

# Blitz

*By Clarity*

*Nathan, the son of a white nationalist leader, learns that hard times reveal true friends.*



Chapter 1	6
Chapter 2	8
Chapter 3	12
Chapter 4	16
Chapter 5	20
Chapter 6	24
Chapter 7	30
Chapter 8	34
Chapter 9	38
Chapter 10	44
Chapter 11	50
Chapter 12	57
Chapter 14	61
Chapter 14	64
Chapter 15	70
Chapter 16	75
Chapter 17	81
Chapter 18	88
Chapter 19	94
Chapter 20	100
Chapter 21	105
Chapter 22	109
Chapter 23	113
Chapter 24	118
Chapter 25	125
Chapter 26	132
Chapter 27	139
Chapter 28	144
Chapter 29	149
Chapter 30	154
Chapter 31	159
Chapter 32	164
Chapter 33	171

Chapter 34	177
Chapter 35	182
Chapter 36	187
Chapter 37	195

# CHAPTER 1

## *Kristallnacht*

**T**wenty-eight individual cigarette packs sat on the shelf. Trust me, I counted them. All were identical, their silver scorpion logos illuminated by the convenience store's fluorescent lights.

With a shaky hand, I reached to pick up a pack, then quickly thought better of it. Although I was wearing black leather gloves, I couldn't risk leaving any fingerprints. Gulping, I glanced up toward the security camera, then drew my hood even tighter as my heart pounded in my chest, cloaking my sandy blond hair. Odd, shrieking music with a Middle Eastern vibe played over the speaker system, reminding me of my mission.

I took a deep breath, and turned away from the cigarette rack. Walking up to the counter, my steel-toed Doc Martens clicked on the linoleum floor. With every step I took, my heart beat faster, thumping against my blue hoodie.

"Can I help you, sir?" the man behind the cashier's desk asked in a thick foreign accent, wearing a forced smile. His skin was a light shade of brown, and a loose white moustache draped over his upper lip. Scrawny and fairly short, he wore a white Tommy Hilfiger polo, with an American flag stitched onto the chest pocket.

"Sir? Are you alright?" he inquired, furrowing his brow.

I opened and closed my mouth, my jaw trembling as I did. I felt ill. Hell, I'd felt ill for the past week. After all, I was under a lot of pressure. This was the single most defining trial in my life: my initiation.

My clammy hand inched toward my waistband. I knew what I had to do, and I was well aware of the consequences for failure, but a voice still persisted in the back of my mind, screaming at me to stop...to turn around and leave the shop.

“Sir?” he asked a third time.

Gulping, I withdrew my SIG Sauer P250. The gun felt heavier than it had the day before, as if it was weighed down by my mountain of nervousness. It was loaded with live rounds, my Dad had made sure of that, and it shook in my two trembling hands as I aimed the barrel square at the confused shop owner.

His confusion quickly gave way to disgust. With a furrowed brow, he raised his hands into the air, his upper lip snarling with disdain.

“Money,” I demanded, in an equally terrified voice, the husky tone barely escaping from my throat. Goosebumps raced up and down my arms, and my whole body trembled.

“All of it.”

“Why?” the shop owner asked, meeting my eyes and clearing his throat. “I have only just moved here. I do not have money to spare. My family, we don’t wan-”

“The register,” I breathed, tightening my grip on the gun, as beads of cold sweat streamed down my sideburns. “Empty the register.”

The man opened his mouth to argue, then shook his head in sorrow, as if he was contemplating every decision he’d ever made in his life. Solemnly, he reached into his pocket and produced a key, then popped open the register. Staring into my eyes, the shopkeeper collected all of the bills into a plastic shopping bag. There were far more individual bills than I expected, and I gulped once more, fighting back a wave of dizziness and a hint of guilt. Why was I doing this? The question echoed in the back of my head.

“Uh,” I said uneasily, taking hand off of my gun to receive the shopping bag full of cash. “Thank you.”

The shopkeeper shook his head in disappointment. “Get out,” he replied with an abrupt shooing gesture. “You pathetic...you pathetic...,” he couldn’t finish his sentence, his voice brimming with emotion.

Backing away slowly, I heeded his advice. I stuck my gun back into my waistband and ran out of the store, bolting down the dark sidewalk toward the only home I’d ever known.

# CHAPTER 2

## *Initiation*

“**T**hat’s my boy!” Dad cackled. Collecting the crisp green bills, he thumbed through them with age-spotted hands. He glanced up toward me with milky blue eyes, twinkling with an emotion that I’d never seen from him before, almost as if...as if he was proud of me.

“One thousand nine hundred and fifty three dollars,” he slurred as a smug smile spread across his face, revealing three missing teeth. I took a sharp breath when I heard the total figure, and the shop owner’s crestfallen face flashed before my eyes.

“You sure showed that Taliban fuck.”

My father, Darren Pike, was an overwhelming figure. 6’4” with white hair and an iron gaze, his body was covered in tattoos and his mere presence commanded respect. Truth be told, I feared that man more than anyone else on Earth. He was the founder and leader of the National Socialist Brigade, a two hundred-strong neo-nazi organization that he had run out of the warehouse on our Dexter, Arkansas property since before I was born.

The brigade was my life. I grew up in that sprawling warehouse, which everyone called ‘HQ’, with its swastika banners flying overhead and white nationalist music blaring through the stereos. Rather than Spongebob, I was raised watching Hitler-truth documentaries on a grainy warehouse television, surrounded by the thirty or so core members of Dad’s group.

It wasn’t just Dad’s group, though. I turned eighteen two weeks prior, and underwent the group’s extensive training process. My final initiation task was to ‘hit’ the Arab-run convenience store that just opened up a few blocks away, and I’d passed



with flying colors. Although I was still in my senior year of highschool, I was about to become the Brigade's newest official member.

"Welcome to the crew, Nat," Hunter drawled, his mouth moving slowly. Like me, Hunter was a senior in highschool, but he was already nineteen, and had been a member of the Brigade for the last year. A gentle giant, Hunter stood 6'5", seven inches taller than me, with the frame of a linebacker and a skinhead haircut. He wasn't much of a talker, but he was the only person who I considered to be a real, true friend.

Hunter's father was a member of the Brigade, although he'd been behind bars for as long as I could remember. Something to do with a botched robbery. I never got the full details, as my Dad never trusted me with that sort of information. Hunter, on the other hand, always had Dad's approval. With his Dad in prison and his Mom skipping town, Hunter was brought into my family as a second son...a more appreciated son. Giant in stature and tough as nails, Hunter was everything Dad wanted me to be. Everything I wasn't.

"Thanks, Hunt," I replied with a weak smile.

"You trash the place, too?" Colton asked with a snort.

Colton Anderson was born to be a member of the Brigade. Stocky and strong-jawed, he was an avid weight-lifter and he could knock out a grown man with a single punch. Although we were the same age, his appearance far outpaced his years and he'd been ordering drinks at bars without being carded since he turned fifteen. Colton's loyalty to the Brigade was unwavering. Fanatical, even. I saw him almost every single day, between school and HQ, and sometimes...sometimes he scared me.

"Uh," I licked my lips and glanced nervously around the room. Thirty pairs of eyes bore into me, as if I was in an interrogation chamber. "Yeah. Some," I lied. Around me, a few of my friends nodded their heads in approval.

The sensation of sickness hadn't passed after my adrenaline faded. Hell, it'd only gotten worse. Beads of sweat dribbled down my cheek, despite the fact that the warehouse had fully functional air conditioning. Was I legitimately sick? If so, I'd have to keep that to myself and power through.

"Well, boy," Dad said with a cough, slowly chewing his tobacco as he spoke. "Can't say I ain't surprised, but you put in the work." I nodded, a stupid grin on my face. This was the nicest my Dad had ever been to me...in my entire life.

With a snort, Dad squinted his eyes and turned toward another member of the Brigade, who sported a long black ponytail, tied back with an Imperial Eagle bandana.

"Waldo," Dad addressed the man, "Is your station ready to go? We need to ink this kid up."

“Course, boss,” Waldo replied, a sneering smile on his face. He was my Dad’s right-hand-man, and the group’s tattoo extraordinaire. I’d known him for as long as I could remember, and he practically lived at our house, coming and going as he pleased. Like Mom and Dad, Waldo drank heavily and violently, but always had a steady hand when it came to tattoos.

As Waldo led me toward the corner of the warehouse that we’d fashioned as a tattoo parlor, Dad intercepted me.

“You cry, I knock your teeth out,” he muttered in a low tone, which sent a shiver down my spine. “Understood? None of that fairy crying shit.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied, my stomach balling into a tight knot. I hadn’t cried for ages, but Dad would never forgive me. That day, last April, he hadn’t even beaten me harder than usual. Still, I recall balling my eyes out, like a ‘pussy’, as my Dad would say...all because our dog Llama died.

I loved Llama. With an empty sigh, I plopped into Waldo’s tattooing recliner, my mind wandering into the past. She was a beautiful black lab, full of spunk and life, without an evil bone in her body. The best friend I’d ever known.

I named her Llama because I was four years old, and had no idea what a Llama was. All I knew was that it sounded like a happy word, and it was fitting for Llama because she was a happy pup.

“Where do you want it, champ?” Waldo asked, brandishing a fierce needle.

“Uhh,” I began uneasily. “My stomach? I guess?” Putting the tattoo on my abdomen would probably hurt the least, and...well...if I had second thoughts about joining the Brigade, I could cover it up more easily. I kept both of those thoughts to myself, though. In Dad’s company, I couldn’t show weakness and I definitely couldn’t express doubt about ‘the movement.’

Everyone’s initiation tattoo was different, but they all had similar, predictable themes: Nazi Germany and American white nationalism. To an outsider, those two cross-sections might have seemed strange or irreconcilably contrasting, but, as my father often explained, pairing Nazi purity with Americanism was the only way our race could survive.

When Waldo’s needle hit my skin, I let out an audible whimper. Sweating bullets, I clenched my jaw, as the world started to spin around me. I couldn’t let them know that I was sick. I couldn’t show weakness. Drawing a deep breath, I closed my eyes, allowing the world to spin around me as the needle worked its magic across my lower torso.

Around me, Brigade members laughed and roared, as they grew ever drunker. The celebration was supposed to be in honor of my initiation, but everyone around me

seemed to be having much more fun. I even heard my mother's drunken laughing, as she stumbled into the warehouse, leading a small group of drunk Brigade women as if she were their matriarch. To be specific, these were Brigade-affiliated women. The fairer sex wasn't allowed in the Brigade, and had been relegated to supporting roles. The 'girls', as Dad called them, were mostly wives of Brigade members, dragged along on Darren Pike's wild ride.

As Waldo continued his craft, I kept my eyes shut and attempted to close my ears, too. It was just past midnight, which meant that everyone was drunk, high, and loud. Their shouts and boisterous racial jokes reverberated around the warehouse, causing me head to ache. My hands and feet even began to feel a bit tingly, like they weren't getting enough blood flow. Yup, I was definitely sick.

"What's it gonna be?" I asked Waldo, too afraid to look down as he etched ink into my skin. I knew that this was part of the initiation ritual, and that I'd be disowned if I didn't become a 'member' but it all seemed so...so permanent...so final. I was scared shitless.

"You'll see," Waldo chuckled, scratching the back of his head, just above his ponytail.

"It's a bit of a classic."

# CHAPTER 3

*Forrest*

“Show it to Colton!” Mason demanded, his hazel eyes bright with glee. His voice echoed through the concrete alcove behind the school's main building, which served as our group's lunchtime territory. From our position, we could scan the school's back lot and keep an eye on all of the other students, like guardian angels. Every school day, I found myself leaning against that graffitied wall, chatting with my three closest friends: Hunter, Colton, and Mason.

With a thin smile, I lifted my shirt to reveal the new tattoo.

“Wow,” Colton chuckled. Smoking a cigarette, he ran a nonchalant hand through his dark hair.

A year older than anyone else in our small high school crew, Colton was our de-facto leader. I suppose I should have been the leader of our crew, given that my Dad was the founder of the Brigade, but I knew I wasn't cut for leadership. My father always told me that I was a pussy, and I guess he wasn't entirely wrong. I believed in the cause, and I fought for our race, but I wasn't like Colton. There was a certain conviction that I lacked, a willingness to go the extra mile in the battle for racial survival.

However, my new tattoo ensured that I was well on my way toward gaining Colton's respect, and maybe even my father's. Thick black lines of ink were arranged on my torso, covering three ribs and a portion of my stomach with a simple, age-old symbol. A swastika.

That old Nazi sign had been part of my upbringing and part of my life. Hell, I couldn't remember going longer than a day or two without seeing one, and now it had become part of me. I would wear it with me for the rest of my life. For some reason, that knowledge didn't bring me tranquility. It could have been my lingering sickness

and the tingling of my limbs, but I couldn't look down at my fresh ink without an uneasy sensation, as if something was amiss.

"Hell of a tat, huh, guys?" Colton asked, glancing around at Hunter and Mason.

While Hunter was my closest friend, Mason often rubbed me the wrong way. A mousy man of few words, he was a Junior - a year younger than us - and always studied his surroundings with searing eyes, as if he was constantly deciding how best to defeat the blacks, come the inevitable race war. To be honest, he frightened me. Unlike Hunter, Mason didn't seem to care for me. I saw it in his eyes: he viewed me as weak and expendable. He barely even saw me as white. Hopefully, my tattoo would change his mind.

"Hell of a tat," Mason echoed, as did Hunter. A faint smile crept across my face.

Together, our crew of four was one of the fiercest at Forrest High. Every day, we brought our knives to school - usually replicas of German combat knives - to make sure that the other races never tried to pull any bullshit. Nobody messed with us, not even the jocks. That being said, the jocks probably didn't even know about us. Forrest was a gigantic school, with just shy of 2500 students, so we blended into the background like shadows.

"You need to do some more crunches, though," Colton remarked with a snarl, still eyeing my tattoo. "Your stomach's flatter than Emma fucking Winthrop. Grow some abs, you weak piece of shit."

My smile fled. Meanwhile, Colton and Mason laughed like hyenas. Glancing down at my stomach, I found that Colton's observation wasn't too flawed. I was never in tremendous shape, but my stomach did look flatter than usual, almost like a girl's. My skin was smooth, marred only by a few beads of cold sweat and the thick black swastika. Although I hadn't worked out my core in quite some time, I didn't recall my stomach looking quite so...feminine...before.

"Oh...yeah," I replied with a grimace, flipping my shirt back down. "I guess you're right."

"Course I'm right," Colton snapped back at me, causing me to gulp.

Colton bossed me around every day, and I'd come to accept that fact. Sometimes, I thought of him as an extension of my father, just another person to keep me going on the right path. I guess I didn't have much of a choice. I had to listen to both of them.

"Colton, look!" Mason chuckled, pointing his index finger out across the sprawling lunchground to an isolated, wavy sycamore tree.

Below the tree, Emma Winthrop dropped her stylized blue backpack to the ground and eased down beside it, taking refuge from the spring Arkansas sun. I'd known that intriguing girl since I was five years old, yet we hadn't spoken in about two years.

"Speak of the devil, and she shall appear," Colton added with a click of the tongue.

You see, Emma's mother and father were race traitors: white folk who had chosen the wrong side, despite knowing better. According to my Dad, traitors ranked even lower than cockroaches on the list of species. The Winthrops weren't always race traitors, though. They used to be regular members of the Brigade, and Emma was a Brigade kid just like us. Even more importantly, she was the only Brigade-affiliated girl in our grade, and it was a foregone conclusion that she'd end up hitched to one of us.

Of course, that wasn't to be. A couple years back, Emma's mother and father decided that they'd make more money if they expanded their mattress business and marketed to all of the lower races. Out of sheer greed, they turned their backs on the Brigade, and their business skyrocketed. Nowadays, there were Winthrop Mattress stores in nearly every East Arkansas town. My Dad organized a few night-time raids on their shopfronts, but the Winthrops responded by upping their security with guards and alarm systems, resulting in an odd sort of stalemate.

Emma pulled a thin red book from her backpack and flipped it open, fervently scanning the pages. She was somewhere between a nerd and a badass. Although she was a valedictorian candidate, she had a grungy style and a 'do whatever the fuck I want' attitude. Part of me envied her. Every day, she'd spend break and lunch under that sycamore, reading away. I used to like reading sci-fi books when I was younger, but my Dad made me stop. Reading books made people soft, he'd always tell me, and I didn't want to be soft.

She sighed and ran a hand through her unruly blue-dyed hair, her eyes still trained on her book. Did she know that all four of us were watching her? Probably. She didn't seem to care, though. Her thoughts were likely engrossed in an exciting fantasy world, following a loveable character as they fought orcs and dragons.

Unlike stereotypical nerds, Emma was strikingly pretty. Light freckles dotted her cheeks, and her large chestnut eyes were nothing short of enchanting. She looked amazing in her pair of tight, tattered black pants, and her sleeveless white top, which bore the word 'Peace' in large blocky letters. A ring piercing dangled from her eyebrow, one of her five prominent facial piercings. I usually didn't like girls with piercings, but Emma made them work. As Colton had mentioned, Emma wasn't gifted in the breast department. That didn't matter to me, though. If her family hadn't betrayed us and left, Emma would have been my dream girl.

“Does she even have any fucking friends?” Mason asked with a chortle. He quickly glanced at Colton after he’d told his joke, who let out a low chuckle before taking a long drag from his cigarette.

“Don’t think so,” I answered softly.

“That’s gotta suck,” Hunter added, a hint of sympathy in his voice as he studied Emma closely with his sharp hazel eyes.

“Don’t feel bad for the bitch, her family made their choice,” Colton smirked. “Plus, she’s a five out of ten, max.”

I raised my eyebrows, but didn’t voice my thoughts. I’d never really rated girls like that, but Emma was definitely higher than a five out of ten. Hell, Colton himself had been hitting on her almost every day back when her family was in the Brigade. He’d talk about how hot she was all the time...did he forget about that? How could someone say something with such conviction, when they knew it wasn’t true?

My thoughts were interrupted by the electronic school bell, which screamed its ear-splitting song, signalling that lunch was finally over.

# CHAPTER 4

## *Civilization*

“**A**nd what is Jared Diamond’s main conclusion in *Guns, Germs and Steel*?” Ms. Washington asked, pacing before the whiteboard as she often did. A black woman who couldn’t have been a year over thirty, I was beyond grateful for the fact that my parents had never met my AP Human Geography teacher. Without a doubt, they would have chewed me out for not immediately telling them that I had a black lady teaching me. Hell, they might even pull me out of school if they found out...and I sort’ve liked school.

There weren’t too many black folk in our town, and Ms. Washington was the first black teacher I’d ever had. Every time she walked into the classroom, I couldn’t help but feel uneasy. Did she hate me? She probably didn’t know about my family, but I couldn’t shake the sense that she disliked me for being white. What had my father told me the other day? ‘The races are born to hate each other.’

Whenever Ms. Washington scanned across the classroom with her icy gaze, that sentence always replayed itself in my head.

“Come on, y’all,” Ms. Washington scowled, crossing her arms over her professional purple blouse. “This was in the reading.”

I didn’t do the reading. I didn’t even own the book. My parents refused to pay for schoolbooks, on account of the biased public school system. They didn’t want to waste their money paying for me to learn politically correct lies. While I understood their intentions, I hated the feeling of being ‘left behind’ in school...like everyone else knew something that I didn’t. As a result, I purchased schoolbooks with my hard-earned money from summer jobs. Every year, massive math and science textbooks ate up



most of my cash, and I had to use Sparknotes and Wikipedia to survive the rest of my classes.

However, even without the books, I always received good grades: As and A-minuses, with the occasional B+. I was one of the quiet kids, always choosing seats in the back of the room, acing tests, and doodling throughout lectures. Although my pencil was often busy sketching mythical monsters, landscapes, and portraits, I still took notes and paid attention to the class material...I just enjoyed drawing.

With gentle pencil-strokes, I filled in the shadows of my drawing: a pack of cigarettes with a scorpion logo. I'd been drawing for as long as I could remember, although I tried to hide the hobby from my parents and friends. I could only imagine the amount of shit Colton would give me if he found out that I sketched in my free time. Thankfully, none of the other Brigade-affiliated guys were in this class, so I could draw as much as I wanted.

Emma Winthrop, however, was one of the thirty students in this class. I didn't worry about her gossiping about my drawing habits, though, given that I hadn't seen her talk to any other Brigade guys since her family turned their backs on us. Plus, she often sat on the opposite side of the classroom, probably because she wanted to avoid me.

Absently, I brushed a lock of blond hair from my eyes. Had it been this long yesterday? I wasn't sure. Either way, it was already start to approach my shoulders, and I needed to get it cut military-style ASAP or else Dad would give me shit for looking like a hippie. I sighed and adjusted my grip on the pencil. For some reason, my hand seemed smaller than usual...or maybe the pencil was just remarkably large. Regardless, I began to shade in the scorpion logo.

"His conclusion," Ms. Washington turned toward the whiteboard, using a squeaky blue marker to transcribe her words onto the board, "is that human societies are shaped by our surroundings. By our environments, by our circumstances, by external factors on a macro, civilization level. With examples, he proves the point that the hegemony of Eurasian civilizations over civilizations from the Americas and Africa are not due to any inherent intellectual, moral, or genetic superiority."

I shook my head silently, still doodling. If my Dad heard those words, he would have beaten the shit out of Ms. Washington. Although I hadn't read the book, the author seemed to have an interesting theory...I knew what Dad would say, though: it was all disgusting lies.

"Instead, Diamond claims that the Eurasian geography granted certain civilizations competitive advantages. These advantages enabled those civilizations to conquer the

rest of the world with guns, germs, and steel. Now...what was it about the Eurasian geography that gave those civilizations an advantage? Why weren't European colonizers ravaged by an Aztec disease comparable to smallpox? Why did the Europeans have suits of metal armor and guns, versus spears and arrows?"

Ms. Washington paced down the aisle as she spoke, coming to a stop behind my desk. I abruptly stopped my sketching and flipped the page to my notes, but my cover-up efforts were belated and futile. I didn't glance up from my notebook, but I knew that she was irked by my apparent lack of attentiveness.

Thankfully, she didn't call me out. Instead, she pointed toward one of the many waving hands and continued her stroll down the aisles.

While I continued to doodle, Emma cleared her throat, an unmistakable cough that I'd known for almost all my life. Goosebumps ran up and down my arms. They were the most intense goosebumps I'd ever felt, tingling as if every inch of my skin had become twice as sensitive. Curious, I ran the tips of my fingers along my lightly haired forearm, and almost audibly shivered. This definitely wasn't normal...something was going on...but who could I tell? Hunter? I already knew what Dad would say: 'suck it up.'

"Well," Emma began with a laid-back voice that still exuded razor-sharp intelligence, "the book argues that Eurasia provides some really small benefits, which turn into massive advantages over time. Unlike Africa and the Americas, sprawls East-to-West, horizontally, across a big portion of Earth. A more horizontal continent means that more of the continent is in the climate sweetspot: more of it is habitable and farmable, for people and animals. That means a bigger variety of animals that can be domesticated, more competition between civilizations, and larger populations. When a bunch of people in a bunch of civilizations are connected by land, they trade with each other, they share germs, and they develop new technologies...like guns."

"I couldn't have put it better myself," Ms. Washington replied to Emma with a sugary voice. That was the tone that Washington used when she was pleased with a student. I wasn't the brightest person on Earth, but I was good at reading people's emotions. I had to be. In the Brigade, it was my survival strategy: My life depended upon decoding my father's wishes. Then, I'd do my best to keep him appeased. That was the story of my life, really...I just failed to meet that goal, almost every single day. I wasn't a good enough son for Dad, and that knowledge gnawed at me like rats on a wire.

Class droned on, and I struggled to maintain focus. For some reason, my thoughts kept returning to that store-owner's dejected face. He hadn't been consumed with

fear...rather, he appeared to be disappointed. As if he expected more from me. That image, down to the fine hairs of the man's mustache, was burned into my mind, and caused my stomach to tie itself into a firm knot.

The electronic bell released its whining tone, waking me from my nightmarish reverie. Within seconds, almost every student in the classroom began slapping their notebooks shut and tossing their books into backpacks. Slinging my own worn backpack over my shoulder, I intended to follow their lead. For the first day in a long time, I was looking forward to seeing my father. I was now a fully-initiated member of the Brigade, and he had been so proud of me, the day before. Would this be the turning point in our relationship? Was he actually starting to respect me? The mere thought caused my heart to soar, and a thin smile spread across my lips.

"Your reading will be the final four chapters, and there will be a quiz. I am not bluffing, this time!" Ms. Washington announced, as students began to stream past her toward the door. I rose from my seat and went to join that tide of departure.

Just as I neared the exit, Ms. Washington uttered two dreaded words: "Mr. Pike."

"Do you mind chatting for a minute?" she asked with a sparkling white smile.

"Uh," I began uneasily, eyes wide open like a deer in the headlights. "Alright, Ma'am."

# CHAPTER 5

## *The Book*

Students streamed around me toward the exit, until Ms. Washington and I were the only two people remaining in the silent classroom. Nervously, I took a glance toward the door. In the back of my mind, a thought lingered: was she going to hurt me because of my family? Was she going to kill me for being white? We were all alone. If she was going to kill me, now would be the time. My Dad always used to tell me about how...people like Ms. Washington...were naturally violent, especially toward people like me.

“Nathan,” she stated in a caring tone, her eyebrows furrowed in concern. I winced when she said my name. The only people who called me ‘Nathan’ were teachers and my parents, when they were angry with me. To everyone else, I was simply ‘Nat’. “Why are you making this harder than it has to be?”

“What do you mean?” I raised an eyebrow, shifting my feet uncomfortably.

“There’s a reason why participation accounts for 30% of your grade in my class, Nathan. I don’t care how high your scores are on tests and quizzes. When you show up unprepared, and you don’t contribute to the class discussion, do you know what that says to me?” She took a deep breath, rubbing her fingers against her temple. “It tells me that you don’t care.”

“I do care,” I quietly countered, casting my eyes to the linoleum floor so that I didn’t have to look at her disappointed countenance. Did I care? I think so...I enjoyed school. I wanted to get good grades, even if my parents didn’t care. At the same time, though, this class always made me feel uneasy. I couldn’t listen to Ms. Washington speak without also hearing my father’s voice in my head, critiquing her whole method. With

a deep breath, I channeled my inner courage and spoke. "I just...I just feel like a lot of the class discussion is propaganda. Why should I participate in propaganda?"

Sure, my complaint was a bit of a cop-out. An excuse of sorts. I didn't participate in any of my classes, regardless of whether or not they were shoving ideals down my throat. I just wasn't a very talkative person...and I definitely didn't appreciate being pulled aside by teachers for one-on-one discussions.

Regardless, my complaint was well-founded. Dad would have certainly deemed Ms. Washington's course to be propaganda...he'd be proud of me for calling her out. My second day on the job, I was already fulfilling my duties as a member of the Brigade. My heart swelled with a bit of pride.

"Propaganda?" she tilted her head slightly, her dark curls bouncing on her shoulders. "How so?"

I shrugged, fighting off another spell of dizziness. With a frown, I contemplated whether or not to share my true thoughts with her. Glancing down toward Ms. Washington, I dampened my fear and asked myself the most important question: What would my father say?

"Earlier, you stated that Europeans conquering the world had nothing to do with genetic superiority, as if that was an absolute fact."

She blinked a couple of times, as if she didn't believe her ears. "And?" she asked sharply.

"And...I don't know...that's just a multiculturalist claim. It's not the truth."

Ms. Washington pursed her lips, studying me closely with her light brown eyes. I could tell that she was angry, but doing her best to cloak it.

"So you think that you're superior?" She continued her questioning.

"Not me personally, but..." I shrugged, then repeated a list of facts that I knew very well. "Most technological advancements have come from white people, even though we only make up a small portion of the human population. We score higher on IQ tests than most of the world, and all of the safest cities and neighborhoods in the country are white. It's not a coincidence that all of the country's smartest people are white, while so many athletes aren't. Some people are meant to lead, and others aren't."

Washington massaged the bridge of her nose with her two index fingers, then drew a deep sigh. "Are you done?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

She scoffed, easing into her black swivel-chair and crossing her legs. "You tell me that I'm genetically inferior, and yet you still call me 'Ma'am'?" With a tsk, she shook her head. "Do you know what 'regurgitating' means?"

I nodded, still feeling nervous in her presence. Perhaps I should have kept my mouth shut about my beliefs...but that's what they wanted. They wanted to prevent people like me from speaking our minds...and I couldn't let them win. Like my Dad often said, this was a war for the survival of our race, and every day was a battle.

"Tell me, then. What's 'regurgitating'?"

I eyed her suspiciously. "When birds vomit up their meals, to feed the young."

"Don't get cheeky with me, you know that's not what I meant." She maintained her stern expression, running a stressed hand through her straight black hair.

"Then why did you even ask?"

"Because I wanted to see what you'd say," Ms. Washington replied flatly. "And you didn't give me a straight answer. You knew what I meant, and you dodged the question. Because, deep down, you know that you aren't thinking for yourself."

My cheeks burned red and I opened my mouth to argue otherwise, but she waved away my protests with an elegant hand gesture.

"You're too damned smart to be regurgitating, Mr. Pike. You're a senior, right? How old are you? Eighteen?"

I nodded uneasily, glancing toward the door.

"I don't know who filled your head with all of this junk, but you're right about one thing: there's a source of propaganda in your life, but it ain't me."

I gulped, as my stomach began to sink. I opened my mouth again and sensed all the words on the tip of my tongue. If I were a stronger man, like my father, I would have let all of those words loose. I would have called her every slur under the sun and told her to fuck off and die...but my Dad was right. I was too big of a pussy. Instead, I stood there like an idiot, my lips parted and my skin grey from sickness and nervousness.

As time seemed to freeze, I pondered her words. Was she right? Maybe...or maybe not. Honestly, I had no idea, which scared me more than anything else. I knew the facts...I knew that whites were superior...and yet, for whatever reason, it just didn't always feel like the truth. However, I couldn't let feelings run my life...Dad had warned me of those dangers.

She must have seen the confusion and hesitation in my face, because her expression seemed to change, inklings of sympathy gleaming in her eyes.

"You like drawing, huh?"

I shrugged, again glancing toward the closed classroom door. If my father knew that I was having a private discussion with a black teacher, he'd kill me himself. Plus, why should I even listen to her? For some reason, I couldn't summon the courage to leave.

"I've seen you drawing a lot in class," Washington stated matter-of-factly, causing me to open and close my mouth, once more. "Oh, don't you dare try to argue with that. Nothing happens in this classroom that I don't know about," she said with a chuckle. "Mind if I take a look at your work?" She asked with a smile, exposing pearly white teeth. "Every time I walk by your desk, you scramble to hide all of your hard work...I never get a chance to look at it."

"No," I replied in a raspy voice. "That's...private." I knew how this worked: she was desperately trying to connect with me. There was only one flaw in her plan: I would never trust a person like her. My parents had raised me better than that.

Her face flashed with disappointment, and her cordial smile faded. "Okay," she wrinkled her nose. "How about reading...do you like reading?"

"Sometimes," I admitted. In a perfect world, I'd read far more often than that. Glancing toward the door again, I drew a breath and asked the question: "Can I go, now?"

Ms. Washington frowned. "Yes, you may," she sighed, then straightened her black skirt and began rummaging through her desk drawers. "Before before you do," she began in an authoritative tone, which almost reminded me of my father's, "take this with you."

She produced a small leather book with no title on its cover, sliding it across the desk toward me. I accepted the book with a clammy hand, then brushed a strand of long blond hair from my eyes.

"What's this?" I asked, picking it up and studying its worn spine.

"I don't imagine you've read many black authors. Take it home and give it a try," she instructed with authority, speaking to me as if I was a misbehaving dog.

I could tell that the conversation had been stressful for her, given her clenched jaw and defensive posture, as she crossed her arms against her violet blouse. I shouldn't have tried to be some sort of hero...I shouldn't have tried to act like Dad. All it did was make my teacher angry with me, and I didn't want her to be mad. Even though I knew my words to be true, her anguish weighed upon me like a ton of bricks, causing my stomach to sink further. I was a nuisance, a negative force on the world. Useless. An inconvenience to every person around me, and too wimpy to be a true member of the Brigade.

"Alright," I muttered, shoving the book into my backpack. Scrambling out of the classroom, I darted through the hallways and outside, wrinkling my nose at the muggy air as I began my long march home.

# CHAPTER 6

## *The Frog and the Scorpion*

“Boy!” Dad’s rough voice was my only greeting. It reverberated through the warehouse, bouncing off the metal walls and eclipsing the hard-working air conditioning unit’s low drone. “Get me a beer!”

I massaged my temples. My ears were ringing, my whole body ached, and I felt lethargic, as if all of the energy had fled my body. I’d never been this tired before, and the walk home from school had been a struggle. On top of all of that, Dad’s request had left me in a rather bitter mood.

As I trotted to the refrigerator and pulled out a six pack, I let out a bitter sigh. I thought that all of this was over...the days of Dad ordering me around like a servant. Didn’t he realize that I was a fully initiated member of the Brigade? Did he forget? No. Dad never forgot anything. He was a genius with a steel trap of a mind, and he held fierce grudges. I glanced back toward him, as he sat high on his favorite leather recliner. His throne. Why couldn’t I be more like him? Any time I heard him talking about me, he always used the same phrase: ‘the apple fell from the tree, then took a roll down the hill.’

“Boy,” Dad repeated, when I returned to him with the pack of beer. For Dad ‘a beer’ usually meant a whole pack, as I’d come to learn over the years. I’d been his beer-boy for as long as I could remember...and apparently that wasn’t changing any time soon.

“What’re they teaching you in that school of yours?” He eyed my backpack suspiciously, as if the inanimate object represented everything evil about the world. Beneath the warehouse’s flickering fluorescent lights, his camouflage baseball cap cast foreboding shadows across his face, almost cloaking his eyes from view.

“You know,” I replied with a gulp, training my eyes on the concrete floor. “Stuff.”



“They teaching you the truth?”

I paused, glancing around the warehouse at the five or six Brigade members around us, who were all staring at me. Conversations with Dad were always a test. Every question that he asked had loaded ramifications, and a wrong answer could spell disaster: a beating...or worse.

This particular question was somewhat difficult to answer. If I admitted that my teacher was teaching my multiculturalist lies, Dad would raise hell and might even get me taken out of school. I couldn't let that happen. At school, I felt more relaxed...more safe. It gave me an opportunity to practice my sketching, as well. That being said, Dad would probably end up punishing me for telling him the truth. He'd beat me for simply listening to my teachers' lies, whether I believed them or not.

I usually tried to be honest, but Dad gave me little choice.

“Yeah,” I replied after a moment of hesitation. “They are.”

“Good,” Dad nodded in approval, then pointed toward the television screen, which was tuned to the news. “In fact, that's real good. Damned good. Sometimes, it feels like we're all alone in our fight. Blacks are killing in the cities and Mexicans are sneaking on in and breeding like rabbits. Course, only a few news stations are even talking about it. The rest are all run by the Jews. Meanwhile, most white folk don't even give a shit. They just sit there and take it, don't they?”

“Yes, sir,” I agreed, as the Brigade guys around us muttered their agreement.

“It's the scorpion and the frog,” Dad chuckled, taking a sip of beer. I knew the old fable by heart, as did everyone else in the Brigade, but that never stopped Dad from repeating it almost weekly. Sometimes, I wondered if Dad just liked hearing himself tell the story.

“See, there once was a scorpion,” he began in a grand, gravely voice. He used that same voice every time he was telling a story or getting philosophical.

“And that scorpion needed to cross a river, but he couldn't swim. So, he turns to the frog who's sitting next to him on the river-bank.

He says ‘Please, Mr. Frog, help me across the river. I can ride on your back!’.

Course the frog, being wise to the scorpion's ways, says ‘Hell no, Scorpion. I ain't falling for that. Once you get onto my back, what's stopping you from stinging me?’

Then the scorpion says ‘No, no, no. Why would I sting you? If I did, you'd die and we would both drown!’

‘Hmmmmmm,’ Mr. Frog replies, in his croaky, croaky tone. ‘I can't argue with that one, Scorpion.’

So, the frog gives the scorpion a ride on his back, swimming across the river.”

Dad paused with a grin, making a swimming gesture with his arms. He always loved to put on a show, and relished the fact that he'd captivated everyone's eyes, becoming the spectacle of the warehouse. It happened every time he told a story...and he sure loved to tell stories.

"And once the unlikely pair was about halfway across that river, Mr. Frog felt a sharp sting in his side. He cried out in shock and pain, then began to sink below the current. 'Scorpion!' the frog yells, 'You promised not to sting me!'

The scorpion shrugs, and the two little critters await certain death. 'I can't help it,' the scorpion says. 'It's in my nature'."

Dad stroked his stubble pensively. "It's in their nature. Muslims are going to blow themselves up for 'Allah', and Mexicans'll fill the streets with meth and force good white folk into addiction. Savages'll steal all your cash at their casinos, and Jews'll do it in broad daylight." He lowered his eyes to me, nodding his head, as if he was agreeing with himself. "That's just how the world works, boy. We're always under attack. Don't you ever forget that."

"Yes, sir," I replied, massaging my jawbone in attempt to fight off my headache. Around us, more Brigade members were streaming into the warehouse as day turned into dusk. Most of them worked in construction and would come to HQ straight from work, causing the whole warehouse to smell pretty rough. That wasn't why my head pounded, though...I was undoubtedly sick. It felt as if my body was crying out for help, with sharp pains in my stomach and a tingling sensation on my skin. Something was definitely wrong with me.

"And to think that the fucking government is opening up one of them terrorist havens in our own backyard! They're asking for war!" Dad's voice fell into its fiery sermon tone, and he withdrew his antique luger from its holster, pointing it toward the metal ceiling like a marching baton. As he spoke, more Brigade members streamed inside the warehouse to hear another one of Dad's legendary sermons.

"The war may be fought slowly, and y'all may worry 'bout who's gonna come out on top." He took a dramatic pause, ever the orator.

"But rest assured: the war is real. It's all around us, every second of every day. They hate us for our race. They wanna destroy us. Day by day, they chip away at us." He clicked his teeth together like a gnawing rat. "Bite by bite, they take everything from us, but we will not be conquered! No, sir! We will fight back!"

A chorus of agreement rose from the gathering crowd of twenty or thirty. At this point, Dad had completely forgotten about my existence, far too absorbed into his own world of grandier. He continued his speech, but my head hurt too much to listen. With

everyone's attention captivated, I slinked away from the crowd, and headed toward my room. I didn't need to stay and listen to every moment of Dad's speech. I'd heard enough of his speeches over the years, as they weren't exactly rare.

Walking out of the warehouse, I tightened the straps on my backpack. With a pang of guilt, I recalled the small black book sitting inside of my worn pack. I'd accepted that book from Ms. Washington, although I didn't have to do so. I could have spat in her face, or screamed at her...but I hadn't. With a deep breath, I made a mental note to hide the book from my father. Based on what Ms. Washington had told me, the book was written by a black author, and I simply couldn't afford Dad finding it...maybe I'd have to burn it.

Just as I approached the doorway, Mom came stumbling through. I took a sharp breath, but said nothing. It was still early in the afternoon, and she already appeared to be hopelessly intoxicated. This wasn't an anomalous incident. Her daily drugs of choice were alcohol and pain meds, although I suspected that she sometimes used harder stuff, as well.

She brushed past me, then turned around. Her eyebrows were furrowed in concern, and she began to inspect me.

With flowing blonde hair, vibrant green eyes, and a small spread of freckles on her cheeks, my Mom was one of the most beautiful women in Dexter. Wrinkles tailed her eyes, but they were only barely visible, remarkable for a woman who was so indifferent to her body. Apparently, she used to run marathons and stay exceptionally fit, but that was before I was born. Nowadays she no longer prioritized her health or well-being. She seldom left our family's property, and could best be described as 'frail', almost sickly, despite her natural beauty.

Sometimes I wondered how she ended up with my Dad, considering that they were nothing alike. Sure, Mom believed everything that Dad preached and was a staunch supporter of the Brigade, but she actually seemed to care about me...at least a tiny bit. She didn't love me as much as she loved Dad or booze, but I was convinced that she did indeed love me. I saw it in her eyes when she looked at me. There always a little twinkle in her irises, and it made my heart swell.

"You needa get yourself some sleep, honey," she slurred, reaching a hand down to brush hair from my eyes as she struggled to balance herself against the metal wall. "You ain't looking good," she added with a note of sympathy.

Forcing a smile, I nodded and pulled away from her, heading out of the warehouse. I hated to see her like that. Drunk. However, that seemed to be her default state, these days. I couldn't really talk to her about it, though. Intoxication was practically a

Brigade requirement, and I'd been drinking beer since I was ten. It was just a part of our culture, so intrinsic to who we were that we didn't even call ourselves 'drunk' when we were. We'd say that we'd 'been over-served', as if the universe had conspired to render us intoxicated.

I headed across our property, trodding through red mud toward our house. A large ranch-style home, its walls were coated with bright white paint, contrastingly starkly with the lush grove of evergreens behind it. It was a nice house, almost too nice, but my family made a good chunk of change from the Brigade's membership fees, along with a couple other sources. My Dad was the big fish in the whole Arkansas Nazi scene, and he took a cut from every rally in the state.

I was winded and woozy by the time I reached my bedroom and collapsed onto my welcoming bed. I loved my room. It was my cozy sanctuary, situated in an isolated corner of the house. The walls were filled with every poster that my parents had ever given me, from German eagles and SS insignias to framed photographs of the Nuremberg Rally. Below my bed, meanwhile, sat my sketch notebook, filled with drawings of every morsel of inspiration that came to my mind, from magical worlds to memorial portraits of Llama. I prayed that my parents never found that notebook. I could already picture the familiar look of disappointment on my father's face, after discovering that his son was some sort of soft artist, with a portfolio of over fifty bunny rabbit sketches.

I lied there for a few minutes with my eyes closed. The world spun around me. Letting out a groan, I propped myself upright and picked up my laptop. It was a nice laptop, and my heart swelled with pride every time I used it. I'd purchased the sleek computer with hard-earned cash that I earned for working the admissions booth at rallies last year. As such, it meant more to me than any other object I owned - aside from my notebook, of course.

Flipping open my laptop, WebMD was my first destination. I licked my lips nervously, and entered my symptoms into their search system: Cold sweat, tingling, stomach pain, headache, fatigue, the list went on.

"Pneumonia?" I shook my head uncertainly. "Really? Pneumonia?" Brushing a strand of hair away from my eyes, I glanced through the article on Pneumonia. The disease sounded scary, but it also seemed highly unlikely. There were a whole host of other symptoms for Pneumonia that I hadn't experienced, and I didn't seem to have any trouble breathing.

I quickly scanned through the other potential diagnoses, a list that seemed to scroll on forever: Avian flu, Bronchitis, Lupus, Relapsing Polychondritis, Gender Bimorphism, Lyme disease, Meningococcal disease, Salmonellosis, and many more.

“Real helpful, WebMD,” I grumbled. “Real helpful.”

At the end of the day, I didn’t learn a damned thing about my ailments. My brief research yielded only heightened anxiety. None of the possibilities sounded particularly pleasant. Lyme disease? I shuddered at the mere possibility.

Closing my laptop, I let out a low groan as my stomach quaked. If my symptoms persisted tomorrow, I might have to see a doctor. That’d be a last resort, though. Mom and Dad always discouraged me from going to the doctor’s office, since so many of them were Jewish.

With a heavy sigh, I reached down to the mini-fridge beside my bed and cracked open a beer. It tasted flat, but I drank it anyway. I drank most nights, but I especially needed one tonight. I couldn’t shake the frustration lurking in the back of my mind for much of the day. For some reason, I thought that my official membership in the Brigade would change everything...that it would earn me respect from Dad, from Colton, from all of the guys. As it turned out, the world had other plans. Nothing had changed. I was still Nat Pike, the worthless son, the walking pile of human garbage who could never do anything right, all because I was too spineless to be my father’s son.

