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And I Will Say Your Name: A Novella

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Abstract

“And I Will Say Your Name” follows the life of Margot Scott, a teenager who witnesses her boyfriend’s death by drowning when she is sixteen years old. Margot finds herself struggling with her grief and her own sense of self following the death of Jake, relying on her therapist and younger sister to make sense of what is happening to her. Spanning multiple years, this is a story of grief, loss, growth, and everything in between.

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While he’s not a big reader, I’m thankful for all of Bryan’s support throughout this process, even if at times he had no idea what I was talking about. Whenever he does get around to reading this novella, I hope he likes it.

Lastly, I’d like to give a huge thank you to all of my friends who listened to me talk about this story for months on end and took the time to read it whenever I was stuck — they know who they are, and I’ll see them at our hype house. Your enthusiasm for Margot and my writing was a big factor in me actually being able to finish this story and making it into something I could be proud of.

Introduction

The idea for this novella came to me in three pieces over three years. The first time was when I was a sophomore taking an introduction to creative writing class. My assignment was to write a short story of a certain length, and beyond that I had complete creative liberty. I got an image in my head of a young woman sitting on the concrete steps that overlook Lake Michigan in Chicago, listening as another woman told her that she would have to move on eventually. Move on from what, I wasn't sure, but the image was strong enough in my head that I knew I had to start from there.

The next piece came when I was a junior taking Advanced Fiction Writing. Again, my assignment was to write a short story of a certain length, and beyond that, I had complete creative liberty. I again thought of this young woman sitting by this freezing cold lake in the middle of a harsh Chicago winter, completely unaffected by the weather because she was so lost in her thoughts. This time, the woman had a backstory: her boyfriend was dead, and she wasn't coping well. She had a name, too. Her name was Margot.

My junior year was cut short by the pandemic when I left State College in March and never came back. My classes went online, and suddenly I had a lot of extra free time. This is when I realized that Margot's story went beyond a short story for class.

I'm not completely sure why I felt so drawn to Margot and her story. I've always liked to write and I want to publish a book someday, but I struggled with telling a full, complete story without losing interest along the way. With this novella, I found myself entirely invested in a character I had made up who became more and more real to me as the days went on. It didn't feel like work; instead, it felt like talking to a friend and writing down her story. Unlike in other

instances where I've written stories, for this project, I felt like I was simply writing down everything she was telling me.

I don't have a lot of personal experience with grief, and maybe that's why I set out to write a novella about it. I grew up in a small town very similar to the one that Margot lives in, and when I was her age, there was a period of about eight consecutive years where a teenager in my school district died in some sort of accident — AJ, Matt, Alex, another Matt, Haylie, Camden, and Alyssa. Grief counselors were a constant at my school, and while I wasn't extremely close to any of my peers who passed, I had several close friends who were deeply impacted by these events. There is something extremely helpless about watching people you care about go through something like that and not be able to do anything for them.

Maybe telling Margot's story was a way to work through these feelings I was never able to name when I was growing up. At fifteen, I didn't know how to be there for my best friend when her young and healthy ex-boyfriend drowned unexpectedly one day in July. At seventeen, I didn't know the right thing to say when my boyfriend's little sister had to pick up the pieces after her boyfriend committed suicide. Sometimes, I still don't know what to say, but I found that writing Margot's journey through her own grief has helped me begin to try.

Music influenced this story a lot. I didn't realize how many songs there were about loss and grief until I set out to find them, and once I did, I couldn't seem to stop. There was *Amen* by Amber Run — the lyrics "Sometimes I can't help blaming you/For leaving me here, what am I supposed to do?" And "I don't wanna be here, I don't know what to do/Sometimes I'd rather be dead/At least then I'm with you made me understand what I was trying to say a little better." *Be Still* by the Fray inspired my title, while *Not Healthy Anymore* by Cale Tyson seemed to describe Margot's mental and emotional decline better than I ever could. Whenever I was stuck, whenever

the words eluded me, there was always a musician who could help shake the cobwebs free and get me writing again.

Thinking about it now as I write this introduction, I realize that I started to read a lot more as writing took up more of my time this year. Another writer's words can help you formulate and verbalize your own, and I don't think this story would have become what it is without them. *Hold Still* by Nina LaCour, for instance, is a story about a teenage girl dealing with the suicide of her best friend as she reads the diary that she left behind. It won the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature in 2009, which is given annually to the best book written for teenagers. Interestingly enough, LaCour's story started out as her thesis project too when she was in graduate school. We'll see how mine plays out.

Adam Silvera's *They Both Die at the End* tells the story of two boys who find out that they only have up to twenty-four hours left to live. It was interesting for me to read about characters who were knowingly walking towards their death, struggling with grieving their lives as they were still living them. It made me think about choices, different perspectives, different kinds of endings — I'd like to think I addressed some of these big questions here, but I'm still trying to figure it all out myself.

This Is Where It Ends, written by Marieke Nijkamp, takes place over the course of fifty-four minutes from four different perspectives. This novel about a school shooting impacted me so much upon finishing that I had to start my next class with my camera off because I was crying. I even wrote an email to Nijkamp about how emotionally effected I was by the way she wrote emotion, trauma, and loss. Her language and diction were both so personal that I felt as though I was sitting there huddled in the school auditorium along with the characters, and I couldn't read each sentence fast enough.

I've spent my entire life reading, so I could spend a novel's worth of pages trying to talk about how each of my favorite books influenced the way I write. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* showed me how to write disconnect and disillusion, while Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* taught me about guilt and the thousands of different ways it can manifest itself, even years later.

I believe that Margot and her grief are a culmination of everything I've read, said, written, and done since I was a teenager. I found myself laughing when she resorted to sarcasm instead of dealing with her feelings, and being brought close to tears as I wrote her lowest moments. She is someone who became quite real to me, even if it's just inside my head, and there's something a little bittersweet about letting her story end and saying goodbye. I hope I've done her justice.

prologue

“Those will kill you, you know,” he says, looking over at her where she lies by his side.

She doesn't answer for a moment as she watches the tendrils of smoke curl off the end of the cigarette perched on her finger. She feels him looking at her, feels his reproachful gaze and the way his eyebrows furrow when he's frustrated.

“A lot of things can kill me,” she finally responds, bringing the cigarette to her lips. She inhales, her head feeling lighter as the smoke fills her lungs. She lets it out between her teeth, knowing it will irritate him further.

He scoffs, and she knows without looking that he's rolling his eyes. “Don't be an idiot, Margot.”

Margot continues to work on her cigarette, letting the conversation stretch into silence. She doesn't have to look to her left to know that her boyfriend is upset, she feels his restless energy beside her in the long grass. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see him fidgeting with his hands, his long fingers twisting and pulling at his knuckles.

The sun comes out from behind a cloud just then, bathing the meadow in a warm light. The breeze rustles the long grass and the leaves on the tall surrounding trees, and Margot can smell the pure scent of the woods mixing with the toxicity of the cigarette smoke. She's never been one for the outdoors or loved activities like camping or hunting or fishing, but in this moment she wishes she could melt into the earth and stay there forever.

“It's just — it's just I *hate* it,” he says suddenly, breaking their silence as she knew he would and bringing her out of her thoughts. “You *know* I hate smoking. You *know* it's stupid and you *know* it'll cause you to die a horribly slow painful death fifty years from now, because

everyone knows that because they've been drilling that into our heads in health class every year since, like, fifth grade."

"Fifty years is a long time, Jake," Margot finally looks at him, a small smile forming on her face as she watches him glare.

He opens his mouth, then closes it. "You're trying to annoy me on purpose."

"What if I am?"

"Then it's *working*," he huffs, turning his body fully to glare at her.

It's no wonder he was always so popular in high school, always turning heads when he sauntered down the hallways at school, camera in hand. Even when he was upset, like he is now, his brown eyes sparkled with fire. They're a warm brown, and when the light hits them just right they seem to reflect shades of gold, like honey. His skin was tanned; it was always tan, even during the dead of winter or when he was hit with the flu. He had dark brown hair, almost black, that sat in a curly mop on top of his head. She remembers what it felt like to run her fingers through it, and she feels something in her chest crack.

"It takes my mind off things," Margot shrugs.

He snorts. "You could read a book. Go see a movie. Do a puzzle, I don't know. What you need is a hobby, Margs. Spending ten dollars for a pack of cigarettes so you can lay in a field and smoke them by yourself is not a hobby. It's just sad."

"You're a hobby."

He sets his mouth in a line, and his expression turns stony. Margot finds that she can no longer maintain eye contact with him and instead turns her attention back to her cigarette, which is almost finished.

“I’m worried about you,” Jake says quietly then, much more serious. A lump forms in her throat, but she pushes it down as white hot anger begins to form in her chest.

“Worried about me?” she laughs, venom in her voice. “What right do you have to be worried about me?”

“Margs —”

“No,” she cuts him off. “That’s not fair. You don’t get to be worried about me.”

“I just think —”

“What?” she sits up suddenly, putting out her cigarette and tossing the bud back into her backpack beside her. “You just think that I’m going to grow up and get lung cancer and die?”

“Yes!”

“Well,” Margot says, hands clenched into fists. “You don’t — you don’t get to care, at all, if I give myself lung cancer fifty years from now, or if I have a slow, painful, cancer-y death, or anything else at all. And you wanna know why?”

She looks at him and sees his cheeks getting red, his jaw set, but she takes a deep breath and continues.

“Because you’re fucking dead, Jake. You’re gone.”

chapter i : today

Jake Johnson died on a Tuesday. It was late at night, so it could have been early Wednesday morning, but for Margot, she always thinks of it as a Tuesday. Tuesdays are mundane, easily skipped over. Mondays have a reputation of being hated, and Fridays are universally loved, but no one ever gives Tuesdays a second thought.

Jake Johnson is buried on a Saturday. It's raining, and the sky is gray, and it's warm enough that Margot feels slightly uncomfortable in her winter parka in December. The snow is starting to melt, and she can't escape the thought in the back of her mind that that means the ice on the lake is probably starting to melt too.

The thing about funerals, Margot thinks, is that no one really knows what to say to each other. Of course, there's the typical, *I'm sorry for your loss* bullshit and the *He's in a better place now*, but no one really knows how to say anything of substance. Looking around her, it's like everyone is wearing a mask that's just a little bit too tight, just enough that it's beginning to crack.

Fortunately for Margot, the drugs that her parents have kept pumping through her body since that fateful Tuesday on the lake are keeping her mask from slipping completely. It's probably the only thing that has allowed her to stay standing on her feet throughout the service, shaking hands and giving empty smiles to the people wishing her well.

It's all incredibly fake. She knows what they're saying, whispering from a safe distance away. *That poor girl*, maybe, or *Can you imagine seeing that?*

She hadn't planned on speaking at the service. No one expected her to, least of all Jake, who's currently on display mere inches to her left. It's weird seeing her boyfriend all dressed up in a suit he would have hated, looking pale and waxy like one of those figures at a wax museum.

A lot of books like to describe dead bodies as looking like they could be asleep, but Margot thinks that those writers must never have seen an actual corpse before, because in reality, they looked exactly like those fake bodies in those crime shows on TV.

Margot may not have planned on speaking, and maybe no one really wants her to in case she has a complete meltdown over seeing her boyfriend's casket being lowered into the wet earth, but when the time comes and they're asking if anyone wants to say a few words, something compels her to raise her hand.

"I do," she says, her voice cracking from lack of use. She can feel the cool wind biting at her cheeks, and the dark building of the church looms in front of her. She shivers and it has nothing to do with the air around her. "I have a few things to say."

She knows everyone around her looks alarmed, or pitying, or a mixture of the two, but she ignores them all, gaze locked solely on the casket that holds Jake's body.

"There's —" She starts, clearing her throat. "Sorry. A few days ago, I watched my boyfriend die."

There's a quiet gasp from the crowd, and she feels her younger sister grab onto her arm. She doesn't care.

"Jake — Jake drowned. On a Tuesday. He fell through the ice, and I couldn't find him, and he drowned," Margot can hear herself speaking, but it feels like an out-of-body experience, like the words are coming out of her mouth without her realizing it. "And — and I read somewhere that drowning is the worst way to go, because your body fights it until you can't take it anymore, and then you finally try to breathe. And you die."

She doesn't really know what she's saying, or why she's saying it. She knows she's upsetting everyone else, especially his parents, but with every word, her chest feels a little lighter.

"And I guess . . . I don't really know where Jake is now," Margot says, her eyes boring a hole into the side of the casket. "I don't really believe in heaven or that sort of thing. Or at least, I didn't before. I don't know what I believe now."

"Margot —" Jake's dad tries to cut her off, stepping towards her.

"I'm almost done," she says quickly. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to upset everyone . . . it's just, I know for a fact that Jake didn't believe in God. So I think it's kind of bullshit that you're subjecting him to this uber-religious funeral service."

She feels more confident now, and she knows if Jake was here, really here, he would be laughing his ass off.

"I mean, this is Jake's last hurrah. It's his party, and you're spouting all of these Bible verses, like you don't even care —"

"That's enough," Margot's own father says quietly, appearing at her other side. "Let's take a walk."

"But I don't want —"

"*Margot,*" he says forcefully, angrily. She freezes; this is the first time someone hasn't tried to tip toe around her since that Tuesday.

"Okay, Daddy," she whispers, letting him pull her away. There's a buzzing in her ears that wasn't there before, and it's getting louder and louder until she's hardly able to bear it.

The numbness that had settled over her like a wet blanket ever since Jake had disappeared beneath the ice is quickly evaporating, shifting into a white-hot range of emotions

that she can't begin to process. Fear. Anxiety. Grief. Overwhelming, choking, impossible to escape grief.

Her father's arm is around her shoulders, leading her back to the church. She follows him blindly, stumbling over her boots, and tries to focus on her breathing. She feels like a little girl again, lost and not quite sure of how her limbs work.

Jake is gone. Gone. *Dead*. In the ground, where his body will break down and decay, and she will never hold his hand again. She is at his *funeral*, for Christ's sake.

For the first time since that stupid, meaningless Tuesday, Margot feels herself begin to cry. She feels muted, still, and she knows it's the drugs coursing through her body, but there are also tears running down her face and ruining the makeup that she spent all morning carefully applying with a shaky hand. She knows deep down that she should *feel* something. It's like her body's reacting to this great big heartbreak that she can't react to, can't comprehend just yet.

But she knows that if she *could* feel, the first emotion that would overtake her would be guilt.

Guilt that he's gone, guilt that it wasn't her instead, guilt that she didn't do something more. Didn't do anything, really, just stood there, and she knows in her heart of hearts that that's going to haunt her for the rest of her life, like a phantom ache she won't be able to shake. Jake will be a gut-wrenching pain that will stick with her until the day she joins him under the earth, and she knows that for certain.

Her dad is talking to her now, his voice low and reassuring as he leads her towards the family Subaru. Vaguely, she thinks that he sounds like the adults in the Peanuts cartoon, and she feels the corners of her lips begin to turn up in the beginning of a smile.

“Are you listening to me, Margot?” he finally stops, and she almost stumbles again in the melting snow. She doesn’t even try to fake it.

“No,” she says, and maybe once upon a time she would’ve felt a twinge of remorse to see the look on her father’s face, but that was then, and this is now, and Jake is dead.

He sighs, and Margot takes a second to really look at him, and she thinks that this week alone he’s aged ten years. Henry Scott looks young for his nearly fifty years, his dark hair still full and barely streaked with gray. He’s squeezing her hand now like he’s trying to ground his oldest daughter to the earth, and she remembers what it felt like when his hand seemed like the biggest thing in the world.

“Let’s just go home,” he says instead, sounding defeated. She knows he doesn’t know what to do with her, same with her mother and everyone else in her life, frankly.

If everything had been normal, if she hadn’t been forced to leave a funeral early because she lost her mind in front of everyone, she would have slid into the well-worn leather of the passenger seat, kicked her boots up on the dashboard, and turned the radio up until her father told her to knock it off. She would’ve switched to the oldies channel to appease him, and they would have sung an incredibly off-tune rendition of some Fleetwood Mac song, and maybe would have gotten some ice cream despite the fact that it’s the middle of winter and she’s lactose intolerant.

But the radio is silent, her door slams shut with a snap, and her feet stay decidedly on the floor as though they were glued there. Her father climbs into the driver’s seat beside her, and there’s this indescribable tension in the air that never used to be there before. She knows he’s not going to suggest ice cream today. Strangely, part of her wants him to.

They drive home in silence, and in the back of her mind, she wonders how her mother and Hannah are getting home since they all drove in one car, but she doesn’t say anything. The

silence feels like the tension between them, which feels like the tension that's been between her and everyone she cares about all week.

It's ice just before it cracks, that tensing in your muscles when you realize you're not on stable footing.

She's lying on her bed, staring at her ceiling, and the house is too quiet. Her dad's old record player sits in a corner by all her books, and while part of her aches to drown herself — don't think that, why would you think that? — in Freddie Mercury and just not *be* for a minute, the other part of her thinks that she might explode if anything breaks through this silence that's consumed her since they'd left the cemetery.

She's not fully aware of what she's doing as she watches her thumb move across her phone screen seemingly of its own accord, but then the number is dialing and the phone is pressed to her ear and she doesn't have time to consider it further.

Hey, it's Jake. I can't come to the phone right now, but if you leave a message, I'll call you back.

Margot is quiet as she listens for the beep, her knuckles white as she grips her cell phone to her ear.

"Hey Jake," she murmurs when it finally comes. Her voice sounds thick, defeated. It's not her own. "It's me."

She knows there isn't really a point in calling him. She doesn't even know who has his phone now, whether it's in his room left untouched with the rest of his things or sitting at the bottom of the lake. It sucks, not knowing, but there's a small part of her that can pretend it's in his pocket, and he's just busy, wherever he is now.

“I, uh, just got back from the, um, funeral,” she continues, choking on the word. “It was ... it was pretty bad, to be honest.”

Distantly, she knows she sounds crazy, but in this moment, she finally feels like she’s able to breathe. It’s the first time in days where she’s been allowed to just sit on her bed without someone staring at her, waiting for her to break, and it feels kind of eerie. The air is almost too still, and her thoughts a little too loud in her head.

“I — I said some things that kinda upset your family, I think,” Margot sighs. “I don’t know why I said it.”

She can hear footsteps on the stairs right outside her room, and listening closely, she knows it’s her sister, though she’s not sure when or how her and their mother came home from the service. Hannah is two years younger than she is, just a freshman in high school, but the two had always been close. Lately, though, Hannah treats her just like everyone else: she’s a scared, wounded animal they don’t know what to do with.

“Anyway, Jake ... call me back. I love you.”

Margot throws her phone on the blankets next to her just as Hannah starts to push her bedroom door open. “Margs?”

“Yeah?”

“Who — who were you talking to, just now?”

Margot feels her throat begin to close up as her eyes well with tears that she fights to push down. It’s completely stupid, she thinks, that she had managed not to have a meltdown for days after helplessly watching her boyfriend drown in that lake, but as soon as she opened her mouth at that stupid funeral, the floodgates were open. Margot was not a crier, not even when

she was a little kid getting a shot at the doctor's office, but Jake had completely changed that. He had completely changed her.

"No one," she says, breaking the stretch of silence between them. "I wasn't talking to anyone."

"Okay," Hannah says suspiciously, opening the door wider as she steps into the room. She's changed out of her simple black dress and boots into sweatpants and a too-big sweatshirt, her dark hair tied into a knot at the top of her head. She stops in the middle of the room, seemingly unsure of what to do with herself.

"So," she starts, moving to sit at the edge of Margot's bed. She seems uncomfortable. "I just wanted to, uh, let you know that I heard Mom and Dad talking."

It was a pact they had made when they were little: they would always tell each other when they heard their parents talking about one of them. They're a team; it's them against the world, and it always had been.

"Yeah?" Margot says, flat on her back as she continues to stare at the whiteness of her ceiling. If she looks hard enough, she can see the tiny holes in the plaster where she had pinned Jonas Brothers posters above her bed when she was in middle school.

"Yeah," Hannah says, her voice quiet. Hannah is never usually quiet, it's why she's such a good cheerleader, already on JV as a freshman. Margot feels the mattress dip beside her as her sister slides into the space next to her, their shoulders and arms touching. "They're going to send you to a therapist."

"How come?"

Hannah shoots her a look. "You're not serious."

The numbness that's enveloped Margot since before the funeral is flexing its grip on her once more, reminding her of its presence. It's like there's this heavy weight sitting on her chest, pushing her into her bed until she'll eventually disappear.

"Obviously not," Margot mutters. "My boyfriend's dead, Han. Figures they think I'm gonna go crazy."

Hannah scoffs. Margot was blunt sometimes, said things just for the reaction, and Hannah's no stranger to it. "You're not crazy, Mar."

Margot pauses, thinking. "Yeah. Maybe not yet."

The silence falls between them once more, and Margot feels like she's about to pop. Pulling herself up from the bed, she crosses the floor to her box of records in quick steps, flipping through the albums like a madwoman until she settles on the one she's looking for.

Carefully, methodically, she pulls the black vinyl from its faded sleeve and places it on the record player.

