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Flickers in the Dark

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Flickers in the Dark

By

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of
Stephanie Hines
Flickers in the Dark

Has been approved by the committee
for the capstone requirement for

the Master of Arts in Professional Writing
in the Department of English

Spring 2013
At the (month and year) graduation

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Flickers in the Dark

By: Stephanie Hines

Chapter 1

There are three secrets that I didn't want anyone to find out. The first one was taken away from me the day my mother decided to leave the apartment and step out into the warm, damp air. Even though it was drizzling, the people in the Bronx still stood in the streets. Megan and I were nine then, walking home from school. As we shuffled closer towards my apartment building, we noticed a group of people circled around someone. One of two things could've been happening: someone was fighting or someone was being made fun of. As we got closer to the laughter, I realized it was the latter. My cheeks burned at the sight of a frail lady smiling and dancing in her flimsy nightgown.

"Ya'll don't feel that rain though?" The woman asked, her southern accent slurring past her lips. She closed her eyes and lifted her arms up as if she was opening herself up for something we couldn't see. "Reminds me of that song." In between small giggles she began singing, "Sitting on the dock of a baaaay! Watching the tide roll away. Oooh, sitting on the dock of a bay, wastiiiiing time!"

The crowd cheered her on.

"Sang it, Janelle!"

"Go head girl!"

I frowned at their taunts.

"Ain't that yo mamma?"

My heart jumped at Megan's whispered words.

Anyone who took one look at us would know the truth. My oval-shaped face was hers. Our almond shaped eyes seemed to whisper the darkness we kept behind closed doors. Our thick lips refused to say what shouldn't be said. Our long, brown limbs have walked paths that

shouldn't been treaded. I am my mother's daughter, and I would've been an exact replica of her if it wasn't for my brown eyes in contrast to her hazel.

Ain't that yo momma?

I said nothing as I looked at the woman swaying to an unheard beat and screaming out words to an old song. I could smell the beer that seemed to come from her pores and mingle with the mist around us. She was supposed to be inside of our home. Tucked away from the judging eyes. My skin burned from anger, but I wasn't mad at her. I was mad at her boyfriend, Nick. He was supposed to keep her hidden from the taunts and misunderstandings. I wasn't aware of moving until I was by her side.

"Momma, come on. Let's go," I whispered to her, taking a hold of her hand.

"Baby, sing with me."

"Momma."

"Laney," her haunted eyes looked into mine. "Sing with me," she begged.

"I will as soon as we go inside." I tugged on her hand, pulling her away from the outside world.

As soon as the crowd realized that they were losing its jester, one of the men stepped forward. "Come on yo, don't be like that."

I looked at him and noticed that his eyes were pink and his lids were so heavy that he looked half asleep. It was a reaction from the weed he smoked every day. He didn't care to keep that hidden from anyone, but I cared about people knowing that my mother drank every day. Putting my arm around her waist, we walked around him. I could hear Megan's distant voice saying that she would see me later, but I knew that she wouldn't want to be associated with the daughter of a crazy drunk. We walked in silence. I was surprised that my mother didn't say a

word as we walked up the stairs leading to our apartment door. I glanced at her, checking to see if she was going to be sick.

“Momma—”

“I’m fine, Laney.”

I held her closer to me as we walked inside of the apartment. All of the energy my mother had earlier seemed to leave her body as we closed the front door. She leaned against the wall, staring at me as I locked the door.

“Are you gonna sing for me?” Her words were soft, barely heard above the air conditioner.

Before I could answer, I noticed a shadow moving across the hall. My gaze narrowed as Nick walked closer.

He rubbed a towel against his thick hair while addressing my mother, “Where were you?”

“Outside.” Her lips tilted slightly upwards as if she was sharing a secret.

While I stood by the front door, I couldn’t help but feel angry at Nick. He didn’t know how to take care of her like I did. He walked into our lives a little over a year ago, and he still didn’t have a clue. “You were supposed to be watching her,” I accused him.

He tensed, draping the towel around his shoulders. “I can’t watch her all the time. Clearly, I was taking a shower.”

My mother chose that moment to walk to him. Swaying, she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. “You smell like dove,” she whispered.

I could feel the tips of my ears burning as my anger grew. “You weren’t supposed to let her out of your sight.”

“What ya expect me to do, Alayna? I turned my back for one minute to take a shower. How the hell was I supposed to know that she’d go tramping around the hood with her PJ’s on?”

“You supposed to watch her. I’m nine and I do a better job than you!”

His eyes darkened. “Who the hell you talking to like that?”

I snorted and threw my backpack on the ground. “I’m going to my room.” Before I could stomp past him, he grabbed my arm.

“Pick up your bag.”

“What ya talking about? I always place it by the door.”

“And I’m getting tired of you messing up my place as if you the fucking boss! You’ve been here for three months now. It’s time for you to learn the rules around here. Rule number one, I’m boss, so don’t talk to me any kind of way. Rule number two, this place will always be clean.” His hand tightened around my arm. “Pick up your damn bag.”

I winced as his nails dug into my skin. “You’re hurting me.”

“Rule number three, don’t talk back to me.”

My mother let out a nervous giggle as if she could see the tension building in the room. She held up her hands, offering peace. “Guys.”

He clenched his teeth. “Pick. It. Up.”

I planned on defying him. The rapid breath coming from my lungs begged me to. This was the first time he’s ever told me what to do. My mother didn’t even tell me what to do. Looking into his eyes, I was sure that my anger mirrored his own. He squeezed my arm harder, and it was then I knew that I wouldn’t defy him. My lips tightened as I struggled to pull my arm away from his grip. He refused to let go until I bit out, “Fine.” As soon as his fingers loosened its hold, I snatched my arm away.

His fists clenched.

“See? All’s well,” my mother’s perky voice cut through the silence.

I rolled my eyes and picked up my bag. My head cocked to the side as my brow rose.

“Happy?”

I could see the change in his body as his anger erupted. It was like a rubber band stretching past its limit until it finally snapped. The next few seconds seemed like minutes as he rushed towards me. A gasp escaped my parted lips as his hand raised. His arm resembled a massive crane coming down. The room became a blur as his backhand connected to my face. The force of the slap caused me to fall. My mother’s smile dropped as my hand reached up to touch my burning cheek. A metallic taste filled my tongue as blood oozed from the corner of my lips. Wincing, I looked up at him in shock. My classmates told me how they used to get whoopings from their parents. Some said they used to get hit with belts and sometimes switches, but they never said anything about hands. Tears filled my eyes and fell over as my gaze shifted to my mother.

She stood there, processing what just happened. “Oh my god.”

Nick turned to her. “Janelle.”

They both were equally surprised at what happened.

My mother snapped out of her drunken haze and ran to my side. Nick stepped back as she bent down. Removing my hand, she tilted my head up and stared down at my cheek.

“Janelle.”

Her hair swung as she whipped her head around to face him. “Shut up! Look at what you’ve done!”

“Janelle, I’m sorry.” Regret shone in his eyes as he looked down at me. “I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry. I was just so mad, and it happened.”

My mother said nothing as she straightened and helped me up. Brushing past him, she guided me to the kitchen. Moving as fast as a drunken person could, she struggled to place a few ice cubes in a dishrag. I winced as she placed the rag against my cheek.

“I’m sorry.”

Looking out the corner of my eye, I could see Nick standing in the doorway.

“You know I love her like my own.”

Placing a hand on one of the chairs to steady herself, my mother glared at him. “Then why did you hit her?”

“I was so mad at her. You saw what she did. She spoke back and got an attitude. You know I’ve been trying, Janelle. I just reacted the same way my dad did. I only meant to teach her. I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

“Yo dad?”

“Yea, my dad.”

Silence filled the room and I thought she was finally understanding why I didn’t like him. Maybe she was realizing that it was better with just the two of us, and we didn’t need him.

His face changed from pleading to anger. “How do you expect me to treat her like my own if you won’t even let me?”

“What are you talking about? You not supposed to hit her!”

“How the fuck else you won’t me to punish her?”

“I don’t know.” She blinked, her mind processing the answer. “Grounding works.”

“You serious? Grounding. She too old for that. You want her to be like those rude kids running around?”

“No, but she’s not like that.”

“She’s always like that towards me.” He pointed at me while glaring at my mother. “She gets an attitude and mess up this house as if she owns the place!”

I frowned. “No, I don’t.”

His head swiveled in my direction. “Who the fuck was talking to you!”

My mother snapped in shock, “Nick!”

“This is what I’m talking about Janelle. Her talking back and disrespecting me.” His voice lowered as he tried to reason with her. “You want me to love her and treat her like my own, right?”

She nodded.

“Then let me do that, Janelle. Stop babying her and let me be her father.”

“You can’t hit her, Nick.”

“How do you expect her to learn?”

“I don’t know, but no hitting her.”

“Things need to change around here. Either you want me here for both of you or you don’t.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “You leaving me?”

“What do you want?”

“I want you. I love you.”

“Then act like it.”

My heart sank as he looked in my direction. “Let me be her father.”

Things changed after that. I wasn't allowed to talk back anymore, and as time passed, anything I did was scrutinized by Nick. If I did any little thing wrong, he would see it as disrespect and punish me the right way.

* * *

Sneakers squeaked against the polished basketball court as ninth graders ran to keep track of the volleyball. For the third time that week, I sat on the wooden bleachers, watching from the side lines. My phone vibrated in the palm of my hand, taking me away from the game. Flipping it open, I read my mother's text. *Nick's coming home early.* There wasn't an explanation. I just knew that I had to get home immediately after school to make sure the apartment was clean.

A sharp whistle pierced through my thoughts. Pushing the phone into the side of my backpack, I watched as the thin coach glared at one of the students on the court.

"Ms. Sawyers, this is the last warning. No pushing during the game."

The girl he addressed turned around with a look of astonishment on her face. Her long, thin, processed hair swung with her every movement as she placed her hands on her hips. "But she pushed me first."

Coach McIntire shrugged. "I only saw you pushing, and like I said before, final warning."

Her dark brown face shone bright with anger. "You mean to tell me you can see ants taking food up an anthill through those microscopic glasses, but you can't see this trick pushing me?"

He whistled again, ending the snickering of my classmates.

The girl she was talking about suddenly walked closer towards her. "Who you callin' a trick?"

Fearing a confrontation, the coach's whistle began to sound like a train choo-chooing.

A look of disgust crossed Sawyer's face as she looked down at the girl's chest. "Uh uh girl, I know you not pushing yo boobs all up on me."

The coach's yelling cut through the classes' laughter. "Sawyers, off the floor!"

Her head swiveled in his direction as she squeaked, "Seriously?"

His caramel face turned a light shade of red as he bellowed, "Now!"

Rolling her eyes, Sawyers stumped off the court. The game resumed as she slammed down on one of the benches. Folding her arms across her chest, she muttered, "He's such a bitch." She turned towards me in time to catch my sympathetic look. "Don't give me that look."

I shrugged before looking away. "You asked for that one, Megan."

Megan Sawyers, the only person who knew all of my secrets thus far, except two. I thought she would abandon me after the incident with my mother, but if anything she gotten closer. I asked her once why she stuck by me, and she answered, "Cuz I said before I got ya back, so I got ya back."

Megan rolled her eyes and wrinkled her nose in disgust. "I can't stand that trick."

"What did she do this time?"

"You ain't see that heifer pushing me? She better be lucky we in school cuz if we were on the streets, I would've been beat her ass."

My best-friend gotten the reputation of "having hands" once she beat up a boy who was two years older than her on a field trip we had in the middle of the New York Botanical Garden. Our biology teacher has refused to take the "little hoodrats" anywhere ever since that trip. I could still see her reddened cheeks and hear her shrill voice as she begged for them to "stop embarrassing the school this way".

Megan turned completely around, her back facing the court. “That girl can’t stand me because of the simple fact James likes me and not her.” She rarely mentioned James' name without a blush. “James and his boys are going by Central Park after school. You wanna go?”

“I can’t. I just got a text from my mom saying I have to come straight home.”

“For what?”

“We’re supposed to be doing something tonight.”

Megan sighed. “Sucks. James was gonna hook you up with his friend, Chris.”

“Who’s Chris?”

She gave me a look of disbelief. “Chris Jackson. The most wanted guy in school.”

I gave her a blank look. I rarely gave any guy in this school a second glance. As soon as I transferred from training bra to a real bra, Nick has been on my case about not dating. Dating led to sex and sex led to babies. Never mind the fact that I only wore an A cup and no guys were interested in me in the first place.

Looking over her shoulder, she pointed. “He’s the guy from the other class with the green shirt on. The one talking to James. You see him?”

I looked at the group of boys heading to the locker room to change. The boy in the green shirt turned his head to reply to James’ comment. He looked older than the other guys. Hair was starting to come in above his upper lip and he stood taller than most of the boys on the court.

