



WAKING OLIVIA

Elizabeth
O'Rourke

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ELIZABETH O'ROARK

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Waking Olivia

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I

Olivia

It's my first day at a new college and I'm dragging my feet like it's an execution. Which makes sense since the man I'll meet today has the ability to end my life. Life as I know it, anyway.

I seek out the dining hall first, using the crappy, copied map the school sent me last month. Athletes are provided a dining plan whether they live on campus or not. Given that I've spent the past three months eating nothing but eggs and ramen, this is probably a good thing.

I get my food and sit alone with the exact breakfast I have every day during the school year: one scrambled egg, plain oatmeal, and one apple. I eat the apple first, praying I can hold it down.

I already know that today's meeting can't possibly go well. After the incident at my last school, it was a shock that *any* team would have me, and I'm pretty sure my new coach is about to make his reservations clear. The best case is a series of warnings and threats, and the worst is that he lays out conditions I can't possibly agree to. *They wanted you*, I remind myself. *They gave you a scholarship. It won't be that bad.*

Somehow I just don't believe it.

The athletic department is housed in a vast building that dwarfs almost any other on campus. It lets you know in no uncertain terms what matters most at East Colorado University. I suppose I should be grateful for this fact

since it's the reason I've got a scholarship.

There's no wariness on the secretary's face when she tells me I can go in, which means she must be one of maybe 10 people in the world of collegiate sports who don't know what I did. Most people watch me now as if I'm a rabid animal or that snake in Malaysia, the one whose bite is so deadly you collapse only a few feet from the site of the attack.

There's no doubt, as I enter the room, that the two men in front of me know *exactly* what has happened. They're already looking at me sternly—narrowed eyes, arms folded—which means I'm already sort of pissed off.

I brace myself for the lecture I know is coming because I have no other choice. Peter McEwan, the track coach in front of me, is the stuff of legends, and I *need* a legend right now. People used to call me a “gifted” runner. They spoke of my potential in awed voices. Now they don't.

But McEwan needs a legend too. ECU hasn't had a winning women's track team in nearly a decade, which is why they've incurred the vast risk of offering me a scholarship.

They need me to find that thing, whatever it is I've lost, almost as much as I do.

I'm willing to act contrite right now for the chance to work with him. I'll even pretend I'm sorry. But I'm not prepared to do so for the other one. He's not much older than me and looks like he should be posing for the cover of *Men's Fitness* instead of sitting there scowling. He leans back in his chair, blue eyes glittering like ice on his tan face, a smug lilt to his mouth that sets my teeth on edge. I'll let McEwan lecture me, but I'll be damned if I'm going to kiss this guy's ass. *Keep glaring at me, asshole. See how far that gets you.*

McEwan rises from his chair and greets me with a handshake. "This is my colleague, Will Langstrom," he says, motioning to the guy beside him. Langstrom shakes my hand, but his eyes remain narrowed and unwelcoming.

He towers over me, and between his size and the way he is looking at me—like I just drowned some small pets for fun—Langstrom feels like a threat. People either cower or lash out when threatened, and I'll give you one guess what camp I belong to. *This is bad.*

"Olivia," he says.

"I go by Finn." I meet his eyes once before I look away. *I don't need your approval, dickhead.*

"Will is the coach for the women's cross country team," McEwan adds.

Oh shit. I do need his approval. Shit, shit, shit.

This is news to me, but did I really think Peter McEwan was going to coach me personally? I know he has his hand in the entire coaching program, but talk about equal rights all you want, no school is wasting a revered coach on the women's team.

"You have two years until graduation," McEwan continues, "and whether we can make something of your ability before then is entirely in his hands and yours."

I shift uncomfortably. I can't say I love the phrase "make something of your ability." I still hold three course records. Wasn't that something *made* of my ability? Am I going to have to keep proving myself for fucking ever?

"I don't feel we need to go over what happened between you and your former teammate," he intones. My spine relaxes, just a little. "I do, however, need to make sure you understand that it can't happen here." I nod again, hands clasped in my lap. *Contrite*. "And we're not going to wait until you've hospitalized someone before we kick you out of here," he warns. "We get even a hint of that temper and you're packing your bags. Understood?"

Not show a hint of temper? Impossible. You're on the verge of 'a hint' right now. I somehow manage to nod my agreement.

"The other thing is your *extracurricular activities*," he says. "According to the reports from your last coach, they had a huge impact on your ability to practice. That can't happen here, understand?"

He has no idea what my extracurricular activities really were. How they were so much worse than what he's imagining. How I couldn't stop them if I tried. And believe me, *I've tried*.

Just when I think the meeting is over, it gets worse. McEwan stands and says he'll give me and Langstrom time to chat. My throat grows dry watching him walk out the door, and once it closes I reluctantly turn back to my new coach, who I already fucking hate.

"I don't want you here," he says flatly. "I'm not buying this whole good-girl-made-a-mistake crap. You nearly killed someone."

I stare at the ground, at anything but him, trying to rein myself in. I brace myself, tighten my thighs and my biceps, draw everything in so that I don't explode. *Fuck you fuck you fuck you*. Why should I have to listen to this guy anyway? He's tall and broad, the body of a swimmer or football player, not a runner. I wouldn't tell a mechanic how to change my oil, so why should this

guy get to tell me how to run?

"I'm curious," he says. "Are you even sorry?"

People always ask me this, but they don't really want an answer. They simply want to remind me that I *should* be sorry. And I am. I'm sorry I lost my scholarship. I'm sorry I had to leave and that I'll never run for a Division 1 school again. But I'm not sorry I did it. When I think of Mark Bell, with his smug smile and that ugly thing behind his eyes, it's hard to feel much regret.

I'm going to try not to say that last bit out loud.

"I didn't mean to hurt him as badly as I did," I mutter. It's the one true statement I can offer that doesn't make me sound like a sociopath.

"That's not really the same thing as being sorry," he says.

No, it's not, asshole.

"Your running is crap. You haven't placed better than third in nearly two years, and the last time you ran a 4:30 mile was three years ago. I think you've lost it."

These are words I hear in my own head daily. "I can get it back," I tell him. "I just need to apply myself."

He crosses his arms in front of his chest. He has particularly nice biceps, which would totally distract me if we were having a different conversation. "You're a liability and I don't feel like taking time away from really talented athletes so that you can 'apply' yourself, but Peter sees something in you. Claims you're a diamond in the rough."

The words console me, momentarily. Peter McEwan thinks I'm a diamond in the rough. That's got to be worth something.

His mouth goes to a flat line. "I disagree."

If I were a smarter girl, I'd pack my bags right now. Because one of us has to go, and I'm guessing it won't be him.

THREE GUYS SIT ALONG A BRICK WALL OUTSIDE THE ATHLETICS BUILDING AS I WALK out. "Hey, new girl!" one of them shouts. Athletes are cockier than the general population. They don't worry about being shot down as much as everyone else.

I stop, letting my dark hair swing over my shoulder as I turn my head toward them. It's soothing that no matter how much I fuck up, I still always

have this one thing. Being attractive is the next best thing to a superpower. It's a get-out-of-jail-free card, causing men to overlook my many other terrible qualities. *And I have so, so many terrible qualities.*

"Yes?" I ask with an eyebrow raised.

They all grin like naughty children, and the boldest one saunters forward. "So you're new here?" he asks as he catches up with me.

"I thought we'd established that." He's hot. Broad. Football player. I like that. A skinny runner's build does nothing for me.

"I'm Landon," he says, and inwardly I flinch. Landon is a private school name, one of those kids who wears a pink collared polo shirt and beats up gay kids after class. But he's cute. The whole super-all-American boy thing isn't necessarily my type, but after a few beers I have a whole lot of types.

"Hi, Landon," I reply, but I keep walking because men love to chase. And he chases. Of course he does. They are all so fucking predictable.

"You didn't tell me your name," he says, catching up.

"You didn't ask."

"Okay, what's your name?"

"Finn."

He stops in his tracks and I keep walking. "That's a boy's name!" he shouts.

"I know." I laugh.

"I want you to be my girlfriend, Finn!"

Yeah. I know that, too.

Will

I don't want that girl on my team.

From the moment she walked through Peter's door, I knew it. The music from "Jaws" could have been playing and it wouldn't have felt more ominous.

It's mind-boggling that Peter brought her onto the team at all. She took a bat to another member of her own team, for Christ's sake. Even if her talent could make up for that, she's hit-or-miss at best. Moments of brilliance followed by months and months of mediocrity.

"She's nothing but trouble," I tell him after she's gone. I try to make my voice neutral, try to disguise my vehemence because even I realize that it exceeds anything close to reasonable.

"You need a frontrunner," Peter says. "Someone who's going to make your girls think they've got a shot. Someone they're going to work for."

Peter is the one who's been doing my job for 25 years, who's made a national—hell, an *international* name for himself. He could have left us for a Division 1 school decades ago. Peter is the expert.

But Jesus, this time he's just wrong.

"We've got Betsy," I say. His snort of derision says it all: Everyone hates Betsy. She's arrogant, a bully, and only marginally faster than the other girls but acting like she's the star. Everyone's just too scared of her to say

otherwise.

"Okay, but Finnegan? You think *she's* going to inspire loyalty? She makes Betsy sound like Mother Teresa."

"Have you ever seen her run?" he asks.

I shake my head. I'd graduated from college two years before she entered. I heard her name a few years ago when she was a freshman and people thought she was the next big thing. And then the whispers faded and everyone forgot, including me. I wish I could have continued forgetting.

"She's unbelievable." He sounds slightly awestruck. "When she wants to be, she makes the rest of the field look like they're in slow motion."

"Well, she hasn't been unbelievable in a long time," I counter, "and she sure as hell doesn't seem like the type who pulls people together."

Peter smiles. "Who better to teach her how to do it than you?"

It was not a job I wanted, and now that I've seen her it's *really* not a job I want. That girl isn't just trouble of the not-a-team-player, not-a-reliable-runner variety. She's trouble of the devious, manipulative, too-fucking-hot-for-her-own good variety. Sashaying into Peter's office like a runway model, all long-legged and tan with big green eyes and a knowing smile. She's the kind of girl who causes trouble merely by existing, and then makes sure to cause more.

And the last thing I need right now is more trouble.

Olivia

I'm in a car, and we're going too fast. The street is narrow, and with the cars parked on either side of the road there are points where we barely squeeze through. There's a four-way stop at the end of every block, but we only slow at some of them. I watch my mother's shoulders stiffen, her body pushing backward into her seat. My brother takes my hand and squeezes it once, hard, preparing me for pain.

I see the woman in the intersection. A navy blue dress and swollen ankles. I see her before she sees me, and when she does, we both know what happens next. Her eyes meet mine and we both know.

Her body flies up over the hood. The blood is there, on the windshield, a splatter of it like modern art, with such immediacy it almost seems like she must have been bleeding before we hit her. We slam on the brakes and she goes flying forward. And then the car lurches over the top of her like an oversized speed bump.

My mother turns to me then, her eyes wide with fear, sick with it. Suddenly we are in her room.

"Run," she whispers. "Hide in the woods."

So I run.

I run as hard as I possibly can, desperate and hopeless at once.

The woods, the woods, the woods. It's a single phrase burned into my

brain.

Get to the woods.

I'm nothing but my desire to do what she's told me to do as if it can fix everything. I run and run, knowing he's behind me, knowing that the blood pouring down my back is only the start, knowing that I've done something very, very wrong, and when I stop it will all catch up with me.

I WAKE.

Except I don't wake in my new apartment. I'm on a street I've never seen before, wearing the shorts and tank I fell asleep in. I'm barefoot now because I never, ever manage to keep shoes on my feet when I sleep. I have no idea where I am. The sun's not out yet but the sky has the promise of it, its black softened with expectation. My heart's still beating hard from the run, from the terror.

"Son of a bitch," I mutter. Now I've got to find my way home.

IT TAKES ME OVER AN HOUR TO FIND MY APARTMENT BECAUSE I'M NOT FAMILIAR with the area yet. I figure I only ran about three miles before I woke up, but I probably ran another four backtracking to find my neighborhood.

I arrive at the track a short time later, undoubtedly the only girl here who's already run seven miles. I stare off in the distance, trying to pretend I don't see the girls around me whispering, shooting sly glances my way. They all know who I am. Most of them wish I weren't here. There's one girl in particular, taller than the rest, who makes no secret of her disdain. Fuck. I haven't even met my teammates yet and I already want to throw a punch.

Will Langstrom, my new coach and dickhead extraordinaire, walks toward us and every head snaps up. Now that I am watching from a distance, I'll admit that he's ridiculously hot. Just his stride is sexy. His tousled brown hair, the hollows under his cheekbones, the upper lip. He's cocky and it only makes him more appealing. I sort of hate us both for that fact.

He grins. "Morning, ladies."

"Morning, Coach," they sing in unison. I remain silent. They're all looking at him like he's Prince Charming and Christian Grey rolled into one.

He could pull down his pants right now and half of them would drop to their knees. *No wonder he's such a dick.*

"I assume you've all met your new teammates," he says, with a glance at me, but his voice holds no true expectation. Now it's their turn to be conspicuously silent. He introduces the two freshmen first, and then he turns to me. "And this is our only transfer. Olivia Finnegan comes to us from UT."

They look at me with some combination of expectation and delight in the comeuppance I've clearly received, the D1 girl sent back to the minors, but one who might just win them a title. They want to look down on me, but they can't do it for too long because they want to look up to me as well.

He makes them all introduce themselves. Betsy, the one giving me nasty looks, is the only name I remember. It's nice to put a name to the face I'm probably going to rub in the dirt.

"We're running the 10-mile loop this morning, and it's your lucky day because I'm running with you."

There are collective groans, so I guess that's a bad thing. "Hit the road and let's see how many of you slacked this summer."

I haven't slacked. I spent the whole summer giving riding lessons during the day and running morning and night. *But that won't be reflected today.*

BETSY TAKES OFF AND WE FOLLOW. SHE SETS A DECENT PACE. NOTHING TO WRITE home about, but given that I barely had time to shower after my run this morning, I'm okay with that.

Sometimes I don't feel it as much but today I do, that heaviness in my thighs as if I'm asking them to lift a weight with each step, something tepid running through me. It's not that I can't run 17 miles in a day. I can. It's just that I can't run them fast. I can't sprint them. And I must have sprinted this morning because my body has nothing left to push me forward. I manage, though. I have to. I can't fuck up here too.

I wasn't surprised that I'd had a nightmare last night and woke up nowhere near home. It's been happening since I was a kid, usually when I'm under stress but sometimes for no discernible reason. There are other people out there like me. They have a forum online where they exchange stories, but I've never told mine. Their stories involve running down a flight of stairs or

maybe a block or two. Mine involve running miles, running through the woods, waking up bleeding and drenched in sweat.

Even in a group of abnormal people, I'm the freak.

There's a water stop at the halfway point, which is when I first take a good look at my teammates, covered in dust from the dry road kicking up, sweat streaking down their arms, creating tiny pathways through the dirt. I have a bad feeling about Betsy, the one who led. There's something arrogant, aggressive in the set of her shoulders, though I suppose the same could be said of me.

Will says nothing the entire time, and I have a begrudging respect for the fact that he can keep up with us at all. Every extra pound you carry, whether it's muscle or something else, is like carrying a few bricks along for the run. He probably outweighs me by 80 pounds. That's a lot of bricks.

It's a relief when I finally see campus looming in the distance. I kept up. I didn't embarrass myself on the first day. Given that I've got that swimmy, unstable feeling I get before I pass out, it could have gone much worse. We reach the track and Will tells us he'll have notes for us at tomorrow's practice and sends us on in.

Well, almost all of us.

"Olivia," he says with an edge to his voice, "we need to talk." It's clear that this won't be a feel-good pep talk welcoming me to the team, and prompts a little smirk from Betsy.

"I go by Finn," I growl.

He acts as if I haven't spoken. "What the hell was that?" he demands. "I don't know what they did at your old school, but when I ask for 10 miles, I want a little effort."

"This is complete bullshit," I argue. "I kept up."

"You think we brought you on the team because we hoped you could *keep up*?" he asks. "We need a leader out there. You ambled down the road like a new mom trying to take off the baby weight."

God, what a dick. "I was tired."

"You've done the exact same workout that everyone else here has, so you've got no reason to be tired," he says, "unless you've already violated Peter's rule about drinking the night before a practice."

He has me by the throat. The story I used at UT is not going to fly here, so I make the very questionable decision to go with the truth instead,

something I've never found pays off.

"I ran a little this morning before I came out," I tell him quietly.

His mouth grows tighter. "And why *exactly* would you do that?"

For just a moment, a millisecond, I meet his eyes, though I don't want to. There's a part of me that wants to beg him not to ask, not to question, not to try to take my secrets away from me. I look away because I refuse to beg him or anyone. "I ... I couldn't sleep."

He's silent for a moment, his jaw tense but his eyes uncertain. "You're on my watch now," he finally says. "You run when I tell you to run and that's it. Don't do it again." He turns and walks away.

I IGNORE EVERYONE IN THE LOCKER ROOM. THESE PEOPLE AREN'T MY FRIENDS NOW, and they won't be my friends in two years. I've done all this before, and I know exactly where it got me.

"I'm Erin," says the girl changing beside me.

"Hey," I say tersely.

"So you're here from Austin?"

"Yeah."

"Is it true that you got kicked off the track team for beating up Mark Bell?" She doesn't even *try* to disguise her delight about this juicy morsel of gossip. Funny how everyone looks down on me for what I did, but they don't look down on themselves for being so fucking delighted to hear about it.

"Yeah," I say, packing my bag. "So I've heard."

"So is it true?" she whispers as if this is some special "just us girls" moment of intimacy with half the team standing there with their ears cocked.

"Yes."

"So why did you do it? He must have done something to you, right?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, fixing a look on her along with the other little listeners, who no longer feign disinterest and are watching us avidly. "He asked me too many fucking questions."

Will

“So how did it go?” asks Peter, but he can tell the answer by taking one look at my face. He chuckles. “You’re just like your father, Will. Incapable of hiding your thoughts.”

It’s taken the better part of two years for the mention of my father to stop hurting, and it will be a good two decades before I can appreciate the comparison. I did what he wanted. I gave up my career as a climber to take over the farm, but he wasn’t alive to see it happen and it wouldn’t have made a difference anyway. My father still would have found fault.

“It could have gone better,” I sigh.

“How are the new freshmen?”

“They hung in there. Evans was solid. The other one I’m not sure about.”

He nods slowly. “What about Finnegan?”

There are a million things I could tell him. That hostility came off her in waves, that she looked at the rest of the team like she wanted to shank them, and that her running was disappointing if not flat-out infuriating. I should tell him that she’s troubled. What could possibly compel a girl to run before track practice? I *need* to tell him this because if it continues it will spell disaster. She’ll either go into shock or have a fucking heart attack right in the middle of a race. But for some reason, I think of how lost she looked when I asked her about it, young and lost and *destroyed*.

"She's going to be a lot of work," I reply.

I've only told him half the truth, and it wasn't the important half.

Olivia

In the dining hall, I get a salad with grilled chicken, no cheese, no dressing, no bread. The world's leading female long distance runners only have about 15% body fat. Nothing matters so much as weight in distance running. Every pound you run with adds two seconds per mile. It might not sound like much, but an extra 10 pounds over a six-mile course equals two full minutes, the difference between a win and a loss.

I watch the football players with envy as they load their trays with cheese fries and burgers and baked potatoes and pie. Just once in my freaking life I want to eat like a football player. I spend my life in a state of continuous hunger. It's been that way for so long that the depth of my hunger scares me. Sometimes I think that if I took off the leash, I'd eat until I exploded and that I would never stop.

Erin finds me and sits down uninvited. She's extraordinarily wholesome looking with milky skin, scattered freckles and big cornflower-blue eyes. The kind of girl you'd see in an ad for America's farmers. You can take one look at her and know she's never suffered. I shouldn't hate her for it, but I do.

"I'm really sorry," she says. "I feel awful. You were right, I was prying, and it was none of my business."

"Whatever." In truth, I'm too busy being fascinated by her tray to say anything else. Meat swimming in gravy, potatoes, bread, pie on the side and

milk. She has at least 2000 calories on that tray. Just the sight of it alternately disgusts me and makes me ravenous in the same moment. I open my newspaper and pray she goes away.

"You aren't very friendly," she says, "you know that?"

"Yes." *Hint, fucking hint.*

"Why?"

"I don't need friends."

"Everyone needs friends."

"I don't." I continue to read my newspaper.

"You're not going to scare me off, you know."

"Are you going to continue to babble while I try to read?"

"Yes," she chirps, digging into that disgusting pile of wet meat on her tray. I flinch, and yet I watch. "I've dealt with worse than you. You should see my brother. He's been in and out of rehab so many times it's like his second home. Maybe it's even his first home. And when he's using or coming down or detoxing, he's the biggest asshole you've ever met."

"Fascinating," I mumble.

"He's great, thanks for asking," she replies dryly. As annoying as it is, my mouth twitches, and I would smile if I knew it wouldn't encourage her. "He's in LA at the moment, exploring his 'craft.'" She rolls her eyes and does air quotes. "You're probably thinking LA isn't the greatest place for someone just out of rehab. Which is precisely what I told my parents, but they're so excited he's into something that they're trying to overlook it. Is that all you're going to eat?"

Jesus fucking Christ. This girl never stops talking.

"The leading female runners only have 15% body fat," I reply pointedly, looking at her tray. Erin isn't fat, but she could be thinner. Her extra pounds will drag the team down, and I already resent her for it. I resent that I will work my ass off and starve, and we still won't place because of the girls who had to eat their platters of meat swimming in gravy every day.

"You need food to build muscle," she argues.

"And thus the chicken breast."

"You really ought to talk to the nutritionist. She'll tell you herself that's not healthy."

"I'm a nutrition major. I think I've got it under control."

"I still think that's not healthy."

"Do you always talk this much?"

She grins, wide-eyed. "I do. That's why we're perfect together. You never speak and I never shut up. You're so lucky you found me."

AFTER THE ORDEAL OF LISTENING TO ERIN BLABBER IS DONE, I GET ON MY BIKE AND head toward the far side of campus, where the old Victorian houses give way to fields and woods, the kind of places where there will be no landmarks to tell me which direction might be home. I will need to learn this town like the back of my hand.

I try to sleep with my cell phone tucked into my clothes, but it's fairly useless. And who the fuck would I call? I don't have any friends. Besides, when you're deep in the woods, the odds of getting a strong enough signal to pull up the GPS are zero-to-none. Not to mention the fact that I'm a restless sleeper and half the time I discover I've pulled the phone out and thrown it across the room at some point.

I usually only make it a few miles before something triggers me to wake up, but a few miles is pretty far when home is new to you and you have no idea how to get back. I got lucky this morning, but I know from experience that I'm not always lucky. That means the more familiar I am with everything outside my apartment, the better.

I need to be able to stand in the woods and gauge, based on the light from the city or the stars or the sound of running water, exactly how to get the fuck out. It's bad enough to wake up and discover that you are outside in the middle of the night, barefoot, defenseless, far from home, but multiply that by 10 for the times when you wake up and have no idea where the hell you are.

I hate this.

There's so much that could go wrong, and there was plenty that went wrong even when I did know where I was. And it's all probably for nothing: I came here solely to be coached by McEwan, thinking he might turn it around for me, and instead I'm being coached by some cocky asshole who probably didn't even run *high school* track.

I made a mistake taking a bat to Mark Bell, and I made a mistake coming here. Maybe staying will be the next big regret. In fact, I'm almost sure it will

be.

Olivia

The next morning I'm ready to put Will Langstrom in his fucking place. His words from yesterday are still pissing me off almost 24 hours later. *Asshole*. I've had a full night's sleep, so let's see him try to complain about me now.

Everyone is chattering, the combination of nerves and dread making their noise a little more high-pitched and a lot more annoying—Erin in particular, whose breathless discourse is directed entirely toward me. Will eventually saunters up, and when he smiles that crooked smile they all titter like he's the lead singer of their favorite boy band. I guess if he weren't such a dick I'd be swooning too. Everything about him is perfect—the ice blue of his eyes, the slight curl of his hair, the ever-present hint of scruff, his mouth and the way his lip quirks upward when he's trying not to smile. I see the edge of a tattoo peeking out from his shirt sleeve and wish I could see the whole thing.

"You're running six at race pace," he announces. "I marked the route earlier. I'm going to drive along today to assess. Everybody stop at the turn-around point and we'll reconvene there."

You're going to have to assess my ass from a distance. I plan to run nowhere near the rest of these losers.

When the time comes, I take off so fast and so hard that I don't see the other girls. I don't even hear them. I feel buoyant, as if I can fly, and there isn't a soul in sight. This is my favorite way to run—the absolute freedom of

not thinking or remembering or feeling anything at all

I notice nothing but the hash marks he's left on the road, only vaguely aware of the miles ticking by. I get to the turn-around point and I keep running. Yeah, I know he said to stop, but I'm in my zone, my best place. *Fuck him*. He's not even a runner.

I don't even look over when I hear an engine purring beside me until I realize it's Will shouting at me to stop. It's possible, based on how pissed off he is, that he's been shouting for a while. And now that he's yanked me from my happy place, I'm pissed too.

He pulls the car over to the side of the road and marches toward me. "When I tell you to stop you need to listen," he growls.

"I was *running*. That's what you do when you're not 'trying to lose the baby weight,'" I snap.

"Get your ass back to the turn-around point and stop showing off," he snarls, marching away.

I get back to the turn-around just as Betsy, the one who led yesterday, comes in. She is winded, the way she should be at the end, not the half. She leans down, hands on knees.

"You okay, Bets?" Will asks her.

"Yeah," she says, standing. Then she turns to me. "It's not a race, you know."

"He said *race pace*." I laugh. "So yeah, it kind of was."

"Look," she snarls. "You're not D1 anymore. You weren't D1 material, so stop pretending you are."

Here's the unfortunate thing about a hard workout, about the adrenaline, when someone pisses you off: it's like you've got a Greek chorus behind you, egging you on. "Only one of us is breathing heavy," I say, stepping up so we are face-to-face, "so who's pretending?"

"That's enough," says Will. He places a hand on my shoulder and pushes me backward just enough so that he can move between us. "You two are on the same team. Try acting like it."

He blames me.

He didn't say it, but he obviously blames me, when *she's* the one who started it. I'm only two days into the season and I've already had it. I've had it with Betsy and her half-assed running, with the rest of them who are actually *slower* than Betsy, and with Will Langstrom, who is the single biggest

asshole I've ever had to run for.

When he sends us back to campus, still scowling at me, I leave them both in the dust. I take all my anger and adrenaline and apply it to a single goal: leaving Betsy so far behind me that when this run is over she will hate herself a little. At this very moment, as she makes a futile attempt to keep up with me, she feels useless, weak. I know because I've felt it too. I know she will come in angry at me and angrier at herself, and that the anger will fester, linger, for days, because this is what happens to me when I lose.

I get back to the track long before any of them. *Not D1 material, my ass.*

Will has parked and is stalking toward me. "You did that just to piss her off," he says.

"What do you care? You wanted fast. You got fast."

"No, what I want is a *team*. You can run to see yourself succeed, Olivia, but don't ever run to see someone else fail."

"I go by *Finn*," I hiss. He's just calling me Olivia to fuck with me at this point. "And she started it."

"And was it true? Are you here because you're not D1 material?"

"No," I snap.

"Then act like it," he says in disgust.

Asshole. Asshole. Asshole. I just ran sub-fives for that prick and I get *nothing* but a fucking lecture? I watch Betsy coming in, gasping for air and glaring at me.

Sadly, she's no longer the person on the track I hate most.

I go to the cafeteria with Erin nipping at my heels like the world's most annoying dog. No matter what I do or how appallingly rude I am, this girl can't take a hint.

"That was crazy this morning," says Erin. "I mean you're fast, you know? Like super fast."

I shrug. Am I supposed to feign modesty here? I *am* fast. I wouldn't be doing this if I weren't. However, I already dislike this expectation. She's seen me run fast *once* and she's already got her hopes up. I could tell her right now that getting hopeful about me is a losing proposition, but I just open up my paper and ignore her instead.

She's not the only one who noticed, though. At that afternoon's practice, Erin stands beside me while we wait for Will, as does her friend Nicole.

"That was impressive this morning," says Nicole.

“We totally have a chance at placing this year with you,” agrees Erin.

I feel like I’m suffocating. I don’t want them counting on me. God knows I can’t even count on myself. “It was just one run,” I reply.

Will is walking toward us in a fitted grey V-neck and shorts. It irritates me that I find him so freaking attractive. Knowing what a jerk he is should throw cold water on my hormones but it seems to do the opposite.

Nicole and Erin start to giggle, that kind of secretive girlish giggle, a noise I’m proud to say I’ve never made. “We *love* the grey shirt,” explains Erin with a lascivious grin.

When I roll my eyes, Nicole looks at me as if I’ve just denied evolution. “You don’t think he’s hot?” she asks.

“Maybe I’m just having a hard time seeing under that thick layer of dickhead he wears,” I reply.

"He's not as bad as you think," Erin argues. "Off the track he's super nice. On the track too, actually."

"Not to me, he's not."

"He gives people what they need." She cocks her head, eyeing me somewhat warily. "No offense, Finn, but he seems to think you need discipline."

If it didn't piss me off so much, I'd probably agree.

HE HAS US DO SPEEDWORK, AND I IMMEDIATELY REGRET MY SHOWBOATING THIS morning. I no longer have that buzz of energy that kept me well ahead of Betsy. This afternoon we are neck-and-neck during every 800. We’re both destroyed during the recovery, and then we do it again. But *I’m* the one Will calls out, of course.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Running 800s, like you said."

"Really? Because it looks to me like you're racing Betsy."

"Or maybe *she's* racing me. Why am I the one getting bitched at here?"

"Because I expect more of you."

"You shouldn't."

He looks at me. It’s an assessing look, not cocky or angry but earnest as if he’s trying to decide something. “Yeah,” he finally says sourly, “you’re

probably right."

The remainder of the week passes with a few more lectures from Will and not a single compliment. I give him what he wants. I'm fast but I'm not too fast, and I don't race Betsy even though I'd like to pound her into the dirt and stomp on her remains, yet he stands there praising everyone but me. I scowl at him as I pass, but he doesn't even seem to notice. Probably because he assumes I'm not going to be his problem for much longer.

I guess I assume it, too.

If he's not happy with me right now, then he's definitely not going to be happy when the real problems begin—when school starts in two weeks and our first meet looms. The stress will lead to nightmares, nightmares will lead to running, and running leads to meets where I perform about as well as a retiree trying out a treadmill for the first time.

I spend my time between our two practices mapping the town and combing the woods, which is where I almost always head during the dreams. I have no idea why I go there, and I don't really want to know.

Erin continues to follow me to lunch, despite the fact that I've told her I want to eat alone. At this point, her attempts at friendship are flat-out stalking.

"Seriously?" I groan when she sits at my table. "I think I need a restraining order."

"Restraining orders can only be issued if there's intent to harm," she quips cheerfully.

"I'm not at all surprised that you are so informed about restraining orders," I gripe.

She just laughs.

As if I was joking.

Will

I can see five different peaks I've climbed on the drive to my mother's farm. I'm not sure if that's necessarily ironic, but it's definitely shitty. Fate's way of laughing in my face. Rubbing salt in the wound.

I climbed those peaks when I was younger and every single time it was against my father's wishes. Every single time it led to a fight. It took my desire to climb and transformed it, took something pure and made it angry and defiant. I look back on those climbs, how reckless they were, and realize they proved my dad right in a way. I did need to grow the fuck up. I just couldn't do it until it was too late for him to see it happen.

The farm is my full-time job, left in my unwilling hands when my father died. It was already failing when I inherited it. Coaching is part-time, covering my younger brother's tuition but not a lot else. Between two jobs and the debt my father left behind, there aren't enough hours in the day and there probably never will be, so my climbing days are over. I sometimes wonder if my dad is looking down and getting a good laugh out of the situation.

"Was Jackson even here this morning?" I grouse when I walk into my mother's house. We sold off some of the farm, but what's left is still too much for us and the part-time guys we've hired. "The stables look like shit. Probably because they were full, literally, of shit."

She sighs. "Yes, he was here. You know how that goes, Will."

Yeah, I know. No one is going to kill himself for a job that is seasonal or part-time. This is just a stop-gap until he finds something better.

"How's work?" she asks.

I shrug. "Pretty good. This year's team looks okay." Even if it didn't, I wouldn't tell her. She's got enough guilt about the fact that I'm here as it is.

"How are the new ones?"

"Hard to say. There's one with some promise." I didn't mean to add that. I don't know why but something about Finnegan makes me want to discuss her with someone, and at the same time makes me want to pretend she doesn't exist.

"Well, you've got four years to make something of her."

"Only two. She's a transfer."

She nods. "That's right. Peter told me about her."

This surprises me. Peter's been a friend of the family all my life, but I didn't know he discussed work with my mom. It's a little weird. It makes me wonder if they discuss me too.

"She's fast, but she's unstable," I sigh. "That girl's got more problems than an entire psychiatric team could fix."

"Will, she just got here," she says gently.

"Didn't Peter tell you what she did at UT?"

"Yes," she says, raising a brow. "And I remember a time when you couldn't set foot outside this house without winding up in the back of a police cruiser. So maybe you shouldn't be so quick to judge."

Fine. But I never tried to *kill* someone.

She sets food on the table. "Eat," she commands. "It'll make you less grumpy."

I'm sure she's right, but even a full stomach won't make me feel better about Olivia.

Olivia

The next two weeks are basically a repeat of the first: Me, working my ass off, and Will, being a total dick about it. The twice-a-day workouts are so exhausting that I don't dream at all. I give him everything at practice, and while I don't deserve an award for it, I do deserve one for not telling him to go fuck himself. Actually, I deserve something better than an award for that. *Maybe a new car or a trip to Disney.*

Erin not only eats with me every day, but she gets my number off the team roster and starts *texting* me too. It's unbelievably annoying. I respond to her initial texts with one of my own.

Me: Stop texting me.

Erin: Aren't you cute? ;-) ;-)

I hate emojis.

I'm not sure why I haven't just blocked her yet. And then she invites some of the other girls to eat with us and I know what hell truly is. Nicole, a mouthy redhead who's the fastest girl on the team after me and Betsy, Meghan, whose dark curls are so big her head blocks half my view of the cafeteria, and Hannah, blonde and quieter than the others but not quiet enough.

Betsy and her small posse sit at a separate table. It feels as if we're two rival gangs, and I wouldn't be surprised if Erin and these girls have

befriended me solely because I'm faster than Betsy, and add some clout to their side. Clearly it's not my winning personality attracting them.

I listen in surly silence as they chatter. Ten percent of the conversation is about running, and the rest is about boys.

"You'll see the guy's track team at tomorrow's practice," Nicole tells me the week before school starts.

I couldn't care less about meeting the guys. Runners are too gangly for me. *I prefer a build like Will's.*

I want to take bleach to my brain the moment I hear that admission in my head.

"Mmmm, and Erin will get to see Brofton," someone teases.

"Dan Brofton is hands-down the hottest guy on the team," Erin informs me. "Aside from Will, that is."

There's a lot of sly giggling. "Will doesn't count. He's not on the team," Nicole objects.

"But if he were ..." Hannah sings, and there is more giggling. Coaches can't date students, and even if they could I can't imagine the appeal of an asshole like Will. Okay, that's a lie. I can totally imagine the appeal. But I refuse to let myself.

"Did you see the way his shirt clung to him at yesterday's practice?" asks Meghan.

"Wish his shorts had clung too," cackles Nicole.

I roll my eyes. "This is like listening to a bunch of horny teenage boys."

"Welcome to the team." Erin grins.

THE GUYS' TEAM IS WAITING WHEN WE WRAP UP THE NEXT MORNING. I KNOW WHO Brofton is immediately because he's the kind of good-looking that is universally appealing to everyone. Dark hair, knowing eyes, a little smirk on his face like he's imagining you naked. You might have a particular type, but Dan Brofton is cute enough to be everyone's type. *And yet...*

I begrudgingly admit that he's *still* not as hot as Will.

He saunters over to me. The cocky ones always saunter. "You must be the D1 girl."

"Wow," I deadpan. "Your psychic powers are top-notch."

“Fine.” He grins, irritatingly unfazed by my bitchiness. “So we’ve actually heard all about you.”

"And what exactly did you hear?"

"That you put Mark Bell in the hospital."

"I hope that means you're all scared of me now."

"You don't look so scary." He smiles. "And I've met Mark a few times. He ran in my division in high school, and I know for a fact that he's a world-class prick, so I'm gonna guess he had it coming."

He definitely had it coming.

Will

I am on the south face of Denali. It's not necessarily the hardest climb, just steep as shit. The guys we're leading are already tired, which doesn't bode well since we've got at least three more hours before we hit the next camp.

"You got this?" I ask one of them. His name is Bob. He's from Beaufort, South Carolina, which sits below sea level, and this is his first major climb. Not sure Denali should be anyone's first major climb, but I don't choose our clients.

His mouth is pulling inward, stretched tight. He nods.

I asked. It's all I can do.

I look at the summit and the sun warms my face. It's cold as hell, cold enough that it's stripped everything inside of me. Any lingering uncertainty. Even the anger.

My father was wrong. He said mountain climbing was a hobby, not a profession, and that one day I'd be home with my tail between my legs. He was wrong, and I know it as I stand here. I know there's nothing else in the world I'm supposed to be doing. I know that even if this climb is my last—and no serious climber ever goes up without at least acknowledging the possibility—it was worth it. I'd rather have had two good years with the sun on my face and the summit hovering above than a lifetime of working on the farm. Climbs like this are the only time, for as far back as I can recall, that I

don't feel as if something is missing.

I WAKE. I'M NOT AT HIGH CAMP OR BASE CAMP. I KNOW THAT THE ONLY CLIMBS IN MY future are the ones I wedge into days and weekends that are already too full. I'll probably never summit Everest or Annapurna or any of the other ones on my bucket list. I'm going to live and die toiling on that farm, just like my dad did.

The only difference is that he had a choice.

There were things about climbing that sucked, that would have bothered me over time. It's hard to have a relationship when you're gone months at a time. I'd eventually have wanted kids, and it would have been hard to leave. But I was 24. I didn't want commitment—I wanted convenience. And I had it. Sometimes I think if it had just been a little less perfect this wouldn't be as hard for me as it is right now.

There isn't a single afternoon, when practice is done, that a tiny voice doesn't suggest I go climbing. I hear it today, but I don't go. I never go. The sprayer's coming to do one last application of weed killer tomorrow and I've got to make sure the fields are ready first. Otherwise, I'll spend the next goddamn month fixing ruts he's put out there.

But the voice is still there, even as I head to the farm on the way home. *You've got four hours of light left, it says. You couldn't do much, but your gear is already in the car. You deserve just one.*

Sometimes I feel like an addict, except the only person my climbing ever hurt was my father. I'm sure as shit making amends for it now.

Olivia

School begins.

Between that and practice, I don't fall asleep at night. I collapse. Which is ideal. Exhaustion tends to keep the dreams at bay.

I have fresh legs every day, not that Will is any less displeased. I'm running well, but he only seems to find fault. I am, *by far*, the fastest girl on the team, but every day he stands there looking for things to criticize, bitching about my turn-over rate and stride length, or making me stay after everyone else to run next to a metronome for Christ's sake. I'm doing every fucking thing he asks and he's still treating me like a burden, a charity case he's been forced to take on.

"Good job," he says to Erin and Betsy at the end of practice. I approach and his smile fades. "Your kick was off on the last lap."

"Well, I came in ahead of everyone else," I snap, "so maybe the rest of the team's kick was off too."

There's a small muscle at the corner of his jaw that pops when he's mad. That muscle and I are practically family I know it so well.

"If you're not interested in improving," he says, "then stop taking up a spot that could be used by someone who is." Even now, in the midst of his anger, I can't stop noticing things about him. His eyes are the brightest blue, like a postcard of the Caribbean. Especially when he's mad.

"Yeah, you'd love that, wouldn't you? I'm apparently the only person on this team who needs constant correction."

"Has it ever occurred to you that I ask more of you because I think you're capable of more?" he demands. "The rest of those girls are giving me everything they have, but you are not. Do you want me to just let you plod along and get through college having never taken first when you know you have the potential to?"

For the first time ever, I don't feel anger in response to his words but an inexplicable urge to cry. I prefer anger. I don't know what to do with this other feeling. "I'm going to shower now," I say, my voice slightly hoarse. He nods, looking unhappy and puzzled at the same time. Possibly even concerned.

I don't want his concern.

God knows it won't last.

ON THURSDAY, HANNAH BRINGS THIS MASSIVE BOX OF STUFF THAT HER MOTHER HAS sent, full of homemade cookies and peanut brittle and even rolls of quarters for the laundry.

"Ugh, snickerdoodles," says Hannah, throwing the bag into the center of the table. "I'm already sick of snickerdoodles and school's only just begun."

"At least your mom sends you homemade stuff. My mom just sent me a bag of Oreos," laughs Nicole. "Like I couldn't go to the store and buy my own Oreos."

Hannah passes me the bag and I hand it on to Erin as if it's toxic, my stomach tight and my throat dry.

"Oh my God, Finn, live a little," gripes Erin. She takes a cookie from the bag and pushes it toward my mouth, but I avert my head.

"I don't like snickerdoodles," I tell her. It's a lie. What I don't want is the queasy feeling this whole thing causes in my stomach. This tangible reminder that this is what other people have – a family who cares that they are gone.

"Saw Will's girlfriend heading to his office just before we left," smirks Nicole. "Looks like someone's getting a little a.m. wake-up call."

"Not necessarily," counters Erin. "She works for the university. Maybe they're just meeting for breakfast. Is she hot?"

Nicole rolls her eyes. “She’s dating *Will*. What do you think?”

What *I* think is that any girl who would date Will must have a big bag of stupid lodged in the area meant for white matter. I don’t care how hot he is. Nothing is worth dealing with his bullshit.

I I

Will

For some reason, after a relatively mild Colorado summer, it turns blazing hot on Wednesday. The girls were dragging this morning and, by afternoon, I'm not sure this practice can be technically classified as speedwork.

As soon as I get out of here, I've got to mow the perimeter of the fields and spray the area between our farm and our neighbor's, which the sprayer didn't hit last week. I've got to start getting the grain bins ready, manually moving the last of it down since they're too light for gravity to do the job for me anymore. I've got 15 things to do, and not a single one I *want* to do, so I'm already on edge.

I find the appearance of the men's track team more annoying than normal. Under the best of circumstances, I find them grating. We're only one week into sharing the track and I've already had it with the way they gawk at Olivia like she's a Playboy centerfold. The damn football team now has a *song* they sing when she passes. It's insane.

If I were being reasonable, I'd say I couldn't blame them. Olivia isn't just beautiful. Something compels you to look at her even when you don't want to, like Medusa. The difference is that I realize Olivia *could* probably turn you to stone with her withering glare, while the rest of these idiots are completely blind to it.

"Looking good, Finn," Brofton says. Olivia rolls her eyes and keeps

walking, but another kid, Piersal, stops staring at her chest just long enough to look at where the back of her singlet is gaping open.

"Jesus," he says. "What happened there?" He trails a finger over her skin and she jumps as if he's burned her.

"Nothing," she snaps.

Anyone who's even spent a modest amount of time around Olivia would know that tone means *leave me the fuck alone*, but Piersal is either clueless or has a death wish. "It doesn't look like nothing," he says. "How'd it happen?"

There's an expression on Olivia's face, a combination of panic and rage as everyone turns to watch. "I don't know," she says through gritted teeth. She barks at the freshman to move and they scuttle.

"What do you mean you don't know?" He laughs. "You look like you got knifed! You *have* to know."

Before I can even process what the hell is happening, she's spun around and flung herself toward him, grabbing his shirt at the neck like she's going to kick his ass across the track though he's at least six inches taller than she is.

"I told you I don't know," she snarls, pulling tighter at his shirt, starting to choke him. "Now ask me one more question so I can feed you your own balls."

I finally snap out of my shock and grab her, wrenching her away from him, and yelling at everyone to go on about their business. Once they've left, I round on her. "What the hell was that?"

"He was fucking with me."

"He just asked you a question."

"He *laughed*," she hisses. Her voice sounds strangled, anger and grief warring in her throat. "Did you not hear that part? A kid gets stabbed and it's just a big fucking joke to you people, isn't it?"

I'm slow to cover my surprise. Is she seriously saying someone *stabbed* her? "I'm sure he had no idea it was something that serious," I finally say.

She rolls her eyes. "Of course he didn't. Bad shit never happens to any of you. You all just stand around with your fucking care packages, salivating for a gory detail or two, and I get to be the bad guy for wanting some privacy."

"You know, if you'd just answered the question that would have been the end of it."

"I *did* answer the question," she growls. "How much do you remember

from when you were little? And even if I did, it's no one's business but mine."

SOMEONE FUCKING STABBED HER.

I can't get past that fact. I want to forget it entirely because it causes this unfortunate pit of sympathy in my stomach and she's the kind of girl for whom feeling sympathy is dangerous. Feel bad and you start forgiving, making exceptions. The truth is that the odds of her getting through the next week without kicking Betsy's ass are slim. The odds of her making it through the season? Impossible. So getting attached to her in any way is futile at best. I want to not think about it and I want to not think about her. It's got to be the first time I'm actually grateful that I can go to the farm and throw myself into work.

I've been out in the fields for at least two hours when my mom takes the golf cart out to find me. "Did something happen at work?" she asks. Sometimes my mother sees through me so easily that it's almost scary.

"Nothing I couldn't have predicted."

"What's the problem?"

I shake my head. "There's no problem." It's a lie, of course, but the truth is that I don't know what the problem is. I don't know why Olivia Finnegan seems to have taken over a small portion of my brain and, the moment my attention isn't diverted, it seems to land right back on her.

I keep working, keep trying to focus my mind elsewhere. It doesn't seem to work. It's not until I feel my phone vibrating that I realize the sun is setting.

Crap.

"Hey, Jess," I say, already preparing my apology. I really am the world's shittiest boyfriend. She puts up with a lot.

"I haven't heard from you all day," she says. "What time are you coming over? We're supposed to be at Cat's house by seven."

Shit. It's after six now, I'm drenched in sweat, and my mom's place is at least 20 minutes from Jessica's. "I'm gonna be a little late. I'm sorry. I was helping my mom and—"

"It's okay," she says immediately. "I know your mom comes first right

now." In the year we've dated, Jessica's never once made me feel guilty about the farm, but I can picture her right now, twisting an auburn curl around her finger, her full mouth pouting slightly, and I feel bad. She deserves better than a boyfriend who forgot her all day long.

I'm going to try harder, I swear.

Olivia

That scar on my back is one small clue to a past I barely remember.

I had a brother once, I had parents once, but they all left me in quick succession, and now my memories of them are blurred and untrustworthy. I still think about them, though, no matter how badly I wish I didn't. Some days more than others.

Sunday is one of those days. Somewhere in the world, my brother is celebrating his 24th birthday. He ran away when he was eight, only three years older than me although, at the time, the difference seemed monumental. A year later, my parents ditched me and took off. I remember worrying that my brother might still try to return, like a lost dog, and discover we'd gone.

I wonder if he's alone like I am. Maybe leaving young like that gave him a head start. Maybe someone took him in. By now he's probably out of college. He liked to build things, elaborate towers out of cans and sticks, a delicate suspension that would collapse at the first hint of a breeze, so maybe he's an engineer now, or an architect. Maybe he's married, or thinking about it.

I get a cupcake at dinner, which I won't eat, but I close my eyes and make a wish as if there's a candle, as if it's my wish to make, and my wish is that he wound up happier than me.

I WAKE SOMETIME BEFORE DAWN, STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF AN UNFAMILIAR ROAD.

My brother's birthday always triggers a nightmare, so I'm not all that surprised. I don't think I'm too far from my apartment, which is good. What's less good is that there's a pretty big piece of glass in my foot. Barefoot again, naturally.

"Why? Why can't you ever keep the fucking shoes on?" I groan to myself, wincing as I dig out the glass.

It's hardly the first time it's happened, but the cut is deep and it hurts like a bitch to return to my apartment in bare feet. I should just be grateful, I suppose, that it stopped me. Sometimes the injury becomes part of the dream, and a series of things underfoot just means fighting harder to get away from the thing behind me.

I get home in time to clean it and slap some gauze over the top, hoping that's enough to get me through practice.

"You're running like a six-year-old on Field Day," says Will a few hours later.

"There's that voice of support I missed all weekend," I reply snidely. "And just for the record, I'm still faster than anyone out here."

"I'm not coaching 'anyone out here' at the moment," he says. "I'm coaching you, and I want to know why your gait is off." His eyes are narrowed, his stare hard. He is sure I ran and I'm not about to tell him he's right.

"I broke a jar this morning and cut my foot," I tell him.

"Let me see."

I roll my eyes as I walk to a bench, not sure if this is actual concern on his part or suspicion. I take off my shoe and my sock and wiggle the ball of my foot at him. "Happy?"

He scowls at me and then comes forward, grabbing my ankle to hold my foot aloft. "You need to go to the health center, Olivia. That needs to be stitched."

I shrug. "It'll be fine. It just needs a day."

He looks more carefully at it. "Why is your foot so cut up?"

"It's not," I say, jerking my ankle out of his grasp.

"Do you have to argue about everything? I have eyes and I know what scars look like. Do you walk over broken glass daily?"

I look at him flatly. "Do you really expect me to answer that?"

"No, but I really expect you to go to the health center."

"Despite your years of medical training, I'm gonna have to refuse."

For just a moment, fleeting sadness flickers over his face. It makes me wish I hadn't spoken. He sighs. "Go shower and wait in my office."

I'm either about to get bitched out for not following his directions, or I'm about to get kicked off the team. Either possibility seems fair. I refused to do what he asked. I ran when he told me not to. I was told no more temper and I nearly crushed a teammate's windpipe. I figured I'd lose my scholarship eventually, I just thought I'd get to go out with a bang.

WHEN I WALK IN, HE LOOKS AT ME WITH EQUAL PARTS RESIGNATION AND DISDAIN, AS if steeling himself to undertake a very unpleasant task.

"Take off your shoe," he sighs, going to his closet. He retrieves a small kit and pulls a chair up in front of mine and grabs my ankle.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"What does it look like I'm doing? You are obviously not going to the health center, since following even the smallest direction is impossible for you, so I'm fixing your foot."

I swallow. "You don't have to. It doesn't hurt that much."

He shakes his head as he looks at my foot. "I applaud your high pain tolerance, Olivia, but there's no way that doesn't hurt, and it affects your running, so for once stop arguing with me." He swabs it with alcohol, which does hurt though I refuse to show it, and then he stitches it as deftly and assuredly as any surgeon.

"How'd you learn how to do that?" I ask.

He pauses, and his shoulders seem to sag a little. "I had some medic training at my last job."

His tone does not invite further questions, but I barrel on anyway. "You weren't always a coach?"

"No."

"What did you do?"

His eyes remain on my foot. "I was a guide," he finally says. "Mountain climbing."

Somehow this makes complete sense to me. It explains how cut he is, the

tattoos hinting that he hasn't always been this goody-goody country boy, but that's not all. There's something intense about him, something that demands complete immersion. He isn't a guy meant to stand on the sidelines and watch other people achieve.

"So you, like, led tours or something?"

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

His jaw sets. "My father died, so I came back and took over his farm."

"So did you even *want* to coach track?"

He closes the kit with an echoing snap. "It's a good job. I'm lucky to have gotten it."

"That didn't answer my question."

"Didn't it?"

I guess it did.

