

LIFE SUPPORT

SARAH MCKNIGHT

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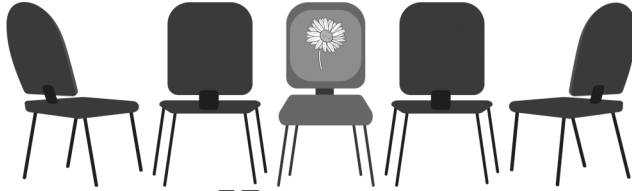
WARNINGS

This book contains mentions of self-harm, abuse, eating disorders, body shaming, bullying, anxiety, and depression. If you are not in the right headspace to safely read about these topics, kindly put the book down. Your wellbeing is more important to me than a sale.

Stay safe and well.

LIFE SUPPORT

ONE



KENDRA

I see you. Two rows to the left and one ahead of me, I see you, resting your cheek against your palm, the sleeve of your jacket drooping tiredly down from your wrist. I see you, Alec – or is it Alex? – with the red lines that start at your wrist and disappear beneath the sleeve. I spot them easily. I have had them too, and I am sure those angry red lines do not stop until they reach the milky white curve of your elbow. Mine, unlike yours, were brought on by a blade, but I can see that yours were not. Your lines are too thick, too broken, too red. Your lines are caused by a fingernail, dragged slowly up from the wrist to the inner arm. The burning sensation from a fingernail lasts for days, unlike the sweet, sharp pain of a blade. There is no blood when scratched with a nail, but the mark left behind is a constant reminder of what has been done. I know, Alec-or-Alex.

I look down at the thin metal bracelets over my wrists, my own form of cover-up still needed as these marks will never fade. Perhaps I should teach you to be more cautious. Those lines will last for days. People will notice. People will ask questions. Do you want that, Alec-or-Alex?

You do not look over at me, no matter how hard I stare at the lines on your wrist. Your hood is pulled over your head, mostly covering your mess of black hair, scraggly and unkempt. You appear to focus on the math worksheet in front of you, but I can see that you are absently tracing the numbers printed on the page, not working. My sheet has been finished for the past ten minutes, ready to be turned in at the end

of class. Yours is blank. I wonder if you understand the problems in front of you. Or perhaps you just do not see the point in doing them?

You notice that your sleeve has fallen, exposing the line, and you quickly pull it back up, gripping the worn cuff in your palm to hold it in place. I wonder if you have told anyone your cat was the one who made that mark. Has anyone bothered to ask?

The bell rings and I stand with my bag, already packed up. You must notice me staring, for you give me a quizzical look as I walk down the aisle and pass my completed worksheet to the teacher. I wonder, Alec-or-Alex, will you approach me?



Kendra's been staring at me. I don't know why, but her cat-like eyes have been locked on me for the past five minutes. Did she see something? Could she have seen...?

The bell rings and she stands, already packed up to leave while the rest of the class scrambles to stuff books and folders in their bags. She walks down the aisle and suddenly I'm the one left staring at the back of her head. Her hair is a pure, rich black against the dark skin of her partially exposed back. Her top is definitely against school rules, but no teacher has bothered to call her out on it.

I get up, my blank worksheet in hand, and drop it into the recycle bin next to the teacher's outstretched hand. I didn't bother writing down the answers; why bother turning it in?

Kendra is already out the door, but she seems to walk slowly against the rushing sea of people in the hallway, pushing against each other to

lunch or their lockers or their next class. Kendra is in no hurry. I catch up to her easily.

I step to her side and keep stride with her. “What were you staring at?”

A smile touches her lips as she turns to look at me, like she was expecting me. “Did your cat get you?”

I feel my face fall. She saw. She saw the evidence of the uncontrollable panic attack from last night, when I sat curled up in the bathtub, the showerhead spraying me with lukewarm water while my nails dug an angry line into my skin. There was no blood, just the red raising of flesh.

“Well?” She’s waiting for my answer.

“Yeah,” I say, avoiding her gaze. “Guess I played a little too rough.”

“Cat scratches are so painful.” She catches my eyes despite my avoidance and raises a hand to press against her cheek. Her bracelets fall down her arm, revealing puckered scars that were once slashes against her wrist. “You really have to keep those claws trimmed, or they’ll just keep swiping you.” She smiles and a secret passes between us. “I’ll see you later, Alec,” she says and takes a sharp left, pushing open the door to the girl’s bathroom. She waves as she disappears inside.

“It’s Alex,” I say, but the door is already closed.



I can’t get my goddamn shorts to button. What the actual fuck. These were supposed to be the last pair that fit me, and they’re just like the rest of them. Did I gain another five pounds between breakfast and lunch? It sure feels like it.

The bathroom door opens and I'm not alone anymore. The back stall I've locked myself into isn't exactly private, so I flush the toilet and suck in my gut, forcing the zipper up and pulling the button closed. I open the stall and step out, and as I wash my hands, I notice a stick of a girl in the mirror dropping pieces of food from her lunch bag into the trash.

"What are you doing?" I ask before I can stop myself.

She seems surprised by the question, because she freezes, hovering a handful of carrots over the bin. She looks familiar now that I can see her face, but I can't quite place her. She smiles wryly at me as she opens her hand and drops the tiny carrots onto the mountain of used paper towels.

"I packed too much," she says simply.

I suddenly realize who she is, and my finger shoots up to point before I even realize what I'm doing. "Hey, aren't you the girl who passed out in gym last year? Kendra, right?"

That smile never leaves her face. "Dehydration is a nasty thing."

"I heard you hadn't eaten for four days," I blurt. I always do that. Damn it. It's like my mouth reacts before my brain does. But still, I'm pretty sure that's what I overheard from the teachers last year. Kendra didn't come back to school for the rest of the semester after the paramedics took her away in an ambulance. I heard whispers about how she was staying at some hospital getting treatment for an eating disorder.

"Nothing gets by you." Her tone is sharp now. "If you really must know, my mother insists on packing lunches for me. She always puts in way too much."

"So why don't you just not eat it?" I ask.

"She gets the cafeteria ladies to spy on me while I eat. If I don't eat everything, they call her. She thinks I don't know."

"That sucks." I don't know what else to say. I wish I could have that problem, though. To be rail-thin and having people worry about me eating too little instead of too much. A tinge of jealousy hits somewhere deep inside my chest. Or maybe it's a heart attack. Mom always says I'm going to have one of those at an early age if I keep gaining weight the way I do.

"I get by," Kendra says as she rolls up her now half-empty lunch bag.

“Just don’t tell anyone what you saw here.” It sounds more like a plea than a demand.

“Who am I going to tell?” I ask. “It’s not like I have any friends to go running to.”

“Is this your lunch hour?” I must look shocked because she laughs.

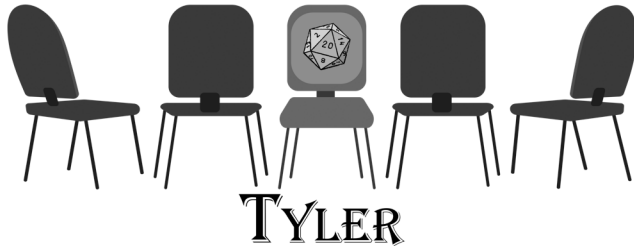
“Yes?” It comes out sounding like a question. What is she getting at?

“Come eat with me,” she says and hooks her arm through mine before I have time to pull away. “I don’t have friends anymore either.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. She’s already dragging me out into the emptying hallway.

“By the way,” she says as we go down the stairs to the cafeteria, “what’s your name?”

I blink in surprise, then throw my head back with a loud laugh. Did she really just ask me to eat with her without even knowing my name? “I’m Rose. But you can call me Rosie.”



For once, something interesting is happening. From the tiny table crammed into the farthest corner away from the lunch lines, I see Kendra, practically a skeleton despite last year’s incident, sashay into the room with Rose hooked on her arm.

I lean forward, pushing the forgotten Magic cards out of the way. Zack had rested his head on his folded arms a few minutes ago and is now snoring loudly. We can finish our game later. This is much more intriguing.

Kendra has apparently found a friend in Rose, whom I have never seen sit with anyone at lunch. Zack and I had offered her a seat at our

table earlier this semester, but she refused with a deep blush on her cheeks. Zack fumed about her being a homophobic bitch, but I had a feeling that wasn't really the case.

Since then, I began to watch Rose closely during our lunch hour. She always sits alone at the table reserved for students with food allergies, though she doesn't seem to have any. She always sits with enough food to feed two people and eats every bite. When she's finished, she sits and stares at her empty tray until the bell rings. I've stitched together a few things about Rose: she is fat, she seems to regret every bite of food she takes, and she never talks to people. Zack doesn't care much for my observations, but I think they're important. I think if Rose could just reach out and make a friend, she would appear much happier.

I find myself smiling when Rose returns from the lunch line with a single cheeseburger and fries and sits with Kendra at the allergy table. I would never have guessed that somehow, she and Kendra would become friends. Rose is smiling. Something big must have happened.

I nudge Zack, who grunts at my disturbance and lifts his head, a line of drool slowly making its way down his chin. "What?"

"Look," I say and point across the cafeteria.

Zack turns his head to see Kendra laughing at something Rose has said. "So?" he says and buries his face back in his arms. "I really don't get why you care so much."

"She doesn't have any friends," I try to explain. "I feel bad for her."

"You don't have any friends," Zack shoots back tiredly.

"I have you," I reply.

"That's not much to brag about."

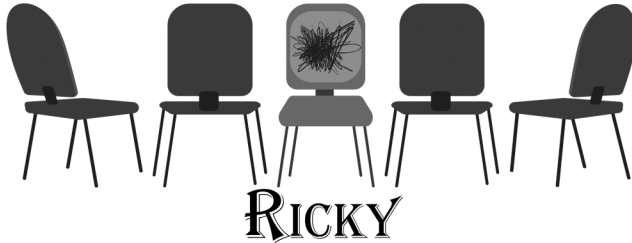
The bell rings and I wrap an old rubber band around the deck of cards. "You're still coming over tonight, right?"

"I'll be there," Zack smirks as he slings his backpack over his shoulder. He waves, then turns toward the gym.

My next class is on the third floor. Calculus. As I climb the stairs, crowded with other students, someone bumps into me – or am I pushed? – with enough force to slip and fall back to the landing. I land hard on my ass, cringing at the impact as pain shoots up my back.

"Queer!" my possible attacker yells down the stairwell. There are a few scattered laughs as I try to pinpoint the asshole, but he's blurred

together with everyone else. I push myself off the floor, grimacing, and try taking the stairs again.



People are tossing their lunch trays away and leaving the cafeteria, and here I am stuck in the gym with Coach Brennan, watching everyone through the ugly barred window on the door. He's still talking to me, using that fake persuasive voice he's been using on me since sophomore year. It's been two years. When is he going to get the fucking hint?

"Come on, Rick," Coach says, and I cringe at the way the jerk says my name. "Rejoin the team. The guys need you. You might still have a chance to get a scholarship. Any school you want!"

"I'm not going to college," I say.

"And just what do you plan to do then? Take over your dad's auto shop? You know that place isn't going to be around forever with all the competition popping up." He tries to put a hand on my shoulder, but I shrug him away. "I'm trying to give you a future here, Rick!"

"I don't have a future. I don't *want* a future. I just want to get the hell out of this place." My face is getting hot.

Keep it together. The warning bounces around in my head.

Coach shakes his head slowly. "I just don't get why you ever quit in the first place. Look at you. You're built to be a cornerback."

"I quit because I hated it." I cut him off. I've heard this argument too many times before. "Look, man, you're wasting my time and I'm missing lunch."

He huffs and shakes his head. "Just think about it, okay?"

"I will." I won't.

I wait for him to retreat to the locker room - probably to scout out other possible recruits for his lame football team - and walk out into the cafeteria. It's almost empty now, and the lunch ladies have shut down the lines. So much for that. I sling my bag over my shoulder and start walking towards the vending machines when I see the familiar dirty blonde hair of my next-door neighbor. I rush to catch up with her.

"Hey, Rosie!" I call, and she turns around with a light smile. She's walking with the tiny girl who passed out in my gym class last year, and I'm a little surprised. I never thought they knew each other.

"I'll talk to you later, Rosie," the girl coos with a sweet smile, and she gives her a dramatic wave that jingles the dozen metal bracelets on her wrist before walking off.

Rosie waves back then turns her attention to me. "Hey, Ricky. Do you still need a ride home after school?" she asks, and she follows me as I walk toward the vending machines.

"I always do," I say. She knows that. She also always double-checks. I don't know why.

"Then I'll meet you out front," she says while I put a crumpled dollar bill in the machine and press the button for a plain bag of chips. It gives me two.

"Cool." I bend down to take them and hand one to her. "Here."

"Thanks," she says as she takes them. Her cheeks are kind of pink. "See you later, then."

"Yeah, see you." I turn away and head to class, pulling the bag open as I go.



I wait outside the main doors of the school. Sitting on one of the benches, I watch the crowd of students flooding outside as the grating of the bench digs into the back of my thighs. I find myself wishing for cold weather so I don't have to wear these stupid shorts anymore. There will be deep diamond shaped engravings in my thighs when Ricky finally shows up. Embarrassing.

I stand quickly, brushing at the marks with my flattened palms as if it'll do any good. He usually takes his sweet old time leaving the building for whatever reason. But of course, as soon as I stand up, Ricky saunters out, lightly pushing some people out of the way as he goes. He's got his backpack slung over one shoulder and an unlit cigarette sticking out of his mouth despite the school's strict no-tobacco policy.

"Hey," he walks up to me and appears to be chewing on the edge of the cigarette. He looks frustrated about something.

"Ready to go?" I've learned not to pry. He never answers me anyway.

He grunts, walking ahead of me to my parking spot. I follow after him, panting slightly in the heat. I can feel myself starting to sweat. Fucking fantastic. Now I'm going to stink up my car, and with Ricky right there.

I unlock the doors and plop into my seat. The tires bounce as Ricky gets into the passenger seat beside me. I hope he doesn't realize that my weight makes my little car bounce every time I get in and out of it. Then again, I worry about that every time. I don't think he's noticed. Or if he has, he's never made fun of me for it.

I roll down the windows as fast as I can and start the car. Hopefully

the combination of breezes and air-conditioning will take care of the sweat before it can stain my t-shirt.

Ricky lights the cigarette as I roll out of the parking lot, and I wrinkle my nose. He knows I hate that stench, but I've stopped saying anything about it. He's doesn't listen. And besides, maybe it'll overpower the smell of my sweat.

"I hope you got to eat something a little more substantial than chips," I say.

"Yeah," he replies.

"At least enough to make it through the day," I add.

He looks at me, and I keep my eyes focused on the road ahead. "Hope you liked those extra chips."

"I gave them to Kendra," I lie. I had finished the bag off as I walked to my class.

He pauses for a moment. "Since when are you friends with her?"

"We just ran into each other in the bathroom," I explain. "She asked me to eat lunch with her. I wouldn't say we're friends."

"It's weird," Ricky tosses the half-finished cigarette out of the window. "She's a bitch. She hasn't talked to anyone since she went down in gym last year."

"And then she just dropped off the map for a while," I say.

"She went to the psych ward. Never ate. Everyone knows that."

"Yeah."

"Did she even eat anything when you were with her?"

"A little. Her mom makes the cafeteria ladies watch her eat."

Ricky scoffs. "Damn, that girl's sick."

"Just as sick as the rest of us, really."

Ricky doesn't say anything, doesn't even move, as I turn onto our street. The west side of town where we live is known to everyone as the place where the "rich" kids live, although the houses here don't compare to the literal mansions a few miles up north. It's not like the people who live here don't make good money, though. Dad's a personal injury attorney with his own firm. Mom eats into his paychecks with fancy yoga classes and trips to the day spa. My dad hasn't touched a lawnmower in the entire time I've known him, and he hasn't had to because our gardener keeps mine and Ricky's yards spotless. Ricky's dad, by

some miracle, owns his own auto shop. With how much that man drinks, it's amazing that he even manages to get any work done. His mom is an orthodontist, so I guess that's where most of their money comes from.

I pull into my driveway and shut the engine off.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I say as we get out of the car.

"Maybe."

"What?" I shut the door and lock it.

"I said maybe." He slings his backpack over his shoulder again. "Bye."

"Bye, Ricky," I try to stop myself from sighing. I shove my keys in my pocket and walk into the house.

Mom is in the kitchen. I can hear her talking on her cell phone and clicking the keys on her laptop, probably making another Facebook post about how proud she is of my older sister. I try to sneak past her to the stairs, but she holds up a hand to keep me in place. She smiles sweetly to the air as she says goodbye to whoever she's talking to and hangs up, turning her attention to me.

"Hello, Rosie," she smiles. "How was your day?"

"All right," I say, glancing at the stairs. "I have homework, so—"

"Look at your sister!" she interrupts as she turns her computer screen towards me. Called it. There's a picture of Molly squishing faces with a group of new friends, holding up their coffee cups as they show off big, toothy smiles. "Look how happy she is. Oh, I'm so glad she's adjusting well to college. I was a little worried about her, you know."

"I know," I say, inching back towards the stairs.

"And she hasn't let that Freshmen Fifteen get to her!" she gushes. "Oh honey, if you could just take some advice from your sister—"

"Mom, please," I cut her off. She drinks more sugared overly caffeinated coffee-flavored drinks and stuffs more candies into her mouth than I ever have. But for some reason, Mom keeps thinking if I follow in her footsteps, I'll drop my weight in a day. She's always been the skinny one. I haven't been so lucky.

She sighs and closes the laptop. "I just want you to feel confident in your body. If you'd just come to yoga with me a couple times a week..."

"I don't want to do yoga, Mom. Please, I have homework to do."

She gives me a hard look for a few seconds. “Fine. But first look in the bag.” She motions to a pharmacy bag on the counter. “I picked something up for you.”

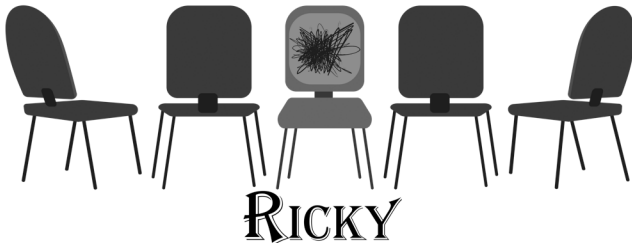
“I don’t need anything,” I say, but I reach into the bag anyway and pull out a colorful box with a skinny bitch in a red dress on it. Diet pills. I glare at her. “No. I’m not taking these.”

“Just give them a try.” She’s almost begging me. I can hear it. “They could really help you. This kind has a lot of good research behind it, even your father says so. I think this’ll be the boost you need to start dropping weight.”

“I am not taking diet pills, Mother,” I say more forcefully. “I don’t need them.”

“You’re not losing weight on your own,” she says bitterly. “I just want you to be happy.”

“No,” I say, and I can feel my face burning red with the anger building up, “you just want me to be skinny. Like perfectly skinny Molly.” I turn on my heel and make my way towards the stairs, but first I stop at the trash can. I turn my head and lock eyes with my mother before throwing the box into the can hard enough that I can hear it break open and the pills rattle forcefully in their bottle. She drops her jaw in shock and begins to say something, but I storm up the stairs, putting all of my weight into each step, and slam the door to my room with so much anger the windows rattle.



The house is quiet when I walk in. I think I may have some time alone but then I hear a rattle in the kitchen.

“Brenda?”

“It’s me, Dad.” I walk into the kitchen. Dad’s standing by the open refrigerator, making sandwiches and stuffing them into a cooler. His beer belly and six-foot even height make bending over hard for him, and he grunts as he drops the wrapped sandwiches on top of the six-packs. He has an open beer can next to his arm, and his hunting rifle is leaning against the counter. “Where’s Mom?”

“Still at work, I guess.” He throws a couple of apples into the cooler.

“Where are you going?” I stay standing in the doorway.

“Camping,” he grunts and closes the refrigerator.

Camping. With the rifle. Sure. He and his stupid friends are probably going to try illegally hunting a few deer and spend the rest of the time getting smashed. I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

He turns to look at me. His eyes are narrowed. “What are you making that face for?”

“Nothing,” I say.

“I’ll be gone for a few days.” He closes the cooler and turns to look at me. He looks taller like that - when he’s looking down at me. Menacing. Overbearing. I feel his eyes burning into the side of my face. He picks up the rifle and swings it toward me. The barrel touches underneath my chin and he uses it to turn my head to face him. “You hear me, boy?”

This is so fucked up, but I can’t say I’m surprised. My body tries to start trembling. I lock my muscles in place and hold my chin up. These kinds of fear tactics aren’t out of the ordinary for him. I don’t know why it still gets to me. He holds the gun, unmoving, breaking every gun safety rule I know. Sometimes I wonder if he even has a license to own that thing. “Yes,” I say.

“Tell your mother I’ll be back Sunday.”

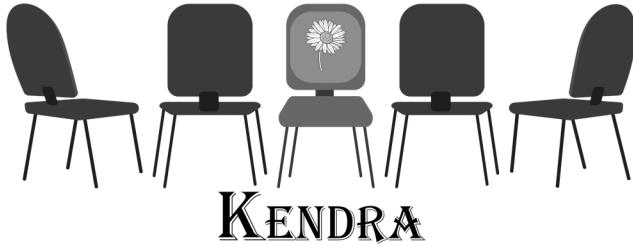
“Okay,” I agree. He lowers the rifle and I relax.

A pickup truck pulls up outside. Dad’s friends are crammed inside. The back of the truck is loaded with cases of beer. I wish for an accident. A fatal one.

“Behave yourself.” He picks up the cooler and walks out the door. I hear him greet his friends loudly and I listen to the door slam shut,

followed by the loud rattling of the old muffler as the truck speeds off. He's probably telling his buddy he can fix that up for free.

The house is quiet now. Finally. Peace.



Ah, fresh flowers. Mom redecorated the house again. It smells like daisies this time. I call out a greeting and my voice echoes down the hallway like music.

"In here," Mom says from the living room. I follow her voice and she gives me a warm smile. She has placed a vase of colorful daisies on a new coffee table. "What do you think?" She's beaming.

"They're beautiful," I say. I touch the petals gently and they feel like velvet beneath my fingertips. "What made you decide to go for daisies this time around?"

"There was a sale," Mom explains. "They were so bright and colorful; I just couldn't resist."

"You couldn't resist the coffee table, either?" I smile.

"Maybe your father won't notice," she says sheepishly.

"Your secret's safe with me," I sing and drop my backpack on the couch.

"Good." She touches my shoulder. "Did you eat all of your lunch today?" She is looking me right in the eye.

"Yes," I say, unwavering. It flows from my mouth as naturally as water through a stream.

She holds my gaze for a moment, perhaps seeing the lie buried deep within my eyes, but then she turns back to her daisies. "Do your home-

work, okay? Then you can help me make dinner. Dad said he would like salmon tonight.”

“I’ll make a citrus glaze,” I volunteer as I return to the living room for my backpack. I love helping my mother cook, not only because it’s a bonding activity, but because I can regulate what I’m making for myself. She still hasn’t caught on to that.

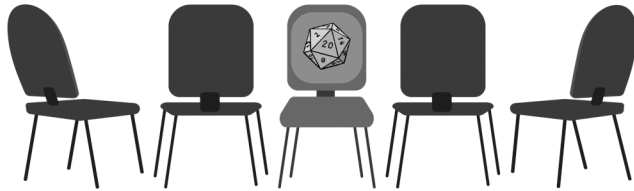
“Sounds delicious,” Mom smiles. “I’ll make a bit of pasta for a side too.”

“I’ll pass on that,” I say automatically.

“Kendra.” Her eyes hold a hint of warning.

I turn my attention to the books I’m removing from my bag. “I’ll have a taste.”

“That’s all I ask.” She disappears into another room to finish decorating.



TYLER

Zack comes home with me after school as usual. We wave to my stepdad, who came home early from work, and head up to my room. I turn on the TV and start up our favorite game. It’s our usual routine. Almost every day after school, we come to my house and play games, work on homework, and talk until dinnertime. I never go to Zack’s house. His parents still think we’re only friends. Best friends.

He lays on his stomach on my bed, holding his controller steady, his eyes focused on the screen. He doesn’t say a word. This has been more and more. We used to joke around, pretend to be competitive, and throw fake insults at each other when we played. Now he’s silent. He’s

been like this since the middle of the summer. I'm not sure why. Every time I try to ask him about it, he just changes the subject.

"Hey," I say as we play.

He grunts in reply.

"Anything wrong?"

"No," he says simply.

"You always say that." I set my controller down to really look at him. "You've been like this for a long time, though. Come on, what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on." Zack sets his controller down and gives me a hard look. "And stop asking me if something's wrong. If something's wrong, I'll tell you, okay?"

"But you act like something's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong!" He stands quickly, knocking the pillow off my bed. "Look, I got to go."

I feel myself starting to frown. "We were supposed to work on that history paper today."

"You can handle it on your own, can't you?"

I sigh. "I guess so."

He stands in front of me, leans down, and touches his lips to mine. Barely.

"Bye," I say.

"Bye," he says back. He picks up his backpack and walks out.



I get off the bus a block away from home and walk the rest of the way there. The shabby apartment complex my mom and I moved into

four years ago has missing siding and shingles that fall off the roof. In other words, it's a dump. Mom keeps promising we'll move to a better place once she saves up enough money, but every time she saves up enough, there's always an *inconvenience*. That means I needed braces, I broke my leg, and I accidentally pulled the door off the oven. It's me. I'm the inconvenience.

I open the door and see Mom sitting on the couch. She has a sewing needle in her hand and is repairing another tear our cat made in our already torn-up couch. Another inconvenience.

"How was your day?" Mom asks tiredly.

"It was okay," I say and shrug my backpack off.

"Any homework?"

"No," I lie.

"Good. Any plans for the weekend?"

"No." That one was the truth.

"Well, Sherry was supposed to work on Saturday and Sunday, but she caught that nasty stomach thing going around. I'm already scheduled, so it looks like I'll be doing doubles this weekend."

"I can work them, Mom, don't worry," I assure her. It'll mean that I'll be the one working doubles, but it won't be the first time. Mom needs the break. I can manage. "I don't mind helping you out."

"That would be great." She tries to smile but she only looks more tired. "I'm so happy to have a son who's willing help his mom out."

"I know," I say. "Are you done working for the day? I'm scheduled six to close."

"No, I'm going back." She frowns. "I told Dennis to stop scheduling you so late."

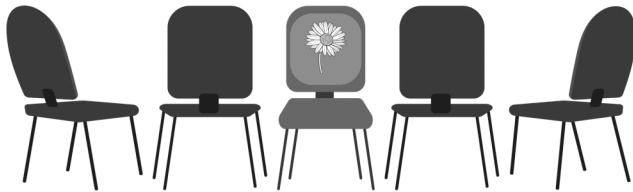
"I don't mind," I say with a shrug. "It's not like it even gets busy that late anyway. I told him I didn't mind."

She stands and puts a hand on my cheek. "You're a very big help." She looks down and tugs at my sweatshirt. "Don't you want to take that off? It's boiling outside."

"I'm fine," I lie. "I just want to go chill out a little before work, okay?"

She studies my face carefully. "Okay," she agrees. "Try to take a little nap."

“I will.” But I probably won’t. I’ll just end up lying on my bed and staring at all the tiny cracks on the ceiling. Again. I watch Mom go into the kitchen to make pre-work snacks for me and retreat quietly to my room.



KENDRA

Over a week has passed since I asked Rosie to have lunch with me, and she has eaten with me every day since. I share the lunches my mother packs for me with her. I give her half before we reach the cafeteria, and this way the lunch ladies are none the wiser to my eating habits.

We talk, Rosie and I, about classes, stress, and how horrible it is to spend so much time at school. I feel as though I’m getting to know Rosie now, but I still don’t know anything real about her. Where does she live? Does she have siblings? What are her parents like? I can’t really complain, I suppose. I have not revealed much about myself either, but we are becoming friends, and I am satisfied with that.

I am walking to Biology with Rosie by my side. Her next class is also on the second floor, and we walk together when we can.

But today, something is off as we walk along the stretching locker-lined hallway to the back stairs. After three years here, I have learned that the back stairs are rarely used and are much better than the main stairs. Next to the back stairs is the door to the school’s basement. It is supposed to be locked, but I see Alec (or was it Alex?) throw the door open with a surprising force and stumble down the steps. He disappears into the blackness before the door slams shut with a blast that echoes down the emptying hallway.

“What was that?” Rosie raises her head. She had been staring down

at her feet as we walk. She did not see Alec-or-Alex disappear into the dark.

“Someone from my math class,” I say. “He went down to the basement.” I take Rosie’s arm and lead her to the door.

“Students aren’t allowed down there.”

“I know.”

“So, what’s he doing?”

“I don’t know.” I put my hand on the doorknob. “Let’s find out.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Rosie takes a step back.

“I don’t want him to miss class,” I explain. “If you want to go on ahead, I’ll just see you later.”

She hesitates. “If we get caught, this is all your fault.”

“That works for me,” I smile as I open the door and call down, “Alec?”



I can’t stop shaking. Oh God, I can’t stop shaking. Stop thinking, stop, stop, stop, turn it off! No tests, no homework, no housework, no work, no Mom. Mom. No. I have to do it for Mom. She needs me. No one else is there for her. Oh God, I have to get out of here. I have to go, I can’t make it, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t do it! Lights are too bright. Voices are too loud. They bounce in my head and echo, echo, echo. I can’t breathe. Fuck, I can’t breathe! Help me, someone help me, I can’t help myself. I can’t do it. I need to leave, I need to get out, I need to go somewhere far away. Oh God, helpmehelpmehelpme.

“Alec?”

The First Meeting

Alex looks up, his chest heaving as he sucks in a deep breath as if he's been broken from a spell. Kendra is coming down the stairs. He hears her light footsteps on each creaking step. Someone else is coming down with her.

He croaks out a quiet inquiry, trying to ask who's there, but only a small sound escapes his lips. Squinting, he can make out the dark silhouette of Kendra. Behind her is a heavy-set figure he recognizes as Rosie.

He is seated on the floor near a pile of broken and forgotten desks in the corner of the school's small storage space. He always comes here when his panicked thoughts begin to sink in. He finds the damp, cool darkness comforting in a way, and he thinks of this place as his sanctuary.

The girls are almost to the bottom of the stairs, and he tries to call out to them again, but stops as he notices a thin trickle of blood sliding down his forearm. He's done it again, and he didn't even notice. Quickly, he pulls his sweatshirt from his backpack and tugs it over his head.

Kendra notices the movement from the corner of her eye and grabs Rosie's arm. "Come on, he's over there."

"Don't pull me," Rosie stumbles on the last step. "We're going to kill ourselves on these fucking stairs."

"That's one way to go," Kendra says, her voice sounding like a song as she pulls her phone out of the pocket of her jeans, which hang loosely around her waist. She activates the flashlight and smiles. "There you are."

The light hits Alex directly in the face and he jerks his arm up to shield his eyes. "Damn it, that's bright!"

"Sorry." Kendra lowers the light to the floor. "What are you doing down here? Class is about to start."

"Then go without me," Alex turns his head away, his arms crossing over his chest.

"Not without you, Alec."

“My name is Alex.”

“You didn’t even know his name?” Rosie whispers fiercely in Kendra’s ear.

“I’m sorry.” Kendra shrugs at Rosie’s comment. “But you can’t just skip out on class.” The one-minute warning bell rings faintly overhead.

“Well, I am.” Alex’s tone is not one of stubbornness. He is simply stating a fact.

“Come on, Kendra, he clearly wants to be alone.” Rosie takes the thin girl’s arm and motions towards the stairs. “Let’s just go.”

“We’re not leaving without Alex. At least I’m not,” Kendra declares. She gives Rosie a challenging look.

The final bell rings, barely audible in the darkness. Rosie huffs and crosses her arms, but she makes no effort to move.

“Look, you guys, just go,” Alex says. He is focusing on the wall. He finds it difficult to control his breathing. “I’m staying down here for a while.”

“How did you even get down here?” Kendra presses. “The door should be locked.”

“It’s never locked.”

“How did you figure that out?” Rosie is becoming curious now.

“I just tried to open it one day, and it opened,” Alex replies.

Kendra takes a step forward and the light from her phone falls on his hand. His fingertips are smeared faintly with blood. She catches his eye and gives him a knowing look. “Can we sit with you?”

He lets out a long sigh, but he is not angered by the request. “Fine.”

“Guys, if we leave now, we’ll only be a few minutes late. The teachers probably won’t—”

“Come on, Rosie, sit,” Kendra urges as she examines the mound of broken desks. She removes a chair with the writing surface broken in half and sits. She gives Alex and Rosie both a look, encouraging them to do the same.

Alex obeys silently, pulling out a desk covered with ancient scribbles and etched carvings.

“No way,” Rosie protests. “Even the intact desks make noise when I sit down.”

“Try,” Kendra says with a shrug.

Rosie stares at her for a moment before huffing and removing a chair with the attached writing desk missing. She places it within the small circle and sits down slowly, making a show of it, but the seat holds, and she begins to relax. She looks at Kendra expectantly. “Now what?”

“Why ask me?”

“You’re the one who made us sit,” Alex points out.

“So?”

Alex and Rosie stare at her, still waiting for her to say something. Finally, Kendra leans back in her chair and smiles. “I have to go to therapy every week. My parents try not to be obvious, but they’re still really worried about my eating habits. The hospital was supposed to fix me, but...” She trails off with a shrug.

Alex and Rosie stare in shock at the sudden confession, unsure of what to say. Kendra eyes them, gauging their reactions, still smiling as she laughs lightly. “You wanted me to say something.”

“You could have said something about the weather,” Rosie says. “That’s what normal people do.”

“And what on earth made you think I was normal?”

“I never thought that,” Alex says, a slight smile touching his lips. His nerves have calmed. His body has stopped its violent shaking and he is beginning to feel lighter.

Rosie pauses for a moment then cracks a smile. “I can top that. My mom bought me diet pills.”

“Can I have them?” Kendra jokes. “I could certainly use them.”

“I threw them away.” Rosie begins to feel the anger from that day bubbling back up into her chest, but the encouraging look Kendra gives her calms her. “I tossed them out so hard I broke the bottle.”

“You’ve got some muscle on you,” Alex comments wryly.

“Yeah, somewhere.”

They stare at each other for a moment then burst into uproarious laughter. It echoes loudly and bounces off the walls, resonating up the old, creaky stairs. They laugh until tears come to Rosie’s eyes and Kendra is forced to stop herself because it has caused her stomach to cramp up. Alex leans over his desk, his face buried in his arms as he sucks in deep breaths to quell the laughter.

“Okay, okay,” Alex says as he pushes himself back into a sitting posi-

tion, "I'm down here because my mom asked me to work double shifts for her all weekend and I have a history paper due on Monday."

"Did you start the paper yet?" Rosie asks.

"I didn't even read the topic yet."

"Sounds like you have a real problem," Kendra says with a residual giggle.

"That's what it feels like," Alex says, suddenly turning serious.

"It's only Wednesday," Kendra assures him. "You have time."

Alex shakes his head. "I work tomorrow too, right after school until close. All I have is tonight. And it's not like that's the only assignment I have."

"Well, it's not like you're in class now," Rosie points out. "You've got a good forty-five minutes before the period ends. More if you skip out on the rest of the day."

"Yeah, that's true." Alex looks down at his bag. "I might as well work while I'm down here, huh?"

"There you go," Kendra gives him a reassuring smile. "You can make it work."

"You'll get detention for it, though," Rosie adds.

"Like I care about that." Alex pulls a folder from his bag and smirks at them sheepishly. "You guys mind?"

"Not at all," Kendra stands and motions for Rosie to do the same. "Let's go get our own detentions."

"Oh boy, my first one," Rosie says, her voice dripping with sarcasm. She stands and makes her way towards the stairs with Kendra, but she is stopped suddenly by a bony hand on her arm.

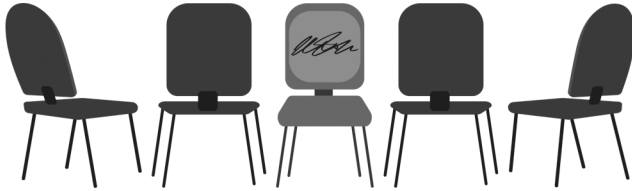
Kendra looks back at Alex. "We should do this again sometime." She smiles, enjoying her joke.

"Yeah, for sure." Alex rolls his eyes. "Enjoy your punishment."

"Catch you later," Kendra says.

"Yeah, see you." Rosie hesitates for a brief moment, looking at Alex with an unreadable expression, before turning and following Kendra up the stairs.

Two



ALEX

The diner is nearly empty. The analog clock above the door reads 11:26. Only half an hour to go. My notebook sits on the countertop beside me as I survey the few remaining tables. My history paper is nearly done, it just needs a conclusion. A good one. I spent the better part of two hours in the school basement working on it and, damn it, I'm going to get a good grade. I decided in that basement to start thinking this way for all of my classes. I even finished my math homework before I came into work tonight. I was five minutes late, but at least I got it done.

An old man in a business suit motions me over. He asks for one more cup of coffee and the check. I bring it to him quickly. People in business suits always tip the best, and Mom really needs me to bring good money home tonight. She said she may have to choose between the water and electricity bills again. She was supposed to finish the shift with me, but her feet were hurting her so badly I told her to go home. It doesn't matter much which one of us is here, anyway. Our tip money goes to the same place. Dennis is never around, and he would just see it as one less person on the payroll. It's just me and the cook, Ralph, now.

The old man gets up and leaves. I clean off his table quickly and cash out his bill. He left a ten for the food and a five for me.

The lady at table six, wearing a sweatsuit that's never seen a gym, waves me over.

"I'm all finished," she says, placing her napkin neatly on top of her plate.

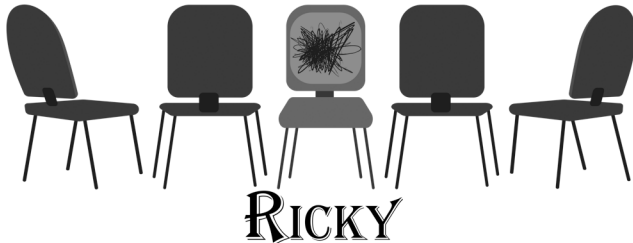
“Okay, I’ll get your check.” I reach out to pick up her plate, but she holds up a hand to stop me.

“How old are you, sweetie?”

“Nineteen,” I lie. High school students aren’t supposed to work as late as I am. They’re also not supposed to work as many hours as I do. At a shithole like this, though, it’s easy enough to get away with.

The lady looks at me skeptically. She knows I’m lying. I wonder if she’ll try to drag my real age out of me, but she just says, “I’ll take my check now.”

I drop it on the table and start getting ready to close.



I don’t know what the fuck he’s doing down there. I was asleep. Almost. Then this bullshit starts up again. He’s yelling things at my mother I can’t understand and she probably can’t either. Throwing shit around. Something glass breaks below and my mother screams.

I can see Rosie’s bedroom window through mine, and through the sheer curtains, her shadow gets up and turns on the light. The last thing I need is her fat nose in this.

I get out of bed and throw my bedroom door open. “Hey!” I shout. My voice echoes down the stairs. The shouting stops. “Shut the fuck up!”

Loud, lumbering footsteps. My father appears at the foot of the stairs. His face is bright red, covered in sweat, and he grips the railing for balance. “What did you say to me?”

“I said shut the fuck up.” I hope my voice sounds as strong as I want it to.

He starts making his way up the stairs. Mom appears behind him, but she stays on the ground floor. “Ricky.” She frowns. She’s carrying a dustpan filled with the broken shards of what looks like her grandmother’s vase.

“You listen to me, boy,” my father reaches the top of the stairs, and his hand shoots out at lightning speed. He grips the front of my shirt before I can pull away. “You don’t speak to me like that.”

“You speak to Mom that way,” I say. He’s pulling me closer towards the edge of the landing, and I dig my bare feet into the carpet.

“Ricky, please, just stay out of this,” Mom begs at the bottom of the stairs. “He had too much to drink. He needs to lie down. That’s all.”

“I can speak to you and your mother however I like!” he bellows. “You need to learn your place in this house, boy. You don’t tell me what to do!” He pulls me forward with such a force that I stumble past him, lose my balance, and nearly pitch down the stairs.

“Tom!” Mom cries in horror, but I catch myself on the railing and plant my feet on the third step from the top.

I scowl, my teeth making a grinding sound in my ears. I don’t turn to face my father but stare down at my mom instead. “Are you going to let him do this to me? He tried to throw me down the stairs! I could have broken my neck!”

Mom is looking past me, to the top of the stairs. To my father. She stays quiet for a long time then turns her gaze away from the both of us. “Go to bed, Ricky.”

“You listen to your mother, now,” my father sneers behind me.

I bite my lip hard and turn to go back up the stairs. He’s blocking the hallway, so I duck beneath the arm he’s using to support himself with and push against his side. He stumbles but catches himself. Too bad.

I go back into my room and slam the door. Rosie’s window is dark again. Good. I get back into bed and pretend to sleep.

They stay quiet for the rest of the night.



“Pick it up, Rosie,” Mom calls in front of me. She’s squeezed into tight running pants and a top that looks more like a bra than a shirt. Like me, she also carries brightly colored five-pound weights in her hands. “You’re falling behind!”

My heart is pounding so hard in my chest that I feel it beating sickly in my throat. My head pulsates and each breath is getting harder and harder to suck in. We’ve only been jogging for three blocks, and I’m pretty sure I’m dying. Mom decided to drag me out of bed this morning, toss me a pair of sweatpants, and say “get up.” She didn’t even let me have breakfast before dragging me outside for a “fun morning jog.”

“Can we take a break?” I shout. My voice sounds weak and strained.

“No breaks yet!” she calls back. She isn’t even breathing heavily. Sorcery. “We’re going to start this every Saturday. It’ll get easier!” She pauses, jogging in place as she waits for me to catch up.

“I’m not doing this again.” I catch up to her and she takes off again.

“Oh, sure you will. We’ll do it together and get you in shape.”

I bite my tongue and push myself a little to stay in pace with her. “I don’t want to.”

“Rosie, please, it’s good for you.”

“I don’t care,” I say breathlessly.

Mom sighs and slows her pace. “Molly’s coming for a visit next weekend. She’s excited to see you.”

“Good for her.”

Molly’s only been at college for a month, and she already talks nonstop about her awesome friends, awesome classes, and awesome new boyfriend. Then she asks me about my friends, my classes, and my

boyfriend. My answers don't change: none, sucks, and nonexistent. After I tell her, Molly smiles, pats my head, and says it'll all happen for me *someday*. Like I'm fucking twelve. And Mom wonders why I'm not happy about her visiting. Fuck her.

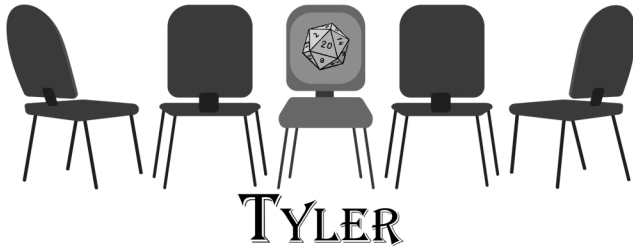
Mom rolls her eyes. "Just try to get along with her."

"No promises."

She pats my back and gives me an encouraging smile. "Come on, let's run a little further."

"I can't. I feel like puking," I say, unable to keep the whine out of my voice.

"Feeling that way means you've had a good work-out." Mom smiles and pushes me forward, taking off ahead of me again.



Zack's mom answers the door after I ring the bell. She smiles warmly and motions me inside.

"Good morning, Tyler. Zack's still asleep, but I'm sure he won't mind if you hang around until he wakes up." He shouldn't, for all the times we spent in his bed while his parents spent the weekend out of town. He would wake up in the mornings with mussed hair and drooping, sleepy eyes. I think he looks his hottest that way. But of course, his mother doesn't know that I know that.

"Yeah, he probably won't care," I nod, keeping it casual. We're just friends, after all.

"You can go up to his room. If you're brave enough, you can try to wake him," she smiles at her little joke.

“I think I can handle it,” I say. It wouldn’t be the first time. She pats my back and I head up the stairs.

Zack’s room is the second door on the left. I’ve visited it many times. The door is slightly ajar. His blinds are closed, and it’s dark despite the late morning sunlight. He always likes to sleep late on the weekends. I guess I’m more of a morning person.

I glance down the hall to make sure his mom has gone back to whatever she was doing before pushing the door open and stepping inside. Zack is sleeping deeply. He snores lightly with each breath. I stand in the doorway for a moment, debating on waking him up or letting him be.

I frown. Zack has been acting more and more distant lately and I’m getting worried. There’s a fear tugging at me, a fear that our relationship might be over soon. That would be devastating. Zack and I came out to each other a couple years ago. We were in the same circle of friends, and we ended up talking after everyone else had fallen asleep at a sleepover. The talking had led to a late-night kiss – the first of many. We were both nervous, and a little scared, but after a while we told our friends about what happened. They were cool with it, and nothing really changed until word about our relationship got around the school. That was when the bullying began, and our group of friends trickled down to a select few when they discovered that the friends of “the queer boys” were targets of bullying too. For a while, Zack and I were pretty strong about it, but lately he’s been getting more and more uncomfortable. He doesn’t even walk next to me in the hallways at school anymore.

I approach the edge of his bed. He doesn’t stir as I sit carefully beside him. He really is out cold. His fine brown hair has fallen into his face, and I brush it away. He opens his eyes slowly at my touch and sits up as if he’s in a daze. “Hey,” he mumbles through a yawn. His eyes fall on me as he runs a hand through his hair, mussing it more. “What are you doing here?”

“I figured I’d come see you,” I say with a shrug. “You said something about going to the movies today.”

“I meant, like, tonight,” Zack says. “It’s too early.”

“It’s noon,” I say. “Besides, the movies are cheaper before four. We could eat after if you want.”

“I don’t have enough money for dinner and a movie.” Zack yawns again, and his gaze shifts away from mine.

“I can pay for it,” I volunteer. I don’t have much either, but I really want to spend some time with him.

“I don’t know.” He’s still avoiding my gaze, and it’s really starting to piss me off. I think of all the times he’s avoided me lately, and the times he’s blown me off with lame excuses. I think of the times he refused to talk to me, refused to tell me what’s wrong like he did before, and I get angrier. In the silence that passes between us, I grab his face in my hands and make him look at me. I pull his face to mine and kiss him as hard and as passionately as he used to kiss me, back when our relationship meant something. He doesn’t move. He makes no effort to pull away or even kiss me back. He just sits here, motionless, but as I force my tongue into his mouth, he begins to kiss me back, hard and desperate, like he’s releasing something that’s been pent up inside of him.

He pulls me closer to him, wrapping his arm tightly around my back and holding on to me. I kiss him back just as fervently. I’ve needed this too, this proof that our relationship isn’t dying and that we’re okay. We are okay. Yes, yes, we’re finally okay.

A loud gasp, almost a scream, comes from the doorway. We pull back, panting from the heat that’s built up between us. My lips are swollen. Zack’s eyes are so wide I think they might pop out of his head. His mother stands there, holding cans of soda. The shock on her face has melted into white-hot anger.

“Get *out*,” she commands in a voice that’s deathly calm. I stand quickly, knocking pillows off the bed and avoiding her glare. My face burns.

“I-I’m sorry,” I stammer out. What do I even say? Sorry you had to find out this way? Sorry you had to find out at all? It’s not like it would help.

“*Out!*” This time her voice is deafening, but I can’t move. My feet are glued to the carpet.

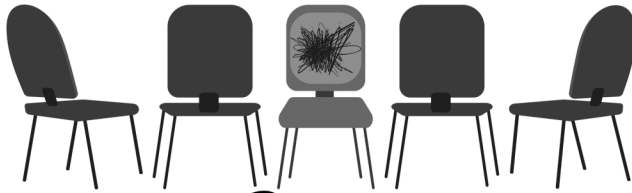
“Mom.” Zack’s voice cracks and he scrambles out of bed, breaking out in a nervous sweat.

She drops the cans. They roll away from her feet as she walks towards me. She reaches a hand out and grabs a fistful of my shirt,

nearly throwing me toward the door. “Get out of my house! Don’t you dare try to come back here, you sick bastard! Stay away from my son, and don’t you *ever* go near him again!”

I’m thrust towards the door with such a force that I stumble and nearly lose my balance. Glancing behind my shoulder, I see Zack still has the deer-in-the-headlights look. He makes no effort to defend me. He doesn’t even move. Now I’m angry too.

I have nothing to say to Zack. I respect his mother’s request and leave their home, slamming the front door behind me.



RICKY

I hate Mondays. Sincerely. The rest of the weekdays are calm, predictable. But when it comes to Mondays, I can never guess what they’ll be like. The day after a weekend of watching my father drink. Or scream. Or smack me and my mom around a little bit. I never know what I’m going to look like when I get to school on Monday. Today, I am sporting a faded black eye. It happened on Friday, just barely enough time to become a yellowish shadow before going back to school.

People notice. I’m not stupid. I can see them staring at it, then turning away and pretending they didn’t see when I lock eyes with them. But they don’t say anything. Not even the teachers.

Rosie asked about it while she was driving me to school this morning. I don’t know why she bothers. When is she going to learn I’m not going to answer her no matter how much she pries? I don’t owe her an explanation anyway. She knows exactly what goes on. I’ve caught her staring into my window through hers way too many times. But whatever. My point is: it’s just another shitty Monday. Nothing new here.