She places the needle, adjusts the dials, and suddenly Nirvana is bouncing around the walls of her room. Margot plays with the volume until she can feel Hannah's eyes boring into the back of her head, knowing the exasperated look on her face before she even turns around.

"Not feeling Kurt?" she asks, smirking, and all she wants in that moment is to piss off her little sister, because at least then she'll stop tip-toeing around her. The inside of her is a tornado of emotion that's rapidly coming to the surface as whatever she'd taken that begins to wear off, and she doesn't want Hannah here when it finally rears its ugly head.

Margot would rather be alone when she has to face the full force of today.

"I don't care, Margot," Hannah says, and the way she's looking at Margot makes her seem a lot older than fourteen. "You can — you can blast shitty 90's grunge until your ears

bleed, you can cause a scene at a funeral — I *still* can't believe you did that — you can push me away . . . I don't care.”

“Good to know.” And she's turning away because this conversation is becoming too much too fast, and why can't everyone just leave her alone?

“Don't be so goddamn obtuse,” Hannah says. “I just — God, you can fall apart, do whatever you need to do because this fucking sucks, but don't shut me out, okay?”

Margot doesn't say anything, which Hannah clearly takes as an invitation to plow onward.

“Jake — what happened to Jake, what you had to see, I don't even fully know what happened. I don't think any of us do. But I'm here for you, okay? Don't forget that I'm here, promise, Margot?”

She's watching the record spin round and round the needle, and she is empty. “What, you want me to cry in your arms? You want me to hug you and then we can have a capital ‘M’ Moment?”

Hannah sighs, and Kurt Cobain keeps saying hello, and there's a pressure building in Margot's temples that won't go away, and Jake is dead.

“I need you to leave,” Margot says quietly, almost impossible to hear over the music, but Hannah leaves anyway, shutting the door behind her, and she's alone again.

Margot is alone, and Jake is dead, and this is her life now.

chapter ii : the first day

Before everything came crashing down, before Margot's world was thrown onto its axis and she was left alone to pick up the pieces, there was a boy, and there was a girl, and they fell in love.

It started the way that most high school romances do: sideways glances, reddened cheeks, fighting smiles, and a sick feeling in your stomach that you can't seem to shake when that person says their name.

Jake sees Margot long before she sees him, a detail that she would hold over him for the rest of his life. For him, it starts in the girls' locker room before a varsity volleyball game, a place he didn't ever think he would find himself due to his general disinterest in sports and the fact that he was a boy.

It's a Wednesday, and while the school day had ended a few hours ago, the gym and surrounding hallways are packed for the volleyball game that evening. It's homecoming week, the dance is Saturday, and the varsity girls' volleyball team is set to continue their undefeated streak that stretches back three years.

Margot had made the team as a freshman, and after the current starting outside hitter had sprained her ankle coming down from a jump at practice the week before, she was set to start. Despite the constant encouragement from her teammates and her parents' promises that she had earned this through her hard work, an hour before the game is supposed to start, Margot finds herself sitting with her head between her knees on a bench in the girls' locker room.

Her team is warming up out on the court and hadn't spared her a second glance when she left to go to the bathroom, but now it had been ten minutes and no one had come looking for her.

She's sure that her coach will have her ass on a platter when she realizes that she's missing, but she feels like she might throw up regardless, so it might be worth it.

Suddenly, there's a sound like a door opening, echoing around the cinderblocks of the locker room, and Margot feels the hairs on her arm begin to stand on end. As the door decidedly closes, she stands, pressing herself against a wall of lockers as she peeks around the corner. The last thing she wants is for someone, especially someone on the team, to catch her having a meltdown before her first game in the starting lineup.

Fortunately — or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it — it's just a boy, probably around her age. He's tall, around her height, with tortoise shell glasses and hair that sits in a curly brown mop on top of his head. He's skinny, too, in a way that she knows her father would make a joke about him blowing away with a gust of strong wind, and she would let herself smile if he wasn't in the middle of the girls' locker room, clearly not paying attention to his surroundings as he fiddles with the buttons on the camera that hangs around his neck.

She has no idea if he's a student here, but her gut reaction is a no, because after nine years in the school district, she feels like she probably knows everyone at this point. It's a small town, only around four hundred kids in each class at the high school, so the odds of this kid being some creep from the opposing school trying to snap a lewd picture seems pretty high to her.

Well, Margot isn't going to be a victim today, not when she's got enough to worry about already. Squaring her shoulders, she pushes off from the lockers and marches forward, tapping him on the shoulder expectedly.

He looks startled, and she smirks.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” she says, looking around to make sure they’re really, truly alone. “Did you get lost or something? Or are you just a perv?”

He drops his camera in his shock, the strap the only thing that saves it from hitting the concrete floor. As she waits for him to say something, she looks at him closer: brown eyes, long eyelashes, tanned skin. He was cute, honestly, and would probably be her type if he wasn’t obviously a creep.

“Oh, um, no,” he finally answers, gesturing with his camera lens as he finally looks at her. “I was just — my camera.”

Obviously, that’s the whole point, she thinks, and she gives him a look that she hopes conveys her level of disgust. Margot feels like she’s a moderately forgiving person, but she has neither the time nor the patience for dumb boys today.

She watches the back of his neck get hot, and her smile widens. There’s something about the way that it’s so easy to make this guy nervous that gives her great satisfaction, makes her want to keep poking at him. It’s almost easy to forget how nervous she is about the game tonight.

“Do you even go here?” she asks, her voice sharp as she starts to herd him to the exit. The last thing she needs is for someone else, especially someone from the team, to walk in and see her and a boy alone together in the locker room. “What kind of creep sneaks into the girls’ locker room with a camera?”

“Yes — no, that’s not what I meant, I mean —” he stammers, and he doesn’t fight her as she continues to push him towards the door. “I was just —”

Margot has had enough of his stuttering, and this game she’s been playing is no longer fun anymore. “Spit it out before I tell Coach.”

“I’m on the newspaper!” He finally manages to say, his face beginning to turn a gross shade of purple as he fruitlessly shows her his camera again. “I swear I didn’t mean to come in here, I was just —”

“Taking pictures of the girls’ locker room?”

“No!” He looks like he’s going to choke. “The settings, I was messing with my settings, see, I’ve never used this lens before, so I was trying to figure out the settings, and I wasn’t paying attention —”

“Obviously,” she snorts, because she can’t not, and he’s starting to look less like some sort of sexual predator and more like an awkward boy in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“— And do you really not know that I go here? This school isn’t that big.”

It’s really not, but Margot thinks that if this guy stood in front of a lineup with a dozen other boys with brown hair, she still wouldn’t have a damn clue. He’s smiling now, which was really embarrassing, and now it’s Margot whose face is getting warm.

“I’m really bad with names?” she tries, and he looks unconvinced, but not annoyed. Now that they’re in the hallway, the locker room door shut firmly behind her, she leans against it, crossing her arms to ignore the feeling that’s beginning to grow in her stomach at the way that this supposed classmate of hers is looking at her.

“Uh huh,” he says, and he sounds a mile away from the nervous wreck that he was a minute ago. “Jake Johnson. I’d say nice to meet you, but this has been the most mortifying experience of my life.”

“Jake Johnson?” Margot asks, her embarrassment fading away. “Like New Girl.”

It's one of her favorite shows, and as she watches him roll his eyes and shake his head in what she hopes is mock disgust, she realizes that her earlier nerves about the game have completely faded away, replaced with a new kind of nerve that she definitely doesn't hate.

"Yeah, I haven't heard that before," he says, his voice full of sarcasm. "That's actually why you haven't seen me around school before, because I moonlight as Nick Miller. I'm a spitting image, don't you think?"

Margot laughs, because he could be, if he didn't look like he'd fade away if he turned sideways, and his overall human disaster aura was a little stronger. "That must be it."

She thinks that she could stand there all day and shoot the shit with this Walmart brand Nick Miller, but she really does have a game to play, and she's sitting on borrowed time until her coach inevitably comes looking for her.

"Well, I gotta get back in there," she says, nodding her head towards the gym behind him. "I'll see you around, Nick Miller."

She looks at him again as she begins to jog back towards where she knows her team is still warming up, and she finds that he's already looking at her with a dazed expression on his still-red face.

Margot plays better than she ever has before, and as her teammates crowd around her to celebrate the continuing of their undefeated season, she finds her eyes being drawn to a camera flashing. They make eye contact, across the gym, and he waves shyly.

She has a feeling that he's going to get her in trouble someday.

Now that she's met him, Margot swears that she can't walk down the school hallways without running into him and his dorky camera. Apparently, they've gone to school together for years, Margot too caught up in classes and sports and friends to take notice of the photographer that always had one foot in a darkroom.

"The paper wants to interview you about volleyball," he tells her one day, sidling up next to her locker while she grabs books for her next class. She looks up at him, startled, and he's standing there in jeans and a green sweater that's rolled up to his elbows.

As usual, his camera hangs from his neck. He fiddles with it like it's a nervous habit, and based on the last time they spoke, it probably is.

"Just, like, the sport?" she asks, slipping her geometry book into her bag.

He snorts, his glasses sliding down his nose. "Um, no. They shot that idea down for some reason. It's about your performance, I think? You did well in that game?"

Margot laughs. "You don't know anything about sports, do you?"

"Not a damn thing."

She closes her locker, they're walking down the hall together even though she has no idea where he next class is, and she has no idea how he was a stuttering mess the first time they met and now he's treating her like a lifelong friend. She doesn't hate it.

"Anyway," he continues, his hands on his camera strap. "Sam Wyatt is writing the article, and I think she wants to do the interview at a coffee shop or a diner or something after school this week, if you're free."

"Why isn't Sam telling me? We literally have math together next period."

"Oh," he says, and it makes her smile to watch his neck get red. "Well, um, I'm gonna take some pictures. For the interview."

“Huh,” she says, not quite believing him, but also not able to come up with another reason.

They arrive at her class, and when she looks in the open doorway she can see Sam Wyatt sitting there getting out her notebook, and the thought of Jake Johnson taking pictures of her at this interview doesn't sound so bad.

“Well, I'll probably need your Snapchat or something, right?” she says, feeling a burst of bravery. “So we can work out the details. For the interview.”

“Oh!” He's flustered again, and it's kind of adorable, and she has to fight a smile. “Yeah, no, definitely, um. Here.”

He hands her his phone just as the warning bell begins to ring, so it's a mad dash of typing in her username and him running down the hall to his next class, which is apparently two floors down.

“See you at the interview!” She calls. He whips around to wave, and in doing so, he trips over his own feet, and goes tumbling to the floor.

The few people that are still lingering around the hallway laugh, and Margot does too, until there are tears in her eyes and a stitch in her ribs. He looks flustered, he always looks flustered, but he's laughing at himself from his spot on the floor, and Margot can't even care about the class that she's now late to.

“Yo, Scotty, stop Snapchatting your boyfriend,” Lauren Huntley laughs, appearing over the top of the bus seat with a smirk. It's early morning, the sun just starting to poke through the clouds, and there's a sleepy haze on the bus as the girls lie spread out in their seats.

They're on their way to a weekend volleyball tournament a few hours away, and Lauren, one of the seniors on the team, seems to be the only one with any semblance of energy.

Margot's phone sits open in her lap, and she's so tired that Lauren's words aren't computing. "My what?"

"That photographer guy?" Lauren snorts, and now more of their teammates are starting to wake up. "The one you're, like, always with or whatever?"

"Oh," Margot blushes, locking her phone. "No, we're — we're just friends."

At this point, it's been weeks since the interview, where Jake really had no business in attending but did anyway for some reason, and they've been talking every day. Talking to Jake is easy, despite the fact that he's hopeless when it comes to sports and has this weird affliction with reality TV shows, and they've slipped into this easy rhythm like they've been friends for years.

And yes, he's cute, and whenever he runs his hand through the curly mess that sits on his head she wonders what it would feel like against her own fingers, and whenever he says her name a certain way she feels this swooping in her stomach, but they're just friends. It's okay, she thinks, constantly, she's just happy he showed up in her life.

"Is that the guy that takes pictures at all our games?" Hailey Lambert asks as she sits up. She's a junior, one that Margot doesn't know very well yet, and extremely superstitious. She wears the same threadbare socks to every game because the first time she wore them, they won state. Margot's still unsure if she actually washes them in between games. She hopes so.

"The one that acts like he gives a shit about volleyball, and looks like he's going to have an aneurysm every time Margs so much as looks his way," another girl chimes in, not looking up from her phone.

“He does not!” Margot tries to argue, and she doesn’t have to see all her teammates to know that they’re all rolling their eyes.

“You’re delusional,” Lauren laughs, smacking the back of Margot’s head. “You gotta shoot your shot before someone else does, dude. He’s pretty cute for a freshman.”

Margot just shakes her head, unlocking her phone to answer a text from Jake, which is just a link to a Tweet he thought was funny.

They’re just friends, and that’s okay.

Jake Johnson, 5:52 p.m.: Heard you had a tough day, got you some coffee and left it with your sister!

Margot Scott, 5:56 p.m.: Omg. You’re the best. You did not have to do that.

Jake Johnson, 5:57 p.m.: I mean, I drank some of it. But. The thought’s there, I think

Margot Scott, 5:58 p.m.: I take it back.

Margot Scott, 5:58 p.m.: I actually hate you.

Jake Johnson, 6:03 p.m.: No you don’t

No, she doesn’t.

“You know that girl Ava in my bio class?” Jake asks her one day. It’s December, nearly the end of the semester, and they’re sitting in a well-worn booth at their local diner, sipping on milkshakes.

“The short one with the glasses?” Margot is hardly paying attention, instead focused on the big bit of Oreo that’s stuck in her straw.

“Yeah,” he says, his voice sounding strange. “She, um, kind of asked me out today.”

“She what?” and just like that, the Oreo is completely forgotten.

“Yeah,” he says again. “To get coffee or something.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Jake says, like it’s the only word he knows, and part of Margot wants to reach across the table and smack him. “I, uh, I think I’m gonna go with her.”

Oh. The thought of Jake on a date with this girl, laughing and showing her his favorite pictures, makes Margot’s milkshake sit like a lead ball in her stomach.

“That’s nice for you,” she finally says, and she hates how weird her voice sounds.

He laughs, but it doesn’t sound like his normal one. “Uh huh. She’s nice, I guess.”

“I guess.”

The thing is, Jake can do whatever he wants. They’re not dating, she’s not his keeper, and she’s also not the kind of girl that hates other women. It’s hard enough to be a girl as it is, and there’s no point making it even harder by turning on each other.

Margot knows that, she *very much* knows that, but she’s also felt *something* for Jake for months now, and she thought that one day they might get somewhere. He’s so painfully awkward sometimes, flustered whenever emotions are brought up, but she thought that he was just shy, that he was like that with everyone.

She sips at her milkshake, and she tries to give him what she hopes is an encouraging smile, but she thinks it’s probably more of a grimace.

“Well, um, let me know how it goes,” she finally says. “She seems great.”

What Margot Scott feels for Jake Johnson is just a crush, and eventually, hopefully, it'll pass. He's her friend, first and foremost, and she's not going to let something like feelings get in the way of that.

Jake Johnson, 11:03 p.m.: I don't think it's gonna work out with Ava tbh

Margot Scott, 12:15 a.m.: how come

He doesn't answer, and she hopes he's just fallen asleep and they'll talk about it tomorrow in school, but when they finally do see each other, he doesn't say anything. She wants to ask and gets close to it, but something holds her back.

She has decided not to have feelings for Jake Johnson anymore. It's easier that way. The issue is convincing the rest of her body to agree with her.

"Can I use you as a model for my photog project?" he asks, plopping down into the seat next to her. She's in the middle of her lunch period, which he is decidedly *not* part of, since she's pretty sure he's supposed to be in gym right now, if the gym uniform he's wearing is any indication.

She swallows her bite of bagel before she answers. "Aw, you think I'm pretty?"

He rolls his eyes, and the other girls sitting at her table laugh. "That's not what I — just, can you help me? It's due Monday and I need time to develop the film."

It's January, a Tuesday, and there's a thick layer of snow on the ground that looks like it should've caused a snow day.

“Yeah, whatever,” she says, taking another bite of her bagel. “Can I have copies after, though? My Instagram’s been looking a little bare lately.”

Jake laughs. “You’re so weird about social media. But yes. I’m thinking we can do something on the lake by your house, since it’s been so cold it’s probably frozen over by now.”

“Jake Johnson, using me for my lake and my good looks?” she gasps in mock astonishment. “You’re lucky I love the attention.”

“God, you’re annoying,” he shakes his head. “We can go Friday, after school maybe? I can take the bus home with you and we can go from there.”

“Good with me.”

“Awesome,” he stands. “I’m supposed to be in gym, so I gotta get back. See you.”

He leaves, and Margot turns back to her lunch, but not before seeing the looks her friends are giving her.

“What?”

“When are you guys gonna date?” her friend Megan asks teasingly, and the other girls nod their heads. At this point, whether it’s just her friend group or the girls from the volleyball team, it’s a running joke that Margot and Jake are in love and everyone but them knows it.

Margot doesn’t think it’s funny.

“We’re just friends,” she argues. “It’s not like that at all.”

“You’re delusional, dude,” Megan laughs, and they all go back to their lunch.

It doesn’t matter what she says, she can’t even convince her friends that there’s nothing there, so why is she still trying to convince herself?

“You know, I can’t believe you live next to this lake and you just hardly acknowledge it,” Jake says, hands deep in the pockets of his coat, camera swinging from his neck as the snow crunches under his boots.

“What, am I supposed to just constantly be knee deep in water or something?” Margot snorts. “You want me to just have a swimsuit under my clothes at all times? One of those shitty white girl wave tattoos on my ankle?”

They’re walking along the short dirt path that leads to the lake by Margot’s house, and the cold air is biting at her exposed skin. She tugs at the zipper of her parka, yanking her beanie down further over her ears, but it’s no use against the Midwest winter.

“You could try sincerity once in a while, if you want,” he quips, glancing back at her with a smirk. “Might suit you.”

“Doubt it.”

Her breath is forming in small clouds in front of her face, and she’s reminded of winter afternoons with Hannah years ago, tumbling around in the snow pretending to be dragons. She can’t remember the last time she played in the snow; she’s grown to hate the cold.

“One day I’m gonna move so far south they won’t have heard of snow,” she tells him, kicking a lone rock into his path. He trips over it, predictably, and she smiles to herself.

“Oh yeah?” he chuckles. “Chicago winter not doing it for you?”

“Absolutely not,” she shakes her head, even though he’s not looking at her. “I’m gonna be one of those old Florida retirees, except I’ll be like sixty years younger than everyone else and just as bitchy.”

He’s laughing for real now, and she doesn’t feel as cold. “Can I come, or is this just a you thing?”

“I’m definitely on a solo journey here. Good try, though.”

They’re at the lake now, which is completely frozen over now that it’s the middle of winter. It’s completely empty, quiet, and the wind is starting to pick up. Even with her hat, the ends of Margot’s hair whip around her face, and she can feel her cheeks beginning to grow numb. She hugs her arms closer to herself in a fruitless attempt to trap what little body heat she feels like she has left from escaping, but looking at Jake, she sees he’s fiddling with his camera like he’s completely unbothered.

“Why did this have to be an outdoor project, again?” Margot asks, teeth chattering.

“Other than you hating me and wanting me to be miserable?”

He shakes his head, and it’s like a switch has been flipped inside him, because now he’s all business. “The color contrast with the snow and the trees is really good, especially on film, and I have a few ideas about how to incorporate the ice that I wanna try out.”

They’ve been friends for a little less than six months, and Margot thinks that she’s never seen anyone as serious about anything as much as he is about photography. She’s never been passionate about any of her hobbies as much as he’s been about his camera, could never sit and focus for the amount of time that he spends in the darkroom at school, and it’s always been something about him that she can’t quite figure out.

It makes her wish she had something she was passionate about, even if she wasn’t good at it. There was volleyball, obviously, and basketball and soccer, but she did those more on autopilot than anything else, not because she felt like she might die if she couldn’t be on the court. She was good, what her father would describe as a *natural athlete*, but it was good luck with genetics more than it was some crazy Mamba Mentality.

With Jake, though, it's different. It's obvious in a way she can't put to words, and even if she could, she would never tell him. It's not like he needed something else to make fun of her for.

"Okay, Margs, I'm gonna have you start over there," he says, bringing her back from her thoughts. He's pointing at a spot out on the ice, relatively close to the shore. "I want you to stand with your back to me, but look at me over your shoulder."

"Look back at it?" she tries, but he doesn't acknowledge her joke, instead digging through his camera bag for something, and she falls silent as she moves to the spot. "Jake, are you sure the ice is thick enough?"

"Um, yeah," he says, distracted as he twists a new lens onto the camera body. "It's been pretty cold recently, so it should be at least a few feet by now."

"Okay, well, if I die, that's on you," she warns, not meaning it as she steps onto the ice. It's slippery, and she steps gingerly, listening closely for any signs that it might crack.

It's solid, not even giving an indication that it has the constitution to break, and when she finally looks at Jake again, he's giving her an encouraging smile. His camera is ready to go in his hands, and he's holding it like it's anchoring him to the world, like it's some sort of lifeline. She feels nervous, suddenly, about this whole thing: he's trusting her with this, bringing her into this part of himself and just trusting her to fit whatever vision of herself that he's created in his head.

