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Everything Nobody Knew

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Everything Nobody Knew

The blade looked beautiful when the sunlight hit it. There were no lights on in the room. When the sun peeked through the blinds and hit the silver blade, it shined. This razor was bigger than the one she had grown accustomed to. She typically chose small shaving blades. She stole this one from the cafe they were repainting in the center of campus. It was a helpful tool for painters, she assumed, but she couldn't resist. She had bigger plans for it.

The music was blasting; a mix of Armor for Sleep, Brand New, and Taking Back Sunday. Pictures littered the floor. Some ripped around the edges, some having lost their color over the years. Smiling faces stared back at her as she sifted through them. She tried to remember the people in the photographs. They disappeared a long time ago. She opened the bottle of Mr. Boston's vodka. It smelled like gasoline. She remembered thinking the same thing when she tasted Mr. Boston's for the first time four years ago. Vodka and orange juice. Her first "real" drink. She listened to the music, looked at the photos, and poured. Throwing back shots never came easier. The clear liquid burned her throat on the way down. She took the glistening blade and pressed it against her thigh. The bright red blood crept out of the thin line she drew. This was the only stability she felt these days; the only thing she was sure of. When you cut your skin, you will bleed. No doubt about it. She drew more lines

across her thighs as she tossed back more shots of the burning liquid. She had grown immune to the sharp pain. She continued to look through the pictures, searching for something - anything - that would bring her back. There was nothing. She moved the blade up to her forearm. She poured another shot glass full of Mr. Boston's and drank it in one fluid motion. The taste made her shiver.

She pressed the blade into her arm and waited for the blood to seep through. Pour, drink, cut. The music was blaring but she couldn't hear it. The vodka reeked but she couldn't smell it. She was crying but she didn't know it. Pour, drink, cut. As she stared at the floor full of pictures, she saw a picture of her old best friend. She pressed the blade harder. The blood came out faster and she didn't feel a thing. There was blood on both of her hands now. She felt tired. She was mesmerized by the red liquid coming out of her arm. She couldn't speak. She couldn't move.

ONE

The suburbs of Mayville, New York were perfect and predictable. The same children that started kindergarten together were the same teenagers that graduated high school together. The parents that attended the homecoming football game were the same people that played on the football team, twenty-something years earlier. The lawns were always perfectly manicured. The policemen knew everyone by name, address, mom's maiden name, and dad's graduating class year. Tag sales were always on Saturdays, lemonade never cost more than \$.25 per cup, and Sunday dinners unfailingly consisted of spaghetti and meatballs.

Life in Mayville was perfect as were the people who lived there. The James' were no different. All five of them lived in a big house in the center of town. Mr. and Mrs. James were one of the few couples who were still a couple and even more than that, still a happy one. They held hands when they walked, watched television on the couch together, and attended whatever events their children were involved in. Carlie was the oldest child, followed by Louie then Jack. They were all three years apart and never fought with anyone, especially not each other. The James' kids were well-known and well-liked. Carlie was the tall jock with huge green eyes and tan skin who could make an entire room smile just by smiling herself. Louie was the class clown who could make a mute boy laugh. He was an artist and spent his days turning the real world into a comic book.

Jack was the sweetheart. He stood six feet tall with broad shoulders and shaggy brown hair. He never swore, always took the dog for a walk and never forgot to call his grandmother on her birthday. The James' had a beautiful dog, family dinner every night, played board games on Thursdays, and went to their grandparents house for spaghetti and meatballs on Sundays.

Since Madison was a little girl, she stood out. She didn't like sports, she hated pasta, she liked to draw, and could not listen to music that wasn't at a headache-inducing volume. She wasn't heavy but she wasn't skinny. Her hair was much too curly to do anything with. She wore glasses, never contacts, and sneakers, never shoes. She liked wearing jeans until they thinned enough to rip instead of buying the pre-ripped jeans for far too much money and she constantly bought colorful new shoelaces to make her much too worn in Vans look brand fresh. Madison Ross wasn't poor, she could just never understand why people spent so much money on materialistic things. She was a saver and knew that when all of her peers were struggling to find the money to do whatever it was that would make their dreams come true, she would be five steps ahead of them. Madison was a dreamer. She wanted to draw her way around the world and out of Mayville, NY.

Madison met Carlie in Mrs. Bernstein's first grade class. Their mothers were class moms together, which led to instant playdates every

time they had to plan an event or discuss class business. Quickly, the girls eventually grew to be so close that they wouldn't go to a birthday party unless the other was going, they had their first sleepover together, and they called each other every Christmas morning to compare gifts from Santa. The girls joined the town softball and basketball teams together, they rode their bikes along the paths that ran along the outskirts of town, they played at the park. They learned how to be independent together, walking home from school, having ice cream at Friendly's, and going to movies unsupervised.

As they grew older, the girls remained close even though social norms tried it's best to drive them apart. Carlie stuck to sports, Madison turned to art. Carlie joined every club possible, Madison preferred time to herself after school. Carlie was invited to parties, Madison tagged along unwillingly. Carlie had a different boyfriend every few weeks, Madison would listen to her complain about them.

"Psst!" whispered a guy sitting behind Carlie in Mr. Lynk's twelfth grade math class. She turned around and grabbed a folded up post-it note out of his hand.

"Keg party at Chatter's house tomorrow night. Parents away. Come." He drew what was supposed to be a smiley face at the bottom of the note. It was the most unhappy smiley face Carlie had ever seen.

She folded up the note and put it in the back right pocket of her jeans. When the bell rang he tapped her shoulder.

“Think you can make it?” asked Bobby Flank, quarterback for the Mayville Marshins.

“Probably,” she said, never committing to anything right away. “I’ll see if Madison is free too.”

Carlie went to parties without Madison, but she didn’t like to for two reasons. One being that if Madison didn’t go, Carlie took her own car and then couldn’t drink. The second reason, and arguably the more important one, was that if Madison didn’t go, Carlie felt lost. She knew everyone at the parties, and most of the girls were on her basketball team, but she didn’t trust them the same way she trusted Madison. She was always on guard around them, on or off the court.

“Uh alright I guess,” he said with a shrug. “Just make sure she doesn’t rat us out.”

Parties weren’t Madison’s thing, but Carlie was convinced that the more Madison went, the more she’d like them. Madison was too shy, according to Carlie, and she was determined to change that.

“Why would I go to a party I’m not invited to Carlie?” Madison asked, closing her locker. “We go over this every single time. If they wanted me there, they’d invite me.”

Madison was frustrated. Carlie didn't understand that going to parties as the hot girl's friend just wasn't that fun. But she couldn't understand, Madison knew, because Carlie didn't think of herself as the hot girl. Carlie James was the most self-conscious person that Madison had ever met. She was also the best at pretending she wasn't.

"Of course they want you there, they just don't know you well enough to invite you. I told Bobby I'd see if you were free and he said 'Awesome, I hope she is,'" Carlie lied. A white lie. He didn't say she couldn't come, after all, he just wasn't as excited about it as Carlie made it seem.

Madison looked at Carlie inquisitively, studying her friend's big green eyes. "Awesome, huh? Bobby Flank actually said it was 'awesome' that I come to this party?"

"Yep. Sure did."

"You're such a liar," Madison laughed, her dark curly hair bouncing on her shoulders.

"Well he definitely didn't say you couldn't come," Carlie smirked. Madison always called out her lies. Either Madison was a human lie detector or the girls spent way too much time together. Carlie knew it was the latter.

“What does it matter that Bobby asked you anyway?” Madison asked, adjusting her thick black frames. “Aren’t you dating Jeremy still? Or did that change since lunch?”

“I guess. I mean, I am. But I think I’ll break up with him after practice today.”

“Why? I thought we liked this guy.”

“He’s nice, but he’s boring. Plus, Bobby’s cuter,” Carlie said with a wink. “Plus, he’s been asking me out for about four months, so I figure I should give him a shot. And you’ll be there with me in case he sucks, right?”

“You always have a plan, don’t ya?”

“Well of course, you have to be on your toes with these guys. They only get worse as we get older I hear, so consider it training for college.”

“Can we not talk about college now? I don’t even want to think about that.”

College was a hot topic for most high school seniors, but Madison and Carlie were an exception. Carlie had gotten accepted to Boston College and was leaving at the end of the summer. Madison, sticking to the girl’s plans to never be far away from each other, had gotten accepted to Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Despite how incredibly hard of a school that was to get into, Mr. Ross refused to let Madison go and

chase her childish dreams. She needed to go to a “real school” and study “actual things.” Madison was heartbroken. Mr. Ross enrolled her in Delta Community College the day Madison got the letter of acceptance to MassArt. She added that to the list of reasons she hated him.

“Okay okay, sorry, it slipped out. Back to my main point. You have to come to this party with me,” Carlie pleaded. “What else are you doing tomorrow night? Drawing pictures of high school kids at parties using fresh tears to give it a more artsy affect? Please come. It’s more fun when you’re there. Plus, I’m telling you. The more parties you go to, the more you get invited to. It’s like you have to prove that you’re cool enough for an invite. And trust me, you are.”

“First of all,” Madison said as the bell rang. “I do not sit at home drawing pictures of things I’m not doing nor do I sit there and cry about it.”

Carlie was smiling, she knew she had won.

“And second of all,” Madison said as sternly as she could manage without laughing, “I’ll go, but the second you leave me standing alone, I’m ditching you and leaving you stranded with no ride. Got it?”

“Yes! Got it!” Carlie gave Madison a big hug and ran into Chemistry yelling “Love you!” as she ran.

“Love you too,” Madison said smiling and shaking her head. This would be fun, she told herself. If nothing else, Carlie definitely kept things interesting.

At the party, Carlie upheld her promise to not ditch Madison for a total of thirty-two minutes, a new personal record. Madison had silently promised herself to stay at the party for an hour before leaving Carlie, on the off chance she might have a nice time or that Carlie would feel guilty about ditching the friend she dragged along. Both were unlikely. Madison sipped her one obligatory Bud Light from a red solo cup and resigned to people watching. She watched Carlie toss back drink after drink while talking to Bobby Flank, his arm draped around her shoulder. Madison saw Jeremy sulking across the room. Carlie ended their seven day relationship a few hours ago. *How does she do it?*

“Ditched ya again, did she?”

Madison jumped, startled. Chris Gizzo was standing behind her, sipping his beer. “You know it,” she replied.

“She’s the worst.”

“Eh, she’s just having a good time,” Madison shrugged.

“Yeah but you can’t tell me you didn’t only come here because she promised she wouldn’t go off without you.”

Madison let out a laugh. Chris knew Carlie so well it was scary. Their fathers were best friends, so Chris and Carlie spent most holidays and most weekends together since they were born.

“Am I right?” Chris prodded.

“You’re right,” Madison nodded. “Of course you’re right.”

“Well, do you want to stand here and watch the time on your phone a little longer or would you like to come outside with me and grab another drink?” he asked smiling.

Chris and Madison knew each other practically their whole lives because of Carlie, but they had never been friends without her. Chris was captain of the baseball team and always hung around with jocks and, as Madison liked to refer to them, “all the assholes in Mayville.” They had nothing in common, but Madison had to admit, she did always think his crooked smile was adorable.

This is a first. “Sure. Let me just...”

“Just tell Carlie?” Chris finished Madison’s sentence for her.

“Why? Do you think she plans on telling you when she disappears with Bobby in about fifteen more minutes?”

Right again.

“Come on, Madison. Just come keep me company for a bit, I promise I won’t bite.”

Madison laughed and followed Chris outside, glancing over her shoulder at Carlie who was still completely immersed, or at least pretending to be, in whatever Bobby Flank was saying.

TWO

“You alright, Mad?”

“What? Yeah. I’m fine.”

“If you say so. I mean, it’s not like you’ve been sitting on the couch staring at the back of your knees for the last eighteen minutes or anything,” Carlie said nudging Madison. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. Sorry. Just thinking.”

“Okay well if you feel like thinking aloud, you know I’m right here.”

“I know,” Madison said letting a small smile form on her lips. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Madison rolled onto her side, resting her head on Carlie’s lap. Carlie let her lay there for another ten minutes, rubbing Madison’s back softly.

“Hey, you awake down there?”

“Yeah,” Madison mumbled.

“Feel like going for a walk? It’s beautiful out.”

“It’s cold.”

“Not if you wear a sweatshirt, and conveniently, I have about nine sweatshirts too many. Come on, it’ll feel good. We can walk to Joe’s, I’ll buy you a chai latte.”

Still on Carlie’s lap, Madison was smiling. Carlie always knew how to make Madison feel better, just by distracting her with the smallest thing. Carlie was the coffee fiend, but Madison liked going to Joe’s Java Shop. Joe was about seventy years old and owned Joe’s Java Shop for forty-five years. Joe knew everyone in Mayville and went to school with most of their parents. Madison liked feeling welcomed and known. The James family had deep roots in Mayville, but the Ross family moved there when Madison was two. Joe didn’t know Madison’s family well, but Madison stopped into Joe’s often because Carlie lived five blocks away from his shop and the James’ were a big coffee drinking family. Madison started going to Joe’s with Carlie when they were little. Carlie’s mom would walk them down the street after work so she could get coffee and finish up the work she couldn’t get done at the office while Carlie, Madison, Louie, and Jack would sit in the back corner of the shop and eat chocolate chip cookies and drink milk. The James children came in so often that Joe set up a children’s section complete with a small bookshelf full of donated books, a toy chest with hand-me-down toys, and a small wooden table with four chairs around it. Madison always felt like a grown up sitting there, talking with her best friend over cookies and milk. As the

girls got older and Carlie got involved in sports after school, Madison would go to Joe's on her own, bringing her sketchbook and iPod. She'd always be greeted by Joe with a big smile as he said "Well there's my artist!"