“James was telling me that he was held back a year because of his late birthday. He just turned fifteen and has the cutest dimples. You interested?”

Shifting in my seat, I frowned. “Not really.” He was cute, but I really didn’t want to suffer the consequences of getting his number.

“Why not? It’s just hanging out. Nothing big.”

“I can’t hang out—”

She waved her hand, dismissing the thought. “I know that, but I’m not talking about today. I’m talking about some other time, like tomorrow or Friday.”

“I can’t.”

“What? Why?” She leaned closer. “I’ve known you long enough to know you interested in boys, so what’s up? What could possibly be wrong with this guy, Picky One?”

“Nothing’s wrong with him,” I began.

“Great! So I can go head and give him your number.”

“He’s just not my type,” I finished.

She sighed in frustration. “You are making this hard for me. I want to actually go on a double date or something. Did you forget that we both need dates to homecoming?”

“That’s not for another three months. School just started.”

“I know James will ask me,” she continued as if I said nothing. “But there’s the question of who will be your date.”

“Megan, we have three more years of homecoming. It’s not that serious.”

“Then after that, there’s prom.” She eyed me up and down. “And you my friend need all the practice you can get.”

Before I could retort, she stood.

“Gotta get dressed in normal clothes before the bell rings.” She sighed as a melodic tune burst through the speakers. “Oh well, we all know how Mrs. Brown loves my tardiness, so what’s another day?”

I shook my head. “I’ll see ya later.”

I didn't see Megan until school let out. We had to part ways since I had to rush home. My stomach rolled at the thought of Nick coming home early. I've tried to keep our interaction at a minimum, but as I've gotten older, everything I've done seemed to be wrong in his eyes.

"Is he home yet?" I questioned my mother as soon as I walked into the living room.

Her eyes struggled to focus on me as she stood. Her loose t-shirt swayed with her as she reached out a hand and placed it on the back of the leather couch. Her other hand brushed the frayed ends of her cut-off jeans as she answered, "No, he's just hopped on the train ten minutes ago, so he won't be here for another hour or so."

I closed my eyes in relief. That gave me more than enough time to clean up. Turning, I shrugged the backpack off my shoulders and placed it in the hallway closet. Once I turned around, I jumped back in shock at my mother standing directly behind me. She was standing so close that I could see the specks of green in her eyes. We stood at the exact same height, a tall reflection of one another. Her thin fingers smoothed back my headband and ran over my thick, curly hair. One thing my mother had control over was my hair. Ever since I could remember, she always permed her hair, but would never allow me to put a relaxer in my own.

"I envy your hair, Laney. You know that?"

I looked at her mother's long, thin, brown hair that fell past her shoulders. "I don't know why." Memories of kids making fun of my hair ran through my mind. No matter how much my mother doted on my hair, I've grown to hate it. I would never forget the statement one girl made when a boy was talking to me instead of her. As her eyes pierced at me, she exclaimed, "At least a comb can run through my hair without breaking it." Everyone, including the boy, laughed. Megan later pushed the girl against the wall and threatened to do damage if she ever made fun of me again. I pushed back the memory as I heard my mother's explanation.

“Because it’s curly and curly is beautiful.” She hiccupped. Rolling her eyes, she slurred, “Damn hiccups.”

I didn’t cringe at the strong smell of alcohol seeping from her lips. Over the years, I’ve grown used to it and accepted it as something that was a part of her. “You still have time to sleep it off.”

She frowned, her hand dropping away from my hair. “I’m not drunk, Laney.”

“How much is left in the bottle?” Without waiting for an answer, I walked around her and into the living room. I picked up the bottle of Smirnoff from the tan, coffee table. The bottle had been full when Nick gave it to her yesterday, and now it was already half empty.

She folded her arms across her chest. Even though she halted in front of me, she still swayed back and forth on her feet just like a boat that was sitting patiently waiting for its captain at pier 57. “I’m not drunk.”

Without arguing with her, I nodded. “I know, I’m just saying that maybe you should rest before Nick comes home. That way you’re not too tired once he’s here.”

Her glazed eyes stared at the white wall across from her as she thought about what I said.

“I’ll help you into the bed.” I put an arm around her waist after turning her around to face the door.

“You shouldn’t worry about me so much, Laney.” She leaned against me, her legs struggling to move.

“I know, but I do anyway,” I muttered.

Once I returned to the living, I glanced at the bottle of vodka and thought about throwing the rest in the sink. Then I remembered how angry my mother could get once she’s been away from alcohol for more than an hour. She became more irritable than Nick. For some reason, it

always gave her comfort just by looking at it. With this in mind, I walked past the kitchen sink and placed the bottle in the freezer. As I tidied up the living room and kitchen, I thought about dinner. Nick used to be okay with cooking something to eat since he didn't come home from work until late, but that all changed once he started letting me in on the rules of the house. One of them being, I had to cook dinner and have a plate waiting for him on the table no matter how late he came home. I've never learned how to cook from my mother, since the only thing we ever ate were ramen noodles cooked in a microwave and boiled hotdogs. I've gotten a step up in cooking by following the instructions on the back of frozen bags of cooked meals.

I emptied the contents of Bertolli in a skillet. We've eaten it so much that I knew the instructions by heart. As I stirred the meal, I thought about Megan's mother. She had dinner ready at a certain time, but then again her husband didn't work late nights. Even if he came home late, she expected him to heat up the left overs and clean up after himself. I've never had home cooked meals until I was ten. It was then that I realized what I was missing. She cooked everything from scratch. Even her barbeque sauce was whipped up from memory alone. Sometimes I envy Megan's luck.

I was placing Nick's plate on the wooden table when I heard his keys jingling at the front door. Looking around the small kitchen, I made sure everything was in its place. I placed my mother's and my plate adjacent to his. My fingers tightened around the silver forks once I heard his footsteps entering the room.

"Where's your mother?"

Trying to relax my tense muscles, I placed a fork on each plate. I hated the way I reacted to him. I didn't used to be this jittery, but then again there was a time he wasn't this hateful. After straightening, I turned to face him. "Still sleeping."

I took one look at his glistening low fade and realized that it was raining outside. Instead of looking at his face, I studied the wide shoulders of his leather jacket. Wet droplets continued to roll from his jacket and onto the linoleum floor. The stubble along his jaw moved as he clenched his teeth together.

“You mean sleeping it off?”

I looked up at his dark brown eyes and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Sir was the only thing I could call him. Another one of his rules. He made a move towards me, and I scrambled out of the way as he walked to one of the chairs. Without glancing my way, he threw his leather jacket at me. I wondered what would happen if I hadn't caught it. What if I just left it lying on the floor? How could he be so sure that I would catch whatever he threw at me in the first place? My fingers tightened around the damp material as I walked out of the kitchen to hang it up. Before I could walk back in the kitchen, my ears perked at the low sound of his voice.

“Wake her up.”

“Yes, sir.”

I walked to the back bedroom. This part of the house was his domain, and he refused to let me touch any part of it no matter how dirty it would be. Walking around the clothes and shoes, I focused on my mother curled up in a ball in the center of the bed. I shook her shoulder, hoping to wake her quickly. Her hand was slow at batting away my touch.

“Mom? Wake up,” I demanded as I continued pushing her.

Her grumblings became louder until she snapped. “What?” She glared up at me as her hand fell away.

“Nick's here.”

Understanding was slow in reaching her eyes as she sat up. Groaning, her hands grabbed her head. "I'm sorry, Laney."

She was always apologizing whenever she got an attitude with me. I understood a long time ago that it wasn't her snapping, but the alcohol. I gave her a smile. "It's okay. Come on. You need to eat. Nick's waiting."

I placed my arm around her waist, helping her to her feet. "Can you walk?"

"Yep."

"Walk to the door then."

Lifting up her head, she took two steps before stumbling over a gold high heel. "I can walk. That wasn't my fault." She continued walking and was doing fine until her shoulder bump hard against the door frame. She held a hand up before I could rush to her side. "I got it. I promise."

Nodding, I walked alongside her. As I looked over at her, she brushed her shoulder against the wall, using it as a crutch as she made her way down the hallway. She reminded me of that leaning building in Europe.

Once we made it to the kitchen, I avoided Nick's stare as I walked to my seat.

"It took ya'll long enough."

My mother focused on making her way to the table. "My head is pounding, Nick. I'm going as fast as I can." The chair scraped loudly against the floor as she pushed it back to take a seat.

Nick took one bite of his food before slamming his fork on the side of his plate. "Now the food's cold."

She stabbed a fork into a noodle and shoved it in her mouth. "Taste fine to me."

I stood before he could say anything. "I'll heat it up."

"Why should you have to heat it up, Laney? Food's fine."

"Momma," I warned.

He picked up his plate and banged it against the table. "It isn't fine."

My mother said nothing as I took hold of the plate. Before I walked away from the table, I looked into his eyes and knew then that my punishment depended on a microwave. I quickly placed it inside and prayed for the two minutes to go faster as I watched the plate taunt me in slow turns. Waiting for the microwave timer to ding was like counting down the final seconds before a bomb goes off. Once it went off, I ignored the burning feeling in my hand as I carried it to him. Keeping my head down, I placed his dish on the table and sat back down. I was picking up my fork when he asked, "You not gonna heat your plate up?"

"No, sir. It's fine." As soon as the words left my lips, I regretted saying it.

"So, you don't think the food is cold?"

I looked from him to my mother and realized then that he wanted me to choose. Was he right or was my mother right? "The um," I struggled to find the words. Even though I've yet taken one bite of it, I continued, "The food is cold, but it's okay for me."

He grunted as he took a bite of his own food.

For a moment, the sound of forks clinging against the glass plates was all that could be heard in the small kitchen. I was okay with the silence. It was a whole lot better than hearing Nick's rants.

"What happened you came home early?"

I coughed as I choked on the pasta. My mother ruined the silence with that question.

“They let some of us go early.” The table shook lightly as Nick’s right leg bounced. “The damn bastards might cut my hours.”

“For what?”

“They talking about low budget and shit. I don’t know. I might end up being cut short of hours or fired like the other guys before me.”

My heart dropped as his words sunk in. They might cut his hours, or worse, fire him. That meant he would be home more than usual, watching my every move. Frowning, I pushed back the thought and took a sip of my water.

“What was that?”

I waited for my mother to answer the question, but there wasn’t an answer. When I looked up, I realized that Nick directed it to me.

“Sir?”

“I said, what was that?”

“What was what?”

“That sound you made.”

“I didn’t make a sound.”

“Yes, you did. I heard you. You were giggling and started drinking to cover it up.”

I shook my head. “No, I wasn’t. I swear.” Looking down, I could see his fists resting on either side of his plate. I knew then I was going to lose this argument. He did that sometimes.

Made things up just to take his anger out on me. I tensed, waiting for him to snap.

“You calling me a liar?”

“No, sir.”

My mother placed a hand on his arm. “Nick,” she began.

His head turned so hard in her direction, it was a wonder that he didn't break his neck.

"You stay the hell out of this!"

"Just calm down."

"I am calm!"

"You yelling at me is being calm?"

"Ma, let it go," I whispered at her across the table, but it was too late.

Nick grabbed the edges of the table and shook it. "Why the fuck are you questioning me?"

"All I'm asking is for you to calm down. You been fine the last few days, but now you starting back with this angry thing."

He snorted. "Really? I'm surprised you can even remember the last few days, Janelle."

She paused, allowing what he said to sink in. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Whatever the fuck you want it to mean."

"You don't have to cuss at me."

He pushed his chair back, still glaring at her. "I don't need this shit."

My mother threw up her hands. "You always do this!"

"What?"

"Get a damn attitude for no reason and then up and leave."

My body prepared for battle once he stood up.

"For no reason?"

"Yeah."

"Janelle, you take that girl's fucking side all the time!" I struggled to slow my heart rate

as he pointed at me. “You tell me to take control and be the man of this house, but when I do, you got a problem!”

My mother rolled her eyes and stood up.

“Where the fuck you going? I’m not done!”

The freezer door squeaked as she opened it. She took out the frosted bottle of vodka and placed it on the counter.

“Janelle,” he warned.

Chill bumps covered my arms at that one word. I knew that tone. It was barely above a whisper.

She didn’t answer. Instead she twisted the plastic cap off the bottle.

“There you go. That’s what I mean about you not remembering shit.”

She swung around to face him. “So I drink, Nick! Damn, get over it!”

His arm reached out, but instead of grabbing her, he turned and grabbed me. My eyes widened as his fingers clutched my arm. “Get up!”

My chair banged against the floor as he jerked me out of my seat.

“Nick, dammit, let her go!”

He shook me as he yelled at her. “Shut the fuck up! You think I forgot about her giggling at the fact that I might lose my damn job?”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t hear a giggle.”

“My point proven. You taking her side. Again.”

Her arms folded across her chest. “Fine, I’m taking her side.”