Suddenly I feel bad that I've been sort of a pain in the ass, that I've made so many assumptions about who he is and why he's here. I sense that even the act of stitching my foot is reminding him of things he gave up. "You'd probably make a good doctor if you ever decided to leave the lucrative world of coaching," I tell him. "Not, mind you, a doctor who needs to be pleasant, like a pediatrician or something. But one of those doctors you expect to be an asshole."

"Is that right?" he drawls, trying not to smile.

"Yeah, I mean, can you imagine yourself as, say, an oncologist? I'm pretty sure saying things like 'your healing is crappy' and 'get better faster' wouldn't be as well-received by patients as it is by me."

He laughs. "Yes, it's so well-received when I say it to you."

Moments like this almost make me wish I were a better person. The kind who makes other people happy.

Or at least not the kind who makes them miserable.

Will

That girl.

I'm still kind of smiling when she leaves. When I realize this, I wipe it clean from my face. I cannot allow myself to get sucked in by Olivia Finnegan. She's already got half the men at this school watching her every move like she's a wet dream come to life. I refuse to join her cheering section.

I had to hide my shock when she took off her shoe. That cut was deep. I know a lot of tough guys, but I'm not sure I know any that would have run on a cut that deep unless their lives were at stake.

She's tough, but no one's tough enough to overcome self-destructive tendencies as bad as hers. I know she's still running before practice, though she won't admit it. And why was her foot so cut up? I wasn't entirely kidding when I asked if she walked on broken glass every day.

What kills me is that she could be amazing if she'd stop doing whatever it is she's doing. She's capable of blinding, astonishing speed. She shouldn't just be running for a D1 school, she should be its star. At a different school, with a different coach, someone would be preparing her for the Olympic trials, not getting ready for a quiet local meet against four other D3 schools, which means she's capable of giving our track team their first winning season in over a decade. But she didn't perform at UT, and I suspect that counting on

Olivia Finnegan for anything is a losing proposition.

Olivia

It's the week before our first meet.

Aside from Betsy, the entire freaking team is looking at me like I'm the second coming, and this is the week that every last one of them, *my coach in particular*, will discover I am not. I try not to think about this as I go to sleep. I try to think of happy things, few though they are. I imagine the beach, though I've never been. I imagine floating on a raft on a peaceful sea. I imagine, and I pray, that somehow this will keep me in bed tonight.

I find myself deep in the woods the next morning, gasping and drenched in sweat though the air is cool. I run back to my apartment, strip my running clothes off and pass out. An hour later, my alarm goes off. I'm not sure I've even stopped sweating from my earlier run when I meet the rest of the team at the track.

It happens again Tuesday morning, and then Wednesday, at which point Will loses his shit. "What the hell is going on, Olivia?" he demands. "Your running has been half-assed all week."

"I'm just tired from class."

That muscle ticks in his jaw. "Is it that, Olivia, or have you been running before we practice, even though I told you not to?"

I can't tell him the truth, now. He's made sure of that. "No, I'm just tired."

"If I catch you running before practice you're off this team. Do you

understand?"

Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.

I'm not allowed to say it, but I think it. Frustration clogs my throat, making my brain hazy. I want to scream at him. I want to tell him that I can't help it, that no one alive wishes it would stop more than me. But I've told people before. I know where it gets me, and I won't do it again.

At the end of Thursday's practice, Will gathers us in a circle and reminds us to take it easy on Friday, drink lots of water, no alcohol, extra protein, and carbs. The freshmen ask dumb questions because that's what freshmen do. He sends us off but stops me with a hand on my shoulder. "I shouldn't have to say this, but no running tomorrow. Got it?"

"I heard you the first time," I snarl, shaking out of his grip.

"I get the feeling you don't hear anyone," he mutters.

ON FRIDAY NIGHT, I RUN UNTIL IT'S DARK.

Yeah, I'm not listening to him because I know for a fact that exhaustion is the only thing that will keep me in bed tonight.

I slide beneath the sheets. *Please, please, please let this work. I really need this to work.*

I'm not sure exactly who I'm whispering this to because as far as I can tell, God hasn't looked out for or listened to me once my entire life.

I WAKE TO FIND MYSELF IN THE MIDDLE OF A FIELD BENEATH A BLACK SKY STREAKED with hints of daytime. I'm barefoot and my legs are cut to shit, the blood an itchy trickle down my ankle. No phone, no shoes. Jesus, I should just crazy glue them to myself before I go to bed. My shirt is drenched and my heart is hammering as I gasp for breath. The gasping always happens, and I'm never sure if it's because I ran hard or because I was terrified. It's happened so many times I can't begin to recall them, yet it's always a surprise.

I struggle for air and utter a slew of profanities. *Why? Why the morning of our first meet? I'm doomed now. There's no way I'll perform. None.*

The early morning air chills my damp skin, bringing goosebumps, and I know I've got to get moving. But to where? At least if it were night, I'd be

able to make out the lights, but right now I see nothing. Sure, I can tell which way is east based on where the sky is lightest. Doesn't do a damn bit of good unless you know what direction you went in the first place.

I jog back through the field for lack of a better idea. Eventually, I'll hit a road. Eventually, it will be daytime and someone can tell me where I am. But as the sky lightens, I realize I'm heading for more woods.

I double back and begin to run harder. It's probably between 5-5:30 right now and I'm supposed to be at school by 6:00 to catch the bus to our meet. With every step, I know I'm about to lose another scholarship.

By the time I find a road I'm desperate. I hear the rumble of an old muffler approaching. Hitchhiking is what's going to get me killed eventually. Today, though, it feels as if I've got no choice.

The guy pulls up alongside me, the roar of his truck drowning the silence. "Need a lift?" he asks, brow furrowed as he takes in my appearance. I'm dressed to run, aside from the missing shoes. I don't bother to assess his appearance. Even if he's got a machete on his front seat, I'm getting in the truck.

"Yes, please," I breathe. "I'm trying to get to campus."

"You ran here all the way from campus?" he asks.

I nod.

"Now why'd you do something like that?"

I'd really love to stop this game of 20 questions and push his foot to the accelerator, but I have to play nice. "I was out running, and I got lost, and I think I just got more and more lost," I reply. It's not entirely untrue.

"Well, damn, girl, you belong on a track team. We got to be seven miles from campus at least."

Oh shit.

We start driving. He's blathering on about something, but all I can think is that I'm completely fucked. I probably ran nine miles this morning all together. There's not a chance I'll perform. There's not a chance I won't be the slowest girl on the field. How the hell am I going to explain it?

"You got a boyfriend?" he asks.

I glance at him warily. He looks older than me, but not old, and I dislike the eager glint in his eye as he waits for my answer. "Yeah."

He laughs. "Can't be much of one if you're jumping out of his bed to go running this early in the morning." He tells me he has a son who's eight, but

he only sees him about once a month. He tells me he has a boat. "You like being out on the water?" he asks.

I nod, though I've never been.

"I'll take you out on my boat sometime, then. Write down your cell," he says, pushing a receipt toward me. I make up a number and hand it back, directing him to a sorority house on the other side of campus. No fucking way is this guy finding out where I live.

I get home with just enough time to change before I have to run back across campus to the track, and I'm still late. Betsy's smirk is so wide I'm surprised it doesn't crack her face.

Will never even glances at me as I climb on the bus, which feels intentional somehow. The girls talk, anxiety making them extra annoying. Some of them have parents coming to the event, which I suppose is an extra layer of excitement if you actually have parents you'd want attending.

I chug my water bottle, but there's no way I can drink enough to make up for the fact that I ran as much as I did this morning. Today it's that loose-limbed weakness that comes after a long, hard run. It's the kind of weakness that no effort on my part can overcome. I can't think of a time in my life when I ran that far and stayed asleep. I'm going to fuck this meet up as badly as I've ever fucked up anything.

"Are your parents coming, Finn?" asks Nicole.

I shake my head. "They're traveling."

"Where'd they go?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." And this is entirely true. As far as I know, they've been traveling for the 14 years since they dumped me with my grandmother and took off.

Will listens to our exchange, still stony-faced.

"What crawled up his ass?" whispers Erin as we climb off the bus.

I shrug. I don't know, but it will be a hell of a lot worse after we don't place today. I get in line for the port-a-potties, and the moment I've gone, I feel like I have to go again. My limbs are weak. I often feel a little weak and shaky at the start from nerves. Today, I'm pretty sure it's not nerves.

Will tells us to try to stay ahead of Denton, our biggest rival, to block them out in the last mile. But he doesn't direct a single word of this to me as if I'm not going to be in the race at all. It's a fair assumption.

We line up and the weakness overwhelms me. I have to pull it together. I

have to at least stay with the team. I need to pee again, but it's too late. The gun goes off and from my very first steps I know how this will go. Some days you feel weak and it turns out that it was transient, nerves or just some shallow weakness with a deep reserve beneath it.

This is not one of those days.

For the first mile, I run with Erin, noting her curious glances. I've never stayed back with her before, and she probably thinks this is strategy on my part.

It's not.

I'm running with her because it's all I'm capable of.

At the second mile, it gets tough. I'm breathing heavy, and sweat rests thick on my back, bristling against my skin like something alive. My stomach is churning and I think that water I drank coming here might be about to make a return trip.

On the third mile, I'm still with Erin, but barely. She's all that is keeping me going. My vision has begun to dim on the sides as if I've got a flashlight pointed on her in a dark room.

The circle of the flashlight narrows...

Narrows...

Narrows...

WHEN I COME TO, I'M IN THE BACK OF AN AMBULANCE. WE'RE NOT MOVING, SO I assume we're still on the field.

Will is there, hovering behind paramedics. He looks vaguely concerned but mostly he looks pissed off as if I fainted on purpose. Even now, looking angry, something about his face draws me in, makes me long to run my index finger over the rise of his lip, his cheekbone...

Stop, I command myself. It's inappropriate in so many ways. Mainly because Will is an asshole.

They've already started the IV. "I don't need this," I mutter.

"I must have missed the part where you got a medical degree," snaps Will, his tone drawing surprised stares from the paramedics and from me.

Will is an asshole, but I expected a little sympathy in the back of a freaking ambulance. I scowl openly at him. "I'm not dehydrated, and even if I

am, I'm fine now. I can drink it myself. I don't want to hold everyone up."

"Oh, so *now* you're worried about the rest of the team?" he scoffs. "I think your worry is coming a little late, don't you?"

"Dude ..." says the aghast paramedic to my right. "Seriously? She just passed out."

"I'm sorry if we didn't place," I tell Will between clenched teeth, hating him in an altogether new way at this very moment. "I don't know what happened. I think I'm just coming down with something."

"That's interesting," he says, looking me dead in the eye. "Because you looked pretty healthy running across campus this morning."

THE RIDE BACK TO SCHOOL IS THE LONGEST OF MY LIFE. NO ONE SEEMS TO BLAME ME for the loss—Will hasn't told them precisely how much of it is my fault—but no one's happy either. And Will ...

He doesn't say a word to anyone.

"My office," he hisses as we exit the bus. "Now."

Olivia

I wait in the hallway as he walks past. His face is so cold, so still, it could be chiseled in stone. I follow him into his office and he slams the door behind me. "Explain," he demands.

I'm not telling him what happened. I doubt he'd believe me anyway. "About this morning? You've heard of the walk of shame, right?" I smirk.

He narrows his eyes. "Dressed in running clothes?" he demands. "No shoes? Drenched in sweat?"

"You're probably not aware of this, but when sex lasts more than 30 seconds, the girl can get sweaty too."

"Cut the shit, Olivia. I want the truth, and you'd better not lie when I ask it. Did you go running this morning before the meet?"

I have nothing to lose at this point. He's probably going to kick me off the team no matter what. "Yes."

"How far did you go?"

"About nine miles."

"You must be out of your mind," he growls. "On the morning of a race you ran nine miles? Why?"

I say nothing. I mean, he's right, isn't he? I'm definitely out of my mind. I don't think that idea is even in dispute at this point.

"That wasn't a rhetorical question," he snaps. "I expect an answer. I

specifically told you to stop running before practice but you did it anyway. Unless you can offer a compelling reason for it, you're off the team. You're nothing but a liability."

"You don't know that," I retort. "It was only the first meet."

"I know how fast you are, Olivia. We should have placed today. So yeah, I do know you're a liability. You're incapable of taking direction and we all paid the price for it today."

"I can't control it!"

"Is someone forcing you at gunpoint? I must have missed that this morning."

"I do it in my sleep, okay?" I snarl. "Like sleepwalking, except I run."

I'm not sure what's more horrifying, that he wants to kick me out of the program already or that I just told him the truth. I don't know why I told him. I've only admitted it once in my adult life, and it really didn't work out for me.

He rolls his eyes. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard, and I've heard a lot of stupid things."

"Fine." I should have expected his reaction, but it still hurts. "Don't believe me. Kick me off the team." I jump to my feet. "You know what? Don't bother. I fucking quit."

I slam his door and run across campus, back to the shitty apartment I'm only in so I can attend a school I never wanted to be at in the first place. I really wish I could cry. I'd like to right now.

I just ruined everything.

Will

The door slams shut and I sit in shock.

Her story sounded so far-fetched. It never occurred to me for a minute it could be real. Not until she jumped to her feet, her eyes wide and hurt.

It can't possibly be true, though. People don't sleep *run*.

This is just one of Olivia's many talents—the ability to tell a ridiculous lie and make you want to believe it. The minute those big green eyes of hers go even the slightest bit vulnerable I want to hand her my keys and sign over my paycheck. God help the man she ends up with.

It's for the best that she's gone. She's been nothing but trouble since day one, and she's no longer my problem. But I have a curiously empty feeling as I drive out to the farm.

"How'd the meet go?" my mom asks.

"Bad question," I grumble. "I'm gonna go check the horses."

"The horses are fine," she clucks. "Sit down and I'll make you some lunch."

"I don't have time for lunch, Mom. I have a shitload of work to get done and Jessica expects me by seven."

"One quick sandwich and I'll leave you alone," she promises.

Over lunch, I tell her about the meet, about Olivia and my frustration that we lost because of her.

"It sounds," she says gently, "like you'd have lost with or without her?"

"But we could have placed if she just didn't go running this morning! That's the whole point! And then she tells me the most preposterous lie to get out of it."

"Are you sure it's a lie?"

"Of course it's a lie, Mom. You don't know this girl. She's made of lies. People do not *run* in their sleep."

"And you're sure of that."

"Yes," I reply, even as I admit to myself that I'm not actually sure at all. But no, this is just Olivia's influence again, and God knows I'm lucky to be separating myself from it. "She's been trouble since the start, so she can go be trouble for someone else."

"But, Will, why would she lie?"

"Who knows why she does anything?"

Exasperated, I push away from the table. Olivia is like this small, insistent wound in my side. Always there, making itself known every time I bend one direction or the other. Even now, when she's no longer my problem, I'm still seeing that lost look on her face and feeling as if I just kicked something small and defenseless. That look stays with me. I see it as I turn on the tractor. I see it when I should be inspecting fields. I see it when I'm fixing the water. I see it as I drive away, and find myself heading not toward Jessica's at all but back to my office.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," I grumble as I go online. Sleep running does not exist. I'm angry at myself for even checking. I'm angry at her for having the pull over me that she does.

And when I find that it exists, I feel something much worse. It's the moment I realize how badly I wanted to find nothing. That I want her out of my line of sight. I want to continue believing she is willfully destroying her running career rather than having it destroyed by something she can't control.

I don't want to feel sorry for her.

I don't want to feel *anything* for her.

Maybe the problem is that I already do. I already care about her outcome, and it feels dangerous for no reason I can pinpoint.

There is website after website devoted to sleep running and forums for people who do it. It explains so much. Her exhaustion, the fact that her college career has been a long series of disappointments. I pull up her file

from UT. They must have known, but how could they have just let it go on the way they did? I find nothing. The notes discuss only her performance and that she seems to implode under stress. The underlying implication is that drugs or alcohol are the culprit, but it's unclear to me how they really could have believed that. She often shows up exhausted, but I've never once seen her show up hung-over.

I go through her academic file and it is similarly unrevealing. She gets good grades and she keeps to herself. But then I find three notes written shortly after she'd arrived at UT.

The first: 3:42 am. *Student was running through lobby, attempting to leave dormitory. Student was informed that she could not leave premises, but was hysterical and broke free of officer in charge. Student was later identified by security officer and informed that disciplinary action would be taken in event of further incidents. Student claimed to have no knowledge of incident.*

The second came only two weeks later: 2:19 am. *Student ran through lobby and did not respond to commands to stop. Campus security was alerted and found student running barefoot toward southern end of campus. Several officers were required to restrain student, who resisted and did not appear oriented to time or place. Medical personnel called to scene. Student taken to UMC by paramedics. Patient's next-of-kin could not be reached.*

The only other note comes a week later: *Due to psychological distress caused by close living environment, student has requested and been granted a stipend in lieu of remaining in the residence halls.*

With a sinking stomach, I realize that there is far more than meets the eye with Olivia. She's been keeping a lot of secrets for a long time, and today, when she finally opened up to someone—to me, I laughed in her face.

SHE LIVES IN THE WORST POSSIBLE SECTION OF TOWN. HER APARTMENT COMPLEX looks like it was built in the 70s, and probably last maintained then too. Once we sort out what's going on with her running, I need to get her back into the dorms. Even I don't feel safe on this end of town.

I knock and she opens the door without unchaining the lock. "Yes?" she asks, her face blank.

"Can I come in?"

She bites her lip. "I'll come out," she finally says.

She unchains the door and opens it as little as possible in order to get out. I get the distinct impression she doesn't want me to see what or who is in her apartment.

"Am I interrupting something?" I ask, nodding at her door.

"Yeah. Me, packing my shit."

She isn't going to make this easy. No surprises there, I guess. "I'm sorry about earlier. I shouldn't have implied you were lying."

She blinks in surprise. "Why the sudden change of heart?" she asks sourly. "You realized I'm your only chance of winning in two weeks?"

"You really think as piss-poor as your performance has been so far that I'm putting my hopes on you?" I demand. It's harsh but true, and I know she's the kind of person who responds more to candor than flattery. I could tell her that I think it's possible she could win it for us, that I see in her the kind of untapped potential that makes almost *anything* possible, but I don't. She wouldn't believe me anyway.

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm here because it appears possible that I was wrong."

"That's big of you," she snarls. "The way you're conceding it's *possible* that I'm not lying." She turns toward the door. "Thanks for stopping by. Come back if you'd like to tell me you think it's also possible that I don't deal drugs or poison children, and in the meantime, go fuck yourself."

"Sit," I bark, pointing at the curb. "And stop being a pain in the ass." She pauses, arms across her chest, scowling but not going inside either.

"How long have you been doing it?"

Her jaw shifts. It's a conversation she's dying to avoid. "Since I was little," she says flatly.

"Why?"

"How should I know?" she scowls. But finally she approaches, lowering herself beside me to the steps.

Her legs are crisscrossed with small scratches. The paramedics had mentioned it earlier, but at the time I was too pissed about her early morning run to care.

"What happened to your legs?"

Her jaw grinds. "I assume I ran through some brush," she says quietly. "It

happens."

"It doesn't wake you up?"

"If it hurts enough."

I sigh heavily. I don't know what to do with this girl. That she hasn't been badly injured is a miracle. "Have you seen anyone? A specialist?"

She shrugs. "When I was a kid."

"It didn't help?"

She shakes her head. "It made things worse."

"How?"

She shakes her head again.

"You can't keep doing this, Olivia. You've got to stop."

"You think I don't want to?" she hisses. "Do you know how humiliating it is to be hitchhiking barefoot at five a.m.? To walk up to a stranger's door and tell them you have no idea where you are or how you got there?"

"Jesus Christ," I exhale. "Whatever you do, don't hitchhike."

"I had to! I wasn't going to make it in time for the meet otherwise."

"You're going to get hurt. That's far worse than missing a meet. You've probably already *gotten* hurt at some point."

She closes her eyes. I'm beginning to decipher Olivia-speak. Anything that isn't flat out argument is unwilling agreement. She has gotten hurt, and I'm guessing it was bad.

"There's got to be some kind of sleeping pill they can give you," I insist.

"Yeah, and it'd make me comatose the next day. You think my run today was shitty? Watch me the morning after I take the drugs."

"Olivia, there are things that matter more than running."

She looks at me like I'm insane. "Not for me."

This girl. This stupid, stupid girl. Does she not realize how badly she could be hurt? How in a moment's time it could all just disappear?

"What about your *life*?" I ask. "Isn't that more important than running?"

She turns to me with a single brow raised, her eyes bleak and unapologetic. Nothing's more important to her than this. It's an answer I understand all too well. That's exactly how I felt about climbing.

THE NEXT FEW DAYS ARE UNEVENTFUL. SHE'S ON TIME WITHOUT A SINGLE SCOWL OR

acid-laced barb. She gives me exactly what I ask for, bearing my adjustments to her form in silence, but she also avoids my gaze entirely. She puts on a good act, but I'm beginning to suspect that tough shell of hers is there for a reason. That perhaps it's hiding something so fragile she's not sure it could survive out in the open.

It's not until Friday that she's done it again. That she can't keep up, and ends up hanging back with the slowest girls on the team. I almost tell her to stop. When they come back to the track, I see her hands and legs jerking, the muscles spasming, and she clasps her arms around her waist to hide it as best she can. Still not meeting my gaze.

"Good practice, ladies," I call. "Head in and I'll see you Monday. Enjoy your last free Friday for a while." She starts in and I stop her. "Hang on, Olivia."

She nods but stares at the ground, her legs knocking together. It's hard to watch. How much must this girl drive herself in order to keep up on the days when there's nothing left?

I tell her to sit and hand her a drink. "What are we going to do about this, Olivia?"

Her glance at me is both panicked and angry, shooting quickly toward me and then away. "I don't know. If I knew, I'd do it."

"What makes it better? What makes it worse?"

"Exhaustion. Exhaustion makes it better. Stress makes it worse."

I look out over the track as I let this sink in. What this tells me is that races create the perfect storm for her. Not enough of a workout to tire her the day before and tons of stress on top of it. And me there, acting like she's going to lose her scholarship the minute she messes up. Coaching a runner isn't rocket science, and yet I'm at a loss as to how I can help her.

"Your parents must have had a way to stop you, though," I say. "They couldn't have allowed a kid to just run out in the middle of the night."

She looks at me again, that small wounded thing inside her making only the briefest appearance before it goes away. She shakes her head. "Nothing stopped me."

God, the idea of her out running like that unnerves me. She thinks she's tough, but the truth is that she's 5'7 and about 110 pounds. A large child could probably take her down. The idea of her hitchhiking to get home ...

It sits in my stomach like a stone.

"You know if you get too far from campus you can call me, right?" I finally ask. "Or if you just need a ride when you wake up? For Christ's sake, don't hitchhike, anyway."

She almost smiles, but not quite. "How am I going to do that, Will? I don't stop to grab my phone on the way out the door."

Jesus. She's right. She's absolutely right. I can't stand the idea of her taking the risks she must take when it happens. "You need to go to counseling."

"It won't do any good," she says flatly.

"I said that wrong. What I meant is you *are* going to counseling. This is not a negotiation." She glares at me and I laugh. "You're giving me that look like you wish I were dead again, so at least things are back to normal."

Her mouth twitches. All of the trouble she's caused me so far feels worth it the moment I see her almost-smile.

Olivia

This is going to go so poorly.

Will, I'm sure, thinks I'm going to go in to see this counselor, and by the end of the session I'll be crying about how I never felt loved or how my mom skipped my ballet recital when I was five or whatever it is normal people cry about. And then I'm going to pop out of my chair, healed and ready to move on. Except I'm not normal. I'm so far from normal that I doubt even the psychologists have seen one of me before. I have experience with this. I have so much experience with this that I swear to God I could switch chairs and counsel myself.

It doesn't work.

The therapist's name is Ms. Daniels. She's small and chunky and has a big, fake smile on her face. I hate her on sight, which seems like a bad omen. I'd love to ask, since she's apparently the picture of psychological health, why she can't get her weight under control. I manage to hold back.

She has a whispery little baby voice and sings her words to me like I'm a toddler. "Olivia?" she hums. I don't bother correcting the name because I already know I'm not coming back. "I'm so happy to meet you," she coos as we sit in her office. She still has that eager smile on her face as if I'm here to plan a trip to Bali and she's on commission. "Why don't you tell me what brings you in today?"

This is bullshit. She knows exactly why I'm here. Why should school funds pay for her to sit there and listen to me recount something she can read for herself? "Isn't it already in my file?" I ask.

"I saw a few things," she sings, "but I want to know why *you* want to be here." She continues to smile. It's freaky. I didn't come in here because I just won the lottery, so why the fuck is she smiling?

I tell her I'm only here because my coach forced me to be. "If you'd read my file you'd know that," I add. That gets her. I watch her lips twitch, her eyes blink a little extra. She's growing nervous.

"Well, then we can talk about why you don't want to be here."

"Because I've done this before. It just doesn't work."

"Not all therapists are the same," she says, eyes brightening. "Maybe your last one just wasn't a good fit."

"No, I mean that I don't think it works for anyone," I reply. "Did you know psychiatrists commit suicide more than any other profession?"

Her mouth twitches again. "I don't think that's true."

"Look it up."

"I don't need to look it up, Olivia," she says, growing flushed. "This session is for you to talk about your feelings."

"My feeling is that you're scared to look it up." I almost feel sorry for her, but not quite. If she wants to position herself as the expert, then she should freaking be an expert.

She glances at the wall behind me. No doubt she has a clock there and is trying to gauge exactly how many more minutes this will drag out. And it will drag out, believe me, because I plan to make this every bit as unpleasant for her as it is for me.

It's one of the very few things I'm good at.

Will

On Tuesday afternoon, I tell the team that there will be a time trial the next morning. The top three runners will fly to Oregon in early December for the Cooper Invitational. I don't want to look at Olivia's face, but I do, *and I regret it*. She's scared. I can see it in her eyes. She deserves one of those three spots. Hell, she deserves all of them. She's the best runner this school has seen in a decade, if not more. But that fear I see is only going to feed on itself, ensuring that she runs tonight. I feel powerless as I send her off. I hate the feeling, and I hate that it's probably how she feels almost all of the time.

JESSICA AND I HAVE AN EARLY DINNER. I WALK HER TO HER DOOR, BUT I DON'T COME inside. "You're not staying?" she asks, looking at me beneath long lashes, arching her limber frame so her chest brushes mine. She has the kind of body few men can say "no" to, and she's well aware of it.

"I'm sorry, I've got to be up early tomorrow." She knows I don't sleep well at her place. It's nothing personal, but I inevitably wind up sleeping on her couch because I can't fall asleep next to someone. I've never been able to, but that has nothing to do with why I'm not staying tonight.

"I have alarms here, you know," she says, tucking her hand into the waistband of my jeans before she starts to tug at my belt. I place my hand

over hers.

"I would love to stay, but you're slightly too distracting, and I've got work to do."

"Work? Will, it's 10 p.m. What work can't wait until tomorrow?"

And that's the question I can't answer.

There's no way to make what I'm about to do sound reasonable, or ethical. But I think about the possibility of stopping Olivia, and how spectacular she might be at a meet on a full night's rest, *and I just don't care.*

As I head to Olivia's apartment, I recall a conversation I had with Peter only two weeks ago when he accused me of being too harsh with her. He was right, and I knew he was right which made it hard to defend myself.

"SHE'S JUST TROUBLE," I TOLD HIM.

"Trouble for you or trouble for the team?"

"What do you mean? She's trouble for everyone."

He shrugged. "She's a very pretty girl."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

He exhaled heavily. "I'm just wondering if maybe what worries you so much isn't that she's going to cause problems for the team but that she's going to cause problems for you."

"You cannot be implying what I think you're implying," I snapped. "When have I ever been inappropriate with a student?"

Peter shook his head. "Never. And I'm not implying you would be now. In fact, I know you wouldn't be, which is precisely why it might trouble you so much to have her around. Unnecessary temptation."

I'D SHUT THE CONVERSATION DOWN, DISMISSED IT AS RIDICULOUS, BUT NOW, AS I pull up to her apartment, I have to wonder. *Am I pretending?* Am I really here because I want to see her succeed, or am I here for another reason? Olivia Finnegan is so pretty that you feel compelled to look at her even when you don't want to. You want to memorize the delicate structure of her face, her full rosebud mouth, the way her green eyes spark when she looks at you and make you want to uncover all the secrets behind them. So pretty that pretty

isn't even the word for it. It's something that makes me feel like I can't breathe on the rare occasions I see her smile.

It's that last part that worries me.

I WATCH HER APARTMENT. I SEE HER SHADOW MOVING BACK AND FORTH BEHIND THE window, and when her lights finally go off, I sit on her steps. I'd rather stay in the car, but I'm drowsy enough at this point that I'd pass out and never even notice her racing past.

It's almost 2:30 when I'm startled awake by a noise inside. My heart is beating hard, as if I'm about to cross a line, but then again, I'm sitting outside a student's apartment in the middle of the night.

I guess that line is already crossed.

Olivia

There's a storm coming. Something bad. The sun is out, but my mom is like a tornado, running from room to room.

"Mommy?" I ask. "Are we okay?" The possibility of disaster always exists in this house.

She spins on her heel to look at me, running her hands through her dark hair like she's fixing to yank it all out. I shouldn't have stopped her.

"No!" she screams. It's her angry-sad scream, the one that brims over with the tears she's holding back. Her sadness makes her want to lash out, and when she does the guilt will make her sad all over again. "Just give me five minutes in peace, Olivia, please!"

I nod and back away. She drops to her knees and begins crying hard, holding out her arms for me. "I'm sorry, baby," she whispers into my hair. "Mommy is just a little stressed."

She tells me we're going on a trip, but we have to leave really fast. She asks me to run to the basement and grab a few toys, and then to go to my room and get the white dress I wore on my last day of school.

I run to the basement and pick a doll I don't even play with, don't even like really, so when I look at her, it won't make me feel sad for what I've left behind. I go back upstairs but haven't reached my room yet when I hear a car door slam outside. My mother comes to a dead stop, a violent shudder

running over her skin.

There's a storm coming. A storm that is outside but rushing at us fast.

She squats in front of me. "Run out the back door. Run as hard as you can and don't stop until you get to the woods. And whatever you do, don't come back."

"I want to stay with you," I beg.

That's when we hear the front door open, the heavy tread on the first step, and I know the storm has caught us. And when a storm is inside your house, it's too late to run.

She shoves me into the closet. She tells me to stay and hide and not to make a sound until she comes for me, not a sound. Her words are threatening but her face is so, so sad. "Don't watch," she says. "And if he finds you, run."

Then she shuts the door.

I peer through the crack. Darkness fills the house, clouds rumble overhead, and his shadow stretches long and thin across the room, reaching from doorway to bed, where she sits with her hands in her lap. I can feel her fear. It diffuses like the spread after a nuclear blast. She will not fight him because there are things in this world too large, too terrible to fight, and he is one of them.

Suddenly I'm running, hard like she told me to do.

Down toward the high corn where I am small and he is big and only I can hide. But then he has me, grabbing me from behind, his arms wrapped around me like a straightjacket, immovable. I fight but it's useless. I wait for the pain to come, the pain I know is coming again, the sharp heat in my back and the wet feel of my shirt sticking and the blood on his hands. I know all this will come.

But there is nothing.

He tells me to calm down, begs me to calm down, but it's not the monster's voice. It's a soothing one, one that rolls over me and through me like a drug. A voice that tells me I'm safe, which can't be true but he says it again.

I give way.

I believe him.

I stop fighting and let the world grow black.

"LIV. IT'S TIME TO GET UP."

I open my eyes slowly. I'm not in my room, and it's daylight. In a flash, my grogginess gives way to panic. If I'm not in my own room, I've done something very wrong. I've run or I've passed out again and I'm in a hospital or somewhere worse.

The time trial. I've missed it or I'm about to.

I sit up, blinking at the bright sunlight, at the unfamiliar room. The first thing I see is Will. For a fraction of a moment I see something on his face I haven't seen before, something that isn't disdain or even concern, and then he squeezes his eyes shut.

"Jesus, Olivia," he groans. "Cover up."

Oh God. I look down and then look over the bed, where at some point in the night I flung my tank. This is getting worse and worse.

I yank the sheet up, but he's already turned away and leaving the room.

"Where am I?" I ask.

"I'll talk to you when your clothes are on," he rasps, his voice sounding a little strangled.

I don't mind getting naked. I'll strip down in front of almost anyone. But not *him*. My tank is still the tiniest bit damp, and I shiver as I slide it over my head. I must have run and, par for the course, stripped it off at some point. But how exactly did I end up stripping it off *here*? And why don't I remember any of it?

When I walk out, he's in the kitchen pouring coffee, his shoulders rigid as if he's angry. He seems to be making a point of not looking over at me.

"Where am I?" I ask.

"My apartment," he replies. He glances up as he hands me a cup of coffee, and then storms out of the room.

I've clearly done something terrible. I try to recall the evening before. Large quantities of alcohol would explain both why I was here and why I stripped off my clothes, but I don't remember anything.

He returns, handing me a T-shirt, again without looking at me. "Put that on," he says. "You're practically naked."

I look down. Between the fit and the dampness of the shirt, I guess it doesn't leave much to the imagination. There is only one logical explanation

for why I'd be in his apartment with no memory of it. "Why am I here?" I ask. "Did we...?"

"No," he gapes, with an insulting mix of shock and disgust. "Of course we didn't."

"You don't need to act like it's so repulsive," I snap. "You could do a lot worse than me."

"You don't remember anything?"

I scowl. "Isn't that somewhat obvious?"

"I caught you trying to run from your apartment. You were asleep or ... I don't know what you were. I stopped you and you just kind of passed out."

I close my eyes and feel dread wash over me. I'd prefer that he'd seen me drunk. The running episodes are a mystery to me. I'm scared of who I am in those nightmares, and I'm scared of who I am when I'm running away from them.

"Did I, um, do anything?" I ask. The words are so quiet I'm not sure if he's heard me.

"You took a swing at me." He chuckles. "But I kind of deserved it, under the circumstances."

"Sorry," I murmur, looking for signs of damage. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, I sort of knew what I was getting into. You're hardly known for your even temper."

I roll my eyes, and then force myself to ask the other question. "Did I talk?" I don't want to know what I said, so God knows I don't want *him* to know what I said.

"A little." He hesitates, and my stomach drops. "You were really upset. You kept saying something like 'I left' over and over, but I couldn't understand it."

I steel myself to look at him and find the exact emotion on his face that I don't want to see.

Pity.

I'm inclined to just walk out of his apartment right this minute, except I'm barefoot and I have no idea what part of town I'm in.

"Then you just sort of collapsed."

"Why were you there?"

His shoulders sag. "I shouldn't have been. I thought you'd be stressed out about the time trial and would run, so I waited. I just thought if I saw it

firsthand ..." He sighs, shaking his head. "I don't know what I thought. I didn't expect anything so extreme. Do you know what the dream was about?"

"No," I whisper. I stare at my hands, gripping the coffee cup so hard that they are drained of color.

"Maybe you should try to remember. Maybe that's the key to ending all this," he says. "Did you talk to the counselor?"

"She was a moron."

"I'm guessing you say that about 95% of the people you meet."

"Well, it's true of about 95% percent of the people I meet, so I'm okay with that statistic."

"You need to talk to someone," he insists.

I ignore him. Therapists are for people with little problems. Therapists begin to drown the second they hear about me.

"So how did I end up here?" I ask.

He rubs his temples as he begins to pace. "Your door was locked. I could have woken you, but I was scared that you'd ..."

"Freak out?"

He nods. "I didn't know where else to take you. I put you in my room and I slept on the couch. But this is bad. You absolutely should not be here. I could get fired for this."

"It's not like anything happened," I argue.

"No one is going to believe that, Olivia," he sighs, turning away. "Not with you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snap. "Just because a few guys on the team ask me out doesn't make me the team slut."

He rubs his eyes. "I wasn't trying to imply that you were," he groans. "You're attractive. That's all I was saying."

A tiny warmth weaves its way through me. It shouldn't. I shouldn't care what he thinks. "I'm attractive, huh?"

He walks away. "Don't worry, your personality ruins it. Let's go. You're gonna make us both late."

MY EYES SLIDE TOWARD HIM AS HE DRIVES ME TO MY APARTMENT BUILDING. IT'S almost unfair how pretty he is, with that jaw and that hollow under his

cheekbones, the ruggedness of his face contrasting with his soft mouth.

"Oh, shit," he says as we pull up. "I forgot you're locked out."

"I keep a key under the flower pot to the right. Just in case you ever happen to be stalking again."

"I wasn't stalking," he growls.

I sigh reluctantly. There are few things more difficult for me than being earnest and grateful, and I suppose right now both are called for. "I guess I never thanked you," I say haltingly, "so, um, thanks."

"I can't keep you from doing what you're going to do," he says quietly, "but if you tell anyone, I'll probably lose my job."

"I would never tell anyone." I start to remove his T-shirt and he stops me.

"Just keep it. You being seen leaving my car is bad. You leaving it half-naked would be worse."

Olivia

When Will walks onto the track a little later, I avoid his gaze. He seems to be avoiding mine as well. He's in a shitty mood and barking at almost everyone as we warm up. Everyone but me. "Higher kick, Olivia," is all he says and even that is lackluster and unwilling.

"You can't do that," I tell him quietly.

"Can't do what?"

"Don't start treating me differently. Don't act like I'm fragile."

"I'm not."

"Bullshit, Will. You're in a crappy mood today and God knows when you're in a crappy mood I'm the first person you bust on, but you aren't saying a word to me. I'm not fragile. Nothing that you've seen is new for me."

"You're normally crying about how hard I am on you," he sighs. "I can't win, can I?"

"A, I don't cry, and B, I like Asshole Will. He's a known commodity."

"If I'm such a known commodity," he says, his mouth lifting on one side, "you'd know not to refer to me as 'Asshole Will.'"

I walk away, wanting to laugh and yet feeling unsettled. I know how to be angry at him, but I don't know how to feel *this*. Or even what, exactly, *this* is.

AFTER THE WARM-UPS, PETER COMES DOWN TO THE TRACK WITH THE MEN'S TEAM following him. They'll do their time trial first. I wish it were us. My stomach plummeted the moment he walked down here, and it's going to remain swimming and nervous until this is done.

"You're pale," says Erin. "You can't be nervous, you're the fastest girl here. You're the only one who shouldn't be nervous."

"Things go wrong." My voice is tense, and for some reason even talking seems to rock the uneasy thing in my stomach and make it feel less stable.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, because you sure don't seem to think a lot of things through, but you need to think less."

I scowl at her.

"I'm serious. Let your mind go blank. Say it with me." She crosses her legs and puts her hands in the lotus position. "Ommmm."

"Please shut up, Erin."

"That's super un-Buddhist of you."

"You know what else is un-Buddhist?" I warn. "Punching someone in the face. So stop talking." Erin doesn't tend to get scared off by me the way she should, and I doubt I've scared her now, but she does, for once, stop yammering.

Will motions us down from the bleachers, looking oddly anxious given that he just has to stand there looking pretty. It's not until we're lined up and I catch his quick glance that I realize he's anxious for *me*. I hate that. I don't want anyone hoping things for me. It's bad enough when I only disappoint myself.

The gun goes off and I stop thinking. My mind stops running and my body takes over, pulling me through as if directed by some outside entity. This is my meditation. This is how I let my mind go blank.

My legs pump and I feel that rasp in my chest that warns me I've gone out too fast and I don't care. I ignore it because I want this. I want this more than I've ever wanted anything. I want to show Will that I am worth his effort. In five weeks' time, in his own abrasive way, he's done more for me than anyone I've ever known.

I see him standing by the bleachers, watching, and I don't look around me. I don't even look at the finish line. I pass it, and I am first, and the whole time he is the only thing I see.

2 I

Will

She was brilliant.

She was absolutely fucking brilliant today.

And the truth is I'm not surprised. I need to get out to my mom's, but seeing Olivia's performance today has given me tunnel vision. I want to solve this for her. I want her to become the person she's capable of being. I realize it's naïve. Her family has probably spent the last decade trying to fix it, so there's no reason to think I'll be any more successful, but I have to at least try.

I pull up her student records again. Will she be pissed that I've called her parents? Undoubtedly. Do I give a shit? Not really. The nightmares have to stop. I think about her in that neighborhood in the middle of the night, not even awake, and I feel sick. It's just a matter of time until she gets hurt.

But there are no parents listed anywhere in the file, no home address, and the only contact I can find is a grandmother somewhere in Florida. Why are her parents not listed? No aunts, no uncles, no siblings? The more I try to solve the mystery of Olivia Finnegan, the more mysterious she becomes.

Resignedly, I dial her grandmother's number. The chipper voice on the other end informs me that I've reached Sunset Springs Assisted Living. For a moment, I think I've dialed wrong.

I ask for her grandmother by name.

"Are you a family member?" the woman asks.

"No, I'm calling about her granddaughter."

"I'm sorry, sir, but we have instructions to only pass calls through to Miss Anya from family."

I grip the phone tight, trying hard to rein in my impatience. "Look, this is kind of important. I need to get in touch with someone and she's the only contact number we have."

"I doubt she'd be much help anyway," she says.

"Excuse me?"

"Alzheimer's," she whispers. "I'm not supposed to tell you that, but hers is pretty advanced. She doesn't remember anybody these days."

"How long has she been with you?" Somehow I know before I've even asked the question that the answer will only make things worse.

"Well, I'm not supposed to release that kind of information either," she says, and then her voice drops to a whisper again. "But it's been a little over four years."

Olivia wasn't even out of high school yet. So who was raising her all those years? And where are her parents?

I'M DISTRACTED THROUGH DINNER AT JESSICA'S THAT NIGHT. THE MINUTE I THINK I'm beginning to grasp what Olivia's been through, it just gets worse.

"What kind of work did you have to do last night anyway?" Jessica asks, pulling my attention back to her.

My intentions were completely innocent with Olivia. And had it all stayed that way I'd probably tell Jessica the truth.

Except that it hadn't.

Because something changed in me when I caught her last night. And then it changed again, in a far more dangerous way, this morning. When I saw her asleep in my bed, her back bare, her breathing even, her hair spread over the pillow...

I've tried a hundred times to block the image. And the one that followed, when she sat up and the sheet slid to her waist.

I can't.

It's pretty much all I've thought about all day, despite my best efforts. It's left me feeling as if a small crack has formed, a fault line, one that could

grow into something unmanageable.

It's the first time in the year we've dated that I tell Jessica a lie.

Olivia

I run hard for him the next day.

I follow his every command to the letter. In the end, when he has not a single criticism to offer, I feign shock.

"Wow. Nothing shitty to say? Does that mean you were actually *pleased*?"

"You know you did well," he says. "Don't fish for compliments."

"I'm pretty sure it's the only way to get them out of you," I gripe.

"Try running like that in the meet and the compliments will flow freely."

My mouth goes into a hard line. "Awesome. So basically, as soon as I'm able to stop doing something in my sleep I don't even know I'm doing, *that's* when you'll be pleased."

He sighs, pinching his nose between thumb and forefinger. I know his moods now, his tells. He does this when he's frustrated, and when he's about to face something he doesn't want to face.

"Go shower and come to my office."

I can't imagine what he thinks a talk in his office will accomplish. He's probably going to send me back to that idiotic counselor, who will send me off with some stupid fucking homework. Last time, I was supposed to list things that make me happy. "Like bubble baths," she'd said. "Doesn't a nice bubble bath make you happy?" I told her a bubble bath would make me feel

like I was wasting valuable time, which still makes me laugh although she didn't seem to appreciate that much.

He's waiting for me, sitting behind his desk and looking grim.

"I'm not going back to the counselor if that's what this is about."

He runs a hand through his hair and almost smiles. "Yes, you've made your feelings about her known."

"So what do you want me to do? The only thing that ever works is keeping myself up, which usually fails, or running the night before the meet. Sometimes if I do six just before bed, I'm tired enough—"

"No, I want you fresh, and that'll just give me some version of the half-assed running you give me when you've had a nightmare."

I frown at him. "So what's your magic solution then?"

"You're going to stay with my mom."

"With your mom?" I scoff. "Are you crazy? I punched you! What would I do to her? And how could she possibly stop me?"

"I'll be there too." His shoulders sag a little. "It still looks bad, but no one needs to know I was there. I'll sleep on the couch so you can't get by without me hearing."

The effort he is making causes something to tighten and twist in my chest, a small pain that radiates outward and makes me long to walk away from this whole conversation. "You shouldn't have to do all that," I mumble.

"I want to."

When I reluctantly meet his gaze, I see how badly he wants me to succeed—not for him, *but for me*. The pain in my chest gets worse, and I look away.

"Okay," I mumble, a single word that doesn't begin to express what I am feeling. No one has ever made an effort for me.

Until now.

HE PICKS ME UP ON FRIDAY AT 6 P.M.

"This is embarrassing," I mutter as I put on my seatbelt.

"What's embarrassing?"

"Your mom is going to think I'm some kind of freak."

"And she'd be wrong to think that because ...?" he asks with a grin.

I give him my most menacing look, which he seems to now be

impervious to, annoyingly enough.

"She's not going to think you're a freak," he continues. "My brother used to sleepwalk when he was little. It's not that different."

It's actually really fucking different, but okay.

"Have you eaten?" he asks.

"Yes."

"What did you have?"

"Oatmeal."

"It's the night before a meet," he grumbles. "You can't possibly think that's enough food, not after what happened last time."

I shrug. "Last time was sort of an anomaly."

"You *are* aware that 'anomaly' means 'an unusual occurrence,' right?"

"That's why I said 'sort of' an anomaly," I argue.

"And that's why you're 'sort of' going to eat dinner at my mom's house."

IT'S SURPRISING HOW QUICKLY THE TOWN BECOMES RURAL ONCE YOU MOVE AWAY from campus. It reminds me of where my grandmother lived, the endless roads with nothing but farmland and forest on either side. He pulls onto a bumpy gravel road littered with potholes that send me bouncing toward the ceiling of his truck, and in the distance I see a small house and a substantial barn.

"This is where you grew up?" I ask.

"Yes, I suppose you have some smart-ass comment about it?"

I did, but now that he's called me on it I'm inclined to keep it to myself.

"No," I say huffily. "I was going to say it looks nice."

"Right." He jumps out of the truck, leaving me to follow.

The house seems substantially larger on the inside, like some kind of "Alice in Wonderland" trick of perception. There's a big living room with a kitchen on the right, bedrooms to the left.

His mom comes out of the kitchen. "You must be Olivia," she says. "I'm Dorothy." She hugs me with so much enthusiasm I feel certain Will has kept a number of details about me to himself. She tells us it's a while until dinner and suggests we go out for a quick horseback ride, which he greets with a look of disgust.

I huff in exasperation. "Am I really that awful, Will?" I demand. "You're acting like she just asked you to give me both kidneys."

"It's the night before a meet. You might get sore."

"I spent the whole summer riding horses. I'll be fine."

"Okay, Olivia," he says with just a touch of acid to his voice. "Would you care to go horseback riding?"

I walk out the front door without bothering to reply.

"Do you even know how to saddle a horse?" he asks, coming out behind me.

"Are you seriously asking me this question? Did you think I was just going to jump on bareback and take off?"

"Right, how silly of me, when you have such a reputation for restraint and good judgment."

I march toward the stables, trying to ignore him. The smell hits me first. It is, without a doubt, an unpleasant smell, hay and manure and grass baked in sunshine, the faint smell of leather beneath it. But the memories it brings back are good ones. I spent summers as a girl cleaning out the stables down the road from my grandmother's house. I got to ride in the afternoons when I was done, worth far more to me than the crappy pay I got for doing it.

HE PUTS ME ON TRIXIE, WHO LOOKS SO DOCILE I'M NOT SURE SHE'LL EVEN WAKE UP long enough to be ridden.

"Don't even think about going faster than a trot," he warns.

I roll my eyes. "I doubt this horse is *able* to trot," I retort.

I can tell he's assessing my seat, and the only sign of approval I get is his eventual decision to ride ahead.

I'd like to ignore the fact that he looks good riding a horse, really good, but cannot. He wears the hell out of a pair of jeans on his worst day, and even 20 feet behind him I can see the definition of his arms. I have a sudden desire to sneak up behind him and press my nose just to the nape of his neck, just below where his hair is shaved close. A small shiver brushes over my arms at the thought.

I don't want him.

I don't.

I don't want his bossiness and his bad temper and the way his upper lip curls when he's mad at me. Half the time I'd just as soon kick him in the balls as fuck him. I need to focus on the part of me that wants to watch him writhe in pain because right now, at this precise moment, the other part is winning easily.

WE GET TO THE CREST OF THE HILL AND A LAKE COMES INTO VIEW. "Wow," I breathe. "It's amazing. I just assumed it was all woods down here."

"My dad built it for my brother and me."

I cast a suspicious glance at him. It's not a pond. It's a lake the size of a football field. "He *built* it? How the hell do you build a lake?"

Will shrugs. "Engineering background and a lot of persistence, I guess."

"Did you guys swim in it?"

"Pretty much all year long. It's built over a hot spring, so it stays warm for the most part."

"Why?" My voice is quiet and uncertain, and I'm embarrassed by the question.

"Why does it stay warm?"

"No. Why would he build it for you?"

Will cocks his head, looking at me as if he's trying to understand something. "Because he loved us. Why else would he do it?"

I don't answer, but the truth is that I can't imagine someone caring about his children that much. I can't imagine anyone caring about anyone that much.

By the time we finish riding, the sun has gone down and the breeze has picked up. The air feels crisp, a hint of fall on the heels of summer.

"So what was the deal with you and Mark Bell?" he asks as we ride back to the stables.

I'm immediately wary. "What do you mean?"

"It takes a whole lot of rage to take a baseball bat to another human being. I figured he must have cheated on you or something."

A small, choked laugh escapes my throat. "No, we weren't dating. I don't date."

"What do you mean you don't date?" he asks, aghast. His tone suggests

that I just told him I don't breathe. "*Ever?*"

I shrug. "If I want to sleep with someone, I don't need him texting me all the time and pretending he actually likes me as a person in order to do it."

He looks more dumbfounded than when I told him about the sleep running. "I don't even know what to say. You can't mean that."

"Why not?"

"Because you should be waiting for someone who actually *does* like you as a person. And how do you know they're pretending?"

I roll my eyes. "I know my strengths, Will. Likeability isn't high on the list. You'd be the first to attest to it."

"I never said you were unlikeable," he protests.

"You don't have to. It's written all over your face every time you look at me." I sigh, tiring of this whole conversation and glad we're almost done riding so I can escape it. "Don't worry. I'm used to it."

"Olivia, there are guys out there who would actually like you."

"No, there aren't. There may be guys who convince themselves they like the whole package when they actually just like the box it comes in, but they'd figure it out soon enough."

"So you just stick with douchebags," he huffs, "instead of waiting for a decent guy to come along who actually means well?"

"When I'm looking for someone to hook up with," I reply, smirking, "the last thing I want is someone who *means well*. Nothing's less exciting than a guy who's too nice." Because in that one area of my life, I want a guy who isn't scared to take charge. Who's a little bossy and knows exactly what he wants. Someone like ... *no, I'm not even going to think it.*

WE DISMOUNT AND I UNSADDLE TRIXIE WHILE HE HANDLES THE SIGNIFICANTLY better horse he chose for himself. We finish up at the same time and turn back toward the house.

"Race you?" I challenge, expecting him to refuse.

"Your funeral," he says, taking off. I'm so shocked that it takes me a second to register the fact that he's running at all.

"No fair!" I shout from behind. He slows just enough to let me catch up and then we are flying.

It's my favorite kind of run. The kind where the breeze is warm and blowing at your back and you feel so light and so strong it seems possible you'll take flight. At the very last minute he pulls ahead to win and we both crash into the front porch, laughing.

"You cheated!" I protest.

"How was that cheating?" he demands.

