

# LEAVING WISDOM

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

Zoe Sherman

Submitted to the Undergraduate Research Scholars program at  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by Research Advisor:

Dr. Lowell M. White

May 2020

Major: English

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
DEDICATION.....	4
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	5
SECTIONS	
I. RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT .....	6
Motivation.....	7
Artifact .....	8
II. LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND/HISTORY/SOURCES .....	10
Bridging the Gap Between Generations .....	11
The 1980s: Reflecting a Setting.....	12
Literary Influences .....	14
III. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE.....	15
Venue .....	15
Audience Feedback.....	16
Excerpt .....	17
IV. REFLECTION .....	18
WORKS CITED .....	21
CREATIVE ARTIFACT .....	22
Chapter 1 .....	23
Chapter 2.....	33
Chapter 3.....	45
Chapter 4.....	60
Chapter 5.....	82
Chapter 6.....	97
Chapter 7.....	117
Chapter 8.....	131
Chapter 9.....	151
Chapter 10.....	167

Chapter 11 .....	188
Chapter 12 .....	200
Chapter 13 .....	213

## ABSTRACT

Leaving Wisdom

Zoe Sherman  
Department of English  
Texas A&M University

Research Advisor: Dr. Lowell White  
Department of English  
Texas A&M University

*Leaving Wisdom* is a novella, based around historical and sociological research on New York City in the 1980s. The creative work follows seventeen-year-old Joanna Reese as she tries to make it on her own in New York City in the year 1984. This work explores themes of coming-of-age, mother-daughter relationships, and the unique cultural influence that the 1980s had on the youth during that time. In the past few years, a great deal of television and film have revisited the 1980s nostalgia, these works often overlook the true societal upheaval of the era and the way that it affected the psyche of the American teenager. *Leaving Wisdom* will attempt to create the most realistic recreation of the era as possible and utilize the setting to tell a moving narrative. Research for this project involves consultation of various primary historical resources such as newspapers and photographs to inform the setting of the novella. For character development and cultural reference, I have completed a review of research done in the area of the psychology of teenage runaways, mother-daughter relationships, and the effects of environment on the development of adolescents. In addition to this research, various literary works published during the 1980s and about the 1980s are being utilized as reference for the novella as a form, stylistic approaches to prose, and artistic inspiration. The decade of the 1980s is enigmatic in its difficulty

to be defined as an era and there are many contradicting opinions on how the decade should be remembered. Despite this, most will agree that the 1980s were incredibly influential years in the history of the United States, particularly for the youth of that era. The ripples of this influence can still be seen today in popular media. Most representation of the 1980s today lean toward nostalgia rather than fact but resonate strongly across multiple generations. The 1980s were a time of drastic societal change and by viewing a narrative of a teenage runaway through the lens of this decade, new insights into the psyche of the American teenager and the evolution of American culture can be discovered.

## **DEDICATION**

To my mom, who gave me her record player and her Billy Joel album; my dad, who always checks the oil in my car before I run off; and my brother, who never let me order a lame drink at a bar.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor Dr. Lowell White for all his encouragement and guidance. I would not have been able to finish this work without the regular reminder to keep moving forward. Our weekly meetings were some of my favorite memories of my Senior year whether we were discussing slow-walking pedestrians, *Midsommar*, or my thesis.

Thank you to the Aggie Creative Collective and Dr. Lowell White and Dr. Harris. Thank you also to my creative writing cohort Kyrie, John, Grace, Amy, Katie, Hannah and Rae. Learning and writing alongside you has been a joy and a privilege. I will treasure our conversations, dinners, and karaoke nights for forever.

I am forever indebted to the Texas A&M University Writing Center, especially Flo Davies who was incredibly helpful in preparing my writing and in coaching me through the preparation for public presentations.

Evan's Library was my first and greatest love at Texas A&M University. I would not be who I am today, and this thesis would not be finished if it were not for the resources at Evans Library and the cozy corners which provided me with a place to camp

My favorite coffee shop, source of caffeine and people-watching entertainment: Sweet Eugene's House of Java. Had it not been for the large lattes, kind baristas, and comfortable couches, I would not have survived this process. Thank you. I will return one day to write my name on your tables, but until then I will write your name forever in the pages of this work.

Finally, thank you to my mom, my dad, and my brother without whom I would never have begun writing in the first place and this thesis would never have come to exist.

## SECTION I

### RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT

*Leaving Wisdom* seeks to answer the question of how the cultural influence of a time and place can affect a young adult by exploring these factors through the eyes of an adolescent in a very distinct setting. In addition to this, *Leaving Wisdom* also explores the adolescent struggles that transcend time and place. Whether it is the feeling of isolation or the desire to rebel against the societal conventions of their time, there are some experiences that are common among all young people.

#### **Motivation**

*Leaving Wisdom* is motivated by the desire to address trends from the 1980's that have come back into the popular-culture within the last ten years or so, and what this means to those of us consuming this media in the present time. In the introduction to *Uncovering Stranger Things: Essays on Eighties Nostalgia, Cynicism and Innocence in the Series*, Kevin Whitmore writes, "Nostalgia for the '80's has been a major theme of the 21<sup>st</sup> century...Since the millennium and 9/11, American culture has called a "do over" and run straight back to the '80s" (Whitmore 2). Whitmore points out in his introduction, that the function of nostalgia is ultimately to seek comfort in perceived "better times". From re-makes of 1980s blockbuster films to the reintroduction popular fashions, the Eighties are all the rage again forty years later. However, many of these reproduced artifacts from a different time fail to capture what was truly significant about the decade and how the social, political, and economic changes have made a drastic impact on the present and continue to influence the culture of today. By writing a work of fiction that thrusts an adolescent into the intense landscape of New York City in the year 1984, I



will be exploring the ways that my character's personal growth and development into an adult is both helped and hindered by setting. This is an exploration both in how literature treats setting and of how young adults are portrayed in a historical setting.

### *Nostalgia*

A recent surge of nostalgia for the 1980s has occurred in the last few years with television shows like *Stranger Things* and *GLOW*, re-makes or re-boots of popular 80s franchises such as *She-Ra*, *Ghostbusters*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, as well as the reintroduction of technology like vinyl, cassette tapes, and polaroid pictures, purely for their aesthetic purposes. This nostalgia can often lead to misrepresentation of crucial historical events and points. In order to combat the way that nostalgia has the tendency overpower and trivialize issues that were important to people in the 1980s *Leaving Wisdom* approaches this subject matter in the interest of being as true to life as possible.

### *A Shift in Adolescent Development*

In the last thirty years, the development of technology and a shift in cultural values has drastically changed the way that American youths experience the world. Now, the average seventeen-year old in America has access to almost instant global communication and information, while in the 1980s the cellular telephone was still in one of its earliest generations and not accessible to the average American. In addition to technological changes, there has also been an incredible change in society. These changes, and its pros and cons will be explored through the perspective of the teenage protagonist in *Leaving Wisdom*.

### *Runaways in Fiction and the 1980s*

The figure of the runaway is a popular character type within young adult literature. In addition to nostalgia for years gone by, *Leaving Wisdom* will address common tropes attached to

runaway characters in literature. Historically speaking young runaways are prominent part of America's cultural landscape. The treatment of runaways, their motivations and their survival are primary interests of my thesis research. Many stories of kidnapping from the 1980s and the decades prior begin with the assumption that the victim was a runaway which impeded many investigations. In the early 1980s the Milk Carton program was initiated as an attempt to help find missing children. Those pictures on the sides of milk cartons became an iconic image, which is still associated with dread. The significance of a runaway to a community is a factor that I have kept in mind when addressing the issue in my novella.

### *New York City*

New York City has been the subject and setting of hundreds of works of creative writing, filmmaking, photography, among other mediums. As one of the most iconic and recognizable American cities, New York is often considered to be emblematic of American culture and as an urban center that is known for being a place in which trends are set. That being said, New York City of the 1980s was an unstable and shifting environment. Home to some a diverse community of people, who gather together from all over the world, it is essential to acknowledge this diversity when discussing the city. As the central setting of *Leaving Wisdom*, it is important to capture the essence of New York in the year 1984 and the culture significance of all the changes happening within its city limits.

### **Artifact**

*Leaving Wisdom* was conceptualized and written with all these motivations in mind. Set in the year 1984, *Leaving Wisdom* will follow seventeen-year-old Joanna Reese, who runs away from her hometown, the fictional Wisdom, Oklahoma to move to New York City. While in the city Joanna will have to learn how to handle the pressures of adulthood like holding a job, paying

rent, and functioning in the big city. On top of this, Joanna must also confront common struggles of adolescence like the overwhelming sense of isolation and insecurities. The goal of incorporating research and critical literary analysis into the process of writing the novella was to assure that the novella reflects a realistic depiction of life in the 1980s. While making sure that the historical information is correct, this research also allows for the interpretation of the cultural influences that are included in it. The novella acts as a lens through which the reader can compare two different times that, while seemingly not that distant, are separated by critical changes in society.

## SECTION II

### LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND/HISTORY/SOURCES

#### **Bridging the Gap between Generations**

In January of 2020 the podcast “On Being” released an episode entitled “Where Does it Hurt?” in which the show’s host, Krista Tippett, interviewed Civil Rights activist Ruby Sales. In the episode, Sales speaks about how she has observed the youth of today having an intense desire for cross-generational relationships. Sales’ thoughts and words offer important insight into the relationship between generations and offer a possible answer to one of my thesis’ major questions; why does American Culture keep returning to the nostalgia of the past?

The theory of Cultural Memory involves the idea of how experiences are passed from generation to generation through artifacts. An article by Kevin Laland and Luke Rendell studies how many species have a biological instinct to learn through social transmission. The authors write,

While cultural inheritance has long been recognized as important to human biology, recent research reveals that the social transmission of learned knowledge is widespread in animals, not just in vertebrates, but also in invertebrates. All sorts of creatures learn valuable life skills, such as what to eat, where to find it, how to process it, what a predator looks like, how to escape that predator, how to move safely through the environment, whom to mate with, and so forth, by observing and copying other animals. Inexperienced female fruit flies, for instance, copy the mate-choice decisions of other females (Laland).

This research demonstrates that learned behavior plays an important part in the existence of many living creatures and is a behavior that reflects how important community is to the survival of different species.

Outside of basic tasks learned by example, research also speaks to how multi-media holds influence on multiple generations. Through art, writing, music, and film the feeling of an experience can be passed down, sometimes creating a sense of nostalgia for things not experienced first-hand. An article concerning the topic of cultural memory by Richard Meckien speaks to society's relationship to the past writing that, "According to the researcher, from the 1980s, confidence in the future as a promise of better days lost power and gave rise to the restlessness before the past: 'the idea of progress is increasingly obsolete, and the past has invaded our consciousness' (Meckien). This viewpoint would explain why in the new millennia a significant return to past trends has been observed. In the last twenty or so years, some of the biggest trends and topics of the 1980s have come back into fashion. With remakes of some of the decade's biggest blockbusters such as, *Ghostbusters*, *Karate Kid*, to creating new material inspired by the aesthetics of the era with shows like *Stranger Things* and *GLOW*, it may not seem like we've left the 1980s at all.

The fascination with past decades, particularly the 1980s, that society demonstrates today, mirrors a fascination with the 1950s that occurred in late 1970s and 1980s with television shows like *Happy Days* and *The Wonder Years* and films like *Grease*. This shows the repetitive habit society has for revisiting the not-so-distant past to indulge in a sense of familiarity and comfort. Considering the capacity that we have as humans to learn through social interactions and shared cultural experiences, there is a responsibility to wield this power wisely. With the

immense expansion of media in the last ten years, through media services people have more ways of consuming media than ever before.

With *Leaving Wisdom* I made use of these artifacts and experiences from the past to show how cultural memory can be used to develop empathy between generations and satisfy the thirst for meaningful relationships between multiple generations that Ruby Sales was speaking of. In order to do this, I identified the societal issues and influences that have carried across the last four decades to address within *Leaving Wisdom*: issues concerning LGBTQ rights, political elections, drug and alcohol abuse, as well as the beginnings of a changing world for teens and young adults. These are all topics that I have tried to address within the novella in a way that mirrors the current events and societal issues.

### **The 1980s: Reflecting a Setting**

#### *Geography, Architecture, and Neighborhoods*

A great deal of research surrounding the setting of *Leaving Wisdom* has influenced my work. New York City on its own, is a unique and difficult setting to understand and represent authentically. Considering the famous city in a decade nearly forty years removed from the present is even more complicated. The photography collections of Carrie Boretz, Edward Grazda and Sue Kwon have informed much of the descriptions of New York City within *Leaving Wisdom*. The photography captured in the aforementioned work reflects the qualities of the city and its inhabitants during the 1980s. The photography also helped me to understand more completely, the geography of the city that I was not able to physically study for myself.

The photography of these artists captures the everyday moments in New York City in a very tumultuous time in the city's history. In the foreword or Street, Vivian Gornick writes, "The years in which Carrie Boretz was walking the mean streets were among the most volatile in

urban history: the city went bankrupt, crime was rampant, anxiety off the charts; yet its fundamental humanity was never in question” (Boretz). This fundamental humanity captured in images, helped me to insert snapshots into the landscape of the city into my own work as well.

In addition to this, I also consulted various studies of the demographics of neighborhoods in order to decide on my setting. It was very important to reflect the diversity of New York City and the spirit of the people who called the city home. New York City Neighborhoods are often extremely indicative of individual cultures and experiences, some neighborhoods are known to be the hub of art and artists, other areas of the city are home to Wall Street Executives, while minorities often are forced into specific neighborhoods. In the 1980s this was certainly true, when New York City was experiencing extremely high poverty and crime rates.

#### *New York City Nightlife*

The famed, perhaps even infamous, night life of New York City in the 1980s plays an integral part in *Leaving Wisdom* and is also one of the aspects that took the most research to understand and represent accurately. Tim Lawrence’s book *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor* provides substantial reference for New York City nightlife. Lawrence captures the unique culture of 1980s club life, as well as the city’s LGBTQ community at a time.

I used information on several famous New York City nightclubs in *Leaving Wisdom*. Many of these clubs, most of which have long since closed. Lawrence provides detailed histories and descriptions of clubs that I was able to use within my novella either by including details in the work or by informing me of all of the inner workings of this unique sub-culture of New York City.

## Literary Influences

Writing a novella in a creative format, in addition to my more traditional research, involved the consultation of various creative writing examples and guides. These were very helpful in guiding my writing process. I utilized two works as inspiration that I returned to throughout the writing process; Patti Smith's *Just Kids* and Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*.  
*Just Kids*

Patti Smith's *Just Kids* was a tremendous influence on me in the early stages of writing *Leaving Wisdom*. Even though Smith's work is auto-biographical and takes place about a decade before the focus of my research, it provides a comprehensive guide to the parts of New York City that are of interest within *Leaving Wisdom*.

Smith's work is also a beautiful example of prose, which provided me with inspiration for my own writing. Smith's voice is strong and powerful and she has a tremendous skill for including details which she then collages into a vivid picture of her setting. The picture that she captures of New York City is un-censored and honest in way that avoids romanticism but still captures the famed magic of New York City.

### *The Bonfire of the Vanities*

Another work that I consulted was, Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. In addition to being a tremendous example of creative fiction and the artful description of 1980s New York City, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is also a powerful insight into the tensions and anxieties of the decade. Published in 1987, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is often referred to as the essential novel of the 1980s for its depiction of the decade.



## SECTION III

### EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE

Over the course of working on my thesis I have given three separate presentations of my work. The first, was a public reading of my novella-in-progress through the Aggie Creative Collective, in which I was able to give a brief overview of my research so far and read an excerpt of the first chapter of *Leaving Wisdom* to an audience. At the other two presentations of my work, I presented in front of a panel, focusing on my research. For all three of these presentations, my material was mostly the same, with brief modifications to my presentation at each of them. Each of these presentation opportunities, helped me not only to work on my public presentation skills, but also to receive a reaction to the early and in-progress stages of my work.

#### **Venue**

Each presentation of my work was given in a different venue but were all similar. All three happened to be held on University campuses, two at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas and one at University of Texas in Austin, Texas. Each of the presentation rooms allowed for audiences of less than one hundred people and provided a podium and projector screen for my use.

#### *Audience*

The average audience size at the presentations was around 30-40 people. My presentation at the University of Texas had the smallest audience by far and less than 20 in attendance. The audiences in these venues had a wide variety in age which was interesting for my work because some audience members had either experienced the 1980s or had not and their reactions to the work were shaded by that.

The audiences at my presentations were a mix of students, faculty, staff and invited family members of myself and other presenters. This provided an audience with very diverse backgrounds, knowledge, and insights into the time period. Because of the great amount of diverse audiences, the feedback that I received was diverse as well.

### **Audience Feedback**

One of the major benefits of giving multiple presentations was the variety of feedback that I was provided with from the different audiences. The responses were either addressing my research or the way that my research was demonstrated within my creative artifact.

#### *Response to Research*

In response to my research, most people responded in amusement that someone not born in the 1980s would take such an interest in the decade. This then led to questions about the aspects of the 1980s that I was most interested in, a question that was helpful to me in refining my research and identifying the aspects that were most important to my novel.

#### *Response to Artifact*

In response to the artifact itself, I received a wider range of questions. One question that I received was concerning how I used language to capture the 1980s. The question concerned the use of slang and felt that my work did not use enough of it. This concern was something that I have considered a great deal throughout the process of writing *Leaving Wisdom*.

Another question that I received was concerned with how I planned to represent New York Cities minorities in *Leaving Wisdom*. This question was of interest to me because it was something that I had already put a great deal of thought into. While the protagonist of *Leaving Wisdom* is white, I was acutely aware of how important it was not to whitewash the story set in such a culturally diverse place. I have walked a delicate line attempting to depict the diversity of

the city respectfully, while also being careful not to sugar-coat a very tense time in New York City for race relations.

### **Excerpt**

At each presentation of my work, I read the same excerpt of my novel. I chose the excerpt according to length and time constraints of the presentation and how well the narrative would be followed if it was told out of order. That is why I chose to read from my first chapter, because I felt that if I read from the middle the audience would be confused by the material. In a work of such length, it is difficult to cut and paste pieces of the narrative out of order and still have it make sense.

However, the choice to present only a small portion of my novella multiple times was somewhat limiting in that the audience was only able to give feedback on a brief piece of my longer work. Each time I read, I received similar reactions to the same parts of the same chapter. I would have liked to hear how the audience reacted to some of my later chapters and what they thought of the aspects of the 1980s that I chose to highlight throughout the complete work. I feel that this method did not provide a complete understanding of my work.

Ultimately, I feel like the choice to limit my reading was inevitable, even though it meant that I was only able to gauge the reaction to a small portion of my novella. I did not have the time in any of my presentations to read more than a small portion of the book and I did not want to sacrifice the coherence of the narrative for the sake of variety.

## **SECTION IV**

### **REFLECTION**

In the time that I was given, I think that I was able to succeed in completing a substantial amount of work. In the very early days of this project, I initially planned on writing and completing a novel rather than the novella. Under the recommendation of my advisor, I decided to shorten the word count goal of my artifact to the novella form because I felt that it would be more manageable with the rest of my workload. I still feel that I was ambitious in my goals and I am very satisfied with my ability to complete three drafts of the novel.

My writing process began with an outline of the entire novella which I discussed with my faculty advisor. This outline did change slightly as I worked my way through multiple drafts, but it served as a roadmap for my work, making sure that I was keeping track of all the major movements of the novella. This was by far one of the most important steps in my process. In addition to this step, I also maintained a very strict writing schedule throughout my process. For the first few months of writing I set a goal of 500 words a day, then as I worked on later drafts, I increased that goal to 1000 words a day. This schedule helped me to make progress efficiently and to make up for time lost when unexpected things occurred.

The research process for *Leaving Wisdom* included several phases and parts. Beginning with fundamental research to help me determine the appropriate setting for the novella and literary research into the novella form. My literary research mostly involved consuming as much literature relevant to my work as possible. In reading them I was studying both their form and content with the goal of improving my own writing. My historical and sociological research branched off into two directions. The first direction was studying Primary sources from the

decade in question such as newspapers, photographs, even watching old TV commercials from the New York City channel. The second direction I took, was to consult critical analysis on the topics of my research questions.

One of the greatest challenges that I faced was one that came out of the blue. The COVID-19 pandemic affected a lot of my research in the last three weeks before the deadline. This resulted in the University Library being closed meaning that I didn't have access to the last of the materials that I wanted to consult for my research. The change from in-person classes to online classes also became a priority and slightly interrupted the work schedule that I planned for my thesis. I had to work on my thesis. Since the pandemic was not something that I could have foreseen and planned for, I think that I responded the best way that I could.

I did receive some feedback in the multiple public presentations that I gave. Which were helpful in that they allowed me to gauge responses to the short excerpts that I was permitted to present. A negative of this was that because I am working on a longer work, I was only able to present on a small section of the larger whole. In an ideal world, I would have been able to receive feedback on the entire work, but the feedback that I did receive was helpful to me in my editing process.

One of the major questions that occurred in my multiple public presentations of my work was how accurately I felt that I could portray a decade that I was not yet born in. This was also a question that I asked myself throughout the writing process and ultimately my conclusion to the question was simply that I had approached the project the same way any historical fiction is approached. I knew from the very start of this project that I did not want to write a cartoonish depiction of either my characters or setting, so I tried to avoid clichés associated with these things. I do not know that I entirely succeeded in this, because it was just as difficult as I

anticipated it would be to write about a time and place that I have not experienced first-hand. I struggled to find language for description of places that I haven't been, ways of life that do not exist anymore due to the technology that we have now. I shied away from writing about the complicated New York City Subways systems as much as possible. It was an extremely challenging process to write about a subject that is very foreign to me but I feel like facing the challenge has taught me many valuable lessons, the most important one being to stick to writing about things that I am more familiar with from here on out.

Looking back on the process of writing *Leaving Wisdom* and now at the draft that I am submitting, I do wish that I had more time. This is by no means a final version and hopefully there will be many more drafts to come in the future. But considering that I had nine months, was taking a full course load, and working part time, I feel that I made the most of the time that I had. I wish that it would have been possible to have multiple readers to provide me with feedback but that was not really an option for me, so what is contained in these pages had only been edited by my very biased eyes.

However, despite the problems I faced, I do not have many regrets about the outcome of this project. I am proud of the progress that I was able to make on a very long work in such a short time. I learned many valuable things and I enjoyed doing it. There are certainly things that I would do differently if I had the chance to go back, but overall, I am very pleased with how things turned out.

## WORKS CITED

- Boretz, Carrie, and Vivian Gornick. *Street: New York City 70s 80s 90s*. First Edition. Photographs by Carrie Boretz; Foreword by Vivian Gornick. powerhouse Books, 2017.
- Grazda, Ed, and Gary Leon Hill. *Mean Streets: NYC 1970-1985: Photographs. First Edition. Edward Grazda; [Essay. Gary Leon Hill]* powerHouse Books, 2017.
- Kwon, Sue. *Street Level: New York Photographs, 1987-2007. 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. Sue Kwon*. Testify Books, 2009.
- Lawrence, Tim. *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983*. Duke University Press Books, 2016.
- Moffit, Kimberly R, and Duncan A. Campbell. *The 1980s: A Critical and Transitional Decade*. Edited by *Kimberly R. Moffitt and Duncan A. Campbell*. Lexington Books, 2011.
- Richard Meckien. "Cultural Memory: the link between past, present, and future." *Institute of Advanced Studies of the University of Sao Paulo*. <http://www.iea.usp.br/en/news/cultural-memory-the-link-between-past-present-and-future>, June 3, 2013, Date of Access January 25, 2020.
- Smith, Patti. *Just Kids*. First Edition. Patti Smith. First edition., Ecco, 2010.
- Tippett, Krista. "Ruby Sales – Where Does it Hurt?." *On Being with Krista Tippett*, Apple Podcasts, January 16, 2020, <https://onbeing.org/series/podcast/>.
- Wetmore, Kevin J., Jr. *Uncovering Stranger Things: Essays on Eighties Nostalgia, Cynicism and Innocence in the Series*. Edited by Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018.
- Wolfe, Tom, and Nicholas A. Basbanes. *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. [Tom Wolfe]. Farrar, Straus, 1987.

## **CREATIVE ARTIFACT**

THE FOLLOWING PAGES CONTAIN MY CREATIVE ARTIFACT.



## CHAPTER ONE

The Palladium turned into an oven that night. While a long line of people waited to get in on the sidewalk outside, shivering and huddling together against the September chill, everyone inside the club was slowly cooking alive. Sweat pooled at my hairline and the small of my back, it made my hair and borrowed dress cling to my skin. The more I moved, the more sweat seeped from every pore. More and more bodies piled into the building and pushed against one another in an attempt to get closer to the stage and the temperature rose, along with the electricity in the atmosphere.

My friend Frankie got us into the show at the last minute. She knew a guy who knew a guy who was a roadie for the band and all she'd had to do was bat her lashes and toss her hair and the guy had been tripping over himself to get her tickets. This was a lucky bonus for me, 'cause I never would have been able to get in on my own.

The entire audience pulsed and rocked as one while a band that I hadn't heard of until that night called *Shattered Hearts*—a ridiculously stupid name for a band—blared their music. They weren't very good but everyone was either too drunk, or too high, or too apathetic to care about it. People wanted to feel good—so they were willing to pretend that the band was good, that the alcohol was top shelf, and that there was someone in the crowd waiting to fall in love with them.

I was *just* drunk enough to be completely enthralled by the band despite their very average capabilities. Their music filled the venue with so much sound that the walls shook and my heart beat in time to the rhythm they created. Red and blue lights flashed from the complicated arrangement of fixtures rigged around the room, washing the crowd in color.

Though there were countless faces in the crowd I stood alone. Frankie had disappeared from my side to get more drinks ages ago and hadn't made a reappearance. I was fine on my own—hypnotized by what was happening on the stage. It was like the band was playing just for me and I was the only one who could possibly understand what they were trying to tell me. They were so close, not twenty feet away from me, and they were real, flesh and bone, not just bodiless voices floating through the air. If I'd reached out, I could have touched the blond lead-singer who was writhing about on the ground in very tight jeans. When he moved it was so cool, stylish and effortless and aggressive. After a while, it didn't even cross my mind that the music wasn't very good, I only cared about watching them perform. I'd only ever heard music on the radio or a record, listening on the floor of my bedroom back in Wisdom. But there—I was actually watching the music being made right in front of me.

Time stopped.

For a moment I was free of all my worries. The fear of not making rent didn't matter, my job didn't matter, the fact that I'd left Wisdom, Oklahoma without saying goodbye to my mom didn't matter. I was completely alone in the world and nothing and no one could hurt me. I was numbed by vodka and the vibrations of the guitar strings until I didn't feel my body anymore—just my soul standing in my shoes.

“There you are!” A voice in my ear pulled me from my trance, “This place is a drag!”

Before I could say anything, Frankie had taken hold of my arm and was dragging me away from the stage, back the way that we'd come in. I didn't really want to leave but I didn't argue. I'd seen most of the show anyway.

Frankie and I must have looked like paper dolls attached at the hand weaving our way through the shifting sands of people in the electrified club. Our palms were sweaty but we held

on tightly to each other, not letting the audience pull us apart. I didn't know what time it was or how long we'd been at The Palladium. It didn't matter to me except for the fact that I had to be at work at 9 o'clock. I had a feeling that the hour was closer than I wanted it to be. I didn't want to ask for the time because once I knew how late it really was, I'd feel the exhaustion start to set in. It was better to be ignorant for the time being.

The street outside had a sobering effect on me. We emerged from the club and into a cloud of smoke created by the crowd standing around the door. When we passed the line at the door, all the guys in line stopped talking and turned their heads to watch Frankie walk by. All men looked at Frankie that way—I couldn't really blame them for it. She was spectacularly beautiful.

They didn't look at me the same way. Even with Frankie's intervention, I was pretty unspectacular to look at. I was all elbows and knees, wearing one of Frankie's dresses that didn't fit me quite right. My face was a little bit too long to be considered *really* pretty and my hair was long and flat and lank. Not ugly, just not beautiful in a city that loved beautiful things. Eyes easily passed over me. In a lot of ways, it was a relief to me. I didn't want people to look at me the way they looked at Frankie. I wasn't like her.

Frankie was twenty-five. We'd met a few weeks after I'd moved to the city and she'd taken me under her wing. She worked at the beauty counter at Macy's and she wore her confidence like it was perfume. Sometimes I wondered if she kept it bottled up somewhere to spray it on every morning and if she would share it with me so that I could walk with my head up and eyes forward like she did. Never once have to glance behind me to see if people were looking because I'd know that they all were.

Our footsteps fell unevenly on the sidewalk. We drifted apart and bumped back together, two buoys bouncing on an unsteady sea of lingering liquor. It was as silent as the city ever got. Cars drove by, sirens blared in the distance, inside their apartments people were listening to music or fighting or God-knows what else.

I counted the steps between the pools of light cast onto the sidewalk by the streetlights. A shiver ran down my spine every time we got to the darkest space in between the pools of light, the halfway point between two lamp posts.

Frankie flicked her lighter to life and lifted the dancing flame to the cigarette held in her pursed magenta lips. She offered me one and I took it from her, trying to hold it with the same way she held hers.

“Where to next?” Frankie asked with an exhale of smoke.

I licked my lips to relieve them of the dryness that the cigarettes and alcohol had left behind and enjoyed the heavy numbness of them.

“I should probably get home...” I said slowly, knowing that Frankie would berate me for being a quitter, “I’ve got to work in the morning.”

Frankie clicked her tongue, “You’re no fun.”

I didn’t argue but I silently thought that if I wasn’t any fun, Frankie might be too much fun.



Frankie and I took the subway from Midtown to Chelsea. She was out of tokens so I used one of my precious resources to get her through the grate—it was the least I could do considering she’d scored me tickets to the show and free drinks all night.

We leaned against each other on the platform waiting for the train to come.

When the train came and Frankie and I stepped inside, the car was almost empty. The only other occupants were a couple of black kids sitting together right next to the doors. They looked pretty young, younger than me. One was tall and had an angry looking face, the other was shorter and his eyelids looked like they were being pulled down by weights. They both looked up at me and Frankie in unison but quickly turned their eyes back down to their shoes.

Frankie led the way to seats at the other end of the car.

I watched the short kid digging in his pocket for something and felt Frankie grow tense beside me. When he pulled out a candy bar and started eating it, she relaxed again. The short boy looked up and caught my eye. I gave him a little smile which he didn't return, instead looking away like he hadn't seen. Almost like *he* was scared of *me*.

The rocking of the train on the tracks nearly lulled me into sleep. I leaned my head against Frankie's shoulder and trusted her to stay attentive and listen for our stop.

At our stop, Frankie shook me back to life. The two boys stayed on the train, waiting for a later stop.

Frankie lived a few blocks north of me and we parted at her apartment with a kiss on the cheek and slurred farewells.

I walked the rest of the way alone.

As drunk as I was—I noticed everything. A couple who looked like they weren't going to make it home before they started ripping each other's clothes off. In the window of a building a man hunched over a desk writing furiously. The sounds of a party in a building nearby. Music floated out of a window and down the street. Everything happened a little bit slower, giving me more time to take it in. The lights were brighter. I was even convinced that the terrain underneath my feet had changed in the last few hours.

The door of 424 West 14th St. was a beacon in the threatening darkness. The stoop, where I'd spent many hot summer days, sitting and watching the city move around me was a familiar landmark in my distorted vision.

Once I was inside, with the door shut and locked behind me, I exhaled a breath that I hadn't even realized I was holding.

There was no elevator in the six-story building, only stairs, and my apartment was on the fifth floor. I stared at the twisting staircase that had once charmed me, with exasperation before beginning the tiresome climb.

When I first moved in, I'd loved that I could stand at the bottom of the stairs and look up and see all the way to the ceiling six stories above. I'd never lived anywhere with stairs before. Back in Wisdom, only rich families lived in two-story houses with fancy staircases. It didn't take long for me to learn to hate those stairs. Pretty didn't make for easy going.

My feet turned to cinderblocks when I started to climb that first flight. My head was too heavy. It pulled me back down toward the earth when I was trying to go up. With each heavy footstep, I clung to the railing for dear life, placing hand over hand to pull my body forward. Eventually I gave up and dropped to my hands and knees to crawl the rest of the way.

Briefly, I considered curling up and going to sleep on the stairs right then and there. I was just so Goddamn tired. But I'd made it so close to my own bed that I decided to keep going.

After what seemed like an eternity, I finally made it to the fifth floor and dragged myself the last few feet to the door.

My stomach lurched with liquor that was threatening to revisit if I didn't settle into stillness soon.

Hurry up before you puke all over the landing, I told myself, digging around in my purse for my keys.

I tried to insert the key into the lock but the key scraped off of the surface, leaving a scratch on the metal. I tried again and again, each time missing the keyhole entirely. My hands were shaking too much or my vision was blurry—I wasn't sure but it was making it impossible to open the damn door.

“Fuck!” I shouted at my unopened door.

I dropped to the floor. My ass hit the ground with a thud and my head lulled to the side. Sleep. God, I wanted to sleep. And water—I wanted all the water in the world to quench my thirst. And to take off my shoes. My feet had been aching for hours. I could feel where the skin had been rubbed raw on my heels.

“You need a hand?”

I raised my eyes.

My neighbor, Max, was watching me from the last step of the staircase. A little smile wrinkled the corner of his mouth and his eyebrows were raised up high on his forehead. He was laughing at me which might have made me mad if I hadn't been so tired.

Max worked at a bar a few blocks away. Judging by the puffiness of his eyes and the wrinkles in his shirt, he was just getting back from a shift.

I wondered how much of my pathetic crawl up the stairs he'd witnessed.

“I'll get it...eventually,” I mumbled.

Max took a few steps toward me. With my delayed reactions to everything I didn't realize what he was doing until he'd already taken the keys right out of my hands. In one effortless

motion he inserted the key into the lock. It turned without resistance. While he did it, I looked at the veins in his hands and the hair on his arms. He had nice hands—nice forearms.

The nice hands handed the keys back to me.

“You didn’t walk home alone like this did you?”

His voice implied that he thought that I wasn’t capable of this somehow and I was immediately irritated by the suggestion.

“I can handle myself,” I snapped, a little bit more harshly than I meant to.

Max shrugged but didn’t say anything else.

A moment of silence settled over us. We just looked at each other, him standing in front of his door with his hands in his pockets, and me, still sitting on the ground, trying to keep from throwing up my guts until Max left.

The universe was exhaling and we’d been caught in the middle of it.

Then Max pulled himself out of the daze.

“Have a good night, Joanna.”