Ignoring the pain in my arm, I looked back and forth between the two as they glared at each other. I didn’t know what to expect next. With Nick, I never knew.

“Aight, Janelle. You got it. You the man in this house.” He released my arm. “You can take care of the bills cuz here on out, I’m gone.”

“Leave then!”

The determination in his eyes showed her he really meant it this time. He didn’t make it two steps out of the kitchen before my mother’s eyes started tearing. “Nick! Don’t, I’m sorry,” she cried out, running after him. He said nothing as she begged him to stay. Once the front door slammed shut, she screamed, “Fine then! Leave! I don’t care!”

She rushed back in the kitchen. My heart ached at the pain in her eyes. “Momma.” I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to tell her it was going to be okay, but I lost the will to lie. Things stopped being okay a long time ago. Even though Nick left, I knew he would be back. In the meantime, my mother was going to continue to drink.

Chapter 2

Nick didn't come home last night. I should've been calm, excited even, but as I walked down the halls of my school, all I felt was dread. I knew he would be back, I just didn't know when and what would happen once he returned. Ignoring the crowd of teens pushing past me, my eyes zoomed in on locker 24. Once there, my fingers performed the programmed combination. The door squeaked as I opened it to take out the thick biology book. Just as I was about to shove the straps of my backpack down my shoulders, I felt a finger stabbing my shoulder blades. My first thought was that Nick decided to pop up at my school. My second thought calmed me as I remembered that he would never act out in public. I pushed my hair to the side and looked over my shoulder. Instead of Nick, Megan's most hated enemy stood there, staring up me. She was the one that kept pushing Megan whenever our classes were in gym.

"Ya Megan's friend, right?"

"Yeah," I answered, closing my locker door. I wasn't sure what she wanted, and that's what caused me to be anxious. Unpredictable people were the worst kind. I held my biology book in one hand as I shoved my backpack further up my shoulders.

Megan's enemy stepped closer. "So what's that shit Megan be talking?"

"I don't know."

"I'm sure you do. You her friend, right?"

"Yeah"

"So, ya'll got a problem with me?"

I glanced at the group of people gathering around us before looking back at the girl. "I don't even know you."

"I'm Jazmine, bitch. You seen my face. Now you know me."

Her voice grew louder as she took a step towards me. On instinct, I stepped back, but my bag prevented me from moving closer to the locker doors. My heart raced as I looked down at Jazmine's angry face. She stood there, glaring at me through her naturally lazy eyes. I had an advantage with her being two inches shorter than me, but she looked more experience in fighting than I was. Then again, Megan always told me that if a girl ever approached with a friend then she was more likely all talk and no action. I looked over at her friend and took in her wide stance and balled hands. She shook her fist at her sides as if she could barely control her anger. Her auburn hair framed her face like a wild mane and was an almost even match to her skin tone. She then gave me a look that said she didn't like me sizing her up and took a couple steps towards me. Jazmine, I could take, but I wasn't too sure about fighting her friend too. My feet scraped the ends of the lockers, reminding me that I had nowhere to run.

“Come on, Jazzy. Fuck talking. Let's beat her ass.”

“Listen, I don't know you,” I explained. “I don't wanna fight you.”

“It won't be much of a fight anyway,” Jazmine snapped.

At those words, I knew it was over. The crowd egged her on as they pushed her closer to me while telling her to beat me down. They ignored the tune ringing through the speakers that signaled the late bell.

Jazmine smirked as she continued, “Hoe, I will drag you—”

“Do it, bitch! I want you to!”

I never felt so much relief as I turned at the sound of Megan's shouts. I turned back in time to see the smirk falling from Jazmine's face. Megan shoved her way through the crowd and stood in front of me. “You lay one hand on her and I will beat yo ass.” Her hair swung in my face as she twisted her head with each word.

Jazmine's friend frowned while looking Megan up and down. "Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm Megan! You looking for me right? Damn, the girl got ya looking for me, but you don't even know how I fucking look?" Before the girl could reply, Megan waved her hand as if to shoo her away. "Fuck outta here with that, yo." Her arms swung loosely at her sides as her fists grew tighter. Her lips were in a thin line as she eyed Jazmine. "Pop off, Jazmine. You ain't talking that shit now. Pop off one good time, Jazmine, so I could finally lay ya ass out."

"You ain't gonna do shit." Her words lacked confidence as she shifted her stance.

"Wanna bet?"

She flinched as Megan jumped at her as if she was going to hit her. It was Megan's turn to smirk as the crowd laughed.

A random voice in the crowd broke the laughter. "Oh shit!"

Looking to my left I noticed the reason for sudden panic. Vice-Principal Jones stomped down the hall towards us, screaming out, "Detention slips handed out to everybody in this hallway!"

Everyone began shoving against one another to escape his wrath. The air escaped my lungs as Megan's body suddenly pushed back against my stomach. She grabbed my wrist as we ran in the opposite direction of the dictator like voice. We didn't stop until we reached the girls' bathroom. After we rushed in we saw five other girls who were also hiding from him.

One girl noticed Megan from the hallway and smiled in awe. "Yo, Megan, that shit was crazy."

She shrugged. "Still didn't get to fight her though. Any of ya'll got Jazmine Bank's number?"

A girl who wore a basketball jumpsuit stepped up. “I do. She’s my home-girl.” She said, raising an eyebrow as if asking Megan to do something about it.

Megan gave her a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Even better. Text her and tell her to meet at Heritage Park if she bold enough to get her ass whooped.”

“Aight, I’ll tell her.”

Heritage Park was the place all the teens hung out, whether it was to play around or fight around. It was rare anyone stopped us from the antics that took place there.

“I think the coast is clear,” one of the girls said, ready to leave the awkward environment.

I stood to the side as all of the other girls exited the bathroom. Reaching out a hand, I stopped Megan from following behind them. “I have to use the bathroom first.” Honestly, I didn’t want to be alone in the bathroom in case Jazmine and her home girl decided to pop up.

“That’s cool. We already late.”

Once I locked my stall door, I immediately pulled up my shirt to look down at my discolored stomach. I received those bruises a week ago, and they were just now fading. It was a habit of mine to cover them with makeup. Brown stains marked the inside of my shirt. Some of the make-up rubbed onto it when Megan bumped against me. After pulling my backpack off, I placed it on the floor. The sound of my backpack unzipping echoed throughout the small bathroom. I winced. I didn’t want Megan to become suspicious of what was really taking place.

“Girl, what ya doing in there?”

I thought of something at the top of my head as I pulled out my small compact makeup case and opened it. “Time of the month.”

“Oh, sucks.”

To Megan, I was all about honesty. She has yet to catch me in a lie. Then again, she had no reason to suspect I would ever lie to her. The makeup pad felt soft against my stomach as I brushed the brown foundation across it. The marks became nonexistent. I was planning on going to gym and didn't want to chance anyone seeing what I hid. In the girls' locker-room, everyone undressed in the open. I tried dressing in the stall once, but it ended up being pushed open since it didn't have a lock on it. That's when the questions started. No one got a chance to see the bruises, but everyone wondered why I didn't change in front of them like everybody else. *Why you hiding? Ain't nobody studying you, so why act like it? You think you better than everybody else?* Every girl was eying every other girl to look and see the competition. Some were curious about the rate the other girls' boobs were growing. Others were curious as to what boys saw in particular girls.

"I was thinking. We should just skip Biology."

Megan's voice interrupted my thoughts. I placed the pad back inside its case and closed it. "I think we're good. We're only ten minutes late, and Mrs. Brewer won't turn us in."

"Yeah, she cool, but that class is boring."

"We should go anyway." I zipped up my bag and flushed the toilet.

"Dang, Laney. Why can't you skip just one day? It won't hurt your grades."

I didn't like missing classes. I already missed enough of them whenever I had to stay home because it was too painful to walk around. Other than those days, I came to school every chance I got. It was the only place I could go to escape Nick and the drama in that house. My teachers would always let me make up any late work, but points were deducted regardless of the forged doctor's notes my mother would give me. Even though I knew that the school couldn't kick me out if I failed too many classes, it was a constant fear of mine. I used to dream of the

principal sitting me down and telling me that I could no longer attend that school. At the end of that dream, I would look around and could only see my apartment building. Everything else disappeared as if it was the end of the world. The only two people left were me and Nick. That nightmare has caused me to make it to school every chance I got.

I explained to Megan, “I planned on dressing out in gym, so we might as well go to Biology since it’s right before it.”

“Wow, little miss never-dressing-out is finally going to get an A?”

“Yeah,” was all I said as I washed my hands. Today was dodge ball day. That meant that it was double the amount of points. Since I was no longer in pain, I would be able to make up for yesterday and still receive points for today.

“Okay then. You coming with me to Heritage Park after school?”

Turning the handle on the faucet, I answered, “I can’t.”

She paused in the process of handing me a paper towel. The brown towel dangled from her fingers as she eyed me. “Why not?”

The water dripped from my fingers as I thought of an answer. There was no telling when Nick would pop back up, and I didn’t want him to return early to a messed up house, especially after what went down last night. He was the type to hold grudges, so every little thing I did would be dissected. “I have to go straight home, remember? I’m still on punishment.”

“And? What worse can happen if you come home late? What they gonna do? Ground you some more?”

I opened my mouth to reply.

She held up her hand, stopping my comment. “Let me get this straight. I’m the one who always got yo back no matter what, but when the time comes for you to have mine, you don’t.”

“I do have your back, Megan. It’s just.” It was just Nick, but I couldn’t tell her that.

“Whatever, yo. I’m skipping Bio. I probably won’t see you in gym either.” She slammed the paper towel down on the counter and stomped out of the bathroom.

I wanted to run after her and tell her the real reason why. I’ve always wanted to tell her the truth about Nick, so that she could really see and understand what I was going through. She never understood his strict punishments and why I could never go over her house or hang out as much as she wanted to. She saw him as an overbearing parent. I saw him as a monster. There were rules I had to follow in my house that were different from hers. My consequences were larger than hers will ever be. I was tired of explaining and coming up with lies to tell her. No matter how tired I was, I knew that she could never know my secret. If she knew, then others would find out and I would be taken away from my mother. I’ve seen it happened to two kids that lived down the block from me. They were picked up by social workers and placed in separate homes all because their father was trapping in the house. Since the mother knew he was dealing, they were taken away from her too. I refused to let them take me away from my mother. When it all came down to it, I didn’t want anyone to make that decision for me.

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I reached over to adjust the magazines on the dining room table for the third time that hour. Shifting in the couch cushions, I pulled my cellphone out of my jean pocket. Flipping it open, I checked the time. It was already 8:15, and Nick still wasn’t home. I got word from my mother that he came earlier that day and apologized to her. As usual, she accepted his apology. Nick stopped saying sorry to me a long time ago because he knew that how I felt no longer mattered. He told her he would return after work since his boss told him that he was still on the time sheet. Before he left, he asked her to have me clean up the house before he got home. I

rolled my eyes at the thought. My mother said “asked”, but I was sure it was more like a warning. I was waiting up for him, which seemed like all I’ve been doing every night. It was getting old. The not eating until he returned and respecting the household by keeping it clean. Our house reflects us. His words, not mine. There was a time my mother and I didn’t have to worry about a clean house. Our clothes landed wherever they fell, and the toys stayed where I last played.

Out all of the rules, I believe the worst was having to wait for him to eat. He worked night shifts at a shipping warehouse, and some nights he would work overtime. I remember one night when I was just getting used to that rule. I was ten, the age he finally broke me. I was afraid of my own shadow at that age. I finally got the concept of who was boss, and that I couldn’t fight back anymore.

I remember one night when I was sitting at the dinner table, staring at the cold plate of food in front of me. My mother kept explaining that Nick wasn’t going to come home until late, and that I could eat. I ignored my stomach’s protests as I thought about the beating I received last night for forgetting to pick my jacket off the floor. This could’ve been a trick. I knew if it was, my mother wouldn’t know anything about it. She didn’t know when I would receive a punishment until it was too late to stop it. I sat there, watching her eat. After finishing, she rinsed off her plate and turned around to face me.

“Baby, eat something.”

“Not until Nick comes home,” I whispered, looking back down at my plate.

“He won’t be home until late. He’ll understand if you eat.” She sighed when I made no move to eat. “Okay, well I’ll be in my room if you need anything. Don’t stay up too late, okay?”