"Because I didn't know you were that fast!" I laugh. "I'd never have challenged you if I thought I might lose."

Dorothy is watching us from the door. "Will, did you never mention to this poor girl that you ran track at ECU too?"

"You?" I gasp, following him inside. "You ran track?"

He shrugs. "You don't have to sound so shocked."

"It's just that you're big," I protest. "I mean, you're not just tall but you know, you're broad shouldered ..." I begin stammering because all of a sudden it sounds like I'm describing him to a teen magazine. "I just meant you're muscular," *dammit I'm just making it worse*, "and so you carry a lot of weight." It's a relief to finally conclude on a note that doesn't sound like I'm writing porn.

I follow them into the dining room reluctantly. Will points to a chair for me to take, and his mother objects. "I raised you better than that," she chides. "Pull her chair out."

"Mom," he growls, "this isn't a date. I'm not pulling her chair out."

"She is a lady," his mother says, "and you always pull out a lady's chair."

He smirks. "I think even Olivia would agree that calling her a lady is a stretch."

I take a minuscule portion of the dinner Dorothy has made. It smells unbelievable, but it will sit in my stomach like a 20-pound dumbbell when I race tomorrow.

"More, Olivia," says Will, glaring at my plate.

"I'm going to get sick," I argue.

"Not as sick as you will if you don't eat enough. No more fainting episodes."

Under his watchful eye, I consume everything on my plate. The joke will be on him when I can't run tomorrow because I'm carrying an extra pound of pasta in my stomach.

After dinner, Will and I clear the table. He tells me to go sit and I ignore

him, silently grabbing a dish towel. I stand on tiptoes to put a bowl away on the top shelf of a cabinet.

"I got it," he says, coming up behind me and taking it from my hands. I turn just as his arms come down and find myself facing him, our chests touching, his arm brushing against mine as it descends.

It's not just that he's close—it's that I feel *enveloped* by him. The sheer size of him, the power that lies in his muscles, coiled tight even at rest, makes me feel like I can't breathe.

It's as if the part of my brain that has any common sense has shut down. The only part still functioning is the part that notices the smell of his skin, the way his breathing has gone shallow, the tiny scar on the bridge of his nose and the look in his eye, vanquished as quickly as it appears, that is different from anything I've ever seen from him before.

For a single moment, I think his brain shut down too.

AFTER I'VE PUT ON THE RUNNING CLOTHES I SLEEP IN, THERE'S A KNOCK ON THE door. Dorothy pops her head in and smiles. "Just making sure you didn't need anything. I used to make Will drink a glass of warm milk the night before a meet. Would you like one?"

I feel a pang of envy and joy simultaneously. "No, thank you," I say, stumbling over my words a little. "I'm fine."

"Okay." She grins. "Sleep tight."

I lie down and turn the lamp off. I imagine Will here once upon a time, getting tucked in. A part of me is jealous, but I'm glad he had this growing up. Even if I could take this memory, make it my own instead of his, I wouldn't.

I feel peaceful, imagining him here, and it makes me feel safe knowing he's on the other side of the door. It seems possible that tonight I won't even dream.

Will

I exhale with a groan when she finally goes to bed.

I've spent the last three hours pretending to not be completely freaked out by what happened in the kitchen. When she turned and I found her pressed against me like that, looking up at me with those big eyes and that mouth of hers, a mouth which could inspire bad thoughts at any hour of the day—*and has*—I didn't just *think* about kissing her. I planned on it. Some baser part of me took charge and demanded a hundred different things it had wanted before I came to my senses.

I must have been out of my mind.

She does that to me. She does that to everyone as far as I can tell, but it's only me I'm worried about. It's not just that I'd lose my job. It's that it's *wrong*. She trusts me. She's counting on me to help her with this, make her the runner she is capable of being, and there I was not just imagining kissing her but getting ready to actually do it.

She can't stay here again. I'll explain the situation to Peter in the morning, the way I should have when I first found out. The school may very well be forced to take her off the team. Keeping someone on board with psychological issues like that makes them liable if something goes wrong, which is the reason I never told him in the first place, but maybe he can come up with something else. Maybe if she agrees to counseling he can find some

female chaperone on nights before meets. All I know is it can't be me.

Ever again.

I haven't been asleep long when I'm jolted awake, realizing slightly too late that it's Olivia I heard and that in the time it's taken me to wake up she's already out the door. I vault over the couch, jump from the top of the porch to the ground and bypass the steps entirely. She's flying, halfway to the stables by the time I hit the ground. I struggle to catch her and when I do it's not pretty, more of a football tackle than a rescue, and we both end up face first on the ground. She scrambles to get up as I roll off her, but my arm is around her and she can't get far. She screams, begs, fights. It's unintelligible and heartbreaking. Wherever she is right now, she's begging for her life and she sounds very, very young.

I pull her against me, heedless of the dirt and grass underfoot, binding her with my arms so she can't flail. "It's okay, Olivia," I plead. "I promise. It's okay. No one's going to hurt you. It's just a dream."

I tell her these things again and again until the fight leaves her, until her eyes close, until it's the two of us laying in the middle of the open field late at night, one of us sound asleep. Gingerly, I lift her. Her face at rest is perhaps the sweetest thing I've ever seen in my life. As pretty as she is in real life, what I see right now is a thousand times more compelling: Olivia, safe and trusting. Trusting me of all people not to hurt her, to help her through this. I look at that face and know I'm not telling Peter anything tomorrow. I'll find a way to deal with my own demons.

Right now all I care about in the entire world is making sure we deal with hers.

Olivia

There's a knock on the door early in the morning, and Dorothy peeks in again.

"Rise and shine!" she sings. She is just too fucking cheerful for this hour of the day, equal parts irritating and endearing. "It's your big day!"

I sit up and realize that I'm still in bed. "I didn't run?" I ask, beginning to smile.

Oh my God—if Will has solved this there are no words for what a relief it will be.

Dorothy's frowning as she walks closer and reaches up, pulling a leaf out of my hair. "What's all over your shirt?" she asks. "And your legs?"

I look down. Dirt and grass stains.

Will comes to the doorway and we both look at him. He glances at my knees. "Sorry," he says. "I, um, sort of ended up tackling you in the grass."

I flinch and look down at my legs. Dorothy silently retreats.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I nod. "Just embarrassed," I sigh.

He sits in the chair across from me, hands clasped between his knees.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"Sure. It's completely normal to need your track coach to tackle you in the middle of the night to keep you from losing your scholarship. Did I hurt

you?"

"No, but I landed on you pretty hard. I was more worried about you."

"Did I say or do anything ... stupid?"

"No one is going to hold you responsible for what you do when you're not even aware you're doing it," he replies, which doesn't really answer my question.

"I just ... I don't like having this piece of me out there that even I don't know," I explain. "I do enough stupid shit when I'm conscious."

"You don't do anything stupid," he says, rising. "In fact, you're a lot more lovable asleep than you are awake."

"So you think I'm lovable?" I tease.

"Everyone is lovable. Some of us more so than others," he grumbles. "Get dressed. We're leaving in 10."

I THANK HIS MOTHER AS WE GO AND SHE PULLS ME INTO A FIERCE HUG THAT surprises me so much it nearly disables me. "I loved having you here, Olivia," she says. "Come anytime."

"Your mom is a nice woman," I tell Will in the car.

"She's the best," he agrees.

"How'd you turn out to be such an asshole?" I grin.

He rolls his eyes, but I can tell he wants to smile. "No one thinks that but you."

"You sure about that?"

He laughs. "Not entirely."

ON THE BUS RIDE TO THE MEET, MY SERENITY SLOWLY SEEPS AWAY. I GOT A GOOD night's sleep, but I still don't feel good. We arrive and discover the course is muddy, so we're wearing long spikes, which I dislike. My teeth begin to grind and I press my hands into my stomach and walk away.

It's bad.

This is bad.

It's a new course. I'm in new spikes. I ate last night.

Peter comes out to talk to us. Despite my initial chagrin at being coached

by Will instead, I've begun to suspect that, for me, he's a better fit. Peter's advice is generic. Don't go out too fast and don't get cocky when you're ahead. When he finishes up, everyone who's come out for the meet surrounds us, making me feel like I can't breathe. Their excitement just makes this thing in my stomach worse. Nicole introduces me to her parents and asks if mine are still traveling. I notice Will look over when she asks.

"Yeah," I say. "I think so."

"Must be nice," Nicole says, turning to her parents. "Finn's parents have been traveling for weeks. Why don't you guys do that?"

Her father grumbles something about having to pay for her frequent trips to Macy's and I extricate myself, breaking from the group and pacing in the field behind us. I thought escaping would make the anxiety better, but it doesn't. I slept last night and this should be an incredible day, a perfect run, but it won't be. I feel it in my bones. I've now had every benefit I've been denied at past meets and I'm still going to implode. And then what happens to this unfounded belief I had in my potential?

"This is all fucked up," I whisper to myself again and again. "This is all fucked up."

Will walks out to find me. "You look sick," he says. "Are you okay?"

I shake my head. "I have a bad feeling. You shouldn't have made me eat. God, why did I listen to you? I'm going to tank."

"Liv, everyone has a bad feeling before a race. It's called nerves."

I shake my head again. My own belief in my imminent failure is too strong to be dissuaded.

"Listen to me." He holds his hand to my shoulder, forcing me to meet his eye. "You. Have. This. You do. Just go out and run your own race. I know Peter told you all not to get cocky in the last mile, but I'm telling you different. Get cocky. Sprint. You have it. You always have it leftover when we're done and you'll have it today."

I nod. A tiny part of me is inclined to believe him.

When the gun goes off, I try to focus on what Will said to me, but instead hear my own ranting.

I feel weak.

I shouldn't have eaten.

That food is sitting in my gut just weighing me down.

The spikes are throwing me off. They don't feel right. I should have

trained in them more than I did.

Why the hell didn't Will make us train more in these conditions? It shouldn't feel this hard in the first mile.

I listen and begin to panic, until I force myself to remember what Will said. He believes I have this, and maybe he's right. That's when we get our one-mile split and I realize that we are *blazing*, these two other girls and me. It felt hard because we just ran a fast first mile, which means that no matter how bad I thought I felt, I'm performing as if I'm good.

I have it today. Whatever it is I need, I have. The moment I realize this, I break ahead and forget about everyone behind me.

I make myself do what Will said.

I run my own race, compete against my own desire to slow, to rest my legs.

With one mile left, I blow it out. I'm sprinting and I'm still *fine* when I see the finish line in the distance, when I come around the curve and hear the clang of cowbells and the shouts. That's when I know that I'm really going to do it. I blow through and the first person I look for is Will. He's already running toward me, exultant, and I feel something in my chest that pulls me toward him as well, as if we are tethered. He comes at me fast and then stops himself short, clapping me on the shoulder.

"You did it." He grins. "You broke the course record, Olivia."

I smile up at him, wishing I could say something or do something that I can't do. I want to thank him for believing in me. I want to wrap my arms around his neck and hug him the way his mother hugged me.

Instead, I stand there speechless, gratitude caught somewhere in my throat.

Will

I told Jessica that I'd head to her place after the meet, but instead I find that I am pulling up to my mother's farm, almost surprised to find myself there.

"Didn't expect to see you again today," my mother says, beaming. It saddens me how happy she is to see me when I'm already here every day. She went from a full house to living alone in three years' time.

"I can't stay long," I tell her. "Thought I'd just stop by for a second and check on the horses."

My mother knows me well. And she knows this is what I do when I need to work something out in my head.

"How did Olivia do?" she asks.

I can't stop my smile from spreading, creeping out from the corners of my mouth. "She broke the course record."

"I really liked her," she says.

This I knew. Olivia brought out the maternal in my mother the way a newborn would. She was one step away from putting Olivia in a high chair and spoon-feeding her. "No accounting for taste," I reply.

She clucks her tongue. "Now what kind of thing is that to say? She was lovely."

"She's a nuisance."

My mother glares at me in a way I haven't seen in a long time. "In what

possible way is she a nuisance?"

She's totally right, of course. Olivia wasn't a nuisance in any way. Sure, she still didn't listen for shit about anything—the horses or the dishes or even the eating, because for all her complaints she barely ate anything. But it was oddly ... easy, her being here, unexpectedly so. It felt as if she'd been here her entire life, and perhaps that's what made her dangerous. It made me let my guard down, and suddenly things like that moment in the kitchen happened. *The length of her pressed against me and that mouth of hers ripe and waiting...*

Disliking Olivia is a hell of a lot safer than the alternative.

"I thought you were going to Jessica's after the meet?" my mother asks.

I sigh. Yes, Jessica, my *girlfriend*, the one I completely forgot existed several times last night. "I'll get there."

"But it's going well?"

"It's fine. It's good."

"You've dated her for quite a while now. Don't you think it ought to be better than fine?"

"What are you getting at?" I ask tersely.

"Nothing, I just think that Jessica is a little more serious about this whole thing than you are."

"Mom, we've only dated for a year and we're both young. I've already told her I'm not getting married for a good long time."

"Just because you've said it," my mother warns, "doesn't mean she believes it."

I go to the stables, suddenly feeling like there are now too many things I have to avoid thinking about. *All of them female.*

I work until I'm too tired to think. At one time, I'd used climbing to accomplish this, but it feels self-indulgent now, with so much to be done here. By the time I emerge from my worry and begin to feel steady again, the sun is setting.

Which means I am very, very late.

JESSICA MADE DINNER. IT'S COLD.

I apologize and tell her I had to go to my mom's, which isn't technically

true, but I can't exactly explain that going to the farm makes me feel peaceful, and coming to her apartment does not.

"It's okay," she says. "I'll just warm it up."

"You didn't have to do all this. I thought we were eating out."

"We can't eat out all the time," she tsks. "You ought to let me take care of you more."

I suppose I should feel grateful, but instead the statement makes me slightly anxious. There's something a little pointed about Jessica's domesticity these days. She even offered to do my laundry a few weeks back, though I refused. I've told her so many times that I don't want to settle down. I've even implied that I'm not sure I *ever* want that.

Yet now I find myself worrying that my mom might have been right.

Olivia

I can tell something has changed when I get to the track on Monday.

It's the women's first win in over five years, and there's this buzz in all of us, a renewed dedication. Everyone works hard, pulls from a reserve we never guessed was there. It's not until practice ends, as we go to gather around Will, that all that good feeling dissipates, at least for me.

"Finn, if you take first again next week we will totally place," gushes Nicole.

I wish she hadn't said it. I guess everyone was thinking it anyway, but now it's out there and it's official. They all need me to take first and if I don't, they'll be disappointed. It's entirely on me, and I don't want it to be.

"There's a 50% chance she'll just pass out in the middle of the course instead," snorts Betsy. She's right of course, and it's probably *because* she's right that it makes me so angry.

"If that happens you could pick up the slack, right Bets?" I snap. "Oh ... No, wait, you've never placed, have you?"

"I'm not willing to become anorexic just to win some dumb race," she replies.

I laugh. "You are *far* from anorexic."

"That's enough, you two," Will says. "Olivia, I'd like to speak to you for a moment. *Now*."

If Betsy were a smarter girl, she'd wipe that smug smile off her face because she's about 30 seconds from getting it punched off.

When everyone walks away, I explode. "You *always* blame me. She started it. You heard her."

"Yeah, I heard her."

"So why am *I* the one over here?" I demand.

"Because you're the only one who's off the team if there's another incident, remember? If you're going to lead this team, you're going to have to do better. And maybe that starts with realizing that Betsy's jealous and giving her a pass."

"I don't want to lead this team," I reply. "I want them to stop depending on me."

"I know you do," he sighs, "but it's only because you're not sure they should. Well, *I'm* sure, Olivia. I'm sure they should. And if I do anything this season, it's going to be making you believe that yourself."

THE NEXT FRIDAY WE'RE ONCE AGAIN HEADING TO HIS MOTHER'S HOUSE AFTER HE gets off work. "You're sure this is okay?" I ask as he takes my overnight bag from my hand.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because it's a lot ... Your mom can't be fired up about having me there again so soon."

"Get in the car. My mother likes you. She's excited you're coming today."

I glance over at him in surprise. Will doesn't lie, I know he doesn't, but this seems hard to believe.

He sees the look I've cast his way and shrugs. "It's as much a mystery to me as it is you."

WHEN WE ARRIVE, THERE'S A BEAT-UP HONDA CIVIC IN THE DRIVEWAY THAT I DON'T recognize. I look over at Will.

"Brendan," he says, sounding not entirely pleased. "My brother."

From the little I've heard, Brendan sounds like a bit more of a wild card than Will, but then who *isn't* more of a wild card than Will? I've seen

pictures of him—a cute kid with a kind of impish smile. I get the sense that the impishness is still there, and that while Dorothy enjoys it, it's an irritant to Will. *As am I...*

Maybe Brendan and I will get along just fine.

I don't have to wait long to meet him. The man himself comes running out of the house and tackles his completely unaware older brother while I look on. Brendan is a rangier version of Will. He has the same ice blue eyes, the same light tan, the same wide mouth, but there's something boyish about him that no longer exists in Will.

Brendan jumps up and whoops, then runs in a circle shouting "Vic-tor-y! Vic-tor-y!"

"Brendan," sighs Will, climbing to his feet, "stop being an idiot and say hi to Olivia."

It's only then that Brendan seems to see me at all. "Oh. Holy shit. I mean, hi." He laughs at himself. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting you. I mean, I knew Will was bringing a student home I just didn't know it would ... Wow. I'm sorry. I'm gonna stop talking now."

"Good plan, jackass," says Will, picking my bag up and slinging it hard at Brendan, who staggers backward.

"Hey!" I object. "Don't use my bag as a weapon. What if it had been full of priceless glass objects?"

"Yeah," smirks Will, "you seem just like the type who'd collect priceless glass objects."

"I can totally see you collecting priceless glass objects, Olivia," says Brendan with a wide smile. Brendan, like his brother, is insanely hot. Also like his brother, he seems well aware of it.

"More the type to beat up priceless glass objects," mutters Will. "Put her bag in my room."

Brendan raises a brow and has a smile on his face so dirty that there's no doubt what's going through his head.

"It's not like that, dickhead," says Will, pushing me inside.

"You should come out with us," Brendan says to me, ignoring Will entirely. "We're going to Jimmy's, in town. Have you been?"

"She's not going drinking the night before a meet," snarls Will, which sort of irritates me. It's not like I was going to agree.

Brendan glances over at me, giving me another of those sly half-smiles.

“I don’t have to leave right away,” he says to his mom. “Maybe I’ll stay for dinner after all.”

“I was going to hold dinner so Olivia could go riding first,” says Dorothy.

“Cool,” says Brendan. “I’ll go with her.”

Will’s face has gone, over the course of this conversation, from its standard stern look to something far more grim. Right now he’s giving Brendan a scowl I thought he’d reserved only for me.

“You hate horseback riding,” he says.

Brendan grins. “Under the right circumstances I don’t.”

Will

I can't remember the last time I wanted to hit my brother as much as I do right now.

I've certainly had better reasons for wanting to hit him. Technically, he's not doing anything wrong, but my brother runs through pretty girls the way Starbucks runs through coffee, and he loves a challenge. And right now he's looking at Olivia like a mountain climber staring at Everest from its base.

He not only invites her out, but when she refuses (okay, I guess I actually refused on her behalf) he starts waffling about whether or not he's going to go out *at all*, when he just drove three fucking hours to see his friends, proving he still does 90% of his thinking with his dick.

"Let's go for a walk," I tell him, between clenched teeth.

"Walk?" he asks, meeting my eye. "Don't you think we should stay back and make sure our guest is comfortable?"

"Brendan," my mother sighs unhappily, "go with your brother."

I head toward the stables in silence, trying to pull my thoughts together. When he catches up with me, I round on him, any hope of diplomacy abandoned. "She's off limits, Brendan."

"Why?" he taunts. "Saving her for yourself?"

"I'm her coach, asshole."

"Exactly. So if she wants to go out with me, the road is clear, right? And

it's also none of your fucking business."

"She doesn't want to go out with you."

He arches a brow. "So now you're psychic? Because I never heard *her* say she doesn't want to go out with me."

"Leave her alone," I hiss, grabbing his collar and yanking him toward me before I'm even aware I've done it. The two of us stare at each other in shock. It's the first time since we were kids that I've even come close to threatening him, and both of us know it. Our entire lives it was me, standing between him and my father, protecting him. I have no idea why I've gotten so carried away, why the idea of him with her makes me feel crazy.

I drop my hands and back away from him. "I'm sorry. It's just ... she's been through a lot, okay? She seems tough but she isn't, not at all, and you know how you are."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you tend to tire of people pretty quickly."

"Trust me," he says in a way that makes me want to punch him all over again, "it would take a long, long time for me to tire of that girl."

The desire to hit him overwhelms me. I've always had Brendan's back. I've covered for him too many times to count over the years, but it's about to end here. "Lay a finger on her and I tell Mom you got busted for possession last year."

"You've got to be shitting me."

"Go inside, say goodbye to Mom and Olivia, and get the fuck out of here. And I'd better not see your face again until Olivia is gone."

"Seriously, bro," Brendan says, shaking his head. "What's going on with you and that girl?"

"Nothing, but she's our first shot at a title in over a decade, and I don't want anything messing that up."

He looks like he doesn't believe me. I'm not sure I believe it myself.

WHEN HE LEAVES, IT FEELS LIKE A BURDEN'S BEEN LIFTED. I IGNORE THE STRANGE look from my mother and ask Olivia if she wants to go riding. I'm not sure why I do it because I swore to myself that this time I'd be strictly professional, that I'd eat dinner with her but have no other interaction, but the

thing with Brendan got me riled up, so fuck it. I want to go riding, and for some bizarre reason, I want her to be there too.

“So that was Brendan, huh?” she asks as we walk to the stables. “You two always get along that well?”

I shrug. “We used to be close. It’s been a little tense since my dad died, I guess.”

“What changed?”

“Not him, that’s for damn sure,” I mutter. My life ended when my dad died, but Brendan is still doing his thing. Hanging with his bros, getting high, sleeping with everything that moves, doing just enough work in college to avoid getting kicked out. I had to become an adult, while it’s looking like he never will.

“My dad left a ton of debt when he died. The farm was failing and none of us knew it, so we had to give up a lot of things. Maybe I just resent the fact that I’m the only one who had to give anything up.” I don’t really know why I’m telling this to Olivia. Jessica has asked about this too, and I’ve always brushed her off.

“Did you guys ever think about selling the farm?”

“We did sell part of it. We had to. But it’s my mother’s only source of revenue, and she’s lived here her entire adult life. I can’t take that away from her. Even if she sold it, I can’t make enough as a guide or as a coach to support myself and her, plus cover Brendan’s tuition. Not to mention that it will take years to pay off the second mortgage my dad took out.”

“And you think Brendan should have dropped out of school to help?”

“No,” I sigh. “I don’t. He deserves to at least get through college. I want him to finish. It’s just that now he’s talking about all this bullshit. Auditioning for some reality TV show when he graduates, maybe going to Europe for a year. He doesn’t have a single actual goal, but he’s still not planning to come back and help.”

“While you had a goal and had to abandon it. It seems like he ought to come back.”

Except my dad never wanted Brendan to take over the farm. He wanted me to. It’s caused this rift between me and Brendan, this bitterness I can’t seem to escape. Even in death, my dad is still causing me trouble.

ONCE AGAIN THAT NIGHT, OLIVIA PICKS AT HER FOOD, PUSHING IT AROUND HER PLATE as if that's going to convince anyone over the age of five that she's actually eaten.

"You aren't eating much," my mother frets. "Is everything okay?"

"It's delicious," Olivia says. For whatever reason, that hostility that seems to mark Olivia's every interaction is completely absent when she deals with my mom. "I'm just nervous about tomorrow."

"There's nothing to be nervous about, honey," my mother soothes. "You go out and run your own race, and what happens, happens."

"That's not the way the rest of the team sees it," Olivia says. "They're looking at me like I'm about to cure cancer."

"You don't need to worry about what they think or want. Tell them if they're so desperate to go to regionals, then they should run faster."

"That's awesome, Mom," I sigh. "That's just what Olivia needs, advice on standing up for herself. Maybe you can teach her some new fighting techniques next."

My mother scowls at me but Olivia's mouth twitches with the desire to laugh.

"Are your parents coming to the meet?" my mother asks her.

Olivia grows wary. "Uh, no, we aren't close."

I look over at her. "I thought you said they were traveling."

"Yes, and their travel plans don't include a visit to me."

It's a lie, and now both of us know it.

THAT NIGHT, WHILE OLIVIA IS IN THE SHOWER, MY MOTHER CALLS TO ME FROM THE porch. "What was that today?" she asks. "The thing with Brendan."

It's an effort to make my voice sound neutral. "You saw the way he was looking at her."

"She's a beautiful girl, Will. I imagine that's how most men look at her."

"He wasn't just looking, though. You heard him. He was gonna change his plans so he could sit here and hit on her all night."

She sighs. "I don't see the harm. That's just Brendan being Brendan."

"Well, he can go 'be Brendan' around some other girl. Olivia doesn't need that shit. She has enough going on right now without adding him to the

mix.”

My mother opens her mouth as if to argue, but then leans her head back and closes her eyes. “Maybe it’s time you told Peter what’s going on with her.”

“I can’t, Mom. If Peter knows, then the school is liable if something happens to her. They’ll kick her off the team.”

“It just seems like this is too much for you to deal with.”

“I don’t know why you’d say that. I was able to stop her last weekend. I’ll be able to stop her tonight.”

She stands and kisses my cheek. “Honey,” she says, turning to go inside, “I think we both know I’m not talking about the running.”

Olivia

When Will wakes me up the next morning, he can't quite seem to meet my eye. It's almost as if he's scared of me. "Fuck," I sigh. "Something bad must have happened last night. What did I do?"

"Nothing," he replies. "I caught you before you even made it to the door." Even as he says it, though, there's something muted, reserved in his tone.

"And that's all?" I ask.

"That's all."

I still don't believe him.

THE SECOND MEET IS IN MANY WAYS A REPEAT OF THE FIRST, BUT MY FEARS ARE different. This is a more difficult course than last week's. I'm positive I haven't trained for it properly. Once again, Will is there, talking me through it, convincing me to ignore my fears and just run.

"All of this you're feeling," he says, "it's like a person running beside you, shouting shit in your ear to tear you down. But it can only change the way you run if you choose to believe it."

I'm not sure why but, this time, I listen. Maybe it's because he was right last time, or maybe it's something that goes deeper than that. If Will told me I could jump off a skyscraper and survive, I might even believe that too.

The gun goes off, and I let his words drown out my own. I outrun her, the nasty person who tells me I will fail, who is convinced that disaster lies around every corner. And when the finish line approaches, I realize that in outrunning her, I've managed to outrun the competition too.

Peter reaches me first, swooping me up in a hug. "You're gonna put our track program back on the map, young lady," he crows.

Will comes up a moment behind him, smiling with quiet pleasure, but there is worry on his face too. I suspect that whatever occurred last night (the event he claims never happened at all) is what's making him keep his distance.

Everyone on the bus is jubilant. Erin asks me to go to lunch, but I tell her I have other plans and head straight to Will's office. He's gathering his stuff when I arrive and looks surprised—and not entirely pleased—to see me.

"I want to know what happened last night," I tell him. "You're being super weird about it, so please just tell me the truth. Did I hit on you or something?"

He laughs. "*That's* what you're worried about?"

"Part of it."

"You didn't hit on me."

"So what did I do?"

His shoulders sag. "It wasn't a big deal."

Oh, Jesus. Now I know it's bad. "Then just tell me."

He exhales and runs a hand over his head. If he's trying to distract me with his biceps, this is a good way to do it. "You ... cried."

Bullshit. Of everything he could have told me, this is the hardest to believe. "I don't *cry*," I retort. I can't remember crying once, not in my entire life. I'm *unable* to cry. There have been plenty of times when I've wanted to and I just couldn't do it.

"You cried so hard I could barely understand you."

I sink into the chair behind me, gripping its handles with a force that could splinter lesser materials. In a way, I want to leave this room and forget the conversation ever occurred, but I can't stand having him know something about me that I don't.

"What did I say?"

He hesitates. "It was kind of like last time. You repeated 'I shouldn't have left' again and again."

"That doesn't make any sense," I whisper.

"Olivia, whenever I catch you, you're terrified. You're running from someone. But you also seem to feel guilty about it. And I've heard you telling people your parents are traveling for the last two months, but your grandmother is the only contact we have on file for you. Did something happen? Did you run away from home?"

My heart begins to hammer in my throat and it feels as if it's constricting me, making it impossible to take deep breaths. Somehow he knows too much, as if all the parts of me are escaping and I'm helpless to stop them.

I'm torn between a desire to flee from this conversation and a desire to fight.

Naturally, I choose option two.

"I'm allowed to keep some shit to myself," I snarl. "That's why I tell everyone they're traveling. I have no idea why people think it's okay to go around asking other people about their parents all the time anyway. And I didn't fucking run away from anything."

"Then where are your parents?" he demands, refusing to back down.

"They ditched me when I was six, and I never saw them again." I hate them for it, and hate myself for it too. If I'd been a different kid, if I'd been sweet, like Erin, maybe it would have been different.

"No siblings?"

Of all the things in the world I don't want to discuss, my brother is first. "You're no better as a therapist than that chick at the health center was if that's where you're going with this."

"You didn't answer the question."

"I had an older brother. He ran away when he was eight."

"You mean he ran away *permanently*? For good? They never found him?"

"I gotta go," I reply, jumping to my feet.

"Olivia, wait." He stands. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," I say through clenched teeth. "They were shitty parents and they did me a favor, so save your sad face for something serious."

"You don't think any of that has to do with your nightmares?" he asks.

The idea makes me feel helpless, and feeling helpless enrages me. I roll my eyes as I turn to walk out. "Does it matter if it does?"

I BARELY REMEMBER MY PARENTS.

My father is a dark shadow on the periphery of my early childhood, a thing that hung in the background as a threat more than a real person. He took me fishing once, but mostly he had a bad temper, and I stayed out of his way, relieved when he left town. At some point, he was gone, and there was a boyfriend around, a bad-tempered boyfriend. I guess my mom had a *type*.

And then, one day, there was no one.

I don't remember being left with my neighbors. I don't remember anything, really. Small snapshots of early childhood, that transition without explanation into another life, the one under my grandmother's roof.

My grandmother didn't want me. I guess I can't blame her. Who'd want some kid who wakes screaming and flailing in the middle of the night, who bolts out of the house without warning?

Her mind was already slipping, even then. She couldn't remember the name for ice cream. She'd call me Alicia, my mother's name. If I corrected her she'd usually get angry, but sometimes she would cry instead—a heartbroken sound I was desperate to avoid so I eventually stopped correcting her. She got worse, of course, and I couldn't help but wonder if it was me—the running, the nightmares, the fights at school—that had made it so. I couldn't really remember the times before her, with my parents, but it didn't seem like a mere coincidence that all the people in my life decided to leave in one way or another.

I storm out of Will's office, all my earlier goodwill toward him gone. These thoughts are always in my head but he's brought them front and center today and God, I wish he hadn't. I go to campus for dinner, feeling edgy and looking for distraction. Landon is there. He slams his tray down beside mine.

"Party tonight, future girlfriend. You in?"

I am. I'll do anything right now to be numb.

THREE HOURS LATER, THE WORLD IS A MUCH EASIER PLACE TO EXIST. WITH ENOUGH liquor in my system, everyone seems entertaining, and right now, everyone seems entertaining as hell. If Landon and his buddy Jason would stop fucking following me, I'd say tonight was almost perfect.

"Stop talking to him," says Landon the moment Jason leaves my side.

“Why exactly should I do that?” I ask. I don’t actually *want* to talk to Jason, but I’ll be damned if Landon is going to tell me not to.

“Because I’m the one who brought you here.”

“This isn’t a date, Landon,” I sigh. “I can talk to anyone I want.”

“I’m gonna beat his ass if he keeps hitting on you,” he replies. I laugh. Men are so stupid, fighting over me like there’s a chance in hell I’m going home with either one of them.

Time passes quickly, a blur of faces I don’t know but am now best friends with. Being that social is a sure sign it’s time to stop drinking, but I bravely plow on. My talk with Will is still in there, a poisonous thing in my chest and I will continue to drink until it’s forgotten entirely.

Jason appears out of nowhere. “Let’s dance,” he says. Somewhere in the back of my head, a voice tells me that Landon will be pissed, but it’s silenced by a louder voice saying that’s not my problem.

He takes my cup and puts it on the counter before he grabs both of my hands and pulls me onto the dance floor. For such a big guy he’s a surprisingly good dancer, and for such a drunk girl I’m staying surprisingly upright. I don’t really object to the way our dance turns into more of a grind within a song or two. It’s not like everyone else on the dance floor—which is actually just someone’s living room—isn’t doing the same thing.

And then I’m knocked backward, falling into other dancers, and Landon is on top of Jason. I regain my balance and stand there, surprised and mildly amused, watching Landon and the other idiot beat the shit out of each other.

“Do you always start this much trouble?” says the guy behind me. He’s hot. Way hotter than either Landon or Justin.

I grin at him over my shoulder. “Always.”

“C’mon,” he says, pressing his hand to the small of my back. He leads me into the yard, grabbing us more beer on the way.

His name is Evan, and I find something about him specifically appealing. He’s tall and well-built—too muscular to run track but too lean to play football. Sort of like Will.

One minute we’re in the backyard talking and the next we’re in someone’s room. I guess I’ve had more to drink than I thought, but that’s okay. There’s a very specific memory I need to rid myself of, a specific memory that won’t go away no matter what I do to excise it, so my aim now is to replace. Evan kisses me and I feel nothing. His hand slides under my

shirt, into my bra, and I wait for it to end, like sitting through a movie you really aren't enjoying. My satisfaction only comes from how much progress we've made, how close it is to being over. And then his hand moves to my jeans and I fly off the bed, panicked.

"I'm sorry," he says, his eyes wide with surprise. "I thought it was okay."

"I can't," I gasp. "I'm sorry. I thought I could, but I can't."

HE WAS NICE ABOUT IT. FAR NICER THAN MARK BELL WOULD HAVE BEEN UNDER THE same circumstances. But then Mark didn't ask.

And he didn't stop until I made him.

Will

I can't shake what Olivia told me after the meet. How could her parents have done that to a six-year-old? I'm furious at people I've never met because they created the mess she's in now. *It's their fault* she's having these nightmares, that she's putting her life at risk when she has one. *It's their fault* she's forced to survive off stipends and loans, hoping to God she can hold on to her scholarship.

Jessica and I go out to dinner then watch TV after. "You're distracted," she says. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," I lie. "Just a long day."

But that's not really it. I'm pissed off on Olivia's behalf, but it's more than that. I feel oddly unsatisfied tonight. Jessica and I ate at a restaurant I chose and are now watching a movie I've been wanting to see, but it feels empty, like a meal that can't satisfy me no matter how much I consume.

And it wasn't like that last night.

I bickered with Olivia while we watched a TV show I didn't want to watch in the first place, and when it was time to go to sleep, I wished it wasn't. But right now, with my girlfriend, I just want the night to be over.

LATER WE'RE IN BED AND JESSICA'S BENEATH ME. I'M TRYING TO FOCUS ON HER BUT

every time I close my eyes all I see is Olivia, asleep face down in my bed, the sheet twisted around her waist, her hair spread over my pillow, her back bare.

The moment she sat up and the sheet slid away.

That last image appears unbidden and I finish with a hoarse cry of surprise, ashamed of myself even as it happens.

Jessica curls up against my side, but it's Olivia in my head once more as I remember last night, the way it felt to have her tucked in my arms. I stayed with her until her tears stopped, and it seemed like the right thing to do even though, at the very same moment, it seemed as wrong as anything I'd ever done in my life.

Because I liked it.

Because I wanted to stay.

And right now, with Jessica, I'm counting the seconds until I can leave. The same way I always do.

AFTER PRACTICE ON MONDAY, I GET A TEXT FROM JEFF JORDAN, ONE OF THE assistant football coaches. He needs to "chat". *Fuck*. A meeting with one of the football coaches is never good. They never want to give you anything, and they're often looking to take something away. And the sad truth is that at this school—at almost any school—football trumps track every time.

"We had a fight this weekend," he tells me instead. "Two players. Our defensive end is out the rest of the season with a broken hand."

"Yeah?" I'm still not seeing what this could possibly have to do with me, which of our meager resources he's going to ask us to give up to fix this.

"Apparently it was over one of your girls."

Before he's said another word, I know *exactly* which girl he's talking about.

He tells me the version he's heard from members of the team: Olivia, bouncing back and forth between a running back and a defensive end, laughing when they got mad at each other, dirty dancing with the one who *wasn't* her date. Sure, the story is one-sided. Sure, I should hear Olivia's version. Except it's so goddamn easy to imagine her laughing about it, to imagine her knowing good and well she was causing a problem and giving them both that insouciant little smirk she gives when she wants you to

understand you're not the boss of her.

And none of it is nearly as infuriating as the story's conclusion, in which Olivia takes off with some other guy at the end. For some reason, it's *this* that truly has me seeing red. She *left* with one of them? What the hell is she thinking? Did she even know the guy?

"Now I've got one guy out, and half the team taking sides. It's a complete clusterfuck."

As is everything involving Olivia Finnegan. *Everything*.

"I'm sorry, Jeff," I say through gritted teeth, "but there's not much I can do about it at this point."

"Just keep her away from my team, okay? I have no idea who this girl is or what's so magical about her, but I don't need any more of my guys on the bench this season."

If this were about any other girl on the team I'd be pissed at him for pinning the blame on her. I'd point out that maybe he should be discussing this with the drunk assholes who did the fighting. But instead I'm fucking enraged at Olivia myself, and I'm pretty sure it's not for the right reasons.

Olivia

I'm summoned to Will's office on Monday afternoon, which can't possibly be a good thing.

"I've been hearing some stories," he begins, leaning back in his chair. "Big fight this weekend. Over a girl."

I roll my eyes. "I wasn't fighting over a girl if that's what you're accusing me of. I don't swing that way."

"I'm glad you find this so amusing, Olivia," he says, his eyes narrowed. "Because the story I'm hearing is this girl at the party was another athlete, and she was kind of encouraging both of these guys, kind of egging them on. And they're getting drunker and drunker, and so is she, and she just thinks the whole thing is funny, the way these two guys clearly want to beat the shit out of each other. And she just keeps encouraging it until it finally happens. And then she *leaves* with someone else. So I hear this story and the first thing I think—the *very first thing*—is 'please don't let Olivia be the girl.'"

"Seems sort of unfair, the way you assume the girl was me."

"The girl was you, Olivia."

"Okay, fine. So what? They weren't on the track team."

"Because we are all part of a larger team! What don't you get about that? We all work on behalf of the school, so when you mess with one part of that, it has repercussions everywhere. And now I've got the football coaches

breathing down my neck because one of their guys has to sit on the bench all season with a busted hand."

I slouch in my seat. "I didn't *tell* them to fight," I mutter. "And if you ask me, this is all pretty misogynistic on your part. Two grown men decide to pummel the shit out of each other over some girl who isn't interested in either of them and she's the one at fault?"

"I'm not saying you're at fault, but you sure weren't trying to help the situation either, were you?"

"Oh my God. Big fucking deal," I say with an exaggerated exhale. "I'd just had too much to drink."

"And that's the other thing. You weigh next-to-nothing soaking wet. So don't you think it's maybe not the greatest idea to get completely trashed at a party with a bunch of testosterone-fueled guys who are more than twice your weight?"

"I can take care of myself."

"Yeah? And how did taking care of yourself work out for you at your last school?"

My whole body tightens like it's imploding. It makes me hate myself, the decisions I sometimes make and how stupid and unjustifiable they are. And I hate him even more for calling me on them. "You've made your point. Are we done here?"

"Olivia, you're going to do what you're going to do. But I'd better not hear another 'Olivia was so fucked up' story for the rest of your tenure here."

I stand and walk out without saying a word because, just like the nightmares, there's not a chance in the world I can make him a promise like that.

FOR THE REST OF THE WEEK, WILL IS UNREASONABLY RUDE TO ME. HE'S ANGRY AND critical and doesn't smile at me once. I think he'd like me to just disappear.

The whole thing is ridiculous. Okay, maybe I sort of enjoyed their idiocy at the party. That doesn't make me evil. How was I supposed to know one of them would wind up with a broken hand?

On Friday morning, I'm eating when a tray slides next to mine. For one horrible moment, I worry that it's Landon or Jason. But it's not. It's Evan,

which is almost worse. Sure, he was nice about everything that night but it's awkward. I'm embarrassed by the way I freaked out if nothing else.

"I've been looking for you," he says.

"Why?" I ask coldly.

He grins, not dissuaded at all by my chilly reception. He's really hot. I thought maybe my memory was beer-influenced, but it wasn't. His black hair is cut almost military short, highlighting the structure of his face—hard jaw, nice mouth, mischievous eyes. "You're much nicer when you've had a bunch of beer."

"Everyone is nicer when they've had a bunch of beer," I retort, returning to my newspaper. "What do you want?"

"I want to take you out," he says.

"We tried that already, remember?"

"That wasn't taking you out. That was hooking up."

"Let's cut to the chase," I say bluntly, lifting my head. "You seem like a nice enough guy, but the truth of the matter is that you're only here because you're hoping if you buy me dinner I'll sleep with you."

"That is not even vaguely close to the truth," he says, and I have to admit he looks a little offended. "How about this: go out with me, on a real date, and I won't even try to kiss you at the end of it."

"What would you get out of it?" I ask.

"Finn, you're the hottest girl on this campus. Hell, you've got to be the hottest girl in the state for that matter. And you're pretty fun when you're not telling me to fuck off. That's what I'd get out of it."

"I don't really date."

"Why not?"

"It's just not my thing."

"You don't like food?" he asks. "You don't like movies? Going to see a band?"

I shrug. "I suppose."

"So are you saying that you're positive you'd have less fun doing them with me than you would doing them alone? Like tomorrow night, for instance, would you have more fun making ramen noodles in your apartment and watching *Project Runway* than you would going to a restaurant with me?"

"I don't watch *Project Runway*."

He laughs. "You're avoiding the question."

I almost smile. "I'll have to think about it."

He starts eating. "You think. I'm just gonna eat my breakfast."

"I didn't mean I was going to think about it *now*," I argue. "It's not a snap decision."

"Well, I'm still going to eat here. So just pretend I'm your buddy. Your super-hot buddy who you secretly want to date."

I allow myself a small laugh. I'm not going out with him. *I'm not*. But I can't say it's the worst offer I've ever heard.

Will

I was out of line. My anger, my reaction ...

It was entirely wrong.

I know this because I've forced myself to imagine it, and if it were Betsy or Hannah or any other girl on the team who got drunk and caused a fight, and I know my reaction wouldn't have been the same. I know I'd have put the blame squarely where it lies: with the two idiots who fought. But it wasn't Betsy or Hannah, it was Olivia, who seems to do something to me that no one else does. The part that angered me most didn't involve the fight. It involved her leaving with someone.

I know I need to pull back, and I spend the rest of the week doing just that. I don't speak to her unless I have to. I don't even *look* at her unless I have to. Maybe I'm doing her a disservice as her coach, by not spending the same amount of time on her. But I'm doing her a greater disservice by getting invested in the wrong way.

By the next week, however, she makes sure I can't ignore her anymore.

On Tuesday afternoon, I can tell she's off. She gets through four 800s but there's something distant in her face, fading. She was tired at this morning's workout too. There's a look on her face on days like this, days when she's pushed herself beyond what her body is willing to provide, and it's there now. Grim determination, the face of someone who would rather die than give up.

At the end of the fifth 800, I can no longer stand to watch. I call out to her, she turns toward me, and I know by the panicked look in her eyes as they meet mine and the way the color has left her face that she's going to pass out. I'm sprinting toward her before she's even begun to fall.

She collapses right where she stands. I was worried the last time this happened, but now it's a different sort of thing, bordering on panic. I know she's only fainted, but a million other possibilities run through my head anyway. The whole team is hovering around her when she finally opens her eyes.

"Olivia, do you know where you are?"

"Yes," she groans.

"Who's the current President?"

"Justin Bieber," she replies. Her eyes close. "I'm fine. Let me up."

I put Betsy in charge and take Olivia to my office so I can clean off her cuts.

"You're having a bad week," I tell her as I tape off her knee.

"No shit."

"I guess the question I really want to ask is *why* are you having a bad week? Are you stressed about the meet?"

She sighs, staring out the window over my shoulder. "Everyone assumes I'll take first now."

I'd like to tell her she's wrong, but she's not. Olivia's accomplishments are no longer a surprise, a thrill. They're expected, and as hostile as she tends to be, I know that she doesn't like disappointing people.

"Is that it? Or are you worried because you won't be at my mom's?" Our next meet is too far for a day trip, which means that we'll be in a hotel the night before, away from the safety of my mother's house.

She sighs. "A little."

It's a lot.

Everything about her posture is tense as she answers, as if she's trying to compress the truth inside herself.

"What normally happens when you're in a hotel? You must have dealt with this before."

"I try not to fall asleep."

No wonder her performance has been so hit or miss through college. "How do you do that if the lights are off and you've got someone in the bed

next to yours?"

A flush ghosts her cheekbones, which surprises me. I didn't think she was capable of being embarrassed. "I usually tell whoever I'm rooming with that I'm sneaking out."

My next question sounds angrier than it should. "To do *what*?"

"To go serve food to the homeless," she snaps. "What do you think? I let them think I'm staying with one of the guys."

"And do you?"

"What good would that do? You think I'm any less likely to run from a guy's room than I am from my own?"

A tightness I wasn't even aware of seems to release in that moment, just a little. "So what do you do?"

"I go outside and walk to keep myself awake. If I can find a place that's open all night, I'll go there and hang out. When I start to fall asleep, I start walking again."

"Olivia, walking all night and staying up all night aren't much better before a meet than a six-mile run."

"Yeah, I know that. But they *are* better than being brought back by the cops or missing the meet entirely because I'm lost, or having my roommate watch me tear screaming out of the room in the middle of the night."

"Well you can't do that this weekend."

"So what's your grand plan, Will?" she scoffs. "You gonna tie me to the bed? Because I'll warn you in advance I really, really like that."

Thank God I'm sitting behind a desk right now because there's definitely a part of me that reacts to that as if I'm not her coach and she's not off limits.

"No," I say, closing my eyes and trying to push the image from my brain. "Better. You're going to room with my mom."

Olivia

At first, I refuse. The idea of Dorothy being the victim of my craziness when I'm not even aware of what's happening horrifies me. Eventually, he convinces me by promising that he'll be in the adjoining room and his mother will make no effort to stop me. I appreciate what they're doing for me, I really do, but it still blows to have the rest of the team think I'm rooming with Dorothy because of my bad reputation.

"That completely sucks," says Erin. "You started one fight. That doesn't mean you need a chaperone."

"It doesn't matter," I sigh. "It's not like we were going to sit around braiding each other's hair and talking about boys."

"I'd planned to braid yours." She grins. "And I *always* talk about boys." I half-smirk. "Then maybe I'm glad I'm rooming with Mrs. Langstrom."

BROFTON PLANTS HIS COCKY ASS BESIDE ME THAT MORNING ON THE BUS, EDGING OUT Reed Loughlin, who'd just asked if the seat was free. And that's fine. I have no problem putting an asshole like Brofton in his place, but I'm worried Reed's got a little crush, and that's harder to deal with.

"Heard you're staying with Will's mom," smirks Brofton. "So we'll need to be really quiet when I come to your room."

"If you were in my room, I guarantee I'd be quiet. I'd probably sleep right through it."

"Keep giving me something to prove, Finn. It's just going to make it that much better when you're screaming my name."

"Only thing I'd be screaming for with you is a magnifying glass," I reply. Reed and Erin crack up, but Will's shoulders tense, which tells me he's listening and he's not happy. Fuck him. I'm not a nun. I didn't take an oath of celibacy to be on this team.

Fortunately for Will, Reed changes the subject. "Are your parents coming in, Finn?" he asks.

Before I can answer, Betsy chimes in. "Finn's parents never come. I guess they like her about as much as everyone else does."

"I'm surprised your parents bother," I retort, "seeing as how you've never placed."

"That's enough," Will intones without ever turning his head. I don't appreciate him intervening like he's our fucking dad, but I'm consoled by how pissed off Betsy looks right now. I give her a big grin and shoot her the finger before I turn around in my seat.

WHEN WE ARRIVE, ERIN'S PARENTS ARE WAITING WITH THEIR WIDE SMILES AND THEIR bright eyes. I want to resent it, but oddly I don't. I like Erin. I'm jealous, yes, but I still wouldn't want to take this away from her. I know that somewhere deep inside I've looked at these situations and felt that something was taken from me, as if every set of proud, involved parents could have been mine if they didn't belong to someone else, as ridiculous as that is. But even if it were true, I would never want Erin to be alone like me. She's too sweet, too soft. If one of us had to draw a short straw, it's best that it was me.

Her parents invite me out to dinner with them. I agree, feeling oddly chagrined that I won't be eating with Dorothy and Will, which makes absolutely no sense. Why would I *want* to eat with my dickhead coach and his mother for Christ's sake? I shower and blow out my hair, put on a little make-up, skinny jeans, and my favorite royal blue blouse.

"Don't you look cute?" Dorothy smiles. "Where are you off to?"

Just then, Will knocks on the door. His face seems to empty, go blank, for

a moment, as he looks at me, as if he didn't expect to find me here at all.

"You guys ready to go to dinner?" he asks.

"Erin invited me to go out to eat with her and her parents."

His mouth goes into a tight line. "Not happening."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't trust you enough to let you go to dinner with Erin."

"Seriously?" I snap. "How much trouble do you think I can get into between here and Erin's room?"

"Plenty," he retorts, "but that's not what I'm concerned about. I don't trust you to eat."

"I'll eat. I don't need a babysitter."

"I had to force feed you *last week*. But suddenly you've got it all under control?"

"If I'm telling you I'll eat, I'll eat."

"Fine, I'll give you two choices. One, you tell Erin I said you couldn't go. Or two, you write down every bite of food you put in your mouth and Erin's parents come here personally and vouch for the fact that it's true."

"Will," his mother says softly.

"No, Mom," he snaps. "Do *not* take her side. I've had to watch her pass out one too many times and I'm not watching it tomorrow too."

When the door slams behind him I turn, jaw agape, to Dorothy. I'm livid, and I expect to her to be as well. But she's got a small smile on her face instead, the kind people get when they're looking at a puppy or a newborn.

"You *support* this?" I demand. "He's being completely unreasonable! You can't possibly think he's right?"

"No," she says, "but I think he cares. And it's been a long time since I've seen my boy care about anything."

Something seems to flip in my stomach at her words, nauseating and hopeful at once, but I cling to my anger instead. I know well enough that feeling hopeful about anything is always a dead end.

Will

I'm not sure why I did it. I guess I just assumed she'd be eating with us. And when I saw her all dressed up and discovered she had other plans, I was weirdly – I don't know exactly what it was. Angry? Disappointed?

Whatever it was, it was illogical and I should have gone about it another way. I could have insisted that she eat a decent breakfast, or even have a snack when she came back to the room, but instead I behaved like a controlling dick, which has led us to the present moment: a dinner where Peter and my mother chitchat away while Olivia and I scowl at each other across the table in silence.

I stop her before she goes into my mother's room when the meal is over. "I'm sorry," I tell her.

"For what?" she demands.

"Tonight. I was out of line and I should have handled it better."

Her eyes flutter open in surprise, and then her mouth turns down at the corners unhappily and she looks away. Her awkwardness is something I could easily have predicted. When she feels threatened or mistreated, no one is more sure on their feet than Olivia, but show her the smallest amount of kindness and it's as if she's on a foreign planet.