I gulped down the remains of my beer and lied spread-eagle on my bed, staring at the blank ceiling as fatigue washed over me.

# CHAPTER 7

## *Impure*

*I'm on my way to the promised land  
I'm on the highway to hell,*

The familiar song blared through my phone. Groggily, I reached to turn it off, allowing my automatic morning routine to take control. Swinging my legs off my bed, I paused for a moment. I could sense that something wasn't right. Something was askew. My eyebrows furrowed and I leaned forward, glancing down at my feet. They didn't touch the floor. I frowned, as I grew more and more perplexed. From my bed, my feet always touched the floor...ever since I was fifteen.

I blinked and rubbed my eyes. It was undeniable: my legs were dangling in the air. People didn't magically become two or three inches shorter overnight, though...did they?

Confused, I slid my feet to the fuzzy black carpet. The carpet felt different. Softer. Meanwhile, my mind was a sea of millions of thoughts and worries, so many that they created a sort of mental static, preventing me from processing anything. Instead, I let my legs carry me to the bathroom, where I paced onto the cold tile floor and paused before my oval mirror.

Staring back at me was a face that could best be described as 'kind've cute.' With smooth skin, big turquoise eyes, and not even a trace of stubble, the face was neither male nor female. Androgynous. I maintained my firm jaw, along with many of my recognizable facial features, but I still looked profoundly different, and far less masculine.

My heartbeat didn't even accelerate, at first. I was too deep in shock. Instead, I simply stared into my own eyes, then my gaze wandered downward, and I studied the

rest of my body. Beneath my thin white tee, any semblance of pectoral muscles had vanished, and the shirt now draped over my narrower shoulders, as if it was two sizes too large. Poking through my white shirt were two nipples. They were perky, pink, and thicker than they should have been, sitting atop two miniature mounds on my chest. They were small, not even A-cups, but there was no denying it: I had two budding breasts.

With a nervous gulp, my eyes drifted even lower. The day before, Colton had chastised me for having a flat stomach, but it hadn't been this flat. My belly was as smooth as a wooden tabletop, any evidence of my developing beer gut had entirely disappeared. Instead, the most defining feature of my abdomen was the black swastika, which stood stark against my pale skin.

Still mesmerized, I brought my remarkably calm hands to my loose sweatpants, sliding them to the ground. I was greeted by a pair of thin legs. They were soft, hairless sticks, devoid of any shape. Where had my muscles gone? I hadn't been the most fit person on Earth but over the course of the evening, I'd become an absolute shrimp.

"No, no, no," I whispered, in a voice that sounded slightly off, just a note or two higher than it should have been. "This isn't happening. This is not happening."

It couldn't be. There was no way. I was no fool, and I didn't need WebMD to identify the early symptoms of Gender Bimorphism. GB. The affliction that only affected the weak boys, and turned them into freaks. Ever since GB became known a few years ago, Dad had taken a firm stance against GB girls, launching ultimately futile political campaigns to keep them out of bathrooms. They were freaks, after all...if Hitler were in charge, they would be purged like the gypsies, because they were impure, because they belonged to a lower order.

I couldn't be one of them. It was impossible. I was Nat Pike, son of Darren Pike. I came from Aryan roots, a pure, untainted bloodline. I couldn't have GB.

Glancing away from the mirror, I fell back into my morning routine. Like a zombie, I stepped into the shower and let warm water cascade over my softer skin, careful not to look down. Although I couldn't see it, I sensed that my package had shrunk. Rubbing soap over my body with quivering hands, I did my best to ignore my new, leaner frame.

"All in my imagination," I muttered. Careful to avoid looking into the mirror, I stepped out of the shower and began drying myself. The towel felt soft against my golden hair, which now extended down below my shoulders. Had my hair become softer? I shook my head in denial, causing my hair to swish back and forth, getting caught in my eyelashes. Had they become thicker? They certainly seemed thicker.

Carefully, I brushed the locks away from my lashes, and wrapped my towel around my waist. Nothing was wrong with me. I couldn't have GB. My mind was just playing tricks on me. I had nothing to fear, and no reason to panic. Pushing those concerns from my consciousness, I continued my preparation routine like an automaton.

Almost every day, I wore a white t-shirt and my favorite black jeans to school. It was my look, my aesthetic. However, as soon as I saw myself in the mirror, I knew that I'd be forced to improvise on the clothing front. Both my underwear and my jeans were almost slipping down my legs, held in place by a desperate belt. That, however, was not as concerning as my shirt situation. Two unmistakable nipples poked up against my t-shirt, as if they were trying to advertise the small mounds beneath them.

My eyes widened, and I darted to my dresser. The pink nipples weren't just my imagination. They were undoubtedly real. It was all real. My heart began to pound in my chest as I slipped my blue zip-up hoodie over my smaller shoulders. The hoodie draped over me, far too large, and the sleeves were so long that I had to roll them back in order to uncloak my hands. If I had to guess, I'd say that I lost three inches overnight, along with at least twenty pounds.

Returning to the mirror, I drew a deep breath, attempting to slow my thumping heart. Staring at the frightened person in the mirror, who still sort've resembled Nat Pike, a possibility dawned upon me: what if this was all a test? I usually didn't believe in spiritual bullshit, but what if the universe was testing my mettle? Maybe I had a temporary version of GB and, if I survived the day, everything would go back to normal. There were temporary versions of GB, right? From what I'd heard, the symptoms were often permanent...but having a temporary version of GB wasn't impossible...was it?

Nervous, I pulled my blue hood over my head, cloaking my long hair.

"It's all gonna be normal again," I whispered to myself, my voice cracking as I did. "No reason to freak out."

For a brief moment, I considered staying home from school. Calling in sick. However, I decided against doing that. I'd never missed a day of highschool, and staying home would almost certainly draw suspicion from my parents. Although I didn't have a long-term plan, aside from hoping that this would all be temporary, my short-term plan was clear: I couldn't let Mom and Dad discover my changes.

With that in mind, I popped open my bedroom door and began walking briskly through the house.

"That you, Nat?" Mom called from the kitchen, as I approached the front door. She was already slurring her words.



“Mhm,” I replied, not trusting myself to speak, given my cracking voice. Even so, the utterance was accompanied by a boyish voice-crack.

“Keep an eye out for them Mexicans,” she ordered me, scorn in her voice. My Mom was a good woman. Not only did she care about me, but she was also a true believer in the cause, loyal to a fault. “They’re coming in like rodents. Over a thousand in Dexter, that’s what your father’s been saying. Living in their damned tent city outside town. You see one of them, you best lay them out cold.”

“Mhm,” I repeated, filing that information into the back of my brain and pushing open the front door and stepping out into the overbearing humidity.

Everyone knew about the Mexicans and their tent city. It’d been around for at least three or four years, but I’d never actually met any of the Mexicans living there, thank God. If more were flocking in, though, that might change. Once they outnumbered the good white folk in Dexter, we’d have to take up arms and drive them out. The Cleansing, as Dad called it. That all sure sounded scary, but I had too many concerns in my life to worry about The Cleansing. After all, Dad had been predicting a race war for as long as I could remember, and those predictions never seemed to come to fruition. Maybe I wasn’t quite as devout as Mom or others in the Brigade, but I had a feeling that The Cleansing was just a fantasy. Of course, I kept that feeling to myself.

As I trotted down the side of the road in oversized shoes, I wasn’t pre-occupied with The Cleansing, or the Mexican tent city. Instead, a dark thought occupied the back of my mind: What if I really had GB? Permanent, real GB? Gender Bimorphism. I’d seen news reports about GB, and I’d heard my Dad talk about the freaks, but I’d never met anyone who dealt with it. I’d never even heard of incidents of GB in the state of Arkansas. It was supposed to be a city problem, because the city folk crossbred with too many blacks.

Drawing a deep breath, I shook my head. I didn’t have GB. I couldn’t have GB. I came from a pure bloodline, tracing our roots all the way back to the Nordics. It was probably something else. Definitely something else.

# CHAPTER 8

## *Bundled Up*

“**W**hy’ve you been wearing that sweater all day?” Hunter asked with a furrowed brow, laying a strong hand on my shoulder. “It’s hot as balls, ain’t it?”

I flashed a smile, then shrugged. I’d managed to survive four classes and almost the entire lunch period without being asked about my hoodie, but Hunt just had to pry. He was my closest friend, after all, and often noticed stuff about me that other people missed. Every time my Dad beat me, Hunt knew. I couldn’t hide anything from him.

“Doesn’t feel too hot,” I lied, attempting to make my voice sound deeper as I spoke. Of course, that drew even more attention to my strange vocal pitch.

“You sure something ain’t wrong?” he pried, leaning in to study my face. “You kind’ve look different.” In the background, the lunch bell rang, causing me to breathe a sigh of a relief.

“I’m fine,” I said with another confident grin. “Just a bit tired. I’m feeling a lot better than yesterday.” That was the truth, as many of my flu-like symptoms had disappeared overnight, only to be replaced by more perplexing conditions.

Hunt took a step away, but continued to scan my face, taking in my larger eyes, my pronounced lashes, and my smoother skin.

“Seriously, Hunt,” I insisted, slinging my heavy backpack over my shoulder and almost toppling from the weight. Thankfully, I managed to stabilize myself against the building’s concrete wall, saving myself from embarrassment. “I’m fine,” I repeated.

Wiping sweat from my forehead, I tightened my backpack straps and headed toward my next class: Human Geography with Ms. Washington.

I sat in the back row, fidgeting with my pencil. I was too stressed to draw. That same ‘What if’ question swirled in the back of my head, causing goosebumps to crawl up my arms.

“...and throughout the course of this project, you’ll discover how certain neighborhoods are formed. You’ll come to understand all of the factors involved in shaping human settlements, and hopefully,” Ms. Washington paused to glance directly at me, “this will help you view the world more analytically.”

I let out a small sigh, regretting my decision to tell Ms. Washington my true beliefs. She was probably going to make my life a living hell, and maybe even give me an F in the class. To be honest, I was surprised that she hadn’t immediately complained to the principal and gotten me suspended for voicing the truth. Dad had warned me about how whiny people like her could be. Anyhow, I couldn’t ignore the small sinking sensation of guilt in my stomach. With a click of my tongue, I shook my head. I shouldn’t have felt guilty...but I did.

“Now, here are your teams: Brett and Jane, Emma and Jessica...” her voice droned on in the background, and I tuned out until I heard my name listed: “Nathan and Joshua.”

I glanced up from my desk and scanned the room, looking for my assigned partner. Sure enough, I eventually made awkward eye contact from across the room with a student who I assumed was ‘Joshua’.

He was sitting near the front of the class, not too far from Emma, and wore a friendly smile with perfect teeth. ‘Perfect’. That was the only word to describe him: the absolute embodiment of a high school jock, with jet black hair, sharp blue eyes, an athletic build, and a face that was pulled straight out of an American Apparel advertisement. I couldn’t help but frown. Was I jealous? Probably. Joshua’s self-confidence poured off of him like rolling fog. His Dad was probably proud of him, and he definitely didn’t have to bundle himself up like an infant to keep people from catching a glimpse of his budding breasts.

Casting my eyes away from Joshua, I let out a dejected sigh and continued fidgeting with my pencil, praying that my condition proved to be temporary.

When Ms. Washington finished reading names, she had us divide into our pairs. After a minute or two of shuffling around and resituating, I found myself sitting next to my assigned partner.

“Hey, I’m Joshua!” he beamed, extending a hand to shake mine.

“Nat,” I replied, unenthused. I met his handshake, and my stomach sunk when I realized how small my hand was compared to his. My hands definitely weren’t that small when I woke up, and my fingers weren’t quite as slender. I gulped, and my heartbeat quickened.

“Is that short for something?” he asked, lifting an eyebrow with ease. His facial pose made me clench my jaw. With his eyebrow raised like that, he looked like an actor playing James Bond. Yup, I was jealous. No sense in lying to myself about that.

“Nathan,” I answered flatly, avoiding eye contact.

“Oh,” he remarked, as if he was surprised. “That’s cool. You can call me Josh, by the way.” Nathan was a fairly common name, why would that surprise him? Joshua’s behavior and presence was making me feel uneasy. He kept staring at me, while I avoided his gaze, and he spoke with some sort of accent.

“You ain’t from here, Josh,” I stated matter-of-factly.

“Is it that obvious?” he grinned, with two subtle dimples marking his cheeks.

I shrugged in reply.

“My family moved here last year, from Chicago,” he began to explain, before Ms. Washington’s authoritative voice interrupted our brief conversation.

Wielding a basket full of paper slips, she explained the details of the project as she paced up and down the aisles, forcing each pair to draw a random slip from the basket. Apparently, each of the small white slips of paper represented a different neighborhood in Dexter. Each group of two would have to visit their assigned neighborhood, talk to its inhabitants and local leaders, then write a paper about the factors that shaped that area’s defining features.

I enjoyed school because I was a gifted test-taker. I was never a fan of stupid projects like this one, partly because I wasn’t an incredibly extroverted person. Coordinating with a partner, traveling to different neighborhoods, and interviewing locals sounded like an absolute nightmare.

Things went from bad to worse when Joshua drew our slip from the basket.

“La Ciudad?” I read, peering over his shoulder at the stupid piece of paper. “Where the hell is that?” I’d lived in Dexter my whole life, and I’d never heard of a ‘Ciudad’ before. I ran a hand through my long blond hair, and furrowed my brow. “It ain’t that tent city, is it?” I asked to nobody in particular, and my stomach sunk at the mere thought.

“La Ciudad is indeed a ‘tent city,’” Ms. Washington smiled down at me nefariously, causing me to clench my jaw. “But it falls within the Dexter city limits and, therefore, it’s a neighborhood.”

“How are we gonna find any local leaders?” I spoke in a low, mumbling tone, trying to avoid an embarrassing voice crack. “Only illegals live there,” I added with a disgruntled sigh.

“Guess you’ll have to figure that out, won’t you?” Ms. Washington replied smugly, before moving on to the next pair.

She wanted this, didn’t she? She wanted me to visit some Mexican slum...get me killed. Josh had drawn the slip, though. Maybe he was in on it. With a heavy sigh, I glanced suspiciously in his direction. Josh returned my glare with a charming grin. “Asshole,” I muttered under my breath.

I made a mental promise to never trust Josh or Ms. Washington again. Everyone’s always got an agenda. That was the most important fact Dad ever taught me, and I didn’t intend to forget it anytime soon.

Just as I made my silent pledge, a wave of fatigue passed over me, along with a pulsing sensation in my belly. “Erm,” I grunted, my eyes fluttering shut as I inhaled sharply between my teeth. Automatically, my hands moved to massage my temples. It was a demanding tiredness, the kind that pestered and pestered until it proved victorious.

“Are you okay?” Josh asked with concern, placing a firm hand on my shoulder and lightly shaking me, as if he was trying to keep me conscious.

“Mhm,” I sighed, almost inaudibly.

Although I was aware of the world around me, and of the fact that all eyes in the classroom were now pointed in my direction, I was too preoccupied to care. Instead, I lowered my head onto my rectangular wooden desk, and began to imagine how nice a nap would feel. I was tired...so tired.

I heard the nervous conversation in the background, wherein Ms. Washington determined that I needed to be taken to the hospital, but I barely even registered her words. If I could have replied, I would have told everyone not to worry about me. I wasn’t in any sort of pain or grave danger, I was just sleepy...although, I suppose I couldn’t blame Ms. Washington’s logic. Most sleepy students didn’t fall into such a profound stupor during class, where physical shaking and loud noises still didn’t wake them from slumber.

All I remembered crystal clearly, whilst in my semi-conscious state, was a pair of thin arms wrapped around me, guiding me into a topless Jeep. As my eyes fluttered shut, the vehicle zoomed along the Dexter streets toward the Stonewall Free Clinic, and a familiar chirpy voice spoke to me, assuring me that I was going to be just fine.

# CHAPTER 9

## *Changes*

“**M**mm,” I groaned, stretching my arms.  
Inhaling deeply, I caught the wafting scent of disinfectant.  
Disinfectant? Where the hell was I?

Slowly, my eyes fluttered open and I found myself lying on a thin bed in a naturally lit hospital room. Bright sunlight streamed through a half-shuttered window, casting prison-bar-like shadows across the wall. How long had I been asleep? Propping myself into a sitting position, I felt a strange jiggling sensation on my chest as I moved.

With a nervous gulp, I peered downward. During my slumber, my baggy clothing had been replaced by a blue-dotted hospital gown. Beneath the gown's covering, two sizeable mounds rose from my chest, pressing against the fabric and begging to be set free.

“Holy shit,” I murmured. As soon as the words left my mouth, I gasped. My voice was high and lofty - almost soprano. I...I sounded like a girl.

“No, no, no, no, no.” Hopping down from the stiff cot, I scrambled to the room's only mirror, a plain square that hung above the room's industrial sink. Despite the room's bright lighting, the mirror had a weird fuzziness around it. Hell, everything further than five or ten feet from me seemed somewhat fuzzy, as if I was looking at a poorly focused photograph. I could still make out the shapes of objects and their colors, but I couldn't see all of the details. It almost seemed as if I was living in some sort of foggy twilight zone. I didn't fully come to terms with reality until I stood on my tiptoes, only a foot or two from the mirror.

A frightened girl stared back at me, her lips parted in shock. For the last few days, I subconsciously knew that I had GB...it was the only logical explanation for my ailments. Regardless, the face in the mirror still shocked me.

With pale skin, innocent turquoise eyes, and sandy blonde hair that streamed freely over her shoulders, the girl in the mirror was objectively adorable. A subtle sprinkling of freckles dotted her cheeks, barely standing out against her smooth skin. Her features were delicate, accentuated by powerful, golden eyebrows and a pair of relatively pouty lips.

She almost looked like my mother. Almost. The similarities were certainly present, although the girl in the mirror was substantially paler, probably shorter, and sported a different eye color. Also, if I had to take a guess, I'd say that the girl in the mirror had a larger set of breasts. They weren't gigantic but they were quite firm. I could feel them clinging to the girl's chest like squishy orbs, and swaying with her every movement.

"Holy shit," I repeated, absorbing my reflection.

The new body - my new body - wasn't incredibly tone. It could best be described as slender or thin. I suppose that made sense, given the fact that I wasn't the healthiest person on Earth, and GB wasn't going to magically change that. Thankfully, my stubborn belly fat had entirely disappeared, but I felt like an absolute twig...as if a stray gust of wind could break me in half.

In a leap of faith, I winced and lifted my hospital gown. In doing so, I caught a glimpse of something so jarring that my eyes shot wide open. A vagina. I had a fucking vagina. Pink flaps, folds, the whole works. It looked so alien...as if it'd been grown in a laboratory on Mars and flown to Earth, only to be unceremoniously implanted between my thighs. Breathing heavily, I returned my gaze to the mirror, staring at my panicked reflection.

"Oh," a voice came from the doorway, causing me to flinch. "You're awake!" A fuzzy brunette stood there, clad in scrubs. As she strode inside, I determined that she couldn't have been older than her late 30s, but she gave off the vibe of a cool professional, as if she'd been doing this for centuries.

She scanned her clipboard as she spoke. "I'm Doctor Harper, and you are...Nathaniel. Gender Bimorphism. That's a challenging one." She glanced up from her board to give me a smile that she probably thought was reassuring. "We usually don't have patients stay overnight. Then again, we haven't seen too many GB cases around here...especially such advanced stages of GB. How did you deal with the symptoms for so long without noticing?"

I shrugged. Of course, I noticed my symptoms long ago, but I just couldn't afford to tell anyone.

"Your transformation, though...wow. That was something else. You turned out so...great," she contained her grin, but I knew what she meant to say: 'cute.' Her cheery grin was the sort of thing that someone would wear after seeing a video of a bunny rabbits playing with a puppy. Reigning her smile under control, she scribbled something in her notepad, as my eyes returned to the mirror. "Of course, you probably already realized that. Too bad your changes didn't finish until after your friend left."

"My friend?" I asked with a piping voice, turning away from the mirror.

"Yeah. The girl with purple hair? The one who brought you here?"

"Oh," I replied quietly, still puzzled. "Emma."

"Right. Emma. She stayed for a while, until two in the morning or so, and she made sure you were set for the night before she left. She also gave us her number, and asked us to call her to come pick you up."

"No!" I blurted, which sounded like a desperate shriek upon leaving my mouth. "Don't. Please don't."

"Are you sure, hun?"

"One hundred percent," I answered, my heart racing. Emma? Seriously? Emma took me to the doctor's. She was a race traitor. I couldn't be seen with her...why would she even offer to drive me home? Was she insane? Did she want to hurt me?

"Is there anybody else you'd like us to call?"

"No," I replied flatly. I couldn't even think about how my parents would react to the news. The mere thought caused my stomach to drop with dread.

"Okay, then. I'll give you a quick check-up and make sure that everything's running smoothly, then you'll be good to go. Usually, with GB, there aren't any major complications."

After a moment of hesitation, I nodded. "I think I already found a complication."

"Oh?" Doctor Harper furrowed her brow.

"I'm having trouble seeing things," I continued softly, rubbing one of my arms uncomfortably as I spoke.

"Is that only for things that are far from you?" She inquired.

Once more, I nodded. "Anything further than...I don't know, maybe ten feet."

"Okay, that sounds like you've become near-sighted. Little changes like that aren't too uncommon, among people who share your condition." She scribbled something else on her clipboard, and smiled down at me. "I can take a look at your vision, and I can get you some non-prescription glasses, but I recommend seeing an optometrist."



“Mhm,” I nodded, running a hand through my wavy hair. “I’ll take any glasses. Anything to make the fuzziness go away.”

Truth be told, whatever non-prescription glasses Doctor Harper had here were likely to be my only pair. The nearest optometrist was probably outside of walking distance, and I’d have to beg my parents to drive me there. Would they even pay for a pair of fancy glasses for me, if I managed to get to the optometrist? Before I contracted GB, the answer was ‘no’, and I had a feeling that those odds weren’t going to increase.

Thus, I politely asked Doctor Harper to fetch a pair of glasses, and she quickly obliged. The glasses that she found were round and fairly thick, with leopard-print coloration. Based on their appearance, I was hesitant to even try them, but all of those aesthetic concerns proved to be short-lived. When I slid the glasses over the bridge of my nose, I let out an audible sigh of relief. The fuzziness was finally gone. Millions of tiny details became visible to my eye, all at once, and I longed to sketch them into my notebook. By some miracle of nature, that undeniably feminine pair of glasses seemed to be the perfect match for my vision.

With the beginnings of a faint grin on my lips, I began to prepare for Doctor Harper’s full evaluation. I disrobed on the cot, and allowed her to study my body. Despite my new body and my general shyness, Doctor Harper did a great job of putting me at ease. She spoke to me as she analyzed my well-being, careful to explain everything that she was doing. Still, it took all of my willpower not to cover my breasts with my hands, shielding them from her eyes.

For whatever reason, Doctor Harper seemed to completely ignore the thick swastika on my belly. She didn’t even look at it, which actually made me quite happy. I guess I just didn’t want her to hate me for it. She seemed like such a nice woman. Dutifully, she listened to my heartbeat, put a flashlight in my eyes, made me stand on a scale, and even measured my height.

“Five-foot-one,” she announced, causing me to let out another groan. “Probably a bit closer to five-foot, but we’ll round up.”

“And I thought I was too short before all of this,” I mumbled angrily, staring at my bare toes. I guess it made sense, though. I’d been shorter than Dad as a guy, so I was shorter than Mom as a girl. Regardless, I couldn’t contain the sinking sensation in my stomach. What the fuck was I going to do, once I got home? I was beyond screwed.

Concluding her quick inspection, Doctor Harper picked up her clipboard once more and began jotting down notes.

“GB changes your primary and secondary sexual traits, alters a few other minor traits, and makes your hair longer. Don’t ask me about that last part, because I have no

idea why it makes your hair grow. Anyways, that's where you are, right now. Physically, you're a relatively healthy young woman. However, you could certainly be healthier, if you exercise for at least sixty minutes per day and eat a good mix of food. Your weight is within the fifth percentile for your height." She paused to scratch her unruly brown hair. "The lower fifth percentile, that is. You're about seven or eight pounds under your ideal weight range, which can cause a some health issues down the road."

No shit. I wasn't some sculpted fucking athlete. Big surprise. I let out a high sigh, tossing the gown back over my head.

"Is it all...permanent?"

"Yes," Doctor Harper nodded. "Unless you have some never-before-seen variant of the condition. Yes."

I shut my eyes and fought off tears. Fuck. All of the denial and self-persuasion in the world couldn't fix reality: I had GB. Real, freakish, life-ruining GB. I drew a deep, shaky breath and promised myself that I wouldn't cry.

"In the coming week, your brain chemistry will change substantially. Your preferences will likely change, causing you to enjoy things - and people - that you didn't enjoy beforehand." She sent me a side glance, which caused me to take an unintentional gulp. "After the first few weeks, it's usually somewhat smooth sailing. Not always, though. That's why we strongly recommend that you spend a few days at the nearest Gender Bimorphism transition house in Little Rock."

"You want me to go to Little Rock?!" I sputtered, my eyes widening. I didn't have a car! Who would drive me to Little Rock? Who would pay for me to stay in a 'transition house'? No, no, no. I couldn't do it.

"Almost every GB patient who goes to a transition house finds the experience to be very valuable." Doctor Harper reasoned.

"No," I replied flatly. "No way."

"Okay, then," Doctor Harper sighed. "You're legally an adult, so the decision is yours alone."

I nodded, feeling my blonde hair tickle my back. I was an adult. I'd completely forgotten about that. Technically, I was free to do whatever I'd like. Only technically.

"So, what happens next?" I asked.

"Well," Doctor Harper shrugged, as if she was sad to hear that I wanted to leave. "We need you to fill out some paperwork and legal documents."

"Legal documents?"

She glanced down at me with care. "To change your official gender, and your name...unless you plan on staying 'Nathaniel.'"

I shook my head, fighting off another round of welling tears. It seemed as if they'd arrived out of nowhere, and I knew that I couldn't hold them back.

"Are you okay?" the doctor asked, concern in her voice.

"I just..." I allowed a few drops to meander down my cheek, tracing over my freckles and dripping from my delicate chin. "Why me?"

"Hey," Doctor Harper winced, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder, as if she wasn't sure if she should hug me or not. "These sort of things happen, whether we want them or not. My advice: stick with it. I know that GB comes with a whole host of challenges. You'll run into people who don't understand what you've gone through, people who judge you, but they're a small slice of the population. Don't even worry about them. Most GB girls end up loving their lives. Just power through, okay?"

Wiping my tears away with the backside of my thin forearm, I caught a glimpse of my birthmark. The mark sat on the underside of my wrist, like a large freckle, and it brought me a small degree of comfort. It confirmed that I was still myself. This was the same body that I'd always had...it was just shaped a little differently.

Drawing a steady breath, I nodded. "Okay. I'll try."

"Alright," she flashed a grin down at me and spoke in a profoundly soothing voice. "Let's get you taken care of, hun."

# CHAPTER 10

## *The Flick of a Pen*

**H**olding my shoulder, Doctor Harper guided me through the winding white corridors until we came upon the receptionist's desk. It was a long counter, and I imagined that three or four staffers would sit there during busy hours. Today, however, the clinic was mostly a ghost town, and only one receptionist was on duty.

She was a lean woman in her mid-twenties with bouncy red hair. Despite the fact that she was sitting behind the counter, I could see the bottoms of her grey sweatpants, along with slippered feet, peeking through a gap at the counter's base. Perhaps I wouldn't have seen her casual attire if I wasn't so damned short. Losing that much height was a strange experience. Everything seemed larger, now. With a slight frown, I made the sad realization that I was probably the smallest person in the room.

"This is Georgia, she can help you with all the paperwork," Doctor Harper explained, in her calming way, gesturing toward the redheaded receptionist.

"Hi there," Georgia smiled, giving me a polite wave. Before her were an assortment of papers, arranged in a small stack and pointed toward me.

"Uh, hello," I replied timidly. Approaching the papers, I drew a shaky breath and glanced up at Doctor Harper. She flashed her reassuring smile, which made me feel a bit more at ease.

"It's all pretty simple, really," Georgia explained, scratching at her curly red locks. "Just take your time, give them a read, and sign on the dotted lines."

As Georgia pushed the papers toward me, Doctor Harper passed me the black ballpoint that she'd been using to scribble notes on her clipboard. I pushing my glasses up the bridge of my nose, and dutifully replicated my signature on page after page.

With Doctor Harper peering over my shoulder and helping me through some of the more difficult legalese, I managed to get almost all of the new documents signed. Swallowing all of my pride and disbelief, I officially changed my gender to 'Female', both Federally and within the state of Arkansas. 'Nat Pike', I signed, in scrawling cursive letters.

When my pen left the paper, I felt tears welling in my eyes, but did the best to quell them. I was so fucked. There was no escape. I was no longer Nathan Pike, but rather a petite blonde girl. No, a petite blonde GB girl. Closing my eyes, I vividly recalled how Dad wished death upon everyone with GB, getting on top of his barstool at HQ and calling for all of the freaks to be rounded up and put in concentration camps. At the time, I thought nothing of it. Hell, at the time, I agreed with him.

"You can do this," Doctor Harper whispered to me, giving my shoulder a comforting squeeze.

I nodded, then flipped to the final document: Legal name change.

With a trembling hand, I wrote down my new name: Natalie. Perhaps I wasn't the most creative person on Earth, or maybe I was just lazy. At the end of the day, my decision was guided by one key fact: I already went by 'Nat', and I didn't want that to change. At the same time, I didn't want Nat to be my official name. It just seemed too...informal. Thus, I was Natalie. Natalie Pike. Just thinking that name gave me the chills. That was the new me. My new legal identity. Natalie Pike, a girl from Arkansas.

I turned back toward Doctor Harper, returning her pen.

"Thank you, Doctor," I whispered, not trusting myself to speak without breaking down in tears.

"My pleasure, Natalie," she replied with a sad smile. "And you can call me Laura."

I hesitated upon hearing my new name, but still gave a cordial nod.

"We've got your old clothes here, but I seriously doubt that they'll fit. You lost around..." Laura paused to look down at her clipboard.

"Ten inches," I muttered, cradling my exposed arms with my hands. My arms were fragile and mostly smooth, with only tiny, wispy blonde hairs. My limbs were also quite cold. The clinic was well air-conditioned and the flimsy gown only extended past my shoulders and thighs, leaving my extremities exposed.

"That seems about right," Laura nodded with a slight grin. "I'll see what we've got for you in the longterm lost-and-found...also known as a crate in the supply closet. Georgia, can you get her the pamphlets? You know...the puberty ones?"

“On it,” Georgia chirped, as Laura disappeared into the hallway. “Here you are,” the redheaded receptionist offered, holding a few papers in her hand. They looked like travel brochures, but their contents were likely far more uncomfortable.

“All About Menstruation?” I asked helplessly, reading the top pamphlet’s title.

“Yeah,” Georgia winced. “Maybe I should’ve put that one on the bottom.”

I glanced up from the laminated paper to see Georgia grinning infectiously. I did my best to fight off a smile of my own, but it persevered. “I guess so.” I paused, flipping the menstruation pamphlet to its first page. “Are they really that bad? Periods, I mean.”

“Sometimes,” she shrugged. “They’re different for everyone. For a lot of women, they’re miserable, but some others barely even notice their symptoms.”

“Oh,” I cocked my head, placing All About Menstruation and its fellow handouts back onto the counter. I definitely wouldn’t be taking those home. “Interesting,” I added, making a silent plea that my periods weren’t too extreme. Once more, my heart began to pound in my chest. The very notion of having periods was beyond frightening...of blood coming out of my...out of my...

“Nat,” Laura called from around the corner. Gulping, I temporarily cast my worries aside and padded toward her voice. I meandered down the hall until I found myself in a bright closet with brooms, mops, shelves, and a box labeled ‘Lost and Found’.

“You lucked out, Natalie,” Laura smiled upon saying my new name. Although I hated signing my new identity onto paper, ‘Natalie’ didn’t sound too jarring when it came from Laura’s mouth. There was something endearing about how she said the name, as if she was addressing a lost rabbit.

“Not only did we find something in your size, but I also stumbled across,” Laura raised her arms to one of the top shelves, far higher than I could have reached, and retrieved a blue kit embroidered with the letters G.B. “A Gender Bimorphism kit! They used to make sure that all hospitals carried these, back when people thought that the condition would become an epidemic. I guess we never used ours.”

“What’s in it?” I asked cautiously. I knew that Laura had nothing but good intentions, but I couldn’t curb my suspicion. She was just being so nice to me...why would anybody treat me so nicely? It reminded me of the way that Ms. Washington spoke to me. Did they both have some sort of secret agenda?

“Well, for starters,” Laura spoke, flipping the bag open. “They’ve got ten different sizes of underwear and bras, to help you figure out your size. Then, there are some feminine hygiene products in there that you’ll need.”

“Feminine hygiene?” I lifted an eyebrow.

“Tampons, mostly,” she replied, glancing down at me. “About half of the time, ‘feminine hygiene’ is code for tampons.”

“Oh,” I replied, furrowing my brow and adjusting my glasses.

“Here, take this stuff to the bathroom and get yourself dressed,” she ordered, handing me the blue GB bag with a few articles of clothing stacked on top.

I nodded hesitantly. The bag was far heavier than I anticipated. Clenching my jaw, I drew a deep breath. I wasn’t going to drop it. I couldn’t. I’d look like such a weakling. Using every ounce of my scant strength, I clutched the blue bag to my chest and trotted forward like a pack animal, voyaging down the hallway toward the bathroom.

\* \* \*

“Okay,” I whispered, eyeing the spectacled girl in the mirror. “This ain’t too bad.”

Releasing a controlled breath, I held my hair to the side as I fixed the collar of my long-sleeved red plaid shirt. I didn’t button the plaid shirt, which exposed my white undershirt and slim figure. I always wore my plaid shirts open as a guy, and that wouldn’t change any time soon. Tight blue jeans encased my legs, accentuating my unmistakably female hips and butt, and a pair of black tennis shoes hugged my small feet. Aside from the constricting jeans, Laura had picked out a pretty comfortable outfit.

“Half country, half nerd,” I allowed a faint smile to grace my lips. It was the truth. I was wearing the kind of outfit that you’d expect to see at a Brad Paisley concert, and I still managed to appear nerdy. Between my frustratingly innocent face and my thick glasses, the label was unavoidable. I looked like a nerd. A cute nerd - admittedly - but a nerd nevertheless.

Beneath that outfit, the stars had aligned and I’d managed to find a snug pair of panties and a bra size that fit: 30D, as it turned out. Although the breasts had seemed absolutely massive when I first awoke, I came to the realization that they only appeared that big because of my relatively small body. After further inspect, I determined that my new assets were reasonably sized - albeit on the larger side - a fact which brought me a degree of comfort.

I made sure to record my cup size in my phone, just in case I’d have to buy more bras. With a high sigh, the brief smile fled my lips. Why was I even worried about bra shopping? I was a freak. A genuine, hopeless freak. That should have been my chief concern. How would my parents react, upon my return home? Would they think that I

wasn't like the other GB girls, or would they decide that I deserved this because I was never 'man enough'?

I suspected that I already knew the dreaded answer. I pushed my glasses up my nose and shivered, folding my hospital gown across my arms and making a silent wish that everything would turn out alright - a seemingly unrealistic goal.

With that resolution in mind, I hoisted up my blue GB bag and strode out of the bathroom. Navigating the hallways, I found myself back in front of Georgia's long counter, and let the heavy bag fall to the floor with a whiny grunt.

"Look at you!" the redheaded receptionist grinned. Her voice had a certain coo to it, which caused my cheeks to redden. "You're just the cutest thing, ain't you?"

I frowned, slowly approached her countertop.

"You know, you're the first one of them GB girls I've ever met," she paused for a moment, her eyes still alive. "How does it feel?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it, temporarily settling on an uncomfortable shrug. A GB girl. To Georgia, that my identity. That was who I was. Just a GB girl. I was a disappointment, who was about to return home and meet my final judgement. It made me want to cry, but crying was for the soft folk. Clenching my jaw, I met Georgia's bright blue eyes.

"Not great," I replied with a measured tone, causing Georgia's smile to fade. "Not great at all."

"Oh." She looked crushed, as if she'd drawn a beautiful sketch and her father had just ripped it up out of spite.

"So," I continued, feeling a pang of guilt for ruining her chipper mood. "Do I have to sign anything else?"

"You don't need to sign anything, but..." Georgia reached down below the counter and pulled out a stack of large clothing, along with my backpack, phone, and wallet. "...here's the stuff you came in with."

"Thank you," I gave a slight nod, then reached across the table to collect my possessions, stowing them away in the GB bag as I slung my backpack over my shoulders. I had to fiddle with the straps for a few seconds to make it fit correctly.

"Oh, there you are," Laura's voice caused me to spin around. Striding toward me, she no longer wore her teal scrubs. Evidently, she had changed her outfit while I changed mine, donning a black and yellow sundress and a thin white sweater. She was a pretty woman, with her flowing brown hair and her endearing face. There was also a certain elegance about the way she moved, as if she knew how good she looked, but she didn't want to flaunt it.



“Perfect timing. I’m just getting off my shift, so I was thinking I could give you a ride home...if that’s where you want to go.” Laura stated with her calming voice.

“It’s alright,” I added, drawing an uncertain breath. “I was just gonna walk home.”

“How far away do you live?” Laura tilted her head, gazing down at me.

“A few miles,” I shrugged, avoiding eye contact as I studied the lines between floor-tiles. Half of the diamond-shaped tiles were blue while the other half were white, and lines of grey mortar connected them in a sprawling pattern. I enjoyed staring at tiles. It helped me escape certain situations, at least mentally.

“You’re going to lug that bag ‘a few miles’?” she asked in a doubting tone, gesturing down toward my blue GB bag. Of course, she was right. I’d barely managed to lug that behemoth down the relatively short hallway.

“You really don’t have to...” I replied quietly, shifting my feet as I spoke.

“I want to,” she smiled warmly, then began striding toward the sliding glass doors. “It’ll be easy. Come on, hun.”

I paused for a moment before caving and following at her heels. “Alright. If you say so.”

# CHAPTER 11

*It*

“Okay, you can drop me off here,” I murmured. Absently, I rested my hand against my cheek, surveying the familiar reddish mud of my parents’ sprawling yard. “Thank you for the ride, Ma’am.”

“Not a problem,” Doctor Laura Harper flashed a warm smile, which faded after a split second.

Like me, Laura was also scanning the property. Her eyes lingered upon the metal warehouse in the distance. Blood and Soil read the sun-faded banner draped across the warehouse’s side paneling, accompanied by two SS thunderbolts at either flank. At least five trucks were parked below the banner, all sporting swastika flags of their own. Laura furrowed her brow, but said nothing.

“Hun,” Laura turned to me once more. “Are you sure that you feel...safe...with being dropped off here?”

I blinked a couple of times, my stomach tying itself into a knot. “Mhm,” I managed a faint smile as my heartbeat quickened. “I do.”

Was she worried about me? Did she have good reason to be worried about me? Maybe. I had no idea how my parents would react to the news. I guess I’d never really presented them with any comparable news. The most similar case I could remember was when my parents discovered that one of Mom’s distant nieces was a lesbian. To put it mildly, our families were no longer on talking terms.

“Alright,” Laura gave a hesitant nod. “Well, either way, I want you to have this.” She pulled out a slip of paper and scribbled a message, before handing it to me. “There’s my number. Call me whenever you need anything, alright? Anything at all.”

I accepted the paper, shoving it into my backpack. Laura and I hadn't talked too much during the car ride, for which I was thankful. I wasn't really in the mood for chatting, and she seemed to detect that.

"Sure thing," I managed a small smile, then popped open the door to Laura's truck and carefully eased myself down to the ground.

As I lugged my backpack and GB bag to my bedroom, Laura pulled a U-turn and headed back down the dirt road from whence she came. I didn't watch her leave, but I did think about her as her engine's noise faded beneath the familiar buzz of cicadas. What kind of life did she have? I never really asked. She seemed like she had everything figured out. She was a confident doctor, probably happily married to a loving husband, raising a bunch of perfect kids.

I let out a bitter sigh, then scampered inside my parents' house, darting to my bedroom. Thankfully, nobody was in the house, so I went largely undetected. That was a common occurrence, as everyone usually sat around the warehouse from dawn 'til dusk. It was our HQ, after all.

Dropping my bags to the ground, I took a glance in my bedroom mirror, observing the lightly freckled girl with unkempt blonde hair, and a pair of glasses.

"Fuck it," I muttered. Everyone was going to find out about my GB sooner or later. There was no point in trying to hide in my room.

With a measured breath, I bit the bullet and headed toward the warehouse. The intimidating building was less than a hundred feet from our front door, but that distance suddenly felt like a mile. For every step I took, another fear entered my mind. The fears all swirled around one question: how would my parents react? To be honest, I had no clue. I was only confident in one fact: they weren't going to be happy.

I strode through the metal door, and quickly found myself staring up at an absolute giant of a human being blocking my path. He was probably a foot and half taller than me but I knew his face as soon as I saw it, even in the dimly lit entryway.

"Hey Hunt," I said with a hopeful smile, looking up at my friend. He hadn't changed one bit, with his close haircut and thick frame. Meanwhile, I couldn't have possibly been mistaken for my former self.

"Who're you?" Hunter asked in his typical terse fashion. If words were currency, then Hunt was a true miser. I wasn't much of a talker myself, but he always made me look like a social butterfly.

"I'm Nat," I offered another nervous smile, which grew desperate when I saw Hunt's confusion. "You know...Nathan...your friend Nathan. That's me."

“Nat?” Hunter’s eyes widened, and he bent his knees to get a closer view of my face, like a giant peering into a treehole. My body tightened up as he did. I knew he’d never hurt me, but I couldn’t help my flinching reaction. His looming figure was just too intimidating. “You have...”

“Gender Bimorphism,” I finished the sentence for him. “Yeah,” I gulped as Hunter took a step away from me. “I didn’t realize I had it until the changes happened. I ain’t contagious or anything, though.”

“You’re really Nat?” Hunt asked, still a bit skeptical.

In response, I lifted my white t-shirt, revealing my telltale tattoo. Despite my body’s reshaping and my skin’s texture alteration, the tattoo remained as clear as ever. Hunt’s jaw hung open, and he glanced between the tattoo and my face, before he spoke.

“What should I call you?”

I shrugged. “Nat.”

Hunt nodded thoughtfully, as if to say ‘That makes sense.’

“You’re the first person I’ve told. Thanks for not freaking out or anything.” I smiled up at him, and he managed a faint smile in return. Truth be told, I expected that sort of treatment from Hunt. He was my best friend, after all, a fact which almost brought tears to my eyes. We always stuck together, through thick and thin. The same couldn’t be said for everyone else in the Brigade. Pausing, I glanced around Hunt’s arm toward the warehouse’s interior. “Do you know if my parents are in here?”

“Yup.”

Clenching my jaw, I nodded. “Well, I guess I should let them know.”

“You sure?”

“What choice do I have, man?” I sulked, my exasperation mounting. “Have you seen me?” I frowned, trying my best not to full-on pout. “Do you think I could just glue on a fake mustache and pretend I haven’t changed? I look like a fourteen year old librarian-in-training, and I don’t even remember how the god damned Dewey Decimal System works.”

Hunter’s look of concern gave way to a faint smile as I ranted. “You’re definitely Nat.”

With a determined nod, I brushed past Hunt and mustered all of my confidence, walking into the open warehouse. As expected, five or six Brigade guys sat lazily on the assorted leather couches, listening to Alex Jones’ rambling voice through the radio receiver. Next to them, my parents shared a single loveseat. Mom sat on Dad’s lap, and the pair held blue cans of Bud as they whispered amongst themselves.

“Mom, Dad,” I called in a piping tone. With a deep breath, I did my best to slow my thumping heart. I’d been worrying about this encounter for some time, and my adrenaline was already making itself known, causing my small hands to shake.