I nodded. I lost count how long I stayed up waiting. My mother left me alone in the kitchen while she went into the back bedroom. Thirty minutes later, I could hear her loud snores coming down the hallway. I focused my mind on counting the long strands of noodles that lay on my plate, so I wouldn't keep thinking about the strong urge to pee. I had been taking tiny sips of water every five minutes to stop my stomach from growling. Once I counted twelve strands of noodles, I realized that I couldn't wait any longer. My full bladder pulsed painfully at being rejected a sudden release. Whimpering, I pushed my chair back and rushed to the hall bathroom. After slamming the door shut, I sat on the cool porcelain bowl in relief as my bladder emptied. I cleaned up after myself in record timing and opened the bathroom door so I could race to my seat before Nick came home. Just as my foot stepped from the bathroom's linoleum floor and onto the hallway's wooden floorboards, I bumped into a dark figure. I heard a flick as light flooded the hallway. Blinking, I looked up into Nick's tense face. My breath escaped me as I stared up into his dark brown eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"I waited for you," I stammered, taking a couple of steps back. "I made dinner like you said, and I didn't eat. I promise. I didn't touch my food. I only went to the bathroom, but I was coming right back."

"Alayna," he began.

I cut him off, not wanting him to focus on the fact that I wasn't waiting at the table. "And I cleaned up, just like you said. I even—"

"Alayna," He interrupted. His voice was harsher this time.

My eyes widened as his left arm lifted up. I would pay the price of my actions like I have so many times before. I flinched back, my arms reaching up to protect my face. His arm swung

over my head towards the side wall and flicked the switch, turning the bathroom light off. My arms lowered at his next statement.

“We don’t waste electricity in this house. It’s good that you waited up, but I expect the dishes to be cleared off the table and cleaned by the time I hop out the shower. I also expect you to be in bed.”

“Yes, sir.” My heart didn’t slow until he walked away. That was the first and only time he had ever given me a compliment. I was so certain that he would be mad at me for not obeying his rule. I didn’t understand him, and I didn’t think I ever would.

As I sat in the living room waiting up for Nick like I’ve done so many times before, my mother walked in. She was already dressed for bed in her thin purple nightgown and black satin scarf.

“You didn’t eat?”

I shook my head and sighed. “I’m still waiting.”

She gave me a look of pity. “Laney.”

“He didn’t say what time he was coming home?”

“No, Laney, only that he would be really late.”

I stood. “I should get started on dinner.”

“And then what? He might not be here until after midnight. That’s what he means by really late. His food would be cold then, and he sure wouldn’t be hungry. You know how he doesn’t like the dishes to be dirty when he gets home, so why make it worse? Eat something.”

“Momma, I’m not trying to make him even more pissed off at the fact that I ate before he did. You know how he could get.”

“But he promised not to punish you like that anymore.”

I gave her a look of disbelief. “Yeah, just like he promised that the last time and I ended with bruised ribs.”

“He won’t do it. I’ll leave him, and he knows it.”

“You always say that.”

“I love you, Laney, and I don’t want him hurting you like that. I won’t let that happen again.”

I didn’t say anything. It was like *déjà vu*. We’ve had this conversation so many times before only to reach the same conclusion: she would never leave him, and I would never leave her.

“I’m going to my room until he comes home. I’ll just heat up some hot pockets. That way he isn’t waiting long and they won’t be cold.”

I walked past her and into my room. As soon as I shut the door, I walked to my dresser and opened the top left drawer. This was where I kept my snacks. Nick never brought home sweets, and when he did, he made it clear that they were his and nobody else’s. Megan started giving me snacks from her house, since she started telling her mother to pack an extra lunch. She never explained why she started bringing an extra brown paper bag to school for me. When I asked about it she only said that the cafeteria food sucked and she didn’t want me to suffer through it. I started taking home little things from the bag. I would save a hostess cake or a small bag of chips with the excuse of I’m too full to eat the rest and save it for later. My drawer was now filling up with sweets. For nights like this one, I would take some out and eat them to hold me over until dinner. I reached in and grabbed a bag of Lays. While I crunched on the chips, I thought about what I was going to do next. I could hurry up and change for bed, since a shower

would take too long, and then wait up in the living room for Nick. Who knew if he was staying overtime or not? I tilted my head back and emptied the rest of the crumbs in my mouth. Just as I was balling up the small bag, I heard light taps on my door. I tensed but then relaxed once I realized that I didn't hear the familiar slam of the front door yet. After placing the bag underneath the other trash in my trash can, I opened her door. My mother stood out in the hallway holding JCB grease and a wide tooth comb.

“You want me to do your hair?”

My brows lifted in shock. She hasn't done my hair since I was ten. “Yea, I have to change to my night clothes.”

She smiled. “Okay.”

She walked in the room and sat on the bed as I changed my clothes. Once I finished, I turned around to see her sitting on the bed with the grease and comb on either side of her. I glanced at the opened door checking to see if I had a clear view of when Nick would walk in. I sat between my mother's legs and pulled my hairband off.

“You need to stop wearing those things so much, Laney. They thin your edges after a while.”

I remained silent as she began to carefully part my hair. Instantly, my body began to relax as I felt the cool, thick oil against my scalp. It's amazing what smells could do. The smell of grease brought back memories of my mother doing my hair every night before bed. She was more sober back then. We would sit, talk, and laugh all night about any and everything, like the time I asked my teacher if she wore a wig like the lady next door. I was only five and didn't know that people actually got embarrassed over things like that. My teacher didn't think it was

funny, but my mother couldn't stop laughing. She had wrapped her arms around me and called me her little angel. She made me feel important, special.

“How was your day, Laney?”

I shrugged. “Okay, I guess. I miss this.” Even though, I missed it, I knew that it wasn't the same anymore. She didn't know enough about my life outside of this house to understand what's going on. She always forgot Megan's name, and barely knew how she looked. She didn't know anything about the classes I were taking or the grades I was making. She knew none of my teachers' names or their faces, since she refused to go to the parent teacher conferences.

“Me too. I miss Georgia sometimes.”

She hadn't spoke about her hometown in a long time. I was born and raised in New York, but she was born and raised in southern Georgia. She left her entire family behind to raise me alone. I used to think of her decision as a sacrifice. Instead of staying down south with a family that didn't love her, she came up north to make a fresh start and give me the love she missed. I liked it better we were alone. Things were calmer then.

After continued silence, my mother spoke up again. “The north is pretty cool too though. I like this neighborhood.”

Our neighborhood was located in the Bronx, and it wasn't the most ideal location. I really didn't realize that we were living in the projects until other kids in my class began to point it out whenever I talked about which block I lived on. Megan lived a couple blocks over from me, and whenever I crossed over onto her block, it was like entering into an entire different city. I was never embarrassed about where I came from, but then again, I wasn't too excited about it either.

“You're being quiet tonight.”

I stared out into the long darkened hallway. “Nothing to say.”

“That’s cool, I guess.” She began detangling my hair.

I leaned my head to the side of each tug. She lifted my hair up to comb the back and paused. I could feel her fingers graze a burn mark on the back of my neck. As I felt her light touch, my eyes stared down at my hands that lay on top of my folded knees. That burn was a constant reminder of Nick having the power in the house. I received it three months ago when I was curling my hair in the bathroom. Because the door to the bathroom was closed, I didn’t hear him calling my name. I had clamped my hair on top of my head to continued curling. I was focused on ring curling a section in the back when the door slammed against the wall. Nick stood in the doorway, glaring down at me.

“I called your name four fucking times and you too busy doing your hair to obey me!”

I just stood there, looking at the hate in his eyes. My hand that held the curling iron remained paused in the air. “I didn’t hear you.”

My words were barely out of my mouth when he snatched the curling iron out of my hand. I expected him to hit me, punish me as he’s done before. I didn’t expect what came next. He cursed at me as he pressed the heated iron against my skin. I tried jerking away as I heard the hair oil sizzle on the back of my neck. Screaming, I tugged at his hand that gripped the top of my hair to keep me from moving. I don’t know what made him drop the iron, but the next thing I knew, my mother was rushing me to the tub and pouring cold water over the burns. She had screamed at him while crying over me. I had felt pain for the most part of my life, but I would take any amount of beatings to get rid of the pain of having second degree burns.

“Nick’s been good to us, hasn’t he?”

I didn’t answer right away. I didn’t really know what to say. I could be honest with her like I used to be, but she would only listen for that one day and started back loving him the next.

I could lie and have her continue living in a fantasy world where she finally had her perfect family. Instead, I asked her the same question she's been asking me.

“What do you think of him?”

I could feel her legs tighten on either side of me as she shifted on the bed. Before answering, she parted my hair down the middle. “He's been good to us.”

Her words lack the usual conviction. Maybe she was getting tired like I was. Years of dealing with the same crap tended to take a toll on people. I could see it building up inside of the walls of this small apartment. I could all but hear the sound of the walls threatening to break under the constant pressure of the rising tension.

“I like doing your hair,” she said, attempting to change focus.

I tilted my head to the side, so she could begin the French braid. “Must be one of your happy days.” I immediately regretted making that statement. We haven't referred to her happy days in a long time. It was a reminder that she battled depressions and had very few moments of peace and happiness. Those days seemed to come few in between the older I get.

My mother gave a weak laugh. “I guess.”

I wanted to ask her if she was happy. I used to ask her that question every night before I went to bed, hoping that each night she would learn to try harder. She would smile and answer yes, but after a while, I began to notice that she was lying. I no longer needed to ask her. I could see the truth in her eyes.

Chapter 3

I dreamt of the happy days. My dream was a distant memory of knowing what happiness truly meant. My mother and I had been living in a smaller, one bedroom apartment in the city. Back then, we didn't have to worry about keeping the house structured. The bed was never made, since we would hop back in it at any given moment. Dishes were piling in the kitchen sink and were beginning to stink, but my mother always held off until she felt the time was right for spring cleaning. Certain spots on the beige floor caused our socks to adhere to the sticky surface of dried up juice. The living room was our favorite place. Dusky light would seep through the blinds as I played with my toy train. The carpet floor was always cluttered with plastic toys and dolls.

This dream focused on one particular day. I was five years old then, standing in the living room's doorway. I looked at my mother swaying and humming to the melody of Boyz II Men. My tiny fingers clutched the door frame as she continued to dance around the colorful Legos. Her eyes sparkled once she noticed me standing there. She stretched her hand out towards me.

“Come dance with me, baby.”

I smiled and ran into her outstretched arms. I was her baby again. The day before I was just Laney, and she didn't want to be bothered with me. Instead she stayed in bed, sleeping off and on. I assumed that she was just too tired to cook, so I ate saltine crackers and bologna for lunch and dinner. I was so excited that she was no longer tired. I clasped her hands as I stood on her tip toes. “What we dancing for, Momma?”

She laughed as she looked down at me. “To celebrate my happy day.” Her southern accent was stronger back then.

I smiled up at her. “You not sad no more?”

“Now why would I be sad when I have my little Laney?”

I giggled and wrapped my arms around her small waist. The front door slammed and I jerked away, confused as to who would be entering the house.

“Alayna!”

My brows wrinkled as I looked up at my mother. She was screaming my name except her voice wasn't coming out of her mouth.

“Why you calling me Alayna, Mommy?”

A deep voice erupted from her throat as she yelled it again.

I jumped back in fear. I hated that name. She never called me that. Only one person did.

I woke up as soon as my bedroom door opened.

“You don't hear me calling you? What you doing still in bed?”

Rubbing my eyes, I looked up at Nick before glancing at my clock. It was eight in the morning, the same time he was supposed to be leaving for work. “It's Saturday.”

“And?”

I was too tired to think of an answer.

“Get up and clean the kitchen. Janelle threw up in the sink this morning, so you have to rinse it out.”

“Yes sir,” I grumbled, sitting up.

He walked away before I got out of bed. As I was making my way down the hall, he was leaving out of the front door.

“I'll be back the usual time, so have the food ready by 6:30.”

“Yes, sir.”

He slammed the door shut and I walked over to clean out the sink. Before going back to sleep, I walked towards the back to check on my mother. The floorboards creaked under my feet as I walked down the hall towards the master bedroom. Twisting the bronze doorknob, I opened the door. I could barely make out my mother huddled in the center of the bed. The dark blue curtains emitted little to no light in the room.

“Mom,” I whispered, stepping further into the room.

She didn’t respond.

I kicked the clothes out of my way as I walked closer to the bed. The blanket whistled in the air when I pulled it back. She remained curled up in a ball. Fear caused me to hover my hand over her nose. I waited to feel the warm air against my palm. Closing my eyes, I emitted a sigh of relief. I placed a hand on my mother’s forehead, smoothing her hair back. My hand felt cool against her burning flesh. I frowned. She was getting sick. Her body rocked side to side as I shook her awake. She blinked slowly, focusing on me.

“You’re burning up. How you feeling?”

“Like shit.” Her cracking voice made her words sound harsh.

“When was the last time you drank?”

“I don’t know. What time is it?”

“Was it before Nick came home?”

“After.”

I nodded. “I’ll go get you some water.”