It's still fairly early but my mom keeps farm hours – a prompt bedtime, up before the sun. She'll want to sleep soon but Olivia is far too nervous

about tomorrow to lie down just yet.

I go to our shared door. My mother isn't there, so she must be in the bathroom. "My mom goes to bed pretty early, so I guess you can watch TV in here," I sigh.

"Don't do me any favors," she says with a roll of her eyes. "You make it sound like I'm someone's pet ferret you have to watch."

"Olivia, it's not that, it's just ..." I stop and pinch the bridge of my nose. "I don't like breaking the rules."

"There's a rule against watching TV?"

"In my room?" I laugh. "Yeah, there's a rule."

She follows me and stretches out in the double bed beside mine. We end up watching the last 45 minutes of some movie I'm completely incapable of focusing on. There are a lot of explosions, which I'm a fan of, but every time she moves I grow aware of her to the exclusion of all else.

She changed into a T-shirt and shorts earlier, so I can't get her endless legs out of my peripheral view, no matter which direction I shift. And then she moves, and her T-shirt rides up, revealing a swath of toned stomach and I have to stifle a groan.

I had it pretty easy in high school and college. If I wanted something from a girl, I almost always got it. This must be my karmic payoff, because I don't think I've ever wanted something quite this much, yet I'm *absolutely* not allowed to have it.

When the movie ends, some trivia show comes on and we watch that too. The guy walks away with over \$500,000, even though Olivia and I answered the questions before he did.

"We totally could've taken him," she says sleepily, rolling over on the pillow to face me. Her shirt rides up again and it takes almost superhuman restraint not to look.

"Maybe you should go on game shows if the running thing doesn't work out."

She smiles. "Maybe I will."

"What would you do if you won that money?"

"Spend it all on hookers and blow."

"No, seriously, what would you do? Would you stay in school? Would you keep running?"

She's quiet for so long that I begin to think she won't answer. "I'd find

my brother,” she finally says.

Her words take my insides and twist them in a tight grip. I don’t want to know this. I don’t want to know anything more about the soft side of Olivia than I do at the moment. I already know far too much.

“You realize you could probably find him just by going online,” I tell her.

She shakes her head, a motion so small it’s as if it wasn’t meant for me. “He could’ve found me if he’d wanted to.”

“So why do you need the money?” I ask.

“I just want to make sure he has what he needs,” she says quietly.

The look on her face when she speaks hurts my chest. “Do you really believe he’s still alive, Olivia?” I ask.

She looks away from me, her voice growing hard and intent. “My brother is crazy smart. And he was fast. He could outrun anyone. That’s how I know he got away.”

“Got away from what?”

“Anything that tried to stop him.”

“Like the thing you have nightmares about? Is that the thing?” I ask.

“He got away,” she says with finality, jumping to her feet, and she leaves the room.

After she leaves, I struggle to fall asleep. The look on her face and her insistence that her brother is okay haunt me. The way she clings to the idea feels desperate, perhaps even childlike. If I were to guess, I’d say that the reason she hasn’t looked for him has nothing to do with the fact that he doesn’t want her.

I’m still awake hours later, thinking about it. I’ve had my share of hard knocks. Everyone has. But nothing compared to what she’s suffered. I wish I could fix it. I wish I could fix every single wrong that’s been done to her. Get her out of that God-awful neighborhood, make the nightmares end, protect her from all the bad things that might lie in wait for her.

I wander into the room she shares with my mother and sit quietly at the desk. She looks so innocent when she’s asleep with her long lashes fanning her cheeks, her mouth slightly open.

“Why are you still up?” my mother asks.

“Worried,” I reply.

“She’s a sweet girl,” my mother sighs. “And she’s the only one who doesn’t realize it.”

My mother is right. Olivia seems to see only the worst things in herself. She believes she deserves nothing from anyone, yet something about her makes me want to give her everything.

"I wish I could fix things for her," I tell my mother.

"You're doing your best," she replies. "But for now you really need to get some sleep."

"I can't. I'm too worried I won't catch her in time if I'm in the other room."

My mother hesitates, and then climbs to her feet. "Take my bed," she says. "And I'll go sleep in your room."

"I don't know," I answer. "I realize I'm already breaking rules, but that seems so ..."

"You have her best interests at heart," she says. "I wouldn't suggest it if I thought for a moment it was truly wrong."

I'm just dozing off when Olivia begins to talk. Unintelligible words that sound young and distraught. The minute she flings the covers off I'm out of bed and beside her, my arm anchoring her while I do my best to convince her she's okay. I shush her again and again, promising her she's safe.

"It's just a dream. You're okay."

And something miraculous happens. She doesn't fight me. She jolts for a moment as if she's been shocked, and then she curls into me, her head pressed to my chest, her hands fisted tightly in my shirt as she cries, still sound asleep.

I hold her until her tears slow and then cease, and then something slightly less miraculous but still surprising happens.

I fall asleep too.

Olivia

Holy shit.

Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit.

Will Langstrom is standing in front of me, shirtless.

I'm gawking, and that probably needs to stop. It's not like I didn't *assume* he'd look fan-freaking-tastic without a shirt, but he exceeds anything I was previously capable of imagining. Yeah, fine, I admit it, I occasionally imagine things with him, and they're usually R-rated. Except when I imagine him there isn't an alarm going off in the background and he doesn't have a pillow clutched to his stomach or a panicked look on his face like he has right now.

"Why are you in my room?" I ask.

His expression grows surly. "Waking your ass up," he growls.

"Good morning to you too," I snap, rolling over and putting the pillow over my head. "And I've seen you in shorts before, dummy. What's with the sudden modesty?"

He makes a testy noise that I ignore and heads toward his room.

"Did she run?" asks Dorothy, passing Will as she comes in.

"She never left the bed," he replies, hurrying away with that pillow still clutched against him. There's something about his phrasing that I find suspect, but I let it go. I didn't run. Before a big meet. Before a meet I was

sick with nerves over.

“Wait. Why were you just coming in from Will’s room?” I ask Dorothy.
“Did you sleep in there?”

Her eyes widen. “He was worried about you, so he took my bed and I took his.”

Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I remember the feel of his arms around me, of curling into a warm chest in the middle of the night.

Maybe another dream ...

Or maybe not.

WHEN WE ARRIVE ON THE COURSE, WILL WALKS WITH ME THROUGH THE BACK FIELD and gives me his standard pep talk, which, being tailored to me, is less “pep” and more “stop being insane.” He does this despite the fact that at this very moment he has a thousand other things to do and people to deal with, despite the fact that a young male coach wandering off with one particular female student is bound to draw suspicion.

I know it looks bad that he spends so much time with me. I know he’s put his job on the line again and again when I’ve done nothing but give him grief in return.

Today I want to give him the only thing I’m capable of giving. I’m going to win.

I take off too fast at the sound of the gun, feel that itching in my chest far too early, yet I keep going. I will win for him if it kills me. That voice in the back of my head tells me I’m going to lose if I keep going like this, that I’ll never make it, but I silently tell her to shut the fuck up.

I cross the finish line going so fast that I run an extra 20 feet trying to stop, like a car with bad brakes. This time it's him, not Peter, who catches me, holding me by the shoulders so I don't collapse. "Another record, Liv," he whispers, just as Peter runs over.

I'm happy, but this time my happiness is entirely for him.

A TEAM TAKES FIRST BY WEIGHTING THE SCORES OF ITS RUNNERS. TODAY WE manage to place, coming in second for the first time in a decade. Everyone is

ecstatic. Brofton picks me up on his shoulder and spins me around and I actually laugh without threatening to hit him. He sets me down as we line up to climb on the bus, and I'm so dizzy I stumble into Erin.

"Watch it," she says to Brofton. "She's our ticket to regionals. I want you treating her like a delicate flower from now on."

"Yeah," I laugh, "that's me. A fragile little flower."

Betsy pushes forward, looking oddly annoyed given that we just placed. "If *someone* hadn't come in sixteenth," she sneers at Erin, "we might have taken first today."

I hate the way her words have leached all the joy from Erin's face. "We'd have won if you'd placed better too," I snap.

What happens next occurs so quickly that I have little memory of it. One minute I am speaking, and the next she's pushed me so hard that when my face hits the side of the bus, I'm blinded momentarily by the pain. And then I'm on the ground, with Betsy pinned beneath me. There's blood pouring from her nose and someone's arms tight around me from behind, a straitjacket.

"Liv!" shouts Will. "Stop!"

It's only then that I realize what I've done.

Somehow I've lost the moments that occurred between me standing beside the bus and now, but I've done something bad. Will's arms are around me, holding me back as he pulls me off of Betsy. She gets off the ground while all of my teammates, and Peter, look at us in shock.

"What the hell just happened? We took second and you," Will says turning to me in amazement, "you *won*. So why the hell are you fighting?"

"She assaulted me!" screams Betsy. "You said she got one chance and she just blew it!"

"It was self-defense," Brofton interrupts. "I saw the whole thing. Betsy slammed Finn's head into the side of the bus."

"Finn was just defending me," Erin tells Will rapidly, "but she shouldn't have bothered. Everyone knows you're just jealous, Betsy."

I can see the fear in all of their faces. I had my one shot, and now I've blown it. Hannah, Nicole, Erin – they look at me with some mixture of desperation and resignation, wanting to fix it and knowing it's too late.

"You promised she wouldn't hurt anybody," Betsy argues, holding her shirt to her nose.

"Everyone on the bus," Will says. "We'll discuss this when we get back."

It's a silent, painful ride home. Betsy sitting there with a smug smile I plan to beat off her face as soon as there is no staff around, Erin looking wan and worried. I'm going to lose my scholarship. It's not like I don't have a backup plan. I do, even if it's a shitty one. I can sell enough of my stuff to get a bus ticket to Seattle, and I'll train there. The idea once even appealed to me, but now it seems empty.

By the time we get back to campus, I'm as broken and weary as I've ever felt, while Betsy is jubilant and not even trying to hide it. The two of us follow Will to his office, and he takes Betsy in first. She leaves a minute later looking chastened but then shoots me a nastily triumphant look. No matter what they did to her, she knows I'll get worse.

I go in and Will's got his head in his hands. He looks as beaten as I feel. And for one of the first times in my life, I feel guilty.

"You're a smart girl," he says. "Don't you see through her?"

"See through what?"

"She's *trying* to get you kicked out. She's been pissed off and jealous since you arrived. You took her spot on the team. She was the star, and now it's you by a mile, and she's pissed. You've got to be smarter."

"Wait. Does that mean you're not kicking me out?"

"No," he sighs wearily. "I'm not kicking you out."

"Why?" I breathe. "What happened to the 'one more violent outburst' thing?"

"Why the hell are you arguing with me about this?" he demands. "Did you *want* to be kicked out?"

"No, of course not. I just ... I just don't get it."

"But it can't happen again. You can't let her bait you."

"She wasn't trying to bait me," I argue. "She was just being a bitch to Erin."

"Yes, because she knew she'd get a response from *you* by going after Erin. I can justify this one as self-defense, but it's a stretch. Next time something happens, even if she hits you, you've got to hold back."

I exhale. "I don't think I can promise you that."

"Why the hell not?" he demands. "How many chances do I have to give you?"

"Because I black out or something," I tell him reluctantly. "Yes, I'm even

weirder than you already thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what I did today. I don’t remember anything from the moment she pushed me until the moment you were pulling me off of her. None of it. I don’t even know how I got her on the ground. I saw her bleeding and didn’t even realize I was the one who’d done it until you yelled at me.”

"Jesus, Liv," he breathes. "So has this happened before?"

I nod. It’s happened plenty. It’s a wonder I haven’t killed anyone.

“Is that what happened with Mark Bell?” he asks.

I sigh. “Sort of.”

“‘Sort of’?”

“I mean I remember fighting him and I remember seeing the bat. I don’t remember the rest.”

“Wait. What do you mean by ‘fighting him’? I thought you just attacked him unprovoked.”

“Why would I attack him without a reason? Even *I’m* not that psychotic.”

Will’s face grows still, wary. “Did he do something to you?”

I bite down on the inside of my cheek. What happened with Mark Bell isn’t something I need to share. It’s not like anyone would believe me anyway. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“That’s not what I asked you,” he says between clenched teeth. “I want to know exactly what he did.”

I roll my eyes as if it doesn’t matter. But the truth is that it does matter, to me, and he’ll be the only person alive to whom I’ve told the truth. “He found out about the nightmares. He offered to stay with me the night before a meet to keep me from running.”

Will’s face has fallen just a little. Anyone can see where this story is going. Anyone could have seen it then too, aside from me. It was so fucking stupid to trust Mark, and I’m not sure why I did. Maybe because I just wanted, so badly, to think there was a solution. “I’m sure you can figure out the rest,” I sigh.

His mouth opens and it takes a second for any words to emerge. “He *raped* you?”

“He *tried*,” I reply. “That’s where the bat came in.”

“Olivia,” he groans, putting his head in his hands. “Did you tell the school that?”

I laugh. "Right. I was sleeping in his apartment and I had the worst reputation in the history of the school's track team. Who the hell would believe it was rape?"

"Even if you'd been *dating* him you'd still have been allowed to say no."

"I could have had the whole thing on film and no one would've sided with me, Will. I had a bad reputation and was about to lose my scholarship anyway. Mark is the star of the team. It was pretty obvious how it would all go down."

Mark even had the gall to press charges against me, which he only dropped when I told him I'd gone to the hospital that night and had everything documented. I didn't really go, of course. A few bruises and some torn clothes weren't proof of anything, but he didn't know that.

He sits back in his seat, looking helpless and stunned. "This is insane. All of it. You should still be there, and that asshole should be in prison."

"I wasn't going to be there in any case. No way was I getting another year out of that scholarship."

"But that's not the point!" he cries. "You left there letting hundreds of people think you're some sociopath who goes around swinging a bat!"

"I *am* a sociopath who goes around swinging a bat, Will," I retort. "I don't remember *anything* after I saw that bat in the corner, so why shouldn't they think it?"

"That's what this is really about then," he says, looking grim. "You hate that you did it. You feel guilty it went as far as it did and this is how you're trying to pay for it."

There's something in his words that stings, and I don't like it. "If you're done with the analysis, Dr. Langstrom, I think I'm gonna take off."

"How's your cheek?" he asks.

I shrug. "Fine, I guess."

"You need to go get it checked out."

I shrug again. "I think it's okay."

"Right," he smirks. "I forgot about that medical degree of yours." He gets up and kneels in front of me. "This might hurt a little," he warns. "Let me just make sure it's not broken."

I close my eyes because he's too near. His warm mouth and the curves of his face and his ungiving jaw make me feel slightly unhinged, when he's this close by. The pad of his thumb presses to my skin. He stops when I wince in

pain, holding his hand there, waiting for me. He continues, and just the brush of his skin against mine awakens other things. Things I'm not supposed to feel. My eyes open of their own accord and lock with his. His hand holds my face, his mouth slightly ajar as he looks at mine, both of us breathing quickly. I want him to kiss me. I want him to kiss me so badly that my blood starts to sing, and all logic goes rushing from my brain. It sits between us, quicksand that drags us under so fast that fighting it seems impossible. He leans toward me, for just a second, before his hand falls away suddenly and he practically jumps backward.

"Nothing is broken," he says roughly. "Just ice it over the weekend, okay?"

I practically run from the office. The idea of losing my scholarship was scary, but whatever just transpired between Will and me is a thousand times worse.

Will

I refuse to think about what just happened.

Nothing happened, nothing at all.

We had a talk, I checked out her cheekbone, she left to spend her weekend however she sees fit and I am doing the same.

Nothing happened.

Yeah, the nothing that happened maybe leads me to work a little extra at the farm, leads me to be late getting to Jessica's again, makes me so distracted that I can barely carry on a conversation all weekend ... but that doesn't change the fact that *nothing happened*.

I've been with plenty of pretty girls. Jessica was hands-down the best-looking girl at my high school. But all of them felt ... *replaceable*. Olivia, in my office, wasn't replaceable. The need for her was sharp, urgent, painful, unlike anything I'd ever felt. At that moment, there was nothing in the entire damn world I wanted more than her. And it felt like there was nothing else I would *ever* want. It was insane and I'm taking it for the warning it was.

I need to stay away from her.

I IGNORE HER ON MONDAY. IT'S THE BEST THING FOR EVERYONE. I'LL IGNORE HER, and she'll get pissed off and things will feel totally normal again. I just hope

it happens sooner rather than later because all I can think about is her mouth inches from mine and the surprise of discovering there were a thousand things I wanted to take and do, and I only wanted those things from her.

I send them out on a six-mile run and try not to think about it. I will fix this somehow. Next weekend, when she's staying at my mom's, I'll ... I don't know what I'll do. I have five days to figure it out, but I *can't* be alone with her again.

I'm just about to head out after the team when two police officers walk on the track.

I know who they are here for.

Olivia

I take off for my run on Monday with Will treating me like a communicable disease, as if the shit in his office was entirely my doing, and I return with him thinking I'm a criminal.

The police are waiting to see me in Peter's office. "Do you have any idea what this is about?" he asks as we walk inside.

"No," I say stonily.

"I don't want to be blindsided, Olivia. If you've done something please tell me now."

"Maybe it's that counterfeiting operation I run out of my bedroom," I say, rolling my eyes. "I'm not on *parole*, Will. I don't routinely go around committing crimes."

I go shower and head to the office with my stomach in knots. Yes, I've had more than my fair share of "incidents" but it's not like I have some secret urge to go knock over a bank or something. It seems unlikely I'd have done it in my sleep, but I'd also have sworn I never cried in my sleep and look how wrong I was there.

In Peter's office, the faces could not be more grim, and my stomach sinks a little lower. "Have a seat, Olivia," says Peter. He introduces me to the detectives, whose names I immediately forget. One is very tall and the other short. A couple of jokes come to mind, but given that I may be on the verge

of arrest, this probably isn't the time.

What unnerves me most is not the presence of the police. It's the look on Will's face. There's something raw and shocked there that doesn't bode well. I begin to shiver, and I'm not sure if it's caused by my wet hair or something else.

"Olivia, these men are here to talk to you about your brother," he says gently.

Immediately my heart rate accelerates and I begin to sweat. I'm tempted to bolt, which Will seems to sense. He moves to the chair beside me, placing a warning hand on my arm.

"As you know, your brother was presumed dead—" the tall one begins, but I cut him off.

"No. Just because you guys never found him doesn't mean he's dead. When I can't find my house key or my phone, it doesn't mean they're *dead*."

"There's been a new development in the case," the other one says.

Whatever he's about to say, I don't want to know. I want to plug my ears and sing to block him. I want to flee.

"Last month," he says, "a child's remains were found buried in the woods about a half mile from your old home."

My ears begin to ring and it feels as if I can't breathe. I jump to my feet, but Will blocks me, gripping my arms and holding me in place.

"Olivia," he says. "You need to hear them out."

"No, I don't," I insist, trying to wrestle free. "I don't know who they found, but it isn't my brother."

"Miss Finnegan," the officer says gently, "we ran a DNA test. It's been confirmed."

The sweat turns to ice. I'm leaving. I'm not listening to another word of this. I will my feet to move, toward the door, out of this office, but they don't respond.

"An autopsy was performed," one of them says.

"Stop," I whisper. "Stop talking." Why can't I move? Oh my God, I need to get out of here as badly as I've ever needed anything. "Please make them stop," I beg Will, but I know by the resigned look on his face that he will not.

"Miss Finnegan, we could really use your cooperation here. Someone snapped his neck."

I need to go.

I need to go.

I need to go.

I need to go.

I take one step toward the door and then there is nothing but black. A long dark tunnel and I'm falling into it ...

THE FIRST THING I SEE IS WILL'S FACE. IT'S OCTOBER, BUT HE'S STILL TAN. HE HAS beautiful eyes. So pale against his skin that they seem to glow.

"I called 911," says Peter's secretary. Where'd she come from?

"No," I whisper. "I don't want help."

"I think we should—"

"No," says Will, still looking at me. It feels as if I'm drowning and his eyes are the only thing keeping me from going under. "She's okay. She doesn't want help."

He raises his head and looks to the police officers. "I think you should go now. Everyone out. She just needs a minute."

There's the click of the door and then there is silence. I sit up and he moves back, just enough.

I wish I could cry. There's a sadness in me, so infinite and boundless that it seems as if I shouldn't be able to do anything else.

"Can you make them leave? The police? I don't want to see them."

"Yeah, but you'll have to talk to them eventually. You know that, right?"

I nod and squeeze my eyes shut. My brother ... I can't think about it. But I'm picturing him in spite of it, how little he was, how fragile. "I'm gonna be sick," I whisper, and I lean over and throw up in Peter's trashcan. Will holds my hair back while I empty the contents of my stomach.

I finally pull back and put my head between my knees.

"Is there anywhere you have to be?" he asks.

"I have astronomy," I tell him, "at two."

"Are you going?"

I close my eyes. Am I? "No."

"Then come on," he says gently, pulling me up by my hand.

"Where am I going?"

"To the farm," he says. "I'm not letting you sit in that apartment alone all

afternoon thinking about this, and there's no way I'm letting you sleep there."

This tight ball in my chest, this vacuum in my stomach ... they are never going away, whether I'm alone or not. "You don't have to do that. I'll be fine."

"You aren't fine and you won't be fine."

Normally that bossy tone of his makes me want to fight. Right now I'm just glad one of us knows what we're doing.

He places his hand gently at the small of my back. "Let's go home."

Will

There's something frighteningly vacant in Olivia's face.

For the first time during her waking hours she seems fragile, the way she does in her sleep. We leave straight for my car and she follows me blindly. I'm not sure she's even aware that we're moving and that I'm here.

"Are you okay?" I ask as we drive.

"Uh huh," she replies, but she's shaking.

I reach out and grab her hand. "It's going to be okay." She looks at me and nods but doesn't release my hand the entire drive to the farm.

Peter has forewarned my mother about our visit, and she's waiting on the porch for us. She's at Olivia's door the minute we pull into the driveway, enfolding her in her arms. "Oh, honey," she says, tears streaking down her face. "I'm so sorry."

Olivia shakes her head. "It's fine," she murmurs. "I'm fine." She's still shaking. I'm not even sure she realizes it.

"I think she should lay down," I say, directing Olivia toward my room with a hand on her back. I bundle her in the quilt that lies at the foot of the bed, but there's panic in her eyes when I stand to go. "Do you want me to stay?" I ask.

She nods, so I sit in my old desk chair beside the bed, frustrated by my inability to do anything for her. She stares blankly somewhere over my

shoulder, still shivering.

“Scoot over,” I finally tell her, and when she does I climb in beside her, sliding my arm under her neck and her back to my chest. We’ve laid like this before, more than once, but she has no idea. I’d feel a lot less guilty about it if there wasn’t a part of me that *wants* to do this.

When she falls asleep, I carefully extract myself and leave the room.

“How is she?” my mother asks.

“Asleep,” I sigh. “Aside from that, I have no clue.”

“That poor, poor girl. Do they have any idea who did it?” she asks.

“We didn’t get far enough into the conversation. Olivia passed out and then wanted them to leave.”

“Do you think that’s what the nightmares are about?”

“I don’t know.” It would make sense, except the timing doesn’t quite work out. Her brother ran away—or whatever *actually* happened—when she was five. She didn’t start having the nightmares until after she moved in with her grandmother, which would have been a year later. Is it even possible that things somehow got *worse* after he disappeared?

I GO BACK TO CAMPUS TO RUN THE AFTERNOON PRACTICE AND CALL JESSICA. I explain that Olivia had a death in the family and is staying with my mom tonight, so I can’t come by.

“Okay, I can just meet you there,” she says brightly. “I’ll bring us dinner.” She seems to be under the impression that our night can still be saved, that she can somehow make Olivia’s tragedy some romantic moment just for us. I gently dissuade her, but there’s a distinctly displeased note in her voice as she finally agrees. It surprises me given how understanding she’s been all year long about me helping my mom.

I head to Olivia’s apartment to pick up a few things. I assume she’ll need her laptop. Clothes too, I imagine, but I’m not touching that one. I have enough Olivia-based issues without looking through her underwear drawer.

I grab the key she keeps hidden under the planter and let myself in but come to a quick stop just inside the door.

The room is empty.

No couch, no table, no pictures, not so much as a cup on the counter. If I

hadn't seen her enter and exit this apartment on multiple occasions, I'd assume I was in the wrong place entirely. I knew she was hiding something, or someone, that time I came here to talk to her, but I never dreamed she was hiding this.

In the bedroom, I find evidence of her, but that's only more unsettling. Her clothes still sit in a suitcase that's open on the floor. She has a laptop but no books, no desk, no lamp and no bed, just a sleeping bag on the floor. I've had times in my life when I considered myself broke, but it was never like this.

SHE'S AWAKE WHEN I GET BACK, SITTING ON MY MOTHER'S COUCH STILL WRAPPED IN the quilt, and her face hardens when she sees her suitcase.

"Why didn't you tell me you were living like that?" I ask her.

She doesn't meet my eye. "It's fine."

"I could have helped you, though. I mean, it's insane that you've lived like that for over two months."

She opens her mouth and closes it again. "I'm not a charity case. I have what I need," she finally says.

My mother comes out of the kitchen, where she's been baking, her go-to in times of stress. She sets a plate of cookies in front of us. "You know what you should do?" she says briskly. "Take Olivia out climbing."

"She doesn't climb."

"Then teach her. It's always helped you when things aren't going well."

I glance tentatively at Olivia. "I'm sure she doesn't feel like climbing."

To my surprise, Olivia stands and casts off the blanket. "Actually, I sort of do."

Under any other circumstance, I'd refuse. I consider that part of my life over. But I don't seem able to refuse Olivia anything under the best of circumstances, so I'm certainly not going to today.

Olivia

We're standing at the base of a massive rock.

It looks close to impossible to climb. It's not smooth like glass, but it's not exactly laid out like a climbing wall either.

"I can't climb that," I tell him definitively.

"Yeah, you can," he says. "You'll be wearing a harness. I'm not going to let you get hurt." It seems like the kind of thing he can't promise, but I believe him anyway.

He leaps onto the rock without any kind of rope whatsoever. "It's easy," he says. "Seriously, watch."

He scrambles up and across the rock effortlessly, his body twisting and shifting as if this is a dance he's practiced a thousand times. It's the hottest thing I've ever seen in my life. Every muscle in his body straining and delineated, his attention focused entirely on the movement.

"You just have to shift your weight," he calls. "And if you twist into it like I am, it won't require as much upper body strength."

He hops down and has me slip into a harness, carefully knotting ropes, checking and rechecking both mine and his own. He climbs up again, and affixes something into the rock, and slides the rope through it. When he's finally satisfied, he slides back down with amazing agility.

"Ready?" he grins. His face is bright, and I don't think I've ever seen him

quite like this. He's happy, but it's more than that. It's as if he is 100 percent here, invested.

"I guess," I reply doubtfully.

I set my feet in the most obvious place and look desperately for something to grab hold of before jumping back to the ground. "You were fine until you panicked about your hands," he says. This time, I climb back on the same footholds and he places a hand against my lower back to keep me there. "Do you feel that?" he asks. "If you balance on your feet and lean in, you don't even need your hands."

No.

What I actually feel is his hand. Its heat and its breadth spanning my lower back, making it hard to breathe much less find some elusive foothold or balance. I fumble with my hands until I find something to cling to, and then he has me practice moving across the rock. I'm a graceless, slow-motion version of his earlier display.

"You made this look a thousand times easier than it is!" I shout.

"You don't have to shout. You're still only a foot off the ground."

"Asshole," I mutter.

"I heard that," he replies, "proving you don't have to shout."

I go back and forth, time and again, and once I'm doing reasonably well he tells me I can start climbing up. I see now why he used to do this to get away from his problems: it requires such absolute concentration that I can't think of anything else. I'm about 10 feet off the ground when I lose my balance and start to scream, expecting to plummet to the ground, but instead I'm suspended, and he's standing beneath me laughing.

"I assume you're laughing *at* me, not *with* me," I say sourly.

He smiles. "You're doing great. You need a break?"

"No, dammit," I say, looking at the distance I still need to climb. "I'm getting to the top. I don't care if it takes all night."

"That's my girl," he says proudly, and for a moment I sway in the air, stunned by how happy that statement makes me though I've got no idea why.

It takes an hour, and by the time I get to the top I've fallen repeatedly. My arms and legs are undoubtedly bruised and my muscles are shaking. I slide back down on the rope and collapse at his feet.

"What did you think?" he asks.

"I think you need to carry me to the car."

His smile is proud and happy and wistful all at once. "But you loved it."

"Yeah," I laugh, "I guess I did."

Once we're back in the car, I tell Will he can just take me to my apartment. "I'm fine. Honestly."

"You're going back to my mom's."

"She shouldn't have to do that," I sigh.

"My mom loves having you over. And you're doing me a favor."

"How am I possibly doing you a favor?"

"Because my mother's couch is a hell of a lot more comfortable than your front steps, and I'm sleeping on one or the other."

I don't even know what to say. His willingness to take care of me time and again hurts somehow.

I GO TO MY ROOM THAT NIGHT, BUT I'M UNABLE TO FALL ASLEEP. NO, I'M TOO *scared* to fall asleep. The idea of those nightmares scares me under normal circumstances but tonight they terrify me. I walk back into the living room just as he's emerging from the bathroom freshly showered and shirtless. Jesus Christ, he should be in magazines looking just like this – tan and slightly damp and nothing but muscle. He's so pretty that for a moment I'm scared I might make some audible noise of longing.

I move toward him, knowing I shouldn't, unable to help myself. He stiffens as I approach. "I just want to see your tattoo," I tell him. He's unnaturally still as I run my fingers over his left arm. He seems to be holding his breath. "Denali?"

"I got it done the first time I climbed it. I was going to do all seven summits and get a tat for each."

I want to move closer to him, to press myself against his damp chest. "Why isn't K2 on there then?" I ask, mainly to have some reason to keep my hand on his arm.

"Because that was the climb where I realized I wouldn't be climbing the other five." His voice is stilted, wary. He moves away from me and reaches into his duffel bag for a T-shirt.

Dammit.

He pulls the shirt over his head and I use the opportunity to ogle the shit

out of his stomach when he does it. “Just before I climbed it, I called home. I thought my dad might actually be proud, but instead, he told me it was time I grew up. I hung up on him like an entitled little dick and went climbing, and when I got back to base camp, I learned he’d had a stroke. He was dead before I got home.”

My stomach drops. “I’m so sorry. So you came home then for good?”

He shrugs as if the aftermath didn’t really matter. “He wanted me to grow up. It was the last fucking thing he ever said to me, so it seemed like the least I could do.”

“You had a job, Will, a good job. And by the sound of it, a job you were good at. That’s a hell of a lot more grown up than a whole lot of people.”

“I had a duty to my family,” he counters. “I should have been pulling my weight around here, and instead, I let my dad take it all on by himself. No wonder he had a stroke.”

“You don’t know that his stroke was related to any of that.”

“I don’t know that it wasn’t, either,” he sighs, spreading a blanket over the couch and sitting down. “So why are you out here, anyway?”

“I don’t want to go to sleep,” I tell him. “You take the bedroom. I’m gonna stay up.”

“All *night*? Olivia, you know I’ll catch you if you have a nightmare,” he says. “You haven’t made it out of the house once since the first time you stayed here.”

I shake my head. “It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

I hesitate. I don’t even want to put words to it. “I don’t want to dream about him,” I finally admit.

“Your brother?” he asks. “I didn’t know he was in those dreams.”

“Sometimes.”

It’s usually at the start of the dream. My brother and I in a car or at the kitchen table. Nothing out of the ordinary except I’m terrified and I know he is too. My nightmares must be at least part fiction, but knowing how he died makes me think that the fear was real. And it’s far too easy to imagine Matthew’s last moments because I’ve lived them a thousand times.

He lays down and pats the space in front of him. “Come here,” he sighs reluctantly. Will feels guilty about so many things and I’ve become one of them.

“It’s okay,” I swallow.

“I’m tired, Olivia, and you’re tired,” he says, stretching out his arm. “So stop arguing and go the fuck to sleep.”

“What a sweet talker.” I laugh, but I lay down. He takes the quilt and tucks it around me. It’s the last thing I remember.

Will

As tired as I am, I don't fall asleep. Once again, there are so many things wrong here, not least of which the fact that I'm ostensibly doing this to comfort Olivia but happen to be hard as a rock while she lies a centimeter away sleeping peacefully. I took the precaution of shoving half the quilt between us after she fell asleep tonight. *Not helping*. So, in essence, I'm perving on a student and cheating on my girlfriend, at least in spirit, and I don't know of another goddamn way to deal with any of it.

But the things that make sleep impossible and my shorts profoundly uncomfortable also make me happy that I'm here: the feel of her, the smell of her shampoo, the way her shoulders rise and fall, how at this moment all of her intensity and twitchiness are gone and she's so completely at peace. Today had to have been one of the worst days of her life, and yet it turned out to be one of the best I've had in years.

It wasn't just climbing. It was sharing it with her. I should have known she would love it, that it would strip her of every thought and emotion and let her be free of it all for a while. There are times, like today, when it strikes me that we are far more alike than different. And God knows I wish that weren't the case.

Olivia

The next morning, Will is already up and dressed when I wake.

“I can be ready in five minutes,” I tell him.

“You don’t have to run today. Why don’t you just take it easy? I can come back and pick you up in time for class.”

I shake my head. “I think I need to get back to it.”

“Fine,” he sighs, “but you’re staying here tonight.”

“So bossy,” I mumble, but it’s seriously hard to pretend I’m unhappy about it.

AFTER PRACTICE IN THE AFTERNOON, HE PICKS ME UP IN THE SIDE PARKING LOT SO NO one will see. We aren’t doing anything wrong, but I feel guilty because I know the whole thing makes *him* feel guilty. And it sure as hell would look bad if anyone saw us.

He turns to me just after he slides into the driver’s seat. “Want to climb?” His whole face brightens as he asks, and even if I didn’t want to go, I’d say yes.

“Don’t you have to work on the farm?”

He grins at me. “Yeah.”

“Am I finally seeing the naughty side of Will Langstrom?”

He arches a brow. “This doesn’t even come close to the naughty side, Olivia.”

Gulp.

I didn’t think it was possible, but Will just got 10 times hotter.

HE TEACHES ME TO LEAD CLIMB TODAY, WHICH INVOLVES CLIPPING INTO BOLTS THAT are already in the mountain as I go up instead of relying on a rope anchored at the top. He also teaches me to belay, which allows him to climb with me on the ground, scared shitless that I’m going to accidentally feed him too much slack from the rope and kill him.

“I trust you,” he says.

“You shouldn’t,” I remind him. “Remember? I nearly killed a teammate?”

“I still trust you.” He grins.

Watching him climb is an amazing thing, the strength and the agility and the gracefulness of it all.

“You look like Spiderman!” I shout.

His laugh echoes down through the rocks. “Hold the rope just in case,” he shouts back.

He’s lighter, happier than usual on the way home. His laughter and smiles come easily.

“I don’t understand how your father possibly thought climbing was the wrong choice for you. You’re so much happier like this.”

He sighs. “I don’t think he ever looked at work as something that should make you happy. He looked at it as a responsibility, and all he saw was that I was shirking mine.”

Normally conversations about his father seem to bother him, but it’s not until the farm comes into sight—with a burgundy BMW convertible sitting in the driveway—that his mood plummets. His whole body has stiffened at the sight of it.

“What’s the matter?” I ask. “Is it Peter?”

“No,” he says, his shoulders sagging. “It’s Jessica, my girlfriend.”

I know nothing about Jessica, but there’s this spiteful little flame in my stomach caused entirely by her. So I definitely don’t want to see her, but shouldn’t *he*? “I’ll deal with the horses and give you some time to hang out.”

He nods, his mouth set in a hard line, and heads inside like he's facing a firing squad.

I go to the stables and take my time getting the horses groomed and fed. I was hoping she'd be gone by the time I head back to the house, but even from a distance I can see her, posed like a pageant queen on the front porch with her long, perfect red hair swinging over her shoulder and her legs crossed. My first emotion isn't mere dislike. It's loathing.

She hops up and walks down the stairs with her arm extended. "You must be Olivia," she says with a wide smile. "I'm Jessica, Will's girlfriend."

"Hi." I don't pretend to smile. I know this girl and I are not going to be friends.

"So what brings you out here tonight?" Her voice is too bright, too clipped. She says it as if she's caught me trespassing and is diplomatically sending me on my way.

I raise a brow, and allow a small, mocking smile to escape. I have a feeling it bothers her that I'm here, so I plan to let it keep bothering her. "This and that."

"Why were you in the barn?"

"I was cleaning the stables," I reply. "You know what a disaster they've been since Jackson quit." Her smile falters. She didn't know Jackson quit, obviously. *Score: one, Olivia.*

Will walks out the front door, freshly showered, following Dorothy. The identical tension in their shoulders is really the first resemblance besides eye color I've ever noticed between them.

"I see you two have met," says Dorothy.

"Yes," replies Jessica. "Olivia was just telling me she was helping with the horses. If you needed help, you should have asked me, Dorothy."

What utter bullshit. I don't know how this girl affords a BMW or those designer heels she's wearing by working for the university, but there's not a chance that *she's* cleaning stables.

"Olivia grew up working with horses," Dorothy explains.

Jessica walks around Dorothy and goes to Will's other side, grabbing his hand. "You should teach me what to do, so next time I can be the one to help. I'll need to learn eventually anyway, right?"

Whoa. What in the actual *fuck* did that mean? Is he *marrying* this girl?

Will acts as if she hasn't spoken as he turns to her. "You ready to head

out?”

“Head out?” she asks. “But your mom made dinner. We don’t spend enough time out here anyway. You know I love the farm.”

“I thought we were eating out,” Will argues, sounding a bit like a surly adolescent.

“We can eat out any time,” she exclaims. “But how often can we eat with your mom and your star athlete?”

Pretty much anytime, I think with a smirk.

IT’S UNCOMFORTABLE, SITTING DOWN AT THE TABLE WITH HER THERE, ESPECIALLY when I don’t know my role or what Will has told her. Dorothy asks me how our climb was over dinner, though, so that’s one cat out of the bag. I tell her Will taught me to belay.

“So you climbed?” Dorothy asks him excitedly.

“Yeah,” he says with a half smile. “I haven’t lost it entirely.”

“He hasn’t lost it at all,” I tell her. “He looked like Spiderman. Which was good because I wasn’t entirely sure I was doing it right and didn’t want to find out by watching him plummet to the ground.”

“You don’t need to worry about Will,” says Dorothy. “He’s a natural born climber.”

“I wasn’t worried about him,” I reply with a grin at Will. “I just didn’t know how to get home on my own.”

Jessica’s jaw drops but Will laughs. *His* reaction is the only one I care about.

“We should go climbing sometime,” interjects Jessica, looking at Will. He blinks as if she’s speaking in some foreign language he needs to translate. Or maybe he just forgot she was there, though that’s hard to imagine given the way she’s clinging to him.

“Sure,” he says hesitantly. “I didn’t think you were into it.”

“Well, I’ll never know until I try,” she says with another bright smile. She turns to me. “So, Olivia, what are your plans for Thanksgiving?”

I shrug. “I don’t know yet.”

“You have to come here,” says Dorothy, “if you’re not going home, that is.”

“Oh, I disagree,” says Jessica decisively. “You should go home. It’s important to keep those ties strong when you go away to school.”

I smile tightly, managing to not roll my eyes. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Stay with us,” Dorothy pleads. “It won’t be the same without you.”

I feel as if I’ve been put on stage and was never provided the lines. I don’t want Dorothy to always feel like she has to take me in, but her last words have clearly made Jessica so very unhappy that I find myself agreeing just to see Jessica’s face fall a little more.

After dinner, I start clearing the table and Jessica inserts herself there too, reaching for the dishes in my hands. “Here,” she says. “Will and I can get this. You’re the guest. You should sit.”

For some reason, this completely reasonable statement makes me want to punch her in the face. *I’m* the guest, but she’s not? *She’s* the one they want around, and I’m the one they’re forced to host?

“I’m good,” I say, brushing past her to walk to the kitchen. I start rinsing the dishes and putting them in the dishwasher. She takes the bowls I’ve just placed there and moves them for no evident reason. “Isn’t Will’s family great?” she asks. “I’m surprised Dorothy doesn’t have a houseful of pets. She just can’t resist a stray, you know?”

And with that, she gives me her sunny pageant smile and walks back into the family room.

WILL LEAVES WITH JESSICA, AND ALTHOUGH I WISH HE WERE STAYING, IT’S A RELIEF to escape his girlfriend’s noxious presence. I sit on the couch with Dorothy.

"So that was Jessica, huh?" I say. "What a *lovely* girl."

"I think she was a little unsettled to find you here," replies Dorothy. "She's not normally quite so ... controlling."

"Will could do a lot better than that," I grumble. "I don't know what he sees in her." Okay, that's a lie. Anyone with two eyes knows what he sees in her. I guess I just expected more of him.

"Jessica is a nice girl," Dorothy sighs. "And Will's known her forever. Back in high school, Will's father hoped they'd get together, but Will was never interested."

"I see why he wouldn't be interested. What could they possibly have in

common? She wore stiletto heels to a *farm* for God's sake."

"Maybe she isn't what I'd have chosen for my son, but it's not my choice to make. And she may be my daughter-in-law someday, so I need to make the best of it."

"You think he's going to *marry* her?" I ask incredulously. "*Her*? She's not good enough for him in a million years!"

Dorothy's face falls a little. "I think Jessica wants to get married," she replies carefully. "And she's pretty good at getting her way."

Will

The moment I saw Jessica's car in my mother's driveway, my stomach sank. I prefer to keep the various parts of my life—the farm, coaching, Jessica—separate. Her presence felt like an intrusion, but what could I possibly say? Jessica is a separate part of my life, but somehow Olivia is not. Olivia *belongs* at the farm. When I go and she isn't there something feels lacking. But since it's something I can't even explain to myself, how could I possibly defend it to Jess?

She was inside, sitting on the couch talking to my mom, who had her polite face on — the one she uses with strangers, except I couldn't remember her ever looking like that with Olivia.

"I thought I told you I couldn't meet tonight?" I asked. It was a struggle to keep the edge from my voice.

"I thought I could finally meet Olivia," she replied. "She seems to be spending a lot of time with your family."

Jessica is insecure about many things, and it became clear in that moment that Olivia was one of them. I should have expected it, I suppose. My interest in this job and the amount of time I put into it have increased exponentially since she joined the team.

I exhaled my frustration, knowing that if Jessica was already feeling insecure, actually *seeing* Olivia was not going to help. I went to shower, and

my mother met me before I went out to the porch, where Jess was waiting.

“How much does Jessica know?” she asked.

“She knows Olivia has slept here before some of the meets,” I said defensively.

“And does she know you stay here too?”

“It was implied.”

My mother clicked her tongue in disapproval. “In other words, you never specifically addressed it and hoped she’d *assume* you were at your apartment. And she’s about to see Olivia, who even the most secure woman would be jealous of, and discover you’ve been sleeping here with her.”

“I haven’t been sleeping anywhere with her,” I snapped. “Jessica has nothing to worry about. You’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

She shook her head and walked ahead of me to the front door. “For all the girls you’ve run through in your short life, Will, you still don’t know much about women.”

And when I followed her outside and saw the looks on both their faces, I knew she was right.

JESS’S SILENCE TELLS ME EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW WHEN WE GET TO HER apartment.

“Are you okay?” I ask. I want her to smile and move on, but I know she won’t, which means we remain in this ugly sort of limbo until we’ve *talked*. And talks with Jessica don’t necessarily go well. The only way you seem to achieve resolution is by promising something more than you are really willing to promise.

She sighs. “That’s the girl who’s been sleeping at your mom’s house?”

“Yeah, I told you about her.”

She sucks in her cheeks and her jaw shifts beneath them. “She’s pretty.”

Her words are a trap. If I agree, I open a whole new universe of insecurity. But denying it is pointless. You’d have to be blind not to notice Olivia. Increasingly, of late, it seems I’m incapable of noticing anything else.

“I guess.”

“So you were hanging out with her last night?”

“Jess,” I groan. “Don’t make this weird. She’s just one of my athletes.”

"*She* doesn't seem to know that."

"Believe me, Olivia is well aware of the fact that she's one of my athletes. I've never been fought so hard by someone in my life."

"That's not what I mean, Will. She acts like..." she trails off, her frustration mounting.

"Like what?"

"Never mind. I just don't see why she has to stay with your mom."

"She just found out her brother was *murdered*, Jessica," I say, hearing an edge slip into my voice. "Do you really want to begrudge her having people around while she deals with it?"

"No, but the people don't have to be you and your mom."

"She's only been here for two months. She doesn't know anyone else."

"Well, I don't think she should be staying with your mother anymore."

I feel my temper inching up, and I do my best to keep my tone stable.

"And why is that?"

"Because it looks bad. I work in public relations, and I'm telling you right now that *no one* is going to believe you're hanging out with a girl who looks like *that* out of the kindness of your heart."

"I don't give a shit what anyone believes," I snap. "She has the ability to be a world-class runner, and she's leading our women's track team to its first winning season in a decade. If staying with my mom makes the difference, she's staying with my mom."

"As long as that's all she is to you."

I agree because it should be true. Because it needs to be true. There's no other option.

I GET BACK TO MY MOTHER'S AROUND 11. JESSICA WAS CLEARLY UNHAPPY THAT I wasn't staying, but her lack of sympathy for Olivia left me not really giving a shit.

I'm just dozing off when I hear a noise from Olivia's room. She's flailing in the sheets, saying something over and over. I approach quietly as she grows more agitated.

"Stop crying," she pleads in a whisper.

I sit on the bed. "Olivia," I tell her, running my hand over her back as if

she were a child, “it’s okay. You’re okay.”

She grabs my arm and her eyes fly open. “Stop crying,” she begs. “You’ve got to stop.”

“Olivia, you’re dreaming. It’s okay.”

“Please stop crying,” she says and then she begins to weep, a small, childlike noise that is hard to listen to.

I pull her to my chest. “It’s okay, Olivia. I promise. It’s okay.”

“Don’t cry,” she says, over and over. “Don’t cry.”

When she finally falls back asleep and I emerge from her room, my mother is waiting with her head in her hands.

“You heard that?” I ask, and she nods.

“What on earth happened to that girl and her brother?” she asks.

I wish I knew. And I’m equally scared that someday soon, I’m going to find out.

Olivia

I return to my own place on Wednesday.

Both Dorothy and Will encouraged me to stay, insisted really, but I said no. It can't be good for Will – he needs to be working on the farm instead of entertaining me, and he's risking his job at the school every time he does it. I guess it's also causing problems with Jessica, though I don't care as much about that.

Will drives me back before that morning's track practice, swinging my suitcase out of his trunk before he drives off.

I open the door and come to a dead stop before I'm even over the threshold. It's not the same apartment I left on Monday morning.

I call Will immediately. "I've been vandalized," I tell him. "Someone broke into my apartment and furnished it."

"That's an outrage," he replies. "I hope you called the police."

I laugh, and then grow quiet. There's nothing in the world harder for me than what comes next.

"Thank you," I say awkwardly. "I don't know what to say."

"It wasn't a big deal," he replies.

"But all this stuff ... Where'd you get it?"

"Almost everyone I know has something extra they don't need. You were also offered a pie safe, whatever the hell that is, and a grandfather clock, in

case you're interested."

It's the first time since I moved out of the dorm my freshman year that I've had furniture. Now I have a couch, a table, a bed, and a nightstand. There's even a TV. I wish he hadn't done it. Not because I don't want the stuff—I love it—but because of the feeling it leaves me with. The same way I feel after I spend time with Will.

Like I now have something to lose.

THE FOLLOWING WEEKEND WILL PICKS ME UP TO GO TO DOROTHY'S, AND FOR ONCE, it's not an act of charity. At least I don't think it is. Dorothy's asked me to stay over and help with the horses because Will has to assist with school events for Parents Visiting Day. I'm not sure if it's true, but I'm eager to be far away from campus this weekend, so I agree.

Brendan's car is parked outside. "I didn't know your brother was coming."

"Neither did I," he says, that muscle in jaw popping.

Dorothy and Brendan walk out together. "Olivia!" shouts Brendan as if we're old friends, grabbing my suitcase and swinging an arm around my shoulder. "I'll take this in for you. Who's sleeping where?"

"Oh, Will's not staying—"

"She's in my room and I'm on the couch," Will cuts in firmly.

I raise a brow. There is no meet this weekend for him to be concerned about. Does that mean he's staying to protect his mom from *me*?

"Worried I can't keep my fists of fury to myself?" I ask dourly.

"Why would I be worried?" he smirks. "I've only witnessed you attempting to fight two people, excluding the time you took a swing at me."

"Come on," Dorothy says, tugging Brendan in. "Let's give them a minute."

"I would *never* hurt your mother," I hiss after they've gone inside.

He looks surprised by my vehemence, and his face softens. "I know that, Olivia."

"Then why are you staying?"

"You seem to be forgetting that this is my mother's house. I don't need an excuse to be here."

I stop. "Fine, but I'll sleep on the couch. It's one thing before meets, but there's no reason you shouldn't have your own room tonight."

"There are miles of woods around here," Will says. "You're not sleeping on the couch and that's final."

I sigh deeply. "It's fine, Will. I haven't been having the dreams as much, and if I do, I'm not likely to make it far. Running barefoot in the woods ought to wake me up pretty damn fast."

"What if it doesn't? Do you know how many miles of woods are out there? You think I'm gonna sleep for shit, worried that I'll wake up in the morning and discover you've been lost in the woods, freezing for God knows how long? And if nothing else, I don't want my horndog little brother coming out to the living room every morning and watching you traipse around in your pajamas."

"I don't traipse around, first of all, and second of all, I wear *running clothes* to bed almost every night so it's not exactly sexy."

"You wear a tight little tank with no bra," he glowers. "That's enough. Did you see the way he was looking at you just now? Multiply that times 10."

If I didn't know better, I'd think he sounded a little possessive. I like it. And I like that he seems so intensely aware of what I wear to bed.

"Okay."

"Okay? You're giving in, just like that?"

I shrug. "Sure. If it means that much to you, I'll do it."

"I guess that's why it's so much colder this afternoon," he says, opening the door. Brendan and Dorothy stand right on the other side, and I suspect they were listening. "Hell must've frozen over."

DOROTHY TAKES ME INTO THE KITCHEN, WHERE SHE HAS A LIST OF JOBS FOR ME.

More than anything, she seems excited to have someone to cook for again.

"You're sure this is okay?" she asks for the hundredth time. "I'm not keeping you from a date, am I?"

I laugh. "No."

"From what Will says, you have your pick. I hear you have the entire men's track team and most of the football team on a leash."

"That's a slight exaggeration."

"No it's not. I heard the football players were singing some song at you from the bleachers. It irritated Will to death."

"Everything irritates Will to death," I mutter. "And that song stopped a while ago."

She nods. "Will spoke to the head of the football program about it."

"He told you that?" I ask, surprised the song annoyed him that much. And I thought *I* was irritable.

"No," she says, suddenly turning pink. "Peter did."

SHE ASKS ME TO SET THE TABLE, WHICH I'M HAPPY TO DO UNTIL SHE INFORMS ME WE need an extra place setting for Jessica. I dread her arrival long before it occurs, bracing myself for her big fake smile and big fake laugh and big tits—sadly, those are probably real—and the way she's always pawing at Will.

She shows up once again in a suit that looks super expensive—what the hell does she do for the university anyway? I feel young and silly in my sweater and jeans. She hugs all of us, though her hug for me is decidedly stiff with dislike.

"You always do such a nice job with dinner, Mrs. Langstrom," she gushes as we sit down to eat. She glances pointedly at me. "If I'd known you had such a *crowd*, I'd have gotten here sooner to help."