She wonders if she'll ever feel like she matches up.

"Like this?" she says instead, turning to look at him over her shoulder. She's freezing, the cold from the ice seeping up into her boots and under her skin.

"Actually, if you could just — you know what? Hold still," he's shuffling towards her on the ice, his hand is reaching for her, and she feels her breath catch.

Jake grabs a strand of her hair between his fingers and pushes it, delicately, away from her face. He continues moving strands, his lip caught between his teeth as his brow furrows, and it's like every point that his fingers meet her skin is amplified with a thousand open nerves.

"This should be good," he finally says after what seems like hours of her holding her breath, and it's like he doesn't even notice the effect he's having on her. "Just don't move, and try to look, I don't know, pensive?"

"Pensive?" she laughs, and it only sounds half-forced. "Bringing out the SAT words today?"

He rolls his eyes as he moves into position, dropping into a crouch as he holds the camera in front of his face. "Shut up and look pensive before I make you lay in the snow for your next pose."

She bites back her response, instead shifting her face into what she hopes is a pensive expression that doesn't make her look too dumb. It must work, or at least Jake hates her a little, because he starts clicking away, moving every so often to change the angle of the shot.

"Okay," he says after a few moments of silence, not taking the camera away from his face. "Now just, like, walk and look at your feet, like you don't know how and you're trying not to slip."

"I *am* trying not to slip," Margot mutters under her breath, but she does what he says, and his camera keeps clicking away.

He keeps working, pausing every so often to move her into a new pose, and Margot is so focused on watching him in his element that she begins to forget how cold she is. He keeps stepping into her space too, which definitely doesn't help, and the worst part is, she seems to be the only one affected.

“Hold your hands like this,” he says, grabbing her hand in his own, his fingers brushing over her knuckles. She feels her brain begin to short circuit as his fingers deftly move between hers, the smooth skin of his palm brushing against the calluses on hers, and she thinks that she’ll die in the next second if he doesn’t stop touching her right *now*.

Margot yanks her hand away from his, and he looks up at her, startled. “Everything okay?”

“Um, yeah,” she lies, clenching her hand into a fist. The space where his hand used to sit feels colder than the winter air around her, and she shivers. “I just got — I’m ticklish. Sorry.”

“No worries,” he says, reaching for her hand again as though nothing happened. She lets him manipulate her hand into the position he’s looking for now, her entire body numb. “We’re almost done, sorry this is taking so long. I know you’re cold.”

“I’m fine,” she argues, more to herself than anyone else, and he laughs.

“Okay, Margs,” he shakes his head. “You’re literally shaking. Thanks for doing this, though, even though you hate the cold.”

“Of course,” she says, her voice sounding distant.

The problem with Jake Johnson is that he has no idea that he can’t just *do* things like hold her hand or touch her face and expect her to be able to function normally. The problem with Jake is that he’s either too nice to tell her he just wants to be friends or too blissfully unaware to notice that she’s tripping over herself in front of him and has been for months, basically since the day they met.

The problem with Margot Scott is that she’s falling, fast, inexplicably against her will, and she doesn’t have a clue what to do about it.

“Han, I think I’m in love with him,” Margot sighs, flopping onto her sister’s bed. Hannah is younger than Margot by two years, and they look exactly alike: tall, long dark hair, blue eyes, pale.

“Jake? Congrats, you’re officially the last to know,” her sister snorts. Margot throws a pillow at her. “Other than Jake, I mean.”

“Don’t be a dick, I need help!”

Hannah laughs. “Literally, Margs, I think you could just walk up and kiss him and that would solve it.”

“Be serious, Han, Jesus,” Margot says. “I just — okay, we were taking those pictures for his project the other day, out on the lake, and it was so weirdly *intimate*, I’m just like afraid to go for it and it turns out I read it wrong and just totally ruined our friendship.”

“‘Intimate?’ What does that even mean?”

“Like...” Margot pauses, trying to find the words. “Like, he was just so in his element, I guess, and he would touch me to like adjust my pose or whatever. And he seemed so focused and into it, and I’m just standing there casually losing my mind, and he didn’t even notice.”

Hannah flops onto her bed beside her, and their shoulders are nearly touching. “I mean, photography’s like his whole thing, right? It makes sense that he’d be, like, focused and into it and stuff.”

“You don’t think it meant anything?”

Hannah sits up and gives her a look. “You know him better than I do, dude. Go for it or don’t, that’s on you, you know?”

Margot shakes her head. “You are *so* unhelpful. I don’t know why I come to you for anything.”

“Get out, then!” her sister laughs. “I have a test tomorrow that I need to study for anyway.”

“Fine, whatever, I’ll figure it out on my own.”

She gets up and stomps down the hall to her own room, taking careful steps to avoid the spots where she knows the floor will creak. They’ve lived in that house since before Hannah had been born, and Margot could make her way through these halls in her sleep.

Closing the door to her bedroom, she thinks that underneath it all, Hannah is probably right. Not that she’ll ever admit it to her.

The air in Lauren Huntley’s house is hot and smoky, which makes sense considering the number of teenagers that are packed into her living room shoulder to shoulder. It was a tradition of sorts, stemming from a small hangout during Lauren’s freshman year and continuing to build momentum until it was one of the biggest parties of the year. It’s February 13, a Friday this year, and the day before Valentine’s Day, just as it always is. It was Lauren’s way of giving the middle finger to a holiday that she deemed ridiculous and unnecessary, and the rest of the student body’s way of capitalizing on her parents that always seemed to be travelling.

Margot had been invited by Lauren herself, despite the fact that she’s only a sophomore, because they had gotten close on the volleyball team that season. Jake, despite the fact that he was starting to gain some popularity from his photography skills and Margot herself, had *not* been invited, but Margot had demanded he come anyway.

“I don’t even drink,” he whines, for the umpteenth time that night, as they shoulder past their classmates on the way to the kitchen.

Margot scoffs and punches him in the shoulder, rolling her eyes when he acts like he's in pain. "Don't be such a wuss, dude. It's a Friday night, we're young, let's live a little."

Reaching the kitchen, Margot reaches for a can of Busch Light and downs it, fighting the urge to gag as it hits her throat. She turns to see Jake smirking at her, and she lunges to punch him again, only to have him duck out of her line of reach.

"Margs, you hate beer," he says, laughing. "Why are you drinking it?"

Margot carefully takes another sip, fighting to keep her face neutral. "I don't — okay, I do, whatever, it tastes like motor oil. But it's a *party*, Jake!"

He laughs again, and Margot thinks that it's the best sound in the world. She opens her mouth to tell him so, because sue her, she's a little in love with her best friend, but she's cut off at the appearance of Lauren Huntley herself.

"Hey, Margot!" She says, her voice unnaturally high as she wraps an arm around Margot's shoulders. "Fuck Valentine's Day, amirite?"

"Oh yeah," Margot laughs, giving Jake a look. "We hate love."

Lauren glances at Jake as though she's just realizing for the first time that he's here. Her eyes light up and Margot feels uneasy. "Jake Johnson! Did you finally make an honest woman out of my girl here?"

Margot wants to sink through the floor to never be seen again, but unfortunately, the universe is not working in her favor, and she's left trying to avoid Jake's persistent eye contact.

"We're just friends," Jake says, and his voice sounds different somehow, more subdued. She chances a look at him and sees an unreadable expression on his face, which is weird because she's always been able to read him.

“Uh huh,” Lauren snorts, taking a big sip from her plastic cup. “You guys are just friends and I’m completely sober.”

The thing about Lauren, especially now, clearly drunk, is that she has the ability to take this conversation and effortlessly ruin Margot’s life with it.

“Lauren, isn’t that Brett over there?” she cuts in, gesturing vaguely to the other side of the house. Brett was Lauren’s on again, off again boyfriend, and as of tonight, they are decidedly off.

“It better not be,” Lauren whips her head around, Jake and Margot momentarily forgotten as she tries to see over everyone else. “I will *literally* kick his ass.”

She vanishes into the crowd, already yelling at the top of her lungs about cheating assholes ruining her party, leaving Margot to go back to forcing the Busch down her throat. She isn’t completely sober, having taken a few shots of some nasty cheap-smelling vodka before this, and she doesn’t want to be if it means remembering the conversation that she’ll inevitably have to have with Jake about this.

“What was that about?” he asks, and she slams the now empty can onto the counter. His eyebrows are furrowed and his cheeks are slightly red, but it isn’t from the alcohol since he hadn’t had even a sip.

“Wanna dance?” she counters, grabbing his hand and leading him to the makeshift dance floor in the middle of the living room.

“You hate dancing.” And she does, but his hand is on her waist and she thinks that it’s actually not so bad.

“I love dancing,” she argues, raising her voice to be heard over the music that’s causing the walls to shake. “You’ve just never noticed.”

He scoffs. “There’s not much that I don’t notice about you, Margot Scott.”

She feels like she can hardly breathe, a lead ball forming in her stomach as she notices his neck begin to turn red. *Just friends*, she reminds herself.

It was going to be a long night.

Rap music is pounding from a stereo that someone had brought and placed in the corner, and the windows are completely fogged up. Somewhere on the other side of the living room, Lauren and Brett are screaming at each other, drawing a small crowd even though everyone knows they be back to holding hands in the halls on Monday. The room is hot, the air thick with the smell of alcohol, teenage sweat, and smoke, and Margot tries to convince herself that that’s the only reason she’s struggling to breathe, and not because he’s standing so close to her.

They dance, and she drinks some more, and some more, until finally she’s leaning against his shoulder and breathing in the scent of his sweatshirt, and he suggests that they go home.

“Are you feeling okay, though?” he asks, his eyebrows scrunched as he looks her over. She feels warm, and she’s pretty sure it has nothing to do with the alcohol.

“I was just having fun,” she says, shaking her head as she wraps an arm around his waist. He looks at her, surprised, but he doesn’t step away.

“Okay, well, let’s go home then.”

They start making their way to the front door, stepping around the scene Lauren has started to cause as she loudly argues with her maybe-ex boyfriend, and Margot realizes that she hasn’t let go of him yet, and he hasn’t done anything to stop her.

“Bye, lovebirds!” Someone calls as Jake pulls open the door for her, and Margot feels her face get hot. She hates her high school and everyone in it.

Stepping into the night, Margot finally releases her hold on Jake in order to wrap her arms around herself. It's cold, even with the alcohol coat she'd created for herself throughout the party, and the sleeves on her black top only reached her elbows.

"Are you cold?" he asks, and she tries to stop her teeth from chattering.

"Um, not too bad," she says, her arms crossed tight across her chest as though to keep her limited amount of body heat in. He shakes his head at her.

"Margot Scott, you are a horrible liar," he tells her, smiling, and Margot feels herself begin to fall a little harder as he slips off his own jean jacket to hand to her.

"I'll be okay," she tries to protest, and he shakes his head again.

"Stop being stubborn and take the damn jacket."

She slips the worn denim over her arms, noting that it smells like him, and she sighs.

"You smell good," she blurts. It's dark as they make their way down the street, but even in the dim streetlight she can tell he's blushing.

"Um, thanks," he says, and she can see him starting to get flustered again. "Also, uh, it's almost one, so ... happy Valentine's Day."

Margot laughs, loudly, until Jake begins to smile. "Jake Johnson, don't tell me you're a hopeless romantic at heart?"

"I actually love love," he assures her, sticking his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. "I would die for *The Notebook*."

They're coming up on her street now, and she can see the familiar outline of her two-story Colonial up ahead. The windows are all dark, thankfully, which means that her parents haven't noticed that she's gone and aren't waiting inside ready to end her existence.

“I’m gonna tell everyone at school that you’re a big softie,” she teases, and wrapped up in his jacket and watching him roll his eyes at her just like he’s done a million times before, she doesn’t feel quite so cold.

Or quite as nervous.

“Jake, I’ve gotta tell you something.”

They’ve come to a stop at the foot of her driveway now, and for some reason he won’t look at her. Normally, she might have stopped, maybe made a joke, and said goodnight. She would’ve gone inside, crept up to her room, and punched the air thinking about how she was never going to get the nerve to *tell* him.

Tonight, the cheap beer she drank surges her forward.

“Jake —”

“Don’t, Margs,” he cuts in quietly. She feels her heart drop into her stomach. “I know what you’re gonna say.”

“You do?”

“Of course I do,” he says. “I know you. But don’t, please. I don’t wanna — I don’t wanna mess this up, somehow, because I know I will, and ruin this.”

A soberer Margot would have agreed, and they never would have spoken about it again. It would’ve gone on the list of things that sits between them, the things that she thinks about at night when she can’t sleep because she’s terrified of losing one of the best friends she’s ever had.

Instead, she steps forward and grabs his hand in hers, forcing him to look at her as she laces their fingers. They’ve held hands before, completely platonically — or so they said — but this is different, and they both know it.

“Jake, please,” she says, and her voice is quiet. “I’ve been — it’s sucked, it’s really sucked, this whole thing, and I’ve been trying not to feel this way anymore, but I can’t. I do. And maybe I’ll regret this in the morning, but I can’t not tell you. I need you to know.”

He’s looking at her, and she’s looking at him, and there’s an understanding passing between them that he doesn’t seem to want to acknowledge.

“You’re drunk, Margs,” he tells her, just as quietly. But he doesn’t let go of her hand. “You won’t mean it.”

She shakes her head, her vision swimming. “That’s not — okay, yeah, I’m drunk, whatever. But let me say this, please.”

He closes his mouth and a silence stretches between them. It’s freezing now, the cold February air biting at her exposed skin as the wind whips their hair around. Her alcohol-addled brain takes this moment and stretches it into an eternity, the last moment of their friendship before he knows the truth, before everything changes. She thinks of what Hannah said, how this was on her, and she takes a deep breath.

“Jake,” she starts, her thumb pressing into his palm. “Jake.”

“That’s my name.” He’s making fun of her, and the tension between them disappears. She smacks his arm, and he laughs.

“Will you shut up for once?” she admonishes. “I’m trying to be serious.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. Go ahead.”

“Jake,” she gives him a warning look at his mouth opening, and he closes it again. “Jake, I — I don’t really know when it happened or how it got to this point, but I’m in love with you. In a really gross, rom-com kind of way. I am, and I think I’ve known for a while, but now I’m just

ready to tell you, because fuck it, you deserve to know. Even if you don't — even if you don't feel the same way."

She has no idea what the expression on his face means, but she's nearly out of breath and there's a weight that's been lifted off her shoulders. His hand is loose in hers, and she fights the urge to let it go. It's out in the air now, her secret, and she has to own it.

"Margot —"

"It's okay," she breaks in. "If you don't — if we stay friends. It's okay."

"Will you shut up for once?" he repeats her words back to her, and the air feels lighter.

"Margot ... I'm pretty sure I've been in love with you since you yelled at me in the locker room," he laughs, and she's smiling so hard her cheeks are beginning to hurt. "And I didn't — I couldn't tell you, because I loved being your friend so much, and I didn't want something to happen and have it ruin it. But I do. I love you."

It feels like a cheesy teen romance movie, especially with it being Valentine's Day, and maybe it is one, a little, but Margot can't begin to care.

"Are you gonna kiss me, or what?" she asks. She isn't sure who moves first, but suddenly they're kissing, soft and sweet, and the world has come to a screeching halt for a moment that she wants to live in forever.

A little less than two years from now, Margot would follow Jake out onto the lake by her house to take some pictures, except this time, it won't be for a project. It'll be a little warmer than a typical night in December. Margot will only be wearing a light winter coat over a sweatshirt, and when she watches Jake go sliding across the ice, she'll look at him and know that she's never loved another person the way she loves him, and she might not ever again.

Something will go wrong, as things are prone to do, and a sharp crack will pierce the night air. For one horrifying moment, Jake and Margot will unknowingly make eye contact for the last time, and his terrified expression will live in her memory for the rest of her life.

A little less than two years from now, Jake Johnson will fall beneath the ice of Deer Lake, and he will drown, and Margot will be left to navigate a world without him.

For now, though, they are two kids in love, with the rest of forever in front of them, and they're happy. For now, that's enough.

chapter iii : recovery

When Margot was six years old, her father tossed her off the edge of the pier into the lake by her house. The water in Deer Lake was cold, a brief respite from the hot July sun that was beating down overhead, and it served as a shock to her system as her head went under. Her first inclination was to inhale, to fill her lungs with the lake water her older cousin Nate told her was filled with fish poop, and it only took her half a second to realize her mistake.

Fortunately for Margot, her mother Lily was a pragmatic woman, and had had her in swim lessons at the local pool as soon as she was old enough, sensing that a house by a lake would mean summers spent in the water.

So, as Margot was gasping for breath, fighting to push the water from her lungs, her body had started to push her upward out of some sense of self-preservation. Her face broke the surface, her pale arms flailing in the water as she coughed violently, and she felt her father's strong arms scoop her up from under her armpits. He swung her through the air, her feet back on the surface of the pier before she realized what was happening.

“Just breathe, okay, sweetie?” he said, his hand rubbing soothing circles on her back. “Cough it out, okay? Just breathe.”

It was easy for him to say; his lungs probably didn't burn like they'd been filled with acid. Margot kept coughing, though, and eventually the air returned to her lungs, and she could breathe again.

“Are you okay?” he asked, and she nodded, her eyes filled with tears.

“It hurts, Daddy,” she said, and he wrapped her into a hug, soaking through his faded blue Chicago Bears t-shirt.

“I know, sweetheart, but you did so good!” he told her, trying to calm her down. “You were so brave, buddy, you’re a little fighter!”

“A fighter?” Margot sniffled. “Like the Flash?”

She had been going through a superhero phase, watching reruns of the Justice League cartoon every evening after dinner with her father until her mom told her it was time for bed.

“Yeah,” he said, scooping her up into his arms. “Just like the Flash. And you didn’t even cry, that’s something a fighter would do when they’re big and tough and strong. Are you big and tough and strong?”

Margot laughed, burrowing her face into her father’s neck, her brief brush with death already forgotten. “I’m super tough, Daddy!”

“Just make sure you don’t tell your mom, okay?” he smiled, squeezing her tighter as he carried her towards the shore. “And I’ll let you stay up an extra fifteen minutes tonight.”

Now, eleven years later, Margot’s not so sure she’s as big and tough and strong as she used to be. She’s sitting in the driver’s seat of her family’s beat-up Subaru, listening to a Green Day song, watching the windshield wipers furiously work to keep the oncoming sleet from covering her windshield.

It’s her first day of therapy. It’s been thirteen days since the accident, nine since the funeral, and today is the day her parents decided she needed to get help to make sense of what’s been going on inside her head since the moment that Jake fell through the ice.

Today, she doesn’t feel so brave.

The building that houses Twin Oaks Behavioral Health looks like any other office building in corporate America: old, gray, and made with the cheapest materials that could get the

job done. Margot thinks that a therapist's office shouldn't look so depressing, and she makes a mental note to tell her new therapist so.

If she can get out of the car, that is. Looking at the clock, she can see that she has four minutes until her appointment is set to start, upon which her parents will be charged a \$150 no-show cancellation fee. Even through the fog that she's been living in for the past thirteen days, she knows there's no way she'll be able to look her parents in the eyes when they see the charge and she has to explain that she was sitting in the parking garage the whole time.

She gets out of the car. Her feet are dragging on the pavement, but she pushes herself through the door and up the worn carpeted stairs to Suite 2B. She remembers that her father used to call her a fighter, and she tries to muster the strength she used to feel before.

"Are you Margot Scott?" the receptionist, a thin, pointy woman, asks as soon as Margot crosses the threshold.

"Um, yeah," Margot answers, stuffing her hands in the pockets of her coat. "Sorry I'm a little late."

The woman nods. "Dr. Levi is waiting for you. Second door on the left."

Margot nods, taking a glance around the non-descript waiting room before she steps through the next door. She feels like she's in a fog again, different than the one she's been living in for almost two weeks, and it's like she's watching some outside force control her body as she raises her fist to knock on the door.

"Come in," a woman's voice says from inside, and Margot takes a deep breath, just like she did when she was six years old.

I can do this, she thinks to herself, and she pushes the door open.

Dr. Levi is a middle-aged woman with long, graying black hair that's tied into a knot at the back of her head. When she turns her gaze to meet Margot's, Margot feels like she's just had her soul stripped from her body and laid bare on the carpet for her therapist to analyze.

Unable to maintain eye contact, Margot steps further into the room and throws herself onto the leather couch across from the chair where Dr. Levi is sitting, notepad and pen in hand. The air in the room is suddenly stifling, thick and full of tension as it wraps its hands around Margot's throat, and she forces herself to stare at the ceiling instead.

"It's like I'm in one of those therapist scenes on TV," she tries to joke, and Dr. Levi ignores her.

"My name is Dr. Levi," the woman says instead, peering at Margot over her glasses. "But you can call me Sandra, if you'd like."

Looking around the small office for the first time, Margot thinks that this looks exactly how a therapist's office would look in a movie. Sandra is seated on a brown leather chair, dressed in a light-colored pantsuit as she clicks her pen. A clock sits on the end table next to the chair, and Margot can't help but stare at it every few seconds as though it will be drastically different each time.

