

the truth won't let her go

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Y O U

TESS SHARPE

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Cover photograph by Yojik

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ISBN 978-1-4231-8784-4

Visit www.hyperionteens.com

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For Gramz,

who gave me all my great loves.

And for Mom,

who believed this would happen, even when I didn't.

It doesn't start here.

You'd think it would: two terrified girls in the middle of nowhere, cowering together, eyes bulging at the gun in his hand.

But it doesn't start here.

It starts the first time I almost die.

The first time, I'm fourteen and Trev's driving us home from swim practice. Mina has the window rolled down, her hands dancing to the music, rings glinting in the late afternoon sunlight as we speed past barbed wire fences and scrabbly ranches, the mountains stretching out behind them. We sing along to the radio in the backseat, and Trev laughs at my off-key voice.

It happens fast: the screech of metal on metal, glass everywhere. I'm not wearing my seat belt, and I pitch forward as Mina's scream drowns out the music.

Then everything's black.

The second time, I'm seventeen and annoyed with Mina. We're already late, and now she's turning off the highway, onto Burnt Oak Road.

"Just one little detour. It'll be quick, I promise."

"Fine," I say, giving in easy, like always.

This is a mistake.

The first time, I wake up in a hospital room, hooked to an IV and beeping machines.

There are tubes everywhere. I claw at the one down my throat, panic climbing inside me, and someone grabs my hand away. It takes me a second to realize it's Mina beside me, to meet her green eyes and focus enough to let her words sink in.

"You're going to be fine," she promises.

I stop fighting and trust her.

It's only later that I learn she's lying.

The second time, I remember everything. The beam of the car's brights. The shooter's eyes shining through his mask. How steady his finger is on that trigger. Mina's hand clutching mine, our nails digging into each other's flesh.

After, I'll trace my fingers over those bloody half-moon marks and realize they're all I have left

her.

The first time, I spend weeks in the hospital. The doctors put me back together piece by piece. Surgical scars snake their way up my leg, around my knee, down my chest.

Battle scars, Mina calls them. “They’re fierce.”

Her hands shake when she helps me button my sweater.

The second time, there is no hospital. There are no scars.

There is only blood.

It’s everywhere. I press hard against Mina’s chest, but my jacket’s already soaked through.

“It’s okay,” I keep saying. Over and over. She stares up at me with shocked, wet eyes and takes gulping breaths. Her body shivers beneath my hands.

“Sophie...” My name wheezes out of her. She lifts her hand, drags it toward mine. “Soph—”

It’s the last thing she ever says.

NOW (JUNE)

“So, today’s the big day,” Dr. Charles says.

I look across the desk. From her shiny pumps to her tasteful, “natural” makeup, there’s not a hair out of place on her. When I met Dr. Charles, all I wanted to do was mess her up. Slip the glasses down her nose, crush one of those perfectly pressed French cuffs. Tear into that neat, orderly mask and get down to the grit, the chaos.

Chaos has no place in recovery, Dr. Charles would say.

But I crave it. Sometimes even more than the Oxy.

That’s what happens when you’re trapped by clean white walls, endless therapy sessions, and pipe music in new-age music for three months. The order and rules get to you, make you want to screw up just for the messiness of it.

But I can’t afford that. Not now. Freedom is so close, I can almost taste it.

“I guess,” I say, when I realize that Dr. Charles is waiting for an answer. She’s big on getting answers to her nonquestions.

“Are you nervous?” she asks.

“No.” It’s the truth. I can count on one hand how many times I’ve been honest with her. Including this one.

Three months of lying is exhausting, even when it’s necessary.

“There’s no shame in being nervous,” Dr. Charles says. “It’s a natural feeling, given the circumstances.”

Of course, when I finally do tell her the truth, she doesn’t believe me.

Story of my life.

“It is a little scary....” I let my voice go reluctant, and Dr. Charles’s neutral therapist mask almost slips at the prospect of a confession. Getting me to open up has been like pulling teeth. I can tell she bugs her. One time she asked me to walk her through the night of Mina’s murder, and I knocked over the coffee table, glass shattering all over as I tried to get away from her—just another thing I’ve destroyed in Mina’s name.

