Time's Sketchy Rules

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Prologue

What is time anyway? Where does it begin and when does it end? Is it linear and bendy like those plastic rulers we used to use in math class? Does it stop sometimes, like those old clocks that tick tick tick all day long, but one day, in a sudden twist of fate, you look at it and it’s not moving? And you freak because you don’t know what time it is. All of a sudden, you’re living in this strange limbo moment where time isn’t being measured, and well, that just won’t do. We need measurement. We need time.

In the smaller than life, not even big enough to be microscopic, world of quantum physics measurement is quantified. If you touch something, notice it, try to measure it, you instantly change it. Everything is in a state of superposition—where two opposite things, two completely opposite things, somehow manage to be equally true at the same time. How and why is irrelevant. Like magic. The laws of physics literally break down, and you can’t even un-break them. Everything is predictions and probabilities. This is the world of uncertainties and entanglements. Nothing is ever sure. Nothing to hold onto. Grip with your fingers until they turn red and blotchy, and numb-like. What you have is unknowns and unknowables. What you have is best guesses and a whole lot of probabilities. We live in a world of entanglements.
Chapter 1
Hello Anxiety

“No way.”

The girl standing in line in front of me, with unimaginably high heels, huge hoop earrings, bright red lipstick, and shiny black hair styled in a decidedly not-so-messy bun that was probably intended to be messy, looks back at me annoyed. She’s on the phone, and apparently I’ve distracted her from whatever riveting conversation she must’ve been having with the person on the other side of the line. We’re standing outside of a club, in a long line on the sidewalk, with blaring music and people complaining about one thing or another, but I’m the one that gets a nasty look from her.

I didn’t mean to say anything, at least not out loud, but when I saw Chris and a few of his friends crossing a street in front of us and coming this way, I couldn’t believe it. I haven’t seen him in three years. Three years. I still can’t believe it’s been that long. And now he’s here. And I’m here. And what the hell am I going to say? Maybe if I look away he won’t see me.

“Emily?” Okay, this is fine. This is fine. You can do this. I turn around to face him.


“You’re here,” I blurt out, looking up at his smiling green eyes.

“In the flesh. And so are you apparently,” he says, stretching out his arms in front of him, gesturing at where I’m standing.

“Yeah. I mean wow. I..Its been a long time,” I say, wanting to hug him, not knowing if I should, noticing the empty space between us. No. I probably shouldn’t. It would be weird. Yeah, I don’t want to make things weird and awkward.

“Yeah, that it has,” he says, sliding some of his fingers through his sandy brown hair. I
want to ask him so many questions about how he’s been and what he’s been up to, but I settle with, “So what are you guys up to tonight? Any plans?”

“Well, not yet. Still figuring that out. Right now we’re just looking for a good place to eat,” he says, looking over at his friends standing on the corner, joking and fooling around.

“What about you?” he asks, noticing the long line I’m standing in.

“I’m here for the two for one special they have on drinks tonight. Got my fake ID and everything. See?” I show him my card.

“To be honest though, I’m not even sure it’s worth waiting in this long ass line for,” I say. The line hasn’t moved an inch in the last ten minutes. Literally all the college students come here because they know they’re not that strict with checking people’s ID’s. Even freshman like me can get in easily. Especially if you’re a girl. Forget about it.

“Well, look at you. Fancy-shmancy ID and everything.”

“Don’t hate. I can hook you up if you’re nice. Oh, also, there’s actually a really good pizza place a few blocks down from here—Mario and Luigi’s Pizza Place—if you’re in a pizza kind of mood. They just opened a few months ago. Have you been?”

“The name is reason enough to check this place out.”

“Right? That’s what I’m saying.”

Chris walks over to his friends to tell them about the pizza place, and I go back to counting how many people are still in line in front of me. Unimaginably High Heels Girl is still on the phone, in a heated argument now, her right arm flailing around in angry bursts. I look up at the cloudy, violet sky and think about how glad I am to not be the person she’s yelling at. Too much drama for me.

I glance over to where Chris is talking to his friends and wonder what the odds were that
I’d ever see him again. Not very likely, and yet here we are. At least I didn’t act like a complete idiot. It could’ve been worse. I could have stared at him in silence and disbelief when he said hi. I could’ve said I missed him. Oh thank god that didn’t happen. That would’ve been terrible. Absolutely unacceptable. Although, I do wish I’d have something funny or interesting to say. But, it’s fine. It is. It’s probably better this way. He’ll come back over here and say goodbye. He’ll smile that easy smile of his, and that will have to be enough. It’s not like I expected to see him again anyway, so I should be happy. I should feel great. I got to see him again and somehow managed to not say anything too stupid. So why do I still feel so shitty?

When I notice Chris turning around, I look away and pretend to be momentarily fascinated by my nails. Chipped, blue nail polish and shiny glitter cover my nails in uneven patterns.

“We’re going to the pizza place,” he says, beaming.

“Great! Well, if you guys come back over this way later, let me know what you think of the place. Hopefully, by that time, I’ll be in there,” I say, pointing my thumb to the right, towards the club, “Instead of out here. Waiting until the end of forever.”

“Actually, I was thinking, you should come with. We don’t know exactly where the place is anyway. And it would be cool to hangout.” Uh, yeah it would! In fact, I want to go so badly, I probably won’t.

*Reasons why I shouldn’t go:*

One. Because, most likely, at some point I’ll say or do something incredibly weird/stupid/lame. The likelihood of this happening is directly proportional to the amount of time I spend with him. This is an unfortunate but inevitable reality that cannot—should not—be ignored. Then, I’ll spend all of tomorrow thinking about the stupid things I said or did. It will be a merciless tornado
storm. A relentless rush of *no no no NO* and *stupid stupid stupid STUPID* and *why why WHY?*

My mind will be like a broken record. Scratching and stuck and annoying as hell.

Two. Let’s face it, I’m still into him. This is not okay. He is too good for me, and he’s being nice, and I don’t deserve it, and what if saying yes to hanging out somehow reveals how into him I still am? Oh, God, I *cannot* let that happen.

Three. It’s easier. There are no risks and there are no consequences. There will just be a plastic cup of Regret, filled to brim. A shot of shame and a shot of sadness mixed in. And I can handle that. I have handled that.

Chris’s eyes are searching mine, waiting for an answer. I try desperately to think of an excuse. I could say I’m meeting a friend, but I’m not, and if he comes back later he would see that for himself.

Then, I don’t know how it happens. I don’t know if I forget everything for a fleeting second, or if I lose my mind, or if a braver part of me decides to hijack this situation and take things into her own hands, but I say, ”Yeah. Sure. Why not?”

#

We walk into Mario and Luigi’s Pizza Place right as it starts to rain. A bell rings as we walk in, and the smell of melted cheese and warm bread washes over us. One of Chris’s friends—Jordan—points at the Super Mario Bros-inspired wall to our left and says, “I want that wall.”

“You’re not the only one,” I say, before walking over to an empty booth near the window. A waiter drops off a few menus on the table before rushing off to do something. On the front cover of the menus there are hundreds of brick blocks with question marks on them. Chris slides in next to me, still looking at the wall, and says, “Know what? I don’t even care if the
pizza here isn’t all that great. I say this place is amazing.” Despite all efforts, I can’t seem to hold back my smile.

“I know. But the pizza is actually pretty good here. Granted there’s not a lot of choices when it comes to the pie crusts, like they don’t have deep dish for instance, and I feel like because of that they should lose some brownie points with me, but in all honesty, who cares about that when you get to sit in a cool place like this? And then there’s the fact that Mario serves you pizza. Whaat? It doesn’t get better than that.” Chris looks around bewildered, like he hasn’t even noticed all the waiters and waitresses dressed in Mario costumes.

“No fucking way,” he says, slamming a fist on the table. I can’t help but laugh. His face is a wonderful mixture of shock, disbelief and amusement. I’m just glad to have stopped my ridiculous rambling for the time being. I’m sure I wasn’t doing myself any favors talking nonstop like that for three blocks straight. Not knowing how to act around him after all this time. And now I’m sitting here in this greasy red booth, with the rain pouring outside, super hyperaware of our bare arms touching, as the waiter slides a whole lot of garlic bread on the table. He looks over at me and smiles. It’s that sweet smile of his, the one I can never figure out. I look down at my hands, and try to keep them still in my lap.

Before long we’re all eating and laughing. And as he’s telling a story to one of his friends, I think back to the day we first met. I was sitting on a bench at the bus stop, waiting for the school bus to arrive, listening to music on my phone. I was listening to my Favoritesforeva playlist. Drowning in a sea of Good Charlotte/Simple Plan/Bowling for Soup/ Blink 182/ Sum 41/Linkin Park and Green Day. I had actually just listened to Simple Plan’s “Shut Up” four times back to back, which goes to show the kind of day I was having. A shitty one. I didn’t even notice when he walked over to the bench and sat down next to me—not close enough for me to notice
right away, but also not on the far side of the bench either. A few minutes before the bus showed up he waved his right hand in front of my face and I took out one of my headphones.

“You like Nirvana?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, even though I don’t. I feel like people always get offended when I say I don’t like Nirvana. Everyone. It’s like I’m always having the same conversation. Always having to defend my case. I hate that. And I just did not feel like having that argument that day. I have tried and tried to like Nirvana. But you can’t make yourself like something. You either do or you don’t. Some things are just like that.

“Me too,” he said, smiling. Then he looked down. He had a huge textbook open on his lap. A black notebook was peeking out beneath it.

“What are you reading?” I asked, leaning over a little so I could get a better look.

“Math homework. Also known as cruel and unusual punishment or how-to-kill-your-brain-cells-by-means-of numbers-and-letters-that shouldn’t-have-anything-to-do-with-numbers.”

“I see.”

“Wish I did,” he said, scratching his head, then closing the book.

I don’t remember much else of what we talked about that day. But that doesn’t really matter because what I haven’t forgotten is how it started raining the second we got off the bus. And of course I didn’t have my umbrella. There was thunder and lighting and the sky was a strangely apocalyptic orangey color. I remember laughing as we ran across the parking lot trying to make for the closest door, trying desperately to outrun the rain (which, of course, is always a pointless thing to try to do, but that doesn’t make it any less fun). With one hand Chris held up his math book on top of his head, and with the other he tossed me his notebook, yelling above the thunder and rain, “In case lighting strikes you on top of your head. At least it’ll go through
my notebook first.” This of course made me laugh even more, and I almost tripped over myself, partially because I’m a clumsy hot mess and slippery surfaces are always out to get me, but mostly because of the absurdity of what he had just said. As if he could protect me. As if a slim black notebook can keep the universe from hurting me. It felt like he was looking out for me, and that was new.

“That’s very considerate of you,” I said, trying to keep a straight face. He nodded seriously and started running. By the time we made it inside we were both soaking wet. He walked in small circles for a few seconds listening to the weird squishy sound his sneakers made, and said, “I have a lot of water in my sneakers.”

“I can tell,” I said. “I’m going to be freezing in class today. Wearing a dress today was not one of my best decisions.”

“I disagree. I think your dress is nice. It’s the rain that’s to be blamed here.”

After that I didn’t mind walking into class like I just stepped out from under a waterfall. It was a nice thing to say. Even if I looked terrible. I walked into history class, found a seat in the back, and smiled to myself as I thought about our silly, little adventure. I wasn’t nervous around him then. Not yet. It was so much easier then because he was just this funny guy I met at the bus stop. He was Nirvana And Thunderstorm Guy. And that was it. Simple. Easy. No expectations. Just fun.

#


“It’s the olives right? I know it is. Nobody appreciates olives. Are you anti-olive? Because if you are, we’re going to have serious problems, dude.”
“You feel that strongly about it then, huh?” he says, left eyebrow arched slightly.

“I do,” I say, folding my arms in front of me, trying to keep a straight face.

“I believe strongly in the right of olives to be on pizzas. Especially these yummy green ones. I won’t stand for any anti-olive talk.” On the other side of the table, leaning against the window, Jordan says, “I hate olives. I don’t know why anyone would eat it on a pizza. Why ruin a perfectly good pizza?” He says this with a full mouth, and a challenging grin.

“You listen here you olive Nazi—“

“Don’t waste your breath,” Chris says, laying a hand on my shoulder, “He’s just messing with you. Jordan is impossible. He’ll say just about anything to get a rise out of anyone. I bet he probably eats olives all the time.”

“Lies! All-oves these lies. I do not!” Jordan says, banging his cup on the table. I consider this for a moment, then say, “Still. I would just like to point out that I don’t ordinarily eat olives, but they are amazing on a slice of pizza. And, just so you know, you can’t say you don’t like something before you’ve actually tried it. So, your take on olives doesn’t mean squat buddy,” I say, picking up an olive and pointing it at Jordan. Then, “Just because you don’t like it, doesn’t mean no else is allowed to like it.” I eat the olive, grab a napkin, and wipe my greasy fingers—happy that I have said my piece. Everyone looks at Jordan and he shrugs, saying, “Olives are gross.”

“You can never win with him,” Chris says, as everyone at the table starts laughing.

“It doesn’t really matter. I got to say what I feel. That’s the important thing.”

#

I’ll never forget the day in the library. I was sitting on the floor with my legs crossed in front of me, my blue sandals touching the wooden bookcase, reading a poem by my homegirl
Emily Dickenson. A crumpled piece of paper went flying over my head.

“Touchdoooooooon,” Chris said, his hands forming an O around his mouth. He had just finished telling me about the football game I missed the night before. Apparently, the final minutes of the game were intense, and the last touchdown was downright beautiful. Of course I wished I’d seen it. The way Chris told it made me feel like he’d witnessed the most epic moment of all time. It made me wish I could time-travel back to the night before, just so I could see it for myself. After he sat down next to me I asked, “What do you think about time-travel?”

“What do you mean? You know Marty McFly or somethin?”

“Haha. Very funny,” I said, shoving his left shoulder a little. He shrugged, then smiled teasingly.

“I’m completely serious. If you could time-travel, would you do it? And what would you do?” He crossed his arms in front of him and finally considered the question.

“Well, I don’t know. Even if I wasn’t worried about disrupting the whole space-time continuum thing, I’m not so sure I would.”

“What? Why? I mean c’mon. If you could go back in time and change things you wish had happened differently, wouldn’t you? Like, undoing mistakes, or doing things better. Or, I don’t know, watch the last few minutes of yesterday’s football game again.”

He smiled at that.

“No, I don’t think I would change anything. Even if I could time-travel, I would just relive things. No changes. No takebacks. Not because I’ve never made mistakes or anything, but because everything that’s happened to me and everything I’ve done has made me the person I am today.”

“Oh come on, but—“
“Sure, there are tons of things I regret. But don’t we all make mistakes? I’m glad I can look back to say a year ago and say, well, at least I’m not that dude anymore. Know what I mean?”

And I could see the genuineness in his eyes as he said it. The unapologetic sincerity of it made me see him in a completely different way. It changed everything. But, no, to this day I still don’t know what he meant.

#

As we’re all walking out of Mario and Luigi’s Pizza Place one of Chris’s friends starts talking about a band he knows that’s going to be playing a show at a music festival tonight, in a park on the other side of the city. It stopped raining, but the smell of rain is still in the air. I wonder if I should say bye now and leave, while they’re all making plans. I don’t want him to feel like he has to invite me to come along or anything. And besides, now is a good time to leave. I’ve surprised myself so far by not being too awkward or anything, but who knows how long I can keep this up.

“Do you have anywhere you need to be tomorrow morning?” Chris asks.

“No, not really. I don’t have class tomorrow, but—“

“Alright. Then, you should come with us to see this band. I need someone to complain with if they’re no good.” It’s almost like he knows I was just about to leave. And this time he’s not letting me get away with it.

#

There’s nothing worse than leaving things unsaid. But it’s so easy. It’s so seductive. No risk has to be taken. No pain has to be felt. Everything is kept simple. Easy. Safe. Tucked away somewhere in the back of a drawer.
Except your feelings. Fucking feelings are never simple. Ever.

#

We’re walking through the park towards the bright lights in the distance—Chris and I a few feet behind his friends. We’re both not saying anything, but somehow, it seems as though things are being said in the silence. Although I can’t quite figure out what exactly. We disappeared from each other’s lives so quickly, and for so long, but we both know it was my fault. I was the one who pulled away, disappeared. Like I always do. Because it’s what I do best. Every time I start to feel, I automatically start planning my exit strategy.

“Hey, it’s Explosions In The Sky,” I say, finally breaking the silence.

“What?”

“This song. It’s by Explosions In The Sky. I didn’t know they were playing here tonight.”

“They’re good. Reminds me of Ratatat a little bit.”

I nod and fold my arms in front of me as a cold gust of wind hits us. Chris moves closer to me, then hesitates. I notice it out of the corner of my eye.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah,” I say in a smaller voice than intended.

“So what ever happened with us?” Shit. This is why I should’ve left.

“I don’t know.”

“Really?” He stands in front of me now, hands in his pockets, looks me in the eyes, his green eyes dark and serious. I don’t know what to say. He deserves an explanation. I know that much. But I can’t.

“Look, I’m sorry alright?”