It's making her feel a little crazy. She looks away from it, again, and returns her attention to the ceiling. It's a popcorn ceiling, the ugliest of ceilings. It almost forces her to sit up from the brown leather couch she insists on lying on very dramatically and actually look her new therapist in the face.

"Where'd you get your degree?" Margot asks, pretending to sound interested.

“My doctorate is from Northwestern,” she replies, gesturing to the diplomas sitting in ornate frames on the wall behind her desk in the corner. Her voice sounds serious, business-like.

“I did my undergraduate at DePaul.”

“Are you in, like, a crazy amount of debt? I heard Northwestern’s expensive as hell.”

Margot can hear Sandra’s pen scratching on her notepad. It’s the only sound in the space between them, and it’s driving her insane.

“What are you writing?” she asks, because she’s curious. She had always wondered what therapists wrote in their papers.

“Why do you want to know?” Sandra counters. Margot rolls her eyes.

“I’m not gonna open up and reveal some huge trauma to you,” she huffs. “I was just wondering.”

“How am I going to be honest with you if you’re not going to be honest with me?”

“I already hate it here,” Margot says, throwing a hand over her face for the theatrics of it all.

She hears Sandra snort, quietly, and Margot smiles to herself. Even when she feels like she’s drowning — *don’t use that word* — she can still make people laugh. At least she isn’t completely hopeless.

“Fine,” Sandra says, finishing her writing with a flourish. “How about we make a deal?”

“Shoot.”

“How about I tell you what I’ve written so far if you sit up and talk to me like we’re a pair of adults having a conversation about how you’re doing?”

Margot sighs, swinging her legs forward as she sits up. Jake had always said that her need to know everything was going to be the death of them both. He only ended up being half right.

“Fine. What did you write?”

Sandra hands her the paper so she could read it for herself. “I said you’re going to be difficult to work with, get to open up. You deflect a lot, either by making our conversation not about you or by using humor. You clearly don’t want to be here, Margot, and if you don’t want to be here, I can’t help you.”

In another life, one where Jake was here and they hadn’t decided to go to the lake on that fateful Tuesday, Margot might have been mortified. She would have been apologizing profusely right now, because even when she puts on an act of not caring, she cared almost too much about what other people, especially adults, thought of her. She would be promising to be on her best behavior in these sessions, and really work on herself, and she might actually get somewhere.

But Jake isn’t here. And Margot is numb.

“Fuck you, then,” she says, not even bothering to pull on her coat before she flees the room, letting the wooden door slam shut behind her.

Hey, it’s Jake. I can’t come to the phone right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll call you back.

“Hey Jake,” Margot mutters, sliding down further in the driver’s seat of her car. The parking garage is dimly lit, but even so, she doesn’t want anyone walking by to see her. “It’s me.”

She had started crying as soon as she made it to the car, these big, heaving sobs that shook her entire body and exhausted her. Her eyes are almost swollen shut from the tears, and her throat feels raw. Still, though, she needs to tell him what happened.

“My parents are making me go see this stupid therapist,” she continues. “She was such a bitch, Jake.”

In the back of her mind, she wonders when his parents will shut his phone service off, and she feels her blood run cold at the thought. Sure, she has videos of him stored on her phone where she can hear his voice, but these voicemails ... she can still hold on to the fact that someday, he might hear them.

She can imagine him on the other end of the line, rolling his eyes at her. He always thought Margot overreacted when it came to her interactions with people, that she was so distrusting with everyone she ever happened to meet.

“I don’t want to talk about you, dude. I can’t,” her voice is quiet, whispering like speaking any louder might disrupt this bubble she’s built around herself, built around them. She knows she’ll have to, someday. Her parents had *just* been able to convince her to set up this appointment, under the condition that she be allowed to go alone.

She opens her mouth to continue, but her phone beeps, signaling the end of the voicemail. She throws it into the passenger seat, not even caring if it cracks, and rests her forehead on the steering wheel.

She wonders if this is the worst she’ll feel, if this is who she’s going to be for the rest of her life. She wonders if she’ll be stuck walking around feeling like dozens of tiny, fractured pieces of ice held together by her skin forever.

She wonders when people will start getting tired of her. She wonders when they’ll start to leave.

Deer Lake wasn't a massive lake by any means. It was big enough to not be considered a pond, but small enough that motor boats and jet skis weren't allowed out on the water. There was a small parking lot about half a mile from the pier, but it was paved with gravel, and you had to walk along a short dirt path through the trees to get there.

People from Deer Grove mostly used it to fish and kayak. It was surrounded by a thick layer of trees that directly led up to the back of Margot's house, so if she sat in her living room on the first floor or bedroom on the second and looked out the windows, she could just see the sunlight reflecting off the surface of the water.

She used to love watching the lake. She would spend hours sitting at the desk in her room, staring out the window and feeling like the main character in a coming of age movie. She'd spent her summers there with Hannah, taking turns diving off the pier and racing each other to the buoys. They'd played there in the winters, too, sledding and ice skating until Margot had gotten old enough to decide that she actually hated the cold.

For the past few summers, Hannah had taken to kayaking, spending hours out on the water by herself. Margot doesn't understand how she can stand to be alone with her thoughts for that long, going around in circles with scenery that never changes.

"It's grounding," Hannah had said the previous summer, the one time she'd voiced her thought aloud. "It's like ... going on a long drive. It's relaxing."

"I think I'd drown myself if I had to sit in that kind of silence for that long," Margot had laughed.

Hannah rolled her eyes, tucking her hair into her Cubs hat as she threw open the screen door. "Yeah, I don't know, it's supposed to be good for your head or whatever. Tell Mom I'm at the lake if she asks."

Hannah had let the door close with a snap, and Margot had gone back to whatever it was she was doing, and she hadn't given the conversation a second thought.

Now, five months later, Margot is staring New Year's Eve in the face, and while she still can't fathom the idea of being along with her own thoughts for an extended period of time and actually coming out the other end of it alive and intact, feeling grounded doesn't seem so bad.

This isn't going to be her first holiday spent in grief, but Christmas had come and gone quietly with Margot spending most of the day sipping at an eventually-cold mug of coffee until she'd been able to sneak upstairs and pretend to go to sleep. This is the first holiday, the one where she enters a new year and he doesn't — he never will — where she feels like an actual emotion can pierce through the cold exterior she's been crafting around herself, and she isn't sure if she's ready.

Her parents have come up with some big exciting New Year's plan to distract from the obvious ticking time bomb that is their oldest daughter. Her mom had explained it to her, maybe once or twice, trying to sound excited and upbeat in the hopes that maybe Margot would be too, but Margot had barely heard her. It was something in Chicago, something about a hotel, but the details had gone in one ear and out the other.

Which is how she found herself in the backseat of the family car barreling down I-94 at her father's preferred speed of exactly ten miles above the speed limit, her sister scowling beside her with headphones jammed resolutely in her ears. Margot hadn't had any plans for the new year, her previous plans having quite literally sunk to the bottom of Deer Lake, but Hannah claims that she was being kept from the biggest underclassmen party of the year at some basketball player's house and hadn't spoken to any of their family since she'd gotten in the car.

Margot's face is pressed against the glass, her eyes closed even though she knows she won't be able to fall asleep even if she tried. She likes to pretend sometimes, likes to let her parents believe that she's doing better so she doesn't have to hear them argue about it in furious whispers when they think she can't hear.

She learns during the remainder of the drive what they're actually doing in the city tonight: spending the night at the Drake, ice skating in Millennium Park, a dinner reservation at some Italian place her parents love, and watching the fireworks from their hotel room when the clock finally hits midnight. It's something she would've loved any other year, something where she would've spent the entire previous day picking out the perfect outfit for a very posed photoshoot for her Instagram.

Her heart isn't in it. It's been almost a month since the accident, and her jeans almost hang off her frame to the point where her mother's gaze lingers on her a little longer in the mornings. Her hair is straightened, only because Hannah had offered to do it the day before, and her shirt is wrinkled in a way that would've bothered her two months ago but she can't find any sort of shit to give about it now.

She's disheveled, she's exhausted, she's running on fumes, but as she looks up at the familiar skyline off in the distance, she reminds herself of something Jake used to say when she would complain about the state of her life: at least she showed up.

They push through the traffic, push through the throngs of people out and about getting ready to celebrate, and they check into their room. It's nice; the window looks out onto Michigan Avenue, which is still lit up from Christmas, and Margot can see Millennium Park if she squints. She knows her parents must have spent some money on tonight, more than they typically would, and she feels the familiar grip of guilt flex its fingers on her throat.

But she doesn't say anything; she smiles at the right times and says thank you and laughs at her dad's dumb jokes, and she tries not to think too deeply about why she's here tonight when she should be with Jake.

The problem arises when they're waiting in line for skates. The line is long, stretching out the door of the rental office and winding halfway around the ice rink. Her parents are standing in front, holding hands, and in the back of her mind Margot thinks that she's lucky to have parents that are still so in love. Hannah is texting her friends, completely not paying attention to anyone around her, and Margot's hands are shoved deep in the pockets of her parka as she watches the people around her.

Her attention is drawn to a boy, no older than six, skating around the rink as he clutches his mother's hand. He's bundled up in a big blue puffy coat, his brown curls sticking out from beneath his winter hat as he pushes his way around the ice, and her first thought is that he looks exactly like Jake did at the same age. She can't take her eyes off him, watching with a sort of painful fascination. She feels her blood pounding in her ears, feels the way her hands are beginning to shake in her pockets, and she can't shake herself out of it.

"Margot," Hannah says suddenly, jabbing her elbow into her side. She jolts, looking away from the boy and his mother and making eye contact with her sister. "Are you good? You look sick or something."

"I'm fine," she lies, but her heart rate is slowly returning to normal. "I just — I don't know if I wanna skate."

Hannah shrugs, sticking her phone in her pocket. "You're a shit skater anyway. You always used to fall when we were little, remember?"

She knows what Hannah is doing, avoiding the obvious issue at hand that their parents didn't seem to consider. She loves her a little more for it.

"I swear my skates were broken," Margot says, smiling a little. Their family continues to move forward in the line, getting closer and closer to the entrance of the rental office, and she thinks that the last thing she wants to do is step foot on ice, even if it's fake.

Hannah snorts. "More like your brain was broken."

Margot laughs, seemingly against her own will, and their parents turn around at the sound, a hopeful surprise written on their faces.

"You girls ready to skate?" their father asks, and Margot feels her smile fade as she looks back out onto the ice.

"Actually, I don't know if I want to skate, Dad," Hannah says, and Margot fights to keep her face blank. "Do you think we could go to the Macy's or something instead? It's kinda cold."

It is cold, the wind coming off of Lake Michigan biting at all of Margot's minimally exposed skin, but Hannah had always loved the winter.

"Yeah, kiddo," their father immediately agrees, because he was the kind of dad that would bend over backwards for his children. "You should've said something sooner! Do you want my gloves?"

"Oh, no," Hannah says, waving dismissively. "Just don't wanna stay out here longer than I have to."

They step out of line, changing course to the Macy's on State Street, and Hannah goes back to texting whoever's on the other end of her phone. Her parents are holding hands again, and no one's paying attention to her, but as she walks away from the ice and the boy who looks like the one she lost, she feels the tension in her shoulders begin to slowly let go.

The clock finally strikes midnight, and it's snowing, and people are shooting off fireworks up and down the Chicago River, and it's officially 2017. Margot and her family are standing in the lobby of the Drake Hotel, surrounded by dozens of people who are laughing and hugging each other and wishing everyone well in the new year.

Someone hands her a glass of champagne, real champagne, and she downs it in a gulp before her parents can realize the mistake. She looks around at everyone around her, the celebrations that are happening all over the city, all over the world, and she feels empty.

Somewhere, back in Deer Grove, Jake is six feet under the snow, where the fireworks can't reach him, and even though Margot is surrounded by plenty of people and a family that loves her, she enters the new year alone.

"I'm glad you decided to come back, Margot," Sandra says, giving Margot what she probably thinks is a warm smile. "I think we can make some real progress here if we decide to trust each other."

Margot wipes a hand over her face, forcing out a laugh. "Yeah, well, it was either this or get checked in somewhere, and I've got plans this weekend."

They stare at each other, the ghost of a smirk on Margot's face until the intensity of Sandra's stare forces her to look away. She looks at her hands instead, churning in her lap as she picks at her cuticles. She's never been the kind of person to have her nails painted, even though she wants to be, but her nails were now so red and raw that she didn't want to subject them to the women at the salon.

"So why are you here, then?" Sandra asks, clicking her pen. She seems to do that a lot.

“My boyfriend died,” Margot replies, bluntly, voice empty of all emotion. It’s something she’s been working on recently, at least since the new year: turning off all her feelings and convincing herself she doesn’t care.

She had almost been successful this morning, staring at herself in the mirror as she brushed her teeth. Her dark hair was frizzy, half tied up into a knot on top of her head, and her skin was pale, sallow except for the deep purple under her eyes. Her nails were torn and bitten to the quick, dried blood clinging to her fingertips as she clutched at the edges of her bathroom sink like it would keep her from falling off the edge of the world.

She’d thrown on some makeup, straightened her hair and touched up her appearance until she looked like a human again. Margot had stared at herself in the mirror, dead eyes looking back at her that seemed empty, like shattered glass. She had given herself a minute, sixty seconds to stare at herself and let the weight of her grief hit her all over again, her body trembling and her hands shaking until her knuckles were white with the effort of keeping herself upright.

Then the sixty seconds were up, and she filed Jake away into the compartment of her brain where she wouldn’t visit until she allowed herself to again, and she continued getting ready for her day.

There’s a part of her that wants to tell Sandra, wants to confide in this woman who’s supposed to be able to help her, be able to fix her, but the words won’t come.

“How much sleep have you been getting?” Sandra asks, diverting the topic away from Jake.

“A decent amount,” Margot lies. She doesn’t remember the last time she was able to make it through a couple of hours through the night with her eyes closed. She’s read a ton of books, watched and re-watched TV shows that don’t remind her of him and don’t contain any

sort of love story — that list is small — and stared at her ceiling until the morning light creeps through her window.

“What’s a ‘decent amount’ look like for you?” Sandra pushes, and Margot can tell she doesn’t believe her. Maybe she’s better at her job than Margot thought.

“Um, maybe like six hours or so, I don’t know,” she tries, and Sandra gives her a look. The truth is, every time Margot closes her eyes, she’s back at that lake, and Jake is staring at her with that same horrified expression as he begins to fall, and then the ice shatters completely and swallows her too.

“Margot,” her therapist says gently, and Margot realizes she’s crying. “Margot, you have to be honest with me. That’s why you’re here.”

She wipes the tears from her face, pressing her lips together in an effort to reign herself in. “Okay, I’m, uh, having trouble sleeping.”

“Thank you for telling me. Why do you think that is?”

She hates how she’s talking to her, like she’s this wounded animal that might break at any moment. She hates that she’s crying in front of this woman that she barely knows, hates that she can’t do something as simple as fucking sleep without having a meltdown.

“I think — I have these nightmares,” Margot starts, and Sandra gestures for her to continue. “I can’t — I’m at the, it’s like it’s that night again. And he’s there, and he’s ... dying. And it’s just on replay, over and over again until I’m finally able to wake up.”

She takes a deep breath, letting it out through her mouth. Her hands feel sweaty in her lap, her fingers stinging where there are still fresh cuts.

“And it’s like — it was my fault, you know? It was my fault, so maybe I deserve it,” she feels like she’s rambling, like everything she’s saying is coming from that corner of her mind that she doesn’t allow herself to access, and it feels like an open wound, throbbing.

She hates it. She hates this feeling of vulnerability, hates how much it all *hurts*, and she doesn’t want to feel it anymore. She hates not being able to sleep, hates the way she’s forced to *remember*, and she thinks she would do anything for it to end.

She thinks she would do anything just to not be herself, to escape the guilt and resentment that’s been building up inside her until she can hardly stand it. She thinks she’s had about enough of it all.

“I’m sorry, I can’t talk about it — him — yet,” Margot cuts her off when she sees her open her mouth to speak.

“That’s okay,” Sandra tells her. “We’ll work up to that.”

February is unseasonably warm. Margot blames climate change, but she can’t say she hates being able to go to school wearing a light jacket. Living so close to Chicago, though, the warm weather doesn’t last for long, and is frequently broken up by strong bursts of freezing cold wind.

For once, Margot hardly seems to notice as she stares out onto Deer Lake, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and a cookie cake resting on her lap. The ice melted about a week ago, and the snow is beginning to fall off the trees and melt in big clumps.

Hey, it’s Jake. I can’t come to the phone right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll call you back.

“Hey, Jake,” she says, breaking off a piece of cookie and popping it into her mouth.

“Happy anniversary, babe.”

Two years. It’s such a cliché, having an anniversary on Valentine’s Day, but they had been a pair of hopeless romantics, so it made sense.

“I got that cookie cake you like,” she says, conscious of the fact that she’s still speaking about him in the present tense. “It just says Happy Valentine’s Day, because it was cheaper that way, so I hope you don’t mind.”

She had turned her location off on her phone as soon as she pulled into the parking lot at the grocery store to buy the cookie cake, knowing that Hannah and her parents were probably going to want to know exactly where she was at all times today. She hopes that even if they can see her from the house, they have the decency to leave her alone.

“I haven’t been back here since ... since the last time we saw each other,” Margot continues. “I don’t know, I guess something held me back. But I thought today might be a good day to come because I didn’t wanna spend Valentine’s Day in a cemetery. I hope you understand.”

Another reason for avoiding the cemetery is that she knows that that’s where people will go looking for her. Her parents are probably worried at this point, forcing Hannah to reach out to all of Margot’s friends at school to see if they know where she is. She has muted her texts, but she’s sure that messages are coming in by the dozen. She’s a flight risk, after all.

Her hand is starting to hurt from how hard she’s clutching her phone to her ear. She never really used to talk on the phone, before, much preferring to text or Facetime so she could actually see the other person’s face. With Jake, often times she would just show up at his house if there was something she was dying to tell him.

“I just wanted to call and say I love you,” she finishes, her throat tight. “I’ll see you soon, okay?”

She’s sitting at Deer Grove’s local coffee shop working on an essay when she gets an email saying that the ACT results have come in. Instead of rushing home to check her mailbox like the rest of her classmates, she packs up her things, gets in her car, and drives to the nearest gas station.

The man working the register looks greasy — that’s the only way to describe it. His face is full of stubble and a grimy trucker’s hat sits on top of oily black hair that only partially covers thick black eyebrows, and when he fixes his gaze on her, she feels her fight or flight response start to kick in.

“What can I get you, sweetheart?” he asks, and she fights the urge to roll her eyes. She hates men.

“Your cheapest pack of cigarettes,” she says, thrusting a wad of bills across the counter. He raises his eyebrows.

“I’m gonna need to see some ID,” he tells her, but he’s already reaching for a pack on the wall. She shows it to him, and he barely glances at it before he hands her the cigarettes.

“That all?”

She glances around, blushing. “Oh, I guess I need a lighter.”

He laughs, and she hates the sound of it. “First timer, sweetheart?”

“What gave it away?” she asks, actually rolling her eyes this time. “Can I just get my total, please?”

He nods, finally deciding to leave her alone, and she grabs her things and stomps to her car. She wouldn't have gone to the BP if she could help it, knowing that their cashiers had a reputation of being weird with teenage girls, but the other gas station in town is right outside her neighborhood, and she feels like that would be tempting fate a little too much.

She can picture the look on her parents' faces right now if they could see her, sitting there in the driver's seat, cigarette to her lips as she holds a lighter in her shaking hand.

Margot doesn't know what's driving her to take up smoking. She graduated from DARE with everyone else in fifth grade, she knows what it'll do to her body. It's an expensive habit, one that Jake would literally throttle her for if he knew, but he definitely *doesn't*, so here she is.

The flame catches on the end of the cigarette, and she inhales.

The number you are trying to reach has been disconnected. Goodbye.

She sits there, breathing into the phone, and her hands are shaking so bad that she's clutching onto the steering wheel and her phone for support. She's sitting in the parking garage outside Sandra's office, just like she always seems to these days, and there's a bumper sticker on the red car in front of her that says "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

Margot wants to tell the owner of the car to go fuck themselves.

Her appointment starts in three minutes, and she feels like she's choking and her eyes are blurring until the only thing she can see is that stupid fucking bumper sticker.

She twists the key out of the ignition, throwing her phone somewhere in the back seat and stepping out of the car. Margot slams the door shut behind her as she stomps towards the revolving doors. She feels like she's probably worn a path into the concrete at this point, or at the

very least the carpeted stairs leading up to Sandra's office, and she hates that she's gotten to this point.

There's a boy about her age sitting in the waiting room when she throws the door open that looks straight up like a school shooter, and she silently thanks herself for always arriving right on time so she doesn't have to sit in those uncomfortable wooden chairs with those freaks.

"Sandra, I am losing my goddamn mind," she says as she flops down in her usual position on the couch, crossing her arms behind her head as she stares up at the ceiling.