Dr. Charles stares like she’s trying to see through me. I stare back. She may have her therapist mask, but I have my “I’m a drug addict” face. She can’t ignore that, because deep down, buried underneath all the other things I am (crippled, broken, scarred, and grieving), I *am* a drug addict—always will be. Dr. Charles understands that I know this about myself. That I’ve accepted it.

She thinks she's the one responsible for my change from raging to recovering, but she's not. She doesn't get to take the credit for that.

So I stare her down. And finally she breaks the eye contact and looks at her leather portfolio, writing a few notes. "You've made tremendous progress in the time you've spent at Seaside Wellness, Sophie. There will be challenges as you adjust to living a drug-free life, but I feel confident that with the therapist your parents have arranged for you and your commitment to recovery, you'll succeed."

"Sounds like a plan."

She shuffles some papers, and just when I think I'm free and clear, she drops the bomb: "Before we go downstairs, I'd like to talk with you a little more. About Mina."

She looks up at me then, carefully monitoring my response. Waiting to see if I'll break her new coffee table. (It's wood this time—I guess she figured she needed something sturdier.)

I can't stop it: the way my lips tighten up and my heartbeat thuds in my ears. I force myself to breathe, in and out through my nose like in yoga, relaxing my mouth.

I can't slip up. Not now. Not when I'm this close to getting out.

"What about Mina?" My voice is so steady, I want to pat myself on the back.

"We haven't talked about her in a while." She's still watching me. Waiting for me to freak, like she has every time she's forced this. "Going home is a big adjustment. A lot of memories will come up. You need to make sure you're in the right frame of mind to deal with them without..." She tugs at her leather cuff.

This is another of her tactics. Dr. Charles likes to make me finish her sentences. Own up to my mistakes and faults.

"Without going on an Oxy binge?" I supply.

She nods. "Mina and her murder are triggers. It's important you're aware of that. That you're prepared for the challenges her memory may bring up—and the guilt."

I have to stifle my knee-jerk response. The one that screams, "*Her murder wasn't about drugs!*"

It's no use. No one will believe the truth. No one will believe *me*. Not with the evidence in front of them. That fucker in the mask had covered his bases—he knew I'd never notice the drugs he planted on me, not after he'd shot Mina and knocked me out. My mom called in every favor imaginable to get me into Seaside to deal with my supposed relapse instead of being booked for possession.

Dr. Charles smiles at me. It's both bland and encouraging, a warring twist of pink lipstick.

This is my final test; I have to be careful with my words. They're my ticket out of here. But it's hard, almost impossible, to keep my voice from shaking, to stop the memories from creeping back. (I remember Mina, laughing with me that morning, both of us unaware that she'd end with the day.)

"I loved Mina," I say. I've practiced it a hundred times, but this can't sound rehearsed. "And her murder is something I have to deal with for the rest of my life. But Mina would want me to move on. She'd want me to be happy. And she'd want me to stay clean. So I'm going to do that."

“And what about her killer?” Dr. Charles asks. “Do you feel ready to talk to the police about what you might know?”

“I loved Mina,” I say again, and this time my voice does shake. This time it’s the truth, and nothing but. “And if I knew who killed her, I would be screaming his name at the top of my lungs. But he was wearing a mask. I don’t know who it was.”

Dr. Charles leans back and examines me like I’m a fish in a bowl. I have to bite the inside of my lip to stop it from trembling. I keep my breathing steady, like I’m holding a difficult yoga pose and have to power through.

“She was my best friend,” I say. “Don’t you think I know how I screwed up? I barely slept sometimes, thinking about what I could’ve done differently that night. How I could’ve stopped it. How it’s my fault. I know all of that. I just have to learn to live with it.”

This is the truth.

The guilt—it’s real. It just doesn’t come from the place that Dr. Charles thinks it does.

It *is* my fault. For not stopping Mina. For not asking more questions. For letting her act like a newspaper story was something to keep top secret. For following her lead, like always. For not being faster. For being crippled, unable to run or fight or do anything to protect her.

“I’d be happy to talk to Detective James again,” I say. “But he doesn’t think I’m the most reliable witness.”

“Do you blame him?” Dr. Charles asks.

“He’s just doing his job.” The lie feels like glass against my gums, the words grinding through my skin. Hating Detective James is second nature at this point. If only he’d listened to me...

But I can’t think about that now. I’ve got to focus. Mina’s killer is out there. And Detective James isn’t going to find him.

