dropped him off.

I watch him go, and when I get in my car, my entire body is wet, my shirt heavy, my pants soaked all the way up to my knees. I do what Cade did, opening the fuse box and putting the one in my hand where there's an empty space. The car starts, and I pull out onto the road, whisking water off my windshield.

Cade stands there at the bus stop, the rain pouring down on him, and I feel that same tug toward him, an attachment that's somehow still there under the surface after all this time. I can't just let him stand in the rain for the bus.

I stop at the end of the street, pull up to the curb opposite the bus stop, and roll my window down.

Cade's head hangs low, and I say his name, trying to get him to look up at me. When he doesn't move, I realize sometime between my house and the bus stop, he put earbuds in his ears.

I take a deep breath and shout his name louder. His back straightens, and his head comes up. The rain has slowed down a little, but it still leaves tracks on his face. He sees me and glances at the (I hope, waterproof) watch on his wrist then back at me. Maybe he's afraid that if he comes to talk to me, he'll miss the bus, but he comes anyway.

"Get in the car," I say when he's close enough.

He looks over his shoulder at the bus stop. I don't know the schedule, but I know chances are good the bus that runs all the way around Tate is just around the corner. It doesn't matter, though. He came when I called him, and he brought me a fuse, and even after what happened between us last year, he still wants to take me out to dinner, so the least I can do is give him a ride to work.

"Just get in, Cade."

He hesitates, but he finally walks around to the passenger side of my car and opens the door. "It's no big deal," he says as he climbs in. "I wait for the bus in the rain all the time." He shuts the door, and I put the car in drive.

"Well, not today."

He smiles at me, unexpectedly. My foot slips off the brake pedal, and we jerk forward.

"Sorry," I whisper.

His white T-shirt is waterlogged and sticking to his skin, I see when we stop at a light on Main Street. I try not to notice the shape of his body through his wet T-shirt. Unfortunately, this means I can't look at him at all because his torso makes up such a large portion of his body that every time I look at him, all I can see is wet, peachy skin.

I focus on the road.

"So, you work at the garage, but you still don't have a car?" It's a stupid question, but I'm still a little distracted by how wet we are, not to mention the fact that this is the first time Cade has ever been in my car.

He looks over at me, eyebrows raised. “And exactly how many antique lamps do you own?”

I smile out the windshield. “Touché. Although I have about a million books, so that argument doesn’t quite hold up.”

When I sneak a look at him again, he’s laughing quietly, moving his fingers over each other in a way that says he might be as nervous as I am. “So, out of curiosity, how exactly did you just *lose* a starter fuse?”

I grip the steering wheel and try not to growl in frustration. “My mother. She’s trying to get me to quit my job, so that I can be home all the time, and we can pretend we’re a perfect family.” By the time it’s all slipped out, my eyes have gone wide. I can’t believe I just said all that to him. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” he says over me. “I know your mom can be a bit of a control freak.”

I scoff. *Control freak* seems like too forgiving a term. “Yeah. I forgot that I told you all that.”

“Yeah, before we—”

“Right.”

The car falls into silence. We’re almost to the strip mall where we both work, but we’re sitting at the worst light in Eaton, watching cars fly through the intersection.

“What’s that?” Cade nods his head in a gesturing motion, and I realize I left Luke’s map sitting on the dashboard, tucked against the glass of the windshield. My eyes go wide, my thoughts immediately spinning in an attempt to come up with a lie. I didn’t even realize I left it up there, and from where I’m sitting, I can see Luke’s handwriting along the edge of the paper. There’s a crackle of panic under my skin.

“Oh, it’s just a map.” I try to play it off like it’s unimportant so that he won’t ask to see it, but my casual answer has him reaching for it instead. I fight the urge to get to it before him. Instead, I watch

him open it, watch his eyes fly over the marks all over it. It's not a big deal. I don't have to tell him about Luke. I don't have to tell him that someone sent that to me just a few days ago. To him, it'll just be a map. I can almost breathe again.

"Are you going on a road trip?" he asks, still looking down at it, and I pull into the parking lot by the mechanic shop and stop the car.

"Yeah, maybe. It's just a little thing. Me and some friends." It sounds weird coming out of my mouth, and I think Cade understands that I'm trying to make it sound like something it isn't by the way he looks over at me carefully before folding up the map and putting it back where it was.

"Looks like a lot of fun," he says. "Have a nice time."

I start to thank him, but he's already opened the door, and the sound of the rain drowns out anything I try to say.