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If you're riding up from Columbia on I-20, get off at Exit 98 and drive northeast for about forty-five minutes, past a bunch of cows and historic battlefields and bullshit, and you'll hit Buckley, South Carolina. It's a blink-and-you-miss-it town, minus there being anything to miss. When you see a sign declaring the BUCKLEY HIGH GOLF TEAM STATE CHAMPS and a water tower with some faded spray paint, you're there. If you hit the Gas-n-Go, you've gone too far.

We moved to Buckley after I finished sixth grade. Mom bought a tiny house on Main Street, with no explanation as to why we were moving from the middle-class suburbs of Charlotte to a shithole town whose residents live for beauty-salon gossip and the repeal of separation of church and state. Her mouth would flatten into a line of distaste when her eyes hit the ridiculous headlines of the one-man biweekly newspaper, and even though she never said it, she expected better of us than to act like everyone else in Buckley.

Just because you're in the zoo doesn't mean you're an animal.

Buckley liked to maintain an aura of historical importance. Here, a plantation where Jefferson Davis once spent the night. There, a monument for a fallen Revolutionary War soldier, right on the spot he died.

They'd have you believe that Buckley was a perfect—if smaller—representation of southern gentility; another Charleston or Savannah, nestled in the flatlands of eastern South Carolina.

But underneath it all lurked the same nasty streak that marked so many small southern towns. The windows filled with defiant Confederate flags, the sexual rumors whispered behind closed doors, and the firm belief that Buckley was the finest place on God's green earth anyway, thank you very much. Buckley's famed town square was known across the state for its cobblestoned road and historical landmarks. Even still, seedy bars and failed business ventures filled the edges of the square, the same people roaming them for years. Then, later, their children and their children's children after that.

If you headed out of town south toward Myrtle Beach, you'd ride past Buckley High School, then over some railroad tracks and into the old mill village, a part of Buckley no God-fearing townspeople would talk about and many claimed should've never been drawn into the Buckley city limits at all.

That was Buckley—historical tours and meth labs, Confederate legacy and Friday night lights.

From the time we arrived, my older brother, Ryan, and I kept a map on his bedroom wall charting all the places we wanted to go—places so far away, so different from Buckley. I was always picking stupid ones like Albuquerque and Ann Arbor and Austin. They sounded unique to me. Interesting.

His dreams ran bigger. Florence. Berlin. Cairo. I'd listen as he talked, painting enchanted pictures in my head of places as distant as the imaginary worlds in his books. I hung on to Ryan's words when there was nothing else worth hanging on to. Buckley was a fence holding us in, a cage clipping our wings. Everything that mattered was outside, waiting on us.

Until I met Adrienne.

At Buckley Middle School, Adrienne had everything and she *was* everything. She'd hold court with her best friend, Claire, on the swings during lunch and tell Claire all the secrets everyone had fed her that day. Who was making out with whom. What party everyone was and wasn't invited to. Who had on a heinous skirt.

I was fascinated with the pair of them. Adrienne looked so different from everyone else in Buckley. I later found out her father had been a purebred southern bachelor and betrayed his heritage by going to law school at Northwestern and marrying the future Mrs. Maynard, a beautiful dark-haired advertising exec of some kind. That explained Adrienne's perfect tan skin, her shiny black hair. But the one thing that made her uniquely Adrienne was her hypnotizing dark brown eyes, the way they flashed when you had pleased her, offering the most specific kind of acceptance and love. Claire was the perfect unassuming best friend for Adrienne—small for her age, white-bread innocence, and all-American cute.

One day in class, Adrienne was talking about Elona Mabry, a slightly overweight classmate of ours who tended to overpraise Adrienne whenever she was within fifteen feet of her. I had no trouble identifying Elona's type—a specifically sad kind of wannabe in the middle school world. "It's that thing she does with her eyeliner," Adrienne was saying during fifth period. "It totally looks like she puts it on in a dark room while being groped. And that huge, clearly fake Coach purse she carries around, and she can never find *anything* in it. Like, what do you even think she's looking for in there? It's like—it's like—"

"Like a raccoon robbing a trash can," I said from my assigned desk catty-corner to her. I didn't stop to think about what I was saying. The words ripping Elona to shreds automatically strung themselves together.