The girls walked down the street, kicking the fallen orange leaves as they walked. Carlie didn't ask Madison what was wrong, she knew better than that. Madison would open up when she wanted to, and Carlie would wait for that. It didn't usually take Madison long to tell Carlie what was bothering her, especially if she knew that Carlie had noticed something was wrong. Madison hated being worried about or pitied, so she usually chose to explain herself rather than let the worries linger.

Madison pulled her phone out of her pocket and started typing.

"Chris, I imagine?" Carlie asked with a smile.

"Yep. He wants to go to the movies later."

"Oh cool, what movie?"

"Not sure, he didn't say."

"Are you going to go?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"How's it going with him? Still like him?"

"Good so far. You probably know more than me, I'm sure you've seen him more than I have in the past two weeks."

“Not recently, actually. Plus, you know him differently now. You’re his girlfriend. I’m just the girl he’s known forever.”

This was true, Madison mused. Mr. James and Mr. Gizzo graduated high school and college together. They were best friends from when they were little. They were both football players and married their high school sweethearts. Carlie and Chris spent almost every holiday together. Madison always thought the two of them would end up dating, but Carlie never seemed interested.

“He’s like my cousin, Madison,” Carlie would say. “That’d be too weird.” Chris had a similar mantra, but Madison doubted that he would actually turn Carlie down if he had the chance. No one turned Carlie down. Madison stopped herself. She couldn’t think like that, she’d go crazy. Chris was her boyfriend now, that’s all she had to focus on.

“Has he said anything about me?” Madison asked.

“No, but I haven’t talked to him much lately. I think his family is coming over for spaghetti on Sunday, but I’m not sure. Guess he’s been too preoccupied with his new girlfriend to keep me updated.”

“Shut up,” Madison said letting out a laugh.

“There’s the laugh I was looking for,” Carlie said linking her arm with Madison’s. The girls walked into Joe’s, who looked up smiling, as usual.

“I was hoping I’d see my two favorite girls today!”

“Hi Joe,” they said in unison.

“How are you ladies today? Swatting away all the young gentlemen?”

“I don’t know if there are too many gentlemen left these days, Joe,” Carlie said teasingly. “I think you might have been the last of them!”

“Oh now,” Joe chuckled, “you always know the way to my heart, Miss. James.”

Madison stood smiling next to her best friend, marveling at how easily she could joke and chat with everyone. Carlie didn’t have a worry in the world.

“Madison is off the market these days, Joe,” Carlie announced, swinging her arm around Madison’s shoulders. “So any new blood, you be sure to send my way!”

“Ahh I see! Who’s the lucky man?” Joe asked, putting their mugs down on the counter in front of them. The James’ all had their own coffee mugs sitting on the shelf behind the cash register. They were big green mugs, more resembling bowls than coffee cups, with their names written in black calligraphy. When Madison turned thirteen (the legal age to drink coffee according to Mrs. James), Mrs. James bought Madison her own mug to leave at Joe’s too.

“Oh just this guy Chris,” Madison said timidly. “He’s been in here with us, I’m sure you know him.”

“Of course you know him Joe, he comes in here a lot. Chris Gizzo, Giz’s son. Tall kid, always has a baseball cap on. He was in here with me last week after my basketball practice. Drives that ridiculously loud Audi.”

“Of course I know him! Great kid, polite. His family is wonderful too. They’ve been coming in here for years. His father used to help me out around here, fixing whatever odds and ends would break.”

“That’s him,” Madison said smiling.

“Great catch, young lady. He’s a good egg.”

“Thanks, Joe.”

The girls sat on the benches lined with pillows at their favorite table in the corner of the shop by the window.

“Hey, how’s your drawing going?” Carlie asked. “Any progress?”

“Not really, I found some cool art programs around here I’m sure I could get into, but my dad is really against it.”

Aha! There it is. “What’s he saying now? You’ve already agreed to go to Delta. Isn’t that enough?”

“He’s just being a jerk. Saying that art isn’t a career and I’m just wasting my time. Said it’s just a silly little girl’s dream.”

“It’s not though, you know that, right? You’re so talented.”

“Talent doesn’t matter if no one knows you have it.”

“I know you have it.”

“Are you going to pay my bills because of it?”

“Well no, smartass,” Carlie smiled, “but if someone believes in you, you can do anything. Anything and everything.”

Madison looked down at her shoelaces.

THREE

When Carlie went away to Boston College, she was nervous. Nervous about being away from home, nervous about meeting new people, but mostly she was nervous about being away from Madison. They had never been apart for more than three days since they were little. Carlie remembered Madison's mom driving Madison all the way to Pennsylvania one summer because the James' were on a family vacation, but after the first two nights, Carlie refused to do anything until either Madison joined them or they took Carlie home. Ever since then every family vacation the James' took, Madison was included in. Carlie would have gone on vacation with Madison's family too, but they never, ever went away.

Madison was very quiet the weeks leading up to Carlie leaving, but Carlie knew she didn't like change. Carlie worried about her best friend, but she knew that Madison had Chris now, and there was no better replacement for Carlie than Chris.

Friday afternoon after the first week of classes, Carlie was sitting at her desk, music blasting, face glued to the computer screen, fingers frantically hitting her keyboard. Her hair was up in a loose messy bun and she was wearing her usual uniform: gray mesh shorts and navy blue sweatshirt with the Mayville Martian mascot on the front and her basketball number, number 14, on the back. She was so engrossed in the

four flashing Instant Message boxes on her laptop that she didn't notice the guy standing in the doorway.

“Uhh... Hey,” he said, clearing his throat. “Is Emma around?”

“What?” she said turning the music down, “Sorry, I couldn't hear you.”

“Oh, I was just looking for your roommate. You know where she's at?”

“Umm I think she went to Uno's with a girl down the hall, but I'm not sure.”

“Aight no worries, I was just wandering around. I'm Jordan, by the way. I live upstairs.”

“Carlie. I live right here.”

He gave her a quick smile. “Yeah I can see that. You got the perfect room: bathroom directly across the hall, gorgeous view of the dumpster.”

His quick, smartass remarks took her by surprise. *Who the hell is this guy?* She studied him as closely as she could without being blatantly obvious. Black and pink sneakers with a black and pink belt to match. He wore jeans with holes cut in just the right places and a black t-shirt advertising the release of Dashboard Confessional's new album. His hair was wound in tight curls and he had small, crystal blue eyes. His hands constantly moved when he spoke and she noticed something funny about

his arms, though she couldn't place it. He was simultaneously mysterious and talkative. He had "skater" written all over him, without that jerk-ish persona.

"Ha ha ha. Yeah, it's pretty awesome. At least I'm never stuck hanging out in my towel 'cause the showers are full considering I can hear how many are on."

"Mmm I never thought of that. What are you doing?" He asked as he made his way into her room and leaned against her dresser.

"Just talking to some people from home."

"Some? You've gotta have like 10 I.M.'s on there."

"Four," she said definitively. "What can I say? I'm popular."

"Can't argue with that. Feel like going for a walk? Or are all of those conversations matters of life and death?"

She let out a nervous laugh as she glanced back at her computer screen. A message from Chris was waiting.

"Um...yeah," she answered. "Sure."

"Aight cool. I need to get out of here once in awhile, these rooms feel like prison cells."

"Yeah I know. Ever heard of that song This Place is a Prison by The Postal Service?"

"Dude," Jordan said, raising his hand for a high five. "Favorite band."

Jordan and Carlie hit it off instantly. He could tell stories for hours and she was a professional listener. He told her about his girlfriend, his family, his best friends, his hundreds of drunken experiences. She told him about her brothers, Madison, Chris, her basketball team, her big life plans. They spent time being homesick together. They ate breakfast and dinner together. They took walks around campus at night “just because” together. She learned that he fell out of a tree when he was three years old and that if she touched the scars on his arms, he couldn’t feel a thing. She found herself poking at his scars on a regular basis. He introduced her to his roommate, Robbie and Robbie’s girlfriend Janelle. He invited her to drink with them and watch movies with them. He packed a bowl with weed and she took hits of it without thinking twice. All of this she did, partly because she wanted to and partly because she knew he wanted her to. With Jordan, Carlie knew she was safe. She knew that no matter what, he was watching out for her and in this foreign college world, that was exactly the kind of comfort she needed.

After a few movie nights and a few more drunken nights, Jordan, Carlie, Robbie, and Janelle became really close. Some nights they’d spend hanging out with all the guys on the floor upstairs and on others it was just the four of them drinking, talking, and watching television. They ate every meal together, played countless games of rummy on their dorm

room floors, had movie nights, date nights and drunken nights upstairs with other people who lived on their floor.

However busy she made herself Carlie's phone rang constantly: Jordan, Madison, Chris, Chris, Janelle, Madison, Chris, Jordan, Chris. Her homelife and her school life were starting to invade one another, neither settling to take second place in her life. Jordan hated when Chris called but he never told Carlie that. Chris knew that at least 9 out of the 10 times his phone call went straight to voicemail, Carlie had intentionally ignored him because she was with Jordan. Madison knew Carlie well enough to know that she always had her phone in her back pocket, so whenever she didn't answer right away it was a choice, not an accident, regardless of what Carlie would later tell her.

Carlie devoted much of her time to being wherever Jordan was and while they were together she rarely let her mind wander towards home, but the nightly phone calls from Chris and the texts from Madison throughout the day forced her to feel guilty about having fun. Jordan and Carlie spent many nights talking about what they were doing and while Jordan would have done whatever Carlie suggested, Carlie routinely answered with the four words he learned to hate: "I don't know, Jord."

As the nights they spent drinking together grew from once a week to six times a week and the intensity of their relationship increased by the day, the first time they made out, no one was surprised. When they left for

classes in the morning from the same room, it was expected. He carved their initials into her college-owned bedpost with his brand new pocket knife and she let him. They were a couple without ever meaning to be.

FOUR

Madison jumped when she heard a knock at the door. She bounced down the steps and peeked out the side window. She saw her boyfriend standing there, one hand in his pocket, the other fidgeting by his side. She flung open the door with a big smile on her face. She was so lucky to have him. With most of their friends away at college, Madison and Chris were spending all of their time together. He had a baseball scholarship to Iona College two towns over, so he had also decided to live at home.

“Chris! What are you doing here? I thought you weren’t coming over ‘til later.”

“Hey babe,” he said, tilting her chin up for a kiss. “You sounded upset on the phone and I didn’t like the idea of you being upset alone. I thought I’d come cheer you up.”

“Well thanks, that’s so sweet. My dad is a real asshole sometimes.”

“I know. He doesn’t know how talented and incredible is daughter is. I do, though.”

Madison smiled. Chris always had the right words, no matter the situation. Madison had called Chris earlier crying about a fight she had with her father that morning. He had woken her up yelling, demanding to know why she wasn’t up and ready for school. The fact that she never had

classes on Thursdays didn't seem to matter to her. "You should be in the library studying then!" he had yelled. "You think I pay all this money for you to sleep your way through college?!" There was no use telling him that she didn't have classes on Thursdays, that she hated school but went anyway to please him, that had she been allowed to go to art school she was sure she'd be at the top of her class. Instead, Madison apologized in between his yells, waited for her father to slam the door, then gathered the books he had thrown off her desk, called Carlie but got no answer, then called Chris and started crying as soon as he said "hello."

"You're the best. Thank you," Madison said hugging her boyfriend. "Whaddya wanna do? Go get some food or something?"

"Nah, let's just stay here. We never just stay in and relax. No one's home right? So we might as well just kick it."

"Well I do have some beers in the fridge downstairs if ya feel like really kickin' it. My dad wouldn't notice a few missing."

They spent the afternoon drinking and laughing, kissing and drinking, drinking and being in love. They were so happy together, especially on that unplanned afternoon in Madison's very empty house. The couple drank much more than they had expected to, but it didn't matter because they had nowhere else to be.

“Shit, my mom will be home in a couple hours,” Madison said, suddenly snapping back to reality. “We need to clean up before that happens.”

“What time’s she gettin’ home?”

“Around 6. Probably a little before.”

“We got two hours babe. Don’t stress about it.”

He guided her towards the couch and she yielded to his touch. He kissed her softly as she fell back into the light blue cushions. He fell with her, trapping her under his six foot, hundred and ninety pound frame. His hands moved swiftly through her thick curls, down her neck, across her stomach, and rested on her hips. She loved the way his hands moved so gently, sending chills up her spine. He kissed her harder now, taking breaks to suck fiercely on her neck as she clawed at his back and tugged at his hair. His gentle hands moved faster, pulling at her jeans. He unbuttoned them with one swift movement, never letting his lips leave hers.

“Chris,” Madison gasped, “Chris hold up.”

“Not now, Madison,” he whispered, as his right hand moved to hold both of hers above her head. “Please just not now.”

“You need to slow down. Now.”

“It’s always ‘slow down,’” he said, as his mouth moved from her lips to her neck to her stomach. “Always fucking ‘slow down.’” He

stopped for a second, pulling down his sweatpants with his left hand, staring into her small brown eyes. “It’s been four months, Madison. Don’t you love me?”