As I get up to leave History to go to lunch, Mr. Todd starts to hold up a hand, like he wants to stop me. I brush past him, not even sparing him a glance as I walk out. He wants to ask about my eye, and he'll believe whatever lie I tell him about it. In the end, it wouldn't matter anyway, so why should he even bother?

I grab a soggy cheeseburger from the lunch line and head for the library. It's quiet in there and no one really cares if you eat. It's usually deserted anyway. The hallway is silent with all the people flocking to the cafeteria, but a sudden, booming voice stops me.

"Hey, Rick!" Coach Brennan calls.

I really hate Mondays.



My stomach growls as I make my way to the cafeteria. I didn't have much for breakfast, mostly just to appease my mother. She's been watching me like a hawk lately. I can't wait to see what she'll be like when Molly comes home this weekend.

As I round the corner, I see that the gym teacher turned football coach has stopped Ricky to talk to him. Ricky doesn't tell me much about what goes on in his life, but I do know he can't stand this guy. He's been trying to pressure Ricky to get back on the football team for a while now, and he hasn't been letting up. It's really been pissing Ricky off. I don't get why he even keeps trying. Ricky's a senior now. It seems pretty pointless to me.

The coach's back is turned to me, but Ricky looks frustrated. No, he looks angry. It's against my better judgment, but I decide to step in. Ricky can be a little terrifying when he gets mad.

Ricky can see me approaching and he shakes his head once, but I ignore him and tap the coach's shoulder.

"Excuse me, Coach," I say, "there's a fight on the second floor. Some kid's nose is bleeding all over the place."

He turns his attention away from Ricky and I see a flicker of relief in his dark eyes.

"We'll talk more later, Rick," he says. He turns and walks briskly towards the stairway.

As he leaves, I turn back to Ricky. He has a foil-wrapped cheeseburger in his hand. "Were you going to lunch?"

"Yeah," he says, showing his free hand into his pocket. His voice is as apathetic as ever.

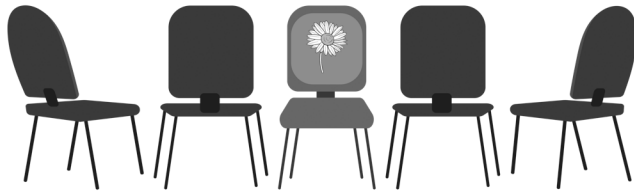
"Want to eat with me and Kendra?" I ask. "She's saving a table."

"I guess."

I start walking and he follows close behind, a slight scowl on his face. I guess whatever the coach said to him really pissed him off this time. Or maybe it was because he called him "Rick." He hates being called that more than anything. Hopefully, he'll calm down at lunch. Maybe he'll even talk to me and Kendra a little, but that's probably wishful thinking.

As we walk into the cafeteria, he touches my arm lightly. "Thanks for that."

"Yeah," I say. I try to hide a smile. "No problem."



KENDRA

Rosie approaches with the quiet boy who sits in the back of my English class. His name is Ricky, and he only speaks when spoken to. Usually, when

he's spoken to, he only responds with short, simple answers and nothing more. I think our teacher has given up trying to get responses out of him. He is Rosie's friend, or something along those lines. They are neighbors and she gives him rides every day. She is also in love with him. She hasn't told me that directly, of course, but the way she is looking at him gives it away.

"Who is this?" I ask, playing dumb, as Rosie sits beside me.

"This is Ricky," she says. He sits down across from her and rests his chin on the palm of his hand. He looks out the window, making no effort to introduce himself to me. "Is it okay if he eats with us?"

"Sure," I agree. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"I'm in your English class," he says. He sounds agitated. Perhaps he has trouble talking to people. Maybe he's just rude.

"How far have you gotten on the reading assignment?" I try.

He scoffs and Rosie shoots me a look, begging me not to press him, but he surprises me with his answer. "I finished it already."

"Really? It's not due until next week."

"I had nothing better to do," he says simply.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"No."

"I didn't like it very much either." I smile. "That Holden kid is too whiny and spoiled for his own good."

"Oh, I hated that book. That kid annoyed the hell out of me," Rosie says.

"He didn't know how good he had it." Ricky turns his attention to the window.

I've lost him. I move to face Rosie instead. "Have you seen Alex?"

"Yeah," she nods. "He looks really tired."

"He said he worked all weekend," I say. "Doubles."

"Isn't that illegal or something for someone our age?"

"I would think so, but he said he wanted to give his mother a break."

"When did he tell you that?" Rosie asks.

"This morning. We ride the same bus. I didn't even know that until he sat next me," I explain.

"I guess you made another new friend, huh?" She wants me to agree that we are friends.

I give her a reassuring smile. “Well, like they say,” I glance at Ricky, listening in discreetly, “good things come to those who wait.”



When I get home from school, Mom is sitting on the couch with a paper in her hands and tears on her cheeks. Oh, shit. An eviction notice? A ticket? Another bill she can't pay? Whatever it is that's making her cry, it looks bad. She looks up at me when I walk into the living room and suddenly, I know the paper is about me.

“Alex,” she says, shaking her head slowly.

“What?” I ask cautiously.

“Your progress report came.” She sounds sad, and she has good reason to be. I've barely done any homework so far this year, and my burst of motivation came too late to reflect on the report. It's not like I can go to college or anything, so does it really matter? But I forgot about Mom seeing my grades. She's always wanted me to be successful, and I've been okay about keeping my grades at an acceptable place, but this year...I'm just not feeling it this year.

“Are you working too much?” she muses. She stands and I can see the flash of *D*'s that line the page. “I'm pushing you to work too much, aren't I? This is my fault.”

“It's not your fault, Mom,” I cut in. “I don't mind working so much. You're not making me or anything.”

“I'm putting too much pressure on you.” It's like she didn't even hear me. “I complain too much about the bills and it makes you worry, doesn't it? You don't have to work so much, honey. I can make do, I

promise. I'll get your hours cut down so you have more time for school."

"Mom, really," I try to interrupt again, but there are more tears streaming down her face. "The work isn't that bad. Besides, you do need me to work. I know you do."

"I'll figure something out, Alex. How are you supposed to graduate if your grades are like this?"

I don't know the answer to that one. Graduation is still eight months away, but I can't bring myself to do the work for some reason. "I'll figure it out too, Mom. I can't just stop working. You and I both know you can't pay the bills without me working."

She frowns and I know I've struck a nerve. "I am doing my best to support you." Her voice breaks, on the verge of crying again. "I'm trying so hard for you. I want you to graduate. I want you to go to college."

"I can't do that, Mom," I sigh. Just thinking about the loans I'd have to take out...

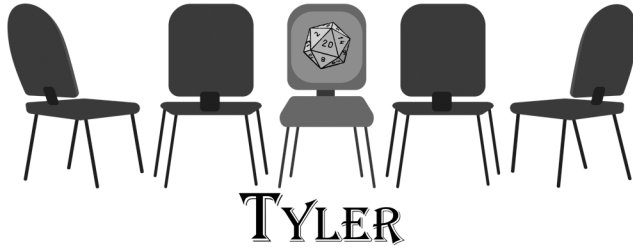
"Yes, you can!" She's pleading now. "I'm going to help you, Alex. You can't do this to yourself. If you don't graduate, you're never going to get a good job! You're going to be stuck here, living in a crappy apartment, working at a dead-end job—"

"Like you?"

She freezes. Her lips form a perfect *O*, eyes wide with shock. Tears drip off her chin and land on the carpet. She stammers for a moment, recovering. "I think you should go to your room now."

I go without protesting and shut the door calmly. Leaning against the cool wood, I slide down to the floor. I didn't mean it. Really. I know how hard Mom works for me. I know how hard she's been trying since Dad died. Her only job used to be taking care of me. But Dad's hospital bills ate up all their savings. The funeral, too. Mom never went to college. The only job she could find after Dad died was waitressing, and it was only by sheer dumb luck that I got a job there too.

I hear her move outside my door. "I try so hard for you. Can't you do the same for me?"



Pussy is spray-painted across my locker with running green letters. Principal Newman stands beside me, his fingers brushing his fat chin as he contemplates the graffiti. I noticed it first thing when I came in this morning, and a teacher called the principal to come handle the situation. I've dealt with a lot of shit since people started to notice my relationship with Zack, but this is by far the worst I've seen. Seeing that word splashed across my locker for the world to see is making my blood boil. I don't even have any idea who could have done this. There's a long list of people who are perfectly capable.

Principal Newman sighs. "Well, uh."

"Tyler." I tell him.

"Yes, Tyler. I assure you the janitor will have this cleaned up by tomorrow morning."

"What about the person who did it?"

"Well." He scratches his chin again, staring fixedly at my locker. "If whoever did it were to come forward, I assure you they will be dealt with severely."

I scoff. I should have expected the indifferent attitude. I think that if I were straight, I would be getting a lot more help than what this fat bastard is offering. I make him uncomfortable. He's standing a little too far away from me, and he keeps scratching at his chin.

"Whatever," I say. "I don't care as long as it's cleaned up."

"It will be, I assure you." He gives me one of his fake beaming smiles that everyone knows him for. "Have a good day." He walks away like he's made the situation all better.

As if I wasn't in a bad enough mood already. I haven't heard a word

from Zack since his mother kicked me out of their house. No calls. Not even a single text. And he's been ducking around corners when we pass in the halls. I've been trying not to think about it.

I need my chemistry book. I open my locker and two slips of folded paper fall at my feet. I stare at them for a second, wondering if I should even bother picking them up off the floor. Chances are, they're just more hate-mail from my biggest fans. I bend down and scoop them up anyway. Curiosity always tends to get the best of me.

Kill yourself, the first note reads. Beautiful. I tear it shreds and drop it to the ground. I almost do the same with the second note, but I catch a glimpse of familiar handwriting. Zack. I frown as I read his brief, four-word message.

We need to talk.



When the final bell rings, I see Rosie and Kendra heading toward the main doors, chatting. I pick up my pace until I'm walking next to them. "Hey," I start. They turn and Kendra gives me a smile.

"Yes, Alex?" she asks in that musical voice of hers.

"Think we could talk again like before?"

"In that disgusting basement?" Rosie wrinkles her nose.

"It's private," I say simply.

"Is something wrong?" Kendra asks. She leans forward slightly, balancing on the balls of her feet, and lifts her head to study my face.

"Sort of," I say. "I could really stand to talk to you guys again." I pause. "If you don't mind."

"I'm supposed to give Ricky a ride home." Rosie glances at the front doors.

"He can take the bus." Kendra grabs her arm and begins to steer her towards the basement stairwell.

"He hates the bus," she protests, but she lets herself get pulled away.

"He'll be fine," Kendra assures her. "Our friend needs us."

Friend. It feels pretty good to be called that. I lost a lot of them when Dad was dying. They just didn't know how to be around me and my grief.

Across from the basement door, someone is sitting against the lockers, their knees drawn up, face buried in their arms. He appears to be crying. People walk by, either ignoring him or not seeing him.

Rosie catches sight of him too. "Hey, I know that guy. He's in my history class. I think his name's Tyler."

Kendra wastes no time in kneeling beside him like a saint, or a guardian angel. That seems more fitting for her, I think. She places a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Hey, you okay?"

He looks up in shock. Tears form wet paths on his cheeks. "What?"

Rosie steps forward. "Tyler, right?"

He stands, wiping the tears from his eyes. "Yeah. You're Rose?"

Rosie nods. "What happened to you?"

Tyler shakes his head. "Nothing. Don't worry about it." He glances at all the people passing by. "I'm going to miss my bus."

"Wait." Kendra places her hand back on his shoulder and gives him a smile. "I'm Kendra, and that's Alex over there. We were actually just about to go somewhere and talk. Do you want to join us?"

Rosie raises a brow at her, as if inviting someone else to our secret meeting is ludicrous. I'm sort of with Rosie too, to be honest. These two girls saw me at a really low point, so I'm okay talking to them about the heavy stuff on my mind. But a total stranger? No way. Then again, he looks like he has some heavy stuff on his mind too.

Tyler shakes his head. "I'm okay," he insists, but his voice wavers.

"Well, all right," Kendra says. She's wearing a sly smile, as if she already knows he's going to falter on his choice. "We're going to the basement." She motions to the door at her back. "If you change your mind,

feel free to join us.” She turns and puts her hands on mine and Rosie’s shoulders, pushing us toward the door together.

I open the door and lead the way down the stairs. The door closes behind us, and when we reach the bottom of the stairs, it opens again, shining a bright triangle of light on the dirty walls and floor. It’s Tyler, still looking hesitant, but coming down the stairs anyway.

“Hey,” he says, looking down at his feet as he approaches, “I think I want to talk after all.”

Kendra’s sly smile reappears. “Come join us,” she says. “If you’d like, you can go first.”

Rosie pulls out another slightly usable desk from the pile in the corner and motions to Tyler. “Have a seat. It’ll probably hold you.”

“Is this like a regular thing for you guys?” Tyler asks, eyeing the arrangement of chairs from our last talk.

“We’ve only done this once before, to be honest,” Kendra says.

We reintroduce ourselves in the quiet, dank basement. He appears a little nervous, and his eyes are puffy and red from crying. Once he knows who we are, he takes a seat in the broken desk Rosie offered to him and we all follow suit.

“So,” he says, sounding unsure, “I just talk, huh?”

“You just talk,” Kendra confirms. “Go ahead. The floor is yours.”

The Second Meeting

Tyler leans back in the creaking desk chair and glances around at the faces waiting for him to speak. “Look, I don’t know you guys at all,” he glances at the stairs, beginning to wonder if he should have just gone home instead. At least there he could cry in his bed without being disturbed, and he wouldn’t have to worry about telling his stupid story to these people.

“But we know who you are,” Kendra says. Her tone is encouraging. “I mean, we’ve heard about you.”

“The whole school knows about the graffiti that was on your locker this morning,” Rosie adds, trying to be helpful.

“I think I saw you get pushed down the stairs once.” Alex avoids eye contact with him. Looking back, he is now wishing he stopped to help him up. No one else had.

“Yeah, thanks so much for telling someone about that.” There is bitterness in Tyler’s voice.

Kendra senses the tension building up and spreads her hands out, letting Tyler know he still has the floor. “How about you tell us what’s got you so upset, hmm?”

Tyler sighs heavily and leans back in the chair, rocking it back on its legs. “I got dumped.”

“That’s it?” Rosie realizes how insensitive she sounds and clamps her mouth shut.

Alex gives her a smirk and pats her shoulder lightly. “I think what Rosie means is that we’ve all been there. Probably. Back in middle school, I had this girlfriend who dumped me when she realized she was taller than me.”

“How could she not realize that beforehand?” Rosie mumbles under her breath.

“You guys don’t get it,” Tyler says, shaking his head slowly. “This wasn’t just some break-up.”

“You really loved him,” Kendra reaches for his hand and takes it gently. “Of course you’re upset.”

Tyler takes his hand away – not forcefully – and frowns. “You don’t know anything about it.”

“Okay, then tell us why he dumped you. Then we’ll know,” Rosie says. She isn’t sure what to say, and her mouth fires off before her brain can stop her. She can’t relate. She’s never even been kissed, let alone been in a relationship. Her experience with dating comes from movies and books.

Tyler looks down at his desk. Someone, probably long since graduated, has etched a crudely drawn penis into the corner. “His mom caught us,” he says quietly. “We were kissing. She didn’t know. She had no clue. She kicked me out of the house, and his parents decided to send him to the Catholic

school. They think he'll 'do better' there." Tears are pricking at his eyes again. He wipes them away angrily with the heel of his hand. "It's such bullshit. He said he couldn't love me anymore. Not that he doesn't love me, but that he couldn't. Can you believe that? He's going to pretend to be straight to please his parents. He can't be himself and he's actually okay with that."

"Do you think he's okay?" Kendra asks slowly, watching Tyler's expression with wide eyes. "Is he safe?"

Tyler snorts as if the question strikes his funny bone. "His parents aren't going to hurt him or anything. Not physically, at least. I know them well enough to know that as long as I'm out of the picture, they're sure the 'evil temptation' is gone. I'm the one who was corrupting their precious son, you know."

"What about your parents?" Alex asks tentatively. "Do they know about...you?"

"If you're asking if they know I'm gay, then yes. I told them when I first started going out with Zack. I didn't know how they'd react at first, but they were actually cool about it."

"That must have been really lucky for you," Kendra put in.

"You have no idea how lucky." Tyler's voice holds a hint of graviness, but his face is expressionless.

"So, your boyfriend dumped you? Just like that?" Rosie asks. She leans forward and the chair creaks beneath her.

"And at school, too," Kendra muses. "What a terrible place to be broken up with."

"He couldn't exactly do it anywhere else." Tyler understands, but being broken up with in front of his peers was like rubbing salt in a wound. "He's not allowed to see me anymore. I mean, he doesn't want to see me anymore."

"You know that's not true," Kendra assures him. "I bet this is killing him."

Tyler shakes his head. "You don't get it. He's been acting weird around me for months. And I don't know if it's just because he was worried about his parents finding out. What if he wasn't in love with me anymore? What if he just...fell out of love and didn't know how to tell me?" He sighs deeply and hunches forward to rest his head in his arms on the desktop. With a shaky breath, he continues, "I denied it. I saw it

happening, but I kept pretending I didn't."

"No one wants to believe a relationship is ending," Alex puts in. "So, I guess that's understandable, you know?"

"I know," Tyler replies simply. "I know." He glances over at Alex. "Hey, weren't you guys coming down here in the first place so *you* could talk?"

Alex shifts in his seat. "Your problem seems kind of more important than mine."

A shaky sigh escapes Tyler's lips. "Look, I'm okay, really. I feel a lot better. I guess I just needed some time to let it sink in or something." It's an obvious lie, and Tyler can see the others recognize this, but he holds his gaze on Alex, urging him to talk instead. He was invited here to this dark and somewhat creepy basement by chance. Alex is the reason they are down here in the first place, and Tyler feels he should be the one talking instead.

Alex sees through his words, but he thinks Tyler might need a distraction from all the crap he had to go through that day. So, to humor him, he crosses his arms and begins to speak. "Basically, I'm about to flunk out of high school. My mom is pissed, and she thinks it's all her fault. So, I either have to get my ass in gear or go to school for another year. Or two."

"And you think my problem is bigger than yours?" Tyler raises a brow.

"Oh, Alex, you have to graduate with me," Kendra says. Her voice is airy and calm, and it causes a light flush, not visible to the others due to the dimness, to flare out on Alex's cheeks.

"What happened to that history paper you worked so hard on?" Rosie asks. "I thought you got a good grade on it."

"I did," Alex says with a shrug. "It raised my overall grade to a D."

"It's only the end of the first quarter," Kendra tries to assure him. "There's still three more quarters and two rounds of finals left. You can raise your grades."

"Do you want to?" Tyler cuts in to ask. He pauses at the strange look the others give him and tries to explain. "I mean, I know it's not easy for some people, but the classes aren't that hard to pass."

"I work," Alex butts in. "A lot. At a diner. It sucks and I work late

even though I'm not supposed to. It's not that I don't want to do my work; I just don't have the time. It's just me and my mom. When my dad died, he left us a shit-ton of hospital bills to cover. The both of us are working our asses off to try and pay them off without going into massive debt. But we already did. My mom won't tell me that. She doesn't think I know. But I know. We're going to be in a lot of trouble soon if we don't get some good money. My mom could get her car taken away. Then neither of us can go to work. Or worse, we could lose our apartment. By that point, I doubt we'd even have a car to live in."

Tyler shrinks back as he speaks, his cheeks turning red. When Alex is done talking, he is panting slightly, and his hand is gripping hard at his wrist. His face is pale in the darkness.

"Sorry," Tyler mutters.

Alex sighs. "I didn't mean to go off like that, okay? My mom only finished high school. She never tried college because she married my dad right after she graduated. He was older. He was supposed to take care of us. She wants me to go to college so bad. She wants me to have a better life than the one she made for herself. Get it? That's why she's so pissed. That's why she's so damn disappointed in me right now. And it's scaring me. It's scaring me because what if I'm not good enough to get the life she wants me to have? I don't think I am. Right now, I really don't think I am."

"You keep saying you want to do stuff for your mom," Rosie says, "but what about for you? Don't you want to graduate? Don't you want to go to college and not work in that stupid diner?"

Alex shrugs. "I mean, I guess. I don't want to spend any more time here than I have to. But I can't afford college. That's just a fantasy for me."

"You could take out loans," Kendra suggests.

Alex scoffs. "Right, and spend the next sixty years of my life paying them back."

"Don't you save any money at all with your job?" The dirty look Alex shoots Rosie shuts her up immediately. She clears her throat. "Sorry, but you could at least try to put a couple bucks away when you can."

"When I can?" Alex is growing angry again. "Seriously? Do you have

any idea how much debt my dad left us in when he died? Do you know how much cancer costs? Do you have any idea how little me and my mom make together, especially after paying for rent, gas, food, and utilities? You have no idea how much we struggle to live!”

The room goes quiet, the silence making everyone shift uncomfortably in their broken seats. Alex looks down at his desktop, tracing the graffiti with his finger.

“I think,” Kendra says, letting out a breath, “this meeting is adjourned.”

“Yeah.” Alex stands, shoving the desk out of the way. He grabs his bag and retreats up the stairs.

Tyler glances between Rosie and Kendra uncomfortably. “That was awkward.”

“It was my fault,” Rosie runs a hand through her hair. “I said too much again.”

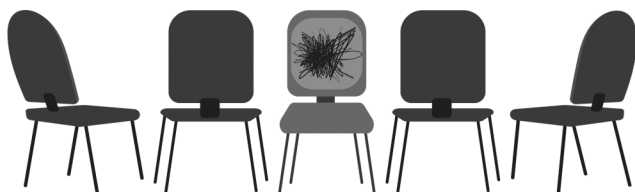
“Give him time to cool down,” Kendra says calmly. “He’ll be all right.”

“You think he’ll be willing to talk again?” Rosie asks.

“I hope,” Tyler says. “You guys are pretty easy to talk to.”

“Don’t worry,” Kendra smiles reassuringly. “I’m certain we’ll meet again.”

THREE



RICKY

She's late. I've been sitting on this bench for half an hour, and she still hasn't shown up. I check my phone again. No texts, no calls, no nothing. If she was going to be held up, she should have at least let me know. I could have gotten on the bus or found another ride.

I give Rosie five more minutes and wonder if she left without me. Did I piss her off? It's possible, but I don't know what I could have done to make her angry enough to leave me stranded here. I look at my phone and debate on who to call. The few friends I have don't drive, so I call Mom. No answer. She's probably too busy giving one of her patients braces to pick up.

There's one other person I can try. I really don't want to, but it's not like I can walk home.

So, I call my dad.

He answers on the third ring. His voice is gruff. "What?"

"I need you to come get me from school," I say.

"The neighbor girl's supposed to bring you home," he states.

"I know, but she left already or something."

"Didn't you try calling your mother?"

"She didn't pick up."

"Fine." I hear him get up and shove some papers aside. "You better be ready to roll when I get there, though. I don't exactly have time for this."

"Sure." I hang up and hold the phone between my knees.

He shows up fifteen minutes later. He doesn't say a word as I climb

into the passenger side of his massive pick-up, and he's speeding off before I even have a chance to fully close the door. Great. He's more than annoyed. He's pissed.

"Can't believe you couldn't get anyone else to come take you home," he mutters under his breath, then turns to face me at a red light. "Don't you have any friends?"

"No." I look out the window, resting my chin in my palm. I don't want to look at him. I can imagine the look he's giving me just fine.

"Worthless." He says it just loud enough for me to hear and remains silent the rest of the trip home.

As he pulls into the driveway, he shuts the car off and grabs my shoulder before I can get out. He jerks me around to face him. His expression is stern. "Listen here. Next time, don't you even think about calling me to come to your rescue. I don't have time for this. Now get inside."

He pushes me toward the car door. I open it quickly and step to the ground. "All right, I get it," I say and slam the door shut. He backs out, nearly hitting me with the side mirror, and speeds back towards his shop.



When I pull into my driveway, Ricky is sitting on his porch, watching me intently. I frown as I turn the car off, waiting as he gets up and walks swiftly towards me. He found a way home, at least. That's good. But he looks pissed.

I start to open my car door, but Ricky puts his hand on the outside

handle and motions for me to roll the window down. Oh yes, he's definitely pissed off.

I roll it down cautiously and try to give him what I hope looks like an innocent smile. "Hey."

"Where the hell were you?" Ricky leans in, a sneer on his face and rage in his voice.

"Sorry." I look down at the steering wheel. "A friend of mine needed some help."

"And you couldn't think to send me one fucking text?"

"It was kind of an emergency," I whisper.

"Because of you, I had to get a ride from my dad. Do you know how pissed off that made him? Do you know how pissed off that made *me*?" He scowls. "Since when do you even have friends?"

"I have friends," I protest. "It's not like you're my only friend."

"I'm not your friend," he growls. "You're just the neighbor who gives me rides because my parents don't think I'm responsible enough to have my own car. Got it?"

"Got it," I say. Tears are beginning to sting at my eyes, but I'm not going to cry in front of him.

He leans into the car to glare at me. "If your little fake friend ever needs *help* again, you better let me know next time." He punches the side of my car and walks back to his house, leaving me sitting stunned, hands still gripping the steering wheel tightly.

Ricky's never talked to me like that before. He's never gotten angry like that either. Something really bad must have happened between him and his father, because he was practically steaming with anger. Ricky can be moody and rude, but he's never gotten violent, and he's never insulted me.

I turn the car off, inspect the side for a dent, and, finding none, walk inside. No one else is home yet, so I set my bag on the kitchen counter and get some bread and butter out to make a grilled cheese. As I wait for the pan to heat up, I notice that Mom got out all of the heavy-duty cleaning supplies in preparation for Molly's visit. Ricky's outburst made me forget about that for a minute. With Ricky angry at me and perfect-little-Molly coming home, I can already tell this weekend is going to suck.



My mother called me sometime during the meeting. I listen to her message as I walk out of the building. Alex rushes ahead of me, silent and seething. She is asking me to meet her at the mall. She wants to buy me new clothes for winter.

I bite my lip as I get into my car and consider the invitation. The mall is an endless source of cute clothes and unique style choices, at least to other people. But it is different for me. It's difficult walking past the perfect-bodied mannequins in their cute outfits. Pictures of models hung up throughout the stores look at me with taunting eyes. The mirrors in the dressing rooms distort my body and make me look ugly and bloated. If I must buy clothes, I prefer to do it online. But mother insists I need to try things on first. She is so old-fashioned.

I do not want to go to the mall. I send my mother a text and tell her I'll be there in twenty minutes.

When I arrive, she is already waiting for me with an armful of sweaters. "Look!" she smiles as I walk into the store. "These sweaters will look so cute on you. Do you have a few pairs of leggings at home?"

"I do," I say as I take the sweaters from her. I examine them carefully. They are knitted and thick, bulky with cute patterns. I can't wear these.

"Let's see how they look on you." Mom places a hand on my back and guides me to the fitting rooms.

My breath catches in my throat as an employee opens a room for me and Mom smiles encouragingly as I step inside. She knows what a struggle trying on clothes is for me. She has no idea I have panic rising in my chest, tightening my lungs and squeezing my heart.

Alone in the room, I hang the sweaters on the rack and let out a shaky breath. I can do this. It's only sweaters. Bits of fabric sewn together to cover my body and keep me warm when I'm cold. I can do this.

With my back to the mirror, I pull my top off and let it fall to the floor. Slowly, I turn to face myself in the mirror. My ribs no longer poke through my skin. How many layers of fat are they buried under now? My hips have become rounded and curved instead of angled and bony. I squint and I see my stomach beginning to bulge at the abdomen. My heart pounds as I race through every bit of food I've eaten in the past week. Too much. It was too much. My therapist took my food journal away. She said keeping a record of what I ate could be more harmful to my problem. I need it back. I've got to get a new notebook. I'll hide it. No one will know.

"Kendra?"

The sweaters.

I pull in a sharp breath and take the first one off its hanger. I tug it over my head without looking in the mirror and open the door with a big smile on my face. "What do you think?"

"That looks adorable on you!" Mom rubs my arm to feel the fabric. "Oh, and it's so soft too. Do you want this one?"

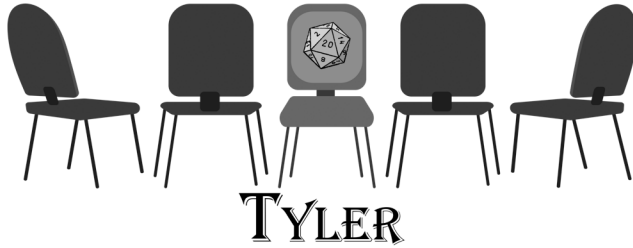
"I'd love it," I lie.

"It's yours," she smiles. "Go try on the rest. I want to see them on you."

"Sure," I say. As I begin to close the door, Mom puts her hand on the handle to stop me.

"You know, honey, I'm really proud of you for being able to do this."

"Thanks, Mom," I say. "I'm proud of me too." The words sound hollow in my ears. I close the door with a frown. Time to do it all over again.



When I get home, Mom is sitting on the couch watching one of her mindless talk shows. I greet her quickly and try to rush up the stairs to the sweet solace of my room, but she turns off the TV and stands.

“Tyler.” She’s frowning. She’s upset about something, but I have no idea what it could be. I saw my progress report yesterday and it was pretty good, so it couldn’t be that. I haven’t gotten in trouble or anything, and I’ve mostly just been keeping to myself lately.

“What?” I ask, pausing at the foot of the stairs to show I didn’t really want to talk to her.

“Zack’s mother called me this afternoon.”

I sink down to sit on the bottom step and bite my lip. Tears begin to prick painfully at my eyes again. “So, what did she have to say?”

Mom sits beside me and puts an arm over my shoulders. “She wanted to know if I knew about you and Zack being...more than friends.” She rubs my back gently. “I had no idea she didn’t know about you two.”

“Zack never came out to his parents,” I say dully.

“She was very upset,” Mom continues, still rubbing my back. “She told me she was transferring Zack to the other high school.”

“He broke up with me today.”

“I am so sorry.” Mom pulls me into a tight hug. “It shouldn’t have had to happen that way.”

“If he really loved me like he said he did, he wouldn’t have dumped me just because his parents got mad. Right?”

Mom sighs. “I think he’s just scared, Tyler. I remember when you first told me and your stepdad. You were shaking so hard, and you kept

twisting your hands together. You could barely speak because you were stuttering so much. I remember how shocked you were when we told you we love and accept you for who you are, and how you were especially shocked when we asked to meet Zack as your boyfriend and not just as your friend.

“I think some people, especially teenagers, are afraid of what their parents will think of them once they know the truth about their child. Zack’s parents are not very accepting people, and I think he’s known that for a long time. I don’t doubt that what Zack felt – feels – for you is real. I think he’s more concerned with his parents loving him than anyone else. Do you understand?”

“I get it, Mom.” I kick at the rug beneath my feet. “But he told me he never wants to see me again. He told me...” I bite my lip and try again. “He told me he can’t see me again.”

Mom kisses my forehead. “I think you need to respect his wishes. At least for now. Give him space to sort things out and regain trust with his parents. It’s possible you two could reconnect again one day.”

“You really think so?” I ask, a spark of hope igniting somewhere deep inside.

“Well, I feel bad for saying not to get your hopes up, but it’s a possibility. You never know what might happen.” She gives me a smile. “How about I call David and ask him to pick up something special for dinner on his way home?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“Do you feel any better?” she asks me.

There’s no use trying to lie to her. “Not really.”

“Give it time.” She squeezes my shoulder and gets up, going to the kitchen to call my stepdad.

I guess I got lucky having parents like mine. I guess I got lucky about a lot of things. Still, there are some things I just can’t tell them.

I get up and go to my room, shutting the door behind me.



I see you staring at me, Kendra. And yeah, I'm still pretty pissed off about the other day. But not at you. Never at you. Tyler. I know he was just trying to help or relate or whatever, but he made it worse. He doesn't know what's going on in my life. He doesn't even know me. Then again, I don't know him either. What's that phrase my dad used to say? It's a two-way street, or something like that. Tyler seemed nice enough the other day, and he definitely had a lot going on. I should apologize about going off on him if I ever see him again. Is that what you're trying to tell me?

I lock eyes with you, watch your lips curl into that wry little smile of yours, and turn back to your work. You little tease. You know exactly what's on my mind, don't you? It's a gift you seem to have, I guess. You're a natural leader - you've made that clear plenty of times - and it really shows when you give people that look. It's your signature "I know what you're thinking, and I know how to make you say it" look. I have to admit that it's pretty cute.

I look down at my quiz. I've actually been doing the work this time. I even scrawled in shorthand equations to show I wasn't being lazy and putting forth some effort. I think some of the answers are even right, too. I had a bit of free time last night, and I studied a little.

Kendra gets up to turn hers in. I watch her skirt swish around her ankles as she walks to the front of the room, then turn back to double-check my answers. As far as I can understand, they're right, so I get up and follow Kendra.

Mrs. Preston gives me an amused look when I set my paper on her desk.

“Did you actually do the quiz this time, Alex?” God, what a bitch.

“I thought I’d try for a D,” I spit back at her.

She furrows her brow at my comment, but before she can think of anything snarky to say, the bell rings shrilly overhead. I step away to grab my bag while the rest of the class crowds her desk to turn their own quizzes in.

I leave the room as quickly as I can, but Kendra still catches up to me in the hallway. She takes my arm gently.

“Join us for lunch,” she says.

“It’s not my lunch period,” I say. “I have to go to English.”

“Come to lunch anyway.” Her voice holds a beckoning tone.

“Kendra.” I glance in the direction of my classroom. She catches my eye and holds my gaze firmly. I sigh. “Fine. Five minutes. That’s it.”

“Wonderful.” She smiles and leads me down the stairs, still holding onto my arm. “I wanted to make sure you were okay after what happened the other day.”

“Look, I know I overreacted but I’m over it now. I’m going to say sorry to Tyler if I ever see him again.”

“I think we’ll see him again,” she says in that mysterious voice of hers. Kendra pulls me into the cafeteria line and hands me a tray.

I take it without thinking. “Is your mom actually letting you buy your own lunch today?” She always comes to school with a brown paper bag. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her buy lunch at school.

“Not exactly,” she says as she places a container of carrots on her tray. “My mother was running late this morning, so she didn’t have time to pack a lunch and she doesn’t fully trust me to do it myself.” The lunch ladies are watching Kendra as she places items on her tray. She adds a fruit cup, hesitates, and picks up one of the foil-wrapped chicken sandwiches. I’m curious to see if she will actually eat it. I’ve never seen her willingly consume that much bread before either.

I grab a slice a pizza and a banana. I’m hungry, and I guess I can take a few minutes to stuff something in my face before going to class.

She’s in line ahead of me. As the cashier checks out her items, I pull out my wallet and hand over the cash to pay for her things.

She turns around in surprise. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I got it,” I say as the cashier accepts my money. “Go have a seat; I’ll meet you there in a second.”

She smiles. “Thank you, Alex.”

When she’s out of sight, the cashier takes the money for my own lunch and gives me a wink. “Buying lunch for her, huh? That sure is sweet.”

“It’s nothing,” I say, but I can feel heat rising in my cheeks.

The cashier gives me a knowing look and waves for me to be on my way.

I join Kendra and Rosie at their usual table. Rosie is staring down at her tray with a grimace. She’s hardly touched her food. Kendra gives her a sympathetic smile.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. “Not feeling good?”

“Basically,” Rosie groans. “My sister is coming home to visit for the weekend. She’s so perfect and skinny. My mom takes every chance to rub it in my face. I’m not looking forward to going home to that.”

“You could come to my house after school. My parents would love to meet you,” Kendra offers.

Rosie sighs. “No, I have to go home. I’d never hear the end of it if I didn’t.” She picks at her fruit cup with her fork. “I just have to make it through the weekend.”

“You can always call me if you can’t take it anymore,” Kendra says.

“Me too,” I add.

“You’re not mad anymore?” Rosie gives me a skeptical look.

I shake my head. “Sorry about that. I’m over it, I promise.”

Rosie studies my face carefully. I think she’s checking to see if I’m lying. I’m not. She relaxes. “I don’t have your number, you know.”

I take a piece of notebook paper out of my backpack and scribble my number on it. “Here, I’ll be working a lot this weekend, but I’ll be around if you need to talk.”

“Thanks, Alex.” Rosie glances at my scribbling and holds her phone discreetly under the table while she types it in. “I’m going to take you up on that.”

“Feel free,” I say. I know Rosie isn’t the dramatic type. She’ll only call if she really needs to talk, and I don’t mind talking to her. She’s

pretty nice, even if she does have a hard time keeping her mouth shut sometimes.



Time really flies when you're dreading something. The final bell rings and I'm still not mentally prepared enough to face Molly. I love my sister and everything, she's just a lot to handle, and I was kind of enjoying my time at home without her. But it's only for a weekend. I just have to keep telling myself that.

Ricky waits for me outside the main doors like always. He's silent as we walk to my car. Once I've carefully navigated my way out of the school's clogged parking lot, Ricky glances at me and actually speaks.

"What do you look so pissed off about?"

"Molly's coming home for the weekend today," I say. "I just don't want to hear about how awesome her life is at college and all that bullshit."

"That's nothing," Ricky scoffs. "You can deal with that for two days. Who cares if she's rubbing her life in your face?"

"It's not just her," I say. "It's my mom too. She wants me to be like Molly and it pisses me off."

Ricky rolls his eyes as I pull my car into the driveway, right next to my sister's cherry red convertible. "Look," he says as he opens the door, "that's nothing. Just get out of the house so you don't have to deal with it. It's not that hard. Quit making problems for yourself."

"You don't know how bad they can be," I protest. "They've always been my problem. They team up and make me feel bad about everything. That's their thing."

“What a great problem to have,” Ricky spits and slams the car door. I watch with a furrowed brow as he storms off to his own house, leaving me to face my sister alone.

I open the front door reluctantly. Mom and Molly are giggling over something. I follow their hyena laughs to the kitchen. They’re sitting at the island counter drinking coffee and chatting in excited voices.

Molly turns around when I enter and brightens. “Rosie!” she says excitedly. She’s gotten highlights in her hair and her makeup looks fresh and vibrant. Yeah, she’s my big sister Molly, all right. Perfect as always. “Come sit, I was just telling Mom about what my new friend, Kristen, and I did last weekend. It was so funny! She and I—”

“I have homework,” I butt in and try making my way for the stairs.

“You have all weekend to do your homework.” Mom pats the chair beside her. “Your sister is only here until Sunday afternoon. Spend some time with her.”

“I really have to—”

“Oh, Rosie, I want to hear all about what’s been going on with you too,” Molly grins.

“I can make that fast: Nothing.”

“That’s not true. What about that new friend of yours? Kendra?” Mom smiles. To me, that smile looks fake - like a snake getting ready to unhinge its jaw and swallow a rodent whole. It’s always like this when Molly is around. Mom and Molly are practically the same person. They feed off each other and corner me.

“You made a friend?” I hate the fake surprise in Molly’s voice. “Tell me about her!”

I shrug. “We just started talking and hanging out. She’s nice.”

“That’s all you’ve got to say about her?”

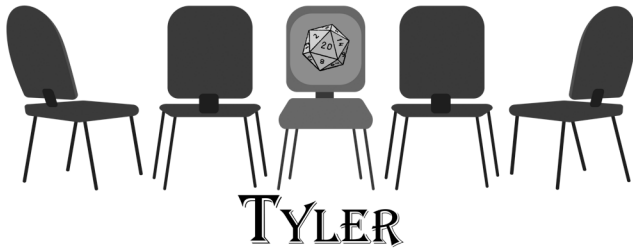
“I guess. I really have to get started on this homework, okay? I have a lot.”

Mom gives me a hard look. “All right. I’ll have dinner ready at six. You’ll at least join us then, right?”

“Yeah,” I say and trudge up the stairs.

When I reach the top, I hear Molly say, “You never have to worry about her missing a meal, Mom.”

They burst into uproarious laughter.



The park is quiet this time of day, just before sunset, when all the kids have gone home for dinner. A toddler and his older brother are crafting some kind of castle in the sandbox while their mother watches from a nearby bench. A dad is helping his kid down a slide they're not quite big enough for yet. Other than these few stragglers, I have the park to myself.

I'm sitting on a swing, rocking it gently and dragging my feet in the gravel. I haven't been home yet today. My backpack rests against the metal pole that supports the swing set. I just don't feel like going home right now. I haven't felt like doing much of anything lately. But I like the park. It's quiet.

The sun is beginning to set, and I can see its rays poking through the leaves of the trees. I've been coming here a lot after school. I like sitting on the swings that overlook the duck pond. No one bothers me and I feel like I have all the time in the world here.

Footsteps in the gravel behind me. A familiar voice says, "Hey."

I turn my head. Rosie is standing with her arms crossed tightly over her chest. She looks upset.

"Hey," I say back. "What are you doing here?"

Rosie shrugs. "Snuck out. I used to walk here a lot when I was little. I thought I'd check out the ducks."

"They're going to migrate soon," I say as she lowers herself into the swing next to mine. It creaks under her weight.

"Not that soon." She kicks her feet beneath her. "It's barely October. It's not even homecoming yet."

Homecoming. I had completely forgotten about the homecoming

dance two weeks away. Zack and I were supposed to go together. It would have been our first dance as an official couple. The thought hits me hard and I find myself facing the overwhelming urge to cry again. I drop my chin to my chest and close my eyes.

“Um, are you okay?” Rosie is staring at me blankly.

I lift my head after a moment and nod. “Yeah. I was just thinking.”

“About homecoming?”

“About how I don’t have a date anymore.”

“Oh.” Rosie sighs and pushes herself on the swing gently. “I’ve never had a date to a dance. Or a date in general, really.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” My dates with Zack were okay. We always kept things pretty low-key. Dinner, the occasional movie, and video games. I guess straight guys hang out like that too.

“Still,” Rosie says, breaking me from my thoughts, “I’ve always wanted a date to homecoming. I know I still have one more year to get one, but...”

“Do you want to go?” I ask before I even realize what I’m saying.

“What are you, straight now?”

“I meant as friends.”

Rosie smiles lightly. “Oh sure, it could be fun.”

“I’ll match my tie to your dress and everything,” I promise.

“My sister is taking me shopping for one tomorrow. She insisted.” She rolls her eyes and swings a little higher.

“Are you just here to escape your sister?”

“Oh, yeah. I can only handle her in very small doses. She’s sort of... perfect.” Is that a tinge of jealousy in her voice?

“You can hang out here for a while, if you want,” I offer. I don’t know much about sibling rivalry. I have a stepsister who’s ten years older than me and lives out of state. I only see her on holidays. Other than that, we really don’t talk. But I can see that Rosie could definitely use some time away. And to be honest, I could use some company.

“Thanks.” Rosie turns her attention back to the ducks gliding over the water.



I keep my phone on me during my shift, but so far, I haven't heard anything from Rosie. Maybe she and her sister are actually getting along. Although, from the way she talked about her, that doesn't seem likely. It's better for me this way, though. It's been busy tonight. Nothing new for a Friday.

Mom rushes back to the kitchen, her arms loaded with dirty plates, and drops them into a sink that's nearly overflowing. She sighs and wipes her brow quickly. "It's a madhouse out there, but at least that big table is gone now. Are you catching up on dishes? We're really low on plates."

"I'm trying," I say as I scrub gravy off another plate. "People just keep bringing me more."

"As soon as you're done, get back out there. We really need you."

"Okay, Mom." I move a stack of plates to the drying shelf and watch her leave. The dishwater has become brown with only a few stray bubbles floating on the top. I reach down to pull the plug and cringe when slimy chunks of loose food brush past my fingers. Dishes suck, and they always get dumped on me because I'm the teenager. We get the dirty work. It's like an unwritten rule. Dennis really needs to hire a dishwasher.

The water creates a vortex as it flows down the drain, and I let out a slow breath. I've been tense all day, and I feel the familiar tightening in my chest. Electric sparks race from the center of my torso to my shoulders. I have two more hours left here. Two more hours and I can go home, start my book report, and maybe get some sleep before I come in again in the morning. The report is due on Monday, and the chances of

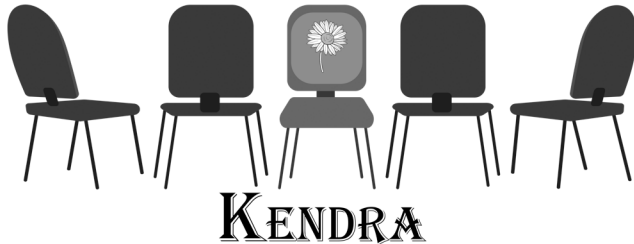
me actually finishing it are slim, but maybe I'll get some points for effort. Wishful thinking, I know, but it's better than blowing off the report completely.

Mom comes back again looking frazzled and tired. She pulls her ponytail out and quickly fixes it so it looks sleek and clean again. "Another big table," she says. "I need your help out there."

"Why do so many people come into a crappy diner like this?" I drop the rest of the dishes into the empty sink and dry my hands. "It's stupid. There are better places they could be going."

"Alex." Her voice holds that warning tone to it. It's the warning tone especially reserved for moms who are tired of their kids' attitudes.

"I'm coming," I say, and follow her out.



The call I have been waiting for has finally come. I answer on the first ring and Rosie wastes no time getting to the point.

"Come shopping with me and my sister tomorrow."

"What are we shopping for?" I ask simply. I think about the bridal magazine Mom brought home for me. It's filled with pictures of beautiful women wearing colorful gowns to cater to high school girls. The models are all adult women with full chests and perfectly trim waists. I didn't think anyone looked through magazines for inspiration anymore, but my mother holds fast to her old-fashioned ways.

"Homecoming dresses."

I knew it. I don't know if I can handle the mall again. After I came home with Mom the last time, I spent a few good hours laying the new clothes out on my bed and staring at them, wanting to mutilate them

until they were nothing but unrecognizable shreds. When the desire to destroy the clothes passed, the urge to destroy myself came. It had been a very long time since I felt that need. Yes, it has been a very long time since I last thought of pulling a razor effortlessly over my skin so I could watch the blood bubble up and spill over. I managed to get away with skipping breakfast the next morning. I would have skipped dinner that night as well, but Mom and Dad were both watching me closely. They always do.

"I suppose I'll go," I say, trying to hide the reluctance from my voice. "I don't think I'm going to homecoming though."

"Why not?"

"No date," I say, which is not at all a lie.

"We can just hang out," Rosie almost pleads. "But I do sort of have a date."

"With whom?"

"Tyler."

"Our Tyler?"

"I ran into him earlier," Rosie explains. "We talked for a while, and it was sort of a joke. But yeah, we're going as friends."

I find this amusing and I smile. "What time tomorrow?"

"Probably around eleven," Rosie says. "We'll pick you up."

"I'll be ready then," I say. I can help Rosie even if I can't help myself.

We say our goodbyes and hang up.

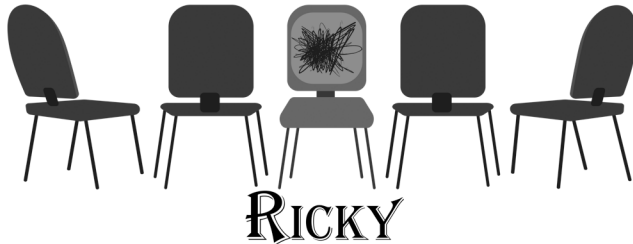
I lie back on my bed and stare up at the ceiling. My thoughts once again drift to the grown women modeling dresses intended for teenagers. They wear painted smiles and pose with their hands planted in the exact perfect position on their hips. No matter how many gorgeous gowns I try on tomorrow, I will never look like them.

I raise my arm above my face. The metal bracelets slide down towards my elbow, revealing the puckered flesh of scars long ago healed. My jaw clenches. I want to make more. I hear so often that survivors love their scars, that they are signs of how strong they have grown. The scars are supposed to show that they were able to overcome the lowest and weakest points in their lives. I suppose I am a survivor, too. After all, I'm still alive. And I suppose I also love my scars. But these survivors rarely mention that

whatever demon they conquered does not stay down for long. They rise again over periods of time. Manic highs and lows. Moments of strength and moments of weakness. I am never above who I was once was. I am still that person who hates their body and wants to destroy it, who wants to mark it up so badly that the entire world can see that I am screaming inside. My arms, my legs, my face, my chest – I want to cover it all.

I drop my arm and push the thoughts away. People’s demons never go away. Mine are alive and well. I can feel myself regressing a little more each day. I was fine over the summer, but now that I am back in school, I feel as though I’m in the same place I was last year. But I will not let this evil boiling within me win. I have fought it before, and I will fight it again with everything I have. I refuse to return to the hospital. I refuse to be weak.

I turn the TV on and lay silently in bed, watching a comedian make a small audience laugh until tears come to their eyes.



I’m sitting cross-legged on my front lawn with a cigarette dangling between my teeth when Rosie walks out of her house with her hot older sister. She’s been mentioning Molly was going to visit this weekend, but I didn’t expect her to look like that. Molly’s always been the hot one, but I guess college has done her even more good. She’s wearing a tiny denim skirt and Rosie’s wearing sweatpants. It doesn’t look like anything has changed between them

Rosie spots me and waves as she opens her sister’s car door. “Hey, Ricky.”

I give a half-hearted wave back and Molly looks up and grins. “Oh, hi!” she calls. “How are you doing?”

“Fine,” I say.

“You know, smoking is bad for you,” she grins.

“I don’t care.” I flick ash into the wind.