"I've been cooking for a crowd on my own for as long as I can remember," says Dorothy.

"Well, you shouldn't have to," says Jessica, reaching beside her to clasp Will's hand. "And besides, I want to learn how to make all of Will's favorite things. Why don't I come by tomorrow? We could make dinner together."

I wish there were a vomiting trough someplace close by. I catch Brendan's eye. It looks like he needs one too.

"It's really not necessary," says Dorothy with more certainty. "Besides, if I need anything, Olivia can help."

Me? Help in the *kitchen*? I can't think of a less likely candidate, but I like the way that Jessica's smile seems to contort around something very large and very sour. It doesn't even look like a smile anymore, more of a grimace with teeth.

"I'd *love* to help," I coo.

Brendan disguises his laugh as a cough and turns to me. “So where are we headed tonight?”

“We aren’t headed anywhere,” counters Will. “Olivia’s not even old enough to drink yet.”

“You’re almost old enough, though, right?” asks Brendan.

“I turn 21 in December.”

“I can’t be seen drinking with my under-age student,” growls Will.

“It’s okay,” I say, waving them off. “You go out. I’ll stay home with Dorothy and watch TV.” I see a wistful look cross Will’s face and wonder if he might actually *like* our nights in.

“No,” says Brendan. “Will and Jessica can go to one place, and you and I can go to another. Problem solved.”

“But—”

“No, it’s okay,” Will intones suddenly, “we’ll just go somewhere away from campus.”

We go to a country bar far to the outskirts of town where Brendan seems to know just about everyone, which is interesting given that he goes to school three hours away. He drapes an arm around my shoulders and we walk away from Jessica and Will. Brendan introduces me to the staff as the next Mrs. Langstrom, and by the time we’ve ordered a pitcher, I’m fairly certain I’ve just met every semi-toothless person in the state.

“How do you know all these people?” I ask.

He grins. “I’m a lovable guy. Surely you’ve figured that out by now?”

“Yes, right around the moment you tackled my coach.”

“It’s so weird that he’s your coach. I mean, isn’t that weird for you?”

“Weird how?”

“You’re almost the same age, for one thing. And the two of you just have that vibe. You know, a couple vibe. When you guys argue, the air is just rife with sexual tension the whole time.”

“You’re watching too much porn.”

He smirks. “That’s entirely possible but irrelevant. *Something* is going on.”

“Nothing is going on.” I can’t help but notice Will, sitting in the corner booth, looking unhappy as he glances over at us. “Should we go sit with them?”

“Nah,” says Brendan. “My brother needs to realize how bored he is by

Jessica on his own. And besides, it's so fun making him jealous."

"He's not jealous."

"Wanna bet?" he asks. "Watch." He puts his hand on the small of my back and then slowly lowers it until it's resting on my ass. Before I can smack his hand away, Will is there, pushing between us.

"What's taking so long?" he snaps, grabbing the pitcher.

Brendan leans toward my ear as we follow him to the table. "Told you."

IT'S PRETTY DAMNED AWKWARD SITTING AT THE TABLE, GIVEN THAT BRENDAN AND Will aren't getting along and Jessica and I clearly dislike each other. It's a relief when Brendan pulls me out of the booth. "You know how to two-step, right?" he asks.

"I just moved here from Texas. I could teach a course on two-stepping."

We get out on the dance floor and a moment later are joined by Will and Jessica. Will looks like he'd rather be anywhere else. Brendan spins me and then dips me so low my head nearly hits the ground.

He laughs. "You're so into me right now, aren't you?"

"Yes, there's nothing hotter than a guy who gives you a concussion while you're dancing."

"You're such a hard-ass," he sighs. "No wonder my brother's so into it."

"Oh my God. Shut up about that already," I groan. "You're making it weird." I give him my best stink-eye, but he's as impervious to it as his brother.

"Believe me, babe," he grins, "it was already weird."

The next time we're alongside Will and Jessica, Brendan pulls away from me without warning, grabbing Jessica's arm. "Switch," he says, and he's the only one of the four of us who looks happy as he and Jessica dance away.

Will and I stand there awkwardly for a second. I start to turn back toward the table, but he stops me with a hand on my waist. "Fuck it," he sighs, grabbing my other hand. "This goes no farther than this room."

I roll my eyes. "Did you really think I was going to *brag* about dancing with you?"

He smiles. "They don't call me the Two Stepping King of Colorado for nothing."

I just witnessed his lackluster dancing with Jessica, so I'm finding this hard to believe. "Who calls you that?" I demand.

"You will," he says with that cocky grin of his that could get him anything he wants from me, and I mean *anything*, "by the time we're done." He spins me one direction and the next, and the speed with which it all occurs leaves me unable to do anything but follow his lead.

"Holy shit," I cry. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

"My mom. She taught us all these stupid dances under the impression that they were important skills to have."

"And did they ever come in handy?"

"They've gotten me laid more than once," he replies, spinning me, and I'm so shocked that I nearly fly free of his hand. He looks a little surprised himself. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry."

I spin close to him, so that my chest is pressed to his and our mouths are just millimeters apart. "Will," I whisper, "I already knew this could get you laid."

His eyes meet mine and there's something fierce there. He squeezes his eyes shut. "Don't do that," he hisses. He pulls away and walks straight to the bathroom.

I sigh, heading to the table alone. I actually allowed myself to believe Brendan. I won't make that mistake again.

MUCH LATER, I'M CLIMBING INTO BED WHEN THERE'S TAPPING ON MY WINDOW. I pull up the shade and find Brendan standing there with that mischievous smile on his face, holding a six-pack aloft.

I open the window. "I thought *I* was supposed to be the bad influence."

He winks. "Got to be some benefit to growing up in a tiny one-story house."

I slide sweats on over my running clothes and climb out. "I get the feeling you've done this more than once."

He laughs. "Been caught for it more than once, too."

We go down to the stables, where the shelter and the hay make it just warm enough to be cozy. "So that was fun tonight," I say sarcastically.

"Fun is impossible when Jessica is around," he retorts. "She's so fucking

fake.”

“I’m not sure why your brother doesn’t see that.”

“He used to,” Brendan says. “My dad was always all over him to ask Jessica out when they were younger and Will would make this face like my dad was asking him to eat a plate full of shit. Then my dad died and he started *dating* her. I don’t get it.”

“If you hate her so much, why’d you come out with us? Aren’t your friends around?”

He shrugs. “I had my reasons,” he says evasively. “What about you? Why do you sleep here before meets? And why the hell would you sleep here when you don’t have one?”

I look at him in wonder. They really didn’t tell him anything — Dorothy or Will. They let me keep all my secrets to myself. “You’re going to think I’m a freak.”

“Hey, I’m a registered sex offender. I’m no one to throw stones.”

My back stiffens. “You are?”

“Little known fact: streaking during pledge week is actually considered a sex crime. It was such a miscarriage of justice. I mean, look at me. Those girls were lucky to get an eyeful of this.”

I snort and he elbows me. “So tell me why my mom wants to adopt you and my brother is risking his job and sanity to have you over here.”

It’s the first time I’ve willingly told someone my story. It still humiliates me, but having brought my secret out in the light to Will and Dorothy makes it seem slightly less dark than it did before.

“That’s kind of awesome,” he says when I conclude. “You get your entire workout out of the way and you don’t even know you’ve done it.”

Calling it ‘awesome’ seems like a stretch, but it’s better than what he could have said.

“So you and my brother are sleeping under the same roof and you see him every morning and he’d rather spend time with you than his girlfriend, but *nothing’s* happening.”

“He’s my coach, Brendan,” I reply. “He’d get fired. And neither of us is interested anyway.” Okay, that’s sort of a lie. But based on the way he freaking ran from me tonight I suppose it’s true for one of us.

“You know,” Brendan says, scooting closer, “I heard his brother is super hot. And available.”

I smile. "I don't think Will would be a fan of that idea."

"Exactly," says Brendan. "Maybe it would help him get his priorities straight."

"No, it's not that he likes me," I explain. "It's just that things are tense between you guys and that would make it worse."

Brendan's eyes seem to twinkle slightly less. "He used to be my best friend," he says. "I still don't know what the hell happened."

Will

Saturday gets off to a rollicking start.

First there's my brother, who's been sniffing around Olivia like a dog in heat since the minute she got out of my truck. Then I'm stuck on campus for hours because of visiting day, knowing that Brendan is probably going to be humping her leg the entire time I'm gone while I'm stuck here remembering last night, the way she pressed herself against me and my reaction. Christ, you could probably see my hard-on from *space*.

And lastly there's Jessica, who got royally pissed off last night when I told her I was sleeping at my mom's. "It's ridiculous that you're sleeping on the couch at your mother's," she argued. "Olivia should find a family of her own."

Jessica, with her doting parents and her siblings and their annual ski trips and beach trips and group photos, telling me that the little we can offer Olivia is too much.

"Her only family member has Alzheimer's, so where exactly do you suggest she go find one? Because I'm sure she'd be all ears."

She exhaled in exasperation. "You know what I'm saying, Will. You don't have to be the only person in her life. You've already gone above and beyond for this girl, but the charity has to end at some point."

I stared at her then as if I'd never seen her before, except the truth was

that I had seen it. All through high school I'd seen it, but somehow I'd allowed my father's opinion to supersede my own. He saw her as a *nice* girl. She was a cheerleader, the homecoming queen, while I was the kid routinely handcuffed in the back of a police car. He must have suggested a hundred times that if I cleaned up my act, I could wind up with someone like her.

Of course, I'd *wound up* with her already, on the floor of someone's bedroom during a party I don't even remember, but I didn't tell him that. I barely remembered the sex, to be honest, only the aftermath. She spent the next year suggesting I come over when her parents weren't home, inviting me by myself to her parents' lake house and then getting pissed off when I turned her down. But for years after, my dad would say, "Now that Jessica Harper. *That's* a girl you settle down with."

I'm not sure he'd stand by that statement if he could've heard her last night. And maybe deferring to the opinion of someone who never really knew her doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

I PICK JESSICA UP ON THE WAY BACK FROM CAMPUS. HONESTLY, I DON'T WANT HER at the farm and I really don't want her around Olivia, but what choice do I have? If we go out tonight, I'm giving my asshole brother unfettered access to Olivia. *Not fucking happening.*

Jessica shouts from the bedroom that she's almost ready, but then she peeks her head out. "Come sit in here," she says suggestively. "We have plenty of time until dinner."

I shake my head, avoiding her eye as I turn on the TV. "My mom asked me to hurry back." It's a lie, but right now the last thing in the world I want to do is sleep with Jessica.

She pouts. "Five minutes?"

"I'm gonna watch the game," I say, without looking back at her.

Olivia is out when we get to the farm. Brendan, naturally, is sitting on the couch watching football, not a care in the world. In moments like this, when I think about the two jobs I'm working to keep him fed and in school, I understand my father's anger toward me. He'd expected me to put the family first, begin to take on some of the weight, and like the selfish little prick I was, I looked at the farm and the trouble he had and couldn't run fast enough.

Jessica goes to look for my mom so I sit in the chair across from him, and attempt civility. “So how’s school?”

He shrugs. “How’s having two girlfriends?”

“I don’t have two girlfriends,” I exhale testily.

“Sure you don’t, Saint Will,” he smirks. “I’ve never seen a guy check out a girl’s ass as often as you did hers last night, but yeah, nothing going on *there* at all.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Cool. Because if you’re not in those pants, I’d like to be, so I’m going to take my shot.”

I feel like I can’t breathe. The idea of him with Olivia is far too easy to imagine. They looked like a couple at the bar last night, and when he grabbed her ass, it was only Jessica’s presence that kept me from violently detaching his hand.

“I told you this already. She’s off limits.”

“I know what you said,” he laughs, “and I decided I don’t give a shit. Tell Mom I got busted. Get her all upset just for no reason other than the fact that you want to keep Olivia to yourself. You don’t get to decide who she goes out with.”

No, but I shouldn’t have to watch it when it happens. “She can do what she wants,” I reply. “But as long as I’m paying the bills, you can’t.”

“Congratulations, Will,” he says bitterly, rising to his feet. “You’ve turned into Dad.”

He’s right and at the moment I don’t fucking care. He’s got everything else—free to do what he wants, no responsibility for the farm. He doesn’t get Olivia too.

Olivia

I hate Jessica.

I *thought* I hated Betsy, but it turns out my feelings toward her are something more like mild irritation compared with what I feel toward Will's girlfriend. And the thing is, she isn't doing anything wrong tonight, not on the surface anyway. But I hate her for sitting on Will's lap before dinner. I hate the way she runs her thumb over his wrist and how he almost unconsciously wraps a hand around her waist. I hate that there's something triumphant on her face when he does it, something directed at me though she's not even looking my way.

When we hear Will laughing in the kitchen with Dorothy, Brendan rolls his eyes. "I guess he found his happy pills or something. He's been a moody fucker all weekend," he says.

Jessica winks at both of us. "He just had to work off a little steam earlier, if you know what I mean."

Bitch.

"Maybe I'll start visiting him during the day at work." She smiles at me. "You know, to take the edge off."

That's when I no longer merely hate her but decide I'd like to see her clinging to life. I want her just conscious enough to know it's me pulling the plug.

I make it through the night with a great deal of jaw clenching and tight fists, and only begin to relax when they rise to leave. “Hey,” she says, pulling me aside when Will leaves the room, “I just wanted to say I’m sorry about your brother.”

I nod. She isn’t the least bit sorry. How Will hasn’t seen through her crap is beyond me.

“So I hate to be the one telling you this,” she continues, “but the Langstroms really aren’t in a position to be helping anyone out right now. Things are tough for them and I’m just not sure they can handle the extra strain.”

“I haven’t been asking them for help.”

“No, you know what I mean, emotional help, stability,” she says. “They can’t be your substitute family right now. They’ve got enough of their own stuff to deal with. Dorothy and Will would never tell you that, of course, but it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?”

I hate every word out of her mouth, but I hate even more that she is probably right.

Will

I showed up on the track Monday morning with a premonition that it would be a bad week and I was correct.

First there's Olivia, who shows up each morning a little more stressed out and hollowed-eyed than I've seen her. With every success, her anxiety grows. The number of people who now expect her to win has increased exponentially, and there's a world of difference between pleasantly surprising everyone with a success and people assuming it. I'm just not sure why it's hitting her so much harder now.

Then there's Betsy, who has a talent for finding anyone's vulnerable spot and stabbing it with the sharpest thing within reach.

"You know," she says to Olivia, "if you don't take first next week, we won't get into regionals."

"Maybe if you were a little faster, it wouldn't all be on my shoulders." Olivia smirks, but there's an echo of fear behind it. I was never a fan of Betsy's, but now I loathe her and it's a struggle to hide it.

As if that weren't enough, the arrangements for the meet in Wyoming are a mess. The people I hired to help us bring in the corn and soybeans say they're behind and I've got Jessica getting clingier by the day. She showed up on the *track* of all places, even after I specifically told her not to.

"What's wrong with popping by to see my boyfriend in the morning?"

she asks.

“We’ve discussed this,” I tell her. “I don’t like mixing my private life and my professional life.”

“That’s a little hard to believe, given how much time Olivia is spending at your mom’s house,” she retorts.

God, I wish she’d never met Olivia. She’s been off the rails ever since last week. “I don’t have a choice,” I sigh.

“There’s always a choice,” she replies.

ON WEDNESDAY, OLIVIA ARRIVES WITH DEAD LEGS AND SMALL CUTS ON HER forearms. “You’re staying with my mom tonight,” I tell her.

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. You’re stressing out and I can’t afford for you to get injured or fatigued right before the meet.”

“I won’t run.”

“You know you can’t make that promise,” I reply. “I thought you liked staying with my mom?”

Something crosses her face, and for a minute she makes me think of the small girl she must have once been, vulnerable. “I’m not a charity case.”

“No one ever said you were.”

“I appreciate what you and your mom have done,” she says, “but I don’t need help.”

“If you won’t do it for yourself, then do it for the rest of the team,” I tell her. I hate that I’m adding to the pressure she feels, but I hate even more the idea of her running through that neighborhood in the dark, and I don’t have it in me to spend night after night sleeping on her doorstep. “You’ve got us in line to win our first title. Think of what that would mean to everyone else.”

She finally agrees, looking so tired and overwhelmed that I wish I’d never brought it up. Sleeping on her steps is a far better alternative than the look on her face.

Olivia

Dorothy seems happy to see me that night, but what Jessica said remains foremost in my mind.

“You should just stay out here until the meet,” Dorothy says over dinner. “Get some rest and some good food?”

That’s nice of you,” I say tentatively, “but I’ve got plans.”

“What kind of plans?”

I shrug, wishing I could avoid this conversation. “I’ve sort of got a date.” It was stupid and impulsive, but it pissed me off so much when Jessica showed up on the track this week that I finally told Evan I’d go out with him, something I know I’m going to regret.

Will’s head shoots up. “A date?” he demands. “With who?”

“You don’t know him,” I sigh. “He’s on the swim team. His name is Evan.”

“Evan? You mean Evan Rainier? He’s the captain of the team. Why the fuck wouldn’t I know who he is?”

“Will,” his mother scolds.

“Sorry,” he mutters, but his jaw remains tight.

“What’s your problem?” I ask. “Is he a serial killer or something?”

“No, I just ... What exactly do you mean when you say that it’s ‘sort of’ a date?”

I sigh. "Because I'm not interested in dating anyone. I told him that, but he asked me just to give it a shot."

"Awww," gushes Dorothy. "He sounds like a really nice guy, Olivia."

"He is," I reply. Evan is very nice. The problem is I seem to have a preference for not-so-nice, which sits right in front of me at this very moment, his shoulders rigid.

"Too nice?" Will asks, recalling our previous conversation. He wants to know if I'm going to sleep with Evan, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let him guilt me into saying I won't.

"No, he's definitely not *too* nice."

He stands, letting his fork land on his plate a little harder than it should. "So you don't even like this guy and you're going to sleep with him?"

Dorothy gasps in shock and begins to scold him, but I'm already off and running.

"Why the hell shouldn't I, Will? You sleep with Jessica and you don't like her! Why shouldn't I do the same?"

He looks like he's been slapped. "Jessica is my girlfriend. Of course I like her."

"Bullshit. I am calling bullshit on that in the biggest way. Every time you see her car here, your face falls. Every time she speaks, you wince. Not only do you not *like* her, I think a part of you actively *dislikes* her. I actually enjoy Evan's company. He's fun to hang out with, he's fun to talk to. Can you honestly say either of those things about Jessica? And before you answer, you should take a look at how much time you spend avoiding her and ask yourself why."

The kitchen is uncomfortably silent when my speech is over, and I think we're all a little shocked by it. Will turns and walks out of the house. Dorothy looks stunned more than angry, but I'm not sure. I just drove her son out of the house, after all.

"I'm sorry."

She looks at me, her face drawn. For the first time since I've known her, she actually looks her age. "Don't be," she says, "I think he needed to hear it."

But if that's actually true, I'm not sure why she looks so unhappy about it.

WILL STILL ISN'T HOME WHEN I GO TO BED, WHICH MAKES ME THINK I'VE REALLY taken things too far. He's always been so worried about me running in the woods and now he's not? Have I pushed him so far that he's given up?

It takes me a long time to fall asleep, waiting for the sound of the front door to open. I know I'm going to run tonight, and for the first time in my life, it's not about a meet or my brother or something that happened a long time ago.

It's about a boy.

.

Will

I'm driving away from the farm as fast as I can go, as if I can somehow separate myself from what she just said. I can't, because she was right. Every damn word out of her mouth was right.

It's not simply that I don't like Jessica. The truth is that I *dread* Jessica. I dread seeing her in my office, in my apartment or hers, or at the farm. There's nothing wrong with her. There's also nothing that makes me crave her, miss her, think about her when she's not with me. All these nights I've spent sleeping on my mother's couch were spent thinking about a girl, but that girl wasn't Jessica.

I'm mad at Olivia for pointing it out, and I'm mad at myself for not seeing it sooner. I turn the car around and go home, to sit on my mother's front porch with my head in my hands, realizing exactly how pathetic the truth is. I was never interested in Jessica. She was just another futile effort to please my father, an effort I made far too late.

I took over the farm like he wanted. I dated the girl he chose for me. I've spent two years paying penance as if these actions will let him know that I'm so fucking sorry for the way I acted and the shit I said to him, and for the fact that I let him carry so much on his shoulders without ever once offering to help. But paying penance feels like it's sucking the life out of me, and it's never going to bring him back.

I've only just stood up when the door flies open. I leap forward, cursing myself for not going inside sooner, and barely grab Olivia before she gets down the steps. She screams and flails and finally gives in to me, collapsing against my chest with a weak, final cry.

I carry her to her room. It's funny that I grew up here, but in a short period of time it has become Olivia's room. It will always be her room, even when she's no longer here.

I lay her down on the bed, but she's still restless. *Fuck it*. The truth is I want to stay. I like falling asleep with her. I think about that almost as often as I think about seeing her naked, which seems to take up most of my day despite my best efforts to avoid it.

I get her into bed and wait to make sure she's okay. I start to slide my arm out from under her, to pull away, except she rolls toward me instead. And then, with her eyes still closed and fast asleep, she raises her head and kisses me.

I've imagined how it would feel to kiss her a thousand times, I can't look at her mouth once without thinking about it. But this is better. Her soft lips, her body arching toward mine. For a moment, I'm drowning in sensation without thought. Nothing exists but her tongue and her exhale, her perfect skin and the way she *yields* as if her body was made for my hands.

My groan breaks the silence and the spell, forces my brain to begin working again, and I open my eyes to see just how far I've taken things: she's on her back and I'm nearly on top of her, my hands at her waist, fingers beginning to slide beneath her tank. *Fuck*. She's still sound asleep and I'm on the verge of ... I don't know what. I don't *want* to know.

I scramble away and go sit on the couch, feeling sick with guilt, but not so guilty that I don't want to go right back in there and do it all again.

I've dreamed about what just happened. You're supposed to be grateful when you get the things you dream about, but I'm not. Because now that I've had a small taste of how it would be with her, I'm going to go through my entire life also knowing what I gave up.

Olivia

“
You’re a total space cadet today,” Erin laughs over breakfast.

“She’s excited for her date with *Evan*,” teases Hannah, and they all laugh. “Even the unfazeable Finn is getting swoony over a guy.” I roll my eyes and let them believe they’re right. And I guess they are, in part.

It’s just the wrong guy.

I kissed Will last night, and it was the kind of kiss that has had me running a finger over my lips all morning, trying to recapture it, relive it, ever since.

I woke up last night. His arms were wrapped around me, shielding me from the outside, and I knew we’d been like this before. It felt familiar. And it wasn’t enough. I wanted more from him, and so, still half asleep, I took it.

His mouth was as soft and pliant as I’d imagined and, to my surprise, he gave into it. A tiny, low moan from his throat, his arms tightening, pulling me closer, kissing me like it was something he’d wanted for a long, long time. Rolling me to my back, moving over me ... and then freezing up and pulling away as if I were on fire.

It wasn’t a good kiss.

It was an amazing, life-altering kiss. The kind I will remember every time I’m with someone else. The kind I’ll still be thinking about when I’m 80 and this is so far behind me I shouldn’t recall any of it. I’m pretty sure I’d take a

lifetime of that kiss over almost anything else.

Will barely spoke to me this morning. Wouldn't even look at me. And it doesn't matter because now I know, whether or not he'll admit it, that some part of him wants this too.

EVAN PICKS ME UP AND, BEING A GENTLEMAN, HE ONLY MAKES A FEW REFERENCES TO how unbelievably shitty my neighborhood is. "It's not all bad," he says. "I bet you don't have to walk far to find meth."

He drives us out of the city and toward the mountains, and we wind up at a tiny shack that serves the best barbeque I've ever eaten in my life. There's a porch in back and a small stream weaves its way right through the center. I didn't want to come tonight, and I'm still not sure I want to date him, but it's okay.

"So is this better than eating ramen noodles alone?" he asks.

"I don't know," I reply. "Are we talking shrimp flavor or the spicy chicken?"

"Admit it, you're having fun."

"Fine. I'm having fun."

"And you'll go out with me again."

"We'll see."

"Awesome," he says, leaning toward me. "Then I lied before, when I first asked you out. I am gonna try to kiss you."

It's a good kiss, just like it's been a good date. And it still can't hold a candle to last night's kiss with Will.

Will

“It feels like something is missing without her here,” my mother says that afternoon. “The house feels empty.”

I don’t need to ask who she means. This house was my refuge and now it lacks something. “I’d never have imagined *her* making anything better,” I reply.

“Will,” my mother says gently, “sometimes it’s best to admit things to yourself, instead of pretending they aren’t there.”

“You want me to admit I like her? Fine, I admit it. Do I like her in a way I shouldn’t? Yes, I think I have since the day I met her. There. It’s all out in the open and it doesn’t feel better in any way.”

“If you like her so much, then why are you still with Jessica?”

“I don’t know. I figured I should wait until after Thanksgiving since she told her family she wasn’t coming home. But it’s going to make things a lot harder.”

“Harder how?”

I exhale. Sometimes I think the only thing that’s kept me from messing up more than I already have is the fact that I have a girlfriend. I’m with Olivia way too much and keep finding myself in situations where it would be so easy to make a mistake, like I did last night. But these are things I can’t tell my mother. “I’m around Olivia a lot,” I tell her, hoping she’ll understand.

“Then maybe you need to come up with a better solution, honey. Maybe you need to not be sleeping here before meets.”

“Are *you* going to tackle her when she runs off, Mom?”

“Obviously I’m not going to be able to stop her, but Brendan could.”

“No.” My voice is cold and certain, my fist clenching reflexively.

“Why not?” Dorothy asks. “He’s as big as you, and nearly as fast. I’m sure he’d be willing.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he’d be all too willing,” I sneer. “I’m sure he’d *jump* at the chance. That’s why he’s not doing it.”

“If you can’t be with her, maybe you should move aside for someone who can.”

“I’m not stopping her from being with someone else. But I’m sure as shit not going to encourage her to be with someone when I’d be forced to look on. And it sounds like you are.”

“I want to see her happy and in love, and if it were one of my boys, it would be the best of all possible worlds.”

“Do you think ...” I exhale, steadying my voice. “Do you think she likes Brendan?”

My mother sighs. “I think we’ll never know until you get out of his way.”
I’m not getting out of the way, that’s for damn sure.

Brendan. Evan. The entire fucking world is full of guys who can take her away from me, and one day one of them will.

Olivia

Everyone wants to know how the date went. It's the first thing they ask from the moment I walk on the track.

"You're such girls," I groan. The date was fine but the truth is that I've already sort of forgotten it, and I don't feel like wasting time discussing it now.

"Ha! She's holding out on us!" screeches Nicole. "That means they got busy."

"Do you think you ladies could do a little less jabbering and a lot more stretching?" Will snaps, but it's as if he hasn't spoken.

"What's he look like with his shirt off?"

"He's a swimmer, Nic." I laugh, trying to mask my irritation. I already feel like I'm on edge and my teammates' girlish bullshit isn't helping. "You can just Google him if you want to know what he looks like with his shirt off."

"Yeah, I know. But I wanted you to admit you'd seen it firsthand."

"A lady never kisses and tells," says Erin.

"No, *gentlemen* never kiss and tell. Ladies can kiss and tell all they want," Nicole responds.

THAT AFTERNOON EVAN COMES TO THE TRACK TO WATCH US PRACTICE. IT'S ERIN who sees him first, but Will's eyes follow hers and turn cold immediately.

"Olivia," he says, "please inform your boyfriend that he is not welcome at our practices."

"He's not my boyfriend," I huff, "and why does it matter anyway?"

"Because he's a distraction. You're here to improve, not to show off for a guy."

"I wasn't showing off. I didn't even know he was here."

"Whatever," growls Will. "You can inform him, or I can inform his coach. Your call."

Once Will's done being a complete dick, I climb the steps toward Evan, who puts down his book and nods at Will, who's out collecting cones from the track. "What was all that about? You guys looked like you were arguing."

"He was informing me that you are not allowed to be here," I sigh.

"Sorry. He said either I tell you or he tells your coach."

"What the hell? It's none of his business. I'm allowed to sit here. It's public property."

Technically, it's university property, but I see his point. "He thinks you're a distraction."

"Am I?"

"I'm not saying you couldn't be, but I'm pretty focused during practice."

Evan's eyes narrow as he watches Will on the track. "That's okay. I can still spend plenty of time with you when you're not practicing. Let's see him try to monitor that."

I get the feeling that if Will could, he would.

SUNDAY'S MEET HAS WEIGHED ON ME ALL WEEK, AND BY SATURDAY, IT'S RAMPED into stomach-churning self-doubt. Betsy's the fastest girl on the team aside from me and I've never seen her come in better than sixth, which means I have to be first to get us a high enough weighted score. If I fuck this up in any way, we don't go to regionals.

I've been pacing my living room all day long, and by the time Will picks me up I don't even have the energy to give him shit about the way he acted the day before.

Dorothy makes dinner, but I can barely choke it down. I listen to them talk but don't participate, because I'm too busy thinking about all the things that can go wrong tomorrow.

Will sighs, taking a look at my untouched plate. "Let's go for a ride."

We head to the lake his father built for him and Brendan. I look out over it while the horses graze, beginning to understand why Will is so conflicted about his dad. How can you love someone who treated you the way his father did? But how can you hate someone who also wanted to give you the world, who built you a lake just hoping to make you happy?

He sits beside me on the grass. "On a scale of 1 to 10, how nervous are you about tomorrow?" he asks with a wry smile.

"1000," I reply.

"Olivia—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, just do my best and don't worry about the nerves and what happens, happens."

"Actually," he smirks, "I was gonna say, 'please don't lose'."

I choke on a surprised laugh. "Asshole."

"And also, just do your best. What happens, happens."

"The whole team will hate me if I don't place tomorrow."

He scowls. "You've said a lot of crazy shit, but that's got to be the craziest. How could they possibly hate you if you fail to do something *they've* also failed to do?"

"Because I'm the only one on the team capable of winning it." I know that sounds arrogant but it's the truth. The girls on the team work their asses off, but there's only so much hard work can do and the rest is genetics. "And if I hadn't fainted during the first meet, we'd probably already have a spot at regionals, but now we don't."

"Or you could consider the fact that if you hadn't come to ECU we wouldn't have placed once all semester. *You* did that for us."

He may be right. It doesn't change the fact that we will all be disappointed if I mess up tomorrow. Anyway, there are other things I'd rather talk about. Like the way he kissed me the other night. I'd like to know if he enjoyed it. If he wishes he could do it again. There are a thousand bad things in my head, things I push away all day long. But that kiss is a good thing and it's the only thing I'm not allowed to discuss with him.

"This conversation is making my stomach hurt. Can we talk about

something else?”

“That detective left me a message,” he finally says. “Apparently, you aren’t returning his calls.”

“I don’t want to talk about that either.”

“Liv,” he says gently, “you’re going to have to talk about it eventually.”

“No, I won’t.”

“But why? You said yourself you’d never planned to try to find your brother as an adult. I know this whole thing has been a shock, but does it really change anything?”

He waits, and I know him well enough to know that he will ask, and ask, and ask until he’s finally gotten the truth.

“It’s not the possibility that he’s dead. An adult version of Matthew would be a stranger to me. It’s that if they are right ...” My voice catches, and still he waits. “If they are right then he would have been so little, and so scared.” The sentence ends on a rasp, and I feel this odd grief come over me, pulsing against my eyelids, my jaw, trying to wrench itself free of my skin. My heart begins beating too hard, a race it can’t win.

He scoots so that his body is tight next to mine, a welcome line of warmth, and puts his arm around me. I bury my head into his chest, relishing the feel of his fleece beneath my skin, the firmness of him under it, his smell and the sound of his heart so close to my ear.

“I would do anything to fix this for you,” he says quietly, “and it kills me that I can’t. Tell me what to do.”

It takes me a minute to reply. “You already make everything better,” I tell him. “And you’re the only one who ever has.”

He stills at the words. His breath, his pulse seem to stop entirely. I look up at him and his eyes meet mine. I don’t know what this is to him, but to me, it’s something far beyond running or lust or even friendship. When did he become so important? I know all too well that it’s not safe to care about anything this much.

I see panic, quiet and fleeting, pass over his face before he looks away. “Good,” he says quietly, “I’m glad I’ve been able to help.”

We ride back to the stables in silence. I’m equal parts embarrassed and angry. I don’t know why I told him what I did. What did I think it would accomplish? I hang Trixie’s tack up and begin to brush her, hurrying through it in my eagerness to get away from him.

“So are you going out with Evan again?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” I say, without interest, “maybe.”

“You didn’t have a good time?”

I could spend longer on Trixie, but I decide that tonight I’m cutting corners. I pass him on my way out of the stable. “It was fine.”

He follows me. “Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t need to date anyone twice. I’m not into relationships.”

“I don’t believe that anymore,” he says. “You’re as much a relationship-type girl as anyone I’ve ever known.”

I glare at him. “No, I’m not.”

“So on a night like this one,” he says, “can you honestly tell me that you’d rather be alone than have one other person with you to experience it all with? Even the lamest possible future you can imagine — sitting in a living room like my mother’s and watching reality TV — don’t you want to be with someone for it?”

I’m angry, and sad, and it’s all welling up in my throat and my chest and my head, making me feel like it can’t be held in.

“Yes,” I hiss, coming to a halt. “Yes, and if I told you I want *exactly* that — the two of us together doing every single lame thing we do — what would you say?”

The breeze rustles between us, only emphasizing the vast silence on either side. I want to hate him for making me spell it out, but there’s something so wary and yet so vulnerable in his face that I can’t.

But if I could cry, I’d cry right now. I’d cry and I’d beg him to see me the way I want him to see me. To admit that all these things, every minute we spend together, are the highlight of his day, his month, his year, his everything, the way they are for me. *Please admit it, Will. Please.*

“I’m sorry,” he says hoarsely, beginning to walk away. He draws his fingers toward his palms in tight fists. “I shouldn’t even have brought this up.”

“Did you like sleeping with me?” I call after him. His body jerks to a halt. “I know you’ve stayed with me. Before the last meet. And the last time we were in the hotel. You stayed when you didn’t have to. Did you like it?”

He hangs his head. “Olivia, I’m not *allowed* to like it. I’m your coach. And that’s all I’m ever going to be.”

He wants away and I want to kick myself for my stupidity. Did I *really*

think he was going to abandon his job and his hot girlfriend for me? I've got no family, no money, a criminal record, and there's a strong possibility that I'll lose my scholarship before I graduate. I start fights, can't account for what happens when I'm asleep, and I'm incapable of any emotion but anger most of the time.

Why would anyone give up anything for *that*?

I WAKE UP MISERABLE. I KNOW I DIDN'T RUN BECAUSE I DON'T THINK I EVER QUITE fell asleep. I never realized how important Will's answer would be until it came back last night as a gentle but thorough rejection. Dorothy tries to get me to eat and it comes back up almost immediately. I wouldn't be surprised if I pass out again today. I don't want that for the team but at the same time it feels as if nothing matters anymore.

I don't say a word to him as we get ready to leave. Dorothy wishes me luck and hugs me goodbye. "We'll see you Tuesday, right?" she asks.

I look at her blankly.

"Thanksgiving weekend?"

I can't. I can't spend another weekend around him after what happened last night, watching Jessica take all the things I want and can't have. It's time to finally cut the cord. Jessica was right. This family has done nothing but sacrifice for me and they're in no position to be taking in orphans right now.

"Oh," I say. "I totally forgot to tell you, but I'm going home with Erin. Sorry about that."

Dorothy's face falls, and guilt spins in my stomach alongside every other bad thing brewing in there right now. But in the long run, I'm not going to be a part of this family, so I may as well stop pretending I am right now.

Will

I fucked up.

I know that I fucked up.

I just don't know what else I could have done.

I wanted to tell her the truth. Yes, I want all the same things, and I want them only with her. I want a thousand boring nights in, sitting on a ratty sofa listening to her malign newscasters and make fun of their guests. That I want to spend my entire life keeping her safe, even if means sleeping on the couch outside her room to do it. That I've never wanted anything in my entire life the way I want her, and the idea of giving her up makes giving up climbing pale by contrast.

What good would it have done, though? I'm not going to wait a year and a half just to watch her move on to bigger things. And I'm sure as shit not going to try and convince her to destroy her future and stay here with me, in a small town where none of the things she wants can happen.

But I still fucked up.

With every minute that passes this morning, I can feel her growing more remote. She didn't speak on the car ride and she barely spoke on the bus.

I see her pacing before the meet, the way she always does, but today she wants nothing from me. She's the Olivia I first met, closely guarding her secrets, struggling beneath an unbearable weight, and certain that no one can

help her carry it.

I have a bad feeling about today. She didn't eat, she looks exhausted, and there's just something missing ... Possibly something *I* took away.

When the race starts, she goes out like a cannonball at a dead sprint. It's speed you pull out at the end of the race, not at the beginning.

"What the hell is she doing?" groans Peter.

I'm wondering the same thing. It could be strategy, but Olivia's strategy is normally the opposite, reining herself in until she knows the end is near. She typically stays neck-and-neck with the top two girls, lets them set the pace, and then pulls from that miraculous well of strength she always seems to have when no one else does. She's not doing that today, and I already know exactly how this will unfold: when the top runners catch up with her, and they will because she can't maintain her current pace, she'll panic, begin the mental self-flagellation she's so prone to, and then she will give up.

By the third mile, it all begins to unfold as I predicted and I watch, absolutely helpless to stop it. "Damn it," says Peter. "She just lost us regionals."

"She didn't lose it," I reply testily. "The team lost it. She's the only one who got us close to it in the first place."

She comes in 4th, still the first out of the team but several places too low to do us any good. When she comes through, I clap a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, Olivia. You did your best."

She nods but there is defeat etched into the curve of her mouth and shoulders as she walks away. Nicole and Erin both throw an arm around her shoulder as we walk to the bus, but Olivia doesn't react. It's not even as if she's sad, it's as if she's empty. She never wanted to care about the team, and I think right now she wishes that were still true.

I say goodbye to her once we reach campus. School gets out Tuesday for break, and it all feels so incomplete. It seems like we should have more time.

She steps off the bus and I watch her until she fades from view, wishing there were anything I could have said to make her stay.

THE FARM IS A PRETTY DEPRESSING PLACE TO BE FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS. IT reminds me of the time after my father died, how we'd sit down for dinner

and the sight of his empty chair seemed to diminish us all a little. My mother doesn't say it, but I suspect she blames me. I see it in her eyes, in the way her mouth tightens a little every time I say Olivia's name. The only person alive who appears happy about the whole thing is Jessica.

"No offense," she says as we drive to dinner on Tuesday night, "but it'll be nice to have a little family time without her there."

Family time? God, there are so many responses that come to mind. I just barely keep them to myself.

"And it's time she found a family of her own," she continues. "She can't be leaning on you guys as her only source of support."

"How exactly is she supposed to find a family, Jess?" I ask, my voice precise and angry. "Post an ad on Craigslist?"

"Will," she says, "don't get snippy with me. You know what I mean."

"No, actually I have no fucking idea what you mean."

"You always defend her," she accuses. "Ever since she got here, you've done nothing but make excuses for her, and she's totally taking advantage."

Jessica has a big family, and parents who dote on her. Her car and the fancy apartment she couldn't possibly afford on her salary are all benefits of having parents who can't deny her anything. It makes every word out of her mouth that much more appalling. "Taking advantage of *what* exactly, Jessica? My family's yacht and mansion?"

"Will," she says with a tremulous note in her voice, "this is a really hard week for me, okay? Please stop making it worse."

"Hard in what way?" I growl, irritated before I even know what she's going to say.

"This is the week we lost my grandfather," she says, pressing her index finger to the corner of her eye as if to stem the tears. "I miss my family and I'm thinking about my grandfather and now you're mad at me and it's hard, okay?"

We are almost into town and I should let this go, just make it through the evening, but I can't.

"When?"

"When what?" she snuffles.

"When did your grandfather die?"

"A few years ago."

"How many, Jess?"

"I don't know. High school."

"What year of high school?"

"I don't know!" she exclaims in exasperation. "I was maybe a sophomore. How could it possibly matter?"

"You expect me to feel sorry for you because your grandfather died at least *nine* years ago, but you think Olivia should find her own family?"

"It's hard for me to be away from them over the holidays and it's like you don't even *care*." This is classic Jessica. Lose the point and just throw out a new accusation. "I stayed here for *you*, remember?"

"I told you to go visit them," I groan. Her parents moved to Denver over the summer, but she insisted on staying here for the holiday, even after I all but begged her to go.

"It's okay," she says tearfully. "You'll come to Denver with me at Christmas and it'll all even out." This after I told her I needed to be around for my mom over the holidays.

That's when I turn the car around.

I wanted to believe that my father knew better. I tried to see the best in her, and I was wrong. We both were.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"I'm taking you home."

"You don't need to do that." She smiles, wiping away another invisible tear and then putting most of her faux-sadness aside. "I'm okay, just a little sad about not seeing my family. Let's go out. I'll be fine."

I take a deep breath, aiming for neutrality rather than scorn. "I'm sorry, Jess, but this isn't going to work out."

"Will, it's fine. I just needed a little cry—"

"No, I'm not talking about tonight. I'm talking about us. We are not going to work out."

Even with my eyes on the road, I can feel the way she recoils.

"You're breaking up with me?" she gasps.

"This just isn't working anymore, Jessica. I'm sure if you think about it, you'll see that too."

"But we've been together for a whole year! We aren't even having problems!"

"We've been having plenty of problems," I reply. "We just haven't discussed them."

“Is this about sex? Because *you’re* the one who keeps turning me down. I tried talking to you about it—”

“It’s not about sex.”

“Then what? You can’t just break up with me and not even have a reason!” she cries, her voice getting higher by the second. “Everyone thought you were about to propose and you want to take a break instead?”

“I was never planning to propose. I must have told you a thousand times I didn’t want to settle down. And I don’t want to take a break,” I correct her. “I want to break up.”

I pull up in front of her apartment complex. “Then why?” she demands. “I’m not getting out of this car until you’ve given me a reason.”

“We have nothing in common, Jessica,” I say gently. “If you think about it, you’ll know I’m right. You don’t run, you don’t climb, you don’t even like sports. And I don’t do the things you do.” In truth, I’m not sure what exactly she does away from me aside from work and shop.

“Right,” she hisses. “I don’t like those things, but your precious *Olivia* does, doesn’t she?”

“She has nothing to do with it.”

“She has everything to do with it!” Jessica screams. “Everything! We were fine until she showed up and it’s been a steady downhill ever since! I *knew* you were cheating when you stopped sleeping with me.”

“I’ve never slept with Olivia and I think you know that.”

“Bullshit, Will! You think I’m stupid? You think I really believe you and that girl are spending all this time together and sleeping under the same roof, but you’ve never hooked up with her?”

I meet her eye. “Yes, I expect you to believe it because it’s the truth.”

“You’re going to get caught!” she cries. “You’re going to get caught and lose your job and then your mom will lose the farm. Is that what you want?”

“I’m not sleeping with her!” I shout. “For the last time, there is nothing going on. Now please get out of my car.”

“Fine,” she says, climbing out, “but just for the record, you don’t need to have slept with her. It’s enough that you’ve been staying together at your mom’s.”

And then she leans her head back in and *smiles*. “When word gets about that, you’re royally fucked.”

“YOU’RE HOME EARLY,” SAYS MY MOTHER.

“Yeah,” I sigh, flopping down on the couch and closing my eyes.

“Where’s Jessica?”

“We broke up.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

I laugh. “No, you’re not. You never liked her. You can admit it.”

“Jessica had her good qualities,” she counters, but even she laughs a little at how insincere she sounds. “So what led to this?”

“She started in on Olivia again and I kind of lost it.”

We sit in silence for a moment and I reach for the remote. “So where did Olivia go exactly?” my mother asks.

I don’t want to think about Olivia right now. I don’t want to think about how enraged I got the moment Jessica spoke against her, or how empty this week will be without her. I turn on the TV, flipping aimlessly through the sports channels.

“To Erin’s,” I reply.

“Where does Erin live?” my mom asks.

“Why?” I ask, a little sourly. “You planning a rescue mission?”

“No,” my mother snaps. “I’m just curious.”

I try to remember where Erin calls home. Most of the girls are from Colorado, but for some reason, it seems like she was not. Her parents flew in for that meet they attended. They wouldn’t have flown in if they were in-state. And they’d had a layover in Chicago.

New Jersey.

Shit.

I hear my mother saying something, but I’m already out the door.

Olivia

I lost.

It's been nearly three days since the meet and that's pretty much the only phrase I've uttered the entire time. I let them all down, but Will most of all. For him to have gotten us into regionals during only his second year of coaching – *that* would have meant something, and I took it away from him. I took it away from Nicole, who's graduating this year. And what's worse is I allowed it to happen. This wasn't me after a long run. This was me fresh, ready. If I'd given it any thought whatsoever, I'd have known I was going out too fast. But I was anxious and angry and bitter and a little too eager to leave those feelings behind me.

I did this.

A lot of the girls have called or texted to make sure I'm okay, which just makes me feel worse. How can they be so nice to me when I just ruined this for all of them?

I've run almost 30 miles since this weekend's meet and it hasn't gotten rid of this feeling in the pit of my stomach. Guilt. I hurt everyone, destroyed everything: the girls on the team, our chance of going to regionals, and canceling on Dorothy at the last minute just because I was upset at Will.

I look at how badly I've messed up in the last few years: attacking Mark, losing my scholarship, and everything that happened this weekend.

My great-aunt once said that I was the reason my grandmother got sick. I hated her for saying it, I still hate her for saying it, but right now even that seems like the truth.

I'M SO USED TO MY ISOLATION THAT I NEARLY JUMP OUT OF MY SKIN WHEN SOMEONE starts banging on my door Tuesday night.

"You lied," Will says, storming into my apartment. "You fucking lied to me. You're not going home with Erin."

I put my hands on my hips and attempt to look bored. "Fine, I lied, you caught me," I reply blandly. "So what?"

"So why did you do it? You lied to *all* of us!" He walks an angry path through my apartment, back and forth, building up steam.

"It was a lie," I say coldly. "I lie all the time. I think we've already established that."

"Why would you treat me that way? Treat my mother that way?"

"I'm not a charity case, Will. Your family doesn't have to take me in for every holiday. Consider yourselves off the hook."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he demands. "We *wanted* you to come."

"Bullshit," I hiss. "You *personally* couldn't have made it clearer that you wanted to be away from me. And I'm guessing that losing the meet on Sunday only makes that more true. So yeah, I lied. Sue me."

His jaw opens and he stares at me. "God, I want to shake you sometimes."

"Go for it." I shrug. "I've lived through worse."

"Pack your stuff. You're coming home with me."

"No, I'm *not*. The Olivia Finnegan Charity Project you want to open has come to an end."

"Pull your head out of your ass, Olivia! For some inexplicable reason, my mother adores you." He raises his hands in the air, helpless with frustration, and slams his palms down hard on the counter. "She's at home right now, lamenting the fact that you won't be there, and it turns out you're lying to her in order to avoid it!"

"Of course I lied. *That's what I do*. All of you should've known not to

count on me.”

“Is that what this is about? Because you *lost*?”

I swallow. “No.” My throat feels like it’s closing in. “But I’m not a part of your family and that was pretty much the end of the cross-country season, so I guess our work together is done.” Just saying the words aloud makes me feel adrift in my own grief. I won’t be seeing Dorothy again, or the farm or the horses. It’s over.

“Olivia, my mother seems to think you’re the daughter she never had. So like it or not, you *are* part of a family. Believe me, I’d have chosen someone a little more even-tempered and less quick to lie or throw a punch, but sometimes you don’t get a choice. We want you there, all of us. You filled a hole we didn’t even know we had and now you’re gone and it’s all any of us can see.”

I want to scream, or lash out, but something inexplicable occurs instead. I feel like I’m about to cry. I hate that he’s mad, I hate that Dorothy is upset, I hate that I lied and that I’ve been here alone wanting to be with them. I hate that I missed them all. My eyes are filling and my lip is trembling. It’s humiliating, and it enrages me that he and his mother have made this happen. That thing inside my chest twists, too hard this time.

Suddenly he looks like he’s been hit. “Are you *crying*?” he asks.

“No,” I rasp, even as I feel tears rolling down my face. I turn away from him and head toward the bathroom. “Go home.”

He grabs my arm and swings me back, into him, looking astonished and saddened and hopeful all at the same time. “You *are* crying.” His arms go around me, tucking me into him, my head just under his chin. “Livvy, I’m so sorry.”

I try to push him off and he holds on tighter. “It’s okay to cry once in a while.” My shoulders shake and I say nothing, but I no longer fight. The small explosion has triggered an earthquake, and it scares me. It seems as if there is no end to it, no bottom.

So I cry. I cry so ridiculously long and hard that it seems unbelievable to me and still the tears don’t stop. He maneuvers me to the couch and wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his chest.

“I can’t stop,” I laugh and cry at the same time.

His hand runs over my hair. “I know,” he says. “It’s okay.”

I cry until I’m exhausted, until the weight of fatigue steals over me. I cry

until there's nothing left, and then I fall asleep.

I WAKE ENTANGLED WITH HIM, THE TWO OF US CURLED INTO EACH OTHER ON OUR sides in a space not even meant for one, my head on his shoulder, his arm draped over my waist, one of my legs pinned between his. He is sound asleep. If I were a better person I'd wake him, or at least go to my bed and let him have the whole couch. But I'm not a better person, so I snuggle in and go back to sleep.

The next time I wake the room is light. I've turned over so my back is to his front and I can feel something insistent pressing against my ass even through my jeans and his.

I laugh. "I guess you're awake, perv."

He groans. "That doesn't make me a perv. Every time I tried to move, you pushed your ass against me again."

I wiggle and I *feel* him groan as I much as I hear it. "Don't notice you trying to move now."

"If you'd get off of me I would," he snaps. "You're a very hard person to be nice to sometimes."

I laugh and sit up, and so does he, bending over to rest his elbows on his knees.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"For what?" he asks without looking up.

"For giving you shit just now. And for lying."

"You know it'd break my mom's heart if she found out."

"You're not going to tell her, are you?" I plead.

"No," he says. "Because you're going to come home with me and tell her your plans changed. So, as I said about eight hours ago, go pack your shit."

Will

“

I brought you an early Christmas present, Mom.”

My mother pokes her head out of the kitchen and a smile breaks across her face that is too wide and too sudden to be fake. “Olivia?” she gasps.

“What happened to your trip?”

“My plans changed,” she says hesitantly. “Is that okay?”

My mother pulls her into a big hug. “*Okay?* Of course it’s okay. It’s better than okay. I’m thrilled.”

Brendan walks out in a T-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms, running a hand through his riotous hair. “Holy crap you people are loud.” He blinks when he sees Olivia and quickly wakes up, looking a little too delighted to find her here. I step in front of her. I’m not sure why.

“Hey, Houdini,” Brendan laughs, “you realize that didn’t make her invisible, right?”

MY MOTHER MANAGES TO ACTUALLY GET A DECENT BREAKFAST INTO OLIVIA FOR once, and then suggests I take her climbing.

I shake my head. “I need to take a look at the combine. That engine isn’t going to last us another season with the noise it’s making.”

“I’ll take her,” Brendan says, and something ugly winnows its way up

inside me. Yeah, Brendan knows how to climb. I taught him myself. Doesn't mean I trust him.

"Not a chance," I reply. "I don't need my lead runner out for the rest of the season because you didn't secure something right."

"The season is over," Olivia argues.

"Have you actually forgotten you have the Cooper Invitational in two weeks?"

"I haven't forgotten, but winning the Cooper doesn't get us back into regionals."

