

I STEP INTO THE REGISTRATION BUILDING and marvel at how it smells the same every time. The strong aroma of bleach cleanser that somehow never manages to get rid of the lingering undertone of mildew and rot is a hard one to forget.

For over ten years, I've spent every Friday afternoon from three to five p.m. at the Polunsky Unit except for the two weeks in December it took to get my "hardship privileges" approved by the warden. It still seems crazy to me that I had to get the approval from Warden Zonnberg—the director of death row himself—just to visit my own daddy without Mama present. It was a whole lot of hassle to go through when you consider that I was only ten months shy of being legal at the time. But like Mama says: *Seventeen is still seventeen no matter what color you paint it.* So once Mama's work made it harder for her to attend visits with me, the warden literally declared me a case of hardship in order to approve my visits. I have paperwork and everything. Nothing like putting a label on a girl to make her feel good about herself.

And the stupid teens on reality TV shows think *they* have daddy issues.

Mama sent me with a letter for Daddy—as she always does. I wonder what it says but don't look. It's enough that the guards thoroughly examine every piece of communication our family shares. Me snooping through their messages too would be as welcome as a skunk at a lawn party.

Almost instinctively, I walk toward the desk and begin prepping to pass through the security checkpoint. By the time I step up and sign my name, my shoes and belt are off and my pockets are emptied. As always, I left my purse in the car and only brought my zip-lock bag with a paper chess set, my ID, change for the vending machines, my car keys, and Mama's letter—nothing that will raise any trouble. I may not be an honor student, but I am nothing if not a model death row visitor.

Mama should seriously find a bumper sticker that says *that* about her daughter.

Nancy, the correctional officer behind the desk, smiles when she looks up and sees me signing in. "You're prepped already. You've got to be the speediest girl at the airport, Riley."

I incline my head. "I'm sure I will be should I ever decide I want to go anywhere. You've prepared me well."

"You've never been on a plane?"

"I've never been outside of Texas."

She seems shocked. "Good Lordy, why not?"

I place one hand across my heart and give her a wide grin. "Because I love it so. I just couldn't bear to leave."

"Everybody loves Texas," Nancy says, nodding with a smile, obviously not catching my sarcasm.

I provide the expected response. "Absolutely."

Nancy opens Mama's letter and scans through it. When she's finished she puts it back with my plastic bag and moves them both through the X-ray machine.

I put the pen down on her book, handing over my driver's license for her to inspect like she's done so many times before.

"Still not eighteen yet, huh?" She reaches for the red notebook behind her desk where I know my hardship form is kept. The mound of paperwork I had to fill out to get that form was filed away safely somewhere in the warden's office. I swear the prison system seems to have taken on the sole responsibility for keeping the paper industry in business.

"Nope. I decided to delay becoming legal for as long as humanly possible."

"Mm-hmm." Nancy makes a note in the folder. "Are you guys ready for the hearing?"

"Yep," I say with false bravado before swallowing against the fear that always clamps down on my throat any time I think about Daddy's final appeal next week.

"What day is it?" She takes me through the metal detector and does my pat-down.

"It's on Thursday." I've grown used to having conversations with people while they're frisking me, but that doesn't make it any less awkward. The trick is to avoid direct eye contact until they've finished. I stare straight ahead as she runs her hands over my legs.

"Well, good luck then. See you next week, Riley," Nancy says, and I wave as I head to the front desk to get my visitor badge and let the receptionist inspect Mama's letter further.

My body follows the usual routine as if disconnected from my

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brain. I cross the yard and go through the gate to the administration building. I don't even realize that I've passed the green outer door and both steel security doors before I'm sitting in the visiting area designated for contact visits and waiting for Daddy to come in.

It's quiet in the barely-bigger-than-a-broom-closet room and my mind goes over the few details Daddy had told me about the current appeal. His legal team had uncovered evidence that at least one jury member from his original trial might have been tampered with. This may be our first chance to be granted a retrial in the nearly twelve years my father has been in prison. This appeal actually seems promising, and for the first time in years, I struggle to keep my hope in check.

It's what we've been waiting for all this time—a new chance to prove that Daddy didn't do it.

I keep running the envelope containing Mama's letter through my fingers. I pass it from one hand to the other. I wince as the edge slices a small paper cut into my palm, but the pain helps me keep my focus here in this visitation room. My mind should not be behind bars. It should not be distracted by thoughts of what could be happening right now in a jail cell or by what may happen on Thursday in a judge's courtroom.

Today is just one more visit with my father . . . and that alone makes it special.

"Hi, Ri," Daddy says when the officer brings him in. I study my father as I do every week. When I decide he doesn't look any worse this visit than the last, I release a shaky breath. Everyone in Polunsky is in solitary confinement, which is enough to drive a person mad if they weren't already when they came in. That much time

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alone isn't good for anyone's well-being. He's lost a lot of weight over the years, developing a leaner and harder look. And sometimes he still manages to get bruises he refuses to explain. I've seen enough to suspect they came from a chance altercation with another inmate while being moved around the prison . . . or the guards.

Once his cuffs are released, he hugs me tight and I hug him back—the same way I do every visit. I guess when you're only allowed two hugs from your father per week, you're never too grown up for it.

The officer clears his throat, and Daddy pulls away from me. We walk over to sit down at the table. Once we're seated, the guard closes the door and stands outside. This is what we're allowed. This is what our face-to-face relationship is defined by: a hug at the beginning and the end of each visit. When I leave, the guard will give me the letters Daddy has written to me this week to take home. While I'm here, we must sit on opposite sides of the table. We can hold hands if we want, but we rarely do anymore. Not since I was little. When Mama used to come more frequently, she and Daddy used to hold hands sometimes. It symbolizes their marriage—their romance—to me now. I couldn't take that away from them.

Mama has had to miss visits and hearings too often in the last year and I know they miss seeing each other, but Mama's new job is demanding. She's been the executive assistant to a vice president at an investment firm since last summer. Her boss pays her well and gives her job security as long as she works whenever and wherever it's convenient for him.

After being fired in the past for reasons like *your presence is creating an uncomfortable work environment for others* or *not disclosing*

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pertinent background information, Mama *really* cares about her job security.

“How is your mother?” Daddy asks first thing, and I smile. Polunsky has aged him, but the sparkle in Daddy’s eyes when he sees me never changes.

“She’s fine. She said to tell you that she’s excited to see you on Thursday.”

His smile falters. “Are you *both* coming to the hearing?”

“Yes.” I prepare myself for the argument I know is coming.

“I wish you wouldn’t, but you already know that.” Daddy sits back in his chair and pushes his hand through his thick salt-and-pepper hair. “Ben can let you know how it goes after—”

“We want to be there. Having your family there to support you is important during your appeals—both to you and to the judge. Mr. Masters even told us that.” I shake my head, refusing to budge on this one. Benjamin Masters is Daddy’s lawyer, and a longtime family friend. When I was little, I used to think he was my uncle. It wasn’t until I was ten that I finally understood that we weren’t actually related. He and Daddy were partners in their law firm before Daddy ended up here.