Once his door clicked shut behind him, I stared at it for just a minute before hauling myself up onto my feet and disappearing into the safety and solitude of my apartment. Calling it an apartment was generous. Really, it was nothing more than a tiny room with a sagging mattress on a squeaky frame and a hotplate. The walls were covered in yellowing wallpaper that was peeling off of the wall in long strips. I hadn’t bothered to cover them with anything. Not a single picture, not even a magazine clipping. There was a closet with just enough space for the few outfits that I owned to fit snuggling inside. On the wall opposite there was a single window that opened up onto the fire escape.



Inside, I found that my stomach had settled a little. In a few guzzling gulps I drained nearly the entire pitcher of water that I kept next to my bed. Then I stripped out of my restricting dress and pulled on the oversize t-shirt that I wore like a nightdress.

The silence in my apartment made me anxious after the noise and chaos of the night. There was too much space—too much opportunity for my mind to wander toward the unpleasant things that I'd spent the evening distracting myself from.

To drown out the silence, I put on a record.

My record player was the only thing of any value that I owned. I'd dragged it with me all the way from Oklahoma. It probably wouldn't have fetched more than twenty bucks at a pawn shop, but it was priceless to me. I kept it on the floor next to the window, with the handful of albums I owned stored in a milkcrate.

With a shaky hand I dropped the arm onto the spinning record, wincing at the scratch of the needle on the surface.

Music filled the room. Notes so familiar to me that I heard them before they played. Billy Joel's *The Stranger* was the first album that I ever bought. It wasn't really the coolest album to have but I liked it. Especially the song "Vienna".

My head was still spinning when I pushed open my window and crawled out onto the fire escape. My body was just wiry enough to twist through the small window. It took some contorting.

The black sky was beginning to lighten into a hazy grey. The sun would be up soon, and I'd have to go to work.

Sirens wailed a few blocks away. I could see the lights moving through the streets. On the sidewalk a guy was leaned against a light post, smoking a cigarette. On the other side of the

street a couple were walking a little fluffy dog on a leash. No one looked up at me, perched like a bird, watching them.

Most of the time, I liked the vastness of the city and the way that I could disappear into it. But sometimes, like when I was left alone in the silence at the end of the night, I wondered how I was supposed to fit into it all.

## CHAPTER TWO

I'd been in the city for almost six months.

I left Wisdom at the end of April and it was already September. I'd run away just as the pavement-melting heat of summer had begun to hint at its impending arrival, hiding tastes of itself on southern breezes. I could always tell when summer was coming. It was the scent of sweat and grass juice and hot tire rubber. If sunshine had a smell it was that. When I started to smell it in the air, on the occasional warm-but-not-quite-hot-yet day that came around at the end of March and I took it as a sign that it was time to make a break for it.

I learned that summer in the city smelled different. Gasoline and sidewalk chalk and burning asphalt. And sweat. I guess everywhere smells like sweat in the summertime. It was stifling. Half the time, my lungs felt like they were getting burned when I inhaled the hot air. All the concrete and brick and asphalt soaked up the sun and channeled it into me with a vengeance.

After surviving the summer in the city, I was starting to discover what Autumn smelled like in the city. Coffee and wet newspaper and wool coats pulled from the back of people's closets.

On the other side of six months, the time seemed like it had passed in both the blink of an eye and an eternity at once. I'd never imagined that so much could happen in just a few months. I had to learn fast in order to keep up with the speed of life that was happening all around me. Moving to the city was like hopping onto an escalator that was moving really fast. If you fell, or your shoelace got caught, it'd just keep moving, pulling you right along with it at full speed.

Even though the sharp edge of the transition was gone and I was beginning to feel like I'd worn it down so that it couldn't hurt me anymore, there were moments when Wisdom felt so close that it was almost like I'd never left at all.

When I ran away, I left a note for my mom. I scribbled it on a piece of paper that I'd ripped from my Biology notebook and left it on the kitchen table, leaning against the green glass ashtray that was always there. Mom would find it there when she reached for a cigarette first thing in the morning.

I've gone to be somewhere else. I'm fine, you shouldn't worry.

I'll call you when I'm settled.

-Joanna

Nearly six months later, I still hadn't called.

It was easier for me to leave my old life behind than it probably should have been. Walking away from everything I'd ever known and toward nothing I could have imagined was almost mundane. One day I was there and the next day I wasn't. Like magic. There really wasn't that much that I was leaving behind, so I didn't have anything to feel sad about. I didn't have friends to miss, I hated my job at the Dairy Bar, school was pointless, and Mom...we were probably both better off with me gone. I knew I was. With thousands of miles between us, we wouldn't be able to fight for once.

That sounds like I hated her. I didn't hate Mom. It would have been easier if I could have hated her. But I loved her. She was my mother. I'd come from her. She knew about the birthmark on the crook of my knee. We'd sat on the edge of the bathtub together and she'd taught me how to shave my legs. Her scent was so ingrained in my memory I would be able to recognize her by it alone. She was the only person I had in the world. It was just her and me and it always had been.

But I didn't want to end up like her.

I refused to get stuck in Wisdom like she did. Never travelling more than a couple of hours outside the city limits, never seeing what else was out there in the world. It was such a....small life to live. Mom had her chance and she screwed it up when she had me. I couldn't be ungrateful for her mistake because it was the reason I existed...but I could make damn sure that it wasn't going to happen to me. Wisdom wasn't going to trap me the way it trapped her.

I felt bad about the way I left, in the middle of the night, without saying goodbye. It was part of the reason that it was taking me so long to call her. She was going to be pissed when I finally worked up the nerve to pick up the phone. Rightfully so, I guessed. When I called—and I would, eventually—I just wanted to be able to give her some good news to disturb the inevitable anger. If I could tell her about how great I was doing in the city then maybe she'd see that it'd all been for the best. She'd be proud. Maybe a little sad that she didn't do it when she was younger.

But it was harder to make it in the city than I thought it would be. Weeks passed. Then months. And before I knew it, half a year had gone by without me talking to Mom. It had been too long. Were there any words that would convince Mom I'd done the right thing after waiting for so long?

My very first night in the city, the minute I stepped off of the bus and looked around at the grim scene of the Port Authority, I realized the reality of what I'd done. The place was depressing as hell. Overhead, the fluorescent lights flickered. My shoes stuck to the tile floor with sticky residue. Two shabbily dressed men were arguing in a corner. Snippets of their words echoed around the building. On a bench against a wall, a woman was wearing stained, worn clothes slouched forward on a bench with her head slumped onto her chest. Drool dripped in a long thread from her bottom lip. It hung on for a long time before letting go. God. I hoped that she wasn't dead.

I was anxious to get away from the place as quickly as possible. Every second that I lingered there my stomach tightened with doubt. I dug in my purse for the slip of paper that held the precious address of the apartment I'd arranged to rent.

It had taken me weeks in the library requesting phone books and at least twenty dollars in long-distance calls in order to find an apartment that I could afford. All I had to show for that work was an address and the name of a landlady who had promised the apartment would be available for me when I got to the city.

A yellow taxi—just like in that movie with DeNiro—was running by the curb. The fumes from the exhaust pipe danced through the night air.

I stumbled over to the cab with my duffle bag and record player in tow. I didn't know if I was supposed to just hop in the car. That seemed like a pretty dumb thing to do—to climb into a car with a complete stranger but it was what they did in the movies.

The driver glanced up at me in the rearview mirror, watching silently as I dragged everything I owned onto the vinyl seat covers after me. The backs of my thighs stuck to the seats with sweat.

“Where to?” He asked.

“424 West 14th Street?” I said it like I wasn't sure, even though I'd spent so much time staring at the address I had it memorized.

The driver didn't say anything else. He just slipped the cab into drive and took off, wheels squealing. I kind of wished that he'd asked me what I was doing in the city so that I could tell him I was new in town. I wanted to be able to share with someone how brave I was to have come all this way—to have someone else acknowledge that I was there—that I'd made it.

With my forehead pressed against the cab's window, I tried to get a glimpse of what was going on outside.

I was disappointed by the view.

I guess it was stupid, but I'd expected to see some kind of landmark of the famous city. Where was the Empire State Building? The Statue of Liberty? Times Square? None of the places that I associated with New York because of all the movies that I'd watched were anywhere in sight. It would be weeks before I understood that those places were all pretty spread out. But in the moment, I wondered where the New York City that I'd pictured in my head was.

I watched the brownstones and skinny storefronts fly by in a blur. The lights flashing by so quickly kind of made my eyes hurt. At 2am the streets were still busy. In Wisdom, no one was out after midnight unless they were causing some kind of trouble. But in the city clubs were still open, people were standing out on the sidewalk smoking cigarettes and talking. I tried to take in as much of it as I could.

The cab jerked to a stop, jostling me and all of my belongings.

"This is it."

I peered out at the street we'd stopped on and the row of buildings.

"It'll be 10.50."

I fumbled with the cash and handed it to him with a couple of dollars for a tip.

The driver grunted in response and barely gave me time to pile out of the vehicle and get clear of the tires before he took off. By the end of the night the driver probably wouldn't remember me, but I'd remember him: the first person I ever talked to in the city.

After a minute of watching the cab's rear lights disappear down the street, I turned to face the wall of buildings.

424 was a tall, skinny building sandwiched between two other tall, skinny buildings that looked almost identical to it. The only thing that set it apart from its neighbors were the numbers nailed to the front door. The second 4 was hanging crooked, barely hanging on by a single nail. There was a stoop at the front of the building, illuminated by lights, one on either side of the door.

It took me a while to work up the courage to approach the door. For a long time, I stood on the curb, letting a film of sweat cover me. I couldn't tell if I was sweating because I was hot, or because I was scared.

Finally, I forced my feet to move.

A call box was hanging on the right side of the door. Faded tags, written in sloppy handwriting, identified the names of apartment numbers of everyone in the building. I scanned the names quickly and found the one that I was looking for.

Maureen Wilson. 1A.

I pressed the button.

A minute passed. I counted the seconds in my head so I knew. Three cars passed by. I twisted the strap of my duffle bag between my fingers.

No one came to the door.

I tried again. Still, no one answered.

After my third try I started to worry. If Maureen didn't answer I had nowhere else to go. I could wander around and try to find a motel room somewhere I guessed but I had no idea where I was. I didn't have a map or a clue. How was I going to find a place to sleep? After sitting on that cramped bus for days, barely sleeping, I was absolutely beyond tired.

Not even an hour in the city and already things were crumbling around me.



An itch tickled the back of my throat. My eyes stung. I hated crying. I hated looking like a baby. I refused to cry. I wasn't going to start off like this.

I was going to get into that apartment building if it was the last thing I did.

Gritting my teeth together so hard that my molars squeaked, I reached out and leaned on that button one more time.

I didn't take my finger off the button for a full minute. Outside the door I could hear the buzzing inside.

The door swung open with such force that it blew my hair back.

At first, I didn't see anything in front of me but an empty hallway. There wasn't anybody there. I blinked stupidly. It was impossible for a door to open itself, obviously, but that's what it looked like the door had done.

Then my eyes travelled down a few inches and settled on a head of smokey-grey, close-cropped hair.

The smallest woman that I'd ever seen was glaring at me. She was the size of a small third grader and the very most. Her round body was covered in a pink terrycloth robe that dragged along the ground. Two tiny feet covered in embroidered slippers peaked out from underneath the hem of the robe. Coke-bottle glasses with thick tortoiseshell frames perched on the end of a red, bulbous nose.

“Who the fuck are you?”

The tiny woman had a shockingly deep voice.

“My name is Joanna Reese. I talked to you about apartment 5b...”

She looked me over from head to toe, her eyes narrowing as they travelled over me.

“You sounded older on the phone.”

The back of my neck prickled with nerves. I'd been counting on her not asking about my age. If she did, I had no way of proving that I was older than I was. And there was no way that anyone was going to rent an apartment to a seventeen-year-old kid. No one in their right mind, at least.

While she continued to eye me suspiciously, she started speaking again. She talked fast, twice as fast as any normal person. "I need to fill this room so *I'm* not gonna ask you how old you are and *you're* not going to tell me. I don't want to be held responsible for harboring some teenage runaway or something..." She paused to breathe, "You can pay?"

My head bobbed up and down in emphatic confirmation.

Maureen stepped out of the doorway and motioned for me to step inside.

"Well, get in here, then."

Somehow it was even hotter inside the building than it had been on the street outside. There wasn't enough air circulating around inside. It had settled and gone stale and smelled like sweat and must. The floors in the entryway were tile. The pattern was pretty but it had been worn down by time. In some places pieces of tile had come loose or cracked, revealing the plain foundation underneath.

Maureen waddled in front of me. She didn't offer to help me carry my stuff.

"There's no elevator, just the stairs. They're a bitch."

I wondered if Maureen was like this with everybody she rented to, or if the desperation was written so plainly on my face that she knew I couldn't afford to back out.

Like the tile floors, the staircase showed the signs of many years of wear. Hundreds of trips must have been taken up and down it. The railings needed a new coat of paint and there was

a faded spot down the center of the steps where peoples steps had fallen more frequently than anywhere else.

I didn't mind the shabbiness of the building.

“Are you coming? Or are you going to take up even more of my time just standing there?”

Maureen was already shuffling up the steps.

I jumped to attention and followed closely behind her, “Sorry—I just got to the city so I guess I'm still—”

“I don't want your life story, kid.”

By the time we made it to the fifth floor Maureen was huffing and puffing like the big bad wolf and I was feeling a little out of breath myself.

There were two apartments on the fifth floor. Two doors with peeling paint right next to each other. 5A and 5B.

Maureen pulled a big key ring from the pocket of her robe. A couple dozen keys jingled loudly. It took her a while to find the right key and even longer to get it off the ring. Then when she'd unlocked the door, it stuck and she had to give it a good shove with her wide hip to get it open.

I jumped at the sound of a door suddenly being thrown open.

“Christ Maureen, can you keep it down? It's 2am, I'm trying to sleep.”

A young man was standing in the doorway of 5A. He was wearing boxers and a t-shirt, his eyes were bloodshot, his dark curls were sticking up in every direction. He must have just rolled out of bed. Pale blue eyes stared daggers at me and Maureen.

“Joanna, meet Max, one of the very charming residents of this building. Max, this is your new neighbor, Joanna.”

His eyes skimmed me over from head to toe. He didn't say any words of acknowledgement. It was like I wasn't even there. The frown on his face didn't soften.

“Could you just keep it down?” His voice was a grumble in the back of his throat.

“Oh please, the whole building hears you playing your music all hours of the day.”  
Maureen snapped back.

Max mumbled something under his breath that I couldn't make out and retreated back into his apartment, slamming the door behind him.

The sound made me jump.

“He's nicer in the daytime.” She looked at me accusingly, “Most people don't like being woken up in the middle of the night.”

I didn't apologize. I wasn't sorry that I'd woken her up. If I had to, I'd do it again.

She led the way inside of the apartment.

It wasn't much. But the rest of the building hadn't set my expectations very high. It was small. A single window without any cover was in the center of the far wall. A full-size mattress with a metal bedframe was pushed against another wall. Aside from that, it was empty.

It was mine.

“You can sign the lease in the morning.” Maureen told me, while I set my duffle and my record player down on the ground.

She hovered in the doorway. A moment passed. She looked at me expectantly, but I couldn't figure out what she was waiting for.

“You have the rent money?”

“Oh!” I dug around in my duffle bag for the envelope of cash I’d set aside. I’d counted it a dozen times. Five hundred dollars in an array of bills and a handful of change. It equaled months of shifts at the Dairy Bar. I’d given up school lunches and movies and roller-skating in order to save every penny I could.

I held the cash out to Maureen like an offering. She snatched it out of my hand like a cat catching a mouse. She counted it quickly. It was hard not to think of all the hours I’d spent dipping soft-serve and ringing up the cash register to make that money. Months of work, all gone in a flash.

Now, all I had left was a couple of twenties until I found another job.

Maureen was apparently satisfied with the amount she found in the envelope, it a bit annoyed at the change hiding at the bottom.

“If you need anything find somebody else to bother,” was the last thing she said to me before turning on her heel and slamming the door behind her.

All alone in the apartment, I felt very small.

When I’d imagined that moment—alone in my very own apartment, in a city that i’d only seen in movies—I’d imagined it feeling more...triumphant. But if I was honest, I felt homesick. It felt like being sick, like my stomach was suddenly too heavy, my body too hot. My chest was tight and my lip trembled.

I set my jaw. I’d made it all this way. I wasn’t going to start crying now.

What was wrong with me? I didn’t want to be back in the trailer park with Mom. But being so completely alone didn’t feel as good as I thought it would.

Maybe it was just fear of what I’d gotten myself into finally hitting me. There was no one around to save me if I got myself into trouble. Not that I’d had that in Wisdom, but at least

there I'd known what to expect. I knew my way around there—the people and place—and at the end of the day I did always have a place to go back to with food in the cabinets and a warm bed.

My stomach growled. I hadn't eaten in forever. After barely making it to the apartment I was weary to march straight back into the night. Even if I did, I didn't know where to find food around here. I could last until morning before finding food somewhere.

Sleepiness hit me like a bus. That was what finally got me moving. Once, I realized how much I just wanted to go to sleep, I was able to make myself move.

Since there wasn't anywhere for me to put my things, I couldn't properly unpack. I did take everything out of my duffle and folded all the clothes so that they wouldn't get all wrinkly.

Pretending that everything was normal made me feel the tiniest bit better.

The bed didn't have any sheets on it and I hadn't brought any with me. There was a suspicious-looking stain right in the middle of the bed, that I covered with a towel. I curled up on top of it like a cat without any blanket to cover up with. I didn't even turn out the light.

That's when I couldn't fight back the tears anymore. Under the bright light shining down on me, laying on a squeaking mattress in a room that didn't smell like me, I had to admit that this wasn't what I'd thought it would be.

## CHAPTER THREE

Mom always told me that you can't be sorry for something if you plan on doing it again.

She always pulled that line out when I tried to apologize for doing something that pissed her off, which happened a lot. It didn't take much to set Mom off and I had a real talent for pressing her buttons. I'd talk back or slam a door or make a mess and Mom would storm around like I'd committed murder or something. Then, when she wore herself out being angry, she'd just sorta stop talking to me. Her eyes would glaze over and she'd act like I wasn't even there. Every time, I told myself that I wasn't going to apologize. I could play the silent game just as well as she could. For a few hours I'd hold out. Camped out in my room, playing record after record to distract me from the silence in the trailer. But I caved first every time. I was always the one who came crawling back to apologize in order to break her stone-cold silence.

“How am I supposed to accept that you're sorry when I know that you're just going to do it again?”

I fucking hated it when she said that.

You could be sorry for something and make the mistake again. If the world only allowed for you to make a mistake once how were you ever supposed to learn how to do anything? Misbehavior was just as hard to correct as spelling mistakes. You wouldn't tell a kid that they weren't ever allowed to spell a word wrong twice would you? If you did that, they'd just chuck it all in and stop trying for good.

I always wanted to throw her words back in her face when one of her boyfriends turned sour a few months in and she locked herself up in her room, licking the wounds of heartbreak.

“I'm sorry I ever met that man...” she'd say, nursing a bruise or counting the money in her wallet to see what he'd taken.

*“You can’t be sorry if you’re just going to do it again, Mom.”*

It would have been so satisfying to watch her face change from deluded determination to self-aware resignation. Nothing smarted quite like having your own words used against you. But I couldn’t do it. She made me mad, but I knew where the line between getting the last word and being unforgivably mean was. Most of the time I didn’t cross it. Plus, there was something unbearably shameful about recognizing Mom’s flaws out loud. I always knew that I was more mature than my own mother, but actually saying it—and watching Mom realize it—that would be too much. It was better just to suck up my pride and let Mom think that she was right.

She could keep dating bad guys and I’d keep doing things that made her mad. These were the only real constants in life. No matter how often we had to apologize for our mistakes, we never seemed to learn from them.

I was starting to kind of see Mom’s point.

Mom’s saying was on my mind when I woke up that morning after the concert with the worst hangover I’d ever had. I was really sorry for all the drinking I’d done the night before but I also knew that being sorry wasn’t going to stop me from drinking next time I was out with Frankie.

From the moment that I blinked my eyes open I knew that it was going to be a bad day. Pain smashed through my right eye and to the back of my brain. I tasted sour in the back of my throat.

I threw up.

All over the floor. I tried to make it to the trash can but I missed it by a few feet.

My head wasn’t attached to my body anymore and in its place my stomach was controlling my nervous system.



For an eternity I lay on the floor with my cheek pressed against the cool, hardwood floor, with the trashcan within reach. It was the only comfort in the world to me in that moment; the solid, steady floor and the trashcan.

I had to be at work in an hour. The walk alone took 30 minutes. If I didn't peel myself up off the floor I was going to be in an even bigger mess than I already was.

I crawled to the bathroom.

I didn't have time for a full shower so I rinsed myself off in the sink the best that I could and prayed that no one would be able to smell the vodka-tinged sweat leaking out of my pores.

The slacks I wore to work were laying in a pile on the floor. I kicked myself for not folding them after the last shift I worked. I searched around for a clean top and eventually settled on a sweater that didn't smell too bad. It was kind of ugly but any shot I had of looking nice had flown out the window long ago.

I stumbled out the door while still pulling on my shoes.

The street outside was busy. Everyone else in the city was heading off to work the same as me but they were in better shape. The second I stepped outside, a car blared its horn. I clutched my head to keep it on my shoulders.

On the corner of Ludlow and Rivington, in front of a place called Paul's Boutique I threw up again. Right into the street. Nobody gave me a second look. Pedestrians simply stepped around me as I puked up my guts into the street.

It probably would have felt better if I'd flung myself into the street for a cab to hit me. At least then I would have had a valid excuse not to go to work.

Asch's Antique's was a little shop in Soho. It sold just about anything you could imagine. Mr. Asch, the owner and my boss, didn't seem to be very picky about the things he sold. He

accepted items of every era and style. Jewelry, clothes, furniture. Taxidermy animals wearing tiny clothes and china dolls with frozen, haunted expressions. There was one particularly ugly painting of a woman with an extremely long neck hanging behind the jewelry display case. She stared down at me while I worked, with beady judgmental eyes. There was something in the antique store for just about anyone. It was a lot like the city itself in that way; if you looked hard enough, eventually you'd find something that seemed to be waiting just for you.

“You're late.”

I wasn't even in the door before Mr. Asch barked at me. He didn't glance up from my paper but he was somehow able to reprimand me all the same.

“I'm sorry,” I mumbled, afraid to open my mouth just in case some puke decided to come up when I did.

Mr. Asch didn't really seem that bothered by my tardiness, just obligated to point it out. Mr. Asch never seemed that mad about anything. He was a man of few words and apparently few emotions. When he'd interviewed me for the job he'd stared at me from across his desk for a solid five minutes before opening his mouth. What he did say was short, and brisk, and to the point. I liked that he never asked me about myself, or where I was from, or what I liked to do in my spare time—all those stupid things that everybody asks but nobody actually cares about. It saved me the trouble of making up lies. In return, I never asked Mr. Asch about his personal life. As far as we were concerned, neither of us existed outside of our capacities in the shop.

It was probably safe to place Mr. Asch in his mid-sixties. He was shorter than me, round in his belly but thin everywhere else. There wasn't much hair left on his head, but what was there was mouse-grey and wispy. He always wore the same brown tweed pants hiked up high on his waist with a tightly cinched belt.

Frankie was the one who set me up at the shop. Apparently, Mr. Asch was an old family friend and when she'd heard about the job she'd recommended me. It didn't pay much—just 3.50 an hour—but it covered rent and from time to time I picked up odd jobs like working at a coat check or serving at parties which helped to line my pockets a little.

I was the only employee at the shop. Before me, Mr. Asch's grandson had my job but he'd left to go to school so that left an opening. I wasn't sure why Mr. Asch bothered to hire somebody because there wasn't that much to do. He probably could have done it by himself and saved the money.

Most of what I did was sit behind the counter and wait for somebody to come in. On the rare occasion that somebody actually bought something, I got to put the register skills I learned at the Dairy Bar to work. When Mr. Asch didn't think that I looked busy enough he'd put me to work sorting antique buttons into jobs or vacuuming off the taxidermy animals.

There were lots of perks to working at the shop. Like how Mr. Asch sometimes sent me out for sandwiches at lunch time and paid for mine too. And there was always a fresh pot of coffee in Mr. Asch's office which I could help myself to whenever I wanted. The scent of brewing coffee covered up a lot of the staleness in the shop's air and made the cramped, overstuffed building feel warm and cozy.

“Hurry up and put your things up,” Mr. Asch muttered, “And pour yourself a cup of coffee. You look terrible.”

I did what he said and when I came back, I took over his place beside the counter. After he disappeared into the back room I settled into my seat and slowly sipped on a steaming cup of coffee. My stomach was still lurching but getting a little something into it helped some.

Nobody ever came into the shop. Most of the time I wondered how Mr. Asch managed to keep the place open but I was grateful for it that day. I didn't have the energy to interact with anybody.

At noon Mr. Asch emerged from the back room and asked me to go to the deli down the street. He was very particular about his sandwiches. His order was always the same: a pastrami on rye with a dill pickle on the side.

The deli was a little out of the way but Mr. Asch wouldn't let me go anywhere else.

"The man who opened that deli gave my grandfather his first job in this city. If it weren't for that deli, I wouldn't be standing here today! I'll give that place my business until the day that I die."

I did whatever he said. Plus, it was nice to get out and stretch my legs in the middle of the day.

The deli was always busy when I got there. I'd never been to the deli when it wasn't busy. The line always stretched out the door which didn't bother me, because I was getting paid to stand there. The deli smelled heavenly inside, the smell of salty cured meats and cheeses was irresistible.

Most of the stuff I hadn't even heard of before;

Wisdom wasn't exactly known for its cuisine. There were three restaurants in town, the Dairy Bar, Quick Chicken, and Antonio's Italian Restaurant which was the one fancy place in town that people went to on special occasions. Mom never fed me anything that didn't come in a can and once I was old enough to fend for myself, she stopped cooking altogether. When I didn't just eat a burger at work, I ate mostly sandwiches.

The city had every kind of food I could think of and a bunch that I couldn't have imagined in my wildest dreams. Food from every region of every country, made by people who actually came from that country. Even a sandwich could be spectacular in the city.

“Can I get a pastrami on rye and uh--” I glanced up at the menu, “a tuna fish sandwich? With two pickles?”

The guy behind the counter had my order ready in about two minutes. I took it and walked all the way back to the store.

Mr. Asch was sitting behind the counter. I handed him his sandwich and his change, and he retreated back into his office.

I ate my sandwich alone.

Nobody came into the shop.

At 5 o'clock, Mr. Asch emerged from his office, told me that I was free to go for the day.

I walked back to 424.

On the way I saw some of the same faces I'd passed in the morning.



I was so happy to go back home after the day I'd had. All I wanted to do was crash into my bed and sleep. I walked kind of slow which made everyone around me mad. New Yorkers really didn't like moving slowly—it was like they were always late for something no matter what.

I liked watching them, learning more about the odd people I lived in such proximity to.

Some people said that the city was alive, but I'd have to disagree. The city itself was just a bunch of buildings and concrete and metal. It was as dead as any place could be, beat into submission by years of progress. But the people—New Yorkers weren't like any people I'd ever

met before. Everyone I met in the city was fighting for something. Some were fighting to have successful careers or to be artists. A lot of people were just fighting to survive. But every single one of them was fighting hard. Teeth gritting-nail digging-taking hard punches and standing back up-fighting. That fight inside of everybody was what brought some life back into the city. The people—with their desperate need to be somebody—made the city spark with something that other places didn't have.

424 was full of people with fight in them. Over the weeks of passing my neighbors on the stairs, hearing their conversations through the thin walls, I started learning about them. The building was like an ant farm and I got to observe my neighbors scurrying around and building their lives. A few of them I actually talked to and knew by name but most of our interactions were limited to silent nods of acknowledgment when we passed or they ignored me all the same.

Maureen was obviously the first person I met and she was the easiest to observe. She left her apartment door open a crack almost all the time so that she could keep track of the people coming in and out. Unless you wanted to get stopped in the entryway for some stupid reason you had to sneak past so that Maureen didn't nab you. I'd seen the woman who lived above me take off her heels at the door one time to make sure that Maureen's bat-ears didn't hear her footsteps.

At just the right angle, you could catch a glimpse of Maureen sitting in her faded, floral chair, wearing that pink robe she never seemed to take off watching TV with the volume turned as high as it would go. Clouds of smoke wafted out of the crack in the door. At 2 or 3am she'd be up watching reruns of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show".

I wondered a lot about how Maureen ended up there, running a building, sitting alone in her apartment. A lot of people talked about ending alone like it was the worst thing in the world,

but it didn't seem that bad to me. Maureen got to do what she wanted. She didn't take anybody's shit. I wouldn't mind living like that.

Then there was Max. My first impression of him, the night I'd moved in, hadn't been good. But I saw a lot of him and he turned out to be nicer when he was woken up in the middle of the night. The first time I actually spoke to him (if you don't count the night I got to the city) was a few days after I moved in. I was sitting on the stoop outside of the apartment after a long day of job hunting. I was tired and hot and I couldn't bring myself to walk up all those stairs yet so I just plopped down on the steps and watched people walk by.

The door opened behind and someone almost stepped on me.

“Oh, hey.”

It was Max, I recognized him right away even though now he was fully dressed and awake.

“Hey. Joanna right?” Without invitation he sat down next to me, “I'm sorry about the other night. I'm not usually an asshole like that.”

“It's alright.” A pause, “Sorry about waking you up.”

Max sat next to me in silence for a while longer. It wasn't an awkward silence. It hung over us like a soft blanket. We stayed like that for a long time.

Then Max stood up and announced that he had better get to work but it was good to see me and he hoped to see me around some more.

After that, Max always talked to me when he saw me. Sometimes, he'd sit out on the stoop with me. I learned that he loved watching Saturday Night Live but that he never actually got to watch it on Saturday Nights because he had to work on Saturdays.

The Cougher was a middle-aged, portly man with a receding hairline, who'd had a wet, rattling cough in his lungs every day for weeks. It never seemed to go away. You could hear him wheezing and expelling mucus echoing throughout the building at all hours of the day. The Cougher lived alone on the third floor. I never saw anyone else coming or going from his apartment. I was pretty sure that one of these days he was going to choke to death alone and no one would know about it for days.

On the second floor there was a woman who I called The Librarian. I didn't know if she was a librarian but her thick round glasses, tight topknot, and immaculate skirt suits made her look like one. She was probably in her mid-thirties and she lived alone. Every morning at 8:00am she click-clacked down the stairs in short heels and at 5:30pm she click-clacked back up the stairs. On Sundays, she left her apartment wearing a dark blue polyester dress and carrying a black handbag. Her clockwork schedule was all I knew about her. That and that she had a cat. I only knew about the cat because I'd spotted the yellow tabby sitting on her windowsill from outside on the street once. No one ever came to see her at her apartment. It was a little sad. I tried my best not to think about it because nobody ever came to see me either.

Angel was by far the most interesting person in the whole building. Angel. That was his real name—well, it was the one he told me, so I assumed it was his real name. It was pretty fitting because he was beautiful. Not just good looking or handsome, he was *really* beautiful.

The first time I ever saw Angel I'd been walking up the stairs. It was June. The city was blisteringly hot and I was dripping with sweat, trudging back up to my apartment. I was hunched over, looking down at my feet, trying to will them to move faster.

When I looked up, I saw him. He was the most beautiful person I'd ever seen—not man—person.



He was so pretty that I almost didn't want to look at him. His shorts were super short, revealing long, athletic, tan legs. Along with the shorts, he was wearing a t-shirt cropped to show off a significant part of his stomach. It was muscular and completely smooth, like an action figure. Even if his body hadn't been perfect, his face would have made up for it. Clean-shaven, high cheekbones, framed my dark, damp curls. His eyes were dark brown with long eyelashes. They were like the eyes of a calf, calm and serene and friendly.

“You're new...”

All of his teeth showed when smiled at me. He stopped on the step above me so that I had to tilt my chin up to look him in the eye. Like me, he was sweating, but it only made him look shiny and smooth.

“Yeah...I moved into 5B a few weeks ago.”

“You new to the city too?”

I nodded, “I'm from Oklahoma.”

His eyes widened and he looked completely delighted, like I'd told him I was from somewhere actually interesting.

“A little country mouse! Welcome to the Big Apple!”

He offered me his hand, oddly delicate and rough at once, “I'm Angel.”

At first, I misheard him. I thought that he said, “I'm an Angel”. I didn't question it because it seemed pretty fitting. I could imagine him sitting on God's right hand surrounded by clouds and cherubs.

A few days later I was sitting on the stoop with Max. He'd knocked on my door and asked if I wanted to go get a coke. It was too hot and stuffy inside the building to stand so I'd

agreed. Plus, I liked hanging out with Max. It helped relieve some of the loneliness to get to spend a little time with someone else.

We sat in silence, sipping our sodas and watching people trudge by. The sun beat down on my face, hitting my nose and cheeks. After just a few minutes I could already feel the top layer of my skin burning. Max kept wiping the sweat off of his forehead with the bottom of his t-shirt, every time showing just a little glimpse of the skin on his stomach. Everyone who walked by looked completely miserable. It was too hot to exist.

Out of the crowd, a bouncing figure appeared, nodding his head along to the music on his Walkman. Only Angel could have managed to look beautiful glistening with sweat and jogging up the street to the apartment.

“Hey there, Country Mouse.”

Angel always called me Country Mouse. It didn't bother me. It kind of made me feel good to have a nickname. I wasn't sure that he knew my real name.

“And Max! You two make a cute little picture out here together.”

I didn't think that it was possible to feel and hotter than I already did but Angel's comment proved me wrong. My flush outshone my sunburn.

Max didn't seem embarrassed, he took a slow sip of his coke, “How can you stand to jog in this heat?”

Angel laughed, “Can't let the heat stop me from working on this body. You two stay out of trouble.”

“What's his story?” I tried to sound casual, not as curious as I really was. I didn't want Max to think that I was fishing for information out of self-interest of anything, cause I wasn't.

“Angel?” He looked over his shoulder at where Angel had just walked by, “I don’t really know that much...he’s lived here since before me. Mostly keeps himself to himself. Never brings his dates around or anything. Can you imagine if Maureen caught him bringing guys in and out of this place?”

“Guys?”

He put his headphones back on and danced his way inside, leaving me and Max sitting alone again.

“Yeah,” Max nodded, “It doesn’t really bother me that much but some people...” Max must have noticed the shock on my face. He laughed, “You didn’t know? Angel’s a fag.”

I felt embarrassed and stupid. I hated looking stupid in front of Max.