“I know going home will be hard. But I feel like you’ve given me the tools to handle everything worse than better than I used to.”

Dr. Charles smiles, and relief hits me like a two-by-four. She’s finally buying it.

“I’m delighted to hear you say that. I know we had a rocky start, Sophie. But our last few sessions you’ve had a much more positive outlook. And that’s very important, with everything that’s ahead of you. Recovery is not easy, and the work never stops.” She checks her watch. “Your parents should be here by now. Why don’t I take you to the waiting area?”

“Okay.”

We walk in silence down the corridor, past the group session going on in the rec room. That circle of chairs has been my own personal hell for the last three months. To have to sit there and *share* with people I barely know has been excruciating. I’ve spent every minute lying my ass off.

“They must be running late,” Dr. Charles says when we get to the empty waiting room.

Right. Late.

She's either forgetting our last strained family-day session or she honestly believes the best people.

I don't.

Which is why I wonder if my parents are late. Or if they're just not coming.

THREE AND A HALF MONTHS AGO (SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD)

“Don’t make me do this. Please, Mom. I don’t need to go anywhere—I’m clean. I *swear!*”

“I don’t want to hear it, Sophie.” Mom snaps my suitcase shut and marches downstairs. I follow. I have to fight her. Make her believe me.

Someone has to.

My dad’s waiting for us at the front door, his coat over his arm like he’s off to work. “Ready?” Dad asks.

“Yes,” Mom says. Her heels click across the Spanish-tile floor as she takes her place next to him.

“No.” I plant myself at the bottom of the stairs, square my shoulders, and cross my arms. My back leg shakes as disappointment bears down on me from both sides. “I won’t go. You can’t make me.”

My dad sighs and looks at his feet.

“Get in the car, Sophie Grace,” Mom orders.

I say it low and slowly. “I don’t need to go anywhere. I didn’t relapse. Mina and I weren’t on scoring. I’m clean. I’ve been clean for over six months. I’ll take any drug test you give me.”

“The police found the pills in your jacket, Sophie,” Dad says. His voice is hoarse and his eyes are red. He’s been crying. Crying over me. Over what he thinks I’ve done. “The bottle had your fingerprints on it. You were supposed to be at Amber’s house, but you girls were out at Booker’s Point instead. You were buying drugs. Even if you didn’t get around to taking the pills, you bought them—they didn’t just magically appear in your pocket. Seaside is the best choice for you right now. Do you know how hard your mother had to fight just so you wouldn’t get a drug charge on your record?”

I look desperately at each of them. Dad won’t even look at me; Mom’s face is frozen; she’s in ic queen mode. Nothing will crack it.

I have to try.

“I’ve told you before, they weren’t mine. Detective James has it all wrong. We weren’t out at Booker’s Point for drugs—Mina was meeting someone because of a newspaper story. The police are going after the wrong people, and they won’t believe me. I need *you* to believe me.”

Mom rounds on me, the suitcase swinging in her fist. “Do you understand what you’ve put me and your father through? What about Mrs. Bishop? Do you care what she must be feeling right now? She already lost a husband, and now she has to lose her daughter, too! Trev will never see his sister again. And all because *you* wanted to get high.”

She spits out the words, and I feel like less than nothing. A speck on her shoe. Narrowing her eyes at me, she goes on, “So if you don’t get in that car, if you don’t go to Seaside and learn how to sta

clean, I swear to God, Sophie..." Tears glimmer in her eyes as the anger evaporates.

"I keep almost losing you," she whispers, and her voice trembles and cracks with the weight of the words. "This is what I should've done the first time, but I didn't. I'm not going to make that mistake again." Her voice hardens. "Get in the car."

I don't move. I can't. Moving would be like admitting she's right.

Six months. Five days. Ten hours.

That's how long I've been clean, and I repeat it over and over to myself. As long as I focus on that, as long as I'm committed to making that number rise, minute by minute, day by day, I'm going to be okay. I have to be.

"Now, Sophie!"

I shake my head and grip the banister. "I can't let you do this."

All I can think about is Mina. Mina's in the ground and her killer's walking free, and the cops are looking in all the wrong places.

