By: smircle

When life is just getting better for Joey and Luke, itâ s abruptly turned around. Theyâ re moving again, for the thirteenth time in the past six years, leaving behind friends and schools while they move on to the next â right placeâ. The house is nothing new, nor is the school; except for the boy who sits beside her in Maths. He also lives in the house by the woods. Bruised, weak and hurt, Joey stumbles upon a pond deep in the woods. The place where everything will change for her- but in a good or bad way, she's yet to find out.

P.S: I apologised for any errors; I will eventually get around to editing.. or so I hope



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The Woodside House 1

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# **Chapter 1: Chapter one**

## **Chapter One**

The weather's a funny thing. Scorching hot sun one minute, and pouring rain the next. Gale force howling winds one minute, calm and peaceful the next. Luke and I make a game out of it, the weather, that is. Whoever guesses the correct weather of the day gets a piece of candy from the bag I bought, with the money I earned from my last job.

Though Luke may not think it, he needs the sweet more than I do, so I try and let him win. I try not to be too obvious when I do this though; he wouldn't take it if he knew I was letting him win.

You could describe Karen as the weather: unpredictable. Ignoring us as though we're not here one minute, cold, angry and abusive the next. You can never tell which one it will be with her.

Though, the violence she feels is only acted upon towards me; never has she harmed Luke in any physical way. The mental part, however, is one I don't have any power over.

If you were to look at us from the point of view of an outsider, we'd look like the next everyday family. I suppose, in a way, we are. People are worse off than us by a lot, so I shouldn't be complaining when I have most of the basic human needs. The clothes may not be in the best condition possible, but they're still clothes. There's a shelter of some sort over my head most of the time too.

Voicing your opinion in this family isn't something that's encouraged, not that your voice would be heard if you did, so I keep my opinions to myself.

"Are you okay?" Luke, my seven year old brother, asks me, breaking my train of thoughts as I stare blankly at the wall for god knows how long.

I smile reassuringly at him, nodding my head and trying not to wince. It hurts to move my head, but Luke needs the reassurance and I'll be damned if I don't give it to him. He deserves that, at the very least.

He gets up from the, what was once, beige carpet, and kneels before me, resting his bony, pale hands on my knees as he looks me in the eyes. "Do you want my blanket?"

Karen is asleep on the couch, her cigarette hanging from her chapped lips as the smoke billows around her before being blown out the window. I can't stop shivering because of said open window but I won't allow Luke to inhale any more of the toxic fumes than he has to. I've given him my blanket to keep his skinny body warm and am forced to leave it open, adding to my feeling cold.

We're running low on food, so I'm hoping we'll be at our newest 'home' soon. We've been travelling for five days now, from our latest 'home' of four months with step dad number seven, to our newest 'home' with number eight. Whenever Karen gets bored of the location, which usually depends on the guy she's with at the time, she decides to move for a 'change of scenery', hoping it's the new 'right place.'

Six years' worth of moving and it still has yet to be found. Though, we have gone a few 'right places' without a step-dad, but we didn't stay long in them.

An average of six months is stayed at each place, but it's not nearly long enough to call a place a home. A home; something I haven't felt as though I've had since I left New York.

The caravan shudders and the brakes squeal violently, protesting their intended aim to stop the van. I can tell I'm going to have to get a new job to pay for the problem if we're to make it to the next 'right place' safely.

"Joey?" Luke says, tapping my knee with a finger while drawing out my name. I didn't answer his question and went off into my own little world, ignoring him when, clearly, he needs some attention. I can be so selfish.

"You keep it," I tell him, moving his hands from my knees and motioning for him to climb up. He does so and I tuck the blankets around him, trying to keep his body as warm as I can.

"Do you think we'll stay here for a long time?"

He knows the drill as much as I do. Because of his tiny frame, he's always found it hard to make friends and has been the object of bullying more times than not in the many schools he's attended in his seven years of life. It's probably a higher number than most people attend in their whole lives, but he doesn't complain. He gets on with it.

"Maybe, this could be our one," I say, but don't add anything more. It most likely won't be, but there's a small possibility that it could.

He sighs soundly, curling up against me. "I hope so."

So do I Luke, so do I. I think this, but never say. It's dangerous to speak your mind when Karen's around, no matter what state of consciousness she's in. If something was to happen to me, Luke would be left on his own. I won't allow that to ever happen.

Luke is curled on my lap, his head of golden hair on my shoulder. I lean back against the lumpy armchair I've been using as a bed for the past few days.

I have no idea where our next destination is. We must have been through half the states in the past seven or so years. I stupidly asked Karen where we're going, but she was in a bad mood- a permanent fixture, it seems- and the result was a bruise on my lower back from various shoes being thrown in my direction.

I lived with my aunt and uncle in New York when my mother, as she put it, 'had enough of me'. My dad left when he found out she was pregnant, so she bought the caravan and started traveling. I stayed with her in the caravan until I was four; then I was put under the care of Aaron and Lisa. She left for Vegas and I didn't see her again until I was nine and she was pregnant with child number two, courtesy of step dad number one, though I suspect there were many more before him.

The caravan was a state and I couldn't let my little brother live in it. I left the home I'd known for five years and moved in with Karen.

Luke may only be my half-brother by blood and genes, but I consider him my whole, complete brother. He doesn't need to know Karen played hookie with number one in Vegas, but I think he suspects it. We look nothing alike at all, no matter how hard I try to find some hint of the fact Karen bore us both.

He has golden hair and green eyes that sparkle with life; the opposite of my dull brown hair that desperately needs a wash, but that'll have to wait until Luke gets his. My eyes, like my hair, are brown and plain, no hint of the sparkle Luke has.

I have what people would call a heart-shaped face, whereas Luke has a round one- or, one that's meant to be round, but it's now gaunt and hollow from lack of food. I try to give him as much of mine as I can, but he refuses to eat it if he knows it was meant to be mine.

"You need it too," he'd tell me, but I'd slip him most of mine while making it and tell him I ate some of it in the kitchen. After a suspicious look at my plate, he'd usually forgo the investigation and eat it before it'd go cold.

"Shut up!" Karen snaps, the agitated beast waking from its sleep once again.

We aren't even talking loud, but she seems to be in a foul mood, wanting to shout at someone, like usual. I'm her first target; nothing new about that. You don't live with Karen and not take your fair share of the nasty remarks and, in my case, hits.

I've long since found out a solution; act hurt, but don't cry. She hates to see tears; says it's something only weak people do. She hates weak people. She hates a lot of things, and I suspect being a mother is one of themnot that she has ever had to do many motherly things.

You then apologise and praise her. The praise is something I tend to leave out, unless she's in an awful mood and Luke's around.

"What're you looking at?" she sneers at me. "You should be making dinner."

It is two a.m., but I'm not stupid enough to point that out to her. She hates being wrong or, even worse, corrected, so you go along with what she thinks.

"You said you were going out with Tom."

She thinks for a minute, a thoughtful expression overcoming the hard one that usually lines her face. "I did, didn't I?"

She isn't asking me, so I don't answer. You learn when and when not to answer when you live with Karen. Now's not the time.

"Tom!" she screeches at the door dividing the driver from the rest of the caravan.

"What?" he bellows back, his voice throaty, like he's just awoken from a deep sleep. I hope he hasn't been sleeping as he's the one driving; I want us to get to the next place safely.

"We're going out tonight."

"Where?"

Why one of them can't go to the other, I don't know, but it's sort of hard not to listen when they're bellowing at each other like banshees. That's another rule you learn when you live with Karen: don't eavesdrop if you want to get by ignored.

I busy myself by making Luke comfortable and try not to listen, but to no avail. She doesn't seem to notice, thankfully, as she finishes up, muttering her opinion of Tom under her breath; she's never been one to keep quiet when she has a thought to express.

"Hell, it is cold in here," Karen complains, whining like a child. "Who the hell left the window open?"

She swivels her gaze around and it lands on me. I'm always the culprit, even if I haven't done the suspected action.

"I pay the money I well earn for this heating for you little brats when I should be treating myself to nice things. But, no! Princess Josephine thinks she can waste the money I earn by opening the window whenever she wants!"

I want to laugh at that; the money she well earns? It'd surprise me if she has ever worked a day in her life. She leaves the work to the step dad or me, taking money whenever she feels like it.

"I'm sorry." I try to look hurt when, really, I'm not taking a word of it to heart. "I shouldn't have wasted your money like that. I was looking out for a place for you and Tom to have dinner; I must've forgotten to close it."

"Stupid idiot," Karen mutters, none too quietly. "Forgot to close the windowâ !"

"Karen!" Tom bellows, banging on the wall, as though his shouting isn't loud enough for her to hear.

"What?"

"Come here!"

Muttering to herself about how much is asked of her, Karen slams the door shut behind her. Silence. We don't get that too often when we're on the road. When we get to the house, Luke and I can be left alone for weeks at a time.

My stomach rumbles, breaking its tranquillity.

"You didn't eat," Luke mumbles, not looking at me. I didn't, but I'm not going to tell him that.

"Of course I did," I say in a fake cheery voice, pleading with my stomach to stay quiet.

He shakes his head. I don't feel hungry, even though my stomach begs to differ. I remind myself that Luke needs it more than I do whenever I come near food. I can only force a few bites down before I push the plate away and give it to Luke.

"You should've eaten some of mine."

He's too unselfish. He needs the food, but he's offering it to me. "Don't be silly. I'm fine."

I haven't had a decent meal since our last home with number seven, but that was only five days ago, so I'll survive.

Josh. Josh Tinley with his black hair and bright blue eyes anyone could get lost in. Josh Tinley, my best friend. I was devastated when we left. He was friends with me despite the fact he knew all about my life; I didn't want to tell him about it, more so he found out during one of Karen's worse days, and I was forced to explain.

The day we left 'right place number twelve' was a week before his birthday. We went down to the lake and out on the boat he owned. We used to go out on the lake a lot because no one was ever down there. It was our

place.

He asked me to stay and not leave with Karen. He never liked Karen, even before he knew what she was doing to me. I told him I couldn't, that Luke would have to go with her and I couldn't do that. He then did something that amazes me even now. He, my best friend, kissed me.

It was a friendly kiss, but it was on my lips. I was shocked and still have no idea why he did it. He said he'd come to get Luke and I when I turn eighteen. Then I left him, and all the others, behind.

Sabbath was glad I was gone. She didn't like me at all, though I never found out why. She's beautiful, so it wasn't that she was jealous of me. She's rich and I'm not. She has a caring family, friends, good gradesâ ¦ I struggle with some subjects. Moving every six months doesn't exactly help, but I need to do better if I'm going to support Luke when I graduate.

I'm going to be a senior this year. I hope I can stay the year in the same school, but I don't count on it.

"I miss Josh," Luke sighs sadly.

Josh was a hero to him. He looked up to him and thought of him as a brother, wanting to be like him when he grows up. I'll do everything I can to give him a million choices of what he wants to do when he's older, but it might not be enough.

"I do, too," I say, stroking the bracelet Josh gave me before we left. It was his birthday, yet he gave me something. "Follow the cloud," it reads, carved on the silver chain that's wrapped around my wrist. I'll never give it away. It's mine; a word I've rarely come across since I left New York.

"Do you think he'll come to find us?" Luke asks, yawning in between the words.

"Time for bed," I tell him. As much as I want to say yes, I will not give him false hope. I don't want him to be disappointed.

He sighs and cuddles up against me. "Can't I stay here?"

I brush his hair back from his forehead and smile down at him. "Don't you want the bed before Karen turns in for the night?"

He shakes his head sleepily. "No," he mumbles. "I want to stay with you."

The only bedroom in the caravan is usually occupied by Tom and Karen but, because they're going out for dinner, it will be free until tomorrow or, considering the time, this morning when they get back in. I usually take the armchair and Luke gets the couch, which I make as comfortable as possible for him.

Creeks in my neck are uncomfortable, but it's worth it to see Luke smiling sleepily at me after a good night's rest.

If Karen and the step dad go out, I usually sleep with Luke in the bed. I have to have breakfast ready by the time they come in, but, the problem is, the time varies. Whether its 4am or 1pm, breakfast should be ready for them when they come in. Like I know what time they'll come in at. I've never had a cell phone and can't contact them in any way at all.

I usually make pancakes the night before and cook them in the morning sometime, giving it to them cold. They don't even eat them. They usually throw them at each other while accusing the other of "staring at that girl's butt," in the club or "flirting with that guy when I was right beside you,"- things of that sort.

It's 2:15am now, so I can tell I'm going to have until at least 10am before they come back from their 'dinner'.

I hope all the ingredients are there for making pancakes. Unless we arrive at our 'right place' before they leave, we're going to be having cereal for breakfast, and that's hard to get off walls and carpets.

The driver's door opens and Tom steps out. Tom's alright, from the few days I've known him. He doesn't bother us, unlike number three who always seemed to be there when I was alone and forced Luke to fetch his beer. Tom has short black hair, a little longer than a buzz cut and is around 6'1 or so. He's quite muscular and has a light moustache that really doesn't suit him. He usually ignores us and that's fine by me.

"We're here," he says, without looking at us and heads for the door.

"Don't just sit there! Move your lazy asses now!" Karen snaps at us.

Karen would be beautiful if she didn't start smoking at sixteen and abusing herself with alcohol. My first guess is that she's around thirty-five or thirty-six, but I've never been good at guessing ages. Her golden blond hair, the same as Luke's, lies lank on her bony shoulders.

Her icy blue, almost grey eyes show nothing about how she's feeling or what she's thinking; she's closed off. I don't think she's touched drugs, but I can't be too sure. I've a feeling that number four was a druggie, but he never left any evidence.

I carefully place Luke onto the space of the armchair beside me and stand up.

Karen has already left, so I go out the door and down the wobbly steps to see 'right place number 13'.

# **Chapter 2: Chapter two**

## Chapter Two

Have you ever seen a place and thought 'this is where I want to stay for the rest of my life'? Well, this place isn't it for me.

The front door, or what's left of it, hangs from its rusted hinges. The doorknob, covered in cobwebs and rust, is placed in its centre as a metal seven barely hangs on to the rotten wood.

The brick work is shabby; paint's peeling off the window frames; glass, of what was once a window, is shattered, cracked and now covered by boards of wood. Holes splatter the roof and weeds, almost as tall as me and towering over Luke, hide the steps that lead to the house: our newest 'home'.

"Are we here?" Luke asks between a yawn, stretching his short arms as he opens his eyes, only to cover them moments later because of the bright light of the caravan headlights.

"Yes, Luke. This is it."

As far as I can see, there is nothing industrial around the house. A forest with tall trees is situated behind it, but I can't see any other houses around. There's nothing.

"Come on," I say, looking away from the forest that looks slightly eerie in the moonlight. "Let's go and look inside."

We push past the weeds and grasses to get to the front door, climbing the crumbling steps. I reach for the handle to open it, but am forcefully knocked aside, falling off the steps and into a water-filled puddle.

Luke soon follows me to the ground, but I catch him before he lands in the muddy puddle, holding him to my front as Karen and Tom walk by us, arguing about something loudly. I'm glad we don't have neighbours.

"Sorry," Luke apologises, ignoring the fact his mother couldn't care less that she knocked him from a height. "I didn't mean to fall on you." He helps pull me up by tugging my arm, dusting his pants down when I'm up.

"You didn't do it on purpose." The back of my clothes are dripping wet. Luke looks in near tears when I find my back bleeding from landing on a sharp stone, so I quickly lower my shirt over it.

"Gentlemen first," I say, mock bowing for him to enter the house.

The hall, as run down as the outside of the house, leads off into the kitchen and living room. The carpet's holey and frayed around the edges, curving up around the baseboards and lumping together in the middle. There's a bathroom on the left with a bath-shower in it. I can finally get Luke his wash.

The caravan doesn't have a shower. The sink supplies the water, but I'm not stupid enough to use it for a wash after the last time when Karen found out. She hit me across the face, but I wouldn't have used the water if I'd known she was coming back. She went out for booze and is usually gone a few hours for that, but she forgot the money and had to come back.

The kitchen has a sink with running water, two faucets for warm and cold, a small table with four seats around it and a few cupboards and counters to store food. There's a small TV hanging from the wall and an oven and

microwave in the corner. A small bedroom is at the far right with a double bed.

The living room- equipped with a TV, an armchair, a small end table and a sofa- is cosy looking, a fireplace at the far wall. I'll be taking the armchair and Luke will have the sofa. Karen and Tom will get the bedroom.

"Joey," Luke calls out from somewhere in the house. He was in the kitchen with me but now, looking around, I don't remember him coming into the living room.

"Yeah?"

"Come here!"

I follow the sound of his voice and find him by a door in the hall. I didn't see it on the way in, but Luke was clever enough to spot it. "What is it?"

"It's a bedroom," he tells me, opening the door with an excited smile on his face. I peer inside, flicking the light on with the switch by the door.

It's a small room with a set of bunk beds, a desk and chair with a rug in the middle of the floor. I walk inside only to be knocked aside by Luke, who rushes to the beds and starts to climb the rickety ladder.

"I want this one!"

I'm going to have to fix that ladder if I want a peaceful night's sleep.

"This is so cool! My own bedâ !"

I love seeing him happy. I'd do anything, and sitting in a caravan for five days with a moody Karen was completely worth it.

"Colours!" he exclaims, pulling back the comforters to find crayons scattered around the bed.

He loves drawing. Karen never buys him any as she thinks it's a waste of time and money, but Josh bought him some before we left.

I, on the other hand, have never been able to master the skill. I prefer reading and writing. Reading makes me forget everything and helps me escape into my own little world where Karen doesn't exist.

I don't have many books, so if I'm not reading one, I write. I write about anything and nothing. I write about superheroes for Luke to read, I write about what my life could've been like in New York if I hadn't left, which is a little selfish, so I try not to do that. I write about whatever sparks my imagination.

"They left," Luke informs me, looking out the window and seeing the caravan gone from its parking spot it earlier occupied.

"Come on. You need to get some sleep. Let's test out our new beds."

He grins and nods happily, pulling the comforters up around him. "Can you take these?" he asks, holding out a handful of the crayons that he found on his bed.

I don't have my bag with me, so I can only hope Karen won't come in when I am asleep, looking for a place to hide her cigarettes from Tom, and find them in the drawer.

"Sure," I say, taking them from his hand and placing them in the desk, before tucking him into his new bed.

"Night, Luke."

"Night, Joey," he says, yawning and curling into his pillow. "Love you."

"Love you, too."

I wait with him until he falls asleep. When I'm sure he is fast asleep, I leave the room, shutting the door behind me as quietly as I can. No one is around, so I decide to take a better look around the house.

I look through the cupboards in the kitchen, but don't find anything except a few mugs and flatware, dust covering them in thick layers. I hope Karen and Tom will be back early enough in the morning so I can get some things from the caravan to make Luke breakfast.

My back is still soaked from landing in the puddle and bleeding from the stone, but I don't have any other clothes with me. I would never dare take any of Karen's, so I'm going to have to make do with what I have.

Opening the refrigerator, I find a banana and apple that do not look too bad, so hopefully I can give them to Luke for breakfast.

We rarely get fruit and Luke's definitely lacking in vitamin C. When I was his age, I was living with Uncle Aaron and Aunt Lisa, so I got everything I needed. They wanted a child but couldn't have one, so I was like their own; I felt the same way.

I take the apple and banana out, away from the spoiled milk and set them on the counter. I cut into the apple in hope that it's not gone off, and try a piece. I'm not disappointed. The banana looks fine, so I leave it on the counter and place the apple into a bowl, covering it with some plastic wrap.

I go into the living room and sit on the couch. I'm not tired, so there's no point in rustling around in the bedroom and waking Luke up. He needs sleep as much as he needs food and I'll make sure he gets that, at the very least.

I see the remote control on the end table and reach for it. The TV's about sixteen inches and sits on a pile of books in the corner. It's very dusty and scratched with cobwebs joining it to the wall. I blow the dust off the RC and look for the button to turn it on.

A noise behind me has me turning around to find a tired Luke standing at the door.

"Couldn't sleep, bud?" I ask, getting up to go over to him.

He shakes his head and looks at the floor. "Sorry."

"No need to be sorry. It takes a while to break in a bed." Especially when you've never had one for yourself before; but I don't say that.

I walk with him back to the bedroom. "You want to lie with me?" I ask.

He looks up at me and nods his head, slowly.

"Come on in." Pulling the comforter down and hopping in, I lift them up for him to join me.

He bites his lip and looks at his bed. "You can try again tomorrow," I tell him, seeing him unsure of where to go. "You don't want me to be lonely."

He looks at me again and smiles, walking over to the bed and getting under. "Thank you," he whispers to me.

"No, thank you for being my feet warmer," I tease, snuggling up to him.

He giggles and leans into me. "I love you, Joey."

"Back at you; you're my favourite brother."

"I'm your only brother!" he giggles.

"And you're my favourite."

He sighs happily and lies on his back, staring ahead.

"Not tired?" I ask, tucking the covers around us.

He shakes his head, meaning he isn't, but says, "I am."

"You know, one day you're going to have to start making sense," I joke, nudging him with my shoulder. "Talk to me."

He hesitates for minute, like he always does when he has something on his mind but's afraid to say it. "I don't want to move again. I want to make friends and live in a nice house where I can bring my friends over. I want you to be happy, like you was with Josh."

"Were," I correct him, "And as long as you're here, I'm happy." It's the truth. Whenever he's here, I'm happy. Not for his sake though, but because he makes me happy.

"Really happy- I don't want Karen to hurt you anymore. I hate her."

"You don't hate her."

"I do when she hurts you."

"You don't. You just don't like what she does, but you don't hate her. She's your mother."

He doesn't reply, making me think he has fallen asleep, but he soon speaks again. "It scares me," he whispers, turning around to face me.

"Don't be scared. I'm never going anywhere without you, so don't worry about that."

He settles into the pillow. "Your hair smells funny," he giggles.

"Thanks, bud. You've just reminded me about your wash in the morning."

"No!" he protests, just like any seven year old boy would. "I don't need one."

"I'm not so sure about that. You haven't had one in six days, little man. It's time."

"You're mean."

"And you love me anyway," I tease.

"I do."

"And I love you. Now, go to sleep. We've to look around tomorrow to see if there are any stores where we can buy you a towel for your bath."

"Fine," he sighs. "Goodnight Joey."

"Night Luke," I say before I fall into a light sleep, curled up beside my little brother.

# **Chapter 3: Chapter three**

## Chapter Three

I awaken to the sound of the front door slamming shut and voices carrying across the hall. The door is closed and the voices aren't as loud as they usually are, so I'm about to fall back asleep with Luke when I bolt upright, scrambling out of the bed. I haven't made any breakfast and they're back.

I fell asleep in my clothes last night, so I don't need to change. I look out the window and see the caravan. I can't go into their room without food and she won't care that there is no food in the house. I should've made do with what's there, she would not-so-nicely tell me. *Yeah*, *because you can definitely make a good breakfast with an apple and banana*, I think to myself bitterly.

The door's out of the question, so that only leaves the window. It's times like this that I'm glad we don't live in a two-storey house.

I rush over to the window and slide it up, hoping not to wake Luke. He's a light sleeper and the littlest of noises usually wake him up.

The window won't stay open on its own, so I reach out, holding onto the frame, and grab one of the bricks piled up beside the front door. I fit it so it keeps the window open, hoping it will stay that way until I'm out.

I'm not a very graceful person in general, but luckily I've done this before and can do it without making too much noise, thus alerting everyone's attention. Unfortunately, I land on a rock and go over on my ankle, scraping my arm on the bricks as I fall down.

Wincing, I rub my foot, trying to get some feeling back into it before I've to get up to go to the caravan. The window shuts and the brick holding it open falls out, hitting me on the back of my head. My head jerks forward and my forehead hits my knee, causing my swollen ankle to kick into the air from reflex.

I usually take pride in myself for my reflexes, but I wish I didn't have such good ones now.

A searing pain flashes through my ankle and I can tell I won't be walking properly for a while. I push myself up off the ground and force myself to walk to the van, ignoring the shooting pain in both my head and foot.

Karen never locks it. She thinks if someone takes it, insurance will cover it and she'll get a new and better one. For that to work, she'd actually have to pay for insurance, but she doesn't think she has to, and I'm not telling her she's wrong and risking a beating or a shouting match.

I go inside and as quickly as I can on a swollen ankle, rush to the refrigerator in hope that the pancake mix I made several days ago is still there. It is. I grab the bowl and a pan, quickly heating them up and flipping them as fast as I can without them being undercooked. I grab two plates and the second I see them solidifying, toss them onto the plates and throw the pan into the sink, quickly filling it with water.

I rush to the door and down the steps, limping on my foot, but carry on until I reach their room and knock on the door. Always knock unless you want to see certain parts of a body you don't need to see.

"Come in!" Karen screeches and I open the door, balancing the pancakes on one hand while I do. "Took you long enough to show up," she sneers at me.

I don't make eye contact as I hand her the plate.

"When I come in, I expect you to have my food on the table and ready. Is that too hard to ask?"

"No. ma'am."

"Then why wasn't it?!" she shouts, throwing a pointed shoe at me. I know better than to duck, so I let it hit my already bruised head.

She throws another, but it goes the complete opposite direction and hits a confused Tom in the naked chest. "What the hell?"

"Oh, there you are. Just come back from some other girl's house, have you?"

"What're you talking about? I came back with you."

"Sure you did. You're just as pathetic as her," she snaps, jerking her head my way, sitting up against the battered headboard. The covers slip off her chest and I'm glad she's wearing her robe.

"I wasn't the one who went off with another guy right in front of my face," he shouts back, her temper rising as he glares at her in a way I could never, without getting a beating or berating.

This is usually when I'd take Luke out of the house, but I'm now stuck here in the middle of it until she dismisses me.

"At least I wasn't practically drooling over another girl's ass while dancing with someone else!"

"Well, that girl seemed to be interested in me unlike the one I was dancing with, who was visually undressing the guy behind us!"

"At least he wasn't staring at another girl- what're you looking at!?" she screams at me, seeing me still here.

She's getting riled up and I want to leave, but I can't until she tells me to. I don't get a chance to say anything before she's throwing another shoe at me, which hits my ankle, causing me to buckle from the impact.

"Go!" she shrieks. "Get out of my sight!"

I quickly get up and run down the hall to mine and Luke's room, hoping he's still asleep. He's not. Instead, he's staring at the ceiling with unshed tears in his eyes.

"Hey, sleepy head," I say in a false cheery voice.

He doesn't answer me and turns on his side, away from me.

I sit on the edge of the bed and rub his arm. "It's okay, bud."

He sniffles and I can tell he's crying. Seeing Luke cry breaks my heart, piece by piece. I hate Karen. I know I told him he doesn't hate her, but I do. I hate her for making Luke cry. I hate her for making us move and making it harder for Luke to make friends. I hate her for not getting Luke the right food he needs. I hate her, I just hate her.

"She hurt you again," he whispers, still not looking at me.

"I'm fine."

"You aren't," he says, turning around and facing me. He looks at my face and dissolves in tears again. I pick him up, hugging him as he cries into my shoulder, returning the embrace.

"I'm fine," I repeat into his ear, desperate to make him happy, even if it means lying to him, something I hate doing.

He shakes his head and lifts his tear streaked face off my shoulder. "Your arm," he croaks, lightly running a finger down my scratched arm.

"It was the wall."

"Your head." Touching a finger to my forehead, he pulls it back a few seconds later, only for it to be covered in blood. I reach up. I didn't think I was bleeding or I would've cleaned up before coming in to Luke.

"It was the wall," I say, but I am not sure if it was that or the shoe she threw. "I was getting out the window and a brick hit my head."

He rests his head on my shoulder again. "I hate her," he whispers in my ear. I don't say anything, but hug him tight to me. We sit there for a few minutes, just wrapped in the other's arms.

"Come on," I announce, getting up off the bed. "Let's go and get you that towel."

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As we rush into the caravan to get a change of clothes, I grab my bag and take out the \$45 I saved from my last job, shoving it into the pocket of my ripped sweatpants. I make sure the bag is put away safely under the couch before I wait for Luke to get ready.

He comes out of the bathroom, wearing his superman t-shirt that Josh got him for his birthday and a pair of ripped, worn out jeans. They weren't styled that way though, but have become like that over the years he has owned and wore them.

"Ready?" I ask him. I have already cleaned up, having washed the blood from my forehead and am now ready to go.

He shakes his head and rushes to the window. "Sunny," he guesses, looking out at the blue, clear sky. Smiling, I walk over to the window and look out.

"Snow."

He looks at me, eye brows raised and head tilted like he thinks I'm either an idiot or I'm letting him win. "It could happen," I shrug, not wanting him to think the latter.

Shaking his head and pursing his lips in an adorable way, he takes my hand and ushers me to the door. I hop down the steps and take his hands, swinging him down the way he likes.

"Race you," I challenge and he takes off in a flash, leaving me and my still sore ankle to chase after him.

"Slow coach!" he calls out to me when he stops to catch his breath and looks for me, finding me far behind him.

"Maybe you're just getting faster."

"Or maybe you're getting slower."

"Probably," I agree, finally catching up with him.

I look around the land and see the outlines of some buildings in the near distance. The forest is on our right hand side and carries on for miles; I'm hoping to stay away from it.

"Do you see anything?" Luke asks, squinting around for any sign of life.

"I think so." I point straight ahead of us.

"Well, let's go then," he declares, grabbing my hand and marching towards the direction I pointed in.

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After fifteen minutes of walking, we arrive at a square. There's a statue in the centre and a few buildings around it, most of them old and slightly run down. The ground has the look of old cobblestone and there's a statue of a man wearing a cowboy hat. I can't see what the carved words say, as someone has had the bright idea to graffiti over them, but I'd guess it's of an important person from this town.

"Cool," Luke says, looking around the place and pausing on the statue for a moment longer.

I look around at the few stores and decide on the one called Mick's. "Let's go."

We walk around the graffiti statue, with Luke playing his usual game of trying not to step on the cracks, and to the doors of Mick's, walking through them when they open automatically.

It's a small store with, as far as I can see, lots in it. There's a fruit and vegetable aisle straight ahead of us, a refrigerated aisle next to it, a tins and boxed food aisle after and though I can't see the sign above it, a toy aisle at the end. Judging by the smell, there's a bakery somewhere and a candy counter at the cash register, where an elderly woman is working.

I take a shopping cart and give it to Luke, knowing he likes pushing it. "Don't break anything," I warn, but I'm joking; he'd never break anything as he's always careful.

"I won't," he grins mischievously and rushes down the first aisle at top speed, careful to keep away from the shelves.

I can't spend all the money until I get a job, but I can spend up to \$30. Most of the step dads get a job, mostly because I don't make enough to get them booze as well as Karen, and I'm hoping Tom will get one. He seems a decent enough person and I haven't had any trouble with him yet.

I go to the fruit and vegetable aisle where Luke took off to. It's only when I see the apples and bananas that I remember I didn't give Luke the ones I found this morning. Karen has most likely found them and has either thrown them out or is using them as a weapon against Tom.

After bagging various fruits, I follow Luke to the refrigerated aisle and look through the shelves. I find a store brand of mince that will last for a few dinners and get some spaghetti.

"Spaghetti?" Luke asks, seeing me put it in the cart.

"Yep, with mince."

"Yes!" he exclaims, grinning at me. I smile back at him and we go to the next aisle. Again, I find the store brand soup and rice and get them, putting them into the grinning Luke's cart.

The toy aisle is split into two sections; 'toys and clothes' is the first part, and 'soft-furnishings' is the next. Scented candles and cushions line the shelves, but we ignore them, as does Luke ignores the toys. He goes straight to the bundles of towels that we came for.

I stop by the clothes section, debating in my mind on whether or not to buy him some. Luke needs new clothes and they're having a saleâ ¦ I grab a shirt and pants I see in his size and put them in the cart before I can convince myself otherwise.

I find Luke at the furnishing section, looking longingly at a Spiderman towel, but he grabs a plain cream one and turns back to me.

"Get it," I tell him, taking the cream towel from his hand and placing it back on the shelf. The cost so far is less than what I thought it would be, and the towel Spiderman towel would make him happy. I've been adding it up in my mind and am surprised that it's not as much as I thought it would be; it's usually a lot more than this.

He looks from the towel to me. "Can I?"

"Yep." Taking the towel from his hand, I put it in the cart by his side. "I think that's it. Let's go pay."

I walk up to the cash register with Luke, who's beaming so bright it's infectious, and we place the items on the revolving belt. The woman at the register, Mauve as it reads on her tag, smiles at us. "Are you new here?"

I nod my head, not particularly liking talking to people I don't know, much less adults.

She smiles vaguely. "I knew I didn't recognise you. Everyone knows everyone in this town." Mauve scans the items and places them in several bags. "\$23.60," she tells me.

\$23.60? I added it up to be \$28. I take the money out of my back pocket and count out a twenty and five, handing them to her.

She gives me back my change and I glance down at Luke to tell him we're going, but see him eyeing some candy for \$1. I spent less than I thought I would, so I give him a dollar for them.

He looks at the dollar and then at me. "What's that for?"

"The candy," I say, taking it off the rack and placing it onto the belt.

He starts to shake his head, but his eyes betray him when he glances at it longingly. I cut him short. "Buy it, or I will."

He bites his lip, but takes the dollar. Mauve's smiling at us as she scans the candy and hands it back to him.

"Thank you," he says.

"You're very welcome," she tells him and looks back to me. "Come back soon."

I nod, not saying I will or won't. It seems to be the only store around here as far as I can see, so I most likely will be back. Thankfully it wasn't a question, so it doesn't really need an answer. Taking Luke's hand, we walk away from the register.

We're almost out the door of the store when something crashes into me and wraps its arms around my waist. "Thank you, Joey," Luke whispers, hugging me tightly.

"No need to thank me, Luke. You deserve it."

He looks up at me and says, "You deserve it, too."

"I don't need anything as long as I have you." I don't; as long as he's happy, I'm happy.

"I love you."

"I love you more and don't you forget it," I tease, nudging him with my hip. "Come on. We've got breakfast to eat."

"Have a good day," Mauve calls after us, her voice slightly dreamy and causing me to look back at her. I smile uncertainly when I see her, eyes shiny and a distant expression on her face, like she's lost in her thoughts, but whether good or bad, I'm not too sure.

"You, too," I wish lowly, so she's most likely not able to hear me, but at least I said something. We leave the store, the bag in one of my hands, Luke's hand in the other.

# **Chapter 4: Chapter four**

## Chapter Four

It's the 30th of August and school's starting again soon. At least I'm not starting in the middle of the school year, like I usually have to. It's annoying when you walk into a room and everyone stares at you, like you just murdered someone, and are on your way to court in cuffs. I don't like people looking at me.

I just don't like attention. At first, it was because I didn't want people to get too close to me because of Karen. I could, and still can't, tell what mood she's to be in and if she is in a bad one, I'd never want anyone to have to endure that if I was to invite them over.

Now, I just prefer being on my own and having time to spend with Luke, but I can't say I don't miss having someone my age to talk to. But I won't be a burden on anyone, so I'm ignoring that want.

Luke's starting second grade this year. Our books came in the mail today, as well as some forms for Karen to look at, but she never does, so it'll have to be me. Luke's in the living room, looking through the books. I flicked through mine, but the excitement of getting them wears off after moving schools two or three times a year for the past eight or so.

"Joey, what's that word?" Luke asks, frowning at his new reader. When I say new, I mean new to him; it's definitely not new if the ripped edges and torn cover have anything to say about it.

I get up and go over to him, sitting down on the rug and looking over his shoulder. "Rhetorical," I tell him, wondering why they'd put a word like that in a second-grade reader.

"What's it mean?"

I know what it means, but putting 'a figure of speech in the form of a question that is asked in order to make a point and without the expectation of a reply,' into second-grade English is not something I'm particularly good at

"It's when you... just say you ask me a question, but you're not really asking me a question, but sort of wondering aloud. You're not going to expect an answer from me, are you?"

"No..?"

He doesn't have a clue about what I'm saying. "Okay, so I say 'I wonder if it's going to rain today,' out loud when it's obviously going to, but I'm not really saying it to anyone. It's more like saying what you're thinking aloud. I'm not asking for an answer from anyone, so it'd be a rhetorical question."

"Oh," he says. "I get it."

"You do?" I ask, surprised he was able to follow and made sense of my explanation.

"It's like when Karen says a question out loud, but you don't answer it. Like, before we got here, we were in the caravan and you were saying she said she was going to dinner with Tom. She said, 'I did, didn't I?' but you didn't say anything back. Is that it?"

Only Luke would get that from my unoriginal example of the weather. "Yes. Now, how about some dinner?"

"Spaghetti?" he asks, looking at me with hopeful eyes. Since Karen and Tom aren't around as much, the spaghetti has lasted much longer than I expected it to, and I only had to go to Mick's three days ago to get some more mince.

"You bet it."

Luke's been eating more fruit and vegetables lately since they're not too expensive in Mick's. I've been keeping an eye out for jobs for the past week, and found an ad for one at Mick's, of all places. I talked to Mauve about it and she said she'd be delighted to employ me, and that the interviews are on Saturday, tomorrow.

The shift starts at 4:30 and ends at 8:45, so Luke will only be by his self for a few hours after school. I don't like leaving him on his own, but I need the job and he's been left for much longer on his own before- against my wishes, of course.

Luke gets up and goes into the kitchen to get the pots and ingredients ready. He's taken an interest in cooking, something I hate, and I let him help me cook the dinner in exchange for drawing lessons from him. He loves teaching me how to draw and marking my work out of ten.

I always get above five, but I think that's because I'm his sister. Either that, or he's blind; whatever the reason, my drawing of a tree looks like a failure of a sheep. He's say I'm getting better and I'd nod along with him, but say I still need some more lessons, knowing he enjoys teaching me so much. He's patient and would make a good teacher.

I wait for the spaghetti to cook while Luke sets the table. I'm stirring the mince around in the pot when the front door opens, banging against the wall before slamming shut, startling me and causing the mince to fall to the floor.

A red-faced Karen, who seems to be in her usual bad mood, storms into the kitchen towards her room, but she stops when she sees the spilled mince.

"You stupid bitch!" she shouts at me, charging towards me like a bull until she's right in my face. She clenches her jaw in anger and slaps me hard across my face, her manicured nails scraping my cheek. "Clean that shit up now," she demands and stalks off into her room, the door banging shut behind her as she slams it.

I get down onto my knees to clean it up, sighing. That is the last of the mince until tomorrow, when I was planning to get some more at Mick's.

"Sorry, bud," I say to Luke. "That was the last of the mince."

I look up at him when he doesn't answer me and see him biting his lip hard, his jaw clenched in anger as he stares at my cheek that Karen just slapped.

"I hate her," he whispers roughly before rushing down the hall and into the bedroom.

I want to go and comfort him, to tell him I'm alright, but I have to get this mess cleared up before Karen comes back out and sees it. I don't want Luke to get upset again if she hits me, so I scoop it all up into the pan and throw it in the trash.

I hate wasting food. It makes me feel bad when others would be fighting to eat it, but I'm not risking Luke getting sick by some bacteria on the floor from consuming it. I rummage through the cupboards and find what

I'm looking for.

I place the un-popped popcorn into the microwave and wait the few minutes it takes until it's done. The TV from the kitchen is in our room now, and Karen hasn't noticed it gone, so it's staying there. Rummaging through the cupboard, I take a deep bowl and when the microwave has beeped, I remove the packet and place it in the bowl.

Walking down the hall, I make my way into the room and find Luke lying on my bed, the blankets in a mess around him as he looks lost in thought.

"You can clean that up," I tease, sitting on the bed beside him. He continues staring at the top bunk blankly.

"Will she ever stop hurting you?" he whispers abruptly, still not looking at me.

"I don't know, bud."

He glances at me then back to the bed. "It was a rhetorical question," he says, cracking a small smile.

I'm not sure if it's rhetorical because he knows the answer already or because he doesn't want to know it, but I smile back at him, shaking my head. "Cheeky monkey."

He smiles back, but that soon fades away. "I'm sorry."

I frown slightly, wondering what he's apologising for. "For what?"

"I could've stopped her. I could've got in front of you and protected-,"

"No," I say firmly, not wanting to think what could have happened to him if he did that. "Don't ever think like that. You will never get involved or interfere in any way at all. Promise me that."

He doesn't say anything.

"Lukeâ !"

He sighs and turns the other way, away from me. I get up and go around the bed to make him face me, my eyes pleading with him to promise me that. I would never forgive myself if she hurt him. "Promise me."

He won't look me in the eyes and my panic increases. I lift his chin up and wait for him to look at me, seconds away from shaking him to get the response I need to hear. "Promise me you'll never get in the way or make her do anything to hurt you."

I can feel my eyes getting watery, but I blink the tears back. I won't cry. The air is tense around us as I wait for him to reply. His eyes search mine for a few moments, like he's trying to figure out if I'm being serious about this. I have never been more serious in my entire life, not even when I told Aaron that I was leaving to go with Karen.

After what feels like an eternity, he nods his head slowly. "I promise."

My shoulders sag in relief and I sigh, lifting him up and hugging him tight to me. I can think of nothing else to say other than a soft, "Thank you," followed by a kiss on the top of his head. He doesn't say anything in return, but I feel him shaking, like his promise has scared the living daylights out of him.

Without setting him down, I sit on the bed and lift the bowl of popcorn up. "What do you say to watching some TV and eating some popcorn with your big sis?"

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*I got the job*. I got the job! It might be the fact that I was the only one who showed up for the interviews, but still. I got it!

I start this Monday, the same day school does. I don't even know where the school is and might have to ask Mauve about it, but that'll have to wait until tomorrow. Now, I'm getting home to Luke to tell him the news.

Thank goodness I got the job. We were running out of money and I stupidly left \$20 on the end table in the living room for a few seconds, only to come back to find it gone. Karen took it for booze, like always.

I haven't met any other kids my age or Luke's. In fact, I haven't met anyone besides Mauve and the elderly man that shops at Mick's sometimes. I haven't really seen any other houses around here either, but haven't looked much further than the square.

I arrive at the house and see Luke sitting on the rug in the living room through the window, drawing and colouring. I walk up the steps that I can now see, thanks to shorter grass which Luke and I made a game out of. It involved seeing who could get the longest pieces of grass and making the biggest bundle.

The door's still hanging off its hinges and I need to fix it, but I have no idea what things I'd need. Mick's has a hardware section at the back, so maybe I could ask Mauve what I'd need to fix a door. I've already fixed the ladder to the bunk bed the third day we got here, after not sleeping well at all, as I was worrying about Luke falling out of the bed all night.

I sneak through the hall, around the living room and into the kitchen. There's a door from the kitchen into the living room, but I don't want Luke to know I'm here yet. I bought a cupcake in the store to celebrate and want to surprise him with it.

I reach into my pocket and take out the plastic bag containing the cupcake, and tiptoe into the living room up behind Luke. I don't want to frighten him and ruin his picture of the tree in the garden, which looks exactly like the tree and nothing like my sheep, so I wait. He puts down his pencil to reach for a crayon and I take my chance.

"I got it!" I exclaim, lifting him up by his waist and spinning him around in a circle.

"You did?!" he squeals, turning around to face me when I stop spinning him.

"I did. Look what I got you." Putting him down, I pick up the cupcake off the table where I placed it on before picking him up.

"A cupcake?" he asks, looking at me and grinning. "Look," he says, rummaging through his pages and picking one out. "I drew you this."

I take the page from his hand and look at it. It's a picture of a house and there's a boy standing in front of it. There's something in the sky that looks like someone flying with a cape behind them and, because Luke loves superheroes, I take it to be one.

"It's you," he tells me, pointing to the flying shape. I look closer and see the person has brown hair all the way down their back and brown eyes. The letters 'SJ,' are written on their shirt.

"Super Joey," he explains, pointing at the letters. "You are a superhero."

"I'm a superhero, am I?"

"You're my hero. You are always there to keep me safe, so you are my hero."

I smile at him and place the picture on the end table before hugging him, even though my heart breaks a little at the words. He shouldn't have to be saved, but I will do everything in my power to keep him that way. "I'll always be there to keep you safe," I tell him, but the playfulness of the conversation lessens slightly as I want him to believe me when I say this. "No matter what."

Though it's not an inquiry, Luke hears the question in my voice. He doesn't even hesitate before he nods, smiling slightly at me. It waves the picture in his hand, retuning the conversation to it. "The house is the one I am going to buy you when I grow up and get lots of money from my job."

My heart swells at his words, and I think to the future when all this will be behind us and Luke will have a normal life. "It's a very nice house."