“I’m not looking for an apology. I just want to understand what happened.”
“I don’t know. I’m sorry I got weird. I just. Can we please just leave it at that?”

“No. Tell me. It doesn’t make any sense. We were cool one day and the next we weren’t anymore. You just stopped talking to me for no reason. I want to know why.” I think back to that party all those years ago. The night I left in a hurry, with my shoes in my hands, and no explanation. The events that led up to that.

“Let’s go. Your friends are waiting. We have to go.” I slide past him and take a deep breath, dried leaves cracking under my feet and the autumn sky as cloudy as ever. I wonder how one apologizes for being a coward, for being damaged.

#

Some people feel that they don’t deserve to be loved. And some people don’t like being tied down. And some people have this idea in their head that there is something distinctly wrong with them, even though they don’t know what exactly it is. Some people are terrified of all the bad things the future may hold, and this leads them to not even consider the possibility of good things happening. Because the world is like a glass vase broken into millions of pieces. And we are all broken pieces of glass. And how can anything good ever come of that? Those pieces of glass are going to cut you no matter what. Some people are just trying to avoid all of that inevitable bleeding that happens when two people come together. I am one of those people.

Why couldn’t Chris understand that? I didn’t pull away all those years ago because I didn’t care about him. I pulled away because I did. The bleeding hurts more when you care.

#

It’s the last song by Explosions in The Sky before the next band comes up. They’re playing “Join Me On My Avalanche” and it’s absolutely magical. I almost feel as if I could float up to the sky, and be swept away by the music into another universe. One where I’m not so
scared of everything. One where I’m brave and fearless and strong.

And the rhythm takes my breath away. There’s the pulsing. There’s the beat. And it builds and builds and builds. It grabs a hold of me and I feel all the air inside of me rush out. I’m no longer in the control. The music is. All I can do is hold on. I cling to every note, every beat, knowing that if I let go, even a little bit, I will fall away. I will have no air inside of me. In this moment all that exists is the pulsing. The building up to the climax, and it’s fucking intoxicating. My heart races. A deep hush falls over the crowd. Heavy and light all at the same time. There’s the girl with the shorts and a purple sweater, swaying from left to right. And there’s the guy in a black hoodie and an orange beanie, spinning in circles. Everything is happening in slow motion and everything is happening all at once. We are all wrapped in a strange kind of silence. There are no words. Just the pulsing. Still building. I don’t just hear the drums; I feel it beating inside of me. It’s like we’re all under some kind of spell, and I never want it to end.

This song always reminds me of how the universe is expanding. I feel it every time I hear this song. It’s expanding faster and faster and all I can do is stand here in awe, spellbound. Waiting for it to collapse. Wanting it to. Wishing it could take everything away. I feel Chris’s fingers brush against mine on my left hand and I look over at him. His face poses a question and I answer it with a smile. He holds my hand and we are experiencing the universe expand together. And it’s okay. It’s scary as hell, but it’s okay.

And as my heart starts racing faster, I let it.

#

Afterwards, on our way to the train, I have to stop by a corner store. I grab some milk, and Chris says, “You still eat cereal every morning?”

“Don’t judge me. I like my cereal okay.”
“What do you have this week?”

“Cocoa Krispies.”

“For the sound?” Basically.

“No, for its chocolaty goodness,”

“Liar. It’s for the sound.” He knows me too well.

“Whatever,” I say, rolling my eyes, walking out of the store.

#

Sitting on the train I look down at my phone. Chris asked me for my new number a few minutes before I got on the train. I gave it to him and he called me right away so I could have his number too. I’m not the only one with a new number.

I consider the advantages of time travel again.
Chapter 2
Shadows

Light particles or Photons as they like to call themselves can totally be spies if you really think about it. They know how to hide things. They do this thing where they act like a wave, but if you try to catch them in the act they’ll switch it up and act like a particle instead. Whoever heard of something acting like a wave and particle at the same time? It’s supposed to be either or, not both. That’s messy. Complicated. Strange. But try to catch them. Nope. No wave action happening here. Not while you’re looking. Keep walking. Nothing to see here. Everything is simple and makes sense. What is that? Lies.

The universe likes keeping its secrets. We like concrete truths. Things we can hold onto. Certainties. Black and white. And so we observe. Some things we catch, some things we don’t. But the waves are still there. Hidden. Beneath the surface. Fierce and unpredictable. Living in the grey.

#

I still feel the wild energy from the music festival coursing through my veins when I get back to my apartment. Seeing Explosions in the Sky live was such a great way to end the night. I decide to blast their old album The Earth is Not a Cold Dead Place on my iHome speaker in the bathroom. My roommate isn’t home anyway. I have the place all to myself and I’m gonna enjoy it goddammit. I grab a lighter from my purse and light up the vanilla and the sugar cookie-scented candles in the small bathroom because why not? I deserve to indulge myself a little tonight. Especially after the absolute miracle of not making a complete fool of myself seeing Chris like that after all this time. After all these years. Tonight turned out so differently than I expected. Not at all what I imagined.
I let the hot water rain down on me, breathe in the warm sugary smell of cookies and grandma’s house during the holidays. I let the song’s pulse take me away. I love that there’s no singing or lyrics here. Just instruments. Just melody. Beat, beat, beat. I love how the music speaks for itself. How it has its own life. Its own soul. How it captures a moment, slows it down, speeds it up, suspends it, stretches it. Time stops to listen in. Inhabits. I love how it makes me feel like I’m flying. Like I’m inside of the song. Inside of this big epic thing that I don’t even understand. The universe? But how could I? How could I possibly fathom a song of the universe?

I look out the window at the cloudy night sky. There’s no moon or stars out tonight, just thick, impenetrable grey clouds with a tinge of orange. But I know the moon is still out there somewhere. I know it’s moving, climbing, shining down some dark, lonely road in that strange way that it does. I just can’t see it. Can’t feel its pull. I turn off the water and step out of the shower. I wrap a towel around my body and grab the small bottle of rosehip oil from the drawer under the sink, pouring a small amount in my hand, and smoothing it over my arms and legs. The flickering light from the candles cast shadows along the bathroom walls and I sit and watch the shadows dance for a while, shivering a little at the draft coming in from the window.

After I walk back to my room, tiptoeing over the rough carpet, I check my phone and notice I missed a call from my best friend. I get dressed and call her back.

“Saraaah,” I yell excitedly.

“Hey hey hey, what is uppp chica?” she says in her happy-drunk voice. I love how I’m always her go-to person to call when she’s wasted because I always get to tease her the next day about the silly things she says when she’s drunk. She never seems to remember any of it, but I certainly do. And I can’t help but take pleasure in reminding her of it.
“What kind of shenanigans are you up to tonight?” I ask her.

“Oh the very best kind! The absolute very best.”

“Is that so?”


“Wait, where are you? Did you say you’re doing karaoke? I thought you had that work party thing tonight?”

“Psh. Yeah Ugh. But you already knooow I left early. My boss was there and you know how I feel about her.”

“Mrs. Pretentiouspants strikes again.”

“Yes. Yes she does. Are you almost here yet? I really want to sing. I need my backup.”

“Oh you know you’re a star. You don’t need me. Go do your thing. I’m not coming. I just got back home.”

“What do you mean you’re not coming? I’m getting you Tequila. We’re doing this. Get over here already. Hey, wait. Hold the phone. Rewind. What you mean you just got home? Spill woman.”

“I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow. But you’re never gonna believe who I ran into tonight.”

“Really? Oh my god, don’t tell me. Don’t even tell me. You saw Christian Bale. Please tell me you met batman. You did, didn’t you? Did you kiss him? Did he do the sexy batman voice for you? Are you two gonna have bat-babies now? I need to know these things. I’m your best friend. You can’t possibly expect me to wait until tomorrow.”
“You’re insane,” I say falling down on my bed laughing.

“Tell me. Tell me now or I’m drinking your Tequila shot. Oh yeah I went there. It’s that serious.” I hear her high fiving someone in the background.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow silly-goose.”


“Love you too. Call me tomorrow.”

I hang up and go under the covers, raising my comforter all the way up to my neck and holding it there for a moment. I turn off the small lamp on my nightstand, open the blinds by my window, stare up at the ceiling, seeing the all too familiar shadow of the tree right outside of my window. Shadows are funny things. You can only see them if the lighting’s just right. They’re always there though, whether seen or unseen, distorting the image of a thing. But does that make them less true? I don’t think so. Don’t we all have our shadows?

#

Three years or three days. What is the difference? Elapsed time. Doesn’t time fold into itself sometimes in space? Doesn’t gravity bend it? Maybe it happens here too. Maybe things happen and like a black hole they warp the space-time around you, and one day you wake up and wonder how you got here, wonder who you’ve become.

#

I stopped seeing Chris the night of Cory Stadniky’s party at that big cabin in the woods, somewhere in Virginia. It was summertime and I was crazy high. I had smoked before the party and then at the party, and then to top it all of I had a cookie or two for good measure, just cause I didn’t think it was going to hit me that hard. Well, of course it did. Cookies always get me. And of course I knew it would. I needed it to after the few hours I had spent with my mother earlier
that day. She was getting married yet again to some loser and I had to go with her to buy a dress. Unsurprisingly she used the opportunity, as she uses all opportunities, to remind me how much of a disappointment I am to her, that my feelings don’t matter, and that if I don’t start going to church soon I’ll most definitely be going straight to hell, because reminding me of these things is what she does best. So I got as high as a kite. I went to the party with Sarah and a few other friends, but somehow ended up going off on my own. I was drinking a beer and walking out by the lake, enjoying the light summer breeze and watching the moonlight sparkling like flickering diamonds on the water. The crickets were buzzing up a storm that night. And the full moon hung low in the sky. I wanted to walk out on the old wooden deck and dip my toes in the water. I needed to know how cold the water was. It seemed incredibly important at the time, but someone was already sitting there. He had light strawberry blond hair and freckles on his shoulders. I said hi as I sat down next to him and we introduced ourselves.

“What are you doing out here?” I asked.

“Counting stars,” he said, looking up at the clear, dotted sky.

“Seriously?” I asked, not believing it for a second. How corny. That’s something I would do.

“No shame,” he said with a small shrug and smile. “What about you? Can I have a sip?”

“Knock yourself out,” I said handing him my bottle. I took off my shoes and dipped my feet in the water, wincing a little bit.

“I had to know how cold the water is. For investigative purposes.”

“Seriously?” he said, looking over at me, one eyebrow arched.

“No shame,” I responded, and we both laughed.

It all happened very fast. Not much thinking was involved. Just feeling. One second we
were laughing, talking, splashing each other with water, the next I felt Jack’s fingers brush against mine. It was a small thing, maybe even an unintentional thing, but it felt good, so I let it stay there and smiled back up at him. He leaned in for a kiss and I leaned in too. He slid his hand along my neck and I rested one of mine on his chest, and before I knew it we were taking each other’s clothes off in the dark. Toppling one another, we grabbed and pulled and kissed and gave each other unintentional hickeys, and for a while I think I even fell asleep, right on the cold wooden deck. That is, until my phone rang. Chris’s name popped up and I scrambled for my clothes and left in a flurry.

I wish I could say I didn’t enjoy it. That it was awful, and boring and mediocre, because then, maybe then I could lie to myself and say it could count as a punishment of sorts for not thinking, for self-sabotaging. But I liked every part of it and that’s the problem. That’s what made it even worse. I couldn’t even look at Chris when he got to the party. I just waved goodbye and left in a hurry with my shoes in my hands. Evidence, a shadow of what happened.

#

It was the first time I’d slept with someone since what happened to me. I don’t really know why I did it. It was meaningless, and the only thing I knew about the guy was his name. I wish it had been with Chris. I know somethings you can never take back, just like there are things you can never get back after they’re taken from you.

#

I wake up to the sound of Mr. Shakesalot, our washing machine, banging loudly across the hallway. Katy must have gotten in early and decided to start her day off by doing laundry, meaning she must be in a bad mood, because she always cleans when she’s in a shitty mood, even if that means doing laundry multiple times in a week, or vacuuming for unnecessarily long
periods of time. I get out of bed, open the door, and shuffle down the hallway. Katy is sitting on the dryer filing her nails, her short auburn hair in a high ponytail on top of her head.

“You get in a fight with Laura again?” I ask, leaning against Mr. Shakesalot.

“Ugh, don’t. I’m not talking about it,” she says checking her phone. I cross my arms in front of me and wait for it.

“All I’m saying is we’re over for real this time. I’m not putting up with her crazy ass drama anymore.”

“Sure, you’re not,” I mumble, as I walk to the kitchen to pour some cereal.

She jumps off the dryer, kicks the washer, and storms to her room. Katy and Laura break up and get back together more times than the sun rises and the moon falls. They’re like two magnets that you know belong together, but can’t quite figure it out already.

After showering and painting my nails I text Sarah to meet up at the library, but she suggests coffee instead, so we decide on the Panera Bread near campus for coffee and pastries.

#

“I promise you. I am not carrying any bat-babies,” I say, stirring my coffee slowly.

“Shut up and tell me already,” Sarah says, taking off her sunglasses, her grey-blue eyes smiling as she sits up a little, pretending to be serious.

“Why don’t you tell me about the party?” I say handing her a piece of my cookie. Sarah grabs a napkin, makes it in a ball in her fist and throws it at me


“Chris? Wait. Chris from high school No! Where?” Sarah was a grade above me in high school but she knew and remembered everyone.

“Yeah. Outside of Perry’s.”
“Oh my god. Well, did you talk to him? What happened?”

“We hung out. I mean it was so weird seeing him, you know, after all this time. But then it was also so nice hanging out with him again. I know he wants to figure things out, but we had such a good time seeing Explosions in the Sky and—”

“Wait what do you mean? Figure things out? He wants to talk?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“You never really ended things with him right? You know you’re gonna have to actually talk to him to figure things out.”

I take a big bite out of my bagel and nod. I have no idea how I’m supposed to do that.

“Well maybe I don’t have to. Maybe he’ll let it go. In fact, maybe I won’t see him again.”

“That’s a lot of maybes.”

Yeah. A world of maybes.

“Sooh did anything else happen?” she asks tucking her wavy blond hair behind her ear with a small smile and a conspiratorial look in her eyes. I laugh and tell her no.

#
Chapter 3

Funky Gravity

Time is a weird thing. It speeds up the farther away you move from a source of gravity and slows down the closer you move. So time in space moves faster than time on earth the farther away you go. It makes sense that the force of gravity is stronger when you’re closer. So strong that it slows time down. But what about the gravity between people? Maybe sometimes it stops time completely. Maybe, with some people, time stays slow no matter how far you go. And when you see him again, time inevitably stops again.


#

“Don’t say that,” he said. But it was true. She hates me. Maybe because I remind her of my father. Maybe because I won’t ever be the person she wants me to be. It doesn’t really matter. I was on my own. I had a skateboarding accident and had to get some stitches at the hospital. Chris thought I should call her and let her know, but I wasn’t going to do that. She’ll just complain and go on endlessly about how she has to pay the hospital bill for my carelessness. No thanks. I’d rather figure it out on my own.

“It’s true. You don’t know her, okay.”

“But won’t they call her anyway? Isn’t she your emergency contact person?”

“No, my dad is. I only put him as my emergency contact because I know they’ll never get a hold of him. And even if they do he wouldn’t care enough to come, so it’s just as well.”

“Well, why don’t you just put me as your emergency contact? There’s no point in having someone they can’t reach right?”

“It’s okay. It’s really not that big of a deal. You don’t have to worry about me.”
“Sorry to break it to you. But you can’t stop me from giving a fuck.”

“Thanks for offering, really, but—”

“Look, you said it’s not a big deal. Then if it’s not, just let me change it for you alright?”

“Fine,” I said. But it was a big deal. I laughed as he helped me sit up, even though what I wanted to do was cry. No big deal.

#

When I get back to the apartment Katy is still vacuuming. I plop down on the old, worn living room couch and play with one of the loose white threads on the arm of the chair, unraveling it slowly but never wanting to break it off completely. Once she notices I’m home she joins me on the couch and turns on the TV. I check in the fridge if we still have some bottles of Mackenzie’s left, and we do, one green apple and one black cherry, so I grab them and hand one to Katy.

“Are you going to class later?” I ask, checking my phone.

“No,” she says setting down the remote on the table in front of us. History channel. This is good. Laura must have called.

“We’re going hiking next weekend. Want to come?” she asks after a few minutes.

“Yeah. Sure. We haven’t gone in forever. Sarah didn’t tell me about it.”

“Oh, I still haven’t told her. It hasn’t been planned yet or anything. I just decided.” Katy and Sarah couldn’t be any more different as far as sisters go. Their twinness has zero effect on how alike they are. Sarah doesn’t do plans. If it was up to her, she’d just decide and tell everyone a day before, and expect everyone to magically be free. I love that about her. Katy on the other hand will probably send a group message tomorrow so everyone has a week’s notice.