“Of course I do,” her voice was quiet but shaky. “I’m just not ready for this.”

“Yes, you are,” he promised, leaning in to her neck again.

“Chris. I’m serious,” she said timidly between each angry kiss. “Just get off me, let’s talk.”

“I’m done fucking talking. Just shut up Madison. For once in your life, just shut the fuck up.”

The grip on Madison’s wrists was tighter now. She felt all of his weight pressing down on her. She couldn’t move. The gentle touch she loved was gone. Chris moved with a purpose. He didn’t look at her anymore. She felt his short, hot breaths on her stomach. She was panicking now. She squirmed at his every movement, trying to break away from him. Both of his hands held her down now. He pressed his body against hers, pushing himself inside of her. He refused to look at her, ignoring her cries of pain and pleas to stop. He tightened his grasp around her wrists and thrust faster and faster. The pain was unbearable. She cried, begging him to stop. Sweat dripped off of his body onto hers as she repeated failed attempts at forcing him off of her. She was weak now, defeated. Her cries sounded distant, even to herself. She felt him

explode into her now numb insides and found herself thanking God that it was over. He didn't say anything to her, but she felt him release his grip and peel his sweaty body off of hers. He pulled up his pants, flipped his Yankee hat onto his head, gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and said softly, "See? That wasn't so bad, was it?" Madison didn't respond. He kissed her again on the lips. "I'll call you later babe," Chris said as he left her house. She heard his car door slam and the engine of his brand new Audi roar as he drove away.

Madison lay on the light blue couch for a long time. She moved her right hand towards her inner thigh. It was covered in something warm and sticky. Chris. She looked at her hand, mesmerized by the dark red color that covered her fingertips. Her inner thighs had the same red color. Blood. She couldn't feel a thing but she knew she was in pain. Her insides hurt, her wrists hurt, her mind hurt, her heart hurt, but she couldn't feel a thing. She looked at the clock. 5:30. Her mom would be home soon. She rolled off the couch and buttoned her jeans. She flipped over the now-stained couch cushions and picked up the beer cans scattered across the room. She saw the bruises on her wrists, stretched her sleeves as long as they would go and promised herself brand new bracelets to hide them. Her lower half burned as she walked. What just happened? She sprayed air freshener throughout the house, masking the smell of beer and sex. Her mother didn't need to know. No one needed to know. *Did Chris*

even know? Of course he did. There's no way he thought that was how it was supposed to be... did he? No one would know, she decided. No one. Not ever.

Chris did call, as promised. He called constantly until Madison finally worked up the courage to send him a text: "Please stop calling. I never want to see you again." It worked, she never heard from him again.

FIVE

Carlie's phone rang while she was walking to the dining hall to meet Jordan. Madison. She hadn't spoken to Madison in about a week. Carlie had called Madison a few times, but Madison kept letting it go to voicemail.

"Hey stranger, what's up?"

"Hey. Wasn't sure I was going to catch you," Madison's voice was soft and mumbled.

"I'm just walking over to dinner. What's going on?"

"Nothing really, just saying hi."

"Well, hi. How's it going over there?"

"Sucks, as usual. You?"

"Eh, it's okay," Carlie lied. She wasn't sure why she felt so guilty about having fun at school. She had to protect Madison's feelings she told herself. "Did you have class today?"

"Yeah only one. Sucked."

"Ha. Classes usually do. How's Chris?"

"Not sure."

"Haven't seen him today?"

"Haven't seen him in four days."

"Oh really? Everything okay?"

"We broke up."

What?! “Really? I didn’t know. When?”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“Nope haven’t spoken to him,” Carlie responded. She had called Chris a few a few times over the past few days too, but he had just responded with a few texts saying he was busy. She assumed he was busy with Madison. “Wow. What happened? You okay?”

“Oh yeah I’m fine. Just wasn’t into him anymore,” Madison lied.

“Okay well good. There’s plenty of fish in the sea,” Carlie said with a laugh. “Now you have more time to have fun with whoever you want. It’s a good thing.”

“Yeah men are just banging down my door to get in,” Madison said sarcastically.

When Carlie left for college, Madison was left behind. Madison had other friends in high school, but no one that she was really close too. The only friends she had left were her sketch pad, her dog Minnow, and her mother. She had had Chris, but she couldn’t even look at him now. She still talked to a few of her friends from high school online, but it wasn’t much help. They weren’t there to keep her distracted. They weren’t there to make her laugh. They weren’t there to stop her from slipping away. She hadn’t planned on actually attending college after her father didn’t get her to MassArt, but the mandates of social normality required high school graduates to go to college after high school, so she

did. Delta Community College was located 16 miles from her house. Her alarm rang at 7:45 every morning, which she snoozed until 8am. She rolled out of bed and forced herself into the shower until 8:15. Her curly hair never benefitted from getting hit with a blow dryer, so she never bothered. She never worried about what outfit she was going to wear, so she would always slip into her self-proclaimed uniform: worn out jeans, black Vans, and a colorful tshirt covered by a black hoodie. Her jewelry never changed. She had nine different colored studs piercing her right ear, five piercing her left. At 8:22am she walked Minnow up and down the block before she let him inside and poured food into his bowl. She always glanced in the mirror before she left the house at 8:30am, she didn't like how she looked anymore, but what did it matter? She had no one to impress.

Madison skated by in her classes, not because she didn't understand the course material, but because she couldn't be bothered by it. Madison ate lunch alone, drank coffee alone, walked the campus alone. She was careful to never make eye contact with anyone. She convinced herself that it was easy to be invisible, and so far, her theory was proving to be true. One morning, a guy placed his hand on her lower back as he squeezed between a table of books and Madison. Innocent, she was sure, but she still jumped, let out a small yell, and ran out of the campus bookstore shaking. *Way to go.* Every day after her last class, Business

101, she drove to her house, let Minnow out into the backyard, and locked herself into her room until her mom got home at six o'clock. That gave her three solid hours to blast music and draw in her sketchbook, or experiment with her latest medium: her skin. Her mom always had dinner on the table by 7pm and the table was always set for four. At least six out of the seven weekdays, though, her older sister Jenn and her father didn't bother coming home. Madison wished her mom would just set the table for the two of them, it would be less sad, she thought. But she never said anything, and her mom never stopped.

"You lucked out with classes this year, huh Maddie?" her mom commented at dinner.

"I guess."

"It just doesn't seem like you have a lot of work to do for them."

"I do most of it at school, then the rest when I get home," she lied, thinking of her pocket knife upstairs. She wasn't sure when she started lying to her mom, but it was much easier than she had imagined.

"Oh. What are the classes like? Are they hard?"

"Not really hard, just boring."

"All of them?"

"Well yeah," Madison explained, "it's my first semester so I have to take all of the introductory courses, so it's no new information really."

“Oh right, I remember that,” her mom said, twirling spaghetti with her fork. “I’m sure classes will get more interesting as you get further into your major, so don’t worry.”

“Yeah but I don’t have a major, remember mom? I’m undeclared.”

“Yes I am aware, Madison, but you’ll have to declare one soon. Have you given it any thought?”

“Sure have. Art,” Madison said, knowing this would lead to an argument they were both tired of having.

“Let’s not get into this again, Madison. You know where your father stands on that. And he’s got a point. How are you going to make a living being an artist? You can do as much art and whatever kind of art you want to in your spare time, but for godsake do it as a hobby.”

“Please don’t refer to that man who comes home to take showers as my father. He shouldn’t have any say in my education.”

“Except that he’s paying for it,” her mom retorted.

“You’re right, mom. He is. And since I want nothing to do with that scumbag, I quit. He can keep his money. I’m never going back to school.”

SIX

"Sup Maddy?" Carlie said pushing Madison's bedroom door open.

Madison jumped as she hurriedly tossed a notebook on the ground in front of her. She should have expected Carlie. Carlie was home from Boston for winter break. Madison knew she would be by but they hadn't talked much, partially because Carlie was too busy with her family and partially because Madison was avoiding her. Madison knew Carlie wouldn't approve of her dropping out of school and that she would want details about her break up. She wouldn't get it. She couldn't get it.

"Jesus, Carlie," she said wiping her eyes. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Sorry girl. Whatcha doin'?"

"Uh, nothing. Just hanging out. I have to run downstairs for a sec."

Carlie watched her rush out of her room and down the stairs. She walked over to where Madison had been sitting. *What the fuck?* A pocket knife lay on the floor partially covered by the notebook. *I should have known.* She lifted up the notebook and saw dark red marks staining the blade. *Fuck.* Madison walked back into the room wearing a sweatshirt big enough to cover most of her hands and Carlie pushed the notebook back over the knife.

"Everything okay Mad?"

"Yeah, yeah. Everything's cool. What's goin' on?"

"Uh nothin' really. Just got bored. Thought I'd see if you wanted to get coffee."

Madison looked into Carlie's big green eyes. Those eyes always seemed to see more than she wanted them too. Madison knew Carlie saw the knife, but she also knew Carlie wouldn't say anything. Not yet, anyway. Carlie was a processor. She was methodical and didn't like to get into serious discussions without being prepared. Normally, Madison's always-emotional self hated that. Today, she was grateful.

"Sure. Coffee sounds cool."

As they sat outside Joe's Java Shop sipping their lattes, Madison felt Carlie's mind working fast. She knew the questions were coming. She'd be honest. She had to be honest.

"So," Carlie began awkwardly.

"So."

"How's Delta? As awful as you thought it'd be?"

"Well yeah, pretty much. Home is the same as it always was. My dad is always at work or at the bar, my mom is always upset because he's never home and I just wait for him to come home and yell at me for doing everything wrong."

“Well I don’t think you really ever thought that part would change, did ya?”

“Guess I was hoping that since I actually was in college he’d get off my back for a bit. I was wrong.”

“Fuck that guy. He’s never going to be happy.”

“I seriously wish my mom would just divorce him already.”

“Why the hell doesn’t she?” Carlie wondered aloud, as Madison finished her latte. Carlie’s cup was still half full, as usual.

“I think she’s afraid of being lonely.”

“You don’t think she’s lonely now?”

“Yeah, but she’s still married. In the eyes of Mayville and our family, she’s not alone. I think that means something to her. It’s a face-value marriage.”

“I guess.”

“Man, I never want to be like them,” Madison admitted.

“Gotta be exhausting. What’s going on with school? Anything exciting?”

Madison let out a laugh, “Nope Carlie, nothing exciting. Nothing at all.” *Because I dropped out.*

“I don’t get how you’re still not meeting people over there,” Carlie said rolling her eyes.

“Just not up for it.”

“Look at it like a game. You spend your days trying to figure out who’s worth your time and who’s not. It’s fun.”

She’ll never understand. “I dunno.”

“Why not?”

Madison lowered her eyes. She didn’t want to talk anymore. More talking would be more lying. Well, not lying, just not telling the truth. She racked her brain trying to figure out how to change the subject, but no ideas came. The conversation was one-sided today. Carlie asking, Madison answering. It was tiring. Madison stared at her bright red shoelaces.

“Maddy, what’s going on?”

“With what?” she managed.

“You’ve been distant lately. I know I haven’t been around much but even on the phone you’ve been quiet. Now is no different.”

Madison let the silence linger for a bit. Planning out her answer. Of course Carlie noticed she had been distant, Carlie noticed everything. “No,” she said carefully. “No, everything's not okay.”

“Well, what’s wrong?”

“I just can’t do this Carlie.”

“Do what?”

“College, my dad, living in this fucking cookie-cutter town, knowing how much fun you’re having, Chris. I can’t do any of it anymore.”

“Come on, Mad. The only thing that’s changed is the fact that we go to different schools. It’s not like life as we knew it ended. We grew up, that’s all.”

“You don’t get it. You love college. You have a whole life up there. Mine is still right here, without anyone else,” Madison said, her voice growing louder. She was getting frustrated now.

“Madison, you’re being dramatic. You chose this, you realize that right? You decided to stay home instead of fighting you dad or moving away without his help. You had the perfect boyfriend but you broke up with him. You’re pushing people away for no reason.”

Perfect boyfriend? “No reason?! You think I wanted to break up with him? He... never mind.” *Breathe.* Madison tugged at her sleeves.

“He what?” Carlie asked. Madison knew the truth would break her best friend’s heart.

“Nothing, nothing. You’re right. I’m being dramatic.”

“Listen, Madison. I am having fun, but it’s hard. Some days it’s goddamn near impossible. I miss the way things used to be too but that doesn’t mean it’s a bad thing. You’re supposed to miss things from your

past, you're supposed to have a hard time once in awhile. If life was easy, it'd be pretty fucking boring."

"It's not just college."

"Well, your dad has always been a prick."

"I'm used to him."

"So then what?! What is so awful?"

"The Chris thing. That's the worst part." *Stop.* Madison closed her eyes, imagined her pocket knife slicing her thigh apart, then opened them again.

"Chris? You guys broke up months ago. What does that have to do with anything?"

"He hurt me, Carlie. Yet somehow you think it's okay to talk to him all the time, like it doesn't matter."

"Chris and I have been friends forever. He's like my brother. You know that."

"I think it's more than that."

"It's not. God, how many times do I have to tell you that? What did he do that was so bad anyway? You guys didn't even date that long."

Madison looked down at her shoelaces again. She didn't want to talk anymore. It wasn't worth it, she decided. Of course Carlie couldn't understand how she felt, Carlie's life was perfect. It always had been.