She was already closing her eyes before I took a step back. Glancing at her to make sure she was sleeping, I grabbed the plastic cup sitting on the nightstand. I didn’t need to smell the clear liquid to know what it was. My fingers tightened around the cup. It was easier to get her not

to drink when she was really sick. She was too tired to put up a fight and sometimes she couldn't even make it out of bed. After dumping the vodka, I checked on her again. Knowing her, she wouldn't wake up for another few hours, so I set my alarm and went to sleep.

The alarm didn't wake me up, banging at the front door did. Groaning, I stood and made my way to the door. We rarely received any visitors, especially since Nick made sure no one came inside the house without his permission. Keeping the rule in mind, I slowed my pace on the way to the front door. I reached my hand out and opened the door wide enough so I could peek outside. I blinked in shock at the sight of Megan leaning against a wall.

“Megan?”

She looked up after placing her hands in her pockets. “Sup?”

My hand tightened around the doorknob as I wondered why she was here. She rarely showed up at my door, let alone without texting first. We haven't spoken since she stormed out of the girls' bathroom. I figured she would still be pissed at me for not having her back by going to the park with her. I quenched my thoughts of her ending the friendship and replied, “Nothing.”

She looked around, unsure of what to say next.

Before she could speak, I stepped into the hall and closed the door behind me. “I'm sorry. You were right about me not being there for you yesterday and I'm sorry.”

“Laney.”

“You have every right to be mad at me. I just hope that you would still want to be my friend.”

She said nothing.

“Don't think that I don't have your back because I do.”

“Laney, I’m not mad anymore. It’s alright.” She shifted, taking a hand out of her pocket to hold it out. “Truce?”

“Truce,” I answered, clasping her hand in mine. I was just glad she was never the type to hold grudges against me.

She smiled. “Good, cuz I have so much to tell you bout what happened the other day.” She looked over my shoulder. “Your mamma’s boyfriend here?”

“No.”

“Cool! Finally I can come in.” She moved towards the door. “That dude be tripping talking bout no guest allowed and shit.”

My smile dropped as I remained standing in front of the door. “You still can’t come in, Megan.”

“Why not? He’s not here so what’s the problem?”

“My mom’s here.” I suddenly remembered Megan’s germ phobia and added, “She’s sick. It’s probably the flu.”

She scrunched up her nose as if she just gotten a whiff of rotten eggs. “Eew. Yea, ya’ll can keep the germs.” Her face suddenly brightened. “You can come to my place then. My moms supposed to be frying some chicken and baking her mac n cheese.”

I hesitated, thinking about her own mother still in the bed. “I should probably stay.”

“Oh, that’s right. Your punishment. What time is Nick supposed to be coming home?”

“Around 7. What time is it now?”

“Ten something.”

“I have to stay here until about two to make sure my mom is okay, but I’ll be over to your house after then. I’ll have to leave at six though.”

“That’s cool. I can tell my mom to fix dinner an hour early for you.”

“Cool, see ya then.”

I walked back in the house and began heating up some chicken noodle soup. I remember the times I used to skip school to take care of my mother. I didn’t mind. I knew that she would try and stay away from the alcohol as long as I was there taking care of her. On my way back to the bedroom, I grabbed a bottle of Nyquil. She was prone to getting sick, but mostly it was stomach cramps with the occasional cool body temperature. I didn’t like giving her cold medicine, especially when she recently had a drink. She liked to take sips of vodka as soon as she woke up, but considering that she has been sleeping most of that morning, I figured it would be fine for her to take the medicine after she ate.

“Come on, Mom.” I coaxed her mother to sit up as I spooned the warm soup down her throat.

She coughed around the spoon and struggled to keep her eyes open. She glanced at the empty nightstand. “Laney.”

I shoved the spoon in her mouth before she could ask. I was intent on her not drinking for this one day, and by the looks of things, she was too weak to get up and move around on her own. I waited until she signaled she was done eating before handing her a cup of water. “If you drink all this up, I’ll give you some Nyquil.”

I hated that I had to dangle the medicine as if it was her only life line. She looked from the cup of water to the green syrup. It wasn’t alcohol, but it was something that would help her sleep. As soon as she gulped the water down, she took the measured clear cup from my fingers. She didn’t even wince as she threw back the nasty liquid. She lay back against the pillows as she handed the cup back. “Thanks, Laney. You always taking care of me.”

I placed the items on the nightstand and smiled. “Only until you feel better.”

“I haven’t had a happy day in a long time, Laney.”

It didn’t take a doctor to tell me that her depression was getting worse. I forced a smile back on my face. “Maybe soon you’ll have a good day.”

“Maybe,” she muttered, drawing the blanket up. It wasn’t long before she succumbed to sleep.

As I looked down at her sleeping face, I couldn’t help but remember a similar time I sat with her. It was the same year I learned about happy days. My mother was too ill to get off the living room couch. I sat by her side, unsure of what to do. Strands of hair were sticking to her damp forehead while she remained tucked under the covers. The only time I left her spot was to run and get her some water when she kept licking her cracked lips. I continuously asked her what she wanted, but the only answer I received was “I’m fine, baby.” I knew that she was far from fine. The sunlight was leaving the room when I realized how hungry I was. I placed my head on my mother’s stomach, trying to hear if it was growling too. Once I heard the familiar sound, I jerked up and ran into the kitchen. My feet were light against the linoleum floors as I rushed to the open pantry. I grabbed a box of saltine crackers before opening the fridge to grab an opened pack of bologna.

“Look, Momma!” I wanted her to see what a big girl I was. I placed the crackers and meat on the coffee table. “Aren’t you hungry?” I struggled to open the clear plastic. She said nothing when I finally gotten it open only to have most of the crackers fall on the carpet. I dumped the rest on the table and used my hands to tear apart pieces of the cold meat. After placing portion of bologna on a square cracker, I held it in front of her lips.

Her dazed eyes looked up at me.

I stepped closer, ignoring the way the crackers stuck to the bottom of my feet once I crushed them. “Come on, Momma. You gotta eat. Eating helps you feel better.” Minutes passed before her mouth finally opened. I smiled, shoving the food past her parted lips. While she chewed, I held up the cup of water. Once she finished drinking, I grabbed another cracker. I continued the process until she refused to open her mouth again. As she drifted off, my small palm brushed against her hair. I didn’t rush to eat the remaining food until I was sure she was sleeping.

Like I had done when I was five, I smoothed back her hair. I could still hear the words I stated to her when I was younger. *I will always make you feel better.*

Even though I said two, I didn’t leave my house until around four to head over to Megan’s. I texted her when I was coming up so she could unlock the door. I didn’t like staying at her place to long. It was a constant reminder of what I didn’t have. Stepping into her apartment reminded me of the differences between my place and hers. Every week, new flowers sat in a vase by the front door. In the center of the living room wall hung a flat screen TV. The living room was the place where friends and family gathered on the large couch and loveseat to watch movies and more importantly, Sunday night football. On almost all the walls of the house were pictures of Megan surrounded by her parents and three older brothers. The brothers were an exact replica of their father. From their brown, baby faces and dimpled smiles to their tall height and bulky figure. Because of their handsome features, Megan was sure to torment every girl that walked through the house with them. She didn’t have to put up much of a fight anyway since they never lasted long enough to be considered girlfriends.

What struck me the most about the large apartment was the smell. It didn’t smell of Clorox wipes or lemon furniture polish. Instead, it smelled of Velveeta intermingled with fried

chicken. The smell was forever changing to match whatever Megan's mother was cooking. Before reaching the kitchen, I stopped at one of the pictures that were hanging on the wall. A baby Megan was laughing around her chubby hand as her father kissed her cheek. I've seen this picture every time I came over, but each time was like I was experiencing it for the first time. This must be what love looked like. Looking away from the picture, I walked further down the hall and turned into the kitchen.

Megan's mother stood in front of the stove, ignoring the splatter of grease hitting her skin.

"Hi, Mrs. Sawyers."

"Hi, Laney!" She placed the silver fork on the counter and opened her arms. "Come here and give me a hug. Girl, I haven't seen you in a minute. How ya been?"

I gave her a brief hug and stood back from the sizzling skillet. "I've been good."

"Why don't ya hang out in the living room? I believe they are in there watching some movie. Food will be ready in a minute."

I nodded and walked to the family room. Mr. Sawyers sat in his usual chair, which was reclined all the way back. It was a wonder he could see the TV over his propped feet. Megan was laying on her side on the sofa, watching what looked to be a scary movie. She was the only person I knew that could watch the gore and guts and not be grossed out. Not to mention she never even flinched when the music would build up only to have a scary person jump out at the screen. She sat up as soon as I made my way into the room.

"Hey, Laney."

"Hey."

Mr. Sawyers looked up and gave me a huge smile. “Hey Laney! Long time no see. How’s my favorite daughter doing?”

Megan rolled her eyes. “Daaad.”

He chuckled before looking back at the TV.

I smiled at his joke. He would always poke fun at Megan, especially when she’s done something bad, which was often. He would remind her to be more like me: quiet and respectful. I sat down beside her and tried to focus on what was on screen. It was long before Mrs. Sawyers called out to everyone to wash their hands.

After washing my hands, I sat in one of the chairs as Megan walked in.

“Hey, Mom.” She pecked her mother’s cheek.

“Megan.” The one word said enough as Mrs. Sawyers turned to flip the remaining chicken in the skillet.

“What did I do this time?”

“What have I told you about leaving this house without letting me know where you going?”

“I was only around the corner. I went to Laney’s place.”

Placing a hand on her hip, she turned around and arched her eyebrow. “Did you really? Only there?”

Megan’s smile faltered. “Yeah.”

“I find that hard to believe when Laney came in an hour after you.”

I could hear of sigh of relief from across the room when her brother, Joshua chose that moment to barge into the kitchen.

“The food done yet? I’m starving.”

Mrs. Sawyers swatted his hand as he reached for one of the fried chicken thighs. “Didn’t you hear me calling you earlier? Go wash ya hands.”

“Sup, Laney.”

“Hey, Josh.”

“Couldn’t resist me, huh?”

He gave me a look that caused my cheeks to warm.

Crossing his arms across his chest, he smiled. “You know, this is our year. With you being a freshman and me a senior all the girls will be jealous.”

Megan snorted as Mrs. Sawyers rolled her eyes. “Joshua, leave the girl alone.”

I broke eye contact by studying the cherry oak table.

His smile widened.

Mrs. Sawyers missed none of the familiar interaction and snapped, “Boy, wash ya hands.”

“Alright, alright.” Instead of going to the bathroom, he squeezed some of the dish detergent onto his palm and washed his hands at the kitchen sink. “What’s taking Dad so long anyway?”

“Probably doing what you should of done in the first place. Washing his hands.”

Mr. Sawyers came in just as the plates were being placed on the table.

“Did you wash your hands first, Rob?” Joshua asked, mimicking his mother’s voice.

Mrs. Sawyers glared at him as she took a seat. “What did I tell you about doing that?” She looked up at her husband’s smirking face. “Did you wash your hands?”

He smiled. “Always.”

Megan pulled out a chair to take a seat next to me. Before she could sit down, Joshua snatched the chair out of her hands, bumped her out of the way, and sat down.

“Hey!” She pushed his shoulder. “Get up!”

“Nope. I like this seat,” he said, smiling as he proceeded to switch their plates.

She punched his shoulder.

Her mother gave her a stern look. “Megan, behave.”

As soon as her mother looked away, she slapped the back of Joshua’s head while muttering, “Punk.” She took a seat next to her mother, glaring at him from across the table.

Taking a sip of my water I hid my smile. I used to beg my mother for a brother or sister, but after seeing the interaction between my classmates’ siblings, I took my wish back.

“How ya been, Laney?”

I looked up at Mr. Sawyers standing at the head of the table. “I’ve been good.”

“Good to hear.”

As soon as he took his seat, everyone held out their hands. It still felt weird placing my palms in another hands while saying a prayer. We never prayed over our food. I asked Mrs. Sawyers once the meaning of praying before eating, and she explained to me that it was about thanking God and cleansing the food. After that, I asked my mother if we could say grace before eating and Nick snapped at me and told me to quit talking and eat.

“Heard anything from Chase yet?”

I broke off a piece of chicken while I waited for someone to answer Megan’s question. Chase joined the air force a year ago while the oldest, R.J., went off to study art at New York University. Megan never stated it, but I knew she missed them and hid a calendar in her locker that counted down the days until they came home for the holidays.

“He’s supposed to video in tomorrow night, so I suggest you come home on time and stop lollygagging after school.”

Her father looked up in irritation. “She’s been late again?”

“Yep, yesterday was two hours to be exact.”

Mr. Sawyers’ eyes studied his daughter.

She looked away and shoved a forkful of macaroni in her mouth.

“Megan, you need to start listening to your mother and come home on time.”

She opened her mouth to say something.

“No excuses.”

Her mouth closed.