“Okay. Well count me in,” I say, getting up and grabbing my keys and purse. I decide to
skip my counseling session today and go to the movie theatre at the mall instead. When I get there I pick a random movie about a ghost haunting a house, and just as I expected most of the seats are empty, since it’s the middle of the day, and who actually wants to watch this movie anyway. There’s an older man sitting on the far left side, in the back, but I mostly have the place to myself, just as I like it. I go back to get some snacks and Mikhail, the guy who usually works the afternoon shifts, is there and as soon as he sees me he grabs a bag of M&M’s and throws them in my direction. I catch it just in time and say, “Ha! Not this day!”

“Wow. You getting faster. I was sure you were gonna drop it this time” he says, as I stick my tongue out and hand him my debit card.

“Which one?” he asks, swiping my card and tapping his fingers on the counter to an uneven beat.

“The one with the ghost and the girl,” I say, opening the bag and handing him two yellow M&M’s. He gives me back my card and I stick it in my purse.

“Ah. This is not half bad.”

“Well, if you are saying that, then I’m sure it must be terrible,” I say, laughing a little, crossing my arms in front of me.

“Why you never trust me Emily? You will like this movie. This ghost is how do you say? Has Character.”

“Really? We’ll see about that. You’re making me miss the trailers again. You know that’s my favorite part!”

Once I’m back in my seat I get comfortable and relax into the dark. Mikhail is probably right. I’ve always had a thing for ghosts.

#
Gravity is weird. It’s different on every planet, every moon, every place in the multiverse. On Earth, gravity’s constant is known by this simple number, 9.8. But this constant is not so constant. The number is different if I’m sitting on the moon, doing yoga on Pluto, eating a grilled cheese on Mars. Things aren’t the same everywhere. They feel stronger in some places, weaker in others. It’s weird, but at the same time, it makes sense.

Mom doesn’t believe in science, thinks of it just as a game I won to get a scholarship into college a year early. Doesn’t even know what physics is really all about. She believes in church on early Sunday mornings, and novelas with cheating husbands and possessive men. She sees the world in these black and white rules and I can never tell her I see grey and a kaleidoscope of colors when I study the universe. I’m not allowed to be right.

I’ve tried to explain this to my counselor, Mrs. Stein, but I don’t know if she understands. What am I supposed to do when my mother thinks I’m bad, that I’m not going to heaven, because I don’t pray or believe the things she believes. How can I think I’m good when she doesn’t? Mrs. Stein says I’m wrong. She says that my mother loves me. But that’s what people are supposed to tell you. And that’s what you’re supposed to believe, no matter how it feels. Right? No. It’s not about love. It’s about not being good enough. It’s about having an opinion that never matters. Knowing, maybe, you don’t matter. I wish I knew how to explain how that feels. Like, a physics problem I could show someone, and say, *See, this is what I mean. Do you understand now?* I wish I could make that feeling go away for more than a night, more than a few hazy hours. But time inevitably goes by, and sometimes you are still standing at the edge of a cliff, looking down, not knowing how to hold on or how to let go.

#

I remember sophomore year like it was yesterday. Every last Friday of the month we used
to skip class and walk over to the river by Crystal Springs Park for a few hours. We’d sneak back in school right after 6th period. It would be me, Sarah, Mark, Charlotte, and Chris. Charlotte would usually roll a few joints while we sat by the river and we’d all pass it around and share. Homecoming weekend we didn’t even go back to school until much later since there was a pep rally anyway. Sarah and I had planned the night before to have a picnic that Friday so I brought an old blue and white checkered tablecloth and she brought a few bags of chips. We sat under the shadow of an old sycamore tree that stood close to the riverbank. We called it Ed. It was our favorite place to hang out so we’d always say, see you at Ed’s, when we all wanted to meet up. It was the perfect shade of autumn sunny that day. The clouds were few and far between. Ed would shake with the wind every now and again.

There were a lot of these shiny black rocks popping out of the river. At times I felt like I could watch the water rush past them all day and never grow tired. They had their own strange shape. Some were square-ish, some round-ish, Others were another shape altogether. The song the river sings is a steady one. I wonder how something that rushes by so fast, with so much force, can sound so calm and unruffled.

We spread the tablecloth on the dry grass and I found a spot to sit where I could lean against the tree. Chris and Mark played around with the hacky sack for a while before they sat down too.

“So have you guys met the new kid Xavier? He’s in my history class. Super smart,” Charlotte said lying down on her back.

“The dude with those huge creepy earrings?” Mark asked.

“They are so not creepy,” Charlotte said as she rolls her eyes.

“There are creepy earrings? Why don’t I know about this?” Chris asked, mildly amused.
“Because you’re not in the know, that’s why. You need to get your life together man.”

Sarah said.

“They’re creepy as fuck. Looks like you got two big holes in your ears. Bleh,” Mark said, his shoulders shuddering a little.

“Oh no. Not those! Totally freak me out too,” I piped in.

“I must invest in these earrings,” Chris said, scratching his chin and smiling.

“You’d have to pierce your ears first. Ask for two big craters,” I said.

“Stop this madness. No one is making big holes in their ears. I’m not having it,” Mark said disgusted.

Charlotte grabbed her purple Bic lighter and said, “Let’s do this Chris. I’ll burn two big holes in your ears for you.”

“Y’all are sick,” Mark said, looking at Charlotte. Sarah and I just exchanged a look and started laughing.

“I think I’ll pass,” Chris said, touching his ears. Charlotte moved closer to him with the lighter and before long she was running after him around the tree. When he came around a second time he grabbed my hand and pulled me up, so we were both running from her. Then Mark stood up and started running after Charlotte. I squealed like a crazy person as we all started running around the park. Only Sarah didn’t get up. She just laid down and smoked as if she didn’t have a care in the world.

We must have stayed there all afternoon. Running and talking, and smoking and laughing about nothing and everything. Chris held my hand for the rest of the day. He’d do this thing where he moved his thumb in circles along the back of my hand. Slow, small circles that I can still feel sometimes. Like an echo that only my body knows.
When we were still in high school Sarah used to work at the record score. Her dad owns it so she didn’t really have much of a choice. First time I met her, freshman year, I was in there looking around for a new CD. I complemented her on her sneakers and she started gushing about how obsessed she was with them because she’d gotten them the same day she went to her first concert. Her older cousin, Barry, invited her, and it was the most fun night she’d ever had. We’ve been friends ever since. Afterwards, I found out that we went to the same school. I used to feel so lucky we were friends because I thought she was so cool. A grade older, lots of friends, a job at a record store. Sarah’s like a sun. She shines and makes everyone around her feel so warm without even trying. She could make anyone laugh if she really wanted to. Sometimes even just hearing her voice makes me happy.

I still feel lucky, but for completely different reasons. She’s been there for me through a lot of things, especially all the drama with mom. So, yeah, maybe she doesn’t know everything. Maybe there’s things I can’t tell even her. But it’s not because I think she’d judge me. There are just some things you don’t know how to talk about.

“Wait, wait, wait. Don’t tell me. Is it Greece?” Sarah asks. She’s always been so good at 20 Questions. It’s one of her favorite games. Katy gets up from the couch and says, “You know what, I think you just have all the cards memorized. I’m not playing anymore.”

“I do not! You’re such a hater.”

“Come on. Relax. It’s just a game,” I tell Katy as she flicks Sarah off.

“I have to go anyway. There’s a Chi Omega party tonight and I need to get ready.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” Sarah yells as Laura walks in the bathroom and
closes the door.”

“She tell about this party?” Sarah asks.

“No. You know I don’t usually go to those sorority things.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m missing out by not going to college. She’s literally going to a party all the time.”

“Yeah, I don’t even know how she’s doing it. Keeping up with homework and all those events they’re always having.”

“It’s Katy. Have you met her.”

She’s right of course. The girl’s so organized she’d actually have to plan to fail to do so. And even then she’d probably have a list of reasons of why failing would work to her advantage.

“You have a good job though. You’re not missing out on too much.”

“True. Not a lot of people can say they work at one of the best music magazines.”

“See, now you’re just bragging.”

I put away the 20 Questions cards in the box and grab my pipe and lighter lying on the table. I take a hit. I inhale and exhale slowly, leaning back against the couch.

“I do miss being around you guys at school though.”

“Same. Everything is so different now. “

One year ago I thought I’d be rooming with Sarah instead of Katie, and that we’d be in classes together for the first time ever. I thought everything would be fun and easy all the time. No stress because I’d be far away from home. Thing is, just because you plan something in your head doesn’t mean it ever works out that way. Katie and I live together across from the school’s campus, Sarah lives with Charlotte, and most of the time I don’t even know what I’m doing. I tell the counselor at school all the time that I’m fine, because that’s what I need to do. But who
is ever completely fine anyway?

#

The second time I talked to Chris about time travel was the time I went with him to visit his grandfather in a nursing home. The place smelled like Pine Sol and old mac & cheese and we went early on Tuesday Bingo night. We took the bus for an hour to get there and we almost missed the last one to get back home. At first, I felt so awkward when we were there because I didn’t know what to say or how to act. I always feel so sad for the old people that live there. What do you say? **Hey, I know you don’t know me, but it must be real shitty living here. I’m so sorry about that. Please don’t hate me.**

Frank Sinatra was playing on the radio when we first walked in, and Chris spun me around in circles a few times in the hallway. His grandfather was sitting in the main living area at a circular wooden table drinking a small cup of fruit punch. We went in right before the bingo started so we had a few minutes to talk to him. Chris’s grandfather was wearing a navy blue baseball hat and a green and yellow Hawaiian shirt. He smiled as soon as he saw Chris and stood up to hug him. I was so surprised at how good he was with his grandfather, although I guess I shouldn’t have been. It seemed so easy for Chris to talk to him, and I wondered what it must be like to have family like that. I didn’t say much, just sat there and listened.

After we left, while we were sitting on the bus, I told Chris about a documentary I had seen a few days earlier.

“So basically, the guy was saying that maybe the fastest way to time-travel would be by means of wormhole.”

“That sounds somewhat dangerous.”

“No, it’s not like a black hole. You’re not gonna get spaghettified or anything.”
“Um spaghettified? Now you’re just making shit up.”

“I’m not. Look, think about it. What if someday someone figures out how to create a wormhole to travel through? How cool and slightly terrifying is that?”

“I’m gonna go with highly terrifying. Manmade wormholes? As if everyday joe-shmo wormholes weren’t creepy enough.”

“Well, when you say it like that,” I said, rethinking it. The lights on the bus flickered for a second, just then—one, two, three times—and we both looked up, then back at each other, not saying anything. After a few minutes, we both started laughing at how freaked out we got over nothing.

“Why are you so into wormholes anyway?”

“I’m not. Black holes are way cooler,” I said, matter-of-factly. Chris shook his head and stared out the window.

“Well I was just telling you about the wormholes because maybe someday you can time-travel to the past and meet your grandfather when he was younger and talk to him and stuff. See, I have my reasons.”

Even as I said it I knew how silly it sounded.

“You’re such a weirdo.”

He wasn’t wrong. But a girl’s got to have her obsessions right.

#

What if time is just a mystery hidden in a patterned treasure box? Decorated with flowers and petals on hard metal, soft red silk inside. What if it slows and flies and pauses and melts in just the right moments, and sometimes the wrong ones? What if I want it back? What if I wanted it to stop? Change. Lock. What if I need to understand why?
A long time ago Mom used to make me go to church with her. Early Sunday mornings were my least favorite day of the week. For the life of me I couldn’t understand why we had to get up so early to go somewhere and sit and listen for two hours on the weekend. If that wasn’t bad enough it had to always be about the same thing: God and the devil and heaven and hell and sin and constantly asking for forgiveness. Everything was *gloria Dios* when she talked to her friends and *stand up straight, fix your dress*, when she talked to me. It didn’t matter to me if she wanted to be religious and believe whatever she wanted to believe. I just didn’t want to be expected to be or think the same way she does. As if I can’t think for myself or be my own person.

The last time I went to church with her was sometime in the spring. Afterwards she had a few of her friends over at the house for coffee. They sat around in the living room gossiping and complaining about things all afternoon. At one point I overheard one of her friends saying, “You know my Christina is pregnant with that boy, Frankie’s, baby. I cannot believe it. She’s only sixteen and already messing up her life. Sixteen. No puedo creer. He won’t stay with her. She knows that. I don’t know what to do with her.”

“*Ay Dios mio. No me digas. Christina’s pregnant? You can’t let her keep living with you after she did that. She knows she’s living in sin. You’ve brought her up right. You need to show her there are consequences to her actions,*” Mom said. I guess she didn’t care if Christina didn’t have any place to go, or whether Frankie would be there to help her. It wasn’t her problem anyway.

“We should all pray for her,” Mom said setting her coffee mug down. I heard it clink against a plate as I sat at the top of the stairs. How she has friends is beyond me. It’s then that I
thought to myself, what if it had been me. But I already knew the answer to that. I knew she wouldn’t think twice about it, and that scared the hell out of me. It’s maybe then that I really stopped trying to be the person she wanted me to be, because in no universe will I ever want to be that person. And maybe I’m wrong for not wanting to be like her. But the truth isn’t usually pretty.

She didn’t like it of course. Kept trying to guilt me into going to church with her. Always asking if I was reading the bible. Told her friends I was going through a phase of rebeldia. But I expected as much. I could care less about their gossip. What I do care about is what she thinks of me. That’s exactly the problem.

#

Sophomore year I went on a camping trip for the first time with Sarah and her family. It was Sarah, Katie, her Dad—Mr. Kushner—and her uncle Aaron. We hiked all morning and around noon we made it to this small, wide waterfall. It was so beautiful I could’ve stayed there all day long, watching the water trickling down. We could easily go in and touch the waterfall because the water didn’t even come up over our knees. Sarah was the first one to go splashing in, squealing and laughing. It took me a while because the water was so cold and I had to slowly ease myself into it. It must have taken me 15 minutes to walk in far enough that the water was two thirds of the way up my knees. Katie took a bazillion pictures while we were there, and I grabbed a few tiny rocks to take home with me.

After we set up our tents Sarah, and Katie, and I went exploring. There was a brook near the camping site they wanted to take me to. When we got there they told me to sit down with them in circle so I did.

“When we were younger we used come to this spot all the time when we were camping,”
Katie said, looking around.

“We’d come here and make up all these stories and games and silly rules about how the world works here,” Sarah said, closing her eyes and leaning back with her arms stretched out behind her.

“The most important thing you need to know is that this water has magic in it,” Katie said very serious.

“What about this ground we’re sitting on?” I ask.

“Also magical. Anyway, what matters is the water. If you scoop a little out with a hand and drink it, you’ll be like our sister. We’ll be friends forever. Nothing in the world could ever break that,” Sarah said with her eyes back open and her hands holding mine and Katie’s. They both sat with their legs tangled in that typical half lotus yoga position, so I did the same.

“How do I do it?” I ask

“Well, I’ll do it first. Then Sarah. Then you,” Katie said.

“ Basically we all just drink a sip, draw an invisible heart on each other’s hand with the water, then take some of this dirt and put it in our hands,” Sarah said.

“We have to hold each other’s hands with the dirt inside. It’s really important. And then we say infinite love,” Katie said.

“At the same time?” I asked, not wanting to get it wrong.

“No we say it one by one,” Sarah explained.

“Like a promise,” Katie said, smiling.

“Okay. Let’s do it,” I said as a bird flew by.

Katie went first, then Sarah, then me. The dirt felt cool and moist in between our hands as the sun seeped in through the canopy of trees. Katie closed her eyes for a few seconds and before
she opened them back up she said, “Infinite love.”

After Sarah and I did the same thing I felt a warm current pass through the three of us. We all smiled goofy smiles and I lay down., stretched out on my back. I knew they were right about this place. It is magic. I thought, if the trees could be this green and the air could feel this light, then maybe anything is possible, maybe we make our own magic.

When we got back to the campsite Mr. Kushner and his brother Aaron had finished building a fire and making us hot dogs. The sun was just setting so I went in Sarah and Katie’s tent to change out of my jeans and into some comfy sweatpants before eating. I took a bag of marshmallows out of my backpack for s’mores later and checked my phone for any texts I might’ve missed. When Sarah came in the tent and saw me with the marshmallows she apologized for forgetting to bring the chocolate. She was supposed to bring the chocolate and Katie was supposed to bring the graham crackers. Of course it wasn’t a big deal anyway because Katie brought the graham crackers and a few Hersey bars because she knew Sarah would forget.

When we were all sitting by the fire Sarah asked Uncle Aaron to tell us some ghost stories, but Katie said she didn’t want to hear them because they’re always the same stories and they’re not scary anymore.

“Well, what do you want to hear Emily?” Mr. Kushner asked me.

“I want to hear an epic story of how the universe began,” I said, “A secret story most people have never heard. A story with mystery and weirdness”

“There she goes,” Sarah says rolling her eyes at me jokingly. I stick my tongue out at her and shrug.

“Actually, I think I can give you girls a story like that,” Uncle Aaron said. He sets down the beer he was drinking and scratches his beard on the side of his face.
“My grandfather told me this story a long time ago so I might not remember all the details, but we’ll see.”

“Boo. I want a ghost story,” Sarah said.