It's become somewhat of a routine for the two of them now over these past few months: Margot would walk in the office without knocking, lie on the couch and go through her week in the most dramatic fashion possible, avoiding talking about the real reason she was in therapy in the first place. Sandra would play along, letting her talk about what was bothering her until finally, with half the session left, she would ask her about Jake, at which point Margot would clam up and refuse to look at her for the remaining time.

Margot thinks it's useless. She doesn't know what Sandra thinks; the woman's a closed book. It's really a one-sided relationship.

"Margot," Sandra says, and Margot's immediately thrown off, cut off mid explanation about why her math teacher is clearly going to hell — it's true, they'd had an altercation about Margot's unwillingness to pay attention in pre-calc, but that had nothing to do with why her world was falling apart today.

"What?" Margot asks, turning her head to look at her for the first time. "Are you like really religious or something?"

“I want to talk about where you are in your grieving process today,” Sandra says, her eyes softening. “I know you haven’t been ready, but I think you’ve made some real progress since the first time you came in here, and I’d like us to try to approach this topic again.”

Margot doesn’t answer for a second, instead choosing to look around Sandra’s office. She doesn’t do it often, doesn’t really look at anything except for the ugly ceiling and the clock on the end table, but now that she is, she’s seeing that Sandra isn’t really so closed off as she thought.

There’s a framed picture of a little girl on her desk that looks just like her, grinning up at the camera with her two front teeth missing. The wall by the door is covered in taped up crayon drawings, ranging from stick figures to what Margot assumes are either dinosaurs or dogs; the artist was clearly no Picasso. A coffee mug sat on the desk as well, a plain gray one with a chip in the rim, and she wonders if Sandra drinks coffee or tea, if she’s into milk or creamer or sugar.

It’s so strange that this woman knows so much about her, and Margot knows virtually nothing in return. She wonders if Sandra has a therapist herself, or if she just gives herself sessions and has perfect mental health.

She decides to ask. “Do you have a therapist? Is that a thing for therapists to have therapists?”

“You’re deflecting,” Sandra tells her, and Margot isn’t surprised. She doesn’t let her get away with anything, not that that stops her from trying.

“Okay, yeah, you caught me,” Margot admits. “I don’t know. I don’t think I’m ready. I don’t *feel* ready.”

Sandra nods, crossing her legs. “Can I tell you a secret, Margot?”

“Are you gonna tell me you have a therapist?”

“You’re never going to *feel* one hundred percent ready to talk about this,” she explains. “It’s going to be hard whether it’s today or next year. But you can’t start healing until you start talking about it.”

She stares at her, her heart beating so fast she thinks it might burst from her chest, but she nods. Something feels different about today. “Okay.”

Sandra smiles. “Okay. That’s great. Let’s start with where you’re at today.”

“Six months.”

“What about six months?”

Margot sighs, her throat feeling like it might close. She stands up, no longer able to stand her previous horizontal position, and walks over to the window. She’d been hoping it had a decent view of the park across the street, maybe, but it’s just the roof of the parking garage. Typical.

“He disconnected his phone,” she says, her voice sounding empty even to her. “It only took six months.”

“Margot, *he* didn’t disconnect his phone,” Sandra corrects, giving her a look as Margot turns to face her. Margot sighs again.

“Yeah, I know,” she replies. “It’s just ... sometimes it’s just nice to pretend, I guess. I don’t know. It’s stupid.”

“Nothing you say in here is stupid,” Sandra corrects. “You are incredibly strong and brave for everything you’ve gone through in the past few months. This conversation right now is a huge breakthrough, even if it doesn’t feel like it.”

“Do you think it’ll ever get easier?” she asks quietly, walking back over and slumping into the couch. Sandra’s gaze is harsh, seemingly looking into her soul and picking her brain with just her eyes, but there’s no malice behind it. Margot knows that now.

“In time, yes,” Sandra answers. “Everything gets easier in time. You’ll change, of course, and be different from who you were before. You’ll come out of this stronger.”

“Am I going to be okay?” she can’t imagine a world where she’ll be okay without Jake in it, but she’s starting to miss who she’d been before. Maybe that’s why she’s willing to say this stuff out loud right now.

“Everyone’s okay in the end, I think,” her therapist sounds thoughtful. “Even you. You just have to try, and have a little faith in yourself.”

She wants to. Oh, she wants to. She’s never wanted anything so badly in her life. She wants to graduate high school, and go to college, and get out of bed every day without feeling like the world had ended months ago and no one but her had realized it.

“Okay,” she says finally, after moments of a silence that clung to the air in a way that didn’t make her want to gag for once. “Okay, yeah. I’m ready to try.”

With a population of 20,000, Deer Grove is officially classified by the state of Illinois as a village. Like every other suburb north of Chicago, the village is dominated by a lake, in this case creatively named Deer Lake, and the downtown area looks like it came straight out of a Hallmark movie — though the locals liked to say it was more of a John Hughes movie.

There was a restaurant that everyone went to for their family dinners, a diner that teenagers swarmed to after football games, a bar that didn’t sell food because no one ever came there to eat anyway, an ice cream stand that seemed to lean perpetually lean to one side no matter

what the owner did to fix it. There was a movie theater that only had two screens and water stains on the ceilings, but only charged five dollars for a ticket, so every time a new movie came to town, the lines wrapped out the door and down the sidewalk.

Deer Grove is the kind of town that you were born in and grew up hating just like your parents before you and theirs before them, but never actually left.

Margot used to think that she would rather die than spend another second longer in Deer Grove than she had to, and then Jake actually did, and now she doesn't know. She tells Hannah as much, one day while they're sitting in her car, weeks after her first breakthrough with Sandra, and her sister gives her a look.

"That's depressing as fuck, Margs," she says, and Margot has to laugh, even though it's not actually funny. "You're telling me that you actually want to stay here forever like Mom and Dad?"

Margot grips the steering wheel, even though the old Subaru has been in park for the past fifteen minutes, and watches her knuckles turn white. "I don't know. It's stupid."

They haven't talked like this in a while, probably since before the funeral, and where once it was easy between them, there's a heaviness in the air that she's struggling to breathe through. She's not sure what to say, not sure how to describe to Hannah how she feels like growing up and leaving Deer Grove and doing everything she used to talk about with Jake means leaving him behind. It's been almost seven and a half months now, and she still can't fathom letting him go.

"Wanna talk about it?" Hannah finally says, and Margot can't tell if it's forced.

"No," she answers immediately, and shifts the car into reverse. "Let's just drive around."

"Okay."

It's silent, the only sound the rattling of the heater pushing hot air into her face and the radio on low. Margot doesn't say anything about where they're going, letting her mind shift to auto-pilot, and Hannah doesn't ask. Her younger sister has always agreed to all of Margot's dumb ideas, happy enough just to go along with the ride; it's one of the things that Margot appreciates about her the most.

"When's the last time you ate?" Hannah asks suddenly as they begin to pass a line of fast food chains.

Margot thinks. She had half a pack of cigarettes and an iced coffee that she counts as her lunch, but she doesn't think Hannah will. "This morning."

It's nearing 10 o'clock.

"Go through McDonalds," Hannah says, gesturing towards the yellow arches.

"I'm not hungry."

Hannah scoffs. "Jesus. Come on, drive through and I'll pay."

"I'm seriously not hungry."

"You're seriously out of your mind," Hannah argues back, struggling to keep her voice level. "Pull into the goddamn McDonalds and let me pay for your stupid chicken nuggets."

Underneath it all, she knows Hannah's anger is coming from a place of concern, but all she can feel is irritated that her sister won't mind her business and let her wallow like she wants to. She's better than she used to be, better than even a month ago, but that doesn't mean there aren't bad days. Regardless, her brain is still on autopilot, and it's probably some sense of self-preservation that takes her to the McDonalds.

Hannah orders an obscene amount of food, ranging from chicken nuggets to Big Macs to hash browns, and she doesn't show any sign of stopping until the exasperated-sounding worker informs her that the ice cream machine is, in fact, broken.

"Thanks," she says quietly as Hannah leans over her to pass the worker at the window her debit card. She's not just thanking her for the food, and they both know it.

"It's my gift to you," Hannah replies, trying to make light of the situation like she always does.

"Really, though," Margot says again, eyes focused on the road as she pulls away from the drive-thru, and continues on to the highway. She still doesn't know where she's going. "Thanks."

"Always."

And she keeps driving.

chapter iv : relapse

There's a brief period where Margot begins to see the sun again, and the ice in her chest starts to hurt a little less. She's going to therapy, she's opening up, she's working out, getting ready for a volleyball season in the fall that she didn't think she would be part of. She's smoking still, secretly, in her car in abandoned lots with a can of air freshener stored in the glove compartment, but hey, these are baby steps.

Those baby steps turn into a stumble somewhere in August. School is starting soon, and even though she had had a vision set in stone for how she wanted her senior year to play out since she was in middle school, it all seems so surface level when she thinks about it now.

It doesn't help when Jake's older brother shows up on her porch one day, cardboard box held close to his chest, shifting his weight from foot to foot and looking so much like an older version of Jake that she can hardly stand to look at him.

"Is Margot home?" she hears him ask from where she sits eating a yogurt at the kitchen table. She doesn't move to greet him, instead continues to pick at her yogurt with her spoon, though she's now lost her appetite.

"I think she's asleep," she hears her mother lie, and she smiles to herself. She's in no headspace to talk to Matt Johnson today, to catch a glimpse of who Jake could've become ten years from now. That's a box best left closed.

"Oh, okay," he says, and she can picture the way his shoulder are slumping forward. Despite the age difference between them, or maybe because of it, Matt had always been Jake's hero. She didn't have to know him to know his mannerisms, because they were the same. "Can you just give this to her, please? We've been cleaning out his room, and there's some stuff in here we thought she'd want to have."

This is where she stumbles, and that pain in her chest begins to return, begins to fracture. Matt doesn't have to say the name for her to know who he's talking about, and the thought of Jake's family cleaning out his room, the space where he was most alive, that feels the most like *him*, less than a year after the accident makes bile rise in her throat. The thought of opening a box full of him, full of all the memories attaches and smelling like that stupid cologne he always wore, sends her running down the hall to the bathroom, yogurt forgotten.

The familiar burning in her throat and nose takes her back to the early days, back when the ground had not even begun to settle over the grave and the thought of sustenance was not anywhere near her agenda, and even through her snot and tears, she has a moment of lucidity where she's thankful that that's not who she is anymore.

As she washes her mouth out in the sink, she hears her mother say goodbye to Matt, and the front door closes. By the time that her mother makes her way back to the kitchen, Margot is back in her seat at the kitchen table, spoon in hand as though she'd never left. It's a tried dance between them, but Margot isn't sure that Lily Scott is completely aware that she's a participant.

"Hey, honey," her mother says, dropping the box on the granite-topped island. "Guess who just stopped by?"

"Who?" Margot asks, feigning interest.

"Matt Johnson. He dropped off this box for you," she pauses, hesitating, and Margot knows what she's thinking. It's what everyone's been thinking, for months and months on end as they tip-toed around her like she's a sheet of ice that's destined to shatter into a million pieces. "It's — well, it's a box of Jake's things. What his parents wanted you to have."

Even though she knows it's coming, she still feels her throat close, her chest clench as though she's about to crack like everyone expects her to.

“Oh,” she says instead, instead of saying and doing what she really wants to, which is to grab her mother by the shoulders and shake her and ask her why the fuck she thinks this is okay, why she thinks her daughter is ready to receive a cardboard box full of her dead boyfriend’s things.

She doesn’t say any of this, though, because that’s not really something you say to your mother, and she keeps her face emotionless as the older woman stares back at her. Margot has always been closer to her father, the two bonding over sports and old rock music, and the gap between her and her mother has only continued to grow as she’s gotten older. It feels like a chasm now.

God, she needs a cigarette.

“I don’t know if you’re ready to open this,” her mother says, nodding like she’s made a decision. “So I’m going to put it in the back of your closet, and you can decide if you’re ready.”

The part of her that isn’t seething — though that seems to be where she’s at, lately — breathes a sigh of relief that her mother isn’t pushing her, that she’s putting this decision into her own hands. Margot feels like there’s a small understanding between them, and the chasm inches slightly closer. It feels like progress, even if it’s temporary.

The cardboard box has sat untouched in the corner of Margot’s room for weeks now. It seems to stare at her, lurking in the corner of her vision as she gets ready for school in the mornings and works on homework at her desk in the evenings. As the days have gone by, clothes have started to pile up in that area of her room, a sweaty t-shirt tossed after a particularly difficult volleyball practice proving to be the thing that covers it completely.

Visible or not, though, the box and its contents are at the forefront of Margot's mind as she moves about her days, her anxiety growing steadily until she greets each morning with the sharp ache of bile in her throat.

The day she gives in and opens it is a Wednesday. It's raining, the kind of rain that makes your hair frizzy and your rain jacket stick to your skin, and Margot comes home from practice with a mounting sense of anger that comes to a complete halt when she sees the corner of that damn box poking out from beneath the dirty t-shirt.

She hesitates, briefly, stepping forward as her hands flop uselessly against her torso with a sort of anxious energy. The box itself isn't even taped, she notices, just folded in on itself, so it wouldn't even take that much effort to open, and there's a big part of her that wants to know just what the Johnsons thought Margot should have. Clothes, probably, the notes they used to pass to each other, pictures from dances and date nights. Almost a years' worth of memories in a relationship that came to an abrupt and non-consenting end.

Margot lets herself slide down to her carpeted floor, her legs folded under her as she pulls the box into her lap. It's not heavy, not overly big, but not extremely small, either. She remembers a story she learned in school one year, a story about a woman who learned the hard way that some boxes are best left untouched.

There's something about Jake's things becoming her things, the possessions he left behind when he left *her* turning into their last physical connection, that puts a lead ball in the pit of her stomach. It's the thought of change, another reminder that the world continues to turn and she continues to grow up and age even though he can't. It feels like she's betraying him, somehow, like she's leaving him behind in the one way they can't fix.

Her fingers are slipping under the flaps of the box, almost unconsciously as Margot continues to frown at nothing in particular. She feels like if Jake were here, sitting with her on her floor like he used to when the world felt like it was too much, he would tell her she was being stupid. He would tell her that it's just *things*, it's not nearly as deep as she's making it, and she had already stolen most of his favorite clothes since they'd started dating anyway.

In the back of her head, in the space where she kept her anger, a voice that sounds like his whispers in her ear: *it's okay to grow up. It's okay to move on.*

With a deep breath, with a familiar ache in her throat and a sharp pain in her chest, Margot slips her fingers under the flaps completely, and she pulls. The box falls open easily, and as she looks at its contents, she can't help but smile.

It's a sad one, but it's there nonetheless.

Denim is a distinct fabric, worn and slightly scratchy against her hands. She doesn't have to look at it to know exactly what it is, could probably identify it on touch or smell alone. It's a jean jacket, a little oversized, and it used to belong to his brother. Not Matt, the other one, Jeff, who was the oldest.

Jeff had left it in the house when he'd moved out after graduating from the University of Wisconsin, leaving most of his things behind as he drove off into the sunset to go backpacking somewhere out west. Out of the three Johnson boys, he was the burnout: long, unkempt dark hair perpetually covered in a ratty Cubs cap, the same eyes as Jake, consistently unshaved.

Margot had never met him, him having settled somewhere in California when her and Jake were in middle school, but Jake had talked about him like he was his hero. He'd worn that damn jacket like it was a prize he'd won.

She brings the jacket to her face, inhaling the scent like she was finally breaking the surface after nearly drowning, and she suddenly realizes that she's crying. Her tears are turning the denim a darker blue, and she can feel her hands shaking, but she can't bring herself to care because for the first time in what seems like an eternity of waiting, she's finally breathing in his scent. It was distinctly *him*, no other way to describe it, and as she clutches the jacket to her chest so tightly she feels the buttons surely leaving indents in her skin, she wonders how she went so long without smelling this smell. It smells like home.

Margot lets the jacket fall into her lap, wiping the tears from her eyes as she looks back into the box. She smiles, almost, at the rest of what's inside: a roll undeveloped film, dozens upon dozens of pictures of the two of them, and, further down, a film camera she recognizes as his favorite. She lets her hand fall into the box, lets her fingers trace over the plastic as she takes a watery breath.

It feels like too much, like the longer she has his things in her possession the more she feels his absence, and she feels her chest begin to fracture once more.

They're lying on the hood of his Jeep, their feet dangling off the edge, and there's a summer breeze that's causing goosebumps to appear along her exposed arms. She crosses her arms over her chest in an attempt to capture any of the warmth that seems to be rapidly leaving her body, and he notices her shiver before she can hide it.

"You're cold?" Jake asks, laughing as he looks over at her. "It's the middle of July."

She scoffs. "I am not cold. Jesus. I'm fine."

He gives her a knowing smile, sitting up on the hood of the car as he shrugs off his jean jacket. It's worn, the fabric scratchy and frayed in a way that's clearly from years and years of

use. He hands it to her, draping it across her knees before settling back against the windshield. Margot didn't make eye contact as she slipped the jacket around her shoulders, shoving her arms through the holes and crossing them over her torso once more.

It smells like him, like the detergent his mom uses and the candles that seem to be perpetually lit in his house no matter the season. She settles her head in between his shoulder and the crook of his neck, breathing in the smell of his sweatshirt; the jacket smelled nice, but it was nothing like the real thing.

It was nearly eleven now, and she knows her father is sitting waiting for her in the living room at home, but Jake had told her to close her eyes and not open them until he parked. When she'd finally been able to open them, it hadn't made much of a difference: they were in a field, somewhere, and all she could make out from the headlights was that they were sitting at the top of a grassy hill. She'd recognized it immediately, of course, it's not like there were a ton of non-flat areas in Deer Grove — he'd brought her to the sledding hill that everyone had used to go to as kids. She's pretty sure it's the highest point in town.

He'd brought her here to look at the stars, because of course he did, because he knew that she'd gotten into astrology recently, and he wanted her to show him where all these constellations were that she was basing her life decisions on. She'd agreed, laughing, and after she'd pointed out her favorite ones, telling him the stories behind them all, they'd lapsed into a comfortable silence.

Margot thinks that loving Jake is as easy as breathing. They're young, Jake having just turned sixteen and gotten his license two weeks prior, but when Margot looks at him, she can't help but see the rest of their lives together stretched out like an empty backroad. There's a part

of her, deep down, that's terrified of the possibility of losing him, of losing this feeling. She thinks it has the possibility to break her, to shatter her completely.

The jacket stays in the box, along with the rest of Jake's things that his family had decided she should get to have. She folds the cardboard flaps closed with shaking hands, shoving the box into the back of her closet where she can't see it unless she looks for it. It's too painful, now, all of the memories of Jake rushing back to her in an onslaught that she doesn't think she can bear.

The sun is gone from Margot's life once more, her brain shutting itself down into survival mode as she starts to go through the motions of her life. Her parents are back to looking at her with concern, Hannah side-eyeing her as they drive to school together each morning, and her friends don't say a word.

Sandra, however, is different. It's kind of her job.

"Are you planning on telling me what's going on?" she asks in a session one day, her voice breaking through the sound of the pattering office fan. It's a hot day in September, and Margot's only half paying attention as she throws her hair into a bun.

"What d'you mean?" she asks, knowing how much Sandra hates when she answers a question with one of her own. She can almost predict the exact phrase that's about to leave her therapist's mouth —

"You're deflecting," Sandra retorts, giving her a look. Margot smirks, but it feels forced, somehow. "You've been quieter our last few sessions. You seem like you're stuck in your head."

"Isn't that the whole point?"

Sandra sighs. “You’re being deliberately obtuse, Margot. If you don’t want to talk about it, we can talk about something else, but that’s not going to help you move past it.”

Sandra’s right, obviously, but that doesn’t mean Margot has to like it, or admit it out loud.

“Okay, fine,” she says instead. “A couple of weeks ago Jake’s brother dropped off a box of his stuff that his parents wanted me to have. I guess they cleaned out his room.”

“That must have been hard for you.”

“I mean, yeah,” Margot shakes her head. “It hasn’t even been a year and they’re cleaning out his stuff and packing it away like he was never there. It’s fucked up.”

“Do you think this might have been something that helped his family’s grieving process?” Sandra asks, not even looking up from her notepad as she writes. Sometimes Margot hates when she does this, just completely sees through whatever bullshit smokescreen Margot’s trying to put up without even looking up from her notes.

“I guess so,” she admits. “I don’t know. Anyway, his brother brought over this box a while ago. And I just opened it a few days ago.”

“What was in it?”

Just thinking about that damn jean jacket is making Margot’s eyes water, and she purses her lips. “A roll of film, undeveloped. His favorite film camera. It’s a Canon. And his favorite — his favorite jean jacket.”

Sandra nods, looking thoughtful as she clicks her pen. “That’s nice that his family gave you his favorite things. But that must be hard to bring back those memories.”

Margot looks out the window behind Sandra, then, an act that she knows will be labelled as *avoiding*, and watches the gray clouds press down from the sky. It was supposed to rain tonight.

“Um, yeah, it does,” she finally says. “It’s just — I don’t know. It smells like him. It sucks.”