His booming voice always reminded me of Nick. When I first heard him chastising Megan for getting an attitude with her mother, I was prepared for him to react in anger. I expected dishes to fly while he reached across the table to grab her. Everyone looked at me in shock when I screamed out, “Don’t hurt her!” It felt surreal. It was like I was yelling at Nick to not hurt me. Only this time Megan took my place. They all gave me a confused look and I realized what I’ve done. Forcing a smile, I said that I only meant to not give her a whooping since I heard that some kids get that at my school. I wasn’t sure if they bought my excuse or not, but they didn’t ask any questions.

“So Laney, when are ya’ll supposed to be getting your report cards?”

I looked up at her mother before glancing at Megan whose eyes begged me not to say anything. I looked down at my plate while answering, “I’m not sure.” Megan still hadn’t told her mother that we received our report cards a week ago. She had already gotten in trouble two years ago for forging her mother’s signature on one of her report cards. I glanced at Joshua out of the

corner of my eye. He got his too, but maybe he was giving her time before finally telling their mother about her bad grades. He could be nice sometimes when it came to sticking up for his little sister.

“Okay,” Mrs. Sawyers said before looking to her side at Megan. “I suspect you to tell me as soon as you get your card, Megan. And it better not be no more bad grades on there.”

“I’ll tell you.”

Joshua chuckled as he sat up straighter in his seat. “Why can’t you be a good girl like Laney over here?”

Megan frowned and snapped, “Shut up, Joshua!”

“It’s true. Laney is a bright girl.”

Her mouth dropped in shock as she looked at her father. “Dad!”

Joshua waved a chicken leg in his hand as he addressed their parents. “See? I told ya’ll it wasn’t a good idea to adopt her. Now we stuck with her for life.”

She frowned as they laughed.

Her mother cleared her throat. Still smiling, she said, “Alright, guys. Enough.”

Joshua decided to change tactics. “So, Laney, dating anyone yet?” He casually patted my back as I choked on a piece of chicken.

I don’t know why I was still shock at the things he did to rattle me. It was like he waited for the moment for me to fully relax before teasing me all over again.

Megan answered for me. “No, but she will be soon.”

I looked down at Joshua’s muscles tightening in his arms as he tensed.

“Is that right?” he asked, looking over at me.

I struggled to pull the rest of the chicken off of its bone. I didn't understand if him getting irritated was an act or not. I shoved the rest of it and macaroni in my mouth. Megan knew darn well I wasn't planning on dating anybody.

She smiled. "Yep, James' friend is interested in her, so you can go on sticking to Aisha's side."

"I'm not talking to Aisha anymore, smartass."

"Watch yo mouth!" Both of their parents spoke up at the same time.

Joshua continued. "Who's James?"

She wiped her greasy hands on a napkin. "No one. Just a friend."

Her father raised an eyebrow. "Betta be. You know you not allowed to date."

Joshua smirked. "Trust me, Dad. With me around to watch her every move, she won't be."

"Can't baby me forever, pea brain."

"According to the recent grades, my brain is way bigger than yours."

"Anyway," she exhaled. "How you gonna prevent me from dating, but trying to flirt with Laney? We the same age."

"You see, that's different."

I inhaled sharply as he dropped his arm around my shoulders.

"We have an understanding. When she's old enough, say like next semester, I'm gonna take her to prom, and eventually we'll get married."

I'm sure if anyone would look at my face, they would have seen the confusion and fear in my eyes. I didn't want to date anyone, most of all Joshua. He was the only one guy I've met that made me feel uncomfortable. I haven't decided if it was a good or bad uncomfortable.

Silence filled the room until Megan spoke up. “That’s just gross.”

He leaned back in his chair, his arm still on me. “Why is it gross?”

“Because she’s like a sister. She’s practically family.”

His smile widened. “Not yet, but by the time we walk down that aisle she will be family. You’ll finally have the sister you always wanted.” He leaned closer to me, whispering in my ear. “Isn’t that right, Laney?”

I sat still as a statue, hoping to just disappear.

Mrs. Sawyers finally intervened “Alright, Josh. Leave her alone.”

He released me.

“Son, are you gonna do this every time she comes over.”

He laughed at his father’s question. “Yep.”

That was just great, I thought. I have to deal with that every time I came over Megan’s house. As soon as we were finished eating, we walked back in the family room while Mr. and Mrs. Sawyers cleaned up the kitchen.

“What do ya’ll wanna watch?”

I could see Megan thinking about Joshua’s question as she sat down. “Um, how about The Lucky One?”

“How about no?”

I couldn’t stop the giggle from escaping my lips.

“Then why ask if you not gonna listen to what I suggest?”

He shrugged, pulling out one of the DVDs from the movie stand. “Here we go. Safe House.”

“Really?”

Instead of responding, he placed the disk in the player.

“You’re such an ass,” she whispered sharply.

He looked over her shoulder and smiled. “Finally, Mom, you see what I’m talking about when I say your daughter is evil.”

Megan panicked face turned around, preparing to come up with an excuse. She gave Joshua the death glare once she realized no one was standing behind her.

He laughed and sat down on the couch beside me. “You should of seen your face.”

I smiled at his face as he mimic her facial expression.

“Stop laughing, Laney. Whose side are you on?”

He patted my leg. “Mine. You haven’t figured that out yet?”

Saying nothing, she turned to face the TV. We were ten minutes into the movie when I stood up, whispering, “I’ll be back.” I was on my way to the bathroom when I heard my name from the kitchen. I paused, making sure I heard correctly.

I could hear Mrs. Sawyer’s whispering to her husband. “Yea, I think we need to pack her something to take home.”

I stepped closer to the kitchen’s door frame and stood against the wall.

“You going to pack all of that?”

“Yeah, why not?” A Tupperware fell to the floor. “Shoot. Can you get that? What was I saying?”

“Packing all that macaroni for Laney.”

“Right, did you see that girl? I swear she gotten smaller since the last time I saw her. I didn’t even think that was possible.”

Mr. Sawyers agreed by only saying, “Humph.”

“You think they feeding her?” Before he could answer she continued. “I don’t think they’re feeding her enough. Megan was telling me that she thinks Laney’s mother has the flu. Not surprising that she’s sick. She’s an alcoholic and the boyfriend is hardly home in the first place.”

I could hear the spoon scraping the bottom of the pot.

“You ask me somebody should have taken that girl away from there a long time ago.”

The spoon stopped scraping. “And place her in an even worse house? Come on Rob, anyone can take one look at her and see how much she loves her mother.”

“Yeah, well her mother is doing a hell of a job raising her.”

One of the cabinet doors slammed shut. “Too bad her and Megan don’t wear the same size. You think I should buy her some clothes?”

He sighed. “Shayla, you bought her some clothes months ago.”

“Yeah, but clearly it’s not enough.”

I looked down at my black tights and snow boots. Mrs. Sawyers handed them to me, saying that they were from Megan’s cousin and since she couldn’t fit them then I should have them. I tried not to wear the tights with everything, but they seemed to make each outfit look different just by changing the shirts. It was convenient enough to wear often without being teased. They were thick enough that they didn’t get holes from me wearing them too often, and they always fit, no matter how much I grew. My mother didn’t have the money to buy me the latest trends, and I refused to ask Nick for anything. I knew that if I even started to ask, he would snap and turn it around on me being ungrateful what I have.

“I don’t know. I feel like we should be doing more.”

I walked away without hearing his response. I didn't want them feeling sorry for me. It was embarrassing enough that they knew my mother drank, but now they knew that I didn't have many clothes. This was why I didn't come to Megan's place often. I always ended up feeling out of place as if I was posing as the perfect child only to return to a place I wasn't wanted.

"I have to go home," I said to Megan once I stood in the living room.

She looked over her shoulder. "Why? You have thirty minutes before you have to leave."

"I know, but I should get going."

"Fine."

Joshua smiled. "I can walk you back if you want."

Megan and I spoke at the same time.

"I'm good."

"Shut up, Josh."

He sighed and looked back at the screen. "Alright, just saying."

"Come on. I'll let my mom know we're leaving."

Conversation halted as soon as we walked into the kitchen. Mr. Sawyers continued rinsing off the dishes while his wife grabbed the filled containers from the counter. She smiled at me. "You leaving already?"

"Yea."

"Well, I've made more than enough food for the house, so you should take home some extra. I don't want them to go to waste here."

Thanking her, I grabbed the two containers.

"Tell your mother I said hi, and hope she gets better."

Nodding, I smiled and waved bye.

Megan told her mother that she had to get a book from my house, but we both knew that she really wanted to copy the answers from our Spanish homework. Each week our teacher gave us a worksheet to complete and turn in on Fridays, and every week, Megan copied the answers from me.

“Sucks,” she said while walking to my place. “If only you were in all my classes, I wouldn’t be making all those C’s.”

“That’s not too bad.”

She kicked a rock, causing it to roll down the sidewalk. “Tell that to my mom. She’s going to punish me for life when she sees my grades.”

“When are you going to tell her?”

“Next week. I had to give Josh ten bucks and promise to clean his room this week in exchange for him keeping his mouth shut. Lucky bastard got all A’s and one B.”

“It’s because he’s smart.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Once we reached my front door, I stopped. “Stay here while I go and get the worksheet.”

Megan nodded and gave me a one finger salute.

I walked in and went straight back into the kitchen to check on the bottle I hid in a black trash bag under the sink. It was still where I left it. Untouched, which meant my mother probably stayed in bed all day. After placing the bottle in the freezer and the food in the refrigerator, I walked back into her bedroom.

“Hey, mom?”

She blinked up at me.

“Did you eat anything?”

“Yea,” she coughed before continuing. “I heated up a hot pocket.”

“Okay, Megan’s mom gave me some leftovers to bring home.”

“That’s nice of her.”

“Yeah.”

“You should tell her we don’t need her charity.”

“Mom, it’s not like that.”

“I seen the way she be looking at me whenever I go somewhere.”

I shifted. “I have to give Megan something, but I’ll be back to give you some more medicine.”

“Alright.” She rolled over onto her side.

I was in my room, pulling the worksheet from my notebook when I heard the front door slam.

“Alayna!”

I straightened. I looked over at the digital clock on my nightstand. He was home an hour early.

“Bring your ass out here!”

I hesitated, going over in my head the areas she cleaned. I was sure that my mother didn’t make a mess, so everything was still straightened. Knowing him, he found one little thing that I did wrong. As I walked down the hall and looked towards the front door, my heart stopped. Megan stood in front of him, a clear source of his anger. She knew I couldn’t have guest in the house, but she came in anyway. I battled being angry with her and terrified of him.

“Listen, I didn’t mean to get her in trouble. I was in here for literally a second.”

“Shut. The. Hell. Up.”

She gave him a what-the-fuck look and opened her mouth.

“Megan,” I whispered. No matter how much I hoped and prayed for her to not say anything, I knew she would snap at him.

“I only came here for my worksheet.” She rolled her eyes before turning around to walk to me.

“You need to get out of my house!”

I continued to stare over her shoulder at Nick, waiting for him to pounce. I barely felt the paper leave my fingertips as she took the paper from my hands.

I could see spit spew from his mouth as he roared, “Get out!”

Megan jumped and turned around. She opened her mouth, but whatever she was about to say disappeared. For once she was speechless as she looked up into his eyes. Every muscle in his face contracted to create an angered expression. She stepped back as he took a step forward.

“Now.”

It was that soft spoken word that hinted to me how bad my punishment would be.

“Alright, dang,” she muttered, stepping around him. She rushed to the front door and then halted. Looking over her shoulder, she glanced to see Nick stepping towards me. My eyes met hers as she demanded, “Call me.”

I wanted her to just leave. Hurry up and go, my eyes begged. After a brief hesitation, she opened the door and walked out.

Chapter 4

My eyes filled with tears as the room remained quiet. “I told her to stay outside. I didn’t know she came in.”

I could tell he didn’t believe me as he continued walking towards me. “You didn’t know?”

I shook her head. “I didn’t.”

He stopped directly in front of me, his chest nearly touching mine. “She ya friend?”

I looked down at his tan timberlands and answered, “Yes, sir.”

Without warning his hand reached down to grab hold of my ponytail. I whimpered as he jerked my head back. “Look up at me when I’m talking to you!”

Tears streamed down my face as I stared up at him. I tensed. I was prepared for his fists. Everything became a blur as he slammed my head against the wall.

“I should snap your fucking neck for pulling that shit!”

I screamed out how sorry I was even though I knew nothing would change his fury.

“Shut up!” He backhanded me, but this time I steadied myself, reaching my hand against the wall to prevent from falling over. “Just shut the fuck up!”

My fear heightened as I scrambled to put distance between us. I only took two steps before he pushed me to the floor. That didn’t stop me from crawling away. His hand reached out to grab hold of my ankle. I could feel his fingers wrapping tight around it. I wondered then if he would snap every bone in my body. He had the strength to break every bit of me.

“Don’t you dare run away from me! Get up!”