“I’m sorry,” Carlie said softly, putting her hand on Madison’s knee. “I want to help you, to make you see that you are going to be okay, but I just don’t know how, especially when you won’t tell me what’s really wrong. You’re so much stronger than the cuts I know you’re hiding under those sleeves, Madison. I just wish you could see that.”

Tears filled Madison’s eyes as she listened to her friend try and reason with her. She knew all the positives, she understood that she sounded irrational, but she wasn’t being irrational. Not to herself at least. It was hard. It was all too hard and no one understood. She knew Carlie was trying but she still didn’t get it. She couldn’t get it because she didn’t know everything. Madison wouldn’t let her know everything.

SEVEN

As winter break came to an end, Carlie only had a few days left at home before she had to head back up to Massachusetts. She and Madison hadn't talked about anything serious after their conversation at Joe's, but they saw each other everyday and Carlie was beginning to grow more and more confident that Madison would be fine. She was just craving attention, after all. Madison never liked change, Carlie reminded herself, of course it would take some time to adjust to a new lifestyle.

Chris took Carlie out for burgers the night before she was planning to leave for school. She couldn't see what Madison thought was so terrible about him. He was amazing, always had been. As they left the restaurant, he took her hand in his.

"I'm going to miss you, Car."

"I'll miss you, too."

"Yeah, right," he said, smirking.

"Oh, stop. You know I will."

"You never call me. I always call you. You ignore it. Ya know, when you're out with your new boyfriend or something and forget about me."

She nudged him with her hip. "You're ridiculous. You know that, right?"

"You love it, you know *that*, right?"

He pulled her close to him as they got to her car, wrapping his large, muscular arms around her. She tucked herself into his chest, letting him hold her. He was so safe. She thought about what Madison said and she couldn't argue it. There always did seem like there was more going on between Carlie and Chris, but there wasn't. They had never kissed, never dated, never would.

Chris guided her face up towards his and kissed her cheek.

"Goodbye, Carlie James," he said as she got into her Jetta. "Call me when you get back to school so I know you're there."

"Will do," she said smiling. "Night, babe."

Carlie checked her phone as she got in the car and saw she had four missed calls. All from Madison. As she headed for home and she called her back. Madison answered the phone without saying a word but Carlie knew she was crying. *Shit*. She didn't ask questions, she sped straight to Madison's. Neither Mr. or Mrs. Ross's cars were in the driveway, as usual. A sinking feeling started to overtake Carlie's body. She let herself in and ran up the stairs to Madison's room. Madison wasn't in her room, though, and she didn't respond as Carlie called her name. Carlie walked towards the bathroom and nudged the door opened, her heart pounding.

The blood pooled below Madison's leg. A deep, dark, crimson red. It looked eerily gorgeous. Not moving, not smeared, just dark and

solid and perfect. The side of the tub was a different story. Her thigh was a different story. There was nothing gorgeous about that. Blood was smeared along the side of the white porcelain bathtub. Madison's handprint was clear from where she held on before sliding to the floor. She was crying. She held her head in her bloody hands. She didn't look up when Carlie walked in. She wouldn't. Carlie looked down at her, shuddering as she tried to determine how deep the cut was. Carlie found it fascinating the way the skin seemed to have yielded to the blade. She grabbed a washcloth and soaked it in warm water, pretending that her hands weren't shaking uncontrollably.

She knelt down as Madison whimpered, "You don't have to do this. I'll be fine. Just go. I don't want you to see this."

"Too late," was Carlie's only reply. Carlie pressed the warm washcloth to her friend's leg and wiped the trails of blood away, deciding where the cut actually began and where it ended. She soaked up as much of the crimson red liquid as she could before attempting the daunting task of closing up the wound. Carlie searched the medicine cabinet, finding butterfly bandages and an unopened package of medical tape. Mrs. Ross must have bought it years ago, preparing for the inevitable injuries that were bound to happen when the girls were on town recreation teams. Together, Madison and Carlie closed the gap in Madison's thigh. One

pushed the top half of her leg, one pushed the bottom half and Carlie taped it tightly. A nasty scar was sure to form.

“Am I hurting you?” Carlie asked, a ridiculous question. Madison looked up, eyes full of salty water, and shook her head ever-so-slightly.

“Hey, Madison,” Carlie prodded. “Mad? How long has this been happening? Like not just being sad. Like the... painful part.”

Madison could hear the fear in Carlie’s voice. It made her voice quiver. She looked at Carlie. It was weird to see her like this. Carlie was always strong and persevering no matter what. This Carlie was different. This Carlie was afraid.

“The first time was at the end of September. Four months ago.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I thought it would go away. I didn’t wanna freak you out.”

“I’m not freaked out,” Carlie began, lying. “Well, okay. I’m a little freaked out but that’s just because I -- I just don’t know what to do. I think we need to call someone. I keep thinking about the conversation we had the other day. I should’ve called someone after I saw that goddamn pocket knife on the floor.”

“No, Carlie. Absolutely not. I called you because I trust you. You. Not someone else.”

“You need help and I can’t give it to you. If you could fix this on your own, you wouldn’t have called me and you sure as hell wouldn’t have

been hacking away at your thigh before I got here!” Carlie cringed as she said it. She knew she needed to calm down. She took a deep breath and started again, speaking slowly. “I know everything sucks right now, but hurting yourself is just not the answer. I mean, shit, Mad. If you don’t want to call anyone, then what *do* you plan on doing about it?”

Fully aware of the fact that Carlie had no idea how much thought actually went into this process, Madison realized that question held more meaning than Carlie intended.

"Well, it’s going to be a car accident."

"What?"

"What I plan on doing about all this. A car accident."

Madison looked at her friend’s blank stare, desperately wishing there was some way to laugh this whole conversation away. There wasn’t. She kept her voice low, as if whispering would make it seem a little less terrifying. The tears she had been choking back disappeared. She spoke matter-of-factly.

“It would look like a mistake. Wednesday, on the Taconic Parkway. Probably during the day when everyone was at school and work and the roads would be pretty empty. Not at night because no one wants that 3 a.m phone call. I’ll just going to take the turn by the reservoir really fast and go into those stone barriers. That way, no one would have to live with the fact that I killed myself, it would look like I just drove too fast,”

Madison paused. She noticed Carlie's hands were shaking and was surprised to see that her's were shaking too. "I'm going to take some Vicodin too. I have some left over from my knee surgery. That way I won't feel too much. Plus, it'd be easier to lose control. I wouldn't have a chance to back out. I know this sounds crazy, Car. Maybe it is. But truthfully, I don't think too many people would even care. I mean, sure they'd come to the funeral and would cry and stuff... but once that was over, I think I'd be over, too."

Carlie reminded herself to blink. Everything Madison told her from the beginning started racing through her mind. *"I hate it here."* *"Car accident."* *Cut wrists.* *"I can't do this anymore."* *"Asshole drunk of a father."* *"Wednesday."* *Knife.* *"Chris."* *"You won't understand."* *Blood.* *"I'd be over too."* She couldn't wrap her head around it all. Up until recently, she had thought they had lived more or less the same lives. Small town, close friends, lives that revolved around school and basketball and art and coffee. No matter how hard she tried or how fast she tried to process everything, Carlie couldn't figure out how two inseparable people could live essentially the same life and do the majority of the same things while one feels so helpless and the other was so happy. *Did I miss something? I should have been here.* She wasn't oblivious. Carlie knew Madison missed the way things used to be. She knew that Madison was depressed, but the fact that she had a date, time, and way of dying was not

what she had expected of her typically over-dramatic friend. Without saying a word, she reached her shaky hands into her bag and pulled out a crumpled post-it she'd been holding onto since she caught Madison with the knife a few weeks ago.

1. Suicide Hotline: 1-800-273-TALK
2. Dr. Max Grant: 761 - 6817
3. White Plains Hospital: 917-512-8182
4. Dr. Mary Blake: 725-1484 ext. 2551

"We're calling."

EIGHT

The Emergency Room at White Plains Hospital was swarming with sick people. People coughing, sneezing, bleeding, sleeping, crying, yelling. Spanish speaking families sat terrified waiting for an interpreter to come to their rescue. Mothers held their wailing infants. Old men held the hands of their beloved. Young husbands rubbed the backs of their wives, wondering if they really were ready to be fathers. A group of teenagers sat in a circle with their heads in their hands, praying their friend would pull through. Nurses ran back and forth as the receptionists handed out clipboard after clipboard of paperwork, constantly repeating that “a doctor will see you shortly.” Then there was Madison: no sniffing, no tears, no blood. Just a teenage girl sitting next to her mother. Priority? Definitely not.

“Ma, let’s just come back tomorrow. It’s crazy in here tonight.”

“You’ll be called in soon. Just relax,” Mrs. Ross said softly.

Relax?!

Mrs. Ross had agreed to take Madison to the hospital after Carlie called her and quickly explained what happened, without all the gory details. Her mother was skeptical at first, saying that Madison was just being dramatic. “I thought so, too,” she heard Carlie say on the phone while Madison was getting dressed, “but I really think she needs help.”

Madison's mind was racing. She replayed the night over and over again. She wished she didn't tell Carlie her plan, now it was ruined. She should have been braver, she should have just done it. *Fucking wuss.* Madison had gotten good at cutting since she was raped. It was the only thing she was in control over. She didn't make mistakes, she didn't cut too deep, she didn't show her scars. She was becoming a professional. Tonight was different, tonight her knife controlled her. *How could Carlie go out with Chris? What doesn't she get? She can't get it. She doesn't know.* Madison battled herself. Madison reached in her pocket and felt her pocket knife. *Soon. You'll be in control soon.*

"Madison Ross?"

Madison looked around, as if waiting to see if anyone else would jump up.

"Yeah, that's me." *Unfortunately.*

"You fill out those forms, honey?" asked the nurse decked out in light blue scrubs.

"Uh yeah," she said, taking the papers out of her mother's tiny, chubby hands. Madison remembered those same hands combing through her hair as she lay on her mother's lap. Those same hands that spanked her behind twice when she was little: once for telling her mom to "shush up!" and once for throwing a book across the library. Those same hands that would clean up any mess that Madison made over the past eighteen

years. *If only those hands could clean up the mess I got myself into this time.*

“Great. You can come back here and Dr. Stevens will be in shortly. She’s the psychologist on call tonight. She’ll decide where to go from here.”

How ‘bout we just go home.

Madison’s eyes dropped to the floor as she tried to zone in on her bright red shoelaces. “Okay.”

She sat on the rollaway hospital bed across from her mother. Mrs. Ross’s expression was blank. No words of comfort or scolding. No words at all. Madison held her left wrist with with her right hand, hoping that somehow, she could spare her mother the pain of being an eyewitness to the lines she had carved into her flesh. Dr. Stevens walked into the room, staring at her clipboard and immediately started asking questions:

“Name?”

“Madison Ross.”

“Birthday?”

“October 3, 1985.”

“Do you smoke, drink, or do any other illegal substances?”

“No.”

“Any history of mental illness?”

“No.”

“When did you first notice you were unhappy?”

“I dunno.”

“How about the suicidal thoughts, when did those start?”

September 24, 2003. “A few months ago.”

“What do you think sparked the problem?”

Chris. “Um... just changes I guess. Going away to school.”

“What do you do to relieve the pain? Ever cause yourself any physical pain?”

Please, please, please let my mother out of the room.

“Physical pain: cuts, burns, anything like that?”

I should have made Carlie take me.

Finally, Dr. Stevens looked up from her clipboard. She was young. Her light green eyes were hidden behind thick, brown glass frames. Her hair was a very light brown and she wore a tiny gold cross around her neck. She looked tired.

“Madison?”

Madison looked at her, wondering how she could just sit there and rattle off these questions like it was nothing; like this was not the hardest thing she’s ever done.

Dr. Stevens exhaled loudly and set her clipboard down on the desk. She was annoyed. She pushed her glasses up so they sat high up on her nose. “Madison. I know this is hard but I also know you wouldn’t be here

if you didn't want to get help or if someone else didn't want you to get help. I have to ask these questions so that we can get you the help you need."

Madison kept her eyes glued to her red shoelaces. *This isn't happening, this isn't happening, this isn't happening.*

"Okay," she said as she let out another loud exhale. "Let's start again. Hi Madison, I'm Dr. Stevens. How are you feeling?"

Madison raised her eyes to meet the doctor's and waited a little longer. "Been better."

Dr. Stevens smiled and nodded her head. "Fair enough. Want to tell me what happened? Why you're in here?"

Madison's eyes darted towards her mother. Mrs. Ross still wore that same blank stare. Dr. Stevens followed Madison's glance.

"Right. Mrs. Ross?"

She caught her mother off-guard. "Yes?"

"Mrs. Ross, I think it will be easier for everyone if I talk with Madison alone. Would you mind stepping back into the waiting room? I'll come and get you once we start talking about the next steps we're going to take."

Mrs. Ross looked at her daughter for the first time all night. Her eyes were shining as she searched for some sort of confirmation. Madison

met her gaze and nodded. *It's okay.* After she left, closing the door behind her, Dr. Stevens let out a deep breath.

“Alright, Madison. I need you to help me out here, okay?”

“Kay.”

“So, what happened?”

“I just didn't want to do it anymore.”

“Do what?”

“Live.”

“How were you going to fix that?”

“By not living.”

“Have you talked to anyone about this?”