"Shut up. He can tell a ghost story after, you idiot,” Katie said.

“The story is called The Shattering of Vessels or shevirat ha-kelim,” he begins. He grabs one of our marshmallows and sticks it near the fire, waiting for it to toast.

“There were ten of them—the vessels. Wait. I’m getting ahead of myself. Sorry, guys. It all started before the beginning of all time. God wanted to create the universe, right? So he had to do some things to make that happen. I mean creating a universe isn’t easy, you understand. You can’t just snap your fingers and poof, universe delivery. He had to literally bend himself out of shape to do this. Contract himself to make light and stars and all that good stuff. Anyway, so when that happened he created these ten vessel things. Think of them as flower pots or vases. Inside of these vases were light. Like, a shit ton of light. The trouble was that the vases were fragile, breakable. They couldn’t hold all that light, so they shattered. Sparks of light flew everywhere. Like these fire embers right here. You can’t control them, you know. Not all of the vases shattered completely. Some did more than others, but shatter they did. It cracked the universe. But, it is said that these sparks of light are still around. That if you find them and bring them all together it’ll fix the broken universe.”

“But wait. Wouldn’t the same thing happen again? Wouldn’t the breaking or shattering just happen all over again?” I asked.

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe not.”

“You just gotta invest in better vases is what I’m sayin’,” Sarah said.

“Not a bad idea,” Mr. Kushner said laughing.
I didn’t know if I believed in God or the universe starting out with vases of light, but something in the story stuck with me. It seemed to have some truth in it. The fragility. The shattering. The broken world. I don’t know. I could feel that. The universe isn’t the only thing that shatters. People do too. And sometimes people shatter people. Sometimes years are spent trying to collect the pieces, put them back together.

I stared at the fire and let its warmth wash over me. Maybe it’s not the vases fault. It’s not about how strong they are. Things just break apart. It’s been happening since the very beginning.

#
Chapter 4

Multiple Dimensions

The first time I heard about string theory in class I thought it was beautiful. Invisible, no, unnoticeable, strings vibrating beneath the surface of all things, carrying their own gravitational force, the very essence of what everything is made of and we don’t even notice, we don’t even know they’re there. How can something so infinitely small contain multiple dimensions, multiple possible universes. Sometimes I wonder what the me in an alternate or parallel universe would be like. Would she be smarter? Listen to herself more often and escape the mistakes I’ve made? Maybe she wouldn’t be scared when she walks down a street at night by herself on her way home. I bet she has it all figured out. I bet sex is never complicated for her. Who knows, she might even know how to get along with her mom. Ugh, I’m jealous of her already. On the other hand, I like to think she enjoys olives and sitting outside at 2 in the morning to look at the stars just like me. She probably has a best friend who thinks she’s crazy, just like I have Sarah.

When my teacher, Mrs. Miller, in 3rd period physics class first told me about the large Hadron Collider in Switzerland I knew that was my dream. That if I work hard enough maybe someday I’ll be able to go there, see them do their experiments. I want to be there when they make two particles travel almost as fast as the speed of light to collide and discover another dimension. I want to see it happen. It’s one thing to study theory and try to work through all these complex formulas all the time. It’s a whole other thing to see a new discovery. I told Mrs. Miller how much I’d love to see it, but she said when it happens you might not even know right away. She told me it would take a lot of testing to see if enough energy disappears after the collision to be completely sure that energy went into another dimension. Of course that makes sense. All the important things take time. They all happen in quite whispers not loud bangs.
On Saturday morning I get a call from Chris while I’m in the middle of cleaning my room.

“We have plans today,” he says.

“Really? I don’t think I have you penciled in.” I say, smiling to myself a little as I sit down on my bed.

“That’s cause you used a pen, not a pencil. Duh,”

“A pen huh? You sure about that?” I ask.

“Oh yeah. One of those pink ones with a fink feather at the end and everything.”

“How classy of me. They must be some plans to warrant a pink pen.”

“Baseball game. This afternoon. You, me and that really bright sun that’s calling our name right now.

“Well, what if I’m busy?” I say jokingly as I look out the window.

“You’re not Busy. You’re Emily. Two very different people. Busy’s an asshole. Super flakey, trust me. You don’t want to know him.

“Alright,” I say, laughing. I get up and walk to the bathroom.

“When?” I ask as I turn on the water.

“I’ll come and get you in an hour. Text me your address.”

“Okay.”

“Be ready. I don’t want to have to call Busy.”

I roll my eyes and hang up.

When Chris arrives I’m still picking out a scarf and hat. Katie lets him in and says,

“Don’t I know you? You look familiar.”
Before he answers I join them and say, “He went to the same high school as us. Pink or yellow?”

“Definitely the yellow. Is that a new scarf? I haven’t seen you wear it before,” Katie says.

“Your Sarah’s sister right?” Chris asks.

“Yeah. How is it that everyone always knows her before me? Ugh, whatever,” she says as she walks over to the couch.

“It’s not that new. I just haven’t worn it that many times yet. Anyway we’re going to the baseball game,” I say.

“Oh me and Laura are gonna go too. We were just planning on getting there later since she’s at a doctor’s appointment right now.

“Is she having those migraines again?” I ask.

“Yeah. They need to figure out why she’s getting them instead of making her take all those damn pills,” Katie says.

“Well hopefully the headaches will go away again soon. That sucks,” I say before we leave. Katie nods and gets back to typing on her laptop.

When we get outside I’m grateful for the scarf because it’s much more windy out then I expected. The sky is clear and the sun deceptively bright. It looks warm out, but it’s not. As we make our way to the car, Chris tells me it’s his mom’s, but she lets him borrow it all the time, which must be nice. On our way to the game we listen to one of his mixtapes. Ramones, Pink Floyd, Nirvana, Green Day. Lots of good songs, except for the Nirvana ones that I could do without.

We arrive at the stadium a few minutes after noon. The game already started, but we decide to get some snacks before finding our seats. I get a soft pretzel and Chris gets a hotdog.
When we finally do find our way to our seats, I notice they’re good ones, right in the middle.

“I’m glad you decided to come. I wasn’t sure you would,” Chris said, sitting down.

“Guess I surprised you then,” I said, looking down at the pitcher, and propping up my feet on the seat below me.

“You have a knack for doing that. Surprising people. You’ve always surprised me. Ever since I first met you,” he said.

“Yeah, right. You know what’s surprising? How fast that pitcher just threw that ball. Geez. How is his arm still attached to his body?”

“A real mystery.”

Things with Chris aren’t too weird, but they’re also not like they used to be. I guess I can’t expect them to be either. That’s my fault. I can’t imagine what he must’ve thought when I stopped talking to him and started avoiding him around school. That was a really messed up thing for me to do. And then a year later he transferred to another school on the other side of the city because his parents bought another house—at least that’s what people were saying when he left. Why on earth he would ever want to talk to me again after I acted the way I did I’ll never understand. I know I’d be pretty pissed.

But then he has always been better with people than I am. I remember how sudden it felt not seeing him anymore in the hallways or at the football games on Friday nights. Not at the skate park in our neighborhood or at the movie theatre where you always bump into people from school. There were a few times I’d go to our old spot at Ed’s place and sit under the tree, hoping he would walk by. I don’t think I expected him to, but I thought if I was lucky enough it could happen. Maybe I’d get my chance to apologize, to say, *please come back.*
But as time went by I realized how ridiculous I was being. I stopped thinking I would ever see him again. And now here I am, and there he is, and I don’t know what I could possibly say to change everything. The truth is hard, and complicated. It’s not just about the night at the party. Even though that was easy to use as an excuse, and I needed an excuse. It was more than that. There is shame and there is fear, and they do not relent, and sometimes all you know is how to hide from it, run from it, pretend it’s not there. Sometimes you have to find a drawer within yourself and stuff everything inside. That is what I know how to do.

The day of the party was not a good one. Everything inside of me was upside down and threatening to spill out. The drawer was shaking and I needed some control. I thought this time I decide. This time I am in control. The problem was that I was all feeling and no thinking. The problem was that I was letting my mother’s words get to me, that I was letting bad memories get to me, that I was all hurricane and tsunami on the inside and you can’t control natural disasters. You sit, and you wait, and you let it pass.

I was a mess and I thought Chris would be better off without me. It’s easier to let everyone think you’re okay. Well, not easy, but anyone can pretend. Chris was starting to really see me, I could tell, and that wasn’t okay. I was starting to really like him, and that wasn’t okay either. The first time he kissed me, a few weeks before the party, I almost forgot how to breathe. For a week. It was awful. Wonderful, too, but that’s beside the point.

“You alright?” Chris asks.

“Yeah. Of course. Sorry. Thought I tasted something weird with my pretzel. It was just too much salt in one bite, I think. No worries.”

“Oh okay. Seemed like something was wrong. You were doing that weird thing you do with your eyebrows.”
“What? Really? What thing? Actually, forget about it. It’s just this damn salt. I think it’s old or something.”

“We can get you another one,” he says, getting up.

“No, no, it’s okay. I’ll live. No more pretzels for me.”

Chris laughs and sits back down. Great, now I can’t finish my pretzel.

“So your roommate…”

“Katie,”

“Yeah. She so different from Sarah. I mean I thought she was Sarah for a second when she let me in. But then I realized she’s not.”

“Oh yeah. People say that all the time. They both think it’s a compliment,” I say. I check my phone to see if Katie called or texted.

“Katie and her girlfriend, Laura, come to these games all the time. They actually met here so it’s special to them, you know. Anyway, they’ve asked me to join them a few times, but I don’t like being a third-wheeler so I don’t usually come. She’s probably gonna call once they get here so they can sit with us,” I say.

“You think they’re still coming? We’re already halfway through the game,” he says pointing at the scoreboard.

“Maybe. If Laura really fusses about wanting to come, they will. She has a cousin that works in security here. He always gets them in. Sometimes he even gets them box seats all the way in the front if there’s ones available.”

“What? That’s amazing! Now I definitely hope they show up. I have some serious schmoozing to do,” he says looking around.

I roll my eyes and smile at him. He smiles back and says, “Well, on second thought, I’d
be okay with if they didn’t show up. It’s nice having you to myself.”

“Nice save, bro,” I say, laughing. He slips his fingers through mine and goes back to watching the game. It feels real good, the soft of his hand against mine, even though both of our hands are cold and my other hand between my thighs is much warmer. It feels good in the same way as it does when Sarah hugs me for a long time because she hasn’t seen me in a few days and she misses me. It’s a connected kind of feel, like a fallen flower petal coming back up to the sepal. You know that’s where it belongs. Where it’s the safest.

#

The first time Chris kissed me was at the pool party at his friend Jordan’s house. It was in the middle of the summer when everyone was trying to see who can have the best pool party. I didn’t really know Jordan because he went to a different school than us. Chris and Jordan’s parents were really good friends, so that’s how they knew each other. It was early on a Friday night and the sky was a dusty shade of violet lit up with the flickering green of lightning bugs. I had been running after him around the pool and all through the backyard because he had taken my shirt. My mother had just called me and said I needed to get home. He didn’t want me to leave so he had taken my shirt hostage. He knew I wouldn’t go home without it because mom would have a fit.

“Give it!” I yelled, as I jumped over a red plastic pool chair lying on its side.

“Never!” he said, as he looked back and smiled, letting out an evil laugh that was particularly not so evil-ish at all. It wasn’t until I cornered him at a fence on the side of the house, behind a glass table and some chairs that I finally got the chance to try and wrestle the shirt from his hands. I kept jumping up trying to grab it as he swung it above his head, but of course he had a few inches on me. I grabbed his left shoulder with one hand and reached up as
far as I could with the other, pushing my feet off the ground. On my third jump he threw the shirt to the ground and grabbed me at my waist, tickling me to the ground. I squealed and laughed until my stomach hurt and I couldn’t anymore. I had teared up a little from laughing so much and when I finally got a hold of myself again and looked up at Chris, he wiped my eyes and tucked my hair behind my ear. My hand was on his upper arm, halfway between his elbow and shoulder, his skin still wet with pool water. I looked down, but he lifted my chin back up, then let his fingers rest on the side of my neck.

When he kissed me it was the kind that pulls you in, like a moon pulling the ocean, like a tide rising inside. It’s strange science, silvery magic. There is want and there is need. Both are heavy.

“I have to go,” I said, after I kissed him back. I picked up my shirt and he said, “Stay.” I thought about it for a second before my phone rang again, so I kissed him and left.

#

Katie, Laura, and her cousin Miguel show up right before the last inning. The girls sit down and Miguel waves and leaves.

“I told you we’d make it,” Laura says, as she sticks a hair clip in the back of her shiny dark brown hair. Katie rolls her eyes and pops some gum in her mouth.

“ Barely. We could’ve stayed home,” Katie says.

“Well, it’s not over yet,” I say, as Laura grabs the rest of my uneaten pretzel.

“I heard about your headaches,” Chris says to Laura.

“My mom used to say grape juice in the morning is good for that. I’ve heard her tell a friend that before,” he offers.

“Grape juice? That’s weird,” she says, considering it for a moment.
“See even this dude is more helpful than your doctor,” Katie says.

“What about wine? I bet wine is even better! It’s like super grape juice right?” Laura says excitedly.

“Well, I’m not sure about that—” he begins. Katie looks at Laura and just smiles sweetly.

I thought for sure she was going to say something sarcastic, but just then Laura leaned her head on Katie’s shoulder and it seemed to melt the girl.

“I’m asking Troy at work for wine and saying its doctor’s orders. He can’t say no to me.” Laura works at Applebee’s and she’s always talking about how she has this coworker, Troy, wrapped around her finger. Apparently, he hasn’t realized yet that it’s never going to happen with her. I’m sure she’s mentioned Laura a bunch of times, but he must not be getting the picture.

After the game we all go back to the apartment and hangout together for the rest of the afternoon. Laura and I paint each other’s nails while Katie and Chris play Just Dance on the Wii. Chris is surprisingly good, but he’s got nothing on Katie. She’s the Just Dance reigning queen. After they go a couple of rounds Laura decides she wants to play too. Chris sits down on the carpet next to me while Laura and Katie dance to a Kesha song. It’s not the kind of afternoon I expected when I woke up this morning, but I’m glad about that.

I look at my silver and glitter covered nails and wiggle them in front of Chris.

“What are you doing?” he asks, amused.

“Magic, obviously,” I say. He tilts his head and arches an eyebrow, as if to say, what?

“It’s in the glitter. Shhh don’t tell anyone,” I say placing my index finger in front of my mouth.

“I thought you needed candles for that,” he says, matter-of-factly
“Oh, good idea,” I say getting up and going to the bathroom to grab a candle. When I come back he looks even more confused.

“Pass me the lighter on the table,” I say as I sit down next to him. He reaches over, grabs it, hands it over. I light the candle and set it down in front of me.

“There. Now it’ll work.”

“What will?” he asks. Laura looks over at us, but before she has a chance to say anything Katie grabs her hand and leads her to her room, with a mischievous smile on her face.

“Well, today’s been such a good day, you know. You seem happy. I don’t know. I thought, maybe I’d do a little magic to ask the universe to give you lots of happy days.”

He smiled at that and leaned back against the foot of the couch, with his hands in his pockets.

“And what about you?” he asks.

“What do mean?”

“Happy days for you too.”

“That’s not how it works, silly. With magic it’s about someone else. You don’t waste it on things you want for yourself. That’s just greedy. It’s about wanting something good for someone else.”

“Emily, sometimes I think I will never understand you,” he says as he sits up and looks over at me. I blow out the candle and stand up to take it back to the bathroom.

“There’s nothing to understand. Don’t worry.”

When I walk back into the living room Chris is standing by the door. He says, “I have to go. My mom needs the car later tonight. So I should probably be getting back soon.”

“Okay,” I say as I give him a hug.
“Thanks again for hanging out today,” he says after he walks out the door. I nod and tell him I had a good time too. Then he leaves.

#

My cat, Miss Schrödinger, is a lazy bum. She sleeps all day on her pillow under my bed and only roams around once in a while. I’ve had her since middle school, so I guess she can use the excuse of being an oldie-pants. She probably knows me better than anyone else. If Chris wanted to understand, he’d have to talk to her, and she likes her secrets. Mom got her for me in eight grade after she noticed I was sad and spent a lot of time by myself. She thought a pet would cheer me up since I had been asking for a cat for years anyway. It might be one of the nicest things she’s ever done for me.

Schrödinger knows everything. Not because I’ve told her or anything, but because she’s seen me cry. Cats understand these things. They can feel what you feel and they’ll curl up next to you to let you know it’s okay. She’s done it plenty of times. She purrs and she rubs her grey fur against my skin and she licks my face with her tiny, rough tongue.

#

It’s simple and I don’t want to talk about it. It happened at summer camp. He had dark green reflexive sunglasses and a black necklace with a round black and white plastic yin-yang charm. He was maybe 17, maybe 18. I don’t really know. There was a half moon and patchy clouds. It was in between the girls and boys bathrooms. I thought we were friends. I didn’t want it. I couldn’t scream. I froze and I shook, I bled, and I hurt all over for 3 days.