“That’s lawyer logic. I know that and so do you.” He frowns so deep it seems to create new lines on his face. “I’m not thinking like a lawyer right now. I’m thinking like a father, and I’m just trying to protect my family. I hate seeing the media circle you and your mother like a pack of coyotes around fresh meat. You did nothing to bring this on yourself.”

“Neither did you, Daddy.” I reach out and give his hand a firm

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squeeze. “We’re in this with you by choice. Besides, I’d hate it if I wasn’t there to hear the good news.”

He returns a weak version of my smile and I decide to change the subject. Opening my plastic bag, I pass Daddy the letter from Mama before pulling out the paper chess set and putting the pieces in place.

“Now, on to the really important stuff,” I say. “I learned a new strategy on YouTube this week that’s going to blow your mind.”

Daddy chuckles before cracking his knuckles and leaning forward with a grin. “As the things you tell me you find on the Internet usually do.”

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BY TUESDAY, I'VE CLEANED my room five times in an effort to keep my mind off Daddy's upcoming hearing. For the first time I can remember, I almost wish I had school in the summer just so I would have something to distract myself. It's a momentary and fleeting wish, since most of the time I would give my left kidney to not have to go to that hellish place where everyone—students and faculty alike—watches me like I might morph into a killer at any moment.

Still—saying that I'm in serious need of a diversion is a definite understatement.

I slump down on the couch with my somewhat maimed copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* to read for the billionth time. The whole house is dim and I wish I knew when Mama would be home. Rubbing my fingertips against my eyelids, I let the tension from the week seep down into my legs and out through my feet.

I flip open the book, and end up dropping it after only a few pages. I love the story, that isn't the problem. The house is too quiet around me. It's peaceful, but sometimes it feels more like our home is wrapped up in a blanket of apprehension. It's waiting, just like

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I am. Waiting for the next visitation day, waiting for the next trial date, waiting to read the next letter—or like right now, waiting for the next appeal hearing in two days.

That's all we do in my family. Wait.

My nerves get the better of me in the silence. They're like red ants swarming, creeping in droves under my skin. I can almost feel their tiny feet crawling, but I can't stop them. I cringe, knowing I'm helpless to prevent the stings from coming at any moment.

I rub my hands along my arms, trying to force away the thoughts, the sensation. Wishing I had something—anything—to do. Then I stop and head toward the stairs.

Right now, I can think of one thing I don't have to wait for.

The moment I get to my room, I grab the three remaining unread letters from this week's stack, slip out the one marked May 31, and flop on my bed as I lift the flap. Daddy never bothers to seal these. We learned a long time ago that the guards would open and read every letter he sends home with us anyway, so he doesn't try to prevent it. Pulling the paper out, I hold it carefully as I read.

Riley,

Happy Tuesday, sweetheart! Hope you're having a good day. I can't believe how fast time seems to move these days. It's always so good to see you. I can't believe you'll be eighteen soon. It feels wrong that my own daughter is growing up so much without me. Every time I see you, it seems you look older. Don't grow up too fast, Ri. I'm still holding out hope that I might somehow find a way to be back at home

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*with you before you move out and on with your own
life.*

*All my love,
Daddy*

I read it again, smiling to myself as I remember my last visit. Our chess match this week had been very close. I'd nearly won—something I hadn't done since I turned nine and realized he was letting me win. I had demanded that he start playing for real, and he'd dominated me ever since.

But I'm learning. I'm getting better with every match and he knows it.

I walk over to my closet. The bottom is filled with neatly stacked shoeboxes. The older letters are packed up and moved into the attic on a regular basis to make room for new ones. I've never tried to count how many boxes I've piled up over the years, but there are twenty-two in my closet right now. The one on top is the only one not held closed with a large rubber band. I slip the newest letter into it and caress the tops of a few envelopes before putting the lid back on and replacing the box. Mama helped me set up this system way back when Daddy was still on trial. He'd started sending home letters every time we visited him—one letter for every day of the week except visitation day.

Mama and I both expected him to stop or slow down at some point, but he never did. The shoebox stacks are reaching the point where they're starting to interfere with my hanging clothes again. Knowing I'll have to move some boxes up to the attic soon forms a ball of sadness in the bottom of my stomach.

I always dread doing that. The boxes hold pieces of Daddy—and

Polunsky has already stolen so much of him away. I like keeping the letters close. I wish I could fill my whole room with them, but Mama won't let me.

I used to think Mama might be jealous that he doesn't send her a letter for every day of the week, but I don't dare ask in case it might hurt her to talk about that. I know she misses him as much as I do, and we've all had enough pain.

A bang shatters my thoughts as I hear the door downstairs close and then Mama's voice. "Riley, are you home?"

"Yep!" I respond as I close my closet.

"Can you come help with groceries, please?"

"Yes, ma'am," I murmur as I head for the stairs. I leave my thoughts where I wish I could stay, locked up tight in the closet full of Daddy's letters.

Mama nudges my hands with a bowl of spaghetti until I blink and take it. When I look up at her, it's clear she's been speaking and I haven't been paying attention.

"Sorry," I say as I carry the bowl to the table and grab the glasses to fill with milk.

"Your mind sure is busy." She waits until I meet her worried eyes before continuing. "Was your day okay?"

"Yeah, it was fine."

"Are you bored? Are you sure quitting your job was the best plan?" Her voice holds a tone that clearly says she thinks I should've stayed, but we've been over that already.

I level my gaze at her. "I'm sure that working in a place like that wasn't worth the money."

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She watches me. I turn and pour the second glass of milk before she speaks again. “I know it was hard—”

“It wasn’t *hard*, Mama.” I put the glass down on the table with a loud *clink* and barely notice when a splash of milk sloshes over the top. “The second Carly found out about Daddy, she told *everyone*. They all started avoiding me, and then someone left those threats in my cubby and on my car.”

“This isn’t the first time we’ve seen struggle, Riley.” Mama wipes up the mess with a napkin and shakes her head.

“They said I should die like the girls in Daddy’s case.” The words spill out like the milk before I can stop them.

Mama gives me a sharp glance and I shut my mouth, fuming silently and fighting to calm down. It’s hard enough to cope with our situation, but the worst part is when she speaks to me like I’m not strong. When she implies that I’m weak after I spend every day fighting to prove to myself and everyone else that I’m tough enough to face my situation, my life. The pain of her doubting me hurts worse than it would from anyone else.

“Did you do anything fun today?” Mama clears her throat and lifts her chin as she puts her bowl on the table and takes her seat. I can see in her eyes that our previous discussion is now over.

“I did some reading,” I answer, knowing that she won’t be pleased if she feels like I sat around all day, content with my newly unemployed status.

“Oh? What did you read?” Her smile is hard, but the tone in her voice has a softer edge. She won’t say out loud that she understands why I quit, but she does. Her job may be stable now, but it hasn’t always been. And I know from her stories that she’s had to work twice

as hard just to get people to look at how competent she is instead of who she's married to.