My dad grabs me around the waist, breaking my hold, and lifts me over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. It's gentle; Dad is always gentle with me, like how he used to carry me upstairs after the accident. But I'm done with his gentleness. It doesn't make me feel safe anymore. I pound on his back, red faced, yelling, but it doesn't stop him. He yanks the front door open, and my mother stands on the porch, watching us, her arms hugging her body like it'll protect her.

He strides down the driveway and dumps me into the car, his face stony as he slides into the driver's seat.

"Dad." Tears are slick down my cheeks. "Please. I need you to believe me."

He ignores me, fires up the engine, and drives.

NOW (JUNE)

My parents still haven't shown up. Dr. Charles keeps checking her watch and tapping her pen against her knee.

"I can wait by myself."

Frown lines mar her smooth forehead. This is not the way things are done. My parents should have been tearfully embracing my new and improved, squeaky-clean self at least twenty minutes ago.

"Let me make a phone call," she says.

I lean my head against the wall and close my eyes. I sit and wait, wondering if she'll even let me call a cab if she can't get hold of my parents.

About ten minutes tick by before someone taps my knee. I open my eyes, expecting to see Dr. Charles. But instead, for the first time in months, I feel a real smile stretch across my face.

"Aunt Macy!" I throw myself into her arms, almost knocking her over. My chin hooks over her shoulder as I hug her. Macy's a few inches shorter than me, but there's something about the way she carries herself that makes her seem taller. She smells like jasmine and gunpowder, and she's the best thing I've seen in what feels like forever.

"Hey, kid." She grins and hugs me back, her callused palms warm against my shoulders. Her hair, blond like mine, is down her back in a long braid. Her tanned skin makes her eyes look shockingly blue. "Your mom got held up on a case. Sent me instead."

I haven't heard from Macy the entire time I've been at Seaside, even though after the first two weeks, I was allowed letters from people other than my parents. But now she's here, and I have to bite my lip against the relief that rocks inside me.

She came. She still cares. She doesn't hate me. Even if she does believe everyone else, she *came*.

"Can we please get out of here?" I ask thickly, fighting tears.

"Yeah." She cups the back of my head, her fingers tangling in my long hair. "Let's get you checked out."

Five minutes spent signing a stack of papers, and I'm free.

I feel like running the moment I step outside. I'm half-convinced that any second, Dr. Charles will come slamming through the doors, suddenly seeing through all my lies. I want to sprint to Aunt Macy's ancient Volvo, lock myself in.

But running isn't an option. It hasn't been for almost four years, since my right leg and back got messed up in the car crash. Instead, I walk as fast as my limp allows.

“Your mom wanted me to tell you how sorry she is that she couldn’t come,” Aunt Macy says as she starts the car.

“And Dad’s excuse?”

“Out of town. Dental convention.”

“Figures.”

Macy raises an eyebrow but doesn’t say anything as we pull out of the parking lot and onto the highway. I roll the window down, trailing my fingers in the hot summer air. I keep my eyes fixed on the buildings blurring past me, away from her questioning glances.

I’m afraid to speak. I don’t know what she’s been told. The only visitors I was allowed were my parents, and they came only when they had to.

So I stay quiet.

Nine months. Two weeks. Six days. Thirteen hours.

My mantra. I whisper the days under my breath, pressing the words against my lips, barely letting them out into the world.

I have to keep adding to it. I have to stay clean, stay focused.

Mina’s killer is out there, walking around, free and clear. Every time I think about whoever he is getting away with it, I want to bury myself with a handful of pills, but I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.

Nine months. Two weeks. Six days. Thirteen hours.

Aunt Macy tunes the radio to an oldies station and changes lanes. We leave the coast behind, the scenery giving way to redwoods, then pines as we head into the Trinities. I let the air flow through my fingers, enjoying the feeling like a little kid.

We drive in silence for almost an hour. I’m grateful for it, for the chance to absorb the freedom singing in my veins. No more group. No more Dr. Charles. No more white walls and fluorescent lighting.

Right now, I can forget what’s waiting for me eighty miles past those foothills up ahead. I can trick myself into thinking that it’s this easy: the wind in my hair and between my fingers, the radio on, and miles of freedom ahead.

“You hungry?” Aunt Macy points at a billboard advertising a diner off exit 34.

“I could eat.”

The diner is noisy, with customers chatting and dishes clanging. I trace whorls of faded glitter embedded in the Formica tabletop as the big-haired waitress takes our orders.