I used to wake up crying in the morning with my heart racing, feeling like I must have dreamt of someone dying, never knowing who. It was only for a few months, but I can still feel it sometimes. It’s simple and I don’t want to talk about it.
Chapter 5

Spooky Action at a Distance

To me, one of the weirdest things in quantum mechanics that makes zero sense and complete sense at the same time is the idea of superposition and entanglement, and what Einstein used to call spooky action at a distance. Since quantum particles are so freaking small, they can easily get away with this spooky weird stuff. The idea is that these particles are entangled, deeply connected and linked in such a powerful way that they share the same existence. No matter how far away they are from each other, no amount of space or time or lightyears even, could make a difference. Their wavefunctions are forever stitched together. They always play a part in the same formula.

These particles act like waves. Waves colliding with waves. They exist in multiple states at the same time. Both here and there. The speed at which they move, both fast and slow and something in between, all at the same time. Since they’re so small, there’s no way of predicting exactly where they are at any point in time, which means they are multiple places at once. It’s not until after you look, after you try to measure, that the superposition is lost. Measuring one particle instantaneously changes the other. Spooky action at its very best. Looking changes it, makes it break down. Choose a state.

This is what I want you to see. I’m fine. I am one thing, not two or more. Maybe this is how time works. Maybe this is how we all work.

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I never liked Husband Number Three. We went on a trip to Williamsburg when I was fifteen. It must’ve been around February or March and he wanted to take Mom and I to see the Jamestown Settlement. The place itself wasn’t so bad. I’ve never been much into history, but it
was kind of funny seeing people walk around in all those old-fashioned clothes. I half expected to see a reenactment of a witch trial, but no such luck. An hour or so after noon we went to the café to have some lunch. I went to the bathroom to wash my hands and when I came back the waiter asked what I wanted.

“Just a cheeseburger,” I said, closing my menu.

“Why don’t you just stick to salads, hun,” Husband Number Three said.

“Well, you could stand to lose a pound or two,” Mom chimed in.

“She’ll have a Caesar salad,” she said, after I didn’t say anything. I hate ranch or any kind of dressing on salads. I like it plain. She knows that.

“I’ll have the bacon cheeseburger with the chili fries,” he said.

“I’m feeling like soup today, with this weather and all. I’ll have the soup of the day,” she said.

Of course I had to get the salad, but he could have the bacon cheeseburger with the chili cheese fries. That’s fair. Stick with the salads, hun. Before the waiter left I tugged at the sleeve of his shirt and said, “Can you please not put any dressing on my salad?” and he nodded.

I spent most of the day upset about it and when we got back home I had worked myself up so much I decided to say something to Mom. I knew it was just going to turn into a fight but I didn’t care. When she went into the laundry room to throw a few bathroom carpets and towels in the washer I followed her.

“Mami, I really didn’t like that whole thing at lunch today. Why do you always have to listen to him?”

She just rolled her eyes and said, “Mi hija, you’re too sensitive. Get over it. It really doesn’t matter,”
She didn’t even bother to look at me.

“You know it really hurts that you always do that. Why can’t you ever be on my side?” I asked.

“I can’t deal with this right now. Go to your room or something. I don’t care. There are more important things to worry about,” she said.

I knew it wasn’t a big deal. It was a dumb thing to get upset about. But all I wanted was for her to have my back, to say I was allowed to be upset. But when has that ever been okay? I have tried, more times than I can count, to talk to her about how I feel, hoping maybe this time, thinking, things can change, but it never changes. I am always wrong, and she is always right. What I feel is irrelevant, not important. Eventually you learn to shut up and realize it doesn’t matter.

Husband Number Three didn’t treat her right either. He had this way of knowing exactly what to say to get under your skin, and he’d do it, just to prove that he could. He said mean things to her all the time. She didn’t deserve that any more than anyone else deserves it.

#

“Benji or Pierre?” Sarah asked when we were talking about the lead singers in our favorite bands, at our first sleepover at her house.

“Both,” I said as I looked through the contents of Sarah’s makeup bag strewn across her bed.

“Oh, you bad girl. I didn’t know you were like that,” she said with mock shock and a dark purple glittery hairbrush in her hand, pointing at me.

“I meant I can’t pick. Both are equally cute. Benji has all those sexy tattoos and bad boy look, while Pierre has that adorably sweet smile that just says I will make you pancakes
whenever you want.”

“I would totally go for Pierre. Pancakes are so important,” she said.

“Wow. I thought for sure you’d pick Benji,” I said picking up a dark brown eye shadow and testing out the color on the back of my hand.

“Really? Hmm. Well, that answers it then. You would pick Benji. You wouldn’t have said that if you didn’t like him more.”

“What? That makes no sense. I—“

“It does! And you also used sexy to describe Benji. Sexy, my friend, says it all.”

“Whatever. You totally tricked me,” I said rolling over on the bed so she could sit next to me. She shrugged and smiled a little as she spread some CDs on the bed and opened up one of them to pull out the inside cover and look at the pictures.

“Okay. So maybe you’re right. But, only because I think he would totally protect me in a fight. He looks like he knows how to fight,” I said after considering the whole thing.

“When are you planning on being in a fight? And why am I just now hearing about it? You can count me in too. I’ll mess someone up,” she says reaching into the back pocket of her jeans and pulling out a black Swiss army knife, flicking it open

“What the hell Sarah? That’s really creepy. You walk around with a knife?” I said surprised.

“My Dad gave it to me. And I like having it. It’s actually really handy,” she said handing it over to me so I could have a better look.

“Well, it is sorta cool,” I said, sliding a few fingers along its edges to see how sharp it was. Walking around with a pocket knife was a pretty badass move on Sarah’s part. The only thing I remember getting from my father was a few old Pokémon cards he got me for my eight
birthday. Can’t even use them for anything.

After we changed into our pajamas I kept thinking about the pocket knife and asked Sarah where she thought I could get one.

#

I used to think the farther you get away from something the easier it gets. That space and time could make a difference. Change you back into who you used to be. That perhaps, one day, when you wake up, look in the mirror, it’ll all be fine. You will have you back. Maybe space helps a little, and time helps a little, but you can never change back. You are fragmented. You can never un-know what it feels like to not feel safe in your own skin. To not even trust yourself. You can tape back a piece of paper that’s been ripped apart but it will not be the same. There is breaking apart and coming back together and breaking apart and coming back together—over and over again. You do what you have to, and sometimes that’s roaring and sometimes it’s raining. But mostly, it’s going to the movie theatre at the mall in the middle of the afternoon and thinking about someone else’s story instead of yours.

#

There have been other guys since Cory Stanicky’s party. I’ve always made sure, though, it was only once and then I’d disappear. I didn’t know or especially like any of them that much, but I guess that was the point. Thinking they were kind of cute was good enough for one night. Most were guys I met after I moved and started college. Sarah knows about a few, but then she also knows I’m never serious about any of them. She thinks it’s because I’m just playing the field, or that I just like to have a lot of fun, because that’s what she does, but I don’t really know if that’s what it’s about for me. It’s just easier. This thing with Chris, on the other hand, not so easy.
Chris knows about my special love of cereal because I used bring it to school every morning. I would bring two of those large, metallic, insulated water bottles with me. One sat at the side of my backpack with cereal inside. The other I held in my hand, milk swishing around in endless circles since I only filled it up halfway. When the school bus came to pick me up I’d race to my seat as soon as I got on the bus so I wouldn’t trip over myself when the bus driver started driving again, moving in the opposite direction at a surprisingly fast speed for 6:30 in the morning.

The two of us would hang out in the hallway near the auditorium, where a lot of the theatre kids sat at lunch. Chris had a locker there so we’d sit on the floor, backs against his locker, and on Mondays I’d unveil what cereal I was having that week. Day after Labor Day I was late for school. I missed the bus, so by the time mom dropped me off, first period had already started. Chris texted me a few minutes before I got there and asked if I wanted to skip first period with him and go hangout at Ed’s instead. After I got out of the car, I walked super slow until mom drove off, then sneaked over to the school’s back entrance, near the library. Chris had been waiting for me and as soon as he saw me he threw his backpack over the other side of his shoulder and ran across the parking lot to meet me.

“Guess what I brought?!” he said excitedly after he gave me a hug.

“A million dollars so we could be rich and famous?” I asked.

“A blunt. Found it in my brother’s room,” he said as we crossed the street.

“Even better!”

“Good. I was starting to worry about not having that million dollars.”

“It’s okay. Being rich and famous is so overrated anyway. You got paparazzi following
you around everywhere and stuff. Who wants that?"

    “Not me,” he said, putting it back in his sweater’s side pocket.

After a 10 minute walk we made it to the park and sat down by the river.

    “I can’t believe you got this,” I said reaching into Chris’s pocket to pull out the blunt. He wiggled a little, and stifled a laugh, pretend-coughing as I took it out. I played with the blunt, sliding it from finger to finger, before grabbing a lighter from my backpack.

    “My brother has a pipe too, but he’d notice it’s gone if I took it.”

    “Good call,” I said sticking it in my mouth and trying to flicker the lighter on. It was a little windy out so I was having trouble getting a flame for more than a millisecond.

    “Here, let me,” he said. Chris placed his hands in a half circle around the lighter so I could get a flame going. After taking a hit, I passed it back to Chris and lay down on the grass.

    “Why’d you miss the bus today?” Chris asked, looking around on the other side of the river, across from us.

    “Got in a fight with mom about my eyeshadow being too dark. Too risqué or whatever.”

    “I thought eyeshadow is supposed to be dark. Hence the name right?” he said joining me on the grass and wrapping his right pinky along my left one, like a double helix.

    “Thank you. I don’t see what the big deal is. She acts like my shade of eyeshadow is what’s gonna make a guy want to have sex with me.”

    “Yeah I don’t think that’ll be the reason”

    “Speaking from your own guy expertise, right?” I said laughing.

    “Absolutely. I know these things.”

I take another hit and relax into the feeling it gives me, trying to let go as I look up at the sky.
“You know, I wish I could understand how she sees the world so black and white. How everything works this specific way, and you have to behave accordingly. I just don’t get it. I want to understand and not let it bother me, but it does.”

“You mean, like the dark eyeshadow leading to risky business?”

“No. Well, yes and no. It’s more than that. She’s like that about everything,” I said.

“Well, I think some people just need that. It makes life easier for them. There are rules and you follow them, and everything is as it should be,” he said.

“It’s exhausting, if you ask me. I mean I get what you’re saying. I do. It makes everything certain. You don’t have to doubt things. Just follow the rules. Do what you’re supposed to do. Apparently avoid too-dark eyeshadow. But that’s not enough for me. It doesn’t make things as they should be, or stop bad things from happening. And even if it did, I still couldn’t think like that.”

“You want more,” he said, after releasing a big cloud of smoke he had been holding in for a good while

“Yeah. I just don’t understand why she always has to be right about everything. It’s not even about who is right or who is wrong. Sometimes I just want her to consider what I have to say. Like legitimately listen and not throw it away like trash.”

“Yeah. I don’t know. That really fucking sucks,” he said shaking his head. I knew I was rambling, and I didn’t want to make him feel awkward or uncomfortable for not knowing what to say, so I shut up. I turned to my side and rested my head on his chest, stretching an arm across his stomach. He pulled me in closer then, and grabbed my hand, folding it upwards so it would sleep near his shoulders, while his fingers kissed mine. We didn’t say much after that. Just laid there watching grasshoppers jump around a few feet away, while the trees slow-danced to the
wind’s still-soft song. Time didn’t even seem to move. Well, it moved, but also didn’t move at the same time. With Chris’s arms wrapped around me, it felt like nothing bad could happen. Like for the first time, I was okay. No one could hurt me while he held me like that. I didn’t even know it was possible for someone to feel so good, for their skin to feel like deep sunshine at noon on a summer’s day. I didn’t want him to ever let me go. Didn’t know what to do with that.

#

If there’s one thing I’ve learned since my father left, it’s the danger that lies in needing someone. It leaves you vulnerable. You don’t know how to exist with this need always there, dripping like a leaky faucet. You hope and you wait and you need. When I saw mom doing these things I decided I didn’t want that for myself. I would do whatever it takes to make sure that never happens to me.

For months she would stand on the front porch of our house, twice a week, at night, with one of his old shirts in her hands. She would stand and look out at the street for a while until her legs got tired, then she’d sit on the front steps and bury her face in the shirt. She never did that again with anyone else. It was only for him. He never said goodbye. He just packed a duffel bag and left in the middle of the night. Sometimes I think I can still hear the old floorboards creaking and soft thuds of his careful footfalls going down the stairs. There were 14 steps. I counted.

I was reading an old issue of National Geographic with a small flashlight in my hand, squinting in the dark, on the night that he left. There was the creaking, the unlocking, opening, closing, locking of the door. The silence was the loudest. The silence that followed after he left. It was loud and heavy, and as thick as creamy lentil soup. I knew he wasn’t coming back and I knew I should tell mom. But I didn’t. I let him leave.
Chapter 6

The Double-Slit Life of Waves

The thing is, there’s always an interference pattern unraveling. Waves meeting waves, paths crossing paths, possibilities overlapping possibilities. This is how the universe works. Peaks and troughs crash, collide, create something new. Do it all over again. Over and over and over. New realities are decided at the very last moment. Who can know what causes what? Who can know how it all ends? Not the wave. Not the broken universe with its shattered vessels of light. I will look for them, I promise. There is constructive and destructive interference. They are both inescapable. The wave is never the same. It grows. It shrinks. Moves on. Disappears. You never know. Uncertainty is certain. You cannot know exactly where it is or how fast it’s moving. Waves interfere each other, with themselves, all the time. This much I know: no experiment can give me the why, only the what and the how and a few dozen maybes for good measure. A quantum mystery endlessly changing its course. Maybe we are not so different from waves.

In the quantum world all of the regular, old-fashioned rules of physics break down and collapse. Things are much harder to measure, pin down. The beauty is in the mess. If I was to hold out my hand and try to grab the fabric of the universe what I’d hold in my hands is equal parts possibilities and chaos.

#

On Sunday morning Sarah knocks on our front door for five minutes. Katie and I were both sleeping and not expecting her, so it took a lot of banging for me to get up and realize someone was at the door. I jump out of bed and almost trip over Schrödinger on the way out of my room.

“I’m coming!” I yell as I move around in the semi-dark living room with only a few
slivers of light slithering out from under the blinds and cutting across the grey carpet.

“Sheesh. What’s a girl gotta do to get some attention around here,” she says when I let her in.

“I was sleeping jerk. So is Katie and Laura probably,” I say rubbing my eyes and walking over to the blinds to let some light in.

“Yeah, yeah. That’s what they always say,” she says, setting her stuff down and crashing on the couch. I join her and yawn into my shirt sleeve, stretching out my legs under the table.

“I woke up this morning realizing we need to have an adventure today,” she says looking over at me very seriously.

“What kinda adventure we talking?” I ask, wondering if we were going to pull another one of her pranks on Mark.

“Beach day. We haven’t gone down to the beach in forevs,” she says.

“That’s probably because it’s a two hour drive and not summer anymore.”

“I don’t care. We don’t even have to swim. We can just chill by the ocean and people watch.”

“Well, if you’re driving, I’m coming,” I say.

“I knew I could count on you. Now get ready,” she says.

I grab some clothes and head over to the bathroom for a quick shower. As I brush my teeth I overhear Sarah knocking on Katie’s door, telling her to wake up to come with us to the beach. Something bangs against her door and I look out in the hallway. She yells at Sarah to go away. I look over at Sarah and she just shrugs and rolls her eyes as she walks back over to the living room. Laura opens the door and says, “When are you are guys going? We’re coming too.”

“No we’re not,” Katie says behind her.
There aren’t a lot of people at the beach, but I expected that. What I didn’t expect to see is all these weird tire tracks running along the beach. Sarah and I follow the tracks and try to come up with stories of how they got there.

“Military people doing training here or investigating some leads,” Sarah says.

“Aliens. They landed right here and drove this way. See how the tracks seem to abruptly stop here? It doesn’t make sense. This is where they must have landed. Come on. Stand right here. We’re standing right where they did when they first touched down on earth.”

“You really think they would’ve left tracks like this? Seems kind of careless if you ask me,” Sarah says bending down to get a better look.

“Maybe it was a few bad guys looking for something on the beach,” she says sitting down and grabbing a handful of sand.

“We talking something valuable like diamonds or just some kind of weapon?” I ask.

“No. We’re missing the footprints. That’s the problem here,” she says pulling me down to sit next to her. I look at the coffee colored sand and rule out my theory on people coming to dump new sand on the beach because it’s in no way clean or especially pretty. It’s just you’re average pollution marked, tourist-stamped, sticky sand.

“The tracks ending randomly is much weirder. It doesn’t even look like someone turned around.”

“I don’t know. I think it’s just one of those things. Like a cloud shaped like a ‘C’ and you think it’s so freaky, and then you look a way for a few seconds, and when you look back its completely different-looking. Not ‘C’ like at all,” she says.

“You mean that by tomorrow the tracks will be gone and it won’t matter anyway,” I say.
“Well yeah. You said it. Not me,” Sarah says dumping some sand on the tracks.