Like Mama always says: *If you make yourself priceless, people can't throw you away.*

"It was *The Count of Monte Cristo*." I swirl some spaghetti around on my fork, but don't take a bite.

Mama's frown is back. "Again? A book about an innocent man in prison, Riley? Don't you think you should try reading something new?"

"I like it." I shrug, and then decide it's my turn to change the subject. "Are you still coming with me to the appeal hearing on Thursday?"

Mama nods as she pokes at her spaghetti. "Yes. I arranged for someone else to cover for me for a couple of hours. Should I come pick you up on my way to the courthouse?"

"Sure." I'm relieved I won't be alone this time. I look down and realize that I've just been swirling the spaghetti around in my bowl and haven't actually taken a bite. My stomach is rolling into a tight knot now, and it has nothing to do with hunger.

Maybe bringing up the appeal at dinner hadn't been my brightest idea.

Mama's hand closes over my fingers, stopping them from clutching my fork a little too tight.

"Whatever happens at the hearing, we're going to be just fine." Mama holds her head high and I wish I could sap a little of her resilience through her gaze. When I don't say anything, she gives my hand a squeeze. "You believe me, Riley?"

I quickly nod and try to convince myself that I mean it. "Yes, Mama."

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WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, my Volkswagen bakes in the Texas sun like one of Mama's pecan pies. Heat rises from it in waves, but I can guarantee it won't smell even half as good. I stop on the front porch when I see a white paper tucked inside one of Mama's planters. No one in our neighborhood has been friendly since they found out who Daddy was about a month after we'd moved in. Since then we've received lovely messages like this occasionally. I consider just throwing it away, knowing from experience that I don't want to see what it contains, but curiosity gets the better of me and I carefully unfold it.

It's exactly the kind of message I was expecting.

*People who support murderers don't belong here.
Get out of our neighborhood!*

Shoving my sunglasses farther up my nose with a sigh, I toss the note in the trash can before speed-walking down my driveway and unlocking the car door. I take a deep breath and open it, stepping

back so the wave of heat escaping from inside doesn't blast me across the face.

Almost as if to spite my efforts, a wind hot as blazes kicks up like it came from the face of the sun itself. God, even the breezes in Texas can be hotter than hell. Instead of cooling me off, it makes sweat drip down the back of my neck.

I see my neighbor Mary walk out of her house three doors down, and I wave. She raises her hand automatically to wave back, but then recognizes me and quickly drops it back to her side when she sees her mother coming out after her. Mrs. Jones ushers her to her car, shaking her head and whispering in low tones the whole way. I can practically hear her clucking from here. Ducking my head, I ignore the sting of it and pretend not to care what they might be saying about me.

I watch them drive down the street as my car airs out a bit. It's always like this. We've moved three times around Houston—new neighborhoods, new schools, new friends. The same three things always happen with the kids at school. First, they eventually find out about Daddy, and that alone weeds out the vast majority. The few that aren't driven away by him being on death row are strangely obsessed with it. All they want to do is ask questions about what it's like to have a father on death row. Which is weird, but at least I have someone to hang out with—until their parents find out and forbid them to see me or come to our house. That cuts out almost everyone.

Only two remained after that, Kali and Rebecca. They were the two who didn't seem to care on any level about my dad—the two

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who felt like they were my friends just for *me*. That's part of what made it so hard when my mom and I moved to the other side of town, away from Kali in seventh grade. She made new friends and we lost touch. Rebecca's dad was in the army at Joint Base San Antonio, and then they were transferred to a base in South Dakota. I still get letters from her occasionally, but not often.

The neighbors usually went straight from finding out the truth to wanting us gone. Not all of them left nasty notes, but none of them were what I'd call friendly either.

Eventually I think I got tired of being rejected and started rejecting everyone else before they got a chance. Keeping people at a bit of a distance may be lonely sometimes, but it can also save a lot of heartbreak.

I punch the buttons to roll down all the windows simultaneously. I throw the blanket I keep over my seat into the back with a little more force than usual. When I climb in, I flip the visor down with a grunt to block the glare blinding me as it bounces off the hood of the car, forgetting for an instant about the old and warped photo of Daddy that I hide there. I catch it with gently cradled hands.

His face is so soft in the photo, so young. His eyes hold a touch of the recklessness he always says I got from him. His expression is now hardened by everything he's gone through. I love Daddy as he is, but I can't help but wish I'd known him when he looked like this. I shouldn't have the photo outside of our house. Mama says the ones from when he was younger are the ones people are most likely to recognize. But I can't bear to not have it close. I kiss the photo before slipping it back up behind the visor and starting the car.

Daddy's upcoming trial is the reason I feel so anxious and

worried lately. He's also the reason I can't stay shut up in our house for another minute. Ever since I was old enough to drive, I've made a practice of seeing what it's like to be someone else on a regular basis. That's the kind of distraction I need to keep my mind busy for the rest of today . . . and I think I know where to find it.

I drive in the direction of First Liberty Mall. It takes fifteen minutes on the road before the air conditioner is even worth turning on. At least that still leaves me another forty-five to drive in the nice, cool interior before I get to First Liberty.

There are malls much closer where I could go to get out of the house. After all, I live in northeast Houston. Nearly every mall in Houston is closer to home than the one I'm heading to. But I prefer a longer drive in exchange for the invaluable perk of anonymity. At First Liberty, I won't see anyone who knows me. I'm not *that Riley* from school, *that Riley* from the law offices, or *that Riley* from the Polunsky prison unit.

While I'm there, I can pretend to be anyone I want. I don't have to be the girl with the dad on death row. I don't even have to tell anyone my real name if I don't want to, and the nearly-an-hour drive in each direction is absolutely worth it to be *anyone else* on a day like today.

When I pull into the mall parking lot, a smile creeps across my face. No one here goes to my school or would recognize me. The diner across from the movie theater is a great spot, so I head in that direction. Often, I just like to people-watch. Other times I give myself a little challenge to interact with strangers. See who I might have decided to be if the Texas court system hadn't already defined that for me.

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Of course, talking to people is always more risky. Folks I interact with look at me closer. And it's still possible that someone could recognize me from the newspaper articles about Daddy's trials and hearings, but that would be a risk anywhere in Texas. I usually stick with people my age, and that group spends about as much time reading newspapers as they do churning butter. With three high schools within spitting distance, this mall is always full of teenagers.

So for today at least, I can have a fresh start. And that's exactly what I need before tomorrow has the chance to crush my family's future.

The moment I enter the mall, a cool draft hits me and instantly puts me at ease a bit. In the back of my mind, I thank the gods of air-conditioning for the zillionth time.

I head straight for the Galaxy Café, and the hostess seats me near the window where I can watch the people walking by. The ambience here is fantastic. I would love this place even if it didn't offer me the freedom it does. It's like a diner lifted straight out of the sixties. They play old music like the Beatles and Elvis and it always reminds me of the music Daddy used to play around the house and how Mama would laugh. But that was long before prison bars stood between them. The seats are covered in bright red vinyl, records adorn the walls, and the ceiling is painted deep blue with tiny white pinpricks of light spread across it in constellations that mimic the nighttime sky.