He glances slyly at the cupcake. "And that's a very nice cupcake."

"Well, I didn't get it for looking at," I tell him with a grin, handing it to him and sitting on the couch.

He takes it out of the packaging, looking at me inquiringly when I make no move to take any from him. "Don't you want some?"

Any other child would have shoved it into their mouths without even so much as a thank you, yet here's Luke asking me if I want any. "Nope, it's all for you," I say, shaking my head.

A small crease lines his forehead. "But you got the job, so you should have the cupcake."

"I bought the cupcake to celebrate, and I want to give it to you."

He looks at me for a minute and seeing I'm not going to change my mind, shrugs, taking the wrapping off of the small treat. Getting up off the couch, I pick up his pictures in case Karen comes back and sees them.

My ankle is still sore, but I can walk on it without obvious limping. It was swollen, but I didn't have any ice, so I dunked it in cold water while Luke was asleep a few nights ago.

I roll the pictures up and make my way into the bedroom. I put them in the special compartment in my bag, so Karen won't find them. I have lots of his pictures now that Karen's not home often and won't catch him 'wasting money' for the paper. He's been drawing a lot now, and he's getting better and better.

School's starting in two days and while I'm past the nervous jitters, Luke is still in that stage. I always see him giving his bag nervous glances before he goes to bed each night. I wanted to get him the superhero bag I saw in Mick's, but our budget has been stretched since Karen took the \$20 for booze, so I couldn't get it, unless we wanted to go a few days without food. His old black one will have to do for now.

I bought him a new blue one before we left 'right place number 12', but Karen saw it and thought I stole it. I received a beating before she took the bag and sold it for a quarter of what I bought it for. I've since learned not to buy him things she'll notice.

"Dinner?" I ask him when he finishes the cupcake, icing smeared around his mouth.

He wipes it from his face and rushes into the kitchen. "What are we having?"

I follow him in and look through the cupboards. "Soup, rice, beansâ!" I am hoping to save the spaghetti for tomorrow night, so he'll actually eat something before school. He has a habit of not eating anything the night before he starts his new school and he's always dizzy and weak the next day. I'm hoping he won't turn down the spaghetti as it's his favourite.

"Soup," he says, stopping me in mid-sentence.

"Soup it is," I conclude, taking out a can of vegetable soup and some bread. I pour the soup into a microwavable bowl and place it in the microwave. Luke gets some bowls and spoons out while I wait for it to heat.

"Can we eat in the bedroom?" he asks.

"Sure we can," I tell him, opening the microwave door and taking out the bowl. I pour the soup into each bowl and take a few slices of bread, then follow Luke into the bedroom.

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"I'm not hungry," Luke says in a monotonous tone, walking through the kitchen door and sitting at the table with his head on his folded arms.

"It is spaghetti," I tell him, hoping to entice him into eating some.

He doesn't say anything for a minute, but then shakes his head. "I don't feel well."

It's Sunday evening, the day before school starts, and Luke is following his usual pattern of not eating anything. "You have to eat something," I insist, taking the spaghetti out of the packet and making him a portion anyway; he'll probably eat it once he smells it.

"I'm not hungry."

I put mince into a pan and place it on the stove, then sit at the table.

I asked Mauve where the school was and she told me Eastward High or Elementary, the ones we're going to, are a ten minute drive from the square. She told me that there is one a bus at 8:20; school starts at 8:50, so we'd have a time to get to our lockers and find our way around the school before classes start.

Eastward Elementary is directly opposite my school, so I'll be able to go to bring Luke to the office and make sure he has everything, maybe wait with him until he finds someone to show him to his class, or I'll bring him myself. Parents are meant to go, but I doubt Karen will be there in the morning; she never was in the past, and this time isn't any different.

I get up to stir the mince. "You're getting old now," I comment, "Second grade."

"Well, you're even older- a senior now."

"Then it'll be off to col-,"

"The grass is growing again," he says, cutting me off and changing the subject. He always does that when he doesn't like the topic.

I walk over to him and kneel before him, wondering what it is about the topic he doesn't like. He wants to leave here, right? When I finish school, we'll be heading off and away from all this, never to look back. We'll be together and happy, and that's all I could ever ask for. "Why'd you change the subject?"

"We should play that game again. It was fun and I bet I could get the longest piece this time-."

"Luke?"

He doesn't look at me and continues talking about the grass game. After he trails off, seemingly unable to find anything else to say, he sighs, looking so sad and insecure that I want to wrap him in a hug and never let him get away. Instead, I stay where I am, kneeling before him on the floor and wondering what it is that he is thinking about to have such an expression on his face.

"I don't want you to go," he finally says, not looking at me, like he thinks I'm going to make fun of him or something.

"To college?"

He nods his head, but says no more. I press on. "Why not?"

He's quiet for a moment, but he eventually answers with, "You'll leave me."

That stops me in my tracks. Leave him? Does he actually believe that? "Why would I leave you?

"You'll have friends and a job and you won't want to look after an annoying little brother like me."

"Luke," I sigh, tilting his head up to make him look me in the eyes. "I'm never leaving you. Don't you listen to me whenever I tell you that?"

"I didn't think you meant it."

"Well, I do. I'm never leaving you and that's a promise. I'll be old and wrinkly and you'll still be with me. You'll be married to some lucky girl and I'll still be there with you. You're not getting rid of me and I can promise you I won't ever go anywhere without you."

"But-."

"The only butt is the one that should be getting to bed because it has school tomorrow."

He giggles and gets up to get plates and flatware, his mood seemingly lightened up. "Can you come into school with me tomorrow? I don't want to go in alone."

"Of course I'm coming in with you," I tell him, setting the food down on the table.

We eat in silence, he, drawing a picture on a small piece of paper while I look out the window at the woods.

I think I see a silhouette of a person walking through the woods, but it is probably my imagination, especially when I think I hear the sound of shouting and crashing before it disappears from view.

# **Chapter 5: Chapter five**

## Chapter Five

I've been to many schools in my lifetime, and this is one of the smallest. I've been to a school with ninety students in the whole school, and that was an elementary school and high school mixed together; and a school with fifty students in each of my classes.

Luke and I get off the bus and enter through the gates of his new school. It's a two-storey building, the brickwork old looking and some of the paint chipped off the door. The office is on the second storey, so we enter through the front doors and go up the stairs.

The halls are packed with kids running around and talking to friends at their lockers. I remember getting up early on the first day of school and arranging to meet up with friends at the bus stop. I haven't seen or heard from Cian or Bianca since I was nine.

We go up the stairs and into the office. A black haired lady with a pixie cut greets us from behind the desk. "Hello and welcome to Eastward Elementary school. How can I help you?"

She looks nice, unlike some of the secretaries from old schools, but she's still an adult. I don't have anything against adults; I just don't like talking much. "Luke was enrolled here and he'd like to get his timetable and other information."

"Are you his mother?" she asks, frowning and looking between the two of us.

"Sister." I didn't mean for it to sound so curt, but she doesn't seem to notice.

"Okay then. What's your last name, Luke?"

"Clint," he says lowly. He's never liked talking to adults either.

She types a few things into her computer. "So, Luke Clint in second grade, Ms Hennely's class," she mutters to herself, printing off a piece of paper and handing it to us. "Would you like me to get someone to escort you to your classroom?"

"Yes, please."

The woman walks around her desk and sticks her head out the door. "Robbie!" she calls out to someone, waiting for them to respond before returning to her seat behind the desk.

A boy of around seven years with blond hair and blue eyes comes through the door.

"Robbie, this is Luke and his sister. He's in your class and I'd like for you to show them where to go."

"Sure," he says and turns to Luke. "It's this way." He leaves through the door, waiting for us to follow.

He takes the piece of paper from my hand and starts telling Luke all about the school. "It's a good school, as good as school can be anyway. Hennely's nice and doesn't give you much homework and lets us watch a movie on Friday for the last hour and a half. The lunch hall's down the stairs and to the left and you can buy your food there, but you should bring your own 'cause most of it is yucky, but the sausages are nice." He

continues on and we arrive at the classroom with him still talking.

I give Luke a hug and wish him a good day before Robbie drags him into the classroom and brings him to a group of kids in the middle, giving him a seat beside him. The door closes before I can see anything else, but I hope that Luke has made a friend.

Its 8:45 by the time I get to my school and it takes me a few minutes to find the office, so I'm officially late by the time I do. I go through the same procedure like I've done a million times before and get my time table and other information about the school.

Considering I'm already late, I forgo the escort and decide to find my own way to my first class: Math. I don't like it, but I get good enough grades in it and don't need extra help whenever we move school.

I'm looking through my timetable, checking to see if I have class in any of the rooms I pass, when I crash into someone, dropping my bag and papers. I bend down to pick them up and am about to apologise to the person but, by the time I get back up, he's walking down the hall and is gone.

I put the papers back into my bag and look for room 102. I find it on the first floor, the very last classroom I find, just as it'd be. I hate making an entrance, so I try and be early and not to be noticed by the teacher- to no avail, usually.

Taking a deep breath and hoping I won't stutter like an idiot, I open the door. It doesn't noisily creek open, so no one notices I'm here. The board is at the opposite end of the door and the class is facing that way, their backs to the door. I don't know whether or not to interrupt the teacher and make my presence known, so I settle on shutting the door.

"Ah, Josephine isn't it?" the teacher asks, causing the whole class to turn around and examine me.

"Joey," I automatically correct. I hate being called Josephine. It was what Karen called me when I was a child, before she left me with Aaron. Aaron and Lisa called me Joey and I've stuck with that name since.

"Well, Joey, welcome to the class. I know the class would like to waste time and to do the standard procedure of 'meet the new kid', but unfortunately- or fortunately, whichever way you look at it-, we have work to do. You can take the seat at the back beside Kyle, which I have no idea why is still free. Don't you kids like the back seats anymore? The whole front row's full by choice which is strange."

I take the seat at the back and am thankful I don't have to walk past the whole class to get to the front. Ms Jones, the teacher, doesn't ask me a million questions and continues on with class.

I put my bag on the floor; I haven't gotten a chance to go to my locker yet, and catch a glimpse of the boy, Kyle, beside me. He is the boy I crashed into on my way to class. He was going the complete opposite way yet he still got here before me. He has jet black hair, not too long and not too short, and green eyes with blue speckled through them. They're mesmerising and anyone could get lost in them. He's wearing a black shirt and a dark blue pair of ripped jeans.

I look away from him, not wanting to get caught staring, and sit up and face the board.

Ms Jones is a young teacher. She has wavy shoulder length blonde hair and brown eyes, so unlike my boring, plain ones. Hers have flecks of gold in them that rival Kyle's, and they sparkle with life. She has high cheek bones and a heart shaped face, and is wearing a green and white tracksuit with no make-up. Her hair is in a loose, messy ponytail that looks good on her unlike mine, which looks a mess.

I didn't have much time to get ready this morning, not that I do much anyway. I don't wear make-up or bright clothes to draw attention to myself. I had a quick wash and threw on a pair of jeans and a jacket.

A rustling noise awakens me out of my daze and I turn to see Kyle holding out some papers to me. I take them and turn to the person on my right, but they already have some. I have to go up to the desk and give them to Jones, just my luck.

I resist the urge to make them into paper airplanes and fly them to her desk; it probably wouldn't work.

I get up and, just my luck again, I get the squeaky chair. It squeals and shrieks when I push it back and everyone turns around to see what the noise is. I can tell I'm beet red without having to look in the mirror. I walk through the gap between the desks with my head down and place the papers on the desk.

I look at the sheet for the first time and see it's a test.

"It's not a test," Jones tells us and unknowingly correcting my mental thought. "It's just a revision paper from all the stuff that you learnt last year and misplaced over the summer. It'll show me what I need to go over again. You have the rest of class to do it, so start now."

She doesn't tell me that I needn't worry about what I don't know and draw the attention of the whole class on me, and I'm grateful for that.

Unlike some, I don't have a panic attack when I see numbers and letters on the same line. I get on with it, like the rest of my life.

I finish the test and I have finished rechecking my answers with five minutes to spare. My next class is English, which I hate. I just don't understand when breaking a poem into its themes and how many stanzas it has is going to help me in life, unless I want to be a poem dissector, or whatever other things people use it for. I get by alright in it, but most of the time I've no idea what I'm doing. I'm just blabbing on about nothing and putting quotes in here and there.

The bell rings and everyone gathers their stuff up and hands in their 'non-tests' to Jones.

"I know you're all excited to get to your next class, but can you actually make sure your paper lands on the table when you bring it up? Yes, Alex, I'm talking to you," Jones sighs, seeing Alex, who I guess is the jock with his muscular build and usually cocky smirk, look innocently at her.

I bend down to pick up the sheets that fell and place them on her desk, along with mine.

"Thanks, Joey," Jones says, smiling at me while cleaning the whiteboard. I go back to my desk and grab my bag, throwing the pencil I was using inside it somewhere before leaving for my worst class. I hope I have a nice teacher.

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Just as my luck would have it, I get the teacher who hates me on spot for my least favourite class and have to sit right at the front.

I'm in the canteen and trying to find a table where no one's sitting so I can eat my lunch. Just because I'm so lucky, it's the table in the middle of the room. I ignore the eyes following me and walk across the room to the table. I'm not very lucky today, now that I think about it.

I sit and am placing my bag on the table when someone starts to talk. "I'm Rosa." She, Rosa, sits down across from me. She has black hair with red streaks through it that falls in wavy locks to the middle of her back. She has a more-long than round face and dark green eyes that people would kill for. She's wearing a pair of jeans and sneakers with a t-shirt that has some design on it.

I ignore her and the sudden pang of loneliness I feel.

"You probably don't remember me, but I am in your English class. I sit in the middle, as far away from Lirks as I could get, but others had the same idea and got the back before I did. I don't know about you, but he has it out for me and has since day one. I'm not sure what I did to make him hate me, but he sure remembers. I've been in this school since I finished elementary school, the one across the road, Eastward Elementary. I'm probably boring you to hell with this information when you just want to eat your lunch and-,"

"Rosa!" someone shouts from a table in the far corner.

"What?"

"Why don't you come over and sit here?" It's the boy from my Math class, Alex.

"No thanks," Rosa calls back and turns to me. "That's Alex. He's an annoying pain in the ass, but I have to put up with him because my dad and his are friends, for some reason. I'm an only child and have no idea if siblings are annoying, but I'd say he's like an older brother. I've always wanted a brother or sister, but my mom doesn't, so that's that. The bell for the end of break is going to ring now, so we better get going. What class do you have next?"

Before I can answer, she takes the sheet of paper containing my time table from me and opens it up.

"I'd give you my number, but I don't have a phone since I dropped my last one in the fish tank, and I'm not allowed a new one for a while now. Personally, I find it easier without a phone- less distractions and all. People probably think I'm weird for preferring to not have a phone, but each to their own. Okay, so you have Geography with Mrs Arms in 125. That's upstairs and to your right, no- left, wait," she stops talking for a minute and looks at her hands, making an L shape on both, as though she is trying to see which one is left.

"Yeah on your right, by the office. I'm terrible with directions, so I'll just bring you there. Let's go now 'cause, knowing me, I'll go the complete opposite direction because I'm talking and not thinking, and bring you to the science lab, which is at the other end of the school. It's not like that's the only thing at that end of the school, but it's the first one that came to my mind-,"

I haven't gotten a chance to eat any of my lunch and am just about to tell her to go on without me when she says, "You can tell me to go away, you know. I'm after keeping you from eating your lunch and it'll be my fault if your stomach rumbles during class. I hate when that happens and then everyone looks at you."

She rambles on about her fish and I eat my food. Despite my, though I admit feeble attempts- but they're still attempts- to stop it, I think I've made a friend.

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For the hour and a half I've known Rosa, I've learnt that she has a pet fish called George, she's an only child, her granny's name is Beth- how that came up in a conversation, I don't know-, she hates dresses, she loves ice cream, she's in my English class, her phone wasn't water proof, she gets confused between her lefts and rights, she wants a sibling, she's seventeen, it's her birthday on the 4th of August, she likes Math, hates Science and

likes cereal.

She knows my name and time table for the week. It has been a one way conversation for most of the day, but she doesn't seem to care.

"It won't stay this way for long," she says, looking at my neat locker. "Mine was like that for the first five minutes then I couldn't find my Math book, not knowing it was in my bag, so I was late for Math and my locker was a mess. That was when I was a freshmen and I still haven't gotten around to cleaning it yet. Wait until you see my bedroom; I think it's fine, but mom says it's a mess. You'll have to be the judge of that."

I don't answer her and close my locker. That's why I don't want friends; I don't want her to have to suffer Karen's mood swings if she ever did come over. Not that I'm going over to her house or anything. I've just met her and have barely spoken a word to her.

She walks with me away from my locker, waving at a few girls as we pass by them.

"Do you get the bus?" she asks me.

I nod my head.

"You want a ride home? My car's over there and I don't want to ride back with Alex alone."

"I can't," I say, the first thing I've said to her. "I have to wait for my little brother."

"Ah ha! I knew I'd get a word out of you," she exclaims and does a funny dance. "You're probably fed up of me now, so I'm going to give you the rest of the day to decide whether you want to be friends with me by your own choice, or if I'm going to have to force you by threat of George attacking you in your sleep. See you," she calls over her shoulder, leaving me to stare after her.

She won't give up until I talk to her, by the looks of it, so, despite my earlier decision to not make friends, I think I may have to have her as the exception.

# **Chapter 6: Chapter six**

## Chapter Six

The week flies by and before I know it, it's the weekend and school is finished, as is my shift at the store.

School is going well and thanks to Rosa, I haven't been late to class since the first day. We actually have lots in common and I find myself trusting her more each day; I'll have to be careful around her.

Working at the store is great, too. Mauve lets Luke come up after school and allows him stay in the back room, messing around on the computer while I work.

Luke's been asking me can we explore the woods because Robbie, his friend from school, told him that there's a tyre swing in there and that he should try it out. Robbie's a good kid. He talks a lot, like Rosa, and is really funny. He's always cracking jokes and making me laugh whenever I see him, and he and Luke seem really close already. Thirteen may be an unlucky number for some, but it's working out a nice place for us.

It's Saturday morning and I haven't seen Karen since Thursday evening. She came in when I was cleaning water from the bathroom floor. She looked terrible. She was very thin, almost emaciated, and had obvious black bags under her eyes, along with a few bruises on her cheek.

She shouted at me and I was prepared for a beating, but she just went to her room, grabbed a bag and left the house in a car that'd pulled up in the field outside our house. Tom's been back since, but he hasn't said a word about Karen and just sleeps, then leaves in the morning. It's mostly just Luke and I.

We're going into the woods today for an exploration and, hopefully, to find the tyre swing he won't stop talking about. I love seeing him excited about something and really hope we'll find it.

He comes out of the room at 8:23am, dressed in old clothes and sneakers. I'm wearing the same, with the exception of the jacket. I only have three and the first one is stained from the first day we arrived here when I fell into the puddle. The other two are ones I want to keep reasonably well and not let them get torn on bushes and brambles.

He practically inhales his pancakes while I eat an apple, thinking about the pile of homework I have yet to start on. "Ready," he announces and rushes out the door.

I follow him, pushing the thought of homework out of my mind for the moment. I've been walking normally for a while now as my ankle isn't sore anymore- it must've only been a sprain. He's halfway to the woods when I make it out the door and by the time I arrive at the forest, he's already there, waiting impatiently for me to catch up.

I look for a path to follow through and am surprised when I see a house at the edge. It's like ours- run down and dilapidated, the door hanging off its hinges and paint peeling, revealing its original coat. There are no lights on in the house, so I'm not sure if anyone lives in it. I find a path and point it out to Luke, who runs down it without hesitation.

I follow him through the woods, looking around at the scenery. I love fall. All the coloured leaves on the ground, the clear, blue skies, the fresh, crisp mornings; the rustle of the leaves when you walk over them and the breeze cooling your face and blowing through your hair. I love seeing the kids playing in the parks before they close for the icy, cold winter and don't open again until the first sign of sun after three months of grey

skies and snowy clouds that look like balls of cotton wool.

We walk for a while, following the trail that's covered in leaves, more often than not. The squirrels in the trees chatter noisily away, collecting nuts for their long months of hibernation, when they ignore the cold weather and wrap up in their cosy lairs.

The trail eventually stops and we look for where it continues, but can't find it, or any others.

"Looks like we're own our own," I say, wondering what to do now.

Luke, who has not been paying the slightest bit of attention to the path and simply following me, looks at me. "Weren't we always on our own?"

"Never mind."

I look around at the trees to see if any of them would be suitable for a tyre swing, but can't see one. They're all too low, or the branches too thin and brittle.

"Let's go a bit deeper," I suggest, seeing some trees in the distance that look taller and thicker.

Luke runs ahead through the bushes and leaves, leaving me behind to catch up with him. I don't want to go too far into the woods without the trail to follow. We could get lost and Karen could come back. To be honest, I don't think she'd care or notice, but it's better to be safe than sorry.

I follow Luke's footprints and soon catch up with him; he's trying to get past a bed of nettles by jumping over them.

"Wait!" I exclaim, remembering back to the bad experiences I've had with nettles, especially in 'right place number seven'.

Karen had had a fight with number four and he threw her purse into some bushes, which I later found out to be nettles. She ordered him to go and get them, but he laughed at her and left. That was the last time I saw number four.

She told me to go and get the stuff and, when I took too long to walk towards the bush, she kicked me and shoved me in. The purse was open and all her make-up, cigarettes and jewellery had fallen out into the bush. It took me eight painfully long hours to find the stuff and I was covered in nettles, cuts and bruises by the time I found my way out. It took a long time to heal and the nurse from school called me in to ask what happened. I told her that I fell into some nettles; I wasn't really lying.

"Go around them," I instruct, looking for a less painful way to go deeper. Luke was only a baby when the nettle incident occurred, so I doubt he remembers it.

"Okay," he says with a shrug, moving away from the nettles. We find a path between two trees and see it leads deep into the forest. We take it and twenty minutes later we've found the tyre swing.

"Yes!" Luke exclaims, running through the muddy ground and dried up leaves to get to it. It hasn't been raining since we moved here, but I suppose the ground never really does dry deep in the woods. The canopy, of what was one time, green and alive leaves is now barely there.

I take my time to get to him and survey the land. I don't know if it's me being paranoid, but I thought I heard some rustling and moving when Luke had jumped onto the swing and away from the leaves. It was probably just the wind. I've always been one to exaggerate things when it's probably nothing.

I go over to Luke, who's trying to jump into the swing which is two feet too high for him to reach. He tries again and this time slips in the mud, falling on his behind, but he gets back up straight away and tries again.

"You'll have no energy left to walk back," I joke, walking over to him, lifting him up by the armpits and sitting him on the swing. I tug on the rope, making sure it won't snap, before pushing him forward. It doesn't take him long until he gets the hang of it and soon he is flying through the air, legs moving in and out as he beams infectiously.

Keeping an eye on Luke as he swings, I also look around the area, not wanting to disturb any wildlife around. Other than birds and a few beetles or spiders, I see no other signs of life, but that doesn't mean there isn't. A butterfly flutters past, getting caught in a slight gust of wind and being blown towards a bush that, I now realise, is the home of one flower; a red and purple one.

It strikes me as rather odd as there are no others flowers around, only that one. It's bright; colours that stand out against the slightly dull green backdrop- and I'm drawn to it. I don't know why I am, but with one last glance at Luke to find him still safely swinging and breathing, I find myself making my way over to it, like a moth to a flame.

Except, moths don't usually have to worry about their sneakers getting stuck to the wet mud of the forest floor, nor do they have to worry about one getting pulled off, leaving them in their sock with one shoe on, the other off. Sighing and wondering why I didn't think to tie my lace, I turn on my left leg, but slip, the mud doing nothing to keep friction between myself and the ground, and fall onto my back. My head knocking against the ground is softened by the soft mud, but not completely.

My hair's natural colouring is basically the same shade as the mud, so it's not easily noticeable, but the stiffness it takes when it dries clues me in to the fact. Pushing up off the ground and leaning back on my elbows, I groan when I see the mess of my clothes, wondering how I could have been so idiotic as to not have tied my shoes, but Luke seems to find it hilarious, if his laughter and clinging to the tyre for dear life tells me anything.

Though I am between two minds about what has happened, I can't help but joining in, despite my scowling in his direction. It doesn't take long before we're both laughing hard, tears falling down out cheeks- in the good way, for once. Happy tears are so very different from sad ones, just like a smile is different from a frown.

I clutch at my stomach, lying back down on the wet mud as I'm laughing so hard; his laughter makes me laugh and, until he stops, I'm going to be lying here. I don't even know how long it has been since I have laughed like this. My throat is dry and my stomach hurts, but I wouldn't trade anything for this feeling. Though my t-shirt and clothes are stuck to me, I don't notice this much until I have finally stopped laughing; the mud squelching between my toes is a foreign feeling I don't particularly like.

Taking off my sock and cleaning my foot with it, I find my shoe, and put it back on my now sockless foot, making sure to tie it extra tight. Looking down at my pants, I sigh, wondering when I am going to get the chance to wash the mud off my clothes. My wardrobe is limited as it is, but with a jacket and now a pair of jeans and a t shirt stained, it's even more so.

Shoving the pessimistic thoughts from my mind, I glance over at Luke, hoping he's okay, and find him watching me with a smile, still trying not to laugh. I make a face at him, causing him to giggle again and my

heart soars at the sound. I love seeing him like this; despite that he has little to be happy about, even though I try my best, he always sees the light in things. When I look at my clothes, I see extra money and time spent on cleaning them- the pessimistic side, but he sees something to be happy about. If me being my clumsy self-causes him joy, that's little to give to keep him happy. Plus, seeing him happy makes me happy; it's a win-win situation.

The butterfly flies past me again, reminding me of the red and purple flower that is the reason for this. A quick glance in its direction shows that it is gone, as though vanished, like the cloud Josh and I saw all those months. *Probably just the wind*, I think to myself.

Getting up off the ground and making my way over to Luke once I see that he is trying to get off the swing, I help him off, setting him on the ground while ruffling his hair.

"You have a go," he suggests, dodging my muddied hand and backing away.

"I'm too big," I tell him, glancing at the swing.

"It's bigger than it looks." He looks at me in a way I can't say no to, so I give in with a sigh, wondering if it's possible for me to use learn how to use that face. There's no one I could really use it on though; I'm a guardian to Luke, and Karen's my guardian; as if a face would make her think twice.

I climb into the swing ungracefully, almost falling off twice before I settle onto it. Luke pushes me once as I can't reach the ground, but I'm soon flying through the air, the crisp wind knocking the pieces of my muddied hair off my face. I feel free, young; like I have not a care in the world.

I feel like I did when I was five and Lisa brought me and Bianca to the park. It was a cool, fall morning and we were bundled up in our woollen coats, hats and scarves, as though it was the middle of winter.

We drove to our favourite park, which was a twenty minute drive from our apartment. We didn't need to bring the coats; they just got in my way when I was climbing the ladders and running up the steps.

I was cold by the time we got back into the car, freezing even, but I didn't care back then. You don't think about the consequences when you're five. You probably don't even know that word exists. You just do whatever you feel like doing at the time and think it's the best idea in the world.

I rushed to the swings, Bianca close behind me, and dived onto the first one I saw. It was a red one. Everything in the park was colourful; pink, red, blue, green, purple, orange -any colour you can think of- it was there.

Aaron gave me that starting push to get me going. He gave me the starting push and was there to catch me in case I fell. I didn't, but he was there anyway, thinking of the consequences when I was living in the present.

He was always there. First day of school, end of the first day, birthdays, Christmases, Halloweens, school plays, bedtime, in the mornings when I woke upâ ¦ he was always there. Then I left.

For the first time, I was thinking about the consequences. I sat all day long in my room, wondering if I should go with Karen or stay with Aaron and Lisa. I didn't want to go. I had a great life there; friends, caring family, a place I could definitely call home and had for the years I lived with them. I didn't want to give it all up for the woman who abandoned me for Vegas when she couldn't cope with me. Then I thought about the baby she was having; my brother.

I couldn't leave him with her on his own, especially after I saw the state of the place he would be living in. I decided that second that I would be there for him, no matter what.

Saying good bye to Aaron and Lisa was painful, both emotionally and physically. I was crying in the caravan when Karen snapped and told me to shut the hell up, and smacked me across the face. I knew from that second my life would be difficult and was having a lot of second thoughts about it but, the second I saw Luke, I couldn't leave.

I will never blame him for keeping me in that caravan. It was my decision and I would never have forgiven myself if I didn't leave New York. Those green eyes captivated me the second he showed me them, like they still do now.

The tips of my finger are starting to get numb with cold, so I stop swinging. It's not like the time when I was five. Then, I went home to the fire and sat by it, drinking hot chocolate while Lisa read me a story. I've Luke to look after now. He's my top priority and I can't spend hours by that fire.

Revelling in the feeling of freedom for one last moment, I get off the swing with a wistful sigh, wondering what it would be like to feel like that again. Then, with a glance at Luke, the thought vanishes from my mind; if I didn't leave New York, I never would have met this little boy, who I love more than anything else in the world.

The tyre swing stops swinging, bar for a gentle sway as the breeze blows. The further I walk away, the slower it gets, until it looks like it's not moving at all.

"Let's go," I tell Luke, taking his hand. I don't have a watch to check the time, but I'd say it's around 10am or so.

The caravan needs fixing, so I'm going to bring it to the garage tomorrow. I'm hoping nothing big is wrong with it. We haven't used it much since we got here, so I haven't been able to check if it still makes the noises. Karen may leave it open, but she always has the keys with her. I've no idea how to start a car without them and I don't plan on trying any time soon.

We take the path that we took to get here, Luke talking about how great the swing was, and how he hopes he can come back again. We get lost once by taking the wrong trail, but eventually find our way out of the woods and back to where we started.

My hair is very stiff and I can tell it's going to take a good wash to get all the mud out. Luke stops to tie his shoelace and I hear shouting and crashing. I look around to see where it's coming from and the door to the run-down cottage opens, and a figure runs out.

Him.

# **Chapter 7: Chapter seven**

## Chapter Seven

He has scratches on his face, blood dripping from his nose as he runs out of the small house, the battered door slamming shut behind him loudly. Though the door has closed, the sound of cursing and shouting is still heard, but slightly muffled.

Kyle stops running, panting as he turns back to look at the house while wiping his bloodied nose with the sleeve of his torn, white shirt. His figure is hunched; slightly leaning to the right, like the left side of his body would hurt if he was to put weight on it.

Grabbing Luke's arm, I run behind a nearby tree, trying not to rustle leaves or make any noise, but Kyle seems to sense someone else's presence as he turns towards us, staring intently at the tree we're hiding behind. I hold my breath and pull Luke behind me, not wanting him to see any more violence than he already has to.

After a moment, Kyle looks away, shaking his head, like he's trying to convince himself something. With a glance in the direction of the house he just came out of, he takes off in a brisk run, rounding the worn building and making his way into the woods; quickly disappearing from sight.

"I wonder who that was," Luke, still behind me, whispers, his voice hushed as he peeks around me. I wait a moment before deciding it's safe to come out.

Taking Luke's hand, I push him in front of me and walk quickly back in the direction of the house. His question goes unanswered; I don't know Kyle, so whatever is happening with him is his business. People don't question me, I won't question them. "Let's get back," I say instead, my shoulders sinking in relief when I see the house in my line of view.

Luke seems as though he's about to inquire again, but he just tugs his hand from mine and runs off, calling, "Race you!" over his shoulder loudly.

Following after him, I try to rid the image of Kyle, bloodied and bruised, from my mind, telling myself it's none of my business.

It doesn't work too well.

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I took them. What she doesn't know won't hurt her, but if she finds out, it won't be the same story for me.

Her wallet was sitting on the counter and she went into her bedroom for a change of clothes. She came back this morning around 7am. I thought I'd have to jump the caravan, but she left her purse there with the keys in itâ ¦it was like fate. So, I took them. She didn't notice.

We're going to the garage after breakfast to see what's wrong with the car. That is, we're *hoping* to go to the garage before breakfast and get there in one piece. I've never driven before and the road is really bendy and bumpy, so we'll be lucky to get there by lunch time with me driving.

Luke's coming with me. I'm hoping it'll only be a quick in and out of the garage because I've lots of homework to do. I'm determined to do well in English this year and I'm going to write the five page essay we got.

We eat our breakfast at the table. I finish before him and go and get the keys I hid in the bathroom wall behind the tile. I didn't want Karen to find them or see me with them, so the second I got them, I ran into the bathroom and hid them. I don't think anyone else knows about the tile.

By the time I come out of the bathroom, Luke is finished his breakfast and is putting the bowls away after washing them.

"You don't have to do that," I tell him.

He turns around to me and says, "I do. Ms Hennely said we should help around at home by putting the dishes away and cleaning our rooms."

Home. He called this place our home without 'number 13' after it. He has friends in school, a nice teacher, food, a bedroom, his own bed, clothes. I suppose it is a home. The best I've had since Aaron and Lisa's, anyway.

It does feel like a home. Luke's pictures are up around the bedroom- I'd love to put them up around the whole house, but if Karen saw them, she'd rip them down and look for the person responsible for putting them up; me, in other words. I don't want Luke's drawings to be destroyed, so I don't put them up.

I silently watch him as he finishes with the last dish, cleaning it thoroughly with a yellow rag before putting it away in the cupboard, the sun's rays catching off the clean plates and momentarily blinding me. When he jumps down off the chair and pushes it back over to the table, I can't help but sigh. I'm not sure what kind of sigh it is, whether it's good or bad, at me or at Luke. I don't dwell on it-, not that I get the chance to as Luke is quickly by my side, shoes on and ready to go.

"Let's go," I say, and he rushes off down the hall and out the door, to the caravan that we haven't been in in a while; about two and a half weeks or so.

Following after him and shutting the door behind me, I make my way to the caravan and into the driver's seat, where I have never been before; especially not to drive the actual caravan. Buckling my belt, I brace myself for the rocky journey ahead.

"You drived?"

Taking the keys out of the ignition as I pull into a space by a dull bricked building, I let out a sigh of relief, glad the journey is over- for now, at least. Turning around, I find Luke standing at the door, looking at me in awe.

"Drove," I correct him, ushering him away from the driver's part, which smells of beer and has many bottles littered around the floor, and out of the caravan. "If you call that driving, then yes, I did drive."

I don't lock the caravan behind me as I'm not sure what needs to be done with it; also, the door doesn't open sometimes, which is the reason why one of the windows is cracked. Number five broke it as he left his money in there, which he needed for beer, and the result was many sleepless nights with him and Karen fighting over how they were going to pay for it; and how they were going to get the beer. Unsurprisingly, they spent it on the beer and the window has yet to be fixed.

Chapter 7: Chapter seven

Luke trailing behind me, we enter the wide doors and arrive in the garage. Nails, bolts, hammers, saws and other various tools, that I haven't a clue what are called or do, are scattered about the floor. Engines, oils, pumps, pieces of metal, helmets and wheels are piled in high towers in the corner of the room.

I look around to see if there's anyone here, but see no one. The chairs by the door are taken up by bottles of liquids I'm not going to go near in case I drop them and poison everyone within a ten mile radius. I don't want that guilt on my conscience.

A blue, rusted car in the middle of the room wobbles on its bench. "Dammit," someone curses from beneath it, and the sound of wheels rolling reveals a boy in a navy t shirt and grey tracksuit bottoms with black hair, his face covered in oil and smudges.

He runs a hand through his hair and sighs at the car. He hasn't noticed us and I don't want to break his train of concentration, so I don't say anything. It turns out I actually don't have to say anything anyways because, with my luck, I take a tiny step backwards and stand on a bolt, which moves underneath me, causing me to slip and hit the back of my head on a can of paint.

Kyle jumps at the sound and turns around to us.

"Sorry," I apologise, trying not to wince as I get up off of the floor.

"Are you okay?" he asks me. It's the first time I've heard him speak. We may sit beside each other in Math, but we don't talk, nor does he talk at all.

"I'm fine."

I can't get the image I saw of him yesterday out of my head. His face is still covered in scratches from the glimpse I see of it. I briefly wonder what happened, but stop that train of thought quickly; I'll never ask. No one has asked about my various bumps and bruises, so I won't either.

"What do you need?" Kyle asks us.

"Oh, um, our van's out front and there's something up with it," I say, trying to explain the problem with words, hoping I won't have to make an idiot out of myself by making the noises.

"Bring it in."

I look around the garage and wonder where I'll park it, but he says, "Or I'll come out to it," before I can ask.

I turn and almost crash into Luke, who's standing right by my leg. He's very shy around adults and with Kyle's height and build, he looks like a man and not a high school student. I take his hand and lead him out the door to the van and wait for Kyle.

He comes out of the garage with a lever of some sort and a skateboard. He places the lever under the wheel and presses down on it, lifting the van up at the front. He opens the hood of the car and hooks the hooked metal rod to it, holding it up.

I catch a glimpse of his stomach and my eyes widen when I take it in. It's not because it's the most toned stomach I've ever seen, but it's the scars and bruises I see on it that catch me by surprise. They're like the ones I have on my back, except newer. Karen hasn't been around much, so most of my bruises have had a chance to heal. His are like my old ones when Karen was around: cuts that had just stopped bleeding before being

opened again and bruises that had just shown before getting hit repeatedly again. I look away before he catches me staring.

He messes about with some things for a few minutes, then closes the lid and slides under the car on the skateboard. A few minutes later he comes back up, wiping his hands on a cloth.

"The head gasket's blown," he says, rolling the skateboard out from under the car. "I know a guy who can get you one, but it's going to cost you."

That's what I was hoping not to hear. "How much?"

"About \$1300."

Obviously something drastic has to happen, and having to pay \$1300 is it. Why can't it be something else? Luke's getting healthier and his face is less gaunt, nearly its round shape that it should be. I can't go back to letting him starve just because the van needs a new gasket.

"Shall I take it that the silence isn't a good thing?" Kyle asks, breaking into my internal panic attack.

"I'll have to get back to you on that," I tell him.

"I wouldn't drive this home," he tells me. "Something could go wrong and you'll be stuck. There's no reception around here, so you won't be able to call anyone. Do you want to leave it here?"

When he puts it like that, I can't help but fear for our safety. If I was sure Karen wouldn't be back, I'd leave it here. But she could be and I'm not sure how she'd react if she sees it gone.

"I can't," I say. "K-my mom needs to get some stuff from it."

He looks as though he's about to argue, but he frowns then says, "Suit yourself," and walks back into the garage.

I frown after him and just before the door closes, he catches it with his foot and turns back. He sees me staring after him and stares back at me. I can't look away. His green eyes hypnotise me and I'm staring into them for who knows how long, until he looks away and takes his foot from the door; it closes. I blink at the noise and come out of my daze.

"Why were you two staring at each other?" Luke asks me with a frown.

"I don't know," I tell him.

And I don't.

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The bus arrives at 8:22. It's late, like usual, but, the one time we're not on time, it will probably have been early and we'll miss it. I'm not taking any chances.

We get on and show the bus driver our tickets we bought. They were \$25 each for the first two semesters and I bought them through Mauve, who knows the bus driver, Kye, personally.

Kye has, or had, black hair, but now it's almost completely grey with tiny bits of black here and there. He wears glasses that keep falling down his nose whenever the bus makes a turn. He's short and rotund and, from what I can tell from my first week on the bus, doesn't like kids and would much rather be an astronaut from the muttering and mumbles I hear.

Luke and I sit in the middle of the bus. No one our age gets it and the back's usually free, but Luke prefers the middle.

I spent most of last night thinking over the gasket problem. It got us home without blowing, but the noises were getting louder and the jerking more abrupt. I'm going back to the garage after school today to talk to Kyle and maybe ask him if I can give him his money monthly instead of all up front.

I'm still a bit freaked out by the way we left things off. Other than going to the garage, I plan on ignoring him before I turn into a mess.

Luke's looking through his bag to make sure he has everything he needs with him for school.

His teacher, Ms Hennely, is great. I was waiting for him to pack up his bag on Friday and she came over to me. She's a bit shorter than me, maybe 5'4 and has auburn, wavy hair that was tied into a messy bun. She's in her early thirties and is very nice. She told me Luke is getting on great and is good friends with Robbie and some of the other boys and girls.

The bus stops at our stop and we get off. I give Luke a hug and wish him a good day before he's dragged away from me by a group of boys from his class. He is grinning from ear to ear as he disappears through the doors.

I'm just through the front doors when Rosa comes rushing down the halls and lands right in front of me. "Hey," she says, standing by my side and walking through the halls.

Rosa's popular. I'm still not used to being stared at while walking through the halls and don't think I ever will be. She waits in front of the locker beside mine while I get my books for my classes: Math and English.

"â ¦ finished over the weekend! I can't write essays. Did you get much of yours done?" Rosa asks.

"Essay? Oh, I got three pages done."

"It's not possible to write an essay on the life of a tree. I mean, who can know what a tree thinks? I don't even think trees think, but if they did, what would they?"

I've no idea what a tree would think, even after two hours of thinking about it over the weekend and I certainly don't have a clue when I look up and find myself staring into Kyle's hypnotic eyes. He stares back. Some of my books fall out of my locker and that breaks the stare, but does nothing for the tension.

I bend down to pick up the books. "Hey, Kyle," Rosa greets.

His gaze flicks to her, but he doesn't say anything. He nods at the locker beside mine. "Move."

"Oh, sorry," Rosa says, pushing away from the locker she was leaning on and moving to the one on my other side. "I forgot this was your locker."

His locker? *Dammit*, I think. Why must he have the locker beside me? I know he was here first, but I'm trying to keep my distance from him and it's going to be harder with him beside me whenever I'm getting books.

I close my locker and pick up my bag. The bell rings while I'm putting my books in.

"Science," Rosa sighs, unhappily. "I just don't understand it."

She leaves me at Jones door and catches up with a guy from her science class. I open the door and find the classroom empty and go to my desk. And I see it.

The red and purple flower from the woods.

# **Chapter 8: Chapter eight**

## Chapter Eight

I stare at it for a moment, wondering how it could be here. Glancing around, I find no one else in the classroom, and I'm left even more confused. Quickly snatching it off the table, I shove it into my battered bag and sit down as the others file into the room. I don't think the wind was the culprit this time.

Getting my books out, I try not to think about the flower that seems to vanish and appear when I least expect it, and focus on Ms Jones, who has arrived with a bundle of papers and files. I quickly find out that the papers are our 'non-tests' from last Monday. She hands them out quickly, looking out of breath when she hands me mine, which is the last in the pile. Though it wasn't a test, she seems to have graded them as a small '96%' is written in red pen at the top right, along with a smiley face.

"So, most of you did well in the test, but we'll go over a few things soon. Open your books on page 219, and do exercise 6.5, questions 12-19. I'll be back in a minute," she announces, before quickly leaving the room.

The second she is out of view, everyone turns to their neighbours and starts talking, the assigned work forgotten. Opening the page, I take out my copy; Leah's not in, not that I'd talk to her if she was, but there's only Kyle now. Judging by the way he opens his books and turns away from everyone, he doesn't want to talk.

With a small sigh, I start doing the equations and problems that I'll most likely never use again in life. Numbers 12-14 are fine, but after a few attempts at number 15 and still no luck, I'm about to give up and go on to the next when someone stops me.

"It's over -2x, not 2," Kyle says, causing me to start when he points out my mistake. I glance down at my work and see what he's saying, but I don't hear anything more as my gaze is drawn to his scarred hand, some new, and some old. I have a sudden urge to show him mine, but I quickly stop that thought before I can act upon it.

He pulls his hand away from my line of view and turns away once again, leaving me feelinga lalone, which is odd since there are many others around me. I get back to work on the problems, sighing in relief when it works out.

The door opens and Jones arrives back; the class quietens and the sounds of pages flipping and pencils scratching fill the room. "I can hear you halfway across the school," Jones sighs, shutting the door and handing me a bundle of papers. "I'm not deaf. So, Ms Travis asked out class to organise the winter dance. She wants y'all, in pairs, to come up with some ideas as to what the themes could be."

While she is naming off the pairs, I read through the page. It basically says the same information that Jones just told us, along with that we're to make posters to hang around the school. I hope my pair can draw well, or no one is going to have a clue as to what's going on. Maybe I could ask Luke to draw them for me; he likes that kind of stuffâ ¦

"â land Joey Clint; Lily-,"

"Wait, who am I with?" I regret the question as soon as I say it. I wasn't meant to say it aloud, but I mustn't have been thinking.

"You're with Kyle Jacobs."