“My best friend.”

“Did she help?”

“She called the hotline and made me talk to the woman on the phone. I don't know if she ‘helped’ exactly, but she's the reason this all became such a big deal. She's the reason I'm here.”

“Well, I'm glad you made it this far. Madison, I know these questions are difficult, but I need you to tell me the truth so I can help you. Now, have you caused yourself any pain?”

Madison pushed the left sleeve of her sweatshirt up above her elbow, exposing the many dark red lines and old scars.

“Have you cut anywhere else on your body?”

“My thighs, my stomach, sometimes my right arm but mostly my left.”

“Did you ever cut yourself to kill yourself?”

“Fuck no. That’d be too messy.”

“Any thoughts other than the car accident?”

“A few.”

“Any you feel like sharing?”

“No.”

“Alright, we’ll save that for another time then. We have a few options here. I can put you on medicine - antidepressants - that will relieve your anxiety and feelings of depression. I can also prescribe outpatient therapy. You would come in everyday for a while and talk to a counselor. During this, I would still put you on some medicine to make things easier for you. The other option, and the one I would most strongly recommend, is inpatient therapy. I could admit you into a hospital not far from here for intensive care. You’d attend therapy sessions there and be monitored. It is entirely up to you.”

“Um...” *Inpatient?!*

“The good thing about inpatient is that you aren’t alone. You’ll be with other people going through a similar hard time. You’ll also be able to relax and talk to all the right people. What I would like to do is place you in the hospital for three days. After that, you’ll be free to go. I would

like the doctors to observe you and for you to get a break from reality for a little while. It might be good for you to recharge a bit.”

“Yeah. I don’t know. Aren’t those places for like ... crazy people?”

Dr. Stevens smiled. “‘Crazy’ is all relative, Madison. If you think it will help you get better, it’s not a crazy idea at all.”

Mental hospital? Come on.

“Do you think it’s possible for you to get better being in the same place that made you like this?”

“I don’t know.”

“Madison, I can’t tell you what to do. But personally, if it was my life on the line, I would take that as a ‘no’.”

Fuck it.

“Alright.”

* * * * *

“Hey Chris,” Carlie said after he answered his cellphone. She knew he would answer before the second ring. “What are you doing?”

“Going to grab lunch with Jeremy, your old heartthrob,” Chris joked. “What’s up? Want to come?”

“Um...,” Carlie tried, but didn’t know what to say.

“Carlie?”

She begged herself not to cry.

“Car? I was just kidding. You alright?”

“Yeah...um...Madison was admitted into the hospital last night.”

“What?! What the fuck happened? Is she alright? Are you alright? Shit, Car. I’m coming over right now.”

“No. Just meet me at the park. I don’t want to freak my parents out.”

“Well you’re scaring the shit outta me. You okay to drive?”

“Just meet me there alright?”

Chris was leaning against the hood of his Audi when she pulled into the parking space next to his. He turned his Yankee hat around so the brim wouldn’t block his face. He looked worried. He pulled her into his chest and held her as she let herself cry for the first time. Carlie never let herself break down, especially not in front of anyone, but this was out of her control. Chris kissed the top of her head and rubbed her back slowly. He didn’t say anything until Carlie stopped sobbing.

“Alright Carlie, tell me what happened.”

“Madison is in the hospital,” she sniffled, her head still pressed against Chris’s chest. “Well, not like the hospital-hospital. There’s a mental institution in the town over, I guess. It’s next to White Plains Hospital. She was admitted last night. She was planning on killing herself.” I knew something was wrong. She’s been so different lately. I

know you guys don't really talk, but did you know something was wrong? Maybe she said something whenever you talked last?"

"No," Chris answered. "No, I didn't know anything was wrong. We haven't talked in months though, Carlie."

"I know, I know. I was just hoping. Did something happen between you two? Something bigger than just a high school break up?"

Chris grabbed both of Carlie's arms and held her away from his body. He looked in her big, green eyes. "Nothing big," he said convincingly. "We just drifted apart."

"Yeah, that's what I thought. She said you hurt her though," Carlie remembered, her voice trailing off.

"I think she knew I was in love with her best friend."

NINE

By the time Madison walked through the doors of the psychiatric ward, it was three in the morning and she was exhausted. It was bright in the hallway, but it was quiet, especially compared to the emergency room. Two female nurses led her into a small room that must once have been a closet.

“Empty your pockets, honey,” the heavysset light brown nurse said. “And your backpack, leave it here.”

“It has stuff for showering and bathrooms though, that’s all.”

Mrs. Ross had grabbed some toiletries from the hospital before then went to the psych division in the next building. Madison had thought that was a good idea. Apparently not.

“We have stuff for you. As you prove you’re not a danger, you get your stuff back. Just the way it is,” she said holding out a white plastic basket, shaking it slightly at Madison. “Everything in here.”

“Okay,” Madison was too tired to argue. She put the bag in the white basket, followed by her wallet, her cell phone, all of her earrings, her bracelets, her four silver rings, and lastly, her pocket knife. *Here we go.*

“Alright, now your clothes,” said the older white haired nurse.

“What about my clothes?”

“They have to come off, everything. We have to make sure you’re clean.”

“Clean of what?” Madison asked confused. “I showered this morning.”

“Let’s go, sweetie. It’s late,” the heavyset nurse said with a chuckle. “All your clothes in here. We have approved cottons and scrubs for you to wear. You can have your family drop off some sweatpants in the morning.”

Madison obeyed, cringing as the two women didn’t look away as she changed. Her deep red scars seemed to be glowing, yelling, *THIS IS WHY I’M HERE* over and over again. She grabbed the cotton underwear and scrubs from the older nurse and slid into them.

“Where does all my stuff go?”

“We keep it in the nurses station,” answered the older nurse as she wrote “Ross - 4” across the side. “Anything you need from here, come ask. If it’s allowed you’ll get it. Some things are only allowed under supervision, like floss. Some you can only use in the common room, like cards or iPods. You’ll see, you pick up on the rules fast.”

“Right. Okay.”

“Let’s get you to bed, sweetie. How’s the sound?” the heavyset nurse asked, guiding Madison down the hallway.

It was louder in the hallway now. Madison looked over her shoulder and realized why. Three male nurses were restraining a boy who couldn't be much older than fourteen. He was grunting, rolling back and forth trying to free himself. He was small, but by the looks of it, very strong.

“Jared!” one of the male nurses yelled calmly, “Jared. Enough. Calm down!”

To which Jared replied “How can I calm down when the cameras are all watching me?!”

Madison glanced at the ceiling. *Good point.*

The heavyset nurse led her to Room 4 and pointed, “Third bed, honey. Sleep tight.”

Madison walked into the dark room, squinting to see the empty bed. She made her way there and sat down. The clock on the wall read 3:50. She was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Madison woke up on Saturday morning to the sound of shuffling feet and running water in the bathroom. Keeping her face pressed to the pillow, she opened one eye slowly so as to hide the fact that she was awake. *Slide under the radar.* The shuffling feet belonged to a woman with brown and gray hair that sat on top of her head in a what could only be described as a bird's nest. She was a tiny person and wore blue scrubs, blue slippers, and an off-white knit sweater. She was pacing in front of

her bed. Two steps to the right, turn, two steps to the left. Repeat. The clock read 5:44. At 5:45 the bathroom door opened and a young girl stepped out.

“Hi Betsy,” the young girl said.

“It’s my turn.”

“Go ahead then, huh.”

“5:45. My turn.”

Betsy walked into the bathroom, shutting the door quickly. The young girl was thin. Her hair was long and blonde. Her skin pale. She pulled on a pair of black sweatpants over her bright green soccer shorts. Her sweatpants hung low on her hips. As she began pulling a gray sweatshirt over her head she looked in Madison’s direction. She closed her one open eye immediately.

“You better wake up.”

Don’t move.

“Breakfast is at 6 a.m. If you don’t get up now, you’ll be late.

You don’t want to be late.”

Slide under the radar.

“You can’t have your meds without your breakfast. Meds are at 6:30 a.m. They definitely don’t let you miss that.”

Shhh...

“Suit yourself.”

Betsy opened the bathroom door at 5:51 and walked out the door as the young girl followed behind. Madison lifted her head off of the pillow, completely unsure of herself. The young girl popped her head back in the room. Madison dove back into the flat pillow.

“I’m really not kidding, huh,” said the young girl. “They’ll make you get up if you don’t get up voluntarily. It’s better if you just go along with them.” *Slide under the radar.*

“You can ignore me all you want. It’s them you can’t ignore,” the young girl disappeared again. Madison waited to hear the door open and shut before she dared peer out from under the bedsheet. It didn’t take her long to realize that the sound she was waiting for would never come. After a minute, she risked it and looked towards the other end of the room. There was a bright light shining through the doorway, in which resided no door. *Of course.*

Madison wondered how serious the girl was about not being able to ignore “them.” She decided it was best not to find out. She rolled off the mattress, which was so uncomfortable it could hardly be described as a bed. She walked towards the bathroom dragging her slippared feet. She pulled back the curtain, because of course there was no door here either. She splashed water on her face and looked up, expecting to see a mirror, but there was none. *Right.* Madison briefly wondered where the shower was, made a mental note to ask a nurse about that, and walked out into the

much-too-bright hallway. She walked to the nurses station at the end of the long hallway and asked where she should go for breakfast.

In the cafeteria, Madison groggily followed the line of patients, copying their every move: Tray, plate, fork, spoon, scrambled eggs, toast with butter, fruit cup, paper coffee cup, coffee that was more light brown than black, milk, sugar, find a seat. Madison sat down at a small round table in the back corner, hoping to be left alone. Aside from an older black man who nodded as he pulled out a chair across from Madison and sat down, no one joined her. She didn't mind the older black man. He didn't say a word.

After she ate, Madison walked quickly past the nurse's station where everyone was lining up for their morning meds. *Slide under the radar.* She ducked into her room.

"Have you decided that I'm not a bad guy yet?" said the girl, flopping onto her mattress.

Madison didn't look up from her sketch book.

"Seriously? This is going to be a long stint in here if you stay silent, ya know," she said, cracking a piece of gum with her tongue. "Here are some tips: keep the truth to yourself, never miss a meal, and don't talk to the old lady with the Donald Duck slippers."

Madison noticed a familiarity in the voice of this girl. She had a very matter-of-fact and calm way of speaking. *Carlie.* She wished Carlie

was here now. She'd know what to do. She wondered what Carlie was doing right now. Was she with Chris? Would she visit or be too freaked out. Of course she'd visit. That was Carlie, she wasn't afraid of anything and she was loyal to a fault. She'd be here. Madison made a mental note to call her and ask her to bring sweatpants and continued sketching in her notebook. She was given a marble notebook and crayons when she arrived under her mother's request to let her take her sketchbook and pencil into the hospital. "No sketchbooks because of the wire spiral and no pencils, too sharp," she was told. "But we have approved methods she can use." Madison had never been more thankful to her mother. She didn't know what she'd do without her art. It was the only comfort she could ever find.

Across the room, the girl was lying on the mattress on her back, stretching her long legs over her head one at a time, cracking her gum the whole time. It was obvious she had no plans on leaving Madison alone. Madison peered over her notebook through her dark framed glasses, wondering what she was here for. She seemed happy, Madison thought, she's probably a basketcase. *Slide under the radar.* As if the girl could read her mind, she turned toward Madison without warning and caught her eyes.

"It's weird, huh? Being here? Look at you, you can't even stand the silent treatment yourself. Go ahead, ask. What did I do? How crazy

am I? Go ahead. Ask. I don't bite. Well, not other people at least," the girl said with a grin.

"I was just wondering if I could have a piece of gum," Madison managed quietly as she adjusted her thick black frames.

"A rebel on your first day, huh? I like it!"

"What?"

"Gum isn't allowed. Nothing is allowed. Come on, you must have figured that out by now, huh?"

"Oh," Madison said sheepishly, looking back down at her notebook. "Right." *Stupid, stupid. Keep your mouth shut!*

"Hey now, don't look away like that. I didn't say no, did I? I was just impressed is all," she said tossing a small, white square onto Madison's mattress. "If you get caught, you better not rat me out, huh? One of the security guards gave it to me. I'll show you the easy ones if you want. It's amazing what men will do for a blowie, huh? Amazing."

Madison quickly came to the conclusion that she didn't belong here and also that if she wanted to survive in here, she had better start figuring out who was a good guy and who was a bad guy. This girl, she decided, was a good guy parading under bad guy pretenses. *Survival mode*. She felt the girl's eyes on her as she reached for the white square.

"Thanks."

"Oh don't mention it. I'm Kelly, by the way."

“Madison.”

“Nice to meet ya, welcome to the cage.

TEN

The first group session she went to was on her third day there. This, she learned, was because she got admitted on Saturday and nothing was scheduled on the weekends. She hadn't even spoken to a therapist yet. It would all change on Monday, she was promised. Whether that was a good thing or not was to still be determined. Madison sat in between a very old man and a very fat woman and across from a girl with bandages starting from her right wrist up past her elbow. She didn't recognize these faces. She wondered if they were even newer than her or if she just hadn't seen them. It seemed hard to believe she could have missed any of these people.

A stout middle-aged woman with short red hair wearing a brown business suit walked into the room. She sat in an empty seat next to the girl with bandages.

“Good morning, everyone,” she said scanning the room. “I see two new faces today. Glad you could both meet with us this morning. I’m Dr. Brill, but in order to keep this space feeling safe and comfortable, please feel free to call me Melissa.”