Galaxy is both old and new. It's kitschy and cool, and I love everything about it.

On a Wednesday afternoon, the mall isn't too busy, but there are about ten tables already taken with late lunch customers. I order a

thick Oreo milkshake and start studying the people around me. One nearby table is full of teens. I scoot to the edge of my booth and pretend to scroll through my phone as I try to eavesdrop on their conversation. Before I get a chance to hear much, though, I feel an impact against my right sandal.

When I bend over, the first thing I see is a red Matchbox car. I pick it up and squint at it.

“Sorry about that. Driving skills obviously need improvement.” A deep voice speaks from the booth behind mine and I spin to face it. My first thought isn’t exactly articulate: *Wow, hotness*. His warm eyes are a slightly lighter shade of brown than his dark olive complexion.

Hot Guy extends his hand. I freeze, not sure if I should shake it or stick the car into it. As if he can read my mind, he drops his hand back to his lap and provides me with an alternate option.

“Unless you’re interested in joining our competition? Any experience on a pit crew, by chance?” His eyes now have a wicked sparkle to them that draws me in.

“Pit crew?” I raise my eyebrows.

“Girls don’t like cars.” I hear a small voice from the other side of his booth and slide to the side a bit to see who spoke. A seriously adorable little boy looks up at me. He can only be Hot Guy’s little brother. His Angry Birds T-shirt is just a smidge too big for him. He has the same skin and dark wavy hair, the same athletic build, the same square jawline and Roman nose—he is his brother in miniature. When he beams up at me, one of his front teeth is missing. “Hi!”

“Hi . . .” I can’t help but smile back at him.

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“What’s your name? You don’t like cars, right?” He continues to smile at me while I consider my answer. The kid couldn’t be more than six years old. “I’m Matthew.”

“I actually do like cars.”

“Then you’re cool.” He lifts his cupped hands up and releases no fewer than eight cars onto the tabletop. His big brother frantically shoots his arms out, trying to prevent them all from careening off onto the floor.

Matthew slides out of his seat and walks to my table. “You didn’t tell me your name.”

Maybe all of my friends should be six. The questions of children seem to be so much simpler than those of adults. Something deep in me really doesn’t want to lie to this kid. “I’m Riley.”

His brother jerks his head up with an embarrassed expression. “Matthew, she doesn’t have to tell you her name if she doesn’t want to.”

“But . . . she already did.” Matthew looks at his brother like he just said the dumbest thing he’s ever heard. He sticks his small hand out to shake mine.

“Nice to meet you,” he says, sincerely. The gesture melts me and I place my hand in his. All my worry about Daddy’s hearing dissolves as he grips my hand firmly and shakes it like this is the most important meeting each of us will ever have. “Now, tell me what your favorite color is.”

After tossing the cars into a green plastic container, Matthew’s brother gets up and puts his hands on Matthew’s shoulders. “Sorry, he has no filter with strangers.”

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“It’s fine. I like being told that I’m cool.” I shrug before lowering my eyes to Matthew. “My favorite color is purple.”

Matthew dives for the green bin and starts digging through it without another word.

“I think that was your official invitation to play . . . in case you didn’t recognize it.” Hot Guy rubs his hand on the back of his neck. His cheeks flush slightly and then he smiles at me. “I’m Jordan, by the way.”

“Your brother is really cute.” I lower my voice so Matthew can’t hear us.

“Yeah, that’s what all the girls say.” Jordan shakes his head.

“Oh, I see.” I lift one eyebrow, deciding these two might be the perfect pair to distract myself with today. “This is part of your game then? Bring your adorable brother to the mall. Hit girls with tiny cars. Have him get them to tell you their names . . . very smooth. Will he ask for my number next?”

Jordan looks horrified for an instant before he picks up on the fact that I’m joking and a grin spreads across his face. “Or maybe we’re part of a research project and he’s just a very small scientist.”

The server comes with my milkshake and I stick my spoon into it. “What would you be researching?”

“The effects of tiny cars on complete strangers.” Jordan sticks his hands into his jeans pockets as his face turns mockingly serious.

“Fascinating.”

Matthew drops a bright purple convertible onto the table in front of me. I pick it up to look at it and before I know it, Matthew is

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pushing himself and his green bin of cars into the seat on the other side of my booth.

Jordan blinks at Matthew and then me before shaking his head. “Buddy, we need to stay in our booth. I think we’ve bothered Riley enough for one afternoon.”

Matthew freezes in the middle of organizing his cars on my table and looks at me in shock. “I’m bothering you?”

I shake my head fast and firm. “Not at all.”

“He’s fine.” I look up at Jordan and then gesture to the seat beside Matthew. “Looks like I’m officially part of your experiment—or pit crew—depending on where this afternoon takes us. Care to have a seat?”

Jordan sits down, picks up a yellow race car, and runs it over the back of Matthew’s hand. His eyes lift to me and he frowns like something is bothering him.

“There is something kind of familiar about you, Riley. Do you go to school around here?”

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I SWALLOW AND LIFT MY PURPLE CAR in front of my eyes, pretending to be very focused on the front wheels as my mind spins. I really don't like the idea of lying to Matthew, because lying to a kid who is so blatantly honest feels wrong for some reason, but I don't want to tell Jordan any more than I have to. There is obviously only one solution here.

Tell Matthew the truth. With Jordan, I'll lie through my teeth.

"Nope. I'm home-schooled, actually." I spin the wheels around once before lowering the purple car back to the table. "Maybe I just have one of those faces?"

Jordan nods slowly and then says. "Maybe . . ."

"Do you play sports?" Matthew jumps in before Jordan can say anything else.

"Not really."

"Jordan plays—" Matthew looks up at Jordan, his forehead wrinkling up. "Do you still play or do you used to play?"

Now it's Jordan's turn to look uncomfortable. "I might play again, but for now I don't play."

Matthew gives me a knowing nod. "He don't play."

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I look from one brother to the other, waiting for someone to volunteer the missing information.

“Football,” Jordan says, and his expression is surprisingly guarded. I wonder for a fleeting moment if I look the same way to him.

“You stopped playing football? On purpose?” I feign shock. “I didn’t think that ever happened in Texas.”

Jordan’s face softens. “I know. You should take note. I’m a rare commodity.”

“You’ll cave and go back eventually. They all do.” I ram my car into Matthew’s and he giggles.

“You’re some sort of Texan football expert?” Jordan’s eyes are on me and he seems to have completely forgotten about the toy car in his hand.

I cast him a sideways glance and try for evasive. “Um . . . don’t you have to be to live here? I thought they took your card away if you weren’t.”

“Your official Texan card?” He starts using a drink menu and the napkin holder to build a ramp for Matthew.

“Yes.” This is good. Keep the chatter light and friendly. No probing questions and we’ll all get through this just fine.

“I think I might just give mine back.” Jordan focuses on fine-tuning his ramp balance by placing salt-and-pepper shakers at the end.