Adrienne snapped her fingers, pointing at me. "Yes." Then she laughed, tilting her pretty head back until everyone was looking. Claire sat behind her, covering her mouth with a hand, giggling as if in spite of

herself. Adrienne went on, “That’s exactly what it is. You’re Olivia, right? I’ve been meaning to tell you how much I love your hair. What do you do to it?” I twisted a strand of hair around my finger. I could practically feel others tuning in to what was happening, looking at me like they looked at her. Adrienne liked me; Adrienne thought I was funny. My smile was radiant. Later, I’d tell her about where I was going. The places on the map. She told me she’d seen some of them, from her parents’ pictures or in person.

Adrienne was in Buckley, but she was so above it.

There’s something about certain people that always draws me in. They make me feel more daring, more alive, more vibrant. They light a match and spark a fire, and the blaze is too enticing to be scary.

Adrienne was a fireworks show to my total eclipse.

Before I met Adrienne, Buckley was a colorless day, a roadblock on the map, a punishment to be endured. Everything about it was so boring, so lifeless and ordinary.

With her, everything developed an edge. And I loved it.

We sat on the swings day in and day out and observed our peers. Mocked them. Grew sharper than them, smarter. In my report cards, the teachers never used the words, but I could read between the lines and Mom could, too. *Bully. Mean girl.*

“Jealous.” Adrienne would laugh.

I laughed, too. Life was easy when you were looking down on everyone else.

Three years later, Ryan packed up our map and put it in his trunk. He took it with him where he was going: Ann Arbor. Turns out, wings grow back. He flew out of Buckley.

He left me behind. I’d forgotten I was supposed to care.

And then he was gone for good.

2

Even though it's September, no one's bothered to take down the Fourth of July banners hanging from the lampposts. Most of the buildings around the town square are closing down, but Corley's Ice Cream is still open, and Buckley cheerleaders get half off on Tuesdays. Claire and I sit at the wrought-iron table out front. She has her fingers wrapped around a strawberry milk shake, slurping loudly. I lean back on the chair's legs and watch a white Jeep drive through the square, heading out from south Buckley toward the nicer houses in Buckton, the rich neighborhood near the Woodhaven Country Club.

It's all the normal conversation of the day. Coxie's pot habit and the shit Daniel Smith pulled in third-period biology today to finally drive Mr. Nickles to walk out in the middle of class. But as it does lately, everything else is eating away at the edge of my consciousness. Until I can't take it anymore.

"Do you think I'm doing this wrong?" I ask Claire. She is still the yin to Adrienne's and my yang after all these years, the light to our dark. She is still petite, but the cute developed into stunning somewhere along the way.

She pulls her straw away from her mouth, her perfectly shaped

blond eyebrows furrowing. “What?” A green cloth banner blows in the wind behind her, saying GO EAGLES, the tattered ends whipping against the post.

I’ve already started, so I go ahead and spill the rest out. “Mr. Doolittle says everyone processes grief differently. When I go to his office, he keeps repeating it like it’s his damn mantra. He says my non-reaction is the most obvious kind of reaction. That when I’m upset, I act even more callous to upset everyone else. So, it’s like, when I’m hurting others by being cold, I’m really hurting myself. Am I cold?” I take the straw wrapper up from under my cup and wind it around my fingers. Every week, Mr. Doolittle tells me something else that creates another crack in my carefully constructed wall, gets too close to touching on something I don’t want to think about.

“Hey,” Claire says, and I look up at her, serious blue eyes trained on me. Claire has the kind of face that you believe, which makes her an excellent liar. “You’re not cold. You’re—you’re different from before. You’re doing the best you can.”

I nod. I feel different. I feel . . . less. It’s when I start letting myself feel too much that everything gets all fucked up. I like having a non-reaction. I like living how I did before Ryan died—ice cream with Claire, post-football games with Ethan. They’re traditions. They hold things together. They remind me to hold it together.

I go through the motions. But it’s hollow. Every second is hollow.

It’s funny, but I don’t think I’d understand the contrast without Adrienne. If I hadn’t ingrained a picture of that mischievous and exuberant face she’d give me sometimes when she felt love for me in her particular way. If I didn’t have to see every day the apathetic, disinterested one she gives me now. Sometimes, that hurts more than grief.