Chapter 8: Chapter eight

It takes me a second to register the name- I haven't heard Kyle's second name before- but, by the time I do, she has moved on to the next pair. I should've known I was going to be paired with Kyle. Everyone has been paired with the person next to them and, since there are four in each row and Lily's been paired with Adam, I'm with Kyle.

I glance at him, seeing everyone else bring their chairs to the other's desk and start to brainstorm. He doesn't move or make any attempt to, so I drag my chair, ever so slowly, to the opposite side of his desk. He doesn't speak, just carries on with the work Jones assigned us before going to the photocopier.

I take out a sheet of paper and start to write down ideas we can use for the dance.

I hate dances. I know that's a strong word, but I really do. Josh asked me to one last year; I can't remember what it was for, but I told him I'd go. I was quite excited about it, but then I realised that I didn't have a thing I could wear to it, so the hope was quickly diminished. Instead, we spent to night out by the lake, Big Blue, talking and dancing to the music from his car's radio. It was better than any dance could ever be.

Realising I have been doodling instead of writing any more ideas, I glance at the clock, coming out of my daze, but find Kyle looking at me. Looking past him, I find the clock on the wall ad silently groan when I see there's still another five minutes left. I glance down at me paper, trying to think of more ideas, but find it gone from my grasp. Frowning, I check under the table and my notebook, but it's not there.

"We need something different," Kyle says dismissively, handing me back my sheet of paper with a bored look on his face. "All those things are going to be the first on everyone's mind."

"I don't see you writing any down," I snap, snatching my paper back and glaring at the table. I didn't mean to sound so rude, but I'm a little annoyed. I'm doing the work, yet he's complaining?

He looks at me for a minute, like he's studying me then says, "See, that's the thing. If you write it down and lose the page, others will know your ideas and will steal them. You can't trust people, so I keep them in my head, where only I know what they are."

His reply leaves me speechless for a moment, and sad. Again, that urge to talk to him, really talk to him has to be supressed. "They're only idea," I say. "Who cares if someone steals them?"

"And let others think that you can do the work, yet they'll get credit for it? That they can bully you into giving them your answers and they get the grade?"

Though I sense something deeper than what he is saying, I still argue. "We're not getting graded on this."

"So? You wrack your brain to come up with great ideas, but they're just stolen. How would you feel about that? You do the work yet they get the credit, and you'll be accused of copying them. Your ideas become theirs, but can you say anything? No, they'll just beat you down and you'll be called a liar. You'll let people down, people you promised to keep safe, but because of my stupidity, she's gone. She's-,"

I now know that there's something deeper behind his words, but it seems he does, too, as he stops talking, freezing up completely. His eyes return to their usual guarded edge and he looks away from me, looking like he's about to bolt at any minute.

She, he mentioned. A girlfriend? Whoever is it, he let her down. I don't question his or say anything, just doodle on the page as the rest of the class passes by in silence, the sounds of pencils and pens scratching on paper filling the room. Why Ms Travis asked a Math class to organise this dance, I don't know.

The second the bell rings, Kyle is out the door, his chair falling over from him standing up so fast.

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I'm waiting at the bus stop when Luke comes running out of the front doors, Robbie on his heels. "Can I go over to Robbie's?" he asks, out of breath.

"Over to Robbie's?"

"My mom said he could," Robbie says, looking at me hopefully.

"Well, Iâ !"

"We can drop him home and he can have dinner or he can stay over, but can he please, please, please come over?" Robbie pleads.

"Iâ ¦ can I speak with your mom? Is she here?"

"Yeah! She's waiting over there," he says and runs off to get her.

Robbie's mom is tall. She's about 6'3 or so and has black hair that falls down to her middle, back even though it's tied in a ponytail, and blue- grey eyes shielded by glasses. She's pretty and has a slim figure that is still visible, even though she is wearing a tracksuit.

"Hi," she greets, holding out her hand. "I'm Linda."

"Joey," I reply, shaking her hand in a firm grip.

"Robbie's been going on about bringing Luke over for the past week, but he's only new to the school and I wanted to give him a chance to settle in. Robbie used pester power and I finally gave in- if you'll allow him to come over, that is. We can drop him back later on, if you want, or he can sleep over if that's better for you. He can borrow a pair of Robbie's pyjamas instead of going home to pack a bag, but it's up to you whether or not he can come."

"Sleep over!" Robbie exclaims excitedly.

Luke has never slept away from home before. I'd love for him to go but I'm worried he may wake up in the night and panic. "Can I speak with Luke for a second?" I ask. He follows me over to the other side of the bus stop. "Do you want to go?" I ask him.

He nods his head frantically. "Yeah! Robbie says he has a trampoline and tree house, and we can stay up real late and- I mean, go to bed nice and early for school tomorrow."

"Good save," I tease. "If you want to go, I'll let you. I just don't want you to feel pressured into going."

"I do! So, can I?"

I pause for a minute before answering, "Of course you can go."

"Yes!" he exclaims, jumping and hugging me. "Thank you!"

"Have fun and be careful." "I will!! Love you." "You, too." He rushes over to Robbie and they run to his car, talking about all the things they're going to do today. "Thanks," Linda says. "Robbie will be happy now." "No problem." "Our phone isn't working, so I can't give you my number." "I don't have one," I say. "I'm sure he'll be fine and if anything's wrong, Luke knows where we live." We say our goodbyes and Linda goes to her car, making sure the boys are belted in before driving off, taking Luke away for the first time in his life. The garage is the same as yesterday; nails, bolts and tools scattered over the place; paint tins, wheels, metal pieces, engines and other car parts piled in the corner, and the car is in the middle of the room. I haven't spoken with Kyle since Math and he mentioned the 'her', so I guess conversation will be tight. He sees me and leaves the room, skateboard and tools in his hand, to go to the van, no words exchanged. Not wanting to try and make too much awkward conversation, in which I'd be talking to myself the whole time, I wait a few minutes before going out to the van. He's working under it, sliding in and out on the skateboard, so I wait on the back bumper. After a few minutes of silence, except for the noise of the tools tweaking the bolts and the squeak of the skateboard wheels whenever he moves to reach for a tool, I decide to ask him if I can pay in monthly payments. "Can I pay you in monthly payments?" I ask, deciding to get to the point; he doesn't want to talk to me and I won't make him. "How many months are you talking about?" "I can give you \$125 a month and \$275 for the first month." He doesn't answer for a minute and the tools stop making noise. "Fine," he says, getting back to work. That was easy, I think to myself. "Have you thought of any other ideas for the theme?" he asks. "Oh, um, no," I say. "Have you?"

"I already thought of ideas. In my head, remember?"

"Well, will you tell me some?" "No." Well, that's helpful. "Helpful to me." Damn, I must've said that last thought aloud. "Why not?" I demand, wondering why he is so adamant her keeps his ideas to himself. "You'll steal them from me." "We're in the same group." "I don't do groups." "So, what, I'm going to have to think of the themes without your help? Weren't you saying, earlier on, that it's unfair for someone to do the work yet the other gets credit for doing nothing?" He wheels out from under the van and sits up to look at me. "The last time I checked, I was the one with the ideas. Not you," he replies and he wheels back under. "How do I know you actually have them if you won't tell me?" "Trust me." "Trust you? I don't know you." "You don't want to." I do. I want to know him. I want to know who the 'her' is and want to help him through it. I want to know what he likes, what he doesn't like, when it's his birthday, his favourite colour, his favourite seasonâ ¦ but I can't. I won't drag anybody else into the mess that is my life. He works on the van in silence as I throw stones into a dried out puddle while he does his job, switching tools every now and again. "You can drive it home," he tells me, appearing from under the van, oil and black smudges on his face and tshirt. "You'll have to bring it back tomorrow though." "Thanks," I say, hopping off the bumper. It's an awkward moment, both of us not sure what to say before we part. "See you at school tomorrow," I offer. He nods. "Bye."

I open the door to the van, step inside and drive off, away from the garage and Kyle.

I'm hoping Luke's alright. He seemed really happy and excited about going to Robbie's, so I hope he has fun. One of the reasons I didn't want Luke to go was because Robbie will have to come over to our house. It's not the house I don't want him in; the house is alright. It's Karen. She's rarely there now but, when she is, she's in

a horrific mood, cursing and muttering while going to her bedroom, grabbing a bag then leaving, the door slamming shut behind her. I don't want Robbie to have to endure that, so I'll try and keep it off for as long as possible.

I park the van where it's usually parked so Karen won't notice it has been gone, and get out and go inside the house.

Shutting the door behind me, I turn to go into mine and Luke's bedroom, when I'm knocked into the wall by a kick to my hip. I whack my head on the wall and fall to the floor. My hair's yanked down, forcing my head up to meet Karen's empty, icy blue eyes. She pulls back her fist and, before I can react, punches me in the nose.

"You little bitch!" she screams at me. "I come back to get a bag and I find the caravan *gone* and you and the boy gone, too! Then you come sauntering in with *my* keys in *your* hand!"

She slams my head into the door and I feel the cut that she gave me, from throwing the shoe a while ago, open up and start bleeding. There's a heavy pounding in my ears and I can only half-hear what she's saying.

"â | whatever you want when youâ | my best to provide for youâ | my keys and take the van for aâ | stupid little bitch!"

She kicks me in the stomach, causing me to double over from the blow and she takes the opportunity to punch my head. "You dirty whore!" she shrieks, looking disgusted at the blood on her hand from hitting my wounded head. "How dare you get your filthy blood on me?"

She grabs my hair and hits my head against the door again. "I regret the day you were born more than that boy," she shrieks then, kicking me out of the way, opens the door and seconds later I hear the van drive off.

My head's bleeding, my nose's throbbing, probably broken, my wrist is probably broken, too, from landing on it when I fell from hitting the wall; my stomach's bruised and my back is cut from the sharp heel of her boots when she kicked me out of the way.

Yet, the first thing I think of is that Luke probably heard it all and might be going after her, even though he promised me he wouldn't. Then I remember he's at Robbie's, and I take the rare opportunity to forget about everything else but myself.

The moment doesn't last long before I start worrying about how I'm going to clean up and hide the cuts and bruises from Luke. I force myself to my feet, wobbling a bit and putting a hand out on the wall to steady myself, but I don't realise the mistake until I'm on the floor again. I used my hand with the injured wrist and have probably made it even worse by putting weight on it.

I need out, away from here. I need to be on my own, but not in here. Not where she was only a few minutes ago. I need somewhere where no one will find me and I can be by myself.

I get up and, ignoring the pain in my body, run out the door and to the woods where I know no one else will be.

I run for five minutes, not knowing which way I'm going or what path, if any, I'm taking, but I don't care. I run and run until I almost collapse of exhaustion and pain and fall into a heap by a small pond in the middle of the woods. Like the lake Josh and I danced by the night of the school dance.

Josh; Josh Tinley with his black hair and bright blue eyes. Josh Tinley who I haven't seen in less a month and I miss him terribly. I wish he was here and I was looking into his bright, blue eyes. Instead, I find myself staring into the green, mesmerising ones of Kyle Jacobs, who has blood running down his face and a black eye, and is standing across the pond from me.

# **Chapter 9: Chapter Nine**

## Chapter Nine

I jump up from my slumped position on the ground, only to fall back a second later, my body protesting every movement.

Kyle looks bad: he has a black eye, blood running down his face from his bloody nose, cuts and bruises on his cheek and forehead, and a puffy, split lower lip. He's limping slightly and, from what I can tell by the way he's standing with one hip jutting out, he has a bruise of some sort on the other one.

We stare at each other, him standing awkwardly and me lying in a heap by the pond. His leg gives out and he collapses to the ground. He doesn't move and I'm thinking he has fainted when he turns slowly onto his back, arms lying limp by his side. His finger has a deep cut from the nail to the knuckle. I can barely see the finger for all the blood covering it, but it looks hard and dry.

My head's pounding and stinging and I know I need to clean the cut on my forehead soon, but I can't seem to move my hands or get my body to cooperate in any way, so I just lie on the ground and focus on breathing, which is becoming harder with every passing second.

A pain in my chest at every breath forces me to get up, but sitting doesn't make it any easier. The water in the pond looks clean and it would soothe the pain of my forehead if I could just get up and go to it without collapsing. I don't think I'll make it, but I'm taking the chance.

I heave myself up, putting most of the weight on my uninjured hand, and get to my feet, wobbling and staggering to the pond which feels like ten miles away when, in reality, it's less than four metres. I make it, but land on my injured hand while trying to sit. It stings; sharp pains shoot through my wrist and up to my fingers, making them tingle and not in the good way. The pain dulls into a monotonous throbbing as I dunk my hand into the water. It's cold and sends shivers up my body until I'm shaking, but it helps my hand.

My forehead pulses, reminding me that my wrist isn't my only injury I need to tend to. I take my hand out of the water and find it didn't help in the slightest; the monotonous throbbing returns to the sharp pains once again, but I ignore it and wet the hem of my shirt, lifting it to my forehead to cleanse the wound. The second it touches the cut, the shirt is covered in blood, the red moving up the shirt slowly, like ink travelling up a wet piece of paper. The wound is still bleeding, but I have nothing to stop it with; my hands are dirty from the ground and I'm not putting them near my head in case of infection.

A cloth lands beside me. It's smudged with black, but nothing too bad, so I take it and dunk it in the water, bringing it up to my forehead. I look up and see Kyle kneeling beside me and jerk backwards. I didn't expect him to be this close; his face is inches from mine.

"Dab," he croaks; his voice is raw and scratchy. "Don't swipe."

He reaches up to take the cloth from my hand. I just notice, before he takes it, that I am swiping from left to right, smearing the blood instead of soaking it up. Eyes locked on mine, he clears the blood from my wound, slowly and carefully, not making any sudden movements, as though he thinks I may bolt off.

"It's deep," he tells me, looking away from my eyes for a moment to look at my forehead. "You might need stitches."

I might needâ ¦ stitches? I jerk upright and back away, shaking my head, but that makes me dizzy.

"Don't move your head," he warns. "You'll open it again. It has barely stopped bleeding and you've lost a lot of blood already."

I stop moving, what he says making sense, and I accidently lean on my sore wrist again. I try not to wince, but he catches the expression and looks at my wrist.

"It's not broken," he says after a few minutes of observation, "Swollen and sprained, but not broken."

I didn't think it was; I've broken it before and it felt different then than it does now. It's easier to breathe now, sitting up, but not bending over. My wrist is still throbbing and my head's pounding, but other than that, I feel okay.

Kyle, on the other hand, is a different story.

I wash as much blood as I can from the cloth, wringing it out before crawling over to him. His eyes widen and he flinches at my raised hand. I quickly lower it.

"I'm just going to help," I tell him in a soothing voice, like the one I use with Luke when he's upset. I inch towards him and, seeing he's not going to bolt, raise the cloth to his face slowly. He flinches a bit when I touch his face, but other than that, he doesn't move.

I clean the blood from his face. His nose has stopped bleeding and the blood's starting to dry. I get nose bleeds, but they're never as bad as this. Most of his shirt is covered and the cloth is completely red when I pull it away from his now blood-free face.

There's nothing I can do for the black eye or scratches. He's not leaning on his right side, his hip jutting out at an odd angle to the left. I glance down at it and see a red welt on the bit of skin between his t shirt and jeans. It looks sore and I don't want to cause him any more pain with my amateur nursing skills, so I leave it alone.

Seeing there's nothing else I can do for him without causing him pain or distress, I sit back, avoiding my injured wrist, beside him and look out at the small pond, my thoughts wandering, as I look at the rippled water, back to a time that was only a few weeks ago, but it feels like years.

A small breeze knocks our boat from side to side, the water lapping around the smooth wood. "Stay," he whispers, holding my hand when I tense at the movement of the boat.

"I can't," I say, wishing I could.

The moon's the only source of light, illuminating the trees swaying in the breeze. It is late, about 12 at night, but it's my last day with Josh and I'm making the most of it.

"I'll come with you."

As much as I want to say yes, I deny myself the pleasure of being able to see him every day. "No. You have a future here. Your family are here, your school, your friendsâ \ I won't let you throw that away for me. I'm not worth it."

"You are! Joey, don't say you aren't worth something when you are. You're my best friend and I don't want you to go. You can't leave me. The reason I wake up in the morning is to see you. The second I saw you I knew

you were different and I'm not letting you go because of her. I need you, Joey. Please, stay."

Tears blur my vision, but I don't blink them back. I let them fall down my cheeks in streams while Josh wipes them away, one by one. 'Let those tears fall, don't hold them in/ No matter what you're told, crying's not a sin.'

I lean into him, shaking my head. "I can't," I whisper into his ear and bring my arms up round his neck to hug him tightly. He's my best friend and it's going to be torture to leave him.

He wraps his arms around me. "I love you."

He's my best friend, but do I love him? I don't know; I've never thought about it before- I've never told anyone I've loved them before except for Luke, and it feels foreign even thinking about it, never mind saying it aloud.

We sit like this for a few minutes, wrapped in each other's arms on the softly swaying boat until he pulls back and reaches into his pocket and takes out a box. He hands it to me and, as much as I want to protest and tell him he doesn't need to give me anything, I take it. I've learnt the hard way to just take what he gives, unless you want him to spend an extravagant amount of money on something else.

I untie the ribbon and open the lid. A silver charm bracelet, halfway full of charms, lies on the purple satin bottom. My name's carved into the silver on the head of the bracelet. I pick it up and stare at it in awe.

"I'll do it," Josh says, taking the bracelet from my hand and pulling it to his knees. He opens the clip and puts the bracelet around my wrist, his fingers brushing over my skin; he's the only person who can touch me without me tensing. 'Follow the cloud,' it reads on the back of the plate of my carved name.

I'm brought back to the time a few weeks after we met; it had started raining and we got lost amongst the trees. I saw a cloud that was pointing in a certain direction and, deciding I couldn't get any more lost than I was before; I followed it and soon found Josh. He said he followed it, too.

I haven't seen the cloud since that day.

I look up at Josh to find him staring at the bracelet and softly running his thumb across my wrist. "I'll find you," he whispers. "I'll come and get you and Luke when you turn eighteen." And then, with the moon as our witness and only source of light, he kisses me, right here, in the boat.

His lips brush mine once, softly then he pulls back. His eyes are closed and a tear falls from them to his cheek. I'm crying too; not sobbing, but just allowing the tears to fall instead of holding them back, like I usually do. I don't worry about what's going to happen when I get off this boat, I just enjoy the moment with him, Josh; my best friend.

After a few minutes of silence, I pull back. "I should go."

"I'll get you," he tells me. "I promise you I will."

Then, I leave Josh. I leave the lake, I leave 'right place number 12', and I leave our boat.

I'm shivering. My shirt's covered in wet blood and freezing water, my jeans are muddy from the fall I took to the ground; my socks are holey and wet, but I can't move from my spot. The cloth is the only barrier between Kyle and I, lying there on the ground, dripping wet. I itch to move it from between us, but I don't.

We sit there, unspeaking. The wind blows the strands of my hair from my forehead, tickling my cheeks in its process. We must have been here for an hour or two, but I've no one to hurry back to. Luke's at Robbie's house.

Karen took the van. She took it and it could break down on her and she'll think I did something to it. It'll cost more money to fix it if she does anything to it, money I don't have.

But I stop worrying about that. I stop thinking about everything altogether and watch the birds in the trees fly from branch to branch and the wind ripple the surface of the pond. A small splash catches my attention and I turn to see Kyle throwing stones into the pond. He hands one to me without word. I take it.

I take it in my uninjured hand and throw it as far as I can, which isn't very far. I'm tired and my body's still protesting movement, but I throw it; and another one; another after that.

I keep throwing until I can't find any more stones around me, but Kyle's still throwing. He picks up a big one and throws it, hitting the other edge of the pond before rebounding and producing a huge splash in the water.

And then he walks away from me and the pond, out of the woods the way he came.

# Chapter 10: Chapter ten

## Chapter Ten

September quickly fades into a wet and windy October. The mornings usually start with rain and dark, cold weather- as if getting if for school wasn't hard enough already.

Luke has been over to Robbie's house twice more since the first time. He's a different boy now; he's getting taller and healthier, thanks to the spare money we have as I haven't taken the caravan back to the garage-I don't plan on bringing it back; if Karen wants to drive around in the death trap, that's fine by me.

Speaking of Karen, she has changed the card number and I can't get at any of the money. Luckily, we don't need it now as we have some left over at the end of each month. We're doing fine on our own.

Though conversation is limited while we're there, Kyle and I seem to go to the pond at the same time. It has become a habit of mine; the pond is so peaceful and tranquil that I seem to find myself going whenever I have some time to myself.

We throw stones into the pond and sit side by side until it gets dark. We don't talk or do much; just sit there until we have to leave. We don't speak in Math either, unless we have to; I find myself becoming more comfortable around him than before. I thought I'd be avoiding him since the first time in the pond, but I seem to be doing the opposite of that- and that worries me.

A lot of things worry me and I've tried to forget about them, but that's the kind of person I am: a worrier. I can't do something without thinking about the consequences and, if it could turn out bad, I don't do it.

Picking up a stone, I toss it into the smooth surface of the pond, watching it sink and create ripples, distorting the reflection of the trees around it. There was a gas leak in school, so we have to leave early. Luke doesn't get out until 3:30 and it is only 1:25 now, so I have a while before I have to wait by the bus stop for him.

I have seen Tom in a while. It was the end of September the last time, and it's now the 19th of October. I don't know if he has a job or what, but I don't really care. It's not like he was anything to do with me, and, like I said before, we don't need the money.

At the sound of a bush rustling, I glance over in its direction and see Kyle. Stepping through the brambles, he wipes some dirt from his pants and sits across the pond from me, like normal. However, instead of picking up a stone like he always does, he says, "You haven't been back to the garage."

Though it's more a statement than a question, I feel like he's asking me why I haven't. "Yeah," I reply, not sure how to elaborate on it.

"Why haven't you?"

I hesitate, wondering how much I can tell him. After him seeing me that day and not asking any questions, I decided to give him the truth. "She took the keys. If she wants to drive without getting it look at, fine by me."

Though I didn't say her name or who she is to me, he seems to already know. "That was her?"

I can either shake my head and leave, or nod, telling him the truth. When I find myself nodding, I wonder why I feel I can trust him. I don't know him; he doesn't know me. It makes no sense, but telling him does, though I

don't know why.

"Has she since?" he inquires, not looking at me, picking at a hole in his pants leg.

She hasn't; she doesn't stay around for long and, when she is, it's a night time, when we're in bed. I hear her grumbling and banging doors, but she doesn't bother us. I shake my head to Kyle's question, sitting up and dusting off my sleeves.

I want to ask him what happened to him and if this person has done it since, but I don't. I have many questions, but I know what it's like to have someone pry into your life when you don't want them to.

"Where did you live before here?"

I don't know why I do, but I tell him. I tell him about my old school. I tell him about 'right place number twelve', Sabbath, Josh and all the others. I tell him about Luke, about the new schools and how hard it must be for him to have to continuously be on the move.

I don't mention Karen, or the step dads; I don't want her name to taint this conversation. I don't want him to feel pity for me or disgust- I just want him to know about me and Luke. Why, I don't know. Though I don't know him, I know he won't say a word about any of this. Maybe it's because something has happened to him for him to be like he is, or maybe it's that I just want to open up to someone who won't judge me; whatever the reason, I tell him.

Kyle listens, not saying a word until I finish. Then, he tells me about him. He has never moved house or school; he has no siblings and his dad left before he was born. Like Luke, he enjoys drawing, painting and fixing things.

I don't learn as much about him as I did about Rosa, but I learn enough to make me want to know more. Neither of us mentions the reason as to why we're here, where we first really met, nor do we ask.

I've never shared all that with anyone; not even Josh. Wanting to tell him about me worries me, but I'm done being worried about every little thing.

Screw the consequences.

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We talk, throw stones and I learn more about him over the weeks. He's seventeen, going on eighteen in March. He's been working in the garage since fourteen to provide for his mother and him. His favourite subject is Math and his least favourite is History.

I tell him about me, too. He knows more about me than anyone else does, excluding Luke. He knows my subject preference, my birthday, my likes and dislikes. He knows how many times we've moved house and the step dads we've had. He knows about Aaron and Lisa and my life before Karen came back. Though I didn't want to tell him, I couldn't exactly leave it out, not when I arrived limping once again at the pond; he knows about Karen.

He doesn't mention his mother though, always closes up whenever it comes to family. I learn more about him in the month of October than I know about Karen. I don't even know her birthday.

"You're different," Kyle says. I look at him, confused and wondering what he's on about. He has a tendency to say whatever pops into his head and, although I've gotten used to it, it still catches me off guard sometimes.

He doesn't look at me, but looks out at the trees. "I feel different around you. I usually won't tell people my name without feeling wary but with you, it's different."

October flew by and it's now the start of November. We picked the theme for the dance: medieval times. The gym's going to be decorated in medieval style with candles and long tables for banquets and thrones for the king and queen. Knights and kings for the boys, queens and princesses for the girls. I heard someone say they're going to come in a horse outfit, but I think they were joking.

"I feel I can tell you things. Everything I've told you has never been shared with anyone else," he says. "But I feel I can trust you with it without worry."

He can feel it, too. I don't know what it is or why it is, but we both feel the same way. I can trust him and he can trust me.

"I do, too."

He looks at me with those green eyes and I find myself getting lost in them. "You do?" he asks.

I nod, still staring into his eyes.

We talk about nothing and everything. About school and hobbies to the future and what we would love to be. He wants to be a mechanic. I don't know what I want to be. I've never really thought about it.

If anything, I want to help people with problems and let them feel they can trust me. I want to be a therapist and want people to know they're not alone. Kyle listens while I tell him this and nods his head and we watch the sun disappear behind the trees and go our separate ways when it gets dark. I, home to Luke and him, down the trail he comes from every time.

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The bedroom door opens and Luke comes in. I'm lying on my bed and was trying to do homework, but gave up a while ago.

"Hey," I greet when he walks over and lies beside me.

"Hey."

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

Between school, homework and him going to Robbie's, we haven't had as much time together as we did before school started.

"You haven't drawn in a while."

"We do in school. Yesterday, before we watched the movie, we were drawing people and I got Eva, so I drew her. Ms Hennely said it was really good and she hung it on the wall. You can see it when I bring the art work

home at the end of the year. Or you can come in one day. Teacher said we have parent-teacher conference, but I want you to go. Can you?"

"I'll try," I say, hoping I can. No way will Karen go or will I let her for that matter, so I'll have a word with Hennely about it. "I haven't added to my pile in a while."

"Before we go off school for Christmas break we get to bring our art back home. I've done lots in school so you'll have lots to add."

I get out some paper and pens and we play 'Stop the Bus'. It's a game where you have to say the alphabet in your head and the other says "Stop the bus" whenever they want. On the paper, you have lots of headings written and you have to name things under each heading with the letter you landed on. Luke heard about it from Robbie and we spent a few hours trying to find out what to do until we got it.

It's a Saturday day morning in the middle of November and the sun's shining through the gap in the curtain. It's cold outside, despite the sun, and Luke and I have learnt that from experience. It's about 9am or so. I've yet to get a clock or watch or anything that tells the time; it's a wonder we are always on time for school.

Luke wins by 20 points. I can never think of the drink or food or colour while he usually gets them all. I usually lose by 50 or so points so I'm getting better at it now.

Robbie lives near the school, about fifteen minutes away from our house. I still haven't seen any kids around here or anyone but Mauve and some elderly folk who live in the big houses near the bus station. And Kyle, who lives in the house by the woods. Luke hasn't met Kyle yet, but he's met Rosa.

Rosa and I were leaving the school when Luke came running over to me.

"This is Luke!" Rosa said, seeing him running over to us.

"Joey!" Luke started, but before he could say any more, Rosa started talking.

"Hi, Luke, you probably don't know me but I'm Rosa and I'm your sister's best-est friend and I'm in her English and History class and I've a fish called George."

She tells everyone about George the fish. "George?" Luke laughed.

"Yep, George," Rosa said. "He's great."

"What colour's he?"

"He's yellow, green and blue. I'd show you a picture of him but my phone fell into his tank and it wasn't water proof." She asked him what grade he's in and who his teacher is.

"Second grade and Ms Hennely."

"Ah, I had her for 4th grade. She's great."

"You had her?"

"Yep. Eastward Elementary was my first and only elementary school."

"Rosa! Hurry up!" Rosa ignored Alex's shouting and carried on her conversation with Luke.

I don't speak to Alex much, or at all really. He's in the 'popular' group with the cheerleaders and the jocks. Like every high school, there are different categories in the school; the popular, geeks, loners, emos, drama geeks and the normal people. I don't see what's so different about the people. We all have a head, body and are mammals, so we should all be grouped under the 'human' category.

After being in lots of different high schools I've learnt to ignore the popular and stay with the people I get along with. I did that for the first year, but after that I preferred to be alone, so I ignored everyone.

Rosa's popular and smart, but not a geek. She's friends with everyone and likable. I'm not sure where I'm in, but I think I'm normal, nothing special, which definitely suits me.

"I'm coming in a minute!" Rosa snapped. Alex kept calling out to her to get her to hurry up, but it only made her stay longer to annoy him.

"Now," Alex whined.

She finished off her conversation with Luke and, as slowly as humanly possible, dragged her feet to her car.

"She likes to talk," Luke said.

"Oh, believe me," I told him. "I know."

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Robbie's coming over today. After a week of Luke's begging, I finally said yes.

I'm waiting at the bus stop when he and Robbie come running out of school, their bags falling off of their shoulders in their rush. They talk non-stop on the bus until we reach the square.

Kyle helped me fix the door and the steps leading to the house. I had no idea what I had to use to fix them and he was in Mick's when I was looking at the hardware tools. Mauve didn't know, so I asked him. He went into great detail about the nails and tools I needed and what I had to do, but he lost me about three words into it, so he ended up having to me the things.

I was outside mending, or more like damaging the door to an unfixable extent with my worse than amateur skills, when he came up behind me, took the hammer from my hands and done it himself. It took him less than five minutes to fix the steps and ten for the door while it would've taken me all night and maybe into the next day.

Luke opens the now-fixed door; they drop their bags in the hall and run into the bedroom, the door slamming shut behind them. I'm praying that Karen won't come back while Robbie's here. I don't think she will, but things always seem to go wrong whenever I need them to be right.

I start my homework at the table in the kitchen and am doing it for ten minutes before the boys come rushing out and ask me if I can take them to the tyre swing in the woods. I'm pretty caught up on the homework, so I tell them yes and to go and get their shoes on.

I take my old sneakers because it has been raining and the ground will be wet and muddy; I don't want to ruin the new pair I bought last week. It's my first pair of new sneakers in years and I want to keep them clean.

Luke and Robbie come running out of the room and out the door, but I find them waiting for me at the wood's edge.

Before I go in, I catch a glimpse of Kyle in his house by the window before he disappears from it, and I into the woods.

# **Chapter 11: Chapter eleven**

## Chapter Eleven

Ever since I was three, I've known Santa's not real, thanks to Karen. I didn't know who Santa was when she told me. He'd never come to my house when I lived with her, but he came when I lived with Aaron and Lisa.

I always thought I was a bad girl when I lived with Karen for him not to come. I asked Aaron when I was five if I was a bad girl with Karen, but he told me I was the best girl in the world, so I didn't understand why he didn't come. I took her word that he wasn't real.

I was four when he first came. I was confused when I was woken up at 8 in the morning. Aaron and Lisa literally carried me down the stairs and into the sitting room. We'd put the tree up in late November and I loved putting the decorations on it. I'd never had a tree before then and wondered what they were doing bringing a tree into the house. They told me that they always get a Christmas tree every year and asked if I wanted to decorate it, which I did.

To say I was surprised on Christmas morning was an understatement. I was down-right stunned into speechlessness. I was to start school the next year, but I was teaching myself to read so, when I looked at the tags and saw some of them were for me, I had no idea what to do.

"Open them," Lisa suggested, smiling widely at me. I'd never gotten a present before since I'd only come to live with them in that October. I nervously opened the present, afraid. Someone once gave Karen a present and it turned out to be something she hated, so she screamed, shouted and broke things; I was afraid I was going to upset them and they might start doing what she did.

They didn't.

There's slow and there's excruciatingly slow. And then there was me. I was almost hyperventilating when all the wrapping was loosened from the tape. I removed it and was about to hide behind the chair when I caught glimpse of what it was. It was the story book with the pictures I saw in the book store a few weeks before. I stared at it, wondering why it was there.

"Merry Christmas," Aaron said.

We spent the next few hours opening presents. I felt really bad because I didn't get them anything, but they told me not to worry.

"There's always next year," Lisa told me.

"Next year?"

"Every year there's Christmas and Santa comes."

"Santa's not real," I told them. Even though I never knew who Santa was, his name was always stuck in my head, but I was too scared to ask who he was for fear of getting them angry.

"Why do you say that?"

"Karen told me." Even back then I never called her mom. She hated being called that and demanded I stop. Something passed through Aaron's eyes that morning, but it went too quick for me to confirm it was real. They didn't mention Santa after that, but didn't deny he wasn't real.

It's nearing the end of November and I'd love to get a tree. Luke's never had a proper Christmas before and I really want him to have one, now that I have some money. I ask him if he wants to come with me to get one and he practically dances around the house in joy.

"Can I put the angel on top?" he asks.

"Definitely. You can pick which one you like."

Mick's doesn't sell Christmas trees, so Luke and I are going into the town. We've never been before and I don't know what to expect. It's a twenty minute bus ride and Luke tells me about the party they're having in school before it finishes in two and a half weeks.

We get off at the bus stop. It is way bigger than the square; the square's a few stores. This place has stores,  $caf\tilde{A}@s$ , restaurants, arcades, banks, housing estates  $\hat{a}$  like I said, way bigger than the square. Karen must've been down here sometime because she has the number for the card. We join a new bank each time we move, so we've been members to many.

I have \$90 with me. I came home from school last Tuesday and found my purse sitting on the kitchen table. I was in a rush for school that morning, so I accidently left it on my bed, under the covers. I didn't think Karen would be home, so I wasn't too worried.

I opened it to check if the money was still there, but it wasn't. I had \$200 in there from savings, which I was planning to buy some presents for Luke for Christmas. The bills are never too expensive and altogether don't cost more than \$100, and the groceries are around \$40 a week. That leaves \$55 extra. I've about a month left before Christmas and I want Luke to have an actual Christmas this year.

"Where do you want to go first?" I ask Luke.

He thinks for a minute, looking around at the stores as people push past him, the streets crowded with people. "I don't know."

"Let's walk for a while," I suggest.

He nods and, taking my hand as I don't want him to get lost in the crowds, we make our way down the sidewalk, walking past stores of all sorts, but none that we can get what we want in.

After twenty minutes of wandering around only to arrive back in the same place as where we started, Luke and I rest against the window of a boarded up building, feeling a little deflated.

"Where would they sell trees?" Luke wonders aloud, glancing over to the window of a bakery for any sign of a Christmas tree. He's been really excited about this and I hope we won't go home empty handed. We won't be able to get the big one like Aaron and Lisa had, but it's still something to brighten up the room.

"I'm not sure," I reply, pushing away from the brick wall and starting our searching again. "But we'll find something."

Something is very vague and could mean anything, including decorations for trees, but no actual trees. Are we too late? Have people already bought their trees and stores think it's pointless to sell them anymore?

Pausing by the window of a clothes store that is having, if the signs on the window tell me anything, a sale of 25% off, I wonder if I should get Luke something for Christmas. His shoes are falling apart and he's quickly growing out of his clothes, especially his pants. My clothes mightn't be in the best form, but they're still wearable.

"Joey!" Luke calls out, barely heard over the loud chatter of the people around us, much less seen with his still small form.

Looking away from the window, I walk over to him, easily spotting him when a crowd clears. Standing beside him, I look at him expectantly.

"I think-,"

The rest of his sentence goes unheard as a loud, shrill voice cuts it off, this shriek heard easily over the dull roar. "Joey!" someone shouts, startling me. Looking around and wondering who would know me- or willingly acknowledge me-, but see no one. Thinking someone of calling another Joey, I'm about to turn back to Luke when a girl pushes through a door and rushes out towards us.

I have no idea who this green eyed, sleek, black haired girl is. Though it's the no the sunniest of says, she is wearing sunglasses which are, as well as most of the rest of her clothes, pink, as are the clothes of the girl next to her.

"Joey?" she asks again, sliding her see-through sunglasses down her nose and looking at me with wide eyes. "Josephine Clint?"

I'm a little worried as to how she knows my whole name. No one in school calls me Josephine, so she's not someone from there. That doesn't calm my thoughts in the slightest.

"Josephine Clint from New York? Aaron and Lisa?"

She's not helping my thoughts, either. Can she now just tell me who she is? As though she can tell that I am beyond confused, she finally enlightens me.

"I'm Bianca- from school? Best friends?"

Bianca? Bianca Ethan? I look at her more closely, but find no physical resemblance that I remember. Though she has obviously grown since she was eleven, her personality has changed, too, it appears so. She used to be a tomboy, always seen in muddied shorts and playing soccer. Now, the shorts have changed to skirts, if they could be called that, and manicured nails that are painted in, you guessed it, pink; which is also the colour of her lipstick.

She, as well as the girl beside her, looks like a Barbie doll, with her huge smile and white, straightened teeth. I know she has had them done up- when we were friends, she was playing Frisbee with Cian and she ran into a wall, knocking her front tooth out and chipping some in the process.

"Joey!" she squeals, rushing over to me and engulfing me in an enthusiastic hug. Though I stiffen at the contact, she doesn't seem to notice- either that, or she ignores it as she only hugs me tighter. "Oh my Gawd! It's been, like, years! This is so awesome!"

"Wh-what are you doing here? Don't you live in New York?" I ask, knowing Luke is looking at me, but I don't say anything to him, just step back a little and stand beside him.

"We do," the girl beside her says snidely, and I recognise her to be Sabina Treys, the girl we hated in schoolyet here she is, with Bianca.

Shocked to see the pair of them within the same square mile of each other, much less right beside each other and wearing the same outfits, I splutter, "Sabina?", wondering if I am seeing things.

"Obviously," she sneers, flipping her blond hair over her shoulder and turning to Bianca. "Let's go," she whines, actually stomping her foot on the ground. "We're appointments to go to."

"Sabrina?" I ask, shocked to see the two of them in the same square mile without attacking each other, much less right beside each other and wearing the same outfit.

Bianca glances at her watch, purple this time, and groans. "We have to go," she sighs, looking over at me while walking backwards. "The spa is about ten minutes away and we have our appointments in fifteen. I'll call you later?"

She doesn't have my number- not that I have a phone- but I don't remind her that. It makes me wonder how she recognised me; have I not changed at all since I was a kid? She's gone before I can say another word.

I want to ask her about Cian, hear about how he's doing-if they're still in contact, though I doubt it. Cian could have changed, too, but the boy I knew wouldn't hang around with Sabina, of all people.

"Who was that?" Luke asks, frowning after Bianca and Sabina.

"I'm not sure." I know he's asking what their names are, but I don't know them anymore. I never knew Sabina anyway, but Biancaâ ¦ "So, what were you saying?"

"Oh, I think they sell trees in there," he says, pointing at the window of the store called Kent's. "There are little ones in the window."

Seeing small trees in multiple colours, along with lights and fake snow, my hope inflates at the thought of getting our tree. "Come on, let's go and see," I say, taking his arm and marching into the store, feeling giddy with happiness at the thought of Luke finally having his first Christmas.

"Have you ever had the feeling you're being watched?"

I look away from the rippling water and over to Kyle, who isn't looking at me, just lying back on the slightly damp ground and into the clouds. "Noâ !" I reply, frowning slightly.

"Me either."

I have found out that he has a habit of saying whatever comes to his mind. Though I have gotten used to it, sometimes the questions have nothing at all to do with the topic at hand, no matter how hard I try and find a connection.

Chapter 11: Chapter eleven

65

Christmas if getting closer and I'm even more excited than Luke is. We've been setting up the gym for the dance, which is on the 15th December; the decorations are up and flyers have been distributed around the school. It's looking well, though there's still a lot to be done.

I think back to the conversation Rosa and I had a few days ago, when I told her I wouldn't be going to the dance. I don't really want to go; I've been to a few in my past schools, but the people I went with went with partners, and I was usually left alone, and ended up leaving early.

For the past week or so, Rosa has been begging me to go to the dance. At lunch yesterday, she came over to the table I was sitting at and stood up on it, asking me, really loudly, to go to the dance. She made a huge commotion out of it, getting everyone's attention- which included that of Mr Lirks, who gave her a detention for standing on furniture. I reluctantly agreed, but really am regretting it now.

Kyle mutters something under his breath, but I don't hear it.

"What?"

He doesn't answer for a moment, just continues to look at the clouds, until her eventually replies. "Is binn  $b\tilde{A}$ @al ina thost."

I may as well have no have heard it at all for all it tells me. I stare at him, wondering what he just said. It's a different language, one I don't think I have heard before.

"A silent mouth if sweet; silence is golden."

And here's with the random thoughts again. "What language is that?" I inquire, curious; I never knew he spoke a different language. I'd love to be fluent in another tongue, but after a few failures of learning French, I have since given up at that; English will have to do.

"Gaeilge."

That produces another questioning look and sound from me. I haven't heard of that before.

"Irish," he answers, even though I didn't actually question him. He says it nonchalantly, like it's a normal thing for him to be sprouting off Irish words and phrases.

In all honesty, I never knew Irish was a language; well, I knew of it, but I have never heard anyone speak it before. "How do you know it?"

"I'm half-Irish."

Well, there's something I didn't know. You learn something new every day. Kyle doesn't talk about his family, so I never would have guessed that. "Really?"

"My mom used to speak to me in it when I was a kid," he says, his voice steady and emotionless, but I hear a wistful tone to it. "She isn't Irish, but my dad used to say some things in it; she told me about him, sometimes. Then she couldn't bear to talk about him and shut down completely, not saying a word about him of anything else. I remember some phrases- that one stuck with me, for some reason."

This is new- he's actually volunteering information about his family, something that doesn't happy very often, if at all. I can't help but feel a little relieved that he trusts me with something like this, something he seems

very private about. I've told him all about me, so to know that he could trust me enough to do the same, adds to my confidence in him.

"What's hello?" I ask, wanting to get more information from him, whether it's about his family or just the language. I don't really care, to be honest; I just like talking with him, about whatever- just being with him, really.

"Dia duit."

"Goodbye?"

"SlÃ;n."

"SlÃ;n," I repeat, testing the word out, but it doesn't sound as good as it does when he says it.

"Not slane, sl-on," he corrects, sitting up and picking up a sharp stone. He finds a clear piece of ground and scratches some letters into it, with a slanted line on the 'a' of the word. "The line on the A? That's called a fada."

Dia duit and  $sl\tilde{A}_in$ . I never would have expected to learn a new language when I woke up this morning, yet here I am now. Expect the unexpected, I suppose. "Any more sayings?" I ask, wanting to know more.

"Well," he mutters, leaning back and thinking. "There's  $n\tilde{A}-l$  aon  $tint\tilde{A}@an$  mar do thinte $\tilde{A}$ ;n  $f\tilde{A}@in$ ."

Once again, I have no idea what that means, but it sounds beautiful. "What's it mean?"

"It means, 'there's no place like home.' Or, if you want it directly translated, it's 'there's no fireplace like your own', but it means the same as there's no place like home."

I chuckle a little at the direct translation. "That's a little odd. Have you ever been to Ireland?"

Kyle shakes his head, tilting his head back. "My dad was born there, a small town in Cork, but I can't remember the name. It' sounds like a nice place, Ireland. I'd like to go and see where he grew up. I've never left this place before."

"You've never left this place, as in Strawton?" I ask, eyebrows rising. I've been all over the place, yet he has never left here.

"Well, I've gone into town a few times, but other than that, no, I have never left."

"Would you like to?"

He doesn't hesitate before nodding his head. "I've seen everything here. I want to travel around the world and see new sights; I want to climb he Eiffel Tower and see the pyramids; explore the Amazon rainforestâ ¦ but it's never going to happen," he sighs, shaking his head, as though to get rid of such ridiculous ideas. "I don't tell anyone about that- except you. No one knows I am half-Irish, no one knows about Alanaâ ¦ only you, Joey," he says, staring into my eyes; green on brown and, once again, I can't look away.

I want him to tell me these things- want him to *want* to tell me these things. I want to know more about him, things no one else knows; want him to trust me and me to trust him.