"It would've been great to make regionals," I reply, "but this race is far more important for you. The Cooper gets national media attention."

"So it's settled," Brendan says to me. "You don't have time to take her and I do. Have fun playing with your engine."

Asshole.

Maybe if he'd offer to fix the fucking engine, I'd actually *have* time.

Olivia

“
I don’t want to climb,” Brendan announces as soon as we get in his car.

“Then why’d you offer to take me?”

“Just trying to piss Will off. Mission accomplished. Did you see his face?”

I roll my eyes — it’s easy to piss Will off. That had nothing to do with me. “So what are we going to do instead?”

He grins. “Something a hell of a lot more fun than climbing.”

He takes me to a small one-street town about 20 minutes away, where we proceed to drink for the next five hours and then spend another two hours walking around while we try to sober up. It’s dinner time when we get home, and when Dorothy asks us how climbing was we both start to laugh.

“Am I missing something?” asks Will, that muscle in his jaw popping.

“Yeah,” says Brendan, grinning at me. “You’re missing a whole lot of something.”

THE NEXT MORNING I’M UP AT SIX TO HELP DOROTHY. I DON’T HAVE A HARD TIME rising early, since I do it every day, but I do have a hard time rising early in order to *cook*.

Dorothy hands me a bag of potatoes as I stagger into the kitchen and I

look at them blankly. “Um ... what do I do with these?”

“Make the mashed potatoes.”

I look at the bag in my hand and back to her. “Uh, okay. Do I bake them first or something?” Like I said, my cooking skills are unbelievably limited. Aside from eggs, everything I know how to make involves ground beef and spaghetti sauce.

She laughs. “Is that a serious question?”

“Well, they need to be soft, right?” I scowl. “I’ve only made mashed potatoes from a box.”

“You’ve never seen *anyone* make them?”

I shrug. “My grandmother stopped cooking when I was pretty young, and this is the only other kitchen I’ve been in.”

She turns to me, her eyes sad. “How is that possible, Olivia? You’ve been on your own since you were 16.”

“It is what it is,” I say, wanting this conversation to end rapidly. “So what do I do with them?”

“Peel them, quarter them, boil them. We’ll start with that.”

“Seems like a lot of potatoes for four people.”

“Peter’s coming too,” she says, as if that explains why she’s got me working with about 40 pounds of potatoes. I’m tempted to tease her about the fact that she blushed as soon as she said Peter’s name, but I decide against it. “How old were you when you took over the cooking for your grandmother?” she asks.

I pause. It’s a casual question that does not come with a casual response. My first impulse is to shut the conversation down. *Old enough*, I could tell her, but I don’t. “I was 11.”

I focus on the potatoes in my hand, the ache caused by the cold water, even though I know she’s stopped what she was doing completely. “What did you cook for Thanksgiving?” she asks quietly when she finally resumes her work.

I shrug. “Same as I cooked every other day. She didn’t really know the difference and it’s not like we celebrated Thanksgiving anyway.”

“So you’ve never had a Thanksgiving meal?”

I pause. “Yeah, I think maybe with my mom. I remember her making a pie.” A shudder passes through me. My mom is smiling in that memory, interested in me, explaining how a pumpkin is considered a fruit because it

has seeds. In that memory she doesn't seem like the kind of person who just abandons her child, and I prefer the monster I've created in my mind. It makes it at least possible that some of the fault rests with her.

"I always wanted a girl." Dorothy smiles at me. "Especially for times like this."

"You could probably still have one," I reply. Maybe it's just good genes, but Dorothy looks young. Too young to have grown sons, actually.

"Shop's closed. And besides, I have you now, don't I?"

WILL WANDERS IN AN HOUR LATER, LOOKING ADORABLY SLEEPY AND UNSHAVEN, AND *hot*. Who the hell looks totally doable just out of bed?

"Out," says his mother.

"Coffee," he replies, scrubbing a hand over his face. "You're not getting me out of here without coffee." He glances at me and grins. "My mom trusted you with a knife, did she?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "That was before she knew *you'd* be in the kitchen. Hope that coffee's fast. I'm feeling stabby all of a sudden."

He hops on the counter and watches me peel potatoes. "For the record, I'd like my potatoes without any of your fingers in there."

"Keep jabbering and you'll be getting them with an extra serving of spit, my friend."

The next time he comes in he's dressed and shaved, with Brendan behind him. "We demand food," Brendan tells his mom.

"Have some cereal," she says.

"*Cereal?* We're growing boys."

"If the two of you grow any more, you won't fit in the house. Out."

"Mom," Will whines, sounding so young it makes me laugh, "we're *starving*." When that fails, he turns to me. "How about sneaking your favorite coach a few of those rolls?"

I feign surprise. "I didn't know Peter was already here." He laughs and gives me the finger at the same time, which is decidedly un-coach-like.

BY 1PM, EVERYTHING IS DONE, OR NEARLY SO. "I GUESS IT'S TIME FOR US TO GET

ready,” Dorothy says, removing her apron. She leans out of the kitchen and yells at the guys to go get dressed. They both make similar sounds of protest, which she ignores. “We all kind of dress up, by the way. The boys hate it and every year they complain, but a rule’s a rule.”

“Oh,” I pause. “I didn’t bring anything. Just jeans.”

“Well, as it happens, I bought you something,” she says hesitantly. “I hope you don’t mind. I just saw it in the store and thought, ‘Olivia would look gorgeous in that.’”

“You shouldn’t have done that.” They’re nearly as strapped for cash as I am.

“I always wanted a little girl to dress up, and you’re the closest thing to a daughter I’ve ever had, so damned if anyone’s going to tell me I can’t buy her a few dresses.”

I follow her to her room feeling nothing but dread. I figure there’s a 90% chance she’s bought me something I wouldn’t be caught dead in, and I’m going to have to sit through dinner with Will and Brendan making fun of me the whole time. In fact, I’m already annoyed at both of them for it in advance.

While she goes to her closet, I pick up a picture of Will that sits on her dresser. He’s a gangly little towhead, standing shirtless by a lake with a big crooked smile and a few missing teeth. I’m still smiling at it when she emerges.

“Wasn’t he sweet?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I sigh. He was adorable. There’s something so free and unencumbered about him in the photo that it kind of breaks my heart. I’ve seen glimpses of it when we’re climbing, but almost never outside of that.

She’s holding up two different dresses. “I got you one for today and one for the fall athletic banquet.”

I laugh uneasily. “I guess the one that looks like lingerie is for today?”

“It’s a slip dress,” she scolds, “and no, that’s for the banquet.”

Both of the dresses are beautiful, but the idea of wearing either of them makes me feel squirmy and self-conscious. She has me take the dress that doesn’t look like lingerie and try it on. It’s a fitted beige sheath in matte jersey, pouring over my body like it was made for me. Dorothy sighs happily when I emerge. “I knew it would be perfect on you. Do you like it?”

I nod. “I do. I’m just not used to wearing dresses I guess.”

She smiles. “Maybe that’s for the best. You’re dangerous enough in

running clothes. Now run and put on a little makeup and I'll see you in the kitchen."

I go to my room and put on mascara and lip gloss, hating myself a little for how much I care. How badly I want Will to like it, for blindly hoping it will somehow change things for us when he's made it so clear that nothing's going to happen. It's a course of action destined to fail but here I stand, undertaking it anyway.

I brought heels, thinking we might go out with Brendan one night, so I slip them on and look in the mirror one last time. I look good, and it won't be enough. He made that clear last weekend, didn't he?

I see Will before he sees me. He's at the dining room table carving the turkey, wearing khakis and a button-down shirt, which isn't all that dressed up, I suppose, but far more than I've ever seen from him. He's gorgeous. Even in that shirt you can see the raw strength of him, the breadth of his shoulders, the taut forearms. He looks hot and grown up and just ... I can't put my finger on it but it's something that makes my breath come a little short.

"Hey, Mom!" he shouts. "Do you want—"

His voice trails off as I come into his line of sight. He doesn't smile. He doesn't move. He just *stares*.

"You're looking at me like I walked in here carrying a decapitated head," I tell him.

"That'd be less surprising than you in a dress," he mutters, turning back to the turkey.

Will

Holy shit.

Olivia stands before me in a dress that flows over every curve. Curves even *I* didn't realize she had, and I've done more than my fair share of looking. I am temporarily struck mute. I want to tell her that she is gorgeous, breath-taking, astonishing. That the second I saw her my stomach dropped with something that goes so far beyond lust that I can't even name it. I can't tell her any of this though, so I do what I've always done.

I try to pretend she's no longer there.

THERE IS NOTHING ABOUT THIS DAY THAT ISN'T HARD. IT'S HARD TO BE THIS CLOSE to Olivia, looking like that, and not touch her. It was hard seeing her with my mom in the kitchen, seeing the way she seemed to cure a certain loneliness in my mom that me and Brendan and my dad never did. It was hard seeing how much she belongs here, and knowing it's never going to happen. It's hard looking at my brother's smug smile. I don't know where they went yesterday, but I know they didn't climb for eight hours.

It doesn't help that my mom invited Peter either. I struggle enough to conceal the way I feel about Olivia as it is without having my boss here as an audience. And it could easily come up that Olivia is staying here, and that I

am too. I don't think he'd fire me, but I know for a fact he'll tell me I can't stay here tonight and there's no way in hell that's happening.

Although, with the way Olivia looks right now, that might be the safest course of action.

PETER DOESN'T TAKE MY FATHER'S SEAT AT THE END OF THE TABLE. INSTEAD, HE SITS next to my mom and leaves the seat for me. I guess he's just trying to be respectful, but I wish he hadn't. I'd kind of banked on talking to him about sports and ignoring Olivia entirely, but now he's talking to my mom and Olivia's beside me, so pretty that my eyes trip over her, stutter, stall, every time I look up.

Peter and my mom have an endless stream of things to talk about, things I didn't even know they had in common. He's in her book club, which I'd always thought was some female thing, and their mutual friend Tina, apparently, drinks too much wine and thinks her husband is having an affair. I guess I should have realized my mom had a life outside of us and the farm, but it's weird to realize that her outside life overlaps to the extent it does with my boss's.

I don't like it.

"How's school, Brendan?" Peter asks. "You gonna graduate on time?"

Brendan shrugs as if doesn't matter when most of my salary is what's paying his goddamn tuition. "I don't know. Don't see myself using that degree anyway."

"Oh?" says Peter. "Why's that?"

"I got a buddy who's trying to line us up jobs with a bike tour company next summer. I'd rather do that than anything I could do with my degree."

"Bike tours?" I ask. "If you're going to piss away your time, why don't you piss it away by helping around here?" *Jesus I sound exactly like my father*, bitter and demanding and unfair. I hate it and yet I'm still angry.

Brendan laughs. *Laughs*. "Right, because working on a farm is just as rewarding as biking through Europe."

Even before Olivia, I'd have been angered by his response. But now I'm enraged, and it has far less to do with the farm than it does the fact that he has choices. If he wanted to, he could take Olivia out tonight. He could sit across

from her in a restaurant and feast on the sight of her in that dress and wonder how the hell he got so lucky. He could be the one who takes that dress off of her when they get home. And most importantly, he could be the one to follow her when she leaves here next year.

I want those things. I want them so badly that when I imagine them, the way I am now, I feel a little unhinged. I lower my head, thinking about the busted engine I still need to fix and the climbs I'll never climb and the girl across from me that I'll never have, and it feels entirely possible that I may explode in a fit of rage, right here, at the unfairness of it all.

Brendan says something I don't catch and he and Olivia exchange a look. He looks at her like he knows things, as if he's privy to her secrets. If he ends up with her, I won't be able to fucking stand it. I won't.

I hear my text tone chime across the room and practically leap from the table. I just need to get away from all of them for two seconds, away from the idea of Brendan with Olivia, or *anyone* with Olivia, before I lose it.

I walk slowly to the other room with my phone, checking the text mostly for show. It's from Jessica, her tone breezy as if Tuesday night never happened. She wrote several times yesterday, asking if we could talk, which I ignored. I assumed she'd gone to Denver, but nope. Her text now says she's on her way here. *I have a little gift for your mom*, she says, *and then maybe the two of us can have a chat*.

And here I thought my evening couldn't get any worse.

Olivia

Will's been weird all through dinner. He seems angry, though at whom I'm not sure. And I'm a little angry at him too. Or actually, I'm just hurt. I knew me getting dressed up would change nothing, but I thought maybe ... I don't know what I thought. Will is as blind to me in a dress as he is to me in anything else, and it shouldn't come as a surprise.

"Jessica's coming over," he sighs as he comes back to the table.

"Apparently she got you a gift, Mom." He looks at me warily.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"When I broke up with her, she made some accusations involving you."

"Then I'll just go home."

"No," says Dorothy hastily, "absolutely not. You're not running off just because Jessica got the wrong idea."

"There's not time anyway," Will says. "She'll be here any minute now."

"Let's just tell Jessica she's dating me," Brendan says with a grin.

A flicker of anger crosses Will's face. "No," he says, his voice hard.

"I'll go to the stables," I suggest. I jump to my feet. "I can groom the horses a bit."

"You're in a dress," Will objects, but I'm already on my way out the door.

What a disaster.

I was so happy that he'd broken up with her, but here I am looking as good I'm ever going to look and he still doesn't care. And now his hot girlfriend is going to come over and he's either going to regret what he did and get back with her, or he's not and she's going to flip out if she finds me here. She will definitely know I'm here—my stuff is all over the room and my plate is still sitting on the table.

Brendan catches up with me as I near the stables. "You don't need to come," I tell him.

"It was worth it to watch my brother's head explode when I left. Besides, you need to tell me what the hell is up with Peter and my mom."

I smile. "It's pretty obvious what's up, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but how long has it been going on? They seem more married than my parents did."

"I don't know. Your mom is pretty evasive about the whole thing."

"Well, what does Will say about it? I mean, Peter's his boss. That's got to be weird."

I laugh. "I think Will doesn't have a clue, shockingly enough."

Brendan shakes his head. "That's not shocking at all. His head is totally up his ass about his own feelings, so why wouldn't they be about Mom's?"

We get to the stables and I groom Little Boy while Brendan lays there comfortably, watching. "You could help, lazy ass."

"I could," he replies, "but that would take work away from you, and I know how you love it. Besides, what endearing nickname would you give me if Lazy Ass no longer fit?"

"I can think of plenty, believe me."

"I'll have you know I'm extremely dedicated to things I care about."

I raise a brow. "Oh, is that right? Like school?"

He laughs. "Don't get carried away."

"Then what?"

"I do P90X religiously every morning."

"I've *never* seen you do P90X."

"I haven't started yet. But come December, I'm going to be the P90X poster boy."

Something cuts into my corresponding laughter. Voices approaching. Brendan and I glance at each other. Jessica's high voice, her dumb fake giggle. Will's low rumble.

Jessica strides into the stables with purpose, while Will comes up behind her reluctantly. "Jessica insisted on coming out to say hi to Brendan," Will says, shoulders sagging.

But Jessica is only looking at me, with malice so intense I'm surprised it doesn't actually burn my skin. "I knew you'd be here," she says.

Brendan pulls me into him, his arm wrapped around my waist. "Do you have a problem with my girlfriend, Jessica?"

"Your girlfriend?" she asks. "Since when?"

He glances at me. "How long has it been, baby? I guess since that first night I made you sneak out of your window? Four weeks? Five weeks?"

Will is glaring at both of us, but I have no choice but to play along now. "Yeah, about five," I agree.

"What night at the window?" Will hisses. His eyes have turned bright blue, the anger in them palpable.

Brendan gives me a cocky smile. "I climbed out of my window, pulled her out of hers and the rest is history."

His story rings true because, I suppose, it is true. Not a word about it is a lie, but then he failed to mention that absolutely nothing happened.

Brendan turns me toward him at the waist, wrapping his hand around my neck. "Best five weeks of my life," he says, bringing my mouth to his. He holds me there tight, not letting me pull away, opening my mouth with his tongue, grabbing my ass as he does it. I stagger a little when he finally lets me go, and he gives me that sidelong grin of his that would make me laugh if I wasn't so inclined to slap him.

"So you finally managed to wedge your way into their family," Jessica snaps at me.

"Yeah," says Brendan, "and you tried and failed, so get lost."

Jessica turns on her heel and storms out. Will stands there a second longer and there's something in his face now aside from anger. He looks hurt. So hurt that I want to run after him as he turns to follow her out.

I lean back against the pillar that stands between the stalls. "You shouldn't have done that," I breathe.

He laughs. "Did you see his face? Oh my God. I wish I had that on film."

I raise a brow. "Why do you enjoy torturing him so much?"

"That's just what brothers do. And besides, he needs someone to light a fire under his ass."

“I think maybe you ought to find a better way to do what brothers do,” I sigh, picking up the grooming brush I dropped when he attacked me. “Like coming back to help for a while after you graduate.”

“Help?” he says. “Why? Will’s got it under control.”

I look at him in disbelief. “Do you really think that, Brendan? He’s working two jobs to keep you in school. Your dad left so much debt they can’t even afford full-time help anymore. I know it’s not my place to say this, and Will doesn’t want you to know, but this place is a sinking ship and you’re swimming away as fast as you can while he bails water.”

He looks stricken. “I had no idea. The farm always did well.”

“I don’t think it’s done well in a long time. Your dad took out a second mortgage a while back just to stay afloat.”

“Why the hell didn’t my mom tell me? Or Will?”

“He’s been trying to give you what he had—four years of college without feeling responsible for anyone but yourself. But his life is hard, Brendan. So when you sit there talking about biking through Europe, it’s got to piss him off.”

“Great. So he’s doing all that and he thinks I’m trying to steal his girl on top of it.”

“I’m not his girl,” I counter.

“The hell you aren’t. But admit it—that was the best kiss you’ve ever had. And for the record, I’m just as good at everything else.”

“I’ve had better,” I reply, thinking of Will.

“No one’s better than me,” he argues.

My head raises just in time to see Will coming at us, looking only at Brendan.

“Oh fuck,” mutters Brendan and seconds later Will’s fist is airborne, connecting with Brendan’s jaw. Brendan takes the hit, stumbling backward. He flinches as he rubs his face. “I’m going to let you have that one,” he tells Will, “but that better be the end of it.”

“Will,” I breathe. “What the hell?”

He grabs my wrist, pulling me outside of the stables. He rounds on me as soon as we’re out. “What the fuck was that?”

“I could ask you the same question!” I cry. “Why the hell did you punch him?”

“Are you dating him?”

“No, of course not. You know I’m not.”

“Well, that was pretty damn convincing back there,” he growls. “And if you’re not dating, what was up with letting him kiss you?”

“What choice did I have?” I cry back. “He lied to save your ass and I went along with it. You should be grateful.”

He presses me to the wall, pinning me there with his hands at my shoulders, his face an inch from mine and angrier than I’ve ever seen him. “Well, I’m not,” he snaps. “So don’t do it again.”

He is solid muscle as he presses against me, and the anger inside me is morphing to something else, something hot and liquid and weak. I can feel his breath against my mouth, his angry eyes registering the difference in me just as I register it in him. And then his mouth descends, crushing mine beneath his, pulling me into him with his hands tight on my waist.

This can’t be happening. But it really is. I’ve never wanted anything so much in my life and it’s too much to take in, to memorize. His soft mouth and the scrape of unshaven skin and his smell and his warmth. It’s too much, too good, and yet not close to being enough.

There is no uncertainty, no hesitation. There’s something urgent, almost desperate in it, and I am senseless to everything except for him. His mouth, his tongue, the rasp of his breath, his hands beneath my dress, sliding along my thighs.

He pushes away from me suddenly, looking stunned. “Oh God,” he breathes. “I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I’m your coach. I can’t ...” He trails off, shaking his head, backing away from me with a look of horror on his face. “I *can’t*.”

He turns, disappearing from view as quickly as he appeared, leaving me so angry and sad and turned on all at the same time that I have no idea how to react.

I walk back into the stables. Brendan takes one look at me and grins, still rubbing his jaw. “Told ya.”

Will

What the fuck am I doing? I just punched my brother and kissed the girl I *coach*, all while my boss waits inside the house. And in spite of this I just want to do both things again.

Our first kiss, the night she was asleep, felt like I was merely going along with something I shouldn't. But this time, I demanded it and it was as if the part of me that's shown any restraint whatsoever these past few months had walked straight out the door. I didn't care that it was wrong in a thousand ways and couldn't go anywhere or mean anything, that it would only create more problems to be solved and more memories to be forgotten. I just didn't care. I wanted her and for a second, before I finally came to my senses, I planned to have her, right there against the back wall of the stables with my brother a few feet away.

I must have been out of my damned mind.

I return to the house and sit at the table, not even trying to disguise what I feel. It's pointless anyway.

"I guess things didn't go well with Jessica," my mother says, looking at my face.

"No, not really," I sigh.

Brendan and Olivia walk in a few minutes later. I should be worried about what they'll say, or about how mad my mom's going to be when she

hears I punched Brendan, but honestly all I can do is look at Olivia. With her hair messed up and her lips kiss-swollen she only looks more beautiful to me. I can't believe that I did what I did. And I also can't believe I stopped.

"My God, Brendan! What happened to your face?" my mother cries.

He grins, taking a quick look at me. "Got hit by a falling rake. It's cool. I should probably be more careful with shit that's not mine."

Olivia doesn't meet my eye once, and I wonder what that means. Maybe she's mad at me for walking off the way I did. Or maybe she's mad at me for kissing her in the first place, though I find that difficult to believe. When I remember the way her whole body arched into me, her sharp inhale as my mouth moved to her neck, I know it was mutual. Just thinking about it has me hard again.

She and my mother serve the pie, and surprisingly, we manage to get through dessert without me assaulting anyone or violating NCAA regulations.

"I'm going to head home," I announce once we've finished cleaning up, giving my mom and Olivia a quick glance to silence any objections.

Peter and I walk out to our cars at the same time. "Will—" he begins, and then he trails off. Finally, he shakes his head and settles a hand on my shoulder. "You've grown into a fine man. I know I can trust you."

Now I feel like an asshole in pretty much every way possible.

Olivia

He kissed me.

He kissed me like it was something he couldn't live without. As if he was suffocating and I was oxygen.

He kissed me as if I wasn't optional. Made me forget everything that had happened and everything that stood before us and between us.

And then he ran, and I haven't seen his cowardly ass since.

He started this. And now he's avoiding me. Probably worried he's going to have to sit me down and explain how sorry he is and how it can't happen like I'm some pathetic girl with a crush.

I don't plan to give him the chance.

When he still hasn't appeared by lunchtime, I ask Dorothy to take me home. "But why?" she asks. "I thought you'd stay for the whole weekend."

"I probably ought to study," I mumble.

"Didn't you bring your books here? Please, at least stay today," she begs. "I'm making that chicken you like, and one of the kids from next door wants to go riding. I was hoping you could take her out." Holy shit. She's as good at begging as Brendan. I wonder if Will possesses even a quarter of their ability, and if so, what he begs for.

Bad Olivia. Not helpful when you're trying to stay mad at him.

I clean the stables, rake the side yard, give the riding lesson and let

Dorothy teach me how to make pie. I may be stuck here, but I'll be damned if I'm gonna be sitting long-faced inside the house when Will returns.

Again and again, though, I run my fingers over my mouth in wonder. He kissed me. And it was so unbelievably good, so perfect, that I don't see how I'm going to go through my whole life without feeling it again.

Will

Yes, I'm avoiding her. It doesn't feel like I have a choice. Right now some gate I've had shut tight, on lockdown, is swinging wide open just waiting for her to walk through, which means that I should be berating myself. But instead, all I can think about is the feel of her, the small hum in her throat as she responded, and that makes me recall just how much further I wanted to take things yesterday.

The mechanic arrives to fix the combine. The whole ride out to the field he's telling me some story about a seed separator. The only thing that could conceivably make this story interesting would be if flesh-eating zombies emerged from the seed separator and went on a rampage, but today I'm not even sure I'd listen to that.

I'm avoiding Olivia because I'm weak. Because the worst part of me wants her to be the one to pursue it, to not take no for an answer and somehow make me guiltless. Which is impossible because unless she tied me down—which is a possibility I'm *definitely* going to imagine later—it's entirely on me. And I can't do that to her, or to Peter.

But it doesn't stop me from imagining it all day. Or from missing her, and hating the fact that she's here and I'm not with her. My mom takes the golf cart out later and brings me lunch. "Looked like you were never planning to come back in," she says.

I shrug. "Lots out here to get done."

"There's almost nothing to be done out here that can't wait," she replies. "So why don't you tell me why you punched your brother and are spending the day out here hiding?"

I should have known she'd never fall for Brendan's 'I got hit by a rake' story. "He kissed Olivia," I tell her. "He said he was just trying to cover for me with Jessica, but he didn't have to take it that goddamn far."

"Will," she sighs. "You're so in love with that girl you can't see straight. Something has to change or this is going to turn ugly fast."

"What can I possibly change, Mom? I can't quit. We can't afford it. I could probably get her a scholarship with another school. Now that she's winning, I could probably get her in a D1 school, but I'm not uprooting her like that when she only has three semesters left. Plus, I can't even imagine what it would be like knowing she's off in some new city and there's no one to stop her—"

"I know, I can't imagine that either. So we need to look at other possibilities. What if Peter tried to find you a position somewhere else at the school?"

"I still wouldn't be allowed to date her. And then who's going to help her during the away meets? Who's going to talk her off a ledge just before the race starts? It's all pointless anyway. She's leaving here after graduation and I'm not."

She cocks her head to the side and sucks in a cheek. "I wouldn't give up on everything just yet," she says softly. "These things have a way of working out when they need to."

"Nothing's worked out for me in a long time, Mom. And I don't see a lot of point in hoping that's going to magically change."

"Well, we'll worry about that later. In the meantime, come back and take that girl climbing. She's working herself to the bone trying to keep busy and the last thing she needs is more work."

"I figured she was busy being entertained by *Brendan*," I say snidely.

"Your brother loves you," she replies. "I know he's got a strange way of showing it, but I think he's trying to help."

OLIVIA IS PISSED. SHE DOESN'T EVEN LOOK AT ME AS I APPROACH, AND I CAN TELL by the rigidity of her stance that it's intentional. She has her guard up again, the way she did when she first arrived, as if she expects to be hurt. I hate that, but I can't exactly fix it either.

"Let's go climbing," I say. She wants to stay mad, but she wants to climb more. I can see it in her face as she reluctantly agrees.

We don't say much on the drive. Maybe she's waiting for me to begin, to explain. Or maybe the truth is so obvious that neither of us feels the need to address it.

As we turn left on the highway, she looks toward me. "This isn't the direction we normally go."

"Yeah, I figure you're ready for a bigger climb."

She almost smiles, and it's the first glimpse of happiness I've seen on her face today. "Are you *actually* admitting I've done something well?"

"Nah, just admitting you're not quite as terrible at it as you were."

"Terrible?" she scoffs. "You're gonna eat your words, asshole."

When we arrive, the doubts sink in. I've chosen a really difficult, technical climb and for all the wrong reasons. I was looking for something hard enough to silence the awkwardness between us, put it on the back burner, but now I'm worried I may get her killed in the process.

"I was kidding before," I tell her. "You've done really well so far, but now that I'm looking at it I don't know if this is a good idea."

"Feel free to wuss out," she says over her shoulder. "I'm climbing it." Fuck.

Someone has already established the route, but I don't necessarily trust it, so I go up first, checking the bolts to about the halfway point, which is as far as I'm letting her climb. I hang my weight off each one to assure myself they can hold hers. When I'm satisfied, I climb back down and grab the ropes.

"Your goal today isn't to hit the top," I tell her. "It's just to get some practice dealing with these kind of angles. There are a couple moments when you're going to feel like you're leaning backward. Just know that I've got you, okay? If you don't have the grip strength yet, you can just slide back down."

She rolls her eyes as cocky as ever. "I've got the grip strength," she says. It should irritate me, but instead, I feel a shot of lust through my stomach so strong that my fist tightens around the rope in response.

It doesn't go away as I watch her begin to scale the cliff face. She goes at it like she's on the attack, and something about her intensity makes me long for a whole lot of things I can't have.

She scrambles to the mid-point far faster than I imagined she could.

"That's good," I shout up to her. "Come on back down."

She looks down, arching a single eyebrow. "Right. After you said I was terrible, you think I'm giving up halfway?"

Shit. I didn't bank on her not listening to me and why the hell *wouldn't* I bank on it? When has she *ever* listened to me? "I didn't say you were terrible," I shout up to her, "but seriously, Liv, the climb gets harder and you've got to be tiring out. I haven't checked the bolts above where you are right now either. Don't be stupid."

"The next time you don't want me to act stupid," she calls back, "don't make the grave error of telling me I'm terrible at something."

She resumes her climbing, going past the midpoint, and all I can do is watch. She's still safe at the moment, not far above the last bolt I checked, but not for long. I have no idea who established this route and how long ago it was. For all I know, a good breeze could knock them loose. I wish to God someone were here so I could hand off the rope and scramble up after her, but I'm stuck watching her, angrier than I've ever been.

"Olivia, stop!" I demand as she clips onto the new bolt, but she ignores me. God damn it, I'm never taking her climbing again. If those bolts come out, she could wind up plummeting to her death.

Exhaustion has set in too. There's a strain I can see in her hands and shoulders that wasn't there before, and I'm not sure if she's doing this to punish me, but it's fucking working. I struggle to think of some way to make her stop while at the same time I marvel at her. Sometimes her grace and agility seem unnatural, and I wish ... Fuck. I wish a whole lot of things and not a single one of them will ever happen.

"Come down NOW!" I finally bellow. "I'm serious, Olivia. Now! You're too tired and you're going to get hurt."

She ignores me.

"I'm never taking you climbing again if you keep going!" I threaten in desperation.

"I'm never climbing with you again anyway, asshole!" she shouts back, and I hear that wounded thing behind her anger. "Who the fuck do you think

you are anyway? You kissed me and then you just ran off like I was going to stalk you or something.”

“Olivia, that’s not why I ran. Please, come down and we’ll discuss it.”

That’s when it happens, when her hand slips above her and she starts to fall. I watch her progress through my worst nightmare, falling, screaming, the first bolt ripping out of the mountain under her weight and sending her hurtling downward. I watch it happen, frozen in place, so terrified I can’t think.

I already know exactly what will happen. If that second bolt doesn’t hold, she’ll die. It will be too great a fall and her weight will pull out the bolts beneath or she’ll swing into the cliff face like a wrecking ball. It can’t take more than three seconds, but it is the longest, slowest three seconds of my life waiting to see if the bolt holds, the bolt I didn’t secure for her.

The rope goes taut as it pulls against the bolt, and it holds, but the momentum sends her swinging against the face of the cliff anyway. For a moment, I’m speechless. I can’t find the words to ask if she’s injured. It’s been a long time since I’ve prayed but, in that millisecond, I pray as fervently as anyone ever prayed for anything.

“I’m okay,” she shouts down to me, as if she knows.

My heart is still in my throat, but I’m able to call up to her. “Just hold still. I’m going to lower you down.”

“I’m okay,” she shouts. “I can climb.”

“No,” I reply, my voice far too harsh. “Don’t even think about it.”

Olivia

I'm bruised and my heart is still beating fast enough that I can't believe it doesn't just explode as Will lowers me. He's going to yell at me for climbing after he told me not to and he was *right*, damn it. It was unbelievably stupid.

As I approach the ground, I brace myself for the coming onslaught, but instead, I find him silent and panicked, wrapping his arms around me before I've even hit the ground. His front is pressed so hard to my back that I can feel his heart racing just as fast as mine.

He buries his face in my hair, holding me so tightly I can't quite take a full breath. "Jesus Christ. You scared the shit out of me."

"I'm sorry," I begin, turning toward him. "You were right and I—"

Something in his eyes makes my stomach clench, the way a flower contracts before it bursts open. His mouth lowers and captures mine, silencing my gasp of surprise. It's a heedless kiss, one that holds nothing back and shuts down my brain entirely.

His hand runs from my waist to the outside of my breast, cradling the weight in his hand and his exhale shudders against my lips, making me arch against him in a silent demand for more. More pressure, more contact, more skin.

"I thought you were going to die, Olivia," he growls. "If you ever do that again, I'll kill you myself."

His hands cup my ass to pull me tight against him. Desire for him coils in my belly, makes me strain to be closer to him as his hands slide into my shirt, spanning my back, pressing fingertips to overheated skin.

“We’ve got to stop,” he groans, but his mouth is still on my neck, his hands sliding up, beneath my bra.

I reach between us, snaking my hand into his waistband. He inhales sharply as my hand slides down to wrap around him, and not that I’d expected any differently, but there’s a lot to grasp. “Olivia,” he hisses. “I ...”

I run my hand over his length, loving the way his whole body jolts when I do it, his eyes squeezing shut.

“Oh fuck,” he says. “Stop. We have to stop.”

I ignore him, running my thumb over the tip of him, slick and swollen and ready.

The air catches in his throat even as he grabs my wrist to stop me. “Please,” he begs, resting his forehead against mine, his voice a harsh whisper. “I’m not sure I’ve got enough self-control to stop if this goes any farther.”

“Good.”

“Liv ... Jesus, I don’t know what I’m doing anymore,” he says, pulling back. “If things were different ... but they’re not. Nothing’s changing. Nothing’s going to make this okay. We both know that. I’ve tried so hard to do the right thing and then this shit happens, like you falling and Brendan kissing you, and I just lose my fucking mind. I don’t even know what to say. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Based on what’s happened, I should be driving straight to Peter and handing in my resignation, and I can’t even do that.”

I want to be angry at him right now but I can’t. He looks so torn, so guilty. Will wants to help all of us. He wants to save me, he wants to see Brendan get through school, he wants to save the farm and give Peter a winning season and do the right thing by everyone, and I’m the one making it impossible, making him put it all at risk.

I tell him I understand. I ignore, for the time being, the part of me that doesn’t.

THAT NIGHT I CLIMB INTO BED KNOWING THAT IT’S MY LAST NIGHT IN THIS HOUSE FOR

a long time, possibly forever. It has to be that way, if only for my own sanity. Dorothy, Brendan, the farm—none of these things are in my future. Nor is Will, and that's the part that kills me. The fact that he doesn't care about me enough to wait.

My chest aches, my throat goes tight. "Don't you dare cry," I hiss. My heart races, but I manage to push it back down, that sadness. I'm not going to cry over Will.

I'm not going to cry about anything.

MY MOM CALLS ME HER EARLY BIRD. "PLEASE GO BACK TO SLEEP, BABY," SHE'LL murmur when I climb in her bed in the morning. So it's weird to find Matthew up before me, perched at the end of my bed.

"Dad's home," he says quietly.

"Oh." My stomach drops.

My father was gone for a while this time, long enough that I started to feel like I could take a deep breath again. Long enough that I almost forgot this moment of trepidation we have when we wake in the morning, wondering how things will go when we get downstairs.

We walk into the kitchen together, sitting at our places in silence while my mother finishes putting breakfast out. I know immediately when I sit that this is not one of the days that will be okay. He has that look, that awful stillness. Today, the solid ground we use to edge around him will be a tightrope.

We begin to eat, silent and tense. My mother's face is drawn, but he ignores her, ignores all of us. He doesn't eat, but instead, opens bills, one after the other, growing angrier and angrier. I feel a tightness in my arms and chest as if I'm being squeezed in from all sides.

And then he holds one bill longer than the others. The air in the room seems to compress around him while we wait. "What is this?" he asks my mother, holding the bill in front of her face. His quiet voice is bad, far more dangerous than his loud one.

I can smell the fear coming off of her as she answers. "Daisy was having seizures," she says, her voice too faint, showing weakness. She shouldn't show weakness, even I know that. My father can smell fear and weakness the

way a predator can smell blood, and he reacts the same way.

"I didn't ask you what the fuck was wrong with the dog. I asked you what the bill's for."

"The medicine," she whispers. "The vet said she needed it or they'd get worse."

I'm only five but I know she needs to stop talking, stop justifying, stop acting like she's done something wrong.

He says nothing. He holds still for a moment, and we wait for his hand to fly out, to send her sideways from her chair with a startled cry. But instead, he turns toward Daisy, curled in the corner of the room.

"Let me show you what we do with a sick dog," he says.

Daisy doesn't sense danger. She nuzzles into him as he reaches for her. Sometimes, just when I think a terrible thing is going to happen, it doesn't. And then I feel stupid for fearing it, as if I must have been crazy to expect things to go poorly. He cradles her in his arms and she relaxes, and I relax.

And then my father grabs Daisy's neck and twists.

She's still in his arms, her eyes open, unmoving. There is utter silence. I can hear my own pulse, nothing else. And then we begin to cry, a symphony of tears and pain and disbelief. My mother gasping, choking on her tears.

"Oh my God," is all she can say. "Oh my God oh my God oh my God."

"You killed her!" my brother weeps.

"Stop crying," he says to Matthew. "And go dig a hole."

But Matthew ignores him, his face flat to the table, his whole body loose and boneless with grief. My father pulls his collar so his face comes off the table.

"I said stop your goddamn crying and go dig a hole!" he yells.

I stop crying so fast that I choke a little. I stop as if it will make up for the fact that Matthew cannot. Matthew's always been soft in ways I'm not, and it's the only thing about me that's ever made my father happy.

Stop crying, Matthew. You've got to stop. Look at me, I plead silently. You can stop just like I do. Look at me.

Even my mother has come to her senses. She grabs Matthew's hand and through her own tears urges him to calm down, to go on outside like my dad said. But he doesn't. He can't. His tears are a form of insanity, suicide, and he just can't stop.

I jump up so fast my chair falls behind me. "I'll do it!" I cry. "I'll do it!"

My voice is hysterical with enthusiasm. "I can dig the hole!"

My father nods. "That's my girl. Glad someone in this family takes after me."

My brother looks at me. I see blame in his face, hatred. I did it for him, but suddenly I'm a monster now, just like my dad.

Will

Her screams wake everyone in the house.

I'm there first and seconds behind me my mother and Brendan arrive, huddled at the door, staring at us in shock.

"I dug the hole," she says, scraping at her throat as if she can't breathe. She gasps for air once and then again. "I dug the hole."

She's curled up in a ball, knees squeezed tight to her chest. I try to pull her toward me but her whole body has gone so stiff that nothing moves. "It's okay, Liv. You're just having a dream. It's okay."

"No," she says, choking again, grabbing her own throat. "It wasn't a dream. It was me. *I* did it. I dug the hole."

"Dug what hole?" I ask, trying to pry her arms apart.

"Where he buried Matthew," she says. "I dug the hole."

IF I HEARD THE STORY FROM ANYONE ELSE, I'D NEVER HAVE BELIEVED IT BECAUSE it's too terrible to be real. But Olivia's entire childhood was too terrible to be real, and her dream made far too much sense.

Her father drove her down the road to dig the hole for their dog, she said. He found a spot in the woods and left her there all day. There was a tree above her, raining down acorns at unpredictable intervals, and by the time he

came to get her it was dark and she had small pinpoint bruises covering her arms. The next morning, Matthew was gone. Her father said he'd run away.

When she finishes talking, she's crying so hard that she's gagging. For the first time ever, I almost wish she could forget. All night I lie there with her, rocking her against me, running my hands over her back and promising things will be okay.

She sleeps sporadically, always waking with a gasp as if she's just remembered all over again. It's just before dawn when she wakes again, staring at me with her glassy, unseeing eyes on the pillow we share.

"We probably need to talk to the police, Liv," I tell her.

It's the first time I've ever seen her look terrified. Even when she fell yesterday, it wasn't like this. "No." She shakes her head. "I can't."

"Olivia, your father killed him. You know he did. If he's still alive, he needs to be stopped."

"I *can't*," she says. "I just can't."

I LEAVE HER ASLEEP IN THE MORNING AND GO BACK TO THE OFFICE. I FIND THE detective's card tucked carefully into the right side of my desk calendar. Somehow I think I knew that it would be me, not Olivia, eventually making this call.

I report what occurred last night, and he tells me he'll need to interview her right away. "She's not going to talk to you," I sigh. "She's as scared of talking to you as she is almost anything."

"Sometimes the kids involved are threatened so badly that the fear of speaking up never goes away," he sighs. "But I still need to try. Secondhand information from you doesn't get us anywhere."

"Look, can't you just interview the other adults involved? At least try to confirm the story through her mother if you can find her?"

"Her mother's been dead almost 15 years," the detective says, "so I don't think she's going to be much help at this point."

I lean back in my chair, and his words seem to whistle through me and right back out, as if they are impossible to comprehend. "Olivia told me her mother abandoned her. I mean, she really *believes* her mother abandoned her."

The detective exhales. “Look, buddy. I don’t know what stories this girl’s been feeding you, but she knows her mother is dead. She watched it happen.”

I know for a fact Olivia doesn’t think she’s been lying to me about this. But I don’t understand how she can’t know the truth. “So ... was it her father? Is he in jail?”

“He should’ve gone to jail, but there was nothing to pin it to him. Olivia was the only witness and she claimed to have seen nothing. It’s probably what saved her life. If she’d talked, you can bet your ass he’d have come after her.”

I feel something icy crawl along my back. “So if her father’s still on the loose,” I ask, “is Olivia even safe?”

“I think it’s fair to say,” he replies, “that as long as this guy isn’t in jail, Olivia will never be entirely safe. *Especially if she starts remembering.*”

I’M FULL OF DREAD AS I OPEN UP MY LAPTOP. A PART OF ME, LIKE A PART OF OLIVIA, doesn’t want to know. Wants to continue believing the version of events she’s created in her head.

It isn’t hard to find articles about it once you know what you’re looking for. Had I even once typed in her mother’s name months ago it would have been the first thing I’d found. Is it really possible that Olivia hasn’t? Yes. Something has warned her away from looking too carefully at anything for a long time, has assured her that she can’t handle what she’ll find out.

The story is awful, but it’s the photo that it hurts to look at – Olivia, tiny and smiling beside her mother, who looked very much like Olivia does now. She was stabbed forty-two times. Olivia ran nearly four miles in the dark and was found unconscious the next day, still bleeding from the wound on her back.

The night running. The scar on her back. The way she seems to black out when she’s attacked. If I’d even tried to guess at the source, I’d never have come up with something quite this awful.

I CALL THE NURSING HOME ONCE MORE. THIS TIME, I DON’T ASK FOR OLIVIA’S grandmother. I ask for her grandmother’s next-of-kin, who turns out to be a

sister. Olivia's great-aunt, I suppose. I should have thought of it before. Olivia was only sixteen when her grandmother was admitted. There's no way she'd have had the wherewithal or the funds to fly her grandmother to Florida and get her help.

And if this great-aunt helped Olivia's grandmother, she sure as shit should have helped Olivia too. I hate her before she's even picked up the phone. I hate her more after she has.

I explain the situation and the woman immediately launches into a tirade against Olivia. "Well, it might have been nice if that girl could have told the police back then, wouldn't it?" she explodes.

"She didn't remember anything until just now," I snap. "She's still under the impression that her parents abandoned her."

She clucks her tongue again. "That stupid story. Anya let her keep believing it, but let me tell you, I'd have put a stop to it right away. She knew good and well what happened. She nearly bled to death. You don't just forget something like that."

"What story?" I ask.

"Oh. Olivia'd get so hysterical when people spoke about it that everyone finally gave up. You couldn't even say 'died' around her. So Anya started saying 'when your mother went away' and they left it at that."

I'm so out of my depth at this point it feels like I'll never surface. I'm pretty sure I could have an MD and a Ph.D. and this whole thing would still be beyond me.

"Is there anyone else I can speak to? I assume Olivia must have lived with someone else, at least in high school, if her grandmother's been sick for a while."

There is defensiveness in her silence. "You understand I couldn't take her in," she finally says. "I'm too old to be raising someone, 'specially someone troubled like that."

"Yes," I say impatiently. "So who did she live with?"

"She just stayed in the house by herself. She was fine. Anya had been sick for a long time and Olivia was used to taking care of both of them. She was better off on her own anyway."

I slam the phone down and sit at my desk after we hang up, staring out the window without seeing anything. It's so much worse than anything I could have imagined. There have been times in my life when I wasn't sure

how to fix something. But now? I'm not sure I *can*.

From the very start, I had this urge to protect her, and that urge should have warned me away. I wanted to be the one to save her, and instead, I've opened up this well that might just destroy her.

It's time to come clean before I do more damage.

IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR PETER'S FACE TO BE MORE WARY THAN IT IS WHEN HE opens his door. "Didn't expect to see you on a Saturday morning," he says, stepping aside for me to walk in.

"I'm sorry," I tell him. "But I'm pretty sure this can't wait."

I tell him about Olivia's night running and the nightmare she had last night. I tell him what I learned from the police and how I've been keeping her from running, which leads to the somewhat obvious fact that Olivia and I have been sleeping under the same roof.

"Will," he groans, rubbing his eyes. "I'm gonna pretend you didn't just say that, okay?"

"Look, I had to tell you. Her problems are bigger than my job. I can't just abandon her right now."

"I know that," he says. "Which is why you can't say what you just did. Because if you tell me you're sleeping under the same roof, I have to tell you to stop, and we both know you're not gonna. So I'm going to pretend you never said it."

He says he'll ask around for the name of a professional. Not the idiot at the health center, but someone actually equipped to deal with this situation. "And in the meantime, just stay the course. She's got the Cooper Invitational next weekend. Let's just get her through that."

"This doesn't seem like the kind of thing we should be keeping from her," I say.

Peter shakes his head. "That girl's had nothing but bad breaks in her life. She isn't asking anyone for the truth, but she is asking for a chance to make a name for herself. And if she wins next week we can make that happen. I say we do whatever we need to do so she gets her shot."

Olivia

They are all bizarrely careful with me, as if I'm made of paper. It's sweet but irritating, a constant reminder of what happened, of what they know about me and what I now know about myself.

I helped bury my brother, and I'm not sure how culpable I am. If I've forgotten this, what else have I forgotten? My head feels like the creepy basement of a haunted house—best left unexplored, evil lurking in all the dark corners. Will, especially, is distant and guarded. Solicitous and yet wary of me at the same time. Probably because he's thinking exactly what I am: what else have I done? Who else have I hurt? No wonder he won't ask me to wait until graduation.

When Brendan leaves for school on Sunday, I insist on going home too. Will made his decision. I'd rather rip the Band-Aid off now than spend the next week or month fearing it.

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, THE WHOLE TEAM STILL PRACTICES TOGETHER, BUT ONLY three of us even have a reason to train until after winter break is over and it's obvious. Most of the team is phoning it in and just barely. Will doesn't look at me once without guilt on his face, and I don't look at him once without seeing what I will never have. That same ambivalence I felt the morning of

the last meet, as if nothing matters and nothing ever will, still weighs me down. Running was once everything because I'd never had anything better. And I still don't have anything better, regardless of what I might have hoped, so I really need to pull it together by Sunday.

ERIN SHOWS UP AT MY APARTMENT ON FRIDAY TO SEND ME OFF.

"Here," she says, handing me a bag. "These are good luck cookies."

"What makes them good luck?"

"Nothing, but it was either that or my good luck underwear, and I figured you didn't want that."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that good luck underwear is non-transferable."

She gives me a hug. "We love you whether you win or not, Finn. Keep it in mind this time, okay?"

THERE ARE NINE OF US FLYING TO WYOMING FOR THE COOPER. PETER WITH DAN Brofton, Marcus Phipps, and a kid they call Rooster. He probably has a real name but I'm not sure what it is. On the women's side is Will, me, Nicole, Betsy, and Dorothy. I'd feel guilty about the expense except there's actually a regulation that *requires* a female chaperone, so all of Dorothy's costs are covered by the program.

We arrive in Cheyenne late Saturday afternoon and are given our room assignments. I'm with Dorothy, of course.

"Still need a babysitter I see," mocks Betsy. "Right up until the last minute."

"It seems to work for her, though," says Dorothy pointedly, "since she came in first the last time I roomed with her. Maybe I should chaperone *everyone*."

Damn, I laugh to myself. Dorothy has claws. No wonder we get along so well.

We all eat together. Peter and Dorothy sit at one end of the table. They talk easily, eat off each other's plates without asking. They seem like they've been together forever.

"Who out of this handsome bunch are your kids?" the waitress asks them.

Peter grins. "All of 'em."

A question, confusion, crosses Will's face then. A moment of insight he blinks away. For someone who's normally pretty perceptive, he's shockingly slow to pick up on this. That or he just refuses to.

After Dorothy lies down, I go to the other bed in his room and stretch out. He seems to be doing his level best to pretend I'm not even here and it pisses me off.

"It's the last meet," I say, rolling to face him. "You gonna miss me?" My tone is playful, but my meaning is not.

He glances at me, his eyes darting over my body before they return to my face. "Your shirt is riding up," he says hoarsely.

I glance down and shrug. "I'm sure two inches of skin won't kill you. Answer the question." I run my finger over my lip and thrill at how avidly he watches the motion. The way his eyes turn feral before he looks away.

He swallows and sits back. "It's not like I won't still see you. I mean, you'll stay with us over break, right?"

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"You have to. You know you're important to my family."

"And that's all?"

"Liv," he groans. "It's all you're allowed to be."

IN THE MORNING, I'M MY STANDARD NERVOUS-WITH-A-SIDE-ORDER-OF-NERVOUS.

"Try to eat, sugar," says Dorothy.

"I can't," I sigh. "You know that."

She somehow gets half a banana in me before we leave for the meet. I felt okay when I woke up, but once we're on the field something spins in my stomach. The air is cold, but it can't account for the chill that seems to climb under my skin.

"Something's wrong," I tell Will. "Something's off."

"Nothing's off," he soothes. He reaches out to touch me and stops himself, letting his hand fall. "It's just nerves."

"No, this is different. I feel sick," I tell him. "I think I'm going to throw up."

"You're not sick," he says firmly. "Don't do this to yourself. Or go ahead

and do it to yourself. But you know once you're running it'll pass."

I nod, but this time, I'm not convinced. Maybe it's just my failure at the last meet, but I don't think it is. My lucky streak is over. I had a small winning streak at UT too, and then it ended and it never came back.

Today is not going to work out.

I taste metal in my mouth as we wait at the starting line, and then it's in my stomach, climbing through me, making my gut churn and my blood go cold. When the gun sounds, I take off too fast, trying to escape the chill that's climbing up my spine, the certainty that I will fail. I think of Will on the sidelines right now, how he'll feel when I lose, and what it must have been like two weeks ago watching me blow our shot at regionals. I force myself to pull back. I let the other girls set the pace, but because I'm anxious it feels painfully slow.

And then the distance increases and I feel better, stronger, more certain. I even out, going head-to-head with some girl from California everyone expects to win. But I can hear the violence of her exhale, the rasp in her inhale. We aren't even two miles in and she's struggling, whereas I feel like I could run this pace all day long.

I break ahead of the others. It's early, for me. A risk. Maybe I don't have another two fast miles in me, but today I want this. I want this for Will and Peter and Dorothy as much as I do myself, and I think it's possible I have it.

When I see the finish line, I begin to sprint and the noise of the crowd rings so loud I can't hear my own breath. Their roar grows deafening as I break through the tape.

Immediately there's a news crew and photographers around me and I push past them, desperately looking for the one face I need to see. He breaks through the crowd and throws his arms around me.

"You did it, Liv," he whispers, his breath warm against my ear, his body wrapped around me, and I feel safe and content and complete all at the same time.

I wanted to win, but I wanted to win for this exact moment, the one shared with him. I won't always remember the race, but *this* I will remember.

He slowly lets go when Peter and Dorothy jog up. "19:22!" yells Peter. Meaningless to most people, but all of us knows what it means. I was only five seconds off the 6K world record. Closer to it than anyone I've ever known.

I'm pulled through the crowd somehow, being congratulated and even hugged by complete strangers. We get to where the guys are waiting and Dan gathers me into his arms for a hug that goes on slightly too long.