Madison was surprised by the doctor's name. She thought she looked like a Pat or a Joan, but definitely not a Melissa. Madison looked at the other unlucky individuals that made up her peers and decided that the bandaged girl was the other new face, partially because of the

bandages and partially because she was staring at the floor, clearly wishing she was anywhere else. *Everywhere else.*

“Let’s start with our veterans before breaking in our newbies,” Melissa Brill said with a smile. “Thomas, could you start us off with a little introduction?”

“Oh sure,” Thomas began slowly. “That’s no problem for me.” Madison thought he sounded uncannily like Eeyore.

“I’m Thomas, not Tom. I’ve been here for twelve days now, hoping to leave on Tuesday. I have two daughters, one son, and four grandchildren. I’ve been married to lovely Louise for thirty-seven years. We have a beautiful house in Hastings, right on the Hudson River. I am an electrician by trade and I’ve always loved my job. From the outside looking in, I have it all. But from the outside looking in, you wouldn’t know that I had originally had two sons. Tom, my oldest, was killed by a drunk driver four years ago. I could talk for hours about the anger I have since then and I could tell you all about how I got fired from my job because I couldn’t bring myself to get out of bed anymore. I could also tell you that his death has only caused me to push away my wife and my children, which admittedly did surprise me. You’d think I’d want to keep them all closer, but that’s not the case. I could make you feel sorry for me, but I won’t. I’ll tell you instead that being in here has made me miss my wife. It has made me regret the past four years and realize that I

barely know my grandchildren. It has made me hate the sadness in my children's voices when they have called, and it's made me realize that their sadness is my fault. It has also made me realize that I can stop that sadness and I can get to know my grandchildren still."

Thomas looked around the room, slowly. His story had taken about fifteen minutes so far, but there was something soothing about his painfully slow voice. Madison didn't pity him, they were all here because they had sad stories, and that is all this was to her, another story.

"I'm still angry," Thomas continued, "but I've decided I'm going to use my anger to live my life, not end it."

Melissa smiled gently, "Thank you, Thomas."

Thomas nodded.

Madison scanned the room. Her peers were looking at Thomas with tilted heads. Pity. She was angry and skeptical. This place gave him a new outlook on life? She doubted that. Time away, time to breathe, sure, Madison reasoned. But this hospital? No way. She was annoyed at the responses. The watery eyes, the nodding heads, the soft gasps. It all sounded fake. Madison had learned that people didn't actually care about other people, not really. People befriended other people to make themselves feel better, not to help each other.

Melissa began talking about how far Thomas has come in the past twelve days and how hopeful she is for him. “He has a long happy life ahead of him,” she began, “Let’s give Thomas a round of applause.”

Everyone clapped. Madison got up and walked out of the room. She passed the nursing station, then the community room, and walked into her room. To her surprise, it was not empty.

“Excuse me,” Madison said angrily grabbing her sweatshirt from the orderly, “that’s my stuff!”

The sweatshirt she was wearing when she got here, minus the string in the hood, was the only thing she was allowed to keep with her. Everything else was taken and labeled as “sharps,” which Madison learned was a way of referring to items that could be dangerous to an inpatient.

“Room check, ma’am,” the man who had been holding her sweatpants said. He gently took them back from her and began checking the pockets.

“What’s a room check?”

“Every day we check the dressers, bathrooms, and beds for contraband. Random times. It’s just the rules.”

God this place really is a prison. Madison took her marble notebook and walked out of the room. She wanted to be alone but there was nowhere to go. She was trapped. She wandered into the community room.

Four people were in the community room. Two were playing Jenga, two were watching Maury. Madison hated talk shows. She chose a loveseat facing the window in the back of the room and began sketching the world outside. It seemed so far away. Madison felt like she had been in here for weeks, but it hadn't even been 72 hours.

She felt someone standing over her and looked up from her sketchbook.

"You're in my seat," said the large Asian boy standing over her. His voice was deep and he wore no emotion on his face.

"I didn't know," Madison replied. *Are you kidding me?*

"Now you do."

"Right," Madison said getting up. "Any other seats off limits?"

If he heard her, he ignored her. He slumped down lazily, tossing his big legs onto the ottoman, and stared out the window.

"You're welcome," Madison mumbled, walking out of the community room.

"Where do you think you're off to, huh?" Kelly asked, stopping her in the hallway.

"The room. I got kicked out of my seat," Madison said angrily.

"What? By who?"

Madison pointed to the large Asian.

“Oh Alex? He’s harmless. Come on,” Kelly encouraged, pulling Madison’s arm back into the community room. *Chris was harmless.*

Kelly the roommate introduced Madison to Alex the large Asian, then Betsy the crazy hair lady, the man who crawls and never walks, Jimmy the soldier, and Jared the teenage boy who swore cameras were everywhere. Madison was overwhelmed after meeting so many people. She walked towards her room, wondering when her mom would come visit. She said she would as soon as possible, but Madison knew that she couldn’t have visitors until after she was evaluated by a doctor. She saw the outgoing call phone at the far end of the hallway and made a mental note to phone home later. As she got to her room, a nurse walked out of it.

“Oh there you are, Madison. It’s time for your meeting with Dr. Ruckles.”

“No thanks, I went to a meeting today. I’ll pass.”

“You don’t have a choice in the matter, honey. It’s time for your meeting now. It’s more of a checkup.”

“All of my bloodwork was taken when I got here.”

“This one is a mental checkup. Follow me.”

Great.

Dr. Ruckles was a tall, skinny man with short spiky brown hair. He couldn’t be much older than twenty-five. He didn’t look up as Madison

walked into the room. *Why is everyone so rude here? They know we're suicidal in here right?*

“Madison Ross is here to see you, Dr. Ruckles.”

“Last night?”

“Saturday, sir. Admitted at 3 a.m.”

“Thanks,” he said, taking a file from the nurse. “Sit please,” he said to Madison, opening her file.

The nurse left, closing the door behind her. Madison was trapped yet again. Dr. Ruckles leaned back in his chair, making eye contact with Madison.

“Let’s start with the easy stuff. You’ve been here a few days it sounds like. Hope you’ve settled in just fine. How ya doing?”

“Good.”

“That’s probably the first lie you’re going to tell me. How have you slept?”

“Not bad. Not great.”

“Did you have breakfast today?”

“Yes.”

“Was it good?”

“No.”

“Okay, now we’re starting to tell the truth,” Dr. Ruckles said with a smile. “I’m not the bad guy here, okay? I could make life in here very

easy, or it can be very hard. It's up to you, really. Are you happy to be here?"

"No." *Chris. Carlie. Fuck.*

"Well then that's where we'll start." Dr. Ruckles punched the letters on his keyboard. "Has anyone explained what your days will look like in here?"

"Not really."

"Figures," he said with a sigh. "So after you meet with me today, you have to go straight to the nurses station. You'll visit there twice a day, once for your daily meds and once for your night meds."

Madison was confused. "I'm not on any meds."

"You are now. After that, you have lunch followed by group activity in the activity room. Then a small group therapy in Room 345 with three other people. Then you have what we like to call Positive Presenting. Sometimes it's a patient who has made significant progress, sometimes it's an outside lecturer. Today it's an outsider. Should be a nice presentation. Then you have dinner, followed by an activity of your choice. *Oh my choice, how lovely.* You can chose art, music, yoga, library, and there are a few other ones I'm forgetting right now. *Art. There is a God.* Then you take your night meds and go off to bed. You'll be put on the job schedule and you'll be expected to do whatever job

you're assigned. You should see your name on the chart next to the nurses station tomorrow morning. Do you have any questions?"

"What if I don't go to these things?"

"You're going to have to if you ever want to get out of here," Dr. Ruckles said honestly. "This isn't supposed to be vacation, we're trying to get you back on track."

That's assuming I was on track in the first place. "Can I go outside? I like to walk around. Or play games in the common room like the other people?"

"You can't go outside until you earn it. Follow the rules for a few days, do your jobs and we'll talk about it again. As far as games, whenever there is an unscheduled block of time or an activity is canceled, you can have some leisure time in the common room, but again, that is a privilege. If you abuse your privileges, you lose them."

Rules. Trapped. "Kay."

"Well then we're all done here, it seems. Unless there are any other questions?"

"No," Madison said, standing up. "Oh. Wait. What medicines am I on?"

"Oh just something to keep you calm and to help you sleep. Nothing too strong. Sound good?"

No. “Sure,” Madison said walking out of Dr. Ruckles’ office. She made a mental note to ask Kelly about the meds.

ELEVEN

On the way to White Plains Psychiatric Hospital Carlie felt out of control. She had no idea what to expect or what she would do when she got there. She had only talked to Madison on the phone once and she didn't sound great. Who knew how she'd react when she saw her in person. Carlie hoped she wasn't mad, but if she was, who could blame her? Carlie reminded herself that she was trying to save Madison's life, but she knew that Madison didn't want her too. She shook her head. *Be positive.*

Carlie pulled onto the long, narrow, winding road leading out of the center of the city and into a silent, serene, isolated place. Trees lined the road, the bright green lawn perfectly trimmed. *How could I not have even known this place existed?* Carlie parked the car in front of the giant brick mansion. *No way it can be a psych ward.* She looked in the mirror and tried to convince herself that she didn't look like she'd been crying for the past seventy-two hours. *If you cry, she'll cry.* Putting on a confident front, she grabbed the back packed with sweats, socks and underwear she brought for Madison, walked inside to a group of people surprisingly cheerful. She asked the woman standing at the desk where block D was. *Right, straight, left, elevator, 3rd floor, can't miss it.* She walked down the wide hallways on the green, red, and gold carpets, passing table and chair sets made of mahogany wood and covered in a deep red velvet.

Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceilings. She got to the 3rd floor and immediately noticed the difference. Colorful carpets turned to white tile floors, crystal chandeliers became overhead fluorescent lights, and instead of inviting mahogany furniture, Carlie found herself standing right in front of the biggest, blackest, scariest door she's ever seen. *Shit.* She looked around for instructions on how to enter. In place of a window, there was a sliding door behind bars. Carlie found the doorbell with a sign next to it that said "ring once." Immediately after her shaky finger pressed the black button, a man slid the little slot in the door open, his bulging eyes interrogating her.

"Who you here to see?"

"Madison Ross, please?"

"Name?"

"Carlie James."

"Aight hold up."

Slowly, the large, metal door opened. *This is right out of a fucking movie.* The walls were white, the floors were white, the nurse's uniforms were white, the beds she passed she walked down the hallway... white. The man guided Carlie to the waiting room and held a plastic container in front of her. She looked at him, his white uniform glowing against his black skin, the florescent lights bouncing off of his bald head.

"Everything in here, princess," he said, handing her the container.

“Like my wallet and stuff?”

“Like yo’ everything. Hair clips, belt, shoelaces. We don’t like to take risks ‘round here, aight?”

“Oh. Right.” Carlie slid her sneakers off and tugged her belt free. She placed everything in the container. She had brought a deck of cards because she knew Madison could never turn down a game of Rummy, but the big, black, bald man wouldn’t let her bring them in. He said when they were ready to play, she could come get them. He went to get Madison.

Carlie noticed Madison first. Hair in a messy bun as always, blue scrubs, white t-shirt. Carlie felt her eyes shift to Madison’s wrists. Here, bracelets weren't worn to hide the scars.

"Carlie? Hey. I didn't know you were coming today."

“Hey Mad,” Carlie pulled her best friend in for the hug she had grown so accustomed to. "I got your voicemail about the extra clothes. I tried coming Saturday but they said you couldn’t have visitors yet. How ya doin'? You look ... normal."

She did try to get here. "Yeah, well, apparently looks really aren’t everything," Madison said, pulling away from Carlie with a smirk. “But really, I thought my parents were coming today.”

"I did too, but your mom called me this morning. Said they couldn’t make it.”

"Oh."

"Your dad had a meeting he couldn't get out of. I'm sure they'll be here as soon as they can," Carlie tried, wishing she was a better liar.

"Right. Sure," Madison said, her eyes glued to the floor. "Better off he doesn't come anyway. Fuck that guy."

"They'll be here, Mad. Well, your mom will be here I'm sure," Carlie said, desperately wanting to change the subject.

"Whatever. You're here, that's all the matters. Wanna see my room?" Madison asked excitedly.

She said "my room" like it was something to brag about. Carlie watched her best friend wave to too many people as they walked down the hallway side by side, as if they were back in high school. In high school, it was Carlie everyone waved to. Carlie the 5'11" starting center on the Varsity Basketball Team and Captain of the Varsity Swim Team with Madison always sticking faithfully by her side. Here, it was different. Here, Madison was shining with or without Carlie by her side.

"You met a lot of people here already, huh?"

"A few. We have group sessions every morning which makes it impossible to avoid meeting the new kids. Plus I can't go anywhere except the common room, so I really don't have much of a choice."

Madison opened the door with the number four on it and Carlie followed her inside. There were three twin beds in the room, each on a

simple metal frame hugged with white linens. Next to each bed was a small table and a reading light. Madison sat on the third bed, her bed. Carlie sat down next to her, noticing the schedule on her night stand. Every minute of Madison's day was planned out starting with breakfast at 6 am and ending with quiet hours at 9:00pm. The reality of the situation struck Carlie, a chill overtook her body. The room was bare, as if no one actually slept here let alone three people.