“Come on, Molly,” Rosie says, motioning for her to get into the car. “Kendra is waiting for us to get her.”

“We’re getting Rosie and Kendra homecoming dresses,” Molly tells me. “Do you want to come with us? We could use a man’s opinion.”

I’d rather spend the day with my dad. “No.”

“Your loss,” Molly coos. “I know Rosie would love for you to come.”

Rosie turns her head to give her sister what I assume is a dirty look. Molly laughs and opens the driver’s side door.

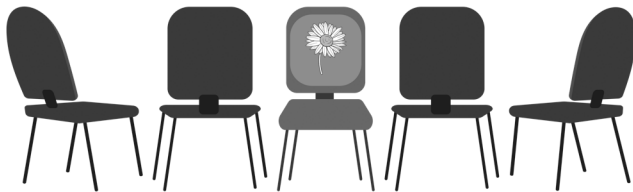
“All right, all right,” she says. “He’s not coming, then. Let’s go.”

Rosie nods, giving me a quick glance before getting into the car.

Molly backs the car out of the driveway and waves like a beauty pageant contestant before speeding away.

Rosie sure was right about one thing: her sister is a major bitch.

I snub out the cigarette in the grass and go back into my empty house.



KENDRA

In the department store, Molly leads Rosie and me to a vast display of all kinds of colorful and patterned dresses. Things have been going well enough. Rosie was quiet in the car despite Molly’s efforts to strike up a conversation. We chatted for a little bit. She seems nice

enough, but the vibe she gives off explains why Rosie isn't too fond of her.

"You're so skinny," Molly tells me as she pushes aside a few dresses to admire them. "You could wear anything you want."

"And I can't," Rosie mutters bitterly behind me.

"Well, you should definitely go for something a little...sleeker." Molly is choosing her words carefully.

"Right," Rosie scoffs. She's barely glancing at the gorgeous dresses surrounding her. I suppose it's up to me to save the day.

"You know," I begin. Molly turns to look at me. "I'm really not that interested in finding a dress for myself. I may not even go to homecoming. Dances just aren't my thing. Rosie, on the other hand, actually has a date."

"With a gay guy." Molly's expression shows her displeasure.

"It's still a date," I reply quickly. Rosie's mouth is open, ready to shoot off a verbal attack, but she clamps it shut as I speak. "We should find her a gorgeous dress."

"But this would look so good on you," Molly protests, holding a ruffled red dress out to me.

"It's pretty," I agree cautiously. Suddenly, I feel as though I'm stepping through a minefield. "I may try it on. Let's find something pink for Rosie. It's definitely her color."

Rosie gives me a grateful look. "I do like pink. But no frills. Or lace. I just want something plain and simple."

"That's so boring." Molly sounds like she's whining. She probably is. This girl can't seem to get it through her head that it's her sister's dress, not hers. Oh well. Some people simply can't have any sense knocked into them. I'll just help Rosie manage her for the time being.

"Maybe I like boring." Rosie's voice teeters on the verge of anger.

I sense a real fight brewing, so I grab Rosie by the arm and pull her to another display of dresses. "How about this strapless one?" I suggest.

"It's cute," Rosie says, but her eyes drift to a wispy sheer dress with a halter top. She thinks she's being so subtle. Molly stands behind her and crosses her arms with a huff.

I pick up the dress Rosie is eyeing and check the size. "Look, this one looks like it will fit you perfectly."

"It looks too small," she says doubtfully.

"Just try it." I place the dress in her arms and give her my biggest, most encouraging smile.

She stares at the dress for a moment then holds it against her chest to test the size against her body. "Well, okay."

"That shade of pink won't look good on you," Molly puts in from behind her. "It's too light. You need a darker pink."

"I don't want a darker pink," Rosie protests. She actually sounds confident. "I like this one." She turns back to me. "Are you trying that dress on?"

I look down at the ruffled dress Molly handed me. It's pretty, and judging by the looks of it, it could create the illusion that I actually have a chest. I don't really feel like trying on clothes again, especially since I'm not even sure if I'm going to the dance, but I know Rosie, and she may back out if I refuse. Besides, she doesn't know how much I hate clothes shopping, and now is certainly not the time to tell her. So, I give her a nod and we walk together to the dressing rooms with Molly sulking behind us.

She's making it obvious that this trip isn't going the way that she planned. I wonder how she expected this day with her little sister to go. Rosie mentioned that she has caused some pretty serious blows to her self-esteem in the past, and it's especially bad when she teams up with their mother. I guess it's a small blessing that Mrs. Cotter isn't here as well. It's the little things.

I can hear Rosie struggling to pull the dress on in the fitting room next to mine. I haven't taken my clothes off yet. She's going to be done before me and that may raise suspicion. I turn away from the full-length mirror and quickly strip my clothes off. The dress feels nice under my fingers. Silky. It will be comfortable, at least. I slip it on and pull the zipper up. Rosie is still working to get her dress on. I hear her grunting as she tries reaching for the zipper on the back. I take the spare moment to turn and glance at myself in the mirror, holding my breath as I examine every inch of the dress.

The top of it looks all right. I was right about the ruffles making my chest look bigger, but the positive aspect ends there. The ruffles follow the neckline all the way down to my waist, and then turn with a chic

curve at my left hip, where it ends in a swirling pattern. It makes my hips look large and uneven. In fact, my hips appear to have tripled in size. I can't be seen in this. My body begins to tremble and my hand darts to the zipper, ready to rip it down and pull it off my body when I hear Rosie open her door. My heart nearly stops.

"Kendra? You ready? Let me see it."

I plaster a big smile on my face. "I'm coming," I sing out as I open my door and step into the hall.

Rosie looks absolutely stunning in her dress. It hugs her in all the right the places and the color brings a soft blush to her cheeks. The simplicity of the dress itself suits her so well that it looks like it's been made for her. She keeps her arms crossed over her chest, though, and she doesn't meet my eye. Rosie isn't really one for girly clothes.

"It looks fantastic," I say. My own arms are also crossed over my chest. I want to take this dress off so badly it's beginning to stress me out. I feel the tension coiling in the pit of my stomach.

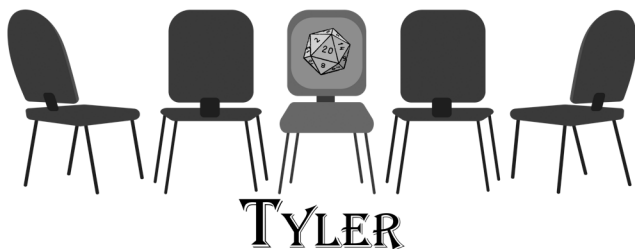
"It doesn't look too bad," Molly agrees reluctantly.

"I like it." Rosie glances over her shoulder into the full-length mirror.

"I think we found your dress." I am hoping to draw attention away from my own dress, but Rosie looks it over anyway and nods in approval.

"Yours isn't too bad," Rosie comments. "But I don't think it's for you." Maybe she's caught on to my discomfort. "You want to try on another one?"

"Not today," I say. "Today is about getting your dress. I'll look again some other time." I probably won't, though. I really don't want to go to homecoming. All the girls look so flawless in their dresses with their hair and makeup done. I certainly can't compare to them. Besides, no one wants to ask Kendra the Ice Queen - or whatever it is that they call me - to the dance anyway.



My tie is pink. Rosie could have chosen any color she wanted, and she chose pink. I hate pink. But I promised I'd match my tie to her dress, and with homecoming tonight, I can't exactly make her pick something different.

The tie is annoying. I can't get it to sit straight down my chest. I don't wear them often, and I'm pretty sure the last time I had one tied up around my neck was last Christmas. Or some important holiday. Frustrated, I pull my suit jacket on and button it, hoping it will hide the unevenness. I promised Rosie I'd pick her up, like a real date. If I keep fiddling with it, I'll be late for sure.

Mom's waiting by the front door with David, who chuckles when he sees my failed attempt to look nice. He reaches out to fix the tie, his fingers working swiftly to tie it properly.

"There," he says, brushing his hands off like he's just finished some enormous task. "Now you're set."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Mom asks. She's not asking about going to homecoming or anything, she's asking about my choice to take a girl with me. She was pretty surprised when I told her who my date was, and despite assuring her we're just going as friends, she still thinks I'm being untrue to myself.

I just give her a smile. "I'll take some pictures for you, Mom. And don't worry, I'll have fun."

She puts her palm against my cheek. "I know you will. Be safe."

"Be back by midnight," David says. "Curfew still exists."

"Yeah, I will," I agree. David's a cool guy. I see my real dad a couple times a year, but David's really the one who plays the father

role. He married my mom almost ten years ago, and I've never had a bad thing to say about the guy. I hear a lot of horror stories about crappy stepparents, but I guess I lucked out again. Maybe I'm a luckier guy than I ever really thought I was. "See you guys later."

They wave. Mom snaps a quick picture, and I get into David's car so I can pick up Rosie at her house. Her mom is nice enough to me. She snaps a few pictures, but she looks a little uncomfortable. Rosie might have mentioned that her date is gay. With her mouth, it's not like she could really keep that a secret. I can understand how that might make someone uncomfortable.

"You ready?" I ask Rosie after her mom takes one more reluctant picture. She looks nice in her dress. It fits her well, and the color looks good on her. She's even wearing a little bit of makeup, which is surprising. But it looks nice. I probably should have brought her a corsage or something. Oops.

She nods at me and grabs my wrist, pulling me outside. "Sorry," she says once her mother has closed the door safely behind us. "She can be a little crazy."

"I've dealt with worse." I say and walk with her to our borrowed chariot for the evening. "Let's just have a good night. I'll even open the car door and everything for you."

"What a gentleman," she grins, but the smile leaves her face when a door slams behind us. She turns, her mouth twisting with concern.

I follow her gaze. Ricky comes storming out of his house, face red with anger. I can see how pissed he is even in the dim evening light.

"Ricky!" Rosie calls. He turns to look at her and scowls. I sense trouble brewing in the air. "Are you doing anything tonight? Come to the dance with us."

He runs a hand through his hair. He looks distraught, like he was expecting to be outside alone, and turns without a word to go back into the house.

Rosie's face falls and she turns her attention back to me. "Come on, let's go. Kendra's waiting for us to pick her up. Alex convinced her to come."

"Are we picking him up too?" I ask. I wouldn't mind being in a

group for homecoming. It could be fun; like one of those cheesy teen movies.

“If it’s okay with you,” Rosie says. “This kind of happened last minute.”

“Sure.” I open the car door for her as promised. “I really wasn’t expecting Kendra to go.”

“Me either,” Rosie agrees as she gets into the car.

I settle into the driver’s seat and give her a smirk. “I guess Alex can have some courage sometimes.”

“What do you mean?”

I shake my head. “Never mind. Where does Kendra live?”

Rosie points. “That way. Take a left at the stoplight.”

“Maybe we all can get some dinner or something after the dance,” I suggest while I follow her directions. “I don’t have to be home until midnight.”

“I don’t know what time I have to be home. My parents never said.” She smiles. “But I think that’ll be okay. It’ll be fun to go out with everyone. Turn right here. Her house is at the end of the street.”

She’s waiting for us on her porch, sitting on the steps with her chin resting in her palms and her elbows on her knees. She’s wearing a simple black dress, one that looks more suitable for a cocktail party than a school dance, but whatever. It’s her choice what she wears. Even with the way she’s sitting, covering up most of her dress, I can tell it looks nice on her.

She stands when we pull into the driveway and waves, a bright smile on her face. Alex is going to think she looks stunning. I sure do now that she’s reached a healthy weight. Well, almost healthy. Her cheeks are still a little sunken, her arms and legs just a little too thin, but still. She looks good.

Rosie motions for her to get into the backseat and she hops in quickly. “You look nice. Where did you get the dress?”

“I’ve had it,” Kendra says simply. “Alex only talked me into this a few hours ago. I didn’t have time to go shopping.”

“It’s nice,” Rosie says.

“Yeah,” I agree. “And speaking of Alex, does anyone know where he lives?”

Kendra giggles and points down the street. “Start that way. I’ll direct you. I’ll text him and let him know we’re on our way.” She pulls out her phone, the light illuminating the car in the setting sun. She has a little bit of makeup on. It makes her face glow in an almost ethereal way.

Rosie turns around to look at her. “Tyler wants us all to go out to dinner after the dance.”

“Oh.” I can see her hesitate in the rearview mirror. “That sounds like fun.”

“You’ll go?”

“Sure,” Kendra agrees. “I already had dinner, but I’ll come sit with you guys.”

I can hear the lie in her voice. I wonder when she last had a full meal. I’ve seen her nitpick over her food at lunch, taking her sweet time to eat everything, knowing the lunch ladies are watching every bite she takes. It must be awful. I wonder if it’s hard for her just to walk into a restaurant.

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” I put in.

“I’ll go.” She sounds confident.

I drive into the parking lot of Alex’s apartment complex. It really is rundown and shabby, even the pavement, and my car bounces uncomfortably as we pull up to the entrance. Alex is waiting for us there, wearing a green button-up shirt that’s a little too big for him and black pants that show his socks. The shirt must have belonged to his dad; the pants are probably from last year.

He gets in the car and slides in next to Kendra. “Hey,” he greets simply as he buckles his seatbelt. “I’m glad you decided to come.”

“I’m glad you decided to convince me.”

Oh, great. Flirting in my backseat. I can’t get a real date and these two are oblivious to each other’s feelings. If that doesn’t sum up my high school experience, I don’t know what does. And I still have one more long year left to go after this one. I think about telling them to just go for each other, but the timing seems off. Besides, they don’t need my interference. They’ll figure it out on their own. At least, I hope they will.

When we get to the school, I hear music pounding out through the gym from the parking lot. It sounds like things have gotten wild already.

“From the sound of it, it’s really crowded in there,” Kendra says. She’s sounding unsure again.

“Don’t tell me you’re changing your mind,” Rosie says. “We’re all going to do this. We can make it fun. Besides, it’s your last chance to go to homecoming.”

“Same here,” Alex agrees. “I figured we might as well experience this at least once, date or no date.”

“We’re not going to stay long, anyway,” I put in. “We’ll have to leave before all the good restaurants close.”

“One hour,” Alex suggests. “We’ll stay for one hour.”

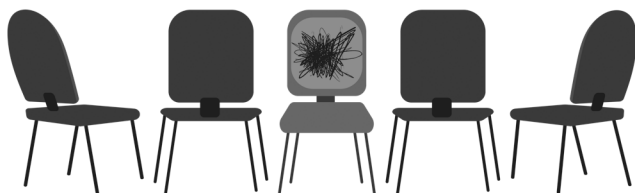
Kendra considers this for a moment. “All right. One hour.”

“Then let’s have,” Alex pauses, “what do they say? The best night of our lives?”

“That’s prom,” I correct him. “At least according to the movies.”

“We can still make it good,” Rosie says. “We’re going to have to stick together in there.”

“Then let’s go.” I turn the car off. We all glance at each other and get out, heading towards the school together.



RICKY

It’s almost eleven when that gay kid pulls into Rosie’s driveway. Damn. I was hoping to be inside before they got back from the stupid dance, but they already saw me. It’s too late to dart into the house now.

I hold my cigarette in my mouth and keep my head turned when they get out, hoping they won’t say anything. Rosie will want to know why I’m sitting cross-legged in the middle of my front lawn, and I really don’t feel like explaining that my dad came home drunk and

decided I'm the worst thing that could possibly have happened to him. Again. He only managed to get one good swing in at me before I got outside, and I'm staying out here until he goes to bed. It doesn't sound like that will be anytime soon, either. I can hear Mom trying to talk him down in the kitchen as quietly as she can. It's not quite working.

They get out of the car. The skinny bitch and the quiet guy she's been hanging around with get out, too. Great, they're going to have a fucking party next door and keep my dad up even longer.

"Ricky?" It's Rosie. Maybe if I don't move, she'll go away. "Ricky?" Or maybe not.

I sigh and turn to face her. "What?"

"We were going inside to hang out for a while. Do you want to come in too?" I expected pestering. I expected questions about what I was doing outside so late at night. This is different.

They're all staring at me expectantly, so I push myself up to stand and grind out my cigarette in the grass. "Yeah, sure."

She grins and opens the front door. "My parents are probably sleeping already, so we're going to the basement."

"I can't stay for long," Tyler says quietly as Rosie leads them inside. "I have to be home by midnight."

"And he's our ride." Kendra nudges Alex, and it looks like he's blushing at her touch.

I still don't really want to be here, but I guess anything's better than going back to my own house.

The Third Meeting

Ricky follows the rest of the group down to Rosie's basement. The stairs creak beneath his feet with each step he takes. The carpet is old and worn, but the basement is clean and furnished with a large L-shaped couch. It's a small area, meant for gatherings like this. Well. Maybe not quite like this. Ricky still isn't sure why he was summoned here with

them, but he figures a little company might be worth it. He was getting tired of sitting outside by himself.

Rosie settles herself on the soft leather couch. The others follow suit as she turns on the television for a little background noise. Ricky glances between the four of them and sits at the very end of the couch.

“Did you go to the stupid dance?” he asks to break the silence.

“For a little bit,” Kendra says. She kicks lightly at the carpet with her high-heeled shoe. She glances from Alex to Tyler to Rosie, who are all looking off in different directions. None of them are willing to admit the real reasons they decided to leave the dance.

For Kendra, she became overwhelmed the moment she walked through the threshold. She was unable to look away from the other girls’ dresses, hugging their curves perfectly. The way their bodies filled their dresses, and the way their hair and makeup were done so flawlessly, they would have fit nicely on the covers of high-end magazines. She had slipped away from the crowd and disappeared into the bathroom to calm her nerves and stare at herself in the mirror for a while.

For Rosie, it was a similar issue. She noticed the girls in their dresses, too. She also noticed their tiny frames fitting into dresses that were probably ten sizes smaller than her own. She began to feel out of place. No, more than out of place. She felt like an outcast; like the other girls were staring at her bloated body and judging her for having the audacity to show up to an event like this. This dance was not meant for her. So, she kept her head down for the brief time that they were there and avoided talking to anyone. From the furthest corner of the gym, she pretended not to notice the stares.

For Alex, the crowd became dizzying. Too many people in too small of a space. He began to feel squeezed in, and his chest tightened more and more the further he followed his friends. When his vision grew hazy, he followed Rosie to her corner, head down, and leaned against the wall to catch his breath. The music was too loud. It reverberated within his head and pulsed in his stomach. The more he struggled to breathe, the more nauseous he became. Rosie chatted with him in short, clipped sentences. It helped a little. He needed the distraction. He kept his head turned away from the crowd, trying to ignore all the people. It was difficult, and there was a brief period where he really did feel like he might

pass out right there on the gym floor. He was glad that Rosie was there to chat with, even though she seemed to be shaking and nervous herself.

For Tyler, a scene kept playing over and over in his head. Zack was there. He approached Tyler through the crowd, dressed in a jet-black suit with a shining red tie. He took Tyler's face in his hands and pulled him in for a deep kiss. They reconcile. Their relationship is rekindled, and all is right with the world. But Zack wasn't there. He had transferred to his new school. Despite all the people around him having the time of their lives, Tyler felt lonelier than ever. The reality of the break-up began to hit him again, and tears threatened to fall. He was not going to cry in front of the entire school. So, for comfort, he joined Rosie and Alex in the corner. They stayed there until Kendra emerged from the bathroom and suggested they go to dinner with a smile on her face and fake cheerfulness in her voice.

"We really didn't stay long. It was pretty lame. So, we went and ate at that diner Alex works at," Rosie tells Ricky, avoiding eye contact. "The place isn't that bad."

"My employee discount might have helped that." Alex cracks a light smile. Kendra only had a smoothie. Alex had slipped the waiter a five while she wasn't looking and told him to let Kendra know it was on the house. The rest of the group got a ten percent discount, since Alex was such a "devoted" employee. They didn't eat much anyway. Some cheese fries and mozzarella sticks were split between them, along with a side of chili for Rosie to dip the fries in. They chatted for a couple of hours, not talking about much. For the most part, they were just trying to kill time to make it seem like they actually stayed at the dance.

Ricky kicks back and rests his feet on the coffee table. "So, you all just decided to come back here?" he says flatly.

"It's...kind of a thing we do every once in a while," Rosie explains with a soft blush.

Ricky grunts in acknowledgment and turns his head away.

There is a brief moment of silence, and Kendra breaks it with the question that has been on everyone's minds. "What were you doing outside, Ricky?"

"Nothing." His response is prepared. It shoots out of his mouth like a bullet in a hair-trigger gun.

Rosie is silent, pressing her lips together to avoid another accidental slip of the tongue. She had an idea of what went on in the house next door. She's never seen it first-hand, but she's witnessed the aftermath. She heard the screaming and crashing. On multiple occasions, she even witnessed Ricky sitting cross-legged on his front lawn, holding a cigarette between his lips, and scowling at the grass. Oh yes, Rosie had strong suspicions. And on that topic, Rosie stays silent. She thinks her parents know as well, but they're far too absorbed in their own lives to worry about the neighbors.

But the others; they don't know. The others will ask questions about his odd behavior. The others might even notice the faintest of bruises on his left cheekbone, where he may have taken a good, hard punch, and ask about it. Rosie hopes the lighting in the basement is dim enough to hide his discolored flesh.

"Ah, you just enjoy sitting on front lawns." Kendra smiles wryly. She's playing with him in that sly little way she has, and Rosie worries that it will make him angry. Ricky has a temper that easily flares up. Rosie has witnessed it many times, and she did not want her friends to see the darker side of Ricky.

When they entered the basement, she hoped that Ricky would be accepted into the little group they had formed. The five of them together – it just felt right. But if Ricky were to lash out, she worried that they would never allow him to join in. Rosie realizes she wants that to happen quite badly.

But Ricky doesn't say anything. He gives her a look instead. One that says to stop, to shut up, with only a brief locking of eyes. Kendra closes her mouth.

Rosie reaches a hand out and gently places it on his shoulder. "Are you okay, Ricky?"

His face crumples for a split second. A frown tugs at the corners of his mouth, his eyes squeeze closed, before regaining his stoic composure. "Would everyone just shut up about it?"

"We just want to know if you're okay," Tyler says cautiously. "You've been out there all night, right? We were just wondering if everything was good."

Ricky stands. His hands clench into fists and his knuckles turn

white. "My dad kicked me out. You all fucking satisfied? I figured he'd forget about it by tomorrow, so I'd just stay outside until he goes to sleep."

"And you were going to sit on your front lawn until then?" Alex asks.

"Where's your mom?" Kendra adds, brows knitting together.

"In there with him." Ricky scoffs and heads for the stairs. "I'm out of here."

"Wait." Rosie stands. "You shouldn't just sit out there all night. It's kind of cold. You can sleep here, on the couch."

"I don't need handouts." But Ricky pauses on the first step, gripping the railing.

"It's not a handout," Rosie says.

Kendra glances from Tyler to Alex. "Maybe we should go. It's getting late."

Alex nods and rises to his feet. "Take her up on it. No one has to know. Besides, it'll be morning soon enough, anyway."

Ricky remains frozen on the step.

"I have to get home," Tyler says quietly. "It's almost my curfew."

"See you guys on Monday." Rosie sighs as the small group gets up to leave.

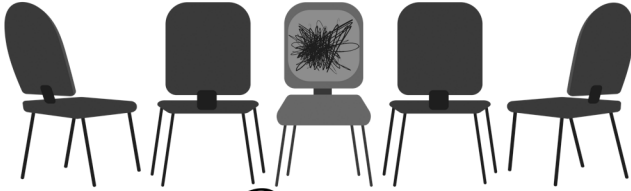
Ricky wordlessly stays in place, still gripping the railing as the others brush past him on their way upstairs. When the front door closes above, he breaks free from his trance and looks back at Rosie.

She bites her lip and gets up to pull a blanket out of the linen closet. She approaches him with caution, holding it out like a peace offering. He stares at it for a moment. It's old; a faded beige color with a few strands of thread hanging loosely from the edges. He snatches it from her arms and walks over to the couch.

With his back still turned, he mumbles something that may be words of thanks. After a moment, he adds; "Leave me alone."

"Sure," Rosie says, unfazed. "Get some sleep."

FOUR



RICKY

There's something about the changing of the seasons that always brings bad things. Don't get me wrong, I've got a pretty shitty life to start with, but there's just something about fall. As soon as it starts getting cold, something bad always happens. Always. Last year, my cousin puked on me at her Quinceañera and gave me the worst case of the flu I've ever had. The year before that, my dad smashed my fingers in the car door on "accident" and broke two of them. The year before *that*, my dad almost lost his business and spent weeks trying to sell our stuff because he was convinced we were going to be broke. I still don't know how he managed to come back from that one. But anyway, this year takes the cake.

This year tops all because grandma died yesterday. That chain-smoking old woman was the only person who kept my dad in line. He never laid a finger on me or my mom when she was around. If he treated us in a way she thought was wrong, she stopped him in his tracks, and I loved that woman for it.

And he loved her, too.

I see him sitting at the kitchen table, nursing a glass of scotch but not really drinking it. That's a first. He's been on the phone with my Aunt Nina all morning making funeral arrangements. She's flying in from Arizona tonight. Mom's getting the guest room ready for her while Dad sits slumped over the table, dragging a hand down his face.

No one has asked if I'm okay. They let me stay home from school today due to the circumstances. That's nice, I guess, but it doesn't make

me okay. It's quiet. There aren't really any birds to sing and fill up the silence since it started to get cold.

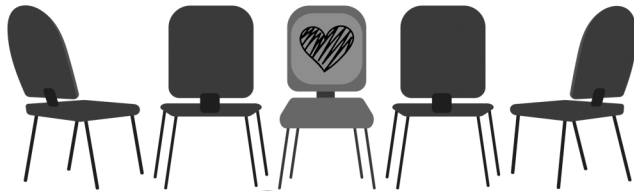
I wonder what it'll be like to walk into her house without her smoky presence there. A neighbor found her. They had tried calling her a couple times before getting concerned and using their spare key to check on her. I guess she died in her sleep. She was in her bed when they found her.

So now Aunt Nina's coming, Dad's too numb to even drink, and Mom hasn't said a word since this morning. I'm basically alone in the house with him. I've never seen him like this before, just sitting silently and staring into the wood grain on the table. I'm doing my best to keep quiet. I feel so on edge, like the tiniest movement will set him into a blind fury.

The sick thing is I almost want him to fly into a rage. That's what I expected him to do when we got the news.

But he's been quiet. And so have I.

Quiet.



ROSIE

Ricky slammed the door in my face this morning. I went to pick him up like usual and he just slammed the door in my face. No words, just the sound of the door echoing in my ears. What an asshole.

I hope he's okay.

It's not uncommon for him to skip out on school once in a while, but he looked like something bad had happened. And his dad was still home, too. He didn't look hurt, at least not physically, but knowing his dad...

“Rosie.”

I look up at Mr. Horner. My face must be completely blank because he taps my desk and tells me to pay attention.

“Sorry,” I mutter, looking down at my blank sheet of notebook paper. Maybe I can find Kendra before lunch and we can talk. I’m sure she suspects what goes on at Ricky’s house, but I don’t think she knows any more than I do about what really happens. I’m worried. I’m so worried.

Mr. Horner locks eyes with me and I look down and pretend to scribble down some notes.

Yeah, I have to find Kendra. So, when the bell rings, I jump up, already packed despite Mr. Horner’s disapproving side-eyed look, and I’m the first one out the door. Kendra should be on the third floor, and I have six minutes to catch her before the next class period starts.

I run past the main stairs. My heart pounds in my chest and my breath comes out in hard puffs. I throw open the door to the back stairs. They’re deserted and I use the railing to push myself up faster. I get up the two flights of stairs in what feels like record time and push through the door.

There she is, at her locker, looking into the small magnetic mirror hung on the inside of the door. She is frowning and applying a layer of mascara. She looks like she’s lost in her own world, and she starts when I appear in the mirror behind her. When she recovers, she breaks into a big, toothy smile.

“Hey, Rosie,” she says with sweetness in her voice. “I was just doing a little touch-up before class. Do you want some? You can borrow mine.”

“There’s something wrong with Ricky,” I blurt.

She raises a brow and closes her locker, turning to look at me. “What happened?”

“I went to pick him up this morning and he looked...he looked... look, his dad, he’s abusive. He screams and hits and flies into these... these rages that I can hear all the way at my house, and I’m scared. I’m scared that...what if something—”

She grabs my wrist, cutting me off, and begins to pull me towards the stairs. “We should talk in private.”

I bite my lip, realizing the scene I almost caused in the crowded hallway. “Right. Sorry.”

“Let’s go to the basement,” she says as the minute warning bell rings.

“Wait, we’re going to be late to class,” I protest.

“So, we’ll be late,” she says. “Something is happening to our friend, and you’re concerned. You need to talk.”

“I don’t think he really considers us friends,” I say.

“But we consider him a friend, and that’s all that matters.”

She opens the door to the basement for me and waits. I hesitate, debating. My teacher gave me a warning the last time I was late to class. If I’m late again I might actually get in trouble. But the look she’s giving me – one of comfort and compassion and...and friendship – I can’t just walk away from that. I need Kendra right now. I need my friend.

“Let’s go,” I say and head down the stairs.

Kendra follows me down and we take our seats. They’re still arranged in their little circle, exactly the way we left them. Alex was right; no one comes down here.

So, we sit in the desks we sat at last time. My desk creaks underneath me, and it still makes me a little nervous, but I have bigger problems right now.

“You know, I had a feeling he was having issues at home,” Kendra offers. She’s trying to get me talking, and I’m grateful for that since I feel like I’m beginning to lose my steam. I could just be worrying over nothing. I’ve done that plenty of times before.

“I don’t know how bad it is,” I admit, “I never asked him about it. It really isn’t my place.”

“But it is your place,” Kendra assures me. “As his friend, it is your place.”

“What am I even supposed to say? He shuts me down in a normal conversation.”

Kendra sighs and leans back in her seat, looking up at the ceiling. “Oh, I don’t know. I think when the time comes, the words will just come. You know? Even if Ricky doesn’t want to hear them, and even if he doesn’t want the word out, it’s important that you say something.

They've been telling us since elementary school to report anything wrong with our friends."

"No one ever reported anything about you."

She cringes. Me and my damn mouth.

"No," she agrees after a moment of consideration. "But maybe they should have."

I pause. "What do you mean?"

She looks like she wants to answer me for a second, but she shakes her head and flashes me a smile. "Never mind. Let's go back upstairs. We must be pretty late by now."

She wants to say something else. I can feel it. But I've been working really hard to not pressure people into answering my questions. If she wants to tell me, she'll tell me eventually.

"Right." I stand, wobbling the desk. "Let's go."

We walk up the stairs side-by-side and she places a hand on my arm. "Talk to Ricky," she urges. "Try to get him to talk to you. It's really important. You know that, right?"

"I know." I don't think I sound very convincing.

"Call me tonight, and let me know what happens," Kendra says as we step into the bright hallway.

"All right," I promise.

She walks down the hallway. Her frame is so tiny she practically seems to disappear as she turns the corner. Damn. What I wouldn't give for a body like that. Mom's still been pressuring me to work out, but the results, or lack thereof, are totally unsatisfying.

I twist at a lock of my hair as I walk to class and glance at the clock hanging in the hallway. I'm going to be about ten minutes late and in a world of trouble, I'm sure. I wonder if it's even worth it to walk into class this late, but I've got nothing better to do. Any punishment I get is worth it, anyway. I really needed to talk. I do feel better, and I'm going to talk to Ricky as soon as I get home.

I open the classroom door and Mrs. Tanaka stops mid-sentence to turn and look at me. She raises a brow and gives me a questioning look.

"So, you weren't absent after all, Rosie," she says. She sounds passive aggressive about it. "Just where were you?"

"Uh, bathroom," I stammer, looking down at my feet and

pretending to be embarrassed. Maybe if I fake some kind of gastric distress, she'll let me off easy.

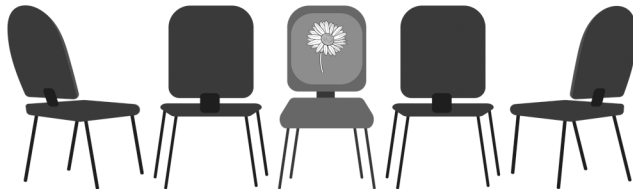
But she looks skeptical. I can tell she sees through my lie.

"Did you go to the nurse and get a note?" she asks.

"Well..."

She doesn't let me finish. Instead, she turns her back to me and pulls a stack of pink slips out of her desk drawer. I've seen them before, but I've never received one myself.

I clamp my mouth shut as she begins to fill it out. I know if I open up my big, fat mouth, I'll just fight back. And I'll probably earn myself another detention while I'm at it. So, when she turns to hand me the slip, I take it without any protest and go to my desk. A few people snicker as I walk past them, and one guy even tries to stick his foot out to trip me, but I make it to the seat unscathed. When I sit down and Mrs. Tanaka goes back to teaching, I examine my detention slip. As luck would have it, I get to report to detention tomorrow. Friday. Great.



KENDRA

I certainly didn't mind that Rosie hunted me down to talk. She clearly needed to, after all. I do mind that now I have an ugly-colored pink detention slip in my possession. My record was already spotty thanks to my semester-long absence, but now I have to go home and explain to my parents that I have my very first detention after being let off with a warning the last time I was late. I'm sure they'll be thrilled for me.

But detention is just one day. Two hours in the library, sitting in

silence with other delinquents. I can make it through that. That, I can handle.

What really pisses me off is that Rosie didn't ask me anything about how I was doing. I know we only had a short time to talk, but couldn't she see that something was clearly bothering me? She should know I'm not the type to stare at myself in the mirror between classes. She should have known that something is wrong with me.

Something is bothering me. Something has been bothering me since homecoming.

Something happened there; something that I haven't made peace with yet.

I relapsed.

Oh, how hard that is to admit. Oh, what a terrifying word it is: Relapse. I didn't spend all that time in the bathroom during the dance doing nothing. I broke. The dresses, the perfection, the thought of my body being examined so judgmentally by the others just as I was judging them...I cracked. And ever since then, I have been fighting with all of my might to close that crack, to be strong, to forget those feelings. And it's not working.

I'm scared. And the longer I'm forced to be here, to interact with these people, the more scared I become.



The bell rings and I stand up to leave, but Mrs. Preston catches my eye and motions for me to come to her desk. Her usually stern expression looks even more intense if that's possible. This probably means I'm

in trouble. My stomach does a flip and I'm grateful that Kendra has already slipped out of the room.

"Alex," she says as I reach her desk. She pulls an empty folder out of the drawer and shows it to me. "Do you know what this is?"

"A folder?" I'm not trying to be sarcastic or anything. I really don't know what it is or why she's showing it to me.

"This is your folder." She opens it up to emphasize its emptiness. "This is the folder I use to keep your homework organized. As you can see, there's nothing in it. Do you know why that would be?"

"Your dog ate it?" Okay, now I'm being sarcastic.

She narrows her eyes. "My dog has not had the pleasure of eating your homework, Alex. This is because you haven't turned it in. In fact, you haven't turned in any of your homework for a week now. Why is that?"

Well, crap. I meant to do that homework. I really did. I've been so focused on bumping up my English grade that I completely neglected my math homework. My backpack is full of it. But I had two papers. One was a make-up book report that I had to write as quickly as possible, the other was a five-page essay on the Gothic period. It was boring and I was desperate to get it turned in on time for once, so I just kind of threw everything else aside and forgot about it.

"Look, I'm sorry," I start. "Can I get it to you on Monday? I had a lot going on. I'll get it all done over the weekend. I promise."

She eyes me carefully, her lips pressed in a thin, harsh line. She takes a moment to consider my offer. "I'll accept the late work for half-grade."

"Half-grade? You mean even if I get it perfect, I'll still only get a fifty percent on it?"

"You can take the half-credit, or you can take no credit. The choice is yours." I wonder if she just enjoys torturing her students.

I sigh and sling my bag over my shoulder. "I'll take it."

She watches me walk halfway to the door before speaking again. "Just where do you think you're going?"

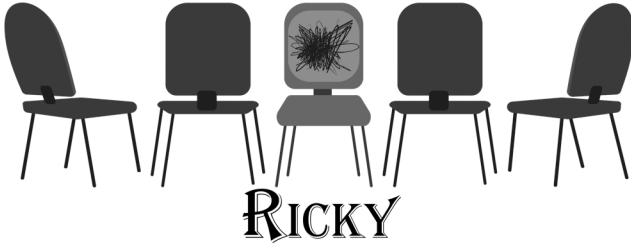
I pause. "My next class?"

"Not without this."

I turn around and see that she is holding a tiny pink sheet out to me. A detention slip. It's not my first one but that sting of anger in the

center of my chest is the same every time. She watches me silently as I approach, snatch the slip from her hand, and walk back out the door. At least I can start all that make-up work while I'm sitting in the library.

Mom will just have to cover for me at work while I'm there.



“Wake up.”

I lift my head from my pillow, barely recognizing the voice. Sounds like Dad, but it's too calm to be him.

“Come on, get up.”

I rub my eyes before opening them. It is Dad, standing in the doorway and tapping his foot impatiently.

“What?” I ask.

“You're going to be late for school.”

“I'm not going to school. Your mother died, remember?”

“Oh, I remember.” He still sounds calm. “We have a lot of planning to do for the funeral on Sunday and you're just going to be in the way. Now get up and get ready. You can eat in the car. I'll drive you.” He doesn't even wait for me to say anything back; he just turns around and walks downstairs.

I could be half asleep still, but it seemed like he was almost being gentle.

I get up and grab some clothes that are hanging off my desk chair. They're probably clean. I'll most definitely be late at this point, so I knock back some mouthwash, swish it, spit, and hurry downstairs. Mom is sitting at the kitchen table with Aunt Nina going over some plans. They don't even notice when I walk past them.

Dad's waiting in the car. When I get in the passenger seat, he tosses a granola bar in my lap and peels out of the driveway.

He doesn't say anything the entire way to school. I eat the crappy breakfast in silence, which I'm okay with. I don't really have anything to say to him anyway. I mean, really, what do I say? 'Sorry your mom died?' 'I'm glad you're not violent right now?' 'Should I expect you to fly off the handle anytime soon?' I can't say anything. So I just stay quiet. He probably wants it this way too.

He doesn't even say bye or wish me a good day or anything when I get out of the car, not that I was expecting it. I stand on the curb and watch him drive out of the drop-off parking lot before heading into school. First period has already started, which means I'm already in trouble.

I walk into the lobby and the hallways are eerily silent. I'm sure there are hall monitors everywhere just waiting to write me up. They love doing that. Trying to avoid them, I walk through the halls as silently as possible to get to my class. American Lit is probably the most boring class I have right now, so I'm not too torn up about missing the first ten minutes. My obnoxious old fart of a teacher might have a different opinion though.

When I reach the door, it's closed. Mr. Connor is lecturing about the very end of *Catcher in the Rye*. I can hear his overpowering voice clearly through the door, and I really don't want to sit through this. I could turn around and leave. I really could. No one's seen me. I could sneak back home, use the tree in the backyard to climb into the house through the upstairs bathroom window. Dad would be none the wiser.

Then again, spending the day cooped up in my room sounds just as unappealing.

The door opens.

"Mr. Pinto, are you going to stand out there all day, or are you actually going to join us?"

Caught.

"Sorry," I mutter. "I'm coming to class. I'm a little late."

Mr. Connor crosses his arms over his fat chest and glares at me through beady eyes behind thick glasses. "Well, that is no surprise. You're always just 'a little late,' aren't you?"

“I guess.”

“Well, I’m not going to stand for it anymore,” he says. “I am tired of you disrupting my class by coming in whenever you please. I’ve let you get away with it long enough, but not anymore.”

“Look, my grandma died, and my house has been a mess,” I try to explain.

“You know I accept no excuses. Or at least you would know if you attended my class properly.” He motions to my desk in the front row. “Take your seat.”

“That’s it?” I ask as I slide into the desk with the rest of the class watching me with interest.

“That is not it.” Mr. Connor goes to his desk and pulls out a stack of detention slips. I’ve already been handed plenty of them this year, what’s one more? “You will serve after-school detention tonight. Understand?”

The class lets out a chorus of “Ooohs” as he walks up to my desk and holds it out for me to take.

I snatch it out of his hand roughly. “I understand.”

The Fourth Meeting

Kendra sits at a library table, resting her cheek in the palm of her hand and looking out the large window at the low-hanging sun. The new librarian, Miss Keener, is at her desk at the entrance of the library. She doesn’t spare the handful of students in detention a glance. Kendra taps the table with her finger absently. Another punished student had told her that Miss Keener doesn’t care what anyone does while serving detention as long as they’re reasonably quiet about it. Since the school can’t afford to pay a detention monitor anymore, Miss Keener was asked to do the job. From what Kendra has heard, she isn’t terribly happy about it.

She thinks about how boring the next two hours are going to be. She’s brought some homework to work on, but she doesn’t really feel

like doing it. A few of the students have pulled out headphones and are listening to music. Others are absently texting. One or two are actually working on their homework. Kendra has never had detention before, but she can differentiate the seasoned detention-goers from the newbies.

Kendra is reaching into her bag for a textbook when Rosie walks in and hands her pink slip to Miss Keener. She brightens at the familiar face and waves Rosie over to sit next to her.

“You too, huh?” Rosie asks as she lowers herself into the wobbly library chair.

“We did both skip out on class together.” Kendra smiles lightly. “It’s no surprise we were destined to meet here. Have you ever been trapped here before?”

“Never, since we lucked out that time we were late,” Rosie sighs heavily.

“I see.” Kendra taps her fingers on the table again. “What do you think people do to pass the time?”

Rosie shrugs. “Probably homework.” She looks up. “Look, another familiar face.”

Alex is handing his detention slip to Miss Keener. After she signs him in, he shoves his hands in his pockets and keeps his head down. He doesn’t notice Rosie and Kendra until he’s pulled out a chair at another table and starts to sit. They wave to catch his attention. He hesitates for a moment before pushing the chair back in and joining them.

“What are you in for?” Rosie asks light-heartedly.

He sighs and leans back in his chair. “I didn’t do my math homework. My teacher got pissed. I was planning on doing it now. I’m getting half-credit. It sucks, but it’s better than nothing.”

“I thought you worked on Fridays,” Rosie says.

“I do.” Alex kicks at the thin carpet under the table. “My mom is covering for me until I can get there. She was supposed to have the night off.”

“I’m sorry,” Kendra sympathizes. “We can leave you alone so you can do your homework. We really should be doing ours, too.”

Alex shrugs. “It’s all right. I wasn’t expecting you guys to be here. I’d rather hang out with you to pass the time.” It’s brief, but his gaze shifts towards Kendra. Rosie sees it happen and looks down at her lap.

“What about your homework?” Kendra asks with genuine concern.

“I’ll find the time, don’t worry. I have Sunday off.”

Kendra remains unconvinced. “If you’re sure.”

“Oh, it’s Ricky,” Rosie says.

Kendra and Alex turn to look at Miss Keener’s desk, where Ricky is handing her a pink slip. She waves him towards the tables with an air of familiarity. Judging by the look on the librarian’s face, this is far from Ricky’s first time.

He places his hands in his pockets casually as he saunters over towards the group. Rosie raises an arm and silently waves him over. He glances at her, debating. His eyes scan over the other vacant tables, considering them before pulling a hand from his pocket, running it through his mussed dark hair, and plopping himself in the seat across from Rosie.

“Hey.”

“I texted you yesterday,” Rosie blurts. “What happened? Something’s not right.”

Kendra and Alex exchange a glance. Ever since homecoming and Ricky’s outburst, they had been a little cautious of him. Kendra could sense him screaming inside. She could see how much help he needed. In fact, she had been turning over ideas, trying to think of a way to help him ever since that day. So far, she has come up with nothing. She only hopes Rosie will take her advice and talk to him soon.

“My grandma died.”

The statement is said so casually that Kendra feels her breath catch in her throat.

“Oh.” Rosie scratches at the mock wood of the tabletop. “I’m sorry, Ricky.”

He shrugs and pushes his chair back, propping his feet up on the table. Miss Keener looks over, rolls her eyes, and decides not to bother yelling at him. “She was old.”

“I’m still sorry,” Rosie says.

“It’s always hard to lose someone,” Kendra adds. “But why are you serving detention?”

“I was late to class.”

“Same,” Kendra and Rosie say in unison. They both smile, as if they had rehearsed their response.

“Well, aren’t you lucky,” Alex jokes. “I only got in because I didn’t do my homework.”

Ricky rolls his eyes, not amused.

A silence falls over the small group until Kendra looks past Ricky’s shoulder and her features spread into a winning smile. “Don’t tell me you have detention too.”

Ricky and Alex both turn to see Kendra’s newest target. Tyler stops behind them, his backpack slung haphazardly over his shoulder.

“Oh, hey.” He looks over at all of them, crowded together at the table. “I was just going to the War Games club meeting. Do you guys *all* have detention?”

“As fate would have it,” Kendra says and motions to the last empty chair. “Care to keep us company?”

“Yeah,” Rosie says. “What do you even do at a War Games club?”

Tyler shrugs and takes the seat offered to him. “We mostly play tabletop games, *Dungeons and Dragons*, card games, and stuff. It’s pretty fun.” His eyes flick over to a senior making his way into the meeting room. “I like it.”

Ricky catches the brief look and scoffs.

Kendra smiles. “We won’t keep you.”

“I don’t mind hanging out for a while,” Tyler says with a shrug. “You guys look bored.”

“Wasn’t there someone you wanted to see?” Kendra nudges him.

Rosie snickers quietly. “Like that hot senior you were just eyeballing?”

A flush graces Tyler’s cheeks. “Well, I have to move on at some point, you know.”

Kendra touches his arm gently. “Have you even seen Zack since... you know?”

Shaking his head, Tyler leans forward and folds his arms on the tabletop, resting his chin in his arms. “He transferred over to the Catholic school. He didn’t even try to find me on his last day here to say goodbye. He never tried to call or text me. He even blocked me from all social media. I don’t get it. He only ended things because his parents

found out about us. They were pissed. Zack never wanted his parents to find out he was gay, at least not until he left for college. You know how that sort of thing goes.”

Kendra sighs. “It really is a shame. He shouldn’t have felt like he had to—”

“Who the hell cares?” Ricky interrupts. “Anyone who doesn’t have the decency to fight for what they really want isn’t worth fighting for at all.”

All eyes are on Ricky, astounded by the sudden insight. Ricky is cold, unfeeling, only out for himself. Tyler also gets the feeling that Ricky is uncomfortable around him, and he doesn’t think it’s because of his personality.

“I know,” Tyler says. “But you don’t get it. It’s not that easy to just... let someone like him go.”

“Getting over a relationship takes time,” Rosie tries to comfort him. “At least, that’s what I’ve heard.”

Ricky rolls his eyes dramatically enough for Rosie to notice. “You’re really in no place to talk. The closest thing you’ve had to a date was that guy taking you to the stupid dance.”

“Hey!” Rosie cries out in offense, earning an angry glare from Miss Keener. She leans forward and lowers her voice to a harsh whisper. “You’re one to talk; I’ve seen you sneak girls into your room. Or did you forget that I have a perfect view of your bedroom window?”

“I’m well aware of all your spying,” Ricky snarls.

“Hey.” Kendra reaches out and grips Rosie’s arm. “This is no place to fight. We’re all here to keep each other company, not talk about relationships or lack thereof.” She shifts her gaze to Ricky. “Calm down, please. You two live next door to each other. You’re bound to see...things.”

Ricky grunts in some sort of acknowledgement, but he pushes his chair back and stands regardless. “I’m out of here.”

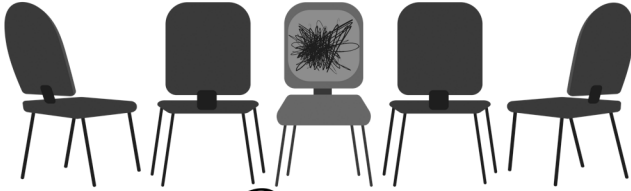
Rosie looks down at her hands. “Stay. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Yeah, no need to sit alone for the next two hours. You can stay,” Alex puts in. Tyler nods in agreement and Kendra gives him another one of her winning smiles.

Ricky looks over at the empty table in the corner. Part of him wants to be over there, serving his sentence alone. But these people – strangers, most of them – actually sound like they want him to stay. Sometimes, he wonders if his own mother cares that much about him. She never seems to be there when he's getting screamed at or beat on. She never says a word when his bruises are obvious. She never even tries to apologize on her husband's behalf. But these people can see what he's going through, even though they try to tip-toe around him. They are making an effort to make him feel included, and that counts for everything.

Without another word, Ricky sits.

FIVE



RICKY

Saturday comes with a haze of rain and fog. How cliché.

The funeral is in the late morning, but we're still running late getting there. Aunt Nina was crying so much that she had to reapply her makeup three times. Dad didn't yell at her to hurry it up like he normally would. He's been calm. Even as he drives all of us to the funeral home, he's quiet. His hands grip the steering wheel, and he stares soberly at the road ahead. It puts me on edge.

The rest of the family is already at the funeral home. I can hear them texting Aunt Nina over and over again. She's sitting next to me in the car, so I peer over at her phone and see that she's telling everyone we're almost there. She won't tell them why we're all running so late, though.

As Dad pulls into the parking lot and we get out of the car, the hazy rain turns into a downpour. He stares up at the sky with a scowl.

"Not going to be able to bury her today," he grumbles. "It'll be too muddy."