And I do trust him. I've told him about Karen and Luke; about Aaron and Lisa, seeing Bianca again. He knows things about me that even I barely know. He has a way of getting things out of me without trying; but I'm not worried about it.

For once in my life, I' not worrying or thinking about the consequences- or thinking much at all, really; especially not when he's looking at me with his green, mesmerising eyes, not looking away from me- like he actually wants to, and is not in a rush.

It makes me feel special, like he wants to be with me. I like it, and I'm not going to worry. I'm going to enjoy the moment and live in the present, not the future.

The future can wait for now.

# **Chapter 12: Chapter twelve**

## Chapter Twelve

It's the start of December, and the dance is in two weeks. We've been spending a lot of time setting the gym up and have hardly done any Math this week- not that anyone is complaining, and the time spent on it has definitely been worth it.

"Alex, would you get up and do something?" Ms Jones sighs wearily, looking away from her clipboard and seeing Alex sitting on the stage, once again. "Unless you'd rather be doing some Math; I'd be more than happy to occupy you with some."

Lounging lazily on the thrones for the King and Queen, Alex replies, "No thanks, Ms Jones." Everyone else, bar for him and Jake, are working, whether it's setting the music system up or hanging things to the walls. I'm hanging up candle brackets- or trying to, anyway. Over the past fifteen minutes, I've been able to hang up one without it falling off.

"Well, get up and help. You too, Jake," Jones tells them, trying to sound firm, but doesn't come out like that as a yawn punctures her sentence.

Even though she doesn't look like she's going to manhandle them from the stage any time soon, they both do as their told, for once, and get up, making a dramatic scene with long stretches, before dragging their feet to Jones to get their jobs.

With a sigh, I turn back to the wall, cringing when I see the other four brackets I have to somehow hang without destroying the place.

"You want to switch jobs?" Adam, who is hanging banners up with sticky tape, asks me, seeing my failure at using tools of any sort.

I nod my head gratefully at him, glad he's a nice guy; he's also funny, too, and good at DIY things. The room is really warm and his black hair is sticking to his forehead, as it mine, some pieces having fallen from my ponytail.

Getting off of the step-up ladder, I hand him the nails and tools. "Thanks."

Giving me the sticky tape, he hops onto the ladder and doesn't stumble, unlike I did. I'm no good with heights; just don't like them. I don't think there's a reason as to why I don't- I've just never really been around them much, so maybe it's that.

"So much fuss for a dance," Adam says, looking around at the room with a shake of his head. "I personally don't see the point of them. You go, dance, get photos and go home, whilst spending lots of money on clothes you'll never wear again. You can do that at home for free and have more fun."

Biting a piece of tape off, I stick it to the corner of the banner, which is meant to be like the parchment they used in the medieval times; that's the theme of the dance: medieval. They're just thick paper stained with used tea-bags, with 'Welcome to ye Christmas Ball' written on them, in writing that I can barely distinguish.

"â ¦ have their own opinions, but that's mine," Adam finishes, and I glance over at him to find he has already hung the bracket onto the wall, and it already on the next one. "What about you?"

"Umâ ¦ oh, yeah, I don't like them much, either," I mumble, pressing against the wall hard, hoping the tape will stick to it. Unlike Adam, I'm not a very opinionated person, and don't like arguing mine with others, preferring to keep it to myself.

When the banner falls off the wall again, I sigh, wanting to just give up.

"Here," Lily, who is working beside me, says, offering me a ball of sticky tack. I only have Math with her, but she's a nice person. I'd wave to her if we pass by each other in the hall, and she's really smart, too.

"Thank you," I say, taking the tack and sticking it to the corners of the banner.

It takes me a while to put the five banners up, but after about twenty of so minutes and some small talk with Adam and Lily, I'm finished, with some time left before class it over. Lily is setting up the tables and Adam still has another bracket to put up, and the rest of the class is still working, so I have nothing to do.

Unlike in some of the books I read, I don't seem to feel people staring at me. I'm not sure if that's possible, really; or maybe I'm just unusual, but, when I look over at the wall with the clock on it, I see Kyle watching me closely, like he has been for a while.

I may know things about him no one else does, but we don't talk to each other much outside of the woods. Rosa told me one time at lunch that he doesn't talk to people and prefers to keep to himself, despite her attempts to convince him otherwise. I used to be like that, but Rosa's persistence and the pang of loneliness I was feeling made me give in.

I can't say I regret the decision, but I wish I didn't have to lie to Rosa about the bruises and cuts I appear in school with; though it is less often than I used to, I still do. I tell her I fell or some other lame excuse she probably doesn't believe if her suspicious looks tell me anything, but she doesn't say otherwise.

Christmas is my second favourite time of the year. I love the lights and the trees in the windows of houses; the white blankets of snow covering the ground. I love to see the little kids having snowball fights and building snowmen in their puffy coats and gloves, scarves and hats; their cheeks and tips of their noses red from exhaustion and the cold. The fires lit in the living room and the tree in the corner, beneath it the colourful sight of presents and the surprise of what's inside. The towns are lit up and the Christmas carols are sung on the streets and the radio. It's a magical time of year.

The tree Luke and I bought in town is now in our bedroom. It's green, fiber-optic and decorated, thanks to Luke, with baubles and lights. It's in the corner of the room and quite small, but it's Luke's first one and he really likes it. I'd love to be able to decorate the outside of the house with lights and other Christmas decorations, but if Karen saw them, she'd go mad and I'm not letting her ruin Luke's first real Christmas.

I did buy some stick-on snowflakes and tinsel for the widow in the bedroom, and Luke's drawn pictures for the walls; the house is looking Christmassy already.

I asked Luke if he was ready to write a letter to Santa yet, but just he looked at me as though I had five heads. He's never gotten any presents besides the one from Josh last year. I've never been able to buy him anything because Karen always took the money I earned from work, but she hasn't this year, so I'm planning to make it his best of many Christmases to come.

I told him that Santa couldn't remember where we lived for the past few years, and that's why he didn't come to us, but I don't think he believed me. I got him to write a list anyway and, after a lot of persuading on my part, he finally wrote two things he'd like. An art pack with pencils, sketchbooks and other arty things he saw

in a store when we went to town, and a cook book for his interest in cooking. Not the usual thing on the average seven year old boy's Christmas list, but it's what he'd like.

I've bought the art case already and I can't wait to see the look on Luke's face on Christmas morning when he sees it. Just the thought has me smiling and wanting to give it to him now, but I'll have to wait another few weeks.

The calling of my name snaps me out of my daze-like state, and I look up to find Kyle standing in front of me. How I didn't notice him before, I don't know, but he doesn't look too happy.

"You're to help me," he says shortly, then walks off to the corner where I previously saw him working.

As I have just come out of my daze, it takes me a few moments to comprehend what he just said but, by the time I do, he is back in my face again, snapping, "I don't have all day."

I briefly wonder why he's in such a mood, but I don't question it. We're in public, not in the woods; he is never in the best of moods in school, but he doesn't usually snap at anyone. I walk over to the wall, where he is hanging brackets to the wall, but I'll be of no help to him here.

"I have no idea how to put them up," I tell him, wondering why I was asked, of all people.

"Hold it," he instructs tightly, moving out of the way so I can hold the bracket while he drills it.

Though I have no reason to be, I am still cautious; I don't like drills or any tools, especially hammers. Number three liked tools and DIY, but that meant that there were tools around for Karen to throw about when he went into another one of her moods. I've had a few broken bones thanks to them, and have stood on so many nails that I have lost count.

Warily, I hold the bracket, standing as far away from the tool as possible.

"Higher," he instructs, lifting it up the wall a bit. I have to stand on the tops of my toes, but I do so without complaint, not wanting him to snap at me again.

He holds the drill steadily, unlike me, where it takes chunks out of the wall and seems to go haywire. Finished with the first screw, he kneels down to get the second one. My arm is getting sore from holding it and when he takes quite a long time to get the screw, I glance down, wondering if he has lost it.

He's not looking on the ground for the nail, though. He's staring at me- my stomach, to be exact. Since I have been stretching up, my jacket has lifted up slightly, exposing a part of my skin; it just so happens to be the part with the most scars and bruises.

I jerk my jacket down, feeling my cheeks heat up as I tuck my arms around me. In doing so, I let go of the bracket, which slides down the wall, producing a high pitched screeching that has some people covering their ears.

My scars aren't as visible as Kyle's were that day in the garage, but they're still there and won't go away. I've had one since I was ten; I was playing with Luke and accidently broke one of her wine glasses. Karen didn't take it well and ordered me to pick the pieces up but, apparently, I didn't do it fast enough as she shoved me onto the broken glass and whacked me with the broom.

There was a bruise on my back for weeks and the pieces of glass cut into my stomach, some small pieces getting stuck. It took me a few hours to get all them out and by then, it was gushing bleeding.

It wasn't the worst that has happened to me, but it was still new to me then that she'd hurt me like that. I was only living with her for a year- if even that- and she didn't really hurt me too much back then.

I feel inexplicably angry at Kyle. At the garage, I didn't stare at his scars or give him any impression that I saw them, yet he was staring at mine and not even trying to be subtle about it. I know I have told him all about me already, but him actually seeing my scarsâ ¦

"Okay, guys," Jones calls out to the class. "The bell's going to ring, so you can go and get your books."

I don't think twice before I run from the room.

~

"Did you get much homework?" I ask Luke, picking up his heavier-than-usual bag as the bus pulls to abrupt halt at our stop.

"Sort of; we're having a big test on our tables and spellings, so I have to go over them."

Hurrying Luke along when Kye mutters his under breath and looks as though he is going to speed off before we're out of the bus, I sigh in relief when we're off and safe. "You know them all already."

"Not all of them, I got two wrong last week," he cuts in modestly, taking his bag from my hand and throwing it over his shoulders. Making sure to look left and right when I give him a stern look, we cross safely and make our way to the house.

The stores in the square are decorated with lit-up snowmen, lights and trees. Mick's outdoes them all, if I do say so myself, with its colourful trees, huge manger in the window, inflatable snowmen and giant Santa by the door. The snowmen took ages to get ready; I didn't realise there was a pump- Mauve was laughing hard, thinking my light-headedness was funny as I spent hours trying to manually blow it up.

It started snowing last night sometime. When we woke up this morning, the ground was completely covered in two inches of fresh snow. It was predicted and we weren't mean to have much snow this year, but it's still snowing now; about another inch has fallen since this morning. Luke wanted to stay off school to build a snowman, like most little kids would like to do, but I wouldn't allow him.

It's like a postcard scene, with the snow covered tree tops of the woods, the snowman, that Luke quickly built this morning, in the garden. Snow covers to roof of the house, still falling from the white sky above it.

I managed to avoid Kyle for the rest of the school day- it was sort of easy, since we don't have any of the same classes, except for Math. I avoided my locker, but I'm regretting that now as I have an essay that's due for tomorrow, but I don't have my notebook with me to finish it. Mr Lirks doesn't like it when you hand something up on a page, as I found out the hard way.

At least I can use the snow as an excuse to avoid the woods.

Opening the door, Luke rushes in, shaking the snow from his hair as he throws his bag to the floor. He runs into the bedroom, leaving me in the hall alone.

Just as I am about to go to the bathroom, Luke shouts, "Christmas tree!" loudly, making me frown. We've had the tree for a while now- the excitement of seeing it must have worn off by now.

Changing course, I make my way into the bedroom, to find Luke sitting on my bed with a rectangular-shaped box in his hands. "What's that?" I ask, taking a seat beside him and looking at the slim box. A picture of a snowman and some children playing by a log cabin is on its cover, but I don't know what it is.

"It's an advent calendar," Luke tells me, his gaze intent on the box. "Ms Hennely says someone gets to open a square each day until it is Christmas. We get out names picked out of a hat and I was first." Finding what he was looking for, he pushes down on a small square with the number 'one' written on it, and takes out a piece of chocolate. "Do you want some?" Luke asks me, smiling at the small Christmas tree shape of chocolate.

I shake my head. "No, I'm fine."

He happily munches on the small treat, closing the piece of cardboard up. "Are you going to the dance?" he asks, placing the box on the table and turning to face me.

"How do you know about that?" I ask, not remembering mentioning it to him.

"I head Rosa asking you a while ago. Are you?"

"Maybe," I sigh. I don't really want to go, but I told Rosa I would, and I don't think she'd let me take that answer back.

"Why not?" Luke asks with a frown. "You haven't been to one in a long time."

The last time I went to one was when I was freshmen, but that wasn't too long ago. There's always prom, but I highly doubt that I'm going to go to that- I don't have a dress and there's no way I am buying one just for one occasion.

Josh asked me to prom, even though it was a year away when he did. Karen didn't say anything about moving until two days before we actually did, so I thought we'd be staying there; stupid of me to think we would stay at a place for over a year, but I was feeling hopeful. I told him I'd go with him and, a week later, Karen told me to pack up all the stuff and we moved.

Maybe Josh is coming for us, maybe he isn't, I don't know. He has probably forgotten about us, not that I'd blame him. He has his own life to worry about, never mind me.

His father was sick and he has to look after him. His father never liked me, but his mother was nice and I liked her. When Josh brought me over to his house, she made cookies for me to give to Luke and I sometimes had dinner while I was there.

His father wasn't as welcoming. He looked at me as though I was vermin and dirty, something unwanted; a look I get from Karen when she is feeling generous. I suppose I did- look dirty, that is. I didn't have money to buy clothes because Karen took it for booze and cigarettes. The money I saved was for food for Luke, which was barely enough to live on.

The house we have now is the best life Luke's had so far and I'll do the best I can to keep it that way.

# **Chapter 13: Chapter thirteen**

"Stop it," Rosa snaps, hitting Alex's hand out of the way as he tries to change the station again. "It's annoying."

He rolls his eyes, pushing her hand away from the button and pressing it once again. "You're annoying."

I cringe when loud rap music starts blaring out of the speakers all around the car, wondering why I agreed to this. I have tried to get out of going to this dance many times, but Rosa won't allow me to take my word back. I have tried excuse after excuse, but she always has a way around them.

"Real mature, Alex," Rosa mutters, taking a left and driving up a small, windy back road with so many sharp turns that I tighten my seatbelt. And I thought Kye's driving was dangerousâ ¦

"You're mature," he snaps, but then seems to realise what he just said as he tries to take it back. "No, wait-,"

"Thank you, I know I am," Rosa replies haughtily, abruptly stopping at large, black gates that are taller than me. "We're here."

I try to open the door, but there are so many buttons that I have no idea what to do to open it. I haven't been in a car since 'right place number seven', but number four's car was really old and the windows wouldn't open, much less have a radio. It smelt of beer and cigarettes, but I'm used to that by now, with having Karen around all the time.

Rosa appears and opens the door for me. "They lock the doors," she tells me, pointing to a small button on the handle. "They're so children can't open the doors." She looks pointedly at Alex, who is snickering at the number on the gates.

"Hey!" he cries, hearing Rosa's obvious insult and taking offense to it.

Rosa ignores him, pressing the buttons and the gate opens, leading way to a three storey, old fashioned brick house. There's a lot of land around it; a trampoline, swing-set, tree house and sand box are spread out around the yard, with some flowers- now dead- in pots around the house.

Rosa leads me up the snow-covered path to the front door, rummaging around in her pockets for her keys. Though the outside of the house gives the impression of a clean and neat environment, the inside is the opposite.

A set of stairs leading up to the second floor are covered with clothes and shoes, the soil from the plant behind the door spilling over the side as it's knocked over by Alex, who doesn't seem to notice what he has knocked over. Picture frames hang from every inch of the wall, from baby photographs to wedding pictures, and everything in between.

"It's a bit messy," Rosa says, but she doesn't sound embarrassed by the untidy house. "We were cleaning out the attic last night, but we got a bit carried away and forgot to clean it up."

The sound of scratching from behind a closed door catches my attention, reminding me that Rosa has pets.

"That's Roper," Rosa tells me, shuffling through the boxes piled by the walls to get to the door. "He won't bite, but he'll bark for a while. Jingo will want to give him a pat and won't stop nudging you until you do."

When Rosa opens the door, a tiny, white, puffy dog comes waddling out, making its way over to Rosa immediately and jumping around her legs. "Hey, boy," she coos, rubbing Jingo's back and kneeling beside him. "Where's Roper? Roper!" she calls, whistling for her other dog to come, but no one arrives. With a sigh, she gives Jingo one more rub before making her way into the room.

Jingo goes to follow her, but he spots me and comes bounding over. Nudging my shin, like a cat, he rubs against it, barking playfully at me.

Cautiously, I kneel down and place a wary hand on his head. When he doesn't attack me, I give him a rub, wondering how he can be so trusting with me; I'm a stranger, yet he's not barking at me, or wary in the slightest.

"You'd make a terrible guard dog, you know," I tell him, to which he lets out a small yap. I've never had a dog, or have had much, if any, experience with them, so I'm not really sure what to do.

"Roper!"

Jingo jumps up and scurries into the room where Rosa went, following the sound of her voice. Cautiously, I do the same, unsure if I am allowed or not.

If I thought the hall was a mess, this place is nothing compared to it. A pillow or something must have been torn up as there are feathers and pieces of material all over the room, some still floating in the air. A big dog is sitting on the couch, looking at Rosa while she scolds it.

"You weren't meant to tear it up! It was a toy, not something to destroy," she sighs, looking around at the mess as Roper hangs her head, like she regrets the action and is ashamed of such behaviour. "Don't be showing me that you're sorry; save that for mom."

Jingo dives into a pile of feathers, sending them flying all around the room. Roper looks up and, catching sight of me, she flies into a barking frenzy, her deep, low bark so different from Jingo's high-pitch yap.

"Zip," Rosa demands, waving her hand and Roper stops, but still watches me warily, unlike Jingo, who continues to play with the feathers.

"What type of dog is Jingo?" I ask, watching him sneeze and pounce on a feather that moves.

"He's a Shih Tzu and Roper's a Boxer. Unlikely pair, but they get along well."

"Ooh," Alex taunts, appearing in the doorway with a packet of chips in his hands. "Alicia is going to be mad."

"And why would I be mad?" a new voice asks, not sounding like she is surprised in the slightest. Mrs Carnes, Rosa's mom, nudges past Alex, stealing one of his chips, and arrives in the room. "Roper!" she shrieks, looking around at the mess as Jingo waddles over to her.

She picks up the small dog, while glaring at the other one, like it's the bane of her existence.

"It wasn't one of the cushions," Rosa assures, standing in front of Roper defensively. "It was a toy,"

"That's the third time this week, Rosa," Alicia replies wearily, sounding tired and fed up.

"I'll find her one with no stuffing."

Alicia sighs, but nods, not looking like she wants to argue with her daughter. "Just clean this up or she's not going to be allowed in here anymore."

"I will, but first, I have to get Joey ready for the dance," Rosa says, subtly moving in front of Roper as she starts to attack a cushion.

"Joey?"

I shuffle my feet, taking a step to the right so I am not hidden behind the fireplace. I wonder if Rosa told her mom if I was coming over, but the look of slight surprise tells me my visit is unexpected.

"Oh, hell, Joey," Mrs Carnes says, smiling politely at me. "Well, you girls can go up and get ready for the dance."

Rosa takes advantage of her mother's sudden change of mind and rushes out of the room, motioning for me to follow. "Quickly," she hisses, "Before she makes me clean it up."

"You're still cleaning it up!" her mom calls out after us, but Rosa pretends to ignore her, rushing up the stairs as she rolls her eyes. When we get to the top, she goes to the door straight ahead of us.

"Welcome to my room."

~

I never thought I'd see myself with curly hair- nice curls, not the wavy mess that I usually have. I wouldn't put myself through the hassle of doing it regularly, but it's nice; different, for a change.

Against my wishes, Rosa has done my make-up, but it's only a light coating of mascara, and some eye shadow, so it's nothing too drastic. I have never gotten my ears pierced, so I can't wear any earrings, but I have the necklace Lisa gave me the Christmas before I left on, along with the bracelet Josh gave me on my wrist.

The dress is nice, but I still don't like dresses. I liked them when I lived with Aaron and Lisa, but Karen sold all my dresses the first chance she got, and I haven't worn them since. They're a childish thing, and my childhood is in the past.

"Yes!" Rosa exclaims, jumping on the spot and clapping her hands with a huge grin on her face. "I knew you'd look awesome in it."

Rosa looks good, too. Her hair is straightened and pinned back, showing the golden earrings she is wearing. She doesn't have much make-up on either, but she doesn't need it. Her dress is nice, too, with red pieces of material overlapping each other, and white lace around the sleeves and the hem.

"Ready?" she asks, grabbing her phone and checking the time.

I nod my head, following her out of her bedroom and to the stairs. We don't get far before her mother is ambushing us with a camera and clicking the button furiously.

"Photos!"

~

Though we're not late, Rosa and I are probably one of the last people to enter the packed room of people, wearing costumes ranging from peasants to knights; kings and queens and, though I thought it was only someone joking, I see a horse wandering through the crowds, bobbing along to the music. If I feel warm, I can't imagine how the people in that costume feel.

All the work we put into the gym paid off; it looks like a medieval castle, with long, wooden tables and a throne for the queen and king of the dance to sit in. Candles light up the room in the brackets, and music plays from a large jukebox, which sort of ruins the olden effect, but no one seems to be complaining about that.

"Anyone want to dance?" Chloe, one of Rosa's friends from another school, asks, looking around at us. Anna, another friend, nods her head and they rush off the make-shift dance floor, which is crowded with people and lit up with flashing lights.

"And then there were three," Zoe says, walking through the crowds to the table with refreshments. They each take a soda, but I don't like those kinds of drinks, so I grab some water.

The time passes by slowly as we talk to some people or to each other. Chloe and Anna come back a few times, sweaty and tired from dancing, but they're enjoying themselves.

I join in with the conversation, not wanting to be a drag, but I wish I was at home with Luke. I mightn't be normal for a teenager to want to spend time with their younger brother rather than with their friends, but Luke and I haven't gotten much time with each other, lately. We're not growing apart, exactly, but now that he has Robbie and I'm busy with school, we don't talk much anymore. He's growing up; as much as I love that he has friends, I miss him and our close relationship.

When Chloe and Anna leave for a fifth time, Adam appears beside me, coming out of nowhere. "Do you want to dance?" he asks and if he wasn't looking at me, I would have though he was asking someone else.

*Dance?* I think, wondering why he's asking me. I don't dance- can't dance, actually; and I'm not just saying that. I have two left feet and I'm not left-footed or ambidextrous, and I find the whole thing awkward, especially slow dances.

Rosa, who has realises that Adam is asking me to dance, nudges me forward with an exaggerated wink, and Adam seems to take that as a yes as he leads me over to the floor before I can politely say I don't want to.

As though the DJ knows I am on the floor, the next song is a slow one, making me want to run off the dance floor, but that would be rude. Instead, I just allow him to place my hands on his shoulders and take lead. His hands are on my waist and I tense slightly, but he doesn't seem to notice as he keeps them there and we spin to the music.

It's really an awkward experience as I have no idea if we should talk or not; everyone else is close to their partner and not crashing into others, so I just look around and try to avoid eye-contact with him.

All of a sudden, he spins me out in a circle, but I, being the ungraceful person that I am, stumble and almost land flat on my face, but he catches me before I fall. We earn a few glares from the people around us when I crash into them, and I want nothing more than for the song to be over.

"Sorry," Adam apologises, looking a little embarrassed. "I should have warned you."

Luckily, the song ends and I all but run from the dance floor. I'm not trying to be rude, but I really don't want to dance again. Adam's a nice guy, but I just don't like dancing.

Arriving back to Rosa and her friends, I grab another bottle of water and spend the remainder of the dance wishing I was at home, or in the woods. I haven't been back there in a while, not since the start of the month. Kyle and I haven't spoken since then either; I've been avoiding him, which is sort of easy as we don't have a lot of classes together.

"Okay, everyone," Ms Jones announces, her voice booming around the room as the microphone produces a loud shriek. "Whoops," she mumbles, adjusting the volume level when everyone starts complaining. "Okay, so you've voted for your King and Queen, and the results are in. This year's Queen isâ !" she pauses for that dramatic effect, "Don, don, do-on! Rosa Carnes!"

I didn't even know we could vote, but I still smile and clap for Rosa all the same. "Well done," I say, looking at her surprised face; it seems she didn't know she was running.

"Who put me in?" she asks, looking at Jones with her eyebrows raised.

"Who cares? Go and get your crow, your majesty," Zoe teases, nudging her towards the stage when Ms Jones calls her name again.

Still looking confused, Rosa passes through the crowd, receiving pats on the back and words of congratulations, and glares from girls who didn't get picked. When she arrives on the stage, Jones announces the King.

"And the Kingâ ¦ Alex Ryans!"

Alex, looking like he knew he was going to be chosen, unlike Rosa, saunters up onto the stage and picks up the crown, a crooked grin on his face as he takes his place on the throne beside Rosa.

"And now, the Queen and King will dance," Ms Jones says, holding back a smile at the looks on Rosa and Alex's faces.

"What?" Rosa shrieks, Alex joining in not too far behind her.

"Kidding," Joes assures, chuckling at their reactions. "Carry on with your night."

It takes Rosa a few minutes to get down from the stage as she keeps getting stopped every step she takes to be congratulated on winning. When she finally reaches us, she grabs our arms and drags us to the doors.

"I don't know about you, but dances give me a headache after a while. You want to go?"

Zoe and I nod our heads immediately, causing Rosa to chuckle at our enthusiasm. She skips off to her car, her dress swishing around her legs as we follow in her wake.

# **Chapter 14: Chapter fourteen**

### Chapter Fourteen

The snow's getting heavier and deeper as the month of December flows by. By the 20th, the first two steps leading up to the house are covered and most of the bottom half of Luke's snowman is, too.

I haven't been back to the woods since Kyle saw my scars and I haven't seen him since, either. It's funny how you don't know how lonely you'll be without someone until you don't actually see them, but I've gone years with only Luke, so I'll manage now.

I can picture the scene in the woods; the pond frozen over and covered in snow, the tree tops and branches hidden from sight and snow falling off of them into piles by the trunks. The squirrels will be gone from the branches, their chattering replaced by the sound of the cold wind blowing and the crunching sound of snow when someone walks on it.

I've Luke's presents wrapped up in wrapping paper and hidden in a high cupboard so he won't find them. His pictures from school are up on the walls and the house feels Christmassy for once, like a home. It's the first house since Aaron and Lisa's that I've thought of as a home, and Luke feels the same way about it, too.

I went shopping on Sunday last week, the last day before Christmas of my work in Mick's, and I'm hoping the food will last until the snow's mostly gone. Snow's great, but it's a real pain in the ass sometimes, especially when you slip while carrying heavy bags of groceries.

Luke's watching TV in the bedroom and I'm making him some hot chocolate. Linda, Robbie's mom, introduced it to him when he last went over and he's hooked on it now. Personally, I don't like it, but I get it for Luke. I steal some of the marshmallows for myself and put some more into his cup, then bring it in to him.

"What're you watching?" I ask him, handing him the cup and nudging him over on my bed to sit down.

"Not sure," he replies. "I just turned it on and it looks funny."

It's an animated movie and on screen there's a mouse, cat and dog all wearing Christmas hats and talking to Santa Clause. Mice, cats and dogs don't usually get along well, but Christmas is a time for putting aside bitterness and starting again, I suppose.

Luke and I went to town again a few days ago to pick out a few presents to give to the local homeless shelter. I had some spare money left from groceries and my Christmas bonus Mauve insisted on giving me, so we bought boxes, wrapping paper, scissors, glue and some toys. Luke was excited about giving them into the shelter and we had thirty in total, each containing sweets, a card and a small toy. I spent more than I'd like to have, but we have food, a shelter and Luke's presents while they don't have some of that, so we'll just have to make do with the food we have a for a day longer or so, or I'll take some of the money from my savings. But the look on the children's faces when they saw the presents was worth it."

It's still snowing outside. By Christmas, I'll be surprised if we can get out the door without the need of a plough.

I haven't seen Karen in ages. I doubt she'll be back for Christmas and, honestly, I hope she won't. I won't let her ruin Luke's first real Christmas. Tom's been gone for ages, too. It's been easily two months since I last saw him. I don't know if it's because of work or if he and Karen are fighting, but I'm not worried about it because

Luke and I have enough money to survive on, so we're fine.

The Santa on TV's flying away in his sleigh with the reindeers and waving to the dog, cat and mouse. The screen goes dark and '*The End*', appears before the credits come on.

Luke yawns and leans against my shoulder. "Tired?" I ask him.

He shakes his head but yawns again. "Maybeâ!"

"Well, no point in staying up if you're tired." I take the cup from his hand and put it on the table with the lamp and wait for him to climb the ladder. "Which book?"

"I didn't finish the one last night," he says, lifting his pillow and taking the book out from under it. Ruffling his hair only for him to make a face at me before allowing me to tuck him in, I get down from the ladder, making sure he doesn't need anything else before getting into bed. Tucking the blankets around me as I shiver slightly, I take out my notebook and write.

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As I suspected, the snow didn't stop overnight. The complete bottom half of Luke's snowman is now covered, as is the third step leading up to the house.

It is two days until Christmas, the 23rd December, and I'm in a Christmassy mood. Luke helped me bake cookies earlier today, but we failed miserably and agreed to leave out some store-bought cookies, not wanting to risk food poisoning anyone. Even that fail couldn't put us in a bad mood and, after making sure everything was away from the oven- we always seem to set fire to things- we went outside to have a snowball fight.

Luke, being smaller than me, won because he didn't have to build a fort the same size as I did- or so I told myself- and we made snow angels after that. Mine looked like an indistinguishable shape in the snow, unlike Luke's obvious snow angel. It seems he's better at drawing and making snow angels. And cooking and baking. And painting and snowball fights along with building forts. I could go on, but it's getting colder and, when I tell Luke we can go in and make some hot chocolate, he runs into the house as quick as a flash, leaving me to follow after him. I don't even need to climb the steps anymore as the snow is so high; I hope we won't be snowed in.

At least we're both bad at making cookies, and I don't feel bad about throwing them away. I'd give them away to a food drive, but I don't want to break anyone's teeth.

A Christmas Carol is on tonight and Luke's looking forward to watching it. I used to love it when I was a kid and watched it with Aaron and Lisa every Christmas. I haven't seen it in years and want to watch it with Luke.

We make popcorn and drinks and bring them into the bedroom, taking the duvets off the bed and placing them onto the ground. One is wrapped around us while the other is being used to sit on, the popcorn bowl in the middle of the blanket. It's cold when I reach to get a piece of popcorn or a drink, but I quickly take some and pull my arm back under and out of the cold.

When the movie finishes, Luke goes to bed to read his book. I'm not in the mood to write today, so I go into the kitchen to get another drink. The water won't run. Hoping it's just something wrong with the pipes for that sink, I go into the bathroom to check, but the water won't run either. The pipes must be frozen. I had a feeling this was going to happen, so I bought three bottles of bottled water in Mick's, but I don't know if they will last long.

I look out the window to see if the snow's stopped yet. It hasn't but instead has gotten heavier, large pieces of fluff falling from the white sky. It's dark but, for some reason, the snow makes it seem brighter; the white highlighting everything. It's a beautiful sight and, as much as I would like to sit around and look at the scene, I hear a knocking coming from the bedroom. Luke hasn't been feeling the best so, instead of calling for me or getting out of bed, he knocks if he wants me.

Wishing I have something heavier on as it's quite cold, I leave the bathroom and make my way into the bedroom, peeking in and whispering Luke's name. "You okay?" I ask him, but I don't get a reply. Opening the door wider so the light shines on the bed, I cross the room to find him fast asleep, leaving me wondering where the knocking came from.

Maybe I was hearing things, I think as I take the book from his hands and place it on the desk, alongside the other ones he has. Like me, he loves reading and was happy to find a full-sized library in school. He gets a new book weekly, sometimes even several times a week and always reads before bed instead of watching TV. It's time like that, that I am most proud of the boy I have basically raised.

When the knocking continues, I look around the room, pressing my ear against the walls to see if it's coming from there. I don't hear anything for a few minutes before it starts again. Probably the pipes, I think to myself as I go to close the curtains for bed. Luke's light snoring has me smiling slightly as I pull the rope that is holding the curtains back. Seeing movement outside, I jump back, falling onto the floor with a thump, but Luke doesn't wake.

It knocks again.

"Joey!" I hear, a muffled sound that seems familiar, but I can't place it. It could be someone completely different so I'm not going to open the window. Who knows what could happen.

The knocking gets louder, as does the shouting, "Joey!"

Luke mumbles in his sleep and rolls around. If the noise doesn't stop, he's going to wake up. He isn't the heaviest sleeper, and the knocking is quite loud. I take a deep breath, getting up off the floor and put my hand on the handle of the window. I hesitate, all the bad things coming to mind; what if it's a burglar? A murderer? A beast- maybe even Karen. Before I can convince myself not to, I open the window the slightest bit and peek out.

I was wrong. Having scolded myself for having such ridiculous conclusions in my head, I convinced myself it was Tom, who'd forgotten his key or something. It's not Tom, but someone I never would have expected to be here.

What does Kyle want? The person I have been avoiding for the past few weeks, who doesn't say a word to me in public unless necessary, is at my house, knocking on the bedroom window? What if Luke had answered? He would have been scarred for life seeing a man he doesn't know knocking on the window like that.

He's stubborn- as am I, but Luke's needs are my downfall-, so I open the window in hope that he only wants to ask something quick, like Math homework or something along the likes of that. The voice in my head reminds me that we don't have any Math homework, but I push it away, telling it to shut up.

"What are you doing here?" I hiss, barely making out his figure in the dark. In the past few minutes, it must have gotten darker or something; or maybe there is more light out the window of the bathroom.

I hear the sound of feet on fresh snow, the soft crumpling it makes, before he says, "What the hell, Joey?"

I grit my teeth but say nothing other than, "What are you doing here?" It's repeating my previous question, but he didn't seem to hear it the first time. Or, most likely, he decided to ignore it. It has been a few weeks since I last saw him, not that I can really see him now, but I don't know why he is here. He has made no move to talk to me in school or any other time, so why now?

"I have been trying to talk to you for the past few weeks, but you haven't been at the pond. Are you avoiding me? What did I do?"

I have been avoiding him, but he doesn't need to know that. Luke and I are going to be leaving soon, so there's no point in getting to know Kyle any more. Besides, he knows a lot- too much- about me already, but no one- and I mean no one- has ever seen my scars. That just made it more real to me and I am sticking with my decision to stay away from him.

"I was busy," I lie, hoping he doesn't question it. But, of course, he does.

"You weren't! I saw you in the library at school doing nothing."

"I was studying."

"You used to always come to the woods and now you don't. Why not? And don't say you're busy," he snaps, getting riled up.

"The snow's too heavy."

"Quit lying, Joey. What did I do?"

"I'm busy."

He stares at me for a minute then sighs; it's a weary sound, but also, as well as annoyance, full of sadness that he tries to hide, but unsuccessfully. "Fine, Joey. You don't want to be seen with me. I get that, it's happened before."

He gets down off the bricks, walking backwards away from me. "I thought you were different. I know what you've been through, but you don't seem to think that. I do know what it's like, Joey; you don't have to be alone through it."

Then he walks off into the night, footprints following him until he disappears from sight, the words hanging in the air.

# Chapter 15: Chapter fifteen

### Chapter fifteen

Lying in bed, sneezing and coughing is not a good way to spend Christmas Eve. Luke didn't feel well yesterday morning and kept sneezing and then, in the afternoon, he got sick and stayed in bed the rest of the day. There's nothing I can do but let the cold pass and bring him water to drink.

The snow has stopped completely, but it's still really deep. The water's not running and because of Luke's cold, we're running out of bottled water; I'll have to go to Mick's sooner than I thought I would.

With Luke sleeping most of yesterday, I had a lot of time to spend thinking. I thought about Kyle and what he said. He thought I was different? He has never told me he has been through the same thing. I mean, I guessed he has been, but he never actually confirmed my suspicion.

The thing is; I do have to go through it alone. I wish Luke didn't have to know about all this, but he does and there's nothing I can do about that but keep him as far away as possible from it all as possible. Kyle has enough of his own to worry about without me burdening him even more.

I miss him. Last night showed me how much I miss talking with him by the pond. I wanted to run after him when he left and tell him I was being an idiot for the past few weeks and that I need the time in the woods to get away from everything else, but I didn't do that.

Luke's out for the count and has been for the past few hours. His hair is sticking up from his sleep, some stuck to his forehead from the cool, damp cloth I placed when he got too warm. He's pale, more so than usual, and I hope it is just a cold and nothing more. He can be a really heavy sleeper when he's not well and I guess he'll be out for a few hours now.

I'm not in the mood to read or write, and am sitting by the window in the bedroom, alone with my thoughts like I will be for a while now.

Not the best companion.

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It's just as I pictured it would be, except for the fact it's not snowing. The sky's white though, so I guess it will start again soon. The breeze is cool and crisp, the snow covering the ground and everything on it; the pond is frozen and barely visible under the layer of snow, though I can make out the slippery patch of ice as it's lower than the ground.

I left Luke with some water, a bucket in case he gets sick again and an extra blanket, along with a note saying I've gone out for a few minutes. I hope he'll be okay; he hasn't awoken since he went to sleep this afternoon and I can't stay in that house much longer. This is the first place that I could think of to go to.

Considering I've been ignoring him the last few weeks, he's not here. I didn't expect him to here, but I was hoping he would be. He thinks I don't want to be seen in public with him and that's far from the truth, but did I say anything yesterday to convince him otherwise? The answer, sadly, is no.

I sit in the snow and look out at the pond and trees, wishing my mind would shut up for a few minutes so I could enjoy the view. I'm wearing my jacket, along with a pair of sock that I am using as gloves since I don't

have any, but it's hard to do anything with them on, so I take them off and shove them into my pocket.

The snow is cold as I sit on it and I can tell I will come away with wet pants if I sit too long. But I can't bring myself to care at the moment; its peaceful here, no one to judge me for anything as I'm alone. The feeling is both relaxing and worrying.

"You're here."

Apparently, I'm not alone, I muse, his voice startling me as I awaken from my daze-like state with a jolt. I don't say anything; just continue to sit on the snow while looking around for him. The sound of snow crunching catches my attention and I see him on the other side of the icy, snow covered patch that is the pond.

"So are you."

No one, person or thing, makes a sound. We're surrounded by silence except for the sound of the breeze blowing, the fresh snow crunching as he takes a seat. It's dark, so I can't see him very well, but I can tell he is looking at me.

"Why are you here?" he asks, to the point as always.

I don't say anything, just wonder, why am I here? "I know you know." To some, those words wouldn't have made an ounce of sense, but they make sense to him.

"Do you?"

His question stops me for a second and I think about my words before I say them. I have never been good at speeches or liked reading aloud, but I put my fears aside; he deserves an explanation.

"You said I don't have to be alone through it, but I've been alone my whole life and it's hard to adjust to the fact someone else in the world wants to help me; that they know about all of it. I don't admit to being afraid very often but, when I do, you know I really am. I try not to show it when others are around and I've gotten very good at hiding my emotions.

"You don't show me pity. You don't tell me everything's going to be alright and give me false hope. You don't know if it'll all be okay, so you don't say it; like I don't tell Luke it'll be okay if I'm unsure.

"I'm not used to having someone else here for me and I'm scared. Scared that you'll tell everyone about her, scared that you'll get hurt if she finds out I told youâ ¦ scared that you'll leave like everyone else has in the past- that's why I don't get too close to anyone.

"Karen likes to move, as I'm sure you've figured out. It's usually twice a year, but sometimes even more, maybe three. We don't stay in places very long and it's only a matter of months before we're gone again. I'm hoping she'll hold out until my birthday but I highly doubt it.

"I've hated ignoring you the past few weeks. It's like there's something missing and didn't want to do it at all â !" I stop myself, shutting my eyes and cursing myself. I didn't mean to add that end part.

"Why?" he asks, sounding every bit as confused as he looks. Why would someone stay away from another if they didn't want to? It sounds stupid and such a pointless thing to do and my answer isn't one he is going to like.

I feign innocence, hoping the topic will change. "Why what?"

"Why has it been hard for you to ignore me? Why did you in the first place? Why haven't you come back here since? Why did I wait here for hours for you to come back, only for you to not arrive?" he spills out, each sentence following the next in rapid tempo as he spells it out, clear and simple; the opposite of what I hoped he would do.

I look away from him and stall, picking at the dirt on my clothes as I contemplate an answer. I could answer truthfully, but that would mean trusting him and dragging him into my life even more. I could lie, but I know he'd be able to catch me out: I'm a terrible liar.

"Because," is all I say. The word hangs in the air between us, weighing heavily. It says so much, yet so little.

"Because?" he says, his face blank of expression as he tests out the word. "Because? That's all I get? I waited hours for you to turn up and you didn't. I sat in the freezing snow to wait for you and you didn't show up. I thought you got lost, so I went to look for you. Guess who I didn't find? Then I thought she hurt you and you were lying on the floor, unconscious and bleeding, so I ran to your house and I found you there. Not unconscious, but in the kitchen, doing homework at the table like you didn't think I'd be waiting for you like always. Like I wasn't part of your life and never have been.

"Maybe I don't mean as much to you as you do to me, but I must've meant something if you came every day. Here, in the woods, where no one else knows about. Where I told you things that no one else knows about me; maybe it has slipped your mind, but you did the same thing, too. Why? Why did you tell me if I mean nothing to you?"

His voice is full of such emotion; anger, confusion and- though I may be wrong- desperation, like it's hurting him that I am showing none of my emotions. It has been a while since I have let them loose having learned to keep them at bay after years of isolation. It's hard to let my guard down, but I find myself doing so: He thinks he means nothing to me? After all I've told him? All he has told me?

"Answer me, Joey," he pleads, lifting my chin up to look him in the eyes, his green, mesmerising eyes. I didn't notice him come across the pond, didn't hear the crumpling of the snow even though it is quiet; so very quiet.

"I trust you," I say after a few moments of silence; more silence. Despite its name, silence can be loud sometimes. "You listen when I tell you things, something I've never been able to do before."

"But what does that mean, Joey?"

"I miss not talking to you," I continue, ignoring his words for now. I don't know where I am going with this; just let the words come out freely to see where they take me. "You help me forget about other things in my life when I don't want to think about them. You make me laugh and smile and I trust you completely. You mean a lot to me, Kyle. Don't ever think otherwise."

We're facing each other now, him sitting in front of me and me still in the same spot. His hair is blowing in the wind slightly; a smudge of oil or something on his forehead tells me he has been at the garage recently. I have a funny feeling in my stomach that I sometimes feel around Kyle; it's tingly, like the feeling you get when dropped from a height; it's not a bad feeling, but it's different.

"You mean so much to me," he whispers softly, "So much. I know I may not show it, but I miss you like crazy when you're not here and love our time here. There's something different about you, Joey."

"A good or bad different?"

"A good difference and-,"

I don't know why, but whether it's a shift in the earth's magnetic field or my impulse, I lean forward, cutting him off efficiently with my lips to his. As soon as they touch, I freeze, wondering what the heck I have just done. As much as I would like to blame the shift in the earth's magnetic field, I know it was my impulse. I pull away, embarrassed by my actions.

He cups his hand at the back of my neck and pulls me back to him. He brings his other hand up to stroke my cheek with his thumb, the palm cupping my face. He brushes soft kisses on my lips, applying a second's pressure before pulling back and repeating. The hand cupping my neck falls to my waist and he pulls me closer, so I'm nearly sitting on his lap.

I feel my pants soaked to the bone when I'm off the ground, the snow having melted into freezing cold water. Wet pants are a feeling I don't like, even in the summer when they dry quickly, but it being winter, I am surrounded by snow, adding to the cold effect. I try to shiver subtly, but Kyle senses it and pulls me closer.

"You cold?" he whispers it into my ear. How could I be cold with him doing that? I shiver again, but I don't know if it's from the cold or him planting soft kisses along my jaw. He pulls back and looks at me for a second, then gets up.

"You're freezing," he decides, taking my hand and pulling me up. I don't want to leave, but when I'm up, I remember Luke in bed, sick and on his own and the thought has me jumping up and running to the trail I take to get to the woods.

"Joey?"

I whip my head back to look at him, who's frowning at me and looking confused. "Luke," I say quickly. "He's on his own and he's not well." God, I'm so selfish. How could I leave him on his own like that? I need to get back.

"Come on then," Kyle says, walking towards me and taking my hand, leading me down the trail to the house.

Two sets of footprints following us in the snow, we arrive at the door of the house and I stop, looking back at him and unsure of what to do now.