I knew that gay people existed. It was on the news a lot now with the AIDs epidemic. But it wasn’t something that you were supposed to talk about in Wisdom. It was a bad word...an accusation...used to mock people who weren’t like everyone else. Boys called other boys fags when they didn’t play sports. Girls were dykes if they didn’t date lots of boys. It was a dirty word that got hissed in the locker room or etched on the walls of the bathroom stalls.

I’d never actually known a gay person before, at least, I didn’t think that I did.

Max didn’t say anything else and even though I was trying hard not to look at him, I knew that he was looking at me. He was waiting to see what I was going to say.

“He’s nice.”

Max nodded, “Sure.”

I didn’t say anything else about it and neither did Max. We went back to watching people walk by silently.

I didn't stop thinking about Angel and him being gay. For the rest of the day I just kept thinking about what that meant. When I thought about two guys together...I couldn't even picture it.

Then there was AIDs. I knew about AIDs from the news. People were talking about it everywhere. Everyone was scared about it. I wasn't sure how much I had heard was true--most of it I'd picked up from people whispering about it or in short bursts from the news. I didn't think that I could catch it—but still...and surely Angel had to be...

People hated him. Really hated him and everybody who was like him. Even here in the city when people didn't care as much about what people did, there were still people who painted slurs in alleys. It seemed like it would be easier for Angel if he acted less...like he did. If he tried to blend in more maybe people wouldn't ever know.

But was that fair? That he should have to be different than he was in order for people to hate him less? He was always nice to me. He wasn't hurting anyone. I always hated it when people tried to tell me what to do...I couldn't imagine how Angel must feel when the whole world wanted him to be something different.

I came to the city because I didn't feel like I belonged back in Wisdom. I didn't fit in there. Angel couldn't have felt like he belonged wherever he was. New York was probably one of the only place on earth where Angel had even the slightest chance to be himself anywhere.

The next time I passed Angel on the stairs I kept my eyes down. I didn't want something on my face to give away what I knew...or how I felt.

“Hey, Country Mouse,” Angel smiled, “How's it going?”

I mumbled something. I don't even remember what.

Angel stopped on the stairs, “What's wrong with you?”

My mouth opened and closed. No words came out.

It took Angel a few minutes to put it together. But I saw the moment it clicked written all over his face. I got the feeling that I wasn't the first person to do this to him—to find out something and start acting strange around him. He must have been used to it because he kept his composure. A frown pulled at the corners of his lips and he took a deep breath.

“Oh honey,” Angel's smile was kind of mean, “If I'm the scariest thing in the city to you, you've got some surprises in store.”

I wanted to apologize to Angel then. He'd only ever been nice to me. And here I was acting like he'd done something wrong. Maybe he had. But that wasn't for me to decide was it?

Angel walked away before I could say anything to him. The next time I saw him on the stairs he didn't call me Country Mouse. He looked up and nodded and then looked back down at the floor.

## CHAPTER FOUR

A few months into my new life in the city, Frankie set me up covering a shift for one of her friends at a Broadway theatre checking coats. The show was called *A Chorus Line*. I hadn't heard of it before, but Frankie told me it was good. Making my way through Times Square was terrifying. There were peep shows and pornography palaces on every corner, along with the creeps that liked to hand out in front of them.

I got to the theatre about an hour before the doors opened. The actors were still making their way into the building while the other girl who worked coat check was showing me the ropes. I barely paid any attention to the training because I kept getting distracted by the dancers warming up in the lobby. All the women were incredibly thin, parading around in their leotards and legwarmers, talking to each other casually while they contorted their bodies into impossible positions.

I could overhear their conversations from where I was standing. I listened in pretty shamelessly. Mostly they talked about boring stuff; rent, and family, and how late the train was running. A lot of complaining. I expected their conversations to be a little more interesting.

You'd think they'd all have been really happy. I mean, they got paid to sing and dance on Broadway! I wasn't an expert but wasn't that what every actor in the world dreamed about? But most of them didn't look all that happy, most of them just looked...tired. Maybe they were saving their energy for the show.

Or maybe the reality wasn't as good as the dream.

A couple of the dancers were warming up in a corner. One was on the floor with her legs spread, reaching forward so that her stomach was resting on the ground between her knees. The

other was leaned against the wall with her foot in her hand, her leg hoisted hiked up over her head.

The one on her floor was whispering to the other, “My ankle has been killing me. I’m afraid my tendon is torn. I can’t afford to get injured—I just got this job. It took me forever to even get called in for an audition before this. There just isn’t work like there used to be.”

Her face was twisted with pain while she went about her stretching. From far away all the makeup she was wearing made her look beautiful, but standing a little closer, it looked garish.

“That’s rough,” The other dancer commiserated, “But at least you’re young. I had some casting director tell me that I was too old for a role. I’m twenty-eight!”

The first dancer let out a long sigh, “Some days I wish I’d decided to do something else. My parents wanted me to go to college...but I wanted to be on Broadway. This business just takes more than it gives you know?” She brought her legs together and her face winced.

I didn’t get to hear much more because the house manager came through and told all the dancers to clear out of the lobby so that they could open the doors.

The people who came to the show were rich. Until that night I’d never seen an honest-to-God-real fur coat in person. The thing was heavy and it smelled like mothballs but the fur was soft and shiny.

Theatre wasn’t really something that I’d had much exposure to. Wisdom High put on a couple of shows a year, but I’d never been in any of them.



After the late-night checking coats I’d gone to the bed with the intention of not leaving my bed until well into the next afternoon.

I lived for my days off. They were rare, between my regular job, the odds and ends I picked up here and there, and my nights out with Frankie. I got so used to being tired that I forgot what it felt like when I wasn't. So, I learned to make the most of the days when there wasn't anything I had to do. I created a whole ritual around my days off.

I started every day off by sleeping as long as I possibly could—usually until at least noon. The luxury of waking slowly, of taking my time to get dressed, of stretching out my limbs and burrowing back under the covers, was something I'd taken for granted before I had to work my ass off every day in order to make rent.

Once I finally got moving, I'd go to a bakery down the street and get a coffee and a cherry filled donut for 65¢. Most days I didn't eat breakfast in order to save money but on my days off I liked to give myself a little treat. And since technically it doubled as my lunch, I was able to justify it.

After eating, I liked to explore, each time trying to dive a little deeper into the city that I had the time before. Once, I made it all the way to the Met. All by myself, without Frankie or anyone else to guide me through the mess that was the subway system. I didn't have the money to actually go inside but I felt like getting there was enough of an experience on its own. One day when I had a little extra money, I'd go back and see what was inside.

But I didn't get to do any of that the day after working coat-check. All my plans were interrupted from the moment I woke up.

From inside my deep sleep, I heard the distant sound of music. It wasn't peaceful music. Not at all. It was loud riffs and banging drums and a shrill voice singing about girls. It yanked me right out of my slumber and into the real world.



The offending music was coming from Max's apartment. The wall between our apartments was shaking.

I tried to block out the sound by covering my head with a pillow. It was useless. I wasn't going to be able to go back to sleep.

Frustration and exhaustion made me want to cry. Of all moments, or all days, why—God why—had Max chosen that moment to play his music?

I threw myself out of bed, angrily untangling myself from the nest of blankets and sheets that I'd created in my sleep.

The kind of anger that comes from being ripped out of your sleep is one of the purest forms of anger that there is. Its raw and blind and fueled by lack of sleep. Then, because you're so tired, your brain is still hazy and muddled. You couldn't react rationally even if you wanted to. I was filled to the brim with that anger, positively bursting at the seams.

Without pausing to get dressed, without even putting on shoes, I stormed out onto the landing and stomped ten steps to my right, whirling around to face Max's door.

The music was even louder outside on the landing. Max probably wouldn't even be able to hear my fist pounding on the door over the din but I hammered away anyway. He was going to turn down that music if I had to kick in the door to get him to do it.

After about a minute of knocking the door opened and my balled fist hung in the air mid-knock.

My determination and anger retreated the minute Max looked at me. He looked me over in my t-shirt and socks and nothing else with his eyebrows raised up, like he was completely surprised to see me standing in front of his door.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?"

I'd wanted to sound stern and accusing, the way Mom did when she was trying to make me feel bad for something. But I only sounded confused, liked I'd forgotten why I was there.

Max looked calmly down at his watch, "1:13."

Shit.

Now I felt stupid. 1:13 was well past the respectful time to keep the volume down.

"Oh."

I wanted to slink away but couldn't seem to unglue my feet.

Max pulled the door open a little wider so that I could see further into the apartment.

Want a cup of coffee?"

It was a peace offering without the admission of fault.

"Okay."

Without another word he turned around and walked back into his apartment. I followed, a little reluctantly, but tempted by the promise of coffee.

I'd never seen the inside of his apartment before. It wasn't what I expected it to be. Not that I'd given it any thought before. But sometimes when I looked at people I just kind of put together this picture in my head of what their life was like. Things like what they did in their free time and the music they liked and the way that their rooms looked. My brain did it automatically, without me telling it to. It didn't happen with everybody but there were certain people that my brain seemed to be extra-interested in.

While Max's apartment had the same layout as mine, our apartments couldn't have been more drastically different. His walls were plastered with posters, newspaper clippings, photographs and handwritten notes. He'd constructed several bookshelves out of cinder-blocks and boards, piled so high with books that the boards sagged in the middle. A double mattress was

shoved up against the window, without a frame, like sleeping was an afterthought. The bed was neatly made, a navy quilt smoothed across it.

While it was chaotic with all the clutter, the place was immaculately clean. There weren't any dishes or take-out containers anywhere like there were in my apartment. The shelves were dusty, the floors looked like they'd been swept recently. And it smelled good. Like laundry detergent and something else I couldn't name.

Max turned down the music but didn't speak while he fiddled with the percolator and hotplate that was balanced on an old milk crate. I took his momentary distraction as an opportunity to snoop around.

Snooping was a talent that I'd developed during my short stint as a babysitter, before I'd realized that I didn't like kids even when I was paid to be around them. You could tell a lot about a person by the stuff they had—the things they hid at the back of their dresser drawers. I liked finding people's secrets. It was kind of like being a detective.

Max's stuff said a million different things and they all seemed to be contradictory.

His albums suggested that he was a musician—or at the very least that he understood music well. He had everything from David Bowie, to Mozart, to Simon and Garfunkel. No one genre or artist seemed to be a favorite. That wouldn't have been unusual since the city was teeming with musicians who were all trying to make it big. There weren't any instruments though.

Then there were all the books. I couldn't believe how many books he'd crammed into the room. If he ever moved out it was going to be a bitch for him to carry them all back down the stairs.

I ran my fingers over the spines of the books, tracing the titles with my nails and wondering how Max, and all his books, had come to 424.

One set of books caught my eye; a set of medical textbooks, sandwiched between a book of Andy Warhol art and Chaucer. They seemed particularly out of place among all the other books. They looked almost new, like they'd never been opened. All the other books appeared to be well-worn.

“Those are from my pre-med days.”

I jumped. When I turned around Max was standing right behind me with a cup of coffee in both hands. I blushed because I knew that I'd been caught but Max didn't seem to mind that I'd been rifling through his stuff.

He handed me one of the mismatched mugs.

“You were a med student?” I asked, blowing on my coffee to cool it off.

He nodded but he didn't seem to be very interested in the subject. I got the feeling that it wasn't something that he thought about anymore—either because he was pained by regret or because his life had moved so far in another direction that the past had become irrelevant.

“Did you quit because you wanted to be something else?”

“No...I just knew that I didn't want to be a doctor.”

He walked over to his bed and sat down. After a beat I followed him since there wasn't anywhere else in the apartment to sit. I perched on the edge of the bed. Max sprawled, taking up lots of space and not worrying about accidentally brushing his leg against mine.

He leaned across me and turned up the music, signaling that the conversation wasn't going to go any further.

We sat in silence for a long time, listening to the music. I didn't mind it as much anymore.

I couldn't relax. I was just too aware of Max's breathing next to me. And the fact that we were sitting on his bed. Nothing that Max did made me feel like he was giving my presence a second thought.

When I finished drinking my coffee I stood up.

Max looked around over and nodded to me, "See you 'round."

I didn't know what to do with the coffee mug, so I just left it on the floor next to the bed and walked as quietly as possible across the room, softly shutting the door behind me.

It wasn't until after the door closed that I realized what the smell I couldn't identify in the apartment had been. It had been pleasant and fresh and familiar even though I knew for sure I hadn't even smelled it before. I wanted to smell it again, to breathe it in deeply and remember it for the rest of the day.

It was the smell of Max.



I'd only had my heart broken once and I wasn't sure that it counted since I never actually dated the guy who broke it. It should have counted because it hurt just like any other heartbreak.

The night it happened I was working. It was a Friday in the March of my Junior year almost a year before I ever thought about running away. It started out like any other Friday night. I worked most Friday nights because I never had plans and figured that I'd rather be making money than sitting home alone.

I'd started working at the Dairy Bar when I was fifteen. I'd done it because I wanted to start making my own money. I hated having to ask Mom for cash every time I needed something.

Most of the time she didn't have the money anyway. I worked almost every day after school and some Saturdays. Technically I wasn't supposed to work that many hours but nobody was checking up on it so my manager Patti let it slide. I was a reliable employee. I always showed up on time, wasn't rude to customers, and I didn't do stupid shit like counting the register wrong. Those were difficult qualities to find altogether in one teenager in Wisdom, where the rich kids were too lazy to work because they were rich and had money and the poor kids had bad attitudes because they were poor and had to work.

My favorite coworker Richard Ilkes was working that too. Rich was unpopular as I was. Most of his problem was kind of his own fault. His parents had money. They lived in one of those nice neighborhoods with the two-story houses. If he'd wanted to, he could have fixed himself up. Poor Rich, couldn't really do anything to change the fact that he was awkwardly tall and skinny, and that he still had braces at sixteen. But he could have bought some better clothes. He wore a pocket protector for God's sake! That was just asking for people to pick on him.

Sometimes I wanted to tell him that if he would change then people wouldn't be such assholes to him. If he would just drop debate team, switch out his khakis for a pair of jeans, and maybe go to a sporting event, people would wouldn't have so much ammunition to pelt him with. Being so blunt with him would be harsh, but at the end of the day it'd save him a lot of trouble. It was self-preservation. If I'd had money, you could bet that I wouldn't be wearing discount clothes and I sure as hell wouldn't be working at the Dairy Bar.

I never did say anything about it to Richard. Probably because as long as Richard kept on behind a huge nerd, I didn't have to worry about being alone. If Richard really did try to coolify himself the first thing he'd have to do was stop talking to me.

Aside from being such a nerd Richard wasn't half-bad. He was funny. Every time I worked with him the shifts seemed to go faster. And he was smart. Richard knew at least a little bit about anything I could think to ask.

Nothing people said about him seemed to phase Richard. Then again, he did get to go home to a fancy two-story house at the end of the day. If I had that maybe I'd've been able to let the mean words roll off my back too.

The night had been pretty slow up until the high school basketball game let out. Before that Richard and I had eaten our weights in ice-cream that we didn't have to pay for and played a game of trying to throw wadded up burger wrappers into the trashcan from behind the counter. The only adult working was the cook Howie who was outside smoking the whole time Rich and I were goofing off.

It was a good time. Until all our classmates showed up.

Someone kept playing "I'll Be Watching You" by The Police over and over again on the jukebox for nearly an hour. I was sick of it.

My polyester uniform was scratching under my arms something awful. The armholes were just a little too small and the seams rubbed the tender skin of my armpits every time I moved. I hated that uniform. It made me look extra-boxy. The yellow fabric made me look sallow and sickly.

The hypnotic whirring of the soft-serve machine behind me and the chatter of teens gossiping was slowly lulling me into a kind of dream state. My eyes glazed over. There was still an hour left of my shift before I could go home and wash the smell of burger grease out of my hair.

“Is this song supposed to be creepy?” Richard asked me, nodding his head to the jukebox which was still playing The Police.

Richard was more alert than I was. He kept flicking a quarter on the counter, sending it spinning around and around and around.

The bell above the door chimed. I pulled my eyes away from the counter.

I didn't answer Rich's question about the song. Suddenly I didn't have any spit in my mouth. I swallowed a couple of times but couldn't work up any saliva.

Dave Lipinski had entered the building.

Dave Lipinski was the most beautiful boy I ever knew. He had hazel eyes with little flecks of gold in them and corn-silk yellow hair that fell past his ears. His face was the kind of face that you couldn't help but notice. He was always smiling. People who knew that they were beautiful smiled like that. And he always wore his letterman jacket. In case anyone in town ever forgot that he was the star of the basketball team.

The fact that some people were born looking like Dave Lipinski and others got stuck looking like Richard Ilkes was proof that the world was fundamentally cruel and unfair.

I lusted after Dave Lipinski the way every girl in Wisdom lusted after him. His tight jeans and the way they hugged his butt like they'd been made just for him had us all acting a little crazy when he was around. But aside from my biological desires I'm not sure what drew me to him. I think I just wanted the beautiful, popular boy—to look at me the way that I looked at him.

Deep down I knew that the boy whose Dad owned the Cadillac dealership in Tulsa wouldn't have any interest in the girl who worked at the Dairy bar and lived at the North Star trailer park. But it wasn't enough to dampen the tiny seed of hope that maybe I'd be the exception to the rule that said the cool guy couldn't like the uncool girl.



I don't know what I would have done if Dave Lipinski had given me the time of day. It was like that stupid game girls used to play in elementary school during recess, chasing boys around the playground. Around and around they'd run, squealing and giggling, pursuing some poor boy. Then when they finally caught him there was a moment of disappointment. The game was over and all they had to show for it was some sweaty, panicked boy. What would I do with Dave if I caught him. It wasn't like I wanted to have sex with him. God no! The very thought of it made me want to die of embarrassment. All I really wanted was for him to look at me the way that I looked at him.

Dave approached the counter, flanked by his teammates. If we'd been in a movie they would have been moving in slow motion while everyone else in the restaurant stopped what they were doing to stare at them. Even the stupid song didn't sing as annoying anymore.

*Oh can't you see, you belong with me? How my poor heart aches, with every step you take.*

Wisdom High must have won the game because the whole team looked happy and cocky.

Richard's quarter spun off the counter. He ducked out of sight and tried to look busy. His long neck sank down into his collar like he was a turtle. The basketball boys weren't exactly his best friends. I'd personally witnessed them trying to shove him in a locker twice.

"Hey," Dave grinned at me, resting his forearms on the counter and leaning so close that I could smell the fresh, minty toothpaste on his breath.

"How can I help you?" I asked, fumbling the words in my mouth and wincing at what a spaz he must have thought I was.

I waited anxiously for his order. A person's ice-cream order was very telling. Dave seemed like a cone kind of guy. Cones were cool. The crisp crunch of wafer followed by the soft, cold drip of ice-cream. Or maybe he was a sundae person. Sundaes were special. They had layers and surprises and when you mixed them all together you could find all new flavors. I decided that if he ordered a Sundae, I'd put an extra cherry on top. There weren't a lot of things that I had power over, but the indiscriminate distribution of maraschino cherries was one of them.

"I'll take a dipped cone."

His tongue ran across his lips which looked incredibly plump and lush. They looked so soft that I wanted to kiss them right then and there.

"Sure thing..." I whispered instead of kissing him.

I turned and went about getting the cone. I followed each step just as I'd been taught to by the manager. After two years of working at the Dairy Bar, I was a pro at making a dipped cone. There was some skill involved. You had to get your timing right or the chocolate would drip and you couldn't be a cheapskate on the amount of chocolate or customers would complain.

I was aware that Dave was watching me. Every move that I made, and how I looked making it, was conscious. It wasn't easy to make dipping a cone look attractive but I tried my very best.

"Your name's Joanna right? You're in my trig class?"

My stomach did a flip. He knew my name. I'd never imagine that he knew my name.

"Yeah."

He nodded thoughtfully, "Did you come to the game tonight?"

I watched the thick chocolate coating the delicate cone.

"No. I was working."

“That’s too bad. It was a great game. We won 36-10.”

“Almost seems a little mean to beat them so bad,” I handed him the cone.

Our hands brushed. After I pulled away I could still feel his lingering touch on my skin.

He shrugged, “They should’ve played harder.” He handed me a quarter before I had to ask for it. “What time do you get off tonight?”

The register dinged when I put the quarter away.

“9 o’clock. Why?”

He never took his eyes off of me. People who are really sure of themselves do that. They stare at you until you can’t stand it anymore. They don’t look down at the ground shyly, their eyes never dart away.

“Some of my friends are having a party. Maybe you want to come with me?”

Words didn't come to me at first. I stood there with an open mouth. I’d never been invited to one of the high school parties. Not ever. I knew that they happened because everybody talked about them at school. Most of the time the parties were held at Tommy Barringer’s dad’s land, where nobody’s parents were going to interfere. On the Monday after, the whole school would be buzzing with the whispered tales of the legendary happenings of the weekend before. I learned a lot of things listening to those stories. I knew about the time that Johnny Taylor got super drunk and streaked across the field and the time that Barbara Casey and Debbie Richards got in a fight because Debbie had been flirting with Barbara’s boyfriend, and how sometimes people would sneak away from the party to make out. Those were all just stories. They might as well have been things that I saw in a movie or read in a *Sweet Valley High* book.

Finally, I responded, “Really?”

He shrugged, “Why not? We can leave as soon as you get off.”

I was so glad that I hadn't worn my uniform to work that day, so I'd have something to change into. There was no way I could show up to a party in my bright yellow polyester uniform. I would rather have died. Jeans and a t-shirt weren't the coolest thing in the world but it was better than looking like a mustard bottle.

It took a lot of self-control not to shout YES! YES, I WANT TO GO TO THE PARTY WITH YOU. Somehow, I managed to pretend to think about it for a minute, like I had some other plans or something.

"Well—I guess I could come for a little while."

Dave smiled. His teeth were practically glittering like he was in a toothpaste commercial. He'd known that I wouldn't say no.

"Sounds good. I'll see you at nine."

I watched him away with my heart pounding in my throat.

Richard emerged from his collar and scooted closer to me, "What was that?"

"Dave Lipinski just asked me to a party."

Richard couldn't hide the surprise on his face, though he was nice enough not to voice it. I didn't know it for a fact, but I thought it was pretty safe to say that Richard hadn't been to any of Wisdom's famous parties either. I felt a little bad, like I was rubbing it in his face. My guilt wasn't strong enough to kill the bubbly feeling in my stomach.

I have never and probably will never, enjoy the last hour of my shift as much as I enjoyed that one. The last hour of the shift is usually the worst bit but for the first time ever I had something afterward to look forward to.

When the clock finally told me that my time was up and I was free to go, I yanked my apron over my head and went to the bathroom to change. When I came back, dressed like a normal person, Rich was sweeping behind the counter. He didn't get off for another hour.

Rich looked over his shoulder at me, "Hey, before you go, can you take the trash out?"

I looked at the overflowing trashcans and sighed. I hated taking the trash out but I was in a good mood. Besides, I felt like I owed it to Rich to the shitty job since—well, since I was getting to go pretend that I was one of the cool kids and he wasn't.

The trash cans were packed after the busy night. At some point people had stopped trying to make their trash fit and just started throwing their used cups and burger wrappers on top, creating a precarious mountain of greasy wax-paper and half-eaten fries. I wrestled with the bags and tried not to get any of the beige leakage at the bottom on me. I couldn't go to the party smelling like everybody's trash.

The dumpster was around the back of the building. I dragged the bags out the back door in one trip because I didn't want to keep Dave waiting any longer than I had to. It was a chilly night. Moths were fluttering around the light over the back door. Crickets were singing in the brush that surrounded the restaurant.

Normally I was careful when I approached the dumpster because once a raccoon had been inside. It nearly scared the shit out of me when it popped its head out and bared its pointy little teeth. But I was on a mission to get to Dave and not even a raccoon could scare me. I chucked the heavy bags up over my head and into the dumpster like I was competing in the Olympic shot-put.

I was heading back inside to wash my hands when I heard voices coming from around the front of the Dairy Bar and the occasional loud crack. Curiously, I tiptoed around the building to see what was happening.

Dave and his friends were all standing around his car. Gil Jenson and Roland Robinson were tossing firecrackers across the gravel parking lot. That explained the cracking sound. The pop, pop, pop of the fireworks vibrated across the desolate lot. The boy's faces were tinted pink by the light of the red Dairy Bar sign.

Standing where they couldn't see me, I paused for a second. I only wanted to hear a snippet of their conversation. It was every girl's dream to know what boys said when they thought no one was listening.

"I can't believe you asked the trailer park girl out. She's total white trash. You know her mom's always hanging out down at The Proud Man, right?"

It didn't surprise me that Gil would say something like that. He was a real asshole. He wasn't that good-looking, or athletic, or smart, so he compensated by being a jerk. No one could make fun of him if they were scared of him. Still, the words stung like a slap. Trailer Park Girl. They didn't even make fun of me for a good reason—the best thing they could do was make fun of where I lived. Even though I hated letting them get the best of me, my face turned hot.

I pressed my body flush against the door and waited to hear what Dave said.

"Would you shut up? I know what I'm doing."

My heart leapt. Dave Lipinski was standing up for me in front of his friends. The coolest boy in school was going to change his mind just because his friends made fun of me.

"Explain yourself then, 'cause I'm startin' to think you've lost your mind." Roland was a little weasel of a guy, of course he had to pipe in.

Dave laughed, a sound that made my heart sink to the pit of my stomach, “Everyone knows that the white trash girls put out. It’ll be nice not having to work so hard to get some for a change.”

All three of them laughed. Gil and Roland went back to throwing their firecrackers.

I sank back inside. My limbs were limp, like all the blood had left my body.

I was angry—about what he said, sure—but mostly because it wasn’t even true. I didn’t want to sleep with him—I didn’t think I wanted to have sex with anybody. I’d never done anything to make anybody think that it would. I’d only ever kissed one boy and it was barely a peck. What about me said that I was easy? Because me Mom was? That didn’t mean I was going to be as stupid as her.

My skin felt see-through. I wondered if every boy who’d ever looked at me had only been thinking of that one thing. Had they been scanning for glimpses of lines under my polyester uniform—the places where my body was completely covered by fabric? I felt violated—but couldn’t say anything. Wandering eyes couldn’t take anything from you but your pride could they?

If I hadn’t been so proud I would have cried. Right there next to the whirling ice-cream machine. But I couldn’t do that. He was still out there waiting for me. Which left me with the question of what I was going to do. Obviously, I couldn’t go to the party with Dave now? Did I tell Dave that I couldn’t go? That I’d gotten sick or something had come up?

I knew what I *wanted* to do. I wanted to take a baseball bat to his shiny red convertible. I wanted to smash it in like a coke can, dancing on the hood like it was a crumbling stage. With my house keys, I’d carb obscenities in the glistening body for everyone to read when he drove

around town.

DAVE LIPINSKI HAS A LITTLE DICK!

DAVE LIPINSKI CAN'T GET IT UP!

DAVE LIPINSKI IS A DIPSHIT!

But I wasn't going to do that. I didn't have the balls. I didn't even think that I could look Dave in the eye without bursting into tears. All I wanted to do was sink to the floor where no one would ever find me or say things about me again.

"Geez, what's the matter with you? You look green," Richard looked up from counting the register, pushing his glasses up his nose so that he could see me better.

I didn't say anything.

"Shouldn't you be heading to that party?"

It wasn't fair but I hated Rich right then. Why'd he have to go and be so nice? It felt like pity and I didn't want his pity. I already felt sorry enough for myself.

I couldn't bring myself to tell Rich about what I'd heard. I didn't want him to be even nicer—to try to comfort me or something. It wouldn't change anything. I was stuck in Wisdom and as long as I was there I would always be Trailer Park Girl. I'd be the butt of the joke.

"Yeah, I guess I should."

I tried to ignore the churning in my stomach and the feeling that I'd been caught standing in my underwear when I stepped outside.

Dave was standing next to his car still, spinning his keys around and around on his pointer finger and checking his hair in the side mirror. He, Gil, and Roland watched me approach, like they hadn't been talking about me just a few minutes before. I read terrible things into the looks they exchanged.



“You ready to go?”

I looked down at my shoes, “Actually, I don’t think that I can go after all.”

Dave stopped spinning his keys.

“Really?”

His face looked so genuinely surprised that I got the feeling no one had ever told him no before. The idea wasn’t so hard to believe. The crease between his eyes got deeper and deeper every moment that he was forced to comprehend my words. He was going to have to show up to the party without a girl on his arm—not even Trailer Park Girl.

I nodded to affirm my statement before turning on my heel and started walking to my old bike that was leaned up against the side of the Dairy Bar. Gravel crunched underneath my sneakers, emphasizing every step that I took away from Dave. I shivered, not from cold, but from that unpleasant feeling of dread you get when you walk through a graveyard.

Dave was stuck standing there, watching me walk away. Maybe he was waiting to see if I changed my mind and came running back to him. Eventually, I heard him tell Gil and Roland to get in the car.

I was unchaining my bike when his car roared to life.

The tears started coming while I pedaled my bike through town. All of the shops were closed. The lights inside were all off, leaving only the outlines of porticos and the shadowy lettering on windows advertising half price ladies shoes and buy-one-get-one-free Aquanet hairspray. It was eerily quiet. The only sounds for miles were the chirping of crickets and the crunching of the ground beneath my bicycle tires.

Once I got clear of downtown, the silent tears turned to choking, gasping sobs. I could barely see where I was going through all the tears in my eyes.

The trailer park was on the outskirts of town, across the train tracks and a couple miles down a dirt road. Trees stretched over the road, forming a canopy there. In the summer, you could see the flashes of fireflies in the trees. There weren't any fireflies that night though. There was hardly any traffic, especially that late, so I could pedal right down the middle of the road without having to worry about any cars coming. I pedaled as fast as I could. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead and mingled with my sour tears. All I wanted was to get home so that I could cry in the comfort of my bed.

I was going so fast and crying so hard that I didn't see the loose gravel on the road in front of me. When I hit it, the wheels of my bike skidded and I started to tip. I couldn't save myself in time—me and my bike crashed into the ground. I'd been going so fast that when I hit the ground I skidded for several feet. Gravel scraped across my left side—the side that hit the hardest. Chalky dust cracked my skin and mingled with the blood that was blooming from my wounds.

For a minute after the crash I couldn't move. The whole world was spinning so fast that I felt like I had to clutch the ground to keep myself from getting thrown off the earth and out into space. My brain rattled around in my skull. If I'd tried to stand I probably would have fallen right back over. So, I didn't even try. I lay there, hoping that a car would come and smush me.

I probably had a head injury but at least I'd stopped crying.

Finally, I pulled myself up. I didn't want to look down at my arm where it had been torn up by the road. It would hurt more if I saw it. Without looking I could feel that it was bad. It would be one of those terrible scrapes that would be scabby for weeks after—right at my elbow so I'd be reminded of it every time I bent my arm.

When I made it back to the park I threw my bike down in front of the trailer.

Mom was inside in front of the TV when I walked in.

“What the hell happened? Did you fall off your bike?” Her eyes followed my march from the front room to my bedroom.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I snapped, slamming my bedroom door behind me.

Mom didn’t argue with me. I guess she heard me crying in my room. I tried to stifle it but the walls were thin. You could hear everything. She knew better than to try to comfort me though.

I don’t think Dave ever found out that I’d heard him talking to his friends that night. He never asked me to another party. From then on, whenever he ordered ice-cream, he looked right over my head like I wasn’t there at all. Sometimes I felt him looking at me after I turned around.

I told myself it didn’t matter. Dave wasn’t the first person to talk shit about me behind my back and he wouldn’t be the last. But he was the first I’d ever heard talk about me like *that*—like I was some whore, like I was something he could use and toss away. It stayed in the back of my mind and it picked away at me until I was raw.

I thought about Dave Lipinski every time I talked to a guy. I wondered if they’d say the same things he’d said the moment I turned around. I thought maybe it was better just to stay away than to let another Dave Lipinski break my heart.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I thought about Mom a lot. It may not have seemed like it, but I did. The longer I went without calling, the more guilty I felt about not doing it sooner. At this point, I wasn't sure what was keeping me from it. I knew she'd try to make me feel guilty for leaving when I finally called, which wasn't something I wanted to deal with. Maybe it was just the fear that hearing her voice would bring me straight back to Wisdom. People had a way of doing that when you talked to them—a way of pulling you right back to a place or a moment whether you wanted to be there or not.

Mom did her best. I knew that. But for some reason it never felt like enough...for either of us.

I didn't think that I was the daughter that she'd hoped that I would be. Mom was really popular when she was in high school. There were pictures of her plastered all over Wisdom High. Her in her cheer uniform, her standing in line with the homecoming court, her smiling broadly, carefree, totally unprepared for the fact that she'd have a baby by the time she graduated. Part of me would look at those pictures and wish that I could go back and time and warn her.

I wasn't like that at all. There weren't going to be any pictures of me hanging in Wisdom High after I graduated. I wasn't cut out to be a cheerleader. I wasn't pretty and social. Nobody ever asked me to school dances. It was better that way probably. It cut back on the risk of me ending up like Mom.

Mom didn't know how to understand me because we were so different. From the time I was small it was like we were speaking different languages and we didn't have any way to translate. The only way we knew how to communicate was through fighting.

Mom's name was infamous around Wisdom. People in town talked about what went wrong with Tanya Reese all the time. She was a cautionary tale. A warning to young girls about what could happen if you gave it up too easily. Don't get me wrong, lots of girls in Wisdom got pregnant young—a quarter of the town's population was conceived under the bleachers at the football field. But they all did the right thing when it happened. They got married. They became homemakers. They went to church and raised their little accidents like they weren't accidents at all.

Mom wouldn't do that. Even when people talked about her because of it. She wouldn't do things the way that everybody told her she should. After finding out she was pregnant, she dropped out of school. She moved out of her parents' house and got a job at a bar. My dad proposed to her, but she turned him down—said that she wasn't going to marry someone who didn't really love her just because she was going to have his baby.

I didn't know who my dad was. No one would tell me exactly who he was. I knew that he'd been in school with mom. He was a Senior when she was a Junior. He'd left Wisdom in the dust after Mom turned him down. When I was younger, I'd flip through Mom's old yearbooks, examining the pictures of all the boys, trying to find someone who bore any kind of resemblance to me. By the time I was twelve or so I gave up trying to figure out which one he was. If he'd wanted to know me, he'd have stuck around—or at least acknowledged that I existed. Why should I waste my life wondering about someone who never wondered about me? My life wouldn't be any better with him in it, so I just pretended like he didn't exist.

My grandparents weren't in the picture much either. Even before Mom got pregnant, they didn't get along very good. Then, when they found out about my impending arrival, they were pretty disappointed, like any parents would be, I guess. They fought about it a lot and eventually

Mom moved out because she couldn't stand it anymore. That's when she moved into the trailer park.