“Who you calling ‘Mom’, girl?” Mom rose from Dad’s lap, eyeing me with suspicion. Upon further inspection, her suspicion gave way to confusion as she realized that we were obviously related. We had the same hair, similar faces, and my bodytype looked like a miniature version of hers. “Who are you?” she crossed her arms and raised her chin suspiciously. “Are you a niece or something? One of Bridgett’s kids?”

“I’m Nat,” I squeaked hopefully, glancing around the silent warehouse. As expected, I’d captured everyone’s attention, including my father’s. His eyes bore into me like a laser, but I couldn’t quite read the emotions behind his gaze.

“Nat...” Mom wore the same surprised expression that Hunt had worn earlier. “You’re...you’re one of them,” she muttered. She placed a hand on her forehead and glanced back over her shoulder at Dad as if she was waiting for a cue, unsure of how I ought to be treated.

As it turned out, Dad’s reaction would be burned into my memory for the rest of my life.

“Why are y’all so shocked?” Dad’s bitter voice echoed off the metallic walls and he let out a dry laugh. “It was never a real believer,” he shook his head, anger flaming in his eyes. After a moment or two, I realized that ‘it’ referred to me. “This creature wasn’t a real man, nor a real woman.” He pointed directly at me, and I felt the weight of over a dozen disdainful eyes upon me. “The creature you’re looking at can best be described as a leech. This ain’t surprising, though. Even in the purest bloodlines, mistakes do happen. Creatures like this, though...they ain’t worth our time. They’ll be gone with the Cleansing. Remember what I said: only the pure will remain.” Drawing a sharp breath, he glanced at my mother. “It’s a damned shame that these things exist, but what can you do? We’ve just got to move on. I dunno, maybe we can try for another.”

Mom glanced between my face and Dad’s, the cogs in her mind spinning ‘round. With an uncertain nod, she cast her eyes away from me. “Okay, honey. If you so say so. What should we do with it?”

The blood fled from my face. “Dad,” I whispered, my lower lip trembling. I knew that this encounter wouldn’t be pretty, but I never imagined it would go this poorly. “Mom. It’s me. I’m...I’m...”

“Well, it shouldn’t be allowed in HQ, that’s for damned sure.” He gestured grandly around the warehouse as he spoke. “This is sacred ground. Blood and soil. This is the shit we fight for, we can’t let something like that in here.”

I opened my mouth and closed it a couple of times, nervously tugging at my plaid shirt. "Mom," I whimpered, "please...it's me. It's still me. I'm Nat."

Avoiding eye contact, my Mom spoke in a whisper. "Go to your room," she ordered with a scathing tone, as if she was addressing a mangy stray dog who'd just bitten someone. "Don't you dare come back in here. Understood?"

"Mom...please."

I glanced around the room. Most of the Brigade guys were glaring daggers at me, or looking upon me with burning disdain. I wasn't welcome. On the verge of tears, I made eye contact with Hunter, who stood tall by the entryway. There was no hatred in his eyes, only pity. His reaction made sense, considering my general patheticness. After a moment or two that seemed to last for an eternity, I cast my eyes down toward the cold concrete floor.

My chest rising and falling with heavy breaths, I turned around and walked out of the warehouse like a wayward zombie. The silence was surreal as they watched my depart, judging me with their eyes. Could I blame them? Dad was right about almost everything. He was cut-throat, but he was a genius. Maybe I really was just a creature. Maybe I was a mistake.

I trudged across the red mud and slinked through the front doors of our ranch house, straight toward my bedroom. Tears were brimming in my eyes, and I did my best to fight them off. I locked the door behind me before collapsing onto my mattress. With shaking breaths, I stared at the ceiling, unsure of what to do.

When I went to talk to my parents, I thought that I would be removed from the Brigade, since I had a girl's body. I didn't expect Dad's chilling speech. I knew he didn't like GB girls, but it wasn't like I chose this. Did he realize that? I suppose I could have told him. I could have argued with him, but that usually wasn't a great strategy. He was smarter than me, so he won every argument anyway.

I'd spent my entire life looking up to Dad and trying to win his favor, yet now he despised me. By extension, the whole Brigade despised me. The Brigade was my life, the only group to which I belonged, the only friends I had, and I'd just lost them. Maybe there was some way that I could get back in their good graces. My mind raced through a myriad of possibilities, but I couldn't think of any reasonable solutions.

My glasses began to fog, so I pulled them off and rubbed them dry, returning my gaze to the ceiling. The unblemished white ceiling looked like a clean easel, marked by only a few stray divots. I pursed my lips. What if I wasn't in this stupid petite body? What if I was someone else...somewhere else. A detached observer. Closing my eyes, I imagined that I was on the ceiling, looking down at the hopeless creature on my bed.

She lied there spread-eagle with her plaid button-down and blonde locks fanning out around her. Her large turquoise eyes were pointed skyward and her lips were parted in delayed shock. Her cheeks were pale, even paler than the last time she saw herself in the mirror, and her freckles seemed to be equally muted. A rogue tear clung desperately to her lash, but she refused to let it run free. She had the appearance of a confused girl, but she was not a girl. She was a creature, a monster, a freak. A life-long pretender, destined to be mocked and ridiculed by anyone who learned of her true nature, anyone who discovered that she was only a GB girl. But she wasn't any GB girl. She was me.

With a whimper, I mentally returned to my body. I couldn't run away from myself. I was a dainty blonde GB monster, and there was no way of changing that. Blinking away a tear, I lied still on my bed, watching my chest rise and fall.

Adrenaline was still rushing through my system, but it had no utility, no purpose. I dug my nails into my palms, biting my lip and fighting the urge to scream. One word raced through my head on repeat: Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. My life was absolutely, one hundred percent fucked. I'd been robbed of everything I'd ever worked to achieve, and it left a strange sensation in my stomach. An empty, sinking feeling, as if I was stuck on an inverted rollercoaster.

Releasing my lip to exhale, I glanced around my room. Apparently, I was grounded...or something. I wasn't exactly sure. I suppose my parents just didn't want me in their line of sight, and I couldn't blame them. My eyes landed upon my backpack, which sat upside-down on the floor, right where I'd thrown it. A small black book poked its spine out of the top. The same book that Ms. Washington had given me. Obviously, I hadn't gotten a chance to read it, and I had no intention of doing so...but something about the book perked my curiosity.

I stared at the book for another minute or two, before hopping down from my bed and picking it up.

### *Captive Hearts, Captive Minds*

Those words marked the binding in small golden lettering. I began padding back to my bed but stopped to take a nervous glance at my door. I didn't know what this book was, but I had a feeling that it was contraband in the Pike household. It was given to me by a black teacher, after all.

With a pang of guilt, I secured my deadbolt lock before plopping onto my bed with the book in hand. Under normal circumstances, I never would have gone against my

parents' wishes like this. I would have burnt the book like a good Brigade member. These weren't normal circumstances, though. I was no longer Nathan Pike. My father himself had said it: I was a leech, a freak, a thing.

Licking my lips, I flipped the book open. Its pages were slightly yellowed, as if it'd gone out of print many years ago, and the corners of each page were well-worn with use. It still possessed a sort of stateliness, as if it was insisting that age hadn't rendered it irrelevant. Pushing my glasses up my nose, I began reading:

*Cult leaders have an outstanding ability to charm and win over followers. They beguile and seduce. They enter a room and garner all the attention. They command the utmost respect and obedience. These are individuals whose narcissism is so extreme and grandiose that they exist in a kind of splendid isolation in which the creation of the grandiose self takes precedence over legal, moral or interpersonal commitments.*

I was engrossed. Lying down on my bed, I dangled my feet in the air and lost all recognition of space and time, surrendering my senses to the yellowed pages.



# CHAPTER 12

## *The Nervous Turtle*

I stared blankly at my desk. The bell had rung a while ago, and the last few students were filtering in for my most dreadful class: AP Human Geography. Thus far, every single one of my classes had followed a nightmarish formula. First, the teacher always told the class that they had an important announcement, then began to introduce their newest student: Natalie Pike, formerly Nathan Pike. Every student in the class would turn and stare at me. Beads of sweat would dribble down my brow, as if some massive spotlight was illuminating my desk. The staring became worse as the day progressed. After my first class, word had traveled like lightning, and people began eyeing me in the hallways, like I was some sort of circus attraction.

I drew a nervous breath when Ms. Washington marched to the front of the room, preparing for another embarrassing ‘announcement’ about my new appearance. To my surprise, it never came.

“Good, you’re all here,” she clicked the blue ballpoint pen. “You know who your partners are, and you should all know your assigned neighborhoods. So, break into your groups and use this period to strategize. Figure out who’s responsible for what, and if you already have a plan, you can discuss the reading amongst yourselves.”

I released an elated sigh, the faint beginnings of a smile on my lips. A few students were still glancing in my direction, but Ms. Washington had spared me from another round of extreme humiliation. I slouched back in my desk as people lumbered around the room, positioning themselves next to their partners.

“Hey,” Josh waved, dropping into the seat next to me. “Didn’t recognize you,” he grinned.

I became inundated with nervousness as soon as he turned to face me. My heartbeat quickened and a few goosebumps crept their way up my arms. Shivering, I tugged at my plaid sleeve.

"Is...is that a joke?" I shifted my glasses, surveying Josh. He was so cookie-cutter, so generically handsome. If he wasn't working a part-time job as a stock photo model, then he was definitely missing a golden opportunity.

"Sort've, but I didn't know exactly what you'd look like." Josh paused for a moment, as if he was waiting for me to reply. "You have a really nice outfit, by the way."

"Thanks," I flashed a shy smile and scratched my arm. "It's from a lost-and-found bin."

"Well, it looks great on you."

My cheeks burned red. Was he...was he flirting with me? I sat petrified in my desk, unsure of how to react. I opened my mouth to reply, but couldn't quite manage to think of a suitable response. Unlike Dad, I'd never been a particularly eloquent speaker.

"T-thanks," I stammered.

"I'm just really glad that you're okay. We were all really worried for you."

"Oh," I murmured, still fidgeting with the sleeve of my plaid shirt. I felt like a turtle, desperately retreating into her shell, with millions of thoughts swirling around in her mind.

My life was a wild, raging dumpster fire. My parents and friends were treating me like I wasn't even white, and Ms. Washington's book had planted some dark seeds in my mind. To make matters worse, I was seriously regretting my decision to attend school. I'd always been a fairly shy person, so the constant attention and embarrassment were a jarring nightmare.

"So, tell me about yourself, Nat," Josh asked. While he spoke, I studied his hands, which were resting face-down on his desk. They were so big..."I can still call you 'Nat', right?"

"Mhm," I answered softly, glancing down at my own hands for comparison. "W-what do you want to know?"

Josh shrugged. "What are your hobbies? What do you do when you're not stuck in class?"

"Dunno," I whispered, wishing that I could just disappear. "I draw, sometimes."

Okay, that was a lie. I drew constantly...but drawing was for softies. Then again, my new appearance was about as far from intimidating as possible. I was a softy.

"That's cool," Josh grinned once more. "I'm a pretty terrible artist, myself. I can't even draw a straight line."

"Maybe you just need a ruler," I replied with the faint beginnings of a smile.

"Guess I didn't think of that. So you're a bit of an artist, then?"

"Just a bit," I agreed, feeling a little more at-ease. There was something about his demeanor that brought me a degree of serenity. "What are your hobbies?"

"Oh, I really like running," he shot back with a winning smile.

"Running?" I asked, adjusting my glasses as I spoke. "What do you mean? Like running away?"

"No. Running," Josh replied with an amused chuckle. "Track and field, marathons, that sort of thing."

"Oh," I brought a small hand to my rosy cheek. "Running! Jogging! Right..." I shook my head and frowned. Shit. He probably thought I was a gigantic idiot. Was that the worst thing in the world, though? I'd rather be an idiot than some sort of freak.

"Sorry," I mumbled, "I've...I've got a lot on my mind."

"I bet." Josh wore a sympathetic wince, as if he wanted to reach over and embrace me in a hug. For some reason, that prospect made my heart race. "So, I take it you don't do much running."

"Nope. I ain't much of a runner. I mean, I've run before, but I've never run for the sake of running, if that makes sense." I usually wasn't this open with people who I'd just met, but Josh oozed a unique genuineness which made me feel...secure.

Josh opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted by Ms. Washington's assertive voice. Apparently, she had snuck up on us while we were engrossed in conversation.

"Ms. Pike, I'd like to have a word with you. Do you mind coming up front?"

I lifted my eyebrows in surprise, and nodded after a moment of hesitation. Rising from my chair, I shot Josh a conciliatory look before following Ms. Washington to her desk. All the while, goosebumps crept up my arms and I bit my lower lip to keep it from trembling. What did she want from me?

"Alright," Ms. Washington smiled, easing down into her swivel chair. "How are you holding up?"

I took a nervous glance at the classroom behind us. Most of the students seemed too engrossed in conversation to notice me, except for Josh, who grinned and gave me a thumbs up. Seeing that, I allowed a faint smile to work its way onto my lips.

"I'm doing okay," I replied.

"I know you've had a lot on your plate, but did you get around to reading the book I gave you?"

I pushed my glasses further up my nose before nodding. "I finished it, actually."

"Did you?" A pleased smile spread across her face. "What did you think?"

I hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to answer. "I don't know, to be honest. I guess it made me think about things that I hadn't thought about before." I scratched the back of my flowing blonde hair, still not used to its silky texture and its meandering length. "If you don't mind my asking, why did you give me that book? Do you think...do you think I've been brainwashed?"

The smile fled from Ms. Washington's face. "I can't answer that, Natalie. Only you can answer that." She paused for a moment, before continuing. "Just keep your eyes open and question your assumptions. You're a bright...girl, you'll discover what's true and what's false."

"Okay," I replied, unsure of how to feel about her little speech. "Thanks for the book, I guess."

"Absolutely. You can keep it," she smiled kindly. "Well, you seem like you might need some time to process everything. Let me know when you're ready to chat about what you've read."

I nodded uncertainly, then headed back toward my seat. I was still mulling over her words when the bell chimed, marking the end of Human Geography and the beginning of a uniquely terrifying prospect: post-GB lunch.

# CHAPTER 14

## *You Too*

**T**here they were. Colton, Mason, and Hunter, leaning against the graffitied wall with cigarettes between their fingers. They'd been my best friends for as long as I could remember. I wanted to walk up to them and chat, like the good old days, but I couldn't muster the courage.

They looked down upon me. I saw it in their eyes, every time they glanced my direction. Were they talking about me? They were definitely talking about me. Colton was whispering to Mason with an expression that was halfway between amused and disdainful. Studying me inconspicuously from a distance, he took long drags on his cigarette and his smirk grew wider.

Thankfully, that trio was on the opposite side of the sprawling lunch ground, with hundreds of students between us. I was an island amid a swarm of teens, all of them laughing and chatting and eating. I'd never felt so alone in my life.

Brushing a lock of blonde hair from my eye, I spotted another apparent stalker, sprawled beneath her favorite tree. Emma Winthrop. Her purple hair was tied high in a bun, and she studied me with her vast chestnut eyes. Unlike Colton, her expression held no disdain, only pity. As soon as she realized that I'd noticed her gaze, she stared down at the book in her lap. I drew a high sigh. Had she really driven me to the hospital? And had she actually stayed by my side for hours? For some reason, all of that made me feel...empty. I'd said so many nasty things about her, behind her back, yet she went out of her way to help me.

With a guilty gulp, I continued scanning the scattered groups of guys and girls with forlorn eyes. None of them were even staring at me, anymore. It seemed as if the whole 'new GB student' attraction had already become hopelessly mundane, which was - of

course- the eventual fate of anything 'new'. Instead, the happy crowds were all chatting amongst themselves, smiling and laughing, each of them sporting t-shirts which indicated their future universities. I'd never be like them. My parents had raised me with only one future in mind: the Brigade. With the imminent race war - the Cleansing - they never really encouraged me to construct a plan for my life.

Sinking down onto a small patch of grass, I hugged my legs to my chest. Ms. Washington's book had touched upon doomsday theories, albeit only for a few pages. According to the book, there was a consensus among psychologists that doomsday theories were used by cult leaders as a tool to maintain obedience. Was the Cleansing just another far-fetched doomsday theory, like Y2K or that Mayan calendar nonsense?

That question pestered me relentlessly, as I caved to my hunger and sunk my fork into a tray of unappealing cafeteria pasta. Truth be told, I didn't even know what 'the Cleansing' was supposed to be. Were white folks just going to rise up and start killing everyone else? I had no idea. Dad was never really a detail-oriented person, and every time anyone asked for specifics, he would just tell them a meandering story about the Jews. Everyone already knew that the Jews were bad, though, so his stories weren't exactly telling us anything new. Was it all just a diversion tactic, because he knew that the Cleansing was a myth?

"Hey, Nat." A male voice came from behind me. I flinched and my heart stopped for a split second. Despite the fact that I was in the midst of a busy lunch ground, I couldn't help but feel...vulnerable. When I spun around and saw Josh's smiling face, my fear was compounded with excitement. "I was looking for you. I just realized that we never exchanged numbers."

"Numbers?" I asked, wide-eyed.

"Phone numbers, so we can coordinate on the project." Josh furrowed his eyebrows, maintaining his charming grin. "You do have a phone, don't you?"

"Oh!" I nodded. I tried to prevent a blush from spreading across my cheeks, but failed miserably. "Sorry, I...I..." I stuttered, my hands shaking as I sifted through my worn backpack. Eventually, I found my phone nestled between the Captive Hearts, Captive Minds book and a Snickers bar. Pulling it out, I exchanged phones with Josh. "I swear I'm not an idiot. I just..."

"I know you're not," he interrupted with a firm voice. "You're just going through a lot, right now. I can't imagine dealing with...all of that."

"Mhm," I nodded with a squeak. I typed in my number, double-checking to ensure that I hadn't entered it incorrectly.

Swapping back phones, his fingers brushed against the palm of my hand. It lasted only half of a second, and he probably didn't even notice. Regardless, that half-second sensation caused my stomach to spin with exhilaration, a hint of happiness combined with the overwhelming adrenaline of uncertainty.

"Awesome." He ran a steady hand through his wavy hair, seemingly unphased by our hand-brushing incident. "We should meet up sometime this weekend, just so we're on the same page for next week. I'll let you know when and where."

Still somewhat surprised by the brief touch, I hesitated, pushing my glasses up my nose. "Alright, you too," I chirped. As soon as the words left my mouth, I finished processing his sentence and realized the extent of my response's stupidity.

"I...I mean, I'll see you too," I continued, struggling to string words together, "...sometime this weekend...when you...when you give me the details..."

"Yeah," he let out the slightest of laughs, a nearly inaudible chuckle, "See you later."

I opened my mouth to reply, but he was already gone, walking away from me with confident strides. With a defeated sigh, I buried my face in my hands.

"Idiot!" I whispered to myself, poison dripping from my voice. "How are you so stupid? How are you so fucking stupid?!"

Tears brimmed on the corners of my eyes, but I clenched my jaw and did my best to quell them.

"Alright, you too," I imitated myself with an airheaded tone of voice, running my hands through my hair and squeezing the wavy blonde locks. 'You too.' That was what I actually said. 'You too.' It didn't even make any sense, given the context.

"Dad was right," I muttered, blinking as I sprawled onto my back. "You're fucking worthless, Nat." The lunch bell rang and I climbed to my feet. With a bitter sniff, I slung my backpack over my shoulders. "Fucking worthless."

# CHAPTER 14

## *The Night*

**M**y walk home took longer than usual. I allowed my mind to wander as I trotted down the road, mulling over my precarious situation at home and fantasizing about being...normal.

The sun was already sitting low in the sky when I trudged across our muddy yard, and I was beyond exhausted. It had been a physically and emotionally taxing day, and I wanted nothing more than a few hours of private relaxation. I hadn't expected school to be so nerve wracking. Usually, it was the one sanctuary where I could escape my father's gaze and just enjoy learning. I'd don a figurative invisibility cloak and blend into the background, sketching portraits and soaking up knowledge like a sponge. Today had obviously been a drastically different experience.

Across the yard, the warehouse was thumping with music and chatter, but I tried to ignore all of that. Colton's truck was parked outside next to seven others, all sporting typical Brigade signage. They were probably having a fantastic time in there, all drinking and chatting, enjoying each other's company. Part of me wanted to join them, but Dad's words still lingered in the back of my mind. I wasn't welcome there. Every time I remembered those words, they brought a sinking sensation to my stomach.

I scampered through the front door of our house and made a bee-line to my room. Upon entry, I collapsed onto my bed like a sack of potatoes, letting out a long, high sigh. I lied there motionless, my eyes fluttering open and closed in a state of semi-consciousness. Despite my exhaustion, however, sleep never came. I sat up with a frown. I suppose I just had too much on my mind.

After pausing momentarily to scratch my head, I pried open my backpack and withdrew my favorite sketching notebook. The mere sight of it brought a faint smile to



my lips. I flipped through its pages, humming pensively. I seldom went back and reviewed my older works, but - for whatever reason - I felt a compulsion to do so. Upon review, I came to the realization that my artwork was surprisingly dark. I hadn't noticed beforehand, but there were a few undeniable themes.

My earliest few sketches were renditions of a young boy with duct tape over his mouth, trapped in a cage as demons poked at him with long tridents. From there, it only became more morose, with sketches of people drowning, and suffocating. Over time, my artistic abilities improved, but the themes stayed the same. Then, I reached one of my more recent drawings: the pack of scorpion cigarettes.

I stared at the image, studying the contours and vivid shading. I'd only seen that pack once, but it had been burned into my memory, so deeply ingrained that I could reproduce every single detail.

My inspect was interrupted when I heard the familiar sound of combat boots on hardwood floor. Two pairs of boots were stomping toward my room. I froze for a moment then snapped my notebook shut, stowing it in my backpack.

The footsteps moved closer, until they paused outside my door.

"Who is it?" I called in a piping voice. The knob began to turn, and my breaths became shallow.

"Hey there, little Pike," Colton smirked, taking a step inside my room. Mason stood behind him like a henchman, leaning on the doorframe.

"What's up, Colton?" I asked, flashing a nervous smile. Brigade guys rarely entered the house, and they never entered my room. They usually stuck to the warehouse - Colton included.

"What are you doing here?" I continued with a hint of suspiciousness.

"Things are changing, Nat," Colton replied, taking a step forward with each word. He was a few feet shy of my bed, and I could already smell the alcohol on his breath.

"The natural order. The chain of command." He paused, his voice falling into a gravelly tone. "You're gonna have to learn your new place."

"W-what are you talking about?" I curled my legs beneath me, and fought the urge to scoot away from him. I recognized the sinister grin on Colton's face. I'd seen him wear it before, but I couldn't quite remember when. Still, my heart pounded with instinctual fear. Colton and Mason were my friends, but something about their behavior seemed...off...as if they didn't have the best of intentions.

When Colton didn't answer my inquiry, I cleared my throat. "Colton," I spoke with a wavering voice as he continued his approach. "Colton, what's going on?"

Mason let out a deep chuckle and closed the door behind him. "Your Dad really hasn't told you?"

I glanced between Colton's face and Mason's, my lips ajar. As I did, Colton eased down onto my bed, beside me. I never remembered him being so large, so intimidating. Even sitting down, he was over a head taller than me. He could probably crush me with his bare hands, if he wanted.

"Told me what?" I muttered, eyeing my nightstand. It was about five feet away, which seemed like a gargantuan distance, and my pistol was sitting in the top shelf. Still, the pistol was inside of a box, with no bullets chambered and an unloaded magazine. In this situation, it was a useless device.

Colton reached a hand toward me and I froze once more. His hand wrapped around my left wrist and squeezed with an iron grip, like the tightest shackles imaginable. I let out a pitiful yelp and felt my hand go completely limp.

"According to him, you're free game, now," Colton smiled. "You know what that means."

My eyes widened, but I was too nervous to speak. Instead, my breaths became increasingly rapid and audible, until I was on the verge of hyperventilation.

"I thought he was joking at first, but he said it again and again," Colton snorted. "Free game. Treat it like it's one of the blacks. That's what he told us."

He lifted a hand and covered my trembling mouth, then pressed my head back until I was prone on my bed, staring at the ceiling. All the while, my heart pounded harder in my chest. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. Different people dealt with crises in different ways and my coping mechanism was apparently akin to a sheep's: total and complete petrification. Even if Colton wasn't pinning me down, I wouldn't have been able to react.

Growing up, I spent a great deal of time contemplating how I'd react in a situation like this. Granted, in those hypothetical situations, the assailant was always a black man and never my close friend. I always imagined that I'd respond heroically. That I'd kick myself free and dive for my gun, unloading five or six shots into the attacker's chest. I'd be greeted as a hero by everyone I admired. Of course, all of that proved to be nothing more than a fantasy. Gnawing hopelessness began to sink into my stomach, accompanied by the pressing fear of the unknown.

"So there's two ways we can do this," Colton lowered his voice into a chilling whisper. As he spoke, he climbed on top of me, staring down into my eyes. "The easy way, or the hard way." I tried to gulp, but I couldn't. "When I move my hand, I don't want you to scream. You understand that?"

Breathing heavily through my nose, I managed a slight nod.

“Good choice,” he removed his hand from my mouth, and I gasped for breath. I didn’t even have a chance to fill my lungs before he began prying off my long-sleeved plaid shirt. “You always were a fucking dumbass, always questioning Mr. Pike and shit, but I guess you ain’t stupid enough to fight back. Either that, or you’re too big of a pussy.” He remarked with a sneer, leaning even closer until his beady eyes were only inches from mine. “So, are you gonna keep being a good girl?”

I gave another shaky nod. It seemed to be the only motion I could make. My whole body was trembling, too consumed by fear to make any major movements.

“Let me help you out of them jeans. They look like they ain’t too comfy,” he sneered, gripping my hips. He paused to glance back over his shoulder, addressing Mason: “Don’t worry, you’ll get your turn.” Turning back to me, he eyed me like I was a cut of steak. “Free game, baby. See, I’m only here first because I won a hand of poker. Soon enough, everyone’ll get a turn.”

I wanted to scream, I wanted to run, but I couldn’t. I closed my eyes, and made a silent wish for my best realistic outcome: that this would all be quick and painless. As much as I hated to admit it, I’d already given up.

My shaking gave way to complete stillness as Colton began to unbutton my pants. Just as they slid past my hips, however, a commanding knock pounded the door.

“Colton? Mason? Y’all in there?” Hunter’s voice carried through my bedroom.

Mason opened his mouth to reply, then look toward Colton for guidance. Colton hesitated for a moment, then let out an angry sigh.

“We’re busy,” Colton called back.

“This is important, though,” Hunter responded through the door. “Mr. Pike wants to speak with both of you, right now. It’s about the Cleansing, it’s real important.”

Colton licked his lips, then grunted. He rolled off of me and strode to the bedroom door, swinging the door open to reveal Hunter’s large frame. Colton gave him a cordial nod, before walking by him and disappearing down the hallway, Mason at his heels.

My eyes were still wide with surprise when Hunter lumbered to my bedside. Just like that...they were gone? I wanted to breath a sigh of relief, but the knot in my throat was too restricting.

“Listen,” Hunt said in an urgent tone, kneeling beside me. “You need to get out of here. You need to leave now. You understand?”

Staring at the bedroom door, I nodded numbly.

“Are you okay?” Hunter asked, concern seeping into his voice. “Did they...do anything, yet?”

I turned to face him. My heart was racing, but I could sense that I was in a state of shock, as if I still hadn't processed any of the past few minutes.

"Look, you've only got a couple minutes before those two realize what's up. You need to get your shit and leave." He jostled my shoulder once or twice, and I began to emerge from my petrification. "Come on, Nat," Hunt pleaded. "Snap out of it."

Eventually, he stopped prodding me and exhaled a disappointed sigh. "I'll try to distract them some more," Hunter left my side and began marching out of my bedroom. "Just promise me that you'll be gone by the time they come back."

I nodded, drawing a deep breath as Hunter slammed the front door behind him. Then, like an empty vessel, I rose from my bed and grabbed my backpack. Following Hunter's advice, I began stuffing it full with every prized possession I owned. At first I moved like a zombie, but my pace increased as I emerged from my fear-frozen state and sheer adrenaline began to take hold.

I stowed all of my artistic supplies and sketchbooks into the backpack, along with all other essentials. My hands began trembling again, and I made the swift realization that I wouldn't be able to bring my GB bag. It was just too heavy. With a pang of sorrow, I unzipped the blue GB bag and unloaded a few 'feminine hygiene products', as Laura had so eloquently described them.

Slinging my backpack over my shoulders, I broke into a full sprint. People say that we run fastest when we're motivated by fear, and that adage proved to be undoubtedly true. I ran out the front door like a blur. The sun had recently fallen below the horizon, cloaking the yard in dead blue light, but I was still able to see where I was going. Kicking up mud, I scampered across the yard that I used to call home, praying that nobody would give chase.

I ran deep into the woods, silently thanking my lack of height as I dodged beneath boughs and vines. I might have run for minutes or hours, I wasn't quite sure. At some point, I stopped keeping track of my direction and fell into a trance, listening each of my feet hit the ground in a calming rhythm. My feet were the drums and some cicadas sang a hectic melody, squeaking and screeching in the moonlight.

Eventually, our humble song was joined by a new instrument. The low hum of car engines provided a bass line, rising and falling as vehicles drew nearer and farther. When I dashed past the last outcropping of trees and found myself about fifteen feet from a highway, the headlights served as makeshift spotlights, illuminating me as if I was on the world's biggest stage.

I sunk to the ground. I wanted to laugh and I wanted to cry. Instead, all I did was hug my legs to my chest and close my eyes, feeling my body rise and fall with strained breaths.

I was 'free game'. As much as I wanted to pretend that Dad hadn't told that to Colton and Mason, and that they were making it all up...I sensed that they weren't. In the Brigade, 'free game' meant...well...it meant exactly what you'd expect it to mean. Usually, it was a term used only for specific women of certain other races, and only when those women had pissed off Dad. Had I pissed him off? Well, I definitely brought him shame as an unworthy child. I didn't deserve the Pike name. Hell, maybe I deserved to be free game. Maybe I shouldn't have run away at all.

Massaging my temples, I drew a long sigh. Whether or not I deserved to be free game, my encounter with Colton had been both jarring and terrifying. I couldn't go back home. Not if that was going to become my daily existence. I clenched my trembling jaw and shivered, despite the night's humidity.

Pursing my lips, I foraged through my backpack and eventually produced my cellphone. Holding my large phone with both hands, its screen shone like a bright beacon. Slowly and carefully, I dialed the only contact who could aid me.

"Laura?" I asked with a shaky voice. "This is Nat...Natalie Pike. I-I need your help."

# CHAPTER 15

## *Rocky Road*

“So,” Laura spoke in the most calming voice imaginable as I shoveled a spoonful of rocky road ice cream into my mouth. “Is there anything you want to tell me?”

She was curled up on her leather couch with her legs tucked beneath her. Meanwhile I sat on the opposite side of the couch, mirroring her sitting position. It was a nice couch: comfortable, fashionable, and expensive. Those three traits described much of Doctor Harper’s home.

Her house was immaculate. Close to downtown Dexter, it was a spacious modern-style home with ornate decor and a delicate vibe. The shelves were lined with antiques, and several rooms sported pristine white carpet. I wouldn’t have called it a mansion, but it was certainly a large, expensive house. The perfect place to raise a family.

“I dunno,” I murmured in reply. I ran a hand along the surface of the bright pink bathrobe that Laura had given me. It was an embarrassingly girly article of clothing, but I had no right to complain. Other than the robe, I only had one dirty outfit. Plus, the bathrobe was actually quite soft and fuzzy, and made my skin tingle.

“Thanks for...everything,” I added. It was the fifth or sixth time that I had thanked her already, and I was beginning to think that words couldn’t properly describe my gratitude.

Like a guardian angel, Laura had picked me up from the side of the highway and driven me to her house. No questions asked. She let me move my scant possessions into her pink-walled guest room, and even let me take a long bubble bath to help me relax. Admittedly, I was a bit of a mess when she found me. Hyperventilating with

muddied clothes, I had the appearance and demeanor of a stray dog. After bathing, washing my hair, and donning the clean bathrobe, however, I began to feel slightly more mollified.

Laura had gone through the trouble of cooking me a hot dinner while I bathed. It was a chicken and tomato dish, and she insisted that I eat more and more until I was on the verge of a food coma. I guess she was pretty serious about the whole 'underweight' diagnosis. I couldn't complain, though. Laura had been beyond welcoming. She was kinder to me than anyone I'd ever known...almost suspiciously kind.

"It's the least I can do," she nodded slightly and flashed a sad smile. "How are you liking the ice cream?"

"It's..." I paused to finish swallowing a spoonful, "...really good. Thank you."

She stared at me for a few moments, calculating how to approach the conversation. I knew what she was up to, but I wasn't going to tell her about what happened. To be honest, I didn't even want to think about it at all.

"You know...I ran away, too," she offered with a tense voice, running a hand through her flowing brown hair.

"Lots of people do," I replied, staring sadly at the bottom of my emptied bowl of ice cream.

"I mean, I ran away for good."

"Really?" I gulped and raised my eyes to hers. "Like, you've never gone back...ever?"

"Never," she shook her head. "I usually don't talk about this, but," she paused and looked up at the ceiling, exhaling sharply. "Have you ever heard of Scientology?"

I nodded apprehensively, clasping my hands beneath my chin.

"I grew up in Little Rock, just down the street from a Scientology center. When I was around eight years old, my parents started getting involved with that... 'religion'. They brought me in, too, before I was old enough to actually make my own decisions. I was raised in the 'Church' and they taught me all sorts of crazy things." She glanced at me, then rested her hand on her cheek. "And I believed them, because...why wouldn't I? These people were adults. I respected them and I wanted to earn their approval. When someone who you view as intelligent and wise tells you that you have ancient aliens living inside of you, or that you can't talk to your old friends because they're evil...you end up believing them."

I lifted my eyebrows and adjusted my glasses. "Aliens?" I murmured.

"I know it's hard to believe, but yes. Aliens. That was far from the worst part, though. When you're in the 'Church', they control your whole life: who you talk to,

what you do. Everything. They put you through 'auditing' and all sorts of tests. It was just one big rat-race, where everyone was being pushed toward unthinking loyalty." She let her voice dwindle until it was little more than a whisper. "Loyalty to some dead science fiction author and his power-loving successors."

"W-When did you leave?"

She eyed me for a moment. "I was a couple of years younger than you when I started to get...curious. Scientology sees curiosity as dangerous, and for good reason. Once I started reading more about the 'Church' - from real sources, I mean, not the sanitized propaganda - I learned about all of the horrible things they'd done. They stalked, threatened, blackmailed, and maybe even killed people. They ruined so many people's lives, and all of that was done in the name of a completely ridiculous 'religion'. Between the aliens, galactic overlords, and space lasers...it's just insane."

She wore a morose smile. "I tried to convince my parents to leave with me, but they refused. So, I filed for legal emancipation. It wasn't easy. I lived in government housing and worked my way through school. Over the past couple decades, I tried to reach out to my parents." Her voice cracked, ever so slightly. "They aren't allowed to talk to me, though. I'm officially an SP. A 'suppressive person', because I hold dangerous views."

"I'm sorry," I murmured, staring longingly down at my bowl. There was still a good bit of ice cream in there, caked onto the sides.

"Don't be," Laura replied with a tranquil voice. "It's sad, but they made their decision." She took a hesitant breath, then furrowed her eyebrows. "What are you doing?"

"Huh?" I squeaked, freezing like a raccoon in a spotlight.

"Oh, sweetie," Laura closed her eyes and brought a hand to her temple. She wore the faint beginnings of a smile on the corners of her lips. "That's not how you're supposed to eat ice cream."

Puzzled, I stopped licking my bowl. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "I just wanted to get all of it."

She tried to look at me, but burst out laughing and put a hand over her eyes. "You've got it all over your nose!"

"Oh no," I murmured. "This bowl is a bit more shallow than I'm used to."

I was bringing up a hand to wipe my nose when Laura leaned over and stopped me.

"I'll get it," Laura smiled. Scooting closer to me, she grabbed a tissue and removed the stray pieces of rocky road from the tip of my nose. As she did, I sat petrified, unsure how to react. My mother definitely wouldn't have done that. She would have just made



some disparaging comments, and mimicked Dad's reaction. "There you go, hun," Laura added with a pleasant smile.

"T-thank you," I stuttered and my lower jaw began to tremble.

"What's wrong?" She asked, studying me carefully.

"It's just..." I began to explain. My voice wavered as I spoke, and tears began to well in my eyes. "Nobody's ever been so...nice to me."

It was the truth. Between Laura's kindness and Hunter's bravery, I was overwhelmed. People were actually helping me and making me feel...special. Why were people going out of their way to help me? Didn't they realize that I was worthless? That I was just a walking disappointment? Tears began to manifest, sliding down my cheeks as my glasses fogged.

"I know exactly how you feel," Laura replied, her voice dripping with syrup. "But you've been through a lot, and you deserve kindness. You deserve it."

I bit my lower lip, trying to quell my emotions. "They hate me," I whispered, tears flowing full-force. "A-and I can't even do anything about it."

Laura wrapped her arms around me, drawing me into a tight hug. Because of our height difference, my head ended up nestling against her neck. With one hand, she drew my body into hers, while her other hand pet my hair, releasing tension with every delicate stroke.

"It's okay, sweetie," she whispered in my ear, as I leaned into her hug.

I'd never been hugged like this before. It was so different...so alien...and yet, it brought me a steady calmness. Serenity. As if I needn't worry about my problems, because I was in a safe haven. Slowly, my stream of tears began to dry while Laura maintained her embrace.

"Natalie, can I ask you something?" Laura inquired uneasily. "Something personal?"

"Mhm," I squeaked in reply. Despite Laura's comforting presence, my whole body was still trembling.

"Did they hurt you?"

"N-no," I shook my head, then hesitated. "They...Colt and Mason tried to. I thought they were...my friends..."

"Do you think they'll try again?" Laura asked, the intensity of a mother bear in her voice.

Nuzzling further into her neck, I nodded. The tears that I had quelled began to return, brimming against my lashes. I was scared. Terrified. The close call from earlier in the day had been nothing short of scarring...what if Colton and Mason did try again?

What if other Brigade guys did? What if they succeeded? Drawing deep breaths, I let out an unintentional whimper.

"Everything's going to be okay," Laura assured me with a whisper. "Nobody's going to hurt you. I'll make sure of that."

She cared about me. I could hear it in her voice. That realization caused all of my fears and tears to dissipate, and brought a pleasing warmth to my stomach.

Although Laura never asked for more details, I felt compelled to provide them. It seemed almost disingenuous for me to hold back, after hearing her difficult story.

With a soft, trembling voice, I told her everything. Absolutely everything. I provided details about my upbringing in the Brigade, my tumultuous relationship with my mother and father, and even the jarring encounter with Colton. For the first time in my life, I unloaded my problems onto someone else. Someone who was actually listening to me. All the while, Laura held me close and rested her chin on top of my head, granting me some much-needed stability.

My tone was meek at first, but it grew stronger as I spoke. By the time I ran out of words to say, I'd almost reached a conversational volume. It felt weird to talk that much with this new voice. Other than my brief chat with Hunter, I couldn't remember the last time I'd said more than a few words at a time. When I finally finished what seemed like my entire life-story, Laura let a still silence hang in the air.

"You're a strong girl, Natalie," she eventually muttered, laying a gentle kiss on the top of my head.

I couldn't help but smile. "I'm not even a hundred pounds," I quipped in reply with a rare note of levity. For whatever reason, I felt somewhat...liberated.

"There are different kinds of strength," Laura gently breathed, withdrawing from the hug and flashing a weak smile. "Never forget that."

I nodded with a sniffle, wiping tear-streaks on my forearm. Was she right? My Dad definitely would have disagreed. In his world, strength was the ability to knock someone's teeth out, and any other definitions were hippie bullshit. Then again, did Dad's opinion even matter?

Snuggled up against Laura, I let out a high sigh and closed my eyes. Exhaustion took hold and my breathing fell into a steady pattern, until the pacific bonds of sleep whisked me away.

# CHAPTER 16

## *Open Arms*

**M**y eyes fluttered open to the ambient chirp of birds. I glanced around, confused at first by the unfamiliar pink walls and floral bedding, until I realized that I was in Laura's guest room.

Stretching my arms, I rose from the bed. I didn't remember moving from the couch to the guest room...Laura must have carried me. A faint smile graced my lips. How was she so nice? So kind? Tears began to well in my eyes, despite my efforts to quell them. No. No more crying. Crying was for the weak. That was what Dad always told me. Then again, I cried a lot last night, and it was a cathartic experience. By the time I went to sleep, I felt light and pure, as if I'd rid myself of years worth of strife.

Everything around me seemed out of focus, as if I was watching life unfold on a crappy television. I blinked a couple of times, then realized that I was no longer wearing my glasses. Laura must have taken them off when she tucked me into bed. I fumbled with the black nightstand by the side of the bed, until my hands grasped the familiar pair of girlish glasses. Once I slid them up my nose, my vision returned, like night and day.

With a measured breath and a smug smile, I padded around the guest room. I relished the sensation of the comfy white carpet on my toes. It was like walking on a pillow.

Strong sunlight shined through the room's vast window. My eyes went wide. I was missing school! Sure, it was only a half-day, but I hated missing school. When I returned the next school-day, my classmates always seemed to be privy to insider knowledge that I'd never be able to grasp, as if I'd missed the most important lesson of the year.

Running my hands through my fuzzy pink robe, I left my room and entered the immaculate hallway.

“Laura?” I chirped, biting my lip. “Are you here?”

There was no response.

I crept down the hallway on the tiptoes, toward an open door at the end. “Laura?” I called again, this time much more softly.

Again, there was no response.

Reaching the open door, I peered inside. It was Laura’s room. A lavish king-sized bed sat at its center, flanked by a towering wooden dresser and a solid desk. It was a large room, about twice as large as the guest room, and was clearly designed to house two people. I saw no sign of Laura, although her bed sheets were tangled, suggesting that she’d slept there last night.

I clasped my hands below my chin and tiptoed into the room. “Laura?” I whispered, mystery in my voice.

Despite my small, quiet steps, I eventually reached her desk. On it were stacks of medical papers, filled with jargon and incomprehensible charts. I sifted through the papers for a moment, feeling a tinge of guilt. I was snooping again. Why was I snooping? Had I forgotten what my Dad did to me, the last time I got caught snooping?

I unleashed a nervous breath and began to turn toward the door when a curious object caught my eye. It was a framed photograph, featuring both Laura and an unknown man. His arms were wrapped around her possessively, resting on her stomach as he hugged her to his chest. The mystery man was attractive, with dark hair and a layer of light stubble on his strong jaw. More interesting than his appearance, however, was the band that he wore on his finger. In the photograph, Laura wore an identical band...yet she hadn’t been wearing a ring last night.

Lifting the photo off of the desk, I brought it up to my eyes, trying to study every detail. They were a couple, they had to be...yet she’d never mentioned him before. Who was he? What was he like? For some reason, I was intrigued. The man wore a Hawaiian shirt and cream shorts, while Laura sported some kind of flowery dress. The trees in the background of the photo were tropical, suggesting some sort of island vacation. I continued to stare at the photo, and my thoughts became entangled with every inch of its surface. This wasn’t new for me. Every time I looked at a powerful piece of art, I became lost within it, shedding all sense of time and space.

“Whatcha got there, hun?” Laura’s voice lofted through the room, breaking my reverie.

“Huh?” I squeaked, petrified. With wide eyes, I looked back to see her looming over my shoulder. Was she going to hurt me? My heart pounded in my ears, before her kind countenance dispelled that notion. She wasn’t like my mother or father. She was different. Ever-so-slowly, my heartbeat began to steady.

“You really didn’t hear me come in?” She lifted an eyebrow with concern. “Have you had any trouble with your hearing?”

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head. “Sometimes I just...zone out.” After a moment of hesitation, I lifted the photo up to her and pointed to my man. “Who is he?”

“Oh.” Her concern gave way to nostalgia, and she rested a hand on her cheek. “Him,” she tilted her head as she spoke. “He’s Allister.”