“You can't have pictures of anything around? Like stuff from home?” Carlie asked Madison.

“Nah, they say there's no way to know the true root of a person's issues unless they are completely free from their regular lives. Photos and notes and stuff just bring up good memories usually, making it tricky to distinguish what might have been bad.”

“Makes sense,” Carlie responded, folding her legs underneath her.

“Plus, the creativity in here is amazing. People will try to kill themselves with anything. I think they stay away from hanging pictures or photographs to avoid, I don't know, suicide by art?” Madison laughed at her own joke, Carlie didn't.

The bathroom door opened, making Carlie jump. A woman shuffled out, closing the door behind her. Her eyes darted from Madison to Carlie and back. The nest of hair rocked back and forth on top of her head.

“Hey Betsy.”

“One, two, three beds. One, two, three people. Three. One, two, three,” Betsy repeated softly to herself. She shuffled towards the first bed, her bed, then back towards the bathroom door, not daring to sit down.

“Betsy. This is my friend, Carlie. She came to visit me,” Madison said loudly. She spoke slowly and clearly.

Carlie remembered Madison speaking to her grandmother in the same manner. Loud, slow, clear, precise. Madison’s grandmother had passed away two years before. She and Madison had been very close. Carlie remembered Madison telling her stories whenever she got back from visiting her grandmother in the nursing home. *“She’s crazy, Car. Bat-shit-fucking-crazy. I love her though and she knows it. God, I don’t ever want to get that old. Age does some nutty shit to the brain, I’m sure of it.”* Madison would tell Carlie about the stories from her grandmother’s childhood, the only memories her grandmother was certain of. Madison would hold her grandmother’s bony hands, reassuring the frail old woman that she was right there, listening.

“Say hi,” Madison whispered sternly, nudging Carlie.

“Oh. Right,” Carlie stuttered. Betsy scared Carlie, a ridiculous fear being that her own roommate was a very sane eighteen year old girl who’s biggest stressor was figuring out how to write a paper due at

midnight while simultaneously participating in a beer pong tournament.

“Hi. I’m Carlie.”

Betsy wasn’t satisfied. “One, two, three. Betsy, Madison, Kelly. One, two, three. Three.”

“Okay, Betsy. We’re leaving. Okay? We’re going to leave right now,” Madison said slowly standing up. She tugged at Carlie’s t-shirt, “Come on.”

Carlie followed Madison out of room number four and into the community center. The community center wasn’t white like everything else. It mimicked the deep green and red covered hallways Carlie had walked through to get to block D. The chairs were covered in velvet with big pillows engulfing whoever sat in them.

Alex the oversized Asian boy was sprawled out on one of the dark green couches watching Cartoon Network on the flat screen television as if he was home alone. He didn’t notice the two girls walk in, nor did the man rocking himself back and forth in a ball on the floor, or the two women sitting at a table together without saying a word. Madison led Carlie to the chairs in front of a bookshelf that spanned the length of the room.

“It’s really not too bad here, I swear. I mean, the first night was pretty terrifying, but you get used to it pretty quick. The doctors are all really nice and they give us medicine three times a day to keep us calm,

which is probably a good idea. There's this girl here, Kelly, she's my other roommate. This is her seventh trip to a place like this. Apparently she tried to kill herself a few times and she's crazy anorexic. She told me that if I just put the pills under my tongue they won't notice and I can save them. I won't do that though, don't worry. Jesus Carlie, I'm telling you... some of the people in here are nuts."

Carlie forced a smile. *How the hell am I supposed to respond to that? I am in a psychiatric ward for godssake. Being "nuts" is a prerequisite to getting admitted.* Madison didn't wait for a response. She told Carlie about the different doctors she was seeing, the ones who made her talk a lot and the ones that didn't. She explained that she had a new diet regiment to follow, which was exciting because "who doesn't want their own nutritionist?!" As Madison talked, Carlie's mind was on everything but what she was saying. Carlie thought about how normal she seemed and how positive she was. *It's like the whole I'm-going-to-kill-myself thing never even happened. Maybe it's the meds.*

When Madison finally stopped talking, the girls eyes met. It was the first time since she arrived that Carlie actually saw Madison. Past the white walls, past the positive tones, past the big smile. Madison was still in there, and she was terrified.

"Mad, I am so sorry."

"I know."

“I just didn’t know what else to do. I thought calling the hotline would get you on the right track, I couldn’t risk not calling. I couldn’t risk losing you.”

“I know.”

“I never wanted this to happen.”

“I know.”

“I just want you to be okay, Madison. I love you so much.”

Madison kept her eyes locked on Carlie, neither girl daring to look away.

“I know that, too.”

TWELVE

Carlie stood in the store in the center of campus waiting for her coffee. It was 5:00 pm on a Thursday. She looked down at her cell phone and saw that she had two missed calls from Madison at the hospital, one from Chris, and a text from Jordan that said “with rob getting beer. 230’s for tonight? see ya later ;)” The only one she responded to was Jordan’s: “awesome. can’t wait :)” She paid for her coffee and turned to see Janelle walking around the corner with a smile on her face. She always had a smile on her face, even when she was walking alone. Janelle bounced over to the coffee stand as soon as she caught Carlie’s eye and Carlie couldn’t help but laugh at her bubbly friend.

“Hey, Car!”

“What’s up, girl?”

“Just got out of Steinberg's class. He’s an asshole.”

“What’d he do now?”

“Oh ya know... the usual. I have a 15 page paper due on Monday on a topic that I swear he never once taught.”

Carlie couldn’t help but laugh at Janelle’s misery. “Oh man,” she said in between laughs, “I’m sorry. So I guess you’re spending the weekend in the library?”

“Umm definitely. Well, right after we get our drink on.”

“Obviously,” Carlie said with a smirk.

“What are the boys up to?”

“I just got a text from Jordan. He and Robbie were getting two thirties of Busch Light. I told him that was good. I’m sure you have a liter of Captain Morgan too, right? So we should be set.”

“Awesome. Of course I do. Are the guys upstairs all around tonight?”

“Yeah except for Tim. He’s at his girlfriend’s tonight.”

“Jaime right? Where does she go again?” Janelle asked. She never remembered anyone’s name.

“Somewhere in Vermont. I don’t remember which school.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Wanna grab dinner before we go?”

“Yeah for sure.”

“Perfect. Lemme just change real quick.”

“Yep, I have to grab a notebook from the bookstore and then jump in the shower anyway. I’ll be in your room in like an hour then we’ll go. Cool?”

“Cool. See ya!” Janelle said with a smile, walking towards their dorm.

The girls did this often. Often as in daily. Classes, complained about classes, planned out what to drink, sent the boys out to get alcohol, went to dinner, went upstairs to the boys’ room, drank. Drank a lot. It

never got old though. The drinking or the complaining or the dinners in the cafeteria. Not once.

Carlie walked back to her room and jumped in the shower. She let the steaming hot water pour over her as she cracked the purple plastic casing of her disposable razor opened. She yanked one blade free from its setting, only slicing her thumb once in the process. She gripped it tightly between her thumb and pointer finger. The blade glistened when the water hit it, making it look almost magical. Carlie pressed the blade against her right forearm and made two swift cuts, deep enough to break the skin but not deep enough to cut any major veins. Then she pressed the blade against the left side of her stomach and made the same markings. She moved methodically and purposefully. She let the blood roll down her body, mixing with the water as she watched it disappear down the drain. *Still nothing.* It was like a science experiment gone bad. A daily test to see if she could feel again. Shower, cut, rinse, repeat. She dried herself off, carefully blotting her fresh wounds with toilet paper, then walked back to her room.

Carlie secretly prided herself on being prepared to ward off the urges. She could never keep them at bay too long, but she was usually able to make them wait. Once in awhile, they would catch her by surprise. Those were the worst episodes. If her urges surprised her, she was unable to be in public, which was unfortunate because most of the time, she was.

She would have to find something small and sharp to press into her thighs or hands, not to draw blood, just to feel in control. She would find a bathroom to focus on breathing in. She splashed water on her face. She continued to take deep breaths. When she had calmed down enough, she would return to whoever she was with and make up a reason that she had to leave - a headache, a stomach ache, bad news from home - and then she would find the quickest route to homebase. After too many of these episodes, Carlie learned to carry a small source of pain with her. She learned to never go anywhere without a bottle cap in her pocket. More often than not, Carlie would find herself pressing the bottle cap into her left hand with her right one, making imprints in her palm.

The first time Carlie cut herself was the first time she ignored a phone call from Madison. She didn't know why she ignored her or why she cut herself. Was she curious? Jealous? Trying to understand? Or was it completely unrelated to Madison? Carlie had no idea. But she did know that the first time she did it, the rush was like nothing she had ever experienced. She hadn't expected that. She also hadn't expected the cravings that would come along with it, or the empty feeling that overtook her when she wasn't cutting, and she certainly didn't expect she'd become addicted to it. But she had, and the one person who might possibly understand was the one person she would never tell.

Carlie checked the time on her cell phone. She had to be at Janelle's room in 20 minutes. She threw her hair up into a bun, pulled on a pair of jeans, and carefully chose a shirt that had sleeves long enough to hide any potentially revealing scars. She placed a pack of cigarettes in one of her back pockets and her iPhone in the other. She looked at the I.M.s flashing on her computer screen and closed her laptop with a sigh. Tomorrow. She'd call Madison tomorrow.

After dinner, the girls made their way to Jordan and Robbie's room where the boys had already started drinking. Their night started off with a quiet game of "kings" and ended with loud music, belligerency, a Domino's delivery, and a write up from the R.A. on duty. Various friends coupled off for the night; some repeating past drunken nights, others adding another hook up to his or her "list." As usual, Janelle spent the night in Robbie's room and Jordan spent the night in Carlie's.

"Hey Car, what are we doing?"

"If you don't know, then I don't think I want to do it anymore..."

Carlie answered in her sarcastic manner.

"You're such a bitch," Jordan said playfully, "I mean this. Us."

"Jord, can we please not get into this now. This always happens."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. I just... ah forget it."

Carlie propped herself up on her pillow. "You just... what?"

“Like we do this all the time. Like every night and every day. But you know as well as I do that I have a girlfriend and you have a boyfriend. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“It makes me feel like shit, I’m not gonna lie. Well, no,” Carlie quickly corrected herself, “we don’t make me feel like shit, but the fact that we’re a ‘we’ at school, but nowhere else definitely sucks.”

“I know. I’m going to break things off with her.”

“With Ashlee?”

“Yes,” Jordan answered definitively. “Even if we keep saying that we’re nothing, we’re definitely something.”

“I know.”

“I’m not going to make you commit or anything like that, but if we keep doing what we’re doing, I can’t keep lying to her.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” he said as he took a deep breath. “Yeah, I am.”

He cupped her face in his hand and tilted her chin up towards him. He looked into her large green eyes that he was quickly learning how to read and kissed her. He kissed her in a way that no one had before and she loved it.

THIRTEEN

“Good luck, Madison. I hope I never see you again.”

“Ditto, Doc,” she answered in the positive tone she learned in here.

“Thanks for everything. Really.”

Madison walked out of her home for the past three weeks and sat in the front seat of her mom’s car. She kissed her mom on the cheek and turned the radio on. Music stopped the silence from being awkward. She looked down at her phone, still nothing. Madison looked out the window and thought about her “best friend.” It was fascinating to watch “forever” turn into just a few days. She checked her phone, still nothing.

“Have you talked to anyone lately? Carlie?” her mother broke the silence.

“Not since the last time she came to visit.”

“When was that?”

“Sixteen days ago.” *But who’s counting.*

“Oh, well I’m sure she had to get back to school. Have you talked to her on the phone?”

“A few times.”

“Well that’s good. Do you want to grab a slice of pizza before we go home? Or anything else?”

“No thanks.”

Madison knew her mom was trying, but after a few weeks of fitting in, she could not help but feel like she was completely standing out. There was no more routine, no more white walls, no more familiar faces, no more comparing stories, no more empathizing. Out here, people either pitied you or forgot about you. Madison wasn't sure which one was worse.

She went straight up to her room and closed the door. She heard her father ask her mom what was wrong. "She just needs some time alone to settle in," her mom had explained.

"Time alone? She's been alone for about three weeks now," was her father's tender reply. *Asshole.*

In her room, Madison lay on her very comfortable bed she had missed so much and stared at the ceiling. She reflected on the past three weeks. She found herself missing the comfort of feeling normal and the safety in the routine she had hated just a few hours earlier. She went over ways she could have made her stay in the psych ward last a bit longer. Kelly had taught her so many tricks and she had only scratched the surface of them. *Hide the pills under your tongue. Don't ask any of the nurses for access to your sharps except for Danny, he'll do anything if he thinks you'll sleep with him. Don't sleep with Danny. Always say you're feeling better. Learn how to smile on purpose. Not like that, like this. Better. How are you feeling? Much better. Perfect.* Where were the tricks to

surviving life outside of the white walls, Madison wondered. She let herself think that Carlie had figured them out and considered calling her. Then she remembered: Carlie had nothing to figure out, her life was perfect, and she probably wouldn't answer her phone call anyway.