When I was really little, we'd go visit them on holidays. The visits were always short and tense. Mom would perch on my grandparent's tiny, antique furniture like she was ready to make a run for it at any moment. I always had to be on my absolute best behavior. She kept her eyes on the clock, waiting for the appropriate amount of time to pass before she could leave. I'd sit in a stiff-backed chair, keeping quiet and looking at Mom before accepting anything that was offered to me.

She always gave me the same speech on the drive over to their place.

"You are to be on your absolute best behavior! We're not going to give them any fuel for their judgement."

She'd look back at me in the rearview mirror when she told me this but I always got the feeling she wasn't really talking to me.

Grandpa died when I was six and Grandma followed him a few months later.

I don't remember being sad. I mostly remember being kind of confused about how people could be there one day and then just be gone forever the next. My most vivid memory is of the black velvet dress that mom bought for me just for Grandpa's funeral. I loved that dress. When I wore it again for Grandma's funeral, it was about three inches too short cause I'd hit a growth spurt.

Mom didn't cry at their funerals. During the services, she stood with a stone face, clutching my shoulders like she thought I was going to run off. People from town kept telling her how sorry they were—people who never spoke to us any other time.

For months after, I heard her crying alone in her bedroom late at night when she thought that I was asleep.

For my entire childhood, Mom talked about how someday we'd move out of the trailer and into a real house in town. There was one house, a little two-bedroom with shutters and vines growing up around nine-paned windows, that she always pointed to when we drove past it.

"That one!" She'd say, "One of these days the old bat who lives there is gonna die or move to a nursing home and then we'll move in, sugar."

Then she'd explain that she just needed to save up enough money or find a new job. When she said it—I believed her. She made it sound so possible, so within our reach.

It didn't take me too long to figure out to realize that it was never going to happen. Mom didn't want it bad enough. And unless she really wanted it, she wouldn't make the changes that she'd have to make in order for us to get that little house. She'd have to stop staying out all night at the bar, wasting her money on drinking and playing cards....she'd have to stop bringing new men into our lives every few weeks.

The men...God, Mom really did go through boyfriends fast. You'd have thought Mom had learned her lesson about men after getting pregnant with me, but she didn't. Mom couldn't live without a man in her life. She wasn't very good at picking them either. It was almost like Mom had a special radar for men who were losers.

There were times though...when things would be good. Times when it felt like mom was finally going to turn things around for us. These brief moments of hope almost always occurred when Mom was between boyfriends. She'd break up with one and then wake up and decide that she was going to start fresh. For a few days, maybe even a few weeks, she'd act the way I always imagined other people's mom's acted; making dinners and cleaning house.

One of my favorite days happened when I was about twelve. Everything had been really good for a few weeks after Mom broke it off with some guy whose name I don't even remember anymore. Her mood had been high, she was coming home right after work and making dinners from scratch. She even came to pick me up from school a couple of times.

It started in the morning. Mom woke me up early, shaking my shoulders and whispering to me that we were going on a trip.

"Mom, I've got school." I was tired and bleary eyed.

I must have been delirious if I was reminding Mom about school. It was totally out of character for me to turn down a chance to skip.

I rubbed my eyes until they felt like they were going to pop out of my skull. Mom was digging around in my dresser for something.

"School isn't going anywhere," she kissed my forehead, "But we are."

It was still dark outside when I followed Mom out of the trailer. There was that hazy blue that came just before sunrise but it was already hot. Humid hot. Sticky hot. It made me kind of irritable. I could have been in bed but instead, Mom was dragging me off God knows where. Mom, however, was excited. I hadn't seen her that giddy in ages. She practically bounced over to the car, carrying several bags along with her picnic basket that I'd never seen her use before.

I dozed off in the car while Mom drove. Slipping in and out of sleep, not sure if I was hearing music on the radio or in my dreams. When the sun was fully up, I finally pulled myself out of sleep completely and looked out the window. I didn't know where we were. Mom never took me anywhere outside of Wisdom. She was always too busy or we were too poor.

"Where are we going?"

Mom turned down the radio.



“We’re going to the lake. Mom and Dad used to take me there when I was a kid...it’s about time that I took you too.”

There wasn’t anybody at the lake. Big green-yellow trees grew all along the edges of the water, their roots twisted and stretched toward the water, making it look more like a naturally formed lake instead of a man-made one. The water was so dark blue that it was almost black, the beach was rocky and all the little pebbles dug into the soles of my feet when I walked on it. We lay our beach towels side by side. Mom told me to lather on sunscreen while she covered herself with tanning oil. She hummed along to Dolly Parton on the portable radio while I floated on the surface of the lake.

The sun stung my face while I lay on my back, tilting my head up toward the sky. With my ears underneath the water, the world sounded far away. Half chilled by the water, half burned by the sun, completely weightless, I felt perfectly at peace with the world. I imagined that I was some water fairy princess, waiting for a handsome knight to find me and rescue me and take me far away to a place where everything was different. That was the kind of stupid thing I used to daydream about when I was twelve.

When we got hungry, we ate the picnic that Mom packed. She practically cleared out the kitchen. There were sandwiches and macaroni salad and pickles and devilled eggs and bottles of coke.

The sun was setting when Mom announced that it was time to go home.

I didn’t want to leave. If we could just stay there forever, every day would be like that. Maybe, I thought—just maybe, things would really be different this time. Maybe Mom was really going to pull it together. If things could just stay like this, then maybe someday we really could have that little house in town.

Mom said not to worry. We would come back again sometime.

I fell asleep on the ride home, sunburnt but happy.

About a week later Mom brought home Bobby.

We never went back to the lake again.



Bobby was the worst of all Mom's boyfriends. He wasn't just lazy and stupid—he was mean. Not of first, of course. At the beginning he acted like a real gentleman. Brought Mom flowers and took her out to the nice restaurant in town. Mom was the type of woman who caved really easily when she was flattered. She liked to feel special. Bobby was good at making her feel like she was the most special woman in the world.

Once he'd earned his way in it all fell apart.

It was the regular stuff at first; being a slob, not wanting to go out, drinking too much.

Then he hit Mom.

I was there when it happened. I was watching TV in the living room, sitting way too close to the screen but I had to or else I wouldn't be able to hear over the argument happening in the kitchen. I wasn't concerned. Mom fought with her boyfriends. If I dropped what I was doing every time I heard shouting, I'd never have finished anything. *Bonanza* was on. I didn't want to miss anything, so I kept inching closer and closer to the TV set.

It wasn't until I heard a crack that I looked up from the TV. I knew what the sound was even though I'd never heard it before. It was skin on skin with a real force behind it. Like a high-five that one person wasn't ready for.

When I whipped my head around, I saw Mom bent over the kitchen table, covering her face with her hand.

I probably should have shouted—should have told Bobby to get the hell out of our house—but I just sat there on my knees staring. Words wouldn't come. Hop Sing was having a fit on the TV because the Cartwrights were late to dinner but I wasn't paying attention anymore.

“Baby—aw, baby I'm so sorry—” Bobby knelt down, wrapping his arms around Mom, “I don't know what got into me—”

I waited for Mom to push him away; to kick him out. She didn't. She wrapped her arms around his head and cried big tears that dropped down onto the sleeves of Bobby's denim shirt.

She looked up and caught my eye, giving me the tiniest shake of her head.

That made me so mad that I stood up and shut myself in my room. Without even finishing Cheers. I couldn't watch what was unfolding in the kitchen.

I was mad at Bobby, but I was even angrier at Mom.

I didn't understand how she could let him stay after that. He hit her. In her own home. He didn't belong here. Why did she need him to love her so badly that she'd let him get away with anything?

Bobby stuck around for about a month after that. He never hit Mom in front of me again but I knew it was happening. I wasn't an idiot. Mom was pretty good at covering up the bruises with makeup, but not good enough that I didn't notice.

One day I said something that made Bobby mad. I don't remember exactly what it was. It could have been anything; it didn't take very much to set Bobby off. Whatever it was, was one step too far for Bobby.

He hit me.

The close-fisted blow connected with my cheek and knocked me off my feet. One minute I was standing and the next I was on my back on the shag carpet. Throbbing pain pulsed through the right side of my face. The world spun. My ears rang. My eyes filled with tears.

I was too dazed to do anything but lay on the floor holding my face. The whole world was deadly silent except for the continued ringing in my ears.

Mom lost it. She started yelling and throwing things at him; pillows, magazines, even a can of collard greens. Mom chased him right out of the trailer. She kept throwing things and wailing until half of our neighbors came out of their trailers to watch the show.

It should have made me happy that she stood up for me when she wouldn't even stand up for herself but it didn't. Why didn't she do any of that the first time he hit her? If she had there never would have been a second time or a third time. I was twelve and I didn't understand how easy it was to stop caring about yourself yet. All I could think about was how none of this would have happened in mom hadn't brought him into our lives in the first place.

I wouldn't let her look at the damage Bobby had done to my face. When her hands reached out for me, I pushed her away and ran to my room. I turned the volume of my record player all the way up to drown out the sound of Mom's teary apologies coming from the other side of the door.

I wanted to go back to that day at the lake.

The bruise on my face disappeared after a few days, but I kept feeling it for a long time after.



Frankie called the way that we met kismet. I don't know if I would have gone that far but I couldn't argue that our meeting had been pretty damn lucky.

After getting to the city, I was hungry every day for three weeks. Paying rent had left me next to broke. I was surviving on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich a day, which I made with ingredients I bought at the bodega down the street. The miniscule amount of money that I had left was being reserved to pay my train fare so that I could search for a job.

I applied for every job I could find. Restaurants, clothing stores, bars; nobody wanted to hire someone whose only work experience was scooping ice-cream at the Dairy Bar in Oklahoma.

I kept telling myself that it was going to be alright. From the moment I woke up in the morning to the time that I fell asleep I repeated over and over to myself; it'll be fine, it'll be fine, it'll be fine. But the longer I went without a job, the more desperate I became. I didn't have enough money to pay the next month's rent. The reality that I might fail at making it before I even got started was weighing on me. A bowling ball of anxiety had nestled itself in the pit of my stomach, reminding me every moment or every day that I could lose everything.

There was this one corner where these girls, who didn't look like they were that much older than me, stood. They leaned against walls and lampposts like they couldn't hold themselves up. Their faces were all sharp and steely but that might just have been the way that they painted makeup on their faces in thick strips that emphasized the angles and edges. I knew that they were hookers but that seemed too unpleasant, so I told myself that they were something else. When I walked past them, my mind raced with questions. Had those girls been like me when they came here? Did they look for jobs and come up empty handed too? The question that popped up most often, was also the one I hated the most, If I had to choose between packing up and going home, and standing next to those girls, what would I choose? How much did I want to make it in the city?

I tried not to look at them when I walked by because I didn't want to have to picture myself next to them. They were an ugly reminder of the thin like I was walking between making it and floundering. It was easier to ignore the things that made me squirm than it was to face them. I had enough to worry about. When I think about what might have happened if I didn't meet Frankie, I always thought about those girls.

I met Frankie at an Italian restaurant on the Lower East Side. Of all the places in the city, we both ended up at the same one at the same time, albeit for very different reasons.

It was a Friday night and the restaurant was packed. It wasn't a very nice place. The tables were covered in cheap red and white checked; vinyl table covers. The grout of the tile floor was dirty, the waitstaff was surly. Still, the scent of the food made my mouth water while I was sitting on a bench in front of the hosts booth, waiting to speak to the manager. I'd passed by the place and stopped in to see if they had any positions open. I hadn't had a hot meal in weeks and seeing the steaming plates heaped high with carbonara and alfredo without being able to eat any of it was torture.

When I saw the stranger stand up from her seat and start walking toward me with her arms wide open, I figured that it was some kind of mistake. I looked around me to see if she was approaching somebody else.

"What are you doing here?" She asked me, I was certain that she was looking at me now because she was looking right into my eyes.

"Uh—do I—" I started to question her but was cut off by her tight embrace.

I got a big whiff of her strong perfume and choked on it a little.

“Listen,” she whispered frantically into my ear, “I’m on a really bad date. Could you just pretend like you know me? Say there was some kind of emergency so I have a reason to get out of here?”

I was startled by this complete stranger and the way that she was still holding me so close. Words tried to form in my mouth but they got all jumbled when I tried to actually speak them.

“What’s going on?” Frankie’s sweaty date had left the table and was looking at us, “Who’s this?”

I didn’t like his tone or the way he looked me over like I was a piece of trash. His sweaty, red face made my skin itch.

“Tony, this is my roommate, Elle.”

The bad date, Tony, raised his eyebrows, pushing the skin on his forehead up in thick folds.

I gave him a half smile and nod to confirm Frankie’s statement.

“She took a call for me at our place and it was an emergency so she came down here to tell me. I told her that I was going to be out with you, so she knew where to find me.”

This strange woman in front of me was an excellent liar. Everything she said rolled off her tongue so easily that if I hadn’t known better, I’d have believed every word that she said.

“What kind of emergency?”

It was clear that he was looking at me for the answer. I was not a good liar.

“Her grandma died.”

My strange new friend twisted her face into an expression of grief and loss. I was impressed by how quickly she was able to look so genuinely distressed.

Tony seemed reluctant to accept that his evening was ending this way but there wasn't much that he could do to stop her now.

“Well, uh, raincheck then I guess...”

If i hadn't gotten such a bad feeling from that guy I would have felt bad for him.

Before I knew what was happening, I was being pulled out of the restaurant by this woman that I did not know.

“Wait, I don't have your number—” Tony called, but it was too late.

The woman didn't look back. She kept a hold on my hand and at a brisk pace guided me a couple of blocks without saying a word. At one crossing sign she didn't wait for the signal to walk. Cars blared their horns and screeched to a stop. The woman flipped them the bird.

When were completely out of sight of the restaurant she released my hand. I expected her to say a quick thanks and then head off on her own direction but she kept walking beside me.

“I hope that guy can take a hint. I don't know how much clearer I can make it that I'm not interested in him. She exhaled a deep breath and started searching in her bag, “You're an angel, I swear to God, I don't think I could have taken another minute with him.”

She offered me her hand, “My name's, Frankie by the way.”

“Joanna.”

Frankie told me all about how she'd come to be in the situation then.

Apparently, she met the guy at work. He came into Macy's on his lunch break one day. He'd walked back and forth in front of the perfume counter where Frankie worked, trying to work up the courage to talk to her. It wasn't the first time that a man had gone out of his way to get Frankie's attention. She made most of her commission on guys who spent too much money



on cologne in an attempt to impress her. But this guy was unusually persistent. He came by at the same time every day for weeks.

Frankie was beginning to think that there was something wrong with him when he finally made his move.

After approaching the counter and making small talk, he asked her out.

The man was short and balding. His forehead was always sweaty like he'd just finished running a mile. If he hadn't worn such nice suits Frankie would have dismissed him quickly, but Frankie knew how much suits like those cost. Frankie didn't discriminate based on looks but she was very open about her preference for a rich man. She once told me that she really didn't care about money, it was just that it was the only thing that motivated her to date anyone at all.

“The only thing a man can give me that I can't give myself, is money. Once I figure out how to get that for myself, you'll never catch me with a man again.”

I can't say that I didn't understand the reasoning. I just wasn't sure if I could ever put up with the creeps that Frankie put up with, just to get her meals paid for and a shiny bauble from time to time.

The guy from the counter turned out to be a major creep. It took a lot for Frankie to want to call it quits with a guy before dinner was even served but this guy pushed all of her buttons. Before they even got to the restaurant, he tried to grope Frankie in the cab. He was loud and abrasive, but so were most of the businessmen in the city. However, there was a fine line between taking charge and being rude and Tony was crossing it. He snapped at the waitstaff, tried to order on Frankie's behalf and wouldn't let her get a word in edgewise.

Frankie was stuck.

Then she saw me.

“You were sitting there like a little, scared, angel,” Frankie explained to me as we strolled down the street, “it was something about your eyes—you’ve got innocent eyes—those eyes aren’t going to hurt anybody.”

I could feel her eyes on me while we walked. She looked at me really hard, like she was trying to read my mind or something. I kept my eyes focused on the cracks in the sidewalk in front of me.

She offered me a cigarette, “What were you doing there by the way? I hope I didn’t pull you away from anything important?”

I shook my head, remembering that I never did get the chance to talk to the manager, “No—I was just there to see if they had any job openings.”

Frankie’s eyes lit up, “You need a job? I can help you with that! After what you did for me, that’s the least I can do!” She puffed out a breath of smoke, “You were my guardian angel back there, now, it’s time for me to be yours.”

## CHAPTER SIX

“Tell your friend to stop calling my number! I am not your personal answering service!”

Maureen held out the phone to me, her already red complexion brightening with anger. Frankie always called Maureen’s line because I didn’t have a line of my own. It drove Maureen crazy but for some reason she never just hung up on Frankie. She always screamed up the stairs for me to come take the call.

“I’m sorry. I’ll tell her again.”

It was a lie. I wasn’t going to tell Frankie to stop calling because she wasn’t going to listen anyway.

I waited until Maureen had walked away to start talking.

“Hey, Frankie.”

Frankie started talking without a greeting, “We’re going to the Danceria tonight.”

She did that all the time, just called up out of the blue and told me what we were going to do. It didn’t bother me. I was just happy to have someone who invited me to do things—I’d have done anything Frankie asked me to do. A small little part of me was afraid that if I ever told Frankie no, she’d stop inviting me for good.

“What time?” I asked.

“Come by my place at 9:30. I’ve gotta go, my manager thinks I’m on a smoke break.”

She hung up before I could say goodbye.

I looked at my watch. 6:00. That left me with a few hours before I had to leave. I didn’t have anything to do in that time. Well—there were lots of things I probably *should* have done—the pile of laundry in the corner of my apartment was getting pretty high—but I had no interest in doing any of it.

So, I said thanks to Maureen and plodded up the stairs back to my apartment and decided to start getting ready.

Finding something to wear was always a challenge for me. I didn't have nice clothes—even back in Wisdom I'd been behind the trends—in New York I didn't even have a chance.

I studied my face in the mirror, staring at it for so long that it didn't look like my face anymore. If I could have changed my face I would have. My face was a little long, my cheeks were still a little round with baby-fat. I wasn't ugly but I wasn't really pretty either and in New York it seemed just as bad to look completely normal as it did to be ugly. There were lots of people who weren't that pretty but made up for it by being different. Cyndi Lauper wasn't someone you'd miss in a crowd.

I had a new-ish dress to wear out. I'd found it in a thrift shop for 3.50. It was black and it was plain but it fit alright. I liked that it was kind of low-cut and showed off my collarbone. I thought I had a nice collarbone.

My hair was straight and long and lank. All the teasing in the world couldn't get it to stand up the way that Frankie's did so I didn't even try. I brushed it until it was smooth and shiny and pinned some strands back behind my ears. Then, I swept some pale blue Maybelline shadow across my lids and swiped on some mascara before taking one last look in the mirror and resigning myself to the way I looked.

“Hey, you heading out somewhere?”

Max was leaning in his doorway, drinking a steaming cup of coffee.

I nodded and crossed my arms over my chest to cover up my exposed skin.

“Yeah—you working tonight?”

He nodded, “Going in as soon as I finish this cup of coffee.”

I shifted back and forth on my feet, trying to decide if I should say something else.

“Well, have a good night.”

My back was turned and I was halfway down the stairs when Max called me.

“You look great by the way.”

It made me smile all the way down the stairs.



Frankie skipped hello and went straight to looking me over.

“Is that what you’re wearing?”

I’d smiled all the way to Frankie’s but the smile fell off of my face.

“Yeah—is there something wrong with it?”

Frankie tilted her head and frowned at my outfit, “It’s a little plain. But you look cute. You’re an understated kind of pretty so it works for you.”

The way she said it kind of made me feel like understated pretty wasn’t actually a good thing but I also knew that Frankie wouldn’t lie to me. If she thought I looked stupid she’d tell me that I should change.

Frankie wasn’t ready yet. Her hair was still wrapped in a towel and she was finishing her makeup. It’d be an hour before we left at the very least.

While she was in her bedroom getting ready, I walked circles around the apartment, looking at the pictures and ornaments and baubles that Frankie had placed around. Frankie’s place was a lot bigger than mine. It had a living room, a real kitchen, and two bedrooms. Frankie had a roommate apparently but I’d never met her. According to Frankie, the roommate spent most nights with her boyfriend. That was crazy. If I could afford an apartment like that I’d never stay anywhere else.

“Max said I looked nice,” I called to Frankie.

I don’t know why I told her. It was the butterflies still flitting around in my stomach that made me want to share it.

Frankie poked her head out of the bedroom. Her hair was now out of the towel and half in rollers.

“Who’s Max?”

“My neighbor. I’ve mentioned him before. We hang out sometimes...when he’s not busy.”

Frankie pulled a face and ducked back into her bedroom.

“Are you sleeping with him?”

“What? No!” I nearly choked, “We’re just friends—not really even that. He’s just nice to me because he knows I’m new.”

I heard Frankie’s snort all the way in the other room. I peeked into the bedroom and saw Frankie pulling a silky, teal dress over her head.

“Joanna, no man just wants to be friends with you. Men aren’t nice just to be nice. They want something for their trouble. This neighbor of yours may be a real sweet guy—but it’s because he also wants to see you naked.”

I didn’t want her to be right. I’d really been hoping that Max was being so nice because he actually liked me. When he invited me to hand out it felt like he was saying he believed in me and that I belonged here just the same as everybody else. I wanted so badly for that to be the truth.

Frankie’s words opened a crack that let all my doubts come flooding in. Was I really being naive about Max? When I gave it some thought—Max definitely would be the exception to

the rule—all the other men I'd known were only interested in sex. What did I know about it, really? Frankie had a lot more experience than I did which had to mean she was more in tune to how they thought than I was.

Frankie seemed to realize that I was upset and she scrambled to comfort me.

“Listen—just because he wants you doesn't mean that he doesn't like you. If anything, it makes him more...motivated to express his affections. There are worse things than having a guy wrapped around your finger.”

I didn't know how to explain to Franke that I didn't want to have some kind of power over Max, I just wanted him to enjoy being with me without the pressure of anything else.

I nodded, “I know...but I don't think it's like that. I mean—he'd have tried something by now right?”

“Sure.”

Frankie was watching me closely. I avoided meeting her eyes, comparing two pairs of shoes that she'd left lying on the floor until she eventually turned around and went back to getting ready.



We left Frankie's apartment a little after 11:30. Frankie said that if you got to a club before midnight you might as well have stayed home. Nobody worth knowing got to a party on time. Only desperate people showed up early.

A line of people was stretched down the sidewalk at 30 West 21st. Bodies leaned against the wall talking. Others stood on their tiptoes, trying to see how far they were from the door. Clouds of cigarette smoke hovered over and around the line.

My feet turned toward the line but Frankie marched right past the line and straight to the door. Standing guard at the door, a hulking, brooding bouncer crossed his thick arms over his burly chest. He watched Frankie approach. Not a muscle on his face twitched. Only his eyes moved, sizing Frankie up.

“We’re on the list.”

The door guy didn’t even check. He just looked at Frankie then at me, hovering over her shoulder, and then stepped out of our way.

Once we were through the door I whispered in Frankie’s ear, “Were you really on that list?”

She shook her head, “No, but we’re cute so I knew he wouldn’t check.”

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust from the yellow glow of the streetlights on the street to the flashing, multicolored lights inside the club. My ears throbbed at the sudden swell of music that came crashing toward me. The beating of my heart, quickened resonating through my entire body. Crammed full from wall to wall with people pressed together, there was hardly any space to move inside the club. It took a lot of pushing and squeezing to keep up with Frankie who wove her way effortlessly toward the dance floor.

Frankie turned and looked back over her shoulder, her eyes flitting over the sea of people, eventually settling on me. She held her hand out to me.

“Let’s dance.”

Summoned into the throng by Frankie, I let myself be pulled into the waves of rocking bodies.

I tried to move like Frankie. She was sexy and graceful. I copied her moves; swaying hips, tossing hair, and twisting limbs into unnatural shapes. The more I danced, the easier it got.



Movement came more easily to me. Soon, my eyes were closed, I stopped watching the people around me. Frankie and I bounced and moved together until our skin glistened with sweat. My hair got frazzled and tangled with every toss of my head.

“Frankie!”

It took me a while to realize that someone was calling through the crowd to us.

The minute I turned around and saw the guy waving at us, I touched Frankie’s shoulder. She stopped dancing, scanned the crowd until her eyes settled on the man waving at her. He looked younger than Frankie but older than me. His face was friendly and handsome. Wearing a button up shirt with the sleeves rolled up and pleated khakis he looked very fashionable.

A brief frown of confusion crossed Frankie’s face then it disappeared, replaced by a wide, warm smile.

“Don! Why am I not surprised to see you here? Shouldn’t you be doing your homework or something?”

Frankie pushed through the crowd toward her friend. I followed behind her.

The man wrapped Frankie up in a tight embrace, picking up off of her feet.

“Frankie, it’s been forever. How are you doing?”

“Same as ever.”

Frankie literally pulled me into the conversation, tugging on my arm and forcing me to stop hiding behind her.

“Don, this is my friend, Joanna. Joanna, this is Don.”

Don smiled, “Nice to meet you.”

He punctuated the greeting with a wink.

“Some buddies of mine have a table in the TV Room. Let me buy you two some drinks. Plus,” he reached nudged Frankie with his elbow, “I’ve got something I think you’ll like.”

“I’ll never turn down a free drink.”

Don slipped one of his arms around Frankie and the other around me, guiding us off of the dance floor and to a room off to the side.

TVs covered every inch of the wall in the room. Each screen was playing a different video. Images of bands performing, women dancing, cars racing, explosions and fireworks flashed across the screens, lighting up the room. In one corner a group was perched around a table. A handful of guys and a couple of girls were talking animatedly. Empty drink glasses were stacked up around them.

All of Don’s friends looked oddly like him. Tan faces, white teeth, coiffed hair. They were all wearing nearly identical outfits, variant only in the shades they were wearing. Wristwatches sparkled on every arm. Some of them sat a little unevenly on the thick wallets in their back pockets.

“What can I get you ladies to drink?” Don asked, clapping his hands together.

“I’ll take a vodka tonic.”

I always got flustered when somebody asked me what I wanted to drink. I didn’t know any drinks. All Mom ever drank was beer and wine. The cheap kind. I pretty much always just repeated whatever Frankie said.

“I’ll have the same.”

“Two vodka tonics coming right up,” Don said, then headed off to the bar.

Frankie didn’t seem to mind being at a table with a bunch of people that she didn’t know. She lit a cigarette and leaned back in her seat. I felt uncomfortable and out of place, stuck in

between conversations that I wasn't a part of. None of Don's friends bothered to introduce themselves.

"How do you know Don?" I asked, having to shout in order to be heard above the music.

"He's the son of an old family friend. We grew up in the same neighborhood, went to the same church. He's a sweet guy, like a little brother to me."

Don came back with three drinks balanced in his grasp.

"Here you go, ladies."

He slid into the booth right next to me and spread out his arms behind my back. Taking up space didn't seem to concern him, he just waited for everybody around him to make room.

"So," Frankie took a sip of her drink, "when are you graduating, Don?"

Don nearly emptied his glass in a single swig, "May. Then, I'll start working full-time at my uncle's firm."

He turned his attention to me, tilting his head to meet my eyes, "Are you a student?"

"No, I work at an antique shop. I pick up some odd jobs here and there, too."

"No kidding? Well, if you're ever looking for something, I've got a connection with the Reagan campaign. They're usually looking for some help doing canvassing here and there."

I nodded politely and told him that I'd let him know.

Frankie was getting bored with the conversation. She leaned forward on her elbows and looked at Don.

"Tell me what you've got."

Don smiled. He'd just been waiting for her to bring it up. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a little plastic baggie with fine white powder in it. He gave it a little shake and grinned

devilishly at Frankie. Then, he produced a crisp twenty dollar bill out of his wallet which he began to roll up into a tight tube.

I wasn't an idiot. I knew what he was doing. And I was uneasy about it.

I had no experience with drugs. Some kids in Wisdom used to smoke weed but I wasn't cool enough to be invited to join. I couldn't have done drugs even if I'd wanted to. But I didn't want to. I was too scared of getting in trouble.

I watched Don pour the bag of powder out onto the table, cutting it into even, straight lines with his shiny platinum credit card. The whole process was methodical and practiced. Each movement was purposeful and accurate. It was almost like watching someone creating a masterpiece.

When five neat lines were on the table he held out the rolled bill to Frankie.

"Ladies first."

I watched Frankie take the bill. My heart was pounding faster than usual. It was fear maybe. Although I couldn't tell you exactly what it was that I was afraid of. I didn't want anything to happen to Frankie...most importantly, I didn't want her to be so incapacitated that she wouldn't be able to watch out for me.

This obviously wasn't Frankie's first time. She leaned across me and snorted the powder up through the rolled bill. After she'd done in she leaned back in her seat and took a deep breath.

Don passed the bill to me.

I hesitated.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Frankie told me.

I looked from her to Don to the lines on the table. Frankie wouldn't let me do anything she wouldn't do herself. If everyone else at the table was going to do it, I could too.

It burned. Tears filled my eyes. I pinched my nose like I was holding in a sneeze.

At first, I didn't feel anything except for an itching in my nose. Then I felt really, really good. All of a sudden. It was like lidocaine for my whole body. My brain was racing. Everything around me was brighter and louder and more colorful.

Frankie and I danced.

She was beautiful and when I was near her, I felt like I was beautiful too. It was as if I was absorbing some of her glow and we became a circle of light and color all our own in the middle of the dance floor.

My body moved better without me in it. For once I was sexy and free and lithe and—God, I loved Frankie. I loved that she took me places and showed me things and introduced me to people. I'd never had a friend like her before—someone who made me feel like a grown-up—like an equal.

I wanted every moment to be just like that one.

Then we were being pulled apart. Some guy was taking Frankie away to dance with him and I was standing all alone.

The glow I'd been stealing from Frankie was gone.

The world around me felt a little bit darker.

I watched Frankie and the guy that she was dancing with. I wished that someone would look at me that way—would hold onto me with their hands on my hips, pulling me closer to them.

Max appeared in my thoughts un-invited. He would look out of place there on the dance floor. I wondered if he liked to dance. Maybe, if he'd been there, we would have danced

together. Or maybe if I'd been at 424 instead of out with Frankie, he would have invited me over to his apartment. Just to sit in silence and listen to music together.

He'd probably be there when I got home. Maybe I'd sit out on the landing until he found me there. He always found me eventually. When he did, he never acted like he was disappointed to see me.

I wandered away from Frankie's line of sight, drifting through the crowd aimlessly, clumsily. None of the faces around me were clear. They all looked like they were far away—like I was looking at them through the wrong end of a telescope.

Occasionally, time kind of jumped. I looked around and found myself standing somewhere without remembering how I got there. I couldn't keep track of the details of my surroundings anymore. It began to happen more and more frequently. My heart pounded uncomfortably fast in my chest.

“Hey.”

A deep voice whispered in my ear and I whirled around, looking for its source.

Behind me, a man I didn't recognize was looking down at me—down the front of my dress at what little there was to see.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

I shook my head because I'd forgotten how to speak.

“C'mon, you look like you could use a drink.”

He looked like someone my Mom would date. Something about the hair—or the lips that looked too wet.

I pulled away from him. The whole world started to cave in around me. Why had I done the drugs? What was I thinking? I didn't feel good anymore. I felt sick to my stomach and scared because I didn't know where I was anymore.

Then—out of the crowd like an angel—I saw Frankie walking toward me, arms outstretched, a halo of technicolor light shining around her. She'd found me. She'd been looking for me. She was going to save me from the strange, frog-lipped man.

Actual tears sprang into my eyes.

“Oh, thank God!” Frankie crushed me in a tight embrace, and I leaned all of my weight into her, “I looked up and you were gone. Scared the shit out of me! Are you okay? I never should have let Don give you that coke—you're such a lightweight...”

I didn't know what to say.

“We better get out of here.”

Don appeared over her shoulder, “Ah c'mon don't go...she can go hang out with my friends at the table.”

“I'm not leaving her with your scuzzy friends, Don. I'll see you around, k? Take care of yourself and tell your mother I said hi.”

Frankie started walking, half-dragging me along with her. I focused on the sound of her shoes on the cement. The steady steps were like the ticking of a clock.

“You doing okay?”

Click. Click. Click. Click.

I nodded.

Click. Click. Click. Click.

I unlinked my arm from hers and lunged toward the nearest wall. I threw up on the sidewalk.

“Ssshhh...” Frankie stood behind me, pulled back my hair from my neck, “It’s okay. You’ll be fine. Just get it out.”

Later I would remember it and feel stupid but I was too busy wondering if I was going to die then to care about the vomit splattering the pavement.

The world faded in and out. Pieces of what was happening flashed in front of my then slipped away. Two pairs of feet on the sidewalk. Spray Paint on the back of a stop sign. Getting caught in the turnstile and Frankie pulling me through.

The only thing that I was aware of the whole time was Frankie’s hand, holding on to mine.

On the subway, I clung to her desperately, resting my head on her shoulder and praying for the next stop to please, please come because I didn’t know how much further I could make it.

At some point I realized that we weren’t getting any closer to 424.

“Where are we going?”

A few beats passed before I processed the words.

My bed. My things. I wanted to crash into the comfort of my own home—and maybe Max on the landing, where I always seemed to find him.

“I’ve got to go home,” I insisted, “It’s not that far.”

I tried to walk on my own but Frankie kept a hold on my arm.

“Joanna,” Frankie laughed, “I don’t think that you’re gonna make it home tonight. Just stay at my place.”



Thank God, Frankie's apartment had an elevator. Nothing could have helped Frankie haul me up a set of stairs. I practically fell into her apartment, thudding down onto the floor.

Frankie kicked off her heels at the door and started to take the pins out of her hair, releasing it from its carefully coiffed updo. I slipped off my shoes—well, I fought with them a little—and lay on the floor, praying for the world to stop spinning. The silence was wide and still. I was floating weightlessly in that place between time and nothingness.

“Here, you can change into this,” Frankie tossed a t-shirt at me.

I tried to snatch it out of the air but missed.

“You're a mess,” she laughed.

She laughed to herself while walking around the apartment. She popped into the bathroom and emerged with a clean, makeup-free face. Seeing her with no makeup on what a little jarring. I couldn't remember ever seeing her without a full face painted on.

I slipped out of my dress right there in the living room. I felt exposed even though it was just the two of us there. I'd never liked being undressed—not even on my own. In just my underwear there were too many of my flaws exposed—the dips in my hips, the little protrusion in the lower part of my stomach, the bruises that I gathered through the week from bumping into things or tripping up the stairs or getting kicked in dark clubs. God—I'd stopped letting my own mother see me naked when I was twelve and she'd commented on how I was going to need a bra soon. If I didn't want to look at my own naked body, I sure as hell didn't want anyone else looking at it.