After she hurries away, silence overtakes us. It’s like Macy doesn’t know where to start after all this time, and I can’t bear to be the person to speak first. So I excuse myself and head to the bathroom.

I look like crap: pale and too skinny, my jeans hanging off hip bones that used to be a model’s suggestion. I splash water on my face, letting it drip down my chin. Dr. Charles would say I was

avoiding, delaying the inevitable. It's stupid, but I can't help it.

I run my fingers through my straggly blond hair. I haven't worn makeup for months, and the dark smudges underneath my eyes stand out. I press my dry lips together, wishing I had some lip balm.

Everything about me is tired and cracked and *hungry*. In more ways than one. In all ways that a bad.

Nine months. Two weeks. Six days. Fourteen hours.

I dry my face and force myself to walk out of the bathroom, back to the table.

"Fries are good" is all Macy says, dipping one in ketchup.

I wolf down half of my burger, loving it simply because it's not rehab food and doesn't come on a tray. "How's Pete?"

"He's Pete," she says, and I smile, because that pretty much sums it up. Her boyfriend has tranqu down to an art form. "I've got some yoga flows he put together for you." She eats another fry. "Do you keep up with your practice?"

I nod. "Dr. Charles let me bring my mat and blocks. But I couldn't have the strap. I guess she was afraid I'd hang myself or something." It's a lame attempt at a joke that leaves a gaping hole awkward silence between us.

Macy sips her iced tea, looking at me over the glass. I tear a fry in half and squish it between my fingers just for something to do.

"Anything else for you girls?" the waitress asks as she refills my water glass.

"Just the check," Macy says. She doesn't even look at the waitress, keeping her eyes on me. She waits until the woman's behind the counter. "Okay, Sophie. No more bad jokes. No more small talk. Time to tell me the truth."

I feel queasy, and for a second I'm so full of dread, I'm afraid I'll be sick.

She's the only person left who hasn't heard my truth. I'm so afraid she'll do what they all did. Blame me. Refuse to believe me. It takes every shred of strength I've got left to force out: "What do you want to know?"

"Let's start with why you supposedly relapsed two weeks after getting home from Oregon."

When I say nothing, she taps her fork against the edge of her plate. "When your mom called and said they found drugs in your jacket, I was surprised. I thought we'd worked through all that. I could have understood your relapsing if it had been *after* Mina's murder. But this...not so much."

"The pills were in my jacket at the crime scene, so they had to be mine, right? Mina didn't do drugs. I'm the one with the history. I'm the one who'd barely been clean six months when it happened. I'm the reason we were out there in the first place. That's what everyone says." I can't hide the bitterness in my voice.

Macy sits back in the booth, lifts her chin, and peers at me, a sad sort of knowing in her face. "I'm more interested in what *you* have to say."

“I— You—” The words stick in my throat, and then it’s like she’s pulled a plug inside me. A garbled sound wrenches from my mouth, tight and incoherent with relief. “You’re going to listen to me?”

“You’ve earned that from me,” Macy says.

“But you didn’t visit. You never wrote. I thought that you—”

“Your mom.” Macy’s mouth flattens. She has that look in her eye that she always gets before she goes off on a job. A coiled tension that’s dying to leap out. “This has been hard on her,” she continues. “She trusted me to get you clean, and she feels like I’ve failed. Plus, when I found out she’d sent you to Seaside, I may have said some things.”

“What things?”

“I bitched her out,” Macy explains. “And I shouldn’t have, but I was angry and worried. I asked her if I could go see you or at least write, but she didn’t want me involved. I love you, babe, but you’re her kid, not mine. I had to respect her wishes—she is my sister.”

“So you stayed away.”

“I stayed away from you,” Macy says. “But I didn’t stay away from the case.”

I sit up straighter. “What’s that mean?”

Macy opens her mouth, but closes it when the waitress stops by our table, setting the bill down. “You girls take your time,” she says. “Let me know if you need any boxes.”

Macy nods her thanks and waits until the waitress is off taking another order before turning back to me. “Your mom had made her mind up about what happened to you. But I was the one who got you clean. I spent more time with you last year than she did. And I couldn’t do anything for you while you were at Seaside, but I knew how much Mina meant to you. And I knew that if you had any information about her killer, you would have come forward, even if it got you into trouble. I couldn’t shake that feeling, so I put some calls in to a few old friends from the force, asked around, got my hands on their reports, and the head detective’s take on things didn’t click. Even if you and Mina had been out there to score, why would a dealer leave the drugs? That’s evidence.