“Allister?” I asked, wonderment in my voice. “Is he...you know...alive?”

She allowed a sad smile to grace her lips, and she nodded. “He is.” She paused, her hand moving up to massage her temple. “Look, you probably don’t want to hear the whole stor-”

“I do,” I interrupted her, staring up at her pained expression. “Tell me about him.”

Laura reached out to grasp my hand, then guided me to her bed, taking a seat beside me.

“Allister,” she began, studying the photo as she spoke, “was my husband. That picture is us on our honeymoon, and we were just so...happy. Sometimes, I think that’ll be my high-point in life.” Her voice began to tremble, and I wrapped an arm around her, resting my head on her shoulder. “Thanks, sweetie,” she flashed me a reassuring smile, then returned her focus to the photo. “I can’t blame him for leaving.”

“Why not?” I asked in the softest of tones. Any man who wanted to leave Laura must have been absolutely insane. She was just so wonderful, so perfect.

“He wanted kids,” she shrugged, her breaths becoming ragged and audible. “His own kids. His flesh and blood. When we learned that I was barren...that I couldn’t have children, he wanted to find a woman who could. That’s...” A tear began to meander down her cheek. “That’s how life works, sometimes. We fought about it every day, for years. I tried to convince him that we should adopt, but he wouldn’t budge.” She drew a deep breath. “I prayed every night, asking for help....”

With a determined sniff, she wiped the tear from her cheek, and began to gather herself. She smiled down at me. Ruffling my golden hair, she laughed. “Can’t be sad when you’re around, though.”

I beamed up at her in return.

“Speaking of you,” She grasped my hand, holding it in hers as she spoke. Her hands were soft. Not as soft as mine, but almost butter-like in texture. “I’ve got some good

news, some bad news, and a few gifts for you. I ran some errands while you were asleep. I was going to wake you up and tell you, but I didn't want to disturb your sleep. You looked like a little angel."

My cheeks burnt red. "Thanks," I murmured.

"We'll start with the bad news. I went to see a lawyer and discussed yesterday's...events. As it turns out, even if your friend Hunter testifies, we have no case against your father or that boy Colton. There's no real evidence of wrongdoing, and the court system will be very hesitant to issue any search warrants for a fortified compound, in light of what happened in places like Waco." She paused. "You do know what happened at Waco, right?"

I nodded feverishly. "My Dad talks about it all the time."

"Alright," Laura winced. "There is a sliver of good news, though. I contacted your school, and they are aware of the situation and they'll be keeping a close eye on Colton and...what was the other boy's name?"

"Mason," I whispered.

"Right. Mason. The school's going to make sure that they don't get near you during the day, and I'll either pick you up myself, or I'll arrange for someone to pick you up."

"So, I can stay...here?" I straightened my glasses, glancing up at Laura.

"Of course!" She grinned down at me. "Of course you can. You can stay as long as you want, hun. You'll always be welcome here."

"Thank you," I breathed a sigh of relief. She actually wanted me here. How had I gotten so lucky?

"I just want you to be safe and happy...but you need to promise me that you'll be careful."

"I will," I nodded dutifully. "I promise."

"Good," she wrapped me in a quick hug. "So, for your gift, I went out and bought some clothes for you, along with some other supplies. I left it all in your room, do you want to check it out?"

"Okay," I assented. Your room. That's what she'd called it. I couldn't contain my smile. It was my room. I...I lived with Laura! My heartbeat quickened, as I followed at Laura's heels.

\* \* \*

"Oh my God!" Laura's eyes lit up with glee. "Gorgeous!"

"Thanks," I bit my lip, turning around for her like a clothing model.

Fortunately, Laura had avoided buying a lot of the frillier stuff. Most of the clothing she had bought me was tight jeans and cute tops. However, she did include a few summer dresses. She insisted that they were a godsend on humid days, and claimed that I had to try on one of the dresses for sizing. Thus, I stood in the center of my room, wearing a blue dress with white flowers which didn't quite reach my knee. The straps fell over my shoulders, accentuating my slim frame and bringing attention to my proportionally large breasts.

I had to admit: the dress wasn't uncomfortable, although wearing it was definitely a scary experience. I never imagined that I'd ever wear a dress, even after becoming Natalie...and yet there I was, playing dress-up for Laura. I couldn't be angry with her, though. From what she told me earlier, all she wanted was a daughter to dress up, and I was a substitute of sorts.

At least six shopping bags sat on my bed, some overflowing with clothing while others contained hair products, a makeup kit, and even an array of nail polish. Laura hadn't asked me to wear any of the makeup or polish for my dress modeling. Still, in the back of my mind, I milled through the possibilities. I knew that most boys would have dreaded the idea of wearing nail polish, but the notion actually excited me. Being a self-proclaimed artist, I could close my eyes and imagine all of the cool designs that I could paint onto my nails. When I changed genders, they became yet another canvas for my works.

I gave Laura one last spin-around, and then heard a vibration coming from the bed. More specifically, the vibration came from inside of my new purse, which Laura had insisted that I use. According to her, it was the only way I could carry my belongings, given that so many articles of women's clothing had no functional pockets. I wasn't sure if I bought her explanation, but I caved anyway.

Padding to my bedside, I fetched my phone from my purse and drew a sharp breath. It was a text from Josh. Short and sweet, it asked whether or not I wanted to chat about our project tomorrow on a quick run. He wanted to go on a run with me! This was bad. This was really bad. He was on the track team, and last night's great escape was the furthest I'd run in years. Plus, there was the matter of equipment.

"Laura?" I piped, spinning around once more to face her. "Did you happen to buy any tennis shoes?"

"Of course," she smiled in reply, tilting her head as if to decipher the meaning behind my inquiry. "Why?"

I bit my lip once more, then showed her the text from Josh. As soon as she saw it, she let out a shrill laugh.

“Less than a week, and you’ve already got a boyfriend.”

I crossed my arms defensively - perhaps too defensively. “He’s not my boyfriend. He’s a guy from class who I got assigned to do a project with.”

“I know, hun. I’m just teasing you,” she ruffled my hair once more, and began foraging through one of the shopping bags. She produced a pair of black shorts, a white tank-top, and a pair of teal running shoes. “In all seriousness, is it safe for you to be alone with him?”

I shrugged. “I think so. He doesn’t have anything to do with the Brigade.”

Laura nodded slowly. “That’s good. Just...always be careful. When you’re with this boy, I want you to be texting me every half-hour with updates. Okay, sweetie?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I closed my eyes, nodding slowly as I tried to push last night’s memories to the back of my mind.

“Good,” She smiled, then placed the athletic wear onto my bed. “You should try on the running outfit, too, since you’ll be wearing it tomorrow.

“I will,” I muttered, grasping the shorts and lifting them to eye-level. “Wow. They’re so...short.”

“That’s why they’re called shorts.” She quipped in reply with a smug grin.

I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t keep the smile from my lips. “Thanks for everything,” I repeated for the umpteenth time. “You’re the best.”

“Don’t sweat it, hun.” She glanced down at her wristwatch, then let out a groan. As soon as she saw the time, her entire disposition shifted, and she became all business. “Listen - I’ve got to go work the late shift, at the clinic. You know how to reach me if you need me, right?”

I nodded, careful not to upend my glasses.

“Good,” She sighed with newfound urgency, rising to her feet and striding to the doorway. “Make yourself at home and please do not disappear on me. I want you to stay in this house until I come back, alright?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I repeated, offering her a reassuring smile as she departed.

Only a few minutes later, the front door thudded shut, and I was left alone in the large house. With a humph, I glanced around the room, wondering how I would spend the remainder of the day. Eventually, my eyes settled upon the vast collection of nail polish and I brought a hand to my cheek as an excited smile spread across my lips.



# CHAPTER 17

## *Nailed It*

“Hey, Josh” I smiled at my bedroom mirror. Nonchalantly, I brushed a lock of hair from my eyes. “How are you doing? Did you run all the way here?”

Last time I chatted with Josh, I came off like a babbling idiot. I barely even managed to string together a full sentence. This time, however, was going to be completely different. I’d been practicing for his impending arrival for the last hour or two, and I was determined not to make a fool of myself.

“Clear, intelligent, succinct,” I repeated to myself. It was a mantra that I’d used for a number of years, with varied success. “Clear, intelligent, succinct.”

I was fully decked out in my running clothing, although the word ‘clothing’ was generous. My shorts were just as small as they had first appeared, and their coverage was scant. My pasty-white legs were on full display, all the way to my upper thighs, as the shorts hugged my ass with a firm grip. They made me feel naked, but apparently these skimpy running shorts were fashionable. Over the past few years I’d seen loads of other girls wearing shorts like these, and if they could pull it off without constant worry, so could I.

My blonde hair was collected in a tight ponytail, a process that I struggled to master for about twenty minutes. Combined with my glasses, it gave me a rather sophisticated appearance.

“Clear, intelligent, succinct.”

Eyeing the excited girl in the mirror, I licked my lips. Unsurprisingly, they tasted like fruity lip-gloss. I’d always been a bit of a curious person, and last night my inquisitive nature got the better of me. I began experimenting with my new beauty products, and

discovered that I kind've liked my tube of strawberry lipgloss. It tasted nice, and I appreciated the slippery-smooth sensation it left on my lips.

Sure, lip gloss wasn't very manly, and my father would have been disappointed...but he was perpetually disappointed in me, anyway. Did his opinion even matter, anymore? I wasn't quite sure. Throughout the past few days, my whole life had been turned upside-down. I'd begun to question whether or not I was actually as stupid and useless as I thought...and I'd also started questioning Dad's infallibility. What if he really was just a self-absorbed cult leader, like Ms. Washington's book seemed to suggest? What if...what if some of the facts he'd taught me about the world were wrong?

My thoughts were scattered by the ring of the doorbell. With a grin and a thumping heart, I began scampering down the stairs. Reaching the front door, I paused with my hand on the doorknob and drew a focused breath. Collecting myself, I turned the knob and tugged open the heavy door.

"Josh!" I squeaked. Taking a step outside, I eyed him carefully. As usual, he looked dapper and composed. With his red t-shirt, black shorts, and those icy blue eyes, he could have easily stepped into a Nike ad without seeming out-of-place. I gazed up at him, searching for words. "H-how...uh...how are..." My stomach began to sink, and I entered panic mode. "How are..."

"I'm good," He replied with a suave grin, tilting his head ever-so-slightly. "How about you?"

"Good," I clasped my hands beneath my chin, and rubbed one of my shoes against the other. "Real good...very, I mean...very...good."

"Awesome," Josh nodded. "You look great, by the way."

"Thanks," I whispered, my cheeks burning red. "Y-you too."

"Oh, before I forget: are your parents home? I'd love to meet them."

I opened my mouth and closed it, unprepared to answer that particular question. "Uh," I hesitated. "M-my...Mom...is at work right now."

"Oh, Okay. She works on weekends? What does she do?"

"She's a doctor," I answered, the words just tumbling from my mouth. Oh God, why did I lie to him? Laura wasn't my mother...why didn't I tell Josh the truth?

"Cool!" Josh remarked. "I'd love to talk to her. My parents want me to be a doctor, and I'm going to study pre-med at U of Chicago."

"Cool," I echoed with a hint of sadness, my voice just above a whisper. I had applied to that school's design program and gotten accepted. It was one of the dozen or so universities to which I applied, but there was no way I'd be able to attend any of them.

It was all just wishful thinking. Sighing, I turned away from Josh and stared down the winding suburban street.

“So, you want to get going?”

I nodded, then pulled out my phone and sent a quick text to Laura, keeping her updated on my whereabouts. I knew that she would worry about me if I didn’t keep her posted, and I didn’t want to be a bother.

“Let me take these off,” Josh offered, extending both hands toward my face. My sheep-like defence instincts kicked in, and I froze. My heart pounded in my ears, and I couldn’t move a muscle. When Josh gently removed my glasses and placed them in his backpack, I exhaled a sigh of relief. He wasn’t like Colton. He wasn’t going to hurt me.

“Glasses aren’t fun to run with,” Josh grinned. If he had taken five steps backward, I wouldn’t have been able to tell if he was grinning. As soon as my glasses left my nose, I could barely detect distant objects. I became even more helpless than before.

“Josh,” I piped, crossing my arms uneasily beneath my breasts. “I-I can’t see without my glasses.”

“Don’t worry,” he reached over to place a steady hand on my shoulder. “Just stay next to me, and I’ll keep an eye out for you.”

“If you say so,” I murmured with a nod.

With that, we were off the races. Okay, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration. We were actually running quite slowly, working our way down the blurry suburban street at a leisurely pace. Even so, I was already huffing and puffing after less than a mile.

The concrete street gave way to a dirt path. We journeyed into the woods, jogging side-by-side for what felt like miles, and only exchanging a few words. All the while, I felt my strength fading, and I struggled to put one leg before the next. I sounded like a dying hippopotamus. Frustratingly, Josh jogged beside me without even breaking a sweat. Perhaps Laura was correct when she advised that I needed to get more exercise.

“Josh,” I panted, slowing my jog to an amble as blurry leaves stared down at me. “Can we...please stop?” I managed to ask.

When I escaped from my parents’ house, raw adrenaline was fueling me. I had been running for my life. Needless to say, that energy was hard to replicate. My legs felt like tired noodles, where every step was a struggle.

“Come on, Nat. Don’t stop,” Josh slowed down to my speed, a tinge of disappointment in his voice. “We’re almost there. It’s just around the corner.”

“Where are we...even going?” I wheezed between labored breaths.

“Well, if you don’t keep going, you’ll never find out,” Josh winked with a handsome grin, which made my stomach do a flip.

Before I had time to formulate a reply, Josh took off at a steady trot.

“Josh!” I groaned, then sped to a jog beside him.

We ran for another few minutes before we rounded a bend and found ourselves on a rock overhang, above a blurry body of shimmering water. Fishing through his backpack, Josh returned my glasses and unfurled a picnic blanket, which he spread across the rock.

“Wow,” I murmured, sliding my glasses up my nose and admiring the lake. It stretched out in every direction. The sun beamed down at its center, and the shores were shrouded in shade, as willows dipped down to kiss the water’s surface. Stunning and gorgeous, it was the kind of scenery that just begged to be painted. “How’d you find this place?” I asked with wide eyes.

“It’s on my running route,” Josh shrugged, as he removed his shoes and socks. I followed his lead, and did the same. “Pretty, isn’t it?”

“Pretty,” I agreed, slumping down onto the blanket to rest my tired legs. I pulled my phone from my back pocket and texted a quick update to Laura, then let it rest on the patterned picnic blanket. “Real pretty. I’ve lived in Dexter my whole life, and I never knew about this place.”

“Guess you need to get out more.”

“Mhm,” I brought a hand to my cheek and leaned into it. “You wanted to talk about the project, right? I-I mean, we have most of it figured out, don’t we?”

“Yeah,” Josh nodded. He strode to the edge of the rock and peered at the water below. “I think we’re all good on that front.”

“Oh,” I replied softly. Why would he schedule this meeting, if he didn’t want to talk about class? My heart thudded urgently against my thin top.

“Nat! Come look!” Josh exclaimed, pointing down at the water.

He beckoned me excitedly, and I hesitantly rose from the blanket and approached the edge of the rock. Standing beside him, I furrowed my eyebrows.

“I don’t see anything...”

“Here, maybe if you take your glasses off,” he offered.

“How would that help?”

By the time I’d asked the question, Josh had already snatched my glasses and tossed them onto the blanket. In the same fluid motion, he also removed my hair-tie and cast it aside.

“So they won’t get wet,” Josh said with a devilish grin. “You know how to swim, right?”

My eyes widened, and I nodded.

I squeaked when he grabbed my shoulders. It wasn't a fearful squeak, but rather an excited one. I'd already come to terms with the fact that Josh was going to throw me into the lake. Thankfully, the water was deep and the fall was shorter than it appeared. I hit the water with a tiny splash, and relished the sensation of cool water meeting my warm skin. Powering to the surface, I ran a hand through my wet hair and let out an embarrassingly shrill giggle.

My giggle only grew higher in pitch when Josh catapulted into the water beside me, which sent small waves pulsing through the lake's formerly tranquil surface.

"Oh," Josh said with a grin as he turned to face me. "Didn't see you there."

"That ain't cool," I smiled and drew a deep breath, putting an end to my giggles.

"No, it ain't," Josh swam closer to me, until I could see his charming face in high definition. Both treading water, we were only a couple of feet apart. "I love your accent. I can't get enough of it. Every time you talk...it just makes me smile."

"Huh?" I raised an eyebrow. "I don't have an accent."

He looked at me with a strange expression, a mix of confusion and disbelief. "You're joking, right?"

"No," I wrinkled my nose, studying him carefully. "Do I really have an accent?"

"Wow," he shook his head. "Woow. I don't know how nobody has ever told you this before, but you have a really strong accent."

"Oh," I pursed my lips, unsure how to feel about that knowledge. "...an Arkansas accent?"

"Well, yeah. I can't really tell Southern accents apart, but you're from Arkansas, so I guess it's an 'Arkansas accent'. It just makes you so...cute."

"Thanks, I think." I couldn't keep the grin from my lips. The water sat still between us, and I noticed that Josh was inching closer with every passing second. "You know, you've got an accent too."

"Not like yours," he said with a syrupy tone. "Not like yours."

Underwater, his hands grasped mine. He began to lead me toward a shallower part of the lake, and I swam behind him dutifully, until my bare feet touched the lake's floor. Once we were standing comfortably, he tenderly lifted my hand above the water.

"You painted your nails?"

I nodded. Last night, I took advantage of the bottles of polish that Laura had bought me, and I used them to draw a vibrant forest across my nails. They were lush with dark green and pastels. I was pretty pleased with the final result. To be honest, I couldn't wait to repaint them with some new, cool design.

"It was my first time. I just thought it might be...might be an interesting thing to do."

"That's really cool," he nodded with a faint smile. "I've got so much respect for you...the way you're just diving right into this whole mess. I know that if I became a girl overnight, I'd go ballistic."

"It ain't easy," I shrugged, "but becoming a girl is the least of my problems."

"Really?"

I shrugged once more.

"Do you want to talk to me about anything? Any of those other problems?"

"Not really," I murmured. I couldn't tell him the truth about my life, or about the Brigade. What if he judged me? What if he thought I was some sort of monster? "Life never forgives weakness," I added.

"Huh?" Josh eyed me skeptically. "What do you mean? Is that a quote or something?"

"Josh," I replied with an uneasy tone, brainstorming ways to redirect the conversation. I didn't want to discuss my life, or the Brigade. "What is this?"

He shrugged, running a hand through his jet-black hair. "It's a lake."

I rolled my eyes and rubbed my cheek. "I mean this. This is a date, ain't it?"

"Well," Josh raised his eyebrows, still holding my hand. "If you want to call it that, sure. I really just wanted to get to know you better, and I didn't think you'd come if I called it a date."

"Because you think I'm...cute?"

"Among other factors," he nodded, gazing down into my eyes.

"Oh," I squeaked, my heart thudded against my chest. "I think you're...you're cute, too." I paused, re-thinking my declaration as my cheeks burnt red. "H-handsome, I mean. You're handsome. Y-you're really good looking. Y-you're...you're..."

"Deep breaths," Josh ordered with a tranquil tone. He gripped both of my shoulders with his hands, which made me feel secure. Grounded. Much like Laura's hugs, I felt like I was in a sanctuary where nothing could hurt me. Obeying his order, I slowly filled and emptied my lungs until my heartbeat steadied.

"There you go," he chuckled, wrapping me into a firm hug. Instinctively, I reciprocated the hug and buried my head into his chest. "Easy," he rubbed my back. "Easy."

"Thanks," I whispered, my head still against his chest. "Sometimes I just get too nervous. It usually isn't this bad, though. I've just been going through...a lot."

"That's okay," Josh nodded, still rubbing my back. "That's what I like about you."

“That I’m scared?”

“No, that you’re real. That you don’t hide your emotions behind fake personas or anything. You’re you. You’re Nat, and you’re awesome.”

“Thanks,” I gulped guiltily. Little did he know, but I was hiding a lot from him. I wasn’t entirely innocent, either. I was a neo-Nazi, and last week I committed armed robbery. Was that my true identity? Was the doe-eyed girl living with Laura just a persona? I wasn’t sure. Regardless of the answer, guilt swirled in my gut, balling itself into a tight knot and bringing goosebumps to my arms.

“Can we head back?”

“Yup,” Josh replied, still massaging my back in tiny circles. “The sun will set pretty soon, let’s get going.”

# CHAPTER 18

## *The Traitor*

*“Y*ou make me sick.” Dad’s harsh voice echoed through my head, as he glowered down at me. We were nowhere, surrounded by darkness in every direction. I wanted to scream. I wanted to run...but I couldn’t. Instead, I stood petrified before him, unable to shift a muscle. “You know why we haven’t come looking for you?” He sneered down at me. “It’s ‘cause we don’t want you. Nobody wants you. All you ever do is pussyfoot around and turn away from the truth. Nobody wants you.”

*As soon as he was done speaking, more familiar faces began to materialize around his.*

*“Nobody wants you,” Mom said with a nasty chuckle, her face floating beside Dad’s shoulder.*

*“Nobody wants you,” Colton added from the shadows.*

*“Nobody wants you,” Laura echoed, smiling sadistically.*

*“Nobody wants you.” The chorus grew louder and louder, rising from all around me. “Nobody wants you.”*

“Wake up, sweetie,” Laura gently jostled my shoulder, and my eyes shot open. I’d been making a low moaning noise, which faded into silence as I regained consciousness. “Were you having a nightmare?”

Still frightened, my eyes darted around the pink-walled room. Once I realized that I was in Laura’s guest room, my heartbeat began to steady itself. I was safe and sound. Sunlight was already pouring through the bedroom’s open window. I must have slept for hours on end, exhausted from the long run with Josh. As soon as I’d gotten home, I had passed out on my bed. Home. Was this place actually my home, though? Honestly, I wasn’t quite sure.



“Nat? What’s going on, hun? Are you okay?” Laura pursed her lips in concern, peering down at me. She sat on the side of my bed, clothed in her sky-blue bathrobe as she held what smelled like a steaming cup of coffee in her offhand.

“Oh,” I murmured, flashing a faint smile up at her blurry figure. “Yeah, it was just a nightmare.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I lifted my shoulder in a hesitant shrug. “I don’t know.”

“Alright,” she nodded with the slightest of sighs. “Just know that you can tell me anything you want. I’ll never think less of you for it. Okay, hun?”

I reached over to the nightstand and fished around for my glasses. “Mhm,” I squeaked, sliding the spectacles up my nose.

She was far too kind to me. Sometimes, it just made me feel so...so special, as if I was the only person in the world who mattered to her.

“Good,” Laura flashed a smile, grasping my hand with both of hers. “How was your run? Did that boy treat you well?”

I bobbed my head up and down in a steady nod. “It was great...” I began with a relatively mild tone, which gradually gave way to gushing excitement as my story unraveled.

I rambled on for what seemed like centuries, recounting all of the previous day’s events in vivid detail. When I recalled the way that Josh had hugged me and quelled my tears, my stomach began to relive its fluttering and I let out a giddy giggle.

“It’s so nice...” Laura quietly remarked, upon the conclusion of my tale.

“What’s nice?” I raised an eyebrow.

“To see you smiling,” she gave my hand a happy pat. “You just light up the room.”

“T-thanks,” I murmured in reply, my cheeks reddening. I didn’t know what to say. Nobody had ever complimented me so much. Did she actually mean it, or were those all empty words? I had no idea...although I suppose her actions matched her words. After all, she allowed me to stay in her house, and treated me like...like a daughter.

“Alright, sweetie,” she rose from my side and strode toward the door. “My shift starts in half an hour, and I won’t be back until pretty late tonight. So, stay out of trouble - stay inside - and call me if anything comes up. Got it?”

“Yup,” I piped in reply. “Bye Mom.”

She froze in the doorframe. Only when she turned around did I realize my mistake. Mom. I called her...Mom.

“Oh my God,” I squeaked, pulling up my bedsheet to cover my mouth. “I...I...”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. Her surprised expression subtly gave way to sympathy. “You can call me ‘Mom’.”

Uneasily, I lowered the bedsheet below my chin. “Really?” I murmured with wide eyes.

“Sure,” she nodded, moving her tongue in her mouth as if she was trying to disguise a smile.

I opened my mouth and closed it. “Okay,” I whispered, still a bit befuddled.

Before I could shake my confusion, Laura disappeared down the hallway and headed out the front door, leaving me alone in my perplexity. Was she actually okay with me calling her ‘Mom’? Had she just said that to lessen my embarrassment? Honestly, I wasn’t sure. I prided myself on being able to read people, and it seemed to me as if she almost wanted me to call her ‘Mom’.

I hugged my knees to my chest and let out a sigh.

Why had I even called her ‘Mom’ in the first place? She was nothing like my real Mom. Laura was more like the perfect mother that you see in some TV shows: a loving guardian who every decent child deserved. Maybe that was why I called her ‘Mom’. She was the Mom who I always wanted. The Mom who I never deserved.

With a groan, I rolled out of bed and trotted to the bathroom. I shed my pink robe and stepped into the shower, letting cold water stream over me as I quietly hummed an improvised tune. I never sang in the shower, I only ever hummed. I used to sing, but my father had put an end to that. After all, he didn’t want to be raising some ‘Broadway queer’.

Running a hand through my wet, lengthy hair, I stepped out of the shower and began to dry myself. I cracked open the bathroom door and turned on the blow-drier. As I parsed through my soggy strands of hair, the mirror began to unfog.

A cute blonde girl stared back at me. I’d already begun to grow used to my new appearance. My pale skin was unblemished, aside from a light farmer’s tan on my upper arms and that glaring black tattoo. The unmistakable symbol sat prominently across the left side of my flat belly.

For me, that stark swastika used to be a symbol of pride. Of course, that was before all of...this. Before GB, before that night, and before Laura. So, what was the swastika? What did it mean, these days? Did it actually represent me, or was it just a lasting vestige of my father’s tyranny?

With trembling hands, I put down the hairdryer and fumbled through the robust First Aid drawer. Eventually, I found what I was searching for: an extra large band-aid. My hands still shook when I carefully laid the adhesive bandage over my tattoo and

secured it in place. Returning my gaze to the mirror, I no longer found myself looking at the reflection of a Neo-Nazi. Instead, I was looking at an unfortunate girl who appeared to be nursing a stomach wound.

I shook my head and ripped off the bandage, tossing it into the bin. That swastika was part of me. Although I sometimes resisted my heritage, I was a Pike. I was a Nazi. My father couldn't stay angry with me forever, could he? What if I went home, and he welcomed me with open arms? Laura was nice to me, but she wasn't my flesh and blood. She wasn't my real mother...my real mother still loved me, didn't she? She always went along with my father, so she would almost certainly accept me back if Dad forgave me for running away.

Wrapping my towel above my breasts, I padded back to my room and collapsed into my bed. I was on the verge of tears. Simply put, I didn't know what to think. Throughout my whole life, someone - whether it be Mom, Dad, Colt, or any number of Brigade guys - had always told me how I should act and what I should think. Without their guidance, I was free...but I was also lost.

With a bitter sigh, I hopped to my feet and sifted through my new wardrobe. I slipped on a fresh set of clothes, shimmying into a pair of tight black jeans and a white tee. All the while, I mulled over my current situation. Did I really want to completely disconnect with my family? What if they realized how much they missed me, during my absence? Nothing was stopping me from strolling out of Laura's front door and walking to my parents' house...

"No," I spoke to myself with a soft, trembling voice. "I can't go back."

What the hell was wrong with me? Why had I even entertained the possibility of returning? Mom and Dad didn't love me. They had treated me like trash throughout my entire life. Why would that suddenly change?

Closing my eyes, I recalled my father's devastating words: "This creature ain't a real man, or a real woman."

The words came through in crystal-clear definition, as if my father was whispering into my ears with his smoky voice. There was no coming back from those words. I was dead to him, and to believe otherwise would be foolish.

Laura saved me.

Without her help, I would have returned to my parents' house with my tail between my legs. I would've surrendered to the 'free game' status, and...I couldn't even wrap my mind around the horror of that fate. Suddenly, Laura's suggestion to stay inside the house seemed like sound advice.

I ran a nervous hand over the edges of my cap-sleeved t-shirt, and padded to my desk with a measured breath and a newfound purpose. If Laura was going to let me live here, I was going to be the best 'daughter' I could be. It was the least I could do, and would take me one step toward returning her massive favor.

I foraged through the drawers and eventually found my tool of choice: a sharp number two pencil. Non-mechanical, of course. I temporarily held the pencil between my teeth while I produced a white sheet of drawing paper from my backpack. I had a habit of holding pencils between my teeth. For whatever reason, I found it to be soothing.

"Okay," I murmured to myself, as I withdrew the pencil and twirled it between my fingers. "Let's do this."

My plan was simple. Almost all of Laura's photos featured both her and her ex-husband. I wanted to create a hand-drawn portrait for her, to display her beauty in its purest form. I exhaled a deep breath, as I brought my pencil to the paper. Hopefully she liked my artwork. As much as I hated to admit it, I'd probably break down and cry if she didn't enjoy my drawing. My Dad certainly wasn't wrong when he called me 'soft'.

I rubbed my nose, and recalled all of the contours and delicate edges of Laura's elegant face. I imagined her standing in front of me, turning back over her shoulder to send me an encouraging smile as she ventured through a meadow. Ever so slowly, I began to turn that mental image into a drawing. Held between my slender fingers, my pencil danced across the sheet like a ballerina. So far, that was my favorite part of GB: my fingers were now a bit smaller and more dexterous, which meant that my hand wouldn't cramp up quite as much when I was working on tiny details.

While I sketched, my mind fell into a purely artistic mode, ignoring almost everything else. Before I knew it, two hours had passed and the drawing was just about complete. Laura's beautiful features had translated quite well onto the paper, and I couldn't contain my proud smile. She was going to love it...well, I hoped she loved it. Would she actually love it? What if she thought it made her look bad? What if I brought too much attention to a feature that she didn't enjoy, like her light sprinkling of freckles?

"No," I murmured to myself with a sniff, clasping my hands beneath my chin. "Confident. Be. More. Confident."

Furrowing my brow, I glanced down at my clasped hands. I curiously unfurled my fingers and moved them beneath my desk lamp.

"Hmm," I tilted my head, studying my nails. They were still colored with nature tones and designed to look like small forests.

I wasn't really feeling the woodsy aesthetic anymore. The design looked okay, but it was a bit... campy. Feeling the sudden compulsion to fix a piece of flawed artwork, I padded to the bathroom and began removing my polish, taking the exact steps that I'd seen in an online video. Once I began to fixate on a task, especially an artistic task, I often became far too engrossed.

Thus, I didn't initially notice when my phone buzzed with a text notification. Instead, I was busy carefully applying fresh layers of matte turquoise polish to my nails. It was almost the same shade as my eyes, and would definitely make my irises look even more striking. When I finished my last nail and began to inspect my handiwork, my phone's brightened screen caught the corner of my eye.

I furrowed my eyebrows and delicately picked up the phone, careful not to disturb my polish. Reading the text, I let out a high gasp and almost accidentally dropped my phone into the sink. It was a text from...Emma.

Hey, it read. How are you doing?

I simply stared at the message with parted lips.

"Emma..." I whispered to myself, my heart pounding against my chest. "Emma Winthrop..."

My mind raced with all of the possible ways to respond to her message. Gulping, I organized my thoughts into an equally simple reply.

I'm alright, I typed with my fingertips. Then, I paused to bite my lip. Considering what Laura had told me, Emma had driven me all the way to the hospital and stayed there with me for hours. At the very least, I owed her my gratitude. Thanks for everything, I added.

No problem. Glad to hear that you're doing well, she fired back, almost automatically. Wanna chat at lunch tomorrow? I'll be under the tree.

Ok, I concluded the conversation. My hands trembled as I hit the 'send' button.

Still somewhat rattled, I returned to my desk and plopped down into the black office chair that was slightly too large for me. Emma Winthrop. For the last two years, I'd been led to believe that she was some sort of demon. A race traitor. Only a few groups were worse than race traitors: the blacks, the gays, and - of course - the Jews. Yet, she'd shown me kindness. She'd gone out of her way to help me.

Rubbing my temples, I let out a defeated sigh. Nothing was simple, anymore. The whole world had been turned on its head.

# CHAPTER 19

## *Specs*

**T**here she was. Emma Winthrop, sitting cross-legged beneath her rustling sycamore. Locks of blue hair bounced across her face in the light breeze, but she didn't seem to notice. She was engrossed in a hard-covered book, which rested open on her lap like a sprawling atlas.

I drew a sharp breath and marched toward her. For much of the school-day and all of last night, I'd been preparing myself for this encounter. I hadn't even been able to fully finish Laura's portrait...I just couldn't focus. Instead, I had stared at inanimate objects while my mind traced countless paths through imaginary conversations with Emma.

"Hey Nat," Emma stated in a song-like tone, not even lifting her eyes from her book. Reading was her lunchtime tradition. Every day, she'd sit and read in a near-meditative state, as if she was in her own little world. "It's still Nat, right?"

Taken aback by her apparent friendliness, I hesitated with parted lips. I was unsure of how to reply, and simply froze like a sheep while my hands wrapped even tighter around my worn backpack straps.

My silence drew Emma's curiosity, and she glanced up at me. "You don't have to stand there," she said with the hint of a smile, gesturing at the patch of grass beside her.

Her eyes seemed to sparkle as she spoke, as if she possessed some outlandish form of magic. She certainly had an enchanting look about her, with her dyed blue hair, her spattering of freckles, and those perfectly shaped black eyebrows. I used to have the biggest crush on her, back before GB tore through my life like a tornado.

"Right," I flashed an unsure smile and eased down beside her. As I did, I exhaled slowly, and calmness began to wash over me.. "And yeah, you can call me Nat," I added.

I had no reason to be so fretful. I knew Emma. Sure, I hadn't talked to her in over a year, but she used to be my friend. I could relax around her, couldn't I? Even though she was a race traitor?

"How've you been, Specs?" Emma asked, tucking a lock of blue hair behind her ear. She'd completely disregarded her book, and instead chose to stare at me with those vast chestnut eyes of hers.

"Specs?" I lifted an eyebrow.

"Do you prefer 'four-eyes'?" she smirked.

"Oh, right." My cheeks reddened and I shifted my glasses. "I've been...good," I offered the default response, which caused her to tilt her head in disappointment.

"I heard about what happened with Colton," she replied matter-of-factly.

When she said his name, I wrapped my arms around my knees and hugged them to my chest. I looked away from Emma, and felt a compulsion to glance toward the graffitied corner of the lunch yard where Colton, Mason, and Hunter were undoubtedly loitering. However, I managed to quell that desire. I didn't want to do anything that could provoke them. The school had stepped up their lunchtime security force, evidenced by the milling guard with 'Security' written on the backs of their jackets in white sans-serif font, but I still felt as if I wasn't entirely safe.

Closing my eyes, I gulped. "Who told you?"

"I've got my sources," she shot back cryptically.

I pursed my lips, and a silence fell over us. My eyes fell to the green stalks of grass, avoiding her intense gaze.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" She asked.

Raising my eyes from the grass, I shook my head. "Nope." The word came out of my mouth as a weak murmur.

Emma sighed, then ran her eyes up and down the length of my petite figure. "I like your nails," she offered hopefully, as if she was just trying to draw me into a conversation of any kind. "Who did them?"

"Oh," I exhaled a breath that I'd been holding obliviously. "Me. I did...I did them."

"Really?" her face lit up. "They look amazing!"

"Thanks," I flashed an uncomfortable smile. "I like to draw and stuff, so..."

"I know," she nodded.

"You know?"

"Course," Emma rolled her eyes. "You doodle all the time."

"Didn't think anyone noticed," I shrugged.

“Nat,” a grin spread across her lips. She cast her book aside and scooted in front of me, only stopping when our feet were mere inches apart. “I spy on you just as much as you spy on me.”

I parted my lips to retort, but she cut me off with a hand gesture.

“And trust me, I notice when people are staring at me,” she raised her eyebrows, and pointed a subtle finger toward the Brigade guys’ lunch spot. “I know y’all talked about me all the time.”

“Emm-” I began to contradict her.

“Shush,” she cut me off, then exhaled a deep breath. “I’m just happy that you’re free. From the outside, you can really see how fucked up your family is.”

Once more, I gulped uncomfortably. “T-they aren’t that bad.”

Emma’s eyes widened, and she let her jaw hang open. “Is that a joke? You’re kidding, aren’t you?”

“They’re my family,” I shrugged.

“Nat, they’re insane!” Emma snapped, with the sort of authority and anger that lurked beneath her relatively cool surface. “Look at how they treated you! They made you free game. Free game. How can you possibly think that they ‘aren’t that bad’?” For the first time, Emma’s voice wavered with emotion. “They’re hateful and evil and...and...and they just spew stupid crap.”

“I don’t know,” I replied softly, with a hint of guilt. “Some of it makes sense.”

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, as her expression soured into disappointment. “Like what?” she asked with a tone so sharp that it could have drawn blood. “Give me one example, just one fucking example of something true that they believe.”

I shifted uncomfortably, clutching my knees even tighter to my chest. I felt miniscule, like a cornered mouse with a spotlight trained at my face. “I don’t know,” I repeated. “Not all of that Nazi stuff makes sense, but some of it does. I mean, there’s a reason why there’s so many blacks in the inner cities, and so much violence in Africa. I ain’t sure...”

“Holy shit,” Emma shook her head in bewilderment. “Holy fucking shit, you are beyond brainwashed,” she said in an intense, rapid tone. “What about you, Nat? You’re spewing all this crap about black people, but you’re a GB girl. Isn’t that even worse, in their eyes?”

I nodded with a sigh. “I-I’m worthless.”

“According to them,” Emma appended my remark, furrowing her eyebrows in concern.



"I'm on the bottom of the totem pole," I murmured.

"Nat," she spoke slowly and with authority. Scooting toward me, she gripped my shoulders and stared down with those big hazel eyes of hers. "There ain't a fucking totem pole. Everything your Dad ever taught you is a lie. He's a bad person. A really bad person. Are you really that blind? Why can't you see that? All he does is tear you down and belittle you. That's why you feel 'worthless' all of the time. Ever since I've known you, that man has been abusing you. Emotionally and physically."

"He's my Dad, though," I squeaked, with only weak resistance in my voice.

"He's a piece of shit," she shot back with a stern cadence.

I stared down at the grass, and didn't respond.

"You hate yourself, don't you?" she asked flatly.

Avoiding her eyes, I gave a hesitant nod.

"That's his doing. Don't you ever forget that. He wants you to feel that way, because that's how he controls people. He breaks you down, until you're so self-loathing that you'd do anything to get some validation...some approval."

Tears began to trickle from my eyes, and Emma noticed immediately. Flashing a reassuring smile, she drew me into a hug. It wasn't quite as firm as Laura's hugs, but it made me feel secure regardless. Emma's blue hair served as a handkerchief for my tears, wiping them off my cheek as I shut my eyes.

"He broke you," she whispered near my ear, "but you'll heal. You'll be just fine. Just fine."

For most of the other students, the sight of two girls hugging beneath a sycamore was unremarkable. For me, however, the hug meant more than words could describe. I hadn't talked to Emma for over a year, and she embraced me with open arms. As I nestled my head against her neck, my mind flashed back to all the times that Colt, Mason, Mom, Dad, and the rest of the Brigade had bad-mouthed Emma's family. I used to laugh when they made jokes about her being a 'blue-haired slut' who needed to be 'put in her place'.

"I'm sorry," I murmured back to her, as I exited the hug. I was still trembling with emotion, despite my best efforts to control myself. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," she sighed and stared into my red-circled eyes, as if she was reading my exact thoughts. "You were just trying to fit in." She plucked a piece of grass from the ground and twirled it between her fingers. "Now, you can be yourself. Running away was the smartest move you ever made."

My eyes were transfixed by the strand of grass between her fingers. It meshed well with her nails, which were painted a light shade of pink. "How do you know I ran away?"

She cracked a faint smile. "I've got my sources."

I shook my head. I wouldn't let that answer slide this time. "Who?" I demanded, reaching out to pluck the blade of grass from between her fingernails. "Tell me."

She pursed her lips and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Please tell me," I asked, channeling all of my politeness and innocence as I pushed my glasses up my nose. Looking up at her, I wore my most pitiful pout. In front of the mirror, I'd spent an embarrassing amount of time working on my new facial expressions. After all, I had a new face and I had to understand its limitations and benefits. As it turned out I could make a damned convincing pout, like a puppy whose dinner bowl had just been stolen.

"Fine," she rolled her eyes, as a thin smile spread across her lips. "But I need to know that I can trust you."

"You can trust me," I chirped back immediately.

"How do I know that, though," she tapped her chin pensively. "Why don't you tell me a secret first, then I'll tell you mine?"

"Okay, I guess," I muttered. "What secret should I tell?"

She let out a light giggle. "Why are you asking me? They're your secrets."

I rested a hand on my cheek and joined her giggle. She had a point. However, I still couldn't make up my mind. I'd never been a particularly decisive person.

"Okay, okay, okay," I piped, which drew Emma's full attention. "Here's my secret," I drew a deep breath and shut my eyes. "Last weekend, I went on a...a...date. With a boy."

I opened my eyes to Emma's shrill laughter. She was practically rolling on the grass. "Holy shit, that was fast," she managed to remark between giggles. Excitement practically radiated off of her, as if she'd heard the best news of her life. After a few moments, she popped up ecstatically, like a cartoon character. "Tell me everything," she demanded. "Everything."

Fighting the urge to roll my eyes, I sighed. "His name is Josh, and he's really sweet."

"And do you like him?"

I opened and closed my mouth, unsure of how to reply. The hesitation was enough to reveal my answer, and Emma squealed, a grin on her lips.

"Did you kiss?"

"No..." I scratched my arm uncomfortably.

"...but you wanted him to kiss you," Emma said, as her grin turned devious.

My eyes widened, but I didn't contradict her. After all, she wasn't entirely wrong. "Your turn," I remarked with a gulp. Why had I told her any of that? What if she talked to Josh, and told him about me? About my family? About how I'd treated her?

Those worries were dashed by Emma's adoring smile. "Okay," Emma let out a pensive sigh of her own, and began to twirl her blue hair between her fingers. "My secret is also about a guy. We haven't been on any dates - 'official' dates, that is - but I like him a lot. We've been texting and talking almost everyday for the last year and..."

"And he told you about what Colt did?" I interrupted, wide-eyed. "So, he's in the Brigade." That was the only explanation for her knowledge of my encounter with Colton. "Oh my God," I gaped up at her. "Hunter."

Unlike me, she didn't blush. Instead, she wore a grave expression as the lunch-bell sounded. "You can't tell anyone," she demanded sternly, reaching out to grasp my wrists. "Nobody. Ever. Do you understand?"

I brought my fingers to my lips and bobbed my head up and down, still somewhat shocked.

"Nobody ever," I echoed in just above whisper. "I promise."

Just as the words left my mouth, the lunch bell chimed and my heart sank. I'd been enjoying our conversation, even through its somber turns. Since GB struck, Emma was the only other girl my age with whom I'd spoken. She was also the only other girl my age who really understood my past...who understood me.

"Same place tomorrow?" Emma asked, gesturing up at the rustling sycamore.

I was half-way through a nod when I recalled my prior obligations.

"Actually, I've got a field-trip tomorrow."

"Hah, lucky," Emma replied.

"We'll see," I rubbed my arm and drew an strained sigh, as I slung my backpack over my shoulders. For the last day, I'd been consumed with worry over my meeting with Emma...and I got the sense that the field-trip would now become my chief source of anxiety. I'd never been fond of stepping outside of my comfort zone and - according to Ms. Washington - the field-trip was designed to accomplish just that. "Maybe."

# CHAPTER 20

## *El Camino*

“Clear, intelligent, succinct,” I repeated the mantra under my breath. My head leaned against the car window, and I eyed the passing scenery, ignoring the blonde locks that hung over my eye. We’d already left the core of Dexter, and the road was flanked by a thick layer of evergreen trees. We were only a few minutes away from our destination: the tent city that was somehow classified as a ‘neighborhood’. If not for Josh, I probably would have neglected the field-trip and taken a failing grade. “Clear, intelligent, succinct.”