She’s right, I know, but I still want to know what happened, what I missed. Maybe it’s nothing, maybe it’s something.

“I’m going to see where the other side of this leads,” I say standing up.

“But it might be far. Let’s just stay here. It was the aliens okay. You were right.”

“You don’t have to come. I’ll be right back.”

Sarah puffs and says, “Fine.”

I try to walk all the way to where the tracks must have started, but it’s a longer walk than I expected, so I stop a little before I reach a large hotel and turn around. We were supposed to be having a laid back beach day anyway, and here I am chasing after some stupid tracks while Sarah waits.

As I turn around I bump into someone with a surfboard and take a step back.

“Sorry. I didn’t know there was someone behind me,” I say regaining my balance.

“It’s cool. I didn’t see you either. Hey do I know you?” he says, looking me over, brows furrowed and head tilted.

“Uh, I don’t think so,” I say, not recognizing him. He has dark brown hair that goes past his shoulders and big hazel eyes under thick eyebrows. It’s the green ankle-bracelet on his right foot that makes me remember.

“Wait. Sam?” I ask.

“So we do know each other,” he says dropping his surfboard on the ground, seemingly intrigued.

“I’m Emily. Our Dads used to work together, remember?” I say, showing him the bracelet on my ankle.”
“Oh yeah. I remember now. Wow, and here I was thinking we slept together. I should’ve know that wasn’t it. I’d definitely remember sleeping with you,” he says smiling.

“And, you’re still an idiot, I see. That’s good to know,” I say laughing.

“Well, I guess that’s an improvement from, what was it, banana-brain,” he says.

“Sounds about right. You used to get me in trouble for climbing that tree in Mr. Peterson’s yard,” I say remembering what must have been at least 10 years ago.

“In my defense I climbed it too. I was just better at getting down from it faster than you did.”

I start walking away and say, “You literally jumped out of that tree like a monk and ran away. How are you even alive right now? It’s no wonder you’re a banana brain.”

“You’re just mad because I had the guts to do what had to be done to get away, and you didn’t. It’s okay. We all understand. It’s hard to keep up with someone like me.”

“You’re so full of it. Get a room with yourself already,” I say rolling my eyes. Sam follows me as I walk back over to where Sarah is sitting.

“You brought back a pet for me,” Sarah says lowering her sunglasses when she sees me.

“He just followed me. This is Sam. I used to know him when we were kids,” I say plopping down on the ground next to her.

“Well, took you long enough to get back here. I’ve been waiting the longest,” she says uncrossing her legs in front of her.

“Let me guess. You were yoga-ing and then got bored?” Sam asks.

“Yes. Well, not bored, just restless,” she says shrugging a little.

“I cam help with that,” he says with a huge smirk on his face.

“He has no shame,” I explain.
The last time I saw Sam was during summer camp. We didn’t go to the same school. We didn’t live in the same neighborhood. But somehow we both ended up going to the same summer camp. I didn’t talk to him much since it had been a few years, and I wasn’t sure if he knew about my father leaving us. He used to come over to our house for Fourth of July and things like that, all the time, when Dad was still around, but by the time I saw him at summer camp we were both in middle school and he’d changed completely.

We didn’t actively avoid each other, but we also didn’t try to hangout or pretend to be friends. He was friends with a whole group of older guys that he got into trouble with all summer long, pulling pranks, while I kept to myself most of the time. I didn’t mind it, because I figured it was better than having to be awkward around each other anyway. He probably did know about my father. How could he not?

The summer camp was in the mountains. We were surrounded by trees and meadows and never-warm-enough air. On my first week there, on Thursday, I saw an owl with huge piercing eyes sitting on the very edge of a low tree branch. I sneaked out of the cabin after lights-out because I heard it hooting in the distance—a strange, high-pitched hoot—and wanted to get a good look at it. Its feathers were dark-greyish, almost blue-grey, and dull. It looked ancient. Like, it had been sitting there, hooting, for a very long time, much longer than when I first heard it.

I didn’t see it again until my last night at camp. Not for a lack of trying, though. Every night before I went to sleep I would lie still, closing my eyes, listening as hard as I could. I waited for the hooting, but it never came. I tried going to the same tree a few times, but it was never there. Not until the last night.
I’ve never understood coincidences. What they mean, why they happen, how they work. There are so many throw-away coincidences that happen all the time. I can’t help but want to make sense of them all. I can’t help but wonder what the universe is trying to say. It’s easy to notice a pattern. The why is the problem. Maybe coincidences are like warp threads in a tapestry, held in tension, where weft yarn loops over and under, over and under, in a discontinuous pattern, and warp threads stay hidden underneath the decorative fabric.

There are discontinuous patterns in tapestry and discontinuous functions in math. If infinite discontinuity can happen in math, then it makes some kind of weird sense for it to happen in the universe too. There are gaps and threads. Gaps and threads. Infinite coincidences in the middle of it all.

Last time I went home to visit Mom I couldn’t help noticing that things are different now. We have found a middle ground. Puzzles. We work on puzzles together, 500 piece sets, while we watch TV in the living room. We’ve been working on the same puzzle for three months now, one with sunflowers and baby blue sky. It’s been on the living room floor this whole time. I wonder how she vacuums the carpet around it. Since I usually only visit for a day or two, we haven’t finished it yet. You’d think easy peasy when you look at the cover. Not so much. At first I thought she would keep working on it after I left, but she never did. I’d find it just the same as I left it.

“Why don’t you work on it when I’m not here,” I asked her.

“Because it’s ours. I want to finish the puzzle with you. Why would I want to do it by myself? That’s no fun,” she said.
When we’re working on the puzzle everything is easier. We’re too busy doing something to worry about saying the wrong thing to each other. It’s there, but hidden.

“How’s school?” she asked as we worked on the bottom left corner, blades of grass.

“It’s okay. I still like most of my classes,” I said rotating a puzzle piece to see if it fit.

“They keep you busy with all that homework?”

“Sometimes. I think I’m learning a lot, though.”

“That’s good. It’s good to stay busy. People from around the neighborhood ask for you all the time.”

“Yeah? Who? I think these three go somewhere over there,” I said.

“Mrs. Kramer from down the street. Saw her when I came back from Target the other day. Said how you’re still getting those good grades.”

“How’s Chia?” I asked, thinking about Mrs. Kramer’s old dog.

“As wild as always. She never shuts up.”

“Some things never change.”

#

I invite Chris to come hiking with us on Saturday. I tell him he can bring someone if he wants. But I half-hope he does and half-hope he doesn’t.

“Why the hell did you do that for?” Sarah asks, when I tell her about it as we’re walking around the mall.

“Invite him? I don’t know. I—”

“No. Tell him he could bring someone. What the fuck is that? I know what you’re doing. I’m not letting you do it, Ems.”

“I’m not doing anything. What are you talking about?”
“Yes you are. You and I both know you don’t really want him to bring anyone,” she says. We walk into Sarah’s favorite store so she can look at some purses.

“I just wanted to keep it casual. I didn’t mean anything by it,” I say as we brush by some clothes. Sarah stops, turns around, crosses her arms in front of her chest. She knows I’m bullshitting her.

“Whatever. Don’t look at me like that. Can’t we just be happy I invited him?” I ask. Sarah sighs and shakes her head.

“You’re an idiot. But I love you,” she says hugging me.

#

I wrote Mom a letter once. I wanted to explain why I can’t believe the same things she believes, or why I can’t be the perfect daughter she wants me to be. The words never seemed to be enough, or right, or what she could accept, so I never gave it to her.

Dear Mom,

I wish I could talk to you about this without it turning into a fight. I wish you could listen to me and understand that I’m not attacking what you believe, and I’m not attacking you. I’m just saying what I feel. I don’t need you to agree, just listen. But that’s never how it goes with us, is it? So I’m writing this letter instead. I don’t know what I think about God. Whether or not he exists, whether or not he cares, whether or not he can stop bad things from happening to you.

Sometimes I look at the clouds change from peach to lilac, at sunset, and I can’t help but think there is a painter creating here. And other times I feel like I want to drown in pitch-black water to end the pain I feel inside. Bad things happen, and no one is there, and somehow I am still here, even though I don’t know why or how. It just is. I can’t believe in ultimatums. Think this.

Say these words. Don’t do that. Black and white. It’s not for me, Mom. I’m sorry.
It’s windy out on Saturday morning when we first arrive at the park. We walk in between two tall trees. One with golden-yellow leaves and the other with dark, merlot-red leaves. It’s early in the morning so everyone’s still in a groggy, slightly zombie-like mood as we make our way up to the campsite. I only packed the essentials since I wasn’t sure how much hiking Katie had in store for us, and I didn’t feel like carrying too much around. Katie and Mark are all the way in the front, Sarah and Charlotte behind them, and Chris, Laura and I are in the back.

We start setting up our tents an hour later when we make it to the campsite. By noon it seems everything’s warmed up, including everyone’s mood. We all sit around on the ground and have some lunch before we go exploring. I take out my pipe and lighter and start smoking.

“Hey, you better pass that around!” Mark says, as soon as he smells it. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes, smiling.

Sarah laughs and says, “Dude, when has she not shared? Just ask asshole.”

I laugh and hand my pipe over to Sarah, holding my thumb on its side to keep the bowl cherried.

“See, she didn’t even have to ask me because she’s got my back,” I say.

“I do too. Just throwing that out there,” Chris says, grinning. We all laugh and Sarah passes the pipe over to Chris when she’s done with it.

We hike a short trail, maybe two miles tops, but end up heading back early because it starts to get foggy out. We’re back at the campsite an hour before sunset and a few of us decide to take a nap. I jump into my tent and fall asleep as soon as I zip myself up into my sleeping bag, like a human Hot Pocket. By the time I wake up the sky is a polka-dotted deep violet, and the air smells of fire and burnt steak.
Mark and Chris are arguing by the bonfire and the other girls seem to still be asleep.

“Why don’t you try then? All you’re doing is sitting there and fucking complaining. I don’t mind eating it like this. It’s extra-well done. Nothing wrong with that,” Chris says as he stops pacing back and forth and sits down on his sleeping bag with a plastic plate and napkins in his hands.

“It’s crispy is what it is. Looks like huge ass steak chips,” Mark says pouring some soda in a cup and taking a sip.

“In what world does that sound like a bad thing?” Chris asks taking a bite, then putting it inside of a hamburger bun. I grab my sleeping bag, walk over, sit down next to him.

“Can I try?” I ask looking down at his sandwich. He nods and lifts the plate to my face. As I take a bite and chew, he says, “It needs a little more ketchup, but I can make you one if you want.”

“Yeah, that would be great. I actually really like it like this. I did bring some salt though, if you could put some on the steak for me before cooking it.”

“You got it,” he says and I walk back over to my tent to grab it.

“She’s just being nice,” Mark says as he starts playing some music on his phone.

“I’m really not. But you, on the other hand, totally lazy bum material,” I say shoving Mark on my way back.

“Uh, this is pink. I think you grabbed the wrong thing,” Chris says looking at it closely.

“It’s pink salt. It’s supposed to look like that,” I say laughing.

“Girl things. Now they even make special salt just for them. What is happening to this world, man?” Mark says.

“Strange things apparently,” Chris says shaking the salt and using his phone’s flashlight
to get a better look.

“You guys are so stupid,” I say sitting back down on my sleeping bag. Charlotte wakes up then and joins us by the fire. So does Sarah, not too long after that. We eat and we joke and we listen to music on Mark’s phone until he turns it off to charge it with his portable charger. Then we use Charlotte’s phone, and we listen to an unhealthy, yet completely reasonable amount of Backstreet Boys and Nsync while the guys cringe.

I don’t know when it happens or how, but I end up holding hands with Chris. What I do know is how good it feels to have his fingers interlaced with mine. It happens almost automatically. Like our bodies know something we don’t, like my skin, my cells, know what I need before I even do.

The flickering fire and the body heat of Chris’s arm resting against mine keeps me warm for a long time as the moon tip-toes across the blue-black sky and my friends slowly grow tired and walk sleepily to their tents. But when the temperature drops and the wind picks up, I start shivering a little.

“Do you want to come in my tent with me?” Chris says as the firelight beams off his face.

“Yeah. Sorry I’m shaking like this. I—“

“No. Don’t be sorry. It’s okay. We should get inside. It’s cold. I should’ve said something sooner.”

We grab our sleeping bags and walk over to his tent. After he zips up the tent and we set down our sleeping bags next to each other I say, “Oh my gosh. You brought a blanket? That looks super comfy. I should’ve thought of that.”

“Yeah, it’s fleece. It’s actually a thermal blanket so it’s warm too. If you want we can share it,” he offers.
“Sure. I already feel so much warmer just looking at it,” I say unzipping my sleeping bag from top to bottom, and laying down on my side. Chris unfolds the blanket and spreads it across the both of us. We then place the top half of our sleeping bags over the blanket, so we have two layers. I pull the blanket over my head and stretch my arm across Chris’s torso.

“Much better, huh?” he says chuckling as I look up at him in the dark. The yellow oval of his black batman hoodie is still visible in the dark and I can’t help but laugh at this.

“What so funny?” he asks as he tucks my hair behind my ears. It takes me a few minutes to get ahold of myself, but I finally do.

“Nothing. I’m just really glad I’m here with you right now.”

I want to say, it’s a batman thing, but he won’t really get it, so I decide to keep it to myself.

“Me too,” he says slowly tracing his fingers across the side of my face. I kiss him then, and he kisses me back. First it’s short, tender kisses, and then long, deep ones. The kind of kisses that pull you in. The ones I didn’t even know are real. No one has ever kissed me like this. I never knew it could even feel so good. He slides his hands on my waist and asks, “Is this okay?”

I say, “Yes.”

This is more than okay. This is what I want.

Afterwards, when I turn around on my side to go to sleep he pulls me in closer and wraps his arm around me, my back to his front, my skin against his skin, our breathing slow and rhythmic and almost in synch. Knees bent, limbs folded over limbs, his warm breath blowing circles in the back of my head.

Time freezes, elapses, suspends in loops and coils.
Chapter 7

Warping Space Time and Other Shenanigans

I wonder what Einstein thought when he first realized how intricately connected space and time are to each other. How they’re woven together to make space-time, and that all throughout the vast universe, in all the dark empty places and all the fiery nebula shiny places, space-time is curved everywhere. Who would’ve thought that the fabric of space-time can curve and wrinkle and bend out of shape? Even the universe is delicate.

For a long time, scientist and physicists have been grappling with the problem of time travel because you’d first have to figure out how to move faster than the speed of light, and that’s hella fast. Only teeny-tiny quantum particles can do that. Then there’s paradoxes and self-consistency in timelines to deal with. But we’ll it figure out someday. There is always another way. We’ll be breaking the rules, sure, but we have to try.

There are three songs I would want to take with me if I was time traveling. Pink Floyd’s “Time,” would be the obvious first one. U2’s “Moment of Surrender” would be the second. And Explosions in The Sky’s “The Birth And Death of a Day” would be the last. I thought I’d save the best for last. I probably won’t have time to listen to all three songs, but they’ll be playing inside of me anyway. Sometimes I think music, in its own way, is a form of time travel. Sometimes people are like melodies, chords, beats in a song.

If I could just listen to the right song at the right time, maybe I could fix everything. I just want to find the shattered pieces.

#

Self-sabotage is easy. You want someone to give up on you, so you give them reason to. Chris was getting too close. We were hanging out all the time. I started telling him more things
about me. He was there and I was getting used to him being there. I couldn’t let him see me, really see me. It was all too much. If he really knew me, he wouldn’t want to be with me. He’d realize I’m not enough and he’d leave. He’d leave just like dad left. He would go and I would stay. I’d be alone with my not enough self, proof that yet again I’m not worth it. I couldn’t handle that. I had to do something. I needed control and falling for someone is a lack of control. There’s no easy to press, red plastic stop button. Anything can happen. You can’t stop him from leaving, from breaking you, so you have to stop it before it ever happens. You leave before he can.

And then there was Cory’s party. I wasn’t planning to do what I did. I wasn’t planning for it to be over that night, but I might as well have. I knew what I was doing. Chris and I weren’t together, but we weren’t completely not together either. It was this weird in between place where possibilities and uncertainties vibrated. Maybe it wasn’t just me. Maybe he wasn’t sure about what he wanted after the in between place either.

I had to do something.

#

I have gone over it in my head so many times. I’ve relived it, and relived it, and relived it. I want to forget it, that night, the look on his face, that whole summer. I still don’t know why I froze. I couldn’t move or scream or push him off. I kept thinking. It’ll be over soon. It’ll be over soon. Just stay still. Just pretend you aren’t here. Maybe he’ll stop. You’re not here. This isn’t happening. Please be over soon. I didn’t fight or scream or try to run. I hid inside of my body and waited.

I only wanted to find the stupid owl I saw in the woods a few weeks before. If I hadn’t snuck out, if I had screamed when he first grabbed me, if I could’ve just understood what was
happening and done something, anything, it never would’ve happened. I want to know why he did this to me. I want to stop it, erase is, change the entire night. I want to forget he exists. How could I have let it happen? How can I change something that was my own fault?