I’m jarred and stop my car in place, suddenly so curious about this guy across from me that I forget about protecting my own secrets. “Really? Why?”

Jordan notices the difference in my tone and looks up at me for a few seconds before saying, “I don’t know. Reasons.”

I blink. *Reasons?* And I thought *I* was the one being evasive.

He picks up Matthew's car and slides it successfully down the ramp. It only stops when it runs into the side of my milkshake and Matthew picks it up immediately for another run.

I take my purple car, place it on the ramp to go next, and smile, feeling myself start to relax. Something tells me that a guy who is trying to keep his own secrets won't press me too hard if I don't want to reveal any of mine.

Apparently, six-year-olds have very strong opinions about what they want to do and when they want to do it. Matthew is our leader and we spend our time mostly following his commands.

"Let's go to a movie!" he shouts as we walk out of Galaxy thirty minutes later.

Jordan looks over at me nervously. "Want to go to a movie?"

"Depends . . ." I look down at Matthew and lift one eyebrow. "Which movie?"

He suddenly frowns. "Ugh, do you like the kissy movies?"

Jordan slaps his hand over his eyes with a groan.

I answer like I'm thinking hard about it. "Hmm . . . not today, I don't."

"Oh, good!" Matthew looks so relieved I actually giggle. "Maybe one with explosions or cartoons?"

"Maybe cartoons?" I assume with Matthew we probably need to pick something in the G to PG rating range. "What do you think, Jordan?"

We both turn to face him and he looks up from checking something on his phone. He seems genuinely surprised that we're even

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asking his opinion. Maybe hanging with a kid Matthew's age all the time has its downside. You never get a say in anything.

"Yes. Cartoons it is," Jordan says as he leads the way toward the theater.

Matthew sits between us for the movie. I glance over at Jordan during the previews. I've had a lot of fun with these brothers already and I've only known them a couple of hours. Could Jordan finally be someone who wouldn't push to know too much about me? Maybe this could actually turn into a real friendship? My cheeks flush as I look away, grateful for the dim theater around us.

I scowl in the darkness. I know better than to get caught up in anyone like this. It *never* ends well . . . no matter how it starts.

Still, on a scalding hot Wednesday afternoon with nothing better to do, why can't a girl dream a little?

When I lift my eyes again, I see Jordan watching me. This time he doesn't look away or seem shy. He just smiles at me . . . and I smile back.

After the movie, we race cars down the slide at the mall playground and get pretzels. Matthew and Jordan are an infinitely better distraction than the people-watching I'd been hoping for. By the time we're leaving, I'm starting to wish I had a younger sibling to hang out with.

They walk me to my car because Matthew informs me "that's what the gentlemen do." Cuteness is surprisingly difficult to argue with.

Matthew zooms along in front of us as we make our way toward the mall exit. We watch him run his favorite car, the silver monster

truck, over every flat surface he can find—the backs of benches, around flower pots, across the bottoms of store windows—I'm surprised he hasn't started trying to drive it over the people passing by.

"Thanks for hanging out with us today." Jordan sounds a little uncomfortable. "I hope we didn't keep you from anything important."

"I had nothing else to do," I say. "And even if I had, I would've picked doing this. You two are highly entertaining."

"Well, that's good to know." Jordan tousles Matthew's hair as he zips by. "It seems he's the secret weapon I never knew I had."

"Should I expect to see you here with a different girl every week now that you know you've struck gold?" I lift one eyebrow and grin.

"Nah, too easy. Then it won't be a challenge anymore."

"Yeah, too easy is never fun." I chuckle, then look down when I realize Jordan is watching me more closely than before.

"Seriously, Riley, something about you is so familiar." Jordan squints and that sense of dread creeps over me again. My stomach goes shockingly cold after such a fun day. I plead inside my head. *Don't remember me from a newspaper or a picture online somewhere. Not today. Not you.* "Are you sure I don't know you from somewhere?"

"I don't know." I stall before continuing as we approach my car. "Maybe you saw me here before. Do you spend most of your Wednesdays with your brother at the mall?"

"We've never been here before, actually." Jordan adjusts the green bin of cars that he has tucked under his arm. I hear several tiny crashes from inside it.

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“Like I said, one of those faces.” I shrug and pull my keys out of my pocket.

Matthew runs his monster truck over the hood of my car and then abruptly hugs me. “Thanks, Riley.”

“You’re welcome, Matthew.” I pat his head. When I open the door to climb inside, my car seems oddly emptier than it did this morning.

“You want me to give you two a ride to your car?”

“No, we’re just a few rows over.” Jordan opens his mouth to speak again, but then looks down at my car and frowns. “Uh . . . does your tire always look like that?”

“I have a flat?” I ask, but it’s more of a statement than a question now that I’ve seen it. The tire is so empty it looks like the only thing holding the car up is the rim.

“Yes, you do.” He follows me to the trunk. When I open it, I see an empty spot where the jack is supposed to go and I groan. I’d lent it to Tony—a guy from my old job—a week before my co-workers had found out and started giving me trouble about Daddy and I’d quit.

My perfect distraction day just took a *very* wrong turn.

I close my eyes and rest my head against the open trunk lid. I almost let a storm of curses burst out of me. How could I forget about the jack? Why did my tire go flat *right now*, and out here of all places? Why on the night before Daddy’s hearing?

What am I supposed to do now? Who can I call? Mama is working late and even if I can get her on the phone, I know I’ll have to wait until she finishes up before she’ll be able to come and get me. Why is Mama never around when I need her most?

The last question ricochets through my body like a microscopic

bullet. I don't usually let myself think like that. The thought pierces every cell until there is nothing in me that doesn't hurt, that doesn't bleed. This particular question is the one I actively try not to ask . . . because I'm honestly not sure I can handle it if the truth is that the only parent who really cares about me is on death row awaiting execution.

"Hey, are you okay?"

I turn around and sit on the edge of my open trunk. The still-hot metal heats my legs uncomfortably even through my khaki shorts, but I don't care anymore. I look up at Jordan.

"It appears that I am seriously lacking in the jack department."

Jordan grins suddenly. "I believe I can help with that. Stay here, we'll be right back."

Before I even get a chance to answer, he picks Matthew up and carries him like a sack over his shoulder. Matthew giggles and then makes an *uhh* sound as Jordan jogs across the parking lot. With every foot landing, Matthew's voice gets louder.

"Uhhh UHhhh UHhhh UHhhh UHhhh."

I watch them, a laugh bursting free from my chest. They climb into a blue Honda and drive over to park next to my car.

When Jordan hops out, Matthew follows him like a little shadow.

Jordan hesitates, but then looks down at him. "You can play right around these two cars or inside my car. Nowhere else, okay?"

Matthew nods and starts running his silver monster truck across Jordan's bumper.

Jordan walks up to me and extends a hand to pull me up from my spot on the trunk.

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“Thank you,” I say quietly, wishing I could’ve ended our meeting as the cool person they just met and not the helpless girl who isn’t even able to take care of her own flat tire.