Plus, Frankie's earlier comment about Max wanting to see me naked flashed through my mind again.

I pulled on the t-shirt as fast as I could.

Frankie meanwhile, had no qualms about being naked. I didn't mean to look but I couldn't seem to pull my eyes away.

She was perfect. Round where she was supposed to be round, flat where she needed to be flat, and smooth all over like polished stone. Her collarbones jutted out, her slim shoulders hunched forward. She looked so small and delicate—almost breakable, like a china doll.

I wouldn't ever look like that. I'd never thought that anyone but girls in magazines did.

She pulled on a t-shirt that looked a lot like the one I was wearing and crashed down onto the bed. The bed springs squeaked underneath her weight. She patted the space next to her.

I crawled up beside her. I felt too big next to her.

Frankie and I looked at each other. We were lying nose to nose, staring into each other's eyes. There were hints of lines around her eyes when she didn't have any makeup on but I still thought that she was beautiful. She looked grown up—complete—no part of her was still trying to grow into what it was supposed to be.

“You're so pretty,” I whispered so softly that I thought maybe I didn't actually say it out loud.

Frankie laughed and ran a hand through her thick curls, “I look more and more like my mother every day. I thought I'd be at least thirty before I turned into her.”

No one ever told me that I looked like my mom. I always kind of figured that I looked like my dad even though I didn't have any evidence to confirm my suspicion.

“How do you make guys like you?”

She raised her eyebrows, “Is this about the neighbor again?”

I blushed and shook my head, “No—I just wonder. They always look at you and they give you stuff and they buy you dinner. And they don't for me.”

I thought about Dave Lipinski and what he'd said about me.

Frankie sighed, "I wish I knew the secret. They don't really like me—they just want to sleep with me. That's okay with me because I don't really like them either. Nice guys are hard to come by." Her hand reached out and brushed a stray hair off my face, "You're too smart for that. You won't let guys run your life the way that I let them run mine."

I thought about it. The sadness in her voice. It was hard for me to believe what Frankie was saying. I'd always just thought that she was getting exactly what she wanted—that she'd been the one in control.

Even Frankie didn't know how to navigate life as easily as she made it look.

"You know something sad? No one has ever given me flowers. I always wanted to meet a man who would send my flowers. My dad always sent my mom a box of long-stem red roses on their anniversary. I thought that was the most romantic thing—" she turned on her back to look up at the ceiling, "When I meet someone who send me flowers—that's how I'll know it's love."

I thought about flowers and Frankie and love. I never talked to anyone about things like this. There had never been anyone for me to talk to.

I didn't have any girlfriends back in Wisdom. My mom hadn't been the easiest person to talk to. She always inserted her own experiences into my problems.

I'd always wished that I had an older sister to turn to. If I'd had one I would have liked to believe that she would be like Frankie.

"Thank you," I said.

I was blinking heavily, trying not to fall asleep.

Silence.

"What for?"

“For being nice to me.”

Frankie smiled, “We’re friends, Joanna.”

A minute later Frankie was asleep. I stayed awake. It was the first time that it occurred to me that our friendship wasn’t as one-sided as I thought. I worried that I was just some annoying kid that followed her around like a puppy. It felt good to know that she liked having me around as much as I liked being around.



In the morning, I walked home hungover but happy.

The city was bright and fresh when I stepped out of Frankie’s apartment building and onto the street. Nothing physical had changed but I was seeing it through rose colored glasses. I didn’t notice the trash in the streets or the scowls on the faces making their way to their jobs. Instead, I saw the couple walking hand in hand and the little old man walking a droopy-eared dog down the street. Even the stairs of 424 didn’t seem so steep that morning. I took them two at a time and arrived on my landing winded but smiling.

Before going into my apartment, I hesitated at my door, glancing over at Max’s apartment.

He was probably awake, and he didn’t work in the mornings so he wouldn’t be at home. If I went over there now, I could ask him if he wanted to join me for the day-off ritual of coffee and donuts.

Usually, I waited for Max to invite me to join him in doing stuff, but I wanted to see him.

I knocked softly at first, then a little louder.

Before it was all the way open, I started talking.

“Hey, I was just coming by to see if you wanted—”

When I saw that it wasn't Max at the door my words caught in the back of my throat. For a flash of a second I thought I'd made a mistake and gone to the wrong apartment. But that passed quickly.

A woman, smaller than me, but somehow more domineering at the same time, was staring at me with an expression of absolute boredom. Her hair was bleach blond, hanging in messy waves across her fragile shoulders. She was only wearing a t-shirt, revealing long, tan legs and the outline of perky breasts from beneath the thin fabric. I recognized that t-shirt the minute I saw it. Max wore it all the time.

"Oh," I mumbled, "I'm sorry I was just—"

I started to back away, to make a retreat before Max saw me—

"Hey, Joanna. What's up?"

Max appeared over the strange woman's shoulder. He wasn't wearing a shirt, just a pair of boxers—just like he had been the night I met him. Her curly hair was messy. Images of her fingers in his hair flashed through my mind, sending blood to my face.

Hey, I was just—it doesn't matter—I'll come back another time..."

The woman was wrapping her arms around Max's waist, kissing his shoulders while I just stood there. The whole scene was too distracting for me to get out a complete sentence. I'd never felt more uncomfortable in my whole life.

I started to turn around, to hurry back to my apartment before Max and that woman could see me turning bright red.

"Joanna?"

I stopped and slowly turned to face Max.

"Is everything okay?"

My smile felt pasted on. I had one hand on my own doorknob, “Yeah! I’m fine.”

My apartment felt extra empty when I closed my door behind me.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

I hadn't thought of Max as a man before I saw him with that woman.

I mean I knew that he was a guy—with all the guy parts and stuff—but up until that day I'd thought of him as a boy. The same way I thought about the boys that I went to school with. The boy next door, the boy who was nice to me, the boy who always stopped to talk to me, the boy—

But Max wasn't a boy. He was a man. He was a man who had beautiful women in his apartment.

There was a big difference between being a boy and being a man. A boy you talked to; you teased. You could count on a boy being just as awkward and confused about everything as you were. A boy was on the same level as me. But a man—a man had experience. What they said had more impact because they had authority. Men were not as safe as boys were.

When he was just a boy in my head, Max didn't exist beyond the role he played in my life. He appeared with welcome distractions and kind smiles and little quips in passing. But now I was starting to see that *I* was the mere interruption in *his* life. Max had an entire life—relationships—that didn't have anything to do with me. When he was going about his day, he probably didn't give me a second thought.

Frankie had warned me that Max wasn't special—that he wanted what every other man in the world wanted.

Just once I wanted to be right. This one time I wanted the world to be better than I expected it to be. For a long time, I'd been holding on to the tiniest hope that maybe Max liked me. I read it into all his actions without meaning to. I'd really tried not to let myself walk in front of the speeding bus of heartbreak, but I'd tripped up.

It wasn't fair but it felt like a betrayal—Max sleeping with that girl, inviting her into his apartment and into his life. Seeing her in there, completely comfortable, taking more than just a friendly cup of coffee, filled me with blind rage.

I wasn't really mad at Max. He hadn't done anything wrong. Not to me. No. I was jealous.

I wanted to be that girl with Max. I didn't even know I wanted it until I saw her, and I realized that I couldn't have it. If that was the kind of girl Max liked I'd never even had a chance.

I'd only ever kissed one boy. It had been fast and awkward and sloppy. The whole experience had nearly turned me off kissing altogether. But I wanted to kiss Max. I wasn't sure, but I may even have wanted to do more than kiss Max.

Sex wasn't something I thought I wanted. The thought of it was more terrifying than anything else. The act seemed invasive, too intimate, too exposed. Everything I knew about it I'd learned from the clinical descriptions of health class and via overheard conversations in the locker room. Girls at school talked about it like it was a chore—an unpleasant duty they performed in order to keep their boyfriends under control. It was an exchange I didn't understand the benefit of.

Then there was the danger of getting pregnant—the punishment for girls who gave it up. Mom made sure that I knew all too well about that.

Not once in the time since my body had started to mature without my permission—to develop and rage with hormones—had I ever thought I wanted to have sex. Not outright. I sometimes thought that I might never do it.



But sometimes with Max—it embarrassed me to admit it, even to myself—I thought that maybe if he'd tried, I would have gone along with it. The idea of letting him touch me didn't seem so terrible—it seemed like it could be good.

No matter how hard I tried I couldn't stop seeing that girl with Max. Her arms around his waist, the way that their legs tangled together because they were standing so close—

I saw Max the next day, when I left my apartment to go to work.

“Hey, Joanna.”

He smiled the same way he always did but instead of making butterflies in my stomach it turned my insides to steel.

I didn't know what to say to him anymore. I couldn't go back to acting like I hadn't seen anything. I knew a secret now—that changed the way that I saw Max—and it was too late to go back to the way things had been before.

“Hey.”

He must have noticed the way that I couldn't meet his eyes—the way that I fiddled with the keys in my hands.

For a beat he looked like he was going to say something—he opened and closed his mouth. I might have been imagining it but I thought that his ears looked a little red. He worked his jaw like he was chewing on words that he couldn't speak.

If there was something that he wanted to say, he kept it to himself. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

“I'll see you around.”

I felt my head move up and down and I watched him walk away, wishing that there was something that I could do to make him come back.



Over the next few days, I couldn't stop kicking myself for letting a stupid, childish crush develop in the first place. I should have seen it happening—should have squashed it that very first night I met him when I'd felt all the blood in my body rush to my face. I should have ignored it—ignored him, stuck to myself and my own business. I'd had enough pointless crushes in my life. I should have learned my lesson after Dave Lipinski.

I hadn't come all this way just to get wrapped up in some stupid guy. That was something my mother would do—and I didn't want to be her.

I don't really think that I could've avoided it. It wasn't like a light that you could switch on and off. It just happened. One day I was just so happy to have someone to talk to and then the next he was the only person I ever wanted to talk to.

When I thought about it, I could pinpoint the exact moment I knew that I was holding just a little too much space in my heart from him—that it was too late for me to protect myself because I had fallen.

In July, I'd done a job filling in as a waitress for some party in Midtown. It was a swanky event. I'd had to wear a little black uniform and carry a tray heavy with champagne glasses around a room for a couple hours. I made good money. Guys slipped tips into the pockets of my uniform while I made my way around the room. It was the most money I'd ever made in one place ever.

It was after 2am before I finally got to call it a night. The party was still raging on but the caterer wasn't getting paid to stay anymore so I got to leave. I collected my tips and slipped out the door, feeling satisfied with the rewards of a night of work.

Walking home after dark always made me nervous. I heard stories about people getting mugged all the time. I was lucky nothing like that had ever happened to me considering all the times that I'd stumbled home drunk and alone. Most of the time I did try to be aware of my surroundings, of the faces of the people that I passed, and the sounds of footsteps coming up behind me. I walked with one hand on my purse in case someone tried to grab it and kept my keys in my hand so that I could use them as a weapon to defend myself from potential attacks.

That night, on my way back to 424 after that job, I felt more anxious than usual. My gut felt...unsettled. Every unexpected sound made me jump, every person I passed seemed to be walking with a suspicious gait. Maybe it was the months' worth of rent in cash stuffed into my pocket that was making me so jumpy—but it felt like something more. Something in the air didn't feel right—it felt sour.

The buildings around me felt more like a cage than usual.

When I finally got close enough to 424 that I could see the crooked lights above the doorway I sped up my steps. Once I was inside I'd be safe—everything would be fine.

“Help!”

The sound of the scream—jagged around the edges like a piece of broken glass—made me stop in my tracks, just feet from the door. A chill crawled down my spine and curled up in my stomach.

“Please...somebody” That frayed cry—the cry of someone who didn't expect an answer—was coming from somewhere close.

I looked across the street at the dark alley where the streetlights didn't reach. My body was frozen in a space between running away and running for help. I didn't want to get involved but I didn't want to fail to help someone who needed it. It should have been an easy decision—

when someone cries for help you're not supposed to hesitate, you're supposed to rush forward to help. I was scared. I was scared that if I went and intervened then I'd get into trouble soon.

It's terrible—I know—it makes me a bad person, but I wished that I didn't hear that scream. If I'd just walked a little faster, I would have been inside before it happened and I wouldn't be standing on the stoop trying to decide whether or not I was going to ignore it.

My feet finally moved. I took a step toward the direction of the scream.

The closer I got the more I could hear of other voices, mumbled and grunted. One sound over and over again, like someone breaking in a baseball glove or throwing around bags of sand, followed by sharp cries of pain.

Two large figures hovered over a small, huddled figure.

The small figure was trying to get out a sound—a shaking hand reached toward the light of the sidewalk—toward me.

“Shut the fuck up, faggot.” One of the faceless figures slammed a heavy boot into the little figure's side.

Angel. It was Angel. Those two huge guys were beating the shit out of him. I'd never seen anything like it in my whole life. Boys at school used to fight all the time—but never with that kind of anger behind every blow.

I turned on my heel and ran. I darted back across the street without looking. A car honked at me and slammed on its breaks. I didn't stop. My hand was shaking but I managed to get my key into the door. The five flights of stairs loomed over me, but I darted up them blindly.

I hammered against the door.

Please be home. Please be home. Please be home.

I didn't know what I would do if Max didn't open his door. I didn't know anybody else. Frankie, sure, but she wouldn't be able to help even if I could find a way to get in touch with her. I wasn't even sure that Max could help—or if he would. But he was the best shot I had at saving Angel.

The door swung open. I'd been leaning so heavily onto the door that when it opened, I nearly fell into the apartment.

“What's going on?” Max looked bleary-eyed.

He took in the picture of me for a moment while I panted. I could practically see the gears in his head turning, trying to figure out what I was doing standing in his doorway.

“Joanna? Is everything okay?”

“It's Angel—he—these guys across the street—they're beating him—bad—” I took a deep breath, “I think they're gonna kill him, Max.”

Max looked at me for a moment, his brow deeply furrowed, then disappeared back inside his apartment, leaving the door ajar. Where was he going? Was he going to help? Was I supposed to wait there for him? He reappeared a moment later wearing shoes and holding a baseball bat in his hands.

“Show me where they are,” Max muttered.

He slammed his apartment door closed behind him.

“Shouldn't we call the police?” I asked, following him down the stairs.

Max laughed without any humor, “If you don't mind waiting three hours.”

His step was brisk, his expression determined, marching down the stairs. It took two steps for every one of his for me to keep up with him. I still hadn't completely caught my breath after

the run up the stairs and I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. My lungs ached for a moment to breath.

On the ground floor, Max reached for the handle of the front door. I reached out and covered his hand before he could turn the knob. Normally, I wouldn't have touched him like that—so carelessly. Instinct made me do it.

“You're not going to go out there are you? What if the guys are still there?”

“That's what the bat is for.”

I looked down at the bat clutched in his hands. The shapes of those two men looming were still incredibly clear in my mind. They were big, big enough to bring Angel, who was in no poor physical condition, to his knees. Max was tall but he was gangly. I didn't know if he could take on those two men, even if he was wielding a baseball bat.

I wanted to tell him that he shouldn't go out there. I didn't want him to end up like Angel.

Max opened the door and we stepped outside. The street was eerily silent. I didn't hear the cries anymore. For a moment I was relieved. The screams had been a terrible sound. Then I realized what the absence of screams might mean. It wasn't usually a good thing when a person in pain grew silent.

“Where were they?”

Wordlessly I pointed to the alley.

“Just wait here.” Max told me, then started walking across the street.

For a moment I did what he said but standing alone on the stoop, I felt too vulnerable. Open space on every side of me, shadows stretching toward me from every angle could be hiding any number of attackers. I felt like a little kid scared of the dark again. I followed Max.

At the sound of my shoes on the pavement in pursuit, Max glanced back at me and shook his head but didn't say anything. I kept close to him. If he'd stopped suddenly, I would have walked right into him.

When we got closer to the alley, Max put out his arm to keep me back. It was a protective gesture, one that would have made my stomach flutter if it hadn't already been weighed down with dread.

The two men in the alley were gone but Angel was still there. You could see the shape of him, lying on the ground. The alleyway was too dark, there were too many shadows to see him clearly. He wasn't moving, he wasn't uttering even the smallest sound. He looked so small. Curled up on the ground like a stray dog.

Max dropped his bat and moved to crouch down beside Angel. I watched him take Angel's pulse from a few feet away. Too afraid to step out of the light on the street and into the dark alley.

"Is he—" I couldn't bring myself to finish the question.

"He's breathing," Max answered my question without me having to finish it, "But he looks bad. They really did a number on him."

"Should I go call an ambulance?"

Max shook his head again, "Hospitals don't want to treat fa—people like Angel."

That hadn't occurred to me.

"Will you help me lift him? We've got to get him inside. He's in bad shape." Max was trying to lift Angel up off the ground as carefully as he could.

Together, with our arms hooked under Angel's, we began to drag him with us toward 424. Our height difference made it difficult to carry Angel smoothly. Max carried more of the

weight that I did. Once we were inside, the stairs proved to be an even more difficult challenge. We moved slowly. Too slowly. Blood dripped from Angel's head and onto the steps as we moved.

I hoped that I remembered to come back down and clean the blood up off of the stairs later. If I didn't somebody was going to get the shit scared out of them in the morning.

Angel's face had always looked so beautiful and flawless to me before. I'd thought that his skin was so smooth and pore-less that it looked almost doll-like. Now, the blood had seeped into all the fine lines of his face, dark bruises were already beginning to form on his body. His left eye was so swollen that it looked like it might pop right out of its socket.

Looking at his swollen, bleeding face made my own face hurt with phantom pains, so I turned my attention to Max.

"Where are we going to take him?"

"My apartment—I have some stuff. I can try to bandage him up a little. We'll see if any of that pre-med classes are still with me."

I thought about what Max had said about how we couldn't take Angel to a hospital.

"Max—what if—what if he's got it? Could we—we couldn't get it could we?"

I peered across Angel to get a look at Max. He knew what I was talking about. Of course, he did. Everyone in the world knew about AIDs.

I could see it on Max's face that the thought had already occurred to him and that his mind was set firmly. It was written in the furrow in his brow and the way that his jaw clenched like his was chewing on something with his back teeth.

"Well...if he's got it, he's got it. I'm not going to let him suffer alone just because I'm too scared of some fucking disease."



Max kicked open his door with his toe and we stumbled into the dark apartment.

“On the bed...the bed.” Max panted.

We tried to lay Angel down as carefully as possible. Then, Max switched on a light and started searching around his apartment. He grabbed an old, rusted metal toolbox that was stuffed with first aid supplies.

Max worked silently while I watched from my spot by the door.

He would have made a good doctor, I decided. It was his hands, just looking at them, I knew that they had a gentle touch. It was the kind of touch that most people reserved for holding babies or petting a kitten, it was restrained but sturdy and firm. Here was Max, using that special touch for someone he barely knew. He wiped the blood away from Angle’s face with cotton balls and alcohol, revealing that the wounds underneath wasn’t nearly as scary as the blood had made it look. Tenderly, he covered the cuts and scrapes with antibiotic ointment then lightly pressed bandages on top to cover them.

“Hey, hand me those scissors over there would you?”

Max didn’t look up from his work as he pointed in the general direction of his little makeshift kitchen. I searched around timidly, not wanting to disturb anything, or discover anything I didn’t want to find. I finally found the scissors sitting in an old tomato sauce can that had been repurposed into a pencil cup.

Max’s fingers brushed against mine when I handed him the scissors. Angel’s blood smeared from Max’s palms to my knuckles. I quickly wiped it off on the thigh of my jeans. Hopefully, it would come out in the wash.

“I think that’s the best I can do for now....I don’t have any ice.” Max sat back on his heels, “When he wakes up, I’ll give him some painkillers. He’ll want them. Hopefully, he’ll go to an actual doctor later.”

Angel lay on Max’s bed. He looked beautiful even when he was unconscious, like something out of a renaissance painting. His sinewy muscles were on full display, his lean body stretching across the wrinkled sheets of Max’s bed.

When I pulled my eyes away from Angel, I caught Max’s gaze. He’d been looking up at me.

“I need a smoke,” Max exhaled softly.

The underneath of his eyes looked puffy and dark. I hadn’t noticed earlier but his cheeks were covered in a shadow of scruff.

He searched around his apartment for a minute, then found a pack of cigarettes. With the cigarettes in his hand, he headed toward his door. I followed, because it would have been weird to stay in his apartment alone...with just the sleeping Angel.

I wasn’t sure what was supposed to happen now. My heart was just now beginning to slow down to a normal rhythm, but my mind was still racing. I didn’t want to go back into my apartment, where everything would be too quiet.

“You coming?”

Max looked over his shoulder at me when he headed down the stairs.

I followed him, glad to have an excuse to not be alone.

It was unnaturally quiet on the street. Or at least I didn’t notice the sounds because the noise in my mind overpowered it.

Neither of us said anything. We inhaled and exhaled smoke and looked straight ahead. Overcome by exhaustion and our own thoughts.

My stomach hurt, like I was gonna be sick, a real twisting and tightening pain like someone was wrapping my intestines up in a knot. If Max hadn't been sitting right next to me I probably would have puked, but since he was there, I swallowed down the sour taste in my mouth and clutched my stomach.

Mom always said I felt everything in my stomach. When I was just a baby I'd cry and cry because of stomach pains. As I got older, any time I was upset or angry or anxious, I felt it first in my stomach.

I broke the silence without really meaning too, "I saw it happening...I saw it happening and I just stood there watching,"

My mouth was dry and my lips tried to stick together as I pushed the words out, "He was calling for help and I just—watched."

I could feel Max studying my face, waiting for me to go on.

I never thought I'd be the kind of person who'd stand by while people got hurt. I grew up in a town where everyone just—stood by—they kept to their houses and minded their business and they never helped anyone but themselves."

"I look around at people—there are so many people in this city who are so sad and lonely— people who have nothing—and I feel so...so helpless and guilty because I can't do anything to help them. I can't even seem to help myself."

I was saying too much—more than I'd ever said to Max in one conversation. Words just came spilling out. It was like I needed to speak them out loud in order to clear my conscience.

My throat was tightening. I was edging dangerously close to tears. If I started crying it would be even more embarrassing than my diatribe.

“Angel didn’t have anyone who would have known what happened to him... I don’t have anyone who would notice if I was gone. It gets so lonely here sometimes...when I remember that everyone here is all alone.”

When I finally stopped talking, it was quiet for a long time.

know what you mean. That’s one of the worst parts about living in this place. Most people here learn to block it out--to stop noticing all the hurt and pain around them. The fact that you see it, means that you’ve got a heart. It’s a good thing. But you can’t take on everyone else’s sadness, Joanna...” Max whispered softly, “In this city...it’ll kill you. The sooner you learn that the better.”

I looked at Max’s face carefully. I believed that he meant it—but I didn’t believe that he could do it either. I’d seen the way he’d looked at Angel...heard the way he’d talked...Max felt it all. The same way I did.

“You’re full of shit.” I said, feeling just bold enough to call him out.

He laughed and passed the cigarette to me, “Yeah well...I’m working on it.”

Silence fell over us again.

“I’d notice if you disappeared, Joanna.”

That was it. That was the step too far. Max wasn’t like all the other guys I knew. He was brave and kind and smart.

I wanted to sit there with him in that exact moment for forever.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

A few days later, Maureen yelled up at me that I was getting a call.

I expected it to be Frankie, she was the only person who ever called me. I picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Joanna, it’s Don—Frankie’s friend from the other night in the club.”

“Oh, hi.”

I had absolutely no idea why Don was calling me. He must have gotten my number from Frankie but I couldn’t think of any reason for him to use it.

“I was wondering if you would go to dinner with me sometime this week. Maybe tomorrow unless you have other plans?”

I was hesitant. Don was alright and he was offering to buy me a dinner which I knew better than to turn down. And it wasn’t like I had anything to do except sit at home to my quiet, empty apartment. The only thing that I liked about being at my apartment was the chance of getting to see Max. Since there wasn’t much of that happening, I cared less about being around.

Still, I didn’t know Don very well and the one time someone had asked me out it didn’t turn out so well.

“I don’t know...”

“C’mon...it’ll be fun I promise. Dinner, drinks, conversation.”

I bit my lip and twisted the phone cord around my fingers.

The line was silent for a long time.

“Joanna? Are you still there?”

“Alright.” I conceded, what was the worst that could happen?

“Amazing! Tomorrow night. You won’t regret it.”



Don took me to a restaurant in Midtown. It was fancier than the kind of place I usually went to. The table-tops were clean, not at all sticky. A man was playing music at a piano. When I looked around at all the other women in the place, I felt underdressed. I might have imagined it but I would have sworn that the hostess tilted her nose down at me, pursing her lips together.

Unlike me, Don looked totally comfortable in the environment. He waltzed right in keeping a guiding hand on my waist the way that men in movies did with their dates. Were we on a date? I hadn’t thought that was what Don was suggesting but it wouldn’t be the first time I misunderstood... No. I wasn’t about to make a fool of myself by assuming this was anything more than a friendly gesture. Besides, I wasn’t sure that I wanted it to be a date. Not with Don. He was nice and he was good-looking but I didn’t feel very comfortable with him yet.

I followed Don over to the bar. He pulled out a stool for me.

“What can I get for you,” The bartender looked me over and for a moment I thought that he was going to ask for my I.D.

“Vodka soda, please.”

Don ordered a beer.

Neither of us said anything while the bartender got us drinks.

“So,” Don had a really loud voice, it was conspicuous even in the packed restaurant, “you’re new to the city right? How’s it treating you so far?”

I shrugged, “It’s alright. It takes some getting used to though. Where I’m from didn’t exactly move at the same pace as things do here.”

“It’s a rough town. You’ve got to get tough or get pushed around.” He motioned around at the people in the restaurant, who didn’t really look that tough to me. They looked rich. “No one in this city gets anywhere by being nice and having people like them.”

That reminded me of what Max had said so long ago about not taking on other people’s sadness. Unlike when Max had said it, I believed that Don actually meant it and was capable of it.

“Yeah...I guess I’m not very good at not caring yet.”

“What do you want to do?” Don leaned back in his chair.

I shrugged, “I don’t really know. I’d be happy if I can just keep paying rent and feeding myself for the rest of my life.”

“Really? You don’t have any goals? You don’t seem like the type to settle.”

The words made me bristle. I don’t know where he was drawing the conclusions from. This was only the second time we’d met.

“I don’t think I’m settling...I’m happy with the way things are.”

I said it to defend myself but the second I spoke it, I wasn’t sure if it was true.

Right now, I was happy I guessed. I was paying rent and eating well. Frankie was my friend. Was everything the way that I’d hoped it would be? No. I was lonely a lot of the time. Sounds on the street at night kept me up late. Not a day went by that I wasn’t worried about how I was going to sustain what I had. But it was better than Wisdom. At least here I was in charge of my own life.

Don didn’t know what I’d come from. He didn’t understand what a step up this was from the bleak future I had in Wisdom. To him it might have seemed like I was settling but I knew the truth. I wasn’t tied to anything here.

Don shrugged, as if to say, “if you think so.

“I’m going to be somebody important. After I graduate, I’m going to get a full-time job working for my Uncle and start investing. I want to be a senior finance manager by the time I’m thirty-five and have a house on the Cape.”

He said it with the kind of confidence that made me believe him. Leaning back with a drink in his hand, he looked like somebody with a plan, who would actually be able to follow through.

Looking at Don, it was impossible for me not to compare him to Max. Max didn’t have any plan for his life. It never seemed to bother him in the least. That was something I liked about him. The fact that neither of us seemed to know what we were doing was comforting.

But the idea of stability was attractive to me. After growing up in an unpredictable home, with a mother who changed her mind with every change of the wind, the idea of knowing exactly what was going to come next was tempting. Listening to Don talk about the future with such absolute certainty was like having somebody dangle a cigarette in front of me. I wanted it now that I saw it...I needed it or I’d go crazy thinking about it.

We finished our drinks and then got seated for dinner.

I never really felt comfortable. The conversation always felt a little stilted—the pauses went on for just a little bit too long. Don talked about things that I was absolutely clueless about—which I was used to with Max—but the stuff Don talked about I didn’t even want to learn about. Stocks and business and his fraternity. I tried to pay attention, I really did, but I kept getting distracted by the things that were happening around the restaurant.

It was easier for me to get pulled into other people’s conversations than to listen to Don.



I wanted to have fun. I tried. There was no good reason not to enjoy it except that it all just felt so...unnatural to me. When we were finished with dinner, I felt a little guilty, like maybe I hadn't tried hard enough.

"Well, thanks for dinner. I had a nice time," I told Don outside the restaurant, shifting back and forth on my feet.

"Let me walk you home." He said, "It's dark."

"You really don't need to go out of your way. I walk home all the time."

"Don't be ridiculous. It's really no trouble."

He seemed pretty intent on walking me home so I stopped protesting.

Don took off his blazer and draped it over my shoulders when he noticed that I was shivering. He wrapped his arm around my waist.

Everything about the night seemed incredibly grown-up. This was like being on a real date with a real man who wanted a real relationship with me. For the first time, I understood why Frankie did this all the time. I understood now how it could make you feel special to have someone hold on to you like you belonged to them—like you were something worth protecting.

When I saw couples walking together the way that Don and I were walking together, I always thought, "now that's what it looks like to have it together." Even back in Wisdom, there were those couples in school who entered a kind of relationship that seemed to be anticipating marriage. I watched it and told myself that I didn't want that. That was for people who were afraid to be alone. But, experiencing even the briefest glint of it for myself, I had to admit that there was something appealing about the potential of entering into something and knowing exactly what I was going to get.

Maybe Don was the kind of guy I should be with. He had real goals. A real future. That was the kind of person who could be good for me. I could learn from him. Frankie was always saying to be smart about the kind of people you attach yourself to. There was a lot that I could get out of attaching myself to Don. Sulking around, feeling sorry that I wasn't the right kind of girl for Max wasn't going to do me any good.

Even though my mind was calculating all the logical reasons to like Don, there was something that felt...off. I felt it in the way our strides didn't match. He looked around at the world like he was sizing it up, comparing it, making sure that nobody looked better than he did. Something was missing. A feeling that I didn't know the word for but could feel its absence anyway. I knew that it was missing because it had been there with Max and it wasn't there now.

I found myself wishing that we were moving faster. Don's arm around my waist didn't feel good anymore—it didn't feel like protection, it felt like it was holding me back.

“This is me.”

I pointed to the lights of 424. I was anxious to get inside, to be alone for the first time all day. Once I was inside I was going to switch out of my uncomfortable clothes and into a soft sweatshirt. I would curl up in bed and sort through all the thoughts and feelings that were spinning around in my head.

Don hovered over me while I dug around in my purse for my keys. He was standing just a little too close for comfort.

“Well, goodnight.” I hoped to cut him off.

The moment Don kissed me I knew that I wanted him to stop.

None of those good reasons for me to be with Don mattered when Don kissed me. All I could feel was a crawling in my stomach and the urge to escape. It wasn't just that his lips were

cold and his hand on my hip held on a little too tightly—the moment itself felt intrusive and uncomfortable. Hovering in front of the door for the whole world to see, I wished that he would notice I wasn't kissing back and would stop. What was probably only a few seconds felt like hours.

I tilted my head away from his to escape the kiss. I forced a smile, not wanting to hurt his pride. When I started to walk to the door I paused when I noticed Don following behind me.

I turned to face him with my hand on the door.

“Aren't you going to invite me up?”

The question caught me off-guard. It hadn't crossed my mind to invite Don inside. I wouldn't have invited him up even if I hadn't felt so conflicted about him. I knew what that meant and I wasn't going to go there.

“I have to get up early in the morning.” I stumbled over the excuse, backing up to put as much distance between myself and Don as possible.

“Oh c'mon,” Don grabbed my hand, “We had fun tonight didn't we? We talked, I bought you dinner...”

My heart pounded against my ribcage. Not in a good way.

This wasn't the guy that I'd spent the night with. Or maybe, this was exactly who'd he'd been the whole time and I'd been trying to convince myself that he was a replacement for what I really wanted.

Don moved so close to me that I was backed up against the wall with nowhere to go.

“We can keep having fun.”

His lips collided with mine when I was in the middle of protesting.

“Don, stop it.”

Don didn't stop. He kept kissing me. When I pushed against him he pushed back—harder than I could.

“You're blocking the door.”

A voice interrupted the panicky thoughts racing through my mind.

Don pulled away from me but kept one hand wrapped around my arm.

It was Max. A surge of embarrassment washed over me. But then I realized that Max could save me. Surely he would see it in my face that I did not want to be here with Don. He would interfere and tell Don to leave me alone.

“Sorry bud,” Don ran a hand through his displaced hair, “Guess we were getting a little carried away.”

Don pulled me away from the door.

Max looked us over with a sour expression. My stomach churned realizing that he was directing the look as much at me as Don.

“You know you have a perfectly good apartment, Joanna.”

Max's words were pointed and sharp.

I didn't have a chance to respond before Max pushed past me, bumping my arm. He disappeared without a word, leaving me all alone with Don again.

“What an asshole,” Don shook his head.

His hand dug into the skin of my bicep, pinching it beneath his fingernails, holding me against the wall while he pulled at the bottom of my blouse, untucking it from my jeans.

“Stop!”

My hand lashed out wildly and blindly, connecting with something hard that gave way beneath my fist.

Don whipped his hands away from me.

“What the fuck?!”

Don’s voice echoed down the street. He was bent over, clutching his face and groaning.

“I told you to stop…” I whispered.

When he took his hands away from his face I could see the red lines on his face where my fingernails had scratched him.

“You’re such a fucking bitch!”

The words punctured through the silent night, hitting me so hard that my breath left my body.

I didn’t know what to say or what to do. I’d been trying so hard to get away from him but now that I was free I couldn’t get my feet to move.

“I’m sorry—”

“Fuck you!” Don backed down the steps, eyes glaring.

While Don stormed off down the street I sank back into the building.

Maureen’s door wasn’t cracked when I stepped into the lobby—a relief. I dropped to the floor. I sat there for a long time with my head tucked between my knees, trying to force myself to breathe normally again.

I could still taste Don’s lips on mine. I wiped my mouth with the back of my sleeve but it couldn’t erase the feeling of him pushing against me.

I knew that I couldn’t sit on the floor forever. I wanted to be in my apartment—to take a shower and wash away the dirty feeling covering my skin.

Max was outside of his apartment when I got to the landing. There was no apparent reason for him to be there. He didn’t smile when he saw me.

I didn't say anything while I unlocked the door. I didn't want to bring any more attention to myself or the way that the buttons on my blouse weren't buttoned correctly.