“What’s that, hun?” Laura’s voice startled me, and my cheeks burnt red.

“Nothing,” I murmured in reply.

For the last couple of days, Laura had been my chauffeur. She drove me to school, picked me up, and now was even taking me all the way to this godforsaken place. ‘Wetback City,’ as my father often called it.

I couldn’t help but feel guilty for taking so much of Laura’s time, but she didn’t seem to mind. She’d just insist that it wasn’t a big deal, and that she wanted to drive me around, since she wasn’t able to spend much time with me at home. Whenever she told me that, it brought a grin to my lips.

“You sure about that?” Laura pried.

I stopped staring at the passing trees and exchanged a glance with her. She had a knowing look in her eyes.

“I dunno,” I squeaked, pushing my glasses up my nose.

“Are you nervous about your project?”

“I guess,” I said with a shrug.

Okay, that was an understatement. Not only was I about to meet up with Josh, but I was about to meet him in a slum full of Mexicans. Mexicans. I'd heard about the things they did after they crossed the border, how they'd go around shooting people for sport. What would they do to me? I had no illusions about my size or toughness. I was a rather helpless pure Aryan girl, who probably couldn't even complete a single pushup. What if they tried to hurt me, like Colton did?

Closing my eyes, I vividly recalled a news segment I'd watched about the illegals on the warehouse's TV. They'd streamed over the border like rodents, bringing drugs and guns and god-knew-what.

My eyes shot open when I remembered the rest of the news segment. It'd been a special about Mexican gangs! What if I was wearing the wrong color? Would they kill me for that? My outfit was simple: a white tank-top and a pair of denim shorts that extended halfway down my thigh. Were those both safe colors? God, I hoped so.

"You're just supposed to interview people, right?" Laura continued, breaking the long silence.

I nodded once more.

"Don't worry, hun," she spoke with sincerity. "I know what it's like."

Glancing back at her, I tilted my head in doubt.

"Seriously," she nodded. Her eyes became distant as she stared down the road. "When I first left Scientology, everything was terrifying. I didn't even know how to talk to people who weren't in the Church." She paused to laugh at my baffled expression. "When you're in the Church, you mostly talk to other Church members, so everyone has some shared experiences. Something in common. It's easy to start conversations with people when you've got something in common. That's all you need to do, today."

"What if I don't have anything in common with them?" I asked. With a shudder, I imagined a Mexican man leering down at me with a sombrero on his head.

"Trust me, you'll find something. Everyone's got something in common," she stated with an even tone, studying me as she spoke. "Tell me about your new friend," she changed topics, perhaps surrendering her efforts to boost my assurance. "The one you mentioned yesterday."

The faintest of smiles flashed across my lips. "She's an old friend, actually," I explained in the softest of tones. "We just hadn't talked in awhile."

"What's her name again? Emma?"

"Emma," I nodded.

"She's not one of those Brigaders, is she?"

My smile returned and I shook my head. "Nope...and don't call them 'Brigaders'. They hate that."

"More reason to call them Brigaders, then," Laura quipped in response, laughing with that soothing giggle of hers. It never failed to brighten my mood, and I didn't even fight back my grin.

Sighing contently, I rested my cheek on my hand and continued studying Laura's profile. If I had to grow up as a woman, I'd like to be a woman like her. Her hair looked great, as usual, streaming down shoulders in elegant brunette waves. She was so pretty, and assertive, and perfect...and...

"Laura," I began hesitantly, unsure if I would be prying too far. "Have you been dating anyone lately?"

"Nope," Laura swiftly answered, a teasing glint in her amber eyes. "I don't have a boyfriend like you."

I groaned. "How many times do I have to tell you: he's not my boyfriend." Her smile was too infectious to ignore, however, and I was soon grinning with her. "Why aren't you dating anyone?"

"Because I don't have to," she countered with a decisive tone. "Not everyone needs to be in a romantic relationship at all times. Some time off can be...refreshing." She paused for a moment, fidgeting with the thin watch on her wrist. "Dexter doesn't have the best selection, either."

It was true. There probably weren't any men here who deserved her. Dexter was an aging town. Its population spiralled lower with each passing year, like water down a storm-drain. According to Dad, a good chunk of the younger folk went off to college, got themselves brainwashed, and never came back. The rest were wise enough to realize that there weren't any jobs in southeast Arkansas, and they'd move out to places like Texas.

Over the course of our conversation, the vibrant green forests gave way to the tent-infested slum. It looked like an army camp from the War of Northern Aggression with canvas dwellings scattered around a muddy field, stretching from the highway to a distant tree-line. The tents were painted in a myriad of bright colors, ranging from vibrant pink to turquoise.

As soon as I saw the tent slum, my stomach dropped. How many people lived there? Hundreds? Thousands? It didn't matter. I was an outsider - destined to be the only white girl within a mile. My hands trembled in my lap, and I licked my lips.

This was another source of Dexter's backward slide, according to my Dad. There were too many damned foreigners. They took all the jobs, they drove wages down, and

they were all illegals. They weren't bound by the law, so they were free to prance around, killing and stealing.

Shuddering, I turned back to Laura and tried to clear my thoughts. "Why are you still here?" I offered with a weak voice. "You're a doctor. They need doctors everywhere, don't they?"

"I ask myself that same question almost every day," Laura's smile faded. "Fear? Doubt?" Her smile fled completely, and she furrowed her eyebrows. "To tell you the truth, I've only ever been across the river to Mississippi. Other than that, I've spent my whole life here. I can't imagine what it'd be like to live anywhere else." She paused again, and her loving smile returned in full force. "Course, if I left Dexter, I wouldn't have met you. Maybe some things are just meant to be."

I knew she was only saying it to brighten my day. Regardless, it worked like a charm. I was giddy when she pulled into the center of town and parked beside Josh. He waited there with a nonchalant thumb in the pocket of his jeans, waving with a stupidly handsome grin.

"Oh, it's your friend!" Laura laughed, stepping out of her car as I did the same. My sneakers squished against the muddy ground, but I ignored that sensation. After eighteen years in Dexter, mud and I were well-acquainted.

We seemed to be in a parking lot of sorts. Old trucks were strewn throughout the field, encircled by tents. Despite the lack of parking stripes, the derelict vehicles were all parked in an orderly fashion, leading up to the large tent at the city's center.

"Hi, I'm Josh." He approached Laura, greeting her with a friendly handshake.

"Laura Harper, nice to meet you," she cordially accepted his handshake.

That was when I remembered my little lie.

"Nat told me you're a doctor," Josh continued.

"Yes, I am. I work over at the Stonewall clinic."

"Awesome," Josh's eyes lit up. "I'm planning on going to medical school, myself."

"Really?" Laura replied, sharing a sly glance with me. Of course, I'd already told her everything I knew about Josh, but she had to pretend as if this was new information. Based on what I'd told her, she already thought that Josh was a good influence on me, so I had no worries on that particular front. "That's great. It's a difficult commitment, but it's a fulfilling one. If you ever have any questions or if you want a recommendation, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you. That's really kind offer." Josh nodded politely. "And thanks for raising such a great daughter. I don't know how you did it, but she's just..." He faltered for a moment, struggling to word his compliment appropriately. "She's the best."

My cheeks burnt red, and my heart began to race, from both joy and stress. Why had I told him that she was my mom? Why didn't I tell him the truth? What if Laura spilled the beans? What if she told him about my real family? I was usually so worrisome that I developed plans for moments like these. I suppose I'd been so busy worrying about the Mexicans that I hadn't even considered this inevitable encounter. Instead, I just stood there blushing like an embarrassed schoolgirl.

After a moment of hesitation, Laura nodded. "She is the best," Laura agreed, glancing down at me with knowing eyes. "And truth be told, she came this way. I didn't do a damned thing."

I sighed in relief, and my blush began to fade. Was Laura angry with me? It was hard to tell. When she wanted to, she could wear a great poker face.

"Well, my shift starts soon. I'd best be on my way," Laura gave a slight wave to Josh and leaned in to hug me. "You two be careful, okay?"

"We will, Mom," I squeaked in reply.

Laura planted a gentle peck on my cheek then whispered in my ear, just loudly enough for me to hear. "If you really like him, you'll have to tell him eventually."



# CHAPTER 21

## *Mud, Sweat, and Tears*

“**Y**our mom seems really cool!” Josh beamed as Laura’s truck disappeared down the muddy road.  
“Yup,” I replied. “She’s real nice.”

Clasping my hands beneath my chin, I flashed him a weak smile. Laura’s words still reverberated in my head. She was right. If Josh didn’t know about my real family and my upbringing, then he would never understand me.

I studied him closely, taking in his charming grin and the mop of jet black hair that dangled lazily above his striking eyes. Without a doubt, I’d have to tell him the truth...but not today.

“I’m sorry if it’s a rude question,” Josh began uneasily. Perhaps it was from his tone or his anxious expression, but I sensed that he had given his upcoming question a great deal of thought. “I was wondering if I’d ever get to meet your dad. Is he - you know - around?”

As soon as the words left his lips, my stomach sunk.

Out of the blue, Josh’s inquiry had placed a fork at center of my proverbial road. Either I could tell him the truth, or I could turn my small lie into a larger lie. An unmanageable lie. I licked my lips, reviewing my options. As I did, a strange thought crept into the back of my mind: what would my father do, if he was in my position?

He’d probably avoid the question. He would construct some wise parable about animals, rambling on for hours in that colorful, entrancing voice of his. Afterward, Josh would have forgotten that he’d ever asked a question. Would I be able to pull off the same tactic? I suppose there was only one way to know...

I opened my mouth to speak, but I was interrupted by a chirping voice before I could even utter a word.

“Hey there!” A girl said as she strode toward us. “Welcome to La Ciudad. I’m Eva, and I’m going to be showing you around today.”

She had long black hair that trailed down to her waist. It shone in the mid-day sun like a fresh layer of paint. Her body was slim and she had an attractive face, with a delicate touch of mascara that complimented her deep brown eyes. She must have been around the same age as me, perhaps a year or two older, but her skin was a few tones darker than mine. She was...Mexican.

I froze. I’d never actually met a Mexican before. Sure, I’d seen a few, but I’d never been so close to one. When Ms. Washington told us that locals would guide us around their neighborhood, I assumed that we’d be greeted by some elderly Mexican with a sombrero who barely spoke English. Instead, Eva stood before us, wearing a cute cap-sleeved shirt with blue jeans and speaking without the faintest hint of an accent.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Josh,” he spoke in a warm tone, shaking Eva’s hand with that suave grace of his. “Thanks for taking the time to do this. We really appreciate it.”

“Absolutely,” Eva nodded, causing her locks to bounce on her narrow shoulders. She turned to face me, and extended her hand. “And you must be Natalie?”

I parted my lips, but no words came forth. Instead, I stared at her hand. A myriad of thoughts were swirling in my mind. What would my father say if I shook her hand? What if she carried some exotic Mexican disease?

My eyes began to focus on her nails. Like mine, hers were painted. They were coated with alternating shades of pink and purple with intricate white detailing. The colors seemed to work quite well in combination, and the fine-point details were fantastically precise. She must have spent hours perfecting the design.

A thin smile graced my lips, and I accepted her handshake. Her hand was cool compared to mine, and she probably noticed the film of nervous sweat on my palms.

“Nat,” I introduced myself in the softest of tones.

“Great!” Eva piped with an exuberant nod, like an excited puppy. “First things first, I’m gonna give you a brief tour around town and answer any questions you might have.” She began walking toward a pathway between the rows of tents, taking confident strides through the reddish mud. “Then we’ll share lunch together! You’ll actually get to see what authentic Mexican food is like,” she added with a wink.

I shot an anxious side glance at Josh, but followed her nevertheless.

As Eva explained, the tent city of 'La Ciudad' was not quite as chaotic as I first believed. Tents were grouped together based on their color, with green residential tents at the rear of the city, furthest from the highway. Orange marketplace tents dominated the town's foreground and red medical tents were scattered throughout the interior, ensuring easy access. The center of the village, of course, held the largest structure: a towering white church tent.

Eva briefly took us inside of the church, and we got to witness the high ceiling and elaborate interior decoration. Statues of Mary marked each corner, with ornate artwork propped up around the stone figures. Wooden benches lined the room's center, leading up to a sturdy altar. Despite the fact that it was a weekday morning, some elderly folks sat on those benches, eyes closed as they thumbed through the strange beaded necklaces in their hands.

I couldn't help but admire the tent's simple, eerie beauty. I stored its image in my memory, creating a mental reminder to draw the unique scene.

After showing us the church, Eva led us back through the parking lot and toward the edge of town. As we walked, we passed through bustling orange marketplaces. People greeted us with smiles and waves, although they'd never met us before. They were selling everything under the sun, from hot food to delicately painted ceramics. There was something beautiful about the way that Mexican artwork used color. Their art was so...alive. So bold. They mixed striking oranges and vibrant blues with spirited tones of green and whatever else, in wild harmony. I couldn't help but smile.

Unfortunately, I didn't have long to gawk at the artwork. Eva rushed us onward, past the marketplace. As we marched, Josh asked her a variety of questions, then scribbled Eva's answers in his notebook. He was taking this project rather seriously, and I felt guilty for not asking many questions of my own. Hell, I hadn't even uttered a word since introducing myself. I was just too wrapped up in the scenery, like an overwhelmed tourist.

After a few minutes, we reached the edge of town. Five muddy soccer fields had been constructed with netless metal goalposts. Deep grooves marked the boundaries. Did they have to re-dig the boundaries after every storm? That seemed like a futile chore...why would anyone go through that kind of effort just to play soccer in the mud?

Children kicked the ball along the field, churning up mud as they ran. On the sidelines, a few parents and many elderly folk sat laughing and chatting, enjoying the beautiful Arkansas sun. I'd played soccer as a kid, but my parents never showed up to

watch my games. After each game ended, most of the other kids were met with parental congratulation. Meanwhile, I just had to look forward to a long walk home. Of course, my parents didn't want to pay for me to play, so I had to quit the sport as I grew older.

All of those Mexican parents and grandparents were probably illegals. I knew that I should have hated them, yet I couldn't...not when they were cheering for their kids.

I clenched my jaw, and a lone tear began to meander down my cheek. I wiped it away before Josh could notice.

"...and the residents here are actually from a variety of places, not just Mexico," Eva explained. I had momentarily tuned her out whilst reminiscing. "A lot of residents work in the fields or construction. The pay isn't great, but most of the parents here work long, long hours, so that their kids can live better lives. Thanks to them, some kids..." she paused as a proud smile flashed across her lips, "are even going to college."

"You?" I guessed, lifting an eyebrow.

"Yeah," she grinned, brushing aside her flowing black hair. "I'm a waitress, but I'm also working my way through community college. My plan is to transfer out and become a psychologist." She lowered her voice to a devious whisper. "That's why I'm doing this whole 'tour-guide' thing. I get a free credit for it."

"Cool," Josh mirrored her grin, amicable as ever.

"Cool," I echoed, with much less enthusiasm.

Eva was a Mexican...or a South American, or whatever. She was probably an illegal. She grew up in a freaking tent city, yet she actually knew what she wanted to do with her life.

Unlike me, she knew what she wanted. She had a future.

# CHAPTER 22

## *The Oath*

“After that, we had dinner with a whole bunch of Mexicans,” I explained. Lying on my belly, I absently wiggled my legs in the air behind me as I spoke.

“How was that?” Emma asked.

From the proximity of her voice, I could tell that she was peering over my shoulder as I sketched the soccer game at La Ciudad, using vibrant colored pencils. Emma had invited herself over to my house - Laura's house - upon my return from the field trip, and we'd spent a couple of hours lounging on my bed, listening to music and chatting.

Emma still hadn't really met Laura, although they'd briefly spoken at the hospital. Laura had left before Emma arrived at my house, and I had a feeling that their inevitable encounter would be curious. In some ways, they were quite similar. They were both strong-willed people with far more flair and confidence than I'd ever have. However, while Laura's willfulness was masked beneath a well-mannered exterior, Emma's was opaque. The average person would probably find my blue-haired friend to be rather abrasive.

Friend. I was already thinking of her as my friend, despite the fact that our recent conversation had been the first in over a year. That conversation, although relatively brief, had been one of the most genuine discussions in my entire life. We'd shared our secrets, but that wasn't the only reason why our conversation had been so meaningful. Emma understood me in a way that most people never would. She knew how I was raised, and she knew what it was like to be on the Brigade's 'shit-list', as she called it.

“It was...interesting,” I replied, biting my lip.

"Sounds like a kick-ass field trip. While you were prancing around, I was sitting in fucking math."

"It was better than math," I agreed. "They treated us like family. They were all real nice, and happy, and...I dunno, it wasn't what I expected."

"It's almost like people who aren't white are capable of basic human decency." Emma stated dryly. "Shocking, huh?" For whatever reason, she had a fairly irate expression.

I nodded. "I guess so. The food was real good, too. Dad always said that food is the best thing that the Mexic-"

"Stop it!" Emma cut me off. "Fucking stop it. Have you ever listened to yourself talk?!"

"Huh?" I squeaked. Halting my sketch, I looked back over my shoulder at Emma with alarm. I knew to expect abruptness from her, but it still caught me off-guard.

She pursed her lips, then mimed the act of sliding glasses up her nose. "I'm Nat," she mimicked, in a faint, breathy voice. "My Daddy tells me that the blacks are evil. My Daddy's amazing. He's a hateful, old, overweight, balding fuck who can barely read, but he's just so smart. Daddy also says that I don't ever need to think for myself, I can just-"

"I get it," I interrupted, my lower lip trembling. "I get it," I repeated. Tears began to form on the corners of my eyes, and I blinked to clear them, drawing in a shaky breath. "You think I'm some sort of idiot, don't you?"

Emma opened her mouth, but didn't speak. It was the first time I'd ever seen her struggle for words.

"That's what I thought," I muttered. Repositioning to face Emma, I hugged my knees to my chest, tears sliding down my cheeks. "Thing is, I ain't even sure if you're wrong. Everyone's always thought I was stupid. Dad always got on my case about it. I mean, I'm alright with school, but..." I trailed off.

"Nat," Emma sighed, closing her eyes. "That's not what I meant. I think you're smart." The edge to her voice was gone, replaced by reassuring softness, like an older sister comforting her sibling. "Your brain is just filled with a bunch of garbage - a whole load of useless shit for you to sift through." She drew a sharp breath and winced. "And you have terrible judgement. Really terrible judgement."

"So you do think I'm an idiot."

Emma held my bleary-eyed gaze and laid a hand on my shoulder.

"In some ways, I guess," she admitted. "I think 'naive' would be more accurate. You're not hopeless, though. If you forgot everything your Dad ever taught you, you'd

be on the right track. Even if you just admit that your Dad isn't some sort of demi-god, you'd be better off. That man shouldn't have any power over you, anymore. His words should mean nothing to you."

"I'm sorry," I whispered. Sniffing, I scooted forward and embraced Emma in a hug. I think it took her off-guard. She let out an almost inaudible gasp, but quickly recovered and wrapped her arms around me.

"Don't apologize to me," she scoffed. "This is about you. Your mind is all fucked up, and only you can fix it."

"You really believe all that about my Dad? You think he's evil?"

"Of course," Emma replied. "I don't think he's the devil or anything, but he's making the world a worse place. As far as I see it, there's two kinds of people in the world: people who make it better, and people who make it worse. The people who make it worse tend to live shitty, unfilling lives, and then they die. You don't wanna be one of them."

I nestled beneath her chin, chewing over her words in silence for a few minutes before I finally spoke. "How'd you get so smart?"

"I'm not any smarter than you, Specs," Emma snorted. "I've just been out of the Brigade for longer than you. I've had time to think shit through, from a distance."

I allowed another silence to settle over us, before breaking it. "You're right."

"About what?"

"My Dad," I murmured. "He's no hero. I just...I...it's hard. It's like he's always there, all the time, in the back of my mind. When I close my eyes, I can almost hear his voice."

"Wow," Emma shook her head. She exited our hug and used the sleeve of her grey pullover to dab away my last remaining tears. "You're even more fucked up than I thought."

"I'll try," I nodded, disregarding her sharp words. I knew she didn't mean to offend. "I'll try to put it all behind me. No more Nathan Pike. I'll be...Natalie Harper."

"Harper?" Emma lifted an eyebrow.

"It's Laura's last name," I said, unable to contain my smile. "Dr. Harper. Remember?"

"That's right," Emma smiled faintly, and her eyes wandered to my completed portrait drawing of Laura, which still sat on my desk. "In the hospital, I was real nervous and she kept trying to calm me down. Once she told me you had GB," her smile widened, "I just started laughing."

"Laughing? Why?" I frowned.

"Because I knew they wouldn't keep a GB girl in the Brigade. It meant you'd finally be free." She brushed a blue lock over her ear, displaying a myriad of piercings. "Plus, I knew

that we had some shared experiences, and that you were always a somewhat decent person. If you haven't noticed, I'm not great at making friends. Around here, a lot of other girls are just too..."

"Polite?" I offered, smiling despite my puffy eyes.

Emma laughed. "I wouldn't have used that particular word, but sure. We'll go with 'polite'."

"Well, I'm glad I'm not too 'polite' for you. You're my only girlfriend, too...but sometimes I feel like you're my older sister. You're just so damned wise."

"Damned?" Emma wore a look of gleeful surprise. "I think that's the first time I've ever heard you swear. Guess I'm rubbing off on you."

I blushed but didn't reply, allowing Emma's eyes to drift back to Laura's portrait.

"You gonna give that to her?" Emma asked.

"I've been thinking about it. Do you think she'll like it?"

Emma chuckled, then sent me an annoyed glance. "You know how good you are, stop being such a wimp. For fuck's sake, I hope Natalie Harper has more balls than Nathan Pike."



# CHAPTER 23

## *Harper's Ferry*

**M**y first full day as Natalie Harper had an unremarkable beginning. As had become routine, Laura dropped me off at school and I doodled through my classes. The doodles were all variations of Emma. From simple portraits to expressionist renditions, I'd filled at least a dozen pages with depictions of her. Why wouldn't I? She was both the most intriguing person I'd ever known, and she was...well...she was my friend.

After school, Laura whisked me off to the optometrist. I needed a new pair of glasses - according to her - because my previous ones hadn't been prescription and therefore weren't ideal. It was a boring process. I struggled to read distant letters for half an hour and waited around for another half-hour while they fit the lenses, until I finally walked out of there with a fresh pair of glasses. Laura brought me back home, and I scampered to the nearest mirror. They'd had mirrors at the optometrist, but only tiny ones. I wanted to see how my whole face looked, with the new glasses.

"Not bad," Laura grinned. She stopped behind my shoulder, and we both stared into the wide living room mirror. "It's a good look."

Laura was right, as per usual. My old narrow leopard-print frames made me look like a little girl who was playing dress-up. These new ones were larger, more rounded, and black. The optometrist had mentioned that these were 'in style', but I didn't really care about fashion trends. I was more concerned about whether they would make me look older. As a girl with a youthful face and a rather scrawny build, I needed to appear more mature if I ever wanted anyone to take me seriously.

My new glasses did the trick. With my previous pair, I would have pegged myself at around fourteen years old. I wasn't exactly sure how, but these new ones made me look like I was at least sixteen. Staring into that mirror, I couldn't help but grin.

"Thanks, Laura," I chirped. "This was real nice of you."

"Don't be ridiculous," Laura said in reply. "This wasn't a gift, it was a necessity. Those old glasses were only a partial fix. If you had tripped over something and gotten yourself hurt, I'd never forgive myself."

It was true. These new glasses made a world of difference. The switch from non-prescription to prescription lenses was like the difference between Standard and High-Definition. The objects, faces, and scenery around me were all sharpened, and I could detect subtleties in color that I'd previously missed. How would this impact my drawings? Would my new glasses make me a better artist? I'd definitely have to take another look at my portrait of Laura, before I gave it to her.

Laura reached down a hand and brushed a lock of my blonde hair away from my lenses, still eyeing me through the mirror.

I paused for a second, and recalled the fact that I needed to have a chat with Laura. After all, how could I call myself 'Natalie Harper' and put my past behind me if I never talked it through with Laura Harper herself? During my discussion with Emma, I'd made my decision, and I intended to stick with it.

"Laura," I said, nervousness seeping into my voice. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything. You know that."

I nodded. My heart raced against my chest. "I was wondering if...if..."

I was on the verge of hyperventilation. Calm down. Calm down. I had to calm down. Closing my eyes, I drew a deep breath and counted to ten. As I did, Laura rested a hand on my shoulder and gave me a gentle squeeze. She probably had no idea why I was so nervous, but comforted me anyway. She was too good for me.

"Can I be your daughter?" I managed to ask. My body was shaking, so I clutched my arms across my stomach and drew another long breath. "Can I...can I be Natalie...Harper?"

"Oh, honey," Laura cooed. She hugged me across my shoulders and rested her chin atop my head, as we eyed each other through the mirror. Tears streamed down my cheeks like rain. What the hell was wrong with me? Why couldn't I keep it together for just one single day?

"Absolutely," she eventually said with a wavering tone. My shoulders lowered with relief. I hadn't noticed, but they'd been high and tensed for the last few minutes. "I

don't know much about the adult adoption process - because you are technically an adult - but I think that we can figu-"

"I don't care about that," I cut her off, murmuring. "I don't care if it's official. I just...I just want you to be my Mom...and I want you to tell me what to do."

"Come here," Laura drew me closer to her. Then, she steered me onto the brown leather couch and took a seat beside me. "What are you talking about, sweetie?"

I shrugged, blinking away more tears as I struggled to compose myself. "I used to have it all figured out, you know? I was gonna be in the Brigade. I was gonna go around to rallies and stuff, and do work for my Dad...that was gonna be my life." Shutting my eyes, I curled up and rested my head in Laura's lap. "What am I gonna do?"

"Hmm," Laura said. She stroked my hair with her hand and brushed away a few of my tears with her sleeve. "So you're feeling rudderless? A little lost?"

Looking up at her, I nodded. I didn't quite trust myself to speak without breaking down into more sobs. At least I knew that Laura wouldn't judge me, if I had.

"Okay," she sat back, staring out the living room's vast window. "I think I see what's going on here." My ears perked up. "It seems to me that you built your whole identity upon this idea that you were going to live and die in your Dad's 'Brigade', because that's what people always told you to do. With that gone, you think your whole future is ruined."

"Mhm," I squeaked.

She nodded in understanding. "And you want me to become your Dad's replacement. You want me to give you orders. You want me to tell you exactly what you should do with your life."

I frowned, chewing over her words.

"That's the problem, hun," Laura smiled down at me, petting my hair. "You've got it all backwards. Nobody should be ordering you around like that. I'm not gonna tell you to become a doctor, or a clothing designer, or whatever else. Natalie, I'll be your mother. I'd love to be your mother. Your future, though, is for you to decide."

I bit my lip. That notion had honestly never occurred to me. My future? It seemed like such a massive decision...why would I ever trust myself to make a decision like that? Perhaps Laura was right, though. What had Emma told me, the other day? That Dad had 'broken' me? Was this what she meant?

I nodded to myself. I was broken. For the last eighteen years of my life, I'd had no power of my life's direction. Because of Dad, I didn't trust myself to make decisions.

"What are my options?" I eventually asked.

“Sweetie, you’re eighteen years old. If you want me to list out everything you can do with your life, we’ll be here for days.”

A weak smile flashed across my lips.

“I’ll give you some resources to look through. I think there are a few career paths that you might find interesting.” She hesitated for a moment. “I know how it feels to be young and lost. You aren’t alone, and you aren’t as lost as you think. At your age, everyone’s clueless. You’re all still searching for your purpose.”

I sniffed and adjusted my glasses. “Thanks, Mom.”

I couldn’t keep the smile from my lips. She just made me feel so confident and secure. In only minutes, she’d made all of my worries evaporate.

“Any time, Natalie Harper,” she winked down at me.

\* \* \*

When I returned to my bedroom, I was still bouncing with joy. I shut the door behind me and did a silly little dance, before plopping spread-eagle onto my bed and giggling at the ceiling. I had a mom! A mom who actually loved me! My giggles gave way to tears. Happy tears. They trickled sideways and fell into my sprawling hair, a new drop toppling with every rise of my chest.

A familiar buzzing noise captured my attention, and I spun to grab my phone.

It was a text from Josh!

*Hey! Are you busy tomorrow night?*

*Nope, I immediately replied. What’s up?*

*My parents have a really nice pool and they’re out of town. Want to hang out?*

*Like a pool party? I wrote back.*

*A two-person pool party. Yeah. Are you down?*

A date. At his house. My heartbeat quickened and my mind raced. Did I want this? What would be expected of me, if I agreed to come to his house under such circumstances? Would he expect us to have sex? I shuddered at the thought. I was just getting used to this body, and I had no plans for a guy to...to take me like that. Josh wouldn’t pressure me into anything like that, though. He was such a gentleman.

Sure. I sent the single-word reply before I had a chance to second-guess myself. That afternoon run with Josh had been one of the highlights of my life. If I had a chance to relive that awesome experience, I’d take it any day.

*Great! I can't wait to see you. Let's meet in the parking lot after school. Don't forget to bring your bathing suit!*

I tossed my phone to the side and kicked my legs in the air. Between Mom's pep talk and an exclusive invite to Josh's two-person pool party, I had more energy than I could handle. I couldn't just lie on my bed and relax. Instead, I bounced to my feet and dashed to my desk. Tearing a sheet of paper from my sketchbook, I began to draw.

Initially, I didn't know what I was drawing. As I added more graphite to the paper, however, the subject of the sketch became clear.

It was me. Well, that wasn't entirely true. I was a girl, and the drawing depicted a woman. She sat regally on her bed, wearing a flowing, low-cut dress. Her hair was styled into an ornate bun, and her hands were clasped on her left thigh. Her face had the same general shape as mine, along with the same sprinkling of freckles and black-framed glasses, but she wasn't 'cute' like I was. She was beautiful. Sophisticated. She gazed out of the drawing with intensity. Hers was the sort of stare that sowed the seeds of inspiration, that signalled an underlying confidence and strength. She wasn't me. Not yet.

# CHAPTER 24

## *Blindsided*

I stepped out of Josh's black sedan and my jaw hung open. His house wasn't a house. It was a mansion.

Okay, 'mansion' might have been a bit of an exaggeration, but it was a beautiful house. It had to be one of the most expensive in all of Dexter, nestled in the winding hills just outside the city. The house was chateau-style with a sleek white paint-job and impeccable landscaping. It was three stories tall, and I wouldn't have been surprised if they had a wine cellar underneath. Everything about it was just so purposeful and structured. The mailbox was ornate, designed in the same chateau aesthetic as the house, and sported the word 'Silver' embossed on its side. Even the tiny rounded rocks that lined the pathway to the house were remarkable. They were arranged in a uniform row, placed with almost machine-like precision.

"Josh?" I asked, following him as he led me through the house and toward the backyard. "What did you say your parents do, again?"

"Oh, I don't remember if I ever told you," he said. "My mom has a shoe company and my dad is a lawyer."

"A shoe company?" I asked, intrigued.

"Yeah," Josh scratched his head. "She used to hate wearing heels, so she designed comfier heels. I really don't know too much about it, beyond that."

"That's...interesting," I tilted my head. "I've never worn heels."

"Me neither," Josh chuckled.

I smiled, rolling my eyes. I could listen to his laugh forever. It was so warm and genuine. "What kind of law does your dad do?"

“Boring corporate stuff,” he shrugged. “He wants me to go into either law or medicine, and I’m definitely not following in his footsteps. If I had to spend half of my adult life reading through contracts for munitions companies, I’d be miserable.”

“At least you know what you want to do,” I replied, following at his heels.

“No, I don’t,” he frowned. “I’ve never been a doctor before. What if I go through years of med school and then decide that I hate it?”

“I dunno,” I whispered. “You really should talk to my mom. Maybe you could tag along with her at her clinic, and see what it’s like?”

“Huh,” Josh paused at two glass double-doors, which led into the backyard. “That’s not a bad idea.”

I smiled, proud of myself, and followed him through the doors.

His backyard was just as elegant as the front, with a vast lawn and a deep blue swimming pool that was almost olympic in size. There were about a dozen stone statues placed strategically throughout the yard, along with a beautiful garden of blooming flowers. When we reached the side of the pool, the delicate scent of those flowers had already begun to waft to my nose and I took a few happy sniffs.

“You know,” Josh said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in a dress before.”

As he spoke, he plopped onto a lawn chair, tossed his shirt aside, and began applying a tube of sunscreen.

“Before today, I’d never worn one in public,” I admitted.

After carefully placing my purse and backpack onto the lawn chair beside Josh’s, I ran my hands along the surface of my blue sundress. Mom had insisted that sundresses were great for hot days, and she was right. Although I felt a bit more exposed throughout the school day, the thin fabric helped with air flow. Mostly, however, I wore the dress because it fit perfectly over my bathing suit and came off easily.

“Cool,” Josh nodded, pausing from his suncreening to glance over at me. “Well, it looks great on you.”

“Thanks,” I flashed a smile, and willed my cheeks not to turn red.

He was shirtless. He was one hundred percent shirtless, and I couldn’t stop staring. With a satisfied hum, I bit my lip. The way his arm muscles tensed when he squeezed the sunscreen bottle, the way his abs...

“Natalie?” he asked, lifting an eyebrow. “Did you hear me? Are you okay?”

“Oh,” I jumped, feigning a cough. “I’m great! What’s up?”

“Can you get my back?” he asked, offering me the stick of sunscreen.

"Sure," I chirped, noting that my cheeks had indeed turned red. He hadn't noticed...had he? I hoped he hadn't. Gah, why did I have to embarrass myself so frequently?

Scolding myself, I slid onto his chair and lathered my hands in sunscreen. I hesitated for a moment, then began spreading the sunscreen. This was completely normal. There was no reason to be nervous. I was just putting sunscreen on an attractive friend's back, so he wouldn't get burnt. My hands trembled.

"Are you sure you're alright?" he asked.

"Yup," I replied abruptly, then clenched my teeth and finished applying the sunscreen. "All done!"

"Thanks," he flipped around and grinned at me. "Now it's your turn."

"Uh," I hesitated. "Okay."

Gulping, I removed my dress. I moved the garment as gently as possible, and folded it into a nice pile. I turned to face Josh, taking shallow breaths, offered him a hopeful smile. I wore a two-piece bathing suit, a black bikini top with a matching bottom. In hindsight, I should have asked Mom to purchase me a one-piece.

"Woah!" Josh's eyes widened. "What happened to your stomach?"

I glanced down at the large bandage which sat across the left half of my midriff.

"Oh, it's nothing," I shrugged and waved a dismissive hand, doing my best to suppress my mounting anxiety. What if sunlight hit the bandage just right, and he could see through it?

"Have you gotten that looked at?" he asked, approaching me with an outstretched arm.

Instinctively, I backed away and held a defensive hand over the bandage.

"Laura's already seen it," I spoke truthfully, then cursed under my breath. I'd called her Laura, but Josh thought she was my mom. I wasn't good at this. "It's a long-term sort of wound, but it's getting better. Just don't touch it, it's really sensitive."

He gave me a skeptical nod, as if to say 'if you say so', then gently laid me down on the lawn chair and began suncreening my back.

"Is it alright if I give you a bit of a massage while I get your back?" he asked, as his fingers met my skin. "You seem pretty tense."

"Uh," I gulped, resting my head on the lawn chair's pillow. "Okay. I've never had one before, though. Will it...hurt?"

"No," he laughed lightly, speaking in an assuring tone. "It won't hurt. Trust me, you've got too much stress. You need this."

"Okay," I murmured once more. "I guess."



I let out an unintentional and content sigh when his fingers pressed into my shoulders, easing the tension that I'd built up over the last few hectic weeks. It was marvellous. His digits moved with precision and practice, hitting all of the right nerves. With every motion, another one of my worries floated away. After a few minutes, I surrendered my senses and self-control and began to release happy little moans.

My imagination began to run wild. In my mind's eye, I pictured Josh and I running through a meadow, hand in hand. We were both laughing, and every color seemed to be exaggerated...fuller. The flowers were just beginning to bloom a rich shade of pink, and sprawled out as far as my eyes could see. I was wearing an emerald green dress and he was shirtless, displaying those same hard muscles. "Josh," I whispered to him, butterflies dancing in my stomach. "Josh..." He spun me around like a ballerina, then lifted me from the ground with ease, holding me in his hands as he lowered his lips to mine...

"Natalie?" Josh's voice roused me from my daydream, and I blinked my eyes open.

I was still lying on the lawn chair. My lips were puckered against a pool towel, and my cheeks burnt red once again.

"Yeah." Frazzled, I bounce up and turned to face him. "What's up?"

"Did you fall asleep?" he asked.

"Maybe," I answered with feigned non-chalantness as I swiped the sunscreen bottle from his hand and applied some to my face.

"So you were dreaming of me?"

I froze. "Huh?" I squeaked.

"I heard you say my name," he explained.

"That was...that was about a different Josh."

Stupid. I was stupid. Why would I even say that? Josh already knew that I liked him.

"You're a bad liar."

"I know," I sighed, somewhat relieved that I wouldn't have to commit to that lie.

"Yes. Fine. I dreamed about...you."

"Tell me about it," he grinned, looking rather pleased with himself.

"It was a just dumb dream. If I told you what it was about, you'd laugh at me."

"No, I wouldn't," he shook his head.

I tilted my head and frowned, removing my glasses. If we were going for a swim, they'd only get in the way. "Yes, you would."

"Tell me, then. I won't laugh."

I furrowed my eyebrows and sighed again. "Fine."

Then, I went on to explain the dream in its embarrassing entirety, and kept a close eye on Josh. I considered withholding the detail about almost kissing him, but couldn't bring myself to lie to him once again. He grasped my hand as I spoke and led me into the pool, until we were both standing in the shallow end. Throughout my tale, his grin had widened, but he didn't laugh.

"See?" he shrugged, running a watery hand through his jet-black hair. "Told ya so."

"Thanks for not laughing," I smiled up at him. For whatever reason, telling him about that dream had been fairly liberating. Between that and the massage, I felt remarkably zen. More than zen...I felt confident.

"I keep my promises," he winked down at me. "So, in your dream, I woke you up before we kissed?"

I nodded. "You caught me just in time."

"Well," he began with a gentler tone, and placed one of his hands on my hip, right near the edge of my bandage. "Sorry for being such a buzzkill. How do you think I should pay my penance?" With his other hand, he grasped my chin and angled it up toward him. Instinctively, I stood on my tip-toes, but I was still quite a ways from his face. "One kiss and we'll call it even, alright? I owe you one."

"Sounds fair." The words escaped my mouth before my brain could process them. Josh was pleasantly surprised, and I was just as taken aback. We were actually going to...kiss?

Yes. Yes we were.

Josh leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. I let out a surprised noise that was half-squeak, half-moan and shut my eyes, basking in the firm texture of his lips and the taste of his tongue against mine. It was everything I'd expected it to be, and more. He pulled me closer and hoisted me up, above the water. Instinctively, I wrapped my legs around his torso for support and continued our kiss. With him carrying me, we were finally around the same height, and I didn't have to worry about craning my neck. My stomach fluttered, and I released another happy moan.

When we eventually broke off our kiss, I found myself only inches away from Josh, staring into his eyes.

"Josh," I murmured, heart pounding. My lips almost brushed against his as I spoke. "T-that was...that was my first kiss."

"As a girl?" he asked, cocking his head. He looked so cute when he did that.

"Ever," I replied truthfully.

"Are you serious?"

“Dead serious,” I breathed, still reliving the kiss in my mind. Unconsciously, I brushed a lock of hair over my ear, and was happy to discover that my hair hadn’t gotten wet during the kiss. After our dive in the lake last week, it’d taken hours for my hair to fully dry.

“Did you enjoy it?” he asked with a tinge of anxiety. I guess he hadn’t realized how much this kiss meant for me.

“I did,” I whispered, resting my chin on his shoulder. “I really did.”

Still, there was a voice in the back of my head. It wasn’t a loud voice, but it was there. What would your dad say about that? the voice asked. What would he say if he saw you kissing a guy? Would he call you a GB queer? Then, a second voice joined the fray. Josh only wants you for sex, it said, matter-of-factly. Why else would he invite you to his house? He hasn’t even taken you on a date, yet. He thinks you’re just another piece of meat. He thinks you’re just another hole for his dick. He’s going to use you, just like Colton tried to. He’s going to pin you down and...and... The more I listened to those worries, the more frantically they invaded my mind. I shuddered and closed my eyes, accidentally letting out a faint whimper.

“Is everything alright?” Josh asked.

I raised my head and nodded, then unwound my legs from him and dropped to the pool’s floor.

“I...I need to go to the bathroom.” I didn’t. I just needed to go somewhere private, a place where I could think.

“Through the doors, then down the hallway on the left. It should be the first room on the right.” Josh furrowed his eyebrows with concern. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah,” I flashed him a forced smile, then dashed from the pool and quickly dried myself, wrapping a towel above my breasts. I didn’t even stop to put on my glasses. Instead, I rushed into the house and followed Josh’s directions, taking a sharp left turn down a long, blurry hallway. I needed time to process what had just happened.

I ran inside the bathroom and scampered to the mirror. Drawing a few soothing breaths, I tried to regain focus. I’d kissed a guy! My head swam with warring factions, each producing too many thoughts to parse. Part of me wanted to giggle and dance across the bathroom’s cold tile floor, while another screamed at me in my father’s voice. That fragment of my mind called me a freak. A creature. Meanwhile, another slice of my mind screamed at me. It called me a stupid, naive girl who was about to get physically abused and emotionally destroyed. Those thoughts made me want to crumple to the bathroom floor and cry.

Thankfully, those negative thoughts were far outnumbered by the jubilant ones...until I glanced toward the closed bathroom door.

Hanging from a hook on the door was an unmistakable decoration. Even with my limited, blurry vision, I knew that symbol when I saw it.

It was a Jewish star.

# CHAPTER 25

## *Eyes Wide Open*

**M**y instincts took control. I sprinted out of Josh's house, clad only in my two-piece bathing suit. My bare feet burned when they touched the exposed stone pathway in the front yard, but I was too preoccupied to care. Much like the night of Colton's attack, I ran without a destination. I didn't even stop to check for oncoming traffic when I dashed across the residential street, and found myself staring down at a sheer cliff face.

It was a long drop. Despite my fuzzy vision, I could tell that it was over fifty feet straight down, with jagged rocks awaiting below. The incline then gradually turned into a rolling green hillside. Beyond that, the city of Dexter looked up at me, fully visible on the cloudless spring afternoon.

I drew a shaky breath, and my thoughts began to reclaim their coherence. He was a Jew. Josh was a Jew, and I kissed him. The mere acknowledgement of that fact made my stomach sink. The Jews weren't just bad, they were...they were the embodiment of evil. They existed for the sole purpose of destroying the world. They ran every sinister banking system, they brainwashed everyone with their Hollywood media. According to my dad, they were responsible for every terrorist attack, every murder...everything.

It wasn't just my dad, either. Everyone knew that the Jews weren't to be trusted. I'd seen so many documentaries about them. I'd read the Protocols. I knew what the Jews were. If Josh was one of them...then he almost certainly intended to use me. He brought me here to rape me, then kill me in one of those Jewish blood sacrifices. Of course he didn't actually like me. Why would he? I was damaged goods. I wasn't a girl. I was a GB girl. Dad was right. Those voices in my head were right. I was utterly

I took another step toward the edge. My bare toes hung over the lip, and my whole body began to shudder. If I took an additional step and tumbled down, would I die? I'd seen people survive fifty foot falls in the movies, but movies were movies and the rocks below looked sharp. If I jumped, I'd probably impale myself, then bleed to death. It'd be a quick way to go.

Closing my eyes, I recalled that fateful night. For the last couple of weeks, I'd tried to forget that it ever happened. Any time I began to replay those events in my mind, I redirected myself. Still, I couldn't deny reality. I couldn't change my past.