His hand squeezes mine as soon as I’m up, then he drops it and pops open his trunk. He grabs his own jack and I start freeing the replacement tire from my trunk. Jordan helps me lift it out.

“I’m sure I can do this myself if you need to go.” I try to let Jordan off the hook as I reach out for the jack, but the truth is I have no clue how to change a tire. It isn’t like I have my dad around to teach me, plus then Jordan would be the one without a jack when he someday needs it.

Thankfully, Jordan is already shaking his head. “Let me help. I’d rather not disappoint my folks’ dream of turning Matthew and me into good Southern *gentlemen*.”

“Lofty goals.”

He shrugs as he pushes the jack into place. “It’s good to have dreams.”

“I suppose.” I can’t find a witty comeback this time. I sit down close to the car, watching Jordan so I’ll be able to take care of this on my own if it ever happens again.

Jordan frowns at my now hopelessly dirty shorts. “You can just sit in your car or go inside the mall while I do this.”

“No way. I’ve never been confused for a good Southern lady, but even I know better than to leave the guy helping me outside on a hot summer evening while I wait in the air-conditioned building.” I look through my bag. “I just wish I had some sweet tea or anything flat I could use to fashion a large fan.”

Jordan chuckles as he finishes cranking the jack up high enough

to lift the weight of the car off the flat. “I thought girls only did that in old movies like *Gone with the Wind*.”

“Maybe the girls you know are *actually* helpful instead of just pretending to be.”

He squints over at me. “Maybe they’re less creative.”

“That’s hard to imagine.” It surprises me how comfortable this feels to just sit and chat with him. “So, if I can’t fan you, I’ll have to entertain you with witty conversation.”

“Somehow, I’m certain you’ll be good at that.” He glances up at me.

A wave of pleasure goes through me before I continue. “Let’s see, I now know that you’re an expert in miniature cars and scientific experimentation, you at least appear to know how to change a tire, and you temporarily pride yourself on being a gentleman.”

Jordan doesn’t even hesitate as he removes another lug nut. “Sounds about right.”

Matthew comes over, his hair all matted with sweat. “Can we go home now?”

Jordan pauses and looks up at him. “Remember those things the *gentlemen* do?”

Matthew’s eyes go from me to Jordan, and finally to the tire. He sighs. “This is one of those things, isn’t it?”

“Yep.”

Matthew shuffles away, looking hopelessly bored.

“I’m sorry. I can try to do this—”

“Sorry, can’t hear you, this socket wrench squeaks too loud.” He holds his free hand out like he’s helpless against such a problem.

The wrench is almost completely silent.

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I roll my eyes. “Fine.”

“Good answer. It’s really pointless to argue anyway. I’m a scientific mastermind, remember?”

“I don’t remember ever saying mastermind.” I frown in mock confusion.

“Weird.” Jordan looks up at me with wide eyes. “Pretty sure I heard you say that.”

“So anyway, back to my witty conversation. What else should I know about you?” I lean my head back against the car. “Anything else your mom wants her dear son to be? The first mechanic / baby-sitter / tiny-car scientist perhaps?”

Jordan’s movements stop abruptly. When I tilt my face toward him, he keeps going, but he doesn’t answer, and there is a distinctly pained look on his face now. Perfect. Of course I would somehow manage to hurt one of the only prospective new friends I’ve made all year.

“I . . . I’m sorry—” I begin.

“No.” He shakes his head and his smile is back to almost the strength from before. Jordan removes the final lug nut and stands up straight. “You have no reason to be sorry, Riley.”

I climb to my feet and help him lift the tire off in awkward silence. I’m not at all sure what I said that hurt him, but I’m determined not to repeat the mistake.

Jordan and I put the replacement tire in place before he turns to face me.

“Now you aren’t speaking, and I don’t want that.” He pushes his wavy black hair back from his face and glances over his shoulder to

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make sure Matthew is out of earshot. “Our mom died in a car accident a few months ago. Thinking about her hurts, that’s all.”

My stomach drops and I feel terrible. “Oh, Jordan, I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you.” Jordan nods. “Now to make sure I didn’t scare you away, promise me that you will talk to me constantly from right now until I finish putting this tire back on.”

I raise my eyebrows. “That’s quite a request. I’m actually not a big talker.”

“Learn to adjust.” He grins and then squats down to start securing the lug nuts back into place.

“Okay then.” I retake my seat on the ground, trying to think of anything to keep this conversation going. It suddenly feels like a lot of pressure.

Jordan stops and gives me a pointed stare so I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind.

“It sucks having only one parent.” I blink at him, and from his expression I can see he seems as surprised by my comment as I am. *That? That* is what I decide to say? What happened to being evasive?

Then he turns his eyes back to the tire. “Yes . . . it does. Your parents divorced?”

“Yes.” This lie is too easy and common not to take advantage of, but somehow lying to Jordan after what he just told me feels wrong. I try to leave in some of the truth. “My father hasn’t lived with us for years . . . since I was six.”

“That’s a long time.” Jordan’s tone is level and measured, but his eyes are filled with such a deep and aching sadness that my breath catches in my throat when he goes on. “Do you still miss him?”

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“Yes,” I respond quietly. “Every day.”

Jordan finishes securing the spare and lowers the jack. Several seconds pass before he asks, “Does it get easier?”

I think about that question for a moment. Truthfully, I don’t really remember much about the time when Daddy lived with us, so that part would be hard to compare with. But I do remember early visits at Polunsky, back when I would hope that maybe the next week, next month, next year, that at some point it wouldn’t make me as sad when I said goodbye.

That day had never come. It still feels like I’m leaving a piece of me behind when I exit Polunsky. It’s like a part of me has been imprisoned with him for most of my life.

Finally, I reply with the only answer that feels true. “Not yet.”

Jordan climbs to his feet and picks up his jack. “All done. We both survived, but I think at some point you owe me that sweet tea you mentioned.”

His tone is light, but his eyes study me intently. The idea that he actually wants to see me again makes my stomach wobbly.

“That sounds more than fair.” I give him a shy smile as I close my trunk. Jordan pulls a paper out of his pocket and I see him writing on it before he walks to stand beside me.

“Drive safe. You have a full-size spare, so you’re set, but you may want to get that flat fixed or replaced soon.” He reaches down and presses the paper against my palm. “Just in case you decide to make a habit of getting flat tires.”

I feel warm inside as I see a phone number scrawled in heavy black numbers on the tiny paper. “Thank you, Jordan.”

“Why is this picture so old?” Matthew’s voice comes from

behind me and I spin to see him sitting in the passenger seat of my car. The door hangs open and I gasp when I see my picture of Daddy clutched in the boy's small hand.

I rush over to him, jerking the picture away and sticking it in the glove box before Jordan can see it. When I stand back up, both of them are watching me with wide eyes.

"Sorry, I—"

"No." Jordan cuts me off before I say any more. "I'm sorry he was snooping around in your car."

"I wasn't snooping!" Matthew yells, and when I glance down at him, he's rubbing his eyes and looks very tired.