"Was that your boyfriend or something?"

"No."

"Didn't think you would be with a guy like that..."

I stiffened. My hands were still shaking.

"What do you mean?"

His eyes flitted to the ceiling, "What and who you do is your business...but it's pretty trashy to have some guy feeling you up at the front door for everyone to see."

Tears stung my eyes, "Are you calling me a whore or something?"

Max met my eyes for the first time. He didn't deny it.

Of all the people I knew in the city, Max was the last person I would have expected to say something like that.

"You're right," I snapped, "It's none of your goddamn business."

I slammed my apartment door behind me, to make sure that he knew exactly how angry I was with him.

Slamming the door didn't make me feel any better.

I sank to the ground and buried my face in my hands, trying to muffle my sobs. The walls were so thin—I didn't want Max to hear that he'd managed to make me cry.

I thought about calling Frankie to tell her what had happened. But how could I tell her about Don, an old friend of hers? What would I say? He kissed me when I didn't want him to? It wasn't like that was a crime.

No, I decided that it was better to keep my embarrassment and shame to myself.



In the morning I opened my eyes and for a blissful moment I didn't remember what had happened the night before.

Then it all came rushing back.

Don. Max. The things that I couldn't tell Frankie. I could feel all still curled up in my chest, flattening my lungs.

If I hadn't had to work, I probably wouldn't have gotten out of bed at all. It was easier to hide underneath my covers and pretend that it had all been a bad dream. But I did have to work.

I got ready. I moved slowly.

When I got out of the shower, I noticed the bruise on my arm for the first time. The bruise wrapped around my bicep, black and blue marks showing exactly where Don's hand had squeezed my skin painfully, tight.

I stared at myself in the mirror until my reflection didn't look like me anymore. I saw a nose and hair and freckles and chin and cheeks—but none of those features seemed to add up to a person. I was just a bunch of scattered pieces.

I chose a shirt with sleeves long enough to cover the bruise.

Work was a welcome escape from my own mind. If I stayed busy, if I could focus on something else, then I didn't have time to think about Don or Max or how strange I felt in my own body. Even though the shop wasn't any busier than usual, I went out of my way to find work to do. I opened up all of the display cases, removed each piece and dusted them all. When I was finished with that I wiped down the case so that customers didn't have to peer around fingerprint smudges on the glass in order to see what was inside. By the time I was done, my hands were pruney and red from scrubbing with hot water.

“You’re unusually industrious today,” Mr. Asch commented.

He sipped on his coffee and watched me work.

I nodded and kept working.

But closing time the whole store was glistening from top to bottom.

“You alright, Joanna?” Mr. Asch asked me when I popped into his office to tell him that I was leaving for the day.

“Yeah, of course.” I responded, pretending not to have any idea why he’d ask.

He frowned and shrugged and turned back to the ledger on his desk.

Once I was back in my apartment I curled up on my bed and prayed that I would be able to go to sleep. Sleep seemed like the only way to get away from the feeling that I was slowly rotting from the inside out.

The feeling I couldn’t shake, the one that I hated the most, was the feeling that I had done something wrong. Had I done something to make Don think that I wanted him to do that? Had I been too flirty without realizing it? If I had been I didn’t know it then and if I had I would have stopped.

But Don hurt me. There was a bruise on my arm to prove it. I’d told him no. I’d told him to stop. He didn’t listen.

Why did I feel so dirty?

A knock on my door pulled me out of my own head. I sat up, still wrapped in my blankets. At first, I thought that it was Maureen. Who else would be at my door? Rent wasn’t due for two more weeks. What could I have done to make her mad? I’d kept to myself for days. Maybe Frankie had called her line. I didn’t really want to talk to Frankie right then.

I lay back down and ignored the knocking and hoped that Maureen would go away.



The knocking got louder.

“Joanna, I know you’re in there.”

Max’s voice made me sit back up. But I didn’t start to move toward the door. After what he’d said the other night, I didn’t think that I wanted to see him.

“Listen, I know you’re mad at me...I want to apologize.” Max’s voice was unusually small, “Please, would you just—would you open the door?...please?”

I seriously doubted that anything Max could say would make up for the way he’d made me feel. Opening that door—letting him in—was probably going to make me feel worse. But in spite of my anger, I still wanted Max to be in my life. I was afraid that if I started shutting him out now, I’d lose him altogether. I definitely didn’t want that.

When I opened the door, Max had turned his back, giving up.

He turned around quickly at the sound of the door opening.

His smile was wide, “Hey!”

I wasn’t going to give into that smile so easily. I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Hey.”

Max shifted his weight back and forth on his feet. He looked like a nervous kid.

“I’m sorry for being an ass the other night. What I said...” He winced, like remembering it hurt, “I didn’t mean it. I don’t know what got into me but I swear to God, the last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt your feelings.”

He seemed to really mean it. It didn’t erase the sound of his voice playing over and over in my head. But it helped to muffle the sound a little bit.

“Okay.”

Max didn't turn to go. He stood on the landing looking at me, like there was something else that he wanted to say but he couldn't get it out.

"Do you...do you want to come in?" I asked because I couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"Sure."

I stepped out of the doorway to let him in.

Max had never been inside of my apartment before. I'd been to his place lots of time but there had never been a reason for him to see mine. The way that he looked around at all of my things—or lack of things—made me self-conscious. Bare walls and makeshift furniture. It somehow felt more empty with someone else in there. When I'd gone to his apartment it said so much about him. Mine didn't say anything.

If Max thought anything of the emptiness he didn't say anything.

"Do you want a coke of something?"

Luke-warm coke was the best thing that I had to offer him.

"I'm okay, thanks."

Max was walking around the small space, looking at every little thing. It didn't take him long to see it all.

"It looks like you're ready to pack up and run off at any minute," Max finally said, looking up at me with a little smirk on his face, "Are you secretly a Russian spy? An escaped convict on the run?"

A nervous laugh got stuck in the back of my throat.

"I guess I just don't want to have a lot of stuff back down the stairs if I ever move out."

Max laughed, “Good point.”

Max stopped pacing in front of my record player and knelt down to flip through my tiny collection. He picked up each and every one, quietly judging each of my choices. I was embarrassed. I wanted to tell him to stop looking. I wanted to explain that my taste was more sophisticated than that—that those were just some silly albums I’d brought from home.

“Billy Joel?”

Heat spread through me, giving me away just like always.

“Yeah...it’s stupid...”

“Can I put it on?”

By the time that I nodded he was already lowering the arm of the record player onto the spinning album.

The opening chords of Vienna filled the room. It was strange, listening to the song that always made me think of home while Max was standing in my apartment. Two contradicting parts of my life colliding right there in front of me. It made me wonder if Max ever would have talked to me if I’d met him in Wisdom. If I didn’t live next door, if he didn’t come knocking on my door—I probably still would have ended up watching him from afar. I’d have gone out of my way to catch glimpses of him—daydreamed about him in my spare time. He was too beautiful.

Hundreds of miles away, I was still the same girl who’d loved Dave Lipinski so much that it hurt and had ended up in tears. I didn’t want Max to make me cry. If Max broke my heart it would be a thousand times worse than what Dave Lipinski had done to me.

I sat down on my bed, then fell backwards, crashing into the mattress, making the springs squeak. Max lay down next to me. He closed his eyes and tilted his chin toward the ceiling. My body was rigid. I tried not to breath, not to move, not to take up too much space on my own bed.

He'd laid down so close to me that if I'd let my muscles relax, we would have touched. I held myself away from him—afraid to let go.

It took me a while but eventually I worked up the bravery to turn my head and look over at him. His eyes were still closed, and I looked at him as closely as I could before he noticed. He looked different up close. Still beautiful, but a bit more human. I could see pale freckles on his nose and the shadow of stubble on his cheeks. It took all my self-control not to reach out and touch his face, just to see what it felt like. Most of guys I'd been in school with hadn't been able to grow beards yet.

Lying there hurt. My chest contracted around my heart, squeezing it tightly to keep it from jumping out of my chest. It hurt so badly that it felt like my heart was going to actually burst.

With the sensation of Don's hands on me still lingering, I wanted to replace it with the sensation of Max holding me.

I wanted to tell Max that I wished it had been him who kissed me instead of Don. I would have let him kiss me. I would have kissed him back. I wanted to be the girl in his apartment. I wanted him to know that I would be the chewing gum stuck to the bottom of his shoe if that meant that I could be close to him all the time. I wanted to open up my mouth and tell him that I loved the way he cracked his knuckles, how he licked his lips when he was thinking hard, how sometimes I imagined him lying beside me late at night. How when we were alone together, like we were then, the pounding in my chest reached out to him, wanting to pull him closer to me.

But it was too stupid to admit.

I turned my eyes away from him and back up toward the ceiling where the fan was spinning in dizzying circles, so fast that the whole thing rocked and creaked.

“What happened to your arm?”

Max was looking at me, at my arm, with a frown on his face. I glanced down and quickly pulled my sleeve down to cover the bruise where Don had grabbed me.

“It’s nothing.”

“Are you sure?” Max was so goddamn pushy, he reached out and pushed up my sleeve, brushing his fingers across the bruise, “That doesn’t look like nothing—that looks like someone—”

Realization passed over Max’s face.

“Did that guy do this?”

I looked anywhere but at Max.

“I don’t want to talk about it...”

Max sprang up from the bed, “That fucking bastard!”

I stood up, watching helplessly while I watched Max. His outburst made me nervous. He stormed around the small space in a fury.

“Please calm down, you’re scaring me.”

When I reached out and put my hand on his chest to make him stop moving.

“It’s fine. I’m fine. He just didn’t like hearing no...”

“That’s not a reason to leave a bruise on you.”

The room was very quiet.

Max ran his fingers through his hair, “I saw you—I walked right past you when he was—” His eyes met mine, “And then I told you—I’m so sorry. I was just so jealous after I saw you with him and—”

“What?”

When I saw you...I turned into some kind of monster. I swear I haven't felt like in my life. I've never wanted to hit a guy I'd never met until I met him. Now, I really wish that I had. But then, I only wanted to hit him because he was with him."

I didn't understand what he was saying or what I should say back.

After months of fantasizing about scenarios in which Max said to me some variation of what he'd just said, of wondering what his lips tasted like, and wanting him to want me with all of my heart, I should have been ecstatic.

Instead I was scared. Max wasn't a boy. He was a man. Men wanted things, just like Don did, and even though it was Max standing there in front of me—Max who treated me better than most people in my life—even though I wanted him, I was afraid of what the wanting might lead to.

"You're the first girl I've met in long time, who doesn't seem to be trying to be someone they're not. I really like that about you."

My voice was just a whisper, "I *really* like you, Max."

Max stepped close enough to me that I could feel the warmth radiating from his skin. I backed away or put any space between us. I stepped closer. His face was close; his nose brushed against my temple.

He kissed me and I wasn't scared anymore.

I'd kissed other boys of course, but not a lot of them and not like that. Not alone in a room where there was no risk of someone seeing. Never so slowly, so patiently, so firmly, taking our time because there wasn't the threat of somebody's parents walking in or telling us to leave the door open.

We stumbled over to the bed, our arms and legs tangling because we couldn't bear to part to part for long enough to travel the two feet from where we were standing to the bed.

Everywhere he put his hands sent shivers down my spine. He knew exactly what to do. For a moment this made me panic. How many girls must he have kissed in order to learn to do it so well? But I shook the thought away. Nothing before this mattered, because in that moment he was there with me.

His fingers brushed underneath my shirt, grazing the skin above the buttons of my jeans.

“Is it okay if I—” He whispered the question into my neck, his warm breath moved down my spine.

I nodded, forgetting how to speak.

In one swift move he pulled my shirt up over my head. When he took off his own shirt, my hand moved of its own accord. I reached out and touched his chest, running my fingers over his chest hair. Underneath my palm I could feel his heart pounding, almost as fast as mine.

I didn't stop to think about him seeing me—whether or not he would like what he saw—all I knew was that I wanted to feel him with all the parts of me. I was being driven by an unfamiliar, desperate curiosity to see what would happen next.

“You're beautiful.”

When he said it, I believed him because of the way that his eyes drank me in thirstily.

The more he kissed me, the more of our bare skin that touched, the more I recognized that we were edging toward a dangerous moment. This was the moment that I'd been warned about my whole life.

I'd been told about all the bad things that could come from this—conditioned to say no because I wasn't supposed to let this happen.

No one had warned me about how much I would want it when the moment came. That I would want to say yes. That I would want it so badly that every muscle in my body would ache.

If it hadn't been Max— if I hadn't spent so many months learning to like all the many parts of him—if it didn't feel so damn good when our bodies were close like that—I probably would have wanted to say no. I wouldn't have let it get so far.

But it *was* Max.

So I said yes.



## CHAPTER NINE

Max wasn't any of the things that scared me about men. He wasn't like the guys that Mom dated, or the creeps in the clubs that hit on Frankie. Max was safe. He never made me feel like I was giving up a part of myself to be with him. We had an unspoken exchange: he gave me his roughness; the scratch of his morning scruff, the hoarse croak of his voice when he first woke up in the morning, and in exchange I gave him my softness; the baby curls that stuck to the back of my neck, the imprint of my body on the sheets where I fell asleep beside him.

He took me to parts of the city that I'd been too scared to explore on my own. On one of my days off he took me to the Met, and I got to go inside for a change. I didn't know anything about art, but I loved walking around the museum, holding onto Max's hand and letting him teach me. He was so smart. I wanted to be as smart as him so I paid attention, hanging onto his every word.

I was finally getting to see the things that I'd been waiting to see since I got to the city and I was seeing them all with Max.

I was a light sleeper and I wasn't used to sleeping with someone next to me because of it, I was constantly reaching out in the darkness to find him--to make sure that Max was still there. Max slept deeply and unmoving. Sometimes he was so still in his sleep that if I woke up in the middle of the night I'd lean over and rest my head on his chest just to make sure that he was breathing.

On slow mornings, when neither of us had to rush off to work, I liked to just lay there in bed, watching Max sleep peacefully, enjoying the way that the cool sheets felt against my legs, wondering how anything that could ever feel as good as things did then.

I didn't know how you knew if you loved someone but I was beginning to think that I loved Max.

It wasn't something that I planned on telling Max—I didn't want to scare him away by being too eager or too clingy. The worst thing I could imagine would be to blurt it out in some quiet, perfect moment and have to see him just stare back at me because he didn't know what to say. I decided to keep it to myself, holding on to it until the moment was right—if the moment was ever right.

On Halloween I woke up before Max like I usually did.

Our legs were tangled together under the sheets. Max had a way of arching his body around mine even while he slept, protectively. Cool, cloudy sunlight was sneaking through the small part in Max's curtains. I glanced at the digital alarm clock on the shelf next to the bed.

8:15

We'd been up late the night before—we'd gone to see a movie. Ghostbusters the new movie with Bill Murray, and afterward we'd gone to the bar Max worked at for drinks. The movie was good—I'd spent all night trying to figure out how they'd made those ghosts. But what I'd liked more than the movie was the way that Max had draped his arm around my shoulders through the whole movie holding me close to him. Then at the bar I'd blushed at the way that he'd introduced me to all his friends at the bar while either holding my hand or keeping his hand on my hip. Like he didn't want anyone to forget that I was with him. The intoxicating power of simply having someone want you around shouldn't be underestimated.

Even though I'd barely slept the night before I felt wide awake as soon as my eyes opened.

While listening to Max's soft breathing, I decided that I was going to make coffee, so that he would wake up to the smell of it brewing.

Moving slowly, being careful not to disturb Max, I slipped out from under the covers and padded across the apartment. I was familiar with all the creakiest spots in the floor so I stepped around them.

While I hadn't made coffee in Max's percolator before, I must have watched him do it a hundred times. It seemed like a pretty intuitive process. I measured the coffee out, filled the water.

It didn't take very long for the coffee to brew. While I waited, I flipped through one of Max's books—mostly just looking at the few pictures that there were inside. Max didn't stir.

When the coffee was finished, I poured two mugs full. I used Max's favorite mug—the one from NYU and the mug that he always poured my coffee in that I always thought of as mine—one with the Statue of Liberty on the side. The coffee steamed.

Walking back across the apartment, I was feeling pretty proud of myself—proud that I'd managed to make coffee and that for once I was going to surprise Max with a special gesture. It wasn't much but it was something to repay him for everything he did for me.

Then I tripped. I stubbed my toe on a stack of books and lost my grip on the mugs. I watched, horrified and it shattered on the floor, scattering ceramic shards across the floor.

“Shit!”

Max groaned and stirred in bed. He looked around at the mess and the glass, still squinting and adjusting to the daylight.

I covered my face with my hands, “I was trying to make coffee...so that you could have some when you woke up but...”

I braced myself for him to be angry or at least annoyed. It was Max's favorite mug. This was the kind of thing that my mother's boyfriends would have lost it over.

Max looked me up and down, shaking his head and grinning softly, "Good morning."

I peered at him through my fingers, "Good morning."

"Would you get over here before you cut yourself on that glass?"

Carefully I tiptoed around the glass to the bed. I hovered next to the bed.

"Don't look so upset. It's not a big deal. It was just a stupid mug." Max reached up and grabbed me by the hips, pulling me down to the bed.

I couldn't get used to somebody wanting me around. Even when I did stupid shit.

"I should sweep up that glass...." I said, half-heartedly pulling away from him.

Like I'd hoped he would, Max pulled me closer while shaking his head, "Leave it. We'll get it later. It isn't going anywhere."

"Hey!" Max said suddenly, like he'd just remembered something, "Happy Halloween! We should do something tonight. The neighborhood is usually pretty fun on Halloween...people dress up, kids come by trick or treating..."

There wasn't anything that I wanted to do more than spend the holiday with Max.

"Wanna get breakfast?"

Yes, I wanted to go get breakfast with him. I wanted to spend every second of every day with him. I wanted to be there for everything. Even the most mundane tasks; going to the laundromat, taking out the trash, walking to work were better when I got to do them with him.

But I had a prior engagement that morning.

I groaned, "I promised, Frankie that I'd meet her this morning. I've been blowing her off a lot lately."

Max sighed and pulled me in a little bit tighter. He would let me go when it was time, but for now, we were both content to stay like we were, breathing in the scent of each other.



Frankie flipped through the racks of costumes in the busy shop. She was in a bad mood. When I'd met her for breakfast, she complained that I was late which was rich coming from her. Then, after a breakfast filled with boring small talk that wasn't like Frankie, she'd dragged me to a costume shop to help her pick out something to wear out for the holiday.

Kids and parents were pushing around the shop, fighting to get the last masks and costumes. I did my best to avoid getting jostled by the crowd, wedging myself between a bin of masks and a rack of costumes. I picked up a cheap plastic mask—the kind with the cheap elastic that always snapped five minutes into trick-or-treating.

I'd never had a store-bought costume before. Mom always made mine because she said it was stupid to spend money on something that you were only going to wear once. Back then I used to be embarrassed about it but I could kind of see her point now. Who wanted to pay good money for some cheap, itchy costume that was just going to get covered up with your winter coat anyway?

“You've got to come out with me tonight.” Frankie said, finally breaking her steely silence, “You've been spending all of your time with your new boyfriend. Soon, you're not even going to be a person anymore. You're just going to be someone's girlfriend.”

“Oh, c'mon, Frankie. It's not like that. Max is great.”

“I'm sure he is...now.” Frankie turned her back and started walking away from me, “They're all great at first.”

“Max is different.”

Frankie kept giving me shit about Max. It kind of made me mad and I didn't want to be mad at Frankie. Why couldn't she just believe me? I wanted to make Frankie understand about Max. She didn't even know him—I was sure that if she did, she'd see what I saw and she'd get it. Then, we could all be friends and we could do things together.

But Frankie didn't seem to want that.

“Frankie.”

She stopped storming and looked up at me.

“Are you mad at me? Did I do something wrong?”

She sighed and looked up to meet my eyes for the first time since getting to the store, “I'm not mad at you... I just miss hanging out with you. You've been too busy with your boy to have any time for me lately.”

I never imagined that Frankie would miss me when I wasn't around. She seemed to have so much going on in her own life I didn't think that she would notice my absence from it very much. It made me happy to hear her say that she missed me in the same way that it made me happy when Max introduced me to his friends was becoming a permanent part of people's lives in a way that I hadn't thought I could be. There would be someone to miss me if I just disappeared—more than just someone—people.

“I miss you too, Frankie.” I told her, “And I guess I have been kind of wrapped up in Max...I just got excited...I've never had a boyfriend before.”

Frankie's face slowly spread into a smile and she threw her arms around my shoulders, pulling me into her.

“Ugh, I remember young love. It's sickening. But it's great.” she sighed, and ruffled my hair, “Everybody acts like an idiot the first time.”

I blushed and laughed and things felt more normal.

“I still have to come out with me tonight. We have a lot of nights to make up for!”

“If we go out tonight...can Max come too? He loves Halloween and I told him that I’d...”

Frankie bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling too hard, “Sure, but you have to wear costumes. I’m not going to be seen with the only two people in the city who are too boring to dress up for Halloween.”

I shook my head, “I don’t know what I’d wear.”

She wrapped her arms around me, “Don’t worry. I’ll help you find something perfect.”



Frankie kept her promise. She’d spent hours looking up and down Chelsea for the perfect costume for me. At least, *she* swore it was perfect.

I wasn’t so convinced.

I looked at myself in the mirror, fussing with my hair and costume. An Angel! An ANGEL! Frankie thought it was hilarious. The stupid wings stuck out like an extra foot on either side of me. A halo perched on top of my head was just begging for attention.

“You look darling,” she’d told me, “You have to wear it. This boy of yours isn’t gonna know what to do with himself.”

If I’d been left on my own I probably would have worn the same dress I always wore. But Frankie had insisted that I buy the costume. It was a stupid thing to spend money on. I felt silly and conspicuous.

Eventually I forced myself to stop looking at myself. I’d already bought the costume and got all dressed up. I had to wear it now.

The stupid skirt of the dress dragged all the way down the steps of the apartment.

Max was sitting on the stoop of the apartment building with a bowl of candy, waiting for the neighborhood kids to come by. He'd told me that he was going to be passing out candy which had surprised me and delighted me. It was such a sweet picture, him sitting there waiting for kids to stop showing up. When I saw his costume, I smiled. He was wearing one of the Ghostbuster jumpsuits. Just like in the movie.

I sat down next to him, being careful not to get my white dress too dirty or crush my wings.

He looked over at me and his eyes widened, "Wow! You look—you look great."

"I don't look stupid?" My cheeks burned.

"Not at all."

"Any trick or treaters, yet?"

"Not yet," Max looked up at the hazy, grey sky, "It's still kind of early though."

The street was busy. People in costumes walked by, laughing and talking. Halloween had a way of bringing people out of their shells--not that many people in New York needed help with that—but being in a costume, pretending to be someone else just seemed to make people feel like that could be a different person for the night too.

Max put his arm around my shoulder, and I leaned against him. It was just a little chilly outside and Max was perfect to keep me warm.

"Don't you two look cute?" Angel brushed by us, "I heard a rumor from a certain landlady that you two were getting particularly close and here you are."

In typical fashion, Angel was dressed to the nines. His beautiful face was covered in multicolored glitter and his outfit, what little there was, was black leather. You wouldn't ever guess it looking at him now that he'd once been so broken. It kind of amazed me that he'd go out



looking like that again after what had happened—I didn't know if it was brave or stupid to make such a target of himself. Maybe it wasn't fair for me to judge at all—I just worried about something happening to him.

“Hey, Angel,” Max nodded, never fazed by my Angel's teasing.

“Looks like the Country Mouse borrowed a thing from my book for the night.” He winked at me, “Don't behave too angelic tonight, that's no fun for anyone.”

While Angel left the apartment a couple of kids approached the stoop. They stared at him with expressions of confusion and fear when he walked by them.

“Trick or Treat!”

Both of the kids were wearing store-bought costumes. Those cheap plastic masks with the thin elastic stapled to the back and flimsy dungarees in the imitation of some animal of character I couldn't really make out underneath their winter coats.

A little girl approached Max shyly, with her pillowcase held out at arm's length. I understood how she felt. I still felt like that whenever I approached Max too.

Max dropped candy into their pillowcases and both kids scurried off to the next building. He was smiling from ear to ear. You'd have thought that he was the one collecting candy instead of handing it out.

“When I was a kid...there was this one neighborhood that gave out the best candy. Full-size candy bars and stuff. God, I loved Trick or Treating.”

“You really like Halloween, huh?”

“Yeah there's just something about it that makes me feel like a kid again. Even when I was in high school, I'd take my kid-brother trick-or-treating.”

“You have a brother?”

“Yeah...he’s...” Max squinted his eyes, thinking, “Seventeen now...yeah.”

I stiffened. A kid brother. The same age as I was.

“He’s great though. You should meet him some time. Maybe if you don’t have plans for Thanksgiving you could come home with me. Meet the whole family.”

I’d known that Max was from Connecticut. It had come up in conversations before, but I hadn’t yet thought about it very hard. It was hard for me to think about Max existing anywhere but in the city. He seemed to fit so perfectly into the rhythm of the city that it didn’t make sense for him to be anywhere else. But that was stupid of me. Everyone was from somewhere before they came here. Max himself had told me that.

I was suddenly, intensely aware of the fact that Max had lived an entire life before ever meeting me. I would never be able to understand it completely and Max wouldn’t ever really understand the life I’d lived before. I didn’t plan on sharing that part of my past with him...but here he was inviting me into the life he’d left along with the one he lived now.

“Yeah, maybe. That’d be great.” I said quickly, just wanting to steer the conversation away from kid brothers and family Thanksgivings.

I was glad that Frankie arrived and interrupted the conversation.

“So this is the neighbor I’ve heard so much about.”

Frankie was dressed up like Wonder Woman. She looked as beautiful as ever. I don’t know how she wasn’t shivering with so few clothes on. She must have had some drinks before coming—that was usually her trick for staying warm when it was cold out and she didn’t want a jacket to ruin her fabulousness.

Max stood up and offered her his hand, “Max, it nice to finally meet you. Joanna talks about you all the time.”

Frankie looked him over carefully before taking his hand, “You’re cute. I hope you’re as great as Joanna seems to think you are.”

Even Max squirmed a little underneath Frankie’s gaze. He shifted back and forth on his feet, his face caught in a little half-smile, trying to decide how he was supposed to react to that statement. I never saw him that nervous.

“I hope I am too.”

Frankie turned her attention away from Max and toward me, “You look amazing, just like I said you would!” She hugged me tightly.

A group of trick-or-treaters pushed past Frankie toward Max with the candy bowl. Frankie made a face when they got a little too close with their candy-sticky faces and puffy coats. She wasn’t much of a kid person.

Max passed out candy, complementing each child on their costume.

Frankie caught me gazing at him. She made a face but surely, she understood.

We sat together on the stoop for a couple of hours, handing out candy and talking and laughing. Max ran around the corner and got a case a beer which we drank together

Max was growing on Frankie. As grudging as she’d been about him, I could tell that she liked him because she stopped putting on a front of toughness. She told stories and laughed at his bartending tales.

I was happy—beyond happy—I’d never felt so content in my whole entire life. With two of my favorite people on either side of me in a city that didn’t seem so big and scary anymore. I’d found my place. I belonged here, in the neighborhood recognizing faces, feeling perfectly...at home.

We sat there until well after 10 o'clock. All the little trick-or-treaters had disappeared, herded inside by parents or older siblings to go tally up their night's loot. The adults were taking over the street now, groups heading out to clubs and parties.

"Enough of this cute little domestic scene." Frankie announced, "It's time to party!"

Max and I followed behind Frankie through the crowded street, trying not to lose sight of her as she bobbed and weaved only occasionally looking back to make sure that we were still following.

The club was a lot the same as it usually was but everyone was wearing a costume. It was like someone had given everybody in the city to let go of the little inhibition that they had left just for that one night. We all got to be kids again. Kids who could drink and do drugs and stay out as late as we wanted.

I danced with Frankie then Max then Frankie again. Max wasn't much of a dancer. I could tell that he didn't get out to the clubs very much. I didn't mind. We could find our own rhythm and sway to it together.

Frankie did like she always did and bobbed in and out all night. Disappearing with strangers and reappearing a little less sober.

Around 3am I yawned.

"Maybe we should head out."

Max looked a little worn himself, his hair was a mess and his eyelids were heavy.

I nodded, "We've got to find, Frankie."

"Are you sure you don't mind us leaving? I don't want you to have to walk home alone..."

Frankie waved her hand at us, which I figured was a go-ahead. Most of her attention was fixed on the man that she was talking to.

Max tugged on my hand, “I don’t think she’s planning on walking home alone...”

I looked between Frankie and the man who were sitting incredibly close to one another.

On the street we both drew in deep breaths of fresh air. New York air could really only be considered fresh when being compared to the air inside of a New York City night club.

We had a sleepy, quiet walk home. Neither of us talked much. A couple of times Max pulled me a little closer to his side when we walked by men walking alone, or homeless people huddled in allies. Light from the streetlamps caught the glitter on the sidewalk, left behind by hundreds of costumed pedestrians.

My wings had taken a beating in the club. I took them off and tossed them onto a pile of trash on the street. I didn’t really have another reason to wear them. They’d served their purpose.

The train back to Brooklyn was packed. There wasn’t any room to sit down so I wrapped my arms around Max while he held onto the straps on the ceiling.

The closer to our neighborhood, the quieter it got. Anyone who was going to be out celebrating was going to be in Manhattan still.

“You want to sleep at your place or mine?” Max asked at the door of 424.

“I don’t care.”

It was the truth. A bed was a bed to me and I’d go to whichever one he was in.

I caught sight of the payphone across the street and hesitated in the doorway.

“Everything alright?”

“Yeah...I’m just gonna go make a call really quickly?”

Max glanced at his watch, “At 3am?”

“I’ll probably just end up leaving a message for them to get in the morning.”

He was perplexed but unbothered, “Okay. You want me to wait?”

“No, I’ll meet you upstairs.”

I could have waited until the morning to make the call, God knows I’d already been waiting months to make it, but it suddenly felt urgent. And I knew what I needed to say. Plus, if I waited until I was sober I would never have the courage. After the night, with Max talking about his family and those kids in costumes and feeling that everything was finally right...I felt sentimental.

“You’ve reached Tanya Reese. I can’t come to the phone right now so leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

The sound of my mother’s voice surprisingly made my breath catch in my throat. Her southern twang that I sometimes heard in my own voice brought me right back to Wisdom, to our green carpeted living room, where she sat and watched her programs after work. I was relieved that she hadn’t answered. It would be easier to talk to the machine than it would be to talk straight to her. I only hoped that she’d remembered to clear the tape.

“Hi, Mom. It’s Joanna.” Not off to a great start. If she didn’t recognize my voice then what was I calling for? I took a deep breath. “I just to call and tell you that I’m alright. I meant to call a long time ago and I’m sorry that it took me so long. I know you’re probably mad at me--I should have said goodbye....” There wasn’t enough tape in the world for me to explain myself so I stopped trying, “Anyway...I just wanted to tell you I’m okay and that you shouldn’t worry. I love you. I’ll call you again soon.”

I hung up the phone. For several long moments I stared at the receiver and the dial buttons that had been so often used that the numbers had almost completely worn off, half-expecting it to ring.

I was lighter when I walked back across the street and into 424.

Max was waiting outside of my apartment for me. He'd changed out of his costume and was wearing his softest, most worn t-shirt. His curls were a little damp with sweat.

"Everything alright?"

"Yeah, I was just calling my mom."

One of his eyebrows cocked up toward the ceiling and he reached out to wrap me up in his arms.

"You've never mentioned your mom before."

I opened the door of my apartment.

"We haven't talked to her in a while...last time I saw her I didn't leave on good terms."

"Why call tonight?"

I didn't answer right away. I looked around my apartment. It was still bare in comparison to Max's but I'd added a few things that made it feel like it belonged to me. There were curtains on the window, a little mirror hanging on the wall, and a couple of lawn chairs I'd found on the curb and repurposed. It didn't look as much like I was ready to pack up and leave at any moment anymore. There was a polaroid picture of me and Max pinned it to the wall next to my bed where I would be able to see it when I woke up in the morning.

Max was sitting on the bed, unlacing his shoes and still waiting for me to answer his question.

"I guess I just wanted to let her know that I'm okay."

Max's reach was long enough that he didn't have to move from the bed in order to grab my hips and pull me toward him. My head tilted so that his lips could trace soft, whispering kisses down my neck. Pleasant chills shimmied down my spine and I inhaled the scent of him that was soaked into his hair. His kisses stopped for a moment and he rested his chin on my breastbone, tilting his head to look into my eyes. There was something so incredibly open and honest in his pale, blue eyes looking into mine that made me want to be with him for forever.

"You're okay?"

"Yeah, I think that I am."



## CHAPTER TEN

There were three churches in Wisdom. The First Baptist Church of Wisdom on Main Street, The First Presbyterian Church of Wisdom on Elm Street, and Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy on the outskirts of town—across the train tracks. The sizes of their congregations ranked from highest to lowest in that same order.

Mom and I did not attend any of them.

Mom wasn't a religious woman. She said that if there was an all-knowing and all-powerful God then she didn't see what he cared about what she was doing.

It never bothered me much. I didn't want to dress up in stuffy clothes and go sit in a hot Church for an hour listening to someone drone on and on about some boring book on one of the two days a week that I didn't have to go to school. Or, it didn't bother me until I met Susie Marks.

Susie and I were in the same third grade class. Ms. Wiley was our teacher. Susie was something like a best friend to me. We sat next to each other in class, traded lunches, and at recess, when all the other kids were playing stupid games, Susie and I sat underneath the play structure and had long talks about a variety of different subjects.

There weren't a lot of kids that wanted to be my friend back then. By third grade most kids had developed a need to feel cool. The other third graders could pick up on who wasn't wearing the fancy clothes, who lived in the nice neighborhoods in houses with playrooms and swimming pools. That was the kind of capital who got you friends and I didn't have any of it. So, when Susie wanted to hang out with me I jumped on the opportunity to have someone to talk to.

Susie was Catholic and a lot of the time, she utilized our recess discussions to try to convert my heathen soul. I was just so happy to have someone to talk to that I didn't mind her proselytization. For being only nine years old, she was a shockingly dedicated missionary.

Everyone knew about my mother and the shameful state she was raising me in. Poor Mom had a lot of strikes against her, unwed single mother, barfly, and Godless. The people of Wisdom loved talking about her. It was sad that I knew about it even in third grade.

I think Susie must have heard people talking about us too, which is why she was always so concerned about the state of my soul.

It was Susie who taught me about sin.