I was back in my bedroom - my old bedroom - at my real parents' house. Colton smiled at me, with that sinister grin of his. He was gripping my wrists, with far too much power for me to overcome. His hands felt like iron shackles, cold and unmoving. He pressed into me as I whimpered and squirmed.

"Things are changing, Nat," Colton whispered, his lips near my ear. Alcohol was heavy on his breath.

"The natural order. The chain of command." He paused, and his voice fell into a gravelly tone. "You're gonna have to learn your place."

My breathing fell into a staggered rhythm and my toes trembled.

"Colton...please," I whispered. I was frozen in terror, like a sheep. That was part of why I tried to forget about the whole ordeal. I hadn't even fought back. Did that mean it was partially my fault? Did I secretly want it? Was this my true 'place'?

"You're free game, now," Colton chuckled in my ear, tightening his grip. "You know what that means."

My eyes shot open. Rocks stared up at me from fifty feet below. I lifted a foot and hovered it over the edge. One more step. That was all it would take. All of this would be concluded. I'd never have to worry about anyone hurting me again - not Colton, not Josh, not my father. Nobody.

Just one more step.

As my foot hovered in the air, a voice spoke to me, inside my mind. High and light, it was my own voice. Natalie Harper's voice. People love you, she insisted, as firmly as she could. People love you.

It was a simple statement, but it made me freeze in place. She was right. I was right. In the last couple of weeks, I'd received more love than I'd ever known. Laura loved me like a daughter. Emma had become my best friend. My confidant. And how could I forget about Hunter? He put himself at risk to save me from Colton, proving his true allegiance during the darkest of hours. If I stepped off that ledge, all of that would have been for naught. I would have betrayed each and every one of them.

Shaking my head, I pulled back my foot and took a step away from the edge. What the fuck had I been thinking? What would that have solved? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Emma was right. I was hopelessly naive.

“Nat!” Josh’s voice called, from behind me. I didn’t turn to look. Instead, I gazed out at the miniature buildings that made up the sad city of Dexter.

If Josh really did intend to use me or hurt me, wouldn’t he have already done it? After all, we’d spent hours together on our run, alone in the middle of the woods. That seemed like the perfect place to get away with a murder.

What if the Jews weren’t as bad as I thought? Emma did tell me that everything my dad ever said was a lie, and Dad definitely didn’t like the Jews.

“Nat,” Josh said again. This time he sounded closer, only a few feet away. “What are you doing?” There was fear in his voice, a kind of primal fear that I’d never heard from him before.

Slowly, I turned to face Josh. He stood frozen in place, as if he was concerned that I would jump if he got too close. Keeping his distance, he offered an outstretched hand. I met his eyes. Even with my limited vision, I could tell that his icy blue irises were pleading with me, swimming with a mix of terror and desperation.

“Come on, Natalie,” he muttered. “Take my hand. Everything’s gonna be alright.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the long drop, then eyed Josh’s hand.

“Are you going to hurt me?” I asked, struggling to put my thoughts into words.

“No,” he shook his head, eyes wide. “Of course not!”

Staring at his hand, I gulped. For some reason, I wanted to believe him. There was something profoundly truthful about his tone.

Maybe Dad was wrong. Maybe Jews weren’t inherently bad. After all, Dad had been wrong about Mexicans. Eva’s face flashed through my mind, along with the friendly, laughing faces of all the people in La Ciudad. I hadn’t met many of them, but they seemed like lovely people. Why had I been afraid of them? They’d never tried to hurt me...not like Dad...not like Colton. My eyes remained fixed at Josh’s outstretched palm.

To take his hand, I’d have to surrender all of my beliefs. It would be the ultimate betrayal of everything I’d ever been taught. From birth, I’d been raised to know that the Jews were the root of all evil. I’d been told that they killed babies and plotted to destroy everything I held dear.

“You’re scaring me, Nat,” Josh’s voice wavered. “Come here,” he beckoned. “I won’t...I won’t hurt you.”

I studied his face. His fear and dread were genuine. He was legitimately worried about me, even though he was Jewish.

Nodding, I reached out and grasped his hand.

\* \* \*

“What were you thinking?” Josh asked. He massaged his temples, as if he had a headache.

I sat next to him on his black leather couch. I’d wrapped myself tightly in a pool towel, and sat with perfect posture, staring at his unkindled fireplace. Josh had been a gentleman, as per usual. He helped me back to the house, then attended to all of my needs. He even scrubbed the mud and dirt from my feet. How could I have possibly believed that he’d hurt me? That he’d treat me like Dad and Colton? I knew that the whole ordeal should have left me feeling guilty, shameful, or terrified, but I didn’t. Instead, I felt...thoughtful. Pensive. Sitting there with Josh, I began to re-think every moment in my life, interpreting all of it with a new lens.

“I was confused,” I replied softly. “Naive, too. I didn’t see the whole picture.”

“You were confused, so you almost jumped off a cliff?!”

“Yeah,” I nodded and met his eyes. Why had I ever believed that this guy had evil intentions? He wasn’t anything like Colton. “I guess so.”

“How are you so calm about it?! You could’ve killed yourself!”

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry, I’m in a really...weird mood.”

Josh picked up his phone, shaking his head. “No shit. You’re scaring me, Nat. I don’t know what’s going on with you, but I’m gonna call your mom to come pick you up. What’s her number?”

“She’s not my mom,” I replied evenly.

“What?”

“She’s not my mom,” I repeated.

“Then who is she?” Josh asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“She’s Doctor Laura Harper. She’s been letting me stay with her, ever since...” my voice trailed into silence.

“Ever since GB?” Josh attempted to finish my sentence for me. He wasn’t correct, but he wasn’t entirely incorrect.

I couldn’t tell him about the real reason I left. In the back of my mind, I still worried that he’d judge me for what happened with Colton. I knew that the notion was irrational, but it persisted regardless.



"My old life was...different," I said. Was I really going to show him who I'd been? I shut my eyes and drew a calming breath. I had to show him. If I didn't, I'd feel like a liar.

Gently, I unwrapped myself from the pool towel and shed it to the side. My fingers trembled when I reached down and removed the bandage, then turned to show Josh my tattoo. It was just as stark and recognizable as usual, black ink on my pale skin, arranged into a swastika along the lower left section of my stomach.

"What the fuck?!" Josh gaped. "Tell me that's not real. It's a temporary one...you're just...you're just messing with me."

"It's real," I whispered in reply.

"Why?! Just...just...why?!"

"My parents are Nazis."

Josh blinked. "It's the 21st century!"

"That doesn't stop them from being Nazis," I shrugged. "For my whole life, I was a Nazi, too. I believed everything they told me."

"But you're not a Nazi anymore, right?" Josh asked, hints of desperation in his voice. "Right?!"

"Right," I said with a faint smile. "Not anymore."

Nat Pike was dead. He died ten minutes prior, when I chose to knowingly take a Jew's hand.

"Good," he sighed in relief, and seemed to visibly relax. Silence passed between us. All the while, his eyes were trained on my tattoo. "That thing," he shook his head. "That's going to take some getting used to. Holy shit."

I didn't respond, and the two of us sat in silence for a few minutes, before Josh eventually spoke.

"Why'd you get it?"

"They made me," I stated, then hesitated. That wasn't the entire truth. "I didn't exactly say 'No'," I added. "I was...I was brainwashed, I guess."

"Why'd you leave?" he asked. "What changed your mind? That seems like a pretty big decision."

"It was," I frowned, shivering at the memory of Colton holding me down. That wasn't the real factor that turned me away from the Brigade, though. Even after that, I'd clung onto pieces of their ideology.

Once more, I hesitated in pensive silence, collecting my thoughts.

"When I actually met the people who I was supposed to hate, I started to question things." I smiled weakly at Josh. "Turns out, some of those folks aren't so bad. Plus, the

Brigade doesn't like GB girls too much, so I had to...to step outside my comfort zone, just a bit."

"Who's the 'Brigade'?"

I sniffed. "My old family, pretty much. Just a bunch of assholes."

Josh laughed, shaking his head. "'The Brigade'," he repeated, testing the word on his tongue. "It sounds like a crappy boy-band."

I tried to contain my laughter, but I couldn't. I knew that I should've been more morose, given the heavy events of the day, but there was something about Josh that just put me at ease. As I laughed, I found myself scooting toward him on the couch, until we were almost touching.

"So," I said softly, looking up at him. "You're Jewish, right?"

He studied me carefully, then cocked his head. "Is that news to you?"

I nodded.

"My name is Joshua Silver, for fuck's sake! How'd you not realize I was Jewish?!" He paused, his expression darkening slightly. "Is that what this is all about? Is that why you-"

"No," I cut him off, sliding my glasses back up my nose. Josh had been nice enough to fetch them for me, so I wouldn't be blind as a bat. "Like I said earlier, I was confused and naive. I'm not confused anymore."

Josh sighed in relief, and any trace of moroseness disappeared. In truth, discovering that he was Jewish had been a catalyst for my actions, but I didn't want him to feel guilty. He'd done nothing wrong. My issues were internal. Only I could solve them.

"So you're still naive?" He asked with the beginnings of a grin.

"Very," I nodded, mirroring his smile. With a deep sigh, I tucked my legs beneath me and leaned into Josh's shoulder. "I'm sorry for scaring you," I whispered up at him.

"Don't do it again," he whispered back, reaching around to grasp my shoulder and draw me closer. "Please."

"I won't," I promised. I fully intended to keep my word.

"Let's take it easy, okay?" Josh asked, running a hand through my hair. I shut my eyes and let out a happy sigh. I could trust him. He'd been nothing but kind to me. He wasn't like Colton. "I'll order pizza," he continued, "and we can just hang out and watch some TV. How does that sound?"

"I'd love that," I whispered. Smiling lazily, I nuzzled further into his shoulder.

It felt strangely calming to snuggle up against Josh, especially given that I'd almost jumped off a cliff to escape him...well, that wasn't entirely true. When I stood at the lip of that deadly drop, I was actually trying to escape my own demons. I'd been trying to

escape the memories of my terror at Colton's hands. I'd also been trying to silence the nagging dissonance that Dad's teachings brewed in my head and my soul, the clear disconnect between my old beliefs system and the real world. Why hadn't I realized all of this, years ago?

My dad was a liar. For the first time in my life, everything began to make sense. The pieces all started to fall into place. It hadn't been an easy truth to swallow, but it was eye-opening.

My whole life had been a lie.

# CHAPTER 26

## *Mission Impossible*

I foraged through my black purse, cursing under my breath. Laura's porch lights were off and only a faint sliver of the moon was visible, so I had to search for my keys like a mole, sifting through the clutter with my hand. Over the past couple of weeks, I'd managed to fill my small purse with a whole lot of junk: a pack of gum, my phone, my wallet, a miniature mirror, an assortment of pencils, a few 'feminine hygiene' products, and - usually - my keys.

After another full search of my bag, I let out of a groan. I must have left my keys at Josh's house. Either that, or I'd forgotten to put them in my purse before I left. My stomach began to sink. Laura had already texted me a few hours ago, telling me that she was heading to sleep and asking me to get home as soon as possible. Did I want to wake her? She wouldn't be happy. She had an early shift in the morning, and her sleep was precious.

I bit my lip and pulled out my phone, contemplating whether or not to call Josh. He'd only dropped me off a few minutes ago, but did I really want to bother him? It was already well past midnight, and we'd had such a great time, chatting while we cuddled and watched reruns of his favorite show. Did I want to spoil all of that by forcing him to run a late-night errand?

No. I didn't. I paused for a moment, then glanced around mischievously. Scampering to the side of the house, I looked up at my bedroom window. If I remembered correctly, my window was unlocked. However, because of the house's slope, the windowsill was six feet off the ground, well above the top of my head. Would I even be able to reach it? There was only one way to know. Breaking and entering...I felt like I was a character in a Mission Impossible movie.

I drew an excited breath, and instinctively straightened my sundress. Then, I stood on my tiptoes and reached up my arms in an attempt to remove the mesh window-screen. I managed to unlatch the screen's bottom hook, but couldn't possibly reach the uppermost. It was probably eight or nine feet off the ground. Unless I managed to triple my athleticism in an instant, there was no way I was going to get through the window.

I sighed in frustration. Maybe Laura had left some of the other windows unlocked.

"Freeze," a gruff voice demanded.

As soon as I heard it, I entered sheep mode. My whole body tensed up and began to shake. The man's voice was accompanied by the growl of a vicious dog, only a few feet away from me. My eyes, still aimed up at my bedroom window, went wide with fear. "Hands behind your head," the voice ordered, then clicked on a flashlight. The flashlight shone from directly behind me, silhouetting my nervous, petite figure against the white wall of Laura's house.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. They found me.

I didn't move.

"I said, hands behind your head," the same voice repeated, much more slowly and forcefully.

I gulped, then complied. My hands trembled as I locked them behind my head.

"Now turn 'round, real slow."

Fighting the urge to whimper, I held my head up and shuffled to face the man and his angry dog. With the flashlight now pointing at my face, I had to stare at the ground, unable to study the man's features. Judging by his voice, he was an older man and a smoker, and I didn't immediately recognize his timbre.

Was he alone? Aside from his dog, he certainly appeared to be alone. The tension in my shoulders ebbed. If the Brigade was truly coming for me, they wouldn't have sent one man and a dog. They would have sent a whole car-load of 'Brigaders' - as Laura called them. Plus, his accent had that unmistakable Texas twang to it. As far as I knew, there weren't any Texans in the Brigade.

"Oh, it's you," the man grunted, then pointed the flashlight away from my eyes. "Blondie."

"W-what?" I squeaked, blinking.

"You've been living with the Doc?"

I nodded uneasily.

My eyes adjusted, and the man's face became visible. He was about a head taller than me - not an incredible feat - and he wore a grizzled beard below his camouflage

baseball cap. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say that the man was in his mid-sixties. He was built like a wrestler a few decades past his prime, with broad shoulders and a barrel chest that probably used to be quite impressive, but had traded muscle for fat over the years. In his hands, he held the flashlight and a handgun, both trained at the ground. I shivered at the sight of the weapon, and gulped once more.

"I've seen you coming and going," he admitted. His tone was far more relaxed than before. "I thought it might be you when I spotted someone scouting 'round the house, but I ain't taking any chances." His eyes darted around, and he nodded to himself. "Not these days."

"What do you want from me?" I managed to ask, my confidence gradually returning.

"What do I want from you?" he repeated my question, then laughed, as if I'd just told a grand joke. He holstered his weapon and scratched at his beard. "I just wanted to make sure that you weren't a burglar - or worse. You shouldn't be prowling 'round at this hour."

I breathed an almost inaudible sigh of relief. He wasn't here to kill me. He was probably just some overambitious neighborhood watchman. Now that I could see clearly, his yellow labrador retriever also seemed far less intimidating, studying me with a cocked head and a wagging tail.

"Forgot my keys, sir," I said as nonchalantly as I could, reminding myself to hold my chin high.

"Then you're in luck," the man wore a faint smile, causing wrinkle lines to spread from the corners of his eyes. "I called the Doc as soon as I spotted you. Figured she didn't want someone climbing through her window."

I frowned and crossed my arms, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. Great. All of my effort was for naught. Laura's sleep was already disturbed.

I was silent and deflated when the man put a hand on my shoulder and guided me to the front porch, as if he was returning a lost little girl. Laura's bedroom was already illuminated, along with the main hall and the porch itself. Laura was definitely awake.

The man planted three heavy knocks on the door. He then turned and studied my face, taking in my defeated expression. I stared down at the porch, but still caught a glint of sympathy in the man's eyes.

"My advice? Use a ladder, next time," the man said with a chuckle. "Either that, or grow a foot taller. You looked like a toddler at a jungle gym."

I pursed my lips. Was this his attempt at humor?

"People call me Barnes," he eventually said, as we waited for Laura to answer the door. His smile had faded. "You got a name?"

"Natalie," I murmured, just loud enough for him to hear. Recently, I'd felt a stronger connection to my full name, rather than just 'Nat'. I wasn't quite sure why.

"And what's your business with the Doc?"

"Daughter," I replied.

"Daughter?" He asked with a hint of suspicion. "I've known the Doc for years, but she's never mentioned you."

I hesitated, momentarily raising my eyes to meet his. "It's complicated."

He continued to study me, seemingly intrigued. "Not a big talker, are you?"

"I dunno, sir."

"You don't know. How about that." He chuckled once more. Although I'd only known him for a matter of minutes, I already found his sense of humor to be...odd.

"You're an Arkansas girl?"

"Yes, sir," I bobbed my head.

"Barnes. Not 'sir'. I ain't a sergeant anymore."

"Okay," I whispered.

The dog sniffed at the hem of my dress, as if he found my smell to be curious. He didn't seem to be quite as fearsome, now that I could see his perked ears and fluffy fur in the porchlight.

"She likes you," Barnes smiled, gesturing down at the yellow lab. "You can pet her, if you want. Her name's Bella."

Hesitantly accepting his offer, I knelt down to before Bella, careful to manage my dress as I did. She immediately stepped toward me and planted a series of joyful licks on my cheek, her tail wagging so quickly that it became a blur.

I let out an embarrassing squeal followed by a laugh, and struggled to maintain my balance. Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around her neck in a hug and used her fur as a pillow, resting my head against her.

"Thanks, Bella," I said, unable to contain my smile. How had I been so afraid of her, mere minutes ago? She was an absolute sweetie, pure and loving.

I was still hugging her when the front door swung open.

"Mr. Barnes," Laura said with a slow, groggy voice. "You said there was an emergency?" Looking up from the dog, my eyes met Laura's and she lifted an eyebrow. "Sweetie?"

“Found this one,” Barnes gestured toward me, then hesitated. Our eyes met, and I could sense that he had a soft spot for me. He didn’t want to get me in trouble. “She was just a bit lost.”

Laura glanced between us. I rose to my feet and nodded innocently, wearing a hopeful smile. ‘Just a bit lost’ sounded a whole lot better than the truth: that I’d inelegantly failed to climb through my own window.

“Thank you so much,” she said to Barnes, clasping her hands beneath her chin. “You’re an absolute dear. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Just doing my duty,” he replied, his eyes already darting around the vacant street, searching for nefarious activities.

Laura and I both bid Barnes and Bella farewell, then she ushered me inside. Once the door clicked shut, her eyes settled upon me and her smile disappeared.

“Natalie Harper,” she rounded on me in a sharp tone, which took me by surprise. I’d never heard that sort of tone from her before. “It’s one in the morning. It’s a school night. What were you thinking?!”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. Why was she being so stern?

“What kind of pool party lasts until one in the morning?”

“S-sorry,” I mumbled, licking my lips and avoiding her gaze.

“You lied to me,” she said, evenly. “It wasn’t actually a pool party, was it?”

I hesitated, then shook my head. “No.”

“Were you with that boy?” she asked. Her eyes were trained at mine, and seemed to peer into my soul.

I nodded.

“If you’d asked me, I would have said ‘okay’. You realize that, right?”

I didn’t reply. Tears were welling in my eyes, and I stared at the hardwood floor, unable to mask my shame.

Mom sighed, then grasped my hands in hers. Only then did I realize that my whole body was trembling.

“You can trust me,” she stated in a firm tone. “I know that this is all new. I know that you haven’t been able to trust people, in the past...but you can tell me the truth. You need to tell me the truth. Remember: I’m on your side, hun. I’m always on your side. Don’t ever forget that.”

“Sorry,” I murmured. Stepping forward, I embraced her in a hug. As had become tradition, she rested her head atop mine and rubbed my back.

“Did you thank Mr. Barnes?” she asked.



I paused, then shook my head. I'd thanked Bella for her happy licks, but I hadn't thanked Barnes.

Mom clicked her tongue in frustration. "You'd better."

"Mhm," I bit my lip. "Who is he? How do you know him?"

"Well," Mom began, "He lives across the street. I've treated him a few times at the clinic, over the years, so I've gotten to know him pretty well. He's a bit paranoid, but he's a nice old man and he goes out of his way to help others. Don't take people like him for granted." She hesitated for a moment. "Come to think of it, you should go over to his house tomorrow. He's got his dog, but I think he still gets pretty lonely."

"I will," I squeaked.

"Good." Mom squeezed me closer to her chest. I could tell that she was smiling, even though I couldn't see her face.

"How was your date?"

I sighed. "Crazy."

She pulled out of the hug to study my face, then lifted an eyebrow. "Crazy? Why? Did you..."

"No," I snapped in reply, eyes wide. I shook my head. "He saw it."

"He saw what?" she asked, curious.

Her eyes followed mine, until they settled upon the lower left side of my stomach.

"I showed him."

"Ah," she muttered.

We hadn't actually discussed my tattoo before. I knew that she'd seen it, back at the hospital, but I got the sense that she was waiting for me to broach the subject. She didn't want to rush me into talking about such a personal topic.

"Was it difficult for you?" Mom asked.

Again, tears brimmed in my eyes. I didn't trust myself to speak, so I simply nodded.

"I did some research," she said, taking me by the hand and leading me toward my bedroom. "Because I wanted to understand all of your options."

"I have...options?"

Mom flashed me a smile. "Just because it's ink doesn't mean it's permanent. You've got two main options: you can get it covered up, or you can get it laser-removed. Covering it up is the easier way. It's quicker and less painful. On the other hand, it still leaves you with a tattoo - sometimes an even larger tattoo. Laser removal takes longer, it's more painful, and it can take a whole bunch of treatments to make the tattoo disappear...but it will disappear."

I hesitated for a moment, recalling that sinking shame in the pit of my stomach when Josh saw my tattoo. I looked up and met her eyes.

“I want it covered up.”

“Are you sure? This doesn’t have to be a rushed decision, i-”

“I’m sure,” I cut her off with a iron resolve in my voice. “I want it covered up.”

“If that’s you’ve decided, I’ll arrange an appointment. You’ll have to pick a design, though, for the new tattoo.”

“Can I make my own?” I asked, looking up at her with a hopeful smile as we entered my room.

She laughed, beautiful and sonorous. “I thought you might ask that.”

Mom took a seat on my bed, and I sat down beside her. There were a few folders arranged on my bedspread. She shuffled through them, until she produced a pamphlet and handed it to me.

The delicately crafted pamphlet was titled Careers in Design. It was a minimalist booklet, using only three colors: white, black, and red. Inside, it detailed countless different careers that one could pursue with a design background, including the day-to-day responsibilities of those careers, hours, pay, etc. My eyes were wide, and I blazed through the pages.

“You have a lot of strengths, sweetie,” Mom said with care. “But you have an artistic gift, and - more importantly - I think it makes you happy. Am I right?”

I nodded dutifully, my nose still deep in the pamphlet.

She cracked a smile. “I saw your drawing of me, by the way. You did a fantastic job.”

“Thanks,” I chirped, mirroring her smile. “It was going to be a present, but I...I guess I was too nervous.”

“Too nervous?” she let out a sad sigh. “Hun, we’ve been over this. Please don’t feel nervous around me. I’ll never judge you. I love you, no matter what.”

My heart swelled and I leaned my head onto her shoulder.

“Love you too, Mom.”

# CHAPTER 27

## *The Thrill of the Hunt*

Sitting beneath the sycamore with Emma had become a tradition, of sorts. It was our spot. One of the safest places on Earth. Under its branches, everything seemed simpler and warmer. The harsh lunch-time glares from Colton and Mason didn't even bother me anymore. In fact, the tree had become so familiar that Emma and I even used it as an after-school meeting spot.

"You're seriously getting it covered up?" Emma asked, staring up at the clear sky, her blue hair splayed out around her.

"Mhm," I chirped in reply, carefully shading with my pencil. At least five pages of my notebook were already filled with a slew of designs that could be used to mask my tattoo.

"Fuck yeah," Emma laughed, studying me with her chestnut eyes. "I knew you'd come around, eventually."

"Why?"

"Why?" she repeated my question, then shrugged, twirling a blade of grass between her fingers. "'Cause you're not a fucking idiot."

"Thanks, I guess?" I replied with a quiet scoff.

"Plus, you're too sweet for those assholes. You tried to hide it, but you never really fit in."

We exchanged a smile and let silence pass over us. The only sound was the smooth whisper of graphite against paper and the chirping afternoon birds. Silence with Emma was never awkward or negative. It was almost beautiful. Whenever she stopped talking, I sensed that she was deep in contemplation, probably mulling over some startling insights about herself, me, or all of humankind.

I wasn't like her. I wasn't capable of such profound thought or answering big fancy questions about the nature of life, but that was okay. That was perfectly fine. Not everyone could be exceptionally bright like her, or a manipulative genius like my father. I still had value. As Emma had put it in our treeside talk at lunch, I had endless opportunities to make the world a better place.

"Hi, ladies," Hunter's low, unmistakable voice caused me to finally look up from my sketch.

"Hunt!" I almost squealed.

Bouncing to my feet, I scampered into an embrace with my old best friend. My head only came up to his lower chest, and my arms barely managed to wrap around his large figure. I'd forgotten how big he was.

"Thank you," I whispered in his ear. "Thank you so much." He saved me. He had displayed more courage than I'd ever know. I couldn't put my appreciation into words, so I simply tightened my hug.

He didn't reply, but I knew that he'd heard my words. Hunt had never been good with compliments or appreciations. It wasn't that he disliked them...he just didn't know what to do with them.

Stepping back and taking a moment to collect myself, I glanced around for any other Brigade guys. None were in sight. They usually didn't hang around after school, instead opting to head to the HQ. Still, Hunter was rather bold to greet us like this. We were in the middle of the school grounds, in plain view. Hunter had generally stayed away from us and only talked to Emma in private. After all, he was still a Brigade member, and fraternizing with us meant near-certain expulsion from the organization.

"Stop hugging," Emma hissed, her eyes darting around rapidly. "For fuck's sake, Hunt. What if someone sees?" She spoke with a tone that I'd rarely heard. It only emerged when her too-cool disguise faded and her anxieties were revealed. From the panic in her eyes, I knew that Hunter held a special place in her heart.

I stepped away from Hunt with a guilty frown. Emma was correct, of course. Why was I so opposed to thinking before I acted?

To my surprise, Hunter only smiled. "Fuck them," he said. There was something beautiful in the slow, purposeful way that the words left his mouth. "I left."

"You...left?" Emma asked, eyes wide as she beckoned Hunter to sit down beside her. "Holy shit, what happened?! Tell me everything!"

Hunter merely shrugged. "I told them that I was leaving. They ain't happy."

"That's it?" she persisted. "That's all you're gonna tell me?"

Hunter shrugged again. "Yeah."

"Jesus fucking christ. Your Dad is in the Brigade. Is he leaving, too?"

Hunter paused, then shook his head.

"Then what's your fucking plan?!" she squawked. "Where are you going to live?"

"Dunno," he replied.

"You don't know," she repeated with a nod, visibly annoyed. Running a stressed hand through her hair, she sent me a side-glance. "How were you two ever friends? Were your conversations all ten words long? I swear to God. Getting either one of you to talk is like pulling teeth."

We both shrugged. Hunt and I had been friends for as long as I could remember. He'd always been a man of few words, yet wielded them with skill. I figured that his choosiness with words was by design, whereas mine was out of shyness.

"I'm getting better," I shot back, holding my chin up high. "You know, at...talking."

"I guess," Emma admitted with a hint of skepticism, before turning back to Hunter. There was so much affection and care in her eyes, when she looked at him. "Let's get this figured out. I'm pretty sure that my parents would be alright with you staying over for a while." She pulled out her phone. "I'll text my mom."

"Thanks," Hunt smiled sheepishly.

After sending her text, Emma paused to smile up at Hunter. Her eyes began to shimmer with tears. Without warning, she wrapped Hunt in a hug and left a gentle kiss on his cheek. She spoke in a trembling whisper: "I know it sounds sappy and stupid, but I'm so damned proud of you."

Their embrace below the sycamore's waving branches was a beautiful sight. I stored a snapshot in my memory, for later drawing. Emma had been working to get Hunter out of the Brigade for over a year, and her efforts had finally come to fruition. Her rare display of sentimentality almost brought tears to my own eyes, but I managed to quell them.

Hunt smiled and exhaled deeply, running a hand against her cheek and wiping away her tears. They held that pose for a moment or two, before Emma collected herself and pulled away, pretending as if she'd never lost composure.

"Great," Emma said with a forced cough and her usual indifferent tone. Nonchalantly, she straightened her hair and brushed a lock over her ear. "So, do you think the Brigade will come after you?"

He shook his head. "They're busy with Nat."

“Huh?” I asked, struggling to process his words. Unlike my mind, my body knew exactly what he meant, and my stomach began to sink. “Busy with me? W-what do you mean?”

“Watching you.” He said matter-of-factly, scratching at his close-cut hair.

My brain spun with too many worries to possibly list. “They know where I live?”

Hunt nodded, then tilted his head, as if he didn’t realize how this could possibly be new information to me.

In truth, I’d almost forgotten about the threat that the Brigade posed. If nothing else, they were masterful at holding grudges. Had I already forgotten what they were willing to do to an innocent shopkeeper who happened to be Middle Eastern? Had I forgotten all of the crimes that I’d witnessed and aided? I’d completely lost sight of the big picture.

Emma shook her head and chuckled. It was a dark chuckle, devoid of humor. “When were you planning on telling her?”

Hunt scratched his head once again. “Just told her.”

“No shit,” Emma rolled her eyes. “So, do you know if they’re planning anything?”

Hunt shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Maybe,” Emma repeated with an annoyed click of her tongue. Then, she scooted next to me and placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. I hadn’t realized, but my whole body was shaking. “Don’t think about it too much. Remember when my family left the Brigade? Y’all followed us around for a month or two and broke a few windows at our shop. Never really did anything to us, though, did you?”

I shook my head.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about,” she said, taking on her ‘older sister’ tone of voice. “They were probably just trying to scare you.” A pretty smile graced her lips and her eyes seemed to twinkle. “Guess their intimidation didn’t even work. You were too oblivious to notice them.”

With Emma’s hand on my shoulder and her comforting words in my mind, my numerous fears scattered to the spring wind. I met her smile with one of my own, then shot a glance at Hunter. I wasn’t in any danger, not when I had so many people who cared about me.

“Can you take me home, Em?” I eventually asked, breaking a long silence. “Mom wants me to keep our neighbor company, after last night.” I’d already told Emma about my embarrassing attempts to break into my own room. There were no secrets between us.

“Aw,” Emma giggled, once again shedding her hard demeanor. “You’re calling her ‘Mom’ now?”

My cheeks burnt red and my eyes caught Hunt’s. He was on the verge of a rare laugh.

“Shut up,” I said with a faint grin, giving Emma’s shoulder a light punch.

Emma feigned a yelp and rubbed her arm. “Look at you,” she giggled. “So vicious. You’re finally growing a pair.”

She was only half-teasing. I wasn’t the same weak-willed kid, who had blindly followed the rules of others. Trying to discern the world with a critical eye was difficult and scary, and it was never easy to admit that the people who I once respected were never deserving of that respect. However, I became more confident in my judgement with each passing day, and my whole world had dramatically widened. Something had clicked. For the first time in eighteen years, despite the threat of the Brigade and my changed body, I was truly happy.

# CHAPTER 28

*Burgundy and Bella*

**D**<sup>ing Dong</sup> The doorbell chimed and I took a step backward. My eyes drifted to one of the three security cameras on Mr. Barnes' porch, and I flashed it an innocent smile.

Thankfully, Barnes was home. His front door swung open, and his large frame blocked most of the entrance. He wore a curious expression, as if he wasn't quite sure why I was visiting. His flannel shirt fit him snugly, and he held a rifle in his hands. It looked like an antique, a weapon that you'd see behind glass in a war museum. The dark wooden stock shone with polish, yet still bore grooved scars of age and use. Black steel sights marked the top, with a barrel of matching color. He gripped the weapon with firm care, directing the barrel toward the ground while his calloused finger rested safely clear of the trigger. I'd never been a big fan of guns, but I grew up around them. I'd seen enough of them to know that the gun in Mr. Barnes' hands possessed a certain sentimental value, and that he could wield it with skill.

Given the recent information provided by Hunter, visiting Mr. Barnes' house seemed like a safer option than heading straight home. I'd even sent Mom a quick text, telling her to stay on the lookout for Brigade folks. She hadn't messaged me back. That was to be expected, as she was still working a fairly long shift, and I immediately regretted sending the text. Perhaps my guilt was irrational, but...what if I was getting her all worried over nothing? She had enough concerns in her life, without my baggage.

"Hi, sir," I said nervously, almost cursing when I remembered that he didn't prefer that moniker. "Mr. Barnes," I corrected myself with a weak smile.

"Harper," he grunted, ushering me inside.



When my tennis shoes touched the hardwood, Bella darted around Mr. Barnes. She was a ball of yellow fur and energy, scampering for traction on the slick floor.

“Bella!”

I knelt down to greet her, and she skidded to a halt, planting a series of licks on my cheek. She was so exuberant that she nearly made my glasses topple to the ground.

“Thanks,” I giggled, wiping my face with the sleeve of my sweater. The burgundy sweater wasn’t necessary in the spring weather, but I liked the color and it matched my cream top...and it doubled as an effective handkerchief.

Bella, ever the performer, then rolled onto her belly and looked up at me expectantly. I tilted my head and gave her belly a few gentle scratches, careful not to ruin my nails. I’d painted them to match my sweater, fully committing myself to the color scheme.

“Did you come to see her?” Barnes asked with the beginnings of a smile on the corners of his lips.

My eyes went wide and I rose to my feet, brushing a few strands of Bella-hair from my jeans as I did. Bella’s cheeriness had completely distracted me from the purpose of my visit.

“Sorry!” I squeaked. “I actually came by to thank you.”

“To thank me?” he scoffed, which gave way to a hacking cough. After the cough passed, he shook his head and stored the rifle beside his fireplace. “What for?” he asked. With lumbering steps, he eased into a seat on his couch and let out an almost inaudible sigh of relief. “For stopping you from breaking your neck, or for lying to your mother?”

“Both,” I shrugged, wincing.

“You’re welcome.” He sipped from his canned beer. “Don’t just stand there,” he ordered, gesturing with a lazy hand.

His eyes were fixed on the television, which was broadcasting some football game. I’d never been a sports fan, unlike many of the Brigade guys.

“So...” I began cautiously, as I settled on the opposite end of the couch, “who’s playing?”

He glanced at me and chuckled through his nose.

“Texas and LSU,” he answered then paused, seeing the blank look on my face. “Louisiana State,” he clarified.

“Oh, neat,” I replied, feigning interest. “Who do you think is gonna win?”

He chuckled once more. “It’s not a matter of think. I know who’s gonna win.”

“Really?” I asked, raising a curious eyebrow. “How do you know?”

“Because the season ended months ago. This is just a recording. Texas wins by a touchdown.”

“Oh.” I felt stupid. It was not a new feeling.

“You don’t know much about football, I figure?”

I shook my head, and we began to watch the game in silence. Bella climbed onto the couch and settled between us, collecting pets with glee.

“How many points is a touchdown?” I eventually asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

He turned to me and narrowed his eyes. “How about we make ourselves a deal. You grab me a beer from the fridge, and I’ll answer any of your damned questions.”

I hesitantly obliged, and padded to the kitchen. My father used to demand that I fetch him beers. Barnes wasn’t like my father, was he? No. He couldn’t be. Although he had that same towering intensity as Dad, he was profoundly different. I saw kindness in Barnes’ eyes, rather than Dad’s piercing disdain. I could trust him.

Upon entering the kitchen, my eyebrows rose. The place wasn’t as pristine as Mom’s kitchen, with spatulas and spoons cluttered over the wooden countertops. Still, it had a certain rustic charm. The white fridge door was dotted with an array of quirky magnets, from stern military insignias to silly animal outlines. Some of the magnets were used to secure photographs to the fridge. The old images showed Barnes and his family: his wife, and two young kids. Judging by the faded edges of the photographs, those children were likely far older than me.

Mom hadn’t told me too much about Barnes, and I’d probably never have the courage to ask him about his past. Thus, I began to construct a backstory for him, all in my mind. He was Sergeant Barnes, war hero. He’d fought in wars, but he wasn’t a killer. He saved lives, protecting those who couldn’t protect themselves. When he returned home from battle, he began working as a bank-teller...no...as a cowboy! A Texan rancher! While he wrangled cattle, he met his wife...what would I call her? Jane. She’d be Jane.

She looked like a Jane, with flowing black hair that reached the small of her back, and the unique kind of smile that reached through photographs to comfort me. Barnes loved her, and she opened up his hard shell to expose the kind man beneath. Was she still alive? My lips trembled, and I sensed that I already knew the answer.

Barnes’ love for her was only eclipsed by the love for his children. The boy’s name would be...Simon, and I’d call the girl Hannah. How old were they, now? At least thirty, perhaps even older.

I rubbed my cheek and sighed. His children probably didn't live nearby. Dexter could have a suffocating effect on people, and most young folk moved away as quickly as they could. Hopefully they still visited, or at least called him from time to time.

With a rather somber mood, I fetched a beer from the fridge and returned to the living room.

"I knew you'd come in handy," Mr. Barnes grinned beneath his beard, accepting the beverage.

I managed a faint smile of my own. Mine, of course, wasn't cloaked by facial hair.

"Six points," he added with a labored breath. "That's how much a touchdown is worth. Seven if you make the extra point. Eight if you go for two, but that's rare."

I only understood half of what he'd said, but nodded anyway.

An hour or so passed and Mr. Barnes had gone through another beer and answered at least thirty questions. I sensed that his annoyance was feigned, and he'd actually come to enjoy my presence. Whenever I asked a question, his eyes seemed to come alight. Also, the game began to make a bit more sense as it reached its closing moments, to the point that I was almost interested in it.

On the screen, the purple team's quarterback went into his 'pocket' - a term that I'd proudly learned - for one of the game's final plays, and was swiftly taken to the ground by a bunch of opposing players. Barnes cheered in delight and I tilted my head.

"What was that?" I asked, tilting my head.

"A sack," he answered, then sighed, realizing that he had to explain further. "When defenders get past the blockers and tackle the quarterback before he can throw. That's a sack."

"How could they block so many people, though?"

Barnes sighed once again, but wore a smile. "Usually, only a few defenders rush the quarterback. That play was a blitz, where the defenders send overwhelming force and try to take down the quarterback as quickly as they can."

"A blitz!" I exclaimed. "Like the Blitzkrieg?!"

Mr. Barnes turned to look at me. "Like the Blitzkrieg." He held my gaze with his deep brown eyes. "You're a strange one, Blondie. Anyone ever told you that before?"

I shrugged and nodded.

Chuckling to himself, Mr. Barnes rose to his feet. The game was over, and I was curious to see what he would do next.

"When's your mother getting home?" Barnes asked, stretching his arms and yawning.

"Not for a few hours," I chirped in reply.

“Then how about this,” he asked with a cough. Unlike the others, they sounded forced, as if he was intentionally clearing his throat when it wasn't necessary. “I’ll make you some dinner if you clean the...the first room down the hall.” He gestured without looking, his eyes trained at the fireplace. He couldn’t even bring himself to look at the closed blue door with the brass knob. “How does that sound?”

I eyed the door skeptically, glancing between it and Barnes. What was going on? Was this some sort of elaborate trap? What if the door led to some dungeon? What if Colton was waiting for me, behind that door? I shivered, then shed those worries aside. Mom said that I could trust Mr. Barnes. I had nothing to fear.

“Deal.”

# CHAPTER 29

## *The Blue Door*

**T**he blue door eased open, and I peered inside with wide eyes.

“Just needs some dusting,” Barnes grunted from behind me.

I nodded, only half-listening to him. The room was enchanting, like an ancient burial tomb that had gone untouched for millenia. A thin film of dust covered the room’s wooden shelves, along with much of the oak floor. The room’s four lamps were bright and lively, starkly contrasting with the house’s otherwise rustic mellowness. Three framed landscape paintings were mounted on the walls, muted from the dust on their glass frames. Light shone in from a vast window, which provided a view of the front yard’s stout evergreen trees. My eyes, however, were fixed on an object which stood nobly at the center of the room: an easel.

Time seemed to stop as I approached, and ran a gentle hand along the thick wooden frame. My eyes began to water and my mind flooded with memories. In grade school, I used to sneak into the art room to use the easel, whenever I could. I still remembered that fateful autumn day, when Colton discovered my hobby. He followed me into the art room, and I instinctively spun a story about how I’d intended to trash the place. So we did. Broken easels and ripped paintings had littered the floor, and the school’s art program was cancelled for the year. I cried myself to sleep that night, and many nights thereafter.

“It’s something, isn’t it?” Barnes’ voice startled me from my reverie.

“Yup,” I recovered with a chirp, glancing over my shoulder at the wistful man. He still stood by the blue door, resting a hand on its frame. He made no move to enter, as if some invisible barrier was preventing him, and his eyes took on a distant quality.

“You’re a painter?” he asked.

I tilted my head. "Just a bit. I do more sketching..."

"An artist, then?" he asked, his voice trembling ever-so-slightly.

My cheeks burnt red and I shrugged. I wasn't much of an artist, but I tried my best.

"I'll tell you what. After you clean this place up, you should use it."

I inhaled a surprised breath, then a stupid grin worked its way across my face.

"Really?!" I asked, almost bouncing with energy.

He nodded, then unleashed another cough. "She...she'd want it to get some use." He hesitated for a second, a faint smile on his lips. "I'd better get the oven going. Get to work, you."

"Yes, sir," I piped, eyeing the paper rolls, paint jars, and assorted brushes lying beneath the wooden easel. "Mr. Barnes," I corrected myself, yet again.

With that, I gathered cleaning supplies and began the process. Under most circumstances, scrubbing floors and dusting shelves would have bored me to death. I'd have gladly performed the task, but I wouldn't have taken any joy in it. It would have been a chore. However, armed with the knowledge that I could use the easel, I scrubbed with more speed and power than ever before. Even back when I was nearly a foot taller and actually had muscles, I hadn't been able to remove paint stains from hardwood with such efficiency.

Almost an hour after I'd begun, I stepped down from my small ladder and exhaled a proud, heavy breath. Transforming the space from a burial chamber into a serviceable room wasn't quite as exciting as finishing a painting, but it did add the same tangible validation. My efforts had made an observable impact on the world, taking a discarded, forgotten place and giving it utility.

I shook my head and tossed my feather-duster into a bucket, wiping a layer of glimmering sweat from my forehead. This room was not 'forgotten'. I sighed again, a deeper sigh. A gloomy sigh. Mr. Barnes probably thought about this room every day. Based on what he'd said, this was his wife's old room. 'Jane', as I'd arbitrarily named her. I'd prefer to know her real name, but Barnes didn't seem ready to talk about her. 'Jane' would have to suffice.

Resting a hand on my cheek, I stared at the easel. My mood had turned somber, and my art tended to mirror my emotions. I couldn't help it. I was a sensitive person. If I was feeling blue, I could consciously begin a painting with a beautiful field of flowers, and it would still end up sorrowful. Then, I would be left with a lasting relic of that sadness.

My thoughts were again interrupted by the distinct sound of a tail whacking against the side of a doorframe.

“Bella!” I giggled, spinning around and falling to my knees. I greeted her with a hug, and she chose to sniff my glasses. “Look at you! Are you a happy girl?” I asked in a silly tone, completely discarding my previous moroseness. She was like a pressure washer for gloom, removing it from even the most tarnished of surfaces with only a few wags of her tail.

My eyes lit up, and I sprung to my feet. I led Bella to the window and - with surprisingly little effort - got her to sit in front of it. The sun had begun to set behind her, and the painting completed itself in my mind, before I’d even placed a dash of paint on the canvas. I saw how each stroke of the brush and etch of the scraper would combine, all in beautiful harmony.

Although I didn’t need Bella to maintain her pose, she sat there with proud obedience as I lost all sense of time. I hummed to myself as I painted, and was so engrossed with my work that I unconsciously began singing a quiet song. I was singing. Singing! I hadn’t sung in years, and I welcomed the melody as it flowed through me.