“And what about the film?” Sandra asks, changing topics. “Have you thought about possibly getting that developed?”

Margot purses her lips, her fingers twisting in her lap. She hadn’t thought about it, not really — there was something about this rolls that seem decidedly *off-limits*. “I don’t know. Those are Jake’s.”

Sandra gives her a look, and Margot avoids it. “It might give you some closure.”

“I’ll think about it.”

She does think about it, and think about it, and think about it. It seems to occupy her every waking hour. As she lies in bed at night, staring at her ceiling fan, she tries to remember the last time she saw Jake in the darkroom at school, or the last time he mentioned getting photos developed, and she quickly realizes it’s pointless. The truth is, Jake was always in the darkroom, he was always developing pictures, and she doubts she ever saw all of them.

As the school year begins to slip further into fall, the film rolls sit in the box in the corner of her closet, untouched. She continues to go through the motions with school, with practices, with games. No one seems to notice, not if she smiles at the right times and makes it seem like she *could* be paying attention.

The day she cracks comes the night of the volleyball team's first home match of the season. Margot's the captain now, after four years of smashing records at the varsity level, and there's been more than one occasion where a college scout has been sitting in the crowd. Once upon a time, it was her dream to play volleyball at the collegiate level, Division I if she could swing it, but now, it just makes her chest hurt.

There's a moment right before the game starts where Margot's world begins to cave in on itself. She'd gone through warm ups setting and hitting at all the right times, and she'd given her teammates a pep talk in the locker room before they'd all come out for the National Anthem. She'd felt fine, sort of, or at least as fine as she was now, which was more like a state of numbness.

And then she'd seen the camera flash, and on instinct, she'd looked in the direction of the photographer, muscle memory telling her that it would be Jake's wide grin on the other side.

She'd been wrong. It was Julien Hernandez, a junior from the newspaper who had always shot the games when Jake couldn't make it. Jake had always referred to him as his apprentice, and Julien had always shaken his head, but it was obvious that the younger boy looked up to him.

Margot feels her heart plummet to her stomach, where it promptly shatters into a million unsalvageable pieces. Her body feels open, raw, and the sense of numbness she'd formed around herself like a shield has been replaced by an indescribable pain. On some level, she probably knew that they would have to assign a new photographer to the varsity volleyball games, but actually *seeing* it, being confronted with it, *that* was an entirely different beast.

She can almost feel the blood draining from her face, feel the way the air is being crushed from her lungs to leave her hollow, empty. Her vision has tunneled, she can only see Julien and

his camera, and in the back of her mind, she can hear one of her teammates trying to say something to her, but it's muffled like she's underwater.

Margot is walking off the court before she realizes what she's doing, her body running on autopilot as she ignores her team and coach calling after her. The fluorescent gym lights are messing with her vision, making everything spotty and fuzzy around the edges, and she knows that someone's going to follow her out here, they have to, because she's a ticking time bomb and this is the kind of thing that everyone's been waiting for.

She's outside the girls' locker room, now, her volleyball shoes squeaking against the tiled school floor and her labored breathing the only sounds in the hallway. Sandra would tell her she's having a panic attack, and it wouldn't be the first time, either, but it is the first time that it's happened like this in public.

Margot can't bring herself to care, not when she's standing outside the entrance to the locker room and all she can see is a fifteen year old boy stumbling over his words. It's disorienting, to say the least, and she's frozen in the middle of the hallway staring at this door with its peeling paint and worn metal handle and it's like she's seeing a ghost, transported through time to a Margot that didn't know how it felt to lose.

"Hey," someone grabs her arm, and she doesn't have to turn around to know that it's Hannah, Margot's number 9 painted on her cheek in black eyeliner. "Are you okay?"

Margot looks at her now, and her sister's worried expression forces the air back into her lungs and brings her back to the present.

"Julien's the photog now," she responds, and her voice sounds hollow. She watches Hannah go through the steps of figuring it out — the furrowed brow, her eyes squinting, the dawning comprehension — and she doesn't have the energy to help her along.

“Oh,” Hannah finally says, her fingers still wrapped around Margot’s arm, squeezing.

“Do you —”

“I’m quitting the team,” Margot cuts her off. Hannah gives her a look.

“You’re *what?*”

“I don’t give a shit anymore, Han,” she shakes her head. “I can’t — I don’t want to do this anymore. It’s stupid.”

“But — but I thought you loved volleyball?” Hannah is well and fully confused now, and Margot doesn’t blame her. She didn’t know she wanted to quit the team until about 30 seconds ago. “I thought you wanted to play in college.”

Margot shakes her head, pulling her arm from her sister’s grasp. “Yeah, well, things change. People die. I’m done. See you at home.”

Later, she’d tell Sandra about how she just wasn’t passionate about the sport anymore, or sports in general, and she wanted to focus her energy into getting into college. She would go on to detail the application essays she’d written, the campus tours she wanted to go on, the letters of recommendation her teachers were writing on her behalf.

Sandra would nod, tell her she was proud of her progress, and Margot would leave at the end of her session smiling, despite the fact that she was, in fact, lying through her teeth.

“You’re full of shit,” Margot spits, and Jake rolls his eyes. “You’re honestly unbelievable. I can’t even look at you right now.”

They’re standing on opposite sides of Jake’s room, voices low in case his parents had come home early. The distance between them feels much larger than the few feet that it is, and Margot would make it further if she could. There are pictures, all unframed, all taken by him,

taped to his wall, and it feels like the frozen faces in the images are staring at her as she argues with him.

“You’re dramatic,” he responds flippantly, and she wants to toss him through his open window. They’ve been fighting for forty minutes now, though it feels like hours, about something that had started with another girl on the newspaper staff with Jake and had shifted into something else entirely. “You’re always doing this shit, it’s driving me crazy.”

She feels tears beginning to prick at the corner of her eyes, and she swipes a hand across her face angrily. They’re going through a rough patch, admittedly, where it’s like even the sound of the other breathing too loudly is enough to set the other off. This fight, like the one before it and the one before that, was quickly becoming the norm, and she can tell that he’s getting tired. She is too.

“Leave then,” she says, her voice breaking. “Just end it, then, if I’m so incredibly annoying.”

Margot doesn’t mean it, and she doesn’t really know why she’s saying it. She’s said it before in past arguments, and she remembers the first time she did and watching Jake’s face fall, watching him stumble over his words as he told her that he didn’t want to leave, didn’t want to end things.

“You’ve gotta stop saying that, Margot,” he says instead, shaking his head. He doesn’t make any move to step closer, so she doesn’t either. “You’ve gotta stop saying shit you don’t mean. It’s not fair.”

And it’s not. But they’re only fifteen, and they’re only just starting to learn that loving isn’t easy all the time. They’ll make up, eventually, because they always did, but for now, they’re just staring at each other with a mountain between them.

This is the first time Margot feels her chest begin to crack, but it's surely not the last.

Margot's grades begin to slip, and she's not applying to colleges like she's telling everyone she is, and she doesn't care at all. It's nearing the end of autumn now, the Midwest weather rapidly taking the crisp fall air and giving it more and more hints of the bitter winter to come.

The colder it gets, the darker the sky gets, the more that Margot feels herself begin to close in on herself and shut down. She brushes off old teammates who still don't understand why she left the team, she brushes off teachers who are just trying to get her to care about her future, she brushes off friends who notice when she isn't talking to them anymore. Eventually, by the time Thanksgiving rolls around, everyone has slowly but surely stopped trying, and she can't blame them.

She starts to spend a lot of time at Deer Grove's only local coffee shop, a hole in the wall called The Bean. She doesn't even particularly like coffee, but she likes the way it smells, so over time, she forces herself to learn how to ratio the cream and sugar so it didn't completely taste like bitter bean water.

There's a boy there, Peter, who works as a barista while he studies to become an EMT. He's tall, taller than Jake was, with thick blond hair and more tattoos twisting up and down his arms than Margot can even begin to count. Sometimes, when the shop isn't busy, he tells her the stories behind them, and Margot pretends to listen and pretends to care. At this point, she can tell he likes her as something more than a regular customer or even as just a friend, and there's some dark part of her that wants to see just how far she can push him.

“What are you doing after this?” he asks one day, and she fights the urge to smirk. The older she gets, the more she begins to realize how predictable men can be, how easy it is to get them to do what she wants.

Margot’s not really sure what she wants. She knows grief like the back of her hand at this point, and she hates it. It’s been nearly a year now, nearly the length of their relationship, and the world seems to be moving on: an empty bedroom in his house, a filled position on the newspaper staff, a crowded classroom with no empty seats.

“Nothing at all,” she tells him, and he smiles as he continues to clean the espresso machine. She notes the way it doesn’t make her feel anything.

The more she thinks about it, the more she spends her time after school swirling her cooling coffee with a spoon and talking to this boy who doesn’t know about what she’s been through, the more she’s started to convince herself that what she had with Jake was never really love at all. She’s nearly eighteen now, but Jake would forever be seventeen, a junior in high school, and they’d met before they were even old enough for driver’s ed. It was a high school romance, really, and probably would have ended when they’d gone their separate ways after graduation with Margot to college and Jake to some sort of art school.

She wonders what he would think if he could see how cold she is now, could see this icy exterior she’s adapted to survive in a world without him.

Later, as Peter is lighting her cigarette and giving her a reassuring smile from the driver’s seat of his old beat up Toyota, she lets her hand drop to his thigh, just high enough on his jeans to be suggestive. He stares at her, his cheeks turning pink, and she inhales the smoke steadily.

I am going to ruin him, she thinks, and then I’m going to leave.

They're skipping rocks on the lake by her house, and Jake hasn't said a word since he showed up unannounced an hour before, an odd look on his face. She hasn't said anything, hasn't pushed him even though she's dying to know; he gets like this, sometimes, where he seems to fold in on himself and his thoughts, and she just has to wait for him to be ready to talk about it.

It's a Sunday and tomorrow is the first day of junior year. They don't have any classes together, but they didn't last year, either, so Margot isn't too bothered by it. She'll see him in the hallways like she always does, and he'll come to take pictures for the newspaper at the volleyball games, and they'll hang out after school when their schedules line up. They'll be fine.

"Is everything okay?" she finally asks, because even though she knows better, she just can't take it anymore. She's never done well with silence, especially when it means not knowing something.

He tosses another rock before answering, and they both watch it skip three times before sinking to the bottom of the lake. "Do you believe in God?"

"What?" Margot blurts, the rock in her own hand falling to the ground.

"I don't know."

She looks around at the water, the trees, and the setting summer sun, and they don't tell her anything. Jake's family was pretty religious, his parents dutifully attending church every Sunday, but Jake had never talked about it. She'd assumed it was just something he did, a part of him and his beliefs that she wasn't privy to.

"I've never really thought about it," she says, studying him. He has the collar popped on his jean jacket, and it accentuates his cheekbones to make him look like one of those old-time actors.

“I just — I don’t know,” he sounds frustrated, the tension palpable in his shoulders and the way he’s carrying himself. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately, I guess. I don’t know.”

“So I’ve heard,” she says in an attempt to lighten the mood. He gives her a ghost of a smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “I mean, I thought your family was really into that?”

He snorts. “‘That’ being God?”

“Shut up!” she laughs. “I have no idea how to talk about this. I’m trying!”

“That’s why I love you,” he says, reaching over and linking their fingers. “I don’t know. I’ve just been thinking about it a lot lately.”

Margot doesn’t know what to say, but she wishes she did. Jake always seemed to know exactly what to say to her when she was down, or mad, or got in some sort of mood, but she seems to know shit all about emotions or helping other people.

“Okay, well,” she pauses, thinking. “If you ever want to . . . talk about it, I’m here.”

“I know, Margot,” he says, and the smile starts to reach his eyes. “I’m here too.”

A week before Jake’s anniversary, Margot finds herself standing in front of New Hope Presbyterian Church, her hands clenched in the pockets of her parka. Truth be told, she had had to use Google Maps in order to get here, and had taken a wrong turn or two along the way, but she’s here now, and she feels like she has a purpose in doing so.

The church only partially looks how she expects it to, with its stained glass windows and heavy wooden doors, but it doesn’t feel as guilt-ridden as she thought it would be. It’s a Friday, so the building is pretty much empty, and she ends up walking the worn hallways until she’s able to find the back offices, feeling less and less sure of herself with every step she takes.

She finds the minister sitting in his office, his attention focused on the older-looking computer monitor in front of him. He's older, which she had suspected, and bald, and even though he's sitting, she suspects he's pretty short.

"Hello?" she says, knocking on the door frame. The minister looks up with a smile, though he looks a little puzzled, and beckons for her to come in.

"Hi there," he says, gesturing to the chair in front of his desk. "I'm John. What can I do for you?"

"I'm — I'm Margot," she says, unzipping her coat. She wants to tell him that John is *such* a minister name, but she doesn't want to start off on the wrong foot, and not here of all places. "Margot Scott. I'm — I was Jake Johnson's girlfriend."

"Oh," he says. "I'm so sorry for your loss. Jake was a wonderful young man. It was such a shame."

Margot shifts in her seat, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. She had been only eighty percent sure that this was actually Jake's old church, and now that she's actually here, the wind is rapidly being taken from her sails.

"So is there something I could help you with?" he asks after several beats of silence. She nods, pursing her lips.

"Did you know Jake didn't believe in God?"

"I beg your pardon?"

She feels her cheeks turn red, and suddenly this doesn't seem like such a good idea, but she's already gotten herself here and this man is staring at her and she'll feel like a massive idiot if she walks out now. "Jake didn't believe in God."

“Is that so?” he doesn’t seem to know how to respond to her, and she doesn’t blame him. She doesn’t really know how to respond to her either.

“Yeah,” she continues, and she almost feels like she’s having an out of body experience. “He didn’t believe in any of it. And you gave him a religious funeral.”

“That was his parents’ request, I believe,” John tells her, leaning back in his chair as he folds his hands. “I’m afraid I wasn’t aware that Jake was struggling with his faith.”

“Isn’t that your whole job?” Margot scoffs. “Isn’t the whole point of you to know what’s going on with your congregation or whatever the fuck it’s called?”

There’s a painting of Jesus behind his desk that seems to be staring at her, admonishing her for coming in here unannounced and cursing at this minister who’d done nothing wrong. She glares at him, glares at John, and she realizes that she’s so, so angry.

“You seem upset, Margot,” John’s voice is calm, like she’s not this random teenage girl disrespecting him who isn’t even part of his church. “Do you have a good relationship with God?”

“Wouldn’t say I do,” she retorts. “And I am upset. I’m super pissed, to be quite honest.”

“Grief is a long process.”

“It’s not about — I’m fine, okay?” she rolls her eyes. “I’m completely fine. But honestly, I’ve been thinking about this for almost a year, and I just think it’s really awful that you took Jake’s funeral and turned it into this massive ode to Jesus, or whatever you want to call it, when it was Jake’s day. I think it’s fucked up.”

John nods. “I can see why you’d feel that way.”

“Don’t you feel bad, like at all?” she continues. “You — you force your ideologies, or your beliefs or whatever, on everyone, and you make it out like you’re doing it for the greater

good or something, when really, it's selfish. It's selfish, what you're doing. You let Jake's parents make that stupid service about themselves, and you don't even care, do you?"

She knows her own parents would smack her if they heard her speaking to another adult this way, but she can't bring herself to care. She feels like this confrontation has been a long time coming, pretty much since the night she watched Jake die.

"Margot," John says, leaning forward in his chair and fixing her with a frown. "Are you mad at me, or are you mad at God?"

She looks at him, and she looks at the painting of Jesus behind him, and she feels all the air leave her lungs at once. Her world is crashing down around her, and she's choking again despite the hours and hours she's spent agonizing over this very topic on Sandra's couch, and none of it feels like progress at all.

"I'm — you're making this into a bigger thing," Margot says, her voice breaking. "That's not what this is about, okay?"

"Are you sure?"

The office walls are closing in around her, the religious paintings adorning the walls suffocating her until she feels like she's about to combust. She wants to tell him, this stranger, how hard this is, how waking up every single day for the past year has felt like a punch to the throat, how she's been using this boy who's done nothing wrong other than make the mistake of having feelings for her. She wants to tell him that it's his fault, *His* fault, all of it, that her life has been ruined, and she's so, so angry.

"Sorry for wasting your time," she spits instead, and she stands up and walks out the door.

“I’ll love you forever, Margot Scott,” Jake smiles, pressing his lips to her temple. His skin feels soft, his bare chest warm against her back, and Margot feels like she could melt into his sheets and stay there forever. “You know that, right?”

“I love you more,” she responds, and she means it.

She is sixteen years old, and she thinks that loving means to know someone, knowing all the intricate pieces that fit together to make up who they are. It’s knowing the little things, the big things, the things they don’t know about themselves.

Margot thinks that Jake Johnson is a forever kind of love. She isn’t wrong.

“I want to tell you something,” Peter says, tracing his fingers up and down her arm. They’re lying in his bed in his apartment, and Margot just wants to go home. She hates when he makes her stay afterward.

“What is it?”

“I — I know we haven’t been doing this for a while,” he begins, and she sighs. She has a feeling she already knows what he wants to say. “But I — I really like you, Margot.”

She doesn’t know why she’s been doing this, because she really doesn’t feel anything for him and knows she never will. It makes her feel empowered, almost, like she’s proving to herself that she’s okay, even though she feels like vomiting every time Peter touches her.

“You do?” Margot asks, because she doesn’t know what to say. She looks around his room, at the chipped paint and the band posters on the walls, and she wonders how he can claim to like her so much when he doesn’t really know her at all.

“Yeah, I do,” he tells her, and she knows he has no idea how one-sided this whole thing is. “I was wondering if . . . well, if you wanted to go exclusive. You know, I haven’t been —”

“I want to be done,” she cuts in, and he looks like he’s been slapped. “I want this to be over.”

“You — what?”

She slips out of his bed, grabbing her stray clothes from the floor, and begins to pull them on. “I don’t feel that way about you. I’m sorry.”

Margot doesn’t even want to look at him right now, so she doesn’t. She’s sick of pretending like this thing between them means anything to her, sick of pretending to feel anything at all.

“Is it something I said?” Peter asks desperately, and she resents him for it. She doesn’t understand why he can’t just *get it*, why he can’t just let it go and recognize that *this didn’t matter*.

“No, Peter,” she sighs, and turns to face him, keys in hand. “It’s something to do with me. I’ll see you around.”

“The stars are really clear tonight,” Jake says, his face pressed against the glass of her bedroom window. “The moon’s looks really cool too. Super thin.”

“Oh yeah?” Margot responds, only half paying attention as she flips through one of her notebooks. It’s Tuesday, and they’re studying for a test that was coming up in their AP Psychology class on Friday; even though they weren’t in the same class, they had the same teacher, and worked on all the homework together when they were able to.

“Let’s take a break from this,” he tells her, turning around and gesturing at her notebook.

She shakes her head. "We can't, dude. I need to do well on this one or my mom's gonna be pissed."

He smirks, flopping onto the bed next to her and pulling her notes towards him so he's covering them with his arms. "Come on, Margs. A half hour. I wanna go take pictures by the lake. I've got my camera in my bag."

"Of course you do," she rolls her eyes. "What do I get if I model for you?"

After months of being the subject of Jake's photography, Margot had managed to move past her initial lack of confidence about being the center of focus, and had realized that she kind of liked it. Jake made it fun, relaxing, and his pictures made her look like someone other than herself: someone older, more mature.

"Hmm," he says, pretending to think. "I'll buy you dinner. I'll give you the pleasure of my company."

"Oh!" She laughs, and he's grinning at her, leaning forward and grabbing her hand to press a kiss to her palm. "Lucky me!"

"Please, Margs?" he begs, his lips moving to her inner wrist. "I have an itch."

"Fine," she says, dramatically rolling her eyes. "But I'm timing you."

They slip out of her room and down the stairs as quietly as they can, knowing that Margot's parents wouldn't be happy if they knew that Margot and Jake were going down to the lake in this weather and at this late hour. It was nearly 10:30, and according to the weather app on Margot's phone, it was thirty three degrees.

Jake's phone flashlight lights their way, and he's practically skipping as they make their way through the trees and down the dirt path that leads to the shoreline. Photography seems to light a fire in Jake that Margot herself has never felt in her life, and there's a part of her that

envies him for it. She wonders what it would be like to feel so passionate about something that you were willing to run around in the middle of a winter night for it.

By the time they get there, Margot is slightly out of breath from trying to keep up with him, and he seems unfazed. The moon — and he was right about it being thin — is reflecting off the surface of the layer of ice that coats the lake, and it's warm enough that she isn't feeling frozen for once.

"The clock starts now," she tells him as he drops his backpack to the ground, unzipping the top and rifling around for his camera. He raises a hand to flip her off as she waves her phone at him, gesturing to the thirty minute timer she'd just set.

"Yeah, yeah, you say that now, but you're gonna be all over me when you see how great these turn out," he waves her off, popping the lens cap from the camera.

He starts with taking a few shots of the lake itself before he raises the camera even further to take some more of just the moon and the stars. He's so engrossed in his work, and Margot just watches him, and she's aware she's got a dopy smile on her face. She loves him, so much, and she can't believe how lucky she is to still have him.