"It's supposed to pass," Aunt Nina informs him. "Maybe the ground won't be too wet."

"We'll worry about it later," Mom says, and she slips her hand into Dad's. To my surprise, he actually let's her do it. "Right now, we have family waiting for us."

He frowns. "Right."

We walk into the funeral home together. Immediately, my dad and Aunt Nina are bombarded with family we haven't seen in years. They offer their sympathy and Dad takes it calmly while Aunt Nina starts to

sob and hug distant relatives. I try slowly inching away from the chaos. I don't want to be hugged or touched or offered sympathy that might not even be real.

I'm almost to the door, planning to make a break for it, when I see a group of familiar faces.

Oh hell, what are they all doing here?

"Ricky!" Kendra raises an arm no bigger than a stick and waves me over. The girl looks sick. Haven't those friends of hers noticed how pale she's gotten? How much thinner she is since that dance?

I can feel the scowl on my face as I walk over to join her, Rosie, Alex, and Tyler. "What are you doing here?"

"You wouldn't tell us where the funeral was," Rosie says timidly. She's twisting her hands around. "I found the obituary online and..."

"We thought you could use some support," Kendra says for her. "I suggested we all come."

Alex shrugs as if it's no big deal. "I had the morning off, anyway."

Tyler hasn't looked at me yet, which is fine by me. I can tell he's not too comfortable around me and I can't say I'm his biggest fan either. I wonder how they convinced him to come.

"You shouldn't have done that," I say.

"You looked like you needed a friend yesterday." Kendra puts her hand on my shoulder. I shrug it off and she sighs haughtily. "We don't have to stay, you know. We'll leave if you tell us to."

People are filing into the tiny chapel. Mom is walking in with Dad and she turns to glance back at me, telling me to follow with her eyes. I don't bother responding to Kendra. They'll come in whether I tell them to leave or not. Instead, I just follow Mom and Dad inside.

The chapel really is small. There are ten rows of pews on each side, and a stained-glass portrait of a sleeping lamb at the front, behind the altar or whatever it's called. There are lit candles on the table draped with red fabric. Grandma's favorite color was red. I guess they did that on purpose. Her coffin is right in front of the stained-glass lamb. It's closed, unlike at the visitation last night, where her dead body was on display for the whole world to see.

Mom and Dad sit in the very first pew, but I pick an empty one a few rows back. Mom turns around and motions for me to join them. I

shake my head. She bites her lip and glances at my dad, but he isn't even paying attention. I can only see the back of his head, but it looks like he's staring at the coffin. It's pretty, at least. Pearly white with brass handles. It was expensive. I saw the bill on the kitchen table.

Mom lets out an exasperated sigh and turns to face forward. The preacher from my mom's church is standing at the podium. Dad doesn't go to church. Neither do I. Mom gave up on trying to get us to go with her years ago. Aunt Nina goes to church too, but it's not like she could get her preacher to fly out here to lead a funeral for someone he never met. Grandma went to church with Mom a few times, so the preacher knows her at least a little bit.

He starts reading some quotes from the Bible at the podium. I guess they're supposed to be comforting, to reassure people about death and that everything is all part of a grand plan or something like that. It's not really convincing. Everything the guy is saying is pretty obscure.

Dad turns his head away from the preacher and away from Mom, too. He doesn't look like he's paying attention. He actually looks...sad? Upset?

There's no way this is happening. The single tear on my dad's cheek is so unreal that I'm sure this is a dream now. The people who call themselves my friends showing up, Dad crying, the ethereal way the colorful sunlight shines on the casket despite the rain – none of it seems real. But, as the preacher claps his hands together and tells people to join him in a prayer, I am snapped back into reality. As everyone is bowing their heads, I glance behind me and see Rosie, Kendra, Alex, and Tyler all bowing their heads, too. How fake. They never knew my grandma. They don't know what kind of person she was. They couldn't even guess.

The prayer ends and the preacher steps away from the podium. He holds his hands out to everyone in the pews and calls for people to come up and share something about my grandma.

My great aunt Angela gets up first. She walks to the podium slowly with the use of her chipped cane and talks about all the times they spent cooking together when they were little. It's nice, and the audience eats her story up.

After great aunt Angela, a few of grandma's friends get up and share

more stories of their favorite memories. The old ladies hobble away from the podium and Aunt Nina walks up next. She's blubbing so badly I can hardly understand what she's trying to say. She keeps using a crumpled tissue to wipe away her tears as she talks. I was sure she had finished all her crying this morning, but I guess not. The woman's probably going to need an IV drip for dehydration once all of this is over.

I'm pretty sure no one in the pews understood a word of what Aunt Nina said, and when she steps down from the podium, everyone shifts uncomfortably. All eyes turn my dad. He dips his head, cheeks turning red, and a scowl forms on his mouth.

The chapel has gone silent. Mom nudges his arm and whispers something about embarrassing her. He jerks her arm away and, under the scrutinizing stare of everyone there, stands and walks to the front in three long strides.

Damn. I was hoping he would expose his true nature. He was so close.

He leans toward the microphone and grips the edges of the podium. "My mother," he begins, and he grits his teeth, "was a wonderful woman. She spent a lot of time with us growing up, and I have very fond memories of her. She will be missed." He steps down and sits heavily back in the pew.

How generic. I've never heard such a heartless speech. Dad loved his mom. I know that. He's never had a way with words, but that's no excuse. Even Mom is giving him a sour look, but she makes no effort to go up and say anything herself. She loved grandma too, but it's not like she was her mother or anything.

The funeral is pretty much over after the handful of speeches. The preacher gets up and invites everyone to join him in prayer again. I've never been to a funeral before, but it sure seems like a lot of praying for such a short event. Everyone bows their heads again and the preacher goes on and on about a valley and fearing no evil. I don't really see what that has to do with dying, but whatever. The other people in the pews seem to be enjoying it.

The preacher dismisses us like a teacher at the end of class, and everyone gets up. My parents, Aunt Nina, and other members of the family line up at the doorway. Mom motions me over and, after looking

around in an attempt to find a way out, I join them. People I've never seen before make their way down the lines. They hug my family members while muttering about how sorry they are. I doubt they really are sorry, but whatever. I'm in no mood to be hugged by anyone, so I stay a step behind Mom and hope people will get the message.

Mom glances back at me and touches my arm. "Why don't you invite your friends over to the house? You look like you could use some company." She must see the surprise on my face. "I know those are your friends over there. I saw Rosie. I can only assume the other three are your friends, too."

"Sort of," I mutter. I was planning to just hide up in my room and avoid all the strangers in my house, but if I don't at least attempt to invite them, Mom will do it herself.

They make their way through the line and stop in front of me. Kendra smiles sympathetically and grabs my hands before I can pull them away.

"I really am sorry for your loss, Ricky," she says.

"That's very kind of you," my mother says, and smiles right back at her. Dad is too distracted by my grandma's elderly friends to cut in. Good. Just having Mom acknowledge these people is bad enough.

"We weren't going to miss a chance to support our friend," Tyler tells her. I really wish he would stop calling me that.

Mom gives me an encouraging look and I sigh.

"We're having a gathering or whatever at my house after this. You guys can come if you want to," I say.

"Sorry, man," Alex slaps a hand on my shoulder. "I have to get to work. I'm really sorry. I know how it feels to lose someone. It sucks, but it gets a little easier over time."

I mutter something that resembles a thank you.

"I can't make it either," Tyler says. "I've got a lot of work to do for class on Monday."

"It's fine," I reply simply.

Mom is now looking at Kendra and Rosie expectantly.

"I'm coming," Rosie says. "I live next door, how could I not?"

Kendra gives me that big, toothy smile of hers again. "Rosie is my ride. That means I'm coming as well."

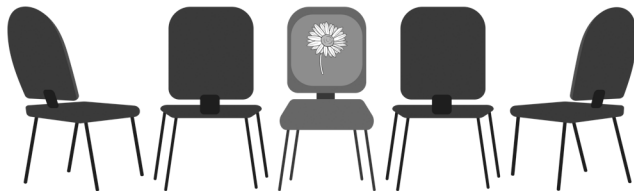
“It will be wonderful to see you there,” Mom says. She turns away from them and squeezes my dad’s shoulder. He gives her a nod and turns to tell my relatives it’s time to head to our house to get set up.

The rest of the night goes okay. I can’t exactly escape to my room with my ‘friends’ here, so I end up jamming myself into the farthest corner of the room while I try to avoid all the kisses, hugs, and half-assed words of sympathy from people I’ve seen maybe once in my life.

Rosie stays by the food table most of the time. No surprises there. I watch her sample some of everything while Kendra keeps her head turned away. She looks like she wants to eat, though. Her eyes keep darting over to the spread. I don’t know what her deal is. Her cheeks are sinking into her face again, just like last year before she passed out in gym. She wasn’t allowed to come back to school until she had control of herself. Looks like she’s failing at that.

They don’t stay very long, and they leave after Mom offers both of them big plates of food to take home. Rosie accepts her offer, but Kendra waves her hands and declines, making up some bullshit excuse about how her mom was making a big dinner and she didn’t want to spoil it. My mom doesn’t even give her a second thought. She just thanks them for coming, motions for me to come over to do the same, and sees them out the door.

I didn’t see my dad the whole time.



KENDRA

I didn’t mention my relapse to them. The timing seemed off. Ricky was so clearly distraught, and Tyler was obviously distracted by the senior in the War Games club, I just didn’t feel like confessing.

Besides, what could they have given me aside from unwanted sympathy?

I am sitting at the usual lunch table, waiting for Rosie to make her way through the long cafeteria line. She has begun to keep a better eye on what she eats and as a result, she's been taking a lot longer to select her meals. Unfortunately, her figure has nothing to show for it.

I glance down at my own lunch. Spinach salad, vinaigrette dressing, grilled chicken breast, carrots, and sunflower seeds. It looks delicious. Mom's food always does.

A chair scoots out from the table and someone sits, followed by another person. I look up, expecting to see Rosie and Ricky, but instead find myself face-to-face with Amber and Marie.

I haven't seen them in a while.

The three of us were once best friends. We met in middle school, sixth grade, science class. We all sat in the back together, giggling and gossiping like young girls do. They were –and still are – flawless. I longed to be like them. Amber with her fiery red curls and green cat eyes that are probably contact lenses but look beautiful regardless. Marie with her smooth features and olive skin. There are years of makeovers and sleepovers behind us. History. But it fizzled out slowly after the incident in gym class. They would stop by to see me in the hospital every once in a while, but eventually, as expected, they simply stopped coming. It hurt at first, like I had lost another part of me, but after a while I just stopped caring.

They have made no effort to talk to me since then.

"Hi," I say, and they must hear the shock in my voice because Amber breaks into a laugh and Marie's lips twitch into a bright grin.

"What are you doing sitting all by yourself?" Amber asks. "You could come join us, you know."

"I'm actually waiting for a friend," I say.

"You don't sit with us anymore," Marie puts in.

"You don't talk to me anymore," I say back. There is an uncontrollable bitterness in my voice.

"We kind of fell apart, I know, but we still want to be friends with you." Amber reaches across the table and tries to grab my hand in a comforting way, but I pull away.

"I'm not interested," I say. "I have real friends now."

"Hey!" Marie cries, offended. "We are your real friends!"

"Real friends don't leave when they're needed the most!" I stab my fork into my salad, all the anger I had tried to block away from last year suddenly flooding in and burning my cheeks. "Don't you try to tell me you're my real friends!"

"Oh, and that fat bitch is?" Amber has venom in her voice. She was always so judgmental. "And the quiet boy, and the gay kid? Those are your real friends?"

"We've been watching you, Kendra," Marie says. "We see who you're hanging out with, and we don't like it."

"Why should I even care what you think?" I spit back. "Those people have done more for me in the past month than you two ever did in the past six years."

"You were in the hospital," Amber points out. "What were we supposed to do?"

"Visit me," I say. "Be supportive. Be my friend."

Marie wrinkles her nose. "It was so gross there. Everything was so plain, and it smelled weird."

"Like cleaning solution. All the time," Amber adds, as if that's some kind of excuse.

"Yeah," Marie agrees. "Like cleaning solution."

"It was a hospital!" I slam my fork down and pause, taking a moment to regain my composure. After a slow exhale, I say, "Look, I'm happy with my new friends, okay? It's pretty clear that our friendship is over."

Rosie walks up. She stands behind Amber and Marie with a confused look. She probably knows nothing of them. How could she? I never said anything about them, and our paths didn't cross until that fateful day in the second-floor bathroom.

Amber scoffs and stands, slamming her palms on the table. "Fine. But don't come crying to us when these 'new' friends of yours end up turning their backs on you."

"You mean like you did?"

Marie looks down, guilty, but still stands with Amber. "We're still open to being friends again."

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I wave at them in good nature as they walk away. The gesture is just as fake as they are. Rosie sits in Marie’s place.

“Who were they?” she asks as she opens her milk carton.

I sigh and pick lightly at my food. “Some old friends of mine. After...after last year, they haven’t really had anything to do with me.”

“Why were they talking to you now?”

I shrug. “They seemed to think I don’t have a good selection of friends.”

“That’s dumb.” Rosie picks up her fork and stabs at her lukewarm pasta.

“Well, they’re not the most intelligent girls,” I say.

Rosie looks down at her plate and stays silent for a moment. I can tell she is concerned about these old, skinny friends of mine. They appear flawless on the outside, but I know them on the inside.

“For the record,” I say with a smile, “you’re a far better friend than those two ever were.”

She grins. “Thanks. That really means a lot.”

“I know it,” I say, and finish the rest of my lunch.



Mom is knocking on the bathroom door.

How long have I been in here?

I can’t remember.

“Alex?” Mom knocks again. “Alex, are you okay? We have to leave for work in ten minutes. Are you ready?”

I look down. My hand is trembling, and there are fresh, angry red welts running up the length of my forearm. What happened? The last

thing I remember, I was sitting at my desk, working on some make-up math homework, and getting more and more frustrated. And now I'm here. My nails are poised over the old, faded scars like claws. They always were my weapon of choice when I lost control of myself. It's been a while, but it looks like it happened again. Luckily, Mom unknowingly pulled me out of it before I could do any actual damage. I'm not even bleeding yet.

I really need to be more aware of what I'm doing. I don't even remember coming in here.

"Alex?"

"I'll be out in a minute!" I call, and my voice cracks.

"Are you sick? Do you need to stay home?" She sounds concerned, and it's not for my well-being. Rent is due in a couple of days. Mom mentioned we might end up being short for it. The diner's been unusually slow lately.

"I'm fine." I pull the sleeve of my jacket down over my arm, climb out of the bathtub, and throw open the bathroom door. "All good, see? I can go. I'm ready."

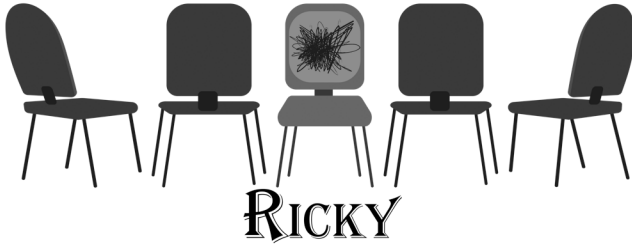
I mean that. I actually feel ready for a night of waiting tables and doing dishes. Before, the only thing that could pull me out those blackout moments was when I saw the scattered drops of blood bubbling to the surface of my skin, but I didn't do it today. Mom woke me up before I could scratch myself too hard, and she'll never know what she did. It feels good to be stopped. Much better than it feels to be torn open. Maybe there's hope that one day my scars will disappear completely.

Mom examines my face. She takes my chin in her hand and checks for any sign that something might be wrong. When she's satisfied, she pats my back and gently pushes me toward the door. The cat watches us from the couch, waving her tail back and forth calmly.

She points to the cat and says sternly, "Don't you scratch that couch up while we're gone. We can't afford a new one." The cat meows defiantly in response and Mom turns her attention back to me. "Do you have everything?"

I pat my pockets to check. "My wallet." I grab it off the kitchen counter. It's thin and tattered, and there's only a few singles stuffed into

it. It's Friday. Hopefully after my shift, it'll be a little fatter. "Okay, I'm ready."



Rosie spots me before I can make it outside with my lunch tray. I usually try to get out into the courtyard before she and Kendra are through the lunch line, but it looks like they both brought their lunches today and they're sitting at the table right by the door.

I stop. They know I saw them and Rosie waves me over. I prefer to eat my lunch sitting alone on the grass, especially while it's still warm enough to do that, but if I walk away now, I'll look like a total ass.

I glance down at my tray. It's just a cheeseburger and a carton of juice. I should be able to eat it pretty quick. I sit down between them and yawn.

"How are your midterms going?" Rosie asks. I think the question is for me and Kendra, so I wait for her to answer first. I don't really feel like talking.

"Oh, fine." Kendra waves her hand like it's no big deal. "I just had to write an essay for American Lit, and I had a history exam that was pretty much straight out of the book. I can't complain."

"That's good," Rosie nods. "What about you, Ricky?"

I shrug and swallow my bite of burger. "They're tests. I won't know what I got on them until next week, so why should I care?"

"Well, were they easy or hard?" she presses.

I shrug again and take another bite.

A hand is on my shoulder, and I turn around to glare at whoever's touching me.

“Long time no see, Rick,” Coach Brennan says.

Rosie and Kendra are staring curiously.

“Go away,” I growl.

“No need to get so touchy,” he says. “Look, my cornerback was hurt in the last game pretty bad. Can’t play for the rest of the season. I was hoping you might reconsider joining the team. I know the season’s already started, but I could really use you.”

“I already told you, I don’t want to.”

Rosie has a sympathetic look on her face and Kendra picks at her food. Neither of them looks directly at me.

Coach Brennan grins widely. “I bet your little girlfriends would love to see you out on the field.”

“I’m not doing it.” My chest is beginning to tighten. Heat is rising in my cheeks. I’m not going to get bullied into doing something I don’t want to do, at least not while I’m at school.

“Give it a shot,” the coach presses, squeezing my shoulder. I jerk away from him, and he takes a step back. “I just don’t get it. You’re graduating. This is your last chance. You were great before. You could get a scholarship, still. The chances are slim, but if you play like you used to...”

“No!” I stand rapidly, forcing the chair back so hard it topples over the ground. “I told you I’m not doing it so get off my fucking back!”

His eyes widen. “You can’t talk to me like that! You’re serving detention for that one.”

“Fine,” I spit. “I’d rather serve hard time than be on your shitty football team.” I kick the chair back up to its upright position and make a break for the doors, leaving my half-eaten burger behind with those stupid girls.

I’m in the parking lot, and then I’m suddenly standing beside Rosie’s car and realizing that I have no way to get out of here. I’m trapped.

My hands go to my hair and I groan, a long, deep growl in the back of my throat.

Lunch is almost over. If I’m late to class, I could get detention. Well, I could get another detention. Coach Brennan sounded like he was serious about his threat. I really can’t afford anymore. My father gets so

mad when I get detentions, and Rosie can't always stay late to take me home. Plus, with midterms going on, my punishment for being late might be even worse, and I can't let that happen. Not right now.

I'm starting to calm down. My heart slows until it is back to normal, and I can breathe evenly again. The bell rings inside, so I shove my hands in my pockets and, trying to play it cool, make my way back to class.



The yelling from next door grows louder. Mr. Pinto has been screaming at Ricky since he got home from work. I can't quite make anything out, but Ricky must have done something really bad to get screamed at like this.

I can't believe Mom and Dad are just ignoring it, although at this point it really shouldn't come as a surprise. They just eat their dinner quietly, absorbed in their own worlds, which is fine by me. Mom has yet to comment about my weight today, but with the dinner of steamed vegetables and baked chicken, she doesn't really have to. They don't even really notice me as I push the vegetables around my plate to make it look like I've eaten some of them. It's not that I don't like vegetables; I just don't like the ones Mom makes.

I'm pretty sure I hear something break next door, but it could have been the wind pushing the branches against the windows. It's been getting colder and windier every day.

I stand with my plate, trying to hide it from Mom's watchful eye. "I'm done," I say as I scrape what's left into the trash.

"Do you have homework to finish?" Dad asks.

“No, I finished it already,” I say truthfully. “I was thinking of going for a walk...”

“I’ll come with you if you like,” Mom offers, her eyes never leaving her phone.

“That’s okay, I’ll go alone.”

“Just be back before dark.” Dad gets up and starts in with the dishes.

“I will.” I slip out the front door into the dim sunset. I glance at the kitchen window to make sure they’re not watching and cut across our lawn to Ricky’s. The yelling gets louder with every step I take.

“Goddamn it, Ricky! I’m so sick of this shit!”

I have to know what’s going on.

When I ring the doorbell, Mr. Pinto shuts up immediately. Maybe I’m giving Ricky a chance to escape.

Mrs. Pinto is the one who opens the door. She seems tired and she doesn’t quite look at me when she speaks. “Hello, Rosie. Do you need something?”

I guess it’s better to be oblivious. “I was just wondering if Ricky was free. I’m going for a walk. I thought he might want to come.”

“Oh, that’s nice of you.” She glances behind her. “Ricky can’t come out though. He got a detention again today. It’s the fifth one this year. We decided to ground him for the weekend.”

“Oh,” I say simply. “Sorry to hear that.”

“I just don’t know why he’s lashing out so much,” Mrs. Pinto mumbles. I don’t think I was supposed to hear it. “I’m sorry, Rosie, but I have to go back in now.”

I nod. “Tell Ricky I said hi.”

“I will.”

She closes the door before I can say goodbye. How the hell can she not know why Ricky acts the way he does? I don’t feel like actually walking, so I turn back around and head home. I’ll just tell my parents it was too cold to walk or something.

The yelling picks up again as soon as I step foot on my own lawn.



I have to find Kendra. She'll know how to handle this. She'll know what to do...what to say. She should be somewhere around the cafeteria. We have the same lunch period, and I sit with her and Rosie sometimes, but today I felt like sitting with my new friends from the War Games club. They're pretty cool, and they've shown me a lot of cool new games to play. We were just talking about a good strategy to use in our next Dungeons and Dragons campaign when I got the text.

"I miss you."

It came from a number that I don't have saved, and I know Zack got a new phone number when he transferred schools. But he must have kept mine. Right?

There she is, standing by the vending machines with Rosie. They're laughing about something. Kendra's eyes look a little sunken. She looks skinnier than before, which is really saying something. It doesn't look right. I have to remember to ask if she's okay. But later. Right now, I have a serious problem of my own to deal with.

"Kendra!" I call as I approach them.

They both turn. Kendra raises an arm to wave, but she lets it fall back to her side when she sees the look on my face.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Rosie adds.

I glance down at my phone. Maybe I did. But the text is still there. I hold the phone out so they can see it themselves.

Kendra peers at it with squinted eyes and makes a contemplative humming noise deep in her throat.

"You think it's from Zack," Rosie says bluntly.

“He did change his number,” I say. “But his contacts must have transferred over, right?”

“That does make sense,” Kendra says, but there’s doubt in her voice.

“What should I do?” I’ve never had to deal with anything like this before. Finding someone to be in a relationship with was so hard, but once it happened things were easy between us; that is until he started slipping away. But I never had to face anything like this. I’m at a complete loss.

A small smile touches Kendra’s lips. “Let’s call a meeting.”

I blink, confused. “A what?”

“You know what I mean,” she waves her hand nonchalantly. “Rosie, you get hold of Ricky and tell him to meet us in the basement right after school. I’ll let Alex know.”

Rosie raises a brow. “So, we’re calling those little get-togethers meetings now?”

“Isn’t that what they are?” Kendra asks. She has that mysterious tone in her voice again. “A few chance encounters have turned into meetings, or self-help sessions. Whatever you want to call them.”

Rosie shrugs. “Seems fitting, I guess.”

Kendra turns her attention to me. “So, are you in?”

“I guess I don’t have a choice.” I shove my phone in my pocket as the bell rings. “See you after school.”

The Fifth Meeting

Ricky stands in the furthest corner of the small basement, closest to the stairs, with his arms crossed over his chest and a scowl on his face that may as well be permanent. He didn’t want to come down to this dank, cold basement, but Rosie wasn’t going to take him home until they were done here, and he was absolutely not going to call his father to come and pick him again. Never again.

“Come sit with us, Ricky,” Kendra invites. She and the others have

already taken their seats in the small circle of broken desks. "This won't take long."

"I really didn't need everyone here. I just wanted to talk for a minute, that's all," Tyler says. He's twisting his hands together nervously, his face red with embarrassment.

"Well, Kendra clearly thought we all should be here." Alex reaches out and slaps a hand on his back. "And we're here to help you."

"Yeah, even Ricky," Rosie puts in. Ricky scoffs at the remark but sits heavily in the empty desk that had been brought out just for him.

"So, let's see this text again." Kendra holds out her hand and Tyler places his phone in her palm obediently. She pulls the message up and shows it to Alex, who gives it a nod, and Ricky, who barely glances at the screen. "I see you didn't reply."

Tyler sighs and runs a hand through his hair, mussing the gel he had brushed in that morning. "I want to, but I just don't know what to say."

"That's easy," Rosie says with a shrug. "Just tell him you miss him too. I mean, you do, don't you?"

"Of course!" Tyler jumps up from his desk, defensive. "I miss him every day! We used to see each other all the time and now he's suddenly gone, and I'm just supposed to accept that? There's no way! I really...I really loved him." Tears are welling up in his eyes, threatening to spill over, and he wipes them away quickly with the heel of his hand.

"So, tell him that!" Rosie encourages him. She reaches out to take his hand. "This could be your chance to get your boyfriend back! He misses you, you miss him, and maybe he's willing to fight against his parents this time."

"Yeah," Alex agrees. "You'll never know unless you reply."

Ricky leans back in his chair and stares up at the ceiling. "What do either of you know about relationships? Where do you get off giving advice at all?"

"What do *you* know about relationships?" Rosie retorts. "You know about as much as we do, but you could at least try to give Tyler some advice. He could use it, you know."

"I'm right here," Tyler mutters under his breath.

"I've got nothing to say," Ricky crosses his arms impatiently. "I'm just waiting for Rosie to take me home."

Alex rolls his eyes and glances at Kendra, who has her hand on her chin, her eyes staring off into space. He reaches over and taps her desk lightly. “You’re being unusually quiet. What’s up?”

Kendra blinks and she is back into reality. “Sorry, I was just thinking.” She turns her attention to Tyler. “Listen, you won’t like hearing this, but I don’t think you should reply to that text.”

“What?” Tyler’s eyes go wide. “But this could be my chance! I could get Zack back! Rosie said—”

“Why would you say that, Kendra?” Rosie interrupts. “He has to tell him he misses him too!”

Alex glances down. “Kendra might be on to something.”

“Oh sure, take her side,” Rosie scoffs.

Ricky rolls his eyes and shifts in his seat. “Look, can we get out of here? This is bullshit. Reply to the damn message or don’t. You don’t need four other people here to make the decision for you. It’s your choice. Say you miss him or don’t. We can’t do it for you and hold your hand along the way.”

Silence.

“That’s pretty mean, Ricky,” Rosie mumbles after a moment passes. She doesn’t want to risk pushing the wrong button with him. “He’s just asking for advice.”

Tyler sighs and taps his dark phone screen. “No, Ricky’s right. It shouldn’t be this hard. He’s my ex. I should be able to say whether or not I miss him. And I do.” Tyler picks up his phone, staring at the screen, fingers slowly tapping out a response.

“Wait.” Kendra reaches her hand out and grasps his wrist gently. “Please listen to me, Tyler. This could be Zack’s way of closure...his way of telling you how he really feels so you don’t think the relationship was ended on a bad note. I don’t think he wants a reply.”

“But...” Tyler looks down at the half-finished message until the digitized words blur together. Biting his lip, he gently places his phone back on the cracked desktop. “Maybe you’re right.” He hesitates and swallows thickly. “Look, I left something in my locker. I’ve got to go grab it.” He stands swiftly and climbs the stairs to the first floor with a hand up to cover his face, shutting the door behind him.

“That was a little harsh, Kendra,” Rosie says.

“It could be the truth,” she replies. “Zack didn’t want to truly end the relationship in the first place, but he was forced to by his parents. Some people can’t just stop obeying their parents, and I think Zack is one of those people.”

“But Tyler should still have the chance to tell him how he feels,” Rosie argues.

“I still think Kendra’s right,” Alex puts in. “What if Zack’s parents see the message? They’d flip out all over again.”

Tyler’s phone vibrates and illuminates the dim basement. They stare at each other for a moment before curiosity overcomes them, Ricky included, and they all lean forward to see what has set the phone off.

A new text from the same number stares back at them. Three words: “*Sorry, wrong number.*”

Silence again.

Rosie finally breaks the quiet with a loud groan. “Should we tell him?”

“It might crush him,” Alex says. “He really wanted that text to be from Zack.”

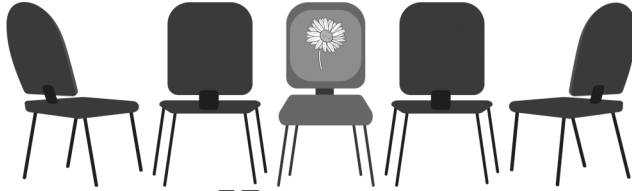
“You already let him get his hopes up,” Ricky mutters.

Kendra lifts the phone up to examine the message. She glances at the rest of the group before looking down again and deleting it.

“Hey!” Rosie cries. “Why did you do that?”

Kendra lifts her head and offers a smile that doesn’t quite reflect in her eyes. “We should let him believe.”

SIX



KENDRA

Growing up, I was taught my strength could move mountains. I was told my words could convince an army. I was taught I was worth all of the precious gems of the world. And I was stubborn to boot, my father would always say, chuckling as my mother empowered me with her words. We are very much alike – my mother and me. She walks on air. Her smile is a radiant thing that is passed on to anyone who is lucky enough to witness it. With a wave of her hand, she can force away any negative energy surrounding her. I have been told that I possess the same abilities.

But I do not feel that way.

I am weak. I am powerless to my own body. I am sick.

I think about the things my mother often told me as a child - like how strong I am and that there is no limit to what I can accomplish in life – as I grip the edge of the toilet seat, leaning over the bowl helplessly.

I will not throw up again, I tell myself. I will not. But I do, and hot tears prick at my eyes. I didn't mean to do this. Mom made pasta and garlic bread for dinner, and I found myself ravenous. But as I finished my plate, the guilt began to eat at me, and I excused myself to my room as calmly and innocently as possible. They don't suspect a thing because I am supposed to be better than this.

I can feel myself spiraling back to that place from last year. It is a tangible thing. And as I force myself to stand and flush my guilt down into the abyss, I am ready to admit that I need help. I should have done it after the first time at homecoming. That is what a healthy person

would have done, but I am not healthy. I am sick. There is something wrong with me, and it is no longer within my control.

I am determined to tell my parents I need more extensive therapy, but as I pull open the door and step into the threshold of my room, I begin to reconsider.

My strength can move mountains. My voice can sway an army. I am strong, and I can beat this by myself.

I feel a smile spread across my face, the kind of smile that is passed on to anyone who witnesses it.

I can do this. I have the power.



“Are you okay?”

My question seems to shock Kendra out of some sort of trance. She looks down at the page of homework we’d been working on together as if she’s never seen it before. She blinks, slowly, and then turns to face me with a smile. “I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“I just asked what you got for number six, but it’s like you didn’t hear me at all.”

“Oh.” Kendra looks down at her paper and taps her pencil lightly. “I haven’t gotten that far yet.”

I glance at her paper and give her a quizzical look. “You’ve barely answered the first one.”

“Sorry,” she says sheepishly, “I guess I kind of zoned out.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Before she can answer, Mom knocks on my bedroom door and opens it without waiting for me to tell her to come in. “How are you

girls doing?" she asks. "I can bring you up a snack if you'd like. I've got apples, carrots, celery sticks..."

"I'm fine, thanks," Kendra interrupts with a smile. "I'm not hungry."

Mom gives her a little nod and turns to me. "What about you, Rosie?"

I shake my head. "I'm not hungry either." I've decided it might help me lose weight – or at least stop myself from gaining it – if I eat only when Kendra eats when we're hanging out. She never eats outside of lunch at school, so it's been pretty easy so far, although my stomach is practically crying for something to be put in it.

"All right." Mom gives me a sort of proud look. "Call me if you need anything." She closes the door, and I hear her high heels clack all the way down the stairs.

Kendra writes down her answers neatly, staying quiet. I'm staring at her, studying her face, which doesn't move. She seems expressionless, concentrated.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I ask like a broken record.

Kendra waves her free hand. "I'm just fine, Rosie. You don't need to keep asking me."

"You just," I hesitate, "don't look like you're feeling too good."

"Oh, I've been a little sick lately," she says nonchalantly. "But I'm fine. Don't worry."

"You're feeling better?" I press.

Kendra finally turns to face me and gives me a bright smile. But the thing is, I've learned to tell which of Kendra's smiles are real and which ones are fake. This one is most definitely fake.

"I'm feeling much better."

I study her face again. Her cheeks look hollow, and her eyes look like they're starting to sink back. There are heavy bags under her eyes, too. Something is going on. She's not talking to me, but I don't know how to get her to talk. Is she slipping back into her old habits? How do I even ask her about something like that? I'm a really bad friend.

I turn back to my homework and study the next question. "If you say so."



I have got to get out of here. I can't breathe. I can't even hear what Mrs. Hanson is saying, all I can hear is the blood rushing through my ears. It's deafening.

I'm trying so hard to focus on the teacher, to pay attention to the notes she's writing on the board, and to follow along in my chemistry textbook, but I can't. The words are blurring. The room is starting shift and sway around me.

I have to get out of here. Now.

If I focus, I think I can appear calm enough for Mrs. Hanson to not suspect anything. So I push all of my energy to my arm and raise it, catching eyes with her as she turns around.

Mrs. Hanson stops midsentence. I didn't mean to interrupt her. "Yes, Alex?"

I fight to keep my voice from wobbling. "Can I go to the bathroom?"

She nods and motions to the little keychain hanging by her door that serves as her bathroom pass. "Be quick, okay?"

"Thanks." I stand and make my way down the aisle, feeling all eyes on my back as I walk. I snatch the keychain from the thumbtack that holds it - it must weigh a thousand pounds - and walk out, trying hard not to slam the door.

The hallway feels gigantic, and I can breathe easier now. It's empty, and I'm thankful for that. I totally forgot to grab my backpack on my way out, so going to the basement and waiting it out there until class is over is out of the question. I'll have to pull myself out of this quickly.

I'm not even sure what triggered it this time. I actually managed to

pass the test Mrs. Hanson handed back today. Well, it was a C+, but it's still a passing grade in my book. I guess I was just thinking about how many more of those I'd have to get to pull my overall grade up. Finals for first semester are next month, and I suck at chemistry. Last week, Mrs. Hanson even handed me a flier for an after-school tutoring program. She was trying to be subtle about it, and I appreciate that, but I couldn't go even if I wanted to. I have to work.

Water usually helps calm down my panic attacks, so I make my way to the drinking fountains near the bathrooms. I take note of little things as I walk. It's a technique I read about called grounding, or something. There's a dry erase board stuck on someone's locker where friends can write cute messages. There are a few candy wrappers crumpled up in the corner as I turn down the hall. There's a brightly colored poster promoting college prep classes.

My heart begins to pound again. I've been trying so hard not to think about college. Mom wants me to go so bad, and I feel like I'll be stuck at that shitty diner job forever if I don't go. But how can I afford it? I've been putting aside as much money as I can, but most of my paycheck and tips go to our rent and utility bills. Plus, Mom's car has been making some weird noises lately. Not good. I guess I could apply for student loans, but with my grades I doubt I'll get them. Hell, with my grades, what college would be insane enough to accept me in the first place? Senior year is almost half over. If I even want to try, I should have been applying to schools months ago.

I can't think about this. It's only making things worse.

I stop at the water fountain and bend down. The water has a funny taste to it. It always does. But the dryness in my mouth is going away, and that's helping a little bit. When I pull back, my breath isn't as shaky, and my vision is clear again. I'll give myself another minute or two, and then I think I'll be okay to head back to class.

I'm getting better at this.

I'm starting to feel more grounded, so I turn back down the hall, but someone catches my eye. Kendra. She's walking toward the bathroom. She reaches out and puts her hand on the lockers for support as she walks, legs shaking, like she can't keep her balance.

"Kendra?"

She doesn't react. It's like she doesn't hear me at all.

"Kendra?" I say again, louder this time.

She starts to look up, I think, but she loses her balance and pitches forward. I run towards her as fast as I can, and I manage to grab her arm before she hits the floor.

"Hey!" I shout, helping her into a sitting position as I kneel next to her. "Kendra! What's wrong?"

Her eyelids flutter, like someone waking up from a nap, and they aren't focused on anything. She looks dazed and tired. I can't think of anything else to do, so I shake her shoulders and shout her name again, trying to snap her out of it. Her arms feel so bony. She doesn't look good.

I try to remember something I learned in health class about helping someone who's passed out. Lay them on the floor, right? On their side? I can't remember.

She mumbles something and I lean close to her mouth, trying to listen. "What? Say it again."

She clears her throat; she looks like she's starting to be more aware of where she is. "Help." It's like a croak, not even a real word.

"I'm taking you to the nurse," I say. My arm wraps around her waist. Her skin is taut, and her hip bone pokes into my palm. This is not good. She needs help. I've been noticing her getting worse for a while and I've been too stupid to do anything about it! Damn it, I should have said something to someone, anyone, weeks ago.

I stand with her, and she leans against me. God, she feels almost weightless. Why hasn't anyone said anything? Haven't her parents noticed? They were so observant before. Has she been tricking them?

The stairs are hard to get down. Her legs are weak, and it takes a while to reach the first floor, but luckily the nurse's office is close by, and I manage to get us there by nearly dragging her across the linoleum.

Nurse Abby knows Kendra from last year's incident, and she almost jumps up from her office chair when we walk in the door. She's not that much older than us, and fresh out of nursing school. Last year was her first real job, and Kendra gave her quite the welcome. I overheard her joking to a teacher about it once with a nervous laugh.

"What happened to her?" Nurse Abby comes up and takes Kendra's

free arm, helping her to sit down on one of the cots. Luckily, the nurse's office is empty. That's pretty rare for this time of year as it gets colder and people get sicker.

"I'm not sure." I start to explain what happened but Kendra interrupts, shaking her head lightly and laughing like she's embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," she says, "I was just going to the bathroom, and I got a little dizzy. Luckily Alex was there to catch me, but I'm fine now. Really."

"You didn't seem fine," I say. "And you still don't look fine."

Nurse Abby takes her temperature before she can protest, so I tell the nurse as much as I can while the thermometer is in Kendra's mouth.

"Have you been losing weight lately?" she asks.

"No."

"That's a lie!" The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. I feel like Rosie. Kendra looks at me, hurt. She looks at me like I've betrayed her or something. "I mean, she's gotten a little thinner lately," I stammer. "I noticed that...well, you don't look good, Kendra. You just don't."

"I look just fine," Kendra hisses, warning me to stop with a harsh glare.

"Could you step on the scale please?" Nurse Abby asks. "I just want to check your weight. That's all."

"No!" She leans forward, gripping the edge of the cot and nearly shaking. She turns to look at me with narrowed eyes. "I want you to leave. Now."

"Kendra," I start.

"Now!"

"Sorry," I mutter and turn to the door. Sorry I care, is more like it. She needs help. Why can't she just accept it?

Nurse Abby catches my eye as I walk past her. "Don't worry," she says, "I'm calling her parents."

I can hear Kendra protesting all the way from the stairwell.

The Sixth Meeting

. . .

Alex waits in the basement, pacing the floor and casting nervous glances at his blank phone. He had texted the others, asking them to meet him down in the basement the minute school got out, but he hasn't heard back from any of them, and he is beginning to worry.

He checks his phone again, and just as he is about to give up, the door at the top of the stairs opens and floods the dim basement with light. Rosie's hefty form creates a shadow on the concrete floor, and she descends the steps with Ricky following behind her, brooding.

"What's wrong?" She asks as she reaches the last step. "Where's Kendra?"

Alex frowns. "Let's wait for Tyler."

Rosie sees the concern and frustration on Alex's face and plops down at her desk. She runs a hand through her hair. "What happened to her?"

Ricky scoffs and lowers himself into one of the desks. "I bet she passed out again. Back to rehab for her."

"Hey!" Alex cries. "We don't know that yet!"

"Oh my God, she passed out?" Rosie gasps and grips her chest in her shock, bunching her shirt up underneath her clenched fists. "I was so scared something like this might happen. She's been changing...I've noticed..." She trails off, her eyes darting into the darkness.

"Yeah," Alex mumbles. "Me too."

The door opens again, and Tyler makes his way down the stairs, eying the small group cautiously. "What's the emergency?"

Alex lets out a slow breath, crossing his arms and tugging at the sleeves of his jacket. "Look, I bumped into Kendra in the hall earlier. She was barely coherent. She couldn't even hold herself up. I caught her before she hit the floor and I helped her to the nurse, but she kept insisting she was fine. She made me leave. She's sick, guys. Really sick."

Ricky rolls his eyes. "Obviously. Anyone with eyes can see that."

"This is serious, Ricky!" Rosie cries. "Our friend is sick! She's relapsing, and we've all been watching it happen."

"And we haven't done a damn thing about it," Alex finishes. "What kind of friends do that?"

Tyler hesitates, searching for an answer. “Friends who are scared of the outcome?”

“She made herself throw up at homecoming,” Rosie says, looking down at the surface of her desk. “I know she did it, but I didn’t say anything about it. If that doesn’t make me a shitty friend, I don’t know what does.”

“This is ridiculous,” Ricky says. “If she doesn’t want to get better, she doesn’t want to get better. Nothing you say or do will fix her.”

“You don’t know that!” Rosie turns to face Ricky with such a force that her hair whips around her neck and fans her face. “If we had just helped her, if we had just told someone what was happening-!”

“She would hate you.” Ricky’s words are cold, and his features remain smooth and even. Rosie’s jaw drops and hangs in stunned silence as a cool smirk forms on his lips. “You can act surprised all you want, but you know it’s true. She would hate to have her secrets spread, even to a counselor or whoever you would go to for that kind of crap. She likes to be all high and mighty—”

“That’s not true!”

“And she wants to fix her problems by herself. That’s why spending an entire semester inside a mental hospital didn’t fix her,” Ricky continues as though Rosie hadn’t interrupted.

“Hey,” Tyler says calmly. “We all learned about mental illness in health class. We all know that it’s a constant battle. No one is ever really cured.” He wants to believe his own words, but he somehow finds himself agreeing with Ricky, despite the harsh delivery.

“Look.” Alex breaks the awkward silence beginning to form. “We all have our moments, and right now Kendra is having one. It’s been building up for a while and we’re all to blame for not stopping it. We all watched her regress and none of us said a word; not to her, and not to each other. I don’t know if she’s going back to the hospital, or taking some time off school, or what, but as soon as we’re able to get a hold of her, we’re going to help her through. And we’re going to keep this from happening to her again. Understood?”

Rosie raises a brow. “When did you become a leader?”

Alex shrugs. “Since Kendra’s not here, someone has to fill in.”

“But how do we even do that?” Tyler asks. “I mean, are we really

going to help her? What can we do? Force her to eat? Watch her every second? Go into the bathroom with her? Seriously, guys, what can we do?”

They all pause to consider the question.

“We’ll figure it out,” Rosie says. “I’ll try calling her tonight and see what she says.”

“We can invite her out to do things more,” Alex puts in. “With... with my own issues, being distracted really helps. Maybe if we spend more time with her, she won’t focus so much on how she looks and focus more on having fun with her friends.”

Ricky stands. “Do whatever you want. I’m not going to be a part of it.”

“Ricky!” Rosie shouts as he heads for the stairs. He stops, not turning to look at her, but pausing all the same. “Damn it, she’s our friend! You act like you don’t care about her, about any of us, but you’re still here! You still come to hash things out with the rest of us. You’ve even made a few contributions yourself. That says more about you than any of the really mean things you’ve said about us. I don’t know why you’re being so cruel, Ricky, but I think you still consider Kendra and the rest of us your friends. Don’t you?”

Ricky is stiff as Rosie speaks. His face never changes, his hands never leave his pockets, and his eyes remain fixated on the stairway. Her question hangs in the air. Tyler and Alex watch him closely, waiting for his response.

After a moment, with the silence settling around them like dust, Ricky walks soundlessly up the stairs and shuts the door behind him. They all watch him go. After a moment, Alex kicks at the leg of his desk, making a metallic clicking sound.

“Has he always been such an ass?” he mutters.

Rosie picks at the ancient scratches on her desktop. “He cares. Trust me, he does.”

“Do you really know that for sure?” Tyler asks. “Or would you just like that to be true? Because that makes a huge difference. Trust me. I know.”

“Well, he hasn’t said it directly,” Rosie admits.

“Then you don’t know,” Tyler says. “Denial is a really bad road to go down.”

“I know,” Rosie sighs, “but he really isn’t a bad guy. Trust me. I’ve lived next door to him my entire life.”

“So he wasn’t always dark and brooding,” Alex jokes, but a part of him is having a hard time believing that the Ricky he knows has ever been anything but a major asshole.

“He’s always been quiet,” Rosie admits. “But he’s a nice guy deep down. Back in elementary school, I was crying on the playground one day. I think I was in, like, first or second grade. I was upset because my sister told me I couldn’t play with her and her friends. She said I was too little, and she couldn’t be seen hanging out with a little kid. I was mad. I sat on the side of the sandbox and cried my eyes out.”

Alex cracks a smile. “Let me guess: Ricky was your knight in shining armor?”

“Sort of.” Rosie smiles back. “He saw me crying and he asked if I was okay. I told him what happened, and he picked me a dandelion. He said he didn’t like to see girls cry, so he was going to make me feel better. He said he would play with me, but then the bell rang, and recess was over. We went inside and I guess he kind of forgot about it.”

“So that’s when you started crushing on him?” Tyler asks.

Rosie hums lightly, thinking back. There were no longer any secrets between them. “Yeah.”

“It makes sense,” Tyler says. “He told you he didn’t like to see girls cry. I wonder if that’s because his dad kept making his mom cry.”

“You say that like its past tense,” Rosie says. “Trust me, that hasn’t changed. His parents still fight like crazy.”

“That must take a pretty big toll on him,” Alex frowns. “No wonder he acts the way he does. Why don’t his parents just get a divorce?”

“I don’t know,” Rosie admits. “It’s like his mom can’t leave. I think it’s like that with a lot of families, and Ricky just gets to sit back and watch. He doesn’t like to see people fight, but he says things that practically start fights all the time. He’s pretty hard to understand. But really, guys, he’s a good guy.”

Alex reaches out and takes her hand, squeezing it gently. “I believe you.”

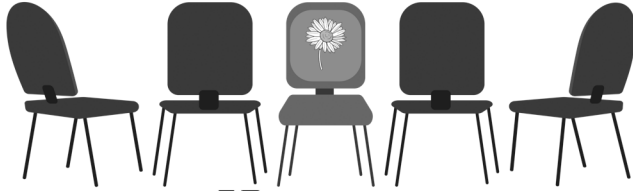
“Me too,” Tyler pipes up.

“We’ll find a way to see the better side of Ricky,” Alex promises.
“But first, let’s focus on Kendra. Okay? She needs us right now.”

Rosie nods. “Okay.”

Tyler smirks and gives her other hand a squeeze. “Okay.”

SEVEN



KENDRA

My phone is ringing again. This must be the sixth or seventh time. It's Rosie. By now, I'm sure Alex has told her and the others about what happened this morning. By now, my anger towards Alex has festered into a pit deep within me. I can feel it bubbling in there, ready to burst and explode in an artillery fire of words I don't mean. If Alex hadn't been there in the hallway, someone else would have found me and taken me to the nurse. In a way, it was inevitable. And deep, deep down I am glad that it was Alex who found me at that low point. I shouldn't have lashed out at him.

I want to tell him I'm sorry, but I just can't right now. And I can't talk to Rosie either. Not yet.

The hospital band weighs heavily on my wrist. I haven't cut it off yet. I've only been home for an hour or so. I begged Mom not to take me in. I told her I would be okay if I could just rest, take a couple days off school to build myself back up, and eat. I need to eat. That's all. I told Mom if I could just stay at home, it would be okay.

But of course, she was too worried about my overall health to listen to me.

My therapist came to see me while I was having my health checked by a stern-faced nurse. That was the worst part. That kind old woman, Dr. Walker, looked at me like I had betrayed her. She wanted to admit me again, to keep me in that place for who knows how long in the hopes that I would do better than last time. It was a joke.

I feel a little bad about it, but I sweet-talked the doctor out of that

idea. We came to a compromise instead. I would start seeing her twice a week, and absolutely no food journaling. She wanted me to take a couple days off school, relax, get rid of any magazines in the house, and no internet or television for a while either. She said it was far too risky to be exposed to things that might trigger my disorder.

I thought I could do this by myself. I really did. But I have failed. It's time to admit that I need help. I need my doctor, I need my parents, and I need my friends. I can't go through this alone.

I need them.

And with Thanksgiving only a week away, I'm going to need more help than ever. At the point I'm at right now, I really don't think I can eat in front of a large group of people.

My phone buzzes again. Rosie. If I'm going to accept help from others, I need to start by answering the phone. I take it and put a smile on my face as I bring it to my ear.

"Hello, Rosie."