"I know you weren't." I crouch down in front of him. "It's okay. Thanks to both of you for all your help." I lift my eyes back to Jordan, hoping he doesn't think I'm a total freak after that display. "I had a really fun day."

Matthew nods seriously, then turns his face up to Jordan, a whine creeping into his voice. "Are we done being gentlemen yet?"

"I guess so." He points toward their car. "Go buckle yourself in."

Jordan and I stand together alone. I squirm awkwardly, but he seems to have recovered.

"I'm sorry, it was just—"

"Really, Riley, you don't have to explain." He walks closer and rests one hand on my shoulder for just an instant, but even that shoots sparks through me. Then he pulls out his wallet and shows me a picture of a beautiful Hispanic woman who has Matthew's dimples. Her hair falls in soft curls that remind me of Jordan's. "Of all the people in the world who should understand why you have a picture of your dad hidden in your car, don't you think I'm one of them?"

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I can't lie and tell him that my reasoning is different. Not after he showed me something that is obviously so special to him. But maybe our answers *are* the same. Maybe we both love and miss the parents that we can't be with. Why can't it be as simple as that?

So I just whisper, "Thank you."

"Have a good rest of your week, miss." Jordan tips the brim of a nonexistent hat to me as he backs away, and my soft smile breaks into a full-blown grin.

Matthew waves again from the backseat as they drive away. I wave back, amazed at how one afternoon with a guy I barely know could leave such a huge impression on me.

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THE COURTROOM SMELLS OF SWEAT AND FEAR. People shift awkwardly in their seats. They don't look much at each other, just mostly at us—they don't even try not to stare. I grab Mama's hand and don't look them in the eye, but I can't help but wish we could face today alone instead of with a hundred hostile strangers.

As much as I hate it, I understand them perfectly. They're both fascinated and frightened by my father and his family. We are the circus freaks in this charade. Maybe I should be better equipped to entertain them, but I'm not. I keep my appearance as generic as possible for every court appearance in the hopes that I can bore them into forgetting me. I wear large sunglasses even indoors, no earrings or hair accessories. I keep my dark hair straight and in a low ponytail. If I could find an outfit to blend in with the wooden bench I perch on, I probably would.

I can't even bring myself to look at the people on the opposite side of the aisle. If the strangers in this room have hostile gazes, the glances from the families of the victims are downright hateful. I'm sad for them. I really wish they could find the justice they think they have, but it's not here. I've never seen justice here.

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In some ways, we're the same. All bound together by a stranger who committed a few acts of senseless violence. I expected the families of the victims to go away once Daddy was found guilty, but that was naïve of me. They're here for every hearing, every appeal—just like us. None of us, on either side of this situation, have been able to move on.

Mama and I have been told to sit quietly, no matter what the result may be. And we've done our duty every time. We might as well be bound and gagged in this room. We're helpless to do anything here, as we always have been. The fact that we are sure he's innocent doesn't matter, and it never will.

Daddy is here to play their games and guess at their questions. All in the vain hope that the correct answer might convince them of the innocence he has argued for almost twelve years. That he might someday earn his freedom.

I'm starting to believe that kind of freedom doesn't exist—not for us. This holding pattern of a life may be all we ever know.

Mr. Masters and Stacia stop beside us on their way up to the front. Stacia used to be Daddy's assistant. Daddy probably doesn't need legal help as much as the other Polunsky inmates, being an excellent lawyer himself. But they're the only other people in the world who believe Daddy is innocent besides our family, and we'll take any help and positivity we can get.

Daddy says Mr. Masters has watched out for us over the years in ways that he couldn't. All I need to know is that I can trust him, and I don't trust anyone else but my parents. He is the exception, the one person I can go to anytime, anywhere, with anything, and

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he won't judge or question me. That makes him family in my mind—and God knows I don't have enough of that.

“How are you two holding up?” Mr. Masters crouches down in the aisle at the end of our row and studies us both with concern. Stacia stands beside him, her hands fluttering nervously as she straightens the edges of papers in the stack she's holding.

Mama nods, her face a mask of confidence. “We're just fine. Thank you, Ben.”

Masters searches my face and he seems to be checking to verify how much of what she's saying is true. I give him a tiny shrug because I'm really not sure how we are. Maybe he should ask again after we get through this appeal hearing.

“What do you think our chances are?” I ask, keeping my voice soft.

He puts on the same confident expression as Mama and nods. “I think we *have* a chance, which is what matters most right now.”

Stacia reaches one hand out to squeeze my shoulder. “We're fighting our hardest for him. We won't give up.”

“And we're very grateful for that.” Mama swallows hard, and then all of us look to the front as the door they'll bring Daddy through opens.

Mr. Masters reaches over and pats Mama's hand before winking at me. Stacia gives me a nervous half smile before they both head to the front. I know they're here to support Mama and me as much as Daddy, and I'm grateful. Theirs are the only friendly faces that have ever greeted our family in any courtroom.

Daddy is escorted in and joins the rest of his legal team. He's less

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than ten feet in front of me, but I can't reach him, I can't touch him. I release Mama's hand and clench both of mine tight in my lap. I don't know why seeing him in a courtroom still shakes me in this way. I should be used to it. This is the perfect example of the way we've lived all my life. He's right here in front of me, but still just out of reach.

He's told me a million times that he would be with us if he could. His wishes can't overcome the steel and bars that have been placed between us by a broken system. My hopes can't erase the words that were spoken in a different courtroom by Judge Reamers when I was only six years old.

Those words crushed my world. They haunt my dreams at night. I've even looked up the recording online to see if I was remembering it wrong—I've watched it more than once. Even so many years later, the words race through my head unbidden every time I sit in any courtroom.

This jury has found you, David Andrew Beckett, guilty of three counts of capital murder. In accordance with the laws of the state of Texas, this court hereby sets as your punishment: death. It is therefore the order of this court for you to be delivered by the sheriff of Harris County, Texas, to the director of the Polunsky Unit, where you shall be confined pending the carrying out of this sentence.

“Riley?” Mama squeezes my hand hard, and I turn my eyes on her immediately.

“Yes?” I study her face, wondering if she feels the same things I do as we sit here. My own mother is so difficult to read.

She gives me a wavering smile. “If you don’t feel like you can be here, Daddy would underst—”

“No.” I answer louder than I intend and then bite my tongue, actually drawing blood, but I force myself not to wince.

Mama’s back stiffens, but I can’t back down, not about this. During Daddy’s trial, she deliberately kept me out of the courtroom whenever Mr. Masters didn’t believe my presence was necessary to help the case. Since then, I’d missed several of the appeals when I couldn’t convince Mama that Daddy would want me there. Only when I’d gotten my driver’s license had she started to relent and let me choose whether to come to hearings. Even now, though, she still tries to shield me from specific information about Daddy’s trial as much as possible. She refuses to understand that I’m not a six-year-old for her to protect anymore, but I will not let her send me away from his final appeal hearing. Not today.