"I'll see you, Joey," he says, kissing my cheek. "Have a great Christmas."

And he leaves, me watching after him as he makes his way back to his house, turning back to look at me one last time before he disappears inside, gone from my sight. I turn and go inside the house to find Luke sleeping peacefully on his bed, the way I left him.

Things have changed for both of us in the short time of a half hour; positions for him, in his restless way of sleeping; a lot of things for me, maybe even my future.

I fall into a surprisingly peaceful sleep, the sound of Luke's soft snoring breaking the tranquil hold of the silence.

# **Chapter 16: Chapter sixteen**

### Chapter Sixteen

I have had just about enough of this. Storming through the living room where I have been waiting for the past half hour, I open the bedroom door, glaring when I see Luke in bed.

"Luke!" I cry for the fifth time this morning, yanking the covers off his body; I'm glad to see he looks less pale. "Get up!"

It is not normal for a seven year old boy to still be sleeping at 10am on Christmas morning. He should have been dragging me out of bed at the crack of dawn; *I* should be the one unwilling to get up, not him. Instead of waking up and running into the living room like a normal child, he rolls around, grumbling in his sleep for, "five more minutes."

"You've been saying that for the past two hours! Come on, wake up!"

"Why?" he groans, looking much better than he did yesterday, I note happily. He opens his eyes slightly, wincing at the bright light from the window and bulb I turned on in hope of getting him to wake up; my efforts were unsuccessful as he is still in bed.

"Presents!" I exclaim excitedly, wondering why he isn't getting up at that word. It's his first real Christmas, yet it's me all excited.

"Cool," he grumbles and I know he isn't listening to me.

"Presents from Santa, Luke: it's Christmas, remember?"

He mumbles something incoherent that sounds a lot like, "later" and I growl in frustration. "You are such an abnormal child," I huff, shaking the bed in hope that he'll get up; it's either that or I drag him out of bed.

I have been awake for hours now, having awoken at five as I forgot to leave his presents out last night, so I suppose I am glad he didn't wake before me, or that would have been a bit awkward. I know that he is sick, but isn't that supposed to miraculously disappear on Christmas morning? His three presents and sweets are in the living room, along with a few smaller things in the stocking that he made in school.

"What does 'abnormal' mean?" he asks, sitting up on the bed and looking at me curiously.

Out of all the things I have said, this gets him to sit up? I should start sprouting off big words on school mornings to get him up.

"You'reâ | unusually different," I tell him, not in the mood to search for a proper definition this early in the morning. "Come on, get out of bed already."

He looks as though he is contemplating the word, testing it out silently as his lips move, but he doesn't make any attempts to get up. I have never manhandled anyone before, but with desperate times, comes desperate measures.

Luke squeaks as I lift him out of the bed and toss him over my shoulder, carrying him out of the room and into the living room. I set him down on the chair and he glares at me, but it quickly turns to laughter as he

tackles me into a hug.

"Why do you want me awake?" he asks with his back to the presents he has yet to see. "Is it snowing again?"

I turn him around by the shoulders and shout, "Merry Christmas!" to him loudly, sounding like a little kid instead of the seventeen year old that I am. There is just something about Christmas that turns me into a young child.

When he doesn't make a move for the presents, I pick up the one closest to me and hand it to him, loving the sight of the shock on his face. "Open it," I urge, all but shoving it into his hands so he is forced to hold it. He looks at it as though it's a foreign object, which it is, I suppose.

"Are you sure it's mine?" he asks finally, still looking shocked as he takes in the sight of the wrapped gift in his hands.

"Yes!"

He still looks unsure, but starts to open it, sitting on the floor and, like the first time I received a present, taking a long time to open it. I want to take it and rip it open to speed it up and see the look on his face, but it's his day today and I won't rush him.

At long last he finally opens it, placing the paper in a neat pile beside him, no doubt thinking of what he can make out of it later on. He cautiously turns the box around, his eyes bugging out when he sees what it is.

After a few minutes of no response from him, I start to worry. Was he only joking when he said he wanted the art set? Should I have gotten him the toy car he was playing with in the store that day? "Do you like it?" I ask, unsure, hoping I didn't get it wrong. "Hey," I say, looking at him in concern, "I can bring it back and get something else-,"

My words are cut off as he launches his tiny seven year old body at me, wrapping his arms around me and hugging me tightly, resting his head on my shoulder. I hug him back just as tightly, sighing in relief that he likes it.

"Thank you, Joey," he whispers into my ear, "I love you."

I kiss his head. "Love you too, bud," I reply, releasing the tight grip I have on him. I know the thanks is for the present but I don't reply to that; I don't want questions about Santa just yet, he has the right to a childhood just like everyone else. "Let's open the rest," I suggest, trying to reach for the other one, but falling over in the process, causing Luke to laugh.

"There are more?" he asks, looking around and realising that there are, in fact, more presents. "They're for me?"

"Who do you think they're for?"

"But I didn't get you anything!" he cries, turning around on my lap to face me. "I didn't know you got me anything, and now I don't have anything for you-,"

"I don't need anything," I interrupt, shaking my head at him. "I have all I need right here."

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It takes Luke the whole morning and into the early afternoon to open the presents, and lots of persuasion on my part to get him to take them. It's now two thirty and I'm in the kitchen, waiting for the chicken to cook while Luke is in the sitting room, drawing with his new sets of crayons and pencils. I also got him the bag he saw in Micks a while ago, along with the matching lunch box set and pencil case.

Setting the table, I glance out the window, shaking my head at the sheer amount of snow; how we are able to get out of the house, I have no idea, but I thank god we are. Any colour other than white stands out and can easily be seen against the snow, so a movement by the edge of the woods easily catches my attention.

I see Kyle by the side of his house, sitting, I think, but I can't be sure from this distance. A thought comes into my mind and I make a quick decision, hoping it's the right one. Before I can change my mind, I call out to Luke.

"Luke!"

"Yes?" he replies, attentive as always.

"I'm going to get something; I'll be back in a few minutes."

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The snow is soft under my feet, barely making a sound as I arrive in front of him. "Hey," I greet unsurely with a small smile, hoping this will go well.

He looks up, wincing at the winter's sun and frowns when he sees me. I hope it's a good frown and not one that means he doesn't want me here.

"What're you doing here?" he asks, scooting over when I make a move to sit down. Sitting by his side, I try to focus on the present and not the past, particularly not last night. Just the thought of it has a blush staining my cheeks, but I use the cold as an excuse for that.

"Well," I start, wondering how I should begin this, "I was wondering if youâ ¦ wanted to come over for dinner with us, but you don't have to if you're doing something-," I ramble, wondering why I am so nervous about this.

"Who's 'us'?" he asks, cutting me off as he turns around to face me. Damn it, Joey, there is nothing to be nervous about; it's Kyle, the person you have known for a few months and who knows a lot about you. The last part doesn't help my bundle of nerves.

"Me and Luke," I say, wondering if this is a good idea. Luke hasn't met him yet. What if they get along, but Kyle leaves? I curse myself for thinking that; I should give Kyle a chance instead of thinking bad things of him. It would be good for Luke to have a male in his life- that is, if Kyle comes over. What if they don't like each otherâ *Shut up, brain*.

He thinks while the both sides of my brain argue, unknowing of the internal conflict before him. He shakes his head. "Christmas is a family time."

"Oh, okay. I'llâ ' see you later?" I ask, uncertainly and feeling dejected. It is a family time, but he's alone out here; he's a friend of mine now- or so I hope-, and I don't like that he is alone. He doesn't reply to my question and goes back to fiddling with the tools in his hand.

I get up and am halfway back to the house when I slow down, debating on whether or not I should say it. It seems the reckless side of my brain wins out as I turn my head over my shoulder and call out, "Lots of food is going to waste," but don't stop walking.

Again, he doesn't reply and I feel my shoulders deflate, but try not to dwell on it. He doesn't have to spend time with us if he doesn't want to; it was just a thought. A snowball zooms past me, missing me by a couple of centimetres.

I turn back and see him a few feet behind me, nonchalantly looking around, acting innocent, though the snowball in his hand ruins the effect. He looks back at me and blinks slowly, eyebrows comically high on his forehead, as though surprised. "Can I help you?"

And then it starts.

I pick up some snow, mould it into a ball shape and throw. It breaks into pieces in the air and, by the time it comes anywhere near him, it's so small I can barely see it. So, I try again, but it's another epic fail. And again; and again, adding two more failures to my growing list. I try until there's no more snow around me and I can see the grass. Annoyed, I stop throwing, scowling at Kyle when a snowball lands on my head.

"I just had to do that," Kyle laughs, shrugging at my look.

Determined to show him up, I pick up some more snow and carefully mould it into a perfect sphere. I'm smoothing the surface when it's knocked from my hand.

"That's not how you do it," he sighs, taking some snow and pressing it in his hands. "Press it quickly and throw."

"Yeah, well that doesn't work for me," I mutter, thinking back to my many fails.

"I know. I saw that. Try it with mine," he suggests, handing me the lump of snow with no distinctive shape. I take it, tossing it from hand to hand, as though I am testing out its weight; I don't care about its weight, but I saw Kyle doing it, so maybe that's what I am doing wrong.

"Aim," he instructs, stepping back.

"Where?"

He looks around then nods at my house. I look at it then back to him with a look of disbelief. "Kyle, I couldn't hit you and you were two metres away; I've no hope of hitting the house."

"Try," he urges, not backing down, so I throw it with a sigh. And I miss. At least the snowball didn't break, so that's something I have achieved. I look back at him and shrug, having proved my point: snow doesn't like me.

"Again," he tells me, making another snowball. I reach out to take it from his hand, but he takes my wrist and pulls me to him so I'm in front of him.

"Go," he says into my ear, his breath warm against my cheek.

Go? I think, getting distracted by his nose as it lightly trails down my cheek. Go where? Then I remember the snowball that's currently residing in my hand and I pull my arm back as far as it can go and throw. I miss.

"You are hopeless."

"Gee, thanks," I say, but I see the teasing glint in his eyes.

"You're cold," he mutters, touching my gloveless hand. I don't feel cold, especially when he's rubbing my hands in his.

"You are, too."

"You're colder."

"No, you are," I argue, liking the playful banter between us. I never would have thought Kyle and I would be doing something like this, he never gave me the impression he had in it him to be playful.

"No, I think it's you."

"Nope, sorry, but it's you."

We're standing in the middle of a field, his arms wrapped around me, in the snow, with no gloves, hats, scarves or anything warm, arguing about which one of us is the coldest. There are no neighbours to see us, so we're not going to be the object of people's confusion and eye rolls, but I wouldn't care if we were; I'm enjoying myself, for once.

It's nice to be able to joke around with someone without having to worry about saying something to upset them, or thinking about what I have to say so as not to give away something about my life. Kyle knows and I know about him, so I can be careless.

"I'm wearing a hat," he argues and I look up to see he is; a blue one with white stripes. I subtly reach my hand up and snatch it from his head, placing it on mine and smiling innocently at him.

"No, you're not," I say, fighting back a smile as he looks at the hat that is now on my head.

"Can I have it back?" he asks, tracing his finger across my lower arm and making me lose my train of thought. I'm not used to these kinds of feelings yet as I haven't felt them before, so it is going to take some getting used to

I pretend to think about it, tilting my head to the side as my mouth twists in thought. I shake my head. "Nope."

"You sure?" he asks, his hand trailing up my arm and resting on my shoulder, my stomach erupting in those tingly feelings that I felt last night. I nod my head, trying to ignore the feelings his wandering hand produces.

"Positive?"

I nod again. "Definitely," I assure, smiling and rolling my eyes when he continues.

He lifts my chin up. "Absolutely certain?"

"Positively positive."

He smiles, something I'm not quite accustomed to seeing on his face, and does something that surprises me. Closing the distance between us, he wraps his arms around me and holds me. It's a hug-just a hug, but it feels

like so much more. "Merry Christmas," he whispers softly, not into my ear, but just says it for me to hear.

"Merry Christmas," I reply, my arms coming around and joining at his back.

There's no skin-on-skin contact as we're both wearing heavy clothes; there are no hands joined or anything else- it's a hug. His arms encircle me, mine encircle him; and, even though I wish I don't, I feel safe with him. I'm numb from the cold, but I feel him; hear him, see him.

I take these senses for granted while there are others out there who aren't able to see or hear. They can't see the beauty that is the world or hear the voices of their loved ones; can't experience some things we can, but they're not alone through it all.

Loved ones who will never be seen, family who'll never be heard stand by them; they love them unconditionally, not asking for anything in return but their love and trust. They see the world in their own way, imagining the sound of the voice in their own mind. They hear the voices like they imagine them to be, how they think the person sounds.

But they'll never know. They can imagine and think and, while it's not the same thing, it's what they think of the world as; it's real to them.

"Dinner?" I whisper into the silence. Things have changed for me in the few seconds we have been hugging; maybe his answer has changed.

He nods his head, releasing me after another moment. As we walk through the snow to the house, close, but not touching, I realize I still have his hat on my head.

I smile happily.

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Luke was wary of Kyle at first, but I couldn't have expected anything else of him; if our roles were reversed and he was me, I'd be shoving Kyle out the door and telling him to never come back, and to stay away. Well, maybe I wouldn't be shoving him out of the house, but I'd be keeping an eye on him. Luke, however, has accepted him and, by the time dinner was on the table, they were talking about school.

It felt like a normal family having Christmas dinner, and I liked it. So did Luke, I think, if I go by the smile on his face throughout the dinner. Kyle looked happy, too. I'm used to seeing him happy when we're at the woods, but outside, I'm not familiar with him smiling, but I like the way it lights up his face and shows the dimples that he has. It makes him look younger, too, and that's saying a lot considering he's only seventeen.

Karen didn't come back, which only added to the joy I felt. I never expected her to, but I'm glad I was right. Luke didn't mention her at all, most likely having forgot about her while talking to Kyle and playing with his presents. Kyle kept glancing nervously at the door throughout dinner, as though he was waiting for her to arrive for the family moment. I smiled reassuringly at him when he looked at me, to which he returned a small one of his own.

With dinner over, Luke asks can we watch a movie, but quickly looks at Kyle, as though he has said something wrong. "Y-you don't have to stay," he says quickly. "Only if you don't have anything else you need to do and if you want-,"

"What's on?" Kyle asks him, and Luke's smile is so big, that I feel myself smiling, too; I want to go over and kiss Kyle for giving Luke a reason to smile that big. Luke starts naming off the movies that are on then rushes in to check which one's on first.

"You don't have to stay," I tell him, not wanting him to think he has to. Luke and I have survived this long without anyone else, so we can survive much longer, as long as we have each other. "If you have some-,"

Once again, he cuts me off, but not with words; he takes me in his arms and hugs me tightly, kissing my cheek before he pulls back, leaving me confused.

"Thank you," he whispers into my ear. The way he looks at me tells me what he's thanking me for; for giving him a Christmas that feels like a normal one, not one of a broken family. I nod my head, understanding completely, and he rests his chin against my forehead, planting a soft kiss there.

I hear the doorknob turn and pull away, worrying about how Luke would react if he was to see us. I glance at the door and see Luke smiling that huge smile again. I smile back and we go and watch the movie on the floor covered in the duvet, Luke in the middle of us and Kyle holding my hand.

My best Christmas yet.

# **Chapter 17: Chapter seventeen**

### Chapter Seventeen

I have never just sat and watched a fire before. I have always had the TV on when I was with Aaron and Lisa, or was playing a game or had some kind of distraction. It's fascinating, watching the reds, yellows and oranges rise high, burning brightly before flickering, dying down and disappearing. The heat hangs in the air, my face feeling as though the sun is beating down on it. The smell of wood burning is now one of my new favourite smells.

Luke is in the bedroom drawing with his new set; the room is full of new pictures and his sketchbooks are filling up quickly. Kyle and I are sitting beside each other but, other than the occasional brush of our arms, we're not touching.

It's cold outside, but it hasn't snowed since Christmas day. Even though Christmas is over, I can't bring myself to take down the tree yet. It's familiar now, and the room will feel bare without it and the few other decorations we have up.

Kyle's arm brushes mine again, but this time it stays there and his voice follows the movement. "Merry Christmas," he says softly, even though Christmas is over. I glance over at him, frowning when I see a small box in his hands covered with paper.

I blink, wondering if I'm imagining it. Has he gotten me a present? He said he didn't buy me anything! When I don't make any move to take it, he turns my hands around so they're palm-up, placing the box on them. Mick's closed on the 21st of December, so there was no way I could get anything for him. Besides, he said he didn't get me anything, so I didn't worry.

I look up at him. "You said you didn't get me anything. I didn't get-,"

"I didn't say I didn't *get* you anything," he says with a small smile. "I said I didn't buy you anything. Open it and you'll see."

After a few seconds of hesitation, I pull the string that is tied around the paper and lift the lid off. My curiosity gets the better of me and I put my fingers in, feeling something cool and metallic, like a chain or something. I retract my fingers and peek inside.

Lying on a white cushion is a chained length of silver cord with a wooden pendant at the base. My eyebrows rising, I pick it up and examine the design on the pendant. Carved into the wood is a design of swirls and spirals, going in every direction in the shape of an arched diamond. The lines overlap frequently, no line not connected in one way to another. I stare at it, wondering how he didn't 'buy' me something; it looks beautiful, but I doubt it's for me. Maybe he wants me to give my opinion on it before he gives it to a friend.

"It's a Celtic design," he tells me, watching me stare at it. "I carved the lines into the wood myself, so you don't have to feel guilty about not getting me something." He takes it from my hands and opens the clasp. "Can I?"

I find myself nodding my head, still shocked that it's for me; and the fact that he made it himself. I saw him carving something on Christmas day when I went to ask him if he wanted to come over for dinner, but I didn't think much of it. He made this beautiful thing and wants to give it to me, of all people?

I turn around, gathering my hair from my neck so he can put it on. His hand holding the necklace comes around me as he puts it on; like how Josh put the bracelet on my wrist.

Josh, I think as I look down at the bracelet. I wonder if they'd get along, Josh and Kyle. They don't have much in common, other than the fact that they're both male and around the same age. They both get along with Luke, too, so I suppose that's another similarity. Josh liked- maybe still likes- sports and is more outgoing, whereas Kyle keeps to himself and likes the arts.

Kyle clasps the necklace together, taking my hands from my hair and into his, my hair tumbling across my shoulders in messy waves. Holding one of my hands, he rests them on his knee. "This has been my best Christmas," he says lowly, "thank you."

I rest my head on his shoulder, wondering if it is normal to feel so comfortable around him so quick. Even with Josh, it took a few weeks to get used to him, but Kyle and I have only recently opened up to each other.

Josh kissed me before I left and, while I don't regret it, I hope he doesn't think I wanted anything beyond friendship with him. I liked, maybe even loved, Josh, but it was completely platonic, nothing romantic about it.

Sabbath, a girl from my old school, liked him and wasn't too subtle about showing it. She flirted with him all the time and went out with other guys to try and make him jealous. Then, when she figured out he was friends with me, she threatened to tell everyone about my life if I didn't stay away from him. I thought she knew about Karen, so I stayed away, not wanting to get social services involved and have Luke taken away.

It turned out that she meant she'd tell everyone that number seven wasn't our real father. Josh tried to talk to me, but I avoided him and took to going the long way to school, having to leave at seven in the morning; school didn't start until nine. He was in most of my classes and we sat by each other but Sabbath, being the saint that she was, volunteered to swap with me in the classes she was in with us and I sat by the window, as far away from Josh as I could.

It went on for a month and a half before Josh finally snapped and came to the house one night when Karen was home. He didn't know about Karen's tendency to get a bit drunk and violent, so he was shocked, to say the least, to find me on the floor with a giant bruise on my head.

He had climbed in my window when I went to get Karen's purse, which she'd unceremoniously dumped on my bed; she had come in with another guy to get number seven jealous (I was actually surprised number seven lasted that long; he'd been with us in 'right place number eleven' as well as twelve) as he'd been "staring at another girl's ass" in the club they went to- that always seems to be the problem. I saw Josh, but didn't know who he was and screamed when he came at me, causing Karen to shout at me to, "shut the hell up!"

He hugged me tightly, not saying a word and I felt safe and secure, wanting to tell him everything. Karen decided that that was a good time to come into the room, along with her opinion that I was taking too long and that, while I may be stupid, even I could find a purse on the bed. Then she saw Josh.

I'd never seen Josh look so angry before and, even though it wasn't directed at me, I flinched when he took a step forward. He caught my movement and hid me behind him.

"You little slut!" Karen shrieked at me. "Sneaking bastards like this into the house when I'm here. Disrespecting your own mother like that! How dare you?"

She took a step towards me and grabbed the closest thing she could reach, a book I was reading for school. Because the teacher hated us-, I've got a feeling English teachers and I will never get along- she'd given us a book with six hundred pages to read for an assignment.

Like Karen could say much when she'd just had a guy over that she barely knew just to make number seven jealous, I'd thought as she screamed at me. Number seven never came back that night, or that week. Actually, we've never seen him since nor has anyone else, for that matter.

Josh stood in front of me, completely blocking me from the view of Karen. Being drunk, she stopped and looked around for me and, not being able to find me, went out of the room in search of me, ranting under her breath about how "kids these days are so disrespectful" and other unpleasant things.

I'd only known Josh three months then, and a month and a half had been spent avoiding him because of Sabbath, but I had liked him since the start. We'd become quick friends, something that hadn't happened since Bianca and Cian. I hadn't told him about my life at home, but the bruises I kept arriving at school with had caused a few arguments. I felt really bad that I couldn't tell him, but, even though I trusted him, I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

But that night I told him. I told him everything from when Karen gave me away to Aaron, until that moment we were sitting on the bed in my room in 'right place number 12'. We became close after that. I reluctantly told him about Sabbath, but made him promise that he wouldn't say a word about it to her or anyone else. He didn't and, after that, I knew I could trust him with anything. Then we moved a month later, only having stayed for four months.

Coming out of my reverie, I remember that I am with Kyle and immediately feel bad for thinking about Josh whilst in his company, so I push Josh from my mind. I feel a bit better since I know that I don't like Josh romantically, and it isn't one of those 'love triangles' that I've read about in so many books. Besides, I probably won't ever see him again.

I hear footsteps before Luke arrives in the room, pictures in his hands. Remembering that Kyle is holding my hand, I try and get him to release his grip, but he doesn't. I know we're only holding hands- hand, actually- but I'm not into the whole PDA, even though Luke is the only spectator. I don't want him to get too attached to Kyle as I don't know if he's staying for long- or if we're staying for long. His goodbyes to Josh were hard enough, and I'd hate for him to have to do it again.

I give up trying to free my hand and look up at Luke, wondering if he thinks anything of it. Seeing him smiling broadly makes me smile and soon enough we're all smiling so big that, with one look at each other, we burst out in laughter.

It's carefree and joyous laughter, like the first time Luke wanted to go to the tyre swing in the woods and I fell in the mud. I'm laughing so hard that my stomach is hurting, as are my cheeks and I'm gasping for breath, Kyle and Luke doing the same thing.

I wouldn't swap it for anything else in the world.

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The Christmas break flies by and before we know it we're back at school. Luke's happy to go back and, for once, we're early; and on the first day, too. Luke gives me a hug before he rushes off to catch up with Robbie, who's waiting by the door for him. I watch them for a minute until they disappear into the school, then start towards mine.

Kyle's rarely at his locker in the mornings, so I'm surprised to find him there when I arrive at mine.

The Christmas break was different, but a good different. We went to the woods several times, but it was too cold, so he came over to the house. Luke's comfortable around him and loves talking about 'guy stuff', as they put it, with him. It's great to see Luke interacting with a male. I do my best for him, but I can't do anything about the guy stuff. The step dads aren't any help, so he's been without a father figure or role model for the start of his life.

Karen or Tom didn't come back over Christmas. It's been a long time since I've seen them, but I'm not going to go looking for them. They're adults and can do whatever they want; I'm not going to interfere.

I'm not sure if we're meant to be acting as though nothing has happened between us or not, so I open my locker, waiting to see if he says anything.

"Hi," he says, leaning against his locker and looking at me.

"Hey," I reply, getting my books out. We close the locker doors at the same time, but nothing else is said. The silence isn't awkward though; it's comfortable and friendly. Without saying any goodbyes, we make our way to class.

I have yet to see Rosa and am a little surprised at that; she is usually early and always seen in the halls, talking or messing around. My first class is English, so I'll see her there. The second I walk through the door, she is the first- and only- one that calls my name.

"Joey!" she shrieks from her desk, not getting up as Mr Lirks is in the class, glaring at her, but she doesn't seem to notice the last part.

He's always early to class on Tuesdays and thinks any time after he's there is late. Class doesn't start until 8:50 and it's only 8:42, but he glares at me and whoever else comes in the door until they sit down.

The years haven't been too kind to Mr Lirks. I'm not saying that to be mean, but honestly stating the obvious. He's in his late 40s, early 50s and has mostly grey hair that I'd hazard a guess to have been black when he was younger. He always wears the same ripped suit jacket and baggy bottoms and boots with a huge, thick heel on them, but they don't do much to make him taller. He's about 5'1, smaller than most of the students.

The permanent scowl on his face and the frown line between his two eyebrows give the impression he's not such a happy person. He has a bushy moustache and beard that are both grey, and the beard is unusual; it's short in the middle while it falls down half his arm on the outsides. He ties his hair into a bun at the top of his head and has glasses around his neck that he never seems to wear. He doesn't particularly like students or children, so I don't know where the idea of teaching came from.

He and Kye, the bus driver, would make good friends, except for the fact that Lirks hates astronauts, which was the very first thing he told us when the year started. I'd hazard a guess he doesn't like people in general.

He places some sheets on his desk and sits down at his chair, taking out a book and starts reading. He doesn't talk much and gives us lots of written work and rarely any oral, which is fine by me. Rosa sits in the middle of the class, but I, sadly, sit at the front, so I'm meant to give the sheets out. I'm getting better at talking to others and making eye contact, but I don't like being the centre of attention.

I know it sounds silly since I'm only giving out some sheets but, in Mr Lirks English class, it's really boring and whenever there's a noise, everyone turns around and focuses their attention on its source. And with my

luck, I get the squeakiest chair in the room and it squeaks whenever I move, drawing the attention of everyone.

Trying not to make a noise, but do, I get up off of my chair and take the sheets from his desk, handing them out to everyone. I'd love to pass a pile to the person at the front of each row, but people don't bother passing them back or, if they do, the class gets confused when there's one sheet left and it's all a big commotion; Lirks hates commotions, so we'd all get detention or more homework. I save us the joy of detention with Lirks and give them out individually.

I'm no good at writing essays if I go by the grades I've gotten off Lirks. No one's ever gotten an A off of him and I don't think it'll be me breaking the pattern anytime soon or even ever.

The scratching of pens and pencils fills the room and I get to work writing about the latest topic.

-

"Did you have a good Christmas?" Rosa asks me after finishing telling me about George the fish's new friend, Ben. Her hair is now dyed with green streaks that match Ben's colouring well, as she says. I'll take her word for it as I haven't seen Ben yet.

I think back to the break and the time I spent with Kyle and Luke- and the time they spent together- and smile happily. "Yeah," I tell her, leaning back against the pole of the bus stop, "It was great."

"I've always liked Christmas, mostly because of the snow- don't get me wrong, the presents are good too, but the idea of Santa used to creep me out. You know the part where it says "he sees you when you're sleeping"? Well, I had an active imagination when I was a kid, so I overreacted to that slightly. I sort of refused to go asleep on the days building up to Christmas, and would run for cover when I saw a robin."

I don't doubt Rosa for a second.

"One time, I forgot that a robin was a bird, so I climbed up a tree and camped out there for the night. My parents didn't realise until that night, and sort of woke up when I screamed bloody murder at the robin on the branch near me. And another time, Alex had the bright idea to dress up as Santa and look through my bedroom window one night. I hit him over the head with a baseball bat, then freaked when he wouldn't wake up, so I buried him in the snow, hoping no one would notice. And-,"

Rosa's stories are interrupted when Luke comes running up to us, waving goodbye to Robbie who is getting into his car. "Joey-,"

Before Luke can get another word in, Rosa has cut him off, jumping right in his path. "Luke!" she cries excitedly, hugging him when he is in her reach.

He and Rosa get along well, much to my surprise. They hit off right away and Luke, who has gotten used to her constant chatter, likes her bubbly personality. She tells him about Ben, her fish, and shows him a picture on the new phone she got, which I have no doubt will be 'misplaced' or broken soon.

Luke laughs when she tells him the name; Ben and George the fish. No good ole' Bubbles or Pebbles for Rosa's pets. Rosa's not one for following the latest trend and she doesn't go by what other people do. She's original and unique, not one to follow the crowd, and I like that about her.

The bus pulls up to the stop and I have to drag Luke away from Rosa, who hasn't notice its arrival and is still telling him about Ben.

"See you!" Rosa calls after us, waving frantically, like we're not going to see each other for weeks, before she walks off to her car. Alex got one of his own for Christmas, so he doesn't have to get a ride with Rosa anymore.

"How was school?" I ask Luke as we sit. The second we're through the doors, Kye zooms off.

"We went to other classes," he tells me. "Ms Hennely wasn't in and I got to go with Robbie and Eva to the 5th grade room and do the work Ms Hennely left for us."

The snow stopped on Christmas, but the roads are still icy. Kye doesn't seem to care and is turning at sharp angles on the bends and braking centimetres before the stoplights. Luke tells me about the 5th grade and all the work they did today in the few minutes it takes to get to our stop.

We get off and I'm glad the walk back to the house is quick, despite the snow. I start work again today at the usual time so, when we get inside the house, I change out of my clothes and into the uniform.

The uniform is simple; the pants are navy and there's a light blue blouse with my name tag on it. Mauve's not fussy and, if you're late by a few minutes, she doesn't dock your wages or get angry- as long as you're not taking advantage and doing it constantly- but I try not to be late anyway.

Luke, who comes with me as I don't want to leave him alone, carries his bag and we walk the few minutes it takes to get to Micks, trying not to slip and fall on the ice along the way.

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It's a slow day today. Luke's in the back room doing his homework and Mauve is placing some items onto the shelves. I'm behind the register and flicking through the book we're to read for English.

"You work here?"

I look up when I hear the familiar voice and internally groan when I see who it is. I nod my head and return to my book, hoping he won't annoy me any further and will go away, but he doesn't.

"Well, get to work then. My cousin is outside waiting and we don't have all day," Alex sighs, dramatically, looking at his watch and tapping his foot, as though he's been waiting for ages.

I look for what he's buying, but find nothing on the belt. "There's nothing here."

He sighs impatiently and points to the screw at a start on the revolving belt, as far away from me as possible, and probably the smallest thing in the shop. I press the button for the belt to move, rolling my eyes and wanting to hit him over the head with the book, though I doubt that would be allowed. "Will that be all?"

"Yep," he says and hands me a \$50 note.

A \$50 note for one little screw. I want to glare at him, knowing he is only doing this because it's me at the register, but I keep from doing so. I take the note and open the register, cursing myself for taking most of the \$10 and \$20 bills out. Week days are usually slow and no one does lots of shopping here, so I left myself with \$1 and \$5 bills. I could easily go back and get some bigger notes, but I find myself wanting to annoy him.

I start counting out some \$1 and \$5, taking my time and ignoring him when he sighs impatiently. I've two \$10s, so I take them out. I pile out the money; two \$10 bills, seventeen \$1 bills, two \$5 bills and a whole lot of change. "Here you go," I say, handing him the pile of notes and the bundle of change. "Have a good day."

He glares at me and opens his mouth to probably start a ranting session, but Mauve comes up to the desk just in time. "Joey, your shift is over now. Are you okay, sir?" she asks Alex.

He stands up tall and begins his rant, glaring at me. "Look! She gave me this," he starts, pointing at all of the change.

Mauve looks down at it, glancing at me before looking back up at Alex. "Did she count it out wrong?" Mauve asks with a frown, her tone polite and steady, but I can tell she is having a hard time holding in her laughter. Have I mentioned Mauve is a great boss?

Alex looks at her in disbelief, looking back at the bundle of change in his hand, as though to make sure it is there and that he isn't seeing things. Seeing he isn't delusional, he starts again. "She-,"

"I don't believe Joey did," Mauve continues, cutting him off. "She's quite the genius at Math, you know. She's never gotten it wrong before and I doubt she has now. Maybe you've gotten it wrong?"

'Quite the genius at Math'? Oh, now I know she is messing with him.

"I have not gotten it wrong-!"

"Well, then, I don't see the problem, sir," she sighs, shaking her head dismissively at him. Hearing a bell sound, she exclaims, "Oh, the food is ready!" before she rushes into the back room to check on the cookies she and Luke are making.

Alex glares at me. "How am I meant to carry all of this?"

I shrug at him and begin to collect my things, ready to leave. "Not my problem."

"It is your pro-,"

"I'm not the one who has to carry the change home," I retort and go into the back room before he can demand a refund.

I've never spoken to anyone like that before. It felt good. I'm probably going to regret it at school but, for now, I'm going to enjoy the fact I didn't back down.

# Chapter 18: Chapter eighteen

### Chapter eighteen

Luke insists that I have to go out in the snow once more before it all melts away. The sun's peeking out through the clouds, and I can tell it's not going to be too long before it does melt, so I humour him by agreeing to go out, trying not to fall on the black patches of ice lining the lawn out front.

I haven't seen the caravan in months. The last time Karen came back, she didn't have it, so I assume she sold it and used the money for booze or cigarettes. I can't say I'll miss it, but I wonder how we're going to get to the next 'right place'.

It's unusual for us to stay in the same place for over five months, but not unheard of. We stayed in 'right place number three' for eight months, the longest time we've spent in one place. We've been here now for six and a half months, it now being the middle of February. I'm hoping she'll hold out until June 10th, when I'll be eighteen, but it's very doubtful.

Luke and I build a snowman with the mushy snow that's left on the ground. No matter how many lessons I get off Kyle and Luke, I've still been unable to make a proper snowball that hits its target, and have been teased mercilessly about it.

When we finish building the snowman and are drenched to the bone, we decide to go back inside. Jones decided to give us lots of homework to make up for the lost time spent organising the dance and while I do that, Luke sits in the living room and draws.

My mind bored with Math after a few minutes, I think back to lunch today when I sat with Kyle. I got lots of stares and later found out that I was the first person to sit at the same table as him in a long time.

I was eating my lunch when he stopped beside the table where I was sitting with Rosa. When I looked up, he looked at me and walked over to a table, then glanced up at me again.

"I think he wants you to sit with him," Rosa said, seeing me unsure of what to do.

I wasn't so easily convinced; other than a "hi" in the mornings if we're at our lockers at the same time, we don't speak in public. He doesn't come around to the house either, and hasn't since Christmas. Luke asks about him sometimes, but I don't get much of a chance to talk to him as we don't go to the woods since it is too cold, and the snow is mushy there, so we can't sit for long.

When Kyle looked at me again, then to the seat across from him, my curiosity got the better of me and I decided to go over. I asked Rosa if she'd be okay if I went and she said she'd be fine, and that I'd have to tell her the 'details' after, whatever that meant. I packed my lunch into my lunch box and went over to his table.

"Hi," I said to him, placing my lunch box on the table and took the seat across from him.

"Hi."

I opened my lunch box and began to eat. I noticed some people staring at our table and I frowned, looking around to see what they were staring at. I didn't find anything and tried to ignore them, but it was hard since Stella's table was glaring openly at me.

It seems, as Rosa told me after lunch, that Stella was given a bet at the beginning of the year that she has to get to second base with someone, and the person chosen is Kyle. I didn't, nor do, know what second base is, but I could tell my sitting with Kyle wasn't going to help her achieve it.

Like Sabbath and Sabrina, Stella's flirting isn't too subtle. She'll lean over something so her cleavage is spilling out of her tiny top, and will bat her fake eye lashes so much that it looks as though she has something in her eye. According to Rosa, Kyle once asked if she needed eye drops, and he has been admired by others for saying that to her.

I turned away from their glares and found Kyle watching me. "Hi," I said then remembered I already said that and cursed myself. He grinned and looked back down at his food.

"You already said that."

"Well, how about "hey"?"

He didn't look back up, but I could see his dimples. They're faint and can barely be seen, but I find myself studying them whenever I do see them. We didn't talk much as we ate our lunch, just sat there and caught each other looking at the other every now and again.

"See you," I said to him when the bell rang. He nodded in farewell and exited through the doors leading to the hallway.

"Well?" Rosa asked, coming up behind me and startling me. I turned around to find most of the people looking at us, so I quickly motioned for her to follow me out of the room, not liking the attention. "What was that about?"

I wondered if I should tell her about Christmas, but decided not to, not really sure what to make of it myself. "Nothing really, we didn't talk much."

She looked suspiciously at me, but left it at that. Rosa doesn't pester you for information if it's private and I like that about her, but I can't help but feel I'm disappointing her with my lack of information. It's not that I don't trust her; I know she wouldn't tell anyone anything I don't want her to, but I don't want to burden her with my troubles. I feel like a bad friend sometimes; I can't even tell her about the guy I have a crush on- isn't that what teenage girls talk about with their friends?

Shaking my head with a sigh, I look down at the page and see I have scribbled into the margin while lost in my thoughts. Giving up for the night on homework, I pack my bag and make my way into the living room to see if Luke's ready for bed.

"Ready for beddy-byes?" I ask in a baby voice, thinking back to when he was a baby and the words I used to use. He's still drawing at the table, but hides it when I go to take a look.

"Okay," he says quickly, lifting his shirt and hiding the paper under it from my view. When he doesn't complain at me for using 'beddy-byes', I know something is up. I raise my eyebrows at him.

"What're you doing?" I ask him, following him into the bedroom.

"Nothing," he replies, much too quickly, climbing up the ladder with one hand while the other hides the thing he was drawing or making.

I'm suspicious at his behaviour, but don't ask what he is hiding. He has the right to privacy, something he hasn't gotten a lot of due to bullies in school and an even bigger bully at home, who goes by the name of Karen.

Shrugging and resisting the urge to roll my eyes when he shoves the paper under his pillow, I tuck the blanket around him, brushing the hair from his forehead. "Night, Luke," I say, climbing down off the ladder and pulling back my covers.

"Night, Joey. I love you," he replies after a yawn.

I turn out the light and get into my bed, lying against the pillow. Just when I think Luke is asleep, his voice rings out in the darkness.

"Did you say 'beddy-byes'?"

"Of course not," I assure, knowing he would be scowling at me if he could see me. "Now, go to sleep."

With a sigh that has me holding back a smile, I hear the covers rustling as he turns on his side. The wind howling against the window but the room silent, I fall into a restless sleep.

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Luke's acting very suspicious today. He brought his bag with him all around the house and when I went to get his lunch box from it, he ran into the living room, dived in front of the bag and brought it back out to me, as though it's usual behaviour of his to dive across rooms.

We're on the bus and he keeps opening his bag and looking inside his folder, checking to see if something's there before putting the folder back into the bag with a sigh of relief, only to look again a few minutes later. We pull up at the stop and he runs off the bus.

"Bye!" he says, giving me a quick hug and running to school. I watch him go in bewilderment, turning away when the doors shut behind him and start for my school, debating on whether or not I should go to my locker.

I pause at the doors then, glancing at the clock on the wall, decide I can go to my locker quickly before class. Hurrying down the hall and glad there are others around so I'm not the only late one, I jerk to a halt at my locker and quickly dial the combination, not even noticing Kyle at his until he says, "Hi."

I mumble something back to him, scowling when I can't find my calculator, but I don't have the time for a thorough search to find it. With a sigh, I shut the door, looking at the books in my bag to make sure I have all the right ones.

Kyle's door shuts and he walks off, his shoulder brushing mine and startling me. I turn around, but find him gone, making me wonder how he can move so quickly.

Locker locked and all the right books in my bag, I make my way to my first class before the bell rings.

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It is finally lunchtime and, looking around the halls, I realise that there are red and pink hearts all over the school; on lockers, walls, doors, windowsâ ¦ everywhere. I don't know how I didn't notice that before now.

In 4th grade, we used to make cards and send them to people in the class. Sabrina used to get loads from all the boys. Bianca and I got some, too and Cian got nearly as much as Sabrina.

Cian was always cute and some of the girls in my grade had a crush on him and were always asking me about him. I knew he was cute, but I never thought of him that way since he was my friend for a long time; besides, boys were yucky back then.

As I walk into the cafeteria, I find myself glancing at Kyle's table, only to find Stella sitting there, doing her 'subtle' flirting procedure. Kyle looks like he'd rather be anywhere else in the world and's trying to ignore her, but she keeps talking and talking and talking.

Rosa went to the dentist earlier this morning, so I don't have anyone to sit with, besides Rosa's friends, but I'm not in the mood to pretend I know who this celebrity is, and who wore this dress to wherever. Usually that wouldn't bother me and I'd sit with them, but I don't really want to have to sit and see Kyle with Stella; it reminds me of Josh and Sabbath, and I really don't want to think about them.

Kyle and I haven't spoken much since Christmas, so I'm starting to think it didn't mean that much to him, but then I remember what he said in the woods and I'm completely confused.

After a moment's hesitation, I debate on whether or not to go to the library to eat lunch, and the thought wins out when Stella glances up and sees me, then leans closer to Kyle, who is looking bored and picking at his food. As quickly as I can, hoping not to draw attention to myself, I slip back through the doors and make my way down the hall to the library, hoping I won't get caught by the librarian.

The library's rarely busy, unless its exam time, as Rosa told me. Today is no exception, so I find a table near the back, as far away from the librarian's desk as possible, and sit down, glancing around to make sure no one can see me before opening the lid of my lunch box.

I love libraries. The shelves are full of books from romance to historical, from fact to fiction, from art to magazinesâ ¦ so many types to choose from. I could spend hours in one and usually spend the majority of lunch time in it, but Rosa prefers to be out socializing at lunch, so I sometimes go with her, but I'm not good at that, so I usually stay at the library.

Maybe it's the fact that I feel like I'm going to get caught, or maybe it's that I'm just not hungry, but I close the lid of the lunch box before finishing all the food, and place it in my bag, wishing I brought the book I'm reading so I could change it. I pick up my bag and am rummaging through it for the English homework, when a shadow falls over me.

I glance up from the bag, wondering if the librarian has caught me and I'm going to get a detention for eating in the library. I haven't gotten a detention before and really can't afford to have one with Luke; he'd be on his own and the next bus after the one we get isn't until seven, which would have us standing outside the school for hours.

I sigh in relief when I see it's not the librarian, then frown, wondering what he's doing here.

"Hey," Kyle says. His expression is neutral as he sits down on the hard chair across from me, not saying another word as a door slams roughly somewhere, the sound echoing in the room around us.

I look at him warily, not sure why he is here. I don't reply, just nod and we sit in silence, both waiting for the other to speak first.

He gives in, finally breaking the silence between us with a question. "How's Luke?"

"Good," I reply, going back to looking through my bag. Back to the silence, I think; and even though conversation is somewhat strained, it isn't awkward, which is weird.

I glance up to see the librarian back from wherever she was, and she's glaring at us, probably for speaking too loud. Not wanting to be on her bad list, I get up from the table, slinging my bag over my shoulder. Kyle mimics me, getting up off his chair and pushing it under the table.

"See you," I say and go to leave. Before I have gotten past the table, he takes my wrist, stopping me from leaving. I turn back to look at him but, before I turn around completely, he is opening my hand and placing something inside it. Then he's gone.

Curious, I open my hand to see what he put in it. If the librarian wasn't glaring at me for making noise, I would have dropped my bag when I see it.

The red and purple flower from the woods.

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The wait by the bus stop is lonely without the chattering Rosa, but I manage. I have been alone for six years, so I can survive a few minutes while waiting for Luke. It shows how easily I can get used to having company-I don't know what I'm going to do when we move again.

Leaning back against the pole, I focus my gaze on the doors of Luke's school, stopping the thoughts of moving from overtaking my mind. I don't have to worry about that now but, as long as I have Luke, everything is going to be okay.

The doors bursting open loudly, slamming into the wall has me frowning, especially when I see Robbie running at breakneck speed out of them, Luke not far behind him. They're running in my direction and I panic, wondering if someone is hurt.

When they get closer, I see Robbie has a huge grin on his face, and my panic lessens slightly. "What's going on?" I ask when they arrive in front of me. "Is everything okay?"

Robbie, gasping in a breath from all the running he has done, looks up at me, elbowing Luke out of the way and shushing him. "Luke likes Eva!" he announces, looking at Luke with a teasing glint in his eyes.