When I remember that night, I see myself frozen inside of my own skin, shaking behind the girl’s bathroom. The air was humid, his sweaty hand pressed over my mouth, and his necklace dangling slowly in the dark. I yell at myself to kick and push and run away, but it never happens. No matter how many times I relive it, it always ends the same. I wait for it to be over, and it never seems to be over.

I thought it was pointless to try and run away. Where would I go? Who would help me? It was no use. I was not in control.

#

“Call me back. I need to talk to you,” Mom says in a voicemail. I’ve been avoiding her calls for the past two days.

“You alright?” Sarah asks.

“Oh, yeah. It was just my mother,” I say sliding into the front seat of her car.

“So she’s been the one calling you. You should get back to her. Seems like she really wants to talk to you.”

“I guess. I don’t know why she’s bugging though. I just saw her like two weeks ago or something. There’s literally no reason for her to be calling already.”

“Maybe she just misses you. Moms do that sometimes, right?” Sarah says fastening her seatbelt and turning on the ignition.

“Whatever. It’s not even that serious. You know it isn’t like that with her,” I say.

“So last night. You and Chris?” she asks looking over at me.
“Yeah. It was the best. Sarah, he was so sweet.”

“Aaah, yay! This calls for a celebration. You know what that means.”

“Milkshakes at the diner!” we yell at the same time. Sarah cracks opens the windows a little, letting some cool air in. I turn on her radio and music fills up every inch of her car. We both laugh and sing at the top of our lungs as we drive back to the city.

We arrive at the diner just in time for brunch and find a seat in the back. We sit in the booth right under a large screen TV showing a football game. I order the S’mores milkshake and Sarah orders the Brownie and Salted Caramel one, like always. While Sarah goes in the bathroom to wash her hands I decide to call Mom.

“Sorry I missed your calls yesterday. I had a busy day,” I say.

“It’s alright. I just really need to talk to you. Can you come over soon? Maybe sometime this upcoming week?” she asks.

“I don’t understand. What’s this all about? Can’t you just talk to me now?”

“No. I can, but I think it would be much better to talk to you about it when you’re here with me,” she says.

“Is something wrong? Why won’t you just tell me what’s going on?” I ask.

“Nothing’s wrong. I promise. Just come, okay? It’s important.”

“Fine. I’ll be there on Wednesday,” I say before we hang up.

When Sarah gets back and sits down she says, “Why do you look like someone just stole your milkshake?”

“I called her. Something’s up.”

“Let’s just not think about that for now. We’re in the bad mood free zone, remember,” she says. I nod and try to forget about it
Sarah and I used to leave notes in each other’s lockers all the time. We’d fold a piece of notebook paper in the smallest square possible and slide it in on the side of the locker. We kept the silly folding ritual even after we memorized each other’s locker combinations. Sarah started the whole thing by saying it was more fun than texting since we had to work for it a little. Write out notes in baby blue and purple ink with doodles on the side, come up with new and inventive excuses to get out of class to drop it off in each other’s lockers, wait and constantly check for a note back later on in the day. Sometimes it felt like we were spies trading in super-secret spy information and every time I raised my hand to “go to the bathroom” I was really going on a classified mission instead. I loved Sarah’s notes. Even when it was just a drawing of a bored elephant with an apple on the tip of its trunk, pointing at the sky, with a cloud shaped speech bubble saying, *To be, or not to be, that is the question.* Sarah had serious elephant drawing skills. For the life of me I don’t know where she learned how to draw such elephantly elephants. Other times the note included the latest gossip, with all the juicy he said she saids.

My favorite notes were the ones I took my time to write. A couple of times I even wrote them at home, a day before. Some things were easier to tell Sarah when they were written down. One time I wrote, *Do you ever feel scared? Like, you’re waiting for something bad to happen kinda scared? I do sometimes.* It took me an hour to write that. I didn’t want her to ask any questions, or be weird about it, but I wanted to say it. I needed to know if she understood. She wrote back, *Maybe. But that’s why we have each other. Fuck that. We have magic, remember. You and me. Bad things don’t stand a chance.*

I laughed when I read that in class. Sarah always did make me believe in magic.
“You expecting important message?” Mikhail asks. I take out my debit card and hand it over to him.

“What?” I say as I stuff my phone in my jeans.

“You check phone many times. I saw you in line,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Oh. No, it’s nothing. I didn’t even check it that many times.”

“Yes, you did,” he says leaning on the counter after helping the last person in line. I roll my eyes and hand him two M&M’s.

“If this is message from boy, he is no good,” he says.

“It’s not. It’s actually my mom. The boy can not message me as much as he wants. It’s my mom I’m waiting to hear back from.”

“This is strange. Moms always answer back.”

“Yeah. It’s not like that. There’s just something she doesn’t want to tell me.”

“Ah, she must have her secrets. Not to worry. Now, who is this boy? Why do I not know about boy?”

“You’re ridiculous. There’s nothing for you to worry about either,” I say.

“Now you are keeping secrets too. Why? I will not be happy if he comes here with you. I will tell him he’s no good if he doesn’t send you message.”

“Thanks Mikhail. That’s really nice of you to say, but you don’t know the whole story. People have reasons.”

“You are strange girl,” he says as I walk away. I can’t argue with that.

#

I walk up the front porch steps on Wednesday night right before the sun dips under the horizon. The street is mostly quiet except for the occasional car driving by and the sound of one
of the neighbors talking on the phone in his front yard. Every time I come back here I expect something to be different in the neighborhood, for there to be the smallest little thing that’s out of place, but it never changes. Everything seems to be just as I left it. Some kids are standing around on the corner of the street waiting for the 240 bus. Mrs. Kramer’s super hairy dog, Chia, is sitting on her front porch barking at every person who walks by, as if to say, *Don’t you even dare cross into my territory! I will mess you up.* There’s that one random streetlight that glows orange unlike the other bright off-white ones.

I take my coat off after I walk in and join Mom in the living room. She’s folding some clothes and watching the news. The room is clean as always, with everything in its place, but it looks like she moved the puzzle a little to the left. Maybe only an inch or so, but I could still tell. I wonder how she moved it without it coming apart at least a little bit. I walk around the puzzle and sit down on the coach.

“Do you want some tea? I have water on the stove. I was going to make some tea. I only have chamomile right now though,” Mom says shifting in her seat a little as if to get up.

“Sure. I’ll have some,” I say even though I don’t really want any. She walks over to the kitchen and I hear the opening and closing of drawers. I flip through TV channels absentmindedly as I wait, not really looking for anything.

“Oh, you know what, Rita told me there’s supposed to be a special tonight on the history channel about the bible,” she says walking back into the living room with two cups of tea. I take one and she goes back in the kitchen to grab the sugar.

“Mom, is that why I’m here? Is that what this is really all about?” I ask, setting down my mug on the coffee table.

“No. No it’s not, honey. I just thought we could watch that later if you want,” she says,
and I know it’s not really a choice. I know I’m supposed to want to watch it.

“You called me like four times last week. I just want to know why,” I say.

“Okay, okay. I just thought we could relax and talk first. I shouldn’t have called so many times and made you worry. That’s my fault. I made it into a big thing, while it’s really not that big of a deal,” she says taking a sip of her tea.

“If it wasn’t a big deal, you would’ve just told me on the phone,” I say scratching my elbow.

“Fine. Why aren’t you drinking your tea. You haven’t even touched it. “

I lean back and look up at the ceiling.

“I didn’t tell you on the phone, because I wanted to really talk to you about it. It’s better to do that in person. That way we can be sure to listen to each other,” she says placing a hand on my knee.

“I’m listening,” I say looking over at her.

“Well, what I wanted to tell you is that your father is back in town. He came here last week and we talked. It was really nice. He wants to see you too,” she says smiling.

“You’re kidding right? You let him in here? You think I want to talk to him. That’s not going to happen,” I say standing up.

“He’s you’re father. You can’t shut him out,” she says sitting up and putting her tea away.

“This is why you wanted me to come? To try and make me see him. You knew I wouldn’t. How can you even talk to him? He left us, Mom. He left. He doesn’t get to come back and think it’s all good.”

“Sit down. There’s no reason to get angry like this. You need to calm down,” she says
crossing her arms in front of her.

“I have every reason to be upset. I don’t care if you want to talk to him, but I’m not interested. You can’t make me see him.”

“Sit down. Look, you can’t tell me you haven’t missed him after all this time. He’s back. This is a good thing. You’ll feel differently after you talk to him.”

“No, I won’t,” I say sitting back down. I can’t believe this. She really expects me to talk to him.

“I knew you were going to be difficult about this. But he’s your father. This is the right thing to do,” she says grabbing my tea and walking over to the kitchen to throw it out in the sink.

“You’re not listening to me. I don’t want to talk to him,” I say.

I grab my purse, get up and walk over to the kitchen.

“I know you thought having me here would make it easier for you to try and convince me to see him. But maybe you should think about the fact that you already knew I wouldn’t have even considered it on the phone and I won’t now.”

“I just wanted you to know. I didn’t want to wait and then have you hear about it from someone else. “

“Well, thanks for the heads up. I’m gonna go.”

“Just give him a chance. If you change your mind, he’s staying at the Hilton. You should go and see him,” she says.

I don’t understand why she would even let him in the house after he left the way that he did. We haven’t heard from him in years, absolutely nothing, and now she lets him waltz right back in, just like that. Then, there’s this wanting to talk to me thing. It’s a joke. He hasn’t cared for years whether I’m even dead or alive. What does he want with me now? It makes no sense.
So what if I used to wish he had taken me with him. It was stupid. It wasn’t even really about him at all. I wanted to get away. That’s all it was. I told Sarah about it once and she said that she would help me find him. But when it came down to it, I realized I didn’t want to find him. He could stay gone.

“Are you sure?” Sarah asked. We were sitting by the river after school on a cloudy day. It was sometime in April, a week before the school dance.

“Yeah. I mean, thanks for offering. I’m sure you’re right. It probably can’t be that hard trying to track him down. But what would I even say to him? What if he has this whole new family? I don’t want to know if he does. It’s better this way,” I said.

“That makes sense. What an asshole. That’s what he is. You’re better off without him,” she said.

“You know, this one time, he took me to the zoo. Him and Mom didn’t even fight that day. At least I don’t remember them fighting. Not once. We went to this one area where they had monkeys. It smelled so bad there.”

“Gross,” Sarah said laughing and wiggling her nose as if she smelled it in that moment.

“We saw the monkeys moving around through the trees, grabbing branches and swinging back and forth with their freakishly long arms and stuff. He said something about how he thought it would be funny if we could move around like that too.”

“What did your mom say?” Sarah asked.

“She just shook her head and said he’s being silly. Then he did that stupid thing with his arms, pretending like he was a monkey. It was really funny.”

“That’s cute,” Sarah said throwing a stick in the river.
I asked for one of those fluffy monkey stuffed animals all day, but I never got it. I can’t remember why.

#

When I get back home I notice Katie isn’t there. I sit on the couch in the living room with my legs tucked under me and I turn on some music. Schrödinger jumps up on my lap and purrs as I pet her. Not long after that my phone rings and I see that Chris is calling me. It rings a few times before I decide to pick it up.

“Hey,” I say nervously, not really knowing what to say.

“How are you? Did I call at a good time?” he asks.

“I don’t really know. I’ve had a pretty bad night. I’m not sure I’ll be much fun to talk to right now.”

“That’s very honest. What’s going on? Do you want me to come over? We can talk about it,” he says.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine,” I say trying to sound more okay then I feel.

“I’m coming over. Are you home?”

“No I’m not. It’s sweet of you to want to cheer me up and everything, but I don’t want you to worry, seriously” I say.

“I can hear your cat. So, she’s totally given you away, just so you know. Alright, listen, if you really don’t want me there, I won’t come. But I want to. I promise not to try to cheer you up.”

“Okay. Well, I don’t not want you here,” I say finally.

“Cool. Be there in a few,” he says before hanging up.

I go to the bathroom and take a shower in the meantime. I wash my hair and let it air dry
after I brush out all the tangles. It’s not long before Chris knocks on the front door and I let him in. We sit down and I turn on the TV. I ask him if he wants something to drink and he says yes, so I grab two cans of soda from the fridge.

“What are you doing?” I ask seeing him play around with the soda can tab after he opens it. He messes around with the pull tab until it breaks off.

“It’s for good luck,” he says putting it in palm of my hand.

“Really? How does it work? I can’t believe I’ve been missing out on good luck all this time. You have to tell me everything.”

“Well, first you count to seven before you break it off. If it takes more bending than that, it’s not gonna work. Same thing if it breaks off earlier. So you have to be careful. And then you hold it like this,” he says making my hand into a fist.

“What now?” I ask curiously.

“You think about whatever you need some luck with and gives you courage. At least that’s what my grandma says.”

I open my hands and look at the pull tab. It’s so simple and ordinary. Nothing special about it. It’s light and dull and made out of cheap aluminum.

“I guess it must be true since your grandma said it, huh?” I say sticking it in my pocket.

“That’s right. She’s never wrong,” he says fake-serious.

I scratch my shoulder and look over at the TV, not paying much attention to the movie that’s playing.

“My Dad is back,” I say all of a sudden. It sounds weird even to my own ears.

“The one who walked out and disappeared?” he asked.

“That would be the one,” I say.
“I’m going to take a wild guess and say that’s why you haven’t had the best night.”

I finally look over at Chris and say, “My mom thinks I should talk to him. She’s crazy. She doesn’t even seem mad at him.”

“Do you know why he’s back?” Chris asks.

“No. She didn’t tell me. What does it matter anyway? I don’t want anything to do with him.”

“Well, you don’t have to talk to him. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. You don’t owe him anything,” he says. Schrödinger pushes her head against Chris’s legs and meows until he reaches down and pets her.

“Exactly. I don’t. I wish he would’ve just stayed away, wherever he was. I hate this. She can’t make me see him.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t decided yet,” I say.

We go back to watching the movie and I try to push away my thoughts. I don’t want to think about any of it.

#
Chapter 8

Black Holes

If there’s one thing I’ve always wondered about, it’s black holes. Everything about them is so weird. It’s not until very recently that astronomers and astrophysicists have learned that there are supermassive black holes at the center of almost every galaxy. I don’t know what this means exactly, why they’re there, but it seems important. They’re in the middle of it all. Black holes are interconnected with galaxies in such a powerful way. Their creation, shape, maybe even future of the galaxy. Then there’s the stars that float around at the edge of a galaxy. Even these are affected by the black hole’s gravitational field. It decides how fast they move.

You never think of black holes as the death state of a star, but that’s what they are. They get a bad rep. Mostly because they’re so dark and mysterious—like to swallow up things that come too close. But they’re creators just as much as they are destroyers. It has to mean something. The universe is filled with holes and if you get close enough, if you cross the event horizon, there is no going back. At the center of black holes lies gravitational singularities, where the force of gravity becomes infinite. I can’t imagine what that must feel like, but Stephen Hawking knows. Not because he’s like, actually gone inside of one, obviously, but because he’s studied them a lot longer than I have, and also he’s way smart. If you were to fall inside of a supermassive black hole or even a smaller Joe-Shmoe sized one, it would take a while before you start feeling the tidal forces stretching you out like a noodle. The deeper you fall in, the more you feel the imbalance of gravity between your head and feet. The unevenness of it all. Time inside of black holes is different. Things slow down, and you don’t even notice it. The gravity is so strong and powerful that it distorts time.

Black holes are an important piece of the puzzle. As they bang against space-time, as
some of them rotate and others stay still, they leave behind clues of how the Universe first started, about the things that have happened so long ago. The expansions and collapses.

There are holes everywhere.

#

“Barry’s band is playing tonight at that bar we went to last time. You want to go?” Sarah asks. We walk out of the makeup store and wait at the light to cross the street.

“That place with the all those blue lights? Yeah, I’m in. I love the vibe there. How long is their set tonight, do you know?”

“It’s supposed to be half an hour, but they might go over. You know how they always do that,” she says.

“They know they can get away with it, that’s why. They’re really good.”

We get there a little after 8:30 and stand near the front of the stage. The drummer, Will, nods at me and I smile back before they start playing. Sarah walks over to the bar to get us some drinks, and I sway along to the music as Barry starts singing, his fingers slowly strumming the guitar. I look around and notice that even though the bar is full of people, the atmosphere somehow still manages to stay really low-key. Not too loud, not too quiet. It’s the frothy, smooth place in between.

Sarah and I stand under a blanket of misty blue air as the sad song hits just the right chords that make you want to sink right into them. We smile as we hook our arms into infinities and our shoulders sway from left to right. She sings along, then I sing along, and everything tastes like the right shade of semisweet bitter.

When their set is over, we stand around with the band in a circle at a dark end of the bar. Will nudges me to follow him and I do.
“Glad you came Star Kid,” he says giving me a hug.

“Me too. I like the new song you guys played at the end,” I say.

“Tommy and I wrote that one together. I thought you’d like it.”

“Always so confident,” I joke as we lean against the dirty wall and he sticks his hands in the front pocket of his sweatshirt.