Every element of the painting seemed to fall into place, and every color found its home. With one last flick of the brush, my senses returned and I stepped away from the completed painting. A smile graced my lips. The painting depicted the same image that had been stored in my mind: Bella staring up at me, her tail a blur and her tongue out, while the sun dwindled behind her. The colors were slightly more vibrant than real life, more vivid.

“Good girl,” I cooed down to Bella. At some point during the painting process, she had relaxed her pose and lied down beside me. When I addressed her, she raised her head and licked her own nose. I wasn’t exactly sure what that meant, but I sensed that she wanted to be petted. I obliged her, scratching behind her ears until she rolled onto her belly.

“She would have liked you,” a voice startled me, and I spun toward the door.

Mr. Barnes stood in the doorway, leaning on the frame as he eyed my painting. He wore a pained smile.

I bit my lip and hesitated, then decided to be bold. “What was her name?”

Barnes tensed, and glanced between me and my painting. “Kathy,” he replied. “She was a teacher. Taught the little ones.” He spoke each word with great difficulty. “This was her art room,” he continued. “She’d come in here just about every day, and she was damned good. Always trees and...and peace.”

He gestured up at one of the newly cleaned paintings, which hung from the wall. Regrettably, during my focused cleaning, I hadn’t inspected her work too closely. I rose

from Bella's side and approached one of the paintings, running a hand along the edge of the frame whilst I tapped an index finger against my lips in contemplation. She seemed to use a rather impressionist style, with thin strokes and careful lighting. Her work was quite beautiful, and 'peace' was the correct word to describe it.

"One stroke," his voice rasped, almost startling me again. Although I wasn't looking at him, I heard his labored breaths and knew that he was on the verge of crying. "Just one. That was all it took. She exercised, she ate well. Didn't even matter."

A surge of emotion passed through me, and a tear meandered down my cheek. Kathy had been a living, breathing person. She'd come and she'd gone. In a way, though, she was still here. With her art, she'd left a mark on the world.

"I wasn't allowed in here when she was painting," Barnes managed to say. "Always said I was too distracting. She liked the quiet...unless she was the one doing the talking. She could talk more than just about anyone I've ever met. Science, life, hobbies...you name the topic, and she'd be able to talk your ear off about it. Everything was interesting to her. Everything..." he trailed into a long pause, and his eyes glistened. "I miss her voice."

I let the silence reassert itself before I spoke, still eyeing her painting. "How'd you meet?"

"County fair, 1959" Mr. Barnes answered almost immediately, a faint smile beneath his grey beard. He still hadn't completely entered the room, and I was beginning to suspect that he never would. "Tyler, Texas." He breathed deep and closed his eyes, as if he was trying to recreate that day in his mind. "The place was like a jungle. The people, the music, the rides, the sun...they don't make fairs like that anymore." He coughed once again. "We met at one of those shooting games. Hit the bullseye, get the bear. I'd just about run out of quarters, and I had one pellet left in my gun. I noticed a girl next to me, with one of those long blue dresses and the darkest hair you've ever seen. There was something about her. We were just kids, but she still had that...that way about her. Like nobody else." His voice faltered, and he shook his head. "I can't do her justice with words." Barnes looked up at the ceiling and exhaled. "I pointed at a big white bear on the wall, and I asked her 'If I win this bear for you, can we be friends?' She gave me that look of hers. I guess you could call it amusement or doubt. You see, Kathy didn't believe me. She didn't think I had it in me."

"So you proved her wrong? You got the bear?"

"Oh God no," he answered with a deep chuckle. "Not even close. Missed wide left by about two yards. She fell to the grass laughing. That's when I knew I was going to spend the rest of my life with her."



I tilted my head and smiled. He must have loved Kathy like nobody else, and her death seemed to have crushed him. Would I ever love anyone that much? I hoped so. The grin on Barnes' face confirmed proved that love could provide strength, even when the subject of that love was long since buried.

"She really would have liked you," he reiterated in the most genuine of tones. "You're a good kid."

"Thanks...for everything." I murmured with a weak smile. "That's yours, by the way." I said, glancing at my painting of Bella.

Barnes flashed a smile of his own. "Appreciated," he said, then he scratched at his beard in a contemplative manner. "You painted that, just now?"

I nodded.

"You've got talent. Anyone ever told you that before?"

My cheeks burnt red and I shrugged. "A couple people." Mom had told me that, as had Emma. However, they weren't the most objective sources. They both wanted me to be cheerier and more confident, after all. I knew that I was an above-average artist, but there were so many gifted people out there...I really wasn't anything special.

"Good, 'cause it's the truth," Barnes grunted. "Dinner is just about done. I'm gonna go out for a quick smoke, and it'll be ready by the time I get back." He pulled a carton of cigarettes from his front pocket and turned to leave.

I froze. I'd seen that carton design before. A blue pack with a silver scorpion logo. In fact, I'd seen exactly twenty eight of them on that convenience store's shelf. I shut my eyes, and the whole scene rushed back to me. The fluorescent lights, the gun, and that odd mix of anger and jadedness on the shopkeeper's face, as if he'd surrendered all hope for a peaceful life in Dexter.

Sinking to the floor, I hugged my knees to my chest. Barnes was wrong. I wasn't a 'good kid.' I was an armed robber. I was one pull of the trigger away from being a murderer. I had entered that man's life, and gone out of my way to cause pain and fan the fire of hatred. I was a monster.

No. I was not a monster. I robbed that store because I was weak and manipulated. My father was the monster. I wasn't like my father.

How could I prove that, though?

I had to rectify my deed, which had previously been quarantined in the back of my mind. I had to repay that man. I had to apologize, whether he chose to accept that apology or not.

# CHAPTER 30

1953

“Nineteen hundred dollars? Sweetie,” Mom groaned. “That’s a lot of cash.”

As had become tradition, she stood over me like a sentry, tracking my progress while I finished eating my breakfast: a yummy plate of sausage and eggs. Even when I wasn’t too hungry, Mom always tried to ensure that I finished my meals. She never explicitly called me ‘scrawny’, although I knew that I was, and favored the medical term ‘underweight’.

“Nineteen hundred and fifty three,” I corrected her, between bites. “And it’s... important,” Using my tongue, I reeled in a bit of scrambled egg that had dangled from my lower lip. “I told you, already. It’s for a good cause. I stole it from them, so I need to give it back. Otherwise, it’s just an empty apology.”

Sighing, she eased into the chair beside me and ran a gentle hand through my hair.

“Josh already agreed to take me there, after his track practice,” I continued, trying not to sound too pleading. “All I need is the money.”

“Why now, hun? Why the urgency?”

“It’s all I can think about,” I shrugged up at her, hoping that I was portraying the genuineness of my request. I sensed that she was suspicious, and I suppose that I couldn’t blame her. It was an odd request. “I really need to take care of this...plus, I’ll pay you back. I’ll get a job, or something. I promise.”

“If this is about a gambling debt, or drugs, or...”

“No,” I protested sharply. “Remember what you told me, the other day? About how we needed to trust each other?”

“Using my own words against me, huh?”

I didn't reply. Instead, I stared up at her with the most innocent puppy-dog eyes I could muster. She held my gaze, and her faint smile confirmed that I'd already won the battle. She believed in me.

"Fine," she eventually said, with a hint of resignation. "I'll go to the bank before work. Just...please don't let me down."

"I won't!" I chirped with a smile, holding up two criss-crossed fingers.

With renewed vigor, I wolfed down the remainder of my breakfast, my heart fluttering all the while. Penance, forgiveness, and relief were just around the corner. Today was going to be the best day of my life.

\* \* \*

At school, electricity lingered in the air. It was the unique energy that stirred when spring break was just around the corner. My life had been so hectic, as of late, that I'd almost forgotten about the much-needed break. Smiles graced the lips of students and teachers alike, and every color appeared to be more vibrant, from the rolling emerald hills to the classrooms' gleaming whiteboards.

Classes were a breeze. Most teachers didn't want to try teaching new material before the break, so I ended up sitting through numerous movies. They were only tangentially related to the courses, and I was so preoccupied with my sketching that I barely remembered their plots.

Ms. Washington's class - the last of the day - was equally lax. She had us play a jeopardy-style game, where all of the topics had been covered earlier in the course. As was tradition, I paid a sufficient amount of attention to the class while drawing in my notebook. From butterflies to soaring birds, all of my sketches carried themes of freedom and elation.

When the final bell rang, I waited for all of the other students to file out of the classroom. I had to complete a long overdue task.

"Natalie," Ms. Washington addressed me as I approached her desk. Her eyebrows were raised in surprise. She had been preparing to leave, and her large purse was already slung over her shoulder. As usual, she was impeccably dressed, with a sky blue skirt and tasteful light pink polish on her nails. In the past, I never noticed the effort that she put into her nails. They were exquisite, far more neatly filed than my own.

"Hello ma'am," I said, nervously rubbing my white sneakers together and forcing myself not to stare at the ground.

"I finished reading your write-up from the field trip. I can't tell you how glad I am that you found the experience to be so...meaningful. I don't think I've ever received a paper with so many drawings included."

"T-thanks," I stammered, then silently cursed myself for doing so. I thought that I'd conquered that habit. Clearing my throat, I fixed my posture and reasserted my self-control. "I actually came here to apologize, for my behavior in the past." My voice wavered, but did not break. "I've been doing a lot of thinking, lately. I-I know how frustrating it's been to deal with me, and I just wanted to thank you for your patience...and for everything you've helped me with...and for the book, and...and..."

The struggle to keep my emotions in check proved to be futile. Tears slid down my cheeks, and I welcomed them with a smile. They weren't a source of shame, they were a reflection of my true personality. I was Natalie Harper, and I was a softie. My smile widened, and I surprised Ms. Washington with a hug. It wasn't a consoling hug or a tragic hug. It was a brief, happy hug. The kind that made me want to squeal.

"Thanks," I chirped again, stepping away from her.

Ms. Washington stood in utter shock. Her lips, though ajar, betrayed the dawn of a smile.

Before she could recover, I spun and scampered out of the room, with wet cheeks and a radiant grin.

\* \* \*

I was practically skipping when I met up with Josh on the outskirts of the school's oval running track. I usually didn't venture to this part of the schoolground, but Josh had relentlessly pestered me about joining him for afternoon practice, until I finally caved. After all, he was both my ride home, and my ride to the convenience store. I'd feel bad if I refused such a simple request. Thus, I'd come prepared, fully outfitted in my white top and black running shorts.

"Are you alright?" Josh asked with a raised eyebrow, taking in my puffy eyes and wide smile.

"Never better," I breathed, then pulled my long blonde locks into a ponytail with relative ease and gently stored my glasses in my backpack.

"If you say so," he chuckled.

With that, we began our laps. At first, I worried that all of the other kids on the track team would stare at me because I wasn't on the team, or judge me for my poor stamina. Thankfully, that never happened. The team was rather decentralized, and the

elderly coach was beyond aloof. As long as students were on the track and running the correct direction, he was happy. This gave Josh and I some time to chat, as we jogged side-by-side.

“So, how are you gonna pay her back?” Josh asked, after our fourth or fifth journey around the big oval. He was barely even sweating, and I already felt a bead trickling down the side of my cheek. I really needed to exercise with him more often.

“Dunno,” I shrugged between labored breaths, then narrowed my eyes skeptically. “Why do you ask?”

“I think I might have an idea,” he gave me that devilish smile of his. “My mom has been looking for someone to model her newest line of heels, and-”

As the words graced my ears, I stumbled like an inelegant deer. I almost toppled to the ground, but Josh grabbed hold of my arm and steadied me. His words had surprised me, but he’d clearly spoken them in jest. He was just teasing me...right? I was too shrimp, far too short, and my legs were pasty white. I couldn’t possibly be a model.

“Ha ha,” I laughed dryly, recovering myself and resuming my light jog. “Very funny.”

“I’m serious,” he insisted with his eager, booming voice, which seemed to emerge whenever he had a ‘brilliant’ idea. “She’ll pay you well, and it won’t take too much time. You can model after school, and you’ll be able to pay your mom back before you know it.”

I cast him a skeptical eye. “Really?”

“Dead serious,” he grinned, his tone growing even more boisterous. “Plus, the photo shoots will mostly be at my house, so we can hang out afterwards!”

“Does your mom know what I look like? I’m...I’m not a model.”

He shrugged, that undying optimism still pulsing from him. “What do you mean? You could totally be a model.”

I felt guilty for contradicting him, considering how enthralled he seemed to be with his idea, but one of us had to be realistic.

“Have you ever opened a magazine? Do you honestly think that I could hold a candle to those girls?”

“Sure. Why not? You’re beautiful.”

I opened my mouth to argue with him, or to call him out for lying. However, when I turned to him, I saw that his cheeks had gone red. He was embarrassed! I wasn’t quite sure if I’d ever seen him in such a state, previously, and the sight was rather cute. His eyes were cast toward the distant hills, as if he wished he could fly away and escape the chagrin.

I bit my lip. Josh actually thought that I could be a model. Sure, he didn't know anything about the industry, and his mother would probably shoot down the idea...but it was worth a shot. Even if I had no idea how to walk in heels, modeling was preferable to searching for a job. Job openings were few and far between in Dexter, so even the chances of finding minimum-wage work were slim to none.

It was a no-brainer. The only factor that had been preventing me from immediately leaping on this opportunity was self-doubt. The lingering fear that I wasn't sufficiently smart, good, or - in this case - attractive. As Emma would say, fuck that. I was too strong to let myself fall victim to my own lack of confidence.

"Alright," I bobbed my head, flashing him a smile. "I'll give it a shot."

# CHAPTER 31

## *In The Headlights*

A number of emotions swirled through me, as Josh pulled his sedan into the convenience store's parking lot. Excitement, guilt, and the gnawing sense of impending doom. Was I making the biggest mistake of my life?

I'd delayed this confrontation for as long as possible. After track practice, I insisted upon grabbing some dinner. Then, I chatted with Josh for hours, before I finally decided to face my fears. Midnight was approaching, but thankfully the store still appeared to be open.

My hands clung to the bulky manila envelope, darkening its tan surface with nervous sweat. What if the man at the store tried to get the police involved? I wouldn't blame him if he did, but I also had a feeling that I wouldn't fare particularly well in prison. Even in a women's prison, I'd be the easiest target in the world. I was sensitive, fragile, small, and - despite my best efforts to grow a backbone - my response to danger seemed to be complete petrification. Some Brigade guys had spent time in prison, and they'd mentioned that there were only two kinds of people in there: bosses and bitches. I had no illusions of grandeur. If I went to prison, I would not be a boss.

"You know," Josh interrupted with thoughts with his warm, soothing voice. "It takes a lot of courage, to do something like this."

I shook my head. As I did, a few stray locks of blonde hair bounced around my glasses. The rest was still pulled back in a ponytail, from Josh's track practice.

"Courage?" I scoffed, then drew a long sigh. "I terrorized this poor guy, for no good reason. If I don't apologize, I'll hate myself forever."

Josh held my gaze with those sharp blue eyes. "Do you want me to go with you?"

Did I? I bit my lip in contemplation, then eventually shook my head. This was my battle, not his. I flashed him a final, reassuring smile, then eased out of his car and stared up at the convenience store's looming figure and its bright neon sign. All of it seemed so much bigger than I remembered, and much more intimidating.

During the car ride, I'd envisioned myself marching into that store with my head held high, confident and poised. I would return the man's money, and he would thank me profusely, telling me how noble I was for owning my mistakes and making amends. As it turned out, my vision couldn't have been further from reality.

Instead, I was already shaking by the time I approached the automatic sliding doors. My tennis shoes dragged along the convenience store's squeaky linoleum, as if they were mounting a protest, begging me to turn back. Meanwhile, the rest of my body trembled, just like it had when I'd last entered this store. Goosebumps rose from my skin, bristling like a porcupine's quills in the face of coming danger.

"Can I help you, miss?" asked the man behind the cashier's desk, speaking in his thick foreign accent. His smile seemed weaker than before, and his white mustache seemed to droop even further over his lip. Still, he wore his white Tommy Hilfiger polo, with an American flag stitched onto the chest pocket.

I froze. I'd pictured him so often in my mind, and I'd simulated this encounter thousands of times...and yet, I was entirely unprepared. I opened and closed my mouth, producing only a feeble squeak.

No. I had to collect myself. I was stronger than my fear. This had the potential to be the most defining moment of my life, the instance that I'd remember whenever I wanted to convince myself that I was a good person.

"Miss? Are you alright?" he inquired, furrowing his brow.

Nathan Pike would never have been able to apologize to this man. He would have lashed out, then ran away. Because that's what Nathan Pike always did. From danger, from truth, from people who wanted to help him. He ran away.

I, however, was not Nathan Pike.

"Y-yes," I stammered, correcting my posture and walking up to his check-out counter. Every step was a chore, but I maintained my resolve and slid the manila envelope across the countertop. "I took this from you. I-I'm sorry."

The man's confusion deepened. Lifting the envelope, he weighed it in his hands suspiciously before peeling open the top. His eyes went wide.

"Nineteen hundred fifty three dollars," I added, gulping against a lump of guilt in my throat. "I'm sorry. You probably don't remember me, because I used to be a guy...I got GB, and...it's complicated, I just...I just wanted to apologize, I...I..." my voice trailed



off when the man fixed me with a hard stare. A loathsome stare. Over the past day, I'd somehow partially convinced myself that this man would meet my confession with kindness and compassion...but why would he? I'd only brought him pain, and he had every reason to hate me.

Still eyeing me, he fished through a drawer below the cash register. I tensed, and my trembling resumed. Was he reaching for a gun? Was he going to shoot me, on the spot? His fierce glare certainly suggested that he might.

Instead, however, he produced a black-and-white photograph, a frame capture from a security camera. It was a grainy photograph of me. The old me. Nathan Pike. He was standing beside a rack of scorpion cigarettes, staring right into the camera with sheer nervousness, a deer in the headlights.

"This," the man tapped the photograph and spoke carefully. "This is you?"

I nodded, and my lips quivered. "Please don't go to the cops," I pleaded. He maintained his glare, and I fought back tears. This was not going as planned. "P-please," I whined, in an unintentionally nasally tone.

"You are ashamed?" he asked, diverting his eyes to the envelope. He pulled out the stack of cash and began flipping through it with his thumb, counting the crisp green bills.

"Mhm," I squeaked. "Yes, sir."

"Good. You should be." He let his words hang in the air. "And why should I not call the police? Do you believe that you should not be punished?"

His hand inched toward the old-school phone beside the register, and I tensed again.

"I do," I replied somewhat frantically, clasping my hands beneath my chin. "I...I didn't keep any of the money that I stole. Someone took it from me...the same person who convinced me to rob you, actually. I sort've took out a loan to pay you back," I gestured at the bills in his hand, and wore my most innocent expression. "That's punishment, isn't it?"

He hesitated, and his glare softened ever-so-slightly. It was almost imperceivable, but it was enough.

"I can mop your floor on weekends, if you want. You know, as punishment. I really am sorry, I..."

"No," he cut me off with a tired wave of his hand. "I do not want you near my store."

I sighed and muttered under my breath. "That makes sense, I guess."

"And do you plan to steal from anyone else?" he asked, furrowing his heavy eyebrows.

"Never," I quickly shook my head. "Never."

He studied my downcast expression and my shaking hands, then clicked his tongue. "Go," he motioned toward the door, almost in a shooing gesture. "Leave. I do not want to see you again."

I obeyed, and scampered out of the store. An odd concoction of emotions swirled within me. To my surprise, most of those emotions were rather pleasant. The encounter had not gone particularly well. The man - I still didn't know his name, and probably never would - still hated me. He still thought that I was a stain on humanity, but...that was okay. Even if he didn't appreciate my gesture, I knew how much courage I had shown, in order to apologize like that. I knew how hard it had been for me. I knew that Nathan Pike never would have been capable of such an act.

Throughout the car ride, Josh went out of his way to make small-talk with me. Despite my busy thoughts, I joined him in pleasant conversation. As I did, serenity began to overtake my emotions. I'd made two long-overdue apologies, to the man and to Ms. Washington. I'd conquered two demons that had been corroding my resolve for ages. Reflecting on my day, I felt strangely at peace, as if my life had finally achieved resolution.

"My mom won't get off work for another few hours," I remarked, when Josh pulled into my vacant driveway. The sun had long since fallen from the sky, and a lone porchlight illuminated the front door. "Let's hang out for a bit."

"Uh, sure," Josh replied with a hint of surprise.

I grabbed his hand and led him inside my house. All the while, my head was held high and my posture was impeccable. Confidence bubbled within me, and I fought the urge to giggle with delight. I felt so light, so free...it was like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

As soon as we got inside, I brought him to the couch and pushed him down onto the cushions. Those sparkling eyes of his widened when he saw my devious grin.

I lied on top of him and brought my hands to the sides of his face.

"Just you and me," I purred, running my nails along his cheek. "Want to have some fun?"

"Who are you?" Josh asked with a surprised chuckle, then wrapped his arms around my waist, drawing me closer. "And what did you do to Natalie?"

I brought my lips to his ear and gave it a gentle kiss. "This is the new me," I whispered in his ear, using a tone that I assumed was rather seductive. I brought my lips across his cheek, tracing a path across his freshly shaved skin and planting small kisses along the way.

I felt so...in-control. I knew what I wanted. Nothing was holding me back, anymore. With an excited breath, I brought my lips to his.

They were soft, just like I remembered, and our kiss was nothing short of blissful. I no longer cared about the fact that he was Jewish. Natalie Harper didn't give a shit. He cared about me. I could see it in the way he looked at me, the way he treated me, the way he carefully listened to my words when I spoke.

Closing my eyes, I took charge and worked my tongue against his. I wasn't going to be a passive bystander in this relationship. Yes, I'd called it a relationship...because that was the most accurate word to describe it. Josh and I were together. That thought alone made my stomach flutter, and I poured even more of my soul into the kiss.

I would have kissed him for hours on end, if not for a series of urgent barks.

*Woof Woof Woof*

I abruptly pulled away from him and tilted my head, listening. It was hard to tell, but the barks sounded as if they were coming from across the street...from Mr. Barnes' house. From Bella.

"What's up?" Josh asked, lifting an eyebrow.

I ignored his question and scrambled to the nearest window, pulling back the blinds. The lights at Barnes' house were out, which was to be expected. Few people stayed up this late in Dexter.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, I noticed a bright glow down the road. A set of lights, all moving closer. Not just lights. Headlights. Several pairs of headlights, from four or five trucks.

My face went pale.

# CHAPTER 32

## *Blitz*

“**N**at?” Josh approached me and laid a hand on my shoulder. I didn’t even flinch. I simply stared into the approaching lights, petrified as Bella’s woofs filled the night air like discordant music.

“What’s going on?” he asked, with no small amount of exasperation.

“They’re coming,” I whispered. I was barely able to move my lips.

“Who’s coming?!” Josh gripped my other shoulder, then turned me to face him. When he saw my blank expression, he took a step back. “Is it that gang? The one you were in?”

Visions assaulted my mind. First were the memories of my father berating me, then the vivid recollection of my real mom’s look of disappointment as she banished me from the warehouse. Ultimately, my memories settled upon that jarring scene in my old underlit bedroom. Colton lied on top of me, pinning me to my bed. His hand slowly worked its way up my thigh. He wore that evil grin of his. That smirk. Once again, I felt myself slipping into ‘sheep mode’. My sparse muscles stiffened, and I stood perfectly still, displaying pure petrification in the face of danger. Dad was right. I was a coward. I was worthless. I thought that I’d spent the day conquering my fears, but I couldn’t have been more wrong.

“Hey!” A voice called, distantly. There was a frantic edge to the voice, as if it was warning of a grave situation. My sight was wrapped up in terrible memories, but I seemed to be occupying multiple worlds at once. Someone tugged on me, as if they were trying to drag me away, but I did not move. I could not move. “Snap out of it!”

I barely noticed the words, but I knew that they were Josh’s. My mind was still replaying Colton’s advances. I’d sat there like some sort of doll, not offering even a hint

of resistance. A hopeless damsel in distress. Was I even a damsel? If my father was to be believed, I was no girl. I was a creature. A worthless, spineless sub-human creature. Perhaps there was some truth to Dad's assertion. When Colton began undressing me, I definitely hadn't felt like a girl. I hadn't felt like a human being, at all.

"Natalie," Josh said. His tone was gentler than before, more calming, and my ears perked at the sound. Although his voice was softer, it seemed to carry further, cutting through the vision. "I'm here with you," he continued, then began giving my shoulders a light massage. I could sense that he was deeply worried, and speaking with such tranquility required a herculean effort. "Nothing's gonna hurt you...but if you don't snap out of it, I'll have to carry you."

I focused on Josh's voice, clinging to it like a guiding light. Josh cared about me. Emma cared about me. Mom cared about me. Before my eyes, Colton began to dissolve. My old bedroom collapsed around me, and the real world came rushing back.

I blinked. Everything had returned. The pristine hardwood floors, the neat chateau-style blinds, and even the glaring headlights, which now pointed directly into the front windows, casting long shadows through the living room. The floor moved below me, passing in a blur. I was being carried! Josh held me in his arms with minimal effort, one arm caressing my legs while the other supported my back. He was making a beeline for the back door.

"No!" I screeched. Josh flinched in surprise, but didn't break his pace. "Not the back door!" I hissed, leaping from his arms and - fortunately - landing on my feet. "Upstairs! Go upstairs!"

My father was an asshole, but he wasn't a dumb asshole. He would have expected us to run, and planned accordingly. There were probably a handful of Brigade guys stalking in the shadowed backyard, eagerly waiting for Josh and I to sprint out the door. There was no escape for us. We could only buy time and hope for the best.

I grabbed Josh's hand and darted up the stairs, taking them two at a time. When we got to the top of the stairs, the windows below us began shattering. The noise created a beautiful, terrible harmony. Glass crunched beneath boots like a tambourine, and window-frames splintered into percussive notes. The Brigade was making its entry.

We reached Mom's room, and slammed her door behind us. Josh looked frightened, perhaps even more frightened than I was. After validating the obvious fact that people loved me, I'd emerged from the vision with an unexpected amount of focus and poise.

Pursing my lips, I glanced around Mom's room, searching for objects that might come in handy...for anything that would lead to a strategy. The room was sparsely

decorated, aside from the photos on her nightstand, and a single framed portrait that hung above her dresser. Upon seeing that portrait, my heart swelled.

Mom's voice played in my head: There are different kinds of strength. Never forget that. You're a strong girl, Natalie.

I had to be strong for Josh. I knew that I could be. I wasn't a natural leader by any means, but a few minutes before, I had acted like one. I'd ushered Josh into the house and taken control, driving our relationship into a more...physical...state than ever before. When I kissed him on that couch, I'd done so with authority. I could reclaim that authority, even after my petrification, even after seeing those terrible memories. I could be a leader.

"Blockade the door," I ordered, gesturing toward the hefty dresser. "I'll call the cops." My tone was thick with confidence, causing Josh to raise a pair of surprised eyebrows before jumping to the task.

When I got an operator on the line and began explaining our situation with the necessary amount of desperation, I could already hear the familiar click of steel-toed Doc Martens on the hardwood. They sounded like an army of cicadas, all swarming in the night. Searching.

"Okay, Miss," the operator responded as Josh piled more items in front of the door, bolstering the dresser. His eyes were wide with adrenaline, and his breathing was audible. "Please stay on the line, the police are on their way."

"How long until they get here?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"About ten minutes. They're coming as fast as they can, Miss."

I suppressed a groan, then tossed my phone to the side. Ten minutes was not going to be enough time. Not even close. My heartbeat increased its pace, and began to thump like a drum as I helped Josh move the mattress to block the door. We'd managed to create a bit of a barrier, between the dresser, the mattress, and whatever else we could find...but I knew that it still wouldn't be enough.

"Nat," Josh whispered. He'd positioned himself with his back against the mattress, adding some extra force to our blockade, and I mirrored his tactic. Ten minutes. We had to delay for ten whole minutes. "Does that window go to the roof?" he asked, eyeing Mom's large bedroom window.

I pursed my lips, thinking. It was difficult to hear my thoughts, over the thunder of my heartbeat. "Mhm. It's the front roof. If we go out that window, all those headlights will be pointed at us. They'll see us real quick."

"It's worth a shot, though. Isn't it?" Josh countered. As he spoke, he took my hand and squeezed it tightly. His was rather warm compared to mine, although both of us

were trembling. "We can't just wait here..." He trailed off, then eyed me expectantly, waiting for me to make a decision.

The Brigade had brought four trucks, which meant that there were probably at least twenty guys. They'd be armed with guns, knives, baseball bats, and whatever else they could find. Would the guys in the front yard shoot at us, if they spotted us on the roof? I'd be surprised if they didn't. When the Brigade made house-calls, they were usually out for blood.

The clicking of boots grew nearer. Then, the sound abruptly stopped. It was replaced by a jarring rattle, which caused me to let out a curious noise, half-way between a squeak and a gasp. The doorknob. They were here, mere feet away from us.

"Boss, we found 'em!" shouted a muffled voice, from the other side of the door. Clicking boots began shuffling once again, drawing nearer and drowning out any further conversation. The words replayed in my head. Boss, we found 'em. In the Brigade, the word 'Boss' only referred to one person. After my weeks of freedom, my father had personally come for me.

I tightened my grip around Josh's hand, desperately trying to maintain my composure.

As it turned out, maintaining composure would become almost impossible. Something large and hard slammed against the barricaded door with a splintering crunch. Splinters and dust puffed out of the barricade, leaving a light coat on the floors. A battering ram. They'd actually brought a battering ram. The force of the impact was so powerful that the whole barricade seemed to lurch. If not for the buffering mattress, the dresser would have fallen down, crushing us in an instant.

We exchanged a worried glance, then I nodded at the window.

Josh was right. The barricade would not last. The door would give out in mere seconds, and the dresser wouldn't delay them for long. If we slouched against the makeshift barrier, we would be idly awaiting our deaths. For better or for worse, we had to venture out, into the unknown. There could be a dozen men in the front yard, with their guns trained at the window...but, on the other hand, the move had potential to buy us an asset of precious value: time.

We scrambled to the window hand-in-hand, and opened it to both the crisp night air and the distant blare of sirens. The window was rather narrow. Thus, I was the first to hop through it, doing so with ease. For once, my fun-sized body had come in handy. I landed gently on the steep roof, silhouetted in the glare of trucklights.

I took a moment to survey the front yard, searching for enemies beside the trucks, who might open fire upon us. I soon had to avert my eyes. The headlights were just too

blinding, and miniscule spots had begun to fill my vision. Although I didn't see the men down below us, their rage-filled shouts confirmed that Josh and I were surrounded. With that knowledge, my heart raced even faster, until it was skipping against my chest like the wings of a hummingbird.

Turning around, I studied Josh through the open window. His mop of dark hair sat lazily on his head, cutely framing his face, and those blue eyes held my gaze. They were widened by fear, but still maintained that enchanting aura.

I flashed him a reassuring smile and beckoned him to follow me. It seemed counter-intuitive to smile at such a desperate time, but the logical part of my brain was being overtaken by raw, nervous adrenaline. In hindsight, I was glad that I gave him that smile. He earned the smile. He deserved it. He probably didn't even realize how much joy he'd brought to my life. In the limited time we'd shared together, he'd helped me realize that I wasn't some GB-tainted creature. I was a girl. A winding, chaotic path had led me to girlhood, but that didn't make me any less of a girl...or any less of a person.

Of course, Josh didn't return the grin. His adrenaline had manifested itself differently, and his hands trembled as he hoisted himself onto the windowsill.

Then, without warning, the shooting began.

Bullets rained upon us. Not from the front yard, as I'd initially expected, but rather from the bedroom. The tiny bits of deadly metal cut through our barricade as if it was paper-mache. The wooden dresser offered no resistance before the hail of bullets and the mattress fared no better, littering the air with unbound feathers.

Josh toppled through the window, amid the gunfire. He landed on me, and sent me plummeting down the roof with a gasp. If I fell to the ground, I was as good as dead. I'd be a present, delivered right into the waiting arms of the Brigade. I didn't want to consider that fate. I couldn't. Desperately, I clawed at the shingles until my nails found a groove, halting my descent about halfway down the roof.

"Natalie," Josh rasped. His voice carried through the whizz of bullets, which now flew well above our heads. From his tone, I could sense that something wasn't quite right.

Gritting my teeth, I did my best to ignore the fresh rash on my bare leg, and climbed up toward Josh. He was sitting awkwardly. It seemed that Josh hadn't moved much, after falling through the window. His back was slightly hunched forward and he stared wearily down at his chest. With every breath, he seemed to waver. He stabilized himself with one hand, while the other was balled into a fist and pressed against his t-shirt.



“What’s wrong?” I climbed to his side, and spoke in a gentle tone. The gunshots seemed to have stopped...either that, or I was too preoccupied to notice them. I rested a hand on Josh’s shoulder and my eyes followed his.

Beneath his balled fist, a bright patch of red marked his otherwise white shirt. The patch, located near the right side of his chest, was about the size of an index card but seemed to spread with every passing second. Initially, I thought that we’d both been fortunate enough to narrowly avoid the gunfire. I was wrong.

“No,” I whispered, a knot forming in my throat. The confident adrenaline that had been coursing through my veins disappeared entirely, replaced by an emptiness. A hollowness. A sinking sensation that threatened to plunge my stomach into the depths of hell. “No, no, no. Shit. T-this...this can’t be real. This can’t be real.”

Josh coughed and met my eyes. “Run,” he rasped. “Go.”

“No!” I said in what could only be described as a screech. Tears welled, threatening to spill down my cheeks. “Y-you’re gonna be okay,” I continued with unconvincing certainty.

He had to be okay. If he died because of me...I couldn’t live with that. I had entered his picture-perfect life, and turned everything upside-down. He believed in me, despite the fact that I had been a hateful idiot with no perspective whatsoever. He was kind to me, when I felt like the ultimate outsider.

Gulping, I pressed Josh against the roof, until he was lying on his back. Although I was no expert, I’d seen enough war movies to know that I was supposed to stifle the blood flow. I moved his hand and replaced it with my own, applying pressure on the wound. Blood oozed through my shaking fingers.

What was wrong with me? Why didn’t I go out of my way to hang out with him? To get to know him better? Sure, we had spent some time together. We’d gone on a couple of dates...but they were both at his insistence. He’d approached me, not the other way around. What had I been afraid of? That he would turn me down? Of course not. He liked me. I saw it in his eyes...he’d never turn me away.

I suppose I’d really been afraid of this exact scenario. I hadn’t wanted to drag him into my wild, dangerous, stupid world. I didn’t want him to throw his life away for me.

“You’re gonna be okay,” I repeated, kneeling above him. My tears flowed freely. They dripped down my cheeks and landed on Josh’s shirt, mixing with the small crimson pool. “Just stay awake. Y-you’ll be fine.”

“Nat,” Josh breathed.

Despite my protests, he brought a hand to my cheek and dried a few of my tears. Then, he stroked my hair, brushing a few strands away from my glasses. His fingers were warm against my cheek and almost made me smile.

“You’re my best friend,” he murmured, tracing my lower lip with his thumb. “And you’re beautiful. A beautiful person.”

“So are you,” I managed to reply, fighting off another wave of tears.

With that, Josh withdrew his hand, clasping it against mine as I maintained pressure on the wound. He stared up at me, his face illuminated in the headlights, but his eyes still looked eerily unfocused. Empty. Devoid of the spark that once made them unique. I could barely stand to look him in the eyes, but I persisted anyways, for what felt like centuries.

“So are you,” I repeated, my voice barely above a whisper.

# CHAPTER 33

*Kreig*

“**F**ound the bitch!” Colton’s harsh voice broke my trance. Hesitantly, I glanced up from Josh, whose eyelids were beginning to flicker open and closed. Colton stood at the window, peering down at me. He gripped a massive hunting knife, brandishing it with a sadistic grin. Light glinted from its freshly sharpened blade, and I fought the urge to run.

I was going to die. In the past few moments, as I pressed down on Josh’s grave wound and stared into his eyes, I’d begun to accept that fact. The knowledge caused goosebumps to race up my arms and made my breathing become shaky. As much as I’d like to pretend otherwise, I was absolutely terrified. I no longer had control over my own survival. The only factor that I could actually control was where I would die. Did I want to die face-down on the front lawn, or beside Josh?

The latter option was far more appealing. I could still hear Josh’s shallow breathing, and feel the rise and fall of his chest. Depending on how quickly emergency services arrived, and how swifty the Brigade decided to end my life, there was a legitimate chance that Josh would outlive me. His chances of surviving the night, however, remained questionable. I was no expert in wounds, but I knew that a bullet to the chest was not good. I raised a bloody hand from Josh’s wound and ran my trembling fingertips across his cheek. More likely than not, we would die side-by-side.

“You’ve got your boyfriend with you?” Colton sneered, wiggling through the narrow window and landing with a thump on the rooftop shingles. He was only a few feet away from us, so close that I could smell the alcohol on his breath.

I looked up at him in defiance, not wishing to dignify his question with an answer. Instead, I asked the only question that came to my mind: “Why? W-why are you doing this?”

“Why?” Colton repeated, a grin spreading across his lips. “You hear that, Mason?”

“Sure did,” Mason replied. He struggled through the window behind Colton, grunting with effort until he finally tumbled onto the roof and found his footing. Mason wielded a pistol in his left hand. My pistol. The one I’d used to rob the convenience store. I’d left it behind at my old parents’ house. I would have laughed, if I wasn’t scared shitless. I’d spent the whole day trying to put that robbery behind me, to seal away that part of my past, but it’d returned for vengeance.

Mason leveled the barrel in my general direction, although it wasn’t quite on target. Regardless, I gulped and pressed down harder on Josh’s wound. Would they toy with me before they killed me? Maybe. They had a few minutes before the police would show up, which left plenty of time to execute me.

“The bitch wants to know why! Guess she’s too stupid to figure it out,” Colton chuckled, turning back to me. “You always were a fucking idiot, Nat.”

The way he said my nickname sent chills down my spine. His tone carried a hint of excitement, as if he was speaking to a roasting hog.

“Let’s see,” Colton continued with a sneer. “Where do I start? You run around like a fag with your dresses and skirts and shit. You spend all day palling around with that Emma bitch. Then, you went and took Hunt away from us. You poisoned his mind, you fed him your whiny bullshit.” He marched forward and let out a snort, lowering his voice. “That was the last straw, bitch.”

I wanted to tell him the truth: that I’d only played a minor role in saving Hunter. What would that accomplish, though? If anything, that would only make them target Emma, after they’d finished with me. The Brigade had already made up their mind. I wouldn’t leave this rooftop alive.

“Get out of my way,” a dreadfully familiar voice demanded. It was a rough voice, raspy due to years of smoking. Authority seeped from each word. That same commanding voice had levied punishments against me throughout my childhood. That same voice had caused me to make regrettable decisions, and think shameful thoughts. Now, that same voice caused a whimper to escape my trembling lips.

My father stood at the window, flanked by a handful of minions. Unlike Colton, there was no mirth on his grizzled face, just disappointment and inconvenience...as if he was frustrated that I hadn’t come home and presented myself for slaughter.

Instead, my persistence had forced him to drive all the way to the opposite side of town.

He hulked in the window frame, running his hands along its width. With those bear-like hands, he could have snapped me in two.

"You still want to finish it yourself, boss?" Mason asked in his droning mumble, still aiming the gun near my face.

"Did I say otherwise?" Dad's voice boomed in reply.

"Uh, no," Mason replied with a shrug, his cheeks burning with shame. I knew what that was like. Dad didn't like 'stupid questions', and I used to ask him a whole lot of those. My father had a unique talent for making people feel as if they were useless.

Unfortunately for Mason, his gun moved when he shrugged, drawing additional scorn from Dad.

"For fuck's sake, Mason. If you don't know how to use the damned thing, put it away," Dad grumbled. "Unbelievable," he added, under his breath, as Mason begrudgingly holstered his pistol.

"Well, I ain't fitting through this thing," Dad said, gesturing at the window. "So hold the bitch steady, I'll take the shot."

Dad drew his favorite gun, an old revolver, and began loading it with a single bullet. I suppose he'd used his existing ammunition while shooting through the door...shooting at Josh. Instinctively, I squirmed, lifting my hands from Josh's wound and flinching to the side. When Mason had initially pointed his gun toward me, I knew he wouldn't shoot. This was different. Very different. Dad wasn't the type to make empty threats. If he said he was going to shoot me, he was going to kill me.

"Grab her!" Dad shouted. "Grab it!" he corrected himself.

Colton and Mason complied, wrestling me against the rooftop and raising me to my feet. It wasn't a particularly difficult task for them. Before I knew it, I was staring up at the window. Dad's grim face stared back, as he readied his gun. Colton and Mason stood on either side of me, gripping my arms so firmly that their hands felt like iron shackles.

I drew a shaky breath as a lone tear wandered down my cheek.

"Please, Dad," I whispered. Thanks to the knot in my throat, that was the loudest my voice could be. "Please."

He didn't reply. Instead, he began to raise his revolver.

I shut my eyes. I wouldn't allow my final moments to be a reminder of Dad's torment. Instead, I imagined a cozy night by the fireplace. I was curled in a ball on a fuzzy rug, licking a bowl of ice cream. Mom was there - Laura, to be specific. She sat

beside me, petting my hair, laying gentle kisses on the top of my head, and whispering words of comfort in my ear. Emma was there, too...and Hunter, and Josh. Everyone was there. Everyone who cared about me. Ms. Washington, Mr. Barnes, and - of course - Bella. She was lying with her head in my lap, collecting pets and treats with glee. Everyone was so happy. So content. I didn't know what would happen after death, but I hoped it would be like that. Just a whole bunch of happiness, with no shortage of love.

A shot rang out. It was loud and crisp, cutting through the wail of sirens and Bella's concerned barking.

Then a second shot pierced the night, followed by a third.

I flinched with every bang, whimpering softly. The gunshots were startlingly loud, and the last two were followed by jarring thuds. Wait...I was alive? My fists were still tensed in anticipation, and I opened my eyes ever-so-slightly, daring to peek.

Dad looked absolutely befuddled. His mouth hung ajar, and his arm rested limply on the windowsill, causing his silver revolver to tumble down the roof. I didn't turn around to watch the gun's descent. My eyes were fixed on my father. Blood trickled from just above his hairline, leading into three strong currents. Each of the three rivers traced the grooves of his face before sliding into his grizzled beard, where his grey hairs had already begun to turn a chilling shade of pink.

The wound itself was only partially visible. It was a single dark patch, sitting only a few inches above Dad's temple. A bullet wound. One clean shot to the head.

"D-dad?" I said...or, rather, I attempted to say. The word didn't quite make it past the lump in my throat.

Dad opened his mouth, but he was even more speechless than I was. His eyes no longer burned with disappointment, only confusion and fear. I'd never seen him look so frightened. So terrified. I had no way of knowing his thoughts, in those last few moments. Regardless, I liked to imagine that the fear in his eyes was due to a profound insight: the long-overdue realization that he'd wasted all of his time on Earth. The realization that he'd been wrong for casting away his only child, and for trying to erase one of the few positive contributions he'd made to the world.

Perhaps that was all wishful thinking. More likely than not, Dad would never have the personal strength to recognize his faults. He couldn't display remorse. He could never admit that he'd been misled, or that he'd misled others. He wasn't as strong as I was. Even so, I preferred to believe that Dad truly understood the evil of his deeds, that he really understood the pain that he had caused, before he collapsed against that windowsill and exhaled his last ragged breath.

The scene turned chaotic. Shouts about a “sniper” echoed from the front yard. However, nobody returned fire against the shooter. Instead, the men behind Dad’s lifeless body all scurried away from the window, tripping over each other and crying out in fear, rudderless without Dad’s iron-fisted leadership.

As the Brigade took cover, Colton’s knife fell from my side. Rather than cutting through my skin, however, it only ripped a long tear my bloodied shirt before bouncing against the rooftop. I looked down in wonder, eyeing the tear. Where had Colton and Mason gone? I hadn’t initially noticed, but their binding grips on my arms had vanished, along with the boys themselves. If not for the two bright red marks above each of my elbows, I would have begun questioning my sanity.