"Babe, come out here," he tells her, tearing his eyes away from the viewfinder and grinning at her. "I wanna take some of you now, ya know, before my time runs out."

She rolls her eyes, shining her phone's flashlight on the ground to avoid tripping as she makes her way to the water's edge. The lake's completely frozen over now, and she wonders if Hannah will pull her outside sometime before Christmas to go ice skating like they used to when they were kids.

Jake breaks her out of her thoughts, bringing her back to the present as he grabs the sleeve of her jacket and pulls her onto the ice. It feels solid under her feet, and she allows him to slide her around the surface, his camera snapping as they move.

“Come on, Margs, dance with me,” he says, pulling her into his arms and letting the camera fall to his chest. “It’s a beautiful night, let’s be romantic for once.”

She smacks his arm, pulling out of his grasp in mock outrage. “Don’t be a dick! I’m plenty romantic.”

He laughs, and the sound echoes around the lake. The lining of trees around them are dark, barren, and out of the corner of her eye, they look like hands reaching forward to grab them. She can barely see Jake, the only lighting the moon, and he looks younger than he is.

“Here, give me your camera,” she tells him, reaching out her hand. “I’ll put it on the ground. I don’t want you to fall and damage it or something.”

“Don’t tell me you care about me?” he teases her, but he’s sliding closer to her and pulling the camera from his neck.

“No,” she says, rolling her eyes and she takes it. “I just know how insufferable you’d be if anything happened to it.”

“You know me so well.”

By the time Margot is back on land with the camera safely tucked into Jake’s backpack, Jake has slid further out onto the ice, and she can only see an outline of him in the dark.

“Come back, babe!” She calls out, and she sees him turn. “I can barely see you. It’s too dark.”

“Oh, come on, you wuss,” he jeers. “Come out with me! It won’t kill you.”

“Fine,” she shakes her head, stepping back onto the ice. “Don’t go out any farther, though, I don’t know how thick that ice is.”

She doesn’t have to see him to know that he’s rolling his eyes, but he starts sliding closer to her anyway. It almost looks like a scene out of a dream, watching him move towards her lit only by the moon and the stars, and she wishes she had his camera so she could snap a picture.

Suddenly, a sharp crack pierces the air, and she freezes, watching as Jake does the same. She looks down at her feet, and she sees smaller, thinner cracks beginning to form in the ice in front of her, and she feels her heart drop to her stomach.

“Jake —” She begins to call, and then she looks up, and almost chokes. She sees Jake in front of her, farther out towards the center of the lake, still too far to reach, a terrified expression on his face as more cracks begin to tear through the night’s silence, and for a moment, he seems to be suspended in midair.

And then he’s just gone.

It doesn’t feel real, like in the time it took her to blink he managed to hide somewhere just out of her line of sight, like she might jolt awake from this nightmare at any moment. She finds herself scrambling, suddenly, her brain turned off and her body on autopilot as she throws herself closer to where he was, where he should be.

The closer she gets, the more water begins to slosh up against her boots, coming in miniscule waves that make her want to scream.

“Jake!” She cries, and she hears it echo off the water like his laughter had just minutes ago. “Please, Jake!”

The cracks under her feet begin to get bigger, and she comes to an abrupt stop as she realizes that the ice under her feet isn’t feeling as solid as it did by the water’s edge. Frantically,

she searches the ice in front of her with her eyes, her heart pounding against her rib cage, stuttering to a stop as she finds the hole where he must have fallen through.

Her hands come up over her mouth, trying to quiet her own breathing as she desperately listens for a sound, anything that might tell her where Jake is. The only sound she hears is the blood pumping in her ears.

This is when she starts screaming. It starts with his name, over and over again until her voice becomes hoarse, and it shifts into monumental, earth-shattering sobs when he fails to resurface. She's shaking, and it has nothing to do with the cold, and she feels her body begin to go numb.

Somewhere in her pocket, the timer on her phone goes off.

December 19 is a Wednesday this year, and when Margot's alarm goes off, her mind is made up. It doesn't feel real, this date, but then again, none of the past 365 days have felt real, either.

Margot climbs out of bed, not bothering to pull up the comforter or straighten the pillows as she walks towards the door. She takes a look around her bedroom: the pile of dirty clothes in the middle of the floor, the vinyl records haphazardly stacked on her dresser, the light blue paint on the walls that she had helped her father paint three years prior.

She closes the door behind her and pads down the hallway, taking extra care to be quiet as she passes Hannah's door, and steps into the bathroom that they share. She locks the door, and then she's staring at herself in the mirror.

Margot looks like a ghost, her skin pallid and the bags under her eyes prominent, and she quickly breaks eye contact with herself as she pulls open the medicine cabinet. Slowly,

methodically, she grabs the bottles one by one, setting them out on the bathroom counter like a line of soldiers until there are none left.

Slowly, methodically, she uncaps each one, not bothering to read the labels as she dumps their contents into her palm.

The last thing she sees before she blacks out is the last bottle tip over, a dozen pills falling to the tile floor.

chapter v : clean

“I’m not saying this as your therapist,” Sandra begins, staring at Margot intently, her expression raw and real for the first time that Margot has known her. “But as someone who has enjoyed getting to know you. I am so happy that you’re okay.”

Margot hears what she’s really saying: *I’m glad you didn’t succeed in killing yourself in December*. It’s something that she’s heard a lot since she’s been home, but no one’s really come out and said it. Sometimes, she wishes they would. She hates tip-toeing.

“‘Okay’ might be a relative term,” Margot tells her, because she doesn’t know how to respond to sincerity without being a dick about it. Sandra is still looking at Margot as though she’s trying to stare through her, as though she’s trying to figure out what was going on in her head that night all those months ago.

There’s a scar on her temple now, red and angry but surely healing. She doesn’t remember hitting her head on the edge of the bathtub as she fell, but there’s a new rug in the bathroom now, and Hannah’s moved her toothbrush to the powder room downstairs.

“Tell me what you mean by that,” Sandra responds, and her expression becomes closed off once more, clinical. “We have a lot to catch up on.”

It’s January now. Margot had missed Christmas, had missed New Years, had missed the newly-apparent gutting and renovation of the dining room that her father seemed to have thrown himself into, but 2019 had come anyway, the universe seemingly ignoring that her own life had taken a temporary pause.

Her bedroom is the same, except someone — one of her parents, maybe — had made her bed. She can tell just by looking at it that the sheets are drawn in too tight and she wouldn’t be

able to poke her feet out at the end of her bed like she likes to do, but the sentiment brings tears to her eyes all the same.

She pictures her father smoothing out her comforter, her mother placing the pillows just right. She sees Hannah slinking in in the middle of the night to grab the blue throw blanket off the end of Margot's bed when she gets cold, trying on a shirt from her closet in the mornings before school.

Hannah mostly asked for permission before she'd stolen a piece of Margot's clothing, but Margot had always given her a hard time regardless. She wonders if her sister was struck with a weird feeling in her chest when there was no one around to ask, no one around to give her shit.

Margot hadn't had a wave of clarity when she'd woken up in the ICU. She hadn't been struck by the overwhelming sensation of being alive, hadn't felt thankful for the air moving in and out of her lungs or the steady pulse beneath her skin. While she hadn't had an epiphany about God, or whatever it is that happens after you die, she did have a thought that while she had chosen to come this close to the edge and had wanted to throw herself off of it, Jake probably had not had the chance to figure out his own beliefs before he was made to be confronted by them. The notion made her heart twinge, and she had sunk deeper into the bed.

Mostly, Margot had felt thirsty. Her throat felt like sandpaper and her head was pounding, and the nursing assistant that was serving as her suicide watch would tell her it was because she'd had her stomach pumped. As she watched the woman's face, saw her expression remain passive and blank as she described just how long it took to bring her back from the brink of death, a thought passes through her head that she would never dare say out loud: *there was a part of her that was mad at herself for failing.*

Then the nurse would push a call button, and someone else would come in, and then her family would be there — except it wasn't her family, it was just her parents, because Hannah was staying with a friend.

Even in her disoriented state, Margot doesn't think that she'll ever forget the look on her father's face when she saw him for the first time. He looked as though he had aged about twenty years, his eyes rimmed with red and his thick graying hair standing every which way on top of his head like he'd been running his hands through it. His hands had shook, clinging on to the end of her hospital bed for support as he had seemingly fallen into the room, and her mother had followed closely behind.

“Margot,” she had said quietly, like the sound of it was heavy in her mouth, mixing with something like contempt as she kept her face as carefully blank. Margot might have thought that there was nothing amiss had it not been for her swollen eyes and makeup-free face.

It had been said before, but Lily Scott was a pragmatic woman, and she never left the house without a full face of product. This was when Margot had started to realize the gravity of the situation.

Her father had been crying, having always been the more outwardly emotional of the two of them, his lips pressed together like he was trying not to make a sound. There was a weight on both of their shoulders, so obvious as they stood there in front of her, almost physically hunched over in their grief. Margot felt a burning in her throat as the knowledge that she had put that weight there washed over her, and for a moment, she felt a twinge of grief herself.

The doctor had started talking, then, about what had happened, how she had been brought in barely clinging to life, but they'd managed to save her. He had started to talk about her options, and her mother had been quick to chime in and say that Margot would be committed to

the pediatric psych ward on the third floor, for as long as necessary. Margot hadn't said a word, instead watching the way her mother clung to her father's arm, and she thinks that maybe her mom is hurting too.

"I washed your sheets," her mother says now, breaking Margot out of her memories and bringing her back to her bedroom. She turns to see her standing in her doorway, her face unreadable.

"Thanks." Margot traces her fingers on her comforter. It's soft, softer than the hospital sheets were, softer than the pajamas and robe she'd had to wear for the past three weeks.

"I got — I used that Tide detergent you like," Lily continues, hesitantly taking a step into her daughter's room. The air feels charged, like it knows that the room's newest inhabitant isn't usually here.

"You never buy that detergent," Margot remarks, surprised. "It's like twelve dollars a bottle, you always say it's a waste of money."

"I know," her mother responds, and for a moment, they just look at each other, and there's a thousand unsaid words between them. She's reminded of being small, six or seven, and avoiding her gaze when she'd been sent home with a bad note from her teacher. Lily had kissed her head, told her it was okay, and her forgiveness had been soft like linen, breathable and warm. "I just thought you might like it."

"I do," Margot says softly. "Thank you."

Her mother nods, giving her a tight smile. "Dinner will be ready in thirty, I just wanted to let you know."

The warmth remains in her chest, and Margot wonders if maybe she's ready to forgive herself too.

Stevie Nicks is filling the walls of her room, filling her head and wrapping her in a warm, familiar hug that she didn't realize she had missed until she was here again. Margot remembers her fifteenth birthday, unwrapping the Rumours album, her father's bashful grin, running up the stairs to put it on her record player right away.

The volume is low, now, and Margot is lying on her floor, staring up at the ceiling. She hadn't meant to end up here, had started off trying to rearrange her room just to have something to do with her hands, but Stevie is talking about being afraid of change and now Margot is here.

Twenty four hours ago, she was being handed a paper cup full of pills by a young-looking nurse that seemed to have a permanent scowl on her face. It seems like another life, one where she has a roommate who makes her a little nervous and group therapy a couple times a day and her world doesn't extend beyond the fluorescent lights, and even though it was only three weeks, she's not sure she remembers how to navigate the life she's just returned to.

She hadn't meant to. Return, that is.

Margot wonders if Jake — and it still hurts to think about him, but it's muted now, just like the rest of her is because of these damn antidepressants they've got her on — had a moment before he died where he regretted it. Regretted coming out on the lake, regretted taking a break from studying, regretted coming to her house that night in the first place. She wonders if, instead, there was a moment of clarity where he made peace with his life and the fact that it was ending.

A part of her wishes she could remember the way it felt before she blacked out in her bathroom. She's spent three weeks trying to recall if she'd felt peace, if she'd felt acceptance, if she'd felt anything at all. If there was a moment, right before the doctors were able to bring her back, where she met God, or wherever it is people go after they're gone. She'd heard of so many

people coming back from near-death experiences with renewed faith, telling stories of warmth and bright lights and a sense of hope.

Maybe that's not where she was going at all. She's never been one for faith, can't remember the last time she cracked open the Bible, but she thinks there's something in there about non-believers.

Her phone buzzes then, and it's a text from Hannah about dinner being ready, and she's broken out of her reverie. She sits up, hearing something in her back crack, and pulls the needle from her record, sending Stevie to an abrupt stop.

Her father made pork chops for dinner. She fucking hates pork chops.

Margot won't say anything, though, because even though he's been smiling at her every time she'd looked at him, she can't get his broken expression from the hospital out of her mind, and she can't help but wonder if he would've worn the same face if he had had to plan her funeral.

She doesn't say anything about the pork chops.

It takes her a few days to notice it, but Hannah has stopped speaking to her unless it's absolutely necessary. Telling her when food is ready, asking her to turn her music down, wondering if she has the notes from her old AP Psych class. She's polite, but it's clear there's a wall between them, and Margot isn't completely sure why.

Her parents have been bending over backwards trying to make her feel comfortable, trying to make sure everything's perfect and just the way Margot likes it, and she knows they're just trying to help, but it's beginning to feel suffocating. She wonders if that's why Hannah's

angry with her, if maybe she's just missing their parents' attention now that it's completely focused on Margot.

She gathers the courage to ask her one day as they drive to school. It's a Thursday, maybe a week since Margot's been home, and the sky is dark and gray. The air is thick and silent around them in the car with not even the radio to act as a buffer.

"Why are you pissed with me?" Margot asks, and Hannah acts as though she hasn't even spoke, continuing to scroll through her phone. "Han."

"What?"

Margot fights the urge to roll her eyes. "I literally just asked you why you're pissed at me."

"I'm not pissed at you." But she's still not looking at her, still giving her the absolute bare minimum of human interaction.

"You obviously are," Margot says, and she's trying to keep the desperation out of her voice. There's not much more humiliating than fighting for the attention of a sixteen year old girl, especially one that's your little sister.

"Well, I'm not," Hannah tells her with an air of finality, and Margot purses her lips. Maybe the five minute drive to school in the morning wasn't the best place or time to hash things out, but Margot's never been the best with not speaking her mind.

"Okay, well, I'll be here to drive you home from school," she tries instead, pulling into the school parking lot.

Today is her third day back at school, and people are still looking at her like she's a bad car accident, and her friends are still talking around her in hushed voices. She hates it.

"I'm going to Kelli's after school," Hannah says.

“Oh,” Margot responds. “I’ll just see you at home, I guess.”

“Yeah, see you,” Hannah’s out of the car before Margot can get the key out of the ignition, and she watches her sister’s retreating back with bewilderment. She wonders when she stopped knowing her best friend.

“Not to be a dick,” Margot says to Sandra later that day. “But you would think that nearly succeeding with killing yourself would make Hannah a little more, I don’t know, interested in me?”

Sandra smirks, like she’s trying to hold back a chuckle, and Margot counts that as a win. “I would say that’s more blunt than being a dick, as you say. But have you thought about how your sister may be feeling, especially since you’ve been home?”

“I don’t know,” Margot says, picking at a loose thread on the leather couch. She’d missed this couch when she was away, thinking about it often as she’d spent twenty one days trying to get comfortable in those horrific plastic chairs they’d had at group therapy. “I guess I haven’t really thought about it too much. I’ve been dealing with my own stuff.”

Sandra nods, tapping her pen against her pad of paper. “Which makes sense, you’ve been through a lot this past month. However, I do think that if you were to take a minute and maybe put yourself in your sister’s shoes, you might learn something.”

Margot sighs. “Aren’t you proud of me for asking her about it? That was big of me, I think.”

Her therapist rolls her eyes, the smile on her face apparent now, and Margot thinks that she’s making some real progress with making her act like a human being.

“Very big of you,” Sandra agrees. “It’s good that you’re being so upfront when you have an issue instead of resorting to sarcasm. You might try talking to her about it when you two actually have more time to hash out the problem, though.”

“I can never win with you,” Margot complains, but she knows she’s right. There might have been a part of her that knew that Hannah couldn’t possibly dive into whatever was bothering her with the limited time that they had, but she’d never admit that out loud. She’s a lot better than she used to be, but she thinks that there are some things that are okay to keep from your therapist.

She finds Hannah in her room curled up in bed, curtains drawn as she watches a movie on her laptop despite the fact that it’s the middle of the afternoon. Empty water bottles are stacked on her dresser, and a dirty plate sits on her nightstand. The room smells musty, like fresh air hasn’t been allowed to inhabit the space in weeks, and Margot has to step over a pile of clean-looking clothes to make her way closer.

“Can we talk now?” she asks, and Hannah doesn’t look up. Part of her wants to roll her eyes, to say *fuck it* and go into her own room and blast her music so loud that her sister can’t hear her movie, but she’s just told Sandra about how mature she is now, and doesn’t think that would be that great of a look.

“What’re you watching?” She tries again, and this time she sees Hannah’s eyes flick over to her momentarily before they’re back on the screen.

“Ten Things I Hate About You,” Hannah mumbles.

“I love that movie,” Margot says, smiling. It had been one of their favorite movies since Margot was in eighth grade and had fallen in love with romantic comedies, dragging her definitely-too-young sixth grade sister down with her.

“I know,” Hannah says, pausing. “You can — there’s room for you here, if you want.”

This feels like a breakthrough, and for a second, it feels like nothing has changed. She pulls back the comforter and slips beneath the sheets, trying not to immediately break down as soon as she feels her sister begin to scoot away from her.

“What part are we at?” she asks instead, and Hannah’s eyes are still focused on the screen.

“They’re at that book store,” she says, and Margot gives up on her sister for a moment, letting herself fall back in love with Heath Ledger and Julia Stiles.

They don’t talk, but then again, they didn’t used to talk all that much during movies before. It’s not as comfortable as it used to be, and Margot wonders if it hasn’t been comfortable for a while and this is just the first time she’s started to notice.

Before she knows it, Heath is dancing across the bleachers, the band is playing, and Margot isn’t eighteen anymore, she’s thirteen, and she and Hannah are screaming this song at the top of their lungs to each other every single time they watch the movie.

“You’re just too good to be true,” Margot starts, almost out of habit, a muscle memory she can’t quite shake even though her life now is a world away from what it used to be.

“Stop,” Hannah cuts in, her voice strangled. Margot looks over and sees that her sister’s face is red, and she’s curled in on herself like the last thing she wants is for Margot to be able to see her.

“What — did I miss something?” Margot asks, pausing the movie. “Did something happen?”

Hannah laughs, but it sounds wet and hollow. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Hannah, I literally asked if you were mad at me, and you said no.”

“Margot, you fucking tried to kill yourself,” Hannah scoffed, her eyes still on the screen. “You walked into the bathroom that *we share*, and you took all the pills you could find, and you tried to kill yourself.”

Margot doesn’t say anything, instead continuing to stare at her sister.

“And,” Hannah continues, coming to an abrupt stop as tears begin to fall down her face.

“And, do you know who found you?”

Margot feels a feeling like lead in her stomach, a cannonball dropped into her core and dragging her down, down, down as she tries to get a good look at her sister’s face. Hannah continues to hide it, continues to look at the now black screen of the laptop, but Margot can see the signs — the red cheeks, the quivering bottom lip.

“Hannah —”

“It was me,” Hannah cuts her off, turning to face her, finally, as she lets herself cry these huge, silent tears. “I was the one who found you, all laid out on the bathroom floor, blood everywhere, pills everywhere. It was me. Do you know what that did to me?”

Margot just look at her, sensing that she’s not done.

“It —” Hannah stops, allowing herself to break down even further. “You were my best friend. You were supposed to — I literally made starter in basketball, finally, like you *knew* I’ve been talking about for months, and I had the best games of my life, and you weren’t there. You were supposed to be there for me.”

Margot inches closer to her, and when Hannah doesn't move as their shoulders touch, she wraps her arms around her little sister and pulls her closer, bringing her face into Margot's neck.

"I'm so sorry," Margot whispers, and she doesn't just mean for that night in December, and she's hoping her sister knows it. She feels Hannah's arm push back against her, her hands curled into fists that begin to beat against her, feebly, and she doesn't let herself breathe.

"You were dead," Hannah cries, and Margot begins to feel her own eyes tear up. "I thought — I thought you were dead."

"I'm not, okay?"

"But you were —"

"I love you," Margot cuts her off, and she thinks that even if her little sister is fighting against her right now, even if she hates her, being able to feel the warmth of her skin is an anchor holding her to shore.

"I love you," Hannah says, and she sounds bitter about it. Margot can't blame her, hoping she just needs time, and maybe one day she'll be able to hug her back and it won't hurt them both.

When Margot looks up and breathes — deep, warm, deserving — the air that fills her lungs feels clean.

It's around a month after Margot is home again that she stumbles across the roll of film that Jake had left her.

"I don't even know if I want to get it developed," she tells Sandra in her session that week. "It's like . . . this is the only piece I have left of him, as he was, you know?"

“Yeah, I get it,” Sandra nods, pen clicking. “You don’t think you want to just *know*, though?”