Don't get me wrong. I knew that some things were good to do and some things were bad to do before I met Susie. Mom wasn't that careless that she didn't bother to teach me about right and wrong. But before I met Susie, I didn't know that there was a word for the bad things and that if you did a lot of them that you'd end up in hell. I had no idea how many ways there were to sin. There were different types of sin. Venial and mortal and sins of the flesh and sins of omission. The list of crimes against God went on and on, things I didn't even know you could do.

My heart pounded with every word Susie spoke. Susie preached and preached, and I felt myself sinking further and further down until I was pretty sure that I was going to get pulled down through the playground mulch and into the depths of hell right then and there. Sweat trickled down my spine, anticipating the eternal fires of hell. I could practically feel Satan's twisted fingers wrapping around my soul.

It wasn't just me that I was worried about either. If *I'd* sinned a lot, *Mom* was in deep trouble. She swore and drank and brought home men all the time. Mom had lots of flaws but that

didn't mean I wanted her to burn in hell. I couldn't imagine a heaven where Mom wasn't there to hug me and comfort me when I cried. She wasn't a perfect mom but no one in the world smelled the way she did.

My stomach cramped. Tears stung in my eyes. How could I have gone nine whole years without knowing about what was going to happen to me? Why would God have made me if he was just going to send me to the most terrible place?

With all my worrying I'd stopped listening to Susie a bit.

"The good thing is...I can go to confession and all my sins go away. All I have to do is tell the priest about all the sins that I committed and then my soul is all clean again. Like I walked through a car-wash for my soul."

Her words, carrying the promise of deliverance, brought forth a wave of emotion similar to a religious experience. I had to get myself to this confession thing as soon as possible. I'd bike down to the nearest church right after school, pour out my soul to a priest in order to save myself.

Susie must have seen the hope in my eyes because she frowned, "Oh, only Catholic's can go to confession."

I have to give her credit; she did look genuinely sad that I was going to have to go to hell.

There was only one clear solution in front of me. Mom and I needed to become Catholic as soon as possible. Once we were in, we would be able to confess our sins and save our immortal souls that were otherwise doomed to an eternity of suffering.

The big problem was how I was going to convince Mom to become Catholic.

There was a strict, unspoken policy in the house that we didn't talk about Church.

“Everybody in town feels the need to tell me how to live my life, I don’t need my daughter doing it too.” She’d say.

But surely, she just didn’t know about how grave our situation really was.

The whole rest of the school day I plotted out exactly how I was going to convince Mom. I ran through the conversations in my head, trying to foresee all the possible ways that it could go and planning accordingly. The biggest trick was going to be catching Mom at a moment that she wasn’t in a mood.

I was old enough to know how to tell when Mom was in a mood. If she was in a mood there was no point in trying to talk to her. Her moods manifested in lots of ways. Most of the time, she simply drank more than usual. Sometimes, she went straight to bed after getting home from work. The worst times she got mad at everything and anything. If I opened a door too loudly she’d start raging around, telling me how ungrateful I was.

Mom was in an unusually good mood that night. She was actually making dinner on the stove, instead of in the microwave.

I sat at the kitchen table, staring at my homework, trying to work up the courage to ask Mom the big question.

“Mama?”

“Mmmhmm?” She didn’t look up from the pot she was stirring but she did flick her cigarette into the ashtray.

“Mama...can we...can we become Catholic?”

That got her to turn around.

Mom turned off the burner and took the pot off the stove. She leaned back against the counter and looked at me with an expression that knew there was something more to the question than I was letting on.

“Now, why on earth would you want to do that? I don’t really think that you’re all that anxious to haul your little butt to church every Sunday morning to sit and kneel for an hour, so what’s this really about?”

“I don’t want to go to hell!”

I told her about Susie and about confession and about how I was worried for our souls.

“What the hell does Susie know? Nothing except what her parents tell her! And they don’t know anything either.”

Her eyes stared right into mine, “Do you really think that you’re a bad person?”

I thought about it hard. Searching deep into my heart for my true intentions.

“I don’t want to be.”

“No you don’t. You try real hard to be a good girl. You’re a lot better than I ever was...”

Mom shook her head, “I don’t want anything to do with people who would tell me that my baby girl could ever go to hell...just because she’s not one of them. You shouldn’t either.”

That was it. The end of the conversation. Mom went back to fixing dinner. She never mentioned it again.

As brief as the conversation was, it made me feel better. The knot in my stomach untangled itself. The next day at school I told Susie about what my Mom had said. Including the part about her parents not knowing what they were talking about. After that Susie didn’t want to have conversations at recess anymore.

Susie had been on my mind a lot since Halloween. I was feeling that same knot in my stomach that I had back in third grade. That knot that came from counting your sins.

I was pretty sure that even Mom would have to admit that I wasn't being a good person anymore.

I didn't want to lie to Max.. I didn't really even mean to. It just happened as a result of me not wanting him to know the truth. It wasn't until he started telling me about his family that I started realizing all the things that he didn't know about me. Then when he told me that he loved me, it occurred to me that he could get hurt by all the things he didn't know.

My age was the biggest lie. It wasn't like I'd told him that I was older than I was...I just let him believe it. He knew that I was younger than him, he must have thought I was nineteen or twenty.

Then there was the fact that I was a runaway.

Those two big lies seemed to open the door for lots of other little lies to come flooding through. The more that he told me about his life, the more that I had to makeup and edit about my own.

I tried to justify it in lots of different ways. If he really cared that much, he would have asked outright. He himself had told me that everyone in the city was a runaway. At the end of the day, the truth was that I desperately wanted him to keep loving me and I thought that if I told him the truth it would put an end to that. So, I let it go on and on until I could feel myself starting to lose track of what I'd told him. My whole life was beginning to become an act that I wasn't sure I could keep up.

The fear of either accidentally letting the facade slip or of coming clean was gnawing at me every minute of every day. One or the other seemed inevitable. Both ended in losing Max.

Because of all of this, I couldn't enjoy the moments that I had with Max anymore.

When I wasn't trying to maintain the portrait of myself that I'd painted for him, I was worrying about how wrong it was for me to keep doing it.

I loved Max. At least, I thought I did. I hadn't felt for anyone the way I felt for him. When I woke up in the morning, I thought about him. When we were together he made me feel like I was the most interesting person on the planet. I was starting to understand why my mother couldn't be alone...she was searching for someone that made her feel the way that Max made me feel. I was sure that I had it right.

The very thought of losing Max, of losing the feeling of being loved, seemed world-ending. I would do anything to keep that from happening.

Waking up beside Max was still the nicest feeling in the world, right up until the moment that I remembered that while I was watching him sleep, I was also lying to him.

I tried to be gone before Max woke up, so that I wouldn't have to come up with any more lies. But when I started to roll out of bed, Max stirred.

"Good morning."

When Max smiled sleepily up at me, my heart felt like melted butter. Warm and silky.

"Morning."

I couldn't hold back my smile, not from Max.

"You weren't trying to sneak away from me were you?"

I was already pulling on my jeans when he asked.

"Not sneaking away...I just didn't want to wake you up. You should sleep in."

He stretched his arms above his head with a big yawn, "I'm up now. We could go get breakfast or something."

I wanted to be able to say yes. I wanted to push all of my worries to the back of my mind and forget about them. But I couldn't.

"I wish I could," I said, backing out of the apartment, "I can't be late to work again."

Max just smiled a sweet, ignorant smile, "Okay. See you later then?"

"Of course."

Out on the landing I ran into Angel who was on his way down the stairs.

When he saw me leaving Max's apartment, he grinned and wiggled his eyebrows, "Looks like somebody's already had a good morning."

My neck burned.

"What's the matter with you? You look miserable. Nobody who's getting laid regularly should look as miserable as you do right now."

"I just...I have a lot on my mind."

Angel looked at me closely. His eyebrows were knit together in the middle like he was trying to make up his mind about something.

"Listen, don't go crazy. But..." He pulled something out of his jacket pocket, "have a little pick me up."

I looked at the little bag he was holding out to me. The one time that I'd done coke before hadn't felt very good. But it had swept the world away. I wanted so badly to feel numb, just for a little while.

"Thanks." I took the bag from him.

He nodded, "Sure thing. I owe you."

For a minute he looked like he wanted to say more but he couldn't decide if he should or not.



“I’ve lived in this building for a long time...and I’ve known Max since he moved in. I’ve never seen him as happy as he has been since you got here. You two...are really good together. You shouldn’t let that go. Not everybody in this city gets lucky enough to find someone they way you two found each other.”

I understood that Angel was just trying to be nice and that there was no way that he could have known the way his words felt like a stab in my heart.

“Yeah,” I nodded, “thanks...”



My mind was racing. I just wanted to make it stop. To think about something else.

I knew I shouldn’t. Not at work. But Mr. Asch was in his office and he wouldn’t emerge from his office for hours. There wasn’t anything else for me to do except for sit around and let my mind run circles. It had felt so good then. Maybe if I did just a little now. It would help me to soothe me, to help me figure out was I was going to do.

I must have checked over my shoulder fifteen times to make sure that Mr. Asch wasn’t going to pop out of nowhere before I pulled the little bag that Angel had given me out of my pocket.

It had been ages since that night in the club when I’d done a line with Don and his friends, but I remembered what he’d done. I did my best to get the lines as even as Don had. Then I took a bill out of the register and rolled it up the way that Don had then.

There was a second when I almost changed my mind. I knew it was a bad idea. I should have listened to that little voice in the back of my head telling me that I was making a mistake. But unfortunately, that was the little voice that I was trying to silence.

I did the lines.

Time stopped existing for a little while.

It was too much for me to sit there still behind the counter waiting for a customer that was never going to come. I fiddled with the stuff around the shop, picking stuff up and moving it around. I wanted to do something—to go somewhere. But I had to stay in the shop. That was pretty much the only requirement of my job. I switched on the radio. Some Duran Duran song was playing. I danced to it. I jumped and swayed and tossed my hair around the shop.

I must have gotten too excited. I stopped paying attention to what was around me. In a moment I threw my arms apart and lost my balance, bumping into one of the big, heavy display cases.

The whole case came crashing down. The glass shattered—is slid across the floor under all the rest of the furniture. Everything inside the case was either crushed underneath it's weight or broke the minute that they hit the ground.

I stared at the mess dumbly.

The door of the backroom opened. Of course he'd heard the crash. He ignored most things, but he'd have to be an idiot to ignore something so huge. I clambered to clean up the mess I'd made before Mr. Asch could see. But it was a pathetic attempt. There was no chance in hell that I could clean up that mess before Mr. Asch noticed what had happened.

“What is all this?”

The old man surveyed the damage with utter horror scrawled across his face. I could see his mind racing with a million questions and calculating how much money he'd lost in a matter of seconds.

“I'm sorry—it was an accident.” My tongue was heavy. It tripped up my words.

Mr. Asch frowned at me, “Are you on drugs right now?”

“What? No!”

He brushed past me toward the register and looked at the desk. He ran a long, wrinkled finger across the glass and looked at the power that came up with it. Mr. Asch wasn't a fool.

“Mr. Asch—” I started to defend myself then realized that I didn't have any words.

“What were thinking? Doing drugs at work? In my shop?” Mr. Asch looked distressed.

I was embarrassed but I was also still in the middle of a high.

“I'm so sorry...I swear it won't ever happen again.”

“No, it won't. You're done here.”

Mr. Asch had never had a reason to be mad at me. I'd never done anything wrong before. Then in a matter of minutes I'd screwed up so badly that Mr. Asch was standing there glaring at me and telling me to get out. I heard the words but I couldn't comprehend what they meant. I needed that job. Rent was due soon.

I couldn't move my feet. Or maybe I just wouldn't let them move because I hoped Mr. Asch would suddenly change his mind. I wanted to remind him about all the times I'd gone out for sandwiches. That I was good at my job. That I was trustworthy. But the evidence that none of that mattered was scattered all over the ground.

“Don't you want me to clean up—”

“Go! I won't let you in my shop if this is how you're going to repay me.”

I picked up my things in a daze and brushed past Mr. Asch. He watched me go. Didn't say a word, just frowned after me. I probably should have said something but I couldn't think of any words. Not one. Not even “I'm sorry”. My mind was all white.

I stood outside on the street. My whole body was damp with sweat. I couldn't hear anything but my own heartbeat pounding away in my ear canals. Cars raced by, creating a breeze that whipped my jacket around.

Fuck.



I didn't know where else to go so I went to Frankie's.

Luckily, she was home for once.

She opened the door to me standing on her doormat sobbing uncontrollably and blubbering words that were impossible to understand.

After I explained to her what had happened through hysterical tears, Frankie made me sit on the couch. She got me a glass of water which I drank thirstily. I still felt loopy from the drugs and the knot in my stomach had tightened even more since the morning.

At least I had Frankie.

Frankie didn't say anything at first. She sat next to me on the couch and waited for my breathing to slow down and my pupils to return to their normal size.

"Ah, honey," Frankie said in a soft, soothing voice, "Everyone gets fired from a job at some point...if I had a dollar for every job that I got fired from I'd never have to work another day in my life..."

Frankie's long nails scratched my head as it rested in her lap. My face was puffy and hot from crying and coming down off my high I was too tired to move.

"You'll get another job. I'll ask around. I bet I know someone who's looking."

"It was so stupid, Frankie," I wiped the snot from my running nose with the back of my wrist, "I shouldn't have done it—I knew it was a bad idea."

“Listen, everyone makes mistakes at seventeen.”

I sat up, “Wait. How’d you know that I’m—”

Frankie raised her eyebrows, “Oh, yeah. I forgot to tell you. Your Mom called up. She said you gave her this number. At first I was really confused but she explained to me what happened.” Frankie moved to keep eye contact with me even though I tried to dodge away from her gaze. “I’m sure that you had a good reason to leave. And I only talked to her for a few minutes which isn’t enough to judge a person by...but she sounded like she was really worried about you, Joanna.”

I swallowed hard, feeling my face turn burning hot.

“Oh God.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Frankie whispered, “I mean, I pretty much knew this whole time but...you should have said.”

“I didn’t tell anyone, Frankie...not you, not my landlady, not...” My voice caught in my throat, “Not Max. No one was going to take a seventeen year-old seriously. No one would have hired me. And I couldn’t stay there...I couldn’t keep rotting away in that nothing town. I had to get out of there as quickly as I could or I never would.”

“Joanna, Joanna, Joanna—I get it.” She nodded, “I get why you did it...”

“I’ve been tearing apart inside because of this secret. I’ve been avoiding Max for days because when I look at him I think about all of the ways I’ve lied to him...”

“Joanna,” Frankie’s

The tone of Frankie’s voice made the rest of my words catch in my throat.

“I didn’t know that Max didn’t know.”

At first, I didn't understand what she was talking about. Then I put together the look on her face with the words and I got it. She didn't know that he didn't know and now he did.

"You told him?"

"I didn't know that I was telling him something that he didn't already know! I just called up your place to tell you that your mom called but you weren't home so Maureen gave the phone to Max and—" Frankie's lip quivered, "I told him your Mom called and that it seemed urgent so he should give you the message as soon as possible."

I rubbed my face with my hands, "How much did you tell him, Frankie?"

"He seemed confused about why your mom being so worried—I should have seen—but I didn't—and I—"

"God Frankie!" I shouted, "Why'd you have to go and open your big mouth?"

"I know you're mad but..."

"Yeah I'm mad! I had—I had a plan—I was going to tell him—"

"Why'd you keep it a secret for so long, Joanna? You never even told me! I just kind of figured it out on my own!"

"Because if he'd know that I was—" I stopped just short of saying it out loud, "He never would have talked to me let alone..."

"You don't know that, Joanna."

When Frankie reached out to touch my arm, I jerked away from her.

"Well, now that he knows I've been lying to him since we met he's definitely not going to want to have anything to do with me!"

"You just couldn't stand that I had a boyfriend could you? A really nice boyfriend."

“Woah.” Frankie froze, “Maybe you should calm down because now you’re just making things up to be angry about. I wasn’t fucking jealous of you and Max, Joanna. I didn’t sabotage your relationship. I haven’t done anything except help you since we met! I helped you get a job, I drag you along with me so that you wouldn’t stay shut up in your apartment all alone!”

Her words hit like a train and I searched desperately for something to throw back at her.

“You didn’t do that to help me. You were bored because you don’t have anything else to do with your life then try to turn me into another one of you. Now you’re just mad at me because I figured out that I can do better and you can’t even find a man who doesn’t just want to sleep with you and toss you aside”

Frankie’s lip was pursed so tightly that it had become just a straight line across her face. She had never looked older or angrier.

“Get the fuck out.”

I grabbed my coat and bag up off of the floor again. When I left the apartment, I slammed the door as hard as I could behind me. I could hear the pictures on the walls inside shaking.

Outside of the apartment, I stormed down the street with no real destination in mind. I couldn’t go home to where Max was. I wasn’t ready to face him yet. Not until I figured out what I was going to say. Frankie thought that she was the only reason that I’d survived in the city—that I couldn’t have done anything without her.

What did she know? I’d found the apartment for myself. I’d done this for myself. I’d worked every single free second I had. She didn’t know anything about my life before this—about how hard I’d had to work to get here and to stay here. All she’d done was help me out a little. I would have done what I needed to do to stick it out if Frankie hadn’t come along.



I wish I could remember more of what I did after that but I can't. I see flashes of the rest of the night, but it's all blurry and muddled.

I went to the Danceria.

It was early to be there. I didn't care. I always thought Frankie's rule about showing up early was stupid anyway.

I did the rest of the coke that Angel gave me in the bathroom. I was getting pretty good at it. It didn't even hurt that much when I inhaled it up into my nostrils.

Consequences were far, far away. I knew that I'd ruined things but I wasn't ready to face it, so I would stay and I would dance and I would avoid facing the world for as long as I possibly could. It was a dream or a nightmare that seemed better than waking.

I'm not sure what finally made me snap out of it. Maybe I was coming down off of the high finally. Or maybe it was looking up and realizing that I was dancing with a complete stranger.

What the hell was I doing?

This wasn't what I wanted. This wasn't where I wanted to be.

I pushed away from the stranger and started stumbling out of the club.

I hailed a cab. I could count on one hand the number of times that I'd taken a cab because it was so damn expensive. But I knew that I wouldn't make it home walking. In the backseat I drifted in and out of reality. Street signs flashed by. I tried to keep track of where the cab was driving but couldn't keep myself alert for long enough.

The cab screeched to a halt in front of 424 and I lurched out, tossing some bills at the driver without bothering to count them.



Maureen's door was cracked open but I didn't try to sneak past. She could try to stop me if she wanted but I was on a mission.

"Max!" I leaned against his apartment door, speaking in a loud whisper, "Max, open the door! I'm sorry it's so late...some of us went out after the—"

The door swung open.

For a minute, his expression kind of scared me. He was mad. Like, one mom's asshole boyfriend's mad.

His brow furrowed even deeper, "Are you high right now?"

I shrugged. The motion was awkward and stilted, "What does it matter? You're not my parent."

"It matters because if you're high I'm not going to try to have a real conversation with you right now."

"Did you just open up the door to tell me off?"

God, I didn't even know why I was acting like this. He was just worried about me. Why was I being such a bitch?

"Frankie called. She was looking for you. Apparently, she got a call from your mom."

I nodded, "I know."

You could have heard a pin drop in the hallway.

"How old are you, Joanna?" Max asked.

There was a long silence. Max waited.

I thought about lying. But I knew it was pointless. I wasn't a great liar when I was sober. The jig was up. Nothing I could say now would change the truth. Then I thought about running,

darting down the stairs and out the door and away and away and away without stopping. If I was going to do that, then I might as well have answered the question.

“I’ll be eighteen in a month.”

My voice was a croak that sounded far away in my own ears.

Max’s shoulders slumped and he fell back against the doorframe. He’d known what I was going to say, but hearing me confirm it hurt him.

“What the hell, Joanna?”

“What does it matter?”

“Well—for one if I’d known that you were seventeen I never would have—” He trailed off.

“You never would have had sex with me?” I scoffed, “You weren’t exactly asking for my ID.”

It was mean. My voice sounded mean even as the words left my mouth. But I didn’t try to stop myself. I wanted to be mean. I wanted to hurt Max’s feeling before he hurt mine. If the building had been on fire I probably would have thrown gasoline onto the flames.

It worked. Max face changed from sad to angry.

“You’ve been lying to me since we met! I always thought that you were just trying to find your feet here—you know—no one knows what they’re going to be when they first get here but the whole time—” He took a deep breath, “You’ve been telling everyone what they wanted to hear. You’ve been running around with your Reagan button one day, doing lines with Frankie at night, and then coming home and being this cool girl that I—”

“Why can’t I be more than one thing?!” My voice was too loud.

“How is anyone supposed to know what the real you is? How do I know if anything you told me is true?”

“It was!” There was the threat of tears in my voice but I pushed them down, “I meant everything I told you.”

I reached out to touch him but he jerked away, “You’re just a kid. You didn’t think about who was going to get hurt. Not once. You took what you wanted, Joanna. But you didn’t give anything back.”

It wasn’t fair. He wasn’t even giving me a chance to explain. He’d decided what he thought before I even showed up.

“Well, at least I’m not some med-school dropout! I’ve never had anything! If I’d stayed in Oklahoma I would have ended up just like my mother dating assholes and slowly wasting away in a trailer park. You could have been something but instead you’re a bartender at some shitty bar—”

“AT LEAST I’M HONEST ABOUT WHAT I AM!”

I shrank in response to the roar of his voice.

He took a minute to compose himself, “I may just be a bartender. But I never lied. And I’m happy with who I am and with the way I live.” He studied me, “You can’t say the same thing, Joanna.”

“Fuck. You.” I spit at him.

His eyes had settled on a spot above my head and they didn’t move. His lips were pressed into a tight line and his jaw worked itself back and forth.

When I realized that he wasn’t going to respond...because he didn’t have anything left to say to me I wanted to take back my last words and exchange them for something else. I didn’t

want him to stop fighting back because if he just stopped fighting it meant that he'd given up—that nothing I could say mattered anymore because he had already written me off.

He just stood there, not saying anything and not looking at me. Slowly, I realized that he was waiting for me to walk away. He wasn't going to let me into his apartment. We weren't going to talk anymore, there would be no apologies or reconciliations—this was the clearly marked ending of something that I hadn't recognized.

Even realizing this I couldn't bring myself to move from the place—my feet were cemented into place so firmly that God himself couldn't have moved me without ripping the floorboards up along with me. I couldn't walk away from him—from hoping that there was still some way to make him understand why I'd done the things I did—and that I wouldn't do them again if he'd just please, please, please let me try—

Eventually, it was Max who had to step back, retreating into his apartment and turning his head away from mine.

The lady next door was poking her head out the door and I whipped my head to glare at her.

“What are you looking at?”

I wiped snot and tears from my upper lip with the back of my hand.

The old lady sniffed and scowled at me as I retreated into my apartment.

Rabid anger and distress coursed through me. My fists itched to pound away at the walls until the drywall crumbled away and my first bled. I wanted to hurt something, someone, just to distract me from the way I hated myself.

I looked at my record player on the floor. Sitting there, daring to remind me home, of Max kneeling down beside it, playing my favorite record. Dizzily, I lurched toward it and ripped

the chord out of the wall. Then I picked the whole thing up and started lugging it across the apartment.

The stupid window was stuck. That piece of shit apartment never worked.

I didn't even think when I did it. All I could think of was how much I hated everything. All it took was the tiniest push and the record player dropped off of the railing of the fire-escape. It was heavy and it fell fast. I blinked and it was gone forever.

The sound of the crash when it hit the floor echoed down the whole street. All its pieces scattered across the sidewalk, flew into the street. I saw the arm lying near the lamppost, the turntable was split in two.

A little tinge of regret surged through me. Now I didn't have anything to listen to music on. Plus, I'd had that record player for years. I spent so many hours in my room back home, locked away, trying to escape from the world through music. That record player had taken me away to new places long before I ever dreamed of actually running away. It was gone forever now. There would be no taping that back together.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?" Some guy on the street shouted up at me, "You could have killed somebody!"

I flipped the stranger the bird and ducked back inside of my apartment.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Eventually I ran out of tears to cry. It was like a well inside of me had dried up and all that was left was a hollow, heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach that weighed me down. The weight pinned me to the floor, making it impossible for me to pull myself out of bed.

For days after my fight with Max I didn't leave my apartment. I didn't change my clothes or eat or shower. My whole entire world had shrunk down to four walls and the space underneath the blankets on my bed. I decided just to decompose there—slowly rotting away on my bed until there was nothing left of me.

In that time, the only thoughts that went through my head were about how cruel and unforgiving the world had been to me. I calculated all the disadvantages I'd had—the ways that people had failed me. If I hadn't been born in Wisdom, if Mom weren't a deadbeat, if my father had stuck around, if Max hadn't... The list went on and on. I tried to find anyone to blame for where I'd ended up. Anyone but myself. It was easy to find fault in other people. It hurt less than admitting that it was all my fault—that I'd had my chance and I blew it.

I'd secretly always known that it would turn out this way. Maybe I didn't know that it would end exactly that way...but I'd always expected to fail. The one thing I'd been afraid of the whole time was failing to hold my own in the city because I'd believed it to be the most likely possibility. I expected to let myself down and now I had, along with the few people in the city who'd cared about me. Maybe it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Maybe I was just like my mother—always promising to buy that little white house in town but knowing that it would never really happen.

A few days into my self-inflicted solitude, Maureen came banging on the door, demanding rent money.

I didn't go to the door. I lay on the floor, face pressed against the ground, and waited for the shadow of her feet to go away. She knew I was home. Everyone in the building who hadn't heard the fight on the landing firsthand, would have known about what happened by now. Everyone knew that I was holed up in my apartment—which only compounded my embarrassment. It was bad enough that Max knew how pathetic I was, having the whole building know too was unbearable.

I didn't have the money for rent. I barely made rent in the first place and after getting fired I was short. At best I had a few more days before Maureen brought in someone to kick me out. That meant that I needed to figure out what I was going to do next, and I needed to figure it out quickly.

Desperately, I searched my mind for any possible way around what I'd done. But the harder I searched for an answer the more painful it was when I came to the realization that I hadn't accomplished anything without help since my very first day in the city. Just like Frankie had said. She'd been the one who helped me find a job, she'd taken me out to parties—Max had been the one who showed me the hardest parts of the city to navigate. All this time I thought that I was fending for myself, when really someone had been looking out for me every single step of the way. And now I'd gone and lost them, so I was utterly lost.

This was the helplessness I'd been trying so hard to escape when I left Wisdom. Depending on people, getting stuck in a life that I didn't want to live, having everyone around me think of me as less than them—I might as well have stayed in Wisdom.

Wisdom. I pictured myself returning, facing my mother after all of these months. Rumors about what happened to me would have spread all over town by now. No one took note of me

when I was there, but people would have noticed when I just disappeared. Returning would be horrible.

What other option did I have?

I packed my bags and snuck out of 424 in the middle of the night when I was sure that Maureen wouldn't have her door cracked open. I left almost everything that I'd acquired in the city in my apartment. The furniture, the dishes, the clothes. Most of it I couldn't carry with me and it would only have reminded me of what I'd had and lost.

I turned back just once to look at the outline of 424. The night that I'd come to the city seemed so far away—the details were a blur but I remembered exactly how it felt that night, standing on that stoop worried and scared and completely clueless. Then I didn't have any idea what I would find here in the city. It all seemed to go by so slowly when it was happening, I wish I'd known how soon it was all going to be over.

The bus ride back to Wisdom was a blur to me.

I curled up in my cramped seat, staring at the city and watching strange cities fly by. People got on and off the bus. Some baby in the back of the bus wouldn't stop screaming. The man sitting next to me kept spreading his legs open, taking up half of my seat. I didn't even have it in me to be angry at him. Sometimes I slept. The rest of the time I just tried to let my mind go numb to the world around me.

It was easy not to get so restless when I dreaded the destination. Maybe I'd just stay on the bus forever. I'd ride and ride until they eventually kicked me off. When I got off I'd be somewhere new and unrecognizable. I could try again.

But I'd probably mess it up there too.



I wanted it to be a dream. I wanted to be able to close my eyes and then wake up and be back in my apartment with Max there and I'd still have a job and Frankie wouldn't be mad at me anymore. But even if I did wake up from this nightmare, I'd still be a liar. I'd still be pretending at being someone else. No matter what that would follow me around.

It was too late for me. I'd taken my chance and I'd missed. Now, all that I had to look forward to was the next 50-60 years in Wisdom where nothing ever changed.

The bus didn't actually stop in Wisdom. Town was too small for that. The closest stop to town was about thirteen miles outside of Wisdom. Even that stop was tiny. Only three people, including myself, got off the bus. There weren't any cabs to call around Wisdom, no subways to catch.

I started walking.

It wasn't such a bad walk. I'd forgotten what it felt like to have so much open space around me, to see every single inch of the sky stretching on and on. The air smelled like cow manure and decaying leaves, it was a familiar, earthy smell. Surprisingly fresh in comparison to the city which always smelled like emissions from exhaust pipes and the sour scent of garbage.

It took me a few hours to get from the bus stop to town. Most of it had been almost pleasant, especially after being cooped up in the bus for so long. Then, when familiar landmarks started to appear, I remembered what I was walking toward.

Town hadn't changed in the last six months. Not one bit. Everything was exactly the way I'd left it.

Not that it ever changed much when I was there. If you could count on anything in Wisdom, it was that it wouldn't ever surprise you.

It was a Sunday morning, so town was quiet. Everyone was either at church or in bed. Pattie's Hair Salon was empty or gossips, Lou's Hardware had a closed sign hanging on the door. Even the Dairy Bar was empty. Closed on Sundays. It was almost like the town had heard that I was coming back and had taken cover. Like in an old-fashioned Western, when a duel is about to happen and everyone runs inside to hide from the bullets.

I wanted to take cover too.

A flyer haphazardly taped to an electrical post, flapping in the wind caught my attention. I stopped to look at it and found my own face staring back at me.

### MISSING CHILD

JOANNA MORGAN REESE

LAST SEEN MAY 10, 1984

Mom hadn't used a very recent picture of me. It was a school picture from 9th grade. My hair had been shorter then, my face a little rounder, and I was wearing a thick purple sweater. The picture was black and white so you couldn't tell that the sweater was purple but I remembered. I was smiling in the picture. The kind of smile reserved for school pictures, without teeth or any real happiness in the eyes.

The sight of those flyers took the breath out of my lungs.

I hadn't thought that Mom would put signs up. That's why I'd left the note on the table the morning I left—so that she wouldn't think that I'd been abducted or something—so that she wouldn't go through all of this trouble...

I reached out, ripped down the flyer, crumpled it up in my hand and kept walking.

I'd known that when I came home I would have to deal with Mom being mad. Mom got mad at the stupid little shit I did, of course she'd be furious that I up and left without saying a

word to her. For a few days she'd rant and rage and refuse to talk to me. But I also figured that it would blow over, just like all her anger eventually did. I did things to make Mom angry so often that she was pretty good at getting over stuff. After a while life would go back to the way it had been. We would continue on existing the life we had...not like nothing had happened...but with the knowledge that it had happened and now it was over.

Knowing that she wasn't just mad—she had actually been worried—I was starting to think that it would be as easy for Mom to get over it.

Anger Mom got over...but worrying, feeling helpless and out of control. Mom didn't move on from stuff like that.

North Star Trailer Park was outside of town. Over the train tracks and past the Catholic church. It took about an hour to walk there which is why I always used to ride my bike everywhere.

The closer I got to home, the more worried I got about facing Mom.

It didn't matter what I said to her because she wouldn't give me a chance to explain. She'd almost certainly yell. If she'd been drinking she might do worse. I wouldn't have any choice but to sit there and take it until she calmed down a little. Where else was I gonna go? It wasn't like I had any friends to go stay with. Or family. Unless I wanted to sleep on the street, I was going to have to face whatever Mom had in store for me.

North Star hadn't changed at all either. The park's sign was still faded, the h of North hadn't been replaced since it was stolen by some pranksters the Halloween of '81. Mindy Hurst's trailer still had the broken-down AMC Gremlin parked beside it, the one her ex-husband had left behind when he ran out on her. The Keefe's trailer had kids' toys and shoes scattered all around it. Through the thin walls, I could hear the sound of Mr. Keefe yelling at one or all of the kids to

turn down their goddamned cartoons or else. Only the birdbath in front of Mrs. Bartosik's place had fallen into further disrepair. Mrs. Bartosik kept that birdbath in pristine condition. She cleaned it every Saturday, filled it with fresh water for the birds every day. There were no signs of birds when I walked by and the basin of the bath was dry.

I wondered what was wrong with Mrs. Bartosik.

Our trailer, Mom's trailer, was the last one in the furthest row of trailers. I approached it the way someone would approach an active landmine. Every step, bringing me closer to a bomb that would easily tear me apart.

There was no evidence of my absence on the outside of the trailer. The ceramic turtle from the dollar store in town stared at me from the front step of the trailer. For a long time, I stood there staring back at it. Maybe if I stared long enough it would offer me some words of wisdom.

After a while I accepted that the turtle was not going to be coming to my assistance and I stepped toward the door.

My hand hovered a few inches away from the door. I couldn't make myself knock. It felt too wrong, to knock on my own door, but it seemed just as wrong to march right in as though nothing had ever happened.

I counted to three then knocked.

Inside there were sounds of stirring and mumbling, then footsteps approaching the door.

Wisdom hadn't changed but Mom had. She looked old. Not older. Old. There were bags under her eyes and without makeup, all the lines around her lips from years of smoking were showing. She was thin too, thinner than she'd ever been before. The roots of her hair had grown

out, showing the natural brown that looked like mine instead of the bleached blonde she'd been paying for years.

She stood terrifyingly silent, it would have made me feel better if she'd just scream at me. Her eyes travelled over me manically.

"Hey, Mom." I spoke softly, the way you would to a dog with its haunches raised, careful not to make any sudden movements or sounds that might make the wild beast lunge.

She moved swiftly. I flinched, bracing myself. Mom didn't ever hit me when I was a kid, maybe a little swat on my butt if I was being a smart-ass but nothing that really hurt anything but my pride. But I thought she was going to hit me then. If she had, I wouldn't have been able to blame her. Not after seeing those posters in town. I was done trying to convince myself that I didn't deserve any of what had happened to me.

Mom didn't hit me. She pulled me into her arms, squeezing me so tightly that my ribs pinched together. All my muscles tightened for a moment, I'd been so prepared for a fight that my body was already bracing for it. Then, after a moment, my body slowly relaxed. I took a deep breath, inhaling Mom's smell. She smelled so distinctly like herself, a mixture of cigarette smoke and aqua net hairspray and something unnamable that I was pretty sure only I could pick up because I had come from her. It was a scent that I would have known anywhere. A scent that followed me like a ghost, catching me in the moments when I was stupid enough to think that I was a real grownup.