“I got a reputation to uphold. You know how it is. Gotta keep the fans happy,” he says smirking. I laugh at that and shake my head.

“No, I just notice the kind of songs you like the most. It’s not hard to tell with you. You get this look.”

“Whatever. I don’t get a look. I am completely look-free mister.”

“If that’s what you need to tell yourself. By the way, I still have one of your scarves at my place. I don’t know if you want it back, but you’re welcome to come over tonight to get it,” he says.

“It’s the black one with ruffles, right? I was wondering where that was. I’m going to have to pass, though. I can’t,” I say.

“Why not? You and I both know we’ll have a good time.”

“I know. That’s not it.”

“You seeing someone now?” he asks taking a sip of his beer.

“Something like that. I’m still figuring that out,” I say.

“Well, if you change your mind, you know where to find me,” he says.

I give him a hug and we walk back over to where everyone’s standing. The good thing about Will is that he gets it. He never expects more than I can give, and he’s not a jerk about it.

When Sarah and I go to the bathroom a few minutes later she says asks me about Will.
“I thought for sure you would’ve left with him already,” she says as she washes her hands.

“I didn’t really want to this time. It’s weird right?”

“He’ll survive. You know how he is with girls,” she says

I do know and I’ve never had a problem with it. He’s upfront about how he is. I think that’s what’s always made it so easy to be friends with him. He does his thing, I do my thing. Sometimes we come together.

A bunch of us go over to Barry’s place to hang out after. He has access to the rooftop in his building so we take a few blankets and chairs up to the roof with us. Sarah and I share a large beanie bag chair. It’s soft and seems to be made out of really nice material. Velvet, maybe. Definitely more comfortable than the typical plastic kind. There are white twinkly lights all around the side of the roof. The lights wrap around a bar in loops, like shiny city vines lighting up the night.

“Do you want something to drink? I’m going to raid Barry’s refrigerator,” Sarah whispers in my ear. I laugh looking over at her, realizing she’s already buzzed.

“Check if he has Baily’s and ice cream. I could definitely go for that right now,” I say after thinking about it for a minute. Sarah’s eyes light up and she says, “Oh my God, that’s what I want too.”

I decide to go downstairs with her, in case she gets distracted and forgets.

“Nobody take our chair! We have important girl things to go do. But we’ll back for it,” she says to everyone before we leave.

Barry says, “I’ll make sure of it Cuz.”

She starts making her way down the stairs and Barry grins, giving me his famous take-
care-of-her-will-you look as he leans against the red brick wall. I nod and follow her down to his apartment. Someone stumbles out of the bathroom as we walk into the kitchen.

“How could he not have ice cream? Who lives without ice cream? It’s just wrong,” Sarah says, disappointed. We find some Bailey’s in the side of the refrigerator door, but no ice cream.

“I can go get some. There’s a CVS two streets down from here. What kind do you want?” I ask.

“I’m coming with you. I have to see what kind they have,” she says, grabbing her purse on the kitchen counter. I think about telling her to stay, but change my mind. It’s not even a long walk anyway. I text Barry and tell him where we’re going.

We wait forever at the corner of the street for the light to change, so we can cross. We walk into the CVS right before it closes and run over to where the refrigerated things are, on the left side of the store. I pick a small carton of ice cream, but Sarah takes her time. She can’t decide between the Haagen Dazs cookie dough or the Ben & Jerry’s cookie dough.

“Emily?” I hear behind me. I look around and see an older man in a charcoal suit and navy blue tie. He’s clean shaven and has spiky, dark hair. I grab an ice cream and pull Sarah with me over to the cash register.

“Are you sure this one is yummier?” she asks.

“Yeah. I’m sure. We need to go,” I say handing over ten dollars and grabbing our bag. The lady gives me my change and we rush out. I don’t look back after we leave.

“Who was that at the store?” Sarah asks when we finally make it back up to the rooftop. We sit down and I look up at the sky.

“That was my father,” I say. Sarah looks at me wide-eyed and offers a bite of her ice cream. Neither of us knows what to say.
“I want to get Laura something really nice. She deserves it you know,” Katie says as she paces back and forth in the living room. I stretch my legs across the floor and focus on my deep breathing as I switch between yoga poses.

“I’m surprised. I would’ve thought for sure you’d already have a present ready to go. Her birthday is tomorrow,” I say teasing her.

“Shut up. You don’t think I know that. I’ve been looking for the perfect thing all month, and I haven’t found it. I can’t get her just anything. It has to be special. It has to be absolutely perfect—so she knows how important she is to me. What am I going to do? This is a fucking disaster,” she says grabbing her hair.

“You’re focusing way too much on getting the perfect thing. It doesn’t exist,” I say.

“The hell it does,”

“If you keep freaking out and thinking like that, you’re gonna end up not finding anything for her. That’s worse.”

“Don’t say that. Ugh, I hate this,” she says, sitting down.

“Look, for her birthday, all she’s going to want is to know that you care, which I’m sure she already does. Just get her something you think she’d appreciate. It doesn’t have to be this big, out of this world thing. It doesn’t have to be perfect to be special,” I say.

Katie bites her nails and doesn’t say anything.

“Well, I was thinking of maybe taking her somewhere special, just the two of us. Like a weekend ski trip or a long road trip to somewhere she’s always wanted to go.”

“Laura would go crazy for that,” I say.

“Are you coming to the surprise birthday party tomorrow night?” she asks.
“Yep. I’ll be a little late though. I have to meet up with this girl from school. She’s going to be presenting at this physics conference thing, and one of my professors assigned me to help her set up. Anyway, it’s only supposed to be for an hour, so don’t worry. I’m not missing the party.”

“You can invite your friend Chris if you want. Laura thinks he’s nice.”

“Maybe I will,” I say.

“I think I’m going to make some brownies for tomorrow. Not for everyone at the party, but just for us. Laura sent me this really good recipe the other day on Facebook. I can just, like, hide the brownies in my closet or something and save it for when the party’s over and most people have left. She’s going to flip.”

“We’re not talking regular brownies here are we?” I say scooting over to where Katie’s sitting.

“No we’re not,” she says with a small smirk.

“You should probably make them today to make sure they taste good first. We can test one and leave the rest for tomorrow,” I say as Katie looks through her phone for the recipe.

“Dude, it’s going to be good. Have you not met me? I’m not going to mess it up. And get this; the recipe also explains how to make canna-infused coconut oil to use for the brownies. It’s much healthier and stronger than if you were to mix it with butter, cause it has a higher fat content.”

“Damn, look at you girl,” I say laughing.

Katie shoves me and says, “Now you want to flatter me. Get outta here.”

But she looks so proud of herself already.

#
With every year and every day, with every minute and second, time runs faster. I keep wanting to go back, but I can’t. I keep wanting to pause, but I can’t. There’s so much I wish was different. So much history I want to unmake. A part of me wants to come up with reasons and explanations. Where are the answers? A problem can usually be solved if you plug in the right variable, quantity, element in the right place. But I can’t seem to put the pieces together. Multiply or divide. Solving and unsolving. I can’t understand why things happen the way that they do.

I’m so tired of being the wrong variable.

I’m reeling on the edge. Holding on. I’m holding on.

#

By senior year I had mastered the art of sneaking out after fights with Mom. Yelling, more yelling, locking myself in my room. It wasn’t a hard thing to do, slipping away. I knew where to step and where not to step--where creaks hid secrets under old, wooden floorboards. All I had to do was wait and take my time. Hurried tiptoeing is louder than carefully placed footsteps, heels and all. The door’s metal lock was the loudest thing in the house, and it was only loud to me.

I’d run down the driveway and Sarah would be there, waiting for me at the edge of the sidewalk. Sometimes we went to the arcade that was open 24/7, other times we drove around in her car. The best of these nights were the unexpected ones. Times when Barry would be playing a show at a coffee shop or bowling place at the outskirts of the city. He’d invite us last minute. Even if it was just for a few hours, it was enough. The best kind of escape lets you forget. You’re too busy being swept away by the present moment, you fall right into, and nothing else matters.

#
I expected more of Laura’s sorority sisters to be at the party, but Katie didn’t invite a majority of them. Apparently, they all took her to a birthday brunch earlier, so Katie thought there wasn’t any reason they should all be at the party too. She only invited a couple of girls she knew Laura would absolutely want at the party. The rest of the party guests are friends from school.

There’s people spread out all across the living room and kitchen when I arrive at the apartment. Sitting, standing, dancing around to music. I wish Laura a happy birthday and walk over to the small balcony with a drink. I’m surprised to see Chris sitting there in one of the plastic chairs with his feet up against the railing.

“Look who finally showed up to the party. I got here first,” he says standing up to give me a hug.

“You beat me to it. Relax. We’ll see about next time,” I say sitting down next to him.

“Next time, huh? Bring it,” he says with a challenging smile. I look down at the parking lot, people walking by. The night air is cool and still, only interrupted by the occasional slight breeze. I grab Chris’s plastic cup and take a sip.

“Hey, yours is right there genius,” he says picking up mine and doing the same thing.

“I just wanted to see what you’re drinking. Rum and coke. You can never go wrong with that.”

“Wise words,” he says.

“My dad used to say that. You can never go wrong with rum. He’d laugh at himself every time he said it. We used to always have it in the house. He loved the stuff. I don’t know how I still remember that.”

“Some things stick with you,” he says.
“I guess. Is it weird that I like it too? I feel like I shouldn’t, you know. But I kind of do,” I say.

“There’s no reason to feel bad about it. It doesn’t matter what he likes.”

“It’s not rum’s fault for being good, right?”

“Exactly. Good things need to be appreciated,” he says.

“Besides, have you ever tried Malibu with literally anything? It’s like liquid paradise,” I say.

“You guys, you should come inside and dance,” Laura says leaning against the sliding glass door. Katie sneaks up behind her and kisses her until Laura follows her back to the living room.

Chris stands up from his chair and pulls me inside.

“You heard the girl,” he says doing a silly dance move with his arms.

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” I say joining in on the weirdness. Chris grabs my hand unexpectedly and swirls me around in a quick circle. I squeal as he does it again, this time pulling me in closer to his chest, leaving no space between us. We dance and we bump into people and we laugh until we bubble over.

“You’re not so bad at the dancing thing,” I say when we finally find a spot to sit on the floor, in a corner.

“Don’t look so surprised I can keep up with you. I’ve always had skills,” he says, stretching out his legs.

I look around the room and take a sip of my drink.

“I give it another half an hour,” I say conspiratorially.

“Half an hour for what?” he asks.
“For most of the people to leave so we can have brownies,” I half-whisper.

“Why are we whispering about brownies? Are we not sharing?” he asks.

I nod and give him a high five.

He laughs and says, “I gotta say, it feels good to be in on this. It was my dancing skills wasn’t it?”

“No silly. You’re part of the inner circle. It has its perks,” I say.

Buzzed or not, my guess turns out to be right. It’s not long before people start leaving, a little after midnight. I guess that’s the good thing about having a party in the middle of the week. Most people have classes to go in the morning.

I don’t have to remind Katie about the brownies because she brings them out herself after telling Laura she has one last surprise.

“Wanna share one?” I ask Chris, as Laura opens the Tupperware.

“You don’t want one to yourself?” he asks.

“No. These are actually pretty strong and I don’t want it just make me go to sleep as soon as it hits. I want to enjoy it.”

“Oh my god. These are so good babe,” Laura exclaims, hugging Katie.

Sarah says, “She’s right sis. It’s mad soft and chocolatey. I’m literally dying here. We have to make this for our birthday too.”

“Emily helped me out. It took a long time, though, since I wanted to do it exactly like the recipe said. But it turned out good, so who cares,” Katie says.

Chris takes a bite and so do I, while Sarah closes the glass door to the balcony. I walk over to the stereo, with the flickering candles on each side, and change up the music to something more chill. When I go back and try to sit on the arm of the sofa, Chris pulls me down
to sit on his lap.

We hang out for a little while longer, listening to music, talking, playing Cards Against Humanity. Mark keeps going to the bathroom to pee because he drank too much beer and his bladder is not having it. An hour or so later everyone else leaves when Laura starts to get sleepy and Katie carries her on her back over to the room. Chris and I stay on the couch too lazy to do much of anything but eat chips and watch an old Star Wars movie playing on the TV.

I lean my head against his shoulder and say, “I hope you know how sorry I am.”

“Sorry for what?” he says surprised.

“For the way I stopped talking to you.”

“It was a long time ago,” he says, stiffening a little.

“I know. But it was still really messed up. I wish I’d never done that.”

“Why did you?” he asks.

“I was really scared. I don’t know how else to explain it. The way I felt about you. The way I still feel about you. You don’t understand how terrifying it is. I know it doesn’t change anything. I fucked up. I really did. I just want you to know I’m sorry.”

“I thought about you lot after we stopped talking. I was so mad at you for a long time. I didn’t understand what I could have possibly done wrong. I didn’t get why you would just stop talking to me out of nowhere. And I missed you. God, I really fucking missed you. I hated that.”

“I’d be mad at me too if I was you. I wouldn’t blame you for hating me. I deserve it. But I did miss you too. I tried not to, but I did. And then you moved. I thought I wasn’t ever going to see you again.”

”Ems, I could never hate you. Not ever. I was just confused. Mad too, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t think about you all the time. Why didn’t you just tell me how you felt?” he asks
lifting my chin so I could look up at him.

“I couldn’t. How was I supposed to do that? I didn’t want to lose you. I was so scared you would leave. Chris, I was so sure you would. I knew once you did I wouldn’t be able to handle it,” I say feeling ashamed.

“How could you think that? You were so wrong,” he says grabbing my face and kissing me hard. I lose it then. I try to hold it in, but can’t. Lava hot tears build up in my head. It builds up and builds up, then releases—rolls down in streams down my cheeks. I try to stop it, will myself to keep the salty liquid where it belongs. It doesn’t stop.

“I’m so sorry,” I say again, not having any more words inside of me.

“Hey. Hey. No more apologizing, okay? No one’s mad. Come here,” he says pulling me closer and tucking my hair behind my ear.

“Do you want to lie down?” he asks softly.

I nod and say, “Yeah, but we should go to my room. This couch is really hard and uncomfortable.”

“Okay,” he says as he follows me down the hall.

#

A few days later I decide it’s time to go over to that hotel. I ask Sarah to take me.

“I’m not going to be long. If you couldn’t just wait for me, I’ll be in and out as quick as I can,” I say.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” she asks.

“No. I have to do this on my own. I don’t want to, trust me, but I have to do this, otherwise it’s just going to keep bugging me. Thanks for offering, though,” I say as I get out of the car.
“Of course. I’ll be here,” she says.

I walk across the parking lot and into the hotel lobby. Once I’m inside the elevator I stand and wait for a few minutes before I press the button to the fourth floor. I stand in front of room 450 for what seems like an eternity. Right as I’m about to knock, it opens, and my father stands shocked in the doorway.

“Emily. I didn’t hear you knock. Come in. I was just on my way to get some ice, but that can wait,” he says closing the door behind me. Those are the most words he’s said to me in ten years.

“If you want you can go. It’s fine,” I say hanging in the hallway, not wanting to go in further into the room.

“Oh, no. Don’t worry about it. I just wasn’t expecting you is all,” he says.

“Well, there’s been a lot of that going around. Not expecting people to do things.”

“Excuse me?” he says looking confused.

“You know, like, me not expecting you to leave Mom and I out of nowhere. Do you want to leave now? Because you can. I’m expecting it now, so you don’t have to feel bad about it,” I say.

“Emily, why don’t you—“

“I wonder what you think you could possibly say to me. I was you’re daughter. I was just a kid. What excuse could you have to make up for leaving us?”

“Sweetie, your Mom and I, we weren’t in a good place. I know this is going to be hard for you to understand, but I need you to listen.”

“First of all, I’m not your sweetie. You don’t get to call me that. I’m not a kid anymore. And you need me to listen to you? What about all the times I needed you to be there? You didn’t
care about that.”

“I’m sorry for not being there for you, and missing out on so much,” he says crossing his arms in front of him.”

“Are you? You never once sent me a letter, you never called. You never tried to see how I was doing. When you left, you didn’t just leave Mom, you left me too. And you know what? The thing is, it’s not even about you leaving. I understand if you weren’t good for each other or if you didn’t love her anymore. I’m not naïve. I know that happens all the time. But that’s not the problem. It’s about how you left—“

“You’re right. That wasn’t the right way to do it. I didn’t think it through. I was young and selfish, and I’m sorry for that. But I’m a better man now. I’m back. I just started a new job in the city. I’m going to do right by you and your Mom. I promise,” he says.

“I’m not interested in your promises. They don’t mean anything to me. If you want to fix things with Mom, fine. Whatever. But, I’m not her. I don’t want anything from you.”

“Just give me a chance, Emily. It’ll be different this time.”

“I only came here to say what I had to say. I don’t expect you to understand,” I say.

He sighs and doesn’t say anything. I turn around and walk out of the room, not bothering to close the door behind me. Sarah is standing by the elevator waiting for me and we leave together, not looking back.