"Eva?" I ask with a frown, trying to remember who she is. "Is she the girl in your class?" I ask Luke, who turns bright red.

"Maybe," he mutters, glaring at Robbie. "Well, Robbie got a card from someone secret!"

"And Luke likes Eva!" Robbie cries in a sing-song voice.

"Someone likes Robbie!"

"Luke likes Eva!"

"Robbie likes Allie!"

"I do not!" Robbie gasps indignantly, shaking his head at me as though he is trying to assure me Luke is joking. "Besidesâ ¦ Luke likes Eva!"

"You do!" Luke says, "You gave her a card today. You like her."

"And you like Eva!"

Luke shrugs, glancing up at me before looking away. "Well, yeah, she's a nice girl, but I don't like her, like her."

"You admitted it!" Robbie exclaims, as though he understands all this. He probably does, but I'm beyond confused. Was Luke hiding the card he made Eva? Is that what he was being so evasive about last night and this morning?

"So, wait," I cut in, stopping their outbursts. "Robbie gave Allie a card, and someone anonymous gave him one, and Luke made Eva a card?"

"What's anonymous mean?" they ask simultaneously, a small crease appearing on their foreheads as they turn to me.

"You don't know who it is," I explain quickly, "So, Robbie likes Allie-,"

"I don't!" Robbie cuts in indignantly, refusing to budge on the matter.

"-someone likes Robbie, and Luke likes Eva?" I finish, wondering how I have gotten myself in the middle of this topic.

"Yeah," Luke says shrugging, but not looking at me.

Okayâ ¦ I think, wondering where all this is coming from. Then I remember it is Valentine's Day and they most likely did the card thing we did in 4th grade. Aren't they a bit young for that? Luke said he likes Eva because she is a nice person, not that he "likes her, likes her." I'm not even going to bother to look deeper into that.

As Luke and Robbie argue over the topic, a voice cuts in, calling Robbie's name. A girl, around seven or eight years of age, comes running up to us, her ponytail bouncing with every step she takes. "Your mom's looking for you," she tells him, dragging on his arm. She catches sight of me and drops his arm, turning to me with a smile. "Hi! I'm Allie."

"Hello, Allie," I greet, shaking the hand she's holding out for me. "I'm Joey. I've heard a lot about you."

"You have?" she asks, her eyes widening. "Really?"

"No, she hasn't," Robbie quickly cuts in, shooting me a glare. "She's thinking about Eva."

"Eva?" Allie asks a thoughtful expression on her face. "She thinks you're funny," she tells Luke, nodding firmly, like she's daring him to disagree with her.

Luke doesn't reply, not that he gets the chance to before Allie is shouting at Robbie again. "Come on, your mom," she urges, dragging on his arm.

"Oh, yeah," he sighs, allowing her to drag him off. "See you, Luke."

"Bye, Joey!" Allie calls back before she and Robbie are running over to his mom's car.

When they have gone their separate ways, I nudge Luke with my hip. "So, Eva, huh?"

# **Chapter 19: Chapter nineteen**

### Chapter nineteen

Kyle hasn't been in school for the past two weeks, nor have I seen him around. He's never at our spot in the woods and I don't see him outside his house anymore; maybe he's at the garage, but I don't check. It's the beginning of March and the last time I saw him was the 14th February. His birthday is the 16th March, a little more than two weeks away; he'll be eighteen then.

After a terrible game of dodge ball, in which Alex thought it would be smart to continuously bring me back in, even though I am terrible, I have just finished showering and my hair is dripping wet, annoying me as the back of my clothes are damp. I still have one class left and I hate having showers when there's still a class, but Coach said we all have to have one.

My arms are sore and I most likely have many bruises from 'accidental' hits from Alex, who always seemed to be behind me when he was throwing the ball.

That, along with tipping his lunch tray on me at lunch one day, is most likely payback for the change thing. I knew I would be getting payback because of it, but I didn't think he'd actually spill his lunch on me like that; he wasn't even subtle about it.

Rosa didn't take too well to it and didn't keep quiet about her annoyance; she poured her soup into her glass of water and threw it at Alex, before telling the room all of his secrets loudly.

They both got a detention for making a commotion, but Rosa didn't mind as she wasn't happy with Alex being mean to me all the time. How have I gotten someone as great as her as a friend?

I pull my hair up into a ponytail and ignore the water dripping down my back. My books are by my locker, so I grab them on my way and go to Science early; the first time that has ever happened in this school.

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I stare at the piece of paper in shock, not sure I believe it. Three-hundred and seventy six dollars and twenty cents, it reads, along with the figure written beside it; \$376 20 cents, the electricity and gas bill.

The paper falls from my shaking hands and onto the table, the writing facing up, as though taunting me. I rest my elbows on the table and lean my head against my hands, trying to calm down. I am such an idiot! Why did I think things were going to start looking up for us? Just because I have a job that pays enough doesn't mean I'm always going to be able to spend a little extra every now and then. I never should have bought myself that bar of chocolate or the warm socks.

I should have been saving the money up, not buying myself stupid things that I don't even need. I am going to have to learn to grow up and stop being selfish if I want Luke to stay healthy; he comes first, I have to get that into my head.

I never thought the bill would be this much; if I had known, I wouldn't have spent so much on the groceries and would have left back the new shoes I got for Luke. I don't regret getting him his presents for Christmas or the ones for the homeless shelter, but I just wish things would stay on the bright side, for once.

"Joey?"

I peek out from the gap between my hands and see Luke standing in the doorway, frowning at me and looking worried.

"Hey," I say with fake cheer in my voice. He comes over to the table and sits beside me.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I sigh, lifting my head from my hands. "I'm just feeling a little tired."

"You should go to bed," he suggests innocently, and I find myself wishing- not for the first time- that he had a different life than he does. He doesn't deserve any of this, never deserved being ignored by his mother, abandoned by his father and left to starve because his 'mother' cared about alcohol more than her son's health. I can't imagine what would have happened if I decided to not go with Karen - I don't even want to think about it, so I tune back into the conversation.

"If I went to bed, how could I get my art lesson?" I ask, shaking my head at him. Ever since he saw my terrible failure of a drawing, he has been determined to improve my art skills, but to little avail. Still, I let him give me tips and advice and have found out that he's actually a good teacher; I just don't have any talent at arts and crafts.

His face brightens up at the mention of art lessons and he rushes into the bedroom to get the materials needed. Last week we were drawing people and I found out that the head goes into the body seven times when someone is standing up, and six times when sitting.

How he knew that, I've no idea, but even with that piece of advice, it didn't help my drawing in the slightest. I'm worse at art than I am at cooking, and that's saying something. We've had fun trying to make the cakes and recipes from his cookbook, but that'll have to stop until the bill is paid off and until we're back on our feet again.

Luke comes running out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, art pack and sketch pad trailing along behind him. He would make a good teacher as he has the patience it would require, unlike me. While he goes into teacher-mode, I find myself thinking back to the times Bianca, Cian and I would play games like that in Aaron and Lisa's apartment, but sometimes I went over to theirs.

Luke has never met Aaron or Lisa and I don't think he ever will. I have no idea how they're getting on and if they're well. I promised to keep in touch with them before I left, but there was no phone in the caravan and by the time we got to the first 'right place', Karen had either destroyed all of my possessions or sold them for money. I was lucky enough to have hidden the necklace Lisa gave me, but the hairband she bought me when she went to visit her family in England didn't survive.

They were my family and I know they would love Luke as much as I do. I've never met any more of my family other than Aaron and Lisa, but Aaron mentioned his mother sometimes, but I never met her personally. His parents are divorced and even when I was nine I know he hated his father. When I once mentioned about meeting my grandfather, he looked really angry and sad, so I never mentioned him again. Aaron never knew that Karen was abusive; he wouldn't have let me go with her if he did.

I wonder what would have happened if Aaron had taken Luke and me from Karen and kept us in New York with him. Life would have been different, that's for sure. Luke would have had the life he deserves and would have never felt abandoned. He would have never have had to stay with Karen and would have been in the same school his whole life. Aaron and Lisa would treat him right and he'd be loved and cared forâ

I should have switched with him. He stayed with Aaron and I went with Karen. I had had a good childhood in New York and Luke deserves that, but he has never gotten it. I've tried my best, but I was nine and he was a baby, and Karen didn't do much to help other than scream at him to shut up when he was crying and, though it was a *very* rare thing, sometimes she would feed Luke his evening bottle while I made her dinner; but she never did help out much.

When I went to school, I had no choice but to leave him with her. She was his mother after all and should have been able to look after him, but she usually gave him to a sitter and went off drinking, but sometimes the guy she was with would look after Luke. Number two did that sometimes, but only if there was something in it for him, money usually.

You'd think someone wouldn't take money from a nine year old, but he had no shame. It's not like Luke was even my child; he was my brother, but if I asked him to look after Luke while I was at school, he'd expect some sort of payment and since I couldn't buy him booze, he took money. The money I worked hard for.

I used to go around, asking if anyone wanted a job done, like painting a house or mowing a lawn. People thought it was cute that I wanted a job and usually took me on, giving me small things to do, but 'right place number three' was a hard place and we nearly starved before I found a retirement centre that I could go to.

Karen, oblivious to the world and drunk out of her mind, gave her consent and I went there to visit the old people, sometimes bringing Luke along. I sometimes felt bad for taking the money they gave me; I didn't want them to think I was with them for money, but they told me that they liked having a young person around. I was always tall for my age, so I guess they thought I was older than I was; especially Ms Wickham, she must have thought I was a teenager as she was always asking me about boys and trying to set me up with her grandson.

I come out of my thoughts to find Luke looking at me with a frown. "Are you sure you're okay, Joey?" he asks when I look at him blankly.

"I'm fine," I assure with a weak smile, motioning for him to continue.

Sometimes he's just too observant for his own good.

The locker beside mine opens with a loud bang, the door knocking against mine and causing it to shut. I open it again with an inward sigh, getting my books out before shutting it with more force than necessary.

"Hey Kyle," Rosa greets, arriving at my locker and looking her usual cheerful self. Kyle, being Rosa's polar opposite, grumbles a reply, looking as un-cheerful as one can be.

Against my will, my eyes glance up at him. It was only meant to be just that; a glance, but seeing the dark bruise under his eye and his busted lip has my eyes full-on staring at him. He doesn't look at me, just continues to get his books out of his locker before shutting it and walking off, not another word spoken.

I watch after him, seeing him walking with a limp, but he's trying not to show it. Having a good build and physique and the 'rebel' look about him, others probably don't think much of the cuts and bruises he arrives with at school and probably think he's been in a fight with someone, or something of that sort. Honestly, I would've thought that, too, if I hadn't seen him that day in the woods.

That day was in September and it's now March, six months after that. So much can happen in six months that I'd have never have thought would happen; Luke making lots of friends, having a proper Christmas, Rosa, the house feeling like a homeâ ¦ and Kyle.

We haven't spoken since Christmas much, the last time being the library, and I'm not sure what to think about that. Is he purposely avoiding me? Did I do something? Does he not want to be friends with me because of something? Does he think what happened over Christmas was a mistake?

The last one upsets me, but I ignore the feeling. Again, the answer to my questions is right in front of me, yet I say nothing.

A/N: sort of slow chapter, I know, but soon things are going to be... interesting, for lack of a better word. Thank you once again for reading; still shocks me that people have kept with something I have written for this long, so I'm really grateful:)

# **Chapter 20: Chapter twenty**

# **Chapter twenty**

I never did get to do anything for Kyle's birthday. He was in school on the day, a make-shift bandage around his wrist, a black eye and some cuts and bruises around his face; he was late in arriving, not around at lunch, and the first person gone from the building. I didn't get to say a word to him.

I don't see him at his house or in the woods, either; but I don't go looking for him. If he doesn't want to talk to me, I won't force my company on him.

Luke asked me why Kyle isn't around anymore, but I don't know. He frowned at me for a moment before getting back to his colouring, but I noticed that it was a lot less enthusiastic than before. He's used to people coming and going from his life, especially men, but I think he really liked Kyle, maybe as much as Josh.

And now Kyle has gone, like everyone before him. I'm angry at Kyle for leaving, and that has stopped me from going up to talk to him the few times I have seen him around. I'm not sure if that's the right decision yet, but I'm not going to dwell on it too deeply.

When I was doing homework yesterday, I realised that we have been here for seven months now, and Karen hasn't been back for many. I hope that that's a good sign and she'll hold out to June, which is two months from today. She doesn't usually leave us for months at a time, but I'm not going to question it.

As much as I don't want her here, either I'm going to have to find another job, or Tom is going to have to start leaving some money for us. Mauve's brother is sick and she has to go out to Florida to look after him. I'll be without a job until the end of June; Mick's is a family business, and she doesn't trust anyone else with running it.

She said she was sorry that I had to lose my job and that she'd get me another, but I told her not to worry. If a family member or anyone close to you has cancer, you drop everything and go to their side. I'm worried about what we'll do for money, but we'll make do somehow.

We always do.

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The light breeze knocks the loose strands of hair from my face, the air cool against my warm skin. Even though the trees shade me from the sun, I can still feel its heat in the air around me.

My feet are dipped into the pond, my shoes lying beside me somewhere as I stare out at the trees. The leaves have grown back onto the once bare branches a while ago, but I still marvel at how nature can change so suddenly; one minute they're there, the next, they aren't.

Flowers are blooming everywhere, birds are tweeting, leaves are swaying; the grass is greenâ ¦it's peaceful; tranquil. Isolated.

I lightly graze my finger over the smooth surface of the water, watching as my reflection is distorted by the small ripples, before plunging my whole hand under, revelling in the cool feeling as a drop splashes onto my leg. Memories of times like this come to mind, and they feel like they happened years ago, but, in reality, it was only a few months ago.

Water laps against the boat, rocking it from side-to-side as I hold on for dear life. "Come on!" Josh urges, splashing me playfully with water. "It's nice and cool."

"No," I stubbornly deny, knowing nothing would get me into that water, no matter how hot it is out. Josh sighs, pulling himself out of the water and back onto the boat, flecks from his drenched clothes landing on my skin as his back grazes my knee. "You're all wet."

"Yeah, well water does that to you," he says in all seriousness, but the effect is ruined when his lip starts to turn upwards. I lightly kick at his shin, but he grabs my foot and tugs me off the blanket I am sitting on.

"It's not nice to kick people, Joey," he chides, a grim expression on his face.

"You call that a kick?"

"You think you can do better?"

Not when my foot is in your hand, *I think*, but *I'm not going to remind him about that*. "I know I can do better than that."

Before he can reply, I yank my foot from his grasp and lunge at him, but he jumps to the side. I fall onto the blanket and hear his laughter. Getting up and scowling, I turn and dive at him, catching him by surprise and knocking him backwards. I hold his hands above his head in victory, looking down at him smugly.

Josh grins devilishly, tugging his hands free and holding onto the side of the boat. I figure out what he's going to do a moment too late; before I can react, he roughly shakes the boat and we topple into the water.

I panic, breathing in deeply, but I hit the water and suck up the liquid. My throat burns as I kick and flail, but I only manage to push myself under deeper, further away from the surface.

As my feet touch the bottom of the lake, I feel light-headed. My eyes are shut, adding to my distress and I just want to lie down, but I know I can't. I can't give up; Luke needs me. Finding the last of my energy, I push against the bottom of the lake and kick my feet, propelling through the water as I struggle to not breathe in.

I hit the surface gasping, holding onto the boat so tightly that even the jaws-of-life couldn't pry it from me. Josh appears in my line of vision and hauls me onto the upturned boat and into his arms.

"I'm so sorry," he repeats for the tenth time, rubbing his hands up my arms.

"Josh," I sigh, interrupting his muttering. "It doesn't matter; I was just taken by surprise. I haven't been in water in years and don't know how to swim, but you didn't know that."

It takes us a while to get back to shore, but I don't panic whenever I fall in. I just take a deep breath and don't flail about. It takes us a long time and we eventually just give up with the oars and drag it back to shore, which takes us a lot longer, but we did it.

Luke has never been to a beach before; we've never lived near one, but I'd love to take him- let him feel the sand between his toes, the sound of the waves, the hot sun beating down as he wades through the water. I'll get him to one eventually; hopefully sooner rather than later, but whatever comes first.

Thinking about the times I went to beach with Aaron and Lisa for day trips, I lean back with a sigh, wishing I could see them again; to know if they're well, if they have other kids... The sound of a bush rustling, followed

by muttering, catches my attention.

I look around, my breath catching when I see Kyle, who is frozen in place beside a bush. His back is to me, but I can tell something is wrong by the way he is hunched over and leaning heavily on one foot. He stumbles as he makes a move to go back the way he came, but not before I get a glimpse of his face.

It's like being taken back in time to six months ago, except my wrist isn't throbbing and I'm not collapsed on the ground in a heap from exhaustion. Kyle looks the same as he did them; black eye, split lip, limping, covered in bruisesâ † The scar on my temple tingles at the memory.

Kyle changes course and comes over to the pond, sitting down instead of leaving. "Dab," I say, seeing him roughly swipe at the blood on his face. "Don't swipe." Those are the same words he said to me that day.

He winces every time he moves, looking in deep pain. I go against my mind's warnings and get up, making my way slowly around the pond, but stop before I reach him, unsure if I should go any closer. He's the one who has been ignoring me; my feelings shouldn't be hurt by that as I'm used to being ignored, but they are. And I don't know why.

"Ashley," he says lowly, his voice hoarse and ragged, like it's painful to say the name. I abide by my decision to stay put, sensing this is important. "She was five; light brown hair and the brightest blue eyes I've ever seen. She had a dimple on her right cheek that was always there because she never stopped smiling. I took having her around for granted; thought she'd always be there and I wouldn't be without her.

"I never liked Stan Tykes, didn't know what Alana, my mother, saw in him, besides that he had money. I was always careful to never leave her alone with him, but he was rarely there anyway; out drinking and doing drugs with his buddies. They never had plans to get married, but that didn't stop him from moving in and acting like he owned the place.

"The groceries were running low and Ashley wasn't feeling well, so I left her to go and get them. I left a five year old in the house alone, the stupidest thing I've even done in my life. She had asthma, but I left her inhaler and promised to be back soon. I was gone for about an hour.

"When I got back, I saw Stan's car in the drive- it wasn't there before. Ashley wasn't in the kitchen or the living room, but I'd always told her to go to the bathroom and lock the door if she was alone and they came back. When I checked the bathroom door, it was locked, and I was so relieved. I knocked, but there was no answer. I tried to window outside."

Kyle stops taking for a moment as his voice breaks. He tries to hide his trembling jaw, but unsuccessfully. I'm frozen in front of him, unable to move for the life of me as I listen to painful words.

"S-she was on the floor by the bath, crumped in a heap; face down and there was a blood on the floor. I broke the window and dived inside. She didn't die from blood loss- she had an attack and her inhaler wasn't with her. She had a lump on her forehead, like she was thrown against something or pushed roughly to the floor a l

"The guys in the kitchen started laughing, and I noticed that the door was locked from the outside, not the insideâ ¦ like she was intentionally locked in the room. I didn't even stop to think before I broke the door down and lost it completely.

"It was six against one, but they were drunk beyond sense. I nearly killed them, but the one I suspected locked the door made a run for it. Alana came stumbling in; she barely took in the scene before Stan grabbed her and

threatened to strangle her. He said he'd call the police and say I locked her in the bathroom and beat Alana; she went along with the story.

"There were no neighbours or witnesses, so no one would believe me, especially since Alana was playing along. Stan ran out the door and I completely lost it, broke down in tears when the door slammed. He got away, scot free and there wasn't anything I could do about it.

"I looked for him, but I couldn't find him anywhere. He had money and could be anywhere now. Alana called the police, but she left out any mention of Stan, just said that she had an asthma attack and locked herself in the bathroom. I said nothing, but they thought it was shock because my sister just died. Alana was on his side, the side of the man who locked her child in the bathroom where she died."

He ends in a whisper, tears streaming down his face that are barely visible because of the bloody and swollen mess. "It was three years ago yesterday. Luke reminds me of her so much; it's hard to think about her. She was the only person I cared about, but I failed her."

I'm frozen in my spot, my hands by my sides and my feet planted firmly on the soft, muddy ground that is covered in flowers; but not the red and purples ones. Kyle's looking out at the trees, his eyes watery and his body shaking from relaying the story.

"I hurt myself," he says lowly, his voice ragged and hoarse. "Whenever I get too happy; whenever I feel like life is living without her, I cause myself pain. It reminds me that I failed her, my little sister; Alana joins in but I don't stop her. She was her daughter, and now she's gone.

"Alana's emotional when she's drunk, which is every moment of the day. She cries every night- it hurts to see her cry; she's my mother. Letting her take her pain and anger out on me is the least that I can do. She still takes Stan's side; only cares about herself; but there's nothing I can do to prove he locked her in the bathroom.

"I've been hurting myself a lot more recently, Joey," Kyle says, looking away from the trees and locking gazes with me. "I feel like my life is worth it now; I'm happy when I wake up- you make me happy; you and Luke. But Ashley's not here anymoreâ ¦ I failed her."

I never knew he had a sister. She was five years old; would be eight now, nearly Luke's age. The thought of losing Luke brings tears to my eyes, but I blink them back. Kyle may be crying, but he needs someone to stay strong. God knows how long we would be sitting here if I started crying, too.

I hate Stan Tykes; almost as much as Karen, probably even more. She's a monster, but I don't think she could ever actually feel no guilt at killing someone, but I don't know that for sure. I hate Alana; I have never met her, but she can't even stand up for her daughter, she only cares about herself. She takes out her weakness on her son, blaming him for something that isn't his fault.

And Kyle blames himself, too; he hurts himself, causes himself pain, allows his mother to hurt him for something that isn't his fault. I understand that he thinks Ashley was his responsibility; if something happened to Luke, I would never forgive myself.

I close the small distance between us and kneel on the ground in front of him, slowly reaching out and taking his hand, willing him to look at me. "Don't," I plead, catching his gaze with mine; his green, mesmerizing eyes stare back at me, full of emotion that he can't hide. "Don't hurt yourself. You have a right to be happy; to live your life. Don't let her hurt you, don't hurt yourself- your life is worth it, Kyle; Luke misses you, *I* miss you. Your life is worth living; I need you to see that."

He doesn't want me to tell him everything is going to be okay; he knows it won't be. He doesn't want pity-that's not what I feel for him; it's something strong, but on a more emotional level.

I've never known someone who has died; Karen only has Aaron as a sibling, and I've never met my dad. My grandparents are still alive, but I've never met them; I've no cousins that I know of, or any other relatives. I consider myself lucky; I don't know how to cope with loss, how to grieve or mourn. I just sit by Kyle's side, holding his hand as he silently cries.

"She was the only person I cared about," he says after a while's silence. "It was too painful and I became closed off. I couldn't let myself become close to anyone; I didn't want to experience loss again. Luke made me feel something- the thing I didn't want to feel again.

"So I left. It was selfish; a complete and utter selfish thing to do. I didn't want to just be another person who left his life, but I did it anyway.

"The day I first met you, you crashed into me in the hall. You apologised, but I hate apologies, so I just left. You were on your own at lunch, but you didn't seem to care. We didn't speak much, but you kept turning up everywhere, and there was something about you.

"Alana and her man of the week had been in an argument, which turned physical, so I stepped in. That angered him, especially when I punched him and probably broke his nose, and she shoved me out of the house. He got a few good hits in and has been back since, hence the sprained wrist and bruises a few weeks ago. I went to the pond to clean up.

"When I saw you there, I couldn't believe my eyes. You never complained, were nice to everyone... yet she had been hurting you all that time. I didn't know how you did it. When I got to know you, it was impossible for me not to care about you, but I couldn't allow that. Everyone I care about ends up hurt- I wouldn't let that happen to you and Luke.

"I was out at Ashley's grave and saw the red and purple flowers; they reminded me of you. I took one and gave it to you on the 14th to remind you of that day in the woods, when you were at the tyre swing. Ashley and I built that together one summer. I was at her grave that day; you were so happy and carefreeâ ¦ I left the flower on your desk that Monday.

"I don't wear my heart on my sleeve; it's hard to talk about this kind of thing. I'm trying to explain why I've been ignoring you, but I don't talk about this kind of thing often, if ever. I've never told anyone about her before, and it feels the slightest bit better that I have shared Ashley's memory with someone else."

The tears have stopped and are drying in with the blood on his face. I dip the cloth in the pond water, take his hand in mine and wash it. One finger at a time until they're all free of blood then his palm, dabbing the cuts and avoiding the bruises on the back, before repeating the process on his other hand.

He watches my hand, following its movements. When they're free of blood, I wash the cloth in the pond. I look up at him and find him staring at a scar on my back. I'm wearing a t-shirt that's a bit too small for me, but I didn't think much about it as I was wearing a jacket before it got too warm; I took it off, though I wasn't expecting to run into anyone here.

"I fell."

He looks at me, like he doesn't believe me. It's sort of hard to believe, but it's the truth.

"I did. I was in the yard in 'right place number three' with Luke. The ball hit the barbecue that Karen was lighting and knocked it over. She shouted at me for a while then demanded I get something to clean it.

"I was going into the house and she threw the spatula at my head, and number two had opened the door then and it hit against my back and I fell down the steps. He was in to gardening and he had metal fences all around the yard, so I landed on one of the spikey ones. I pulled it out straight away- it was sore for a few weeks and the scar has been there since."

He reaches over and takes my hand, placing a kiss on a scar on the back of it that I told him a few months back about. I wipe the blood off his face. It's mostly dried in now and it peels off. There's a gash on his temple that's still bleeding and I hold the cloth to it for a minute.

His eye is black and I try to avoid touching it while getting the blood off but, judging by the winces he gives me, I don't avoid it as well as I hoped.

His lip's split and I see a faint scar on his upper one when I wipe the blood away. The cuts and bruises I can do nothing about, so I wring the cloth in the pond when the blood's gone from his face. He's still holding my hand in his, rubbing the back of it in a soothing motion.

I lean forward and kiss his cheek before laying my head on his shoulder. He wraps his arm around my waist and brings our entwined hands onto his lap. Nothing is between us as a barrier this time; the cloth lays forgotten behind us; our hands joined together and the silence golden, as he once said.

Is bin béal ina thost.

# **Chapter 21: Chapter twenty one**

# Chapter twenty-one

April passes by in a flash and before I know it, it's the middle of May and still no sign of Karen. It's getting hotter each day and most days are spent in the woods by the small lake Luke, Robbie and I discovered in early May.

It was a Friday and Luke asked if Robbie could come over. We went to the woods and discovered the small lake. We were at the tyre swing and Luke heard running water behind the trees, so he and Robbie scrambled through the bushes and briars to follow the sound. I followed them, trying to avoid the thorns, branches and muddy patches on the way.

Between the gaps of the trees, I could see a field of grass at its greenest, disappearing only to make way for a small lake in the middle before reappearing again. The boys shouted out in exuberant cries and rushed towards the lake.

I never brought Luke with me to the lake Josh and I went to. It was a rough trek to reach it and we got lost most of the time. This lake is smaller than the one Josh and I discovered, but bigger than the pond. We called it Big Blue as the water was crystal clear and it was quite big. Not very original, I know, but we weren't known for our originality.

Luke had never been swimming before he and Robbie found the small lake, or in water deeper than the bathtub in the house, but he ran in without hesitation, splashing and kicking on his way. The water wasn't very deep, about up to my chest, but that was over Luke and Robbie's heads by a bit. He didn't go any further than his waist deep, but Robbie was under the water, surfacing in random places. It was obvious he could swim, but I was still worried in case his foot got tangled in some rope or his pants caught on a rock.

Thinking about that day now, I don't know why I was so worried. Robbie can hold his breath for nearly two minutes and I wouldn't be surprised if he could swim before he could crawl. Luke's getting better at swimming now from Robbie's lessons and can do the backstroke and nearly the breaststroke. I haven't ventured too far in yet; it feels foreign, even though it's only been a few months since I was last in water.

"Joey!" Luke calls over to me.

I get up from my seat beside the rock and place my notebook on its surface, before wandering over to them in the water.

"Look!"

He dives under the water, his head and body disappearing under before his feet surface. They vanish after a few seconds and he jumps up, water dripping from his hair and a huge smile on his lips.

"Did you see that?"

"That was great, Luke."

"I can do it too!" Robbie exclaims and dives under, his body submerged with the exception of his feet.

As Robbie teaches Luke how to do a somersault underwater, I go back to the rock. I open the notebook on the torn page.

"What's that?"

I quickly shut the book and shove it under the desk. "Nothing."

Not liking that answer, Sabbath grabs the book before I can stop her and rushes over to the opposite side of the classroom, beginning to read while not bothering to pick up the loose pages falling out.

I push my chair out and rush over to get it back, whacking my arm in the process. It's not funny when you whack your funny bone, though it seems to be for everyone else as they burst out in laughter while I wince at the forming bruise. I'm lucky the wound I received two days ago doesn't open up.

*I get up off the floor, ignoring the throbbing and start towards her.* 

"Superheroes?" she sneers at me, turning the page of the story I'm writing for Luke while making sure to speak loudly so everyone can hear. "What're you, five?"

The book is roughly yanked from her grasp, tearing a page in the process.

"Ouch!" Sabbath whines, shaking her finger in the air from side to side as a drop of blood forms on the opening of the paper cut.

The book blocks my further vision and I look up to find Josh standing in front of me, glaring at Sabbath. I grab the book and hold onto it tightly, not letting it go.

Josh takes my arm and I cringe when he touches the bruise; he slides his hand down to grasp mine. I don't miss the glare I receive from Sabbath, nor does anyone in a thousand mile radius, except Josh.

"I'm really sorry, Joey," he says when we get out of the classroom. "I don't know why she's acting like that towards you. Are you okay?"

I flex my arm. "I've been better."

He's still holding my hand and the door opens, hitting my arm and knocking me off the step. I lose my balance and fall into a flower bed and because it's my lucky day, the flowers residing in the bed are roses with extra spikey thorns.

"Josh!" Sabbath pouts. "Look at my finger."

Josh rushes towards me, ignoring Sabbath. This would've hurt a lot worse if I was dressed like Sabbath, who's wearing a short skirt and a t shirt that her chest is bursting out of. I'm glad I decided to wear the jacket this morning, with the sleeves covering my hands; it has saved me from picking thorns out of my skin for the next two hours. He helps me up and sits me down on the wall surrounding the old oak tree that was planted many years ago.

"Josh!" Sabbath whines louder, pouting at him.

"Go away, Sabbath," he snaps impatiently.

"But Josh-,"

"Sabbath, seriously, go away for five minutes. Joey's hurt."

She storms off in a huff to the crowd that's waiting for her, saying something that causes them all to turn and glare in my direction. I excuse myself, mumbling about needing to get something and run to the bathroom away from everyone.

Later that week Sabbath cornered me and threatened to tell everyone about my family if I didn't leave Josh alone.

The grass sways from side to side below my feet, which don't touch the ground from the rock I sit on. The edges are rough and jagged, easy for climbing but, as you make your way up you find out they're fragile and easily broken.

The surface is smooth and flat, easy to sit on if you make it to the top without falling on your way up. It makes me think of Kyle; he looks and plays the part of a rebel, someone who does what he wants, when he wants, but, as I get to know him more and more, I find out he's not like that.

He's had tragedy in his life, too big of a loss for a person so young; so much that he doesn't know who he is anymore. I used to describe Karen as the weather; unpredictable. Josh was a cloud; day or night, he was always there, somewhere. Now Kyle's a rock.

Comparing people to inanimate or animate objects isn't such a normal way to pass the day, I know, but it works for me.

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The graduation ceremony took place on 30th May, a week after our finals. It was a normal ceremony, with the black robes and the weird shaped hats called mortar boards that we threw into the air at the end. Lily was salutatorian and she gave her speech. I didn't go to prom, which was the 20th May. People say you'll regret it in later life, but I don't think I will.

June brings warmer weather, more time out of the house and, finally, some sun. In the evening it's still warm, but not as much as it is during the day. Luke's at Robbie's house for a sleepover and I'm by the pond, the place I find myself whenever I have spare time on my hands. I glance up at the rustling of the bushes and see Kyle. I'm not surprised since we've gotten back into our old routine of arriving at the pond around the same time.

He comes around the pond and sits beside me, but instead of lying back and relaxing like he usually does, he is sitting straight, looking stiff as he looks out into the woods, but at nothing in particular. "She's gone."

I turn and look at him, frowning. "Gone?" I ask, wondering if he is referring to Alana, his mother. Since he told me about Ashley, he has been a bit more open about his life at home, like how his mother blames him for her daughter's death and for scaring away the men in her life.

He nods his head wearily. "Gone. No note or anything. All her clothes are gone from her room and her shoes, too. She never takes them anywhere in case she loses them, but they're gone. She's gone."

He splashes the water with the toe of his shoe and, finding a stone on the ground beside him, throws it to the other end of the pond, missing the water as it lands on the rocky ground.

"It's nearly your birthday," he says.

It is. It's the 3rd today; though school is over, people can volunteer to go back to help around and, because I don't want to have to say goodbye to Rosa yet, we both volunteered to help out, drawing out our inevitable farewells.

"Has she been back yet?" he asks, referring to Karen as he takes my hand and traces the scars on the back.

I shake my head. "I don't think she will. There's only a week left until I'm eighteen and she's been gone for months, so I doubt she will. It's not like she is going to remember when my birthday is. When I turn eighteen, I can take Luke and leave here."

I know I can't take Luke and have him be legally my responsibility, but unless Karen takes things to court-which I highly doubt she will as she doesn't care about Luke-, I won't say a word. Aaron wasn't my legal guardian, yet I stayed with him for years without the need of court and paperwork.

If she does take things to court, I will give my statement and tell them about how she has neglected us; it will prolong everything, but at least Luke would be legally my responsibility then. When we get to our one and only right place, I might look into it, but I won't worry about it for now.

In less than a week I won't see Kyle again. I didn't think about that before and the silence that surrounds us gives me all the time in the world to think about it, but I don't want to.

"What are you going to do?" I ask into the silence, not wanting to talk about this, but knowing it is going to have to be spoken about sometime.

He sighs, leaning back against the ground with his elbows, staring at the pond. "I don't know; now that she's gone, I don't have a reason to stay here anymoreâ ¦ I'll think of something."

So many thoughts come into my head at his words, but I never thought I'd have the courage to say them aloud. *Or maybe it is stupidity*, I think, pleading with myself to stay silent, but my brain doesn't listen. "Come with us," I blurt out, wanting to hit myself for being so stupid; no eighteen year old boy wants to be tied down with a seven year old kid who has nothing to do with him. Luke is my brother, but he's nothing to Kyle. *Shut up, please shut up!* "â | travel for the summer or-,"

"Joeyâ !"

"â | get a dog or a cat and we can pick a great name for it and-," *Really, Joey?* I ask myself, wanting to shut up, but not being able to for some reason. A dog or a cat? What is wrong with me? I don't want to leave Kyle or Rosa, but I left Josh last year, so I can do it again; this time, it will be willingly as I'm finally eighteen, and we won't be with Karen anymore.

"Joey-," Kyle says again, but I don't look at him, knowing he is thinking I am insane for asking such a thing of him, or he's feeling sorry for me, pitying me and is going to try and let me down easily. The second thought has me gritting my teeth and forcing myself to stay quiet; no way will I allow him to pity me.

It's a good thing that he is going to say no; I don't want his pity, so I'm glad he's not coming. It'll be just the two of us on the road, me and Luke, going to our one and only right place and giving him the life that he deserves. We'll be fine as long as we have each other.

"Joey," he repeats softly, but I refuse to look at him.

We should just say our goodbyes now, I think; it's going to be hard, but prolonging it would be worse.

"Joey." He lifts my chin up, but I close my eyes before I can see his. I won't open my eyes; I won't open my eyes, I chant mentally.

"Joey, open your eyes."

This is it, I realise, taking a deep breath; this is our farewells. What do I say? 'Well, it was nice knowing you?' I can't just say that! I feel like I am saying goodbye to part of myself; I have told him so much and know him more than anyone else-trust him more than anyone. It's in this very place we really met; if I never came to the woods, would we have ever spoken?

Forcing my eyes open, I find him staring at me, looking at me with such intensity that I want to close mine again. Instead, I look away, gathering the courage to say it. Why could I ask him to come with us so easily? I couldn't get myself to shut up, and now, when I actually need to say this, I can't get a word out of my mouth.

Swallowing hard and thinking of Luke, who I promised that we would leave together when I turn eighteen, I turn to Kyle and look up at him, pulling my hand from his. "It was nice knowing you." *Oh, good god, did I just say that?* Anything else would have sounded better than that! Cursing myself, I continue, "I mean, I think we should say our goodbyes now. I'm going to be leaving soon-,"

"I'm leaving, too," he says, frowning at me.

So he *has* decided to go somewhere. He said he didn't know a few minutes ago, but maybe he was just saying that because he thought I'd follow him or something. As if I would follow him; why would he think that? Luke and I have made it this far, so there is no need for him to think that.

Though I don't know he thinks that, do I? I hate the way I automatically think the worst of Kyle and others; I judge so easily sometimes. He probably just thought of a place while I was deciding on how to say goodbye to him. His mother is gone and he has nothing left here to stay for, and he's eighteen; he's an adult now, and he doesn't want to be friends with someone who has the responsibility of a child.

"Ohâ lokay, well, we should say our goodbyes now. You probably have to pack and have other things to do, so-,"

"The packing can wait," he says dismissively, looking at ease, as though our goodbyes aren't a thing to worry or care about.

I'm starting to think that this has all been a joke; has he ever actually been my friend? Has he just pretended about all this? Maybe it's a prank or something- he has to pretend to be this abused, lonely guy for a bet and he has to befriend the new girl, then he tells everyone all her secrets. Maybe they're all in on it, Rosa, too.

"Was this some kind of sick game to you?" I snap, jumping up from the ground and backing away, my anger getting the better of me.

"What?" Kyle asks, looking genuinely confused.

"Befriend the new girl and learn all her secrets? You don't actually care about me and are using me?"

Kyle gets up from his sitting position, a hard expression on his face. "Is that what you think? Are you actually serious, Joey? I don't tell just anyone about my life, and I certainly don't decide to leave everything I've

known behind and leave with them."

The words on the tip of my tongue are held back as I take in his words. "What?" I stammer, wondering if I heard him right. He was going to come with Luke and me?

"I don't know where you got that idea from, but it's not true at all, Joey. You asked me to go, but now you're saying you want to say goodbye? I don't get it."

I am such an idiot! Why did I let myself think such things of Kyle? I trust him and know he wouldn't do something like that, but did that stop me from being an idiot and accusing him of all sorts of things? No, it didn't; why can't I keep my mouth shut?

"I'm sorry," I sigh, disgusted and annoyed at myself. "I somehow convinced myself in a moment of weakness. I know you wouldn't do something like that."

"Does your offer still stand?" he asks after a moment of silence, staring at something behind me before his eyes snap to mine.

"Kyleâ !"

"You're different, Joey. I know I've told you that many times already, but you are. I don't want you to leave and I've been thinking about going with you, but I didn't want to impose, so I didn't ask. I have a car at the garage that I'm fixing up and-,"

A mode of transport; how could I forget about that? I didn't even think about that, just thought we could get the bus to the furthest place and start from there.

I glance at Kyle and see the genuine look on his face; he isn't promising me false things, like how he'll come and get me when I turn eighteen, like Josh did. Maybe he will, but I highly doubt it. Kyle isn't coming to 'save' me; we'd be saving each other, getting the other away from this place and being with someone we trust, someone we can talk to about our pasts without having to worry.

Thirteen is an unlucky number, but it is turning out to be the best place I could have ever hoped for. We'll be leaving it behind, but we'll have memories of people and friends, and Luke's first real Christmas.

Kyle wants to do this; no one is forcing him to come with us, he actually wants to. *This is really happening;* we're finally leaving. This feels like it's not real, but it is. My dreams are never this good and I don't cry in them, but I don't cry in real life, either. Yet here I am, tears streaking my cheeks for the first time in months; and I don't blink them back or wipe them away as though they're contagious.

I don't sob, I don't bawl, I don't clutch at my stomach and pour my heart out to him. I just wipe the three tears away and nod my head, the silence meaning more than words could ever.

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It's quite late when I get back to the house and I'm glad Luke's gone for the sleepover to Robbie's. Climbing up the steps, I go to open the door, but find it already open halfway. I pause, thoughts of thieves coming into my mind- though what we have anyone would steal, I don't know-, but I try to convince myself that I didn't close it when I left.

Slowly, I slip through the door, but don't close it, not wanting to make a sound. All the lights are out, but the doors are open. I enter the kitchen quietly, looking around for anything suspicious. Seeing nothing, I shut the door behind me and sigh.

The sound of a door banging causes me to start and the bedroom door opens, the light shining into the dark kitchen.

"Where the hell have you been?"

I hit my head on the door at the sound of the voice, but can't form an answer to the question.

"You been out slutting around the town?" she sneers at me. "Leaving your poor mother here to pack up all the things alone? God, you're selfish."

"Packing? Why?"

"Why?" she mimics in a childish manner, sneering as she looks at me. "We're moving."

# **Chapter 22: Chapter twenty two**

# Chapter twenty-two

Karen looks terrible. She's literally skin and bones; her hair lies lank on her shoulders, dirty and greasy, as though she hasn't washed it in months. Her face is gaunt, her cheeks hollow and her cheekbones jutting out like an over-exaggerated drawing. Her clothes are hanging from her frame, even skinnier than it used to be, and her teeth are yellow- from smoking, probably. Her eyes are still the same; not giving away anything within their icy blue depths.

It would be impossible for me to miss the bruises and marks on her face; two black eyes that have yet to heal, a fresh bruise on her cheek and another on her temple that is turning yellow from age; her bottom lip is busted, dry blood around the corners that makes it hard to move them- I speak from experience.

"Don't just stand there," she snaps, throwing a suitcase that misses me by metres; I can tell she's drunk. "Pack!"

"When are we going?"

"When are we going?" she mimics me in a not-so- nice manner. "When do you think we're going?"

Again, another question I'm not meant to answer, as I have no idea. I open a drawer and take out some of the things inside, placing them into the suitcase while keeping my face blank, but inside, my mind is reeling.

We're moving. We're moving. I should've seen it coming; I've been expecting it for a while, but it was so close until my birthday that I didn't think she'd come back; but she has, like she always does, and at the worst timing, too. Less than ten minutes ago I was out with Kyle, not knowing she'd be back with the news that we're moving.

Kyle. I'm going to have to leave him. We usually move about five days after she comes back with the news, but sometimes it could be a day; in 'right place number four', we moved a day after, but that was probably because we didn't have a step dad there; in some of the places, we don't have a step dad, though we usually only stay a few months there.

I'm hoping it will be seven days as it will be the 10th then and Luke and I can leave, and maybe-if he still wants to- Kyle can come. I am shocked that he wants to; why would he want to be stuck with an eight year old boy? Kyle knows that he can't leave; Luke would be devastated and I won't allow that to happen to him again. Though I didn't say that part, it was an unspoken agreement that Kyle agreed to when he said he wanted to come with us; I'm confused, but I won't question it.

I wonder how we're going to get to the next 'right place' if she doesn't have the caravan. I didn't see it parked outside, so I assume she sold it for money or something. How has she been getting around? Where has she been? Did she meet someone else, and that's why we're moving? How did she get back here from wherever she's been for the past few months?

It's always the step dads; that's the reason we move. Either to get away from them or because Karen wants to start a new life with one of them; the 'new life' only lasts for a few months before she is moving again. I just don't understand why she feels like she has to have a man in her life; they get the money, I suppose, but I do too and she doesn't think twice about taking any from me.

Why did she have to come back today, why couldn't she have waited until I turn eighteen? What am I going to tell Lukeâ ¦ what about Kyle?

-

"Luke, we're moving."

I shake my head; I shouldn't sound like I'm about to cry at any moment. I clear my throat and hold back a yawn, knowing there is no way I am going to be able to sleep tonight now that I know the news.

"Luke," I say, looking at the wall as I practice what I'm going to tell him when he gets back. "I know you like it hereâ !"

Of course he likes it here; *I* like it here, we all do- well, I can't say anything for Karen as she is the one who wants to move, but Luke and I do. I have a friend; Rosa.

Rosaâ | what am I going to tell her? I refuse to tell her about my life; she is going off to college and doesn't need that burden, so I'll keep it from her. I am going to miss her badly; she is a great friend and never judges me, stands up for me, she was loyalâ | god, am I going to miss her.