Hearing Kendra's voice was like having a massive weight drop off my shoulders and disappear. I almost want to step on the scale and see if I lost any physical weight. She didn't sound that great, but she didn't sound so bad either. Ever since Alex told all of us what had happened to her, I've been worrying myself sick. I couldn't even eat much at dinner. I picked at it the way Molly used to.

Speaking of Molly, she'll be coming home for Thanksgiving break soon, and I'd give anything to avoid that meal.

There's an idea forming in the back of my mind. I can feel it

bubbling up in there, but it hasn't fully formed yet. I can't imagine how hard Thanksgiving has been on Kendra in the past, and I bet it'll be even harder for her this year. There's got to be something I can do to help her through it.

I don't want my best friend to go back to the hospital. I wouldn't be able to see her very often, and she would probably need someone there to keep her sane.

Maybe I can talk to Alex about it. He'll probably be able to help me figure out what to do to help her. Tyler might have an idea too. I start to wonder if Ricky would have any thoughts about it, but I quickly shake that away.

He was such an asshole today. I still can't believe the way he acted. I know what he's doing; he's just taking all his pent-up anger from living with his dad and forcing it out on everyone else. He's done it before, so it's no surprise that he'd do it again.

Oh well. I'm sure the others will be able to help me come up with something.



Rosie sits in a stool at the counter. She's sipping a chocolate milkshake and staring me down, waiting for a response. The diner is practically empty. It usually is at this time on a Saturday afternoon. The rest of my coworkers are hanging out in the kitchen, chatting and doing busy work to pass the time. I got the easy job: stand out front and make sure the few customers who are hanging around have everything they need.

"So?" Rosie asks. "What do you think?"

I shrug. "I think it's a good idea. I mean, it'll help Kendra for sure, but where would we all meet up? And how can we be sure that everyone will be available? People usually go away for Thanksgiving."

"Are you going away?"

"No."

"Then there's two of us," Rosie says. "I'm going to fake a stomachache to get out of going to my aunt's house. My mom won't question it. Are you doing anything?"

"No," I say. "My mom and I don't really have much to be thankful for. It's just another day." Well, it has been since Dad died. We used to celebrate like normal people, but after Dad got sick, Mom fought with his parents a lot over his course of treatment, and that caused a rift between them. They didn't speak at the funeral, and they haven't spoken to us since. Mom's brother lives too far away for us to afford to visit, and he's in the same boat. We get a phone call on holidays and birthdays though. Mom's parents died when I was a kid, so it's just us. I don't really mind, though.

Rosie smiles but there's no light in her eyes. "Maybe the others will be around too."

"It doesn't hurt to ask, I guess."

"I'll ask Tyler and Ricky about it," Rosie says.

I can't hide the disgusted look on my face. "Ricky? Seriously? After all that?"

"He's not a bad guy," she assures me for about the thousandth time.

"Whatever. It's your party. Just tell me when and where to be and I'll show up."

"Great," Rosie smiles for real this time. "My house. Six o' clock. Bring something to eat. Preferably something low fat, small, and light."

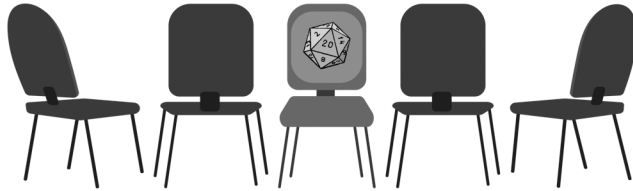
"So, ice," I say, cracking a smile of my own.

"Very funny." Rosie slides a five-dollar bill across the countertop. "I'm going to head out. You can just keep that."

I shake my head. "Don't worry about it. The shake's on the house."

She hops down from her chair and grabs her purse. "Take it anyway."

She's out the door before I can even protest.



TYLER

Rosie stops me as I walk to the library for the War Games club meeting.

“Got a second?” Without waiting for a reply, she grabs my arm and pulls me out of the flow of people making their way out of the building.

“Sure, but I’ve got a club meeting soon. What’s up?”

She nudges me playfully. “Going to check out the hot senior again?”

I feel my cheeks get hot. “Is that all you wanted to ask?”

“No,” she says, growing serious. “I think I have an idea of how to help Kendra.”

I’m interested. I’ve been wracking my brain since the last time we all met up, but I’ve come up with nothing. Kendra is sort of a mysterious person. She seems like a natural leader, and she can quiet a room with the wave of her hand. It seems crazy that a person like her could develop such a serious sickness. She’s practically impenetrable, but she tears herself down. How can anyone help a person like that?

“I’m listening.”

“So, I was thinking, Thanksgiving is probably going to be a really tough holiday for Kendra. I mean, it’s a holiday based around eating. And not just eating but eating a lot in front of a bunch of people. I have a feeling she’s going to have a really hard time with it. So, I thought maybe we could have our own Thanksgiving, with small amounts of food like appetizers. We could just hang out, watch movies, talk. You know, have a normal night with no pressure. What do you think?”

“You’re going to do this *on* Thanksgiving?”

“Around six,” Rosie nods. “Do you think you can make it? I understand if you can’t...but I think it’s important for you to be there, too.”

I pause to think about it. My stepsister will be coming home Wednesday night to spend the holiday with us. All my aunts, uncles, and cousins are coming over to our house this year, but we usually end up eating Thanksgiving dinner early. I never understood why people eat so early that day. But that's beside the point. I could probably sneak out and make it to Rosie's in time.

"All right," I say finally. "I'll be there. Let me guess, it'll just be the five of us?"

She glances away. "I haven't asked Ricky yet."

"He'll probably say no, you know."

"You never know," she says. "I don't think Thanksgiving is really his favorite holiday. He may prefer to be with us over his family."

"I guess we'll see," I shrug. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see other club members going into the library. "Look, I have to get going."

Rosie smiles wryly. "Got to chat up that guy, huh? Any developments?"

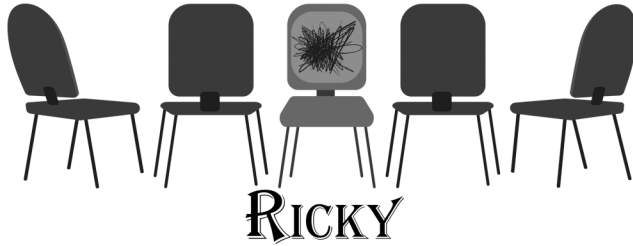
"His name is Ryan," I say, "and no. We mostly talk strategy for games."

"Why don't you make a move?"

"I'm working up to it," I say defensively.

"You better get that courage soon. You're only a junior and he'll be graduating soon," she pokes my side with a grin. "Have fun." She gives me a wave and blends back in with the thinning crowd.

I roll my eyes, but I can't help but smile at her playfulness. I catch sight of Ryan walking through the library door and quickly rush to catch up with him.



I guess I agreed too eagerly to Rosie's plan, because her eyes light up and a huge smile spreads out on her glossed lips. She didn't used to wear crap like that. I guess that's Kendra's doing.

"Really?" she gushes, and I fight not to roll my eyes. I've been trying to be nicer lately. I guess I was too mean last time because Rosie was pissed, and the others avoided me like the plague for a little while. It's not like I really even like these people, but they're the closest thing I have to friends, so I don't really want to screw that up any more than I already have.

She turns off the car, and I shrug, trying to be cool about it. "It's just next door. Besides, the holidays with my family kind of suck." That was an understatement. Mom usually puts up a sad little Christmas tree as soon as the Thanksgiving leftovers are put away, Dad tends to break out the extra strong holiday booze, and Aunt Nina picks one of the holidays to come and visit. She never stays very long, though. Dad starts to go on about how she's too old to find a decent husband after her divorce, and Mom reassures her that it's never too late. It's a constant circle. We eat, open up some presents, and go our separate ways. Big deal.

Rosie's still smiling. It's getting a little creepy.

"Come to my house at six, then, okay? Bring a little something to eat or drink but keep it healthy."

"I'll see what I can do," I say.

She's beaming. "Thanks, Ricky! This really means a lot."

"It's nothing," I say, because it is.

"Still," that smile never falters, "it does to us."

"Whatever," I say and push open the car door.

“See you tomorrow,” she says. “Just one more day until break.”
“Yeah,” I say and shut the door before she can say anything else.

The Seventh Meeting

At five o'clock, Rosie tells her mother she has a stomachache and asks to go home. Her mother eyes her skeptically, as Rosie expects, and only makes one small remark about overeating causing bloating and stomach pain before allowing her to leave. By quarter to six, Rosie has set out sparkling water, a fruit salad, and a baked oatmeal dish that was really intended for breakfast, but she figures it's healthy enough to be set out. She hopes Kendra will eat just a little bit of it.

She had called Kendra the night before to invite her over. “Just to hang out,” Rosie promised. Kendra agreed, sounding a bit disheartened. She explained that her parents felt that Thanksgiving with family would be too much pressure on her this year, so they had decided to ignore the holiday all together. Rosie was sorry to hear that Kendra's condition had reached the point of holiday cancellations, but at the same time, she was grateful that Kendra would be able to attend without a fight.

Tyler is the first to arrive. He's always on time, Rosie notices. He brings a mango salsa his mother made with low-fat chips.

“I told her what was going on tonight,” Tyler confesses. “She wanted to know. When I explained that this was for Kendra, she made this for her. Healthy, a little spicy, and really good, too.”

“It looks delicious,” Rosie agrees, taking a chip for herself and scooping up a small bit of the salsa. “I didn't eat much at dinner. My mom was watching me like a hawk.”

“That's bullshit,” Tyler says bluntly.

“I know,” Rosie says. “But you know what the worst part is? I've been trying so hard to eat better and eat less than I normally do, but the last time I stepped on the scale, I gained two pounds. How does that even happen?”

Tyler smirks. "I'm not a doctor. I couldn't even guess. If it makes you feel better, you look the same as you always do."

Rosie considers this. "You know, it does make me feel better, in a weird sort of way."

"Good," Tyler shrugs. "You shouldn't worry so much about the way you look. If I didn't like you, I wouldn't be here."

"It's not really me who worries," Rosie says. "It's my mom."

"Fuck her."

Rosie is shocked by the calmness in which Tyler expresses his opinion. She finds herself laughing despite the harsh words. She never realized it before, but Tyler really did have a way of making her feel better. Much like Kendra had a way of lifting up everyone in her path; Tyler could make anyone feel better about themselves, no matter what.

Alex knocks on the door and lets himself in. He holds a bowl of popcorn with peanuts mixed in. "No one's allergic to nuts, right? I realized I never asked," he says as he sets the bowl on the table.

Ricky saunters in as Rosie and Tyler both express that they have no allergies. He hasn't brought anything with him, and Rosie decides not to press him about it. They have plenty for just five people.

"How was your Thanksgiving?" she asks.

Ricky shrugs and sits down on the couch. "Fine."

It was a lie. They could all see that, but none of them call him out. The doorbell rings before the silence becomes too awkward.

"Remember," Rosie says before she goes to the door, "Kendra may be the reason we're doing this tonight, but we're not going to treat her like this is special. We're just hanging out like normal, got it?"

"We get it," Alex speaks up. "Let her in before she freezes out there."

Rosie nods and throws open the door with a smile. "Hey, I'm glad you could make it."

Kendra smiles lightly. Her cheeks are still hollow and there is dullness in her eyes. "Well, it's not like I had anything else going on. I'm happy you could have people over today."

"Thanksgiving with my family is boring," Tyler says simply. "I'd much rather hang out with you guys."

"What are we doing tonight?" Kendra asks. "Rosie just said to come over."

“I figured we’d watch some movies.” Rosie casually motions to the small assortment of food. “We can have some snacks and just hang out. How does that sound?”

Kendra eyes the food table and walks over to examine Tyler’s dish. “What is this?”

“Mango salsa,” Tyler says. “My mom made it. She’s kind of a pro with salsas. It’s really good. Try it.” He hopes he isn’t coming on too strong. The last thing he wants to do is pressure the girl with the eating disorder to eat.

But to everyone’s surprise, Kendra picks up a chip with ease, dips it into the salsa and pops it into her mouth, chewing thoughtfully. She swallows. “It’s incredible.”

“You really like it?” Tyler says. “Have as much as you want.”

Alex can see that the situation could potentially turn bad for Kendra, being the only one eating, so he quickly walks over, grabs a plate, and begins to fill it with a little bit of everything. The others follow suit while Kendra watches. She hesitates for a moment before taking a plate of her own, adding some fruit and more salsa. Rosie can’t help but smile. Her plan is working. She is doing something good for her friend.

Everyone settles on the couches in the living room. No one has turned on a movie yet, so Rosie decides to start up a conversation with the most basic of questions: “So, who’s ready for finals?”

“I actually am.” Kendra sounds like she is partially joking. “I had all those days off from school, so I studied a lot.”

“Lucky you,” Alex mutters and Kendra gives him a questioning look. “I mean, with the holidays and everything, I’m working a lot more. Everyone is,” he explains quickly. “So I don’t really have any time to study.”

“We could have a study session,” Tyler suggests. “I could use it. Geometry is kicking my ass.”

“It might only be a distraction to study in groups,” Kendra points out. “We’d only end up chatting.”

“She’s right,” Ricky puts in, and Rosie is happy he’s at least contributing to the conversation, even if it was only two words.

“I wouldn’t be able to make it anyway,” Alex says. “I’m working

every weekend up until Christmas and almost every night. I was hoping to get my mom something nice this year.”

“That’s so sweet of you,” Kendra smiles.

“I guess we’ll need to start Christmas shopping soon,” Rosie sighs. “I never know what to get people. I hate going to the mall, but I think I hate online shopping even more.”

“Me too,” Kendra agrees, although she thinks that she dislikes those things for an entirely different reason than Rosie.

“I’ll go to the mall with you,” Tyler puts in. “I want to find something for my parents, too.”

“We’ll plan later,” Rosie says with a smile. “One holiday at a time.”

Ricky scoffs. “Don’t you dare go around making us all say what we’re thankful for. My answer is nothing.”

“I wasn’t going to do that, don’t worry,” Rosie says. “But for the record, I am thankful for all of you guys. I know it sounds lame, and it’s not like I’ve never had friends or anything, but you guys are some of the best friends I’ve ever had. I’m glad we all found each other randomly like we did.”

Kendra smiles a genuine smile. “I think that’s the best way to make friends: randomly.”

“I thought we weren’t going to do this,” Ricky says flatly.

“Aren’t you happy about our friendship at all?” Rosie asks, but Ricky only shrugs and gets up to refill his plate. Tyler nudges her and gives her a reassuring look. She snickers. “All right, all right, you don’t have to say it, because we know.”

“Whatever,” Ricky says with his back to her.

The evening continues with laughter, plans for winter break, and talk of the dreaded finals. They are content with each other; they don’t even bother checking out the movies Rosie suggested when they first arrived. As they talk, Rosie continues to sneak occasional glances at Kendra, and she is pleased to see her friend has eaten an entire plate of food. Rosie mentally pats herself on the back for the success. She wishes the night could continue, but the clock is warning her that her parents will be coming back shortly, and she doesn’t want to get caught in her lie.

Rosie stands abruptly and begins to clean up the remains of the

food. "Sorry to cut this short, guys, but my parents are going to be home soon, and I'm supposed to have a stomachache."

They help her clean up in silence, removing all traces of their presence. They don't want to get caught either.

Kendra slings her purse over her shoulder and grips Rosie's hands tightly. "Thank you," she says, and her voice holds more sincerity than Rosie has ever heard her express. "I would love to do this again sometime."

"We can," Rosie promises.

Alex touches Kendra's arm lightly, cautiously. "I'll walk you out."

"Thank you."

"See you later, Rosie," Tyler pats her on the back and gives her a quick hug from the side before walking out.

Ricky is the last to leave. He doesn't say much to Rosie, but she notices him check the living room over once more for any traces of the party, and she's glad he doesn't want to see her get in trouble either.

"Bye, Ricky," she says, wishing he could stay longer. She wishes that, in the spirit of the holidays, she might get some sort of miracle. Maybe even a kiss.

But he simply says "Bye" back to her and walks out the door.

Rosie barely has fifteen minutes to herself before she hears the garage open. Quickly, she lies down on the couch and turns on the television.

When they come inside, she does her best to look miserable.

"How do you feel, honey?" her mother asks. Molly is right behind her, looking at her skeptically.

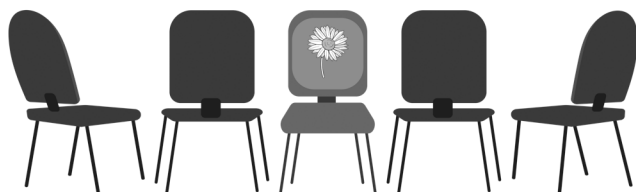
"A little better," Rosie says.

"Good," her mother says as she hangs up her coat.

"You should probably go to bed," Molly says sweetly. "You'll feel better in the morning."

Rosie does her best to muster up a pained smile. "I'm sure I will."

EIGHT



KENDRA

I have the greatest friends.

I am lying in bed now, staring up at the few glow-in-the-dark stars left stuck on the ceiling from years ago. They don't glow as brightly as they used to. They have faded to a dull light that can barely be seen unless the room is pitch dark. It is tonight. The sliver of moon is hidden behind a wall of clouds.

Alex talked to me for a few minutes in Rosie's driveway, standing next to my mother's borrowed car. He made small talk, smiled, and went on about how nice it was of Rosie to have the get-together. I agreed, but I knew Rosie's plan all along. And I appreciate her for doing it.

Thanksgiving in my house was cancelled this year, and it was my fault. My parents pretended it was just a normal day, but the television wasn't allowed to be turned on, just in case any of us caught sight of a parade float. It didn't feel like a normal day. I knew it was a holiday, and my parents did, too. We just wandered around the house, cleaning, chatting, reading, and trying our best to act like everything was as it always is.

It was exhausting.

Rosie is just the best. No one has cared for me like this before. I was so distracted by the people surrounded me, I managed to actually eat without thinking about what I was putting in my mouth. It was a wonderful feeling, and something I haven't experienced in a very long

time. I hope we can have more days like this. I hope these are the people who will help me fight the battle raging within me. Deep down, I really think they can do that.

I have the best of friends.



I have got to get out of here, I think as I stare at the pile of textbooks on my desk. Everything I need to know for finals is in those textbooks and I can't focus worth shit. Two more weeks until finals and the teachers won't stop reminding us about them. It's going to suck, but I'm not terribly worried. It's not like my grades are bad. They're not great, but they're not that bad; average to say the least.

But it's Friday night, and studying is the last thing on my mind. I should be out doing something like Molly probably is. Mom always complains that I spend every weekend holed up in my room on the internet. It's not a lie, but I like doing that. I'm not exactly an active person, and my body shows that. But tonight, I've got to get out of here.

I grab my phone and call Kendra, but it goes straight to voicemail. One thing I've noticed about Kendra is that she turns her phone off if she's spending time with her parents. That's something I admire about her. I could never do that. I need the distraction.

I try Alex next but I'm pretty sure he's at work. I probably shouldn't have tried him in the first place. Tyler does answer, and when I ask if he wants to go to the mall and start on that Christmas shopping, he can't hide his enthusiasm. He must be as bored as I am.

I tell him I'll pick him up soon, but instead of going straight to my

car, I turn and walk to Ricky's front door and knock. I'm sure he also needs an escape. I heard Mr. Pinto screaming at him for something or other again today. I don't know how the other neighbors don't hear it. Or maybe they do and they just don't say anything, like my parents.

Mrs. Pinto answers. She looks tired but she smiles at me anyway. I think she likes me. It doesn't look like Mr. Pinto is home right now. I don't see his car. "Hello, Rosie," she says. "What can I do for you?"

"Is Ricky home?" I ask. "I'm going to the mall. I thought he might want to come."

"He is, and I'm sure he would," she sounds sort of relieved. "He really needs to get out with his friends."

I nod at her. "Yeah, I think so, too."

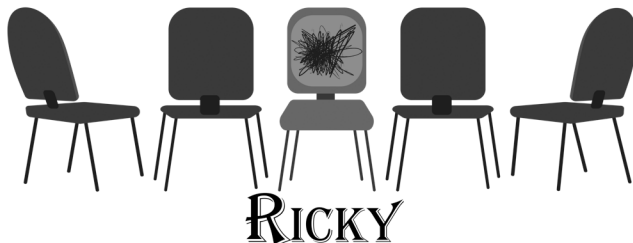
She calls up the stairs to him and he appears on the landing a moment later. "Do you want to go to the mall with Rosie?" she asks.

He takes a few seconds to respond. "Yeah, sure."

"See you later, then," Mrs. Pinto says to him as he walks up to me. "Don't be out too late."

"We won't," I promise her. "Tyler's coming too. We're picking him up on the way." I can see Ricky cringe. I still don't know why he doesn't like Tyler very much, but I really want them to be friends.

He doesn't protest though. He just says, "Let's go." As he pulls on his coat, I can see a new bruise forming on his arm, kind of shaped like a handprint.



Tyler slides into the back seat when we pick him up. The sun is

almost completely gone, and I've pulled on my coat to hide the bruise on my arm. I had come home late from school. Detention again. Late assignments. Dad was pissed. I tried to walk past him and go to my room, but he wasn't going to have that. He grabbed my arm and let me know just how angry he gets when I have detention.

I'm glad for the chance to get out of the house, and I'm even more glad that Mom was the one to open the door when the invitation came. Dad would have never let me leave. He grounded me, but Mom hasn't heard about that yet.

I freeze as Rosie pulls to a stop at a red light. Mom doesn't know I'm supposed to be grounded, and she let me out of the house. If Dad finds out I'm gone, he's going to be furious. He'll blame Mom. Shit. He's going to hurt her. I whirl my head around and look at the street behind me.

"I need to go home," I say.

Rosie turns to look at me. The red light reflects on her face, making her look demonic. "Why?"

I struggle to come up with a reason. "I just forgot some stuff I have to do. Turn around."

"We won't be out long," Rosie says. "Is it really that urgent?"

"Yes." I'm fidgeting in my seat now. "Take me back. Right now."

Rosie gives Tyler a weird look before making a U-turn. "Do you mind?" she asks him. "It sounds important."

Tyler shrugs. "I've got all the time in the world. I don't mind."

"We'll have you home soon, Ricky," Rosie promises.

For a second, I feel a pang of gratefulness for Rosie. She's changed in the past few months. Before she would have pressed me, demanding all the details. She's losing her nosiness.

She drops me off in the driveway and says she'll see me at school on Monday. I close the car door as quietly as I can. The front door is unlocked, and I step inside. It's quiet. Mom's sitting in the living room reading a book, and she looks up in confusion when I walk in.

"I thought you were going out with your friends?" she says.

I hesitate. "I forgot I was grounded. Thought I should come back."

Mom frowns. She knows what I'm really thinking. She's always been good at that.

“Besides, I don’t need anything from the mall,” I continue. I glance around. “Where is he, anyway?”

“At the shop,” she says. “One of his employees messed up an order for parts. He’s fixing it.”

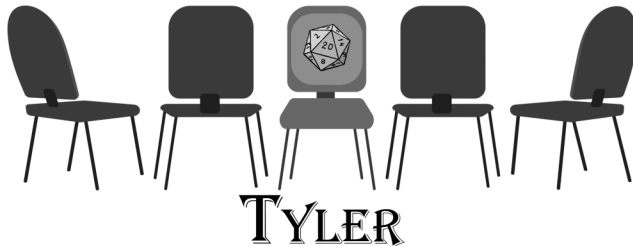
“He must be pissed.” Now I’m really glad I decided to come back.

“Don’t say that, Ricky,” Mom sighs. “It’s a new employee. He’s still learning the ropes. Your father understands.”

“That’s a rarity,” I grunt.

“Ricky.” She sounds exhausted and I don’t want to start a fight. Not with her.

“I’ll be in my room.” I go up the stairs before she can say anything back.



The mall is flooded with hurried shoppers who seem to have realized Christmas is only a few weeks away and now have to handpick gifts for loved ones in a frenzy. With all the news of shipping delays, they can’t rely on online shopping right now. I already got some gifts for my family. I didn’t have much money to spend on them, just what I saved up from doing summer jobs here and there. They’re nothing special, but I hope they like them anyway. Even though I can’t buy anything, it’s still fun to be among the holiday hustle and bustle. Rosie seems to be enjoying it, too. Her cheeks are flushed with excitement as we push through the crowds, Ricky seemingly forgotten.

That’s good, I think. Ricky doesn’t treat her that nicely. Or anyone for that matter.

Rosie comes to a stop in front of a lingerie store, and I grimace. “Don’t tell me you need to go in there.”

She looks embarrassed. “Actually, I do. I’ve lost a couple pounds recently. Can you believe it? But it’s only affected my boobs.”

“Say no more,” I stop her. I hadn’t noticed, but when I glance quickly at her chest, I see that she’s right. “I’ll just meet you in the food court.”

She laughs. “Thanks. I appreciate your understanding.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I wave my hand, motioning for her to go on inside, and push my way through the crowds to the food court. Almost every table is full, and each food kiosk has a huge line. I’m not really hungry, but I have a few bucks in my pocket and decide to grab a pretzel to snack on while I wait. The line there isn’t too long. I’m not sure how long bra shopping takes, but I figure I have some time to kill.

The line moves slowly, and in my boredom, I begin to look around the crowded food court and observe what’s going on. A mother is trying to get her son to drink some water over soda, but he’s having a screaming fit about it. An older couple is bickering, probably over the price of something. To my left...

Zack.

He’s standing in the smoothie line, checking his wallet. His hair has fallen in his eyes. He looks amazing, but he’s not smiling.

I’m frozen, feet glued to the old, scarred tiles. I want to go talk to him so bad, but I can’t seem to make my legs work. He’s pretty far back in the line, and by the looks of it, he’ll be waiting there for a while.

The person behind me nudges me to move forward, but I step out of line instead. My legs are suddenly taking me over to the smoothie kiosk without my permission. He hasn’t noticed me yet.

He looks up when I step beside him shyly, and he looks like he’s seen a ghost. I guess in a way, I am.

He struggles to find words. “Hey,” finally slips from his mouth.

“Hey,” I whisper back.

He turns his eyes to the front of the line, not looking at me. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m with a friend,” I say. “She’s shopping for some...girl things.”

“Oh,” he says absently.

“What about you?” I ask.

“Zack?” A high-pitched voice comes from behind me, and I turn around to see a girl about our age. Long brown hair, big green eyes, and wearing the classic pleated skirt and polo that’s uniform at the local Catholic school. She smiles at me, seeing he and I know each other. “Who’s this?” she asks sweetly.

Zack hesitates, avoiding eye contact with me. “This is Tyler. He’s from my old school. We hung out sometimes.”

His words hit me like a barrage of arrows, and I have to take a step back from the sheer, invisible force of them. I gulp, trying to compose myself, and nod, “Yeah.”

She holds out her hand to me. “I’m Candice. It’s nice to meet you.”

I shake her hand half-heartedly, glancing at Zack for an explanation.

“Candice is my girlfriend,” he says.

I stare at him. So many questions flood into my mouth, trapped by my lips. God, I feel like I’m holding in a mouthful of puke. Is he happy? Was this his idea or his parents? How does it feel having to hide who he is every single day? How does he kiss her and still remain true to himself? His eyes look hollow and sad. Suddenly, I hate his parents so much. I was unhappy with them before, but now...now I truly hate them for doing this to Zack. And this poor girl. She seems nice. She seems so happy. She’ll be crushed when she finds out the truth. She doesn’t deserve that.

“Nice to meet you, too,” I muster.

She smiles at me again but notices a friend of hers in another line. “I’ll be right back, I just have to go say hi,” she tells us apologetically.

“Sure,” I say, and Zack nods his approval as well. When she’s out of earshot, I turn back to him. “I got your text.”

He seems confused. “What text?”

My brows furrow and now I am equally confused. “The one you sent, saying you missed me?”

He softens. “I never sent a text, Tyler. My parents forced me to delete your number.”

“But I got a—”

“It wasn’t from me,” he says. “Look, I can’t do this. I can’t talk to you. I just—”

“You want to be with me still,” I interrupt.

“I have a girlfriend now.”

“Are you really happy?”

He looks away. In that one swift movement, he has answered all of my unasked questions. “She’s coming back,” he says. “You should go.”

“I still love you.”

“Goodbye, Tyler.”

Candice rejoins us and takes his hand, giving it a squeeze. “Do you want to get some smoothies with us?”

“No,” I say smoothly. “My girlfriend is waiting for me. She’s probably about ready to leave.” I look Zack in the eye as I speak. “Nice to meet you, Candice.”

She nods and waves, her smile showing off her dazzling white teeth. I can’t dislike her. She’s nice. I guess if Zack has to force a relationship with someone, I’m glad it’s her. “Bye.”

Zack nods at me. He looks hurt. Good.

I wave and walk back to the lingerie store, keeping an eye out for Rosie. I catch her as she’s walking out, holding a big bag with a huge grin on her face.

“I guess your trip was successful,” I say.

“Yes!” She’s ecstatic and I’m happy for her. I can’t say that I get it, but if buying new underwear makes her happy, then good for her. “I went down a whole size. Can you believe it? A whole size!”

I smirk. “I guess all that dieting is working out after all. And you thought you weren’t getting results.”

She actually giggles. I’ve never seen her so happy. “I guess I just had to be patient. It was just so hard for me. I’m not a very patient person.”

“I know.”

She punches my arm playfully. “I’m a little worried about getting through the rest of the holidays, though.”

“You’ll be fine,” I assure her. “I mean, it’s past Thanksgiving and you look great.”

She grins. “Thanks. Sorry I took so long. What did you do?”

I hesitate, thinking about telling her about my run-in with Zack, but I decide to save that for another time. Right now, it’s about her

victory, not my loss. “I went to the food court,” I finally tell her. “But the lines were ridiculous.”

“That food is bad for you anyway.” She sounds like Kendra. “Is there any store you want to go to?”

“Nah,” I shake my head. “Let’s just walk around for a bit. I kind of like all the chaos.”

“Yeah.” She smiles and hooks her arm through mine. She’s developing Kendra-like confidence and I’ve never seen this side of her. I’m proud of her. “Let’s go.”

I keep my arm entwined with hers and we walk down the packed hallways of the mall together.



Never has a single word made me so nervous. Finals. *Finals*. They never used to bother me before, but my grades have really slipped. No, slipped is an understatement. They’ve been hurtled into a black hole with no hope of ever returning, and I’ve been trying so hard to hide that from Mom. It’s true that my grades started to go down when I started working at the diner, but I can’t let Mom think that my contribution to our income has anything to do with my grades.

I really have to do well on my finals, or I’ll be completely screwed when next semester starts. I can already feel the panic rising in my chest as the teacher passes out a sheet with all the material we’ll need to know. It’ll be a big help. None of my other classes are doing this. At least I won’t have to worry too much about this one.

But I still have five other finals to take next week. I’ve managed to

make it through them in the past, but this year, I'm not so sure. Even with my recent efforts, it still hasn't been enough.

I guess I'm sounding pretty repetitive. I just keep going on about how worried I am about my grades, but it's all I can think about. It's consuming me.

Maybe I'll be able to focus on other things over winter break. That's something to think about, at least. Two weeks of break. No school, no homework, just work.

Work. Right.

Mom told me last night that we're going to be working on Christmas. I guess not enough people were volunteering to work that day, so she decided to put us down. It's fine, though. I scraped together enough money to get my mom a cheap but nice-looking bracelet from the department store. I'm not expecting anything from her. I really hope she hasn't wasted money on me. Maybe I should tell her I don't want anything this year. Besides, the only thing I want is way too expensive for her to afford. The new game console I was looking at costs hundreds of dollars. I'll never let her know I want that. It's the only material thing that I want.

I glance at Kendra, looking over her sheet carefully, memorizing every word and looking confident. Confident, but not healthy. She's still far too thin. I'm still worried about her.



I always had this image in my head of confident women. To me, confident women are strong. They are independent. They keep their head held high even in the toughest of situations. They wear suits and

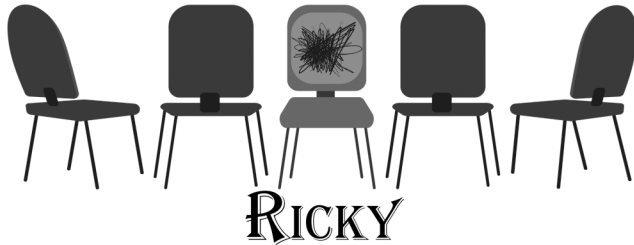
they work respectable jobs. That image was shattered for me by Mrs. Pinto, because she has only one of those qualities.

She's an orthodontist, and a good one at that. She got my braces off in under a year and a half, and for that I was grateful. She has her own office building, and she sees patients of all ages. She goes to work wearing nice dresses and a white lab coat, and as I watch her walk to her car this morning, the woman with a successful job who is supposed to be confident and strong destroys the image I had instilled in my head. Her eyes are swollen from crying. She wobbles slightly in her high-heeled shoes. Her lips are pulled into a tight, thin line and I can't tell if she's angry or trying not to cry some more.

She's so pretty. Her dark brown hair is thick and wavy, and she looks like she has a tan all year. Her legs are long, her figure is good, and she hasn't started to show any signs of aging despite being in her forties.

When I was little, I used to think Mrs. Pinto was the picture of confidence because she had a great job and she was beautiful to boot. I wanted to be like her. I wanted to hold my head high and work at a good job and be able to afford to go on a vacation by myself once in a while. But Mr. Pinto broke her. He beat her back into a corner and took away her confidence. She doesn't hold her head high anymore, and she doesn't smile enough to develop wrinkles.

I can't look up to Mrs. Pinto anymore because she is broken. I don't want to end up like her. I guess I'll just have to become my own version of confident.



I know the answers, but I can't write them down. Damn it, this is my first final and I'm already freezing up.

Actually, that's not it. I've always been good at taking tests. I never have to worry about them or study much, and I still pass. I know every single answer on this page, but I can't make my hand move the pencil. All I can think about is last night, and what that bastard did to my mother.

He came home early; she came home late. That never happens. She walked into the house, smiling and apologizing for her lateness. She explained that she had a last-minute emergency appointment, and it took longer than expected, but before she could even finish her sentence, he slapped her across the face hard enough for the sound to echo into the living room.

I was watching TV and glancing at the textbook in my lap every couple of minutes when she came in. I heard the laugh, the light-hearted apology, and the smack followed by a small cry of pain. I jumped up from the couch and ran into the hall to try and diffuse the situation before it could really get started.

Mom was holding her hand on her cheek and looking up at my dad with those dumb deer-in-the-headlights eyes, like she didn't expect that kind of reaction from him at all. Her naivety is scary sometimes.

"If you're going to be late, you know damn well to let me know!" he shouted at her. He was gripping her arms tightly and giving her a hard shake with each syllable. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"I-I'm sorry," Mom stammered. She was trying to back away from him, but her footing was thrown off.

"What were you really doing?" He hovered over her, covering her face in a shadow.

"I told you, I had a patient."

"Bullshit!" He raised his arm to slap her again, but I'd seen enough. I charged and grabbed his wrist, jerking him back. He's always been taller than me, and stronger too, but I caught him off guard and he stumbled backward.

"Leave her alone, she said she was seeing a patient!" I yelled, stepping between them. I could see Mom behind me, hands clasped against her chest, eyes wide and apologetic. It pissed me off. She never fights back.

He regained his balance quickly and grabbed the front of my shirt, jerking me forward. “You leave this matter between me and your mother,” he growled. “Don’t you dare come between us.”

“Ricky, go back to studying for your finals,” Mom said quietly. She was looking down at her feet. “It’s my fault. I was late and I didn’t say anything.”

“No! He doesn’t have to beat you just because you were late coming home.” I keep my eyes locked onto his. I wanted him to direct his rage at me.

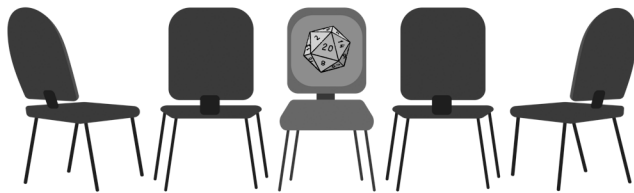
She was starting to cry. I could hear her sniffing behind me. My father shoved me to the side with all the force he could muster, and a sharp, searing pain shot up my spine. I glared at the pointed finger hovering in front of my face. “You get out of this house right now. I don’t want to see you for the rest of the night.”

“Ricky, just go to your room,” Mom whispered.

He whirled around to face my mother again, face red with anger and shining with sweat. “Don’t you contradict me. I said I want him *out!*”

“Its fine,” I spat. Mom watched me again with those stupid deer eyes while I grabbed all my books off the couch, walked between them, and slammed the front door behind me. I hung out on the front porch, shivering and smoking the stale cigarettes in my pocket until my father was settled on the couch with his fifth or sixth beer. When a light snow started to fall, I snuck back in and shut myself up in my room.

But I can’t waste my time thinking about last night. I force myself back to the present and, focusing all the effort I can muster into my hand, make the pencil move.



TYLER

With finals going on, the War Games club has been pretty empty. I haven't been going as much as I used to either, to be honest, but for entirely different reasons. Zack and I met here. We were accepted here as more than just members, and that meant a lot to the both of us. Our friends are here. Not just my friends, not just his friends, *our* friends. Not having Zack sitting on my right makes the whole club experience a hell of a lot less fun.

I'm early to the meeting, which gives me plenty of time to pull all of the ruined notebooks and textbooks out of my backpack and lay them out on the library table in a desperate attempt to salvage them. Some asshole jock had dumped the entire contents of his water bottle into my open bag last period, laughing with his friends while I tried to tug it out of the line of fire. According to him, I was asking for it. Lately, it seems I've had a big red bullseye painted on my forehead. A good, hard shove here, a derogatory slur there. It's not like it's anything new, though. Since I came out with Zack, we both became subject to torture, but recently things have been escalating. Together, we had been able to put up a bit of a force field. Apart, not so much. Yesterday, there was even a note in my locker with a Bible verse printed on it and "God hates fags" slashed in angry red marker beneath it. That was a new one. I guess whoever wrote it didn't know God doesn't seem to care much whenever I walk into church with my parents. So far, I haven't burst into flames or dropped dead in the doorway. Either God hasn't realized I'm gay or that timeless argument is invalid.

I groan as I carefully open my notebook. The ink turned all my notes into illegible blue blobs fanning out on the pages like a Rorschach test. I know that because these particular notes had come from my psychology class. The irony is not lost on me.

As I'm peeling apart the pages of another sopping notebook, a voice speaks up behind me. I fumble and grasp at the pages to keep it from falling. The sopping paper rips apart soundlessly and lands on the floor with a wet *plop*.

"That looks like a mess."

I don't need to turn around to know it's Ryan behind me. His deep voice sends a pleasant chill down my spine. For a split second, I forget all about the rage bubbling in the pit of my stomach. Rosie had called him

my 'hot senior' before, and she's definitely not wrong. His broad shoulders and smooth features make him stand out in a crowd. His cool gaze makes the breath catch in my throat every time his dark eyes meet mine.

"A jerk with a water bottle plus an open backpack is just asking for trouble," I reply, trying to sound unaffected by the incident.

Ryan pulls up a chair next to me and glances at the blobs that were once psychology notes. "Is anything salvageable?" he asks sympathetically, picking lightly at one of the pages.

I shrug and pick the ruined notebook up off the floor. "My psychology and math notebooks are done for, but most of my history notes are still legible. The textbooks should be okay after a bit of airing out." I pause. "Well, okay enough to still turn in at the end of the year."

Ryan lets out a low breath, a hollow whistling sound passing between his lips. "What a dick move. Know who did it?"

"Some jock," I say, looking down at my lap. "I think his name's Brett, but I don't know for sure."

"Going to report him?"

I shake my head slowly, feeling a blush creep up onto my cheeks. We're still alone, and I'm hoping it might stay that way. "What's the point? Nothing would come of it."

"You really think so?" He quirks a brow, making a line of shallow wrinkles on his forehead.

"I know so." I try not to let bitterness creep into my voice. This is far from the worst of the bullying. At this point, I shouldn't be getting so upset over this stuff.

He studies my face for a moment. I can feel his intelligent eyes searching my own, and for a moment I get the feeling that he can see my attraction for him. I quickly look away, breaking his stare. He leans back in his chair.

"When's your psych final?" he asks.

A harsh laugh escapes my throat. I can't help it. "Tomorrow. Can't study very well now."

"Maybe you can," Ryan says.

I blink. "How? The textbook doesn't have all of the information I need." I try to say more, but he holds up a hand to stop me.

"I took that class last year," he explains. "And I should still have my notes. I can never bring myself to throw away a notebook." He says this sheepishly, looking away as if he's embarrassed by his hoarding habits. "You could use it if you want. My handwriting is pretty terrible, but you should be able to make it out. I can't help you with the math, though."

A flood of relief washes over me and I break into a smile. "That would be great," I say. "I can get it back to you tomorrow."

"Don't worry about it," he assures me. "What am I going to do with old psych notes, anyway?"

"You never know when you'll need to psychoanalyze someone," I chuckle. I'm amazed at how easily the joke came to me. I stand and start to gather all my books together again, but he claps a hand on my shoulder as he gets up, freezing me in place.

"Hang on," he says and goes up to the librarian. He asks her something quietly and returns a moment later with an old plastic shopping bag. A smirk touches the corner of his lips. "Seems Miss Keener just can't throw things away either. This way you won't have to get your books wetter than they already are."

He offers me the bag and I take it, our fingers brushing against each other. As I hastily shove my books into it, I wonder if he felt the same electricity I just did. My heart is pounding, and, after I sling my empty but wet backpack over my shoulders, I keep my eyes plastered firmly on the floor so he can't see how red my face has become.

I follow him out of the library and into the deserted hallway, keeping an eye on his feet as we walk to avoid getting too close. Ryan's been a football player for the past three years. I don't know what position. I never cared much about that stuff. But all of that physical activity has left his calves thick with muscle, and I watch them tense and release with every step he takes. It's exhilarating to see his muscles working like that, and just as I'm about to slip into an uncontrollable fantasy of feeling those strong legs for myself, his voice breaks through the budding daydream.

"Did you drive here?" he asks. He looks over his shoulder and I snap my head up quickly, feeling my face turn feverishly hot.

"Yeah." I struggle to keep my voice steady. "I can follow you, if you want."

He nods and holds the door to the parking lot open for me. "Sure. I don't live too far out."

His car is gleaming; red and sporty. It's an older model, but even I can tell it's well taken care of. He must like cars, too, I think to myself as I follow behind him in my own aging gunpowder colored sedan. I've never had much of an interest in cars. The reason I'm driving this one is because it was my stepdad's old car. He passed it on to me when he was ready for a new one. I like it, though. I have no idea what kind of motor it has, or how much gas mileage it gets, but it has a nice settled-in sort of smell to it, like a cross between a musty library and spring rain. It's comforting. I'm sure Ryan could tell me all about the mechanics of it if I asked him to.

He pulls into the driveway of a two-story brick colonial in a neighborhood I recognize. It's not too far from where Rosie lives. Ricky, too. I nose my car up behind his and get out, unable to help noticing that there are no cars in the garage. We're going to be alone, and the revelation gets my heart pounding. I haven't felt this way since the first time Zack kissed me in the cafeteria after lunch. It was quick and unexpected. I definitely hadn't been ready for it and I...

I push the thoughts away as I meet Ryan next to his car. I can't be thinking about that now. Not ever again. "Thanks again for doing this," I say with a smile.

"No problem," he says, and leads me to the front door with a casual gait.

The inside of the house is immaculate, practically sparkling in the late afternoon sunlight. The furniture looks like it has never been used, and it's arranged in a way that reminds of show houses. Ryan catches me looking and gives me that sheepish grin again. "Dad's a realtor," he explains. "Our house may not be on the market, but he wants it to look like it is."

I laugh and he takes me up the stairs to his room, which looks a lot more lived in than the rest of the house. Trophies and medals from various sports and competitions are cluttered onto a shelf above his unmade bed. The floor is littered with discarded t-shirts and gym shorts, which he kicks out of the way to clear a path. I almost snicker at that,

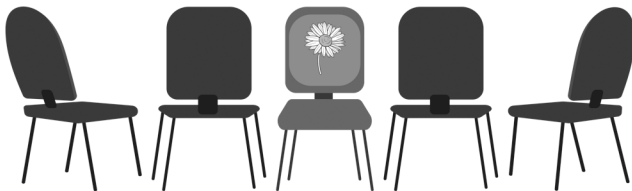
finding it funny that someone who looks so put together all the time could live in such disarray.

“Guess I haven’t picked up my room in a while,” he mutters. He walks to a bookshelf cluttered with a handful of dog-eared paperbacks and notebooks that probably date back to his elementary school days. He pulls out several one-subject spiral notebooks, examining their covers and tossing them aside until he finds the one with *Psych junior year* scrawled across the cover in red permanent marker. “Like I said, it’s probably not too legible, but hopefully this can help.” He turns around and holds it out to me, our fingers brushing together again as I take it.

“It’ll be fine,” I say, wondering what to do next. After all, I have the notebook. It’s the whole reason I came here. Now what? “I won’t have to worry about failing.”

“Hey, don’t put that weight on my shoulders.” He grins and holds his hands up in defense. His laugh is deep and hearty. It’s a sound that resonates in the walls and echoes in my head. It’s an unforgettable laugh. “You better go get studying. It’ll take you hours to decipher those notes.”

I smile again, but it’s less genuine this time. So that’s it. I get the notebook and then I leave. I shouldn’t have expected anything else. But the encounter has given me a lot to think about; his strong body, his deep laugh, and the racing electricity that passed between us as we touched. It’s not much, but it’s enough to fuel a few decent daydreams. I cast a brief glance at his lips as I leave, wondering what they would feel like over my own.



KENDRA

The air is filled with a crisp clarity that accompanies a bright winter day. The streets are clear, and the lawns are lined with glittering, untouched snow. I inhale deeply and exhale a slow stream of dragon's breath up to the cloudless sky. The semester is behind me now and ahead lies two weeks of freedom. I can place all of the horrible ups and downs of the past four months out of my mind. I can relax and look forward to my final semester of high school. I will do my best to make it wonderful. No more relapses.

I promised myself that at my therapy appointment last night. I can't let my disease run my life, especially not now. I want to go away for college, start a new life with a new Kendra. A Kendra who is not sick. A Kendra who can focus on her studies and help others who suffer the way I have. I am so fortunate to have Dr. Walker, who encourages me and gives me the tools to cope with a new environment rather than discouraging me from it.

I can practically feel myself glowing at all of the things ahead, and I hum a jolly holiday tune as the snow on the unsalted sidewalk crunches beneath my feet. Rosie had offered to give me a ride home, but I declined. One cannot simply ignore a gorgeous winter day like this. I want to enjoy every second of it.

Truthfully, I can't remember the last time I felt this good. My finals went well, Christmas is coming, and I get to enjoy time with my family and friends. Nothing could be better than that.

My home is lit up with sparkling white lights. My father enjoys the holiday season just as much as I do, and he always makes a point to have the most tastefully decorated house on the block. Our Christmas tree stands in the front window with its blinking red and green lights and shining tinsel, and I am filled with excitement. I push open the front door and am hit with the powerful scent of warm cinnamon and pleasant ginger wafting in from the kitchen. Suddenly, my stomach drops, and I am flooded with the force of a vivid memory.

Gingerbread cookies. The uncontrollable urge to eat. Gorging myself. Vomiting repeatedly in the privacy of my bathroom. Shoving my fingers down my throat to ensure that every last cookie crumb comes back up. Crying in the dark. Praying no one heard me. The stink of regurgitated ginger.

I no longer feel good. In fact, I feel sick. I drop my bag in the hall and run to my room. The smell lingers, even up here, and I pace in front of the toilet as the horrible scene from last Christmas plays over and over again in my mind. I wait for the inevitable, but it doesn't come. My stomach turns, and still nothing happens. I lean against the wall and slide slowly to the floor, taking in deep, gasping breaths through my mouth to avoiding inhaling anymore of that horrendously triggering scent.

A knock on my bedroom door, followed by my mother's concerned voice. "Kendra? Are you alright?"

Inhaling slowly, I steady my voice. "Fine, Mother. Just left my phone at home today. I wanted to check it."

"I swear, you're addicted to that thing," she says with a laugh. "I made gingerbread cookies today. Come get some."

My stomach seems to be practicing gymnastics at the thought. "Mother, you know I don't like ginger."

A pause. Will she catch my lie? "Isn't your friend Rosie coming over tomorrow? Offer some to her at least, okay?"

A sigh of relief escapes me. "I'm sure she'd love to have some."

I listen to her practical kitten heels clicking down the hallway as she walks away. In my panic, I had almost forgotten about Rosie. We planned a sleepover to celebrate the end of the semester. She promised to bring a pizza. Somehow, I am not so worried about that. Rosie has a way of talking to me and keeping me distracted so I don't focus on what I'm eating.

Perhaps I can even manage a gingerbread cookie with her around. I used to love gingerbread cookies.



Christmas at my house has always been an average event. Mom decorates the house. We trim the tree as a family, bake cookies, and watch holiday movie marathons while drinking hot chocolate. Santa stopped coming to our house years ago, but there's still a nice pile of presents under the tree every Christmas morning.

Molly comes home on Christmas Eve and holes herself up in her room. She ignores Mom's offer to bake cookies and Dad's not-so-subtle attempt at bribery by telling her she can open a present early. I can't complain about Molly refusing to come out. It means she can't get on my case about anything. But my room is next to hers, and I can hear her talking loudly to her boyfriend on the phone.