“Adrienne acts like she doesn’t get me anymore,” I finally confess to Claire, turning over the words in my head as I see Adrienne’s face. “Like

what I'm feeling is so beneath her. That I'm no fun. But I don't want—I don't know *how* to be fun."

"Adrienne misses the way things were. You know how she is," Claire explains away, not quite meeting my eye.

The way things were. I try not to think about it too much. I know what's right and what's wrong, who's good and bad, and I know if you sin against enough people, ultimately the universe will find you. I *always* knew better. That's probably what made it worse. I should've known even before he died. I should've known it was coming.

Ethan warned me, accidentally probably. He once said to me: "This isn't who you are. These things you do. They're Adrienne."

They weren't, but I could never admit that to him. Or that I thrived on top, on the way people looked when they were afraid. That drama gave me a kick of adrenaline. That sometimes I loved him more just because it pissed Adrienne off.

Those aren't things a good person thinks. Not things you think if you're the *right* kind of person.

"Ethan wants me to talk about it," I say now. "He's kind of like Mr. Doolittle that way. He thinks grief is a glass barrier I must break through and he'll be on the other side with warm fuzzies and hugs. I know he talks about it with his mom."

"Isn't she a psychologist for dangerous criminals?" Claire returns, sounding a little amused.

I snort. "Yeah. Hit the nail on the head, huh?"

"He loves you."

"I know." It's easy to hear the resignation in my voice. I finish off the rest of my ice cream and throw the empty cup into a trash can. I pick up Mom's keys from the table. "Anyway, I'm going over to Adrienne's house. She wants to choreograph a new routine for the pep rally next week, and I told her I'd help. She says I've been avoiding her."

I have. But I can't tell her why. I can't even fully explain it to myself yet. I only know I can't be who I was before my brother died.

I wave at Claire as I head out, purposely not allowing my gaze to wander down the street leading away from the town square. I still can't look at the white church.

Some sins can't be forgiven.

3

The countryside barrels by me as I take Mom's Bronco farther and farther into the outskirts of town. The Buckton neighborhood, built around the Woodhaven golf course, isn't exactly the stuff of network television perfection, but it's the nicest part of town. A place where little kids meet for playdates and dads golf on weekends. People who want Buckley to be something it isn't but were too sheltered to get the hell out of dodge. It's a stark contrast to the other side of the town, where Buckley High School is. Over the railroad tracks where the mill-village kids roam, ratty backpacks thrown over their shoulders.

I come to the sign telling me I'm five miles from the next town over,—a town with a movie theater and a Dillard's, and I take a left down a side road. Adrienne's parents are the type that decided they wanted to raise their family in the wide-open country, which seems sweet if you think about it but is actually totally ridiculous in practice. Mr. Maynard grew up in Atlanta, Mrs. Maynard in Chicago, and neither could shake the city from their system. Since Adrienne was old enough to stay home by herself, her parents have been leaving her alone—her dad traveling for work with her mom along for the ride. Adrienne's always hated staying in the big house on her own, so Claire and I crash there a lot to keep her company. And to get into trouble.

The closer I get to Adrienne's house, the more my stomach churns. Adrienne has always been hard to read, but lately she's been impossible. Deep down, I know she's worried, but at the same time, some sort of subtle anger bubbles under it all. Every conversation is clipped, uncomfortable. Like she wants me to snap, and I'm waiting for her to do the same right back.

Today, she asked me why I was so obsessed with things I can't control, and I told her I didn't really know.

Trees line the Maynards' long, winding driveway. I pull in up front, behind Ade's shiny red coupe. Outside it's eerily quiet, and the heat hits me like a wall as I get out of my car. I bound up the front steps and knock—I know neither of Ade's parents is home, and from here, I can hear music pounding against her upstairs window. I push open the front door and take the hardwood steps two at a time, hitting the landing leading to her room. I study the closed door for a minute, considering. She still hasn't answered my text that said I was on my way; she must be busy. But she wanted me to come. She'd yelled at me about not spending time with her.

I push open the door.

I should've trusted my instincts.

She's with a boy.

With a boy in a way that I do not want to see.

It takes a minute for me to stop looking and start seeing. It's not just any boy.