“The killer shot Mina. He could’ve easily shot you, too, getting rid of both witnesses, but he chose to knock you out. That tells me it wasn’t random; it was targeted. And if he planted the pills on you, that means it was planned.”

Something close to relief starts to uncurl inside me. Everything that she’s saying is everything that I’ve thought, over and over, while I’ve been locked away. Why did he leave me alive? Why did he plant the pills? How did he know enough about me to plant the *right* pills?

“I didn’t know the pills were in my pocket,” I say. “I swear. He must have put them there while I was unconscious—he was gone when I came to. And Mina was...” I have to blink hard and swallow before I’m able to continue. “I had to stop the blood. I used my jacket, but it wasn’t...I left it there after she...after. It wasn’t until Detective James came to the house that anyone even mentioned drugs. Then it didn’t matter to Mom or Dad that my tests from the ER came back clean—they wouldn’t list

to me. No one would.”

“I’m listening,” Macy says. “Tell me what happened. Why were you girls out at Booker’s Point the first place?”

“We were going to our friend Amber’s party,” I say. “But halfway there, Mina said we had to take a detour to the Point. That she had to meet someone for a story she was working on. She was doing an internship at the *Harper Beacon*. When she wouldn’t give me any specifics, I just figured it was an errand for her supervisor, or maybe an interview someone had to reschedule. I didn’t want to make the trip—it was way out in the boonies, and Amber lives on the other side of town. But Mina was...” I can’t say it, that I couldn’t ever deny her anything.

My hands shake, rattling the ice cubes in my glass. I put it down carefully, knotting my fingers together and studying the table like the answer to everything is hidden between the glitter in the Formica.

I haven’t talked about this honestly since the police first questioned me. Dr. Charles tried his hardest, through broken furniture and weeks of silence, but I’d twisted the truth to suit the person she thought I was.

With Macy, I’m finally safe. She’d yanked me back from rock bottom once, and I know she’d do it again. But I’m not at the bottom anymore. I’ve found my footing in that precarious middle place, the gray area where you trade addiction for something almost as dangerous: obsession.

“I saw him before Mina did,” I say. “I saw the gun in his hand. I saw he was wearing a mask. I knew...I knew what he was going to do. I knew there was no way I could outrun him. But Mina might have. I should’ve yelled at her to run. She could’ve gotten away. She would’ve at least had a chance.”

“There’s no way to outrun a bullet,” Macy says. “He wanted to kill Mina. That was why he was there. You couldn’t have stopped him. Nothing could’ve.”

“He said something to her. After he hit me, I fell, and as I was blacking out, I heard him. He said, ‘I warned you.’ And then I heard the shots and I...I couldn’t hold on anymore. When I woke up, it was just us. He was gone.”

My hands are shaking again. I tuck them underneath my thighs, pressing them hard against the red vinyl booth.

“I told Detective James all of this. I told him to talk to the *Beacon* staff. To ask her supervisor who she’d been working on. Did he check her computer? Or her desk? She wrote notes on everything—there have to be somewhere.”

Macy shakes her head. “He talked to everyone, Sophie. Mina’s supervisor, her fellow interns, even the cleaning lady who worked the night shift. He dragged in every known dealer in three counties for questioning, along with most of the kids in your grade, but didn’t find anything to warrant further investigation. Along with a witness testimony that was—well, shaky.” She fiddles with her fork, looking up at me. “Without any fresh evidence or a miraculous confession, it’ll be dismissed as a

unsolved drug-related murder, and that'll be it."

I feel sick inside and grit my teeth. "I can't let that happen."

Macy's eyes soften. "You might have to, babe."

I don't say anything. I keep quiet.

We get up, she pays the bill and tips the waitress before we leave the diner. I'm still silent, the id of never knowing who took Mina away from me burning in my chest. But somehow, as always, Au Macy hears the words I can't say. When we're in the car, Macy reaches over and takes my hand.

She keeps it in hers the entire drive home.

It feels like a safety net.

Macy is always poised for my inevitable fall.