Then there's Robbie for Luke, his teacher and other friends; he has a good life here, the life he deserves. The life I had with Aaron and Lisa is one I could never forget; never will forget. I wish Luke could stay here, but there are too many ghosts and reminders of our past; we'll find our one and only right place and stay there forever.

I promise him that.

Leaning back against the bunk beds, I take in the room; I have grown to think of this as my own now. I'm used to the bed and not having to sleep on the couch; I like having the desk where I can write, the window that looks out into the woods- the place where everything changed for me.

If I hadn't gone out there that day, I wouldn't have gotten to know Kyle; sure, I knew him from school, but we rarely spoke and I never would have known anything about him like I do now. Luke wouldn't know him and he wouldn't have anyone to talk about 'guy stuff' with; Christmas would have been different, I wouldn't have the necklace he made meâ ¦

A loud shriek pierces the night, drawing me from my thoughts abruptly. Feeling alert, I jerk off the bed and hurry down the hall, wondering what it is.

Rushing into the living room, I find nothing; the room looks the same as it always does, with the exception of a few less things that have been put into boxes. I make my way into the kitchen and, again, see nothing out of the ordinary.

I start to think maybe it was from Kyle's house, but it was a feminine noise; and Kyle's mother is gone. I then remember that Karen is back, the panic lessening as I know no one is hurt. She probably saw a spider or something.

When the scream sounds again, my curiosity gets the better of me and I make my way across the floor, quietly opening the door to her bedroom and peeking around it, unknowing of what the scene behind it will be.

It's dark; the drapes are pulled across the window so there is no light at all; nothing. The closet is pulled open, clothes strewn around the place and a shoe behind the door; I can't open it any further.

I hear whimpering, like someone is about to cry and I freeze in shock; Karen *never* cries. She doesn't have the emotion to do something as humane as that; the only emotion she can feel is anger and, for the step dads, love. In my opinion, it's more lust than love, but, like always, voicing my opinion isn't something that's encouraged; not that it would be heard if I did.

"Noâ !" someone pleads lowly and if I wasn't sure it's Karen, I wouldn't be able to tell as the voice sounds unfamiliar. "Pleaseâ | don'tâ |"

What do I do? Should I go in and wake her up from her nightmare? She'd probably take her anger out on me; she hates when people see her in a vulnerable state, so I'm not risking a beating. This is my mother, the woman who bore me, yet I can do nothing to comfort her without risk of abuse. The thought makes me feel sad, but only for a second; she is the one who hurts me, not the other way around.

"David!" she shrieks loudly, sounding frightened, the word ringing in the air. Is there another person in here? I quickly back away, wondering if this is the new step dad. I didn't hear anyone else come in, but I'm not going to risk it.

I never speak to the step dads until I'm sure they're safe. Number three was one I never spoke to since he was horrible to Luke and always seemed to be alone with me, so I stayed away from him for the seven months he was with us. Most of the others ignored us, like Tom has, so I didn't mind them.

"No, stopâ | please, it hurtsâ | !!"

She sounds like she's in pain and my natural instinct is to go over and help her, like it would be if anyone else was in pain, but she has hurt me over the years so much that I can't bring myself to go over. The name sounds slightly familiar, but I couldn't place it for the life of me.

I silently shut the door, but it does nothing to dim her shrieks.

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"It's a nice day," I say, for what must be the fifth time since we got here ten minutes ago. We sit side by side, looking out at the trees of the woods for, I realise, what will be one of the last times- for me, anyway.

I will miss this place; I'll miss the tyre swing, the red and purple flowers that I have yet to find again; I'll miss the tranquillity of the pond where I can sit for hours and just think, with no disruptions.

I'll miss the squirrels chattering and the birds tweeting, the sounds the leaves make in the breeze and throwing stones into the pond. I'll miss it all, especially sitting here with Kyle, like I have done so many times before.

"Tomorrow it is meant to be raining, so we better make the most of it while we can," I continue, knowing Kyle is looking at me, but I can't bring myself to tell him yet. "But the day after it's meant to be nice again and-,"

"Joeyâ !"

I sigh, my shoulders tensing as I wonder what his reaction will be to my words. "We're moving."

Silence. I like silence as it gives me time to think, but I don't want to think now; I want there to be noise around, people talking and laughing, but I don't want to be a part of it. I just want some noise, but not to have to join in.

"You're moving," he says, like he is testing out the words. It's not a question, it's not a statement; it's somewhere in between. "When?"

"I don't know."

I never asked Karen after she told me to shut up last night, so I don't know. She left this morning before I came here, and I can't help but wonder what her nightmare was about. The name David is stuck in my head; I know I have heard it before, but I can't think how.

"You don't know?" Kyle asks, his voice neutral, but I can tell he is fighting to keep it that way.

"She wouldn't say."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

More silence.

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I still have yet to think of a way to tell Luke. He's not due back from Robbie's until this afternoon, so I find myself wandering around the square, looking at the stores and buildings for one of the last times.

The statue, of the man wearing a cowboy hat, has been repainted, the graffiti gone for now. Its silver colour gives it a new look; fresh and clean. I wonder what it would be like to be able to grab a brush and paint over the parts that are unwanted; start over again when something doesn't go right.

I don't know what I would paint over. Maybe I'd stay in New York, but get Aaron to take Luke and we could live there together. Maybe I'd get rid of all the bad times with Karen, or living with Aaron and Lisa at all- if I didn't live with them, I wouldn't know any different.

Maybe I'd get rid of my birth completely. If I wasn't born, Karen mightn't have been as she is now- maybe Luke would have a good life. Karen was young when she had me, but maybe she would look after Luke well since she was older.

But what if she didn't? What if Luke had to live like he does now, but without me? I wouldn't be there to take care of him, he would have to take the beatings, he'd be starvingâ ¦ I could never let him do that.

Shaking away the thoughts, I look around, taking in the place for the last time. My eyes widen when I see the door to Mick's opening as someone leaves; isn't Mauve meant to be gone until the end of June?

I cross the pavement and cautiously enter the store, wondering if I'm allowed in or not; maybe she just came back to get something and no one is actually allowed inside.

It's just as I remember it was, though it was only a few weeks ago that I last saw it. People are shopping and getting on with their lives like usual, but I don't see Mauve. Maybe she got someone else to open the store

while she is gone.

Walking across the floor, I walk past the cash register and peek inside the back room, my eyebrows rising when I see Mauve in there. Glancing around, I don't see anyone looking my way, so I slip inside, but stop at the doors.

I shouldn't be in here. Should I leave and write a note saying we're moving? Or should I tell her now and get it over with? It seems I don't have to make the decision as Mauve turns around, shutting the computer off with a sigh.

She starts when she sees me, but soon relaxes. "Ah, Joey," she says with a smile, motioning for me to sit on the chair beside her. "I just got back today and wasn't planning to open up until tomorrow, but Rebecca was able to work, so I figured why not."

I take the seat, even though I am only planning to tell her I'm moving and nothing else. It doesn't go that way as I spot a picture of someone on the screen of the computer before it shuts off. Mauve sees me looking at it and sighs sadly, looking teary eyed.

"That's Daniel," she whispers, looking at the floor and away from me. "My brother."

The one with cancer, I finish silently in my head. Is he better? I wonder; she's back and she went over to look after him. It's either that or heâ

"I'm sorry," I say softly, seeing the tears in her eyes; he died. I am unfamiliar with death, but I'd have to be an idiot to not know it's hard to see someone you care for die.

"He had a good life and he's in a better place," she says, her voice a little bit stronger, but I can tell she doesn't really believe the words. "So, Joey, what can I do for you?"

I take advantage of the change of subject, feeling uncomfortable talking about something emotional. I don't do emotions well, so I'm glad we're on something else. "We're moving this week, so I came here to tell you I'll have to resign."

Mauve doesn't look up or say anything, just sighs. We sit in silence for a minute and I'm wondering if she is short of staff or if I need to give a while's notice before leaving, when she speaks, "Again?"

I freeze, wondering how she knows; has she been following us? She seems to sense my panic as she lifts her head up, shaking it from side to side. "No, I haven't been following you," she assures, chuckling slightly. "I heard you and Luke talking about this being the thirteenth place you've lived in, so I guessed."

I tense on the chair, wondering if she has heard anything else. I have been careful to make sure to never mention anything private in public, but it seems I wasn't careful enough. I know I have never mentioned Karen as I don't like talking about her with Luke unless it has to be done, so I know she doesn't know about her.

"You hide them well, but I still can see the bruises and cuts you arrive here with," she says softly, though the tone of her voice does nothing but make me tense even more. "It's in your eyes, but no one would be able to tell unless they've been through the same thing."

My eyes flick to hers and she holds my gaze; I see a pain in them, like she is remembering something that happened in the past, but she's stronger now. She has been through something like me?

"I was in an abusive relationship for years. When I tried to leave, he'd say things, call me things and I'd feel so weak that I wouldn't go. I believed what he said and stayed, thinking no one would ever want me.

"It went on for a few years until I finally had enough. He hit me one day and I snapped. I left him and have never looked back. I found someone, who is now my husband, and I wonder why I stayed with him for so long.

"The man was my best friend for years and I trusted him, so when he started saying I was unlovable, I believed the words; he'd never lied to me before, so why would he suddenly start, and say things like that? I know what you have been through, Joey, and have for a while now, but I didn't say anything. I hated the thought that someone knew what was happening to me, so I said nothing to you.

"Luke is a wonderful little boy and you've done well with him. Someday the two of you will get the lives you deserve and I know you will make that happen. Until then, don't let her get to you; you are a wonderful person, beautiful inside and out, and you need to always remember that. There will be bad things, but there will also be good things, too; don't let the bad overcome the good. Life is unpredictable, it's a rollercoaster with twists and turns, but you'll get to your destination eventually. You always will."

I am staring at Mauve, my eyes wide as I take in her words. I never would have guessed something like that happened to her. I don't know what to say to it and her words, so I do what I do best.

I run; I run away from the problem, away from the store and away from Mauve.

And I hate myself for it.

# **Chapter 23: Chapter twenty three**

# Chapter twenty-three

The sound of a car pulling up, followed by the sounds of laughter, has me struggling to breathe. I don't want to see the look on Luke's face when I tell him we're moving, but I have to.

Tapping my fingers uneasily on the table to an unknown rhythm, I glance out the window to Kyle's house, but see no lights on or any sign of human presence. He's probably at the garage, fixing up the car he said he found a while ago; I can't believe I didn't think of transportation before he mentioned it.

The door shuts and I hear Luke walking down the hall, calling out, "I'm back,", just in case I didn't hear him come in through the door. I don't reply as I hear him opening the door to the bathroom; I have a few more minutes to think of something to say to him.

Looking away from the window, I glance around the kitchen, taking it in for one of the last times. We've been here for ten months now; the longest we have ever stayed in a place. I have come to think of it as a home, and I don't want to leave; I'd have to leave when I turn eighteen anyway, but at least that would be of my own accord.

The door linking the hall to the kitchen opens and I try to compose my face so I don't look as though my dog has died, but it doesn't seem to work. Luke comes rushing in with a huge smile on his face, holding something in his hand, but he quickly senses my mood. "What's wrong?" he asks, dropping the bag he brought to Robbie's and walking over to me.

The smile on his face dims and he drops his hand, kneeling before me and looking into my eyes. "Are you okay?"

With a sigh, I motion for him to sit down, getting off the chair and offering him my seat. He does so warily, no doubt knowing the news is of a bad nature.

"We're moving." On the spot, I decide not to sugar coat it as I wouldn't know what else to say to do that; the effect the words have is immediate. Any trace of a smile is gone and his face loses its colour, turning white and grim.

"Moving?" His voice is shaky as he searches my face, looking for any signs that I am lying.

I would never lie about something like that, but he'll resort to anything as he doesn't want to move. I nod my head, willing my voice not to break at the look on his face. "She came back last night and said that we are. I don't know when or where, but it will be soon."

"What about school?"

He finishes in four days, but I don't know if he will be there for it or not. I shake my head, hating that I can't give him the answers to his questions. "I don't know." This is the first time he has ever stayed in a school for the whole year and I really hope she doesn't come back until he's finished.

"Robbie?"

Once again, I don't know the answer, though I guess it is one he doesn't want to hear. Even if we did leave when I turn eighteen, he would have to leave Robbie behind. Maybe he can still stay in some type of contact with him.

We'll probably still be traveling to the next 'right place' on my birthday, but the second we get there, Luke and I are leaving. It doesn't make that much of a difference as we can still leave from wherever is next, but I'd prefer to go from here. If we're in the caravan, or whatever we're using to get there, Karen could find the money I have saved; I need that money or we won't be able to go.

Luke seems to take my silence for the worst as he looks away from me, but I catch the watery look in his eyes. He wipes at them subtly and I look away, knowing he wouldn't want me to see him cry; he tries to stay strong and has in the past for so long, but this is his breaking. It would be mine too, but I won't allow it.

After a moment, he gets up and walks over to the bag we use for trash. Uncurling his fingers from the fist his hand has been in for the past few minutes, he tosses something in the bag and starts to walk down the hall.

"What's that?" I ask softly, hoping I haven't ruined our relationship because we're moving. I hate myself for not being able to do anything about it; I should stand up to Karen, but he hates seeing me get hurt. I can't win without him being upset.

Without a word, he reaches back into the bag and pulls the piece of paper out, handing it to me silently. Seeing it's an envelope, that is now crumpled, I open it, wondering what it is; did he pick it up from the mailbox? I pull out the paper inside.

Luke! You're invited to my birthday party! It's at 3:30pm in my house on the 17th June! There's going to be lots of candy and cake and food and soda and a bouncing castle! And a clown who makes cool balloons! Please, please, please come!

I can't read any more. This is the first party Luke has been invited to and he's going to miss it, all because Karen thinks she needs a man in her life. I have never hated her more than I do this second.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, my voice breaking at the look on his face. He's blinking quickly, but trying not to let the tears fall. "Don't hate me."

He looks up at me, shaking his head. Taking a step closer, he wraps his arms around my waist tightly, hugging me. "I don't hate you," he says, resting his chin on my stomach. "I love you, you're my hero. It's her I hate."

Before I can reply, he is walking off down the hall at top speed and into the bedroom.

He doesn't slam the door behind him.

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Walking through the halls, I take my last look at Eastward High. Never again will I see these lockers; never will I see these faces or teachers, or the posters on the boards around the place. I don't know why I am feeling sentimental as I've been to many schools in my life, but this is by far my favourite.

I'll be glad to never have to see Lirks again, he is someone I won't miss- nor will I miss Alex and Stella, and a few other people. It's the people I do know that I will miss; Rosa, particularly. I'm not sure how I am going to say goodbye to her.

Even if she wants to stay friends, I don't know where I am going and she is off to college, so we'll most likely never cross paths again. Though, I thought the same with Bianca, but we met again in the town, which was surprising since New York is hours away from here.

Taking one last look inside the school, I step out of the building and the warm air instantly gets to me. Four days have passed since Karen came back, but we haven't seen her since. I wonder about the nightmare she had sometimes; I still can't place the name.

Luke has finished school now, it's the last day and the bell will be ringing any minute. He is telling Robbie that he can't go to his birthday today, and I know that is going to be hard.

"All those years in that school and I'll never be going back again," Rosa, who has just come out the doors, sighs, walking backwards alongside me. "I know I complained about it a lot, but I'm going to miss it."

I wonder what it would be like to go to the same high school for my whole life. If I'm feeling sentimental now, I don't even want to think about what I would be like if this was my only school. This is my last time in high school and the thought saddens me slightly, but it means I'm my own person now. Luke and I can start our new life soon.

I haven't applied for any colleges as I don't know where we're going next, so I'll most likely go to a community college or something.

The few people who volunteered, along with Rosa and I, walk past us, teary eyed as they say goodbye to friends and others, but Rosa just laughs and waves, smiling hugely; she is quite odd.

"I can't believe I'm going off to college," she sighs, whistling lowly and shaking her head. "Where did the years go? I remember walking through the door for kindergarten like it happened yesterday! I can remember things I don't need to remember, yet I could never seem to remember my locker combination. The amount of times I had to break it to get it to openâ ¦

"I'll always remember the time Alex wet his pants in first grade. We were painting and I 'accidently' splashed water on his pants, and he thought he peed himself, as did everyone else. Then he got me back in seventh grade by putting red paint on my chair the day I was wearing white pants. I had to endure a talk with Ms Hennely about 'growing up' and the changes our bodies make, and I've hated him ever since- Jessie!" she shrieks, cutting herself off as she rushes over to a girl and hugs her tightly. "Good luck with everything, have a good life!"

My mind still buzzing with Rosa's words- damn, that girl can talk- I mentally prepare myself for what I am about to say.

"Bye, Joey," the girl, Jessie, says, waving at me with a small smile. I have never spoken to her before, but I wave anyway.

"Freedom at long last!" Rosa shouts loudly, jumping in the air while pumping her fist above her head. "Adios, people," she shrieks, giving the building, that she has spent many years of her life in, the middle finger before running away, high-fiving people as she rushes to the bus stop.

I watch after her, my throat tightening as I follow. She is so lively and bubbly, and it's impossible not to like her.

When we arrive at the bus stop, Rosa screaming at the top of her lungs, "Freedom is mine!", I glance over at Luke's school, but see no one out of the building yet.

When Rosa takes a breath from her singing, I take advantage of the silence and tell her, "We're moving."

I would love for people to have any other reaction than silence; scream, shout, hit, punch, cry- anything other than more silence. I have never managed to get Rosa to keep quiet, but it seems I have done so now.

"W-what?" she splutters, her bag dropping to the ground as she stares at me, wide eyed. "Why? When? Where?"

"I don't know." I hate that that is the only answer I can give to people, but I don't. I won't know where until we arrive, don't know when until Karen comes back; I don't even know why. It's because of Karen, obviously, but I don't know the real reason behind her wanting to move all the time; I assume it's because of the step dads, but maybe it's something else.

"Really? But-,"

"No!" a voice cuts her off, sounding so angry that I start, as does Rosa. I turn to see a very angry Robbie storming up to us, looking in near tears. He stops before me, arms crossed over his chest and his face red. "Luke said he won't be able to come to my party, but I know that's not true. Who else am I going to climb the walls of the bouncing castle with? He's my best friend and he has to be there! Tell him to stop lying to me."

I glance up at the school, but see no one else out. Now that I think about it, I haven't heard the bell, either. Did Robbie run out of class before the bell rang? "He's telling the truth, Robbie," I tell him softly, kneeling and looking up at him. "I'm sorry-,"

"Wait until after my party, please!" he begs, his blue eyes filling with tears as he looks imploringly at me. "Or don't go at all; I don't want Luke to leave."

Is it possible for one to feel their heart breaking? Well, mine is being smashed into pieces right now, especially when I see a group of kids rush out of the school to surround someone- the 'someone' I know to be Luke.

"I can't, Robbie, it's not my decision to make," I reply, trying to keep my voice steady as I tell him. I want nothing more than to be able to tell him that it's all a joke, that we're not moving and Luke can go to his party and every other one he has, but I can't.

Robbie glares at me, looking like he wants to say something, but he just turns and runs back to the school. Without another thought, I follow after him, running as fast as I can to the gates, but not stepping through them.

I look over at the group of people surrounding Luke; it's not his whole class, but it's at least half of them. I spot Luke over with that girl he gave the card to, Eva, I think. She is laughing at something and Luke is smiling at her. Another boy comes up to him and says something, then they do some sort of handshake that has me wanting to laugh and cry at the same time.

"I got it!" someone shouts, running out the doors of the school and to the small group. "He signed it!"

Confused as to what is going on, I see two of the kids from the group rush off back into the building, and the others cheering loudly at a piece of paper the newest arrival's carrying. Luke looks just as confused as I am

and he says something to someone, but they just smile, seemingly not answering his question.

A few seconds later, the two kids come back out, carrying a large bag between them. Stopping in front of Luke, they hand him the bag and I take a few steps closer, wondering what it is.

"â 'Henry Hedgehog has to go to Luke because we'll all miss him and feel better if he has Henry to remind him of us," the boy that came running out of the school with the paper reads, looking at the sheet proudly. "We got Mr Blake to sign it and Henry has to go with you now."

Opening the bag, Luke pulls out a giant hedgehog that I know is from the readers they have in class. He's the main character and he is taken home with the person who gets the most stars every weekend, so he is quite the hedgehog.

Hugging Henry tightly, Luke takes out a rectangular object; it's wooden around the outside and has a glass sheet covering it, so I take it to be a picture frame.

"We all signed it," Eva tells him, pointing to something I can't see, "And we got you a card, too."

I look away, not sure how much more I can take. I hate that Luke has to leave. He has friends here, something he can never make easily, yet all those people around him are sad to see him leave. I wish I could just say no to Karen, just stay here and let Luke be happy, but I can't.

"You're an awesome person, Joey," Rosa says, startling me. I didn't notice her as I have been focusing on Luke, so I thought she had left since she hasn't said a word. "Luke is, too, and I know he will do well wherever you go."

How wrong she is with that; Luke is bullied in most places, but I love the fact she sees the wonderful little guy like I do. It makes me even sadder to leave her, but I have to.

"I know you don't have a cell," she continues, rummaging through her pockets and pulling out a piece of rumpled paper and a pen, "but if you are ever near one, call me. We can arrange something and meet up. Just because we're leaving doesn't mean we don't have to see each other again."

Handing me the paper, she pulls me into a quick hug, knowing I don't like affection. I don't tense this time though, which surprises me. This is my chance to tell her about my life, my last chance.

I don't. We're parting on good terms, upbeat and, though a little sad, still happy. I don't want for her to think she has to help me; we're leaving when I turn eighteen, so we'll be fine.

"Make sure you keep your phone away from water," I tease, putting the paper into my pocket.

She grins widely and slightly mischievously, shaking her head. "If that's all it takes, I'll be sure to get a waterproof one. I'll see you, Joey."

"See you, Rosa," I reply, giving her one last smile before she turns and walks over to her car.

Watching her until she gets into it and drives off in the opposite direction, beeping her horn while waving out the window to me, I turn back to Luke and the group to find him walking towards me, a sad smile on his face.

I smile back, but I know it's just as weak. I take the bag from him as he clutches Henry, waving to the group of people as he walks backwards alongside me, like Rosa was a few minutes ago. We walk to the bus and I'm

surprised to see it's still there; Kye never stays later than he needs to, and we're at least five minutes over time.

"Goodbye, friends," Luke says under his breath when the school is blocked from view by the bus.

"Hurry the hell up," Kye snaps, revving the bus as he waits impatiently for us to climb on. I don't question why he waited, but I know it wasn't his idea. When we get on, I see a little girl sit down and wave at Luke; Kye glares at her, like she did something wrong.

The bus ride isn't long, only about ten minutes, but it feels much longer as I have many things to think about in my head. Luke looks out the window, sitting beside me as Kye drives like a maniac, speeding up when he turns around the bends. How he got his licence, I don't know.

Luke sniffles, but he's not crying; though, Kye seems to think it's a good time to snap at him to, "Man up! They're not going to miss you."

Maybe because it's the last time I'll ever use this bus, or maybe it's the fact that he is such a bitter old man that needs to be told, but I find myself standing up while the bus is still moving, and walking down to him.

"Just because you have never had anyone care about you before in your life, doesn't mean no one else can. Just because you're a bitter, lonely old man does not mean that these kids have to be like you when they grow up. Stop trying to bring everyone down to your level; they're so high above you that even your beloved astronauts couldn't reach them."

I don't know what possessed me to say that to him, but I am glad I did. I can't stand up for Luke to Karen, but I can against anyone else.

I'm jerked forward as Kye slams his foot on the brakes and presses a button. The doors open and he snaps his hand towards them. "Get the hell off my bus now."

Motioning for Luke to follow me, I grab my bag and get off the bus, not saying another word to Kye. The second we're off, the bus doors close and he speeds off. Our stop is only a few metres away, so his abrupt halt was completely pointless.

I look down at Luke to see him holding a hand over his mouth, doubled over in laughter. I smile down at him, reaching a hand into my pocket to find the piece of paper Rosa gave me still there. I probably won't ever see her again, but it's nice to have hope.

# Chapter 24: Chapter twenty four

Chapter twenty four

I'm not packing.

I'm not packing because we're not moving; I refuse to go with Karen. She has probably forgotten about us by now anyway; Luke and I can leave before she comes back. We're not going with her.

Luke has been really sad ever since he said goodbye to Robbie and his class yesterday, but he tries not to show it. He is packing up some stuff in our room; we're only taking a small duffle bag with us, so whatever fits in it is all we can bring. Clothes are necessary, and whatever else can fit in can be brought.

The house doesn't look any different than it did before Karen came back. All the items are still where they were a few days ago; the furniture is where it always has been, knick knacks and flatware are still there; because we're not moving, I keep telling myself.

We're not moving.

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This is my last night at the pond before I turn eighteen. The 9th June, one day after the 8th and one day before the 10th; It's just another day for most people, nothing unusual or worrisome about it, yet here I am, freaking out about the next day to come.

As Kyle and I go through the pages we've written out to make sure we have everything we need, I can't help but think I am going to miss this place. It's peaceful and quiet, a place I could come to when I wanted to be on my own; with the exception of Kyle, for the most part.

I have seen it in all the seasons and fall is by far my favourite. Never again will I see the piles of crisp leaves on the rocky ground; the squirrels will chatter and collect nuts without me being here; life will move on as we leave.

We're leaving. I still can't believe it. Luke and I, along with Kyle, are leaving this place; I'm leaving Karen and all the ghosts behind me; Luke will have friends and a place he can call home without having to put a number after it. It will be our one and only right place.

I'm ecstatic at the thought, but I'm also worried. What if Karen decides to take things to court? I'm ready and willing to do anything to win custody of Luke, but he might have to go to therapy because of the things he has been through. I don't think he will, but what if it does happen?

Karen probably won't do anything anyway; she is free of children, so she should be happy. I hope she won't get knocked up again- I won't know if she does as I am cutting off all forms of contact with her, but I don't want the child to have to go through it all alone.

I scan through the list for the tenth time; *money, ID, food, clothesâ* lall of those are a check; they've been bagged and are in the house, waiting to be put into the car Kyle is fixing up. It's pretty much ready, but he wants to change the oil or something like that; I don't speak car, so I was lost after a few words into it.

"And we're ready," Kyle says, folding the sheet up and tucking it away into his bag.

We're really doing this. In a few hours, we will be gone and out of here; Luke will be safe and will have two guardians who will look after him and give him a proper homeâ ¦ I want to weep with joy, but I don't. I look up to find Kyle watching me, a soft smile playing on his lips.

"We're ready," I whisper back, repeating his words. This is his last chance; I haven't told Luke that he is coming with us-hell, I haven't even told Luke that we're going as I didn't want Karen to ruin it if she was to come back. If Kyle wants to back out, he can do so now, but I won't allow him to hurt Luke.

Instead of speaking, he just takes my hand in his, lacing our fingers together and staring at me with his mesmerizing eyes. "I'm ready."

Those words hold so much promise and I have to blink back tears I feel building. Why am I so emotional? He is leaving behind everything he has known to come with us and is providing a mode of transport to get us to wherever; we've put all our money together and have a grand total of \$3760. I have never held so much money before and without Kyle I would only have \$1370. He has literally saved my life.

Feeling overwhelmed by it all, I swallow hard and look away from him, my gaze wandering around the trees. Owls are hooting and trees seem like giant shadows rustling about in the wind of the night. The moon is a half and barely seen as the trees block it from view, but it illuminates our surroundings just enough so that I can see around me within a certain range.

Kyle tugs on my hand and I find myself willingly allowing him to pull me to him and into his embrace. I lay my head against his shoulder, wrapping my arms around him and hugging him back, revelling in the moment. The next few weeks, or however long it's going to take to find somewhere to stay, are going to be tough, but we'll stick together.

We have the whole summer to find a place before Luke has to go back to school; we'll both get jobs and save until we have enough. I don't know where we're going, but we have time to figure that out. First we have to get on the road and leave here.

Kyle rests his forehead on my shoulder, pulling me tightly to him. Though the night's air is cool and the wind is brisk, huddled in our little cocoon, I don't find myself feeling cold, despite the flimsy jacket I am wearing.

In the books I sometimes read, this would be the perfect time for the characters to profess their love for each other, but I don't do that. I don't want to ruin the moment with words. Wrapped in our embrace, I feel safe and secure, along with other things I don't want to think about yet. I can worry about things like that at a later date, but for now, I am fine with the way things are.

I lift my head from his shoulder and take one more look around me, knowing I have to go back in a few minutes. Luke's in the house on his own as I don't want him to come into the woods with us so late at night. I don't want to be any longer than a half hour and our time is drawing to a close.

I look at Kyle and see him taking in the scene around us; he has lived here all his life, so it must be hard for him to leave it all of a sudden. Deciding to let him have some time on his own to say his goodbyes, I lift my hands from around his shoulders and he drops his from my back, flicking a piece of my hair from my face.

Before I can convince myself not to, I press my lips to his; it is only meant to be a chaste peck, but when his arms wrap around me again, it turns into something a little more than that. It's in the same place as our first kiss, maybe even the same spot, but a lot has changed since that time.

I knew about Kyle back then; we'd opened up to each other before then, but the fact that he trusts me with something so dear to him, the memory of his sister, makes me feel like I can tell him everything and anything.

The thought of Luke being alone in the house registers in my mind and I break away, leaning my forehead against his. We sat like this, the first time, just holding each other and not speaking. There was snow that time though, whereas now it is dry ground and the pond isn't frozen over.

Remembering that I should leave Kyle alone to say his goodbyes, I get up and brush my pants down. "See you," I say, not sure if there is anything else to say.

A small smile touches his lips as he replies, "See you soon."

I can't help but smile at the words; the next time he sees me is when we'll be going. We're going! I feel like skipping my way through the woods, but I don't; rats and mice could be anywhere and I don't want to disturb any of them.

I feel so happy and carefree, like the time I was on the tyre swing all those months back; maybe we'll see Aaron and Lisa, I could introduce them to Luke, catch up with themâ ¦ the possibilities are endless as to what we can do. We can go wherever we want without having to worry about Karen or step dads, Luke will get everything he needsâ ¦ I'm free.

When I see Kyle's house, I know I am out of the woods. No trees block my sight of it and I take one last look at the woods before making my way back to the house, hoping Luke is asleep as we have to be up at 4am; five hours or so away.

In five hours we will be leaving here and I'll never have to see Karen again! Just as I am about to do Rosa's happy dance, something grabs my wrist and I'm pulled back into the woods, lifted into the air and spun around.

"Joey?"

# **Chapter 25: Chapter twenty five**

Chapter twenty five

One minute I feel as though I can fly and the next I am, spinning around as someone lifts me into the air by my waist. I panic, struggling against the hold; it's not Kyle, but the voice sounds familiar, though I don't stop struggling.

"It's really you," he whispers softly, like he is gazing down at me and hoping I am real.

"Who are you?" I stammer, backing away, but I hit against a tree. The voice is bugging me; I know it, but can't place it.

Suddenly a light shines; it's dim, but it is bright enough for me to see Josh Tinley, with his black hair and bright blue eyes, staring at me. My jaw drops and I can't say a word. What is he doing here? How does he know where I am?

I have so many questions, but I can't bring myself to say anything other than, "Joshâ !?", like I don't know the face that I had seen for four months and didn't want to leave.

His face brightens and he hugs me to him, but I don't hug him back, just stiffen at the embrace. *What is he doing here?* Am I dreaming? Is all this just a dream and Karen hasn't come back? Luke will be in the house sleeping like normal and I will wake up any moment in my bed, like nothing has happened. I'd pinch myself, but I can't move from shock.

I can barely focus on what he is saying and only catch the words, "â lsaw you in that store a while agoâ !"

"W-what are you doing here?" I splutter, stepping back and looking up at him. He has always been tall and I barely come up to his shoulders; I used to tease him about having his head in the clouds, he's so tall; that's another reason I think of him as a cloud.

He stops talking at my words and I see him frowning, like he is confused as to why I have asked such a question. "I came to get you."

"Get me?"

He nods his head. "And Luke."

"Why? Waita |what?"

Is he serious? How has he found me? How did he get away from his parents? He is meant to be going to college and should be back at home packing, not here 'getting' me and Luke. I never thought he was serious when he said that; always thought he was trying to cheer me up. *This cannot be happening*. Kyle, Luke and I are leaving in a few hours, we have it all planned out.

"I said I'd come and get you when you turn eighteen," he says softly, the light turning off only for it to turn back on a few seconds later. "Happy birthday." Turning the screen of his phone towards me, I see the numbers 12:03 on the screen, along with a picture of Big Blue and a small boat bobbing in the water.

I turned eighteen three minutes ago. I don't know the exact time I was born as Karen has never mentioned it; I consider myself lucky to even know the date, as Karen doesn't remember her own, much less her daughter's birthday. If I didn't live with Aaron, I never would have known the date.

I can't say anything to that, not sure if there is anything that could be said. He is here to get me yet, in less than four hours, I'm scheduled to be leaving with Kyle and Luke. We've planned out everything and have it all ready, but the one person I thought I would never see again is back and ready for Luke and me to leave with him. Why can't I have a drama free life?

"A few months back, I came here to visit my cousin," Josh says, not seeming to notice I am still shocked.

"Alex, you might know him since he was a senior, too; Alex Ryans. Anyway, we went to some store close to here, began with an M, I think-,"

"Mick's?" I guess, remembering Alex mention he was with his cousin that time he bought one screw and I gave him the load of change. Josh mentioned he had a cousin called Alex once, but I never thought it would be the Alex in my school- my *old* school, I should say.

"Maybe," he says dismissively, continuing on with his story, "I waited outside and when he was taking so long, I glanced in and saw you at the register. I was 99% sure it was you and when Alex came back out, he started complaining about you; when he said your name, I almost had a heart attack.

"We waited around for a while and I saw you and Luke come outâ ¦ it took everything in me not to run over to the two of you. I started looking around, but couldn't find you anywhere. I got lost in these woods a while ago then saw Luke rushing across the field to a house, and you were behind him.

"I was so happy, but I waited until now before speaking to you. We couldn't go until you turned eighteen and I didn't want Luke to be upset if she was to come back early."

He says 'she' with such anger and bitterness that I can't help but feel angry; not at him, but at myself. I never thought he would act on his words to come here and get us, but now I have to tell him I have made other plans. Well, this should be fun.

Josh has a future ahead of him and I can't let him ruin it. He wants to be a doctor and I know he has it in him, and having Luke and me would only weigh him down. He won't know how to deal with us, or my trusting and judging issues. Kyle gets me; he knows what I have been through and vice versa. As much as I miss Josh, I won't go with him- *can't* go with him.

Even if I hadn't met Kyle, I don't think I'd have gone with Josh. He deserves better than this, I just needed some time to realise that I can't be waiting for a prince to come and save me. I have to do this on my own; Josh is a great person and has a good future ahead of him, but I'm not in it.

He's still holding onto my waist and my arms have wound their way around his neck in the past few minutes, probably sensing this is goodbye.

The bracelet he gave me all those months ago is glinting in the moonlight, the light of the phone long since gone. It seems so long since he gave me the bracelet; everything's changed, yet here he is. Moments ago I was talking to Kyle at the pond, so different from Big Blue; they're both just holes with water in them, but they're both so special to me.

"Joey?" he asks, looking at me encouragingly.

This is it, I realise; unlike when I thought it was goodbye with Kyle, I know this is the real thing this time. "Josh, Iâ !" My mouth doesn't seem to want to say the words.

"You what, Joey?"

I try and take my arms from around his neck, but he holds them in place. "I can't."

"You can't?"

I shake my head, not looking at him as I don't want to see his expression. He sounds confused, like he doesn't understand why I won't go with him after all he has done. I feel awful, but this is better for him.

"You can't what?" he asks imploringly and I sense he's getting a little irritated by my one worded answers.

"Leave."

"Why not?"

I don't reply and the silence surrounds us. For silence being so quiet, it can be really loud, too.

"You're eighteen," he says roughly, still not letting me remove my arms from his shoulders. "She can't do anything about it now. You're an adult. If it's the case of not having packed yet, we can go back now and pack quickly and get Luke before we leave."

"It's not her," is all I say.

"Then what is it?"

He finally releases my arms from his grasp when I tug at them again, but holds my waist tightly, so I can't move away from him. It's not tight enough to hurt; Josh would never hurt me.

"Iâ ¦ I justâ ¦ can't."

"There has to be a reason."

Again, I don't speak.

"Is it him? Kean or Kai orâ !"

His grip tightens on my waist and I tense, waiting for the bruising mark to appear as I forget Josh won't hurt me. I wince slightly, but he catches the motion and drops his hands quickly.

"Joey, I'm so, so, so sorry," he whispers, pulling me back to him and hugging me, repeatedly apologising. I let him hold me for a minute before I pull back.

"Why won't you come, Joey?"

"I can't," I say, repeating myself again.

"You can!" he bursts out, sounding annoyed at my refusal, "Can't and won't are two different things, Joey, and you won't. You're an adult now and you can do what you want; no one can stop you. I said I'd come and get

you and Luke when you turn eighteen, and you agreed with me, yet here I am and you won't come. Or, wait, sorry, I mean *can't* come- but you can! You won't and I don't know why not.

"We used to tell each other everything, Joey, and now I hardly know you. I want to leave here with you and Luke, just us three, and give him a great life far away from all this. It's his future you need to think about here just as much as yours. I haven't seen you in months and I thought we'd be leaving to start our new life, but here you are saying you can't. Why can't you, Joey?"

"Because," I say, and the word hangs between us in the air on a thin line of tension that could snap at any second, like a brick hanging from a piece of thread. I'm reminded of the time Kyle came to the house that night a few days before Christmas. 'Because' seems to be my word of choice.

"Alex told me about Kean," he says, sounding bitter and angry. "You started talking in school and he saw you two together."

I wonder who Kean is; I don't think he's talking about Cian from New York, but he continues on, as though this Kean guy is my best friend.

"He may think he knows you, but he doesn't. He doesn't know about her and what you suffer through every day, he doesn't know about how she left you, he doesn't know about Luke and how you try and do everything for himâ ¦ he doesn't; but you told me and I know. I was there once when it happened and he wasn't. He doesn't love you, Joey."

All of what he said is wrong except for the last part. He does know what I go through every day, he does know about her, he knows about how she left me, knows about Lukeâ ¦he wasn't there when it once happened, but he saw the aftereffects of it and he helped me, no questions about it. The last part, I'm unsure of.

Love is such a strong word; The opposite of hate, more passionate than likeâ | people use it so freely these days. They talk to their friends, ending the conversations with an, "I love you" this and, "I love you" that.

I love Luke- that I am sure of. The emotions I felt earlier with Kyle could be love, but I don't want to think about that yet. We have our whole lives ahead of us- unless he decides to leave. Again, here I am thinking about the worst things.

I don't believe that there's only one person in the world that is meant for you, but I believe in love. I love Luke, I love Aaron and Lisa; I can't say I love Karen- I hate her, but we will always have the bond that every mother and daughter has.

"His name is Kyle," I correct Josh, realising it is Kyle he is talking about. "And he knows everything." *More than you*, I want to add, but I don't; that would be mean and he is only here to help.

"What?"

"Kyle knows about it. No, he wasn't there when it happened, but he knows it all; he knows about Luke, about school, about Aaron and Lisa, about the houses and step dadsâ ¦ everything."

He looks me in the eyes, brown on blue, but I find them unfamiliar and wishing they are the green ones I've gotten so used to.

"Butâ ¦ heâ ¦ why, Joey? You can't do that. You can't tell anyone about it unless you trust them. You don't trust him; and if you don't trust him, you can't tell him. You've never told anyone about it but me, and that was because you trust me-,"

Maybe it's years of never being able to stand up to Karen, or maybe it's just that I don't want to be told what to do anymore, but something inside me snaps when he says I can't. I can't tell anyone, I can't do this, I can't do thatâ | It's my life and I will do what I want with it. I can do what I want with it.

I hate that I have let Karen tell me what to do and control me for all these years; I should have done something about it earlier, told someone. Sure, Luke might have been taken away, but at least he'd have had a loving family and never would have had to know about the abuse his mother is capable of.

I was selfish all those years; I should have told someone; we both would have been put up for adoption-maybe Aaron would have taken us both in. I will never know because I was only thinking about myself and I hate myself for it.

Feeling angry at myself and at him for telling me what to do, I break from Josh's grip and glare at him. "You can't tell me what to do! I'd trust him with my life- and Luke's for that matter, and you know nothing about him! You don't know what he's like, you don't know what he's been through and you don't know him!"

I'm breathing heavily, my hands fisted by my sides as I will myself to not take my anger out on Josh. He is here to save me, but I don't want saving. I am saving myself and don't need some hero to come and save the day. I am a hero- a hero to Luke and if I can save just him, that's all I need.

"But I know you," he whispers, his voice hoarse.

"And what does that mean?"

"It means I love you, Joey."

And then, before I can react, he pulls me into his arms and kisses me. It feels wrong, but I can't do anything as I am frozen in shock, once again. The sound of a branch snapping pulls me from my daze and I jerk back, pulling myself from his grip.

I hate this; hate being confused and feeling so emotional, like I want to cry. I just want to get back to the house and cuddle up next to Luke; pretend none of this has ever happened.

"No you don't!" I practically scream at him, feeling like I am about to burst out in tears at any second.

"I do," he insists, making a move closer to me, but I back away, almost tripping over something as I can't see where I am going. "I love you Joey and I have since the day I saw you. You do too, I know you do and-,"

"You don't know anything about me! Stop thinking you do!"

He knows the facts about me, but he has never had to experience the abuse of Karen or anyone, especially not someone who is meant to love and protect him. I hate that I want Karen's love; she has never said a nice word to me and I hate that I want to know what it feels like to feel safe and secure. I wonder what it would be like to be able to go to her and just talk about nothing; go to her if I have a problem, or to talk about guys I like.

I just want a normal relationship with her; want to be able to tell her I love her at night before bed and to be able to hug her before leaving for school. I would give anything to have something like that, but it will never

happen. I hate her and I hate that I have to hate her. Why does she have to hurt me? Why can't she just like me; just tolerate me?

I feel like I am drowning, like the time at Big Blue with Josh all those months ago. He helped me then, but now he is the one causing it. Why can't he just accept that I am doing this for his own good and leave? I am struggling to stay calm and I don't want to lash out at him. I just want to start life over again and give Luke all the love that I can. I vow that I will never let a day go by that he doesn't hear the words 'I love you' from me. I promise myself that.

I want to lash out at something, something I've never wanted to do before, not even when Karen was at her worst. Back then I got on with it, but seven years' worth of anger is pouring into one moment and I know I'll regret it if I do something, but my body doesn't seem to care. I quickly turn before I hurt myself or someone else, and run out of the woods.

I hear Josh call out to me, but I don't listen. I choose not to listen; I am living my life and not doing what others want me to do. I am choosing to run away with Kyle, not Josh; we both understand each other and we'll be fine that way. Josh can get on with his life and it will all be okay.

I run up the steps, heart pounding as I run through the door, glancing to make sure the bags are there so we can leave. I see them and sigh, slamming the door shut behind me, my back to it. I sink down, my eyes closing, but I don't miss the fist that lashes out and hits me right on the nose.

"You bitch!" she screams at me in a slur, sloppily punching at me and missing. "You haven't packed!"

And I do something I haven't done before.

I fight back.

# Chapter 26: Chapter twenty six

A/N: I apologize profusely for taking so long to upload this. My account has been acting up and won't allow me to add chapters or update anyone. Once again, I apologize, I hope to update regularly from now on. Thank you all so much for continuing on with this.

Chapter twenty six

Karen is screaming at me for not packing, but I'm not taking a word of it in. I get up from the floor, uncaring of the blood that is flowing freely from my nose, and pull her hair hard, not thinking about anything other than the hatred I feel for her at this very moment.

I yank her golden blond hair that has been dyed, cut and blow dried with the money I earned to feed and clothe Luke. I don't care that I am going to pay for it, all I care about is doing something to get rid of this emotion I feel inside me.

She falls backwards, a surprised gasp escaping her lips as she lands on the ground with a loud thump, her head hitting against the baseboards and producing a dull thud. She curses drunkenly, getting up and rubbing her head while staring at me in shock.

I never fight back. I have never ever fought back before; have never stopped her or said anything. She is used to me being her personal punching bag and I am sick of it. I'm fed up of letting her hurt me without even trying to stop it. I have let her do this to me for years because of Luke- if she hurt Luke, I would never forgive myself.