"*Enough*, Brofton," barks Will behind us.

Even Betsy is almost nice. "19:22," she says, shaking her head. "I still don't like you, but holy shit that's fast."

There are interviews later and people wanting to meet me and an awards ceremony. It's what I've wanted my entire life, but it all comes in second to Will. I answer a reporter's questions, but my eyes don't stray from him.

"How does it feel to come within seconds of breaking the world record?" the reporter asks.

I give the answer that I'm supposed to, tell her that I'm shocked and thrilled, and yes, this is the biggest day of my life. And the whole time I watch Will, knowing I'd give it all up for him – my wins, the team, my future. He just doesn't want me enough to take it.

WE LAND IN DENVER AND TAKE THE BUS BACK TO CAMPUS TOGETHER. I HATE THAT this is my goodbye to Dorothy and Will, brisk and impersonal, walking away as if they are strangers with Nicole and Betsy beside me. I'll see them again at the banquet, but that's hardly any better.

Except not an hour after I arrive at home, I find Will standing at my door. He walks in, head down and hands in pockets, and then he rounds on me. "What did you mean last night when you said you didn't think staying with us over break was a good idea?"

"That's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

"Look, I swear on my life I won't repeat what happened," he breathes. "I swear it. Just stay with us."

"You think I don't *want* to repeat that?" I demand. "I want to repeat that more than I've ever wanted anything."

Desire flares in his eyes. "Please don't say things like that, Olivia," he groans, tugging at his hair.

"It's the truth."

"What happened shouldn't have, but you're a part of the family now. You matter to all of us. We can get past this."

“That’s just the problem, Will. You *can* get past it. I can’t.”

“What do you mean?”

I swallow hard and meet his eye. “If you wanted me enough, you could have had me. Or you could have asked me to wait until I graduated. But you didn’t, and you won’t, and do you know how hard it is to have to look at you?” My voice grows raspy and I pause because I refuse to cry in front of him again. “To look at you and know that you made your choice and you didn’t choose me?”

He flinches. “Olivia, it’s not a matter of choosing.” His voice is rough. “I don’t have a choice.”

“You do,” I whisper. “It’d just be a little over a year. You could ask me to wait. You could ask me right now and I’d do it. Gladly. But you’re not going to, are you?”

He closes his eyes and that muscle pops in his jaw. He says nothing.

I walk to the door and throw it open. “That’s exactly what I thought.”

Will

I wait until I get to the car. I wait exactly that long before I punch the steering wheel and let loose a long stream of profanity.

That was it.

I lost her.

It's not that I ever thought she'd be mine. I'd just refused to consider that there'd come a day when she wouldn't be. I thought I could steal all these moments from her. At my mother's house, on the track, climbing. Store them up as if they'd do me a damn bit of good once she's gone.

I've been so selfish with her for so long. I never should have brought her to my mother's house. I could have found another way, but I wanted it to be me who was with her, me who saved her.

Tonight, far too late, I finally did the right thing, and I want more than anything to go back in her apartment and undo it. I think of that catch in her voice when she spoke about waiting and I start to get back out of the car.

And then I stop myself.

I'm not letting her piss her future away so she can come live on a debt-ridden farm. I'm finally going to do what's right for her, no matter how much it kills me to do it.

“I WENT TO SEE OLIVIA YESTERDAY,” MY MOM TELLS ME.

It’s been a long three days. I haven’t seen or heard from her once. I just want to know how she’s doing. Okay, that’s a lie. I want to see her face, bury my nose in her hair, hold onto her and stay just like that for as long as she’ll allow.

“How was she?” I ask.

“Just like you. Doing her level best to pretend she’s okay when she’s clearly not.”

“You sound like you’re blaming me.”

“I *am* blaming you, Will. You’re in love with her. Have you even told her that?”

I push away from the table. After everything I’ve done wrong, I can’t believe that I’m finally doing the right thing and she’s mad. “It wouldn’t do any good, Mom. I can’t be with her anyway.”

“Will, for God’s sake. She’s a junior. It’s not that long until the student thing isn’t even an issue.”

“Right. And then what? She comes and lives on some shitty farm, with no coach and no group to train with? Where she can’t get endorsements and doesn’t have the money to fly to big races? She gives up her future for *this*?”

“You can’t know how things will play out. That’s over a year away.”

“Mom,” I say, rising to conclude this conversation, one I’ve had with myself many times. “I know the only two things I need to know. That I can’t leave and she can’t stay.”

BY SATURDAY NIGHT, THE NIGHT OF THE BANQUET, I THINK I’D CUT OFF A LIMB JUST to lay eyes on her again. I crave her like a drug. It won’t solve anything and I don’t care. I just want to see her.

I’ve spent the entire week arguing with myself, and each day I grow a little more desperate, my arguments growing wilder and less probable by the minute. *Maybe I could* is how every single thought begins, each one borne of desperation. *Maybe I could get a third job so I could fly out to see her. Maybe once Brendan’s out of school I’ll be able to afford it. Maybe she’ll decide on her own that she doesn’t want to run after college.*

It’s weakness on my part and I just need to get through this banquet

without giving into it. Probably with a great deal of assistance from my close friend Jack Daniels.

My mother is already here, sitting with Peter. I have no idea how *that* happened. I could have taken her if she wanted to go so badly. I trust Peter, but I hope he's not getting the wrong idea about this.

I head to the bar. I'm going to need something, possibly a whole lot of something to make this experience palatable. I grab a beer and drink half of it before I even head to the section of the room reserved for the track team.

I'm halfway there when my eyes meet Jessica's. I suppose she's here in some public relations capacity, although she somehow managed not to work at it last year. She's been leaving me tearful, angry voicemails every day since Thanksgiving. In roughly half the calls she tells me she misses me and wants to talk. In the other half, she tells me I'm going to be sorry I treated her the way I did.

Tonight, though, she's the happy, social version of herself. She comes straight to me, throwing her arms around my neck and kissing my cheek. "Will!" she squeals. "It's so good to see you."

"Is it?" I ask, disengaging myself.

She laughs, linking her arm through mine. "Just because we've broken up doesn't mean we can't be friends, silly."

"I don't know, Jess. You said in that last message that my mother should have aborted me. I don't say that to most of my friends."

She waves it away. I wish she'd let go of my arm. "I was hurt, Will. You hurt me. But I'm okay now, really."

Uh huh. "Good. Well, I better go sit."

"Come sit with me," she says, pulling at my elbow. "I saved you a seat."

At that very moment, Olivia walks in. She's in a green silk dress that matches her eyes, pours over her curves, and reveals only a hint of cleavage while allowing you to imagine what you *can't* see too fucking easily. Her hair is straight tonight, falling over her shoulders and down her back, highlighting her long neck and the angles of her face.

As always, I seem to settle on her mouth. I don't know that I've ever seen her wear lipstick before and, for some reason, this opens an entire Pandora's box of fantasies. I want to see it smeared. To kiss her so hard that neither of us can breathe. To pull back and find that mouth ajar, panting, the lipstick a pink blur around the edges.

My God, I want it so badly I'm not sure how I'll get through the goddamn night without having it. That and all the things that follow it. My hands sliding that silk dress over her head, learning every inch of her the way I've dreamed about for months.

Except right now her eyes are focused on the point where Jessica's arm is linked with mine, and when she raises them the hurt I see there is like a knife to the chest. I step away from Jessica, grabbing my beer and draining it.

"I'm sitting with my mom," I say as I distance myself.

"I see what's going on," she hisses, looking from me to Olivia.

"There's nothing going on," I say in disgust, turning toward my table. I just *wish* there were.

"DOESN'T OLIVIA LOOK GORGEOUS?" MY MOM ASKS.

"She looks like she needs more clothes," I grumble.

"I bought her that dress," my mother says with a brow arched. "It fits her like a glove."

"Yeah, exactly," I retort. "That's sort of the problem."

She ignores me and I go back to thinking about Olivia's mouth, about seeing that lipstick smeared, of her breathless under me.

And then a single possessive arm wraps around her waist, his hand cupping the hip bone I can make out through the thin silk, and I'm ejected from my fantasy at high speed.

Evan. She came here with *Evan*. My lust morphs into rage over the course of a single breath. *Why the fuck is she with him? She said she wasn't interested. She said he wanted something serious. She said ...*

She said she wanted me, and I turned her away.

I grab my beer and realize it's empty. She's moving on, doing whatever she needs to get by. The same thing I'm doing, I guess.

I stand abruptly and return to the bar.

SHE AND EVAN SIT AT ERIN'S TABLE, ON THE FAR SIDE OF MINE, GIVING ME A painfully direct view of the two of them. He is physically incapable of keeping his hands to himself, and I'd love to relieve him of that problem.

Whenever she stands, his eyes are on her, devouring her. He paws at her when she returns, jumping to pull out her chair but managing to get his fucking hands over approximately 70% of her body when he does it. And if he tries to look down her dress one more time, I'm definitely taking him out.

She doesn't even notice he's doing it.

I go to the bar again and move from beer to whiskey. I don't normally drink much, but tonight's a special case. It's either this or I completely lose my shit in front of hundreds of witnesses.

Food is served which I can't taste. Awards are given out that I don't notice. She is more real to me than anything in this room or out of it, the only thing I can see.

No one knows her fears like I do. No one knows how fragile she really is, how sweet. They don't know that she cries in her sleep and that she curls her whole body up against me as if she'd like to crawl inside. But *I* know these things. And for all the fighting we've done, there aren't two people in this room as made for each other as the two of us. My world is constructed entirely of artificial rules about what I owe people—my father, my family, the school. But somehow it excludes the only thing that matters to me.

Her.

If it weren't for the goddamn farm and the school, she'd be here with *me* tonight.

I watch her say something to Evan and he nods, wrapping a hand around her waist and pulling her toward him as she begins to rise from her chair. He kisses her. It's just a small peck, nothing like what my asshole brother did, but that's when I'm fucking done.

"Enough," I say quietly as I stand.

I don't know what possesses me to follow her. I know, with every bone in my body, that it's the wrong thing to do. That I have no claim on her and I should be distancing myself from her as fast as humanly possible, but I saw that kiss, saw the look in his eye, the one that says he intends to leave with her soon, and I found myself on my feet.

She's halfway down the hall by the time I reach her. She looks over her shoulder warily when she hears me, but she is too late. I'm already there. I grab her elbow before she has time to react and pull her into a classroom.

She stiffens and pulls back, ready as always to fight. Squaring off, eyes flashing and hands on her hips. Seething before I've even said a word.

“You have no right to— ”

That’s when I cup her jaw and capture that mouth I’ve longed for the whole goddamn night.

Olivia

His mouth comes down on mine, obliterating my pathetic attempt to object. He seizes it thoroughly, with such certainty, as if he's spent his entire life practicing for this precise moment—his hands raking back through my hair, his tongue finding mine as he presses against me. It's so good that for a moment I forget my objections.

His mouth moves over my neck, gentle and harsh at once, soft tongue contrasting with the rasp of his skin, the pull of his lips. *Oh that's perfect. Perfect.* Heat pools in my belly, sinking lower. *But no, wait ... there was something ... he did something ...* His teeth graze my skin and he groans, a noise of despair and satisfaction. *I want this, I don't care what it was ...*

And then I remember: he and Jessica tonight, the way he walked out my door last week.

"No," I hiss, clinging to my anger, trying to push away though I don't budge an inch. "You didn't want me a week ago but now you do? It doesn't work like that."

He loosens one hand, palming my face, turning it toward his. "Olivia, it was never about not wanting you," he says, his eyes burning, flickering toward my mouth in a way that makes my legs weak. "I just don't want you stuck in a shitty small town when you graduate. I don't want being with me to mean you're giving things up."

“But—”

“Later,” he growls. “Argue with me later.” And his mouth descends again, melding with mine, hot and rough and perfect. I know there are things I’m supposed to remember, other reasons why I’m supposed to object, but they escape me. I am only this—my body ripe and raw and overexposed, pain and pleasure at once. I’ve wanted this too long, his hands on my skin, my body pressed against his and his mouth creating a trail down my neck.

It’s right.

I’ve known nothing in my life with such certainty as the fact that what’s happening right now is the thing I want most.

His hands move from my hips to my breasts, cradling their weight in his hands, and then he pulls one strap of my dress down, trailing slow, open-mouthed kisses over my shoulder and collarbone, almost reverently. Nipping at my skin and soothing it with his tongue. He pulls the dress down to my waist, unclasps my bra with a single hand. He cups my breasts, bringing his mouth to them in the same way, sharp and sweet at once and creating a need in me so intense that it borders on pain. I gasp and arch toward him, submitting entirely as my head falls backward against the wall.

He pulls back just enough to see my face. His eyes are such a vivid blue as he searches mine, looking there for something he desperately needs. Permission. He wants permission. As if I’d ever tell him no.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Please.”

“You’re sure?” he asks, his voice gravelly.

And when I nod he pushes the dress over my hips and allows it to slide to the floor. His hands follow, skating over my hips, down my thighs, and I stand before him now in nothing but panties and heels.

“That fucking dress nearly did me in,” he says, smoothing my skin as he kisses me again. He pushes against me, his suit against my bare skin, his erection pressed hard against my stomach, a quick pulse there as if he is desperate for friction.

He slides his index finger under the elastic of my panties. The moment he touches me, my whole body jolts. “Fuck,” he hisses, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. “You’re already soaked.”

His finger slips back and forth, lightly, in torturous circles before it pushes inside me.

“Oh God,” I whisper, my body bowing toward him. He adds a second

finger and this time his groan is louder than mine.

“Jesus, Olivia,” he growls. “You’re going to be the end of me.”

I unclasp his belt and unzip his pants, reaching down to pull him from the confines of his boxers. He is thick and heavy in my hands, hissing as my fingers wrap around him, tugging gently. “Stop,” he exhales after a minute. “I’m not gonna last if you do that and there are so many things I want to do first.”

He pushes my panties down and lifts me up almost simultaneously, turning to deposit me on the table beside us. He kisses me once, hard. “Lie back,” he commands.

He drops to his knees, spreading my legs so I’m displayed before him, the slide of his fingers making me arch off the table. Suddenly, his fingers are joined by quick swipes of his tongue.

“Oh my God,” I gasp. “Will ... just—”

His mouth and tongue lick and brush and pull, creating tiny flames that begin there and spread all the way to my toes. I try to scoot backward, but his free hand clamps down on my thigh, holding me in place.

“I’ve dreamed about doing this every goddamn night for months, Olivia. So let me.”

I can’t even nod in agreement because suddenly everything inside me is swirling together, muddled, building so quickly that I can’t tell where I am or where I’m going.

“Oh,” I gasp. It’s so insufficient, that word. It doesn’t begin to explain to him that this is completely uncharted territory for me. That if sex were running, I’d be the girl who makes such slow progress you can barely tell she’s moved at all, yet right now I’m moving at a pace that defies logic.

But instead of telling him these things, I only utter these nonsensical words, sounds that tear from my throat involuntarily. And then his fingers push unexpectedly inside of me and I explode with a cry of pleasure and surprise, arching against his mouth.

He doesn’t pull back, but instead slides his hands beneath my legs and tugs me closer, buries his face to create wave after wave of something I never thought would happen in the first place.

When it finally begins to recede, when the small of my back rests on the table once more and I’m capable of speech, he finally stands, his face contorted with longing and triumphant at the same time.

“Holy shit,” I breathe. I’d like to be more eloquent right now, but I’ve got nothing.

He leans over to kiss me and when he does I wrap my legs around his waist, bringing him against me so suddenly that he gasps in my mouth.

“Olivia,” he groans.

“Please,” I whisper. It seems impossible for anyone to be more satisfied than I am right now, yet I still need the very thing he wants most, the thing he is so certain he shouldn’t give.

He looks tortured and pulls back but I tighten around him, pressing him against me. “Don’t even think about stopping right now.”

He shifts his hips just enough that he is pressing right there, not inside me but mere seconds away from it. In a single pulse, he could be buried inside me. “Is this okay?” he asks, his voice tight. “Do we need ...”

“No,” I beg. “Just do it.”

He pushes in, barely. He’s so thick that already I’m stretched to the point of pain.

“Oh God, Liv,” he flinches. “God, that’s so good.” I squirm impatiently, overwhelmed and yet needing more all at the same time. He bites his lip. “Just give me a minute,” he rasps. “Or this is going to be over before it starts.”

Finally, he begins again, going slowly, a low noise deep in his chest as he finally shoves all the way in. “Are you okay?” he asks, his voice strained.

I nod as I lay there adjusting to the size of him, pain still outweighing the pleasure. It’s when he starts to withdraw that the margin shifts, that the pain recedes as a burst of pleasure crawls up my spine, sucking the air from my lungs. It feels *too* good, something so vast and all-consuming it can’t possibly end well. I *never* finish this way but *oh my God...*

If it were ever going to happen ...

His next thrust is faster, more certain, but he stops entirely at my sharp inhale. “Did I hurt you?” he asks.

“No.” I’d laugh if I were capable. He didn’t hurt me. He *stunned* me. His strokes come slow and rhythmic then, as he leans over, finding my mouth with the table bracing his weight, his arms taut.

“I’ve wanted this for so fucking long,” he says, holding still inside me.

“Keep going,” I beg. “Don’t stop.”

“Patience,” he croons. “You have no idea how hard it is not to come right

now.”

I grab his ass and push upward, ignoring his warning, thrilling at the low grunt he makes as he bottoms out. “Liv,” he growls, “goddammit.” His hips jerk back and then forward, almost involuntarily. It’s all I need.

I cry out, my neck craning back as it happens again, everything inside me bursting into color. He thrusts quick and hard, desperate now, and then stiffens with a single guttural noise as he pushes in one final time.

He takes a few last slow thrusts after he’s come, bending low to kiss me, to bury his mouth in my neck. It’s only when he removes his weight that I open my eyes, feeling dazed and sated and *dizzy* with happiness, to find him staring down at me.

And he looks horrified.

Will

When I finally open my eyes, it's a little like waking from a dream. I imagine it's a little like when Olivia wakes from hers, a moment of wonder followed by a much more sickening moment of *what the fuck have I done?* She's still stretched out before me, and I know that I've messed up before I've even pulled out, yet I already can feel that twinge, the growing impulse to do it all over again.

The best sex I've ever had and the biggest mistake I've ever made just occurred simultaneously. The guilt and astonishment twine around each other, leaving me unsure what I think or feel about anything. It was wrong. No matter what other considerations there are, I just slept with a student. I slept with someone who looked to me for guidance and protection, even if she'd never admit it was the case. She would argue that it was okay because she has feelings for me, but how can she possibly know? As fucked up as her life has been, and with all the ways she's needed to lean on someone this semester, how can she tell the difference between love and need, or between love and gratitude? She can't. Somewhere inside I knew that, and because I wanted her and I was jealous, I chose to ignore it.

She looks up at me and something changes on her face. "What are you thinking?" she asks, with a small note of dread in her voice.

"That was the most amazing, most intense sex I've ever had," I tell her,

“and I can’t believe it happened.”

“You regret it,” she says, her voice hard.

“Olivia,” I sigh, pulling her to my chest. “It’s not that. I just need to figure this out.”

“Figure what out?”

“What happens next. I mean, it shouldn’t have happened. We both know that. I took advantage of—”

“No,” she snaps. “You didn’t. Did you hear me saying no? Probably not because I was too busy begging you to keep going. You did *not* take advantage of me.”

“Even if you said yes, you’re in a vulnerable place right now and I was in a position—”

“Do *not* say you were in a position of authority. We moved past that a long time ago. Are you really going to let the way it looks to everyone outside this room dictate whether or not this is wrong?”

Except it’s not everyone outside this room. It’s me. I didn’t do this after careful thought, after balancing my duty to her and the school with the things I want. No, I let my anger and my need obliterate every reasonable thought. I gave in to something I’ve exerted unholy restraint to avoid until now. And in doing so, I’ve put her scholarship at risk.

“I don’t know, Olivia. I can’t think. But I do know they’re going to notice we’ve been gone,” I sigh. “We should get back out there.”

“You want me to go back and continue my date with Evan?” she gasps. She snatches her dress off the floor and begins sliding it back on.

“No. *Fuck*. Olivia, your scholarship and my job are both on the line here. I just ... I’ve got to figure this out, and until I do we both need to make it through the rest of the banquet as if nothing happened.”

“And then what? Are we leaving together? Am I going to see you?”

I look at her in that dress with that smudged lipstick just like I envisioned and I want—no, *need* to do it all over again. I want to take her back to my apartment and do a hundred different things to her.

“We can’t leave together, you know that. Peter is out there. Jessica is out there. Hell, Peter’s boss is out there. The most important thing either of us can do for the next hour is act like nothing is wrong.”

She slips her heels back on and moves to the door, her head high and her posture rigid.

“Olivia, wait—”

“For *what?*” she demands. “You just fucked me on a table and now you’re sending me on my way. What more could you possibly need to add to that?”

I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose. She’s so far from the truth, and yet I can totally see why she believes it. “Look, that’s not what is happening. But we did something unbelievably rash, and I want to make sure the steps we take next are determined by reason and not,” I gesture between the two of us, “*this*.”

I approach her and she steps back. I hate that. I know already, based on the wary look on her face as she watches me, that I’ve hurt her.

I pull her to me, but she remains rigid in my arms, uncertain. “I just need a little time to think, okay?” I ask.

“No,” she says, pushing away. “If this wasn’t enough to make up your mind, nothing is.”

She starts down the hall before I’ve even finished dressing. I call after her, but she never turns around.

By the time I get back to the auditorium, she and Evan are gone, which is both a relief and a worry. I excuse myself as soon as I can and head to my apartment, wondering how I’m going to tell Peter and my mom what I did, and how the hell I’m going to pay for Brendan’s last semester with no income other than a farm that’s still operating at a loss.

I could solve those issues by lying to everyone, but how will I live with myself if I do? How will I face Olivia every day knowing what I did, how I sacrificed her for my mom and the farm and the school all over again?

There’s a dull pounding in my head. I eventually lay down, hoping sleep will make the answer clear. But I just lay there, alternately appalled at myself for my bad decision-making and reliving it in my head, wanting it again so badly that I find my hips pressing into the mattress.

It’s nearly daylight when I give up on sleep, and decide to do the one thing that has ever successfully cleared my head.

I go climbing.

In spite of my rustiness, I choose a difficult climb, knowing I need something so consuming that it will obliterate all other thought. I scramble up the rock, hammering the first pin in, and scramble up again. Twisting and straining, moving quickly until my shirt is sticking to my back and sweat

begins to drip into my eyes. I clip into the next bolt and pull my fleece off, throwing it to the ground before I keep going.

I'm halfway up the mountain face when a single thought occurs to me.
I wish Olivia were here.

This was once my sweet spot, climbing alone, and now it's shifted and expanded to include her. It feels *empty* in her absence. The farm, my job, my *life* were once central but now are merely white noise that surrounds her.

I stall, clinging to a small handhold, only a single foot making contact with rock, realizing that she isn't just a part of my life now. She is *all* of it. And even if I made a mistake, even if it means that I will gravely disappoint Peter and mess up things with the farm, she is non-negotiable.

She is the thing I won't give up.

Olivia

I told Evan I was sick.

It was easy enough to be convincing. I've never felt more ill in my life. I thought when Will came to me that things had changed. Sleeping with him was beyond anything I'd ever imagined and when it ended, I expected to see my own surprise reflected on his face.

Instead, I saw regret. *Instead*, I heard him telling me to return to my date. Telling me he needed to think. And that was the difference between us.

I did not need to think.

I *knew*.

And he should have, too.

I don't sleep. I sit with my back pressed against the headboard. How can I possibly stay here now? I can't imagine three more seasons of wanting him, of seeing him daily and remembering that look on his face as I left.

There's a knock on the door. Despite everything, I open it assuming it's Will. Hoping that maybe he's made a different decision than the one he seemed to have made earlier tonight.

But it isn't him at all.

Jessica walks in uninvited, still wearing her dress from the party.

"I'd invite you in, but it looks like you already took care of that on your own," I scowl.

She glares at me. "Cut the shit, Olivia. I know about you and Will."

"There's nothing to know."

"I followed you!" she cries, her voice on the brink of tears. "I saw him take off after you at the banquet and I followed him. And believe me, *neither* of you was quiet."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I lie. "I went to the bathroom. I have no idea where he went."

"You lying little bitch," she says, shoving me.

I feel that rage in the pit of my stomach, my father's legacy, and I refuse to succumb to it. "I don't know how much you know about me," I warn, "but I can guarantee that if you lay another finger on me, you'll regret it."

She clenches her fists. "I don't need to hit you because I can do something much worse. Let's see how much he wants you when you're the reason he gets fired next week."

I have a lifetime's experience with acting calm when I'm scared shitless. Right now, I need it. "You're insane," I reply. "He's my coach and nothing more. Unless you have some proof to the contrary, you should probably get the fuck out of my apartment."

"I don't need proof that you slept with him. I have enough to fry you both without it. I have proof of the two of you sleeping under the same roof repeatedly. I have photos of him dropping you off at your apartment at seven in the morning. You were drinking with him when you were under-age. I witnessed that myself."

"If you cared about him at all, you wouldn't think of threatening his job. You know they need that money."

Jessica rolls her eyes. "Maybe love is knowing what's best for someone. And I think we both know that you are not what's best. Do you really think you're going to make him happy? Look at all the *problems* you have. Can you honestly say you're the kind of girl he should end up with? Raise kids with? Sinking your claws in him because you want him isn't love either. It'll ruin his life. Even the way you've risked his career with all this bullshit. Is *that* love, Olivia?"

I want to lash out at her, but I can't deny the basic truth of what she's saying. Nothing about my arrival at this school has benefitted him. I can't possibly make him happy the way someone else can, someone pulled together and from a good family and, well, not crazy.

I feel like I'm standing at the cliff's edge and jumping is the only option left, so I exhale and prepare to jump.

Will

Peter is just pulling up when I get to his house.

Under normal circumstances, I'd find it odd that he was out and about so early, but right now I'm a little focused on my own shit.

He takes one look at my face. "This can't be good."

"I suppose it's not."

"Does this have anything to do with your long disappearance last night?"

I raise a brow. "You seem to already know exactly why I'm here."

"Will, only an idiot could have looked at the two of you last night and not seen the truth."

"I didn't know it was that obvious," I sigh.

"I don't want you to tell me what's happened. I imagine there's something, but if you tell me, then it changes the way I have to respond. You understand what I'm saying?"

I do. If I tell him we've slept together, then the university launches an investigation. My name will be everywhere. Her name will be everywhere. Her scholarship could get called into question.

"I'm here to resign. I don't know how the hell I'm going to support my mom, but I'm no longer able to perform my duties as a coach."

He nods. "I accept your resignation. And speaking as your friend, not your boss, we will come up with another solution, okay? I can cover

Brendan's spring tuition, and we'll find you something that pays nearly as well."

"We can't accept that. You've done too much for us as it is."

"We'll talk about that later. In the meantime, maybe you should go tell your mom the good news."

"My mom? I'm hard-pressed to see how she'll think me losing my job is good news, Peter."

"No, but you winding up with Olivia is. Poor woman is the only person alive who's wanted to see that happen more than the two of you."

I grin reluctantly. "I think there's someone else I need to go see first."

I TEXT HER, BUT SHE DOESN'T REPLY.

I call, but she doesn't answer.

I knock on her door, but I get silence in response.

Now that the decision is made, now that I'm no longer her coach, waiting feels like an impossible burden. I want to begin. I want to tell her everything and promise that somehow I'll find a way to make it work. Maybe once the farm is up and running, I can fly out to see her on weekends. Hell, maybe one day it will be successful enough that we can sell it entirely. If she's even a fraction as willing as I am to make this happen, we'll succeed.

I go to my office and pack my stuff, waiting for her to respond. Better to do it now, over the weekend, without witnesses. I'm not sure how my resignation is going to get played out, but no one resigns this suddenly without reason, usually a bad one. People will be looking for the worst possible cause, and unfortunately, in this case, they'll be right.

I call her again, text her again, and I get no answer. *Where the hell is she?* As the day goes on without a word from her, my dread grows. I know she was upset last night but was she upset enough to give up on me entirely?

I go back to her apartment. When she doesn't answer, I grab the key under the pot and go in. When I do, it seems like all the air has left my body.

Because the furniture remains, but every other sign of her is gone.

Olivia

The buses run pretty regularly to Denver. Before daylight, I was already past the perimeter of the city, moving away from the mountains I'd grown to love.

Because this is what Jessica wanted—me disappearing quietly, without a word of explanation. She promised she wouldn't turn Will in if I left. She's assuming my absence is all she needs to get him back, and who knows? Maybe it is. She took my cell phone just to be sure he couldn't somehow convince me to come home.

In Denver, I call Erin from a pay phone. I gloss over the whole I-just-slept-with-our-coach part but tell her everything else—what Jessica has proof of and what she is threatening. I ask if her brother will let me stay with him in LA just long enough for me to find a job and save a little money. No, LA isn't where I want to end up, but right now I just need to get on my feet and I'd prefer not to do it in a women's shelter. I've stayed in women's shelters before, and you either wind up getting hit or robbed there eventually.

But the whole thing worries Erin. "What do I tell Will? I mean, you know he's going to ask."

He's not going to *ask*. He's going to *flip*. I can see it unfold and it makes me sick. The way he'll worry. The way he'll blame himself, and he'll call, and he'll go see his mom and probably go to my apartment and find it

stripped. “Tell him I got sick of living in a small town and that my chances were better somewhere else.”

“Why would he believe that?”

That one’s easy. Because he said it himself.

Will

My mother takes one look at my face when I enter the house and she knows. “Oh God,” she whispers. “What happened? Is she okay?”

I tell her. I know she wants to cry, but she doesn’t because one of us has to be sane here and it sure as shit isn’t me.

“It’s okay,” she says. “We can find her. We can fix this.”

“No,” I rasp, sinking into the couch. “We can’t. I can’t. I did this. Something happened last night, something that shouldn’t have happened, and I told her I needed to think. I mean, I thought she understood. I was just trying to make sure I could do this without impacting her scholarship, but ...” I bury my head in my hands, so fucking frustrated by my own stupidity, by the way everything in my life has seemed beyond my control and now Olivia, the most important part of it, is too.

And I did it to myself.

“No, she wouldn’t just take off like that. She’s a strong girl. She’s dealt with so much and things were turning around for her. They were. She wouldn’t just leave.”

“She did. There’s nothing left in that apartment but the furniture I took over there. Nothing.”

“Maybe she’s coming here.”

“How would she get here? She doesn’t have a car.”

“Did you talk to her friends?”

I shrug. “She kind of kept to herself, aside from Erin, and maybe Evan.”

“And you spoke to them?”

“I asked Erin and she didn’t know anything.”

“So call Evan.”

I like that idea less. It’s unfair, how angry the idea makes me, how jealous I feel, but if she went to Evan I’m gonna lose my shit. I guess it’s a good thing I’m already out of a job because if she’s there I’d beat his ass and get fired anyway.

How did I ever think I’d be able to stand being near her but not *with* her for the rest of her time at ECU?

I finally call him but he knows nothing. “Are you sure?” he asks. “She wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t just take off.”

It’s a struggle not to sound miserable when I reply. To sound like a worried coach and not a guy who’s just realized he can’t live without someone. I’m pretty sure I didn’t pull it off.

I contact her landlord, who hasn’t heard from her. No one in the administration has either. She won’t answer her phone. I call Erin again, who continues to swear she knows nothing. Things are as dire as they’ve ever been.

And then they get worse.

The detective who interviewed Olivia calls on Monday. He says he left her a message yesterday and she hasn’t returned his call.

“She’s taken off,” I tell him. “No one knows where she’s gone.”

His quick intake of breath unsettles me. “Are you sure she left?” he asks.

“Her stuff is gone, she didn’t show up for class today and no one’s seen her, so yeah.”

“Yes,” he says, “but are you sure she left *willingly*?”

Olivia

The bus ride from Denver to LA is exactly 22 hours long.

I pretend I'm just going on a short trip because it's easier than thinking about the fact that I've left him behind for good. Does it matter anyway? Better to leave now than to spend the next year falling more deeply in love with someone I am not going to end up with.

During one of the stops I call his work line, knowing it's late enough there's no chance he'll answer. My voice is breezy and careless as I tell him that it was never going to work and that ECU is a waste of my time. I want to apologize, to ask him to tell his mother goodbye, but I don't because I'm about 90% sure I'll cry and ruin the whole charade.

And when I end the call, I *do* cry. I might never hear his voice again, and he and Dorothy will always remember me as an ingrate who took everything they offered and threw it in their faces without a backward glance.

I check my emails at the Las Vegas bus terminal, pushing the ones from Will into a folder. I'll read them someday, when it's easier, but I can't right now. I only read and reply to one thing in my inbox — a letter from a representative for Fumito, some fledgling Japanese shoe company, who says he wants to Fed Ex me a proposal. I write back and give him Sean's address in LA. I just hope Sean lets me stay long enough to receive it.

I should be happier about the endorsement than I am. I mean, this is all I

wanted, right? But the truth is that what I want even more is to be able to call
Will right now and share the good news. Without that, it feels a little hollow.

Will

All the details of Olivia's story checked out.

There were animal bones in her brother's grave, which rested just beneath a large oak tree. The police went to bring in Olivia's father for questioning and found that he'd skipped town. From all appearances, he was in a hurry.

"We think someone tipped him off that she's talking," the cop says. "Maybe he just ran. But it's also possible he's going after the only eyewitness we have."

Olivia.

I've got to find her before he does.

It's only in absolute desperation that I ask Erin again. I insist on meeting her in person this time, because Erin has one of those faces you can read before she's ever said a word. If she's lying, I'll be able to tell.

She denies all knowledge again, but there's something fearful in her eyes.

"Look, Erin, if you know anything, you've got to tell me."

"I think you need to just let her go."

My head lifts. "What did you say?"

"It's best for everyone if you just let her leave. Don't look for her."

"How can you say that? She's got no family, no money, nothing. She's going to lose her scholarship if we don't get her back here."

"Look, she's safe, and she's doing this for you. That's all I can say."

“For *me*?” I demand. “How the hell could this be for me? I’m going crazy, Erin. Her father may be after her. I have no idea if she’s checking her email or voicemail, so I don’t know if she realizes she’s in danger. If you know something, you’ve got to tell me.”

TEN MINUTES LATER I’M IN MY CAR, MAKING THE HOUR-LONG DRIVE TO DENVER. There’s a direct flight to LA that leaves in two hours. No, I can’t afford this plane ticket, but I’ll worry about that later. There’s not a chance I’m wasting a day or more driving to LA when I have no idea if she’s safe.

Erin told me everything, and I still can’t get my head around it. I’d begun to suspect that Jessica was a little crazy, but for her to blackmail Olivia? It’s a level of insanity I’d never even guessed at. I feel sick imagining Olivia leaving, and immeasurably grateful at the same time: she thought I’d used her and rejected her, but she was still willing to give up everything for me.

I messed up. And once I find her, I’m going to spend the rest of my life making it up to her.

Olivia

The good news is that Sean lives in a nice section of town. I guess his parents didn't want him to suffer while exploring his "craft". The bad news? Sean is high as a kite, and I can see cocaine residue laying right there on the coffee table.

"Olivia!" he says. "Hey, hey, this is so awesome, so fucking awesome. You can totally crash here."

He tells me he's having a party. He asks if I like to party. I assume he doesn't mean with cake and gifts. "I have a lot of parties," he tells me.

I'll just bet he does.

THINGS SEAN IS NOT GOOD FOR: PROVIDING A PLACE I CAN SLEEP WITHOUT FINDING A roaming hand sliding up my shirt, or providing a place where any reasonable human being could hope to sleep or stay sober before around 6 am.

Things Sean *is* good for: finding me work.

By Wednesday, I'm already working at some strip club where he knows the owner. I'm not old enough to tend bar for another week, and I'm technically not supposed to serve drinks either, but his creepy friend says he can overlook it. Of course, he seems to be overlooking it by instead focusing on me in a skirt that doesn't entirely cover my ass and a shirt that covers little

more than a bra, but so be it.

Obviously, I can't keep living with Chris Cocaine for long, so I need to make some damn money. And fast. Nothing came today from the Fumito guy, which is troubling. He said he was overnighing it. An endorsement, even a small one, would be enough to get me out of here, but now the whole thing seems a little weird.

By 9 p.m., it feels like it's already been a very, very long day. I've been here since three, and there's nothing sketchier than guys who hang out at a strip club in the middle of the day. It's finally starting to pick up, and with guys who *don't* look like Jack the Ripper, but my feet are killing me in these heels they make me wear and I've got a whopping total of \$35 dollars to show for the six hours I've put in so far.

"You can make a lot more money up there," one of my customers tells me. "Or in back."

Is that where this is headed? Am I eventually going to be desperate enough that I wind up on stage?

No. No fucking way.

I'm going to do this for a few weeks until I get enough money to head to Seattle, and then I'll start training. This is *not* how I'm going to end up.

I refuse to think about Will. Okay, yes, I thought about him the entire bus ride and during Sean's parties. And every two minutes I think of something I want to tell him, think of a joke he'd find funny or remember him above me. And every time I realize it's impossible, I grit my teeth. I've been stabbed before, I've been assaulted. I was hit by a car and broke 4 bones. I came home one day and discovered that my grandmother had no idea who I was. I survived all of that. I'll survive this too.

"Come here, honey," calls a businessman with three other guys, all in suits. "We want a lap dance."

I shake my head. "Sorry, I just serve drinks."

"Even better. A lap dance virgin. I'll give you \$500 to come dance for my friend."

I shake my head again. "Sorry."

\$500. \$500 for three measly minutes of dancing? I must be insane to turn it down. I just worked 360 minutes for \$35 freaking dollars. They wouldn't even be allowed to touch me, although this club seems to have a very *flexible* approach to the rules.

I can't.

I take \$500 for a lap dance tonight, and next time I might be rationalizing making a few grand to do something far worse.

The next guy swats my ass, and the guy after him asks if I'd consider going to the back room. And I have to stand here being cheerful and cute about it so I get my tips at the end of the night. Sean assured me this place was "cool" but I'm thinking he was talking about the customer experience, not the employee one.

As time goes by, The Suits are drunker, rowdier. Their leader flags me down again. Asks me again about the lap dance. "Come on," he wheedles. "My buddy here's getting married."

I smile and put my hand on my hip, imitating the kind of girl I've always hated. "Now you know I can't do that," I say with an accent I don't actually have. "How 'bout I get y'all another round instead?"

I go back to the bar and wait for their drinks. All of them drinking whiskey on the rocks and chomping on cigars they aren't allowed to smoke, the biggest caricature of all time.

"I'll give you two grand," he says when I return. "Two grand to give my friend here the best lap dance of his life."

And I hesitate. Because I need to get out of here. Because I need to be in Seattle so I can maybe find a way to keep running and stop wishing I'd died when my brother did.

"\$2500!" he shouts. "That's my last offer."

I set the tray down. *Hello, slippery slope.*

Will

Erin gave me her brother's address and promised she'd try to get a warning through to Olivia without tipping her off that I was on my way.

I arrive in LA around 6:30 and go straight to the apartment. No one's there, so I wait. And wait. When Sean does finally arrive, it's almost comical how panicked he looks to find me on his steps.

"Hey man," he says warily. "I'm empty-handed if that's what you're here for. I'm gonna party at Avalon tonight."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I tell him. "I'm here looking for Olivia."

"Whoa, whoa," he says, backing away as if he thinks I'm going to throw a punch. I guess I probably do look slightly unhinged right now. "My sister told me about you. I don't need any trouble. She's not even staying here."

"I'm not her father, moron," I seethe. "I'm her track coach. Do I actually look old enough to be her dad?"

He laughs nervously. "Ha, that's funny. No, sorry, you're right. Erin did say it was her father after her."

"Look, I appreciate you helping her out, but I really need to find her. And I've got to see her in person. Otherwise, she'll run before I get a chance to talk to her."

"How do I know you're not some dude she's got a restraining order

against?”

I sigh. “You don’t. Why don’t you ask Erin?”

He looks at me and shrugs. “Whatever,” he sighs. “I’ve got a party to get to. She’s at Wet-n-Wild, this strip club on Fifth Street.”

“*Strip* club?” I don’t even recognize my own voice.

“It’s not that far away,” he says, as if my actual concern was the distance.

I catch a cab and lean my head back in dismay. This is my fault. It’s my fault I gave Jessica so much ammunition, that I never let Olivia know how I felt. She should have realized she meant more to me than losing than this job, but she had no idea. It’s my fault that she’s in a strange city, broke and desperate.

A strip club. “Oh God, Olivia,” I say quietly to myself. “What have you done?”

Olivia

Well done, Olivia. Only you could manage to lose a job on your first day of work.

So now it's barely 10 p.m. and I've got \$40 in my pocket instead of the \$2500 I'd planned on after a full day's work. And if I call a cab, I'll be down another \$20.

It sucks, but I can't bring myself to regret it. I can't believe that asshole thought he could put his hand *there* and get away with it. Maybe some of my rage was just at how fucking arbitrary it all is. What kind of world do we live in where Will can't do that but a complete stranger can?

I start walking. It's just a few miles. I'd prefer to run but I'm not that great in heels and this skirt is so damn short it'd show my whole ass with every step I take.

It's 11 in Colorado right now. I wonder what Will and Dorothy are doing. I wonder if they're still angry or maybe they've just moved on to being relieved. Eventually, they will. How could they not? Poor Will's barely had a decent night's sleep since I joined the team.

But I miss them. My eyes burn and blur as I think of Will sitting there on Dorothy's couch alone, probably feeling guilty since that's how he is. I miss him. I miss everything I had and everything I never got with him and I'm pretty sure that I always will.

By the time I get back to Sean's, I'm beat. Not from the walking or the long day, but from my own misery. I find the keys he left me under the mat and walk in, dropping my heels off to the side of the kitty litter box and flipping on the light.

I step forward, and I hear a voice, one I have heard a thousand times in nightmares.

"Hello, Olivia," says my father.

If he were anyone else, I'd lash out. I'd attack, or run. Instead, I stand here, still as a statue aside from my hands which shake so hard I can hear Sean's keys rattling against each other.

If this were a movie, I'd ask him why he's here, but in real life, my voice has stopped working. There is just a creaking sound coming from my throat instead of words. And I don't need to ask anyway. I know exactly why he's here.

My entire life the nightmare was faceless, blank, something purely evil and inhuman. And now, in a single second, it's standing before me — and I remember *everything*. Where I've seen him so many times, the part of my dream I could never recall in the morning.

MY MOTHER TOLD ME TO HIDE IN THE CLOSET. SHE TOLD ME NOT TO WATCH, BUT I DID. I saw him grab her arm and twist, heard the bones snapping. He had his knife, the one he used to gut fish. It dove into her, sinking into her soft flesh, and when I ran from the closet to stop him, throwing myself onto her as if I could do anything at all, the knife went into my back and I slid to the floor. My mother began screaming at me to get up, to run. She had something hidden under her leg—scissors—and the last thing I saw was her pulling them out.

I scrambled off the floor and ran, expecting that he would chase. I ran hard, I ran so hard that the world seemed to close in on the edges and even the moonlight was squeezed out of my vision.

I woke up in the dirt. My mother wasn't there. She didn't come to get me. That's when I knew I should never have left her.

I'VE BEEN LIVING WITH THIS IN MY HEAD FOR NEARLY 15 YEARS, WITH HIM, THIS

monster I was scared to look in the eye. And I will now be what Will lives with. He'll think about my death a million times, the way I have my brother's. The image will never leave his head, and though it has nothing to do with him, he will blame himself for it. Erin's going to tell him why I left when it all comes out, and he'll see blood on his hands for the rest of his life.

My father bridges the distance between us and wraps his hands around my throat. They are gentle, though, almost a caress. "You went to the police, didn't you?"

"No," I whisper. I'm not following the rules. Don't apologize, don't show fear. I can't help it. Desperate people apologize and show fear, people without another option, and right now I'm one of those people.

His hands tighten, ever so slightly. "But you told someone something, didn't you?"

I grab my father's wrists and attempt to pry them off, but my grip strength is no match for his. "Let go," I hiss. Instead, they tighten further.

I think of him breaking Daisy's neck...

And Matthew's neck...

I pull harder at his hands, just enough to drag air through my throat, to push it back out. And to scream as loud as I possibly can.

Will

I arrive at the strip club, scared that I will find her on stage, or worse, and I leave trying not to smile over the fact that she punched a customer. *That's my girl.*

The cab driver has left, and I'm too anxious about her to wait for another. I know I'm being ridiculous, but I can't help it. I start running.

I hear her screaming just as the apartment complex comes into view. I thought, at that moment, that I couldn't be more scared, but I was wrong.

The scariest moment was when she *stopped* screaming.

I run harder than I've ever run in my life. I fling the door open and find her there—silent, limp, her hands swinging by her sides and her father's hands around her neck. He starts to turn just as my fist makes impact, crushing the side of his face.

The two of them fall together. They lie crumpled on the floor. Lifeless.

I drop, pulling her to my chest, but she is boneless and still in my arms. Terror invades my chest, so acute that I struggle to breathe. That I'm shaking her, refusing to believe, unable to believe, that she may be gone. I want her back — not this shell, but *Olivia*, with her smart mouth, her bad attitude, her wary smile. I want everything back, everything I had and took for granted, all of the bad, all of the good, and I'm shouting at her, pleading, knowing it's too fucking late and that the moment I stop shouting I will have to accept it.

And then she gasps.

There has never been a sweeter sound than her gasping inhale.

I lower her just enough to see her face. She's confused for a moment, as if she's just coming out of a deep sleep, and her small smile, the pleasure on her face when she sees me, breaks my heart a little. The fact that I'm capable of putting that look on her face amazes me, and I'm even more amazed that I ever thought I could ask her to wait. That I thought *I* could wait. I know only now that nothing matters more than keeping that look on her face, and nothing ever will.

And then she looks at her father, still unconscious, and seems to remember everything, all the things that wouldn't have happened if I'd just pulled my head out of my ass a few hours sooner.

The smile fades.

I pull her to my chest and cling to her. I'm not even trying to comfort her. This time, she's comforting me. "Fuck, Olivia. I thought ... fuck." I can't even say it. I just know that I don't ever, for the rest of my life, want to feel that kind of terror again.

"I'm fine," she whispers.

"You could have died," I reply, choking on the words, realizing how close we were to that being true. "I'm sorry," I murmur into her hair. "I'm so fucking sorry."

Her voice is raspy, barely intelligible. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"I did everything wrong," I reply. "And I swear I'm going to fix all of it."

Once she's sitting up, I reluctantly let go of her to call 911 and bind her father's wrists, though I doubt he's going to be conscious anytime soon. That punch I threw was aimed right at the corner of his jaw and would have killed him, as I intended, if he hadn't turned his head. And when I'm done I go to Olivia again, cradling her in my lap. We are silent, shocked by what's occurred. I can't believe she's really okay, and how close she came to *not* being okay. I can't believe I ever let her go in the first place.

She stares at her father as if she's looking at a ghost. "He's half of who I am," she finally says.

"He's none of who you are," I reply. "None."

THE POLICE ARRIVE, SHOUTING AND WITH GUNS DRAWN THOUGH I TOLD THE dispatcher her father was unconscious. They point their guns at me instead, and it's not until Olivia screams at them that they realize I'm not the culprit.

She is taken by ambulance to the hospital despite her protests. She's on a stretcher, then moved to a hospital bed, and not for a single moment of that time do I let go of her hand. She seems fine, but I don't think I'll ever get over seeing her the way she looked when I ran into Sean's apartment.

The police take statements from us both and the process feels endless, interrupted by nurses and doctors and a trip to get x-rays. Olivia is attached to monitors tracking her heart rate and oxygen levels, every unusual noise they make drawing her ire and bringing back a small taste of the panic I felt when she was lying in my arms, still and pale.

Olivia's father is also in the hospital somewhere. He was just gaining consciousness when they took him away. He's under police guard, but I'm not going to feel secure until she's far away from him and he's in jail.

It's not until the police are done and the doctor has left to get the discharge paperwork ready that we are finally alone.

"I guess Erin told you," she sighs. "I knew you'd feel guilty into coming after me if you found out what Jessica did."

I look at her in astonishment. "I'm not here because I feel *guilty*. And I don't know how the hell you thought I'd choose my job over you."

"You *did* choose your job over me," she replies. "You chose it when you sent me off the night of the banquet to pretend like everything was normal. I understood why you did it but ..."

"I quit, Olivia."

"You *what*?" she demands, springing forward, twisting the blood pressure cuff in the process. "You can't do that! Jessica got what she wanted. I left. She's not going to tell."

"It had nothing to do with Jessica," I reply, lowering the railing on the side of her bed so I can sit closer to her. "I knew the night of the banquet that I was going to quit. I just had to do it in a way that wouldn't jeopardize your scholarship or get Peter in trouble."

"You *can't*," she insists. "What about the farm? What about Brendan?"

"Olivia, I made my choice when I followed you at the banquet. I put you first then. Everything else will have to work out somehow."

"You don't have to do that," she argues. "It was sex, not a promise ring."

You never once suggested it was anything more than that, so stop trying to do the honorable thing and go get your job back.”

“I’ve been far from honorable for a long time,” I tell her. “I’m here because I love you. Because I’m so in love with you, I’m not even capable of giving you up.”

She turns away from me. I don’t know how I thought she’d react, but it certainly isn’t like this.

“I don’t see how that can possibly be true, Will,” she finally says, avoiding my eye. “We both know how fucked up I am. How could you want to be with me knowing what you know?”

I rest my palm against the curve of her cheek, gently forcing her to look back toward me. I wish I were more eloquent. I wish I had some way of explaining it to her, but right now what I feel seems so deep, so vast, that I could sit here all night and never manage to describe it all. My thumb brushes her lower lip, lingers there as I struggle to find the right words. “Olivia, I’d give anything to change your past,” I finally tell her, “but at the same time it’s made you who are. The things you think are so terrible? I *love* those things. That fragile part of you, the way you freeze when someone tries to hug you or compliment you or acts like they care. I can’t separate that from everything else now, so I love all of it. I don’t want some other version of you. I want the one in front of me, and I want it more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my entire life.”

She doesn’t reply, just looks at me wide-eyed as if everything I’ve said to her is a surprise when it shouldn’t be. Everyone but the two of us saw it months ago.

I run my hands through her hair. “In case you haven’t done this before, this is the part where you tell me you love me too.”

“Have *you* done this part before?” she asks.

“Yeah, about five seconds ago. And she didn’t say it back.”

She takes a deep breath, looking terrified, as if she’s about to dive into a stormy sea. “I love you too.”

I lean down, brushing her lips with mine. “That was pretty good for a first time,” I whisper against her mouth.

She smiles and I find her mouth again. I mean only to seal our words — a quick kiss, a promise of things to come. But her lips are so damn full, and soft, and it’s been too long, so I don’t pull back like I should. Instead I

deepen the kiss, tease her mouth open, and find myself sinking into that place I always go to her with her, the one where there is no thought, only impulse and action. Where nothing exists but the soft skin just beneath her jaw, her mouth, the sounds she makes, my hands tracing her curves as I follow her gasp with my tongue, her body arching toward mine ...

An alarm goes off and we both startle, opening our eyes to discover I'm alongside her, the blankets thrown off entirely, my knee wedged between her thighs and my hand on the verge of sliding under her gown.

Jesus Christ. She's in a *hospital bed* and I'm on practically on top of her. I'd be ashamed of myself if I wasn't so damn turned on.

"Don't stop," she says.

"I have to," I groan, climbing out of the bed and returning to the chair beside it, "or that doctor's going to walk in on something she can't unsee."

In fact, that doctor's still going to get an eyeful unless I get a cold shower or change of conversation *fast*.