Against her better judgement, Madison did something she promised herself she wouldn't. With two clicks of her mouse, Madison was on the internet and looking into the lives of all of her "best friends." Facebook: the most dangerous thing invented for someone who had just lost everyone. Before she could stop herself, she was clicking through photos taken of Carlie over the past few months. Carlie had never looked happier. She was surrounded by people, drinks in hand, laughing. She was laughing in almost every picture. She was always next to a guy that Facebook dubbed Jordan McAffre. To her pleasant surprise, Madison didn't see Chris in any of these pictures. Madison didn't know how to feel. Happy that Carlie was happy, pissed that Carlie was happy, angry that Carlie couldn't be happy and a good friend at the same time. She chose none of the above. She knew she should be focusing on herself, not Carlie. She should be focused on the positives. Madison was alive. She was home and healthy and alive.

Madison was home for twenty six days before she carried out her plan. She did everything she said she would. Taconic Parkway, by the

reservoir, at three in the morning, and they found traces of Vicodin in her system. The town of Mayville was shocked. Carlie was not.

FOURTEEN

At the wake, flowers and photos covered the wall. As Carlie walked through the big brown doors, she felt all the eyes on her. *They don't know we haven't talked in weeks.* She walked slowly towards the casket. She saw people reaching out to touch her arm, but if they had made contact, she didn't feel it. She saw lips moving and assumed they were offering their condolences, but she didn't hear a word. She paused at the large collages, posters of Madison's 18 years on earth. Carlie was in at least 50 percent of the photographs. This struck her as odd at first, surely Madison's mom had known that they hadn't spoken. But then she realized Madison's mom probably didn't have too many pictures of her without Carlie in them. Carlie had forgotten what Madison's smile used to look like. She stared at the most recent photograph of Madison, eight months earlier, at Carlie's college send-off party. Madison was hugging Carlie as tight as she could, both girls were laughing. She felt Madison's hug, she smelled her green apple shampoo. She forced herself to look away. Carlie walked towards the casket. Madison's father was standing there, crying, with his arm around her mother. *Madison would hate that you're here, you piece of shit.* She looked up towards the ceiling. She heard Madison's laugh. Then, Carlie fell to her knees, sobbing.

After the service, Carlie walked out of the church and took a deep breath. Louie and Jack tried guiding her to her car, but Carlie decided to

walk home. It was cold, but she didn't care. She couldn't stand the looks. Carlie walked to the park she and Madison used to go sleigh riding in when they were little. She looked around. It was so much smaller than she remembered. Everything was always smaller than she imagined. She wondered if Madison's problems were smaller than she imagined, too.

If maybe there was another solution that she had never thought of. Carlie remembered Madison's laugh again. She climbed the red metal ladder and sat inside the blue plastic house on top of that playground. *I just don't want to do it anymore. Do what, Mad? Live.* She heard those words on repeat as minutes turned to hours. She closed her eyes. *I'm so sorry, Madison. I'm so, so sorry.* When she opened them it was pitch black out, she was freezing, icicles had formed on her eyelashes from tears.

She rolled up her sleeves and looked down at her own scars. *Never again.*

25 and Single

Yes, I am 25 and single and no, I don't have any plans on finding someone to settle down with. I mean, if it happens, it happens. But until then I won't be searching for the love of my life at a coffee shop nor will I be downloading every single online dating app onto my iPhone. I'm 25 and single. And really, it's not as bad as everyone thinks. You'll want to know why I'm single I take it because well, everyone always wants to know why. Yes, everyone. This is how the conversation usually goes: "So where's your boyfriend tonight?" "I don't have one." "You don't?!" "Nope." "Why not? A pretty girl like you, surely you are beating boys off with a stick!" For the record, never in my life have I had to beat anybody off of anything. Not once.

Anyway, I'll tell you why I'm 25 and single because maybe you'll understand and we can avoid the typical conversation I always find myself having. The reason I'm 25 and single is because of my alcoholic ex-boyfriend. My alcoholic ex-boyfriend and I dated for a while when I lived in Colorado. I moved to Colorado in January of 2010. I was 23. I met him at the restaurant I worked at in February and we started dating in March. I'm sorry to admit that we didn't break up until June. I don't know why it took me so long. My alcoholic ex-boyfriend wasn't cute. He wasn't smart or a really hard worker. He didn't have a great body, he didn't drive, and he was definitely not romantic. He was losing his hair

and had an eyebrow ring and a nose ring. He was thirty years old. I know you're wondering why we even started dating in the first place. Truth is, I couldn't tell you. I think I just wanted to be with someone. I was a New Yorker in Colorado who didn't know a soul. Plus, I didn't know my alcoholic ex-boyfriend was in fact an alcoholic until after we started dating and by then, it was too late to turn back. My alcoholic ex-boyfriend had a strange name, too. His name was Gofried. He said it meant "peaceful god" in German. How ironic.

Four nights a week, Gofried and I would work together then I'd drive us back to his apartment (which was never clean) and we'd hang out, watch movies, and drink. I was partial to red wine at the time, so we would always have a box of that and a handle of Jose Cuervo ready to go. Classy, I know. We'd open the back door that led to his balcony even though it was freezing, sit on the couch carefully avoiding the far left cushion because there was a spring poking out, smoke cigarette after cigarette, watch one bad movie after another as the cats walked all over us. Oh yeah, he was a cat man. He had two cats which he named Joey and Chandler after the television show Friends. Friends, to this day, is my all time favorite TV show, but I've never once thought it'd be a good idea to name anything after a character. And I can't stand cats.

The first time I realized that my alcoholic ex-boyfriend was in fact an alcoholic was a Wednesday morning in April. We both had the day off

which was incredibly rare, so the day before we had planned to get brunch in Denver and then go for a hike in the mountains. We drank the night before, as usual, so we got a late 11 am start on the day. As we were leaving, Gofried reached under the coffee table for Jose, poured two shots in the glasses that were left out from the night before, and drank them both without even taking a breath in between. I didn't say a word.

The second time I realized that my alcoholic ex-boyfriend was in fact an alcoholic was about the hundredth time we drank together and the first time he hit me. Bam. Right across the face. He doesn't remember it of course, but I do. I left right away. In the morning I picked him up to go to work, he kissed me hello, and I didn't bring it up. It happened again nine days later. This time it was a shove into the wall and two slaps across the face. Left cheek then right cheek. If I were to tell you that it started because I told him that I thought the new bus boy (who was only seventeen, for the record) was an awesome kid, you probably wouldn't believe me. But that's what pissed him off. As soon as he shoved me against the wall I immediately thought "Damn you, Jose Cuervo." I left that night too. I was pretty scared that night to tell you the truth. So were Joey and Chandler. They ran out of the room when they heard my body bang against the wall. I did too, but they were faster than I was. I didn't pick Gofried up for work the next day and I didn't speak to him when he got there. I did end up telling him what he had done. He started crying

and apologizing. Of course, he didn't remember it at all. I told him he drank too much and that he was out of control. He denied having a drinking problem. It didn't take me too long after that to come to the conclusion that you just can't have a relationship with someone who doesn't remember anything that happens during the actual relationship.

I went to see a therapist after we broke up. I didn't go because I missed him or was sad or anything like that. But apparently, when you are in a relationship with an abusive alcoholic your friends get really concerned. The therapist told me that I put myself into that situation because I liked to take care of people. She said it wasn't uncommon for women to enjoy taking care of others. Some women, she said, need to take care of their significant others so they date men who have major issues and may abuse them physically, emotionally, mentally, or sexually. I said thanks for the chat and then I left. I had thought therapy to be a lot of expensive bullshit before I attended the session. Now I know that to be true.

I'm sure you're reading this wondering if it's a true story. I'm here to tell you that it is, though you'll still doubt it even though I just told you the truth. Ah the blessing and the curse of short fiction. But I digress.

Contrary to popular belief, I didn't stop dating right away. In fact, I dated a lot. By the time my alcoholic boyfriend became my alcoholic ex-boyfriend, I had lived in Colorado for about five months so I had made

a lot of friends. Regardless of who your friends are or how close you all actually are, there is one thing that I've found to be true across the nation: girl friends are great at taking out their newly single friend. So that's what they did. First there was the Cowboy, then the Texan, then Hiking Anthony. The Cowboy used the word "yee-haw" too much. The Texan hated life in Colorado. Hiking Anthony's teeth were too yellow. Then came the Snow Bro, the pothead, Pizza Place Pablo, the white supremacist, the Deaf guy, 42nd and 2nd, Mr. Jones from Montana, the bartender, the bar regular, the guy with a cleft lip, Airport Eric, the guy who doesn't drink, and a few guys in between who don't even deserve nicknames.

None of them worked out, mainly because I didn't want to know who they really were. In my head, they were all raging alcoholics. Thanks for that, my dear alcoholic ex-boyfriend. In reality, they probably weren't, but you just can't know how many skeletons are actually kept in someone's closet, and I just didn't feel like meeting them all. I decided that it was okay to be 25 and single. So, here I am 25 and single and it's really not as bad as everyone thinks.

Superdad

My father calls the tooth fairy the tooth bunny, because my grandparents didn't know how to say "fairy" when he was a little boy. He jumped off the roof of their house once, using a towel as a cape, because his parents explained to him that a man named S-u-p-e-r could fly. They spread their arms out wide, to emphasize how he flew, but no one knew how to tell him Superman wasn't real.

* * * * *

We were out way past the buoys, my father and I. The waves were small, but they were powerful enough to keep the boat rocking. My side of the boat hung just over the water, my father's weight anchoring the opposite side down.

My father didn't say much, but he was a very observant man and never kept any of his observations to himself.

"Annarose," he'd say, tapping my leg with one hand, pointing to something on the horizon with the other, "look!"

I always listened to my father, but when the tiny beach disappeared, my nerves kicked in. I banged on the side of the boat to get his attention.

"Too far," I mouthed, pointing at the shore.

"It's fine," he said. He always said things were fine.

A few minutes later, I heard a whistle coming from the beach. I squinted. I made the letter C with my right hand and started banging it against my chest.

“Cops! Too far! Cops!”

My father rolled his eyes.

“Relax,” he motioned with both of his hands. “It’s fine.”

Panic ensued. I was sure we were going to jail for being too far from the beach. If you break laws, you get in big trouble. The whistle kept blowing. Tears started pouring out of my eyes, but I stopped trying to get my father to listen to me, so I cried loudly to myself.

“Annarose,” he said, tapping my leg, “look there.”

He pointed to the sunset. My father loved the sun and he loved colors. He was right, it really was beautiful.

“Pretty,” I signed, nodding. He smiled, then looked at me and noticed I was crying.

“What’s the matter?” he asked?

“Cops,” I said meekly. “Trouble.”

He smiled again and patted my leg. “Okay, okay. Ready to go back?”

I nodded again.

When we rowed onto the beach, the cop was furious.

“You’re not supposed to go past the buoys! Whatddya think they’re there for anyway?! What kind of example are you setting for your kid! When someone of authority whistles at you or tells you to come back, you listen! Ya hear me?! Sir! Don’t just walk past me!”

My father dragged the rented boat onto the beach with me in it. He collected our shoes and the towels we sat on. His strong arms picked me up. He wasn’t in a rush and he most certainly wasn’t bothered by the cop.

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” the cop yelled. He was really angry now. “Excuse me! Sir!”

He tapped my father on the shoulder.

My father kissed my forehead and put me down on the sand. I was too scared to cry.

My father put his right hand up in front of the cops face. He jammed his right pointer finger into his chest, brought it up by his right ear, then slammed it on his chin. “I’m Deaf!”

Then he motioned to the cop to relax, he explained with his hands that he wanted his daughter to see the sunset. Then he told the cop to enjoy the evening, took my little hand in his, and we walked to our car.

* * * * *

When I was in third grade, my father came in to Mr. Rich’s class to teach everyone sign language. He taught us the alphabet, signs for our relatives, how to sign our favorite foods, and the signs for animals.

Toward the end of his lesson, he asked me to stand next to him at the front of the class. He introduced me as his daughter and explained that I was known as a CODA in the Deaf world, a Child of a Deaf Adult. He asked me to help him show the class how we can have a full conversation without using our voices.

He asked me what I did in school, what I ate for breakfast, and how many siblings I had. I answered every question perfectly, without even moving my lips. I was, as my father said, “a natural.”

After my father left for the day, Sarah Miller, who sat at the table next to me, came over to me and said “Hey, I know sign language, too!”

“You do? That’s so cool!” I responded, excited that I’d have a friend in class I could talk to in secret if we wanted.

“Yep! Watch.”

And with that, she put up her middle finger.

* * * * *

Most of the time, when a person realizes my father is Deaf, they just stop talking. Other times, they look at me with their head tilted and say “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

I’m not sorry though, I always thought it was pretty cool.

He told me once that if he could hear, he wouldn’t. “Too noisy,” he used to say, covering his ears with his hands. He told my mother that he

wished he could hear her voice, then mine, then my three brothers voices, then go back to being Deaf. Other than that, he loves it.

* * * * *

I grew up in my mom's mom's house with my grandmother, parents, three brothers, and our pitbull. My grandmother and my father never got along, mainly because they couldn't communicate. My grandmother took one sign language class, decided she couldn't do it, and quit.

To this day, after 27 years of living with my father, my grandmother can still only mold her hand to say "I love you" to her grandkids.

Now, at 93, she suffers from Alzheimer's.

She doesn't remember quitting sign language. In fact, she's quite intrigued by it now. Recently, she asked my mother why she was using her hands when my father was in the room. My mother explained to her that my father was Deaf and that they communicated through sign language.

"Oh that's beautiful," my grandmother said. "I wish I could do that."