This is the woman who has made mine and Luke's lives a living hell for the past seven years. She left me when she had enough of me; she hated me and my brotherâ ¦ she gave birth to me. Yet she means nothing to me and never has; she took me from my home and guardians-, she knew I would never be able to leave Luke alone. How could I do that to my brother? Anyone with a heart would have gone with her.

Everything she has done to me has given Luke a life free from physical abuse, and I would do it again a hundred more times if it meant he would never have to experience any of this.

She's never allowed me to call her mom, bought things for her own entertainment instead of food for me, left me alone with sick step dads who shouldn't be allowed within twenty miles of a child, never mind on their own in a small house with one. She means nothing to me.

Yet even after all the years of abuse, I still can't hit her back without freezing up.

Revenge isn't sweet. It isn't great, it isn't sating, it doesn't relieve anything and it makes you feel worse for doing it. Or maybe that's just me. Some people don't think twice about it and live for revenge. I can't do it without feeling guilty, even though the person who's receiving it has been abusing me since I was nine, maybe even when I was four, I don't know.

I don't get a chance to do a thing before I am being shoved up against the door, my head hitting its surface and the knob digging into my back. The bruise that I most likely have received is the least of my worries for the moment.

She's screaming at me and shouting, but whether it's about my pulling her hair or not packing, I don't know as I can't hear a thing over the pounding in my ears.

When I was younger, I was told to respect my elders, especially my parents- or, in my case, parent. I was about five when I learnt that fear and respect are two completely different things.

When I was with Aaron and Lisa, I realized that what I felt for Karen was not respect. I don't think she hurt me back then, but she wasn't the best parent around. I didn't know any other way of life than the one she was giving me; thought everyone had to go days without food and be left alone, sometimes with people you didn't even know.

It was only when Aaron and Lisa took me in that I realized I didn't respect Karen; I feared her. I don't know if I have ever stopped fearing her; she could ruin me within seconds, she could take Luke away from meâ ¦ but I can do the same to her. Yet I choose not to- why, I don't know; I could tell someone what kind of person she is and save Luke, but he's the reason I didn't. I can't blame him- *have* never blamed him; it's all me.

I've been selfish and wanted him to stay with me- he's the only family I have that I love and who loves me back. Aaron and Lisa are gone; I never knew my dad or my grandparentsâ ¦ If I didn't have Luke, I would have nothing.

All this is running through my mind as I look at her, and her, at me. This is my mother; we share the same blood, the same genes, same familyâ ¦ yet I don't know her. I doubt she's seeing me; she's probably blinded with drunken rage; alcohol is most important to her, so why should she have to worry about something like me?

I see her mouth moving, but hear nothing. Maybe it's that I am lost in my thoughts, or maybe I'm just slow, but I don't get a chance to react before she is yanking me forward by my hair, turning me around and slamming my face into the door; if my nose hasn't broken at the force, I don't know if it ever will.

She holds my arms behind my back, resting her weight against me so I can't move them without causing pain to my shoulders. It all happens so quickly that I curse myself for letting my thoughts get to me- I can't do a thing, but she can, and is.

My hair is still in her hand and she's pulling on it hard, her fisted hand connecting with my cheek before I'm shoved forward at the door again. I want to do something- *need* to do something, but I can't. I hate myself for hesitating; I should have grabbed Luke and ran- *Luke!* 

Where is he? Is he okay? Has she hurt him? I turn my head towards the bedroom door, but it's closed. I see nothing else as her sharp nails dig into my temple as she covers my mouth and partially my nose. I'm spun around, my head clashing with her chin; my eyes water when my ankle twists, then her sharp heel connects with my toe through my shoes.

I feel the blood, feel its sticky warmth erupt from my probably broken nail- maybe my toe itself has broken, I don't know. I let out a noise, something between a squeal and a cry, but I force myself to hold it back; I won't allow her to get that satisfaction from me.

I'm half-doubled over, my head's pounding, blood is pouring from my cheek and temple, water mixed in from my eyes; I'm covered in bruises, probably have a black eye; my clothes are ripped and bloody, my nose is throbbing and I can't stand up properly on my right leg. All of this is the doing of my mother.

I want to fight back; I wouldn't hesitate again if I got the chance, but she has me trapped. My hand is still in her grasp, above my head and she's towering over me. I'm briefly reminded of a time when Aaron would tickle me to get the truth from me. Back then I was happy and carefree, joyous and loving life, but nowâ ¦ not so much.

I need that rush of adrenaline I had only moments ago in the woods; I could fight her back, could do something, protect myself and Luke, but the second wind is long gone. I will myself to move, just to push her back and maybe knock her out, but every movement has me wanting to lie down and cry myself to sleepâ ¦ or maybe something more permanent.

I hate that thought; I have never thought a thing like that before, but my mother is making me want to die. The person I should be able to go to with problems is the one who is causing me them in the first place.

Though I can't hear what she is saying, the sound of banging is something that catches my attention. It's coming from the bedroom, mine and Luke'sâ ¦Lukeâ ¦I see the door moving, like someone is banging on it, but it's lockedâ ¦Luke!

Has she locked him in there? Is he okay? I physically feel sick at the thought of her hurting him- she can't have, I promised he wouldn't ever go through something like that. I can't break that promise to him.

I start towards the door, but whether it's because Karen pushes me or I collapse under the pain, I don't know, but the next thing I know is that I am on the ground and she is on top of me, her hand covering my mouth and a glint in her eyes.

I can't breathe in through my nose; it's blocked and useless, so the only way to get air in is through my mouth, which is now coveredâ | Realization hits me: she's going to kill me. She's actually going to do it.

Her hand doesn't waver as she holds it over my mouth and no matter how much I try and struggle free, it won't budge. She has a smile on her face, like she's in a peaceful place and enjoying herself without a care in the world.

As my throat burns and my lungs feel like they're going to explode, I picture Luke in my mind, like the time I went under the water with Josh at Big Blue, but this time, I don't think I'm coming back. There's no bottom for me to spring up from and I'm sinking lower.

The last thing I see is my mother's blank smile before I am forced to go under.

# **Chapter 27: Chapter twenty seven**

## **Chapter twenty seven**

My hands sink into something soft and lumpy; slightly cool, but I welcome the feeling. The nothingness I feel doesn't last long before a pounding pain erupts in my wrist and side, causing me to tense on the soft material.

The sound of ticking reverberates around the room, adding to my already pounding head with its incessant ticks.

Voices float around in the back of my mind, but they seem muffled, like there's a barrier of some sort between them and me. I don't care about them though; none of the voices are Luke's, and he's the one that I want.

Releasing a huff of breath, I force my eyes to open to take in my surroundings. Bright light pours into the white room through the open window, causing me to wince at its fierce glare. The room takes a yellow tint, but I can tell everything is white; the beds, the walls, the floor, the doorâ ¦ so bare and empty, bar for a few paintings of abstract things on one wall.

I shift my arms, but instantly regret the action when my elbow skims the surface of the soft material; I may as well be rubbing them roughly over sandpaper, it's that sore. They feel as though they have been rubbed raw and skinnedâ ¦ like they've been dragged over a rough carpet. A glance down at my legs shows they are bruised, like they have been kicked at; my nose is bandage, like it's been punched at and hit against a doorâ ¦

*I remember*. The real question is, is how could I forget? Karen has hurt me before, but never has she actually done something like this. Out of all the things she has done, breaking my arm and giving me a concussion was the worst, but I didn't go to hospital.

She was actually going to kill me. My mother intended to end my life. My own mother. My heart aches at the thought, which makes me angry. I hate her, but there will always be a part of me that will wish we had a normal relationship; the naÃ-ve, childish part of me.

"â | report any of this?" a voice I don't recognise is saying, but I pay no attention to it.

Careful not to rub my arms against the material, I push the blanket off me and go to get up. Something tugs at my arm and I see two needles in my skin, taped, but they're coming out. I slide them from my skin and toss them to the side, but groan in annoyance when something else stops me.

Another tube is connected to my nose, which is bandaged, so there's nothing I can do about that. Looking around, I find it's connected to a tank of some sort, and unhook it.

Finally able to move without being restricted, I get off the bed, but almost immediately fall over, feeling winded with the slightest amount of movement. I quickly find out that I can't walk on my right foot, which is bandaged from the shin down. Hopping is out of the question as I would probably faint, so I look around and find a table with wheels.

Shoving the jug of water to the side, I sit on the table and use my left leg to drag it and my weight along the floor, over to the door- which I can't open. I glare down at my bandaged hands; after all that work, I can't even leave.

But I need to get to Luke. He could be hurt- what if he's still at the house? Is he okay? I need to know, I can't waste another second.

Looking around, the only escape route I can find is the window. Wheeling myself over to it, but having to stop many times to catch my breath, I glance outside and sigh in relief. I'm on the ground floor; fate is on my side, for once.

There's still quite a drop to the ground though, and the table I am on is a little lower than the window's ledge. *At least I can't plummet to my death.* And that's the end of the list of positive things.

When I bend down to lift my right leg up, I realise what the tube up my nose was for; struggling to get breath, I force myself to breathe without the need of supplied oxygen, but I can't get anything in. I feel like I am chocking; my eyes water up and my chest is clogged, my throat tingles and I start a coughing fit, which does nothing to help me.

It's like I am drowning; there's nothing I can do, nothing I can spring up from or anyone around to pull me up. The tank is so far away and I keep forgetting that I can't breathe in through my nose, adding more pain until I feel I am about to pass out.

But I don't. I don't know why, but all of a sudden, I can breathe again. Glorious, fulfilling oxygen fills my mouth and makes its way to my lungs and I'm able to inhale and exhale again. I don't question it, just take advantage and take in as much as I can before it leaves again.

Knowing better than to bend over again, I shift and turn on the table, trying to get my legs to lift over the ledge so I can get out. Luke needs me, and I need him. I promised, when I left Aaron and Lisa, that I would do whatever I could to help him, yet here I am, stalling and wasting time.

Don't doctors usually check up on their patients every once in a while? I glance around at the door, but it's still shut. I wonder what they'll do when they find me gone- they probably won't think I'd get far, but they don't know I have broken my leg and other bones so many times that I have gotten used to getting by without using whatever's broken.

Finally, I get both of my legs over the ledge and cool air surrounds me. It's fresh and cooling and it reminds me that I am nearly free. All I have to do is get to the ground without killing myself and I can find Luke.

Easier said than done, I quickly find out. My left hand is useless, bandaged and flapping around pointlessly, so I have to use my barely functioning right to push myself out the window. The drop is a bit higher than I expected and I land on the grass with a thud, hitting the back of my head on the hard ground and knocking the breath from me.

Thankfully, I am not knocked out, only struggling for breath once again, but all I can think is that I am free. Looking at the tall building behind me, I let out a small laugh, but quickly stop when it causes me to ache. All I need to do now is get up, find Luke and we can go.

Bandages are restricting; even when I was a kid, I hated them. They draw attention and people ask what happened, more so than if you weren't to wear one. With my blood stained gown, bruised face and bandaged limbs, it's safe to say that I stand out a bit.

Rolling onto my stomach, I force myself to my knees, holding onto a ledge with my right hand and putting all my weight on my left foot. Thinking about the oxygen tank longingly, I force myself to breathe in again and hobble around the back of the hospital, where, thankfully, no one is, but try to act natural anyway.

If there is one thing I have learnt in my life, it's that you can't act natural. Natural is, well, natural, and you can't act it. Everything hurts and I just want to lie down and give up; give into the pain and make it go away, but I can't allow myself that. I need to keep moving.

I don't get far before I am forced to stop, feeling dizzy, so I lean back against a wall. I'm angry at myself for stopping; this will just make it even harder to continue on, but my body doesn't seem to care about that.

My back touches something cool and I glance back to find a window behind me. My curiosity getting the better of me, I glance inside. It's busy with people, pushing and waiting by the desk or in the waiting room. Doctors and nurses walk from room to room, talking to people and there's a receptionist behind the desk on a computer and filling out sheets.

I look at the seats, hoping Luke is there, but I don't find him. My shoulders deflating, I look away, but freeze when I see Kyle. He's staring out the window- the window I am in front of, looking like he's lost in thought. I don't know if he actually knows it's me, but I'm not taking any chances.

Heart pounding in my chest, I struggle to my feet- or foot, and hobble away from the building, not knowing where I am going, but just wanting to get away. If Kyle finds me, he'll bring me back and I won't get to Luke. I *need* to get to Luke.

I feel like I have been moving for hours, but it's probably only been about twenty seconds. Dragging my foot across the ground is weighing me down and when I come across a mesh gate, there's nothing I can do.

I am trapped.

"Joey?"

I pull at the wiring, hoping it will move and I can keep going, but it doesn't. Fate has switched sides once again.

"What the hell are you doing out here?"

The voice is closer now, much closer, but I doubt it's hard to catch up with me when I'm moving a metre a minute, if even that. He sounds angry and confused, like he doesn't know what to do, wants to help me, but he can't. I don't turn around.

"Joey," Kyle says softly, his arms wrapping around me and pulling me backwards, careful not to touch my injuries.

I don't know why; maybe it's because this is Kyle, who I know won't hurt me in any way, or maybe it's because of years of not allowing myself to give into the urge, but I find myself turning around and burying my face into his chest, just wanting to feel safe and cared for.

He says nothing, doesn't tell me everything will be alright or to stop; he just allows me to break down, be weak, not saying a word. He doesn't let me fall when I lose my balance; he catches me, like Aaron used to all those years ago on the swings, with Bianca in that park. I want nothing more than to go back there and not have to worry, just do things without having to think about the consequences, but that's in the past.

"Luke's sleeping inside," Kyle tells me, his breath warm against my temple as his scent surrounds me.

My shoulde	ers go lim	p in relief	at his words	and my head	drops agains	t his shoulde	r. Luke's okay	; he's in the
hospital; he	s' being to	aken care	of and he's no	ot at the hous	eâ ¦I didn't l	oreak my pro	mise to him.	

He's okay.

# **Chapter 28: Chapter twenty eight**

# **Chapter Twenty Eight**

I don't even have to open my eyes to know that I am still in the hospital. Wincing when I move my arm, I force my heavy eyelids to open and look down to find a bandage wrapped around my arm, holding a needle in place tightly. I'm not sure what the liquid being pumped into my body is, but it sure is no form of painkiller.

I go to swallow, but my throat is too dry and my head starts to pound when I glance over at the door as it opens and a young man, in his late twenties or so, walks in, a clipboard in his hand and wearing a white coat.

"Ah, Josephine," he says, glancing up from it. "You're awake."

"She's awake?" another voice asks, quickly followed by Kyle appearing through the door, looking tired and filthy, still wearing the same clothes as he wasa | yesterday? Today? Two weeks ago? I really have no idea.

"So, Josephine, how are you feeling?" the doctor asks, picking up a sheet of paper from the table at the end of my bed and looking over it.

Well, there's a question. Physically, I feel tired, sore and bruised; mentallyâ ¦ there's something I don't want to even start thinking about. I make an incoherent noise, but cut it short when my throat burns.

"Well, at least you didn't say you were fine. No one could be fine after what you've been through. Do you have any recollection of the incident?"

Panicking, I glance over at Kyle. Does the doctor know? Did Kyle tell him about Karen? I try to ask him this telepathically, hoping that he didn't say a word about what really happened.

"I already told you," Kyle grits out, his jaw clenched, like he's angry at the doctor, but I can tell his anger is at me because I won't tell anyone what happened. "She was attacked when she was walking home at night."

Even though I nod my head at the words, the doctor doesn't look completely convinced, but he doesn't argue it. "You lost a lot of blood, Josephine, and were unconscious for some time before you arrived here. You'd been out for eight hours until I arrived to check on you, only to find you gone. How you were able to stand up without damaging your leg even worse is beyond me, but your lack of concern for your wellbeing was very irresponsible- you could have fallen at any time.

"You are not to move from that bed until I tell you so; ask the nurse if you need the bathroom or anything else. Someone will be in in a while's time to give you some painkillers. Do not- and I repeat, *do not*, take that drip from your arm or I will superglue it to your skin."

With those wise words, he leaves the room, shutting the door behind him and probably putting some sort of lock on it, in case I find the need to escape again. Kyle and I are left alone and, for the first time in months, the silence between us is one of unease.

"Luke?" I ask quietly, not looking up from the blanket that is covering me. Kyle doesn't say a word, just stands in the same place for a moment before abruptly storming across the room and over to the window.

"Sleeping."

"Can I see him?" That's all I want; I don't want to be here, don't want this bed or to be fixed up. I just want Luke and to make sure he's all right. No one will let me see him, and that worries me; is he okay? Is he hurt, but they don't want me to know, so they won't let me see him?

"What the hell were you thinking, Joey?" Kyle bursts out, slamming his hand against the wall as he turns sharply in my direction. "Climbing out a window like that in your state! You could have passed out, hit your headâ ¦ why? How, even? You shouldn't be able to move! I'm so tempted to chain you to that bed until you heal- and then some."

"I wasn't thinking!" I snap, ignoring the burning of my throat as I glare at him, just wanting him to tell me Luke is okay and to mean it. "Is that not obvious? Lying in a bed isn't going to help me get to Luke. The door was locked; the window could open, so I just did it! I wasn't thinking."

"Your leg was bandaged and you were connected to an oxygen tank- how the hell did you even make it two steps? You were smothered, Joey; within an inch of your life. You should have been resting, not-!"

"I panicked, okay? The last thing I remembered was Luke banging on the door and I needed to find him-,"

"Did you think I'd leave Luke if he was hurt? Do you know how much I care about that little boy?"

"He's not your brother!" I cry, my voice so loud and shrill that it hurts even my ears, but I'm used to pain by now. Breathing heavily, my hands fisted on the white sheet covering my body, I stare fiercely at Kyle, who returns the look. "He's not yours."

The clock ticks on, its tinny ticks filling the silence between us. Kyle glances away, over to the window and looks out of it, like he's in deep thought. "It was Luke who found you," he says all of a sudden, his voice sombre and low. "He tried to break the window to get help, but he couldn't. I wasâ conflicted and didn't come out of the woods until a while later, but she was long gone by then."

Wasn't everything sorted out when we were in the woods? I don't understand- did he have second thoughts? Did he not want to leave? "Why were you conflicted?"

"It doesn't-,"

"Kyle," I say sharply, cutting him off with a meaningful look. "Tell me." If he doesn't want to go, then he doesn't have to. He was the one who said he wanted to; I asked him many times and he said he was sure of it.

"I was leaving the woods, but went the long way to make sure you got back okay. I heard voices at the path near the edge; one was yours. I didn't know the other. I saw you with someone; your arms were around his shoulders and his were around your waistâ !"

He doesn't need to say anything more; I already know what happened next. Josh said he loved me and he kissed me. The branch I heard must have been Kyle walking off. "Kyleâ !"

He says nothing, just stares at the floor, looking pained. It's just my luck that he would arrive at that one moment. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt him.

He takes a step back, towards the door, and I quickly shove the covers off me and try to get up. As quick as a flash, he is by my side and covering my hands with his, before tucking the sheet around me. I go to grab his hands, but he just shakes his head, still not looking at me, and withdraws.

"Don't," he says, staring at my wrist, the one that isn't bandaged. I glance down to see the bracelet Josh gave me caught on a button. Kyle lifts my hand up, letting the strap fall free from the confinement.

"I understand," he finally continues. "You were meant to leave with him; you said that already, but it wasn't certain, so I just forgot about it. You've known him longer and you trust himâ ¦ he loves you; I heard him say that. Sorry for listening in on that moment. It was probably special to you, so I apologise for ruining it by eavesdropping."

Lifting my hand, he places a soft kiss on my palm before dropping it and standing back. I watch wordlessly, unable to speak as I try to take in what has happened.

"I'm not sure where he is now, but he's not at the hospital. I'm still going; I need to get away from here as soon as I can, but I'll wait until I'm sure you've healed. After that, I'll leave you to start the life that you and Luke deserve."

Frozen, I say nothing to his words; do nothing as he steps back and walks out the door, leaving. Alone.

We should be going together- *gone* together; Luke and I should be driving off with Kyle, bags packed and never having to look back or worry again. Why can't something just go right, for once?

Shoving the covers off me, I leap from the bed, squealing in pain at the needle that rips from my skin and falls to the ground. I squeeze my arm tightly, wincing and biting the inside of my cheek hard at the stinging pain, but I can't pause.

Limping to the door, I pull on the handle, but I can't open it again, because of my useless hands. Anger and frustration has my fist clenching, cutting off the circulation in my arm and I hit at the door, only to produce more pain.

Tears of anger and pain well up in my eyes, but I don't let them fall. I feel as though I am about to scream when the door opens and a blond-haired woman peeks her head around and frowns. "Are you okay?"

I barely even hear her question as I am bulldozing my way past her and into the hall, looking around the narrow hallways for any sign of someone I know, but there's no one. My leg as a dead-weight, I pull it along behind me, cursing loudly when I find steps and shoving past people to try and find himâ ¦ whether it's Kyle or Luke, I don't know anymore.

I justâ ¦ I need someone; need to hold them and feel safe and be told everything will be all right, even though it won't. I know it won't, but why can't it be? Just for once, can't it be okay; not unpredictable?

Coming to a dead end, I collapse to the floor, my back against the wall and my head on my knees. Breathing heavily, trying to hold back tears and to keep whatever is in my stomach down, I pull my legs to my body and curl up into a vulnerable ball, wondering if I can take any more.

"Joey!"

At first, I don't believe it; it's just my sick mind playing tricks on me, and it's not really him. Then, when a shadow falls over me and my name is called again, I look up to find the person that I need most right now standing in front of me.

Arms tackle me and wrap around me tightly, his small body clinging to me and not leaving an inch of space between us. His head hits my bandaged nose, but all the pain is pushed to the side as I squeeze the life out of

my little brother, praying that he really is here and I'm not dreaming.

When his hands start to tremble and he pulls back, taking in my injuries and tear-filled eyes, his own start to fall before he buries his face against my neck. "You're okay," he gasps out between deep sobs, his words barely heard as they're muffled against my skin.

"I'm okay," I whisper, kissing the top of his head and wrapping my stiff arms around him.

Rocking him back and forth, I'm reminded of the times Aaron used to do this for me, when I was upset. He told me stories of when he was a kid, and made me laugh until I forgot about what happened and went back out to play. Lisa made me cookies sometimes, and all the pain just went away.

Rubbing Luke's back as he cries, I lean back against the wall, my shoulders slumping in relief. My little brother is okay; he's not hurt and he's fine; he's right here with me and we're going to make it through this together.

We're going to make it.

# **Chapter 29: Chapter twenty nine**

## Chapter twenty nine

I awaken once again in the same hospital room as before. This is the second time I have woken up here, and I have no idea how I keep getting back to this room. One minute I am outside or with Luke then I wake up here.

Still feeling tired, even though I've probably slept more in the time I have been here than I have slept in the past few years, I force myself to open my eyes, wincing at the bright light coming from the window. The room is silent, all but for some soft snoring coming from my right. I glance over, thinking it's Luke, but I'm surprised when I find Kyle there, sleeping on the bed beside mine.

*Kyle's a snorer*, I find myself thinking, rolling onto my side, but making sure not to move my arm too far from the tube it's connected to. The drip is once again attached to my arm and the bandage is so tight that it is almost cutting into my skin. If I move too much, it will probably bruise me, so I try and keep still.

Kyle looks much younger when he's sleeping, and that's saying something, considering he's only eighteen. We shouldn't be in this hospital; we should be halfway to wherever we were meant to be going, leaving this all behind. Thanks once again to Karen, we're not.

With a sigh, I turn onto my back and look up at the ceiling. I don't know what time it is, but I guess it's sometime in the morning. Swallowing, but finding my throat still dry, I look around for some water. There's a jug of it on the table beside the bed, so I push the covers off me and shift out of the bed.

I'm almost out when I feel a tugging on my leg, which won't move any further. I tug at it again, wondering why it's stuck, and pull the covers off to find it tied to the headboard of the bed with a length of rope. What the hell?

"I told you I'd tie you to the bed if you left again."

Trying once again to get my leg to move, but failing, I glare in Kyle's direction. "Untie me," I demand, wondering what the hell he was thinking when he did this.

He yawns, turning off his side and onto his back as he stretches. "No, thanks."

My scowl deepens. "Kyleâ !"

"Yeah?"

Why is he acting so nonchalant about this? I am tied to a bed and he thinks this is okay? I glance down at the knot, wondering how I didn't wake up when he was doing this. It's not tight enough to cut off circulation, but the rope is rough and scratchy, a little sore if I move my leg.

"I need the bathroom," I lie, seeing there is no way that I can get this untied without cutting it.

"Call the nurse."

"And how do I do that?"

Taking his time, Kyle gets off the bed, putting his shoes on and runs a hand through his messy hair. As he shuffles across the room, I wonder why he's here. Didn't I leave to go after him? Didn't he say he was going? I'm confused, but I don't want to have the conversation yet.

Reaching behind me, he presses a red button, like he thinks something is going to happen, but the room stays still.

"Wow," I remark, clapping my hands slowly. "And that's meant to help me, how?"

"Well, aren't you Little Miss Sarcastic this morning?" he replies, sounding rather cheery, something I don't usually associate with Kyle. Even when we were at the woods, he wasn't very open, but he was more carefree than in public places.

"Where's Luke?" I ask, wondering how I got here. I remember being in a hall with him, but nothing after that.

"He's sleeping."

That always seems to be the answer. Looking around the small room, I see two more unoccupied beds and chairs around. "Why isn't he in here?"

"He's not allowed," Kyle replies. "He's with some nurses."

After a few more tugs at my leg and no help on Kyle's part, I give up and lie back down on the bed. I still don't know why he's here; he said he would stay until I'm healed and then he's going, but why is he doing this? If he's going, can't he just leave now? I don't want to have to see him all day, knowing that he's only going to leave without us; that we'll never see him again when we should be gone already.

As much as I don't want to have this conversation, I need to know where we stand. "It's not true."

Kyle raises an eyebrow. "It's not true that Luke is with some nurses?"

I can't be sure if he genuinely doesn't know what I'm talking about, or if he's avoiding the conversation. "No, what you said yesterday; what you saw, to be exact. It's not true."

Kyle gets up from the bed, releasing a ragged sigh and runs a hand through his hair. "You don't have to try and make me feel better, Joey. I gambled and I lost; there's no one to blame but myself."

"I'm not saying it to make you feel better," I protest, sitting up and watching as he walks over to the window, leaning against the wall and looking out the glass. "I don't love Josh, not like that. He's my friend; was my friendâ ¦ I don't know anymore.

"I've told you much more than I told him. He tried to understand it, he really did, but he couldn't. He was there once when it happened, but he has never had to have it happen to him; seeing, and it actually happening, are very different things.

"I've told you more in these past few months than I have told anyone in my lifetime. Having someone I can actually talk toâ ¦it's new to me.

"Yes, Josh kissed me, but I stopped it; he was or is my friend, I don't know; but that's not the point-,"

"Then what is the point?" Kyle cuts in, sounding weary. "You were meant to leave with him; I knew that, we both did-,"

"I didn't know that; I *thought* that. I thought that was what I wanted; for him to come, get Luke and me and take us away from here. But what would that do? He's a young man; he's not going to stay with us forever-and what would we do then? I need to do this myself."

"Where do I come in to all this, Joey? You want to do this by yourself."

"Be realistic, Kyle," I sigh, knowing I am probably making no sense at the moment, but I continue anyway. "I may have made it this far, but I have Luke to think about here, too. If I fall, he falls. What if I don't get a job? What if we can't find anywhere to live; what if he gets hurt? I can't let that happen to him. I can't give him everything he needs; everything he wantsâ ¦ everything he deserves. I just can't."

I hate that I can't. Luke deserves so much better than this; he just got his first real Christmas at nearly eight years old; seven years too late. He's growing up now and making friends; soon enough, he'll be his own person, dating and having funâ ¦ leaving me alone, because he's all I have.

"I don't want to do it alone anymore, Kyle," I whisper, hating myself for saying this and showing weakness, but I don't want to be alone anymore. "That's why I don't make friends; we just leave and I never see them again; just leads to disappointment. I love Luke, with all my heart, but he's just going to leave, too; he deserves much better than this and I know he will make that happen, but he's all I have. I don't want him to go."

"You deserve better than this, too, Joey; you know that," Kyle says softly, his words barely heard because of the distance between us.

"What about you, Kyle? If I deserve it, you do, too."

Kyle turns away completely, leaning his forehead against the wall and putting his back to me. "You know why."

I want nothing more than to get up and go over to him, comfort him somehow, but I can't. My heart breaks at the thought of the conversation we had, when he told me about his sister and how he failed her. "No, Kyle, you did all you could to-,"

"And look what my best has done for her now; she's dead- dead! My little sister is dead because I was stupid enough to leave her alone-,"

"Kyle-,"

"-and not even think about telling her to keep her inhaler with her all the time. Maybe I did try, but it wasn't enough. It's never enough."

"You did what you could do and that's all that's expected of you-,"

As quick as a flash, Kyle turns around, his eyes fierce and face hard as his hands clench into fists by his sides. "I expected her to live longer than she did- I should have done more; I should have stayed with her instead of going after them, maybe I could have done something. But I didn't; if my best wasn't enough to save her, how could it be enough for-â !"

I can feel the tears building up, but I doubt that they'll fall. They rarely do; I'm used to holding all this emotion in, but seeing Kyle looking so lost and broken; angry and scaredâ ¦it makes me want to do something, but I don't know what that something is.

"For who, Kyle?" I ask in a whisper, my throat still dry, but I ignore it.

His eyes, that have been looking everywhere but at me, flick to mine and hold them. Swallowing, he takes a step away from the wall, but doesn't come around the bed. "For you," he says lowly, his voice hoarse and slightly shaky. "What if I'm not enough for you or Luke? If my best wasn't enough for Ashley- I can't go through something like that again, Joey. You should go with him, Josh; you'd be safe then; would get everything you needâ !"

"I don't want to go with him, Kyle. When he leaves, then what? We'll never see each other again? Anything could happen to anyone, and none of us would know. No, I don't know what will happen, but sometimes, you have to just take the risk."

"I already took that risk; now look where it has gotten me. Everyone is either dead or doesn't want meâ !"

"What about Luke and me? I care about you; Luke does, too. I don't want to go with Josh or anyone else; I want to go with you; Luke doesn't know yet, but he'll be so happy if you doâ ¦ I know it didn't end at all well the last time you took the risk, but sometimes, you just have to keep trying."

I never thought I'd be having this conversation with anyone; maybe them telling me, but never me telling someone else. I never thought I'd become this close to someone, other than Luke. I was friends with Rosa, but she knew nothing; it wasn't that I didn't trust her- I just didn't want to burden her with it. She has a good life and doesn't need this weighing her down. Sometimes, you just know if you can tell a certain person something; this, isn't one of them.

When Kyle takes another step, I hold my breath, wondering what he's going to do. He looks torn; conflicted, and I can't tell what his answer is going to be. Walking around the bed he was earlier lying in, he keeps his gaze on mine. He's just about to say something when the door bursts open; it's just his luck that he is right behind it as it opens, and it swings into him, sending him flying backwards into the wall.

"Ah, Josephine," the young nurse says loudly, slamming the door shut. When she sees me looking at something behind her, she glances over with a slight frown. The expression on her face is comical when she sees Kyle looking dazed and holding a hand to his head. "Sorry!" she squeaks out, rushing over to check him for injuries.

I don't know why, but for some reason, I burst out into laughter. Kyle is waving the nurse away, but she seemingly won't take no for an answer as she keeps pushing his hands to the side. My uncontrollable laughter doesn't help my dry throat, but when both Kyle and the nurse look over at me, like they think I'm crazy, it does nothing to help control it.

After a few minutes and it doesn't seem like I am going to stop, I hear the door shut and footsteps making their way to my bed. The matrass slumps to the side and I feel someone's hand cover mine.

"You okay there?" Kyle asks, sounding amused as my laughter dies away and I'm left gasping for breath. "Sometimes I worry about you."

I sober up, remembering the important conversation we were having before he was hit by the door. "Well," I say, pursing my lips, like I am in deep thought. "Maybe you should come with us to make sure I won't get into

any trouble."

Biting the inside of my cheek, I await his reply. Nothing has changed in the past few minutes; I have no idea what his answer will be. Looking at him, he gives nothing away; his expression neutral and eyes serious.

"I think I will."

He gives me a small smile and I break out in a grin, a huge weight lifting off my shoulders. "You should," I agree, nodding my head gravelly and trying to act serious, but I'm still smiling widely. "We-,"

"Joey!"

I look up to find Luke at the door, holding a lollypop in his hand and trying to get past the nurse. "Luke!" I cry, trying to get out of the bed, forgetting that I am still tied down.

The nurse moves out of the way and Luke comes running in, jumping onto the bed and landing beside me. "Hi," he says, sitting beside me and leaning back on the pillows.

The nurse quietly shuts the door. Looking down at Luke and then over to Kyle, I smile inwardly to myself. It used to be us two; Luke and me, but now it's three. It may be a few days later than expected, but the three of us are going to leave together.

We're going to make it.

\_

The sight of the house makes me sick to the stomach, but I suck it up for Luke's sake. Hobbling up the steps while trying not to stab Luke's foot with my crutches, I arrive in the hall; the place where she was only a few days ago.

If it wasn't for Kyle gently pulling me along into the kitchen, I don't know if I would be able to stay in the house. Karen has done bad things to me, but she never went as far as she did the last time.

Sitting down on the chair that Kyle pulls out for me, I take a few deep breaths, trying to get myself together. Luke is in the bedroom, getting his stuff, but he's taking a bit longer than usual; I know it's because he thinks I need a minute, and I'm grateful for that.

"Okay?" Kyle asks, standing behind me with my crutches in his hand.

Looking out at the trees for the last time, I nod my head. "I'm okay."

Leaning my crutches against the table, he picks up a bag and makes his way out into the hall, leaving me alone. I didn't want to come back, but we need to get our stuff. I was discharged from the hospital this morning, with the doctor's warnings to not walk without my crutches and, if I feel dizzy, I am to sit down and wait until it passes over, along with an extra five minutes of staying still.

We're leaving today; in a few minutes. Kyle has the car outside; it's a blue-green colour and is working well, thanks to his work on it.

Luke comes stumbling out of the bedroom, laden down with bags and his art-pack he got for Christmas. I've never used crutches before and they're taking a lot of getting used to, so I am not of much help to him, but I

get up anyway and slowly make my way towards him.

By the time I am in the hall, he already has the front door open, but he's not going out. As though he's frozen, he drops the bags in his hands and takes a step back, bumping into the wall. "Joey?"

I speed up, wondering who's at the door. Lighting tapping his shoulder, he moves and I peek around the door to find two men standing there in navy uniforms, a holster at their sides and a notebook in their hands.

"Good afternoon, Miss. Do you happen to know a Karen Clint or Stan Tykes?"

# **Chapter 30: Chapter thirty**

# **Chapter thirty**

While I can't say it's the cause of her behaviour, as she has been doing it since I was nine, it has definitely contributed to the intensity that ended up with me in hospital. Karen's been doing drugs, according to the police officers; and not just weed.

I suspected number four did them and maybe even number two, but I didn't think she did. Number four was always mellow and spaced-out after them, but I have never seen Karen like that. She has either just started recently, or waits until the effects wear off before coming back here.

She was found in a room, with empty needles and bags of drugs all around her. The room was filthy and letting off rotten odours, which clued some residents in to the fact that something wasn't right. Some tests were done and she was found to have been drugged and raped, probably left in the room for two or three days before she was found. The DNA was Stan Tykes'.

Thankfully, the other officer brought Luke out of the room when he told me this, but Kyle stayed. At first, I didn't recognise the other name mentioned, but I was quickly clued in to it when Kyle tensed and clenched his fists.

"I'd never liked Stan Tykes, didn't know what Alana saw in himâ ¦ he got away, scot free and there was nothing I could do about it."

"What age is she?" the officer asks, taking some notes on his clipboard.

"I don't know," I tell him, my mind still on Stan and the way Kyle left the house quickly after the name was mentioned. How am I meant to feel? My mother was raped by the person who locked Kyle's sister in a bathroom, where she died. I never thought I'd hear of her again, and then this happens?

After a few more simple questions about the woman who bore me, and no answers on my part, the officer is starting to get annoyed. I really don't know the answer to the questions; what's her middle name? Where was she born? Who are her parents? I just don't know.

"Do you have somewhere to stay?" he asks, looking around the small living room that I have lived in for the past few months now. The look on his face gives the impression that he doesn't approve.

"We're going to stay with an aunt, now that I'm eighteen," I say, adding in the last bit so he knows I can make my own decisions, and that he can't take Luke. He just nods, getting up from the chair and calling for the other officer, who is in the kitchen with Luke.

This is it, I think as I get up and follow them to the door. I can tell them now what she has been doing to us, get her to serve time and keep her away from us forever. This is my last chance.

I don't. Shutting the door behind the officers after thanking them, I lean back against it. I could tell them; should, really, but I won't. We can just leave now instead of having to go through things that will just prolong it- maybe we mightn't be allowed to at all. What if they took Luke from me? I don't even know why they took my word that we're going to an aunt's now, without even checking to see if it's true.

Seeing Luke at the kitchen table, I make my way through the hall and over to him, seeing him looking confused and tired. "You okay, bud?"

He taps the wood with his fingers in a rhythm. "Should I be?"

I smile humourlessly at him, picking up his art case with one hand and dropping one of my crutches. I don't have an answer to that question, as I feel the same way. How should I feel- happy that I will never have to see her again? Sad because we will never have a normal relationship?

Leaving Luke at the table, I go back into the sitting room and sit on the couch, grabbing a worn, tattered blanket and setting it on my lap. Shutting my eyes, I am reminded of a time when I didn't have to worry about these things; happy was when something good happened; sad was when I fell and hurt myself. There were no other confusing feelings; my biggest worry was how would I get my homework done, watch TV and play with Cian and Bianca all in the one day?

I wonder how Cian is getting on; and Aaron and Lisa. I have never really wondered about my family before, but I am now. The officer asked me who Karen's parents are, and I don't know. Aaron never mentioned his father or mother- around me, at least.

I glance down at the necklaces on my chest; the one Kyle made me, and the one Lisa got me all those years ago. I remember the day well. I was opening the box and they were in the kitchen, talking about something-'grown-up' stuff, as they called it. I was never really interested, but I remember I went out to thank Lisa, but didn't want to interrupt them, so I waited for them to finish.

"â \be there, your father-,"

"Don't call him that," Aaron snapped, rubbing his temples in agitation.

Lisa sighed. "David needs to be put away; you have to testify against him-,"

"You don't think I know that? You think I wouldn't care if the bastard of a man got away after what he did to her? She's my sister, Lisa; and you know what he did to her. Look at her now; look at what she is doing! She has just abandoned her daughter and left on her own- I mightn't ever see her again. She's my little sisterâ \"

Davidâ ¦ "No, stopâ ¦ please, it hurtsâ ¦! David!"

Gasping, I shove the blankets off me, just grabbing my crutch in time before I fall. I knew I heard that name before, butâ *Your father*, Lisa had said; David. Karen had a nightmare about a Davidâ *her father*.

They were divorced, the mother and father; that is all I know. She must have stayed with her father sometimes a 'I rush out of the room, feeling like I am going to get sick. *No*, I think, hobbling down the steps and out of the house. *It has to be a different David*. Why would she put her own children through what she was put through? I could never do that; not that I am going to have children, but if I did, they would never go through anything like this, ever.

Throwing the art-pack into the trunk of the car, I lean back against the doors. Karen is a horrible person, but I don't think she'd do something like that- what would she do it for? Revenge? It was done to her, so it's only fair that she did it to her own children?

I swear that I will never do that to anyone. I can't imagine hurting someone like she has done to me; neglecting her own children and thinking so lowly of herself. I couldn't even hurt her when it came to a life

and death situation; I can only hope I stay like this, because I would *never* forgive myself for doing something as inhumane as that.

Looking around and trying not to think about that, I wonder where Kyle is. He left a while ago, but I can't see him around. Flicking my gaze over to the house, I quickly limp my way to the woods, taking the trail that I have seen him take all those times before.

It's sad to think that this is the last time I'll be seeing these woods. I must have thought that many times already, but I know this is the last. We're leaving today, no matter what. There's no Karen or Josh to stop us now; we're on our own.

When I come across a split in the trail, I glance at both sides. I've never taken this trail before, so I don't know where it will take me. The ground is dry and hard, the hot, June sun beating down onto it through the gaps in the trees. There are no footprints to guide me.

I close my eyes and allow my feet to take me wherever, not thinking about where I am going. It's probably not the smartest idea I've ever had, but I'm tired of thinking. If I go the wrong way, I can simply turn and find the right one; no need to worry.

Moments later, I arrive at a clearing; no grass or trees, only a few bushes in the shape of a circle. The bushes aren't bare though; bunches of flowers are growing from them- the red and purple ones. Their petals are open, growing in their dozens for all to see; but not many do see them, for they grow in such a desolated area and I haven't seen them anywhere else.

I go to step into the clearing, but stop when I see Kyle. He's kneeling beside a small tree, a sapling that has barely grown. Bushes are all around it, almost hiding it from view with its flowers blooming all around it. He stares intently at the tree, his head bowed and kneeling. I sense this is an important moment, so I step back. For once, I don't make a sound to disrupt Kyle's memorial.

I don't think it is Ashley's grave, more so a place where they used to come; a place that's special to him, so he planted something in memory of her.

I back up against a tree, thinking back to the times in these woods and how special it has become to me. Luke and I found the tyre swing here, where we stayed for hours and laughed and talked; the small lake that he and Robbie found; the small waterfall by the old, weathered statue deep in the woods.

And then my pond, where Kyle and I met. So many things happened by that small hole with water, both good and bad. It has been an unforgettable experience.

Taking in the sight one last time, I glance back over at Kyle. He's still in the same position, but his eyes aren't focused on the tree anymore. He glances over at me when I peek out, and motions for me to come over. I do so, feeling glad he isn't annoyed that I have disturbed him.

As I kneel beside him, I see a picture of a little girl attached to the small sapling. Her hair is tied into a curly ponytail, her eyes a bright blue as she smiles at the camera, a dimple on her right cheek. She's standing beside the small tree with a watering can in her hand, soil on her cheeks and clothes.

Looking down at my bracelet, I take off a charm and place it beneath the tree, under the picture of the beautiful little girl that I will never meet. Kyle takes my hand and squeezes it softly, though he doesn't let it go.

"Thank you," he whispers lowly, once again looking at the picture with watery eyes, pain etched on his face.

I squeeze his hand back, shifting closer to him. The sun catches on the silver charm of the small, lone leaf. It looks like a normal leaf, but when the sun shines on it, it reflects a bright light, almost blinding; like the smile of the girl in the photo; disarming.

Taking an unopened flower from the bush, I place it beside the small tree, looking at a worn piece of wood with the words 'Ashley; the sun doesn't shine without your smile' carved into it in beautiful writing, like the design on the necklace that Kyle made me.

Kyle kisses his palm and, with tears in his eyes, touches the picture of his sister, letting his hand slide down until it touches the soil. After a moment of looking at it, he gets up, offering me his hand. I take it. I take it for me, but I also take it for him, knowing he needs someone to be there.

We walk through the woods, hand in hand; I, leaning on one crutch as I have left the other one in the house. We walk to the car that will take us away from the place I have known for the last nine months; the place we have known as home, and now 'right place number thirteen'.

We walk to Luke, who is now waiting for us by the car. We walk away from the clearing, away from the woods; away from what we've know, what we're used to, and into the unknown.

Opening the door for Luke, I don't think or cry; don't jump up and down in joy. The saying Kyle once told me comes to mind: " $D\tilde{A}_i$  fhada an  $l\tilde{A}_i$ , tagann an  $tr\tilde{A}_i$ ; however long the day, the evening will come.

And I don't worry.

A/N: I'm not going to write 'the end'; I may be finished writing it, but their story doesn't stop here.

Anyway, enough confusion for the moment. I want to thank everyone who read this, whether silently or not. Your consistent support is greatly appreciated, and I hope you enjoyed Joey's story- which, by the way, is the first novel that I've finished! \*cheers and jumps in joy\* I usually get a new idea halfway and stop to write that, but I didn't this time!

So, thank you- yes, YOU-, for reading this story. I'm currently working on two others, one sort of a darker topic, while the other is a lighter romance, and I'll hopefully have them somewhat presentable soon.

ANYWAY, before I ramble even more; I hope you enjoyed this story and thanks for reading! :D

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