Long moments passed and she didn't say a word. She just held onto me like I was something she'd caught and was afraid might get away. I wished she'd say something. Mom always had something to say. Always. If she would just say something then it would feel a bit more normal to be there with her.

When she released a strangled sob I realized that she was crying.

Of all the ways that I'd expected her to react I hadn't imagined this. This...this emotion...made me feel worse than any yelling could have. What I'd done had broken my mother, which wasn't what I was trying to do. Not at all.

"Mom," I pushed her off of me gently, "Don't cry. It's fine. I told you that I was fine."

"How was I supposed to believe that? Because you left a note? And a message on the phone? You never even told me where you were! You could have been abducted for all I knew!"

Now, the anger was starting to show. Mom wiped the tears off of her face with the back of her hands. When she was mad her face pinched up, like it was being pulled by a drawstring. That drawstring was getting pulled really tightly now. Her face was wound up so tightly that you could barely see her lips at all. Just the tiny little wrinkles from all the years of puckering up her lips to smoke.

"I'm sorry. I really am. I didn't think..."

"No. You didn't think did you? About how I would feel when I realized that you weren't in your bed? When I called everyone in town I could think to call and none of them had seen you or heard from you?"

I wondered if she was going to make me stand on the steps while she yelled at me. My question was quickly answered when she whirled around and marched back into the trailer. I hesitated for a minute before following her.

It was dark inside the trailer. All of the blinds were closed and only the lamp in the living room was turned on. It cast a yellowish glow around the room that made everything look kinda sick.

Mom was pacing around the living room, furiously searching for something. She flipped through piles of newspapers on the coffee table and in the little basket on her side table where she kept a nail buffer and a folded up TV guide. Finally, she found what she was looking for: a pack of Marlboros.

I watched her light a cigarette and wished that I had one too. It didn't feel like a good time to ask my mom to bum a cigarette so I tried to ignore the dryness in my mouth that longed for a smoke.

“What gave you this idea? What on God's green earth made you think to run off across the country?”

It wasn't a rhetorical question but it kind of sounded like one. I waited a second to be sure, before I answered.

“All the cool people go to the City, Mom. The greatest musicians and artists and actors in the world go there and they're able to make something of themselves. I just thought that if I went there, that I could be like them. If I just got a job and worked hard I'd figure everything out as I went... You know?”

It stunk like bullshit. Even to me. The truth was that I couldn't even remember what I'd been thinking any more. Too much had happened. Too much of what I'd believed had been proven to be completely wrong.

Mom didn't have any time for my bullshit.

“You're too smart to have thought that was a good idea! To drop out of high school?” She slammed her hand down on the table, tipping over the glass of water on top, “What are you going to do now without a high school diploma? You had a real chance! You could have graduated and gone to Junior College! I wanted you to do so much better than me!”

“I don’t want to go to Junior College, Mom! I don’t want to get stuck in Wisdom. I hate it here! I hate the people, who’ve made fun of me my whole life. I hate living in this trailer park and being poor. I hate that there isn’t anything to do here except sit in the Dairy Bar or go drink out in a field.”

Anger and frustration was building up in my head, pressure that was threatening to burst. I could actually feel it pressing against my temples. There wasn’t anything that I could do to release the tension. Yelling about all the things that I hated didn’t help, it just made me angrier and made my throat feel raw.

God I really, really needed a cigarette.

“If Wisdom is so goddamn awful then why’d you come back? Huh? What are you doing here?”

“Because I didn’t have anywhere else to go!”

My voice cracked.

“Mom. Please. I know I messed up! I did everything wrong.”

It went against everything I’d trained myself to do to start crying in front of her. To admit that I’d been wrong nearly killed me. I clutched my stomach like that would somehow keep all of my emotions inside but they spilled out anyway.

“And it hurts so badly....because I really thought that I could change my life...” Snot ran down my nose, “Just please, this one time, please just let me be wrong without rubbing it in...nothing you say can make me feel worse than I already do.”

Mom’s face softened. She may have been mad but she knew that if I was crying then something was wrong. While she may not have known the details of my sudden return, she was smart enough to understand that something had happened.



It was easy to forget that she had a motherly instinct because she didn't often make much use of it. But she snapped into action then. She stamped out her cigarette in her ashtray and took my hand, pulling me into the living room while I cried like I hadn't since I was little. I let her guide me, mostly just because I didn't have any fighting left in me. I was deflated like a balloon. My bones were jello and they didn't put up any resistance.

She sat down in her green recliner and had me sit on the floor. Then she started brushing my hair. Her touch on my scalp sent shivers down my spine, it disconnected my head from the rest of my body and sent it off to space. It was a kind of magic that washed away everything else, except for that feeling.

Mom didn't ask me what I'd been doing all this time. I think that she was afraid to know the details of my life the last six months. She wouldn't like them. I didn't offer the information up.

The tears stopped rolling slowly and my mind settled. One of the good things about being home was how familiar with everything around me. There wasn't anything for me to think about because I already knew everything about everything in that room. I closed my eyes and pretended that I was little again and that I hadn't screwed up yet.

When my hair was more silky and smooth than it had been in months, Mom set the brush down on the table. She didn't show any sign of moving.

"It's all gonna be alright, baby."

I didn't believe her but for the first time in my life I really wanted Mom to prove me wrong.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Three weeks passed in Wisdom.

They felt like a year.

In those three weeks I barely left the trailer. Part of what kept me homebound was the aching in my chest that weighed me down to my bed, like an anchor pulling me down to the bottom of the ocean. Most days, I didn't get out of bed before noon because I just felt so tired. It wasn't just that I felt sad...it was like everything that had ever felt good was gone forever. I remembered what it felt like before this, what it felt like to be happy, but no matter what I did or thought I couldn't get back to it. Nothing had a point anymore. My life didn't have a point. So why get out of bed?

There was also the part of me that didn't want to have to face everybody. Everyone would see me back in town and they'd look at me with smug expressions, satisfied that I'd crashed right back down to my place after daring to step out of line. The only thing that I hated more than being wrong, was having everybody know that I was wrong. I wouldn't survive that kind of shame, not on top of everything else.

It was easier to stay inside and sleep and wait for happiness to come back. Or at least wait until I forgot what happiness used to feel like so it didn't hurt so much to not have it.

Mom was surprisingly patient with me. She didn't push too hard, or ask too much, or hover too closely. Before she left for work she'd peak her head into my bedroom and ask if I needed anything. When she got back at the end of her shift she'd ask me again. More often than not, she'd find me in the exact same place I'd been in when she left. Even with the fog hanging over me, I had to appreciate the restraint she was showing. But even this enormous display of effort by mom, wasn't enough to make me happy.

I might never have left the trailer again if Mom hadn't run out of cigarettes.

Since coming home, I'd been sneaking cigarettes out of the packs that Mom left lying around. Before running away I never smoked, probably because Mom did and I hated doing anything she would do. But, as a result of spending so much time with Frankie who lit her cigarettes off the ends of others, I'd picked up a habit for them. The only souvenir I had from the last six months was the addiction to something that could kill me. It was appropriately morbid.

But one day, when I hauled my stiff body out of my bed and searched around the house for a pack of cigarettes I couldn't find any. I looked everywhere. In the junk drawer in the kitchen, on the coffee table, in Mom's dresser, all of the little hiding places Mom used. It was impossible that there were not cigarettes somewhere in the house. Not once in my seventeen years of life, had there been a day when Mom didn't have a cigarette available for her. An empty fridge was more expected than a house without cigarettes.

The longer I searched without any luck, the more I needed to smoke. The need was a little itch in the back of my throat, anticipatory dryness of my lips, a ghost weight between my middle and pointer finger where a cigarette balanced so perfectly.

I was going to have to go out and get myself a pack or I'd never stop thinking about it. Which also meant that I was going to have to go into town.

I cleaned myself up a little—took a shower for the first time in a few days and brushed my hair out well.

The day was cold and grey. Leafless trees loomed in at the edge of the park lot, casting skeletal shadows across the brown, crispy grass. I pulled my jacket more tightly around me and ducked against the wind.

Mrs. Bartosik's bird bath was still empty. I stared at it. It looked so pathetic all dried out and dirty.

I sighed and searched around Mrs. B's trailer for her hose, then once I found it, I dragged it around to reach the birdbath. There was a pretty thick layer of bird shit and dirt in the basin. It took me a while to rinse all that out. I used a broom I found laying by the door to scrub the worst of it away.

It made me feel a little bit better to get it all cleaned out. North Star didn't feel the same without the birdbath.

I was standing there admiring my work when Mrs. B's screen door squeaked open.

"Hey there, Joanna!"

Briefly, I considered pretending not to hear my name being called. But I couldn't ignore Mrs. B.

Mrs. B was ancient. I had no idea how old she was exactly but she had to be older than 90. I couldn't imagine her being young. She must have come straight from her mother with curly white hair and a face that uncannily resembled an apple-head doll.

She shuffled—Mrs. B always shuffled, I hadn't seen her pick up her feet in ten years at least—out onto the front steps. She had a cane in her hand. She didn't have a cane when I left. I wondered what had happened. Had she fallen? Who did she have to help her? I used to be the person who helped her out when she needed it.

"Hi, Mrs. Bartosik. I was just cleaning up your birdbath. I saw that it was all dried up and—"

I didn't finish my sentence. I could tell that my thin, stretched smile looked as fake as it felt. It was as good as I could do.

Mrs. B had known me all my life. She'd lived in her trailer at North Star since before Mom had moved there, heavily pregnant and all alone. After I was born, she babysat me when Mom was off at work. In that way she was more like a grandmother than my actual grandmother had ever been.

Seeing her, I felt a sudden surge of guilt for not having thought of her. In all my time in New York had I ever thought about her once? I should have stopped to say hello when I got back. Or said goodbye when I left.

"That's real sweet of you, honey. I've been awfully worried about my birds but my health hasn't been so good these last couple of months." She looked me over from head to toe.

"Your mom told me that you were back but we haven't seen you around yet. The whole town was real worried about you."

What was I supposed to say to that? Did I have to apologize to the whole town for running away? I didn't doubt Mrs. B's sincerity but I did question the idea of the whole town being worried. Sure, there'd been gossip. I'm sure people were upset by the thought of their own kids' disappearance that my running away would have sparked in their minds. But concern for me specifically? That was resigned for a small handful of people.

"Well, I'm back now." I responded quietly.

My neighbor looked at me for a long time, studying me.

"You look different, Joanna."

She didn't say if this was a good or a bad thing. It was just a fact that she felt she ought to point out. It hadn't occurred to me that my time in the city had left any physical mark on me.

“It’s good to see you.”

I hoped that this was enough to end the conversation. This exchange was too uncomfortable, the way that she was looking at me felt too accusatory. How could I have left? The itch for a cigarette was getting stronger with every moment that passed.

Mrs. B smiled and nodded and watched me walk away from her, “Thanks for taking care of my birds!”

My old bicycle was leaning against the side of the trailer, exactly where I’d left it last time I rode it. After months of disuse and neglect it looked shabby. The seat was discolored and the vinyl was peeling off, rust was speckling the metal of the handlebars. Thank God, the tires still had air in them by some miracle.

They say that you never forget how to ride a bike but that only really covers what your brain knows. I knew what I needed to do, in theory, but my body struggled at first. It took a few minutes to get going, to get my feet pedaling and my hands steering together. I was half a mile down the road before I got comfortable enough to relax.

There was something kind of nice about riding my bike, zooming past the familiar landmarks. Wind whipped through my hair, burned my cheeks and nose.

After spending so much time curled up on my bed inside of the trailer it felt good to move my body. I’d let my muscles get stiff. In the morning my muscles would be tight and achy from misuse.

Wisdom was easy to navigate—nothing like the city. I could have ridden my bike into town with my eyes closed and made it to my destination.

Lucky's Corner Store was open thank God. It was a gas station with two pumps, painted green with a big four-leaf clover painted above the door. It was not owned by a man named Lucky. It was owned and operated by Frank Lewis.

I'd been to Lucky's a million times. It was within walking distance of the highschool so I used to leave at lunch time and buy candy for lunch instead of a school lunch. And Mom would send me there to pick up cigarettes for her sometimes. I knew exactly where to go the minute I walked through the door.

It smelled like fryer grease and the mop bucket that was always sitting by the door and half-filled with dirty water. The shelves were filled with MarsMen and Jujubes and Lays and Frank's own homemade deer jerky. Icy air had fogged up all the glass of the refrigerators—I was tempted to write my name in the dew.

“Marlboro Lights, please.”

Frank narrowed his eyes at me. I gave him a few minutes to recognize me—either from the hundreds of times I'd come in or from the posters with my face on it plastered up all over town.

“You're back.”

“Yup,” I held out my cash and waited for him to hand me the pack.

He took the cash and gave me back my change and a pack of cigarettes.

Immediately after leaving the store, I opened the pack and lit a cigarette, taking a long deep drag. I leaned against the green wall and let the nicotine work through me.

Now that I was out of the trailer and had my nicotine fix I felt almost like a human again.

After finishing my cigarette I stamped the butt out with my toe and hopped back on my bike. I'd planned on riding straight back to North Star but I pedaled more slowly, took in the sights. I was a little surprised that there were actually some bits of Wisdom that I'd missed.

The Dairy Bar was open. I checked my watch. School would be out by now which meant that my former peers would probably be inside gossiping and making out because it was the only place to go after school besides home. I didn't really want to face all of them but I knew that I was going to run into them eventually. Maybe it would be best if I got it over with fast, ripped off the band aid while my nicotine addiction was freshly satisfied.

"Ho-ly shit!" Richard nearly dropped the cone he was dipping in chocolate when he saw me walk in, "Joanna! No one thought you were ever gonna be back here again!"

Kids were turning around in their booths to stare at me. You would have thought that an alien had walked into the place by the expressions on their faces. I ignored them the same way I had been my whole life. It was easy to walk right past them and up to the counter to talk to Richard.

It was good to see that Richard hadn't changed much. His braces were finally off but they hadn't been able to completely correct his overbite, just minimize it.

"How's it going, Rich?" I hopped up on the counter, sitting just like I always did.

Rich waved his arms around and the Dairy Bar, "Same as ever. Still stuck in this dump. Not all of us are brave enough to run away."

I smiled.

"Is it true that you've been in New York City this whole time?"

I nodded, "Yeah. How'd you know?"



“Oh c’mon you know how things get around here. Your mom told somebody who told somebody who told the whole town.” He pushed a chocolate shake across the counter toward me, topping it with a little cherry. “What was it like?”

How could I describe it to him? Any comparisons would come short of the truth. But I didn’t have the words to explain exactly how different it could be. He was looking at me with wide eyes, like a little kid waiting to get told some fairy tale.

“It was...like another world. You wouldn’t believe it, Rich. Everybody does exactly what they want. Nobody went out before 11:30. There were clubs and live music and...” The more I talked, the more excited I got about my boasting. Then I got sad again, remembering that it was all over. Like waking up from a nice dream, “Sometimes it was terrifying but a lot of times it was great.”

“So why’d you leave?”

I shrugged and looked down at the ground, “I messed things up.”

Richard nodded thoughtfully, “Well, if I were you I’d figure out how to fix it. Wisdom still sucks. You’re like the only person to ever do anything--even it was insane. Everyone talked about it.”

I didn’t respond. I wished it were that easy. I didn’t know how to explain it to Rich—that it wasn’t so much about not being able to fix it as it was that I didn’t think I had it in me to try again.

Instead of trying to make Richard understand I looked around the Dairy Bar. I didn’t hate the sight of it as much as I used to. There was something about it that was kind of comforting.

“You seem different.”

“Everyone keeps saying that, but I don’t know what they’re talking about.”

Richard tilted his head, “It’s hard to say. Before you always used to be so—defensive. You were scared of anybody looking at you or talking to you. Now—I guess you just don’t seem scared anymore. Like—you walked in here and everybody stared and you didn’t even flinch. I don’t know anyone who could walk that gauntlet the way you did.”

Hearing the way that Richard had just seen that versus the way that I’d pictured it threw me for a loop. How had he not seen how completely terrified I was when I walked in? And why couldn’t I see myself the way that he saw me?

“Well, I better go,” I hopped off the counter, “Thanks for the ice-cream.”

“Are you ever gonna show up here again? Or are you planning on disappearing again?”

I shrugged, “Who knows. I guess I’m a wild card now”

“Remember us little people wherever you end up someday, Joanna.”

I smiled. Poor Rich. He was too good for Wisdom.

I hopped back on my bike and started pedaling back home. The whole way I was mulling stuff over. I’d only been out of the house for a few hours and it felt like a month’s worth of events had happened.

It was still strange to me that everyone seemed to think I’d changed. I didn’t *feel* different. I didn’t think I *looked* any different either. Maybe I wasn’t the best judge.

I guess I’d thought that I was trying to shove myself into a place—to make myself fit. But when I thought about the city—really thought about it—it was all the stuff that I hadn’t planned that had ended up changing me.

For the first time I didn’t think Wisdom was so bad. I guess that I was seeing it with fresh eyes—eyes that had seen other things. The whole time I was in the city I’d been telling

myself that there wasn't anything in Wisdom for me and I'd been wrong. I had a couple things. Mom; as screwed up as she was, and friends; if you counted Rich and Mrs. B; and open fields.

But I missed the city.

I missed it so much that it felt like there was a hole in my stomach

My trip out to town made me feel better in a lot of ways, but it also made me more confused than ever. How was I supposed to go back to living in Wisdom now that I knew what else was out there?



I didn't really feel like celebrating my birthday.

I was finally eighteen. But it wasn't all that exciting when I'd already been running around pretending to be a grown-up for most of the year.

Mom went out of her way to make it a celebration anyway. I told her that she shouldn't make a big deal about it. But she ignored me like she usually did. This time at least, it was for a nice reason. She was trying to make me feel better. I didn't know how to tell her that I was pretty sure nothing was going to make me feel better if I was there.

She made dinner. From scratch. And a birthday cake and everything. She even bought some streamers and party hats at the dollar store.

I probably could have done a job of pretending to be happy about it. But it was so hard to fake happiness. I pushed the dinner she made just for me around the plate, trying to find images in the arrangement of my soggy peas.

"Your dinner is for eating. Not for playing with." Mom said, looking from me to my plate, "You need to eat, you're too skinny. Do they not eat in that city?"

*That* city. Mom always called it *that* city. Like it was the city's fault that I'd run away—like the city had kidnapped me or something.

I took a bite just to make her stop watching me. The peas didn't taste like anything. I couldn't tell if it was because nothing tasted good anymore or if it was because the peas were just bad.

"Maybe on Monday you can go by the Dairy Bar and see about getting your job back? It would give you something to do..."

The last thing I wanted to do was go back to working at the Dairy Bar.

"Not the Dairy Bar."

Mom's lips pulled tight.

"Well, you can't just lay around her for forever."

"Why not? You do."

Why'd I have to say that? I was picking a fight and I knew it. I didn't want to fight but I couldn't help but press the buttons. I regretted it the minute Mom's face pulled all tight.

She didn't say anything. All she did was look down at her plate and chew on her bottom lip.

"How long are you gonna punish me for not being a perfect mother?" She finally said, "What do I have to do to make it up to you? I can't turn back time—I wish I could. But are you really going to ruin your own life, shut up in your room because I'm not what you wanted me to be?"

I took a deep breath, "I want to go back to the city."

Mom stared at me.

"No way in hell."

That was what I'd expected her to say.

"Mom, I don't want to be stuck here my whole life. There's nothing for me here!" I waved my arms around at the green carpeted living room and the pictures of me and mom over the years, "I still don't know if there's anything in New York for me but at least there I've got a chance! If I stay here then I'm just going to work at the Dairy Bar until they make me manager. I'll never meet anybody who doesn't make me feel small and insignificant. I'll end up just like--"

I stopped myself before I said it out loud but I didn't really need to finish the sentence because we both knew what I meant.

A long silence fell over us.

"Why do you hate me so much, Joanna? I know I'm not perfect—but I really did try." My mother's eyes were watery, the tip of her nose red, "I love you with my whole entire heart. When I thought I lost you...I didn't want to live anymore..."

I could not remember the last time that I'd seen Mom cry. Not like that--not like a lost little kid. It made me uncomfortable--it made me feel guilty.

"I don't hate you." I said softly, "I just—I don't want to be you, Mom. I want to live a different life."

"I didn't want to be me either, honey. I made mistakes....I got hurt and then it was too late for me to fix things—"

"I've made mistakes too, Mom. But I don't think it's too late for me to fix them...or at least to try to get around them." I took a deep breath, "Didn't you ever want to leave Wisdom? Didn't you want to see what was out there in the world? I have a chance to do that...don't you want me to try?"

She sat down in her chair heavily, lighting a cigarette. The first couple of tries she couldn't get her lighter to ignite and she cursed loudly.

“I don't want to lose you...but I know that if I try to hold on too tight, I'll lose you anyway. My parents tried to make me who they wanted me to be and look what happened...” She studied my face for a long time, “You're gonna do what you want to do no matter what...you're my daughter after all. And now that you're eighteen there isn't anything that I can do to stop you. But please....don't cut me out of your life completely. Just call me from time to time. Let me know you're alright.”

It took me a moment that this was Mom's way of consenting...or at least of acknowledging that it was happening. All that she was asking was for me not to leave her for forever. I was all she had left in the world. I didn't think much about what it must have felt like for her when I left. Everyone left Mom. Every boyfriend she'd ever had. My dad. Her parents. Then me.

Tears crawled down my face and I tried to wipe them away but they were coming too fast, “Okay.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

My new apartment was in Williamsburg. Pretty far from my old neighborhood and 424. I never really ended up in that area anymore. Somehow, I always managed to be able to avoid it, even if it took walking a wide circle around the neighborhood in order to get where I was going. There was an elevator in my new place. Getting home at the end of the day seemed almost too easy now that I didn't have to trudge up four flights of steep stairs to get there. The apartment was a two-bedroom that I shared with a girl named Beverly who I'd connected with after seeing the ad she'd put in the classified section of *The Village Voice*.

Beverly was twenty-three. She was an actress who worked as a waitress. She seemed to be doing more waitressing than acting but she always introduced herself as an actress first. Who was I to question her career? I thought she was nice enough but I didn't really have enough information yet to make a firm decision. We never seemed to be at home at the same time--when I wasn't working Beverly was at work or going to an audition or acting class. But when we did run into each other in passing or for brief intervals when we were both home, we had short, pleasant conversations about the weather or the news.

I was sort of afraid to start becoming her friend. I didn't seem to be very good at friendship. And since I was going to be sharing an apartment with Beverly for the foreseeable future, I figured that it was safest for me to keep my distance and not risk screwing it up.

The day that I'd moved in, Beverly had been there to give me my set of keys. She'd tried to make conversation, but I'd been quiet and distant. I probably seemed like a frigid bitch to her.

"Are you new to the city?" She'd asked me, standing in the doorway of my bedroom while I started to unpack my bag.

“No...I moved here last summer but...I had to go back home for a while. I kind of left things here in a mess when I left.”

Beverly nodded thoughtfully, pushing her large, round glasses up her skinny nose, “I don’t think that I would ever be able to come back here if I left...it was hard enough to feel at home here in the first place. I don’t know that I’d have the guts to start all over again if I had to.”

Her face turned pink and she looked at me apologetically, “Sorry. I guess that isn’t very encouraging to hear.”

I looked around at the bare walls of my new room. It wasn’t anything special. Just four walls and a window. Not that different than my old room.

Beverly had a point. I’d been thinking about it since the moment I’d decided to come back. Starting all over again was going to be terrible. It was like writing an essay and then losing it and having to re-write. Or running a mile in the wrong direction and then having to running two miles back. I’d barely survived the first time—I’d caved in after six months. But there was a kind of promise in it too—I could do better this time. I knew what not to do now, so there was a chance for me to change it.

“No, you’re right, starting over...sucks. I think the only thing worse would be giving up.”

Beverly had nodded at that. I got the feeling that she understood something about not being able to give up. I thought about what Max had once told me; that everyone in New York was running from something.



After a couple weeks back in the city I stopped on my way home from work one day and bought a bouquet of flowers from a corner store. They were shitty flowers. An odd mixture of



daisies and carnations, with a clump of Babies Breath. Their stems were limp, the petals were beginning to turn brown. But I couldn't afford a box of long-stem roses from an actual florist.

I didn't knock when I got to Frankie's apartment. She probably wouldn't have been home in the middle of the day anyway and if she had been...I don't know what I would have said.

I left the flowers in front of her door with a note scribbled on a napkin and hoped that they didn't get stolen before Frankie got home to find them.

It wasn't enough. I knew that. If I were Frankie, I wouldn't have forgiven me. But I couldn't leave things the way I had. I didn't know if Frankie knew that I was back in the city--or that I'd left to begin with. At the very least, I wanted Frankie to know that I knew I was wrong and what I'd lost. She was the best friend that I'd ever had.



I'd avoided going near the old neighborhood since I'd gotten back to the city. There wasn't any good reason for me to go there and there were lots of reasons for me to stay away. I didn't think that I could stand running into someone from 424.

For some reason I still can't pinpoint, a few days after leaving the flowers for Frankie, my feet started walking toward 424 after work instead of toward my new place. I didn't really feel brave enough to face it yet, but I also knew that I couldn't avoid it for forever.

I didn't plan on stopping at 424. I just wanted to walk by, to see that it was still there, still solid, that everything and everyone had gone on existing as usual without me. Maybe if I saw that, I would be able to put that nagging voice in the back of my head to rest once and for all.

The closer I got, the more familiar places that I passed, the more nervous I felt. I hadn't even felt that way when I'd gone back to Wisdom. I'd expected stagnancy there--relied on it.

There hadn't been anything that I was afraid of missing out on. Here, I was afraid of seeing what I'd left behind.

It had only been a few months, but the small changes jumped out at me. Things like where people had pasted new posters over old ones, new specials advertised in restaurant windows. None of them were important changes but they reminded me of how fast things in the city moved when you weren't looking.

There was a figure sitting on the stoop of 424 when I approached. My heart jumped and fell into the pit of my stomach.

When I got closer, I recognized Maureen, smoking a cigarette and looking straight ahead into the street. Part of me was relieved that it was only her but the other part of me had wanted to see Max's face again.

"Oh, so you're alive." Maureen took a deep drag of her cigarette. The expression on her face didn't change at all.

"Yeah." I shifted on my feet anxiously, "I'm sorry about running out the way that I did..."

Maureen shrugged, "I knew the risk when I rented out to a kid like you. Honestly, you stuck it out longer than I'd expected you to."

I was a little surprised that she wasn't angrier. If anything, she just seemed...disappointed.

"It's serendipitous that you decided to come by though. That friend of yours—Frances something—she called up looking for you the other day. I guess that you didn't tell her you'd left and she seemed pretty anxious to find you. I explained to her that I was just as clueless about your whereabouts as she was..." Maureen flicked the butt of the cigarette onto the ground and

crushed it beneath her slippered foot, “You should give her a call. Not everyone in this city is lucky enough to have someone looking for them.”

I smiled softly, “Yeah, I will.”

I’d gotten the best news that I could have hoped for—my excursion had turned out more positive than I could have imagined. Still, I didn’t leave. I didn’t tell Maureen goodbye and start walking home. My feet remained glued to the sidewalk. I was waiting for something, but I didn’t know what.

“He’s not here if that’s what you’re standing around for—he’s at work, left about an hour ago.”

“I wasn’t—” I didn’t bother finishing the sentence because Maureen wouldn’t have believed me anyway. I wasn’t even sure that I believed me.

Maybe I had come by hoping to run into Max—just to see his face. I missed him. All the time.

“Well, sorry again. I hope whoever moved in after me is less trouble.”

“That’s a pretty low bar to set.”

I grinned and shrugged and turned and started walking away.

“Take care of yourself, kid.”

Maureen said it like the words just slipped out of her mouth. An outburst of concern-- maybe a slim hint that Maureen wasn’t totally absent of a nurturing instinct. I didn’t want to let it get to my head and start thinking that she actually liked me.

“You too.”

I could have gone home then, accepted that my visit had gone well, and left it at that. But I was curious now and I wouldn’t be satisfied or settled if I left then. Maureen had mentioned

that Max was at work. 424 wasn't that far from the bar and if I walked by I might be able to catch a glimpse of him through the window. I wouldn't stay and I wouldn't go inside, I'd just walk by. I only wanted to get a look at him, to see his face and memorize it because it would probably be the last time I saw him. Then I would let him go for forever.

My heart pounded the whole time I walked, passing the same storefronts I'd walked past hundreds of times, listening to the sounds of the city mix together into their complex rhythm, while the street lights began to turn on.

The neon sign above the bar cast a pink light onto the street. I stood just out of the lights reach, in the shadow of the darkness, standing as far away as I could while still being able to see inside. It wasn't very busy inside. A handful of people were sitting at the bar, nursing drinks and watching a game on the T.V., a few more were sitting at the tables holding quiet conversations.

None of them were Max.

My feet twitched, anxious to make a break for it before things got bad. Even though I'd promised myself I wouldn't linger, I found myself frozen to the sidewalk, completely unable to work up the strength to make myself move.

Then I saw him.

He appeared out of the backroom, carrying a case of beer which he set down behind the bar. His shirt was rolled up to his elbows and I could see his mouth moving--he was talking to the group at the bar. Someone said something and Max laughed. A full laugh, with his head thrown back. My stomach tightened. I watched his hands while he wiped down the counter. I knew those hands, all their calluses and lines, the freckle on his thumb—

A lump in my throat kept me from swallowing. The scene in front of me blurred and I blinked rapidly to keep them from falling. My body was reacting even though I'd steeled my mind and heart against this feeling.

Leaving was the only thing left for me to do. It wasn't going to do me or anyone else any good to stand there, losing my mind in the middle of the sidewalk. I'd done what I'd told myself I could. It was time to do the last thing, which was to let him go.

My feet were just beginning to lift off of the ground when suddenly, Max turned his head and glance out the window.

At first his eyes skimmed right over me. Then they settled on me and his face changed. The calm, content expression he'd been wearing melted away and his brow furrowed, his mouth tightened into a thin line.

My first instinct was to take off running. It would have been ridiculously childish, but it probably would have been exactly what Max expected of me. Which is why I planted my feet, stood my ground, and waited for Max to make his move. If he turned his head and pretended he didn't see me, I'd leave.

Max said something to the other bartender working and dropped the towel he'd been wiping the counter with.

The bell on the door jingled which was such a cheerful sound that it sounded ridiculous in the moment.

There were at least six feet between us which seemed to be both too much and too little at the same time.

Max didn't look angry, or at least not completely. If anything, he just looked a little confused. He didn't look straight at me. His eyes kept glancing down to my shoes, or above my head, anywhere other than my face.

The silence around us seemed hollow, like it might suck us both into its vacuum, to a place so deep and vacant that we would never be able to find our way out. I wanted to scream at him to say something for God's sake. I bit my tongue to keep the scream in.

"You're back."

I let out a shaky breath, "Yeah." I was too afraid to say anything else. I didn't have the right to try to explain or excuse myself. That was long gone. It may not ever have had that right.

"Why?"

It took me a minute to figure out what Max was asking. There were a lot of explanations that I owed Max. But I figured he was asking why I'd come back. The time for those other explanations were long gone.

"I guess...I just realized that I couldn't keep running for forever. Eventually, I was going to have to make a choice about where I was going to go—who I was going to be. I chose here."

Max nodded slowly, thoughtfully. His eyes met mine for the first time.

"Good."

I was startled by this response.

"There were a lot of reasons that I fell for you, Joanna...one of them was that you were always so...determined. No matter what happened—you didn't let it stop you. When I found out that you lied to me..." He sighed, "You kind of broke my heart Joanna...but it would have made me even angrier if you just gave up. Because the girl I fell in love with wouldn't have...and I

really really want to believe—I NEED to believe—that it wasn't all fake. Knowing that you're really that determined girl after all..." He shrugged, "It's a small comfort."

It hurt a little, hearing him talk about me with such doubt. But hadn't I been doubting myself since I got to the city?

"I'm so sorry that I hurt you, Max. The fact that I fucked everything up...will always haunt me. But, for what it's worth, I hope that I really am what you thought I was. I always liked the way that you saw me. You're one of the only people in my life who believed that I could be something special. I want to be that girl you cared about...I'm trying to be."

Max smiled, not a big smile, just a twitch of the mouth really.

"You've got so much time to figure out your life, Joanna..."

He kind of laughed to himself, like he knew a secret that I didn't. I wanted him to let me in on it—to share some sage wisdom that was going to help me. I waited for him to finish his thought, but he didn't. Instead he glanced back over his shoulder into the bar where the other bartender was watching in annoyance at being left all alone inside.

"I've gotta go." Max started backing toward the door, hands in his pockets. "I'm glad that you're alright."

I tried hard to hide my disappointment at the conversation's end, "Yeah, no..um thanks. Me too...and I'm glad that...I'm glad that you would talk to me."

Max smiled and shook his head, "I'll see you around, Joanna."

He disappeared back into the bar. I watched him go back into the bar. His co-worker was mad, but Max waved him off.

I didn't look back at him when I walked away. I hoped that it wouldn't be the last time that I saw him. But if it was, I promised myself that I wasn't going to forget anything about him.

I'd remember it all. Even the bad stuff at the end. I owed him that much—to let him hold real estate in a part of my brain for the rest of my life.



The walk home seemed incredibly long. I didn't think much about where I was going, instead I looked around at the city in a way I hadn't in a while. It was easy to block things out after a while, to stop seeing everything that was going on around you. Being more selective about the things that you took in was really the only way to survive in all the chaos. But when you did that you missed out on a lot of stuff too.

After the events of the night I felt kind of empty. Not a bad empty. A released empty. Everything that I'd been holding in: the grief, the doubt, the regret, it was gone. For now, at least.

Beverly was out when I got home. I was kind of glad for having the apartment to myself. I didn't want anything to disturb the peace that had settled over me. Just a little time to sit and consider...everything.

I made myself a cup of tea and crawled out onto the fire escape to look down at the city, just like I had so many times before.

The view was a little different now but there were a lot of similarities. It was late but the street was still busy. There were lots of people for me to watch. Taxi cabs drove by, couples walked home hand in hand, a man dragged his reluctant dog down the sidewalk on a tight leash. Everything was the same and different at once.

I used to wonder about my place in the city, where I was supposed to fit myself into the big puzzle. Now I thought that maybe it didn't work like that. Maybe I didn't have to shave off bits and pieces in order to make myself fit. The city wasn't a puzzle and I wasn't a piece. It was a



living, breathing organism, constantly changing and growing and shifting things around. It made space for new people. I'd make it make space for me too.

In the morning I would call Frankie. I missed her voice.

After that? I didn't know what would happen. But at least I would be moving forward again.