“I told you, I don’t have a drug problem. I’m in *pain*. That’s what happens when you get crushed by an SUV and your bones are held together by metal and screws.”

“Blah, blah, blah.” Macy waves it off and sets her magazine down. “I’ve heard it all before. Some people can handle pain meds, some can’t. Considering the pharmacy your dad found in your bedroom, I’m going to say you’re just a few bad days away from an OD. You think I’d let you do that? Put your mother and me through that? I don’t think so. Not again.

“When you run out of bullshit excuses and admit you’ve got a problem, then we can talk. The sooner you admit it, babe, the sooner we’ll get to the root of this. You might as well start talking—you’re not going anywhere until I’m sure you’re not a danger to yourself.”

“I’m *fine*.” I wipe the sweat off my forehead, swallowing against the constant nausea that’s taken over since yesterday. God, withdrawal *sucks*.

Macy gets up and shoves a trash can in my hand. “If you’re going to throw up, use this.”

Her face softens, a ripple in that bad-cop facade she wears so well. She reaches over, grasping my free hand in hers, and holds on tight enough that I can’t tug away. “I won’t give up on you, Sophie. No matter what you do, no matter what you say, I’m here. I won’t lose you. Not to this. I will get you clean. Even if you end up hating me for it.”

“Great,” I say bitterly. “Lucky me.”

NOW (JUNE)

Harper's Bluff is nestled in Northern California's side of the Siskiyou mountain range, a tiny town carved out of the wilderness, sheltered by the piney mountains, surrounded by oak woodland for miles around, with a lake that stretches out into what you trick yourself into thinking is infinity. We've got a population just tipping twenty thousand, more churches than grocery stores, American flags flying from most of the houses, and REAL MEN LOVE JESUS bumper stickers on every other truck on the road. It's not idyllic, but it's comfortable.

I thought I was ready to come back, but the second we pass the WELCOME TO HARPER'S BLUFF sign, I wish I could tell Macy to hit the brakes. Beg her to take me back to Oregon with her.

How can I be here without Mina?

I bite my tongue. I have to do this *for* her. It's the only thing I can do. I stare out the window as we pass by my high school. I wonder if they decorated Mina's locker, if it'd been festooned with flowers and candles, notes tucked into corners, never to be read. I wonder if her grave's the same, teddy bears and pictures of her, beaming up at a sky she'll never see again. I hadn't even gone to her funeral—I couldn't bear to watch them put her in the ground.

As we're turning onto my street, Macy gets a call. Maneuvering the car into the driveway, she tucks the phone under her chin. "Where?" She listens for a second. "How long ago?" She shuts the car off, eyeing me. "Okay, I can be there in thirty."

"Someone jump their bail?" I ask after she hangs up. Macy's a bounty hunter, though she prefers being called a bail recovery agent.

"Sex offender in Corning." She frowns at the empty driveway. "I'd hoped your mom would be here by now."

"It's okay. I am capable of being alone in my own house."

"No, you shouldn't be by yourself right now."

"Go catch the bad guy." I lean over and kiss her on the cheek. "I promise I'll be fine. I'll even call you soon as Mom gets home, if it'll make you feel better."

Macy taps her fingers against the steering wheel. She's itching to get going, to chase down that guy and put him in jail where he belongs.

I know that feeling, that drive for justice. All the women in my family have it. Macy's is wrapped up in the chase, in hard and fast and brutal judgment, and Mom's is wrapped up in rules and laws and injuries, the courtroom her chosen battlefield.

Mine is wrapped up in Mina, magnified by her, defined by her, existing because of her.

“Seriously, Aunt Macy. I’m seventeen, I’m clean, and I can spend some time by myself.”

She shoots me a calculating look. Then she reaches over and flips open the glove compartment.

“Take this,” she says, pressing a container the size of a water bottle into my hand. There’s a white pulley at the top of it and a label with big red letters that say BEAR REPELLENT.

“You’re giving me bear spray? Seriously?”