It's *my* boy.

Ethan Masters. All shaggy blond hair and long torso and silly grins just for me since the first day we met. My Ethan with Adrienne and her tan skin and her dark hair on the black sheets we'd slept on together so many times during innocent sleepovers. As I stand there and watch, every moment stretching as long as ten, one word keeps running through my head: *cold*.

Cold.

Adrienne. “Oh my God.”

Cliché.

Ethan. “What the hell.”

Obvious.

I turn and walk downstairs, carefully down every step, and then I sit on the couch.

Adrienne fumbles down the stairs after me in a Buckley High cheer-leading T-shirt, sounding more like a herd of elephants than a 120-pound teenage girl, all doe eyes and shame. “Listen, O—”

I push a piece of hair back behind my ear. “Well, that should be an interesting beginning to our routine and will probably really get the boosters going, but maybe for your opening solo, you should dial back on the slut a little bit.”

“O.” We both turn as Ethan pokes his head around the staircase. Adrienne tells him, “Do not come out here,” in a way I can’t believe, like she has any right, and then it hits me so hard, I dig my fingernails into my palm if only to feel something concrete. I try not to look at him, because he is *my* Ethan. I never thought I’d get through losing Ryan, but Ethan had always been there. I never wanted him to know about Ryan’s problems, but those few times Ethan found out, he stayed. He’d be with me. And sometimes—in those moments when our skin was touching, when he breathed in as I breathed out—that had been all I’d had.

And now he’d been with her.

“What is wrong with you?” I demand of Adrienne.

“I don’t know,” she tells me, and I almost believe it’s genuine. “I’m lonely and I miss you and I’m trying to hold everything—”

“Spare me,” I cut her off. “I’m going.” I push myself up from the couch and look from Adrienne to the spot where Ethan disappeared and start to leave.

“You just came down and sat on the couch,” she says behind me,

the words coming out slowly like she's solving a puzzle for me. "You didn't storm out; you just sat. It's like . . . who are you even? Don't you care?"

I honestly don't know—I know that I should.

Care.

I want to.

So I slam the door, leaving nothing but the reverberations behind me.

4

TWO YEARS AGO

Adrienne was dark. She always had been. Not just her skin and hair and eyes. Not just her smooth voice, seducing everyone in her path. But her demeanor, the way she liked to set things aflame and watch them burn. And here's the thing: A trash can full of paper could keep us entertained when we were in middle school, but by high school, there was something much more interesting to set fire to: people's lives.

It was never personal, which I think was the worst of all of it. But I had fucked up. And I had fucked up bad.

It was a party at Coxie's—Claire's boyfriend. His parents were gone for the weekend, and his house on the outskirts of town ensured no adult would catch us. The music was too loud and the drinks too sweet, and what I remember more than anything else is feeling like I could destroy the world if I so chose. That power was a thrum of energy, a life force. It just so happened that Anna Talbert was too tall and too skinny and a JV cheerleader with very little promise. Which I had told her. Repeatedly.

Adrienne, Claire, and I were the only sophomores on the varsity cheer team that year, a fact that only bonded the three of us closer together as a trio. We were running with some of the senior girls, and things were looking up every day.

Never mind that my brother had gone over a week without answering a text from me. The obvious solution was to start shoving vodka down my throat, and the more I drank, the meaner I got. Anna had no idea why.

“God, Anna, I’d say you were a slut, but everyone knows a boy would never sleep with you.”

Shot.

“Christ, Anna, are you still here? Has no one clearly told you to fuck off yet?”

Shot.

“Jesus, Anna, is there a world where you don’t exist, because I’d like to live in it.”

All this while Anna told me how pretty I looked, how goddamn funny I was. She brought me drink after drink, shot after shot. Adrienne laughed until she cried.

I handed Anna a bottle and told her to stay out of my way, permanently, if possible.

They told me she drank until the designated driver had to put her in the back of the car and take her to the hospital.

It all ended the next morning with me locked in Adrienne’s bathroom, sobbing. A text from one of the senior girls had come through at six a.m. Anna Talbert in serious condition. Don’t say shit. A few more followed, the last from Anna’s cousin asking if we knew who’d given her so much vodka, if we’d keep her in our thoughts and prayers. I’d made it to the bathroom and thrown up, and now I was curled on the rug in front of the toilet, crying like I had never cried in my life. *I did this.*

I had fucked up so incredibly bad.