She's pissed because she wanted to bring him home for the break, and Mom and Dad obviously said no. They've only been together for a few months; how can she possibly know she likes him enough to spend a holiday together? I'm on their side with this. I don't want some strange guy in my house.

Molly almost refused to come home for break at all because of this. God, she's such a drama queen. But, as it turns out, her boyfriend's parents wouldn't let her go to their house either. I really don't know what kind of outcome she expected. She can be so dumb sometimes.

I don't want to listen to her whine. Mom is getting upset now, and I know soon enough she's going to start accusing Molly of ruining Christmas. I definitely don't want to be around when that happens. I've still got some time to kill before we're supposed to eat the roast Mom has cooking in the oven, so I grab my purse and slip out of my room.

Dad is still outside Molly's closed door, trying to talk over her while

she complains to her boyfriend about what horrible parents she has. I want to tell her they're not that bad. Dad's oblivious, and Mom is self-centered, but there are a lot worse parents out there. But she's never been there for me, so why should I try to be there for her?

I manage to get out the front door unnoticed. It's cold. Snow has been falling off and on for the past couple of days. The kids across the street are working on building a snowman. A dad is dragging his toddler down the sidewalk on a red sled. It's the very definition of a winter wonderland out here.

I make a beeline for my car but stop when I see Ricky sitting on his front porch. His red coat stands out vividly in the snow. As usual, a cigarette dangles between his lips. The smoke rises up to the sky. He's looking up, lost in a world of his own. His expression is unreadable, but his eyes are sad.

I step onto his lawn, damaging the previously untouched snow. "Hey."

He snaps out of it and takes a long drag. "Hey."

"Want to go for a ride?"

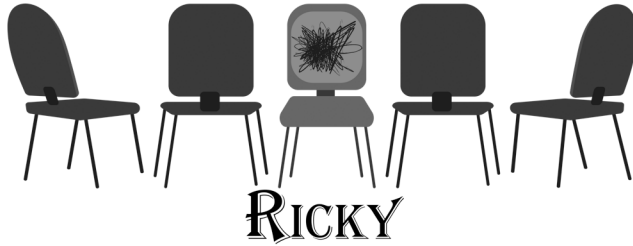
"Where are you going?" The smoke he exhales invades the pure winter air.

I shrug. "No particular destination in mind. I just need to get out of my house. So, you in?"

He considers my offer. I can see his options turning in those dark eyes. Go inside, stay on the porch, go with me. He's probably out on the porch for a reason, so going inside might not even be a real choice for him right now.

He gets up and drops his cigarette into the snow. Wordlessly, he opens the passenger door of my car and slides in.

Okay. I guess we're going for a ride.



Dad's passed out on the couch already, and Mom is sitting in the recliner pretending that he isn't while watching one of her lame Hall-mark movies. Driving around aimlessly with Rosie is much better than hanging out in that house. She doesn't even seem to mind that I'm not talking. That's unlike her. Even if she doesn't have any questions to pester me with, normally she'd be talking just to fill up the quiet.

Should I talk first?

I don't even know what to say.

The sun is starting to set. It makes the snow look weirdly orange. I hate how early darkness comes in winter. I keep my eyes on the window, trying to guess where Rosie is taking us. Honestly, she could be taking me deep into the woods to murder me, for all I care. I wouldn't be surprised if her slutty sister caused her to snap. The holidays sure are good for that.

And it's weird how quiet she's being.

I still don't know what to say. Her life is different from mine. Her parents don't fight. In fact, they seem so lost in their own worlds that they barely register they have kids at all. Must be nice. And sure, she's fat, but she's been happier lately. I guess she has Kendra to thank for that. It was strange seeing them hang out at first, but they clicked.

We're driving through an unfamiliar neighborhood. It looks like Rosie is just taking lefts and rights at random. I kind of hope she's getting us lost. It'll be the most memorable thing to happen to me on a holiday.

And still, she's silent.

Her eyes look straight ahead, her lower lip curls out slightly. I can't

tell what she's thinking. She used to be the girl who just blurted out everything on her mind. When did she change?

The sky is almost black now. Bright lights illuminate the houses we pass. They reflect on the windshield and cast a whole spectrum of colors across Rosie's face. They shine in her glistening eyes. I can't tell if she's holding back tears, or if her eyes are just wet. I don't know how to ask, just like I don't know how to tell her that I don't want her to eventually take me home.

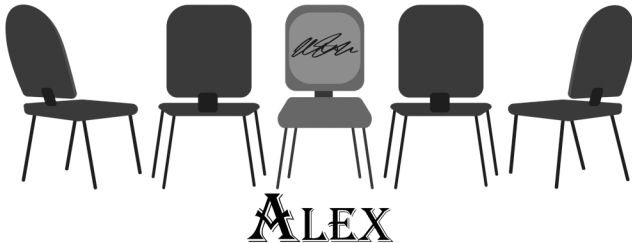
The thought of going back to that house with that man makes my stomach turn, even if he is blessedly unconscious right now.

So, I look at the lights.

We pass elaborately decorated homes, all kinds of lawn inflatables, and creative light displays. The streets are quiet. Only a handful of cars go by as Rosie makes her aimless turns. Everyone is probably inside with their families, but right now I don't want to be anywhere else but here.

The way the lights illuminate the inside of the car in a bright mosaic of colors is breathtaking. Our house is boring. A holly wreath on the door, a tree in the living room decorated with white lights. That's it. Mom will set out gifts under the tree before she goes to bed. Dad wouldn't give me any money to get a decent present for her. The best I can do is try to keep him off her back for the day. I bet it's the only thing she really wants.

We've driven pretty far out. I wonder if we're running away. Rosie probably has her reasons, too. But she pulls into a cracked parking lot, and I realize she did have a destination in mind after all.



Kendra is perched on a stool at the farthest end of the diner counter. Her legs are crossed, her back straight. She hasn't taken her coat off, but she makes no attempt to leave.

And her eyes stay on me as she stirs her metal straw around her water glass. I can't tell what she's thinking behind those dark eyes.

"I just didn't want you to feel alone," she had said when she walked in and saw my astonished face. She hasn't said a word to me since.

There are only a few scattered people eating here tonight. Mostly truckers who didn't make it home for the holiday. Mom nudges me as she passes by with a tray of food.

"Go talk to your friend. I can handle this."

"You should get off your feet," I counter, and reach for the tray. She's been complaining about how much they bother her lately. I try to get her to sit down when things are slow, but she usually won't hear of it.

She shakes her head and pulls the tray away. "She came to see you."

I glance at Kendra. It's not like I don't want to go hang out with her, but I also don't want to leave all the work for Mom. "Let me just—"

"Alex." Her tone says it all.

I gulp and turn to the counter, but the bell above the door jingles. I sigh, gathering up menus without even bothering to see who walked in. Seriously, who comes to a place like this on Christmas Eve?

The menus slip out of my hands and land at my feet when I realize it's Rosie and Ricky standing in the doorway. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kendra break into a toothy grin and wave. Was this planned? But the surprised look on Rosie's face tells me this was all coincidence. Ricky doesn't seem particularly blown away, but he doesn't have his usual expression that says he'd rather be anywhere else, which is an improvement, I guess.

Rosie smiles and walks over to Kendra. Ricky follows behind with his hands shoved deep into his pockets. Mom catches my eye and nods toward them. It's about time for me to take a break anyway.

The Eighth Meeting

. . .

Alex brings out mugs of hot chocolate while his friends settle into a booth. He wants to do something to make this feel at least a little festive. He still has no idea why they've all shown up here, but he can't hide that he's grateful for the company, even if it means his mother has to man the diner for a while. The only person missing is Tyler. Alex wonders if he's going to end up walking through the door as well.

He sets the mugs on the table and slides in next to Kendra. "Okay, what are you guys all doing here? Seriously."

Kendra and Rosie exchange a glance. Both shrug. Within that gesture, it's decided that Kendra will speak first.

She looks down at her mug and pokes at the marshmallows floating lazily in the chocolate pool. "I told you I didn't want you to spend this evening alone."

"I'm not alone." Alex glances back at his mother. She's in the kitchen chatting with Ralph while she scrubs dishes. He feels a rush of love for her. She is not the nosy type, and she wants to give him a private moment with his friends.

A smile touches the corner of Kendra's lips. "I have a selfish reason, as well."

"You're not capable of being selfish," Rosie blurts. Alex swallows a chuckle with a sip of hot chocolate.

Kendra breaks into a full smile. "That's not true at all. I'm actually very selfish. The truth is, I didn't want to be with my parents tonight. It's Thanksgiving all over again. They don't want to make a big deal out of the holiday. They walk on eggshells around me, as if one wrong move, one wrong word, will break me." Her face falls as she clenches her mug. "I do not break so easily."

Alex's eyes never leave her face. "You really scared me that day."

"I had a moment of weakness." Kendra looks between them and smiles softly. "But you've all helped me to be stronger."

"What have I possibly done for you?"

Rosie's eyes widen at Ricky's question. They are the first words he's spoken all night.

Kendra reaches across the table and gently places her hand on Ricky's arm. To Rosie's astonishment, he does not pull away.

"Just you being here is enough," Kendra says. She draws her hand back as Ricky turns his head to look out at the dark night.

"You seem like you've been doing okay, lately," Rosie ventures.

"Therapy is a wonderful thing." To prove her point, Kendra raises her mug to her lips and takes a long sip. "This is delicious, Alex."

"It's just a mix from a bag," Alex rolls his eyes. "We're not exactly classy here."

"But you still made it for us." Kendra turns to Rosie. "And you're right, I am doing better. I am never going to let myself slip like that again."

"But you can talk to me if you start feeling bad again," Rosie says earnestly.

"And me," Alex quips. His cheeks grow pink under the harsh fluorescent lights.

All eyes are suddenly on Ricky. His brows furrow together. "What?"

Kendra clears the growing tension from the air with a single shake of her head. "What brings you two here? I was really surprised when you walked in."

"Oh, my sister is just being a total drama queen, and I didn't want to be around all that bullshit." Rosie can feel Ricky watching her, and she realizes she never gave him an explanation for her sudden escape. She just wanted to drive around and look at the Christmas lights to clear her head. When she realized they were close to the diner, she decided to come in on a whim since she knew Alex was working. Ricky didn't ask a single question the whole time.

Rosie explains the reason for her sister's bad attitude. Alex and Kendra react appropriately with wrinkled noses and rolled eyes. Ricky listens complacently.

"And you?" Kendra asks Ricky when Rosie is finished.

Ricky shrugs. "She asked me to come with her, so I did."

"But why were you sitting out in the cold?" Rosie asks. She drops her head quickly, expecting harsh words or a dirty look, but they don't come.

"I just didn't feel like being inside," he answers.

“You never seem to feel like being inside with your family.” Kendra has breached the barrier that Ricky built around himself. Rosie holds her breath.

“Nope,” is all Ricky says. Rosie lets out that breath in a whoosh.

“Would you like to tell us why?” Kendra presses. “We are safe people to talk to.” She looks at him expectantly.

Rosie does her best to hide her displeasure at her friend’s prodding. She’s watching Ricky like he’s a bomb about to detonate. Alex suddenly finds his half-empty mug of hot chocolate the most fascinating thing in the world.

Kendra’s hard eyes drill holes in Ricky’s forehead. Finally, he raises his head to meet her gaze. Rosie grips her knees. *This is it*, she thinks. He is going to erupt, leaving nothing but a steaming pile of ash around him.

“I’m just staying out of my dad’s way,” Ricky says, his voice hollow.

Rosie’s eyes are wide with astonishment. It is the closest Ricky has ever come to confirming her suspicions. The words tumble out of her mouth before she can stop them. “He hurts you, doesn’t he, Ricky?”

Whatever progress Kendra just made has been ruined. They all watch as Ricky folds back into himself, his muted eyes cast downward once more. “He doesn’t do shit,” he mumbles before he shuts down completely.

Rosie dares to glance at Kendra, but her friend doesn’t appear to be angry. There is a gentle smile playing at her lips, a celebration of her small victory. If she can crack his barrier once, she can do it again. Rosie has no doubt in Kendra’s otherworldly abilities. And next time, Rosie decides she’ll shut herself up with duct tape if she has to.

Kendra takes a drink from her mug and turns her smile to Alex. “What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Working,” Alex deadpans. “Truckers still have to eat, even if it is Christmas.”

Kendra’s smile turns sympathetic. “What about New Years?”

Alex nods towards the holiday hours posted on the door. “We’re closing early that day.”

“Wonderful,” Kendra beams. “We’ll have a party. You’re all cordially invited to my house to ring in the new year. Tyler too, wherever he may be tonight.”

Rosie pauses, taken aback by the sudden invitation. “Your parents are okay with you having a party?”

“They will be.” Kendra leans over to pat Rosie reassuringly on the shoulder, then turns to Ricky. “Please say you’ll come.”

Ricky’s eyes are glued to the chipped Formica tabletop. “Whatever.”

Alex smirks wryly. “Wow, my first New Year’s party that isn’t with my mom.”

Rosie laughs. “That’s pretty pathetic.” She pulls her phone out of her pocket as it vibrates. The message on the screen turns down the corners of her mouth. “Looks like my parents finally realized I’m not there. I should get back.” She finishes off her hot chocolate and stands.

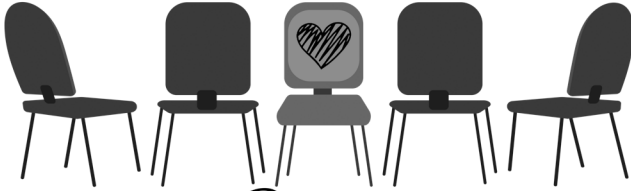
Ricky follows suit, shoving his hands back into his pockets.

Kendra nods at Alex. “And we should let you get back to work.”

“You guys can come hang out whenever you want,” Alex says with a shrug.

They say their goodbyes, and Alex watches his friends retreat into the windy night. He has something to look forward to, and he feels oddly rejuvenated. With an extra bounce in his step and a merry holiday tune echoing in his head, he whisks dirty plates off the tables with a genuine smile.

NINE



ROSIE

I'm such an idiot. If I could have just kept my big, fat mouth shut, maybe Ricky would have opened up more. Maybe we could have found a way to help him. But I just had to go and say what I was thinking. No. I said what I *know*. I need him to confirm it, though. I need him to say what's going on behind those closed doors, so I know for sure it's not just my imagination getting the best of me. I want to help him, but I don't even know where to start.

Ricky is quiet again on the way home. He only looks out the window, his expression totally blank. I can't read people like Kendra, but even I can tell that he's blocked himself off. I wish I knew the right thing to say. I wish I could just say something, anything, in the first place.

When I pull into the driveway, I see Mom setting the roast on the table through the dining room window. I'm not looking forward to the stiff holiday dinner. I turn to Ricky, an invitation to join us sitting on my tongue.

Before I can open my mouth, he shoves the passenger door open, a quick "Thanks" slipping out. The door slams shut.

I stay in the car for a few more minutes, watching my family through the window. I wonder what it's like in Ricky's house tonight. Maybe I did help him out, even if it was just a little bit, after all.



The diner closes two hours early in honor of the holiday. Mom and I ride home together in the dark. The streets are empty. Everyone is home with their families. In the apartment, there is a two-foot tree on the end table decorated with handmade ornaments I made when I was a kid. I'm surprised to find a large, wrapped box sitting beside it when we walk inside.

Mom hangs her worn purse on the hook and puts her hand on my shoulder. "Do you want to open it now?"

"Uh, sure, hang on a second." I rush to my room and open the dresser drawer, where the small jewelry box sits on top of my sloppily folded T-shirts. I told her not to get me anything this year, and she told me the same. I guess we both refused to listen.

I step out of my room and hand the box to her. She smiles softly as she takes it from me.

"You didn't have to get me anything, Alex."

"Neither did you." I pick up my box. It's heavier than I expect, and I nearly drop it on my toes. She must see the surprise on my face because she laughs, and it sounds as genuine as Kendra's.

"Just open it. I think you'll be happy." She's already gotten the wrapping paper off her gift, and she opens the box to examine the bracelet inside. "Oh, it's beautiful," she breathes as she slips it on her wrist. "Thank you, honey."

"It's nothing," I say, because it does kind of feel that way. She looks like I just handed her the Heart of the Ocean anyway.

The wrapping paper tears off my present easily. For a second, I think I'm seeing things. It's not the newly released game system I've been

dreaming about, but it's the previous generation and still just as good. I see remnants of the "Used" sticker that Mom tried peeling off in the corner. Even though it's older, even though it's not new, it's still too much.

Mom is waiting for my reaction. I think I take too long because her smile drops into a frown. "I know it's not the new one, but I was told this is basically the same."

"Take it back."

Her brow furrows. "What? I thought you wanted this."

How do I explain that I'm dying to plug it in and start downloading games, but the thought of the money she spent on this makes me want to puke at the same time? She wouldn't understand. She's looking at me expectantly. I have to say something.

"It's too much, Mom. What about...rent?"

She sighs. I've ruined her good mood. "Don't worry about that. I've been saving up to get you this for a while. Please just enjoy it, Alex. For everything you've done for me, you deserve it. You deserve much more, actually, but this is the best I can do right now."

How am I supposed to argue against that? I look down at the box again, but any excitement I might have felt has been zapped as I think about all the things Mom could have bought for herself with the money she spent on me.

"Alex?" She's starting to look genuinely concerned, so I make myself crack a smile.

"Thanks, Mom. I really did want this."

A relieved look crosses her face, and she reaches out to pull me into a tight hug, nearly crushing the box between us. "You can consider it a gift for doing well on your finals. But if your grades start slipping again, I do reserve the right to take it away."

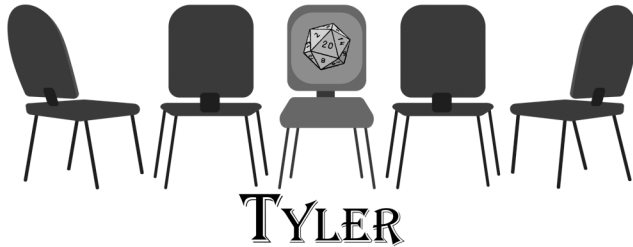
I've never had a bargaining chip like this before, and I laugh at how normal her threat sounds. "I'll get on the honor roll if it means I can keep this."

She laughs with me. "If you make it on the honor roll, I'll buy you the newest one."

The good mood has been restored, but it's getting late and we're both tired. I can tell Mom's feet are hurting by the way she keeps

shifting her weight from foot to foot. I know all she wants to do is lie in bed and maybe watch a holiday special or two while she dozes. And I really, really want to fire up my new toy.

So, we say goodnight and retreat to our personal paradises. As I stare at the startup screen of the game included with the console, I think that this is the best Christmas I've had since Dad died.



Nothing remarkable happens. I open up the newest edition of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. I had mentioned to David that I was thinking of running my own campaign for the members of the War Games club a while back. I think he's kind of a nerd, too, because he told me about a campaign he played in college and asked a bunch of questions about the logistics. Mom doesn't really get my interest in it, but I open up some unpainted mini figures and a paint kit from her. I'll have a good time customizing them.

While we chat over a late holiday brunch, I look out at the snowy neighborhood and realize I haven't once thought about Zack.



The mountain of gifts under the tree are mostly clothes. I don't have to open them to know that. They're always mostly clothes. There'll be some makeup sprinkled in for Molly, and a few books for me, but Mom likes to spoil us with fashion. My closet is full of trendy styles that I'll never wear, and it's not because of my weight. I don't think my mother will ever get that I'm just a plain and simple jeans and T-shirts kind of girl.

Mom claps her hands excitedly to her chest as I come down the stairs. Molly is already there, sitting cross-legged in front of the pile and still sulking. I think she's just mad for the sake of being mad at this point. Dad sits in the recliner smoking his special occasion pipe and looking like the most cliched version of a father on Christmas morning I've ever seen. If not for Molly's sour look, they'd be the most picture-perfect family, like a portrait. And then I step into the room.

"Let's get this over with," Molly huffs. She reaches into the pile and grabs a gift with her name on it. As usual, she doesn't bother handing out presents to anyone else.

"Wouldn't you like to have breakfast first?" Mom glances into the kitchen.

I smell the cinnamon rolls cooling on the rack and open my mouth to say that I would, but quickly close it before the words can spill out. Mentioning that I'd like to eat first thing would only be an invitation to ridicule me.

Molly shrugs and Dad grunts indifferently. Everyone seems to be in a bad mood this morning, and it's no one's fault but Molly's. Well, I'm not going to let her ruin my Christmas. Even if I am going to end up

with a pile of clothes I hate, I know there's a few hidden treasures in that pile for me somewhere.

The first gift I unwrap reveals a plain white clothes box. Shocker. But what's inside actually surprises me. A simple V-neck T-shirt, the same blush pink as the dress I wore to homecoming. Did Mom actually get me something I would wear? I pick it up to get a better look, but my shoulders sag when I see the tag.

"I think this was supposed to go to Molly." I hold the shirt out to my brooding sister, but she doesn't take it. She's too busy trying to pretend she hates the Coach bag she just opened.

"Actually, that *is* for you, Rosie." Mom's smile is too cautious. "I thought having some smaller clothes in your style might be a good incentive for you."

Okay. I guess it's my turn to ruin Christmas.

There are so many harsh, angry words I want to throw out, and if I hadn't been working so hard to control my mouth lately, I might have said some things I'd really regret. But instead, I bite down on my tongue and dig my fingers into the soft fabric. I pull with all my might and grin at the satisfying sound of ripping material. Mom watches, jaw dropped in horror, as I let the scraps fall to the floor and stand. Dad is shaking his head, as cool and indifferent as ever. As for Molly, she simply busies herself with opening another present. She can have them all, mine included, for all I care. They're her size anyway.

I storm up the stairs, slamming all my weight down on each step. Between stomps, I hear Dad mutter, "I told you she'd be upset." And Mom makes that defiant *hmpb* sound she does when she knows Dad is right but doesn't want to admit it.

My mouth is filled with the coppery taste of blood. It dribbles warmly down chin and I wipe it away with the back of my hand.

Safe behind my closed bedroom door, I grab a tissue and dab at my poor, throbbing tongue. If this is what it takes to keep my hasty words from falling out without warning, it isn't worth it.

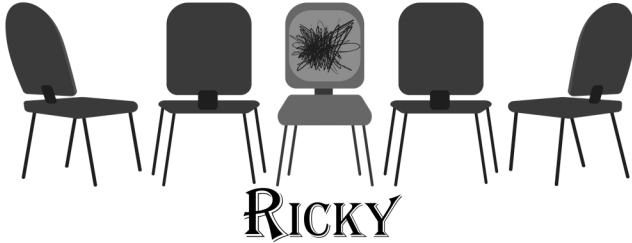
No one bothers to come up and get me. That's fine. I'd rather starve up here in my room than go back downstairs right now. I won't show my face again until those disgusting gifts are cleared away.

Incentive? What a joke. I'm happy with the progress I've been

making. It dawns on me now that no matter how much weight I lose, it won't be fast enough or good enough for my mother. I steal a glance at the mirror hanging on my closet door. I don't look that much different than usual, but fuck her, I like what I see. My weight doesn't define my worth, as much as that woman tries to make me believe otherwise. I like who I am, uncontrollable mouth and all. Why should I make myself miserable trying to make her happy?

From a health standpoint alone, I know I should try to eat better. *That* I can do. But I'm not going to worry about the pounds that may or may not be there. I'm making my New Year's resolution right now: *Just be me.*

I look out the window. Ricky's room is dark, his curtains drawn tight. I wonder how he's doing. I really hope his Christmas is going better than mine.



The leather jacket is a perfect fit. I'm glad I make it downstairs before Dad wakes up so I can actually enjoy opening it.

"I wish you would have waited for your father," Mom says in that quiet, mousy voice of hers. The words are a front. She's probably wishing he'd sleep all day, or better yet: not wake up at all. I know that's what I want.

I don't want to start anything with her though, so I keep my mouth shut and work through the smaller gifts with my name on them. Mom already opened the perfume I bought with the lawn mowing money I'd saved up from the summer. She always says she wants to make sure she smells nice when she's leaning over the faces of

her patients, so perfume just made sense as a gift. I think she's happy with it.

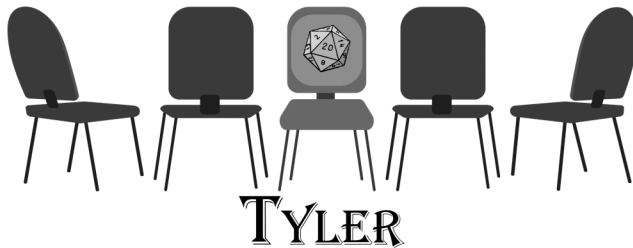
I'm curious about the sloppily wrapped box with her name on it, but since it's from Dad, she won't touch it until he comes down. The box with the leather jacket said it was from "Mom and Dad," but I know the truth. He wouldn't bother picking anything out for me.

I hear the shower turn on overhead and gather up the small gifts in my arms, standing. "Merry Christmas, Mom."

Her face falls. "You're leaving?"

I don't like seeing her looking that way but, for my own sanity, I don't want to be around when Dad comes downstairs. I plan to go back to my room and stay out of his way until he's too drunk to notice my existence.

"Sorry," I say, and I mean it. She doesn't argue, so I retreat up the stairs. My door is safely shut and locked by the time the shower turns off.



The day before Kendra's New Year's party, I walk into the local game shop to spend a gift card and crash straight into Ryan. It's my fault. My attention was so focused on the shelves of mini figures lining the back wall that I didn't even see Ryan reaching for the door from the inside when I pushed it open.

He stumbles but catches himself easily.

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry!" I grimace and Ryan laughs easily.

"No worries." He rubs his shin with his free hand, and I notice the large bag he's clutching in his other.

“What’d you get?” I try to sound casual, but all I can think about is attempting to coolly ask if we could play whatever game he got together. After several after-hours discussions in the War Games club, I’ve learned we have more interests in common than I originally thought. But I’ve never had to flirt before. How do people do this?

He opens the bag so I can see what’s inside. It’s a game I’ve never heard of before, but the text that reads “2-6 Players” in the corner gives me hope.

“I played it with a friend last weekend,” Ryan explains. “I ended up liking it so much, I had to get it for myself.”

“It looks fun.” God, I hope I sound casual. “Maybe you could... bring it to the club?” Dammit, I’m such a chicken.

Ryan doesn’t seem to notice my internal struggle, but maybe he picks up on what I’m actually trying to ask. “I was planning to. But maybe I could teach you the rules first? It’ll help to have more than one person who knows how to play.”

Oh man, this is killing me. I could take that at face value, or I could scrape up some double meaning and convince myself that he really just wants to spend time with me. Either way, my heart has leapt into my throat, and I struggle to speak. I have to say something before I choke.

“Actually, do you have plans tomorrow? My friend is having a party. We’ll be playing some games, and with you there, that’ll make six.” Holy hell, where did that come from? Kendra didn’t say we could invite anyone else. What if Ryan turns out to be some kind of outsider in the weird little club we’ve formed? Our issues brought us together, but Ryan doesn’t have any. He’s flawless. But at the same time, something tells me Kendra wouldn’t mind the extra guest. She welcomes everyone with open arms.

“I told some friends I’d hang out tomorrow night.” My heart drops down to my shoes. “But I think I can swing by before the ball drops.” Like a dysfunctional elevator, my heart jumps right back into my throat.

I tame the wide grin spreading across my face. I don’t want to seem weirdly eager. “I’ll text you the details?”

Ryan smirks, and my heart flutters. It’s such a mischievous look on his normally calm face. “Do you even have my number?”

Shit. I don't. I guess I should have started with that. I fumble my phone out of my pocket. "What is it?"

He gives me the number and I send him a quick text so he can have mine, too.

"See you tomorrow, then." He slings the bag over his shoulder and walks out into the chilly afternoon. I watch him go, my gift card and the mini figures I was planning to examine completely forgotten.

The Ninth Meeting

The atmosphere in Kendra's basement is heavy, and not because of the decorations. Silver and gold streamers hang from the ceiling. A Happy New Year banner is pinned to the wall above the TV, and quiet music plays from a curated station. An assortment of snacks sits untouched on a folding table by the stairs. Party poppers and silly hats have been scattered on the coffee table. No one spares them a glance.

Tyler looks oddly out of place. He is the only one who appears genuinely happy as he examines the shelf of classic party games next to the TV. A secret smile passes between him and Kendra, but even she is not her normal, confident self.

Alex sits at one end of the oversized couch, picking aimlessly at a loose thread on his hoodie.

Ricky leans against the wall by the stairs, arms crossed tightly over his chest.

Rosie has folded herself into the furthest corner of the couch. Not only is she unusually quiet, but the conflicted look on her face is like nothing anyone had ever seen before. For this reason, Kendra decides to start with her.

"How did your Christmas go?" she asks as she sits in the vacant space between Rosie and Alex. "You mentioned your sister was being dramatic."

Rosie huffs, blowing her dirty-blond bangs out of her eyes. "Mom

was *so* worried that Molly would ruin Christmas with her attitude, but it turns out I was the one who ruined everything.”

Alex manages to get the thread off and flicks it absently to the floor. “What did you do?”

“Well, my mom thought it would be a brilliant idea to get me clothes in my sister’s size. She thought it would motivate me to lose more weight.” Rosie’s voice is toneless, and Tyler wrinkles his nose.

“That’s sick.”

Rosie shrugs. “Could be worse. A few months ago, she tried giving me diet pills. I thought I was going to end up with some in my stocking, too. Luckily, she just filled it with lotions and hand sanitizer.”

“You don’t get candy in your stocking?” Tyler’s question is innocent, but the blank look Rosie gives him tells him everything he needs to know. He scoffs. “Why does your mom care so much about how you look?”

“Because I’m a big, fat stain on her otherwise perfect image.” There’s no malice in Rosie’s voice. She is merely stating a fact.

“Your mom only cares about how *she* looks,” Ricky mumbles. His eyes remain focused on the floor. “I’ve never even seen her even get the mail without makeup and fancy clothes.”

Rosie tries to hide her surprise at Ricky’s commentary, but her wide eyes give her away. She lets out a long breath and shakes her head slowly. “You’re not wrong. But I’ve decided not to let her get to me anymore. It was the weirdest thing. I looked at myself in the mirror, I mean *really* looked at myself, and I liked what I saw.”

“You did?” Kendra asks, astonished. She has often wished to adopt Rosie’s seemingly carefree attitude about her body. She never realized that Rosie’s mother’s words were cutting her so deeply. The way she laughed off the diet pills made Kendra think that Rosie was able to brush aside her mother’s verbal assaults. Her chest wells up with pride for her friend. And a little envy, too.

Rosie is able to read her friend’s face as easily as a book. She smiles. “If I could give you instructions on how to do it, I would.” Her face falls as she realizes that, for all the times Kendra has asked the others how they were doing, they rarely remember to ask Kendra the same question. “How did your day go? Did your family end up doing anything?”

Kendra leans back against the couch. “We made good use of the fireplace, watched a few movies, and I got some gift cards. My mother and I made a nice dinner together, too.”

“But it was nothing special?” Rosie asks.

“It was nothing special,” Kendra echoes.

Rosie wonders if Kendra’s parents are making the right choice in denying her the holidays. But she’s grateful they at least allowed her to have this little party. They seem like nice enough people. Rosie understands that they just want to do their best for Kendra, but who can really know what’s best for someone in a situation like hers?

Alex finds another loose thread. “The diner was pretty slow, but Mom and I still made some good tips. She got me a PS4. I told her it was too much, but she really wanted me to have it.”

Tyler’s attention is on Alex. “What games do you have? I have a few you can borrow, and some you can just have, if you want.”

Alex lists off the dismal collection he’s managed to gather so far. “Did you get the new one?”

Tyler snorts back laughter. “No one got the new one. But if you ever want to game together, I’m around.”

“Yeah, that would be awesome. Whenever I have time.” Alex smiles lightly. “I’m trying to work extra over break.”

“Aren’t the hours you’re working, like, illegal?” Rosie asks. “How are you getting away with that?”

Alex shrugs. “Lying about my age. The manager is never around. Mom covers for me. I really don’t care, though. It’s not like it’s a hard job, and I can do some homework when things are slow.”

“How did your finals end up going?” Kendra asks gently.

A prideful smile breaks out on Alex’s pale face. “Not bad at all. I’m starting to think I can spare myself from repeating my senior year.”

“That’s great, buddy.” Tyler claps a hand on his shoulder. “A light at the end of the tunnel, huh?”

Alex wrinkles his nose. “If only I knew what was at the end of that tunnel.” He glances at Ricky. Silent against the wall, keeping as close to an escape as possible. He is not an outsider here, but he’s trying to make himself one. “That’s a nice jacket, Ricky. Was it a present?”

His fingers toy with the silver zipper. “Yeah.”

Rosie eyes him warily, internally pleading with him to come closer and let them all in. “Was it a good day?”

Ricky pauses to consider the question. There was no yelling. His father had drunk himself into a stupor by that evening. The sloppily wrapped gift for his mother turned out to be a fancy coffee maker, which she was ecstatic to use. He had spent a peaceful day in his room. “Yeah.”

“Tyler had a good Christmas, too,” Kendra says in that mysterious voice she uses when there is a secret to tell.

“Huh?” Tyler raises a brow. “Mine was pretty average. Nothing special.”

“Oh, that’s not true. Your gift just came a little late.” Kendra’s smile widens as she turns her attention to the rest of the group. “We have another guest joining us tonight.”

The announcement is met with confused stares.

Kendra laughs merrily. “Oh, come on. No one wants to take a guess?”

“Is it...?” Rosie stops herself from saying *Zack*. That just wouldn’t be possible. Not with the way he treated Tyler. Not with his ignorant parents and their iron-clad grip on him. The dark blush on Tyler’s cheeks brings another guess to mind, and she excitedly blurts, “The hot senior?!”

“His name is Ryan,” Tyler reminds her for about the hundredth time. “And you better not call him that when he gets here.”

Rosie grins. “No promises.”

“So, he’s really coming?” Alex smirks lightly. “I feel like there’s a story there.”

Tyler relays the events at the game shop. “We’ve actually been talking a lot at the War Games club. And now that I have his number, we’ve been texting.”

“Flirting?” Rosie asks mischievously.

“I’m, uh, not really sure about that, actually,” Tyler admits. He glances at Ricky. He’s no longer leaning against the wall and has dared to take a few steps closer to the group. But he still looks stiff and uncomfortable. Tyler wonders, not for the first time, if it’s his presence that makes Ricky act this way. A darker part of him wonders if Ricky could

even be one of the ones leaving little love notes in his locker. But something tells Tyler that his guess might be off base. His preferences are well known throughout the school. The notes could be from anyone.

He quickly shakes the thoughts away. Now is not the time to be getting hung up on whether or not Ricky actually likes him. Or at least tolerates him. Rosie has asked him a question, and he asks her to repeat it.

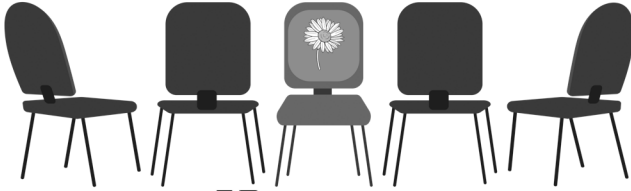
“I said, how are you not sure?”

“Oh.” Tyler laughs. “I don’t know. I guess our conversations just seem pretty normal, but at the same time there could be some underlying meaning. You know?”

Kendra smiles her secret smile and loops her arm through Rosie’s. “It sounds like we’ll have to do some observing tonight. Rosie and I will be able to tell you where he stands.”

Amused, Tyler gives her a playful shove. “Just don’t be obvious.”

TEN



KENDRA

Mother beats me to the door. She welcomes Ryan graciously into our home and motions to me, waiting at the top of the basement stairs. The atmosphere downstairs has shifted considerably. With the holiday weight lifted from our shoulders, we are free to ring in the new year with cautious optimism. I am glad that Ryan is here, and I'm thrilled Tyler mustered up the courage to invite him. But I am also glad that he was late. He seems like a kind person, but somehow, he doesn't quite fit into the little box we have carved for ourselves.

I think they all feel that.

He is tall, muscular. His frame fills out the doorway. But his face is gentle. His arms could envelope Tyler in a hug so deep he would disappear completely. I don't know how he feels about my friend, but the fact that he is here speaks volumes. I am certain he knows of Tyler's preferences. The whole school knows. But Ryan is a mystery.

I offer him a smile. "I'm glad you could come."

"Thanks for having me." He sounds sheepish. It's an odd tone coming from such a large man. But then again, the only person he really knows here is Tyler. This is the first time I've ever spoken to him. He holds up a bag. "I brought some games."

"Wonderful. We just figured out it was Colonel Mustard with the pipe in the billiards room. I think we're ready for a new game."

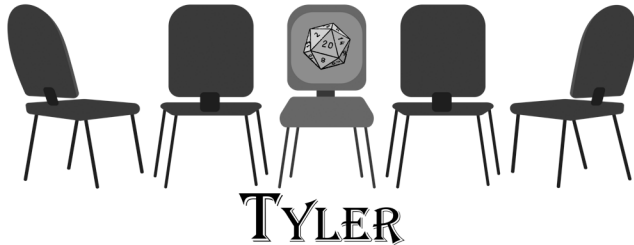
I lead him down the stairs, and Tyler's face lights up. It's a look I've never seen before. It makes him look almost childish, giddy with excite-

ment at the prospect of something new on the horizon. What a wonderful feeling that must be.

We select a new game from Ryan's supply. I watch as Tyler helps him set up the pieces. Their fingers brush together over the table and red tinges Tyler's cheeks. I'm not sure if Ryan notices this, but I notice that he makes no effort to draw his hand back. I catch Rosie's eye. She has seen it too, and she can't suppress her excited grin. It's like watching a love story play out in front of us.

Gathered around the table, Ryan and Tyler explain the rules of this strategy game in tandem. They make a good team, and soon we are all having fun as we try to be the ones to come out on top. To my surprise, I win. Alex playfully challenges me to another round, which I graciously accept.

The clock ticks ever closer to a fresh start.



TYLER

At 11:55, we stop the game and turn on the TV so we can watch the ball drop. We put on the silly hats and grab the party poppers that were sitting on the coffee table. I'm feeling exhilarated by my closeness to Ryan, and he's fallen easily into the group. Even Ricky participates in the games he's brought, and it might be my imagination, but I think I even saw him crack a smile when a dice roll guaranteed him a win.

I stand next to Ryan as we gather around the TV. I deliberately stand a little closer than what's considered normal, just to see what he does. To my relief, he makes no effort to step away. In fact, our arms brush together and a spark of electricity races through my chest.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Alex doing the same with

Kendra. His hand hovers at the small of her back. *Just do it*, I think, because I doubt she would pull away from him. I actually think she'd welcome his arm around her waist.

Ricky stands at the edge of the semi-circle we've created. Rosie is next to him, but she keeps a good foot of space between them. I see her feet shift. I see her looking at Kendra, and the lack of space she has with Alex. I send her a mental message: *You can do it, too.*

Maybe she hears me because she takes a cautious side-step closer to Ricky. His feet are rooted to the ground.

The countdown begins. A thought crosses my mind. Isn't it tradition to kiss someone when the ball drops? Do I dare take that kind of risk? It would be one way to really find out where he stands with me.

I mentally roll for initiative.

The big, grand ball plummets. I don't want to think about it. So I just do it.

He's so much taller than me. I turn and grab him by the shoulders, standing on my toes while simultaneously pulling him down. Our lips crash together. He isn't surprised or offended. He actually seems to be expecting this, because his large hand immediately moves to rest on my hip. It's warm. Comforting. I don't even care that all my friends are here. I'm too lost in the sweet feeling of his mouth over mine while the party poppers go off around us.

It's over as quickly as it started. I open my eyes to tiny, colorful streamers floating lazily to the floor. A heavy weight settles over my shoulders as Ryan puts his arm around me. There's no acknowledgment. He just shouts, "Happy New Year!" with the rest of them. But he's smiling. And I'm smiling. And I think we must look like idiots, because our smiles are both wide enough to crack our faces open.

I couldn't ask for a better way to kick off the new year.



Seeing Tyler just go for it so freely with Ryan makes my heart throb. I glance at Ricky beside me. He hasn't bothered to put on one of the hats or pick up one of the party poppers, but I didn't really expect him to, anyway. If I were brave like Tyler, I would grab Ricky and kiss him too. But I'm not that brave. I don't want to risk setting him off when he's in an okay mood.

Once the shouts have died down and the carpet is littered with little streamers, I decide to kick off another New Year's tradition. I square my shoulders and announce to my friends, "This year, I've decided to just be me."

Kendra smiles broadly. "I like it. This year, I will just be Kendra."

Alex laughs. "Yeah, I'll work harder to just be Alex."

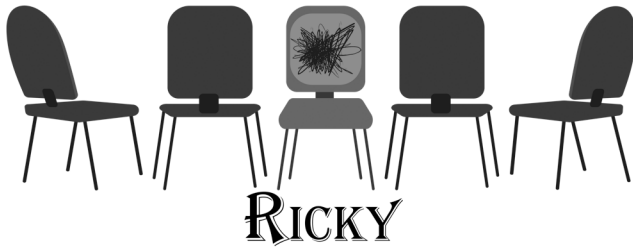
"I'll stick with just being Tyler," Tyler says with a smirk.

Ryan seems a little confused by our weird declarations. But nevertheless, he shrugs and says, "I'll be Ryan, I guess?"

I turn to Ricky. Kendra is also looking at him expectantly. Her eyes are full of encouragement and warmth. "And who will you be this year?" she asks.

Ricky's hands are in his pockets, his face the usual unreadable mask. "I'll just be Ricky," he says in a voice so low I can barely hear him. I don't know if he says it just to placate us or if he really means it, but I'm glad he said it. In a weird way, it makes me feel better.

I'm really starting to worry about him.



Dad's taken the first few days of the new year off, and school doesn't start up again for another two days. Mom's working. She always has tons of appointments to take braces off before break ends. I tried to convince her to let me come with her. I've done some bookkeeping for her before. But she just told me to enjoy my break. Doesn't she know I can't enjoy anything with him around?

So, I go to the park. It's cold, but the sun is bright, so it's really not that bad. A few kids are even braving the playground with their parents watching from the sidelines. I used to play here a lot when I was kid, sometimes with Rosie, most of the time by myself. This park was the farthest place I was allowed to wander off to alone when I was little.

I sit on a whitewashed bench by the frozen pond. During the summer, it's full of honking geese and quacking ducks, but now it's so quiet it could be a still from a movie. The book on my lap is *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I know it'll be assigned reading once school starts up again. I've already plowed halfway through it. I finished *Cat's Cradle* yesterday. It wasn't on the syllabus. That one was just for the hell of it. I like the author. His writing is kind of insane, and sometimes I wonder what kind of drugs the guy was on, but I like his style. I don't have to worry about what author I'm going to write my final paper on.

The snow crunches behind me. My breath gets caught in my throat. But the muffled voice that speaks isn't his.

"Oh, hey. What are you doing here?"

I turn my head. Tyler stands behind the bench, hands in his pockets and a green scarf wrapped tightly over his nose and mouth. I don't ask him to, but he sits down next to me.

My fingers run over the corner of the book. “Nothing. Just reading.”

“Out in the cold?”

“It’s not so bad.”

His eyes are on me. I can feel them drilling into my face. I think he’s expecting me to say more. Carry on a conversation. Why is he trying? I think he’s going to stay whether I say anything or not, but the silence winds up the air between us.

“What are you doing here?” I finally ask lamely.

“I was actually on my way to hang out with Rosie for a bit.”

“What about your boyfriend?”

He pauses, like he’s trying to decide if the question is malicious or not. He must decide that it’s not, which is good. Because it isn’t.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” he says. His eyes stay on his lap.

“Oh.” It’s all I can think of to say. They were so obviously into each other at Kendra’s party, I just figured they’d end up together. I kind of know Ryan from my football stint, but we weren’t really friends. He never talked about himself much, and he was pretty shy. I didn’t think he was the type to just kiss someone in front of a bunch of people and walk away like nothing happened.

“Yet.”

“Huh?” I raise my eyes.

Tyler is grinning. “I said he’s not my boyfriend, *yet*. But we’re getting there.”

“Oh.” I repeat.

That grin falls just a little bit. “Hey, Ricky?”

“What?”

“I really do consider you my friend, you know. I hope you do, too.”

I have to take a second to absorb his words. I got sucked into Kendra’s little club against my will. But I keep going back. Why? I don’t exactly bring much to the table. I don’t like talking about my personal life. But they let me come, even if I just sit there. Why do they do it?

Tyler’s eyes are on his lap again. “I...kind of get the feeling that you don’t like me much. Is it...because I’m gay?”

Shit. I think I took too long to say something. But what can I possibly say to a friendship declaration like that? No one’s ever said

anything like that to me before. Not even Rosie, who always just assumed we were friends.

But this guy has the wrong idea.

“You don’t have real problems.”

He blinks, confused. “Um. What?”

How do I explain this? I struggle to find the right words, but I can’t. So I just let them come out.

“Your life is basically perfect. Yeah, you got dumped. Yeah, some people are dickheads to you. But you’ve got friends. And parents who want you around. So, yeah, you don’t have real problems. Literally everyone gets bullied one way or another. And everyone gets dumped. But you act like those are the worst things that can possibly happen to you. Well, they’re not, and you should be grateful for that.”

He’s staring at me. I was probably too harsh again. But it’s the truth. I don’t give a damn about his boyfriends. It just pisses me off the way he lets these minor annoyances run his life. He’s going to get defensive. Yell. Take back what he said.

But he laughs.

What the hell is wrong with this guy?

His laughs are accentuated by big plumes of steam as his breath hits the cold air. I turn my head and pull a crumpled cigarette from my pocket. He starts to calm down as I light it.

“You know what’s weird?” he asks, stifling another laugh.

“You?”

He snorts, but I really wasn’t trying to be funny. He waves the guess away with the smoke from my cigarette.

“I’ve basically been thinking everything you just said for months,” he explains. He clasps his gloved hands together on his lap. “I’ve got great parents. They never had a problem with who I am. In fact, I think they kind of saw it coming. My mom makes sure I know how much she loves me. My stepdad makes a real effort to connect with me, and we get along great. I’ve got some awesome friends, too. So I shouldn’t let what happened with Zack get me down. The occasional hate mail in my locker isn’t such a big deal, either. But I still feel like it is. And yeah, I think I got pushed down the stairs once or twice. Maybe they were accidents. So, what’s the point of telling anyone about it? I can’t prove it.

The adults like to turn a blind eye to that kind of thing. Even still, I know how lucky I am to have what I do, but it feels unstable; like everything could turn to shit any second. You know? Sometimes I wonder how my secret admirers would feel if I actually took their advice and offed myself. But then I think about my parents and my friends, and I think that the real revenge would be for me to just be happy. You know?”

His speech is long and disjointed, but I let him talk. Do I know? What would my dad think if I just perked up and smiled through his harsh words and sharp smacks – if I acted even a little happy around him? He’d probably think I’d lost my fucking mind. So, no. I don’t know. My situation and Tyler’s are too different.

“Whatever works for you,” I finally tell him.

He smiles, but there’s pity in it. “You pointed out that I had friends. Are you one of them?”

“I guess so.”

He stands and claps a hand on my shoulder. There’s a fading bruise there from a couple nights ago, but his touch is gentle, and it doesn’t hurt. “You have friends too, Ricky.”

I guess he’s right. I don’t know what to say. My voice is suddenly locked up, and I only manage to choke out a simple “Yeah.”

Tyler checks his phone. “You want to come hang out with me and Rosie? We were going to go get coffee or something. She wants to get away from her sister.”

I look down at the book in my lap. “I want to finish this.”

He can see the remaining pages beneath my bookmark. He probably knows I’m going to be out here for a few more hours if I really mean to finish the book today. But he doesn’t argue, he only shrugs. “Suit yourself. If you ever want to hang out, I’m around.”

I surprise myself by saying, “See you later.”

He nods and walks off, raising a hand in a wave as he crunches through the snow. I turn to look back at the frozen pond. For a while, all I can do is stare at it. I’m not really sure what just happened. I realize I never had a one-on-one talk with him before. He’s not so bad.

I open my book. Later, when a light snow starts to fall and wets the pages, I get up and make my way back to the house.



Watching Molly's shiny red convertible back out of the driveway is the best gift she could possibly give me. Good riddance, dear sister. Spring break can take its sweet time getting here.

The atmosphere in the house has been thick since our disaster of a Christmas morning. Mom still blames me, but she's getting over it. With Molly gone, at least some of the tension has evaporated. Our boring lives resume.

Kendra is coming over to celebrate our last day of break. I tried inviting the guys, but Alex is working, Tyler won't admit he has a date and claims he and Ryan are just *hanging out*, and Ricky made some vague excuse about getting ahead on a book report. The Pinto house has been pretty quiet lately, but it does nothing to squash my concerns for my friend. I plan to talk to Kendra about it when she gets here. Tyler told me about his run-in with Ricky at the park, and I'm hoping that was a positive step forward for him, but he still seems distant. Maybe it's just me. Or maybe it's just me he hates.

I shake the thought away. Kendra's mom has pulled her car into the driveway. I watch her give Kendra a smile and a kiss on the cheek before she gets out. Kendra says something to her mom before she closes the car door. They both laugh. She blows her mother a kiss. The sound of the door closing echoes into the late afternoon air.

Mom gets to the front door before me. She likes Kendra. She thinks she's a good influence on me. She has no idea how sick Kendra is.