Before I could move a muscle, he yanked me up by the back of my shirt. The sound of it ripping echoed throughout the hall. He turned me around to face him. Raising my arms, I

shielded my face. His fist slammed into my unprotected stomach, causing my gaze to fall from his face to the floor. Chicken and macaroni threatened to make a reappearance as I covered my mouth. My stomach throbbed. My breathing wheezed from my parted lips as he pulled me by the arm down the hall and into the living room. I struggled to keep up with him. My leg bumped the edge of the coffee table, causing it to scrap against the hardwood floor. I struggled to break away from him. He suddenly released me, slamming my body into the sofa's cushions. I looked up in shock at the sound of him unbuckling his belt.

This was it. He had been telling me that one day he would teach me how to act around a man since I wanted to be grown. "No!" I wasn't aware of even speaking, but I could hear the tortured sound of my voice. I sat up, intent on jumping away from him. He pushed me back down and whipped his belt from the loops of his jeans.

"I'm gonna teach you a thing or two about disobeying me." The leather belt whistled in the air as it swung down towards me.

The stinging sensation registered in my brain as the belt connected with my arm.

"I deal with my boss giving me shit all day!"

I pushed back against the couch, kicking at him.

"Now I have to deal with you!"

I screamed as the leather marked my flesh again and again. I rolled onto the floor, obeying my brain's demand to move. He kicked the table out of the way and continued swinging. The belt bit into my arms, neck, chest, and face. My heels dug into the carpet floor as I backed away. He followed my every move. I looked up at him, standing over me. His feet suddenly straddle each side of my body, preventing me from moving any further. I had to alternate between beating at his legs and blocking my face from the swinging belt.

“Shut up!” His words cut through my screams. He released the belt and bent down, his crazed eyes meeting mine.

I continued screaming, fighting against his swinging fists.

“Shut up! Shut up!” He pressed his knees into the floor and grabbed my throat. “Just shut the fuck up!”

My eyes bulged. He was going to go through his threats and kill me. I’ve finally pushed him to a breaking point. I scratched his hands as they tightened around my throat. I flailed beneath him. His face began to fade away. I heard someone screaming, but it sounded distant. I could see my mother’s arms floating above me to wrap around him. I remembered her wrapping those same arms around me, embracing me. Protecting me. Her lips formed words that I couldn’t understand as she tried to pull him away. My body felt too heavy to fight against him. As my hands released his squeezing fingers, I thought about what my mother once said. She said life was fleeting, and sometimes she used to wonder what it would feel like to let go. Would your memories disappear or would they follow you like the breeze? Darkness surrounded me and I thought, it would be nice to forget everything once I die.

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I wondered if God would accept me into heaven. Would He be mad at me for not praying as much as I used to? I felt a burning sensation in my throat and a light pressure against my stomach. Maybe He didn’t accept me and I was in hell being taunted by the devil. I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out. I tried again, but only managed to exhale. Inhaling, I smelled the familiar scents of home. I opened my eyes and blinked at my bedroom ceiling. Lifting my finger from the sheets, I wondered why He didn’t take me. There was a painful

feeling of a crook being in my neck when I tried to lift it. My eyes squeezed shut at the pain that shot through my throat. Why didn't He take me?

"Laney?" My mother lifted her head, releasing the pressure on my stomach. "How ya feeling?" She smoothed my hair back and leaned closer to my face. "Can you talk?"

I shrugged.

"I'll get you some water."

When she tipped my head back to pour water down my throat, I tensed. Instead of the water cooling my throat, it burned going down as I swallowed each drop. I wasn't even aware that tears were coming from my eyes until I felt them slide down my cheeks.

"Laney, I'm so sorry." She placed the cup on the floor and pulled me into her arms. "He won't come back. I promise."

I wasn't crying because of Nick. I felt betrayed. God didn't accept me. Instead, I was here. I shook her head and pushed back. Nick would be back. I was sure of it.

"What's wrong?"

I glanced at the open bedroom door and pointed to my neck, hoping to communicate what he's done.

"You want some ice?"

I reached my hand out to stop her from standing.

"No ice?"

I shook my head. I struggled to find the words. "Coming." The raspy word finally escaped my mouth. Closing my eyes, I continued, "back."

Her eyes were fierce as she glared at me. "No. He's not. I promise you. I'll never let him hurt you again. I promise."

I've never seen so much anger and determination in her eyes before. Only once, did I see that look and it was when I was four and told her that my teacher said I was too slow for preschool. My mother came up to the school, went off on her, and complained until the principal until she was fired. My mother was my protector then. My face remained crestfallen as I looked down.

She clasped my hands. "I promise."

I stayed in bed as she went out to get some more soup. Even when she came back, I refused to get out of the bed. The only time I left was when I had to use the bathroom. I kept my head down to avoid looking in the mirror. I didn't feel like looking at the results of yesterday's fight. Really didn't feel the need to until I noticed the way my mother looked at me. She kept looking into my eyes with concern before finally avoiding making eye contact. I knew I would have to face myself eventually. I walked back to the hall bathroom and closed the door. I turned to face the sink. Taking a deep breath, I looked up. My jaw dropped. Underneath my eyes were dark red bruises. The whites in my eyes were filled with red spots. It was like the pink eye except worse. Some of the spots almost took over the whites. I leaned closer into the mirror, holding back tears as I stared down at the dark bruises on my neck. My head rang with my screams and Nick's yells. My fingers trembled as they brushed against the discolored marks. Gasping, I could feel his fingers clenching my neck.

"Laney?"

I jumped, bumping hard into the sink. My heart rate slowed as I stared blankly at the door.

"You okay?"

Looking away from the door and back in the mirror, I expected to see blood seeping from my eyes instead of tears. I wiped the tears away and opened the door.

My mother looked at my eyes and down. "I was going to cook some soup if you were hungry."

It's been two days since Nick left, and I've yet smelled the alcohol from my mother's lips. She told me that she would try and get better for me. I was tired of hoping.

We were in the kitchen searching in a drawer for a can opener when a knock sounded at the door. He was back, I thought. He never stayed away too long. I couldn't stop the fear from creeping inside of me. I turned and backed into the counter.

"Don't worry, Laney. It's not him." She grabbed my hand and squeezed it. "He's not coming back. I promise."

I snatched my hand away and glanced at the kitchen doorway, expecting him to barge through at any moment.

"It's probably just Megan." She walked to the door. "She came by twice yesterday." She looked into the hole and asserted, "Yep, it's her." She turned away as I walked out of the kitchen.

I didn't hear any knocking yesterday.

She responded to my confusion. "You were in the shower, and then you were sleeping when she came by the second time."

I expected her to open the door, but she walked away.

"Just ignore it."

The soft knocking turned into loud banging.

"Ms. Moreland!" Megan's muffled words pierced through the closed door. "I'm not leaving until I see Laney!"

I jumped as the banging grew louder.

“Ignore it, Laney.”

I continued staring at the door.

“Ms. Moreland! Open up dammit!”

“You can’t open the door, Laney. She can’t know.”

If I opened that door she would know what Nick did. There was no hiding my eyes or the bruises across my neck. Ignoring my mother’s protests, I walked to the door. I wanted her to see the secret we’ve kept hidden. I opened the door. My fingers tightened on the door frame as I looked up at Megan.

“Laney, thank,” she broke off and slammed her palm against the door. “The fuck happened to your eyes?”

I shook my head. My brow furrowed as I struggled to get words out. “It’s not that bad.” My hoarse words were no louder than a whisper.

“What?” She pushed against the door, trying to enter the house. Her eyes fell down to rake over my body and narrowed in on my throat. “What the?” Before I could react, she grabbed the front of my shirt and yanked it down to take a closer look. “Oh my god, Laney.” Nothing else was said as she continued to eye the bruises.

“Did he do that to you?”

The voice asking the question came from the side. I leaned my head further out. My eyes went to Joshua as he came into view. I wasn’t ready for him to find out.

“Answer me, Laney.”

Megan’s released her grip from my shirt, and she did something I’ve never seen her do.

Joshua's anger increased at the sound of his little sister's sobs. "Let me in," he demanded as he pushed against the door, forcing his way into the house.

I stepped further away from his fierce steps. I didn't stop until I felt my mother's hands on my arms.

"Where is he?"

My mother's confused eyes went from Megan who closed the door to Joshua. "Who?"

"That nigga who put his hands on Laney!"

I blinked up at Joshua. He looked so different than the young boy who used to make jokes and poke fun at everyone for a laugh. Standing in his place was someone similar to Nick.

"Where the fuck is he?"

I whimpered and instinctively took another step back, bumping further into my mother.

His angry eyes turned to concern as he looked from my mother to me. "Dammit, Laney. I'm not gonna hurt." He reached his hand out to me, but dropped it when I jerked back.

I didn't want to react that way towards him, but I couldn't control my fear. No matter how hard I fought it, it kept returning harder than before.

"Laney, come stay with us," Megan pleaded while she wiped the tears from her face. She lifted her head up and demanded, "Come stay with us."

My mother grabbed one of my hands and walked around to stand next to me. "No, she's fine here."

Joshua's eyebrows raised in disbelief. "Yo, you serious?"

"Nick's not coming back. She's fine with me."

"You?" He released a harsh laugh. "You allowed this to happen!"

"I'm staying."

I was shocked at my outburst as much as Joshua and Megan. I didn't know why I chose to stay behind. I thought the part of me that was hopeful died the same night Nick tried to strangle me. It didn't matter how much I've been through, it always went back to my mother. I didn't even understand why I still held hope for her, but I knew that she still had a hold on me that was stronger than Nick's.

I swallowed and squeezed her hand. "He's not coming back. I'm staying."

Megan said nothing as she glared at my mother. I could see that she blamed her for everything.

Joshua spoke, breaking the silence. "Promise me that if he comes back, you come straight over to our place. Don't stop for nothing or" he looked at my mother before continuing, "no one."

I nodded.

He looked back at me. "You promise?"

"I promise."

"Let's go, Megan."

She looked like she was about to argue with my decision, but said nothing as she followed her brother out the door. Once the door closed, my mother commented on what just happened.

"You have some good friends."

I released her hand and walked to the kitchen. I sat at the table while watching her heat up some soup on the stove. After opening one of the cabinets, she grabbed three bowls. She placed one at her usual seating, another in front of me, and halted before placing one at the head of the table.

“Right.” She replaced the bowl back in the cabinet. After pouring the soup in the bowls she sat down across from me.

There was no grace. We just looked at each other and then began eating. She finally broke the silence by talking about what to do next.

“I have to start back working. I don’t know where at, but something part time.”

I looked up to see if she was serious.

“I know you don’t believe me when I say he’s not coming back, Laney. He’s not ever coming back.” She dropped her spoon and rubbed her forehead. “I don’t know what I was thinking, Laney.”

She wasn’t thinking. She was only feeling.

Dropping her hand, she looked at me. Sorrow and guilt seemed to weigh heavy on her. “I’m sorry. I’m gonna try harder this time. I won’t drink. I’ll go to groups if I have to.”

“You have to.” My mother tried to quit plenty of times before. Eventually, she gave up.

“I will. I’ll sign up for one when I can.” She picked up her glass of water and gulped it down.

I began to count down the days.

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Megan was standing in front of my locker as soon as second period let out. I’ve been avoiding her by walking to school early enough to rush to home room without bumping into her on the sidewalk or hallway. I didn’t know what to say to her. She now knew two of my secrets.

She gave me a timid smile. “Hey.”

This was why I didn’t want her to know. I didn’t want her pity.

She looked down at my neck. “You hide it well.”

I fidgeted under her stare and pulled the turtleneck higher, making sure it covered everything. “Yea, I’m not dressing out today.”

“Right,” Her eyes lit up as she thought of something. “So that’s why you don’t dress out in gym? Because of the,” she broke off as other students started to fill the hallway. “You know.”

“Yeah.”

“Is he back?” Her brow lifted as she waited for me to answer.

“No.”

“Good.”

I gestured behind her. “I have to get my book for class.”

“Right.” She moved out of the way. “You coming by my house tomorrow? It’s Josh’s birthday and you know we always do the cake and ice cream thing.”

I didn’t want to face her family. “I can’t make it.”

“Alright, well I’ll tell Josh that.”

After turning away, I focused on opening my locker.

“See ya in gym?”

“Yep.”

Day four for my mother was hell. She sat at the kitchen table for what seemed like an hour, staring at the refrigerator. We dumped all of the remaining alcohol couple of days before. She was determined and even had a calendar on the freezer door that counted her days of freedom. I knew that it wasn’t a free feeling being away from the drink. It was more like hell.

By day five, she was a monster. She snapped at everything I did. I was walking too slow down the hall. I didn’t come home early enough. I slurped my water too loudly.