"You sure?" she asks, with a smile that goes straight to my dick when the last thing it needs is more encouragement. "I'm not wearing *anything* under this hospital gown, Will. It'd be so easy..."

I groan aloud.

This girl is going to be the end of me. But I guess I've known that since the day we met.

Olivia

It's late by the time I'm finally released from the hospital. Will finds us a hotel near the airport that's reasonable by LA standards and gets us checked in.

"I need a shower," I exhale, kicking off my shoes the moment we're in the room. "Although I'm not sure I'm ever going to be able to wash off the seven hours I spent in that strip club."

"I probably don't want to know exactly what happened that led you to punch someone, do I?" he asks with a small wince.

"Probably not," I reply, peeling off the skirt. He tries not to watch, but it's like he can't help himself. "You're allowed to look now, you know."

He closes his eyes tightly. "I think it's best if I don't."

"Why?"

"Just go shower, Liv," he sighs, not opening his eyes. "You need some rest."

"*Rest?* So you're saying that you're no longer my coach and we're alone in a hotel room and you want me to get some *rest?*"

"Olivia, in the last few hours you were assaulted and nearly died. You *just* got out of the hospital. So yeah, under those circumstances, I want you to rest."

"I'm fine."

“Well, I’m not. We have lots of time to do this the right way.”

“Oh my God,” I groan. “You’re not going to do, like, candles and rose petals and shit, right? While you recite poetry, maybe play some slow jams on your guitar?”

“I’m pretty sure there’s some middle ground between being sensitive ponytail guy and the guy who fucks a girl as she’s exiting the hospital.”

“You go first then. I’m going to call Erin.”

Which I don’t do, of course.

I hear the water start, the slide of the shower door, and give him two minutes before I strip off the rest of my clothes and walk into the bathroom, pausing for a moment to take him in—perfect arms, tight ass, water streaming off that delectable v where his waist meets his hips.

“Olivia,” he sighs, opening his eyes to find me ogling him. “What are you doing?”

I step into the shower. “Don’t mind me.” I lather the soap in my hands. “I’m just here to get clean.” My hands slide over my skin, down to my thighs and between my legs.

“Liv,” he groans, half-plea and half-warning. To my delight, I notice that he’s already hard and I haven’t laid a finger on him.

“Oh, how rude of me.” I wrap my slippery hands around him. “I should clean you first.”

“You just got out of the hospital,” he says through gritted teeth.

“Maybe you’d feel better about it if I was sitting,” I say as I drop to my knees, washing away the soap before I take him in my mouth.

“*Fuck*,” he gasps, and in that single word I hear him cave. “Stop,” he tells me, but it’s half-hearted and already his fingers are pressing into my scalp, running through my hair. When I glance up, I find him watching me, eyes at half-mast and feverish. I think I could come from his reaction alone: his low groan, the way he strains not to push hard into my mouth, his hips still jutting forward softly despite his best efforts.

“You’ve got to stop,” he says gruffly. “I’m not going to be able to hold back much longer.”

“Why are you holding back at all?” I ask, preparing to resume my task but in a second’s time I’m lifted from the floor entirely, my back pressed against the shower wall.

He takes the soap and runs it between my legs, and then takes his fingers

to push through the soapy trail he's left behind. "Will ... oh God, that's amazing."

His fingers slip and slide until I think my knees are going to buckle. He is rigid in my palm, beginning to thrust up into it, as he seizes my mouth violently. "Should I take it easy on you, Olivia?" he growls.

"No," I gasp. "Definitely not." With a speed I didn't imagine possible, he lifts my legs around his waist and pushes inside me hard, just the way he thrust into my hand.

"That's so good," he groans, his mouth pressed to my damp neck. He pulls out and presses back in, faster and harder than before, as my back slides against the shower wall.

I'm far from virginal. I've always enjoyed sex. But this is something else entirely, a pleasure so sharp that it almost hurts, that it draws goose bumps and elicits cries from my throat I seem helpless to stop. For the first time, I'm not worried about whether I'll finish but about whether I can hold off a little longer.

"I'm close," I gasp. I meant it as a warning but the second he pushes in again something bursts open inside me like a bomb. He hammers into me, prolonging everything until suddenly his whole body tenses and he groans into my neck, sinking his teeth into my skin as he comes.

He buries his face there, and I cling to him. I want to stay like this forever. "You okay?" he asks.

"I think so," I reply, "but we ought to do that one more time to be sure."

He laughs. "You'll get your 'one more time' tonight, don't worry. In fact you'll be getting it right here if we don't end this shower quickly."

We take turns soaping each other off, and then he turns off the water and wraps me in a dry towel. "We've now had sex in the shower and on a table," he says. "I think it's time we got really crazy and tried this thing called a bed."

"I've heard of those," I reply, following him to the room. "They sound dangerous."

He turns toward me with a grin that could only be described as predatory. "You have no idea."

Will

Last night defies description. When we first woke up together, it was gentle. Times four through eight were increasingly less so. Every part of my body feels bruised today and she was limping a little as we walked through LAX, which didn't stop me from wanting to take her straight back to my apartment when we land, except that both my mom and Peter are waiting for us at the farm.

She changed out of that tiny skirt she was wearing last night, but honestly, Olivia could be wearing oversized trash bags sewn together and I'd still be itching to see what was underneath. "Maybe we should stop by my apartment first," I suggest. "Just to get cleaned up."

She laughs. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?"

"Don't hear you saying no," I reply.

"Will," she says, moving toward me and placing her mouth next to my ear, "I never say no."

Fuck it. We are totally stopping at my apartment.

But not one minute later, my mom calls. "What on earth is taking so long? Your flight got in two hours ago."

"Well, you know how that goes," I begin. "It's over an hour drive from Denver, and it takes a while to get the bags and—"

"Baloney. Hurry up."

WHEN WE ARRIVE, SHE RUNS FROM THE HOUSE, ALREADY CRYING, AND POUNCES ON Olivia.

“Let’s give them a minute and take a walk,” Peter says to me.

I go to the porch and he follows, looking unbelievably uncomfortable.

“What’s going on, Peter?”

“A few things,” he says nervously. “The first is about the farm. On your mother’s behalf, I entered conversations with the school late last year about allowing the agriculture program to lease a fair bit of it, year round.”

“Lease it? Why would they do that? They have their own land, right?”

“Yeah, but they could use more, and this is a perfect test case. Your father needed to switch up the crops he was growing a few years back, when demand for corn decreased, and he didn’t. The school wants to use the farm to teach students how to change out a field, plant a new crop entirely, work out the profit/loss estimate for the first few years until it flourishes. They’re willing to pay your mother far more to lease it than your father ever earned off crops in his best year, and she’ll get 25% of the profits to boot.”

“And once we’re up and running, they’ll end the lease?” I ask.

“Not necessarily, but that’s okay either way because I’m looking to retire in a few years and I thought I might try my hand at farming.”

“So you want to buy the farm?”

“No,” he says. “Not exactly.” He hesitates. “What I’d like to do is marry your mother.”

I blink at him, momentarily speechless.

I guess I can’t call it “shocking” after everything I’ve seen happen to Olivia, but yeah, it’s still pretty goddamn surprising. It takes me a minute to process the whole thing. “Don’t you think you ought to *date* first?” I finally ask.

“Will,” he laughs, “I’ve been seeing your mother for over a year now.”

“But *how*? I mean, when did this all take place?”

He shakes his head and looks a little sheepish. “I guess you’re not the only one who fell in love behind everyone’s back.”

I’m feeling pretty good about everything until I get back inside and find Brendan with his arms around my girlfriend. Brendan’s smile fades when he sees me over her shoulder – possibly related to the fact that I already want to

hit him and I'm guessing it shows on my face.

With an exaggerated sigh he releases her. "Chill, dude. I was just saying hello."

I glare at him. "Just use words next time."

"But Olivia gives such good hugs," he counters, glancing at her chest. "She's got to be at least, what, a D cup?"

"That was your last hug, asshole," she says with a laugh, wrapping her arms around my waist.

Olivia's mood is slightly more forgiving than my own. She's told me that Brendan was never interested in her and was only trying to bait me before, but it's going to be a while before the memory of him kissing her stops pissing me off.

"It's the middle of the week," I say, struggling to sound civil. "Shouldn't you be taking finals?"

He shakes his head. "The school let me take them early. I thought you might need some help around here."

Brendan hasn't given a shit about the farm since the day he was born. When he was little he used to come home suggesting non-farm jobs to my father, as if possibly my dad just didn't *realize* he could be a pilot or fireman instead. "Help?" I ask, my voice rife with disbelief.

I wait for the punchline but it doesn't come.

"Yeah," he says. "It means 'providing assistance to.'"

"I know what it means, asshole. Are you saying *you* came back to help with the *farm*?"

He shrugs. "Unless you want me to help take care of your girlfriend, which I'm also open to."

For the first time ever I am almost able to smile at his reference to Olivia. "This will surprise you, but no, I'm not really open to that."

"Then I'll just help with the farm. The school said I can take next semester off if I need to. I could even complete my coursework from here."

"You don't need to do that," I argue. "You're nearly done."

"I've got my whole life to finish school, but my family needs me now. And by the way, if you've clung to your girlfriend long enough, you probably should go check on the horses. They've eaten more than their fair share of Hamburger Helper this week."

"They aren't supposed to eat *any* Hamburger Helper."

He grins. "Oops. Then you may want to hurry."

I HEAD TO THE STABLES, FEELING A LITTLE SHELL-SHOCKED BY HOW MUCH HAS changed in a few short days. Peter is in love with my mom. Brendan is actually trying to be helpful. And Olivia – she's safe and she's home and most of all she's mine. I'm not sure I'll ever get my head around that one.

I'm still marveling at all of it when I feel my cell vibrating in my back pocket. I don't have to look to guess who's calling. Jessica's been blowing up my phone since she heard I quit.

I didn't trust myself to answer when Olivia was missing because every word I wanted to utter was a threat. I'm not even sure I trust myself now, but it's time to end this once and for all.

"Will!" she cries when I pick up. "Thank God. I've been calling and calling. I heard you quit!"

"I did quit," I tell her calmly.

"But *why*?" she gasps. "I know I implied it, but I never would have told anyone about Olivia sleeping at your mom's."

"I don't think you *implied* it. You used it to blackmail Olivia into leaving."

She's silent for a moment, recalibrating. "I don't know what she told you, but you know what a liar she is, Will."

"Jessica, I didn't even learn it from her, so don't try to bullshit me."

"I was upset that night, honey, and I was jealous. Maybe it was a little crazy, but I love you and sometimes love makes you do crazy things."

"I agree," I tell her. "It's what made me resign."

"You—" she draws in a hopeful breath. "You resigned for *me*?"

"No," I reply. It's petty but I'm really going to enjoy disappointing her. "I resigned for Olivia. And I don't think I'd ever have known how much she really meant to me if you hadn't run her off, so I guess I should say thanks."

"You really think that girl can make you happy?" Jessica snarls.

"She already does. Oh, and Jessica—you know how I kept telling you I wasn't ready to get married anytime soon?" I add, preparing to hang up the phone. "I was wrong."

WE END UP STAYING FOR DINNER, AT MY MOTHER'S INSISTENCE. I WAS ON THE VERGE of arguing but a look from Olivia silenced me. "We should get going," I say, as soon as the meal has concluded.

"You're not going anywhere," says my mother. "I've got Olivia's favorite pie in the oven."

Olivia, sitting across from me, looks like she wants to laugh. I'd been considering breaking my lease and moving back to the farm until I found a new job. Now, after spending two hours watching Olivia and keeping my hands to myself, I realize that plan will never work.

It's just begun to snow as we leave. Snowflakes cling to her hair, to her lashes, making her seem other-worldly, lit up from within. She looks up at the sky and laughs, her delight almost childlike, and I'm flooded with warmth. I love her so much that it feels like there's not even room inside me for all of it.

"What's with the look?" she asks. "You don't want to date me now that I'm geeking out about the snow?"

I shake my head and step toward her, wrapping my hands around her hips, and taking it all in—her wide smile, her moonlit eyes, the snowflakes glowing in her hair. "Just the opposite," I tell her truthfully. "I'm looking at you and wondering if it's possible that I've gotten this lucky."

Her smile changes then from delight to something else, something warm and surprised, quietly pleased. "We're both lucky," she says, rising on her toes to find my mouth.

By the time we get in the car, our hair is soaked and we're both shivering. I crank the heat and head down the long road from the farm, but when I reach the highway, I don't turn toward campus.

"Where are we going?" she asks.

It didn't even occur to me to take her home. I suppose I should have asked her, but there's no way in hell I'm letting her set foot in that neighborhood again. "You didn't think I was actually going to sleep in your apartment, did you?" I tease. "I'm big but I'm not bulletproof, and we've already been involved with the police once this week."

"Okay, but you're not going to be weird about it, right?" she asks. "You were so weird that first time I slept in your apartment."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, you mean the time my hot student sat up in bed and flashed me her tits? Nothing to be weird about there."

“I assumed you’d seen breasts before mine.”

“Yeah, but yours are exceptional,” I reply, pulling into the parking lot. I’ve thought about that morning so many times, and now I can actually act on it. I grab her bags and head for the door. “There is one way tonight will be like the first time you stayed,” I warn her, putting the key in the lock.

“Oh, what’s that?”

I grin, pulling her in behind me and not bothering to turn on the lights. “My bedroom is the only part of this apartment you’ll see until daylight.”

Olivia

I suppose it's because Will and I have spent so much time together at his mother's house that there isn't anything awkward about staying with him. About waking up in his apartment. Drinking coffee in his bed. Telling him I have a final in an hour so he'd better get undressed fast.

No, all the *awkward* has been saved for outside of his apartment, for the time when word about the two of us gets out.

And it *will* get out, eventually. The track team is a little too close-knit and a little too gossipy for it to escape everyone's attention.

Our biggest concern, of course, is Jessica—a problem Peter solves with a single phone call to her boss. It turns out that threatening to make the university look bad when you work in the public relations department is frowned upon. Jessica could still tell one day when she no longer cares about keeping her job, but the whole thing is not much of a story, given that Will has already quit.

So while our secret is safe for a while, I do tell a few people, and Evan is one of them. Even though we barely dated, I knew from Will that he'd been worried when I disappeared. It only seems fair that he know the truth. Not the part where I slept with Will during the banquet I attended with *him*, just the rest of it. And he isn't surprised.

"I kind of guessed it around the time you disappeared and Will went

batshit crazy,” he admits.

I also tell Erin and Nicole. Erin, because she already kind of knows, and Nicole because she’s way too nosy not to figure it out on her own.

“I want *all* the dirt,” Nicole says, slightly too eagerly.

“You’re not actually saying you want me to talk about, like, physical stuff, right?” I ask.

She looks at me blankly. “Of course I am. You think I want to know what he eats for dinner? You’ve at least got to tell me how big his d—”

“I’m sure you can guess,” I say, cutting her off. “And that’s the very last detail you’ll request, ever. Understand?”

She ignores me entirely, turning to Erin. “I told you he’d be huge, didn’t I?” she crows.

THE DAY THAT I OFFICIALLY BECOME AN ADULT COINCIDES WITH THE DAY I officially stop living alone. On December 21st, we return the furniture Will borrowed from various people and take the last of my meager possessions to his apartment. Erin and Brendan both come to help, though Brendan’s version of “help” involves a lot more lying around than you might imagine.

“I still can’t believe you’re doing this,” Erin says in wonder as we enter Will’s apartment together. Brendan is, at the moment, “helping” by watching TV. “I mean it’s weird, right? Isn’t it weird?”

“How so?” It doesn’t feel weird to me at all. Now that we’re together it feels as if it was always inevitable.

“It’s just so random. I mean, I knew you guys were tight but it’s like finding out that Brofton is sleeping with the woman who scans our IDs at the cafeteria.”

I choke on a laugh. “In what possible way is this like Brofton sleeping with an obese Polish woman?”

“That was a bad analogy,” she concedes. “Okay, it’s like finding out Brofton is moving in with Angelina Jolie. It’s just, you know, he’s *Will* ...”

“Yeah.” I smile. “I know.” Sometimes I look over at him, when he’s in the kitchen or getting dressed or stretched out on the couch waiting for me to lie beside him, and I can’t really believe it either.

She throws her arms around me before I can back away. “This is the first

decent break you've ever gotten, Finn. Don't fuck it up, okay?"

I promise her I won't, and though I'm not much good at keeping promises, I feel pretty good about this one.

THERE IS A SMALL BIRTHDAY DINNER AT DOROTHY'S LATER THAT NIGHT. WILL HAD wanted to take me out but I insisted we go to his mom's. "But we eat there all the time," he objected.

"I *like* going to the farm."

"You do realize that it's supposed to be me pushing you to go visit my mom and you *reluctantly* agreeing, not the reverse?" he asked. "You're turning 21. It should be something special."

"Maybe," I suggested, "you can focus on making it *special* when we get home."

Surprising no one, he liked that idea.

PETER, BRENDAN AND ERIN ALL JOIN US THAT NIGHT AT THE FARM, WHERE DOROTHY has made every food she knows I like. I don't mention it to them, but it's the first time anyone's celebrated my birthday since I was 10, which makes even a small gathering feel a little overwhelming. I swallow hard and dig my nails into my hands to avoid tears when Dorothy comes out of the kitchen carrying a cake with my name on it, singing "Happy Birthday." Sure, maybe I can cry now, but it doesn't mean I'm going to start crying when I'm *happy*. Dorothy gives me another dress, and Will gives me my favorite gift ever—new racing flats.

"How did you know?" I ask. I hate the shoes the school provides, but it's something I've never mentioned to him.

He laughs. "You scowled every time you put them on. It was hard to miss."

Much later, after we've come home and celebrated in other ways, he lies, sated and sleepy while I trace small circles on his back. His back fascinates me, still tan and all muscle. I've seen guys pose in a gym and look less cut than he does at rest.

"We just moved in together," he says out of nowhere, turning to face me,

“and we’ve never actually been on a date.”

I shrug. “We’ve eaten in a restaurant together.”

“With my *mom*. Usually fighting.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” I say, studying him. “Does it bother you?”

He rises up on his forearm, lips brushing one temple, and then the other.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You remember that dress you wore on Thanksgiving?” he asks. “I spent the entire meal imagining you in that dress on a date with Brendan and it made me crazy that it couldn’t be me. And now it can be.”

I smile at him. “I’ll put the dress on right now if it means that much to you.”

He grins. “It’s not just the dress. It’s also that you haven’t ever really dated—”

“I’ve been on dates.”

“With someone you *liked*?” he asks. “Someone you planned to keep seeing?”

“No,” I sigh.

“Then you should probably try it while you have the chance, Olivia,” he says softly, his mouth pressed to my ear, “because I’m going to be the last guy you ever date.”

I want to not smile at that but I can’t help myself. “The *last*, huh? Pretty sure of yourself.”

He rolls us over until I’m on my back and looms over me, clearly no longer *sleepy*. “Yes,” he says. “I’ve never been more sure about anything.”

AND I’M SURE ABOUT HIM TOO. BUT THE VERY NEXT DAY, WHEN HE TELLS ME HE’S going to the farm and doesn’t ask me to come with him, I grow a little less certain.

I sit up, pulling the sheet around me. The days leading to the move were crazy because I had so much catching up to do at school, which makes this only our second full day together. Does he already need *space*? It hurts.

Part of me, the old me, wants to say “Fine, *asshole*. Go.”

But the other part of me, the newer one, trusts him enough to ask the

question. “You don’t want me to come with you?” I venture hesitantly.

“Yes, I do,” he says, sitting on the bed beside me. “But you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m taking you out tonight and I want it to feel like a real date, not one where we’re in the bathroom at the same time while we get ready, and then end up having sex and never leaving.”

“Why?” I ask. “I like staying in with you.” It’s comfortable. It’s what I know.

“Because I’m wooing you.”

“I’m already wooed,” I say. “Take off those jeans and I’ll show you just how wooed I am.”

For a single second he glances at me, his resolve faltering a bit, but then he grabs his T-shirt and pulls it over his head. “I’ll pick you up at 5:30.”

I climb out of bed resignedly. “5:30? Isn’t that kind of early for a date?”

“Yeah,” he says with a grin, pulling me between his legs, “but I don’t think I can stay away longer than that.”

I lean my head on top of his. “Argh,” I groan. “Do we really have to?”

He laughs. “You’ve got to be the only female I’ve ever met who would argue about this. And wear a dress, okay? Maybe the one you wore on Thanksgiving?”

“Okay,” I say, feeling suddenly shy, which couldn’t make less sense. Not 20 minutes earlier he had his face buried between my legs but *this* I find awkward?

After he leaves, I go for a run, eager to try out my new racing flats, which are easily the nicest running shoes I’ve ever owned. Will and I still haven’t run together outside of team practices, and I’m not sure we ever will. Some transitions have been easy to make—being together, living together, sleeping together. But when I run I think he’ll still feel like my coach, someone judging me, someone I have to prove myself to. And given my temper and his, that seems like a recipe for disaster.

When I get back, I shower and straighten my hair. I’ve got a few hours to kill, so I go to the grocery store but have no clue what to buy. We eat at Dorothy’s a lot but when we don’t, Will actually *cooks*—I mean, cooks real things that don’t come in cellophane. He has shit like arugula in his refrigerator and some fancy salt that comes in a green box. Maybe I could convince him to bag this whole thing tonight and stay in, but what the hell

would I even cook? I know how how to make garbage like tacos and spaghetti, which I'm guessing won't fit the bill for Mr. Seared Ahi Tuna.

I give up and return to the apartment, putting on makeup for the first time since the banquet. I feel excited in a small way, but mostly I feel ridiculous. He knows I don't look like this normally. He knows I couldn't care less about food, aside from Dorothy's pie. And we've now gone a full seven hours without sex, so I guarantee that when he walks in I won't be thinking about dinner.

There's a knock on the door just as I'm finishing up and when I open it, I find him there, freshly showered, in suit pants and a button-down shirt without a tie. I should be used to this by now—I've seen him dressed up before—but God he wears his clothes well.

He steps in, his eyes lingering on my mouth. "You're wearing lipstick."

"Is that bad?" I ask, stepping closer, sliding my hands up his arms, wanting very much to reach for that top button.

"No," he groans. "It's really, really good." He pulls me closer, his mouth ghosting over mine, making my skin prickle as it might if I were chilled, or scared, but in the best possible way. I want more, but he puts his hands on my hips and removes himself carefully, like one of us might break. "We should go."

"Will," I sigh, "you don't have to do this."

"I don't have to have a really good meal with my beautiful girlfriend?" he asks dryly. "Thanks for letting me off the hook."

"We're broke. We shouldn't be going out to dinner." The lease for the farm is a done deal, and Peter is covering Brendan's tuition, but that doesn't mean we're flush. At the moment our only cash is my stipend and savings from the summer plus his last paycheck.

"Is that what this is about?" he asks.

"No," I reply truthfully, though it should have occurred to me much sooner than it has. I've lived hand-to-mouth for years, and worrying about money is so ingrained that I can't believe, for a moment, I forgot.

He smiles. "I was going to tell you over dinner, but I got a job today."

"You did?" I gasp. "Doing what?"

His eyes are so blue right now they don't seem real. "I'm going to lead small group excursions for a company in town."

A smile spreads across my face. "You're going to climb again."

He reminds me, at this moment, of that picture in Dorothy's room—he looks unencumbered and excited and *free*. “It won't be anything major, but it's something.”

I step up, wrapping my arms around his neck, pressing my mouth to his cheek. “It's a big something, Will. You're good at it and it makes you happy.”

His buries his nose in my hair. “*You* make me happy,” he says. “The rest is irrelevant. So tell me why you're so desperate not to do this tonight.”

“I don't know,” I sigh. “It's just something I don't have much experience with and I guess I don't like feeling unsure about things.”

He stares at me for a second as if he thinks I'm joking, and then he starts to laugh, which I can't say I appreciate. “So the same girl who threatened to feed Piersal his own balls and put another guy in the hospital is scared to go out to *eat*?”

I roll my eyes. “It sounds stupid when you put it like that.”

“That's because it *is* stupid,” he replies.

I glare at him, and this makes him laugh as well. I really need to come up with a more effective way to convey anger.

“Do you trust me?” he asks. His face is earnest as he waits for my reply.

It's a question I don't even need to *contemplate*. I trust him more than anyone alive. More than I trust myself. “Yes.”

“Then come on,” he says, lacing his fingers through mine. “Let's go eat.”

We drive into town and he parks beside a restaurant I've seen before but never dreamed I'd one day enter. It looks expensive, and I want to dig my heels in and refuse, but I bite my lip and take his hand instead.

We walk in the door, the warm air in the lobby whipping around us like a blanket, and I take everything in: the dark paneled walls, the white linen tablecloths already set with wine glasses, which shimmer under the glow of candlelight. Will squeezes my hand, knowing instinctively that my anxiety just grew by a mile.

The hostess is a girl about my age, maybe a little older, pretty and showing way too much cleavage. She sees us—or, I should say, she sees my *boyfriend*. She's looking at him like he's her winning lottery ticket. Will asks for a table and she gives him her widest smile, grabbing menus while she licks her lips and tugs her low-cut dress even lower.

We follow her through the restaurant, her hips swaying so much you'd

think she was in a Shakira video, and then she leans over as she seats us, letting her cleavage spill forward, to ask Will if the table is okay. He absent-mindedly tells her it's fine, with a polite smile, but I shoot her a nasty look as she walks away.

He's watching me. "What's with the face?" he asks, grinning. "I know you don't want to be here but it's not her fault."

"Did you seriously not notice the way she was acting with you?" I demand. "She practically shoved her rack in your face."

He looks genuinely, adorably confused. "I didn't notice anything."

"I'm not sure how you failed to notice *that*."

He laughs, but it sounds slightly disgruntled. "It's about time you spent some time in my shoes."

I gasp. He's got to be kidding. How many times did I have to watch Jessica sitting in his lap or implying they'd just had sex? Showing up on the track in her fuck-me pumps and short skirt? "*Your* shoes? You're the one who had a girlfriend all fall!"

"I've put up with plenty, believe me," he says with a scowl, setting down the wine list.

I roll my eyes. "Is this about Brendan again? I already told you he was just acting like that to make you pull your head out of your ass. He's never laid a finger on me."

"I *saw* him lay a finger on you, *remember?*" Will asks, his face clouding. I really need to stop bringing that up. "And do you know how many fucking times I had to listen to Brofton hitting on you on the bus? Or the football team with that stupid song, sitting on the bleachers watching you come in from a run like it was a lingerie show? You're so used to it you don't even know it's happening."

I wave it away. "None of that meant anything."

"Just like that girl doing whatever she theoretically did means nothing. It meant so little that I didn't even see it."

He's right. The football players, Brofton—they barely registered because I only had eyes for Will. Is it so inconceivable that he might feel the same way?

"Maybe," I say reluctantly.

"Definitely," he replies, his mouth softening, a hint of laughter behind it. I smile. "It's our first date and we're already arguing. That can't be

good.”

“I bet arguing with me made you feel right at home though, didn’t it?” he asks with a low laugh.

And the funny thing is that it *did*. Neither of us are different here, as I feared we might be. He’s the same guy who often annoys me and always thrills me, the same guy who can get me to undress with simply a look, and right now he’s watching me across a candlelit table with a smile I’ve never seen him give anyone else.

“You’re better now?” he asks.

“I am.”

“Good,” he says. “Because even if we’re arguing, this is still the best first date I’ve ever had.”

By the time our meal concludes, I feel all warm inside and relaxed from a glass of red wine and can’t even remember why I was nervous about this. I love being here with Will, hearing his stories about climbing and about how unbelievably bad he was in high school. I love that I can watch him, take in the flash of his teeth when he laughs, the slow curve of his reluctant smile. And I love that beneath the table, my legs brush against his, and every time it happens he registers it with a look that makes me shudder in the best kind of way.

So as our plates are cleared, I rub my leg against his, this time very, very intentionally. His eyelids lower ever so slightly and his mouth goes slack. I think about how many times I’ve seen that look on his face without realizing what it meant, that it’s the look he has when he wants something and is doing his best to restrain himself. Except his restraint is no longer necessary. Thank God.

I kick off my shoe and lift the hem of his pants with my toes so I can run my foot along his bare skin. His eyes meet mine across the table, vivid in the dim light, and his mouth opens slightly as he exhales. He pushes his plate away and his glance falls to my mouth.

“Maybe we should get the check,” he breathes.

BY THE TIME WE REACH THE APARTMENT, FOREPLAY IS COMPLETELY UNNECESSARY and even unwanted. He pushes my back against the wall just inside the door,

his mouth landing on mine as he slides up my dress, his hands skimming my thighs.

“Oh *God*,” he groans when his fingers slip between my legs.

I reach for his belt and undo it as we move toward the table. I’m not sure which of us is leading the other. There will be time for something slow and measured later, but that’s not what either of us wants right now. He turns me so that I’m face down, and I remain there, breathless as I listen to the sound of his zipper sliding, feel him push against me and then into me with a groan of relief. He holds my hips in place, his thrusts quick and sharp, murmuring my name as he bends over to kiss the back of my neck. My back is damp, soaking through the dress and I don’t care as he moves faster, as his words grow incoherent.

“Grab the table,” he grunts, and then he pushes so hard that it feels as if my clinging hands are all that separate me from a long, hard fall. One more push, the table sliding across the floor, and I come.

He lets go with a hoarse cry, and when he’s finally spent he lies over me, his front pressed against my back, his mouth buried in my neck. “I love you,” he whispers. “God I love you so much.”

I know that he does. And I know I love him so fiercely that words are inadequate. So fiercely that it will destroy me if he ever changes his mind.

OVER BREAK, WILL BEGINS TAKING GROUPS OUT, MOSTLY TOURISTS IN TOWN FOR THE holidays, skiers looking for a diversion though I can’t imagine wanting to climb when it’s so cold. But he comes home with a light in his eyes he never had when we first met. I attempt to cook, because it shouldn’t fall entirely on him, and it’s awful but he digs in anyway, asking for seconds. We go running, and when he tries to correct my turnover rate I bark, “*You’re not my coach anymore!*”. After a fair amount of bickering we decide that I will do what he asks if he promises to make it worth my while when we get home—an agreement that works out satisfactorily for us both.

He’s happy.

I’m happy.

And then I talk to the police.

Olivia

It didn't take them long to figure out how my father got Sean's address. There was no endorsement offer from a Japanese shoe company. It was my father, using a fake email address, and I was an idiot to fall for it. They tell me he's being extradited to Kansas to stand trial for the murders of my brother and my mom. They also tell me that my years of not remembering probably saved my life because he'd have shown up a lot sooner otherwise.

And then they mention something in passing that leaves my stomach sinking like a heavy weight: my father's nickname was Finn.

It's the part of the conversation I don't want to tell Will later, but I do, and he sees in my face all the things I'm thinking. "It doesn't mean anything, Liv," he says immediately. "Lots of people have that nickname."

Except I've had time, too much time, to think this through. To look for and find all the staggering similarities between my father and myself.

"That nickname's not the only thing we have in common," I reply, staring at my hands, wondering what more they might be capable of.

Will's gaze pins me, and his voice is angry. "There's a world of difference between what you've done and what he's done. Don't you dare make that comparison."

I want to believe him.

But then I think of the look on Matthew's face when I agreed to dig that

hole.

SECOND SEMESTER BEGINS. WILL CLIMBS. DOROTHY PLANS A WEDDING. I BEGIN working with ECU's new female coach. She's good, but not as good as Will, who I run with on weekends now and actually listen to without demanding an incentive.

And we are happy, very happy, but all the while there is something festering—something I don't share with Will. The similarities between my father and me are sort of like a monster under the bed: I'm so scared of what I might find that I can't bring myself to look.

Will comes to my first meet that winter. He makes no secret of the fact that he's there for me, and it becomes pretty obvious to everyone who hadn't already figured it out why Will left his job. But people love Will, and inexplicably seem to like me, so it's not a big deal to most of the team. There are a few assholes, naturally, and I really don't care. Betsy and her peers can be snide about it all they want: I'm the only one of us who's taking first place consistently, and I'm the only one of us going home with Will. That last bit makes it easy not to care what *anyone* thinks.

It's almost perfect, aside from this: I'm having nightmares again. And in these, my father is longer the villain. I am.

I dream that I'm arriving somewhere—the farm, our apartment, the track—like it's any other day. And then I suddenly *remember*, as if it's something I could ever forget, that Will is dead. The realization tears through my chest, cracking it wide open, and when the pain hits I remember something else: I'm the one who did it. In some moment of blindness, like the one that happened with Mark Bell, I attacked him and I can never bring him back.

I wake sobbing, with Will beside me, trying to calm me down. When he asks, I lie and say it was about my father. I can't imagine telling him the truth: the awful thing is no longer something outside of me.

It's inside me, waiting to strike.

BY MARCH, COLORADO'S YEAR-ROUND SUNLIGHT GROWS WARM INSTEAD OF MERELY bright, and the snow begins to melt. Will is always doing small things, things

I suspect he doesn't think anything of—he stuffs newspaper in my wet running shoes to help them dry faster. He makes coffee even on mornings he doesn't have time to drink it. Every time he passes Starbucks he stops to get me a pumpkin scone. These are small things, meaningless things, but what they tell me is not: I matter to him, always, and even if I'm being evil or cool or dismissive, he's not going anywhere.

He isn't going anywhere, but I might be.

The nightmares are more frequent now, and each time I wake from one I tell myself I should leave. That I should go somewhere Will can never find me in order to keep him safe. Sometimes the only way I can ease my anxiety and go back to sleep is by *swearing* to myself I will go. Once I even begin to pack, but then daylight comes and I look at Will sleeping there and can't bring myself to do it.

"Why are you out of bed?" he asks groggily.

I shove the bag into our closet. "I couldn't sleep."

"Come here," he says, rolling over and stretching out his arm to carve a space for me against him.

I go, relishing the heat of his bare chest, the smell of his skin. "I'm sorry I woke you up."

"Probably need to be up soon anyway," he yawns.

"No you don't. You haven't been sleeping enough as it is." Now that the weather's getting warmer the demand for guides has increased. He works more hours now than he worked with two jobs in the fall.

"If you really feel bad," he suggests, "I can think of several ways you could make it up to me."

I smile against his chest. "I could tell you a bedtime story. Or sing you back to sleep?"

"Not what I had in mind, but it *is* something you can do with your mouth," he says, already lifting the covers and sliding down the bed. "Here, I'll show you."

Will has many talents, but *this* is one of my favorites. He's so good at it that he quiets the voices in my head, but they return the moment I finish. And even as I'm pushing him onto his back, pulling his boxers low, I'm saying in silence the things I can't bring myself to tell him aloud: *I'm going to miss you, Will. It's going to kill me to leave.*

SO MANY THINGS ARE GOOD WITH US. MY HAPPIEST MOMENTS ARE THE ONES I SPEND with him: when he walks in the door at night. When we wake up together and neither of us has anywhere to be. But at the same time something is changing, taking the edges between us and making them sharper, because he's begun to suspect that we no longer look at the future and see the same things.

Will wants to plan. He wants to discuss the time after I graduate. "That's over a year away," I reply. He talks about us moving to Seattle, where I can train for long distance and he can lead bigger climbs, and I dismiss it. He references marriage, and kids, and I say nothing, hating the small glint of hurt in his eyes each time I fail to respond. But how can I possibly discuss the future, discuss marriage or—God forbid—kids, when I have no idea what this is inside me and what harm it's capable of?

It's created a wedge between us, one he feels but can't identify and one I understand but won't explain.

SUMMER COMES AND WILL GETS ME A JOB WORKING THE DESK AT THE TOUR company. It should be ideal. We drive to work together, and I love when he comes into the office between climbs, the way his whole face lights up when he sees me. We ride home together. Sometimes we stop on the way to hike or to climb. Sometimes we make dinner, and sometimes we rush straight to our messy bed and remain there for hours, only leaving once hunger pangs set in. But the wedge between us is growing, and because of that we argue, and the arguments are less playful than they once were.

It's July. He pushes an article toward me about a group of ultramarathoners in Seattle, and I push it back without reading it.

"I thought that's what you wanted," he says, the words clipped and precise.

"I don't know what I want anymore," I reply flippantly, pushing away from the table.

That muscle in his jaw pops. "What exactly does that mean?"

"Who knows where we'll be in a year?" I reply, busying myself scrubbing a counter that's already clean. "We can't know, so there's no point in discussing it."

"I know, Olivia," he hisses. "I know that wherever you are in a year, I want to be there too."

I say nothing. I don't meet his eye, knowing what I'll see there.

"You don't even know that much?" he demands. "You're so uncertain about us that you don't know if you want to be with me in a year?"

I glance at him and he looks so wounded I have to look away. "It's not that simple," I reply.

"Yeah," he says, heading for the door. "It actually is."

The door slams and the glass-framed pictures vibrate in protest. I grip the counter so hard that my hands ache.

I don't know what to do. I can't tell him the truth. I can't trust that he's safe with me. I also can't keep him in this permanent limbo, never sure whether I'm planning to stay, assuming I just don't love him enough to commit.

I need to let him go, yet even the hours I spend waiting for him to come home are torture. I need to let him go, and it's going to kill me when I do.

He comes in late, far after we've normally gone to bed. "I thought you'd be asleep," he sighs. It's the first time he's looked *unhappy* to see me and it makes my chest ache.

I stand, blocking his path, resting my hands on his arms. "I love you," I tell him. "You know that. I love you more than anything in the world. I just..." And here I trail off because I don't know the rest of that sentence myself.

He pulls away from me. "It's late. I'm going to bed."

"Will," I plead. "Don't do this."

"I'm not doing anything, Olivia," he says without inflection. "You are."

He goes to bed and I remain on the couch. I have the nightmare again and wake to find him scooping me up and bringing me to bed, but in the morning he doesn't say a word to me.

He drops me off at the office, with a kiss on the forehead that feels more obligatory than willing.

I spend the day watching my phone for a text from him, scanning the parking lot for his car. By mid-afternoon, that sickness in my stomach has grown. I've always heard from him by now.

If he's mad, if he's done with me, that's good, right? It means I can leave and maybe he won't care, or he'll at least care less than he would have. I pick

up my phone to text him and put it back down. Why try to fix this when it has to end? Why console him or console myself when we'll just have to go through it all again?

There's this restless, painful energy inside me as if I've had way too much caffeine on absolutely no sleep. I can't stop pacing, moving, my hand reaching for my phone and jerking away.

I've just picked up the phone and begun to type when Mike, our boss, emerges from his office. I put the phone down guiltily, but he doesn't even seem to notice.

"Jim just called," he says, in a voice of forced calm. Jim is another guide who often works with Will. "There was an accident."

MY BODY SHAKES AS I SIT IN THE PASSENGER SEAT OF MIKE'S CAR, ON THE WAY TO the hospital. Mike knows nothing except that a bolt came out and Will fell.

Which means he could be paralyzed. He could be in a coma. He might already be dead.

The terror I feel is worse than any nightmare, a fear so acute that I refuse to believe it's happened. A small, irrational voice in the back of my head suggests I find a way to end this—throw myself out of the car, *anything*—so I won't have to endure the piece that comes next.

Mike leads me by my elbow into the hospital, steering me blindly as we go to the front desk and the elevator and the nurse's station. I feel both desperate and numb at once, suffering one interminable wait after another with my stomach clenched so tight that it nearly bends me over with pain.

And then we arrive in his room, and Will *turns*—he's in a bed but he's alive, he's moving—and with an anguished sob I run across the room, where he pulls me to him, burying my face in his neck. I cry endlessly, uncontrollably, the way I have only once before in my entire life. He runs his hand over my hair, soothing me, promising me he's fine.

"You're in a hospital bed," I whisper, broken and almost unintelligible. "You're not *fine*."

He gives a low laugh. "Two broken ribs and a dislocated shoulder. That's it."

It doesn't help. I should be overjoyed and instead it feels as if someone's

wrapped a cord around my heart and is pulling it so tight I can't breathe.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm sorry we fought. All I could think as I fell was of how I'd left things. That me being shitty to you was going to be your last memory of me."

I press my face to my hands. I'm still crying. I can't seem to stop. It's partially the relief of discovering he's fine, but it's also the terror of discovering that he is vulnerable. I can keep him safe from *me* by leaving, but how can I possibly keep him safe from everything *else*? From climbing accidents and car crashes and muggings and illness? There are thousands of ways he could be hurt, and I can't prevent any of them. He lowers the bedrail and pulls me next to him on his uninjured side.

"I love you," I tell him, still crying. "I want to be with you next year. I've always wanted that."

"Liv," he says into my ear, part laughter and part desperation. "That's a good thing, right? Why are you so upset?"

"I can't keep you safe," I whisper, hearing how ridiculous and childlike the words are even as they fall from my lips.

"You can't keep anyone completely safe," he replies. "Not even yourself."

This is common sense, I know, but it's hitting me right now as if it's a new revelation. "I thought *I* might hurt you," I admit quietly, "but I never thought something else could hurt you instead."

"Hurt me how?" he asks carefully. There's a barely concealed note of dread in his voice, and there should be. I wish I hadn't said it. He's never going to trust me again, feel safe with me again, once he knows the truth.

"Those nightmares I've been having for the last few months? I told you they were about my dad but they weren't. They were about you, that you were dead and I was the one who'd done it. I don't know what they mean. I don't know if it's some kind of warning. I kept telling myself I would go somewhere, where you couldn't find me, but I just couldn't."

He freezes. How is it possible for someone to lie completely still and yet recoil at the same time? He is doing both. The room is silent but I still hear doors slamming shut, the sound of us coming to an end.

"Jesus, Olivia," he finally says. "Is that what this has been? You were going to *leave*?"

"Yes," I whisper. "I didn't know what else to do."

“When?” he hisses, and it takes me a second to realize that he no longer sounds horrified—he sounds *pissed*.

Reluctantly I lift my head, forcing myself to meet his eye. “Soon, I guess. After this morning I thought ... I thought maybe it wouldn’t bother you so much.”

His jaw drops. “Not *bother* me? It would fucking *destroy* me. No matter how unhappy I am you need to know that I still love you more than anything on this earth.”

“I just told you that I have dreams about killing you,” I reply, “and it’s me *leaving* that bothers you?”

“You would never hurt me, Olivia. Not physically anyway. I don’t even understand how you thought that was possible. But the fact that you seriously considered just taking off without a word ... You’ve got to swear to me that you’ll *never* just leave. That you’ll tell me when this stuff is going on.”

“But what if I—”

“No,” he says. “No, I don’t care what your excuse is. I don’t care what you think is wrong or what you think you might do, you tell me. Okay?”

“Okay,” I sigh, shaking my head. “But I can’t believe I just told you that and all you want me to do is *stay*.”

“That’s not the *only* thing I want you to do,” he says with the start of a smile.

I raise a brow. I generally have a pretty good feel for things Will wants me to *do*.

He sees my face and laughs. “And it’s not what you think.”

THINGS I’D PREFER TO COUNSELING: A 20-MILE RUN. AN ENTIRE AFTERNOON SPENT hearing about Nicole’s sex life. Letting Betsy beat me in a race. But when you tell someone you’ve dreamed about killing him and he doesn’t run for the hills, going to counseling seems like the least you can do.

The psychologist is in Denver; someone Peter found many months before. He specializes in post-traumatic stress disorder, which is my apparent diagnosis. Really it’s just a fancy way of saying that I’m a mess because something fucked-up once happened to me.

I give him my whole unfiltered history. He listens without betraying even

a hint of surprise, as if it's the most normal thing in the world.

"A lot has happened," he says when I conclude. "What's led you to seek treatment for it now?"

So I tell him about the dreams I've been having, about Will's fall and how panicky it's made me. "I always felt like *I* was the only danger in his life, and now there's this whole universe of things that could hurt him and I can't control any of them," I say rapidly. I sound nuts. I know it, and it's *exactly* why I didn't want to be here in the first place. "It makes no sense, and I *know* it makes no sense, and I keep panicking anyway."

"It makes perfect sense," he counters, still completely unfazed, and I wonder if it's his job to assure everyone who walks in his door that they are normal no matter how crazy they sound.

"How could that possibly make sense?" I challenge him.

"Imagine being a child," he says. "A child who's watched someone kill people, who's been attacked by that person herself. How do you protect yourself against that?"

"You can't."

"Exactly." He nods. "Unless you tell yourself that it's *you*—that you're the monster, that you're the dangerous one, the crazy one. Because you can always feel safe from yourself. It's not uncommon in situations like yours."

"Situations like *mine*? You actually have more than one patient who watched a parent die and now dreams that she's killed her boyfriend?"

He laughs. "No, but plenty of people have suffered horrific abuse, Olivia, and the mechanism they use to cope with that is often similar to yours. You took on your father's persona because it made you feel safe. And it's taken being unable to protect someone you love to reveal the fallacy in that."

It sounds far-fetched, and yet something about it feels kind of, sort of, right.

Will waits for me outside. "How was it?" he asks.

"Okay," I sigh. It was better than okay, but I'm not going to admit that to him since he's been pushing me to do this for nearly ten months.

"Still want to kill me?" he teases.

"I don't *want* to kill you," I say, glaring at him. "And it's not funny."

He laughs. "It's kind of funny."

"Maybe I do want to kill you after all," I mutter.

He wraps his arms around me from behind and kisses my neck. "That's

my girl,” he laughs, and for some bizarre reason he sounds proud.

IT ISN'T ALL SOLVED IN A DAY. IT'S NOT EVEN SOLVED IN A MONTH. BUT OVER TIME I finally believe that there is no monster under the bed, and I realize that I *wanted* there to be one. It made me feel safe, believing the evil in the world was housed somewhere inside of me. The truth—that none of us are ever completely safe, that there are no assurances—is scarier. But I'm getting used to the idea, the way everyone does.

The nightmares abate. My father gets life in prison without parole. And when Will turns to me, at Peter and Dorothy's wedding, and tells me he wishes it was us up there at the altar, I tell him I wish it were too.

A YEAR TO THE DAY AFTER OUR FIRST KISS, THE ONE THAT TOOK PLACE WHILE I pretended to be asleep, I collapse on the couch beside him after afternoon practice, freshly showered.

“How was work?” I ask.

“Good,” he says, lifting my legs and placing my feet on his lap. It's something I'd never have allowed anyone to do a year ago, but my days of barefoot running are over. On the rare occasions when I have a nightmare, I'm not even out of the bed before Will's stopped me.

“I took a family climbing at Garden of the Gods. It was their kid's first climb and you wouldn't believe the smile on his face once he got about 20 feet up.”

“You're not taking any future children of ours climbing. I hope you realize that.”

“Of course I will,” he says with that sideways grin of his. “You know you're incapable of telling me no.”

“In *bed*, yes. Parenting, no. But since today's our anniversary I'll let you think you're right.”

He shakes his head. “Our anniversary isn't until December.”

“But the first time we kissed was a year ago today. I know you remember it. In your bed at the farm.”

His eyes widen and his jaw drops just a bit. “You were *awake*? You did it

on *purpose*?”

I laugh. “Of course I did.”

“Jesus,” he says, grinning at me. “You were even more evil than I realized.”

“You loved it.”

“I loved it *too* much. Thinking about that kiss tortured me for weeks,” he says, lifting one foot gently and kissing the arch in a way that has me trying to stifle a moan and failing. “You like that?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say, my voice the tiniest bit breathy.

“Your feet are soft now,” he says, kissing the arch again. “Almost like girl feet.”

“These girl feet can still kick your ass in a race.”

His mouth moves to the top of my foot, to my ankle. “We both know that’s not true,” he says with a low laugh.

“You’re just dying to race me, aren’t you?”

“That wasn’t entirely what I had in mind.” He smiles lazily at me, a *suggestive* smile, and my heart thumps once—*hard*. “I’m just saying that all the barefoot running in the world won’t make you as fast as me.”

I swing my legs off his lap. “That sounds like a challenge.” I stand and begin backing toward the door.

“I was just trying to get laid,” he says, but he jumps to his feet with that gleam in his eye, a tiny hint of wildness about to be set free.

“I think you need to earn it,” I reply, and with a whoop, I’m bolting out the door, past the parking lot and into the fields newly glazed by moonlight. I am running hard but it’s a *good* hard, and I feel the entire world in my bones—not a horrifying one from a time gone by, but this one with the wind and the dry grass crackling beneath my feet like tiny fireworks. Here are the things I love: I love the smell of winter coming in, I love the burn in my muscles as I sprint across the field and the icy air whipping through my lungs. And I love the boy behind me, the one who’s closing in fast. I love him so much that I slow my pace, realizing that, for the first time in my life, I want to be caught.

EPILOGUE

After Olivia graduated, we left for Seattle, where she began to race long distance. She had enough endorsement deals to get by on while she trained, and got a part-time job as a nutritionist, using the degree she swore she didn't care about.

I went back to work for the same guide company I was with before, but it wasn't the same. A funny thing happened after I got everything I thought I wanted: I didn't want it quite so much. I still loved climbing, but I'd grown to love other things so much more. There came a point when I could no longer stand the look on Olivia's face when I left for an expedition, or the fact that no matter how hard I promised her I'd come back in one piece, neither of us entirely believed it.

But mostly, I gave it up because I missed her. Two months in Peru, the trip I'd dreamed of, was the longest two months of my life. I missed her first marathon win during that trip. So I moved on to other things, things that allow me to be where I am today, waiting at the rest station for her during the Western States Endurance Run, a 100-mile race she has a damn good chance of winning.

"How much longer, Daddy?"

Our son has asked me this no fewer than 100 times over the past hour. We are waiting at mile 70, and she's been running for over 11 hours.

"Any minute now," I tell him.

"That's what you said last time," he tells me reproachfully, reminding me

a great deal of his mother.

“Should we go down to the bottom of the hill and run back up with her?”

He’s off like a shot. *His mother’s son to the end.* We jog to the bottom of the incline and wait, and despite her exhaustion, her face lights up when she sees us there.

“Mommy!” shouts Matthew, “you’re winning!”

She laughs, fatigue cutting the sound a little short. “There’s still 30 miles to go, baby. No one’s winning yet.”

“Daddy already *told* me you’re going to win,” he informs her, sounding a little put out.

She smiles at him. “Well, he *is* the one with the fancy degree, so I guess he’d know.”

I thought I would miss climbing when I went to medical school, but I like what I do. And it certainly comes in handy when you have a wife who tries to run 100 miles at a time. I’m nearly done with my residency, but I have a feeling things will still be pretty busy even when it’s over.

When we get into the rest station, my mother brings the baby over, and Olivia holds her with that kind of awestruck look she tends to get sometimes when she’s watching the kids, as if she can’t quite believe she’s created them.

“How do you feel?” I ask, pulling off her shoes. Blisters, bad ones, are unavoidable in this race, and she has several.

But when she looks at me her smile is dreamy. She takes in the family around us, the family we made, and her eyes grow damp. “I feel complete,” she sighs. “And it’s all because of you. You saved me, you know that?”

She sets off for the last leg of the race, giving me, Matthew, and the baby each a quick kiss. We begin packing up our gear to head to the finish line, where Brendan and Erin wait. I still think that them dating is a recipe for disaster, but Olivia reminded me that people thought the same thing about us once upon a time, so I’m keeping my mouth shut.

“How’s our girl holding up?” Peter asks.

“She’s good.” I smile. “I think fatigue is setting in. She almost got emotional.” I shake my head. “After all this time, she’s still under the impression that I saved her.”

“You did save her Will,” my mother replies. “And she saved you.”

I guess she’s right. And one day I’ll tell Olivia exactly that. But right now? It’s time to go to the finish line and watch my girl win a race.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth O’Roark lives in Washington, DC with her three children. *Waking Olivia* is her third novel.

If you enjoyed this book, please post a review!

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