Kendra does not like my mother. She thinks she's too self-absorbed for her own good. She once heard my mother ignorantly inform me that I could have a body like Kendra's if I just worked hard enough at it.

Kendra spent the rest of that visit with a clenched jaw and a quiet, seething rage. She offers my mother a pleasant smile that doesn't reach her eyes and brushes past her to meet me at the bottom of the stairs.

Up in my room, safely behind the closed door, Kendra lays back on my bed and spreads her arms wide. "This may sound like absolute insanity, but I can't wait to go back to school."

"You're right, that does sound insane," I agree. I plop down to sit at the foot of the bed and her body bounces with the movement.

She's suddenly serious. There's no playful undertone to her voice, and it's jarring. "I just want to put this whole break behind me. It's a new year, and I'm ready for a new beginning."

"Do you...think you'll be okay?" I ask cautiously.

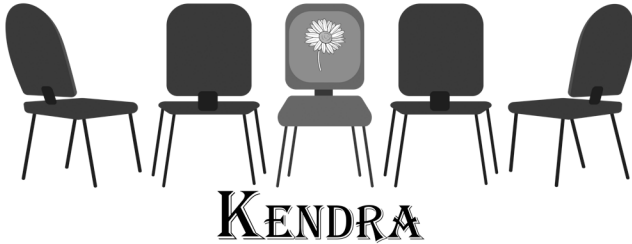
She pushes herself up to sit. Her dark eyes lock onto mine. They don't glitter with mischief, but there's a force behind them. "I know I'll be okay." She leans forward. Her hand moves to rest on my knee. She's looking at me so earnestly that for a second, I think she might lean in for a kiss. But she only goes on to say, "Rosie, I cannot thank you enough for everything you've done for me. I don't know if you realize just how much you've helped, but from the moment you stepped into my life, I knew things were going to change for me. Because of you, and Tyler, and Alex, and Ricky, I no longer have to fake my optimism. It's real. You care so deeply for me, and I love you fiercely for that."

My jaw might as well be on the floor. Kendra always had an eloquent way with words – mature beyond her years, my dad said once. A simple "*Thanks for everything*" isn't good enough for her. She has to tell me exactly how she feels. I don't think I could ever get the words I want to say just right. Not like she does.

As much as I've apparently helped her, she's helped me. She made me see that anyone can have issues with their bodies, no matter what the scale says. It's because of her that I'm getting happier in my own skin. I'm not totally there yet. Maybe I never will be. But I wouldn't be where I'm at today without Kendra, and I love her fiercely for that, too.

I don't have the right words, but I know how to make her understand. I wrap my arms around her tiny frame. She's not bony anymore, and it's a relief, but she's still too thin. I won't mention it. This time, I believe her when she says she's getting better. I'm so filled with love and

respect for my best friend that, for the moment, I can't even remember what it was that I wanted to talk to her about.



Rosie's arms are like an anchor without which I would simply float away. I'm not sure exactly when the weight of my illness began to lift, but it has been a gradual thing – progressing steadily towards a recovery on the horizon. I know I will never truly be cured. I know I will battle this demon with sword and shield for the rest of my life, but lately that battle does not seem so daunting. And I know exactly who to thank for that.

I only wish my parents could see it. I am no longer made of glass.

My words for Rosie were not prepared. I wanted to thank her, and I let them flow freely. If not for her, I truly do not know where I would be today, and I thank the Fates for allowing us to cross paths. Something started that day; something big and wonderful and beyond any of us.

We hold each other for a long time, and after a while my shoulder becomes wet with her tears.

“I love you, too, you know,” she says in a voice clogged with her emotions. “I can't express it the way you can, but you helped me, too. All of you. Alex, Tyler—” She cuts herself off. She pulls back and her eyes are wide. Her hands are on my shoulders. She is looking at me with a near desperation. “Ricky. We have to do something about Ricky.”

“Is he all right?” It's a loaded question with no definite answer. Of course he's not. In the grand scheme of things, he is very far from all right. But I want to know if something has happened recently. Rosie knows this. We have gotten good at reading each other.

“It’s been quiet lately.” Her eyes shift to the window. Ricky’s bedroom window lies beyond it. The curtains are closed but I can see the dim light of a lamp beyond them. “And I know he seemed to have a good time at your party, but I can’t help but worry. I don’t even really know what I’m worrying about. Nothing’s changed with his parents; not as far as I know, at least. It’s just a feeling I have.”

“A gut feeling?”

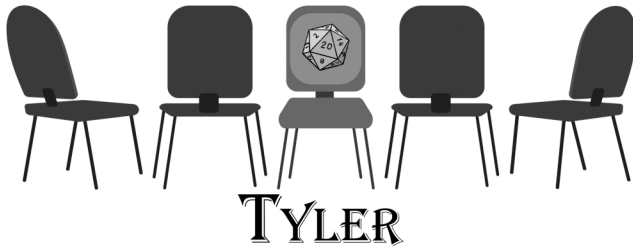
She looks down at her stomach. I was not trying to be funny or trying to make some kind of sick joke. She knows this, too. But she still finds my phrasing amusing.

“Yeah, a gut feeling.”

“I’m a firm believer in intuition,” I tell her.

“What do you think we should do?”

I’m not sure why she thinks that I have the solution, but I’m willing to take on the challenge. “Tomorrow, after school, we call a meeting. We’ll make sure our friend is okay.”



Mom’s eyes light up when I walk into the house with Ryan. We’re not holding hands or anything, but our closeness must be enough to set her Mom Radar off. That and the fact that I’ve been spending a lot of time with him the past few days. She shakes his hand with enthusiasm and offers to make us a snack. David’s at work, but I can see Mom taking in every single detail so she can give him a full report when he gets home. My potential love life must be more interesting to her than those mindless reality shows she watches.

We accept the snack offer and I usher Ryan quickly up to my room while Mom disappears into the kitchen.

“Sorry about her,” I say sheepishly once the door is closed behind us. “She gets excited.”

Ryan laughs. “It’s cool. She seems like a good mom.”

“I can’t complain.” My thoughts go to Ricky’s commentary at the park. I remind myself that I’m lucky. I’ve been doing that a lot more lately.

Ryan stands in front of my cluttered bookshelf, although it’s filled with more games than books. I never was much of a reader. He runs a finger along the stacks of video game cases and stops at one. “I haven’t played this yet. I heard it’s good.”

I’m already turning on the TV. “You can try it out, if you want.”

“You sure you don’t want a two-player game?”

I shake my head. “I don’t mind. Sometimes it’s fun watching someone experience a new game for the first time.”

“I have been wanting to try it out.” He smiles sheepishly. It looks ridiculous on his large frame. A guy built like him should be nothing but confident, but I think it’s endearing. He’s really a lot softer than he looks.

We settle on the floor, and he starts making his way through the tutorial. It’s nice watching him concentrate on the game. I really meant what I said. Sometimes I like to just sit back and watch people play. Zack never did.

The thought came out of nowhere and it makes me pause. It’s true, though. Zack always insisted on two-player games. He thought it was boring to watch other people play, and he always wanted to be part of the action.

Mom knocks and pushes the door open, holding a big bowl of caramel corn on her hip. She sets it down between us, careful not to block Ryan’s view of the screen, along with two cans of soda she’d been clenching under her arm. She smiles warmly and tucks her hair behind her ears. “Just let me know if you two want anything else.”

Ryan smiles back, and it lights up his whole face. “Thank you, Mrs. Michaels.”

Mom must be as smitten with this guy as I am because she lets out a

girlish giggle I've never heard before and quickly excuses herself from the room.

This takes me back, too. Zack never smiled at my mom like that. He liked her. Really, he was jealous that I had her, I think. But part of him must have always been afraid that she would somehow slip up and mention our relationship to his mom. I realize now that Zack might have been living in a constant state of fear, like he was strapped to a bomb with a timer, but the countdown was unreadable. I wonder how he's doing now, but I have no way of finding out. I hope he's okay.

I push the thoughts away.

Ryan now occupies the space where Zack once sat, and I like the way he fills it out.

I watch him play for a while longer, noting the way his tongue pokes out of the corner of his mouth when he's really focusing. I've seen him do that a few times before, when he was mentally working through a strategy for his next turn in Dungeons and Dragons. It's cute, and watching him concentrate so hard on the nerdy things I love so much makes it hard to believe that this guy is actually the best defensive tackle our football team has ever seen.

I scoot a little closer to him.

After a few more minutes, he sets the controller down and stretches. "I'll have to get this one for myself."

"You can just have mine," I say. "I've already played through it a few times."

"For real? Thanks." He checks the time on his phone and stands. "Sorry to take a game and bounce, but I promised my parents I'd be home for dinner."

"It's fine," I say, because it is. Unlike Zack, he actually seems kind of reluctant to leave.

I mentally smack myself. I've got to stop thinking like that.

"You want to hang out after school tomorrow?"

I almost blurt out a yes. The word hangs on my lips, ready to explode, but then I remember the text Kendra sent a few hours ago. As much as I'm dying to spend more time with Ryan, it sounds like my friends need me.

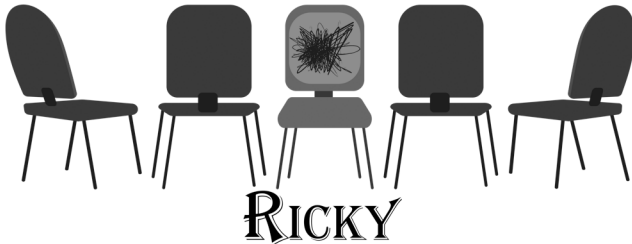
I smile apologetically. "I've got plans already. But the next day?"

“Sounds good,” he agrees.

He bends down and gives me a lingering kiss. I can’t help but think of the last time Zack kissed me in this spot, but I quickly push that image away. This is better.

Once Ryan leaves, I take a moment to look around my room. Nothing in it has changed since the last time Zack was here. Maybe that’s why I can’t seem to stop comparing him to Ryan. Even my unmade bed looks exactly the same. My life has changed, drastically, and I think I need my room to reflect that so I can truly move on. It’s time for a remodel, both mentally and physically.

I run downstairs to ask David to take me to the hardware store so I can get some paint.



Rosie reminds me of the meeting that Kendra’s called as she pulls into the school parking lot. Even if I didn’t want to go, I wouldn’t have a choice since she’s my ride. I don’t know why she feels like she has to keep reminding me. I got the same text that everyone else did.

The day drags. The meeting is the only thing I have to look forward to, even though I don’t plan on saying anything. Somehow, just sitting around with them feels okay.

But then lunchtime comes, and everything goes to shit.

Coach Brennan is standing by the gym doors, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. By the time I notice him, it’s too late to change my path to the cafeteria, so I try walking by at a fast pace with my head down.

“What a waste,” he mutters under his breath.

I freeze. My fists are balled up at my sides. My jaw aches and I realize it's because I'm clenching my teeth so hard. A quick glance around tells me that Rosie probably won't come to rescue me this time. Even still, I open my fucking mouth. "You got something to say to me?"

"Actually, I do." The coach steps away from the wall and squares his shoulders. "Do you have any idea how much you've thrown away? Ryan Stewart got a full scholarship. That could have been you, too. Instead, you just sulk around the school acting like everything is too much trouble for you to bother with. When are you going to grow up, Rick? You've got five months to graduation. Do you even have an inkling of what you're going to do with your life? Because right now, all you are is wasted potential."

My knuckles hurt.

Through my hazy vision, I wonder why.

Coach Brennan is on his ass, legs sprawled. His big, meaty hand is clamped to the lower half of his face. Bright red blood seeps through his fingers. His eyes are wide as he stares up at me.

I look down at my throbbing hand. The knuckles are smeared with blood. Around me, the thinning crowd of students and faculty watches the scene unfold in stunned silence.

"You've really done it now, Rick." The coach's voice is muffled, but it's just as harsh as ever.

There's only one thing I'm absolutely sure of right now: I'm fucked.

The Tenth Meeting

The school basement is as quiet as it is freezing. Rosie, Alex, and Tyler sit huddled in the desks they have claimed as their own, shivering despite their winter gear wrapped tightly around them. Kendra stands in the middle of the circle, seemingly untouched by the chill. Her thin arms are crossed over her chest, a deep frown marring her beautiful features.

"I assume you've all heard by now?" Her voice is sharp, demanding of attention.

Rosie wipes a stray tear from her eye. She has been holding them back since that afternoon, but she still stubbornly refuses to let them fall. With a clogged voice, she says, "Coach Brennan's nose is broken."

"And Ricky's the one who did it," Alex adds dully.

Tyler sighs. His fingernail scratches at the crude drawings etched into the desktop. "Is he suspended or expelled? I've heard it go both ways."

"I think just suspended." Rosie has no basis for her claim. She is only projecting what she hopes to be the truth.

The school's rumor mill turned fiercely that day. A student punching a teacher was the most exciting thing to happen since Kendra's incident in gym class the year before. There were several variations of the story, all told by those claiming to be eyewitnesses. Some say that Ricky punched Coach Brennan out of nowhere, completely unprovoked. Others say that the coach was practically asking for it. Some claim to have seen Ricky's father dragging him out of the school by the wrist. Others say he sat in the office all day. The claims that Ricky was either suspended or expelled from the school were evenly split.

What frightened Rosie the most was hearing that Coach Brennan was considering pressing charges against Ricky. She can't even begin to fathom just how much trouble he's already in with his father. With a police report thrown on top of everything, Rosie's fear evolves into utter terror.

Kendra's eyes are on her. "You haven't heard anything, have you?"

Rosie checks her phone for what feels like the thousandth time and shakes her head. "Nothing."

"Do you think he's...okay?" Alex asks cautiously.

The feeling of dread that has slowly been coiling in Rosie's stomach for the past few weeks tightens. When she speaks, her voice is barely above a whisper. "I really don't know."

Tyler glances at Kendra. "He's the reason you called this meeting, isn't it?"

"Yes," Kendra says with a nod. "Rosie has been worried for quite some time. I was hoping to...talk to him, make him see that we are his friends. I wanted to get him to talk to us..." She trails off, at a loss for words for what may be the first time.

“He seemed okay when I talked to him in the park the other day,” Tyler volunteers. “I know his dad sucks and everything, and he’s probably going to be in a lot of trouble after this, but the way you guys sound...you don’t really think that he could...that he might...?” He wants the others to assure him that there’s no way Ricky would be in that kind of danger, yet the truth that anything could happen renders him unable to finish the thought.

The coil twisting in Rosie’s stomach snaps. She stands abruptly, knocking her desk over in the process. “I’m going to check on him.”

Rosie is already at the stairs when Kendra says, “Should we come?”

She takes only a second to consider. “Let me go first.” She ascends the steps two at a time and disappears into the harshly lit hallway before anyone has the chance to protest.

Kendra fishes her mother’s keys from her purse, grateful that she was allowed to borrow the car that day. She clutches the cool metal in her palm and turns to the men. “Let’s go.”

Alex hesitates. “She said she wanted to go first. Shouldn’t we give her a few minutes?”

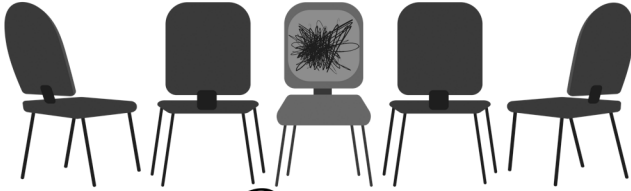
“She got a head start.” Tyler frowns. The worry in the air is palpable. He wonders if this is what people call a premonition. “I agree with Kendra. Let’s go.”

Kendra nods, offering him a soft smile that doesn’t quite touch her eyes. “We’re probably overreacting, but nevertheless, our friend needs us.”

As they rush into the dim afternoon, Alex wonders if Ricky knows just how much of an impact he’s made on them simply by being there. If he needs help, they will be there, whether he likes it or not.

We’re coming, buddy, Alex thinks, unaware that Tyler is having the exact same thought.

ELEVEN



RICKY

My wrist hurts worse than my knuckles. The skin on the back of my hand is scraped to shit, and the nurse wrapped it up loosely with a bandage while the principal tried calling my mom. She refused to look at me while she did it. I didn't think it was possible for the situation to get any worse, but then the principal told me he couldn't reach my mom and called my dad instead. I puked right there on the office floor in front of everyone.

When he finally showed up, he was deathly calm. The principal told him I wasn't welcome back at school for two weeks. I guess some people reported that Coach Brennan said some pretty shitty things to me, so he decided to cut me some slack. It didn't make any difference to my dad, though. He apologized for my behavior and grabbed my wrist, dragging me out of the school with that same calm, cool expression on his face.

Not a word is spoken until we're back home, the front door closed and locked behind us. I hold my throbbing wrist and brace myself for what's coming.

The slap across my face doesn't sting nearly as much as what he says.

"What the fuck is the matter with you? I ought to break *your* goddamn nose! What kind of worthless piece of trash punches a teacher? Are you trying to get your ass arrested?"

The next slap hits lower, and my lip grinds against my teeth. The coppery taste of blood fills my mouth.

"You don't know what happened! You weren't there!" I burst. Red

spittle flies from my lips and splatters across the front of his white T-shirt. I think my heart stops beating for a second.

He looks down and his face turns as dark as the stains. He grips the front of my shirt and jerks me forward like I'm some kind of ragdoll. "I don't need to know what happened, you piece of shit. You're always causing some kind of trouble for me, for your mother. Who the hell do you think you are, huh? All you're good for is making me miserable."

He flings me to the side like the bag of trash he probably thinks I am. I hit the wall at a weird angle, and a burst of pain shoots up my shoulder. He's going up the stairs, and I think about making a mad dash out the front door while I clutch my shoulder with my throbbing hand.

"Don't you fucking move." His voice is low and threatening. I might as well be rooted to the ground now.

He comes back down a minute later in a clean shirt. There's still color on his cheeks, but I start to hope that maybe the worst is over. No such luck, he grabs me by the collar again and gives me a good, hard shake. I let my body flop with the force of it. I've learned that if I try to tense up and keep still, I'll only be sore later.

"If this guy presses charges, do you know how much shit you'll be in?" he hisses.

Probably so much shit that my dad doesn't know what he'll do to me, I think. He can't even come up with a good threat because me getting arrested would literally be the worst thing that could possibly happen. I think about how worthless I'd be then. I certainly wouldn't be able to count on any kind of bail coming from him.

"I can guess," I respond, even though I can't. I keep my eyes on the ground. It's safer that way.

He shakes me again. I bite my tongue and swallow the gush of blood that floods into my mouth.

"Don't think you're just going to sit around here for the next two weeks. I'm going back to the garage to make some arrangements. You'll be coming in with me. Every day. We'll make you useful, see if some manual labor will set you straight."

This time I think my heart really does stop. The air in my lungs feels trapped, blocked by some kind of steel door with no way to escape. Two weeks in the garage with him. Alone, most of the time. Surrounded by

tools. Weapons. I can't talk. I can't even move. My legs feel like jelly, like if I try to take a step, I'll just crumple to the floor. My mind is racing, but the thoughts are incoherent. As a cold sweat breaks out all over, my vision narrows into nothing more than a pinhole.

He lets me go, then. I think he says something else because his mouth moves, but my head feels like it's been dunked underwater. The world ripples around me the way my laptop screen distorted the time he threw it across the room.

He pushes me. My ass hits the bottom step, but I don't feel anything. My whole body feels like it just isn't there. He leaves. I think the door slams because through the haze, I see the windows rattle.

I'm alone, but I can't move. My body is frozen. I don't think I'll ever move again. I wish for the police. Maybe behind metal bars, I'll be safe from him. But I don't think that's going to happen.

I'm just not that lucky.



My chest is tight as I drive to Ricky's house, and I think I might actually be having one of those heart attacks my mom is so worried about. The ten-minute drive feels like ten hours. I have these roads memorized, but my mind is so focused on getting to Ricky that I run a stop sign and leave an angry driver laying on their horn in my wake.

I'm not sure what I'm so afraid of, exactly. It's like this feeling of dread has been blowing up and expanding in my chest, and when Tyler implied that Ricky's dad might try to hurt him (or worse, that Ricky might try to hurt himself), that balloon popped. Suddenly, those two things seem like very real possibilities. Ricky's dad has a temper. Ricky's dad has guns, and honestly, I'm not sure if all of them are legal. Ricky is distant. Ricky always has his guard up. I like to think I'm his friend. I

like to think I'm in love with him. But do I even really know what's going on his head? Sometimes I wonder if Ricky himself knows.

The house comes into view. The garage is open but there are no cars inside. I should be relieved by the sight, but it only scares me more. It means Ricky is alone. Alone with guns.

I swerve into the driveway, my front right tire plunging off the cement and into the yard. I throw my door open, but the seatbelt jerks me back into place as I try to lunge out of the seat.

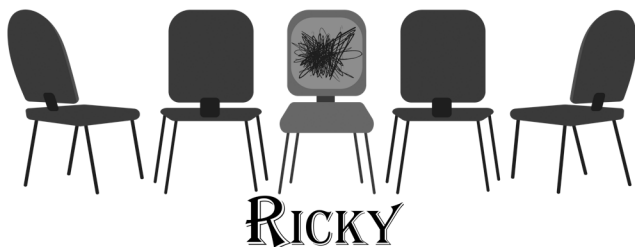
"God, fuck!" I whisper as my sweaty fingers fumble with the release. I can't shake this dread, this sense of urgency, that bubbles up inside me with sickening speed.

Finally, the seatbelt snaps back and I'm free. I bolt from my car, not bothering to close the door, and make a beeline for the garage door that opens into the kitchen. It's unlocked, and I throw it open without knocking.

My feet stop before my brain does, and I nearly pitch forward onto the linoleum. I can't process what I'm seeing. It's wrong. It's all wrong. And it's my worst fear.

Ricky sits in one of the chairs at the kitchen table. For a second, it just looks like he's sitting there, waiting for something. But then I see the shotgun. Its butt is firmly planted on the floor, the barrel pointed straight up. Ricky is leaning over it. His cheeks are wet. His feet are bare. It's not hard to guess what he's getting ready to do.

For once, I'm grateful for my overactive mouth. Before I can fully process the scene in front of me, I scream.



“Stop!”

The single word pulls me out of the void I’ve slipped into. Dad’s shotgun is knocked from my hands. It’s easy enough to do. My palms are so sweaty I barely had a grip on it in the first place. And then arms are around me, squeezing my torso so tightly I can’t even suck in a breath. They’re soft, these arms, but they’re strong. They won’t let me go.

My eyes have been closed for a while, a feeble attempt to dam up the tears. I didn’t want to risk Mom seeing my face stained from crying, but it didn’t do much good.

My face feels hot, like I have a high fever. I can feel it radiating off my skin as I press my face into the shoulder attached to those strong arms. Damp fabric rubs against my cheek, and I know it’s wet because of me.

For a while, I keep my eyes closed, floating in the darkness, not caring who’s holding me this way. I feel like a little kid clinging to his mommy. But this person isn’t my mom.

I open my eyes.

I’m not surprised to see Rosie. I think that I should be, but I’m numb. I feel nothing but her. She’s squatting with her arms around me, leaning her weight against me to keep her balance. It’s a comforting weight, like an anchor stopping me from slipping out to sea.

I sob like a baby, and she doesn’t say a word. She just lets me get it all out, never moving even though her legs must be killing her. Something inside me is released. I can feel it, like popping a tab on a can of soda. My body slumps, all the pent-up tension from years and years of anger simply vanishes, and it’s too much to handle. I fall forward, unable to

hold myself up. Rosie overbalances and falls back on her ass, but her arms are still wrapped tightly around me, and she takes me down with her.

My eyes fall on the shotgun. In the chaos, it's been kicked under the table, and I realize how fortunate it is that it didn't go off. I know what I was about to do. Part of me still wants to, because the thought of living another day with that man breathing down my neck is so horrific that I'd rather splatter my brains all over the ceiling. I could break out of Rosie's hold and make a grab for it. But I don't.

I realize that she's crying. I think she has been the whole time. She makes no effort to get up or push me off her. She just hiccups as she chokes out a barely coherent sentence. "Ricky...why...please...love you... don't...please..."

I push myself onto my knees beside her. She clears her throat and sits up as well, wiping furiously at her eyes with the back of her hands. We sit in a stalemate for what feels like hours, but only a few seconds pass. I watch the clock on the wall tick them away behind her.

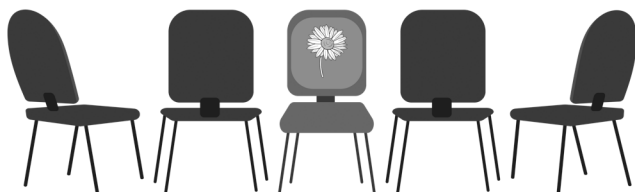
She seems to get a better hold on herself, and she reaches out to grab my hands. Her grip is tight. It almost hurts. But I don't pull away.

"Please don't do it, Ricky." Her voice breaks.

If I don't, my father might. But I don't tell her this. I don't tell her anything.

She doesn't seem to care that I'm not responding. Instead of forcing me to talk, she gets to her feet and pulls me up with her. Her eyes are locked on mine. Unshed tears hang precariously from her eyelashes, ready to fall at any second. She's crying for me.

"Come with me. Please."



KENDRA

The feeling of dread is palpable as we approach Ricky's house. Despite the cold sunshine and cloudless blue sky, there is a heaviness to the air that settles into darkness around us. Alex sits in the passenger seat. He is leaning back, his hands buried in his hair, his expression unreadable. The worn sleeves of his gray hoodie have fallen down to his elbows, exposing pale white skin, unmarred by the pink scratch marks that first drew my attention an eternity ago.

Tyler sits in the middle seat in the back, leaning over the center console. His eyes are focused on the road as if he's the one driving. His hands are on his knees, gripping them so tightly that his knuckles are as white as the snow outside.

The scene at the Pinto house does nothing to quell the disquiet. Rosie's car is parked at an angle in the driveway, one tire in the yard between her home and Ricky's. The driver's side door is open, and frantic feet have disturbed the previously untouched snow.

I park on the street in front of the house and get out of the car. The neighborhood is quiet. It's too early for the adults to be home from work, and the kids of the community are likely holed up in their homes enjoying the solitude of a cold winter's day. Is anyone else aware that someone near them is suffering? Or would they only become aware when it's too late?

Tyler and Alex stumble out of the car. Both are ready to dash through the yard and burst into the house. I stop them with a single word.

"Wait."

Alex looks at me over his shoulder. His face is pinched, as if he's in pain himself. "Kendra."

I shake my head and repeat my command. I'm not sure what it is that we're waiting for, but I'll know it when it happens. And so, I lean against my mother's car and look up at the house, studying it as if it could tell me what is happening inside its heart. Alex and Tyler join me on either side. I feel them wanting to talk, to ask questions, but we continue to wait in silence.

And then it happens.

The front door opens. Rosie and Ricky are in the doorway. He is leaning heavily against her, his right arm slung loosely around her shoulders for support. He is taller than her by a good six inches, but she doesn't seem to mind the awkward positioning. Ricky is hanging his head, hiding his face. As Rosie begins to make her way across the walkway, Ricky stays in step beside her like a person coming out of a deep sleep.

The flood of relief that washes through my body is strong, I think I would fall to my knees if I didn't have my mother's car to support me. He is not okay, but he is here. And we are here. Everyone is exactly where they are supposed to be in this moment.

We all know what to do next. There is an unspoken agreement as the five of us get into the car. We scheduled a meeting today to help Ricky, and that is precisely what we are going to do.

The Tenth Meeting Continued

For lack of a better place to go, Kendra parks her mother's car in the furthest space available at Alex's diner. In the retreating afternoon, the diner is nearly deserted, and Alex guesses that they have a couple of hours before the dinner crowd begins to roll in. In this secluded spot, they are free to talk as they please.

Not a word is spoken until Alex brings five to-go cups of hot chocolate out of the diner and into the car, where the heat is rapidly escaping.

To spare the environment, Kendra refuses to turn the engine back on unless absolutely necessary, but no one really seems to mind. Their closeness and the steaming hot chocolates are enough to keep them from getting too cold.

No one knows what to say or how to get the conversation started. So, in true Kendra fashion, she speaks first anyway.

“We’re glad you’re here, Ricky.”

He gives a single nod, barely noticeable. His hands are loosely wrapped around the paper cup, eyes staring into the little hole in the plastic lid. Brown splatters of hot chocolate surround the opening.

“We heard what happened with the coach,” Rosie ventures. She is the only one who knows exactly what Ricky had been planning to do when she found him, but she thinks the others have a pretty good idea. She swallows the lump in her throat. “Your dad must be pretty pissed, huh?”

Ricky scoffs. “That’s one way to put it.”

Kendra is no longer willing to beat around the bush. She wishes that she would have been blunt with Ricky sooner; drag the answers out of him if she had to. But there was no sense in dwelling on the past. She can make the effort now. “Are you afraid of your father, Ricky?”

He stiffens at the question because no one has ever asked him that before. In the middle seat, with Rosie and Tyler on either side of him like twin anchors, he begins to cry. “Fuck,” he whispers in a shuddering voice. “I hate him. I fucking hate him.”

He swallows thickly as Rosie’s arms wrap around him. Without hesitation, Tyler joins her. Kendra and Alex are in no position to participate in their friend’s much-needed hug, so they twist around in the front seats and reach out, placing their hands on his knees.

Ricky doesn’t seem to mind the contact, although he is struggling to keep control of himself. His arms are restricted by Tyler and Rosie’s tight hold, so he tilts his head and wipes his eyes as best he can on his shoulders. Kendra has broken the dam. There is no need for further questioning, and they all understand this. They simply remain quiet and hold onto Ricky until he is ready to talk again.

He clears his throat a few times, but his voice is still thick when he ventures to speak. “I’m so sick of his shit.”

Rosie's arms tighten around him. He thinks about telling her to let go, she's squeezing him too tightly, but her words confuse him.

"Ricky, I'm so sorry. I think...maybe some of it is my fault."

"Huh?" is all he can manage to get out. The others are looking at her as well, waiting patiently for her to continue.

Rosie keeps her head down, her cheeks red. "I can hear your dad sometimes from my house. And then you have bruises the next day. It's not hard to connect the dots. If I could have called the police or just done *something*—"

"No," Ricky interrupts, his tone harsh. The single word is spoken so forcefully that Rosie immediately clamps her mouth shut. "That would've been a huge mistake. He doesn't care about getting in trouble, and the police wouldn't be able to prove anything."

Rosie tries again. "Your bruises—"

"Could have come from anywhere," Ricky finishes for her. He scoffs. "And you better believe he'd come up with a very convincing lie for them."

"Wouldn't your mom help back you up?" Alex asks. Tyler nods in agreement.

But Ricky shakes his head. "She wouldn't dare."

Kendra nods slowly. "Because she's afraid of him, too." It's not a question. She is merely stating a fact, and Ricky's silence confirms the truth.

"I don't get it," Tyler says with a frown. "Your mom's a dentist or something, right? So, she probably makes more than enough money to just pack up and leave with you. Why doesn't she do that?"

"Because she's afraid of him, too," Kendra repeats. "I think...this type of situation is pretty common."

Ricky fidgets out of the tight hold Rosie and Tyler still have on him and runs a hand through his hair. "She'd be too fucking terrified that he'd find her. And it's not like she can just abandon her practice. She's a lost cause."

"Are you?" Kendra asks, meeting his eye.

Ricky considers the question as he slumps back in the seat. It occurs to him then that these people – strangers, save for Rosie, just a few months prior – genuinely care for him. They're worried for him. They

won't leave him alone until they know he is okay. Despite his aggression, despite his bad attitude, and despite his tendency to clam up around them, they still care. They still want him there. He is caught in what feels like a hopeless situation. A few hours ago, he saw no light at the end of the tunnel. But now, there's a flicker.

"I don't want to be," he admits quietly.

Rosie studies his face, watching the thoughts race behind his deep brown eyes. She wants so desperately to help him. Her thoughts drift to the shotgun, likely still lying on the linoleum underneath the kitchen table. An idea begins to take form in the back of her mind, but she can't quite grasp it. Not yet.

"I don't want you to be either," Kendra says. She reaches out and gives his hand a gentle squeeze.

Tyler nods an agreement. "What can we do to help you? Seriously, whatever you think will help, I bet we can find a way to make it happen."

"I don't—"

"Come stay at my place," Alex blurts before Ricky can complete that hopeless sounding sentence. The words surprise him, but now that they've been spoken, he's not going to back down. "Just for a couple days. Maybe longer if you want. You don't have to tell your dad where you are. Give him some time to cool down. Or...time to think about what to do next."

"That's a wonderful idea." Kendra's radiant smile lights up and begins to dissipate some of the gloom. Without waiting for Ricky to agree, she starts up the car. "We'll swing by your house. Pack a bag as quickly as you can."

"H-hold on," Ricky stammers, but Kendra ignores him and backs out of the parking space. "I can't just leave my mom alone with him!"

Rosie straightens. "I can keep an eye on your house. If your dad blows a fuse, I'll know. And I promise I won't just sit back and do nothing."

"He'll be even more pissed when I get back." Ricky frowns, hesitating, wanting so badly to agree to this crazy idea.

Tyler claps him on the back. "We'll help you come up with a plan. Don't worry."

“Easy for you to say,” Ricky mumbles under his breath.

“You’re eighteen now, right?” Tyler continues. “What can he really do in terms of legal action? As long as you let your mom know you’re safe so they don’t file a missing persons report or something, you can do whatever you want.”

“You make it sound so simple,” Ricky sighs.

Rosie smiles gently. “It is if you let it be. I’ll make sure your mom is safe. I promise.” She leans forward, her mouth practically against Alex’s ear, and lowers her voice. “Are you sure you can afford to take in a stray?”

Alex nods. “Don’t worry about me. We can make it work, and my mom will understand.”

Satisfied, Rosie sits back. She hesitates a moment before taking Ricky’s hand. “You’re going to be okay, Ricky.”

He hasn’t agreed to anything, not out loud, but as Kendra pulls out of the parking lot, Ricky settles back in his seat and looks out through the windshield. His thoughts are still on his mother, but he figures he will just send her a text once he settles in at Alex’s place. He tells himself she’ll have to fend for herself eventually.

The house is exactly as they left it - a good sign. Rosie sheepishly gets out of the car so she can remove hers from the Pinto driveway. She’s grateful that her own parents haven’t returned home for the day yet. They would have had a lot of questions for her. Ricky steps out behind her, and she gives his arm a squeeze.

“Pack fast. If someone comes home while you’re inside, come around to my backyard. I’ll drive you and Alex home.”

Ricky nods curtly and heads into the house.

In the car, Kendra twists around to give Alex and Tyler one of her winning smiles. “Friends, I really think he’s going to be okay now.”

Tyler hesitates. “Do you really think running away is the best thing?”

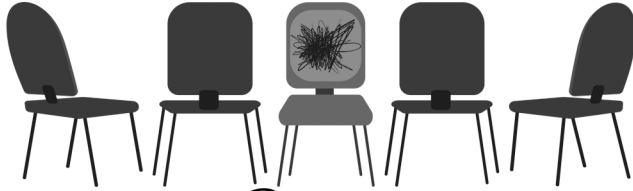
For a moment, Kendra is quiet. As she considers the question, she lowers her eyes. “When I told my therapist that I wanted to go to an out-of-state college, she said sometimes running away is the best option. It’s a chance to truly start fresh.”

“You’re planning to leave?” Alex asks, eyes wide.

Kendra nods with a coy smile. “But I don’t think of it as running away. I think I’m running to something; a new future in a place where I’m not known as ‘the girl who passed out in gym class.’ I think that Ricky needs to run to something, too. Alex,” she reaches over the center console and takes his hand, “I trust you to help him find that something.”

Alex takes in a slow breath, his fingers tightening around her slender hand. “You can count on me.”

TWELVE



RICKY

What do you take when you're planning to leave?
It's not forever.
I can't go forever. It's too risky.

But temporarily.

What do you take?

The barrel of the gun peeks out from beneath the kitchen table. What would Mom think if she came home to see that? What would my father? How much worse would it have been if I were lying in a mess on the floor?

An hour ago, I was really ready to end it all. And now...

Now, I don't know.

Maybe I'll never know.

I return the gun to its rightful place – a metal cabinet in the basement where Dad keeps all of his hunting supplies. It has a lock on it, but the key was lost decades ago. I turn for the stairs, but, as an afterthought, I return to the cabinet, empty the guns, and gather all the boxes of ammunition into my arms. It's a process, and I worry I'm wasting precious time, but I want this shit out of the house and away from Mom. He can always buy more – and he definitely will – but at least he'll be inconvenienced for a while.

In my room, I dump the boxes and loose ammunition into an old duffel bag and zip it up tight. I hope Alex will be willing to toss the bag into the dumpster behind the diner tonight. I don't dare to try hiding the bag somewhere in the house.

With that matter settled, I grab my backpack and begin stuffing clothes into it. A few pairs of jeans and T-shirts, some pajama pants, socks, boxers. And books. I don't even take the time to pick specific ones off my shelf, I just dump an armful into the bag. I really don't know how long I dare to stay with Alex, but with a two-week suspension, I'm going to have a lot of free time on my hands.

I check my phone and realize something important. Tracking. Even with the features turned off, what if he finds a way to pinpoint where I'm at? I can't take this with me. It's way too risky. I'll pick up a burner phone for emergencies, borrow Alex's, or something.

I tear a sheet of paper out of my English notebook and quickly jot down the phone numbers worth keeping. I don't include him on the list. With that done, I send Mom a text and hope that it won't send her into a panic.

I'm safe. Don't look for me. I'll be back soon. I'm safe and I love you.

If she's smart, she'll know she can ask Rosie where I am if she gets desperate. I don't include that in the text just in case he sees it. He'll be too furious to think anything through, and I don't want to give him any ideas.

It's dark now. I have to move fast.

I leave my phone on the bed and open the nightstand drawer. Inside is an old coffee can stuffed with money I've been squirreling away. It's not much, maybe seventy-five dollars tops, but it's everything I have. Alex and his mom struggle enough. I refuse to add to their burden. I just hope Alex was right when he said his mom would understand.

I wonder how long it'll take him to realize that I'm gone. Mom probably won't say anything, at least not right away. At best, he won't even notice my absence until he comes in to wake me up and drag me to the shop in the morning.

"We'll make you useful, see if some manual labor will set you straight."

What a joke.

I pick up the bags and turn off the lights.



I don't bother asking Ricky what's in the duffel bag. Rosie swings by the diner on the way to my apartment and I drop it into the dumpster. Whatever it is, he seems glad to be rid of it.

Mom's home when we get there. She'll have to head back to the diner for her second shift soon. I tried to get on the schedule for today, too, but she really wanted me to take it easy on my first day back from break. I guess it worked out for me.

Ricky stays behind me when I unlock the door and step into the living room. Mom's sitting on the couch, the TV playing one of her predictable Hallmark movies. A half-eaten frozen dinner is on the chipped coffee table in front of her, and I see that she's treated herself to half a glass of wine before her next shift starts. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Ricky tentatively looking around the room.

Mom turns to greet me and straightens when she sees Ricky. She breaks into a tired smile. "Oh, hello."

I clear my throat. "Uh, Mom, this is Ricky. He's going to stay here tonight..."

She's taken aback. After all, when was the last time I had a sleep-over? She stands, her smile becoming more genuine. Probably because this is the first friend I've brought to this crappy apartment. When we had a house, I used to have friends over almost every weekend.

She suddenly falters. "It's a school night."

And now I have to explain. I glance at Ricky and point down the hallway. "My room is the second door. You can go set your bag in there."

I'm sure he gets the hint, but he still hesitates. This whole situation

is weird. But after a second, he mumbles an “Okay” and disappears into the hall. Alone, I turn back to Mom and lower my voice.

“Listen, I know it’s a school night and everything, but...Ricky’s house isn’t really safe right now. I sort of told him he could stay here for a few days.”

“Why would you promise something like that without talking to me first?” Mom’s tone is harsh, but she keeps her voice down. “If he’s in any kind of danger, you should be contacting the police.”

I swallow thickly. How much can I get away with keeping from her? “He doesn’t want anyone to do that. He just needs a safe place to stay while he figures things out. Please, Mom.”

She shifts from foot to foot and glances over her shoulder towards the hall. “What kind of trouble is he in?”

Now comes the hard part. She knows who Ricky is. She’s heard me mention him before, and she saw him that time at the diner. But she doesn’t know about him, and that’s not really my story to tell. So, I tell her as much of the truth as I can for now. “His dad hits him and stuff. He got in some trouble at school today – this asshole coach has been giving him a hard time all year – and he got suspended. His dad is... really mad. And he’s scared. So...he needs a place to stay. Please.”

She frowns, accentuating the lines on her face. “Damn it, Alex. This is not the kind of situation you should be trying to handle on your own. If he’s being abused, we need to—”

“No!” I cut her off and quickly drop my voice back down. “I’m sorry, Mom, but you can’t let him know that I told you this. All he wants is some time to figure things out, and he needs a safe place to do it. Can he stay here? Please?”

She’s still frowning, and I start to worry I’ve made a huge mistake. “Alex, secrets—”

“Only lead to trouble,” I finish, repeating her old mantra from my childhood. “I know, I know. And I promise I plan to talk to him about all this. Really. Me and the rest of our friends are going to help him figure things out. He just needs a place to stay, Mom. *Please.*” I know I’m begging at this point, but I can’t let this plan fall apart.

Her frown softens, but I can still see her hesitation. She lets out a long sigh and picks up her purse. “I have to get back to work. He can

stay for a few days, but you better keep your word. Whatever solution you come up with, I want to know about it. And, if after a few days, you've come up with nothing, I'm stepping in. Got it?"

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Yeah, I got it. Thanks, Mom."

She nods curtly. "I'll try to bring some leftovers back for tomorrow."

I watch her leave, my heart swelling with gratitude for her. I know she probably thinks I'm not making the best choice given the situation, but I'm glad she's trusting me to do what I think is the right thing, at least for a while.

Once the door is closed, I clean up the remains of her dinner and go to open the hall closet. On the top shelf sits an army green sleeping bag that hasn't seen a sleepover or camping trip in over five years. The stuffing inside it has worn out in some places, but it's better than the bare floor.

Ricky is sitting on the edge of my bed, eyeing the cat who's curled up on my desk chair in a tight ball.

"Oh, that's Garbage Can," I explain as I set the sleeping bag down. "She's harmless as long as you don't touch her stomach."

He gives me a weird look. "You named your cat Garbage Can?"

I laugh and Garbage Can flicks her ears in displeasure at the disturbance. "Garbie for short. We found her foraging around the trash bins out back when we first moved in. She was just a kitten. We guessed she somehow got separated from her mom. So, we took her in."

"Hm," he grunts. His eyes fall on the sleeping bag.

"This is for me," I say quickly. "You can take the bed. If you want to be alone, I can sleep in the living room. I don't mind."

He only shrugs. "Your mom's cool with this?"

"Yeah, you can stay for a couple days. But we need to talk about a plan, or something."

"What did you tell her?" His eyes narrow and I can't help but cringe under that hard look.

"Look, I had to tell her some of the truth. I said your dad sucks and you need a safe place to hole up for a while. She's not exactly thrilled, but she said you can stay as long as we come up with a plan for you. Otherwise..."

“Otherwise what?” His eyes are slits, brows knit tightly together.

“She’ll call the police,” I say quietly.

“Fuck!” he spits. Garbage Can startles from the sudden noise and bolts from the room with a cry of displeasure. “I don’t want the damn cops getting into this!”

“I know.” I take the seat the cat vacated. “So, we’re going to figure things out. Not tonight. You’ve probably had a shit enough day already. But tomorrow, come to the diner with me. Thursdays are always dead. We can talk then.”

Is that a flicker of gratefulness in Ricky’s eyes? It’s hard to tell with the way he’s staring down at the floor.

“Seriously, Ricky, it’s going to be okay.”

“You can’t guarantee that.”

He’s got me there. But there has to be a solution. For both of us.

I stand, brushing the cat hair off my jeans. “We’ve got a frozen pizza. I’ll make that for us.”

As I walk out into the hallway, I hear a quiet, “Thanks, man.”



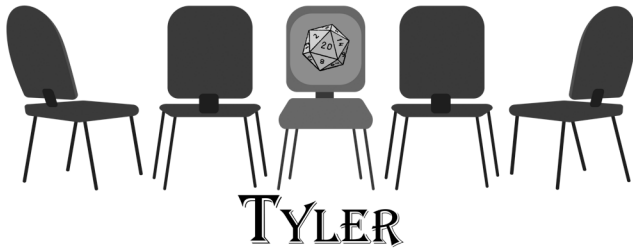
The Pinto house is quiet tonight. I keep my bedroom window cracked despite the freezing air. I don’t want to risk missing a sound. But nothing happens. Perched on my bed, I see the lights go on and off in their visible windows. Just another night. No yelling, no sounds of breaking glass. But I can’t help but worry that this is some kind of calm before the big storm.

I think of all those guns. I remember Mr. Pinto speeding off on

some hunting trip and my dad casually remarking that hunting season hadn't started yet.

There has to be something I can work with. Something I can use to help Ricky once and for all. That idea, that little spark, flickers again, but I still can't get a good hold on it. I'll sleep on it.

It's getting late. The Pinto house goes dark. I text Alex and let him know that everything is good here.



My hand still tingles from the squeeze Ryan gave it before he headed to his next class. It's barely been a week since that New Year's kiss, but it feels like an eternity ago in the best way possible. If I fell in love with Zack, I crashed with Ryan. He doesn't care if anyone sees us in the halls. He holds my hand and keeps his head up high as we push through the crowds. With my big, strong, football-playing boyfriend by my side, I haven't gotten any anonymous notes in my locker since break ended. It's only been two days, but I'm feeling cautiously optimistic.

Ryan doesn't have the same lunch period as me, and that sucks, but it does give me time to catch up with Kendra and Rosie. I didn't tell Ryan about what happened with Ricky yesterday. I feel kind of guilty about that, but for some reason, I get the strong feeling that this is something that should stay within the group. My friends like Ryan a lot, but somehow, he doesn't quite fit in with us when things turn south. Maybe that's a good thing.

"Has anyone talked to Alex yet today?" I ask as I slide into an empty chair at the allergy table.

"I saw him last period," Kendra volunteers. She's picking the vast

majority of the bread roll off her turkey sandwich, but I'm glad to see she's actually eating it. "Ricky is settled in at the apartment. He says he's going to talk to him about the next steps."

"Does he have a plan?" Rosie asks. She's munching on baby carrots dipped in ranch. Since her New Year's declaration, something in her has changed. Despite her concern for Ricky, she looks amazing, almost glowing. Confidence is a good look on her.

Kendra smiles. "He asked me if I had any ideas."

"Do you?" I ask.

"I've been thinking." For a second, I think Kendra has come up with the ultimate solution. If anyone can do it, it's her. But then she says, "And I've come up with nothing."

Rosie nearly chokes on her carrot. I guess she was expecting something else, too. "Nothing? Come on, Kendra. There has to be something..."

Kendra studies Rosie's face carefully as she trails off. She smiles one of those secret smiles that tells the world she knows everything. "You've thought of something, haven't you?"

Rosie hesitates. "Not quite. I guess I was just thinking about...the guns his dad has."

"What about them?" I ask with a frown.

She keeps her eyes on her half-eaten lunch. "Well, I guess he goes hunting in the off-season, you know, when you're not supposed to. So, I started wondering if he might do anything else that's...illegal."

"Like owning unlicensed firearms?" Kendra asks with a sly smile.

"But I don't have any proof," Rosie says quickly. "So, then I started thinking about what we were told when we learned about mental health. That we should, you know, tell a trusted adult, like a parent or teacher, if our friends do or say something that worries us."

I snort back a laugh. I can't help it. "I don't know any teachers at this school that I trust. Do you? I mean, Mrs. Johnson saw one of the nasty notes that got put in my locker a while back. She didn't say anything. And you can forget about Principal Newman. Remember when my locker got spray painted? He didn't do anything real about it."

"Do either of you trust your parents enough to tell them something like this?" Kendra asks.

“Hell no!” Rosie cries as if the very thought is ludicrous. “They have to know what goes on over there, unless they’re deaf and are really good at hiding it. What about you, Kendra? Your parents are awesome.”

Kendra nods. “Yes. I could trust them with this.”

“But Ricky specifically said he didn’t want the police involved,” I remind her. “Your parents may be great, but they’re still parents. Calling the cops is going to be the first thing they want to do.”

“Yes, you’re probably right,” Kendra agrees with a sigh. “So, let’s consider the guns again. Rosie, your father is a lawyer of some kind. He would know what would happen to Ricky’s father if it was discovered that he had illegal firearms in his possession.”

“Maybe,” Rosie says tentatively. “He’s a personal injury attorney, but I guess I can ask him and try to be as vague as possible.”

Kendra nods curtly. “Alex said Ricky can only stay with him for a few days. We must figure things out quickly, and I think that’s the best place to start.”

I don’t want to doubt her. She makes the impossible seem within reach. But I have to ask. “Do you really think we can make a difference for Ricky?”

Kendra smiles and reaches across the table, squeezing my wrist. “Tyler, darling, we already have.”