On day six, I was close to snapping. I knew she was trying, but it took everything out of me not to yell at her. I was by her side, practically holding her hand, but nothing I did was ever good enough. She missed her meeting that night, and rolled her eyes when I told her that she needed to go every day. She thought she could do it on her own. I knew better.

It didn't get better between us, but I finally felt comfortable enough to let my guard down. Nick was no longer there, and we were able to get by with what little we had left. I was finally able to do whatever I wanted, laugh, cry, talk as loud as I wanted to without being hit. On the other hand, if I showed any type of emotion, I would pay the price through my mother's stares. I expected our house to be like the day I was five and we were dancing inside of our cramped apartment. Instead, the tension between us was growing.

The seventh day was the worse. When I walked into our place, I heard her laughing in the living room. I missed the way she used to laugh freely at every little thing. This laugh was different. It was more hysterical. The type of laugh drunks made that sounded like a rolling giggle. A deep baritone voice came rolling from the left down the hall. My mind screamed at me that the voice was a lie. He wasn't back. My mother would never take him back, especially after what he's done. I gripped my phone tighter in my hand as I walked towards the room. His voice became clearer. It all became a whirlwind like I was on a carousel looking out at passing faces and hearing the distant sounds of strangers at a carnival. I turned left and the faces became mere shadows as one stood out.

Nick stood as I entered the room. My mother sat on the couch, cradling flowers in her arms. My legs ceased as she took in the scene before her. Confusion filled my eyes as I glanced from him to her.

"Alayna." The look in his eyes seemed sincere.

I hated that name. Only he would call me that and it was usually out of disgust or anger. I used to fear hearing someone call me that. It took years to not tense up whenever my teachers first did roll call.

I did something he forbidden me to do a long time ago. I corrected him. "It's Laney."

He ignored what I said and continued. "I was just talking to Janelle about what happened. I apologize from the bottom of my heart. I shouldn't have hurt you."

I looked at my mother, who sat there with a stupid grin on her face.

"I've done things to you, Alayna."

"It's Laney."

He took a deep breath. "I'm trying. I wish I could take back the things I did to you. I."

I looked back at him in disbelief as he broke off.

He cleared his throat before continuing. "I have some problems in my past. The way my dad treated us. Wasn't right. And I took it out on you. I want you both to know that I've changed. I'm getting help. I want you both back in my life." He turned, looking at my mother. "Janelle said she would take me back if it was okay with you."

I said the words that I wanted him to hear since the first day I met him. "I don't want you here."

"Laney."

I looked over at her. "You're letting me decide, right? I don't want him here."

He took a step towards me, causing me to back up.

My mother stood. "He said he's going to take classes. Anger management. I'm going to do my classes too."

I looked at the bottle of wine sitting on the coffee table and back at her. “Looks like you have to start over.”

She blinked. “Well, yeah, but I’m gonna try harder this time. I wasn’t strong last time, but I am now.”

“Who bought the wine?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

The rage I felt finally poured over. “It matters to me!”

Nick glared at me.

I waited for him to say something. Do something, but he only stood there.

“Laney, he’s sorry. He loves us. He promised me he would never hurt you again.”

“Why give me the decision if you gonna decide in the first place?”

I glanced at Nick as he made his way towards me. He said nothing. That was the scariest part about it. There was no warning of what he would do. What he had planned for me. Only his steps moving closer. It was like that night all over again. I was sure he would punish me for speaking out. The look in his eyes was darker. This time, he would finish what he started. I wasn’t aware that I was running until I heard my mother shout my name behind me. The sound of the front door slamming shut caused me to run faster. My book bag slammed against my back with each step. I pushed people out of the way, half expecting Nick to come barreling after me. Even though children were screaming as they played on the sidewalks, I could hear the sounds of my tennis shoes slamming against the hard concrete. I didn’t stop until I reached apartment C. I lost count of how many times my fist banged on the closed door until it finally opened.

“Laney? What’s wrong?”

I pushed my way into the apartment and slammed the door behind me. I stood still, staring at Megan's mother and brother looking back at me. Her arms folding around me was the breaking point. I sobbed against her chest like I did against my mother's when I was younger.

Chapter 5

My mother had a pearl necklace that she kept in a jewelry box. She never took them out of the box unless she found herself missing her mother. She once told me that the pearls had magic. No matter how cold everything felt around her, the pearls would stay warm. She said, “You could leave them in a freezer overnight and even the ice would melt around them.” I’ve only worn them once. I was eight, the same year we moved into Nick’s apartment. My mother was trying to calm me down about the move. She placed her arms around me and hugged me close.

“Everything’s just fine, Laney. The place might be a little different, but we still have the same things, don’t we?”

She reached for the jewelry box that sat on the dresser. Opening it, she pulled out the white necklace. “See? This right here will calm you down, just like it calmed me down when I moved up north.”

I frowned as she placed them around my neck. “They’re not gonna calm me down.”

“Yes, they will. You just have to let them.” She tucked them underneath my shirt. “Don’t they feel warm?”

They felt cold against my chest.

“They have magic.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her what I learned in school. Magic wasn’t real. They only existed in fairy tales or make believe stories. I said nothing, but she must’ve seen the disbelief in my eyes. She turned me around to face her and bent down until her eyes were on the same level as mine.

“Magic is only real if you believe in it. My mother wore those pearls up to the day she died. She laid in that hospital bed, smiling even in death because that necklace took her pain away. She told me that once I inherited them, they would do the same for me that they’ve done for her.”

I looked down at the necklace and shrugged. “Then why don’t you wear them?”

“Well,” she sighed. “I don’t have to wear them all the time if I’m okay. I only wear them when they’re needed.”

“But you said your momma wore them all the time.”

“That’s because she needed them, especially after getting cancer. She was in a lot of pain then.”

After thinking about it, I took the necklace off and placed them around my mother’s neck. “You need them more than I do.”

I wished I would’ve felt the same feeling my mother felt whenever she wore that necklace. As I lay awake in Megan’s room, listening to her soft snores, I couldn’t help but miss my mom. Mrs. Sawyers threatened to call the police on Nick when she calmed me down. I don’t know if her husband succeeded in talking her out of it. He didn’t see the point since there was no evidence of recent abuse. He had promised that I didn’t have to go back and I could stay here with them. It’s been awhile since I’ve shared someone’s bed. I’ve slept by my mother’s side until I turned eight. As I closed my eyes and listen to Megan’s snores, I allowed myself to remember my mother’s bedroom. For a moment, I could smell the moth balls she kept in our closet. She told me once that they reminded her of her grandmother. She never knew why people place them around the house, but she decided to put some in her closet just so she could smell them whenever she walked into the room. I pretended that Megan’s snores were my mother’s snores. I

was no longer there, lying in her bed alongside her. Nick no longer existed. In my mind, it was just me and my mother.

Footsteps coming down the hall halted my dream. Keeping my eyes shut, I shifted to my side, facing away from the door. Light seeped into the room as the door opened. I could hear Mrs. Sawyer's whisper.

"Are they sleep?"

"Yes." I could hear the irritation in Mr. Sawyer's whispered words. "I don't know why you have to check up on her every night. She's been here for a week now. I'm sure she's not going back."

"Rob, you know how I am. No one should go through what that girl's been through."

"Yeah, well, that's reality. Some people just shouldn't have kids."

"Rob!"

The blankets rustled as Megan shifted in her sleep.

"We're not going to talk about this here," Mrs. Sawyers said, closing the door behind them.

I opened my eyes as darkness reappeared. If my mother didn't have me, would I have been born to somebody else? I thought about that sometimes. I thought about the types of parents I would have if my mother didn't have me. What if she gave me away? Would I be adopted into a household like Megan's?

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Vibrations coursed from my jean pockets as the screen of my phone lit up. Pulling it out, I noticed that I missed another call from my mother. I opened my text messages and reread the

ones she sent me since I left. There was no conversation between us. Only her texting me, hoping that I would eventually reply.

“Is that your mom again?”

I could feel Megan’s breath against my arm as she leaned closer to read the screen.

Flipping the phone shut, I nodded.

“When are you gonna hit her up? You still have to get your clothes from that place.”

I’ve been wearing Megan’s clothes for a couple of weeks now, and people were beginning to ask questions. After all, not too many people had shirts with outrageous messages written on them.

“We could stop by today, since Nick won’t be home from work until late.”

“I’m down, just make sure.”

The phone remained close in my hand as I thought about texting my mother. What should I say? *Thanks for choosing Nick over me, but I need my clothes?* or simply, *Is Nick home?* I knew that the second one sounded better, but part of me wanted her to know I was angry. I didn’t want to have a nice conversation. I wanted to curse and yell at her through words written with cap locks. Frowning, I typed the second message and pressed send. Before I could flip the phone close, my mother texted back.

No, you know he works late Sat. Why? You comin over?

I read her message and closed the phone. Five minutes later, it vibrated in my hand.

Please come over Laney. I miss you.

Letting out a breath of frustration, I put the phone in my pocket.

“What did she say?”

Shrugging, I answer Megan’s question. “He’s not there. He won’t be back until seven.”

“Cool, so you wanna head over there now?”

Before I could answer, my mother sent another text.

I need you. Please. I'm lonely.

“No,” Looking down at my phone, I read the time. “We’ll go over around four.” It was twelve, and the only thing I could think was to let her suffer. I wanted her to know how it was like with me gone. Let Nick take his anger out on her. Let her learn what it was like to have no one there to clean up her mess.

I love you.

I didn’t want to love her back. She texted me those three words every day, and I did what I’ve done before. I didn’t respond.

The dread I felt as I walked to my mother’s apartment weighed heavy. It was as if I swallowed the biggest rock I could find, and it sunk down into the pit of my stomach. Megan talked nonsense and yelled across the street at the variety of neighbors as we walked blocks over. She knew why I was quiet. Knew that I didn’t want to return to the place filled with bad memories. The sad thing was she didn’t have anything to say. I could feel her fumbling around for the right words to make me feel better, but she always came up short. It has been that way since I came over to her house, crying because my mother took Nick back. I actually missed Megan being oblivious to everything. At least then, she was able to keep the mood upbeat because she didn’t have a care in the world. It sucked that the darkness in my world began to seep into hers. That was all I thought about as we walked into my mother’s flat. While we walked upstairs my anger for my mother began to burn. I could feel my skin heat, starting from the tips of my ears and moving down to my toes. I hated her. Hated the decision she made. She was nobody to me. I don’t remember even taking my keys out to open the front door as I thought

about my hatred. My fingers clenched around the keys, causing them to dig into the palm of my hand.

As I stepped over my mother's coat that lay on the floor, I could see the difference of me being gone from that place. Dirty dishes piled in the kitchen sink, pizza boxes sat on top of the stove, crumbs led from the kitchen to the dining room, a bag of chips lay open on the coffee table, fruit punch wasted from its can on the beige carpet. The mess went on and on. Smiling, I felt immense joy. The mess was an indication of me not living there anymore. It felt good to know that they both suffered because I was gone. Let her regret taking Nick back.

I kicked various items to the side, hoping to make the place look even messier as I walked to my bedroom. Once there, I pulled out my black suitcase from underneath my bed.

Megan stood in the doorway, unsure of what to do.

I threw the suitcase on top of my bed. "You mind throwing my clothes from the closet in here?"

She shrugged. "Okay."

"I'll be back." I walked out of my room and down the hall. I wanted my mother to see that I returned, only to leave again. She should watch me walk out of her life for good this time.

Twisting the knob, I pushed her door open, causing a glass bottle to roll across the floor and stop near a pile of clothes. Looking at the blankets and sheets that were strewn across the bed, I noticed that my mother wasn't there.

"Dammit," I whisper. That was just like her. The one time I wanted her there, she was gone. My face brightened at the thought of her being in the bathroom.

I stomped further into the room, intent on opening the closed bathroom door. I was so focused on that brown door that I almost missed the arm peeking from the other side of the bed.

Figures, I thought, she's passed out drunk again. Even though I was mad at her, I knew that I wasn't going to leave her lying on the floor. I walked over to her and could see her lying on her stomach, her head turned away from me.

"Mom," I yell, not bothering to keep the anger from my voice. "Get up." My hand clasped her arm, intent on turning her over. My heart jumped at the feel of her cold skin against my warm hand. When I turned her over, my eyes zoomed in on her staring up at me. This look was different than her dazed look she got from alcohol. Even then there was some clarity in those eyes. This time, there was nothing. Her light hazel eyes seemed dark. Vacant. I wasn't aware of my screams until Megan rushed in. Her voice sounded muffled as she screamed for me to call 911. I don't remember what happened next. All I know is that I was on the floor next to my mother, whispering over and over how sorry I was. If I was there, she wouldn't have died. I killed my mother. As I thought this, I looked down next to her and could see the white pearls on the floor. I sat there, staring at those pearls as the paramedics scrambled around me. As I cried, everything became blurry until even the pearls began to be muddy.