“Please. I need to be here,” I say.

She relaxes and takes a deep breath before “nodding and patting my knee.”

I know Mama is worried about how I’ll handle it if this appeal doesn’t go well. Daddy says that things look good this time, but he says that every time. At least with this appeal I don’t feel like I’m going into the hearing blindfolded. This time, Daddy told me about the juror who was convinced by a family member that she should vote guilty. It’s the most promising lead we’ve had in a while, but all the same, I’m afraid I’m being set up to fall. I can almost feel the ground beneath me starting to shake.

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Mama sits so straight, her chin held high, but I wish I could know what is in her mind. Her last visit to Polunsky was over three months ago, and lately I wonder if she's lost hope after all this time. Maybe she's trying to make it less painful for herself if today doesn't turn out the way we want it to. Maybe that's the smart approach, the safe approach.

The bailiff orders us to rise as Judge Howard enters. I remove my sunglasses, sticking them in my purse. I want to be able to see everything that happens clearly. The judge's black robes float about her and make her seem more like an omen of death than the symbol of justice she should be. When we sit, she almost looks bored as she shuffles through the papers in the stack before her. It infuriates me in a way that I know it shouldn't, but she has too much power, and I have none. And I hate her for it.

Finally, she stares over her bench at my father. "Mr. Beckett, I have gone through the evidence you've submitted to this court several times. And while I agree that a juror's family members shouldn't give advice to the juror on rendering a verdict, I do not believe that in this case the advice swayed her decision. That means your evidence isn't sufficient to warrant the retrial you've requested, or even another stay of your sentence."

My breath catches in my chest as though an enormous weight has just crashed down on me. The room fills with the murmurs and rustling of the crowd watching Daddy's show. On the other side of the aisle people are cheering. They smile and hug at the thought of my father being killed. The irony is both maddening and heart-breaking. Being accused of killing is what landed him here in the

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first place. What kind of system is this? What kind of justice repays the killing of innocent women by then killing an innocent man?

The eye-for-an-eye mentality seems like it will always be alive and well here in Texas.

I feel sick and wish everyone else would just leave. My heart thuds painfully inside me like it wants to escape. My head spins as I try not to let my inner turmoil show on my face. If Daddy turns to look at me, I refuse to let that be what he sees.

Judge Howard pats at her curly gray hair before picking up one of the papers in front of her and frowning. “You’ve been convicted of the murders of three young women, Mr. Beckett. And they are particularly gruesome murders. Violent beatings followed by strangulation. Is that correct?”

I hear Daddy’s voice hesitate. “I . . . I’ve maintained my innocence—”

The judge frowns down from her bench at him and interrupts. “Just answer the question, please.”

Daddy responds immediately, but I can hear the slight edge he’s trying to bury deep in his voice. “Yes. The state has convicted me of that crime, Your Honor.”

“Those crimes,” she corrects him, her gaze growing harder.

“Those crimes,” he repeats back.

She glances back down at her papers again. “It says here that you’ve already requested your writ of certiorari?”

My father clears his throat before answering, and my heart aches for him. “Yes, I have, Your Honor.”

“And I’m sure that as a former lawyer, you understand how

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unlikely it is that the Supreme Court will agree to hear your case?” Judge Howard squints over the bench at Daddy for several seconds until he nods. Then she brings her arm and the paper down onto her bench with a boom that reflects the finality of her dismissal. “Mr. Beckett, you don’t have time left for me to mince words here. Assuming you aren’t one of the lucky few cases chosen, you’ve exhausted your final appeal, and your execution will be carried out as scheduled in four weeks. From what I can see here, you’ve definitely had your due process. I recommend that you and your loved ones prepare yourselves.”

Daddy doesn’t move or flinch. I’m not even certain he is breathing. My eyes don’t seem to be able to blink as I stare at him, trying to absorb the way he looks today, right now, before *everything* changes.

They’re going to kill him. They are going to kill my father. And there is nothing I can do to stop it. If this happened on the streets instead of in a courthouse, I could call the police. Here and now, I can do nothing but watch in horror. People around me shuffle to their feet, but my world shifts and spins and I think I might be falling until I realize I’m not the one who is moving.

Mama falls off of our bench and crashes onto the ground in front of us. It takes me a full three seconds before I can react.

“Mama!” In—and out—I remind myself to breathe as I check for her pulse. My entire world locks up, not willing to move forward until it knows that I will at least have one parent left.

Then I feel the light but steady thrum of her heartbeat and a shuddering breath forces its way free from my lungs. Leaning in to hug her close, I hear her exhale quietly against my ear. Mr. Masters

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has come over to us. He says something I can't make out, and his hands are on my shoulders, pulling me back gently.

All I can hear is my own panicked muttering. "She's still here. She's okay. She's okay."

Stacia is speaking behind me and I realize she's calling for an ambulance.

When I look down, I see blood on my shirt and realize Mama hit her head when she fell. I grab the only thing I have in my purse, a workout T-shirt, and hand it to Mr. Masters, who presses it against her head.

Nothing here makes sense. Mama never shows weakness. She never fails and she never falls. This can't be real. It can't be happening right now. Not after what the judge just told us. If I squeeze my eyes tight enough, I might wake up from this nightmare.

I *have* to wake up.

I'm on the floor with my eyes shut tight. I'm clutching my unconscious mother's hand when I hear Judge Howard dismiss the court. The guards begin taking Daddy away.

"Wait! Wait! My wife fell. Is she okay? Amy!" His voice floats to me from far away and I open my eyes even as tears burn them. Tucking my head low so no one can see, I blink frantically until the traitorous drops fall away and shove my dark sunglasses back onto my face.

"She'll be okay, Daddy," I yell out loud enough for him to hear me. "We've got her."

Newspaper reporters crowd around us and start taking pictures. I can't hide myself from them. Stacia goes out to meet the paramedics. Mr. Masters keeps his head down and pretends the cameras

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aren't there. I do the same, but now that Daddy is gone I've lost my strength. No matter how hard I try, I can't stop the tears that pour down my cheeks.

One of the bailiffs makes his way through the crowd and crouches next to me. He looks from me to Mama and asks, "Do you need medical assistance?"

I shake my head hard and try to wipe the tears beneath my sunglasses away. "We already called for help."

His expression is tainted with disdain as he stands up, and I realize he thinks my mother is faking it. I look at the crowd around me, wishing the bailiff would at least make them go away, but he doesn't, and I'm sure from the look on his face that he won't.

After all the things I've experienced in places of so-called justice in the last eleven years, I would be shocked if he did anything at all. The paramedics come in, and Mr. Masters tugs me back, forcing me to drop Mama's hand as he pulls me into a tight hug, muttering against my head that everything is going to be okay.

Mama is always so tough and strong. All of my worry has been so consumed by Daddy for my entire life that worrying about Mama feels strange. Wrong.

The tears have stopped, or I can't feel the heat from them anymore. For the first time ever, I wish this court was even more of a circus. Because then at least the lights would fade, the crowds would leave, and I could slink away into the darkness.

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