“I’m not sure,” she admits. “It’s like, on the one hand, this is the last ever undeveloped roll of film that Jake Johnson ever shot. And part of me is okay with that, because I think I’ve worked a lot on healing and coming to terms with the fact that this is my life now.”

Sandra gestures for her to go on, and Margot thinks to herself that even just six months ago, she was nowhere near a place where she could talk as openly about her feelings as she is now.

“But on the other hand, I think I want to know what he was in the middle of taking pictures of,” she continues. “He had this thing where he would spend a whole roll just focused on this one subject. Just, like, different angles, different perspectives, that sort of thing. And there’s a part of me that’s dying to know what his last project was.”

“I don’t think that’s a bad idea,” Sandra says, crossing one leg over the other. She’s dressed in a brown turtleneck and slacks today, looking every part the therapist, and Margot was sure to comment on it as soon as she walked into her office. “It could give you some closure.”

“Me, closure?” Margot chuckles. “I’m not sure if those two can mix.”

The film roll sits in her pocket like a pile of lead, and Margot allows herself to close her fingers around it, almost able to pretend like it’s his hand she’s touching. It’s not the same.

“Have you applied to colleges?” her father asks her one day in the kitchen, and Margot nearly spills her bowl of mac and cheese all over her lap.

It's April now, only a month away from graduation, and miraculously, Margot will be able to cross the stage with her classmates. Her grades are something to be desired, but they're not as bad as they were in the beginning, and she's quit all of her extracurriculars.

Her guidance counselor keeps telling her she has one hell of a personal statement. Margot thinks this is kind of an obtuse thing to say.

"Well," she says, considering her next words carefully. "I haven't . . . *not* applied for colleges, if that makes sense?"

"It does not," he tells her, and she might laugh if this wasn't more than slightly serious. He takes a seat in the kitchen chair across from her, and she drops her fork into her bowl of now-forgotten lunch. She has a feeling this is going to be a longer conversation than she's looking for.

"So, I haven't actually submitted an application," she admits, and she can feel her cheeks turning red. This is the first time she's actually admitted it to someone out loud, and at this point, she's been lying for so long that she's started to believe it all herself.

"I see," she hears him say, but she's not looking at him, instead focusing on a knot in the wood of the kitchen table. Before, she would probably have committed to play volleyball somewhere, and the next four years of her life would be pretty set in stone. She doesn't want to see the look of disappointment on her father's face.

"Margot, look at me."

She's biting her lip — it's not her cuticles anymore, at least, she'd been able to unlearn that habit — and finally looks up, and she sees that he's close to tears. Margot feels her throat constrict, and it's like a bucket of freezing cold water has been dumped on her head.

"Dad —"

“Sweetie, I don’t care that you haven’t applied anywhere,” he tells her, his voice breaking. “And I hate that you’re nervous right now. You could tell me you were going to join the circus, and I wouldn’t care.”

Margot laughs, and she’s crying too. She hasn’t talked to him about any of this yet, not the way that she has with Hannah and she’s hinted at with her mother, and now that it’s here, it’s not as awful as she’d made it out to be in her head for all these months.

“You don’t care that I lied?”

He reaches across the table and grabs his hand in hers. It used to be huge, she remembers thinking once, but it’s still just as warm and strong as it’s always been.

“I mean, I wish you hadn’t, sure,” he admits, using his free hand to swipe the few tears that had fallen off his cheeks. “But honestly, Margs? I just want you to be happy. I just want you to be okay.”

She nods, squeezing his fingers, the pad of her index brushing against the metal of his wedding band. “Me too.”

“Do you want to go to college?” he asks. “I’m realizing your mother and I never really asked you or your sister that growing up.”

Margot thinks that the thought of leaving Deer Grove sounds like simultaneously the best and worst thing in the world. Leaving her hometown, this place where everyone knows everything about everyone and all they’ll ever be able to do is see her as the sad little girlfriend of Jake Johnson, sounds like a breath of fresh air. Going somewhere for college, finding something she’s passionate about the way that Jake loved photography, meeting people who won’t think of her as a tragedy — it sounds like a dream.

Leaving Jake behind, physically, metaphorically — that’s an entirely different beast.

She tells her father that, choking over the latter and struggling to maintain eye contact with him all the while, and he listens to her with his brows furrowed into a thoughtful expression.

“Have you thought about a gap year?” he asks. “Or even a gap semester?”

In truth, she hadn't. It makes sense, though, considering most colleges she would even be interested in had already closed their applications for the fall, and she has no idea what she wants to study, or how far away from home she can stand to go.

“What would I do, then? I don't want to just, like, sit here with my thoughts. That didn't work out so great in the past,” she chuckles. She catches herself, seeing the look on his face.

“Sorry.”

“You could just work on yourself, sweetheart,” he smiles warmly and Margot can see a younger version of him, the father who taught her to swim. She thinks that if there is a second chance, she can see it in this kind of smile. “There's no rush. You're so young, you have so much more time than you think.”

Jake didn't, though.

“I guess,” she says instead, because she's been working on not being so much of an asshole to the people that are just trying to help. “I don't know, Dad. It's weird seeing everyone at school, like, know what they're doing.”

He laughs as he pulls open another cabinet, stacking the clean plates on top of each other. “They don't know what they're doing, Margot. No one does, especially not people your age. You're just maybe a little more honest with yourself about it.”

Margot nods, and the weight on her shoulders has eased just a little bit, and the air in her lungs is exiting a little more smoothly.

“Do you wanna get ice cream when you’re done?”

Margot wonders if her father will ever forgive her, if there will be a time when their jokes are unlaced with grief. “Of course I do.”

Margot goes to her senior prom with a group of old teammates, in a navy blue dress that Hannah helped her pick out that makes her feel pretty, and there’s only one moment during the night where she feels Jake’s absence like an old wound.

It happens when she sees the photo booth, and she feels like her eyes were drawn to it as soon as she stepped into the banquet hall of the country club her high school’s prom committee had rented out.

“I never don’t look like an idiot in those,” Jake had told her once, and she had agreed, and he had punched her shoulder.

She takes pictures with her friends, and she can tell they know when she’s thinking about him, and they’re trying their best to distract her from it. They pull her onto the dance floor for every song, jumping around like they’re in the middle of a mosh pit instead of a school-sanctioned event, and she feels grateful for them.

During a slow song, though, she manages to sneak off the floor and heads to the photobooth by herself. She sits there and smiles, trying to ignore the tears pricking at the corner of her eyes, and she even manages to make a dumb face for a few of them.

Margot leaves the space next to her empty. She hopes that he can see her, wherever he is. It still hurts, and probably always will, but it’s manageable now, and she doesn’t feel as angry as she used to.

She hopes he’s proud of her. She is.

Towards the end of May, Margot dons her cap and gown, slips on her heels, and finds herself sitting in a metal chair on the football field. It's sunny, not a cloud in the sky, and Margot kicks at the turf with her toes as her classmates wait for their names to be called.

In between Maya Jackson and Luke Johnson is an empty seat. When their principal comes to his name, she pauses, falling silent, and the only sound Margot can hear is that of her own breathing. No one has to say his name to know who the moment of silence is for, and as Margot looks around, she sees expressions on her classmates' faces that mirror her own.

"Jacob Johnson," she says quietly to herself, just because she feels like someone should. No one pays any attention to her, no one makes any indication that they've heard that she said anything at all, but Margot doesn't mind. It was for him, above anything else, and maybe for herself, too.

She might never speak to the majority of these people again, but Margot thinks that there is something unifying in tragedy. There's not much that's more tragic than realizing your own mortality when you're still a kid, and there was nothing more tragic than losing Jake Johnson.

Her principal moves on and calls Luke's name, and graduation continues. Eventually, she makes her way to the stage, and her own name is called, and she is no longer in high school.

After she throws her cap in the air, smiles for pictures, and accepts a bouquet of flowers from Hannah, she takes a moment to look back at her high school. Somewhere in those hallways, Margot fell in love, and even if he's gone now, those moments will stay with her for the rest of her life.

Leaving this school, leaving this chapter of her life where Jake's presence and his subsequent absence had all but defined it, seems like it has the power to be a fresh start of some

sort. Margot has talked about this in therapy, both with her group in the hospital and then with Sandra once she'd come home, but she thinks that the thing she wants the most in the world is to give herself permission to be okay again, and maybe one day even find some joy.

It's raining when Margot finds herself inside of the Walgreens, her damp hair sticking to her forehead as she lets the doors swing shut behind her. It's nearly July, and it's a humid kind of rain that makes your skin feel sticky and fogs up your car windows. She had not known it was going to rain, having forgotten to check the weather app on her phone that morning, so her umbrella is sitting at home somewhere in her room, and she is admittedly soaked. She hardly notices it, instead focused on the roll of film that's been sitting in her pocket for what feels like forever.

Today is the day she begins to let go.

She had talked about it with Sandra extensively for the past month or so, having gone over the pros and cons until it felt like they were finishing each other's sentences, and Sandra finally told her that she needed to make a decision.

In the end, her curiosity had gotten the better of her, and after some quick Google research, she had found that her local Walgreens still developed film for a small fee. If Jake had been here, he would have pushed her to develop the film herself, telling her that she wouldn't get the full *experience* if she sent it away to have some company do it for her — he had always been an obnoxious photography snob, and she had always made fun of him for it.

She wonders if it might have been cathartic for her to develop the film herself, to spend hours in the darkroom just as Jake had done. In a perfect world, she thinks that she might have

been able to feel his presence there, just like she does whenever she sees something that reminds her of him, and maybe it would have helped her to breathe a little easier.

The world is cruel, though, and her fear of doing something wrong and completely ruining the photos before they could be finished and she could see them is holding her back. Plus, there's a part of her that thinks that sitting in that cramped closet in the dark, Jake's energy surrounding her like a ghost that just won't leave her alone, would be too much to handle. After over a year of therapy, she's starting to learn her limits.

She slips the small roll of film into the little envelope that sits by the photo machine, and the cashier, a younger boy who goes to her old high school whose name she can't remember, lets her borrow a pen to fill out her contact information. She does so neatly, methodically, applying just a bit too much pressure to the paper as her fingers grow white in her grip.

Margot gives the boy the envelope and her money, and she watches as he tosses it into a box by the counter with identical-looking envelopes.

"It'll be ready in about two weeks," he tells her, his attention already on his next task, and Margot stares at him.

"Be careful with that," she says, her voice short. She knows that he has no idea of the importance of this individual roll of film, but she pushes down that rational thought to cling to her irritation.

"Um, okay," he gives her a look, but his voice cracks, and his cheeks flush red. "Sorry."

"It's — it's okay," she says. "Just be careful."

Two weeks later, she sits in the parking lot in her car that she used to smoke in with shaking hands, the newly developed photos gripped in her fingers. The cashier had been the

same, and she still can't remember his name, but she thinks it must have started with a B. She had made an effort to be a little less snappish with him this time, and he had still given her the same slightly confused expression — she wonders why she even tries sometimes.

There's something that's sort of foreboding, something scary about opening these photos and seeing the last pictures that Jake had ever taken. It's almost like he's gone for real, now, like the last possible question mark she had had with him is finally being severed, and she is forced to let him go. Maybe this is healthy, and maybe this is something that will help her. She prays to whoever is listening that this will let her breathe a little easier.

Margot is anxious for a cigarette, but she's been off those for a little over a week now, and she thinks that it might be counterintuitive for her to restart the clock on account of Jake. She's switched to Diet Coke now — the carbonation will surely rot her teeth, but it probably won't kill her in the long run. She's starting to think that she's deserving of a “long run.”

She pulls open the envelope, and she lets the pictures fall into her lap, and her eyes are screwed shut. The anticipation is starting to make her sweat even more in the July heat, even with her car's air conditioning on at full blast, and despite the nauseous feeling in her stomach, she just wants to see his new pictures again for the first time. It's something — one of the many — that she didn't realize she would miss until it was gone.

Finally, she opens her eyes, and she lets herself take it all in. There's about thirty photos in all, Jake having not managed to complete the roll before he'd stepped out onto the lake for the last time, and Margot chokes out a laugh when she realizes that nearly all of them are of her.

Her laughing, posing, scowling, unknowing that her picture is being taken — there's two dozen snapshots of herself sitting in her lap, and she's glad she's sitting alone in her car because she doesn't know what she would say if anyone else were there with her.

It's on the precipice of being too much for her to handle, and she finds herself reaching across the center console into the glove compartment for her half-empty box of cigarettes. With trembling fingers, she sticks one in between her lips, but she pauses in lighting it.

"God dammit, Jake," she mutters, letting the cigarette fall from between her teeth into her lap with the photos. She punches the steering wheel, lets her forehead rest on it, tries to breathe.

It comes in warm, heavy sobs, but she's alone, so she lets them flow freely down her cheeks without any sign of stopping. The photos look blurry now, and she tosses them into the passenger seat before her tears can drip down and ruin them. The cigarette falls to the floor by her feet and she makes no move to grab it.

"...And I just lost it," Margot finishes, staring down at the slightly wrinkled envelope in her lap. She's been staring at it for most of her session, and she knows that Sandra's been itching for her to talk about it. She's been kind enough, for once, to let her get there on her own.

"Why do you think that is?" Sandra asks, and even though the office is air conditioned, Margot can see sweat gathering on her upper lip.

"I guess — I don't know."

"I think you have an idea."

Margot rolls her eyes, but she's not surprised. Sandra has never not pushed her in one of their sessions, and deep down, Margot knows she's better for it.

"I feel like I don't want to — or maybe I do want to, I don't know, it's just hard — know how he saw me through that camera," she explains carefully, picking at a corner of the envelope with her thumb.

"I see."

“Yeah,” she continues. “I don’t know how to describe it. I guess it just hit me a little hard, seeing all these pictures of me and knowing that he took them, and maybe he would’ve given them to me some day. Maybe he would have kept them for himself, and I never would’ve known about it. Maybe it was for a project. I don’t know, I’m never *going* to know, and I think that’s what’s bothering me.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Sandra says, and Margot smirks. Even after all this time, she still feels the need to celebrate every small victory with her therapist. “Maybe we could go through them together, and we could talk about them? How does that sound?”

Margot nods, and it feels right. She moves to the carpet, her legs crossed under her, and Sandra moves to her level too. They sit there together for the remainder of her session, photos spread out all over the floor like some sort of conspiracy board, and Sandra listens dutifully as Margot explains the context behind every single one — even with the blurry ones, the ones that didn’t come out, she comes up with an explanation.

As she leaves the office building and makes her way back to her car, she realizes that for the first time in a long time, talking about him didn’t hurt. The guilt that’s been eating at her is starting to subside, and it feels a bit like the beginning of something new.

On the two year anniversary of the night that Jake died, Margot finds herself standing at his grave, her hands shoved deep into the pockets of her parka. She tries not to come here often, feeling much more connected to him when she’s at the lake, but it felt like something she needed to do today, so here she is.

“Hi Jake,” she says, her voice soft. It’s weird talking to a headstone, weirder still to see his name completely written out like that — Jacob Bernard Johnson. He had always hated his middle name.

She kicks at the snow with her boot. “Today marks two years, dude. That’s 730 days. I looked it up because you know I’m piss poor at math.”

Margot chuckles at her own joke, and she knows wherever he is, he’s probably laughing at her too. The thought doesn’t feel so much like drowning anymore.

“Anyway,” she continues. “I just wanted to come and say goodbye. We’re going down to Florida for the holidays. Dad thought we all needed some sun. So I won’t be around for a bit. It’s not like last time, though, don’t worry.”

She wonders if he did. Worry, that is. She’s not sure what she believes in, whether it’s God and Heaven and some sort of afterlife or whatever, but she feels like wherever he is, she can see her now. She hopes he’s happy with the choices she’s made, the person she’s turning into.

“I also wanted to tell you that I’m going to school in the fall,” Margot says, grinning even though he’s not here to see it. “I don’t know if you heard, but I got in to one. Not even for sports, either, and it’s DUS.”

She thinks that her life would have been completely different if he was still here. She would be nearly finished with her first collegiate season of whatever sport she had committed to by now, and she would probably major in something business-y because her mom said that it gives you job security. Maybe they would still be together, maybe she would have him blocked on every social media, an ex to call whenever she drank too much. It’s a weird feeling to know that this is something she can never know.

“None of them are going to know about you, dude,” she says, and she purses her lips together to keep her eyes from welling up. “None of them are going to know about me, either.”

Someone had left a bouquet of flowers here recently, probably one of his parents. Margot had heard that they had separated, Jake’s father moved into a condo one town over, and she remembers reading somewhere that couples are more likely to split up after the loss of a child.

“I’ll tell them, though,” she nods, more to herself than anyone else. “I’ll tell them all. I won’t let — I’m not going to forget you, I promise.”

If she strains her ears, she can hear the wind whistling through the trees, branches shaking. She wishes it would pick up, that he would send her some sort of sign, but she knows that this is something she has to do for herself regardless.

“I’ll love you forever, Jake Johnson,” Margot whispers. “And don’t you forget it.”

Somewhere overhead, it begins to snow.

epilogue

Margot's apartment is small, just a kitchen that combines with a living room, a bedroom, a bathroom, and a closet or two, but the windows let the sunlight in in a way that fills all those rooms with a warm glow, and it's in a city she always dreamed about but never thought she'd make it to. Deer Grove is hundreds of miles away, her childhood bedroom and all the people that used to make her heart hurt a chapter in the book that her mind has chosen to close forever.

There are boxes surrounding her full of the things she loves. Novels filled with dog-eared pages annotated to mark the passages she wants to remember. Cookbooks, unopened but purchased in a flurry of excitement over the idea of learning something new. Vinyl records, whole boxes of them, old and new, despite her father's warning that she didn't have the space. Pictures in frames of all her friends, of everyone she loves, smiling at the camera in a way that she'd once never allowed herself to hope for.

One picture in particular. It's black and white, slightly grainy, and it's followed her to every room she's ever lived in since she was seventeen.

It's Jake. It's always Jake, but this picture in particular has always been her favorite. He's grinning somewhere to the side of the camera, smirking really, and she remembers when he took it: his film camera on a tripod as she stood off to the side, trying to make him laugh while he tried to be serious. His brown hair is slicked back like an old film star, his sunglasses perched on his nose and his hands deep in the pockets of his jean jacket.

She still has that jacket. It sits in a box, somewhere in this room, and it's a little tighter around the shoulders than it used to be. It doesn't smell like him, not anymore, and part of her hates it, but it's okay.

There are days when Margot feels the ice begin to shift under her again, days where she closes her eyes and she's a teenager with her world ripped out from her feet. But for every blue day, every down day where she feels herself begin to fracture, there are at least three where the sun lifts her up and reminds her that she's alive and she's loved.

Margot thinks that growing up means learning to live with your losses. It means sitting with your regrets and finding your peace with them, using your mistakes to make yourself better. She feels better, a world away from who she used to be, and she knows that wherever Jake is, he would want her to be happy. One day she will grow old and return to the earth, and her soul will go to where Jake is, and she'll see him again.

Until then, though, Margot will be okay.

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EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

Graduating May 2021

College of the Liberal Arts

Bachelor of Arts in English, Minor: Technical Writing

- Dean's List, Graduated with Honors
- Paterno Fellows Program – Honors program within College of the Liberal Arts
- Schreyer Honors College Scholar
- Thesis: *And I Will Say Your Name: A Novella*

EXPERIENCE

The Pennsylvania State University, College of the Liberal Arts

University Park, PA

Strategic Communications Intern

April 2020 – Present

- Coordinate social media and analytics for platforms including Facebook and Twitter
- Interview and create article profiles of current students and alumni for the University's official news website

OnwardState.com

University Park, PA

Associate Editor

September 2019 – Present

- Write a minimum of 2 articles per week for an independent, student-run Penn State news site that works to generate honest conversation in the hopes of enriching the Penn State community
- Extensively cover news events related to Penn State
- Generate media content of the highest quality by editing and strengthening the work of other staff members at least twice per week

Study Abroad

London, England

Student

May 2019 – June 2019

- Spent 5 weeks in country, as well as 1 extra week of enrichment, studying English and Rhetoric by taking classes in London and traveling to locations such as Oxford and Edinburgh, Scotland

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

Delta Phi Epsilon, Delta Pi Chapter

University Park, PA

Vice President of Operations

April 2019 – December 2020

- Created and managed a budget of over \$100,000
- Supervised actions of chapter of over 150 women

Risk Management Coordinator

January 2018 – April 2019

- Facilitated chapter-wide educational program
- Enforced risk policies to uphold sorority's level of standards

RELEVANT COURSEWORK

Creative Writing: Advanced Nonfiction Writing • Advanced Fiction Writing • Introduction to Creative Writing • TV Script Writing • Introduction to Article Writing • Writing the Literature of the American West • American Modernist Writers on War • Creative Writing and Bob Dylan

Technical Writing: Interactive Learning and Web Design • Write for the Web • Advanced Business Writing • Writing for the Humanities • Technical Writing and Editing • Introduction to Web Design • The Editorial Process

SKILLS

Writing • Public Speaking • WordPress • Collaboration • Teamwork • Social Media Analytics • Problem Solving • Copy Editing • Microsoft • Google Drive