That’s where Adrienne found me. She sat down in front of me, crossing her legs. “O . . .”

“I almost killed her,” I managed to choke out.

“She almost killed herself,” Adrienne told me calmly. “And they pumped her stomach. She’s going to be fine.”

“I was like Ryan. I was drunk and mean and everyone else be damned. Why couldn’t I leave her alone?” I didn’t get up to look at Adrienne, but her eyes found mine. “It’s some kind of fucking gene that makes me a monster. And wait until she tells them I gave her the vodka. I don’t know what they’ll do to me.” I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. “I deserve it. All of it. I’m dangerous.”

“Get up,” Adrienne told me.

I lost some of my conviction then, tuning out her voice. I stopped crying quite as hard. The thought crystallized in my mind. I was dangerous, and I needed to be away from here. Really, it was an escape.

Maybe this is my way out of Buckley.

Adrienne realized I wasn’t getting up. She crawled down on the ground next to me, until our faces were right in front of each other, our noses inches apart. “She’s not going to tell,” she said to me.

I skipped a breath. “Why?”

She blew out a laugh that I felt on my cheeks. “Because I texted her first thing this morning and told her how concerned we both were about her. How we hadn’t slept since we heard. I don’t like it, but she’s in now, O.”

“In?”

“She’s our friend. We love her like she loves us, so no more of that shit from last night, all right?”

I hadn’t known up until that moment that we had an *in* or an *out*. But it seemed so obvious now. *In*. It should have felt better than it did.

It should’ve been more of a relief. I said, “Thank you,” anyway.

Adrienne pushed a hand into my hair, holding it there tenderly. “You’re not like him,” she whispered to me. “You’re my best friend and you’re beautiful and hilarious and perfect, okay?”

I nodded.

“I love you,” she said at last. She never said that. We weren’t like the best friends who were always hugging, saying *love you*. That wasn’t Adrienne. Coming from her, it was practically a confession.

“Love you, too, Ade,” I said, my voice still the hangover of a cry. She smiled. “That’s why I’d never let anything bad happen to you.”

5

It is gray outside.

I'd gotten fairly used to sleepless nights, used to the moment after the night had retreated and before the sun was really up yet. A bottle of Jack Daniel's stared at me sadly from my desk.

I'd found the bottles stacked away in my brother's closet right after he died, presumably for when he was home in Buckley and would need at least eight or nine drinks to survive each day. I hadn't wanted Mom to see them, which had to be the most futile part of Ryan's personality to hide. But I'd stashed them away, out of sight, and last night, I'd pulled this one out and set it on the desk.

I couldn't bring myself to take a drink.

Adrienne and Ethan had texted and called me until about two, when surely they had fallen asleep. With the pattern of the buzzes, I could only assume they were communicating with each other between texting me, while simultaneously laying the blame on each other.

I decided not to care.

One, though. One text—one small string of words—had caught my attention.

O, this is as bad as it gets. Tomorrow, we start trying to fix this again.

Adrienne doesn't ask; she tells.

The sad thing is, I like the idea. I like to think we could fix this and be best friends. Be best friends differently than we were before.

But she has to pay first. I don't want sorry.

I want blood.

I fall back into the thought like a safety blanket. The thought of revenge gives me life. Purpose.

That's what I was missing.

So I get up, and I get on with it. Tight jeans. Loose top. Red lips.

Let's do this.

She hasn't looked at me yet.

We're sitting there in fourth period, our first class of the day together. The first time we've been in the same room since yesterday and she's not looking at me.

It's the poetry section of the year. The one we all dread most.

The only concept worse than writing poems in English class is reading them out loud. I always see it in the teachers' eyes. They think they tell you to write a poem and you spill pain and heartbreak and blood all over a piece of college-ruled notebook paper because it's your only chance to get it out. Maybe they'll cry and you'll cry and it'll make a really great TV movie. You'll have conquered your emotional demons in the span of their fifty-minute class, all thanks to them. Written everything you're thinking, everything that's pulling you apart.

No one does that. Except me, I guess. Right now. My eyes boring into the back of Adrienne's head, I write it all down.