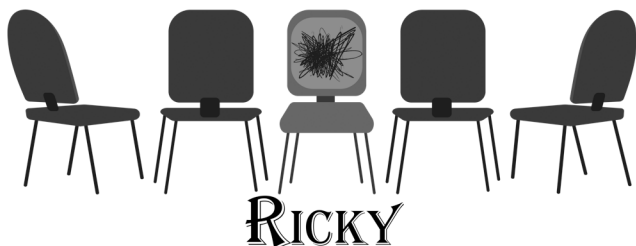


I have an idea and it just might be crazy enough to work. I didn’t tell Kendra about my plans to talk to Ricky at the diner tonight. He tends to fold into himself when all of us are around, and I think for this kind

of thing, one-on-one would be best. She'll understand. She always understands.

In my backpack, there are brochures swiped from the revolving card rack in the front office at school. With the internet available at everyone's fingertips, no one really checks that card rack anymore, so the weird looks the secretary gave me were probably warranted. But whatever. These brochures might be exactly what Ricky needs. And me, too.

These brochures might be the key for both of us.



I only leave Alex's room to eat some of the diner meatloaf his mom brought home last night. I saw her briefly again this morning before she went to work. She was dressed up pretty nicely for a crappy diner job, but I guess you have to do what you can to rake in the tips. She doesn't say much to me as she gets ready to leave; only tells me about the meatloaf and to make myself at home.

The apartment is kind of a shithole, but I think Alex and his mom work pretty hard to keep the place clean. There are rust rings in the bathtub, and the linoleum has weird faded patches, but the place is clutter-free. The faint smell of cigarette smoke hangs in the air, probably brought in by one of the neighbors. At least I don't have to worry about masking my own habits. But, just to be safe, I crack open the window in Alex's room and flick my ashes into the wind. I don't know how Mrs. Kent feels about smoking, and I don't want to risk getting on her bad side.

I look at the crumpled pack. Only a few cigs left, and I'm not

wasting what little money I have on more. I can make them last. It's not like I'm an addict or something.

When Alex finally comes back from school, I'm lying on his bed with a copy of *Frankenstein* and his weirdly named cat curled up at my feet. He comes into the bedroom and sets his backpack down, eyeing the pile of books spilling out of my own bag.

"We have a TV," he says.

"I like reading," I shoot back, suddenly on the defensive.

"Yeah, I know." Alex opens his closet and pulls out a pair of black pants. "Kendra mentioned you always finish your English assignments early. I guess that's your favorite class?"

"So?" The word is sharp coming out of my mouth and I grimace like it physically hurt.

Alex just shrugs. He looks like he's thinking about something, because he nods to himself before going into the bathroom to change into his work clothes.

He wasn't kidding about the diner. It's completely deserted when we get there, save for the cook in the back. Since his mom has the night off, she just drops us off and drives away. I follow Alex to the bar and sit on one of the stools. He grabs some hot chocolate for the both of us before settling in next to me.

"I won't see a table for at least an hour," he says as he reaches for something in his pocket. "So, it's a good time to look at these."

He lays a couple of brochures out on the counter, all for various programs the local community college offers. I stare at them. "The fuck is this?"

Alex laughs. "My mom really wants me to go to college, but we can't afford that. I passed by the office today and saw these, and I realized I've been thinking way too broadly. This," he taps the brochures, "is doable."

"Why are you telling me?"

"You can go with me," he says like it's obvious.

"And do what?"

"Get started on a literature degree," he says simply. My jaw is hanging slack and he doesn't give me time to scrape together a response before pressing on. "You like to read, and Kendra's talked about the way

your teacher praises your essays. You could teach, too, you know. Maybe even at the college level.” His eyes are studying my face and I grip my mug. “You really haven’t given much thought to your future, have you?”

Yesterday, I didn’t plan on having a future. I shake my head.

“Me either.” Alex looks back at all the brochures, running a finger over the covers. “My mom really wants something bigger for me, but I always figured I’d just be stuck in this crappy diner forever, barely getting by. I’ve always been interested in programming and stuff, so maybe some kind of technology degree isn’t so far out of reach.”

This can’t possibly work. A million roadblocks flood my mind. Sure, Mom would pay for my school, and that man wants me out of the house so bad, he probably wouldn’t try to interfere, but where the hell am I supposed to go.

“You could get a job over the summer,” Alex says like he’s reading my thoughts. “Save up, get some roommates. Start at the community college and move up to a university after two years. I guess a lot of people are doing that to save some money. Where there’s a will, there’s a way, you know?”

“Are you telling me or you?”

He runs a hand through his hair with a sheepish smirk. “Both, actually.”

I take a slow sip of the hot chocolate, keeping my eyes on the bobbing marshmallows. “You weren’t going to even try for college. Why’d you change your mind?”

Alex kicks at the scuffed foot bar on his stool. “I guess I just realized that I could.”

“Graduation isn’t until June.”

“You think you can put up with your dad until then?” My silence is enough of an answer, and he sighs. “Okay, so let’s figure out what to do for the more pressing issue.”

“I never said I was going along with your college plan.”

He chuckles to himself and looks down at his mug. “I wish Kendra was here. She’d have some amazing speech at the ready, and she’d convince you that it’s the best thing for you. And because she’s Kendra, you’d agree, because that’s how she is.”

I stare at Alex for a long time. For a while, neither of us say anything, we just drink our rapidly cooling hot chocolate. He is right about one thing, though. I have a much more pressing issue, and I need to come up with the solution now. Tonight. I open my mouth to see if he has any brilliant plans, but a couple of truckers walk through the door, and Alex jumps to his feet.

I stay at the counter while he does his job, and when he isn't looking, I take one of the brochures and fold it up, sliding it into my pocket so I can look at it more closely later.



Mom's in the living room on a video call with Molly. They're both doing that obnoxious hyena laugh again. All has been forgiven on Molly's end since all the blame for the Great Christmas Disaster was shifted over to me.

Dad's upstairs in his office putting a file together for some case. If I slip past Mom quietly enough, I can make it to the stairs without her demanding that I slap on a fake smile and say hi to my sister. Our last forced conversation was tense and awkward, and I've got enough on my mind right now.

Mom's sitting with her back to the stairs, and I press my back against the wall as I make my way over to them. I used to take this same path back when Molly and I were actually friends and played Secret Agent, which was nothing more than a modified game of hide-and-seek. When I get to the couch, I duck so I can avoid being caught in Mom's laptop camera. I probably look like an idiot, but I've been rehearsing my

plan in my head since lunch and I'm dying to just get it over with already.

I manage to make it to the stairs without being caught, and I go up as quickly as I can, my feet barely making contact with the carpeted steps. The door to Dad's office is shut, which means he doesn't want to be disturbed, but he'll just have to get over it. I knock and push open the door without waiting for a reply.

He looks up warily as I step into the room. His desk is cluttered with manilla folders and loose sheets of paper. This case looks like a big one.

"Rosie, I'm busy," he yawns.

My speech is on the tip of my tongue, so I don't bother with a reply and just blurt it out. "I'm doing a project on gun ownership for class, and I was wondering what the penalty would be for someone who owned an unlicensed firearm. Or several of them."

He's taken aback for a second. "Why would you pick a topic like that?"

"It was assigned to me," I lie.

He sighs and leans back in chair, staring up at the ceiling. "Why don't you just look it up? That's what I'm going to have to do to answer your question."

"I thought you might know," I say, and it's the truth.

He turns to his laptop, typing as he speaks. "Gun ownership laws vary state-by-state."

"Ours, specifically," I say quickly.

"Right." I can see the Google homepage reflecting on his glasses. I could have done that. But I guess since I'm already here, he decides to answer my question. "In our state, owning an unlicensed firearm is a third or fourth-degree crime depending on the situation."

"Which means?"

He shrugs. "A person found in possession of an unlicensed firearm could spend up to five years in prison."

I can barely contain my excitement, and I turn to leave the room. "Thanks, Dad!"

"That's all you needed?" His voice sounds puzzled.

"I don't really need a *detailed* report," I say, and quickly walk out,

closing the door behind me. I probably seemed like a fucking idiot, but I got what I needed. I have my solution to help Ricky now.

I retreat to my room and pull my cellphone out of my backpack. As I look up the correct number, I pray that my plan goes smoothly. The police are about to get an anonymous tip.

The Eleventh Meeting

“Tell us everything that happened,” Kendra commands from her broken desk in the dank school basement. Her eyes are glittering with excitement as she looks at Rosie.

Everyone is gathered in their respective places in the circle, even Ricky, who was let in a back door by Alex when the final bell rang that Friday afternoon. Rosie has given the group no information. She only told them that something big went down and they needed a meeting *now*. With all eyes on her, she takes a slow breath and turns her attention earnestly to Ricky.

“Your dad’s been arrested.”

Ricky chokes. No one can tell if it’s the dim lighting in the basement that makes him look so pale, or if all the blood has simply drained from his face. For a moment, he looks like he might be sick, but that expression is soon replaced with one of disbelief. He only manages to get out a single word. “What?”

Alex is gripping the edge of his desk. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” Rosie says with a nod.

Kendra reaches over the circle and takes her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Walk us through it, Rosie. What all did you see? What all do you know?”

“Yeah, you’re sure he’s been arrested?” Tyler asks. “He’s not just like, being held at the station or anything?”

Rosie clears her throat and, in the moment, decides to leave out a crucial piece of information. “The police showed up at your house last night, Ricky. Your dad wasn’t home yet, otherwise I don’t think they

would have gotten through the door. Your mom let them in. While they were in the house, your dad came home. He'd been drinking."

"So they got him on drunk driving charges?" Tyler glances at Ricky, who's listening to Rosie with a completely dumbfounded look plastered on his face.

Rosie nods. "Among other things." She takes a slow breath before continuing. "I went over to talk to your mom after they took him away. They took a look in his hunting cabinet, found out several of the guns in there were unregistered. Also, his hunting license has apparently been expired for a while. I guess he never bothered to renew it. Your mom also had some bruises on her wrists and a black eye that she was trying to cover up. I don't know if she told the police where they came from, but hopefully they were smart enough to put the pieces together."

Ricky lets out a long, shuddering breath. In a daze, he says. "Mom. How is she?"

Rosie takes a moment to answer. "She actually seems okay. My mom offered to let her stay at our house, but she said she was fine. She said she wasn't going to pay his bail."

"Good." Ricky stands abruptly, fists clenched at his side. "I've got to see her."

"I'll take you," Rosie offers, standing as well.

"You think you're ready to go home, man?" Alex asks. He pushes himself out of his wobbling desk and grabs his bag.

"If that old bastard is really behind bars, I've got no reason to stay away," Ricky says. His voice is filled with amazement, as if he can't quite accept the reality of the situation just yet.

Alex holds his phone out to Ricky in an offering. "Do you want to let your mom know you're coming?"

He considers a moment before taking the phone from Alex's hand. "Yeah, thanks."

As Ricky fishes his list of phone numbers out of his pocket, Kendra turns to Rosie and quietly asks, "This is all thanks to you, isn't it?"

Rosie blushes deeply and glances over at Ricky, making sure he's out of earshot. Just to be safe, she keeps her voice low. "I know he didn't want the police involved, but seriously, how else were we going to make sure Ricky was safe? My dad said he could get up to five years for the

firearms alone. With the DUI and expired hunting license, who knows what could happen.”

Kendra smiles and places her hand on Rosie’s arm. “You stepped up, Rosie. In the end, you are the hero of this story.”

Rosie’s cheeks burn brightly, and she lowers her head. “A real hero would have done something a long time ago.”

“Hey, what matters is what you’re doing now,” Tyler pipes up. He also keeps his voice down. “For real, I don’t think the rest of us have the balls to do what you did.”

“It could have gone bad in so many ways,” Rosie admits quietly.

“But it didn’t.” Alex’s smile is bright. “I think Ricky is actually realizing there’s a future out there for him.”

“That wasn’t my doing,” Rosie mutters.

“That was all of us.” Kendra beams and claps Rosie on the back. “I am so grateful for all of you.”

Ricky comes back to the small group and hands Alex’s phone back to him. “She’s waiting for me.”

Rosie straightens her shoulders and picks up her bag. “Let’s go then. I hope you don’t mind, but I told her where you’ve been last night. She seemed to understand, so I don’t think you’re in trouble or anything.”

“Thanks,” Ricky says simply.

“I can drop off your stuff after work tonight,” Alex volunteers.

Ricky nods and retreats up the stairs with Rosie, hands in his pockets and a look of bewilderment still lingering on his face. Alex wonders if Ricky thinks this is some kind of cruel dream and one wrong move will startle him awake. But it’s no dream. Alex is certain of that. Things are finally looking up for Ricky. And if they can get better for someone like him, Alex has no doubt that his own life can improve as well.

Startled by the sound of the heavy door closing at the top of the stairs, Alex realizes he is suddenly alone in the basement with Kendra. Tyler must have slipped out while he was lost in thought, and warmth rises to his cheeks. He clears his throat, trying to think of something to say to her, but before he can open his mouth, she’s hugging his torso tightly, cheek pressed to his chest. In his shock, all he can do is wrap his arms around her shoulders.

Her ear is pressed to his heart, and for a moment, she only listens to the steady beat pulsing against her cheek. Too stunned to do or say anything else, Alex does not move, keeping his arms loosely around her small frame.

Kendra squeezes him so hard that his breath is completely knocked out of his lungs, then she steps back, a genuine grin stretching from ear to ear. “We did it!” she declares.

“D-did what?” Alex stutters. His whole body is a tingling mess, and he struggles to refill his lungs with the air that was lost.

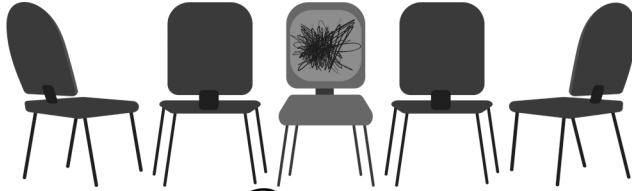
“We helped Ricky, Alex,” Kendra says, explaining it to him as if he were a child. “He’s going to be all right now.”

“You sure sound confident.” Her smile is infectious. “I guess things really are looking up for him.”

“For all of us.” Kendra reaches out and squeezes his hand before turning to lift up her backpack. “Do you need a ride home?”

He smiles lightly, relishing in the shockwaves her touch sends racing up his arm. “I’d like that.”

THIRTEEN



RICKY

Mom doesn't say anything when I come into the house, she only wraps her arms so tightly around me that for a second, I think she's going to suffocate me. I realize how much taller I've gotten since the last time she hugged me like this. Her head fits right under my chin. I hug her back, but not as tightly. I might hurt her if I squeeze her anymore, and her days of being hurt are over if I have anything to say about it. My shirt dampens with her tears, and she pulls away, wiping apologetically at her eyes.

"Thank you for telling me you were safe," she says with a sniff.

"Sorry for running away," I say back. Rosie was right. There's a shadow under her left eye that's caked with makeup, and her wrists are sporting twin purple bruises. I feel the anger bubbling in my chest at the sight and quickly squash it down.

"I understand why you did it, Ricky," she says. Aside from the bruise, her eyes are puffy and swollen. This probably isn't the first time she's cried today. "Your principal left me a voicemail, and of course your father filled me in. You must have been...afraid."

I look away. I can't say anything because she's right. I ran away like a dog with its tail between its legs and left her here to fend for herself. "I shouldn't have done it."

"But I'm glad you did." I only stare at her, and she glances away. "I've been a horrible mother to you."

"What? Mom, don't say shit like that!" I clamp my mouth shut. Part of me expects a fist to come flying out of nowhere for the language. It

doesn't come. She doesn't look shocked or offended either. I swallow thickly. "You did the best you could."

"I let him get away with it!" Her voice is suddenly loud, and it cracks with the strain of her words. She turns her back to me, shoulders shaking. "Years and years of his torture, and I just let him do it. To me and to you! Ricky, I'm so sorry. How can I ever make this up to you? After everything I've let him do."

She's fully crying now, and I really want to go to down to that jail, break through the bars, and beat his ass to a pulp. He deserves it for making her this way. He should be dead, and I hope he rots like the garbage he is. She flinches when I put my hand on her shoulder, and I hate him even more.

"You didn't let him do anything, Mom. Really, what could you have done to stop him?"

"I could have gone to the police," she says weakly. "I could have done that a long time ago."

"So he could lie and gaslight us? Tell everyone that we were making up stories to make him look bad? You know that's exactly what would have happened. That's why you didn't do it."

She doesn't argue. She just sniffles pathetically and goes into the kitchen to get a tissue so she can clean herself up. I follow her.

"Bless whoever called those police here yesterday," she says in a watery voice as she dabs at her eyes. "Whoever it was, they had the courage to do what I couldn't."

I pause for a second. "What did they say when they came?"

Mom hiccups and runs a hand through her hair. "They said they received an anonymous tip that there were unlicensed firearms in the house. I know your father always said to never let the police in without a warrant, but...I just had to let them in, Ricky. I felt like maybe it was the beginning of the end of all this. I'm so grateful for whoever called. I admit I had my suspicions about your father's guns, but I never thought to...to have it checked out."

I glance out the window. I can just see the tail of Rosie's car in the Cotter driveway, and it clicks. I think I owe Rosie a whole lot.

"I heard you're not going to pay his bail."

Mom shakes her head and wrings her hands together, her wet tissue shredding between her fingers. “No, Ricky, I’m not.”

“And what happens when he gets out?”

She’s quiet for a long time. In the silence, a cloud passes over the sun and the natural light flooding into the kitchen fades to a dark gray. It’s going to start snowing soon. I see the tree branches whipping in the wind outside.

“When he gets out,” she starts, her voice slow, “I’m not going to be married to him anymore.”

This is unreal. This whole day has to be some kind of sick dream. There’s just no way things can be turning out so good. Any minute, I’m going to wake up at Alex’s apartment and my thoughts will immediately turn to that shotgun waiting patiently for me.

But I don’t wake up.

The kitchen linoleum is hard beneath my feet. My heart skips a beat and reminds me to breathe. This is no dream. This is the reality, and it’s better than anything I ever could have asked for.

She’s looking at me expectantly, and I speak quickly. “You’re really divorcing him?”

“I consulted with a lawyer this afternoon.” Her hand moves to rest on a manilla envelope on the counter. “I’ve been up all night thinking about everything. Once I was done beating myself up over the past eighteen years, I realized what I needed to do. Your father’s arrest was a gift from God so I could get my head together and think clearly. I’m filing for divorce, Ricky. And we’re moving.”

Her declaration shocks me. “Moving? Where?”

“I don’t know yet.” She turns to look out at the first few snowflakes starting to fall. “I’m going to sell the practice and start again somewhere. By the time your father gets out, we’ll be long gone.”

“I’m staying.” The words fly out of my mouth, and I have no idea where they came from.

She gapes. “W-what?”

My hand goes to my pocket, and I feel the community college brochure. There are schools everywhere, but I’ll have a friend at this one. I’ve got people here, and I can’t just leave them in the dust. If Mom

wants to go, she can go, but I think it's time for me to take the reins on my own life.

There are fresh tears in her eyes, and this time I'm the one who caused them. I reach out and grab her hand. "Mom, listen. I have friends here. Real friends. And I have a plan. For school."

"You can go to school anywhere."

I shake my head. "I'm staying."

"Ricky, you're still in high school. You can't just—"

"I'll get a job," I cut her off and repeat Alex's plan like I came up with it myself. "I'll find a place to live. Maybe some roommates. I can make it work."

Mom frowns, and for the first time, she looks old. "I am not leaving my high schooler behind."

"Then stick it out until I graduate. If he's behind bars, you've got nothing to be scared of. Think you can do that?"

Again, she's quiet for a long time. The snow piles up outside. The roads are going to be a mess. She gulps and says, "I think we both have a lot to think about."

Can't argue with that. I go up to my room, leaving her in the kitchen. My phone is on the pillow where I left it, dead. I plug it in, but I'm not really interested in seeing what I missed. Through my window, I see that Rosie's bedroom light is on. Maybe I'm crazy, but I push my window open and let a swirl of snow into the room.

Cupping my hands around my mouth, I lean outside and call out to her. "Hey! Rosie!"

She pulls back her curtain a second later and gives me a weird look. She says something, but I can't hear her through the glass. She groans – I don't need to hear her; her facial expression is enough – and opens her own window.

"Are you nuts?" she yells.

Probably, but I don't need to tell her that. Instead, I say, "I just wanted to say thanks."

She raises a brow. "For what?"

"You know." I close my window and pull the curtain closed.

I flop back on my bed, staring up at the ceiling. The house is strangely quiet. All I hear are the faint sounds of Mom moving around

in the kitchen. There will be no more heavy footsteps in this house. No more shouting matches, no more slaps that echo into the halls. No more alcohol, no more guns, no more sitting outside waiting for it to be safe to come back inside. The thought feels weird as hell. Life's about to change. I can feel the click of everything shifting around me.

And I never have to see his fucking face again.



Mom's lounging on the couch when I walk into the apartment. She's wearing ratty sweatpants and an old T-shirt from the university Dad went to instead of her work clothes. The mug of tea in her hands is steaming, freshly made, and the TV drones at a low volume.

"You okay, Mom?" I ask, a little unnerved.

She looks up at me and smiles so brightly that I practically have to squint. "I'm fantastic."

"That's...great?"

She laughs. "I quit the diner today, Alex."

My heart drops into my shoes and for a second, the world around me grays out. Mom snapped. She's completely lost it. That's the only explanation. It didn't exactly have much security, but that job was our livelihood. There's no way I can support the both of us on my own, even if I do try to find another job. My head is spinning, and my right hand clutches my left wrist. I feel my nails digging into the sensitive skin there as the thoughts race around. How the hell am I going to fix this?

She laughs airily, either not noticing my sudden onset of anxiety or because of it. "I told Dennis where he could stick it, too."

I swallow down the bile rising in my throat. Mom quitting is bad

enough, but if she told our manager what I think she did, I'll probably end up fired, too. Mom's gone off the deep end. My head is suddenly filled with images of mental institutions, and my nails dig into my wrists just painfully enough to bring me back to reality.

"Why would you do that?" My voice is barely above a whisper, and it's shaking like the branches in the wind outside, but she still manages to hear me.

"I got a new job, Alex."

My breath comes out in a sudden whoosh, and my heart jumps back up to where it's supposed to be. My hands drop down to my sides. Panting, I can't help but raise my voice as I ask, "Why didn't you lead with that?!"

She laughs again; loud and genuine. I haven't heard her sound like this since before Dad died. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." She stands and her arms wrap around me in a tight embrace. "You know Dr. Meslar? They were looking for a new receptionist. I interviewed yesterday and they called this morning to offer me the job. Not only am I getting a much-needed pay raise, but I've got a whole benefits package coming my way. No more shitty insurance for us." She catches herself and covers her mouth for a moment, as if she could muffle the word after the fact, then drops her hand and grins again. "The best part is, Alex, that you can quit, too. I don't need you to work anymore."

I've been dreaming of those words for so long. It feels completely surreal to actually hear them spoken aloud. This is so much information, so many changes, in such a short period of time. I wonder if this is how Ricky feels. I'm so caught up in processing everything that I can't even open my mouth to congratulate her. Finally, she can get off her feet. Finally, she doesn't have to work her hands to the bone scrubbing ungrateful customers' dirty plates. Finally, she'll be able to afford to buy herself something that isn't food once in a while. And as for me...

"I think I'll keep the job."

Mom blinks and a red color rises to her cheeks. "Are you sure, Alex? After what I told Dennis..."

"I'll pretend not to know anything," I smile wryly. "Besides, I never see the guy anyway."

"But why?" Her brows knit together. "You really don't have to,

Alex. I start on Monday. I have enough saved to get us through until my first paycheck. You can finally have weekends off, spend more time with your friends, have more time for homework.”

“I’m not keeping the job for you, Mom.” I pat her back. My words have done nothing to ease her confusion, so I explain. “I’ve decided to enroll at the community college, and I want to pay for as much of it as I can. The diner sucks, but at least I make some decent tips there.”

Her eyes are brimming with tears, and she pulls me into another bone-crushing hug. “This is the best news I’ve heard all day.”

“Really? Even better than getting an awesome new job?” I attempt to pry her arms off. She’s really cutting off my air supply. But she holds on tight.

“Even better than that.” She pulls back and looks up at me earnestly. “You’re finally taking steps towards your future, Alex. What made you change your mind?”

“Well, me and Ricky are kind of talking about giving it a shot together.” I don’t know why, but I feel sheepish admitting this. After all, Ricky hasn’t given me a definite answer yet. But I noticed that one of the brochures I picked up was missing, and I have a feeling this is going to be an adventure we take on together.

Mom’s smile falters. “Where is Ricky?”

“He went home,” I say. “I’m going to bring his stuff to him after my shift tonight.”

She nods. “Did you two manage to come up with a plan?”

I fill her in on everything that happened, and her smile turns to a frown.

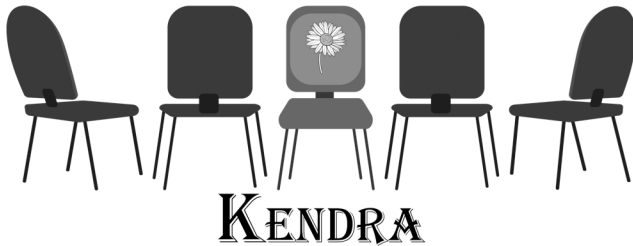
“That’s awful,” she muses. “That poor boy.”

I shake my head. “No way, Mom. This is probably the best thing that could possibly happen to him.”

She’s searching my face for more details, but Ricky’s story isn’t mine to tell. “Things were really that bad for him?” she finally asks.

“Yeah,” I say simply. I check my phone and drop my backpack by the door. “I’ve got to get ready for work. You enjoy your night off, okay?”

The room brightens. Her smile is back. “Oh, I most definitely will.”



Spring is Mother's favorite season, and she always celebrates it by decorating the house with fresh flowers from our local florist. As I sit in the heavily perfumed air, I scroll through admissions emails from the university I'll be heading off to in a matter of months. My parents are still not happy about my choice to run away, but I think it's the best decision I could possibly make for myself. I will miss them. I will miss my friends.

But I need the chance to be Kendra in a place that is not haunted by the old Kendra.

I need my parents to see once and for all that I am not made of glass. I am forged from blood and steel, and I will rise from the ashes of my past. My New Year's resolution was to simply be *me*, and I know the only way I can do that is by leaving, by burying who I once was in a beautiful tomb and leaving her behind; gone but not forgotten, for I have learned so much from her.

Mother prattles about the kitchen, giving my perch on the stool at the island a wide berth. She looks everywhere but at the refrigerator, where my acceptance letter has been pinned up with a decade-old magnet from Disney World. Although she does her best to hide it, her lower lip juts out in a pout of displeasure. Dr. Walker has had a conversation with my parents about how beneficial going away will be for me, but they have yet to come to terms with my impending departure.

I, on the other hand, cannot wait.

The countdown to graduation has been marked in bright blue ink on the calendar hanging on the kitchen wall, and Dad checks each passing day off with a drawing of a frowny face that grows increasingly

unhappy as time goes by. It's amusing, but I do my best not to giggle over it when he's around. I know he's genuinely hurt over my decision.

The graduation gown has been purchased. The senior pictures have been taken. The college roommate has been assigned. I am ready to fly the coop, and much too quickly for my parents' preference.

My eyes follow Mother's trail around the kitchen as she prepares dinner. "May I borrow the car tomorrow?"

"What do you need it for?" she asks flatly.

"Rosie and I would like to go shopping. She discovered her summer clothes from last year are too big."

She stops and finally turns to face me. Her eyes are full of wonder and confusion. Will she finally understand that I am stronger than I once was?

"You're going shopping?"

I nod. "I may get some outfits, too. I'll need some new clothes for school."

Her shoulders slump and she turns to check the progress of the chicken in the oven. "I still don't think this is the best choice for you."

"I disagree, and so does Dr. Walker."

"You are not Dr. Walker's child," she snaps.

I cringe. This tone is rare coming from her. I don't know what to say to make her feel better at this point. The subject has been talked to death, buried beside the corpse of who I used to be, but somehow it continues to rise from the grave like a slowly decaying zombie. Luckily, I don't have to dwell on a response, because Dad chooses that moment to come home from work.

I look down at my phone while he takes in Mother's expression. It's not difficult for him to piece together what's going on, and he sighs heavily. "Don't tell me we're fighting again."

He's just as unhappy about my plans, but he is a peacekeeper by nature. Mother and I rarely get into arguments, but when we do, there is a catastrophic path of mental destruction in our wake.

"We're not fighting," Mother says in that toneless voice she's begun to use whenever I am the topic of conversation.

Dad sits on the stool beside me and claps a hand on my back.

“Kendra, I know you have your heart set on this, but I think if you’d just *look* at schools nearby—”

“No!” I stand so abruptly that my phone topples to the floor. It bounces, but the case protects the screen from cracks. I leave it where it is. My fists are clenched at my sides, my teeth bared like a feral dog. I am sick of this never-ending conversation. It spins in wild circles and goes nowhere but back to the beginning, and it’s time to end it. “I am not made of glass! I am not going to break out in the world!”

We have reached the heart of the conversation that no one has wanted to touch. My parents are unwilling to admit that they fear a relapse, and I have been unwilling to admit that I know their faith in me is frayed. In a way, I hate them for thinking so little of me after everything I have been through.

They are stunned, staring at me with twin expressions of wide-eyed wonder.

“We don’t think that, Kendra,” Mother says so quietly that I know she is lying.

Dad reaches out and places his hand on my arm; my healthy, appropriately sized arm. “Please understand that I’m just worried if something *were* to happen—”

“There are counselors on campus,” I cut him off. “Counselors who I plan to start seeing if Dr. Walker doesn’t want to do video calls. I am going to keep on top of myself.”

“Going to college is a huge transition,” Mother tries. “You really don’t know how you’re going to feel until you’re there. And with you so far away from us...” She trails off and glances at Dad for help.

“We can’t help but worry,” he finishes lamely.

I take a slow breath to collect myself. Angry words will have no positive impact here. My eyes flutter closed as I pull in the floral scented air. They wait patiently for me to respond, and when I open my eyes again, they are watching me as if I am a bomb about to detonate. I will not give them the pleasure. Dr. Walker has given me so many useful tools, and my voice is calm and even as I speak.

“I understand why you’re worried, but I’m hurt that you think I may relapse so easily, especially after all the hard work I’ve done. I want a chance to start fresh. If I get there and find that I really can’t manage,

then I'll come home, but I don't believe that will happen. I'm confident that this is exactly what I need."

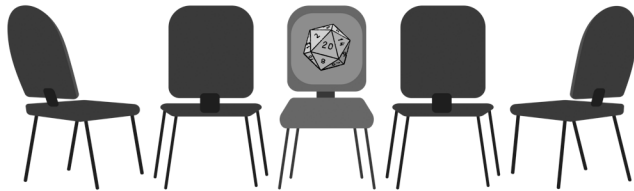
They exchange a glance, a silent conversation passing between them. Mother's brow is furrowed, Dad's mouth is set in a frown. After a moment, he lets out a sigh and turns his attention back to me.

"You're going to do whatever you want to do regardless," he says, defeated. "We know that, and we *will* support you."

"Just promise that you'll check in with us often, let us know how you're doing," Mom jumps in. There are tears brimming in her eyes. "I just...I'll just want some reassurance that you're all right."

Finally, I think, some mutual understanding. I smile. "I can do that."

It's a promise I can keep, and for the first time, they seem satisfied. Mother turns back to chopping up vegetables for the salad. Dad goes into the living room and turns the TV on. I pick up my phone and reread the university emails. Suddenly and beautifully, things have finally fallen into place.



TYLER

The line to pick up yearbooks is long. I'm kind of surprised that so many people want one, since everyone's memories are stored online these days, but I want one, nonetheless. I didn't plan on getting a yearbook this year. It's only my junior year. Next year, maybe. That's an important one. But so many things have happened, and I want this as a reminder.

Graduation is only a week away. Rosie and I got some weird looks when we went to buy tickets to the ceremony. Students don't usually go

to graduation unless they're actively participating in it. The whole process is well known to be long, boring, and hot. But we want to see Kendra, Alex, and Ricky pick up their diplomas. They all made it, and that's something to celebrate. Talk about a miracle.

There's a tap on my shoulder from behind. Ryan is supposed to meet me so we can be the first ones to sign each other's books. I turn with a grin and come face-to-face with a ghost.

For a second, I think I'm dreaming. There's no way that Zack can be standing here. His ashy blond hair has been cut short, but loose strands fall just above his eyes. He wears the khakis and polo shirt that's uniform at the Catholic school. He also looks like he's staring at some kind of apparition, even though he's the one who reached out to me.

I'm gaping. I can't help myself. I blink, expecting the mirage to disappear, but Zack stays in place. I grapple for words and finally manage to stammer out a coherent sentence. "W-what are you doing here?"

He glances to the side. "The yearbook committee emailed me, asking if I wanted one. I was a student here, after all. My picture is in the book. So, I figured why not?"

"Zack," I start, but I have no idea what to say.

"She knows, you know."

"Huh?"

"Candice," he clarifies.

I remember the pretty girl from the mall and how sorry I felt for her.

"What does she know?" I ask.

He gives me a long look. "She's only my friend. Coincidentally, she's into girls, so we just tell our parents were dating each other. It's easier that way. At least for now."

"Sounds like a classic sitcom situation," I say dryly.

He cracks a smile. "Yeah. But whatever gets us through this hell. One more year, you know. And then we'll all be okay."

"Are you okay?" I ask. He looks it, but I've learned this year that looks can be deceiving.

"For the most part." He studies my face. I can feel him taking in every feature, and I wonder if I've changed as much as he has. "Are you?"

“Yes.” There is no hesitation in my answer.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say this at the mall, but...” He looks down at his feet. “I miss you, too.”

I swallow thickly. If he had said those words back on that day, who knows what kind of shape I’d be in right now. But they have no effect on me, and that’s just as scary as any other outcome.

I don’t think he notices my hesitation. Maybe he thinks I’m just taking a moment to absorb the weight of his words. He reaches out to take my hand. It’s colder than I remember. Then he continues with a pink tinge rising on his cheeks.

“If you’re willing to wait for me, maybe we can try again next year, when we’re both free.”

I think about how I would have killed to hear that just six months ago; how much hope it would have given me. But I’m not the same person he left behind, and it feels like we’re breaking up all over again. Only this time, I’m the one who has to end things.

“Zack, I—”

A heavy hand falls on my shoulder, cutting me off. I recognize Ryan’s touch without looking, and I lean into the comforting, reassuring weight. Zack’s eyes go wide, and he drops my hand. I let it fall to my side as I glance over my shoulder at Ryan’s face. Either he didn’t notice that Zack had taken my hand, or he didn’t care. I’d never shown him a picture of Zack before, but he’s probably pieced together who he is by the uniform alone.

I take in a deep breath. “Zack, this is my boyfriend, Ryan.”

There’s hurt in his eyes, but he blinks it back as he extends his hand. “Hey, I’m Zack.”

Ryan reaches out with his free hand and pumps Zack’s in that good-natured way of his. He once asked me what I would do if I ever ran into Zack again, and I had told him “*Introduce you to him.*” I kept my word.

“Nice to meet you, man,” Ryan says, his smile never faltering. “You getting a yearbook, too?”

Zack nods. I see him processing the situation behind his dark eyes. I don’t need to rub the fact that I’ve moved on in his face. He gets it, and now maybe he can move on, too. Both of us. For real.

High school isn’t supposed to be this complicated, but as my hand

slips comfortably into Ryan's, I'm grateful for the experience. I have a better grip on who I am and what I want. I realize now that I don't have to cling to someone to feel like myself. Instead, I only need someone to lean on when I need it.

The three of us wait in line together, making small talk as people shuffle ahead to pick up their yearbooks. I can feel the shift as we wait. It envelops us, and a glance at Zack's face tells me that he feels it, too. Now, finally, everything is how it's supposed to be.



The university lets out earlier than the high school, and Molly is home for summer break. Like *déjà vu*, she's locked herself up in her room again. The girl can't learn. Once again, she tried to get our parents to let her boyfriend come visit for a week or two. Once again, they obviously said no. The real kicker is that this boyfriend isn't even the same one from the Christmas fiasco.

I kind of feel sorry for her. It's like she feels a weird need to push things with boys too far too fast and gets confused when it all blows up in her face. I don't get it. I probably never will. I'm kind of grateful that guys never really paid much attention to me. If they ever do, I know I won't be like Molly and only thrive off their compliments.

But I can't let her sulk like this all summer. It'd be way too annoying.

So, before I can do something to shift Mom and Dad's blame onto me, I walk over to her door and knock.

"Go away!" Molly's voice is full of over-dramatic tears, and I have to resist the urge to roll my eyes.

“Jesus, it’s just me,” I yell through the door.

There’s a pause and then I hear the lock come undone. The door cracks open and Molly peers through the opening. I snort back laughter. Black tears are streaked down her cheeks and her mascara is clumped in awkward bunches on her eyelashes. It’s like she’s actually trying to look upset.

“What do you want?” she asks in a watery voice.

“I just wanted to tell you to get over yourself.” I quickly clamp my mouth shut. I had planned something much more tactful to say, but apparently, I haven’t learned to control my mouth as well as I thought. In an attempt to avoid a screaming match, I add a feeble, “Please.”

Molly’s expression goes dark. With the smeared makeup and frizzy hair, she reminds me of some kind of evil witch in a fairy tale. “You just don’t get how unfair they’re being,” she spits.

This time, I do roll my eyes. “For the record, I don’t want some weird guy I never met in the house, either.”

“Toby is not weird!” she cries defensively. “He’s super nice and he’s doing pre-law. I thought he and Dad would have a lot to talk about, but I guess I was wrong.”

“Chill the fuck out,” I scoff. Her mouth clamps shut as she looks at me reproachfully. “Look, if you keep this up, the only one who’s going to have a miserable summer is you. I know you think you’re punishing Mom and Dad by being all dramatic, but all you’re doing is annoying everyone.”

Her mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water, and I cough to stifle laughter. Damn, it feels so good to tell her off like this. I wish I had done this years ago.

“You just don’t understand,” she tries, and I cut her off with a swift shake of my head.

“Yeah, yeah, because I don’t have a boyfriend and no guy could ever like someone as fat as me. I know.”

She huffs. “Why are you being so mean to me, Rosie?”

“I’m just repeating the same shit you’ve told me before,” I say with a shrug. “If I’m being mean, take a look at who said it first. Anyway, I don’t care what you do. It’d be nice if you didn’t try to play a martyr all

summer. I know that's what you're planning. But you can rot in your room for all I care."

"That's *so* cruel!" she whines.

"You reap what you sow, babe." I flash her a peace sign and turn my back. I don't know why I even bothered. I'll just have to spend as much time out of the house as possible over break. Maybe I can go work with Alex at the diner or something.

"I'm not that mean to you," she says at my back. Her voice is low but defiant.

I turn back around to look at her, amused. Her words don't really have an effect on me anymore. It's nice to see that the tables have turned. "When you and Mom really start dragging me, I don't think you realize just how far you two go."

"We're only trying to help you," she says, but her defense is crumbling. I can see the gears turning behind those dumb blue eyes of hers. I wonder if she's replaying all the horrible things she's said about me, behind my back and to my face, with Mom egging her on.

"You've got a shitty way of going about it," I inform her. The feelings that years of hurt and torment have brought on are bubbling to the surface, but the weird thing is that I don't want to fight her. I don't even want an apology. I doubt I'd get one, anyway. I only want her to know that she hurt me. Maybe after this, I can go put my mom in her place, too. What a fantastic feeling that would be.

Her lower lip trembles and fresh tears are gathering in her eyes. Now, I think, she's going to cry and somehow turn this around to be all about her. It's always about Molly. Perfect little Molly who can do no wrong and gets away with everything. But at least I'll have said my piece.

She surprises me by saying, "You look good, you know."

"No thanks to you." I'm not stupid. I know I never would have gotten a compliment like that if I hadn't dropped twenty pounds since the last time I saw her. And I *do* look good. I feel good. Maybe that's why I can talk to her this way. I didn't lose weight to please her or Mom or anyone. It was only for me, and that's what feels so good about it.

She doesn't seem to know what to say, because nothing can reverse the damage she's done to me. Our relationship will always be strained at

best. So, she does what she does best when she's in an inescapable situation. She looks away and changes the subject.

"I saw the Pinto's are selling their house."

"Yeah."

"I heard Mr. Pinto went to prison."

"There's still kind of a legal battle going on, but yeah," I say. I'm sure Mom filled her in on all of the gossip. News of the arrest and subsequent divorce spread fast throughout this waspy neighborhood. It was the most exciting thing to happen in all the years we've lived here. Naturally, Mom was the one who stepped up to run the rumor mill since she's always been such "good friends" with Mrs. Pinto.

"Must be hard for Ricky," Molly says. She still can't look at me.

"He'll be all right," I say, because he will.

"Good."

And that's it. Our conversation is over. She dares to look me over before closing the door without another word. It's fine, though. It would take a miracle for me and Molly to ever act like more than just acquaintances, blood relation or not. We're too different, but that's okay. I make up my mind to quit trying. While we're in this house together, we can simply co-exist.

The thought feels more freeing than it probably should, but that's okay, too. I go back to my room with a smile on my face and the feeling that everything, for once, is right with the world.

The Final Meeting

Graduation day is a scorcher, and Kendra shrugs off her standard black graduation gown as she descends the stairs to the school basement. As she reaches the landing, the unflattering gown puddles around her feet. She places her hands on her hips, a bright spot in the dark in her orange skater dress, and surveys the room. The desks are exactly as they had left them, a perfect circle in the center.

The steps creak behind her, but she doesn't need to turn around to

see who's coming. After all, she invited them here. Instead, she slides gracefully into her desk and waits.

Alex and Ricky drop their gowns on top of Kendra's. Their caps are long gone, lost in the chaos scattered throughout the gymnasium. They take their seats.

Rosie and Tyler are wiping sweat from their faces as they step into the blessedly cool basement. Despite the air conditioning, the school's gym might as well have been sitting directly on the sun. So many people had crowded into the space that the poor, outdated A/C system just couldn't keep up. As expected, the ceremony was long and boring, which made the sticky heat and putrid smells of stale sweat even more unbearable.

The fanfare is over. Parents and graduates leave the school in swarms to attend celebration dinners and parties. But for five teenagers, the dank, dripping school basement is the only place in the world they want to be.

Kendra lets out a long breath. "Well, here we are again."

"For the last time," Rosie says quietly.

Alex opens his mouth to protest, but Kendra holds her hand up to stop him.

"No, no. She's right." Kendra's smile is touched with sadness, but there's hope sparkling behind her eyes. "Rosie, do you think you and Tyler can hold down the fort?"

"I think we can make it," Tyler answers with a wry smirk, and Rosie gives a reluctant nod of agreement.

Kendra is thoughtful for a moment. Breaking into a wide grin, she says, "Raise your hand if you are not the same person you were a year ago."

Her hand goes up first. Rosie's quickly follows. Alex and Tyler's hands reach skyward as well. Ricky is last, but his hand reaches the highest, his arm straight, fingers pointed at the ceiling.

Kendra nods in satisfaction. "Good. Then I think our work here is done."

"Are you dismissing the meeting already? For the last time...?" Rosie's voice cracks, and Kendra reaches over the circle to take her friend's hand.

“No, no, of course not.” She smiles brightly. “In fact, I won’t be dismissing this meeting at all. We’re going our separate ways, but this circle will never be broken.”

“That’s pretty deep,” Alex says with a light smile.

“But it’s true.” Kendra releases Rosie’s hand and leans back in her wobbling chair. “We’ll always be able to call on each other, no matter what, won’t we?” She looks around the circle. Everyone nods in turn when her sharp eyes fall on them. Her smile softens. “I cannot express how grateful I am that I met all of you.”

“I’m really going to miss you next year,” Rosie whispers as if speaking any louder would unleash the floodgate of tears hiding just behind her eyes.

Tyler leans over and drapes an arm over Rosie’s shoulders in a tight side-hug. “We’ll be okay, Rosie. Kendra has to go off and study to become a big, renowned eating disorder specialist.”

Kendra laughs as though he’s told a joke despite the truth of the statement. “I’ll be sharing my personal experiences with the world in no time.”

Rosie sniffs, discreetly brushing a tear from her cheek. “You’re going to help so many people.”

“So are you,” Kendra smiles.

“No, I couldn’t—”

Kendra interrupts and nods at Ricky. “You already have.”

Ricky straightens at the sudden attention. He is still not one to volunteer to speak, but when prompted, especially by Kendra, he has been trying to open up more. “I would have killed myself without you.”

Rosie starts at his admission. It’s the first time he has blatantly stated his intentions from that day. But the others do not appear surprised by his confession. Because they knew. Of course they knew. It’s not a love declaration, and she understands that she may never get one from Ricky, but just knowing that she was the one who was able to pull him out of his own personal hell was enough. Kendra was right. By helping Ricky, she helped many others, like his future students.

Ricky’s sudden declaration about wanting to teach at the lunch table the day before was a welcome surprise. His ambition was met with

an outpouring of support and, in that moment, he realized just how much he loved these misfits.

“We’re glad you’re here,” Kendra beams. Her smiles have been so genuine lately. Alex finds her to be absolutely radiant.

Ricky’s cheeks tinge with pink. In an effort to get the attention off him, he turns to Tyler. “You didn’t talk to Ryan after the ceremony.”

Tyler lets out a bark of laughter. “Nice subject change. I’m going to his party after this. Don’t worry about us.”

“What are you guys going to do?” Rosie asks. “His university is pretty far away.”

Tyler shrugs. “Long distance relationships can work if you try. I’m weirdly not worried about it.” He nods at Alex. “How are your plans coming along?”

“It’s the diner full-time during the summer until fall classes start at the community college,” Alex says. “And with Mom’s new job and her new boyfriend, I don’t really feel bad about moving out, either.” He slides a page of apartment listings onto Ricky’s desk. “We should check these out.”

Ricky gives the page a precursory glance before folding it neatly and slipping it into his pocket. “Mom moves in July. We’ll need to have a place nailed down by then.”

“I think we can manage that,” Alex says.

Rosie laughs. “Damn, did you guys ever see yourselves rooming together?”

Ricky and Alex exchange an amused look.

“Never,” Ricky says.

“Not in a million years,” Alex agrees.

But, as always, everything falls perfectly into place. They all feel the shift. Even the dark basement seems brighter.

“You can come hang out whenever you need to get away from your parents,” Alex offers Rosie.

“I *will* take you up on that,” Rosie smirks.

“Hey, what about me?” Tyler asks good naturedly. “Am I invited?”

“Duh,” is all Ricky has to say.

They turn to Kendra, who is watching the conversation flow with a gentle smile. Rosie’s shoulders slump.

"I wish you weren't going so far away," she says.

"Oh, don't you dare worry about me." Kendra gives a single shake of her head, as if it settles the matter. "I'll be around on breaks, and video calls exist for a reason. It'll be like I never left."

"And we still have the whole summer to hang out," Alex reminds them. "We'll just make the most of it."

"Hell yeah." Tyler grins and stands, slapping his hands down on the desktop. "And speaking of making the most of things, who wants to go to Ryan's party with me?"

Rosie brightens. "I do." She tries to cast a subtle glance at Ricky, but he catches her eye and gives a slight nod.

"You're my ride. I go where you go."

Tyler turns to Kendra and Alex. "How about you guys? Ryan said you're all invited."

Alex shakes his head lightly. "Sorry, man. Dirty dishes and ungrateful customers are calling for me. I got to save up that deposit money."

"I might come by later," Kendra says as she stands. "My parents are making a five-star dinner in my honor tonight."

"Can't they ever just take you to a restaurant?" Rosie asks, rolling her eyes.

"In time, Rosie," Kendra smiles. "The healing process affects them just as much as it affects me. Maybe even more in some ways." She leans forward, looking at each of them in earnest. "But we are all going to be okay. No matter what happens, no matter where life takes us, we will be okay."

"Damn straight," Rosie says, and the others echo in agreement.

There are hugs all around, but it does not feel like a goodbye. It is a celebration, a victory, because they are all still there. And even though they are leaving this basement together for the last time, they are not leaving each other. Because they know they will always share a bond, they do not say goodbye. One by one, they simply leave.

The heavy door closes as Tyler, Rosie, and Ricky head off to Ryan's party. Kendra bends down to pick her gown up off the floor and brushes the dirt off. She shrugs it back on and smiles at Alex, who has lowered himself back into his creaking desk.

“Are you coming?”

Alex smiles faintly, his eyes taking in all the corners of the room. “Nah, I think I’ll hang out down here, reminiscence for a while.”

“Suit yourself.” Kendra flashes him another of her perfect smiles and ascends the stairs.

Alex watches her take each step, admires the way the unzipped graduation gown swishes around her ankles. She pushes open that heavy metal door and is bathed in the harsh fluorescent hallway light. He clears his throat lightly. She steps through the threshold, the clack of her high heeled shoes echoing on the linoleum.

“You’re beautiful, for what it’s worth.”

The door closes, the light disappears. He is certain she hadn’t heard. But it’s all right. He’s just happy to have finally spoken the words aloud.

On the other side of the door, Kendra leans back against the cool metal, one hand over her fluttering heart, the other resting on her cheek. A smile touches her lips.

“It’s worth a lot.”

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Sarah McKnight has been writing stories since she could pick up a pencil, and it often got her in trouble during math class. After a brief stint teaching English to unruly middle schoolers in Japan, she decided she wasn't going to put off her dream of becoming a writer any longer and set to work. Her books tackle real-world issues such as anxiety, depression, and letting go of the past - with a little humor sprinkled in, too. A St. Louis native, she currently lives in Pennsylvania with her wonderful husband and three cats. You can find her on Twitter @mcknight_writes

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