Spinning around, I checked for any signs of my two former friends. Where were they? My heart resumed its thumping rhythm, and adrenaline again flared within me. If they were nearby, they’d certainly try to finish the job that Dad had put into motion...at least, Colton would. Speaking of Colton, why had he left his knife? That fallen buck knife was probably one of his most valuable possessions.

Within seconds, all of my questions were answered. I knelt down to examine two long streams of blood, running down the shingles. The streams began near my feet, then charted a clear pathway down the steep grade to the roof’s edge. There, the gutter dangled freely. It had once been a white, well-kempt gutter - the kind that you’d expect to find in a picturesque suburb - but it had been reduced to a twisted piece of metal.

Through the glare of headlights, I spotted two motionless lumps sprawled on the front lawn, just beneath the broken gutter. Colton and Mason. The second and third bullets had found their marks.

“Oh my God,” I whispered, suppressing a gasp as an elated tear meandered down my cheek.

The identity and location of the shooter were likely a mystery to the Brigade. To me, however, the answer was rather obvious. Using a shaky hand to block the headlights, I squinted toward Mr. Barnes’ house. The windows that were visible glowed with dim light, just soft enough to go unnoticed by the casual observer. However, the light in one particular room caught my interest, for I’d never seen it illuminated before. The room had an unobstructed view of Mom’s roof, along with a wide window. It was Kathy’s art room, the untouched shrine to Barnes’ late wife. Without the slightest hint of doubt, I knew the origins of those shots.

I fought the urge to wave or salute, as a show of thanks. Of course, that would have been utter foolishness. I wasn’t safe. Not yet. My life hung in the balance, as did Josh’s.

If just one of those Brigade guys decided to be bold and shoot at us before Mr. Barnes' could offer covering fire, we would likely meet the same fate as my father.

With that in mind, I dropped to my hands and knees, then crawled my way up the roof, back to Josh.

"Josh," I murmured, upon reaching him. Although I still felt as if there was a lump in the back of my throat, I was happy to find that I was capable of speech.

The same could not be said for Josh.

He looked pale. His breathing was shallow, and his eyelids were fluttering open and closed. However, he still managed to wrap his hand around mine. Every other time we'd held hands, mine had been colder than his. This time, though, I lent him my warmth.

"They're on their way," I assured him, squeezing his hand.

I'd spoken the truth. If my friend's life wasn't in grave danger, I might have considered the blaring sirens to be a colossal annoyance. There were so many of them, all whirring in disjointed harmony, and they sounded as if they were just around the corner.

I leaned down and planted a kiss on his cold cheek, as the sirens grew ever closer.

"I'm here for you."



# CHAPTER 34

## *The Waiting Game*

**T**he hospital floors were beautiful, in their own special way. White tiles with blue trim spanned across the waiting room. No two tiles were identical. They were all marked by age, made unique by tiny chips, cracks, and streaks on their surface. I'd been staring at that floor as the hours slipped by, dedicating every tile to memory whilst I rocked back and forth, and nervously scratched my arm.

"Stop that," Mom whispered. She placed a hand on top of mine, which prevented my scratching. Her voice was heavy with concern, and I sensed that she was more worried about my well-being than even Josh's. "Deep breaths," she continued, her voice soft and calming. "Remember what I told you? All we can do right now is stay positive and relaxed. Can you do that for me?"

I looked up at her, then sighed, resting my head on her shoulder. The motion caused locks of blonde hair to drape across my face, so I instinctively brushed them over my ear. In the process, my fingers trailed across my cheek, grazing a few spots of dried blood. Mom had tried to freshen me up in the hospital's bathroom, wiping away most of the blood and swapping my red-stained shirt for one of her fresh night-time shirts. The replacement was too long for me, almost doubling as a skirt, but I never complained. My mind was elsewhere, too consumed with worry over Josh's fate, and too haunted by my father's dying face.

"Mhm," I assented.

It was an empty promise. I knew that I couldn't sit still. Remnants of adrenaline still coursed through my veins, and I sensed that I hadn't even begun to process the night's events. Drawing a deep breath, I tried to replay what had happened. A torrent of

memories rushed through my mind, in the form of non-existent paintings: headlights, the fallen revolver, Dad's terrified face, the broken gutter, and then...Josh.

I couldn't even remember my exact location, when I'd seen them rushing his stretcher into the back of the ambulance. Was I on the street? The front yard? Was I still on the roof? All I recalled was the sinking pit in my stomach, and the trembling of my lips.

After that came even more fragmented memories: the police interviews, Brigade members being herded into custody, a white blanket draped over Colton's body, Mr. Barnes' comforting hand on my shoulder, and Mom's tearful embrace. I didn't even remember the drive to the hospital, and only recalled the Emergency Room doctor saying three phrases about Josh's state: transfusion, surgery, and collapsed lung.

I exhaled, and resumed scratching my arm.

Josh's parents had arrived a few minutes ago. At least, I assumed that they were his parents. Their dark hair was similar to Josh's, and the mother's eyes had the same sapphire-blue glow. Understandably, they'd been disheveled and afraid upon arrival, before both a doctor and a county sheriff shepherded them into a side-room and explained Josh's status.

Before they disappeared into that room, however, I overheard a snippet of their conversation:

"I knew it," Josh's mother had lamented, grief dampening every word. "I knew something like this would happen. Didn't I tell you? Why Arkansas? Why did we have to move to Arkansas?!"

Those words hurt. They probably weren't meant to hurt, but they still did. I knew that Dexter wasn't the best town in America. There wasn't much to do. There was a bowling alley, a golf course, and a horse track. That all seemed like plenty of entertainment to me, but I'd never been to a big city. I'd only heard stories. Compared to Chicago, Dexter was probably underwhelming. The town dripped with a sense of stagnation and - like any other town - Dexter harbored both good and evil. Even so, Dexter was the only home I'd ever known, and it had a special place in my heart.

Secretly, I hoped that Josh's parents wouldn't return to the waiting room. If they did, I'd be forced to leave. I couldn't handle the guilt. This was all my fault. I'd put their son in this situation. If I hadn't disrupted his life, Josh would be safe at home, swimming in his pool and watching television. Instead, I had to go and drag Josh into my sea of troubles, and he was lying unconscious beneath a surgeon's knife, his life hanging in the balance.

The side-room's door clicked open, and I nuzzled further into Mom's shoulder. I prayed that Josh's parents would ignore my presence, that they wouldn't confront me. It was an unlikely prospect. Aside from Mom and me, the waiting room was mostly deserted, occupied only by a few sheriffs, stationed nearby to ensure that the Brigade did not seek retribution.

Sure enough, the click of heels grew closer.

"Are you Natalie?" asked the woman who I assumed to be Josh's mother, Mrs. Silver. I couldn't fully read her tone, but each of her words seemed to be charged with intensity. She hated me, didn't she?

I didn't answer, and instead nuzzled even further into the crook of Mom's neck. I didn't want to see Mrs. Silver's face. I didn't want to see the grief that I had caused.

"Hun," Mom whispered, jostling me with a gentle hand.

I begrudgingly opened my eyes, to find Mom staring down at me. She didn't scold me or beat me, like my old parents would have. Instead, she nodded toward Mrs. Silver, silently insisting that I ought to be polite.

Gulping, I met Mrs. Silver's gaze. Her eyes were puffy with signs of fresh tears, and the edges of her nostrils were red. She wore a pair of white heels, which didn't quite match her otherwise impromptu outfit. Police officers had probably woken her up at this ungodly hour to break the terrible news. Scanning the room, I noted that her husband was nowhere to be found. He was probably still talking to the doctor, struggling to digest the terrible havoc I'd wrought on their son's life. I redirected my vision back to the tiles.

"Yes Ma'am," I squeaked, nervously clasping my hands beneath my chin. "I'm...I'm Natalie."

Mrs. Silver knelt before me and took my shaking hands in hers.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Mouth ajar, I raised my eyes from the tiles. Mrs. Silver was...smiling? It wasn't the happiest smile on Earth, but it was inarguably a smile.

"What?" I asked, in the quietest of voices. At the time, it seemed like it was the only word that I could produce. Why was she thanking me? I'd gotten Josh into this terrible mess, I certainly deserved no thanks.

"Natalie, they told me about what you did," she explained, her voice wavering. "It must've taken a lot of courage."

"What?" I repeated. What had the doctor and sheriff told her?

“You don’t remember?” she asked, tilting her head. “You slowed the bleeding. You called the police. If it weren’t for you, Josh,” her voice wavered, “might not have made it to the hospital.”

I nodded slowly. Although my memory was a bit fragmented and hazy, I did recall pressing down on his wound, before Dad’s death, and later while the emergency crews arrived. I also remembered my quick call to the police, as the Brigade searched the house. Had those small actions really made the difference? I wasn’t sure. The doctor might have mentioned that in his original shpiel, but I hadn’t retained many of his words. If that was what the doctor and sheriff really believed, though, there might be some legitimacy to the theory, and I might have actually helped Josh survive.

My lower lip trembled, and a tear began to dribble down my cheek. I wasn’t useless. I already knew that to be the truth, but sometimes I got too caught up in the mistakes that I’d made, and completely forgot that key fact. I wasn’t useless. Because of me, Josh had a chance.

Springing out of my chair, I wrapped Mrs. Silver in a surprise hug. As soon as I snuggled up against her, I cursed my compulsiveness. I couldn’t go around hugging people who I’d just met. What if she didn’t like hugs?

Fortunately, Mrs. Silver didn’t seem to mind. When I pulled away from her and returned to my seat, a weak smile graced her lips.

“Joshua told us about you,” she remarked, fixing her blouse, which I had accidentally ruffled during the brief hug. “He said you were the sweetest little thing.”

I didn’t know whether I should blush or cry. In the end, I did both. Tears streaked my scarlet cheeks. To Mom’s resigned amusement, I dried my those tears on her shoulder, using her shirt as a handkerchief.

Mrs. Silver’s eyes almost as watery as mine. She glanced away, drawing an audible breath.

“It’s been a pleasure to meet you, Natalie.” She flashed me another sad smile, and her eyes settled on Mom. “And you, too...”

“Laura,” Mom introduced herself, rising and offering a delicate handshake. “Laura Harper. I’m Natalie’s mother.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Silver eyed the two of us, in an almost calculating manner. She didn’t say the words, but I sensed that she knew Laura was not my biological mother. We didn’t look too much alike. Sure, we had some similar facial structures, but my blonde hair didn’t resemble Mom’s dark, wavy locks, and our eye color couldn’t have been more different. Mine were light turquoise, and Mom’s were a soothing shade of amber.

“Rachel Silver,” she introduced herself, accepting the handshake.

“I’m so sorry that this happened,” Laura continued, still holding Mrs. Silver’s hand. “If there’s anything we can do for you, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

The two chatted and exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes, but Mrs. Silver seemed a bit distant throughout the conversation. I didn’t blame her. I couldn’t imagine anything worse than raising a wonderful son, only to see his life hang in the balance, hinging on hours of surgery and blood transfusions. Laura offered some comfort to Mrs. Silver, explaining that the surgeons at this hospital were quite capable and that Josh was in good hands, but that information seemed to only marginally ease Mrs. Silver’s anxiety.

“I’d better track down my husband,” Mrs. Silver eventually said, again flashing her weak smile. “Can’t leave him alone for too long...he’s probably already gotten his hand stuck in a vending machine, or something.”

With her departure, I returned my head to Mom’s shoulder. I no longer felt the drowning guilt that had obsessed my earlier thoughts. Instead, the faint buzz of optimism tingled my fingertips. I saved Josh. He was going to survive, and I had helped him. The optimism was followed by a wave of exhaustion, and my eyelids began to flutter shut. The hour was late, and my adrenaline had finally begun to settle down, leaving me emotionally and physically drained.

“Mom,” I murmured, curling in my seat and resting my head on Laura’s lap, treating it like a pillow. “I love you. Y-you’re the best Mom. Ever.”

I needed to tell her those words. This day had reminded me of one dark fact: everyone’s life eventually came to an end, whether I loved that person or despised them. One of the few factors that I could control was how much appreciation I showed them, during their time on Earth.

“I love you too, hun,” Mom whispered, running gentle fingers through my hair.

My eyelids settled, and Mom’s careful hair massage lulled me to sleep.

# CHAPTER 35

## *Weary Hearts*

“Sweetie,” Mom whispered, gently nudging my arm.  
“Mm?” I murmured in reply.

“Wake up,” she said. She underscored the order with one of her soft, contagious laughs. “A special someone wants to see you.”

“Hmm?” I wiggled my nose, and my eyelids fluttered, opening ever so slightly. Fading afternoon sunlight illuminated the waiting room, and about half a dozen tired people now occupied the waiting room. How long had I been asleep?

I lifted my head from a small pillow, which sat atop one of the room’s cushioned chairs. I recalled drifting to sleep on Mom’s lap, but she must have repositioned in the interim, and had graciously provided me with the pillow. My glasses, thanks to some minor miracle, hadn’t been displaced through my slumber, although I had to take a moment to straighten them before I sat upright and stretched my arms. What had Mom been saying? That a ‘special someone’ wanted to see me?

My eyes shot wide open and I bounced to my feet.

“Josh?!” I squeaked, looking up at Mom with a mixture of hopefulness and shock. “Oh my God! Is...i-is he...he’s...he’s...” I couldn’t quite vocalize my thoughts, but Mom seemed to understand.

“He’s awake,” she nodded with an adoring smile, then gave me a quick peck on the forehead. “You were the first person he asked about.”

\* \* \*

Mom held one of my shaking hands, and gave it a light squeeze when we reached Josh's room. I loved the way she held my hand. Not too soft, not too firm. Her fingers were interlocked with mine, reminding me that I wasn't alone. That I'd never be alone, again.

The room's plain teal door was wide open, beckoning me forward. My heart thudded with every step, excitement smothering my fear. Two police officers had been stationed on either side of the door, and were chatting absently. The officers didn't show a hint of concern about the petite girl and her mother in their immediate presence, and made no attempts to stop us when we gingerly passed through the doorway. I suppose I couldn't blame them. Mom and I weren't exactly the most intimidating folks.

The recovery room was larger than I'd anticipated, with floral blinds over the windows and a rather inn-like aesthetic. A thin television hung from one wall, overlooking the room's single bed. It was one of those nicer hospital beds, with a plush mattress that could be adjusted by pressing a button on the side. The bed was flanked by a quaint nightstand, a series of IV drips, a beeping monitor, and a few embroidered chairs. Two of those chairs were occupied. Mr. and Mrs. Silver sat quietly, holding hands, and didn't even raise their eyes when I entered. Their attention was fixed on the bed's occupant, whose lovable mop of dark hair sunk into two fluffy pillows.

"Josh!" I cried, scampering to his side.

He looked tired. Those sharp blue eyes of his were only barely open, just enough to study my face. To my immense relief, however, he seemed to be in half-decent condition. He was alive, he was breathing, and his eyes had regained their twinkle. The faintest of smiles graced his lips, and the beeping heart monitor quickened its pace.

"I-I...I..." I couldn't find the right words. What could I possibly say to him, to convey how much I cared? To let him know that I was there for him?

My jaw trembled, and I said nothing. Instead, I sidled onto his bed and brushed a hand along his cheek. It wasn't as smooth as usual. Instead, a bit of stubble gave his skin a sandpapery texture, bringing attention to the fact that he hadn't shaved in some time. I wasn't sure how I felt about the rough sensation. Regardless, I began to mirror Josh's tiny smile. He was unkempt and appeared to be somewhat zonked on painkillers, but Josh was alive...and that was enough for me.

"Is this..." Josh rasped, raising an unsteady hand to grasp mine. "...a...dream?"

"Nope," I replied. "It's just me. Just Nat." My smile widened at his cute, confused expression. It seemed that my answer may not have registered itself in his mind. Did he still believe that he was dreaming?

“Nat,” Josh spoke the word with care. From his lips, my longtime nickname felt...right. It warmed my heart. “Favorite...dream.”

That seemed to answer my question.

I let out an unintentional hum, still running my hand along his cheek. “It’s real, Josh,” I smiled, fighting the urge to call him a pet name like ‘Joshy’. His parents might have found that to be a bit weird, or overly intimate. They were still sitting by his bedside, likely watching over our interaction like hawks. Although Josh’s mother had thanked me for my arguably heroic actions, I sensed that she still had a negative perception of Arkansas, and...well...I was an Arkansan girl.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered. His words were slurred and his eyelids began fluttering with exhaustion, as the beeps of the heart monitor became more evenly paced. He traced my palm with his thumb, and drew an exhausted breath. “You’re...you’re...” he murmured, his head sinking ever further into his pillow, “I love you.”

I blinked. Had he really said those words? I glanced up at his parents in alarm, then over my shoulder at Mom, who still leaned against the doorframe. How was I supposed to respond to that? I liked him a lot, but...had he really meant it? Was it just the exhaustion and drugs talking? Did I even love him in return? What would his parents think, if I professed my love? Would they think me a fool, for taking his dream-induced ramblings at face value? All of the adults in the room looked equally puzzled, so I turned away from them, and examined Josh’s tired face.

His eyes were shut, and his breathing was labored yet steady, suggesting that he may have already fallen asleep. My hand was still nestled in his, with his thumb resting in the center of my palm. I massaged his digits, as gently as possible, and bit my lower lip. I wasn’t sure if I loved Josh. I’d never loved a guy before, so I had no way of knowing...but it felt like love. I could say anything to him, go anywhere with him, and I was stronger by his side. Why should I care if anyone thought less of me, even if they were his parents? I was Natalie fucking Harper.

“I love you, too,” I declared, speaking loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear.

All three parents drew sharp breaths, bordering on gasps, but I tried to ignore their reactions. Instead, I leaned forward - careful not to disturb Josh’s chest wound - and placed a gentle kiss on his cheek. I allowed my lips to linger, brushing against his layer of tiny whiskers. It was a nice sensation, I eventually decided. I could get used to waking up beside those sandpapery cheeks every morning, and greeting them with a



tender kiss. Gah, had I always been such a hopeless romantic, or had the happiness of the moment just clouded my thoughts? I didn't know, and I didn't care.

I pulled away from him, and my eyes began to water. They were both tears of joy, and tears of relief. I had spent the last day trying to convince myself that Josh would be okay, but I never fully believed my own mantra. There had always been a sliver of doubt lurking in the back of my mind, for good reason. I'd almost lost him. His parents had almost lost him. The whole world had almost lost him.

Glancing over at Mr. and Mrs. Silver, I felt a compulsion to talk to them. I needed to explain my actions, and add some context to my surprise declaration.

"Uh," I began shakily, then gulped. What was I trying to tell them? How could I possibly convey my feelings for Josh, without coming off like some idiotic schoolgirl with a crush?

"J-Josh makes me happy."

That was the best I could manage, and it would have to do. I wasn't a particularly eloquent person, and that was okay. It was all part of who I was. I knew my strengths and I knew my weaknesses. While I tried to improve those weaknesses, I couldn't afford to feel bitterness toward them. Rather than mentally chastise myself or clench my jaw in frustration, I flashed Mr. and Mrs. Silver a brief, hopefully charming smile.

After a moment of unease, the couple looked at each other before offering me a pair of sad yet comforting smiles.

"I'm pretty sure it goes both ways." Mr. Silver nodded with a slight chuckle. "He hasn't been able to shut up about you."

More tears graced the corners of my eyes, and I made no effort to quell their progress.

"Okay, folks," Josh's doctor spoke, entering the room and ruining the moment. He carried a clipboard in one hand, just like Mom did at her clinic, but he somehow carried himself with even more urgency than she ever did.

"Joshua needs to get some rest, so let's give him space," the white-haired doctor spoke the words in rapid succession, with only a hint of forced cordiality. His style of speech reminded me of the conclusion to a pharmaceutical advert, where the narrator rattled off one uninteresting side-effect after another. "As some of you know, the procedure went smoothly, but it's going to be a long recovery process. The more sleep he gets, the better."

With that, the doctor herded us out of Josh's suite, back into the waiting room. Mr. and Mrs. Silver peppered him with questions about when we could next visit Josh, to which the doctor suggested that we all head home and get some sleep, ourselves.

The Silvers were peeved at first, but eventually saw the wisdom in the doctor's words. Josh wasn't going to magically improve and walk out of the hospital any time soon, and he looked perfectly content, all cute and snuggled up in his white blanket.

We hugged goodbye to the Silvers, before heading into the parking lot. Where were Mom and I heading? We certainly weren't going home. The mere thought made my stomach uneasy. Had the blood and bodies even been cleaned up, yet? What about the glass from broken windows? The bullet-holes in Mom's wall?

"Okay, hun," Mom spoke as we reached her car, and seemed to pick up on my uncertainty. "We're going to be staying over at Mr. Barnes' house for a little while. I know that all of this has been...difficult for you. If there's ever anything I can do to help you, please let me know. Alright?"

I nodded dutifully. I'd been wanting to see Mr. Barnes, to thank him for his heroism. He was the real savior, after all. Without him...I didn't even want to consider the outcome of the attack.

There were a few people who I wanted to see as soon as possible, just to reaffirm how much they meant to me. Barnes was among that group, along with Hunter, and - of course - Emma. I let out a high-pitched sigh, then tilted my head in thought. "Can I invite some friends over, tonight? You know, to keep me company?"

"Hm," she tilted her head in return, mimicking me and causing my cheeks to redden. She knew exactly what she was doing, and a sly grin spread across her lips. I rolled my eyes, which only encouraged her to reach over and ruffle my hair. I squealed, which quickly turned into a shrill giggle, as she scrambled my blonde locks.

"If Mr. Barnes doesn't have an issue with it," she laughed, and drew me in for a hug. "I don't see why not."

# CHAPTER 36

*Eat, Paint, Love*

The pleasant aroma of baked chicken wafted through the dining room, and I swung my dangling feet with anticipation. I could barely remember the last time I'd eaten. All I knew was that it'd been far too long. Ever since we arrived at Mr. Barnes' house, my stomach hadn't been shy in voicing its frustration.

Thank god for Barnes. His house was my new sanctuary. Across the street, KGAT Dexter news cameras were still filming their anchors, who told a tale about a gang-related raid that left several casualties. Gang-related. That was what the Dexter Police Department had called it, because a 'white supremacist attack' didn't have the same ring to it. To acknowledge that the intruders had been white supremacists, the Dexter Police and the local news would have had to admit that Dexter had a deeper problem, and that they were complicit in growing that problem. So, they kept it vague.

When we'd tuned into the local news earlier, they'd even followed up the 'gang-related shooting' with a segment about illegal immigration and La Ciudad. It was as if they were hinting that those happy folks in their tent village were at fault. As if those parents who played soccer with their kids, shared pleasant dinners with their grandparents, and had welcomed me with open arms were somehow involved in the violence. Why would the police and the local news choose to spread that lie? I wasn't quite sure at first, but I was starting to think that it was because they were afraid...just like I had been. Their city was changing, and they had an irrational fear about what the future held...and instead of confronting their fear, they succumbed to it.

I caught Barnes looking at me from across the dinner table, and I managed a weak smile. He grunted in reply. I'd gotten better at reading Barnes' emotions, however, and I could tell that it was a rather content grunt.

Pots and pans clanged in the kitchen, announcing that Mom, Emma, and Hunter were still busy preparing dinner. Barnes and I had offered to help them, but Emma - as stubborn as ever - wouldn't allow it. They couldn't accept Barnes' aid because he'd been gracious enough to allow them in his house, and I was...well...I was a special case.

Initially, I was off-put when they refused my help. I was even more off-put when Emma, Mom, and even Hunter began doting over my every need, scrambling to refill my glass of water as soon as it clinked on the wooden table. I sensed that they were pampering me because they saw me as a victim. I didn't want to think of myself as a victim. Sure, I'd been through some traumatic events, but I had agency. I wasn't some damsel in distress. I'd made decisions, I'd battled my deepest fears, and I was damned proud of myself.

Eventually, I came to terms with the fact that their coddling had nothing to do with my status as a victim. It was about them, not me. Emma, Hunter, and Mom hadn't been there when Josh and I were in grave danger. Of course, I couldn't fault them for that. They shouldn't have faulted themselves, either, but I sensed that they did. I suppose regret wasn't always rational.

Barnes let out a forced cough, then scratched at his beard. For the last half hour or so, we hadn't shared much conversation. I'd thanked him when I first arrived. He merely dismissed my appreciations, muttering about how anyone else would have done the same, if they'd been in his position. I knew that to be entirely untrue, but I didn't know what else to say. What more could I possibly say to a man who had saved both my life and Josh's?

I studied him carefully, pursing my lips. His eyes were lingering toward the hallway, and the blue door just around the corner.

"What's on your mind?" I eventually asked.

He scratched some more at his tangled beard, and drew an uncertain sigh, as if he wasn't sure if he wanted to answer. Eventually, though, he spoke. "I saw her."

"Kathy?" I asked, furrowing my eyebrows.

He gave a slight nod, then met my gaze. "Right before I shot. She was standing beside me...had a hand on my shoulder. She was wearing that nightgown of hers...it was her..." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I was hesitating. The man, I had to shoot him. The boys, though...I wasn't so sure. I knew that one boy would knife you, but killing...it ain't easy. She gave me the strength. She said Tim Barnes, you'd better help that girl. You'd better help her. If you don't there'll be hell to pay." A weak smile flickered across his lips. "Ignoring that woman isn't a good idea." He paused, and his

smile vanished. "Wasn't," he corrected himself, his voice falling into a softer tone. "Wasn't."

"Hm," I replied, after a pensive silence. "Well, you did right by her. As for the boys, Colton would've gutted me on the spot, if you didn't shoot him. Mason..." I paused, and bit my lip. "Mason would've hurt me, too."

That last sentence didn't ring with truth. In a different world, with a different set of circumstances, I could've found myself in the exact same situation as Mason. Like I had been, he was spineless, foolish, and easily manipulated. Unlike me, he never got the opportunity to turn his life around, and was lowered into a grave at the age of eighteen. Would Mason have hurt me? Maybe, maybe not. Would he have killed me, though? No. Not on purpose. Mason didn't have it in him.

Did Barnes need to know that, though? What good would it do? I did value truthfulness, but this particular truth wouldn't bring Mason back.

Resting a hand on my cheek, I made a silent promise to myself. If I ever found someone in a situation like Mason's, I would go out of my way to help.

"Dinner is served!" Emma proudly chirped as she pranced into the dining room, distracting me from my somber thoughts. Her blue hair was tied into a bun, but it still bounced with every step.

Behind her, Hunt was carrying one of the largest platters of chicken that I'd ever seen. My eyes went wide, and I shared a hesitant grin with Mr. Barnes.

The food was predictably delicious. Mom had stacked my plate high with food, mumbling about how I needed to put some 'skin on my bones'. I wasted no time in obliging her, and dug into my meal.

As we ate, there a lovely silence. The silence of good food. Everyone was so preoccupied with eating that conversation evaporated.

The silence lasted for about fifteen minutes, until I began wolfing down the meal's final course: a nice bowl of chocolate fudge ice cream.

I was so concentrated on licking clumps of ice cream out of the bowl, I didn't even notice the giggles and snickering around me.

"Huh?" I squeaked, popping my head up and glancing around. Hunter, Emma, Barnes, Mom, and even Bella were all staring at me. Their expressions were fairly similar, all varying degrees of amusement. "What?" I asked, puzzled.

"Honey," Mom sighed. From beside me, she leaned over and wiped a napkin over my nose, causing me to squeak again. "Do you have to be so messy?"

"And people think I'm the weird one," Emma giggled, causing my cheeks to burn red. "Specs, that is not how normal people eat ice cream."

I frowned, and held my chin up high. Wiggling my nose, I carefully grabbed a napkin and wiped streaks of chocolate ice cream from my cheeks. "Tough shit," I shot back with the beginnings of a devious grin. "It's how I eat ice cream."

That bit of sass was received with glee from Hunter, Barnes, and Emma. Mom, however, let out a groan.

"Can't change everything," she murmured, before leaning over and placing a gentle kiss on my forehead. She lingered near my ear, just long enough to whisper. "I love you, hun."

\* \* \*

Her words made my heart soar, and they played happily in my head for the rest of the meal. When Mom insisted upon tidying up the kitchen and Barnes retired to the living room to watch television, I seized the opportunity to show Emma and Hunter how to paint.

With permission, I took Emma and Hunt into Kathy's art room and tried to walk them through the basics. Neither of them were particularly talented. Hunter tried his best, and managed to paint a few serviceable trees. Emma, on the other hand, didn't take the task too seriously, but she seemed relatively open to learning and had a decent eye for color.

As the pair worked on their cartoonish landscape scene, I noticed the tenderness in their lingering touches. They were fused by a nearly indestructible bond: the union of two people who'd been through hell together. The Brigade was hell. There were no two ways about it...and even someone as strong as Hunter needed some help to climb out of its depths.

I hummed to myself and my eyes drifted toward the open window. Mom's house sat across the street. It was still restricted by bright yellow police tape, and small marker-flags dotted the front yard, where Colton and Mason had fallen to their deaths. Although the blood had been cleaned up, along with the bodies, the house was unmistakably a grisly crime scene. A handful of police cars still patrolled the street. Some of them were parked while others carefully prowling along the asphalt, searching for danger.

Fortunately, another Brigade attack seemed far-fetched. As Hunt explained to me a few hours prior, the police conducted a raid of my former parents' property. It seemed that, once the Brigade's strike force was arrested, the cops felt emboldened enough to take down the whole organization. It probably wasn't a difficult feat. Without my

father's leadership, the Brigade were just a bunch of headless chickens. It was funny, in a way. Dad's greatest accomplishment - his iron-fisted grip on his members - proved to be his group's undoing. He'd made the Brigade so dependent upon his instructions and so trusting in his judgement that they had no way of navigating a crisis without him.

Someone unfamiliar with the Brigade might have wondered why they even bothered to attack me in the first place. I was already banished from their ranks, after all. Plus, even if they really believed that I'd helped Hunter defect, I wasn't going out of my way to cause them harm. On face value, their attack wouldn't seem to be too rational...but, in the Dad's vengeful mind, it was the only option. He couldn't stomach his only child being a freak, in his eyes, and he had to take drastic measures to re-assert his toughness and ensure that his lackeys no longer saw me as his offspring.

I never thought I'd live to see the end of that horrible organization. Weeks ago, I would have been devastated by the mere prospect. Now, however, I was elated, and the confidence of victory burned within me.

With a happy hum, I turned back toward the easel, to study the progress that Emma and Hunter had made.

"Great!" I chirped, pleased with my pupils. The artwork itself was far from great, but their effort was visible. "And you can make little bushes by using a little bit of green on the end of a mop brush," I continued. Stepping up to their painting, I provided a brief example, creating a few bushes below one of Hunter's treeline.

"Do you like smurfs?" Emma asked, as I worked.

"Smurfs?" I lifted an eyebrow at the question's randomness.

"You know, the little blue people," she giggled.

"Umm, I dunno," I shrugged. My example was done, and I took a step away from the painting. "Just like that," I nodded with satisfaction, enjoying my temporarily role as an instructor. "And tap softly with the mop brush. Remember: you want the bushes to be ful-"

Before I could finish my thought, a soft object slapped against my left cheek, leaving a big wet mark in its wake.

I let out an embarrassing yelp, then brought my hand to my cheek. It was paint. Blue paint.

"Emma," I scowled, turning to face my treacherous best friend.

She held a blue-tipped paint-brush in one hand and wore a devious grin. "You make a real cute smurf," she whispered, struggling to hold back laughter.

I had two options: I could ignore Emma's nonsense, or I could storm off in an angry huff...perhaps there was a third option...

A smile spread across my lips, every bit as mischievous as Emma's.

Channeling every ounce of my feminine grace - which, admittedly, was a fairly scant commodity - I placed my brush back onto its palette.

"Thank you," I chirped up at Emma, before taking a step forward and embracing her in a tight hug.

"No!" she squirmed, desperately trying to avoid my paint-coated cheek. Her efforts were to no avail, and I nuzzled into her neck. "Stop it! Please!" she groaned, but still wore a grin.

"Get her!" Hunt cheered from behind me. His booming laugh seemed to make the room brighter, and - for the briefest of moments - I swear I heard a second person's laughter. A woman's laughter, but not Mom's - I knew Mom's syrupy laugh too well to be mistaken. Perhaps my imagination was just running wild yet again, but I could have sworn that I heard Kathy Barnes' carefree giggle, just shrill enough to compliment Hunter's.

"God damnit, Nat," Emma sighed and wrapped her arms around me, surrendering to her painted fate. Some of the blue paint across my cheek found a new home on Emma's neck, leaving a long streak to her chin. "I can't even get mad at you."

"You shouldn't," I smirked in reply. "You started it. Guess you didn't know about my secret weapon."

"That's your secret weapon? A hug?"

I shrugged, winking up at her. "Mhm. They seem to solve a whole lot of problems."

\* \* \*

"Alright." For the third time, Mom checked that our room's window was securely locked, then turned to eye us carefully. "If you hear anything suspicious - anything at all - I want you to wake me up. I'll be in the next room over, and I -"

"We know, Mom," I said, exchanging a side-glance with Emma.

There hadn't been quite enough beds at Mr. Barnes' house, so Emma and I were forced to share. I had no qualms with the arrangement. In fact, I welcomed it. In some ways, this was my first real sleepover. Just me and my best friend...and my other best friend.

Bella - not one to be left out - decided to join the fun. The yellow lab had sprawled herself across our feet, and her tail swung behind her in an excited blur. Her presence didn't leave much room on the bed, but Emma and I welcomed her with no shortage of cooing and pets.



Mom nodded at our comfy trio. "And don't stay up all night chatting. You need to get plenty of sleep."

"We know," I groaned, removing my glasses and placing them on the nightstand. My vision grew blurry, but I'd become accustomed to that over the last few weeks. As odd as it seemed, sleeping with moderate blindness was fairly easy, as my eyes couldn't dart around and find distractions.

"We'll be good," Emma chirped. "I promise. We'll be good smurfs." Contradicting herself, she leaned over and poked her finger into my cheek, right where the splotch of blue paint had hit my skin.

Although we tried to scrub the paint off, our efforts were only marginally successful. Emma's neck and my cheek still carried hints of blue, and I sensed that it would take a few more days to fully wash out...but that was okay. The last few weeks had taught me a fact that I'd never forget: everything healed. As long as I was willing to contemplate new information, and didn't neglect my independence and strength, nothing could stand in my way. Not neo-Nazis, not my self-hatred, not even the ink on my skin.

If the room hadn't been a giant blur around me, I would have poked back at Emma. As it was, however, I simply rolled away from her and giggled, squeakily pleading for her to stop her torment.

"If you say so," Mom muttered. She flicked off the light, then laughed to herself as she left the room.

With Mom's departure, the room turned dark and Emma stopped poking me. Instead, she wrapped me in a comforting embrace.

In her arms, with Bella at my feet and my Mom only a couple doors away, I felt secure. Serenity washed over me, and I snuggled closer.

"Thanks," I whispered to my blue-haired, blue-chinned friend.

"What for?" she murmured in reply.

"Since you came into my life, everything's gotten better. You were there for me, when I needed you the most. You opened my eyes."

"Shut up," Emma giggled. "Why are you so fucking sappy?"

I ignored her snarkiness, having expected such a response. Drawing a breath, I redoubled my efforts and let the words pour out of my heart. "For the first time, I feel like my life is going somewhere...you know? Like I'm part of this vast, beautiful world, but I have the power to make it just a tiny bit better. I can't wait to explore it. I want to see what's outside Arkansas. I want to travel with Josh, and...and..." my voice trailed off, as

my throat constricted. Warm tears brimmed in my eyes, before running down my cheeks. Happy tears.

“I think that’s the longest I’ve ever heard you talk,” Emma stated matter-of-factly, rubbing my back as more tears came forth. “Good shit, Specs,” she said, gently wiping a tear from my cheek. “Good shit.”

“Good shit,” I echoed, sniffing as one last tear dropped off my eyelashes.

My breathing fell into a steady pattern, and - as my eyes fluttered shut - a smile graced my lips. When I first realized I had gender bimorphism, I’d considered it a death sentence. In some ways, that proved to be true. The diagnosis came with more challenges than I’d ever known, pitting me face-to-face against my darkest fears and the beliefs that I had held as truths. Even so, I couldn’t deny that I’d emerged from those trials as a new person. A stronger person.

I couldn’t point to a single event or point in time that made me change as a person. Sure, there were influential factors, like first waking up as a girl, or the field-trip, or the cliff incident, but those were nothing more than hard strikes of an icepick on a chunk of marble, altering the original shape but creating nothing new. The real changes occurred in times of silence. That silence brought clarity, which allowed me to focus my mind and think, without the interference of technology or my father’s propaganda. When I sat at my desk in Laura’s house and hummed to myself as I sketched my thoughts onto parchment, or when Emma and I shared long silences beneath the sycamore tree...though they may seem mundane, those were the little moments that made me stop and rethink my beliefs. Those were the little moments that made me Natalie Harper.

Those were the little moments that changed my life.

# CHAPTER 37

## *Epilogue*

**T**he summer heat bore down on us, as we moved my last few boxes into Josh's car. Thankfully, I was dressed for the weather, with a pair of jean-shorts that ended on my upper thigh, and a thin t-shirt that left my midriff exposed.

It was only the second or third time I'd be venturing out in public with my stomach on display, and I had to keep reminding myself that my tattoo was no longer a Nazi symbol. Instead, a colorful sycamore spanned the left half of my belly, reaching its wavy branches up toward my rib-cage. I'd sketched the design myself, and - unsurprisingly - Mom had been more than encouraging throughout the process.

"Are you sure you have everything you need, sweetie?" Mom asked one more time, a tinge of doubt in her voice.

She looked as majestic as ever, standing beside me in her peach summer dress. Her hands were on her hips, and her eyebrows were furrowed with concern. She worried about me far too much.

"Yes, I'm sure." I shared a side-glance with Josh, who wore the beginnings of a grin. "It's not like I'm going to a different country, Mom."

Josh and I were both set to attend the University of Chicago. We were preparing to begin the long drive north and move into our dorm rooms. Josh, despite his unfortunate and lengthy hospital stay, was still committed to becoming a doctor, and intended to study that field in college. He took nearly a full month to get back on his feet after that fateful night, and - although he still wasn't one hundred percent healthy - he had made a strong recovery.

I was there with Josh for every stage of the journey. I sat by his side for countless hours, bringing him homework and making sure that all of his needs were met. Each

time I visited him, I brought him a new painting. Some were paintings of him, some were of Bella, some were landscapes, and others depicted me. Josh wasn't a big art connoisseur, but he seemed to appreciate my work. According to him, it was akin to perfection. His compliments were always reassuring, as I'd chosen to pursue artistry as a profession and had enrolled in Chicago's design program.

"Chicago's a big city," Mom clicked her tongue. "You've never been anywhere like it before. I just want to make sure that you're prepared. What if you forget something important? What if you forget your glasses?"

"I'm wearing my glasses."

"I know, I know," Mom sighed, then rubbed her cheek. "What about your backup pair?"

"They're in my backpack," I replied, tilting my head.

"Are you sure?"

"Mom..." I stepped toward her and took her hands in mine. "I'm gonna be okay."

She held my gaze for a long moment, then wrapped her arms around me. She drew me in for a hug, and the top of my head nestled right below her chin.

"Are you excited?" she whispered down to me, her voice wavering.

I nodded into her neck.

"I'm going to miss you so much..." she trailed off.

I giggled. "I think you'll survive."

We were only going to be separated for a few weeks. Mom was selling our house in Dexter and she'd already secured a job in Chicago, at a small pediatric practice. Though she'd never admit it, I sensed that Dexter wasn't the right place for her. She was a beautiful, lively fish in a smothering pond. Besides Mr. Barnes and Bella - to whom I'd already bid an emotional farewell, and offered assurances that I'd visit whenever possible - Mom didn't seem to have too many friends in Dexter.

I had a feeling that she'd make a whole bunch of new friends in the big city. Maybe she'd even find a special person who understood her, and treated her with romantic love and respect. She deserved someone like that.

"I guess so," Mom smiled. Pulling out of our hug, she planted a gentle kiss on my cheek. "Oh," her eyebrows rose. "Did you pack those heels that Mrs. Silver gav-"

"Yeeees," I blushed, sharing another glance with Josh. He wore a handsome grin. He always liked watching my mother fret over me, and had a habit of teasing me afterward. "They're all in the boxes."

Over the last few months, I'd done a few modeling shoots for Josh's mother. I wasn't a typical high-heel model. I stood quite a bit shorter than most other models.

However, as Mrs. Silver would often say, her company didn't design typical heels for typical models. According to her, I made up for my lack of height by being 'as cute as a button', and I easily repaid my Mom after a single photoshoot.

I hadn't originally planned to make the modeling gig a long-term commitment, but I wasn't foolish enough to turn down the offer. Apparently, Mrs. Silver was so satisfied with my work that she arranged for me to model heels in my spare time, while I attended college. I'd be able to pay for my basic needs and even a small portion of my tuition, for which Mom was more than grateful.

"Did you already say goodbye to your friends?" Mom asked, most likely referring to Emma and Hunter.

"Yup," I chirped with a nod.

Emma had been our school's valedictorian, and was heading off to one of those Ivy League schools on the east coast. In one of our long, scattered conversations, she told me that she wanted to become a teacher. A teacher! She insisted that she'd be able to reel in her swearing habits for a job like that, but I had my doubts.

Hunter, meanwhile, was already learning how to run Emma's father's business, while taking a few classes on the side. Only time would tell whether or not their relationship could survive across such a long distance, but I had faith in them. They were ex-Brigade kids, after all.

"Okay," Mom breathed, then she laid another kiss on my cheek. "I'd better let you get going."

"Mhm," I squeaked. "Love you, Mom."

"I love you too," she sighed, a stray tear rolling down her cheek.

With that, Josh and I hopped into his car. I waved goodbye from the passenger seat as we pulled away, and my eyes began to water. As embarrassing as her prolonged farewell and her fretting had been, I already missed her.

I rested my cheek against the car's window, watching the streets of Dexter pass in a blur. I was going to miss this town. It'd been my home for so many years, through thick and thin.

"Josh," I murmured, just loudly enough for him to hear. "Do you think we can take a quick detour?"

\* \* \*

I stepped out of the car and stepped onto familiar soil. The reddish mud had hardened since spring, completing its transformation into dirt.

“So this is the place?” Josh asked. He walked around the car and placed a firm hand on my shoulder, lending me strength.

“Yup,” I whispered, eyeing the property. It seemed even bigger than I remembered. More vast. The woods appeared to stretch for miles, towering evergreens that stared down at my old home in disappointment.

The entryways to the large metal warehouse and the accompanying house were still wrapped in weathered police tape. The tape fluttered gently in the breeze. That was the only sound produced by the hauntingly abandoned site. I’d never seen it so empty before...so lifeless.

I’d heard that the government had seized the property, after finding caches of unregistered weapons and drugs, but actually seeing my old home in such a derelict state was surprisingly moving. I hated my former life, my former home, and my former family...but they had played an instrumental role in shaping my life. My upbringing was brutal, unforgiving, and often terrifying. However, in overcoming those circumstances, I learned how to persevere through rough times, and how to recognize when I was being manipulated. I learned how to think.

“Was your room in there?” Josh pointed toward the house. It already showed early signs of disrepair, and my old bedroom window was visibly cracked.

“End of the hall, on the left,” I sighed in a distant tone, replaying my memories.

“Wanna take a look inside?” Josh asked, then glanced around. “I don’t think anyone would mind.”

I stared for a while, letting the chirp of birds fill our silence. “Nope. I’m good,” I eventually replied. “Let’s get going.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I flashed him a smile, and headed back to his car. “This place isn’t for me.”

Josh hustled around to the other side of the car and, before I knew it, we were on the road again. I didn’t steal a glance at my old house while we drove off. I’d outgrown that place.

Reaching over, I pried one of Josh’s hands from the steering wheel and held it in mine. I was on an adventure, diving headfirst into a world I’d never known, but I was not alone. I’d never be alone again.

The End