I start scratching out words on the paper, hoping to make it less honest, less raw, less *anything*. Mrs. Morrison calls for volunteers, then

does that tut-tut thing teachers do when no one actually volunteers. “Don’t make me pick someone,” she singsongs.

Silence. The kind of silence that stretches into days. If she asks, I’ll tell her I didn’t write anything. She never said we’d have to read these out loud. *I can’t. I won’t.* But then Mrs. Morrison says, “Vera. Good.”

I look up, my heart caught in my throat, right between my jaw and my esophagus. Vera Drake is this incredibly awkward girl, shy and quiet, someone who disappears outside of a classroom. I focus solely on her when she starts to talk—her short, uneven blond bob and wide-set eyes. Small wrists and nonexistent fashion sense. She stares at the floor when she speaks.

“Sapphire eyes, golden hair,” she squawks, speaking slowly and taking deep breaths louder than is strictly necessary. “Your eyes look at me / but I’m not there. / Standing alone, locker-tall, / you’re right and wrong, / above it all.”

I die a million deaths for her with every word, squirming in my seat.

“Lovely, Vera,” Mrs. Morrison lies. Even she is embarrassed. Vera rocks from her left foot to her right. “Why did you write that?” Like she needs to ask.

“You know that feeling,” Vera explains, and oh my God, I wish she wouldn’t, “where you’re in the same room with somebody and you can’t even remember to breathe?”

“I feel that way about pizza,” comes a voice from the other side of the room, dark and confident; it fills up the empty space, turning the awkward silence into laughter.

“Miss Maynard,” Mrs. Morrison chides as Vera crawls back to her seat, her eyes on the floor to shield off the humiliation. “Thank you for your opinion.”

Adrienne smiles all bright and beautiful, flips her sheet of black hair over her shoulder. She has on her game face. I should’ve known: It’s what she does. She doesn’t let the guilt eat away at her like I do. I always do.

I scratch at my poem until the paper tears. It's all sex and grief, and sex and grief are the last things I want anyone else to think about me.

When I glance up again, Adrienne catches my eyes for the briefest of seconds before burying her face in her hair again with a fake shy smile. That shy smile she employs only when she's been caught humiliating someone who has no ammo to fight back with, like it was only an innocent joke among friends.

"I liked it," I say without thinking. If she doesn't think *I'll* fight back, she's dead wrong.

Everyone laughs again. Of course. They think I'm mocking Vera, too.

I glance back quickly, and Vera stares down at her desk, expertly avoiding eye contact with anyone. She stares so hard, I wonder if there is an alternate universe she can climb into somewhere down there. I wonder if she'll take me with her.

I'm not going to let Adrienne have this one.

"But really," I start to say, still looking at Vera. If I can convince her of my sincerity, I win today's game. *Olivia: 1. Adrienne: 0.*

"That is quite enough, Olivia," Mrs. Morrison cuts me off. "Unless you want me to talk to Dr. Rickards about your participation in homecoming week."

"But I did," I try to stress again. "Like it."

"Give it a rest, O," Adrienne says from across the room. Everyone's staring at me with these horrified looks on their faces, as if Adrienne didn't start it. Because it had been funny, until it wasn't. I lean my face into my palm, smearing red lipstick on my hand in the process. *Olivia: 0. Adrienne: 1.*

When the bell rings, I rip my poem up into eighteen different pieces. I catch Vera out of the corner of my eye as she's leaving. I can't help it. I grab onto her green jacket. "I meant what I said," I promise her.

She pulls away from me, a tear glistening in her eye. This is always the worst part. When they cry. I've always hated when they cry. I'd try

telling myself it wasn't my fault, it was just for fun, they were too fucking sensitive and it was Buckley High, not real life, but I never meant to make them cry.

“Shit.”

I throw the bits of my poem in the trash, watching them float down like paper rain. I think about how people are always saying how good guys finish last. I think about Adrienne tearing Vera down. Listening to it. Enjoying it.

I want to hurt her. I want to see her lose for once in her perfectly constructed life. I want her to come crawling back to me, to beg me for forgiveness. To beg me to *stop*.

I just want one moment to hold on to.

And I'll get it if it's the last thing I do.