“It’s got way better range and packs more of a punch than that pepper spray key chain stuff they sell at the drugstore in the cute pink holders, and it’s even better than a Taser,” Macy says. “Too many things can go wrong there—clothes can get in the way, the prongs don’t fully eject, some big guys don’t go down from the current. Spray them in the face with this? They’ll go down.” She takes the canister out of my hands and points to the pulley. “Press the button at the top, move it right to unlock the mechanism. Aim and pull the trigger. Don’t ever drop the can—you may need to use it again. Spray and then *run*. Even if your attacker’s incapacitated, if he’s got a gun or a knife or any weapon, even blind, he can do some damage. Spray, run, and don’t let go of your only weapon. You got that?”

“You’re actually encouraging me to use this?”

“If someone’s coming at you? Absolutely,” Macy says, and her voice is so serious, it sends prickles down my back. “Whoever killed Mina is still out there. You are the only living witness. And I’m pretty sure you’re about to stir up some serious shit, so *be careful*.”

“You’re not going to stop me?” Until I say it out loud, I realize that I’ve been waiting for her to.

Macy’s quiet for a moment. She looks me up and down, her blue eyes assessing me like she might be a perp. “Could I?” she asks baldly.

My hand tightens around the canister. I shake my head.

“That’s what I thought.” Macy tries not to smile, but I catch it before she slips back into seriousness.

“Do you remember what I told you the night we decided you were ready to come back home?”

“You said I was capable of making my own decisions.”

“You’re not a kid anymore, Sophie. You’ve been through too much. And though you’ve made some pretty bad choices, you’ve made some decent ones, too. You got clean—and you stayed clean. I believe that. I believe you. And it would probably be smart to tell you to move on, that letting go of Mina is the right thing to do. But I see it in you, babe, how it’s gonna eat you up if you don’t do something. If you don’t try. Just—” Her phone rings again. “Dammit,” she mutters.

I take advantage of her distraction. “I’ll be careful, I promise. Go to Corning.” I unbuckle my seat belt and grab my bag. “Kick the perv in the balls for me.”

Macy smiles. “That’s my girl.”

Our house hasn’t changed. I don’t know why I thought it’d look different. Maybe because everything else is. But the tasteful leather couches and the cherrywood table between them are still in the living

room, the coffee machine in the kitchen half-full, my father's empty mug sitting next to the sink. Just like any other day.

I go upstairs to my room. My bed's freshly made, and I run my fingers over the red sheets. They're crinkled at the edges, which means Mom put them on herself instead of having the once-a-week housekeeper do it.

Thinking about her struggling with them in her heels and pencil skirt, trying to make it nice for me makes my eyes sting. I clear my throat, blinking fast, and dump the contents of my bag onto the bed before going to take a shower.

I let the water stream over my head for a long time. I need to wash the smell of rehab—lemon air freshener and cheap polyester—off of me.

For three months, I've been stuck, stagnant and waiting, behind white walls and therapy sessions while Mina's killer walks. It hits me all at once that I'm finally free, and I jam the faucets shut. I can't stand to be inside for another second. I get dressed, leave a note on the kitchen table, and lock the door behind me. The canister of bear spray is safe in my bag.

Macy was right—I'm about to stir up some serious shit. I have no idea why anyone would kill Mina. Which means I have to be prepared for anything. For anyone.

It's getting late. But he'll still be at the park.

The good thing about growing up in a small town is that everyone knows everyone. And if you've got a routine, you're usually easy to find.

I walk to the park and get there as the guys playing soccer are finishing up their casual game, shin guards versus skins. The sun's sinking, that dusky time where dark and light are balanced almost artificially, like an old movie, saturated with hazy color. I watch from across the street and wait until a massive, shaggy-haired blond guy in a dingy white soccer jersey and baggy shorts breaks away from the group, heading toward the bathroom, the door swinging shut behind him.

It's perfect: isolated, with nowhere for him to run. So I seize the moment.

I want to slam into the bathroom, scare the shit out of him, grind his cheek against the dirty tile with my foot until he admits the truth.

Instead, I slip in quietly and lock the door behind me once I'm sure it's just him in here.

The toilet flushes, and my stomach leaps, part anger, part fear.

He doesn't see me at first, but halfway to the sink he catches sight of me in the mirror.

"Shit." He spins around.

"Hi, Kyle."

"I thought you were in rehab."

"They let me out." I step forward, and when he moves away, a sweet feeling rushes through me. Kyle's huge, thick-necked and solid—more suited for football than soccer—and I like that he's a little scared of me, even if he's just afraid that the junkie will do something crazy.

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